
Urban Security: From High-Intensity Crime to Large-Scale Combat Operations and Everything in Between

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**Urban Security: From High-Intensity Crime to Large-Scale
Combat Operations and Everything in Between**

Introduction to the Special Issue (2023): Urban Security

Fifteen authors across ten articles in this special issue explore key events that shape our understanding of urban security and provide valuable strategic lessons to better prepare for the growing threat of conflict in urban areas. This volume seeks to compile cases of urban warfare throughout different regions and decades to expose the ever-increasing trends of urban conflict and expose the complexities of urban combat in an increasingly urbanized world. It also provides lessons learned and makes theoretical contributions in areas such as urban warfare, urban conflict and non-state actors, emergency response to urban terror, artificial intelligence (AI) and data processing and urban security. Battle in urban areas continues to develop with state and non-state actors, so it is crucial to understand the tactics and strategies that have succeeded and failed to continue to create a successful system for urban warfare.

Urbanization has increased substantially over time. The *UN World Cities Report 2022* states that half of the world's population will live in cities in 2020 and that by 2070, 60 percent of the world's population will live in cities.¹ The increase in urbanization will likely produce megacities and mega slums that interact with one another and comprise entire theaters of operation for those seeking to control them.² Mike Davis exposed how since the 1970s slums have outpaced urbanization in the global south with places like São Paulo's slums representing 1.2 percent of the total population in 1973 and exploding to 19.8 percent by 1993.³ Cities continue to gain importance as they become critical for the global economy as they produce, manufacture, and connect cities transnationally.⁴ Under this new demographic reality, security experts must renew their focus on urban warfare and its emerging challenges. Then Army Chief of Staff, who later served as Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, acknowledged that "the Army has been designed, manned, trained and equipped for the last 241 years to operate primarily in rural areas."⁵ Milley recognizes the army's need to reorganize to fight successfully in urban areas.⁶ As the armed forces adapt their strategies to fight in urban settings, new planes of the battlefield have emerged.

Urban operations include a range of activity spanning urban security for high-intensity crime, through riots and disorder, terrorism, conventional, and criminal insurgencies, hybrid warfare, and large-scale combat operations (LSCO). Indeed, these varieties of crime and conflict often interact and provide layers (or strata) of complexity and competition for power and profit. John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus note the strategic importance of urban security and urban operations. The authors explain how urbanization has led most people to live within cities that are fundamentally contested as they have become “commons of political, economic, and thus strategic importance.”⁷ Contested cities will erode distinctions between national and domestic policing strategies complicating issues of jurisdiction and making urban policy part of a grand strategic policy as cities become critical for national prosperity.⁸ The growth in size and importance of contested cities requires new policy and approaches to provide security to these urban centers and to combat globalized gangs that have made crime endemic in many parts of the developing (and developed) world.⁹

At a recent Security Council meeting, UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted that “90% of those affected when combatants use explosive weapons in cities are civilians” and that “50 million people currently face the dire consequences of urban warfare.”¹⁰ Despite the historical importance of urban insurgency in the 20th century, as evidenced with the Tupamaros and Marighella cases, insurgency, and counterinsurgency (COIN) researchers with a concentration on the rural environment have minimized the importance of urban warfare.¹¹ The US experience in Vietnam and Afghanistan, Mao’s ascendancy in China and its ramifications, and demographic trends of the 20th century may have all contributed to this overemphasis on rural COIN.¹² Conventional and unconventional warfare will increase in urban spaces as the world’s cities and population grow.

Scholar-practitioners, including David Kilcullen, Anthony King, Jamison Medby, and Russell Glenn, have identified megatrends that raise the possibility of increased urban violence in the future.¹³ These megatrends include population growth, rising urbanization, the expansion of coastal cities, and the benefits of connection found in metropolitan contexts. Kilcullen notes how several growing cities are also at risk because of climate change’s sea-level effects. In many urban environments,

“ungoverned spaces” should be understood as places with contested or alternative authority under weak sovereignty.¹⁴ Various actors such as warlords, insurgencies, militias, pirates, or nefarious organizations rule over these urban environments and are only interested in making money.¹⁵ The security community has also come to understand that mega-cities, which are cities with a population of more than 10 million, are much likelier to experience urban conflict.¹⁶

According to scholars like Medby and Glenn (2002), urban intelligence plays a crucial role in conflict. “Intelligence preparation of the battlefield” (IPB) is an analytical strategy that aims to comprehend how an enemy in an urban environment might respond in eclectic circumstances given terrain and other contingent factors.¹⁷ Several researchers have recently published numerous anthologies, edited volumes, and collections on urban security, exposing the field’s expanding popularity. For instance, researchers, including Glass, Seybolt, and Williams (2022), wrote their edited book on the significance of urban violence resilience in the global south.¹⁸ Another example is *Blood and Concrete*, a recent anthology collection on urban combat and its effects from the *Small Wars Journal*, anthologizing many paramount pieces from its website.¹⁹

The atrocities of urban warfare have become more evident thanks to the crisis in Ukraine. Urban warfare will play a role in the resurgence of great power conflict, whether from nations seeking to recover lost territory or status like Russia and China or democratic countries in the West like Ukraine defending their national sovereignty. Urban defenders in Ukraine’s most recent urban warfare received guidelines and handbooks on urban warfare published by academic practitioners like John Spencer. His *Mini-Manual for the Urban Defender* is available on his website in both English and Ukrainian.²⁰ The dissemination of the handbook from a personal computer located in the United States to social media and then the battlefield illustrates the practical ramifications of scholar-practitioner activity in urban security. This special issue for the *Journal of Strategic Security* seeks to contribute to the critical body of research on urban security. The following discussion recaps the articles featured in this special issue.

Urban Warfare

David J.H. Burden explores the value of wargames for planning and understanding urban warfare and security. The article takes a comparative case-study approach by analyzing the Battle of Hue, an urban battle fought during the Vietnam War, and the wargames produced about it. The author concludes that no single game model can capture the complexities of the urban conflict, but each contains important information that can be aggregated. Burden asserts that a nested approach that uses different wargaming techniques can help flesh out critical lessons to help understand the battle of Hue and plan better for future urban conflict.

In their respective articles, Russell Glenn and Louise Tumchewics explore urban warfare conducted during World War II to extract essential lessons on urban warfare that scholars and practitioners can apply to today's Russian-Ukrainian war. Glenn focuses on the battle for Manila in 1945, one of the world's most populated cities. The author details the process of liberating Manila from the Japanese, who had set mines and booby traps and faced off with Americans in close combat. Glenn goes beyond the strategic lessons learned by the US Army to minimize casualties during the battle but goes beyond as he points to the complexities of urban architecture in which a clear recovery plan must accompany destruction.

Louise Tumchewics also looks at conflict within World War II but focuses attention on Antwerp, Belgium, as a vital logistics center. The author follows the Canadian Army Civil Affairs unit responsible for revitalizing Antwerp's civil defense and essential services. The author notes that although V-1 and V-2 rockets were essentially impossible to stop, the Civil Affairs unit still managed to provide the city with essential services and governance. The well-organized Civil Affairs unit also set up a vital civil defense organization and offered valuable insights into maintaining critical national logistics infrastructure despite heavy bombardment. These insights benefit the Ukrainian conflict but may also provide useful insights for urban warfare, including non-state actors seeking control over urban populations.

Urban Conflict and Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs)

Daniel Weisz Argomedo, Nathan P. Jones, and John P. Sullivan focus primarily on urban warfare against violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in

México. The authors focus on the two military operations conducted to capture Ovidio Guzmán in Culiacán (son of El Chapo) and the valuable insights from the first and second attempts. The authors compare both military operations and discuss the broader risks and implications of modern urban sieges and swarming. In the first operation in October 2019 in Culiacán, the arrest of Ovidio Guzmán led to an urban siege of the city by the Sinaloa Cartel which ultimately forced his release because of the extreme threats to civilians. The second operation, conducted in January 2023 succeeded in capturing him, in part because of the rapid aerial exfiltration, a generally less urban environment, and a casualty acceptant Mexican security force strategy. It is notable that as this issue goes to press, the Mexican government extradited Ovidio Guzmán to Chicago in record time.²¹

On the other hand, Fausto Carbajal focuses on Michoacán's Apatzingán, uncovering urban violence's historical and political trajectory. The author reveals how organized crime is not solely responsible for violence experienced in Apatzingán. Instead, the author argues that the instability is caused by the reconfiguration of political-economic-criminal factions fighting over political and economic power.

México is an interesting case study for urban warfare as it faces increasingly sophisticated organized crime groups (OCGs) which are also more recently called Criminal Armed Groups (CAGs) in the urban security literature. These CAGs have led heavy urban fighting nationwide.

Jorge Mantilla and Carolina Andrade trace the increase of violence in Ecuador particularly in the city of Guayaquil which saw an uptick in homicide rates from 2018 to 2022. The authors argue that hardline policies, in combination with a fragmented criminal justice institution, only exacerbate urban violence. The authors note the importance of the prisons in Guayaquil as they govern criminals in the streets and are empowered by corruption and limited law enforcement. Mantilla and Andrade urge policymakers to consider spatial connections between prisons, violent slums, and illicit economic circuits and to reinstall institutional infrastructures that help prevent and control crime.

Urban Terrorism and Emergency Response

Nadav Morag traces the development of tactics and technologies designed for urban counter-terrorism developed by the Israel Defense Forces. The author traces the evolution of tactics spanning from ground operations in urban settings to focusing mostly on aerial operations. Several overarching trends from Israel's approach to urban warfare in the last few decades have been identified. There is a greater focus on accurate battlefield intelligence, the use of more accurate offensive and defensive weapons, and more focus on air defense systems. There is also a greater willingness to use reservists for ground operations, increased use of combined arms, and a willingness to ensure operations respect laws of war and other legal conventions. The author concludes that Israel will have to continue to adapt as its enemies evolve and present it with new challenges that may require it to continue to evolve its operational doctrine.

James Duggan, John Petrozzelli and Jay Slattery provide valuable firsthand accounts of the implementation of the incident command during the Boston Marathon bombing. Duggan, Petrozzelli and Slattery explain how the terrorists selected the Boston bombing partly because of the televised nature of such a large event in a densely populated area. The authors unearth several essential lessons from the attack to better respond to these types of attacks. They find that communication was a fundamental problem both immediately after the bombing, as well as before, given several officers present at the marathon had no knowledge of radio channels made available to them for the day of the marathon. Other communication issues spanned from the need for a liaison officer to facilitate interagency intelligence to leaks to the media that caused the suspects to go on the offensive. As intelligence and communication can be designed to better respond to attacks, other authors in this special issue have pointed out the dangers of surveillance as a rebirth of past colonial surveillance systems.

Urban Security and Surveillance

Dinesh Napal looks at the issues of surveillance in urban contexts. Napal argues that wide area motion imagery (WAMI) is a new surveillance technology that repeats mechanisms of dehumanization and disposability inherent to imperial and colonial endeavors. Napal shows the links

between the colonial surveillance imposed on Mauritius from India with the surveillance provided by WAMI. The author argues that such surveillance does not follow a logic of justice and fairness but seeks to maintain discipline and control over the population. Napal notes the problematic ways WAMI has been applied to specific neighborhoods that perpetuate narratives around “suspect” individuals and communities.

Anthony King also looks at surveillance issues as he explores the importance of artificial intelligence (AI) for urban operations. King asserts that the true potential for AI on the battlefield is not in lethal autonomy. The author uncovers that the true value of AI for urban operations lies on its ability to process data and support intelligence and targeting. Several cases are presented by the author to illustrate the importance of AI for data dissemination and targeting including the Ukrainian attacks on Russian command posts and logistical hubs.

The Book Reviews

The special issue includes three book reviews and one book review essay all of which review seminal works in urban security over the last two decades. First, Dr. Magdalena Denham masterfully reviews Russell Glenn’s *Hell or High Fever*.²² This comprehensive work touches upon emergency management issues in urban security, conflict, and pandemics.

Second, Amos Fox reviews the seminal *Understanding Urban Warfare* (2022) by Liam Collins and John Spencer. Collin’s and especially John Spencer’s work has become critically important in the zeitgeist around urban security especially vis-à-vis Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its urban security implications.

Third, Mike Burgoyne writes an important review on the *Small Wars Journal* anthology *Blood and Concrete*. *Blood and Concrete* is a collection of important essays on urban security covering issues like urban terrorism, urban (COIN) counterinsurgency, urban insurgency, and the tactical and operational issues related to complex urban operations.

Finally, José de Arimatéia da Cruz writes a masterful review essay of four seminal works in urban security. These include Kilcullen’s *Out of the Mountains*, an edited volume by Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen *Cities at*

War, Blood and Concrete edited by Dave Dillege, Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and Alma Keshavarz. It also reviews and synthesizes the most recent work of Anthony King a seminal author in urban security studies. King's *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* is usefully contrasted with Kilcullen's *Out of the Mountains*.²³ These reviews and review essay represent a useful starting point for any scholar or practitioner beginning their urban security journey and looking for seminal works.

Conclusions

Richard J. Norton describes a feral city as a

Metropolis with a population of more than a million people in a state the government of which has lost the ability to maintain the rule of law within the city's boundaries yet remains a functioning actor in the greater international system.²⁴

He asserts that these feral cities can provide safe havens for armed resistance groups that can then contest the power of the state.²⁵ Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan note the potential rise of a globalized network among feral cities that flourish in the global illicit economy as criminal enterprises compete for a stake in the licit and illicit global economies.²⁶ The authors warn that the flourishing of feral cities and mega slums is forming a confederation of illicit non-state actors linked globally that challenges states and their structure of governance, security, and economic power.²⁷

Overall, this peer-reviewed special issue presents useful case studies regarding urban warfare and security that help develop a more complex understanding of the phenomena. The cases spanned various locations, actors, and periods, but all help inform one another and help build a practical list of recommendations for current or future urban warfare.

Several authors present vital strategic solutions and lessons learned from these operations. Others focus more on the mechanisms that lead to urban violence, and some offer a cautionary tale for using WAMI surveillance. All authors agree that urban warfare is a growing challenge that requires further research to develop better combat strategies in urban settings.

Endnotes

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