

# Miss Canada Finalist Boycotts Israel

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You think beauty pageants have no content? Well, think again.

The next Miss Canada could soon be parading her crown to protest against the Israeli apartheid and occupation. “If I win, I will proudly wear my crown on a boat to Gaza, in protests for social justice and against austerity,” says Hala, Miss Canada finalist, a civil engineer and board member of PAJU (Palestinian & Jewish Unity).

When assessing her chances of winning on March 5, she asks:

“Does Miss Canada want that kind of publicity? Miss Canada calling for a boycott of Israel? I don’t think so.”

Whether they want this kind of publicity or not, they probably will get some of it since the Canadian Parliament overwhelmingly voted in favor of a motion condemning the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) last week. Apart from her desire to promote the rights of indigenous people from Turtle Island, as they used to call Canada, defending the rights of the Palestinians and calling for the boycott of Israel happen to be the main reasons why Hala is part of the Miss Canada contest. “I’m using the platform to spread my message of peace. I don’t really care about winning,” she says, casually.

In the wake of last week’s vote, will the organisation come under fire for having a contestant who actively protests against Israel’s lack of respect for human rights, war crimes and apartheid policies and is actively engaged in promoting the BDS campaign?

It is still unclear which impact the motion will have on the BDS movement, but the beauty pageant final this Saturday could well be, of all events, the first one to suffer from it.

Like a bull in a China shop

Why would a feminist activist participate in a beauty contest in the first place?

It all started last year when a friend suggested Hala should enter the Miss Quebec contest. She didn’t like the idea, but after giving it a thought, she gave it a try.

“Any platform is good to spread my message, as long as I don’t lose myself and sell my soul. At first feminist groups were against the idea but when I explained to them that my goal was to use the platform, they supported me. I only want to spread a message.”

During the Miss Canada contest Hala wants to promote the causes she holds dear, most importantly the BDS campaign. “Countries around the world are trying to ban this campaign saying it’s racist and anti-Semitic. But the boycott is like a peaceful strike. We’re not killing anyone, we’re not hurting anyone, we just want to raise awareness on international justice. The boycott is a democratic right, it’s a form of free speech and our group (PAJU) doesn’t only call for boycotting Israel, but also Saudi Arabia. Does that make me anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic? The president of PAJU is Jewish. These labels are irrelevant.”

The motion passed last week intends to criminalize groups calling for a boycott of Israel. A new campaign, #DroitAuBoycott, was launched before the vote. “If I become Miss Canada and call for a boycott of Israel are they going to throw me in jail, with my crown? I’d really love to see that.”

“People don’t want to hear about Palestine”

That’s what Hala was told by the organisers when she was finalist for Miss Quebec last year. “I think they didn’t understand, they were afraid it would sound anti-Semitic and they didn’t want any controversy. They thought I was Palestinian, but when I told them I was Syrian they asked me: ‘Why are you talking about this if you’re not Palestinian?’ I had to explain that I was doing this with PAJU and that it was a humanitarian cause, not a religious one. It has nothing to do with Islam or Judaism, it’s a human cause.”

Thanks to the public who showed up and welcomed her speeches in a way she had never experienced before, she reached the Miss Quebec finals. Even if she didn’t win, the judges gave her the highest score. In these contests, the public votes also come into play and since people have to pay to vote for a candidate, Hala, true to herself, encourages people to donate to charity instead of buying votes to increase her chances to win. “I prefer that people give to charity instead of the Miss Canada organisation.”

Bringing controversy in these contests through her support for the BDS campaign surely doesn’t increase her chances to win either. “One of the main reasons why I didn’t win Miss Quebec was because of my controversial speeches. Organisations like Miss Quebec and Miss Canada do not want someone like me to win and possibly wreak havoc in the media. I knew that from the start and my goal is not to win, but rather to bring visibility to my causes.”

Although Hala didn’t win the Miss Quebec crown, she claims victory. “After a while the contestants were coming to me and asking me questions about organisations like PAJU, like Amnesty International, the Federation des femmes du Québec, their speeches suddenly became deeper and they really wanted to get involved. That was my way to win the contest.”

Will Hala win the Miss Canada contest the same way or also win the crown? We will know Saturday, March 5.

You can visit her profile page at <http://www.misscanadatm.ca/277.html>.

*If you wish to support her and buy votes you can do so, but remember she prefers that you give to charity.*

To know more about [PAJU click here](#).

For more information on [BDS Quebec click here](#).

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Julie Lévesque is a journalist and researcher with the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal. She was among the first independent journalists to visit Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake. In 2011, she was on board "The Spirit of Rachel Corrie", the only humanitarian vessel which penetrated Gaza territorial waters before being shot at by the Israeli Navy.

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