A Historic Vote on Palestine in the British Parliament

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Israel is losing the battle for public opinion in Britain. Few are in a better position to chart the draining of support than the Israeli ambassador to Britain. Daniel Taub was born and educated here and has only to compare the benign views about Israel of his youth with the cold, unvarnished judgments of today.

Gone is the rose-tinted vision of Israel as an island of democracy in a sea of irrational and violent Arabs. Gone is the belief that Israel wants to negotiate, if only it could find a partner to talk to. Gone, too, is the notion that there is symmetry in this conflict, that this is a battle between equal forces.

This is not the effect of a larger Muslim community. All Britons today are more likely to be aware of the 14,000 settlements Israel approved during its nine month peace talks with the Palestinians; to wonder where a Palestinian state is going to go, with more than 600,000 settlers in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank; to acknowledge the insouciant racism of Israeli discourse about non-Jews; to recoil at the cost in Palestinian civilian lives of Israel's definition of its own security.

The more Israel insists that its supporters choose between their liberalism and their zionism, the weaker its case becomes that the two can co-exist. Britons are losing faith that a solution is just around the corner. The idea of Israel is changing in the minds of its allies. It is no longer a cause. It is becoming heavy baggage.

Monday's vote in parliament to recognize Palestine as a state, does not therefore come out of the blue. Neither did the largest ever demonstration seen in Britain on this conflict during the recent Gaza war. Nor did the resignation of the Foreign Office minister Lady Warsi, the highest placed British politician yet to resign over the UK's "morally indefensible" stance over Gaza. Warsi was no George Galloway, a figure on the political fringe. She remains a mainstream politician who was courted by the two other political parties after her resignation.

Therefore her plea in the Observer on Sunday to recognize the state of Palestine carries political as well as moral force:

There is a lack of political will and our moral compass is missing," the former Foreign Office minister told the Observer. "There are no negotiations, there is no show in town. Somehow we have to breathe new life into these negotiations, and one of the ways we can do that is by recognizing the state of Palestine.
The vote will be a symbolic one. A Palestinian state is a virtual concept, and it has already been recognized by 134 states, most recently by Sweden. But there is nothing symbolic or theoretical about the pressure applied by the Israel lobby on MPs of all parties to toe the line, but particularly a Labour Party led Ed Miliband. The vote in favor would amount to an historic act of defiance with an ally used to dictating the terms of the debate.

Israel and America's argument that recognition and the reluctant, faltering moves by Mahmoud Abbas to join UN institutions like the International Criminal Court, would prejudice the outcome of meaningful talks is holed below the water line. There are no meaningful talks. What greater prejudice to the outcome of a negotiated solution could there be than the monthly announcements of settlements, which unlike moves in the UN, take immediate concrete shape, and for which Israel pays no cost? Who does more to de-legitimize the state of the Israel, than the state of Israel itself? As the former foreign secretary William Hague himself said, how long can this go on without the two state solution dying. It is by all appearances already dead. It will not take much before the coroner issues its death certificate.

Warsi revealed the support she got for her position from the "highest levels" of the Foreign Office after her resignation. She accurately described the vice like grip on policy by a small group of politicians "who are not allowing public opinion, ministerial views, parliamentary views and the views of the people who work in this system"

This is not a debate about outcomes, a one or a two state solution. It is about the ability of Israel to fashion and limit the international debate; to ensure that debate takes place only within narrowly defined parameters; to ensure that it continues to enjoy impunity for its actions; to nullify the international pressure on it to come to the table.

Occupation, as Abbas has himself said, is cost free to the occupiers.The strategy by all members of the international community has now got to be to start making the occupation more expensive. This debate and the vote will be an important start.