

TRACK II ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM

NEWS BRIEF

JANUARY 2023

The Track II Forum for Environmental Diplomacy, a partnership between the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and Damour for Community Development, was initiated in 2016 to enable key civil society organizations and individuals representing both state and non-state actors to discuss and develop cross-border strategies to facilitate formal and informal environmental agreements between Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. The concept underlying the Track II Forum is a departure from traditional peace-building efforts (Track I) in the region, which have aimed to establish over-arching peace agreements. We believe that by promoting initiatives taken at the professional level, we can catalyze positive change on the ground and in the political arena.

"GUARDIANS OF THE FLYWAY"



In December, Dr David Lehrer, Director of the Track II Environmental Forum and of International Development at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, presented a session about multilateral cross-border cooperation to a group at the International Birding and Research Centre in Eilat led by Noam Weiss. This was a unique gathering of about fifteen nature conservationists from Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Malta, Greece, Cyprus, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, made possible through funding provided by the Ministry of Regional Cooperation, Eilat Municipality and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. The group was here for one week for a course titled ‘The Guardians of the Flyway’ that focused on the importance of birds and their migration routes, and their relevance to biodiversity, the climate crisis, conservation, and eco-tourism.

Using the Track II Environmental Forum as an example, Dr Lehrer argued for the necessity of cross-border cooperation, particularly regarding environmental issues and risks and dangers occurring as a result of climate change. Dr Lehrer presented potential challenges of cross-border cooperation, followed by means of overcoming such challenges. The session ended with a Q & A with the participants, who mentioned various challenges they faced in the sphere of cross-border collaboration in relation to bird conservation, some examples being: uneven access to funding in bordering countries; unequal provision of services, education and the capacity for conservation; cultural differences affecting attitudes as well as laws (such as hunting regulations for example); all of which mean that cooperation between professionals is absolutely necessary in order to create a long term impact on bird conservation and the eco-system at large.

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TRACK II ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM JOINT IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE RETREAT



To launch the new year's Track II actions, representatives from the Arava Institute and from Damour met in Jordan for a strategic planning retreat. The ten Israelis and Palestinians, from both the West Bank and Gaza, who are members of the Joint Implementation Committee, the steering committee for Track II Environmental Forum, convened over the weekend to discuss the vision for environmental diplomacy initiatives in the coming five years, and steps to achieve the vision.

The five-year vision for the Track II Environmental Forum is to establish a regional organization for climate change mitigation and adaptation that includes countries from the Middle East, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. The success of the retreat once again proved that despite the availability of virtual communication technology, nothing can replace the efficacy of face-to-face interaction. Dr David Lehrer, head of the Arava Institute's Department for Applied Environmental Diplomacy, often says, "the scarcest resource in the Middle East is not water, it is trust". Only through people-to-people engagement can we build the trust needed to advance a peaceful and sustainable two-state solution.