

Middle East faced wave of cybersecurity threats since start of pandemic

Sun, 2021-10-24 01:39

RIYADH: Since the start of the pandemic, a wave of advanced threat campaigns targeting the Middle East have been discovered by Kaspersky, a global cybersecurity firm.

An APT is an attack campaign in which intruders establish an illicit, long-term presence on a network to mine highly sensitive data. The targets, which are carefully chosen and researched, typically include large enterprises or government networks.

The region has always been a hotbed for such attacks due to geopolitical factors.

Kaspersky researchers, keeping a close eye on the region for APTs, worked on 68 investigative reports related to 29 cyber gangs actively targeting the Middle East since the start of the pandemic.

The researchers issued 49 threat intelligence reports due to investigations associated with cyberattacks on the UAE, which endured the highest number of reports for all Middle Eastern countries.

The second highest was Saudi Arabia with 39 reports, followed by Egypt with 30. Kuwait and Oman had 21 each, while Jordan had 20. Iraq, Qatar and Bahrain had fewer than 20 reports each.

APT attacks primarily targeted government agencies, followed by diplomatic institutions, the education sector, and telecommunication institutions. Other targeted sectors included finance, IT, healthcare, legal, military, and defense.

Some of the APT groups investigated were Oilrig, WIRTE, Lazarus, and Sofacy.

Fatemah Alharbi, a cybersecurity expert and assistant professor at Taibah University, told Arab News: "PowerShell-based malware are utilized by advanced cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructures in Saudi Arabia."

She said these cybercriminals were sending phishing emails that contained malicious Microsoft Office files impersonating legitimate entities.

To pass the firewall and the email protection techniques, she explained, these rigged files were protected by passwords and compressed as zip files.

"This approach facilitates the mission of these cybercriminals to take full control of the file system and to compromise every single file there. This means they would be able to control the operating system, applications, and

data. Assuming the attack is detected, an in-depth analysis and investigation on the file system is highly recommended as a quick response to recover the system and stop the attack.”

Referring to a report by Bitdefender, a cybersecurity technology company, Alharbi said: “Researchers shed light on a well-known APT cyber espionage campaign that targets mainly critical infrastructures in Saudi Arabia. This threat group is called Chafer APT (also known as APT39 or Remix Kitten). The report shows that these cybercriminals rely on social engineering to compromise victims in Saudi Arabia.

“Technically, the attack tricked victims to run a remote administration tool located in the downloads folder, similar to the RAT components used against Turkey and Kuwait back in 2014 and 2018, respectively.”

Despite these threats, Alharbi said the Kingdom’s cybersecurity resources had proven their ability to face such dangers.

“Saudi Arabia is ranked No.1 in the MENA region and Asia and No.2 globally according to the Global Cybersecurity Index issued by the UN’s specialized agency in information and communications technology, the International Telecommunication Union in 2021.”

This indexing evaluates countries periodically based on five main axes: Legal, technical, regulatory, capacity-building, and cooperation. The Kingdom scored advanced points in all of these axes, she said.

Amin Hasbini, head of the global research and analysis team for the Middle East, Turkey, and Africa at Kaspersky, said: “Our cybersecurity experts have always been at the forefront of detecting and reporting the latest APT threats. Our reports are the product of their visibility into the cybersecurity landscape and promptly identify what poses a threat.

“We use these insights to, of course, alert the concerned organizations on time and provide them with the protection as well as intelligence needed against both known and unknown threats. As companies move towards digitization, especially due to the pandemic, it is more important now than ever before to know about the threats that are constantly evolving.”

According to a recent report from Kaspersky and VMWare, working remotely during the pandemic made Saudi employees vulnerable to cyberattacks.

In the VMWare report, a survey of 252 Saudis showed 84 percent of them said that cyberattacks had increased due to working from home.

Alharbi talked about methods to protect users from social engineering threats. “Recently, we see a rise in the number of cyberattacks that are based on social engineering. According to a recent report by PurpleSec, 98 percent of cyberattacks rely on social engineering. Cyber criminals prefer to use social engineering techniques that can expose a victim’s natural inclination to trust easily compared to implementing malwares or any other tools to hack systems.

“For that, organizations must strengthen and diversify their cybersecurity awareness tactics, such as publishing cybersecurity awareness content, in-class training, videos, simulations and tests,” she said.



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Saudi Arabia to stage global cybersecurity forum in February
Mulkiya Investment creates first Saudi cybersecurity fund

Optimism in Gaza amid indications of reconstruction acceleration

Author:

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GAZA CITY: Some hope has returned to Gaza resident Ayman Dahman upon learning that his apartment building, completely destroyed during Israeli airstrikes last May, would be reconstructed.

Dahman has despaired over the past months, but Egyptian and Qatari statements regarding the acceleration of the reconstruction process have restored optimism.

Dahman and his family of six lived in a five-story residential building inhabited by 10 families, in the north of Gaza City.

After its destruction, he moved to live with his son in a small two-room apartment. Once the war ended, he relocated to a rented house, which was paid for by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

UNRWA provided \$1,500 in rent allowance and \$500 for the purchase of basic home furnishings for each victim who lost his or her home during the war.

Dahman said that the Ministry of Public Works and Housing in Hamas-run Gaza contacted him a few days ago to prepare the engineering plans for the building in preparation for reconstruction.

On Oct. 19, the Egyptian Committee for the Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip announced the launch of its first development project in Gaza: the construction of Al-Rasheed Street in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza.

At the same time, head of the Qatari Reconstruction Committee Mohammed Al-Emadi, currently in Gaza, announced that the coming days would witness an acceleration in the reconstruction process.

Hamas had received Egyptian promises during its leadership's visit to Cairo earlier this month to speed up the pace of reconstruction and to provide

trade and economic facilities at the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt.

After the war, Egypt pledged a grant of \$500 million as a contribution to reconstruction and sent engineering delegations to remove rubble in preparation.

Undersecretary of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing Naji Sarhan, said that the Egyptian grant projects include the construction of three residential cities in Beit Lahia; Jabalia, north of Gaza; and the Al-Zahra area, south of Gaza City.

According to the agreement, these three cities will include 2,000 housing units, giving priority to poor and low-income people. The construction of bridges and roads also will be supported.

Sarhan said that Egyptian officials promised – during meetings in Cairo with an official delegation from Gaza about two weeks ago – to start the reconstruction of the residential high-rises soon.

Egyptian crews had contributed to removing the rubble of damaged high-rises, as well as the construction of the first residential city in northern Gaza, he added.

The talks with the Egyptians, according to Sarhan, resulted in an agreement to operate the largest number of local contracting companies.

It was also agreed to import all the materials needed for reconstruction from the Rafah crossing to ensure the operation of local factories and to provide facilities for the movement of contractors and businessmen through the crossing.

The local authorities estimated the direct losses in the Gaza Strip during the war at \$479 million.

Sarhan said that the direct losses are related to the destruction that afflicted the housing and infrastructure sector, as 1,500 housing units were destroyed, and 880 units were severely damaged. Hundreds of units were moderately and slightly damaged, with the value of reconstruction estimated at \$145 million.

A great deal of damage was also caused to the infrastructure, including public buildings, roads, energy, communications and sanitation, with reconstruction estimated at \$293 million.

Losses were also incurred in the sectors of economy, trade, health, education and agriculture, apart from indirect losses caused by the war.

Sarhan estimates that Gaza needs \$2 billion in order to revive it after many years of wars and siege.

Palestinians see the latest Egyptian move as coming within a context of coordination with the US administration, which hopes to establish stability

in Gaza.

A few days before the Hamas meetings in Cairo, Gaza reconstruction was discussed during talks between Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Hamas-affiliated columnist Majed Al-Zibda believes that the recent Egyptian meeting with Hamas is consistent with the vision of the US administration, which desires to contain Gaza and ensure stability there so to avoid any deterioration that could lead to new confrontations.

Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported earlier that Egypt and the US were pressuring Hamas and the Palestinian Authority to work on forming a new unity government with the aim of pushing forward long-term stability and the reconstruction of Gaza.



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Health activists fight stigma to raise breast cancer awareness in Gaza
Thousands of Gazans apply for Israeli work permits

Turkey to expel US envoy and nine others, Erdogan says

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Sat, 2021-10-23 23:14

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said on Saturday that he had told his foreign ministry to expel the ambassadors of the United States and nine other Western countries for demanding the release of philanthropist Osman Kavala.

Seven of the ambassadors represent Turkey's NATO allies and the expulsions, if carried out, would open the deepest rift with the West in Erdogan's 19 years in power.

Kavala, a contributor to numerous civil society groups, has been in prison for four years, charged with financing nationwide protests in 2013 and with involvement in a failed coup in 2016. He has remained in detention while his latest trial continues, and denies the charges.

In a joint statement on Oct. 18, the ambassadors of Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand and the United States called for a just and speedy resolution to Kavala's case, and for his "urgent release." They were summoned by the foreign ministry, which called the statement irresponsible.

"I gave the necessary order to our foreign minister and said what must be done: These 10 ambassadors must be declared persona non grata (undesirable) at once. You will sort it out immediately," Erdogan said in a speech in the northwestern city of Eskisehir.

"They will know and understand Turkey. The day they do not know and understand Turkey, they will leave," he said to cheers from the crowd. The US, and French embassies and the White House and US State Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Erdogan has said previously that he plans to meet US President Joe Biden at summit of the Group of 20 (G20) major economies in Rome next weekend. Norway said its embassy had not received any notification from Turkish authorities.

"Our ambassador has not done anything that warrants an expulsion," said the ministry's chief spokesperson, Trude Maaseide, adding that Turkey was well aware of Norway's views.

"We will continue to call on Turkey to comply with democratic standards and the rule of law to which the country committed itself under the European Human Rights Convention," Maaseide said.

Kavala was acquitted last year of charges related to the 2013 protests, but the ruling was overturned this year and combined with charges related to the coup attempt.

Rights groups say his case is emblematic of a crackdown on dissent under Erdogan.

Six of the countries involved are EU members, including Germany and France.

European Parliament President David Sassoli tweeted: "The expulsion of ten ambassadors is a sign of the authoritarian drift of the Turkish government. We will not be intimidated. Freedom for Osman Kavala."

Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod said his ministry had not received any official notification, but was in contact with its friends and allies.

"We will continue to guard our common values and principles, as also expressed in the joint declaration," he said in a statement.

A source at the German Foreign Ministry also said the 10 countries were consulting with one another.

Kavala said on Friday

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/philanthropist-kavala-says-no-...> he would no longer attend his trial as a fair hearing was impossible after recent comments by Erdogan.

Erdogan was quoted on Thursday as saying the ambassadors in question would not release "bandits, murderers and terrorists" in their own countries.

The European Court of Human Rights called for Kavala's immediate release two years ago, saying there was no reasonable suspicion that he had committed an offense, and finding that his detention had been intended to silence him.

It issued a similar ruling this year in the case of Selahattin Demirtas, former head of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), who has been held in jail for nearly five years.

The Council of Europe, which oversees the implementation of ECHR decisions, has said it will begin infringement proceedings against Turkey if Kavala is not released.

The next hearing in Kavala's trial is on Nov. 26.



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European court raps Turkey over presidential 'insults' law US jobless claims fall; Turkey's central bank slashes interest rate again: Economic wrap

[Israeli criminalization of Palestinian civil groups condemned](#)

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Sat, 2021-10-23 21:34

AMMAN: Condemnation is pouring in from around the world following Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz's decision to declare six Palestinian human rights groups as "organizations of terror."

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued a joint statement calling the Israeli decision a "brazen" attack and a "shocking assault" on human rights.

Al-Haq, the Palestinian chapter of the Geneva-based International Center of Jurists working in Palestine since 1979, issued a statement saying that it was no coincidence that the escalation of punitive measures followed the opening of an International Criminal Court investigation into Israeli's crimes in Palestine.

Al-Haq stated that it would "tirelessly maintain" its efforts to ensure that Israeli perpetrators of mass atrocity crimes were held accountable. The Global Network on the Question of Palestine expressed solidarity with the targeted organizations.

"To Addameer, Al-Haq, Defense for Children International – Palestine, Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Bisan Center for Research and Development, and Union of Palestine Women Committees, we say: "You are not alone. Your cause is our cause, your freedom is our freedom."

Anis Kassem, editor of the Palestine Yearbook of International Law, told Arab News that Israeli accusations against Palestinian human rights groups were part of the policy of the occupiers.

"The Israeli occupiers are not able to accept any criticism to its cruelty."

Diana Buttu, former legal adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team, told Arab News that the Israeli action was part of a decade-long policy by the Israeli government to criminalize any form of Palestinian opposition to its military rule.

“What they are doing is illegal and this is what apartheid regimes do.”

Ali Abunimah, executive director of The Electronic Intifada, told Arab News that the primary responsibility lies with the US, EU and Arab regimes who have “coddled and pampered” Israel – no matter how it treats Palestinians.

“Why shouldn’t Israel take this egregious step when it knows that it will suffer no consequences and only receive more rewards from all these complicit actors?” said Abunimah, author of the “Battle for Justice in Palestine.”

Sami Abou Shahadeh, a member of the Israeli Knesset, told Arab News that the occupation was the true terror.

Al-Haq, Addameer, and other Palestinian human rights organizations are struggling for justice and against the biggest terror, which is the Israeli occupation.

Nazareth-based lawyer Botrus Mansour told Arab News that it was absurd that Israel had declared organizations that exposed its own illegal human rights violations were terrorist organizations.

“International law and international judicial systems must supersede local government decisions, must investigate the laws of these countries, especially those countries who violate human rights.”

Mofid Deak, a former US diplomat, told Arab News that Israel had never wanted an independent professional human rights group in the Palestinian areas with relations with Israeli groups and international connections.

Deak said that that he expected “the US will response more forcefully once they get all the details of this case.”

Edo Konrad, editor of +972, a magazine published in Israel-Palestine, told Arab News that Israel has “declared war” against human rights defenders everywhere.

“Israel is shrinking the ability of Palestinians to tell the world about their own brutalization and colonization.”

Palestinians are concerned that directors and staff of these reputable organizations might face the same fate as that of detainee Mohammed El-Halabi.

Khalil Al-Halabi from Gaza told Arab News that his son – a humanitarian worker with World Vision – has been in jail since 2016 on unproven charges of diverting humanitarian aid to Hamas.

“My son is still in jail because he refused to accept an Israeli plea offer

in which he would admit to a lesser charge and be free.”



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Palestinians clash with Israeli police in Jerusalem
Israel designates six Palestinian civil society groups as terrorists

[Lebanese president returns electoral law to parliament](#)

Sat, 2021-10-23 21:12

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun has sent a law amending legislative election rules back to parliament for reconsideration, the presidency said in a statement.

Aoun did not sign the law, to which parliament introduced some amendments. He

has requested that these amendments be reconsidered.

Aoun's objection comes after the Free Patriotic Movement bloc raised its opposition to holding elections in March instead of May because it "narrows its margins of action."

During the legislative session of Oct. 19, the bloc also objected to proposals to change the expatriate voting formula by canceling the six allocated seats and allowing expatriates to vote for the electoral lists.

The FPM sought to allocate these six seats in the electoral law, provided that voting for these representatives would take place in the 2022 elections.

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri called on the parliamentary committees to convene next Tuesday to discuss Aoun's response to the electoral law.

Observers described these developments as a sign of a political struggle for the presidency.

The parliament to be elected in March is expected to pick the new president after Aoun's term ends in October.

In the decree in which he requested a review of the amendments, Aoun said that "shortening the constitutional deadline for the elections could prevent voters from being able to exercise their electoral right due to the natural and climatic factors that often prevail in March, making it impossible for voters to reach their polling stations, not to mention the cost of transportation and the inability to supply polling stations with electricity."

He added: "This could also prevent voters residing outside Lebanon from exercising their political right preserved in the current electoral law by voting for their representatives in the electoral district designated for non-residents."

The president said that the amendments to the law deprive the right to vote from 10,685 citizens, who would reach the age of 21 between Feb. 1 and March 30, 2022.

Zeina Helou, an elections expert, told Arab News: "Aoun is trying to pull strings in order to later accuse the other political parties of preventing him from carrying out the reforms he wanted."

She added: "Aoun and his political team prefer to gain more time to conduct the elections rather than move the date up.

"Freezing the voter lists will deprive new voters who would soon turn 21 from the right to vote, and this may be a reason to appeal before the Constitutional Council."

Helou added that "the FPM fears that Christian voters who live in Greater Beirut will not go to the polling stations in their remote villages and towns in Akkar, in the north, the south, and Baalbek-Hermel, either because of the

high prices of gasoline or because of the stormy weather in the mountains in March, and insists on Mega polling centers.”

She noted that “this process requires a lot of time to be arranged, but I doubt that the rest of the political parties want these polling stations in the places where voters live because they lose the ability to control their voters and know who they voted for.”

Helou pointed out: “The Shiite duo, Hezbollah and the Amal movement – unlike Aoun and his political team – do not fear the upcoming elections. Hezbollah does not derive its legitimacy from the elections but from its weapons and power.

“Hezbollah is able to obstruct any parliamentary session, just as it is currently obstructing holding cabinet sessions until Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation into the Beirut port blast, is removed. The second Hezbollah feels threatened, it will turn the tables.”

Justifications for disrupting the elections in March may already be in motion, regardless of constitutional reasons that may or may not be taken into account.

Helou told Arab News that FPM head MP Gebran Bassil – who has always wanted to become president – may benefit from the current developments and reap rewards elsewhere.

Although the political parties believe it is still too early to discuss what the upcoming parliamentary elections will bear, Helou said that in 2018, the elections were held amid understanding and settlements between the political parties in power, while in 2022 they will be marked by tug-of-war and alliances.

“The same parties could be re-elected and regain their seats in parliament, and we may see a low voter turnout for lack of convincing alternatives.”

Next Tuesday, parliament is expected to either approve Aoun’s request, which requires the votes of 61 MPs, or appeal it before the Constitutional Council.

Parliament could also introduce some amendments to the law, which requires the votes of half of the quorum plus one; if the quorum is 65 MPs, the law would need 33 votes.



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Aoun hails new phase for Lebanon
Lebanese President Aoun: We are on the brink of forming a new government