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CYBERSECURITY THREAT BRIEFING

Iran Conflict — Operation Epic Fury / Operation Roaring Lion

Impact on Western Cyber Threat Landscape

TLP:AMBER
For Internal Distribution Only

Date: March 5, 2026
Status: ACTIVE CONFLICT — Rapidly Evolving

Sources: CISA, Unit 42, CrowdStrike, Google TIG, NCSC, CSIS, SOCRadar, Sophos, Halcyon, CloudSEK

1. Executive Summary

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched coordinated joint strikes on Iran under Operation Epic Fury (U.S.) and Operation Roaring Lion (Israel). The strikes targeted military command structures, nuclear facilities, and senior leadership, resulting in the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and several other senior officials. Iran has responded with retaliatory missile and drone attacks across the Persian Gulf region, and the conflict has rapidly expanded into a trans-regional hybrid war combining kinetic operations with significant cyber activity.

This briefing assesses the cyber threat landscape as it stands on March 5, 2026, with a focus on implications for Western organizations. The conflict represents one of the most consequential geopolitical-cyber convergence events in recent history, combining active state-sponsored cyber operations, AI-enabled information warfare, hacktivist mobilization, kinetic strikes on digital infrastructure, and terror threat escalation targeting Western nations.

CURRENT THREAT ASSESSMENT (as of March 5, 2026)	
CRITICAL	Direct targeting of U.S./Israeli critical infrastructure, defense industrial base, and military logistics providers by Iranian state actors and proxies.
HIGH	Opportunistic attacks on Western financial services, energy, telecommunications, and healthcare sectors by hacktivist collectives and affiliated proxies.
HIGH	AI-enabled disinformation, deepfake imagery, and social engineering campaigns targeting Western public opinion and business decision-makers.
ELEVATED	Supply chain disruptions and second-order effects from kinetic strikes on Gulf-based cloud infrastructure and shipping routes.
ELEVATED	Terror cell activation and proxy-directed physical attacks against Western interests in Europe, the Gulf, and domestically.

2. Situation Overview

2.1 Kinetic Context

The joint U.S.-Israeli strikes began on February 28, 2026, targeting military installations, missile facilities, nuclear sites, and key government leadership in Tehran, Isfahan, Qom, Karaj, and Kermanshah. Iran's retaliatory operations (Operation True Promise IV) have included missile and drone barrages targeting Israel, U.S. military bases across Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Iran has closed the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting global oil and gas shipments. Hezbollah in Lebanon has entered the conflict. Drone strikes have hit the U.S. Consulate in Dubai, a CIA facility in Riyadh, and Britain's Akrotiri base in Cyprus.

2.2 Cyber Domain Context

In the hours following the initial kinetic strikes, Iran's internet connectivity dropped to between 1–4%, severely degrading state-directed cyber coordination from inside the country. However, geographically dispersed Iranian cyber proxies, hacktivist collectives, and opportunistic threat actors have rapidly mobilized. An estimated 60+ hacktivist groups—including pro-Russian collectives such as NoName057(16)—have entered the fray. Over 150 hacktivist incidents were recorded in the first 72 hours. An "Electronic Operations Room" was established on February 28 to coordinate cyber retaliation. Kinetic attacks have also targeted digital infrastructure directly: drone strikes damaged three Amazon Web Services data centers in the UAE and Bahrain.

3. Active Threat Indicators & Actor Landscape

3.1 State-Sponsored Threat Groups

Despite the internet blackout inside Iran, multiple APT groups affiliated with Iran's MOIS and IRGC have demonstrated pre-positioned capabilities:

- **Cotton Sandstorm (Haywire Kitten):** IRGC-affiliated; deploying WezRat modular infostealer via spearphishing disguised as software updates.
- **Muddy Water APT:** Conducting Operation Olalampo targeting META region with TTPs overlapping the RedKitten campaign.
- **APT42:** Targeting Western NGOs, media, academics, and activists. January 2026 RedKitten campaign used macro-laced documents disguised as protest casualty records.
- **Hydro Kitten:** Making specific threats targeting the financial services sector (per CrowdStrike).
- **Google TIG:** Confirms Iranian cyber espionage resumed after a brief lull during the initial military strikes.

3.2 Hacktivist & Proxy Collectives

Group	Affiliation	Primary Tactics	Known Targets
Handala Hack	MOIS-linked	Data exfiltration, wiper ops, hack-and-leak, death threats to diaspora	Israeli defense, energy, Jordan fuel, U.S./CA influencers
Cyber Islamic Resistance	Pro-Iran umbrella	Coordinated DDoS, data-wiping, defacement	Israeli ICS/SCADA, drone defense, payment systems
Dark Storm Team	Pro-Palestinian/Iran	Large-scale DDoS, ransomware	U.S. ports, Western infrastructure
DieNet	Pro-Iran	DDoS campaigns	Qatari/Bahraini gov sites, U.S. ports
NoName057(16)	Pro-Russian	DDoS	Israeli gov, telecom, defense
Sicarii	Ransomware (pro-Iran)	Destructive ransomware (unrecoverable)	Israeli/allied SMBs, expanding
BaqiyatLock	RaaS (pro-Iran)	Free affiliate access for anti-Israel ops	Israeli interests, expanding
313 Team	Pro-Iran (Iraq)	DDoS, website targeting	Kuwait gov, armed forces

3.3 Observed Techniques (MITRE ATT&CK)

- **T1566 – Phishing:** AI-enhanced spearphishing, deepfake lures, software update masquerades.

- **T1110 – Brute Force:** Password spraying, MFA push-bombing in healthcare, gov, energy, engineering.
- **T1059 – Command & Scripting:** Tunneling tools (ngrok, frpc, cloudflared, plink) to bypass firewalls.
- **T1485/T1486 – Data Destruction/Encryption:** Wiper malware and ransomware-as-cover. Sicarii permanently destroys data.
- **T1498 – Network DDoS:** Volumetric DDoS against financial, government, and CI sites.
- **T1078 – Valid Accounts:** Credential harvesting and sale on criminal forums enabling follow-on attacks.
- **T1071 – Application Layer Protocol:** Vishing scams impersonating government ministries.

4. AI & Emerging Technology Dimensions

4.1 AI-Enhanced Offensive Operations

AI is playing an expanding role across both the cyber offense and information warfare dimensions of this conflict. While there is no public evidence that Iran can conduct fully autonomous AI-powered cyberattacks at the level documented in Anthropic's November 2025 reporting on Chinese state-sponsored actors, several developments demand attention:

- **AI-Enhanced Phishing:** Unit 42 reports Iran-aligned actors using AI for more convincing spearphishing. CloudSEK documented at least 128 confirmed AI-enhanced cyber threat incidents in early 2026.
- **Deepfake Warfare:** Two fake videos entered the top 15 most-viewed Iran content on TikTok within one week. Three more accumulated over 100 million views. X has warned of 90-day suspensions for undisclosed AI conflict videos.
- **Information Operations:** Experts anticipate Iran will pivot toward AI-generated narratives targeting Western public support and attempting to fracture the U.S.-Israel coalition.
- **AI News Laundering:** NewsGuard identified 2,089 AI-generated news sites laundering rumors as credible reporting. Microsoft tracked 200+ disinformation incidents using AI content between 2024–2025.
- **Cognitive Warfare:** Gulf states have issued official warnings about digital fraud and cognitive warfare exploiting the conflict.

4.2 Defensive AI Considerations

Palo Alto Networks' CSO for UK&I emphasizes that traditional signature-based defenses are inadequate. AI makes human identity verification fundamentally harder to trust. Organizations must adopt AI-powered behavioral analytics, anomaly detection, and real-time threat intelligence correlation.

5. Impact on Western Businesses

Every U.S. multinational firm is potentially at risk, according to former CIA official Christopher Burgess. Organizations with the following characteristics face elevated exposure:

- Defense industrial base companies, especially those with Israeli counterpart relationships
- Critical infrastructure operators: energy, water, telecommunications, financial services, healthcare
- Companies with personnel, offices, or supply chains in the Gulf region
- Technology and cloud service providers with Middle Eastern operations
- Media organizations, academic institutions, and NGOs (long-standing APT42 targets)
- Logistics and military supply chain providers

5.1 Compounding Factor: Reduced U.S. Cyber Defense Capacity

CISA is reportedly operating at approximately 38% staffing due to funding lapses. The agency's former acting director was reassigned. Private sector organizations should not assume the same level of federal support available during prior escalations.

6. Kinetic Impacts & Terror Threat Assessment

6.1 Kinetic-Cyber Convergence

- Drone strikes on three AWS data centers in the UAE and Bahrain — new attack vector blending physical destruction with digital disruption.
- Israeli cyber breach of the BadeSaba religious app delivered psyops messaging to 5+ million Iranian users.
- Iran's strikes on civilian airports and shipping ports in Kuwait, UAE, and Oman disrupt physical and digital commerce.
- Near-total destruction of Iran's internet (1–4% connectivity) — one of the largest state-level cyber disruptions in history.

6.2 Terror Threat to Western Nations

- **European Exposure:** Iran's FM declared European involvement an "act of war." Cyprus raised concerns about terror cells in Northern Cyprus (10,000 pro-regime Iranians, alleged Hamas/Muslim Brotherhood operatives).
- **Proxy Activation:** Hezbollah has entered the conflict. IRGC proxies have a documented history of targeting Western interests globally.
- **Diaspora Targeting:** Handala Hack sent death threats to Iranian-American/Canadian influencers, claiming to have leaked home addresses to physical operatives — escalation from cyber to physical threat enablement.
- **Malacca Strait Risk:** Iran's "Ghost Fleet" of ~60 dark tankers near Malaysia could disrupt a waterway carrying 30%+ of global maritime crude oil trade.
- **Homeland Indicators:** DHS NTAS has issued warnings. FaD Team claimed code injection and PII release from a U.S. township.

7. Posture Hardening & Monitoring Guidance

Synthesized from CISA, NCSC, Unit 42, CrowdStrike, Sophos, SOCRadar, and Critical Path Security.

7.1 Immediate Actions (0–72 Hours)

1. **Patch Internet-Facing Assets:** VPN gateways, firewalls, email systems, cloud services. Iranian actors routinely exploit unpatched software.
2. **Validate DDoS Protections:** Confirm mitigation is active with providers. Test failover.
3. **Enforce MFA Everywhere:** Phishing-resistant MFA (FIDO2/hardware tokens). Iranian actors use push-bombing and MFA registration manipulation.
4. **Change Default Credentials:** Audit all internet-connected devices, especially OT/ICS/IoT.
5. **Air-Gap Critical Backups:** Offline, immutable. Wiper malware and Sicarii make this essential. Test restoration today.
6. **Out-of-Band Verification:** Separate trusted channel for high-value requests. Critical given deepfake/vishing threats.

7.2 Enhanced Monitoring (Ongoing)

- **Hunt for Tunneling Tools:** Flag ngrok, frpc, cloudflared, plink. Flag -tunnel, -remote, -proto, -server command-line args.
- **Credential Anomalies:** Password spraying, unusual MFA changes, impossible travel, VPN from Iranian IP ranges (CISA AA24-290A).
- **Lower Detection Thresholds:** Internet-facing assets — VPN gateways, cloud workloads, external apps.
- **Track Hacktivist Coordination:** Telegram channels, dark web forums. Groups are coalescing into coordinated collectives.
- **Validate Breach Claims:** Investigate claimed breaches. Actors use claims (even fabricated) for psychological impact.

7.3 Organizational Resilience

- **Business Continuity:** Scenario-plan for loss of water, power, or comms for Gulf personnel/assets (up to 2 weeks). Plan for domestic disruption.
- **Manual Fallback:** Especially for healthcare, manufacturing, and critical operations.
- **OT/ICS Hardening:** Harden management planes, just-in-time access, segment OT from IT.
- **Awareness Training:** Conflict-specific: spearphishing, deepfakes, vishing, social engineering.
- **Tabletop Exercises:** Red-team/purple-team simulating Iranian APT and hacktivist TTPs.

- **Supply Chain Contracts:** Explicit incident reporting, threat intel sharing, and joint response clauses.
- **Executive Social Media Hygiene:** Iranian groups excel at long-term rapport-building before payload delivery.

8. Sector-Specific Guidance

Sector	Priority Actions
Financial Services	Validate DDoS; monitor for Hydro Kitten credential attacks; out-of-band wire verification; brief staff on vishing scams.
Energy & Utilities	Segment OT/ICS; audit PLCs/SCADA for defaults; monitor fuel/grid targeting; coordinate with E-ISAC.
Healthcare	Harden per Health-ISAC; manual care fallback; monitor Sicarii/BaqiyatLock; offline patient record backups.
Defense / DIB	Assume targeting; review Israeli relationship access; monitor APT42; enforce CMMC; coordinate with DC3.
Technology / Cloud	Assess Gulf dependencies; failover planning; monitor API probing; review physical data center security.
Government / SLTTs	Coordinate with MS-ISAC; monitor defacement/DDoS; audit defaults; prepare for code injection.
Media / Academia	Priority APT42 target; employee OPSEC training; verify sources given AI disinfo surge.

9. Outlook

The cyber dimension of this conflict will outlast the kinetic phase. Iranian APT groups do not stand down when missiles stop flying — they retool and return.

- Reconstitution of Iranian C2 structures enabling more sophisticated, coordinated operations.
- Potential Chinese AI-enabled cyber assistance could dramatically increase attack scale.
- Escalation of disinformation targeting Western public opinion.
- Expansion of physical-digital convergence attacks (precedent: drone strikes on cloud data centers).
- Hacktivist coalition-building into more capable collectives.
- Estimated 4–5+ weeks of kinetic operations = sustained elevated cyber threat conditions.

BOTTOM LINE: Organizations should assume they are in the blast radius. The threat is structured, state-directed, and already in motion. The organizations compromised in the weeks ahead will largely be those that waited to act. Sustained vigilance, immediate hardening, and proactive coordination with threat intelligence providers and sector ISACs are essential.

10. Key References

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