End bias or else, Israel threatens UN ahead of chief’s visit

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Israel is to tell UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres during his first visit to the country this week it will “no longer tolerate anti-Israel bias” at the international body, Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely said Sunday.

Guterres is set to land in Israel Sunday night for a three-day visit that will include meetings with senior Israeli officials in Jerusalem and Palestinian officials in the West Bank, as well as a stop in the Gaza Strip, where the United Nations runs a major Palestinian aid program. The visit will be his first to the region since taking the helm at the UN in January.

Briefing journalists ahead of the trip, Hotovely said two key issues would be addressed during the visit: ending “anti-Israel bias” at the 193-nation organization, and changing the UNIFIL mandate for UN activities on Israel’s northern border.

“We are seeking a dramatic change in the way the UN treats Israel. It’s time to place the issue squarely on the table and address it head-on,” Hotovely said, threatening funding cuts for the body if changes were not implemented.

Pointing to recent comments by US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, Hotovely said that “if the UN does not drastically change its behavior it will lose both support and funding” from Israel and other countries.

“It’s no longer just us threatening this.” she said. “The US position has changed. Led by Nikki Haley, they have made clear that they will not tolerate bias against us and will no longer be giving an open check.”

In April Israel announced it would reduce its annual membership payment to the United Nations by $2 million following recent “anti-Israel” votes in the organization’s bodies.

The Foreign Ministry said at the time the decision was made following votes critical of Israel at the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, and condemned the “obsessive discrimination against Israel on the part of the United Nations and its agencies.”

Responding to the votes, Haley said that the UN Human Rights Council’s “relentless, pathological campaign” against a state with a strong human rights record “makes a mockery not of Israel, but of the Council itself.”

Haley, who has pledged to tackle hostility toward the Jewish state at a UN, said that if the Human Rights Council failed to make the required changes, the US would consider quitting the body and looking for ways to promote human rights in different frameworks.

Hotovely said discussions with Guterres will also focus on strengthening the mission of the UN interim force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), following a series of skirmishes along the UN-monitored demarcation line between Israel and Lebanon.

“It’s clear that the mandate has to change,” Hotovely said, echoing US calls to change the force’s mission by giving it authority to deal with arms movements by Hezbollah, the Shiite terrorist militia.

The 10,500-strong UNIFIL has been in southern Lebanon since 1978, when it was charged with confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces from a demilitarized zone between the two countries. The mission’s current mandate ends at the end of August.

Since taking over from Ban Ki-moon on January 1, Guterres has been cautious in his approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, partly in response to US accusations that the United Nations was biased against Israel.

In March, the UN chief demanded that a report by a UN body be withdrawn after it accused Israel of imposing an apartheid system on the Palestinians.

Guterres had initially distanced himself from the report, but the United States insisted that it be withdrawn altogether.