



## City as a battleground: trends in urban warfare

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### Background

Urban warfare is as old as cities themselves. Urban centers have always been strategic sites because of their economic, demographic, infrastructural and symbolic importance. Image of cities being captured, recaptured, sacked, burned and rebuilt is inherent to military history, even though much of the classical military doctrine looked at urban fighting with distaste. “The worst policy is to attack cities,” Sun Tzu notes and his view is shared by many military strategists today given the associated risks for armed forces and also given the scope of collateral damage typical for urban operations. However, the decision to fight or not in cities is not usually for the ‘West’ to make. As the world gets increasingly urbanized, so does the conflict.

Professional armed forces around the world recognized long ago that military operations are likely to unfold in dense urbanized areas in decades to come. The Mogadishu incident in 1993 and the military disaster in Grozny in 1994 proved that the most sophisticated militaries can fail when applying tactics designed for open terrain in cities. Thus, during the 1990s the urban warfare thinking and development gained a momentum which lasted

until about 9/11. In the following years, two large scale multi-national operations in Afghanistan and Iraq reverted the attention of military strategists to mostly rural, mountainous and often landlocked operations. A decade later, the Arab urban revolutions and the recent developments in Ukraine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen are once again indicating a growing relevance of cities for analysis and practice of armed conflict.

### Analysis

Predictions about future warfare are very difficult to make in the era defined by complexity. As a result, military strategists have focused on the nature of potential adversaries and the future operational environment. Research on the former suggests that future engagements will be hybrid and asymmetrical, with actors as diverse as regular armies, tribal militias, insurgents, terrorists, warlords and criminal syndicates, to name but a few. The predictions regarding future environment are more straightforward. As argued by Dave Kilcullen, former soldier, diplomat and advisor to General D. Petraeus, four global trends are key: population growth, urbanization, connectivity and littoralization. The plain fact is that most of the world’s human population lived in cities by 2007 and the numbers

continue to grow, especially on coasts and river shores of Africa and Asia.

Consequences of these trends for warfare receive increasing attention by strategic foresight analysts and Concepts branches of professional militaries around the world. The NATO itself has been running an urbanization initiative, in addition to existing urban programs involving everything from doctrine to training in the U.S., UK, Israel and many European armed forces. Still, strategic analysis involving cities is only a small part of the picture when compared to urban-related tactical and technological development currently taking place.

European military budget headaches notwithstanding, many countries around the world are far from cutting investment to develop their military capabilities. Private sector contracts are booming as militaries seek a tactical edge in urban operations, and analyses regarding the needed training for U.S. military personnel are often sub-contracted to 'external' actors. For example, in one such report from 2011 sponsored by the Defense Department, the RAND Corporation proposed to construct a \$330 million urban warfare training site in California. The proposed 'mock city' consisting of 900 buildings and covering an area of 400 square kilometers would be big enough for an entire brigade to train simultaneously.

To list innovations in command and control capabilities and state-of-art technologies in communications, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance tailored for urban environment undertaken as a result of this investment is well beyond the scope of this brief. The objectives include designing ever more efficient monitoring systems, including UAVs using sensors, robotics and nanotechnologies to improve situational awareness in dense urban terrain. With regards to weapons, the development aims for better precision, effect, fire power and mobility which continue to be the decisive aspects of urban warfare. Soldiers' equipment innovations aim for lighter but more protective body armor, perfected night vision and real time communication devices, potentially improving efficiency and reducing physical and mental exhaustion inherent in close urban combat. Last but not least, modifications to military vehicles aim for smaller, effective and mobile capabilities

apt for maneuvering in narrow streets, overcoming physical obstacles and engaging with targets while protecting the operators.

The problem with the prevailing tactical and technocratic perspective on urban warfare is that it approaches the city as a piece of operational terrain rather than a complex system. Urban military doctrines still prefer the "clear and hold" principle as key to military success. However, Western military experts are well aware that their forces can prevail in clearing but they keep failing to hold. Urban room-clearing and block-clearing is a useful tactic but insufficient without a strategic plan; a lesson painfully learned by U.S. marines in Fallujah. A city as a complex network made out of natural, man-made and social elements and their constant interactions is something extremely difficult to "hold", regardless of the above-mentioned capabilities. Most of today's cities are simply too big to be controlled in a traditional military sense.

Applying the 'holding' tactics often leads to isolating and freezing parts of the urban terrain. In its extreme form, this approach has been labeled as 'urbicide' by critics such as Stephen Graham from the Newcastle University, referring to the urban military policy of Israel towards the Palestinians. Freezing a city or its parts by military force seldom leads to long-term strategic success. In order to secure a city, it is imperative for an intervening force to understand the physical and social networks of the urban system. During the engagement, the objective should be to minimize disruption to everyday circulations, such as energy, information and traffic flows. At the same time, military forces will increasingly need to cooperate with the police, intelligence agencies and infrastructure operators, as future urban conflict is bound to further blur the lines between civilian and military, internal and external, as well as private and public.

## Bottom Line

- Cities always were and continue to be strategic sites for military engagement, and global trends and recent conflict developments only confirm the relevance of urban military thinking and practice;
- Defense ministries, professional militaries and

private sector have become aware of these trends and have invested heavily in developing strategies and tactics focused on urban operations, but most of these are technology-based and do not abandon the traditional military logic of top-down control of operational terrain;

- While military-technological edge is imperative to achieve tactical success, securing cities in a long term requires maintaining healthy circulations that keep urban systems going, which makes controlling vast, complex and network-based cities beyond the capacities of even today's most sophisticated militaries;
- Due to the form of future warfare (future conflicts will combine aspects of urban COIN, pacification, crisis management, humanitarian campaigns and long-term stabilization) and the nature of potential adversaries, police and military functions are likely to be increasingly intertwined.