'Terror texts' bring latest form of cyberwarfare to mobile phones

SHABAK message claims suicide bombers are on loose, while another, supposedly from IDF, warns of retaliatory attacks

By NIV ELI and Jerusalem Post staff

On the third day of Operation Protective Edge, a Haaretz news update on 29-year-old Sareena Denis's phone alerted her to horrifying news. Hamas had hit a chemical plant in Haifa. The city was being evacuated. Twenty-five people were dead.

"I was so worried, I was so scared. It was this realization that the conflict escalated to a whole other level," said Denis, a Chicago native who made aliya in 2010, and had been taking the semi-regular red alerts and trips to the bomb shelters in stride.

Yet none of the news sites was carrying the story, and none of her friends had heard about it. Soon, Haaretz clarified that the text messages sent to thousands of phones were in fact sent from a false account.

"I was relieved, but at the same time I was so upset, because it's very disturbing to know that some hacker or Hamas has my phone number," Denis said. "Something about having my emotions manipulated, it just felt like, as terrorists, they had really achieved their goals. I just started bawling when I realized what had happened."

The false message, written in English, was one of several that made its way to people's phones during the operation. Though police do not yet know if the texts originated from abroad or within Israel, they are perceived as part of a psychological war waged by Hamas or its supporters, akin to the cyberattacks on Israeli websites that have proliferated in recent years.

According to Haaretz, the messages were most likely sent from a pro-Hamas source as psychological warfare to instill fear and panic in Israeli citizens.

On Monday, a message from "SMSQASSAM," signed Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades - Hamas's military wing - vowed to keep firing on Israelis until its 'legitimate demands' were met.

An earlier message, claiming to be from "SHABAK," the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency), stated that a suicide bomber was on the loose, waiting to blow up civilians hiding in bomb shelters. "Beware of strangers in shelters," it warned.

Another, written in Hebrew and allegedly sent from Home Front Command, said the IDF was planning an attack in Gaza at 12:16, and instructed people to get to their bomb shelters near that time to avoid retaliatory rockets.

"In these instances the messages are false," said an instructor on the Home Front Command hotline. "We do not disseminate information on IDF activities. It's preferable to ignore it and not pass it on."

With the exception of an SMS survey sent out last week, she said, Home Front Command had not made any attempts to communicate with the public via text message or the WhatsApp mobile app.

Yair Amichai-Hamburger, who heads the Center of Internet Psychology at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, calls the ruses an attempt at psychological warfare.

"Hamas is a very clever terror organization. Psychology is the name of the game, and they want us to feel like they can reach us. It is a mosquito that is trying to pretend it's a lion," he said.

By playing on people's fears during times of high stress and little information, he says, the culprits can strike raw nerves and toy with people's emotions.

It is still unclear who is behind the messages, however, and Amichai-Hamburger notes that they could be coming from devious Israeli pranksters.

"If you want to believe that these are Hamas people, this is a possibility, but from other things happening on the Internet, it may not be the situation. Plenty of hackers and trolls get a certain pleasure out of riling people up, he offered.

Indeed, the police have recently dealt with mean-natured pranks playing upon national security problems. After three Jewish teenagers were kidnapped last month, the police received several false alarms in the form of phone calls. The cranks, mimicking a much-discussed call from one of the teens that failed to elicit a police reaction, claimed they, too, were being kidnapped.

"The people usually suffer from a strong need to justify their existence in a very distorted way. They get their self-esteem from doing these terrible things," said Amichai-Hamburger. "They're normal people who look like you and me, but they find their fun in a very bizarre way."

Text messages aside, cyberwarfare has not been confined to SMS-based misinformation.

Domino's Pizza's Hebrew Facebook page was hijacked for several hours on Sunday, allegedly by Palestinian hackers, who replaced the cover photo with Hamas fighters and anti-Israel messages. When they regained control of the page, Domino's posted a photo of a terrorist saying, "You will not conquer the Israeli hunger for pizza!"

Pro-Israel hackers also had a victory on the cyber battlefield. A major hacking attack was carried out Monday against some of Hamas's leading websites.

For more than five hours, various sites were disabled and others played content against Hamas and its leaders.

The leading Hamas site Shehab.ps displayed anti-Hamas headlines, which when clicked played a video from Egyptian television that was unfavorable to Hamas. In the video, from the Egyptian anti-Hamas website Al Balad, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaaal is seen living a life of luxury. The anchor on the video says: "If Mashaaal is man enough, why doesn't he take a plane from Qatar to Egypt. We would gladly open our border and let him enter the Gaza Strip, and then he can hide together with Hamas leader [Ismail] Hanniyeh in a bunker underground."

Later Monday, the site's Facebook page - which has more than a million followers - confirmed the 'Zionist attack' and said it would "continue to expose the Zionist crimes."

Other leading Hamas sites, such as Felesteen.ps and alafa.ps were hacked as well, and could not be accessed for more than four hours. Soon after the attack, Felesteen's Facebook page posted that the "occupation forces" had hacked the site, and that it was working to fix the page.

THE MESSAGE in Hebrew, supposedly from Hamas's military wing, vows to keep firing on Israelis until its 'legitimate demands' were met. (Screenshot)