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## **The United States Congressional Elections: The Significance for Israel**

**Oded Eran**

President Barack Obama's first six years in the White House were marked by personal strain between him and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and disagreements between them on key issues, above all the Israeli-Palestinian political process and the Iranian nuclear issue. While the two leaders have met many times, sharp disagreements have continued to cloud their relations. The coming two years will severely test the relations between the two leaders and US-Israel bilateral relations, due to the complexity of the issues on the agenda and the results of the recent American elections, which gave the Republican Party control of both houses of Congress. A full-blown confrontation between a Congress controlled by one party and a president from the other party usually has negative internal consequences, with the president deemed a lame duck during the two remaining years of his term. This article, however, examines how the expected tension between Congress and the President will affect Israel.

This is not the first time in American political history that this political configuration has occurred. For Israel, such situations create a dilemma, if not a trap that Israel has sought to avoid. Israel has always stressed its reliance on bipartisan support, and has tried to create a broad coalition based on cooperation across party lines. Every so often, Israeli prime ministers and ministers have slipped by failing to withstand the temptation to express their opinion for or against candidates and presidents in office, but a policy of political neutrality has generally been maintained. At the same time, there has been an increasing sense in recent years that the Israeli prime minister and other senior Israeli officials clearly prefer the Republican Party, and presumably the results of the November 2014 elections were well received by many in Israel. Yet without deflating the political satisfaction, those enjoying it should understand the consequences of the situation created between the US administration and Congress for matters that are of vital interest to Israel.

The US Congress is not a substitute for the administration, which has the executive power. For example, Congress decides how much defense aid to allot to Israel – whether in response to requests from the administration, or on its own initiative. It has already happened in the past that due to a confrontation with Israel, the administration sought to reduce aid to Israel, but Congress refused. In both of the key issues on the agenda – the

political process and the Iranian nuclear issue – that will command much political focus and activity in the near future, Congress can recommend policy, criticize Obama, and try to create difficulties if it believes that his policy is incorrect. However, Congress cannot prevent the president from acting one way or another. If and when a draft resolution on the Palestinian issue is brought before the UN Security Council, Congress cannot force the President to cast a veto. American administration officials are already preparing a resolution that will avoid the casting of an American veto in the Security Council (even without any reference to East Jerusalem, the resolution is unacceptable to Israel, because it refers to the 1967 borders with agreed exchanges of territory). Congress, however, cannot instruct the administration to accept any particular version, nor can it issue instruction on how the US should vote in the Security Council. Furthermore, even Israel's closest and most dedicated friends in Congress will likely not consider "punishing" the President through legislative action having nothing to do with foreign policy matters. That has not happened in the past, and will presumably not happen in the future.

If the US does not veto a US Security Council resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it can be assumed that three quarters of the Senate will sign an angry letter to the President, but the letter will not change his position, even if it arrives before the vote. Three decades ago, Congress stopped US allocations to a number of international organizations, including UNESCO, when they passed vehemently anti-Israeli resolutions. Congress can threaten to repeat this precedent, but the process is a complicated one, and probably cannot be planned and executed in the few weeks left for discussion, if any, in the Security Council.

The situation regarding the Iranian question may be more complex, although here too Congress cannot prevent the President from signing an agreement with Iran that includes concessions opposed by senior Republicans. In the case of the Iranian nuclear program, there are possible effective actions that Congress can take; for example, it can delay the rescinding of the sanctions legislated by Congress. Such action, or similar action, will necessarily position Israel in the middle of a confrontation between the administration and Congress. This does not mean that Israel is not entitled to criticize a possible agreement with Iran and to voice this criticism to the Congress. At the same time, Israel should avoid appearing to incite the Republican-controlled Congress to act against a Democratic administration. Israel's situation in this context will be more comfortable if those criticizing the agreement with Iran before and after it is signed include members of both parties.

Both the Israeli government and the US administration will need much restraint in Obama's last two years as President in order to prevent a further deterioration in the bilateral relations and the recourse to respective political party frameworks during the

debate between them. Yet beyond the immediate aspect of managing the tension on the Palestinian and Iranian fronts, Israel should take into account the demographic-political changes taking place in the US, including those occurring in different generations and sectors of the Jewish population. In addition, minority groups, whose political involvement has been negligible for many years, are expanding their influence, whether because they account for a larger proportion of the population, or because they have simply become more active. These include ethnic, ideological, and other minorities (such as the homosexual community, for example) that rely on greater openness in American society, and are therefore identified with the Democratic Party. The historical and ideological affinity with Israel and the recognition of the special status of Israel-US relations are unknown to large parts of these populations. The media, which reports the ongoing friction between the administration and Israel, exacerbates the damage to Israel's image in American public opinion. Given this background, an unqualified identification with a party considered conservative is not to Israel's benefit.

Furthermore, the sweeping Republican victory in the Congressional elections indicates virtually nothing about the 2016 presidential elections. On November 4, 2014, the US cast a vote of criticism and protest against an incumbent president, and not necessarily a vote in favor of Republican ideology. At the very least, therefore, Israeli politicians should look forward to 2016, and remember that while a president in office caused his party to lose control of the Senate, a charismatic presidential candidate is likely to carry candidates from his party to victory. Moreover, the voting pattern of the American Jewish community remains solidly inclined toward the Democrats, even if the percentage has declined somewhat. Balance and restraint are therefore the name of the game for Israel in Washington – until January 2016, and beyond.

