**Introduction**

The Russia-Ukraine war – the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II – is a case in point of the interaction 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 nations supporting Ukraine and applying “hard” power on Russia, and Global South countries (countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America), most of which have maintained strategic ambiguity, thereby providing Russia with “breathing space” amid the pressure it has faced from the West.

[GRAPH: TARSHIM A]

The current study aims to examine how the civilian population affects the dynamics of conflict on the modern battlefield at both the strategic and operational levels, based on the case study of the Russia-Ukraine war (February 2022-February 2023). To this end, this research provides a systemic analysis of the interrelationships between the involved parties through the prism of the civilian question.

Did the interaction between the involved parties and their relations to the civilian population shape the course of the war? How did its relations with the civilian population constrain the actions of the attacking state (Russia) and affect its achievements, and in what way did the civilian population impose constraints and provide opportunities for the attacked state (Ukraine)? To what extent did the issue of civilian casualties and war crimes shape the willingness of international actors to intervene in the war? In addressing these questions, we aim to highlight the conceptual approaches of the main strategic actors in the war between Russia and Ukraine with regard to the civilian population and the different leverage tools that these actors employed during the war. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify what is new in this conflict compared to past conflicts regarding the civilian population’s influence on the dynamics of war, and how the impact of civilians may appear 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, the Western camp, and Global South countries). The analysis was conducted across four main dimensions: the actors’ strategic objectives, their general conceptual approach to the population in relation to these strategic objectives, their operational toolkit (informational tools, military and political-diplomatic actions, and economic pressure of various sorts) used on civilians, and the interactive dynamics between them.

We argue that in the Russia-Ukraine war**, the civilian population has acted as a sub-system within the ecosystem of the war.** This sub-system is becoming central in modern military conflicts., and it can profoundly impact 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 in the following ways: as a military obstacle for the attacking state, as an opportunity to weaken the enemy for the defending state, and as an active player on the battlefield and in the information sphere, and as a player whose degree of combat participation is increasingly blurred. These roles outline the dynamics of relationships among all the actors involved and deeply affect the conflict itself, particularly due to the empowerment of civilians in the digital age.

**Outline**

The report is composed of four chapters. Chapters 1-3 expand on the actors’ perspectives. For each actor, we analyze its strategic objectives and their implications for the Ukrainian populace; we then define each actor’s approach to civilians and the civilian question in implementing these objectives and map out the action methods used by each actor on the civilian population.

**Chapter 1** will analyze the Russian side, **Chapter 2** will focus on the Ukrainian government’s perspective, and **Chapter 3** will discuss the international actors, with an emphasis on the Western camp, and general observations on the Global South countries.

**Chapter 4** 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 determine recommendations for Israel.

The present report is a condensed version of a larger research project published in Hebrew by Tel Aviv University’s Elrom Center for Air and Space Studies in February 2023. It was not updated in response to later developments in the war in Ukraine.

We would like to thank ELNET, the Executive Director of ELNET-Israel, Dr. Emmanuel Navon, and ELNET’s CFO, Omri Attar for their partnership and support in publishing our research in English. We are grateful to Professor Eviatar Matania, Dr. Assaf Heller, Dr. Tomer Fadlon, Prof. Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, Lt. Col. (Res.) Omer Dank, Lt. Col. (Res.) Yuval Kali, Roy Zilber, Uri Castel, and Osnat Zilberman, who each contributed in their own special way to the writing of the original research in Hebrew. Daniella Blau, Avi Staiman, Joshua Amaru, Nitsan Lear, and Miriam Blum were extremely helpful in translating and publishing the English edition.