

## **US midterm elections and implications for the Middle East**

*By Lamis Andoni*

The resounding defeat of the Democratic Party in the United States midterm congressional elections has clearly weakened President Barack Obama's hand on both the domestic and foreign policy fronts. With a new Congress, US foreign policy – at least as regards the Middle East – will remain pro-Israeli, and will maintain the goal of boosting Israel and weakening Iran. But the tone and manifestation of this policy will undergo changes that will result in hard-line tactics that will serve to increase the pressure on the the Palestinians, Syria and Iran.

With the changes in the two houses of Congress, right-wing Republicans will gain more power, thus limiting Obama's room for manoeuvre on foreign policy issues – ranging from China and North Korea to Russia, Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Democratic Party's loss of more than sixty seats in the House of Representatives, and the weakening of the party's grip on the Senate, indicate a serious shift to the right as the two houses have become more pro-Israeli, more supportive of the Netanyahu government, and in favour of a confrontation with Iran.

While it is the White House that leads US foreign policy, a strong oppositional Congress can stop, or at least impede, policy through its control of foreign aid allocations and funding, as well as its power to block ambassadorial and other political appointments in key government positions. Moreover, Congress is very influential in setting the tone for foreign and domestic policies and shaping public opinion – thus narrowing Obama's policy choices even further. The results of the midterm elections therefore mean that Arab leaders, regardless of the status of their relationship with Washington, will be under more pressure to comply with US demands for speeding up normalisation with Israel and to back its actions against Iran. There is no doubt that prospects for a strike against Iran have been boosted by the midterm elections results, but the option of a war is not necessarily inevitable.

Before analysing Obama's positions on the Middle East and the impact of these elections on American policies, it is necessary to note two important facts. First, the Democratic Party loss was mainly a vote against the economic policies of the American president. Obama antagonised the right by increasing

government spending through his healthcare and social security reform, and, at the same, alienated part of his liberal and left-wing constituency by his bailout of the big commercial banks, an intervention that was seen to favour big money over the welfare of workers, the poor, and even the middle class. The economic crisis, which began before Obama's presidency, is perhaps the major factor behind the Democrats' defeat. Yet the campaign against Obama's economic policies, which were portrayed as 'socialist', and, sometimes, even as 'communist', went hand-in-hand with the portrayal of him as a Muslim anti-Israeli president.

Second, Obama was already under tremendous pressure from pro-Israel groups and the Congress, which were forcing him to retract or shift from some of his initial positions on Iran and Israel. It is important to stress that Obama's initial positions were already based on support for Israel as an overriding factor in American policy-making, linked to the marginalising of Iran's influence and the neutralising of Syria by creating distance between it and Iran. Obama differed with his predecessor, George W. Bush, by adopting a conciliatory tone towards the Arab and Muslim worlds, and emphasising dialogue and engagement. But his June 2009 Cairo speech to the Muslim world, which is regarded as his major outreach to the Muslim world, did not deviate from the American strategic foreign policy goal of guaranteeing Israeli security and supremacy in the region. It did, however, indicate a relatively better understanding of Palestinian national aspirations by the president – a factor that created an illusion in the Arab world of a genuine quest for a just peace for the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

#### On Palestine

More concretely, Obama's emphasising that Jewish settlements were illegal – rather than simply being 'an obstacle to peace' as his predecessors were fond of saying – and his initial insistence on a complete halt to all settlement activity seemed to have lent some credibility to his rhetoric. His demand that a settlement freeze was a prerequisite for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks emboldened the Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority to insist that a moratorium should take effect before the PA would return to the negotiating table.

Obama would soon discover that imposing preconditions on Israel was acceptable neither to the Democrats nor the Republicans. Support for Israel is a bipartisan project in the US, and the pro-Israeli lobby has strong influence in Congress. What made matters worse for the American president was that many Republicans sided with Netanyahu while Democrats were sympathetic to the Israeli Kadima Party – which is not in government. But the pressure to halt settlements was a red line that was rejected by the majority of Democrats and Republicans.

Obama soon began retreating; he first moved from a call to halt settlement building to a mere 'freeze' on settlements; then he dropped that demand as a prerequisite for direct talks, redirecting pressure away from Israel and onto the Palestinian leadership. The Israeli lobby launched a media campaign, arguing that Obama had committed an error that needed rectification. The pressure bore fruit when, in June 2009, veteran pro-Israel diplomat Dennis Ross was moved from the state department to the White House, and appointed special assistant to the president. Under Ross' guidance the president stepped up the pressure on the Palestinians and on Arab countries, demanding that they authorise a resumption of Palestinian-Israeli talks.

No sooner had the talks resumed than the Palestinians suspended negotiations when Israel refused to extend a moratorium on a partial settlement freeze that had ended on 26 September 2010. Obama, wary of applying any pressure on Israel lest it jeopardised his party's prospects in the midterm elections, asked the Arabs to give him a chance until after the poll. Meanwhile, Ross was gaining the upper hand and prepared a package proposal that called for a two-month partial freeze on settlements in return for unprecedented security pledges from the US, including a guarantee that the future negotiated Palestinian state would be disarmed and would effectively remain under Israeli control. The package, rejected by Netanyahu, gave Obama a much-needed boost as it seemed to prove his commitment to Israeli security objectives.

It is difficult to assess if Obama's call for a settlement freeze affected the midterm elections. But it can be concluded that the right-wing campaign against Obama, even if it was mostly focused on his economic policies, played on the notions of him as a Muslim and as anti-Israeli. For example, The

Israel Project, an increasingly influential public relations group that supports Israeli president Binyamin Netanyahu, ran commercials on the eve of the elections portraying Netanyahu as an advocate for peace and prosperity, and advocated for America's 'independence from Middle East oil'. The timing of the advertisements was not coincidental, because pro-Netanyahu campaigns are essentially anti-Obama campaigns. While the majority of American Jewish voters are believed to support the Democratic Party, the pro-Israel campaign targeted Jewish and non-Jewish supporters of Israel across the party line, but appealed more to non-partisan and non-traditional voters.

An exit poll conducted by Jim Gerstein showed that sixty-six percent of Jewish voters voted for Democratic Party candidates. This is not surprising since many Jewish voters supported Obama's economic policies, and, furthermore, support for Israel is not confined to any single party in the US. Democrats have a solid historical record in support of Israel. This time around, however, there was a division between supporters of the extreme right-wing coalition government of Netanyahu on the one hand and the supporters of Kadima and the Labour Party on the other. Thus, the hard-line pro-Israeli groups' advocacy campaigns were in harmony with Republican Party campaigns and rhetoric which openly supported Netanyahu's positions and not just Israel in general. This was the same approach adopted by Christian evangelical voters who reportedly made a high showing at balloting centres, and contributed to the Republican victory.

## Iran and Syria

Obama's position on Iran and Syria spurred the right-wing campaign against him soon after his presidency began. Pro-Israeli groups, and the American right in general, had pushed for a strike against Iran and for an increase in the isolation of Syria throughout the two George W. Bush presidential terms. Obama's initial endorsement of a 'soft power' approach was immediately met with rejection from the right, and even from some quarters within his own party. His adopting a policy of keeping Iran contained through engagement was instantly attacked by the neo-conservatives and their supporters – whose influence continued even after Bush's departure from the White House, the pro-Israeli lobby, and many Republicans who advocated war against Iran.

Even among those who supported engagement of Iran, the goal was to weaken the Iranian regime and court the rising opposition without dropping the military option against Tehran. Israel was alarmed by what it viewed as Obama's attempt to avoid using force against Iran, and launched a campaign to step up pressure on the Obama administration to give Israel a green light to carry out a strike against Iran. Obama, who had already embarrassed himself with his commitment to win the war in Afghanistan, appeared to be serious about avoiding a military confrontation with Iran, thus angering the Republicans and pro-Israeli groups and members of congress.

Bowing to pressure, Obama announced that he did not exclude a military option against Tehran. He then provided what seemed to be a deadline of the end of 2009 before he would make a final decision. But the deadline passed and Obama was still steering away from a commitment to war with Iran. His main concern was the partial withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by September 2010, and he could not afford a military showdown with Tehran while a large percentage of American troops were preparing to withdraw from neighbouring Iraq where Iran was emerging as the dominant external power.

Such a withdrawal of troops also required the cooperation of Syria and Turkey; the first is regarded as an Iranian ally, and the second proved not to support the US policy of besieging Tehran. In fact, Turkey's position was a blow to the US policy towards Iran in more than one regard. Originally, Obama had been very supportive of Turkey's emergence as a strong regional power – mainly because he saw in that country a counterforce to Iranian influence. But Turkey had a different vision. It's 'zero problems' foreign policy envisioned an improvement of relations with all its neighbours and the countries of the region as a major source of its power, one which could enhance its ability as a regional and international power broker. Within that context, expanding political and trade relations with Iran enabled Turkey, in the opinion of its political strategists, to ensure stability in neighbouring Iraq, Syria, and Turkey's Central Asian border countries. Ties with Iran would also facilitate Turkey's role as a mediator between the west and the east, it believed.

Turkey's demand that Israel apologise for killing nine of its citizens on board the Mavi Marmara, an aid ship bound for Gaza, created new pressure on Obama to alter the status of Turkey from friend to foe. The US Congress wanted Turkey to return to its role as a strong ally of Israel, and unquestioningly to follow American policies in the region. But, when Obama finally bowed to pressure to tighten sanctions on Iran, a more independent Turkey voted against strengthening United Nations sanctions, further angering Republicans who blamed Obama's policies for a failure to undermine Iran.

Republicans were also suspicious of Obama's overtures to Syria. While the pro-Israeli US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, talked tough with Syria, Obama relied on John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to reach unpublicised understandings with Syrian President Hafez Al Assad. The rationale was that, by giving Syria a green light to restore some of its influence in Lebanon, Damascus would be more cooperative in contributing to political stability in Iraq. The main aim was to create distance between Syria and Iran. Again, the Republicans and hard-line Democrats opposed the policy towards Syria as they wanted a clear policy targeting Iran and Hizbullah in Lebanon. The congressional opposition succeeded, and the US renewed economic sanctions under the Syria Accountability Act, which had been originally imposed in 2004. This resulted in Syria being drawn closer to Hizbullah and Iran. Even before the elections, Obama was unable to get congressional confirmation for the people he chose as ambassadors to Syria and Turkey.

Although the midterm election was a reflection of disappointment with domestic policies, the Republicans and Israel presented the results as a victory for a more hard-line approach towards Tehran. In addition to the overall loss in the number of Democrats elected, the party also lost three key posts to the Republicans. John Boehner will almost certainly take over as Speaker of the House, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen as chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Eric Cantor will be the new majority leader. All three are very pro-Israeli and ardent supporters of a showdown with Iran. While John Kerry will remain the chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, the Republican gains have strengthened the position of hard-liners – especially that of the staunchly anti-Iran and pro-Israel Mitch McConnell. In other words, the foreign services committees in both houses will no longer automatically defer to the White House's policy for guidance. Foreign policy issues will be subject to tough negotiations in Congress, weakening Obama's hand at foreign policy manoeuvring.

## **Implications for Palestinians and Iran**

**What does this mean for Israeli-Arab negotiations and for Iran? Obama will be pressed to rectify his record on domestic policies, which means reaching agreements with the Republicans. Those agreements may include trades-off on foreign policy, prompting the president to toughen his tone towards the Palestinians, Iran and Syria. He will still try to reach a breakthrough deal between Israel and the Palestinians, but will expect (even more) compromises from the Arab side.**

**In post-election statements, US officials reiterated that they have not abandoned their efforts to engage in a process that will lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state; but that goal is more unlikely than ever unless the Americans force the Palestinians to accept an Israeli-determined arrangement, a situation that no Palestinian leader can accept. Israel is expected to act with even more impunity, especially since the Republican victory has further strengthened the status of the extreme right-wing Israeli coalition government.**

**Obama will remain reluctant to wage war on Iran, but he might endorse new tactics. A possible scenario is that he agrees to covert actions inside Iran. Republicans, other hard-liners and Israel will continue to push for an American or Israeli strike against Iran. The chances for war will be boosted if Obama comes to a decision that military action will be the only option that will boost the American economy and produce more jobs.**