Leading US Jewish groups decry top legal award for anti-Israel UN official

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Leading US Jewish groups and legal organizations on Tuesday called on prominent law firms to cut their support for a prestigious award that will be given to a UN human rights official, saying her anti-Israel activities were discriminatory against Jews and Israel.

The American Branch of the International Law Association (ABILA) will grant Navi Pillay its Outstanding Achievement Award at the organization’s International Law Weekend next month in New York. The annual gathering is one of the world’s leading conferences on international law.

Over 30 groups signed onto a letter calling for three prominent law firms to rescind their sponsorship of the conference over the recognition of Pillay. Signatories included the American Jewish Congress, World Jewish Congress — North America, B’nai B’rith International, StandWithUs, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Hadassah, Human Rights Voices, NGO Monitor, CAMERA and Women’s Zionist Organization of America.

Legal groups also signed including the American Association of Jewish Lawyers & Jurists, Shurat Hadin, the Lawfare Project, the International Legal Forum and the Zachor Legal Institute.

The letter was sent to the legal firms Debevoise & Plimpton; Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher; and White & Case. The firms did not respond to requests for comment.

‘Pillay has used her platform at the United Nations to further a  
demonstrably discriminatory agenda against the Jewish people and the State of Israel,’ the letter said. ‘Your financial sponsorship of this conference serves to legitimize this bigotry and appears as a tacit endorsement.’

‘Pillay has repeatedly demonstrated a bias that fundamentally undermines the fight against antisemitism, Israeli-Palestinian peace prospects, and the integrity of international law,’ the letter said.

Pillay will also deliver a keynote address at the event held at the Fordham University School of Law.

Pillay, a South African jurist, was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014, during which time she frequently criticized Israel’s actions in Gaza.

She chairs the UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which [Jewish groups](https://www.timesofisrael.com/bnai-brith-calls-to-dismiss-un-probe-against-israel-over-members-odious-remarks/), Israel, the US [and other countries](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-leads-27-countries-in-condemning-un-human-rights-council-probe-into-israel/) have condemned for its alleged bias. It is the council’s first open-ended commission of inquiry, the UNHRC’s highest level of investigation.

The commission overwhelmingly [blames](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-probe-blames-israel-for-perpetuating-conflict-with-palestinians/) Israel for the conflict and accuses the Jewish state of other misdeeds, such as stealing natural resources. Its most recent 28-page report [did not mention](https://www.timesofisrael.com/lapid-slams-antisemitic-un-report-accusing-israel-of-violating-international-law/) Hamas, rockets or terrorism at all.

One of its three members, Miloon Kothari, said last year that social media was ‘controlled largely by the Jewish lobby,’ espousing a common antisemitic trope, and questioned why Israel was allowed in the UN. Pillay [defended](https://www.timesofisrael.com/head-of-un-panel-probing-israel-says-comments-on-jewish-lobby-taken-out-of-context/) Kothari’s comments.

Pillay [has dismissed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-commission-says-it-will-investigate-apartheid-charges-against-israel/) antisemitism concerns as a ‘diversion’ and ‘lies,’ and called Israeli security concerns ‘a fiction.’

In a May 2021 lecture, she described Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians as ‘inhuman’ and compared Israel to apartheid South Africa.

The [program](https://www.ila-americanbranch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ILW2023_Program.pdf) for the International Law Weekend does not mention Pillay’s position on the commission of inquiry.

In 2014, over 100 members of Congress [signed a letter](https://web.archive.org/web/20140802125231/http:/israel.house.gov/sites/israel.house.gov/files/wysiwyg_uploaded/UN%20HRC%20Letter%20on%20Hamas%20Human%20Shields%20-%20FINAL%20SIGNATURES.pdf) to Pillay decrying the UNHRC’s bias against Israel under her leadership, saying the council ‘simply cannot be taken seriously as a human rights organization’ while it was probing Israel, but not Hamas.

As UN human rights chief, Pillay [defended and reincarnated](https://www.un.org/en/durbanreview2009/coverage/press/pr_24-04-09_pillay.shtml) the so-called Durban Conference, a 2001 summit that was marred by anti-Israel animus so extreme that the US and Israeli delegations walked out.

Pillay oversaw and later defended the UN’s report on Israel’s military operation in Gaza in 2008-2009, which accused Israel of war crimes.

The report’s critics said it was deeply flawed due to bias, factual errors and falsehoods. The report’s lead author, Richard Goldstone, later retracted its most inflammatory claim — that the IDF deliberately targeted civilians — due to lack of evidence.

Christine Chinkin, the chair of the International Law Association, which is granting Pillay the award next month through its US branch, was another of the Goldstone report’s authors. After Goldstone retracted the accusation against Israel, Chinkin and its other authors rejected the move, saying it had ‘no justification.’ Pillay has defended the report and continues to cite it in her reports for the commission of inquiry.

Chinkin was later [nominated](https://www.timesofisrael.com/unhcr-slams-israel-delays-controversial-palestine-appointment/) as the UNHRC’s special rapporteur into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while Pillay was high commissioner.

The UNHRC condemns Israel more than any other country, as does the UN’s General Assembly. Last week, US Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/meeting-with-un-chief-netanyahu-demands-world-body-change-attitude-toward-israel/) that anti-Israel bias at the UNHRC ‘regularly crosses into antisemitism.’

Last year, Jewish groups [criticized](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pro-israel-advocates-decry-one-sided-apartheid-panel-at-new-york-law-conference/) the International Law Weekend for hosting a panel titled ‘Racism and the crime of apartheid in international law,’ featuring several strident critics of Israel.