



# Global Demographic Trends and Security: Implications for the U.S. Army

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Over the past few decades, the world has experienced several demographic trends that are altering the landscape of U.S. national security. These trends are creating a security environment unlike any that the U.S. Army has ever seen. The ratio of urban dwellers to rural dwellers continues to rise, with many urban areas having grown to populations of over 10-million inhabitants. These large urban areas are known as megacities. As of 2014, there were 28 megacities. By 2030 there will likely be 41 megacities.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the Chief of Staff of the Army's Strategic Studies Group reported that the Army is unprepared to operate in the megacity environment.<sup>2</sup>

In the ten years from 2004 to 2013, the world's population grew at an average rate of about 1.2% per year. By 2050, there will likely be a global population of 9.6 billion with more than half of the world's population living in the least developed countries.<sup>3</sup> Urbanization is also increasing around the world. By 2050, the United Nations estimates an increase of 2.5 billion people in the world's cities, with nearly 90 percent of this increase occurring in Africa and Asia.<sup>4</sup> A third demographic trend likely to impact future security is the growing youth bulge, an increase in the proportion of people in the 15 to 29 years age group compared to other age groups.<sup>5</sup> Roughly, one-sixth of the global population is between the ages of 15 and 24, with the largest rate of growth of this demographic in Africa. A youth bulge, coupled with higher than average unemployment in developing countries, can become a factor driving instability.

In the past, conventional warfare often occurred in sparsely populated landscapes, where industrialized militaries could employ weapons at maximum ranges. The World Wars, the Arab-Israeli Wars, and Operation Desert Storm are such examples. However, warfare is increasingly occurring in more populated areas, as seen throughout much of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Rupert Smith refers to this change as a paradigm shift, whereby warfare is less likely to occur between industrialized militaries on an open battlefield, but, rather, amongst populations.<sup>6</sup> The three trends identified above make it more likely that



future conflict will take place in large urban areas, including megacities; against a wide array of threats; including both military and criminal elements; and with local security forces that may be unable to cope with such threats. The US Department of Defense, especially the Army, should take action, reviewing and improving the way it trains and develops leaders for operations in heavily populated, urban environments.

The effects of the three identified demographic trends are likely to affect global security over the coming decades, especially within already fragile regions. An understanding of the mechanisms that link the demographic trends to instability and conflict is necessary to design a strategy for mitigating the potential threats.

### **Demography and Mechanisms that Drive Conflict**

A larger population leads to increased population density, with more social and ethnic groups living in close proximity than in the past, raising the likelihood of social and ethnic conflicts. Much of this population growth will occur in urban settings. In less developed regions, local governments may be unable to cope with the increasing rate of urbanization, potentially leading to disruptions in the provision of essential services and resources, such as electricity, water, food, and adequate healthcare.

This could lead to conflict over remaining resources. Criminal elements could take advantage of the opportunity to profit by controlling access to resources. This could create instability or worsen the situation in areas with already weakened local governance, increasing the likelihood for conflict.

Lastly, an increase in the number of people between the ages of 15 and 29 will stress the ability of local economies to provide enough employment opportunities to meet the demand. A large number of unemployed people in this age group could become fertile recruiting ground for militant groups. These people may turn to violence as a means to provide money for themselves and their families.

These demographic trends, taken together, create an environment that will shape the future operating environment for Army forces. Tomorrow's battlefield will likely be large heavily populated urban areas, with many unemployed people who could likely become combatants. The U.S. Army will likely find itself operating in these areas and should prepare accordingly.



## Urban Growth: A Problem for the Army

The Chief of Staff of the Army's Strategic Study Group published a report in 2014 indicating that the U.S. Army is not ready to deal with conflict in this future environment.<sup>7</sup> Some critics say that the Army should avoid this environment altogether. Their reasoning is that these conflicts will be excessively bloody and costly. The United States would likely be unwilling to accept such a violent conflict. However, war is most likely to take place in and amongst populations.

Recent conflicts demonstrate the shifting of warfare from rural to urban environments. The Russian-Chechen conflict in the 1990s and 2000s saw much urban conflict, in which the modern Russian Army engaged in unconventional warfare with Chechen rebels. The war in Iraq in the 2000s also saw much urban combat from Baghdad to Fallujah to Ramadi. More recent operations by the Islamic State have focused on capturing key urban areas in both Syria and Iraq.

These three examples illustrate the growing trend of combat in heavily populated areas. In all three, the combatants recognized the importance of controlling population centers, especially larger ones. This will likely remain the trend in the future, with conventional and unconventional forces competing for control over urban areas. The demographic trends identified earlier will lead to ever larger urban populations. Currently, the Army is unprepared for this environment.



## The Debate

A healthy debate over the future of warfare in heavily populated urban environments has emerged in recent years. Two major schools of thought seem to have emerged concerning the role of the U.S. Army in densely populated urban environments. The first is that operations in this environment are unavoidable and that the U.S. military should prepare. The second opinion is that large urban environments present challenges that the military cannot overcome, and that the U.S. forces should avoid them altogether.

The first group advocates for preparing the military to operate in a megacity environment. It sees these areas as becoming more strategically significant and that the United States will inevitably find itself committing forces there. Studying past urban operations could provide some utility in developing the capabilities necessary to succeed in large urban areas. Some authors offer Stalingrad in 1942-1943, Mogadishu in 1993, Grozny in 1995, and Baghdad and Fallujah in 2003-2004 as case studies.<sup>8</sup> Although these examples are not megacities by today's standards, they still offer useful lessons for preparing the future force.

Some commentators are less willing to commit forces to these heavily urbanized areas. They argue that urban combat, even in smaller settings than the aforementioned megacities, is bloody and costly to both combatants and noncombatants. The Army would need a major overhaul in its organization, doctrine, and technology to fight in a megacity. Instead, some argue, the Army should look at shaping the environment in such a way as to not require the commitment of forces in the urban setting.<sup>9</sup> They even argue that the sheer size of megacities render the lessons learned in historical case studies useless because it is impossible to "scale" from a Fallujah-sized city to a modern megacity with more than 10-million inhabitants.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. Army appears to have decided where it stands on the heavily populated urban operating environment argument. The Army Operating Concept identifies urban areas as being likely to have a significant impact on operations and the need to understand how to operate in these environments.<sup>11</sup> Events, such as Unified Quest 2014, also indicate that the Army is gaining an understanding of how to operate in the future urban environment.



### **Recommendations for Army Leaders**

Given the lack of preparedness to operate in heavily populated urban environments, the U.S. Army should begin to emphasize readiness for this challenge. Specifically, it should examine its leader development, doctrine, and training models to ensure they prepare leaders and units for the challenge of operating in this setting.

First, urban planning and sociology instruction should become part of the institutional domain of the Army's Leader Development Model. Officer candidates should consider developing this knowledge through coursework in sociology, psychology, and urban planning. After commissioning, officers could continue growing their knowledge base in these areas as part of the self-development domain. The Army, or the Joint Force, should offer online or resident training and coursework incorporating the latest lessons learned from academia and contemporary military operations in these areas. All leaders should familiarize themselves with the systems needed in a functioning city, such as utilities, law enforcement, health care, communications, etc. While it is not necessary to have an in-depth knowledge of these systems, a basic understanding could guide the development of plans to operate in such an environment.

A reexamination of Army urban operations doctrine may also be necessary. The Army published its current urban operations doctrinal manual, Field Manual 3-06, in 2006. That manual does not adequately address large urban areas. For example, the doctrine highlights the need to physically and psychologically isolate the threat from the noncombatant population.<sup>12</sup> Lagos, Nigeria, is a metropolitan area that covers over 260 square kilometers.<sup>13</sup> Its estimated population was 21 million in 2014.<sup>14</sup> Physical isolation of a megacity of this size is nearly impossible. Given the interconnectedness of such a city with the global economy and with nearby rural areas, isolation may also be undesirable, as it would likely cause adverse impacts on the urban system itself, creating unintended consequences such as the disruption of food supplies, the population's livelihoods, and other essential services. Much of the doctrine attempts to transpose combined arms tactics and concepts, developed for maneuver on an open battlefield, to an urban environment. The diagrams depicting forms of the offense look



very similar to diagrams of brigade attacks in other manuals.<sup>15</sup> The Army should redefine decisive, shaping, and sustaining operations in new ways that reflect the complexities of urban areas.

Leaders at battalion-level and above should also incorporate collective training for operations in this environment. While it may not be feasible to build a large urban area to train units, the use of tabletop exercises, terrain walks, and virtual and constructive training could help prepare unit leaders to operate in large urban settings. Leveraging organizations such as the Training Brain Operations Center to replicate the operational environment with its complexities and multitude of actors would enhance the training experience. Training scenarios would need to represent multiple threat and friendly actors, urban systems, and the resource scarcities likely to exist in large cities.

Smaller units, such as squads, platoons, and companies, would still be able to use the urban training environments available at most installations to hone their skills. These formations must maintain proficiency in their core skills and mission-essential tasks. Specific tasks, such as entering and clearing buildings, remain relevant. Units must close with and destroy the enemy in close combat and should continue to train those skills as a primary function. No matter the environment, urban or other, the Army must always maintain its ability to win the nation's wars and dominate the land domain.

## **Conclusion**

Current demographic trends, especially rapid population growth, urbanization, and an increasing youth bulge, will dominate the security environment in the future. These trends are most prevalent in the developing world, especially in states already prone to insecurity and conflict.

The Army should assess its preparedness for operations in such an environment. Refining existing doctrine to account for operations in large urban environments is necessary. Leader development should help leaders in understanding the context, both social and physical, of these cities. Army exercises should also include operations in such environments.

Large, heavily populated urban areas will likely be the battlefields of the future. The world's population is growing exponentially, with much of this growth occurring in the world's large urban areas. Many of these areas are in countries



plagued by ineffective governance. Many already experience instability and conflict. The U.S. Army should prepare to understand and operate in such areas.

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#### NOTES

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