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ISIS Turns to Cyber Warfare

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ISIS has opened a new front in its attacks against the west – cyber warfare. It has managed to hack thousands of web sites and social media to post threatening messages, including the social media of the US. Central Command. It even was able to take down eleven French TV stations for almost 24 hours.



Many of the hacked systems were thought to be exceptionally secure. This indicates that ISIS has developed a very sophisticated and effective hacking capability.

TV5Monde Losses Eleven TV Channels

TV5Monde is a French-language global television network (“monde” is French for “world”). It is one of the top three television networks around the world, along with CNN and MTV. It broadcasts eleven channels and offers round-the-clock French entertainment, news, and culture programming that reaches 260 million homes worldwide

On Wednesday, April 8, 2015, at 10 PM Paris time (4 PM EST), all eleven channels of TV5Monde went dark. Well, not quite. They showed the logo of ISIS, the so-called militant Islamic State. By Thursday morning, TV5Monde could broadcast only prerecorded programs. Full service was not restored until about 6 PM on Thursday, April 9th, almost a day later. Various computerized internal administrative and support systems including e-mail were also shut down due to the attack.



TV5Monde Channels

The hackers, who called themselves the CyberCaliphate, also hijacked TV5Monde's Facebook page and Twitter account. The Facebook page carried the message “Je suIS IS,” a play on the outcry “Je suis Charlie,” French for “I am Charlie,” after the deadly attack on the Charlie Hedbo publishing house.



TV5Monde's Facebook Page

ISIS used TV5Monde's Twitter account to post identity cards and CVs (curriculum vitae, or resumes) of relatives of French soldiers involved in anti-ISIS operations, along with a threat against the troops. The message read:

"Soldiers of France, stay away from the Islamic State! You have the chance to save your families, take advantage of it."

The messages were posted in Arabic, French, and English.

Messages critical of President Francois Hollande were also posted. They stated:

"Hollande, you've made a great mistake! You've send your military to serve sneaky Amerikan buffar in a faceless war with our brothers. That's Why Parisians received January "gifts" in Charlie Hedbo and Kosher supermarket from our brothers mujahideen Chariffe and Said Kouachi and Amedi Couilibaly. May Allah accept them."



Threatening Message to French President Hollande

France is part of the US-led military coalition that is carrying out air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

As part of the official response to the attack, the French Minister of Culture and Communications, Fleur Pellerin, called for an emergency meeting of the heads of various major media outlets and groups, to take place sometime on April 10 at an undisclosed location. The French government indicated that it intends to hire 500 people to engage in cyber-crime defense.

TV5Monde stated that they had extremely powerful and certified firewalls. It is assumed that the hack occurred through social engineering, in which people are tricked into installing malicious programs or giving up sensitive information such as user names or passwords.

Other ISIS Hacks

On January 15, 2015, shortly after the Charlie Hedbo and kosher supermarket attacks that killed seventeen people, ISIS hacked into the Twitter and YouTube accounts of the U.S. Central Command. The Central Command oversees the American-led war against ISIS and has been spearheading the hundreds of air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. Its Twitter account has 113,000 followers. ISIS replaced the Central Command's Twitter banner with a black and white banner showing an image of a hooded militant.



U.S. Central Command Twitter Banner

ISIS also posted a warning message on the Central Command's Facebook page saying, "American soldiers, we are coming. Watch your back. ISIS."



U.S. Central Command Facebook Page

Another posted message said:

"In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, the CyperCaliphate continues its CyberJihad. American Soldiers, we are coming. Watch your backs."

Additional posts listed the purported names and addresses of American military personnel, including some four-star generals.

Central Command took down its Twitter account and suspended its YouTube feed.

Later that month, the home pages of an estimated 19,000 French websites of businesses, religious groups, universities, and municipalities were replaced with an image of the ISIS logo and the message "The Islamic State Stay Inohallah. Free Palenstine. Death to France. Death to Charlie."



Home Page of 19,000 French Websites

Summary

To add to its aggression in Iraq, Syria, and other areas, ISIS is attempting to spread its influence through the Internet. So far this year, it has managed to carry out an impressive number of sophisticated attacks. We can only assume that these attacks will continue as it appears that ISIS has created an impressive hacking capability that can overcome even the most secure of cyberattack defenses.

Acknowledgements

Material for this article was taken from the following sources:

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