

"Siege by terror" in disputed territories in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro

O "cerco pelo terror" em territórios em disputa na zona oeste/RJ

Monique Batista *Carvalho* [I]
Jonathan Willian Bazoni *da Motta* [II]

Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze the movements made by different actors in the world of crime in a neighborhood of the West Zone to identify the multiple organization forms of criminal groups based on territorial control and management of illegal activities, which characterize the war in the disputed territories in Rio de Janeiro. We follow leads offered by fieldwork conducted in Praça Seca and attempt to establish relations between the disputes for territorial control, sometimes by militias, sometimes by drug trafficking, in the neighborhood's favelas and their surroundings, and identify strategies activated by residents who experience the "siege by terror" to maintain their routines despite the constant situations of violence to which they are subjected.

Keywords: militia; violence; warfare; West Zone; Rio de Janeiro.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é fazer uma análise acerca dos movimentos realizados pelos diferentes atores do mundo do crime em um bairro da Zona Oeste na busca por identificar as múltiplas formas de organização dos grupos criminosos em função do controle territorial e da gestão dos ilegalismos que caracteriza a guerra nos territórios em disputa no Rio de Janeiro. Seguimos pistas oferecidas pelo trabalho de campo realizado na Praça Seca e tentamos estabelecer relações entre as disputas pelo controle territorial, ora pela milícia, ora pelo tráfico, nas favelas do bairro com o seu entorno e identificar estratégias acionadas pelos moradores que experimentam o "cerco pelo terror" para manter suas rotinas mesmo nas constantes situações de violência a que estão submetidos.

Palavras-chave: milícia; violência; guerra; zona oeste; Rio de Janeiro.



Introduction

On the night of 06/06/2023, an armored military police (PM) vehicle, popularly known as *caveirão*,¹ was shot by criminals linked to the drug trafficking faction who threw Molotov cocktails and homemade bombs in the Bateau Mouche favela [slum], in Praça Seca, in the Zona Oeste of Rio de Janeiro. The video of *Caveirão* in flames was shared on various social media profiles, as well as being reported on highly visible websites and daily news broadcasting. According to the newspaper *O Dia*, the traffickers' audacious action was a retaliation for the murder, by the military police, of the *favela's* drug boss the night before (Criminosos, 2023). In response, the governor of Rio de Janeiro Cláudio Castro posted on his social network profile that the attack on the armored vehicle by criminals was an unacceptable action and that he had already ordered the permanent occupation of PM troops in the favela. He concluded with the following statement: "It is an attack not only against the police but against the whole of society" (Castro, 2023).

Caveirão is used in police operations, mainly by the Special Police Operations Battalion (Bope), in theory, as a last resort to guarantee protection to police officers and to attack criminals. It became a symbol of strength for the Rio de Janeiro PM and an object of terror for *favela* residents. The attack on the armored vehicle therefore represents the inefficiency of a supposed public security policy in *favela* territories under the control of drug trafficking organizations.

However, it is necessary to adjust the analytical lens and look more carefully at the territory in which this attack was carried out. The Bateau Mouche *favela* or just Batô is one of the

numerous favelas in Jacarepaguá that have been experiencing, since the end of 2022, an intense conflict due to disputes over territorial control of the region. These disputes revolve around drug trafficking organizations and militia groups that have been operating in the region's neighborhoods since the first decade of this century.

At the time of this attack on the police base located in the favela, which resulted in *caveirão* catching fire, Bateau Mouche was under the territorial control of *Comando Vermelho* [Red Command] but was being intensely disputed by the group of militia members who previously controlled not only this territory but also the neighboring *favela*, Chacrinha.

It is important to highlight that, in the region, these conflicts are recurrently referred to by the media and also by residents of the neighborhood as the Praça Seca "war", which has a temporal variation but has been happening since 2011, when the first militia members who were residents of Chacrinha would have taken over Morro da Barão and the Bateau Mouche *favela* from drug trafficking, intending to guarantee the protection and well-being of the residents.

The novelty in this trafficking enterprise was not only due to the occupation of Bateau Mouche, but, above all, to the invasion that took place in the Chacrinha *favela*, considered a favela dominated by the militia "since always". The repeated attempts to invade and take over territory by the *Comando Vermelho*, in areas of historically consolidated militia control in the Zona Oeste, may be indicative of an inflection and a reordering of the world of crime in Rio de Janeiro.

From this perspective, our purpose is to analyze the movements carried out by the different actors in this scenario in an attempt

to identify the multiple forms of organization of criminal groups as a function of territorial control, which characterizes the war in the disputed territories. We followed the clues offered by ethnographic research carried out in the territory throughout 2022 and 2023² and tried to establish relationships between the disputes in the neighborhood's *favelas* with their surroundings and with the ways that residents find to try to maintain their routines despite constant situations of violence to which they are subjected.

To carry out the research, the source for the production of this article, we used a qualitative methodological framework composed of different techniques. Ten in-depth interviews were carried out with residents from different locations in Praça Seca. One of the researchers is a former resident of the neighborhood and used his knowledge network to carry out this communication, as did the other researcher, who maintains friendly relationships with people who live and used to live in the neighborhood. These networks of knowledge and affection were fundamental to breaking the silencing that violent contexts produce (Rocha, 2013). In addition to the interviews, we also used newspaper reports cataloged in a database that brings together journalistic material about the violence in Praça Seca; analysis of profiles on social networks that follow the themes of violence and militias; and statistical and demographic data to map, contextualize and sequentially order the events in Praça Seca.

The article is divided into three sections, in addition to the introduction and final considerations. The first section corresponds to a presentation of the scenario in which the disputes are taking place. Next, we carry out an analysis of the neighborhood and, in the

third section, we relate the war to the different strategies mobilized by residents. In the end, we tried to establish correlations based on the different forms of production of violence and reproduction of illegality in neighborhoods in the Zona Oeste.

The Zona Oeste as the birthplace of the militia

According to the Historical Map of Armed Groups in Rio de Janeiro produced by researchers from the Study Group on New Illegalisms at the Universidade Federal Fluminense [Fluminense Federal University] (Geni/UFF) and the Instituto Fogo Cruzado [Cross-fire Institute] (2022), which covered the period from 2006 to 2021, Among the territories identified as "dominated by armed groups", 50% would be occupied by militia groups, while the organizations divide the other portion of the controlled areas among themselves.

When analyzing the aforementioned map more carefully, we can see that the territorial and population expansion of the militias initially occurred in the period from 2006 to 2008; and, more recently, from 2016 to 2018, new growth of these groups is identified. It is also highlighted in the data presented in this research that the activities of militia members in the capital occur hegemonically in the Zona Oeste. As demonstrated, in the last three years of the historical series (2019-2021), territorial concentration reached almost 95% in this region (*ibid.*, p. 22).

The Zona Oeste of the city of Rio de Janeiro is geographically divided by the city hall's official agencies into two planning areas (AP) numbered 4 and 5. In this territorial

division, in which the borders are not so fixed, AP4 brings together 19 neighborhoods and it has two centralities: Jacarepaguá and Barra da Tijuca. AP5 has 21 neighborhoods with five centralities: Bangu, Realengo, Campo Grande, Santa Cruz, and Guaratiba. The two regions are separated by the Pedra Branca massif and represent more than 70% of the territory of the entire city, home to 2,945,963 inhabitants according to the 2022 Census. Each in its own way, these two places were notable for being the birthplace of paramilitary organizations, currently known as militias.

The widespread use of the term militia to characterize armed groups with territorial control that differed from groups of drug traffickers due to greater control over the routines and moralities of residents and the charging of fees for services provided such as security for merchants, internet provision and clandestine cable TV, among other extortion practices, occurred in the early 2000s. From 2005 onwards, headlines in mass circulation newspapers began to highlight both the expulsion of groups linked to drug trafficking organizations by militia groups, especially in the region of Jacarepaguá, as well as pointing out payment of taxes and some disputes between the different groups that were forming at the time (*O Globo* online and Araújo, 2006).

Until the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, militias were identified as associations of police officers that offered “security” to local residents, in opposition to the violence carried out by drug trafficking, mainly related to drug sales, robberies, and conflicts between rival groups and between rival groups and the police. Financed by local merchants and residents, the group of police officers, and the militia members, established

themselves as a kind of community solution to the problem of violence that plagued Rio de Janeiro at that time. However, the ways used to maintain “tranquility” included the continuous use of violence as a form of exercising power and expanding control over territories (Araújo Silva, 2017; Burgos, 2008; Cano and Duarte, 2012; Da Motta, 2020; Mesquita, 2008; Misse, 2011; Pope, 2023; Rocha and Da Motta, 2020; Zaluar and Conceição, 2007).

Over time, these militia groups became associated with politics, electing parliamentary representatives to act as the institutional arm of their interests (Alves, 2003). Networks of influence and cooperation were established with police, politicians, community leaders, and state officials, guaranteeing access to resources, reducing conflicts, and limiting combat by state authorities (Arias, 2013; Arias e Barnes, 2017; Manso, 2020; Mendonça, 2014).

We can mention two important milestones in the recent history of Rio de Janeiro that highlighted the militias, identifying these groups also as a category in the world of Rio crime: the kidnapping of journalists from the newspaper *O Dia*, in the Batan favela, in 2008, and the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI das Milícias) chaired by the state deputy at the time, Marcelo Freixo, in the same year. From then on, researchers in the field of urban violence began to look more carefully at this phenomenon, at the same time that public opinion paid some attention to this new formation of groups with territorial dominance.

Over these 20 years, conflicts and territorial disputes intensified between militia members and drug trafficking organizations, as well as between different groups of militia members who fought for the monopoly of territory to maintain their businesses,

which also changed. At the same time, the perception that residents had of these groups as "protectors" of the localities was relativized, mainly due to constant armed conflicts and economic super-exploitation promoted by militia members (Carvalho, Rocha and Da Motta, 2023; Da Motta, 2024).

Although we have expanded studies on the phenomenon, due to the nature of the topic, its specificities, and its little materiality, we are still far short of producing information in the field of urban studies and illegalism that is capable of capturing the dynamics and modes performance of these actors in the world of crime.

In recent research on the "siege" experienced by residents living in territories dominated by drug trafficking or militias, Carvalho, Rocha, and Da Motta (2023) highlighted that the forms of the presence of groups in the territories, the relationships established with local institutions, the social composition that characterizes each group, the economic resources explored and the relationships established with the local population are fundamental elements for understanding the new ways in which the groups operate and the perception of the residents on the different experiences of violence in their daily lives.

In territories identified as "in dispute", the category "war" is constantly used, both by residents and the mass media, to explain conflicts and justify changes in residents' routines, which are constantly altered and put at risk. The actions of militia members and drug traffickers in the *favelas* of some neighborhoods in the Zona Oeste have changed in recent years, and we have noticed a symbiosis between the practices that characterized and distinguished each of them. However, here we

are interested in understanding the instability that characterizes "war" as a government technology (Grillo, 2019; Magalhães, 2021) and the classification of disputed territories.

If, as Cano and Duarte (2012) indicated, the militias, in the early 2000s, acted discreetly to demonstrate their power in the territories, the new generation of militia members would be more willing to diversify their activities and dispute territories to expand their domains. We have identified that in a series of locations, drug trafficking organizations, and militia groups would be carrying out "consortium operations", in which one would manage territorial control and the retail sale of illicit drugs, while the other would economically exploit certain local resources, such as security fees, residential gas, and illegal cable TV, among others (Carvalho, Rocha, and Da Motta, 2023).

These configurations have produced new "territorial regimes" in several locations in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Leite (2014 and 2017) adds that the process of installing the pacification policy in the city generated incredibly different forms of regulation, resulting in a type of government of the poor, inscribed in the territory, which articulates different forms of power. The current context of the city of Rio de Janeiro's criminal world has also produced situated and specific forms of action and territorial control, as well as negotiations and resistance.

The first and classic experience of this type of territorial control in the Zona Oeste began in the late 1960s, in Jacarepaguá. During this period, the so-called *polícia mineira* were formed, a type of militia with a strong community character. The myth of the origin of this organization came from an alleged robbery that injured a merchant with a bullet, causing

residents and merchants to organize themselves to put an end to the criminals who were causing problems in the region, contributing to the representation of the *favela* as an unsafe place (Mesquita, 2008).

In the following decades, according to Mesquita (ibid.), there was a “rigging” of the residents’ association by the *polícia mineira*, especially after the struggle for housing in the community, orchestrated by the institution. After a series of internal splits between political groups and members of the *polícia mineira*, a nucleus of power came together in the region, with deep relations with the civil police. The residents’ association was transformed into a kind of “Local Leviathan” (Burgos, 2008), a mimesis, on a smaller scale, of the State that channeled community demands and exported services and consumer goods. This overlap between local collective action and the paramilitary domain of the *polícia mineira* produced a type of police order that, despite being extremely authoritarian, guaranteed residents a state of “tranquility” and some guarantee of the exercise of daily routines; and, in return, the community supported local politicians (Mesquita, 2008).

This mode of action expanded to other neighborhoods in the region that became known for the “tranquility” that this form of territorial control maintained. As a field interlocutor revealed:

Everyone felt very calm walking around Taquara because there were the polícia mineira there. In the center of Taquara, there has always been private security for the stores controlled by a politician from the region, and everyone knows who he is. The consensus has always been that Taquara is calm because it has private security. The names were changing.

In fact, it has always been a militia. It's just that people didn't call it a militia. The militia is in focus so much that now everyone is a militia member, but at the time Taquara was calm because it had a polícia mineira. It was calm concerning urban violence. Praça Seca was calm as well. This all changed with the arrival of a new militia and the expulsion of some residents here. Some young men who were from the community ended up going into drug trafficking, it wasn't a common thing there either. (Interview with a woman resident, white, 44 years old, 2022)

In the AP5 Zona Oeste, a group with similar rhetoric and practices emerged in the formal neighborhood of Campo Grande, which would gradually become the largest and best-known militia in Rio de Janeiro, the *Liga da Justiça* [Justice League]. We can identify four moments of the Campo Grande militia, according to Da Motta (2024): the first, a type of “proto-militia of police officers” that had the purpose of managing order and profiting from security fees, preventing organizations from drug trafficking invaded the territory. Then, two civil police brothers unified these dispersed police officers into an organized group with the same purpose of ordering the territory and ended up launching their candidacies for parliamentary positions, a strategy that consolidated the power of the militias in Rio de Janeiro.

Alves’ research (2003 and 2008) on the activities of extermination groups in Baixada Fluminense [Translator’s Note: Region of the state of Rio de Janeiro that encompasses the municipalities of Guapimirim, Magé, Duque de Caxias, Nova Iguaçu, São João de Meriti, Nilópolis, Belford Roxo, Mesquita, Queimados, Japeri, Paracambi, Seropédica, and Itaguaí],

especially the formation of the *Esquadrão da Morte* [Death Squad], offers us clues as to what would be a model of criminal activity that brings together public security agents, local politics, gambling, extortion, homicide, drug and weapons trafficking. In this scenario of criminal disputes, three agents are essential for this mechanism to work. In addition to drug traffickers and militia members, security forces, especially police officers from the area's Military Police Battalion (BPM), make up the triad that manages these conflicts. Intertwined in this scenario, residents of *favelas* and neighboring areas experience a daily life of uncertainty.

After the brothers' arrest, two other leaders ascended to power in the organization, this time from the military police. At that time, territorial expansion and an increase in revenue began, led by irregular van transportation (Da Motta, 2024). The militias' CPI, carried out in 2008, forced the group to reduce its overt presence in the territories and maintain discretion in economic activities to avoid penalties (Cano and Duarte, 2012). In the mid-2000s, both groups acted in a very similar way, focusing on managing order in the territory and profiting from services, goods, and votes. Each group managed to expand its domain to nearby areas: *polícia mineira* expanded into the Jacarepaguá region, and *Liga da Justiça* expanded from Campo Grande to Santa Cruz. Even though each militia, in each territory, has autonomy and local leaders, in a certain way they were all subordinated, in some sense, or had close and friendly relationships through one of these two poles.

In the recent history of militias, especially in AP5, other actors entered the scene. The Três Pontes brothers, at different times, significantly expanded the role of the militias. After

Carlinhos' death, the first of the Três Pontes, his brother, Ecko, continued his form of action, being responsible for a significant change in the dynamics of the militia groups' actions. In addition to charging security and protection fees, characteristics that identified the activities of these groups, as recent literature has shown (Cano and Duarte, 2012; Zaluar and Conceição, 2007), the Três Pontes brothers innovated the militia's actions in three points: a) with the permission to sell drugs in territories under its control – until then the exclusive domain of organizations linked to drug trafficking; b) replacing the moralizing narrative that supported, for a long time, the justification that the militia would be a lesser evil concerning drug traffickers, with a permissive action not only with the sale but with the use of drugs in the *favelas*; and c) and suspending armed conflicts against rival organizations and militias (Manso, 2020; Da Motta, 2024). The militia no longer wanted to rid the area of drug trafficking, but rather to make an agreement with the traffickers and profit from it. "Prejudice against drug sales is a thing of the past, after all, Carlinhos Três Pontes had joined the militias for drug trafficking. The affinities between drug traffickers and militia members were much greater than their differences" (Manso, 2020, p. 165).

Carlinhos Três Pontes was killed in 2017. Ecko's task, who died in June 2021, was to continue expanding the militia with his other brother, Luís Antonio da Silva Braga, known as Zinho. Manso (2020, pp. 163-164) explains that Ecko's strategy to expand his group's dominance consisted of forming a kind of partnership with small militia groups:

Ecko and his gangs became the main front for the militias' expansion into other territories. He also innovated in growth

strategies, forming partnerships in Baixada Fluminense and the state countryside, with businesses similar to franchises, in which he offered support, armed security, and political contacts to small businesses, in exchange for a portion of the profits [...]. The focus on horizontal partnerships favored expansion through a model similar to franchises, which earned Ecco's group the nickname "Firma" [firm]. Decisions were decentralized, except for the most relevant ones, such as murders and new tax collections, about which the chief had to be consulted. In the event of conflicts, depending on the opponent's weapons, Ecco could offer men and weapons to protect allies. In other words, the Firma functioned as an umbrella militia, charging protection fees to small militia members.

Like his brother, Ecco was not a PM and had no formal connections with public security institutions. The *Bonde do Ecco* [Ecco's Gang] inaugurated another modality of militia action in the territories, based on the expansion of territorial control, the diversification of economic activities, and agreements between the most diverse criminal groups. If the partnership was not successful, co-optation was a commonly used instrument, as occurred in the favelas of Santa Cruz, under the control of *Comando Vermelho*. This form of action also contributed to a significant increase in armed conflicts in regions dominated by this faction.

With the reduction in drug sales in tobacco outlets, drug trafficking suffered a considerable loss in income. As Hirata e Grillo (2019) point out, the crisis and the consequent loss of consumption power of the population affected both legal and illegal businesses, not restricted to the dynamics of robbery and reception, but also drug trafficking. Manso (2020, p. 165) adds:

Ecco began to take advantage of the labor of employees from the drug-dealing spots of invaded communities, offering salaries and tasks under the new management. The measure attempted to use the "crias" [people born and raised in the favelas] to deal with the residents' estrangement from the new command, trying to reduce threats of reports and betrayal. For converted drug dealers, the new career path represented less risk, as there was no need to exchange gunfire with the police or face successive operations.

Carlinhos Três Pontes and Ecco were fundamental to the expansion of the militia and its reconfiguration. If, in the past, "moral projects" (Cano and Duarte, 2012) were one of the pillars of support for the militia, including economic ones, with the brothers' arrival in power the "moral projects" were replaced by a strictly economic logic. The group has increasingly entered the real estate market, whether building buildings or selling protection – with this venture being one of its main sources of income. Taking advantage of the fact that areas under militia control suffer less police repression due to operations and raids, militia members can achieve relative peace of mind to promote their illicit businesses. This "double advantage" of the militia was fundamental for its expansion to other areas of the city (Geni e Observatório das Metrópoles, 2021).

About a month after Ecco's death, the newspaper *O Globo* reported an intense dispute between the different groups that made up the *Bonde do Ecco* in areas of Santa Cruz and Campo Grande (Heringer e Soares, 2021). In addition to the disputes between the militia groups and drug trafficking, with Ecco's death, a dispute was established, within the group itself, between the third brother, Zinho,

and the former ally, Danilo Dias Lima, known as Tandra. Furthermore, other franchise leaders tried to break the agreements made with the murdered leader. In this dispute, several other deaths occurred.

The war in Praça Seca

Praça Seca is a good case to analyze the reconfigurations of disputes between militia and drug trafficking. The neighborhood is located in the greater Jacarepaguá, located in AP4, with 63,284 inhabitants, according to information from the 2022 Census. Seventeen *favelas* are located in the region, which borders neighborhoods in the Zona Norte [north zone] (Vila Valqueire, Campinho, Cascadura, and Quintino), in addition to Tanque, a sub-neighborhood of Jacarepaguá. The main access road to the neighborhood is Rua Cândido Benício [Cândido Benício Street], where buses pass and the four stations of the Bus Rapid Transit – BRT Transcarioca are located (Ipase, Praça Seca, Capitão Menezes, and Pinto Teles). Three *favelas* present themselves as the main stages of disputes: the São José Operário *favela*, known as Morro da Barão, the Chacrinha *favela*, and the Bateau Mouche or Batô *favela*.

Considered a place of passage, because it is halfway between the neighborhoods Tanque (Zona Oeste) and Madureira (Zona Norte), Praça Seca arises from Praça Barão da Taquara, the official name of the two large squares, crossed by Rua Cândido Benício and the BRT station. Today the two squares are surrounded by fences placed by the city hall. The square on the right, towards the north, has a fountain that was revitalized and returned to operation in 2023; and on the left side, there is a bandstand

listed by the State Institute of Cultural Heritage (Inepac). Both monuments are part of the neighborhood's memory. The name Praça Seca became popular due to a contraction of the term Visconde de Asseca, the donor of the land where the neighborhood developed.³

To build a timeline of the actions of militias and drug trafficking in the neighborhood, we combined the reports of interviewees, informal conversations, and newspaper reports, especially from the newspaper O Globo, between 2005 and 2007.⁴ We identified that drug trafficking is actively important in the 1990s, especially in Morros da Barão and Batô. According to those interviewed, during this period this presence did not constitute a problem for the life of the neighborhood, especially because this form of violence rarely went beyond the borders that limit the space of the hills and the space outside the favela, on the streets Barão, Baronesa, Doutor Bernardino and Capitão Menezes, as well as rua Cândido Benício and Praça Barão da Taquara. However, according to reports, there was a feeling of increasing violence in the neighborhood, with street robberies and car thefts.

On the other hand, in the same period, in Chacrinha territorial control appears to be that of another armed group far from the influence of drug trafficking. The violence experienced by residents relates to the actions of extermination groups or the polícia mineira who maintained relations with the Residents' Association and were seen as community leaders. The group offered a type of cleansing for thieves, drug users, homeless people, and all types of people who did not share practices considered morally appropriate by them, but they also guaranteed some conservation actions and improvements in the locality. This type of "moral project"

(Cano and Duarte, 2012) generated a feeling of security and protection among residents that contrasted with the region's *favelas* dominated by drug trafficking.

This territorial division of the neighborhood began to become turbulent in the 2000s when police officers from the 18th BPM, responsible for policing in Jacarepaguá, carried out an operation in Morro da Barão and remained there. Using, mainly, the argument of guaranteeing security for the neighborhood's residents in opposition to the dominance exercised by drug trafficking, the group appointed themselves as the protectors of the *favela*.

According to residents' reports, the group of police officers who occupied Morro da Barão had support from community leaders who worked in Chacrinha and established a partnership. After a while, the Bateau Mouche *favela* was also occupied by this group, offering tranquility to the local residents. This ability to pacify the neighborhood generated legitimacy with the local population, as one resident states:

What I know is that they say that he [referring to the head of the local militia] was raised here and he was in the police and left the police and became a militia member. Now together with who I don't know. That's all I know. But in his time it was very different. He didn't force anyone. He was very respected in the favela. You didn't see any mess. You didn't see dirty words. He had his militia group, but he respected everyone. Now there are people when they come here that a woman can't pass by... If I pass by with shorts that size, old the way I am, they start messing with us. In his time we had more respect. Then it turned into a big mess. But after the others took over it became a mess. (Interview with a woman resident, white, 50 years old, 2022)

The consolidation of the militia's dominance also generated political opportunities for the then community leader Luiz André Ferreira da Silva (Deco), who ran for the position of councilor and obtained just over five thousand votes, remaining as a substitute. In 2006, he took up his seat in the city council and legislated between 2/1/2007 and 12/31/2008. He also ran for re-election and significantly increased the number of voters, receiving 12,497 votes, but he also remained as a substitute and legislated in 2011, for three months. This period coincided with the consolidation of the militia group in Praça Seca.

Sentenced to ten years in prison in 2011, he managed to remain free after appeal. The following year, he lost his legislative position due to administrative misconduct. In 2016, Deco was arrested and accused of qualified homicide and conspiracy. In his place, another leader was left, known as the O2 of the militia in Praça Seca. Even though his successor was highly respected by the community's residents, it was at the end of his administration that things began to change in local daily life. According to a resident, the payment of fees was not a practice of the former militia members who controlled the neighborhood's *favelas*, only recently were these extortions put into practice by local militia members.

This issue of charging fees came a year before [name of the militia member] was arrested, I think he was influenced by people from other communities who were dealing with this issue of fees and I don't know what, and put it in his head and he started charging water fees. He felt he had the right to charge for the water since he was the one who put the water in the community. He was the one who bought the pump, so he was the one who charged you the pump fee

because he had spent R\$18,000.00 on the pump so the community could have water, so it's only fair that you pay him. There wasn't an overt structure of: I'm charging you because it's my place, I'm charging you the water fee because I was the one who bought the pump. They really did, which doesn't happen now. Now people charge water and security fees. (Interview with a woman resident, white, 44 years old, 2022)

Even though fees are inconvenient for favela residents, some fees are legitimized by them. The case of water, mentioned by the interviewee in her report, is not questioned and is perceived as an improvement in its supply. However, over time, the Praça Seca militia became more sophisticated in its form of economic activity in the communities. The reports of two other residents are symptomatic in this regard:

Resident: *They charge us. They want us to buy gas from them. When we don't have the money they start cursing. They say: look, you're not going to pay this month, but next month we want to double the amount, which is for this month and next month. And since I live in an Alley, they keep saying: these people from the Alley don't move for anything, leave them alone, we're keeping an eye on them. They do this to us, understand?*
 Researcher: *Do they go to houses and knock on the door?*

Resident: *They knock... They arrive [sound of clapping] Resident! Resident! Security! When we have money we give it to them, when we don't have it we don't give it to them.*

Researcher: *And how much is it?*

Resident: *R\$50.00 per resident, business is more expensive, it depends on the business... Let's say, if I am a manicure I pay R\$50.00 a week, if I have a thrift store, then it's a different amount.*

Researcher: *Is the security fee charged every week?*

Resident: *No, per month. But businesses are charged every week. Money. Money, child.* (Interview with a woman resident, white, 50 years old, 2022)

At the moment, if I'm not mistaken, the militia is not in charge. There is a war going on for the militia to take over Praça Seca. Something I don't think it has achieved yet. So at the moment, residents are not paying fees, and businesses are not paying taxes. But in the past, until two years ago, if I'm not mistaken, my boyfriend talked a lot about the warehouse where he works distributing beer. They were constantly approached... They were approached and yes, the militia members asked for fees, and when they realized that it was a business that could probably make a lot of profit, they... charged exorbitant fees, charged fees to residents. And yes, they make this differentiation depending on the house, depending on the business, the fee increases. (Interview with a woman resident, white, 28 years old, 2023)

We understand that this type of economic activity is configured as government technology aimed at the poorest population and has been called "parasitic entrepreneurship" (Carvalho, Rocha and Da Motta, 2023; Da Motta, 2024). Such initiative is a rational and creative way to produce new economic arrangements and profits. Drug trafficking and militia undertake a type of economic logic that manifests itself in their territorial practices, imposing themselves through force and the capacity to mobilize violence. This imposition appears to be parasitic, because it takes advantage of the initiatives and innovations of other people or groups, obtaining profit through them. By placing themselves in the place of local normative authority, these criminal groups impose, in an authoritarian and violent way, a type of "tax" on economic enterprises and political and cultural actions.

For *favela* and outskirts residents, this process of super-exploitation to which they are subjected contributes even further to their impoverishment, especially in the political-economic context of rising prices and mass unemployment, as found in Brazil. This has increasingly created discontent among residents, contributing to strains and conflicts with local governance.

From the militia members's perspective, there is a field of opportunity directly related to the rational and creative capacity to produce new economic arrangements and profits. Not surprisingly, as shown by one of the research interlocutors, the militia charges residents and businesses differently. Busier establishments pay a higher amount, just as larger houses pay higher amounts.

The feeling that Praça Seca is at war is not new; The first records in the media of intense shootings between members of the drug trafficking and militia groups, for control of the *favelas* in the Praça Seca region, date back to 2013. The article "Milícia deu golpe no tráfico" [Militia staged a coup in trafficking], published in the newspaper *O Dia*, in November 2013, reveals that, since the beginning of that year, disputes over control of Morro da Barão had already left a trail of homicides due to betrayal committed by militia members. According to the report, the militia members had made an agreement with the traffickers, but did not fulfill it and, in addition to keeping the money from the sale of the *favela*, they reported the drug-dealing spots to the PM (Antunes, 2013). The militia members also formed a place that became known as the Militia UPP [Pacifying Police Unit].

After this specific conflict, a critical event reshaped the landscape of urban conflict in the Praça Seca neighborhood. In 2017, there

was a split between two leaders in the Praça Seca militia. Despite being part of the same organization, the relationship between them was never good. According to the *Extra* newspaper report, after Dande's arrest, Lica tried to dominate the Chacrinha region, an area controlled by Dande. However, other leaders from nearby areas opposed this attitude, preventing Lica from annexing his partner's territory (Soares, 2018). In 2018, they expelled Lica and her family from the Bateau Mouche *favela*, sealing the group's split. Since then, Lica would have allied with the *Comando Vermelho* to retake his territory. According to the report, the former militia member joined other dissatisfied militia members in the organization. Lica and *Comando Vermelho* drug dealers invaded Batô in February 2018 and inaugurated a period of daily conflicts in the neighborhood, as revealed in the *G1* news:

Also according to police officers, a kind of consortium was formed with criminals from communities such as Formiga, Cidade de Deus, Barão, and Covanca to invade the Bateau Mouche favela last Friday. The invasion took place during the afternoon and was caught on video (see at the top of the report). In the images, more than 20 people dressed in black and with rifles arrive at the community. (Martins, 2018)

We can point to the year 2018 as a time frame that characterizes the Praça Seca favelas as territories in dispute. From then on, the conflicts that already existed in the region intensified alarmingly. Between 2018 and 2023, the neighborhood appeared in statistics and newspaper headlines as one of the most dangerous in the city of Rio de Janeiro due to the number of shootings that occurred in the favelas and on the main access road to the neighborhood, Cândido Benício Street.⁵

Life under the "siege of terror"

In recent years, the Praça Seca neighborhood has become a scene of war where militia groups fight with drug trafficking organizations for territorial control. Police operations have become routine in the lives of residents, to mitigate the war or help one side, weakening the enemies. Authors such as Grillo (2019) and Magalhães (2021) argue that the idea of war has become institutionalized as the only political response to the problem of public security. In addition to the increase in armed conflicts between different organized crime gangs, the State currently understands the "war on drugs" or "crime", materialized in police operations, not as a repressive resource among others, but rather as the main policy. This has generated what Menezes (2015) called an overlap with variations in intensity between the "crossfire" and "minefield" regimes. In other words, at certain moments, it is the exchange of gunfire that captures the attention of *favela* residents; After the ceasefire, the concern about monitoring and not becoming infected with either side of the war underpins the subjectivity of this population.

Living in areas like Praça Seca, which sees, daily, several gunfights, police operations, invasions by enemy gangs, and the like, causes residents of these areas to create anticipatory mechanisms to "read the climate" of the community (Cavalcanti, 2008) and minimize the risks to their "ontological security": the guarantee of the continuity of the individual's self-identity and the constancy of the environments of social and material actions that surround them (Giddens, 1991). Residents

of this region of the city created a series of strategies to be able to live and carry out their routines in a profoundly violent context.

Mainly because we are already used to it and as we get used to it we also create strategies and maneuvers and perceptions concerning the environment in which we are inserted. To be able to... get out of a situation when necessary or know that we can be there in that place and that it's peaceful, anyway. So, to avoid these conflicts at the moment, we actually don't avoid them much, because we need to live, we need to be on the move. So, we need to go to work, we need to come back from work. My boyfriend, for example, works in pet shop delivery and business, especially the delivery business, it is very quick and so, sometimes you can't refuse a customer or something. So you end up going even though you hear a gunshot and so, it's a lot, we develop this perception of... For example, I woke up in the morning hearing gunshots. Ah, the shots don't seem to be that close. So I know that on the streets I'm going to pass until I get to the bus stop to go to work, the situation will be calm. So, we go out anyway. (Interview with a woman resident, white, 28 years old, 2023)

The report of this interlocutor who lives near Morro da Barão elucidates the strategies necessary to be able to live in contexts of acute conflict. Even though there is the unpredictability of the conflict and the material need to take risks, as in the case of her boyfriend who works in delivery and cannot refuse orders, over time residents have created different ways of staying aware of the environment and trying to, when possible, minimize these conflicts. The sensorial dimension, such as the sound of gunshots, is a clue that helps residents orient themselves and navigate this conflictive territory.

So I realize that here, people kind of get stronger through people, right? So, if you see there are four, or five people there at the bar. Ah, there are people on the street, so I'm going to go for a walk, I'm going to walk my dog. But if you pass by a street where there is no one, you avoid that street, so that's basically it, we kind of know where the specific shooting points are. For example, the shootings that always happen near me are on Rua Capitão Menezes [Capitão Menezes Street]. So I know that here, in a way, I am protected. But it can happen, as happened, for example, on Teachers' Day when there was a shooting and I was in the middle, I was on the street returning from a delivery with my boyfriend. It was the day after Teachers' Day. And then the street was quiet, there were no shots in the morning, there were no shots at any time, but anyway, the police officers who are usually in a certain place on the street, heard shots and went and overtook that place where they usually stay, they usually don't go beyond that limit, but they did and went after the shots and started to exchange fire and my boyfriend and I were in the middle, we were going around to get the car into the village. That was a situation that surprised me because my street, as I said, is a very quiet street and it's a place where I know there won't be any problems if I go out with my dog at 10 pm. (Interview with a woman resident, white, 28 years old, 2023)

In another part of the report, the resident explains the importance, again, of the sensorial dimension; this time, of vision. Orienting yourself through people is an effective strategy, since if the street is busy, then everything is calm; but if it is deserted, it can symbolize that something is happening or about to happen. Living in a region “at war” means being hostage to unpredictable situations like the one narrated by

the interlocutor. Even though there is a sensorial dimension that helps in maintaining routines, unpredictable situations are also part of the daily lives of these residents and, at these times, there is not much to do, just try to get out of the line of fire, as happened with the interlocutor who entered a village to get out of the crossfire.

The perspective of war is activated at all times when the interlocutors refer to the shootings and the strategies involve sound identification (where it is coming from), sensory identification (deserted streets, little movement), and social networks are used as a place of irradiation of information as one of the interviewees reveals to us:

That's funny. It even reminds us of official country wars because it is regional. It's not the neighborhood. Then the whole neighborhood doesn't know. The whole neighborhood just listens. Ah, there was a thing there in Chacrinha. Now, nowadays, when there is, for example, the invasion of drug trafficking to remove the militia, there is a lot of shooting, there was a recent one in Campinho. And then the police come up to take down the drug traffic and then the militia returns. This does affect the population. People who are here, outside the favela feel it. To give you an idea, This fight happened on Tuesday... The shooting started and I said, it's in Menezes, guys, I think we better stop because the bullet could come here. Then we started seeing social media and everyone in Praça Seca was talking about it, but the thing was in Campinho. It won't affect here at all, here where we are won't be affected, the center of Praça Seca won't be affected but there's no point, when there's a fight like that between drug traffickers and the militia it seems like Praça Seca is involved, it turns into a war of Praça Seca. (Interview with a man resident, black, 40 years old, 2022)

One of the characteristics of the conflict in Praça Seca is the fact that the gunfights were not restricted to the favelas that make up that belt. Increasingly, we have an overflow of conflict in the formal areas of the neighborhood, which has generated a significant increase in the feeling of insecurity and risks in the neighborhood as a whole. Another interlocutor, who lives on the other side of Praça Seca, close to Rua Quiririm [Quiririm Street], located in another neighborhood, tells how he navigates living in the neighborhood.

And, man, do you know what I did? I left there to take [wife's name] to work, early in the morning, at six in the morning, man, every day was a surprise. First of all, I would wake up, and put it on TV, I expected to start that Fachel [TV Globo reporter], right, in the morning so I could get an overview of what the region was like. Because every single day he was there, that was obvious. And then, man, bizarre things have happened, bro, like, I was going to Cândido Benício in the morning with the kids and with her in the car. And out of nowhere the traffic stopped, and the police officer ordered the traffic to stop, I stopped, and when I looked ahead, look, the police officers were lying on the ground, firing rifles into the alley, right, from there in Chacrinha. And people running and I see people from Chacrinha shooting the police too, bullets hitting the road, the BRT window, bro, glass breaking, understand? Yeah, spark on the wall, from the confrontation, bro, it was surreal. It's 6:00 in the morning, bro. Man, I've seen a lot there, I've seen a lot, every morning was a different surprise. Not to mention that bro, there are checkpoints all the time because the siege is starting to close in there. So I would pass by a checkpoint all the time, I was stopped, and my car drew a bit of attention... It's like, the stop is really bad,

bro, the atmosphere is very tense, you don't have a day of peace, bro, you don't. I've had to go back several times because they closed the street there. Like, I'm going there, the street closed, I had to turn back because they set things on fire. I've even been through gunfire. Having to speed up the car and run past, because they were shooting down the street I crossed. Surreal, brother. There it really is, bro. So, man, there are favelas that say they are much worse, but even though they are worse, the confrontation, the conflict there, I don't think any place in Rio de Janeiro has. Honestly, I've never heard of it. (Interview with a man resident, black, 32 years old, 2023)

Walking daily through the streets of the Praça Seca neighborhood has become a major risk of death. The intensity and magnitude of the conflicts are understood as something exclusive to Praça Seca, although several other regions of Rio de Janeiro also suffer from the problem of gunfights, nothing compares to what is currently happening in the region. The uncertainty and risk are so high that they caused this interlocutor to move from the neighborhood where he lived most of his life, nurturing different emotional feelings. The fear of putting his family in danger made him make this decision.

Although we can see a repertoire of actions that seek to minimize risks and ensure safety, Praça Seca is currently defined by a strong indetermination and uncertainty that capture local daily life. Even though the interlocutors of this research were categorical about the fact that the gunfights are concentrated in specific areas, such as the region's hills, such events still manage to cross borders and spill over into the neighborhood as a whole. We argue that Praça Seca is currently going through a type of "siege by terror" (Rocha, Carvalho, and Da Motta, in press).

Inspired by the reflection of French sociologist Boltanski (2013), when explaining that domination through terror is a type of domination in which people find themselves, totally or partially deprived of freedom, amalgamated in deep asymmetries, with explicit violence as a fundamental element. In these situations of oppression, criticism and the possibility of questioning are excluded from the oppressed; and the actions of the dominators do not need to be justified; violence and fear are the elements of coordination of social life in this context. Even though the author is using an ideal-typical conceptualization, the description seems very pertinent to the reality experienced by the residents of Praça Seca.

The siege by terror, which we identify in this work, is a type of life experience that subjects residents to living conditions marked by fear, insecurity, and unpredictability. Violence erupts at any time, transforming any area of the neighborhood into a “war scene”.

Conclusion

This work sought to show how the Praça Seca neighborhood went from a peaceful region, controlled by traditional territorial regimes,

to a war field in which criminal organizations, militia groups, and police dispute the region and the management of peace. In this plot, it was noticed that, over time, a series of changes can be seen in the actions of local criminal groups, modifying the forms of life traditionally established in the neighborhood. The war, so named by the people, by those who live daily in these territories, has spread to all regions of Praça Seca, to a greater or lesser extent, and has produced what we call a siege by terror.

In this scenario, residents are forced to develop a repertoire of anticipatory mechanisms to anticipate situations where violence erupts, ensuring the maintenance of their physical integrity and mitigating risks. Despite this effort, one of the main characteristics of the siege of terror that devastates the communities in dispute is the unpredictability of moments of violence. At any moment, the streets of Praça Seca can become scenes of war, deepening what the philosopher Butler (2022) called precariousness. In other words, the residents of Praça Seca are subjected to a type of situation in which death is a necessary device for the maintenance of those who have a dignified life. Whether through police operations or the governance of criminal organizations or militia groups, residents of the region feel exposed to violations, violence, and death.

[I] <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0353-1424>

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Aplicação Fernando Rodrigues da Silveira, Departamento de Ciências Humanas e Filosofia. Rio de Janeiro, RJ/Brasil.
carvalho.nique@gmail.com

[II] <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5271-0106>

Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais. Campinas, SP/Brasil.
jonathan.jntn@gmail.com

Notes

- (1) Armored vehicle, with small side openings for handling firearms, used by the military and civil police in operations in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Its name alludes to the symbol of the Special Police Operations Battalion (BOPE) and the high degree of lethality produced.
- (2) This article was written based on the results of the research *Milícias, facções e precariedade nas periferias cariocas: um estudo comparativo sobre as condições de vida nos territórios periféricos frente ao controle operado por grupos armados* [Militias, organizations and precariousness in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro: a comparative study on the life conditions in peripheral territories in the face of control operated by armed groups] (2022), carried out by the authors, with other researchers, within the scope of Cities: urban research center at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro [State University of Rio de Janeiro] (UERJ). Fieldwork in Praça Seca is still ongoing through the research project *Dinâmicas da violência urbana nas periferias do Rio de Janeiro: os efeitos do crescimento de grupos armados na vida dos moradores da zona oeste* [Dynamics of Urban Violence in the Outskirts of Rio de Janeiro: the Effects of the Growth of Armed Groups on the Lives of Residents of the Zona Oeste], coordinated by Monique Carvalho, with the participation of scientific initiation fellowship holders (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico [National Council for Scientific and Technological Development] – CNPq) Antonia Coutada and Sara Soares da Silva.
- (3) For the historical formation of Baixada de Jacarepaguá and Praça Seca, see Costa (1986), Magalhães (2017), and Maldonado (2023).
- (4) As reported in the Introduction, the ongoing research currently has a database with 200 records of news about the militia, drug trafficking, violence, shootings, and related topics in Praça Seca, especially about the Batô, Chacrinha, and Barão favelas from 2005 to 2023.
- (5) Data can be found at the Instituto Fogo Cruzado [Fogo Cruzado Institute] (www.fogocruzado.org.br) and in newspaper records, such as: "Fogo Cruzado: Praça Seca é o bairro com mais tiroteios em março" [Cross-fire: Praça Seca is the neighborhood with the most shootings in March] (*O Dia*, 03/31/2019); "Praça Seca teve 11 dias seguidos de tiroteios em março, indicam dados do Fogo Cruzado [Praça Seca had 11 consecutive days of shootings in March, according to data from Fogo Cruzado] (*G1 News Portal*, 03/31/2021); "Com guerra de bandidos, número de tiroteios na Zona Oeste dobrou em 2023, aponta Fogo Cruzado [With the war of criminals, the number of shootings in the Zona Oeste doubled in 2023, according to Fogo Cruzado]" (*G1 News Portal*, 6/19/2023).

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Translation: this article was translated from Portuguese into English by Karla da Fonseca Muzy, email: karlamuzy@yahoo.com.br

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