**Israel livid over ‘anti-Semitic’ ICC war crimes probe; PA and Hamas cheer**

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Israeli leaders on Wednesday denounced the International Criminal Court after its top prosecutor opened a probe into alleged Israeli and Palestinian war crimes, while the Palestinians and rights groups hailed the move.

Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda’s announcement of the investigation, which will focus on suspected war crimes around Operation Protective Edge, beginning on June 13, 2014, came under a month after The Hague-based court ruled it had the jurisdiction to open a probe.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel was “under attack” and condemned the “absurd” decision as “undiluted anti-Semitism and the height of hypocrisy.”

“This court, that was established to prevent the repetition of the Nazi horrific crimes committed against the Jewish people, is now turning its guns against the one and only state of the Jewish people. It’s targeting Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East. But of course it turns a blind eye to Iran, Syria and the other dictatorships that are committing real war crimes left and right,” he said in a video statement.

“We will never stop fighting this injustice,” he vowed. “We will speak the truth in every forum, in every country, on every stage until this outrageous decision is reversed and becomes null and void.”

Echoing Netanyahu, President Reuven Rivlin slammed the decision as “scandalous” and said Israel wouldn’t tolerate any claims undermining “our right and obligation” to defend Israeli citizens.

“The State of Israel is a strong, Jewish and democratic state which knows how to defend itself and to investigate itself when necessary,” he said in a statement.

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said the decision was “an act of moral and legal bankruptcy” and dismissed Bensouda’s announcement as “political,” noting she was nearing the end of her term.

“The fact that the murderous terror group Hamas is praising the decision indicates more than anything that it lacks any moral validity,” Ashkenazi, a former IDF chief of staff, said in a statement. “Israel is a democratic state with an independent and effective legal system, which is not even a member of the court.”

He vowed Israel would continue to take “every necessary step” to defend Israeli citizens and soldiers from “legal persecution” and called on all countries “that consider it important to protect the international legal system from politicization” to not cooperate with the investigation.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz, another former IDF chief of staff, called the decision a “prize for terror” and said it would undermine regional stability.

“Hamas and Hezbollah are hiding missiles in the basements and yards of homes and using the citizens of Gaza and Lebanon as human shields. And while our enemies are trampling on human rights and terrible crimes are being committed all over the world, the prosecutor at the court in the Hague decided to open an investigation against Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East,” he said during a ceremony at a naval base in Haifa.

Gantz added: “The Palestinians must internalize the conflict between us will only be resolved through negotations in Jerusalem and Ramallah. A court won’t help, not even in The Hague.”

Current IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi vowed the investigation would not deter the military.

“We will not allow any foreign institution without authority to intervene in our activities for the defense of Israel, and certainly not to put those serving in the IDF at legal risk,” Kohavi said in a statement.

Numerous right-wing and centrist politicians also denounced the decision.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid called it an “anti-Semitic disgrace,” that would “deepen the conflict and encourage Palestinian intransigence.”

“The ICC has allowed itself to be hijacked by sponsors of terror. This is a shameful day for the cause of justice,” Gideon Sa’ar, who heads the right-wing New Hope party, wrote on Twitter.

Yisrael Beytenu chief Avigdor Liberman said the decision “screams of hypocrisy and anti-Semitism.”

“Instead of investigating the actions of Assad in Syria or Hamas and Gaza, they are appealing the right of the State of Israel to defend itself,” he tweeted.

Yamina, another right-wing party, also accused the court of anti-Semitism.

“The court in The Hague is an anti-Semitic body immersed in hatred of Israel that encourages terrorism instead of fighting it,” the party said. “While our enemies are firing missiles, placing explosives, stabbing and killing Israelis like animals, the court decides to investigate Israel instead of the child killers and suicide bombers.

MK Michal Cotler-Wunsh, the Knesset liaison on matters concerning the International Criminal Court, dismissed Bensouda’s vow the investigation will be “conducted independently, impartially and objectively, without fear or favor” as “absurd.”

“All trustees of international law and human rights, as well as ICC Member States and donors, must recognize and address the harm this decision causes to the foundational principles of the Rome Statute and its intended mandate, undermining the ability and responsibility to serve as a court of last resort for victims of the most heinous crimes needing its protection,” Cotler-Wunsh said, referring to the treaty establishing the court.

MK Nitzan Horowitz, head of the left-wing Meretz party, blamed settlement construction and right-wing lawmakers for “dragging” Israel to the ICC.

“Continued settlement and building and threats of annexation endanger Israel and turn it into a war crimes defendant,” he said in a statement.

Horowitz called for a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, warning that in their absence Israeli leaders may “be exposed to legal proceedings.”

PA, Hamas applaud move

The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority cheered the decision.

In a statement, the PA foreign ministry indicated it would be willing to provide “any assistance required… to realize justice for the Palestinian people.”

“This long-awaited step serves Palestine’s tireless endeavor to achieve justice and accountability, which are indispensable foundations for the peace that the Palestinian people demand and deserve,” the PA foreign ministry said. “The crimes committed by the leaders of the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people are continuous, systematic and widespread.”

The Gaza-ruling Hamas terror group, which is directly implicated in the war crimes the tribunal seeks to investigate, also released a statement welcoming the decision. In the statement, a Hamas spokesperson defended its actions against Israel as “legitimate resistance.”

Human rights groups also cheered the decision.

“The ICC prosecutor’s decision to open a Palestine investigation moves Israeli and Palestinian victims of serious crimes one step closer to obtaining a measure of justice that has for too long eluded them,” Balkees Jarrah, the associate international justice director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

Jarrah said she hoped Karim Khan, who is set to take over for outgoing prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, would “pick up the baton and expeditiously move forward” with the investigation.

“ICC member countries should stand ready to fiercely protect the court’s work from any political pressure,” Jarrah said.

The Israeli anti-occupation group B’Tselem also cheered the decision to open an investigation as “a critical and necessary move after many years in which Israel committed — and is still committing — crimes without having being held accountable.”

The Adalah legal aid organization said the decision confirmed its years-long claims of suspected war crimes by Israel.

“Alongside the crime of the settlements, the Israeli army acts contrary to international legal norms and systematically violates the laws of war,” the group said in a statement. “The sweeping exemption from punishment and Israel’s continued refusal to conduct effective and substantive investigations… prove this move is necessary.”

In February, a pre-trial chamber of the ICC determined that The Hague has jurisdiction to open a criminal investigation into Israel and the Palestinians for war crimes alleged to have taken place in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, paving the way for a full investigation after a five-year preliminary probe opened by Bensouda.

Bensouda indicated in 2019 that a criminal investigation, if approved, would focus on the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict (Operation Protective Edge), on Israeli settlement policy, and on the Israeli response to protests at the Gaza border. The probe will also likely focus on accusations of war crimes by Hamas against Israeli civilians.

The ICC doesn’t try countries, but rather individuals. Defense Minister Benny Gantz said Tuesday that hundreds of Israelis, himself included, could be subject to war crimes probes.

Major world and regional powers like the US, Russia, China, India and Turkey are not members of the court, nor is Israel.

*Aaron Boxerman, Lazar Berman and AFP contributed to this report.*