BAE Systems Sold Sophisticated Cyber-Surveillance Technology to Repressive Middle Eastern Regimes

A 2017 BBC investigation has revealed that UK defence giant BAE systems sold sophisticated cyber-surveillance technology to autocratic governments throughout the Middle East North Africa. Developed by ETI, a Danish subsidiary of BAE, the surveillance system – named Evident – is powerful enough to intercept internet traffic, pinpoint a person’s location by homing in on their cellular signal, recognise the voices of people making calls and decrypting private communications. The technology was exported to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Morocco and Algeria and then used in the brutal suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations by national security forces during the Arab Spring.

The export of goods that could be used to commit human rights violations or break humanitarian law is not permitted under British law. Nonetheless, the sale of the technology was not restricted despite the fact that the regimes to which it was sold have extensive records of suppressing political rights, curbing civil liberties and crushing political opposition. Activists have since highlighted how the technology has allowed the targeting and persecution of political dissidents and given governments in the region the capacity to monitor the private online communications of all their citizens all of the time and means with which to store the data for years. In doing so, it has played a key role in allowing dictatorial forms of government to thrive in the region.

Links between the government and the UK’s biggest arms dealer are well-documented and may explain how BAE was able to bypass UK export laws in the sales of its cyber-surveillance technology. The fact that the export deals were brokered by Detica (which changed its name to BAE Systems Applied Intelligence in 2014), a BAE-controlled international business and consulting firm exemplifies this close relationship. At the time of the deals, Detica was being heavily promoted abroad by UK Trade and Investment (UKTI), the government department whose mission it is to “enhance the competitiveness of companies in Britain through overseas trade and investments.”

Despite a widespread acknowledgement among EU member states that cyber-surveillance technology exported by EU-based companies (many of which are British) have been used to commit human rights abuses in the Middle East and North Africa, the UK government has continually attempted to block proposed EU legislation to limit the export of cyber-surveillance technology due to assertions that its counter-terrorism and national security objectives would be compromised. These efforts have led to concerns among human rights advocacy groups that further cyber-surveillance technology export deals could be permitted by the UK government once Britain is no longer subject to EU arms export control.

BAE has neither acknowledged any responsibility nor been held accountable for the role its technology has played in facilitating privacy and human rights violations in the Middle East and North Africa. The company responded to the findings of the BBC investigation with the following statement: “We have robust policies and procedures in place to ensure our international exports to overseas governments are all fully compliant with international export regulations as well as our own strict criteria to evaluate every potential contract.”

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2. Ibid.
6. Ibid.