Agha, Feldman, Khalidi, and Schiff have written a valuable book on non-official meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. The authors, three academics of strategic studies and a senior journalist of military affairs have participated in some of these discussions and have interviewed others, as well as government policy makers. Two authors, Agha and Khalidi are Palestinians, both at St. Antony’s College at Oxford; two authors, Feldman and Schiff are Israeli. This book is an important contribution to the study of Track II efforts and will be of help in planning such efforts outside the Middle East as well.

The authors define the scope of their study: “Track II talks are discussions held by non-officials of conflicting parties in an attempt to clarify outstanding disputes and to explore the options for resolving them in setting or circumstances that are less sensitive than those associated with official negotiations. The non-officials involved usually include scholars, senior journalists, former government officials, and former military officers. Government and other officials, acting in an informal capacity, sometimes also participate in such talks alongside the non-officials involved…

“A number of Track II venues have been hosted by third-party governments. Most Track II talks, however, have been hosted by non-official institutions such as universities, research institutions, and dedicated non-governmental organizations (NGOs)…

“Track II talks can also be defined by what they are not: neither academic conferences nor secret diplomacy conducted by government representatives…Track II talks are convened specifically to foster informal interaction among participants regarding the political issues dividing their nations and to find ways of reducing the conflict between them...

“The purposes of Track II talks vary, but they are all related to reducing tensions or facilitating the resolution of a conflict. At a minimum, Track II talks are aimed at an exchange of views, perceptions, and information between the parties to improve each side’s understanding of the other’s positions and policies. Such talks may also help participants familiarize themselves with one another, increasing their understanding of the human dimensions of the struggle in which they are engaged. By informing their respective publics, elites, and governments of the perceptions and insights they have gained, participants may indirectly contribute to the formation of new national political priorities and policies.”

The authors divide Track II talks into two — ‘soft’ and ‘hard’. Soft talks are awareness building. They often begin by personalizing the experiences of conflict — an effort to explore personal concepts and impressions — to see the face of the enemy. In ‘hard’ Track II talks “use is made of the informal standing of Track II participants to initiate talks on sensitive issues that cannot be dealt with in formal settings or between parties that have not yet recognized each other and hence cannot engage one another in official negotiations. The objective in these cases is to reach a political agreement or understanding that will be acceptable to the conflicting parties.”

Thus, as the authors point out “While Track II talks need not necessarily be linked to concurrent Track I negotiations, participants in the former must have some relations with
officials in their countries’ decision-making circles for such talks to be effective. The exercise would be pointless if leaders and officials who can affect the course of national policy were not made aware of the information and impressions gained in these talks.”

Thus, the authors are concerned with the ‘feedback’ from Track II talks. In their analysis they look at three key agents; ‘sponsors’, ‘mentors’, and national ‘leaders’. The sponsors are the outside academic institutions, government or NGO which organizes the meetings. There can be a combination of the three — an NGO is the official sponsor but there may be government funds to cover some of the expenses or to provide security. Academic institutions can provide research and expertise. As the authors write “Parties in conflict who have been divided by a long history of violence are generally incapable of managing Track II meetings on their own. Third-party sponsorship is usually required to initiate and sustain such talks. In the political environment of the early 1990s, it was highly unlikely that Israelis and Palestinians could have engaged in sustained talks without the umbrella of a third-party sponsor. It was even less likely that Israelis and Syrians could hold such meetings outside a framework created by a ‘neutral’ sponsor.”

Mentors are political leaders of the parties in conflict but not at the highest level who facilitate the talks but who do not necessarily participate in them. As the authors note “The Middle East experience suggests that effective mentors may need to meet three requirements beyond access to the top leaders: a belief that Track II talks may be a useful tool for conflict resolution; sufficient time and energy to initiate, navigate, and orchestrate such talks, or at least to monitor these talks on a regular basis; and a readiness to ‘enlarge the envelope’ by encouraging Track II talks without necessarily obtaining their leaders’ prior approval for the talks — or at least not initially, when the results of the talks are far from certain.”

The major part of the book are six case studies of Middle East Track II talks held in the 1990s: “the Israeli-Palestinian talks held in 1992-1993 in Norway, leading to the Oslo accords; Palestinian-Israeli talks held in the early 1990s under the auspices of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences (AAAS); the Stockholm talks — Palestinian-Israeli discussions convened in 1994-1995 by the government of Sweden in an attempt to bridge the gap between the parties’ positions with respect to the main ‘final status’ issues; the talks held in 1995-1996 between Israeli settlers in the West Bank and representatives of the Palestinian Authority; meetings held in 1992-1994 between Israelis and Syrians, under the auspices of Search for Common Ground; and arms control and regional security-related talks — Arab-Israeli discussions that were convened throughout the 1990s by numerous research centers and other nongovernmental organizations in an attempt to explore the issues related to arms control and regional security in the Middle East.”

As the authors conclude “The Middle East experience between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s suggests that Track II talks can offer considerable scope for citizen or private diplomacy. In most of the examples reviewed, Track II venues were set up at the initiative of private individuals acting outside —if not without— their government’s consent. Track II talks thus appear to arise and be effective when determined participants see a real need. Much depends on the calibre and dedication of these initiators and on their relationships with their leaderships. Citizen diplomacy cannot flourish without a special relationship built on mutual trust between participants, mentors, and leaders…

“Israelis and Palestinians are unlikely to exit the cycle of violence without considerable further Track II efforts. For if negotiations are to be renewed, a new
understanding must be created about the purpose of such talks and their ultimate outcome, and it is difficult to imagine how such an understanding can be rebuilt except through Track II channels given the prevailing circumstances. Finally, it appears that major new Track II efforts may be needed to diminish the likelihood and impact of any future miscommunication and misunderstanding between the two sides. For while Track II talks may not guarantee perfect understanding, the absence of such talks is almost sure to pave the way to further crises and breakdowns.”

Rene Wadlow