

# Partial US Government Shutdown

By: Dr. Abdullah Robin\*

The US federal government has been partially 'shutdown' since the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 2018, and now, going into January, 2019, there are 800,000 federal employees without pay. They are struggling to cover their mortgage repayments, and some have been returning Christmas presents to pay their bills. Some government services have the reason for the shutdown is that Congress and the President cannot agree on the budget for the financial year 2019.

In September, Congress passed a 'continuing resolution' to keep government open till the 7<sup>th</sup> of December while negotiations continue, and the day before that deadline a second 'continuing resolution' was passed to delay the shutdown for two more weeks. Trump then held a theatrical meeting with Democrat leaders of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and the Senate, Chuck Schumer. They refused a demand from Trump to allocate \$5 billion for his Mexico border wall, and while Chuck Schumer hung his head between his hands in defiant disbelief, the President said: "I am proud to shut down the government for border security ... I will be the one to shut it down. I'm not going to blame you for it ... I will take the mantle. I will be the one to shut it down."

Despite Trump's bold threats, the Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, revealed later that the President was "flexible" about funding for the border wall. After Trump appeared to soften his position over funding for the border wall, prominent conservative voices in the media criticized him harshly, and any possibility of avoiding the shutdown quickly evaporated. Ed Rollins, who leads the pro-Trump political group Great America PAC, said, "I have said critically that the wall was the most sacred comment the president ever made... Trump has to be careful... His supporters care about this. This will antagonize his base if he walks away." And one of his most aggressive supporters, Conservative author Ann Coulter, posted a column titled: "GUTLESS PRESIDENT IN WALL-LESS COUNTRY." Her criticism of him was harsh and she attacked his personality, but what must have hurt the most was: "... he must know that if he doesn't build the wall, he has zero chance of being re-elected and a 100 percent chance of being utterly humiliated." Trump immediately stopped following her on twitter and with his far-right support at risk a return to his original position of absolute insistence upon funding for the border wall was inevitable.

His supporters fear that the border wall was just a campaign slogan that Trump used to get elected. Trump certainly believed that previously disillusioned conservative and far-right voters would love his promises to make America great and safe again behind a "lovely big wall," and he was correct about that. Now he is finding that it is much easier to make promises than it is to fulfil them, and although the wall was just an election opportunity for him, he has talked himself into a difficult corner. He has said that the wall is a matter of national security and that without it America is being flooded with drugs and criminals. He has even compared immigration from Mexico to an invasion, and said that Middle Eastern terrorists threaten the US from the South. There is no evidence for this crazy claim, but one Republican Senator, Lindsey Graham, wrote in support of Trump's stance on the wall: "When it comes to radical Islam, a border wall is our last line of defense—not our first."

Despite the US constitution placing the federal budget in the hands of Congress, rather than the President, Trump could easily have his wall if he really wants it, because the congressional budget accounts for about \$4 trillion in very general terms, and the \$5 billion wall could be accounted for from unauthorized funds without explicit approval, and that is commonly what presidents do. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reported that Obama spent \$310 billion on unauthorized appropriations in the last year of his presidency. To maintain his popularity, Trump doesn't need the wall, he just needs to look strong. His latest threat: "We will be forced to close the Southern Border entirely if the Obstructionist Democrats do not give us the money to finish the Wall" would halt trade that last year amounted to \$558 billion.

\* *Written for Ar-Rayah Newspaper – Issue 215*