Hackers target Israeli websites

IAN DEITCH - Associated Press

A weekend cyberattack campaign targeting Israeli government websites failed to cause serious disruption, officials said Sunday. The attacks followed warnings in the name of the group Anonymous that it was launching a massive hacking assault to protest Israeli policy toward the Palestinians.

Yitzhak Ben Yisrael, of the government's National Cyber Bureau, said hackers had mostly failed to shut down key sites.

"So far it is as was expected, there is hardly any real damage," Ben Yisrael said. "Anonymous doesn't have the skills to damage the country's vital infrastructure. And if that was its intention, then it wouldn't have announced the attack ahead of time. It wants to create noise in the media about issues that are close to its heart," he said.

Posters using the name of the hacking group Anonymous had warned they would launch a massive attack on Israeli sites in a strike they called (hash)OpIsrael starting April 7. Some said they were launching the assault in "solidarity" with the Palestinians.

Israel's Bureau of Statistics was down on Sunday morning but it was unclear if it was hacked. Media said the sites of the Defense and Education Ministry as well as banks had come under attack the night before but they were mostly repelled.

An Israeli government spokesman issued a statement saying sites were operating properly as usual. It said an Education Ministry site was down temporarily due to a technical issue unrelated to hacking attempts.

Israeli sites reported brief cyberattacks on the stock market website and the Finance Ministry website Saturday night. But the two institutions denied the reports.

Israeli media said small businesses had been targeted, and some websites' homepages were replaced by anti-Israel slogans. In retaliation, Israeli activists hacked sites of radical Islamist groups and splashed them with pro-Israel messages, media said.

Shlomi Dolev, an expert on network security and cryptography at Ben Gurion University, said attacks of this kind will likely become more common. "It is a good test for our defense systems and we will know better how to deal with more serious threats in the future," he said.

Dolev said Anonymous had declared on its forums that the main assault would be in the evening. Hackers have had little success in their attempts to take over and change Israeli sites so far and are planning "denial of service" attacks where sites are overwhelmed and communications are hindered.

He said Israel is well prepared to deal with the attacks. "This is a real battle. It is good training for our experts," he said.

Dolev who also serves as Chairman of the Inter-University-Communication-Center which connects Israeli universities and research branches of companies like IBM, said 40 security experts from the center "are looking forward to play with the attackers."

Hackers have tried before to topple Israeli sites.

In January last year, a hacker network that claimed to be based in Saudi Arabia paralyzed the websites of Israel's stock exchange and national airline and claimed to have published details of thousands of Israeli credit cards.

A concerted effort to cripple Israeli websites during November fighting in Gaza failed to cause serious disruption. Israel said at the time that protesters barraged Israel with more than 60 million hacking attempts.

An official of the militant Hamas movement that rules the Gaza Strip praised the current attack. "God bless the minds and the efforts of the soldiers of the electronic battle," Ihab Al- Ghussian, Gaza's chief government spokesman, wrote on his official Facebook page.

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