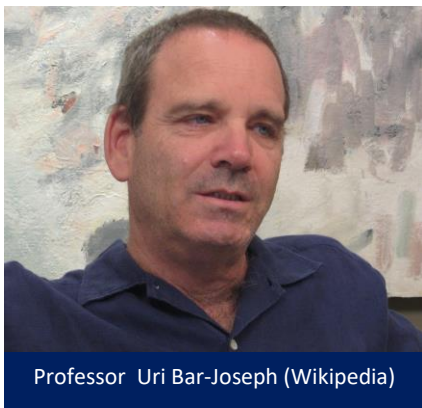


Intelligence in the Age of Populist Leadership: The United States and Israel



Professor Uri Bar-Joseph (Wikipedia)

The emergence of populist leaders in liberal democracies in recent years has brought a highly dangerous adversary to the forefront, one which threatens the very independence of the intelligence community. *Tension becomes particularly intense when intelligence professionals find themselves facing a populist leader.* Traditional leadership respects the established rules of the game, which require listening to and acknowledging the expertise of intelligence professionals, even if their assessments are not

necessarily accepted. Populist leadership, by its very nature, does not see itself bound by these rules.

Introduction

Quality intelligence processes in democratic states encounter three traditional enemies. The first is a result of inherent failures in the intelligence process itself, ranging from straightforward assessment errors, through authoritarian management that hinders free discussion, which is the heart of the assessment process, to communication blockages and internal and inter-organizational power struggles that impede cooperation. The second is external: the adversary seeking to keep its secrets through concealment and deception. The third is the decision-makers themselves, who often find that the assessments they are handed contradict the policy they are promoting, and so in one way or another, opt to exert pressure on intelligence to align its assessments with the policy.

The emergence of populist leaders in liberal democracies in recent years has introduced a fourth and very dangerous enemy that poses a threat to the independent status of the intelligence community. The following begins with a brief discussion on the nature of populism and its implications for intelligence work, before moving to focus on intelligence-leader relations in the United States under Donald Trump's administration, and in Israel since the beginning of the judicial reform in January 2023.

Populism, Populist Leadership, and Intelligence

Populism is a political style that fashions itself as the true representative of “the people,” understood as an authentic homogeneous group, as against minorities, immigrants, opposing political forces, or elite groups with wealth and influence.

Populist leaders share similar personality traits and perceptions. The most prominent of these include a high level of narcissism, which contributes to excessive self-confidence; a tendency toward paranoia and fear of conspiracies, which create a dichotomous worldview dividing the world into “us” and “them”; a strong need for support and validation, leading to the creation of a sycophantic work environment that excludes those with differing opinions; and a radical anti-establishment mindset that drives populist leaders to see themselves as operating outside the system and challenging existing institutions.



All of the above have significant implications for the relationship between a populist leader and the intelligence community. Even under normal circumstances, the encounter between “expertise without authority” and “authority without expertise” can lead to tension between the intelligence community’s professional role of presenting decision-makers with the most accurate and relevant assessment for policy making and its desire to influence the leader’s worldview. However, the tension can come to a head when dealing with a populist leader.

Conventional leadership understands and respects the accepted rules of the game, which require listening to and acknowledging the expertise of intelligence professionals, even if their assessments are not necessarily adopted. By its nature, populist leadership does not regard itself as bound by rules. Since its primary goal is to gain and maintain public support rather than to protect and advance the nation’s security interests, and because the populist leader’s personality makes it difficult for them to accept assessments which do not align with their worldview or political objectives, they may not view the intelligence community as a vital professional partner but as a potential political adversary. As a result, instead of maintaining a proper relationship with intelligence, populist leaders may seek to undermine its status, cast doubt on its credibility, and even attempt to reshape it to fit their worldview and political needs. The the populist leader’s personality makes it difficult for them to cope with a reality that does not align with their worldview, increasing the likelihood of a sharp

conflict with the intelligence system. In such a situation, as evidenced by recent events in the United States and Israel, the established rules can break down.

Trump and the American Intelligence Community

Since the establishment of the American intelligence community in 1947, the relationship between the president and intelligence has experienced ups and downs but has always remained within a well-defined framework. The 2016 election of Donald Trump, an unconventional candidate with distinct populist characteristics, changed the dynamic completely.



The tension at the core of the relationship between the Trump administration and the intelligence community involved the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). Published on January 6, 2017, one day before the new president took office, the NIE concluded that Russia had interfered in the elections, primarily through cyber attacks and influence on social media discourse with the objective of securing Trump's victory. Even a leader without populist traits would have been impacted by the publication and timing of this report, let alone Trump. The result was the intensification of his hostility toward the intelligence community and its perception, by the President and his allies, as a central enemy of the new administration.

John McLaughlin, a veteran of the CIA and former acting director of the agency, identified four stages in Trump's relationship with the intelligence community during his first term. The first stage, **ignorance**, was the result of his total lack of experience in foreign policy. Trump's remarks following the first intelligence briefing he received in August 2016, where he claimed that from the body language of the people briefing him he could tell how much they opposed Obama's policies, reflected his limited understanding of the field and his intention to use intelligence for political purposes.

The next stage was **hostility, which was** Trump's reaction to the intelligence community's confirmation of suspicions regarding Russian interference in the elections. Notable manifestations included his reference to the publication of the report on January 6 as an event that "could have happened in Nazi Germany" and his statement, when meeting with President Vladimir Putin in July 2018, that he, Trump, trusted him more than the American intelligence community. Trump also made it clear that he had no interest in intelligence briefings, including the President's Daily Brief (PDB), considered the intelligence community's most critical report, and showed disregard for the need to protect sources, for example by disclosing sensitive intelligence received from Israel to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov or the publication of classified satellite images in his morning tweets.



The **third stage** was **dependence**. Like his predecessors, Trump eventually recognized the need for intelligence assessments and information. Despite his hostility toward the community, he approved operations that relied on intelligence, such as strikes on facilities associated with chemical weapons in Syria, the elimination of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019, and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, in January 2020. Ironically, despite his well-known hostility toward intelligence, he took pride in the operations.



During his first term, Trump eventually recognized the need for intelligence assessments and information, for the elimination of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (October 2019), and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (January 2020) (A.F.P, AP)

The **fourth stage**, which began in 2019, was the **politicization of the intelligence community**. In July 2019, Dan Coats, the moderate Republican Director of National Intelligence (DNI) who had tried to keep the community free of politics, resigned. Trump made every effort to replace him with his loyalist, John Ratcliffe, who was considered "too political" even by Republican members of Congress. After nearly a year, Ratcliffe was appointed to the position, and his tenure, which lasted six months, was marked by a spike political involvement, including the publication of documents assessed as falsified that aided Trump during his election campaign. Still, though the damage caused by to the intelligence community during by Trump's first term in office was profound—as its primary target was to gain and maintain public support rather than to protect and promote the essential security interests of the nation—it largely involved irresponsible rhetoric. Not so in the second term.

Trump entered the White House in January 2021 with control over Congress and the Supreme Court, facing a weak opposition and armed with a clear action plan – "**Project 2025**" from the ultra-conservative **Heritage Foundation**. This nearly thousand-page document dedicated a chapter to the intelligence community. Beyond detailing the injustices the community allegedly committed against Trump in his first term, it also included operational components: that the **Director of National Intelligence (DNI)** would be loyal to the president and directly subordinate to him instead of retaining their current status as a cabinet member; that a **Deputy DNI** be appointed without external approval processes; that the **DNI's** powers be expanded; that experienced CIA officers be replaced with new personnel who would be more loyal to the president's agenda; and that a database be created to filter out candidates who do not pass a loyalty test.

The first weeks of the new administration proved it was acting according to the plan. **Tulsi Gabbard**, a former congresswoman from Hawaii with no experience in intelligence work, was appointed as **DNI**. Due to her support for the **Assad regime** in Syria and her embrace of conspiracy theories justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suspicions arose that she was a Russian asset. **John Ratcliffe** was appointed as **CIA director**. At the end of his brief tenure as **DNI**, the intelligence community's inspector general determined that he had altered intelligence assessments on **China** and **Russian interference in the 2016 elections** for political reasons. The new **FBI director** was **Kash Patel**, who had called for dismantling the **civil service protections** and had promoted, even in children's books he authored, conspiracy theories portraying the intelligence community, and the **FBI** in particular, as part of the so-called "deep state." According to experts, his appointment signaled a significant

blow to the **FBI's** independence and the intelligence community's ability to handle domestic threats.

The process of domesticating intelligence has also extended to lower levels. "Project 2025" determined that governance should be streamlined through mass layoffs and reductions, and it is clear that the budget cuts in the intelligence community will primarily target elements perceived as liberal, particularly in the field of intelligence research. Beyond damaging research independence, such a move will also significantly impair the community's long-term operational capacity. For, even if the administration changes, the intelligence community will struggle to find a sufficiently high-quality replacement for the loss of an arsenal of professionals built over many years. Additionally, Trump, who ignored the community's briefings during his first term, can be expected to do the same in a second term. The administration's hostile stance toward NATO countries, the recklessness displayed by the president and his team in handling intelligence secrets and the position of Gabbard, suspected of being a Russian asset, are all likely to undermine intelligence cooperation with foreign countries. In addition, there are even more fundamental concerns. Loch Johnson, one of the leading intelligence scholars in the United States, warned that the administration might use intrusive intelligence capabilities to target domestic opponents, posing a real threat to the very foundations of democracy in the United States.

Israel since the beginning of the judicial reform

Unlike in the United States, where shaping intelligence outputs is considered acceptable, Israeli decision-makers traditionally refrain from doing so, even when they disagree with assessments. In Israel, it is also not customary for changes in government to lead to replacements at the top of intelligence agencies. Israeli rules of the game reflect both the relative strength and professional ethos of the intelligence community and the recognition by decision-makers of the signal important of free intelligence assessments, untainted by political pressure, for Israel's security.



"Judicial reform" (Getty images)



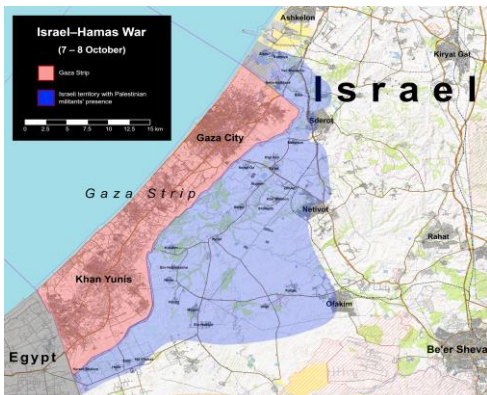
Widespread protest against the "Legal Revolution" (N12)

Also, Netanyahu is not Trump. Though he has been known to exhibit populist traits such as a sense of persecution and belief in conspiracies (the "hot tape" affair), fomenting tensions between political camps ("the Left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish"), and engaging in incitement ("Peres will divide Jerusalem"), he later acted with caution and responsibility. He relied on centrist parties, did not challenge existing elites, and maintained reasonable relations with the heads of the security and intelligence establishment, even when disagreements arose. The turning point came with his major victory in the 2015 elections, after which he formed a distinctly right-wing government. His indictment on corruption charges the refusal of centrist parties to support him while on trial led him to establish a far-right government and launch the so-called judicial reform, which also marked the beginning of his crisis with the intelligence community.



Israel Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu
 (Abir Sultan/AFP, via Getty Images)

The first phase of the crisis was clearly reflected in Netanyahu's disregard for six concrete warnings, four from Military Intelligence and two from the Chief of Staff and the head of the Shin Bet, about the deterioration of Israel's deterrent capability as a result of the crisis caused by the reform. This behavior, along with increasing avoidance of meetings with security leaders, created an unprecedented shift in the pattern of leader-intelligence relations in Israel—a clear departure from Netanyahu's previously more cautious approach. The shift likely reflected Netanyahu's growing confidence in his own abilities, as well as the increasing influence of his close circle, and a strong commitment to the reform agenda and a desire to maintain his government—even in the face of potential harm to Israel's security.



The surprise attack on Israel,
 October 7th 2023 (Wikipedia)

The second phase began after October 7. The shock of the attack, which had no prior warning, deepened Netanyahu's distrust of the intelligence agencies. The growing public tendency to view him as personally accountable for the disastrous failure, set the stage for his campaign to shift all blame solely onto the intelligence and military organizations. The change in rhetoric was signaled in his first press conference on October 28, by his refusal to take responsibility. The message, released for publication hours later,

stated that, contrary to false claims, at no stage and under no circumstances was Prime Minister Netanyahu given any warning of Hamas' intent to go to war and that, in the assessment of all security agencies, including the head of Military Intelligence and the head of the Shin Bet, Hamas was deterred and sought an arrangement. Such was the assessment repeatedly presented to the prime minister and the cabinet by all security agencies and the intelligence community, including up until the outbreak of the war.

The ongoing campaign of repeated statements against the heads of the security and intelligence community (except for the Mossad) is unprecedented in Israeli society, which has always placed its trust in the security agencies, especially during wartime. The so-called “poison machine”—the Likud Party’s propaganda arms in the media—amplified messages that served the interests of the prime minister, and were mainly directed against the Chief of Staff and the head of the Shin Bet. They promoted conspiratorial claims that the intelligence system had deliberately concealed documents and information as part of a conspiracy leading up to the war. As reflected in polling results, the campaign eroded public trust in the security and intelligence community, which has begun to be suspected of political bias. Netanyahu could have addressed the public and refuted the claims but chose not to do so. All indications suggest that this climate undermined the traditional standards of integrity required from intelligence professionals in their dealings with the political leadership, especially the prime minister.

The third and most dangerous phase for the independence of the intelligence community is the legislative initiative to establish a new intelligence department within the Prime Minister’s Office, intended to challenge the intelligence assessments of Military Intelligence, the Shin Bet, and the Mossad. The implications of such a move could be disastrous—injecting a clear political agenda into the assessment process and undermining the professional standing of the intelligence community, which has maintained its independence since its inception. The precedent of the Office of Special Plans established in the Pentagon in 2002—ostensibly to provide raw intelligence on Iraq but in reality, to pressure other intelligence agencies into producing assessments justifying the invasion of Iraq—illustrates the destructive impact such bodies can have on the ability to produce objective assessments.

Finally, there is the concern that intelligence could be used to undermine the foundations of democracy. Nadav Argaman, former head of the Shin Bet, addressed the issue in general terms when he warned in an interview with Channel 12 about the potential damage to democratic norms. Avner Barnea, a former senior Shin Bet official, was more specific. Referring to Section 7(a) of the Shin Bet Law, which assigns the

agency responsibility for maintaining "the democratic regime and its institutions," he warned of a scenario in which the current head of the Shin Bet would be replaced by a Netanyahu loyalist. In such a scenario, the Shin Bet chief might, for example, refrain from intervening in an attempt to prevent elections or use the agency to restrict the opposition.

The intelligence community's relatively strong position, the resilience demonstrated by civil society since the beginning of the judicial upheaval, the relative independence of the Supreme Court, and the fact that, unlike Trump, whose rule is assured until early 2029, Netanyahu's grip on power is vulnerable to party politics, all strengthen the intelligence community's ability to withstand these threats. However, the rapid politicization of the American intelligence community in recent months could create a "perfect storm," providing justification for those in Israel seeking to domesticate the intelligence community for their own purposes.

This situation leads to one conclusion: every effort must be made by anyone who recognizes the importance of a professional and high-quality intelligence community to national security to help it withstand the populist threat it currently faces.



Only three letters have to be changed... (Times Free Press)