

European Parliament candidate Rima Hassan says Palestine is a European issue



Paris, June 4 (RHC)-- French-Palestinian activist and jurist Rima Hassan, a leftist candidate in the upcoming European Parliament elections, has been the subject of political and media scrutiny in France as Israel's war on Gaza continues to rage.

Born stateless in April 1982 in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, Hassan arrived in France with her family when she was nine. She obtained French nationality at 18 and pursued a master's degree in international law, writing her thesis on apartheid in South Africa and Israel; groups such as Amnesty International and experts have long accused Israel of committing apartheid.

Hassan founded the Observatory of Refugee Camps in 2019 and the Action Palestine France collective after October 7, when Palestinian group Hamas led an incursion into southern Israel, which sharply escalated the historic conflict.

After 1,139 people were killed and more than 200 taken captive in early October, Israeli bombing has killed more than 36,400 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian enclave governed by Hamas.

Now a candidate for the left-wing La France insoumise (LFI), or France Unbowed party, in the upcoming European Parliament elections, Hassan has faced criticism for her party's stance on the conflict in Gaza.

LFI has called for a ceasefire and condemned both Israel and Hamas. But after October 7, Mathilde Panot, president of the left-wing party, cast the Hamas assault as an "armed offensive by Palestinian forces" – a comment which saw her summoned by police for allegedly inciting "terrorism". Hassan herself was asked to explain her use of a Palestinian slogan: "From the river to the sea"; ultimately no charges were brought.

Al Jazeera interviewed Hassan about France and the wider European community's response to the war in Gaza, her personal experience as a Palestinian politician in France, and the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Al Jazeera: You recently suggested that "Israel is worse than Russia" in terms of respecting international law and argued that while Europe was quick to side with Ukraine and condemn Russia, the same cannot be said for the war in the Middle East. How do you view the overarching European position on the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Rima Hassan: "France and the European Union's response to the Palestinian question has been inadequate, failing to uphold the EU's proclaimed values of peace, freedom, democracy, rule of law and human rights. The EU lacks a unified policy on this issue, reflecting deep divisions within European institutions, between countries, and between governments and their citizens."

In stark contrast, the EU showed unanimous support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022, providing aid and military support, and implementing sanctions against Russia.

Despite Israel violating more international resolutions than any other state and committing acts documented as apartheid, it continues to enjoy impunity. Israel's occupation and colonisation of the Palestinian territories have persisted for over 50 years, and Gaza has been under an illegal blockade since 2006. Yet, it remains a constant struggle, especially in Western countries, to impose sanctions on Israel.

Al Jazeera: What do you think of recent European moves to recognise Palestinian statehood, and what further action would you like to see from France and Europe?

Hassan: Winning the narrative battle is crucial in Europe to make political and diplomatic progress on the Palestinian issue. Europeans need to be convinced that it is a European issue for several reasons. The Sykes-Picot Agreement committed Britain and France to colonial mandates, dividing the region. The partition of Palestine, leading to Israel's creation, should be viewed as an annexation plan since Palestinians were not consulted, and it was adopted by a largely Western, colonial international community, excluding the Global South. And because Israel was created to address European anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

However, the creation of Israel led to Palestinian ethnic cleansing, with 800,000 Palestinians expelled and 532 villages destroyed since 1948, a process that continues.

Europe should recognise Palestine as a state to counter Israel's colonisation plans, impose economic sanctions by suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement, enforce an arms export embargo for human rights violations, and implement diplomatic and political sanctions on Israel akin to those on apartheid South Africa until international law is upheld.

These measures can be implemented by individual states and serve as guidelines for the EU's common foreign policy. The upcoming European elections are historic in this sense.

Al Jazeera: How do you characterise France's response to the war in Gaza to date?

Hassan: Europe and France's responses have been hasty, divisive and complicit with Israeli crimes, extending beyond the current Gaza conflict. The UN has documented over 120 companies, mostly Western, involved in the settlements. No European country has sanctioned Israel for its documented colonization and occupation of Palestinian territories. Israel is viewed as a Western outpost in the East, with historical and commemorative ties to the EU.

Created by the West in response to European anti-Semitism, Israel's establishment in historic Palestine led to the displacement of Palestinians, a process accepted by Westerners familiar with colonialism. Many Western countries, including France, have not fully confronted their colonial pasts, exemplified by France's reluctance to address its history in Algeria.

Al Jazeera: In the run-up to the European elections, you have received death threats and also faced police investigations. Why do you think you are facing these issues?

Hassan: In France, my candidacy for the European elections faces significant political and legal pressure. I have been threatened, insulted and subjected to anti-Palestinian racism. My Palestinian heritage is often denied, and some of my speeches have been censored. I've filed eight complaints over three months of campaigning and initiated proceedings to ensure that my freedom of expression is respected so that I can give my lectures and speeches.

Palestinians who express political views face intense scrutiny and backlash in Europe, particularly in France and Germany. The complaint filed against me for "apology for terrorism", for instance, was lodged by the European Jewish Organization (OJE).

This procedure is clearly being used mainly to silence those who speak out on Palestinian issues and criticise the Israeli regime. While these challenges are demanding, they pale in comparison to the struggles faced by Palestinians on the ground, highlighting the importance of remaining vigilant and dedicated.

Al Jazeera: How did you feel after witnessing pro-Palestinian student protests at universities in the US, UK and France?

Hassan: Student protests play a crucial role in the current situation, indicating a widespread societal concern for the Gaza war. These demonstrations, predominantly led by students from elite universities, highlight the significance of the Palestinian cause among future decision-makers.

It is essential for citizens and politicians, like myself, to stand in solidarity with these students, supporting their courage in the face of severe repression, including disciplinary actions, police custody and violence. Their bravery stands in stark contrast to the perceived cowardice of our societies.

Al Jazeera: If you win in the European elections, what do you hope to achieve?

Hassan: A political commitment is always a matter of balancing two things: timing and opportunity. This is the right moment for me to take action on longstanding issues. The urgency of the Palestinian question and ongoing atrocities demands immediate action from us all.

Additionally, the rise of the far right, who spread hate and reject displaced people and immigrants, underscores the need to champion international refugee law, an area I specialise in.

This issue, intertwined with human rights and international law, requires investment in Europe to foster a progressive, supportive and humanist Europe committed to its global responsibilities.

Joining LFI presented the perfect opportunity to align with a party whose platform and collective challenges on the European stage resonate with me.

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