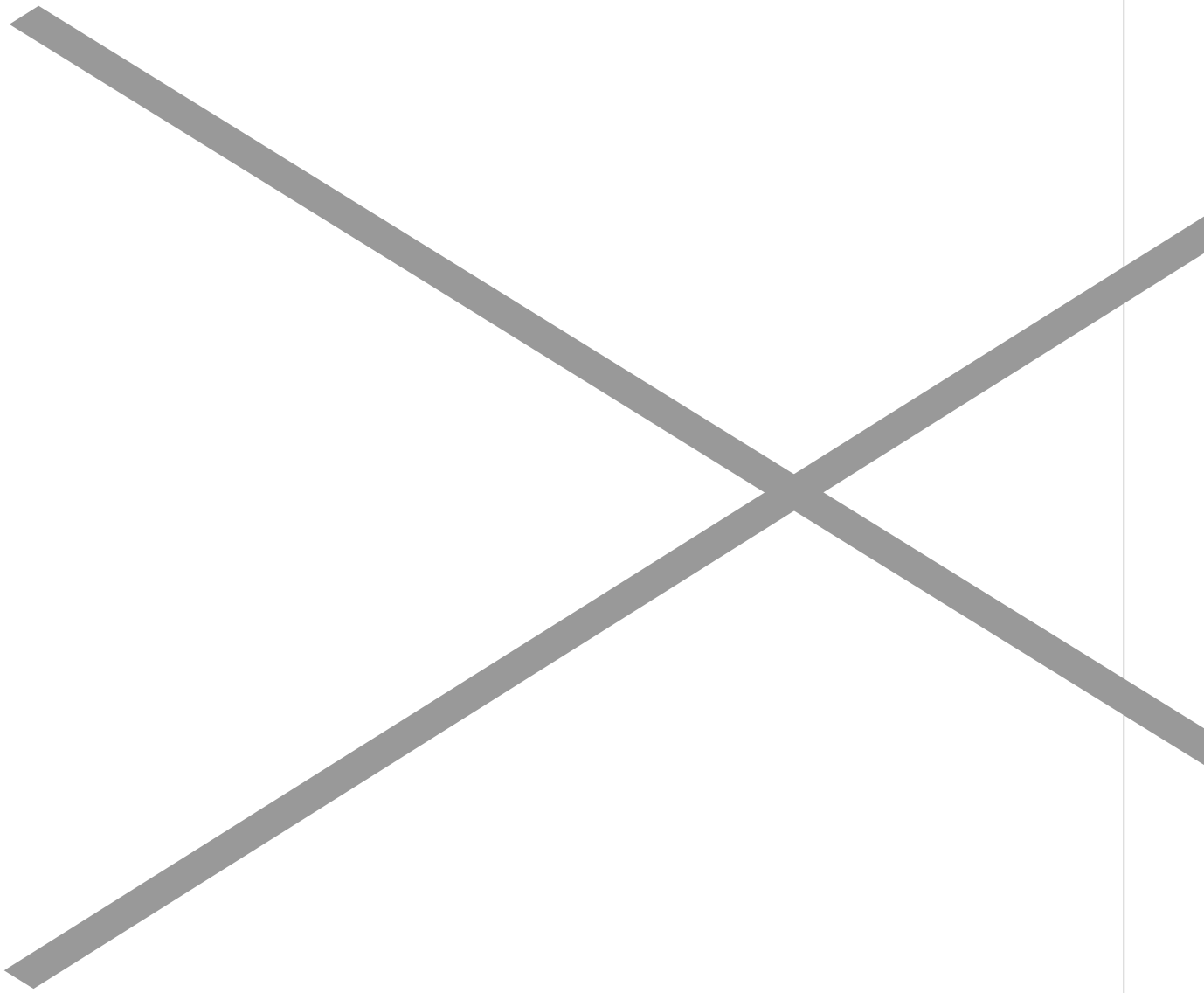


Israeli military spokesman says Hamas cannot be eliminated, causing uproar in Tel Aviv

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Israeli military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari

Tel Aviv, June 20 (RHC)-- Israel's military spokesman has exposed a widening rift between the country's political and army leadership, questioning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's stated goal of destroying Hamas in the Gaza Strip for the war to end.

Daniel Hagari went against Netanyahu by saying that identifying the impossible task of defeating Hamas as Israel's end goal in Gaza means "throwing sand in people's eyes."

After nine months of war in which more than 37,000 Palestinians have been killed in the name of eliminating the armed group that governs the besieged enclave, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari told Israel's Channel 13 broadcaster on Wednesday that the task was impossible and simply "wrong."

"This business of destroying Hamas, making Hamas disappear – it's simply throwing sand in the eyes of the public," he said. "Hamas is an idea. Hamas is a party. It's rooted in the hearts of the people. Whoever thinks we can eliminate Hamas is wrong."

Reporting from Amman, Jordan, Al Jazeera's Hamdah Salhut said Netanyahu's office was "fuming" at Hagari's remarks. "This just gives you an idea of what Benjamin Netanyahu's policies are in this war, and the army on the ground saying it is actually not realistic," she added.

Netanyahu's office responded by saying that the security cabinet, chaired by the prime minister, "has defined the destruction of Hamas' military and governing capabilities as one of the goals of the war. The Israeli military, of course, is committed to this."

The military quickly issued a clarification, saying it was "committed to achieving the goals of the war as defined by the cabinet" and that it has been working on this "throughout the war, day and night, and will continue to do so".

Hagari's comments, it said, "referred to the destruction of Hamas as an ideology and an idea, and this was said by him very clearly and explicitly," the military statement added. "Any other claim is taking things out of context."

Israeli political analyst Akiva Eldar said Hagari has undermined Netanyahu's "doctrine" that Hamas could be defeated "once and for all." "Right now, it seems that for the first time after many years, there is an ongoing escalation between the government headed by Netanyahu and his entourage of reporters, analysts who are actually on his – unofficially – on his team, that are smearing the chief of staff," Eldar told Al Jazeera.

"It's a kind of apocalyptic scenario that the army spokesman – who is reporting to the chief of staff – is just undermining Netanyahu's doctrine, which is: We do have to put an end to the Hamas government once and for all in Gaza," Eldar said. "What Hagari is saying is challenging Netanyahu and saying, actually ... you are hallucinating."

There have already been open signs of discontent over the handling of the war by Netanyahu's government, a coalition that includes right-wing hardliners who oppose any kind of settlement with Hamas.

Months of internationally mediated ceasefire talks, including a proposal floated this month by U.S. President Joe Biden, have stalled.

Benny Gantz, a former military chief and centrist politician, withdrew from Netanyahu's war cabinet earlier this month, citing frustration over the prime minister's conduct of the war.

And Netanyahu this week expressed displeasure with the army's decision to declare a "tactical pause" in the southern Gaza city of Rafah to help deliver humanitarian aid. An aide said Netanyahu was caught off guard by the announcement, and Israeli TV stations quoted him as saying: "We have a country with an army, not an army with a country."

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