Some of the most limiting constraints on future U.S. urban military actions are not going to be technological or operational. They are going to be legal and political. Recent U.S. and coalition operations in the Balkans and elsewhere have been marked by heated controversy over target selection and have demonstrated the difficulty of balancing the often competing concerns of avoiding collateral damage, minimizing risk of U.S. casualties, and maximizing military effectiveness.

To be sure, legal and political constraints are not independent of technological and operational constraints—expanded capabilities or new operational concepts may provide means of reducing or avoiding collateral damage and enhancing force protection, and they may inform the public perceptions that drive legal and political constraints. But, in planning for urban combat, the most salient limitations on U.S. military action are often self-imposed, in the form of adherence to international legal norms and restrictive rules of engagement to satisfy public and diplomatic pressures.

Urban environments pose enormous difficulties for those planning and conducting military operations within the boundaries of international law and self-imposed political constraints. The speed and agility of air power, combined with its ability to deliver firepower precisely and with relatively low risk to U.S. personnel across the spectrum of conflict, often make it the military instrument of choice for policymakers. However, the heightened risk of collateral damage when operating in urban environments partially offsets U.S. technological superiority and provides adversaries with expanded opportu-
nities to exploit U.S. adherence to certain norms. As a result, the urban combat options available to planners and decisionmakers are generally far narrower than the domain of the feasible.

The primary purpose of this report is to place urban air operations in their legal, political, and diplomatic context and therefore lay the foundations for assessing United States Air Force (USAF) urban warfare capabilities across the range of potential tasks. “Urban operations” are defined for this purpose as any operations (from humanitarian aid to conventional war) on terrain that is dominated by man-made features, whether it is a small town or large city. The report gives particular attention to urban military operations other than war (MOOTW), because air operations in this context are especially difficult and may become common, but the issues presented throughout much of the text apply to conventional combat operations as well. It also draws heavily on strategic air campaign planning experiences during the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars and, more recently, NATO operations over Kosovo because, although these operations do not lie at the center of this research, they spotlight the most salient competing pressures that constrain planning of all air operations.

After briefly outlining the key principles and relevant provisions of the international law of armed conflict regime, the report addresses the following issues:

- What difficulties will planners face as they design urban operations within international legal parameters? (Chapter Two)
- How are these difficulties exacerbated or supplemented by political constraints on U.S. military operations? (Chapter Three)
- How might adversaries attempt to exploit for tactical or strategic gain the operational inflexibility imposed by U.S. adherence to legal and political constraints? (Chapter Four)

The report concludes by discussing the potential for technological advances in certain key capability areas to mitigate the effects of legal and political constraints (Chapter Five), and by offering conclusions to guide planners and policymakers in the future (Chapter Six).

It is critical to address all of these issues in a single discussion because law, politics, technology, tactics, and strategy all form a
single system. Law and politics drive strategy, which in turn drives tactical decisions and efforts to promote certain technologies. But both evolution in strategic doctrine and technological changes affect public expectations, which in turn drive politics and sometimes ultimately law. All of this occurs while potential adversaries change their own strategy and tactics in response and develop or incorporate new technologies as well. This report seeks to explain not only how legal and political constraints will influence future air operations but how future air operations will influence those constraints.