OP-ED: Canada must demand the end of Francesca Albanese UN mandate

"The authority of the United Nations' human rights system depends on one non-negotiable condition: its experts must be impartial, credible, and governed by law, not ideology."

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Author: Sergio Karas

The authority of the United Nations' human rights system depends on one non-negotiable condition: its experts must be impartial, credible, and governed by law, not ideology. When that condition fails, the UN does not merely suffer reputational damage — it forfeits moral authority.

That is precisely the risk now confronting the UN Human Rights Council in the case of Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation in the Palestinian territories. Her conduct has crossed a line that no serious legal system can afford to ignore. What is at issue is not controversial speech or robust criticism of a state. It is the collapse of neutrality, the abuse of mandate authority, and a pattern of conduct incompatible with the UN's own legal framework.

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Special rapporteurs are not activists. They are not prosecutors. They are not political campaigners. They are entrusted with credibility precisely because they are expected to apply international law without fear, favour, or ideological alignment.

Yet Ms. Albanese has repeatedly acted not as a neutral investigator but as a partisan actor advancing a singular political narrative. Her public remarks — including statements delivered alongside figures affiliated with Hamas and Iran — have prompted formal rebukes from France, Germany, Italy, Austria, and other democratic states. Such coordinated condemnation of a UN mandate-holder is exceedingly rare. It reflects not political disagreement, but institutional alarm.

Language portraying the State of Israel as a supposed "enemy of humanity," questioning verified atrocities committed against Israel on October 7, 2023, and reframing the mass murder of civilians by Hamas, a terrorist organization, as a political reaction is not legal analysis. It is advocacy masquerading as expertise.

International humanitarian law is unequivocal: deliberate attacks on civilians are war crimes, full stop. A UN expert who publicly casts doubt on those crimes — or rationalizes them — does not advance human rights. She undermines them.

Equally concerning is Ms. Albanese's persistent claim that Israel has no right to self-defence under international law. That assertion is not merely controversial; it is legally unsustainable. Article 51 of the UN Charter recognizes the inherent right of self-defence. Debates may exist about proportionality, necessity, and application, but denying the right itself places a UN legal expert outside the foundational text of the international system she is tasked with interpreting. When a mandate-holder substitutes ideology for law, the mandate is null and void.

The case for accountability does not rest on rhetoric alone. A UN inquiry concluded that Ms. Albanese misrepresented the funding sources of travel connected to her mandate, accepting external advocacy funding in violation of UN rules. The inquiry further concluded that she provided misleading information to UN officials and misused UN resources.

The UN's Code of Conduct for Special Rapporteurs exists precisely to prevent this kind of entanglement. A mandate-holder who relies on partisan funding while conducting advocacy related to her mandate creates an obvious conflict of interest. That conflict erodes trust not only in the individual but in the system that tolerates it.

Canada cannot posture as a defender of the "rules-based international order" while treating UN accountability as somebody else's problem. Ottawa should say plainly that the UN's Special Procedures system collapses when mandate-holders disregard the Code of Conduct, which explicitly demands impartiality, objectivity, integrity, and independence.

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First, Global Affairs Canada should publicly endorse the call already made by France for Ms. Albanese's resignation and align itself with the growing coalition of democratic states insisting that UN mandates cannot be abused with impunity.

Second, Canada should press the Human Rights Council President and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to initiate a formal compliance review grounded in the Code of Conduct. If the current governance framework is weak on enforcement, Canada should say so openly and demand reform. Independence that cannot be disciplined is not independence — it is institutional paralysis.

Third, Ottawa must clean its own house. Canadian decision-makers, including the Immigration and Refugee Board, should cease treating Ms. Albanese as an authoritative or neutral source. Reliance on the work of a mandate-holder whose impartiality has been widely questioned risks undermining confidence in Canadian adjudication and administrative fairness. That is a domestic failure Canada can fix immediately, without waiting for Geneva.

If Canada believes UN human-rights mechanisms require independence, it must also insist they require enforceable standards. Independence without consequences is not a principle. It is permission.

Removing a Special Rapporteur is an extraordinary step. But extraordinary misconduct demands exactly that. The greater danger lies not in acting, but in normalizing the politicization of UN mandates.

This controversy is no longer about one individual. It is a test of whether the UN Human Rights Council — and states like Canada — are willing to defend the integrity of the institutions they claim to support.

Independence does not mean immunity from rules. Neutrality is not optional. Ethical standards are not aspirational. When a mandate-holder repeatedly violates these principles, the responsible response is not renewal or silence — it is accountability.

Canada should make clear that it will support reform and enforcement in Geneva, and that any UN expert who cannot meet the UN's own standards should vacate the office, not be shielded by it.

Sergio R. Karas, principal of Karas Immigration Law Professional Corporation, is a certified specialist in Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Law by the Law Society of Ontario. He is Division Chair of the ABA International Law Section, past chair of the Ontario Bar Association Citizenship and Immigration Section, past chair of the International Bar Association Immigration and Nationality Committee, and a fellow of the American Bar Foundation. He can be reached at karas@karas.ca.

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