Ahead of decision on war crimes probe, Knesset taps point-woman for The Hague

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The Knesset on Wednesday tapped a special parliamentary coordinator for issues pertaining to the International Criminal Court, ahead of The Hague’s expected decision to open a probe into war crimes committed by Israeli soldiers and Palestinian terrorists.

Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin appointed MK Michal Cotler-Wunsh (Blue and White), the daughter of former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler, to the newly created position. Her responsibilities include “working with peers in parliaments around the world and traveling to The Hague to meet with relevant actors,” her office said in a statement.

“The decision by Knesset Speaker Levin recognizes the imperative of having parliamentary representation to the ICC in order to participate in international dialogue and to address the court’s double standards against the State of Israel,” Cotler-Wunsh said. “In my capacity as the official Knesset representative to the ICC, I will ensure that the language of rights and international law are used so that Israel can rise from the docket of the accused.”

Michal Cotler-Wunsh, 49, was born in Jerusalem and moved to Montreal when she was eight, but returned to Israel a few years later where she became a trained lawyer and worked for the Justice Ministry.

In an official document that Levin handed the freshman lawmaker, the Knesset speaker wrote that he sees great importance in having parliament and its members become a part of Israel’s effort to fend off accusations of war crimes likely to be leveled at it in the near future.

“The Knesset, its division for international relations and its legal adviser put at your disposal a series of important tools, which you are invited to make use of at any time,” he wrote.

Cotler-Wunsh is asked to file an annual report about her activities.

The ICC’s chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, has said she wants to open a criminal investigation into possible war crimes committed by Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, but asked a pre-trial chamber to rule whether the court has jurisdiction over these areas. The chambers’ three judges — Péter Kovács of Hungary, Marc Perrin de Brichambaut of France, and Reine Adélaïde Sophie Alapini-Gansou of Benin — have no deadline to hand down their ruling but are expected to do so in the days or weeks to come.

Cotler-Wunsh is joining a long list of Israeli officials dealing with the ICC. It includes the legal adviser of the Foreign Ministry, Tal Becker; the head of international law department at the Justice Ministry, Roy Schondorf; and Higher Education and Water Resources Minister Ze’ev Elkin, who was asked to coordinate the government’s activities regarding the court.

Back in May, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he deemed an ICC war crimes investigation a rare “strategic threat” to Israel, declaring efforts to prevent such a probe one of the new government’s top priorities.

Netanyahu said at the time that The Hague’s intention to launch an investigation was one of the executive’s five main agenda items in the weeks and months ahead.