

Mideast peace talks chess game amid political stalemate

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by Matthew Rusling

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 (Xinhua) -- While peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians have stalled, both sides are feeling each other out during the one-month period the Arab League has given Washington to revive the negotiations, some experts said.

In a game of bluffs and poker faces, each camp is using public statements and media coverage to gauge the other camp's position, what chips the other camp holds and how much leverage it can hope to attain, some experts said.

And that has some analysts voicing optimism: while the political process halted soon after it was launched, at least some means of communication continues, albeit not through the usual channels, they said.

The talks, which began in early September after a nearly two-year hiatus, have remained deadlocked since mid-September over Israel's refusal to extend a freeze on settlement building in the West Bank.

Still, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently suggested he would support another freeze on Israeli settlements if the Palestinians agreed to accept the idea of a Jewish state.

"That's a bargaining position and not something that has much chance of happening. But the fact that Netanyahu made some kind of offer suggests that he's willing to bargain," said David Pollock, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The Palestinians were quick to reject the offer but Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said in an interview on Israeli television Sunday that his side would make no more historical claims against Israel in exchange for a Palestinian state.

The Palestinians want to set up a state spanning Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which the Israelis claimed in 1967. While Israel has pulled out of Gaza, around half a million Israelis remain in other places captured during war.

Abbas's offer is a significant signal of the Palestinians' willingness to at least bargain, Pollock said, adding that the Palestinians are not ready to give up on the peace process, even though it is not going anywhere at the moment, he said.

While such statements are purely tactical, their mere existence is a sign that negotiations could continue, Pollock said.

He added that the Arab League's one-month time line could also be extended. "We are in the stage of everyone finding a reason to delay unilateral action," Pollock said.

ALL QUIET UNTIL U.S. CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

The U.S. Congressional elections, which are set for Nov. 2, present another factor, some experts said.

Leon T. Hadar, fellow at the Cato Institute, said Netanyahu is buying time now, as he understands that Obama is unlikely to ratchet up pressure on Israel during the U.S. election season.

What happens after the mid terms will depend on realities in Washington -- if Democrats take heavy losses, Obama will be in a weaker position to press Israel, Hadar said.

The Obama administration has consistently voiced its disapproval of Israel's building of new housing units in the West Bank, calling it one of the major obstacles to peace.

But whether or not Obama's position weakens after the elections, neither side is likely to just walk away from the bargaining table, Hadar said.

For its part, the Obama administration continues to urge both parties to hammer out a unilateral deal.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is expected to deliver remarks to the American Task Force on Palestine Fifth Annual Gala on Wednesday evening in Washington and reaffirm the U.S. commitment to a two-state solution and a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, according to the U.S. State Department.

COULD TALKS STILL DERAIL?

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that the talks will stay on track, and some experts can produce a laundry list of reasons why they think negotiations could collapse.

Khaled Elgindy, former advisor to the Palestinian leadership and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, said he does not see Netanyahu's offer to recognize Israel as constructive, as the Israeli leader failed to outline exact boundaries.

He added that there are few reasons for optimism at this point - after all, talks have stalled less than two months after they started, he said.

Moreover, they fell apart because the Obama administration lacks a strategy to deal with the settlement freeze -- an issue looming on the horizon since the launch of the talks, he said.

"Even if (the Obama administration) is able to get us over the one month or two month hump, you just kicked the can down the road another two months and then where are you? What have you accomplished?"

"So are we just going to go month to month, crisis to crisis in a type of dynamic that is extraordinarily draining for all the parties?" he said.

The Obama administration needs to use this time out to come up with a plausible strategy to deal with issues that it foresees arising in the course of the negotiations, he said.

"It's like a chess game, they ought to be able to anticipate a couple of moves ahead, but they don't seem to be doing that," he said of the Obama administration.