

URBAN CONFLICTS FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL



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Briefing Paper 10

Urban Conflicts from Local to Global: Why policy and practice must respond at all levels

Cities, and especially capital cities, are key sites for the assertion and erosion of state sovereignty. Much of Conflict in Cities (CinC) research has sought to establish whether ethno-national conflicts – which in the first instance are usually at state level – undermine or destroy cities, or whether cities hold out the promise of ameliorating or diffusing these conflicts. There are fundamental differences between the city and the state, and a related question concerns the extent to which efforts at resolving conflict should involve explicitly urban strategies as well as policies aimed at state-building and reform.

CinC makes links between the rather disparate cities of Belfast and Jerusalem, as well as other divided cities in Europe and the Middle East. Contested state boundaries and the conflicts connected to them, sometimes affecting even the very existence of states, is common to many of these cities. Hence it is important to understand conflicts, and frame policy responses, in terms of processes that span urban, regional, national and international levels. This is a complex undertaking; in divided cities, these processes are neither incremental nor obviously informed by adjacency. Rather, the city often connects to these other levels in unexpected ways.

Conflicts shape cities, and are shaped by them

Ethno-national conflicts are increasingly urban in nature: they both shape cities, and are shaped by them. As such, cities are key sites at the sharp end of conflict, to the extent that if the disputes cannot be resolved or reduced in the city they are likely to linger or deteriorate. Whilst national authorities will try to keep conflict at the margins of the state, it nonetheless migrates into cities where it often becomes centred around key sites. ‘Frontier urbanism’ emerges when civilian rather than military groups confront each other, with urban settings and structures designed to support such hostile encounters. Thus, the city centre becomes implicated, and urban order dislodged or inverted.

Cities are key centres of communication, information, innovation and economic development; increasingly, the links between cities parallel those between states in the global order. As such, they are home to highly symbolic public spaces where political conflicts are performed and communicated to international audiences. The siting and architectural form of Israeli settlements in Jerusalem, for example, has served to make more immediate the relationships of domination, subordination, exclusion and

Key findings for policy

- **Policy makers must understand ethno-national conflicts and their management or resolution in terms of processes that span urban, regional, national and international levels. Trying to find or implement a solution at only one level may be severely limiting.**
- **Cities are not smaller, more compact states. Strategies aimed at quelling state conflicts are not always helpful when applied to cities where diversity, spatial practices, and security measures can be quite different.**
- **The informal and sometimes invisible fabric of practices that make everyday urban life possible must be better recognised as a resource for conflict management and resolution.**

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inclusion experienced by their populations. These planning decisions are made at state rather than municipal level. Paradoxically, perhaps, features distinctive to cities can either intensify or moderate conflict depending on circumstances largely determined by factors at national and international levels: for example, high urban densities and people living in close proximity increase opportunities for both conflict *and* cooperation.

Ethnic identity: where region meets city

We tend to think of cities as both embedded in, and subordinate to, national states. Closer examination can render problematic such categorisations, however, as ethnic identities often have regional connections that are as strong, or stronger, than their links to the state. Cities may or may not support regional characteristics. For example, in Belgium, Dutch-speaking Flanders is home to the Brussels Capital Region that is dominated by French speakers, and international due to the location there of key



A United Nations watchtower within Nicosia's 'Dead Zone'

EU institutions. In the Middle East, where the nation state came late, confessional identities were often imposed by foreign powers; this has made the situation complicated. There is a symbiotic relationship between the Shia of southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut that does not exist with the rest of the city. In many ways the fractured nature of Beirut reflects that of all of Lebanon. In addition, sub-state regional issues are important in most divided cities as conflicts often involve the drawing or redrawing of state borders and rearranging of territory, rather than the continued acceptance of the state as a given entity.

Whilst a region can be part of a state, it may also extend beyond state borders and, in some cases, cover areas in a variety of nation states. States that were formed through international decree, often following World War One, either brought together or divided regional groups with different religions, cultures and languages. This was represented in the resulting structures and demographics of cities, and had impacts on their territorialisation. We witness the legacy of this dynamic in many of the cities examined in CinC research.

State and city: an uncertain relationship

City and state are fundamentally different entities. Some differences are practical: for example, cities do not normally control armies or taxation. Others relate to the nature of conflict: the state is a relatively abstract concept that is based on early modern ideas of national unity and even purity, whereas cities are much older formations that specifically developed in locations where diverse populations came together. Public space and the notion of a centre or centres is usually much more developed and significant in cities, and this can have considerable impact on aspects of conflict.

Historically, cities have been critical to the formation of state and nation although, paradoxically, once those objectives are established cities have come to be dominated by states in the political sphere. Accordingly, in modern countries, most cities are securely embedded in national states, with the latter generally accepted as politically paramount, the main focus and source of political loyalties and power, and the protector of national sovereignty. At times, the state will even determine the main thrust of urban policy. However, in some cases, ethno-nationally divided cities may be an exception to this

Historically, many ethno-nationally divided cities originated at the insecure edges of empires, where imperial powers confronted national independence movements that were mostly based in cities. Similarly, modern divided cities are crucially influenced by today's imperial powers such as Russia, the EU and the USA, for example in the Middle East and the Balkans.

rule. In fragile states, that are contested rather than stable, the city is not securely embedded and relations between state and city cannot be taken for granted. The city may become the main focus of conflict, yet sometimes the city, or parts of the city, may be more resilient than the state. Whilst, in many cases, divided cities are shaped by processes originating at national scale, these reflect the partial successes and partial failures of state- and nation-building projects that leave basic conflicts unresolved. This is internalised both at the scale of the city as a whole, and at neighbourhood or community level in physical and social structures. Conversely, the city and its different neighbourhoods actively shape the ethno-national conflict through the participation of citizens as well as urban processes such as suburbanisation, gentrification, deindustrialisation and property development, or demographic changes due to differential birth rates and migration.

Beyond the state: conflicted cities and international actors

Whilst municipal decisions in divided cities continue to be dictated by national concerns, local authorities and community groups have succeeded in opening up possibilities for meaningful change by circumventing national bodies and instead enlisting international funding and support. In Nicosia, a bicomunal approach to

regeneration that dispensed with the formal negotiating structures typical of national politics, and drew on funding from UNDP and USAID, has seen encouraging results. The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP), established largely on the initiative of the mayors of the two sides of the city, has created many projects in the historic walled city centre. In Jerusalem, Palestinians draw on renovation and restoration as they struggle to preserve their own neighbourhoods. This is demonstrated in the work of one international NGO which, amongst other activities, restores residential buildings and courtyards in the Old City as a means of both reinforcing Palestinian heritage and giving Palestinians an incentive to remain in their homes. Such support is unavailable to them at a national level.

In Beirut, in the aftermath of Israel's bombardment of the Shia neighborhood of al-Dahiyya in July 2006, Hezbollah used money from its foreign allies to fund the speedy reconstruction of many of the residential neighbourhoods destroyed. When a state is failing or non-existent, international bodies or foreign interests will step in; in the case of northern Cyprus, which is unrecognised, this role has been assumed by Turkey. Such solutions are not always favoured by state governments, but these examples show how, at a local level, voids in care and responsibility become filled.

At the same time, the interplay between international actors and contested cities can be contorted and confusing. In the Middle East, the sheer volume of international involvement and agendas sometimes makes the task of improving the situation more difficult, whereas less of such interference in Belfast leaves more room for local communities to resolve disputes. The city can also be affected by international corporate competition and decisions on the location of outlets or corporate headquarters; such decisions can be attended by concerns around alienating key markets or the threat of economic boycott, as in the cases of Jerusalem and northern Cyprus.

Powerful international religious groups can further marginalise the state in contested cities. In Jerusalem, religious sites have become a focus for international organisations and groups. For example, Israeli settler organisations are funded by diaspora Jews in their attempts to increasingly Judaise parts of the Palestinian city through work on projects such as the Generations

Center and the City of David. Fundamentalist religious groups tend not to respect the authority of the secular state. Indeed, some religious Muslims do not want to see any state active in Jerusalem – a sentiment consistent with the views of some anti-nationalist, ultra-Orthodox Jewish

groups. Perhaps the most extreme example of the symbiotic relationship between cities and global structures or organisations is the globalisation of terrorist cells and funding of dissident groups which, as with regeneration, can successfully bypass state structures.

Further reading

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'Conflict in Cities and the Contested State' explores how divided cities in Europe and the Middle East have been shaped by ethnic, religious and national conflicts, with particular reference to architecture and the urban as a setting for everyday activities and events. It is concerned with how cities can absorb, resist and potentially play a role in transforming such conflict. The main research sites are Belfast and Jerusalem, with supplementary enquiry into other divided cities including Berlin, Beirut, Brussels, Kirkuk, Mostar, Nicosia, Tripoli (Lebanon) and Vukovar. This multi-disciplinary project is led by three UK universities - Cambridge, Exeter and Queen's Belfast, with an international network of partners. It is funded by the Large Grant Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (RES-060-25-0015). © Conflict in Cities, November 2012.

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