

Political Retweet Rings and Compromised Accounts: A Twitter Influence Operation Linked to the Youth Wing of Turkey's Ruling Party

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1 Summary

On June 11, 2020, Twitter announced a takedown of 7,340 accounts attributed to the youth wing of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Twitter shared this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on June 3, and we observed that it generally targeted Turkish citizens. Across about 37 million tweets, the network promoted the AKP and criticized the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and Republican People's Party (CHP). The network included several pro-AKP retweet rings along with batches of single-issue fake accounts. According to Twitter, the network also included centrally-managed compromised accounts. As a result, the takedown includes accounts linked to groups that were critical of the government, but that were targeted repeatedly by hackers.

This is not the first Twitter disinformation campaign that targeted Turkish citizens and pushed content supportive of the ruling party. As a response to the widespread anti-government uprising in the summer of 2013, the AKP **recruited** 6,000 people to shape public opinion and counter government critics on social media. The group, called AK trolls, has systematically harassed journalists, politicians, and government critics, and compromised their social media accounts. In October 2019 **DFRLab identified a network** of inauthentic accounts that aimed to mobilize domestic support for the Turkish government's fight against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. The network we describe in this report has some narrative and tactical similarities to these earlier operations.

1.1 Key Takeaways

- We found batches of fabricated personalities, all created on the same day, with similar usernames. We also observed several pro-AKP retweet rings.
- The takedown included centrally managed compromised accounts that were used for AKP cheerleading.
- Some of the suspended accounts were linked to organizations that were critical of the government. According to Twitter, they are included in the takedown because their accounts were compromised by this network.
- Tweets were critical of the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), and accused it of terrorism and social media ploys. Tweets were also critical of the CHP (Republican People's Party).
- Tweets promoted the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, which consolidated power in Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.
- Tweets worked to increase domestic support for Turkish intervention in Syria. There were also English-language tweets that attempted to increase the international legitimacy of Turkey's offensive in northeastern Syria in October 2019.
- Tweets aimed to pressure the government to implement specific policy reforms, including appointing more food engineers in the agricultural sector, pardoning interest payments for scholarships, reducing pun-

ishment for shopkeeper bookkeeping irregularities, and changing Law no. 6000 about the retirement benefits of specialist army sergeants. While it is unclear whether these tweets were part of a government-supported campaign to increase legitimacy for impending policy change, or whether these tweets were directed by other organizers, we note that in one instance the government began discussing a reform and pointed to the popularity of the issue on Twitter.

- Tweets praised Turkey for accepting Syrian refugees, and criticized the refugee policies of several Western nations.

2 Summary Statistics

2.1 Accounts

The 7,340 accounts included in the takedown dataset were created between June 9, 2008 and January 18, 2020, with spikes on particular days, such as October 28, 2014, when dozens of accounts with similar profiles emerged. We note, however, that because many of the suspended accounts were taken over by hackers, it is possible that the operation did not begin until 2013. Accounts in the dataset include some that appear to be leaders of local AKP branches, others that look like digital marketing firms and sport fans, and yet others that are clearly fabricated personalities or members of retweet rings. Sixty of the accounts had over 100,000 followers, though most of the accounts had a very small following. (4,534 accounts had fewer than 500 followers.) Accounts had on average 4,274 followers, and the median number of followers was 207.

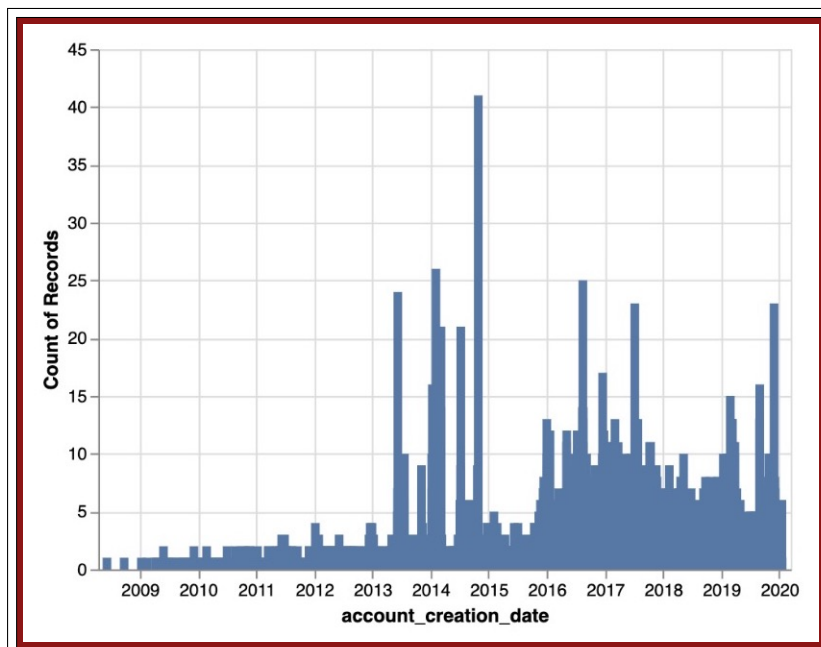


Figure 1: Account creation date histogram

2.2 Tweets

As the network grew, the operation became increasingly prolific. There were notable spurts of activity at the end of 2014 and throughout the last few months of 2019. The average tweet received 3.7 engagements (likes + replies + retweets + quote retweets). Only a small minority of the tweets appear to have come from clients that provide automatic tweeting functionality.

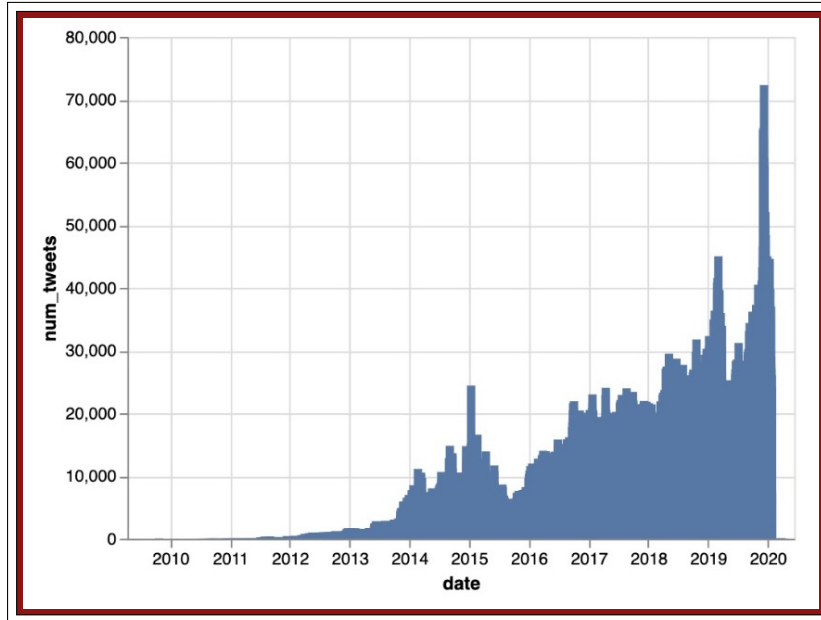


Figure 2: Number of tweets over time

The accounts frequently engaged with other accounts in the network, suspended accounts that are not included in this takedown, and accounts of public figures that are still live. For example, the accounts frequently retweeted @Lokman_Erturk, a local AKP politician, and @HikmetYT1 and @is1234tan1, two very similar accounts that tweet primarily about policy reform around retirement wages for former sergeants. @RTErdogan (President Erdoğan's official account) was either mentioned or retweeted 1.7 million times. Other accounts that the network frequently retweeted or mentioned included @Akp parti (the AKP official account), @tcbestepe (handle for the Turkish president), @BeratAlbayrak (Minister of Treasury and Finance Berat Albayrak's account), @abdulhamitgul (Minister of Justice Abdulhamit Gül's account), and @06meli-hgokcek (the account of Former Mayor of Ankara İbrahim Melih Gökçek).

2.3 Domains and Hashtags

The top domains in this dataset were generally news and entertainment sites. One exception was tccb.gov.tr, the site of the Turkish presidency. Tweets that linked to articles on this site generally promoted Erdoğan.

5bingidamuhendisi	405211	twitter.com	589525
1416ylsy	402625	ofp.li	365056
1416ylsy tazminat	370003	dusuncemektebi.com	170291
FF	247542	bit.ly	121189
VUK359	240519	fb.me	119034
5binGıdaMühendisi	190592	youtu.be	110160
tazminat	152323	dlvr.it	93153
FAIZAFFI	130339	goo.gl	83099
MEB	106765	www.boldhaber.com	77866
YLSY	97321	www.dusuncemektebi.com	42702
yuksefaiz	83622	www.youtube.com	38648
dövizborcu	83270	tinyurl.com	37405
EşitKapsamlıYasaŞart	81646	nettavir.com	36804
AdliMahkumKapsamlıEşitYasa	80391	urun.gittigidiyor.com	34887
yuksekkurlar	73203	www.pscp.tv	33057
EYT	70742	www.swarmapp.com	28132
Tazminat	69114	www.malatyatime.com	20584
HANICOZUM	68896	www.malatyafirat.com	20157
devletbursu	67610	instagram.com	18942
faizaffi	66910	4sq.com	17784
EmeklilikteYaşaTakılanlar	66817	www.instagram.com	17231
Mebbursu	66271	siyahx.com	16849
Külliye1000MahkumYakını	65979	www.habermektebi.com	16444
HükümetinAFSözüVar	65368	www.aydindere.com	16242
GurbetKusu	64541	www.facebook.com	15900

Figure 3: Most popular hashtags in the dataset (left), and most popular domains in the dataset (right). Numbers indicate frequency of appearance.

Many of the top hashtags were political, and several were part of specific policy reform campaigns. #5bingidamuhendisi references a campaign asking the government to appoint 5,000 food engineers in the agricultural sector. The hashtag was used between September 2018 and November 2019. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry announced new positions **in March 2020**.

#1416ylsy, #1416ylsy tazminat, and #Faizaffi are hashtags used to request that the government pardon the interest payments of scholarships used for study abroad programs; “faiz affi” means “interest amnesty.” This reform is in fact currently underway. In January 2020, Minister of Education Ziya Selcuk said that changes to this law were ongoing, and on May 30, 2020, **a pro-government newspaper** published a news story marking the popularity of the issue on Twitter, and said that changes to the laws were being discussed.

#VUK359 is a campaign to change article 359 of the tax law that stipulates prison sentences for bookkeeping irregularities. Several accounts had Vuk359 in their username. For example, the profile description of @Vuk359M read: “Article VUK 359 is the killer of the shopkeepers” (translated). Another, @OVuk359, said the Article VUK 359 is “the murderer of the innocent tradesmen” (translated).

While the exact relationship between these accounts and the AKP is unclear,

it is possible that these hashtags, by respectfully addressing the government and asking for a regulation change, were a strategy of creating legitimacy for upcoming reforms. It is also possible that the accounts tweeting about these policies were not directed by the same individuals who directed other parts of this network. Other important hashtags are discussed throughout this report.

3 Themes

3.1 President Erdoğan Cheerleading Pushed by Batches of Fabricated Accounts

#CumhurbaşkanıErdoğan, or #PresidentErdoğan, was used almost 13,000 times in this takedown dataset. Prior to 2019, there were two notable spikes in the hashtag: the first is on January 6, 2015—the day of the Istanbul suicide bombing—and the second is on September 29, 2016—when President Erdoğan announced that he would extend Turkey’s state of emergency for three months following an attempted coup. Most of the tweets received no engagement.

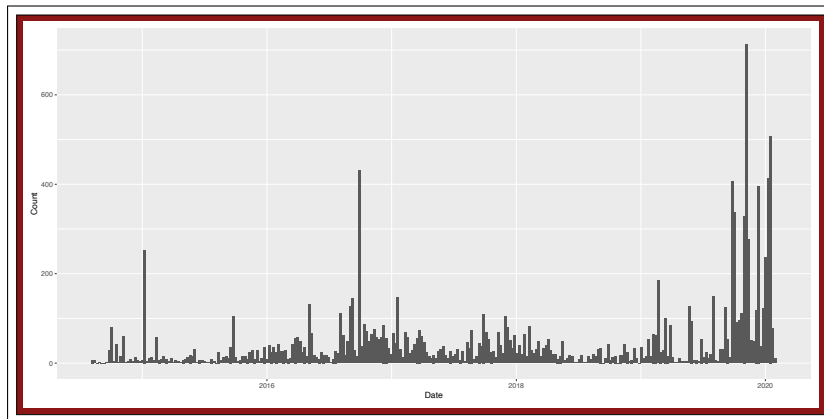


Figure 4: Tweets with #CumhurbaşkanıErdoğan (#PresidentErdoğan) over time

Many uses of the hashtag preceded the 2017 constitutional referendum, which **consolidated Erdoğan’s power** by converting the regime from parliamentary to presidential, and empowering the president to undermine parliament. Most tweets using this hashtag involved romanticized feelings in poetic form about Erdoğan being a great leader and person.

At the end of September 2016, Erdoğan announced that he would **extend Turkey’s state of emergency for three months**, following a failed coup attempt earlier in the year. (Erdoğan had used the coup attempt as an **opportunity to arrest** journalists, academics, teachers, civil servants, and members of opposition parties.) Uses of #CumhurbaşkanıErdoğan spiked on the day Erdoğan made this announcement. Tweets with the hashtag shared photos of Erdoğan, and pushed the agenda for the constitutional referendum. Some tweets showed support for Erdoğan’s remarks criticizing the Treaty of Lausanne — which founded modern-day Turkey and has historically been celebrated. By **criticizing the Treaty**, Erdoğan was setting the stage to challenge the border between Turkey and Greece.

Ten accounts comprised almost half of the uses of #CumhurbaşkanıErdoğan.

Four of the ten appear to be linked to a single name: Ömer Beşparmak. These accounts frequently tweeted identical text and used the hashtag as part of an effort to build support for increasing the retirement wages for sergeants. This was a topic that appeared frequently in the dataset.

In total, we identified seven accounts linked to the name Ömer Beşparmak. They were all created in 2019, and most referenced the retirement policy reform proposal in their bio.

user_display_name	user_screen_name	user_profile_description	account_creation_date
Ömer BEŞPARMAK	Besparmakmer1	45 yaş nedeniyle 6000 sayılı kanun un 26. maddesi mağduru.	2019-01-22
Beşparmak Ömer	BesparmakO	6000 sayılı kanun mağduru	2019-10-14
Omer BEŞPARMAK	omer_besparmak	6000 sayılı kanun mağduru	2019-10-26
Ömer BEŞPARMAK	merBEPARMAK1	6000 sayılı kanun mağduru uzman çavuş	2019-11-08
Ömer Beşparmak 1	1Besparmak		2019-11-11
Ömer Beşparmak	merBeparmak2	6000 sayılı kanun mağduru uzman çavuş.	2019-11-11
Ömer Beşparmak	merBeparmak3	6000 Sayılı kanun mağduru	2019-12-22

Figure 5: Twitter accounts linked to the name Ömer Beşparmak.

Archived tweets from these users show that they frequently tweeted infographics in support of the retirement wage proposal.

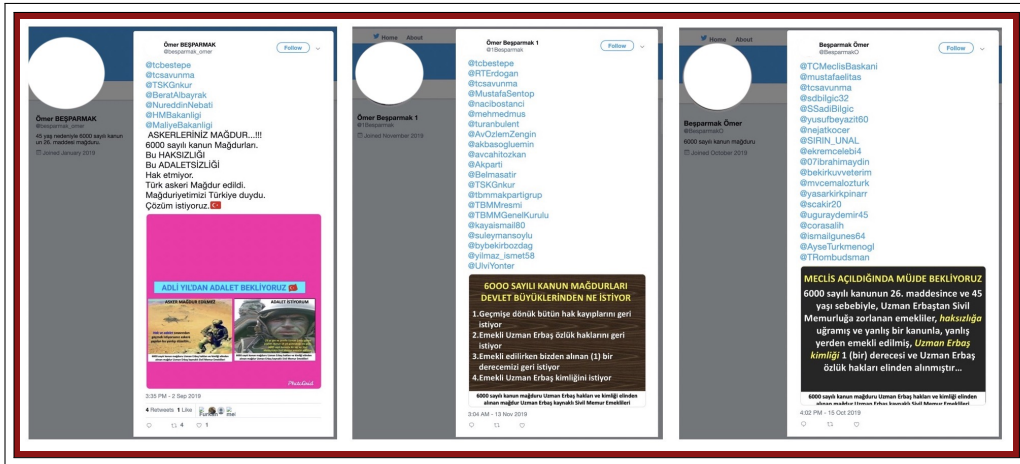


Figure 6: Archived tweets from various Omer Besparmak accounts. Left, center, right. Several Besparmark accounts used the same profile photo. We white out the profile photos as we are unclear as to whether or not the photos are stolen.

Examining tweets using this hashtag brought us to an additional cluster of likely fabricated accounts. They are linked to the name Ertuğrul Çağman. These accounts, created over a series of years, tweeted pro-Erdoğan and pro-AKP messages. We investigated whether the account created in 2013 was included in the dataset because it was compromised. However, we found that it tweeted content similar to the rest of the network as far back as 2013.

user_display_name	user_screen_name	user_reported_location	user_profile_description	account_creation_date
ERTUĞRUL	ert974		HAK GELDİ BATIL ZAIL OLDU	2013-06-03
Ertuğrul Çağman	ErtugrulCagman_	İSTANBUL, TÜRKİYE	Siyasetçi Yazar Sosyal Medya #ert	2014-10-22
Ertuğrul	ertugrul_cagman		Ana hesabım @ERT_974 Haber Sitemiz https://t.co/nquSfpMbRi @Haber_Mektebi https://t.co/S5FPx6O2rp	2016-01-03
Çağman Ertuğrul	ert974_		https://t.co/nquSfpMbRi Kurucu Başkanı İmtiyaz sahibi @Haber_mektebi https://t.co/ID4PVQwRPC VIP	2016-02-22
ERTUĞRUL ÇAĞMAN	ertugrul974	İstanbul, Türkiye	#ert	2017-05-13
MineAK29 Ertuğrul Çağman abi taa 🍷🍷 desin	MineAK29		#ReisinYolundaTT @Dr_K_Aydin sevdalısı	2018-11-05
ERTUĞRUL	CagmanErt			2019-03-27
ERTUĞRUL	ert_cgmn		İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediye Başkanı/Mayor Of İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality	2019-03-29

Figure 7: Twitter accounts linked to the name Ertuğrul Çağman. @Haber_mektebi and @ERT_974 are both suspended, but not in our dataset.

English-language tweets were included in the takedown dataset. These tweets included messages such as “#WeAreErdogan because Erdogan is the strong voice of the oppressed!!” Pro-Erdogan English hashtags included #WeLoveErdogan, #TheLastWarriorErdogan, #ErdoganIsTheLeaderOfTheWorld, #BraveHeartErdogan, and #ITrustToErdogan.

3.2 2017 Constitutional Referendum

There were a number of tweets in both Turkish and English that aimed to shore up support for the 2017 constitutional referendum. Hashtags linked to this campaign in the dataset included #TurkeySaysYes, #YeniAnayasaGüçlüTürkiye (“new constitution, stronger Turkey”), and #ÜlkeninBekasıİçinEVET (“yes for the country’s survival”). One tweet shared in the dataset said “#TurkeySaysYes At least 60% people of Turkey will say YES at the referendum #YeniAnayasaGüçlüTürkiye.”

3.3 HDP and CHP

In Turkey’s June 2015 parliamentary elections, the AKP lost its majority. This was in part because the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) won 13.1% of the vote. We saw tweets critical of the HDP in this dataset.

Days before the elections, accounts tweeted #HDPyeOyVerilmez (“HDP is not to be voted for”). After the elections, one tweet lamented HDP’s success in the eastern Van Province, opining that Van residents had quickly forgotten that the government rebuilt their city after the earthquake. Tweets also accused the HDP of conducting terrorist activities and engaging in social media ploys, such as sharing falsified photos. We observed the hashtag #HDPyeOyVermiyorumÇünkü, (“I am not voting for HDP because”).

There were additionally tweets critical of the CHP, an opposition party. Hashtags included #ŞeddeliFaşistCHP (“Two faced fascist CHP”) and #CHPyeRağmenDireniyoruz (“we are resisting despite the CHP”).

Many accounts that pushed these anti-HDP and anti-CHP messages are part of another batch of likely inauthentic accounts. This batch included 48 accounts all created on October 28, 2014. The accounts include display names that are uniformly in capital letters and they all lack profile descriptions. These accounts tweeted verbatim text that followed this format: poetic phrases in

support of Erdoğan + a trending hashtag in support of Erdoğan + a picture of Erdoğan.

user_display_name	user_screen_name	follower_count	following_count	account_creation_date
ADEM SOYLU	adem_soylu22	0	0	2014-10-28
AHMET KARACA	ahmet_karaca34	4237	207	2014-10-28
AHMET MEMISGIL	ahmetmemisgil	61	221	2014-10-28
ALICAN DEDE	alicandede21	44	112	2014-10-28
ASLI KAZDAG	aslikazdag	44	114	2014-10-28
AYSE AKARSU	_ayseakarsu_	2026	245	2014-10-28
BURAK SOYLUTURK	buraksoyluturk	42	118	2014-10-28
CABIR DEMIRKAN	cabirdemirkan	51	216	2014-10-28
DURDANE BEREKET	durdanebereket	50	120	2014-10-28
ELIF AKINCI	elif_akinci_	1880	160	2014-10-28
FATIH KUHEYLAN	fatih_kuheylan	0	0	2014-10-28
GULCIN ACIBADEM	gulcinacibadem	1813	156	2014-10-28
GULUMSER TASPINAR	gulumserpinar	0	0	2014-10-28
HACER ERDOGAN	hacer_erdogan41	59	216	2014-10-28
HANDE BADEM	handebadem34	155	218	2014-10-28
HULYA BASPINAR	hulyabaspinar	70	217	2014-10-28
KAMIL KARAKOC	kamilkarakoc18	199	464	2014-10-28
KEMALETTIN TUNC	kemalettin_tunc	165	222	2014-10-28
KENAN PARLAK	kenan_parlak22	107	196	2014-10-28
KEREM ATLIHAN	kerem_atlihan	40	112	2014-10-28
KEREMCAN BULUTSU	keremcanbulutsu	69	218	2014-10-28
KERIM ZEYBEK	kerim_zeybek	39	110	2014-10-28
MEDIHA SIMSEK	medihasmisek06	65	213	2014-10-28
MELEK AYDINGIL	melekaydingil	46	108	2014-10-28
MELIKE TURKSOY	meliketurksoy	103	261	2014-10-28
MEVLUT BAYINDIR	mevlutbayindir	37	116	2014-10-28
MURAT TURKCAN	murat_turkcan14	60	218	2014-10-28
OGUZ KAYCAN	oguzkaycan	50	115	2014-10-28
OGUZHAN KAYI	oguzhankayi36	60	215	2014-10-28
OKAN ACISU	okanacisu	131	221	2014-10-28
OZGUR CAVUSSOY	ozgurcavussoy	120	233	2014-10-28
PELIN PELIKAN	pelinpelikan	62	122	2014-10-28
PINAR GEDIKLI	pinar_gedikli	0	0	2014-10-28
RAMIS OZELDEMIR	ramisozeldemir	0	0	2014-10-28
SAHRA ALIBEY	sahraalibey	62	215	2014-10-28
SINAN PEKDEMIR	sinanpekdemir34	45	116	2014-10-28
SONER ATAKAN	soner_atakan34	97	169	2014-10-28
SUDEM NAZLICAN	sudemnazlican	50	122	2014-10-28
SUHEYLA GUCLUSES	suheylagucluses	68	216	2014-10-28
SUZAN KARATAY	suzankaratay	1838	78	2014-10-28
TANJU TOPRAK	tanju_toprak	41	111	2014-10-28
TARKAN GOZDIL	tarkangozdil	139	262	2014-10-28
VEYSEL GOKPINAR	veyselgokpinar	0	0	2014-10-28
YAPRAK SELIMOGLU	yaprakselimoglu	47	120	2014-10-28
ZEKERIYYA KIYMIKLI	zekeriyyakiymik	0	0	2014-10-28
ZELIHA HASRET	zelihasret	210	295	2014-10-28
ZEYNEP KARATOPRAK	karatoprak32	1864	282	2014-10-28
ZEYNEP TUTKUNSOY	zeyneptutkunsoy	132	227	2014-10-28

Figure 8: A batch of accounts created on October 28, 2014

Interestingly, this batch of accounts often tweeted in support of Melih Gökçek, the former mayor of Ankara who is active on Twitter and has four million followers. Gökçek has spread misinformation on Twitter, mobilized his supporters to bully a reporter, and supported an anti-Semitic tweet. The accounts

also supported his son, Osman Gökçek — particularly around February 11, 2015.

3.4 Foreign Affairs: Syria, Libya, and Qatar

We investigated tweets in the Turkish dataset that mentioned other countries, particularly Syria. Almost 170,000 tweets mentioned “Suriye” (Syria). These tweets worked to justify the AKP’s Syria policy — saying that Turkey is fighting terrorism in Syria — and worked to increase empathy for Syrian refugees in Turkey. References to Syria peaked in mid-2016 and throughout 2019. Many of the 2016 tweets praised Turkey for accepting so many Syrian refugees; this was a proud talking point for the AKP. #suriyelicocukolmak (“to be a Syrian child”) was common, as was #AslindaDogrusuNedir, (“what is the truth about it”), which was used to change beliefs about Syrian refugees in Turkey. A tweet about a Syrian saving a woman trapped under rubble during a January 2020 earthquake in Elazığ Province that was tweeted by the Presidency’s communications account was also retweeted 100 times in the takedown dataset. Many of the tweets criticized the West for not accepting more refugees. These tweets frequently retweeted the AKP Women’s Branch, either at @akkadinantalya or @AKKADINGM.

On July 9, 2016, Erdoğan announced that the government was considering granting dual citizenship to refugees, and placing the refugees in government housing. This speech came at a moment when anti-refugee sentiment was boiling in Turkey. Some tweets in the dataset criticized this position, arguing that Turkey should not be supporting refugees because of the poor conditions of Turkish citizens. These tweets often used #suriyelilerehayir (“No to Syrians”). Other tweets defended the government and praised the proposed policies on humanitarian and Islamic grounds.

In July 2019 Erdoğan **announced a plan** for Syrians in Turkey to become citizens. The dataset included a mix of reactions. Consistent with the general pro-AKP tone of the takedown, some tweets criticized those who said that Syrians should return to Syria, saying (facetiously) that instead it is the opposition CHP that should go to Syria. Other tweets expressed anti-refugee sentiment, mocking those who made statements like “Syrians are our brothers.”

As in other parts of the dataset, we discovered batches of similar accounts, in this case created between 2014 and 2019, pushing out pro-AKP Syria-related tweets. Some of these accounts included names linked to either “Meyla Karahasan” and/or “Samyeli.”

user_display_name	user_screen_name	user_reported_location	user_profile_description	account_creation_date
Samyeli Özel Eğitim	Samyeli_Egitim	istanbul esenyurt	samyeli bir eğitim kuruluşudur	2014-10-31
Meyla Karahasan	MeylaKrhsn		Görünmeye değer hiç bir şeyin olmadığı bir görüntü bolluğu! #GRESUN #RTE Ydk hsbm @Meylakrhn_	2015-11-27
Meyla Karahasan	MeylaKrhn_	Giresun, Türkiye	İnsan inandığı şeyler uğruna muhteşem hatalar yapıyor... @meylakrhn	2018-05-18
Meyla	Krhn RTE		Ey Yar taş duvarlar arasındaki karanlığımın senden başka penceresi yok..! @meyla_krhn	2019-03-09
Meyla Karahasan	meyla_krhn	Giresun	Görünmeye değer hiçbir şeyin olmadığı bir görüntü bolluğu..! #RTE #DEVAM 🍌 Hesabım @MeylaKrhn askı oldu.. yedek hesabım @Krhn RTE	2019-09-28
Meyla-k	k_meylak1			2019-09-28
Meyla Karahasan	SamYeli_TR			2019-10-16
Meyla Karahasan	Samyeli_Tr28	Giresun 🇹🇷		2019-10-16
Samyeli	SamYeli_28			2019-10-16

Figure 9: Batches of fabricated accounts created over a series of years

It appears whoever was behind these accounts created a new one in June 2020. @karahasan_meyla, which is live on Twitter, currently follows one account: Erdoğan's.

A number of posts in English discussed Operation Peace Spring, Turkey's October 2019 offensive in northeastern Turkey targeting the Popular Protection Units (YPG), a group of Kurdish fighters in Syria. According to Özlem Keyhan Pusane, an associate professor at Isik University, the extent of international disapproval around this event **surprised Turkish policymakers**. The posts largely publicized the operation in positive terms: as a fight against terrorists, as standing with the Kurds, and as a contrast to purported YPG tactics of targeting civilians. Example tweets included:

- The one who says Turkey is fighting against Kurds in Syria is the Biggest Liar..! Put this fact into your brain that Turkey is fighting against Terrorist Organizations as PKK,YPG, SDG to protect its borders.. NO doubt.! #TurkeyJustKilledTerrorists #PeaceSpringOperation #Kurds
- Attention! Pro-terrorist YPG/PKK social media accounts post falsified photos from other times and places to mislead int'l public #TurkeyisnotAlone
- The perception operation which includes unreal messages that twisting the aims and targets of the peace spring operation continues. The images in the sharings that have been publishing all day long with the headline; "Turkey uses chemical weapons" belong to 2017.
- The total number of PKK / PYD-YPG terrorists who were neutralized within the scope of the Peace Spring Operation in the east of Euphrates was 415. #TurkishArmyForThePeace
- As a result of the attacks of PKK / PYD-YPG within the last 5 days, dozens of our civilian citizens were killed, nearly 200 were injured and journalists were targeted. #TwitterCensorsTRTWorld #OperationPeaceSpring

Several of the English-language pro-Syrian intervention hashtags (such as #TurkeyFightsISISandYPG) appear to have originated with AKP politician accounts, and were immediately amplified by accounts in this network. Many of these hashtags were studied by **Emmi Bevenssee in October 2019**.



Figure 10: The first live use of #TurkeyFightsISISandYPG, from an AKP leader.

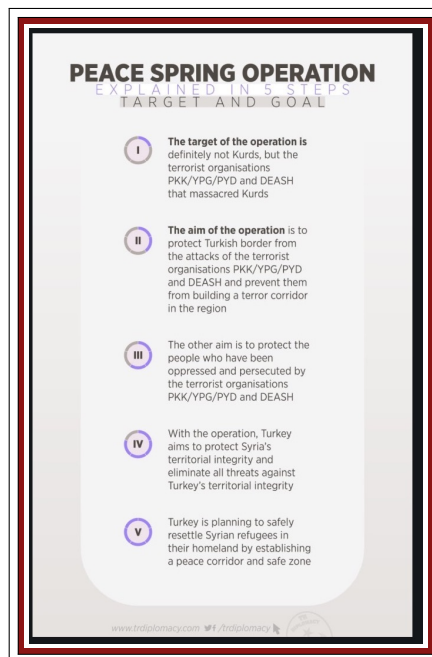


Figure 11: Early users of #TurkeyFightsISISandYPG shared this infographic. It also appeared frequently in the takedown dataset.

Other English-language tweets about Syria in the network used hashtags including #AssadYouAreKidKiller and #AssadGenocide.

We also searched for tweets about Libya, given Turkey's large role in supporting Libya's Tripoli-based government. There were only a small number of tweets about Libya — approximately 1,000 in total. The tweets generally sought

to build support for Turkish intervention in Libya; one January 2020 tweet referred to the “godlessness” of the main opposition party for being critical of Erdoğan’s decision to send troops to Libya.

Tweets about Qatar had a positive tone, saying, for example, “TURKEY WITH QATAR, EARTH FOR HUMANITY,” and using hashtags such as #TurkeyWithQatar, #Qatarismyworld, and #TurkiyeKatarKardeştir (“Turkey and Qatar are brothers”).

Many tweets in the dataset expressed solidarity with the Palestinian cause. They used hashtags such as #IsraelTheRealTerrorist, #PalestineBeautiful, #GazaUnderAttack, and #FreePalestine.

3.5 Fake Elon Musk Accounts

Although not the focus of the takedown, some accounts in the network seemed designed for financial gain. Here, we focus on accounts in the dataset that impersonated Elon Musk:

- @eIunmosk (the second character is a capital i, display name Elon Musk, 126,655 followers, created in 2012)
- @eIanmusk (the second character is a capital i, display name: Elon Musk, 103,271 followers, created in 2011)

@eIunmosk and @eIanmusk impersonated Elon Musk in July 2018. They responded to tweets that mentioned the real Elon Musk and shared links to a supposed cryptocurrency giveaway. For example, on July 13, 2018, @eIunmosk tweeted a couple of versions of “@alexhouse8 @elonmusk It about that thing I promised yesterday, but forgot to show. Here it is: <https://t.co/fZDI-moQeTA>.” The URL goes to: <https://elon-prize.blogspot.com/2018/07/official-btc-eth-giveaway.html?gsr=541211>, the supposed cryptocurrency giveaway. On July 15, 2018, @eIanmusk tweeted: “@elonmusk @danielbrennan @SierraClub <https://t.co/wi37F6DPhO>”; the link went to the same URL.

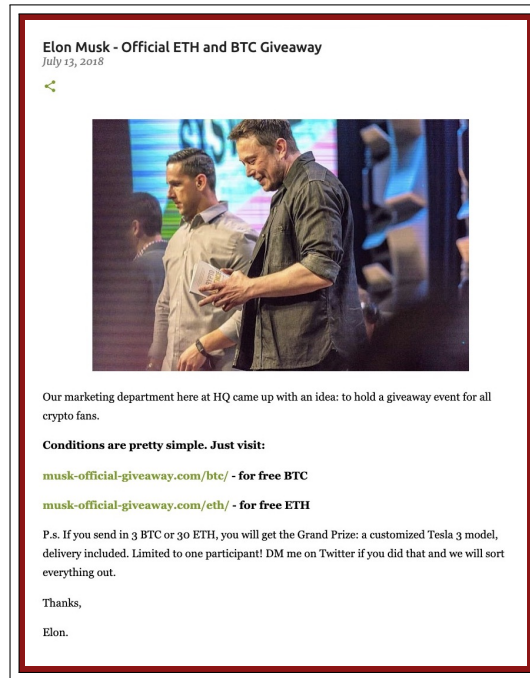


Figure 12: A **website** shared by an Elon Musk impersonator account

On July 15, 2018, @eIanmusk tweeted: “@elonmusk @zeynep Note that it was not me who started this. No offer to help should be met in such a manner imo. Real sus. Have a look at what I have for you today instead:” This tweet was likely part of the thread below:

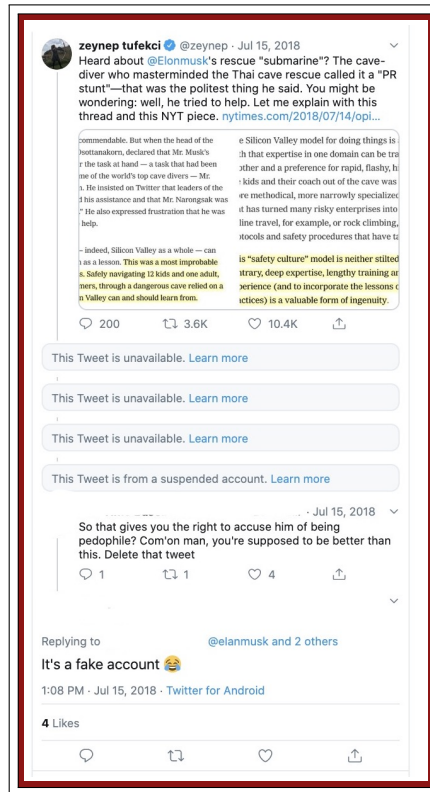


Figure 13: An Elon Musk impersonator likely used this thread to lure people into a cryptocurrency scam. One user called out the account as fake.

Both accounts stopped tweeting on July 16, 2018, suggesting that they may have been suspended around that date. Interestingly, the accounts frequently tweeted in Turkish prior to these impersonation tweets.

This is not the first time Elon Musk impersonators that engage in cryptocurrency scams have been linked to an information operation. Bellingcat connected Musk impersonators to a **pro-Chinese Twitter operation**. However in this case, it is not clear that these commercial scam accounts were linked in any meaningful way to the AKP. Additionally, **Brenna Smith** has written about the **Elon Musk cryptocurrency scam phenomenon**, which is extremely common, and has resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars being stolen. Smith argues that even internet-savvy individuals may fall for the scam, because though it seems outlandish, Elon Musk himself is outlandish.

4 Tactics

4.1 Compromised Accounts

According to Twitter, many of the accounts in this dataset were compromised. We observed several accounts with early creation dates — such as 2008 — that only had tweets from years later visible in the dataset, suggesting that perhaps the hacker had deleted pre-account takeover tweets.

Two accounts in the dataset were particularly interesting: @BylockReality and @HumanRightsDef. @BylockReality is linked to a messaging smartphone app

popular among the Gülen organization. Erdoğan accuses the Gülen movement of being behind Turkey's July 2016 coup attempt and labels it a terrorist organization. After the coup attempt, Erdoğan arrested over 50,000 people, many for using the encrypted messaging app, Bylock. The government deems having Bylock on one's phone as tantamount to proof of being a part of the Gülen movement, and thus proof of being a terrorist. The @HumanRightsDef account appears linked to a legitimate human rights group, which sometimes posts content about ByLock.

It appears these accounts were suspended by Twitter as they were subject to repeated hacking attempts by the network behind the broader operation, though we did not identify any suspicious tweets from these accounts that looked suspicious. There is no evidence that the organizations linked to these accounts participated in the broader pro-AKP network.

4.2 Retweet Rings

We identified dozens of accounts in the dataset that were part of highly centralized and organized pro-AKP retweet networks. These accounts retweet the same content, engage in inauthentic audience building tactics, and work to falsely popularize hashtags. Unlike previous retweet rings we have investigated, the rings in the takedown set appear to have been exclusively political in nature, and rarely (if at all) tweeted commercial hashtags. The rings we identified generally received low engagement.

4.2.1 Network & Account Naming, Structure, and Creation

Retweet rings in the dataset often had political names. For example, the names of some rings include "AK," referring to AKP supporters' preferred notation of the AKP as AK Party. One ring was called "AK Davam," meaning "My AK Cause." A second, "AK Hilal," translates to "AK Crescent." The crescent is an Islamic symbol on the Turkish flag and is used frequently by AKP supporters. Although we focus on the AK Davam and AK Hilal networks in this report, the takedown dataset includes a number of other retweet rings that warrant further investigation.

The AK Davam and AK Hilal networks share purported leadership. The bio of an account under the name Zeynep Akgul (@okyanusgozlum0) identifies the user as the founding president of AK Hilal and vice president of AK Davam, while an account under the name Hakan (@hknknr07) claims to be the founding president of AK Davam and vice president of AK Hilal. Zeynep Akgul and Hakan also claim to be founding president and vice president of a number of other retweet rings in the dataset. Within the overall network (e.g. AK Hilal Gruplari or "AK Hilal Group"), there are sub-network group accounts (e.g. AK Hilal "Gruplari 3 ve 4" or "Group 3 and 4").

Some accounts linked to the network are included in the takedown dataset, while others remain live. One still-live account is @Ak_Davam_01, which is dedicated to retweeting Dr. Halis Bayrak—an individual with positions in pro-AKP non-profits.



Figure 14: A still-live member of the AK Davam retweet ring



Figure 15: A tweet accompanied by a video that highlights different members of the AK Hilal retweet ring

In the AK Davam network and in the AK Hilal network, several accounts were created on the same day or within a short time frame, suggesting coordinated behavior. In the AK Davam network, @akdavam7_8 and @akdavam9_10 were created on March 9, 2019, while @akdavam_3_4 and @akdavam_5_6 were created one day apart (on September 25 and 24, 2018, respectively). In the AK Hilal network, @akhilal_1_2, @akhilal_5_6, and @akhilal_9_10 were all created on September 8, 2017.

Many of the “AK Davam” and “AK Hilal” network accounts in the dataset follow a unique pattern in the user bio. They begin with ★AK DAVAM ★ in their bio (for AK Davam accounts) and ◆AK HILAL ◆ or ◆AK HILAL ◆ (for AK Hilal accounts). They then reference their group number (e.g. 3rd and 4th Groups RT account), followed by hashtags. Most of the accounts are explicitly

group accounts, while several identify as leaders of particular groups or as leaders of the network writ large.

user_display_name	user_screen_name	user_profile_description	follower_count	following_count	account_creation_date
AK HİLAL OFFICIAL	Akhilalgruplari	AK HİLAL ve YILDIRIM TIM / GRUPLARI RESMİ HESABI... Kurucu Başkan	965	46	2017-05-29
Arife Yeilz Ymz AK HİLAL	_Arfe344	@zeynom7927 Genel Başkan @hknkn07 #AKHilal #YıldırımTim #GündemTlİstİşare	4390	2937	2015-02-09
AK HİLAL RT 1-2	akhilal_1_2	AK HİLAL Grupları 1 ve 2. Grup Başkanı @YR3444 Ana Hesabım	408	223	2017-09-08
AK HİLAL RT 1-2	Akhilal_1_2	AK HİLAL Grupları 1 ve 2. Grup RT Hesabı... #HakDavamTlİstİşare	130	82	2018-05-10
AK HİLAL RT 3-4	34AkhilalRt	AK HİLAL Grupları 3 ve 4. Grupları RT Hesabı... #AKHilal #GündemTlİstİşare	555	400	2017-12-27
AK HİLAL RT 3-4	akhilalRT_3_4	AK HİLAL Grupları 3 ve 4. Grup RT Hesabı... #HakDavamTlİstİşare	182	129	2018-02-07
AK HİLAL RT 3-4	4Akhilal3	AK HİLAL Grupları 3 ve 4. Grup RT Hesabı #AKHilal #GündemTlİstİşare	26	58	2019-03-28
AK HİLAL RT 5-6	akhilal5_6	AK HİLAL Grupları 5 ve 6. Grupları RT Hesabı... #AKHilal #GündemTlİstİşare	966	1049	2017-08-03
AK HİLAL RT 5-6	akhilal5_6	AK HİLAL Grupları 5 ve 6. Grup RT Hesabı... #HakDavamTlİstİşare	537	375	2017-09-08
GnyYdz	GnyYdz	AK HİLAL Grupları 5 ve 6. Grup Başkanı #AKHilal #GündemTlİstİşare	632	733	2018-11-20
AK HİLAL RT 7-8	akdavam0	AK HİLAL Grupları 7 ve 8. Grupları RT Hesabı... #TürkiyeTlİstİşare	726	653	2017-12-05
AK HİLAL RT 7-8	akhilal_7_8	AK HİLAL Grupları 7 ve 8. Grup RT Hesabı... #AKHilal #GündemTlİstİşare	354	191	2018-12-09
AK HİLAL RT 9-10	akhilal_9_10	AK HİLAL Grupları 9 ve 10. Grup RT Hesabı... #AKHilal #GündemTlİstİşare	853	542	2017-09-08
SaRmaŞık AK HİLAL	Samasik79	AK HİLAL Grupları 9 ve 10. Grup Başkanı #AKHilal	1711	1496	2017-09-30
AK HİLAL RT 11-12	akhilal_11_12	AK HİLAL Grupları 11 ve 12. Grup RT Hesabı... #HakDavamTlİstİşare	246	447	2018-11-06
Şeyma AK HİLAL	seyma_ank06	AK HİLAL Grupları 13 ve 14. Grup Başkanı #İttihadMiliŞuraTT@seyma_ank06	862	929	2016-10-29
AK HİLAL RT 15-16	akhilal_13_14	AK HİLAL Grupları 15 ve 16. Grup RT Hesabı...	559	677	2017-09-18

Figure 16: Example accounts that were part of the AK Hilal network

user_display_name	user_screen_name	user_profile_description	follower_count	following_count	account_creation_date
AK DAVAM RT 9-10	Akdavam9_10	AK DAVAM Grupları 1 VE 2. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	205	170	2019-03-09
AK DAVAM RT 1-2	Akdavam_1_2	AK DAVAM Grupları 1 ve 2. Grup RT Hesabı... #GündemTlİstİşare	593	590	2018-03-11
AK DAVAM RT 1-2	Akdavam1_2	AK DAVAM Grupları 1 ve 2. Grup RT Hesabı... #GündemTlİstİşare	304	181	2018-09-22
AK DAVAM RT 3-4	Akdavam_3_4	AK DAVAM Grupları 3 ve 4. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	389	260	2018-09-25
AK DAVAM RT 5-6	Akdavam_5_6	AK DAVAM Grupları 5 ve 6. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	357	243	2018-09-24
AK DAVAM RT 7-8	Akdavam_7_8	AK DAVAM Grupları 7 ve 8. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	2778	3077	2018-07-24
AK DAVAM RT 7-8	Akdavam7_8	AK DAVAM Grupları 7 ve 8. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	308	216	2018-11-15
AK DAVAM RT 7-8	akdavam7_8	AK DAVAM Grupları 7 ve 8. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	60	59	2019-03-09
AK DAVAM RT 9-10	Akdavam_9_10	AK DAVAM Grupları 9 ve 10. Grup RT Hesabı #GündemTlİstİşare	383	277	2018-08-26
hafs&Rt	snymgs53	AKDAVAM GRUPLARI : BAŞKANI: #GündemTlİstİşare Ana hesap @snymgs53	3287	4636	2015-10-18

Figure 17: Example accounts that were part of the AK Davam network

4.2.2 Tweet Timing and Tweet Content

The AK Hilal and AK Davam networks each appear to be highly coordinated. We identified 17 accounts in the AK Hilal ring that were either group accounts or executive accounts of sub-network groups (@_Arfe344 is President of Groups 1 and 2, @GnyYdz is President of Groups 5 and 6, @Sarmasik97 is President of Groups 9 and 10, and @seyma_ank06 is President of Groups 13 and 14). The 17 AK Hilal accounts produced 128,257 tweets in the dataset, 98.6% of which were retweets.

The accounts often tweet about the same issue and aim to spread the same message. For example, within a span of one hour on October 19, 2017, many of the AK Hilal accounts tweeted about the opposition CHP using the hashtag #YeteneksizsinizCHP (“#YouAreIneptCHP”):

- @akhilal_1_2 (16:19): Devletin ve milletin hep karşısında olan bir oluşuma #YeteneksizsinizCHP denmez de ne denir? (What do you call an organization that stands against a State and the people? #YouAreIneptCHP)
- @akhilal_5_6 (16:25): Vatana zor günlerinde ihanet eden bir oluşuma #YeteneksizsinizCHP denir. (What do you call an organization that betrays a country in its day of struggle? #YouAreIneptCHP)
- @akhilal_9_10 (16:33): Chp diyorum sonra bi gulme geliyor 😂😂😂
😂#YeteneksizsinizCHP <https://t.co/4wfmS2gAoL> (Can you even say CHP without laughing? 😂😂😂😂#YouAreIneptCHP)
- @akhilal_13_14 (16:42): Kemale soruyorum ne zaman yenilgiyi kabul

edeceksiniz #YeteneksizsinizCHP <https://t.co/xybLZUEwuB> (I am asking Kemal [chairman of the CHP], when will you accept defeat? #YouAreIneptCHP)

- @akhilal_1_2 (16:53): Tayyip gitsin de isterse ülke yok olsun diyecek bir zihniyet #YeteneksizsinizCHP (A mentality that wouldn't care if country is destroyed as long as Erdogan is gone. #YouAreIneptCHP)
- @Sarmasik79 (17:00): RT @OmerSezerRT: Başında olduğu kurumu batıran Kılıçdaroğlu, Chp başkanı olursa #YeteneksizsinizCHP olması gayet doğal <https://t.co/4RdqI...> (RT @OmerSezer RT: Kilicdaroglu [chairman of the CHP] is naturally the head of CHP, since he bankrupted the organization that he was in charge of. #YouAreIneptCHP)

We plot the number of tweets over time for each of the 17 accounts in the AK Hilal network and see that the number of tweets for different accounts often rise and fall in unison.

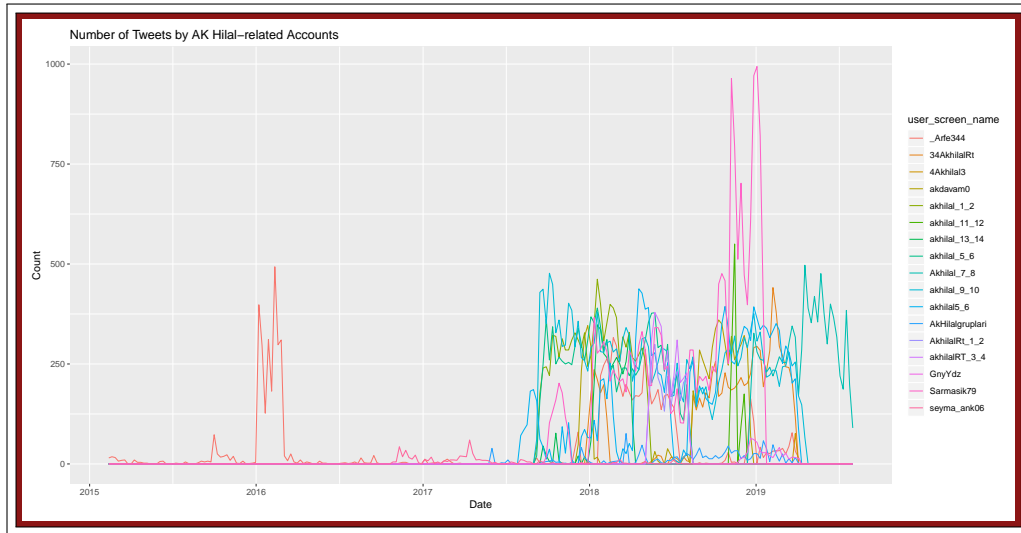


Figure 18: Tweets over time for members of the AK Hilal ring

In the AK Davam network, we identified nine accounts that are explicitly AK Davam group accounts, and one account (@snygms53) that claims to be its president. We did not, however, find presidents of network sub-groups as we did in the case of AK Hilal.

In total, the nine AK Davam group accounts produced 48,091 tweets in the takedown. 99.2% of these tweets had no engagement. The overwhelming majority (98.9%) of these tweets were retweets, while only 506 were original tweets. This strongly suggests that AK Davam group accounts are vehicles to enhance the popularity of other accounts.

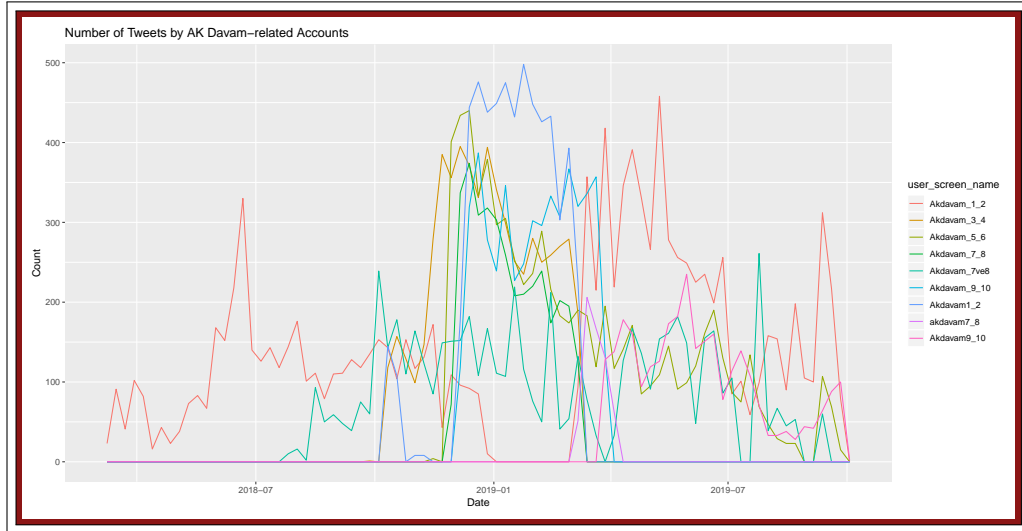


Figure 19: Tweets over time for members of the AK Davam ring

The AK Davam network seems to amplify tweets from AKP officials and AKP supporters specifically. The AK Davam group accounts highlighted above retweeted @AKparti, the Justice and Development Party Official Twitter account, 1,431 times. This was the most frequently retweeted account from the AK Davam pages. Another frequently retweeted account is @zeynepkanter, the account of a member of the AKP Public Relations Commission. @zeynepkanter is the twelfth most retweeted account from AK Davam (retweeted 477 times), despite having only 1,767 followers.



Figure 20: AK Davam accounts frequently retweeted AKP officials such Zeynep Kanter, a member of the AKP Public Relations Commission.

Many of the most frequently retweeted accounts by AK Davam are also frequently retweeted by AK Hilal. This includes accounts that appear to be party supporters. For example, the fourth most retweeted account by each of the two datasets is @dr_uveys and the sixth most retweeted account by AK Hilal

accounts, @SonsuzGull, is the nineteenth most retweeted by the AK Davam network. This is further evidence that the networks are likely related.

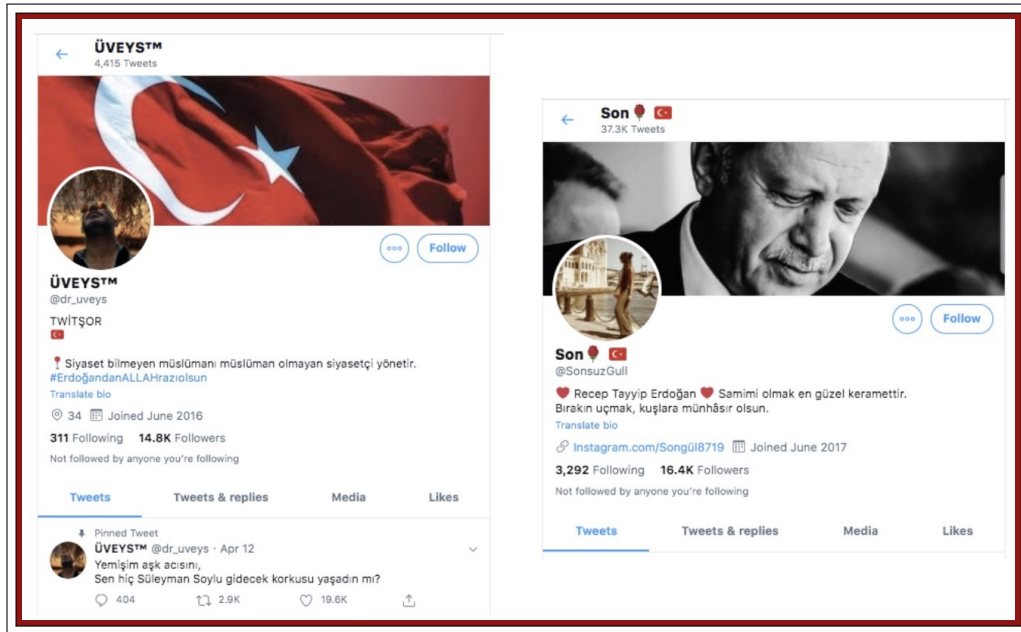


Figure 21: AK Davam accounts frequently retweeted AKP supporters' accounts, such as @dr_uveys and @SonsuzGull

5 Conclusion

This report has discussed the narratives and tactics of a large network of accounts linked to the youth wing of the AKP. We observed batches of fake accounts, including some that were part of well-organized retweet rings to promote pro-AKP content. We also saw compromised accounts re-purposed for Erdoğan cheerleading. We encourage researchers to monitor still-live members of pro-AKP retweet rings to understand what issues these networks prioritize going forward. We also hope researchers will dig further into the networks advocating for particular policy reforms. If these networks were encouraged by the party, it could suggest elites are using seemingly antagonistic astroturfing – messaging that pretends to be grassroots – to increase the legitimacy of impending policy change and make the government appear to be more responsive to citizens.

The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.