



Maati Monjib, right, chats with Moroccan journalist Hicham Mansouri in Rabat, Morocco, January 17, 2016. Amnesty International reported this month that Monjib has been sent malicious messages in an attempt to install spyware on his phone. (AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar)

Q&A: Moroccan press freedom advocate and NSO Group spyware target Maati Monjib

By Avi Asher-Schapiro/CPJ North America Research Associate on October 29, 2019 1:45 AM EDT

Pegasus, the cellphone spyware tool sold by the Israeli firm NSO Group, is one of the most powerful surveillance systems governments can buy, experts say. Researchers who study it have detected “45 countries where Pegasus operators may be conducting surveillance operations,” and detailed its capabilities: whoever tricks the target into clicking on a link that installs Pegasus on their phone can control the device remotely, turning on the microphone, reading encrypted messages, and scrolling through emails—all without being detected.

Journalists, who generally rely on phones for their work, are proving vulnerable to such attacks. Citizen Lab researchers say at least 11 journalists around the world have been targeted with attempts to install Pegasus, usually via malicious text messages carrying infected links. The NSO Group says that it licenses products “only to government intelligence and law enforcement agencies” to investigate serious crime.

This month, Amnesty International identified two Moroccan activists targeted by attempts to install Pegasus since at least October 2017. One of them is Maati Monjib, co-founder of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism, and a prominent writer, historian, and press freedom advocate. In 2015, the Moroccan government brought charges against Monjib for “endangering state security” after he ran training sessions using StoryMaker, an open source app to help journalists produce professional multimedia reporting with a mobile phone; hearings are continually postponed and the charges remain pending, Monjib told CPJ. Amnesty said its analysis of Monjib’s devices showed that he was “repeatedly targeted” with messages linking to “websites connected to NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware.”

An NSO Group spokesperson said in a statement emailed to CPJ that the company takes the allegations seriously and will investigate according to its policy. They asked not to be named, citing company protocol. “[Our products] are not tools to surveil dissidents or human rights activists. That’s why contracts with all of our customers enable the use of our products solely for the legitimate purposes of preventing and investigating crime and terrorism. If we ever discover that our products were misused in breach of such a contract, we will take appropriate action,” the statement said.

CPJ spoke to Monjib about being under surveillance, and his work promoting press freedom in Morocco. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why do you think you would come under surveillance?

I am targeted by the Moroccan regime for two main reasons. I am naturally outspoken and I try to always write what I see as the truth, even if it is against the regime’s powerful men. Sometimes I use the names of these powerful men, including the leaders of the security apparatus. I write that the palace has everything in its hands, and that the royal elite govern with the help of political police and some rentier businessmen and corrupt or “pro-regime” politicians.

The second reason is that my writings are sometimes in English, and Morocco fears pressure from the United States. For example, I was persecuted after I wrote a very critical piece for *Foreign Affairs* magazine back in 2014.

Among your many activities, you are a founding member of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism, and a vocal advocate for press freedom. Do you think the surveillance is

related to this work?

Yes, I do. I was targeted because of my work promoting investigative journalism. Beginning in 2008, I helped organize training for independent journalists and citizen journalists throughout Morocco. Then in 2013 and 2014 we were the first in the region to organize trainings on StoryMaker. This the government used against us—saying that it was spying. They said we were working for foreign powers, that we are harming and endangering the state.

Why do you think someone wanting to get inside your phone would resort to such advanced methods?

In 2015 when I was first on trial for endangering state security, the judicial file officially revealed that my co-accused and myself were under phone surveillance. So I started to use encrypted communications apps—both Signal and WhatsApp. And I think because of that, they decided to use NSO [Group software] against me and others, because it is more effective.

[Editor's note: CPJ sought comment from the Moroccan Ministry of Interior's General Directorate for National Security, which oversees surveillance. A person who declined to give their name answered the phone but said no one was available to discuss Monjib's case.]

You mentioned to other journalists that you believe you clicked on the infected Pegasus link, possibly exposing yourself to round-the-clock cellphone surveillance. How could this information be used against you?

There has been a more or less daily impact on me—my friends, my contacts, the journalists and press freedom fighters I work with. You always wonder if you are being spied on.

Just yesterday, when I arrived to be interviewed by a pan-Arab TV station about a change in the government, the director told me he got a call from the Moroccan authorities threatening to shut down the studio if they aired a critical interview. How could they know I had just arrived?

They are also after personal information that they can pass along to the regime-linked press to put pressure on me. For example, there was a story about me having a mistress. They found out I was at a restaurant with a colleague for lunch, and followed me there and took pictures. A few weeks later, another outlet said I was impotent. I wouldn't need a mistress if I was impotent! But their goal is to put you continually under pressure.

What has been the impact of being under surveillance? How has it impacted your work, your mental state?

I moderate my discourse. For example, I name the king less often, as well as the regime's second in command and the head of the security apparatus.

Nevertheless, I continue to say as best I can that there is no democracy in Morocco, that the regime is outrageously corrupt and that corruption is harming the development of the country and the poor—that independent

journalists are repressed or bought off, that some intellectuals and opponents are repressed or defamed.

But it's very difficult. I receive a lot of threats to kill me, sometimes in the street during the night, sometimes publicly, but in a veiled way, in the pro-state media. I have been warned.

How do you think the use of this technology affects the press in Morocco?

With NSO technology or without it, there is no free press. There will be no free press until there is democracy. The Moroccan autocracy doesn't like a free press—they use a lot of tools to control the media.

But the NSO technology is very helpful, because it gives them the possibility to put pressure on critical journalists and pro-democracy activists. People don't want their private life to be known. If you are in prison for political reasons, you are seen as a hero, but if you cheat on your wife or embezzle money, you lose your reputation and the population no longer believe what you write.

It is a horrible situation. You know you did nothing wrong, but colleagues or even friends begin to suspect you. In 2016 after some newspapers accused me of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars, a member of the rural community where I was born called me and asked me to lend him some money. The pro-regime press wants to assassinate you morally.

Avi Asher-Schapiro is CPJ's Global Tech Senior Correspondent. He is a former staffer at VICE News, International Business Times, and Tribune Media, and an independent investigative reporter who has published in outlets including The Atlantic, The Intercept, and The New York Times.

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Committee to Protect Journalists
P.O. Box 2675
New York, NY 10108

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