

Israel-Hamas war

Benjamin Netanyahu lays out plans for a summer of conflict

Israeli premier's first Hebrew interview since October 7 puts region on notice



A woman and child amid the rubble of buildings in the southern Gaza Strip. Netanyahu's stance will unnerve Israel's allies and neighbours pushing for a diplomatic breakthrough © AFP via Getty Images

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Benjamin Netanyahu's first Hebrew-language interview since October 7 laid out his vision for a long, hot summer in the Middle East: continued fighting in Gaza, no permanent ceasefire to secure the return of hostages, and potential escalation with Hizbollah in Lebanon.

The Israeli premier's unyielding outlook, delivered on Sunday in conversation with the supportive rightwing television station Channel 14, was met with cheers from the sympathetic live studio audience.

But his stance — the first detailed elaboration of Netanyahu's plans since last month's dissolution of a unity wartime government — will unnerve Israel's allies and neighbours in the region, who are pushing for a diplomatic breakthrough to end the [war in Gaza](#) and contain regional hostilities.

"Netanyahu isn't promising the public 'total victory' any more, but he is promising endless war," said Amos Harel, the veteran defence analyst for Haaretz. "Everything is left vague and shrouded in uncertainty — except about the hostage deal."

Families of those 120 remaining hostages immediately condemned Netanyahu for his remarks, and charged him with "abandoning" their loved ones and violating "the

state's moral duty towards its citizens”.

Netanyahu's comments potentially undercut months of efforts by the US, Qatar and Egypt to broker a ceasefire-for-hostage deal between Israel and Hamas that, in its initial phases, deliberately sought to keep the potential end of the conflict ambiguous.

Rejecting the Palestinian militant group's core demand, Netanyahu said he was open to a “partial deal” to return some hostages but was unwilling to stop the war with “Hamas intact”. “We are committed to continuing the war after a pause in order to complete the objective of destroying Hamas,” he said. “On this I'm not willing to relent.”

Netanyahu did allow that Israel was “very close” to finishing the “[intensive phase](#)” of [its military campaign](#) in Gaza, likely in the coming weeks after the completion of the offensive in the southern city of Rafah.



Benjamin Netanyahu appearing on the rightwing television station Channel 14 outlined his plan for continued fighting in Gaza © Reuters video

After that, he added, lower intensity military operations would continue indefinitely, with Israeli forces “mowing the grass” against Hamas's military assets and enduring civilian control. Netanyahu's top security aide said last month that fighting in Gaza would continue until the end of the year.

Yet any postwar governance plans for the shattered enclave remain inchoate, with Netanyahu again insisting that unnamed local Palestinians working in tandem with

neighbouring Arab governments would be tasked with building a new “civil administration” for Gaza.

Many are sceptical such a scheme is feasible, especially with Hamas still able to muster significant resistance. “Who [from the outside] will be willing to go into Gaza and do this? And Hamas will never allow it, turning their own people against them,” said one person familiar with Israeli postwar thinking.

The long-serving Israeli leader rejected once more any role in Gaza for the moderate Palestinian Authority, which exerts limited self-rule in parts of the occupied West Bank. But in a nod to international sensibilities, Netanyahu also dismissed calls by his far-right coalition allies to re-establish Jewish settlements inside Gaza, saying it was “not realistic”.

Netanyahu explained that once the high-intensity phase of the Gaza war was finished, Israeli forces would be redeployed to Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, where the Jewish state and the Iran-backed [Hizbollah](#) movement have been exchanging daily fire for nearly nine months.

In recent weeks, both the firepower and rhetoric from the two sides have escalated sharply, raising fears of possible full-blown conflict.

Netanyahu said the purpose of the future redeployment was initially “defensive”, but that the ultimate goal was to allow the 60,000 residents of northern Israel evacuated since the start of the war “to return home”.

“If we can do this diplomatically, great. If not, we will do it another way. But we will bring everyone back home,” Netanyahu added.

US President Joe Biden’s administration has been attempting to broker a deal between Israel and Hizbollah that would forestall a war that analysts warn could bring in Iran and engulf the entire region.

According to diplomats briefed on the talks, a potential deal would involve Hizbollah withdrawing its forces from the border, Israel ending reconnaissance flights over Lebanon, and the resolution of a series of territorial disputes between the two sides.

Yet such an agreement hinges on an end to the fighting in Gaza, those diplomats added, with Hizbollah making clear since Hamas’s October 7 attack that it would stand in “solidarity” with the Palestinian group.

Netanyahu said he hoped a full-blown war with Hizbollah, considered the world’s

most heavily armed non-state actor, could be averted. But he said Israel would “meet this challenge” of fighting on multiple fronts if needed.

“We can fight on several fronts. We are prepared for this and we are preparing for this,” he said.

Emile Hokayem of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said that by portraying a lull in Gaza as allowing the deployment of greater resources in the north, “Netanyahu is willingly fuelling concerns that a war between Israel and Hizbollah in Lebanon is likely, possibly inevitable”.

“Just like in Gaza, maximalist objectives are expressed without much concern for reality,” he said.

Despite the rising tensions, Netanyahu made clear that he would still be flying to Washington for a July 24 address to a joint session of the US Congress.

“This is a great honour” and “an extraordinary opportunity” to present Israel’s position to the world, which he termed a fight between “humanity and these barbarians”.

“I will bring the word of our nation at a decisive moment in its history, in the battle for our existence,” he said.

Additional reporting: Andrew England in London

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