



INSS Insight No. 292, November 9, 2011

One Year until the United States Elections

Oded Eran

On Tuesday, November 6, 2012, American voters will decide who will be the next president of the United States of America. They will also determine whether the Democrats will continue to control the Senate and the Republicans the House of Representatives.

While the Democratic candidate, incumbent President Obama, is well known (despite the public opinion polls that give Hillary Clinton overwhelming odds against any Republican candidate), the Republican hopefuls are busy wrestling with one another, and it is even unclear whether the list of potential hopefuls is closed. (The American media is spouting rumors that Sarah Palin, the Republican's 2008 vice presidential candidate, may decide to run for her party's nomination, but the chances of that happening are slim.) Texas Governor Rick Perry, who only a month ago seemed like the frontrunner, has lost some of his glow, while the African-American candidate, Herman Cain, whose star was rising in recent weeks, is now forced to confront charges of sexual harassment that allegedly occurred over a decade ago. Likewise, one still cannot write off former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich from the list of potential candidates.

This situation should ostensibly comfort President Obama and allow him to ignore the polls, which so far have not been kind to him, and the state of the economy. Unemployment still stands at 9 percent, and public opinion polls chart a 40 percent approval rating for the president. The Washington Post has noted that of all presidents since World War II, only one whose approval rating fell below 50 percent won a second term in office (Nixon in 1972). On the other hand, the American voter tends to adopt a forgiving attitude toward an incumbent president seeking reelection. In recent decades, Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush were the only incumbents seeking a second term who were rejected by the voters.

As always, the economy will clearly be the central issue of what is expected to a no-holds-barred race. It is therefore clear why the Republicans are firmly opposed to the President's jobs bill, whereby the White House would inject \$447 billion into the American economy by raising taxes on the highest income brackets. The American economy must create

125,000 new jobs every month in order to handle new people seeking to join the workforce. However, last month, only 80,000 new jobs were created. In addition, as the economic forecasts predict that growth in 2012 will be less than 3 percent, Obama will be hard pressed to claim economic improvements, especially if the jobs bill fails to pass both houses of Congress.

In this situation, when the electoral record seems to favor Obama and the current economic data works against him, the question of the Jewish vote, especially in areas with high concentrations of Jewish voters such as Florida, again comes to the fore. The polls indicate that the Democratic grip among Jews is less secure than in the past. In the latest Gallup Poll, only 54 percent of respondents supported Obama, although perhaps this comes as no surprise, considering that even among African-Americans Obama's approval rating has dropped from 90 to 80 percent.

President Obama is certainly aware of the problem, and that may explain at least in part his decisions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that seek to reduce the friction with the central stream of the American Jewish community and deny his Republican rivals ammunition in their bid for the Jewish vote.

The choice of the Republican candidate will have tremendous weight in assessing Obama's chances for reelection. The more the candidate manages to project an image of moderation, the greater his or her chances are to beat Obama. The candidates who represent the central Republican stream are John Huntsman and Mitt Romney. If either one is chosen to challenge President Obama, and if he manages to contain the influence of the Republican right wing platform on the election race strategy, his chances of winning will increase.

The bottom line is that despite Obama's successes in the field of national security – the eliminations of Bin Laden and al-Awlaki, the withdrawal from Iraq, and the toppling of Qaddafi – the economy and only the economy will determine a second term in office. (Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State during the George W. Bush administration, once lamented the lack of debate on foreign affairs and security matters among the candidates.) Real growth of 4 percent or more, which would mean an increase in the number of new jobs, would significantly improve the President's chances for reelection. A growth rate of 2-3 percent would leave the race open until the polls close on November 6, 2012.

It is still too early to assess how the battle for control of the Senate and the House of Representatives will play out. According to the polls, American voters have in recent years lost their trust in the ability of their representatives to bring them relief, especially in terms of the economy. It is thus hard to assess what effect the voters' decision on the presidential candidate would have on the question of who will represent them in the Congress and the Senate.