



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The US 2018 Midterms and 2020 Presidential Election: Implications for Israel

by Doron Feldman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 926, August 20, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Last month, 28-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez upset highly regarded Democrat Joe Crowley – considered number 4 in the Democratic Party and a staunch supporter of Israel – to win the Democratic primary for US Congress in New York's Queens district. This surprising victory shows the growing strength of the leftist-socialist-progressive wing of the Democratic Party – a wing that supports anti-Israeli positions and advocates the removal of members of the party's moderate liberal wing. Israel must prepare for the day when the leftist-socialist-progressive wing gains hegemony, first in the Democratic Party (which now seems almost certain) and then perhaps in the US Congress and the presidency.

The domestic crisis of the 2016 US presidential election, which many believe began during Barack Obama's presidency, continues to worsen as the legitimacy of President Donald Trump is contested daily by the Democratic Party, the media, and the academy. The intensification of disputes and political rivalries within American society, specifically between the right-conservative wing and its supporters and the left-socialist-progressive wing, is undermining the American democratic system and weakening the country's position as a superpower, and may even drag the US into another (probably unarmed) civil conflict.

The accumulating signs of this conflict include:

- the policy of removing statues and monuments of Confederate soldiers and heroes

- the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in July 2017 at which a counter-protester was killed
- the attempted mass murder by left-wing activist James Hodgkinson of the entire Republican Congressional baseball team, resulting in critical injuries to Republican Congressman Steve Scalise
- the refusal of leading cities to comply with federal law on illegal immigration into their municipal territory

These events are against the backdrop of recent public opinion polls showing that President Trump is currently enjoying his highest level of support since the beginning of his term at 42-45% and when the US economy is growing impressively. US GDP recorded a growth rate of 4.1% at the end of second quarter 2018 and an unemployment rate of just under 4%, the lowest in decades. The unemployment rate among African-Americans in particular is at the lowest rate in recorded history.

Given the increasing polarization of American society, and despite the impressive figures and achievements of the Trump administration in both the domestic and foreign arenas, maintaining the Republican Party's narrow majority in the midterm Congressional elections on November 6, 2018 will be a challenging task for the party, its members, and the president. It is reasonable to assume that social tensions in the US will increase as the midterms approach, and that the rhetoric on both sides will ratchet up accordingly (as was the case in the run-up to the presidential election in 2016).

If the Democratic Party wins a majority in Congress, it will certainly attempt to impose restraints on presidential policy and on patterns of power distribution in the American political system. Beyond those efforts, it might intensify the push to get Trump out of the White House entirely, which some Democrats see as a possibility against the background of the ongoing investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 elections.

President Trump is leading an unequivocally pro-Israel foreign policy, and the loss of a Republican-dominated Congress could harm his ability to maintain that policy. This could have clear implications for a potential resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even before the midterms, the administration has had to delay publication of Trump's peace plan aimed at ending the conflict.

As long as Trump has to deal with domestic challenges to his legitimacy as president, the ability of his administration to realize its interests and those of its allies on foreign and security issues will be undermined. If the Democratic Party wins a majority in the Congressional elections and does indeed attempt to

impeach Trump, a deep crisis in American society and politics will ensue that can significantly harm the ability of the US to deal with matters of foreign policy.

In light of this, Israeli decision-makers must recognize what is happening in American society and politics and prepare strategically for the worst possible outcome. If the Democrats manage to overtake the Republican majority in Congress as a result of the midterm elections, Washington could significantly reduce its military and diplomatic involvement in the Middle East, perhaps even to the point that it ceases to function as a superpower in the region and in the world – a situation that would benefit Russia and China. In the longer term, Israel's decision-makers must consider and prepare for the possibility that the midterms are a harbinger of the presidential election of 2020.

Several individuals from the leftist-socialist-progressive wing of the Democratic Party are considering running for the presidency in 2020. They include Bernie Sanders, who won 43.1% of the vote in the 2016 Democratic primary, and Elizabeth Warren, who dubiously claims to be of Native American descent. Both these candidates have expressed anti-Israel positions. If they are elected, they can be expected to follow through on those positions, not only in terms of US policy but also at the UN.

Should the party opt instead to nominate a more old-school Democrat in the person of Joe Biden or Hillary Clinton, they too can be expected to exert direct pressure on Israel on the Palestinian issue. They would likely do so in order to be seen as continuing the spirit of the Obama administration, and to show their responsiveness to the party's younger and often more stridently anti-Israel members.

This tension within the Democratic Party reflects the broader volatility and radicalization of American society. Most minority groups in the US, including most non-Orthodox American Jews, as well as residents of deep blue states like California and New York, tend to vote for extreme figures in the Democratic Party along the lines of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Such candidates support progressive socialist agendas aimed at creating a new order in the US. These agendas include protecting the environment, as well as correcting perceived injustices to, and offering unqualified support for, the LGBT, feminist, black, Hispanic, and Native American communities. These agendas represent an apotheosis for the trend of aggressive identity politics that has largely consumed the American academy. If it consumes American politics as well, it will bring about a real revolution in American society.

Israel must pay close attention to these trends. In the US, there remains a perennial lack of a serious and substantive discussion on Israel based on facts. American perceptions of Israel are often based not on evidence or reality but

on ideological feelings that are fueled by increasingly hostile discourse on American campuses.

As a result, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is itself becoming an arena for intra-American rivalry. It is one of the main issues distinguishing Trump's supporters from his most vociferous opponents. The Palestinians are increasingly perceived as weak and oppressed, compared with Israel, which is perceived as the source not only of Palestinian problems but of all the problems in the Middle East. At the same time, the Republican Party enjoys the support of enemies of the Progressives – the evangelical Christian community, which comprises up to a quarter of the country's population. Evangelicals are sympathetic to Israel, mainly on religious grounds, and made a significant contribution to Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in May.

Ever since the mid-20th century, American Jews have tended to vote for the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate. Israel has traditionally viewed the US Jewish lobby as a significant political force (though it has tended to avoid supporting one of the parties explicitly). But this perception is changing. Many American Jews are withdrawing from Israel entirely. Those who support the progressive agenda sometimes endorse the Palestinian narrative, as well as candidates who support it. This trend is eroding the political standing of the traditional Jewish lobby in the eyes of the State of Israel and increasing the importance of Israel's connection with the evangelical Christian community. This is nothing less than a tectonic change taking place within the context of US-Israel relations.

While the Trump administration is clearly pro-Israel, Jerusalem should not rest on its laurels. It must prepare for the possibility that eventually a president who belongs to the extreme wing of the Democratic Party will serve in the White House and will be likely to hold anti-Israel positions.

If American society reaches a breaking point, some members of the moderate faction of the Democratic Party might secede from the party and run for election as independent candidates. They might even establish a third party that would try to block the extreme anti-Israel policies of the Democratic Party. But if the moderate wing of the Democratic Party chooses to remain and fight for its place in the party, it might be swallowed up by the party's extreme wing.

This would be a nightmare scenario for Israel. In such a situation, Israel could be forced to face heavy political pressure, unilateral UN resolutions on the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 lines, demands for the Palestinian right of return, and perhaps even anti-Israel presidential legislation and decrees forcing Israel to accept Palestinian demands. No compromise

would be required of the Palestinians, and they would not be expected to relinquish any of their claims regarding the conflict.

It is important to remember that despite her loss in the 2016 election, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton won nearly three million more popular votes than Donald Trump. A Republican victory in the 2018 midterms and the 2020 presidential elections is by no means guaranteed. In view of this, Israel must take these actions:

- Strengthen ties with Conservative and Reform Jewish communities in the US. These Americans may one day have to choose between supporting Israel and supporting a Democratic Party with extreme views that are hostile to Israel to the point of endangering its existence. Israel must act to ensure that large parts of the US Conservative community, and also the Reform community, make political choices that support Israel.
- Strengthen the connection with the moderate wing of the Democratic Party.
- Continue to strengthen the strategic alliance with the evangelical Christian community in the US and with the Republican Party.
- Continue to strategically establish alliances and ties with countries throughout the world to reduce dependence on the US, without eroding US-Israeli relations and impairing the status of the special relationship.

Doron Feldman is a PhD student at the School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs at Tel Aviv University.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family