

URBANIZATION, PEACE, AND SECURITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global population's demographic and social transition into predominantly urban environments has implications for security dynamics and efforts to promote peace. Yet cities, their governments, and unique enablers for violence are rarely



INTRODUCTION

are if they don't specifically examine the geographic unit where most of the global population lives.

The Urban Political Space as a Framework

This report tries to fill part of this gap by examining the

Violence and Conflict Economies in the Lake Chad Region

Regional capitals in the Lake Chad region of West Africa, such as Maiduguri (capital of Borno state in northwest Nigeria) and Maroua (capital of Cameroon's Far North) are relatively protected from insurgent groups such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah lid-Da'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). These cities tend to concentrate security forces that deter major takeover attempts by militants. The same cannot be said, however, for small towns around those two cities. Despite having relatively small populations—usually fewer than 100,000 inhabitants—towns such as Mora, Kolofata, Tourou, Banki, Gwoza, and Rann have been severely affected by raids, looting, and taxation by the armed groups along roads. This predation has severely disrupted trade and human flows along Lake Chad's network of cities and towns, as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has shown.²⁷

Armed groups such as ISWAP and Boko Haram have usually targeted the premises of humanitarian agencies and local markets, but many attacks have involved fighters going house to house looting people's possessions and abducting residents. One town with historic importance for trans-Saharan trade routes, Malam Fatori, was deserted for seven years after its 30,000 residents fled Boko Haram violence in 2014.²⁸ Raids are usually accompanied by violence, with abductions and attacks on residents who resist the armed groups. Traders who have tapped into armed groups' microloans and could not repay them have usually been forcibly conscripted and made to join the fighters, while others are charged extortion money in exchange for "security."²⁹

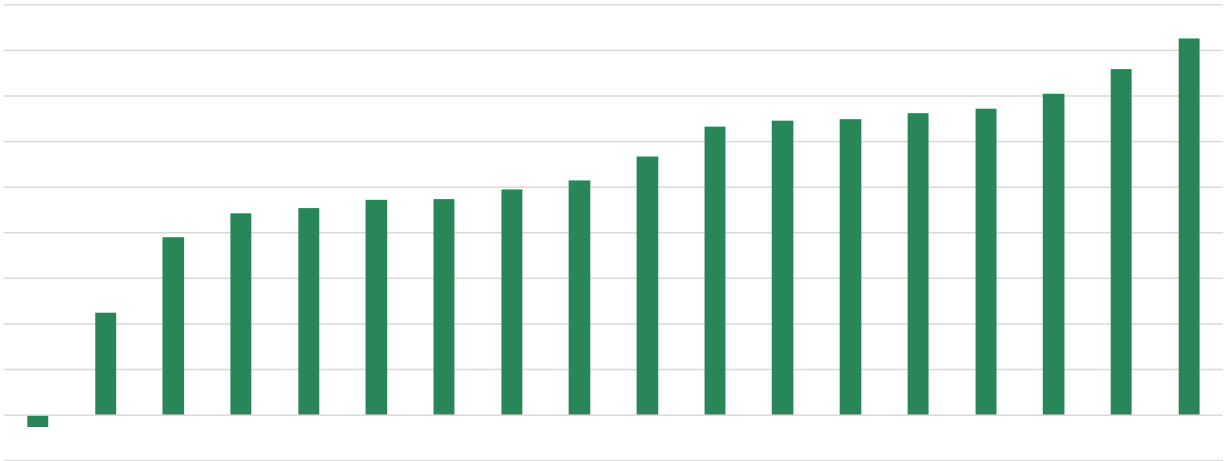
Aside from direct looting of towns, GI-TOC research has shown that armed groups tax several roads linking the Lake Chad region's urban system, imposing checkpoints and taxes on traders and individuals traveling by car between towns and the main cities, especially those connecting with Maiduguri, which is by far the largest in the region with over one million inhabitants. This is also accompanied by violence, with drivers reporting vehicles being set ablaze and abductions of women by fighters who consider them "spoils of war."³⁰

This violence and disruption impact not only residents of the towns directly targeted but also the economic and food security of residents of larger cities that are apparently more protected. Armed groups have frequently attacked major fishing towns in areas under government control, such as Baga and Doron Baga,³¹ and set up alternative villages for fishing and market supplies within their own territories, thus disrupting supplies to major urban centers such as Maiduguri and reducing government tax income.

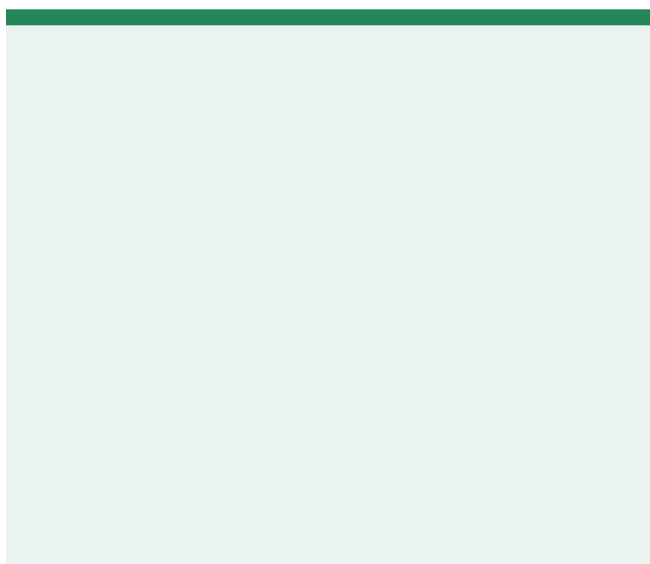
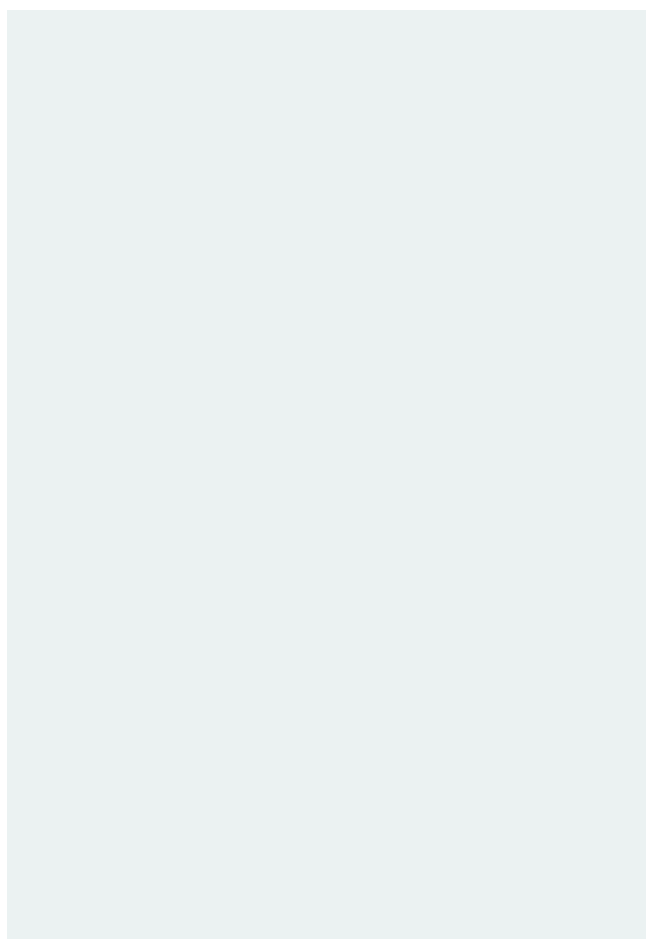
Urbanization, poverty, and inequality are factors that exacerbate the challenges of conflict, organized crime, and other global threats and make urban governance systems less likely to be able to cope with security challenges, both direct ones linked to armed groups and violence and indirect ones linked to displacement flows to cities. The expansion of informal settlements and peripheries stretches the capacity of governments to provide infrastructure and law enforcement. This can benefit gangs and mafias in various ways, for example taking advantage of the void of public sector support to exploit vulnerable populations through the provision to goods and services, including "security" services - often of bad quality and high prices. But such a formal gap can also enable non-transparent, predatory government agents to collaborate with gangs/mafias through an array of profit-seeking and exploitation schemes.

The humanitarian sector has been at the forefront of pushing for better rules and practices for conflict in urban settings, including through the campaign and successful signing by 83 states in Dublin in 2022 of the unwieldily named Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.³²

Meanwhile, conflict prevention and resolution tools used by the United Nations, regional groupings, and national governments have been designed with nation states and central governments as part of the post-World War II frameworks and need adapting.³³ Whereas the United Nations has recognized the importance of urban safety in Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals, UN officials have not shifted their policy frameworks to, for example, adapt peacekeeping and address intercommunity tensions in cities such as Bangui and Port-au-Prince.³⁴ In postcrisis recovery, including from situations of armed conflict, UN-Habitat has highlighted that most "recovery frameworks do not have an explicit urban component."³⁵ A report by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) has pointed to how the "urban environment has been largely overlooked as a unique setting for SSG/R [security sector governance and reform] in existing research, policy debates and practice." This gap, according to DCAF, is driven by how security sector governance "seems to have gotten trapped between the growing

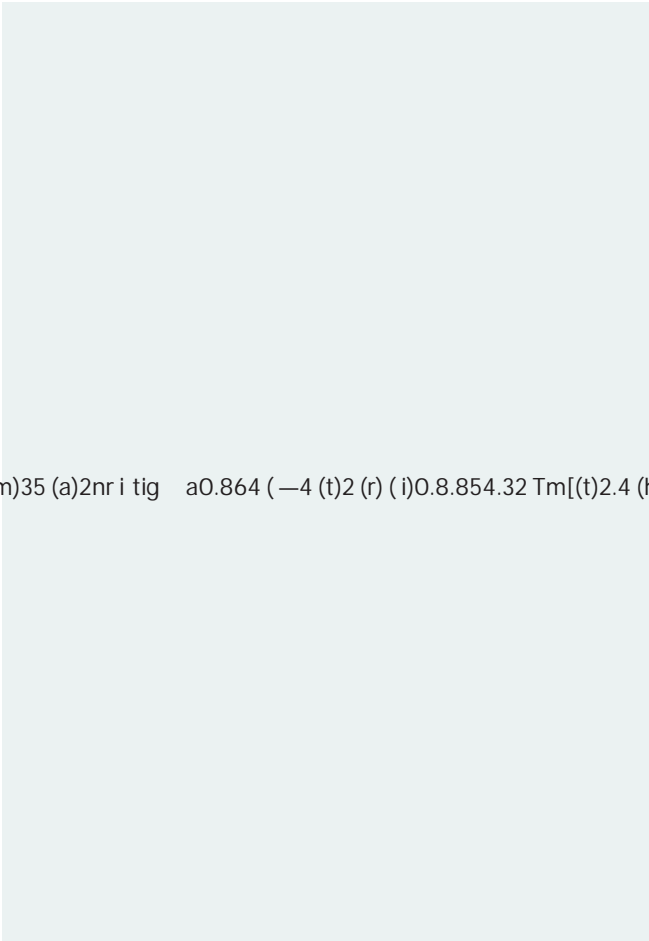


dominant type of national and transnational organised crime in Africa is the usurpation and, thereafter, exploitation of land and property rights.”⁵⁸



TOWARD SOLUTIONS: AN URBANIZATION, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

A great amount of attention has been paid by peacebuilders and the international development sector in the past few decades to “local” solutions and actors. When discussing the need for a more specific “urban” focus, international organizations’ staff sometimes argue they work extensively with “local” actors. Surely, the argument goes, the multiple interactions that international organizations, development banks, western development agencies, and NGOs have with local civil society groups, activists, and communities count as “urban” projects and as supporting urbanization. Perhaps, but prominent experts on peacebuilding and conflict prevention have also pointed out that although urban peacebuilding (though not usually with this name) is addressed by a “plethora of academic fields and communities of practice,” they “do not engage with one another in a systemic manner.”



Clustering, Close Proximity, and Inequality

One of the many insights from recent research on urban conflict and organized crime is the identification of a “spatiality” of violence in cities.⁷⁹ This spatiality refers to the intertwining of urban geographical features and the politics of conflict, violence, and organized crime, that result in unique security dynamics, many of which are illustrated in the discussions above. Concentration (or clustering) alongside the density and populational diversity of cities makes the mixing of diverse groups, ethnicities and sects not only likely but unavoidable—forcing tensions and rivalries to play out in a geographically compressed area.⁸⁰

At the same time, different areas in the same city can have radically unequal access to economic resources, policymakers, political influence, security provision, and public services.⁸¹ Stark inequalities in a single interconnected social space can exacerbate or even create new tensions between communities. For instance, when certain ethnic groups have privileged access to or favors from policymakers, socioethnic tensions can be exacerbated.⁸² Even certain criminal groups can be favored by authorities to the detriment of other groups with less powerful allies. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, areas dominated by militia groups formed by former military police officers have historically been less affected by violent police operations than those controlled by drug-trafficking gangs—a likely reflection of militias’ stronger (illicit) ties to police forces.⁸³ Security provision is perhaps the most acutely felt inequality in cities, as affluent areas even in profoundly violent cities often receive far greater attention from law enforcement and private security even as informal and other low-income settlements witness cycles of criminal and police violence.⁸⁴

These inequalities, tensions, and conflicts take place in a clustered way, with rival armed groups, competing criminal interest (including some by state actors), and law enforcement competing over spaces and resources that exist often within walking distance of each other.

Multiple Powerholders

Cities facing conflict, violence, or organized crime are likely to host a multiplicity of actors who operate at the same time. Research by Clionadh Raleigh of the Conflict Location and Event Data project has shown that urban political violence is more commonly perpetrated by small groups such as militias, paramilitaries, and identity groups associated with communal violence and falls short of the levels associated with civil wars, which have traditionally seen larger rebel groups based in larger rural territories. The classification problem, especially how urban violence cannot be easily categorized as civil war nor as purely criminal (materially-motivated) violence, may be part of the reason why peacebuilders have not embraced urban topics more avidly.⁸⁵ Moritz Schuberth has put forward the concept of community-based armed groups as a subtype of armed actor essentially linked to local, “parochial” objectives such as community protection, vigilantism over a delimited residential area, sectarianism over politically important cities, and purely criminal

actors—categories that would mark militias, paramilitaries, vigilantes, and gangs as typical community-based warriors as opposed to insurgent groups connected to national and sometimes international political goals.⁸⁶ (This definition seems to leave out terrorist groups, which exemplify a type of nationally or internationally motivated armed group operating mostly in cities.) Regardless of typologies, which are always tricky, several studies agree that cities have become hubs for “intense struggles between disparate interests and multiple stakeholders.”⁸⁷

Criminal actors and illicit transnational flows also cluster in cities as hubs in broader networks and supply chains for consumer markets (usually in rich countries)—not just drugs but also weapons, minerals, wildlife, timber, and even humans. Transnational illicit flows can play a decisive role in providing criminal groups with the money and weapons to wrest control over certain urban areas from the state and build the types of hybrid governance structures discussed in the previous section—with extensive corruption of local authorities, municipal agencies, and security forces.

Mapping powerholders also means incorporating the positive and catalytic effect that local governments and civil society leaders have. Pathfinders, one of the co-facilitators of the Peace in Our Cities initiative, has laid out these positive effects in a recent

such as Brazil and South Africa, not to mention conflict-affected ones. This manifests in practice through “spatially circumscribed” armed groups replacing the state in key functions and serving as alternative sources of allegiance, welfare, employment, and protection.⁹⁴ This can be seen in territories that “belong” to militias or gangs. In the Lake Chad region, vigilantism against Boko Haram has in large part taken the form of armed community members (such as the Civilian Joint Task Force in northwestern Nigeria) patrolling towns and cities and setting up checkpoints.⁹⁵ Urbanization, Diane Davis further argues, has shifted the traditional role of “no-man’s lands” for illegal economies operating in impunity and violence from (rural) borderlands to cities, especially informal settlements and other marginalized areas that o) both51(a)-6(e)-9.8 (.5 (n i)-4.-11.774.715(e)-1.5 -9.7 (d)3.5 (i)5.2 (l) s)-9.1 (7.3 54 62-4.-11.774.7).5 (o)-2.7 (r) (b)- (r)2 (t 38.3 (t)0.8 (13(i)-7 (s f)o Tc O.

fall somewhere in between these two categories that challenge political authority even while heavily exploiting illicit economies, short of the threshold that the international community considers armed conflict. These armed groups—militias, paramilitaries, armed wings of political parties—use what Paul Staniland has called “armed politics” where they engage with politicians and the state even while they instrumentally use violence.¹⁰⁴ These community-

What Should Be the Goals and Scope of an Urbanization, Peace, and Security Agenda?

There are several challenges and threats to peace and security in cities. As James Cockayne, Louise Bose i, and Nazia Hussain have argued, the role of organizations like the United Nations in preventing conflict should be to work on instances of violent competition for “urban governmental power that risk impacting formal politics”—in other words, violence aiming to control urban spaces and impose rules on populations with potential or actual harm to the state’s prerogative of regulating services and monopolizing legitimate use of force.¹¹² Contested urban spaces, to put it simply, should indeed be among the top priorities of not only conflict prevention but also peacebuilding, peacekeeping, security sector governance, and anticrime e orts.

The scope of an urbanization, peace, and security agenda would include the following:

- Armed conflict, both internal and involving foreign states, which impacts cities’ critical systems, human security, infrastructure, and postconflict recovery capacity.
- Paramilitaries, militias, and vigilantes: These types of armed groups are widely used in contexts such as West A36.4 (t)-12.7 -8.6 (n)-9.8 ((t A)M8(r)5.6 4)]TJ160.5 (c)-m r

CONCLUSION

This report has argued that neither initiatives focused on central (national) state nor vaguely defined “local” actions are sufficient to adequately promote peace and security in urban environments. The global trend toward urbanization, especially in conflict-affected, postconflict, and fragile settings, requires deep consideration within the urban political space. In other words, it is critical to engage with the powerholders, territorial claims, and governance providers—many of them informal—that compete in a clustered context where adversaries live side by side. An important spatial dimension of urban peace and security is the concentration of illicit economies and organized crime exploiting cities’ international connectivity, which frames the opportunity context for the structuring of more serious and organized armed groups.

This report has argued that in addition to global demographic trends, the growing linkage between global and local security threats—through organized crime and the growing incidence of armed conflict in cities—justify a greater focus on cities. The international security debate is justifiably preoccupied with great power competition and voices of national political elites. But it cannot lose sight of the massive social, political, and demographic transition taking place in vast areas of the Global South. Ignoring urbanization and the local-global nexus risks reducing the applicability of peace and security toolboxes—security sector reform, conflict prevention, DDR, peace settlements, anti-organized crime efforts—if they are not based on a deep understanding of the type of environment where over half, and soon two-thirds, of the global population lives.

Cross-Cutting Policy Recommendations

The report has suggested in the previous section some practical frameworks drawn from the peace and security literature and proposed potential adaptations to urban environments. It has also suggested that donor and multilateral agencies should assign departments and senior staff specifically tasked with promoting urban peace and security, with the crucial mission of linking the various programs on peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and security to a context of urbanization. These final recommendations pertain to the broader international system and cut across different communities of practice.

- **Establish a group of experts to advise on better coordination and action on urbanization, peace, and security.** The main goal would be to review how the international peace and security architecture interacts with and reacts to global urbanization trends and suggest adaptation measures, especially in key frameworks used by multilateral organizations, development banks, donor agencies, NGOs, and think tanks, such as security sector

reform, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, responses to organized crime and community resilience. The panel would also seek to further develop the urbanization, peace, and security framework proposed in this paper. This panel should ideally be assembled under the auspices of the United Nations, with a leading role for UN-Habitat, and co-facilitated by city networks such as UCLG and Peace in Our Cities. It should include experts and practitioners working on urbanization from a peace and security perspective—conflict studies, political science, criminology—and from a developmental perspective—urban studies, planning, international development, humanitarian action. Its impact would be greater as a permanent panel that convenes regularly to ensure cohesion and continuity of efforts, especially in terms of take up by various agencies and organizations. Its target audience

reform would add an urban-sensitive lens to international peace and security.

- **Support a research agenda on urbanization, peace, and security.** This report has mentioned several times the little attention or effort being paid to urban specificities in key areas such as conflict prevention, security sector governance, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. While there is competition for policy attention in a world of “polycrisis,”¹¹⁷

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