



The US Midterm Elections: Projections for Mideast Policy and Relations with Israel

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A. Introduction

The 2014 American midterm elections on November 4 brought a sweeping victory for the Republican Party, which among other gains retook the Senate. When the new Congress convenes on January 3, 2015, the Republican side of the aisle will likely boast a 54-46 seat advantage over the Democratic Party—a recipe for competition between the Legislative and Executive Branch for the last two years of the Obama administration.

What do the results reveal about the moods of the American people, as well as the Jewish community? What might they signal come the 2016 presidential elections? And how might the Republican victory in the midterm elections influence US foreign policy in the Middle East and relations with Israel?

Following an analysis on these three key questions, this paper concludes that Republican gains do not reflect a significant change in Americans' (and American Jews') perceptions of Middle East foreign policy, that Obama still wields enough authority and determination to prevent his visions for the Middle East from being derailed, and that voting trends look to favor Democrats in 2016.

B. Voter Opinions for the 2014 Midterms

Polls surrounding the 2014 midterm elections on issues most important to American voters and the demographics of actual voter turnout on election day may explain how the country in general views American foreign policy in the Middle East, Obama's performance, and how it swayed their vote. Such findings can also give clues as to what might be different for the presidential election in 2016.

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1. Demographic Trends

A central question remains as to how much disapproval of the Democrats and the president contributed to the Republican victory versus the frequently discussed factor of voter turnout. To better explore this question, it is worthwhile to observe the wider picture and evaluate the demographics of voters in 2014 compared to those in prior midterm and presidential election.

Most notably, as [evidenced in these past elections](#), key Democratic constituencies—minorities and young people—tend to vote disproportionately less during midterms than presidential election. This demographic trend continued in 2014, where turnout was its [lowest since WWII](#), at just 36.4%. [In midterm years](#), voters under 30 composed 12% of the electorate in 2006, 12% in 2010, and 13% in 2014. By contrast, they made up 18% of the electorate in the presidential election cycle of 2008 and 19% in 2012. These trends are reversed for voters over 65, who have far higher rates of voting Republican.

Therefore, while certainly many Republicans may have disapproved of the Democratic leaders in power, and while 52% of Independents chose to vote rightward, poor Democratic voter turnout again dogged the party's midterm prospects.

As for 2016, Republicans will find themselves faced with a higher Democratic turnout from core constituencies more enthusiastic for presidential election and, in the case of Latinos, rapidly growing numbers and [no shift to the right](#). Regarding the Senate, Republican prospects for a happy ending are even slimmer, as 24 Republican seats (many in traditionally Democratic or swing states) compared to 10 Democratic ones [will be up for grabs](#).

2. Major Issues

As predicted, the media hype of ISIS (and Ebola) turned out not to reflect the emphasis voters placed on the issues. Days ahead of the election, an [NBC/Wall Street Journal survey](#) showed that 77% of voters picked a combination of domestic views that were more important in their decision. Only 7% picked ISIS as a top issue, despite a September [CNN poll](#) showing that seven in ten Americans believe that ISIS has the capability to launch an attack against the United States.

Exit polls showed similar results. The [Wall Street Journal](#) found that only 13% of voters considered foreign policy a top issue, compared with the economy (45%), healthcare (25%) and illegal immigration (14%). When asked, a 58% majority of voters responded that they approved of the current action being taken against ISIS. A sizeable 33% said their opposition to Obama was a deciding factor, while in an [NBC exit poll](#) found that a commanding 79% disapproved of the job Congress was doing.

3. American Jewish Vote

For those interested in voting patterns of the American Jewish community, the simple answer is that for the 2014 midterms they remained the same. A [J Street post-election survey](#) finds that by and large American Jews vote liberal, hold center-left views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and are in favor of a strong US role in brokering a two-state solution.

The survey reveals that 69% of Jewish voters supported Democratic over Republican candidates in their district—the same figure that voted for Obama in the 2012 election—while 57% still approve of Obama’s performance, which is 13% higher than his [national approval rating](#) among midterm voters.

Regarding the conflict, 80% oppose expansion of settlements, 76% support a two-state solution along the Clinton Parameters, 85% support strong US involvement in reaching a final deal, and 72% believe such US involvement can entail publicly disagreeing with both Israelis and Palestinians.

An [Op-Ed by the Zionist Organization of America](#) disputes the interpretation of “expansion of settlements,” citing that most of those opposing settlements in the J Street poll were not referring to expansion of existing ones.

On issues most important to their voting decision, 40% chose the economy, 31% for health, 20% for Medicare, 17% for terrorism and national security, 13% for ISIS and the situation in Iraq and Syria, and 8% for Israel. 84% support the criteria laid out by the Obama administration for a nuclear deal with Iran.

These figures remain virtually unchanged from the [2012 election exit polls](#), and moreover indicate that American Jews in 2016 will largely vote for local and national Democratic candidates. Indeed, the 2014 survey even includes data showing that 70% would rather vote for potential Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton if she were running against Republican hopefuls Jeb Bush (establishment Republican) and Rand Paul (Tea Party stalwart).

C. Impact on the Middle East and Israel

For US-Middle East policy and for US-Israel relations, the ramifications of a Republican command of both congressional houses will likely manifest in three key issues: Iranian nuclear talks, the battle against ISIS and the Palestinian track. Rather than bending Obama to Congress’ will, this increased congressional pressure on the President could push him to exercise greater executive power to implement his plans.

1. The Iranian Nuclear Talks

Ever since the Obama made overtures to Iran to reboot P5+1 talks for an agreement to prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring nuclear weapons, Republicans in Congress have by and large adopted the view that he is making America look weak, especially after his administration suspended sanctions on Iran in 2013 in a conciliatory gesture while allowing it to keep its centrifuges running.

To that end, Republican congressmen, together with a healthy minority of hawkish Democrats have sought to reverse these steps outlined in the ["Joint Plan of Action" agreement](#), and have demanded under a proposed bill, titled the [Iran Nuclear Negotiations Act of 2014](#), that Obama bring any final nuclear deal with Iran [to the Senate](#) first for a hearing and a vote.

In turn, Obama has vowed since even before the midterms to [circumvent or at least delay](#) any such Senate involvement that could block a deal. This announcement generated speculation on whether or not he indeed has these executive powers. Moreover, erstwhile Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D) had prevented the aforementioned bill from coming to the Senate floor where it would have passed.

Post-November 4, all that has changed. Republican Senator Mitch McConnell will soon officially become majority leader is expected to put the bill on the agenda, as well as a [bill that would impose new sanctions](#). Senator Lindsey Graham (R), who will run the Senate's Appropriations Committee, threatened at this month's Israeli American Council conference to [kill any deal with Iran](#) that did not meet the Senate's expectations. In the likely case that the nuclear negotiations will need to be extended beyond the November 24 deadline, chances for a confrontation between Congress and the presidency appear poised to take place come January.

Regarding tensions in the US-Israel relationship on Iran, it is no secret that Netanyahu and Obama have for a long time not gotten along, as last month's ["chickensh*tgate" incident](#) can attest. The GOP's success at the ballot box doubtless came as pleasant news to the Israeli prime minister who was widely suspected of favoring Mitt Romney in the 2012 elections. As the nuclear talks with Iran continue, Netanyahu and Republican congressmen may try to work more closely on providing a united front to prevent the White House from further advances in the negotiations' progress.

Netanyahu's desire to see sanctions slapped on the Iranian regime may come down to whether Obama decides to enter the constitutional grey zone and make good on his threat to use executive authority to dismiss any Senate bill on sanctions, even if Republicans and Democratic hawks are able obtain a two-thirds majority to override a presidential veto. In an apparent attempt to avoid controversy, Obama mentioned at a November 5 press conference that he would [engage Congress](#) before signing off on a deal.

2. The Battle against ISIS

In contrast to Obama and Netanyahu's disagreements on Iran, the former's decision to bombard ISIS in Iraq and Syria appears to have aligned with the latter's world view.

Domestically, Obama may come under more pressure from a Republican-controlled Senate to "put boots on the ground"—a position [argued by hawkish Senator John McCain](#) who is slated to lead the Senate's Armed Services Committee. In September, Obama [rejected](#) GOP Senate calls that he needed congressional approval to expand the battle against ISIS, even if he would have enjoyed such support. In his November 5 address he toned down this message by endorsing the "process of listening to members of Congress." Again though, this behavior indicates that he may be inclined to dismiss future congressional pressure on how to handle the country's foreign policy.

A perhaps troubling aspect for Israel of the US-led effort against ISIS is that it has helped strengthen US ties with its Arab coalition partners, many of whom continue to reject Israel. These US-Arab relations may be viewed warily especially if they are backed by Democrats and Republicans (including [McConnell](#)) alike. Then again, for decades the US has fostered ties with Arab countries without any trace of it leading to increased American pressure on Israel or lack of concern for Islamist extremism.

3. The Palestinian Track

Obama's demonstrated willingness to take executive action to bypass Congress on Iran and ISIS should be an indicator of what he is prepared to do regarding a potential, final push for the Israeli-Palestinian peace. The administration has already hinted that it plans to present the parties with a [proposal of its own](#).

As argued in the [November issue](#) of the [Mitvim-DC Monthly](#), the contents of an Obama-backed proposal for a two-state solution will probably differ substantially with the position of Netanyahu on the major issues. Obama may decide to put pressure on Israel, and can do so through various channels – on settlements, in the UN, and through further public criticism of Israel's leadership. However he may go, he has little incentive to be easy on both parties in these final two years.

Meanwhile, on the sticky subject of rebuilding Gaza, leading Republican senators [had previously stated](#) that they would reject Kerry's recent [pledge of \\$156 million](#) to the reconstruction effort under UNRWA. All signs point that their position has not changed, and it is unlikely they will easily confirm these allocations in the upcoming 2015 budget.

For the future, a major point of contention between Obama and Congress on the Palestinians will be whether to restrict funding to the Palestinian Authority while the so-called Fatah-Hamas government of national consensus is still intact. The House has already passed a [bill](#) to this tune, and barring an Israeli government appeal

against such a measure one should anticipate the Senate to do the same. In all approximately [\\$70 million](#) would be withheld from the PA.

Thus, with Republicans running the Senate the PA may be weakened while Obama appears ready to press for a renewed peace process on his own, putting himself at odds not only with Congress but also Netanyahu.

D. Conclusions

When considering the American voter, it should be kept in mind that foreign policy continues to be a minor issue, even for the relatively more educated and outward looking Jewish population. Voters wary of prolonged US military presence overseas in prior elections have now been polled as largely in support of the current limited military effort against ISIS. Apropos of Republican fortunes, the GOP victory in the 2014 midterms cannot solely be attributed to disgruntlement with the Democratic Party, but should also be observed in the broader context of traditionally poor Democratic midterm turnout. Such observations point to greater Democratic chances of regaining the Senate and retaining the presidency for a third term in 2016.

For Jewish voters, the 2014 midterms provided another opportunity to prove their loyalty to a liberal outlook on both domestic and international issues. Whether more people in this vast liberal majority will decide to press their views on policies relating to Israel and the Middle East is another matter. At least according to the J Street poll, the opinions espoused by J Street reflect the will of the majority of American Jewry, in contrast to AIPAC which opposes public disagreement with Israel and right-wing groups who differ on settlements and the peace process. Hence, when assessing Jewish American attitudes towards Israel, the continued emergence of a vocal, liberal Zionist movement should be closely followed.

Much can be speculated on the performance of the American government with a president from one party and Congress controlled by the other. It will probably be the case that in foreign policy, among other issues, Republican pressure for a more hawkish stance on Iran, ISIS and the Palestinians will have an impact. Whether this impact backfires by prompting Obama to bypass congress in the urgency to accumulate accomplishments in the final two years of his presidency is another question.

Whatever the direction of US foreign policy, more scenes of Prime Minister Netanyahu going behind Obama's back to curry favor with Republican congressional members can be expected. However many years Netanyahu manages to hold on to the premiership before Obama steps down, it is thus likely that a deterioration of the US-Israel relationship will continue unless one of the leaders relents on his core interests.