Now maligned by Jerusalem, ICC prosecutor Bensouda was welcomed by Israel in ’98

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Fatou Bensouda, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court who last week announced her intention to investigate alleged Israeli war crimes, came to Israel two decades ago to attend a government-sponsored conference, The Times of Israel has learned.

In October 1998, Bensouda, who had just been appointed justice minister of her native Gambia, participated in a seminar for women leaders from all over the world hosted by Mashav, the Foreign Ministry’s Agency for International Development Cooperation, in Haifa.

Two sources, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, confirmed Bensouda’s participation.

“The conference celebrated both Israel’s 50th jubilee and 40 years of Israeli foreign aid,” the Foreign Ministry said in a [press release](https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/1998/Pages/MASHAV%20Hosts%20Conference%20of%20Women%20Leaders.aspx) issued at the time.

No other visit of Bensouda to Israel is publicly known.

In addition to workshops and group discussions about the integration of women in competitive markets, among other topics, participants at the 1998 seminar, entitled “Women’s Leadership: Helping Women Help Themselves,” were hosted by then-first lady Reuma Weizman at the President’s Residence in Jerusalem.

They also met the city’s then-mayor Ehud Olmert, who would go on to become prime minister, as well as with at least one MK and the Foreign Ministry’s director-general at the time, Eitan Bentsur.

A spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry on Thursday did not confirm or deny that Bensouda participated in the 1998 conference, saying he had no means to check who attended the event.

According to a second press release the Foreign Ministry issued at the time, a participant from Gambia — presumably Bensouda — was one of the participants who spoke at the conference’s concluding ceremony.

“In emotional addresses, they all offered a vote of thanks both for the opportunity to visit Israel and for the valuable discussions, and expressed their wish to visit Israel in the future,” it said.

The conference was held at Mashav’s [Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center](http://mctc.co.il/about) in Haifa, which helps women engaged in community work in Africa and Asia.

Mashav has various programs that bring promising leaders from around the world to Israel in a bid to positively impact their views on the Jewish state. The most prominent graduate of Mashav is Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who has vowed to move his country’s embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Bensouda arrived in Israel merely two months after Gambian president Yahya Jammeh appointed her attorney general and justice minister in August 1998. She stayed in that job for only two years, with the dictator firing her while she was abroad after a falling out.

 In 2004, she started working for the ICC in The Hague. Eight years later, she formally become the court’s chief prosecutor.

Following the announcement of her intention to open an investigation into the “situation in Palestine,” where she believes war crimes were committed both by Israeli soldiers and Palestinians terror groups, Bensouda has faced harsh criticism by government officials in Jerusalem, as well as some Israeli reporters, who have highlighted her past work for Jammeh, a brutal dictator.