

Apple unlock ruling explained: What you need to know about the court order requiring the tech giant to unlock a terrorist's iPhone — and how it could affect your device

BY [MEG WAGNER](#) NEW YORK DAILY NEWS Updated: Wednesday, February 17, 2016, 1:53 PM

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Apple Says Mandate to Crack San Bernardino Phone 'Dangerous'

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Apple is pushing back against [a court order to help the FBI hack into a terrorist gunman's encrypted iPhone](#), claiming the one-time break-in could be a slippery slope with repercussions for all smartphone users.

Here's what you need to know about the FBI's request, Apple's refusal and what it means for the iPhone in your pocket.

JUDGE: [APPLE TO HELP FBI HACK SAN BERNARDINO SHOOTER'S PHONE](#)

WHAT DOES THE FBI WANT?

Investigators want to get into a passcode-protected cellphone used by Syed Farook before he [opened fire on his office's holiday party, killing 14 people](#) in December. Farook and his co-shooter, his wife Tashfeen Malik, died in a gun battle with police.

CAN THE FBI CRACK THE CODE ON ITS OWN?

Apple's iOS, the default software on every iPhone, has a self-destruct security feature: If a user types in a wrong passcode too many times, data on the phone is erased.

The security measure, built to protect a user's data from hackers, means that if FBI agents try too many passcodes, everything on Farook's phone — possible evidence — will be lost.

TRUMP, BRATTON SUPPORT ORDER TO UNLOCK KILLER'S IPHONE

WHAT'S ON THIS PHONE, ANYWAY?

It's not clear what investigators believe they might find on Farook's work phone, but they said it may hold clues about whom the couple communicated with and where they traveled before the attack.



NEW YORK DAILY NEWS ILLUSTRATION

Apple says helping the FBI break into a killer's password-protected phone would set a 'dangerous' precedent.

APPLE SAYS MANDATE TO CRACK SAN BERNARDINO PHONE 'DANGEROUS'

WHAT DID THE COURT ORDER SAY?

The order, handed down by U.S. Magistrate Judge Sheri Pym, requires Apple to write a software that will bypass the self-destruct feature. That way, the FBI will be able to try different combinations in rapid sequence until it finds the right one.

The magistrate's order requires that the software Apple provides be programmed to work only on Farook's phone.

WHY IS APPLE FIGHTING THE ORDER?

The software the FBI wants doesn't exist yet, and [Apple fears that it could infringe upon the privacy of all iPhone users](#).

"The FBI may use different words to describe this tool, but make no mistake: Building a version of iOS that bypasses security in this way would undeniably create a back door," CEO Tim Cook said in a statement. "And while the government may argue that its use would be limited to this case, there is no way to guarantee such control."

WILL MY IPHONE BE AFFECTED?

While the only iPhone directly impacted by the order is the one that belonged to the terrorist, security and tech experts worry it could create a slippery slope and weaken security for all smartphone users.

The order mandated the software would be used only once — but there's no way to ensure it couldn't be duplicated, possibly by hackers, cybersecurity expert Vanita Pandey told the Daily News Wednesday.

"The fact that it's done once means there is a way to do it again," said Pandey, vice president of marketing for fraud prevention firm ThreatMetrix. "In a world where security is as strong as the weakest link, this sets a bad precedent."

If hackers and cybercriminals found a way to copy the software, it could leave iPhone users vulnerable, she said.

In his statement, Cook also warned about opening a security Pandora's box.

"For years, cryptologists and national security experts have been warning against weakening encryption. Doing so would hurt only the well-meaning and law-abiding citizens who rely on companies like Apple to protect their data," Cook wrote. "We can find no precedent for an American company being forced to expose its customers to a greater risk of attack."



HANDOUT/GETTY IMAGES

Tashfeen Malik (l.) and Syed Farook were shot and killed by police last year after they opened fire on a packed office party.

However, not everyone agrees that the ruling is a security landmark.

“I think this is a specific incident,” cybersecurity expert Al Berman told the Daily News. “This is a very specific ruling on a very specific phone.”

Berman — who sits on the technical committee of ASIS, an organization of security professionals — said he sees both sides of the argument, but said investigators have a lot to gain by cracking into the phone.

“As soon as you raise the national security flag, it changes the argument,” he said.

IS THIS JUST AN IPHONE THING?

The court case specifically concerns Apple’s iOS because Farook owned an iPhone, and not another brand of smartphone. The theoretical software would be programmed exclusively for Farook’s iPhone — but Pandey said the same concept of bypassing passcodes could “spill over” into other platforms, such as Android.



“It’s
the
idea
that
we
are

ROBERT GALBRAITH/REUTERS

Apple CEO Tim Cook vowed to fight the order.

creating this back door,” she said. “You can make a backdoor for any type of phone.”

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO?

While the average iPhone user won’t have a say in the court case, Pandey encouraged all smartphone users to vigilantly use common sense when it comes to their devices.

“Basic stuff: Don’t have a notepad on your phone with all your passwords. Don’t put your social security number into an unencrypted, untrusted website,” she said, adding that those are tips smartphone users should have been following long before news of the court order broke.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Apple has five days to notify the court if it believes the ruling is unreasonably burdensome. While Apple has not filed anything legally, Cook in his note vowed to fight the order.

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mwagner@nydailynews.com