

Barcelona mayor cuts ties with Israel, citing Palestinian rights

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Mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau speaks during a news conference to discuss cancellation of the Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Fira de Barcelona, February 13, 2020. REUTERS/Albert Gea

Barcelona, February 10 (RHC)-- Barcelona has temporarily broken off ties with Israel over its policy towards Palestine. The Catalan capital has been twinned with Tel Aviv and Gaza for 25 years, but this relationship has been temporarily suspended.

Ada Colau, the left-wing mayor of Barcelona, wrote to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday to announce the city would suspend relations until Israel ended the “systematic violation of the people of Palestine’s human rights.”

“I have decided to temporarily suspend relations with the state of Israel and with the official institutions of that state -including the twinning agreements with the Tel Aviv City Council – until the Israeli authorities put an end to the system of violations of the Palestinian people and fully comply with the obligations imposed on them by international law and the various United Nations resolutions. We cannot be silent,” wrote the mayor.

Colau stressed the boycott of Israel did not apply to Israeli or Palestinian people who “work to build peace in the Middle East.” She said the city council, which does not often involve itself in international politics, had taken the decision after 100 groups and more than 4,000 residents had signed a request to break relations with Israel.

Organisations for Global Justice, a federation of more than 100 NGOs, urged Barcelona to end the twin city link with Tel Aviv after air raids in Gaza in May 2021. The federation called for “efforts to be stepped up as well as contacts with local civil society groups in order to de-escalate violence, protect and defend human rights and to end the occupation.”

Colau’s move to enter international politics comes two months before local elections and has been seen in Spain as playing to her natural supporters on the political left. Lior Haiat, a spokesman for the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, condemned the city council’s move as “against the wishes of Barcelona residents.”

“The statement by the mayor of Barcelona on the suspension of relations with the state of Israel and with the city of Tel Aviv is a regrettable decision that is totally against the opinion of the majority of the citizens of Barcelona and their representatives in the city council,” he tweeted. The Federation of Spanish Jewish Communities condemned the move as “sophisticated anti-Semitism.”

“[Israel] is the only Jewish country in the world. For this reason, in our opinion, this decision has nothing to do with politics or with human rights or with peace. This has a name, and it is called sophisticated anti-Semitism,” it said in a statement.

The move also split Barcelona’s left-wing coalition government. Colau is allied to the United We Can (Unidas Podemos) party which is the junior partner in Spain’s left-wing coalition government, which is led by the Socialists. Laia Bonet, the leader of the Catalan Socialist party in Barcelona, called on Colau to restore relations between the Catalan city and Tel Aviv. “We should reinforce, not weaken, the role of Barcelona in the world,” she said.

Antonio Alonso, an expert on international studies at the CEU San Pablo University in Madrid, said Spanish relations with Israel had changed in recent years. “Since the return to democracy, Socialist governments have been more sympathetic to the Palestinians while conservative ones have been more sympathetic to Israel,” he told Al Jazeera.

“Currently, Spain follows the European Union policy of recognising both states of Israel and Palestine.” The Spanish government declined to comment.

Jewish people arrived in Barcelona more than 1,700 years ago, historians believe, but many left after an attack on the community in 1391.



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