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The Midterm Elections in the United States

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The Democratic Party's success in regaining control of the House of Representatives is a sign of the American public's attitude toward the leadership of President Donald Trump. On the eve of the elections, the President himself stated explicitly that the results would constitute a referendum on his policy. In the American domestic arena, most legislative processes are likely to be paralyzed following the elections, but no conclusions about the 2020 presidential elections should be drawn. However, the results will require President Trump to begin preparing for the presidential race already in the coming months. The Democrats will try to utilize their victory in the House of Representatives to boost the party's recovery and improve their chances in 2020. For Israel, no change is expected from President Trump or in the American administration's unequivocal support. The intimate strategic dialogue between the two countries, however, is now even more important, given the concern that a clash between the parties will affect the administration's policy. In addition, given the Democrats' success, it is essential that Israel pursue a policy of respect and openness toward those on the American political spectrum that do not support President Trump. Without such a balance in Israel's relations with the two parties, potential exists for serious damage to the traditional bipartisan support for Israel.

The Democratic Party's success in regaining control of the House of Representatives, along with the expanded Republican majority in the Senate, follows the traditional pattern in American midterm elections, whereby the administration is unable to retain a majority for its party in both houses of Congress. It is also, however, a sign of the American public's specific attitude toward the leadership of President Donald Trump. He himself explicitly stated on the eve of the elections that the results would constitute a referendum on his policy. President Trump actively campaigned on behalf of Republican candidates, and repeatedly emphasized the importance he attributed to keeping both houses of Congress in Republican hands. At the same time, after he realized that the Republicans were likely to lose the House of Representatives, he focused his efforts mainly on key states in the battle for the Senate. Many domestic issues affecting the welfare of Americans, such as health insurance, for example, marked the campaign; nevertheless, throughout the elections, the growing polarization in American society and the clear division between the President's supporters and his opponents was evident.

The split in party control is likely to paralyze most of the legislative initiatives in the United States. Indeed, the difficulty experienced by Presidents in working with a split Congress is a well-known phenomenon, most recently, in President Obama's second term. At the present time, the likelihood that the two parties will reach agreement facilitating progress in key legislation is slim, given the bitter mutual hostility. Since their representatives will head the committees in the House of Representatives, the Democrats are likely to exercise close oversight of the administration in general, and of President Trump in particular, by means of investigations, summons to hearings, and the possibility, even if not a top priority, of beginning impeachment proceedings - especially if the report that Special Prosecutor Mueller is scheduled to issue on connections between Trump's headquarters and the Russians before the 2016 elections incriminates the President. Yet even if impeachment procedures progress in the House of Representatives, there is no chance that a two-thirds majority of the Senate will convict Trump and remove him from office.

No conclusions about what will happen in the 2020 presidential elections should be drawn from the results of the midterm elections. Nevertheless, it is likely that President Trump will regard them at least as a warning about the public mood, even if he can draw encouragement from the Republicans' success in increasing their Senate majority and the success of the Republicans in holding key governorships (such as in Florida and Ohio). He may attempt to extend inter-party dialogue (the President quickly called to congratulate House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, and praised her call for cooperation between the parties). However, it is more likely that he will try to move ahead with the administration's agenda through increased use of presidential directives. The election results will force President Trump to begin to devote resources to the start of preparations for the upcoming presidential race already in the coming months. The Democrats, on the other hand, will try to utilize their victory in the House of Representatives to speed up their party's recovery, inter alia by reinforcing the image of a vigorous party with strong support from young people and significant involvement of women and minorities, who advocate a progressive internal policy that contrasts with that of the Republicans.

The midterm elections generally do not have a major influence on the administration's foreign policy. Even if the administration is more restricted by the split in the houses of Congress and President Trump sometimes must act with restraint in order to obtain Congressional support, the administration is likely in most cases to continue promoting the same agenda as before the elections. This is true even if the Democrats use the relevant committees in the House of Representatives to voice objections to the administration's policies, mainly by promoting alternative policies and posing stumbling blocks, if and when the administration wants to push forward issues requiring

Congressional action, such as budget allocations for issues prioritized by the administration, and approval of sales of advanced weapons. In such a case, Trump may try to blame the Democrats (especially during the next presidential election campaign) for thwarting measures designed to promote United States interests.

Implications for Israel

No change is expected in the unequivocal support for Israel by President Trump and the American administration. This full backing will continue to constitute an important element in Israel's strategic power. The close relations between President Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the ongoing dialogue between the two countries will continue to be a key factor in maintaining Israel's security in an environment replete with challenges.

The administration will likely continue its policy on Iran and its plans regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with no change. At the same time, President Trump's interest in proving that his policy leads to achievements should be taken into account. The desire to score success, particularly in the heat of the 2020 election campaign, can result in gaps between the administration's goals and Israel's interests. In this context, how the dialogue with North Korea develops will have an effect, including from the Iranian regime's perspective, on the seriousness that can be attributed to the administration's determination to adhere to the conditions it posed to Iran. The blow sustained by President Trump in the elections will likely strengthen those in Iran who wish to preserve the nuclear agreement, despite the American sanctions, in the hope that the election results augur a change in administration in the next presidential elections, meaning that they can hold on until Trump is replaced.

Although most of the Democrats who will chair the committees in the House of Representatives are known to be friends of Israel, the large turnover in the House requires focused efforts by Israel to develop and strengthen connections with the new members, including those among the more progressive wing of the party, and to acquaint them more thoroughly with Israel's interests. In the long term, the Democratic Party's success and the impossibility at the current time of predicting the results of the 2020 presidential elections make it essential for Israel both to maintain strong relationships with the administration and President Trump, and pursue a policy of respect and openness to those on the American political spectrum that do not support President Trump. Without this balance in Israel's relations with the two parties, potential exists for damage to the traditional bipartisan support for Israel and the effectiveness of the pro-Israel groups in the United States. Efforts in this direction are also important for Israel if and when the Democratic Party returns to political center stage in the United States.

The bottom line is that for Israel, concern that the partisan clash in Congress will affect the Trump administration's policy underscores the need to continue the intimate strategic dialogue with the United States. In tandem, it must also bolster efforts to tighten relations with the Democratic Party and foster a balanced image of its relations with the two parties.