

EXCLUSIVE

Cyprus: the home of British/American Internet surveillance in the Middle East

di Nicky Hager e Stefania Maurizi

British and US Internet surveillance in the Middle East and surrounding regions occurs from a secret base on the island of Cyprus, as L'Espresso, the German daily "Sueddeutsche Zeitung", the Greek daily "Ta Nea" and the Greek channel "AlphaTV" can reveal. The country only has a million citizens and is a small player in world affairs, but it is a key site for the mass surveillance systems revealed by US whistleblower Edward Snowden.

The Middle Eastern surveillance hub has remained unidentified in Snowden revelations until now. The Guardian newspaper, which first received the Snowden leaks, said British Internet spying operations were run from two British sites and "a location abroad, which the Guardian will not identify". The UK Independent newspaper also described a "secret Internet monitoring station in the Middle East" intercepting vast quantities of e-mails, phone calls and web traffic carried on underwater fibre-optic cables passing through the area -- but also declined to reveal the location.

The secret location is Cyprus, the 240km long island in the eastern Mediterranean. When Britain granted Mediterranean independence in 1960, Britain retained two large military bases, now home to the most important overseas spying operations of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

This news comes amidst growing anger in Germany and other Western European countries at large-scale US and British surveillance of their citizens and political leaders. Britain faces pressure to stop spying on its European neighbours on behalf of the US intelligence agencies.

The surveillance is also a very controversial issue for the Cyprus Government. It relies on the secrecy of the British spying operations to avoid having to explain to neighbouring countries why British and US intelligence agencies spy on them from bases on Cypriot territory.

The Internet monitoring occurs at the Ayios Nikolaos intelligence station, part of Britain's Eastern Sovereign Base Area. It is possible to see the top secret intelligence base on Google Earth (here): a cluster of operations buildings, several eavesdropping satellite dishes and nearby a large circular radio direction-finding antenna system, a tell-tale sign of signals intelligence bases.

The targets of the Cyprus intelligence operations will typically include the government leaders in all the surrounding countries and other senior public, business and military leaders. Following the pattern of British and US spying in other regions, it will also include United Nations agencies, trade organisations, private companies, police forces, militaries and political groups.

British intelligence documents leaked by Snowden reveal a GCHQ project with the extravagant name "Mastery of the Internet". According to the Guardian, a programme called "Tempora" allows GCHQ to tap into Internet cables passing over UK territory, intercepting hundreds of gigabytes of Internet data every second. This includes websites visited, e-mails, instant messages, calls and passwords. The documents say Britain currently does more Internet monitoring even than the US National Security Agency (NSA). Personal data available to GCHQ from Internet and mobile traffic had increased 7000% in five years.

A large component of this Internet surveillance is occurring in Cyprus. Among the thousands of documents Snowden copied before he left his intelligence job and became a whistleblower is an obscure GCHQ document containing the clue about GCHQ's Internet surveillance "location abroad". It was passed by Snowden to the Washington Post and published last month.

The 2012 report is about Internet surveillance, including a project called Operation Mullenize. It says the Internet surveillance work occurs at three locations and involves "a lot of hard work by some committed individuals". The Internet surveillance staff are based at "Benhall, Bude and Sounder". These correspond to the three Internet surveillance locations mentioned by the Guardian: the GCHQ's headquarters, its station in Bude and the unidentified "location abroad".

Benhall is the address of the GCHQ headquarters and Bude the main British interception station in Cornwall. The third location, "Sounder", is a tightly held secret, but it turns out to be a confidential intelligence agency name for operations in Cyprus.

The name Sounder had been mentioned in the diary of former NSA head General William Odom and was discovered in Odom's archived papers by US intelligence writer Matthew Aid. The diary recorded a 1988 discussion between Odom and GCHQ director Peter Marychurch that noted Sounder was in Cyprus and said that NSA "will share part of costs". Aid identified Sounder specifically as the Ayios Nikolaos surveillance station.

The UK is strategically placed for Internet surveillance. The Snowden documents, as reported by the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, revealed GCHQ monitors at least 14 major undersea cables that come ashore in Britain. There are trans-Atlantic, African, Western European and Europe-to-Asia cables conveniently accessible to GCHQ on British soil.

However, Britain is not well positioned for its long-term role of spying on the Middle East. The answer is Cyprus.

Undersea cable maps show Cyprus at the hub of numerous fibre-optic undersea cables making it a natural site to spy on the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern communications. A number of cables connect Cyprus to Israel and Syria, obvious targets for Anglo-American spying. Other cables run from Cyprus to Lebanon, Cyprus to Egypt and Turkey, to Greece and Italy, and so on.

The major SEA-ME-WE3 cable connecting South East Asia, the Middle East and Western Europe also comes ashore on the little island country. In total over a dozen strategic cables are accessible in Cyprus and more are planned. It is an ideal site for monitoring communications in the Middle East and surrounding countries.

Last August, "l'Espresso" revealed that, according to the Snowden files on the "Tempora" programme, the GCHQ tapped three submarine fiber optic cables having landing points in Sicily: Fea, SeaMeWe3 and SeaMewe4.

As Cyprus plays a crucial role in the mass surveillance operations targeting Middle East, with 14 cables having landing points in Cyprus, Sicily plays a crucial role with its 19 cables with landing points in the Italian island at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, a crossroad for communications between Europe, North Africa, Middle East and Asia (see).

SeaMewe3 and SeaMeWe4 are owned by a consortium of international telecoms including the Italian company "Telecom Italia Sparkle", which is also the co-owner of many submarine cables with landing points in Cyprus, like SeaMewe3, Lev Submarine System, Cadmos, MedNautilus Submarine System, Ugarit, Cios.

Telecom Italia Sparkle is an Italian company which ended up in a huge tax evasion scandal, involving Gennaro Mokbel, an infamous Italian businessman linked to the Italian intelligence services and to the far right extremism, sentenced to 15 years in jail for this tax fraud scheme".

Gaining intelligence access to undersea cables requires cooperation from the telecommunications authorities. In the UK, GCHQ has had a long-term relationship with British Telecom, allowing telecommunications routes to be designed to the advantage of the eavesdroppers.

This makes Cyprus perfect for GCHQ surveillance as well. The British government directly

governed Cyprus until 1960. Since then, the treaty granting the country independence has included a special clause, section 6, stating that the Cyprus authorities must “consult and cooperate” with the British over the island’s telecommunications decisions.

In other words, the government owned Cyprus Telecommunications Authority is legally obliged to assist the British government, which in Cyprus primarily means assisting the British intelligence bases. Some of the undersea cables are directly owned by the Cyprus Telecommunications Authority (CYTA).

We asked CYTA if it is aware that the British intelligence station at Ayios Nikolaos is tapping into and processing international communications carried by undersea cables it owns and manages in Cyprus; and whether there an agreement between CYTA and the British authorities for assisting the surveillance. Cyta spokesperson Lefteris Christou replied that "Cyta is fully compliant to the European legislation relating to the Data Protection of its customers, and is not involved in any practises that violate this legislation." This however says very little. The privacy rules in the EU Data Protection Directive do not apply to "operations concerning public security, defence, State security."

Undersea cable engineers say that undersea cable interception occurs after a cable emerges from the sea at a landing station and travels overland to a data centre to connects with other cable networks. They say undersea cables are copied inside the data centre using a passive optical splitter. A separate fibre-optic cable would then carry the intercepted communications to an intelligence site, in this case the Ayios Nikolaos station.

The NSA has a strong interest in the GCHQ surveillance capabilities. A Snowden document describes direct NSA funding of GCHQ projects it sees having value for its own intelligence operations. In 2010, £39.9 million of NSA funding went mostly to GCHQ’s “Mastering the Internet” project and to developments at the GCHQ’s underseas cable intercepting site in Bude. The following year, according to the Guardian, NSA paid “half the costs of one of the UK’s main eavesdropping capabilities in Cyprus.”

This is not the first time. When a financial crisis forced Britain to withdraw its forces from “East of Suez” and close many of its world-wide bases, the UK government looked at closing the Cyprus bases. The US government insisted in 1974 that the Cyprus bases stay open and agreed to pay some of the costs. Later, in 1988, NSA director Odom’s diary records more US funding, a date that probably coincides with expansion into satellite communications interception at the Ayios Nikolaos station.

A current-day GCHQ document on the future of Cyprus operations was still arguing the Cyprus operations had to "remain resourced and equipped ... to maintain healthy relationships with USA customers".

According to a further Snowden document, viewed by Süddeutsche Zeitung journalists, US intelligence officers are also based in the British Cyprus bases. The document says the American intelligence staff are required to dress as tourists because the UK has promised

the Cyprus government that only British staff will work there.

The GCHQ press office responded to questions about the Cyprus surveillance with its standard non-answer: "It is long standing policy that we do not comment on intelligence matters." Their e-mail said that "Communications with GCHQ may be monitored and/or recorded for system efficiency and other lawful purposes."

Cyprus has been the main British communication interception base in the Middle East for about 65 years [see box]. This has gone together with GCHQ's long-term role specialising in Middle East intelligence gathering as its contribution to the NSA-led intelligence alliance.

The US-British intelligence alliance coordinates its Middle Eastern operations from two huge intelligence centres: the GCHQ headquarters in England and a NSA regional intelligence centre at Fort Gordon in the southern US state of Georgia (known as "NSA-G"). Both facilities contain hundreds of analysts who speak Middle Eastern and surrounding languages. They are connected in real time to the flows of intercepted public calls and messages captured by eavesdropping sites in that region.

However the key eavesdropping site, Cyprus, has remained hidden and so the crucial influence of Cyprus-based spying on Middle Eastern politics has never been widely understood.

05 novembre 2013

© RIPRODUZIONE RISERVATA



Scrivi un commento

1 commenti

Iscriviti



Richard Mayson

8 giorni fa

So when Mossad asserts to the Americans and its allies its intercepted intelligence of chatter by the Syrian Govt/armed forces on the chemical weapons "episode" two months ago, and the USA and its puppet allies in France and the UK, parrot this claim, but no such chatter is picked up by Cyprus's "Sounder" GCHQ,base, (confirmed by an insider) we know Mossad's claims are a fabrication, Either that or the GCHQ has failed in its most advanced interception technical prowess, as Hagert has outliend above.

Rispondi Condividi

0 0

IL NUMERO IN EDICOLA »



PER ABBONARSI

- Abbonamento al settimanale
- Abbonamento a Extra (versione online)

ACCESSO ABBONATI

- Leggi L'Espresso sul PC



▪ Archivio dal 1997

- Newsletter
- Il sommario degli articoli
- Demo online

L'ESPRESSO SU IPAD

▪ Scarica gratis
l'app sul tuo Ipad