

Israel-Hamas war

Ben-Gvir to quit Israeli coalition after it endorses Gaza ceasefire deal

Far-right security minister's departure will leave Netanyahu with a two-seat government majority



Itamar Ben-Gvir said that Israel's deal with Hamas over Gaza was 'terrible' © REUTERS

James Shotter in Jerusalem JANUARY 18 2025

Israel's far-right national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said on Saturday that he would pull out of Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government in protest against the ceasefire and hostage release deal it has struck with Hamas.

Israel's government approved the multiphase deal — which will halt the 15-month war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and pave the way for the release of the 98 hostages still being held there — early on Saturday.

But some far-right members of the cabinet voted against the agreement, and Ben-Gvir later said he would follow through on his previous threat to leave the government on Sunday, when the first six-week phase of the deal — which he branded “terrible” — is due to begin.

Despite the departure of Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power party, Netanyahu's coalition will retain a slender two-seat majority in Israel's 120-seat parliament because his ultranationalist ally Bezalel Smotrich — Israel's finance minister — appeared to be set to remain in the government.

Earlier this week Smotrich threatened to pull out of the government if Israel did not resume the war when the first phase of the deal — during which Hamas is set to release 33 hostages in return for the freeing of 1,900 Palestinian prisoners from

Israeli jails — ends in six weeks' time.

He reiterated that threat on Saturday, but said that Netanyahu had committed to make changes to the management of the war and aim for a “gradual takeover of the entire Gaza Strip”.

“Look at Gaza, it’s destroyed, uninhabitable, and it will stay this way,” he said in a statement on Telegram. “Do not be impressed by the forced joy of our enemy . . . Very soon, we will erase their smile again and replace it with cries of grief and the sobs of those who were left with nothing.”

In a brief pre-recorded address published on Saturday evening, Netanyahu said that the administrations of both outgoing US President Joe Biden and his successor Donald Trump supported Israel’s right to resume the war if talks over the details of the second phase failed.

“If we have to return to combat, we will do so in new ways, and we will do so with great force,” Netanyahu said.

Earlier on Saturday, Qatar’s foreign ministry said the ceasefire would take effect at 8.30am local time (6.30am GMT) on Sunday. Later that day, Hamas is expected to free three hostages and Israeli will release 95 Palestinian prisoners in the first exchange under the agreement.

However, in an indication of the fragility of the arrangements, Netanyahu said on Saturday evening that Israel would not move ahead with the deal until Hamas provided it with a list of the hostages to be released. “Israel will not tolerate violations of the agreement,” he said.

If the deal is implemented as planned, negotiations on the details of the second phase will begin by day 16 of the first phase. During this time the remaining living hostages will be freed in exchange for hundreds more Palestinian prisoners, the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and a permanent end to the war.

The third and final phase will involve the return of the remaining bodies of hostages who have died and the beginning of the reconstruction of Gaza, under the supervision of Egypt, Qatar and the UN.

