Google Street View raises Israeli security fears

JOSH LEDERMAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Google has for years fought claims its mapping and photography services infringed on personal privacy. Now the Internet giant is facing concerns from Israel that the technology could be used for terrorism.

Israel announced Monday it is considering ways for Google Street View to photograph Israeli cities, despite concerns the popular service could be used by terrorists to plot attacks against sensitive locations or political figures.

A team of Israeli Cabinet ministers led by Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor instructed experts Monday to work with Google Inc. to find a safe way to implement the feature "as soon as possible," according to an official statement. The team is weighing benefits, such as increased visibility for tourist sites, with public safety and personal privacy.

Street View allows users to virtually tour locations on a map. It is already available in 27 countries. Google uses special vehicles with panoramic cameras to take ground-level, 3-D images.

The feature has sparked intense debate about invasions of privacy in the U.S., Germany and other countries.

Critics argue the images could reveal people in places they don't want to be seen or doing things that might be embarrassing. Also, Google said last year that its vehicles had inadvertently collected computer data from Wi-Fi networks.

The issue has created a special dilemma in Israel, a country that is known as an international high-tech powerhouse but where the public is on constant alert for attacks by Palestinian militants.

In this environment, officials are concerned about putting unprecedented information about potential targets on the Internet. During wartime, the military often bans reporters from revealing locations that have been hit by rockets, out of concern enemies could use the coordinates for future attacks.

Street View is not the first Google service to raise eyebrows in Israel's security establishment.

"We already have problems with Google Earth, which exposes all kinds of facilities," said retired Lt. Col. Mordechai Kedar, who served for 25 years in Israeli intelligence, who added that Street View functionality could ease and facilitate terrorist attacks.

Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip have said they used Google Earth — a service that shows satellite images from around the world — to help identify targets in

rocket attacks.

Google announced in September it had acquired Israeli startup Quiksee, which creates interactive mapping services based on user-submitted videos. That technology could expand Google's options for acquiring the content for its Street View service.

If Israeli cities are added to Street View, one official suggested it was likely that restrictions will be imposed on filming security installations. He spoke on condition of anonymity because no final decisions have been made.

Ministers involved in the deliberations declined to comment, but Google said it hopes "to offer the benefits of street-level imagery to users all around the world."

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