Affective atmospheres, urban geopolitics and conflict (de)escalation in Beirut

Sara Fregonese

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, B15 2TT, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The article joins literature on urban geopolitics and on affective atmospheres to trace the intensities of feeling that propagate during escalation and de-escalation of urban conflict in Beirut. Based on two months of fieldwork in 2010 in the Lebanese capital, it considers the deadly clashes of May 2008 between government- and opposition-affiliated militias. Political decisions and deliberate interventions involving the urban built environment before and after the clashes, contributed to propagating affective atmospheres of (de)escalation, which in turn impacted on the residents' practical and emotional responses to violence. The paper proposes an atmospheric urban geopolitics that moves away from techno-centric, disembodied approaches to urban conflict, and that instead takes seriously the lived experiences of urban (de)escalation.

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Introduction

'What always freaks me out, is how quickly the city gets back to normal' (Interview [in English] with resident, Beirut, November 2010)

Urban geopolitics has established itself as an interdisciplinary body of knowledge that explores the 'telescoping connections between transnational geopolitical transformations and very local acts of violence against urban sites' (Graham, 2004b, p. 191). In Beirut, these connections are tangibly apparent. Past and more recent violence and consequent insecurities are embodied by layer upon layer of Beirut's built environment (Al-Harithy, 2010; Khalaf & Khoury, 1993; Nagel, 2002; Sawalha, 2010) as "[b]oth the public and private built environments were shaped by daily fighting [...] and acquired new geopolitical meaning" (Monroe, 2016, p. 43). Beirut's built environment has been terrain and mediator of daily urban violence and the wider (geo)politico-economic discourses, practices and materialities that sustain it (Fregonese, 2012a; Hourani, 2010, 2013). Considering the case of Beirut and focusing on conflict as a dynamic process of escalation and de-escalation, this paper builds on and develops the notion of affective atmospheres to broaden and deepen urban geopolitics' theoretical and methodological perspective. Whereas urban geopolitics has broadly dealt with 'the *spaces* and *practices* that emerge at the intersections of urbanism, terrorism and warfare' (Graham, 2004a, p. 52), this paper now explores the quotidian *intensities of feeling* that those intersections entail.

Building on 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson, 2009), I chart the lived experiences of urban escalation to and de-escalation in Beirut during violent clashes in May 2008 and the role of the urban environment in shaping those experiences. Geographers and anthropologists have only recently established a long overdue connection between urban conflict and affect (Laketa, 2016; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). I argue that developing such a connection benefits both urban geopolitics - by engaging with the "intensive space-times" (Anderson, 2009, p. 80) of atmospheres - and geographies of affective atmosphere — by adding to their repertoire the study of (geo)political tension and violence, a field where there is a paucity of both atmospheric and, more generally, affective research. This paper wishes to foster a new sub-disciplinary dialogue, but the importance of engaging critical geopolitics with atmospheric (and feminist, as we will later see) approaches, lies in the wider implications that this theoretical endeavour has for the contextual understanding of conflict, and of its wider geopolitical associations. The intangible intensities and atmospheres of (de)escalating conflict, feed into spatial knowledges that are situated and embodied. Once analysed together, these knowledges compose a repertoire of understandings and practices of urban space: a 'know how' of the

E-mail address: s.fregonese@bham.ac.uk.

intangible sides of urban conflict. This know-how is utilised by those whose daily lives are disrupted by all sorts of encounters with conflict, in order to react and find ways to avoid being harmed.

The first of the five sections below reviews theoretical critiques of urban geopolitics, including by geographies of affect and affective atmospheres. This is followed by methodological considerations of how to research urban conflict as a *process* of escalation/de-escalation rather than as a bounded *state* of combat (Brand & Fregonese, 2013), and of how to narrate that process by accounting for the formation and circulation of atmospheres. Thirdly, comes a contextualisation of the case study - a week of deadly clashes in part of Beirut in May 2008, The choice of this particular moment of conflict was informed, firstly, by the temporal and spatial concentration of the events. The rapid escalation and de-escalation allowed pinpointing and observing the rapid emergence and circulation of specific atmospheres, as well as identifying the measures deployed soon after specifically to manage these atmospheres. The spatial concentration of the violence around and against specific neighbourhoods and buildings, made the 2008 clashes an effective example to study the affirmation of specific connections between (geo)political contestation and specific urban sites. I also had a very specific "angle of arrival" (Adey et al., 2013, p. 300) and affective disposition to the May 2008 events, as a researcher who cancelled a previous fieldwork due to the clashes, and then based herself for this fieldwork in a neighbourhood situated at a particularly violent fault line during the clashes. If atmospheres are diffuse in their propagation, they also 'solidify' when associated with specific built environments. The fourth section focuses on the phase of escalation of conflict and highlights a number of key events around specific built environments, felt as catalysts of atmospheres and atmospheric shifts which then impacted on individual responses, subjective feelings and emotions. The fifth section focuses on de-escalation and on how two urban interventions — reclaiming a central square through a mass concert and eliminating political propaganda signs from around the city — engineered an atmospheric shift away from tension by, respectively, emphasising national cohesion and discouraging political provocation in public spaces.

Towards atmospheric urban geopolitics

Whereas literature on the urban aspects of the 15-year Lebanese civil war (1975—1990) and its aftermaths in Beirut abounds (Al-Harithy, 2010; Awada, 1988; Bourgey, n.d.; Calame & Charlesworth, 2009; Davie, 1983; Khalaf & Khoury, 1993; Nagel, 2002; Maasri, 2008; Sawalha, 2010; among many others), this article attempts to understand more recent conflict in the Lebanese capital. Investigations into Beirut's current urban aspects of security, conflict, and violence have analysed, for example, the relation between sectarianism and planning decisions (Bou Akar, 2012), the reinforcement of socio-political division via the securitisation of urban space and its impact on mobility (Fawaz, Harb, & Gharbieh, 2012; Monroe, 2016) and the sensory elements shaping daily divisions and borders in the city (Hafeda, 2011). However, fewer have considered in depth the violent urban clashes occurring in May 2008 (Fregonese, 2012a; Mermier 2013). In examining them, this paper expands the study of conflict in Beirut, firstly, by focusing on the notion of affective atmosphere and, secondly, by establishing wider connections between the disciplinary fields of urban geopolitics and geographies of affect.

Power and political violence are exercised through interventions on the built environment by a diverse range of state and non-state actors, or even mergers of both (Fregonese, 2012a). Beirut, therefore, adds a rich case study for investigations in urban geopolitics, as it offers several examples of the interplay between urban spaces and architectures and the discourses and practices of international politics.

Connections between cities and geopolitics have also tangentially concerned critical urban and conflict studies (Coaffee, 2003; Coward, 2009a, 2009b; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011; Pullan, 2011; Yiftachel, 1998; Yiftachel, 2006; Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003) and Science and Technology Studies (Brand & Fregonese, 2013; Fregonese & Brand, 2009). First mentioned in Francophone scholarship within the context of urban power struggles in Quebec's cities (Hulbert, 1989) and then in the Anglophone one regarding urban military operations in Latin America (Demarest, 1995), the developing multidisciplinary literature of urban geopolitics shares an interest for the connections between specific urban sites and wider geopolitical processes (Amar, 2009; Douzet, 2003; Fregonese, 2012b; Graham, 2004b; Hulbert, 2009; Ramadan, 2009; Vincent & Warf, 2002; Yacobi, 2009).

Urban geopolitics has attracted two main strands of academic critique. The first comes from political geography scholarship and targets some of urban geopolitics' early writings and the conceptual and moral implications of their understanding of the relationship between cities, violence and global politics. These critiques highlight urban geopolitics' risk of simply replacing states with cities as new scale of reference for contemporary wars, rather than promoting a more refined understanding of the multiplicity of geopolitical discourses and practices surrounding urban conflict (Flint, 2006; Smith, 2006).

The second critical strand concerns urban geopolitics' analytical over-reliance on few and heavily militarised case studies (Fregonese, 2012b), first and foremost Israel/Palestine (Graham, 2002; 2005a). Relatedly, Arab cities feature recurrently as the orientalised target grounds of the war on terror, as opposed to a category of 'our' cities which need protection via other securitisation apparatus (Graham, 2006), or as agglomerations of 'complex' infrastructures and insurgencies that obstacle the US techno-military dominance (Graham, 2008). This techno-centric perspective focused on urban infrastructural warfare (Graham, 2005b), on the "securitisation of the urban" and the " urbanization of war" (Coward, 2009a, p. 415) overlooks the role of more ordinary urban sites, both as targets and mediators of wider geopolitical processes. Harris (2015), for example, suggests that urban geopolitical research on verticality (Elden, 2013; Graham & Hewitt, 2013; Graham, 2016; Weizman, 2002) should give attention to the more 'normal' sites that neither necessarily link back to the Israel/Palestine case nor represent 'a fall-out from warfare doctrines and military technoscience'(p. 4), and to the value of "ordinary topologies" of contestation such as in Palestine (Harker, 2014) for understanding the (geo) political processes underpinning urban change and contestation (Rokem, 2016).

What, then, remain under investigated in urban geopolitics are spaces and practices beyond the clear expressions or derivations of conflict and militarisation. There is still much to be written about the quotidian, embodied, and micro-scale practices that shape urban politics and conflict, such as dwelling, moving, relating to others, coping and making decisions in situations of vulnerability. These ordinary and often very subtle (at least to the outsider's eye) practices and geopolitically charged sites contribute to the production of micro-dynamics of tension and escalation that, as theorized in feminist geopolitics (Hyndman, 2001, 2004; Pain, Panelli, Kindon, & Little, 2010; Pain & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2012), connect individual daily fears and experiences of violence to wider geopolitical struggles.

Further reflections in feminist geopolitics lead to a third critical strand: urban geopolitics' lack of accounts of subjectivity and intensity of experience. Pain (2009) claimed that critical geopolitics, and especially its conceptualisations of fear, remain disembodied,