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Hezbollah's covert bank of Arab World hacked, exposing details on customers

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12.30.20

Hezbollah's covert bank of Arab World hacked, exposing details on customers

12.30.20

Mysterious hacker group says it infiltrated Hezbollah's bank

The Daily Star newspaper says the group known as 'SpiderZ' leaked the lists of customers, including details of more than 100,000 depositors and 200,000 borrowers, as well as the names of other banks that cooperate with Hezbollah

Tal Shahaf | Published: 12.30.20 , 18:56

A mysterious hacker group said Tuesday that it had executed a successful cyberattack against Lebanese terror group Hezbollah's financial wing, Al-Qard al-Hassan, which includes a functioning banking system.

According to the Lebanese newspaper The Daily Star, the group known as "SpiderZ", already leaked passport photos, details on customers and senior executives, as well as security camera footage from inside the bank, all allegedly gathered during the attack.

The group itself said it managed to gather vast amounts of data from the bank's servers which it plans to release to the public and the information leaked so far is only a "taste" of what's to come.

The bank's management confirmed the attack, which they said targeted its branches in Lebanon as well as in the United Arab Emirates, though the hackers did not manage to access any bank accounts.

The leaked data, however, includes lists of the bank's customers, account numbers, financial and private reports of more than 100,000 depositors and 200,000 borrowers, as well as the names of several other banks that cooperate with Hezbollah, including JTB Bank, the Lebanese-Canadian Bank, the Lebanese-Swiss Bank, the Societe-Generale Bank, the Bank of Kuwait and the Arab World.

"The secret has been revealed. [Al-Qard al-Hassan] does not work to protect the public. If you have a debt with them, do not pay it. Stop allowing them to steal your finances and withdraw them from the bank before they become nothing more than ink on paper," said the group in the video.

Some speculated the hack was an Israeli retaliation for the recent cyber attack on the Israel's insurance company Shirbit as well as the attempted cyber infiltration of the country's major defense industries, both believed to have been orchestrated by Iran. However, the choice to harm a bank recently sanctioned by the U.S. for allegedly transferring funds to terrorist organizations, may indicate the attack was actually carried out by American bodies.

The financial intelligence organization Double Cheque - which works against the financing of global terrorism - warned that customers who choose to continue working with Al-Qard al-Hassan risk losing their money.

"The full details of Al-Qard al-Hassan clients, who deposited or borrowed money, were leaked. This means it is no longer secret, and can't be used as a covert financial shelter through which money are concealed from the authorities in Lebanon, including the banks, tax authorities and enforcement elements in the country," wrote the organization.

"The felonies carried out by the depositors using the "secrecy" the bank provides to its members, such as tax evasion and money laundering, are now exposed to the enforcement authorities in Lebanon and the international enforcement agencies," it said.

"If your name or details appear on the leaked documents, you will be investigated by enforcement authorities in Lebanon or other countries."

12.30.20

Netanyahu presents Israeli identity to former US Naval analyst Jonathan Pollard

12.30.20

'Now you can start life anew,' PM tells Pollard upon arrival in Israel

Netanyahu presents convicted spy who spent 30 years in U.S. jail and his wife with Israeli identity cards and joins them in a prayer of thanks; couple kneel to kiss the ground as they disembark from private jet saying they're proud of country and leader Itamar Eichner,News Agencies| Updated: 12.30.20 , 08:31

Convicted U.S. spy Jonathan Pollard received a warm welcome from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he arrived in Israel by private jet early Wednesday, accompanied by his wife Esther.

"Welcome home," the prime minister said as he met the couple at Ben-Gurion Airport. "Now you can start life anew, with freedom and happiness. Now you are at home."

The former U.S. naval analyst served 30 years in American prison for spying for Israel and arrived in the country after his parole restrictions expired five years after his release.

Pollard and his wife kneeled to kiss the ground as they stepped off the private jet that brought them from New Jersey's Newark International Airport.

Aviation data showed the plane is owned by U.S. billionaire couple and Netanyahu supporters Sheldon and Miriam Adelson. The Adelson-owned newspaper Israel Hayom said Esther Pollard required a private plane due to health problems.

Netanyahu handed the couple Israeli identity cards and joined them in prayer giving thanks for their safe arrival.

"We are excited to be home at last," Pollard said. "There is no one who is more proud of this country or its leader than we are. We hope to become productive citizens as soon as possible."

Pollard and his wife, Esther will remain in quarantine and will settle in Jerusalem in a furnished apartment prepared in advance for them.

President Reuven Rivlin welcomed the couple in a tweet saying "Welcome home."

Minister of Diaspora Affairs Omer Yankelevich also welcomed the two in a tweet in Hebrew saying; "How good it is that you are home," quoting from a popular Israeli song. But not everyone in Israel was happy at Pollards' the arrival.

"Jonathan Pollard... is not a Zionist hero," wrote Haifa University's political science professor Dr. Israel Waismel-Manor on Twitter.

He said that Pollard had delivered "a devastating blow to American Jewry by raising a dual loyalty suspicion. It would have been better if he had stayed in the US."

Pollard, 66, had long voiced a desire to emigrate to Israel, which granted him citizenship. The espionage affair strained U.S.-Israel relations for decades.

Sentenced in 1987 to life imprisonment after he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit espionage, Pollard was freed on parole in 2015.

A U.S. Justice Department decision last month to let the parole term's five-year travel ban go unrenewed was seen by some as a parting gift to Israel by the Trump administration. Pollard was under restrictive release conditions following his parole, including wearing an electronic monitor and remaining at his home in New York at night.

Effi Lahav, head of an activist group that had campaigned for Pollard's release from prison, said Pollard had been flown on a "top secret" mission overnight.

"The fact that Esther and Jonathan arrived here in Israel excites us very much," he told the Army Radio.

One of Pollard's lawyers, Eliot Lauer, told Ynet when the parole terms were lifted that the couple's most pressing concern was the welfare of his wife, Esther, who is undergoing cancer treatment.

"I know many people are waiting for Pollard in Israel, but the first thing he needs to do is take care of his wife," Lauer said in November.

"I do not know what their immediate plans are other than to make sure Esther is okay, but obviously Jonathan is expecting to go to Israel," he said, adding that the former spy always saw himself as "a true Zionist and a citizen of Israel."

Netanyahu spoke to Pollard on the phone in November expressing the hope that the couple would travel to Israel.

"You should have now a comfortable life where you can pursue, both of you can pursue your interests," Netanyahu said.

First published: 08:06 , 12.30.20

12.29.20

Gantz slings arrows at PM & Nissenkorn starting new party to run next ballot

12.29.20

Gantz: end of Netanyahu's political career - Blue & White's greatest achievement

Blue & White leader directs his slings and arrows at PM at the launch of his electoral run as head of the centrist party, projecting lose for the incumbent in the upcoming election
Moran Azulay | Published: 12.29.20 , 21:12

Defense Minister and Blue & White leader Benny Gantz delivered a fiery statement Tuesday evening in which he hailed his party for "ending Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political career" which he deemed to be its greatest feat.

"The end of Netanyahu's political career is Blue & White's greatest achievement, but not its only one," Gantz told a press conference where he launched his run as the leader of the centrist party in the March 23 election, adding that, "Blue & White paved the way, Blue & White has saved the country" through a string of political sacrifices for which it now pays the electoral price.

The former IDF chief accused the premier of acting out of personal interests, mainly to avoid his corruption trial.

“There was not one minute in this government when Netanyahu viewed us as partners or acted for the country’s benefit,” he charged. “Only the good of the country is guiding me, even if I pay a price.”

"The upcoming elections, which Netanyahu dragged us into with his hubris, are the last thing the people of Israel need now."

Earlier on Tuesday, Gantz announced he asked fellow party member Avi Nissenkorn to resign from his position as justice minister after he defected to Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai’s new party, a Blue & White statement said.

"Nissenkorn has chosen a new political home and is therefore expected to resign," Gantz said. "The justice portfolio is one of Blue & White’s most important assets to safeguard democracy and the rule of law, and we will continue acting the same way we have thus far."

Earlier Tuesday, Nissenkorn announced he intended to join forces with Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai who is expected to announce on Tuesday he is forming a party to run in the next ballot.

"We will bring a message to hundreds of thousands of Israelis who feel they have no political home - and we will do so through actions and not through words," Nissenkorn said.

Blue & White lambasted Nissenkorn for his decision to jump ship ahead of the next election.

"Nissenkorn proved he cares only about himself first and foremost. He did not even have the courage to leave the party properly and resign. Huldai, watch your back," a statement read. "Nissenkorn is being ungrateful and is acting like a wheeler-dealer rather than a leader. Benny Gantz appointed him, backed him all the way... In the end, [Nissenkorn] made a personal decision and turned his back on [Gantz]."

Nissenkorn's decision to depart the centrist party reportedly stemmed from Gantz's intentions to join forces with Naftali Bennett's right-wing Yamina party.

Meanwhile, Foreign Affairs Minister Gabi Ashkenazi was also reported to announce a temporary hiatus from politics ahead of the upcoming general vote.

Huldai, who is slated to launch his parliamentary run Tuesday evening, is not expected to resign for the time being from his position as mayor of Tel Aviv, and reserve the option to continue at his post until 2023 if he fails to enter Knesset.

Gantz is also expected to speak to the public at 8pm Tuesday and announce his run as the head of Blue & White.

12.29.20

Gantz expects Nissenkorn to resign as justice MK after leaving the Gantz party

12.29.20

Gantz asks Nissenkorn to resign as justice minister

Blue & White hits out at Nissenkorn after defecting to Tel Aviv Mayor Huldai's yet-to-be-formed party; FM Ashkenazi set to announce temporary hiatus from politics ahead of the upcoming general vote

Moran Azulay | Published: 12.29.20 , 19:20

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12.29.20

Journalists watch Gaza exercise by Iran, as militants fire 8 rockets into the sea Tuesday

12.29.20

Gaza militants fire rockets into the sea in first-ever joint exercise

Reports said the drill - which includes Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees and others - was organized by the militants' sponsors in Tehran to demonstrate risks Israel could face if Iran comes under U.S. or Israeli attack
Reuters, Ynet | Published: 12.29.20 , 12:54

An array of Palestinian militant groups launched rockets into the Mediterranean Sea off the Gaza Strip on Tuesday at the start of what they called their first-ever joint exercise, which Israeli media described as a show of force organized by Iran.

The exercise was announced on behalf of a joint command set up by the groups in 2018, which includes Hamas that runs Gaza, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees and smaller armed groups

Eight rockets streaked through a cloudless sky in Gaza towards the Mediterranean after Abu Hamza, spokesman for Islamic Jihad, delivered a speech launching the drill. It will include land and coastal exercises described by the groups as a test of their preparedness for any future confrontation with Israel.

Media reports said the drill was organized by the militants' sponsors in Tehran to demonstrate risks Israel could face if Iran comes under U.S. or Israeli attack in the waning days of the Trump administration.
On the eve of the exercise, a large portrait of Iranian military commander General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed last January in a U.S. attack in Iraq, was erected along Gaza's main coastal road.

Several major IDF exercises conducted by the Gaza Division and units on the northern border also appeared to have been given the Gaza factions a push to conduct the drill. The drill has been accompanied by a mass public relations campaign, which includes special announcements, promotional videos and propaganda in which all the military branches are being glorified.
Journalists were also allowed to enter some military outposts to watch and document the exercise.

A few hours before the exercise, a rocker siren was heard in Kibbutz Kerem Shalom in the Eshkol Regional Council near the Gaza border.
The IDF later said one rocket had been launched that landed inside the Strip's territory. Tuesday's Gaza missile display did not trigger any sirens in Israel, whose drones keep a close eye on Gaza and which employs a sophisticated missile interception system.

12.30.20

UK approved Brexit agreement to regulate EU trade, transport, energy and fishing

12.30.20

UK parliament approves Brexit trade deal as both sides look to future

Parliament's lower house voted 521 to 73 in favor of the deal, with the bill expected to become law around midnight; deal safeguards nearly a \$1 trillion of annual trade between Britain and EU

Reuters| Published: 12.30.20 , 19:19

British lawmakers approved UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's post-Brexit trade deal with the European Union on Wednesday, as both sides looked to begin a new chapter of relations just days before their divorce becomes a reality.

Britain and the European Union signed the deal on Wednesday and the British parliament will finalize its implementation, ending over four years of negotiation and safeguarding nearly a \$1 trillion of annual trade.

Both sides said it was a chance to begin a new chapter in a relationship forged as Europe rebuilt after World War Two, but which has often seen Britain as a reluctant participant in ever-tighter political and economic integration.

Johnson, in a specially convened sitting of parliament, said he hoped to work "hand in glove" with the EU when its interests aligned, using Britain's new-found sovereignty to reshape the British economy.

"Brexit is not an end but a beginning," Johnson said. "The responsibility now rests with all of us to make the best use of the powers that we regain, the tools that we've taken back into our hands."

Parliament's lower house voted 521 to 73 in favor of the deal. The upper house of parliament now debates the bill and it should become law around midnight.

The deal has been criticised on several fronts since it was agreed on Dec. 24. The opposition Labour Party say it is too thin and doesn't protect trade in services, fishermen rage that Johnson has sold out their interests, and Northern Ireland's status remains subject to much uncertainty.

Nevertheless, Johnson has won the support of his party's hardline Brexiteers - delivering a break with the EU far more radical than many imagined when Britain shocked the world in 2016 by voting to leave.

Long-time eurosceptic lawmaker Bill Cash said Johnson had saved Britain's democracy from four decades of "subjugation" to Brussels: "Like Alexander the Great, Boris has cut the Gordian knot."

Johnson said he hoped to end the "old, tired, vexed question of Britain's political relations with Europe" and instead become "the best friend and ally the EU could have".

NEW CHAPTER

Earlier, against a backdrop of EU flags, top EU officials signed the treaties struck on Dec. 24 to preserve Britain's tariff- and quota-free access to the bloc's 450 million consumers.

"It is of the utmost importance for the European Union and the United Kingdom to look forward, in view of opening a new chapter in their relations," the EU said in a statement.

A British Royal Air Force brought the documents, which bear the EU's golden stars on a blue leather folder, to Johnson who signed them sitting at a desk in front of his own backdrop of British flags.

"Have I read it? The answer is yes," Johnson quipped, holding a copy of the full 2,000-page document aloft.

Britain formally left the EU nearly a year ago and the new partnership agreement will regulate ties from Jan. 1 on everything from trade to transport, energy links and fishing. After both sides have signed, the deal will be in place until the end of February, pending final approval by the European Parliament to make it permanent.

12.28.20

EU vaccine mishaps of Pfizer ultra-cold may ease with Moderna and AstraZeneca

12.28.20

EU's marathon COVID vaccination drive off to uneven start

Glitches, inefficient storage and union members accusing each other of not taking 'fair share' of vaccine supply all highlight challenge to inoculate bloc's nearly 450 million residents

Reuters| Published: 12.28.20 , 23:29

The EU's campaign to vaccinate Europeans against COVID-19 has got off to an uneven start in what will be a marathon effort to administer shots to enough of the bloc's 450 million people to defeat the viral pandemic.

In one mishap, eight workers at a care home in Stralsund on the north German coast were injected with five times the recommended dose of the vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech. Four were hospitalized.

"I deeply regret the incident. This individual case is due to individual errors. I hope that all those affected do not experience any serious side effects," district chief Stefan Kerth said on Monday.

In southern Germany, officials had to send back about 1,000 doses after finding they had been transported in cool boxes typically used for picnics or camping trips that failed to keep the vaccine cold enough.

The EU vaccination drive kicked off at the weekend, with health workers and residents of care homes across the bloc among the first to get the shots from Pfizer, which must be stored at ultra-cold temperatures.

In Italy, meanwhile, some politicians complained that Germany - the EU's largest member state and home to BioNTech - may be getting more than its fair share of shots.

The EU is due to receive its first 12.5 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine by New Year's Day, with distribution of 200 million doses across its 27 member countries to be completed by next September. The vaccine course requires two doses.

A spokesman for Pfizer declined to comment on specific schedules or whether the timeline indicated by the Commission represented a delay. “Our timelines are aspirational and can shift based on capacity and manufacturing timelines,” he said.

Talks are underway to agree on the delivery of an optional further 100 million doses under the contract sealed with the two companies, the EU said.

Keeping cool

The initial glitches highlight the challenge in rolling out the vaccine while regulators consider approving other vaccines, including from Moderna and AstraZeneca, which are easier to transport and store.

The rollout of the Pfizer shot in the United States has been slow, putting the government’s target of 20 million vaccinations this month in doubt, as hospitals navigate preparing the previously frozen shots for use, finding staff to run clinics and ensuring proper social distancing.

As well as being the first COVID-19 vaccine to be delivered across the EU, the Pfizer shot is particularly tricky to handle. For long-term storage it needs to be deep-frozen at about minus 70 Celsius (minus 94 Fahrenheit).

It can be defrosted for a few days before being used, but even then must be kept chilled at between 2C and 8C.

In southern Germany, officials said they would not use some shots after temperature trackers in cool boxes showed they may not have been kept cold enough.

“There were doubts as to whether the cold chain was maintained at all times,” said Christian Meissner, district administrator in the Bavarian town of Lichtenfels.

“BioNTech said that the vaccine was probably okay, but ‘probably okay’ is not enough,” he told Reuters TV.

The lapse happened after the doses were handed over to the local authorities. BioNTech declined to comment.

In Spain, delivery of a new batch from Pfizer was held up by a day to Tuesday due to a temperature issue that has now been resolved, Health Minister Salvador Illa said.

Maria Asuncion Ojeda, a resident at Madrid’s Ballezol Parque Almansa nursing home, was still delighted to be an early recipient of the Pfizer vaccine.

“I wanted to do it because it’s the only way we can solve this problem,” the 87-year-old said on Monday, a day after Spain began vaccinating care-home residents and their staff.

Fair shares

The EU is distributing jointly procured vaccines on a pro-rata basis to the 27 member states based on their populations, while some European countries have also made their own deals to buy extra doses separately.

In Italy, some politicians said Germany appeared to be getting more than its fair share, at least during the highly symbolic initial rollout.

“The accounts don’t add up,” Italian virologist Roberto Burioni said on Twitter, pointing to reports in Germany that first-day deliveries had totaled more than 150,000 doses while other EU countries got just 10,000.

An official familiar with vaccine distribution in Germany said that each of the 16 German federal states had received 10,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine ahead of the weekend start of the inoculation drive.

An Italian reporter asked about the supplies at a German government news conference.

An official from the German health ministry replied that Berlin had signed a separate deal for 30 million extra doses of the Pfizer vaccine.