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Obama's defeat is bad news for the peace process

Osama Al-Sharif

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The results of the US mid-term elections last Tuesday were not only bad news for the Democrats and the White House, but also for the Palestinians.

President Barack Obama will emerge weaker at home now that the House of Representatives has been retaken by the Republicans. The Democratic majority in the Senate has been drastically reduced and while the people have spoken it is now up to the President and Congress to find a formula to govern in the remaining two years of Obama's term.

But there were no major surprises in spite of the upset. Polls and pundits have correctly predicted the outcome weeks before the November 2 elections took place. Nine out of 10 voters said they were worried about the economy and about America's future.

Unemployment, foreclosures, bankruptcies, bailouts and the national debt ? and doubts about the government's economic approach to each ? have unified Americans and shattered the euphoria that surrounded Obama's historic victory in 2008.

With a divided Congress and a Republican determination to make Obama a one-term president, it is certain that the White House will be absorbed in bi-partisan confrontations in the coming two years. And with the economy still the number one concern for Americans, the president will be expected to focus more on domestic issues in preparation for 2012.

Obama raised hopes at home and abroad when he was elected two years ago. He promised change at all levels and people listened and celebrated all over the world. He delivered special messages to the Muslim world, vowing to open a new chapter in relations, and he committed himself to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and restarting a peace process that will realise the two-state solution. Only a few weeks ago he announced from the UN that by next year the international community should be ready to welcome the independent state of Palestine.

Now he is not far from becoming a lame duck president; hated by Republicans and the tea partiers and feeling distanced by some of his fellow Democrats. Aside from the tough challenges at home, he still has to end the war in Afghanistan, secure Iraq which is inches from falling apart, and defuse Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In many cases he will need the backing of Congress, but in others he will have to decide on the right strategy all on his own. Foreign policy will remain his prerogative, but when it comes to the Middle East conflict he knows that Israel has many friends on the Hill and that in light of his poor image among Israelis in general he cannot afford a showdown with a right-wing Israeli government.

And Obama must think about his re-election chances. He already knows that Jewish votes will play a crucial role come 2012. Last week The Jerusalem Post said that a McLaughlin and Associates poll carried out last month found that 50.9 per cent of Americans were more likely to vote for a candidate identified as pro-Israel, and just 25.2 per cent were less likely. And when Obama's policies were characterised as publicly criticising and pressuring Israel and not the Palestinians, 27 per cent said they agreed with this approach, and 54.4 per cent said they did not.

Waiting for positive signs

The peace process has stumbled less than a month after it was restarted, again, in Washington in early October. Direct negotiations between Israel and the PNA (Palestinian National Authority) were suspended after the Netanyahu government refused to extend a temporary colony freeze. It went ahead, in spite of US and Palestinian pleas, and approved the building of thousands of new units in East Jerusalem and West Bank colonies.

The Palestinians and the Arab League are still waiting for some positive signs to come from Washington. They will be waiting for a long time. Netanyahu and his right-wing partners understand the meaning of Tuesday's election results more than anyone. They know that Obama has been trounced at home and that he is in no position to put pressure on Israel at this time.

This is indeed bad news for the Palestinians, particularly President Mahmoud Abbas. His choices are all but realistic. Whatever he decides to do he knows that he needs the backing and support of the US administration; something that he can hardly bank on at this time. He can go to the UN and ask the Security Council to recognise a Palestinian state but he knows that such a move is risky and will give Israel the excuse to punish him, the PNA and the Palestinian people.

Likely scenario

His other choices are no less questionable. He will revert to his Arab allies who will only add to his misgivings by telling him that it is his call to make. Israel understands this and it will make sure to use the coming weeks and months to push forward with its own schemes to weaken Arab presence in occupied East Jerusalem and fatten its West Bank colonies.

The more likely scenario is that Obama will re-evaluate his position and policies on a number of foreign policy issues, including the peace process. He will almost certainly back down from his insistence that Israel extend its moratorium on building colonies, and will shift the pressure to the more weaker party that is Mahmoud Abbas. In the end the negotiations may well resume but under different circumstances.

Concessions will be expected but this time it will be the Palestinians who will be asked to make them. In the meantime the US administration will focus its efforts on a more unifying issue: Iran. It can count on bi-partisan support and on Israeli and Arab cooperation. Obama may yet decide to shift his attention from Afghanistan, which can wait until after the 2012 elections, to Iran. In this respect the US and Israeli interests will once again be aligned and in harmony.

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