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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

What implications will the US mid-term elections have on the Middle East?

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Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

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Americans voted on 6 November in the mid-term elections which saw the continuation of a historical trend where the party in opposition gains control of the lower chamber during mid-presidency. The Democrats secured the 218 seats necessary to take control of the 435-member House of Representatives, with the Republicans retaining a majority in the Senate. The elections were seen as a referendum on President Donald Trump and the results suggest that he will face a difficult battle in 2020 to retain the presidency. He did not increase his support nationally, saw his party lose key battleground states to the Democrats, and the election results confirmed two years of polling data on his low approval rating. The new Speaker of the House is likely to be Nancy Pelosi, the former Speaker, who will lead the Democrat effort to challenge Trump and the Republican party in the run-up to 2020. A new field of Democratic Presidential candidates is already forming with former Vice-President Joe Biden the front-runner.

The Democrat gains mean Trump will be more restricted in foreign policy. In fact, the Democrats say they will reverse what they see as a hands-off approach by Republicans toward the President's foreign policy, and push for tougher dealings with Russia, Saudi Arabia and other countries. They will be in a good position to do this with the influential House Committees seeing new Democrat chairs installed. Three of these, the Armed Forces, Foreign Affairs, and Intelligence committees will help shape US policy on the Middle East and they will be chaired by Democrats who oppose Trump's stance with regards to Yemen, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and Russia. The key themes will be attempting to reverse Trump's support for autocrats in the region, avoiding military build-up and a war posture, and tackling human rights issues.

While the priority issue for the Democrats will be the nature of Trump's relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin and sanctions on Russia for interference in US elections, there are several other high-profile foreign

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affairs items on their agenda. There will be renewed pressure on the US-Saudi relationship with the Democrats critical of Trump's attitude after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen which has led to a humanitarian crisis. A Democratic-led House could vote on legislation to block arms deals with Riyadh or even impose sanctions on Saudi nationals and interests related to the Khashoggi case.

The international community will also see a more divided US stance on the Middle East, as now the Democrats will be in a position to challenge the President. This will be especially relevant with regards to the sanctions on Iran, with many European countries now more emboldened in opposing the increased sanctions. In a joint statement issued on 5 November, the EU said they "deeply regretted" Trump's reimposition of sanctions. The deal "is a key element of the global nuclear non-proliferation architecture and of multilateral diplomacy, endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council." The EU is creating a new international financial institution that will "enable European exporters and importers to pursue legitimate trade" with Iran.

The Democrats opposed the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and are unhappy with Trump reversing his earlier pledge to withdraw troops from Syria by agreeing to keep US troops there to counter Iran. Fearful that the Trump administration could expand its mandate to target Iran in Syria, Democrats intend to revisit a contentious debate on the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) that serves as the legal justification for the campaign against Al-Qaeda and subsequently Daesh. Congress has repeatedly failed to agree on a replacement AUMF over the past 17 years, but Representative Eliot Engel, the Democrat in line to head the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said they may now try legislating an AUMF for the US presence in Iraq and Syria.

Even without an AUMF, Congress may impose legislation that specifically prevents military operations against Iran or requires the withdrawal of US forces from Syria. This will need to be a bipartisan effort as the Republicans control Senate and thus bills will not pass without their support. However, the Democrat-led House can do much with the power of oversight, through the House committees and by holding hearings and issuing subpoenas to witnesses. Representative Adam Smith, the Democrat likely to chair the Armed Forces Committee in the House, has called for more oversight of and transparency for the US military and has drafted a resolution to end US military support to war in Yemen and withdraw

US forces from there.

Despite the resurgence of the Democrats the Republican control of the White House and the Senate will still be the key driver on US policy in the Middle East. Part of the outcome is dependent on how the relationship between the Democrats and Trump develops. If it is confrontational then there could be retaliatory action by both sides that affects US activity and policy in the Middle East. However, if there is a more conciliatory tone between the two sides then the prospect for bipartisan cooperation will increase significantly and a more coherent US position on foreign policy could develop.

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