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Netanyahu poised to win razor-thin support for West Bank freeze

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will apparently be able to muster a majority of his diplomatic-security cabinet to approve an additional 90-day freeze on West Bank settlement construction in exchange for an incentive package from the United States.

But Netanyahu's majority will be a razor-thin one, made possible only by Shas ministers' agreement to either abstain or absent themselves from the vote.

Shas chairman Eli Yishai said yesterday that his party would take this step "if it is made clear in a letter from the president of the United States that construction will take place in Jerusalem immediately, and that after 90 days, it will be possible to build everywhere, without restrictions."

Shas' abstention would presumably give Netanyahu a 7-6 majority for the freeze, since votes in favor are expected from himself, three other members of his Likud party (Yuval Steinitz, Gideon Sa'ar and Dan Meridor), both Labor ministers (Ehud Barak and Benjamin Ben-Eliezer) and Yaakov Neeman, an independent affiliated with Yisrael Beiteinu. The six opponents are expected to be the three Yisrael Beiteinu ministers (Avigdor Lieberman, Uzi Landau and Yitzhak Aharonovitch) and the three remaining Likud ministers (Moshe Ya'alon, Silvan Shalom and Benny Begin).

Netanyahu briefed his forum of seven top ministers on the American proposal Saturday night and the rest of the cabinet yesterday morning. But he said the package is not yet final; certain details remain to be worked out.

"When the work is finished, I'll bring the matter to the diplomatic-security cabinet for a

discussion and vote," he promised.

But it seems unlikely that such a vote will be held this week. Defense Minister Ehud Barak left for Europe yesterday and will return only on Thursday, while U.S. President Barack Obama returned to Washington from his trip to Asia only yesterday, and must still approve the verbal understandings that Netanyahu reached with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week. Then, if Obama does approve the deal, he must ensure that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas agrees to resume talks with Israel on the basis of a three-month freeze. Only after that will the understandings be finalized into a presidential letter and sent to Israel for the diplomatic-security cabinet to approve.

Nevertheless, Obama indicated yesterday that he does expect the deal to go through.

"I think it is promising," he told reporters upon arriving in the U.S. yesterday, referring to the news from Israel.

"I commend Netanyahu," he added, according to Reuters. "It signals he is serious."

At a meeting of ministers from Netanyahu's Likud party yesterday, four ministers vocally opposed the deal, with the most vehement being Ya'alon, one of two vice prime ministers.

"Extending the freeze is a honey trap," he warned. "It will send us down the slippery slope, and the freeze will lead us to another crisis with the American administration at the end of the three months, and maybe even sooner."

Shalom, the other vice prime minister, also assailed the proposal, saying the biggest problem was not the three-month freeze, but the concomitant U.S. pressure to begin immediate negotiations with the PA on borders during this time.

"It's a strategic mistake to condition an American veto [in the UN Security Council] and diplomatic assistance from Washington on a continuation of the settlement freeze," he added, referring to two elements of the promised American incentive package. "These are things that ought to be self-evident based on the two countries' alliance."

Netanyahu, explaining why he thought Israel should accept the American offer, told the ministers, "an international situation has developed that must be taken into account. There's an American proposal here that mandates serious discussion. In any case, we will talk about all the issues [with the PA], not just about borders."

The prime minister's aides said later that he has no intention of complying with the U.S. demand to discuss borders first, noting that he told Clinton last week "all the issues must be on the table."

But he also told Clinton that Jerusalem should be the last item on the agenda, due to its sensitivity.

Intelligence and Atomic Energy Minister Dan Meridor, a Likud member of the inner forum of seven top ministers, told Haaretz in an interview published today that if the three-month freeze does lead to renewed talks with the PA, Israel should seek to obtain a final border that roughly follows the route of the separation fence and leaves the large settlement blocs as part of Israel (see page 7).

If Israel does not withdraw from most of the West Bank, he said, the result will be "a binational state that will endanger the Zionist enterprise."

Despite the opposition both within Likud and from some of its coalition partners, it seems the coalition would survive a decision to extend the freeze.

Yisrael Beiteinu, though opposed to the extension, has already made it clear that it will not quit the coalition over this issue, and the same goes for Shas. The only party that has threatened to quit is Habayit Hayehudi, which comprises three MKs. It is not yet clear whether they will follow through on their threat.

But coalition members were not the only ones who objected to the proposed deal: MK Ahmed Tibi (United Arab List-Ta'al) deemed the American offer "dangerous, as it enables the Israeli government to continue building in East Jerusalem while giving a green light for construction throughout the territories at the end of the three months. The United States is a partner in the greatest waste of time in history."

In contrast, MK Otniel Schneller (Kadima) urged the government to agree to the freeze, even though he himself is a settler. "Ideological and political obstinacy will lead to a binational state," he warned. "We as settlers must put Israel's national interests above all and accept the American proposal."

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