Beyond the Handshake

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Multilateral Cooperation
in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, 1991–1996

Dalia Dassa Kaye

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Preface

By the summer of 1994, nearly a year had passed since The Handshake on the White House Lawn, that is to say, the September 1993 Israeli-PLO breakthrough known to history as the Oslo Accord. The Handshake itself—an eager Yasir Arafat pumping the hand of a somewhat sheepish Yitzhak Rabin—seemed to mark the endgame for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement. History—or better, regional politics—proved the optimism premature in many respects. But the Handshake did initiate a period of intense bilateral peacemaking that dominated the news from the region and led to a comprehensive framework for Palestinian-Israeli peace as well as the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. The powerful image of the Handshake dominated the perception of change in Middle East politics so thoroughly that other profound shifts in regional thinking and dialogue went nearly unnoticed by the mainstream media in the United States, Europe, and even the region. It was thus with very good fortune that in the summer of 1994, as a summer staffer in the U.S. Department of State's Office of Policy Planning, I stumbled upon the graduate student's holy grail—a dissertation topic. That topic, the subject of this book, was the Arab-Israeli multilateral peace process, which, by mid-1994, had a momentum and vitality not matched by its press coverage. The multilaterals, I recognized early on, provided just the right framework for understanding Arab-Israeli regional politics in the 1990s, as well as a number of theoretically important developments emerging in the wake of the Cold War.

Focusing on this relatively unknown and mysterious aspect of the peace process offered an opportunity to move beyond the daily headlines and speculations so pervasive in the bilateral arena and offer an assessment of regional relations that would contribute to both the Middle East and International Relations (IR) communities. Because the multilaterals address issues of long-term concern to regional players (arms control, economics, water, the environment, and refugees) rather than the immediate bilateral conflicts between Israel and its neighbors, the process offered an interesting prism for examining the changing nature of regional relations and a concrete set of cases to assess the strengths and weaknesses of various theories explaining regional cooperation more generally.

As with most novel empirical developments, the emergence of multilateral cooperation among Arabs and Israelis raised a number of important questions. Why, after decades of armed conflict and rivalry, did Arabs and Israelis agree to sit down together to discuss regional problems in a multilateral setting? And once this process originated, what drove the regional parties to continue such cooperation or, in some cases, what prompted them to halt their cooperative efforts? Why would many international relations scholars dismiss this type of cooperation despite its significance in the Arab-Israeli arena? It is my hope that the answers to these questions, the central ones addressed in this book, contribute both empirical knowledge about a relatively unknown Arab-Israeli process and a reconceptualization of how international relations scholars can view cooperative processes in regions like the Middle East.

I argue that traditional understandings of cooperation based on outcomes, while important, neglect the equally significant view of cooperation as a process. Cooperation is not just about producing policy adjustment among actors with a given set of interests; it is also about creating a process in which new interests and understandings can coalesce. Cooperation, as viewed in this book, is about a process in which international actors work together to achieve common understandings. Of course, cooperation defined as process can still fail. In the cases of the Arab-Israeli multilaterals, for example, some groups have been more successful than others in reaching common understandings about the nature of their issue area and the value of regional cooperation itself. The varied success of the working groups was related in part to their ability to transform highly politically charged issues into "technical" problems. By viewing cooperation as a process rather than solely an outcome, we can better explain international developments in regions like

the Middle East and appreciate their significance. While, as this study shows, a great power like the United States may be needed to initiate such processes, the formation of new interactive settings may influence how regional actors conceptualize regional challenges and inspire regional activism in shaping the nature of relations in ways not originally intended.

This book was written partly in the interest of narrowing the ever-present divide between regional specialists and IR theorists, and in the hope that scholars and students in both communities will take an interest in all aspects of the book. Still, students of Middle East politics and IR theory may find different parts of this book interesting or relevant to their work. Middle East scholars may take a particular interest in chapter 2 (the historical overview of regional cooperation) and the initial sections of the succeeding chapters, which provide the empirical narrative of the developments in the multilateral working groups covered in the book. IR scholars will likely find chapter 1 (the theoretical framework) of greater interest, as well as the latter sections of chapters 3 through 6, which consider the theoretical explanation for the empirical narrative.

A number of individuals have taken an active interest in this study over a number of years and I am very grateful to them. Beginning with my support network at Berkeley, I cannot thank enough Steve Weber, Ernie Haas, and Elizabeth Kier for their wise counsel and for reading numerous versions of the text. Nelson Polsby and David Caron also provided advice and critical readings of early versions of the manuscript. For introducing me to the multilaterals and becoming another helpful reader of this work and collaborator in the arms control area, I owe a great debt to Bruce Jentleson.

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It is thanks, above all, to their generosity that this book could take the form that it has.

I conducted much of the research for this book as a Foreign Policy Research Fellow at the Brookings Institution and as an Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation/MacArthur Regional Relations Scholar. Many thanks to both of these institutions, particularly to the helpful library staff at Brookings. The Washington, D.C. center of the University of California at Davis provided me with office space as a graduate student and the University of California at Berkeley's Center for Middle Eastern Studies awarded a Mellon grant, which supported one of my research trips to the Middle East.

It is most difficult to thank the person who deserves it most, David Kaye. Without his scrutiny of every word of this manuscript (or so I'm told), and most importantly his steady encouragement and support and his caring for our daughter Danielle while I worked on the manuscript, this book would hardly have been possible. I am forever grateful to him. Of course, all errors are ultimately mine. Finally, I dedicate this book to my parents, Judy and Dani Dassa.