

Why Barcelona Reversed Decision Cutting Ties with Israel

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Why did Barcelona reverse its decision to cut ties with Israel?

In February, Barcelona broke off ties with Israel, citing the systematic violation of Palestinian human rights. Seven months later, and with a new mayor in office, the twin city agreement with Tel Aviv has been restored.

On 1 September, the new mayor of the city of Barcelona - Jaume Collboni - signed a decree suspending a **decision by the previous administration** to halt a twinning agreement with Tel Aviv and cut ties with Israel.

The initial decision in February to suspend relations represented a huge milestone for solidarity with Palestine from **city councils** around the world.

After progressive Mayor Ada Colau declared it would cease cooperation with Israel and support Palestinians, other cities joined the call, such as the **Belgian city of Liege** in April and **Brazil's Belem** in May.

The move came after a campaign by more than a hundred civil society associations which, a few months after being launched, had not just reached but surpassed the number of signatures they needed for the request to be presented to the city council.

After being approved, a **letter signed by dozens of prominent figures**, including four Nobel Prize winners and musicians, actors, and intellectuals from around the globe, praised the decision.

But just seven months on and following a contested May election campaign which saw the leader of the centre-left Socialist Party Jaume Collboni obtain a majority in the city council, the tide has turned.

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Legal harassment against institutions and activists

On the same day that Ada Colau announced the temporary suspension of Barcelona's twinning agreement with Tel Aviv and its ties to the state, the pro-Israel group ACOM - Action and Communication for the Middle East - **announced** it would take legal measures against the mayoralty's alleged "hate agenda and its unhealthy obsession against Jews and their state."

ACOM, founded in 2004, is the largest of a series of groups that claim their objective is to fight “discrimination against Jews and harassment towards Israel and its citizens.”

Although **self-defined** as a secular and independent entity – reportedly supported by the help of civil society and private donors – the organisation is part of an umbrella of international **pro-Israel groups** ranging from MEMRI, the Israeli Allies Foundation, and other influential groups in the United States and beyond.

“ACOM has engaged in intimidating activists and city councils since the Spanish Solidarity Network Against the Occupation of Palestine launched its Apartheid Free Spaces campaign back in 2015,” a Spanish activist and academic who requested anonymity due to a history of reprisals by these groups told *The New Arab*.

As ACOM details in its **press releases**, legal actions by the group have resulted in the annulment of 86 institutional agreements in solidarity with Palestine, and in 2016, ACOM’s sister association sought the prosecution of **eight activists** that called for the boycott of Jewish-American reggae artist Matisyahu at the Rototom Sunspalsh Festival, accused by a local BDS group of supporting Israel’s occupation.

In Barcelona, these groups carried out a huge legal campaign against the former mayor and her team, referring complaints to the **administrative courts** and launching criminal proceedings for alleged hate crimes.

Marc Serra, a councillor in Barcelona’s city council and part of Ada Colau’s party ‘Barcelona En Comú’, told *The New Arab* that despite the first complaint being filed, these groups have tried to use different legal pathways to achieve their objective.

“There is a pattern in which they file complaints in the courts, in the public prosecutor's office, in the national audience... until they find a judge who ends up agreeing with them or at least opens a way to investigate”.

As a lawyer himself, Serra claims that “we can talk about it as an abuse of the judicial system”. He adds that “what they have achieved is what they were looking for, the opening of criminal proceedings against the Mayor of Barcelona, who took a stand against apartheid towards the Palestinian people, as well as questioning any authority that could take a similar stand”.

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The Socialist Party and renewing ties

For new Mayor Jaume Collboni and his team, the decision to renew Barcelona’s ties with Israel was not economically driven nor influenced by any interest group, according to officials.

Pau Solanilla, city promotion commissioner under Collboni's administration and the person who announced the move, told *The New Arab* that "there has been no pressure or encouragement because it was not necessary, we have been clear that dialogue, cooperation and city diplomacy are useful instruments to contribute to peace in the region."

On the same day that Ada Colau broke ties, Jaume Collboni visited Barcelona's synagogue to declare that, were he to be elected Mayor, he would reverse Colau's decision. Some days later, the party also headed a proposal to re-establish ties in a council plenary session. He made clear that the move was on his agenda, but associations claim they were not told it would be a priority within his mandate.

The group that was behind Barcelona's solidarity campaign with Palestine, 'Prou Complicitat', or 'Enough Complicity', told *The New Arab* that Collboni's Socialist Party later met with the Palestine solidarity movement.

"In this meeting, they acknowledged that their reaction to the suspension was hasty and that they overreacted. Yet, only two months later, the facts speak for themselves," they said.

Pro-Israel interest groups and the Spanish right

ACOM was founded in 2004 by businessman David Hatchwell, and is now presided over by the CEO of the international insurance company AmTrust Europe, Angel Mas. ACOM have often **praised political figures** from the right-wing majority party PP, and recently from the far-right group Vox, even **posing in pictures together**.

Another sister association, the Friends of Israel Foundation, was **registered** in Spain in 2010 with Pablo Casado as founder, the president of the right-wing party PP, alongside Rafael Luís Bardají, a conservative scholar, member of the far-right Vox party, and member of the executive board of an arms and ammunition company, and Carlos Bustelo, former minister of Industry and Energy and now also part of the **far-right Vox party**.

For Marc Serra, whose party keeps fighting for Palestinian solidarity in the city council, these possible links are concerning. "I think it is a very serious thing that these associations are using the discourse on human rights and the fight against discrimination after having ties with the extreme right, which is the one that goes against fundamental rights."

In his official X account, and on behalf of his party, the city councillor also **reminded the Spanish public** of the dangers to fundamental rights within Israel itself.

"Collboni has decided to "embrace" Israel when the state is going through its worst democratic crisis: governed by the far right, with a judicial reform that undermines the

separation of powers and an increase in violence against the Palestinian population," he wrote.

"The signal being sent to Israel following Barcelona's recent decision is that 'everything is fine, and that there will be no retaliation for the daily and repeated violations against the Palestinians'"

Impunity for Israel's occupation

For Pau Solanilla, who speaks for his party's recent decision to renew ties, the composition of Israel's far-right government is concerning. "We are radically against the policies of Netanyahu's government, we are against the occupation, we denounce the violation of human rights [...] and we are unequivocally helping Palestine with more than 100 cooperation projects," he told *The New Arab*.

But he added that, "we believe that the citizen of Tel Aviv cannot be held responsible for their government's policies."

Members of 'Prou Complicitat', however, told *TNA* that "politicians who do not take a stand against Israeli apartheid take refuge by offering cooperation projects with Palestine [...] aware of the vulnerability in which the Palestinian people are left". They added that, "these crumbs do not provide a political solution to the Palestinian cause."

Israeli forces have killed at least [219 Palestinians](#) since the beginning of 2023 in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip, making it the deadliest year since the UN began recording deaths in 2005.

For Laurent Cohen, a Jewish member of the Catalan Association of Jews and Palestinians, the signal being sent to Israel following Barcelona's recent decision is that "everything is fine, and that there will be no retaliation for the daily and repeated violations against the Palestinians."

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