

US officials seize on Paris attacks to press for “back door” to encryption

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US officials are moving rapidly to exploit the terrorist attacks in Paris on Friday to push forward with already existing plans to undermine encrypted communications and vastly expand the powers of the state.

The Obama administration, which created the conditions for the tragedy in Paris with its war policy that has laid waste to much of the Middle East, is now using it to further its criminal operations. The campaign is being led by John Brennan, Obama’s CIA director, who has been personally implicated in both the NSA’s illegal and unconstitutional spy programs and the CIA’s torture program.

In remarks delivered Monday at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., Brennan blamed insufficient spying capacities for the terrorist attacks. “A lot of technological capabilities that are available right now... make it exceptionally difficult, both technically as well as legally, for intelligence and security services to have the insight they need,” he claimed.

As with responses to other attacks, there is no effort to reconcile claims that insufficient “intelligence” allowed the attacks in Paris to happen with the fact that the individuals who carried out the shootings were known to intelligence agencies, with several being actively monitored. One of the alleged attackers, Omar Ismaïl Mostefai, had been flagged by French police for suspected “radicalization” but had been allowed to travel to and from Syria unhindered. Warnings from Turkish officials were ignored.

Brennan went on to denounce NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden for exposing the blanket surveillance of communications all over the world. “[I]n the past several years because of a number of unauthorized disclosures and a lot of handwringing over the government’s role in the effort to try to uncover these

terrorists, there have been some policy and legal and other actions that are taken that make our ability collectively internationally to find these terrorists much more challenging.”

In other words, the CIA and NSA must be given the power to spy on all communications, and any challenge to these powers (“handwringing”) provides aid and comfort to terrorists. By “legal” actions, Brennan is referring to a handful of court decisions that have ruled some aspects of the vast NSA spying apparatus illegal, prompting Congress to pass the “USA Freedom Act” last year. Far from undermining the NSA programs, however, the act—which Brennan supported—gives a pseudo-legal cover for unconstitutional spying to continue.

Michael Morell, Obama’s former CIA deputy director, also blamed encrypted communications for the attacks on Monday. “I now think we’re going to have another public debate about encryption, and whether government should have the keys, and I think the result may be different this time as a result of what’s happened in Paris,” he said on CBS’s “This Morning” program.

The US Congress had considered but has not yet adopted a law that would require private companies to allow “backdoor” access by the state to any encrypted communications. This legislation will likely now be revived.

Both Democrats and Republicans have joined in denouncing Snowden and insisting that the powers of the state must now be vastly expanded. Former press secretary for George W. Bush, Dana Perino, expressed the thinking of the ruling class most crudely, tweeting on Friday night, “F Snowden. F him to you know where and back.” Perino is currently a pundit for Fox News.

Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, denounced telecommunications companies on Monday, saying: “I have asked for help and I haven’t gotten any help. If you create a product that allows evil monsters to communicate in this way, to behead children, to strike innocents, whether it’s at a game in a stadium, in a small restaurant in Paris, [to] take down an airliner, that’s a big problem.”

US spy agencies have spent vast resources in the effort to gain access to all communications, including emails, Internet records and phone records. The aim is to be able to monitor the political activities and associations of all individuals, in the United States and internationally. The September 11 attacks were used to expand these powers enormously, but intelligence officials have long complained that encryption technologies have undercut their efforts, allowing individuals to “go dark” and avoid surveillance.

A Justice Department memorandum from November 10, three days before the Paris attacks, stated that “among the greatest challenges the department faces in [the area of cybersecurity] is that malicious actors are increasingly relying on encryption and other technological advances to remain elusive and thwart the government’s efforts to isolate and mitigate cyber threats.”

In September, the *Washington Post* obtained an email from Robert Litt, general counsel for the Director of National Intelligence complaining that the climate in Congress of a law to require a backdoor to encrypted communications was “hostile” but that this could change “in the event of a terrorist attack or criminal event where strong encryption can be shown to have hindered law enforcement.” The intelligence agencies now have their attack, and they are determined to use it to the full.

On Tuesday, Bill Bratton, the police commissioner for New York City’s Democratic Party Mayor Bill de Blasio, added his own denunciation of encrypted communications after announcing the deployment of 500 “counter-terrorism” police officers who will be given “shoot to kill” orders in the event of a terrorist attack. These heavily-armed police forces throughout the city have been accompanied by the deployment of National Guard troops.

“One of the most fruitful avenues, which was our

ability to potentially listen in, has been closed in a very significant way,” Bratton complained on Tuesday.

New York has been a center of protests over police violence over the past year, particularly after police strangled to death Eric Garner in July 2014. Earlier this year, when the city unveiled a new counterterrorism “Strategic Response Group”, Bratton let slip that one of the main aims of the new police unit would be to “deal with events like our recent protests.”

The principal driving force behind all of these measures is not the threat posed by terrorism, but the state of social relations in the United States. In the face of growing social inequality and widespread public opposition to war, the American corporate and financial aristocracy is using the tragic events in Paris as an opportunity to shift the framework of discussion further to the right, intensifying the attack on the democratic and social rights of the working class and accelerating the implementation of police-state forms of rule.



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