

Care in Tarlabaşı amidst heightened inequalities, urban transformation, and Coronavirus

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Abstract

Istanbul's Tarlabaşı neighborhood has been undergoing state-led urban transformation for over a decade, without an end date in sight. Experiencing authoritarianism as a protracted process, Tarlabaşı residents brought to life care as a long-term process in response. Through Tarlabaşı Solidarity Network, a network of care (*ihitimam*) as they conceptualize it, to navigate uncertainty, maintain community, and hold onto their properties through interpersonal and horizontal relationships. And care, as I show in this piece, has become a buffering response to the eruption of the COVID-19 crises, the effects of which have been exacerbated by authoritarian urban politics already in motion. Repertoires of care present alternatives to uneven impacts of crises, and Tarlabaşı Solidarity Network shows us the important of putting care to work in urban spaces we inhabit.

Keywords

Care, authoritarianism, urban transformation, COVID-19, Tarlabaşı, Istanbul, Turkey

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Tarlabaşı is a neighborhood of Istanbul, located in the well-known historical and entertainment district of Beyoğlu. For Istanbulites, it has also been known for its 'dark reputational geography' (Parker and Karner 2010, p. 1451). After all, it harbors the city's illicit economies, like the drug trade and sex work. It also harbors numerous minorities and migrants, including Kurdish and Roma people who have longer histories as Tarlabaşı residents, trans women, Syrian refugees, and more recent migrants from West Africa and post-Soviet Central Asia, among others. Tarlabaşı has a long history of forced displacement and property expropriation (of Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, for example). By the 1980s, this led to a vacuum of ownership. Newcomers to the city in need of dwellings claimed the many vacant buildings sporting art nouveau embellishments, which had come to symbolize the neighborhood.

Figure 1

An image from a window of an apartment in Tarlabasi, with cranes there to build Taksim 360 looming in the background.

Photograph: Author



Politicians often draw on this history to explain the current state of Tarlabası, analogizing it to a ‘poisoned princess’ (Adanalı 2013) in need of revitalization and a return to its glorious, wealthier days. In 2006, Tarlabası came into the limelight due to the Justice and Development Party-led (AKP) government’s plans for areas deemed ‘delinquent and derelict.’ It enacted a law enabling the use of eminent domain for urban transformation projects in areas local governments designated as in need of historical renovation. The Beyoğlu Municipality, also led by AKP politicians, designated a portion of Tarlabası as one of these areas. In 2010, the Municipality evicted residents, permitted demolitions, and began construction of Taksim 360, an upscale residential and building complex. It is still in progress today.

By 2014, Taksim 360’s end date had been postponed twice. Having gotten a sense that Taksim 360 would not be finished anytime soon, residents of Tarlabası formed a ‘group’—pointedly, not an ‘organization’—the Tarlabası Solidarity Group (*Tarlabası Dayanışma Grubu*). Spearheaded by a few Kurdish residents, who have resided in the neighborhood for decades and thus have developed multiple connections and relationships with their neighbors, the Tarlabası Solidarity Group is a network of care (*ibtimam*), best understood as a horizontal set of relationships that hinge on friendship and mutuality, rather than vertical help or charity. Throughout 2017 and 2018, I took part in the group care and solidarity efforts as I collaborated and worked with them during my dissertation fieldwork. Care in Tarlabası is grounded in a variety of concrete everyday practices: from hosting collective dinners on the streets to deploying personal connections to retain residents’ property, access government services, and address immigration problems. Networks of care serve not only as modes of getting by or making do in Tarlabası-in-transformation, but also as ways in which residents have been taking control of and shaping what is to come for Taksim 360.

And now there is COVID-19. The pandemic has been called a crisis, a rupture, a disruption to urban life as we know it. Certainly, it has forced changes and transformations;

yet for denizens of neighborhoods like Tarlabası, who have faced housing injustices for years, the pandemic is more of an acceleration or a densification of these existing injustices. It is the congealment of already present inequalities in forms demanding a newly heightened immediacy. In the context of Turkey, the pandemic coagulates neoliberal authoritarianism through contrasts. On the one hand, we see the state positioning itself as paternal caregiver, which extends international aid by shipping protective equipment abroad, and distributing masks to its citizens.¹ On the other hand, there are inconsistent curfews which punish only an ‘undesirable’ few, who the pandemic already unequally burdens, while President Erdoğan openly asserts that the Turkish economy cannot withstand people not going to work. For the residents of Tarlabası, authoritarianism is not a new turn.² Instead, its rise is an extended process that they have been experiencing intimately for some time now. Yet during the pandemic, when steady support is needed, especially for those who work in informal jobs requiring physical presence in public spaces, the impact of authoritarianism is disproportionately heightened. In this essay, though, we will see that while authoritarianism continues and intensifies, so do practices of care, as Tarlabası Solidarity Group’s practices demonstrate. By drawing on enduring repertoires of mutual care, residents are able to cushion erupting densities and develop responses to what seem like sudden crises through their vocabularies of action vis-à-vis impending processes of urban transformation. And through care, they demand structural responses from local and central governments—something they never lose sight of, politicizing their efforts.

Shelter in Migration

In late February 2020, Erdoğan announced that Turkey would open its western land border, allowing refugees to pass. This statement was widely understood as a threat to the European Union to guarantee their support of Turkey in Syria, after Russia-backed pro-government forces attacked Turkish forces and Turkey-backed Syrian opposition forces in Idlib. Many criticisms of the Turkish government arose, condemning its usage of refugees as a bargaining chip against Europe—nothing new, though, especially since the EU has long framed ‘refugees’ as an object of negotiation. Hundreds of refugees caught rides and even walked to Turkey’s borders with Greece and Bulgaria, where security forces on the other side were prepared to keep them out. As refugees demanded to be let in, violent confrontations erupted. Hundreds of people were hurt, while others were left to navigate hazardous living conditions as their time of waiting between borders lengthened. By March, it became clear that the coronavirus pandemic was a force to be reckoned with, particularly as its effects in Turkey became more apparent. Some made it back before March 18, when the Turkish government announced it is closing its borders and sending the migrants back. Others were forcibly transported to the cities where they were registered when Turkey closed its borders with the European Union—a regulation seeking to take some pressure off already populous

¹ Many journalistic accounts show that these acts of the AKP constitute negligible relief, particularly since they disperse surgical masks, rather than N95 masks. Rather, “relief” is more about exhibiting Turkey as a world leader, helping “even the United States” (İleri and Çopur 2020).

² For an eloquent discussion on authoritarianism as a process, see Erensü and Alemdaroğlu 2018.

cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. This tactic, however, cut people off from their family networks, leaving them to seek housing in a moment when “staying at home” was critical.

The Tarlabası Solidarity Group always saw itself as implicated in larger issues of migration and housing, beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood. Therefore, a few members sought to bring a limited number of migrants to Tarlabası and find shelter for them, both before and after March 18. They issued an open invite to migrants returning from the borders via social media to come to Tarlabası, especially if they needed a place to stay. Some long-time residents, like Mehmet Abi,³ opened up their homes without asking for any payment in return, or found apartments for migrants from all across Africa and the Middle East, putting their connections and relationships with their neighbors to work. They tried to win a rent freeze. They found bunk beds from Istanbulites who didn’t need them, reaching out to them on Facebook, to furnish the few apartments they could put together. These apartments were often basements without sunlight, due to their affordability. They thus created a space in which migrants could sleep with a roof on top of their heads, even though the limited personal space they offered—hence, limited social distancing—was not ideal.

This effort was rooted in long-term practices of care and Tarlabası’s history of absorbing the effects of disasters across the globe. For example, in 2017, flooding and

Figure 2

One of the rooms the Tarlabası Solidarity Group prepared for those who arrived from the Western borders.

Photograph: Mehmet Yeralan



³ “Abi” (or “ağabey”) means brother in Turkish. It often follows cisgender men’s names as a linguistic display of familiarity and endearment combined with reverence for an older person’s age. For cisgender women, the term is “abla,” meaning sister. I will use the terms “abi” and “abla” for collaborators/friends who I addressed this way.

landslides plagued Sierra Leone, affecting non-affluent neighborhoods particularly harshly. Six young Sierra Leonean men who had just made it to Tarlabası reached out to us, asking if we could do anything to help with housing issues they faced. At the time, they did not have a place of their own, and were staying in an already crowded apartment that Mehmet Abi had found for their friends—a group of ten men before they joined. We met them the next day and sat down together on straw mats, which Mehmet Abi’s wife, Fatma Abla and I laid down on their street. After sharing a meal and tea with them, we decided to contact the Beyoğlu Municipality first and see if it could provide shelter or monetary assistance. The response was that the policy was to only assist Syrian refugees. If Africans needed help, they should ask the municipalities in areas with larger African populations. They suggested Şişli, a nearby district whose municipal government is led by an opposition party (the CHP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*). While we kept making requests to other local government units to no avail, we also put long-standing connections of neighbors to work to find a cheap apartment with a landlord who would not harbor racial prejudice against young people from Africa—an issue of internal contention in Tarlabası.

By doing so, we were creating repertoires of care, which were important in facing authoritarianism, both as a long-term process, and as a crisis. In other words, through these acts, Tarlabası residents could navigate and reshape their everyday lives, which have been shaped by slow, lengthy political processes of dispossession and displacement that targeted minorities and migrants. And while their lived experiences of authoritarianism were not always sudden ‘turns’, crises did erupt, as we have recently witnessed. As authoritarianisms disrupted residents’ lives in warmongering, weaponize migrants, and disregard their health, care networks intensified: residents drew on experiences in political demand-making, creatively used relationship-making, and continued community-building. This came in handy when people need shelter, as a response to the pandemic and the crisis of authoritarianism.

Housing and Space

But housing justice is not only having a physical space in which to sleep, and cramped apartments in Tarlabası do not only happen in momentary responses to a crisis. For the majority of Tarlabası residents, a room of one’s own is a rare sight. Narrow buildings whose entirety once belonged to a single family are now rented out floor by floor, each apartment inhabiting at least five or six people. At the other end of this cramped spectrum are the apartments where migrants from West Africa live, who often have limited resources and work in daily menial jobs that exploitatively hire non-citizens who need money the most and who have little recourse if employers violate their rights. To make ends meet, they often rent one or two room basement apartments, or even smaller ones on higher floors, in groups of ten or more. These apartments often have a similar layout because of lack of space: mattresses pushed together next to suitcases serving as bedside tables, with photographs adorning walls. When the Tarlabası Solidarity Group demanded support for residents living in such conditions, we often got the following response: ‘soon they will have to leave anyway, when urban transformation is completed—better they find somewhere else for themselves sooner rather than later!’

Figure 3

Tarlabaşı Solidarity Group discussing social distancing with residents they are visiting to give supplies.

Photograph:
Mehmet Yeralan.



The pandemic has crystallized some points urban activists have been making for a long time: people do not only need housing, but housing with adequate maintenance, with spaces to move around, windows to look out from, near green spaces. It is not realistic to ask Tarlabaşı residents to social distance, particularly those living in apartments where a six-foot bubble is not possible. It is not realistic to assume that they can stay at home when there is no window from which to look out onto the street, or when there are no parks in a neighborhood providing space and fresh air. Many Tarlabaşı residents sell goods like food, water, and prayer beads on the street, which they cannot do now. They thus turn to low-paid construction work or piecework sweatshops that are operating despite the pandemic. “Otherwise, how will we eat?” as Samuel, a Ghanaian friend, wrote to me recently on WhatsApp. We might be facing the same storm, but we are clearly not all in the same boat. And as uneven treatments of urban residents come to the fore, some (often from more affluent backgrounds) reprimand those who have to attend to their livelihoods. Or, as the Tarlabaşı Solidarity Group shows, we can instead extend care and contextually adapt the precautions that different people should follow. For the past few weeks, for example, Tarlabaşı Solidarity Group members—Kurdish, Turkish, Sierra Leonean, Ghanaian, Gambian—have been visiting their neighbors’ homes and handing out masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. They discuss ways in which they can realistically practice social distancing, how social distancing can look in lives necessarily lived collectively, and the people to whom they can reach out if they begin to show symptoms. Though the neighborhood is not hard-hit with the virus yet, the inevitability of displacement, taken for granted at this point, often curtails governmental relief. While official support is suspended, lingering care is proactive and in touch with the struggles on the ground.

Streets

Street cleaning has emerged as a pillar of the AKP’s preventive measures towards the virus. Numerous videos from AKP-led municipal governments show workers wearing

protective gear, spraying every street surface with disinfecting liquids through hoses, or using specialized vehicles to clean the roads. Yet, as Tarlabası residents have suspected, these images do not reflect everyday life in Tarlabası. No government workers are doing sanitizing work. Residents have long been keenly aware of the maintenance purposefully withheld from their public spaces, be it in the lack of garbage cans leading to piles of garbage on the sidewalks, numerous potholes in the streets (fixed around elections cycles, if ever), or the limited street cleaning by the municipality, which twice a day cleans the famous touristic İstiklal Street only a five-minute walk away from Tarlabası.

Although some residents have taken it upon themselves to clean their street, as they have done for a while now, ‘it is not only our job,’ says Mehmet Abi, who tweets at the Beyoğlu Municipality daily, rallying his friends and neighbors to follow suit. Calling upon municipal governments to clean Tarlabası’s streets is a way to show that there are people, active political agents, still living there, still making political demands, defying the fates to which policymakers seek to doom them through urban transformation. By cleverly using social media, they mobilize to put the municipality to work in ways accessible to anyone who wants to show solidarity, including myself, currently far away in the United States. And so, solidarity and care do not preclude political demand-making in Tarlabası. They emerge as political tools that address immediate needs while building towards different sociopolitical horizons.

As the results of this mobilization remain to be seen, the streets remain crucial in another aspect of care work during the pandemic: sharing food. Samuel’s question—‘how will we eat?’—expresses the practical immediacies that these accelerated crises pose, issues postponed by politicians who conjure ostensibly more important immediacies like the recovery of the economy or the value of the Turkish lira against the dollar. Questions like Samuel’s, however, have always been at the heart of the Tarlabası Solidarity Group’s work. Before the pandemic, every Ramadan, we organized iftars on Tarlabası’s streets each Saturday, inviting both Tarlabası residents and people who lived elsewhere in Istanbul via social media. These gatherings would on one hand serve as connecting nodes, places at which horizontal solidarity, durable friendships, and long-term interpersonal relationships could be built, within and beyond the neighborhood. Both strengthening networks of care and casting a wider net were crucial. At the same time, those wondering what they would eat could take a seat on the street atop long straw mats we would lay down. We would either collect money to buy ingredients for dishes planned to feed many people—like *lahmacun*,⁴ soup, and *ayran*.⁵ We would occupy the street as our space and pass down food hand to hand, physically embodying the far-reaching, lasting, caring connections made on the street-table, extending into long hours of chatter accompanied by endless cups of tea following the meals.

We can no longer congregate in precisely the same way, but the Tarlabası Solidarity Group still focuses on the sharing of food as an important lifeline, maybe even more so during the pandemic. During the first weeks of the pandemic, since food assistance from the state was (and still is) nonexistent, Mehmet Abi and Fatma Abla cooked large pots of soup

⁴ *Lahmacun* is a dish consisting of a thin dough topped with minced meat and vegetables.

⁵ *Ayran* is a salty yogurt drink that often accompanies meals in Turkey.



Figure 4

An image from a street iftar in the summer of 2018.

Photograph: Author



Figure 5

Tarlabası Solidarity Group distributing food during the pandemic.

Photograph: Mehmet Yeralan

and bought loaves of bread and bottles of *ayran*, distributing them to residents in need each day. They tried their best to impose necessary health measures, wearing makeshift masks and gloves, telling people to get in line and keep their distance. Many of those who got their food sat close together on the sidewalks, eating side by side.

I couldn't help but worry about Fatma Abla and Mehmet Abi, among others, who had grown to be my kin throughout our solidarity work together. N95 masks were impossible to obtain, and in the narrow streets of Tarlabası, proper social distancing measures were often infeasible. I worried about the fast spread of the virus, an eminently possible scenario for Tarlabası given the circumstances. When I shared these worries with them over video chat, Mehmet Abi took a long look at me, and said, 'I know, don't you think I know? But everyone is coming to us, in need of food, of bread, basic things to live! How can I turn my back on them, say, take care of yourselves? Isn't this what we've been building all along, to take care of each other?'

Mutual care is crucial, with radical potential for transformation in a neighborhood whose future is often considered to have already been foreclosed by urban transformation.

Figure 6

Residents receiving groceries
Tarlabaşı Solidarity Group
provided. **Photograph:**
Mehmet Yeralan.



Especially when crises erupt, though, the responsibility of care should not fall on neighbors who are not able to take necessary precautions. In these moments, broad, structural assistance is necessary, but the government has failed Tarlabaşı in this regard. As people like Mehmet Abi and Fatma Abla strive towards such forms of assistance, they have adapted their care practices to respond to the increasing intensity of the pandemic. They now shop for the elderly and leave the groceries at their doors, and buy supermarket gift cards and deliver them with as little contact as possible, to those in need in the neighborhood. They continue to exemplify care as an enduring practice with plasticity in the face of political and socioeconomic chokepoints.

Concluding Call to Solidarity

We are often told the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the authoritarian regimes across the world that have taken advantage of it, has created ‘a new normal.’ But I am inclined to say that maybe the situation is not so novel after all, though it may require some tweaks. In Tarlabaşı, enduring repertoires of care stemming from complex housing justice issues and urban transformation form the basis of responses adapted to this process of crisis. The Tarlabaşı Solidarity Group’s work shows us that care is both an everyday and political tool which residents and denizens can use to articulate demands and responses to surrounding urban problems. Engagements in care prove to be crucial when cushioning blows from intensified injustice—particularly due to the need for adapted relief caused by layers of

inequality. The Tarlabası Solidarity Group shows us that care is not only an affect. It is a set of practices. It is acting.

So, I invite you to do care work, in any capacity, as a response to the ever-more uneven terrains of housing the pandemic has engendered. Join long-term efforts if they exist in your vicinity. Start or participate in new ones. If you cannot do so physically, do so materially: give to the Tarlabası Solidarity Group,⁶ or similar groups closer to home. As Mehmet Abi once told me, ‘think of what care could look like for where you live, and take action.’

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⁶ You can reach out to the Tarlabası Solidarity Group via their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/TarlabasiDayanisma/>.