

Victory at Any Price: the Drive of Private Intelligence Operators in Pursuit of Enhanced HUMINT Capabilities

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Abstract

Recent multiple high-profile cases involving private intelligence service operators, such as the British Orbis Business Intelligence Ltd., as well as the Israeli Black Cube Ltd. and PSY Group have increased the visibility of some of these usually “quiet” private operators on the global scene. These scandals have also intensified the focus of public and academic scrutiny and have attracted scholarly interest regarding the nature of private intelligence operators’ activities. It will be argued that the increasing stakes for the involved key political actors, coupled with upward spiralling financial and logistics campaign costs, increase the demand for these private sector intelligence services. This article will discuss several seemingly unrelated recent cases involving British and Israeli private intelligence service providers, in search of similarities and patterns in their modus operandi, marketing approach to customers and tradecraft deficiencies. This article will also speculate on the effects of negative publicity and pressure on private sector intelligence providers’ business prospects and their ability to attract new future customers.

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Introduction

Multiple articles and studies devoted to the process of privatization of intelligence¹ point out that due to the nature of the relationship between national intelligence communities (IC) in the West and private intelligence providers post 9/11, the process of privatization of intelligence is bound to be a permanent fixture² of the modern landscape³ and is likely to continue to expand⁴. Most of the attention of this process is devoted to the relationship dynamic between the national intelligence communities and their respective private intelligence counterparts that augment and improve the performance of the government agencies, as well as the shortcomings and risks⁵ involved⁶ in this complex interaction⁷. Another focus of attention and analysis has been the provision of services from private intelligence companies to other private entities and corporations in the context of development and capabilities⁸ of business and competitive intelligence (BI) and (CI) respectively⁹. However, relatively partial attention¹⁰ has been paid to the provision of private intelligence services to private political customers in their pursuit for improved political opponent targeting, electoral victories and lasting political primacy. Such attention is needed, as recent high profile political scandals involving private intelligence operators, such as the British Orbis Intelligence Ltd., the Israeli Psy-Group and Black Cube Ltd. that have offered their various services to international clients in pursuit of their respective political objectives, increasing the visibility of some of these usually “quiet” private operators on the global scene. It should be specified that the private intelligence operators, such as Orbis Intelligence Ltd. and Black Cube Ltd. are an independent third-party entities that provide their specific services either directly to so-called political “opposition research” firms or indirectly to political candidates via contracts or associations with other private companies, such as the now-defunct Cambridge Analytica, engaged in various aspects of supporting political campaigns. The main argument advanced here is that the increasing stakes for major stakeholders and key political actors involved, coupled with upward spiraling financial and logistics campaign costs in highly polarized political environments, increase the demand for the services of these third-party intelligence providers. These conditions become an additional driving factor affecting the increased pursuit of enhanced HUMINT capabilities of the private operators, to supplement their already very well developed SIGINT and SOCMINT capacities, in order to deliver decisive competitive advantages to their private customers in pursuit of victories at any price. Prominent recent examples in regards with such