Google clears key mapping software for Syria

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A view of the African and European continents on Google Earth on a computer screen in 2005. Google announced Wednesday that its mapping software and other products would be available in Syria after getting export approval by the US government.

Google announced Wednesday that its mapping software and other products would be available in Syria after getting export approval by the US government.

The Internet giant said Google Earth would be made available for download along with the photo-sharing application Picasa and the Chrome Web browser.

"Free expression is a fundamental human right and a core value of our company -- but sometimes there are limits to where we can make our products and services available," Google's export compliance chief Neil Martin said in a blog post.

"US export controls and sanctions programs, for example, prohibit us from offering certain software downloads in some countries. The fine details of these restrictions evolve over time, and we're always exploring how we can better offer tools for people to access and share information," he added.

Last year Google made the same services available to people in Iran but blocked access by government computers there.

The US government is in the midst of an initiative to promote online freedom around the world and at the same time to limit certain types of hardware and software that can be used for filtering or monitoring by repressive governments.

Amid a deadly crackdown in Syria, demonstrators use social networking sites, notably Facebook and YouTube, to whip up support for protests against President Bashar al-Assad's rule.

But the regime is also using the Internet to strike back, and the government has deployed a special unit -- the Syrian Electronic Army -- to post pro-Assad comments on anti-regime websites.

Earlier this year Swedish mobile live video streaming site Bambuser said its services had been blocked in Syria shortly after a user had broadcast a bombing in Homs thought to have been carried out by President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

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