When the Pursuit of National Security Produces Urban Insecurity

Cities have long been sites for conflicts – wars, racisms, religious hatreds, expulsions of the poor. And yet, where national states have historically responded by militarizing conflict, cities have tended to triage conflict through commerce and the civic. The bazaars of old Jerusalem and old Baghdad capture this well: while trading was on, one's religions became secondary, but once one re-entered the home, religion could be openly practiced.

But major developments in the current global era signal that a number of major cities are losing this capacity for triaging conflict via commerce and the civic – and not only due to war. They are becoming sites for a range of new types of conflicts, notably asymmetric war and political violence. Further, the dense and conflictive spaces of cities overwhelmed by inequality and injustice can become the sites for a variety of secondary, more anomic types of conflicts, from drug wars to the major environmental disasters looming in our immediate futures. Finally, through a rather different but escalating vector, major investors worldwide have been buying up high-value properties in the last few years – reaching over a trillion dollars in about 100 cities from mid-2014 to mid-2015, which then sit mostly empty. Together, these trends are de-urbanizing our major cities: they challenge that traditional commercial and civic capacity that has allowed cities to avoid war as the solution to conflicts.

This unsettling of the urban order, including importantly its differences with the order of national states, is part of a larger disassembling of existing logics (Sassen 2008: chapters 5, 6; 2014: chapter 1). It is a disassembling that happens even as national states and cities continue to be major markers of the geopolitical landscape and the material organization of territory. The type of urban order that gave us the open city is still there, but increasingly as mere visual order, and less so as social order.

Asymmetric War and Its Urban Consequences

Nowadays when national states go to war in the name of national security, major cities are likely to become a key frontline space. This marks a sharp difference with the two world wars of the 20th century, where large armies needed vast open fields, oceans and skies to meet and fight. These were the frontline spaces of those earlier wars.

With asymmetric war, the search for national security becomes a source of urban insecurity. Thus the invasion of Iraq became an *urban* war theater, with Baghdad, Falluja, and several other cities the key war spaces. The logic behind this is that irregular combatants benefit from dense urban tissue. At the same time, the Western Allied forces were reluctant to carpet-bomb the cities – not necessarily because they worried about civilian casualties, but because it would make an enemy of the whole population of the invaded regions and countries. (This has clearly not been a constraint in the case of the current Syrian government bombing of enemy neighborhoods. The allies needed the

support of locals. The Syrian government wants to kill all its "enemy" nationals.) Finally, we also see the negative impacts of asymmetric war in the case of cities that are not even part of the immediate war theater -- the bombings in Madrid, London, Casablanca, Bali, Mumbai, Lahore, and so many others provoked by 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The traditional security paradigm based on national state security fails to accommodate this triangulation whereby an operational space is generated that does not only include invader and the invaded, but also a large array of individuals, often isolated persons or groups that engage in terrorism far away from the actual theater of war. What may be good for the protection of the national state apparatus may come at a high (increasingly high) price to major cities and their people. The overall effect of these diverse modes has been to escalate the type of security measures and installations that Graham (2012) calls military urbanism. This is a major distortion of the meaning of the urban itself.

Asymmetric war found one of its sharpest enactments in the US war on Iraq. The US conventional military aerial bombing took only six weeks to destroy the Iraqi army and take over. But then asymmetric war set in, with Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and other Iraqi cities the sites of conflict. And it has not stopped since.

The Limits of Superior Military Power?
Over and over history shows us the limits of power. In an increasingly interdependent world, [the most powerful countries find themselves restrained through multiple interdependencies](). To this I want to add the city as a *weak regime* that can, nonetheless, obstruct and temper the destructive capacity of the superior military power. This urban capability can be seen as yet another component for systemic survival in a world where several countries have weapons that can destroy the planet.

Asymmetric wars can be very diverse. But they share a few features. Such wars are partial, intermittent and lack clear endings. There are no hegemons that can decide to have an armistice to mark the end of a war. This fact is one indication of how the center no longer holds — whatever the center's format: the imperial power of a period or the national state of our modernity.

Here I want to distinguish four types of asymmetric war, all of which point to limits of superior military power in today's world. These four types are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One of these is the actual encounter between conventional army and irregular combatants in urban terrain. Post-2003 Iraqi cities are prominent instances. But so are a series of other cities that are not necessarily sites in an officially declared war (see Kaldor et al. 2018). A second is the extension of the space *for* war beyond the actual "theater of war," well-captured in the bombings in London, Madrid, etc. after the war on Iraq was launched. A third is the embedding of conventional state conflicts in an act of asymmetric war, as might be the case for the Mumbai attacks understood (though never acknowledged) to be connected to the Pakistani military's long-standing concerns regarding India. And the fourth is the activating by asymmetric war of older conflicts that can evolve into armed conflict between two unconventional armed forces, as is the case with the already mentioned Shiite-Sunni conflicts in Iraq.

The new urban map of war is expansive: it goes far beyond the actual nations involved. Each of these "offshore" bombings has its own specifics and can be explained in terms of particular grievances and aims. As material practices these are localized actions by local armed groups, acting independently from each other. Yet they are also clearly part of a new kind of multi-sited war – a distributed and variable set of actions that gain larger

meaning from a particular conflict with global projection. The recent attacks in Paris and Brussels epitomize this.

A second set of features of contemporary wars, especially evident in the less developed areas, is that they often involve forced urbanization or de-urbanization. Contemporary conflicts produce significant population displacement both into and out of cities. In many cases, in African conflicts or in Kosovo, displaced people swell urban populations. (Elsewhere [Sassen 2010; see also Kaldor et al. 2018], I have examined how today's civil wars generate a very specific form of the urbanizing of war: as control over land becomes acute, evicting people becomes critical, refugees flow into cities, which are often the last refuge) In other cases, ethnic cleansing in its diverse variants expels people, as happened in Baghdad, forcing the departures – rather more like expulsions – of Sunnis, Christians and others who had lived there for centuries. Finally, in many diverse contemporary armed conflicts, the warring forces avoid battle or direct military confrontation. Their main strategy is to control territory through the expulsion of "the others" as defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, tribal membership, political affiliation. The main tactic is terror – conspicuous massacres and atrocities pushing people to flee. None of these can be solved via conventional armies.

These types of displacement – with ethnic/religious "cleansing" the most virulent form – have a profound impact on the cosmopolitan character of cities. Cities have long had the capacity to bring together people of different classes, ethnicities and religions through commerce, politics, and civic practices. Contemporary conflicts that lead to forced urbanization or internal displacement unsettle and weaken the cultural diversity of a city. Cities as diverse as Belfast, Baghdad or Mosul each was/is at risk of becoming an assemblage of separate urban ghettoes as a result of ethnic cleansing; this destroys a city's civic character and thereby also weaken its capabilities to resist the emergence of urban armed conflict. Baghdad has undergone a deep process of such "cleansing," expelling many Sunnis –so now the conflict is centered on factions. There is no city there.

Bits of a New Reality

The urbanizing of war and its consequences is part of a larger disassembling of traditional all-encompassing formats, notably the nation-state and the inter-state system. The consequences of this disassembling are partial but evident in a growing number of very diverse domains, from economic to religious. Militarized control of urban areas is not going to address that disassembling – on the contrary, they will be strengthened. Here are issues that lie well beyond the questions discussed in this short piece (for an elaboration see Sassen 2008: parts 2 and 3). But they could also explain why some of our major cities are losing older capacities to transform potential conflicts into the civic, as is increasingly evident with police brutality in some major US cities.

Along with growing inequality, massive acquisitions of buildings by corporations, including shell companies, and the growing expulsions of the modest middle classes from city centers, we now have the militarizing of security. We see this in New York, London, Paris and a growing number of other major cities. We need to develop categories of analysis that allow us to capture these transformations. Military urbanism is a good start, but we need more research and theorization to go beyond a mere confrontation of city against militarization and get at the innards of these emergent conditions. The categories of city and militarization will not get us there. They are the x. We need the non-x.

Saskia Sassen *is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and Member, The Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University (www.saskiasassen.com). Her new book is* <u>Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy</u> *(Harvard University Press 2014) now out in 15 languages. She is the recipient of diverse awards and mentions, including multiple doctor honoris causa, named lectures. Most recently she was awarded the Principe de Asturias 2013 Prize in the Social Sciences and made a Foreign Member of the Royal Academy of the Sciences of Netherland. Further information can be found at* www.saskiasassen.com

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