

FORCED EVICTIONS in ISTANBUL



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Abstract:

We should find a way to keep poor people from the city of Istanbul (Erdogan Bayraktar, Chairman of the Mass Housing Administration of Turkey, 2006).

While İstanbul, one of the world’s biggest metropolises, prepares to become Europe’s largest Mega city, urban renewal is having a profound effect on the cities structure. Istanbul is currently being restructured with the aim of becoming a ‘world city’ in the last decades.

While many benefit, others are at risk of losing their homes and with it employment and livelihood. As the city is getting ready for large clean-up, many find themselves without a place in the shiny, new vision of the city’s new future.

Introduction

Squatter housing built on illegally occupied land (usually public land) was known as Gecekondu (‘built overnight’). Gecekondu began to appear in Istanbul from the mid-1940s, and became the predominant source of new housing in the 1950s.

When the migrants first arrived, it was empty spaces within the inhabited city which were first filled with illegal squatter —gecekondu— housing (Keyder, 2005). For thirty years, since 50’s, the state allowed new immigrants from rural areas to construct squatter settlements —gecekondu— on state-owned vacant land in the cities, built either by the settlers themselves or by land speculators (Gundogdu and Gough, 2009). Nowadays, İstanbul’s vast, informally developed post-gecekondu neighborhoods are now seen as eyesores and key spatial resources for urban renewal.



Gecekondu Settlements in Sarıgöl, Istanbul (*Toplum İçin Şehircilik*, 2009)

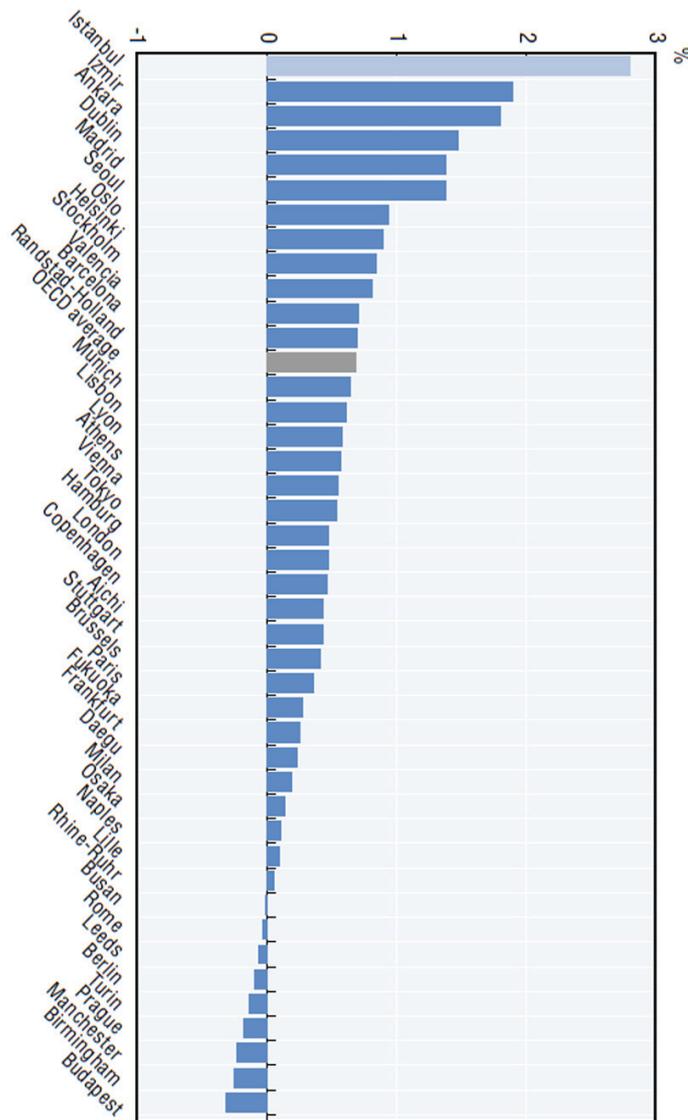


Figure 1. Average Annual Population Growth Rates Among a Selection of OECD Metropolitan Regions (1995-2002). Note: OECD average refers to the average of OECD Metro-Regions. Source: OECD Metropolitan Database.

While public investment is desperately needed to improve earthquake safety and to provide infrastructure, transport links and public spaces, planners and investors opt for a tabula rasa vision: a complete replacement of both physical and social structure and the relocation of the original inhabitants to the city’s fast growing periphery.

Many international and local experts fear that İstanbul’s ambitious restructuring plan threatens one of the city’s key assets, inherited from decades of of-

ficially tolerated, informal urbanization on affordable city build by a small capital: a city without slums, where penniless arrivals could easily find cheap housing and livelihoods; a place where these migrants could slowly integrate themselves into the social and economic system. Instead, urban transformation would produce more polarized social and spatial fabric, making thousands of Istanbulites refugees in their own city.

The Effects of Economy

Located in a dynamic emerging market economy, Istanbul is the economic and financial heart of one of the world's 20 largest economies (Urban Age, 2009). A modern megacity, full of contrasts, it has had rapid growth with relatively little effective planning, bringing major problems – high unemployment, an increasing informal sector economy, uncontrolled and illegal land occupation, the spread of slums, bad transport congestion, and air and water pollution.

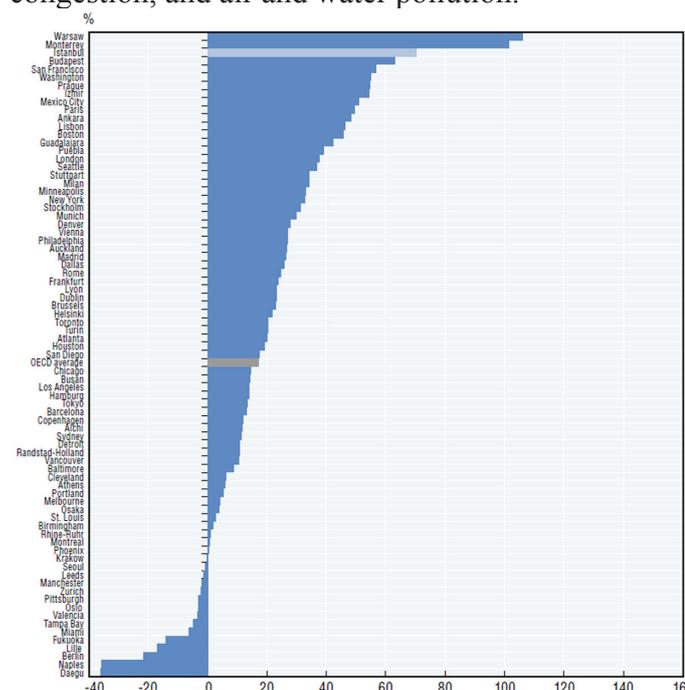


Figure 2. Differences in per capita GDP of Metro-Regions and their national level (2002) *Sample of 78 metro-regions in the OECD*
 Note: OECD average refers to the average of OECD Metro-Regions.
 Source: OECD Metropolitan Database.

Keyder (2005) mentions in his article about the visible impacts of globalization that define exclusion which results marginalization and inequality derived from the structural transformation, the economic and social polarization in Istanbul. Most of the physical transformation associated with globalization in Istanbul has taken place since the mid-1980s: gated

communities, five-star hotels, the city packaged as a consumption artifact for tourists, new office towers, expulsion of small business from the central districts, beginnings of gentrification of the old neighborhoods, and world images on billboards and shop windows (Oncu, 1997). Changes in the labor market and employment opportunities in Istanbul resulted both from the national trend in the relative decline of the formal sector and from the deindustrialization of the urban economy; land has finally become a commodity.

	BRAZIL		TURKEY		UK	
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	Rank 9 (\$1,845 billion)	Rank 80 (\$9,747)	Rank 15 (\$886 billion)	Rank 62 (\$12,865)	Rank 6 (\$2,168 billion)	Rank 19 (\$35,601)
GDP per capita		8.20%	10.30%	10.40%	5.30%	3.60%
Unemployment rate		5.70%			Rank 21 (0.942)	Rank 18 (79.2)
Inflation rate (consumer prices)		Rank 70 (0.807)				
Human Development Index (HDI)		Rank 81 (72)				
Life expectancy at birth (years)		Rank 95 (89.6)				
Adult literacy rate (% aged 15 and over)						

Figure 3. Urban Age City Survey, 2009

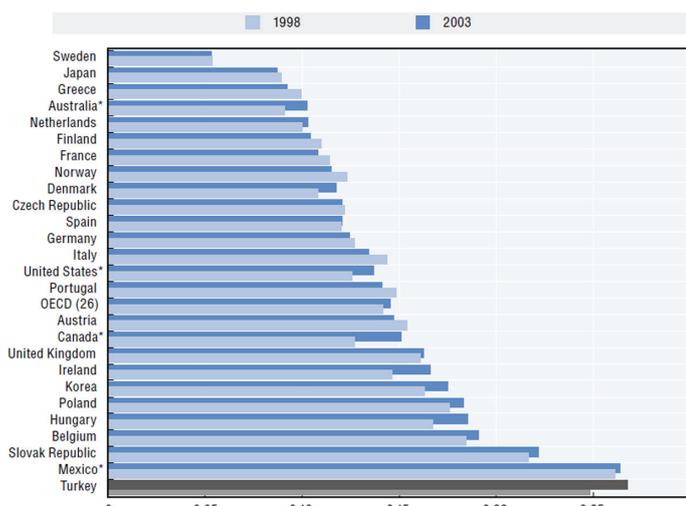


Figure 3. Comparison of Regional Disparities in OECD Countries-
Source: OECD (2007) *OECD Regions at Glance*

Changes in Laws to Make Use of Urban Economy

In July 2005, Municipal Law No. 5393 (Article 73a) allocated responsibility for decisions related to urbanization and urban development to municipalities. With this change, the concept of ‘urban transformation/renewal’ became one of the most important issues for municipal governments.

Article 73 states that:

The municipality, may adopt urbanization and development projects in order to reconstruct and restore the ruined parts of the city; to create housing areas, industrial and commercial zones, technology parks and social facilities; to take measures against the earthquake risk or to protect the historical and cultural structure of the city. The areas to be subject to urbanization and development projects shall be announced under the decision of the absolute majority of the entire members of the Municipal Council.

As to the implementation phase (Article 73b):

The renovation projects and their implementation in regions identified as renewal areas, which have been prepared or commissioned by the special provincial administration and municipality shall be undertaken by the respective special provincial administrations and municipalities or be implemented upon being commissioned to public institutions and organizations or real and legal persons. In these areas, a joint implementation with the Housing Development Administration shall be possible, while the implementation may also be delegated to the Housing Development

Administration.

Transformation/Renewal Projects

‘Urban transformation/renewal areas’ are either historic areas where construction has been restricted, or squatter housing districts that occupy highly valuable urban land, due to the urban expansion that followed their foundation as squatter areas (Türkün, 2011). State funding was provided for mass housing projects through the creation of the Mass Housing Fund (MHF) and the establishment of Mass Housing Administration (TOKI). Istanbul still has major areas of squatter settlements and derelict buildings on high-value land in the inner city and the state is organizing the eviction of most of the residents and the conversion of this land to offices and to luxury housing and shopping malls serving the growing business elite (Gundogdu and Gough, 2009).

Forced Evictions

Alarmed by the approaching negative effects of urban transformation, UN-HABITAT recently placed in Istanbul (together with London, Rome and other major European cities) on an urban eviction red list. In June 2009, UN-HABITAT’s Advisory Group on Forced Evictions (AGFE) was invited by civil society groups to visit selected sites where approximately 80,000 residents are fearing the consequences of urban renewal projects and a local of 12,730 people have already lost their homes. Since city officials have recently declared that two-third of the cities 1,5 million housing units should be redeveloped, and no social measures to help affected residents are in place, there is fear that current evictions are only the beginning of a much larger trend.

The Forced Eviction Map (Adanali, 2010) shows, for the first time, an overview of more than 120 sites where urban evictions are likely to take place if this trend continues. The map is intended to draw a dystopian scenario and to ring alarm bells. Although cities have to maintain dynamism and enjoy change, Istanbul urgently needs mechanisms and tools to ensure that the huge gains expected from urban regeneration will be spread evenly, Istanbul still has a choice.

What is driving the evictions in Istanbul? In recent years many Istanbul neighbourhoods have been going through dramatic transformations, which have led to the demolition of houses and the eviction of their resi-

dents. In some cases, residents are being relocated to the outskirts of the city, while others are being left to the streets. While the actual number of evictions to date in Istanbul has been quite small, the scale of potential evictions is high if the urban renewal plans are carried out as foreseen.

Different factors are driving these evictions, from property speculation in the regeneration of urban areas, to megaevents or mega-projects, such as the airport, Formula 1 racing and the 2010 Capital of Culture. In response to reports by local organisations that further evictions are expected to take place, the Advisory Group on Forced Evictions (AGFE) to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT was invited by civil society groups to undertake a mission to Istanbul. The mission, which took place from June 8 to 12, 2009, was tasked with documenting ongoing and future possible evictions, assessing the existing legal framework, and hearing the viewpoints of those responsible for and those affected by evictions. The findings and recommendations of the report would be communicated to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT. The mission visited several neighbourhoods, some of which had already been demolished and some which had been designated for urban renewal. The mission also met with neighbourhood associations, residents, municipality officials and a representative of the TOKI. The various stages of the eviction and demolition processes. The neighbourhoods visited during the mission were chosen because they exemplified the different stages of urban renewal, which can be identified as (Adanali et al., 2010):

Stage 1) Designated as a renewal or project area

—The area had been designated by the municipality or greater municipality as a renewal area or an area for special projects or mega-projects. Planning was not taking place and evictions had not happened. If the area did undergo renewal or the project did go forward then evictions might have taken place.

Stage 2) Planning process underway

—A plan for renewal of the neighbourhood had been approved or was in the process of being approved. Negotiations with owners and purchasing of properties was taking place. Evictions may not have started but likely would begin soon.

Stage 3) Demolition ongoing

—Some residents had been evicted and some houses had been destroyed; the process was happening then.

Stage 4) Demolition completed

—The residents had been evicted and the houses had been destroyed.

Stage 5) 2nd wave of evictions

—People relocated from renewal areas to social housing in TOKI tenements who had been forced to leave the tenements because they would not afford to pay the monthly installments, the building fees, or other costs.

Evicted Neighbourhoods

Sulukule is a residential neighbourhood situated in the historic peninsula, within the boundaries of the Theodosian Land Walls built in 447. Although home to many different groups of people, the area is characterized by a Roma population who have lived in the vicinity for many generations and who rely strongly on social Networks for their survival.

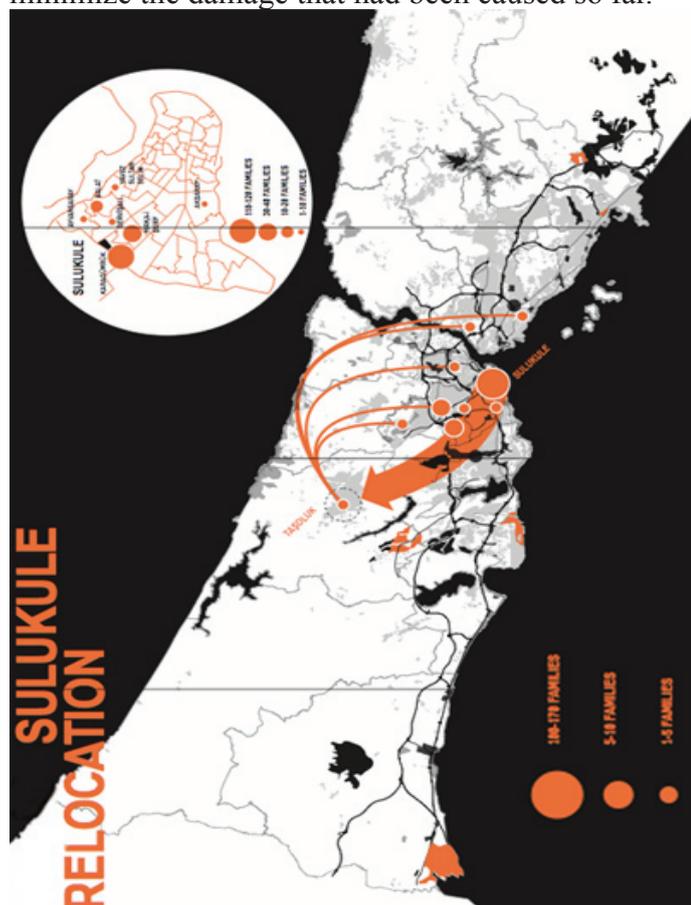


Demolition of gecekondu -Informal Housing- Sulukule, Istanbul

In 2006, an urban transformation project was announced under Law No. 5366, the Preservation by Renovation and Utilization by Revitalizing Deteriorated Immovable Historical and Cultural Properties, which called for the transformation of the area, including the demolition of the existing houses and replacement with modern villas. The renters would be displaced from the area and relocated to a new housing development in Taşoluk, 35 km away. Owners would have the chance to stay in Sulukule if they could afford to pay the difference between the current property valuation and the price of the new houses;

however most could not afford to pay, and sold to third parties.

Demolition had been ongoing for two years and had recently been completed. TOKI considering a re-evaluation of the urban renewal process for Sulukule, following the widespread and intense pressure from national and international urban social networks and international organisations. A new workshop (Sulukule Atölye) was initiated by concerned citizens and experts to prepare an alternative plan, which aims to regain the housing rights of Sulukule residents and minimize the damage that had been caused so far.



Map 2. Relocation of Sulukule (Adanali, 2010)

Süleymaniye is another neighbourhood in the historical peninsula, close to the famous Süleymaniye Mosque. It contains many houses of architectural significance. The area designated for renewal is comprised on 1700 houses and demolitions are ongoing. Most of residents are renters and the owners are generally absentee. Kiptaş (the public development company undertaking renewal projects and acting in the Istanbul Metropolitan Region) has been buying houses in the area and has been evicting the tenants. There have been several fires recently that have destroyed many houses and left families homeless and there are

also many small business in the area which are affected.

Tarlabaşı neighbourhood is also in an historic district and part of Beyoğlu Municipality. It is directly adjacent to the centre of the city, Taksim square, and contains historic domestic architecture and other valuable architecture. In total there are 3200 people to be affected by the Project in 278 plots. The project has been approved but no demolitions have taken place yet.

Başbüyük in Maltepe Municipality is a gecekondu area on the Asian side of Istanbul which was first built in the late 1960s. The neighbourhood is well built with permanent two, three and four storey buildings, paved roads, water and sewerage system, and electricity. The planning process for an urban renewal project began in 2006 and it was designated as a renewal area in 2004. There are 6000 houses and 25,000 residents. Nine houses have already been destroyed to make way for TOKI tenements and the rest of the neighbourhood is under threat of demolitions.



Gülsuyu and Gülsuyu Neighbourhood and TOKI buildings

Gülsuyu and Gülsuyu are two adjacent gecekondu (informally-built) neighbourhoods in Maltepe Municipality. The area was designated for urban renewal in 2004 and there are 35,000 residents currently living there.

Küçükbakalköy was a small Roma community of 256 houses which was demolished in June 2006, with no prior notice given to the residents. Some of the residents are still camped in barracks on the site, as they have no where to go. Living conditions are very unhealthy.

Kurtköy neighbourhood located close to the Sabiha Gökçen airport and the Formula 1 race track. The

settlement originally had 1200 houses and 6000 residents. Houses were of one and two storeys located on government-owned land. Out of these, 950 houses were demolished in 2005 and residents were relocated to blocks some distance away, although most cannot afford to stay there. New housing blocks have been built on the site, but are still unoccupied. The remaining 250 houses have been designated as a renewal site.

Bezirganbahçe is a site of TOKI tenement blocks where the 7800 residents of Ayazma (a nearby former *gecekondu*) have been relocated to after their old neighbourhood was destroyed in 2007 for a renewal project. When the mission visited Bezirganbahçe and spoke to the families it became clear that there is a second wave of evictions happening because many of the relocated families cannot afford to live in the TOKI houses. Out of the 1930 families relocated, there are 650 families which have already received a 'letter of confiscation' meaning that they have not paid their monthly instalments for six months and therefore will have to leave their apartments.

Güverncintepe is a small neighbourhood of 50 families directly adjacent to the former Ayazma site (which has already been demolished). One early morning in April 2009 the municipality and the police came to demolish the houses, but the people were able to resist.

Conclusion

Approximately 80,000 people were directly affected by the urban renewal projects in the areas and in total, 12,730 people had already had their homes destroyed (AGFE, 2009).

Some of these situations cannot be termed 'forced evictions' since some people were willing to sell their property to the government. However, from what the AGFE mission gathered, those people who were willing participants in the urban renewal projects were a small minority and the majority of people were forced to participate in the projects through the signing of a contract agreement with the public authorities. On the one hand, the promotion of rising land and property values is the key ingredient of the urban development strategy, the explicit goal of key authorities charged with urban development, the key to engaging private investors, and the main resource that the authorities use to win local consent (Lovering and Turkmen, 2011). It is not possible to accurately define the total number

of people who will be directly affected. However, in 2007, Istanbul Municipality's Deputy Secretary General İrfan Uzun said, "preparations for urban transformation projects are continuing at full speed. One million of the 1.5 million buildings need to be replaced by new ones". Commenting on the similar figures declared by the president of TOKI, Uzun stated that, "however, this is not something that can be done in a day. This will be done stage by stage. We should build housing that meets the demand of an ever-increasing population."

These economic transformations were reflected in the visible transformation of urban space, making Istanbul the showcase of the country's new era of internationalism. Mass housing projects forming ribbons of high-rise, high-density suburbs in the periphery have created more socially homogeneous residential environments as middle-income groups as well as the upwardly mobile *Gecekondu* residents move to them and vacate older neighbourhoods for all their geographical and socioeconomic differences, poor people in areas targeted for development face similar prospects and problems, and they often react in similar ways, at least initially (Enlil, 2011).

Both local and central authorities project that over 60% of the housing units in Metropolitan Istanbul will undergo demolitions for urban renewal. This gives an idea of the scale of the dramatic problem that the poor and middle class residents of Istanbul are facing and will be facing in the near future, if nothing is done to reverse the current trend and the current practices (Lovering and Turkmen, 2011).

The increasing threat to the life-worlds of many residents give rise to social movements by neighbourhood associations and various non-governmental organizations resisting these massive efforts to transform the city. Yet, it remains to be seen how successful these emergent urban social movements claiming 'right to the city' will be.

The task facing those who wish to reinforce the ability of poor people to resist, and to reconstruct urban development strategizing in a more inclusive and sustainable mould, is to find ways to nurture these spontaneous groups and their implicit or explicit 'alternative' development ideas (Harvey, 2008).

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