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Ex-Obama official exits Israeli spyware firm amid press freedom row

Juliette Kayyem has left NSO, which denies its technology has been used to target activists

Stephanie Kirchgaessner *in Washington*

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A former Obama administration official who has faced criticism from press freedom groups for her role as a senior adviser at NSO Group has stepped down from the Israeli spyware company.

The disclosure of the public departure of Juliette Kayyem, a high-profile national security expert and Harvard professor, as a senior adviser to NSO came just one day after a controversy over her role at the spyware group prompted Harvard to cancel an online seminar she was due to host.

The “webinar”, which was focused on female journalist safety, was cancelled after officials from the Committee to Protect Journalists, among others, criticised Kayyem’s work for NSO, whose technology is claimed to have been used to target journalists and human rights campaigners. NSO has denied the allegations.

Ahmed Zidan, CPJ’s digital manager, said in a tweet that the former Homeland Security official’s role at the event was akin to inviting a “coal executive to talk about renewable energy”.

The decision by Harvard’s Shorenstein Center to cancel the event after receiving criticism of Kayyem’s involvement in the webinar is the latest sign that spyware companies are coming under increasing scrutiny.

The circumstances around Kayyem’s departure are not clear.

The former Obama administration official did not respond to several requests for comment.

NSO announced six months ago it was hiring three new advisers to support the company's work to "assist governments in fighting serious crime and terrorism": Kayyem, Tom Ridge, the former US secretary of Homeland Security, and Gérard Araud, the former French ambassador to the US.

The company has said its technology is only intended to be used to fight crime and that it investigates allegations of wrongdoing by customers who license its technology.

But since that announcement, NSO has faced allegations that its technology has been used to target members of civil society. WhatsApp, the popular messaging app, is suing NSO in a US court and has alleged that the company's spyware was used to hack 1,400 of its users over a two-week period last year. NSO has denied the allegations.

The company is also reportedly under investigation by the FBI, according to Reuters, and is facing separate lawsuits in Israel. Last week, a New York Times reporter working with Citizen Lab alleged his phone had been targeted by Saudi Arabia using NSO technology. The company has denied the allegation.



Juliette Kayyem waves to the crowd before her speech at the Democrat state convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 2014. Photograph: Boston Globe/Boston Globe via Getty Images

The latest controversy began when the Shorenstein Center announced last week it would host a "webinar" featuring Kayyem that was focused on ways female journalists could protect themselves, both on- and offline.

In tweets that appear to have since been deleted, Kayyem joked that she would not be teaching women how to take down 200lb men, but that she would be offering advice to women that they might not like to hear, like not posting realtime photos of their children.

Press freedom advocates questioned the Shorenstein Center's decision on Twitter. One campaigner, Courtney Radsch, noted the irony of Kayyem's involvement, and said she wondered if the event would cover how journalists could protect themselves from NSO Group's signature technology, Pegasus, which has been described as sophisticated malware that is almost impossible to detect.

A spokeswoman for the Shorenstein Center declined to comment on the decision to cancel the event.

But a person familiar with the matter said the the event's organisers had not been familiar with Kayyem's connection to NSO until after it was pointed out by critics on Twitter. Once Kayyem's work for NSO was discovered, the person said it confronted Kayyem and that there was "no question" that it would be cancelled.

When the Guardian approached NSO late on Monday, the company said in an emailed statement that Kayyem had stepped down from NSO.

"Juliette played an important role advising NSO on its governance framework, and we're grateful for her leadership and experience during her time as senior adviser," the statement said. It added that her work for the company had concluded in 2019.

Asked to clarify the date of her departure, since Kayyem was still listed as working as an adviser on NSO's website as recently as last weekend, NSO did not reply.

The revelation marks the second time Kayyem's association with NSO has created controversy for the former Obama administration official. Kayyem was appointed last October to serve as an opinion section contributor at the

Washington Post. At the time, an editorial page editor noted that Kayyem was a “leading voice in her field” and would “help make sense of how the US approaches its most challenging national security issues”.

But days later, Kayyem announced she would not accept the job after facing criticism on Twitter about her role at NSO. At the time, she said in a statement on Twitter that she was working at NSO to help “ensure that this technology is used appropriately, and that fundamental human rights are protected and respected”.

“I still believe reasonable people can disagree on issues of our security and rights and will continue to speak and write about that,” she said.

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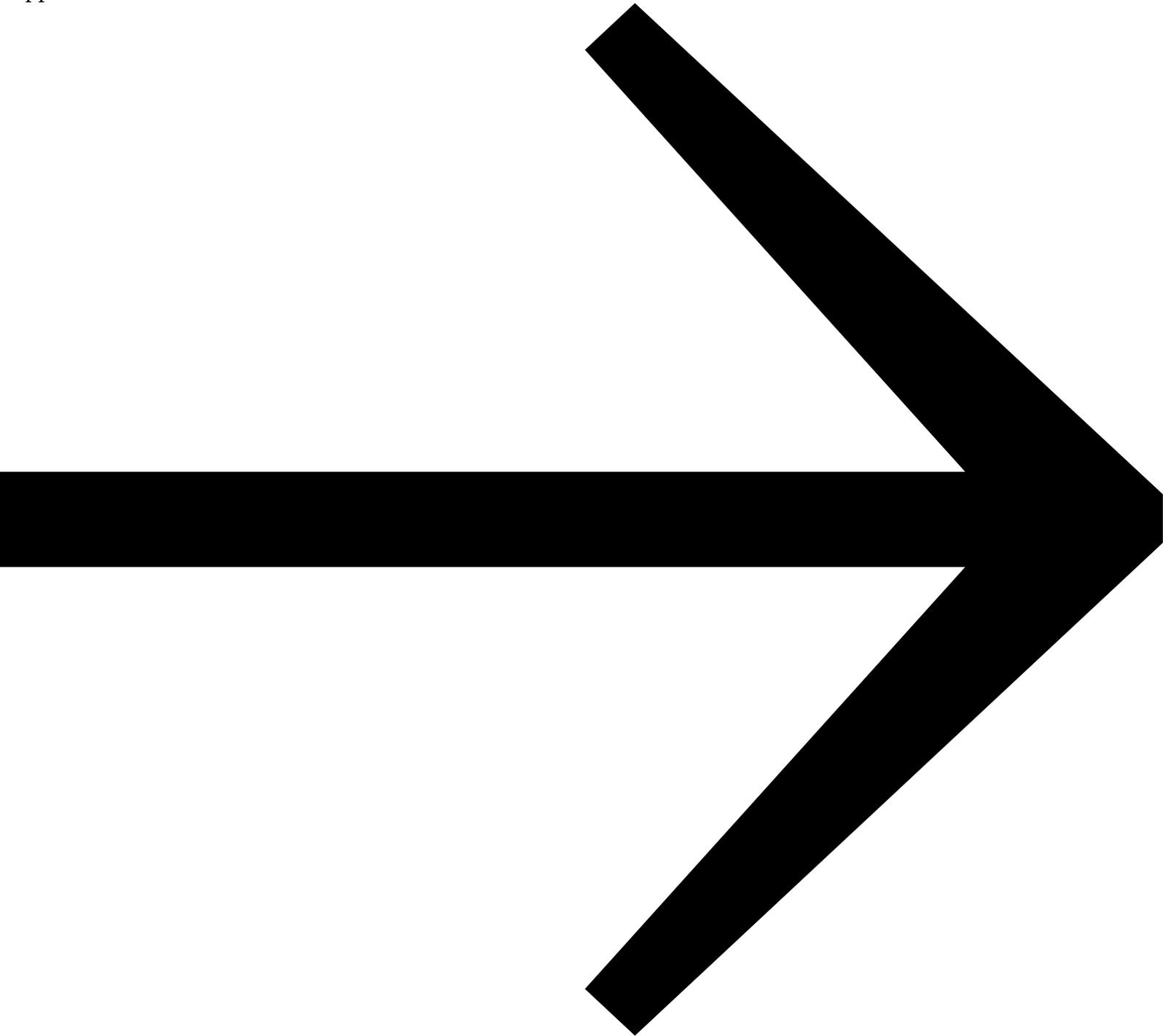
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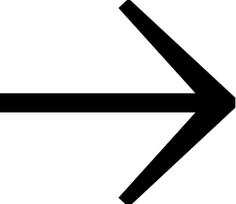


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