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Fregonese, Sara

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Shockwaves

Atmospheres beyond the Conflict City/Ordinary City Divide

Sara Fregonese

■ **ABSTRACT:** Urban conflict literature has attempted new comparisons between contested cities in conflict zones and cities with no armed conflict. This literature tends to use representational frameworks around defensive planning and normative government discourses. In this article, I propose to expand these frameworks and to engage with epistemologies of lived experience to produce new relational accounts linking “conflict cities” with “ordinary cities”. The article accounts for the lived, sensory and atmospheric in exploring the legacies of conflict on the everyday urban environments. It then reflects on the everyday and experiential effects of counterterrorism in ordinary cities. While this is designed to minimize threat, it also alters urban spatiality in a way reminiscent of urban conflict zones. It then explores the unequal impacts of counterterrorism across urban publics, and their experiential connections with practices of counterinsurgency. The article is structured around two ‘shockwaves’ entwining lived experiences across seemingly unrelatable urban settings.

■ **KEYWORDS:** atmosphere, cities, conflict, terrorism

Shockwave 1—London

During the widespread riots in London and other UK cities in the summer of 2011, I did something at once familiar and uncanny. Familiar because, having resided in Beirut for several months in 2005, 2009, and 2010 amid a wave of political assassinations and assassination attempts, I became accustomed to ordinary practices of situational awareness to minimize risk—for example, refining my listening in order to tell apart the sound of thunder and that of an *infijār* [meaning “explosion” in Arabic] (which I did happen to confuse on a sunny December morning in 2005); checking in the live news about road closures or security incidents before going out; and being mindful of cars parked in odd locations and not displaying a message or phone number on the windscreen. Back in central London in August 2011, those practices—acquired from residing in what is officially considered a post-conflict, but still very tense city—returned. However, they now seemed uncanny, almost “out of place” in our quiet London neighborhood in summer, without university students, and in the capital city that was preparing to host the Olympic Games the following year. I watched the live news and scrolled Twitter—at the time, a vital source of breaking news (Vis 2013) as well as of rumors (*The Guardian* 2011). I listened to the helicopter noise and try to gauge its position to determine my proximity to any incident, and then made informed decisions about when, where and for how long to go out.



In terms of protracted violent contestation and its spatial translation onto the urban environment, Beirut and London seem antipodean. However, the doings described just now, and the past experiences that shaped their embodiment, not only allowed me make decisions about my own safety but also created a connection—albeit subtle and intuitive, fleeting and visceral—between my experiences of two seemingly unrelatable cities.

In this article, I focus on the connections of experience between the spatialities (often viewed as exceptional or extreme) characterizing the “conflict city” and those found in “ordinary cities.” In the last ten years, literature on urban conflicts and spatial politics of contested cities has evolved into a rich interdisciplinary field. Besides work in military history and security studies (Dilegge et al. 2019; Kaldor and Sassen 2020; Keogh 2020), it is in planning and architecture, geography, and anthropology that a suite of new analytical approaches has emerged. These include the role of planning and architecture in conflict, contestation, and social control especially in Jerusalem (Chiodelli 2018; Pullan 2017; Pullan et al. 2013; Yacobi 2017), but also approaches that reconcile macro-scale and normative perspectives with grounded narratives (Bollens 2021), non-state territorialities (Fregonese 2019; Hafeda 2019), localized civic practices (Dumper 2014; Nagel and Staeheli 2015), and artistic performances (Carabelli 2018). These grounded approaches also include literature centered on the domestic, banal, and everyday spheres to make sense of wider urban geopolitical dynamics (Handel et al. 2017; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Pullan 2017), as well as emphasizing the everyday continuity between war- and peacetime spatial practices in cities (Bou Akar 2018; Gusic 2020). Urban geopolitics, in sum, is shifting away from accounts limited to institutionalized and macro-level politics of “conflict urbanism” (Misselwitz and Rieniets 2006) as monolithic shapers of conflict and urban space and is attending instead to the quotidian, fligree, and ordinary practices that complicate, negotiate, or even actively disrupt (Musallam 2020) the macro-level frameworks and official contours of conflict. These contributions delineate other, ordinary topographies of contested urbanism that span mobility (Baumann 2015; McGahern 2019), personal agencies and imaginings (Lefort 2020), embodied practices (Greenberg Raanan and Avni 2020) and consumption (Shtern 2016).

Together with this shift toward the ordinary, urban geopolitics and urban conflict literature has also addressed parallels between what are commonly labeled “conflict cities” and more ordinary urban settings. This literature aims to rebalance the epistemological separation between categories such as “ordinary cities” and “conflict cities”—the latter often presenting extreme levels of division and contestation—like Jerusalem, Beirut, Belfast, or Nicosia—and supposedly functioning according to untranslatable logics of their own. The idea is that, by looking at extreme manifestations of urban conflict, we can gain “insights into other urban examples that are relatively peaceful” (Pullan 2015: 213). This agenda, at the same time, warns against exceptionalizing conflict cities and against regarding them as deviations or failures of governance or problematic dystopias where structural problems come to be seen as intrinsic or chronic.

Looking critically and in depth at the conflict/ordinary city binary, Jonathan Rokem has argued that “the majority of contemporary urban studies literature overlooks similar conditions [as conflict cities] in a growing number of ordinary urban areas” (2016b: 408) and that this risks ignoring the conflict-driven spatial practices (Bou Akar 2018) that persist and shape the city even after conflict formally ends and when the conflict city is problematically “upgraded” to a more ordinary status (O’Dowd and Komarova 2013). Building on critical comparative urban geography literature (McFarlane and Robinson 2012; Robinson 2011), Rokem (2016a, 2016b) reframes urban comparisons beyond accepted categories like “extremely contested” or “peaceful” cities, using Jerusalem and Stockholm as examples and identifies correlations between seemingly incommensurable cities in domains like institutionalized segregation, urban violence, and non-state approaches to planning, advocating for the more ordinary voices of urban

dwellers and their ways of life as terrains of enquiry. However, so far even the literature explicitly connecting conflict cities and ordinary cities has mostly focused on the material, architectural, and planning manifestations of these connections. This literature, however, is mainly a representational one: here, planning and architecture and material infrastructure are seen as texts with spatial narratives, as agendas for power agents, and as components of the production of territorial meanings.

In this article, instead, I want to point to a further possible framework for urban comparison between conflict cities and ordinary cities: one where the terrain for comparison is not only made of discourses and meanings, but of non-representational, “more than textual, multisensual worlds” (Vannini 2020: 3) that allow us to connect the actual felt experiences of what are seen as “radically contrastive political and historical settings” (Rokem 2016a).

In the first section, the article addresses the concept of atmosphere and reviews existing atmospheric and sentient approaches to conflict. The second section reflects on the pervading militarization of urban spaces worldwide beyond the confines of war zones. It focuses on the relational, lived and experiential aspects of urban security in Western urban environments deemed “peaceful” that, however, recall experiences of protracted urban conflict. The third section reflects on the unequal geographies of the sensory experience and atmospherics of terrorism across diverse urban publics. By joining literatures and empirical contexts through the lens of atmosphere, the article sets a new agenda to research everyday qualitative experiences of urban place across conflict cities and ordinary cities that can redress planning and infrastructure-centered approaches that risk missing out the differential, visceral, and long-term impacts of urban security and conflict on ordinary experiences of urban dwellers.

Atmosphere and the Study of Conflict and Terrorism: An Epistemology of the Ordinary?

Anglophone human geography conceives atmosphere as the qualitative or felt experience—individual and collective—of a place. The idea was elaborated via the notion of ambience primarily within French urban studies and architecture and has only more recently developed into wider academic dialogues across a number of national contexts (Kazig and Masson 2015) in cultural geography (Anderson 2009; Runkel 2018; Simpson 2019; Sumartojo and Pink 2019) and urban policy (Di Croce 2020). Atmosphere is a term used—in UK cultural geography at least—to make sense of “the collective affects in which we live” (Anderson 2009: 77) and as a type of affective intensity that is at once “registered by sensing bodies, while also remaining diffuse” (McCormack 2008: 413). The elusiveness of atmosphere means that—ontologically and analytically—it “traverses distinction between peoples, things and spaces” (Anderson 2009: 78). Atmosphere is at once felt viscerally and a hovering presence “belong[ing] to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal” (Anderson 2009: 80) and, while it is conjured up by interactions between human and non-human agencies, it can also be intensified by the absence or disappearance of such agencies.

How and why can a theory of atmosphere relate situations of conflict in contested urban environments with those of terrorism in what are normally peaceful cities, and what does an atmospheric epistemology make possible when we bring cities experiencing extreme contestation and conflict into conversation with more ordinary urban contexts? First, it is poignant to investigate the sentient aspects of conflict, where dynamics of violence are manifested spatially and physically in blatant ways and where the organization and reorganization of urban space impact profoundly on people’s everyday experience of their city. Second, despite valuable

emerging work, atmospheric approaches to geopolitical themes are still underdeveloped. While the engineering and commodification of atmospheres has long interested human geographers in relation to ordinary contexts like leisure (Edensor 2012), mobility (Lin 2015) and consumption (Shaw 2014), there is considerably less atmospheric study of politically charged situations, apart from the heavily institutionalized apparatuses of surveillance (Adey et al., 2013), and state-driven government of emergencies (Anderson and Adey 2011). Peter Adey (2013), at the same time, has called for complementing geographies of militarization research with their experiential aspects and more specifically has invited “explor[ing] the atmospheric affects of the intensified presence of something like an occupation, or the resonances constituting political change” (Adey 2013: 53). Recent interdisciplinary work is also using non-representational frameworks to address how atmospheres are enrolled and weaponized for political violence and the policing of protest in cities (Nieuwenhuis 2018; Shaw 2016; see also Graham 2015); shaped during religious ritual in conflict zones (Loi 2018; Wanner 2020); how they fluctuate in escalation toward armed conflict (Fregonese 2017) and their amplifications shape daily practices in the proximity of conflict (Navaro 2017); and finally how they linger in post-conflict settings (Laketa 2016). Importantly, atmosphere allows us to extend the focus of studying conflict from the spectacularly militarized events in war zones and into the often silenced but persisting “gaps, creaks, and crevices not entirely smothered by the bombastic politics at play nor flattened by . . . conflicting governmentalities” (Navaro 2017: 211), and into the everyday expressions of (often heavily racialized) state control at the everyday and ordinary level through affective resonances (Martínez and Sirri 2020) and through “atmospheric-monitoring projects” (Young and Bruzzone 2018: 1340) of surveillance, intelligence, rumor control, and denunciation.

In sum, in highlighting non-representational connections between what are seemingly incommensurable urban spaces, atmosphere allows us to find the ordinary in the extraordinary and vice versa, by considering urban dynamics of conflict and terrorism for how they are made present to the people who live them (see Adey 2013). It allows accounting for their sensory experiences (sounds, sights, smells, and more hybrid situational awareness), as well as for their events, intended as “happenings, unfoldings, regular occurrences inspired by states of anticipation and irregular actions that shatter expectations” (Vannini 2020: 7)—shockwaves, explosions, emergencies, sudden changes of pace in a crowd—and the backgrounds, intended as “the sites that fall outside of common awareness” (Vannini 2020: 9), the ineffable spaces where ordinary affects happen (rumors, tensions, “charge” of a place) that so far have been absorbed within normative analyses of urban conflict.

Experiencing Militarization beyond Urban War Zones

Post 9/11, several crossovers have developed between the technological and operational aspects of military operations abroad and the policing of domestic urban environments (Graham 2008). The last two decades have witnessed a marked urbanization of security, and there has been an intensification of urban operations by militarized police to control, for example, civil protest, where supposedly non-lethal weapons like tear gas are used to discipline populations by weaponizing the atmosphere as living element (Feigenbaum and Kanngieser 2015; Nieuwenhuis 2018).

We are also witnessing lockdowns of entire cities or parts of them to curb terrorism: examples are Boston in 2013 and Brussels in 2015. While we know a lot about the technological and planning aspects of urban securitization (Coaffee and Wood 2006; Graham and Wood 2003), militarization (Katz 2007), defensive infrastructure (Coaffee 2004), and the institutional and

material frameworks of governance of emergency and security (Adey et al. 2013; Anderson and Adey 2011) in Western cities, the qualitative experience of urban militarization outside war zones deserves exploring and unravelling in its connections with contested urban spaces.

The first area of connection relates to how urban environments are being militarized in response to global geopolitical challenges and the ubiquity of the terror threat. In this scenario, terrorism—much like conflict—is increasingly concerning the “soft targets” of everyday urban spaces. Urban Europe is becoming increasingly militarized to address the “perpetual threat faced by cities in the never-ending ‘war on terror’” (Coaffee 2017). As such, the present moment in Western Europe is characterized by a challenge to “traditional territorial counter-terrorism approaches” like security cordons and defensive hard infrastructure (Coaffee 2017). Threat is understood as capable of striking anywhere at any time by hitting the “soft targets” of urban life—low profile but crowded places like sidewalks, cafes, or festivals, that are easily targetable without a great degree of preparation and technological sophistication. Clearly, the ubiquity of terror threat is reshaping how we experience cities, as counterterrorism involves the reorganization of the defensibility of urban space into “a militarization and fortressing of the city—particularly its public spaces—as a demonstration of urban *resilience* against perceived external and internal intimidations” (Gaffikin et al. 2010: 495–496) and in a way that has regeared the military-industrial complex toward urban protection in civilian/domestic settings rather than exclusively in war zones (Batley, this issue). All too often, the mechanisms and appearance of this spatial re-organization (defensive infrastructure, presence of military personnel or militarized police, surveillance) recall the defensive infrastructure urban situations of protracted conflict and physical partition, such as in Beirut, Jerusalem, Belfast, or Baghdad. In cities experiencing conflict as in those “ordinary” ones living with the threat of terrorism, pacification and short-term security are obtained through the deployment of similar defensive design and physical security measures. This was particularly true in the aftermath of 9/11, when infrastructural hardening had not yet made way to more proportionate and aesthetically acceptable ways (Coaffee 2017) of securing urban spaces through more sophisticated designs and risked accentuating “public perceptions of siege or vulnerability, and thus heighten the sense of imminent danger and anticipation of attack” (Grosskopf 2006). It is recognized in studies of urban conflict that the obduracy of the built environment has “the ability to inadvertently accentuate as much as ameliorate divisions in contested space” (Morrisey and Gaffikin 2006: 877). What are, therefore, physical measures undoubtedly focused on minimizing the danger of terrorism and controlling emergencies also alter the experience of the city in the long term, reinforcing perceptions of unsafety, inter-group suspicion, and siege mentality, which in turn intensifies a sense of anticipation of threat in ways that recall very glaringly the long-term effects of urban division and contestation (Conflict in Cities 2012). Anique Hommels (2005) calls interactionist obduracy a process whereby groups with divergent opinions are constrained by fixed ways of interacting, often due to hard infrastructure of security and partition (walls, gates, fences, and so on) that are difficult to shift, change or eliminate. While barriers and divisions produce a physical perimeter/buffer and short-term sense of security among and between groups, in the long term they become engrained in the physical and social fabric of the city and can even end up with perpetuating fear, division, inter-group suspicion, mistrust and misconception, and even a return of conflict (Conflict in Cities 2012; Pullan 2017). As the modus operandi of terrorists shifts toward “highly accessible, simple methodologies” (Great Britain and Home Office 2018: 17) to attack “soft” targets, urban space becomes impossible to completely securitize and, as a consequence, threat is diffuse throughout urban everyday life.

This implication of everyday life in the experience of the threat of terrorism and related risk calculations has ample resonance in cities even when they are—at least officially—in a

“post-conflict” phase. Every day, micro-decisions and negotiations about daily routines, transport, and circulation (Monroe 2016), and even access to public facilities are impacted upon (Bairner and Shirlow 2003; Lysaght and Basten 2005) by rumors, anticipations, and anecdotal knowledge circulation. Klas Borell shows how navigating the city becomes a visceral exercise of risk calculation, widespread suspicion and precautions: “Cars parked where they should not be parked or that in some other way appeared to be ‘abnormal’ were seen by some of the interviewees as warning signals” (Borell 2008: 62).

It is in these corporeal calibrations of risk and threat that, aside from the more spectacular and visible events and effects of conflict and contestation, we can attune scholarly enquiry to the micro- and quotidian practices and elusive experiences of everyday spaces in the city—in other words, their backgrounds (Vannini 2020). It is here that an atmospheric approach—both conceptual and methodological—can be useful in bringing into conversation the ordinary and sentient expressions of protracted urban conflict with the experience of militarized urban spaces elsewhere.

Tapping into the ordinary and the visceral atmospheres transversing conflict urban zones and ordinary cities, requires more than representational methods of research capable of relating to the flux of daily and ordinary experience. Building on and maximizing existing and established social sciences methods, then, non-representational methodologies capture “events, reflexivity, affective states, the unsaid, and incompleteness and openness of everyday performance” (Vannini 2020: 15). Examples of research that uses performative and creative methods to study the ordinary topographies transversing conflict and post-conflict or “ordinary” cities includes Mohamad Hafeda’s audio-visual installation “Look: Someone Is Filming.” Here, Hafeda portrays the negotiation, making, and remaking of immaterial sonic borders and the shifting of political sonic landscapes in the contested city, by traveling through politically diverse neighborhoods of Beirut (Hafeda 2011).¹ Nicola di Croce’s (2017) exploration of how the sonic ambiances conjured up by ice cream vans melodies in Belfast reshape patterns of segregation and marginalization, experiences of “safety” in public space between segregated neighborhoods, and the potential for shared sense of place. These are two good examples of attempts to capture the seemingly ineffable backgrounds, the multi-sensorial and corporeal ordinary spaces where political atmospheres and their variations and shifts become manifest. Such grounded and corporeal accounts add nuance and agency to what have often become accepted universalized narratives of inexorable planetary urban militarization (Gregory 2011). It is to these grounded accounts that I will now turn.

War-Like Experiences of Counterterrorism

While the visual and performative economy of the aftermath of terrorism is rich in commemorative events often held in central urban squares (Closs Stephens et al. 2017; Merrill et al. 2020), the lived experience of neighborhoods removed from the commemorative scene include more sinister and harmful atmospherics, that bear multisensory connections to the experience of war zones. In neighborhoods where security forces focus counterterror operations, what for mainstream urban publics is “the aftermath” of terror, translates instead into an atmospheric unsettling of micro- and intimate scales of domesticity, the body, and the emotional sphere (Hergon, this issue).

In some cases, this translates into the use of technology for increased and pervasive policing and surveillance. One emblematic case was in the city of Birmingham (UK). In 2010, it came to light that using government funds dedicated to addressing terrorism under the name “Project Champion” the Safer Birmingham Partnership with West Midlands Police installed 218 surveillance cameras, both overt and covert, in the largely Muslim areas of Washwood Heath

and Sparkbrook without a transparent local consultation process. This use of the funds attracted stark criticism from councilors and residents and consequently West Midlands Police apologized and uninstalled the cameras after stating that the force had lost the trust of the community (Birmingham Live 2010). This episode exposes the differentials in the experience of terror and fear by diverse urban publics. Counterterrorism is unequal: it has racialized and gendered tonalities and impacts on different communities that inhabit the same city (Pain 2014). From constructing suspicious communities (Hickman et al. 2012) to the stigmatization of specific portions of society, and the gendered (Guru 2012) and racialized implications of counter-radicalization programs (Isakjee and Allen 2013), counterterrorism agendas determine “who is subject to sovereign protection or sovereign violence” (Ingram and Dodds 2011: 95) by the state across the same locale.

An atmospheric approach can serve to grasp the filigree, differential, and uneven atmospheres shaped by terrorism and its security responses across different urban publics and places. Furthermore, the example of the atmospherics of the counterterror raid allows us to trace a politics of atmospheres that cuts through the war zone and the ordinary city. Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink (2019) state that the politics of atmospheres resides not only in that the conditions that conjure up specific atmospheres are the result of situated power relations and discursive fields, but also in that they shape people’s actual futurity and imbue experience with meanings and values.

The aftermath of terror attacks translates into traumatic and even violent experiences for ordinary residents caught up in armed counterterror raids targeting buildings and apartments often located in densely populated suburban areas of European cities, and here lays another zone of conjunction between supposedly ordinary urban settings and war zones, in terms of the unsettling atmospheres that operations in both contexts conjure up. Home raids in war zones and their impact on the population occupy debates across international law, international affairs and military ethics (Bailliet 2007) around the wider realm of counterinsurgency. This wide area of military strategy addresses the issue of raids in often densely populated urban areas deemed to harbor violent non-state actors. According to Cecilia Bailliet (2007), counterinsurgency house raids aimed at extracting insurgents from populated areas, sit in a gray zone of war and post-conflict operations. What is important to underline here is the experiential level at which counterinsurgency operates, and the sensory experiences it provokes. Counterinsurgency is based on building trust from local populations, minimizing local resentment, and triggering dynamics of self-interest that ultimately deprive insurgents of local support (Headquarters and Department of the Army 2009). While house raid operations are considered to be of moderate or targeted scale from a military perspective, their impact on civilian sensory and qualitative experience of the events and their context is much more amplified (Bailliet 2007). In particular, pre-dawn raids are particularly unsettling for the population (Bailliet 2007).

At 4:20 a.m. of 18 November 2015, a counterterror raid by the French police with the backing of the army took place in the commune of St. Denis, five miles north of the center of Paris and where the Stade de France—the first target of the terrorist attacks on the evening of 13 November 2015—is located, after police intercepted phone calls locating Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the person suspected of orchestrating the attacks. While ambulances and military trucks were stationed in the street, helicopters hovered over buildings as the police raided a block of flats. The residents of Rue de Curbillon woke in the dark to sounds of gunfire and explosions. Testimonies to the press convey the sensorial facets of the event. A resident testifies that “From our window we could see flashes of light—gunfire, as if grenades had been thrown. Afterwards helicopters arrived with spotlights, lighting up the roof. . . . We turned on the lights so the children were less scared” (Chrisafis et al. 2015)

Fear of terror acquires war-like traits and physical consequences on the bodies of residents and the built environment. Due to the use of explosives, there were shattered windows, struc-

tural damage, staircases were destroyed and entire buildings became uninhabitable. The raid had long-term consequences: some residents were injured by the operations and others had to relocate elsewhere due to infrastructural damage. A particularly poignant testimony affirms: “We were very lucky to survive, eight bullets struck our living room. Five stray bullets hit my Egyptian neighbour [he survived], my other Tunisian neighbour was hit by two” (France 24 2016: 24). The mental consequences and trauma are also substantial and affect both individuals and the wider feeling of place: “My daughter is six and she’s scared and confused. The schools here are shut today, children are staying home. People are really scared and pretty tense” (Chrisafis et al. 2015). The event not only affected individual felt experiences but also changed the more diffuse experience of the neighborhood and the values attributed to the locality—in terms of reputation, community cohesion, and mutual trust. This is where the politics of atmosphere became manifest, through an event that ruptured expectations and imbued the neighborhood’s experience of counterterrorism with specific values and meanings that linger beyond the temporality and spatiality of the specific event. Here, resilience discourses that encourage community cohesion and “bouncing back” and overcoming the fear of terrorism, acquire different connotations when the state’s violent response affects their neighborhoods in such visceral and corporeal ways. There are lingering and ripple effects of terrorist violence, where the physical damage to property and the securitization of the built environment relates powerfully to the subjective sensorium and the more diffuse experience of place. These effects persist and influence how residents experience their city in the long term and the maps of their sensory and experiential urban landscapes (Gensburger 2019). The long-term experience of trauma in the “ordinary” city allows us to return to the discussion of experience of protracted conflict in the previous section. In a study on Beirut, Borell (2008) found that experiences of protracted conflict influence how terrorism is experienced and how residents manage risk. For example, during the swathe of terrorist attacks in Beirut in 2005, “An elderly man . . . who had experienced the Civil War said that he had got back what he described as his ‘wartime hearing’: . . . to distinguish between thunder and bomb attacks from the air and between fireworks and exchanges of gunfire” (Borell 2008: 63). This situational awareness, which draws on the sensory experience of the city at war, is a trait I also encountered during my previous research (Fregonese 2017), whereby the residents who experienced the civil war were described by younger participants as more street-savvy during the crisis and knew how to interpret sounds reverberating through the urban fabric, as well as procure specific essential goods in anticipation of periods of armed clashes and inability to exit their homes. This supposed increased perceptivity of the aging population to the anticipation of and dealing with violence (Salerno and Nagy 2002) has also anecdotally surfaced in the social media reaction to the 4 August explosion at the port of Beirut (which I will address shortly), as the generation who lived through the civil war is said to have reacted to the event and its aftermath in a more composed and action-oriented way than the younger generation. This hypothesis of a resurfacing of an embodied knowledge of past violent events is supported by studies according to which violent events can trigger memories and grief around past traumatic experiences (Solomon and Prager 1992), as atmosphere affects futurity and shapes how we recall memories of past events and places (Sumartojo and Pink 2019).

Shockwave 2—Beirut

At 6:07 p.m. on Tuesday 4 August 2020, a fire at Hangar 12 in the cargo area of the Port of Beirut propagated soot, smoke, and flashes from exploding fireworks and triggered a first explosion of “partially combusted ammonium nitrate” (Hubbard et al. 2020). A minute later, at 6:08 p.m.,

a further, bigger explosion of ammonium nitrate produced a hemispherical shockwave and a sound-barrier breaking wall of air and water vapor that ravaged the surrounding buildings as it blew through them (Hubbard et al. 2020). What exploded were 2,500 tons of ammonium nitrate unsafely stored in the port due to negligence and inaction by a politically paralyzed post-conflict institutional apparatus (Fregonese 2020). On Thursday 10 September, a further large fire started at the port near the site of the August explosion, destroying a number of cargo goods including part of the International Committee for the Red Cross's humanitarian aid food stock (ICRC 2020). This second incident triggered strong collective feelings of frustration and disbelief at the Lebanese authorities, but it also produced a more visceral shock in a city still reeling from the August explosion. The sight and smell of black smoke reignited trauma and fears in the residents of the neighborhoods affected in August, who hurried to open their windows to prevent a repeat of the destruction; sheltered in windowless rooms; or evacuated the area altogether. The fumes of the fire, triggering respiratory difficulties in the local population, gave bodily form and tangible presence to the lingering atmospheric politics of the 4 August trauma.

As urban air (and its use, abuse, and misuse) is implicated in specific political ecologies (Graham 2015), so "atmospheres can threaten the social and economic viability of entire cities" (Gandy 2017: 364). The encounter between the physics of air (in Beirut's case—the shock wave) and the politics of corporeal vulnerability (in this case, a population made vulnerable by its own state institutions) expose widespread and unequal geographies of marginality (Gandy 2017).

While it soon became clear that the culpability lies within the Lebanese authorities' lack of action regarding the dangerous substances stored at the port since 2013, it became also apparent that the economic, material, and spatial links that allowed the assemblage of the ingredients of the port catastrophe reached well beyond Beirut's specific issues as a post-conflict city. The ramifications of the August explosion expanded into the intricate circumstances of a ship full of ammonium nitrate docking unexpectedly in Beirut six years before, and the multiple human and nonhuman actors implicated in the events. These ramifications ran "far deeper and wider—to a network of maritime capital and legal chicanery that is designed to protect businesses at any cost" (Khalili 2020). In this geography, a contested city like Beirut does not feature in isolation as a poster child, but sits within a wider, and to some extent ordinary, network of economies, materialities, practices, and settings that are not always necessarily connected to conflict. Talking about Lebanon's civil war (1975–1990), which is at the base of most of the country's woes, Najib Hourani (2010) argued that the individuals, capital, and practices that made possible Lebanon's militia war economy were not limited to the locale, but had global ramifications amid capitalist networks whereby "the boundaries of the 'war' or 'militia' economy that separate it from normal economic processes of capitalist globalisation are impossible to locate" (Hourani 2010: 306). The example of the port explosion, therefore, makes it difficult to isolate what is commonly referred to as a conflict (or post-conflict) city from the wider geography of ordinary and non-militarized locations, transactions, and actors. Analyzing how these transnational capital involvements play out in urban planning, Hiba Bou Akar (2018) outlines the transnational investment networks that sustain specific building practices in the city's peripheries. Here, international financial activities include real estate transactions and philanthropic donations pertaining to different religious-political organizations whose investments play out in the spatial reorganization of Beirut's suburbs in ways that are "fuelled by sectarian discourse over the religious identity of land" (2018: 55). This way, explains Bou Akar, past conflict still molds the post-conflict city and shapes its anticipation of future conflict.

This anticipation, I argue, is made as much of brick and mortar as it is of atmospheric intensities: daily tensions, rumors, suspicions, and unspoken practices that shape the everyday experience of the city. Taking the discussion a step further, Bou Akar extends this logic of anticipation

of conflict beyond the specific context of Beirut, stating that “cities of both the Global North and the Global South are currently being governed, regulated, and contested according to a logic of future violence, based on imaginings of the likelihood and effects of gang war, destructive climate change, and international terror” (2018: 34).

Conclusion

The example of the Beirut port explosion concludes this article by returning to a context of protracted urban conflict, but complicating the accepted distinction between this and ordinary urban and political geographies. Using the lens of atmosphere, this article has developed spatial literature about urban conflict that compares supposedly incommensurable types of cities—those affected by extreme and prolonged forms of conflict and those deemed ordinary or peaceful. Engaging with the overarching yet filigree geographies of atmospheres means to respect the untranslatability and uniqueness of extremely contested local contexts, but at the same time—because atmosphere is elusive and supersedes the conditions and place where it propagates—allows us to implement a more diffuse analysis across varied contexts, situations, and facets, thus transcending representational categories of the conflict city as opposed to the peaceful one.

As the experience of cities is being altered profoundly by conflict, the militarization of urban security, and recently by the lockdowns to tame the COVID-19 pandemic, we need new ways of seeing and living the city that bring consideration to the everyday experience and atmospherics as a connector between seemingly unrelated urban situations. These can even vastly learn from each other how to shape sustainable futures in what are profoundly and swiftly changing urban landscapes.

First, the article has argued that the conflict city offers occasions to attune ourselves to the politics of atmosphere that are crucial to understanding actual experiences of terrorism and creates grounded epistemologies to add grain to the meta-narratives of conflict urbanism or the everywhere war. Second, the atmospheric approach also populates the planning and infrastructure-centered work of counterterrorism and urban security studies with sensing bodies and with everyday qualitative experiences. At the same time, the article accounts for the differences in experience toward the infrastructural and technological aspects of urban securitization (divisions, walls, security barriers, hostile vehicle mitigation street furniture, checkpoints). Finally, and similarly to situations of post-conflict where the wartime sensorium persists long after armed violence ends, the article highlights how spatial changes and alterations to everyday experiences pervade the urban atmosphere long after a terrorist attack. The terrorist event is not clear-cut before “bouncing back” to business as usual but is an enduring process with both material and intangible impacts that shape the urban atmospheres for residents and communities in the long term. It is in these diffuse and long-term perturbations, reaching beyond the confines of the event (both the attack and its commemorations) and into the everyday experience of the city, that our attention must be now focused.²

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■ **SARA FREGONESE** is senior lecturer in Political Geography at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *War and the City: Urban Geopolitics in Lebanon* (Bloomsbury) and of *The Radicals' City: Urban Environment, Polarisation, Cohesion* (Routledge). ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4505-0661> | Email: s.fregonese@bham.ac.uk

■ NOTES

1. See Mohamad Hafeda, “This Is How Stories of Conflict Circulate and Resonate.” <https://www.mohamadhafeda.com/this-is-how-stories-of-conflict-circulate-and-resonate> (accessed 18 June 2021).
2. This will now be the pursuit of the project “Atmospheres of (Counter)Terrorism in European Cities” (Jan 2021- Dec 2023) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC ES/V01353X/1), Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR), and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)- – (<https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FV01353X%2F1>). The project is conducted by myself with Paul Simpson (University of Plymouth), Damien Masson (Cergy Paris University), and Simon Runkel (Friedrich Schiller University Jena).

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