CinC

CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE

COPING WITH CONFLICT

Nicosia

Briefing Paper 9
Coping with Conflict:
Dealing with everyday life in divided cities

How people in divided cities cope with conflict is revealed in the ways they undertake everyday activities as well as the decisions they make. This can be described in three ways: simply trying to survive, being resilient, and at times resisting what is happening. These three states do not necessarily exclude each other, nor are they automatically inclusive. Most individuals or groups in contested cities shift between them at different times and to a greater or lesser extent. Survival can be described as responding to conflict situations, whilst managing to keep key aspects of everyday life in reasonable balance. Resilience revolves around being in control and recovering from setbacks, and requires proactive measures to preempt the worst conflict abuses. Resistance is the refusal to comply, working against a conflict situation or occupation in an active way.

In the resilient city, inhabitants enjoy mobility and have access to what they need: urban amenities, commercial and social connections, and religious and political life. However, in times of exacerbated conflict, heightened security alerts and violence people may retreat to more familiar territory and settle for survival. Occupation and unusually heavy control of the population, or certain groups within it, can seriously restrict civilian mobility. Alternatively, people may resist in various ways. Coping is not a linear process, however; people tend to move between these conditions depending on circumstances. Conflict in Cities (CinC) research suggests that many people find ways of coping that are persistent, sometimes creative and occasionally extraordinary. Despite severe damage and long-term problems incurred by urban conflicts, cities themselves may be described as resilient. Even when conflict is ongoing the routines of daily life often endure, and those who wish to improve conditions need to understand why and how this happens.

Surviving conflict

Besides their essential daily activities, in periods of relative calm people can move freely and participate in cultural, political or social events in the city. However, conditions can change without notice and uncertainty can be debilitating. In Jerusalem security arrangements often fluctuate and are rarely advertised in written form. For Palestinians, taxi drivers may be the only source of information. However, people learn to think and move quickly under such circumstances and, most of all, to be

Key findings for policy

- **Resistance organisations often evolve by understanding popular sentiment and the needs and conditions of the city. These grievances need to be analysed carefully and taken seriously.**

- **In times of heavy violence or extreme instability, people tend to retreat into their own communities; it is crucial that mixed areas remain available to them for when fighting subsides.**

- **Whilst digital technologies and social media have made a big difference in perpetuating conflict, they also allow people to cope with conflict and to maintain lines of communication or means of assistance. Exploitation of these networks can make qualitative differences in urban conflicts. Mobility, both in attitude and physical action, is key to coping with conflict.**

In many cities, the use of airport-style metal detectors at key places of entry or exit, such as underground stations, have been proposed; even the gates of Jerusalem's Old City have been considered for such security. In some cases, streets or buildings bristle with security cameras. But with each technological answer, there is the question of how much the unrestricted running of the city may be compromised as well as how people 'feel' in their city. Technology may solve certain problems, yet it may seriously detract from the very features that make a city attractive. The balance between the two conditions must always be critically assessed by various parties.

flexible. In long-term conflicts, people focus on survival, and in doing so may build new connections and rely on unofficial sources in carrying out their activities 'under the radar'.

Some circumstances can be more extreme. People may be forced to compromise themselves through collaboration, or may willingly resort to black market activity. Often remarked upon but understudied, one of the strongest areas of collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem is in drug trafficking.

Attempts at survival can see people working together in groups and organisations on matters of everyday importance. In most contested cities, small-scale, local interventions contribute to security. In Belfast, cross-community groups seek to deal with low level anti-social behavior, whilst more problematic examples of informal security interventions include the involvement of rival paramilitary groups in 'street patrols'.

Whilst security tends to dominate contested cities, survival also involves people's pursuit of activities that in normal circumstances need little thought or planning. When Sarajevo was under continuous siege, even the procurement of water was dangerous and difficult and

presented extraordinary challenges. In extended conflicts, people find ways and means to live their lives, although periods of high unrest or violence may rupture daily routines and require residents to respond. In Belfast, the period in which children had to run a daily gauntlet in the Ardoyne in order to get to school was one such case; in this instance, the line between resistance and survival was very thin.

Conflict infrastructures such as walls and checkpoints are often considered means of solving problems, but regularly divide opinion. In Belfast, those who live next door to peacewalls want them to stay for fear of renewed hostilities, whilst those further away may want them to be removed as they prolong the image of Belfast as a divided city. One person's security is another's peril: most Israelis feel the Separation Barrier increases their well-being whereas Palestinians detest it as it divides their villages and neighbourhoods and has become the main symbol of the occupation. Ultimately, survival in contested cities is characterised by residents not venturing beyond well-known, comfortable and secure territories and activities with predictable outcomes.

Resilience

Resilience in contested cities may be characterised by people feeling comfortable with moving beyond their 'home' territories in going about their daily business and seeking out urban activities beyond the essential. In Belfast, the willingness of young working class mothers to walk down certain streets is a useful gauge of the conflictual 'temperature' of the city.

Organised activities at various levels can help to enforce resilience, and NGOs have important roles to play in this regard. In Mostar, the OKC Abrašević Centre has long striven to implement activities that look beyond the city's divisions, whilst in Nicosia the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR) has sought to create dialogue across the communal divide. Religious organisations can also play a significant role in coping, although sometimes ambiguously; they may provide services that the state has been unable to supply, or create parallel institutions. In Jerusalem, religiously-motivated settlers have mirrored state organisations in providing security, housing and education on a segregated basis. In Belfast, churches are involved in both resistance through the assertion of

> **"At the beginning slogans were about resistance and defying Israel, then people started to use it like any other wall. They put up political posters, death notices, and advertisements. It feels wrong to have messages like 'The Wall Must Fall' next to taxi numbers – but I suppose life has to go on."**
> - *Shop-keeper in Al-Ezariyya*

religious and political identity, and attempts to build resilience through cross-community activity. It should not be assumed that resistance and the affirmation of identity necessarily undermine resilience, however. In Belfast, 'performance' of conflict through parades can be crucial for presenting relationships between residents in contested spaces, marking territories, and, more generally, for the development of trust between communities, the police, and local leaders. Again, many of these activities can be seen to benefit one community and disadvantage another.

Similarly, conflict infrastructures such as walls and barriers can be used to commemorate loss, survival and struggle, and also become part of the everyday – for better or worse. On the Israeli side of the Separation Barrier in Jerusalem, murals are painted in attempts to make the wall more aesthetic and assist the pretence that it is not there. On the other hand, Palestinian posters and graffiti on the Barrier demand the liberation of political prisoners and critique the failure of peace negotiations; effectively it functions as a public repository of recent Palestinian history. Tellingly, however, the political slogans are supplemented by advertisements for Palestinian shops, adding to the Barrier's normalisation.

In the Brussels Capital Region, legislation has been used in support of fairer provision of everyday amenities. Municipal and government services are available in designated places in duplicate, that is, in Flemish and French. It is expensive and can be cumbersome, but is considered essential for a more resilient city.

Urban institutions are both adaptive and important for continuity and order, in both practical and symbolic senses. People become skilled in shifting institutions as necessary; for example, family structures can replace civic leadership, and religious rituals replace banned political events. Examples of this phenomenon can be found in Belfast, Jerusalem, and other cities.

Resistance: from graffiti to global action

People may resist at various times: in periods of heightened unrest and violence, if unfair measures are imposed, or when improvement is slow. This often takes the form of asserting national, ethnic and/or religious identity, but occasionally urban resistance may dispense with divisive identities and instead focus on shared human interests embodied in urban places or institutions. In a confluence of religious participation and political identities, the regular attendance of non-observant Palestinians at prayers in the al-Aqsa Mosque and the buying of religious goods in the Old City can themselves be seen as acts of resistance. Community organisations can orchestrate such resistance; central to the Islamic Movement's activism within Israel has been its commitment to rehabilitate and restore 'holy places'. In Vukovar, memorial plaques commemorate events and

Israeli activists join evicted Palestinian families to protest against settler activity in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem

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people important to Croat understandings of the war, and graffiti on or near to them resists through the expression of Serb sentiments and even non-ethnic Yugoslav identities. Bicommunal organisations may be the most resistant of all in bucking the trend towards greater sectarianism and segregation. In Jerusalem, the Israel Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) rejects the illegal withholding of building permits and collective punishment in the form of house demolition, and rebuilds Palestinian houses wrecked by the Israeli authorities; this may be repeated through several cycles of destruction and rebuilding. On the other hand, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots working together have managed to build a 'Home for Cooperation' (H4C) – a space for people from all communities to gather – in Nicosia's Buffer Zone. Wisely, UN administrators allowed purchase and redevelopment of the building in the otherwise uninhabited Buffer Zone

due to the bicommunal nature of the work. The H4C has become a very active and well-used space, with a popular café and events booked for nearly every day.

In Cyprus, Greek Cypriots have taken to court their grievances concerning property in northern Cyprus owned by them but currently used by Turkish Cypriots. Palestinians use the Israeli court system to raise issues, and the course of the Separation Barrier has been changed several times in this way. At the same time, some Palestinians worry that use of the Israeli judicial system implies recognition of Israel's authority.

Thus, resistance occurs at various levels through expressions of identity, formal channels such as the legal system, or even the simple fact of the presence of certain groups in particular parts of the city. As we have seen, however, resistance and resilience are not mutually exclusive modes of coping with conflict.

Further reading

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