

Before and after urban warfare: Conflict prevention and transitions in cities

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Abstract

The rising pressures of urbanization in fragile and conflict-affected countries have increased concerns about the vulnerability of cities to armed threats. Changes in the character of armed conflict during the twenty-first century and its effects on cities in the developing world have exposed gaps in the planning and practice of peace and security, which retain a “nation-State bias” that circumvents local perspectives and agencies. Whereas full-scale use of military power in cities remains as destructive today as it has ever been, international organizations such as the United Nations have called for changed approaches to State tactics in urban areas. Mechanisms designed to prevent conflict or to help countries transition back to peace are particularly key if massive human and economic damages are to be avoided in a world of increasingly dense cities. Another key concern is the vulnerability of developing-world cities to low-intensity, if protracted, forms of violence by non-State actors, particularly in post-conflict contexts. Conflict prevention and peace transitions in cities (including mainstream international

tools such as peacekeeping, stability and reconstruction aid) are affected by specifically urban pressures linked to rising populations, migration, ethnic tensions, institutional deterioration and the weakening of urban services. Therefore, the physical and social characteristics of cities interact with military and developmental policies in unique ways. An understanding of key local actors, services and institutions affecting urban drivers of armed conflict – an urban strategic environment – can help practitioners and strategists to craft comprehensive policies.

Keywords: urban conflict, urban warfare, cities, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, UN, multifunctional operations, stability, resilience.



Cities have a crucial place in the development path of fragile and conflict-affected States. Metropolitan areas, with their concentration of industrial and service sectors, are important engines for economic growth and productivity in developing countries.¹ However, as urban population growth accelerates in many developing regions, the emerging consensus is that armed violence and conflict tend to increasingly affect these population centres, therefore jeopardizing broader national recovery and development.

The unprecedented pace of global population growth in cities has triggered fears of a potential increase in the frequency of such clashes in densely inhabited areas. This is linked, according to different sources, to increased demographic pressures on urban systems, combined with the attractiveness of such spaces for non-State armed groups. The two risk factors – rapid population growth and armed activity by non-State actors – are key conclusions from strategic studies of urban conflicts. While other factors, such as informational connectivity and State weakness, also play a role, the source of expanding scholarly and humanitarian concerns about urban conflict stems from these two dynamics. For instance, the concept of “hybrid war” was widely discussed during the conflict in eastern Ukraine starting in 2014, consisting of a combination of tactics used simultaneously “by both states and a variety of non-state actors”, primarily in cities.² And one influential voice from the strategic/military studies field, David Kilcullen, has pointed out that “non-state conflicts (guerrilla, tribal, and civil wars, or armed criminal activity such as banditry and gang warfare) ... tend to happen near or within the areas where people live” – i.e., wars are taking place in “increasingly crowded, urban, coastal” areas.³

This linkage between urbanization and non-State armed activity is further strengthened by some of the “conflict economies” that have become associated with globalization. In defining “deviant globalization”, the US National Defence

1 John M. Quigley, “Urbanization, Agglomeration, and Economic Development”, in Michael Spence *et al.* (eds), *Urbanization and Growth*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2009, p. 128.

2 Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington, VA, 2007, p. 29.

3 David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, Hurst, London, 2013, p. 28.

University has highlighted the geographical (particularly urban) aspects of rogue non-State dynamics: criminal flows, it asserts, go through cities “in a de facto archipelago that runs from inner metropolitan cities of the United States to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro to the *banlieues* of Paris to the almost continuous urban slum belt that girds the Gulf of Guinea from Abidjan to Lagos”.⁴ A similar dynamic underlines the illicit profits driving the shift from inter-State to intra-State war according to Paul Collier’s classic “greed” theory of civil war.⁵ Subsequent studies have shown that “urban lawlessness” can nurture similar conflict economies: writing on the effects of neighbouring conflicts in Kabul (Afghanistan) and Karachi (Pakistan), Daniel Esser concludes that “the ‘classic’ rural warlord seems to morph gradually into a modern urban one”.⁶ With more to gain in cities, with their illicit economies, non-State armed groups have been urbanizing alongside the broader populations of developing countries.

Indeed, some of the most intense battles in recent years have taken place in cities, with State and non-State forces fighting each other among large civilian populations. In the case of the Syrian city of Aleppo, the destruction and depopulation in some areas has been almost total: as a city that has existed for four millennia, it lost over half of its population in five years.⁷ Mosul, in Iraq, also faces bombardment as government forces try to expel members of the so-called Islamic State, while the eastern Ukrainian cities of Donetsk and Luhansk faced heavy-weapon fire attacks by separatists and government troops in 2014.⁸ The conduct – and impacts – of urban warfare in such cases have appeared disturbingly unchanged from historic trends: high levels of violence and a corresponding effect on infrastructure and populations. Whereas most post-conflict and fragile settings have experienced much lower-intensity fighting, the rising pace of urbanization and non-State armed activity widens the scope for political violence in cities. This only adds to the challenge ahead for the international peace and security architecture, as urban conflict can take many shapes. In fact, as demonstrated below, the ambiguity and variety of non-State armed groups have been key aspects of current conflicts.

These challenges are amplified as the global urban population grows, particularly in the neighbourhoods of fragile countries and those facing ongoing

4 Nils Gilman, Jesse Goldhammer and Steven Weber, “Deviant Globalization”, in Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (eds), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization*, NDU Press, Washington, DC, 2013, p. 5.

5 Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 2004.

6 Daniel Esser, “The City as Arena, Hub and Prey: Patterns of Violence in Kabul and Karachi”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2004, p. 37.

7 Holly Yan and Eyad Kourdi, “Aleppo: Who Still Lives in This Decimated City – and Why?”, *CNN*, 21 November 2016, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/20/middleeast/who-is-left-in-aleppo/> (all internet references were accessed in November 2016).

8 Dominic Evans and Ahmed Rasheed, “West Mosul shelled as Iraq Steps Up Fight against Islamic State”, *Reuters*, 5 December 2016, available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-idUSKBN13U1U2; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), “Europe and Eurasia: Ukraine”, in *Armed Conflict Survey 2016*, Routledge, London, 29 March 2016, pp. 297–299.

conflicts – as in the cases of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.⁹ While armed conflict, as in the cases of Mosul, Aleppo and Donetsk, is not solely caused by urban population pressures, population growth is a further risk factor in developing countries in fragile or conflict-affected regions. Equally, with more than half of the global population living in built-up areas, it seems clear that armed conflicts do not arise purely due to failures of metropolitan services or overcrowding. Instead, these urban sources of pressure often interact with existing political and socio-economic tensions. The result is a higher potential for disruption and protracted violence in complex urban conflicts, with unpredictable but frequently disruptive (and deadly) effects.

The rising complexity and unpredictability of urban armed conflict has sparked a search for new policy ideas. For instance, the concept of resilience to shocks (including conflict and other violence) has gained traction among urbanists, while humanitarian agencies have strived to understand the specific challenges of urban areas and urban refugees. Post-conflict societies in Latin America and South Africa have sought to tackle segregation and crime through urbanistic interventions, attempting to transform street patterns, revitalize slums and improve mobility. The military understanding of urban environments, in contrast, has been relatively stalled.

When it comes to military responses in urban areas, the strategic studies literature or official military documents make for grim reading: articles from the 2000s onwards carry titles such as “The New Middle Ages”, “Feral Cities”, “Cities without Joy” and “Battleground Metropolis”, reflecting the overall conclusion that urban warfare is destined to remain a go-to response characterized by destructive and high-intensity military operations even in (or because of) increasingly larger and denser cities¹⁰. As Michael Evans writes in this issue of the *Review*, Western strategic studies have long focused on the “anarchy” aspect of urbanization, distracting from multidisciplinary urban strategic studies.¹¹

Fortunately, strategic thinkers and military planners have also signalled their willingness to accept the multidimensional character of urban warfare, paving the way for a constructive dialogue with other fields of policy action. The instability and vulnerability of rapidly urbanizing developing-world cities makes

9 The 2014 United Nations (UN) *World Urbanization Prospects* report lists the following countries as facing the biggest urban population growth by 2050: China, India, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, the United Republic of Tanzania, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan, and the United States. As fragile countries, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) lists five countries from South Asia and twenty-eight from sub-Saharan Africa. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects, the 2014 Revision: Highlights*, New York, 2014; OECD, *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions*, Paris, 2015, p. 15.

10 John Rapley, “The New Middle Ages”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 3, 2006 available at: www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2006-05-01/new-middle-ages; Richard J. Norton, “Feral Cities”, *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 2003; Michael Evans, “Cities without Joy: Urban Warfare in the 21st Century”, *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2005; Alex Ward, “Battleground Metropolis: The Future of Urban Warfare”, *National Interest*, 24 March 2015, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/battleground-metropolis-the-future-urban-warfare-12467>.

11 See Michael Evans, “Future War in Cities: Urbanization’s Challenge to Strategic Studies in the Twenty-First Century”, in this issue of the *Review*.

the search for alternatives to full-scale urban warfare particularly urgent. This is especially true given the modest changes diagnosed in the recent conduct of urban warfare (which we will explore in more detail below). Emerging frameworks of analysis and practice intended to prevent the occurrence of, or relapse into, armed conflict have not been consistently explored in the context of urban warfare, although studies into prevention of criminal violence are relatively more advanced.¹²

The purpose of this article is to explore the implications of increasing vulnerability of urban centres to armed conflict and other instances of politically motivated, low-intensity collective violence, with a specific focus on policy frameworks intended to prevent warfare or steer countries (or, in this case, cities) away from it – conflict prevention, peacebuilding and peacekeeping, broadly speaking. Armed conflict is understood here as the organized practice of armed violence of a sufficient intensity with a political purpose, involving State and/or non-State actors (the latter being by far the predominant format of armed activity in the contemporary world), whereas collective violence is a broader category, encompassing protracted but less intense forms of conflict involving non-State actors such as militias, insurgents and gangs with territorial ambitions and political affiliations. The latter category is further explained below in a discussion on evolving analyses of the “changing character” of conflict. This article will not explore instances of primarily profit-driven criminal violence. The article will show how the relative absence of efforts to understand the urban imperatives of conflict prevention and peacebuilding is linked to a still ongoing effort to define and implement policy principles such as prevention, stability, reconstruction, humanitarian intervention and other international policies designed to bring States back from internal war and towards “normalcy”. The central argument is that the conduct, management and impacts of conflicts affect the functioning of urban systems, which, as a result, have a key role to play in prevention and recovery towards peace. These mutually influencing dynamics (city functioning and security interventions) have been neglected, especially in contexts where militaries have had the lead over missions, due to a still incipient embrace of local perspectives for dealing with armed conflict and other instances of non-State groups waging protracted violence.

Military dilemmas in urban warfare

There has been a growing call for multidisciplinary approaches to military operations in cities. This stems from a widespread view, in the literature of strategic studies and humanitarianism, that accelerated urban growth in developing and, particularly, fragile States will lead to increasing momentum for war in cities. A recent attempt by the US Army to prepare for urban operations

12 See, for instance, Robert Muggah, *Researching the Urban Dilemma: Urbanization, Poverty and Violence*, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, 2012.

by creating a “Megacities Concept Team” was criticized by a senior author as being too narrow in its focus on combat: “the quickest way to degrade American combat power will be to deploy large numbers of troops into a megacity without a thorough examination”.¹³ Alice Hills, writing on “future war in cities”, argues that the “tactical emphasis” by militaries in their strategic and doctrinal documents is “necessary but not sufficient” to understand such a complex environment.¹⁴ While other policy areas were cited as necessary additions to the strategic studies focus, the effort is embryonic and faces significant obstacles within the very foundations of how both practitioners and strategists think about war.

Attempts to conceive new approaches to prevention and recovery from war have clashed with long-standing views on the role of military action. Whereas cities have consistently been understood as complex systems – in which damage or disruption to one element causes a wider and often unpredictable impact on others – recent military practices have followed much narrower parameters. This narrow view is best described by a former practitioner of urban warfare, David Kilcullen, when he warns about the preference of official institutions and academic departments for “single-threat” analyses – concepts such as counter-insurgency and counterterrorism.¹⁵ These single-threat perspectives have unquestionable merits, but they become problematic in complex and well-connected cities. They also clash with the growing evidence (further explored below) pointing to a widening array of formats and motivations for non-State armed groups and their proliferation in metropolitan areas.

In settings as diverse as Karachi, Baghdad, Gaza, Mogadishu and Port-au-Prince, there has been a well-documented movement away from classic insurgency and towards complex, self-funded and native armed movements heavily involved with organized criminal activities and terrorism, sometimes linked to other militias and transnational networks.¹⁶ In an expression that has become one of the guiding principles of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for its future planning, the character of conflict has taken a turn towards hybridity – a concept that denotes, as Frank Hoffman puts it, a fusion of different forms of armed activity in a single environment.¹⁷ Unfortunately for cities, they are forecast to have a crucial role in “hybrid wars”: by their very nature as diverse, dense and well-connected systems, they are the preferred environments from which to draw out conflicts and “protract their duration and costs”.¹⁸

Even outside of a purely military perspective, there has been broad agreement that global urbanization trends have made occurrences of armed threats more likely and protracted in the developing world’s sprawling

13 Michael Evans, “The Case *against* Megacities”, *Parameters*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2015, p. 42.

14 Alice Hills, *Future War in Cities: Rethinking a Liberal Dilemma*, Frank Cass, London, 2004, p. 5.

15 D. Kilcullen, above note 3, p. 16.

16 See, for instance: A. Hills, above note 14, p. 4; Antônio Sampaio, “Violent Cities Need Whole-Government Solutions”, *BeyondBrics*, 12 October 2015, available at: blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2015/10/12/violent-cities-need-whole-government-solutions/; D. Kilcullen, above note 3.

17 F. G. Hoffman, above note 2.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

metropolitan zones. International organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations (UN) have occasionally resorted to the term “fragile city” to describe sprawling areas where rapid growth has overwhelmed local coping systems and reshaped identities, agency and social relations.¹⁹ Humanitarian agencies have intensified their efforts to understand responses to conflicts in urban areas, crystallized by the launch of a Global Alliance for Urban Crisis during the first World Humanitarian Summit, convened by the UN in 2016.²⁰

Long-term studies in areas affected by war have shown the diverse and enduring manifestations of conflict in large urban centres. Kabul and Karachi, two key economic hubs affected by the long-standing conflict in Afghanistan, have experienced rising armed violence amid a context of rapid population growth (partially driven by migration from rural areas) and diminishing social cohesion. One frustrated urban planner wrote, after working with reconstruction in war-torn Mogadishu, that “post-conflict reconstruction is a thing of the past”, since many armed conflicts have become increasingly protracted.²¹

Yet, the prevailing military practice and theory of urban operations is to adopt tactical guidelines that prioritize combat operations and presume a clear-cut separation between war and peace. Military doctrines and practice have had little to no interaction with ideas from the planning, development and administration of cities. The tactical biases of armed forces have led to what Alice Hills has described as “generic concepts and doctrine”:²² urban deployments have been traditionally viewed as relatively “minor” categories of operations, whereas much more attention has been paid to laying out tactics and procedures, such as rules of engagement, logistics preparations and the right classes of artillery and air support capabilities.

The classic manifestation of this tactical bias is the concept of Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT), born in a 1979 US Army field manual which also stressed that built-up areas are essentially too hostile and risky and should be avoided.²³ The MOUT concept reflected a reluctance to look at the complexities of cities precisely because they were not neatly compatible with the force’s traditional manoeuvrist preference. Despite the fact that most post-World War II urban conflicts had been against non-State armed groups, MOUT drew heavily from lessons from industrial warfare in WWII urban theatres.²⁴ At the turn of the millennium, Ralph Peters’ influential article “Our Soldiers, Their

19 See R. Muggah, above note 12, p. 22 ff.

20 See Global Alliance for Urban Crises, *Adapting Global Crisis Response to an Urban World*, 25 March 2016, available at: <http://unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Global-Alliance-for-Urban-Crises-Overview-25-March-2016.pdf>.

21 Mitchell Sipus, “Post-Conflict Reconstruction Is Dead”, *Humanitarian Space*, 3 April 2014, available at: www.thehumanitarianspace.com/2014/04/post-conflict-reconstruction-is-dead.html.

22 A. Hills, above note 14, p. 7.

23 US Department of the Army, *Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT)*, FM 90-10, 15 August 1979, p. 14, available at: <https://archive.org/details/milmanual-fm-90-10-military-operations-on-urban-terrain-mout>.

24 Michael Evans, *City without Joy: Urban Military Operations into the 21st Century*, Australian Defence College, Canberra, 2007, p. 12.

Cities” made the case for a return to full-scale urban warfare as “necessary” for US intervention or assistance to foreign allies in the next century, despite pointing out its essentially destructive character, saying “atrocities are close-up and commonplace”.²⁵ This endured until as late as 1998, when a manual published by the US Marine Corps recommended the use of tanks and artillery (both direct and indirect fire types) alongside heavy infantry presence.²⁶ MOU has had a profound influence in Western military thinking, guiding NATO urban combat training systems.²⁷ Despite pointing to “a number of recent catastrophic failures in MOU” by the United States in Mogadishu and Russia in Grozny, Chechnya, a recent US Army study has emphasized the need to continue to study and train for MOU due to current global urban population trends.²⁸

The problem with this approach is not related to the tactical level – it is perfectly reasonable that armed forces prepare for urban combat operations. On a strategic and doctrinal level, however, the scarcity of multidimensional perspectives guiding militaries’ view on cities becomes problematic when one takes into consideration their own assessment of cities’ rising vulnerability to armed activity. This scarcity paves the way for a shortage of policy options when it comes to protracted, “hybrid” armed conflict that doesn’t quite fit within narrow parameters of combat or peace.

Preventing conflict in cities: Local relevance in a world of nation-States

In an apparent attempt to bypass these security dilemmas, the concept of conflict prevention has gained traction among a variety of voices within the peace and security community. Like so many of the concepts popular among international organizations (in this case mainly the UN), conflict prevention is deeply rooted in a classic and State-centric view of armed conflict. It traces its roots to UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld, who emphasized the term “preventive diplomacy” in 1960, aiming at the superpowers and their proxy wars in “third world” countries.²⁹

The idea that conflict prevention is something that can take the form, across the globe, of negotiations between two clearly delineated “parties” that then decide to settle their differences peacefully has endured since then. Indeed, this formulation forms the backbone of the “prevention” section in the influential 1992 UN

25 Ralph Peters, “Our Soldiers, Their Cities”, *Parameters*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1996.

26 US Marine Corps, *Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOU)*, 26 April 1998, pp. 1–13, 1–14, available at: www.marines.mil/Portals/59/MCWP%203-35.3.pdf.

27 NATO, *Urban Combat Advanced Training Technology*, July 2015, available at: www.sto.nato.int/publications/STO%20Technical%20Reports/STO-TR-MSG-063/STO-TR-MSG-063-ALL.pdf.

28 Michael C. Desch, “Why MOU Now?”, in Michael C. Desch, *Soldiers in Cities: Military Operations on Urban Terrain*, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, October 2001, p. 2.

29 Cited in Michael S. Lund, “Conflict Prevention: Theory in Pursuit of Policy and Practice”, in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk and I. William Zartman (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2009, p. 288.

Agenda for Peace, alongside peacemaking and peacekeeping.³⁰ The Brahimi Report, which is widely credited with having established the “primacy of politics” in UN missions, establishes from the outset “the essential responsibility of Member States for the maintenance of international peace and security”,³¹ and reinforces “diplomatic initiative” as the “usual” instrument for conflict prevention.³² While this is an important focus in a world in which sovereign States are the dominant form of political organization, its nation-State bias influences policies and bureaucratic structures in a way that bypasses local perspectives.

The practical outcome of this strategic orientation has been the development of a toolbox that has limited application for urban environments. Most of today’s go-to instruments for applying the principles of conflict prevention reflect a preference for high-level interactions at the federal levels: special political missions, the Mediation Support Unit and Special Envoys. These instruments, while extremely important for the work of the UN, have limited applicability for urban environments, where armed groups have tended to display little disposition for negotiations and conflict has acquired a protracted form. The UN itself has had encounters with such urban conflicts, for instance in Mogadishu, where the conquest of the city by an international mission, the presence of a large peacekeeping force and the establishment of a federal government in 2012 have not prevented Al-Shabaab and local militias from operating with impunity in many areas.³³ In the Central African Republic, a peace agreement in 2008 helped reduce direct violence from rebel groups, but the capital Bangui saw little in the way of security improvements due to regular outbreaks of armed violence by sectarian militias, who seem to lack the cohesion and top-down leadership that has usually been a requirement for formal peace talks.³⁴ An escalation in factional fighting between Christian and Muslim community militias in the streets of the capital in November 2013 prompted warnings that the country was “on the verge of genocide” and the deployment of additional peacekeepers.³⁵

One of the cornerstones of conflict prevention efforts is the development of an early-warning system, which in theory enables decision-makers to scan emerging armed threats and political conflicts. Like conflict prevention, it has been on the rise in the discourses of organizations involved with peacekeeping and peace support,

30 *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping*, Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992, UN Doc. A/47/277, 17 June 1992, available at: www.un-documents.net/a47-277.htm.

31 Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, UN Doc. A/55/305, 21 August 2000 (Brahimi Report), p. 1, available at: www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/55/305.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

33 Muhyadin Ahmed Roble, “Mogadishu’s Dilemma: Who’s in Control?”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 11 No. 12, 2013, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/mogadishu-dilemma-whos-in-control/>.

34 International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, Africa Report No. 230, 21 September 2015, p. 3, available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/230-central-african-republic-the-roots-of-violence.pdf>.

35 David Smith, “Unspeakable Horrors in a Country on the Verge of Genocide”, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2013, available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/22/central-african-republic-verge-of-genocide.

such as the UN and the European Union. In 2010, for instance, the UN Security Council introduced regular “horizon-scanning” meetings for this purpose.³⁶ However, similar to conflict prevention, these meetings are dominated by broad national-level assessments, manifested mainly in the use of the “fragile State” label as a key requirement for problems to “qualify” for the exercise. As a report by the Clingendael Institute has put it, the key problem with relying on measurements of State fragility for early-warning systems is that “rather than measuring conflict risk itself [the mechanism] measures state fragility as an inevitable precondition for armed conflict”.³⁷ The consequence has been, as the report makes clear, a focus on national elites to the detriment of “local and transnational networks of power”, as many non-State armed groups in countries as diverse as Libya and Honduras focus on local pockets of authority and are divided in factions, rendering national ambitions rare and quasi-irrelevant.

Furthermore, early-warning mechanisms are biased towards the so-called “conflict trap” theory, which establishes that countries which have faced armed conflict in the recent past are more likely to face it again. The bias comes with good reason: as the World Bank’s 2011 *World Development Report* highlights, 90% of civil wars during the 2000s took place in countries that had registered another civil war in the last thirty years.³⁸ So it would be unwise to even consider disregarding this type of data for conflict prevention. However, it would be equally unwise not to recognize that there are increasingly important geographical variations in conflict trends which affect cities in a different way than States – for instance, conflict can erupt in a specific large city before it spreads. Local incidents can ignite or reignite conflicts, due to the close proximity of warring groups or the symbolism of certain buildings in cities. This seems to be a frequent occurrence in the Middle East, where non-State armed groups resident in Gaza frequently spark Israeli retaliations. In Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, the death of a taxi driver sparked a wave of ethnically and religiously inspired killings and attacks on government and civilian buildings in 2015.³⁹ Also, conflict can become restricted to one or a few cities while still causing vast human suffering and economic damage, as both populations and economic assets tend to concentrate in such areas. This is the case in Karachi, a city with recurring cycles of political violence that do not affect Pakistan’s other main cities or the surrounding countryside to the same extent.⁴⁰

36 “Horizon-Scanning Briefings”, *Security Council Report*, 16 June 2016, available at: www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/horizon-scanning-briefings.php.

37 Fransje Molenaar and Rosan Smits, *Capturing Politics and Power: An Updated Approach to Early Warning and Action*, Clingendael, June 2016, p. 2, available at: www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/Capturing%20politics%20and%20power%20June%202016.pdf.

38 World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*, Washington, DC, 2011, p. 2, available at: siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf.

39 Elsa Buchanan, “Central African Republic: UN Calls for Immediate End to ‘Unacceptable’ Violence and Retaliation Attacks”, *International Business Times*, 29 September 2015, available at: www.ibtimes.co.uk/central-african-republic-un-calls-immediate-end-unacceptable-violence-retaliation-attacks-1521621.

40 Huma Yusuf, *Conflict Dynamics in Karachi*, US Institute of Peace, 19 October 2012, available at: www.usip.org/publications/conflict-dynamics-in-karachi.

There has been a recent move towards an expansion in scope of the conflict prevention framework, towards what is called “systemic” or “deep” prevention: policies that address social root causes of conflicts and institutional or policy deficits that undermine peace.⁴¹ This approach has been criticized for being too broad, embracing institutional development, socio-economic measures, the environment, humanitarian aid, military deployments etc.⁴² However, in the context of at-risk cities, this broad and holistic strategy can be grounded in geographical realities. What seems like an impossible coordination task in vast national territories has the potential to be more manageable when targeted at vulnerable peripheries with clear and practical needs. This approach has demonstrated results in Medellín, Colombia, having helped raise the city’s reputation and even “brand” as a success case of recovery from conflict (especially within the broader Colombian context of large-scale guerrilla activity).⁴³ The strategy was broad and holistic: it included several types of interventions, from the building of public transportation to libraries, schools and bold architectural projects in marginalized *comunas* or slums.⁴⁴ Additionally, it was disciplined by a strategy with clear and delimited objectives. It centred on peripheries with high incidences of armed conflict and the presence of guerrilla units, with the aim of integrating them into the broader urban society and therefore encouraging education and jobs. This is an instance in which the pattern of conflict in one city has been markedly different from the country as a whole: armed activity in Medellín decreased even though left-wing insurgent groups still counted many thousands of armed fighters across Colombia and were highly active in rural areas.

Post-conflict transition and the city

When armed conflict, in its various sizes and shapes, does erupt in – or end up enveloping – cities, international interventions and current security-and-development approaches still struggle to respond. There is a tension between the increasing vulnerability of cities amid changing patterns of armed conflict and the relative continuation of combat-centric approaches to security in cities. This tension is related to a long-standing and broader discussion about the extent to which armed intervention helps or hinders the pursuit of peace.⁴⁵ It is not the aim of this article to weigh in on this discussion, but to display the emerging frameworks designed to steer countries away from armed conflicts by using non-combat tools, or to minimize these tools within a multidimensional policy intervention.

41 M. S. Lund, above note 29, p. 290.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 289.

43 Judith Rodin, “The Transformation of Medellín Provides a Model for Cities Worldwide”, *The Guardian*, 10 April 2014, available at: www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/apr/10/medellin-transformation-model-cities-worldwide-resilience.

44 A. Sampaio, above note 16.

45 See, for instance, Robert C. Johansen, “UN Peacekeeping: The Changing Utility of Military Force”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1990.

These initiatives have been frequently discussed within the framework of “security and development”, and gained strength following the 2011 publication by the World Bank of its annual *World Development Report* focusing on conflict, security and development.⁴⁶ It highlighted a challenge facing different communities of practice: “bringing security and development together to put down roots deep enough to break the cycles of fragility and conflict”.⁴⁷ But it also inevitably reflected the same nation-State bias that affects conflict prevention and other peace-and-security concepts. The report has little to say about sub-national policy challenges, armed threats or agencies, despite the fact that municipalities are at the forefront of many of the crucial security-and-development challenges highlighted therein. While recognizing rapid urbanization as a key driver of insecurity, the World Bank report supports its case for a security-and-development focus on national-level challenges of fragile States and the Millennium Development Goals. It also makes clear that it is speaking to an audience of central government authorities and regional and global institutions – therefore bypassing local-level perspectives.⁴⁸

Perhaps more worrying for citizens of fragile cities is the fact that the broader international security and development tools have scarcely looked specifically at cities as settings with peculiar needs and dynamics affecting conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. Another key document laying out international strategies to promote peace and avoid war, the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations’ 2000 Brahimi Report, focused on the member States of the UN – which is understandable given that the organization was founded by nation-States and is tasked with upholding an international order of sovereign States.⁴⁹ However, this “nation-State bias” of organizations such as the UN and World Bank has been replicated by a great number of experts and practitioners in discussions about peace promotion and conflict prevention. A gap has therefore formed in the thinking on how local instances of governance, bureaucracy and policy can interact with and even change some assumptions of the international peace and security frameworks.

The implications of this gap have recently begun to be explicitly discussed. In a 2016 article entitled “Peacekeeping in Cities: Is the UN Prepared?”, UN University authors highlight that a recent review by the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) failed to mention the words “urban” and “cities” in its 104-page report.⁵⁰ Despite that, the article proceeds to mention instances where peacekeeping forces are active in highly violent cities, such as Bangui and Port-au-Prince.⁵¹ The piece, therefore, begins to show the tensions

46 World Bank, above note 38.

47 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

48 For instance, the foreword states that the report is “important for all countries – low, middle, and high income – as well as for regional and global institutions”. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

49 Brahimi Report, above note 31.

50 Louise Bosetti, Hannah Cooper, John de Boer and Menaal Munshey, *Peacekeeping in Cities: Is the UN Prepared?*, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 12 April 2016, available at: cpr.unu.edu/peacekeeping-in-cities-is-the-un-prepared.html.

51 *Ibid.*

within international peace and security frameworks due to recurring statist bias amid challenging local contexts.

The practice of international aid by developed countries shares a similar bias: according to a 2009 study, international aid to cities has amounted to \$3 billion per year on average since the 1970s, a fraction of overall donations to the developing world.⁵² An experienced practitioner of urban development who has advised in Afghanistan and Somalia has recently expressed this gap by asking: “If a city is destroyed by an aggregate of non-state actors, then is it reasonable to expect state-based reconstruction to be effective?”⁵³ “Unlikely”, is his answer.⁵⁴

The nation-State bias of post-conflict transition mechanisms has only recently begun to be openly discussed (and, to some exchanged, challenged) by urbanists – for instance, through the New Urban Agenda adopted by all UN member States in 2016, emphasizing the need to pay “special attention” to cities undergoing post-conflict transitions.⁵⁵ But the bias is also partially caused by a lack of overall clarity around the challenges that security and development are supposed to solve in the metropolises of the developing world.

Blurred lines and blurred responses in cities

One of the difficulties involved in responding to local conflict dynamics is the lack of clarity in categorizing the armed challenges involved. This is related to a broader trend, often referred to as the “changing character of war”, which affects the way we understand urban conflicts. The Armed Conflict Survey published in 2015 summarized the recent changes in conflict trends as the decline of clashes between States while “intra-state conflict remains a significant destabilising factor around the world”.⁵⁶ These shifts also point to a “proliferation of non-state armed actors rooted in cities throughout the global south”, accompanied by a blurring of distinctions between political violence in the form of insurgency or civil war, and violence perpetrated by gangs and militias with less clear political motivations.⁵⁷ These types of armed violence can occur simultaneously, or in a quick succession that defies clear demarcations of “beginning” and “end” of each type. This blurring of classic lines in categories of conflict has direct relevance for urban areas.

52 Michael Cohen, *Urbanization and Conflict: Trends, Impacts, and Challenges for Development Assistance*, International Affairs Working Paper, The New School, New York, December 2009, p. 54.

53 M. Sipus, above note 21.

54 *Ibid.*

55 António Sampaio, *Our Fast-Growing Cities Have Become Hotbeds of Unrest. It Doesn't Have to Be That Way*, World Economic Forum Agenda, 10 November 2016, available at: www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/11/fragile-cities-habitatIII-new-urban-agenda.

56 IISS, *Armed Conflict Survey 2015*, Routledge, London, 20 May 2016, p. 7.

57 Diane Davis, “Non-State Armed Actors, New Imagined Communities, and Shifting Patterns of Sovereignty and Insecurity in the Modern World”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2009, p. 234.

There is still significant discussion and disagreement about what exactly is the “new” character of armed conflict in today’s world. But, echoing the views of strategic and military thinkers such as Kilcullen and the proponents of “hybrid wars”, there is a strong indication that one of the main changes relates to geography. The findings of Oxford University’s study *The Changing Character of War* mention that “the most striking factual change” is “the unlocking of the close relationship between war and the state”.⁵⁸ During the two centuries between 1750 and 1950, both State and non-State armed forces had their eyes locked on the nation-State in their efforts to promote nationalist ideologies, gain independence or overthrow groups at the helm of the State⁵⁹. The new reality, the authors explain, is characterized by “civil wars” driven by local or transnational identities.⁶⁰ Likewise, the non-State armed groups observed in so many current conflicts (as outlined above) have been described as “new imagined communities” challenging the power and legitimacy of the nation-State.⁶¹ This seems in line with what the Cities and Fragile States project, within the London School of Economics, concluded about the relationship between cities and conflicts: at the same time that the metropolis strengthens the financial and developmental capacities of the State, it also exacerbates antagonisms between groups, with cities becoming increasingly “primary sites of state erosion and crisis across much of the developing world”.⁶² Therefore, despite their potential to unlock economic and social development, urban areas have become vulnerable to current trends in conflict, especially due to the dissociation of violent mobilization from the State towards local, and often non-State, entities.

Recent urban conflicts seem to confirm the trend towards the widening range of non-State armed activity. In Bangui, the international peacekeeping forces have had to intervene, enforce law and mediate among warring ethnic-based militias perpetrating bursts of violence that often resemble low-intensity civil wars.⁶³ In 2004, UN forces entered the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, planning to deal with armed groups supporting or opposing former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.⁶⁴ Instead, they were caught in a twelve-hour battle with amorphous gangs in the Cité Soleil slum. Other conflicts display similar difficulties in identifying the nature of non-State armed challenges. In the Crimea crisis during 2014, the term “little green men” was widely used in the press to

58 Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers, “Introduction: The Changing Character of War”, in Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds), *The Changing Character of War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 14.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

61 D. Davis, above note 57, p. 225.

62 Jo Beall, Tom Goodfellow and Dennis Rodgers, *Policy Directions: Cities and Conflict*, Crisis States Research Centre, June 2010, p. 1, available at: www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/Policy%20Directions/Cities%20and%20Conflict.pdf.

63 Aditi Gorur and Lisa Sharland, “The Central African Republic Is Still in Crisis. Can UN Peacekeepers Help?”, *The National Interest*, 11 November 2015, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-central-african-republic-still-crisis-can-un-14309>.

64 Colum Lynch, “U.N. Peacekeeping More Assertive, Creating Risk for Civilians”, *Washington Post*, 15 August 2005, available at: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/14/AR2005081400946.html.

describe armed groups which seemed to be a combination of Russian proxies and self-defence groups that seized official buildings in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk.⁶⁵

These conflict changes, particularly the trend towards non-State armed activity in urban areas, pose severe problems for conflict prevention and post-conflict transition processes. Writing on the future of urban warfare, US General Charles Krulak took on board this ambiguity in his theory of a “three-block war”. State forces, he wrote, “may be confronted by the entire spectrum of tactical challenges” within “three contiguous city blocks”, mixing combat, peacekeeping and humanitarian relief.⁶⁶ Ambiguity is also present at the onset of missions tasked purely with keeping or building peace. The aforementioned HIPPO review, for instance, exposed a key source of contradiction in peacekeeping operations: that they are deployed increasingly to environments “where there is little or no peace to keep”.⁶⁷

But the problem is aggravated in urban areas by a State-centric architecture of peace and security that has adopted ambiguous relationships with sub-national players. The 1993 battle in Mogadishu, in which eighteen US soldiers and hundreds of Somali combatants and civilians were killed, was partially a result of a confrontational approach towards warlord Mohammed Aidid and his militia, which held considerable power. After the devastating impact of the operation, as described in the seminal book *Black Hawk Down*,⁶⁸ Aidid was eventually integrated into the post-conflict phase (and was in fact flown to a peace conference on board a US plane).⁶⁹ In summary, the track record of peacebuilding and peacekeeping shows a capacity deficit in handling the multiplicity and diversity of non-State armed groups in chaotic developing-world cities.

This lack of clarity tends to require improvised responses from international missions tasked with building or keeping peace. Occasionally, international peacekeeping missions have had to resort to tactics resembling urban warfare. The distinction between urban warfare and peacekeeping has again become blurred in today’s Mogadishu, where a fragile State and its peacekeeping supporters share control of districts with Al-Shabaab and clan-based militias – and sometimes directly clash with them⁷⁰. The tough stance on gangs in Cité Soleil, Port-au-Prince’s chaotic mega-slum, was credited with stabilizing Haiti’s capital, if only temporarily. In fact, one study has credited the

65 “Boys from the Blackstuff”, *The Economist*, 19 April 2014, available at: www.economist.com/news/briefing/21601048-government-kiev-has-no-obvious-counters-russian-inspired-occupations-industrial.

66 Charles Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War”, *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, available at: www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm.

67 *Uniting our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446, 17 June 2015 (HIPPO Report), p. 9, available at: www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/reports.shtml.

68 Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, Corgi, London, 1999.

69 *Ibid.*; Mickey Kaus, “What Black Hawk Down Leaves Out”, *Slate*, 21 January 2002, available at: www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/kausfiles_special/2002/01/what_black_hawk_down_leaves_out.html.

70 Muhyadin Ahmed Roble, above note 33.

pre-emptive military operations against gangs there as having been “vital for the defense and preservation of the mission’s mandate”.⁷¹ The fact that this posture results from improvisation, however, displays the mismatch between the challenges and the strategies being deployed in these complex fragile settings. One concept that has been used in diverse conflict locations and fragile contexts is “stabilization”. It has been used by Western military forces to describe a wide range of low-intensity peace support operations in fragile settings. A 2004 report by the US State Department said that the United States has started new stabilization and reconstruction operations every eighteen to twenty-four months since the end of the Cold War.⁷² In theory, stabilization operations seem like an ideal framework for reducing the likelihood of full-scale war: a UK strategic document describes such operations as a process that combines economic, governance and security measures in order to prevent or reduce violence, protect populations and infrastructure, promote institutions and governance, and achieve other political goals also highlighted in the UN’s peace-promotion infrastructure.⁷³ Like peacekeeping dilemmas, the stabilization agenda seems ambitious and broad. But it is able to call on resources from national defence budgets to a larger extent than UN peacekeeping, which remains dependent on resources and troops offered by member States.

First, a key advantage of the stabilization concept, in relation to “rival” concepts favoured by the UN system, is that it does not carry in its core an immediate allegiance to federal-level nation-State governments. Although missions by a foreign intervention force need to address national governments (or embryonic governments in the case of failed States), stability doctrines have more clearly addressed issues of local and urban settings. For one, stabilization doctrines issued by Western militaries often place emphasis on the impact of urbanization and urban-specific dynamics.⁷⁴

Second, there seems to be a more practical emphasis on the territorial aspect of the tasks needed for stability to be promoted. In contrast to the still lingering dichotomy of conflict and post-conflict present in UN documents, stabilization manuals and doctrines recognize from the onset the struggle for territorial control even in post-conflict situations. The UK military explicitly cites the use of force and offensive action as an “uncomfortable reality”, but it frames

71 Michael Dzedzic and Robert M. Perito, *Haiti: Confronting the Gangs of Port-au-Prince*, Special Report 208, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, September 2008, p. 14, available at: www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr208.pdf.

72 Defense Science Board, *2004 Summer Study on Transition to and from Hostilities*, US Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, Washington, DC, December 2004, p. iv, available at: www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ADA430116.pdf.

73 UK Ministry of Defence, *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Publication 3–40, Shrivenham, 2009, available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49948/jdp3_40a4.pdf.

74 For instance, a 2006 US military Joint Operating Concept dedicates a subsection to urbanization and contains several references to the specific challenges of urban environments. See US Department of State, *Military Support to Stabilization, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations Joint Operating Concept*, Version 2.0, December 2006, available at: www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts/joc_sstro.pdf.

its objectives in less political and more practical, on-the-ground (and probably more measurable) processes such as improving the security situation in a specific location in order to pave the way for other civilian initiatives.⁷⁵

Stability, therefore, is a phased process that carries potential for urban settings, where negotiated settlements to end violence have become the exception rather than the norm. Therefore, gradual and holistic measures designed to prevent and deter further escalation of conflict within specific geographical boundaries have gained traction among military and policing authorities concerned with urban insecurity in situations of formal peace.⁷⁶ Following several deployments to the slums of Rio de Janeiro to help clear the way for civilian agencies and development, the Brazilian army released a strategic document on “Guaranteeing Law and Order”, which contains some of the same principles as stability.⁷⁷ David Ucko has highlighted that stability operations and the related framework of military operations other than war (MOOTW, in a particularly complicated military acronym) “tend to be protracted civil-military affairs, occurring principally in urban environments”.⁷⁸

However, at the same time that stability has grown in popularity beyond military circles, it has also become an umbrella term including long-standing security-and-development practices such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, civil-military operations and peacekeeping. Despite the popularity of the term among many Western policy-makers, it “continues to face an identity crisis”, shifting between an end-state, a process, an intervention template and, even more broadly, a “generic vessel for all ideas and activities related to restoring security and development”, as one comprehensive study of the concept has recently highlighted.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, the established practice and doctrinal thought on stability by Western military forces have rendered an inherently military connotation to stabilization. Military practitioners have explored and defined the term more precisely than other communities, as evidenced by the 2015 HIPPO report’s reprimand of the UN Security Council for its frequent use of “stabilization” for missions both in post-conflict settings and “in at least one case during ongoing armed conflict”.⁸⁰ Robert Muggah and Oliver Jutersonke have pointed out that the concept reinforces a “security-first approach” and privileges short-term interventions.⁸¹

75 UK Ministry of Defence, above note 73, p. XIII.

76 Robert Muggah, “The United Nations Turns to Stabilization”, *International Peace Institute Global Observatory*, 5 December 2014, available at: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/12/united-nations-peacekeeping-peacebuilding-stabilization/>.

77 Brazilian Ministry of Defence, *Garantia da Lei e da Ordem*, 1st ed., MD33-M-10, 2013, available at: www.defesa.gov.br/arquivos/File/doutrinamilitar/listadepublicacoesEMD/md33_m_10_glo_1_ed2013.pdf.

78 David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 2009, p. 48.

79 Steven A. Zyck and Robert Muggah, “Preparing Stabilisation for 21st Century Security Challenges”, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2015, available at: www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.gs/.

80 HIPPO Report, above note 67, p. 44.

81 Robert Muggah and Oliver Jutersonke, “Rethinking Stabilization and Humanitarian Action in ‘Fragile Cities’”, in Benjamin Perry (ed.), *Modern Warfare: Armed Groups, Private Militaries, Humanitarian Organizations, and the Law*, UBC Press, Vancouver and Toronto, 2012.

A more fundamental problem, however, is that the stability concept shares some of the same tensions cited above related to peacekeeping and MOUT. On the one hand, it has no “magic bullet” alternative to the balance between use of force and peacebuilding amid protracted armed violence. Following the 1993 operational failure by US forces in Mogadishu, the United States adopted a selective approach to stability, choosing to apply this tool in already fairly stable environments and with a focus on reducing risks to US combat forces.⁸² On the other hand, this “identity crisis” reduced the effectiveness of the stability concept in both rural and urban settings.

The ongoing changing character of war is partially responsible for such identity crises, which to some extent also affect other mechanisms that are designed to bring peace but which instead encounter increasingly complex challenges related to non-State armed groups. The ubiquity of sub-national forms of conflict seems to be an unfortunate reality of this shift in warfare. During the twentieth century, counter-insurgency presented a handy recipe of response to (rural) non-State political violence. This is no longer the case. Instead, central and local governments struggle with the calibration of security and development in order to manage the widening range of armed activities in cities.

Managing conflict spillover in cities

As urban population growth accelerates in the global South and policy-makers and policy analysts alike continue to point to urbanization as a source of instability, it is important to be clear about the shape of armed activities affecting cities. If prevention and post-conflict mechanisms are to function in the “urban century”, they have to adapt to the trends identified above: non-State armed activity amid rapid urbanization. This means that military studies’ fears of devastating “megacity warfare”⁸³ are misplaced. The vulnerability of built-up areas to armed conflict, driven by rapid urbanization and non-State armed activity, looks more like a gradual rise of low-intensity conflict than full-scale urban warfare.

A careful look at the literature concerned with politically oriented armed conflict in cities reveals that protracted, non-State armed activity with hybrid tactics (such as links to insurgencies, terrorism or funding from transnational organized crime) has indeed been registered at several key large cities of the developing world. But such activity tends to take place *after* large-scale conflict or, at other times, is located near areas of conflict and instability rather than in the middle of them.

Very few instances have been registered in the past few decades of foreign military interventions by Western democracies in which large-scale conventional

82 D. H. Ucko, above note 78, p. 49.

83 William Matthews, “Megacity Warfare: Taking Urban Combat to a Whole New Level”, *Army Magazine*, 15 February 2015, available at: www.ansa.org/articles/megacity-warfare-taking-urban-combat-whole-new-level.

land power, which forms the bulk of the MOUT concept, has been applied in densely inhabited urban areas. The main example is that of US and allied operations in Iraq after the 2003 invasion. As Alice Hills writes in an extensive study, urban warfare was widely expected to feature in the invasion and its immediate aftermath. But instead, relatively quick episodes of street fighting took place, followed by a protracted terrorist campaign by non-State actors.⁸⁴ The main exceptions that prove the rule have been Iraqi cities conquered by Sunni insurgents (Fallujah, in Anbar province) and later by the so-called Islamic State group, both rare instances of armed groups adopting an openly confrontational urban warfare strategy against a conventional military power.

A frequent feature of contemporary urban armed conflict has been the further blurring of the distinction between enemy non-State groups and the civilian population in intra-State, or non-international, armed conflicts.⁸⁵ The main reason for this has been that usually the non-State fighters have been native to the locations in which they are fighting – it is not far-fetched to imagine that some of the warlord’s fighters opposing US forces in Mogadishu in 1993, or Hamas in Gaza, are combating some of the world’s most capable armies within walking distance from their homes, assuming they survive to dilute back into the urban sprawl that has dominated the landscape in these and many other cities.⁸⁶ This trend has been called, in the context of Chechen resistance to Russian forces in the Chechen capital Grozny, “resident insurgency”.⁸⁷ As one US radio programme narrating the history of the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu states, “there was never even supposed to be a Battle of Mogadishu” – the forces had been sent to a humanitarian mission, which later expanded to a stability operation.⁸⁸ The elite Army Rangers involved in the fatidic events, which led to the largest US casualties at that point since the Vietnam War, had been sent with a mission to arrest lieutenants linked to a local warlord – whose militiamen outmanoeuvred the well-equipped Western troops through their far superior knowledge of Mogadishu’s narrow streets and alleyways.⁸⁹

The “resident fighters” phenomenon is also seen in the urban peacekeeping battles cited above. Militiamen loyal to current Mogadishu warlords have been battling each other (and occasionally peacekeeping forces) for more than a decade in their respective turfs.⁹⁰ In Haiti, the gangs that posed “a potentially lethal threat” to the country’s fragile recovery during the 2000s were based in the local

84 A. Hills, above note 14, p. 8.

85 Andreas Wenger and Simon J. A. Mason, “The Civilianization of Armed Conflict: Trends and Implications”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 90, No. 872, 2008, pp. 841–842.

86 Olga Olikier, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2001, p. xv, available at: www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1289.html.

87 *Ibid.*

88 “What a Downed Black Hawk in Somalia Taught America”, *All Things Considered*, 5 October 2013, available at: www.npr.org/2013/10/05/229561805/what-a-downed-black-hawk-in-somalia-taught-america.

89 *Ibid.*

90 Mohamed Olad Hassan, “Mogadishu Warlords Merge Militias”, *BBC News*, 14 May 2005, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4547713.stm>.

slums.⁹¹ The gangs of Cité Soleil attacked vehicles on a nearby road leading to the airport and threatened the country's main port terminal, forcing the hand of the UN mission commander to enter the slum forcefully and under fire.⁹²

Frequently, the destabilizing effects for metropolitan areas are felt after major conflicts end and are linked to complex and gradual trends such as migration, rising ethnic tensions, institutional deterioration and the weakening of urban services. The Pakistani port city of Karachi, a key economic hub, has been affected by high levels of armed violence perpetrated by a variety of groups – some linked to political parties, others to ideologically driven insurgencies in nearby Afghanistan and others directly linked to terrorist attacks in Pakistan's other neighbour, India.⁹³

Karachi illustrates the gradual build-up of drivers of instability that can erupt. The city's long history of armed violence and transnational criminality is linked to flows of refugees and migrants from nearby war zones during the past three decades, which have helped propel the population to grow by 115% between 1998 and 2011 (an addition of 11 million people), according to the latest census data.⁹⁴ This virtually unmanageable population growth has been absorbed in large part by informal housing in sprawling slums, which in turn has contributed to the emergence of an estimated 200 criminal gangs, operating alongside, and sometimes in partnership with, political-ideological extremist groups such as the Taliban – leading one author to warn of the “Talibanisation” of Karachi.⁹⁵ As Laurent Gayer observes, the city has “turned into a battleground for rival armed groups competing for votes, land, jobs” and protection money (extortion).⁹⁶

These instances of low-intensity conflict are the most prominent faces of current urban armed conflict. Whereas current wars have featured high-intensity combat in places like Aleppo, Mosul and Fallujah, these are atypical examples of non-State groups seeking direct territorial “conquest” and administration. The real challenge is more nuanced: non-State groups versed in low-intensity conflicts ubiquitously acting in fragile cities. This context has not been fully absorbed by either the military or peacebuilding communities: the former has until recently focused on MOUT and related forms of “megacity warfare”, while the latter retains a nation-State bias. But the growing recognition of this challenge can

91 M. Dziedzic and R. M. Perito, above note 71, p. 2.

92 *Ibid.*

93 Dean Nelson, “Pakistan Details How Lashkar-e-Taiba 2008 Mumbai Attack Gunmen Were Trained”, *The Telegraph*, 12 November 2012, available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/9672494/Pakistan-details-how-Lashkar-e-Taiba-2008-Mumbai-attack-gunmen-were-trained.html.

94 Wendell Cox, “Pakistan: Where the Population Bomb is Exploding”, *Newgeography*, 7 February 2012, available at: www.newgeography.com/content/002940-pakistan-where-population-bomb-exploding.

95 Marco Mezzera, “Dante in Karachi: Circles of Crime in a Mega City”, *Open Democracy*, 10 October 2011, available at: www.opendemocracy.net/marco-mezzera/dante-in-karachi-circles-of-crime-in-mega-city?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzEmail&utm_content=201210&utm_campaign=0.

96 Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 3.

become a powerful driver of new policy perspectives, bringing a sense of strategy to disjoined urban responses.

Towards an urban strategic environment

Modern cities have become, more than in the ancient and medieval worlds, vulnerable to a wide range of conflicts. Whereas historians can pinpoint with relative clarity the predominant function (religious, economic, political) of a specific city in previous centuries and millennia, over time this definition has become much more blurred.⁹⁷ The large urban centres of today have become linked to the accommodation of diverse and conflicting interests.⁹⁸ This trend, linked to the previously mentioned rapid rise in global urban population, expands the challenge of managing the economic, demographic and social development of cities in a way that prevents conflict and helps in transitions to peace.

In sync with these trends, there has been a gradual shift in the way that the role of military intervention in cities is interpreted. At the same time, new perspectives from civil society have expanded the toolbox of policy tools for prevention and post-conflict transition. Driven by the frustrations that the “nation-State bias” has imposed on peace, security and development interventions in cities, different communities of practice have started to suggest new concepts and reformulate some assumptions, taking into consideration the physical, institutional and social dynamics of cities and their role in armed conflict.

Elsewhere, I have defined this interactive pattern between structures, actors and conflict as the “urban strategic environment”.⁹⁹ It can provide a framework for national, regional and international institutions to strike a balance between security and development while looking at cities beyond the “silos” of peacekeeping, stabilization or UN-led conflict prevention.

On the military side, the growing call for an expanded understanding of cities (especially mega-cities) is partially driven by a changed perception of what victory means in such complex environments. This is especially true in the current context of renewed reluctance to have “boots on the ground” after long and traumatic US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reflecting this sense of re-evaluation, authors writing on the current linkage between new moral imperatives and the conduct of conflict in cities have highlighted the difference between military and political victories – with the former undermining the achievement of the latter.¹⁰⁰ This concept is best encapsulated in General Rupert Smith’s influential book *The Utility of Force*, in which he lays out a military conundrum that is all too relevant for cities: “politicians and soldiers are still thinking in

97 John Reader, *Cities*, Vintage, London, 2004, p. 74.

98 *Ibid.*

99 Antônio Sampaio, “The Utility of Force in Cities: Future Challenges of US Army Urban Stabilization Efforts”, in Scott Romaniuk (ed.), *The Future of US Warfare*, Ashgate, forthcoming.

100 Michael John-Hopkins, “Regulating the Conduct of Urban Warfare: Lessons from Contemporary Asymmetric Armed Conflicts”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 92, No. 878, 2010, p. 472.

terms of the old paradigm [of war] and trying to use their conventionally configured forces to that end – while the enemy and the battle have changed”.¹⁰¹ However impressive force may be in military terms, he adds, it may fail to achieve the required political ends.¹⁰²

Bringing this revision closer to the context of cities, David Kilcullen writes that in order to get away from old paradigms of manoeuvre and rural-based counter-insurgency warfare, the military will have to get itself “mentally and physically out of the mountains”.¹⁰³ This transition, he continues, will involve a redefinition of the military purpose from conventional clear-cut defeat of an insurgent, terrorist or State foe (which he calls “single threat” understandings of conflict) towards a “theory of competitive control” that emphasizes the blurring of classic strategic threats into a broader “non-state armed group” definition.¹⁰⁴ This is a further redefinition of strategic purpose in cities, embracing considerations of governance, State authority, service provision and other public goods in order to establish a system of control that draws support from local populations.

Civilian practitioners of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and reconstruction have to come to terms with the same trends. Socio-economic drivers of conflict are an underlying foundation of the security-and-development field, according to which there can be no development without security and vice versa. But the physical and social characteristics of cities interact with developmental and peacebuilding initiatives in unique ways – just like they do with military interventions.

The most dramatic example of this challenge comes from fragile and developing regions affected by flows of economic migrants, refugees and demobilized fighters flocking to cities in search of either relative security or economic opportunities. These rapid flows, as this article has mentioned, tend to set in motion processes and tensions that, if not managed, can lead to future armed conflict. The challenge is made more urgent by the fact that 80% of refugees from the world’s most destructive civil war of this decade so far, in Syria, are fleeing to cities.¹⁰⁵

This accelerated flow of “forced urbanization” has serious implications for conflict prevention and post-conflict transition.¹⁰⁶ The “nation-State bias” becomes more worrying as sub-Saharan Africa is facing one of the world’s most accelerated urban population growth rates and has the highest proportion of urbanites living in slums (62%) in any region or sub-region, while at the same time concentrating several armed conflicts and the majority of UN peacekeeping missions.¹⁰⁷

101 Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, Penguin, London, p. 5.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

103 D. Kilcullen, above note 3, p. 23.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

105 David Miliband, “Cities Are at the Centre of the Syrian Refugee Crisis – So Why Are They Being Ignored?”, *The Guardian*, 30 October 2015, available at: www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/oct/30/cities-are-at-the-centre-of-the-syrian-refugee-crisis-so-why-are-they-being-ignored.

106 Saskia Sassen, “When the City Itself Becomes a Technology of War”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 6, 2010, p. 37.

107 World Bank and International Monetary Fund, *Global Monitoring Report 2013: Rural-Urban Dynamics and the Millennium Development Goals*, Washington, DC, 2013, available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/13330>.

Lessons from cities previously affected by armed conflict, also in the Middle East, reveal some of the specific pitfalls involved in conflict prevention and post-conflict processes in urban environments. A study on Beirut's reconstruction following the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) concluded that the concentration of development and resources in the central district contributed to diminishing State legitimacy and control in peripheral areas, leading in turn to heightened control by “para-State actors” such as the extremist group Hezbollah.¹⁰⁸ Gaza City, which has faced years of wars and blockade by Israel, has been affected by persistent economic and infrastructural issues such as unemployment, late salaries, shortage of water and electricity outages.¹⁰⁹ The physical, economic and social scars of conflict on the city have had, predictably, security consequences. The convoluted cycle of destruction and reconstruction, alongside the inability to properly plan urbanization, has been cited as a factor helping Hamas to hide among the population and use Gaza City as a “nerve centre” for its military infrastructure.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the damage to the city's economy and services has provided an opportunity for black markets to thrive, encouraging potential new sources of criminal insecurity.¹¹¹ In summary, as Saskia Sassen has argued, contemporary conflicts and the resulting “forced urbanization” and internal displacement turn human flows into sources of insecurity rather than diversity.¹¹²

The scale of the challenge for prevention and transition from conflict in contexts such as these is, therefore, huge and increasing. At the same time, however, international organizations and private groups such as the Rockefeller Foundation have promoted the concept of urban resilience as a broad framework for cities. This has been encapsulated in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, which replaced the Millennium Development Goals and introduced a specific goal (number 11) to “make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. The inclusion of “safety” and “resilience” in the same sentence is not accidental. John de Boer, from the UN University, has pointed to “the opportunity embedded in cities” to promote not only economic development but also peace and security if resilience is strengthened.¹¹³

Resilience is by no means a new concept, but it has gained significant attention, and this in turn has been translated into efforts to better conceptualize its theory and practice. The term traces its roots back to the field of ecology, and has been adapted to another system, the urban, to express its potential to

108 Kathrin Höckel, *Beyond Beirut: Why Reconstruction in Lebanon Did Not Contribute to State-Making and Stability*, Occasional Paper No. 4, London School of Economics and Political Science, July 2007, p. 1, available at: www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/op/OP4%20Hoeckel.pdf.

109 Sultan Barakat and Omar Shaban, *Back to Gaza: A New Approach to Reconstruction*, Policy Briefing, Brookings Institution, Doha, January 2015, p. 5, available at: www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/01/12-gaza-reconstruction/english-pdf.pdf.

110 Jonathan Figchel, “Hamas in Gaza: Urban Warfare Strategy”, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 11 January 2009, available at: www.ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=379.

111 S. Barakat and O. Shaban, above note 109, p. 8.

112 S. Sassen, above note 106, p. 37.

113 John de Boer, “Resilience and the Fragile City”, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2015, available at: www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.fk/.

“maintain or recover functionality” in the face of shocks and disruptions.¹¹⁴ The broad scope of resilience carries the risk of rendering it *too* broad, but it can also be interpreted as a perspective that breaks silos between the neat bureaucracies. It carries, therefore, the potential to be the civilian equivalent of Kilcullen’s “theory of competitive control” in the military/strategic domain, in pushing for multidimensional perspectives to bring security and development together in metropolises. In a context of growing diversity of armed threats and growing pressures on urban areas, a comprehensive approach to prevention and recovery from armed conflict in cities is not only relevant but urgent.

Conclusion

The diversification of armed conflict threats in cities has sparked a gradual rethink by the communities involved in the planning and practice of peacekeeping, security and development, which are beginning to focus on local, specifically urban settings as a unit of analysis and intervention. However, the concepts of conflict prevention and those looking at stability and peacekeeping after major conflicts have not addressed local instances of governance and their specific challenges. Instead, a long-standing “nation-State bias” continues to guide international organizations, developed countries, and civil society actors.

But a number of voices from academia and policy-making, worried by rapid urban population growth in cities, have started to push more actively for an urban prism to be attached to peace, security and development. This is a crucial challenge, as evidence from past and current wars shows that large-scale urban warfare invariably causes devastation and massive loss of life. These effects are even more relevant in the current context of rapid urban growth in the developing world.

The military thinking on cities has also started to be steered towards a multidimensional focus, guided by the assessment that armed conflict in built-up areas is now marked by non-State armed groups, resident to the urban sprawl and engaged in protracted forms of violence that often blur the distinction between war and peace, civilian and combatant, political and economic root causes. In such difficult contexts, the application of classic MOUT tactics for urban warfare has become morally and strategically challenging.

The speed and complexity of the challenges highlighted above reinforce the urgency of adding geographical specificity to preventive or post-conflict practices. Few of the instruments now available to international and national policy-makers to avoid escalation or relapse into armed conflict place emphasis on the urban form – or what I have called the urban strategic environment. The latter comprises the institutions, services, unstable peripheries and violent actors that have the potential to influence the likelihood and evolution of urban conflicts. I have touched briefly on some of the conflict-relevant elements of this

¹¹⁴ Arup, *City Resilience Index: Understanding and Measuring City Resilience*, Rockefeller Foundation, 2016, p. 5.

environment; a key challenge ahead is to analyze the relationship between them and the degree to which they influence drivers of conflict.

There is ample evidence that key elements specific to the urban environment carry implications to both civilian and military authorities in the lead-up to, and the aftermath of, armed conflict. A focus on strategic local actors and social structures capable of affecting the drivers of conflict can serve as a unifying set of objectives for cooperation and multidimensional action by international, national and municipal agents.

