

Let's not play the 'no talk' game

Limor Ben-Har and Yoav Sivan, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Surprisingly, Syria still occupies the front pages of Israeli newspapers: Talking to Syria, not talking to Syria, making gestures or playing hardball. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert finally articulated a sentence that included he was "willing to talk if..." instead of "never, because...."

Yet the preconditions Olmert has set easily give the impression that he is not too keen on a breakthrough with Syria.

The preconditions seem reasonable enough. Syria is home to Khaled Mashal and a channel for Iranian influence in the region. The catch is that insisting on obvious Israeli goals as conditions to even start talking will ensure we end up with no process and no achievements.

Syrian President Bashar Assad has publicly been calling for peace talks with Israel with no preconditions. This shows that when Arab leaders' unconditional readiness to negotiate comes true, Israeli leaders find themselves helpless.

Israeli policymakers don't like it that Assad expects the Golan Heights as an outcome to negotiations, but Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni says she wants "to know exactly what we are going to get in the end."

Contrary to what we have been led to believe, negotiations are not the end-goal but the process leading to the big moment - the behind-the-scenes work that eventually enables that desired photo-op. And in emotionally-laden conflicts like ours it is impossible to agree on a final draft before actually negotiating it; and it is a mistake to demand to know the closing details from the outset. That is why agreements like the Geneva Accords are unique - they leave no place for circumstantial compromises.

There is, of course, a point in envisioning the endgame, and building a strategy that would get us there. Yet we should allow room for compromise, flexibility and creativity until we reach our goals. And even the goals themselves may change with time. It's unrealistic to know the exact endgame before even starting it.

CONSIDER, for example, Assad's political calculations. Even if he is frank about his peace wishes - and it's hardly self-evident he is - he will not reveal all his cards in the first round. We need a process to discover his intentions. More dramatically, even if Assad enters the game with ulterior motives, the process's political dynamics might put him on a track he did not plan.

How can the peace negotiations proceed? Imagine Israel and Syria agreeing to negotiate without preconditions. The Americans and Europeans vouch for an agreement and pour the economic wherewithal into it. Then the parties go into negotiations, presenting their demands. And then the process can advance in different paths leading to different consequences.

Hypothetical example: A smart mediator might be able to broker a deal in which Israel is willing to give back only part of the land in return for Syria blocking Iran without reaching full peace with Israel, while Syrian motivation is based on a promised improvement in the relations with the United States.

PLAUSIBLE or not, this is only one idea. Many combinations can come up once negotiations actually take

place. But for negotiations to stand a chance, they need to be conducted out of the spotlight by negotiators empowered for give and take. Otherwise each side will leak to the press each time the other party agrees to back down, and the fear alone of public opinion will hinder any substantial concession.

We don't want a repeat of the Camp David 2000 scenario, where top politicians and officials met, supposedly behind close doors, while outside those doors the press was ambushing them for pieces of information.

That peace talks with Syria remain on the top of Israel's agenda, hints that prospects for a political initiative are not over yet. Americans and Europeans are not likely to apply pressure on Jerusalem to talk to Syria, so such pressure must come from people like Defense Minister Amir Peretz. It would actually help save his political neck.

Peretz's main problem - or, more accurately, ours - is that his attempts seem directed at the Israeli newspapers rather than at the leaders with whom negotiations should take place.

Agreeing to negotiate is not in itself a compromise, but merely sticking to Israel's traditional position that we are always willing to talk. Let the other party play hard to get. The real negotiations should take place bilaterally between Israelis and Syrians, and not among Israelis over Assad's true intentions.

Granted, once negotiations start, it is hard to guarantee their success. The effort put into the talks could lead to unintended consequences. But we have a responsibility to at least make the effort.

Ben-Har is a graduate student at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, the University of Michigan. Sivan is the LGBT Coordinator of Young Meretz, and of the International Union of Socialist Youth.

His Web site is www.yoavsivan.org.



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