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The recent escalation between Turkey and the U.S. provokes response from cyber groups

Summary

The recent escalation in tensions between the United States and Turkey over the detention of pastor Andrew Brunson, have prompted Turkish patriotic hacktivist groups to target American websites. Historically, the two most prominent hacktivist groups Aslan Neferler Tim (ANT) and Turk Hack Team (THT) have reacted to political issues impacting Turkey, by targeting the perceived adversary with low level nuisance attacks such as web defacements and Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS). As the political situation deteriorates, Anomali expects to see an increase in hacktivist related activity targeting American websites.

Key Points

- The Turkish hacktivist group Aslan Neferler Tim is currently actively targeting sites hosted in the United States. Since mid-August 2018, they have claimed attacks against the U.S. Federal Bank, American Bank & Trust, and hotel and holiday sites belonging to President Donald Trump.¹

- The group Turk Hack Team have previously responded offensively in political incidents affecting Turkey adversely. It is probable that members will conduct operations against the United States.
- On August 17, 2018, members of Turk Hack Team are suspected to have been in London and visited locations with ties to the American Expedition, financial organizations, and the Trump Group.
- Both groups, Aslan Neferler Tim and Turk Hack Team, tend to conduct defacements and DDoS attacks.
- Aslan Neferler Tim has been known to steal FTP credentials.
- Relations between Turkey and the United States have been strained amid concerns over Turkey's desire to purchase Russian surface-to-air missile systems and the United States backing of Syrian Kurds.²
- Turkey and the United States have the two largest armies in NATO.³

1 <https://www.mynet.com/turk-hacker-grubu-aslan-neferler-tim-american-federal-bankasi-ni-hackledi-110104335064>

2 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-27/u-s-says-it-will-sanction-nato-ally-turkey-for-russian-missiles>

3 <https://www.forces.net/news/tri-service/turkish-military-numbers>

Background

Turkey and the United States are currently in a standoff regarding a negotiation for the release of prisoner Andrew Craig Brunson. The negotiation has led to the imposition of US sanctions as of the 1st of August and a doubling of tariffs against aluminum and steel on the 10th of August. The Turkish economy has been vulnerable to these impositions as the Turkish Lira dropped 20% after the announcement of tariff increases. President Tayyip Erdogan, in a pre-recorded address, has appealed to "religious and patriotic feelings"⁴ in a bid to harden the Turkish people against the looming economic crisis. Similarly, the call for the release of the Evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson has been rhetorically characterized as the "right thing to do" as the prisoner is a "man of faith."⁵

Andrew Brunson is an American pastor who has lived in Turkey for over twenty years. He was arrested in 2016 as part of a broad crackdown on dissidents believed to have taken part in a failed military coup.⁶ In 2016, Andrew and his wife Norine Brunson went to a police station because of an invitation left at

their house, where they were subsequently arrested. Norine was released but Andrew was held and then sentenced to prison on the 6th of December 2016, accused of being part of the FETO/PDY terrorist organizations.⁷ Despite receiving demands for his release and the attention of people from all around the world, on the 24th of August 2017 he had further accusations placed against him. He was accused of "Political or military espionage, Attempting to overthrow the Government, Attempting to overthrow the Turkish Grand National Assembly, and Attempting to overthrow the Constitutional Order".⁸ On the 25th of July 2018 Andrew Brunson was transferred to house arrest due to health concerns, but he is still not allowed to leave the house or the country.⁹

President Donald Trump reportedly negotiated the release of Andrew Brunson in exchange for the release of Ebru Ozkan, a Turkish woman being held in Israel. Ebru Ozkan was released on the 15th of July by Israel, but a Turkish court ordered that Brunson be placed under house arrest instead of being sent back to the United States.¹⁰ President Tayyip Erdogan is now requesting the extradition of the exiled Turkish leader

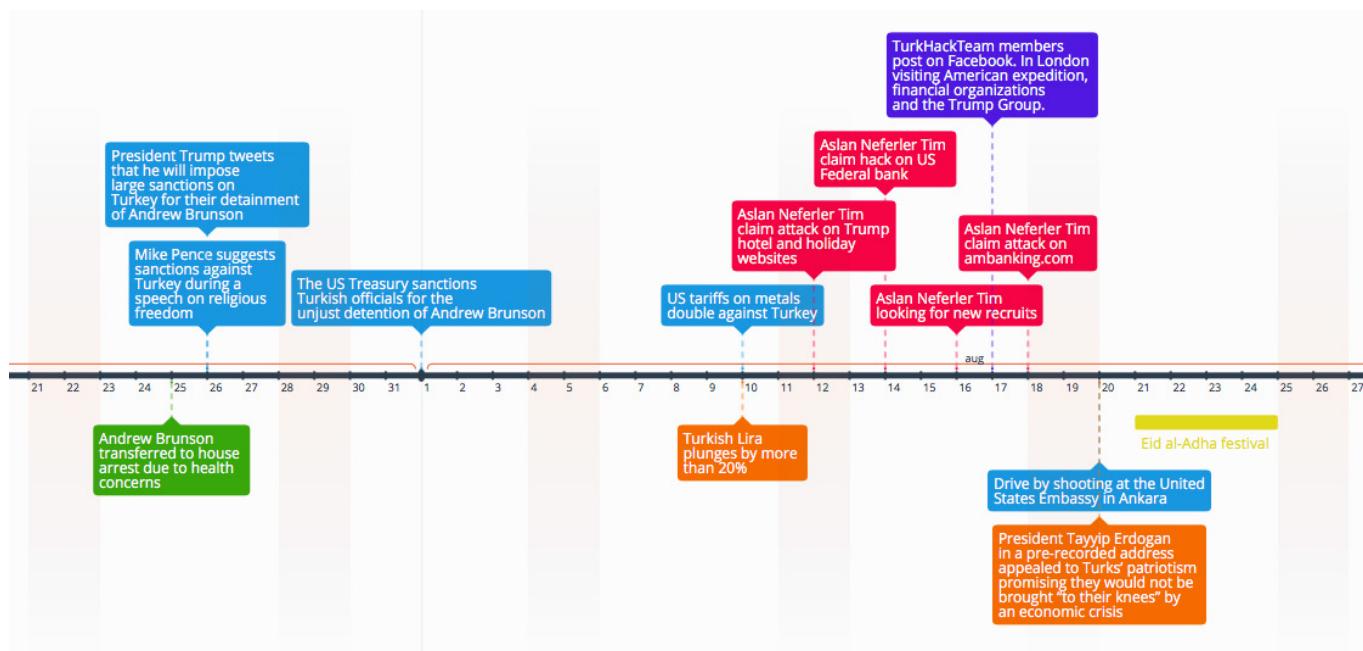


Figure 1. Timeline of key incidents between July and August 2018

4 <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-currency-erdogan/erdogan-invokes-patriotism-islam-as-lira-remains-under-pressure-idUKKCN1L5008>

5 <https://www.dw.com/en/trump-demands-turkey-release-us-christian-pastor-andrew-brunson-or-face-sanctions/a-44842486>

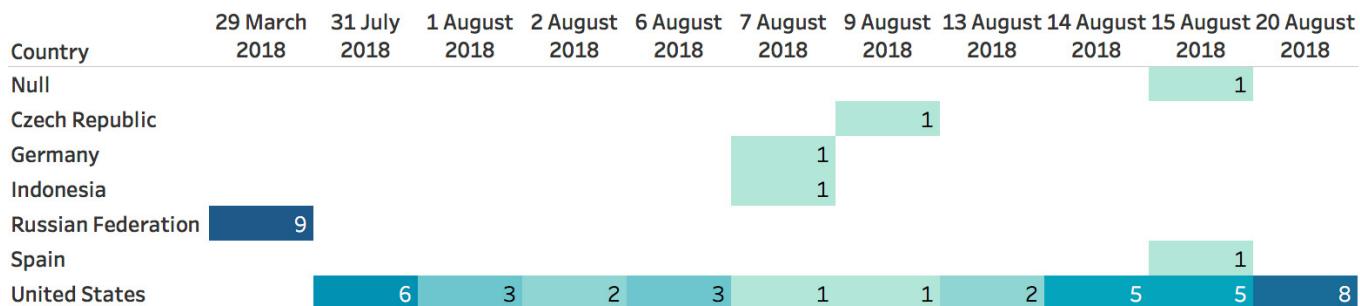
6 <http://time.com/5351025/andrew-brunson-trump-turkey-sanctions/>

7 https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/108601/iirf_reports_2017_1.pdf

8 <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/III.B%20CeCe%20Heil%20Testimony.pdf>

9 <https://www.upi.com/Health-concern-moves-US-pastor-to-house-arrest-in-Turkey/8071532538319/>

10 <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/399218-trump-asked-israel-to-release-alleged-hamas-smuggler-in-prisoner-swap>



of the Gulen movement: Fetullah Gullen.¹¹ Despite the diplomatic standoff between the two countries, Turkey has received support from international partners including by Russia and Qatar. Qatar has pledged to help the struggling economy by investing up to \$15 billion.¹²

Relations between Turkey and the United States have been strained for some time because of ongoing concerns over Turkey's desire to purchase Russia's S-400 air defense system. This has led to the United States potentially withdrawing the supply of F-35 stealth fighters, despite heavy investment from Turkey. The United States is concerned that if Turkey possesses both the Russian S-400 system and the F-35 stealth fighters, Turkey will be privy to how they both interact. More specifically, Russia may then gain a competitive advantage.¹³ The United States has also backed Syrian Kurds in the Syrian civil conflict against Bashar al-Assad; Turkey has long considered Kurdish militants a threat to national security. Escalation of tensions, and the fall in the Turkish Lira, have led to a drive-by shooting in Ankara where two men have been arrested for firing at the US Embassy.¹⁴ Additionally,

we have observed an increase in offensive cyber activity from patriotic hacktivist groups in Turkey that we believe are in direct response to some of the geopolitical events mentioned above.

Turkish Cyber Activity

There are two active Turkish patriotic hacktivist groups, Aslan Neferler Tim and the Turk Hack Team. Historically, Aslan Neferler Tim has been known to respond offensively to political issues adversely impacting Turkey. In 2017, FireEye reported that the group had launched Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks against the Belgian Ministry of Defense, and city of Antwerp websites. This is believed to be a reaction to riots in late October 2017 after a bus of Kurdistan Workers Party PKK supporters were escorted by the police through a primarily Turkish part of the city. FireEye analysts claim that campaigns by the group only last a few days.¹⁵ Since the announcements of sanctions and increased tariffs on the Turkish economy Aslan Neferler Tim have claimed attacks against the US Federal bank and President Donald Trump's holiday and hotel websites.¹⁶ They have also claimed a targeted attack against the site of an American bank (ambanking.com). Data taken from zone-h shows an increase in defacements from July 31st onwards after a period of inactivity since March. There is a distinct targeting of websites hosted in the United States.¹⁷

The Turk Hack Team have also previously engaged



11 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/13/turkish-lira-crisis-caused-by-standoff-between-trump-and-erdogan>
 12 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-capitalizes-on-trumps-effort-to-break-and-isolate-turkey/2018/08/19/3f6154ba-a17e-11e8-a3dd-2a1991f075d5_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bbe1bdd9da2c
 13 <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/americas-big-fear-turkey-mixing-f-35s-and-russias-s-400-air-defense-system-25152>
 14 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/turkey-shots-fired-embassy-ankara-deepening-row-180820054356692.html>
 15 <http://www.intelligenttechchannels.com/turkish-threat-actor-aslan-neferler-tim-targets-belgian-government-sites-according-to-fireeye/>
 16 <https://www.sabah.com.tr/ekonomi/2018/08/16/turk-hackerlar-trumpi-hackledi>
 17 <http://www.zone-h.org/archive/notifier=Aslan%20Neferler%20Tim?hz=1>

in attacks that appear to be in response to political incidents. In March 2017 the Turk Hack Team engaged in the “Netherlands Operation.” The operation was in response to decisions made by the governments of Netherlands and Germany to block Turkish ministers from entering certain towns. There were at least 2700 sites defaced by the group. Previous to this operation, the group claimed a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack on the United States Library of Congress in July 2016. This was motivated by the perception that the United States had played a role in the attempted coup in Turkey of the same year.¹⁸ Social media posts by members of the group do not appear to be as prominently motivated by the current escalation in tensions between Turkey and the United States. However, a Facebook post by one member suggests some of them were in London on the 17th of August 2018 and intended to visit the American expedition, financial organizations and the Trump group.¹⁹ It is likely this is linked to the current climate but there was no further information indicating why or what the members did. The Turk Hack Team seem to operate as a loose collective, with many members opting to put the acronym (THT) in their social media handle. The umbrella group has a core forum that seems to teach, organize CTFs and discuss related subjects.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current political climate, whilst on the surface is tied to the negotiations for prisoners, is more broadly



connected to the strained relationship between Washington and Ankara. Donald Trump, on the advice of Mike Pence, has threatened and imposed on Turkey economic sanctions and tariffs. This has had a dramatic impact on the Turkish economy. One side of the argument is that the U.S. is not responsible for the weakness in the Lira, that it is the consequence of mismanagement and interference from President Erdogan. On the other hand, knowledge of this weakness is a strong negotiating tool for the United States who might feel compelled to bring Turkey back in line with NATO. President Donald Trump has demonstrated the strength of American sanctions on an issue that is domestically sound and “righteous.” He already has a large support base from the thousands of people, Christians worldwide and at home, who want to see Pastor Andrew Brunson free. At the same time, he is able to demonstrate to Turkey what can happen if they do not attempt to align themselves with U.S. interests.

The question is whether the United States will want to further hurt the Turkish economy and if Turkey will swallow its pride and release the Pastor. If neither side backs down, the Turkish people are likely to suffer the consequences. Groups such as Aslan Neferler Tim and Turk Hack Team will rush to exhibit their defense of Turkey’s honor and attack the perceived perpetrator of the grievance. At the time of writing, this is already happening against American sites and is likely to continue until either side backs down, whether in the open or through closed diplomatic channels.

18 <https://www.digitalshadows.com/blog-and-research/turk-hack-team-and-the-netherlands-operation/>

19 <https://www.facebook.com/Herakles06/>