

Israel company admits spying on Emir of Qatar

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An Israeli woman uses her iPhone in front of the building housing the Israeli NSO group, on 28 August 2016, in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv. [JACK GUEZ/AFP/Getty Images]

January 14, 2019 at 9:54 am

The CEO of Israeli spyware company NSO Group has admitted that its software was used to spy on the Emir of Qatar.

In an interview with *Yedioth Ahronoth* this weekend, Shalev Hulio admitted that his company's product was used to spy on Emir Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, as well as Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani.

The interview disclosed that NSO's "Pegasus" software – which can be used to remotely infect a target's mobile phone and then relay back data accessed by the device – was used to intercept phone calls and text messages made by both the Qatari foreign minister and the Emir. These conversations

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reportedly concerned “hundreds of millions of dollars in ransom to Iran and Hezbollah for the release of several Qataris,” some of which was allegedly sent to the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani.

This spying was seemingly undertaken at the behest of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Hulo revealed that the Israeli Defense Export Control Agency (DECA) authorised three deals with the UAE for the sale of NSO software, despite the fact that DECA is only supposed to give authorisation for the “purpose of fighting terrorism and crime”.

These deals – allegedly mediated by former senior Israeli defence officials with close ties to a senior Emirati official – raised a total of \$80 million in revenue for NSO.

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NSO’s Pegasus software has come under increasing scrutiny in recent months after the product was revealed to be complicit in the **murder** of Saudi journalist **Jamal Khashoggi**. Though Hulo **stressed** in the interview with *Yedioth Ahronoth* this weekend that “Khashoggi was not targeted by any NSO product or technology, including listening, monitoring, location tracking and intelligence collection,” it appears that Saudi Arabia used NSO software to spy on many of Khashoggi’s friends and associates.

US whistle-blower **Edward Snowden** has been at the forefront of these claims, telling the Israeli newspaper: “I do not pretend that NSO is involved in hacking [directly] into Khashoggi’s phone, so their denial does not take us to a different conclusion. The evidence shows that the company’s products were involved in hacking into the phones of [Khashoggi’s] friends **Omar Abdel Aziz**, Yahya Assiri, and Ghanem Al-Masarir.”

The UAE is also known to have been using NSO’s software for some time. In 2016, Citizen Lab and Apple **revealed** there were attempts to infect an iPhone owned by the Emirati human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor. Mansoor had raised the alarm after receiving suspicious text intended to “bait to get him to click on a link, which would have led to the infection of his Apple iPhone 6 and control of the device through a spy software created by the NSO Group”.

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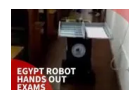


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