Cyber Insight

CARDINAL Group

Cyber Intelligence Bureau

a division of Epidemiology Labs

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Methods & Neutrality

The information in this document is the result of OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) investigations.
These sources are of cyber origin, i.e. from open sources.

The sources have been correlated, validated and qualified as trusted sources.
This information is analysis from a strictly cyber perspective.

The whole report strictly respects the principle of neutrality, which is fundamental to the research carried out.

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CARDINAL Group

- **Creation date:**
  The Cardinal group emerged through a gradual evolution from early technical traces observed between 2017 and 2019, before transforming into a structured pro-Russian hacktivist collective by late 2025. Its official formation on January 27, 2026 coincided with the creation of the Russian Legion alliance, where Cardinal assumed a leading role. Today, the group stands as a symbol of hybrid cyber warfare built on psychological manipulation and strategic “narrative strikes.”

- **Probable Origin**:
  The Cardinal collective likely originates from a core group of developers and operators emerging from Eastern European cybercriminal circles, gradually redirected toward pro-Russian political and ideological objectives. Technical and linguistic indicators point to a decentralized structure operating across multiple jurisdictions, while maintaining functional ties to Russia-aligned ecosystems, blending national, ideological, and opportunistic motivations.

- **Main strategies:**
  The Cardinal group employs a dual-headed strategy that merges offensive technical tools, including DDoS attacks, Cardinal RAT-type malware, and SCADA intrusions, with a campaign of high-intensity psychological warfare. Its tactical pattern follows a “announce first, prove later” model, using theatrical ultimatums on Telegram to flood the information space and disrupt the opponent’s decision-making processes.

- **Geopolitical Motivation:**
  Driven by an assertive Russian nationalism, the Cardinal collective’s core objective is to deter Western nations from providing military support to Ukraine. In March 2026, the group executed a strategic pivot, extending opportunistic support to Iran and the Axis of Resistance following U.S. Israeli airstrikes. Its operations seek to undermine public trust in national defense institutions by showcasing the vulnerability of critical infrastructure, notably Israel’s Iron Dome system.

- **Targeted business sectors:**
  Cardinal targets key strategic sectors: defense, energy/SCADA, government, telecom, finance, media, healthcare, education, and transportation. Its operations aim to expose the fragility of critical systems and undermine public trust in the defensive capabilities of Ukraine’s and Israel’s allied states.

Identification

Identified in early 2026, Cardinal is a pro-Russian hacktivist collective described as state-aligned yet operating with notable independence. As a central actor and founding member of the Russian Legion alliance, established on January 27, 2026, it has emerged as a specialist in narrative strikes, blending disinformation, NLP tactics, and media framing to shape public perception. Its operations focus less on technical disruption and more on psychological destabilization, amplifying spectacular yet often unverifiable claims. Since the March 2026 attacks, Cardinal has expanded its activity toward the Iran–Israel conflict, aligning with the so-called Axis of Resistance and claiming to have compromised Israel’s Iron Dome defense system.

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Associated Adversary Groups of CARDINAL

Russian Legion : Cardinal is the founding member and leading force of this umbrella alliance, created on January 27, 2026, to coordinate actions among several hacktivist groups.

NoName057(16) : This pro-Russian group regularly collaborates with Cardinal, sharing DDoS tools and carrying out joint operations against common targets.

The White Pulse : This collective functions as an operational arm subordinate to the Russian Legion, operating under Cardinal's command.

Russian Partizan : A member of the Russian Legion specialized in executing DDoS attacks and conducting reconnaissance.

Inteid : This subordinate partner participates in Cardinal's joint claims and coordinated operations within the coalition.

ShadowClawZ 404 : An operational unit of the Russian Legion that closely supports Cardinal's cyber-sabotage campaigns.

Handala Hack : A group linked to Iranian intelligence that joined Cardinal within the ad-hoc coalition OpIsrael in March 2026.

Cyber Islamic Resistance : A pro-Iranian collective that cooperates with Cardinal on hack-and-leak operations and denial-of-service attacks.

FAD Team : A SCADA-specialist group that coordinates its actions with Cardinal within the Electronic Operations Room.

KillNet : Cardinal maintains a loose affiliation with this group, forming a coordinated "pincer" dynamic where KillNet provides DDoS firepower while Cardinal manages propaganda.

OpIsrael / Electronic Operations Room : This strategic coalition, emerging in March 2026, unites Cardinal with pro-Iranian actors to jointly target Israeli critical infrastructure.

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Vectors of Influence

1

Martyrdom Framing

Cardinal frames arrests as heroic persecution, turning hackers into “truth-tellers” resisting a corrupt system to gain sympathy and attract recruits.

2

FUD Calibration

The group releases stolen data “teasers” without full disclosure, creating internal panic and uncertainty that often harms organizations more than the final leak.

3

Moral Superiority Signaling

Cardinal claims an ethical code, such as protecting medical data, to position itself as a moral digital vigilante above ordinary cybercriminals.

4

Social Proof Engineering

Bot-amplified posts and coordinated accounts create the illusion of broad support, making the movement appear legitimate and widely backed.

5

Crisis-Timing Exploitation

Cardinal times claims to real-world crises (e.g., Iran strikes) to maximize emotional impact and blur truth-finding in a saturated media environment.

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Emotional Intelligence

Embedded NLP Commands : Hidden imperatives in manifestos subtly influence the subconscious, nudging readers toward fear, sharing, or distrust without conscious awareness. 1

S.W.I.F.T. Pattern : Tight deadlines plus visible technical capability generate a compressed stress window that overwhelms decision-makers and paralyzes rational response. 2

Contextual Reframing : Cardinal reframes attacks as “digital audits” or “justice,” turning sabotage into morally acceptable actions in the eyes of sympathetic audiences. 3

4 **S.T.O.P.-Style Disruption :** Surprise attacks at low-vigilance moments disrupt security rhythms, trigger cognitive freeze, and amplify the perceived severity of the incident.

5 **Narrative Completion Bias :** Partial logs or screenshots push the public to imagine the worst-case scenario, turning limited leaks into exaggerated narratives of catastrophe.

6 **Emotional Anchoring :** Repeated use of the red cardinal bird links the symbol to major breaches, conditioning stakeholders to associate it with crisis and fear.

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Professional Sectors

List of targeted sectors

- Defense/Military
- Critical Infrastructure (energy, nuclear, and SCADA systems)
- Government & Public Administration
- Telecommunications
- Mainstream Media & Information
- Financial
- FinTech Sector
- Health
- Education and Research
- Transport
- Aerospace

Note

Cardinal is a pro-Russian hacktivist collective that leverages hybrid cyber warfare to erode trust in institutions and enterprises. More than a purely technical actor, it excels at psychological manipulation, spectacular announcements, and data teasers designed to generate fear, uncertainty, and decision paralysis. Its targets span critical sectors such as defense, energy, telecommunications, finance, healthcare, education, and transportation, placing many strategic businesses directly within its operational scope. The threat is not only technical but also narrative. Each incident can be turned into a reputation crisis and a loss of public and stakeholder confidence.

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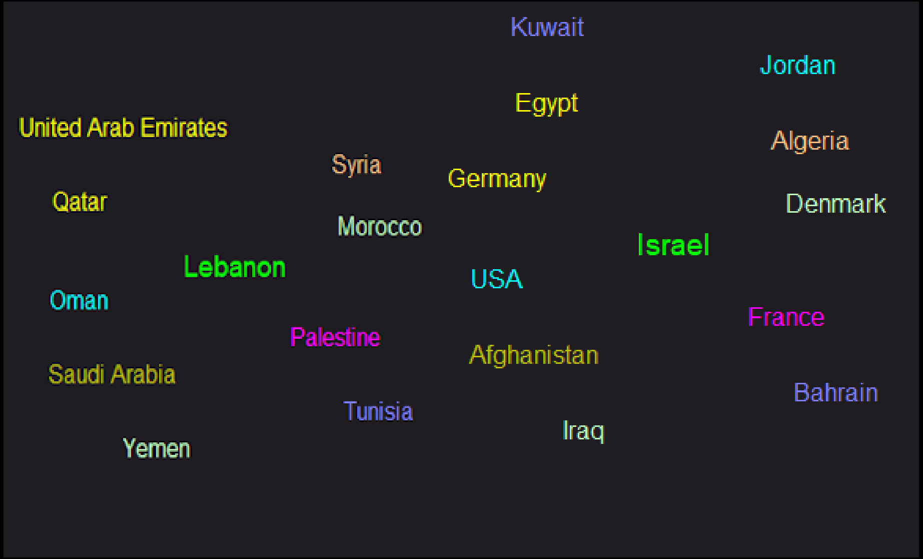
Targeted Countries



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High-Probability Future Targets Countries

Italy
United Kingdom
Romania
Estonia
Lithuania
United States
Japan
South Korea

Canada
France
Latvia
Poland
Germany
Australia
India

Ireland
Finland
Netherlands
Turkey
Belgium
Switzerland
Portugal

Austria
Sweden
Mexico
Brazil
Spain
Norway
Greece

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Most Probable Hypothesis on CARDINAL's Future Activities

Future Targets

Cardinal will prioritize nations supporting Ukraine militarily, such as Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania as well as Israeli defense infrastructure. It will sustain pressure on government portals, transport, and healthcare systems, treating them as “digital front-line” targets to punish Western allies and influence domestic political discourse.

Hybrid Methods

The group will rely on a Pressure-Response Escalation (EPRC) model, combining low-cost DDoS attacks with “hack-and-leak” operations. It will use Telegram to broadcast fragmented evidence and 48-hour theatrical ultimatums, while increasingly leveraging AI-driven propaganda and “slow-drip” data releases to extend media impact over time.

Systemic Impacts

This will generate temporary service disruptions and growing “leak fatigue” across the population. The main effect will be psychological: a slow erosion of societal resilience and the normalization of permanent cyber threat, driving up cybersecurity spending and potentially justifying restrictive state-level digital measures that align with Cardinal’s “information tyranny” narrative.

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The most dangerous hypothesis

The Most Dangerous Scenario

The “Synchronous Catastrophic Cascade” (CCS) envisions coordinated attacks on multiple interlinked critical infrastructures at once. A variant, “Reality Collapse”, would see Cardinal weaponizing AI-driven news aggregation and deepfakes during a critical G20 election period, triggering a full-scale cognitive war aimed at toppling governments by destroying public trust in truth, without kinetic strikes.

Targets and Sectors Targeted

Key targets include European power grids (ENTSO-E), pipelines, air traffic control centers, and air-defense systems such as the Iron Dome. Democratic institutions and electoral bodies would be struck to undermine the integrity of information systems, while the nuclear and energy sectors would remain prime targets for combining real physical impact with mass existential fear.

Methodologies

Cardinal would exploit zero-day vulnerabilities, supply-chain compromises, or insider collusion to implant destructive payloads. Cyber-attacks would be synchronized with physical missile barrages and large-scale disinformation, using AI-driven “psych-mapping” scripts to maximize emotional impact and trigger panic-driven overload of emergency services.

Potential Consequences

Such an operation could trigger immediate economic collapse, prolonged blackouts, and widespread civil chaos. Psychologically, it would shatter trust in institutions and create long-lasting collective terror. Geopolitically, this could trigger irreversible military escalation between NATO and Russia or ignite kinetic conflicts based on carefully timed cyber-falsified information.

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