

## Netanyahu Opens Door to Ending the War During Doha Talks: What's Behind This Shift?



As negotiations continue in Doha over a potential ceasefire in Gaza and a new prisoner exchange deal, they run parallel to a significant escalation in Israel's military operations on the ground.

The Israeli army has launched an intensified ground offensive in both the northern and southern regions of the Gaza Strip as part of what is being publicly referred to as "Operation Gideon's Chariots." The declared aim: to achieve Israel's war objectives, eliminate Hamas, and secure the release of hostages.

Last week alone, the Israeli military targeted more than 670 sites across the Strip in a campaign that served as a prelude to the long-anticipated ground assault. The strikes resulted in over 500 deaths and many more wounded in just three days—recalling the devastating early days of a war that has now entered its nineteenth month.

Notably, the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a statement addressing developments in the Doha negotiations, confirmed that the talks include "discussions about ending the war, in addition to a proposal for a truce and the release of hostages."

The statement, released on Sunday, May 18, further stipulated that any end to the war “must involve disarmament in Gaza and the removal of Hamas fighters.”

This marks the first time Netanyahu’s government has publicly broached the possibility of ending the war—an idea that had been strictly off the table in all previous negotiations. The shift comes despite fierce opposition from Israel’s far-right political factions, who have repeatedly threatened to resign should any negotiation include even a hint of ending the war before all stated objectives are met.

So what does this apparent reversal really signify?



### A Crack in the Wall of Israeli Intransigence

Since Israel broke the November 2023 ceasefire, neither Netanyahu nor his government had openly entertained the idea of a full end to the war. Instead, they routinely sidestepped the issue using vague and misleading terminology—separating the concept of ending the war from any actual negotiation framework and tying it to impossible conditions, such as the total eradication of Hamas, the surrender and exile of its leadership, full disarmament, and the unconditional release of Israeli hostages.

Given this context, the Israeli government’s official, unconditional engagement in wide-ranging talks that, for the first time, seriously consider ending the war and

securing a ceasefire, signals a clear breach in its once-impenetrable position. It's a shift that should not be overlooked when assessing the future of the negotiations.

Some observers argue that the phrasing in Netanyahu's statement—linking an end to the war with the disarmament of resistance factions, the removal of Hamas leadership, and the dismantling of its rule—means little has changed. It could, they suggest, merely be a rehash of the so-called “Wietecov Plan” Netanyahu had previously endorsed.

But from another perspective, the very fact that the issue of ending the war is now on the table—even if couched in broader terms and conditioned—represents a significant breach in the hardline position Netanyahu and the far-right have defended for months.

This could serve as a foundation for eventual talks that truly bring this brutal conflict to an end, particularly if Israel's conditions are tackled one by one in a more pragmatic framework that reflects the evolving realities on the ground.

For instance, the demand for disarmament remains vague and could be interpreted flexibly. Similarly, the removal of Hamas leaders may be less pressing following the deaths of key figures in its top ranks and the group's repeated declarations that it does not seek to maintain political control of Gaza.

#### Preliminary Agreement in Doha

Israel's public broadcaster previously disclosed aspects of a preliminary agreement presented by the Israeli delegation now being discussed in Doha. It reportedly includes a 60-day ceasefire in Gaza and the release by Hamas of half of the living Israeli hostages. According to Israeli estimates, 58 hostages remain in Gaza, 20 of whom are believed to be alive.

In exchange, Israel would release an unspecified number of Palestinian prisoners. There are currently more than 10,000 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

The proposal also stipulates that the future of the war will be debated during the 60-day truce, including the possibility of disarming resistance factions and expelling their leaders from the Strip—conditions Tel Aviv continues to insist on.

Hamas and the Qatari mediator have yet to respond publicly, though Hamas has repeatedly stated that it will not surrender its weapons while Israel continues to occupy Palestinian territory.

#### Aid Entry Without a Vote

Coinciding with reports of the Israeli proposal in Doha, Netanyahu's government

decided to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza based on military recommendations aimed at facilitating broader military operations.

The Jerusalem Post quoted an Israeli official as saying this decision is temporary—only for one week—while distribution centers are established under the supervision of the Israeli army and U.S. firms.

Israeli Army Radio reported that the first convoy of aid was expected to enter Gaza on Monday, May 19, carrying food and medicine to be distributed by various international organizations. This comes ahead of the implementation of a new aid mechanism set to begin on May 24, according to Axios.

The U.S. outlet also noted that this marks the first aid entry in 75 days, after a complete blockade. The shipment includes flour for bakeries operated by international NGOs and medicines for hospitals. It will be delivered by the World Food Program, World Central Kitchen, and other relief agencies.

Israel's Channel 14 revealed that the aid decision caused a major rift during the last cabinet meeting. National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir denounced the move, accusing Netanyahu of a grave error and claiming that any humanitarian aid only strengthens Hamas.

Israel's public broadcaster confirmed that the decision to resume humanitarian aid deliveries was made without a formal vote, despite opposition from Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and others—highlighting the immense pressure Netanyahu faced to push the decision through.

### Caving to International Pressure

Netanyahu justified the decision to resume aid deliveries after 75 days of complete closure by claiming it was necessary to prevent famine in Gaza. But given the widespread destruction, death, starvation, and displacement caused by the Israeli military over the past 19 months, such reasoning rings hollow.

Hebrew-language media sources indicate that the decision was a direct result of mounting pressure from Western governments—both American and European—to allow aid into the Strip amid an escalating humanitarian catastrophe.

During the recent cabinet meeting, Netanyahu admitted that former U.S. President Donald Trump was “applying heavy pressure” on him to allow the aid through. Despite opposition, especially from Finance Minister Smotrich, who threatened to resign, Netanyahu declined to put the matter to a vote, stating he had no choice.

Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar advocated for immediate aid delivery, citing pressure from the European Union and the threat of sanctions, even from the

United States. He added that other foreign ministers had contacted him directly, and that both Democratic and Republican members of the U.S. Congress had relayed similar demands to Israel's ambassador in Washington.

This information was later confirmed in leaked audio from the cabinet session aired by Kan Reshet Bet.

Similarly, Channel 12 reported that Netanyahu informed the security cabinet ("the Cabinet") of political pressure from both the Republican Party and Trump himself, warning that Israel could face a serious crisis if it failed to respond appropriately. Consequently, Netanyahu saw no option but to approve the aid delivery, regardless of dissent within his coalition.

### Escalating the War: A Contradictory Move

Paradoxically, while some interpret the aid decision and the diplomatic progress in Doha as signs of de-escalation, Netanyahu's office stated that the aid delivery actually serves the goal of expanding the war effort.

According to the statement: "To enable the expansion of intensive fighting to defeat Hamas, Israel will bring in basic food supplies to ensure that famine does not take hold in Gaza. Such a crisis could jeopardize the continuation of Operation Gideon's Chariots to defeat Hamas."

This policy shift coincides with an intensified Israeli ground offensive as part of the operation's first phase—an attempt by Netanyahu and far-right ministers to negotiate "under fire," hoping that increased military pressure will compel Hamas to concede more at the table, thereby maximizing Israeli gains before potentially being forced to end the war.

Mounting pressure from the Middle East and Europe has placed the Trump administration in a political and moral bind, particularly given the former president's repeated promises to help end the war. This has led to intensified U.S. efforts to pressure Netanyahu: either achieve all objectives swiftly or agree to a ceasefire through negotiation.

As a result, Netanyahu and his government are racing against the clock to secure a decisive military victory that he can claim as absolute. Failing that, they risk being forced into a negotiated settlement that could end the war on terms not entirely of their choosing.

The current negotiations in Doha represent a breach—however limited—in Israel's rigid position and could lay the groundwork for a diplomatic resolution. But this depends on two key factors: sustained regional and international pressure, and the ability of the Palestinian resistance to withstand Israeli operations and prevent Netanyahu from securing battlefield wins that could



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strengthen his negotiating hand.

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