**Executive Summary**

The study presented here seeks to examine the role of the civilian population in the dynamics of war based on the case study of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This war serves as a current and unique example of intense interaction between an attacking state (Russia), a defending state (Ukraine), the population caught in between (Ukrainian), and the international system. The study systemically analyzes the interrelationships between the parties involved in the war in four dimensions: the actors’ strategic objectives, their approach to the population, the means at their disposal (military, political, economic, and psychological), and the strategic and operational interaction between them. The unique contribution of this study lies in its holistic approach to understanding the growing influence of civilians on the modern battlefield.

The study highlights **the increasing centrality of the “digital front” in the modern battlefield, the growing power of civilians in combat, and the difficulty state actors have in controlling the civilian population.** Both Russia and Ukraine view the Ukrainian population as a key anchor for weakening the rival system. The civilian population shapes the war in multiple dimensions: for the attacking state it is a “military obstacle,” for the defending state it provides an opportunity to weaken the enemy; it is both an “involved” and “uninvolved” factor in the warfare that significantly impacts the dynamics of the conflict and international involvement in it.

There was hope in the Kremlin that Ukrainians would come to terms with the occupation, and **at the beginning of the invasion, Russia placed restrictions on the use of military force against civilians. However, the failure of its surprise attack led to the loosening of these constraints** and their near-complete disappearance later on. Russia did not hesitate to deliberately target civilians to achieve military objectives and sought to instill fear through systematic air strikes on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the winter of 2022–2023. Alongside this, Moscow pursued psychological, diplomatic, and economic efforts to undermine the relationship between the Ukrainian government and its citizens and to convince audiences in Russia, the West, and the Global South that Russia’s actions were humane. To subjugate the occupied population, Russia implemented measures of repression and Russification, forced the population to migrate into its territory, conducted a referendum on annexation, and disconnected residents from Ukrainian media channels.

**The Ukrainian government saw mobilizing its public as one of its strengths in thwarting the Russian attack.** Kyiv developed a mechanism to encourage the population to support the armed forces by supplying equipment and providing support packages for partisan warfare and popular resistance against the occupation. The Ukrainian public had been trained before the war to critically consume information, and mechanisms were built to block Russian information and fill the “information space” with Ukrainian sources. The Ukrainian government even leveraged Russian atrocities against its citizens to gain Western support (the “Bucha effect”). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s leadership and his mastery of the skills necessary to succeed on the “digital front,” especially at the onset of the war, and the existence of strong regional leadership integrated into military governance mechanisms played key roles in mobilizing the Ukrainian public to resist the Russian occupation.

Massive economic assistance and the absorption of millions of refugees by the United States and other Western countries strengthened the resilience of the Ukrainian state, enabling it to provide basic services to the population and thereby complicating the situation for the Russian military. The West sought to capitalize on Russia’s harm to the population to extract a political price from Moscow.

**The pressure Russia exerted on the Ukrainian population backfired, causing it significant strategic damage.** Contrary to Russian expectations, the government in Kyiv received strong support from the public, which underwent an accelerated anti-Russian political transformation: a willingness to resist the occupation grew among the people and they lowered their expectations regarding the basic services they received from the government during the war. While the West sought to separate the local Russian-Ukrainian conflict from the global Western-Russian conflict, the harm to civilians connected the two due to the centrality of individual rights in the Western liberal ethos. The harm to Ukrainian civilians increased the readiness of the Western public to sacrifice their own prosperity to assist Ukraine, expanded the legitimacy of tighter sanctions against Russia, and provided Kyiv with more resources to fight against Russia. However, Russia managed to mitigate the impact of the sanctions by working with the Global South (meaning countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America) which are less sensitive to civilians being harmed. The Russi an public was also convinced of the necessity of harming the Ukrainian population, as this message was conveyed to it by the state-controlled media.

In the final analysis, **the Russians failed to psychologically defeat the rival Ukrainian system by exerting multidimensional pressure on the population.** In fact, this strategy was a central concept in its “New Generation Warfare” approach, which guided Russian military thinking regarding the invasion. It is difficult to determine whether this concept is fundamentally flawed, or whether it was simply not executed properly by the Russian army. The rapid collapse of southern Ukraine and the lack of defensive forces in Kyiv in the early days of the war suggest that better Russian planning and more resolute execution might have led to far more severe consequences for Ukraine.

The war demonstrated that **the aspiration to minimize harm to civilians, as expressed in Russian training materials, was a vague principle and there was no practical mechanism for implementing it**. The Russian army did not prepare its soldiers for intense interaction with the civilian population, particularly not for respecting its rights and maintaining the purity of arms. Even if Russia’s political leadership did not set out to inflict widespread harm to civilians or commit war crimes, these became inevitable due to Russia’s military weakness, the pressure to achieve results at any cost, the delegitimization of the Ukrainian nation by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime, the lack of tools for dealing with civilians at the tactical level, the lack of precise weapon systems (rather the opposite – excessive reliance on tactics using statistical methods), the political and military echelons’ tolerance of violence and abuse, the lack of legal enforcement regarding war crimes, and the use of irregular military forces. The forced migration of the population to Russia and the Russification policy implemented in the occupied territory could potentially support claims, at least by some experts, of genocide and ethnic cleansing by Russia in Ukraine, even without actual mass murder having taken place.

**The Civilian Population as a Factor Shaping Conflicts in the Digital Age: Main Conclusions and Takeaways**

The unique characteristics of the war in Ukraine require extra caution. One must avoid the direct application of conclusions regarding the civilian population’s influence on this conflict to other conflicts. However, several relevant insights may be derived to benefit Western countries, including Israel, regarding conflicts in the modern age where the “digital front” is of paramount importance.

1. **The civilian population is not just an “obstacle” for military forces but in fact a sub-system within the military ecosystem.** It can be a central shaping factor in modern military conflicts, especially those involving intensive ground warfare, and it can deeply influence the dynamics of warfare and the parties’ ability to achieve strategic objectives.
2. **Harming the civilian population can introduce a global ethical angle to local conflicts.** Restrained conduct by an army toward an enemy population can positively impact international freedom of action (vis-à-vis states, public opinion, and corporations).
3. **The main innovation in the war in Ukraine is the exponential increase of civilians’ influence on the “digital front.”** The digital environment served not only as a means for disseminating messages to the public broadly and rapidly but also as a factor shaping the methods of action and as a thread linking all the players and dimensions of the conflict. It enabled broad, continuous, and real-time interaction between the leadership in Kyiv and the Ukrainian public, between the Ukrainian civil society and the armed forces, and between Western civilian organizations and Ukrainian society, accelerating the influence of events on the ground on public discourse and political decision-making. Digital innovations allowed the parties to “play the entire field,” integrating various aspects of warfare (military, political-diplomatic, economic, and psychological) in their activity vis-à-vis the civilian component in the conflict, and attempt to compensate for other warfare systems’ weakness with digital means.
4. **The difficulty in changing policy positions of the rival leadership by applying pressure on civilians has become more pronounced.** It is difficult to predict the civilian population’s behavior during war, and applying pressure may lead to a hardening of the public’s positions.
5. **The blurring of boundaries between the military-security and the civilian spheres and between “involved” and “uninvolved” parties has intensified, challenging the norms of international humanitarian law**, including concerning combatants hiding among civilian populations and the right to destroy the enemy’s economic-national infrastructure, for example in the energy sector. At the same time, the difficulty to influence the conduct of the conflict in real-time using legal warfare and the weak deterrence power of future punishment has become increasingly apparent (given Russia’s rejection of universal jurisdiction).
6. It is both possible and advisable to prepare for warfare on the “digital front” by learning from the conflict in Ukraine and recognizing that the enemy is doing the same. From a defensive perspective, early preparation aimed at educating civilians to be ready for psychological warfare is highly important. From an offensive perspective, saving “operational surprises” for the war itself is becoming increasingly important. The eight years of Russian-Ukrainian conflict preceding the war helped Ukraine and the West learn Russian information warfare patterns and develop countermeasures that made the Ukrainian public more immune to Russian influence. There is a tension between “broad but limited” preparedness and “adequate” preparedness for a national emergency. Ukraine’s preparations were far from perfect, but they were done on national and regional levels and allowed for learning and improvement “on the fly.” However, inadequate preparations contributed to the rapid loss of vast territories in the early days of the war, and if not for the Russians’ own failures and a “compensation mechanism” in the form of massive assistance from the West, the damage to Ukraine could have been irreversible.

**Takeaways for Israel**

1. Civilians’ importance on the battlefield is expected to increase in Israel’s future conflicts. **More significant organization and planning than in the past are required to factor in this element in strategic and operational planning** while taking into account the heightened risk of estimation errors.
2. **The centrality of the population’s role must also be taken into account in all aspects related to planning aerial operations**. In Israel’s future conflicts, the Air Force is expected to be a dominant component in the use of force in a civilian environment, which will impose constraints on the Air Force’s operations and affect the ability to achieve objectives.
3. In future conflicts, **Israel’s enemies may shamelessly use the civilian population to achieve strategic objectives based on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine** to incite civilians on the battlefield, governments and public opinion in the West, and international corporations.
4. The image of the rival parties in the international arena is established quickly and difficult to change. To create strategic freedom of action during a crisis, **it is vital that Israel pre-plans its campaign on the “digital front” and begins to implement it routinely**. This includes, among other things, the use of public diplomacy tools vis-à-vis governments, public opinion, and organizations, primarily in the West.
5. There is a need to **develop technological and content tools** to gain advantages on the “digital front” in the civilian sphere during times of conflict. It is worth examining whether Israel can also enlist an “army of volunteers” both domestically and globally as part of its toolkit.
6. Despite the deep organizational and cultural differences between the Russian army and the IDF, the war in Ukraine powerfully demonstrates **that military operations on the ground within the civilian population have ramifications on the strategic level** that can influence the balance of achievements in the war.
7. The war in Ukraine **reinforces the importance of the IDF’s existing operational approach, which balances fulfilling military objectives and minimizing the use of force against civilians**.
8. It is important to examine Israel’s emergency preparedness in light of the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine. The Ukrainian case illustrates that preparing the Israeli public for war should be ongoing and unrelated to alerts of impending danger. It should be based on an assessment of Israel’s enemies’ capabilities and intentions and their potential impact on the Israeli home front.

**Introduction**

The Russia-Ukraine war – the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II, serves as a test case for the interrelationships between a state exerting significant military force (Russia), a defending state (Ukraine), a population caught in the middle (Ukrainian), and international actors, i.e. Western countries supporting Ukraine and exerting “hard” influence on Russia, and Global South countries (countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America), most of which are maintaining strategic ambiguity, thereby providing Russia with “breathing space” amid the pressure it faces from the West.

[GRAPH]

The current study aims to examine how the civilian population affects the dynamics on the modern battlefield at the strategic and operational levels, based on the test case of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. To this end, the interrelationships between the parties involved in this war have been systemically analyzed in relation to the issue of civilians in the conflict space.

The study addresses questions regarding how the interrelationships between the involved parties and their relation to the civilian population shape the nature of the conflict, how they constrain the actions of the attacking state (Russia) and affect its achievements, in what way they impose constraints and provide opportunities for the attacked state (Ukraine), and how the issue of harm to civilians influences the willingness of international actors to intervene in the war. In addressing these questions, we sought to establish a broad knowledge base regarding the approaches and measures, and their effectiveness when applied to the civilian population in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, this study examines what is new in this conflict compared to past conflicts with regard to the civilian population’s influence on the dynamics of war, and how this may be expressed in future wars.

The focus of this study is the civilian population in Ukraine, which is both an active and passive participant in the war. We analyze the interrelationships between this population and the four actors involved in the war (Russia, Ukraine, Western actors, and Global South countries). The analysis was conducted across four main dimensions: the actors’ strategic objectives, their general approach to the population in relation to these objectives, their toolkits’ characteristics, and analysis of the interaction between them.

We argue that in the Russia-Ukraine war**, the population is a sub-system within the ecosystem of the war.** This sub-system is becoming central in modern military conflict; it can profoundly influence the parties’ ability to achieve their strategic objectives as well as the dynamics of warfare. The Ukrainian population has been shaping multiple dimensions of the battlefield and the strategic interaction among the actors: as a military obstacle for the attacking state, as an opportunity to weaken the enemy for the defending state, as an active player on the battlefield and in the psychological sphere, and as a player whose degree of “battlefield involvement” is ambiguous. These roles outline the dynamics of relationships among all the actors involved and deeply affect the conflict itself, particularly due to the increasing power civilians hold in the digital age.

**The Structure of the Study**

**Chapter 1** provides a theoretical foundation and will address the Western, Russian, and Ukrainian perceptions of the role and importance of the civilian population in the conflict zone. The next three chapters (Chapters 2–4) will examine the study’s analytical matrix vertically (see the diagram) and expand on the actors’ perspectives. For each actor, the strategic objectives and their implications for the Ukrainian population will be analyzed, the general approach to realizing these objectives in relation to the population will be characterized, and the action methods used in relation to the population will be presented.

**Chapter 2** will analyze the Russian side, **Chapter 3** will focus on the Ukrainian government’s perspective, and **Chapter 4** will discuss the international actors, with an emphasis on the Western camp, and more broadly on the Global South countries. **Chapter 5** will focus on the horizontal dimension of the analytical matrix, and based on an analysis of the actors involved in the conflict, will examine their interrelationships: first, in terms of strategic goals in relation to the war and the Ukrainian population and subsequently by exploring their use of various tools, with a comparative discussion of each of the four tool families used in the analysis.

**Chapter 6** will present the main conclusions arising from the analysis of the Ukrainian case study regarding the potential dimensions of the civilian population’s influence on future conflicts and derive recommendations for Israel.

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**The Russian Perspective: Civilians as a Lever for Exerting Continuous Pressure on the Opposing System**

While Western literature and militaries deal intensively with the status and fate of civilians in warfare, both theoretically and practically, the discussion of this issue in the Russian military has atrophied in recent years. In general, Russian authors are very critical of the excessive importance the West attaches to civilian rights and “humanitarian interventions,” seeing them as a means for the West to justify involvement in conflicts in order to promote its global dominance. Having said that, the need to minimize harm to civilians in the context of kinetic warfare does appear in Russian military academic literature but it is underdeveloped, particularly regarding practical aspects.

The Russian Ground Forces’ combat regulations, which have not been updated since 2005, give only marginal attention to the interaction between the army and civilians. Out of approximately 200 pages, only half a page is devoted to this issue, without specifying that every soldier is required to be familiar with international humanitarian law and to behave humanely toward civilians. The sections dealing with the conquering of urban areas rarely mention civilians, except for the need to take their movements into account as they may interfere with the army’s activity. The Russian army’s routine regulations mention soldiers’ obligation to behave in a civilized manner toward civilians, their lives, and their property, and place responsibility on commanders to ensure that this is done. However, the war in Ukraine points to a significant gap between the regulation guidelines and the soldiers’ and commanders’ actual behavior, making the statements in these documents, which were approved and signed by Russia’s president, a dead letter.

For example, an article on the seizure of Ukrainian population centers by Russian marine forces published in 2021 in the leading Russian military journal *Voyennaya Mysl* does not focus at all on civilians’ protection; it does not even mention civilians but analyzes optimal methods for attacking population centers using fire strikes, dismantling enemy systems in the city, purging urban areas of the enemy, and more. The issue is also not mentioned in the booklet *A Brief Guide on Military-Political Work for Graduates of a Military Higher Education Institution,* which was published in October 2022 and presented on the Russian Ministry of Defense website as recommended reading material for officers. Negative reference to harming the civilian population appears incidentally in a single sentence in one of the guide’s 86 pages and is described as a possible by-product of desertion.

In Russian discourse over the course of the war in Ukraine, the principle of protecting Ukrainian civilians is marginal. Furthermore, Russian public relations call for the punishment of the Ukrainian population, to the point of erasing cities and foregoing self-restraint in using force. In Russian opinion journalism, the blurring between civilians and fighters is salient: civilians are portrayed as “spies” and “saboteurs” who are “run by the Ukrainian security service and military” who therefore should be treated as fighters rather than “uninvolved parties.” A booklet for Russian soldiers and conscripts published during the war by the Afghanistan Veterans Organization noted that the erosion of boundaries between the civilian and military components in the Ukraine war legitimizes the use of violent measures against civilians in the conflict zone (including arrests, investigation, forced evacuation, and more). The booklet was available on the Russian Ministry of Defense’s education website for months and was removed in January 2023.

At the same time, the Russian army’s modern military approach, known as New Generation Warfare (which we will explore further in the second part of this study), regards the civilian population primarily as an obstacle or a zone of operations. New Generation Warfare is a collection of concepts based on Russian military thinking from the Tsarist and Soviet eras to the present day, which also corresponds with modern Western military thought. Regarding the civilian population, New Generation Warfare does not deal with the rights of civilians in conflict zones and ways to protect them, but rather with the need to influence the enemy’s public consciousness in order to achieve victory in war.

At the core of the analysis of reality on which the New Generation Warfare approach is based lies the assumption that in contemporary conflicts the line between the civilian and military-security spheres is blurred and that the West has been waging hybrid warfare against the Russian government and people for decades in an attempt to turn the Russian population against its leadership. The New Generation Warfare doctrine views civilians as an integral component of the enemy system. That system can be weakened by exerting continuous pressure on the population before and during the kinetic confrontation. Therefore, the focus in dealing with the civilian component in the enemy’s system is on influencing its consciousness by demoralizing and instilling fear in the population. The goal is to break the civilians’ spirit and cause them to put pressure on their political and military leadership to comply with Russian demands. The expectation is that kinetic force will serve as a final and decisive step following early and ongoing efforts to demoralize components of the enemy’s system, including the civilian population, thus minimizing the need for prolonged kinetic warfare.

**The Ukrainian Perspective: Mobilizing and “Victimizing” the Public as a Central Lever for Weakening the Opposing System**

The government in Kyiv places a central emphasis on illustrating the harm inflicted on the civilian population, collecting information about it, and leveraging it in the media as a means of undermining the legitimacy of Russia’s actions and encouraging the West to support Ukraine. An example of this is a series of visits by Western leaders in April 2022 to suburban areas of Kyiv that had been liberated that included tours of mass grave sites aimed at shocking the visitors from the West. While the Russian approach toward the civilian population in conflicts stems from military thinking that addresses all the types of operations the Russian military is required to perform, both offensive and defensive, the Ukrainian approach is primarily based on a defensive mentality. This approach is based on practices and norms that developed during the eight years of confrontation with Russian military aggression and subversive activity before the Russian invasion (2014–2022), as well as on ongoing efforts to adapt the Ukrainian military structure and training to NATO standards.

The doctrinal documents of the Ukrainian army emphasize the need to rely on the civilian population to resist the enemy. This is based on experience from the fighting in 2014, in which grassroots defense efforts against Russian aggression compensated for the failures of the regular Ukrainian army. It is possible that as part of Ukraine’s cooperation with the US military, the Resistance Operating Concept took root. This concept was developed by the US Special Operations Command to deal with the Russian threat in Eastern European countries and emphasizes popular resistance to occupation.

It cannot be said that the Ukrainian armed forces’ activities preserved the sanctity of civilians’ lives or their rights. Human rights organizations have accused Ukraine of violating international humanitarian law during this war (see Chapter 3). Throughout the war, there have been allegations of harm being done to those who collaborated with the Russians, with no trial. There are many testimonies regarding “popular punishment,” such as tying people to poles in public, and problematic practices toward prisoners of war. Previously, monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) determined that the number of civilians killed as a result of shelling incidents in the Russian-controlled part of Donbas between 2017 and 2020 exceeded the number of deaths on the Ukrainian side of the region. The Ukrainians attribute this to the complexity of defense management in their territory. The use of irregular and semi-regular units and acts of “popular punishment” are likely to contribute to such violations, but we have not found any evidence that the Ukrainian side is consciously exerting pressure on civilians to influence the positions of the Russian government.

**Summary and Conclusions**

The Russia-Ukraine war presents a unique case study of unprecedented scope and relevance of a multidimensional conflict between warring parties with the intense involvement of international actors and a profound impact on the foundations of the international order. The main significance and novelty of the current study lie in the systemic analysis of the civilian population as a factor shaping the dynamics between the warring parties, at both the strategic and operational levels, based on the Ukrainian case study. This approach seeks to take a broad, multi-disciplinary, and holistic view of the clash between the parties in relation to the civilian population.

This chapter seeks to examine future wars through the lens of the war in Ukraine. First, we will consider the Russian failures in implementing the New Generation Warfare approach to the civilian population that have emerged from the war in Ukraine so far. Then, we will discuss six central issues we chose as potential lessons concerning civilian populations from the war in Ukraine. Finally, we will examine what Israel and Western countries might learn from this war, what Israel’s enemies and authoritarian states can learn from it, and what follow-up research can be identified at this stage.

Extra caution is required when attempting to draw conclusions from the war in Ukraine and apply them directly to the strategic and operational reality of other conflicts, and when attempting to extrapolate generic insights about the nature of modern warfare. First, most conclusions from the war in Ukraine are context-dependent. The war between Russia, a large global nuclear power, and Ukraine, a large non-nuclear country that has received unprecedented support in recent decades from Western countries, is being conducted under highly unique circumstances. Military lessons are also context-dependent. For example, there are contrasting views among experts regarding the conclusions that can be drawn from the war in Ukraine regarding the future of maneuver battles or the relevance of armored forces. Second, it is difficult to isolate the reasons for success and failure: are the Russian military doctrines fundamentally flawed, or have they just not been executed properly? To what extent can Ukraine’s successes be attributed to the resilience and determination of Ukrainian society, given the massive assistance it received from the West? Third, the war is still ongoing, and we were able to make use only of the information available to us at this time.

**A Critical View of the New Generation Warfare Approach to Civilians in Combat**

The study establishes that one of the central ideas in the Russian approach to modern warfare (New Generation Warfare), the application of multidimensional pressure in an attempt to psychologically influence the enemy system, was a failure in 2022. This is particularly true regarding the pressure placed on the civilian population: not only did the Ukrainian system not collapse, but its leadership grew stronger and the population lowered its expectations regarding the quality and extent of services it would receive from the government during the conflict. The Ukrainian population underwent a rapid transformation in its positions, shifting toward extreme anti-Russian sentiment in the first weeks of the war, in stark contrast to the expectations of Russian military and strategic planners. However, since the autumn of 2022, Russia has increased pressure on Ukrainian citizens by systematically targeting vital civilian infrastructure, particularly in the energy sector, this conclusion is only relevant for the time being and must be revisited and reassessed based on information that will become available at the earliest in 2023.

Despite the initial conclusion regarding the failure of the New Generation Warfare approach, it is important to note that better planning and more determined and meticulous execution by the Russian army could have led to much more severe results for Ukraine in the early days of the war. The high level of secrecy in the Russian system led to the majority of military forces receiving combat orders only hours before the invasion and not making minimal preparations for it, which resulted in numerous failed operations in the first days of the war. At the same time, the rapid fall of southern Ukraine (where the Russian army apparently was more successful and Ukrainian collaborators helped Russia more), and the fact that Russian forces were very close to entering Kyiv, which was almost devoid of regular defending forces – may support the claim that the execution, rather than the doctrine, had failed. It is possible that setting more limited objectives, concentrating offensive forces in particular sectors, and better organized military preparation could have led to more significant Russian achievements. On the other hand, one could argue that flawed planning and execution (as opposed to theoretical thinking) are inherent characteristics of the Russian strategic culture, and therefore improved execution could not have been expected.

Current training materials for Russian soldiers express a negative attitude toward unnecessary violence and looting against civilians. However, even if the Russian army had prepared its soldiers well for the war, they would not have been ready for intensive interaction with the civilian population, certainly not in a manner that emphasizes respect for human rights and the purity of arms, as these issues are not addressed in any meaningful way on the Russian side.

A long list of factors contributed to the proliferation of war crimes and incidents of civilian casualties committed by the Russian army: the pressure placed on the Russian forces by their commanders and political leaders to achieve their goals at any cost; the delegitimization of the Ukrainian nation by the Kremlin and the Russian authorities; state-level tolerance for violence and looting; disregard for indiscriminate harm to the population caused during infrastructure attacks and justifying it on the grounds of security; the absence of a cohesive military approach to dealing with civilians including training on the subject for all soldiers and legal enforcement of accepted military norms in international humanitarian law; and a shortage of weapons systems that enable precise attacks (rather the opposite – excessive reliance on tactics using statistical methods). In light of all these factors, it is possible to say that the Russian aspiration to avoid harming civilians is nothing more than an abstract principle, a dead letter.

The reports of war crimes caused severe damage to Russia’s image in Ukraine and the West on both the popular and governmental levels. These reports led to an intensification of Western military and economic assistance to Ukraine. Furthermore, they impaired Moscow’s ability to achieve its war objectives through political arrangements. The hollow humanitarianism the Russian army sought to promote through its propaganda efforts failed to mitigate its violent image. However, information warfare helped to offset Russia’s reputational damage among its own public, preserve the Global South countries’ neutrality, and as the conflict continued, raise doubts in the West about the extent of assistance provided to Ukraine.

The strategic damage Russia suffered due to having harmed civilians highlights the importance of addressing mechanisms for restraining military force in a civilian environment in Western armies, including Israel’s. A military approach that balances the needs related to military operations with respect for the rights of the civilian population through appropriate training, weapons, and legal enforcement is highly important in modern warfare.

While population displacement (or “strategic engineered migration”) by Russia led to significant demographic changes within Ukraine, as of February 2023, it has failed as a means of exerting pressure on the opposing system and hindered Russia’s progress in the conquest of the country. This Russian practice may correspond to all four typological divisions that Greenhill proposes:

1. **Population displacement for the purpose of territorial annexation:** Territorial conquest became the central test of success or failure in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Moscow adopted comprehensive “demographic engineering” measures to encourage refugees to move into its territory, implemented a policy of Russification in occupied areas, held referendums on annexation, and issued Russian passports to citizens. Russification of the population also contributed to Putin’s systematic effort to reverse Russia’s population decline.
2. **Population transfer to undermine foreign governments:** Throughout the war, there was a noticeable Russian interest to undermine the Ukrainian regime by leveraging massive population migration from the occupied territories all across the country. Russia also sought to increase pressure on European countries that took in refugees.
3. **Leveraging refugee migration for purposes of deterrence and enforcement:** Russia has sought to use population migration, among other things, as a means of increasing pressure on Ukraine and Western countries. This pressure sought to bring about Ukraine’s capitulation to Russian demands for a ceasefire, to discourage European countries from providing assistance to Ukraine and impose sanctions on Russia, and to prompt Western countries to pressure Kyiv to compromise. The distinction between this section and the previous one is complex, and the division between them is intended to characterize Russian motivations and Ukrainian and Western concerns. While the actions on the ground are the same, interpreting them through information warfare tools among differentiated audiences promotes different objectives.
4. **Exploiting population migration to gain a military advantage:** Population migration through humanitarian corridors, in our view, served both sides as a tool for shaping the battlefield. Kyiv linked the humanitarian issue with arrangements for ending the fighting, through the same diplomatic channel, forcing Russia to make humanitarian concessions, including humanitarian corridors between the besieged areas and the liberated Ukrainian territory, in exchange for its willingness to negotiate with Moscow. These corridors thwarted Russian attacks and allowed Ukraine to organize its defense. The population migration forced Russia to allocate significant forces to control and manage civilians, particularly in the occupied areas, while the dedicated internal security forces brought to Ukraine did not prove themselves as a force multiplier and were involved in brutality against civilians, exacerbating the complexity of the occupation.

Demographic changes and widespread economic damage may cause long-term harm to Ukraine’s demographic base, thus promoting, at least partially, the original Russian strategic goal of dismantling the foundations of the Ukrainian state and nation. On the other hand, in the current digital age, the displacement of the population and its Russification in the occupied territory (based on Soviet-era concepts and practices) come at a heavy diplomatic and reputational cost for Russia in the international arena and may substantiate claims of genocide and ethnic cleansing, even without mass murder having taken place.

The war in Ukraine serves as an important case study for researching the exploitation of refugees as a weapon and the concept of “engineered population migration.” A more in-depth study is needed to examine the phenomenon of shaping the battlefield through the imposition of humanitarian arrangements on the rival party and the “weaponization” of refugee flows in war.

**The Civilian Population as a Factor Shaping Conflicts in the Digital Age: Conclusions and Discussion**

**Conclusion 1: The civilian population has an increasing influence on the parties’ ability to achieve strategic goals and on battlefield dynamics.**

The systemic analysis conducted in the framework of this study demonstrates that the population is not just a “military obstacle” but rather a sub-system within the ecosystem of the war, with an increasing influence on the conduct of operations on the battlefield in the current digital era. The population can create military, political, economic, image-related, and other challenges for the attacking country. In the war in Ukraine, the population played a crucial role in the ability of both sides to achieve their strategic objectives.

One may wonder whether the population’s increasing importance in conflicts is a general trend, or whether it is merely characteristic of technologically advanced societies or those who tend toward political activism. It seems the increasing penetration of digital communication in societies worldwide is establishing this phenomenon as universal in nature.

Within the limits of this study, it was difficult to calculate and weigh the populations’ impact on the battlefield. We demonstrated that its influence is intensifying, but avoided defining it as decisive. In consultations we held with experts in the field, we heard opposing views. On one hand, it was argued that it is unlikely that 30–40 million Ukrainians, each armed with a cellular device, would not bring about a dramatic change in the military balance of power. On the other hand, it was claimed that the influence on the battlefield attributed to civilians is exaggerated and that military forces remain the primary driver of change. The question of whether civilians are a decisive factor in modern wars or just one of their shaping factors requires further focused research.

In Western countries, including Israel, it is important to strengthen the focus on various aspects of civilians in warfare, regarding both routine and emergency operational plans. This is because the enemy may also draw inspiration from the war in Ukraine, whether by terrorizing the civilian home front or by creating difficulties for the IDF or Western armies through diverse forms of civilian resistance.

**Conclusion 2: There is an increased risk of failure in the evaluative-planning aspect in terms of predicting the population’s behavior and influence on policy decisions within the framework of strategic operational plans.**

The Russian failure to understand the characteristics of the Ukrainian population led to a military fiasco. On the other hand, the Ukrainian public’s resilience compensated for Kyiv’s suboptimal preparedness for war. The complexity of analyzing the population and the potential politicization involved in observing it from the rival perspective raise the risk of assessment failures in identifying trends related to the population before the conflict and in predicting the civilian population’s behavior in response to the use of force.

Even if the analysis of the population’s characteristics before the conflict is accurate, it is difficult to know with a high degree of certainty that the rival leadership will change its policy in response to pressure on civilians. This is particularly true when the object of influence is deeply tied to issues of identity. Russia’s failure (at least until early February 2023) to achieve significant strategic and operational gains by exerting pressure on the Ukrainian population is another historical example that efforts to weaken an enemy system through pressure on civilians during warfare may yield unexpected and sometimes adverse results. Attempting to influence a leadership by harming its population’s well-being may lead to the formation of a new kind of social contract regarding the scope of services provided to the public and lowered expectations by citizens from their government.

In the case of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it is evident that the Russian military pressure on the Ukrainian public was gradual, partly due to a lack of precise aerial munitions and possibly also due to Russia’s unwillingness to “go all the way” and damage Ukraine’s entire energy infrastructure during the winter. Had the targeted humanitarian impact been quicker and the West had not provided assistance to Kyiv, the humanitarian pressures on civilians and the government would have had a more decisive impact. When the war is over it will be necessary to reexamine the impact of deep-strike attacks on energy infrastructure to draw more definitive conclusions regarding the effectiveness of this tool.

Ultimately, it is vital to analyze the population and its impact on warfare. Intelligence work and strategic and operational planning in this context should be conducted. Given how elusive this issue is, methods must be used to minimize perceptual distortions and the influence of political lenses when studying the enemy’s population. It may be necessary to develop a new analytical model that will provide possible scenarios regarding the nature of the population’s involvement in warfare. Russia’s failure to influence the Ukrainian public’s positions toward its government calls for caution in the West and Israel in all matters related to influencing the consciousness of civilians in an enemy state, both during war and in routine awareness campaigns.

**Conclusion 3: It is both possible and advisable to prepare for warfare on the “digital front” by learning from the conflict in Ukraine and recognizing that the enemy is doing the same.**

The attacking state must prepare in advance for awareness campaigns aimed at influencing the population. In addition, it must keep “surprises” for real-time use and not expose them to the enemy prematurely. During 2014–2021, Russia laid the groundwork for information warfare in its broadest sense (technological infrastructures, distribution channels, and content) in the fields of cyber, digital warfare, propaganda campaigns, and political subversion. However, Russia’s use of the new tools it developed during these years led to many potential surprises being “wasted” that could have been used in actual combat, which provide Ukraine, NATO, and other actors opportunities for continuous learning. This window of time helped Ukraine strengthen its population’s information literacy, develop response mechanisms that reduced the effectiveness of Russian methods in warfare, and make the Ukrainian public more immune to Russian influence in the war. Therefore, the attacked state had the opportunity to prepare its population and immunize it against the rival’s influence efforts in the years leading up to the war.

There is a tension between “broad but limited” preparedness and “adequate” preparedness for a national emergency. Ukraine’s preparations were far from perfect, but the extensive focus on them across the bureaucratic establishment and in civil society, and the experience accumulated over eight years of confrontation with Russia before the war, helped the Ukrainian government and society make a rapid transition to emergency mode and allowed for learning and improvement “on the fly.” Great importance was attributed to the early organization in the provinces and at the local government level. Mechanisms connecting military authorities with local elected and appointed leadership contributed to Ukraine’s ability to withstand the attack. However, inadequate preparations contributed to the rapid loss of vast territories in the early days of the war, and if not for the Russians’ own failures and a “compensation mechanism” in the form of massive assistance from the West, the damage to Ukraine could have been irreversible.

There is no magic formula for the right level of preparedness, as focusing on training, defense, and shelter and maintaining reserves and surpluses depends on the resource capacity of the defending state. Transitioning to a state of emergency incurs costs and drives away investors, and Zelensky’s government used this reasoning to justify its reluctance to take many crucial steps. The Ukrainian case may indicate that “broad but limited” preparedness enabled the defending state to cope only partially with a surprise attack but made it possible to recover subsequently.

Israel’s adversaries may learn from the methods and practices used to prepare the Ukrainian population for war. This may reduce the effectiveness of Israel’s efforts to influence enemy populations in times of emergency. In particular, they may learn from the way the influence of Russian propaganda tools was reduced and civilian levers were successfully used vis-à-vis states, global public opinion, civil society, and international corporations. In circumstances where Israel’s close enemies (Lebanon, Gaza, and Syria) already have weak and vulnerable electricity infrastructure and the population’s socioeconomic status is deteriorating, targeting national infrastructures may prove to be less effective. It is also important to examine whether the enemy is preparing plans to encourage civilian resistance as a significant part of its attempt to thwart the IDF’s ground efforts.

Accelerating Israel’s emergency preparedness, including on the home front, relies partially on intelligence warnings. The Ukrainian case illustrates that preparing the Israeli public for war should be done continuously, regardless of immediate warnings, based on an understanding of the capabilities and intentions of Israel’s adversaries to affect the civilian sector. The existence of a comprehensive statutory infrastructure regulating aspects of national and local emergency preparedness and their connection to security mechanisms would help improve preparedness without relying on warnings and early resource investment. The relative ease with which the Russians inflicted severe damage on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure using Iranian-made weapons highlights the need to examine similar scenarios in Israel, including preparing the public for such events.

**Conclusion 4: Restrained conduct by the military toward the adversary’s population will expand Israel’s international freedom of action (vis-à-vis states, populations, and organizations); as perceptions are quickly established and difficult to change, public diplomacy is becoming increasingly important.**

The war in Ukraine demonstrates the risk involved in brutal behavior conducted by soldiers toward civilians or the civilian environment. Such behavior, even if not part of strategic and operational planning, severely damages the attacking country as it delegitimizes its military both in the eyes of the targeted population and in the international arena and carries the risk of sanctions initiated by major international corporations. This is particularly true if the attacking military lacks tools for dealing with the population, and its political and military leadership condones acts of violence and cruelty toward civilians.

Harm to the civilian population is a factor that connects the local-national dimension with the global and ethical dimension of the war. The harm Russia inflicted upon Ukrainian civilians has become one of the elements linking the two dimensions of the conflict - the battle over Ukraine’s national future and sovereignty, and the competition between the great powers for global dominance. The Ukrainians sought to convince Western public opinion and governments that Russia is harming civilians systematically and brutally to increase the West’s determination to act against Russia in the context of inter-power competition. The more the West strengthened its determination to weaken Russia, the more harm to civilians contributed to its readiness to provide Kyiv with greater political, economic, and military support. Human rights violations within a local conflict can be perceived as an issue of universal ethical importance and diminish the strategic freedom of action of a country accused of such violations.

The rapid establishment of perceptions in war: The war has demonstrated the ethical and political differences in the perception of conflicts between Western governments and publics versus non-Western countries. The effectiveness of Russia’s information warfare efforts in the political fringes of Western countries and in the Global South has become clearer. On the other hand, just as Russia struggled in 2022 to change its negative image and the negative perception of the goals it sought to promote among the Ukrainian public and the mainstream in the West, so too did Ukraine struggle to promote its positions in public opinion in Russia, on the political fringes in the West, and in the Global South.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that Israel’s freedom of action on the state level may be significantly influenced not only by state actors but also by international corporations and civil society in Western countries, which operate autonomously and independently of governments. Prominent examples include SpaceX’s assistance in making its satellite network available to the Ukrainian government (providing stable internet communication that was protected against Russia’s jamming capabilities), Microsoft’s support of Ukraine’s efforts to defend its networks from cyberattacks, and companies leaving the Russian market to punish Russia, even if they were not required to do so under the sanctions regime. In addition to the risk of using force against civilian populations, the war in Ukraine has emphasized the importance of early Israeli public diplomacy efforts aimed at expanding the legitimacy of the IDF’s actions. If Israel’s image is not positive at the beginning of the conflict, it may struggle to change it later on.

Regarding investing in public diplomacy in the Global South countries – it was difficult to determine how important it is for Israel to be more active in this area. Apparently, Israel already suffers from a disadvantage in terms of its public relations in this arena compared to its rivals, and it attaches importance primarily to its public legitimacy in Western countries. However, even in non-democratic countries, the public puts constraints on its government’s freedom of action and willingness to engage in business collaboration with Israel, so it is important not to neglect the Global South in this context. In any case, this issue merits future research.

**Conclusion 5: The growing importance of the “digital front” - The speed, continuity, and availability of modern information technologies, which connect the dimensions of action (military, political, economic, informational) and allow the parties to compensate for relative weaknesses. The “digital front” is the primary dimension where the population can participate actively in the war.**

Information technologies and the psychological dimension are a central connecting thread between all the actors and aspects of the conflict, and this seems to be the main innovation in the war in Ukraine regarding the population. Information technologies have enabled wide, continuous, and real-time interaction between the leadership in Kyiv and the Ukrainian public, helped build a civil support base for the Ukrainian armed forces, connected Ukrainian and Western civil societies, and allowed Kyiv to put pressure on Western governments by appealing to their publics.

All the parties involved in the conflict are “playing the whole field”: they integrate their various systems (military, political-diplomatic, economic, and psychological) when operating vis-à-vis the civilian population in the war, and try to compensate for one system’s weakness by using other tools. Therefore, it is difficult to confine the conflict to a single dimension. For example, Russia’s military failures prompted it to “weaponize” civilian fields (e.g. energy, food, population migration). While increasing the pressure on civilians did make it easier for the Russian army to temporarily control territories tactically, it also created legitimacy problems that led Western public opinion and governments to strengthen their support for Ukraine, thereby undermining Russia’s ability to achieve strategic objectives in the war.

The exposure of military forces to increasing civilian intelligence activities is becoming more significant than in the past. The civilian environment has become an auxiliary force in gathering intelligence on military forces before the start of the conflict and in real-time, including assistance in directing enemy fire. In some circumstances, as in the conflict in Ukraine, it may become a mechanism for recruiting civilian actors around the world to act on behalf of one of the fighting parties (e.g. by providing analyzed intelligence from open sources). On the other hand, a state actor seeking to enlist the public in an information campaign and intelligence gathering has difficulty concealing its secrets (the Ukrainians are struggling with the tension between sharing information and hiding it). This may not seem new, but thanks to changes in digital technology, the war in Ukraine has set a new benchmark for the speed of information flow, the proliferation of civilian sensors, and techniques for processing information from civilian sources and its depth of integration into warfare.

The question arises as to how concerned Israel should be about the potential mobilization of global civil society to assist its adversaries by providing “civilian intelligence,” as was the case in the global mobilization against Russia. This issue appears to be related to the perception of Israel’s legitimacy to operate, as well as its adversaries’ ability to rally international civil society for such efforts. Israel might not generate the same interest and hostility as Russia did among the Western public. This topic also merits dedicated and complementary research.

The challenge facing Israel regarding the empowerment of its adversaries’ populations through modern communication tools is partly technological and partly content-based. The Russian attempt to block the occupied population’s access to free communication often failed, and this approach seems inappropriate for Israel. We have no concrete solutions to offer regarding this challenge beyond simply shining a spotlight on the need to develop coping mechanisms in every dimension of action and across the dimensions.

**Conclusion 6: The blurring of boundaries between the civilian and military spheres and between “involved” and “uninvolved” parties is increasing, in a way that challenges the operational patterns of Western and Israel’s armies.**

The war in Ukraine has illustrated the increasing blurring of boundaries between the military-security and civilian realms and between “involved” and “uninvolved” parties, in a way that challenges the norms of international humanitarian law. This blurring pertains to the legitimacy of fighters hiding among civilian populations and the right to use aerial strikes to destroy the enemy’s national economic infrastructure, for example in the energy sector. The tension between the legal norm prohibiting the conduct of warfare from civilian areas and the legitimacy of such warfare in the eyes of the defending side, as well as the civilian population and the international community, including governments, has intensified on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides. The Russian legal argument that Ukraine’s energy infrastructure contributes to its security and is therefore a legitimate target has been rejected by the West.

The Ukrainians have managed to deter international human rights organizations operating in conflict areas from criticizing their combat operations in a civilian environment. This may teach Israel’s enemies that exerting public pressure on investigators from human rights organizations could help them promote one-sided reports against Israel.

The difficulty of using legal warfare to influence operational warfare in real-time has intensified and the deterrent power of post-war punishment is being challenged. Russia’s response to accusations of human rights violations and war crimes is to ignore, deny, and resist courts with universal jurisdiction. Ukraine sought to raise concerns among Russian soldiers that they would pay a personal price after the war if they are found to have committed war crimes. However, as long as the perpetrators remain within Russia’s territory, it will be difficult to punish them. This could limit their freedom of movement and affect them in other ways, but it seems that the sheer size of Russia mitigates the deterrent power of such punishment methods in the eyes of Russian soldiers, compared to soldiers from smaller countries. Time is needed to assess the effectiveness of this approach: the legal activity geared toward extracting a price from Russia and its soldiers for war crimes in Ukraine will take years. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether violations of international humanitarian law by Ukraine, as they occur, will trigger legal action in the West (although they may generate symbolic legal activity in Russia).

Israel also rejects the universal jurisdiction of international courts. However, the “deny and ignore” approach, which is possible for semi-autocratic Russia, appears inappropriate for Israel as it is closely tied to Western countries and deeply dependent on them. In light of this, the Israeli response to the challenge of military-civilian blurring requires updating the legal paradigm guiding Israel’s security forces and continuing to enforce it through military and civilian legal authorities, while balancing between restrained use of force toward civilians and fulfilling the military mission.

**Takeaways for Israel**

1. Civilians’ importance on the battlefield is expected to increase in Israel’s future conflicts. **More significant organization and planning than in the past are required to factor in this element in strategic and operational planning** while taking into account the heightened risk of estimation errors.
2. **The centrality of the population’s role must also be taken into account in all aspects related to planning aerial operations**. In Israel’s future conflicts, the Air Force is expected to be a dominant component in the use of force in a civilian environment, which will impose constraints on the Air Force’s operations and affect the ability to achieve objectives.
3. In future conflicts, **Israel’s enemies may shamelessly use the civilian population to achieve strategic objectives based on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine** to incite civilians on the battlefield, governments and public opinion in the West, and international corporations.
4. The image of the rival parties in the international arena is established quickly and difficult to change. To create strategic freedom of action during a crisis, **it is vital that Israel pre-plans its campaign on the “digital front” and begins to implement it routinely**. This includes, among other things, the use of public diplomacy tools vis-à-vis governments, public opinion, and organizations, primarily in the West.
5. There is a need to **develop technological and content tools** to gain advantages on the “digital front” in the civilian sphere during times of conflict. It is worth examining whether Israel can also enlist an “army of volunteers” both domestically and globally as part of its toolkit.
6. Despite the deep organizational and cultural differences between the Russian army and the IDF, the war in Ukraine powerfully demonstrates **that military operations on the ground within the civilian population have ramifications on the strategic level** that can influence the balance of achievements in the war.
7. The war in Ukraine **reinforces the importance of the IDF’s existing operational approach, which balances fulfilling military objectives and minimizing the use of force against civilians**.
8. It is important to examine Israel’s emergency preparedness in light of the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine. The Ukrainian case illustrates that preparing the Israeli public for war should be ongoing and unrelated to alerts of impending danger. It should be based on an assessment of Israel’s enemies’ capabilities and intentions and their potential impact on the Israeli home front.