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Geographies of violence in Jerusalem: The spatial logic of urban intergroup conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses how spatial configurations shape and transform individual and collective forms of urban violence, suggesting that geographies of urban violence should be understood as an issue of mobility. We document and map violent events in Jerusalem, assessing the possible impact of street patterns: segmenting populations, linking populations, and creating spaces for conflict between the city's Jewish and Palestinian populations. Using space syntax network analysis, we demonstrate that, in the case of Jerusalem, street connectivity is positively associated with individual violence yet negatively associated with collective violence. Our findings suggest that understanding the logic of urban intergroup violence requires us to pay close attention to local urban morphology and its impact on intergroup relations in ethnically divided and heterogeneous environments.

Introduction

Are certain urban locations more prone to intergroup violence than others? How do mobility, proximity, and connectivity shape the opportunities available to individuals and groups to engage in violent conflict? Following recent calls for scholarship dedicated to understanding violence from a geographical perspective (Gregory & Pred, 2007; Springer & Le Billon, 2016), this paper combines insights from political geography, urban studies, criminology, and political science in order to address the questions outlined above. We use computational space syntax and grid-based analysis to map recent urban intergroup violence in the ethnically contested city of Jerusalem. Our analysis of street networks in Jerusalem highlights the major, yet differential, role which geography plays in the emergence of individual and collective violence. These findings, we argue, offer relevant lessons for a broader understanding of urban violence and its spatial variations.

Over the last few decades, a growing body of literature has discussed cities labeled as ethnically "polarized," "contested," and "divided" (Bollens, 1998; Hepburn, 2004; Kliot & Mansfeld, 1999). Contested cities, such as Beirut, Nicosia, Belfast, and Jerusalem, frequently exhibit distinctive local attributes together with complex political dynamics and tensions (e.g., Bollens, 2000; Calame & Charlesworth, 2009; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011), leading to the emergence of diverse forms of violence (Savitch, 2005). As a "notable contested city," and a major focal point in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Jerusalem and many of its residents are afflicted by various forms of intergroup violence, often politically motivated. Palestinian[1] residents suffer from long-term state-led police violence and oppression in most spheres of life, including planning, housing, and education (Shlomo, 2017; Shtern, 2018). Jewish residents, by contrast, endure varying degrees of violent attacks, typically perpetrated by Palestinians. Although Palestinian violence in the city has decreased since the end of the second Palestinian civilian uprising (hereinafter, intifada) in 2005, violence continues to rage periodically, manifesting mainly in riots (violence that bears a collective essence), as well as stabbings and ramming incidents (which are more sporadic and individualistic in their patterns).

In an effort to uncover a logic of violence, previous work on urban violence and conflict has, at times, focused on the characteristics of perpetrators (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011; Pantucci, 2011). However, a close examination of the perpetrators of violence in Jerusalem during recent years reveals that they share very few common characteristics. Indeed, young and old, male and female, employed and unemployed, religious and secular residents of Jerusalem alike have all engaged in intergroup violence. Given such disparity, in this paper we put aside questions regarding individual level characteristics and instead turn our

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[1] The term Palestinian, as used in this paper, indicates residents of Jerusalem who define themselves as Palestinian Jerusalemites.

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attention to unpacking the spatial logic of urban intergroup violence.

In emphasizing spatial patterns of violence, we advance a nuanced perspective of urban intergroup relations, asking whether all locations are equally prone to individual and collective violence. Alternatively, are there unique spatial attributes which attract individuals, but not groups, who are interested in perpetrating violence? Our theoretical framework and empirical analysis suggest that connective urban spaces provide actors with mobility and are thus prone to individualistic violence. Concurrently, collective violence, which is far less dependent on mobility, spreads across less accessible urban space and is negatively associated with street connectivity.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to map and analyze the diverging spatial patterns of individual and collective urban intergroup violence. Thus, hereinafter, we introduce a granular geolocated dataset of violent events which occurred in Jerusalem between 2014 and 2016 and, further, analyze individual and collective interethnic confrontations using space syntax and grid analysis methods. In addition to the theoretical and methodological innovation of our approach, this is the first study to examine systematically patterns of violence in the most recent cycle of confrontations in Jerusalem, referred to by locals as the Knives' Intifada, al-Quds Intifada, or the Children's Intifada.

The following section outlines our theoretical framework. Thereafter, the third section situates our case study, Jerusalem, relating it to the broader contested cities literature. In the fourth section, we introduce a new geolocated dataset of violent events which occurred in Jerusalem during the years 2014 through 2016. In the fifth section, we describe our space syntax and grid-based methodological strategies. This is followed by section six, in which we demonstrate the role of connectivity by implementing a spatial analysis of individual and collective violence. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for future research regarding the geographies of individual and collective urban intergroup violence.

Theoretical framework

A growing body of literature examining the impact of geographical and spatial factors on the emergence and patterns of violence depicts how general spatial attributes— including terrain type, accessibility, territorial control, or road networks—affect the onset, recurrence, and dynamics of organized collective violence (e.g. Bhavnani, Donnay, Miodownik, Mor, & Helbing, 2014; Bhavnani, Miodownik, & Choi, 2011; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Fjelde & Østby, 2014; Linke, Schutte, & Buhaug, 2015; Tollefsen & Buhaug, 2015; Weidmann, 2009; Zhukov, 2012). Many of these advances apply an explicitly spatial approach to conflict, mainly using geographical information systems (GIS) to examine how the distribution of inequalities and capacities across space affects patterns of violence. More recent studies have adopted a narrower geographical scope, considering the effect of urban residential patterns and spatial configurations on interethnic violence in Jerusalem (Bhavnani et al., 2014) and Baghdad (Braithwaite & Johnson, 2015; Weidmann & Salehyan, 2013).

While interest in the spatial dimensions of conflict is a rather recent development amongst political scientists, geographers have for some time discussed the role that spatial attributes play in the dynamics of violence in urban contexts (Graham, 2004, 2010; Fregonese, 2017). Coward (2006), for example, notes that in the Bosnian civil war, well-networked public spaces were more frequently attacked by militias because their proximity to main transportation and communal activities facilitated intergroup civilian contact.

While such studies shed light on the relations between contested[2] urban space, violence, and connectivity, it is important to focus specifically on urban geopolitcal spatial dynamics, exploring how intra-city variation in connectivity affects violence and conflicts more broadly (Rokem et al., 2017; Rokem & Boano, 2018). Indeed, violence is a complex social phenomenon, and patterns of violence are often multifaceted (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017). Therefore, we develop herein a theoretical framework that concentrates on individual and collective violence, as well as the ways in which spatial configurations influence their distinctive perpetration.

Individual assaults vary in terms of scope, lethality, and strategy. Therefore, we propose a general definition according to which individually perpetrated violence includes any kind of armed individual act of aggression intended to inflict physical harm on countergroup members. We consider collective violence to be any group behavior aimed at causing harm to countergroup members.

Acting alone to perpetrate ethnic violence is often a difficult task. Thus, in order to overcome challenges and maximize utility, individuals must exploit the unique spatial attributes of their surroundings (Becker, 2014). In the next section, we discuss several of these dimensions, including accessibility and mobility, local opportunity structures, and strategic values of urban spaces.

Mobility

Previous spatial analyses of violence and crime reveal that perpetrators are constrained and influenced by mobility (Capone & Nichols, 1976; Eck & Weisburd, 1995; Summers & Johnson, 2017; Zhukov, 2012). Furthermore, evidence indicates that individuals tend to act relatively close to home. Indeed, some scholars claim that the distance traveled to perpetrate violent crime is a function of the individual's opportunities and returns. While many offenders and criminals are reluctant to commit armed robbery or assault in their immediate neighborhood, for reasons of exposure and anonymity, travelling far away is often not cost effective. Following this logic, we can assume that incidents occurring farther away from a criminal's locality often involve high stakes, in addition requiring arms and weapons (Capone & Nichols, 1976; Eck & Weisburd, 1995).

Applying this logic to intergroup confrontations in ethnically contested cities, it is reasonable to expect that individual perpetrators will be inclined to commit violence in centrally connective locations because such sites are relatively accessible by road networks. Moreover, unlike segregated neighborhoods, connective spaces provide relative anonymity while simultaneously hosting abundant potential targets. Thus, perpetrators are attracted to connective locations in ethnically divided cities because these balance between the need to distance themselves from their community on the one hand and the necessity for lengthy travel on the other.

However, the choice of location is also influenced by awareness to potential targets. Thus, evidence shows that the selection of a location for crime and violence often occurs prior to the day of action: perpetrators pick and choose suitable spaces as part of their ongoing routines. This helps to explain the clustering of violent crime in commonly visited and familiar locations such as transportation vessels, subway stations, markets, and other highly connective and populated spaces (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1995; Eck & Weisburd, 1995). It has also been shown that individuals committing lethal assaults frequently confine their action to familiar locations (Becker, 2014). Considering the centrality of and public familiarity with connective spaces such as subway stations or central public locales, as opposed to non-connective spaces such as peripheral residential areas, individuals are at greater risk of being targeted in connective spaces.

Spatial opportunity structures

Clearly, connective locations provide a multitude of opportunities for offenders seeking to implement individualistic intergroup violence.

[2] We use the term “contested” rather than “polarized” or “divided” because it captures the wider spatially, socially conflicted, and violent nature of intergroup hostilities and their manifestation at the urban scale.