Secret talks do have a place in diplomacy

By *Oded Eran*
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Comment Peace process

Israelis love secret meetings with Arab leaders in London. The most famous were held with King Hussein of Jordan in 1963, in the house of his Jewish physician. As a junior diplomat in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I kept the secret file of these meetings, codenamed "Charles". At the time, the talks produced a greater understanding between Jordan and Israel, but King Hussein was reluctant to be the first Arab leader to sign a peace treaty.

In 1987, it was the then Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, who met the king at the home of Lord Mishcon, in an attempt to produce a roadmap to launch a peace process. Its failure was among the reasons that led the king to abandon the West Bank in 1988.

The most recent report is of President Peres meeting the Palestinian president, Abu Mazen, in the London home of businessman Poju Zabludowicz. This was one of several meetings which ended with Peres apologising to Abu Mazen on the phone, saying that he could not meet him in Amman, Jordan, as planned, because Prime Minister Netanyahu would not allow the talks, aimed at reviving the Israel-Palestinian negotiations, to continue.

Secret, personal talks between leaders are not always a guarantee for success and they cannot substitute for the necessary political environment conducive to reaching an agreement.

The secret talks that Israelis and Egyptians held in Morocco in 1977, prior to Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, which in turn led to the 1979 peace treaty, succeeded because of the political determination of both Prime Minister Begin and President Sadat and the fear that the US and the Soviet Union were about to impose their own solution.

The secret Oslo talks which led to the September 1993 Accords succeeded, inter alia, because of a determined political leadership on both sides to reach an agreement.

There was a grain of naiveté in President Peres's honourable attempt to use secret

diplomacy to revive the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. If Mr Netanyahu believed that the political circumstances were ripe, he could have conducted negotiations himself. It is far from clear that Abu Mazen is indeed ready for, or capable of, substantive talks leading to a comprehensive agreement which will put an end to conflict and claims.

In the Middle East of today, secret talks alone are not sufficient. But as the second Israeli ambassador to Jordan, and a negotiator with the Palestinians, Egyptians and Jordanians, I believe that houses in Kensington or
Hampstead will continue to serve the course of peace.

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