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Article published Oct 5, 2007

Google Earth provides bird's eye view of Israeli reactor

JERUSALEM – When Google Earth first came along, the company went to some lengths to address the security concerns and restrictions in various countries, including Israel, where images of this nation were often blurry and you couldn't zoom in to find your house in Jerusalem.

Well, good-bye to all that.

"Sensitive installations, Air Force bases with their planes and helicopters, missile bases and even the nuclear reactor in Dimona have never been photographed better," writes Yuval Dror in Friday's Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper. "A recent Google Earth update shows satellite pictures that make it possible to see clear, sharp pictures of military and civilian targets all across Israel."

"Up until recently, the satellite pictures of Israel on Google Earth had a particularly low resolution: every pixel was equal to 10-20 meters. Now, the satellite maps of Israel show great parts of the country with a resolution close to two meters per pixel.

"American law prohibits showing satellite pictures of the State of Israel with a resolution higher than two meters per pixel, but Google argues they are not breaking the law."

The images are pretty remarkable. You can check out a very detailed shot of Israel's not-so-secret nuclear reactor in Dimona (along with other Israeli military sites) courtesy of Charles Levinson at Conflict Blotter, www.conflictblotter.com.

Yedioth Ahronoth basically accuses Google of aiding and abetting terrorists, Iran and others trying to destroy Israel.

"We feel like we're dressed, but in fact we're not," the paper's Alex Fishman writes. "We are transparent. The State of Israel, with its sensitive installations, has lost another scarf veiling its charms. If up until now we were undressed only by the superpower satellites, then now, with the improvement in the quality of satellite images from Google Earth, Israel's most secret spots are becoming visible not only to any ephemeral intelligence organization ...

"From now on, when an Islamic Jihad militant is sent to collect information about a sensitive target in Israel, his dispatchers can give him the coordinate to insert in Google Earth on his laptop.

"Up until now, to guide a terrorist or an agent with any level of accuracy, it was necessary to collect information, and this wasn't always easy. Today this information is freely available to all. Go get satellite pictures and take a walk through the State of Israel's secret installations."

Israel is a nation of open secrets. But it does everything it can to keep them, as former Israeli nuclear engineer Mordechai Vanunu well knows after spending 18 years in an Israeli prison for treason after revealing Dimona's secrets in the British press. Even now, Israeli government censors are preventing Israeli reporters from writing many details about last month's Israeli strike on Syria, even though everyone from Syrian President Assad to Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu have spoken publicly about it.

How dangerous is this really for Israel? It certainly doesn't make security easier. Maybe Islamic Jihad militants in Gaza are right now huddled around a laptop loading Google Earth and planning their next strike. Just about the only thing they have to fire are the low-power, unguided Qassam rockets. And one suspects that nations like Iran and Syria, if they plan to attack Israel, are going to rely on something more than Google Earth to stage a strike.

Dion Nissenbaum covers the Middle East as Jerusalem bureau chief for McClatchy Newspapers. E-mail him at dnissenbaum@mcclatchydc.com.

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