

ANALYSIS

Israel's Government Is in Thrall to 'the Concept'

A Hebrew term for complacent blindness still captures Netanyahu's policies.

By [Simon Frankel Pratt](#), a lecturer in political science at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, and [Jamie Levin](#)



A person views a collage showing victims of the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack, seen at the Nova memorial near Kibbutz Reim in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2024. JOHN WESSELS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

OCTOBER 5, 2026, 7:00 AM

On Oct. 7, 2023, thousands of Hamas attackers breached Israel's layered southern barriers around Gaza, killing around 1,200 people and taking 251 hostages. Israel's military, intelligence, and political

systems systematically failed, making the surprise attack possible and then allowing Hamas to run roughshod for nearly three days.

These failures are the subject of several recent books and articles, both in Hebrew and English. Collectively, they show that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his top defense officials were almost unfathomably confident in the status quo, ignoring clear warnings that Hamas was preparing a major attack. Some have turned to conspiracy theories to explain this, claiming that Netanyahu deliberately permitted the attack to happen. The rational, and at least partially correct, explanations instead cite the power of groupthink, misplaced faith in technology, patriarchy (all of the *tatzpitaniyot*—or Israeli military spotters stationed around Gaza’s borders—are women), and cynicism.

But beneath these strategic failings is another more fundamental perversion of national security reasoning: For Netanyahu and his base, along with his coalition partners, the assumption that Hamas was uninterested in war made it possible to keep the Gaza Strip and the West Bank separate, to undermine the Palestinian Authority, and to pursue the creeping annexation of Palestine.

Israeli commentators, along with other experts, have drawn parallels between these failures and those before the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, 50 years prior to October 7 2023, when Israel’s political and defense establishment similarly failed to read the warning signs of a massive combined Egyptian and Syrian attack. The official post-mortem for the 1973 war shed light on Israel’s failure to predict and, more importantly, prepare for the attack. It also popularized a Hebrew term that explains much of Netanyahu’s actions prior to and after 2023: the *conceptzia*, or “security concept.”

This term helps explain the relationship between Netanyahu’s deeper, ideologically driven assumptions and the more prosaic, if nevertheless catastrophic, mistakes of Israel’s professional security apparatus.

In public Israeli parlance, the term conceptzia is pejorative. Its use denoted the refusal to abandon convenient and settled assumptions even in the face of urgent evidence. It implies that military leaders had lost perspective and objectivity, both half a century ago and in the lead-up to 2023. References to the conceptzia frame the cause of a war as the outcome of intellectual and institutional laziness, complacency, convenience, and hubris.

The result: In both 1973 and 2023, Israel was initially fighting on its back foot, often in its own territory near civilian populations and critical infrastructure, at a staggering economic and human cost.

In the wake of the 1973 war, the Israeli government struck a commission of inquiry headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Shimon Agranat, which coined the term. When the findings were released, Golda Meir, the prime minister, along with her Defence Minister Moshe Dayan, the chief of staff, and the director of military intelligence all resigned in disgrace.

They had assumed that Egypt was incapable of achieving military success and therefore wouldn't try, that Egypt would never wage a war for limited objectives, and that Israeli airpower would prevent Egyptian advances. In other words, Israel's government had presumed that its adversary lacked the institutional capacity, political desire, and technological means to gain anything from war.

Netanyahu is battling similar accusations today: complacency and hubris leading to Hamas's surprise attack. Indeed, recent revelations suggest that Netanyahu discounted warnings of an imminent attack on the eve of Oct. 7, assuming they were incorrect. But unlike Meir, Netanyahu has refused to accept any responsibility, instead blaming almost every other top official in the country (all of whom have already resigned or been dismissed).

Israel and Hamas clashed repeatedly in the decade and a half prior to Oct. 7: a three-week war in 2008-2009, an eight-day campaign in 2012, a much more expansive seven-week war in 2014, and a roughly two-

week exchange in 2021. Despite this history of conflict, Netanyahu saw Hamas as fundamentally deterrable through a combination of carrots and sticks.

Over the past decade as prime minister, Netanyahu was not shy about answering attacks emanating from the Gaza Strip with force—particularly attacks by Hamas’s erstwhile ally Islamic Jihad—but he was more intent on seeking compromise and quiet. He was also highly reluctant to pay the high cost of a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip after the significant losses that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) incurred in 2014.

So Netanyahu instead focused on strategically calibrating the blockade of Gaza by issuing tens of thousands of permits for Palestinians to work in Israel (which provided a much-needed source of revenue) and, more importantly, facilitating the transfer of millions of dollars from the Qatari government annually to support the Hamas government, much of which went into the construction of tunnels and the purchase of weapons. Indeed, so convinced was Netanyahu that Hamas could be moderated and effectively contained that on the eve of Oct. 7, he was known to be completing a more expansive deal.

Members of Israel’s security establishment convinced themselves that the greatest threats to the country’s security came from Hezbollah and Iran. They thought that Hamas could be controlled through a combination of threats and economic enticements. Their resources and attention were directed north and to the broader regional conflict with Iran and others.

When the IDF did worry about the threat posed by Hamas, its concerns were with the West Bank and the possibility that increased tensions there could ignite a new wave of violence. These errors of judgement are consistent with the standard meaning of conceptzia, referring to complacency and strategic blindness.

But beyond complacency and misplaced confidence, there is a more insidious element to Netanyahu’s conceptzia. The supposed calm

with Hamas served the ideological and political agenda of Netanyahu and his far-right government. Conceptzia also (and perhaps more importantly) was a commitment to keeping the Palestinian polity divided.

A divided Palestinian polity would be kept busy bickering among themselves. But more importantly, a divided Palestine meant that Israel would not have to contemplate further concessions at the bargaining table. Indeed, negotiations had effectively been frozen since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007. By assuming that Hamas was deterred from violence and focused on governing Gazans, Netanyahu spared himself and his government the need to consider costly solutions that might reunite Palestine or strengthen the Palestinian Authority.

The conceptzia permitted Netanyahu to establish the most extreme right-wing government in Israel's history. To maintain his position as prime minister, Netanyahu formed a coalition with two radical parties committed to a transformation of the existing arrangement—toward ethnic cleansing and settlement growth. Earlier in his career, Netanyahu might have taken a more long-term approach to these goals, but with his premiership at stake and facing numerous criminal charges, he needed to prioritize West Bank settlements, and the neutering of the Palestinian Authority, simply to maintain the conditions needed for his coalition's hyperactive expansionism.

The apotheosis of Netanyahu's commitment to the conceptzia was his unwillingness to assign credibility to or even share the dire warnings that he received in the lead-up to Oct. 7. After dragging his feet on a limited prisoner-exchange deal with Hamas, he received a warning from Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar himself, via the United Arab Emirates, that the alternative was war.

Had he taken this warning seriously, Netanyahu would have faced a number of unpalatable political choices. Finishing the deal with Hamas would have threatened his coalition during a time of

enormous domestic opposition. Redirecting troops from the West Bank and the border with Lebanon would have required reining in the West Bank settlers, in turn also risking his coalition. Mobilizing reservists to bolster existing forces in the Gaza envelope would have been expensive and unsustainable, especially amid domestic upheaval over economic problems and creeping authoritarianism. And since Netanyahu believed that he had insight into Hamas's dispositions, plus reliable intelligence sources that would warn of anything big, why would he make costly decisions?

Conceptzia helps us understand the pernicious effect of two synergizing types of motivated reasoning: blindness resulting from complacency and ideology together. Netanyahu's unwillingness to recognize the threat that Hamas posed was complacent, but it was also a lot more than that. It was absolutely essential to his political career and to his broader ideological positions, perhaps even his vision for the state of Israel itself.

The conceptzia may have collapsed with Hamas's attack, but the forces that drove it remain. Netanyahu maintains a total unwillingness to permit meaningful governance in the Gaza Strip that could lead, eventually, to Palestinian unity and a strengthened Palestinian Authority.

What new conceptzia may emerge in the wake of Oct. 7 is an open question. Netanyahu and his coalition partners have not abandoned their ideological commitments, even as Israel faces increasing diplomatic and geopolitical isolation. Netanyahu and his allies have dragged their feet in permitting a new regime to develop in the Gaza Strip, thereby allowing Hamas to reassert itself amid the rubble and camps for internally displaced people. The settler movement, protected by the IDF, is committing a wave of terrorism directed at Palestinian villages in the West Bank, as the government shows little concern for the destabilizing impact that this has on the security environment.

Regardless of who forms the next Israeli government after next month's election, the risks of another failure of the security state are all the more severe, for both Israel and the region.

Simon Frankel Pratt is a lecturer in political science at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne

Jamie Levin is an assistant professor of political science at St. Francis Xavier University in Canada.

READ MORE ON [ISRAEL](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [SECURITY](#) | [WAR](#)

READ MORE

Israel's Soft Power Is Its Hard Power

The Israeli government's greatest source of diplomatic influence is the popularity of its military equipment.

[ANALYSIS](#) | [ANCHAL VOHRA](#)



Stories Readers Liked



What Machiavelli Would Say About Trump [🔗](#)

By Stephen M. Walt

Brazil's Election



Brazil's Election Won't Fix Its Biggest Problems

Slow growth and corruption have dogged the right and the left. [🔗](#)

ARGUMENT | ADAM GOLDSMITH

How Flávio Bolsonaro Sees the World [🔗](#)

DISPATCH | CATHERINE OSBORN



Lula Bets Big on Defense Ahead of Election [🔗](#)

ANALYSIS | THAYZ GUIMARÃES



The Bolsonaro Inheritance [🔗](#)

ANALYSIS | ANDRE PAGLIARINI



FP SOLUTIONS

- [FP Analytics](#)
- [FP Events](#)
- [FP Studios](#)
- [Simulations and Peacegames](#)
- [Advertise with FP](#)
- [Country Reports](#)

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

- [Your FP Account](#)
- [Group Subscriptions](#)
- [Reprint Permissions](#)
- [FP Magazine Archive](#)
- [Buy Back Issues](#)

EDUCATION

- [Graduate Education Guide](#)
- [FP for Education](#)
- [Institutional Access](#)

ABOUT FP

- [Writer's Guidelines](#)
- [Contact FP](#)
- [Meet the Staff](#)
- [Work at FP](#)
- [AI Policy](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Accessibility](#)



Foreign Policy Magazine is a division of Graham Holdings Company. All contents (c) 2026, Foreign Policy LLC, a unit of Graham Digital Holding Company. All rights reserved. Foreign Policy, 1099 14th St NW, Suite 500 East, Washington, D.C., 20005.

Powered By WordPress VIP



Free delivery in Canada

Exclusive Offer



