

Globalization of Cities and Urban Conflict: A Case Study of Karachi

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Abstract

Globalization, both the process and the phenomena, is indeed complex and needs to be studied at different levels such as sub-national, national or supra-national as opposed to simply in terms of national or 'Global'. These distinctions of different levels only serve to make things clearer and will eventually allow us to formulate a more unified and overarching perspective of what is regarded as globalization and its vast forces by examining the linkages between them. Looking at globalization in relation to conflict, in particular, this article is a theoretical examination of the above mentioned hypothesis using the example of Karachi; a major urban and metropolitan entity in Pakistan. It highlights the strategic importance of cities in relation to larger territorial entities such as the state, and demonstrates the urbanity of conflict that lies within them.

Introduction

There is evidence of a pattern of events which highlights the need for an academic inquiry to understand the relationship between globalization, urban conflict, changing territorialities

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and the nature of different territorial entities in relation to each other (the city in relation to the state scale, the state in relation to the supra-state scale, especially in the context of international relations and political economies, and the global in relation to the local which would include cities to even smaller forms in the urban hierarchies). In order to illustrate this analysis, the paper takes it in the context of the national insecurity that exists in Pakistan due to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the international scene of the US 'War on Terror' and the phenomena of drone attacks and its impact on Karachi.

Globalization as a phenomenon arising out of supra-national forces and/or international networks (channels of communications, trade financial and economic flows etc. and even involving an element of cultural exchange as a result of contact) and one that involves consequences even at the very local level. Therefore, it is undeniably a very well connected world. Additionally, cities, especially major metropolitan ones can be understood as the major sites where the 'Re-Territorializing' effects of globalization can be produced and observed more prominently. This aspect of globalization requires defining 'Territorialization' or 'Territoriality'.

Territoriality can be defined in a number of ways but Robert Sack's definition will serve aptly that territoriality can be defined as "the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area".¹ In addition, there are two presuppositions that can be understood as "after the long historical phase that saw the ascendance of the national state and the scaling of key economic dynamics at the national level, the city is once again a scale for strategic economic and political dynamics."²

1 Robert Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

2 Saskia Sassen, "Cities in Today's Global Age," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 29, No.1 (2009): 90.

Cities become strategic sites by virtue of two conditions: “rescaling of strategic trajectories that articulate the new political-economic system and hence at least some features of power. This weakens the nation as the container of social processes. This is also weakened by globalization and digitization. Cities emerge as strategic sites for major economic processes and political actors.”³

Furthermore, Neil Brenner explains this changing pattern as the state-scale being “re-articulated and re-territorialized in relation to the sub- and supra-state scales. He calls this resultant reconfiguration the ‘glocal’ state.”⁴ These pre-suppositions will be more strengthened by the conclusion of the essay.

First of all, this glocalized understanding of territories is necessary and will also serve a purpose in addressing one of the major concerns expressed by authors such as Appadurai in some of the literature on globalization which provides a more comprehensive understanding of global processes without a theoretical gap between macro- and micro-level theories.⁵ Drawing largely on some of the insights in Sassen’s work *When the City Itself becomes a Technology of War* this understanding would allow globalization, especially in relation to conflict, to be seen in a two-step process. Firstly, supra-state scale events (such as wars) arising out of the interplay of the variety of factors which exist in the realms of international relations and political economies, have effects which are expansive and diffusive in that they penetrate into the sub-state scale in places far beyond the actual site of the event (often the national territory of the country). To clarify this point, Sassen gives the example of how the US invasion of Iraq eventually

3 Sassen, “Cities in Today’s Global Age,” 89.

4 Neil Brenner, “Global Cities, Glocal States: Global City Formation and State Territorial Restructuring in Europe,” *Review of International Political Economy* 5, no. 1 (1998): 1.

5 Arjun Appadurai, *The Production of Locality; Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178-79.

resulted in not only the springing up of insurgent groups rapidly in many of the major cities of Iraq but also expanded the 'urban-war theatre' to other places which resulted in bombings in many of the major cities across the world such as Madrid, London, Bombay, Casablanca etc.⁶ This would refer to the global nature of these events which is the first step of the process. Secondly, the original elements of the expansive effects of such events as the invasion (whether physically in the form of migrations, economic, political, cultural flows or even psychologically or socially in the form of the perversion of fear, apprehension and discrimination towards a particular identity such as the Muslims in general) once they are in a new local context would necessarily interact with local elements as well, to suit the needs and circumstances of the local subjects and actors. Again with regard to the attacks in some of the major cities, Sassen argues that; "Grievances specific to the cities and countries where they took place inspired these attacks, which were carried out by groups acting independently of each other."⁷

In addition, "The War on Terror, in its global expansiveness gave larger meaning to local conflicts and was then expressed through varied and far-flung attacks, all in the name of the same struggle."⁸ Moreover, the characteristics of the global or even major cities are what increase their conduciveness as the sites for these attacks to manifest themselves in the form of insurgencies, asymmetric warfare or even one-off or 'partial and intermittent' events that 'lack clear endings'. These characteristics are by virtue of many of the defining aspects of globalization such as time-space compression coupled with greater mobility for different individual or organizational actors to these pockets of economic flows and political centres. Moreover, the unique features of these cities serve to not only give the

6 Saskia Sassen, "When the City Itself Becomes a Technology of War," *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, No. 6 (2010): 33-50.

7 Saskia Sassen, "Urban Capabilities: An Essay on our Challenges and Differences," *Journal of International Affairs* 62, No. 2 (2012): 91.

8 Sassen, "Urban Capabilities," 91.

possibility of power and action to the individual or the otherwise relatively 'powerless' group but also to prevent national forces such as the military from containing these elements owing to the urban landscape.

Urban Conflict in Karachi: Globalization and the Taliban

A growing number of Taliban has been documented as flocking to the South of Pakistan from the Northern Areas and finding a safe haven in Karachi. By applying the analysis proposed above, one can understand which aspects of globalization contributed to the creation of the Taliban that now reside in the Northern regions of Pakistan that are the sites of the drone attacks and also in Karachi which is nowhere from what may be called the actual theatre of operations alongside the Pak-Afghan border. It is not necessary for the purpose of this essay to elaborate the entire international backdrop at the time of the Afghan War, the legacy of which were the Taliban, both in Afghanistan and eventually the TTP. It is necessary to know that it was an event of international magnitude that arose out of some of the conditions that attribute to the process of globalization today. These can be seen in an understanding of the logistics of the flow of arms and ammunition to Pakistan during this period, the economic flows in the form of funding supplied to the seven militant groups that were initially used by United States and change in the local sociological landscape and demographics of certain areas of Pakistan, especially the Northern Tribal region.⁹

The analysis begins from the point where the militant Islamist elements are vestiges of the Afghan war, present in the tribal areas of Pakistan. According to Christine Fair:

The various militant movements in Pakistan arguably began to gain prominence coincidentally with-or even as a result of the Pakistani military operations in FATA, which were undertaken at the urging of the United States. Several Pakistani analysts contend the onset of US strikes in the FATA — first by conventional air platforms and later by unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones — catalyzed the

⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010).

insurgency... the phenomena of Talibanization which was originally confined to North and South Waziristan began spreading to other tribal agencies, Banu, Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan and Swat where they have 'under various local leaders' effectively exploited socio-economic grievances.¹⁰

Eventually, many of the Taliban come under the umbrella term of the TTP spreading to major cities such as Quetta, Peshawar and most importantly Karachi. Of the tens of thousands of people that were displaced during the military operations in Swat and South Waziristan in 2009, embedded in the Pashtun migrants were a number of Taliban fighters.¹¹ Karachi's demography is such that there were already existing neighbourhoods of Pashtuns and they formed a significant proportion of the population. From a strategic point of view the city provided cover for the Taliban and allowed them to establish their roots over the last few years. Among these, there are many sectarian militants as well from the factions of the Sipah-e-Sahaba and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. These 'local' factions manifest the tensions of sectarian strife, which are often designated as the Punjabi counterparts of the Taliban, inter-related with other insurgent factions across the country¹². It can be safely said that the insurgent elements of the northern areas have become entrenched more easily owing to the network of local militant networks which existed previously.

While it is tempting to view the Punjab as a new theatre or even as a future locus of Talibanization, sites of militancy across Pakistan are inter-related. Punjabi based groups such as the Deobandi LeJ and JM are components of the TTP and conduct attacks on behalf of it. In fact, the so called Punjabi Taliban groups form the backbone of the TTP.¹³

Furthermore, it is essential to understand that it is the metropolitan nature of Karachi which makes it conducive for

10 C. Christine Fair, "The Militant Challenge in Pakistan," *Asia Policy* No. 11 (January 2011): 124.

11 Fahim Zaman, "Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story," *Dawn*, March 31, 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/799118/taliban-in-karachi-the-real-story>.

12 Zaman, "Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story".

13 Fair, "The Militant Challenge in Pakistan," 127.

such insurgent elements to grow and flourish. Karachi is in fact a very unique and extreme case in this regard. It is rightly characterized as a global city because of its strategic location as a sea-port, which serves as a gateway to the Middle East and a key transit point for the NATO supplies heading to the war effort in Afghanistan.¹⁴ It accounts for 53.38percent of the total collections of the Federal Board of Revenue out of which 53.33percent are customs duty and sales tax on imports. According to a 'Price Water House Coopers Survey' released in 2007, Karachi was seen to have a GDP of \$55 billion and with a projected growth rate of 5.8percent that would rise to \$127 billion by 2020.¹⁵ It is the country's largest economic base and home to the headquarters of most of the major banking and industrial enterprises. The multitude of multi-national corporations and organizations that have offices there and it is also referred to as the industrial hub of the country. Therefore, it is definitely a site where large amount of economic flow takes place.

However, it also comprises a huge population of around 14 million people that is ethnically divided by Pashtun, Punjabi, Sindhi and Muhajir residents. Urban conflict between many of these ethnic groups has pushed some of their populations into segregated localities. Rampant crime in many areas helps fuel the funding to different groups to carry out their activities. Target killings, extortion, kidnappings are just some of the examples of the criminal acts perpetrated frequently. For instance, according to a statement by Sharifuddin Memon, the head of the citizen-police liaison committee, "we have come across kidnapping gangs with links to militants in the northwest and Al Qaeda."¹⁶ This ethnic, political and military strife has disrupted many of the economic activities of the city.

14 Tom Hussain, "Karachi is Part of Pakistan: Taliban Plan to Bring War to Urban Areas," *McClatchy Newspapers*, April 29, 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/04/29/189908/karachi-is-part-of-pakistani-taliban.html>.

15 Port Qasim Authority, www.pqa.gov.pk.

16 Miles Kahler and Barbarar F. Walter, *Territoriality and Conflict in an Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

According to a report, the economic stagnation has resulted in an efflux of industry from Karachi since the 80s;¹⁷ however, while it continues to remain an economic power house for the country, it is the city's social and urban life which has taken the heaviest toll especially on the lives of its citizens.

Moreover, the arrival of the Taliban as a new militant actor into the Karachi scene has resulted in their interaction with the already present local elements of conflict that has not only exacerbated the situation but has also brought about slight shifts and changes in the social and political space. By collaborating with already established gangs they have managed to quickly become entrenched as insurgent forces. The pre-existing institution of the Madrassas, provide infrastructure in places where many of the community members share their beliefs.¹⁸ The state police already found themselves hard pressed to deal with local gangs and faced an even bigger challenge in the form of Taliban as a greater element of asymmetry in arms and ammunition being smuggled from Afghanistan. In addition, similar to the role played by leaders in different areas, the Taliban have also managed to set up *Jirga* courts based on Taliban traditions.¹⁹ Further aspects of Taliban influence can be seen in local seminaries where their preaching activities permeate into the social space. The new arrivals, both IDPs and the TTP militants among them, gravitated towards where their compatriots had earlier settled, mostly in *katchi abadis*.²⁰

This urban and socio-political landscape of Karachi makes it to some extent an ideal and fertile ground for insurgent elements. It is not just a major city but also one whose civic capabilities have been weakened largely because of the ethnic conflict and recent migrations that strain its urban fabric and the fact that it strategically serves

17 Port Qasim, pqa.gov.pk.

18 Zaman, "Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story".

19 Zaman, "Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story".

20 Zaman, "Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story".

the interests of insurgent groups. For example, this is demonstrated clearly by recent events such as the two back to back attacks in Karachi in June 2014; the first one on Jinnah International Airport and the second on the Airport Security Force (ASF) academy base.²¹ These attacks seem to demonstrate a very close chronological link to Military air-strikes on Taliban hideouts near the Pak-Afghan border which seems to suggest that they are a retaliatory measure on the part of the terrorists. According to Al-Jazeera, the attack at the ASF base came “hours after Pakistan's Air Force launched strikes in tribal areas on the Afghan border Tuesday, killing at least 15 rebels, the army said.”²² The air-strikes were a retaliatory measure against the initial attack on Jinnah Airport. It seems that Taliban resort to using Karachi's urban capabilities to their advantage since a conventional confrontation in the Northern parts of Pakistan would not be possible for them due to the asymmetry between their military capabilities and those of the Pakistan Army.²³ According to Sassen, cities by their very nature of having numerous civic institutions and dense population obstruct conventional military techniques from being deployed, thus their suitability for insurgent actors.²⁴ They are also increasingly becoming frontline spaces for war as opposed to earlier notions of war in which armies met in vast open fields and battlegrounds. With regard to the different forms that asymmetric warfare in cities can take, Sassen argues that one of them is ‘the embedding of conventional state conflicts in an act of asymmetric war’ or, and the type which figures in more relevantly in our own analysis, there is the activating by asymmetric war of older conflicts that evolve into armed conflict between two unconventional armed forces, such as between Shia's and Sunni's.²⁵ For

²¹ Zaman, “Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story”.

²² Zaman, “Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story”.

²³ Zaman, “Taliban in Karachi: The Real Story”.

²⁴ Sassen, “When the City Itself becomes a Technology of War,” 90.

²⁵ Sassen, “When the City Itself becomes a Technology of War,” 90.

instance, Pakistan incorporates the state as the oppositional actor and the relative 'powerlessness' and confusion of state actors in handling the insurgent problem.

It presents itself a predicament, or more appropriately a dilemma for the nation, the Pakistani case demonstrates very clearly in a number of instances. Firstly, it presents itself in the popular debates about the effectiveness of the drone attacks and more importantly whether they should even be considered as a viable option, given that they have effects that diffuse well beyond the site of the attacks, as this paper is examining in the case of Karachi and numerous instances of which can be seen not in other major cities such as Lahore but other forms in the urban hierarchies as well, in sporadic examples of suicide bombings and threats. This phenomenon is what Sassen is referring to when she says that "the search for national security is today a source for urban insecurity."²⁶ Secondly, the occasional threats issued by the Taliban leaders at specific instances; threats in which they allude to make the point that they have successfully pervaded and entrenched themselves in urban areas throughout the country. It is not the factual verity of these statements which matters as much but more importantly the significance that they carry is that one can infer that a certain degree of influence can now be yielded from the cities, if not politically from the centre, and that insurgent groups are aware of this reality as well.

Another somewhat recent and demonstrative example of this can be found in an alleged order by Hakimullah Mehsud to carry out suicide bombings on the day of the 2013 elections.²⁷ According to one Taliban operative:

The migration of TTP fighters to Karachi has been ongoing, in fits and starts, for several years, but over the last 11 months, the trickle has turned into a steady flow of men, weapons and explosives... Their plan is to establish headquarters in Karachi, and spread their network to adjacent cities from there. Subsequently, attacks were

26 Sassen, "When the City Itself becomes a Technology of War," 34.

27 "Taliban Plan Election Day Carnage," *Newsweek Pakistan*, May 9, 2013, <http://newsweekpakistan.com/pakistani-taliban-plan-election-day-carnage/>

carried out on members of the ANP who alongside the PPPP were part of the coalition government. The threats were also mostly directed towards these political parties, especially the PPPP. The Taliban deem the democratic system as an un-Islamic system which only serves the interests of infidels.²⁸

One way in which the growing influence of cities can be understood today; in terms of reterritorialisation, the kind of which Brenner attributes to globalization not just in the physical sense, but also as 'a reterritorialisation of both socio-economic and political-institutional spaces' (*Globalization as Reterritorialisation*). Sassen argues that, "cities have emerged once again as strategic sites for cultural and institutional change."²⁹ Drawing on Weber's writings on *The City* but only up to a certain point, she says that rather than cities "robbing their citizens of the ability to shape at least some of the city's elements' they can 'serve as catalysts for trans-urban developments."³⁰

Lastly, it would be pertinent to ask what has afforded individual and organizational actors in urban settings, especially global cities, this power to shape and take part in the process described previously as that of reterritorialization. The answer can be found in what Miles Kahler says about globalization; "We do not live in a 'borderless world' or one that has seen the 'end of geography'. Conflict over territory continues in an increasingly integrated world."³¹ Territory is, not just that enclosed by physical demarcations or boundaries, but also relating to socio-economic and political spaces. This can be understood by alluding to Sassen's notion of specialization of circuits of trade, finance and production³² and that access of the individual or groups to their services especially in cities can allow them greater power to shape different urban and trans-urban elements and spaces. They have facilitated

28 Hussain, "Karachi is Part of Pakistan".

29 Hussain, "Karachi is Part of Pakistan".

30 Sassen, "Urban Capabilities," 88.

31 Kahler and Walter, *Territoriality and Conflict in an Era of Globalization*, 1.

32 Sassen, "Cities in Today's Global Age".

the Taliban in the same way. It is mentioned previously the sources which explain that there is a trans-national mobility of arms, ammunition and funds taking place which facilitates them. The circuits that the Taliban use are probably part of the circuits of the illegal economy. A fitting example which can be mentioned is the development of the opium economy which was expanded greatly during the Afghan war. Ahmad Rashid talks about it extensively, of how it was used by the Taliban as a major source of revenue and resulted in the development of vast trading and logistical networks and purification plants in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He also mentions a study on the failure of the US narcotics policy which states that, "During the 1980's, corruption, covert operations and narcotics became intertwined in a manner which makes it difficult to separate Pakistan's narcotics traffic from more complex questions of regional security and insurgent warfare."³³

Conclusion

To sum up the argument in this paper is along with the lines proposed by urban sociologists such as Sassen and Brenner, when they observe patterns of change that are taking place due to globalization with regards to the reterritorialization of different scales (the city, the nation-state, the supra-state). The socio-economic and political ways that are now giving importance to cities as the new strategic sites and frontier zones. This change has resulted in a pattern of increasing conflict in cities being seen; one that needs to be understood as more than just a result of lawlessness and lack of effective state control. It is also tried to show that these changes fit into a narrative greater than their local one, i.e. a global and glocal, by explaining that they are often the result of events being driven by national interests operating within the complex dynamics of international relations, and an increasingly integrated and interconnected world economy.

33 Rashid, *Taliban*, 117-21.