**Executive Summary**

This report examines the role of civilians in modern warfare based on the case study of the first year of the Russian-Ukrainian war (February 2022-February 2023). This war provides a contemporary and unique example of intense interaction between an aggressor state (Russia), a defending state (Ukraine), the population caught in between (Ukrainian), and the international arena. The study offers a systemic analysis of the interactions between the parties involved in the war in four main dimensions: (1) the stakeholders’ strategic objectives; (2) their different approaches to civilians in armed conflicts; (3) the leverage tools at their disposal (military, political, economic, and information warfare); and (4) the strategic and operational interaction between them. The contribution of this research lies in its holistic approach to understanding the growing influence of civilians on the modern battlefield.

The study highlights **the increasing importance of the “digital front” in modern warfare combined with the empowerment of civilians whose impact on the dynamics of the war is increasingly felt.** As the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, **civilians in modern warfare constitute a sub-system within the broader ecosystem of the conflict,** thereby transcending their traditional roles as passive “obstacles” for an attacking military force or as an active partisan military force for a defending state. Through digital platforms and new digital infrastructure, civilians fulfill a wide variety of roles, including intelligence collection via smartphones, early warning for activation of air defenses, air alert phone applications, and grassroots collection of war crime evidence. Civilians have weaponized the digital space, influencing the dynamics of the battlefield and the stakeholders’ ability to achieve their strategic objectives, especially when it involves intensive ground warfare,

Both Russia and Ukraine have viewed the Ukrainian populace as a key anchor and source of leverage for weakening the enemy system. **At the beginning of the invasion, Russia placed restrictions on the use of military force against civilians,** in the hope that Ukrainians would come to terms with the occupation. Following the fiasco of its surprise military attack, Russia’s self-restraint gradually faded away until its near-complete disappearance later on. The Kremlin ceased to avoid collateral damage and even deliberately targeted civilians to achieve military objectives, seeking to instill fear through systematic air strikes on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the winter of 2022–2023. At the same time, Moscow made use of informational, diplomatic, and economic pressure 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 justified and humane. Russia implemented extensive repressive Russification measures in the newly occupied territories, forcing some of the local population to emigrate into the Russian Federation’s territory, conducting a referendum on annexation, and disconnecting residents from Ukrainian communication channels. All of these contributed to the subjugation of the local population.

**The Ukrainian government viewed mass civilian mobilization for the war effort as one of its main strengths in countering Russian aggression.** Kyiv rapidly 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. *Ante bellum*, the Ukrainian public had been trained to identify and counter Russian disinformation campaigns, and the Ukrainian government also adopted mechanisms to block Russian information while filling the information space with Ukrainian sources. *In bello,* the Ukrainian political leadership put a central emphasis on Russian war crimes against its citizens to awaken Western conscience and galvanize US and European support (the “Bucha effect”). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s leadership, using strategic communication and his mastery of the “digital front” especially at the onset of the war, combined with the existence of strong regional leaderships integrated into national military governance mechanisms played critical roles in mobilizing the Ukrainian public to resist the Russian occupation.

Massive economic assistance and the absorption of millions of refugees by the European Union 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 demonstrated determination 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 and caused significant strategic damage to Moscow.** Contrary to Russian expectations, the Kyiv government received strong support from the populace, which underwent an accelerated anti-Russian political and cultural metamorphosis. As the war unfolded, the Ukrainian public showed increased resolve to resist the occupation and lowered its expectations regarding the basic public services they received from the government. Initially, the West sought to uncouple the local Russian-Ukrainian conflict from the global Western-Russian conflict, yet Russia’s widespread harm to civilians connected the two conflicts – local and global – due to the centrality of civilian rights in Western liberal ethos. Russia’s atrocities committed against Ukrainian civilians increased the readiness of the Western public to make sacrifices to assist Ukraine, strengthened the legitimacy of tighter sanctions against Russia, and provided Kyiv with additional resources to fight against Russia. However, Russia managed to circumvent Western sanctions and mitigate their impact by deepening its cooperation with the Global South, countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America which hesitated to hold Russia accountable for civilian fatalities and damage. Through state-controlled media, the Russian public was also brainwashed to believe that harming the Ukrainian population was necessary. On Russian television, war crimes denial went hand in hand with a call for death and sacrifice and the unbridled justification of violence.

**During the first year of the war, the Kremlin’s exerting multidimensional pressure on civilians failed to weaken Ukraine’s resolve to fight.** Contemporary Russian military thinking (“New Generation Warfare” - NGW) recommended exerting informational, psychological, economic, political, and military pressure on civilians as a source of integral, systemic, and multidimensional leverage against the enemy system to be used *ante bellum*, mainly in peacetime.Using civilians as a channel to exert continuous and multifaceted pressure on the enemy system guided Russian operational planning and behavior both before the outbreak of hostilities and during the war itself.

The war has demonstrated **the difficulty of changing the rival leadership’s policy positions by applying pressure on civilians.** It has also shown how challenging it is to predict the civilian population’s behavior during war, and that applying pressure may lead to a hardening of the populace’s positions. Retroactively, it is difficult to determine whether the pressure-on-civilians operational concept is fundamentally flawed, or whether the Russian army simply did not implement it properly. 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 expressed in Russian training materials was a vague principle with no practical mechanism for implementing it**. The Russian army did not prepare its soldiers mentally and logistically for intense interaction with civilians on the battlefield, nor did it enforce any ethical code to preserve civilian rights and minimize casualties. Even if Russia’s political leadership did not initially aim to inflict widespread harm on civilians or commit war crimes, these became inevitable due to an aggregation of factors: the first two weeks’ military fiasco, the mental and logistical unpreparedness of the Russian troops, the pressure exerted on the lower-rank soldiers to achieve results at any cost, and the Kremlin’s long-term delegitimization and vilification of the Ukrainian nation. In addition, the absence of tools for dealing with civilians at the tactical level, the lack of precision-guided weapon systems (rather the opposite – excessive reliance on massive artillery fire and “dumb bombs”), the political and military echelons’ leniency towards soldiers’ violence and abuse, the lack of legal enforcement regarding war crimes, and the use of irregular military forces (Kadyrov’s and Wagner’s troops) amplified the violence against civilians. Ultimately, the deportation of civilians – including children – to Russia and the Russification policy implemented in the occupied territory support the accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide by Russia in Ukraine, even in the absence of a systematic mass murder policy.

**Civilians’ Role in Shaping Conflicts in the Digital Age**

Due to the idiosyncratic characteristics of the Russia-Ukraine war, one has to apply caution when drawing general lessons regarding the civilian population’s influence on the conflict’s dynamics. Nevertheless, one of the general and potentially long-term transformations that the war in Ukraine has demonstrated **is the exponential increase of civilians’ influence on the “digital front.”** The digital environment served not only as a platform for disseminating messages broadly and rapidly but also as an infrastructure shaping the stakeholders’ 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 Ukrainian civil society and the Ukrainian armed forces, and between Western civil societies and Ukrainians, both amplifying and accelerating the impact of the war events on public discourse and political decision-making. Digital innovations allowed the parties to integrate the conflict’s civilian component into various aspects of the conflict (military, political-diplomatic, economic, and information warfare) and enabled them to compensate for other warfare systems’ weaknesses (for example, using information warfare to compensate for a lack of immediately available weapon systems). The civilian-digital front nexus that emerged and crystallized during the war in Ukraine has several implications:

1. **In the digital age, harming civilians risks swiftly transforming local conflicts into global ones** due to the powerful emotional mobilization that viral images of war crimes may trigger.
2. **The blurring of boundaries between the military-security and the civilian spheres and between combatants and noncombatants has intensified. Those shifting boundaries also challenge the norms of international humanitarian law**, including those 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 means and the weak deterrence power of future punishment has become increasingly apparent (given Russia’s rejection of universal jurisdiction).
3. **It is both possible and recommended 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 “digital preparation” aimed at educating civilians to be ready for information warfare is of paramount importance. From an offensive perspective, saving “operational surprises” for the war itself is critical. 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. Also, there is a tension between “broad but limited” preparedness and “good enough” preparedness for a national emergency. Ukraine’s preparations were far from perfect, but they were done on national and regional levels and allowed for continuous adaptation, learning, and improvement. 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.

**Main Lessons for Israel**

1. Civilians’ importance on the battlefield is expected to increase in Israel’s future conflicts. **More significant efforts are required than in the past to factor this element into strategic and operational planning** while taking into account the heightened risk of misjudgment and miscalculation.
2. **The centrality of the populace’s role must also be considered in aerial operations planning**. In Israel’s future conflicts, the Air Force is expected to be a dominant component in operations in a civilian environment, which will impose constraints on the Air Force’s use of force and affect its ability to achieve its objectives.
3. **Israel’s enemies may cynically use the civilian population to achieve strategic objectives based on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine.** Israel can expect the mobilization of civilians on the battlefield, along with enemy efforts to galvanize governments, public opinion in the West, and international corporations to support it.
4. The image of the rival parties in the international arena crystallizes quickly and is difficult to change. To keep 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 during routine, non-emergency periods**. This includes, among other things, the use of public diplomacy directed at governments, public opinion, and organizations, primarily in the West.
5. Israel should **develop technological infrastructure and information content** to gain advantages on the “digital front” in the civilian sphere during times of conflict. It is worth examining whether Israel can 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 forces in the conflict.
7. The war in Ukraine **reinforces the importance of the IDF’s existing operational approach, which balances the principle of fulfilling military objectives with the imperative of minimizing the use of force against civilians**.
8. Israel should examine its emergency preparedness considering 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 war or an impending crisis. It should be based on an assessment of Israel’s enemies’ capabilities and intentions and their potential impact on the Israeli domestic front.