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Obama big loser in failure to halt settlements

By PATRICK MARTIN
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Popular support likely to drain from Abbas; Hamas points out folly of counting on U.S.

The U.S. decision to abandon attempts to coax Israel into adopting a new freeze on West Bank settlement construction has put the future of Mideast peace talks in doubt and badly embarrassed the Obama administration.

That the United States, Israel's greatest ally and largest benefactor, was unable to persuade the Benjamin Netanyahu government to accept U.S. President Barack Obama's formula for making a deal with the Palestinian Authority has left many people scratching their heads in wonder.

What was the deal breaker?

For the Palestinians, who refused to come to the negotiating table unless all settlement construction was halted, it was the fact that Israel wouldn't agree to stop construction in Israeli neighbourhoods of occupied eastern Jerusalem. For the Israelis, who declined to adopt a new freeze, it was the fact that the Palestinian Authority wasn't prepared to discuss Israeli security concerns, especially in the Jordan Valley, until after borders between the two peoples were agreed to in any future talks.

Who emerges as the big winner?

Israeli settlers are certainly crowing the loudest. "Now is the time for the international community to finally recognize that peace will never be achieved by conceding Israeli territory to an entity that will threaten our very existence," said Danny Dayan, chairman of the Yesha Council of settlements. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also is said to be pleased. "We said from the outset that settlements were not the root of the conflict and that it was only a Palestinian excuse for refusing to talk," said Nir Hefetz, a spokesman for Mr. Netanyahu.

The big loser?

Mr. Obama, for whom the admission of failure, 18 months after first calling on Israel to halt the settlements, is particularly embarrassing. A close second is Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, who has little to show for his faith in Mr. Obama.

Is there a possible dark-horse winner?

Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement that controls the Gaza Strip, is sporting an I-told-you-so grin. Its arch-rival, Fatah, "has lost its gamble of counting on Washington," Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said. And as Fatah leader, Mr. Abbas loses even more of his popular support; most of the disaffected will be drawn to Hamas.

Could the failure have been avoided?

Only if the demand for a settlement freeze had never been made. "The whole idea of the settlement freeze for negotiations was a mistake," said Yossi Alpher, co-editor of BitterLemons, an Israeli-Palestinian website. "It was never demanded of any previous Israeli government, including governments much more inclined to make peace with the Palestinians." Once made, however, it became too appealing for the Palestinians to resist, and too infuriating for Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing coalition partners to accept.

Do Israelis really want a deal?

Not necessarily. The arch-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties in Mr. Netanyahu's coalition certainly prefer the status quo that already has allowed them to expand settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem (where about 500,000 now have settled). The country's traditional leftist peace advocates have all but disappeared, and the majority of middle-of-the-road Israelis see no urgency in pursuing a peace deal. For them, life is good; there's no need to worry.

Do Palestinians want a deal?

Certainly not all of them. For one thing, Hamas and other religious resistance movements have not given up on the idea of one day liberating all of historic Palestine, including Israel. They prefer not to have any two-state arrangement complicate things. For another, a growing number of secular Palestinians have given up on the two-state dream, believing that any Palestinian state achieved in that way would lack either adequate territory or sufficient sovereignty, or both. It remains to be seen whether those secular Palestinians still loyal to the two-state concept will remain in power for long.

What happens now?

For its part, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says she will announce a new policy Friday evening at a major public address in Washington. As for Israel, its government is not likely to announce much of anything on this subject any time soon.

It's on the Palestinian side that real movement may take place. Buoyed by Brazil and Argentina's recent decisions to recognize the Palestinian state based on the Palestinian-populated territories prior to the 1967 Six-Day War, Palestinian leaders are urging others, including the United States, to follow suit. And, just last Friday, Mr. Abbas announced he "cannot accept to remain the president of an authority that doesn't exist," referring to Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank. Would that mean he might dissolve the Palestinian Authority and invite Israel to again fully occupy the territory, taking responsibility for all administration? Yes, that's exactly what he's telling the Israelis, he said. "I say to them: welcome ... you are occupiers. You are here, stay here, I cannot accept the situation will remain as is."

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