

“Hijra to Istanbul”: A Study on the Religious Migration to Istanbul from Western Countries

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Abstract

“In Istanbul, we get a modern lifestyle with Islamic spirituality,” this has become a recurring sentiment amongst the Migrant Muslim community, reflecting the city’s evolving role as a transnational religious hub. Migration from developing to industrialised countries has been one of the most significant socio-economic patterns of the past two centuries, a movement that has largely been driven by factors such as higher levels of social welfare, improved living standards, expanded employment opportunities, and explicit support for social rights and freedoms, positioning "Western" countries as attractive destinations for migrants worldwide. However, in recent years, a notable shift has emerged with an increasing number of migrants relocating to Istanbul from regions traditionally classified as "Western," including Europe and North America. What distinguishes this migration pattern is its predominantly religious motivation. Many Muslim migrants perceive Istanbul as a unique setting where they can integrate a modern urban lifestyle with the spiritual and communal aspects of Islamic practice.

In this sense, the reverse migration from western contexts to Istanbul emerges as a thought-provoking phenomenon. Muslim community members are choosing to individually and collectively migrate to Istanbul in search of an alternative religious lifestyle. Furthermore, these Muslim communities tend to be ethnically diverse, yet, rather than return to their countries of origin, they consciously choose Istanbul to settle in, despite cultural and linguistic barriers. The questions that arise is what are the driving incentives for religious communities to migrate to Istanbul? How do these muslim migrants experience being a migrant in Istanbul coming from Western contexts? How do these migrants adapt to and organize their faith-based activities in Istanbul? Accordingly, this research investigates how Muslims who migrated to Istanbul with religious motivations shape their migration decision-making processes, how they adapt their daily and religious life practices in Istanbul, and how they reflect the spatial perceptions and praxis. Furthermore, this ongoing ethnographic research aims to understand the phenomenon of “Hijra to Istanbul” -as it has been dubbed online- as a religiously motivated resettlement in Istanbul and a side effect of reverse migration out of the West.

In order to achieve the aim of the research, in-depth interviews are conducted with 15 female and 15 male Muslim migrant participants who migrated after previously living in "Western" countries and have been living in Istanbul for a year. The participants of this study are individuals over the age of 18, representing diverse occupational groups, social statuses, and ethnic backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their migration experiences. In addition, ethnographic participant observation is conducted in institutions, communities, and cafes where immigrants gather, specifically in the Başakşehir and Üsküdar districts of

Istanbul. This study is expected to contribute to the field of social sciences by revealing how Muslim migrants in Istanbul construct their ‘religious migrant’ identities within the framework of transnational migration theory. Plus, it analyzes the spatial dynamics of Istanbul through the lens of space production theory, focusing on the impact of migration on urban space, immigrants' spatial affiliations, and the intertwined relationship between people and space in the process of change. Therefore, outcomes of the study provide a novel perspective on how faith-based motivations shape transnational migration patterns, which are expected to be useful for policymakers, urban planners, and social scientists interested in the intersections of migration, religion and space.

Keywords: Transnational Migration, Urban Transformation, Space Production, Muslim Diaspora, Religious Migration



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