*We would love to dedicate this book to the dearest memory of Ferhunde Ozbay (1944–2015) who has always inspired and reassured us.*

# The Making of Neoliberal Turkey

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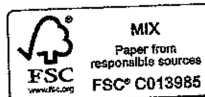


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Chapter 7

# Urban Anxieties and Kurdish Migrants: Urbanity, Belonging, and Resistance in Istanbul[1]

Ozgur Sevgi Goral

In the last three decades, Istanbul has become the object of an ambitious operation of urban renewal through the construction of residence complexes, shopping malls, real estate development projects, colossal luxury hotels, and gated communities. Several grand scale projects are currently taking place, such as Galataport Project, Halic Shipyard Renovation Project, Haydarpasa Railway Station Urban Redevelopment Project, that aim at transforming the old urban areas to new and modern spaces. The *gecekondu*[2] (squatter) areas are also reconstructed through these urban renewal projects, and urban space is constantly reconfigured and rebuilt in the most populated districts of Istanbul, including Ayazma and Tepeustu in Kucukcekmece, Basibuyuk in Maltepe, the area north of the E5 freeway in Kartal, Fikirtepe in Kadikoy, Sulukule in Fatih, and Tarlabasi in Beyoglu districts (Bartu Candan and Kolluoglu 2008; Bartu Candan and Ozbay 2014; Keyder 1999; Kuyucu and Unsal 2010). New rhetoric, discourses, concepts, and politics with respect to urban space began to be disseminated through the actors of the central government, as well as local political actors such as municipalities (Aksoy 2012).

Urban transformation projects (UTPs) are one of the most important elements of this new urban zeal. *Gecekondu* areas, which are self-built houses for the millions of newcomers in Istanbul in search of jobs in thriving manufacturing industries beginning by the migration waves of 1950s, were either ignored or covertly encouraged via frequent *gecekondu* amnesties by the state between the 1950s and mid-1980s (Karaman 2008, 521). The attitude represented through the implementation of the UTPs, on the other hand, clearly contradicts this previous tacit agreement. The concealed approval of the state through the manipulative use of ignorance of the populace is drastically changed through the politics of

1 I must thank Veysel Essiz and the editors of this book for their valuable comments and criticism.

2 *Gecekondu* means, literally, self-built overnight dwellings. It refers to informal/irregular houses built without authorization, mostly on state owned lands, which may have complicated and diverse land tenure structures. For a detailed analysis on the complexity and ambiguity of *gecekondu* ownership structure, see Kuyucu (2014).

transformation projects, including re(dis)placement, demolitions, destruction, and reconstruction of the *gecekondu* areas during the 2000s.[3]

This drastic change regarding urban restructuring overlapped with the major migratory waves of Kurdish citizens to the western and southern metropolitan areas of Turkey, primarily to Istanbul. Although the Kurdish migrants are by no means the only ones affected by the UTPs, those who came to Istanbul as a result of forced migration faced new forms of poverty, isolation, and social exclusion (Bugra and Keyder 2003; Kurban, Yukseker, and Celik 2006; Jongerden 2007; Kaygalak 2009; and Yukseker 2009). The overwhelming majority of these newcomers were in search of cheaper housing alternatives in Istanbul, and they ultimately settled down in the *gecekondu* zones of Istanbul. Although forced migration was at its peak in the 1990s due to economic, social and political factors, Kurdish migrants have continued to resettle in Istanbul after the year 2000. Therefore, the arrival of the Kurds in Istanbul's urban space as a massive population coincided with the government's desire for construction projects in the name of urban transformation. Kurdish migrants, who have struggled to create space for themselves in the ideological, metaphorical, and political definition of the urbanity in Istanbul, have shaped the urban space through their daily activities.

This study focuses on this specific encounter between migrant Kurds, the municipality, and the government. My main argument here is that discussions on urbanization have been basically *ethnicized* since the forced migration reshaped the relation between Istanbul's political demography and urban space. Whether implicitly or explicitly, not only the political actors but also the inhabitants of *gecekondu* neighborhoods discuss their everyday lives, experiences, and opinions in relation to the UTPs with ethnicized terms. The meanings of urbanity, re/displacement, and struggle for the ultimate aim of becoming proper Istanbulite subjects are elaborated and renegotiated in this process.

In the first part of this chapter, I will focus on the phenomenon of forced migration in Turkey throughout 1990s and the peculiar political conjuncture that made this process possible. I believe that such focus provides significant background information on the circumstances and institutions which forced Kurds to migrate. The second part of the chapter analyzes the transformation of urban space in Istanbul through the multiple UTPs. It also sets forth urban anxieties stemming from the desire for renewal. The third part is based on the everyday experiences of Kurdish migrants, with a specific emphasis on the links between forced migration and various urban situations. Finally, I will talk about the ethnicization process of urban discussions in Istanbul, arguing that urban transformation is intermingled with the ethnic identities of the *gecekondu* inhabitants in the narratives.

3 For a broader discussion on the transformation of *gecekondu* areas, including physical destruction as well as altered political and ideological discourses on the inhabitants of the *gecekondu* neighborhoods, see Bozkulak (2005), Erman and Eken (2004), Keyder (2005), Aslan (2008), and Tugal (2008).



## Forced Migration in Turkey

After 30 years of armed conflict between the Worker's Party of Kurdistan (PKK) and the Turkish state, the so-called Kurdish question became the primary issue shaping contemporary political and social life in Turkey. The political conflict has had devastating socioeconomic and cultural consequences for both ethnicities. There have been various eras of escalation or temporal truces within the 30 years of conflict. In this context, the 1990s represent a remarkable and distinctive decade with its peculiar practices and exaggerated discourses. By the beginning of the 1990s, a new concept based on the idea of cutting the logistic support of the PKK has been implemented. This new understanding was described as "area control and non-sheltering of the PKK in the region" by then commander-in-chief Dogan Gures and then Prime Minister Tansu Ciller in 1993 (Ustel 2004, 4). In line with the implementation of area control, some specific practices have become regular and almost naturalized, especially during the first five years of the 1990s.

Forced evacuation of settlements, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial and arbitrary killings (Tezcur 2010, 780; Kurban, Yukseker, and Celik 2006, 15; Goral et al. 2013, 24) often took place in the region dominated by the Kurdish population—mostly the southeastern towns of Turkey. The experiences of forced migration in Turkey should be examined within the specific political conjuncture of the 1990s. These three infamous state practices, which are outrageous human rights violations, have been inflicted simultaneously under a state of emergency, in order to trace the state of exception to the bodies of Kurdish citizens, who were believed to be supporters and/or sympathizers of the PKK. This set of practices created a deliberate way of handling the Kurdish question based on punishment, murder, mistreatment, abuse, impoverishment, and displacement. A holistic perspective may reveal this deliberate state politics and provide a broader framework for the victimization of civilians during ethnic conflict, while discussing the specific forced migration of Kurds into metropolitan areas.

The actual magnitude of the forced migration still remains controversial. Initially, the state refused to accept the existence of the forced migration and denied that it happened at all. International and national non-governmental organizations and academicians, on the other hand, argued that one to four million people were subjected to forced migration in Turkey in the 1990s. As a result of political and legal pressures from the global community, the state gave up the denial strategy and accepted that around 300,000 people were affected. Semi-official[4] research conducted by Hacettepe University Demographic Studies Institute argues that 1,200,000 people were subjected to forced migration for security reasons (Kurban and Yegen 2012, 54). It has already been argued that the legal and political status of the internally displaced people had been consistently underestimated in critical studies of migration. The internally displaced

4 Dilek Kurban and Mesut Yegen (2012) define this research as semi-official given the fact that it was ordered and financed by the government.

population has been left solely to the mercy of their own government without any strong protection from legal structures, transnational institutions, or the global community (Ayata and Yukseker 2005, 8). Their existence in urban areas is often marked by ethnic tensions, apathy at the best and a vivid hostility at the worst. For the Kurdish case, it should be added that the depoliticization of this inherently political problem and the process of publically linking it to the technical agenda of development actually limited the boundaries of potential debate on the issue (Ayata and Yukseker 2005, 33). In this context, severing the link between forced migration and other common nonlegal practices of the 1990s while overlooking the specific historical conjuncture of the period added to the depoliticization of the discussion.

The most crucial outcome of forced migration is the resettlement of rural Kurdish people in major cities, including Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Izmit, Mersin, and Adana. In other words, the Kurdish question has become an ethnopolitical and urban/metropolitan issue instead of remaining within regional limits. Kurdish migrants have experience new forms of social exclusion and isolation as they arrived in urban areas, and they are mostly still living under forms of urban poverty (Keyder and Bugra 2003). Not only poverty, isolation, and exclusion from the social/municipal services, including transportation and water, but also ethnic discrimination, marginalization, and systematic stigmatization are among the migrants' daily experiences. In turn, the Kurdish migrants are not passive receivers of urban circumstances; they are producers of a new urban context through their involvement in urban life, which includes their social and cultural practices, as well as a broad repertoire of political struggle. The urban encounter with the state, legality, urban life, and Turkish citizens has reconfigured the Kurdish migrant subjectivity through a mixture of contradictory elements such as resistance, melancholy, loss, hope, despair, and political involvement. It is possible to state that urban life in Istanbul by and after 1990s is also codetermined and reshaped by the encounter with the Kurdish migrants and their daily performances of participation or resistance.

## Urban Anxieties in Istanbul

While Kurds of Turkey have been forced to migrate towards metropolitan areas, the socio-spatial patterns of Istanbul have undergone yet another important transformation, which is characterized by the rapid integration of the city into the global market and transnational networks. The impact of this process on spatial rearrangement of Istanbul is evident, since "the emergence of globalized spaces of commerce and leisure along with secluded residential areas and the emergence of the urban areas of isolation and poverty marked by different types of social exclusion and ethnic conflict" (Keyder 2005, 128; Ozbay 2010a). The new commodification of land related to the globalization process has made it impossible for the newcomers to construct their own *gecekondu* (Bugra 1998).



The privatization and commodification of the land, the rapid integration of the cities within the global markets, and the emergence of gated communities go hand in hand with the emergence of isolated and poor neighborhoods, and rapid spatial segregation. These are also the main features of the global city (Sassen 2009; Brenner 2004; Harvey 2000; Genis 2007). This process of deepening neoliberalism has some common features throughout the world, as well as some local differences. The process of gentrification, for instance, has been much faster and more rigid in the first group of global cities, such as London and in New York, than in Istanbul (Islam 2006). A deeper and sharper socio-spatial urban segregation is mainstream in most metropolitan areas (Wacquant 2005; Davis 2006). National and/or international migration patterns, the newcomers, and the new outsiders of urban territories mark the new ghettos in major cities. Istanbul's urban growth has also been profoundly affected by waves of migration, new hierarchies of taste, and the commodification of culture (Oncu 2001; Ozbay 2010b).

A new form of displacement, urban transformation projects (UTPs), which are inherently related to the commodification and privatization of the land, has occurred in Istanbul's *gecekondu* areas. These projects include the demolition of the *gecekondu* neighborhoods and the replacement of the property right owner residents in public housing projects far from the city center. The legal basis of these projects stems from a trilateral agreement between Istanbul Greater Metropolitan Municipality (IBB), the District Municipality, and the Mass Housing Administration (MHA)[5] in order to "rehabilitate and reshape the blight, obsolescent and degrading urban spaces" (Turkun and Kurtulus 2005, 12). This rehabilitation discourse operates as a strategy of legitimacy for the displacement of *gecekondu* neighborhoods' residents. In addition, Kurdish and Roma people living in these districts contribute to the discourse of risk and therefore to the legitimacy of the demolition of these *gecekondu* areas. The risk mentioned here is explicitly or implicitly related to the ethnic origins of inhabitants in the neighborhood and thus legitimizes the intervention of the state via ethnic stigmatization. This discourse operates as an additional *useful* discourse, which will legitimize the demolition decision implemented through non-participatory processes. The UTPs are criticized for three reasons: first, legal ambiguity to define blighted, obsolescent, and degrading urban areas; second, the almost

5 Mass Housing Administration (MHA) was created as a governmental agency responsible for the provisioning of public housing in 1984. MHA remained a low profile real estate actor until the government of Justice and Development Party, which has renovated and structurally reorganized it by a series of laws written between 2002 and 2008. Accordingly, MHA became the most powerful actor in the real estate sector and acquired the right to ask for the transfer of public land, among other rights including regulation and planning of the urban land, construction of housing on state owned land, and execution of urban renewal and transformation projects (Kuyucu and Unsal 2010, 1485). Between 2002 and 2008, 66 million square meters of state land have been transferred to the MHA at no cost (AGFE Report 2009, 7).

complete exclusion of residents from decision making processes and third, the total lack of social projects and economic programs for uprooted inhabitants, creating a serious risk of displacement, dispossession, and the geographical relocation of poverty (Kuyucu and Unsal 2010, 1490).

I argue that the desire for transformation of Istanbul's *gecekondu* neighborhoods is implemented through the specific elaboration and manipulation of the ethnic identities of the *gecekondu* inhabitants. Everyday activities of the Kurdish migrants in the city, which include political protests, solidarity networks, struggles for material infrastructure, melancholy, unemployment, and precarious employment render them improper citizens in the eyes of the state institutions and other non-Kurdish *gecekondu* inhabitants. Therefore, the representation of the daily urban activities of Kurdish migrants is produced and incorporated by the state authorities, and this form of representation is more or less borrowed and used by the non-Kurdish *gecekondu* inhabitants as well.[6]

Erdogan Bayraktar, the former president of MHA and the current Minister of Environment and Urbanism, stated that there were actually several aspects of UTPs and one of them is based on the idea of the country and its nation. Accordingly, he states, "Turkey cannot develop without fixing the perception of the state of the people living in the *gecekondu* neighborhoods, without increasing their feeling of belonging to the state and the nation" (Istanbul Bulusmalari 2010, 16). Thus, according to Bayraktar, UTPs are deeply related to broader political issues such as belonging to the state/nation and citizenship. Again, a mainstream newspaper, *Milliyet*, published a report taken from a conservative magazine, *Aksiyon*, entitled "The Terror Map of Istanbul," claiming to be compiled from police records. According to this map, several *gecekondu* neighborhoods, including Tarlabasi,

6 Saracoglu (2011) conceptualizes the hostility towards the Kurdish migrants as manifested among middle and lower middle classes of İzmir beginning in the 2000s as "exclusive recognition." Accordingly, forced migration, the deepening of neoliberalism, and erosion of the economic and social conditions of the middle classes created a specific encounter between the Kurdish migrants and non-Kurdish urbanites. This encounter, representing an historically specific ethnicization process based on exclusion and its origins, does not solely stem from Turkish nationalism(s) or the assimilationist policies of the state. I, on the other hand, argue that this new exclusion is deeply integrated into mainstream Turkish nationalism and, to a large extent, borrowed from the state's official approach. Firstly, the state approach was a sum of contradictory and inconsistent elements for assimilation and externalization of the Kurds. Therefore, elements of the exclusionist and assimilationist approach can be found in the state's complex policies. Secondly, the state policies and mainstream Turkish nationalism produced a discourse including ordinary racism, Turkish superiority, assimilation, exclusion and discrimination. Such discourse is diffused through the mainstream mass media, the academy, and the majority of non-governmental organizations on a daily basis. Thus, its effect is much more crucial than is described by Saracoglu on non-Kurdish people's perception and responses to Kurdish migrants. Although the responses of non-Kurdish citizens cannot be reduced to a mimesis of the mainstream Turkish nationalism and state policies, I believe that these are inherently interconnected.



Fikirtepe, and Kanarya where UTPs are ongoing, are under heavy influence from the PKK (Kanzik 2010, 90). In this view, being supposedly under the influence of the PKK implies that the physical destruction of the *gecekondu* neighborhoods where criminal/terrorist organizations exist appears legitimate. In other words, the urban discussions and debates on the UTPs are explicitly or implicitly deeply *ethnicized*. The term ethnicization is used in two senses in urban studies: First, it points out the rise of multifarious urban inequalities and novel forms of exclusion or marginalization, some of which appear to have a distinctly ethnic component. Second, the spread of ethno-national or xenophobic ideologies and tensions related to a specific ethno-spatial segregation and the settlement of migrant populations (Wacquant 1993; Appadurai 2000; Tzfadia and Yacobi 2011; Eckardt and Eade 2011). I argue that both usages are relevant with respect to UTP neighborhoods in Istanbul.

Studies stressing the conditions of subjects of forced migration depict Kurdish migrants of the 1990s who are dragged to *gecekondu* neighborhoods as "really subaltern, alone, without any sort of protection, dispersed, fighting for the survival and for all these reasons they do not have the power and energy to mark the urban area" (Yavuz 2006, 64). Although the description of their conditions is realistic, I argue that they are currently marking the urban space in several ways, despite their subaltern condition. I also argue that daily experiences of the Kurdish migrants not only produce an *excess* in the urban space but also create spaces of tensions with other migrants living in the same *gecekondu* neighborhoods. I elaborate on this urban space of the Kurdish migrants and the links with the UTPs through data from fieldwork conducted in three neighborhoods of Istanbul: the Bezirganbahce MHA houses in Kucukcekmece district where the inhabitants of demolished *gecekondu* neighborhoods of Ayazma and Tepeustu live, the Hurriyet *gecekondu* neighborhood, and the Yakacik *gecekondu* neighborhood in Kartal district, where the distribution of title deeds is occurring instead of demolitions.

## The Neighborhoods

The fieldwork that this study is based on was conducted in 2011 in three neighborhoods of Istanbul in the context of an international project titled *Public Mediations in the Metropolitan Cities of Maghreb and the Middle East: Competition of Property and Access to Housing*.[7] The project was conducted in Amman, Beirut, Casablanca, Damascus, Istanbul, Cairo, and Teheran simultaneously. In Istanbul, we decided to choose *gecekondu* neighborhoods where different types of urban transformation had been implemented: demolition/destruction and regularization. We decided to focus on Ayazma, a relatively new neighborhood that was situated in

7 I have conducted fieldwork in Istanbul with Professor Yves Cabannes of University College London. The theoretical approach, the selection of the neighborhoods, and the content of the interviews were determined under his supervision.

the European side of Istanbul, which is now completely destroyed. The inhabitants of Ayazma were transferred to the MHA houses in Bezirganbahce, and we conducted research in Bezirganbahce towers. For the regularized neighborhoods, which are very rare in Istanbul, we chose two neighborhoods in Kartal, namely Hurriyet and Yakacik, situated on the Asian side of Istanbul. In these two neighborhoods, the *gecekondu* buildings are being regularized and rendered legal by selling them to the inhabitants according to official procedures. In the Bezirganbahce, Yakacik, and Hurriyet neighborhoods, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted. For Ayazma and Bezirganbahce, I contacted the local leader of the anti-demolition movement and then, through a snowball technique, reached out to other participants. For Hurriyet and Yakacik, I talked to key interlocutors who were struggling in the local association[8] and, again using a snowball technique, reached other participants of interviews. In addition to these, I also conducted 10 interviews with local representatives of the People's Republican Party (PRR), the Peace and Democracy Party (PDP), architects working in the municipalities, municipal employees, and local employees of the MHA. I participated in meetings of the neighborhood association in the Yakacik and Hurriyet neighborhoods. I did participant observation in a hometown association that had a political tendency towards the PDP and in the neighborhood associations.

In terms of their ethnic origin, more than half of my interviewees defined themselves as Kurdish. Only five of them were women. Given the fact that I do not speak in Kurdish, all my interviews were conducted in Turkish. Although I was fortunate to receive the support of several volunteers from PDP who helped me with interpretation where necessary, most interlocutors spoke in Turkish. I have changed all the names of all my interviewees for ethical reasons and to avoid any security problems that may affect them. People who I interviewed were either current or former inhabitants of *gecekondu* neighborhoods. They were either resettled in the MHA blocks in Bezirganbahce, or they were trying to buy the land of their *gecekondu* through the title-deed distribution process conducted by the Kartal Municipality. Most of the interviewees came to Istanbul as a result of forced migration.

The Hurriyet and Yakacik neighborhoods, located in the southeastern part of Istanbul, were built by the workers who came to the city during the 1950s. They seem to me to be better established compared to the other recently founded *gecekondu* settlements. The infrastructural and social services provided by the municipality, even though these services were not evaluated as satisfactory by my interviewees, were at least in place. Approximately 150,000 residents live

8 Neighborhood associations are grassroots organizations where the inhabitants of *gecekondu* neighborhood gather to discuss their strategies and meet with lawyers and experts during the UTP processes to empower themselves. They are either existing organizations for the development, beatification, and amelioration of the *gecekondu* neighborhood that turn into important political instruments regarding the UTPs or become sources of better resources, information, and solidarity for inhabitants during the UTP processes.



in these two *gecekondu* neighborhoods. Hurriyet is relatively heterogeneous in demographical terms; however, Yakacik contains a considerable number of Kurds, mostly from Siirt—a small town in Southeast Anatolia. As a part of the planned outcome of the regularization process, their squatter houses will not be demolished and they will have proper title deeds if they are able to pay the price of the land that they have occupied. I contend that there are many problems with this project, though it seems to be empowering for the residents. The land prices are very high and, for most residents, it is not possible to pay the amount in installments. Also, the drawing of the lines between the parcels and lots are deemed very arbitrary and contradictory to the histories of land usage. In addition, the people of these neighborhoods were not included in the decision-making process, and thus they were silenced about redistribution issues.

Ayazma, which does not exist as of today as a result of complete demolition, was a relatively new neighborhood established in the end of the 1970s. The population of the neighborhood had dramatically increased during the 1990s because of forced migration. According to Kucukcekmece Municipality sources, Ayazma was a neighborhood composed of approximately 1,800 houses and 7,800 inhabitants in 2004 (Yeniay 2007). The majority of the people in the neighborhood were Kurdish. Here is a description of Ayazma neighborhood by the mayor of Kucukcekmece:

> It is an area developed illegally on treasury lands as squatter houses, consisting mainly of single-storied houses devoid of any material and social infrastructure, causing the area to be regarded as a slum area in both social and economic terms. The neighborhood is disintegrated from and located at the outskirts of the city with a population profile which may be considered as 'the others,' who try to hang on to the city, indeed to life as under extremely primitive conditions of living at a sub-area likely to be the most prestigious one in the Istanbul Metropolitan Area. (Yeniay 2007)

Finally, Bezirganbahce MHA houses are comprised of 2,640 houses (55 tower blocks, each of them with 11 stories), 1 primary school (with 52 classrooms) and a sport hall, 1 health care center and 1 shopping mall (with 18 stores). There were 1,474 households allocated for the families coming from Ayazma and Tepeustu (Yeniay 2007). The other blocks are reserved for inhabitants coming from Zeytinburnu due to another transformation project. A number of police officers also bought some of the apartments with financial assistance in payments from the state.

## Kurdish Urbanites

Initially, nearly all Kurdish interviewees used relatively apolitical terminology in their narratives. This included, for example, "We are coming from the East

Anatolia. However, we do have a very clean page with our state,"[9] or "I do not believe that people from East Anatolia are suffering more than people from other parts of Anatolia. I do not see it that way." However, after the first meeting, the majority of the interviewees began to speak with a more politicized terminology about their experiences. The speech became less neutral and the state's intervention was depicted through a politicized, unequivocal, and lucid narrative. The Kurdish interviewees generally held the opinion that the unjust treatment that they have been subjected to is better understood generally if they do not refer to their Kurdishness or political affiliation. They are well aware that their Kurdishness and their political opinions/belongings may be used to legitimize the state violence that most of them have faced. Therefore, the initial discursive strategy of innocence based on apolitical terminology stressing a clean slate with the state seems to be used for legitimacy and self-empowerment in the context of demands for equality, rights, and citizenship.

When they talked to me in more sincere, less neutral terms, their perceptions of the state, stories of forced migration, and the daily experiences in the Turkish metropolises were elaborated in greater detail. The feeling of being at the margins and the perception of the state as an institution of blatant violence were obvious in almost all interviews. These were always related to the exact temporality of forced migration.

> My dear, how can I tell you what we've been through? Our house was burnt down in one hour in our village. We could not even take any clothes or other belongings. Then we came here. We built our house. We thought that we would be safe here. Look at us now. Again, our house is at stake. How can we be peaceful and happy in this country? What does this state want from us? I'm asking you, tell me. I am tired of this pain that I feel all over my body.

Aside from the pervasive narratives of violence, there were several themes that were common in the interviews, such as the perception of urban experiences as bodily experiences, the apathy of neighbors, and having the right to be part of the city.

*Urban Experience as Bodily Experience*

The social services that they could not have, the aid that is not distributed in their neighborhoods, the school teacher who treats their children badly since they have Kurdish accents when they speak Turkish, and the doctors who humiliated their grandmothers because they could not speak in Turkish at all are among the local and everyday experiences and encounters of Kurdish migrants. The state is a real

9 "Having a very clean slate with the state" means not having any previous legal or political problems or confrontations with the state, and therefore refers to the *innocence* of the interviewee.



agent which produces a violent, discriminatory, and humiliating experience. As in the quote above, bodily metaphors are often used to refer to those experiences. Veena Das (2003, 64) argues that at the margins and the local level of the state, exclusion is often experienced "close to the skin, embodied in well-known local officials, through practices of everyday life." This sort of experience of the state, which is *close to the skin* and which has been depicted through bodily metaphors, is always connected to the original form of knowledge learned through the forced migration. "You know, all the soldiers who burnt our house are like these policemen in Bezirganbahce. I mean, they remind me of soldiers with their uniforms and everything. I always feel sick when I see them." Interviewees always considered the moment of forced migration and the traumatic memory where the experience of the state became a solid bodily experience, together with the suffering that took place in Istanbul.

*Apathy of the Neighbors*

The pressure for accepting a role as village guard, enforced disappearances, and extra-judicial killings occurred in the place of origin, constant harassments of the military, and paramilitary forces are commonly interlinked components of the migrant narrative. Furthermore, migrants point out the ignorance and apathy of their neighbors about their situation. Ayse says,

> No one asks why we came here. No one wants to know our story. For them, we are terrorists who came here for certain reasons, but no one is interested in what happened and how we were forced to come here. How can we become friends or even neighbors with these people who do not want to hear our stories?

I think this emphasis highlights two things at once: a will to reveal the nature of the state, particularly an *excess of violence* to its own citizens, and an emphasis of the apathy of their neighbors, who are repeating and reproducing the attitude of the state institutions in the social and interpersonal realms.

*Deserving to be an Istanbulite*

Kurdish migrants emphasize that they consider themselves to be Istanbulites and urbanites based on their definition of these terms. Being an Istanbulite means being a participant of urban life, suffering while having nostalgia about the place of origin, struggling for better living conditions, fighting for survival, and trying to preserve one's dignity in Istanbul—"the chaotic urban jungle." Mustafa talks about his struggle:

> We deserve to be here. We came here like stray animals, without any shelter, job, or even food. People here do not want to hire us because we are Kurds.

> We hardly found a house to live in. But still, we have survived. We didn't beg, we worked like dogs, and we deserve to be in Istanbul, you know. I know in my heart that me and my family we have every right to be here, I don't care whether we live in a *gecekondu* or a legal house.

Deserving to have a place in the city through various struggles including blood and sweat was a common theme in almost all *gecekondu* residents, whether they were Kurdish or not. Houses without electricity and roads, the mud in the streets, the demonstrations for acquiring municipal services and public buses, and people who died when installing the electricity lines illegally were key discursive elements in the interviews. Ayla's was a typical story:

> We endured lots of things in order to be an inhabitant of this city. We did not have water initially, the streets were covered in mud, so we could not walk during the winter, and municipality did not do anything to help us apart from collecting the taxes from us. We suffered so much to deserve these houses, walked kilometers a day, worked so hard in very bad jobs for years.

This standpoint is also a refusal of the new discourse on *gecekondu* inhabitants, which depicts them as undeserving, threatening and criminal inhabitants, "namely, seeing them as the 'Other' who is 'less than' and 'inferior to' the other inhabitants" (Erman 2001, 998). The new popular discourse represents *gecekondu* inhabitants as dangerous and hopeless others and defines them as *occupiers*, a term that underlines the need for formal property ownership in order to be a proper urbanite. The term *occupier* implies that being an urbanite is deeply related with the legal ownership of the right of property. Criminals occupy public land that belongs to the state without ownership. However, Ayla does not associate the right for housing with the right of property but rather with the right to the city that stems from being a part of the urban space and an individual history of struggles. Hence, being an urbanite means becoming a participant to city life, and belonging is acquired through endeavor, struggle, endurance, and suffering. The right to the city includes claiming a kind of power over the processes of urbanization and over the ways in which our cities are made and remade (Harvey 2012, 5). Being an urbanite therefore means not only the right to participate in what is happening in the cities, but also the right to determine the reconstruction of one's own neighborhood.

The right to the city, as formulated by Lefebvre (1996, 158), "is like a cry and a demand ... The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life." This transformed and renewed life involves "an urban spatial approach to political struggles with the participation of all those who inhabit the city without discrimination" (Shin 2011, 3). The making of the urban should also include the activities of the *gecekondu* dwellers, Kurdish or not. Despite this, when the discussions on the content of urbanity begin, conflicting definitions are used by different inhabitants. One of the inhabitants says:



> OK, we are struggling together in the Hurriyet Neighborhood Association. We are saying nice words on being an inhabitant of the neighborhood, how we grew up together, how we fought for having the title deeds of our *gecekondu* houses instead of demolition, etc. However, when we leave the association we are members of different political parties, the government's party or PRR or PDP. We become a Turk, a Kurd or an Alevi again. I don't know. We are saying that we are all the same, but we are actually not. Maybe we should acknowledge that we have different political opinions, but in that case, everything becomes a political issue. I don't really know how to deal with this.

In other words, the possibility of togetherness based on the struggle to appropriate urban space fades away while discussing how to do it. Rights, claims, and struggles become politicized in relation to ethnic identity, an evaluation of ethnic identities, and with the interventions, shifts, and controversial attitudes of different social parties.

**Urban Debates and Ethnic Belongings**

The Kartal Municipality decided to sell the land of the *gecekondu* buildings to people living in these houses. The distribution of the title deeds through the selling of the occupied land has been a crucial local political event. Despite the fact that the local municipality has decided to sell or give the land to the occupiers to increase its political base, so far it has only been able to achieve this end in the Yakacik region because most parcels in the Hurriyet neighborhood belong to the metropolitan municipality. The metropolitan administration does not support Kartal Municipality because they represent two different parties, which are in grave opposition. While the political conflict between two parties and the two municipalities is clear, residents in the area believe that the reason behind the delay in Yakacik stems from the predominantly Kurdish identity of the residents in Hurriyet. One of my informants told me:

> They are Kurdish, you know. They do not recognize the state authority or any of its institutions or rules. I heard that they even threatened the previous mayor [of Kartal]. They said that they would beat up *mukhtar*. Therefore, the current mayor is scared. That's why they are distributing their title deeds [in Yakacik]. To be honest, I am pissed off. If you are against that state, if you threaten people, how come you win at the end? How can this be possible?

Kurds, in the nationalistic discourses of the mainstream Turkish media, are stigmatized as rebellious and insubordinate. As they used violence to claim

their rights, they were viewed as threatening and beating the state officials and reclaiming their rights through the means of terror.

On the other hand, Kurdish dwellers of Yakacik also think that they got their title deeds because of their ethnic identity. However, their normative attribution to Kurdishness is obviously different from that of the non-Kurdish inhabitants of the squatter areas. Kurdishness, according to Kurdish migrants, means struggle and not being scared of the state. One of them said,

> You know we are Kurdish people. We know how to fight for our rights; we know the meaning of struggle. They talk about the entire issue about negotiations between different municipalities. But I think they sell us the land because we are Kurdish, we can be organized and struggle if it is necessary. That's why they sold the land to us and not to the Hurriyet people.

Being Kurdish sounds in this quote like a first step toward participatory grassroots democracy in Turkey.

In the Ayazma case, Kurdish ethnicity played a stigmatizing and criminalizing role. The people of Ayazma got together and organized against the urban transformation project. They founded a neighborhood committee in order to struggle for *in situ rehabilitation* of their neighborhood. The officials in the Kucukcekmece municipality declared that the neighborhood association and the spokesperson were illegal, outsiders, terrorists, and criminals just because most of the residents were Kurdish and because the spokesperson was affiliated with the Kurdish party, PDP.

The municipality officials held secret meetings with some of the inhabitants of the Ayazma neighborhood that they chose. According to Adem,

> People coming from the municipality told our neighbors that we were fighting against UTPs because we were looking for political disorder. They also told them that we were trying to stop UTPs, which will be very lucrative for *gecekondu* inhabitants, because of our political agenda against the government. And our neighbors, unfortunately, believed to this lie. Now, they are checking out who supports the legal order and who does not. Look at the high-rise apartment buildings that we live. We are here because our people had believed to this ridiculous propaganda.

Many interviewees from Bezirganbahce Mass Housing told me that they believed their homes in Ayazma were demolished because the state wanted to destroy the existing political, social, and economic solidarity of the Kurdish inhabitants there. The solidarity networks people utilized when they searched for jobs or money or childcare also had the political capacity to mobilize people on important dates for the Kurdish movement. The state relocated them to the well-monitored public housing buildings as neighbors to police officers in order to interrupt their social and political associations. In addition



to state surveillance, a private company works as the managing authority in Bezirganbahce and forbids satellite TV receivers that people have in their homes in order to watch transnational Kurdish broadcasts. After petitions and negotiations with the managing company, inhabitants demanding access to the Kurdish channels organized a meeting in the public garden. After the crowded meeting, the administration felt obliged to unblock the satellite access and people were finally able to watch TV channels in Kurdish. My informant Hakan recounts:

> They don't want us to watch ROJ TV here. We really have fought for this. We have gone several times altogether to the office of the administration to ask for the necessary regulations. They refuse to make the necessary amendments and we told them: Are not we the equal citizens of this country? We want to watch this TV channel, it is so simple! We have done this several times, we organized meetings and at the end they feel scared because of our reaction.

All of my interviewees argued that speaking of Kurdish in public spaces is an act of resistance and political challenge, as illustrated by Omer,

> Thirty years ago no one was able to speak in Kurdish in public areas. Now we do. I am doing it deliberately while I use the public transportation. Sometimes people look at me in a disturbed way. Even my neighbors here in Bezirganbahce stare at me, but I continue to speak in Kurdish. Why are you so disturbed? I want to ask them, why? You are speaking in your language and I am speaking in mine. What is the big deal about it?

Again, as it was the case regarding neighbors' apathy on forced migration, the non-Kurdish inhabitants seemed to internalize the state's nationalistic approach and discriminate against Kurdish people in the course of their everyday interactions.

Many citizens interpret the urban excess produced by Kurdish migrants through the dynamics of daily politics, solidarity networks, and bodily endeavors as the reason for the state violence. Thus, even when they accept that Kurdish migrants were subject to state violence, they implicitly counter-argue that the Kurds deserved it. One interviewee, for example, says,

> I know that Kurds suffered a lot. I know that our state might have done a lot of wrong things. But to a certain extent Kurds deserved it. They are not obedient, they are always protesting something, and they are unapologetically supporting the terrorists. We are also subjected to unfair treatment but we do not take our arms and fight against our state. Even if they suffered, they shouldn't have answered in this way. You must live with your pain in silence and with dignity. Kurds are always on the street, protesting and shouting the name of Abdullah Ocalan [the imprisoned leader of KWP]. If you do this, then state will answer you. I am sorry, but I think it is normal.

The opinions and stories my informants shared with me, the urban renewal projects, and physical and social circumstances in squatter settings provide a context in which relations with the state and with non-Kurdish neighbors, the meanings of citizenship, and the construction of the urban Kurdish subjectivity are reexamined. My conversations with Kurdish migrants were framed within a political pendulum, which links their intimate and personal experiences to a broader political agenda of rights and demands. Speaking about the physical conditions of the neighborhood is suddenly linked with the struggle for Kurdish identity rights within the neighborhood. This pendulum between the personal (micro) and political (macro) levels through the politicization of members or sympathizers of a political movement can be read as an important factor in social and political movements (Della Porta 2006, 207).

Kurdish migrants, who face different tactics and strategies of governmentality[10] both in their relations with several actors of the state apparatus and on a societal level, create an urban space through their daily performances. They are not only facing these tactics and strategies but also producing responses to them, including their own definitions of being an urbanite, and the meaning they attribute to being Kurdish in the city and struggling against several state policies or discriminatory attitudes. Instead of being passive victims trapped in total social exclusion, they are reproducing the city with their solidarity networks, supposedly illegal demonstrations, work experiences, and daily politics. From a total assimilation to the assertion of identity, the *Kurdishness* of the new inhabitants of the city is a crucial issue both for the Kurdish migrants and for others. The definitions of urban and the meanings of citizenship are shaped and reshaped on a daily basis through concrete life experiences. Belonging to the city means creating an urban space where "the common ways in which hegemonic notions of citizenship are both accommodated and disrupted across urban spaces" (Secor 2004, 365).

## Conclusion

I argue that discussions regarding the uses of urban space are *ethnicized* due to forced migration that obliged millions of Kurdish people to leave their homes in the countryside and move to metropolises, including Istanbul. Kurdish migrants participated to the daily life of the *gecekondu* neighborhoods while they

10 As a concept elaborated by Michel Foucault, governmentality is linked with the terms security, territory, and population (Foucault 2000, 142). According to his definition, the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, calculations, tactics, and reflections that constitute a complex form of power targets the population as its principal form of knowledge. It is a process rather than a result, and it provides a peculiar distribution of power and governmental apparatuses and the development of whole complex *savoirs* (Foucault 2000, 143).



claimed the urban space. They have intimate knowledge of state apparatuses and capacities, as well as violence. However, their knowledge has been deepened through the apathy of various state institutions, including several official actors at the local level. In addition to state discourses and practices, the non-Kurdish residents living in squatter neighborhoods with Kurdish migrants reflected the state's hostility and apathy. The state's and Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's desire to transform the poor and degraded urban areas with major renewal projects and integrate the city into neoliberal globalization has coincided with the attempt to control and decentralize a perceived overabundance of Kurdish people living in the cities. The target population of UTPs was ethnicized as Kurdish and the Kurdish residents found themselves open to implementations of urban renewal and restructuring. As they resisted, stigmatization increased, and they were marked as terrorists and outsiders.

*Gecekondu* inhabitants define the right to be urbanites without linking it to the right to private property ownership. Thus, the right to city, coming from the struggle to become part of Istanbul and its sociocultural and economic life, is recognized by most of the *gecekondu* inhabitants. A possibility of a common urban space regardless of the ethnic origin of the inhabitants (and thus of positionality in relation to the state) seems to be possible.

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