

For The First Time, A Cyberattack Is Answered in Real Time With A Bombing Attack

by Hugh Fitzgerald



While Hamas fired 690 rockets at Israeli civilians during the recent flare-up, Israel is careful to warn civilians away from its own targets. As Hamas always places its warehouses of weapons, including rockets, and its fighters, too, in the midst of civilian neighborhoods, and even in the same buildings as civilians (including schools and hospitals) Israel has perfected the technique known as “knock on the roof.” This refers to the IDF’s practice of dropping non-explosive or low-yield devices on the roofs of targeted civilian homes or other buildings in the Palestinian

territories as a prior warning of imminent bombing attacks to give the inhabitants time to flee the attack. The practice was employed by the IDF during the 2008–2009 Gaza War, Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, and Operation Protective Edge in 2014 to target the homes of police officers or Hamas political or military leaders. But it is also used for office buildings, schoolhouses, apartment houses. Sometimes the residents are given a fifteen minute warning, sometimes ten, sometimes five, sometimes 30 seconds. .

And sometimes, if the entire structure has been deemed to be full of enemy fighters, there may be no “knock on the roof” at all. Apparently that was what happened in the case of a building in the middle of a civilian area where Hamas’s group of cyberattackers worked (and possibly lived). The Israeli intelligence services determined that there were no civilians in the building, based on their recognition that cyber-attackers are just as much soldiers as any soldier in uniform. The Israelis gave no warning, and leveled much of the building. Hamas has said nothing about the wiping out of its entire cyberattack fighters; it would be too humiliating. No doubt it will eventually claim that its cyberwarriors were located elsewhere, and remain unscathed.

The IDF has said that it successfully conducted an airstrike on Hamas’ cyberwar headquarters, and that Hamas “no longer has any cyberwar capability.”

This incident is an unprecedented, immediate, kinetic response to a cyberattack and is likely to be closely watched by cyberwarfare experts. Israel is already a world leader in cybersecurity and cyberwarfare, which makes its actions and techniques in this case likely to be emulated by other countries in the future. Hamas never expected a physical (“kinetic”) attack on its own cyberwarriors. To date, cyberattacks have always been responded to by cyber counterattacks, but not by physical removal of enemy hackers. That is what Israel has just accomplished, which should make

its enemies think hard about conducting cyberwar against it. Even though Israel is a world leader in cyberwar (remember Stuxnet?), right up there with America, Russia, and China, it has apparently decided that retaliatory cyberattacks are not enough, and cyberwarriors are indeed not civilians but soldiers, and legitimate targets of attack. That should worry the cyberattackers in their offices in Teheran. They surely remember how many of the key Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated by Israeli agents several years ago. They now must worry about similar attacks, as they are walking to work, or driving along a street clogged with traffic, only to have an assassin on a scooter pull up beside them and eliminate them, once and for all, as a cyberwar threat, before speeding off.

This has immediately been recognized as a significant new development: a cyberattack from Gaza is met by an air attack from Israel. No “knocks on the roof.” As usual from the Israelis, there was pinpoint destruction of the building housing the cyberwar headquarters, leaving unscathed all the buildings around it. It is true that in the past the American military has killed several cyberwarriors working for ISIS, but never in real time, and always targeting individuals such as Junaid Hussain, not anything like the cyberwar headquarters Israel has just destroyed..

Israel’ s feat is extraordinary. It foiled the cyberattack, and then within minutes, launched its own counterattack on the cyber headquarters of Hamas. This was a real attack, with real bombs, on real people who made the mistake – as so many do– of failing to appreciate Israel’s shape-shifting ability to counter every new threat.

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