

Israel pushing Biden to remove Pegasus spyware from U.S. blacklist



A woman checks the website of Israel-made Pegasus spyware at an office in Nicosia, Cyprus in 2021. (Photo by AFP)

Tel Aviv, June 10 (RHC)-- Israeli regime officials are pushing the U.S. government to remove the controversial spyware company NSO Group from the Department of Commerce blacklist, according to reports.

It comes months after the U.S. Department of Commerce said the Israeli spyware company's activities clashed with the US foreign policy and national security interests.

The Biden administration is likely to face harsh criticism from within the Democratic Party, Congress, and the American cyber-defense community if it moves ahead to remove the NSO from the blacklist.

On Wednesday, a report in Axios news agency quoted one US and two Israeli officials as saying that Washington was mulling over the Israeli demand. Another report in Walla said Israel has asked the Biden administration several times in recent months to de-list the NSO.

"We told the Americans that they should not tear down NSO," a senior Israeli official is quoted as saying by Walla. "Even if the company had some problematic customers, it does not mean that the company's products and capabilities are no longer needed."

Israel has been under tremendous pressure to halt the export of spyware since last July after a group of international rights and media organizations revealed that the Pegasus program produced by NSO was used to hack the phones of journalists, politicians, and human rights activists in several countries.

NSO has since faced lawsuits and criticism from major technology companies across the world, accusing it of putting their customers at risk of hacking.

The group has also been accused of spying and hacking strategic software in countries where the Israeli regime feels threatened.

Israel's Pegasus spyware was used against a device connected to the network of the British government.

Last year, NSO was put on a blacklist by the U.S. Commerce Department, a decision which it said was based on evidence that the NSO group developed and supplied spyware to foreign governments who in turn used it "to maliciously target government officials, journalists, business people, activists, academics, and embassy workers."

After the NSO was blacklisted, the report in Axios stated a debate sprung up inside Tel Aviv on whether it should lobby the Biden administration on behalf of the company to remove it from the blacklist.

"We told the U.S. that they can't destroy NSO and that several bad clients doesn't mean the company's products and capabilities are no longer needed," a senior Israeli official was quoted as saying by Axios.

Last week, the US supreme court called on the US administration to consider whether judges should hear a case in which WhatsApp could file a complaint accusing NSO of abusing an espionage bug in the app to track messengers.

Judges are considering the NSO's appeal of the trial court's decision, which allowed the appeal to proceed. The NSO has argued that it is safe to sue because Pegasus acted as an agent for anonymous foreign governments when installing spyware.

WhatsApp sued the NSO in October 2019, accusing the company of accessing WhatsApp servers six months ago without permission to install Pegasus software on mobile devices.

In its original legal complaint, WhatsApp accused the Israeli firm of breaching its terms of service and undermining the messaging platform's "reputation, public trust, and goodwill".

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