Migration, Urban Space and Diversity: A Case from Istanbul

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ABSTRACT *The growing flow of international migration to Turkey has serious implications for the social, economic and spatial transformation of recipient cities across the country. This paper highlights some of these implications by discussing findings from an ethnographic case study carried out in an inner-city locality of Istanbul. It raises four main points: 1) urban localities of migrant settlement are not accidental; 2) they are often highly diverse in new and complex ways; 3) space and difference are intricately intertwined in such urban localities; and 4) migration and diversification at the local scale can produce conflicted space narratives and governance systems. This paper aims to emphasize the importance of acknowledging the position and impact of migration to Turkey in the framework of larger processes of urban and societal transformation.*

As the publication of this special issue indicates, international migration to Turkey is a field attracting growing academic interest by researchers across disciplines. While the field expands, numerous dimensions informing migrants' experiences in Turkey are becoming more visible, such as ethnicity,[1] religion,[2] gender,[3] race[4] and their intersections with differences in the employment sector,[5] migration motive[6] and legal status.[7] However, while most migration to Turkey is predominantly urban in nature, the city and/or spaces migrants inhabit often appear only as context and are rarely considered as factors that shape and are shaped by migration.[8] Similarly, the unit of analysis is often determined through an "ethnic lens",[9] focusing on particular ethnic and/or national groups with minimal analysis on the relationship between the diversity of migrants and non-migrant groups inhabiting shared spaces.[10] Given these limitations, in this brief commentary, I will present some key points on the intersections between migration, urban space and diversity in the Turkish context, based on ethnographic research I have conducted as part of a doctoral project since October 2010 in a migrant hub in Istanbul.[11]

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1. Urban Localities of Migrant Settlement are not Accidental

Since the 1990s, Istanbul been impacted by the increasing movement of international migrants moving to and through the city, who have come with the intention of settling and/or working, seeking asylum or transiting to a third country. In this process, Kumkapı, a neighborhood located on the historical peninsula, has emerged as one of the main hubs for these groups. In tracing the geographic and historical context of Kumkapı's socio-spatial transformation to the present day, it becomes obvious that

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neither internal nor international migrant settlement is accidental, being variably and uniquely shaped by local histories of migration, economic restructuring and rescaling processes, as well as emergent local practices.

For several centuries, Kumkapı was considered a residential quarter for Greek and Armenian citizens of the Ottoman state, then the Turkish Republic. Following the 1950s, however, the demographic profile and spatial function of Kumkapı began changing quite substantially due to forces were also impacting other minority quarters of Istanbul.[12] This is the period during which large segments of the religious minority populations of Kumkapı emigrated abroad, in the face of discriminatory state policies and growing nationalistic public hostility. Those who stayed, on the other hand, began moving to other districts, becoming increasingly discontent with the combined effects of growing internal migration and commercialization,[13] such as a diminishing sense of intimate and familiar neighborly life. In return, for the exponentially growing number of internal migrants arriving in Istanbul from the 1970s onwards, Kumkapı emerged as an attractive first place of settlement due to centrality, housing availability and proximity to jobs.

Indeed very similar reasons can be observed for the international migrant population of Kumkapı today. The neighboring district of Laleli has changed quite radically from the late 1970s onwards in the face of successive new transnational economic opportunities, catering initially to Arab tourists and traders, then to "suitcase traders" from Russia,[14] which has expanded to include numerous countries in Central Asia and Africa today. Consequently, almost all its buildings have been converted into malls, hotels, restaurants, storage and shipping companies, while neighboring Gedikpaşa and Beyazıt have emerged as its manufacturing counterparts, home to countless workshops that offer plenty of informal job opportunities. Hence, these areas have become well known by most foreigners arriv-

ing in the city, whether for trading or employment seeking purposes.

Kumkapı, on the other hand, appears to have emerged as the residential counterpart, with an increasing number of properties being rented to foreigners, in the form of entire flats, rooms in shared households, and even as sheds in basements or rooftops. Some buildings are even fully refurbished for these purposes, with flats being converted into studio rooms with shared kitchen/bathroom facilities. The density of this type of housing is very high, as several people often share a single room. The turnover of people is also extremely rapid, as most do not arrive with the intent of settling. Also, many older "native" residents of Kumkapı, meaning those who are territorially rooted and are citizens of the Turkish state, have started moving out of the locality to other districts. Firstly, renting properties to international migrants and moving elsewhere has become an attractive and profitable business. Many natives also point to a diminishing sense of familiarity and security in the locality, which is said to have become "too diverse."

Again, while the demographic composition and spatial attributes of Kumkapı are profoundly changing, the matters informing migrant settlement choices here are very similar, including centrality, proximity of jobs, as well as the availability and flexibility of housing. One distinction perhaps is that as the number of foreigners residing in Kumkapı has increased, new micro-ethnic communities and special businesses catering to foreigners (e.g., international call centers, ethnic restaurants and hairdressers) have also emerged. Thus, the presence of ethnic spaces, networks and economies are also additional factors drawing international migrants to Kumkapı.

2. Urban Localities of Migrant Settlement are Often Highly Diverse in New and Complex Ways

Hubs of migrant settlement across many global cities are incredibly diverse, forming social contexts that some scholars have started to describe as "super-diverse"[15]. Kumkapı portrays this point quite vividly. To recognize the immense diversity of its foreigner population, one only needs to look at the international calling deals listed by the dozens of call centers spread across Kumkapı to deduce the very diverse origins of the new residents, ranging from Georgia to Turkmenistan in the Caucuses, Moldova to Russia in Eastern Europe, Somalia to Nigeria in Africa, and Syria to Sri Lanka in Asia and the Middle East. These various national groups are also diverse internally, showing differences in language, ethnicity and religion. Moreover, some nationalities show distinctions by gender and age compositions. Migration channels and motives are equally variable with some groups arriving on tourist visas, others on fake passport, and others by crossing the border undocumented; some have come to Istanbul with the purpose of working, others seeking asylum, while others plan to

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transit onwards to Europe. Depending on these motives and channels, legal statuses and entitlements that migrants are able to obtain also vary, which often fluctuate depending on Turkey's migration policy interests at the time. Last, but not least, the employment sectors that different migrant groups are able to access vary according to matters such as gender, race, language and transnational networks. Hence, it can be seen that there are countless intersecting variables informing a migrant's chances and strategies of local integration.

It is important to note that the native population of Kumkapı is also far from being homogenous. The above-mentioned varying historic migration flows to and from Kumkapı can be traced within its current population. Today, there remains a small resident population of Greek, Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities, although most of them have migrated from the Eastern provinces of Turkey in recent decades. The ethnically Turkish resident population is also small, consisting of families that were among the first internal migrants in Kumkapı in the 1960s and the 1970s, primarily from the Black Sea and Central Anatolia. Though their numbers today are low,

it is notable that the presence of these groups lingers in the form of property and business ownership. As more recent arrivals following the 1990s, ethnic Kurds and Arabs from Eastern Turkey constitute the largest native population in Kumkapı. In sum, the native population is also internally differentiated by religion, ethnicity, language, regional origin, migration time and motive, gender, age, family, labor opportunities, ties with place of origin, local reception, etc. Moreover, it is important to note that each of these groups are distinct in terms of their historical and present experiences of exclusion and discrimination by the Turkish state, which can be significant in determining the nature of relations formed with other migrants and meanings attached to space.

3. Space and Difference are Intricately Intertwined in Urban Localities of Migrant Settlement

As discussed in the first section, while the reasons for arriving and settling in Kumkapı are similar, the experience of living in this locality is far from being equal. Rather, the various differences described above distinctly converge with temporal, spatial and social factors, creating unique experiences for different groups. As I have detailed elsewhere,[16] housing provides a useful case for understanding how such mechanisms arise and impact migrants' everyday lives in contexts of diversity like Kumkapı.

One sphere in which the varying differences determining access to

housing can be clearly read is in the advertisements for room rentals that are posted on walls and windows all across Kumkapı. There are four terms – *bekar* (single), *aile* (family), *bayan* (woman) and *yabancı* (foreigner) – that are likely to appear in these advertisements either alone or combined. These distinctions are partly shaped by local custom and culture, where, for instance, the emphasis on *aile* versus *bekar* expresses traditional conceptions of family honor such that the presence of single people in a building occupied by families is seen as threatening. While *bekar* is not a gendered term per se, the emphasis on *bayan* is rather symbolic of the gendered migration patterns to the area that has created this demand. It can be related to local customs around family honor and/or gender roles as well, such that women are not seen as threatening and are thought to take better care of property. This preference, however, is sometimes also symbolic of more subtle intentions, embedded in the particular employment practices (e.g., sex work) and legalization strategies (e.g., entering into romantic relations with citizens to obtain documents) that female migrant populations have become associated with.[17] Hence, this emphasis on *bayan* sometimes also harbors romantic requests, and even if not the outright intent at first, many lone female migrants in Kumkapı eventually find themselves

vulnerable to such requests made by landlords and/or other male tenants. Similar subtleties emerge related to race. Although the rental signposts do not spell out such distinctions, many landlords and realtors in fact distinguish between *yabanci* and *zenci,* the Turkish expression to denote a black person. Thus, when a black migrant responds to any one of these ads, it is quite possible that they will be turned down immediately upon face-to-face contact, generally depending on the type of housing advertised.

Related to this, housing quality and use is another sphere through which differences become visible. The housing stock of Kumkapı varies both externally – from rundown historic terraced houses to newly renovated modern apartment buildings – and internally, since basement sheds and rooftops are increasingly converted into rooms. There are significant variations in the way migrants use their housing spaces in terms of sharing practices (e.g., how many people share a single room and whether or not one has a say in the choice of other tenants) and non-residential uses (e.g., rooms also serving as informal restaurant and/or hairdresser). While surely the landlord has the ultimate say over quality and use, which as mentioned above can vary according to changing migration waves, demands, and gender and race related differences, migrants' preferences are often determined by a more complex set of interchanging variables, including migration motives and channels, employment opportunities, legal status and strategies, length of resi-

dence, local and transnational networks, and even life altering events such as marriage, children or illness. In return, as patterns emerge around different uses of housing by different migrant groups, this in itself feeds into narratives of difference. The gendered practice noted previously is one example. Likewise, racist discrimination by white "natives" and foreign migrants alike toward black migrants is often grounded in housing use narratives, i.e., that they accept to live in crowded shabby basements, which of course rarely acknowledge the numerous factors above, including racism, that position them in such housing in the first place.

4. Migration and Diversification at the Local Scale can Produce Conflicted Space Narratives and Governance Systems

As described under previous sections, the population of Kumkapı is highly diverse, as are the variables that inform their experiences of inhabiting this locality. On the other hand, there are some overarching patterns observable in ways that the totality of this diversity in Kumkapı is perceived and experienced across most groups, which appear conflicted in nature. In spite of the differentiated experiences stated above, Kumkapı is generally seen as a uniquely accommodating space for foreign migrants of all backgrounds, particularly undocumented ones. Therefore, many foreign migrants speak about the comfort of anonymity in Kumkapı, in the sense that differences

and foreignness are so common that migrants are less concerned about "sticking out." Related to this, it is seen as a space where legal and societal norms can be stretched. Regarding migration status, there is a sense that neither residents nor authorities are concerned with the legal status of foreigners in the area, supported perhaps by the ironic fact that Istanbul's Foreigner Removal Center is located quite literally at the border of Kumkapı, where residential housing meets popular tourist restaurants. Many foreigners and natives alike also speak about the dynamism of Kumkapı's diversity, particularly in relation to economic opportunities. Businesses such as call centers, secondhand furniture stores, laundry services, real estate offices, international shipping companies, ethnic restaurants and hairdressers are all proliferating, not only due to the diversity but also the density of the population and high turnover rate. Many in turn are informal business practices, which offer job opportunities for undocumented migrants, leading to descriptions of Kumkapı being like a "free zone."

Yet Kumkapı's openness can also be narrated as the source of problems. Exceptionality applies to the spread of illicit businesses in the area, such as drug trading, prostitution and human smuggling. Hence, the "free zone" saying often refers to a sense that this is a place where anything goes, and where legal, social and moral norms are put on hold. There are many native business owners in the area who were previously residents, but moved once they had families, often stating that it has become a place "not appropriate for families." Yet many have kept their businesses because of the economic potential; another less openly spoken opportunity relates to possibilities for engaging in extramarital affairs away from the gaze of relatives and neighbors. Many foreign migrants also speak of

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the inappropriate for family dimension of Kumkapı, but often state that living here for them is a necessity in the sense that finding housing elsewhere is very difficult or unaffordable. Furthermore, foreigners and natives alike complain about not being offered protection by the police and law enforcement against crime in the area, with claims that some police are in fact culprits as well. Foreigners in particular state that they have no place to turn to when they are harassed on streets, or abused and cheated by employers and landlords. Yet it seems that there is a shared interest in maintaining the diversity of this locality, with residents and business owners alike making efforts to self-govern by keeping such conflicted encounters across groups at a minimum, reflected through common

statements such as "we are all here to make a living."

Concluding Remarks

As I have aimed to highlight through this brief description, in understanding contemporary experiences of migrants in the city, urban and local histories of migration, diversification and socio-economic development play an important role that must be acknowledged. At the same time, it should be recognized that the substance and format of local diversity are continually changing, where global migration flows of recent decades have made the variables of difference much more complex and interchangeable. As I have tried to show, the intricate mixing of such local histories and complex differences have a significant impact in the ways that urban space is perceived and used. Such contexts also raise important questions about the potential challenges of living with difference and diversity, particularly when looking beyond multiculturalist frameworks to ones that acknowledge structural economic and political inequalities. The importance of recognizing this dimension seems timely and important in the current context of growing communal conflict in localities with Syrian refugees across different cities in Turkey.[18] Examining international migration to Turkey through the lens of urban space and diversity also seems pertinent to the field of Turkish studies more generally. Because it includes but also expands beyond more common emphases on religion, gen-

der and ethnically-based differences, as well as modernist and neo-liberal ideologies in understanding the shaping and contestation of urban space. Moreover, it encompasses the emergence and convergence of new and multiple axes of differentiation, and new modes of pluralistic living in contemporary Turkey. ■

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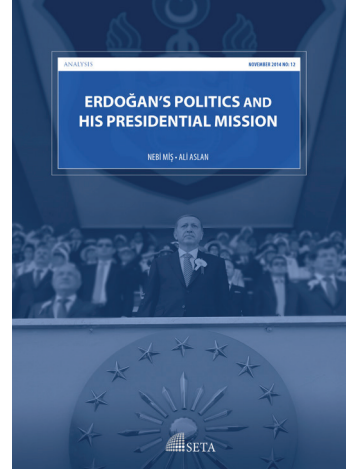
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Erdoğan's Politics and His Presidential Mission

By NEBİ MİŞ , ALİ ASLAN

The "New Turkey" project that is at the center of Erdoğan's reform is comprised of three factors: independence, democracy and development.

If we take a look at the collapse of the Western-centered world in the 1990s one can see the preceding 1945 period and onward as a sign of modern liberal political crisis wrapped around a capitalist versus communist strife which as a result created fault lines in the political atmosphere. The trauma that emerged within the groundwork of modern Turkey in its early days was so engrained that it created many political crises. To this extent the structural breaking points that were experienced in the transitional periods this opportunity laid the foundation for reformist political actors to emerge in the political scene.

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