

مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning



Research Paper

# Bridging the Gap: Multi-Track Diplomacy as a Strategic Necessity for Iraq

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## **Introduction**

In an era marked by shifting global dynamics and escalating regional instability, Iraq faces both challenges and opportunities to assert its position on the international stage. As the country strives to consolidate hard-won political and security stability and redefine its strategic role, traditional diplomacy alone is no longer sufficient to address the complexities of this changing reality. Official channels of interstate relations often fail to accommodate the multiplicity of interests and diversity of voices and ideas that shape policy formation. Multi-track diplomacy, particularly tracks 1.5 and 2, offers practical and relatively underutilized tools that can enhance the objectives of Iraqi foreign policy. These tracks open parallel channels involving non-governmental figures, semi-official participants, and research and political communities, enabling in-depth dialogues with their counterparts abroad. Such channels provide flexible spaces to address complex, sensitive, or stalled issues in a practical and consultative manner.

This paper argues that institutionalizing tracks 1.5 and 2 as tools is a strategic necessity for Iraqi foreign policy. Drawing on global experiences and lessons from the Iraqi context, the paper examines the theoretical foundations, strategic benefits, practical challenges, and future opportunities for multi-track diplomacy in Iraq. It concludes that adopting more inclusive, organized, and sustainable dialogic approaches can serve as a vital bridge between Iraqi decision-makers and the international system, thereby enhancing national stability and expanding Iraq's role as a diplomatic hub in the region and beyond.

## **Defining Multi-Track Diplomacy**

Multi-track diplomacy refers to the use of dialogue channels to resolve conflicts and build peace outside the official frameworks of interstate negotiations. Joseph

Montville first introduced the concept in the early 1980s, and it was later developed by Louise Diamond and John McDonald in the 1990s, becoming a framework that recognizes the need for coordinated efforts across various sectors of society to achieve sustainable peace, not just at the official level.

In addition to traditional government-to-government diplomacy (Track One), this framework includes a spectrum of complementary tracks:

- **Track Two:** Involves non-official actors such as civil society organizations, academics, and community leaders.
- **Track Three:** Focuses on grassroots initiatives at the individual and community levels.
- **Track Four:** Integrates the private sector into peace and economic development efforts.
- **Track Five:** Recognizes the role of media in shaping public opinion and narratives related to peace.
- **Track Six:** Promotes dialogue among religious and spiritual leaders.
- **Track Seven:** Concerns education and training to instill a culture of peace.

These tracks represent unofficial or semi-official channels that complement official diplomacy by engaging actors from civil society, academia, religious circles, the private sector, and the media. In Iraq, where power is distributed among multiple actors and informal networks influence governance, engaging these parties is a necessity rather than a luxury.

This paper focuses on two main tracks from this framework:

- **Track 1.5:** Refers to semi-official dialogues that bring together current

officials and non-official figures such as academics, researchers, and former negotiators, often in informal, closed-door settings. These dialogues enable participants to exchange ideas, propose policy options, and foster trust outside the constraints of official positions or public scrutiny. They are often used to test sensitive ideas before formal presentation and to open dialogue spaces when official channels are blocked.

- **Track Two:** Broadly defined as any non-governmental or unofficial interaction, but here it is more understood explicitly as organized dialogues involving intellectual and professional elites from different parties, aiming to analyze, prevent, or help resolve conflicts within ongoing strategic approaches.

As Harold Saunders noted, Track Two diplomacy is an organized dialogue focused on finding concrete solutions to issues such as security challenges, political tensions, and regional competition. Unlike cultural initiatives aimed solely at acquaintance, these dialogues seek to reshape political thinking and formulate actionable alternatives. Although participants lack formal negotiating authority, their proposals often pave the way for government policy formulation.

These tracks often overlap; Track Two dialogues may lead to recommendations later adopted by decision-makers, or Track 1.5 forums may serve as a bridge between civil society and official institutions. Multi-track diplomacy recognizes and leverages this overlap, especially in environments like Iraq, where official and informal channels are deeply intertwined, and what happens in unofficial spaces can alter the political landscape.

It is essential to clarify that this paper focuses on the use of multi-track diplomacy in Iraq's external relations, not in the context of national reconciliation or local conflict management. The aim is to understand how these tracks can be

employed as tools of foreign policy, whether by enhancing regional cooperation with neighbors or by reimagining Iraq's role internationally. Whether improving bilateral relations, negotiating security arrangements, or establishing multilateral development partnerships, tracks 1.5 and 2 can serve as effective levers for official diplomacy.

These dialogues are often managed or facilitated by a neutral third party, such as a foreign state, an international organization, or a research institution, capable of bringing the parties together and providing a neutral environment. However, this model is not always necessary; in some cases, local or regional actors can initiate and succeed in these dialogues, mainly when mutual trust exists or the discussion is technical. The key is that the design matches the intended objectives.

### **Understanding Tracks 1.5 and 2 Diplomacy**

Tracks 1.5 and 2 diplomacy are essential tools for addressing the complexities of foreign policy and enhancing international partnerships, especially in countries like Iraq, where official diplomatic channels alone are insufficient to address all dimensions of the geopolitical and domestic landscape. These unofficial forms of interaction provide spaces for dialogue even when official negotiations stall and are particularly valuable in advancing bilateral and multilateral relations at the regional and international levels.

A key advantage of Track 1.5 diplomacy lies in its hybrid nature, which brings together government officials and non-official experts, such as academics, analysts, and former diplomats, in closed sessions. In these sessions, officials can speak in a personal capacity, free from official positions and media coverage. This creates an atmosphere for frank and exploratory dialogue, including the presentation of “trial balloons”—preliminary proposals offered in unofficial settings to gauge

reactions before formal presentation.

These dialogues are crucial when addressing complex foreign policy issues that require contributions beyond the traditional diplomatic corps. In Iraq's case, such dialogues can support discussions with international partners about the nature of the political system, strengthen economic ties with neighboring countries, or develop frameworks for security cooperation. These tracks also allow for the inclusion of perspectives from local officials, minority representatives, and independent experts who may not have direct representation at the official negotiating table.

Track 1.5 processes also play a crucial role in breaking down information barriers, providing decision-makers with insights from civil society, technical experts, and researchers, thereby enriching decision-making and offering alternative solutions to complex issues. When integrated into a broader diplomatic strategy, these dialogues help bridge institutional gaps and foster flexible solutions tailored to the local context.

Track Two diplomacy, while entirely unofficial, complements these efforts by bringing together influential non-state actors from Iraq and other countries in strategic dialogues. Participants include former officials, researchers, religious leaders, and journalists who can sustain dialogue when official diplomacy falters and test new frameworks for international cooperation. Unlike Track 1.5, Track Two often focuses on long-term relationship-building and strategic visioning, though it can also contribute to the development of concrete policy proposals.

In the Iraqi context, Track Two dialogues with international partners can help address sensitive and chronic issues in a low-risk environment, such as water-sharing agreements with Turkey and Iran, managing border tensions with Syria, or

disputes with Kuwait. These dialogues are suitable for joint reflection and mutual understanding away from the pressures of official commitments, providing space to explore joint initiatives or confidence-building measures.

A unique feature of Track Two diplomacy is its ability to maintain open communication channels during periods of political stalemate. It serves as a form of preventive diplomacy, quietly maintaining dialogue and reducing the risk of escalation. While it does not produce formal agreements, it often influences decision-makers' thinking by reframing narratives and presenting new approaches that are later incorporated into the Track One agenda.

It is important not to confuse Track Two diplomacy with cultural exchange programs or general popular initiatives. These dialogues are policy-oriented and often yield tangible outcomes, such as joint analyses, draft agreements, or informal recommendations. They are based on the expertise of participants and guided by strategic objectives, distinguishing them from purely symbolic or social forms of interaction.

The nature of Track 1.5 and 2 dialogues varies depending on the stage of conflict or diplomatic tension. In preventive phases, they may be used to monitor instability indicators and provide recommendations for de-escalation. During crises, they can explore conditions for de-escalation or alternatives to confrontation. In post-conflict stages, they may support peacebuilding by proposing frameworks for transitional justice or reintegration programs. Their strength lies in their flexibility and adaptability to the needs of the moment.

In Iraq, Track Two can play a pivotal role in shaping regional discourse. For example, forums that bring together experts from Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf can help develop a shared understanding of regional security threats, thereby

enhancing cooperation even amid political differences. These platforms are not intended to replace official summits, but to complement them by clarifying interests, generating new ideas, and proposing policy options that have not been previously considered.

Ultimately, tracks 1.5 and 2 diplomacy should be viewed as strategic support tools that keep lines of communication open when official channels are blocked, provide forums for creativity and innovation, and amplify voices that may be marginalized in the diplomatic arena. In Iraq, where internal fragility intersects with regional challenges, these tracks are not secondary but essential for building a flexible and future-oriented foreign policy.

### **Best Practices and Challenges**

Tracks 1.5 and 2 diplomacy do not follow standardized interventions but require careful design, context-sensitive facilitation, and strategic understanding of the local and international environment. In Iraq, where regional interests intersect with a legacy of conflicts and alliances, these forms of diplomacy must be approached with both precision and flexibility.

A critical factor in the success of Track Two initiatives is the selection of participants. Effective dialogues require individuals who are respected within their professional or community networks and who can influence and transmit ideas beyond the dialogue circle. These may include researchers at think tanks, religious leaders, women's empowerment activists, journalists, academics, or private sector leaders. Their legitimacy stems from their ability to represent credible viewpoints and influence decision-making circles within their communities.

Equally important is the participants' strategic capacity. In complex political environments like Iraq, participants must be familiar with the core issues and



the surrounding political and social structures. For Track Two dialogues to have a real impact, they must lead to the creation of networks capable of effectively communicating outcomes to decision-makers.

The quality of discussion is also crucial. Productive dialogues blend creativity with realism, avoiding theoretical idealism while challenging conventional assumptions and outdated approaches. The most effective proposals often emerge from the middle ground between rigid positions, offering practical political solutions. In Iraq, such proposals might include reimagining regional energy cooperation or proposing alternative security coordination mechanisms.

The ability to develop new policy proposals is crucial in Iraq, where complex issues such as the nature of the federal system, the role of armed factions, and overreliance on oil revenues necessitate multidimensional approaches. Track Two dialogues offer a safe environment for in-depth engagement with these issues, free from populist rhetoric and media pressures.

Another essential feature of successful dialogues is a collaborative approach. These dialogues are not intended to recycle rigid national positions but to generate new ideas collectively. Participants collaborate across divisions and affiliations to understand each other's motivations, explore possible incentives, and develop shared frameworks that can later be adopted through official channels. In Iraq's regional context, this collaborative methodology can build mutual trust between Iraqis and their regional counterparts, especially on sensitive issues such as border security, water sharing, or customs policies.

Effective participation also requires deep personal commitment, a willingness to confront painful truths, recall difficult experiences, and reconsider entrenched narratives. In Iraq, where political memory has been shaped by wars, sanctions,

and repeated transformations, sincere engagement in principled dialogue can be challenging but is necessary. The success of dialogues often depends on individuals with not only intellectual competence but also psychological resilience and moral courage.

The timing of dialogue initiation is another complex challenge. While theory suggests that dialogue should begin at a moment of “political maturity,” reality often dictates starting under less-than-ideal conditions. Waiting for the perfect moment may mean missing rare opportunities. In Iraq, many positive steps have resulted from initiatives launched during periods of political deadlock, underscoring the importance of continuity and ongoing engagement rather than relying on the ideal moment.

Another best practice is to formulate a clear theory of change. Rigid objectives should not constrain dialogues; some aim to transform relationships, others to manage crises, or contribute to long-term solutions. The key is that each initiative is based on a coherent logic, developed in consultation with participants, and remains flexible enough to adapt to contextual developments. In Iraq, this theory might be based on shared priorities such as regional stability, counterterrorism, and sustainable development.

The role of the facilitator is perhaps the most sensitive and influential. A successful facilitator does not impose conditions or direct outcomes; instead, they create an environment conducive to genuine and effective dialogue. This requires deep contextual knowledge, cultural understanding, political neutrality, and the ability to build trust across ideological divides. In dialogues involving Iraq and its neighbors, the facilitator must be aware not only of geopolitical realities but also of historical sensitivities and underlying tensions.

Facilitation goes beyond logistics; it is about creating a “safe space.” An experienced facilitator helps participants navigate difficult moments, manage power imbalances, and sustain dialogue despite tensions or emotional episodes. In Iraq’s regional dialogues, where suspicion toward some international actors may prevail, the facilitator’s neutrality and contextual awareness can be decisive in determining the success or failure of the dialogue.

Ultimately, Track Two diplomacy should not be viewed as parallel to official diplomacy, but rather as a dynamic complement. It provides a flexible framework for engaging influential actors, generating new ideas, and redefining solution spaces. When coordinated with foreign policy objectives, Track Two dialogues can contribute to the formulation of more mature, inclusive, and sustainable policies that benefit both Iraq and its partners.

### **Multi-Track Diplomacy in Iraq: The Way Forward**

The complex challenges facing Iraq’s foreign policy, alongside its intricate domestic political environment, make the country a clear example of the importance of expanding multi-track diplomacy. Over the past decade, Iraq has witnessed significant growth in its intellectual infrastructure, particularly through the development of research centers, think tanks, and independent analysts. These institutions have produced high-level research in security, governance, and foreign policy, and have fostered a new generation of non-governmental experts who are increasingly recognized both inside and outside Iraq. Despite this momentum, the contribution of these experts to diplomatic tracks remains limited and often uncoordinated, without genuine investment in their capacities.

To activate this emerging intellectual and political capital, a concerted and deliberate effort is needed to integrate these actors into tracks 1.5 and 2 dialogues. Iraqi research centers should be encouraged to establish lasting partnerships

with their counterparts abroad, participate in regional political dialogues, and host diplomats and foreign visitors in formats that go beyond the usual protocol meetings. Too often, meetings between ambassadors, visiting officials, and Iraqi civil society are confined to narrow circles, perpetuating elite narratives and failing to reflect the diversity of Iraqi opinions and experiences. A more representative and inclusive approach can make a qualitative difference in the quality of Iraq's international engagement.

Track 1.5 diplomacy, in particular, can serve as a means to bring together Iraqi analysts and international policymakers in a semi-official framework that allows for candid and in-depth discussion of sensitive political issues. These dialogues are not intended to replace official tracks but to support and enrich them by providing realistic analyses and policy recommendations derived from Iraq's evolving internal dynamics. They can also help clarify Iraqi positions on key issues, identify gaps in political vision, and strengthen the link between official and unofficial tracks.

Multi-track diplomacy provides a space for frank and exploratory dialogues that are difficult to conduct within the constraints of traditional official diplomacy. In Iraq, such dialogues can open new horizons for joint thinking on complex files, such as restructuring the Iraqi security apparatus to enhance international counterterrorism cooperation, deepening mutual understanding of the nature of Iraq's political system after 2003, developing interfaith dialogue between Iraqi leaders and their counterparts abroad, and building consensus on shared challenges such as climate change, water scarcity, and economic integration.

Several sensitive issues between Iraq and its Western partners present suitable opportunities for tracks 1.5 and 2 dialogues. These include ongoing discussions about the future of the U.S. military presence, Iraq's position in the global financial system (including anti-money laundering efforts and extradition agreements), and

debates over Western support for democracy in Iraq. Track Two dialogues can also address files that have seen little progress in official negotiations, such as climate adaptation, strategies to combat disinformation, and the growing role of technology and artificial intelligence in Iraq.

Regionally, Iraq is emerging as a potential diplomatic hub in the Middle East. Successive Iraqi governments have embraced this role, notably by hosting rounds of dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran and offering mediation between the United States and Iran. Baghdad is expected to host the Arab League summit, further enhancing its position as a regional center. However, for this role to be effective and sustainable, Iraq must expand its diplomatic tools. Official diplomacy alone is insufficient to manage the delicate balances between competing powers or to resolve deeply rooted regional conflicts.

In this context, multi-track diplomacy can play a strategic enabling role. Track Two initiatives can create a regional network of analysts, security experts, and thought leaders who understand Iraq's unique geopolitical position and can engage constructively with their counterparts in the region and beyond. Track 1.5 forums can be used to test proposals for security cooperation, trade agreements, or confidence-building measures before presenting them at official summits or multilateral platforms.

In conclusion, multi-track diplomacy should not be viewed as a mere supplement to Iraqi foreign policy, but rather as a strategic choice. It offers flexible and inclusive mechanisms for engaging a wide range of voices, deepening mutual understanding with international actors, and innovating new solutions to complex geopolitical challenges. By institutionalizing these approaches as part of its foreign policy, Iraq can advance its immediate objectives while simultaneously consolidating its position as a trusted regional mediator and global partner.

## **Research Identity**

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The center aims to utilize the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value-system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

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