

Popular Mideast app accused of spying back on Google Play

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The popular UAE-developed mobile application ToTok has returned to the Google Play Store after it was removed on claims it was being used for government spying, the company said Saturday.

Google and Apple removed the app from their online marketplaces last month after The New York Times reported ToTok allowed the UAE government to track the conversations, movements and other details of people who installed it on their phone.

"We are happy to inform you #ToTok is now available for download on the Google Play Store," a statement on ToTok's Twitter account said.

On its platform, Google lists a series of "updates" to the app, including requesting access to permissions and data and a "newly designed dialog to ask your authorisation of accessing and syncing your contact list".

The app remains unavailable on the Apple Store.

Apple told AFP that ToTok was removed from its App Store pending a review, while Google said it was taken down from the Play Store "for a policy issue".

ToTok became popular by offering free calling and messaging to millions of users in countries like the United Arab Emirates where internet calling services like Skype are blocked.

Launched in 2019, ToTok was developed by Breej Holding, which The Times reported is likely a "front company" affiliated with DarkMatter, an Abu Dhabi-based cyberintelligence and hacking firm.

The UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority denied the accusations, saying that the country's laws "prohibit any kind of data breach and unlawful interception".

Security researcher Patrick Wardle, who assisted The New York Times, has said ToTok appeared to be part of a "mass surveillance operation", which "likely afforded in-depth insight in a large percentage of the country's population".

ToTok appeared to trick users of iPhones and Android devices into handing over access to their location and private data on their devices, Wardle said.

It was also promoted by what appeared to be fake reviews, he added.

The UAE is investing heavily in new technologies and artificial intelligence, but many experts and organisations accuse the country of strictly restricting freedoms on the internet.

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