

US-Israel Relations After the November Elections

Background

The election of Bill Clinton to a second term as the 42nd President of the US represents an expression of faith in his economic policy and the direction in which he is steering the country. Clinton is the first Democratic president to be reelected since Franklin Roosevelt despite the trend, becoming apparent in recent years, of a general shift in voter support to the Republican Party (in other words, Republics now comprise a “natural majority”). This trend was manifested in the election of Republican majorities to both houses of Congress, as well as the continued control of 31 of the 50 governorships.

When Clinton was first elected in 1992, a Democrat majority was also elected to Congress: 57 Democrats versus 43 Republicans in the Senate, and 258 Democrats versus 176 Republicans in the House of Representatives. However, in the Congressional elections held in 1994, half-way through Clinton’s first term, the Republicans, under the leadership of Newt Gingrich and supported by a general social-economic-political platform, gained a majority in both houses: The Republicans captured 53 versus 47 Democratic seats in the Senate, and 230 versus 204 Democratic seats in the House (the latter increased to 235 versus 197 seats during 1995-1996 due to the appointment of substitutes for retiring representatives).

In the 1996 elections, Clinton won with 49.9% of the vote, against Bob Dole’s 41% and Ross Perow’s 9%. Despite Clinton’s success, the Republicans retained their majority in Congress: 55 versus 45 Democratic seats in the Senate, and 225 versus 208 Democratic seats in the House.

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The Implications of the Elections on US-Israel Relations

Consistency and Change - The consistent elements in the relationship between Israel and the US pertain to their democratic form of government, shared values, the political power of the Jewish community in the US, and shared regional interests. At the same time, this relationship includes shifting elements flowing from Israeli government policies, specific conflicts (such as the US objection to the establishment of settlements since the 1970s), as well as sporadic disagreements (e.g., the Pollard espionage incident, Israel's sale of weapons to China, and the Lebanon War/ Grapes of Wrath campaign against Lebanon).

Clinton and Israel - Clinton has expressed a fundamental and proven commitment to the foundations of the relationship maintained between the two countries. Hence, during his first term, he avoided direct confrontations with Israel on policy issues at the same time that he extended his support for the peace process initiated by the Rabin-Peres government. Any deviations from this policy could create friction, although direct conflicts, such as those between the Bush and Shamir governments during 1991-1992, seem unlikely at this point.

The reason behind this state of affairs cannot be found among the members of the Republican majority in Congress — who are commonly believed to be stauncher supporters of Netanyahu's positions than is the President — but in the conjunction of two unifying sets of interests: strategic interests based on the avoidance of failure; and the political interests of the Vice-President, Al Gore, whose sees himself as the leading candidate for the Presidency in the year 2000. The supposition according to which Clinton, freed of electoral concerns and financial obligations, as well as the influence of the Jewish community, does not blend well with the political aspirations of the Vice-President, nor does it take into account the fact that Clinton's commitment to the peace process is, first and foremost, a commitment to the successful completion of the process. Nonetheless, the mutual trust held between Clinton and Prime Minister Netanyahu, in the face of the ambivalence felt by Washington decision makers regarding Netanyahu's willingness to advance the process, might still deteriorate to a point of crisis between the two nations.

This evaluation is based on an analysis of the conflicts waged between the America and and Israel governments as of the 1950s, but particularly the 1975 "reassessment," during which President Ford openly opposed the Rabin government on issues related to the intermediate stages of the settlement following the Yom Kippur War.

The Congress and Israel - It is commonly believed in Israel that it is preferable to have a president of one party sitting in the White House and a Congress controlled by another party. No consensus of

opinion has been reached, however, as to what is “better for Israel.” It appears, then, that this assumption is not necessarily correct.

Historically, Israel, and especially the current government, has found it “easier” to deal with a Republican Congress. Nevertheless, we should point out that the number of new congressmen is considerable, their acquaintance with the complexities of the Middle East is minimal and, most importantly, their concerns are focused on internal issues. Despite this situation, the significant isolationist trend in foreign policy that characterized the Republican Party appears to have been halted during the last two years.

The persistence of a Republican majority nonetheless ensures that individuals knowledgeable about Middle East affairs will continue to serve as heads of the Congressional committees pertinent to Israel (Foreign Relations, Budget, Armed Services), and that their willingness to embarrass the President on foreign policy issues will increase as the 1998 mid-term elections approach.

American Jewry and Israel - A current issue bearing the seeds of potential conflict is Israel’s *Religious Conversion Law*, or, in broader terms, the question of “Who is a Jew?” If, in response to a coalition pressures and in contradiction to the promises made by Netanyahu to the American Jewish community, the government acts to change this law, it is quite possible that a conflict may be instigated between the conservative and reform streams of American Jewry and the Israeli government. Such a confrontation would facilitate US government attempts to pressure Israel and to “trap” the individual Congressman between his support for Israel and his long-term obligations to his Jewish voters and supporters.

Summary

The results of the November elections will have no discernable influence on the structure of US-Israel relations. However, the combined results of the elections in both countries may create tensions, especially surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and, perhaps, the Syrian-Israel track as well.