

To what extent is the 'battle of Sadr City' a case of Urbicide?

Written by James Whitcomb Riley

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JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, MAR 5 2011

The battle of Sadr City represents a watershed moment in the Iraq War. One of the fiercest and most intense episodes of fighting since the invasion was an offensive against the most densely populated and impoverished neighborhoods in Baghdad. It has been heralded as a success in the practical application of counter-insurgency (COIN) theory. While this event received little critical attention in the Western media, there has been a clarion call for its lessons to be applied elsewhere. However, viewed within the conceptual framework of Urbicide, which posits that cities have become the expressed target of military operations, the battle reveals the inherent objectives of COIN theory—the annihilation of place. Still, there is a need to broaden the definition of Urbicide in order to capture the nuances behind a comprehensive but insidious process meant to disappear the subaltern into neoliberal hegemony. A review of the military discourse on COIN theory, the literature on Urbicide, as well as primary- and secondary-source documentation suggests that the battle of Sadr City is, indeed, an egregious example of purposive violence against an urban area, urban dwellers, and thus urbanity itself. The empirical evidence provided by this case study points to an even larger process, which has the potential of becoming a global phenomenon to the detriment of impoverished neighborhoods throughout the global South.

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Introduction:

In April 2008, during what has become known as the 'battle of Sadr City,' the United States (US) military, shadowed by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), cordoned off Sadr City's southern districts of al-Jamilla and al-Thawra behind fifteen-foot concrete walls. The battle was a watershed moment in the Iraq War. One of the fiercest and most intense episodes of fighting since the invasion was an offensive against the most densely populated and impoverished neighborhoods in Baghdad. Over 800 tank rounds were fired (more than at any other time since the invasion), and for the first time ever, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were deployed in military operations in urban terrain (MOUT) battlespace. The ostensible objective of this military operation was to isolate and contain threats posed by the Jaysh Al-Mahdi militia (JAM).

Urbicide successfully explains how and why the 'militarization of urban peripheries,'[5] as in the case of the battle of Sadr City, occurs. As distinct from notions of urban warfare (with collateral damage being a mere by-product of conflict in urban settings), Urbicide offers urban researchers a conceptual framework within which to view purposive violence *against* urban areas, urban dwellers, and urbanity itself. However, there is a need to provide more empirical evidence, as well as a need to incorporate concepts from related fields, in order to further develop, clarify, and thereby contribute to the conceptualizations of Urbicide. This paper aims to contribute to the field of urbanization and development by answering the research question: To what extent is 'the battle of Sadr City' a case of Urbicide?

In contrast to Urbicide, counter-insurgency (COIN) theory explains events such as the battle of Sadr City in very different terms. In the post-11 September era, COIN theory has established its place in military doctrine. COIN theory is an attempt to address challenges to the state by insurgent groups. The military discourse on COIN theory emphasizes the urban dimensions and spatial relationships within a given society that support resistance to the state, and thus undermine sovereignty. In particular, alarmist visions of a dystopian urban age in which a majority of the world's population lives in teeming slums throughout the global South have become fetishized images in the 'war on terror.' COIN theory focuses on eliminating such threats, which are also viewed as potential sources of terrorism. In doing so, COIN theory justifies the militarization of urban peripheries. In practice, this has resulted in the destruction of homes, neighborhoods, and public space. Nevertheless, what is Urbicide to one urban researcher may be to another the successful practical application of COIN theory.

The inconsistencies between COIN theory and Urbicide make for a stark theoretical debate. A thorough comparison of COIN theory versus Urbicide will be made in the following pages, in order to critically analyze the discourse and practical application of COIN theory, as well as to illuminate Urbicide as an alternative conceptual framework within which the militarization of urban peripheries can be better understood. The battle of Sadr city serves as a case study; and more specifically, an examination of the battle illuminates the robustness of Urbicide as a conceptual framework, while highlighting the pitfalls of COIN theory as an applied military doctrine. Therefore, in analyzing cities as strategic geopolitical sites, and how the process of the militarization of urban peripheries as a means of disappearing the subaltern into neoliberal hegemony occurs first and foremost on a local level, it is imperative to critically examine the battle of Sadr City through the conceptual framework of Urbicide.

Furthermore, as will be discussed, the subaltern groups of Sadr City, and their survival strategies, have become targets in the Pentagon's scope. The term 'subaltern' refers to those persons, groups, or regions outside hegemonic

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power structures that share a perspective of the colonized—as opposed to that offered by the Western discourse. The main objective of the battle of Sadr City was to annihilate place, and in doing so the spaces that the subaltern occupy. The US military and the Iraqi state perceive the subaltern, as well as the urban peripheries in which they survive, as threats to US security and interests and Iraqi state sovereignty, respectively. Thus, an appreciation of the role of the subaltern is necessary in order to fully answer the research question above.

This analysis begins with an appraisal of the theoretical debate between COIN theory and Urbicide—briefly highlighting the tenets of each. Second, it will examine how and why the militarization of urban peripheries occurs. Third, it will also examine the construction of walls, thereby incorporating their meaning into Urbicide. Subsequently, in a similar way, the paper will also incorporate a study of the subaltern in the Middle East. This will be followed by a very brief look at the pretexts for the invasion in March 2003, as well as the implications this has had, in terms of the massive privatization of Iraq's dismal public sector. In the last section of the main body, the paper will present a case study of the battle of Sadr City as an example of Urbicide, and the inherent objectives of COIN theory. In closing, it will offer a final evaluation of this dissertation's main points, implications, methodological limitations, as well as identify directions for future research.

The methodology for this paper is qualitative, and is based on a review of secondary sources, such as newspapers, reports from various think tanks, case studies, academic journals, edited books, books, as well as primary-source, de-classified documents from official government sources. The limits to the study are the lack of on-the-ground ethnographic data, Iraqi census data, and quantitative data related to the estimated costs of property damage caused by the battle of Sadr City. In addition, the battle of Sadr City occurred approximately one year ago, and thus it may be too soon to conclusively document the long-term effects of the conflict and reconstruction efforts.

Theoretical Debate: (COIN Theory versus Urbicide)

COIN Theory

In analyzing the battle of Sadr City, and as a measure of comparison, it is useful to review COIN theory, both conceptually and in its practical application.

The rise of Islamic non-state actors, and the advent of the war on terror, has been cited as cause for re-thinking military affairs, especially the 'increasing disorderliness of the battlefield.'^[6] According to some sources, the state has 'lost its monopoly on war,' and the militarization of urban peripheries is viewed as a means by which to re-establish state sovereignty.^[7] However, the emphasis on geographically enlarging the state's control as a means of eliminating threats, is not necessarily novel. For example, during the Vietnam War, it was argued that the 'battle for hearts and minds' was essentially about winning a war of population control.^[8] It was suggested that the US military institute 'forced-draft urbanization and modernization' of targeted populations, and thereby 'divide the country into military zones of control.'^[9] This is very similar to what COIN theory currently prescribes: spatial domination as a means of population control.

In its contemporary incarnations, COIN theory is meant to address the 'evolving threats' posed by insurgent's 'sanctuary,' 'safe havens,' and 'ungoverned areas,'^[10] which 'ensures the survivability of the insurgent's ideology and capabilities.'^[11] According to the literature, such areas are described as complex systems of 'nodes and links' that form relationships between 'political, social, economic, military, and infrastructure subsystems.'^[12] The objective of military planners is to identify and 'modify their initial boundaries and reframe the system.'^[13] This involves determining 'which nodes and links provide protection from counterinsurgent action.'^[14]

A recently declassified report published by the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy states:

Many cities, even in Western liberal democracies, have entire housing projects, neighborhoods, or slums that are known to be... "no go" areas for police; many *favelas*, urban slums, shanty towns, refugee camps, and squatters' villages... can be easy targets for illicit actors seeking to blend in and hide out within established social networks. And there is growing concern about international terrorists living anonymously among urbanites who do not know their

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neighbors.[15]

Thus, the report offers a framework to guide military planners and policymakers in mapping these so-called 'pockets of social discontent'—both conceptually and physically.[16] To this end, the report suggests using 'geo-referenced' (or location-specific) 'micro-data' on individuals and households, as well as the 'geographical, political, civil, and resource factors that make safe havens possible.'[17]

A review of the Army's Field Manual on COIN illuminates how COIN theory, in its practical application, intends to achieve spatial domination. The emphasis on spatial analysis is made clear in such statements as, 'Focus on the environment, not the enemy.'[18] The physical attributes of urban peripheries such as 'sewers, rooftops, roads, and sidewalks' are viewed as 'entry points,' which can be exploited by insurgents.[19] The manual also emphasizes 'threats' posed by social networks, and suggests military planners identify 'any zones of separation,' especially along lines that reflect identity, such as religion, race, or ethnicity.[20] In addition, the manual suggests regulating the informal sectors of the economy, crudely defined as 'smuggling' and 'black market activities.' Thus, 'counterinsurgents must monitor the local informal economy and evaluate the role played by various groups and individuals within it.'[21] This is instituted through 'population control measures,' which include 'determining who lives in an area and what they do,' as well as establishing 'checkpoints along major routes to monitor and enforce compliance.'[22]

Furthermore, as a matter of policy, 'ungoverned areas' are targeted in which 'foreign countries that are unfriendly to US interests influence one or more population groups.' Accordingly, 'addressing them will take precedence over other imperatives there'—such as post-conflict reconstruction and development.[23] This highlights why cities as strategic geopolitical sites are increasingly targeted. For example, Sadr City is viewed as an ungoverned area where Iranian influence is strong, and therefore, has been prioritized as a target. More specifically, as will be discussed, the subaltern's homes, neighborhoods, and survival strategies are the subjects of such spatial analysis, and thus are also the intended targets. The objective is not simply to transform the physical and political geographies of Sadr City, but to disappear the subaltern into neoliberal hegemony.

COIN theory views urban peripheries as threats to US security and interests, as well as potential sources of terrorism; and thereby justifies military operations against urban peripheries. In particular, the emphasis on social networks and informality, as a means of promoting neoliberalism by military means, has far-reaching implications for the subaltern. The use of spatial analysis to achieve spatial domination, resulting in the annihilation of place, has geopolitical implications. Therefore, the concepts and prescriptions of COIN theory are what have made the Army's Field Manual, essentially, the textbook for neo-imperial colonization.

Urbicide

Urbicide offers a conceptual framework within which to view the increased militarization of urban peripheries, and in particular, the battle of Sadr City. Urbicide also helps explain how COIN theory has justified 'restructuring the industrial ecologies, urban formations, and spatial practices which marshal the energy, material, and people' in order to impose spatial domination and regulate 'the conduct of everyday life.'[24]

According to the literature on Urbicide, the US military's practical application of COIN theory is actually 'normalizing the spectre of terrorism, of acculturating the public to the prospect of an endless war against it, and of manifesting physically society's acceptance of that war into its very built fabric.'[25] In addition, COIN theory's characterization of urban peripheries as sanctuary, safe haven, and ungoverned areas effectively makes 'all social space a potential zone of war, and every place the site of potential invasion, destruction, and death.'[26] In doing so, COIN theory constructs a 'neo-colonial context of military strategies determined to destroy built environments in order to destroy networks of resistance...and constructs instead an environment that maximizes the capacity of occupying forces to survey, surround, and control occupied lands and populations.'[27] COIN theory may ostensibly aim at eliminating perceived threats, but in doing so perpetrates Urbicide.

Nonetheless, the definition of Urbicide is not exactly clear-cut. In general, Urbicide refers to 'purposive violence

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where urbanity is the strategic object of violence,' which is 'shaped by the political economies of imperialism and the geographical dynamics of colonization.' [28] In other words, as Kanishka Goonewardena states, Urbicide analyzes

...politically organized, territorial forms of socio-spatial domination and exploitation even in the absence of formal colonial empires, thereby cutting across the distinction between "geo-political" and "geo-economic" forms of imperial geography. [29]

Thus, Urbicide is a conceptual framework within which to view the 'imperial strategies of counter-insurgency and spatial control' within urban peripheries. [30]

Furthermore, and for the purposes of this analysis, Urbicide also refers to an attack on the survival strategies of the subaltern. These populations have become the 'targets' of US military operations, as well as the 'bureaucratic machineries of urban planning and nation-state regimes.' [31] The 'secured areas' created by the practical application of COIN theory 'imprison as much as protect' and have precluded the 'possibility of imagining the coexistence of different sectarian worlds.' [32] For example, the battle of Sadr City has resulted in the neighborhoods of al-Jamilla and al-Thawra becoming 'suddenly foreign' as the US military, with the consent of the Iraqi state, have actually secured areas not for, but *from* the subaltern. This process will be further discussed.

Sadr City.

Militarization of Urban Peripheries

Cities throughout the global South have become viewed as concentrations of poverty, discontent, and terrorism. [33] This view dates back to the Cold War era when the US military-industrial complex refocused its sights on so-called 'urban problems.' [34] 'A shared vision of the escalating "urban crisis" as a national security crisis transformed urban problems into strategic challenges to be met through techniques and technologies of command, control,

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communication, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.'[35] This meant that inner-city crime and poverty were viewed not as social issues, but as threats. Since then, especially in the post-11 September era, there has been an increasing deployment of military force within urban peripheries as a means of isolating, containing, and thus eliminating these so-called threats. [36]

In the post-11 September era, urban peripheries must 'be interpreted as profoundly geopolitical.'[37] Jo Beall suggests that urban peripheries have become viewed as 'nodes for the articulation of international terror networks' that operate 'simultaneously at both the global and the local levels.'[38] Taken in this context, military expansion into urban peripheries might be viewed simply as a necessary security measure. However, the increased deployment of military force is tantamount to what could be referred to as neo-imperial colonization, in as much as attempts 'to destroy certain urban spaces, or to disperse particular urban populations,' have always been 'a recognisable feature of empire, and one that has persisted.'[39]

In slums, shantytowns, and squatter settlements throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, the militarization of urban peripheries has had far-reaching implications for the subaltern.[40] The spaces occupied by the subaltern, from Oaxaca to Kolkata, have become viewed with heightened hostility, which is directly linked to 'struggles for survival... played out in physical spaces and built environments that are spatial...expressions of social relations and contending realities.'[41] Thus, in an attempt to address challenges to state sovereignty posed by the subaltern, the increased deployment of military force within urban peripheries is a means to disappear the subaltern into neoliberal hegemony. According to David Harvey, 'The state...must set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure...by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets.'[42] However, state repression alone is no longer viewed as a viable strategy; increasing international attention to repressive tactics, and repeated interventions, have made such strategies much more costly—financially and in terms of state legitimacy. Thus, a much more comprehensive but insidious process is occurring: the militarization of urban peripheries.

The battle over the 'hearts and minds' of the subaltern is largely guided by COIN theory's obsession with eliminating threats, or what it views to be potential sources of terrorism. But in doing so, the state targets 'not only the built environment and the urban political economy, but also cities as social institutions and the very fact of urbanism itself.'[43] This often results in state violence against the very survival strategies of the subaltern.[44]

In addition, the militarization of urban peripheries is largely possible because of the wedding of development programs with military operations. The assumption is that 'insurgents can be reduced through the expansion of market logic,' but instead the 'securitization of development' has neglected the needs of the most vulnerable poor in urban peripheries.[45] As Raul Zibechi states:

Control mechanisms—whether dressed in military garb, or as NGOs for development, or promoting market economy and electoral democracy—are interlaced and, in extreme cases like the suburbs of Baghdad, the slums of Rio de Janeiro, or shanty towns of Port-au-Prince, they are subordinated to military planning.[46]

Just as development was promoted as a means to combat the spread of communism during the Cold War, in the post-11 September context, development has been subordinated to security objectives. However, the so-called security dimensions of development are based on assumptions that are problematic: 'In the first place, there is no obvious link between poverty and terrorism...Secondly, it would be impossible to attribute a reduction or increase in terrorist risk to a particular development intervention.' Third, 'that we can somehow "develop" our way out of our way out of terrorism without really engaging with the political agendas and grievances of those who perpetuate it' [47] is dangerously naive.

For example, the increased 'coordination' between the US military and US Agency for International Development (USAID) has been described as 'providing security through development and reconstruction.' [48] According to Colonel Thomas Baltazar, the role of USAID's 'embedded reconstruction teams' in post-conflict reconstruction is essentially about 'denying terrorists sanctuary.'[49] To this end, the US military and USAID have agreed on 'a method of operation to stabilize local political and economic situations... in strategically targeted neighborhoods.'[50]

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However, this has not resulted in a reduction of poverty, but in an overemphasis on infrastructure that serves military purposes, 'rather than social and economic regeneration.'^[51] Ultimately, the militarization of urban peripheries is a process (destruction by military means, and reconstruction through privatization), which materializes in the construction of concrete walls, checkpoints, and roadblocks—and destroys the physical and social fabric upon which long-term development is based.^[52]

This militarization of urban peripheries, and thus the securitization of development, have been justified under the auspices of COIN theory, but have resulted in Urbicide. By focusing on constructing environments to achieve spatial domination, development has, essentially, been precluded.^[53]

Construction of Walls

The militarization of urban peripheries has been characterized by the construction of walls—which further entrench political marginalization, institutionalize economic polarization, and thus increase inter-communal distrust.^[54] In addition, the construction of 'exclusionary spaces' actually increases fear, and the concrete walls that cordon off al-Jamilla and al-Thawra in Sadr City have come to embody fear.^[55]

The construction of walls to cordon off neighborhoods amounts to a 'ghetto policy.'^[56] In his analysis of the 'urban dimension of national conflict,' Fred Boal suggests that walls have long served as a means of isolating and containing so-called threats.^[57] Although the creation of 'ghettoized enclaves' through the construction of walls has been justified by the immediate reduction in violence, this does not entirely explain what other purposes these walls serve. Peter Marcuse illuminates their other meanings:

[Walls] have come to play an ambiguous and increasingly divisive role. They have come to reflect, and to reinforce, hierarchies of wealth and power, divisions among people, among races, ethnic groups, and religions; hostilities, tensions, and fears. Their use has become aggressive as much as defensive; they have imposed the will of the powerful on the powerless as much as they have protected the powerless from superior force. They have isolated more than they have included.^[58]

Marcuse elucidates how walls are not always 'necessary' security measures, but actually represent asymmetric power relations—between those who stand to benefit from the construction of exclusionary spaces, and those who are unable to resist their construction. Whether or not walls are viewed as defensive or offensive largely depends upon whom they are imposed, as well as who is imposing them. Walls have many purposes: military, political, economic, and even psychological.^[59]

Walls also physically restrict freedom of movement, contributing to what Stephen Graham refers to as a 'growing immobility,' but more importantly, they become walls 'for the temporary warehousing of the unwanted...built for the control and re-education of those forced to live behind them.'^[60] As Eyal Weizman writes:

By designating and constraining habitats, by physically marking out the limit of different legal jurisdictions, these barriers function mainly as administrative apparatuses of population control. More than merely a fortification system, they became bureaucratic-logistical devices for the creation and maintenance of a demographic separation.

This results in an 'endless search for the forms and mechanisms of "perfect" separation,' and in line with the precepts of Urbicide, neo-imperial colonization of the subaltern.^[61]

Yet, 'international law tends to tolerate acts defined according to the logic of security.' The construction of exclusionary spaces, in exchange for a modicum of security, becomes accepted as perfectly logical.^[62] The practical application of COIN theory is largely accepted without opposition in the West, due to COIN theory's ability to depoliticize the construction of walls to cordon off neighborhoods. But, viewed within Urbicide, the construction of walls actually confers power upon specific agencies, largely the political elite, to 'impose their definition of space and how it is to be used.'^[63]

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Subaltern Groups of Sadr City

Urbicide posits that 'urban space is increasingly viewed by those wielding state power as terrain on which militarized operations are necessary to contain crowd violence.' [64] Viewed within Urbicide, the 'periodic imposition of military control over sections and zones,' is meant to deny the 'ability of localities to provide the public space in which citizens can mobilize to express political voice.' [65] In analyzing the battle of Sadr City it is important to 'consider the socio-spatial dimensions of conflict, such as...the use of various kinds of public space by different social groups.' [66]

Occupation of Space

To further explicate how the battle of Sadr City fits into the conceptual framework of Urbicide, it is useful to incorporate Asef Bayat's study of the 'particular logic and dynamics' of 'poor people's movements' in the Middle East. [67] For example, Bayat refers to the survival strategies of the subaltern as a 'salient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives.' [68] This is not an articulated social movement, per se; they do not seek to replace the state, nor undermine state sovereignty, but aim at 'attaining autonomy.' [69] According to Bayat, these 'structurally atomized individuals' do not necessarily view their interests as being inherently intertwined. [70] However, in pursuing their ordinary everyday lives, the subaltern has the potential to become a force to be reckoned with. 'As these seemingly desperate individuals and families pursue similar paths, their sheer cumulative numbers transform them into a potential social force.' [71]

Bayat suggests that physical space allows spontaneous social mobilizations to occur. For example, squatters and informal street vendors may 'act collectively because common space makes it possible to recognize their common interests and identity.' [72] However, 'this unplanned, unstructured, and instantaneous possibility of group action renders the street a highly volatile locus of conflict and thus of politics.' [73] Indeed, in Sadr City, protests that number in the tens of thousands may occur at a moment's notice. Thus, the main objective of the US military in the battle of Sadr City was to destroy the physical and political space that the streets offer the subaltern, [74] that is, to annihilate place. Bayat's analysis of street politics is useful in further defining the conceptualization of Urbicide, and understanding why the subaltern of Sadr City are viewed as a threat by the US military and the Iraqi state.

In addition, the subaltern mainly occupy the informal sector of the economy, which is located outside state regulation. However, their informality creates 'a big crack in the domination of the modern state,' and thus challenges neoliberal hegemony. [75] They eke out livings by navigating 'no go areas,' over which the state lacks control, and in other words, 'knowledge of the geography has been a matter of life and death, yet it is also a way of living a normal life.' [76] Amidst conflict, maintaining autonomy, informality, and reciprocal social networks is a matter of survival. [77] By the same token, COIN theory views these survival strategies as potential resources for insurgents, or terrorists. Urbicide, however, views this as a threat to the subaltern because the construction of walls destroys the social fabric by breaking down 'the instantaneous communication among atomized individuals, which is established by the tacit recognition of their common identity, and is mediated through space.' [78] The survival strategies of the subaltern depend upon free movement within urban peripheries. Thus, population control and forced regulation through spatial domination is an attack on the subaltern.

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(Post)conflict (Re)construction—Sadr City.
Source: Wissam Al-Okaili/AFP/Getty Images

Case Study: The Battle of Sadr City

Background: The Process of Destruction and Reconstruction in Iraq

Operation Desert Storm in 1991 destroyed most of Iraq's civilian infrastructure. The US and British invasion in 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom, further deteriorated living conditions in urban peripheries such as Sadr City. Viewed within Urbicide, the 'shock and awe' campaign was largely about laying the groundwork for, according to David Harvey, 'accumulation by dispossession' through the privatization of Iraq's public sector.[79]

The RAND Corporation reported that 'aside from planning to protect the oil industry and avoid targeting utility installations [which were to be privatized], little effort was spent planning to restart and rehabilitate Iraqi infrastructure.'[80] Instead, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) planned on instituting neoliberal 'shock therapy' on Iraq's dismal public sector in what became 'the largest state liquidation sale of economic enterprises since the collapse of the USSR.'[81] In fact, prior to the invasion in 2003, the largest no-bid, sole-source contracts (contracts that were not subject to open competition) were divvied up between two private construction firms; Kellogg, Brown, and Root (a subsidiary of Halliburton) and Bechtel were responsible for assessing Iraq's infrastructural investment needs.[82]

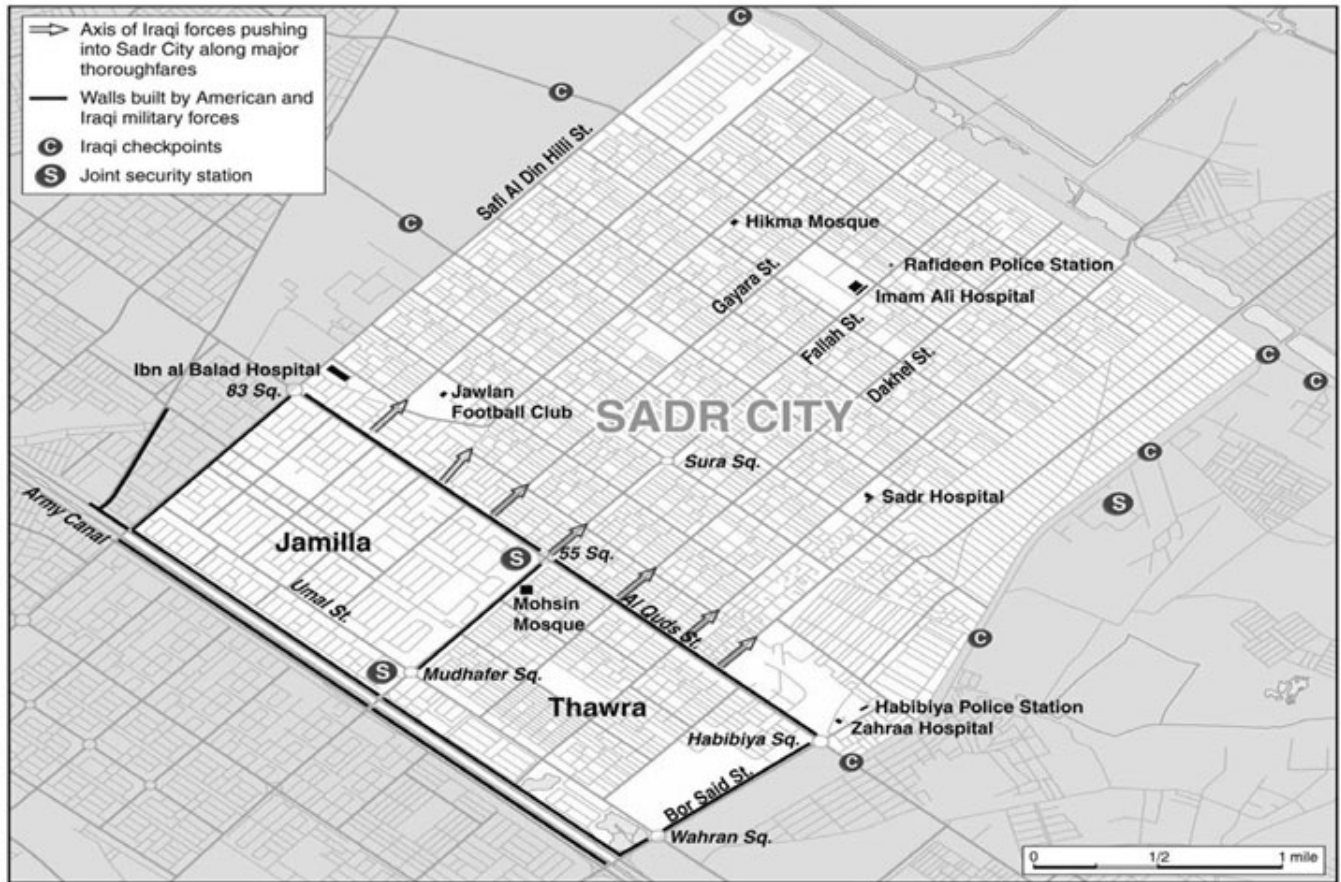
In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the only actual reconstruction that took place was funded by the US military's Commander's Emergency Response Funds (CERF).[83] Meanwhile, USAID was mainly responsible for appointing private contractors to support 'the reconstruction of Iraq according to the neoliberal model.'[84] In essence, post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq was about privatization by military means.

The militarization of urban peripheries is indeed purposive violence, but violence that involves both destruction and reconstruction of the built environment.[85] Stephen Graham suggests that 'the destruction and violence wrought by terror and war often mimic, and accentuate, the wider processes of destruction and creation forged through acts of planning, modernization, civil reconstruction...speculation, urban investment (and divestment).'

[86] In fact, he posits that a continuum exists in which 'acts of building and physical restructuring,' and 'acts of all-out organized war and place annihilation' converge, and thus military operations and urban planning become a unified means for 'modernization' or 'capital accumulation and speculation.'[87] In addition, neoliberal ideology in its most aggressive form necessitates state intervention through military means:[88] COIN theory supports this type of 'regeneration' or 'revitalization' of poorer neighborhoods, which, in essence, amounts to the annihilation of place for the subaltern.[89]

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Operation Peace

Source: Institute for the Study of War

COIN theory and Urbicide in Context

The battle of Sadr City was reportedly instigated by the JAM, after a series of rockets landed in the 'Green Zone' in central Baghdad in April 2008.[90] However, the US military has admitted that it had been planning to mount an attack on Sadr City for over a year, but its plans were complicated by the Prime Minister's political calculations.[91] Approximately a year earlier, US military planners began the 'isolation and targeting phase' in preparation for future attacks. This involved encircling and tightening a cordon around Sadr City by constructing 'Joint Security Stations' along its edges.[92] The most southern section of the wall was constructed during this time, and many buildings along Al-Quds Street (the main boulevard through Sadr City) were destroyed in the process.[93] These actions might be defended as necessary security measures in line with COIN theory, but in reality they represent a process: the militarization of urban peripheries, and thus Urbicide.

The US military had long viewed the JAM as a threat to US interests in Iraq, because the leader of the movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, fervently denounced the US occupation. A more recent report published by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, characterized the JAM as 'little more than street thugs,' extorting local businesses to support themselves[94] However, the JAM filled a power vacuum created by the CPA's policies of 'de-Baathification' and wholesale privatization. As late as 2006, the JAM provided security and essential services to the subaltern in Sadr City.[95] Nonetheless, the US military succeeded in conflating the threats that the JAM posed to its interests with Sadr City itself, and therefore legitimized the imaging of Sadr City as a potential battlespace—and target of Urbicide. According to US Commanding General Ray Odierno, the objective of the battle was to eliminate 'safe havens,'[96] and, of course, this justifies the attendant destruction of homes, neighborhoods, and public space occupied by the

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subaltern.

Sadr City was described in one report as a 'sprawling slum' that 'presents one of the biggest security challenges for US forces in Baghdad.' [97] According to the literature on Urbicide, in the post-11 September era, 'the Arab city' has become 'a distinctive battlespace amongst the US military.' [98] In his analysis, Stephen Graham explains that such urban peripheries are imaged as backward, alien, or 'morally toxic,' and therefore their 'buildings, assets, institutions, industries, and infrastructures' have become the 'explicit target for a wide range of deliberate, orchestrated attacks.' [99] But if Sadr City was 'impenetrable' or 'ungovernable,' it is largely because COIN theory had constructed it to be so. Neighborhoods become bastions for terrorists, not their ordinary, everyday occupants. In reference to a similar case, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, Adam Ramadan writes:

No longer a city of homes, an economic centre, a place vested with human interests and memories and emotions, it had become a maze of narrow streets and corridors, a menacing threat...filled with terrorists, a threat that had to be neutralized at all costs. Buildings were no longer homes, but defenses for terrorists, streets were passageways for terrorists, sewer escape routes for terrorists, all had to be bombed, removed, erased, destroyed... [100]

The battle of Sadr City raged for eight weeks, ending in a ceasefire negotiation between the US military and the JAM. During the battle, Colonel John Hort, the commanding officer of the operation, deployed engineers from the 3rd Brigade Heavy Combat Team 4th Infantry Division, sniper teams, and special-ops units; Bradley and Abrams tanks, Apache helicopters, F-18 fighter jets, and Drone and Predator UAVs. This mass of fire was concentrated on the immediate mission, erecting a 4,000 meters-long concrete wall that would bisect Sadr City in entirety, and isolate and contain the southern districts of al-Jamilla and al-Thawara. As explained by Urbicide, the isolation and containment of these districts, which are the main markets in Baghdad, has been translated into the annihilation of place for the subaltern of Sadr City. Nonetheless, the battle of Sadr City has been heralded as a success that should be viewed as a model to be implemented in urban peripheries elsewhere. [101]

According to US news report, the US military's 'whiz-bang' technology cut through the fog of war and 'mapped' the entire area of operation with so-called 'persistent surveillance,' [102] a tactic used to impose spatial domination. As evidenced here, even the language that reported the battle was meant to depoliticize the military operation and distract from the fact that the physical and social fabric of Sadr City was being methodically and systematically destroyed. Thus, the destruction was justified as a military tactic and 'necessary' security measure.

The US military reported that 'approximately 800' of their intended targets (the JAM and the 'Special Groups,' described as criminals backed by Iran) were killed or severely wounded. [103] However, according to the same report, 'Civilians were the primary victims of the violence, as the exchanges of fire killed or wounded many and caused extensive property damage.' [104] It was also reported that 'doctors received 300 bodies and 1400 wounded over the last two months of fighting, with another 300 dead received by their colleagues at the Sadr Hospital.' [105]

In the wreckage of the battle of Sadr City, living conditions dramatically worsened. [106] Patrick Youseff, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross sub-delegation in Baghdad, reported that 'the burning of Jamilla wholesale market (one of the largest in Sadr City) had severely affected food and vegetable prices, which have doubled or tripled in some cases.' In the same report, Awad Khalf Hadi, a spokesperson of the al-Zahra NGO in Sadr City, said 'the gun battles and air strikes...prevented people from carrying on their daily lives...garbage piled up in the streets, sewage channels clogged, and drinking water [was] contaminated with sewage.' [107]

In contrast to the humanitarian reports, the Multi-National Corps-Iraq Public Affairs Office reported that there was 'no humanitarian crisis in Sadr City.' [108] According to the US military, residents of Sadr City were receiving 'humanitarian aid from their local government' which operates out of the 'recently opened Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC) and Iraqi Assistance Center at Joint Security Station Thawra 1.' [109] At the CMOC, local government officials 'receive guidance' in how 'to plan and carry out operations to better infrastructure and essential services.' [110] This is an example of the securitization of development, or the fusing of military operations with reconstruction efforts, which actually serves as a control mechanism, as these quasi-military outposts peddle infrastructure and essential service provisioning as a means to placate the subaltern.

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The US military also reportedly promised to 'refurbish and revitalize the Jamilla Market' after its destruction during the battle. Col. Hort has said that the market was a major source of funding for the JAM, and that cordoning off these neighborhoods has resulted in 'a free market, controlled by owners, the businessmen, as well as those that lease stalls in the area.' [111] By his own admission, Col. Hort is convinced that his main mission to 'support security, essential services, and governance' as a mean of creating 'safe neighborhoods' was accomplished. [112] However, close to no data has been collected, or at least released to the public, on how this has, in fact, affected the everyday life of the subaltern. Spatial domination and forced regulation of all the activity in the informal sector of the economy, as proposed by the Army's Field Manual on COIN, is a means of disappearing the subaltern into neoliberal hegemony, or into the rubric of market logic. As David Harvey explains:

The process of neoliberalization has, however, entailed much "creative destruction," not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers (even challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare-provisions...ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart...it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.

This helps explain the Urbicidal intentions behind the practical application of COIN theory, especially in the case of Sadr City.

The destruction and reconstruction of Iraq, or more specifically, the construction of concrete walls, checkpoints, and roadblocks is all part of the process of the militarization of urban peripheries; and is meant to achieve spatial domination, to regulate economic activities, to promote a free market—and essentially, to annihilate place at the expense of the subaltern. The battle of Sadr City was an attack on the physical and social fabric of the neighborhoods of al-Jamilla and al-Thawra, as well as the survival strategies of the subaltern. 'Urban war and Western notions of humanitarian war are irreconcilable, regardless of the technology used or the political rationale offered.' [113]

The US military sought to put an 'Iraqi face' on the operation that followed the battle, naming it 'Operation Peace.' [114] The ISF 'pushed down' into Sadr City after the US military temporarily removed slabs of the concrete walls, while guarding the opening with tanks and air ships. [115] According to one report, the ISF re-entered the 'sprawling district before dawn, with troops taking up positions on street corners and deploying on rooftops...down streets with burned out shops and buildings pockmarked with gunfire.' [116] This is important to note because, according to Urbicide, the efficient 're-entry' into militarized urban peripheries (a key component of COIN theory), is a means by which the state maintains spatial domination, controls populations, reasserts its sovereignty, and thus annihilates place.

Conclusions:

The battle of Sadr City, during which the practical application of COIN theory was tried and tested, is indeed a case of Urbicide. The US military attempted to achieve spatial domination through the militarization of urban peripheries—and thereby reconfiguring the physical and political geographies in such a way as to enlarge the domain of the state. The securitization of development, under the guise of post-conflict reconstruction, has contributed to a process that amounts to population control and the expansion of market logic by military means. However, post-conflict reconstruction should be about 'redressing the inequities and injustices of the past, while avoiding creating new inequalities and exclusions.' [117] Sultan Barakat states:

It is important to recognise that legitimacy cannot be based solely on reestablishing security and authority, but should be earned through advocating reconstruction policies that are inclusive and accountable... This means starting to involve Iraqis from the community level upwards in decision making. [118]

The analysis above has aimed at further clarifying and broadening the definitions of Urbicide by incorporating relevant studies and metaphors into the conceptual framework, as well as contributing the case study of Sadr City as an example of a potential global phenomenon.

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Furthermore, the subaltern are increasingly becoming both the subject of COIN theory's spatial analysis, and targets in subsequent military operations, which further traps this desperate population in between the proverbial rock and hard place—the vicious cycle of insurgency and counterinsurgency. As marginalized populations concentrate themselves in urban peripheries to harness their social networks as a resource, their informality becomes viewed with downright hostility from the state, or in the case of Sadr City, the US military.

The practical application of COIN theory is better understood as Urbicide: the neo-imperial colonization of urban peripheries meant to annihilate place; and through the forceful gentrification of these locales, the subaltern that occupy those spaces. The complete disappearance of the subaltern into the neoliberal hegemony, isn't inevitable or even probable, but that has not stopped the US military from attempting to regulate the comings and goings of the subaltern as a means of enforcing population control measures. The US military, USAID, and the private contractors who have taken part in the process of destruction and reconstruction are part of an apparatus that represents the failure of the state to facilitate a 'shared vision of reconstruction,'[119] thereby abandoning Sadr City to the fate of a marginalized, ghettoized enclave.

To be sure, the practical application of COIN theory (post-'surge') has had concrete effects in Iraq that could be cited as evidence of improvements in terms of security, development, and political stability. Iraq has experienced overall decreased levels of violence, increased levels of perceived 'satisfaction' with essential services, and its GDP has steadily increased—with a change in the growth rate from 13.6 to 60.9 percent.[120] These counterfactual variables appear to reflect positively on COIN theory, as the lynchpin in the so-called Middle East project. However, the data also reveals the darker side of COIN theory's promises. For example, the current levels of violence are actually very close to previous levels of violence in the immediate aftermath of the invasion in 2003.[121] In terms of sectarian violence, Shiite communities have actually experienced an increased level of intra-communal violence—attacks have gone from a total of 566 in 2008, to 604 in the first six months of 2009.[122] Furthermore, the number of internally displaced persons has continued to increase since the invasion—from 400,000 in 2003 to 2,770, 000 in 2008.[123] Essential services provision, in terms of access, has not even returned to pre-invasion levels.[124] Furthermore, the unemployment rate is still extremely high, ranging between 25-40 percent.[125] While tertiary school attendance has increased from 1.1 million in 2002, to approximately 1.5 million in 2007, gender disparities have remained, and there has actually been a decrease in the percentage of girls attending classes.[126] Rather than promote, COIN theory has, in fact, precluded long-term development, intentionally destroying the physical and social fabric upon which development depends. In fact, these indicators beg further research, in particular, on the everyday lives of the subaltern, and how they have survived, despite, rather than because of, post-conflict reconstruction.

As Henri Lefebvre writes, 'Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial.*'[127] Most urban researchers can appreciate this statement. However, attention must be drawn to an entire military doctrine that has been developed to encapsulate social relations within time and space, and then methodically and systematically destroy them, in order to reconstruct them—towards Urbicidal ends. The argument has been made that 'planners advocating secure cities risk contributing to the neoconservative war machine that has...only served to fuel resentment throughout the Middle East.'[128] This is what happened in Sadr City. The battle of Sadr City was inherently geopolitical, and this case has the potential of evolving into a global phenomenon—as the conflicts in Lebanon, Gaza, and West Bank attest to.

This paper did not intend to contribute to the fetishization of so-called slums. Dr. Gareth Jones, in a paper entitled 'Baudelaire's Ghost: The Slum in an Urban Age,' promotes the need for urban researchers to resist becoming part of a 'genre that represents slums as spectacle.' He emphasizes the need to examine the 'myriad ways in which people organise daily lives.' While acknowledging the allure of the 'spectacular dimensions' of slums as '*the* locale through which to express contemporary concerns for humanity,' he reminds us that 'an imaginative engagement is pressing if we are to both understand everyday life and turn away from the slum as a space of exception, of difference, and threat.'

Therefore, much more research is necessary. While the subaltern are the subject of COIN theory's spatial analysis, their lives, property, and livelihoods are largely unaccounted for in these battles. The fact that the subaltern do not have a voice in the Western military discourse is, of course, what defines their subalternity. By the same token, it is

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imperative to elucidate the linkages between the global and the local levels of analysis as a means of understanding how the international political economy affects their ordinary, everyday lives. The reorganization of wealth on a global level, and the reconfiguration of power on a national level, are largely based on the restructuring of socio-political and spatial relationships on the local level. Thus, urban peripheries have increasingly become understood as strategic geopolitical sites, which demands that urban researchers take a more nuanced view, while keeping the bigger picture in mind.

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[1] The photo was taken from an Apache helicopter by a US soldier during a mission to Sadr City.

[2] The photo taken on the same mission. The photo shows streets lined with concrete walls, a 'security station,' and military vehicles.

[3] The photo was taken in Sadr City. The photo shows people examining property damage caused by a recent military operation.

[4] A map of 'Operation Peace.' Iraqi Security Forces advanced on neighborhoods of Sadr City in a pre-dawn military operation.

[5] Zibechi (2007). The term 'urban peripheries' refers to cities throughout the global South (as opposed to 'global cities' in core countries in the North), but more specifically, to impoverished and marginalized neighborhoods within these cities.

[6] Lind (2004), pp. 12-13.

[7] Ibid, pp. 14-16.

[8] Huntington (1968), pp. 644-650.

[9] Ibid, pp. 652-655.

[10] Wise (2008), pp. 4-8; Lamb (2008), p. 6.

[11] Ibid, pp. 4-8.

[12] Ibid. p. 32.

[13] Ibid. p. 42.

[14] Ibid. p. 43.

[15] Lamb (2008), pp. 25.

[16] Ibid. pp. 16, 44.

[17] Ibid. pp. 4, 45. 'For the urban maps, the analysts gathers neighborhood- or household-level data on demographics, social networks, income, election results, crime incidents, criminal's addresses, infrastructure... and creates a computer model that layers data onto a satellite image of the city, indicating streets and neighborhoods most likely to have safe houses.'

[18] Petraeus et al. (2006), Ch.1, p. 16; B-3.

[19] Ibid. B-1.

[20] Ibid. Ch. 1, p. 16; B-7; A-8.

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[21] Ibid. Ch. 3, p.10.

[22] Ibid. Ch. 5, pp. 19, 21.

[23] Lamb 2008, pp. 15, 33, 35.

[24] Luke (2004), pp. 122-132.

[25] Dudely (2007), p. 11.

[26] Humphrey (2002), p. 57.

[27] Goonewardena (2007), pp. 5, 11.

[28] Campbell et al. (2007), pp. 4-7.

[29] Goonewardena (2007), p. 21.

[30] Ibid, p. 5.

[31] Graham (2004), p. 33.

[32] Humphrey (2002), pp. 62, 66, 68. 'We can feel violated, harmed and diminished by the destruction of places and people to which we feel attached—e.g. home, places of worship, family, neighborhood, streets.'

[33] Beall (2006).

[34] Light (2002), p. 608. '[In the 1970s], executives and engineers from defense research institutions such as RAND (an Air Force think tank)... decided that the survivability of their organizations depended upon finding ways to transfer their innovations beyond military markets. City planning and management quickly emerged as targets of opportunity.'

[35] Ibid. p. 609.

[36] Stanley (2003), p. 3. 'The case studies that drive this shift in strategic doctrine include Mogadishu, Belfast, East Timor,

Stalingrad, Berlin, Beirut, Grozny, Saigon... the Los Angeles Riots, and Bogota.'

[37] Ibid. p. 108.

[38] Beall (2006), p. 108.

[39] Ibid. p. 112; Zibechi (2007), p. 1.

[40] Zibechi (2007). 'The armed forces move to take the place of the sovereign government, reconstruct the state, and in a totally vertical and authoritarian manner, initiate mechanisms to assure the continuation of domination.'

[41] Cited in Beall (2006), p. 108.

[42] Harvey (2005), p. 2.

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[43] Beall (2006)

[44] Beall (2006), p. 111. 'Violence inflicted on the civilians populations for political purposes by state actors is taken to be a form of terrorism, and one that is central to our analysis of urban terror in the developing world... as a deliberate attempt to deprive people of the benefits of urban life.'

[45] Zibechi (2007); Beall (2006).

[46] Zibechi (2007).

[47] Beall et al. (2006), pp. 61-64.

[48] Baltazar (2007), p. 40; Institute for the Study of War (15 April 2009); Beall et al. (2006), p. 52.; Sheridan (2009). As recently as 5 August 2009, in the *Washington Post*, there are reports that there is a fear that USAID will be subsumed into the US State Department.

[49] Ibid, p. 38; Roggio (2008), p. 2; Department of Defense (17 November 2008).

[50] USAID (29 April 2009).

[51] Putzel et al. (2006), p. 61. Barakat (2005), p. 575; O'Hanlon et al. (2009), p. 51. Although security is a main concern for Iraqis, concerns over economic and social issues are increasing. Between 2007 and 2009, the percentage of Iraqi concerned with economic issues has risen from 9 to 20 percent, and those concerned with social issues has from 12 to 17 percent.

[52] Barakat (2005), p. 577; Beall (2006).

[53] Beall (2006); Beall et al. (2006).

[54] Dominic (2003), p. 255.

[55] Lemanski (2006), pp. 796-798.

[56] Zibechi (2007).

[57] Boal (1994), p. 35.

[58] Marcuse (1994), p. 42.

[59] Marcuse (1994), p. 44.

[60] Graham (2003), pp. 63-67; Marcuse (1994), p. 48.

[61] Weizman (2007), p. 182.

[62] Ibid, p. 175.

[63] Humphrey (2002), p. 60.

[64] Warren (2004), p. 214.

[65] Ibid, pp. 215-229.

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[66] Putzel (2005), p. 20.

[67] Bayat (1997), p. 7.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid. p. 8.

[70] Ibid. p. 10.

[71] Ibid. p. 8.

[72] Ibid. pp. 12, 19.

[73] Ibid. pp. 12, 19.

[74] Stanley (2003), pp. 3-4.

[75] Bayat (1997), pp. 10, 15.

[76] Dominic (2003), p. 259.

[77] Beall (2006); Ismael et al. (2006), p. 622. In Sadr City, under Saddam, patron-client relationships and crony capitalism characterized state-society relations, which 'initiated a process of socio-economic polarization of society where the wealthy few contrasted with the pauperised mass of the population.'

[78] Bayat (1997), pp. 16.

[79] Harvey (2005), p. 159.

[80] Bensahel et al. (2008), p. 213.

[81] Ismael et al. (2006), p. 617

[82] Bensahel et al. (2008), pp. 216, 224, 230. Individual projects were later sub-contracted out to other private firms such as General Electric and Siemens.

[83] Ibid, p. 220.

[84] Ismael et al. (2006), p. 618.

[85] Campbell et al. (2007), p. 1; Harvey (2006), p. 159.

[86] Graham (2004), p. 331.

[87] Graham (2004), p. 33.

[88] Harvey (2005), p. 2.

[89] Graham (2004), p. 43.

[90] CBS 60 Minutes (9 October 2008). 'Last March, they began using the neighborhood as a launching pad to lob rockets in the nearby "Green Zone", the seat of the Iraqi Government and site of the US Embassy.'

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[91] Roggio (2008), p. 2; Cordesman et al. (2008), p. 8; CBS 60 Minutes (9 October 2008). Prior to the battle of Sadr City, the Maliki government ordered the JAM to disarm and disband, or be disallowed from participating in the upcoming provincial elections. Ultimately, the battle of Sadr City was an attempt by the Iraqi state to reconfigure the political geography of Baghdad, thereby disaffecting the subaltern groups of Sadr City from the Sadrists. This serves to highlight the divisions among the three major Shiite political factions—the Sadrists, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, and Al-Da'Wa. Nonetheless, the elections reflected sectarian loyalties and patron-client relationships.

[92] Institute for the Study of War (16 April 2009).

[93] Ibid.

[94] Cordesman et al. (2008), pp. 3-4, 14.

[95] CBS News World Reports (26, September 2006). Reports claimed that Sadr City was 'one of the most secure areas in a city ravaged by violence.'

[96] CBS 60 Minutes (9 October 2008).

[97] Institute for the Study of War (2008).

[98] Campbell et al. (2007), pp. 4-7.

[99] Graham (2004), p. 32.

[100] Ramadan (2009), p. 10.

[101] Tschirgi (2009). In an article published online by the blog, *American Thinker*, the author suggests that based on the model of the battle of Sadr City, Israel should construct a 3-4 mile concrete barrier bisecting Gaza.

[102] CBS 60 Minutes (9 October 2008). 'This was the first time UAVS were used this way at the brigade level, allowing soldiers on the ground to manage and synchronize the information themselves. They call it "find, fix, finish".'

[103] Department of Defense (17 November 2008); Lamb (2008), pp. 15, 33, 35; Putzel (2005), p. 20. As mentioned above, COIN theory prioritizes the targeting of urban peripheries that are believed to be influenced by 'unfriendly' foreign countries—i.e. Iran. This further highlights how urban peripheries have become strategic geopolitical sites, as 'transnational, regional, and national networks act upon and engage with local actors within the context of urban spaces.' In particular, the battle of Sadr City is inherently geopolitical, as the constellation of interests include the US military, the Iraqi state, the JAM, and by proxy Iran; not to mention the subaltern groups of Sadr City.

[104] Institute for the Study of War (16 April 2009).

[105] Gordon and Farrell (21 May 2008).

[106] IRIN (24 April 2008).

[107] Ibid.

[108] Campbell (15 May 2008).

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

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[111] Department of Defense (17 November 2008).

[112] Department of Defense (17 November 2008). According to Col. Hort, \$55 million in development aid has been spent in al-Jamilla and al-Thawra. However, the Colonel admits that 'slow progress' is still the main cause of 'frustration' among the subaltern groups of Sadr City.

[113] Hills (2004), p. 244.

[114] Gordon and Farrell (21 May 2008).

[115] Ibid.

[116] CBS News World Reports (20 May 2008).

[117] Barakat (2005), p. 584.

[118] Barakat (2005), p. 587.

[119] Barakat (2005), p. 584.

[120] O'Hanlon et al. (2009), pp. 4, 51, 43.

[121] Ibid. p. 4.

[122] Ibid. p. 10.

[123] Ibid. p. 30.

[124] Ibid. p. 51.

[125] Ibid. p. 40.

[126] Ibid. p. 47.

[127] Lefebvre (1974), p. 404.

[128] Dudely (2007), p. 12.

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