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Australia cannot sit on the Palestine wall

JOSEPH WAKIM



One plus zero does not equal two. Australia has always advocated bi-partisan support for a two-state solution.

Logically, this means that our vote for Palestinian statehood at the United Nations General Assembly on September 20 should indeed be a no-brainer. With Spain and Belgium now supporting the bid, Palestine is already recognised as a state by 124 countries, so it needs another five votes, or two-thirds majority, to be admitted as the 194th member of the UN.

So why so much frantic lobbying and gnashing of teeth over this simple arithmetic?

Sadly, the vote will have less to do with Palestinian rights and more to do with our domestic politics. In 1948, Australian foreign minister H V Evatt became president of the UN and earned Israel's 'undying gratitude'. In 1949, he 'steered to a vote' resolution 181 which formally recognised Israel into the 'family of nations'. Australia was among the first to vote 'Yes' to a two-state solution.

If our commitment has integrity, we will soon be able to 'steer' another 'Yes' vote. But it will more likely be 'No' for all the wrong reasons.

First, the incumbent Gillard Government dares not bite the loaded hand that feeds it. Our Prime Minister could not face her friends after all the hospitality they have shown during her Rambam Israel Fellowship in 2005 and her Australia Israel Leadership Forum in 2009. The well-oiled machine of the pro-Israel anti-Palestine lobby has supported her political ascendancy and expect a return on their investment. It is expected these dollar numbers weigh more than the poll numbers, especially in electorates with significant Arab populations.

A Fairfax poll on August 8 showed that 70 per cent of Australians believed that Australia should vote 'Yes' for a Palestinian state, so a 'No' vote would show a real disconnect with Australians whom she ostensibly represents. Moreover, growing sections of the Australian Jewish community have become vocal in supporting this bid.

Second, the Gillard Government hopes that the US exercises its right of veto at the UNSC to block the bid, and thereby relinquish Australia from this quandary. But despite any veto, the bid may still be taken to the General Assembly for a vote, and we cannot sit on the 'apartheid' fence.

Third, the Gillard Government is anxious to prevent isolating or de-legitimising Israel. This is ironic as Israel has succeeded to isolate itself all on its own. By its litany of flagrant breaches of UN resolutions that are all on the public record, Israeli governments have shown contempt for the UN and international laws with impunity. Any other UN member would be deemed rogue, threatened with sanctions or have its UN membership rescinded. By bringing Israel back to the family of nations, and ensuring that laws and agreements are honoured, the family would be re-legitimising Israel as a member under the same laws, not above the law.

Fourth, the Gillard Government does not wish to be associated with 'extremists'. This is richly ironic as Australia has positioned itself on the fringe of world opinion when it came to voting on Israel. As deputy prime minister, Ms Gillard defended Israel's 'right to defend itself' during Operation Cast Lead, earning Israeli accolades for being 'alone in sticking by us'. Again, her view was not only out on a limb with international condemnations, but also with the majority of her own population who saw Israel's hundred-fold overkill in Gaza as 'not justified', according to a Ray Morgan national poll in June 2009.

Our extremism was reinforced when we were one of seven countries to vote against a motion at the UN General Assembly on November 30, 2010 which:

Reaffirmed the commitment to the two-state solution of Israel and Palestine... [and] the need for Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem.

Apart from four Pacific Island micro-states, the only other countries to vote against this near global consensus was the US and Israel.

Fifth, the Gillard Government prefers negotiations than any UN motion that may lead to anti-Israel sanctions. This view turns a blind eye to the misery that decades of suit-and-tie negotiations have brought to Palestinians.

Since signing the 1993 Oslo accords, settler numbers have doubled. How does one negotiate with a government that has the Bible as a tenancy agreement for a God-given promised land? Despite many brokered agreements, road maps and accords, the plight of Palestinians continues to deteriorate with Gaza under siege while daily territorial expansion grows while we sleep. This swallowing of Palestine is why we rarely see maps in public discourse about the occupation. This despair is also why disillusioned citizens of the world - Palestinians and Jews alike - have resorted to the same non-violent and non-government strategy that has worked to dismantle apartheid in South Africa and British colonised India.

The global boycotts, sanctions and divestments movement hold Israel to account for its broken promises to the United Nations, including the rights of its Palestinian citizens and the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

Sixth, the Gillard Government never wishes to support a state that sponsors terrorism. Yet the collective punishment of Gazans that is wreaking untold civilian deaths is beyond terrorism. While both Hamas and Israel would prefer to see each other vanquished, only one is backed by the world's sole superpower and can execute this.

Given that Palestinian territories have been reduced to 22 per cent of the historic homeland, and given Israel's track record of breaching UN resolutions, it would be naïve to believe that Palestinian statehood would suddenly coerce compliance. Palestinians may be cornered into a position of gratitude for statehood, as if they should be content with the title as a trade-off for sacrificing their 'inalienable rights'. Exiled Palestinians may be constitutionally cornered to forfeit the PLO's observer status at the General Assembly, which has represented Palestinian refugees in the Diaspora and their right of return since 1975.

Australia too may be cornered as the time to demonstrate a serious commitment to a two-state solution is now.

Joseph Wakim is a freelance writer and former Multicultural Affairs Commissioner for Victoria.

