Lapid urges UN chief to disband ‘tainted’ Gaza probe over remarks deemed antisemitic

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Prime Minister Yair Lapid demanded United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres disband his organization’s ongoing, open-ended Commission of Inquiry into last year’s 11-day fight between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, over “antisemitic remarks” made by one of the members.

Miloon Kothari, a member of the commission, told  a podcast last week that the “Jewish lobby” was controlling social media and questioned why Israel is allowed to be a member of the UN, sparking widespread criticism and calls for his dismissal or the commission’s disbanding. The head of the commission claimed the remarks had been deliberately misrepresented, and the UN’s top rights official has asked for clarifications.

“I am writing to you to demand the immediate removal of all three members of the COI tasked with investigating Israel, and the disbanding of the Commission,” Lapid said in the letter dated July 31.

“The COI has been fundamentally tainted by the publicly expressed prejudices of its leadership, who do not meet the basic standards of neutrality, independence, and impartiality required by the United Nations,” he said.

In comments aired Monday, Kothari told a podcast for Mondoweiss, a website highly critical of Israel, that a lot of money was being spent on efforts to “discredit” the UN Human Rights Council, which set up the commission, and that social media was “controlled largely by the Jewish lobby.”

“It’s not only governments. We are very disheartened by the social media that is controlled largely by, whether it is the Jewish lobby or specific NGOs. A lot of money is being thrown into trying to discredit us,” Kothari said.

Kothari also questioned “why [Israel is] even a member of the United Nations.”

In his letter to Guterres, Lapid noted that the UN secretary-general had himself referred to denial of Israel’s right to exist as a “modern form of antisemitism” in a 2017 speech.

“These antisemitic remarks are a stain on the entire United Nations and are not befitting of a person with such a position of responsibility,” Lapid wrote.

Kothari is one of three members of the commission, which was launched following Israel’s 2021 fight with Hamas in Gaza to investigate “all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and all alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law” in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

The commission is the first to have an open-ended mandate from the UN rights body — rather than be tasked with investigating a specific crime — and critics say such permanent scrutiny shows anti-Israel bias in the 47-member-state council. Proponents support the commission as a way to keep tabs on injustices faced by Palestinians under decades of Israeli rule.

The head of the commission Navi Pillay defended Kothari’s remarks on Thursday, claiming the comments were deliberately taken out of context, in a letter to UN Human Rights Council Federico Villegas addressing the controversy.

Villegas later sent a letter to Pillay, warning that some of the comments Kothari had made “could reasonably be interpreted as stigmatization of the Jewish people, which… is at the heart of any expression of antisemitism.”

“I would respectfully suggest that Commissioner Kothari consider the possibility of publicly clarifying his unfortunate comments and his intentions behind them,” he wrote.

In his letter to Guterres, Lapid said that Pillay “chose to defend and excuse” the remarks, “instead of taking a moral stance and repudiating these comments.”

“I urge you to listen to Mr. Kothari’s interview and judge for yourself,” Lapid said.

Israel has railed against both Kothari’s remarks and the decision by the other members of the commission to defend them over the past week, though this was the first time Lapid himself has weighed in.

“From Mr. Kothari’s outrageous slurs to Ms. Pillay’s defense of the indefensible, this Commission does not just endorse antisemitism — it fuels it,” Lapid wrote to Guterres, in comments that echoed a letter sent earlier by Israeli Ambassador in Geneva Meirav Eilon Shahar, who also called for the commission to be disbanded

Officials from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and countries across Europe have denounced Kothari’s comments as well.

Israel has previously said it will not cooperate with the commission, saying its members “have repeatedly taken public and hostile positions against Israel on the very subject matter that they are called upon to ‘independently and impartially’ investigate.”

The commission issued its first report last month, concluding that Israel’s occupation and discrimination against Palestinians were the main causes of the endless cycles of violence.