

# FBI probes Israeli spyware firm NSO Group for 'hacking Americans and government agencies' after Jeff Bezos and Facebook both accused the company of malicious attacks

- FBI is investigating NSO Group Technologies in possible hacks on Americans
- Probe is also looking at suspected intelligence gathering on governments
- Jeff Bezos accused NSO of helping Saudi Arabia hack his nude photos
- Facebook said in lawsuit that NSO hacked 1,400 WhatsApp users
- The company says its spyware is only used by governments to catch terrorists

By [REUTERS](#)

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The FBI is investigating the role of Israeli spyware vendor NSO Group Technologies in possible hacks on American residents and companies as well as suspected intelligence gathering on governments, according to four people familiar with the inquiry.

Earlier this month, a security firm contracted by Jeff Bezos implicated NSO in hacking the Amazon CEO's nude photos, and Facebook in a lawsuit accused the company of hacking 1,400 users. NSO denied the allegations.

The FBI probe was underway by 2017, when Bureau officials were trying to determine whether NSO obtained from American hackers any of the code it needed to access smartphones, said one person interviewed by the FBI then and again last year.

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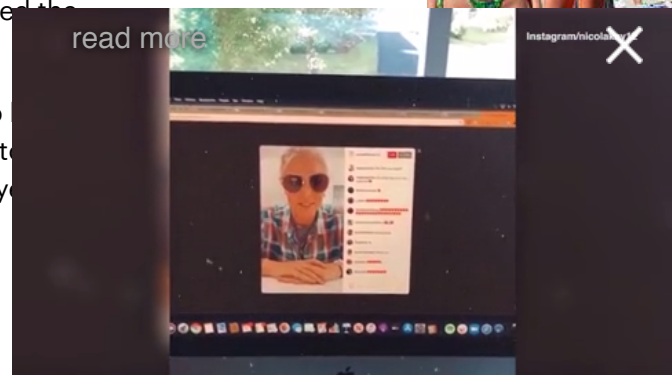
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NSO said it sells its spy software and technical support exclusively to governments and that those tools are to be used in pursuing suspected terrorists and other criminals. NSO has long maintained that its products cannot target U.S. phone numbers, though some cybersecurity experts have disputed that.

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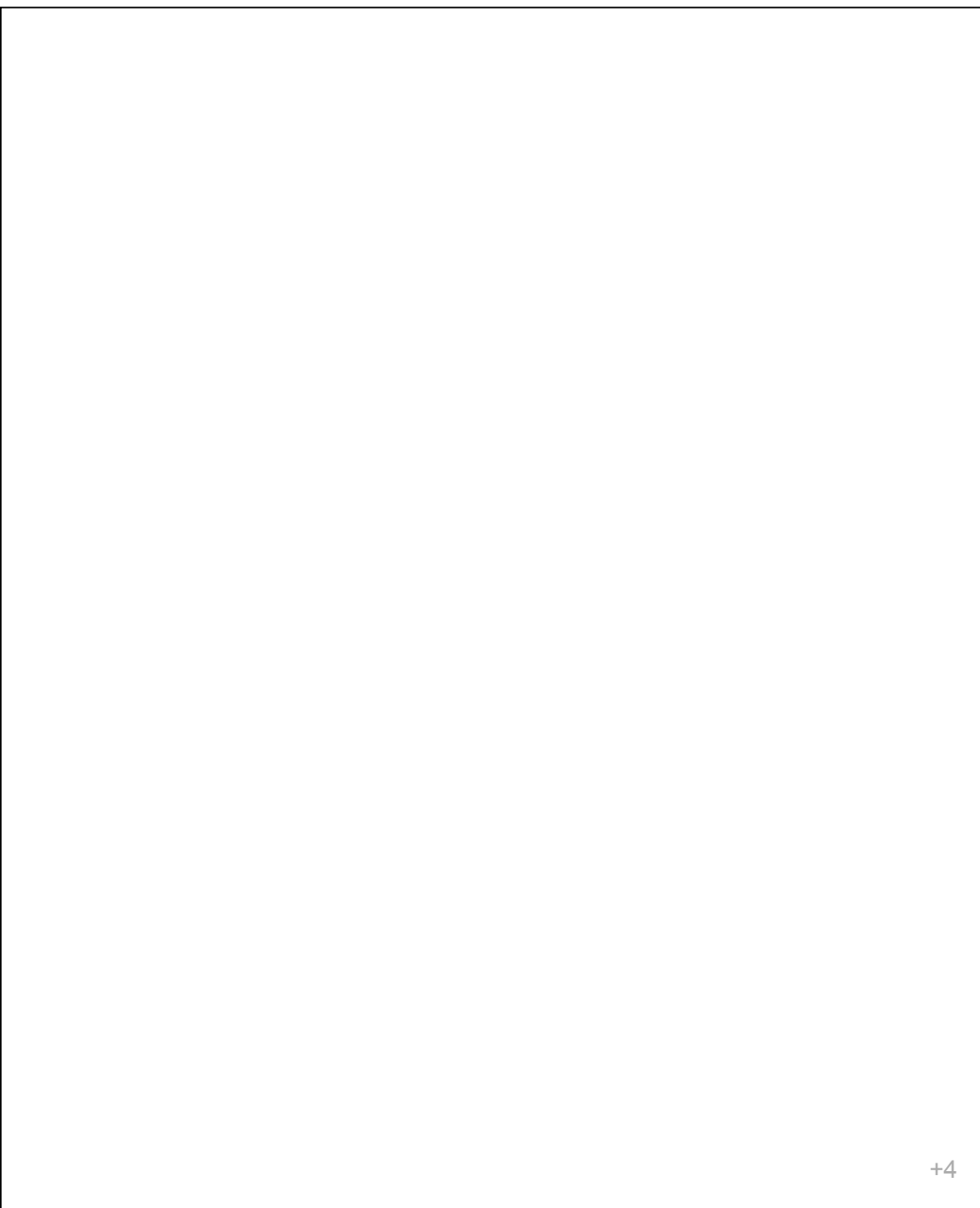
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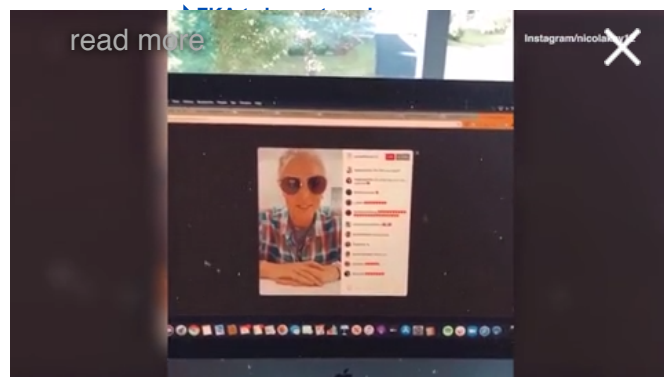
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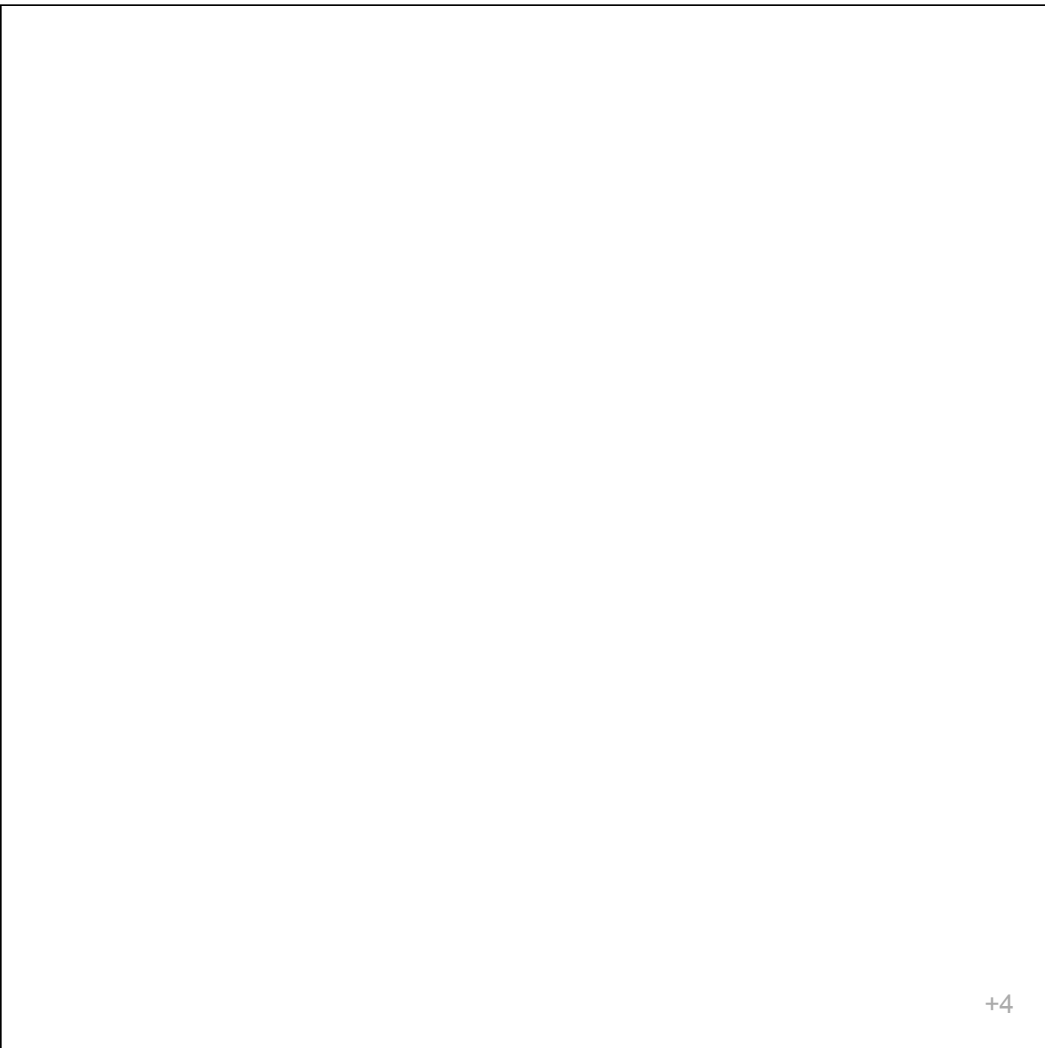
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**A security firm contracted by Jeff Bezos (above with girlfriend Lauren Sanchez) implicated NSO in hacking the Amazon CEO's nude photos**





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Shalev Hulio is the CEO of NSO Group. NSO said it sells its spy software and technical support exclusively to governments and that those tools are to be used in pursuing terrorists

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UN investigation suggests Israeli spyware from NSO

The FBI conducted more interviews with technology industry experts after Facebook filed a lawsuit in October accusing NSO itself of exploiting a flaw in Facebook's WhatsApp messaging service to hack 1,400 users, according to two people who spoke with agents or Justice Department officials.

NSO said it was not aware of any inquiry.

'We have not been contacted by any U.S. law enforcement at all about any such matters,' NSO said in a statement provided by Mercury Public Affairs strategy firm. NSO did not answer additional questions about its employees conduct but previously said government customers are the ones who do the hacking.

A spokeswoman for the FBI said the agency 'adheres to DOJ's policy of neither confirming nor denying the existence of any investigation, so we wouldn't provide any further comment.'

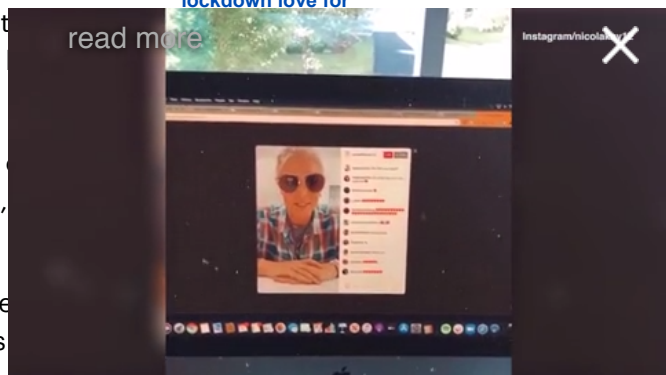
Reuters could not determine which suspected hacking targets are the top priority for investigators or what phase the probe is in. But the company is a focus, the issue is how involved it has been in specific hacks, the sources said.

Part of the FBI probe has been aimed at understanding NSO's business operations and the technical assistance it offers customers, according to two sources

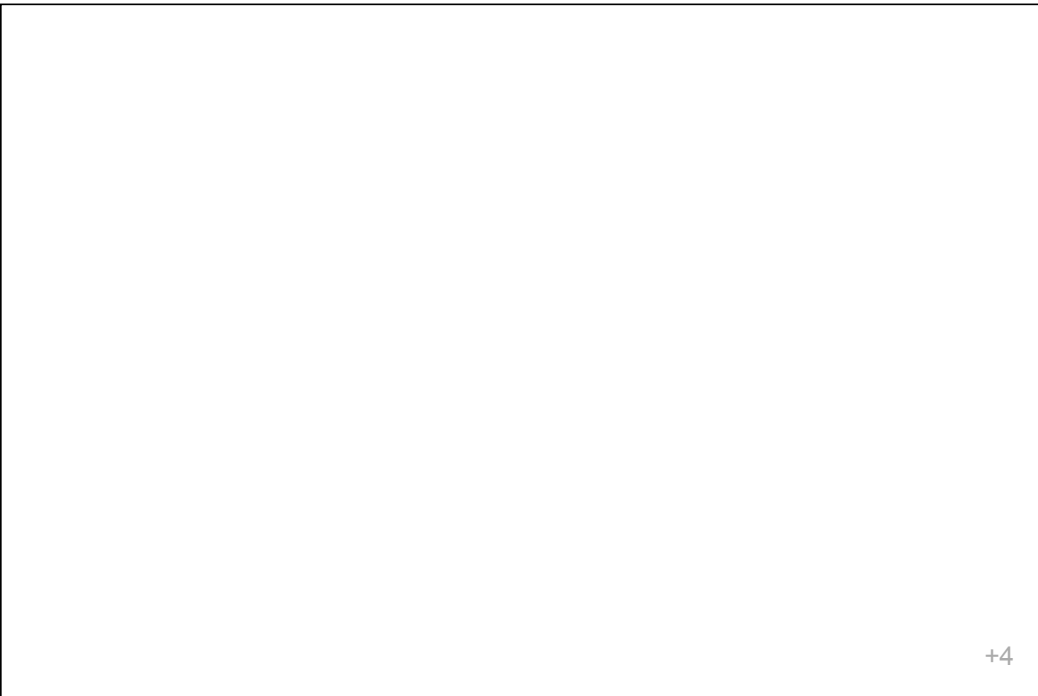
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with the inquiry.



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Facebook filed a lawsuit in October accusing NSO itself of exploiting a flaw in Facebook's WhatsApp messaging service to hack 1,400 users (stock image)

Bezos says tabloid tried to blackmail him over 'intimate photos'



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Suppliers of hacking tools could be prosecuted under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) or the Wiretap Act, if they had enough knowledge of or involvement in improper use, said James Baker, general counsel at the FBI until January 2018.

The CFAA criminalizes unauthorized access to a computer or computer network. The Wiretap Act prohibits use of a tool to intercept calls, texts or emails.

NSO is known in the cybersecurity world for its 'Pegasus' software other tools can be delivered in several ways. The software can capture everything on a device including the plain text of encrypted messages, and commandeer it to record.

A business strategy firm retained on behalf of Amazon Chief Executive Jeff Bezos, FTI Consulting, said this month that NSO could have supplied the software used by Saudi Arabia used to hack Bezos' iPhone.

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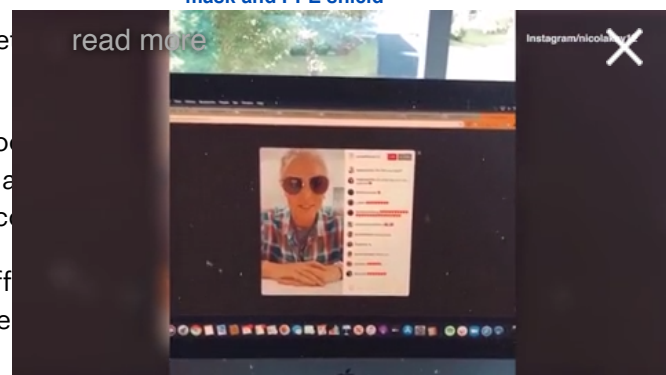
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The phone began sending out more data hours after it received a video from a WhatsApp account associated with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, FTI said.

Saudi Arabia called the FTI allegation 'absurd,' and NSO said it was not involved. Other security experts said the data was inconclusive.

The FBI is investigating and has met with Bezos, a member of his team told Reuters. A Bezos spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

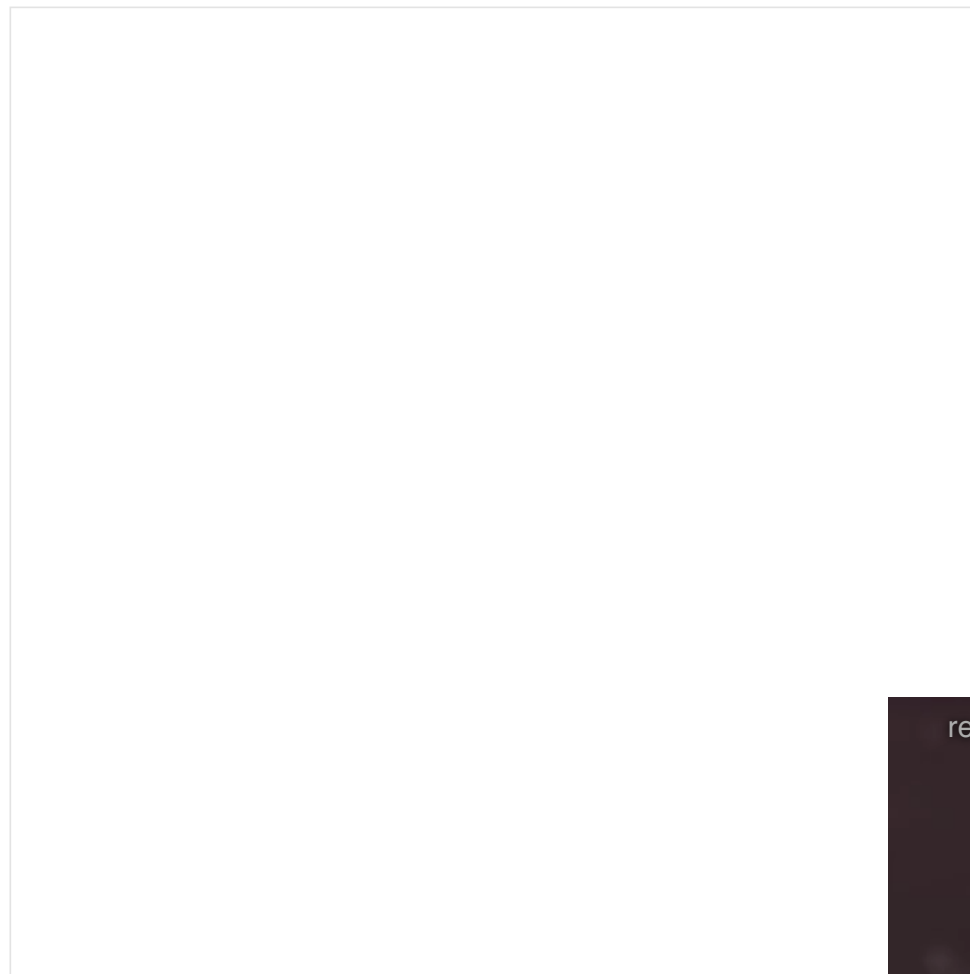
## UN investigation suggests Israeli spyware may have been used in Saudi hack of Jeff Bezos' phone

A report issued by the United Nations suggests that malicious spyware created by Israeli company NSO Group may have been used by Saudi Arabia to hack Jeff Bezos' phone and steal his nude selfies.

The report issued on Wednesday by UN Special Rapporteurs suggested that NSO Group's Pegasus spyware was the 'most likely' explanation for data that was stolen from Bezos' phone.

A video file that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman sent Bezos on WhatsApp on May 1, 2018 was identified in the report as the likely source of the malicious code.

The report notes that the Saudi Royal Guard acquired the Pegasus-3 spyware from NSO Group in a November 2017 contract.



The logo of the Israeli NSO Group company on a building where they had offices in Herzliya, Israel is seen in a file photo. A UN report ties the company to the suspe

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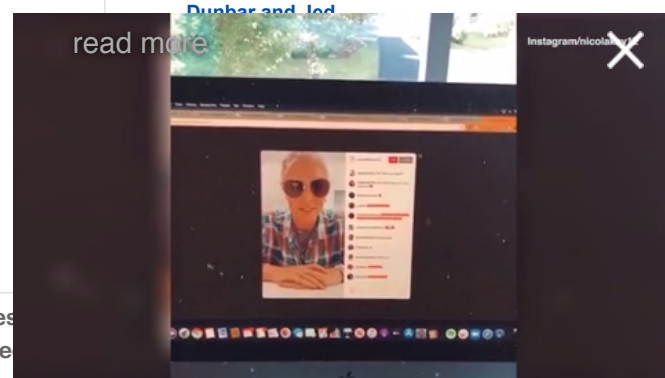
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The firm's wares have been used by governments to target journalists in Mexico, opposition figures in Panama and human rights activists from the Middle East.

The U.N. experts said Bezos' phone hacking occurred during a period in which the phones of two close associates of Jamal Khashoggi were also hacked, allegedly using the Pegasus malware.

Khashoggi was killed by a Saudi hit squad in October 2018 after writing columns critical of bin Salman in the Washington Post, which Bezos owns.

NSO Group said in a statement it was 'shocked and appalled' by the reports linking its software to the Bezos phone hacking.

'If this story is true, then it deserves a full investigation by all bodies providing such services to assure that their systems have not been used in this abuse,' the company said.

'Just as we stated when these stories first surfaced months ago, we can say unequivocally that our technology was not used in this instance,' the company said.

In October, WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook, sued NSO in the U.S. federal court in San Francisco, accusing it of helping government spies break into the phones of about 1,400 users across four continents.

Targets of the alleged hacking spree included diplomats, political dissidents, journalists and senior government officials.

NSO has denied the allegations, saying it solely 'provides technology to licensed government intelligence and law enforcement agencies to help them fight terrorism and serious crime'.

Amnesty International will ask an Israeli court on Thursday to order Israel to revoke the export licence of NSO Group, whose software is alleged to have been used by governments to spy on journalists and dissidents.

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FBI leaders have indicated that they are taking a hard line on spyware vendors.

At a briefing at FBI Washington headquarters in November, a senior cybersecurity official said that if Americans were being hacked, investigators would not distinguish between criminals and security companies working on behalf of government clients.

'Whether you do that as a company or you do that as an individual, it's an illegal activity,' the official said.

In the counterintelligence aspect of the probe, the FBI is trying to learn if allied government officials have been hacked with NSO tools and which nations were behind those attacks, according to a Western official briefed on the investigation.

Outside of government, journalists, human rights activists and dissidents in other countries have been victims of attacks using NSO spyware, according to the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab researchers.

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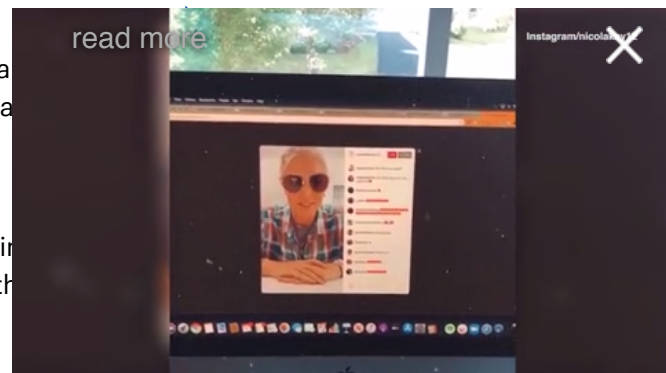
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In the past, NSO has denied involvement in some of those instances and declined to discuss others, citing client confidentiality requirements.

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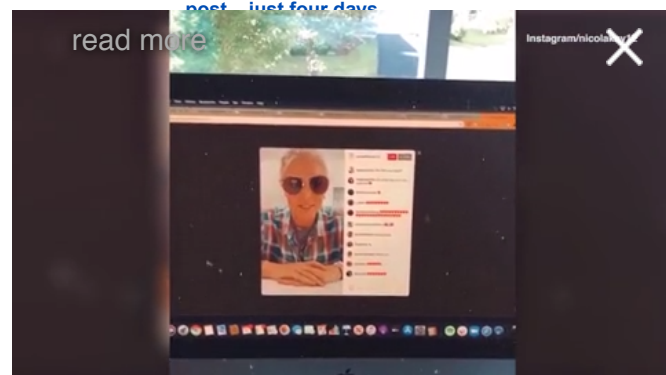
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