

Waiting for Disaster? Housing Choices and Disaster Knowledge Among Migrants and Refugees in Istanbul's Southwestern Districts



Estella Carpi, University College London Institute For Risk and Disaster Reduction, Saman Ghaffarian, University College London Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction, Ouaees Hommous, Independent, and Cassidy Johnson, University College London Development Planning Unit

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Summary

This study documents how disaster knowledge among Arabic- and Persian-speaking, Türkiye-based migrants and refugees residing in Istanbul's southwestern districts (namely Avcılar, Zeytinburnu, Küçükçekmece, Bakırköy, Bağcılar, Fatih, Esenyurt, Bahçelievler, Başakşehir and Beylikdüzü) cannot fully reflect their housing choices. More specifically, by approaching the issue from an interdisciplinary perspective encompassing urban sociology, urban studies, architecture, environmental sciences, and geoscience, housing choices are considered to explore what possibilities and hindrances are available to migrants and refugees when it comes to disaster preparedness and safer living conditions. By this token, a holistic approach to studying disaster-affected societies (e.g., looking at both local displaced people and migrants) should be combined with an approach informed by group specificities. Indeed, while disaster knowledge may be in place, the conditions to aspire to safer housing—and a safer life overall—are proved to be rarely attainable for migrant and refugee groups.

The study shows how increasing levels of disaster knowledge cannot be translated into an active search for safe and verified earthquake-proof housing for many migrants and refugees from Arabic and Persian backgrounds. The main obstacles for accessing safe housing are: legal status, which, instead, is not seen as an important variable for particular groups of refugees who access better legal protection; the impossibility of reaching their workplace—often located in the southwestern districts—with low commuting costs; the economic affordability of presumably safer housing; social discrimination as low-income foreign tenants or buyers; and the trade-off between choosing safer housing in areas where there is no network in place versus benefiting from the support of ingroup members, who have built longstanding networks in some of these districts. Finally, the interviewees deemed their disaster knowledge as generally broad and nonspecialistic, revealing a desire to access more information and specific documentation to evaluate housing safety. The findings point to the importance of rethinking disaster knowledge contextually within societies which have become home to large numbers of migrants and refugees.

Keywords: earthquakes, housing, disaster knowledge, migrants, refugees, Istanbul

Subjects: Earthquakes, Policy and Governance, Exposed Populations, Preparedness, Legal Issues, Urban Issues

Introduction

This article examines the politics of housing in the context of future disasters across Arabic- and Persian-speaking, Türkiye-based migrants and refugees residing in Istanbul's southwestern districts (namely Avcılar, Zeytinburnu, Küçükçekmece, Bakırköy, Bağcılar, Fatih, Esenyurt, Bahçelievler, Başakşehir and Beylikdüzü; Figure 1). Housing choices are here considered as a way of exploring the possibilities for disaster preparedness and safer living conditions for migrants and refugees. By this token, while a holistic approach to studying disaster-affected societies is suggested (e.g., looking at both local displaced people and migrants), it needs to be first informed by group specificities. Indeed, while disaster knowledge may be in place, the conditions to aspire to safer housing—and a safer life overall—are often unattainable for certain societal groups.

Istanbul's southwestern neighborhoods are mixed in terms of social status and economic background, ranging from working to middle class. Avcılar and Bakırköy are especially mixed, with middle-class migrants and refugees residing in gentrified areas, such as Beylikdüzü and Başakşehir. Importantly, gentrified areas are usually considered safer during earthquakes than ungentrified areas, which are particularly vulnerable, as is the case in Istanbul and large regions of Türkiye. Areas like Avcılar were particularly affected during the 1999 Marmara earthquake, which killed nearly 18,000 people, displaced 400,000 to 600,000 more, destroyed 35,000 buildings, and damaged 80,000 more across Istanbul and the northeastern part of the country (World Bank, Turkey Country Office, 1999, p. 22). The neighborhoods included in this study are known to have been built on soil sediments prone to liquefaction in earthquakes and near to fault lines which run from east to west along the Marmara Sea coast.

After the 1999 earthquake, along with the *Doğal Afet Sigorta*, a compulsory earthquake insurance that every homeowner needs to pay for, the Turkish government introduced an “earthquake tax” to reduce the damage caused by large earthquakes. However, the February 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, which caused massive destruction in the southeast of the country (near the Syrian border), offered proof of the lax enforcement of a robust, but perhaps ill-conceived, national seismic building code. Residents complained about a general lack of public knowledge regarding what this earthquake tax had been spent on, sparking criticism of the government in the run-up to the national elections. This criticism was publicly expressed on social media under the hashtag #DepremVergileriNerede (“where is the earthquake tax?”). In January 2021, the tax rate increased to 10%, and journalists reported that public money totaled 580 billion TL, after taking the years of inflations into account (Saç, 2023).



Figure 1. An overview of Türkiye (a) and a North Anatolian Fault Line earthquake risk map for Istanbul Province (b). A 2019 study area and corresponding county names, reporting projected number of dead and injured people from a 7.5 Mw earthquake scenario occurring at night (c).

Source: Tunc et al. (2022), reprinted from Deprem Risk Yönetimi ve Kentsel İyileştirme Dairesi Başkanlığı (2023).

More specifically, by approaching the issue from an interdisciplinary perspective encompassing urban sociology, urban studies, architectural and environmental sciences, and geoscience, the authors aim to understand the extent to which migrant and/or refugee status in different Istanbul-based groups impinges on people's access to earthquake-safe housing and disaster knowledge (Figure 1). Indeed, national disaster risk mitigation education programs (*Afet Bilinci Eğitimi*) are generally run by several municipalities across the country and, in theory, address all social groups. However, earthquake preparedness in Türkiye is mostly discussed in technical terms and focuses on developing preparedness for all residents, without regard for the cultural, economic, and legal peculiarities of different societal groups and the limited choices they may have. In this vein, the authors consider *if* and *how* refugees' housing choices suggest a tendency to consciously "wait for disaster" and, when possible, opt for safer housing and districts.

More broadly, recurrent practices and threats of eviction and forced displacement engender diversely vulnerable forms of inhabitation in Istanbul, Türkiye's largest city, especially in its increasingly urbanized districts (Figure 2). These policies have put at particular risk mostly low-income groups, who can only afford low-cost housing. Since the 1999 earthquakes, the city's most inexpensive housing has in fact been available in districts located on the fault lines' map, which indicates where future earthquakes are more likely to occur, through a process of unregulated private construction and legalization amnesties that retrospectively made illegally built buildings legal, even though they are not earthquake-proof. However, these same areas are also the sites of new construction—luxurious apartment buildings and middle-class entertainment and consumption complexes—leaving the authors of this article with the broader, more complex question of whether low-income groups tend to end up in locations that are more exposed to risk during disasters or if, instead, geological considerations do not necessarily overlap with the political economy of local housing, because the building quality varies within these same areas where low-income and middle- or high-income people live. To the authors' knowledge, no in-depth research—even focusing on local citizens only—thus far has addressed this matter.

In an effort to examine how housing choices reflect people's attitude toward disaster, the authors do not aim to carve out a nationality-defined culture of waiting but instead aim to explore recurrent attitudes toward disaster and disaster knowledge across migrant and refugee groups inhabiting these districts. Consequently, there is no pretension to unravel the attitudes of their respective, predominant, national cultures toward local histories of disaster, which would have required an *ad hoc* ethnographic study for each group interviewed.

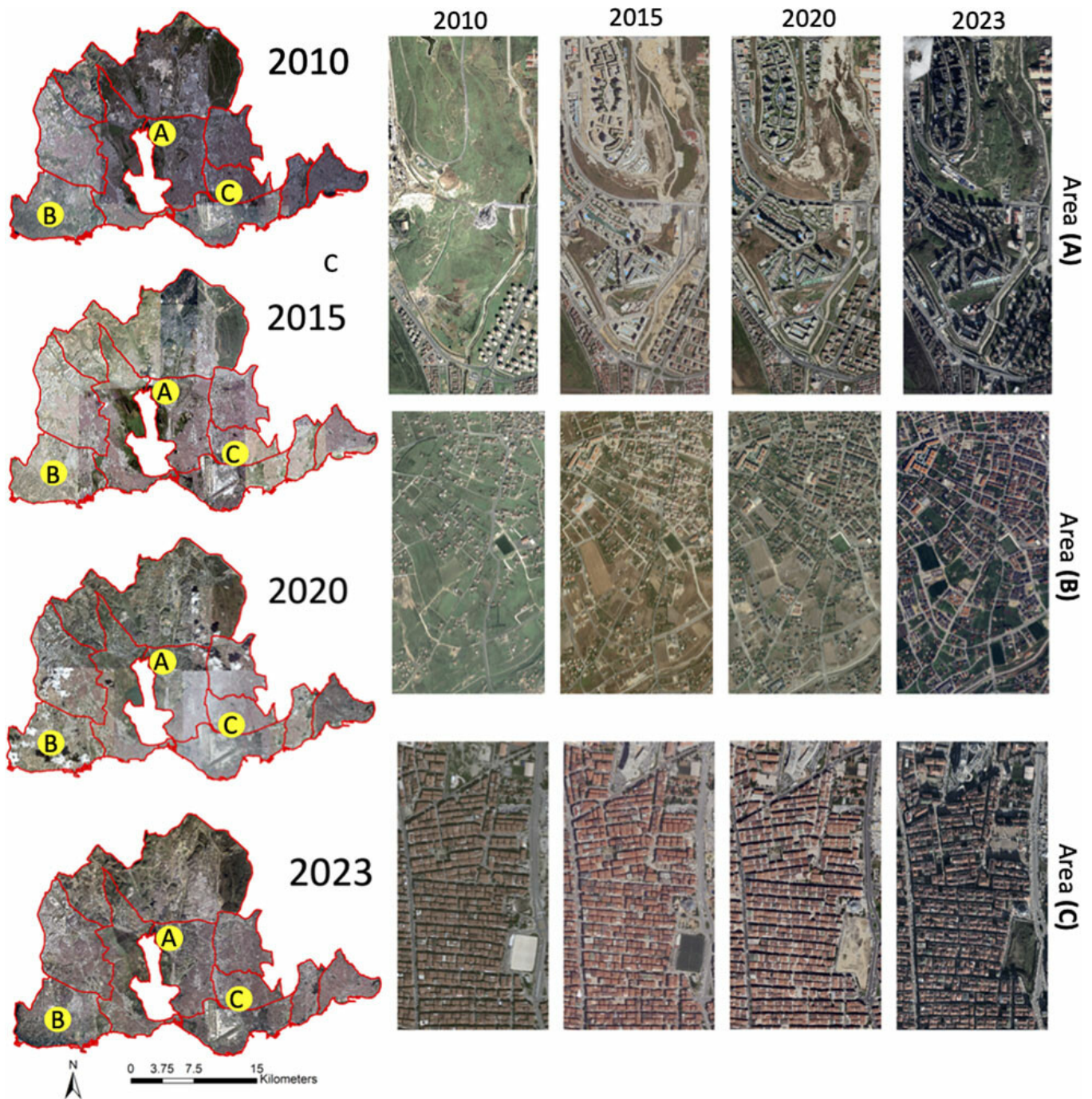


Figure 2. Bird's eye view of the study area for 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2023, showing the urbanization of the southwestern districts.

Source: Sentinel 2 satellite images (left column), high-resolution Google Earth images (right columns).

The Intersection Between Disaster and Conflict-Induced Migration

While critical turning points such as disasters are often approached in the international media as self-standing events, they are in actuality processes interrelated with continual ecological degradations (Johnson, 2007; Sultana, 2022)—like air pollution, toxic waste, and deforestation—

which are the product of everyday politics. In this context, scholars have studied migrant and refugee residents in Istanbul to explore their ways of inhabiting space and their diverse forms of vulnerability (e.g., Biehl, 2020; Danış, 2011; Rivetti, 2013). However, whereas there is a vast body of literature discussing how earthquakes and disasters are “awaited,” most of it focuses on perceptions and understandings of a general category of disaster-affected dwellers, overlooking the idiosyncrasies of diverse social groups and mostly focusing on local citizens. Residents in these districts come from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds and have peculiar mobility histories and varying legal statuses. These factors significantly nuance people’s attitude toward and collective understanding of disaster.

The history of vulnerability and urban risk in Istanbul’s southwestern districts challenges the contemporary urbanists’ definition of “borderscapes” —predominantly meant as marginality of life and space and as the lack of “urban citizenship” based on exclusion dynamics (Lebuhn, 2013). Indeed, such mixed districts highlight the complexity of urban demography and economic and social access to decent infrastructure (e.g., quality housing, potable water, and healthcare). In this context, “urban localities of migrant settlement are not accidental” (Biehl, 2014, p. 56). Indeed, housing availability and affordability, as well as proximity to jobs, are other key factors that encourage migrants and refugees to reside in these areas. In some districts, such as Küçükçekmece, old residents are also house owners and able to move elsewhere, making housing more available and, therefore, ready to be rented by foreigners.

Especially during disasters, internal and regional displacements end up “overlapping” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011), since migrant and refugee dwellers are likely to have previously been displaced by conflict. Such diversely motivated displacements complexly intertwine. The recurrent reasons behind displacement that migrant and refugee dwellers of these districts have emphasized are the need to flee violence and support remote families economically, in a broader framework of risk avoidance and search for quality living.

Their complex stories of mobility reflect, in turn, a complex economic status. Indeed, the authors do not presume that refugees and migrants should inherently be associated with extreme economic vulnerability, but their diverse economic backgrounds, housing choices, and regional and domestic mobility trajectories need to be considered. Moreover, in addition to migrants and refugees, local citizens are likely to have moved multiple times to manage urban risk or rebuild their lives after recurrent disasters, especially when post-disaster services in a specific setting are not adequate (Usta, 2023).

An up-close look at migrant and refugee groups, in particular in districts historically subject to disasters, reveals a small number of studies focusing on the intersection between disaster and conflict-induced migration governance in contemporary scholarship. With scholars often adopting holistic approaches to spatial justice as a starting point (Çaylı et al., 2021; Johnson, 2007; Tsavdaroglou, 2020), the peculiarities of the diverse social groups affected by earthquakes as well as their mobility histories have been backgrounded. It is only after the February 2023 earthquake in the south that, in official humanitarian reports and most scholarly literature (see Sevinin et al., 2023), refugees and migrants emerged as distinct groups with distinct needs,

strengths, and vulnerabilities. The inclusion of migrants in disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts is in line with a holistic societal approach to DRR adopted by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. As Guadagno et al. (2016, pp. 13–14) argued,

in order to reduce the impacts of natural hazards, it is essential to ensure that risk reduction efforts “leave no one behind,” addressing the vulnerability of all societal groups, and especially the most marginalized. The Sendai Framework explicitly recognizes migrants’ knowledge, skills and capacities in the design and implementation of DRR and call for national and local governments to engage them in relevant activities.

Nevertheless, preexisting patterns of local mobility scarcely informed contemporary social analyses of disasters, while migrants and refugees have been considered and managed as a well-bounded and self-standing social membership with intrinsic vulnerabilities. Overall, the specificities of migrants’ conditions in earthquakes are still poorly known: according to a 2013 assessment by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (*Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı*, abbreviated as AFAD), one in four refugees resides in makeshift or rubble housing, and, as a study on earthquakes in southeast Türkiye has shown, the level of housing improvements since 2013 is yet unknown (Wilson & Paradise, 2017, p. 22). On the one hand, international scholarship points to the need for merging social groups in pre- and post-disaster analyses and developing a holistic approach to local demography. For instance, scholars highlight that population models should account for significant population displacement, meaning that those based on census data will partially or completely exclude migrants (Wilson & Paradise, 2017, p. 23). On the other hand, contemporary scholars and experts reveal the need for more information on the conditions of migrants and refugees affected by earthquakes in Turkish society, highlighting how holistic approaches may overlook group peculiarities (Tunc et al., 2022).

In a nutshell, the predominant compartmentalization of disaster and broader displacement literature (including conflict) has often led scholars to approach local, migrant, and refugee displacement (likely to occur multiple times) as separate phenomena. Developing a holistic approach is essential to embrace a neighborhood-based (Boustani et al., 2016) rather than an a priori (and often decontextualized) ethnicity-based approach (Smith, 1981) in disaster and crisis responses. However, in order to look at the whole demographic picture, forming an understanding of how each group develops disaster knowledge and awareness, and how the latter is (or is not) reflected in housing choices, is of primary importance and an endeavor the authors undertake in this article. The authors are confident that both a group-based and a holistic approach to local demography and diverse vulnerability to urban risk can document the ways in which displacement, housing, and disaster politics inform one another at the level of governance as well as at the level of local experience.

Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted from March 2023 to June 2023. Through remote sensing, the authors assessed the overall land use in the southwestern districts since 2010 while also providing a history of commonly used construction materials, especially after the 1999 Marmara earthquake. During a pre-electoral field trip by one of the authors in May 2023, local municipal authorities did not make detailed cadastral material available, rendering a full-fledged assessment of land use over time unlikely. Spatial observations were conducted throughout the districts to record the inhabitability of the areas, type of buildings, presence of shops and restaurants on ground floors and, in general, open-ground story buildings, which tend to be unsafe during disaster, as they are more vulnerable to ground motions and lack open spaces for evacuation (Naseer et al., 2010).

Four researchers (including two authors of this article) conducted 71 structured interviews with the Arabic- and Persian-speaking refugee and migrant residents of the southwestern districts of Istanbul.¹ While 100 interviews had initially been planned, some identified potential participants (especially those not holding a legal status) turned out to be reluctant to be interviewed amidst Istanbul's politically tense atmosphere that characterized the months preceding the reelection of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as President of the Turkish Republic. All field researchers capitalized on longstanding connections and networks to identify interviewees, using chain-sampling (namely the snowballing method, asking the first participants to identify others). Sampling criteria included diversity of age, nationality, gender, legal status, and date of arrival in Türkiye and in their current residency. However, most of the interviewees were male and between 30 and 40 years old, with only 25% of the sample female. In terms of nationalities, 35% of the interviewees were from Afghanistan and 55% from Syria, with other nationalities representing smaller segments of the sample. The remaining interviewees included Egyptians, Tunisians, Sudanese, Yemenis, Iraqis, Kurds from Syria, and Palestinians.

Among the Afghan interlocutors, the authors counted 40% living in Beylikdüzü, 40% in Bağcılar, and 20% in Zeytinburnu. Most of them, despite complex and exhaustive journeys from Afghanistan, strove for direct relocation to Istanbul and, most of the time, to their present neighborhood, where many of them already have extensive networks. Among the Arabic-speaking refugees and migrants, most interviewees reside in Avcılar (21%), Fatih (20%), which is considered a second-grade risk area during disasters, and Bağcılar (14%). Other interviewees resided in Beylikdüzü (6%), Küçükçekmece (9%), Bakırköy (6%), Başakşehir (6%), Bahçelievler (5%), Esenyurt (8%), and Zeytinburnu (3%). As highlighted, these districts are composed of mixed social classes, but some housing remains affordable due to the high demographic density of the areas. Migrants from middle- or upper-class backgrounds prefer to live in more expensive, newly built compounds (e.g., Beylikdüzü and Başakşehir), presumed to be earthquake-proof, where their interaction with other residents can be selective by choice. In fact, as a Syrian resident commented (June 2023), migrants are less exposed to discrimination in these compounds, and are "not obliged to integrate," which earlier generations generally consider an asset, as they predominantly remain surrounded by their own community.

Cognizant of the peculiar geopolitical histories and geographic trajectories of the different migrant and refugee groups (and despite not adopting ethnicity-based criteria for discussion, as premised), some specific considerations can be advanced on those coming from Afghanistan *versus* people who arrived in Türkiye from Arab countries. Indeed, the latter mostly arrived after the so-called Arab Spring started in early 2011 with Tunisian, Egyptian, and Syrian popular uprisings, whereas others fled longstanding conflicts that shaped the 20th century, such as the Sudanese civil wars and the longstanding Palestinian exodus. In fact, the majority of the Arabic-speaking interviewees arrived in Istanbul between 2012 and 2015, during the early years of the political mobilizations and the subsequent governmental repressions across the region. As a result, the authors have adopted 2010 as a starting point for the land use assessment. In contrast, all of the Afghans who were interviewed had recently arrived (2022), with only one arriving in Türkiye in 2016; in other words, after the departure of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power (August 2021).

The lack of access to land use maps and municipal material that precede 2010 limits this article's analysis to the 2010–2023 period and highlights the need for further research on the historical transformation of migrant and refugee trajectories vis-a-vis recurrent disasters in Türkiye (Figure 3).

Sociopolitical Context of Forced Migrants in Türkiye

The country currently counts nearly 3.4 million refugees from Syria (UNHCR's, 2023), 200,000 to 500,000 from Iran, and 200,000 to 600,000 from Afghanistan, to mention only the largest segments. There are 320,000 officially registered individuals holding nationalities from countries other than Syria. As a conditional signatory to the 1951 Convention for Refugees and the 1967 Protocol (Çelik & White, 2022), which include all countries recognizing refugees and their right to resettlement, Türkiye only recognizes refugees from Europe and currently adopts a “temporary protection” framework for Syrian refugees once they are registered with the Directorate General of Migration Management, and previously the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). The majority of Türkiye-based refugees reside in urban and peri-urban areas (therefore outside of AFAD-managed camps), with the southwestern districts hosting large numbers in Istanbul. The Turkish migration regime offers some social protection (e.g., access to basic healthcare, education, and social assistance) to select refugee groups, and yet, it rarely approves asylum (Carpi & Şenoğuz, 2018, p. 3). Deportations, detention, and antirefugee violence are likely to occur, especially because regulations are often ambiguous and inconsistent, providing executives with the freedom to change procedures swiftly, as well as to make irrevocable decisions. In this context, Afghan refugees and migrants are believed to be the second-largest community in Türkiye after Syrians. The exact number of refugee and migrant groups is not known, since they tend not to register with local authorities due to fears of detention and deportation. As Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020) noted, while previous movements such as Iraqis (Danış, 2007) and Iranians (Akcapar, 2010) were perceived as “transit migrants,” talk of integration in Turkish society is more frequent with regard to refugees from Syria.

With the purpose of examining their leverage for housing choices vis-a-vis future disasters, the authors observe that, among the sampled participants, only 8% own their flat, with Arabic-speaking migrants and refugees representing the largest segment. Indeed, it is unlikely for Afghan refugees to obtain international protection or citizenship status, which refugees generally need in order to be able to purchase a property. Conversely, some of the Syrian interviewees acquired Turkish citizenship and thus could purchase property or apply for TOKİ (*Toplu Konut İdaresi*, otherwise known as the Collective Housing Authority), which, since 2002, has provided social housing within the scope of the Planned Urbanization and Housing Development Mobilization of the Government of the Republic of Türkiye.

While all Arabic-speaking interviewees held legal papers, only 50% of the Afghan interviewees were de facto refugees and therefore not recognized as such by Turkish law. The others were documented and were studying in Turkish higher education institutions. In this legally diverse framework, the so-called “irregular migration” (*düzensiz göç*) is often believed (Usta, 2023, p. 567) to hamper coordinated domestic resilience and general preparedness to disaster because migrants cannot be identified and consequently cannot be equipped with the knowledge necessary to face disasters effectively.

An Overview of the Housing and Construction Materials Facing Türkiye's Disasters

Zoning or construction amnesties (in Turkish *imar afları*) are a political measure to increase government popularity while also generating income for cash-strapped national governments, as illegal builders need to pay for the formal registration of their houses in order to be released from their penalties. There have been more than 20 amnesties since the first was enacted in 1948.² In the earlier years of the Turkish Republic, amnesties were very popular programs because they enabled poor families to build their own residences through informal and self-built construction (called *gecekondu* in Türkiye, literally meaning “built over night”). This type of housing would quickly be regularized, meaning municipalities would build free infrastructure and offer services in order to obtain votes and grow or reinforce their political constituencies. This is the way most of the country was built in the years following the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and was accelerated during the country's industrialization period between 1945 and 1960 (Duyar-Kienast, 2005).

While most *gecekondu* houses started out as single-story structures equipped with a garden, the amnesties meant that every plot of property could legally be built up to four stories, thus, enabling families to build at least four apartments on a plot, which they could then live in, sell, or rent out. The policy was limited to four stories in order to mitigate the risk of buildings collapsing during earthquakes. This construction process is called *yapsat* in Türkiye—*yapımı* meaning “build” and *satılık* meaning “on sale.” Small contractors would approach families living in a single-story, self-built house on a plot and would offer to build a small apartment on the same plot for them. Once completed, half of the apartment units would belong to each family and half of the units would be owned by the builder. Most of the cities in Türkiye have now been built up through *yapsat* processes. In cities where residential density was particularly high, many

buildings ignored the four-story limitation becoming even eight-story *yapsat* constructions in some cases, especially in Istanbul and the neighborhoods the authors analyze in this article. Importantly, the *yapsat* industry is highly unregulated and, therefore, the quality of the materials used (particularly cement and metal rebar) is low in reinforced concrete designs. Likewise, the quality of construction techniques is likely to be low due to cost-cutting measures that enable builders to maximize profits. In general, 99% of buildings constructed in modern Türkiye are made of reinforced concrete, which can be resistant to earthquakes, but only if designed and built accurately. Most reinforced concrete structures do not use shear walls, which are fully formed concrete walls that run the height of the building: these types of walls are known to increase resilience as they make the building less likely to violently sway during an earthquake. A shear wall keeps structures from blowing over, allowing them to resist the lateral forces of wind and seismic activity.



Figure 3. Land Use Land Cover (LULC) classification of the study area for 2015, 2020, and 2023.

Source: Reprinted from Brown et al. (2022). The maps were produced using Google Earth Engine [<http://earthengine.google.com/>](http://earthengine.google.com/).

The Land Use Land Cover (LULC) classification of the study area for 2015, 2020, and 2023, shown in Figure 3, and their numerical representation in the same table, show that the Built class (which includes buildings, roads, and other built areas) covers most of the study area, ranging from 54% (Başakşehir) to 99% (Bağcılar and Bahçelievler) for 2023. Furthermore, the Built class for all counties has increased between 2015 and 2023, with the largest increase occurring in Beylikdüzü and Başakşehir (8%).

Throughout the 2000s, the Turkish government has been increasingly building such *yapsat* constructions in small lots and TOKİ constructions in large lots (Figure 4). Pérouse (2015, p. 175) noted that in the case of Istanbul, TOKİ hands over the management and maintenance of its buildings to a private company called Boğaziçi Yönetim A.Ş. (previously known as Boğaziçi Konut A.Ş.). This type of social housing was primarily introduced to guarantee safer spaces of residency to low-income groups. At the same time, TOKİ emerged out of the late 1990s' financialization of the Turkish economy, which focused on investments in the construction sector, especially in large cities.

As Pérouse incisively defines this combination of state-led social and capitalistic efforts (Pérouse, 2015, p. 176): “TOKİ embodies the cold, rational, and modernising reason of the state, plus the generous hand of the state when the social nature of its operations is being emphasised.” TOKİ constructions are well known for having a “tunnel form” and having many shear walls. Most TOKİ houses are also built in locations determined as safer, as they lie on hard rock rather than soft soil: a factor that decreases the risk of buildings collapsing during earthquakes. The choice of residing in a TOKİ building or not has increasingly become an object of discussion among refugees and migrants, as the authors' interviews suggested. As became apparent in the February 2023 earthquake, living in a TOKİ building is now considered one of the best forms of

personal risk mitigation. Even though TOKİ housing is largely intended for low-income families, the cost of maintenance fees and rent or mortgage payments make this kind of housing accessible only for middle-income people. Additionally, only Turkish citizens can buy a TOKİ apartment. Of the migrants and refugees interviewed, only 10% were living in a TOKİ building (and, significantly, no Afghan migrant or refugee was among them). Moreover, there is a limited mortgage system in Türkiye, with most people buying their house in cash, with no deposit. Having a large amount of cash is unlikely for many migrants and refugees in Türkiye. However, TOKİ can offer a low-interest way to become a homeowner, and this made the TOKİ industry quite popular among locals (Sezer, 2009). Furthermore, the way some TOKİ houses were eventually sold does not reflect the public good purpose that the propaganda had paraded, showing that house sales were campaigned with no conditions attached, giving rise to a free housing market (Pérouse, 2015, p. 179). In this way, the social engineering side that the TOKİ project seemed to want to cultivate at first was lost (Kanıpak, 2011).

In this context, most refugees are living in high-density *yapsat* buildings. Additionally, as learnt through this study, they usually live on the ground floor or first floor of these buildings, because these are generally the cheapest for rent and sale. In fact, some of these apartments are previous shops or unused places in a bad shape. Ground or first floors are deemed to be the most dangerous during earthquakes due to what is called “soft story,” where the shaking of the building causes the ground floor to collapse. This problem is exacerbated by illegal postconstruction modifications made to buildings, which are normally carried out to cut out columns and, therefore, accommodate shops and other spaces for diverse commercial uses. These require open floor space devoid of vertical columns. In the February 2023 earthquakes in the South, there were many examples of buildings where the soft story had completely collapsed, while the rest of the building was still standing.



Figure 4. TOKİ buildings in Esenyurt, August 2022.

Source: Estella Carpi.

Findings and Discussion: “Waiting for Disaster” in the Southwestern Districts?

Housing Conditions and Aspirations

An overview of factors showing how mobility toward safer and high-quality housing becomes unlikely for migrants and refugees will now be provided. Among the main constraints, the focus will be on legal status, the legal permission to move across provinces within Türkiye, social discrimination, and broader economic affordability. Some hurdles that migrants and refugees

have to deal with are also faced by Turkish residents. These include the difficulty of effectively assessing the level of safety of buildings, to ascertain what renovation processes are in place as well as to access municipal documentation regarding the building safety.

The interviewees often argued that the (un)documented status of the interviewees does not necessarily ensure better or worse housing conditions. For instance, a large segment of the interviewed Syrians who acquired Turkish citizenship said it did not help them access the housing they wanted: “no one in Türkiye wants to rent houses to Syrians and refugees in general; so, the status you hold does not really matter,” (May 2023, translated from Arabic) a Syrian refugee woman voiced. Contrary to the common belief of Syrian interviewees, findings show that Turkish citizenship did help them access safer housing in Istanbul. In fact, relocating to new houses to guarantee safety during disasters was often voiced as a desire among the interviewed groups, but a possibility for few of them. Only 6 out of the 71 interviewees moved to recently built apartments during 2021 and 2022, with Syrians with Turkish citizenship representing the majority of this segment. Having a safe house during earthquakes was mentioned as the top reason for changing homes. Hence, it is noteworthy that mostly Turkish citizenship holders managed to move homes with safety being one of their priorities. In fact, citizenship is needed not only to buy property but also to qualify for social housing in TOKİ buildings.

Nevertheless, the concept of “safer housing” remains a moot point. Of those interviewed, 55% believe their building is not earthquake-proof. Normally, people’s judgment is based on the age of a building: those built after the 1999 earthquake are believed to be safer in the event of a disaster; 30% of the interlocutors argued they did not know whether their building was earthquake-proof; and 15% said it should be, but all of them also affirmed they never managed to access formal evidence to that effect.

In these Istanbul districts largely subject to earthquakes, the interlocutors highlighted how buildings have been demolished and rebuilt after municipality assessments following earthquakes (primarily in 1999 and 2019, and more recently, after February 2023). Many of them reported buildings being evacuated after such assessments, while other buildings were deemed to be safe. Some interviewees contended there was no proper municipal follow-up and that, most of the time, it was difficult to find out what exactly had been done to strengthen a building or if any action had been taken. People’s responses suggested general mistrust toward municipal certificates even when made accessible.

In this atmosphere of generalized mistrust, when flats are renovated, they are generally rented for higher prices with the alleged reason of having become earthquake-proof. Most of the time, interviewees contended that residents are not only unlikely to be able to access official evidence about such renovations but, more specifically, to learn the extent to which such renovations included earthquake resilience. Some landlords also do not allow municipalities to view and assess their apartment because they do not want to pay for renovations, as a Tunisian resident argued (April 2023).

Economic affordability is one of the main hurdles for choosing a safe residential area. As a Syrian interviewee said, “I will move to a newer and safer building if they give me a pay rise” (May 2023). In relation to the importance of making life affordable, those who said that moving was not possible for them mentioned the need to remain close to their workplace to keep the cost of commuting low; to be close to their own community, family, and friends; or to remain close to the city center, in some cases (e.g., the neighborhood of Fatih).

Another constraint is represented by refugees having to live in the provinces where they are registered. As an interviewee specified, “We Syrians cannot live wherever we want.” The inability to make an actual choice has encouraged many refugees and migrants to undertake onward migration, especially after the February 2023 earthquake: in interviews, Europe and Dubai emerged as the primary possible destinations. “In Istanbul it’s impossible to get the high-quality house you want in the neighborhood you want, so you start thinking of going somewhere else with the means you have,” an Afghan man voiced (March 2023). Another cause of onward migration is landlords requesting several months of rent in advance as a result of uncertainty, as also happened in the south after the February 2023 disaster (Saÿyroÿlu et al., 2023). In several cases, migrants and refugees in Istanbul faced similar social discrimination, with landlords requiring 6- to 12-month advance payments or payments in foreign currencies, especially dollars or euros, before accepting them as tenants.

Since many refugees in Istanbul are deprived of the freedom to move around inside the country without legal permit, and such a permit is unlikely to be granted, they contended they are not provided with a choice regarding housing, as several Syrians holding a “temporary protection” status argued (June 2023). Indeed, the group of refugees that generally hold a temporary protection status cannot change their province of residence unless they are moving out of a major Turkish city, where they can usually access a larger number of job opportunities. For instance, the Turkish government periodically updates the list of neighborhoods inside Istanbul where foreign newcomers cannot reside (e.g., the Esenyurt and Fatih districts since 2020). This range of factors illustrates how mobility toward safer and quality housing for migrants and refugees is largely constrained.

Beyond material constraints, some interlocutors expressed a desire to move to a smaller building with a smaller number of floors, or to a village, especially after the February 2023 earthquake in the south. Significantly, mostly for Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, the memory of their respective country of origin was often associated with greater safety, because there, many of them lived in a self-standing house instead of a small flat, as they currently do in Istanbul.

Disaster Knowledge, Social Membership, and “Yabancılık”

Earthquakes can easily become the object of political contention, as manifested in the relationship between the central government and municipal authorities. This complex assemblage of decision-makers and powerholders gives rise to a hybrid set of policies on earthquake response, such as postdisaster urban and housing governance and displacement management. This largely hybrid set of policies and agendas affects the whole population,

including migrants and refugees. Consequently, it is only possible to provide preliminary considerations on disaster knowledge among refugees and migrants if this lack of transparency, conflicting information about disaster management, and public lack of trust are considered. For instance, in Istanbul, it is not unusual for real-estate agents to omit or manipulate the information regarding the resistance of a building to earthquakes. Similarly, people mistake the *Doğal Afet Sigortalar Kurumu* (DASK, a compulsory earthquake insurance company), which every house owner needs to pay for, for a piece of evidence that their building is earthquake-proof. Therefore, many residents end up considering a building's age as the only indicator of safety, which is a flawed guarantee. The gap between reality and perception can only be addressed through systematic know-how delivered to all residents while considering their cultural, economic, and legal constraints: in short, group peculiarities should still be learnt before developing a holistic approach to the disaster-affected society.

This climate of uncertainty around safe housing worsened after the February 2023 earthquake, when people residing in new buildings became suspicious about their own house safety and started fearing being defrauded. In this context, making housing safe became a matter of private responsibility and residents are prone to the exploitation of contractors or susceptible to going into debt to pay for renovations. As a result, the skyrocketing rent prices induced renters to stay in their current accommodations even if they were unlikely to be earthquake-proof.

In this context, the findings indicate that there is a sufficient level of knowledge of local disaster history across migrant and refugee groups residing in the southwestern districts of Istanbul, but this often comes at a late stage of their residence. Eighty percent of all interviewees argued that they held sufficient—although often nonspecialistic—knowledge of Istanbul's disaster history, and that disaster consciousness significantly increased after the 5.8 magnitude 2019 earthquake for those who relocated to Istanbul before it, and, for more recent migrants and refugees (mostly Afghans), after the February 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake in the south of the country. Despite general disaster consciousness across these social groups, the findings show that such knowledge cannot be reflected into safe housing choices due to different constraints inherently connected to the status of migrants and refugees.

More broadly, the field research conducted with Afghan refugees and migrants showed there is sufficient knowledge of Istanbul's history of disasters but no real housing solutions for them. In the face of legal uncertainties, their priority seems to revolve around accessing affordable but better-quality housing. Importantly, the Afghan interlocutors mostly spoke of their limitations to access safer housing due to their “foreign identity” or “foreignness” (using the Turkish word *yabancılık*, rather than Persian, the language used in the interviews), instead of emphasizing their “migrant” or “refugee” status. They highlighted that, regardless of the legal status held, *yabancılık* is the strongest factor in determining housing choices in Istanbul for migrants and refugees. As an Afghan refugee put it, “to be able to decide the type of house you want to move in, you need to have other options. As foreigners, we don't have other options here” (April 2023). This raises the issue of social discrimination against foreigners, who have the distinct social membership of the “outsider.” Being an outsider is a more powerful factor to be able to choose housing than holding a particular legal status or, as some Syrian interviewees argued, even than

acquiring Turkish citizenship. According to them, Turkish landlords are unlikely to rent their houses to foreigners who do not hold a higher economic status (as is often the case with western dwellers).

Indeed, a large number of Afghan interviewees, most of them residing in Beylikdüzü, Zeytinburnu, and Bağcılar mentioned that

unlike refugees, western residents tend to access better housing as landlords prefer them, because they can pay more and because they are sure western dwellers can remain in the country for longer time frames, if they want so. Even though they are discriminated against as foreigners, they remain first-class migrants (May 2023).

In this context, when interviewing migrants and refugees from diverse national backgrounds, a destiny discourse emerged, especially among the most vulnerable segments of migrant society. From their perspective, people need to face more urgent issues, such as sustainable livelihoods and affordable housing. With a destiny-driven understanding of earthquakes, some interlocutors from Syria argued that “the earthquake will destroy everything, so we might be anywhere in Istanbul during the event” (May 2023). Likewise, others voiced that they would have “no other place to go anyway” (May 2023), or, again, that they are “in the hands of God” (April 2023). Against this backdrop, migrants and refugees argued they made the decision not to buy properties, even when some of them acquired citizenship, because this would mean dealing with such disaster-marked local uncertainties to a greater extent. Moreover, among the most vulnerable migrants, a natural disaster is only one problem among many others that they face in the precarity they find themselves in. Those who did not feel they are permanent residents because they are “only refugees” argued that worrying about earthquakes is a “local thing,” while they, holding the social membership of the “outsiders,” had other matters to worry about in everyday life. Especially refugees lacking legal documentation, fleeing violence and persecution or unable to attain legal status in Türkiye tend to focus on what is certain in their immediate present rather than what is likely to happen (but with no certainty in time and space): they indeed fled actual danger in their country of origin to access relative safety. The high level of uncertainty in their everyday lives makes long-term planning, such as safe housing, unlikely. Finding themselves in a situation of “permanent temporariness” (Yiftachel, 2009, pp. 89–90), they either wait to find a permanent settlement somewhere or return home, if the situation becomes relatively safe for them. Long-term decision-making is therefore postponed to a time when legal certainty will be achieved, and basic needs will be met. Especially refugees with no official legal status perceive possible disasters in light of their displaced condition and the resources they own in the moment. As a Syrian refugee woman commented (May 2023), “we have experienced the worst already, how worse can it ever be?” While further research is needed to make a more informative statement, this attitude may be changing in light of the February 6, 2023 earthquake in the south. Refugees in Türkiye and people who were living in Syria’s affected areas often described it as worse than war bombardments in several respects, as was frequently reported in the international media.³

While there is a basic level of disaster knowledge among Persian- and Arabic-speaking migrants and refugees, such consciousness cannot be translated into active housing choices. There is a large number of constraints imposed on migrants and refugees in the country, which has been reviewed in this article. Nevertheless, such disaster knowledge was mentioned as coming quite late during their residency in Istanbul: generally, after landslides or small-scale earthquakes, when local and international media tend to focus on such events; or, in other cases, such knowledge was accrued after the purchase of a property. Finally, most residents expressed their will to develop greater disaster knowledge, as they only had basic information—with the exception of two Iraqi migrant interviewees with a professional background in earth science. Some Arabic-speaking interviewees described their knowledge too broad and superficial. Some of them named such knowledge *thaqafa 'amma* (“general culture” in Arabic) or *ma'lume darije* (“common knowledge”) while hoping to access tangible documentation on the level of safety of their own building during earthquakes.

Considerations Across Migrant and Refugee Groups

Although this qualitative study does not aim to provide a systematic comparison on disaster knowledge and housing choices across these migrant and refugee groups, some preliminary considerations can be drawn on the basis of the fieldwork conducted.

In general, house owners are predominantly from Arabic rather than Persian backgrounds, and mostly from Syria. Legal status, in those cases, does seem to have an important impact on housing choices because Syrians are more likely to own temporary protection status or to have attained Turkish citizenship. However, legal status is not viewed as a factor influencing housing choices, especially among Syrian interviewees, because foreigners, especially those having a refugee background, are constantly faced with social discrimination. Similarly, the number of Arabic-speaking migrants and refugees living in new buildings, allegedly earthquake-proof, is larger than that of Afghans. This is explained by the longstanding interconnections within the region, which makes Arabic-speaking migrant and refugee networks more rooted in Istanbul's urban fabric. This interconnection not only has created strong connections in these districts, which can facilitate access to better housing, but has also enabled such groups (especially Syrians) to develop Arabic journalistic platforms and news agencies, where information about disasters and housing is made accessible.

While disaster knowledge is relatively spread across all groups, it is important to note that interviewees who expressed the desire to access more systematic information on the topic were the ones with more longstanding connections with the city and a longer-term perspective as Istanbul dwellers. In this vein, disaster was not a primary concern for the Afghan interviewees, who, in fact, are more likely to struggle with the legalization of their status and tend to see themselves as temporary dwellers. According to them, earthquakes were considered a secondary concern. In contrast, it was possible to identify different attitudes toward earthquakes among Arabic-speaking interviewees, most of whom were longstanding dwellers: the “wait for disaster” seemed to characterize the everyday attitude of long-term migrants who managed to attain

Turkish citizenship or gain a legal status while having access to locally grown support from ingroup members. As such, legal documentation and temporal perspectives are two key factors extensively marking their cognitive and social relationship with future Istanbul earthquakes.

Conclusive Remarks

The possible earthquake debates in Istanbul, which were on the rise after the 1999 Marmara disaster, have flared up again with the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes (Sajjyroğlu et al., 2023). This affected the collective psychology of local dwellers, migrants and refugees included. However, this study has shown how increasing levels of disaster knowledge cannot be translated into an active search for safe and verified earthquake-proof housing for many migrants and refugees from Arabic and Persian backgrounds. The main obstacles for accessing safe housing are: legal status, which, instead, is not seen as an important variable for particular groups of refugees who access better legal protection; the impossibility of reaching their workplace—often located in the southwestern districts—with low commuting costs; the economic affordability of safer housing; social discrimination as low-income foreign tenants or buyers; and the trade-off between choosing safer housing in areas where they have no networks in place versus benefiting from the support of ingroup members, who have built longstanding networks in some of these districts.

Moreover, the interviewees deemed their disaster knowledge as generally broad and nonspecialistic, revealing a desire to access more information and specific documentation to evaluate housing safety. While *Afet Bilinci Eğitimi (Disaster Awareness Education)* is already included in the local programs of several municipalities across Türkiye and debated publicly, it is generally understood as a kit of technical skills and capacities, which should be developed across all residents, and exclusively promoted in the Turkish language. Such a conception of disaster knowledge as synonymous with technical preparedness risks neglecting the cultural, economic, linguistic, and legal peculiarities of the different groups which make up the affected society. In this article, the purpose has been understanding the extent to which legal status and living conditions of migrants and/or refugees background and living conditions impinge on people's access to earthquake-proof housing and on how their disaster knowledge can turn into active housing choices. This study could be expanded with further historical analyses of local land use, ideally with access to cadastral archives and conversations with dwellers from disparate backgrounds, therefore going beyond the most represented nationalities of migrants and refugees in the southwestern districts. It hopefully paves the way to further research in other geographic areas subject to disasters, where migrants' and refugees' disaster knowledge should be strengthened and promoted at a national level by taking into account the legal, linguistic, economic, and cultural specificities of each social group.

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Notes

1. To conduct this fieldwork, ethics clearance was obtained from University College London in June 2023.

2. For a comprehensive list of amnesties since 1948, check Table 2 at <https://archive.is/c1Q6K> <<https://archive.is/c1Q6K>>.

3. Among the many articles (NDTV World, 2023), see <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/worse-than-years-of-war-earthquake-wipes-out-sections-of-syrian-cities-3758361> <<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/worse-than-years-of-war-earthquake-wipes-out-sections-of-syrian-cities-3758361>>.