Israel said to receive formal letter from ICC informing of war crimes probe

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Israel has reportedly received a letter from the International Criminal Court formally detailing the scope of its war crimes investigation against Israel and the Palestinians, Channel 13 reported Wednesday.

According to the report, the letter arrived over the weekend and the National Security Council has already met to begin formulating Israel’s response.

The report said the brief one-and-a-half page letter briefly laid out the three main areas it intends to cover: the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas, Israeli settlement policy, and the 2018 Great March of Return protests, a series of violent demonstrations along Gaza’s border with Israel that left dozens of Palestinians dead.

Neither Israel, not the ICC published the letter or acknowledged it had been sent.

Israel reportedly has 30 days to respond, the report said, adding that Jerusalem is leaning toward doing so after largely refusing to cooperate with The Hague-based international court until now. However, Israel is expected to use its response as an opportunity to once again voice the argument that the ICC has no jurisdiction to hear the case.

The hope in Israel is that its argument over jurisdiction will succeed in delaying the case until outgoing ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda is replaced in June by British lawmaker Karim Khan, whom Jerusalem hopes may be less hostile or may even cancel the probe.

Earlier this month, a number of officials told Channel 13 that they’re concerned the ICC may already start issuing arrest warrants against former IDF officers in the coming months.

Consequently, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz have begun reaching out to counterparts throughout Europe to galvanize support against the case, the Kan public broadcaster reported. Netanyahu and Gantz have been stressing in those calls that the investigation is biased against Israel, which has an independent legal system capable of prosecuting any alleged crimes.

President Reuven Rivlin and IDF chief Aviv Kohavi are currently on a [three-day tour of Europe](https://www.timesofisrael.com/visiting-austria-rivlin-warns-of-dangers-of-ignoring-rising-extremism/) aimed at galvanizing support for Israel over the issue.

Bensouda announced on recently that she was opening an investigation into actions committed by Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem since 2014.

The announcement of the investigation came less than a month after the court ruled it had the jurisdiction to open a probe. A preliminary investigation to settle the justiciability question took more than five years.

“The investigation will cover crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court that are alleged to have been committed in the situation since 13 June 2014, the date to which reference is made in the referral of the situation to my office,” Bensouda said in her statement.

Ramallah has been gearing up for the investigation for years, preparing documents and submitting files to the ICC on what it deems to be Israeli war crimes.

Israeli observers noted the significance of the timing of the investigation’s span: On June 12, 2014, Hamas terrorists kidnapped and murdered three Israeli teenagers in the Gush Etzion area of the West Bank. Bensouda’s investigation — based on the request submitted by the so-called State of Palestine — is set to begin from the following day.

The brutal terror attack, which horrified Israelis and drew international condemnation, was a pivotal moment in the lead-up to the fighting in Gaza later that summer. With the investigation set to consider events beginning on June 13, 2014, the crime could be excluded from the court’s investigation.