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Israeli Defense Ministry Teaming Up With Spyware Firm NSO to Fight Coronavirus

Authorities looking into tasking controversial firm with aggregating all information available to grade likelihood of any resident to have been exposed to the coronavirus

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Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett Credit: Emil Salman

Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett wants to use controversial Israeli spyware firm NSO to help fight the coronavirus, sources told TheMarker.

On Sunday, Bennett, who also [headed the national religious Yamina alliance in Israel's last election](#), published a plan to fight the virus based on cooperation between the defense establishment and civilian companies. While the document didn't name any specific company, TheMarker has learned that [the company in question is NSO](#).



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The document said that, given the sharp rise in the number of coronavirus patients, contact tracing and geolocation are no longer effective at finding all the people a given patient might have infected.

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Under a spate of emergency regulations passed earlier this month by Israel's executive, [the Shin Bet was controversially tasked](#) with finding people who might have had contact with a patient using cellphone geolocation, a technique which has in the past only been used in countering terrorism.

Bennett proposed that the Defense Ministry, the Israel Defense Forces and civilian companies set up a system into which all the data about coronavirus patients gathered by the Health Ministry and the Shin Bet security service would be entered. The system would determine how likely any given Israel resident is to be infected, graded on a scale of one to 10.

"The system would be updated in real time," Bennett wrote. "It could be that yesterday, my 'grade' was 5.6, but now it has jumped to 9, because I visited a grocery store that two other carriers had visited in recent days."

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The document said the system would be one of the most advanced in the world and is already ready to go. However, it still needs legal approval and appropriate controls to protect people's privacy.

Once it has the necessary approvals, all the data on coronavirus tests and their results could be fed into it. Then, "at any given moment, we'll summon the people with the highest likelihood of infection for testing," the document said.

Bloomberg recently reported that NSO has adapted one of its big data products, which can monitor people's movements and contacts, for use in the war against the coronavirus. TheMarker has confirmed this report.



NSO Group offices in Herzliya, Israel, August 2016. Credit: Ofer Vaknin

NSO's product can retrieve data going back 14 days and determine whether a patient had contact with another person that lasted more than 15 minutes. But unlike its spyware, the company's coronavirus system wouldn't collect data from cellphone companies or any other source; it would merely analyze it.

The company has denied that this product is intended for use in Israel.

NSO has been linked to a long list of unsavory incidents worldwide, including spying on journalists and regime opponents in various countries; it was implicated in the gruesome murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. It also faces several lawsuits by individuals and groups that say they were harmed by its spyware. The latest such suit was filed by Facebook, which accused NSO of unauthorized penetration of its popular app WhatsApp.



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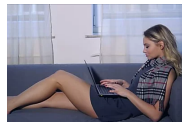
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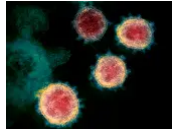
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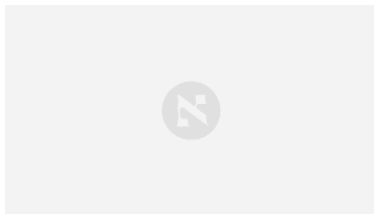
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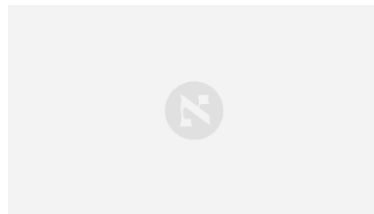
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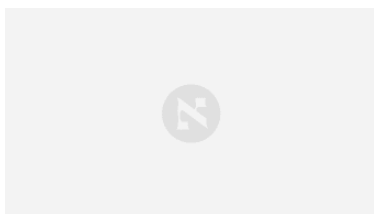
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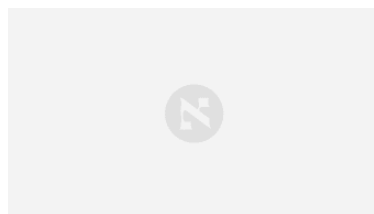
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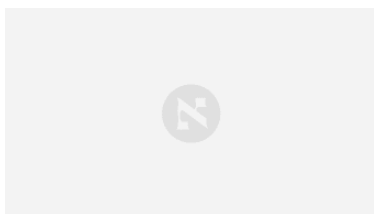
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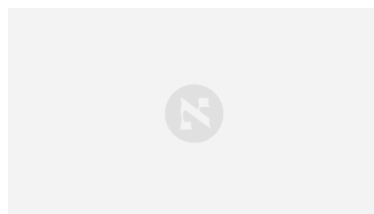
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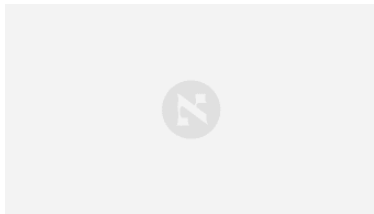
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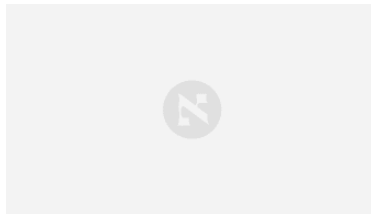
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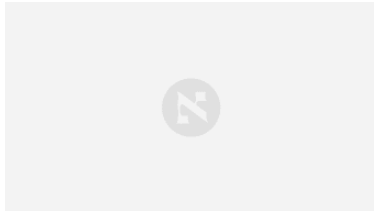
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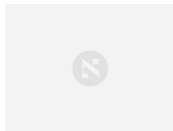
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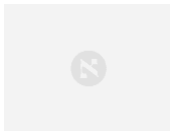
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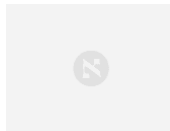
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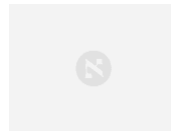
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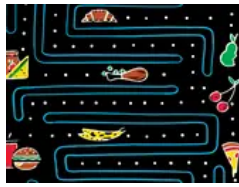
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