PA staffers readying ICC cases against Israel hacked by Pegasus, official claims

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The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/pa-said-to-allege-officials-readying-icc-cases-against-israel-hacked-by-pegasus/>

A Palestinian official claimed on Thursday that three Palestinian Authority foreign ministry employees preparing complaints against Israel at the International Criminal Court in The Hague had their phones hacked by Pegasus, a controversial spyware application made by the Israeli cybersecurity firm NSO Group.

A Palestinian Authority foreign ministry statement blamed Israel for the hacking, calling it a “blatant and immoral violation of international law,” and urging an international boycott of all parties involved.

Ahmed al-Deek, the assistant Palestinian foreign minister for political affairs, said a “professional Palestinian institution” inspected several phones and detected Pegasus on three of them. It was not immediately clear if the results were verified by outside researchers.

“We are 100 percent sure that these three phones were hacked,” al-Deek said. “They belonged to senior officials.”

Haaretz reported that Deek said the phones belonged to ministry employees working on cases that the Palestinian Authority is bringing against Israel at the ICC, which is currently investigating both Israel and the Palestinians for alleged war crimes committed since 2014.

Israel’s defense establishment declined to comment to the paper on the claims.

An [investigation](https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-palestinian-activists-phones-hacked-with-controversial-nso-group-tech/) by the rights groups Front Line Defenders, Citizen Lab, and Amnesty International alleged on Monday that six Palestinians had their cellphones hacked by the Pegasus software. Three of the Palestinians worked at organizations Israel recently declared to be terror groups, drawing an international outcry.

The Palestinian rights group Al-Haq had previously declared that some foreign ministry civil servants had also been hacked. But the PA ministry did not comment until now.

NSO Group activities have sparked controversy in recent months. The company has been dogged by accusations that the Pegasus software was used by governments to track dissidents and human rights activists. NSO insists its product is meant only to assist countries in fighting crime and terrorism.

In response to the Monday allegations, an NSO Group spokesperson said that “contractual and national security considerations” prevented the firm from revealing the identity of its clients.

“As we stated in the past, NSO does not operate the products itself. The company license approved government agencies to do so. We are not privy to the details of individuals monitored,” the spokesperson said.

This summer, news outlets around the world revealed the scope of NSO Group’s activities based on Citizen Lab and Amnesty International’s investigations, finding that the firm’s software had been used by many countries with poor human rights records to hack the phones of thousands of activists, journalists and politicians.

NSO Group and a second Israeli firm, Candiru, were blacklisted last week by the United States Commerce Department for allegedly developing and supplying “spyware to foreign governments that used these tools to maliciously target government officials, journalists, businesspeople, activists, academics and embassy workers.”

According to a New York Times report Monday, Israel is [lobbying](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-lobbying-us-to-reverse-blacklisting-of-nso-spy-firm/) the US to reverse that designation.

The alleged use of NSO Group’s technology by Morocco against French President Emmanuel Macron also sparked a minor diplomatic squabble between Jerusalem and Paris, which the two countries agreed to put behind them last week, following a meeting between Macron and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid stressed that NSO was a “private company” that followed Israel’s defense export guidelines.

“I don’t think there’s another country in the world which has such strict rules according to cyber warfare and that is imposing those rules more than Israel,” he said.