Israel-Hamas war

Israel has to choose between hostage deal and risk of escalation, Yoav Gallant says

Defence minister says only Hamas would benefit from worsening regional conflict

Yoav Gallant said reaching a deal was 'a strategic opportunity that gives us a high chance to change the security situation on all fronts' © Abir Sultan/REUTERS

James Shotter in Tel Aviv 7 HOURS AGO

Defence minister Yoav Gallant warned Israel had reached a "strategic junction" in its war with Hamas where it must choose between the risk of a broader escalation and a hostage deal with the Palestinian militant group.

Mediators have spent months trying to broker a deal to free the roughly 100 hostages still held by Hamas and end the fighting in Gaza with a ceasefire, but talks remain deadlocked with Israel and Hamas at loggerheads over key details.

Speaking at a briefing with journalists, Gallant said reaching a deal was "a strategic opportunity that gives us a high chance to change the security situation on all fronts", and warned that a regional escalation of the conflict would play into the hands of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar.

"Israel should achieve an agreement that will bring about a pause for six weeks, and bring back hostages. We maintain the right to operate and achieve our goals — including the destruction of Hamas," said Gallant, calling on the international community to pressure Hamas to agree to a deal.
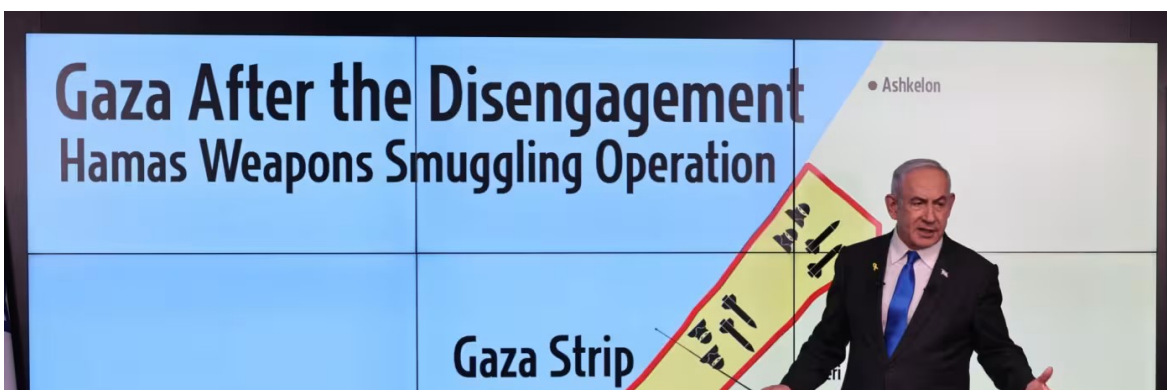
"The scenario of a full-scale, multi-front war benefits Sinwar. That's what he dreamed of when he led a brutal attack against Israeli children, women and men," Gallant added.

Families of hostages and supporters held a rally last week calling for an immediate deal with Hamas © Amir Levy/Getty Images

Gallant's stance on a deal has led to repeated clashes with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who insisted in a defiant press conference last week that Israel would maintain a long-term military presence on Gaza's border with Egypt, despite warnings from mediators and his own security chiefs that doing so would thwart a hostage deal.

However, Gallant said Israel's military pressure on Hamas had created the "necessary conditions" for a deal, and that after 11 months of war, "Hamas as a military formation no longer exists".

He added that Israel had killed "more than half" of Hamas's chain of command, and vowed it would also "eliminate" Sinwar, saying Israeli forces had found traces of his "past presence" in Tel Sultan when they entered tunnels where Hamas killed six hostages earlier this month.

Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel would maintain a long-term military presence on Gaza's border with Egypt © Abir Sultan/AFP/Getty Images

The war in Gaza has fanned tensions across the Middle East, with Israeli forces and Iran-backed militants in several countries exchanging fire, fuelling fears that the fighting could spiral into a broader regional conflict.

The situation is particularly volatile on Israel's border with Lebanon, where Israeli forces have been trading fire with the Iran-backed Hizbollah militant group since it began launching rockets at Israel in support of Hamas the day after the Palestinian militant group's October 7 attack.

So far, the exchanges have not spilled over into a full-blown war. But they have displaced tens of thousands of people from their homes on both sides of the border and led to casualties on both sides.

Gallant said that while Israel was pursuing an agreement with Hizbollah to de-escalate the situation, he had ordered the military "to prepare for every scenario, including directing our attention to the northern arena".

"We will bring our citizens home either through some kind of understanding that will remove Hizbollah's presence on our border, or via military action. We are capable and our readiness increases day by day," he said.

He added that while Israel did not seek a war with Iran, it was capable of retaliating "if necessary" and had the "ability to hit any strategic goal" in the Islamic Republic.

"Iran is creating a war of attrition against Israel in order to gain the time and space to acquire nuclear capabilities — and they are close," he said.