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Analysis of a Multi-Architecture SSH Linux Backdoor

GIAC (GREM) Gold Certification

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Abstract

A key aspect in any intrusion is to attempt to gain persistence on the compromised system. Threat actors and criminals assure persistence through different mechanisms including backdoors. The existence of backdoors is nothing new and over the years very popular backdoors targeting most Operating Systems and many application have been developed. This paper focuses on the code analysis of an SSH Linux backdoor used in the wild by a criminal group from 2016 to at least October 2018. The backdoor runs in multiple architectures; however, the research focuses on the ARM version of the backdoor using the recently released reversing tool Ghidra, which has been developed by the NSA.

1. Introduction

“A backdoor refers to any method by which authorized and unauthorized users are able to get around normal security measures and gain high level user access (aka root access) on a computer system, network, or software application” (Malwarebytes, NA)

Backdoors can be implemented in many ways: in the Operating System, applications, protocols, firmware, hardware, etc (Simsolo, NA).

For instance, in 1998 a very popular backdoor for Windows known as ‘Back Orifice’ was presented in the DEF CON Security conference (Symantec, NA) which was later on used to compromised Windows systems.

More recently, a campaign known as VPNFilter (Cisco, 2018) orchestrated by the Advance Persistence group APT28 (Mitre, 2019) used multi-platform backdoors to maintain persistence in compromised devices, including domestic routers.

In September 2016 a backdoor targeting OpenSSH (OpenSSH, NA) was discovered by the author of this paper through the usage of Honeypots (Alonso-Parrizas, 2016). The analysis describes how the backdoor was distributed and installed in compromised systems. However, this paper focuses on the research of this same backdoor from another angle: reversing and disassembly the ARM (techtarget, NA) binary version of the backdoor.

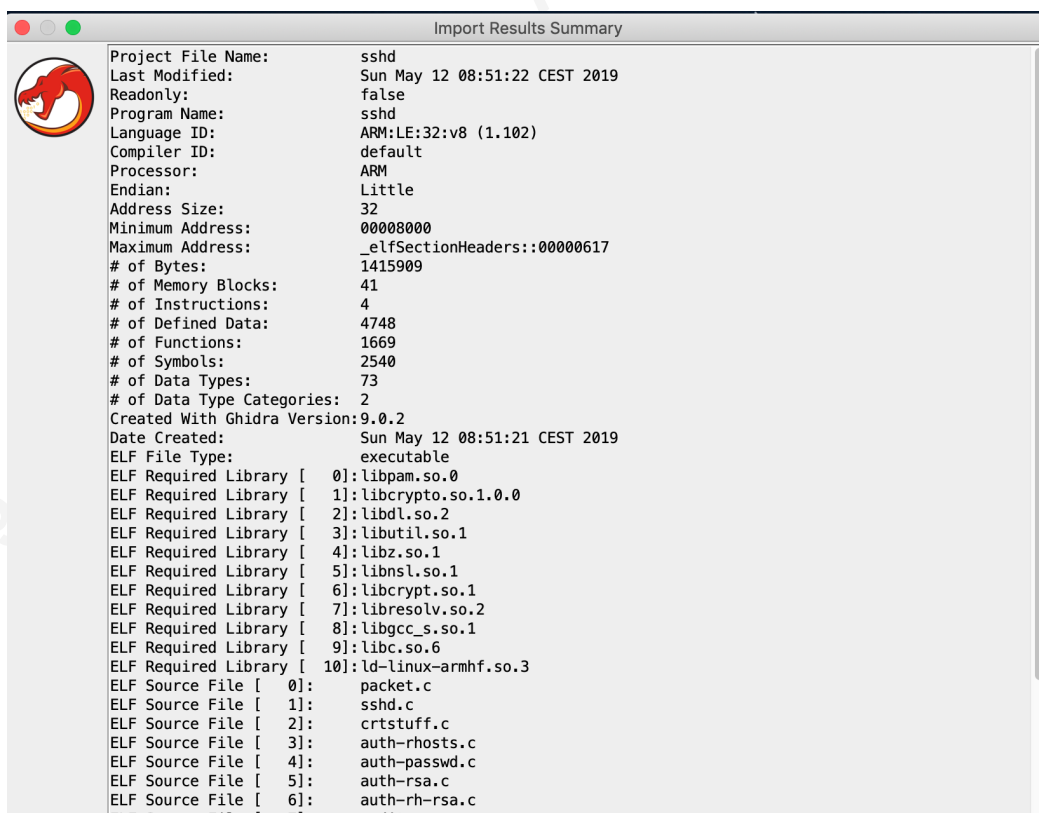
In December 2018 ESET released a research paper about the landscape of OpenSSH backdoors “THE DARK SIDE OF THE FORSSHE - A landscape of OpenSSH backdoors” (EMET, THE DARK SIDE OF THE FORSSHE -

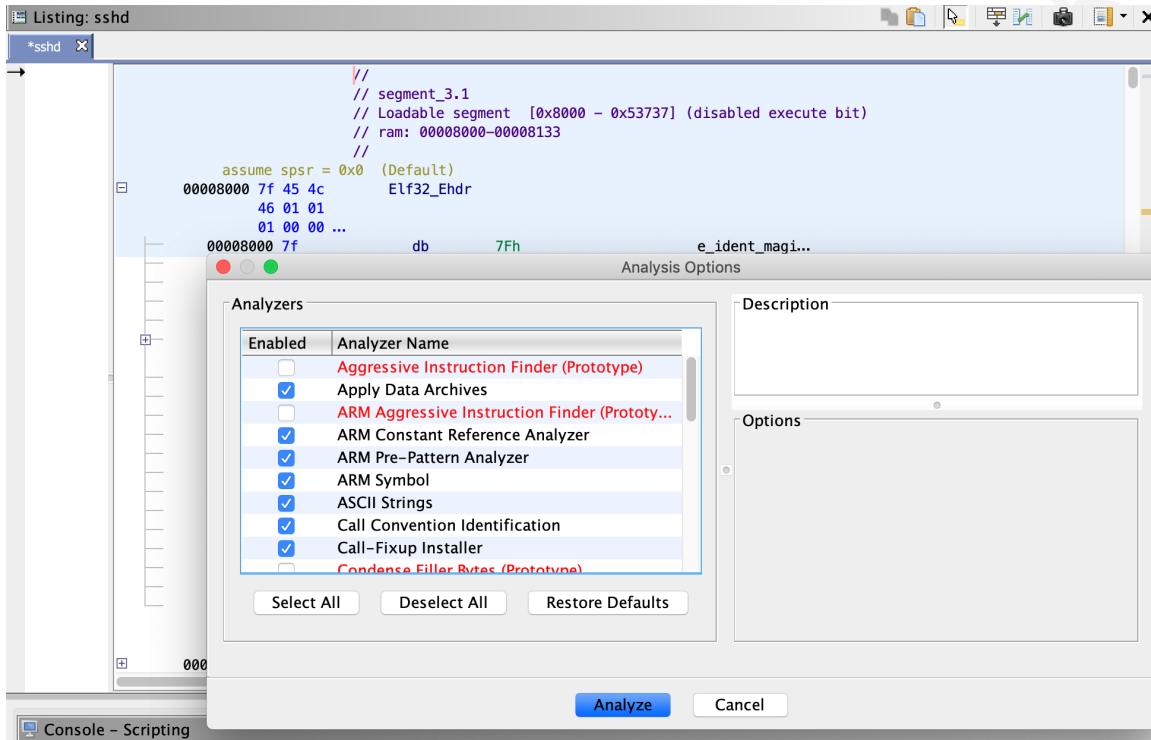
Ghidra (NSA, 2019), a tool recently released by the NSA for reverse engineering is used to support the full analysis. Through this process, the capabilities and functionality of Ghidra will be evaluated.

2.1. Analysis of the SSHD binary

2.1.1. Overview of Ghidra

The first step is to open the file with Ghidra to get an overview of the properties of the file. This overview provides interesting information about the binary file, like the processor supported (ARM), the executable format (ELF), the dependencies, the source code files, memory blocks, number of instructions and functions, etc





In the top right of the screen, in the 'Program Tree', all the sections of the binary are displayed. In the 'Symbol Tree', the imports, exports, functions and labels can be searched. In the center window 'Listing: sshd' is where the assembly code is displayed, while in the right window the disassembly code. Each of the windows and views can be customized.

2.1.2. Analysis of the 'main()' function in SSHD

The first step is to find the 'main()' function on account that it is the entry point of execution.

