Dropping concern, Israel allows Google Street View

DANIEL ESTRIN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Israel has given Google a green light to photograph its streets after a deal with the Internet giant meant to ensure its panoramic Street View service would not aide terrorists planning attacks on sensitive sites.

Google uses cameras mounted on cars, tricycles and even snowmobiles to take Street View's 360-degree images, which users of the website can view by zooming in on any given point on a map. By clicking different points in the image, it's possible to move in any direction and take a virtual tour of a city.

Critics in other countries have long accused Google of infringing on personal privacy with its mapping and photography technology. Initial worries in Israel were that the detailed photos could help terrorists plot attacks against sensitive locations or political figures.

A panel of government ministers met for six months to draft guidelines meant to ensure Israel's security would not be compromised. Israel announced Sunday it had reached an agreement with Google Inc. on security and legal issues related to the project.

Google "agreed to all of our requests," said Moti Ohana, media adviser to Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor, who headed the committee. Ohana refused to divulge details of the security arrangements.

A spokesman for Google Israel declined to comment on details of the project other than to say the company was pleased Israel had approved it. He said Google hoped to provide updates soon about the project's launching. He wouldn't say when Google would begin the service in Israel.

Ohana said Israel dropped its concerns after the deal.

Close-up satellite images of Israeli streets and buildings have been available for years through another Google service, Google Earth, and Street View's photos of Israel would not significantly enhance the information already online, he said.

Street View is already available in more than 30 countries on all seven continents. Israel will be the first Middle Eastern country to display its cities and streets with the service. There's only one other site from the region that the service features: a virtual tour of Iraq's National Museum in Baghdad.

The service has sparked heated debate in the U.S., Germany and other countries, with critics arguing that images could reveal people's identities without their

permission. Last year, Google acknowledged its vehicles had accidentally collected computer data from wireless Internet networks.

Google says its technology automatically blurs license plates and people's faces. It also allows users to file online requests to blur buildings and other sites.

In Israel, where the public is on constant alert for attacks by Palestinian militants, officials are concerned about publicizing information about potential targets. The military often bans reporters from revealing locations that have been hit by rockets, out of concern that the rocket launchers could improve their aim if they knew where their rockets landed.

Retired Lt. Col. Mordechai Kedar, who served for 25 years in Israeli intelligence, said he was not briefed about Israel's security arrangements with Google but that he expected Israel to prohibit Google from photographing army bases located in Israel cities, such as the sprawling Israeli military headquarters in downtown Tel Aviv.

"God forbid a country should need to reveal its secret facilities just because Google invented something," Kedar said. "The lives of people are more important, and the security of countries is more important."

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