

WHAT KIND OF CONFLICT?

Cities, war and the failure of urban public security

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In many parts of the world, the conceptual dividing line between cities in conflict and cities at war is surprisingly thin, owing to the failures of public security and the extent of everyday violence that characterize both settings. In both cases, the state is usually ineffective, illegitimate, unaccountable, or some combination thereof, and is unable or unwilling to provide for the security of rapidly growing cities and their populations.

The violence caused by groups waging open combat in, and over, cities is fairly straightforward. Open warfare between a regime and its opponents can lead to absolute chaos and destruction, especially where religious, ethnic or other differences play out at an urban level, thus thwarting the prospects for political stability, economic development and any semblance of human security for citizens caught in the crossfire of larger political battles.

In addition to the obvious dangers of open warfare to civilians, evidence drawn from war-torn cities as disparate as Mogadishu, Baghdad and Kandahar all suggest that private militias are important actors in this dynamic. This is primarily because they

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serve as armed challengers to the regime in power while also offering themselves as legitimate alternatives for guaranteeing public security. In these conditions of violent struggle over the means of coercion, violence and terror are more likely to accelerate than decelerate, particularly as public and private security forces compete for the hearts and minds of citizens and for control of the security environment.

Conflict and insecurity do not only occur when a city is embroiled in massive armed conflict. Violence, a delegitimized public security apparatus, and citizens taking matters into their own hands are increasingly features of many cities that would not

normally be characterized as "in conflict". From Rio de Janeiro to Mexico City to Johannesburg, there is a rise in the number of privately organized security forces who seek to counter an ineffective local policing apparatus, a state of affairs that has similarly led to ongoing conflict and diminishes the quality of life and human security of large portions of the urban population.

In these conflict cities, despite the fact that local or national levels of government may be much more legitimate and removed from localized, urban violence, few citizens trust the local policing apparatus. In 2005, for example, Amnesty International reported that police killed approximately 2,000 persons a year in the Brazilian states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.¹ With public police delegitimized, gangs and vigilante groups often become so powerful that they are able to successfully battle police for control over urban space, as happens frequently in Rio's favelas and in the Mexico City barrio of Tepito. A conflict between federal police and local residents in Tepito in late August 2005 resulted in a warning from a Mexico City police chief that no group will ever again "try to stop police authorities