

Precedence: Routine

Date: March 18, 2022

To: FBI San Francisco
Attn: Special Agent [REDACTED]

From: Andrew G. Watters
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Case: [REDACTED] v. Doe

Title: Unknown Suspects
George E. Johnson, Esq. (victim)
[REDACTED] (victim)
18 U.S.C. sec. 1343, et al.
Report of Investigation

Synopsis: To provide a summary of information developed to date in this wire fraud/RICO case involving Mexican timeshares and the stolen identity of a retired attorney.

Details:

Introduction

I am a lawyer in California (#237990), and I also offer investigative services pursuant to Business and Professions Code sec. 7522(e) and 7582.2(e), which exempt licensed attorneys from the private investigator licensing law. I often go on to represent the same individuals in litigation.

On March 15, 2022, I was hired on an emergency basis to represent [REDACTED]. Mr. [REDACTED] asked me to look at his timeshare transaction to see whether it was bona fide before he wired another \$20,000 to Mexico (he has already put in around \$50,000). I've concluded the transaction is part of a complex advance fee fraud/RICO for the reasons indicated here, and I'm issuing this report with supporting data and files with Mr. [REDACTED] authorization.

Background

[REDACTED] and his spouse own a timeshare at the Palladium in Cancún, Mexico, the details of which are not relevant here. They wanted to sell the timeshare and were approached in early 2022 by a purported law firm in New York City that specializes in

To: FBI San Francisco
Re: George E. Johnson 3/18/2022

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these types of transactions and was representing the prospective buyer. The "Legal Firm of George Johnson" has a website¹, email, and phone number online. I visited the firm website at approximately 11:48 a.m. on March 15, 2022 as Mr. [REDACTED] was in my office sharing the details of the transaction with me.² The domain name was registered in November 2021 by someone in Argentina, according to publicly available whois information. Critically, the nameserver shown on the domain is ns112.hostgator.mx, which is in Mexico. A lawyer would not normally claim to have his office and phone in New York City while registering his domain from Argentina with nameservers in Mexico.

There is a George Johnson attorney in New York, but he has no registered address on his official court profile/attorney license page. Public records from LexisNexis reveal that Mr. Johnson is also admitted in Maryland. I reached out to Mr. Johnson and was able to speak with him at length on March 18, 2022 (see attached FD-302). In summary, Mr. Johnson is a retired attorney who is dual-admitted in New York and Maryland. He confirmed his attorney license number over the forged signatures as being his correct license number, and he denied being involved with the scam. It was news to him that someone is claiming to be him in New York City. I provided him a download link for the underlying documents and invited him to reach out again if he has comments after reviewing the documents.

The office shown on the fake website is a virtual/shared office in New York City, and it appears the suspects use Google voice from abroad. But the call center answering the law firm's number is definitely American. It may be shared reception at the virtual office.

The PDF documents purportedly bearing Mr. Johnson's notarized signature were created in Adobe Illustrator, and the electronic files clearly show that the signatures and notary seals were dropped in with Illustrator. Also, the documents create illegal obligations for a lawyer to make, such as guarantying client debts. The wire instructions were Photoshopped and not created on the date represented in the document.

I posed as an occasional investor who was considering bankrolling my client's transaction, however, the client mistakenly cc'ed me on the email that I asked him to send to the suspects instead of bcc'ing me. In any case, the suspects still clicked on that link and I captured their VPN IP addresses and access patterns.

1 <https://legalfirmofgeorgejohnson.com/>

2 The first entry in my web server log files shows an access referred by a Google search at 11:49:46 a.m. on March 15, 2022, approximately a minute and a half after my client arrived. From this, I infer that the suspects have real-time web server monitoring in place and are looking up interesting visitors as they access the site, just like I do with my own websites.

To: FBI San Francisco
Re: George E. Johnson 3/18/2022

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The VPN has an endpoint in San Jose, and coincidentally, there is another endpoint in New York. The VPN is reportedly on a leased IP block. I asked the owner of that IP block ([REDACTED] -- administered by Mr. [REDACTED]) about this, and he seems to be providing helpful information so far. He claims ExpressVPN leased that block under a Letter of Authorization, and he shared an email from him to CDN77, which he represented as ExpressVPN's upstream provider, as evidence of the LOA. He declined to provide the actual LOA, indicating that he needed ExpressVPN's permission. I sent ExpressVPN notice to preserve their logs for that ASN, in any case.

The client indicated that there was a buyer involved in the transaction, Ted Wilkerson, who was calling him to follow up as well. The client provided a phone number, and I called "Ted Wilkerson" at +1 (888) 384-4622 on March 16, 2022. Mr. Wilkerson identified himself as "Theodore Wilkerson" when answering the phone. He stated he is a corporate officer/executive in the company that is acquiring Mr. [REDACTED] timeshare, and he wanted to know the status of the transaction. It was an awkward conversation in which we were each trying to see what the other knew. Mr. Wilkerson didn't give any details, including where in the world he claims to be. However, he sounded fully American. I told him to forget about the deal and proceed accordingly. He then called my client several times and I instructed my client to not answer.

The suspects then sent a demand letter to my client, again purportedly from Mr. Johnson, and the suspects are still trying to get money from my client even though I called them out and also emailed them directly accusing them of being a criminal racketeering enterprise. I am intending to shut down at least their website and email with an injunction in District Court in the near future, if my client can financially justify proceeding.

Separately, on March 17, 2022, I spoke with the manager of Palladium, Mr. [REDACTED], at +1 [REDACTED]. Mr. [REDACTED] had previously indicated that Mr. [REDACTED] claimed Palladium has had previous transactions involving the George Johnson law firm that worked out. When I spoke with Mr. [REDACTED] I gave him a summary of my findings to date, and he seemed only mildly surprised. The conversation focused on Palladium denying Mr. [REDACTED] request for a refund of the transfer fee because the refund would require a mutual agreement, and the buyer was not agreeing. Mr. [REDACTED] offered his assistance and invited me to send him a letter or other documentation.

Conclusion

This is a multi-layered advance fee fraud/RICO involving sophisticated criminals, most of whom appear to be located in Mexico or elsewhere in South America. However, there is potential for an American connection given the brazen use of a virtual office in New York City and the possible willful

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blindness of the timeshare company. The “buyer” connection might be investigated further to see whether Mr. Wilkerson is a real person and in the U.S. Searching LexisNexis reveals a number of Ted Wilkersons, but the client’s resources do not permit pursuing all of those leads.

Recommendations:

Set leads described below.

Leads:

Lead 1:

Issue National Security Letter to [REDACTED] and ExpressVPN, both of which are reachable in the U.S., to capture the underlying IP addresses of the suspects who searched Google for my name at 11:58 a.m. on March 15, 2022.

Lead 2:

Interview [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] concerning his arrangement with ExpressVPN for the IP block that contains the suspects’ VPN endpoint.

Lead 3:

Interview George Johnson in [REDACTED] to gain insight as to why the suspects selected him.

Lead 4:

Locate Theodore Wilkerson.

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Andrew G. Watters, Esq.

Date of transcription 3/18/2022

Telephonic interview of:

George E. Johnson, Esq.

[REDACTED]

On March 18, 2022, I spoke with George E. Johnson, who related the following:

Mr. Johnson is a retired attorney who is admitted in New York and Maryland. He never had an active practice in New York, and he is surprised that anyone would think he was currently practicing in New York City because he has been retired for many years. It is a shock to him to learn that someone has created an entire online identity impersonating him in connection with transactions involving Mexican time shares. The suspects have his correct attorney license number.

I asked for his email address in order to provide a sample of his forged signature and the forged notary seals. He asked his wife, Ms. [REDACTED] Johnson (who I could hear in the background) if he should provide me his email address. She advised him not to provide his email address, so I invited him to verify my identity online through the State Bar of California and on my website, and then call back with his email address if desired. I provided him the contact information of Special Agent [REDACTED] at the FBI field office in San Francisco, with a suggestion to call if he wished to speak with anyone about these crimes.

Mr. Johnson called back a few minutes later and stated that he left a message at FBI San Francisco and will be filing a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission concerning identity theft. He asked for the underlying documents, so I texted him a download link.

Investigation on 3/18/2022 at [REDACTED]

File # [REDACTED] Date dictated 3/18/2022

by Andrew G. Watters

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