

Technology

# Israeli Spyware Firm Wants to Track Data to Stop Coronavirus Spreading

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An Israeli technology company, which has gained notoriety for the spyware it sells, has developed a new product it says has the ability to track the spread of the coronavirus.

[NSO Group Ltd.](#)'s product analyzes huge volumes of data to map people's movements to identify who they've come in contact with, which can then be used to stop the spread of infection, according to a person familiar with the matter.

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About a dozen countries are testing the NSO technology, the person familiar said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss a private matter. The software takes two weeks of mobile-phone tracking information from the infected person -- the incubation time of the virus -- then matches with location data collected by national mobile phone companies that pinpoints citizens who were in the patient's vicinity for more than 15 minutes and are vulnerable to contagion, the person said.

NSO's new product is being tested just as Israel approves the use of a tracking technology developed to combat terrorism to retrace the movements of coronavirus patients and people they've encountered. The step has proved controversial, with critics saying it constitutes an invasion of Israeli citizens' privacy.

NSO itself has a history fraught with privacy and human rights controversy. Its spyware has been suspected of helping Saudi Arabia spy on murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi, an accusation the company has denied.

Speculation its software may have been used to hack the phone of Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos was also denied by the company. WhatsApp has filed a lawsuit against NSO, alleging that it violated the messaging platform's terms of service by using it as a delivery mechanism for its spyware.

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## **Civilian Product**

The data analysis tool is the company's first civilian product. Unlike NSO's better-known Pegasus spyware, the big-data software doesn't track mobile phones or conduct surveillance, the person said. It's a civilian product sold to national health ministries and doesn't need special export permission from Israel's Ministry of Defense, the person said.

Should the software determine a possible case of contagion, a text message is sent to the SIM number, without revealing the owner's identity to authorities, the person familiar said. Only when citizens test positive for the virus -- and give permission -- can officials correlate their SIM cards with their identities, the person said.

An NSO spokesman confirmed that the company developed a new data-analysis product with the ability to map the spread of the epidemic and help contain it. He declined further comment.

NSO has said it sells its surveillance technology to law enforcement and intelligence agencies to help catch criminals and terrorists. It can tap into a phone's microphone and camera, view email and messages and collect location data on the user.

## **'Surveillance Democracy?'**

On Monday, the Israeli government authorized the country's Shin Bet internal security agency to deploy a similar technology to track the virus among its citizens, which was originally developed to monitor the movement of militants.

Critics raised concerns about putting such technology in governments' hands.

"We can use any technology to fight this horrible disease," said Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, head of the democracy in the information age program at the Israel Democracy Institute research center. "The question is, who will do it? And who will supervise it? And who will promise that after this is over, we won't become a surveillance democracy?"

In Taiwan, Singapore and all of Europe, governments hired private companies that send the data they collect to health ministries, Altshuler noted.

"Nowhere have they involved the secret services," she said.

The disease, which originated in China late last year, has spread to 141 countries and regions, infecting more than 180,000 people, killing more than 7,000 and sending economies cratering. Israel has 304 confirmed cases, with no deaths.

Israel's Internal Security Agency to Track Coronavirus Patients

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the technology “will greatly assist us in locating patients and thereby stop the spread of the virus” and stressed “strict oversight” of the tools “to ensure they would not be abused.”

*(Updates with background in fourth paragraph)*

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