

Counterterrorism prosecutors seek access to encrypted data

October 21 2016, by Sylvie Corbet

Prosecutors from France, Belgium, Spain and Morocco called Friday for the ability to unlock phones and computers and to gain access to encrypted communications to aid in the fight against terrorism.

Following a two-day meeting in Paris, prosecutors in charge of counterterrorism investigations in the four countries issued a joint statement Friday to "alert" national and international authorities, internet providers, software makers and telecommunication operators about the obstacles posed by data encryption and the locking systems of smartphones and computers.

They say that while the protection of personal data is a basic right, the threat of violent attacks "justifies" giving "specialized justice authorities" access to the data of people suspected of terror activity.

The issue needs a global response since the concerned companies are often not based in the country where an investigation is taking place, French prosecutor Francois Molins said.

Molins referred to the U.S. case earlier this year in which the Federal Bureau of Investigation engaged in a high-profile fight with Apple to access data from a locked iPhone used by a shooter in the San Bernardino, California, terrorist attack.

The issue triggered a debate about the proper balance between electronic privacy and national security.

Molins said there are some software companies to whom French investigators do not send requests anymore since "we know in advance we will not get any answer."

The four prosecutors also insisted that having access to personal phone and computer data would help not only to prevent attacks, but also to protect vulnerable people and teenagers.

New technologies are "being diverted to isolate and manipulate fragile people," their statement said.

"We are now often facing young people who are searching for information autonomously ... and radicalize alone behind their computers without their family and entourage being able to do something," Belgian prosecutor Frederic Van Leeuw said.

Prosecutors insisted access to encrypted electronic devices is a key-issue following attacks in Paris and Brussels by extremists with links to the Islamic State group, and at a time when the threat is still particularly high.

"From the moment (IS members) are having a difficult time in Syria and Iraq, they can be tempted to activate some relays they have in Europe to attack us," Molins said. "We all share this analysis, and I know that all the intelligence services in countries of Western Europe agree with that."

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