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Issue Brief No. 07

Urban Black Holes:
The changing face of
state failure

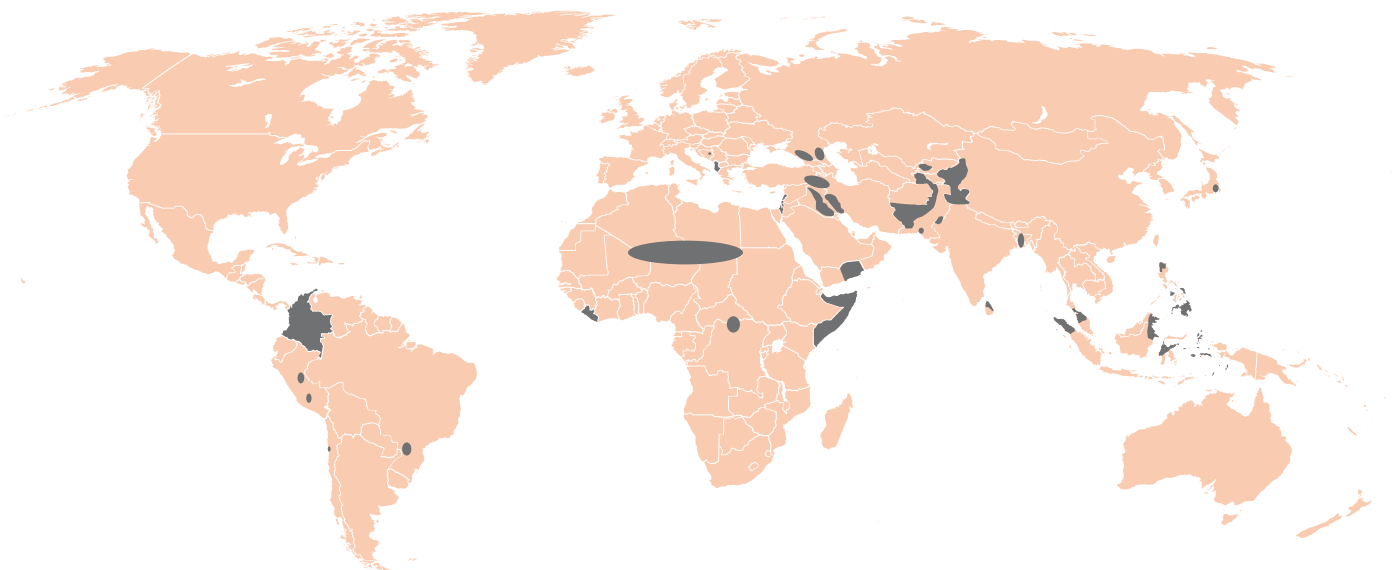www.worldforesightforum.org

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Introduction

In astronomy, a black hole is a "cosmic body with gravity so intense that nothing, not even light, can escape." Recently, the term has also found its way into international security parlance, where it is used to refer to a zone where state power has collapsed. Black holes are usually thought of as rather remote areas, geographically far removed from national seats of power (see figure 1). Notorious examples are the Pakistani region of Waziristan and the tri-border area of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. However, as the segment of the world population that lives in cities keeps growing, the security threats posed by *urban* black holes are growing as well. This Issue Brief shows how urbanization can set in motion a social dynamic that will severely undermine state control over urban areas. It also highlights some examples to show that this development is already underway.

It is well known that big cities have "no-go areas", where the law means little and crime runs wild. The *banlieues* of Paris and the gang-ridden neighborhoods of Los Angeles are just two notorious examples. Nevertheless, there are three reasons to consider urban black holes a challenge that requires consideration for future strategic policy making. First, the number and geographical size of such zones may increase as a result of ongoing urbanization and the growth of megacities, especially since growth of the urban population also takes place in countries where governmental control is already weak. Second, the activities of violent actors that are active in urban black holes are increasingly transnational, which means that the impact of urban black holes goes beyond the cities where they occur. Third, the challenge posed by "no-go areas" is mainly perceived in terms of social-economic and law enforcement problems. Framing this phenomenon in terms of "black holes" makes clear that, like rural black holes, urban black holes also pose challenges to international security and stability.

> Urbanization and the further growth of megacities will make urban areas harder to control and can lead to the emergence of zones without governmental control, where criminal networks, street gangs and terrorist organizations can run free.

Source: Rem Korteweg and David Ehrhardt, Terrorist black holes: a study into terrorist sanctuaries and governmental weakness

Figure 1: Rural black holes

Urban Black Holes: The changing face of state failure

RATIO OF URBAN AND RURAL DWELLERS, 1950-2050

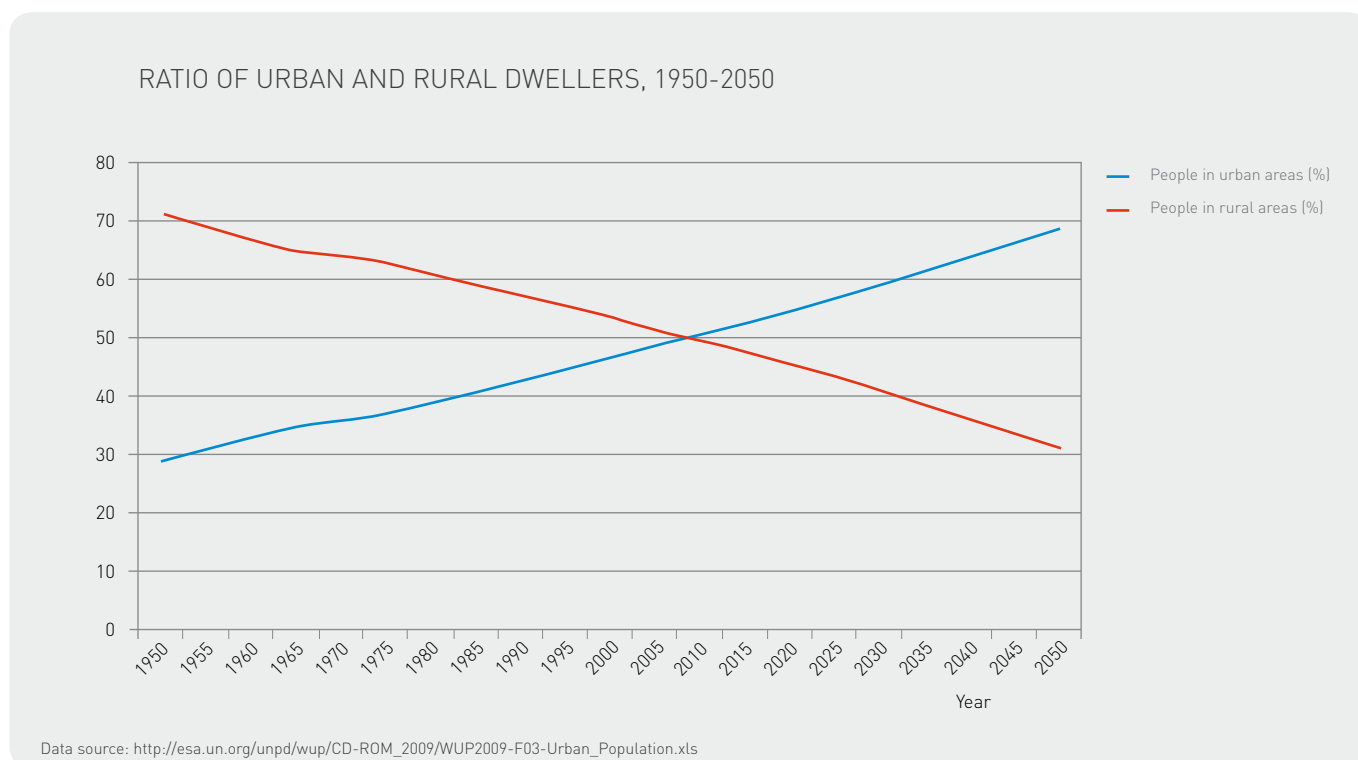Data source: http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM_2009/WUP2009-F03-Urban_Population.xls

Figure 2: Rural and urban dwellers as percentages of the world population
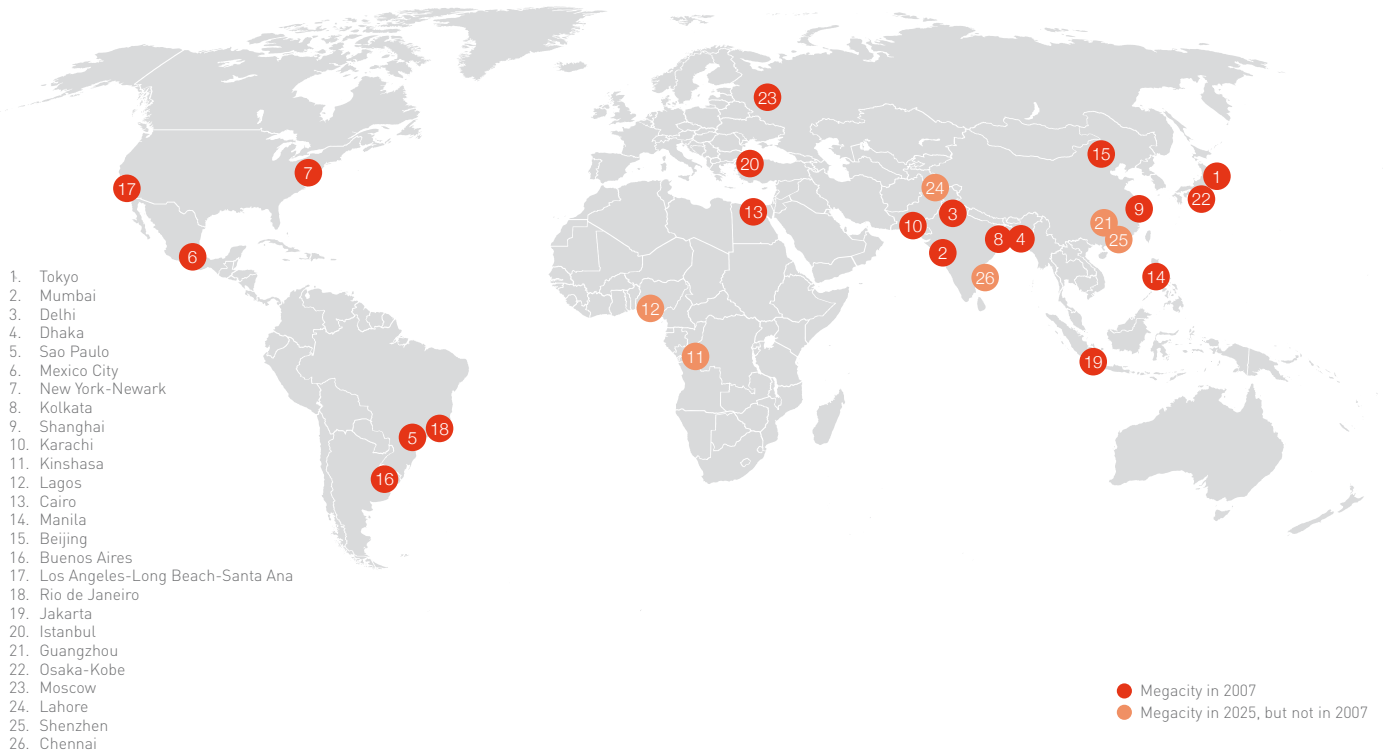
Urbanization and the rise of megacities

All available statistics point out that for decades the world has been undergoing a steady process of urbanization. Currently, more than half of the population is living in urban areas, a percentage that is expected to have increased to almost 70 by 2050 (see figure 2). The numbers of cities with more than one million inhabitants has been on the increase for quite some time, much like the numbers of people living in cities with more than five million inhabitants. This growth also takes place in cities that are already sizeable. Simply put, big cities are getting bigger. The number of megacities, cities with more than ten million inhabitants, is expected to rise from 19 in 2007 to 26 in 2025 (see figure 3). The strongest megacity-growth is expected in Central Asia (Karachi, Dhaka, Lahore, Delhi and Mumbai) and Africa (Kinshasa and Lagos, see figure 4). Although one should not be oblivious to the opportunities that urbanization brings, the growth of the urban population does come with a set of challenges.

The vicious circle of urban black holes

Further urban population growth is likely to lead to increased population stress, meaning that people will have increasing difficulty in gaining access to the economic opportunity structure, healthcare and education. In order to cope with this situation, pressured city-dwellers will turn to alternative, illegal means of subsistence, including robbery, extortion and drug trafficking. The lack of access to economic opportunity structures thus generates violence, as can be orserved in almost every megacity in the world. Given the scale of this degeneration, it is not uncommon for law enforcement agencies in large cities to lose control over poor neighborhoods. For instance, only 8% of the murders in Brazil, many of which take place in major cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, are prosecuted successfully. In this regard, the fact that urbanization is also taking place in regions where state control is already weak should be cause for concern. Pakistan (Karachi and Lahore), Congo (Kinshasa) and Nigeria (Lagos), while facing strong growth of their major

MEGACITIES IN THE WORLD OF 2025

1. Tokyo
2. Mumbai
3. Delhi
4. Dhaka
5. Sao Paulo
6. Mexico City
7. New York-Newark
8. Kolkata
9. Shanghai
10. Karachi
11. Kinshasa
12. Lagos
13. Cairo
14. Manila
15. Beijing
16. Buenos Aires
17. Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana
18. Rio de Janeiro
19. Jakarta
20. Istanbul
21. Guangzhou
22. Osaka-Kobe
23. Moscow
24. Lahore
25. Shenzhen
26. Chennai

● Megacity in 2007
● Megacity in 2025, but not in 2007

Data source: HCSS, Future Issue Urbanisation

_____ Figure 3: Current and future megacities

cities, are labeled "critical", the most severe category, on the 2010 Failed States Index. India (Mumbai and Delhi) and Bangladesh (Dhaka) fall in the category "in danger", one level below "critical". With the rising level of violence and the declining ability of the state to provide security for its citizens, the population will look for other actors to protect them.

The rise of violent actors

State failure creates a power vacuum. With no police around to uphold the law, poor megacity dwellers live in a dog-eat-dog world, where power can be seized by a wide variety of criminal organizations. In this context, we will see a normalization of violence, as more and more people will arm themselves to fight off criminal groups. But they may also turn to or join these organizations for protection and survival. A good example is the street gang. Although street gangs are, of course, criminal organizations, they also serve a protective function in a lawless environment. They offer a form of security to their members, mostly young men, who can count on the protection of their fellow gang members. In order to adequately serve this purpose, street gangs forge extreme bonds of loyalty, for instance through brutal initiation rituals, elaborate sign language and excessive tatoos that indicate membership of the group (see figure 5). These groups typically engage in a wide variety of crimes, ranging from robbing stores and killing their enemies to more elaborate and sophisticated activities like running drug rackets (see also WFF Issue Brief _Drugs, Crime and Terror: a Profitable Business_). The scale and degree of professionalism of these criminal activities differ, but

MEGACITIES IN 2007 AND 2025
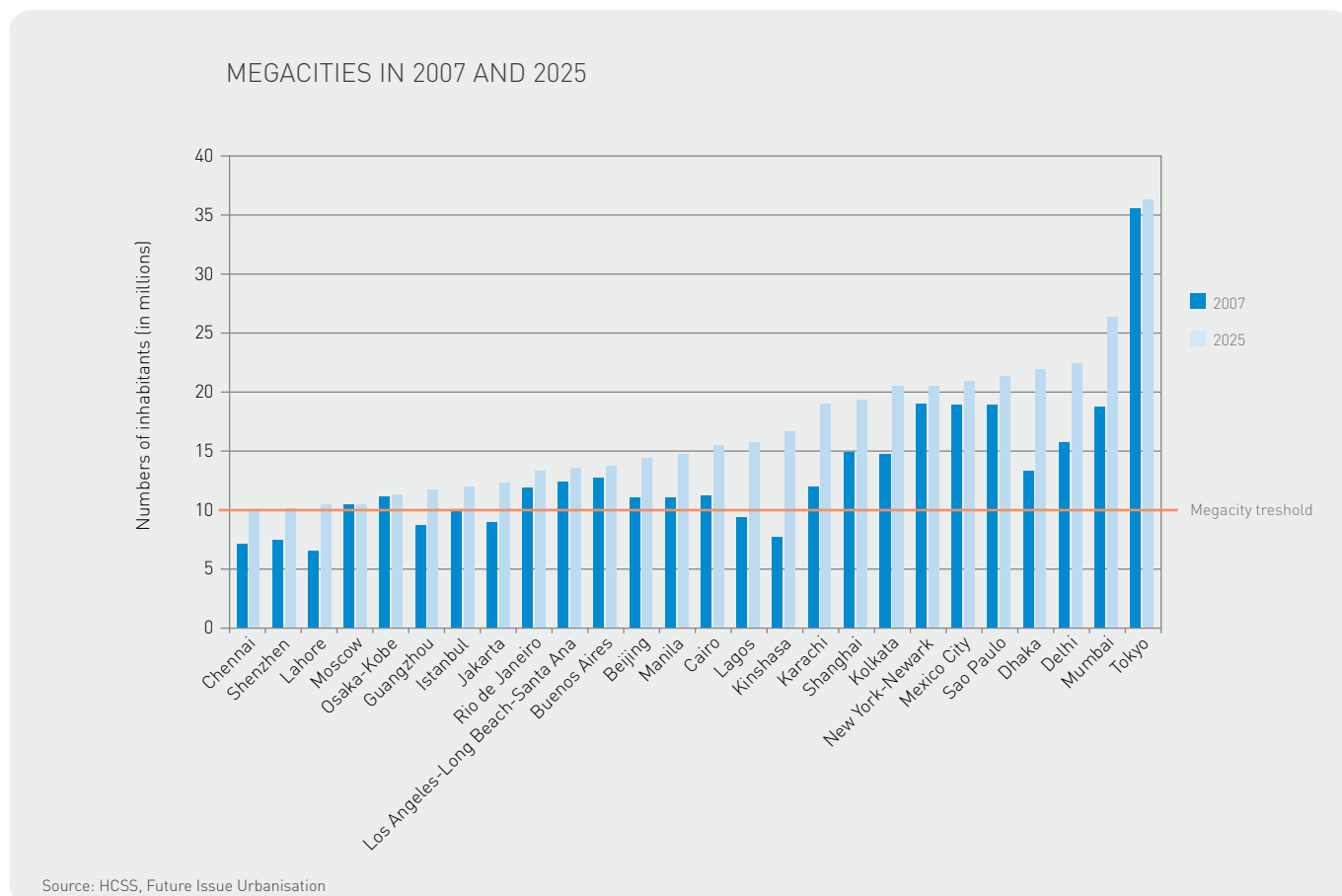

Source: HCSS, Future Issue Urbanisation

Figure 4: Population size of current and future megacities

in the most extreme cases gangs end up running the areas where they are based. Some gangs even explicitly stake this claim. For example, one of the major criminal organizations of São Paulo is called *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (First Command of the Capital, PCC). Further, the rise of these actors may trigger the formation of so-called vigilante groups. These groups are set up to protect the population against extortion, robberies and general chaos, but they regularly engage in hate crime. A good example is PAGAD, which was founded in 1996 to curb the growing drug trade in Cape Town. Similarly, al-Shabaab, the militia that controls larges swaths of Somalia, intends to rid the streets of Mogadishu of drug dealers and other criminals. Both groups, however, have also attacked non-criminal targets, like gay bars and sites frequented by tourists (see figure 6).

Consequences

There are several dire consequences to the growth – both in number and in size – of urban black holes. First, they facilitate massive drug trade. According to an estimate of UNODC-director Antonio Maria Costa, the laundered drug money assets of criminal gangs currently amount to some $352 bn, the equivalent of the GDP of Sweden. In this respect, it is important to note that some successful street gangs acquire the ability to run international drug rackets. The most prominent example is *Mara Salvatrucha* (Salvadoran Gang, also known as MS-13), which was originally a street gang in Los Angeles but now has its tentacles in Central America and several US states (see figure 7). *Mara Salvatrucha* was founded by Salvadoran immigrants in the 1980s, at a time when their own country was being torn apart by a civil war.

Figure 5: Gang members in Guatemala, picture available on WikiCommons

- **PAGAD** stands for People Against Gangsterism and Drugs.
- This islamist-inspired group was mainly active in **Cape Town**, South Africa.
- It has killed gang leaders and **bombed** synagogues, gay nightclubs and tourist sites in 2002.

- The group's full name is Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, which means **Mujahideen Youth Movement**.
- The group is known to have attracted foreign jihadists who are affiliated with **al Qaeda**.
- Al Shabaab currently controls about **half of Somalia**.

Figure 6: Examples of vigilante groups

The group thrived in the lawless environment of the Los Angeles gangster scene and gradually became an international drug syndicate. The evidence found by the Salvadoran police that *Mara Salvatrucha* leaders who were jailed in El Salvador were ordering liquidations of people residing in Virginia illustrates the organization's transnational nature.

Second, urban black holes may fuel other security threats. They offer opportunities for illegal arms trade and recruitment for terrorist organizations. Such collusions between terrorist organizations and criminal gangs are by no means unprecedented. For instance, the D-Company, which started out as a street gang in Mumbai and is now one of the main criminal gangs in India, is widely believed to be involved in arms deals with Al Qaeda. Criminal gangs may also offer terrorist organizations access to their smuggling routes, which, of course, flourish in the absence of state authority.

Third, state failure in urban regions also suggests instability and the threat of large-scale violence. As the rivalry between gangs or criminal networks intensifies, violence may spiral out of control and turn into an urban civil war. That the authorities may have to bear the brunt of the attacks in such cases became clear during the 2006 São Paulo riots. In retaliation for the killing of some of their officers, the São Paulo police launched a series of operations to find the perpetrators. This sparked a major PCC-led rebellion against the police and the security forces. 141 people were killed in a crisis situation that lasted for four days.

The New Approach

A radical option to curb urban black holes is an urban version of the 'traditional' stabilization mission carried out in conflict areas. This may seem far-fetched, but as more and more human activity will take place in urban areas and the degradation of poor areas continues, policy makers may well have to seriously consider this option. Furthermore, there is a real-world example of the urban stabilization mission. Sergio Gabral, the governor of the Rio de Janeiro state, has decided on a permanent presence of security forces in the slums to restore order (see box 1). The way to deal with urban black holes will be operationally very different, but strategically quite similar to the way one should counter rural black holes. On the strategic level, urban black holes require a broad approach, comparable to the one that has been tried and tested in many counterinsurgency operations carried out in zones without state control. Virtually all counterinsurgency studies stress the importance of restraint in the use of force, the importance of winning popular support and the need to improve the security situation and living conditions of the population. In this respect, urban stabilization missions will be no different,

STATES AND COUNTRIES WITH STRONG MARA SALVATRUCHA PRESENCE

■ Six or more active Mara Salvatrucha cells (clicas)

Data source: Mark Haper (LA Times), Multinational gang

Figure 7: Mara Salvatrucha activity in North and Central America

DRASTIC COUNTERMEASURES

• In order to regain control over the favelas (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian government sent in armored vehicles and hundreds of special forces to fight the city's criminal gangs. During this offensive, which took place in November 2010, government forces arrested almost 200 gang members and seized guns, explosives and drugs. The governor of the Rio de Janeiro state, Sergio Gabral, said that at least 2,000 troops will be permanently stationed in the area as a stabilisation force.

• Although Mexico City has so far remained relatively untouched by the ongoing drug wars between the security forces and the government, recent reports mention an increasing military presence in the city. Many interpret this as a sign that the drug war is reaching the Mexican capital. The threat to Mexico City mainly emanates from La Familia (The Family) and the Zetas, two gangs that are engaged in a violent struggle for control over the city's outskirts.

Box 1: Examples of deployment of military forces against criminal gangs

as the main objective should be to show to the population that the state is the only actor that provides security. Due to operational difficulties, however, it will not always be easy to win this trust. In these missions, clashes with street and criminal gangs will be unavoidable, and the density of megacities makes collateral damage all the more likely. Avoiding this will require specific training and research & development for security forces to improve their ability to apply surgical violence. Also, security forces that are deployed in urban environments need different means of operational intelligence than their non-urban counterparts. Further improvement of sensor technology and GIS data processing will enhance the situational awareness of units in urban operations. Nevertheless, while countering the threat of urban black holes may pose a need for new tools, it is essentially a new incarnation of an old craft: pacifying the area, building effective governance structures and gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

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