

News & Analysis

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Kuwait stands up to Iran and Hezbollah

Ever since the ascendance of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been accused in the West, as well as in the Arab world, of instigating trouble and exporting its heterodox brand of political Islam. Iran waved off the allegations as Western imperialist propaganda geared towards subjugating the area and its oil.

However, over the past few decades, Iran's record and its actions and those of its proxies confirmed the allegations. Its involvement in terrorist activities in Kuwait indicates that this kind of disruptive temperament is getting worse. The Kuwaiti judiciary concluded the final stage of prosecuting members of the Abdali cell who were arrested in August 2015 for allegedly plotting terrorist acts on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and storing a cache of weapons and explosives.

This incident might not seem that surprising given how Iran and its proxies have been implicated in hundreds of similar incidents. However, that this took place in Kuwait, a traditionally permissive country when it comes to Iran's transgressions, was unusual. This incident says much about the extent Iran is willing to go in pursuit of its goals, even at the expense of antagonising its friends before its foes.

Despite Iran's attempts to undermine its sovereignty and national security, Kuwait has maintained a publicly cordial relationship with Tehran, especially compared to other Gulf countries.

Shortly after the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982, Kuwait was targeted by a series of terror attacks that ranged from bombings and aeroplane hijackings to an assassination attempt against the former emir. The 17 individuals involved in those activities worked under orders from the IRGC. They were senior members of Hezbollah and the Islamic Dawa Party and included the shadowy Mustafa Badreddine, Hezbollah's head of military operations in Syria who was later killed in a cage incident while fighting in 2016.

All things considered, Kuwait can no longer afford complacency with Iran and its proxies.

While death sentences were handed out by the courts to some of the convicts, Emir Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah – the target of the plot – refused to sign the execution orders and kept them incarcerated until they were freed by the Iraqi Army during the invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

This Kuwaiti forbearance towards Iran and its proxies includes financial assistance (\$185 million) to Hezbollah-dominated areas damaged in the Israeli war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. Following the 2015 Islamic State (ISIS) suicide attack on the Imam al-Sadiq Mosque, fre-

quented by the Shia community in Kuwait City, the emir and his government took a firm stand against sectarian attempts at demonising the Shias and declared that "the victims of [the] heinous acts are sons of mine."

While this humane attitude was recognised publicly by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, the party found it convenient to train and equip the 25 Kuwaiti members of the Abdali cell.

The alarming revelation after two years of hearings is that this cell was tasked with storing weapons to be used against targets in Bahrain and other parts of the region in case the Iranian nuclear deal fell through. Hezbollah denied the allegations, assuring the Kuwaiti authorities that cell members approached them for help but that the requests were rejected. This denial, however, was proven wrong by the confessions of the Abdali terrorists.

The Abdali affair is an additional reminder of Iran's and Hezbollah's nefarious activities. Their propaganda efforts to claim the moral high ground in fighting injustice and defending Lebanon and its population against Israel and jihadi extremist groups are hardly advanced by the goals pursued by the Abdali cell.

What the Abdali cell did do was add credence to the arguments for containing Iran and its attempts to stir instability and chaos in the region. This is at the heart of the dispute between the Saudi-led Arab bloc and Qatar. When Kuwait chose neutrality and tried to mediate between the two rival sides, it was predictably accused of being soft on Iran and was implicitly asked to join the fold of the Arab consensus.

Kuwait can no longer afford complacency with Iran and its proxies. The expulsion measures Kuwait took against some of Iran's diplomats and the severe letter it has addressed to the Lebanese government requesting it curb Hezbollah's actions could be only the beginning.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri planned to visit Kuwait to appease the Kuwaiti government, which regards Beirut's inaction as complicity with the group.

Hariri cannot repeat the line he used during his latest visit to Washington. Dismissing Hezbollah as a regional problem and claiming that the Lebanese government has no say in the matter while at the same time allowing two of Hezbollah's ministers to sit across him in cabinet meetings, is unlikely to be received well in Kuwait.

Furthermore, it's doubtful if the Kuwaiti government will be satisfied with anything less than Hariri's official condemnation of Hezbollah and practical measures to curb their power, matters neither he nor his government can realistically deliver.

More importantly, the Abdali affair and all else that Iran will muster are stark reminders that, while Hezbollah and Iran are declaring divine victories in defending the cause of the oppressed, the sad truth is that their activities add to tensions in the region. Their misdeeds will bring about additional schisms and conflicts and discourage any voices of moderation.

Iranian threat in MENA



Increased activities. A picture illustration shows a man posing as a hacker.

(Reuters)

Investigation uncovers Iran-backed cyber-espionage group in MENA region

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London

The Iran-backed cyber-espionage group CopyKittens has increased activities, launching attacks on governments, defence companies and academic institutions in support of Tehran's political agenda, a report said.

An investigative study by Israeli firm ClearSky Cybersecurity and Trend Micro called Operation Wilted Tulip traced CopyKittens' activities to 2013, shedding light on its work patterns and possible motivations.

The report revealed that CopyKittens' activities mostly centred on espionage of strategic targets, particularly Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Germany and the United States.

The group extracted information from government organisations, academic institutions, online news sites and NGOs with the objective of gathering "as much information and data from target organisations as possible," the report said.

CopyKittens used rudimentary techniques, such as phishing, malicious e-mail attachments and, more recently, watering hole attacks to gather information.

"It's more that the methods they are using are efficient. They are getting out the data that they need to," said Robert McArdle, director of research at Trend Micro, adding that the group's lack of refinement makes it relatively easy to track CopyKittens' activities compared to more sophisticated campaigns that could go on for years without being detected.

McArdle said CopyKittens' methods are of the more traditional variety, using exploits to take advantage of out-of-date systems, so if the user is missing updates or patches, an

automatic infection is more likely. A lot of the group's attacks go after the most vulnerable parts of any organisation – humans.

"In any computer network security chain, the weakest link in always the human element," said Iyad Barakat, a London-based digital analyst.

"Groups more sophisticated than CopyKittens will try to target the human element in the chain, using techniques like a watering hole attack to simply extract passwords because these methods save them time, effort and usually have a higher success rate than the more sophisticated ones."

McArdle said an effective method to gain the human element's trust is a social engineering campaign, which uses a number of psychological tricks to get the information needed to access a computer network.

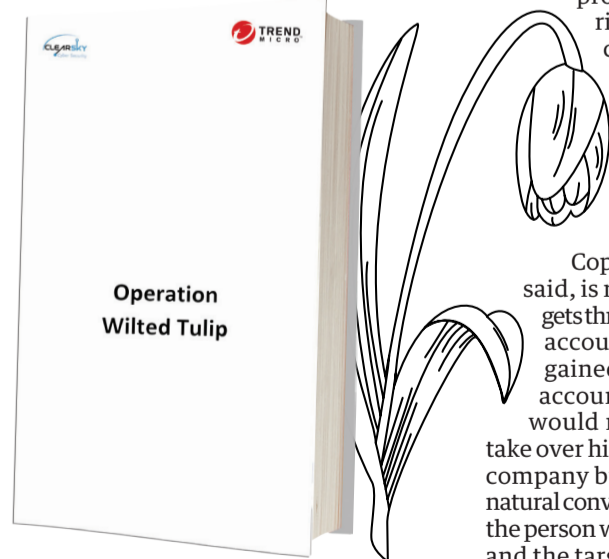
"Social engineering is relatively quick and easy to do in terms of setting up fake e-mail accounts or fake Facebook accounts or whichever social networking profile you are going with," McArdle said, adding that effort is required to manage these resources and accounts.

Social engineering can't be stopped with traditional protection methods, said David Emm, principal security researcher at Kaspersky Lab.

"Social engineering works and even if businesses have the right protection, without the right staff education they can fall victim," Emm said. "Awareness is low in the Middle East as generally Western businesses have had longer to grapple with such issues."

One effective trick that CopyKittens used, McArdle said, is reaching important targets through other compromised accounts. Once CopyKittens gained access to an e-mail account in an organisation, it would not immediately try to take over higher-level targets in the company but log on and wait for a natural conversation to start between the person whose account it controls and the target. It might then reply to an e-mail thread, saying: "You might want to open this link."

During the Gulf Information Security Expo and Conference in May in Dubai, experts urged for more cybersecurity cooperation between countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Middle East cybersecurity market is projected to grow to \$22.14 billion by 2022, with Saudi Arabia expected to contribute the largest share.



Operation Wilted Tulip

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