

Urban drivers of political violence: declining state authority and armed groups in Mogadishu, Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi

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Executive summary

Rapid urbanisation is a major challenge facing the developing world in the 21st century, imposing pressures on the governance, security and economies of cities large and small. This challenge is particularly acute for fragile countries – those where the government is unable or unwilling to meet the population’s basic expectations such as the provision of physical security, necessary services and legitimate political institutions. Between 2008 and 2018, the urban population of sub-Saharan Africa, where there are currently seven United Nations peacekeeping missions, expanded by 51% (reaching a total of 424 million) – and this rapid growth is set to continue, with the urban population forecast to expand by a further 57% by 2030, according to the UN. Other developing regions, such as South and East Asia, have similarly high rates of urban population growth. This demographic trend has profound implications for state stability and security.

This rapid and unmanaged urbanisation process exacerbates local tensions and state weakness. Based on field research, this report identifies urban drivers of political violence in four cities located in fragile states: Mogadishu, Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi.

The main finding in this report is that the decline in state authority in cities near conflict areas, along with the attractiveness of those cities to non-state armed groups, has been a major driver of political violence. The parallel processes of declining state authority and rising non-state violence are facilitated by two main factors: precarious security provision and weak state capacity to implement governance (understood as the establishment of public services and institutions).

Two facets of state weakness in cities: security provision and governance

The ability and willingness of the state to provide security vary considerably from area to area in cities. Urbanisation in the developing world has led to sprawling informal settlements where physical security and other basic needs – such as housing, sanitation

and water – are provided without regulation and often by violent groups. This has meant a fracturing of the urban space, with different actors commanding authority across the cityscape. In cities located near areas of active armed conflicts, this has also created additional opportunities for violent groups.

Weak and corrupt security forces have also been linked to abusive behaviour towards particular social groups – for instance Nairobi’s slum dwellers complain of police brutality, just as they also resent the inequality in security provision between their areas and wealthier districts. Because security provision in marginalised urban spaces is patchy and often abusive, the state’s authority has been undermined by flaws within its own institutional framework as well as by violent external actors such as the Taliban and al-Shabaab.

As in the case of security, the broader set of public services and institutions are not only unequally distributed in cities in fragile states but have also come to be regulated or managed by non-state armed actors in slums and peripheries. Precarious provision of basic services such as water, housing and public transportation strengthens the role of non-state actors in providing replacements (often of lower quality but at higher prices).

In our four case studies, the uneven distribution of public services has been consistently leveraged by non-state actors in order to acquire political influence and economic benefits in sections of the urban territory. Al-Shabaab’s consistent ability to operate and practise extortion in Mogadishu is due not only to armed threats but also to the rift between communities and the state, with the police still unable either to visit certain areas without heavy security or to establish regular interaction with communities. Residents of Karachi’s low-income areas experienced a similar encroachment of insurgent actors when elements of the Pakistani Taliban migrated there during the late 2000s and developed links to illicit service provision. Even armed groups without an overt political or ideological motivation benefit from precarious governance – as is the case of

gangs in Nairobi that act as vigilantes as well as providers of basic services such as water and gas.

Urban environments and policies to address state fragility and conflict

The decline of state authority observed in the four case studies derives from challenges that are either specific to or made particularly acute in cities due to the clustering of populations, ethnicities, armed actors and rival political interests. Non-state armed groups, meanwhile, have exploited urban vulnerabilities to achieve

political or economic goals – or often both at the same time. In contrast to the specifically urban character of these challenges, the policy areas outlined above have traditionally focused on national governments and broad approaches to fragile states. But policymakers will find it increasingly difficult to achieve key goals in fragile countries – such as strengthening institutions, improving security and advancing socio-economic development – without addressing the specific sources of political violence and instability in the world’s rapidly expanding cities.

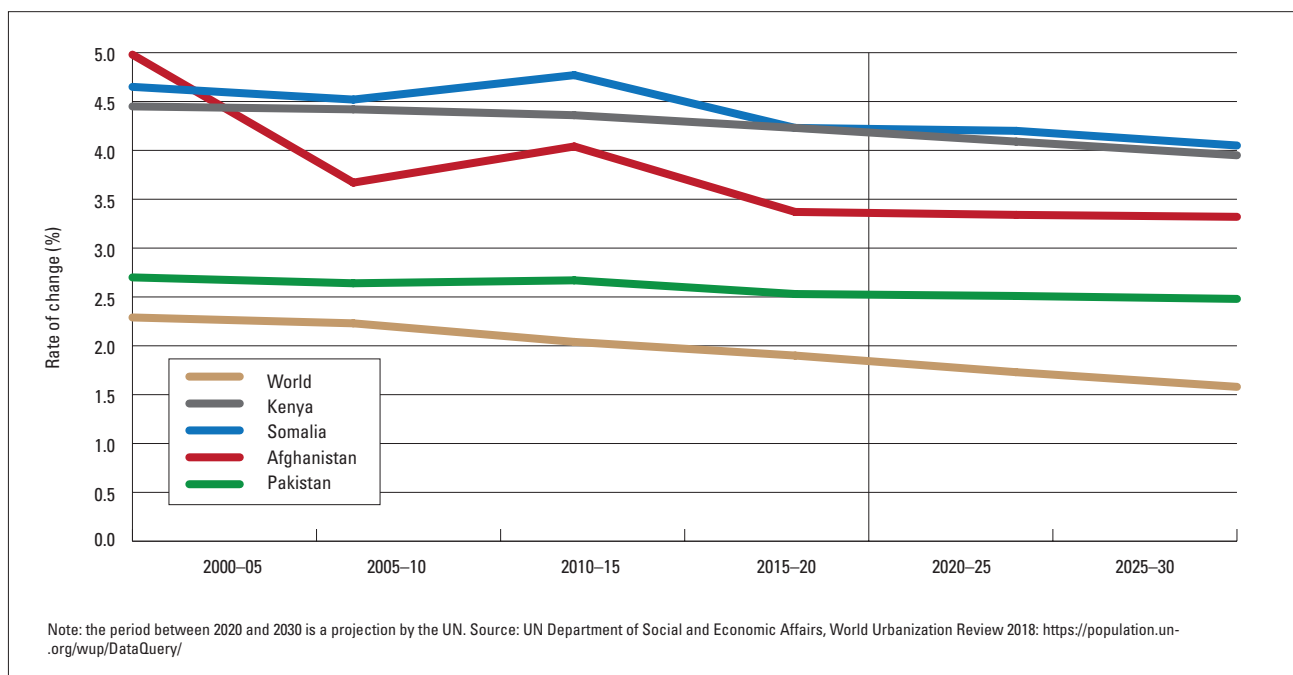
Introduction

On 24 July 2019, a few months before fieldwork for this study was conducted in Mogadishu, the city's mayor, Abdirahman Omar Osman, was severely injured by a female suicide bomber who detonated her explosives inside the municipal government's headquarters. He died a few days later in hospital. The attack, for which the radical Islamist group al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, was widely condemned by Somalis and also by international agencies and governments working to bolster state institutions. The outcry reflected Osman's symbolic importance as a voice against al-Shabaab's ideology in a city striving to recover its cosmopolitan character. Following a truck-bomb attack that killed almost 600 people in Mogadishu in October 2017, Osman had written in a newspaper article that al-Shabaab's urban terrorism campaign would ultimately undermine the group's popular support base.¹ But in that same article

he also acknowledged the local population's lingering fear of further attacks by 'al-Shabaab sympathisers hidden in their communities'.

Osman's death gives us a glimpse into the intensity and impact of political violence in cities such as Mogadishu, located in or near areas where armed conflict is taking place. Terrorism is one of several forms of violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups that exploit the specific characteristics of cities near conflict areas, such as high (and increasing) population density, rival ethnic or sectarian groups living side by side, proximity to the levers of power, and vast, ever-expanding slums deprived of public services. This report sets out to explain how political violence originates, or is amplified, in cities affected by conflict. It does so by closely examining four case studies of cities that are located in fragile countries (i.e. where governments are unable or

Figure 1. Average annual growth of urban population, 2000–30



unwilling to meet basic expectations on the part of the local population, such as security and the provision of essential services), in or near areas where armed conflict is taking place: Mogadishu, Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi. The aim is to highlight the specific policy challenges in such cities, which require tailored responses against a background of rapid urban population growth.

The demographic trend of urbanisation, while not a cause of conflict, exacerbates local tensions and weak governance. It also creates an urgent need to understand the policy challenges that exist in cities such as Mogadishu, Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi. The rate of growth of the urban population in the four countries covered by this study was above the global average for the 2015–20 period – and more than double the average in the cases of Kenya and Somalia.² With the exception of Pakistan, these countries also registered higher urban population growth in 2018 than the average for fragile and conflict-affected countries, which was 3.2%.³

Typically built without formal land rights, lacking basic public services, and featuring low-quality housing in overcrowded conditions, slums are perhaps the most visible characteristic of cities undergoing rapid and unmanaged urbanisation.⁴ But they are not the only one. Cities located in or near areas where armed conflict is taking place also tend to be split by several dividing lines – between slums and the rest of the city, between ethnic groups, between licit and illicit (often criminal) economies, and between violent and safe areas. Whereas many of these divisions may be part of broader national problems, their geographical concentration in the limited confines of a city creates distinctly urban drivers of violence, and therefore requires tailored policies in response. These divisions, exacerbated by the rapid urbanisation process, have contributed to a decline in state authority – governmental capacity to enforce rules, monopoly over the use of force, taxation and other state prerogatives – at the municipal level.⁵

This decline in state authority has immense and very tangible impacts both on urban populations and on the broader national effort to achieve security and development. Efforts to build a vital highway on the northern outskirts of Kabul, for example, have been delayed for years – but that is due not to attacks by the Taliban but to warlords restricting public works on their territory

and demanding a slice of the funding pie.⁶ In Nairobi, one of the most pressing issues faced by people we talked to in Mathare slum, where many homes lack toilets, was the control that gangs exert over public toilet facilities – they force residents to pay for access, creating a financial burden that can quickly accumulate for large families. And in Mogadishu, our research team left the UN compound less than an hour before it was hit by five mortars fired by al-Shabaab. These are glimpses of the obstacles to urban security and socio-economic development that such cities face.

Amid rapid urbanisation and the declining capacity of governments to provide security and services, cities also contain a variety of non-state armed groups vying for opportunities to impose rules, defy the security forces, control criminal economies and even extract taxes from local businesses and individuals. In fact, we found that extortion was one of the most common practices on the part of non-state armed groups in the cities studied.

The main finding in this report is that the decline in state authority in cities near conflict areas, along with the attractiveness of those cities to non-state armed groups, has been a major driver of political violence. This deterioration of authority and governance – for instance in the provision of security and other public goods in low-income areas – has been compounded by the rising demand for services from sprawling settlements and slums along the peripheries of cities that have expanded dramatically in recent decades. But non-state armed groups have also been key drivers of political violence, as they often use violence to enforce their spheres of influence, punish rival groups (as well as civilians) and control criminal revenues in the competitive and crowded environments of densely populated cities.

Two main factors drive the decline of state authority and the rise of non-state armed groups in the four cities studied: precarious security provision, and weak state capacity to provide governance.

Firstly, unequal provision of security as a public good – or indeed sometimes its complete absence – has degraded the legitimacy of the state. This can take the form of the non-provision of policing, justice and other institutions of law and order, but also includes, for example, links between militias and the police, or between gangs and political parties.

Secondly, the unwillingness or inability of the state to provide public services and implement policies (in other words, governance) in low-income areas has opened a gap in which non-state actors can challenge its authority.⁷ This goes beyond security provision to encompass a wide range of essential needs such as water provision – which in Karachi has become a key source of income for mafias allied with political militias, for example. A significant feature of all four case studies is how a scarcity of housing and conflict over urban land – and a lack of public policies and regulations on both issues – have increased popular dissatisfaction with the government and created entry points for armed groups. These groups include private militias linked to former warlords in Kabul, gangs linked to political figures in Nairobi, and wealthy entrepreneurs using corrupt police officers to grab land in Mogadishu.

This report will analyse these two dynamics more closely in parts 2 and 3, drawing on evidence collected primarily from field interviews and also from a literature review and local news sources. Firstly, however, it will discuss the four case studies in more detail, including a brief background of the political violence and urbanisation dynamics in each city. This analysis of cross-cutting drivers of political violence should contribute to an understanding of the specific policy challenges in such urban contexts. The magnitude of urban population growth has highlighted – and exacerbated – the violence and political turmoil afflicting cities across the developing world. Previous studies have made clear

that urbanisation has had a role to play in processes of state formation and decline, and that violent conflict in cities has unique impacts on state power and legitimacy.⁸ Recent conflicts have affected cities differently from rural areas or towns: whereas rebel groups tend to be most active in rural areas, the resulting violence pushes displaced people towards large urban centres where local armed groups (militias, vigilantes, gangs) systematically defy the state or occasionally collude with it.⁹

Another key finding of this report, explored in Part 3, is that governments' inability to provide services and policies weakens some communities' ties to the state. This problem of disenfranchisement would not necessarily generate violence, were it not for the attractiveness of disenfranchised slums and low-income settlements to armed groups in search of valuable land – territories in which they can practise extortion, attract political support and derive other benefits. This fragmented governance pattern was visible in Nairobi's gang-afflicted slums, former warlords' territories in Kabul, and several low-income areas of Karachi during periods of violent conflict between political militias and the Taliban.

In cities, therefore, security and governance go hand in hand. The existence of organised armed groups able to replace key state functions makes the challenges in cities affected by armed conflict particularly urgent. This report sheds light on the ways in which cities contribute to the weakening of state authority, and aims to provide a basis for the formulation of better, more tailored policies.

Part 1 – Case studies

This section explores the four case studies that form the backbone of this research – Mogadishu, Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi. Whereas parts 2 and 3 will present the cross-cutting findings on the drivers of political violence in the four cities, the case studies themselves dig deeper into the background of the political, armed-conflict and demographic trends that are shaping urban violence. Whereas urban population growth is not a cause of violence per se, the expansion of informal settlements with long-standing deficiencies in public services and infrastructure compounds the challenges to state authority. Rapid population growth, and the concentration of the rising population in slums (see graphics 2, 3 and 4), contributes to the main drivers of political violence analysed in this report: failures of security provision and fragmented governance, alongside the presence of non-state armed actors.

Figure 2. **Growth of urban populations, 2008–18**

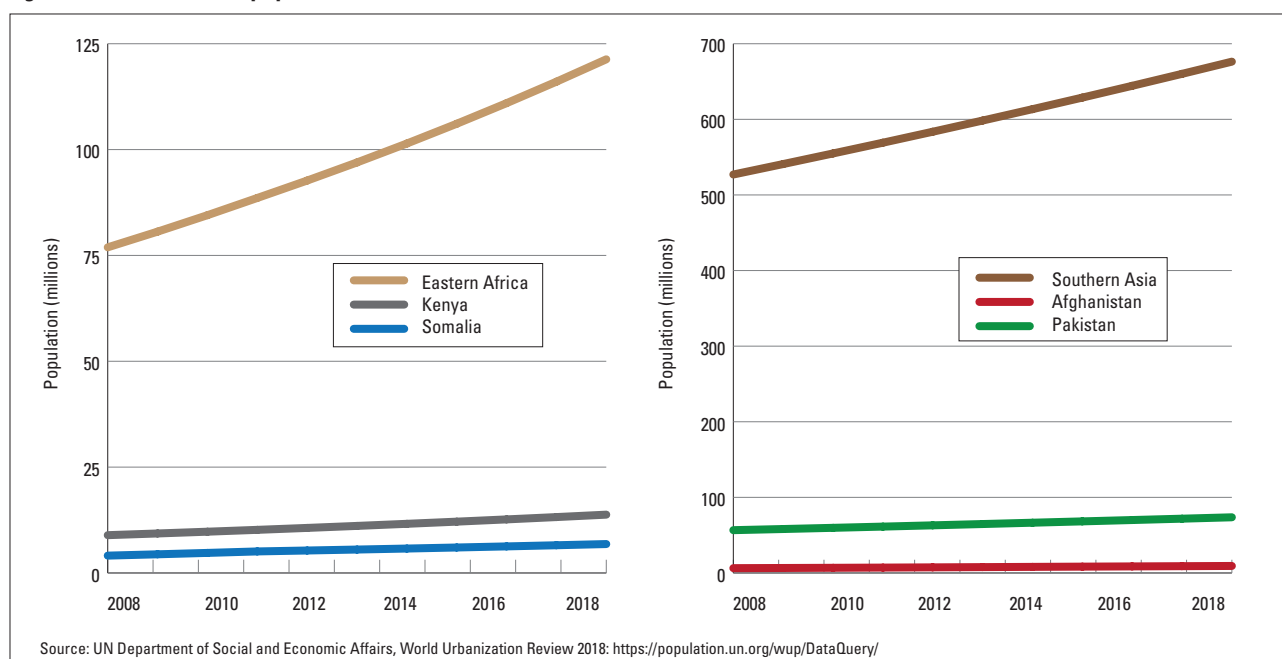


Figure 3. **Slum population as percentage of total urban population, 2014**

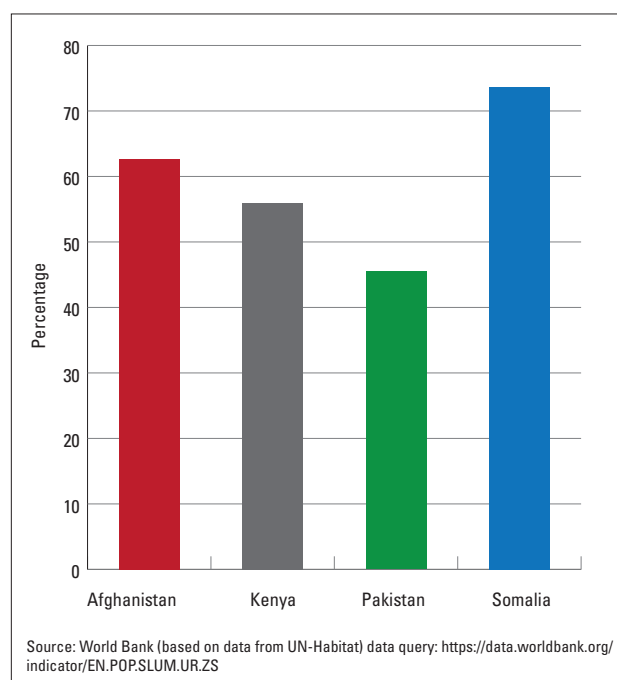
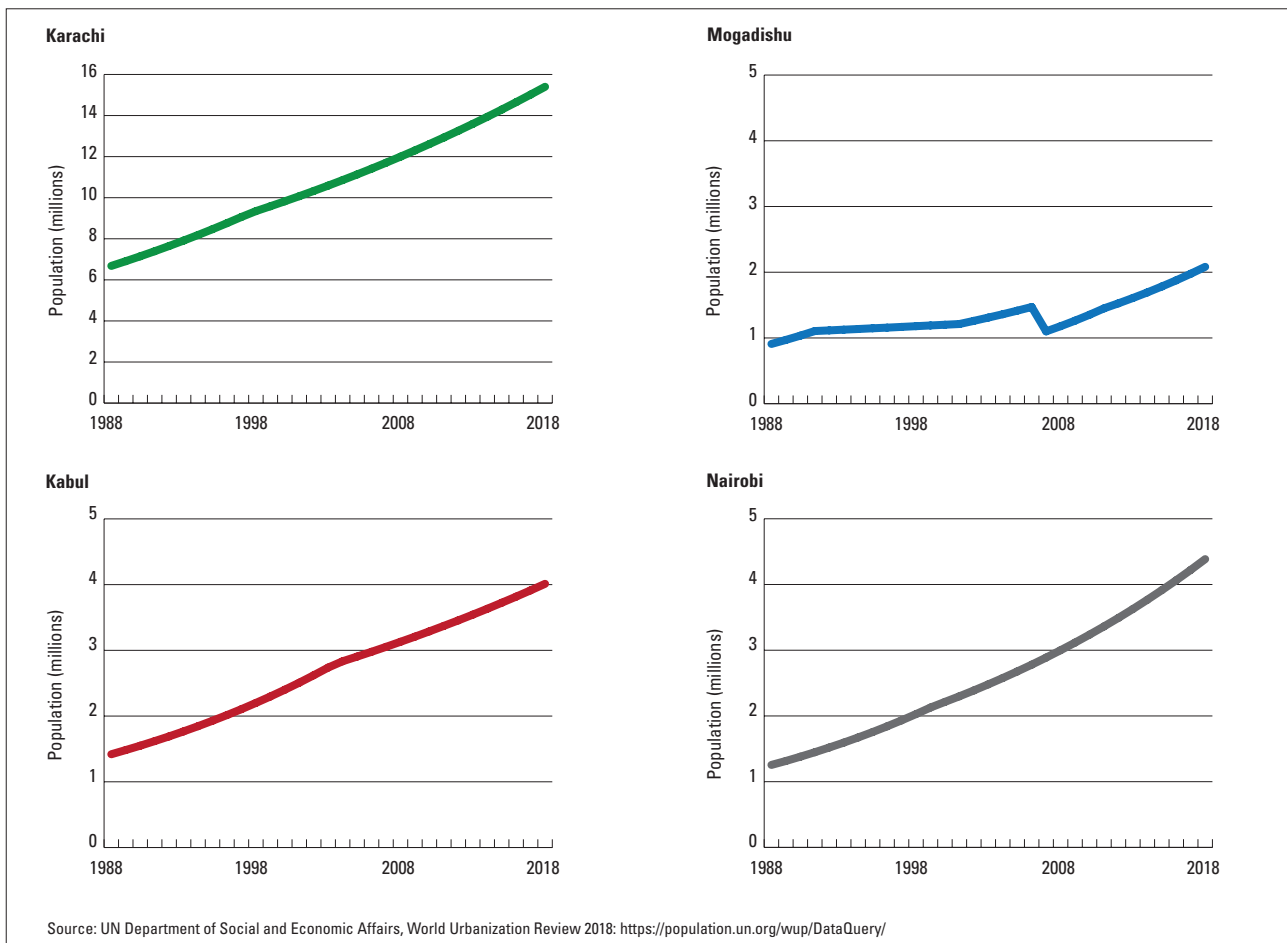


Figure 4. Cities' populations, 1988–2018



Mogadishu, Somalia

Somalia has registered one of the fastest rates of urban population growth in East Africa over the past few decades.¹⁰ For example, the total population of its cities expanded by 66.7% between 2008 and 2018, compared with the regional average of 57.7%.¹¹ The population of its capital, Mogadishu, grew by 76% in the same period – indeed, it is estimated to be among the fastest-growing cities in the world.¹² There is already plentiful evidence that local governance capacity and infrastructure are failing to cope with this expansion, and in future the average annual growth of the city's population is expected to accelerate, possibly reaching 4.3% in the period 2018–30 (compared with 3.1% in 2000–18).¹³ Population displacement, mostly due to armed conflict and drought, has been a major driver of urbanisation: 80% of the country's approximately two million displaced people are now living in urban areas.¹⁴

While al-Shabaab is the best-known and probably the most significant generator of violence in Mogadishu, the group's operations are facilitated by dire governance and socio-economic conditions. Clan tensions, land disputes and a lack of jobs have played significant roles in creating opportunities for al-Shabaab to exploit. A weak state has been unable to exert authority even in some areas of the capital, and has had to achieve its objectives through negotiations with a host of other armed actors.

Somalia's well-known clan divisions are frequently described as a key source of instability in the country. There is certainly truth in that, but their role in perpetuating violence was not inevitable. Somalia has four principal clan families, each of which can trace its lineage back to a single common ancestor. However, each of these major clans is divided into numerous sub-clans that were traditionally a much more significant identity for Somalis, since it is within the sub-clan that mutual assistance has been a feature of daily life. These sub-clans have claimed specific areas of rural territory on historical grounds, or 'rights by blood'.¹⁵

The state collapse that followed the deposition of Somalia's autocratic leader Siad Barre in 1991 saw several armed factions fighting for control of the capital, each of which appealed to the larger clan networks for support. These warlord-led clan formations were extremely unstable and riven by in-fighting. Far more stable were the sub-clan formations that assumed a degree of control over smaller areas. These sub-clans had their own security forces, effectively 'privatising' security provision on their territory. This pattern of sub-clan authority over particular districts and neighbourhoods has endured to this day.

While nearly all districts in Mogadishu are today dominated by the major Hawiye clan, the rivalries between its many sub-clans mean that in practice the city is far from unified. The situation has evolved somewhat in recent years with the growth of the state security sector (police, army, intelligence). Most government officials that we interviewed claim that the clan militias are no longer present in the city, and non-government interviewees mostly agreed that the problem of clan militias has been significantly reduced in the past few years. However, this has not brought an end to privatised security, or to clans' control over the use of violence in their own areas. Several of our interviewees were sceptical about whether the clan militias have really disappeared, pointing out for example that dormant militias could rapidly be re-assembled. As a senior Interior Ministry official put it:

Sometimes a prominent person or politician from a specific clan, if he is threatened by the government, you can see them activating militias. Some of the militias are in their homes with weapons, so they are potential clan militias and they can start anytime.¹⁶

The chief reason for the decline of the clan militias was their gradual incorporation into the state security forces. However, proximity to their home area increases the likelihood of former militia members pursuing their own agendas. Attempts to relocate them and mix battalions in order to redirect loyalties towards the state have had mixed results so far. Most interviewees acknowledged that those wearing the uniforms of the state security services

frequently acted in a private capacity. They also described resistance from former militias to too much government control over their activities, as well as the ad hoc ways in which militias cooperate with the security forces:

Some clans reject some government measures or policies, and that is because they have capacity behind them. For example, the government has tried to implement biometric registration for the Somali army. Some clans rejected that. Some Somali national-army officers report [that they have] larger numbers of soldiers, because they have some soldiers and some clan militias.¹⁷

In practical terms, this means that the formal security sector cannot prevent individuals within it – or partially within it – from pursuing their own agendas while still capitalising on their affiliation to the state. While clans are the best-known and arguably most frequent drivers of private agendas, these 'freelance' militias are equally able to offer their services to the business community or other private 'clients'. As Dr Hodan Ali of the Benadir Regional Administration (the municipal government), explained:

Security personnel sometimes serve as militias for some people. I don't know when one starts and the other stops. We don't have mechanisms to record arms in the city – who has what. I see people wearing uniforms carrying out private businesses [sic].¹⁸

There are several reasons for informal and semi-formal armed actors' resistance to the development of the state. One very significant factor – shared by Somalis more generally – is the legacy of fear from the heavy-handedness of the state during the Siad Barre era. However, an unregulated affiliation with a weak state is very helpful for armed actors, since they can both access state resources and exploit the authority they derive from the state as a commodity for sale.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the formal security sector and the state more generally are aware that they could not withstand significant resistance from non-state armed actors. Rather than imposing their authority, they can only negotiate their terms.²⁰

A challenge for Mogadishu's police force is its trust deficit, due mainly to many officers' previous roles as militia members or al-Shabaab militants. The government has recently taken steps to reduce the number of different security forces operating in Mogadishu, to prevent skirmishes between forces and consolidate the security responsibilities of the police. One step was to re-hat 1,600 National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) operatives as police officers – but since a large number of NISA personnel are former al-Shabaab militants, the local population is wary of them. They are also, in general, less educated and have not undergone adequate police training.²¹ Poorly trained officers – particularly those with previous involvement in armed violence – have a greater propensity to use unnecessary force, further damaging their relations with the public.

Land and violence

The multiple allegiances of those in uniform have direct impacts on residents, and on internally displaced people (IDPs) in particular. The arbitrary enforcement of land claims and evictions was the most regularly cited example of 'formal' security forces acting on someone else's behalf. The issue of forced eviction also demonstrates how different security forces can end up working against each other when private agendas are involved. A senior law-enforcement official recognised that police officers themselves are sometimes involved in the city's many disputes over land, which can lead to armed clashes. However, she said they have made progress in dealing with disputes through the courts, and that 90% of such issues are now resolved peacefully.²²

But property rights in Mogadishu remain extremely vulnerable to private interests – another legacy of the land grabs of the Barre era. The breakneck pace of urbanisation has led to price increases and growing competition for property, against the backdrop of a weak institutional framework. Given that they can frequently act with impunity, landlords are known to employ armed men (including police officers acting in a private capacity) and forced evictions are common.²³

A more complex scenario emerges when IDP camps become established and landowners or local security actors become involved. In effect they become gatekeepers, with aid having to pass through them if it is to reach

the IDPs, and tend to claim their share. Aid agencies are aware of this practice but can do little to counter it. If a land conflict arises or the gatekeeper decides to evict IDPs, they have little or no recourse for protection.²⁴ Without shelter, IDPs in the city have to contend with poor sanitation and limited access to water and food, and are at higher risk of recruitment by al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab in Mogadishu

Al-Shabaab's presence is difficult to identify precisely, but several interviewees told us the group has a visible presence at night in some areas outside the city centre. Ironically, the most heavily guarded federal-government areas – and particularly their walled perimeters – are seen as the most dangerous, especially for Somalis living nearby and for security personnel, since they are attractive targets for al-Shabaab. This presents a serious legitimacy challenge for the government in its own stronghold of Mogadishu. As a former government official put it, 'the city really feels that it is hosting the government and taking the brunt of the problems'.²⁵

When the government and al-Shabaab struggle for control of an area, there are both immediate and longer-term consequences for residents. While discussing an ongoing military operation in Afgooye, a town about 30 kilometres to the northwest of Mogadishu, one interviewee said:

People don't want to stay in a territory that the government has just taken over, for two reasons. One, they don't want to be punished as collaborators for having lived under al-Shabaab rule. They also want to wait to see if the takeover succeeds or fails, and if al-Shabaab will come back.²⁶

In contrast, areas of Mogadishu where government control is tenuous are described by residents as some of the safest in the city, at least for Somalis who are not connected to the government or the international NGOs. The Bakara Market, the commercial hub of the city, is a good example. It has always been outside government control to some extent – for example it used to be an area hostile to the Siad Barre regime, and state forces rarely entered it during his rule. Its continued resistance to state regulation is largely due to the powerful private-security apparatus employed by the Somali business community. However,

al-Shabaab's authority in the market is much stronger, to the point that it extorts protection money from the market's merchants. Al-Shabaab has no incentive to disrupt the market, given that it benefits from the continuation of business, and therefore allows most of the local population to come and go as they please. As a youth activist put it:

There's no contestation from government [in the market area] as they do not enter it, so it's safe. For government-connected people it's difficult, however, and for NGO staff. A friend of mine who was working for the World Health Organization was shot in the market.²⁷

Some of our interviewees suggested that al-Shabaab was becoming increasingly criminal in nature, and the group is believed to have actively recruited individuals with criminal backgrounds.²⁸ Indeed, criminality and ideological terrorism are not mutually exclusive, as many terrorist groups see short-term involvement in criminality as a pragmatic means of funding their longer-term goals.²⁹ This combination of pragmatic criminality and political violence is particularly potent in urban areas such as Mogadishu, where opportunities for extortion are vast and the government presence weak.

Of all the non-state armed groups in Mogadishu, it was certainly the case that all our interviewees regarded al-Shabaab as posing the most serious threat. However, the group's ability to carry out deadly attacks is greatest in the riverine areas of Lower Shabelle, to the north and west of the city, and around Afgooye. A case in point is the 28 December 2019 bomb attack against a checkpoint at a road junction between Mogadishu and Afgooye, which killed 85 people. The federal government has responded by deploying additional checkpoints and building more of the walled compounds in which the headquarters of government agencies and international organisations, and the homes of the wealthiest residents, are located. While interviewees tended to concede that the checkpoints have somewhat reduced attacks, they can also become highly congested and the large numbers of people who tend to congregate around them continue to be vulnerable targets. Some interviewees also said the checkpoints impose severe limits on urban mobility:

The protection they used has violated human rights – there was a big barrier at every junction. People started saying this wasn't acceptable. People said they wouldn't let pregnant mothers go to hospital and some died in the roads. Diabetics died on the road. That caused people to hate [the security measures].³⁰

Terrorism in Somalia would make reliable security provision almost impossible even if the government had a cohesive security apparatus at its disposal. State legitimacy is further diminished by the separation of the city into walled compounds, with checkpoints impeding the flow of people and commerce. The lingering strength of private militias and clan authority contributes to a picture of patchy security provision. Precarious – and sometimes absent – service provision in areas such as the Bakara Market and IDP camps are prominent cases of what might be called 'fragmented governance', with state authority having to be negotiated with gatekeepers, clans and militias. Compounding this picture of a weak state structure, al-Shabaab is visibly present in some areas at night, and able to extract significant revenues from the city's main market.

Nairobi, Kenya

Kenya's urban population increased by 54.2% between 2008 and 2018, a very rapid pace of growth in line with the broader East Africa region.³¹ The population within the official borders of the capital, Nairobi, grew by 46% in the same period, reaching 4.3 million (the population of the wider metropolitan area, including adjoining municipalities, would be significantly higher).³² It is forecast to surpass seven million by 2030, with a predicted annual average rate of growth of 3.9% between 2018 and 2030.³³ More than half of the city's population lives in slums, which is also true of the urban population of Kenya as a whole.³⁴

Nairobi's growth has exacerbated problems of security provision and governance in a city containing some of the largest slums in Africa. When the Kenyan state

marks its presence in those slums, it is usually through the actions of the police or through the rallies that political parties organise at election time. Policing in the slums has tended to consist of occasional raids and arbitrary arrests, meaning that many residents' encounters with the state are violent.

Most of the time, however, the presence of the state is not felt at all in these poor urban areas. State provision of services was reduced during the course of two Structural Adjustment Programs agreed with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s. The policies implemented during that period encouraged private companies to take over service provision, including in informal settlements, but private investment did not materialise on the expected scale. A change of approach came with the 2010 redraft of the national constitution, which made the provision of services the sole responsibility of the governments of the several counties into which Kenya is divided.³⁵ However, the pace of the growth of informal settlements, particularly in urban and peripheral areas, has made local governments extremely reluctant to fulfil these obligations. Given that such settlements are largely created without formal land rights, it is possible for local administrations to deny responsibility both for the buildings and their residents – a convenient evasion that only exacerbates insecurity, public-health issues and the erosion of state authority in the longer term.

This vacuum of service provision has widened the gap between the state and low-income communities, whose residents have instead come to depend on illicit providers of services and the informal economy to make a living (in the absence of regular salaries, social security and other benefits). The groups that have done most to provide basic services are those that use violence – namely, gangs. By establishing themselves as the most durable authority in an area, they increase their capacity to impose rules and control criminal revenue. Gangs have also become useful intermediaries for powerful political figures that wish to gain votes in slum areas.

When asked to list the most significant armed threats in Nairobi, all of our interviewees put the gangs in first place.³⁶ Although they can provide services – including water, electricity and security – to a certain extent, usually their motives for doing so are to consolidate control

of an area and make money. Indeed, it is frequently the case that residents who are dependent on the gangs' services are also victims of their coercive practices. In the words of one of our interviewees:

Gangs are the service providers there. They will kill you if you dare to try and find out more [about] what they do. But they work with formal service providers. They tap the electricity and then charge people per bulb. And these are the only available services. [Residents] use shared toilets controlled by the gangs. You don't have an option.³⁷

Residents are also obliged to pay a so-called 'security tax' to the gangs, supposedly in return for their property being protected and their personal safety assured. Attempts to evade or opt out of these payments result in threats or the destruction of property. For instance, to avoid damage to their vehicles, bus drivers are obliged to make payments to gang members at stops along their routes. While this problem is particularly acute in informal settlements, it can also exist in more affluent neighbourhoods.

Some of Nairobi's gangs have a partial or 'semi-territorial' authority: they do not have a guaranteed monopoly of control over public services and would be incapable of resisting the state's security forces if they were challenged, but they are nevertheless the source of authority that is present for longer than any other.³⁸ This is sufficient to allow them to conduct criminal activities and entrench their role in the daily lives of residents. Some gangs express ethnic and political grievances – for instance the Mungiki was founded as a form of political activism linked to Kikuyu tribal traditions, and has its own spiritual and cultural beliefs. The group gradually acquired more weapons and transitioned to ethnic, political and criminal types of violence.³⁹

Gangs' political ties

The gangs' provision of services (however limited or expensive) is facilitated not just by the absence of government but sometimes also by cooperation from those in government or party politics. While politicians subcontracting government functions to informal actors is

a common phenomenon in Africa, it also tends to generate further criminality and insecurity.⁴⁰ In Nairobi, solid-waste management is a good example. The gradual privatisation of the sector allowed businesses to forge relationships with groups of young people who work as waste collectors at the main refuse dump in the city. As competition for government money between groups of waste collectors increased, so did the tendency for the groups to use violence to maintain control over their areas of the site. One of the interviewees, a local researcher, confirmed that while police sometimes enter the settlements in well-armed incursions, they would be afraid to enter the dump site.⁴¹ And as the groups working on the refuse dump further entrenched their territorial control, these areas became bases for other kinds of criminality, including robbery, assault and illicit trade. This pattern illustrates the relationship between petty crime, territorial control and the genesis of gangs.⁴²

For better or worse, gangs are effective agents for mobilising neighbourhoods, and are therefore a valuable resource for politicians wishing to access voting blocs. Our interviewees all reported that gang violence becomes worse during elections, when they said the gangs and the politicians tend to seek each other out. One interviewee also pointed out that gangs often play a role similar to that of political militias (and indeed he referred to them as such) by enforcing the political interests of certain candidates while providing armed force to intimidate rivals and their supporters:

When the political temperature goes up, you see a resurgence. The militias are scoping for new business – they are doing political-economy analysis to suss out new patrons. They make overtures to politicians, they come to their events, they say, ‘Big Man, we know you have supporters and we’re ready for you.’ If I am a politician, meanwhile, I know that I need the gatekeepers of Kibera [the largest informal settlement in Nairobi] to access Kibera. So I send my people to pay them to be mobilisers, as my party’s youth wing, as my voters. But I will also pay them to exact violence.⁴³

The semi-official activities of these gangs at election time can have various consequences. One is that

violence can erupt along ethnic faultlines, as was well documented during the 2007 general election and its violent aftermath in 2008 – and indeed ethnic tensions remain a problem today.⁴⁴ Gangs are keenly aware of peoples’ ethnicities in their area and are well placed to play a proactive role in divisive ethnic politics.

A further consequence of gangs being given quasi-political roles is the delegitimisation of state politics in the eyes of citizens, since the perpetrators of violence act in a quasi-official capacity. Although several interviewees stated that the investigations into the 2008 violence – particularly the International Criminal Court’s indictment (later withdrawn) of then-deputy prime minister Uhuru Kenyatta, who is now Kenya’s president – meant politicians have since become more reluctant to associate with gangs, the implicit threat of violence remains a powerful mobilising force in electoral politics both in Nairobi and in Kenya as a whole.

While many Kenyans believe police violence against gangs is effective, it has had serious ramifications for the policing of Nairobi’s informal settlements. The police presence in those areas is limited, with interviewees describing how the police typically patrol the edges of the slums without entering them. The interviewees’ view was that the police are more concerned with preventing criminality from spreading into more affluent areas than with combating it inside the slums. Interviewees working in Mathare slum said that the police tend to associate young people in poor areas with criminality – and therefore, when they enter the slum, their actions are frequently violent or at least convey hostility and distrust. This, in turn, arouses resentment and suspicion among residents and has strengthened the legitimacy of the gangs and other actors who see the police as a threat and mobilise against them. One of our interviewees, who works in a community organisation in Mathare, mentioned ‘informal security actors’. When we asked who she meant, she replied: ‘Their networks are vast – it can be the mother selling greens on the road and advising people against talking to the police.’ Her point was that in Mathare, gangs are not necessarily resented by residents. Indeed, when the police are seen as a worse problem, local people might actually help the gangs, as in the case of the ‘mother’ the interviewee referred to.

Policies aimed at combating terrorism are another source of friction between the security forces and residents of low-income areas, with 'CVE' (countering violent extremism) measures having exacerbated mutual suspicions. Two areas in particular have been subjected to scrutiny with regard to Islamist extremism: Pumwani and Eastleigh. Pumwani is a Muslim-majority but ethnically mixed low-income area, while Eastleigh is known for its large Kenyan–Somali and Somali population. Pumwani attracted police attention because of the presence of radical preachers and elements of al-Hijra, formerly al-Shabaab's Kenyan support network, who linked grievances such as unemployment and housing shortages to discrimination against Muslims. Eastleigh is a more affluent commercial area, but extremist recruiters there have also invoked the Kenyan police's history of discrimination against Somalis.

Much like the city's gangs, extremist preachers in Nairobi have also become involved in service provision, lending them a degree of legitimacy that the state does not have.⁴⁵ In 2007, for example, Ahmed Iman Ali, a radical imam later revealed to have links to al-Shabaab, used rents from his mosque's ownership of land to support community projects and help local residents who were struggling financially. Extremist groups and their recruiters are also able to appeal to poor young people by providing opportunities for financial gain that are otherwise non-existent in informal settlements. One interviewee described a form of 'peer-to-peer recruitment' in which individuals who recruited for al-Shabaab's networks received 100,000 Kenyan shillings (just over 800 pounds) for each person they convinced to join.⁴⁶

According to our interviewees, socio-economic marginalisation and resentment towards the government are joint drivers of recruitment both to gangs and terrorist groups in Nairobi. Whereas the processes of joining a gang and entering a terrorist group are different in many respects, they can draw upon the same vulnerabilities – for example poverty and/or unemployment,⁴⁷ and the apparent prospect of enhanced social status for young people in poor areas.⁴⁸ And one connection between gang activity and terrorism is that young men with past involvement in violent crime are attractive as potential recruits to extremist groups, since their experience can be repurposed for terrorism.⁴⁹ However,

poor areas are not the only incubator for extremism and terrorism in Nairobi, as some of our interviewees emphasised that middle-class university students were increasingly being targeted by recruiters.⁵⁰

Despite the differences between gang activity and terrorism, both types of armed threat to state authority have been fuelled by precarious service provision and police violence in Nairobi. The involvement of politicians in electoral violence perpetrated by gangs further damages the state's legitimacy. Although some interviewees mentioned the efforts of both the local and national government to engage with vulnerable young people in an attempt to prevent both crime and terrorism, the abject abandonment of slum areas and the availability of violent actors to replace the state make these government objectives seem unrealistic at the moment.

Kabul, Afghanistan

Afghanistan's urban population grew at an average rate of 4% per year between 2010 and 2015, which was well above the South Asian average of 2.5%.⁵¹ The population of the capital, Kabul, grew by 182% between 1988 and 2018, reaching just over four million people, although unofficial estimates go higher.⁵² And the degree to which the country's total urban population has swelled in less than 20 years is staggering: between 2001 (the year of the the United States-led military invasion) and 2018 it doubled, rising from 4.6 to 9.2 million.⁵³ Afghanistan is 'undergoing the most powerful wave of urbanisation in its history' according to UN-Habitat, which forecasts that the urban population will increase by an average of 3.1% per year between now and 2050 – one of the fastest rates in the world.⁵⁴ Much of the growth has taken place in Kabul, home to 54% of the country's urban population, and this has put huge pressure on public services, housing and municipal governance.⁵⁵ The Afghan government recognises that urbanisation has had 'profound consequences for the country's development', adding that efforts to manage urban expansion have been largely missing in recent decades.⁵⁶ It is estimated that over 70% of the capital's population lives in slum areas.⁵⁷

In terms of the security of its population, Kabul's status as the capital of a country that has suffered armed conflict almost constantly since the 1979 Soviet invasion has been both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, the presence of large numbers of Afghan soldiers, along with a significant proportion of the foreign troops present in the country, has prevented the Taliban from exerting any visible control over the city, although several interviewees reported that the group still has influence in some peripheral areas. On the other hand, Kabul contains valuable assets that are attractive to powerful political figures such as former warlords and military commanders who are still willing and able to confront or co-opt public-security agents, threaten the local population, acquire resources illegally and exploit political institutions in pursuit of their private interests.

Across Kabul's expanding informal settlements, inefficient and corruptly administered public services have eroded trust in the state, particularly in a context of competition between the state and an insurgent group (the Taliban). When trust is further reduced by predatory behaviour on the part of the police, members of parliament or former warlords with close ties to government figures, the Taliban's anti-government narrative gains greater force. Weak governance and uneven security provision show, therefore, that the significant military presence does not necessarily compensate for deeper institutional failures.

Though a powerful force in many rural areas of Afghanistan, the Taliban is absent from most of Kabul. There is a small Taliban presence in majority-Pashtun communities in peripheral areas of the city; the police and military personnel are able to enter those areas but normally only do so when heavily armed. Taliban gunmen occasionally carry out hit-and-run attacks or ambushes, such as the one in the Pul-e-Charkhi district on 2 December 2019 (during my stay in the city) in which two people were killed.⁵⁸ Growing popular resentment over deteriorating services and the lack of security in Kabul and other urban areas serves as a broader propaganda tool for the Taliban. As one senior government official put it:

If we talk strategically, when the Taliban is gone and the authorities don't act against the

warlords' brutality, people start comparing them with the Taliban. Warlords kidnap boys and girls, and local people turn against them and perceive the Taliban as better rulers than those guys. They see the Taliban don't target some people whereas the warlords target everyone. For the Taliban, this becomes a propaganda tool.⁵⁹

Warlords and militias

One major difference between Kabul and medium-sized cities located closer to conflict areas, such as Kunduz, is that former warlords with private militias are less commonly seen in the capital, where several interviewees said that such armed groups operate in relatively 'discreet' fashion – mostly in eastern districts. Former warlords currently living in Kabul exert influence over local populations and business in some areas of the city, seizing resources through extortion and land-grabbing. Their militias are most visible when escorting their bosses on journeys across the city.⁶⁰ The armed capability is both a result of and an addition to the former warlords' political influence. This influence has been built on the foundations of their current or former powerful positions in government and their networks of government allies.⁶¹ Wielding this local power, composed of armed militias and influence networks in politics, former warlords are able to intimidate people in disputes over land and extort money from local businesses.

The former warlords' power over their local areas is sometimes built in the vacuum left by the absence of the state. For instance, one senior official in the national government said that street vendors in eastern Kabul pay taxes to the local warlord but not to the state, since their businesses are part of Kabul's extensive informal economy.⁶² For example, parts of an area immediately to the north-east of Kabul International Airport, which was once planned to be a new urban-expansion area for the capital, have been seized by a former warlord. This kind of land-grabbing is usually financially motivated: the price of land has been rising in recent years due to population pressure, so warlords' illicit acquisitions are often followed by lucrative sales.⁶³ The same government official reported that he saw 10–15 men armed with Kalashnikovs during a visit to a former warlord's area in eastern Kabul.⁶⁴

More than the activities of other armed actors, including terrorist groups, the power still exercised by former warlords was cited by interviewees as the principal challenge to state authority in Kabul. Even though they no longer possess large private armies capable of directly confronting the security forces, urban-based former warlords are able to make use of the political influence they have gained in the last 20 years or so when both Afghan and US officials have sought their acquiescence to state-building efforts, including by granting them government positions and lucrative contracts.⁶⁵

Shaharзад Akbar, chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said that warlords create around themselves a culture of impunity that undermines political stability: in pursuit of their private interests they build corrupt relationships with influential people within the national government, the police force, the intelligence agencies and private security companies.⁶⁶ Those interests include not only criminal activities such as extortion and land-grabbing but also acquiring advantages in public tenders for government contracts.⁶⁷ For example, one interviewee reported that plans to extend a vital highway across the Shomali Plain, north of Kabul, were stopped by a local warlord demanding to be included in the government contract.⁶⁸ Such impediments to the development of public services or infrastructure were confirmed by a senior government official, who added that even some members of parliament issue threats with the aim of halting construction projects if their own companies are not set to benefit financially.⁶⁹ A similar problem has been encountered by the municipal government while attempting to conduct a census to establish the size and distribution of the urban population – the project, which would shed light on Kabul's jigsaw puzzle of illegal landholdings, is opposed by warlords unwilling to have their ownership of such plots publicly disputed.⁷⁰

One particularly worrying area of institutional infiltration by warlords is the security sector, which is vital amid the ongoing war with the Taliban. Not only do former warlords have significant influence over the appointment of district police chiefs but their influence also goes deeper into the ranks, as shown when they sometimes prove capable of mobilising certain

factions within the police. In such cases the warlords buy the police officers' loyalty by guaranteeing to pay them (there are often delays in the payment of police salaries by the government), and then deploy them for the purposes of land-grabbing and extortion of local businesses. Police officers, therefore, can have a 'shifting character from state to non-state, depending on the resources they have at each moment'.⁷¹ An extreme example was seen recently in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where a police chief was accused of using hundreds of officers as his private militia to extort locals. He confronted the government forces sent to arrest him, sparking a nearly 24-hour battle involving machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and helicopters.⁷²

More generally, the combined armed strength of police officers and private militias provides for the former warlords what one Afghanistan analyst described as a 'power bank to mobilise in any conflict' – a constant state of preparedness for war, developed over the course of 30 years of almost uninterrupted hostilities, which is often sufficient to deter potential adversaries.⁷³ Sometimes private militias are used against the state itself – for example in 2019 the leader of a local political movement, Abdul Hamid Khurasani, used both his own militiamen and 'elements inside the police' to confront security forces who came to arrest him for suspected murder, extortion and hostage-taking.⁷⁴

Violence and urban mobility

Even though groups such as the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan – the group's Central Asian offshoot – are unable to control areas or form alliances with influential officials in the capital, their attacks and the fear they create have a great effect on state legitimacy in the eyes of the local population, and on the capacity of the state to enforce rules and the monopoly over the use of force. As an illustration of the scale of the threat, the Taliban was responsible for the fourth-most lethal terrorist attack in the world in 2018: a car bomb at a police checkpoint near Jomhuryat hospital in Kabul that killed 104 people.⁷⁵

In Kabul, terrorism not only affects freedom of movement and business activity but has also reduced residents' trust in the government's ability to keep them safe – and indeed in its willingness to do so. Many local

people feel that the walls and checkpoints, and the frequent closure of roads for the protection of VIPs, have increased security only for political and economic elites while merely imposing greater restrictions on most local people.

One frequent terrorist tactic is the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices against targets deemed to represent the central government and its foreign backers – including the surroundings of the presidential palace, ministry buildings, universities, police checkpoints and the international airport. Because of the constant threat, life in Kabul has become divided by walls – the ever-visible physical barriers that separate the political elite (government officials, international organisations, foreign security contractors and advisers) from the rest of the population. These barriers have also created what one interviewee called ‘transition zones’ between the secure districts or compounds and the rest of the city – areas so frequently targeted that they have become some of the most dangerous in Kabul and indeed the whole country.⁷⁶ In May 2017, for instance, a truck bomb killed 150 people in Zanzaq Square near the presidential palace, at the intersection of several roads lined with foreign embassies.⁷⁷ A security adviser at the Ministry of Defence suggested that another unintended negative consequence of the profusion of physical barriers is that they reduce the transportation of building materials around the city and therefore hamper the construction work that is urgently needed to help the capital cope with the breakneck pace of urbanisation.⁷⁸

The Taliban also sometimes targets the security forces in ambushes and hit-and-run attacks. According to Shaharзад Akbar of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, this type of terrorist activity is more common in peripheral areas of Kabul, outside the city’s formal borders. The police presence in such areas is infrequent because officers will only enter as part of heavily armed convoys. The threat also affects the work of public agencies such as Akbar’s: ‘Our capacity to monitor and evaluate has been shrinking,’ she said.⁷⁹

According to officials and experts we spoke to, criminal activity also forms a significant part of the unstable mixture of competing state and non-state actors in Kabul. Although Afghanistan is by far the world’s

largest producer of opium poppies, the raw material for heroin, drugs-related criminality does not come close to the levels seen in Latin America as a result of the cocaine industry. However, it appears that crime in general is rising in Kabul, with burglaries, robberies at gunpoint and kidnap for ransom frequently cited by our interviewees.

Crime is not an isolated problem in Kabul: it thrives in the context of fragmented governance outlined above, where institutions are struggling to manage the consequences of the surging urban population, security provision is afflicted by corruption, and areas of the city are partially controlled by warlords. A national-government official with experience in urban administration told us that the ubiquity of crime – in the capital and other urban areas – is evidence of a lack of the rule of law in Afghanistan: conflict in a country with such weak institutions, he said, has been accompanied by widespread criminal behaviour such as in disputes over land, water and other resources. He said the biggest security threat in Kabul is crime, especially the land-grabbing carried out by powerful individuals. A potent symbol of this lack of the rule of law are the buildings, including many tall ones, that are widely known to have been constructed without permits on illegally acquired land, which the official referred to as ‘symbols of failure in governance despite their successful construction’.⁸⁰

Kabul provides plentiful evidence of how state authority can be eroded both by armed actors operating completely autonomously (such as the Taliban) and by those who have created shady alliances with actors inside the political system (the case of warlords). More than in the other cities in this study, governance in Kabul is fragmented by private interests pursued through the threat of violence rather than by actual violence itself. Meanwhile, terrorism impairs governance by physically deterring public agencies (including the police) from establishing a regular, reliable presence in certain areas of the capital – and then the legitimacy of the government is further undermined when, in response to terrorist attacks, it is seen as separating itself physically from the population and failing to provide basic security (in contrast to the stability, even if brutally enforced, in insurgent-held areas).

Karachi, Pakistan

Pakistan's urban population grew by 30% between 2008 and 2018, reaching a total of 73 million. The average annual rate of urban population growth has almost always been higher than for South Asia as a whole – it was 2.6% per year between 2010 and 2015, for example. And the pattern is set to continue: the UN forecasts that the total population of Pakistan's cities will grow by a further 85 million by 2050.⁸¹ As elsewhere in South Asia, unplanned urbanisation has resulted in slums, environmental degradation and inequality.⁸² The ensuing governance problems have been particularly severe in Karachi, Pakistan's largest and most populous city, which is now home to 21% of the country's urban population.⁸³ Between 1988 and 2018 its population surged from 6.6 million to over 15 million, an increase of 130%, making it the twelfth-most populous urban agglomeration in the world.⁸⁴ Evidence of Karachi's inability to cope with this demographic explosion is visible in its sprawling slums, home to 55% of the population (across Pakistan as a whole, 45% of the urban population live in slums).⁸⁵

Rapid and unmanaged population growth in Karachi has added further governance and political challenges in a city that also has to deal with ongoing sectarian rivalries, organised crime and armed militias. While the political violence that takes place in Karachi is intertwined with broader conflict dynamics in Pakistan – such as activity by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the main Islamist militant organisation in Pakistan, serving as an umbrella for several militant groups – it has also been driven primarily by tensions specific to the urban environment, such as rapid urbanisation, disputes over influence in densely populated areas, and illicit provision of services in the absence of effective provision by the government.

The inability to extend services and development to Karachi's sprawling peripheries has driven local people further away from the state and towards political parties organised along sectarian lines, armed militias, gangs and the other groups vying for territory, extortion money and revenue from land-grabbing and the illicit provision of water.

Violence in Karachi increased dramatically in 2010, fuelled by growing tension between political parties' heavily armed militant wings and by the activities of criminal gangs (this report focuses on the period in which political violence was at its peak, between 2008 and 2015). Around the same time, factions of the Pakistani Taliban were moving to the city in search of criminal revenues and some degree of territorial control that they could exploit for the purpose of extortion. In 2010 the city saw a 288% increase in terrorist activity in comparison with the previous year (whereas there was a 21% decrease across Pakistan as a whole).⁸⁶ The early 2010s in Karachi also saw increasing crime, including murders and kidnappings, as well as clashes between groups affiliated to different branches of Islam. The year 2010 was also the last in which the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) headed the municipal government. This party – historically associated with the Muhajir, meaning the Muslims who migrated from India during partition in 1947, and their descendants – was heavily involved in armed attacks against rival political groups.⁸⁷ Its rivals the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Awami National Party (ANP) were also involved in the escalating conflict, turning the political battle for votes into a violent conflict that took place in low-income areas such as Lyari, where gangs were co-opted by some of the parties as providers of armed support.

One important driver of political violence in Karachi has been the growing ethnic tension created by the flow of migrants and displaced people from Pashtun areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly North-West Frontier Province) and Afghanistan. This has had an impact on the outcome of local elections, decreasing the share of votes received by the MQM.⁸⁸

In the deeply polarised politics of Karachi, a city in which vast low-income areas had come to rely on ethnic, sectarian and political groups for protection and services, this challenge by another ethnic group escalated into a zero-sum game in which territories (along with votes and economic resources) were either won from or lost to rival factions. This process was made even more combustible by the use of violence by political parties' militant wings, a practice that dates back to the 1980s. For instance, in the late 2000s and early 2010s Karachi's political parties acquired small arms at arms bazaars in

conflict-affected tribal areas of Pakistan, with the MQM's militant wing in the city possessing AK rifles, Chinese light machine guns and even rocket launchers.⁸⁹

When driven by conflict, migration into Karachi has created what Laurent Gayer describes as a 'pool of battle-hardened recruits' for political actors in the capital who are prepared to resort to violence.⁹⁰ In place of co-habitation in an ethnically diverse city, the urban space became increasingly divided. This process – which dates back to the 1971 civil war and the secession of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) – has degraded Karachi's formerly cosmopolitan character and made it, in Gayer's words, 'fragmented from a social, spatial and political perspective'.⁹¹

Militias, gangs and urban governance

The absence of state-provided services has been another of the factors conducive to the use of violence to achieve local political influence. Political militias' territorial disputes in slums and other low-income areas have often been battles for control over local extortion rackets, the illicit provision of water, or opportunities for land-grabbing – which are themselves the results of inadequate urban governance. Lyari, a densely populated area long dominated by powerful gangs involved in extortion and gambling, became a focus for political violence in 2012 as gangs became proxies in rival political parties' struggles over influence, protection money and votes.⁹² There were 12 deaths at a political rally on 22 May 2012, for example, as supporters of a gang leader associated with the Baloch ethnic group were attacked by suspected MQM militants. A few weeks earlier, local police had launched an operation to enter Lyari to tackle the gang's criminal operations and ongoing political activities in favour of a banned political party, the People's Aman Committee (PAC): the ensuing eight-day battle ended with 45 dead, several armoured vehicles destroyed, and failure for the police.⁹³ Orangi Town, one of Asia's largest slums with 2.4 million inhabitants, has also been the scene of a large amount of violence.⁹⁴ Overall, as local political disputes have mutated increasingly into armed conflicts, areas of Karachi with pre-existing armed groups and ethnic tensions (such as the MQM–PAC rivalry in Lyari) have experienced the most frequent clashes.

Non-state actors' frequent use of violence, and also

the impact on local people of violent police operations such as the one in Lyari in 2012, has been eroding state legitimacy from the perspective of the residents of low-income areas of Karachi, pushing them further into the embrace of militias and gangs. Following the creation of the PAC in 2008, it became common for Lyari residents to go to its offices to resolve disputes and register complaints about the local municipal administration.⁹⁵ As in many low-income areas, security was seen as one of the vital services not being provided by the state – an impression reinforced by the 2012 operation. This only increased public support for gang leader Uzair Baloch, linked to the PAC, as the fight with the MQM raged on.⁹⁶ The MQM and its militias, for their part, have gained support as defenders of Muhajir-owned properties during several bouts of ethnic violence since the 1980s.⁹⁷ The authority of violent political actors has become entrenched and normalised – as is clear, for example, from accounts of how membership of party militias, especially those connected to the MQM, came to be, for many young male activists, a kind of part-time soldiering occupation in which they would be sent to settle scores, defend territory in disputed neighbourhoods and make public shows of armed force.⁹⁸

Between 2008 and 2015, authority and security came to be associated much less with state institutions than with the territories defended by armed militias, gangs and cadres of political activists doubling as armed militants. 'No-go areas' in Karachi were mentioned frequently by our interviewees, referring to parts of the city generally off-limits to outsiders and where even the police would be unlikely to enter unless in large numbers and heavily armed. Safe passage often had to be negotiated with gatekeepers – members of the local community with some influence to ensure outsiders could enter without fear of harassment or violence. Local people tended to restrict their movements to certain routes within the city in the hope of limiting their exposure to violence and gatekeepers.⁹⁹

Non-state armed groups have also consolidated their presence in low-income areas of Karachi through methods other than coercion. Significantly, they have provided services that the state does not, albeit in some cases by violently enforcing a monopoly over supply. In some areas, for example, they have provided electricity

by making illegal connections to the public grid, or have connected residents to the internet. One of the services they have offered most frequently is the supply of water. The fact that the state itself has failed to supply water equitably to all areas of the city was described by one interviewee as a source of 'resentment towards the government' in low-income areas, as well as a valuable source of political capital for the armed groups when they stepped in to offer local people 'the dream of more access to resources'.¹⁰⁰ The armed groups still needed to wield force in order to prevent competition, however – for instance by threatening alternative internet providers and ordering locals to consume only one specific brand of bottled water.¹⁰¹

Though the problem of patchy provision of services by the state has certainly been exacerbated by the recent surge in Karachi's population, certain areas of the city have suffered from government neglect for a long time. This has allowed mafia groups, street gangs and political militias to hone their methods for syphoning water illicitly, for example, while also forging alliances and establishing their authority. An estimated 42% of the water provided by the city's main pumping station is either lost or syphoned off by illicit actors, which then resell it by using tankers or bottling it.¹⁰² Nor has the state managed to provide infrastructure or effective governance in some of the newer areas of the rapidly expanding city. In the words of local architect and urban planner Arif Hasan:

We have not been able to extend infrastructure or administration into the newly colonised areas of the city, almost all of which are Pashto speakers. The Pashtun have a strong sense of identity and established their own systems in the absence of state systems. [...] Pashtuns have colonised by building horizontally on the fringes of the city, further dividing it ethnically.¹⁰³

A further problem is that public agencies controlled by political appointees from the MQM, PPP or other parties with a strong local presence have often prioritised certain areas of the city in accordance with the political affiliation of the local population.¹⁰⁴ This has not only favoured rich consumers over the poor but

has also allowed illegal mafias to cooperate with political actors who exercise power in the different areas of Karachi, who can then provide water – for a price – to their constituencies.¹⁰⁵

The Taliban challenge

It became clearer still that weak governance was a threat to public and national security when factions of the Pakistani Taliban (particularly the TTP) established themselves in the Pashtun periphery of Karachi, along the city's eastern and northern edges, and adopted some of the political militias' extortion practices.¹⁰⁶ They expanded there in 2013 and 2014, helped by the limited presence of the state and by cultural factors that separate those areas from the wider city, such as the deeply rooted tradition among Pashtun elders of resolving conflicts without state involvement. Though the government could not offer an accurate estimate of the number of radical Islamist militants based in Karachi by 2014, some said they were 10,000 or more.¹⁰⁷ Zia ur-Rehman, an experienced local analyst, estimated in 2014 that 10% of the city's population lived in 'areas effectively controlled by the Pakistani Taliban'.¹⁰⁸ When interviewed for this report, ur-Rehman explained how the geography and poor infrastructure of those areas helped the militants: 'Pashtun areas are suburban areas in very bad conditions, some of them hilly, with bad road connections, very impoverished. This benefitted the Taliban because when law enforcement officers went there it was easy for militants to flee.'¹⁰⁹ He added that about 90 members of the ANP, a secular Pashtun party, had been killed by the Taliban because their presence was much more of a threat to it than that of non-Pashtun parties such as the MQM.¹¹⁰

The diminishment of state legitimacy in the eyes of the local Pashtuns could be seen from the fact that those opposed to radical Islamism were afraid to go to the police because, in the words of a local journalist, they saw themselves as 'immigrants and aliens', and also because they had often been the victims of violence by local police and militias.¹¹¹ The Taliban's presence was facilitated by the fact that Pashtun peripheries 'were not included in the larger narrative of the city'.¹¹²

More than any of the three other cities in this study, Karachi contained a bewildering variety of non-state armed groups between 2008 and 2015. Violence and the Taliban presence gradually decreased after a military operation initiated by the Sindh Rangers in September 2013, and has continued to do so even though most of the governance failures, and the grievances to which they give rise, are still very much in evidence. Political violence was connected to opportunities to gain electoral advantages and illicit revenue against a backdrop of declining state legitimacy and unreliable governance mechanisms. But the continued control that

political militias and gangs exerted over low-income areas, and over services provided there, further delegitimised state authority and made communities increasingly dependent on governance by illicit actors. The encroachment and expansion of the Taliban in the city, alongside their attacks on police and rival political actors such as the ANP, was clearly aided by these urban-governance flaws. The case of Karachi shows, therefore, how political violence in a megacity is driven by a complex web of competing interests, with armed groups both exploiting and contributing to a weakening of state authority.

Part 2 – Security provision and declining state legitimacy

Security is the most basic and visible weakness in service provision in cities such as Kabul and Mogadishu, which have frequently been the targets of terrorist attacks by the Taliban and al-Shabaab respectively. But terrorism is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of armed violence. One Kabul resident even told us that ‘terrorism is what we are least worried about’, pointing instead to rising crime and to the involvement of influential political figures and former warlords in crime and police corruption.¹¹³ In cities affected by armed conflict, urban populations’ experiences of state-provided security are marred by corruption, ethnic and sectarian tensions, brutality towards local communities and the fragmentation of cities into a patchwork of competing actors and, in some cases, no-go areas.

This weakness in security provision is tied to long-standing flaws in the political institutions themselves. This has been a major cause of a decline in state legitimacy from the perspective of populations who have become used to inept or brutal security forces. It has also paved the way for non-state providers of security and, in some cases, has produced grievances that bolster the radical anti-state narratives of terrorist groups.

In the cities studied here, there is considerable variation in the ability and willingness of the state (understood as the national, regional and local governments, and their institutions) to provide security. Rapid and unmanaged urbanisation in the developing world has led to sprawling slums where physical security and other basic needs – housing, sanitation, water – of hundreds of thousands of people are provided without regulation by non-state armed groups. This has meant a fracturing of the urban space, with different actors commanding authority across the cityscape. In cities located

near areas of armed conflicts, as is the case for each of the four cities studied, this has also meant greater opportunity for violent actors – for example former military commanders accustomed to acquiring power by force, such as the former warlords in Kabul; groups stemming from nearby rural conflicts, such as the TTP in Karachi; and local groups such as the gangs patronised by powerful politicians in Nairobi. Conflicting interests that often play out in struggles for national power or across vast rural areas are, in cities, concentrated into much smaller, densely populated districts.

Territorial rifts

One striking aspect of the urban conflicts in our four case studies is the existence of different security providers, often rival armed groups, which are split between different neighbourhoods. This imposes invisible borders and spatial restrictions on residents’ movements. The problem is clearest in Karachi, which has been divided into the spheres of influence of political militias affiliated to parties that appealed to specific, usually ethnic, constituencies – especially at the height of violence there between 2008 and 2015. The process has taken place within the low-income area of Lyari, for example, sometimes preventing children from going to school.¹¹⁴

When this territorial separation is not enforced directly by armed fighters, it can be maintained by underlying threats and fear: the northern and western peripheries of Mogadishu have a strong al-Shabaab presence, though its fighters only appear openly at night and neither the insurgent group nor the government can claim to fully control those areas.¹¹⁵ This is also the case in Bakara Market, part of the city centre that is perhaps the busiest commercial area in the whole of Somalia, where

the business community pays taxes to al-Shabaab and government agencies (including the police) are reluctant to enter without heavy security.¹¹⁶ Ironically, the market is one of the areas in Mogadishu least affected by terrorist attacks, which is precisely due to al-Shabaab's presence and the apparent absence of representatives of the government or international organisations, who are usually the targets of such attacks. However, it is also an area afflicted by fear, as al-Shabbab extorts business people and publicly punishes those who do not comply.¹¹⁷ Women there feel obliged to wear longer clothing and veils.¹¹⁸ These different restrictions and behavioural codes illustrate the reality of territorial separation in the daily lives of local people.

Co-optation of the state

The presence of alternative security providers so close to countries' political and economic centres comes about not only when armed groups challenge the state but also when they co-opt and establish a close relationship with it. In some cases this consists of members of the political elite exploiting the security forces' insufficient numbers and training in order to infiltrate them with allies. Clan-based militias are no longer seen in the streets of Mogadishu, for example, because they have been nominally incorporated into the Somali National Army and the police force – but in fact they have remained loyal to clan commanders and their objectives.¹¹⁹ Most Somali National Army brigades have a strong alignment with one clan or another, leading to tensions when the army challenges clan interests – for example, in response to attempts to replace certain military commanders, clans have responded by threatening to withdraw all their soldiers from the army.¹²⁰ In a country where loyalty to the clan is much stronger than to the state (which has been a vague entity for most Somalis over the past three decades), urban security has become a porous public service, hence for example the observation by Dr Hodan Ali of the Benadir Regional Administration that 'security personnel sometimes serve as militias for some people'.¹²¹ Dr Ali added that she has seen people wearing security uniforms while conducting private business, and other interviewees told us similar stories. A senior member of an international organisation said that, in Mogadishu, 'the difference between non-state

and state armed actors can shift from day to day'.¹²²

The legacy of conflict is visible in the porous character of urban security in both Mogadishu and Kabul. While in Mogadishu the long-standing reliance on clan affiliations undermines the cohesion of security provision, in Kabul powerful political figures steer security provision in ways that maintain or expand their own influence. Former warlords and military commanders still exert influence over areas of Kabul, backed by their own private security forces. One interviewee told us that warlords are 'trying to find a place for themselves in the new political-economic landscape' as the city undergoes rapid change, while at the same time limiting potential threats to their interests.¹²³ One way they do so is through their continued influence over the appointment of district police commissioners, a process lacking transparency and fraught with allegations of bribery.¹²⁴ Warlords have also strengthened their grip on local security provision by maintaining long-standing patronage networks, with former fighters in Afghanistan's previous wars now working as private security guards for their former commanders.¹²⁵

Karachi's spiralling armed violence during the first half of the 2010s was to a large extent linked to militias maintained by legal political parties. The city's low-income areas were split into fiefdoms controlled by rival militias linked to parties such as the MQM and PPP.¹²⁶ The militias' presence, in turn, meant that local community leaders would help them influence the way residents voted at elections – a process that has been referred to as the 'enclavisation' of low-income areas.¹²⁷ A similar exploitation of illegal armed groups by legal political actors takes place in the slums of Nairobi.¹²⁸

Well-organised insurgents, such as al-Shabaab, benefit from this patchy security provision, for which the main drivers lie deep within the state structure. Political actors seeking to retain power maintain uneasy alliances with the state while at the same time eroding the state's security provision through their own alternative security arrangements. Though the authority of the state – its ability to provide security and maintain a monopoly of force – is not destroyed, it is disputed, doubted, and shared with other violent actors.¹²⁹ This not only reduces state legitimacy from the perspective of the local population but also produces concrete security threats: one

former senior security official in Kabul, for example, reported that local police at checkpoints sometimes demand bribes to let people through, thus making the urban counter-terrorism architecture 'very vulnerable' to corruption by the Taliban.¹³⁰

Grievances and weak security provision

The difficulty of enforcing authority over this patchwork of competing interests facilitates the use of propaganda and violent tactics by insurgent groups such as the Taliban and al-Shabaab. They have been able to 'out-govern' the state in some areas, as well as exploiting popular resentment caused by the state's precarious security provision.¹³¹ When an insurgent group has been able to establish clear territorial control in an urban area, such as the Pakistani Taliban in Karachi during the first half of the 2010s, insurgents have sometimes acquired a reputation of being fairer and more efficient than the state in providing security and justice. Residents in some areas of Karachi with a Taliban presence chose to use the Taliban's courts – which were outside the city, some even as far away as North Waziristan – because they were reputed to be less corrupt and to deal with cases more quickly than the state courts.¹³² The appeal of insurgents' alternative justice systems can also be seen in urban areas where control by armed groups is less direct – such as in Mogadishu, where al-Shabaab has established itself as the principal adjudicator of land disputes. 'If I want [al-Shabaab] to adjudicate my case, it's not hard – I ask around, I get a number and give them a call,' a former senior Somali security official told us.¹³³ He said the system is considered '100 per cent fairer' than that of the state, to the point that even

government employees have been known to use it.¹³⁴

Weak and corrupt security forces are also capable of committing abuses. Slum dwellers in Nairobi often also cite the police as a physical threat.¹³⁵ Their grievances include extra-judicial killings and violent raids.¹³⁶ And such resentment towards the police serves to exacerbate political violence by feeding al-Shabaab's rhetorical tactic of blaming the Kenyan government for injustice and also for discrimination against Muslims, a majority group in some slum areas.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the widespread presence of gangs provides violent extremist organisations with an ample supply of young men with useful skills, as the executive director of the Kenyan Muslim Youth Association, Abdulhamid Sakar, explained: 'Gangs are precisely the first step to a more violent path, including extremism.' Boys as young as 13 can become adept at handling weapons, he added, which potentially makes them cheap and convenient recruits.¹³⁸

In marginalised urban spaces where the state's provision of security – when it exists at all – is patchy and includes abuses of power, the state's authority is undermined from within, adding to the damage done by external attacks from violent actors such as the Taliban and al-Shabaab. The urban space amplifies the effects of weak security provision due to its tendency to densely concentrate competing actors who are vying for political influence and economic resources. Institutional weakness, though certainly not unique to urban areas, is deeply felt in the slums and other low-income areas of the four cities we studied, undermining state authority at the urban core of Afghanistan, Kenya, Pakistan and Somalia.

Part 3 – Fragmented governance and non-state actors

Governance – the ability of the state to implement policies and provide public services – is conspicuously weak in countries suffering from armed conflict or recovering from it, and indeed in many others across the developing world.¹³⁹ Looking beyond the specific issue of security, this section focuses on how political stability in the four cities studied is undermined by weak institutions and limited service provision more generally, thereby furthering the aims of non-state armed groups. The greatest negative impact on state authority takes place in low-income areas or sprawling peripheries that have come to depend more on informal – and often violent – providers of services. This clustering of socio-economic needs, weak governance and non-state armed groups provides an ideal context for political violence to be deployed.

Rapid urbanisation in developing countries has sometimes been portrayed in dramatic terms as a process leading to a dystopian ‘planet of slums’ that foments political instability and violence.¹⁴⁰ Although the picture is more nuanced in the four cities studied, precarious provision of basic services such as water, housing and public transportation strengthens the role of non-state actors in providing replacements (though often of lower quality and at higher prices), and also weakens the ties between the residents of certain areas and the state, facilitating the forging of alternative loyalties within circumscribed urban spaces.¹⁴¹

In each of our four case studies, uneven distribution of public services has been consistently leveraged by non-state actors in order to acquire political influence and economic benefits in parts of the urban territory. This was the case both for insurgents and for more local groups such as militias and gangs. Al-Shabaab’s ability to operate extortion rackets in Mogadishu is due

not only to armed threats but also to the overall rift between local communities and the state. According to a senior government official, the presence of al-Shabaab means that civilian agencies ‘cannot go to the majority of Mogadishu districts’, which obviously impairs the government’s ability to collect intelligence (in the case of the police or intelligence services) or adopt a more collaborative approach towards the local population.¹⁴² Residents of Karachi’s low-income districts experienced similar encroachment by insurgents when elements of the Pakistani Taliban moved there from less urbanised areas such as North Waziristan and Swat during the late 2000s. The group established a presence mostly in the sprawling slums of the eastern and northern peripheries of the city, where they found a receptive audience among Pashtun migrants abandoned by the state (the Taliban is a predominantly a Pashtun movement).¹⁴³ According to a local journalist, ‘the Taliban’s areas comprised fringe and marginalised communities afraid of the police because they were immigrants and aliens and therefore subjected to violence’.¹⁴⁴

Weak governance and political gains by non-state armed groups

Also in the slums of Karachi, criminal gangs and political militias have been able both to generate revenue and achieve some political legitimacy by exploiting the state’s weak provision of services such as health-care, water and dispute-resolution mechanisms such as courts.¹⁴⁵ The way that political parties in power at the municipal level have tended to favour their own constituencies when providing services has reinforced the role of violent actors in low-income areas. For example, a local political party (the PAC, later outlawed) involved

with militias and criminal activities in one such area, Lyari, has provided materials for schools and has established itself as a court for resolving personal disputes.¹⁴⁶ A security operation there in 2012, resulting in deaths and also in interruptions to service provision (see the Karachi case study above), has been described as exacerbating Lyari residents' 'sense of marginalisation'.¹⁴⁷ This sense was further inflamed by the PAC's own rhetoric, which depicted locals, particularly the large Baloch population, as an oppressed minority – tactics similar to those used by the MQM in Urdu-speaking areas.¹⁴⁸

Even armed groups without an overt political or ideological motivation benefit from precarious governance. Despite the violence and economic self-interest of gangs in Nairobi, for example, their acquisition of territory goes hand in hand with the provision of some degree of governance. They 'don't arise just as vigilantes – they provide water and gas, regulate security, [and] enforce ethics such as banning people from robbing in their immediate vicinity', according to Dr Wangui Kimari, a research coordinator with a non-governmental organisation in Mathare slum. Another interviewee added that the gangs 'can organise people in the community to collect rubbish, do some good, but there is still a criminal side – they are still charging for you to walk through a certain street, bring goods, provide water, etcetera'.¹⁴⁹ Their provision of services, which can be more lucrative than petty criminality, depends on their capacity to intimidate local residents into compliance. Their activities can then be leveraged by political actors:

If before they snatched your handbag, now they want to intimidate you, to have some influence over the area they occupy. At that point they become attractive to political actors because politicians see they can use organised violence to scare their opponents, get votes and fight opponents' [supporters]. At this point the gang morphs into a bigger group. Now you have this big group that morphs into criminality, economics, political and vigilante roles.¹⁵⁰

Connections are therefore forged between the political and purely criminal dimensions of violence. This enmeshing of political and criminal interests underlies

the recent political violence that has taken place during elections in Nairobi, when slum gangs become especially useful for political parties who are more interested in 'ethnic clientelism' than in competing in elections through public and policy-oriented debate.¹⁵¹ This use of violence to intimidate voters or prevent political gains by opponents is made possible by slums' status as 'virtual shadow states' where local leaders and even the politicians and parties who initially allied with the gangs are afraid of them, being unable to fully control their activities.¹⁵²

Land as an urban resource driving violence

The cases of Karachi and Nairobi underline the value that densely inhabited urban areas have for political actors willing to ally with non-state armed groups. In exploiting these armed groups' influence over territory, parties and politicians in both cities have been able to secure the votes of the local electorate and also access to the profits of local criminal enterprises (as we shall see later in this section). For those who take control over urban territory, another valuable resource is the land itself. Increasing land prices have been one of the consequences of urban population growth in all four cities studied. In Mogadishu, Kabul and Karachi, this growth has been uninterrupted for at least 20 years, driven to a large extent by the displacement of huge numbers of people by armed conflicts and poverty elsewhere in those countries.¹⁵³ Nairobi has experienced a similar expansion as part of a broader sub-Saharan African pattern of rural-to-urban migration. The resulting scramble for valuable urban land has fuelled disputes involving neighbouring areas, ethnic divisions, rival clans, and insurgents.

A seemingly bureaucratic issue such as land tenure has become a major driver of armed violence in the cities studied, when spiralling land prices add to the explosive combination of armed groups and weak governance. Compounding this violence is the failure of governments to regulate land prices, tackle speculation or confront those who seize land through armed force.¹⁵⁴ This failure is partially due to overwhelming demographic pressure but is also related to the state's long-standing institutional weakness in the urban peripheries where most of this population growth is taking place.

Karachi offers an example of how the issue of land

tenure can end up having severe security consequences. Criminal groups who profit from illegally occupying and then selling land transferred their allegiance from the secular Awami National Party (ANP) to the Pakistani Taliban when the latter began to infiltrate Pashtun peripheries of the city in the late 2000s and early 2010s.¹⁵⁵ These so-called ‘muscle men’ were necessary allies even for a well-armed group such as the Taliban, due to their connections to government agencies and the police. And the muscle men, for their part, benefited from having armed backup for their land seizures. This alliance of convenience between criminals and insurgents ended up fuelling the Taliban’s violent activities in the city.¹⁵⁶

In each of the four cities, state authority over land tenure and housing has collapsed. In Kabul, one former security official said that ‘the city is practically divided up by people who occupied land and implemented their own rules and systems’.¹⁵⁷ The occupation of public and private land by former military commanders and warlords is an intrinsic part of their territorial power – which, together with their influence over the appointment of police commissioners, reinforces their impunity.

Non-state armed groups can also act as facilitators rather than direct perpetrators of land-related violence. Both in Kabul and Mogadishu, the existence of militias answering to warlords, clans and other private interests offers wealthy individuals and land mafias the ability to call upon armed support. With the backing of their militias, for example, former warlords in Kabul have been able to halt the construction of new homes and infrastructure by seizing land.¹⁵⁸ This in turn allows the former warlords to secure continued support from their militiamen by offering them land and even houses.¹⁵⁹ In Mogadishu, landowners and individuals involved in land disputes can call upon armed support by exploiting clan loyalties or offering financial incentives – they can even recruit the assistance of men who are nominally employed by the security services. In a recent dispute over land ownership, for example, one of the parties was able to use police officers as back-up – and the officers did not even bother to take off their uniforms.¹⁶⁰ Other armed men called upon during land disputes are what one former Somali government official referred to as ‘dormant fighters’: they may have a

current or past affiliation to clan militias, and tend to resolve disputes more quickly than the state courts.¹⁶¹

Political and criminal incentives for violence

Political and criminal motives have frequently coincided as factors leading armed groups to commit acts of violence. The Taliban came to the sprawling peripheries of Karachi seeking refuge from military campaigns in Swat and Waziristan, but soon realised, in the words of one of our interviewees, that in its new urban territory there was ‘huge money to be made’ from extortion and land-grabbing.¹⁶² The harsh order that they enforced was not entirely unwelcome for the local population, given that the violent criminal activities of numerous armed groups had previously created a situation of near anarchy.¹⁶³ By maintaining a form of order and security in its territories while profiting from land, extortion and kidnapping for ransom in nearby areas, the Taliban extracted military, political and economic benefits from the urban space.

A similar hybridity of political and economic interests drives al-Shabaab’s presence in Mogadishu, where extortion revenue is a ‘key’ source of funding for the group according to a senior government official involved in security policies.¹⁶⁴ In order to maintain its extensive extortion rackets, described as ubiquitous by several of our interviewees, al-Shabaab ‘has to instil fear’ by demonstrating its capacity for brutality – in fact, according to the senior official, this is one of the main motives for its acts of terrorism in the city.¹⁶⁵

A similar combination of criminal and political incentives can be seen on the part of the gangs operating in the slums of Nairobi. The provision of services such as water, gas, sanitation (toilet facilities) and security is lucrative, and also bolsters some gangs’ purported role as protectors of their tribal areas within those slums.¹⁶⁶ This, in turn, makes those gangs attractive to political actors who might wish to utilise their local territorial power around election time. An example is the role of the Mungiki, an armed group composed mostly of young ethnic Kikuyu, which is involved in vigilantism and extortion while also acting as violent enforcers for politicians. Documents from the International Criminal Court’s investigation into the 2007–08 political violence in Kenya accused

powerful politicians of paying the Mungiki to carry out violent attacks on political rivals and providing the group with weapons. Though the Mungiki have since become less involved in political violence, gangs continue to enact ethnic and political violence: around the time of the disputed 2017 general election, for example, it was reported that gangs in Nairobi would use a simple 'language test' to determine people's ethnicity, targeting those who did not speak Kikuyu.¹⁶⁷

Groups such as Nairobi's gangs and Kabul's warlord-led militias therefore weave a complex web of relationships with the state – sometimes profiting from gaps in service provision and impeding the work of government agencies, but also benefiting from shadowy connections to the levers of power. Even anti-government groups such as the Taliban and al-Shabaab profit by tapping into corrupt networks within land-regulation agencies and the police. Despite this complex picture, the end result is quite clear for state authority in urban areas: a fragmented governance structure that systematically weakens communities' links to the

state and consolidates non-state power. The damage to state authority is even more significant when it takes place within a country's political and economic hub – Karachi, for example, is estimated to account for over 60% of Pakistan's national tax revenue.¹⁶⁸

Fragmented governance erodes state authority by dissociating low-income areas from the state and by providing points of entry for non-state armed groups to exploit service gaps that are politically and economically valuable. In each of the four cities, land conflicts, criminal activity and territorial control by non-state armed groups are persistent manifestations of the state's failure to provide public services. Although urban 'areas of limited statehood' are not always hotbeds of violence or anti-government insurgency, they are arenas where violence can readily be used and is frequently attractive as an instrument for the pursuit of political interests.¹⁶⁹ With both the means and the space to commit violence, non-state armed groups have exploited fragmented governance for their own ends, to the detriment of public security in cities' marginalised areas.

Conclusion

Rather than merely being stages on which broader conflicts between national political actors and transnational armed groups are enacted, cities themselves give rise to political challenges that profoundly affect state authority and institutions. This is clear in the four cities of Mogadishu, Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi, all of which are in countries where institutions and the rule of law are chronically weak. In all four cases, a combination of antagonistic social groups, rival political interests, criminal networks and a rapidly increasing population has contributed to the drivers of violence and the diminishment of state authority. Far from being just the scenes of violence, these cities have been important accelerators of conflict.

One of the fundamental challenges in these cities is the way in which the populations of slums and other low-income areas have become alienated from the state. This process begins with the patchy provision of security, or indeed its complete absence. A more general fragmentation of governance, affecting a broad range of public services and goods, steers populations further away from the state and ever closer to non-state armed groups that take over those state functions. While this does not equate to the replacement of governance by non-state actors, it does mean greater opportunities for the latter to exploit services for private gain, pursue criminal activities and exert local political influence.

Urban spaces, particularly slums and low-income peripheries, are valuable assets in political struggles. The most visible form of political violence, due to its sheer destructive capacity, is terrorism. Al-Shabaab and the Taliban have exploited weak state provision of both security and governance in order to defy the security forces in peripheral areas of Mogadishu and Kabul respectively. In Karachi the Pakistani Taliban have

developed profitable extortion systems and even some degree of territorial control. The contested character of democratic processes play out violently in cities as densely inhabited slums become contested territories, as in the case of Kenya's electoral violence.

But these political dynamics are also closely related to economic drivers of violence. Former warlords in Kabul use their political connections and the threat posed by their private security forces to grab land and conduct criminal activities. Al-Shabaab defies state authority in Mogadishu to receive significant sums from extortion, including in the city's main commercial area of Bakara Market. Gangs in Nairobi profit by providing basic services such as water and sanitation (more specifically, access to public toilets for those whose homes lack that basic facility), but also become involved in political struggles for votes in the run-up to elections. These activities have had significant implications for the decline of state authority and often also entail linkages to powerful and corrupt political actors.

These drivers of political violence are embedded in the spatial divides and social tensions that have come to define cities in conflict-affected regions and the developing world more broadly. They also represent an under-appreciated policy challenge for national governments and international agencies. On their own, the municipal governments in such cities rarely have the administrative or financial capacity to tackle the kind of challenges outlined in this report. In all four cities, for example, there has been a lack of attention to the quality and cohesion of the security services, whose loyalties are too often split between the state and non-state actors. Furthermore, several of our interviewees in Kabul criticised the tendency for international donors

to focus on rural development in Afghanistan, to the detriment of urban areas. Meanwhile, in Nairobi, Kabul and Karachi, where armed groups have occasionally or even frequently operated in alliance with political parties, efforts to strengthen democratic norms and fight corruption could also be tailored more closely to the challenges described here.

These policy challenges relate to a domain not frequently addressed by governments and international organisations responding to armed conflict and political

instability: the city. Perhaps this is due to the understandable notion that each city has its own particular dynamics. It is certainly true that each of the four cities studied here has unique characteristics. But there has also been a rapidly growing recognition, both among policymakers and experts, of the common challenges arising from the spatial and political features of cities. These unique urban traits and drivers of political violence constitute key policy areas for security and stability in an increasingly urbanised world.

Notes

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