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Clear and Present Danger:
The US Intelligence Community and Foreign Intervention in the
Elections

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Concern that a president could be elected in part due to the influence of a foreign country has made combating such intervention in the campaign a top priority for the American intelligence community. However, the specific counterintelligence challenge is difficult and politically sensitive. One of the ways that the US intelligence community has chosen to deal with this danger is by increasing the public's awareness of foreign attempts to exert influence. As part of this effort, announcements have been issued citing certain adversarial countries and their interests, methods of influence, and preferences for the next president. The public has been told to remain alert, and specific actions are recommended. In addition, classified briefings for the Congressional intelligence committees on protecting the elections were stepped up, although this has recently been cut back because of alleged leaks. The issue highlights the difficulty of intelligence work during an election campaign in a democratic country, and this matter should be addressed in Israel as well. In this context, regulated and controlled intelligence sharing between the intelligence community and other establishment institutions, the Knesset, and the public about efforts by foreign entities to influence Israeli democracy should be considered.

Foreign intervention in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, which was attributed to Russia, shook the United States in general, and the intelligence community in particular. The main theaters of action were information warfare and cyberwarfare designed to affect voter awareness and decision. In preparation for the presidential elections scheduled for November 3, 2020, security for the election is a top priority for the American intelligence community.

The United States intelligence community believes that since American citizens are the target of foreign efforts to influence the elections, and since a large part of the campaign is underway publicly and on the social networks, citizens and public figures must be prepared for such warfare in order to reduce its effect.

The Intelligence Sharing Policy

In recent months, the US intelligence community has informed Americans about the main points of the intelligence picture regarding the risk of foreign intervention in the election campaign, and has called for increased awareness and alertness. At the same time, the intelligence community has given intelligence-based briefings on election security to the presidential campaigns, political committees, and members of Congress, including reports to the Congressional intelligence committees.

These measures, taken in order to inform the public and other interested parties are unprecedented in the American intelligence community, according to William Evanina, director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). These remarks were part of announcements issued on July 24 and August 7, 2020 by ODNI concerning the threat of foreign intervention in the upcoming presidential elections and the preparations by the American intelligence community in face of this threat. Evanina called on the public to adopt a critical view of information, check the sources before republishing or disseminating announcements, maintain good cybersecurity and media literacy, and report suspicious activity involving foreign intervention in the elections to the authorities. He said that neutralizing these threats required not only comprehensive action by the government, but a comprehensive effort by the nation. He urged the public to learn about foreign influence and the ways in which the United States government was working to secure the 2020 elections, including by visiting websites of the agencies spearheading the campaign in the matter, chief among them the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI.

The Intelligence Picture Presented by the US Intelligence Community

According to the US intelligence assessment, in advance of the election, foreign countries will continue using covert and overt means of influence in their efforts to tilt the preferences and perspectives of Americans in order to change the policy of the United States, increase social rifts, and undermine the American people's faith in the democratic process. The Covid-19 pandemic and the anti-government protests are also likely to constitute fertile ground for foreign intervention, including through the use of disinformation.

The efforts by foreign actors ("adversaries") to influence the American voter employ primarily the public media. At the same time, attempts by these adversaries to damage election infrastructure by disrupting the voting process, stealing sensitive data, and casting doubt on the validity of the election results are also possible. The intelligence community continues its monitoring of malicious cyber actors trying to gain access to American networks, including systems related to management of the election. However, control of

these systems, the large number of reviews, and post-election auditing make it difficult for adversaries to disrupt or change the voting results on a large scale without exposure.

The American intelligence community is now focused on the efforts of adversarial countries to influence the elections, led by China, Russia, and Iran (in that order). The US intelligence assessments are as follows:

- a. **China** regards President Trump as unpredictable, and prefers that he lose the election. China is striving to shape a comfortable political environment in the United States, exerting pressure on political figures it believes act against its interests and diverting criticism directed against China. In recent months, China has been increasingly critical of the Trump administration on issues in dispute between the two countries, and is mindful that this criticism is likely to affect the election results.
- b. **Russia** prefers President Trump. It continues to disseminate disinformation in the United States through a variety of means, including internet trolls, in order to weaken the United States and undermine its global status, disrupt public confidence in the democratic process, and weaken the American opponents of Russia. As part of this effort, Russia is trying to diminish the Democratic Party's image, especially that of presidential candidate Joe Biden. As Vice President in the Obama administration, Biden opposed Russian involvement in Ukraine, and supported the internal opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin. President Trump did not accept the intelligence assessment on this question, arguing that he (Trump) is "the last person Russia wants to see in office."
- c. **Iran** regards the United States, especially the Trump administration, as a threat to its regime. It is taking action against him, and trying to undermine democratic institutions in the US and divide the country before the elections, for example through disinformation.

All in all, the intelligence community believes that the efforts by foreign countries to intervene constitute a direct threat to the democratic fabric of the United States.

Less Intelligence Sharing with Congress

In late August 2020, Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe notified the Senate and House of Representatives intelligence committees that he would no longer provide "in-person briefings" (by senior members of the intelligence community) about election security and foreign election interference. The committees will continue to have access to completed written intelligence reports, but they will no longer be able to personally question senior officials about the reports, as they previously did. Ratcliffe, a Trump appointee, claimed that members of Congress had leaked classified information for political gain. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and House

Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, both Democrats, severely criticized the decision and demanded that the briefings be renewed.

Significance

The intelligence community in the United States and those in other democratic countries, including Israel, play an important role in preventing foreign intervention in election campaigns. Even though the influence of adversarial countries on the voters is limited, such influence is liable to be significant in a close election. Sharing intelligence with the public and parliamentary institutions is therefore an important means of preparing people in a country for the possibility of foreign intervention. Large-scale sharing of intelligence likewise prevents a situation in which such intelligence is accessible only to representatives of the ruling party, and exposure is also a means to deter adversaries.

At the same time, sharing intelligence has disadvantages as well. The American case highlights the difficulty in handling national intelligence during an election campaign and preserving the purity of the elections. Intelligence organizations are liable to become enmeshed in the political campaign. For example, any intelligence report on the matter, or the failure to share a report, may be perceived by one of the opposing political sides as influencing the elections in some way. For example, intelligence reports that adversarial leaders support a certain candidate for president could have a negative impact on his image with certain voters, forcing him to deny this assessment (for example, Trump's denial of the assessment that he is Russia's preferred candidate).

Given their positions, national leaders and Congressional committees are the main consumers of intelligence of this type, but they also have an interest in being reelected. This interest is liable to lead them or their associates to use intelligence information to promote their reelection campaigns. Such use could create political shockwaves and damage relations between the intelligence community and the political system. To the extent that classified information is leaked, the risk to intelligence sources and methods will grow.

Sharing information is designed to reduce foreign influence, but if the intelligence community focuses the spotlight on tendentious information disseminated by foreigners, it is liable to enhance its dissemination and harmful effect. Commenting on such information in itself constitutes news. At the same time, if the intelligence community does not report it, politicians will claim afterwards that the intelligence community concealed important information from them and from the voters. The decision of whether to report intelligence information about connections between American politicians and foreign elements that is not necessarily verified but is liable to affect elections poses a particularly difficult dilemma.

As for Israel, the American case shows that sharing intelligence during an election campaign has both advantages and disadvantages, and therefore requires regulation. One example of an unregulated report to the public occurred in Israel in January 2019. In a lecture at a closed civilian conference, Israel Security Agency Director Nadav Argaman disclosed that a foreign country was planning to interfere in elections in Israel by means of cyberattacks and hackers. Some of his remarks were disclosed to the public, while others were barred for publication by the censor (N12, January 8, 2019).

Therefore a policy of sharing intelligence about foreign efforts to intervene in Israeli democracy is proposed. Parties that should receive regulated and controlled intelligence include relevant establishment agencies, the Central Elections Committee, Knesset committees, and the public. Reports will be made to each forum according to its security classification.

The election campaign period in the United States is an especially sensitive time. Although the allies of the United States, who support its resilience, are not mentioned in the announcements issued by the American intelligence community as possible sources of foreign influence, Israel should avoid statements liable to be interpreted as support for one of the opposing political sides.