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CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE

DESTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Homs

Briefing Paper 11
Destruction and reconstruction:
How urban recovery has become an integral part of conflict and war

Destruction in cities and of cities due to human conflict is at its worst level since World War II. Cities have become primary battlegrounds and widespread devastation characterises places as diverse as Aleppo, Raqqa, Misurata, Gaza, Mosul, Donetsk, Marawi and before them, Timbuktu, Sarajevo, and Beirut. Conflict in Cities and the Centre for Urban Conflicts Research (UCR) have identified key factors that impede or support responsible reconstruction in cities that experience heavy or prolonged conflict.

Through the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first conflicts have become more indeterminate in duration and have tended to involve civilian populations and paramilitaries more than traditional armies. At the same time cities, which are becoming increasingly populous and often exceedingly diverse in their ethnic, racial and religious identities, are increasingly the principal arenas for fighting wars and for lengthy conflicts.

Although military and strategic targets may be attacked, hostilities are often played out as extensive and indiscriminate destruction across large urban areas – residential, cultural, commercial, civic. Urban infrastructures are regularly and intentionally shattered. In some cities block after block is levelled and with this not only the physical fabric but rich, diverse and long-present urban cultures are wiped out.

Long term ramifications of urban wreckage

In many cases reconstruction is complicated and large urban areas remain in ruins for years. In Mosul (Iraq) much of the west side of the river is uninhabitable although the east side sees relatively normal life. The discrepancy results in a truncated and unbalanced city. Although three of the city's five bridges were reconstructed many basic infrastructures remain non-functional. Debris removal and, ideally, recycling, is daunting; the Arab Forum for Environment and Development estimates eleven million tonnes of debris in Mosul, some booby-trapped or mixed with unexploded ordinance. However, they also suggest that recycling will save 30% of the cost of complete removal.

Other problems are more elusive, making straightforward solutions less feasible or even superficial. Ethno-national and religious divisions tend to be exacerbated by violent conflict. Previously

Key findings for policy

- **Reconstruction can heal but it may also generate new waves of hostility and division.**

- **Timing is a critical aspect of the spatial practices of reconstruction; so-called temporary solutions need to be assessed for the long term, which they may become.**

- **A wide range of parties participate in reconstruction of ruined cities, but local inhabitants must be regarded as the primary stakeholder.**

- **Reconstruction can be effective as a collaboration between different parties with varying abilities and means – local, state, regional and international.**

- **Successful reconstruction precedents need to be publicised and compared in order to share methods and practice.**

unacknowledged social fissures and instabilities across cities become apparent after the major fighting has ceased. New allegiances and groupings may create different urban formations and for better or worse recovery does not necessarily mean returning to old patterns.

Security apparatus and hostile intrusions may, in the longer term, have similar effects on the city. Ordinary civilians struggle with new conflict infrastructures including fences, walls, checkpoints, enclaves and segregated road systems as well as no-man's lands, buffer zones, besieged neighbourhoods and non-functional areas. In Baghdad residents chose to detour many kilometres around the city rather than drive through a dangerous centre or be detained by numerous checkpoints.

Such interventions in urban space may be intended as temporary but become long term or permanent so that everyday life is dictated by imposed barriers. At the same time, constantly shifting frontlines due to changing power dynamics are potentially dangerous. A resident of Homs reports how debilitating it is to walk from her home to work when she must pass through an area of heavy devastation. Uncertainty dictates everyday life. Resuming urban continuity – in mobility, social connections, economic productivity, cultural activity – is slow and ineffectual and the possibilities for interaction across the city are severely reduced.

The targeting of urban culture and everyday life

In urban warfare, destruction and damage may be collateral but an increasing number of cases indicate the intentional targeting of specific sites and sectors in order to destroy a particular urban identity. Often referred to as urbicide, or the killing of cities, this practice of wilful destruction has been used both as warfare against certain cultures and as the obliteration of urban experience and memory.

In recent decades, the ruin of the historic cities of Nimrud in Iraq, Palmyra and Aleppo in Syria, the destruction of the Stari Most, Bosnian Mostar's historic bridge, Mosul's al-Nouri Mosque, and parts of the Old City of Sana'a in Yemen, have all caused national and international outrage. Not only our ability to protect world heritage sites, but our understanding of why they should be protected is constantly challenged.

In cities that experience prolonged and severe conflict, ordinary places of civilian life are intentionally attacked. Reports from the UN and World Bank relate very extensive damage to residential neighbourhoods in Syria and Iraq: In Homs, over 50% of the neighbourhoods are heavily destroyed, and in Mosul, most destroyed sites are housing, mainly in the Old City. Sometimes referred to as domicide, this wilful destruction of homes will have demographic ramifications far into the future rebuilding of these cities.

Urban institutions like markets, sports arenas and bus stations, as well as commercial structures and public spaces are primary targets. In Baghdad, Mutanabbi Street was bombed not just because of the crowds who gathered there to buy books in its many shops and stalls, but because it was a place where people mixed, drawing both Sunni and Shia populations.

During the Yugoslav civil war, Sarajevo's National Library, a symbol of the city's mixed ethnicities, was torched; the Markale or main market was attacked twice; and even the collection point for fresh water – another meeting place during the war – was shelled. In Aleppo and other Syrian cities, hospitals were repeatedly and deliberately bombed, to the extent that the medical profession called it the 'weaponisation of health care'.

Such destruction forms consistent patterns across a variety of cities. Ordinary civilian structures are destroyed in order to eliminate what is perceived to be alien populations. The large-scale mowing down of residential buildings not only forces displacement but also removes the residents from any local role in the rebuilding of their neighbourhoods. The destruction of public buildings, streets and squares eliminates places in the city where people can meet, discuss and participate in plans for recovery, or even, simply, experience the diversity of their city.

Obscuring urbicide

The key characteristics of urbicide – intentional physical destruction, the targeting of a particular urban culture, and the use of present destruction to achieve future objectives – may be obscured by other claims. Although not to diminish the damage that terrorism can do, fighting terror has sometimes been used to justify the destruction of cities.

In the Philippines the historic city of Marawi, with its large Islamic majority, was obliterated in a 2017 war to remove a local terrorist cell thought to be sympathetic to ISIS. The local population was evacuated and two years later, the city remains in ruins and deserted. It is unclear whether the terrorist cell has been routed or has simply gone underground. The local people are minimally, if at all, consulted about the plans to rebuild.

In other cases, so-called 'illegal' or 'informal' areas are

> **"What is sad about Homs, is the disconnection between its different parts. On my way from home to work, I have to go through ruined streets and areas where there are no longer people. Destruction destroys me."** *A young resident of Homs, Syria*

targeted in war in order to displace communities of a particular race, ethnicity, sect or political allegiance. Once urban areas are severely damaged, complete demolition and rebuilding appear the most efficient and least costly alternative. Such a clean slate scenario can lead to transformation not just of the architecture but of the population. Again, a loss of urban culture results.

Across a number of Middle Eastern cities, patterns of attack and war destruction can be correlated with the disappearance of specific demographic areas. In these sectors, which are often those of the urban poor, residents flee destruction and have little means to return, claim their property and reconstruct it. This leaves the area open to redevelopment that will not normally offer sustenance to the original population.

Security stipulations may be used to conceal patterns of destruction and the absence of reconstruction. In Gaza, an economic blockade is claimed to be necessary for the prevention of terrorist infiltration; at the same time, it stops the import of concrete and all but the most rudimentary materials, making recovery after years of bombardment impossible.
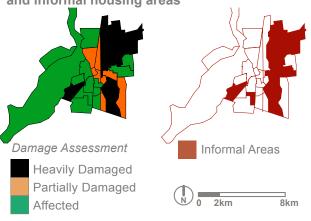
When to reconstruct?

The disadvantages of slow rehabilitation are obvious. Ownership is one of the biggest problems, especially when large numbers of people have been displaced and remain physically removed from their property. In some cases, refugees in desperate need of cash sell property sight unseen and under dubious legal processes. In Mostar, where apartments tend to be individually owned, it has been impossible in some cases to trace owners or to even know if they survived the war. Years after the fighting, destroyed and crumbling homes stand out from those that have been renovated, blighting the entire town. On the other hand, reconstruction may also be too fast. With increasing frequency state authorities entice

developers, indicating that they will ignore ownership and overlook embedded antipathies. Long term conflicts with periods of violence and relative peacefulness force us to question the relevance of the notion of 'post-conflict'. Progress from destruction in war to reconstruction in post-conflict may never materialise in the expected way. Reversing the desired process, Aleppo was thoroughly restored to be a Capital of Islamic Culture in 2006 and less than a decade later is in ruins due to war.
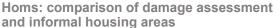
Hungry for lucrative new opportunities, foreign investors may take advantage of war-torn cities and weak local leadership unable to resist geopolitical interventions in the form of major development. Planning and even construction may begin well before the fighting stops and also be subject to on-again/off-again conflicts. Enormous economic interests, both private and state, often regard war destruction as an opportunity for new development; thus, in a deadly formula, increased destruction can mean amplified economic opportunity.

Balancing the urgent need to rebuild with fair and effective long-term planning must be done in the most inclusive and transparent way as possible. The desire to attract international funds may result in hasty and poorly realised reconstruction. Rapid large-scale planning and building managed from a distance often does not reflect fissures that pervade war-torn societies. The practice may ultimately cause further outbreaks of conflict and bad decisions can provoke a new wave of destruction.

Reconstruction for whom and by whom?

The enormous power of global redevelopment interests should not be underestimated. Reconstruction is often dominated by political and economic allegiances and the city may be selectively rehabilitated according to ideology or affiliation. Nonetheless, a broad spectrum is possible in determining who carries out reconstruction

Homs: comparison of damage assessment and informal housing areas

Damage Assessment
- ⬛ Heavily Damaged
- 🟧 Partially Damaged
- 🟩 Affected

- 🟫 Informal Areas

N 0 2km 8km

and for whom. In best case scenarios, an extensive range of stakeholders interact and consult: international, regional and local, including community groups, urban planners, architects, engineers, donors, politicians, local and International NGOs, economists and sociologists. Those involved, have different agendas and abilities for participating in the reconstruction process.

Responsible local reconstruction does exist but can contribute only at a modest level unless in collaboration with larger organisations. Such cooperation forms important precedents. In Homs in 2017 Al-Bir Charity rehabilitated 214 apartments for returnees of the Syrian war and 1382 people benefitted. The local group accepted applications directly from residents and worked in partnership with UNHCR.

In one of the most divided and damaged cities of the Palestinian West Bank, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee has combined renovation of the historical fabric with economic and social development since 1996. It is a combined government, international and local initiative.

Carefully configured local/national/international collaborations are critical in order that urban citizens be properly included in the reconstruction of their own lives and cities. In them each partner contributes according to its own means; the inherent asymmetries between them – finance, local conditions and needs, expertise, authority – must be brought together for rebuilding urban life in the face of uncertainties generated by urban conflicts.

War damage and restoration in Mostar

Further reading

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CENTRE FOR URBAN CONFLICTS RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

ARUP