

How Turks Mobilized Against the Coup

The Power of the Mosque and the Hashtag

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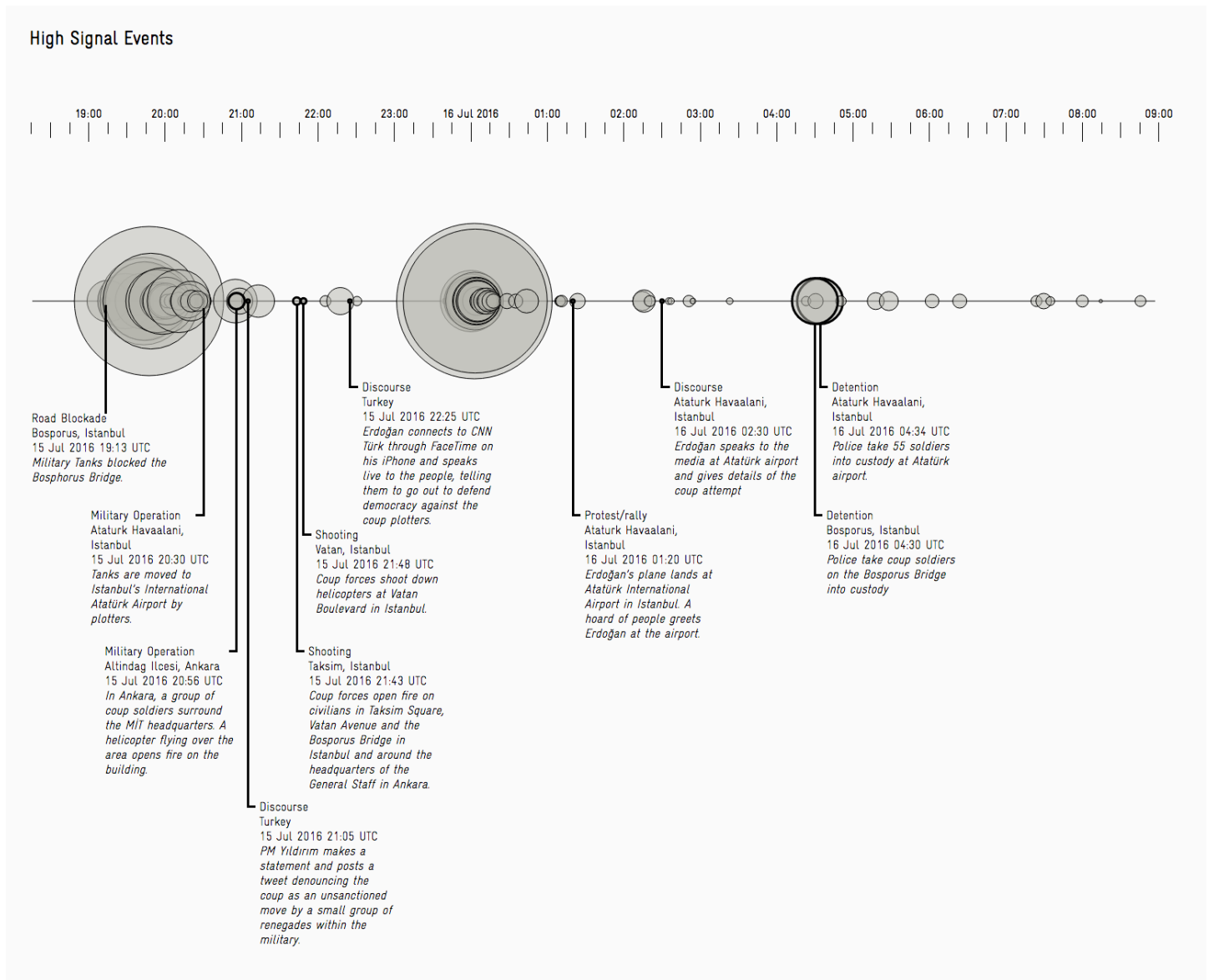
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The Arab Spring movement has long been characterized as a primarily secular phenomenon that was powered by social media. But some scholars, such as [Kat Eghdamian](#), [Seyla Benhabib](#), [Michael Hoffman](#), and [Amaney Jamal](#) have challenged this narrative, arguing that mosques were a silent but central driver of the Arab Spring. Eghdamian, in particular, makes a convincing case that mosque networks acted as anchors across socio-economic strata, unified grievances, and legitimized and helped support popular mobilization. Although convincing, these arguments often lack empirical evidence, mostly because there hasn’t been enough measurable data on how mosque networks operate in relation to digital media in times of crises. But the recent coup attempt in Turkey, which generated one of the most successful hybrid, religious–political mobilizations in the country’s history, could bridge that gap, thanks to widespread access to digital media, as well as the emergence of new analytical tools.

The anti-coup protests produced a flood of digital data with millions documenting the events and protesting against the coup online. We gathered this information using a combination of algorithms that can comb social media and other open data sources in real-time and capture data with a high level of spatial and temporal granularity. On top of this first layer of data, we mapped Istanbul’s extensive mosque network, which served as a traditional, grassroots channel for mobilization. We found that the mosques, in addition to digital media, did play a significant role in mobilizing Turks who were against the coup to frustrate rogue military forces, such as by physically blocking their movements and overwhelming their defensive positions in the strategic areas of Istanbul.

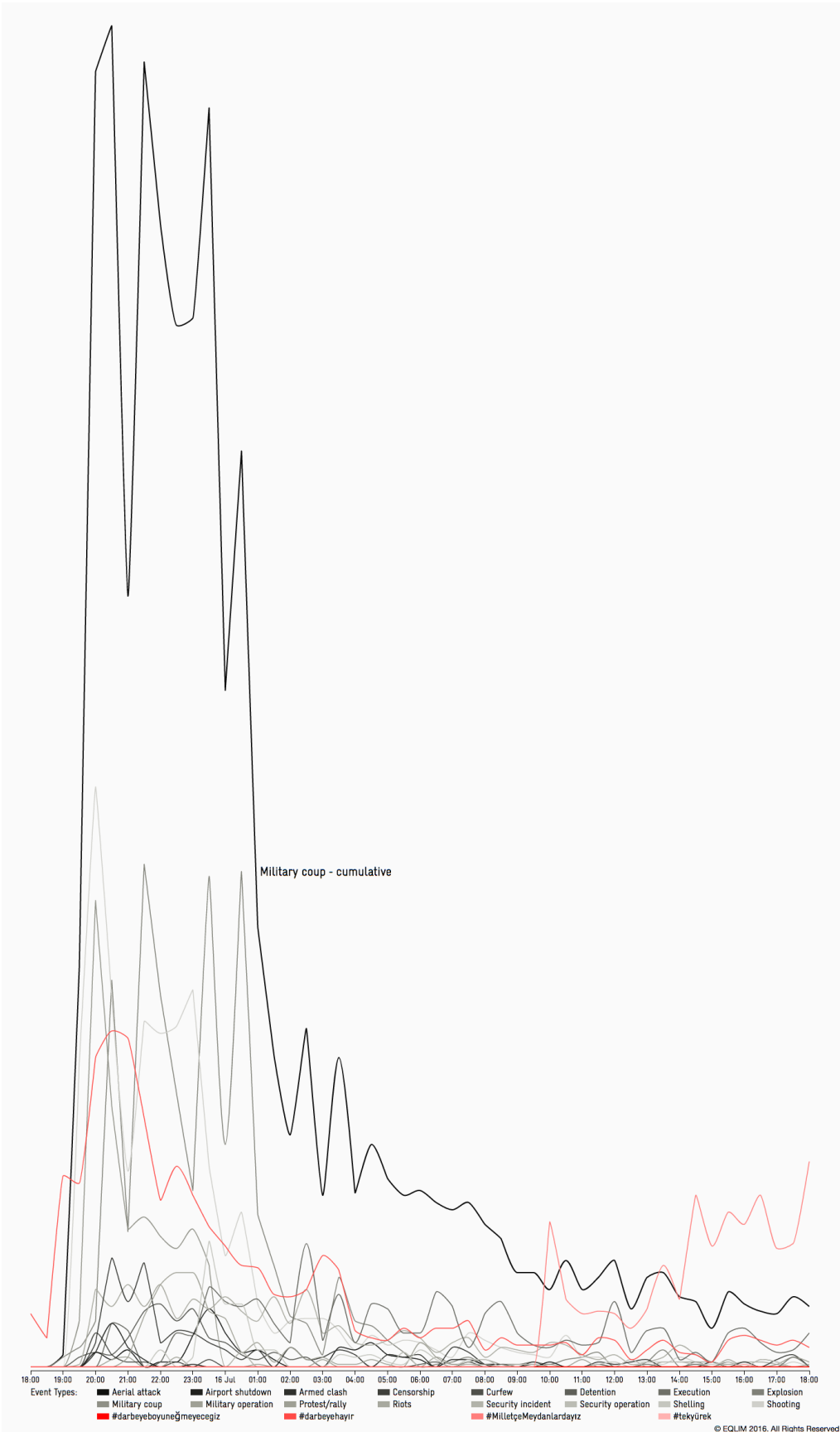
Surprisingly, our analysis showed that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan played a belated role in mobilizing Turks to his defense. The general consensus is that social media “[saved](#)” Erdogan after he used FaceTime and Twitter to implore citizens to join the resistance and they responded, [in the millions](#), by taking to the streets to “[foil](#)” the coup attempt. But our comprehensive analysis of the data detected high levels of organic mobilization against the coup—first online, then through mosque

networks, and finally on the ground—as early as 9:47 PM EEST (Eastern European Summer Time), long before Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made their appeals on live television at 11:05 PM EEST and 12:25 AM EEST, respectively.



According to our analysis, as rogue fighter jets began buzzing low across the skies in Ankara and Istanbul the evening of July 15, Turks took to Twitter to tweet about the peculiar sightings, as well as the sudden deployment of tanks on Istanbul's Bosphorus Bridge, which spans the eponymous strait and connects Europe and Asia. A crop of videos also appeared on Instagram chronicling the unusual proliferation of troop transport trucks across the city. At the very same time, the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) regional networks and sympathizers—and even groups that identified with the opposition parties—began to rally against this unexpected movement in troops, which we now know, had raised suspicions among Turks that a coup was unfolding. Several religious brotherhoods (or *tariqas*) in Istanbul—concentrated in the historic Fatih and Üsküdar districts—were also among the first groups to organize. They connected through phone calls and SMS messages and urged their followers to march toward and cluster around areas with high concentrations of troops.

This effort galvanized dozens of followers who were later joined by civilian masses who had been mobilized by the *tariqas* as well as the AKP and some other civil society groups.



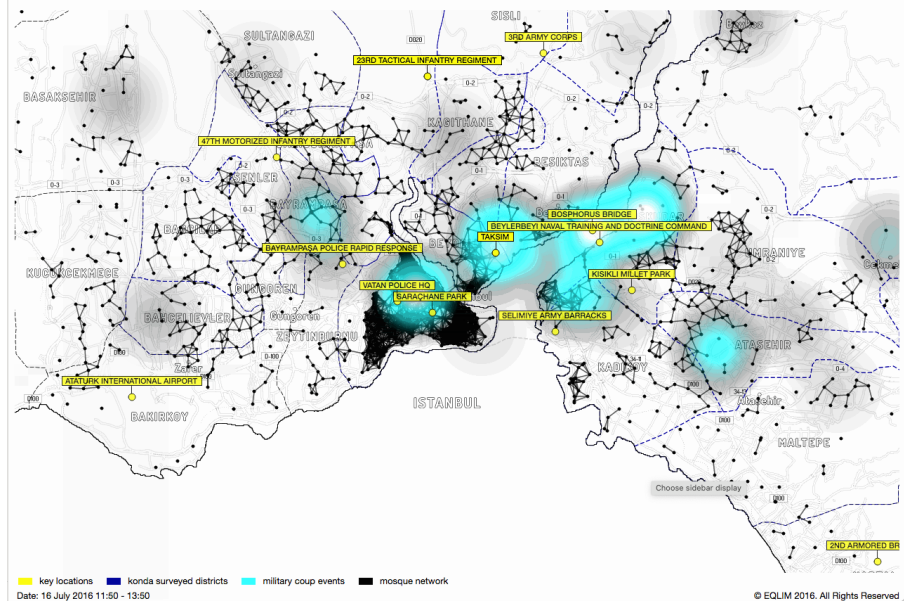
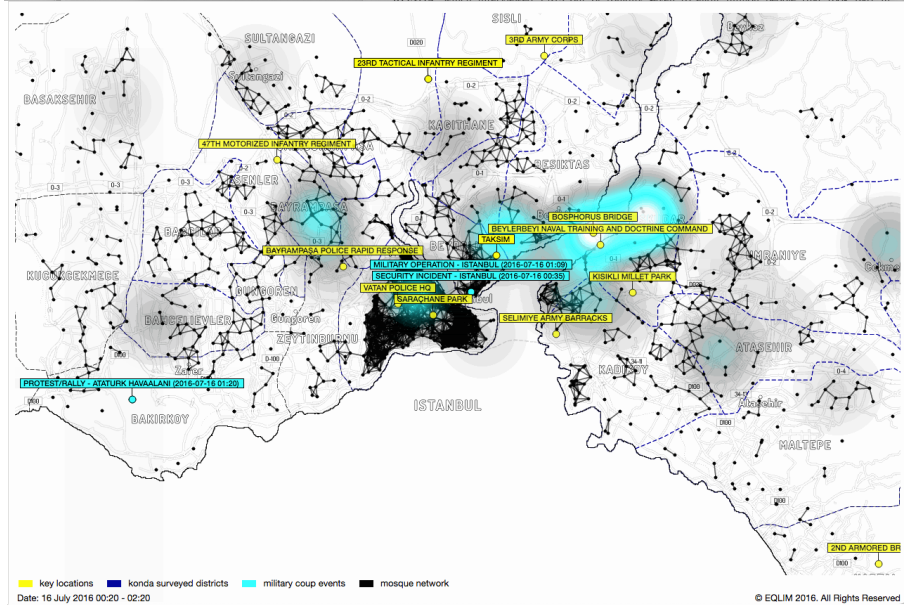
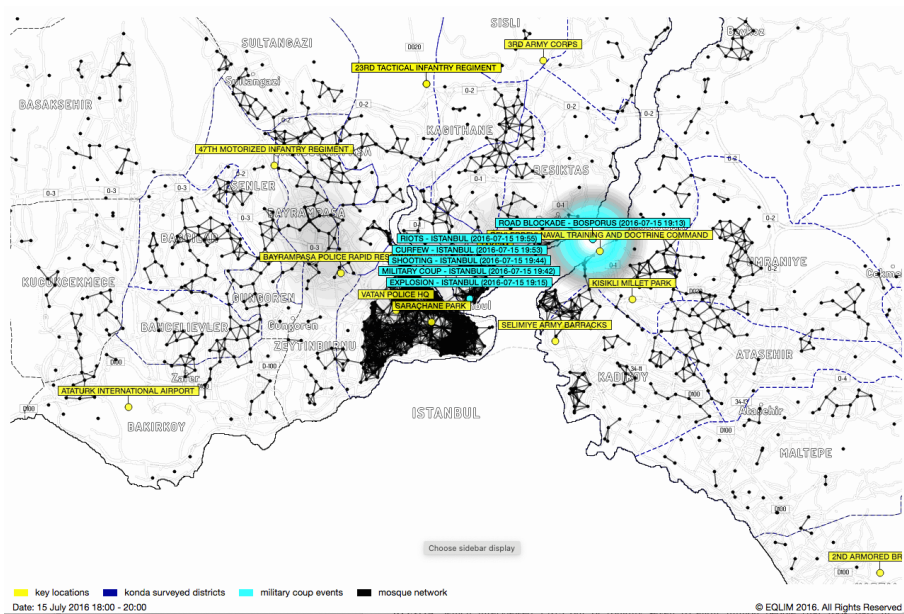
Within hours, their numbers reached several thousands and either overwhelmed or barred the movement of the disorganized and poorly led rogue troops. Our geospatial data study indicates that

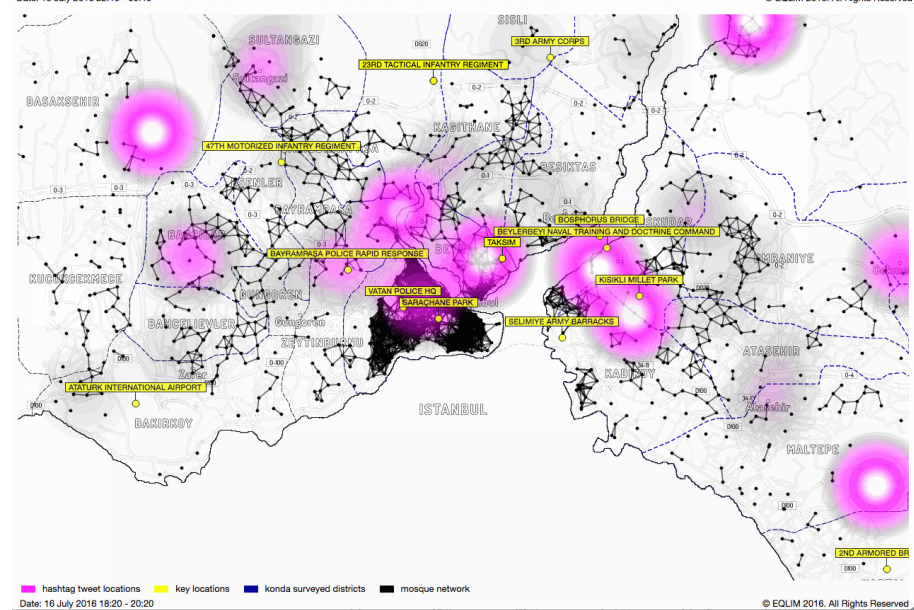
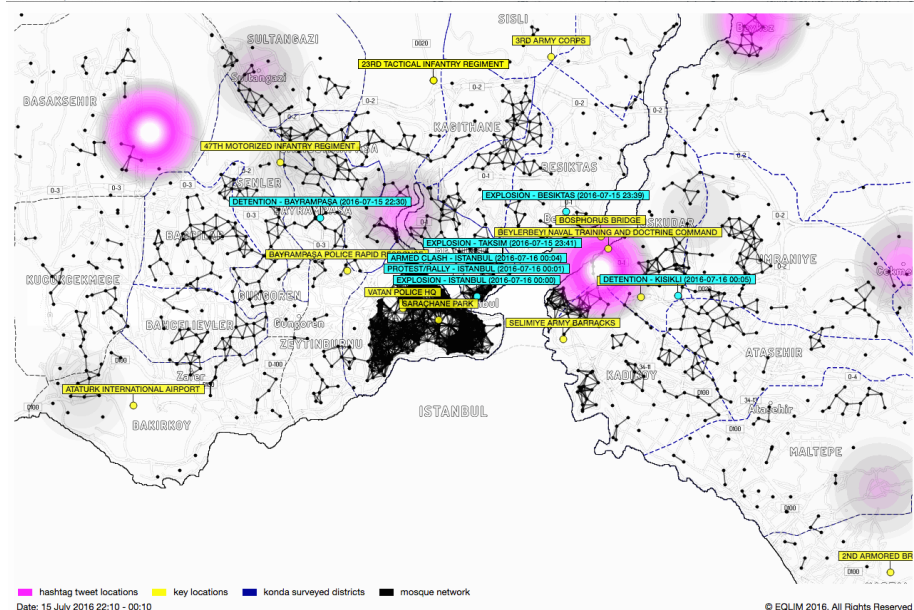
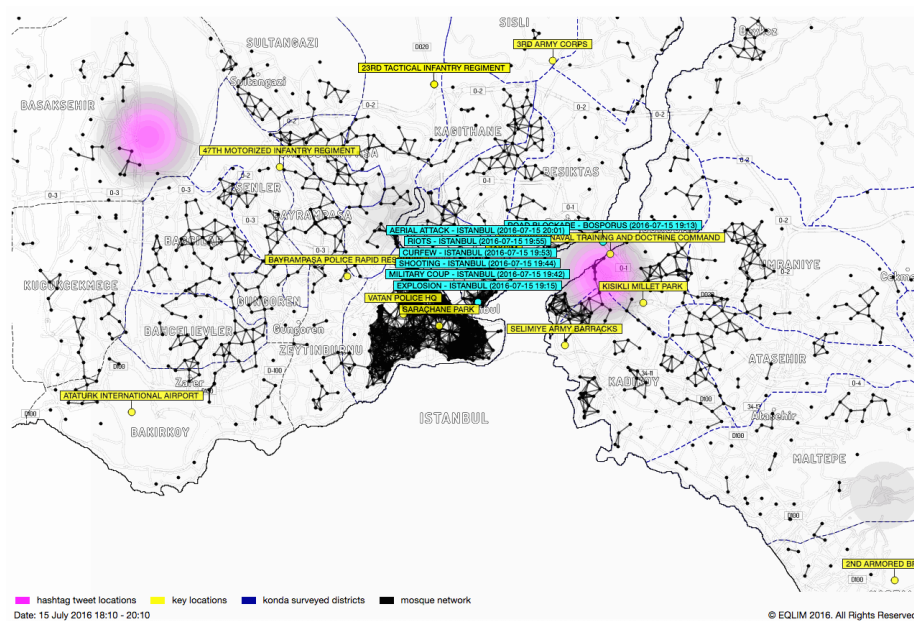
the resistance commenced at roughly 10 PM EEST in response to the troops' barricade on the Bosphorus Bridge. Our algorithm first picked up signals both on the ground and online that indicated resistance around the neighborhoods of Nakkastepe and Kisikli, which are close to the Asian side of the bridge. At the same time, one of the strongest social media campaigns against the coup emerged in the northwestern district of Basaksehir, which holds a tight-knit network of AKP youth. By 11 PM EEST, the physical protests had traveled across the Bosphorus Bridge to the European side and down into Taksim Square, as protestors sought to disrupt the flow of rogue troops into the city.

Concurrently, two seemingly unrelated groups mobilized: mosques across Istanbul (and later, the rest of Turkey) turned on their loudspeakers to broadcast the *salah* prayers as a form of defiance, mobilization, and protest against the attempted coup. A [video](#) posted on Youtube, taken in a nondescript neighborhood in Istanbul, captured the sound of these incantations as they competed with the thundering engine of a jet plane flying low across the night sky. A social media campaign also took hold online, clustered around anti-coup hashtags—such as #DarbeyeHayır (no to coup), #VataniçinNöbetteyiz (on guard for the motherland), and #TekYürek (single heart)—that were all intended to broaden and hasten mobilization. This created a two-way channel for political communication. One was top-down, whereby the mosque networks, which are overseen by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, a government agency, coordinated a nationwide resistance through *salah*. The other was bottom-up, whereby protestors organized and mobilized through digital networks, including Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, and SMS. This flurry of activity took place before the prime minister and president appeared on live television.

Although the president's FaceTime speech and the prime minister's address through a mobile phone certainly intensified the mobilization and encouraged many more to take to the streets, the resistance had largely taken off on its own through digital media and local mosque networks. This evidence strongly suggests that opposition against the coup would have advanced regardless of high-level political speeches: it was a natural political reflex of the people.

If Erdogan did not play a significant role in galvanizing his followers, then how did pro-government Turks mobilize? As mentioned earlier, the trigger for the initial wave of online resistance was the military blockade of the [Bosphorus Bridge](#) at 10 PM EEST. At first, there was great confusion over how to interpret these troop movements, but several Twitter accounts began calling it a coup. The first hashtag, #DarbeyeHayır (no to coup), emerged at this time. Then at 10:30 PM EEST, when rogue forces shut down [Ataturk Airport](#), Turks again rallied on the Internet by using the hashtag #AtaturkHavalimani, which made it to the nation's trending topic list. This pattern continued throughout the evening, with swells of social media activity under related hashtags appearing whenever tanks turned up at key points in Istanbul: for the police headquarters on [Vatan Avenue](#) there was #VatanCaddesi, for the Turkish Radio-Television headquarters in the upscale neighborhood of [Ulus](#) there was #TRT, and for the Selimiye Barracks in the residential area of [Çengelköy](#) there was #Cengelköy. Based on our events map, online reactions to these events—which evolved over the course of six to seven hours into outright on-the-ground resistance—occurred in a relatively concentrated geographic area: a roughly 9.1 mile radius. In other words, where rogue troops went, digital and physical action followed.





As mentioned earlier, mosques mobilized alongside the social media campaigns through a well-coordinated sequence of broadcasted salah prayers, which served as local, district-level alarm bells as well as outlets for bolstering the spirits of the protestors on the ground. To demonstrate how religious networks complemented online resistance, we created a set of maps inspired by the Turkish visual artist Burak Arikan. In his work, “Islam, Republic, Neoliberalism,” he depicts the density of mosque networks in Istanbul by the degree of visual overlap of each mosque’s call to prayers, which has a 300-meter-radius sound range. We remade Arikan’s network by including more recent mosques, updated the web of 300-meter ranges, and exact geo-location data. Then, we overlaid it with military coup events and location-based hashtag tweets culled from a geographic information systems database created by Eqlim, a data and analytics company based in Beirut. The final map reveals that both online and physical mobilization networks have roughly the same 300-meter radius as the mosque’s call to prayers. The western-most mosque network in our study is Bayrampasa–Gungören–Bahcelievler, closely flanked by Bagcilar, which mobilized around 11 PM EEST to relieve blockades of the Ataturk Airport and the Bayrampasa Police Headquarters. Istanbul’s religious center of gravity, the Fatih district, mobilized against forces at the Vatan Police Headquarters at 11:10 PM EEST, followed by the constellation formed by Kasimpasa–Galata mosque networks for Taksim Square at 11:20 PM EEST and the Uskudar–Kisikli constellation for the Selimiye Army Barracks and the Bosphorus Bridge at 11:30 PM EEST.

Our third layer of mapping used data from a recent opinion poll by the leading Turkish pollster KONDA, which interviewed 1,875 out of roughly seven to eight million people that took part in Democracy Watch, a gathering of anti-coup protestors who sought to retain a popular presence on the streets to deter any follow-up attempts after the failed coup. Although KONDA’s survey provides a detailed account of the protestors’ political background, education level, and reasons for mobilization, we only used details on where they live and where they protested. We created three maps showing the most well-attended gatherings—in Taksim, Sarachane, and Kisikli—and overlaid them with the coup events and the frequency of mosque and digital media mobilizations. The overlay revealed that there was a significant overlap between the mosque networks, the frequency of the district’s social media performance on the night of the coup attempt, and the breadth of attendance at Democracy Watch gatherings. Indeed, regardless of population density (not shown in the maps), districts with the tightest-knit mosque networks, as measured by the overlap in the call-to-prayer sound ranges, and the most active digital media resistance to the coup were those that also actively participated in the physical protests during and after the night of July 15.

Our analysis isn’t to imply that it was solely religious brotherhoods and mosque congregations that poured onto the streets in defiance. There is an abundance of visual evidence on social media that Turks from all walks of life and backgrounds came out against the coup, too. That is why a new multi-partisan consensus (albeit a fragile one) has emerged after the failed coup attempt. However, what our study shows is that there is significant convergence with mosque networks and both digital and ground mobilization.

ANALOG COUP IN THE DIGITAL AGE OF PROTEST

As the Washington Institute’s Soner Cagaptay has described it, the July 15 coup was an example of “the victory of the digital age over an analog coup.” What he implies is that the rogue

troops pursued old methods of mobilization and control, compared to the hybrid and innovative tactics of anti-coup forces. The soldiers chose to use conventional radio–television (such as the Turkish Radio-Television headquarters) to broadcast their takeover—just as they did during the 1960, 1971, and 1980 military coup attempts. They also sought to disrupt the conventional communications infrastructure, such as the state-owned Turksat and privately-owned Digiturk satellite communications networks. But as Cagaptay argues, they forgot that they were no longer in the twentieth century: Turkish Radio-Television wasn't the only television channel in Turkey and it was far from being the most viewed. In addition, Turks were already seasoned in the art of social media and had reduced their dependence on conventional media outlets. At the time of the coup, it was either social media or the mosques' broadcasting that raised people's awareness about events as they unfolded.

That said, neither the president nor his advisors were less “analog” than the leaders of the coup, since they, too, failed at times to understand how best to use social media. Before turning to FaceTime, the president had attempted, but failed, to broadcast a statement through the live-broadcasting app, Periscope, because no one was online to watch. Eventually, it was FaceTime and the efficiency of CNN-Turk—ironically, on an opposition media channel—that enabled the president to communicate with the public that night. Seen in this light, what made Turkish defiance against the coup unique was not necessarily being less “analog.” It was the skillful combination of traditional and digital social networks: grassroots religious networks gave the anti-coup movement depth, and the reach and speed of SMS and Twitter gave the movement breadth.

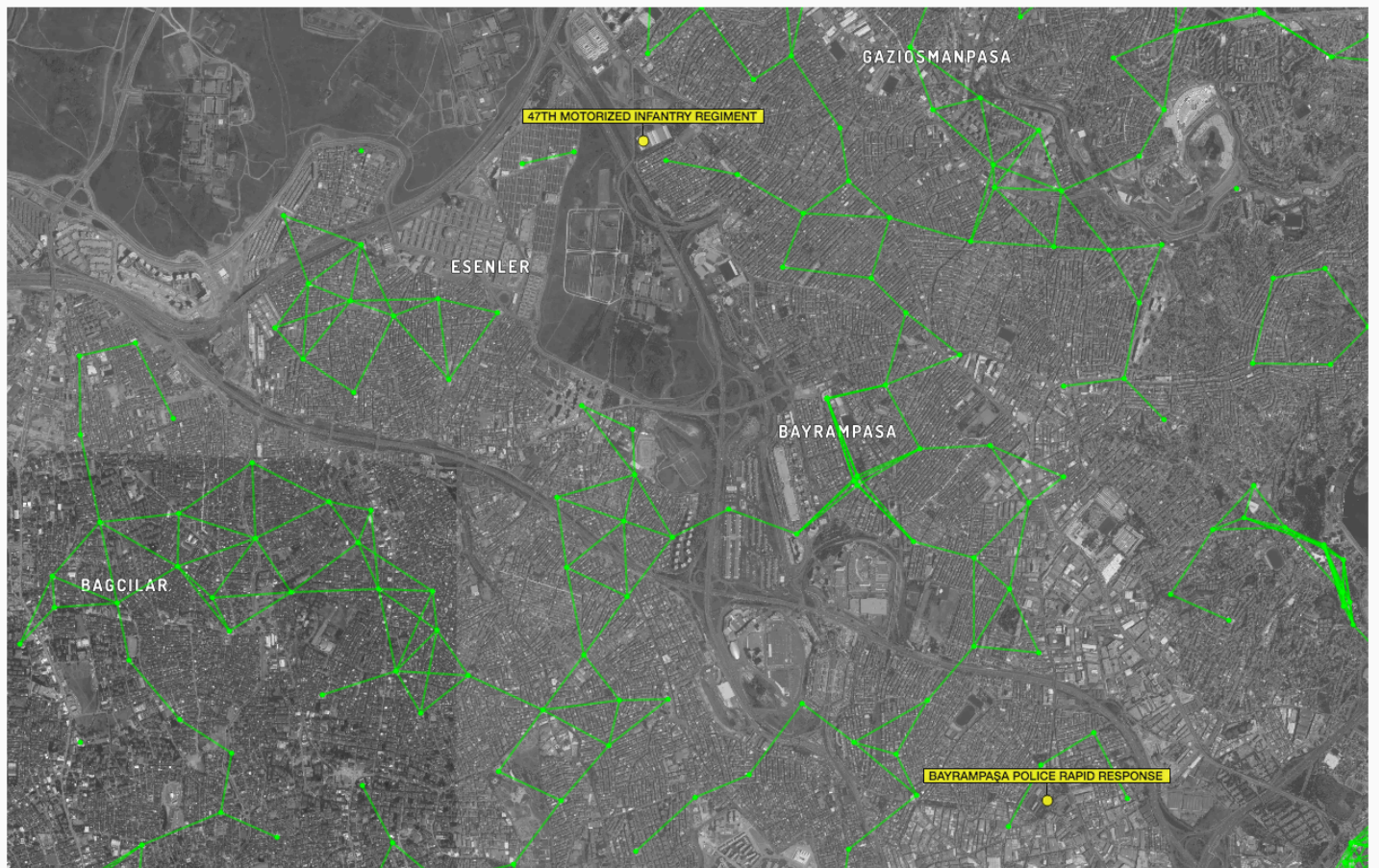
In this way, the data produced on the night of July 15 shows, to some extent, how religion, politics, and democracy intersect in modern Turkey. First, it demonstrated how religious networks and digital media can be used in tandem, and quite organically, to generate a faster and more efficient mobilization in times of crisis. The Arab Spring gave us a rough idea that this was possible, but our data concretely proves the point. Second, it wasn't only social media that saved Turkish democracy. The mosque networks played a key role. After all, mosques, too, are social networks. Although it is unclear whether “saving democracy” was the intention of the mosque networks when they poured onto the streets (some *tariqa* followers insisted that they hadn't come out to protect democracy, but to protect Islam), their actions helped sustain the parliamentary system and democracy as a whole—even as problematic as it may currently be in the face of Erdogan's extensive crackdowns.

Most importantly, a deeper understanding of how *salah* and Twitter can coexist peacefully and cooperate toward a common, more representative political goal may yield better analysis and understanding of the region. The evolution of Islam's political and social influence may very well be hidden between the crescent and the hashtag.



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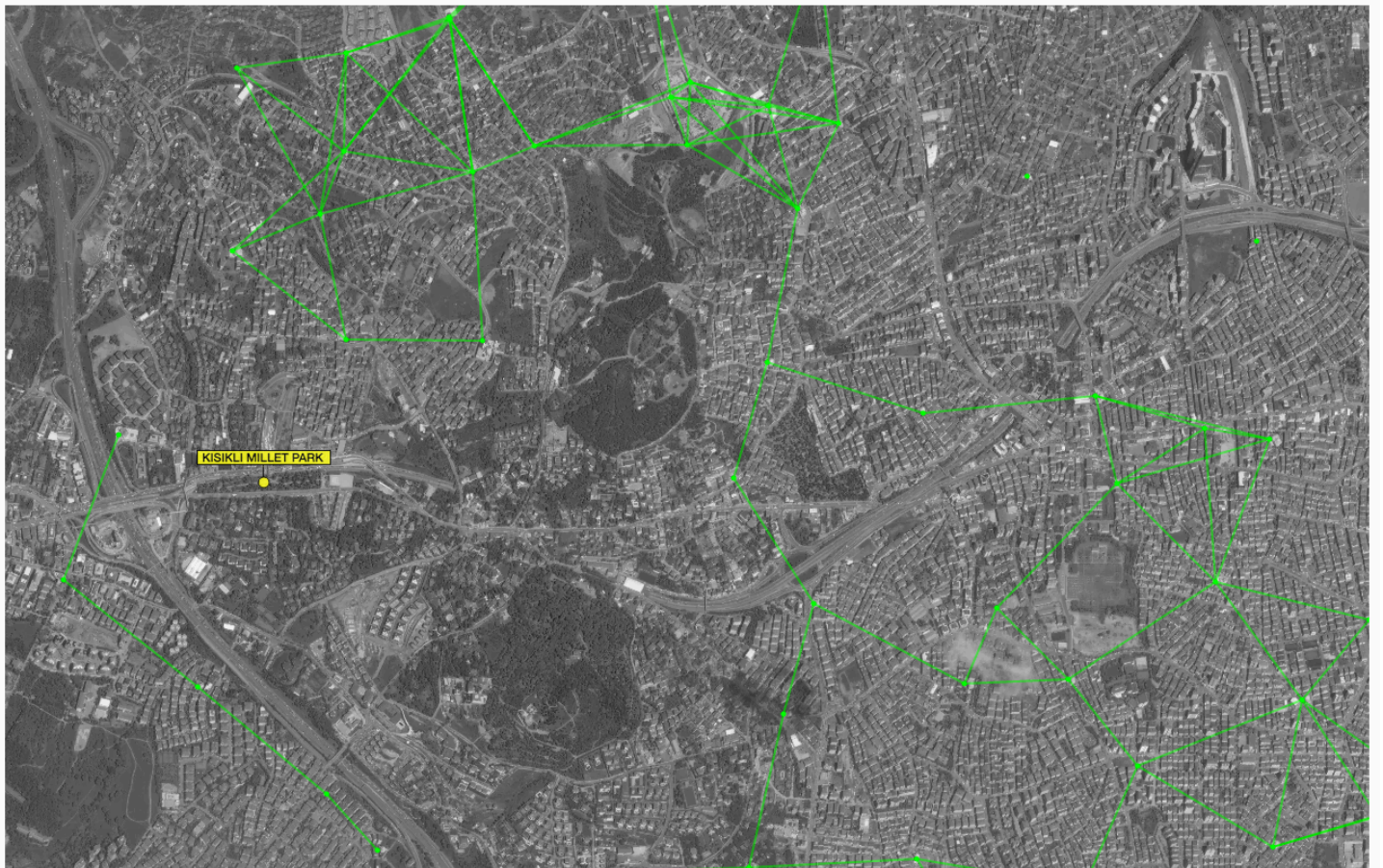
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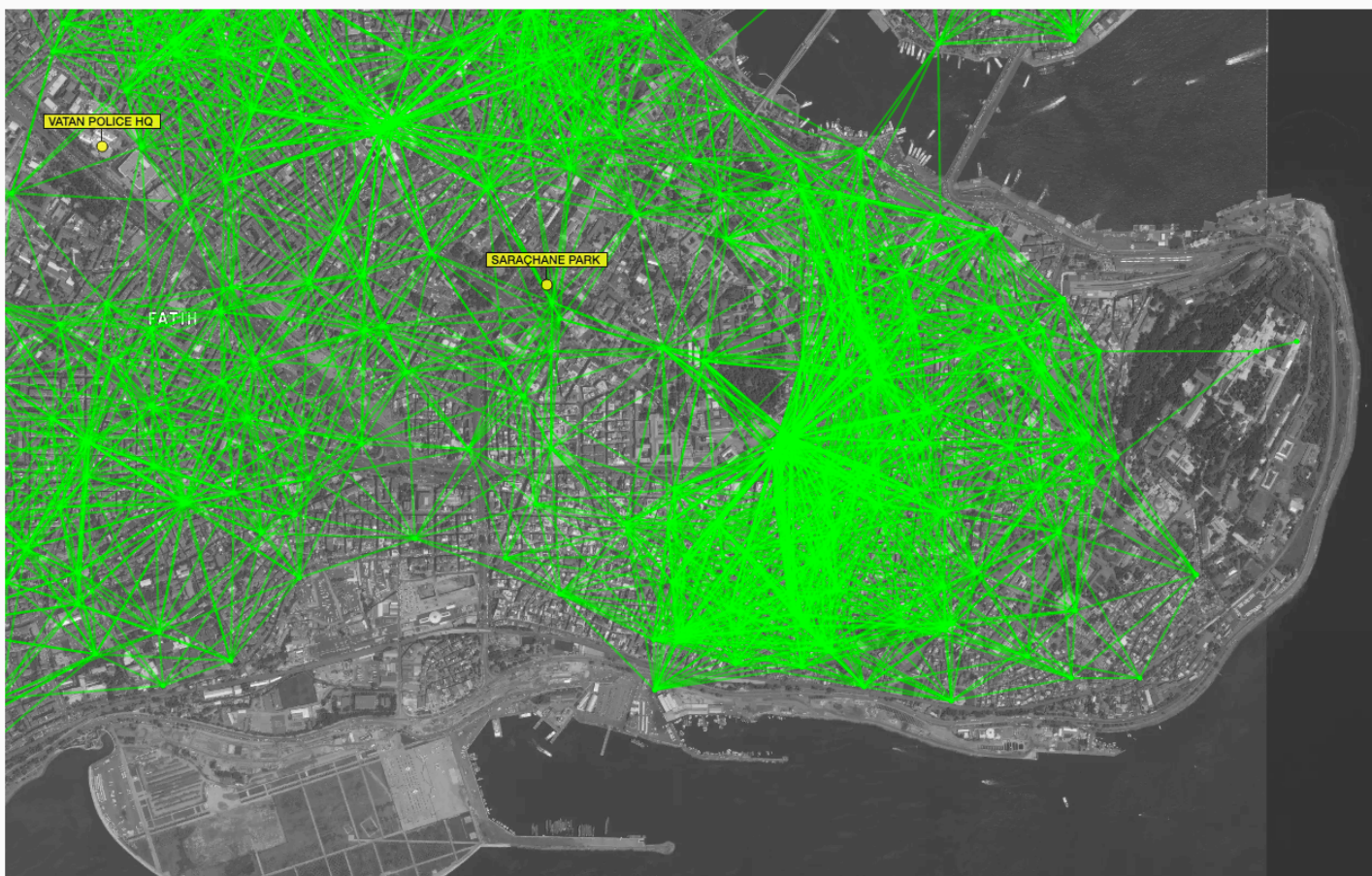
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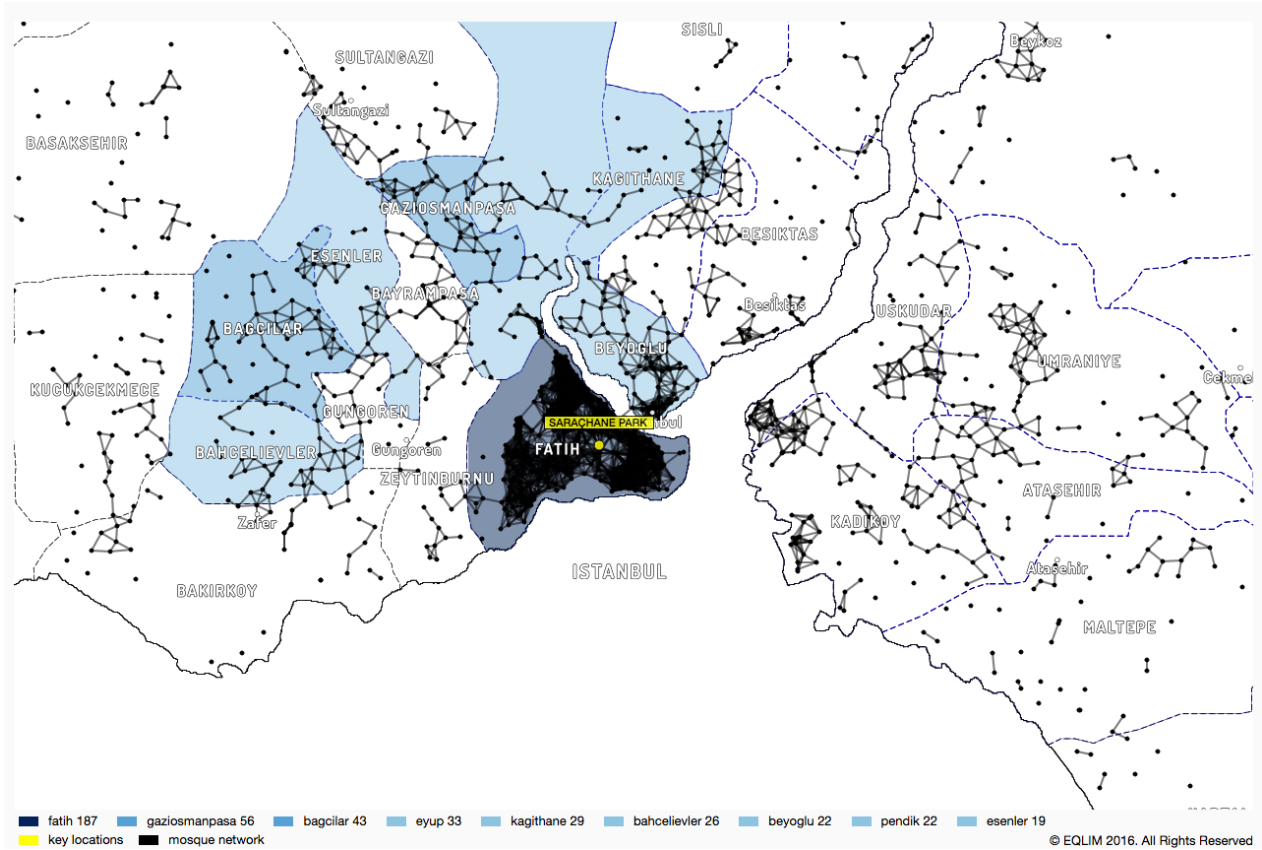
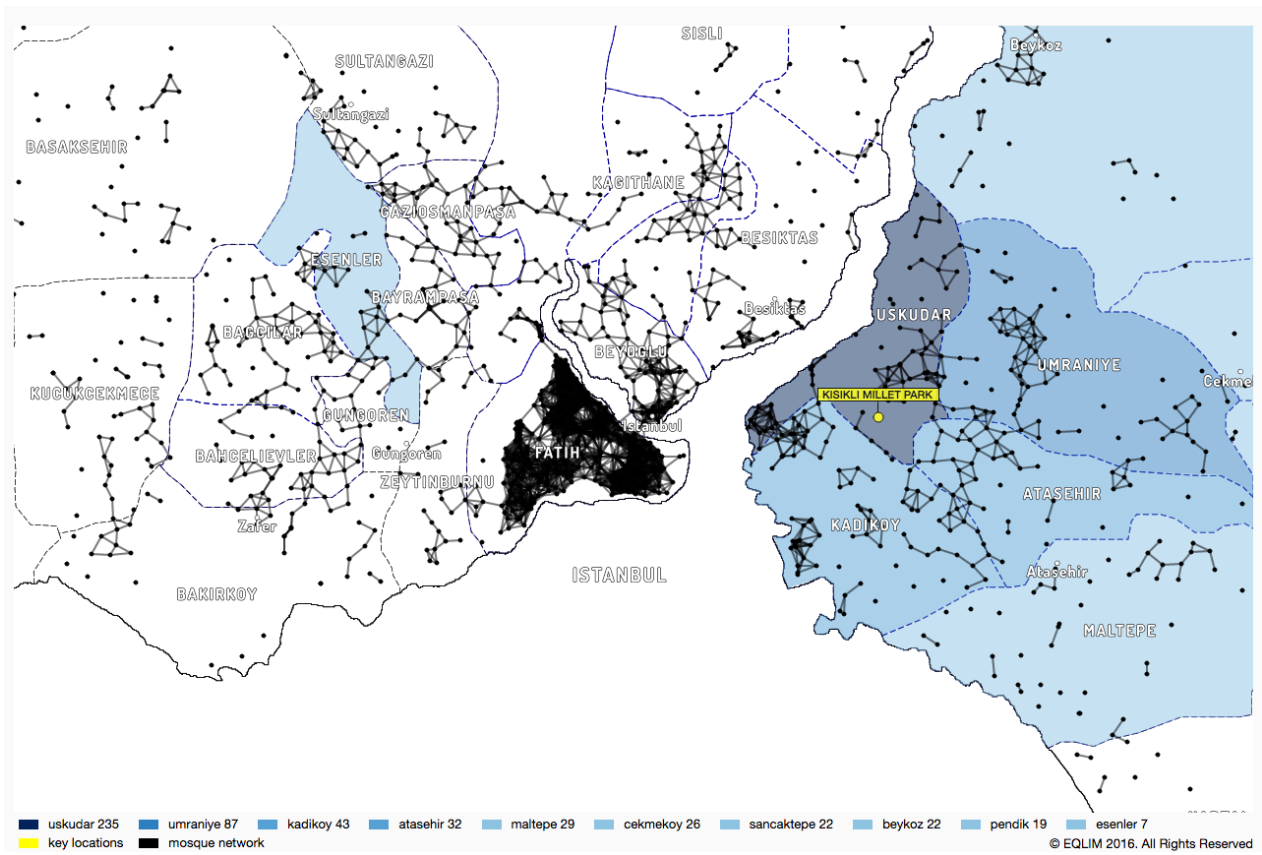
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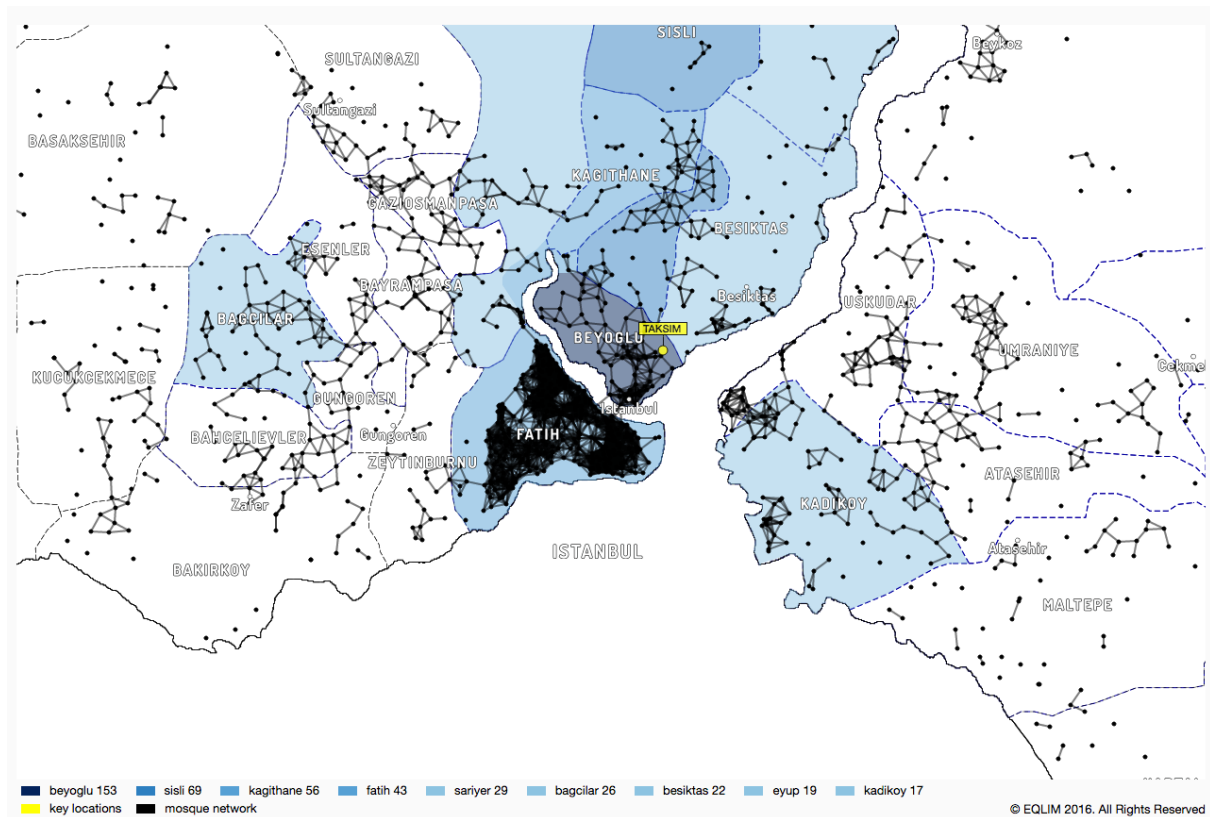
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