WAR BY ANOTHER NAME? THE 'URBAN TURN' IN 21ST CENTURY VIOLENCE

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In the early twenty-first century, as inter-state war appeared to decline in frequency, new forms and discourses of 'war' took prominence, epitomised by the 'War on Terror' and the 'War on Drugs.' For some critics, the use of the term 'war' in these contexts was deeply problematic. Ensuing debate underlined that precisely what constitutes war, and what divides it from peace and other situations of violence, would now be questioned in unprecedented and fundamental ways.

A prominent development that forced critical reflection on definitions of war and peace was the rise in extreme violence perpetrated by non-state criminal groups involved in narcotics trafficking in countries such as Mexico. Here, as in other parts of Latin America, the violence of street gangs, militia and heavily-armed cartels mirrored atrocities of civil wars for its brutal cruelty. Responses by police, militaries and metropolitan authorities, often poorly equipped to deal with violence on such a scale or in an informal urban setting, has likewise often

been of equal, if not greater, extremes. This vicious cycle has alienated local communities from their police forces and compounded the problem of criminal control. In the favelas of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro, for example, many residents are more afraid of being killed by stray gunfire from police than from the trafficking cartels.

Whilst studies of conflict have long recognised the criminal natureof many civil war actors, it is only very recently that scholars have begun to systematically recognise the warlike nature of criminal groups and urban violence. Many have now gone so far as to proclaim the arrival of a 'new' kind of war or 'criminal insurgency' in which state-structures and authority are being challenged through bloody 'coups d'street'. Stathis Kalyvas, a leading authority on civil war violence, recently observed that in many emerging economies, large-scale organised crime has essentially replaced insurgency as the main challenge to the state. Certainly, in cities where the gap between criminal violence and conflict has dramatically narrowed, the distinction between war and peace is virtually imperceptible. In Central America, several countries have

A federal military operation in the Rocinha favela, in southern Rio de Janeiro. In February 2018, Brazilian president Michel Temer signed a degree putting the Forças Armadas in charge of public safety and security in Rio de Janiero, following a rise in street crime and urban violence .

(source: Fernando Frazão/Agência Brasil)

experienced more fatalities through criminal violence than were sustained during past civil wars. Mexico consistently surpasses fatality thresholds used to define civil wars, even being ranked by the International Institute for Security Studies in 2017 as second only to Syria in a list of the world's deadliest conflict zones.

So, are these 'criminal insurgencies' effectively wars in all but name? For all the similarities, it is important to avoid simplistic conflations of criminal violence and civil war, and to recognise key differences in aims of actors and the contexts in which they take place. Academic debates over what may qualify as war, whilst important in many respects (for example for legal and humanitarian implications), risk distracting attention from more pressing concerns: namely how best to respond to violence, whatever we may call it.

The growing centrality of urban violence to global conflict, security and development is such that this article calls for an 'urban turn' in the study of violence. This turn reflects the reality of rapid urbanisation over that last five decades, which continues to take place at unprecedented levels. Fifty-four percent of the global population already lives in cities, and the UN has estimated that by 2050, that figure will grow to 66%. Ninety percent of that growth is predicted to occur in Africa and Asia, with almost 70% of the population of the whole Global South being resident in cities by 2050.

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Whilst there are many positive aspects to urbanisation, this global trend is predicted to present major challenges to developing cities, where the necessary resources and infrastructure to cope with substantial population growth is lacking. Robert Muggah refers to these as 'fragile cities', adapting the terminology of 'fragile states' used in conflict literature. Muggah, as with many other analysts, warns of the dangers of urban 'collapse' and increased violence in such fragile cities. In Africa, rapid urbanisation is raising fears that cities are already stretched beyond their capacity and could experience increased violence. In Lagos, Nigeria, for example, the population grew from 7.2 million to 17.9 million between 2000-2015, and it is expected to double again by 2050.

Whilst urbanisation is most rapid in developing regions, it would be misleading to conclude that associated challenges do not apply to other regions. Indeed, major cities in all regions display the same symptoms of rapid urban growth; visible socio-economic inequalities and a crisis over how to address urban violence. In short, the same challenges are being faced by cities across the globe, though they possess widely varying levels of resources, experience and capacity with which to respond.

The ever-increasing level of global connectivity between states and cities is another reason to be careful not to exclude wealthier regions from any discussion of urban violence. Urban violence and population changes in one region directly impact upon another, as major migrant and refugee flows in the early twenty-first century have tragically shown in the Mediterranean region. Where violence takes root, it does not do so in isolation within a city or a region. More than ever, cities are shaped by influences from across the globe. Growing use of social media by youth, including street gangs, exchange of what might be termed 'urban' popular culture and music, and the physical migration of young people and criminal actors globally, means no urban area can be well-understood in isolation from others. That the global trade and use of narcotics underpin so much of the violence that pervades cities in both hemispheres, and that the supply from developing countries is tied to demand in those more developed, emphatically underlines this point.

The centrality of cities to the future of human security and development demands a refocussing of attention by scholars of conflict and peacebuilding. As global urbanisation continues at unprecedented pace, the UN warns that cities are at risk of ever-widening social, economic and spatial inequalities. Through growing inequalities and exclusion, they may become characterised by gated communities and slums, high youth unemployment, and may ultimate prove 'unsustainable'. Not least among the disastrous results of such a nightmarish vision, already realised in many neighbourhoods around the globe, would be a rise in violence amounting to 'urban warfare'.

The above underscores why urban violence is a challenge that will dominate (in)security in the twenty-first century, and why academic researchers, policy-makers and those active in responding to violence on the ground must work together to find solutions. Despite the alarm over 'fragile cities', the precise relationship between urbanisation, youth marginalisation and violence requires far greater attention, and perhaps most importantly, a thorough analysis is urgently required of what kinds of practical responses – beyond heavy security deployments – may provide effective long-term solutions to this challenge.

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