Transcript Q&A

Urbanization and the Future of Conflict

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Chair: Professor Theo Farrell
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Question 1:

I’d like to link the main conclusions of this meeting to one which was held on Monday, which pointed out that the use of explosive weapons in highly populated areas results in catastrophic, hideous levels of civilian casualties, which I think is a very important point. In Afghanistan my work often revolved around trying to undo the damage that counter-insurgency theorists had done to development and governance programming, and one of the biggest lessons I think of the wars that have been fought in the last 10 years is tread lightly anywhere with the use of military force because the unintended consequences, your own presence, the presence of the military and levels of civilian casualties actually become drivers of conflict as you attempt to suppress it. So, with that in mind, I’d like to ask you how do you factor in projections for levels of civilian casualties through the use of quite standard weaponry in urban areas when you’re actually considering whether it’s worth intervening or not in the first place? Thanks very much.

David Kilcullen:

So, I want to make a comment and then answer the question. It’s interesting to see how different things have developed in Afghanistan versus Iraq. So in Iraq the introduction of a much larger number of troops into the main combat area of the war prompted a dramatic drop, about a 95 per cent drop, in civilian casualties in Iraq. In Afghanistan the introduction of troops in 2009 in large numbers tracked with a rise in civilian casualties, and one of the things that I think hasn’t really been fully explored and understood by people is why there was this dramatic reduction in civilian casualties in Iraq and a rise in Afghanistan. So I think we have to do a lot more work on this question.

I’ve been writing pieces that critique the general theory of counter-insurgency since 2003. One of the pieces that I wrote in 2005 was called ‘Counterinsurgency Redux’ in which I made the point that the kinds of conflicts that we’re engaging in now actually don’t look a lot like classical counter-insurgency, most of which happened in colonial environments, and so particularly governance was an entirely different matter if you were in British Malaya or Kenya than if you were in Afghanistan or Iraq. So I think, A, there’s a lot of work to be done around issues of counter-insurgency, but what I’m suggesting in the book is actually I think that the counter-insurgency paradigm as a paradigm is about due for a scientific revolution. A lot of the data that we’re seeing coming out about the environment suggests to me that we really shouldn’t – we’ve gone about as far as we can with counter-insurgency as a
theory, we need to come up with a new theory and I actually have a whole chapter in the book where I try to suggest what some new theoretical ideas might be that aren’t counter-insurgency, about how to think about a whole variety of different non-state armed groups that are engaging with the population.

To your specific question on the military, where I come out in the book, and it’s an identical conclusion to what I came out with in Accidental Guerrilla in 2009, is that the most important lesson for the military about counter-insurgency is don’t do it, right. It’s almost always dramatically worse to put the military into this environment as to stay out, though I go back to what I said at the beginning; that doesn’t seem to stop politicians from sending the military in. So, on the one hand, the military really has to understand how to do these operations because politicians have a habit of sending the military into these environments. On the other hand, as we think about how to deal with an environment we really need to be saying, let’s not bring the military in, and I talk in the book about military urbicide which is a term that’s used in the urban studies world that basically suggests that armies kill cities, that’s one of the things that armies do, they have this tendency to destroy urban areas.

In the case of Syria I think it’s very interesting to see how the Assad regime has been using chemical weapons. Before the large-scale use about a month ago, there were about a dozen other uses of chemical weapons in the country but they were relatively small scale uses of non-persistent nerve agent. And if you think about it in a very cynical way, if you’re fighting an urban insurgency and you want to control and terrorize a population but you don’t want to destroy the urban fabric, you don’t want to be the Russians in Grozny and destroy half the city in order to save it, then chemical weapons are a great tool, right. You can fire non-persistent nerve agent on a street in Syria on a hot afternoon, kill 100 people and within five, ten minutes, you can send your own troops unprotected down that street because it will have dissipated rapidly enough that it no longer poses a threat. It’s like a poor man's neutron bomb in some sense.

**Question 1:**

It is war crime.
David Kilcullen:

Absolutely. So I think one of the problems that the lack of frankly international action on chemical weapons in Syria is creating, is that other people that are looking at – hey I’ve got urban environments that I may need to control as a dictator or an oppressive regime, I’m actually better off using something like sarin gas than artillery because it has less of an effect on the urban environment, kills people, terrorizes people, but it’s safe again in five or ten minutes. So I think you raise a really important point about not only the role of the military but the legitimacy of the military in these types of environments, and my general take on this is the military is almost always the worst possible actor to send. We should be looking for local solutions primarily. Where those don’t work, what I call co-design solutions between the international community and locals that are primarily civilian in nature, and that’s almost always the best way to deal with these challenges, but on the flip side if you’re in the military you’d better get comfortable with urban because that’s where wars will be in the future and the historical pattern suggests that we’ll keep on getting sent into those environments anyway.

Question 2:

You talked about the periodicity of war in America, you talked about 25 year periods, obviously you’re probably aware that every 50 years America gets involved in a major war and so does China and we’re just approaching that 50 year point, so I just make that point on the periodicity. But I would ask you how relevant do you see [Gustave] Le Bon’s book, The Crowd, to what you’re talking about at the moment with this communication all-round the place with mobile phones?

David Kilcullen:

There’s some really good recent writing on this question, and I think we’ve seen a lot of new work coming out of the tech community about broadband and wiring of environments and what that allows you to do in an urban space, which we’re now starting to see military theorists apply, so flash mobs, the ability to call people together by cell phone or by SMS text message and coordinate activity. In the Mumbai attack by Lashkar-e-Taiba, which I talk about as a case-study in the book, they used Twitter to command and control that operation which was reasonably sophisticated but totally impossible only about 10 years ago, so we’ve got this whole new aspect to conflict developing
as a result of connectivity. That's the new bit. The rest of it, it's old, we've known about it for a long time. This stuff changes the picture significantly.

Question 3:

My question is based on the experiences in Tanzania or particularly in Yemen, where I felt the negative consequences of the deteriorating security situation there for other international aid projects was not really appreciated by some international organizations. They didn't make contingency plans because they frankly were not comfortable dealing with conflict. My question is, who is listening to you and who isn't?

David Kilcullen:

Great question. Well, it turns out navies, Marine Corps officers and special operators are quite interested in what I'm writing because of frankly institutional reasons. I'm getting a lot of interest from the NGO community, which is who we mainly work with, on questions around what urban studies people call participative development or co-design, and the question is how do you do that when someone's shooting at you without then destroying the basis for cooperation? Who's not listening to me? I haven't got a lot of response from political leaders who I have engaged with actually. I spoke at the House of Commons yesterday and one of the members of parliament said, 'well you know, European cities did pretty well in the 20th century, so what makes you think that African and Asian cities won't do just as well in the 21st century', and frankly I hope they do but I think it would be a bit of a gamble to be planning on that basis.

Question 4:

I'm just curious to know how far you've looked into the maritime space because, I must say, I do see it as a major vulnerability. You mentioned obviously one of the great drivers of globalization being the electronic medium, but of course the other is the process by which we shift stuff around the planet, and with the growth in the number of container ships – Maersk Line for example with 18,000 containers embarked – these are big targets, potentially very vulnerable, and I could go on but I won't. I will keep it very brief, because what I'm curious to know is how you take what your – and I've got your book, I'll read it on the way home – but the thesis that everything is
moving towards urban space and in coastal regions, how much thought have you given to the extent to which that will have an impact on, and partly you've answered it in your last answer, on navies and the way they shape their business into the future? Thank you.

**David Kilcullen:**

So, the short answer is it’s going to be a lot of Julian Corbett and not so much Alfred Thayer Mahan. Right, we can talk about that in a bit more detail. I have a whole appendix in the book where I go into great detail on littoral operations and I talk about what I call the nine domain challenge, so actually littoral is much more dangerous and difficult than either maritime or continental operations because you have not only subterranean land surface and super surface structures like high rise buildings, you also have seabed, undersea, sea surface, maritime, aerospace, cyberspace and all these effects intersect in one space and I talk in some detail around some case-studies of littoral conflict.

I’m a naval gunfire support FO (forward observer) and Australia doesn’t have a Marine Corps so I actually did a lot of amphibious operations as a light infantry officer, so I’ve tried to roll some of that into the book. The other thing that I’ve done, which I think you may find interesting, is I’ve looked at the Mumbai terrorist attack, which there have been a dozen accounts of this written that all start from the moment at which the terrorists land in Mumbai and focus on the landward side of the attack. I spend most of the case-study looking at how they got there in the first place, by infiltrating coastal shipping routes coming out of the port of Karachi, which handles 40 per cent of Pakistan’s trade by volume, and then infiltrating the Indian fishing fleet at sea, cutting out a vessel and sailing to a dropping off point outside of Mumbai. That’s part of the Mumbai attack that hasn’t really been talked about before.

The terrorists in that environment really understood not only the urban flow of Mumbai and Karachi but the way that the maritime highway connected both of those and how that worked and they hid within an existing pattern of maritime traffic. I’ve also talked a little bit about how the Sri Lankan Navy had to get well offshore, about 1,000 nautical miles offshore, to deal with littoral operations when fighting with Sea Tigers because of the mothership phenomenon, so there’s a lot in the book that’s about the naval aspect but I would just say that I’m an army guy practicing naval warfare without a licence. We need a naval officer to write the companion piece to this.
**Question 5:**

I was interested in the reference you made to local leaders and their role in Nairobi, and just by way of example I think there’s a lot of evidence that when the 7/7 attacks took place in London, urban terror attacks, the casualties would have been much higher if there hadn’t been a carefully prepared emergency plan which involved not just the security and emergency services but also the local boroughs, the London boroughs, the local governments. In contrast there’s a conference taking place this week in Islamabad organized by the UN on local governance issues, and one of the underlying concerns there is the absence of any elected local government leadership in Pakistan which would allow community leaders to work, whether with the security forces or indeed with other services, in combatting terrorism and indeed wider issues around emergency situations, disaster relief, and indeed if we take it to the urban environment the whole issues around urban infrastructure. So, really my question is where do you see the role of local elected leaders, especially democratic leaders, local governance in this whole equation of urban issues, whether it’s terrorism or indeed other challenges around urban infrastructure problems?

**David Kilcullen:**

In fact this gets back to a point that was made in the first question. I think that actually the critical level here is actually local government and civil society at the village and street level, and that’s been an area that we’ve typically not paid much attention to. We’ve focused on, we have this whole subnational governance strategy in Afghanistan that really stops at the district level at most, and actually villages is where a lot of things happen and urban districts is where things happen in an urbanized environment. To summarize a lot of work that I wrote in the book, I would just say I think we need to move away from the idea of stability to the idea of resiliency and from state-based thinking to really community-based non-state thinking to understand this, and I give a lot of examples of things that worked in the last chapter of the book where local-level community resiliency compensated for lack of state effectiveness. It’s not the whole answer but I think it’s the place to start.

Stability is a systems’ characteristic that’s actually absent in most of these cities that we look at. If you take Dakar as an example. In 1950 Dakar had 400,000 people, today it has 12 million people and it’s heading for 20 million by 2025, and a series of governments have come up with planning approaches and urban development strategies which were repeatedly just a
little bit overtaken by events and too late to deal with. They would have been appropriate if they could have been implemented quickly but they were not able to be implemented fast enough to keep up with a system that's in dynamic disequilibrium. So I think that instead of trying to hold the tide back of urbanization, we need to be teaching people to swim, we need to be focusing on resiliency. But it's not, and I'm very clear on this in the book, it's not a matter of white male technocrats with clipboards coming in and patting the locals on the head and saying, sit down and shut up, we have the answer to your problem. It has to be that co-design process where locals bring the insight and the leadership, and all the internationals can bring is some of the technical and functional knowledge that you may not have if you live in that environment. Locals have to be in the driving seat. They are anyway whether we recognize that or not, so adapting to that is critically important, but again, how do you do that when somebody is shooting at you? That’s the tricky bit.

Theo Farrell:

I’m very pleased to hear you say that because of this emphasis on local resilience particularly in obviously urban and coastal populations, because we have a very large research group on this at King’s College London in the Geography Department. This is a big area of research for them.

Question 6:

In the UK the data shows that one of the consequences of urbanization and interconnectedness is increasing levels of cultural understanding and relativism, and [Malcolm] Gladwell’s recently written a book about how in large urban centres innovation and collaboration coefficients are at their highest, so to what extent do you think that will be a mitigating factor when thinking about urban conflict? Closely related to that, you said that urbanization places people at the mercy of a whole set of systems, so what about a case-study like Gogawan, just outside of New Delhi, where large numbers of mostly wealthy people have decided to opt out of that shared government infrastructure, shared government services and create their own through the use of generators and satellites. I’d be interested in how those types of emerging sub-cities factor into your analysis. Thank you.
David Kilcullen:

So Malcolm and I had a detailed conversation a few months ago about his work and there’s actually some very good data to support his thesis that as cities get bigger their adaptive resources and economies of scale make it actually easier for them to deal with some of these challenges. But I think the conclusion that we came to in conversation was that you need to be able to free up those adaptive resources and that then comes down to questions like, while you may have a very large Gini coefficient, is there a high degree of economic mobility between different classes within the city or are people stuck in an environment that they can’t get out of? While you might have areas of the city that the police don’t go into, are there effective community resiliency structures there even if they’re non-state that may compensate for that lack of government? So I think I would say the short answer is it depends, right, but what it depends on is the adaptability, the ability to free up those resources that already exist and apply them quickly enough to the challenges of the society. It gets back to the urban metabolism argument. It’s the pace and scale of flow, not the flow itself, that leads to these kinds of problems.

To your other point, I very much think that what we see in urban environments – is predominantly in the developing world right now but that’s just a slightly exacerbated version of what we see in all major cities on the planet – and one of the things we see is what urban planners call internal secession, which is what you’re talking about, where people pull out of the city system and set up their own gated community or enclave, and you even have cities seceding from regions in Europe right now. This is a phenomenon that’s not unique to the developing world but we see it in many, many places, and of course that reduces civic resources for dealing with overall problems but you can’t stop people from banding together and doing that. So part of this is about handling a spatial dynamic now where you have often a doughnut or horseshoe shaped ring of peri-urban or transitional territory where the state doesn’t go into, that’s not very well governed, but dotted around in that are these little enclaves that are almost self-governing and have seceded from the state. The city of Detroit is a good example of that in the United States. I’m pretty sure there’s some examples in the UK, but if you really want to see extreme examples, Mumbai, Karachi, Dakar, Lagos, that’s where you see that happening, Rio.
Question 7:

I have a rather general question about the future of conflict. All the signs are that global warming is set to continue and get worse because the world community so far has really failed to do anything much about it. We’re going to have a situation in that event of rising sea levels, increasing acidification of the sea which will make it more difficult for life to exist in the seas, then having increasing desertification in some parts of the world, problems of water shortages, possible quarrels between states, this is going to create all kinds of tensions in the international system, all kinds of potential for conflict, potential for attempted mass migrations of people to more habitable zones. How do you see all that affecting the future of conflict?

David Kilcullen:

A great question. In the book I don’t directly address the question of anthropogenic global warming, for two reasons. One, it’s a very hot political topic in the United States and I didn’t want to distract my readership in the US on that issue when actually you don’t need to posit any degree of climate change or sea level rise to see that more people living in coastal settlements just exposes more of the global population to seaborne issues. Already the most common natural disaster on the planet is flooding, coastal flooding, and you only need to see, without any degree of sea level rise, a storm surge about the same size as what hit New York City last October and you’re going to put 22 million people underwater in Bangladesh. So I happen to believe that the data is reasonably clear on climate change, but even without that it’s still a problem, and the Asian Development Bank in particular has talked about around 40 million people in the next generation moving from rural areas to urban areas as a result of climate shifts, not to do with sea level rise but to do with a lack of groundwater and rainfall pattern changes. Where that intersects with conflict is complicated. I think this whole idea of resource wars and water wars is still out there as something to be proven, but it’s definitely something worth thinking about.

In my own casework on the book I was really struck by, in the case of Syria, the role of water as a driver of the conflict and I wrote the case-study about a year ago but I’m quite encouraged to see some reporting in the media in the last month or so around the same issue. When I was talking to Syrians about the conflict many of them raised the question of water as one of the key triggers. Syria has lost about 50 per cent of its groundwater in the last decade and in that time every major city in Syria has experienced water rationing. By
the end of 2010 there was a major drought going on in south-eastern Syria which prompted a lot of rural population to move to cities that were already right on the edge of not having enough water for their population. I’d also point out that the Iraq War, among many negative effects, also generated about one and a half million Iraqi refugees who all moved to slum settlements outside of Syrian cities and there’s now a fairly thriving black market in water in parts of Syria. So, a lot of people have said to me, it wasn’t just graffiti on a wall about the Arab Spring, it was the fact that if you don’t have enough food you’ve got a couple of weeks to deal with that. If you don’t have enough water and you live in southern Syria you’re dead in a day. So people were on the streets protesting about that issue already and people were already riled up, because of essentially urban overstretch around the issue of water.

It’s very common across many of – so I then looked at that on many of the other cities that I looked at and you’ll see that there’s a strong gradient in accessibility to water from the centre of a city to the periphery, and often drops down to one or two per cent have access to water. The UN published a report about a month ago where they showed that six billion people on the planet have a cell phone, only 4.5 billion have access to a toilet or clean running water. That says something about people’s attitudes to cell phones, right, but also it says something about the problems of global water supply. China in addition is experiencing some very significant urbanization trends, population movement and problems with water largely associated with coal production. They use massive amounts of water in areas that are already water-stressed to wash the coal that they use for power.

So this whole cluster of climate change, human induced climate change, how that affects cities, energy flow, water, that’s an area that I think we’ve got to really think about holistically in terms of its intersection with conflict, because it isn’t just a conflict-free set of questions, this could be the driver of many of the conflicts we see in the future. I happen to think that we’re going to still see Al-Qaeda and al Shabaab and all these other groups out in the environment in the next 20 or 30 years, but if your city’s half under water and no-one has sanitation and you don’t have electricity, and a gang’s running your neighbourhood and the guy that you’re dealing with is a drug smuggler, the fact that there’s also terrorists out there is actually not your major question. It’s the fact that your city’s not coping.
Question 8:

I was thinking about the Israeli experiences and urban fighting most notably in Beirut and Gaza City, and my question would be are the Americans exchanging knowledge and information with the Israelis and, more importantly, given the fact that the Palestinian civilian casualties were extremely high then is the Israeli approach viewed from the Americans as an instance of how not to conduct urban counter-insurgency operations? Thank you.

Question 9:

It was more from the urban side. I’m interested to see where you think planners are getting this right and they’re working in concert with the military to try and get a greater sense of effectiveness over time?

David Kilcullen:

So, to the Israeli question the short answers are yes and yes. Okay, so I write about this a little bit in the book. The Israelis are a great example of taking rational thought about how to fight in a city to an irrational extreme. The Israeli military has a technique called infestation where they stay completely off the street and tunnel through civilians’ houses from house to house, explosively breaching wall to wall houses that have families inside them. Yes, it keeps you guys off the street and it reduces the risk of snipers, it also has some significant political effects and it destroys cities. And I quote at length the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman who talks about this issue as a really significant problem in the way that the Israelis have approached conflict.

The Americans, I would say, don’t have a unified view on urban conflict. There are different communities within the American military, just as there are here, who think about this differently but I think most people regard – and there is a very strong exchange of information – most people regard that approach as taking things too far. That said, we had terrible instances in Afghanistan where whole villages were destroyed from the air by air power because Americans didn’t want to walk the street and see that same kind of threat that the Israelis are experiencing. The British Army did some of the same stuff too, so I think we have to – I wouldn’t want to throw the first stone about that coming from a Western military.
To the issue of urban planning, I talk a little bit in the book about Baron [Georges-Eugène] Haussmann in Paris and I talk about London around the 2012 Olympics and a variety of other issues and, of course, military factors have been a key element in urban planning for some considerable time. There’s a whole anthropological theory which suggest that cities only really arose as a means of organizing for warfare, but Haussmann’s interesting because if you walk central Paris you’re actually walking around a landscape designed by Napoleon III’s chief of homeland security specifically to make it hard to overthrow the state. So the boulevards all happen to be one cavalry squadron wide, the squares are all exactly two cannon shot apart, so you can dominate the area with a limited number of troops. The boulevards go to places that used to be thickets of urban opposition to the regime but now you can get troops around quickly, the railway stations were placed to allow rapid dispersion of troops. Basically it’s a cityscape designed to preserve an authoritarian state against its population.

Washington is a little bit like that too because where the main squares are in Washington is where the artillery emplacements were during the Civil War, so slightly different. London too has aspects of that and, of course, you living in London live in the most heavily instrumented piece of urban terrain on the entire planet, 600,000 surveillance cameras just in central London and measures put in place for the 2012 Olympics that are still in place. One of the issues that I talk about in the book is how do we think about what the Olympic community knows about how to secure a piece of urban space temporarily without killing it like the military does, and is there anything we can learn from that on a more permanent basis about how cities should be organized, and I think where I come out at the end is that you don’t want more Baron Haussmann’s, right, but you do want some kind of intersection between public safety – is what I prefer to call it because it’s not necessarily the military or the police – and urban planning.

We did a lot of work in Africa for the World Bank over the last couple of years, mapping urban slums and working with mainly women’s groups actually that live in this environment to say let’s figure out with you where you’re most at risk in the urban environment and, of course, if you walk through a dimly lit street at night you don’t know if you’re going to get mugged but you know if it is going to happen it’ll probably happen over there. So through focus groups and surveys and a bunch of other data collection we were able to figure out the areas where women in particular, but communities generally, felt unsafe in a couple of these African cities. The interesting thing is when you back up to a big satellite image of the city those areas have a visual signature. Once
you know what you’re looking for because the community told you where they feel unsafe, you can see from space, size of houses, density of road construction, lack of lighting at night, there’s things you can recognise and once you can see the signature you can pick them off the map, so you don’t have to survey the whole of Liberia to figure out where people feel unsafe. The interesting thing about it is that you would think that the government would know what’s going on in its own capital city, almost certainly they don’t.

So, getting back to guerrilla warfare, one of the reasons why I think we’re looking at a future age of the urban guerrilla is because guerrillas always have done and still will go where the cover is. It used to be that the cover was in the jungles but now we have foliage-penetrating radar, we can see you under the jungle canopy. It used to be that the cover was in the mountains but now we have satellites and drones we can see you in the mountains. The cover now is in the city and there’s big areas in cities that are not controlled and not governed and not policed or have any government presence and that’s where a lot of this stuff is moving to, Nairobi being a case in point.

Theo Farrell:
Well, ladies and gentlemen, I think you’ve got from the talk that the book is absolutely full of new ideas, new ways of thinking about the future of conflict and in particular the impact of connectivity on future conflict, but also from the cases that Dave’s talked about, it’s just fascinating case-studies. It’s a darn good read actually, and so for those reasons I would highly recommend it. I think just before we go we should of course thank very much the folks who have been bringing mics to you, much appreciated, and finally of course just thank Dave Kilcullen himself for giving us this fantastic talk.

David Kilcullen:
Thank you for having me.