

KEY  
FINDINGS

## Briefing Paper 1

## Key Findings:

## Why research cities that experience ethno-national conflict?

Increasingly, if one wants to understand ethno-national and religious conflicts, a focus on the urban condition is indispensable. Cities are critical sites for the assertion or erosion of state sovereignty, yet they are quite different to the nations that house them. Together, cities and states co-determine urban life, but emphasis and balance between the two shifts in many ways. Conflict in Cities (CinC) has identified a spectrum of geo-political contexts in Europe and the Middle East that have direct implications for the study of urban conflicts. Research in a number of contested cities has made it possible to learn from certain common themes, but also to compare key differences in the conflicts and urban situations.

Ethno-national conflicts in cities tend not to have clear beginnings and ends, and therefore living with conflict over long periods becomes a fact of life for many people. It is important to understand not just the conflicts but also the cities themselves; a political solution without a long-term urban vision will not succeed. CinC research reveals a great deal with regard to how conflicts shape cities and, in turn, are shaped by them.

## What is the connection between divided cities and states?

Cities are important as symbolic expressions of the material and ideological status of states, and so are critical stakes for ethno-national and religious conflict. The strategic importance of the geo-political frameworks in which cities are embedded serves to shape the intensity and scale of the urban ethno-national conflict and any attempts to resolve it.

Ultimately, responses to conflict must be framed in terms of the processes which span urban, national and international levels. If there is any place in a state where diversity can be absorbed effectively it is the city, making it

prime territory for seeking ways of understanding conflict; urban institutions must be exploited positively to this end. The density and structure of cities can create an arena for contest that is immediate and concrete; it may be dramatic at times, or else extremely repetitive as it reflects everyday life. Urban order – based upon centre and periphery, public and private, areas of mixed uses, activities and people – may be ruptured by conflict. At the same time, well-established urban structures and procedures help to reinforce the city against the worst abuses of conflict, or may aid in its rejuvenation. A balanced approach between local, municipal, regional, state and international levels is crucial.

## What makes a divided city?

Ongoing conflict, with episodes of violence that are often but not always orchestrated, characterises a number of cities with ethno-national divides. This affects people's everyday lives in ways that include heavy, excessive or biased security measures and physical conflict infrastructures that cause problematic spatial divisions. Too often a range of fears, distrust and hatred limits people's ability to live in a way that is compatible with others unlike themselves. These factors can make the difference between populations mixing or not.

Although we often use the term 'divided cities', the urban conditions are usually more complex than simple bilateral rifts. Populations themselves may be fractured into small groups and factions, whilst histories and local contexts can greatly affect conflicts and produce different manifestations of contestation. This is regularly seen in the physical divisions that vary with each urban situation. In some cases, cities may become fragmented into ethnic, religious or linguistic enclaves, bastions, domains, gated communities and zones. Nicosia is the classic 'half-half'

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divided city, but when Germany was also split in two, West Berlin was effectively isolated as an island; Jerusalem is increasingly fragmented with its juddering Separation Barrier and attempts to include the Israeli settlements and exclude the Palestinians; and Belfast is dotted with walls – referred to as ‘peacelines’ – that separate populations, mostly in its working class neighbourhoods. The situation in Kirkuk is fluid, with ethnic divisions increasingly defined by ‘mother language schools’ that separate its populations and may not correspond with the city’s traditional quarters. And in Brussels, where the ethno-linguistic differences are sometimes declared ‘unmappable’, a complex system of legal rights and obligations exists between the urban region and its suburbs in Flanders.

### Why do boundaries become more extreme when cities are divided?

Cities, by nature, are located where diverse peoples come together. It is relatively easy to divide a city, and in cases of severe violence and loss of life this may seem to be the best solution. However, temporary solutions – employing, for example, walls and buffer zones – often become permanent, and it is extremely difficult to reunite cities once they have been divided. This is partly because once inner city frontiers are introduced, the fundamental urban order of how people mix and how cities are structured is disrupted. Ultimately, management of conflict which involves the separation of populations can prevent or undermine resolution. The very experience of urban life may be ruptured, and in the long term divided cities do not flourish. CinC emphasises the value of policies and practices that discourage imposed separations,

exclusions and divisions which prejudice the status of one group of people over another based upon their ethnicity or religion.

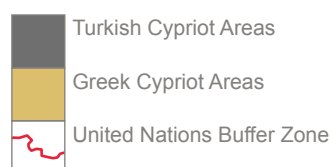
### How do conflict politics interact with the urban everyday?

CinC research shows that people tend to interact more than they think. Sharing space may simply mean that people from either side of ethno-national or religious divides get to see each other, observe their customs, and hear their languages as they go about their lives. Slight as such contact may seem, it begins to open cracks in preconceived perceptions, whilst its absence can mean a reduced potential for improving relations in the future. Moreover, experience and memory of the spaces themselves create some form of common ground, even if little or no direct social interaction takes place.

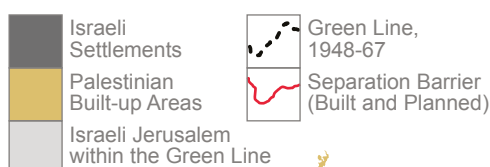
Mixing in contested cities can depend on people having mundane reasons to be together. Ease of access to necessary services and amenities is a key consideration for a functional city, and this can be frustrated when otherwise ‘normal’ features of urban life such as educational institutions and curricula, regeneration projects, religious institutions, and the provision of social services become segregated or hard to reach.

Urban planning regimes can be crucial in this regard, and maintaining mobility is one of the key factors in overcoming fragmentation. Local participation in planning decisions can help to give people a stake in the rejuvenation of their cities and a role in addressing their conflicts. Biased political systems may manipulate schools and educational systems, including the location of

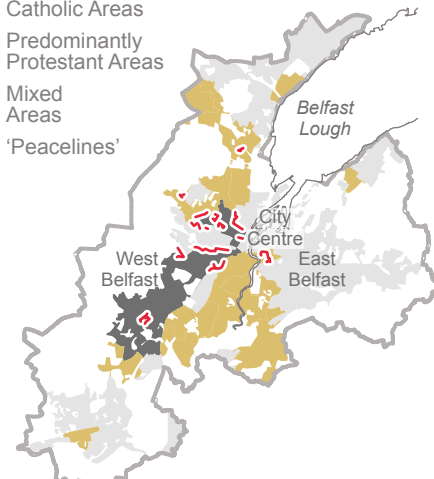
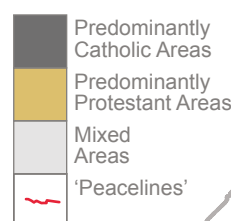
**Nicosia** 0 1km 5km



**Jerusalem** 0 1km 5km



**Belfast** 0 1km 5km



schools, resource provision, and curricula. It is important that international policy makers give careful consideration to the partnerships they form, funding criteria, and the destination of support for educational provision.

Wider conflicts can also affect practices in residential areas. 'Frontier urbanism' emerges when civilian groups are made to confront each other, and urban settings and structures are deliberately used to support these hostile encounters.

### What roles do external actors play in divided cities?

International efforts in combination with local involvement may be able to channel funds and subvert politically biased and short-sighted plans. NGOs in conflicted urban centres, especially occupied cities, may take on particular importance. In Nicosia, the cooperation of local authorities or groups with international organisations and funders – with the conscious avoidance of partisan state authorities – has enabled an approach to regeneration that is much more sensitive to local needs.

International religious groups can also be powerful actors in divided cities. In Jerusalem, the Islamic Movement has sought to restore al-Aqsa Mosque as a teaching and communal locus, and to revive the Old City, via religion and commerce, as a Palestinian political hub. Diaspora groups can also play a part in the politics and economy of divided cities, through funding and investment, tourism, driving up property prices, political lobbying, and supporting overly-romanticised cultural commemorations and heritage sites. Funded by American Jews, ideologically-motivated Israeli settlers in Jerusalem are involved in the development of religiously-inspired tourist

sites such as the City of David, which serve to establish modern mythologies connected to these newly 'created' / 'discovered' religious sites.

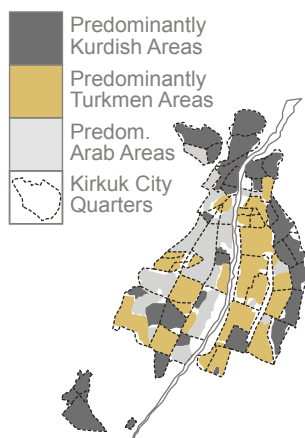
Weak states may become clients of stronger neighbour states. Often the battles are played out by confrontational groups in territorialised streets, but at another level the contest takes place in the redevelopment of the city. Many states support contending groups in Lebanon's Beirut and Tripoli, and the urban landscape becomes more highly fragmented when a weak state authority coexists with armed urban fiefdoms and unstable urban politics.

### How can cities play a role in reducing conflict?

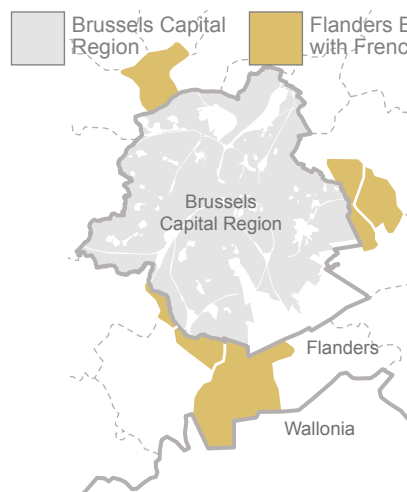
The prognosis for cities that experience extreme levels of ethno-national conflict is mixed. Often, the conditions that make them vulnerable also help to strengthen them. Cities are targeted by both internal and external forces, and the density of their populations and complexity of their systems make it very easy to injure them; we see this happen on a regular basis. Yet, it is precisely these qualities that produce a diverse and rich urban experience which fosters ways of dealing with challenges. These two extreme conditions – fragility and robustness – are integral to the urban condition and figure as significant factors of conflict resolution.

The term 'post-conflict' can be vague and sometimes misleading, promising a 'quick fix', a clear end to conflict, and a swiftly transformed city. In most cases, the damage to cities over many years of urban conflict – physical, social, economic and political – is substantial. Even a negotiated solution, satisfactory to all, would not immediately repair the breakdown of coherence suffered

**Kirkuk** 0 1km 5km



**Brussels** 0 1km 5km



**Berlin** 0 2km 10km



by the city to allow the new peace to become a reality. Rather than focusing solely on either the management or resolution of conflict, we might consider which factors can lead to, if not the 'good city', then at least a viable city. The longevity of urban ethno-national conflicts is a reality. The implications of this are both pessimistic and optimistic: the former because there are rarely easy solutions supplied by a peace treaty or negotiated solution, and the latter because periods of violence are usually sporadic and need to be recognised as such. Any agreements

made should not necessarily be voided by occasional outbreaks of physical hostility.

Ongoing and extremely heavy violence manifested on the streets is usually organised by higher powers. Still, everyday urban practices are remarkably resilient. While resolution remains an ultimate goal, it is important to see it within the long term, with an emphasis upon policies and practices that take into account the requirements of not just a functional city, but one where the experience of urban life can be enjoyed.

### 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; updated by © Centre for Urban Conflicts Research, 2019; [www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk](http://www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk). Grateful acknowledgement is made to ARUP London for their support. This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from Conflict in Cities. In no case may this material be altered, sold or rented.

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