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EXCLUSIVE

Israel accused of planting mysterious spy devices near the White House

The likely Israeli spying efforts were uncovered during the Trump presidency, several former top U.S. officials said.

By **DANIEL LIPPMAN** | 09/12/2019 05:14 AM EDT



Politico Illustration: istock/Wikimedia Commons

The U.S. government concluded within the last two years that Israel was most likely behind the placement of cell-phone surveillance devices that were found near the White House and other sensitive locations around Washington, D.C., according to three former senior U.S. officials with knowledge of the matter.

But unlike most other occasions when flagrant incidents of foreign spying have been discovered on American soil, the Trump administration did not rebuke the Israeli government, and there were no consequences for Israel's behavior, one of the former officials said.

The miniature surveillance devices, colloquially known as "StingRays," mimic regular cell towers to fool cell phones into giving them their locations and identity information. Formally called international mobile subscriber identity-catchers or IMSI-catchers, they also can capture the contents of calls and data use.

The devices were likely intended to spy on President Donald Trump, one of the former officials said, as well as his top aides and closest associates -- though it's not clear whether the Israeli efforts were successful.

President Trump is reputed to be lax in observing White House security protocols. POLITICO reported in May 2018 that the president often used an insufficiently secured cell phone to communicate with friends and confidants. The New York Times subsequently reported in October 2018 that "Chinese spies are often listening" to Trump's cell-phone calls, prompting the president to slam the story as "so incorrect I do not have time here to correct it." (A former official said Trump has had his cell phone hardened against intrusion.)

By then, as part of tests by the federal government, officials at the Department of Homeland Security had already discovered evidence of the surveillance devices around the nation's capital, but weren't able to attribute the devices to specific entities. The officials shared their findings with relevant federal agencies, according to a letter a top DHS official, Christopher Krebs, wrote in May 2018 to Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.).

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Based on a detailed forensic analysis, the FBI and other agencies working on the case felt confident that Israeli agents had placed the devices, according to the former officials, several of whom served in top intelligence and national security posts.

That analysis, one of the former officials said, is typically led by the FBI's counterintelligence division and involves examining the devices so that they "tell you a little about their history, where the parts and pieces come from, how old are they, who had access to them, and that will help get you to what the origins are." For these types of investigations, the bureau often leans on the National Security Agency and sometimes the Central Intelligence Agency (DHS and the Secret Service played a supporting role in this specific investigation).

"It was pretty clear that the Israelis were responsible," said a former senior intelligence official.

An Israeli Embassy spokesperson, Elad Strohmayer, denied that Israel placed the devices and said: "These allegations are absolute nonsense. Israel doesn't conduct espionage operations in the United States, period."

A senior Trump administration official said the administration doesn't "comment on matters related to security or intelligence." The FBI declined to comment, while DHS and the Secret Service didn't respond to

requests for comment.

But former officials with deep experience dealing with intelligence matters scoff at the Israeli claim — a pro forma denial Israeli officials are also known to make in private to skeptical U.S. counterparts.

One former senior intelligence official noted that after the FBI and other agencies concluded that the Israelis were most likely responsible for the devices, the Trump administration took no action to punish or even privately scold the Israeli government.

“The reaction ... was very different than it would have been in the last administration,” this person said. “With the current administration, there are a different set of calculations in regard to addressing this.”

The former senior intelligence official criticized how the administration handled the matter, remarking on the striking difference from past administrations, which likely would have at a very minimum issued a *démarche*, or formal diplomatic reprimand, to the foreign government condemning its actions.

“I’m not aware of any accountability at all,” said the former official.

Beyond trying to intercept the private conversations of top officials — prized information for any intelligence service — foreign countries often will try to surveil their close associates as well. With the president, the former senior Trump administration official noted, that could include trying to listen in on the devices of the people he regularly communicates with, such as Steve Wynn, Sean Hannity and Rudy Giuliani.

“The people in that circle are heavily targeted,” said the former Trump official.

Another circle of surveillance targets includes people who regularly talk to Trump’s friends and informal advisers. Information obtained from any of these people “would be so valuable in a town that is like three degrees of separation like Kevin Bacon,” the former official added.

That’s true even for a close U.S. ally like Israel, which often seeks an edge in its diplomatic maneuvering with the United States.

“The Israelis are pretty aggressive” in their intelligence gathering operations, said a former senior intelligence official. “They’re all about protecting the security of the Israeli state and they do whatever they feel they have to to achieve that objective.”

So even though Trump has formed a warm relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and made numerous policy moves favorable to the Israeli government — such as moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, ripping up the Iran nuclear deal and heavily targeting Iran with sanctions — Israel became a prime suspect in planting the devices.

While the Chinese, who have been regularly caught doing intelligence operations in the U.S., were also seen as potential suspects, they were determined as unlikely to have placed the devices based on a close analysis of the devices.

“You can often, depending upon the tradecraft of the people who put them in place, figure out who’s been accessing them to pull the data off the devices,” another former senior U.S. intelligence official explained.

Washington is awash in surveillance, and efforts of foreign entities to try to spy on administration officials and other top political figures are fairly common. But not many countries have the capability — or the budget — to plant the devices found in this most recent incident, which is another reason suspicion fell on Israel.

IMSI-catchers, which are often used by local police agencies to surveil criminals, can also be made by sophisticated hobbyists or by the Harris Corporation, the manufacturer of StingRays, which cost more than \$150,000 each, according to Vice News.

“The costs involved are really significant,” according to a former senior Trump administration official. “This is not an easy or ubiquitous practice.”

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Among professionals, the Israeli intelligence services have an especially fearsome reputation. But they do sometimes make mistakes and are “not 10 feet tall like you see in the movies,” a former senior intelligence official noted.

In 2010, the secret covers of a Mossad hit team, some of whom had been posing as tennis players, were blown after almost 30 minutes of surveillance video was posted online of them going through a luxury Dubai hotel where they killed a top Hamas terrorist in his room.

Still, U.S. officials sometimes have been taken aback by Israel’s brazen spying. One former U.S. government official recalled his frequent concern that Israel knew about internal U.S. policy deliberations that were meant to be kept private.

“There were suspicions that they were listening in,” the former official said, based on his Israeli counterparts flaunting a level of detailed knowledge “that was hard to explain otherwise.”

“Sometimes it was sort of knowledge of our thinking. Occasionally there were some turns of phrase like language that as far as we knew had only appeared in drafts of speeches and never been actually used publicly, and then some Israeli official would repeat it back to us and say, “This would be really problematic if you were to say X,”” said the former official.

Back when the Obama administration was trying to jump-start negotiations with the Palestinians, for example, the Israelis were eager to get advance knowledge of the language being debated that would describe the terms of reference of the talks.

“They would have had interest in what language [President Barack] Obama or [Secretary of State John] Kerry or someone else was going to use and might indeed try to find a way to lobby for language they liked or against language that they didn’t like and so having knowledge of that could be advantageous for them,” the former official said.

“The Israelis are aggressive intelligence collectors, but they have sworn off spying on the U.S. at various points and it’s not surprising that such efforts continue,” said Daniel Benjamin, a former coordinator of counterterrorism at the State Department and now director of the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth.

He recalled once meeting with a head of Mossad, the premier Israeli intelligence agency. The first thing the official told Benjamin was that Israel didn’t spy on the U.S.

“I just told him our conversation was over if he had such a low estimate of my intelligence,” Benjamin said.

Israeli officials often note in conversations with their American counterparts — correctly — that the U.S. regularly gathers intelligence on Israeli leaders.

As for Israel’s recent surveillance of the White House, one of the former senior U.S. intelligence officials acknowledged it raised security concerns but joked, “On the other hand, guess what we do in Tel Aviv?”

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