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Urban political settlements: a new lens for peacemaking in cities

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the conceptual lens of the urban political settlement. We argue that ordering actors in cities and towns in contexts marked by conflict, violence, and fragile institutions can form urban political settlements independently from those actors at the national level, providing trajectories for stabilising cities. We discuss the shortcomings of the literature on political settlement analysis and its recent efforts to subsume political settlements at the city level to those at the national level. In response, we present the lens of the urban political settlement through its various components. First, we highlight the actors involved, and why they are required to have capacities to engage in order-making processes. Second, we advance the discussion by presenting the control spheres of cities under conditions of conflict, violence, and institutional fragility – territory, population, and the economy – and the control capacities of ordering actors – violence, financial, and institutional. Third, based on the presentation of the heuristic lens of the urban political settlement, we present a research agenda able to respond to contemporary pressures that cities are exposed to.

Introduction

Cities have become increasingly important objects of study in a world of rapid systemic changes. Due to the impact of climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, disruptive new diseases and technologies, uncontrolled population growth and displacement, and geopolitical shifts, political systems are under stress at all levels to deal with the resulting consequences. A plethora of climate researchers – including the International Panel on Climate Change – emphasise that the current realities and future scenarios of systems breakdown will shape domestic and international politics for the years to come.[1] In this context, cities have a particular strategic position. Not only are they the places where most people live, they are also responsible for most global economic activity.[2] Even more relevant in this context is that cities represent an important source of agency, both

in terms of their global engagement, but also in terms of solving major problems relevant for them without depending on national governments or international assistance.[3]

Within the trajectory of breakdown from global to local political systems, cities represent an important sub-national level for action to mitigate the consequences of systemic change.[4] But exactly how such mitigation happens practically is still unclear. With many strands of research and practice obsessed with government and institution centric approaches, this article aims to shift the focus on cities as the primary construction site for order in a world under stress and on approaches that are growing out of the political matrix of cities themselves. The article's analytic and operational contribution is the proposition of the 'urban political settlement' as a lens to help stimulate order-making processes in cities marked by conflict, violence and fragile institutions. We specifically look at cities in these contexts because they are so vulnerable to the stresses that are deriving from, for instance, rapid population loss or growth, or large-scale weather events.[5]

The urban political settlement lens we develop in this article was stimulated by two sets of insights. The first is about the experience of existing stabilisation programmes in cities affected by situations of conflict, violence, and institutional fragility. The work of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Maiduguri, Northern Nigeria, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) work towards stabilisation in Libyan and Yemeni cities are pointers to practices that embrace urban political settlements.[6] This experience shows that ordering processes in cities marked by conflict, violence and fragile institutions require a high degree of co-production capabilities that binds international and local actors together in the production of order. The second insight stimulating this article on urban political settlements was the recognition of the power of entrenched local actors. The breakdown of Port-au-Prince, the capital city of Haiti, showed that there can be non-state armed groups that are not national in their structure but are limited to cities.[7] Conflict management and security approaches that seek to build a foundation for stabilisation at the national level need to respond to and provide trajectories of order-making processes when actors that contest the stability of Port-au-Prince or other cities do not have national aspirations. Previous UN peacekeeping missions have encountered difficulties when pacifying urban criminal networks.[8] The case of Port-au-Prince is, however, not unique and, as such, can stand for many cities and towns as an example and lesson, particularly African cities, which are engulfed in the competition between various non-state armed groups from Freetown to Nairobi and from Juba to Goma.[9] This experience suggest that it is important to be able to perceive urban political settlements in their own right – which means targeted at the city as the primary object – and not only as a part of a larger national settlement process. As Colombia's example already shows, *Paz Total* (total peace) cannot exist without *Paz Urbana* (urban peace), which highlights the negotiations with criminal structures focused on the economic level and made possible by a special legal space created by the government.[10]

Reflecting on these insights, this article pursues an investigation into the learning from political settlement analysis and its applicability for the context of cities that are embarking on order-making processes. By order-making we refer to previous works emphasising formal and informal, and violent and non-violent processes that create nested forms of different social orders.[11] In this context, ordering actors are those actors who shape these

processes. This article reemphasises the initial observations that ordering actors in cities can form urban political settlements autonomously from national level arrangements, hence emphasising the importance of understanding highly localised (street or quarter level) political economy dynamics in cities as a key analytical task to study and shape urban political settlements. But as these power dynamics in cities can be difficult to understand for outsiders, a new lens is necessary – or pair of glasses – that help make the contours of urban political settlement clearer.

We structured the article as follows. In the first section we delve into the concept of the political settlement, its evolution, and the debates and critiques it has sparked over the past decade. We situate the urban political settlement within the broader political settlement analysis (PSA) literature while also noting the contributions and limitations of associated literatures. In the second section we address the tendency in current political settlement literature to confine political settlements to the national level, over-looking their existence at the city, district or street level. By expanding the boundaries of the political settlement to cities, we lay the conceptual groundwork for the lens of the urban political settlement. In the third section we present the components of an urban political settlement lens. We describe this lens as a tool for better capturing the dynamic bargaining processes that ordering actors in cities and towns engage in to stabilise and order the city. We also present the various components of the urban political settlement, guided by the question of what we need to study to recognise and monitor urban political settlements. To start with, we need to identify the 'ordering actors' that channel the agency behind the ordering process. These actors strive to dominate three distinct 'control spheres' – population, territory, and economy. They do so by leveraging their 'control capacities', which encompass coercive, financial, and institutional capacities. Throughout the article, our aim is not to present a specific theory about the trajectories of urban political settlements. Instead, we offer a heuristic instrument to study ordering actors within cities and how they can accumulate the capacities to create a political settlement. This instrument, we believe, will be important practically to better assist cities to find negotiated pathways to order in cities at a time when these will be exposed to ever more stress due to the systemic pressures on them. The article concludes with reflections on further research on urban political settlements.

Challenging political settlement analysis

The body of literature on PSA has become a vibrant field of study in the development and conflict research field over the past decade including wide-ranging debates on the meaning, concept, and application of political settlements.[12] Here we highlight the key points of contention in the debate on PSA to underline the importance of *urban* political settlements as distinct from *national* political settlements.

Two strands of research coined the idea of political settlement. On the one hand, the School of New Institutional Economics (NIE) pivoted the concept through the writings of Khan.[13] In his work, Khan mainly looked at the role that formal and informal bargaining processes between elites have on developmental trajectories. On the other hand, scholars working on violence and development have indicated that political settlements, or 'limited access orders', become a means for controlling violence.[14] The two approaches put forward the presence of a 'ruling' or 'dominant

coalition', which is the pre-eminent political form of how elites organise under the political settlement and direct it. For reasons that we present throughout the article, we define the political settlement *as a formal or informal agreement between different ordering actors that creates rules for a viable political and economic order and that is enforced by the ordering actors with respect to a specific population, territory, or economy*. In this way, political settlements are understood as dynamic processes that seek to create a modus operandi, which is upheld by ordering actors. In contrast to the literature following Khan, the political settlement is, in our eyes, not limited to being a means to enhance development trajectories, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile settings. Instead, it is a process to provide order vis-à-vis a population, territory, or the economy amidst conflict, violence and institutional fragility. Thus, PSA's approach diverges from the conceptualisation of conflict resolution and peace agreements that considers 'the agreement between the warring parties' as the end of a bargaining process. Kelsall and colleagues point out that political settlements 'can be a product of tacit or informal understandings' [15] that occurs outside the formal agreement and that are periodically renegotiated.

The NIE scholars explain through PSA why the political foundations of some states lead to countries' economies performing better than others.[16] The attention paid by these scholars to the underlying political context of development trajectories speaks volumes for the importance that they put on the institutions and their best practices of enhancing growth and maximising development prospects.[17] Various empirical examples from Cambodia to Liberia exemplify the fine-tuning required for finding a balance between economic and political viability that seeks to uphold the political settlement.[18] The institutions created through the political settlement must provide sufficient resources as a buy-in to those elites to commit and perform by the 'rules of the game'.[19] It is these 'rules of the game' that implicitly or explicitly bind together actors and their behaviours through the political settlement. These underlining conditions that premise the political settlement to be a development-seeking tool, as recently exemplified by the literature on pockets of effectiveness,[20] remain helpful for our understanding of the political settlement due to their indication of bargaining processes that lead to what Khan refers to as 'a stable distribution of power'.[21] Indeed, urban political settlements have distributive capacities that benefit actors according to their control capacities. Those benefits vary from the context of the political settlement but can become quite lucrative, such as taxation schemes.

The dimension we wish to emphasise in this article is the political settlement as a project for creating a dynamic bargaining process for transitioning away from violent orders in cities. According to this perspective the means of violence are controlled by 'dominant coalitions', which resemble the most influential groups of society,[22] and thereby provide a 'modicum of political stability' through the political settlement.[23] The central tenet of this understanding of the political settlement is the intention of managing and governing violence. Equally, the political settlement perspective of these authors gives us room to view the political settlement as a strategy for creating pockets of stability amidst conflict and fragility, precisely what some urban political settlements seek to construct.

Returning to the previously raised distinction between peace agreements and political settlements, political settlements in contexts marked by conflict, violence,

and fragile institutions seek to mitigate and manage violence rather than aim to achieve a permanent solution to it as conflict resolution or transformation approaches would suggest. This is why urban political settlement more closely relate to conflict management approaches that by progressive renegotiation to achieve higher levels of peacefulness.[24]

Although the two schools have distinct understandings of assemblage, they generally agree that the 'distribution of power' is the foundation for political settlements.[25] Following Khan's understanding, a strong ruling coalition with little threat perception would be expected to invest in development or other long-term projects that require relative stability. However, when the threat to the ruling coalition is high, it would seek to maintain power and control over the political and economic equilibrium via clientelist means of capturing rents and disbursing them. Hickey contrasts this position, arguing that when a ruling coalition is governing for long, they do not have to become developmentalists but can instead turn 'predatory and personalised'.[26]

In this light then, political settlements must be economically and politically viable to the participating ordering actors. From an economic standpoint, political settlements distribute rents, which 'determine patterns of resource mobilisation that lie at the heart of economic development'.[27] While resources differ depending on contextual conditions, the economic viability of these resources represents the dividends that actors are willing to buy into when forming a political settlement. From a political standpoint, the ordering actors committing to a political settlement shift their engagement from conflict and coercion to political engagement in institutions. The enactment of power through institutions provides the political viability of the political settlement, with the ultimate idea being that violent conflicts can be transformed into processes of 'normal' politics.[28] The process of the political settlement then institutionalises a political *modus operandi.*

The UK Stabilisation Unit demonstrates the pivotal role of formal and informal institutions in shaping the 'rules of the game' that govern elite behaviour and interests, thereby balancing the political and economic viability of the political settlement.[29] The Somali case, where informal institutions hold sway, serves as a compelling example.[30] The Somali political settlement is based on diverse institutions managed by different elites, clan-based or not, which uphold through formal and informal institutions the bargain reached and the state's resources.[31] Menkhaus called the resulting arrangement a 'mediated state'.[32]

When ordering actors' appropriate institutions to enforce rent-seeking schemes, they can uphold a rent-management system.[33] In Libya's capital, Tripoli, multiple actors competed with one another to control state institutions.[34] Controlling them transformed into a large income stream for them, sustaining their rent-seeking mechanisms. Specifically, Eaton highlights how the 'Libyan Post, Telecommunication and Information Technology Company (LPTIC) was a significant source of revenue', with actors, from the competing sides used to channel millions into their accounts.[35]

When formal institutions do not have sufficient enforcement capacities to sustain rent-seeking mechanisms, ordering actors may use informal institutions to uphold their rent-management system. For example, informal institutions emerged in Kyrgyzstan during the post-1990 political settlement.[36] In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the Uzbek and Kyrgyz ordering actors managed a political settlement through various rent-seeking mechanisms embedded within a system of informal institutions,

from credit facilities to property schemes. These legitimised the political settlement through 'brokerage and mediation'.[37]

When ordering actors bargain between them on how to set up the rules of the game, they would seek to also benefit economically and politically from their control of the population, territory, or the economy. In Iraq, the ruling coalition is divided between access to institutions and resources, controlling Baghdad's population, territory, and economy and the broader national landscape.[38] The balance of power is said to be divided 'across ethno-sectarian lines', including Sunni, Shia, Kurdish elites.[39] Each time there is a new government in Iraq, these parties' part of the political settlement would seek to readjust the balance of economic and political assets in their favour.

Before turning to the critiques scholars raised towards the political settlement, one recent seminal contribution is looking beyond elites and at the 'social foundation' of political settlements.[40] Kelsall understands the social foundation of political settlements as 'groups that are important to the settlement's reproduction, in the sense that they have the power to overthrow or seriously undermine it'.[41] Kelsall and colleagues indicate based on four cases, Ghana, Guinea, Cambodia, and Rwanda, that while these countries have different social foundations, each political settlement's dominant coalition is dependent on these social foundations.[42] In Ghana, from 2000 until 2018, the political settlement and its ruling coalition were always bound 'on winning favour from substantial, only contingently loyal swing constituencies', which 'included private business clients, cocoa farmers in parts of Ashanti and the East, ethnoregional elites, and voters in parts of the Western, Central, and Brong-Ahafo regions as well as Accra'.[43] This indicates that without the broad-based social foundation, the dominant coalition would not be able to uphold its political settlement.

While not implying inclusion by looking at the social foundation, this approach opens the space for understanding the internal bargaining dynamics between actors relevant for a political settlement.[44] From the point of view of the social foundation, an insider of the political settlement needs to be powerful enough to be a worthwhile target for continuous co-option. One example is Rwanda, where the governing coalition co-opted the opposition to the political settlement. The Kagame government has continuously practiced 'clientelistic and programmatic co-optation' to embed opposition fractions to it in its coalition, which would include Hutus in political offices, as well as Hutu and Tutsi peasants.[45] Without co-opting these parties, key ordering actors would remain outside the political settlement and might threaten the continuity of the Kagame government.

The social foundation of a political settlement then captures whether multiple groups have disruptive potential. Kelsall's contribution is that elites and the bargaining process that results in the political settlement ultimately result in these elites' relationship with various actors that form their social foundation. Those actors may differ but could ultimately make or break the backbone of the political settlement. Based on Kelsall's argument then, bargaining processes happen vertically (co-opting various elements into a hierarchy within an ordering actors) and horizontally (between different ordering actors).

When transposing these observations into the realities of sprawling megacities in developing countries or in cities marked by conflict, violence and fragile institutions, it is important to consider the issue of numbers – the sheer number of elite groups that matter for order in a specific district – as well as the fluidity of power dynamics. This can

be a real issue for researchers that are trying to make sense of political settlements given the significant local knowledge on the 'who is who' and 'who owns what' that is needed. In most cases, researchers and practitioners are ignorant about the de-facto dynamics of power and control, and this is why finding unique insiders to the political economy of cities is an important remedy to understand the potential trajectory of political settlements.

While the literature on political settlements raises several critiques,[46] to our work the most important is raised by some on the non-attribution of coercion in enforcing political settlements. Some scholars argue that even though violence may be regulated or controlled by a dominant coalition, this regulation does not necessarily mean that violence will disappear or be absent. Instead, the dominant coalition may simply manage or structure violence, but it could persist in some form.[47] We follow these scholars and argue that if ordering actors do not have a broad social foundation, they are more likely to use violence against their opposition in urban political settlements than if they do.[48] One empirical example of a political settlement that relies on a narrow social foundation and has resorted to violent means is Guinea. There, a consolidated dominant coalition faced by strong opposition politics responded with 'violent and volatile politics' to maintain the status quo of the political settlement.[49] Hence, we uphold that violence and coercion are a central control capacity of ordering actors and in some political settlements, violence may become intrinsic.

Political settlements and cities

A significant line of critique of PSA has been its weakness to offer a framework for inquiry that goes beyond the nation-state. Scholars who differentiate between states and cities indicate that particularly capital cities are the spaces were national power and authority are accumulated.[50] As such, when scholars look at political settlements of cities, they do so mainly for capitals.[51] What is more, when looking at political settlements in cities, scholarship so far has mainly looked at African cities.[52] Kelsall and colleagues explicitly identify that city-level political settlements and their ruling coalitions are integrated into national-level political settlements.[53] They build their evidence on case studies of 12 African cities, including capital and non-capital cities. For them, the relationship is binary with 'city-level power blocs [who] may align perfectly with national power blocs, or, in a more complicated case, city power blocs may cross-cut national power blocs'.[54] Accordingly, dominant coalitions in a city can never contest or even differ from those of the national political settlement. We aim to broaden the horizon of political settlements in cities, particularly those with a higher degree of decentralisation or those in which national and subnational governance is contested.[55] By 'contested', we mean situations where the power dynamics between national and subnational authorities are not clearly defined or are subject to ongoing negotiation.

Research on several African capital cities, for example, illustrates that national elites often dispute with local elites at the capital level to assert their power. Based on evidence from Kampala, Addis Ababa, Dhaka, Harare, Colombo, and Lusaka, evidence suggests that national and local elites in capital cities perform different practices to become part of the 'ruling coalition',[56] whereby there exists a tension between national and city elites.[57] Discussing this tension, the ruling coalition exercises power through different strategies

of dominance, which include coercion and violence.[58] Without these capacities, actors do not possess 'disruptive potential' and do not hold sway over the political settlement.[59] For Goodfellow and Jackman, tension exists between capital cities and the actors therein, with the actor part of the dominant coalition of the national political settlement. While looking at autocratic contexts, their work highlights the political tensions that exist between capitals and the nation-state. Such findings resonate with our presentation of the urban political settlement, in which competition between various actors, even violently, is foundational in its make-up and continuous change.

Contesting Kelsall and colleagues that it would 'rarely make sense to describe cities as having their own political settlements', we contend that in conditions of armed conflict and fragility, there exist pockets where ordering actors through the urban political settlements provide different and distinct processes of order-making.[60] This argument challenges ongoing conceptions about PSA and indicates its limitations. While Kelsall and his colleagues are vital in pointing the finger at the city, their contributions leave us puzzled as to why ordering actors in cities would not be able to create their own political settlements. Here, quoting Hoelscher and colleagues, 'Every city has a distinctive cocktail of "contextual" variables that shape political life: The connections between political elites; the composition of populations; the ways that urban spaces are configured, used, occupied, and experienced; the way residents are incorporated into administrative and political jurisdictions (or not); and the underlying political struggles that accompany these dynamics'.[61] For those reasons, and particularly in conflict- and fragile-affected settings, cities and towns become their 'urban political entities', seeking to react by themselves on challenges facing them.[62] Therefore, while authors indicated that the urban political settlement is representative of the national political settlement, in cases of armed conflict and fragility, we expect this to be the exception.[63] With a trajectory of breakdown and increased stress in cities due to the various systemic pressures noted at the outset of this article, it might become even more of an exception. In contrast, urban political settlements negotiated by local elites become a more prominent type of ordering arrangement.

Other bodies of literature beyond PSA are relevant when bringing political settlement to the city. This brief sketch offers some relevant pointers for the development of the urban political settlement lens. First is the literature on urban conflict.[64] Empirical findings indicate the variety of conflict realities and insecurities that engulf cities and their populations.[65] With more cities having become zones of warfare recently – as in the Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and Gaza wars – there is a greater practical need for the conceptual lens of the urban political settlement. Second, is the literature on urban peacebuilding. Björkdahl indicates that divided cities in countries that have experienced conflict might embrace inequalities and cement experiences of exclusion.[66] Embracing a spatial approach to peacebuilding underlines that the trajectories of civilians in cities that underwent armed conflict can diverge depending on the environment in which the peace is constructed. Secondly, the literature on post-war cities indicates that cities are not only special entities but are produced through the practices that conflict parties perform during and after the signing of an agreement.[67] As such, the peace(s) they construct are shaped by the urban social contract and their respective environment and may involve friction.[68] Looking at post-war cities indicates the different nuances of how contestation plays out and transcends over time.[69] Thirdly, the discussion on urban safety

and peacebuilding provides new perspectives on including new actors in conflict man-
agement in cities, including urban planners and architects, while also indicating why
sustaining peace in cities becomes critical.[70] Taken together, these bodies of literature all
strengthen the broader case for the local turn in conflict resolution.[71] In a sense, this
article builds on the 'urban' turn of the literatures on conflict, peacebuilding and safety.

Additionally, PSA can extrapolate the main findings from the literature on rebel and
criminal governance.[72] While the former seeks to examine the way that so-called 'rebels' –
elsewhere also understood as 'non-state armed groups' – govern, engage with civilian
populations, and seek to replace state authorities, the latter attempts to investigate how
criminal organisations retain power, exercise it and attain economic benefits in parallel,
in collaboration, or despite government presence. However, while these two bodies of
literature indicate examples where non-state armed groups exercise control over what we
later coin as control spheres, these literatures take a dyadic approach, focusing centrally
on either rebels or criminals rather than seeing them as part of the broader political
agency that is relevant for forming political settlements.

Another important foundation for this article is the literature on hybridity, generally
understood as 'arrangements in which non-state actors take on functions classically
attributed to the state and, in the process, become entangled with formal state actors
and agencies to the extent that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between state and
non-state'.[73] This literature looks at the interplay between state and non-state actors. We
move beyond this binary opposition between the state and non-state actors because
ordering processes have been shown to be complex and may not even involve the state.[74]
Hence, we follow Kasfir and colleagues' notion of 'multi-layered governance' and look
out for the vertical and horizontal relationships between ordering actors competing to
become part of a political settlement in a city.[75]

Presenting the urban political settlement lens

Based on the strands of scholarship discussed in the previous section, we understand
political settlements *as a formal or informal agreement between different ordering actors
that creates rules for a viable political and economic order and that is enforced by the
ordering actors with respect to a specific population, territory, or economy.* Based on this
understanding, we proceed in this section to construct the urban political settlement lens
which builds on three fundamental components. The first component are the *ordering
actors* that bargain and subsequently enforce the urban political settlement. The second
component is the *control spheres* including the population, territory, and the economy
that ordering actors compete for. The third component are the *control capacities* that
ordering actors apply to dominate control spheres including coercive, financial, or
institutional instruments.

Ordering actors

The actors that order cities, by participating, creating, and enforcing the political
settlement, are understood as ordering actors.[76] PSA scholars describe them as
'groups', 'classes', 'factions', 'blocs', or 'elites' and they assume that it is generally
known who these actors are. For example, Khan indicates that the ruling

coalition's control capacities are assessed vis-à-vis the oppositional bloc or the lower-level factions. He posits that the stronger these lower-level factions are, the more marginal the degree of enforcement of the ruling coalition over order-making processes.[77] According to him, the ability to amass the capacity to 'holding power', actors need to prove their 'capability [...] to engage and survive in conflicts'.[78] However, this relational comparison between those who can amass the capacity to survive conflicts and those who cannot do not provide a definition of a ruling coalition or the capacity to participate and survive those conflicts. Kelsall and colleagues' somewhat short discussion on actors suggests that powerful groups upholding and constituting the political settlement.[79] There is little discussion about how these groups come to power and how they execute it.[80] We contribute to this discussion by suggesting that the control capacities of ordering actors constitute their ordering capacities and make them insiders instead of outsiders in any possible constellations of bargaining, creating, and enforcing a political settlement.

Kelsall and colleagues significantly contribute to understanding the actors' composition of political settlements by indicating that these have a social foundation upon which the ruling coalition relies.[81] This means that the bargaining process for a political settlement happens horizontally between ordering actors and vertically between ordering actors and their social constituencies. The arguments made by them echo those raised by Whitfield and colleagues, who argue that 'ruling elites refers to the group of people who wield power because of their position in government, where they occupy offices in which authoritative decisions are made. Ruling coalition refers to the ruling elites and the groups and individuals behind the rise of the ruling elites to power and/or those groups or individuals that keep the ruling elite in power by organising political support for it, typically in exchange for benefits'.[82] Returning to the specificities of cities and towns, ordering actors in them differ from the state level, as they often do not seek to make claims over controlling the population, territory, or political economy of the state, but rather that of a city, cities, or region. Thereby the actors are expected to diverge from those in national political settlements, able to include, but not exclusively anyone 'from gangsters and mafia, to militia, defence forces, political factions, and state security agencies'.[83]

Scholars and practitioners underline that it is important to conduct a PSA to inform international interventions including political economy analysis of the mix of relevant actors. But with regards to peace agreements these analytical instruments are primarily applied at the national level. A focus on the urban political settlement then can connect to the bargains that grow from the bottom up, and that resemble 'secondary political settlements'. These are defined by Parks and Cole as 'arrangements among powerful local elites to control political competition and governance below the national level'.[84] This perspective helps us to discern the ordering actors at the city or sub-city level that are central in forming the settlement.

Based on the analysis above, and for the purposes of the urban political settlement lens, we suggest that to understand ordering actors through their functional capability to amass power and authority within control spheres and of control capacities.

Control spheres

The second component of urban political settlement lens is the control spheres of cities: territory, population, and economy. These three control spheres have a long tradition of being relevant to actors in armed conflict. In fact, in relation to states, it is the control of the population and territory that are critical components defining the existence of a sovereign state as enshrined in the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States.[85] The other components are a government and the capacity to engage in relations with other states. In the light of the rich literature, we understand territorial control as the ability of ordering actors to be present and enforce their order in specific territories, demarcated by security checkpoints or roadblocks.[86] Often, territorial control is closely linked to control of either the population or the economy.[87] The outcome of competition over territory in cities and towns under political settlements would be either coordinated territorial control or fragmented territorial control. Ordering actors also seek to control the population in cities and towns. We understand, based on the literature, that controlling the population provides benefits and hazards for the ordering actors, as to mobilise new recruits, access information, and gaining legitimacy through the delivery of public goods and services. Third, based on the recent literature, we understand that capturing and controlling the economy of cities and towns corresponds with the ability to access and mobilise licit and illicit financial flows that benefit the purse of ordering actors.[88]

To exemplify what we mean by control spheres in cities, take the case of Marib, Yemen. Marib saw an urban political settlement from 2014 until 2021.[89] In this period, the city saw territorial control and control over the local economy as not being contested despite the ongoing conflict in the country. It was only after that the conflicting parties to the conflict turned their eye on the economically relevant city, seeking to unravel its political settlement. Since 2021, the Houthis have sought to capture the economy of the city and the province through various military offences, which so far was controlled by the internationally recognised government of Hadi.[90] Controlling the oil fields of Marib implies controlling the city's economy. In the case of Marib, controlling the economy is closely related to control over the city's territory. Without controlling the city as a territorial entity, actors cannot access the economy and the access it delivers. The third sphere of control, population, does not seem to play a big factor in the calculation of the actors battling over the city since 2021, as the rationality lies in seeking to control territory and the political economy of Marib. Equally, between 2014 and 2021, under the political settlement, 'the city's population has grown from around 40,000 to more than 1.5 million'.[91] After the break-up of the political settlement due to the incursion of the Houthis, the population of the city remains the witness of the urban political settlement that was unravelled by conflict in 2021.[92] The example of Marib, Yemen, indicates that seeking control over population, territory, and political economy may be interdependent. Overall, the consolidated urban political settlement in Marib, at least from 2014 until 2021, is an example of settlements in many other cities of Yemen, including Taiz, Aden, or Hodeida, which demonstrates and increasing balkanisation of the control structures within Yemen.[93]

Control capacities of ordering actors

Ordering actors enforce the urban political settlement through control capacities. While control capacities of ordering actors are not limited to cities, it is important to note that in cities, they differ from those of the national level as they relate to the urban resources and the specific urban nature of cities.[94] We understand the control capacities of ordering actors to include coercive, financial, and institutional capacities. As Goodfellow and Jackman highlight, these can come in parallel and do not have to be seen as opposing. As such, 'Striving for urban dominance can involve the ramping up of repression, surveillance, and violence against political opposition simultaneously with major investments in infrastructure, job creation, and service provision'.[95] While these practices speak to the consolidation of authoritarian rule in capital cities, they are figuratively telling that ordering actors are not bound to specialise in one control capacity but may use several in interplay with one another.

The first control capacity is coercion. We understand coercive control capacities of ordering actors as the ability, using violence or the threat thereof, to enforce their control vis-à-vis a territory, population, or the economy. While Jackman indicates that violence or the threat of violence is often a tool of intermediation, it is not well-defined how coercive capacities control specifically population, territory, and the economy in cities.[96] When an urban political settlement forms, coercion and violence can become targeted and purposeful. Otherwise, when violence is not exercised purposefully and thereby indiscriminate, the deployment of coercion can retrospectively cause increased frustration from the population, ordering actors to seek to govern and can, over time, undermine the urban political settlement. This is evident in Lusaka, Zambia,[97] or cities controlled by the Islamic State (IS).[98] What matters is 'how a specific armed group uses violence (or refrains from using violence) to exert control in a given locale and time period'.[99] Therefore, understanding the mechanisms that operationalise coercion and violence is relevant for understanding how ordering actors maintain the urban political settlement through enforcement or how some outsiders seek to challenge it. We know that it is 'violence specialists' who perform coercion.[100] We do not expect all urban political settlements to have the same forms of coercive control capacities. Taking the lens of the urban political settlement would allow scholars and practitioners to understand how 'violence orders' urban political settlements.[101]

One example illustrative of the coercion control capacity is that in various towns and cities in Iraq and Syria, the IS created control over the territory, population, and the economy. They achieved this mainly through coercion and threats of violence, from its rise to its territorial defeat. Coercive control capacities were central in consolidating their rule in Raqqa and other cities and towns.[102] Once the IS consolidated control in Raqqa, IS used coercion to enforce its legal code while providing services to citizens who did not seek to stand up against it. Equally, coercion became a means to capture the oil economy and capturing and co-opting transnational criminal networks.[103] However, with the increase in territorial loss in Iraq and Syria, the IS did not seek to restrain the use of violence vis-à-vis the population living under its control and turned back on the provision of services and goods.[104] When ordering actors do not have a broad social foundation, we expect these actors to resort to coercion to enforce the urban political settlement.

The second control capacity is financial. In contexts of armed conflict and fragility, public and social systems, from water to transportation to providing security, housing, and health, become highly valuable to ordering actors, who may well capitalise on the vulnerability and dependency of populations to access these scarce 'urban resources'.[105] By controlling these, ordering actors commodify the basic needs of the population and exercise control over the population and the economy.[106] The funding base of ordering actors determines the capacities of how ordering actors can enact and manoeuvre along the spaces of coercive and institutional capacities, as these are interdependent. However, we know that providing urban resources often goes beyond the cities and towns that ordering actors seek to control. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Some critical elements of essential services (e.g. those provided by electrical power plants, supply routes, water and wastewater treatment plants) are more often than not located outside the city limits. Very distant active combat can thus have a dramatic effect on urban dwellers'.[107] In our understanding of the financial control capacity, proximity to the control spheres of the population and the economy is necessary so that ordering actors can maximise their financial authority. We know that the provision of urban resources can increase the legitimacy of ordering actors in the eyes of the population who receive these goods and services, even if delivered selectively.[108]

Through the commodification of housing ordering, actors practice financial control. As armed conflict unravels cities and towns, land and housing become limited, and controlling it becomes more lucrative.[109] Controlling housing and property on which to build lets ordering actors exercise financial control over all control spheres. For Müller, seeing this process happen in Rio de Janeiro illustrates the 'weaponisation of housing'.[110] Similar patterns of commodification of housing are seen in various African cities, as well as in Colombia and Syria.[111] Returning to Rio de Janeiro, criminal ordering actors control housing properties in parts of the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro through enacting financial control practices.[112] These practices vary from dominating individual households through monetising rent, limiting access to social housing, or providing basic human needs such as water and electricity.[113] Depending on who sits at the receiving end then, ordering actors through the provision of housing and the commodification of its economy create parallel systems of security and insecurity, which are also found elsewhere.[114] By monetising housing as a commodity, ordering actors in Rio de Janeiro exercise control capacities vis-à-vis population, those living in the housing controlled by the criminal actors in Rio, the territory where the population is living, and the political economy of goods and services related to rent and housing. Enacting financial control enables actors in urban political settlements to mobilise financial assets for their benefit and directly influence other control spheres.

Finally, ordering actors can mobilise institutional control capacities. We understand institutional control capacities as the ability to order actors to infiltrate, co-opt, direct, appoint figures, or (mis-)guide formal and informal institutions. Through the capacity of institutional control, ordering actors would be able to amass what Goodfellow and Jackmann refer to as 'creating obstacles, delays, and institutional frustration that limit the organisational capacities of rival coalitions without overt repression'.[115] At the same time, it could also result in the opposite, with accelerating procedures and executive channels for the social foundation of ordering actors. While capital cities are prime examples of national institutions, from the central bank to ministries, other cities and

towns also have formal and informal institutions, from respective ministries to chambers of commerce and industry, which exercise significant influence in such contexts,[116] and provide abilities to exercise control vis-à-vis population, territory, or the political economy. For example, cities with international ports or airports often see ordering actors conflicting with one another over controlling these spaces and their relevant authorities, as they are nodes of trade and economic transactions.[117]

One illustration of the institutional control capacity is Tripoli, Libya. There, regardless of the ordering actors competing over Tripoli, they all want to access and capture the institutions of the capital city and, thereby, the distribution of state revenues.[118] Because of the centralisation process under Gaddafi, 'almost all key state institutions are found within 1 square kilometre in the capital'.[119] Tripoli has seen the consolidation of four main non-state armed groups: the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB), the Nawasi Brigade, the Special Deterrence Forces (SDF), and the Abu Slim Central Security Unit. These actors sought to infiltrate the institutional set-up to better benefit from access and resources that would provide them, from arms to cash.[120] Yet, they have not attempted to exercise control capacities outside the capital city.[121] Through the institutional control of Tripoli, these ordering actors also brought 'competitive violence' between themselves, seeking to outmanoeuvre one another.[122] Once institutional control was established, accessing state funds did not require coercive control capacities. With the fluctuation of the national currency, these four ordering actors have sought to become more enmeshed with the institution of the banking system to commodify the state institutions even more. Hence, Lacher and al-Idrissi conclude, 'Control over the distribution of cash at banks has placed armed groups in a new position of power and economic privilege'.[123] Territorial control is also linked to institutional control capacities in Tripoli, as providing security to the state institutions provides the four ordering actors with lucrative protection schemes.[124] Institutional control capacities are linked to all three control spheres. The capacity to amass them, formal or informal, in urban political settlements provides the foundations for the rules of the game. Other examples exist where ordering actors seek to capture control over population, territory, and economy through institutional control capacities, including Beirut,[125] where Hezbollah can direct ministries to benefit its communities and retain revenues, and Baghdad.[126]

Reflection on the Urban Political Settlement

Taken together, the ordering actors' efforts to dominate control spheres – territory, population, and the economy – through the targeted application of control capacities – coercive, financial, and institutional – capture the key components of the urban political settlement lens. As argued above, political settlements must be economically and politically viable to their ordering actors to distribute their benefits according to their control capacities over the control spheres in cities and towns. Key is not to understand an urban political settlement as a one-off bargaining but as a continuous process of bargaining between ordering actors within the bounds of a city – or a specific district within the city. This continuous bargaining process defines 'rules of the game' and occurs vertically between ordering actors and horizontally between the ordering actors and their respective social foundations. Urban political settlements then may change when a new actor 'comes to town', new internally displaced persons arrive constituting 'new' populations,

or when financial assets outside the city are captured by others. These constellations are not always easy to discern and understand, especially for outsiders unfamiliar with the political economy dynamics and patterns of localised control pattern in cities. For this reason, we hope that the urban political settlement lens can help enhance a clearer vision into the murky realities of cities marked by conflict, violence and institutional fragility.

The lens of the urban political settlement becomes particularly useful for practitioners and scholars. The lens could be useful for peacemakers in their efforts to identify and facilitate the emergence of urban political settlements, but also to mayors, local government officials, and other actors, who might have to engage in the political process of negotiating a settlement. The lens could also be relevant to peace and conflict scholars, aiding them in their quest to better analyse and understand the agency of particular actors in the creation of political settlements. In addition, urban studies scholars could study the relevance of conflict management research as part of their investigation of social space planning[127] or urban safety.[128]

Conclusion: a new research agenda

This article developed an urban political settlement lens that we think is important for the next generation of urban research, particularly in contexts of armed conflict and fragility, but also beyond them. On the one hand, cities will be the places that will have to deal with ever increasing systemic pressures and the consequences of weakling of international and national governance systems. On the other hand, cities are home to a great degree of ingenuity of problem solving and when things get tough, people living in cities – and the actors that represent their interests – will find a way to structure the urban political settlements that mitigates the worst impact from systemic pressures. This article argues that ordering actors in cities and towns in contexts marked by conflict, violence and fragile institutions can form urban political settlements independently from those actors at the national level, providing trajectories for stabilising cities.

After engaging in a discussion on the concept of the political settlement, coined between the school of New Institutional Economics and scholars following the work of North and his colleagues, we define the political settlement *as a formal or informal agreement between different ordering actors that creates rules for a viable political and economic order and that is enforced by the ordering actors with respect to a specific population, territory, or economy*. We demonstrate that the literature linking political settlement analysis with cities looks predominantly at African capital cities and subsumes these political settlements from those bargained at the national level. Based on that, we present the lens of the urban political settlement through its various components. We argue that it is ordering actors, who are those actors that have the agency to bargain with one another to create, maintain, and formalise urban political settlements. Then, we present conceptually the control spheres, which we understand as territory, population, and the economy. Following the control spheres, we argue that ordering actors exercise different control capacities seeking to dominate these spheres. We present the control capacities as coercive, financial, or institutional. We illustrate each sphere of control and control capacity briefly through an example of cities that are or have seen a form of urban political settlement.

As we propose these avenues for sense making for urban political settlements, we feel that we have only started to scratch the surface of an immense research agenda. To start out with, there is the issue of numbers, as we look at potentially several hundred objects of study considering a subgroup of conflict-affected and fragile cities that are part of the in total 2,243 cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants.[129] We are also looking at potentially multiple political settlements within cities, especially in 43 megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants, the 66 cities that count between 5 and 10 million inhabitants, the 597 cities with 1 to 5 million inhabitants by 2030.[130] Therefore, we are looking at potentially thousands of distinct 'urban' political settlements that would occupy many researchers for a very long time. There is therefore a lot of work to do for scholars to empirically investigate the processes behind the formation, maintenance, and disruption of urban political settlements.

For these purposes, we pose the following framing questions based on the urban political settlement lens developed in this article. The common thread behind these questions is our view that we need to better understand the processes of political settlements through qualitative empirical investigations. Such qualitative endeavours would seek to build a better empirical understanding of the phenomenon before quantitative analysis can follow.

- What does the current urban political settlement look like? Who is part of it, and who is not?
- What are the conditions under which the current urban political settlements – or their demise – came about?
- Who are the city's ordering actors? What do we know about their size and group structure? What about their evolution over time? What is their source of funding or revenue?
- What does the urban political settlement regulate regarding the control spheres of population, territory and the economy? And what not does it not regulate? Why?
- How do the ordering actors exercise their control? What are their coercive, financial and institutional control capacities? How do they use them? And why?
- How do ordering actors communicate or negotiate with one another? On what issues? For what functional purpose?
- Are there multiple political settlements that may be found within one city? Between whom and for what? What are the overlapping features of these settlements?
- Is the political settlement institutionalised? If yes, how? If no, what ad-hoc or informal measures maintain the political settlement?
- What are the mechanisms and processes to include or exclude ordering actors in the political settlement?

Based on these questions underlying to the urban political settlements' lens, research can start to develop a better understanding of the ordering mechanisms of cities under great stress from conflict, violence and the many systemic pressures presented at the beginning of this article. Because our current knowledge about future risk allows us to be confident that the world will experience a period of disruption and breakdown, it is important to start thinking differently about ways to stabilise cities in conditions of conflict, violence, and institutional fragility, and help mitigate the systemic impact of climate change. Cities will

not be able to securitise their way out of systemic breakdown and this is why alternatives are needed that can help strengthen an ultimate safety net for order despite a really bad situation.[131] The urban political settlements lens is a first analytical step for this endeavour, and we hope it can help build a foundation for a vibrant stream of research and action.

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