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The Midterm Setback of President Obama

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[The mid-term elections held in the United States on 2 November were a setback to the Democratic Party. While it managed to retain its hold in the Senate, the party lost the Congress to the Republicans. Coming within two years after his landslide victory, President Barrack Obama's political fortunes were widely commented upon. Editorial commentaries from the Middle Eastern media are reproduced here. **Editor, MEI Media Watch**]

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Jeddah, Editorial, 1 November 2010, Monday

1. Midterm lesson

Blame for Democrats' likely drubbing in US election would be laid on Obama. All the polls suggest that the Democrats face a drubbing in today's (1 November) US midterm elections and much of the blame for their expected losses in Congress is already being laid on President Barack Obama.

There is widespread disappointment at his performance during his first two years in office. He is seen to have failed to deliver on the promises made in his stunning campaign for the White House. Here in the Arab world, the letdown is felt principally by Obama's failure to deliver on assurances made in his seemingly ground-breaking speech in Cairo on June 29 last year (2009). Though greeted with caution, the president's words offered a new hope for Mideast peace and the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Now 17 months on, nothing has changed. The revived peace talks between the Palestinians and Israelis seem doomed as Israelis continue to build illegal settlements on Palestinian land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Despite major insults to his administration, Obama has not reined in the Israelis by cutting off the purse strings, as his predecessor Dwight Eisenhower did in 1956 after the Ben-Gurion government conspired with the French and British to invade Egypt and seize the Suez Canal.

Indeed Obama has showed himself just as supportive of aggressive Israeli tactics as all other US presidents who followed Eisenhower.

Obama is accused of being strong on rhetoric but pathetically weak on delivery. In his defence, it could be argued that he engendered unrealistic hopes among his supporters. As America's first black president, he himself embodied his mantra of change. With a Muslim father and a far wider experience of the rest of the world than most past occupants of the Oval Office, Obama did originally seem well-qualified to bring about a radical shift in the way the US did business with the rest of the world.

It was all there for the taking. Yet with the exception of the accelerated departure of US occupation forces from Iraq, Obama's approach to foreign affairs has appeared faltering. It took long months before he decided on the troop surge in Afghanistan, which many claimed he then undermined by giving the Taliban a clear date on which US forces would be quitting the country. He fell out with one commander in Afghanistan and relations now appear strained with the successor.

US voters, however, are less interested in foreign policy than domestic issues. Unemployment is high; the US economy, despite recent encouraging figures, continues to struggle; Obama took a hit over the huge BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico and health-care reform. This last was arguably not his fault. Right-wing Democrats used their party's Congressional dominance to savage the proposed legislation and humiliate their president. Democrat arrogance toward the defeated Republicans only added to the rancour that has grown up among opponents and seen the growth of the far-right Tea Party movement.

Yet tomorrow morning (2 November), as he digests the probable bad results, Obama will need to emulate his predecessor Harry Truman who had that sign on his desk saying, "The Buck Stops Here."

Source: <http://arabnews.com/opinion/editorial/article177721.ece>



Editorial, 2 November 2010, Tuesday

2. Obama's opportunity

If Obama succeeds in preventing Iran's nuclearization, this would drastically undermine this region's extremists. It could also help ensure his re-election.

In the best-selling book *Start-Up Nation*, former *Jerusalem Post* editorial page editor Saul Singer and Dan Senor suggest that one of the main reasons for the success of our local hi-tech industry is the ability of Israelis in this field to learn from their failures. The Democratic Party's anticipated loss of control over Congress in Tuesday's (2 November) mid-term elections presents an opportunity for President Barack Obama to follow the lead of those Israelis.

The Republican gains may be internalized by the US president as an overwhelming sign that voters were unhappy with his economic policies, but foreign policy dissatisfaction, including where this region is concerned, may have played a role, too. Polls have consistently shown that Americans want their president to be pro- Israel and that many Americans and Israelis do not believe the policies of the Obama administration thus far have fit that description.

A McLaughlin and Associates poll sponsored last month (October 2010) by the Israel Emergency Coalition found that 50.9 percent of Americans were more likely to vote for a candidate identified as pro-Israel, and just 25.2% were less likely.

Asked whether Obama has been less friendly to Israel than previous presidents, 51.6% said yes and 35.4% said no.

When Obama's policies were characterized as publicly criticizing and pressuring Israel and not the Palestinians, 27% said they agreed with this approach, and 54.4% said they did not.

Obama himself and his former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel have admitted that mistakes were made in the administration's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

That admission was followed up with what appeared to be a sincere effort to reach out to Israelis with the positive reception Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu received at the White House in

July (2010) and a warm interview Obama gave to Channel 2, in which he called preventing Iran's nuclearization his "No. 1 foreign policy priority."

But the outreach to Israelis appeared to take a step backward last month (October 2010) when Obama returned to publicly pressuring Netanyahu for concessions in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly. "Israel's settlement moratorium has made a difference on the ground, and improved the atmosphere for talks," he said. "We believe that the moratorium should be extended."

Obama's very public call for the extension of the moratorium made it all but impossible for the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table without Netanyahu breaking a promise he had made repeatedly to the people of Israel – to limit the moratorium on settlement housing starts to 10 months. Were it not for that public US pressure for a settlement halt, indeed, the negotiations might have resumed much earlier than they did, and might not have so rapidly lapsed again.

Now Obama has at least two and possibly six years to adjust his course, the better to serve the emphatically shared Israeli-American interest in finding a viable, stable accommodation with the Palestinians.

A vital first step is that Obama make crystal-clear to Palestinian leaders that there would be significant negative consequences if they declared a state unilaterally. This is key for the advancement of the peace process, because if the Palestinian Authority is given to believe that the international community will endorse a state that has not come to terms with Israel, this will leave no incentive for the PA to accept the terms of compromise that are critical to a viable accord.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak remarked in a recent interview that, historically, Israeli governments had made concessions when they had one of three things: a trusted Arab partner, a revered American mediator or a desire to relinquish territory unilaterally. He said the first was true when Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, the second was true when he and Netanyahu made concessions to Bill Clinton, and the third occurred when Ariel Sharon withdrew from the Gaza Strip. Barak said that currently, Netanyahu lacked all three. Obama can help begin to change this by making his first visit to Israel as president at a strategically smart time.

Another constructive suggestion for Obama is to accompany the international sanctions on Iran with a credible military threat. The only time the Iranians froze their nuclear program was when American coalition forces invaded Iraq and Iran felt threatened.

Vice Premier Moshe Ya'alon has said that Obama can blame problems with Afghanistan and

Iraq on his predecessor, George W. Bush, but if Iran gets the bomb on his watch, that failure would be what people remember most about his presidency. If, however, Obama succeeds in preventing Iran's nuclearization, this would drastically undermine this region's extremists, liberate the moderates and strongly enhance the prospects of peace. It could also help ensure his re-election.

Source: <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editorials/Article.aspx?id=193745>



Beirut, Editorial, 2 November 2010, Tuesday

3. US peace-talk slack will fuel extremism

All eligible voters in the US can go to the polls Tuesday (2 November) to elect an entirely new House of Representatives and about one-third of the Senate – an admirable exercise in democracy almost entirely absent from the Middle East; alas, this particular election could well turn into a catastrophe for this region.

For should the Republicans gain control of Congress – or, realistically, winning a majority in the House of Representatives would suffice – the chances for the Palestinians winning a peace deal with the Israelis would become, to put it diplomatically, remote.

The promising forecasts for the Republicans – predicted to gain a 20-seat majority in the House by many reputable polls, while the Democrats still might well keep a one- or two-seat majority in the Senate – have surely been at the forefront of Benjamin Netanyahu's plans.

Knowing what a Republican victory in Tuesday's (2 November) midterms would mean for Barack Obama, Netanyahu has been busy – as usual – creating new realities on the ground, i.e., work on another 600-odd settler homes since the expiration in late September (2010) of the moratorium on settlement construction.

To sum up, the Israelis took Obama for a ride. They posed for the photo ops, sat down and looked serious at the negotiating table, flew to Washington – made all the customary dance steps, all the while with one eye on, and a smile at, his sinking approval rating. A House of Representatives majority for Republicans – who know no limits in their obsequiousness to the Israelis – means that Obama's attempts to pressure the Israelis in the peace process, however fumbling, will vanish.

The Palestinians took Obama's efforts seriously; they did not have many alternate strategies anyway. Netanyahu parried Obama's thrusts just to play for time, waiting for a propitious circumstance – such as a midterm defeat – to let him and his radical-right Cabinet go back to their preferred policies of doing what they can to make a Palestinian state impossible.

To be sure, Bibi and his boys will soon be tut-tut ting about the failed attempt in Yemen to send bombs in parcels to synagogues in Chicago; they will mutter dark fears about the ceaseless security threat they face among these untrustworthy Arabs. Obama offered Israel an overly generous security package to renew the moratorium for 60 days. One would fully expect Netanyahu to take the security gifts and 60 days later get back to the real business of settlement building.

The danger in the possible Republican victory Tuesday (2 November) is that if the US steps back yet again and does not pursue peace genuinely, that will result in the growth of extremism – and extremists – on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide. And any positive outcome is just about impossible to forecast from that campaign.

Source: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17&article_id=121056#axzz14cMR9SV

TheNational

Abu Dhabi, Editorial, 2 November 2010, Tuesday

4. Defeats at home and Mr Obama's policies abroad

It has been hard enough for Barack Obama to change Washington and US foreign policy in his first two years as president. Starting today (2 November), it will only become more difficult.

Mr Obama's party, the Democrats, have controlled both the US Senate and House of Representatives since his inauguration. But as a result of today's (2 November) mid-term elections, that is almost certain to change. Every seat in the House and one-third of seats in the Senate are up for grabs as Americans go to the polls. Mr Obama's party faces a rout.

As he prepares for his own re-election campaign in 2012, it will be difficult if not impossible for Mr Obama to pass much of his domestic agenda. To bolster his battered image at home, he may be tempted to look for victories abroad. Republican gains in Congress will also make this more difficult.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process will present the first chance to see what Mr Obama has learned from his party's defeat. His hand may be weaker in Washington, but Mr Obama remains the only one who has the tools to change Mr Netanyahu's behaviour. He must use them to get the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority back to the negotiating table. And with the damage already done to his own party, Mr Obama may have less to lose from getting tough on Israel.

Republicans will also be tougher on Mr Obama for his conduct of the war in Afghanistan.

Historically, Republicans have found success in criticising the Democrats as weak on defence. They will have another opportunity to do so next summer, when Mr Obama has said that US troops will begin withdrawing from Afghanistan.

Iran may prove trickier still. Republicans have urged a tougher line against Tehran and as they gain in influence, calls for military action will only grow louder. Mr Obama's instincts may favour patience and diplomacy but his political survival may dictate that he take far stronger action. And while a nuclear Iran will certainly make the region less secure, so would the fallout of another bungled US intervention.

Mr Obama must also contend with imbalances in the global economy, and in particular, with how to engage China in helping to resolve them. China's importance to the global economy is only growing. And yet, both Republicans and Democrats will be eager to use China as a scapegoat for many of America's economic woes. Calls for protectionist policies against China, or even a trade war, will become more common if unemployment in the US remains high. Members of Congress will see a short term political benefit in advocating tougher measures against China but enacting them could put the global economy's recovery at risk.

If popular anger in the US spawns protectionist policies, it is not only those in the US and China whose prospects will be dimmed. Indeed, cooling tempers at home may be the greatest challenge for Mr Obama in the next two years.

Source: <http://www.thenational.ae/the-national-conversation/editorial/defeats-at-home-and-mr-obamas-policies-abroad>



Jeddah, Editorial, 3 November 2010, Wednesday

5. US poll results

The electorate has now given President Obama a damning thumbs-down. The outcome of the US midterm elections has been as the polls predicted. The Democrats were the losers and the Republicans the winners. However, that simple analysis hardly begins to convey the magnitude of the political earthquake that has occurred. The implications for President Barack Obama's hopes of being re-elected in 2012 are immense.

For a party that emerged from the 2008 presidential elections in such bad odour, that has since seemed leaderless and split between the party establishment and radicals trying to take it over, the Republicans have performed incredibly well. In the vote for the House of Representatives, there has not been such a swing from one party to another for over 60 years. But that is because this election was not a falling-in-love with the Republicans but a judgment on the Democrats and in particular on Obama. Having given such a resounding thumbs-up to him two years ago (2008), the American electorate has now given him a damning thumbs-down

Polling shows that the economy was the overwhelming issue for the voters and his failure to deliver growth despite the billions spent the reason why so many turned against him. His problem now is that any political initiatives for growth in the next two years which might require fresh funding will not happen. With the House in Republican hands there is going to be legislative gridlock — unless Obama can reach out and do deals with Congress. That will not be easy for a man who, so good at working the public, has proved strangely poor at working the politicians if they do not agree with him. Not all are Republicans.

His first task has to reunite his own party. It should not be difficult. Nothing rallies the troops so much as the prospect of possible defeat. It will, however, mean reaching out to those Democrats who opposed his health-care reforms or did not want his endorsement in the midterm contest. If he decides to be a loner in the White House, standing up to Congress as the anti-establishment champion, he has already lost that battle. As for hoping that the economy will come right in time for November 2012, there is no guarantee of it.

This election has also shown that the Republicans are not without their Achilles' heel. The Tea Party plays to a significant constituency in US political culture, and some candidates it supported won House seats. But it is not popular across the board and there is good reason to conclude that

it cost the party victory in the Senate race, notably in Delaware and Nevada. The Tea Party is not going to go away. It is in the nature of extremists to believe that they alone are right and that one more push will gain them victory. As to where this takes US foreign policy, the answer is probably no change — except in one area. The Republicans are going to want to cut foreign aid or get more value for their money. That will have implications for a number of states in the Middle East and the wider region — in particular Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Palestine and maybe even Israel.

Source: <http://arabnews.com/opinion/editorial/article179484.ece>

gulfnews.com

Dubai, Editorial, 4 November 2010, Thursday

6. Obama should learn from Clinton's term

The time for hype and hope for the US President is gone and he needs to shape up. After one third of US voters went to the polls in Tuesday's (2 November) midterm elections, President Barack Obama is facing the stark political reality that he is the leader of a Congress divided — Republicans having regained control of the House of Representatives, and a Senate where the Democrats majority has been reduced.

United Americans stand against Washington, where the federal government is heading and how it is failing to deal with the economy; divided Americans are as never before on how to fix the list of woes facing the world's most powerful economy, a federal debt of unprecedented proportions and unemployment that is hovering stubbornly at the 10 per cent level.

And for the first time since 9/11, Washington's foreign policy is not on the radar of its electorate.

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Gone too is the message of hope that swept Obama to power just two years ago (2008). Over that time, voters have become disillusioned with his message of change — the change that they have witnessed is one of shrinking pay, higher taxes and less government services.

Where they were once concerned about their international security, now it is the security of their jobs that is on their minds. If there is a war to be fought, it is not one on terror, it is on the

economy and ensuring that jobs are preserved, mortgages can be paid, and the economy can grow at a level to sustain the quality of life to which millions have become accustomed.

The results seem to indicate too that after eight years of the deeply contentious presidency of George W. Bush, Americans have moved on to a moderate extent and are willing to place an 'X' beside the name of Republican candidates.

With the all-important purse strings controlled by Republican lawmakers in the House of Representatives, there is a stark choice facing Obama and his party. They must choose to negotiate and achieve, or revert to a state of political stalemate, where the workings of Washington are deeply divided, its committees more partisan, and its people left to wonder why their federal government is no longer relevant and working for them.

The time for hope and hype is gone. The challenge now is to find a way forward, where the President leads by building bridges and reaching out across the floor to Republicans, not advancing the White House agenda domestically and internationally without partisan consideration. There is a role model for Obama to follow, and it is that of Bill Clinton.

During his eight years, Clinton held a presidency over the divided Congress and worked through compromise to advance a moderate agenda which improved the lives of Americans at home and presented a moderate face abroad.

Should Obama not follow this path, he will be a one-term wonder.

Source: <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/editorials/obama-should-learn-from-clinton-s-term-1.706017>



Jeddah, Editorial, 4 November 2010, Thursday

7. US elections 2010

Voters in Tuesday's (2 November) elections sent President Obama a loud message: They don't like how he's doing his job, they're even angrier at Congressional Democrats and they gave the House back to the Republicans. The Republicans spent months fanning Americans' anger over the economy and fear of "big government," while offering few ideas of their own. Exit polls indicated that they had succeeded in turning out their base, and that the

Democrats had failed to rally their own, said The New York Times in an editorial published Wednesday (3 November). Excerpts:

Americans who voted described themselves as far more conservative as they did in 2006 and 2008 – and than the population as a whole. More than 4 in 10 said that they supported the Tea Party movement. But more than half of the conservatives said they have an unfavourable view of the Republican Party.

The question is: Will either side draw the right lessons from this midterm election? Mr. Obama, and his party, has to do a far better job of explaining their vision and their policies. Mr. Obama needs to break his habits of neglecting his base voters and of sitting on the sidelines and allowing others to shape the debate. He needs to do a much better job of stiffening the spines of his own party's leaders.

He has made it far too easy for his opponents to spin and distort what Americans should see as genuine progress in very tough times: a historic health care reform, a stimulus that headed off an even deeper recession, financial reform to avoid another meltdown.

Mr. Obama has a lot of difficult work ahead of him. The politics in Washington will likely get even nastier. Before he can hope to build the minimal bipartisan consensus needed to move ahead, Mr. Obama will have to rally more Americans to the logic of his policies.

Source: <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2010110486728>



Dubai, Editorial, 4 November 2010, Thursday

8. A mid-term wakeup call

The results of the 2010 US mid-term election should provide a rude awakening to President Barack Obama's Democrat party, to say the least. Poised to run for two terms on basis of the initial wave of euphoria generated by the overwhelming support of the American people, Obama has sadly lost that coveted place.

Even though the Republicans may not be able to take the Senate despite winning seats, they have the House of Representatives — the Congress.

So what does this mean for the Democrats particularly Obama? It means that Obama is likely to face a tough battle ahead within a circumscribed space where he will have to fight hard. The Republicans are already baying for the Democrats' financial services and healthcare reform. More significant is their focus on ensuring that Obama remains a one-term president. The significance of the mid-term election cannot be doubted for it serves a clarion call for the government.

Disgruntlement and disappointment are the key words. The dismal economy is the chief contributor as is the mounting perception that the president is unable to deliver. Besides, Obama is perceived as weak-willed and one who falls short on promises—traits that are unforgivable, especially for one carrying a Herculean load of expectations. To be fair, there may not have been much Obama could have done at least on the economy front given the global economy crisis, but maybe he could have done more than what he did. The way things are going it seems that the Tea Party candidates will have more reason to celebrate unless the government reins in its economic spending that has proved to be its biggest bane.

Political pundits feel that the mid-term elections will not have much of a bearing on Obama's foreign policy that is likely to continue on the same footing. While the impact on foreign policy may not be as visible as on domestic spending and internal policy reforms, there is bound to be inevitable fallout. This is especially true in how other states view Obama's standing. An internally weak US president unfortunately does not command the same respect as does one that has his own house in order. Does the mood of the American public also not echo similar perceptions across the world as far as Obama's will and resolve is concerned? Was he not criticised for his dithering on the Israel-Palestine issue that could have been set on the right course had he taken a firmer stand against Israel on the settlements issue? The dichotomy within his own administration on Afghanistan, and the visible lack of a consensus on major foreign policy issues, has added to the mess.

Unfortunately the reading has been on the wall for a while but was either ignored or dismissed. With the mid-term election having served a dismal verdict against the ruling party, Obama needs to take stock of the rapidly sliding situation and opt for remedial measures. The ball is in his court, yet.

Source:

http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/editorial/2010/November/editorial_November8.xml§ion=editorial&col=



Jeddah, Editorial, 5 November 2010, Friday

9. Predictable election result

The results of Tuesday's (2 November) midterm elections in the US came as no surprise to anyone following the run-up to the vote. In reaction to the country's economic straits, American voters voted with the proverbial pocket book and turned against the party in power, putting Republicans in charge of the House of Representatives and leaving the Democrats' margin in the Senate a very slim one.

The US economy has been a determining factor numerous times before, with the rest of the world looking on as Americans remove parties and presidents that seem perfectly rational and healthy to the rest of the world. Most recently, it was the election of Bill Clinton over George H.W. Bush in 1992 that proved the point. Having engineered an impressive international coalition to support military actions against Iraq in the wake of its invasion of Iraq, Bush was removed from office as the deregulation of the Reagan years began to cut into the economy with the president breaking his "no new taxes" pledge.

Just two years ago (2008), Obama swept into office on idealistic pledges and equally idealistic hopes in the hearts of the electorate. Like the first George Bush, Obama had a tough act to follow. The US economy was already showing signs of being in shambles, and there were two treacherous wars still being waged. Despite the high-flying optimism that ushered in the new president, more sober observers raised countless questions about the ultimate efficacy of government to reverse the economy.

It is unclear what more Obama could have done to reverse his nation's economic slide. He has not fixed the economy and Americans are walking around with fewer jobs, fewer dollars in their pockets and a host of frustrated ambition due to the faltering economy.

Voting in the Republicans may be just as optimistic as voting in Obama two years ago (2008). The party has offered very little on how to reverse the US economy, and has spent the last two years more interested in attacking Obama than offering solutions.

Still, when money is involved, especially one's personal finances, the vote always goes against the incumbent. Whether that will fix the US economy and boost that of the rest of the world is

still to be seen. It is far more the legacy of Reagan, Bush I, Clinton and Bush II than that of two years of Obama's presidency that created the mess.

Source: <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2010110586786>

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