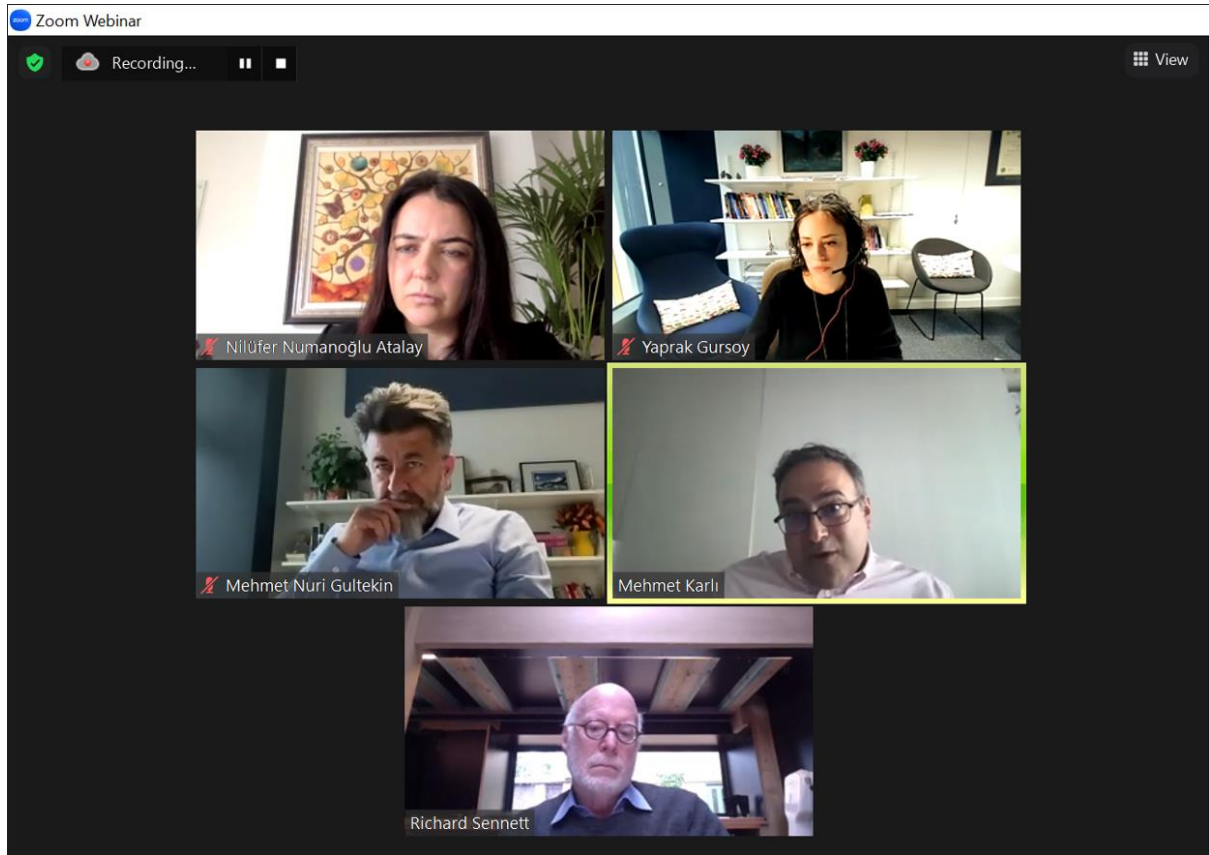


Cities in the Aftermath of the Earthquakes: Experiences, Needs and Possible Futures in Turkey

This is the summary of the online public event, which was held on 8 March 2023.

You can access the podcast [here](#) and the [video](#) here.



On the 8th of March 2023, Contemporary Turkish Studies and the European Institute hosted an online public event that explored the current needs of cities in Turkey after the devastating 6 March Maraş earthquakes. The event was entitled: “**Cities in the Aftermath of the Earthquakes: Experiences, Needs and Possible Futures in Turkey.**” This event was hosted as part of the *Turkish Week: 100 Years of the Republic*.

The speakers were **Mehmet Nuri Gültekin**, Professor of Sociology at Gaziantep University; **Mehmet Karlı**, research fellow at the European Studies Centre of the

University of Oxford; **Nilüfer Numanoglu Atalay**, co-founder and trustee of Turkey Mozaik Foundation and **Richard Sennett**, Professor of Sociology at LSE, and University Professor of the Humanities at New York University.

Professor Yaprak Gürsoy, Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, chaired the event. In her introduction, Professor Gürsoy thanked the audience for attending the online event as part of the Turkish week at LSE.

Professor Gürsoy provided background information on the earthquakes that occurred around 30 days ago. She explained that two devastating earthquakes of the 7.6–7.8 magnitude in southeast Turkey, close to the Syrian border, were followed by several aftershocks. She said that this has been a major and unprecedented event. According to official figures nearly 50,000 people have died in horrible conditions, nearly three million people are currently displaced, and survivors have been through unimaginable pain. She added that families have been broken, and children and babies have been orphaned. She remarked that it was fair to say that anyone with any connection with Turkey has been grieving since the 6th of February.

Professor Gürsoy then stated that within a week of this event, with colleagues across the LSE, and Contemporary Turkish Studies, they had been thinking about what they could do to help the earthquake victims. She mentioned that being in the UK, they could not do much and giving aid seemed to be the only option. However, they also quickly realized that they needed to work towards raising awareness as people around them carried on with their normal lives and routines. She said that it became imperative to keep the devastation on our agendas.

Gürsoy explained that Turkish Week was planned a long time ago, and the organisation of the event series has begun in October. She mentioned that events could not be cancelled for practical reasons, but there was also a need-to come together, talk about different things, and use the week as an opportunity to discuss issues related to the earthquakes. She remarked that they already had a speaker in another event coming from the region, Professor Mehmet Nuri Gültekin from Gaziantep University, who was with the panel on the day. She said that they wanted to hear from him and his experience.

Gürsoy then informed the audience that Professor Richard Sennett had reached out to colleagues at LSE Cities and had asked if he could do anything based on his

international experience. She said that Professor Sennett was also on board and ready to help, and it was a privilege to have him there in the panel that day.

Gürsoy then mentioned that there were also hundreds of colleagues in the UK who had organized quickly to help with the relief efforts. Mehmet Karlı, who had flown out to Turkey within a week, worked in Istanbul day and night, worked with the city council in Istanbul to coordinate the aid, and went to Hatay to set things up and distribute the assistance. She added that Nilüfer Numanoğlu Atalay was one of the founders and the trustee of the Turkey Mosaic Foundation. Through the foundation, they had raised millions in the UK in astonishing speed, distributing to local civil society organizations. Professor Gürsoy remarked that it was an honour to have them there with them that day as well.

Gürsoy then explained that each of the speakers would share their own varied experiences, and they would focus on what the cities and districts that had been demolished needed now, in the short term and in the future.

She said that it was by no means a perfect panel and that with the devastation of this scale, it was really hard to cover everything. She acknowledged that the panel's perspective was sometimes a bird's eye view and that it bothered them because they were lumping everybody's tragedy together. She also stated that they were aware of these problems, as well as the fact that they were focusing on Turkey and not so much on Syria, although they had Syria in their minds and hearts. She added that the panel would also discuss how to rebuild cities. Although this focus might seem premature, reconstruction projects had already started and interestingly it might even be too late to talk about the issue. She then stated that she would not take up more time and would give the floor to Nuri, Mehmet, Nilüfer, and Richard in that order, and each speaker would have 10 minutes for their initial interventions. Finally, she informed the audience that they could type their questions to the Q&A box.

As the first speaker, **Professor Mehmet Nuri Gültekin** expressed his gratitude to appear beside the others on the panel and admitted it was tough to discuss the recent earthquake as a witness. Gültekin acknowledged that it was too early to discuss the full impact of the recent earthquakes that had struck Turkey on February 6th. However, he mentioned that it was possible to discuss the concrete consequences based on recent trips to the hardest-hit areas. The destruction had been beyond imagination,

and it was unrealistic to expect people to return to their pre-earthquake lives quickly. The earthquake had radically changed the physical, social, economic, and demographic structure of the region. There had been a severe humanitarian crisis beyond borders.

The official death toll in Turkey had stood at 46,000, but Gültekin believed that the actual number was much higher. The primary reason for this was that the government had not been as prepared as it should have been, particularly in the first 24 to 72 hours following the earthquakes. The state could not offer crucial aid and support to those in need, and there had been a significant difference between the state's official claims of taking urgent and vital interventions and the opinions of ordinary people who had experienced the problematic process. Similarly, the government could not facilitate and coordinate volunteers and NGOs that wanted to help.

Gültekin argued that the aftermath of the earthquake could be explained in general terms through the framework of state-society relations and daily life of ordinary citizens. The Turkish state apparatus and state organization had been well known to sociologists and political scientists for decades. The class characteristic of the state inherited from the Ottoman Empire had caused it to treat every social issue as a security concern, reducing the most basic human and democratic demands to the ontological problem of the state. The state had approached social events with security concerns, and we had witnessed once again that how the state saw itself from a patriarchal and hierarchal point of view.

The state had fallen short in the area, but later, it had accepted the complaints and rightful demands of the citizens. However, its attitude has destroyed the centuries-old perception of the benevolent state in the eyes of the broad masses in Turkey. Pressure and restrictions on social media, the internet, and communication channels had raised serious concerns. The first teams to come and help in these challenging times were also from Greece, Armenia, Israel, Kurdistan, and Western countries, which had created serious questions about the prejudice of the public imperative, which had predominantly nationalist and conservative outlooks. The local people in the earthquake zone, a sizable portion of which had strong conservative features, have considerable concerns about the situation.

According to Gultekin, the recent earthquake had clear significant aftereffects. First is the questioning of the state's idealized and utopian power and its interactions with common people in need, particularly during the most trying times. The second is the disastrous effects of the political economy of the construction sector as the largest economic sector, the hegemony and dominance of the contractors in every aspect of society's daily life, and decades of wrong urbanization policy. Third is the drastic transformation of millions of people's daily lives in earthquake zones. Fourth, industrial and agricultural production, which were the main industries in the area, are hurting the Turkish economy by at least 15%. The fifth is the earthquake's obvious class dimension. While the wealthier or upper classes relocate their family from the danger zones and start new, "fresh" lives in safer areas and cities, the destitute masses endure severe living conditions.

Dr Mehmet Karlı expressed his gratitude for the event and the invitation and acknowledged that the devastation caused by the earthquake was as severe as Professor Gürsoy stated at the beginning. He mentioned that he arrived in Turkey on the third day of the earthquake and was in the region during one of the largest aftershocks, which had a magnitude of 6.4. Karlı described the degree of trauma among the people in the affected areas as enormous and stated that the level of devastation could not be fully comprehended through TV coverage alone. He shared his experience of working with the Istanbul municipality and other municipalities that belonged to the main opposition party in Turkey after 2019 and praised their efforts in conducting relief and aid work in the affected areas. Karlı also noted the solidarity shown by civil society in donating aid and supporting relief efforts and recounted his experience of being at the Yenikapı logistical centre of the Istanbul municipality, where he witnessed the efficient and organized process of collecting, categorizing, and distributing aid donations. He expressed his admiration for the sense of solidarity and hope he had witnessed during his time in the affected areas, particularly when trucks loaded with aid supplies left the warehouse, and the drivers honked their horns, which became an emotional and uplifting habit.

Karlı recalled a conversation he had with Hakan Altınay, who quoted a Brazilian philosopher, Roberto Unger, saying that hope is more the consequence of action than its cause. Karlı believed that the hope in action was what they did in Yenikapı in that warehouse, and it was collective therapy because they were all angry and frustrated

with the central state organizations. He mentioned that during the first three to four days after the earthquake, the state was not present, and a lot of people unfortunately died due to the delayed relief and rescue work. He mentioned that disaster relief work had failed as well; people did not have access to necessities and felt let down by the state. He believed that people in Hatay region, especially those from non-Sunni and non-Turkish backgrounds, felt discriminated against and let down because of their identity.

Karlı reported that the opposition was left to deal with the aftermath of the earthquake, as the central government institutions only focused on those who voted for them. He mentioned shortcomings in Adıyaman and Maraş, stating that there was no discrimination in the level of failure. However, people in Samandağ, Antakya, and Arsuz felt discriminated against due to their identity. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was more efficient in disaster relief than the central state institutions, such as Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). Karlı believed that AFAD was slow to respond in part due to excessive centralization, cronyism, and nepotism. He mentioned that AFAD viewed civil society as a competitor rather than a partner and tried to monopolize the efforts. Mehmet Karli believed that a democratic, transparent, and accountable state is needed for effective long-term help to the people in need.

Nilüfer Numanoğlu Atalay, explained that the Turkey Mozaik Foundation is a UK registered grant-giving charity that was founded by a group of individuals who had lived in the UK for decades. They came together in January 2018 with a passion to give back to Turkey, their homeland, and launched a "charity of charities" structure similar to the "fund of funds" in the finance world. The foundation started with three grants that were supported by the founders, and then grew in its first five years to grants to over eighty organizations, raising over GBP 800,000. The grants included thematic funds in areas where they aimed to create positive change: such as the Children's Fund, Gender Equality Fund, Culture and Arts Fund, and Environment and Sustainability Fund. She emphasized the importance of collaborating with local intermediary partners - in their case, the Istanbul-based Support Foundation for Civil Society. Such platforms have the ability to support international donors as well as to reach the smallest grassroots organizations working on the ground.

She went on to explain that perhaps what was most relevant for the panel was their Emergency Relief Campaigns in the aftermath of the Elazığ and Izmir earthquakes, the wildfires of Summer 2021, the refugee crises, and an emergency response to their grantees during COVID. The foundation's grants followed a needs-based approach, and they were grateful to have the privilege of having open communication channels with the right organizations on the ground.

She added that the foundation celebrated its fifth birthday just recently in January of this year and very shortly after that woke up on February 6th to the news of the devastating earthquake. This disaster was unlike anything any of the foundation trustees had ever experienced, in fact, one of the worst disasters that humanity has ever faced. She mentioned that the World Bank estimated \$34.2 billion in direct physical damages, the equivalent of 4% of the country's 2021 GDP, and that the recovery and reconstruction costs would be potentially twice as large. UNDP also estimated damages to be over one hundred billion dollars, although it is important to note that this may include both direct and indirect damages.

Numanoğlu Atalay then described how, thanks to their previous experience and connections with the local civil society organisations, they were able to launch their fundraising campaign within a couple of hours, started talks with grantees, and almost immediately provided support to rescue operations and much-needed basic needs. She believed that their track record and timely response in the immediate aftermath attracted support from the wider community. Turkey Mozaik Foundation was hosted on BBC News the day after the earthquake. As of the date of the panel, they had raised over GBP 2.5 million from over 16,000 donors in the UK and around the world. She expressed extreme gratitude for this tremendous support and how their whole community had engaged their own circles, schools, and workplaces in support of their campaign. From QR codes in local cafes, shops and hairdressers to major corporations offering relief support and employee matching programs, everyone had come together to help.

She added that the foundation had so far provided thirty-four grants of a total of GBP 546,000. Their grants to date have been in two categories: emergency relief through direct grants to organizations with relatively higher capacity and calls for proposals to grassroots, smaller civil society organisations where they believe they have the edge.

These grants cover areas such as rescue support, food, clean water, mobile toilets, shelter to medical teams, shelter for families, hygiene kits including women's period kits, play areas for children, psycho-social support for all and animal shelters.

She emphasized the need for a multi-layered and strategic, rights-based approach to address complex issues across different thematic areas and intersectionality, which no single institution can manage alone. Therefore, multi-stakeholder partnerships are crucial, and the world of philanthropy should engage in donor collaborations and pooling funds.

Professor Richard Sennett asked for the audience's indulgence as he was suffering from Covid-19 and not feeling completely well. He explained that he did not have any knowledge of Turkey, although the LSE had a connection with the mayor's office in Gaziantep through the City's program, which is also connected to the United Nations. He has been working with the UN for the past 12 years since retiring from the LSE, and most of his work has been about urban refugees and disaster relief that focused on cities, particularly on disaster relief resulting from urban warfare. He had collaborated with colleagues at MIT and the UN on the reconstruction of Beirut after its civil war temporarily ended in the nineties, and he has been thinking about what they learned there that might be useful to Turkey now, 30 years later.

He suggested that the issue of trauma was the first thing that came to his mind. If the audience were in Beirut in 1995, large parts of the city would have looked like parts of Gaziantep or other Turkish cities today, as everything was in ruins. The problem they faced, which he believed the audience would also face, was that people's trauma meant that the only way they could address it was to rebuild the city as it was before the trauma happened. However, the infrastructure was destroyed, and it would be impossible to put it back with any chance of financial support because it was so radically altered. Therefore, the city needed to be rethought, and this was traumatic for people because the notion of "restoration" appeared as a way of emerging from trauma. He mentioned that they did not manage this particularly well in Beirut, and one of the reasons was that a disaster like this was an incredible "honey pot" for new players to come in and colonize the spaces that were destroyed. The audience could imagine who would have the money to come in and buy up the places that had been destroyed. The people who were remaking the city had no interest in reconstructing it

as it was before, particularly if what they were reconstructing were small-scale housing settlements. People felt that the city was rebuilt, but the places where they lived and the communities where they lived had disappeared.

Richard Sennett expressed that he believed that people who have experienced trauma are greatly affected by the physical details of a place. He mentioned that the absence of certain physical details, such as chairs outside a cafe, can serve as a measure of the amount of suffering that a person has endured. He acknowledged that this is a practical issue and wondered if there was any impulse from the outside to deal with the threat of reconstruction by public seizure of buildings that were poorly built due to amnesties. He suggested that those who built unsafe structures because of corruption or lack of funds should lose the right to the building.

Furthermore, Sennett mentioned that the handling of refugees is a major issue, particularly the idea of refugees returning to a devastated place. He believed that it is unlikely that refugees will be able to return within a reasonable time frame, and that families who manage to survive are more concerned with the issue of return than the refugees themselves.

According to Richard Sennett, it is not feasible to resettle half of a population without sufficient governmental resources. He explained that the notion of returning becomes a source of tension in society in such circumstances. Sennett also noted that the issue of remittances from guest workers is another challenge that arises in situations like this. He cited the example of a family with 14 or 15 members, five of whom are guest workers in Britain. If the family returns home, there is only one check sent back, and it becomes difficult to determine who should receive the money. This problem is not trivial because disasters like this can cause families to disintegrate. Sennett observed that in various circumstances, it is challenging for families to cohere after such an event, especially in refugee situations.

Sennett recognized the communal solidarity displayed after the earthquakes and contrasted it with the lack of solidarity in Beirut, because of the civil war. Sennett acknowledged the difficulty of the situation but was hopeful that the community's collective strength will help navigate through it.