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From Grenfell to Kartalkaya: Disasters, Collective Action, and Social Justice

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The Grand Kartal Hotel ablaze, 22 January 2025. Source: IHA

Dedicated to the memory of Mert Doğan, Duygu Doğan, Mavi Doğan, and Doğa Doğan

On 21 January 2025, a fire at the Grand Kartal Hotel in Kartalkaya, Turkey, killed 78 people, including at least 36 children, and injured 51 others. Despite being one of the region's top ski resorts, investigations revealed severe fire safety violations. The hotel lacked essential protections such as an automatic alarm, sprinkler system, functioning smoke detectors, and illuminated emergency exits. The area had no dedicated fire department, and the nearest units – nearly an hour away in

Bolu – struggled to reach the scene due to harsh winter conditions, allowing the fire to burn unchecked for over 12 hours.

In the aftermath, a fierce dispute over responsibility erupted among local municipalities, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Interior, and other governmental bodies. Authorities imposed a **temporary media ban** and declared a day of mourning. Days later, 31 people were detained, 22 arrested, while a special parliamentary commission launched an investigation. Despite public outcry over fire safety lapses and systemic enforcement failures, no individual or entity has publicly taken responsibility or issued an apology.

We argue that the 2025 Kartalkaya fire and **the 2017 Grenfell fire in London**, one of the deadliest residential fires in modern British history, share similarities in negligence but differ in post-disaster collective action and public response. We explore how lessons from Grenfell can inform Turkey's post-disaster strategies, preventing future failures, mitigating their impact, and helping survivors achieve justice.

Similar Disaster Patterns

The 2017 Grenfell fire claimed 72 lives and displaced hundreds. Like the Kartalkaya fire, it was not a mere accident, but a preventable disaster rooted in systemic failures – flawed building safety regulations, inadequate enforcement, and poor emergency preparedness.

Both **the Grand Kartal Hotel** and **Grenfell Tower** lacked critical fire safety systems and clear evacuation procedures. In both cases, weak enforcement of construction laws allowed unsafe buildings to operate without proper precautions. Poor design, highly flammable materials – wooden exteriors in Kartalkaya and aluminum composite cladding in Grenfell – and a lack of emergency preparedness made it difficult to contain the fires and evacuate residents safely. The rapid spread of flames trapped occupants in their rooms, where they faced intense heat and thick black smoke. In Kartalkaya, some tied bedsheets together in desperate escape attempts, while others tragically jumped to their deaths. In Grenfell, many followed the 'stay put' policy, left helpless at their windows, signalling for rescue.

Although to varying degrees, both disasters triggered public outrage, demanding stricter fire safety policies, legal accountability, and justice for the victims. Survivors and their communities mobilised through collective action, engaging in **legal battles**, **protests**, and **policy-driven campaigns**. These movements were not just expressions of grief and solidarity but strategic efforts to challenge institutional failures and push for systemic reform. By forming collective identities, affected individuals transformed their struggles from personal tragedies into broader fights for justice and structural change.

Different Disaster Responses

The responses to the Kartalkaya and Grenfell fires, particularly how survivors and supporters mobilised for justice, diverged due to distinct social, political, and regulatory contexts. In post-disaster scenarios, shared social identity can empower individuals, shifting them **from victimhood to agency**. In **Grenfell**, affected communities framed the fire as a preventable injustice, strengthening their resolve to demand legislative reforms, transparency, and justice. First, campaigners pushed for a public inquiry in 2017, ensuring survivors had a voice and increasing scrutiny of corporate and governmental responsibilities. Second, their efforts led to UK-wide fire safety reforms, including **the Building Safety Act (2022)** and **Fire Safety Act (2021)**, which imposed stricter regulations and accountability. Third, they pressured the government to ban combustible cladding and remove unsafe materials from thousands of buildings. Fourth, sustained advocacy secured improved housing provisions and expanded mental health services for survivors. Campaigners continue to push for full justice, including criminal prosecutions of those responsible.

In contrast, structural and socio-political constraints limited mobilisation after the Kartalkaya fire. Unlike Grenfell's long-established residential community, Kartalkaya's victims were hotel guests from different cities, lacking pre-existing social bonds. This absence of unity may have hindered sustained protests or legal advocacy efforts like Grenfell's **Silent Walk**.

Turkey's restricted civic space – marked by protest limitations, censorship, and political risks – discouraged large-scale mobilisation. The country also lacks strong housing rights and legal advocacy networks comparable to those supporting Grenfell survivors. Additionally, **limited press freedom** restricted public awareness, weakening collective grievance and demands for justice. Moreover, some social media users framed Kartalkaya as **an issue of fate** rather than a preventable disaster, further **depoliticising** the issue. Unlike Grenfell, where ongoing activism sustained media attention, Kartalkaya's coverage quickly faded, stifling public debate and collective action.

Finally, the absence of transparent legal avenues for action weakened mobilisation. Grenfell's public inquiry process provided survivors with a formal mechanism to push for accountability, sustaining momentum. Kartalkaya, on the other hand, lacked an equivalent independent inquiry, fostering skepticism about achieving justice through collective action.

Conclusion

Despite occurring in different contexts, the Kartalkaya and Grenfell fires reveal the devastating consequences of inadequate fire safety, regulatory failures, and disaster unpreparedness. While both sparked public outcry, the scale and persistence of collective action differed, shaped by broader social, political, and institutional structures. Grenfell became a catalyst for sustained activism, highlighting housing inequality and government neglect in the UK. In contrast, Kartalkaya has not prompted the same level of mobilisation in Turkey. This disparity underscores the role of civic engagement, activist networks, cultural attitudes toward accountability, and the capacity of affected communities to demand justice.

Disasters are political and preventable. Without reform, similar tragedies will persist, particularly where oversight, regulation, and community preparedness remain weak. Collective action – when rooted in strong mobilisation and persistent advocacy – keeps systemic injustices in the public and political spotlight, driving policy change.

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