

# Deconstructing Cities: Military Operations in the Urban Era

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[See table of contents](#)

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## **Deconstructing Cities: Military Operations in the Urban Era**

*by*  
*Alice Hills*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The highly trained US forces operating in Mogadishu in 1993 never really understood how the city worked. They knew that its basic infrastructure had been destroyed and that the clan system was fundamental to its life. But they consistently under-estimated the sensitivities of Somali culture, the military capabilities of the factions opposing them, the effectiveness of the low-technology used against them, the extent to which non-combatants were involved in the conflict, and the strategic impact of their actions.<sup>1</sup> Similar considerations would, no doubt, have applied had Western forces been involved in fighting in Kabul in 2002. Prompted by this recurring theme I argue that we need to pay more attention to the human architecture of cities.

It is necessary to rebalance our approach to urban operations. We consistently focus on the tactical level and downplay the fact that tactics need to be framed by a coherent and generic approach to the problems and opportunities cities present. Yet urban operations invariably contain a strong political element. The point is basic but deserves restating: cities are more than the sum of their parts and tactical operations may have a strategic impact for which we are unprepared.

The tactical problems associated with the urban environment are notorious but future operations will probably present their greatest challenge at the strategic level. In this article I do not devise strategies to be adopted so much as emphasize that urban operations require policy coherence. I make three fundamental points. The first is that cities are potentially strategic sites. The operational level is, as ever, critical in this matter. Its importance must be acknowledged, not least because it represents a wide range of problems that are inherent in operations, but I focus here on the bigger picture. We need to specifically consider strategies rather than tactics if we are to develop a coherent approach to dealing with cities as strategic sites. The second point is that to develop a strategic overview we must understand the city environment. Once again, this is a tru-

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ism. It is also one that is forgotten as often as it is emphasized, yet without it intelligence gathering and reconstruction plans are doomed to inefficacy. We need to know how to manage cities, either in the interests of operational efficiency or because reconstruction usually begins as soon as conflict stops. The third point is that we need to review existing assumptions about strategy and coherence.

Several other factors also support the need for a more comprehensive view of urban operations. They include the strong possibility that urban threats (especially in the developing world) will not be amenable to orthodox military solutions. Key cities are, for example, frequently symbolic and provide the entrance point into intractable political or security problems. This may obscure strategic clarity so I consider three complexity factors. The first concerns the political environment of cities in many parts of the developing world, where commanders may need to deal with alternative forms of political authority. The second is the need to identify the networks and relationships underpinning functioning cities. The third is the presence of civilians – cities are rarely empty and civilian control is a key emergent issue. Together these factors suggest that we need to question our assumptions about what success in urban operations really means. As the current controversy concerning the “war on terrorism” indicates, we know a lot about the physical architecture of cities but we know much less about the human relationships and systems underpinning them.

## **CITIES AS STRATEGIC SITES**

Many future operations are likely to take place on urban terrain. Rates of urbanization, demographic trends, tighter international economic and financial links between states, the incorporation of a policing element into peacekeeping, security assistance, a return to counter-insurgency operations – all suggest that the future operational environment will be characteristically urban. And historical experience indicates that the most complex and politically important urban areas will remain cities.<sup>2</sup> Many political objectives cannot be achieved without controlling certain cities for various periods of time. Key cities cover military corridors, are destination points for criminals and extremists, and are used by global and political capital as base points in the spatial organization of production and markets. They have long been used as sanctuaries or bases by terrorists and insurgents, and they are densely populated. They are strategic sites.

Military analysts naturally focus on the physical challenges of operating in cities. The effects of densely-packed buildings on communications equipment, the inability of tanks to deal with snipers in third-floor rooms, and the constant need for improved situational awareness are well documented. So too is the requirement to control civilians and distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. But concentrating on the tactical issues runs the risk of becoming blinkered. It neglects the fact that most conflict termination requires political rather than military solutions. It ignores the reality that the current contests of

globalization, cultural diversification, liberalization, and ecological change are reflected in cities. A coherent and comprehensive politico-military policy (that is, policy at the strategic level) demands that a greater understanding of the significance and structure of cities should balance narrowly technical perspectives.

Cities are not, in any case, neutral environments. They can act as catalysts through which existing conflict is exacerbated or ameliorated because they introduce “a set of characteristics – proximate ethnic neighbourhoods, territoriality, economic interdependency, symbolism, and centrality – not present to such an extent on wider geographic scales.”<sup>3</sup> Cities are also political organisms. Not only do political elites usually live in them, but also they often cover desirable land, are links in the global production chain and targets for foreign investment, and account for an increasing share of national income, generating 55 percent of gross national product (GNP) even in low-income countries. Only in Africa has urbanization not been accompanied by economic growth.

Urban operations need to be framed by wider political references as well as by specific professional requirements. As recent operations in Afghanistan and the Gaza Strip show, this is essential if we are to understand the socio-political challenges that may subvert conventional Western approaches to cities. It did not prove difficult for America’s Afghan allies in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan to mislead the USA during OPERATION ANACONDA, and the excessive use of military force by the Israeli Defence Force merely created new Palestinian martyrs. In other words, the human factors that obstruct lower-level operations – and sometimes confound strategic objectives – deserve more attention than they have received so far.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Just as it is essential to understand the physical environment of cities in order to overcome geometric constraints, so it is necessary to assess the human environment in order to understand, manage or exploit it.<sup>4</sup> City life is normally the result of a complex web of social forces, institutional settings, and interpersonal relationships. Such relationships are usually suspended during military operations; scale is condensed down to the family, building, or street. But we know little about such relationships or how they affect our political objectives. Underestimating this task is dangerous because a simple misunderstanding can distort our understanding of how a city works. The danger is all the greater because most future operations will probably take place in the developing world – and assessing trends in Southern cities is not easy for non-native analysts. (Southern is taken here to mean the regions outside the main North American, West European, and East Asian economic systems, which represent the North.) As Task Force Ranger discovered in Mogadishu, it is easy to underestimate the web of family and kin relations that may unite against foreign troops, forcing an operation to an unexpected conclusion.

We think of city structures and relationships in Western terms. Similarly liberal models and statist convictions underpin our understanding of the strategic objectives of operations. Globalization and the fact that many urban problems present themselves in conventional terms reinforce both. When tasked with humanitarian relief, enforcement, or (discretionary) warfighting our expeditionary forces naturally look for a basic political infrastructure with which to treat. They look for recognizable authorities, identifiable channels of communication, and an identifiable adversary. Many UN officials and forces expected Somalis to share their values and found it difficult to adjust to the ingratitude, seeming anarchy, and fragmented nature of Somali life. Similar problems had confronted the French in Algiers 35 years before. Algiers was French but the paratroopers sent to destroy the terrorist liberation movement found the silence of the Casbah (a warren of alleys and slums in which 80,000 Algerians lived) impenetrable without the systematic aid of torture – an option no longer open to Western forces. They could not tell the differences between old ladies and terrorists; indeed, they often had little idea of whom they were looking for.<sup>5</sup>

The battle of Algiers took place in 1957 but more recent operations, in Grozny and Freetown as in Mogadishu, provide a salutary reminder that many Southern cities display fluid authority systems that represent something rather different to those of the North. We need to understand these trends, just as much as economic regionalization, decentralization, globalization, or, indeed, urbanization, because they may have the potential to create a new strategic situation in cities.

## **STRATEGY AND COHERENCE**

Tactical and operational skills are essential for success in the short-term but the ultimate success of urban operations usually depends on political considerations. A future scenario of simultaneous operations covering counter-insurgency, terrorism, humanitarian relief, peace enforcement, and warfighting (as encapsulated by the US Marine Corps's work on three-block operations), within a regional hub-city, illustrates the potential task. The fact that operations may be joint, multinational, multi-agency, and politically constrained – all this in a world containing thermobaric weapons, weapons of mass destruction and the remnants of al-Qaeda – is, to say the least, challenging. It also stresses that we need to review the assumptions on which our current tactically biased expectations of urban operations are built. This goes well beyond the issues addressed by the USA's Project Lincolnia.<sup>6</sup> The current re-categorization of insurgents as terrorists in states ranging from Colombia and the Philippines to Russia suggests that the need is pressing. It will be even more so if our adversaries develop innovative theories of warfare, focusing on our weaknesses or templated style of operations. Four further general factors support this belief.

First, events such as those in Mogadishu, the West Bank, and Afghanistan challenge our belief that urban operations are always amenable to orthodox doc-

trine, suggesting that it may be necessary to adapt narrowly focused Clausewitzian concepts such as decisive battle. Definitions of end-states and objectives for multinational peacekeeping forces are already difficult to identify because the defeat of an enemy by military force has been replaced by a mandate to facilitate political settlements. The challenge may prove superficial but it is a useful reminder that youthful and radicalized populations can count for more than sophisticated forces or technology in some forms of urban conflict. A variant problem could present itself if Western forces become involved in non-Western wars, perhaps because of the presence of their nationals. This too could challenge our understanding of what constitutes an urban operation. Afghanistan presents one type of environment but it may be contrasted with that of states in other regions. Africa, for example, remains an overwhelmingly rural continent but civil war in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) in 1997 was often urban. Roads are rare, and airfields rarer, but 62.5 percent of the population live in cities and there were several thousand foreign nationals in Brazzaville.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the resultant urban actions were not operations so much as mob warfare, with looting, RPGs, mortar, and artillery dominating. The example is extreme but it represents a type of scenario which Western forces may not be able to avoid.

Second, as Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Warsaw showed during the Second World War, many cities are not only politically symbolic but may be deliberately invested with strategic significance. In the 1968 Tet offensive, the North Vietnamese held on to the citadel in Hue for 30 days against overwhelming odds because of its value as a national symbol. Comparable considerations were at work in Saigon in 1968 and 1975. We need to consider how or when that significance may be exploited, manipulated, or defended for manifestly political reasons. And this applies to our cities as much as to those of our adversaries.

Third, operations in cities are political because cities are often the entrance point to an intransigent political problem or because military operations are understood as representing an intervention or challenge. The 1994-96 Russian operations in Grozny are a case in point. President Dudayev declared Chechen independence in 1991, and soon began to develop a power base in the capital city of Grozny. In 1994, President Yeltsin ordered Russian troops into Chechnya in an attempt to stop secession, assuming that Dudayev and his army were merely a band of disorganized rebels and bandits. Dudayev had, however, managed to transform the region from a semi-autonomous Russian republic into a well-armed state. Moscow dramatically under-estimated the Chechen rebels' determination to gain independence, with the result that the rebels continued fighting in the countryside after Russian forces took Grozny – where fighting continues despite further fierce battles for Grozny.<sup>8</sup> Analogous considerations apply to the clan warfare in Mogadishu that followed the overthrow of Siad Barre in 1989. One of the reasons for the disintegration of the United Nation (UN)'s good intentions in 1992-93 was that it became part of the struggle. The fact that US forces slipped from providing humanitarian relief to becoming a faction in the internal

conflict was the result of international and domestic politics. But this was undoubtedly facilitated by the failure to pay sufficient attention to the nature and organization of Somali political authority – which did not reflect liberal criteria.<sup>9</sup>

A fourth, linked, reason concerns the reconfiguration of political authority evident in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. In effect this means that the potential exists for the political importance of specific cities (and the provinces they often represent) to increase at the expense of national governments. Parts of the South in which the West has some interest have seen the emergence of state systems that no longer need territorial, bureaucratic, or consent based authority in the traditional sense. Indeed, state competence has already been redefined by the emergence of new pressures in parts of Latin America and Asia, where drug organizations have assumed such key state functions as the provision of social welfare and protection. In addition, the authority of many states has been reduced in a more fundamental manner by the economic re-regulation and growing interdependence of markets associated with globalization. International commercial markets, regional bodies, and the increasing influence of international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations have further qualified sovereignty.

Resolving the problems associated with operations in such environments will require more than new tactics and technology. It could, for instance, involve developing innovative ways of projecting political power so as to achieve politico-military objectives. There is thus a real need to focus on the strategic possibilities relating to the integration of domestic and international assets and infrastructure, especially where a city is a regional hub. The foundations of such an approach already exist, having been developed during operations targeted toward reconstruction and reconciliation. Conditions breeding alienation and terrorism that must now be addressed in the light of al-Qaeda make the matter urgent.

Three important complexity factors likely to affect the political environment of cities are addressed here. They are used as an initial means of rebalancing the resultant concerns, for if the balance is not adjusted there is a danger of urban operations presenting us with problems we have not recognized, let alone considered. The first issue concerns the reconfiguration of political authority. The second, that of the systems underpinning cities, has so far received little attention from military commentators, while the last, the control of civilians, is a consistent tactical and doctrinal motif but is rarely considered strategically nowadays. Post-hostilities operations are not covered here but they also represent a significant theme in urban operations because reconstruction programs accompany most contemporary conflicts. Urban operations will probably be no different; indeed, infrastructure issues may come to the fore as a means for achieving overall strategic aims.<sup>10</sup>

## **POLITICAL AUTHORITY**

One reason why we are reluctant to consider urban operations from a strategic point may be because many areas of life in which centralization is taken for granted in the West are outside the scope or reach of Southern regimes. Nation-wide power structures may be non-existent and the control of key cities may mean less than we wish.<sup>11</sup> It is easier to deal with a Robert Mugabe than a Mohammed Aidid, and it is often politically inappropriate to deal with the factional leaders, terrorists, or cartel chiefs entrenched in regional cities as if they possessed authority. Similarly, in many parts of the world it is illiberal groups such as Hamas, with which we do not wish to treat, that provide social services, medical assistance, and temporary housing.

Another reason is because we have difficulty in dealing with alternative forms of authority. A common obstacle to success in contemporary operations, especially those with expanded missions, has been the failure to determine who is in charge in a city. Although formal authority structures are rarely pivotal in determining the effectiveness of operations, Western states and intergovernmental organizations such as the UN need identifiable political authorities with which to work. The need is unlikely to lessen because it is linked to the legitimization required by international operations (typically provided by UN mandates or, more controversially, self-mandated in the case of NATO in Kosovo). It also results from the awareness that recognition by the military can (as happened in Somalia and Bosnia) confer an inappropriate legitimacy. It may also link into wider trends in the nature of political authority as reflected in debates over internationalization, localization, and non-state actors. Violence in East Timor and economic disaster in Indonesia have, for instance, been directly linked to the support of Western banks and governments for a regime that tolerated a weak rule of law.

There are many possible reconfigurations of political authority but, if the changes evident since the end of the Cold War are fundamental, future urban operations could take place in an environment in which cities represent, or are composed of, multiple competing institutions and overlapping jurisdictions. What this might mean can be deduced from concepts such as neomedievalism and shadow states. If, for example, authority (primarily in the South) is understood in terms of neomedievalism, then zones of political authority, with overlapping boundaries and, significantly, no universal centre of competence, can be identified. This could mean that certain cities become enforcement agents or execution places for decisions made elsewhere in the international system. Success in the ensuing operations could prove illusive, not least because of the difficulties associated with creating effective multinational operations in such circumstances.

An alternative interpretation to neomedievalism in Southern states is what William Reno calls shadow states. Shadow states present alternative forms of structure and power (and profit), in which regimes draw authority from their abil-



ity to control markets and resources, rather than territory or coercive agents.<sup>12</sup> The resultant development of associations and activities not directly under state control are nothing new but they undoubtedly represent a “highly subversive space ... where new structures and norms may take hold to challenge the existing state order.”<sup>13</sup>

It might be argued that the erosion of the post-colonial and post-Cold-War state and a return to the enclave economies and private armies of earlier years would be confined to rural regions in sub-Saharan Africa. It is possible that such trends are peripheral to future urban operations because the regimes running shadow states (and often employing Western private military companies) are most unlikely to engage with Western military forces. Similarly, their relevance might be debated on the grounds that we shall not choose to become embroiled in any African state, though this would be in practice to rule out the possibility of operations in more than 50 fragile states. It would be also to ignore Washington’s concern for possible al-Qaeda links in Somalia.<sup>14</sup> Irrespective of such objections, the analytical value of shadow states is that they present a dramatically different configuration of political authority that will be made manifest in the South and that Western politicians and military forces will find difficulty in confronting successfully.

Globalization will exacerbate such difficulties for, as Reno argues, the ties between foreign firms and rulers in states where politicians and big men use private networks to enforce their demands and extend their powers of patronage have played a dominant part in many conflicts. Reno does not address conflict as such but his argument that corruption is fundamental to states such as Sierra Leone, that it is disconnected from individual morality and the failure of state institutions, is of general relevance because it is indicative of the entrenched nature of problems commonly associated with operations in fragile states. Such an interpretation is even more relevant when combined with other analyses, such as the political instrumentalization of disorder in contemporary Africa identified by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz.<sup>15</sup> It also links into the fact that conflict invariably represents a business opportunity, especially in cities such as Freetown or Grozny, or a chance to settle old scores.<sup>16</sup> And it suggests that operations in such environments will once again leave Western forces asking: who is in charge? It will be an even more difficult question to answer if a regime or city’s elite no longer needs formal state agencies, instead exploiting their dependency on the foreign firms, mercenaries, creditors, and aid organizations that contribute the resources sustaining them.

Strategic incoherence is the probable result of operations in such states. The role of state-centric diplomacy will be limited in these circumstances, and strategy will have to accommodate centrifugal forces. The fact that it failed to do so in Somalia – and runs similar risks in Afghanistan – suggests that it may be necessary to redefine our expectations of the type of conflict associated with such environments.

## **Strong Trends**

The characteristics of most contemporary operations suggest this is the case. Indeed, the trend for conflicts to be intrastate (and to transmute into prolonged crises) not only implies a changing location of political violence in relation to the nation-state, but, through its relative informality, suggests that the organizational forms and borders of conflict are also changing. Thus future urban operations may involve many actors, ranging from the warlords, militia, child soldiers, and local inhabitants of existing states, to those representing the more futuristic Netwar.

The identification of warlords or local strongmen able to control an area and exploit its resources (while at same time keeping both central and foreign authorities at bay and successfully forging international links) would appear relatively straightforward if it were not for the problems made explicit by the debacle of Somalia. The role of militia also seems clear-cut though various types of militia played an integral part – sometimes with a strategic impact – in urban operations in Mogadishu and Chechnya. The Soviet Army's experience against the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s is relevant too, as is the more recent reliance of the US on the militia belonging to various Afghan warlords. Nor should we forget that the Taliban controlled much of Afghanistan until recently, and defined the rules for dialogue between India and the hijackers of an Indian Airlines jet at Kandahar airport in January 2000.

The systematized use of child soldiers could present greater (initial) problems for Western forces in a combat environment.<sup>17</sup> Their use in all recent wars in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, has been made possible by the availability of cheap, light, and easy to use automatic weapons. Many commanders also prefer children because they are malleable, they lack a sense of proportion, and can be persuaded to carry out acts of great violence. The interest of the Western media in such an emotive topic will require the provision of significant strategic guidance for the development of appropriate rules of engagement. The same considerations apply to combat involvement by the indigenous population on the lines of that seen in Mogadishu.

The deliberate use of children and local inhabitants in combat seems unsophisticated when contrasted with the hierarchical systems typical of the international military but, as Somalia showed, it should not be under-estimated. The potential threat from the sophisticated actors associated with transnational networks is more obvious. This is because it is less visible and because political power can migrate to those non-state actors able to organize into sprawling organizational networks, with lateral forms of control, authority, and communication, more readily than to traditional state actors. The conventional application of military force may be of peripheral value in such a scenario.

“Netwar” refers to the modes of conflict and crime emerging as a result. It is relevant to future urban operations – especially those involving digitized

forces – because it is notoriously difficult to fight and because it involves measures short of traditional war, in which the protagonist’s use of network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies are “attuned to the information age.”<sup>18</sup> It may introduce new features which a simple reliance on established counter-insurgency (COIN) principles, for instance, cannot address. Not only may past lessons turn out to be less easily transferable to this new situation than is often assumed, but the assumptions on which they are based may themselves prove dangerous simply because many forms of networks appear familiar. And in Netwar, as in COIN, tactical focus is unlikely to be sufficient because Netwar will be able to cut across standard boundaries, jurisdictions, and conventional distinctions between state and society, public and private, war and crime, civilian and military. If, as seems likely, it is necessary to draw on the same organizational designs and principles (on the principle that it takes a network to fight a network) then strategic coherence to urban operations will be critical.

## **SYSTEMIC EFFECTS**

The problems associated with understanding the physical infrastructure of cities as a coherent whole are well-known<sup>19</sup> but identifying and quantifying the systems or networks underpinning them is more difficult. Such systems represent the second complexity factor.

The set of systems cities represent usually consists of an organizational infrastructure, often involving security forces, transport, and utilities, overlaid on social and cultural structures reflecting sociocultural patterns that may be indigenous or based on those in other regions. They are likely to be bureaucratic or to consist of organizations made up of groups and individuals, existing for specific purposes, and employing relatively structured types of activity with an identifiable boundary. But actors pursuing their own incentives also drive systems, and the complexity of cities results from interaction between the various systems.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the inhabitants concerned may base their understanding of their city on the geographical area in which they live, the public and political organizations of their state, province, or country, or the historical aspirations of their community, often understood in terms of territory.<sup>21</sup> The fluid human networks underpinning the myriad systems in a big city are much more difficult to identify than the physical or economic networks.

Ultimately the need to understand this depends on the type of operation concerned; it may be irrelevant in attritional or retributive actions. But the expanded scope of most recent operations, their humanitarian emphasis, multinational components, the media intensity, and the ambiguity of much intergovernmental strategic direction suggests that cities’ systems are likely to present strategic and tactical impediments, especially when combat takes place simultaneously with enforcement and relief. The need to understand the systems

involved, especially those representing non-Western values and norms, is likely to complicate strategic considerations, either directly or in terms of discontinuities, unanticipated effects, or uncertainty. Future urban combat could even drive systemic relationships through an escalatory process. This will not necessarily be a linear process but it could represent more than a combination of factors reacting in a predictable chain. Escalation could mean that the conventional cycle of combat, post-hostilities operations, and reconstruction might not result in a desired (or previously existing) status quo. War has often acted as a social and political accelerator in the past, so urban operations may prompt, destroy, or cause systemic change. Urban operations may themselves have systemic and strategic effects.

### **CONTROLLING CIVILIANS**

The third major complexity factor identified here is that associated with the presence of the civilians constituting the systems. Even if a city such as Shanghai, with its associated population of 125 million in 2,383 square miles,<sup>22</sup> presents an extreme and improbable scenario, recent operations emphasize that cities are never empty, civilian casualties are an emotive issue, strategic evacuation policies have not been seriously considered for many years, and the presence of non-combatants complicates existing military-civil distinctions. This proved to be the case even in Grozny during Christmas 1999. Leaflets dropped by Russian planes on 5 December warned that anyone remaining in the city after 11 December would be viewed as “terrorists and bandits” and would be destroyed. The main Russian commander in Grozny, General Viktor Kazantsev insisted that only women, children, and men over the age of 60 would be regarded as refugees, everyone else was to be detained. Yet an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 civilians remained in the city as it was destroyed, either unable or unwilling to escape the bombardment. Separating them from combatants proved extremely difficult.<sup>23</sup>

Controlling civilians is a problem at every level of operations but it has received remarkably little attention in terms of strategy. There appears to be no generic policy guidance apart from references to liberal norms yet it is likely to be a consistent theme across operations for the foreseeable future. Russian forces were not constrained in their dealings with civilians, nor were they required to distinguish between humanitarian, enforcement, and combat operations. But the lessons of Chechnya should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the West because it is arguable that they apply to “any modern, mechanized force fighting a determined enemy in a city.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Chechnya represents a situation that an American or European expeditionary force could face if threats to an important ally or trade route necessitated some form of power projection: crime is rampant, law non-existent, and terrorism and religious extremism have made dramatic inroads.<sup>25</sup>

The control of civilians is likely to be a significant, potentially strategic factor in any urban operation, especially at the relief and enforcement end of the operational spectrum, and the problems associated with achieving it should not be underestimated. Sub-lethal weapons (especially those associated with the electronic stimulation of nerves) may eventually prove useful but the technology is currently immature, the scale of application is likely to be small, and its use will be controversial. The policing of big cities such as Karachi or Mumbai is already difficult even for forces familiar with their nuances. The policing of smaller cities (Mitrovica for instance) by military, paramilitary, or police forces in peace support operations is sometimes equally so.<sup>26</sup> Partly because of this urban operations usually require the military to confront or manage criminal gangs, especially when ordinary crime appears out of control and there is no supporting judicial system. A common problem in Mogadishu, for example, centred on what should be done with a gunman or rioter once he was apprehended. But relying on recent experience for guidance in such operations may be misleading because, although urban policing missions are often considered to be low risk,<sup>27</sup> scale will make a difference. Although almost 65 percent of the world's urban residents live in small and medium-size cities, the scale of important coastal cities such as Cairo, Calcutta, Lagos, and Los Angeles exemplifies the potential problem. And the resources needed to conduct operations are always very high in relation to the geographical size of an area, even when fighting between distinct armed forces, as in Grozny, is unlikely. Furthermore, different types of cities in different regions may require different forms of management; boom cities (such as Seoul) are different to reservoir cities (Johannesburg) where men are held, while dispersed cities or conurbations on the scale of Washington, DC are different again.<sup>28</sup>

Yet it may be easy to over-estimate some of the problems associated with the presence of civilians simply because the principle of military necessity is likely to dominate wherever the situation is sufficiently serious for robust enforcement or warfighting. Much of our existing doctrine concerning civilian control is based on peacekeeping and peace enforcement, but current practice is not necessarily a guide to the realities of war as may be illustrated by reference to civil affairs, currently regarded as a critical support element in the civil-military interface. It is probable that civil affairs and its derivatives will revert to more traditional modes of expression<sup>29</sup> during warfighting. The civil affairs organization developed during World War II, for instance, may have fulfilled public health and feeding duties but it acted primarily as a post-conflict activity in support of military-related objectives. These included relieving combat troops of the requirement to provide the civil administration under the law of war. Civil affairs did have a duty to assist in the restoration of "normal" conditions among civilians as soon as possible, but such objectives were offset by the need to meet the requirements of military necessity. Civil affairs was required to ensure that the economic resources of occupied or liberated territory were made available to

the occupying forces as well. Civil affairs was always an instrument of military authority rather than humanitarian relief, and it existed (as General Eisenhower noted), “to keep the civil population from under the feet of the Army.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite the invaluable experience provided by World War II, the problems associated with the effective, let alone efficient, management of civilians in the light of contemporary Western values remain unresolved. The British experience in Northern Ireland holds some general lessons for low level urban operations, as does that of the Israelis in Jerusalem, but the fact that our involvement in conflict is now prompted by choice, rather than necessity, and is shaped by liberal norms and fears, suggests that political guidance will remain critical. The very fact that much seems to depend on the region in which conflict takes place further emphasizes that political factors are paramount. This can be seen from two contrasting examples. The presence of civilians during the liberation of Western European cities in 1944-45 was considered a tactical or operational problem, with civilians merely imposing some restrictions on movement and weapons choice. But it is evident that the existence of civilians during the liberation of the Low Countries, for instance, imposed more limitations on the occupying armies than it did in Caen. Take the case of the battle for the city of Groningen in the Netherlands in April 1945. Military options were dictated by the fact that the eastern flank of Groningen was effectively unassailable because the existence of a large hospital meant the use of heavy artillery was unacceptable.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, UN forces in Somalia were unrepentant that civilians close to the scene of an attack were regarded (and treated) as combatants, whether armed or not: “In an ambush there are no sidelines for spectators.”<sup>32</sup> The grand strategy was clear in 1945; everything followed from the imperative of unconditional surrender. But we are no longer involved in a total war and future conflicts are likely to prove more nuanced.

Different cultures place different values on human life but both World War II and more recent conflicts in Somalia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan suggest that the presence of civilians will intensify political and operational problems for the multi-national forces so characteristic of contemporary operations. The UN military operation in Somalia, for instance, was weakened by disputes within the 27,000-strong 28-nation force, with many nations resenting US dominance and questioning the wisdom of demonizing General Aidid. Many commanders cut informal deals with local militia to protect their forces from snipers, while cooperation between troops of different nationalities was often minimal and when disputes occurred they became full-blown diplomatic incidents. This is not to suggest that such a response is directly linked to the presence of civilians so much as to emphasize that the presence of civilians cannot be considered in isolation from political issues; tactics are not necessarily separate from the other operational levels.<sup>33</sup> Urban operations must engage with this fact.

## NEW WAYS OF THINKING

In order to reconsider operations in cities we need to question our assumptions about the ways in which cities work in both peace and war. The problems currently associated with urban operations may be a natural consequence of the logic of our present approach so we may be able to deal with the problems only by restructuring the logic. Tactics are critical but ignoring strategic considerations could end in entrapment, preventing a full examination of the character of the commitment and the authority structures to be coerced. The policy processes associated with the development of urban operations as a unique type of operation must be made responsive to the risks of entrapment, for entrapment may itself become the objective of an adversary if he is able to influence such processes.

Events may prompt the necessary changes. The British *Strategic Defence Review* (SDR), for example, has re-examined the nature of asymmetric threats in the light of the suicide hijackings of 11 September 2001.<sup>34</sup> This is necessary because although the 1998 SDR recognized the existence of potential asymmetric threats it treated them as one of a range of tactics a potential adversary might use, rather than as a strategic risk with the potential for strategic change. Urban operations could experience a similar adjustment – but it is better if intellectual change occurs in advance of catastrophic events. One way in which the issue can be addressed is through ideas and scenarios, such as those suggested by the concept of escalation, with its connotations of complexity and uncertainty.<sup>35</sup> The case for escalation- (as opposed to chaos- or complexity-) theory needs further development but its initial value is that it is concerned with strategic planning. That the metaphor of escalation does not necessarily include qualitative change is of less importance than the fact that it provides a tool for considering the growth potential of known types of operations. These range from the conventional to the unprecedented or bizarre, and embrace level of complexity, dislocation, longevity, or scale. It provides a framework for thinking about the dynamics of strategic policies.

Escalation also provides a warning that the very phrase “urban operations” implies a degree of control that rarely exists, and that routine methods of planning must be open to new ways of thinking. This is important because the way we think and the way we act are tightly linked, and organizational problems often result from our thinking. Thus achieving new ways of thinking about urban operations will require more than a simple identification of the military options available in cities, not least because globalization and urbanization processes interact to create new sources of uncertainty, structural tension, and loyalty. Whether or not the structural dominance of the state as the prime level of political organization will continue is debatable but, for the moment at least, globalization and urbanization draw attention to significant changes in the role of certain cities.

At the international level globalization emphasizes the potential for important cities and their infrastructure to become critical security issues. The

metaphor of globalization, describing the connected nature of such factors as the transmission backbone networks underpinning telecommunications and financial dealings, emphasizes that a change in one of the elements underpinning a functionally important city could set in train a cascade of reflexive changes in others. An effect of operations in a hub- or world city could extend the notion of an enemy well beyond the parties immediately involved, perhaps attracting a new set of factors exploiting historical enmities. This could require a reconceptualization of urban operations to include economic targeting and information operations as dominant forms of warfighting, together with more subtle forms of exploitation, denial, or punishment.

The affects of internationalization have tended to shape our understanding of the strategic environment but the increasing rate of urbanization suggests that the emphasis should be re-balanced in the latter's favor. It is probable that the world, with its scarce resources and burgeoning population, is now entering a characteristically urban era in which many military operations will take place in cities; new sources of endemic low-level conflict are already evident in the densely populated cities of the South. Such trends have multiple strategic and tactical implications. At the domestic level, for example, the culture and behavior of an urban society tends to be different to that of a rural society, while governments usually respond differently to threats against a city than to those against more rural areas. Cities also attract the disaffected, are vulnerable to asymmetric action, and, in the South at least, are increasingly inhabited by large, youthful, and highly motivated populations. It is the mix of such factors, interacting with political contingencies, technological developments, and trends such as decentralization and international intervention by multinational forces, that leads to shifts in the strategic environment.

## **AN URBAN ERA**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century half of the world's population lives in areas classified as urban. This has significant political and military implications, not least because Asia and Africa are only just beginning their urban transition. The institutions and politics that served the relatively dispersed and stable rural populations of the twentieth century do not necessarily transfer well to cities and new tensions and conflicts are a frequent result. Tensions are further accentuated by increasing inequalities between the economic North and South. Recent operations in Grozny, Mostar, and Ramallah are not anomalous.

Precisely what operations will look like in, say, 2010 is impossible to predict with any certainty. The only thing that can be said with assurance about the future is that it will differ from the present. Any list of the most significant factors affecting operations in the coming decades is to some extent arbitrary. Such a list might, however, include the following possibilities, all of which relate to urbanization: demographic pressures, migration, and a shift in age compositions



will be accompanied by growing threats to water security and by other “new security” issues often representing specifically urban vulnerabilities.

It would be rash to predict which of these factors will be high on the policy agenda in 2010 but one compelling factor is clear: controlling key cities usually requires enforcement operations or warfighting. This is unlikely to change. Neither is the fact that cities, especially when functioning in the midst of existing nationalistic or ethnic conflict, can themselves influence the processes and outcomes of both specific and broader conflicts. For cities introduce a set of characteristics and factors which are themselves capable of strategic effect. A change in one of the elements underpinning a functionally important city could set in train a cascade of reflexive changes in others; operations in a hub- or world city could thus extend the notion of an enemy well beyond the parties immediately involved.

Global trends imply that urban operations are likely to prove as characteristic of the 2010s as peacekeeping has been of the 1990s. Self-interest suggests we should therefore concern ourselves with developing an over-view of the place of urban terrain in military operations. We should pay more attention to developing strategies for military operations in cities, as opposed to tactics for urban terrain generally, because such operations can easily generate unforeseen consequences and contradictions that could endanger our own ideological interests.

### Endnotes

1. The Somalis proved to be aggressive and bold fighters. The population swarmed towards US forces at the sound of gunshots, and gunmen were hidden by non-combatants, making it difficult to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. A much quoted example from Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down* vividly illustrates this: “The US Rangers saw a Somali with a gun lying prone on the street between two kneeling women. The shooter had the barrel of his weapon between the women's legs, and there were four children actually sitting on him. He was completely shielded in non-combatants...” Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press 1999), p. 46.
2. The World Bank's definition of cities is used here. The terms cities and urban areas are interchangeable:

The formal definition of urban areas describes them as concentrations of non-agricultural workers and nonagricultural production sectors. Most countries call settlements with 2,500–25,000 people urban areas. The definition varies from country to country and has changed over time. If the criteria China used in its 1980 census had been applied to its 1990 census, the country's urbanization rate for the 1980s would have been more than 50 per cent – far more than the 26 percent produced by the more rigorous approach used in 1990. A city has a certain legal status (granted by the national or provincial government) that is generally associated with specific administrative or local government structures.

World Bank, *World Development Report 1999/2000* (New York: World Bank, 1999), p. 127.
3. Scott Bollens, *On Narrow Ground: Urban Policy and Ethnic Conflict in Jerusalem and Belfast* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

4. Luttwak's comments about operational art are directly applicable here: "Instead of cumulative destruction, the desired process is systemic destruction" – and this is dependent on knowledge. Edward Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War," *International Security* 5, no. 3 (1980/81), p. 64.
5. For relevant accounts of the 1957 battle of Algiers, see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*, 2nd ed. (London: Papermac, 1987); John Talbot, *The War Without a Name: France in Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Faber, 1979).
6. Project Lincolnia, designed to examine urban operations from a joint and interagency perspective, was prompted by a report by the US General Accounting Office (GAO) that was critical of Department of Defense (DoD) efforts as being too focused at the tactical level and paying insufficient attention to the operational and strategic level challenges of urban operations.
7. Adam Geibel, "Brazzaville – The Congo: Dying Cities in An Unknown Civil War," *Infantry*, (Sept.-Dec. 1999), pp. 17-20.
8. The literature on the battles for Grozny is extensive. For an eyewitness account of the first battle, see Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (London: Pan, 1997). For relevant professional lessons, see publications from the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office. For example, Timothy Thomas and Lester Grau, "Russian Lessons Learned from the Battles for Grozny," *Marine Corps Gazette* (2000), pp. 45-48; Timothy Thomas, "Grozny 2000: Urban Combat Lessons Learned," *Military Review* LXXX, no. 4 (2000), pp. 50-58.
9. Somalia may yet prove a pivotal case for urban operations. It posed the question of how we should operate in a faction-ridden Southern city, in a juridical state lacking forms of centralized authority. States such as Somalia are fragile constructs but have survived as legal entities because "their sovereignty is not contingent on their credibility as authoritative and capable political organisations. Instead, the international community, especially as embodied in the United Nations guarantees it." For an analysis of empirical and juridical states, see Robert Jackson, "Juridical Statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of International Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1-16. See also Kenneth Menkhaus and Louis Ortmayer, "Somalia: Misread Crises and Missed Opportunities," in Bruce Jentleson, ed., *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventive Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 211-37.
10. NATO ATP-35 (B), 2-70 defines post-hostilities operations as activities "focused on restoring order, minimizing confusion following the operation, re-establishing the host nation infrastructure, preparing forces for redeployment, and continuing presence to allow other elements of alliance power to achieve overall strategic aims."
11. Bienen's assessment of sub-Saharan Africa in 1968 remains valid for many regions: "In the power realm, nation-wide political structures are either non-existent or too weak to enforce the will of ruling national elites, no matter whether they are of traditional lineage groups, civilian bureaucracy, or the military." Henry Bienen, ed., *The Military Intervenes: Case Studies in Political Development* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1968), p. 36.
12. William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also William Reno, *Warlord Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Mats Berdal and David Malone, eds., *Greed & Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).
13. Robert Fatton, *Predatory Rule: state and civil society in Africa* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p. 186.
14. Colin Powell's six-day visit to Africa in late May 2001 illustrates the degree of Republican interest at that time. Tony Blair, the British prime minister, also said that he wished to develop the concept of a partnership with Africa and that Africa was a priority for his second term in office. See "Blair's broad horizons," *Financial Times*, 25 May 2001.

15. This process refers to the way in which political actors “seek to maximize their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty, and sometimes chaos, which characterizes most African polities.” Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey and Indiana University Press, 1999), p. xviii. Order in the African state is thus the outcome of rationalities and causalities that are different to those of the West. Compare Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey and Indiana University Press, 1999). The possibility of operations in Africa in the near future appears low but the observations have wider relevance.
16. See, for example, Berdal and Malone, *Greed & Grievance*; Mats Berdal and David Keen, “Violence and Economic Agendas in Civil Wars: Some Policy Implication,” *Millennium* 26, no. 3 (1997), pp. 795-818; Jakkie Cilliers, J. and Peggy Mason, eds., *Peace, Profit or Plunder? The Privatisation of Security in War-Torn African Societies* (South Africa: ISS, 1999).
17. For an informative discussion, see P.W. Singer, “Caution: Children at War,” *Parameters* (Winter 2001-02), pp. 40-56.
18. Ian Lesser, et al., *Countering the New Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), p. 47.
19. They form a central theme in emergency management. See, for instance, Tom Horlick-Jones, “Planning and Co-ordinating Urban Emergency Management: Some Reflections on New York City and London,” *Disaster Management* 6, no. 3 (1994), pp. 141-46.
20. One such example is to be found in the rebel movements in the Horn of Africa. Most have formed humanitarian wings to interface with the Western aid community. Such relationships fuelled conflict in Mogadishu in 1993.
21. Francart and Patry refer to the *espace vécu*, *espace politique*, and *espace de représentation*. See Loup Francart and Jean-Jacques Patry, *Mastering Violence: An Option for Operational Military Strategy* (Commandement de la doctrine et de l’enseignement militaire supérieur de l’armée de terre, 1998), p. 26.
22. Lester Grau and Jacob Kipp, “Urban Combat: Confronting the Specter,” *Military Review* LXXIX, no. 4 (1999), p. 12; World Bank, *World Development Report 1999/2000*, p. 127.
23. BBC World News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 7 Jan. 2000.
24. Grau and Thomas, “Urban Combat,” p. 73.
25. Significantly, the then commander-in-chief of the Internal Troops of Russia’s Interior Ministry, Anatoliy Kulikov, who later served as minister of the interior and was thus responsible for combating organized crime, did not see military force as the solution, believing that military action alone could not resolve the conflict. He emphasized instead the requirement for political, economic, and international diplomatic measures to address the type of conflict in which a Grozny could take place. Anatoliy S. Kulikov, “Trouble in the North Caucasus,” trans. by Robert Love, *Military Review* (July-Aug. 1999), pp. 41-51.
26. More than 550 people were killed during 10 days of severe rioting in Bombay in 1993. The riots occurred throughout the city area. For policing during peacekeeping, see Robert B Oakley, et al., *Policing the New World Disorder: Peace Operations and Public Security* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1998). It is not coincidental that efficient policing demands local knowledge – something the military rarely have.
27. The operation in Haiti during 1994 is often thought to illustrate this but compare the critical account of US operations by Bob Shacochis, *The Immaculate Invasion* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).
28. The classification is that of Ralph Peters, “The Future of Armoured Warfare,” *Parameters* XXVII, no. 3 (1997), p. 54. The rioting in Los Angeles in 1992 extended over 32 miles, covering about 100-150 square miles. The transferability of the US experience is, however, questionable. It is significant that, despite the scale of the riots, only riot control and law enforcement techniques were needed. Compare S. Peterson, “Civil Disturbances in the American

- Urban Environment: An Evaluation of US Army Doctrine (Part 2),” *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement* 3, no. 1 (1994), p. 159.
29. Bringing with them long-standing problems associated with civil affairs’ command, control, status, and quality. See F. S. V. Donnison, *Civil Affairs and Military Government: North-West Europe, 1944-46* (London: HMSO, 1961); *Civil Affairs and Military Government: Central Organization and Planning* (London: HMSO, 1966).
  30. B.N. Reckitt, *Diary of Military Government in Germany 1945* (Ilfracombe:1989), frontispiece.
  31. G. J. Ashworth, *War and the City* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 124-31.
  32. UN official quoted in *Financial Times*, 11 Sept. 1993. After questions were asked about an attack on Digfer hospital when UNOSOM forces were pursuing General Aidid, an unnamed UN official was quoted as saying “The normal rules of engagement do not apply in this nation.” Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey and Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 187. The language used by American troops in Mogadishu made this attitude explicit. See Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*.
  33. The point is further emphasized by the fact that the forced repatriation by British troops of some 25,000 Cossacks and Caucasians, who had been recruited by the Germans from Russian prisoners during the Second World War, and had fought for the Germans with great ferocity, remains controversial. In 1988, a case based on the repatriation came to the High Court in London and resulted in \$3m damages being awarded against Nicolai Tolstoy for repeatedly calling Lord Aldington (who, as Brigadier Low, had been the officer responsible for handling the problem) a war criminal.
  34. Policy Director, Ministry of Defence, *SDR New Chapter Leaflet* (London, March 2002). Asymmetric threats are defined, somewhat controversially, as “the threat of an attack by unconventional methods which would have a disproportionate effect.”
  35. The concept of escalation is primarily associated with Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965).