Track II Diplomacy
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- In the absence of formal U.S.-Iran relations, which were severed in 1980 following the U.S. Embassy takeover, Americans and Iranians have held track II meetings to discuss contentious issues that divide their governments.

- "Track II" refers to unofficial interactions usually carried out by non-governmental actors with access to decision makers. In contrast, "track I" denotes diplomacy conducted by government officials.

- U.S.-Iran track II exchanges expanded under President Mohammad Khatami between 1997 and 2005, particularly during his second term. They provided the space to talk informally about issues that the two governments were not ready or able to address.

- But the impact on official policies was limited, largely due to the volatile environment between Tehran and Washington that impeded the transfer of track II results to track I.

- Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, Tehran has stepped back from track II, and opportunities for Americans to engage Iranians in informal settings have been limited.

Overview

The term "track II diplomacy" refers to frank, off-the-record interactions often between members of adversarial countries outside of official negotiations. An early example of track II was the Dartmouth Conference, which brought together Americans and Soviets in 1960 after the breakdown of the 1959 Eisenhower-Khrushchev summit. Track II diplomacy can also be multilateral, with the aim of addressing specific issue areas. Other examples include regional dialogues focused on the Asia-Pacific (North Korea), the Middle East (Arab-Israeli or Gulf security) and South Asia (the status of Kashmir and nuclear proliferation).

U.S.-Iran track II initiatives are unique because they occur in the absence of official relations, which ceased in 1980. Even during the height of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union had formal relations, track II efforts were able to complement track I diplomacy.

The U.S.-Iran case presents a distinct set of challenges, including the inability to coordinate activities with official negotiators to advance progress. At the same time, the lack of opportunities for Americans and Iranians to interact at the official level makes the socialization, learning and confidence-building aspects of track II particularly

valuable. Several American participants in past track II initiatives hold key positions in the Obama administration, which has offered Iran an opening on engagement.

The Khatami years 1997-2005

During his first term, President Khatami encouraged a "Dialogue of Civilizations," as a counterargument to Samuel Huntington's theory of Clash of Civilizations. The new mood in Tehran increased the opportunities for Americans to engage in unofficial exchanges with influential Iranians. Tehran's tolerance of track II was seen as an attempt to move Iran's foreign policy in a more conciliatory direction with the United States and the West generally.

On the Iranian side, the primary convener was often the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), the foreign ministry's think tank. The Center for Strategic Research (CSR), a policy institute affiliated with the Expediency Council that advises the supreme leader's office, also played a convening role.

A core group of reform-minded diplomats, policy advisors and scholars participated in these discussions. The members of this group remained fairly consistent during the Khatami presidency. Most shared the experience of living in the United States as university students. They also shared the view that rapprochement in U.S.-Iran relations offered a way to advance Iranian interests over time.

By participating in track II, the Iranian reformists often risked their careers and reputations in the process. By early 2008, hardline elements in the Iranian government began to charge members of this group with a pro-U.S. agenda. Most have since faced censure; some faced prosecution. Pressure on them increased after the disputed 2009 presidential election. Their ability to participate in international conferences and travel abroad has since been restricted. Some professors at Iranian universities have been subjected to downgrading of positions or altogether stripped of their teaching duties.

The Ahmadinejad years 2005 -

During the early part of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, IPIS continued to convene track II events that included Americans and other Westerners. This began to change after IPIS hosted the International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust in Tehran in December 2006, which included the participation of David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and other Holocaust deniers. After the conference, several dozen policy institutes and think tanks, mostly in Europe, Australia and the United States, severed relations with IPIS in protest.

In the fall 2007, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki met with a group of Americans in New York to inform them that Iran's participation in track II discussions would be put on hold while the Iranians reassessed their objectives. He also

indicated that the composition of the Iranian group would be reconfigured to better reflect the changing power realities in Tehran.

Since then, U.S.-Iran track II diplomacy has been in transition, with significantly less activity and a change in Iranian participation. Instead of a core group organized by IPIS or another Iranian institute, the interactions have been more ad hoc. They usually involve officials connected to various Iranian power centers, such as the president's office, the foreign ministry or the Supreme National Security Council. Current participants are conservative policy-makers and advisors who represent Iran's "new political order." Many served on the frontlines during the Iran-Iraq War. Most lack exposure to the United States, and have had limited contact with Americans.

The future of track II was further complicated in early 2010, when Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) identified a number of American and European organizations associated with track II as "subversive" and part of a "soft war" against the Islamic Republic.

American organizers

Over the past decade, most track II initiatives have been multilateral in scope and conducted as regional dialogues where Iranians and Americans have had opportunities to meet on the sidelines. The **University of California, Los Angeles** (UCLA) along with the **University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation**, has been organizing regional dialogue groups that meet three times each year in Europe. They include as many as 250 participants from a range of countries. They also organize smaller, specialized working groups.

The **Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs** also has been bringing together Iranians and Americans in a multilateral context. In 2008, Pugwash convened four meetings in The Hague and Vienna that included the participation of currently serving Iranian officials and former American officials. Discussion topics included security in the broader Middle East and, specifically, Iran's nuclear program.

From 2006-2007, the **Stanley Foundation** organized "The Future of Gulf Security" project, which brought together representatives from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, the European Commission, Italy, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Japan and the United States. The discussions centered on Iran's nuclear program, Iran-Arab-U.S. relations, Iraq and cooperative multilateral regional security frameworks.

Other track II efforts have been carried out by American organizations with European partners. **The Nixon Center,** together with the **International Institute for Strategic Studies** and the **Geneva Center for Democratic Control of Armed Forces,** have organized track II sessions with Iran in Geneva.

The **United Nations Association of the USA** in partnership with the **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute** convened one of the longest running track II efforts. From 2002 to 2008, they held 14 meetings, mostly in Stockholm. These discussions focused on U.S.-Iran bilateral relations, Iran's nuclear program and regional security issues, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Israel-Palestine. The core group of reform-minded Iranians participated in these meetings, as well as in the vast majority of track II initiatives held during this time frame. Over 20 influential Americans participated in one or more of these meetings; many were former senior government officials. In 2005, the Americans and Iranians jointly wrote a paper, "The U.S.-Iran Relationship: Breaking the Stalemate," which aimed to provide the foundation and agenda for beginning official discussions. The paper, which was written in English and translated into Farsi, was distributed to select senior officials in Washington and Tehran. It was not released publicly.

Another form of track II diplomacy is citizen-to-citizen exchanges that focus on non-political aspects of U.S.-Iran relations. **Search for Common Ground** has been organizing exchanges in the areas of sports, film, the environment and health. Third parties have also hosted track II exchanges. The **University of Toronto's Munk Center for International Relations,** and more recently the **University of Ottawa,** have played the "honest broker" role, convening Europeans, Americans and Iranians for discussions.

Measuring success

Measuring the success of past and current track II efforts is difficult because there is usually not an immediate breakthrough or impact on policy. Current and past track II exchanges generally have taken a long-term approach geared toward socializing elites with access to and influence on policy makers. The goal is to shape the policy debate by presenting a more nuanced picture of problems and possible options for cooperative solutions.

The key contributions of current and recent U.S.-Iran track II efforts fall into the following five areas:

- Serving as an informal forum to identify common interests, generate ideas, vet proposals and think though policy options.

- Providing reality checks that lead to the clarification of intentions and the correction of misperceptions.

- Communicating insights and analyses to key decision makers in Tehran and Washington.

- Forging important relationships over time, particularly between key Iranian advisors and officials and former U.S. officials/diplomats with access to American decision makers.

- Providing a reliable channel for unofficial communications on sensitive issues and during times of heightened tensions.

Discretion is vital to ensuring the continuation of U.S.-Iran track II dialogues. Participants usually agree in advance not to release any information to the public or the media. Individuals commonly prefer to maintain a low profile and even preserve anonymity. So success stories are not revealed or celebrated.

The future

- After years of steady interactions, the future of U.S.-Iran track II diplomacy is in a state of flux. Valuable efforts are still underway, but it is not yet clear whether they can be sustained over time. In light of Iran's power struggles, it is also unclear which individuals and organizations have the capacity or authority to carry out track II.

- But given tense relations between the governments of Iran and the United States, track II exchanges continue to be one of the few bridges that bring together Americans and Iranians for dialogue.

- If Tehran and Washington move toward formal talks, track II efforts are also likely to gain new traction. This is the optimal scenario, since track II diplomacy on its own is insufficient to address the decades of deep mistrust.

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