

WAYS TO COMBAT RISKS AND THREATS TO THE CIVILIAN POPULATION DURING COMPLEX CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have been characterized by the return of some phenomena considered obsolete by history. Rivalries between great powers seemed to be a thing of the past, in an era of globalization and spread of democracy. Political-military conflicts endanger the stability and security of the international system, which causes chaos throughout society, especially among civilians who are not familiar with complex conflicts. Because of these wars, many civilians choose to leave their, “home countries” and face a lot of physical and psychological problems. From a psychological point of view, prolonged exposure to war is significantly correlated with psychological stress. Prolonged exposure to psychological stress, characterized by sustained negative emotional states, is frequently associated with detrimental outcomes across various aspects of mental and physical health which include somatic/psychosomatic disorders, anxiety, irritability, self-harming behavior, psychotic disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Because of the fact that the civilian population pays the highest price during wars, their protection and respect for International Humanitarian Law should represent key aspects of conflicts and a strategic and ethical imperative in all types of conflict.

KEYWORDS:

International Humanitarian Law, psychological problems, war

1. Introduction

Risk and threat are concepts that have been articulated through both implicit and explicit theories, as well as doctrinal approaches within the security domain; however, a clear consensus on their definitions appears to remain elusive. This research aims to conceptually clarify the terms with which we will operate in the analysis of risks and threats to the civilian population during complex crises, but without limiting ourselves to a simple review of existing definitions.

Dinu, Dolghin, and Sarcinski (2004) consider that a threat can be understood as a declaration of intent to inflict harm or

impose punishment on an individual who fails to meet specific established demands. Risk, in a general sense, can be defined as the gap between the anticipated positive outcome and the potential negative event that may transpire, along with its associated probability of occurrence.

Alexandrescu (2004) defined the risk as a multifaceted psychological process as a consequence of the comparative relationship between the probabilistic assessment of outcomes, success or failure, associated with an action directed toward an individually or socially meaningful aim. Preparing for future risks and threats requires serious monitoring of events and drawing appropriate lessons

from the past. Particular attention should be paid to the complex threats and hybrid warfare that are successfully being conducted by the Russian Federation in the Ukrainian conflict, as well as the negative impact that this conflict has on the civilian population.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how civilians are affected by complex conflicts, as they have become the center of gravity in military actions, as well as to present how to combat the psychological risks and threats to them.

2. The Risks and Threats to Which Civilian Population is Exposed during a Military Conflict

From a psychological standpoint, extended exposure to war is strongly associated with elevated psychological stress. Generally, stress responses interfere with human functioning without resulting in adaptation disorders. However, when the individual's "tolerance threshold" is surpassed, the stress overload becomes so intense that it triggers maladaptive responses, which are not goal-directed but instead focus on alleviating the prolonged psychological stress.

Based on the conservation of resources theory, proposed by Hobfoll (1989), individuals experience stress when there is a perceived threat to the resources essential for functioning effectively in particular situations. Psychological stress may also arise in circumstances where invested resources fail to yield satisfactory outcomes.

Terelak (2008) suggested that chronic psychological stress, characterized by prolonged negative emotional tension, frequently results in adverse outcomes. Chronic psychological stress may lead to a range of negative consequences, including somatic and psychosomatic disorders such as pain (e.g., stomach, muscle, or chest pain) and breathing difficulties; psychological issues like anxiety, irritability, uncontrolled anger, hostility towards others, social isolation, and passivity; self-harming behaviors, including self-injury, suicidal thoughts, or suicide attempts; psychotic disorders, primarily

characterized by depressive symptoms such as sadness, low mood, fatigue, feelings of helplessness, negative self-perception, and a lack of interest in activities; as well as disorder resulting from traumatic stress, which includes manifestations like unwanted recollections, irritability, emotional numbness, hypervigilance, and sleep disturbances. His study assumed gathering of 125 Polish soldiers from the Armored Cavalry Brigade who were deployed to Afghanistan in 2013-2014. They participated in a psychological evaluation that involved completing a series of standardized assessment instruments. The findings revealed no direct association between risk taking and the intensity of posttraumatic stress symptoms among Polish soldiers engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan. However, when controlling for the influence of neuroticism and impulsiveness within the examined group of soldiers, thrill seeking emerged as a significant predictor of PTSD symptomatology. The study highlighted the characteristic of sensation seeking, which, irrespective of its intensity, should not be regarded as a predictor of emotional disturbances. However, under specific conditions influenced by personality traits, a relationship between sensation seeking and posttraumatic stress symptoms may emerge.

Furthermore, a complex system of interactions exists between the individual and their environment, which can give rise to challenging psychological situations. These situations are marked by a dissonance between the demands of the external environment and the individual's capacity to meet them. In cases of conflict, such psychological situations become exacerbated. Such difficult circumstances include, but are not limited to: deprivation of essential biological and mental necessities; overload, where individuals are required to perform tasks beyond their physical or mental capacities; painful situations, involving the need to tolerate physical or mental suffering (such as insults, humiliation, or injustice); motivational conflicts, defined by prolonged

and exhausting decision-making processes with negative emotional implications; and physical or social threats, including the loss of social status or threats to one's life or health.

The types of difficult situations above do not exclude each other. They can manifest simultaneously or intersect at a given point in time. The situation of difficulties is intrinsically linked to psychological stress, which occurs when mental tension exceeds a certain threshold, commonly referred to as the stress threshold.

If the individual recognizes the situation as stressful, a process of stress adaptation is initiated. This mechanism is based on problem appraisal, in which the individual determines what can be done to cope with the challenge.

3. Protecting the Civilian Population during Complex Conflicts

In the majority of conflicts, civilians bear the heaviest toll. The United Nations Statistics Division (2024) estimates that, on average, 100 civilians lose their lives daily due to armed conflicts. Between 2001 and 2021, reports suggest that close to 400,000 civilians are thought to have perished in a direct manner of combat, while many more have endured the indirect repercussions of war, as seen in the devastation of essential structural framework.

In the initial 100 days of severe conflict in Ukraine, as Russia transitioned from the indiscriminate use of weapons to the targeted assault on non-combatants and public service infrastructure, around 4000 civilians were reported to have lost their lives, and about 5000 were injured. Such figures likely underestimate the true toll, as many casualties could not be independently verified. By the 100-day mark, nearly 5 million Ukrainians had sought refuge in Europe, while over 7 million had been displaced within the country. Human Rights Watch (2023) affirmed that arbitrary killings, limited availability of essential

supporting structures, and incidents of sexual exploitation stands as one of the harsh realities faced by many.

Safeguarding ordinary people is a fundamental component of fighting, representing both a principled obligation and a purposeful necessity across all forms of hostilities, covering a spectrum that includes hybrid conflicts and anti-rebellion measures to major military campaigns where the rival may employ maneuvers intended to negatively affect civilians. Close to twenty years of combat engagements and support to law enforcement forces within Afghan territory and the broader Middle East region have underscored that minimizing ordinary citizen casualties represents an essential precondition in support of success of armed interventions and protection collaborations. Protecting civilians from external threats and mitigating the impact of one's own military actions are critical to achieving effective defense. The greater the protection afforded to civilians, the stronger their resilience and the more robust their support for stabilization efforts and sustainable peace.

MacLachlan (2022) claims that by building upon the framework established by International Humanitarian Law and incorporating robust safeguards into their operational practices, armed forces can reduce adverse effects on non-combatants resulting from what they did and ensure ordinary persons are safeguarded from the behavior of opponents. Throughout the ISAF mission in Afghan territory, NATO partners introduced creative measures for minimizing non-combatants casualties. Public Diplomacy Division (2016) affirmed that at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO adopted a policy on the protection of civilians, which was followed by the development related to military concept, an operationalization guide, and a set of activities designed to assess the readiness of NATO forces. However, since the policy was primarily shaped by experiences in counterinsurgency operations, its applicability and operationalization in potential Article 5 missions remain less clear.

The NATO Strategic Concept (2022) presents a unique opportunity to reaffirm the commitment to civilian protection and provide strong political direction to support its implementation. In light of the unpredictable protection environment in EU, it is crucial that both NATO and its constituent nations translate their values-driven approach places a high priority on the protection of non-combatants into concrete actions through governmental directives, tactical guidelines, routine operational protocols, and comprehensive instruction. The primary objective is related to empower NATO member states, and also troops assigned to the coalition, for example Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, including the NRF, Multinational Corps Northeast, and eFP units, to minimize injury resulting from their conducted efforts and safeguard non-combatants from the behavior of adversaries. In case of escalated conflicts, particularly with great powers, urban warfare could intensify the confrontation. The ongoing war in Ukraine, for instance, illustrates how the strategic importance of cities and their central role in sustaining a nation can lead to combat spilling into urban areas. The complexities of urban terrain, including subterranean areas, the challenge of distinguishing between civilians and military adversaries, the proximity of military objectives to civilian infrastructure, difficulties in maintaining robust leadership and coordination, and the limited speed of response all contribute to making cities challenging and dangerous battlegrounds for military forces.

Hybrid warfare has emerged as a key element in the military strategy of great powers, operating below the level of full-scale kinetic operations. Often employed to foster distrust and create situations where conflicts become harder to resolve, it frequently involves a substantial component of information warfare, where civilian casualties are manipulated, weaponized, and exploited to control the information

narrative. Initial studies regarding the conflict in Ukraine suggests that tactics for spreading false information can bring about physical injury by influencing individual reactions and decision-making processes.

Ultimately, it is anticipated that civil armed conflicts will stay the predominant kind of warfare worldwide. The misconduct of government personnel and non-state groups are able to perpetuate patterns of assaults on non-combatants, thereby lengthening conflicts and hindering evolution for decades. The recurrent contribution of external actors – regardless of whether it involves security aid or the deployment of security service providers conducting operations focused on military and protection matters in battlefields and in delicate circumstances – the battlefield becomes more intricate and poses greater challenges to set up accountability. The operations of private military companies can heighten threats faced by non-combatants and, resulting from the involvement of numerous participants with ambiguous chains of operational leadership, complicate the process of holding individuals accountable for wartime abuses.

Given the escalating risks and heightened vulnerabilities faced by civilians as a result of conflict, both within and beyond NATO's territory, the Alliance is presented with a distinct opportunity to reaffirm its political focus on civilian preservation and also to establish a clear authority and direction for its application. The three critical dimensions are:

- As a values-driven imperative for an Alliance dedicated to protecting allied nations and their populations;

- As an essential element of a successful plan, facilitating combat units to advance fulfilling political goals, all while safeguarding non-combatants from the most severe impacts of war;

- As a fundamental element of national fortitude.

4. NATO's Measures for Protecting Civilians

Political commitment should serve as the foundation and a mandate for subsequent implementation. From a practical standpoint, there are several critical measures that NATO personnel can implement to ready themselves for possible aggressions on national soil, along with emerging processes that can facilitate the translation of political will into military protocols and also resources. NATO has the chance to signal these for execution.

First, to effectively protect and mitigate the harm caused during conflicts, NATO institutions and allied governments designed to maintain order must interact with civilians regularly and substantively in order to listen to people's problems. This should involve the development of competencies, guidelines, transmission methods, and practices for anticipatory engagement with communities and community organizations during wartime. These measures can assist armed forces in gaining a deeper understanding of, and better anticipating, their operational environment, as well as the impact of military presence and operations on civilians. Community engagement is crucial if armed forces aim to secure and sustain civilian support within their operational areas. During peaceful period, non-NATO actors, consisting of both civilian governing bodies and societal organizations, are able to serve as indispensable collaborators in continuous consultations, strategy development and simulations, particularly for NATO bodies and their members that have the highest probability of being subject to changing safety dynamics.

Secondly, the Alliance must fully leverage the processes available to it – such as the NATO Defence Planning Process, Graduated Response Plans, and the expanded exercise framework – to ensure that the capabilities required for civilian protection (e.g., intelligence assets, troop preparedness) are prioritized on par with

those necessary for combat operations, and that rigorous standards are implemented consistently across the Alliance. Nations should take into account implementing protocols that facilitate actions to remedy the effects of civilian suffering – encompassing everything from emergency medical aid to systemic adjustment mechanisms – aimed not just to mitigate damage but also foster the development of improved interaction between civilian bodies and the armed forces.

Third, Allies must devise and convey strategies for situations where non-combatants and civil assets could be intentionally harmed in conflicts, the situations in Ukraine and Syria demonstrate this is the most plausible outcome. This will necessitate NATO partners to be ready for scenarios where safeguarding non-combatants from the conduct of adversaries is of utmost importance, and they ought to be capable of shaping military strategies, intelligence collection, and coordination with entities outside NATO to promote timely alerts and strengthen the relationship between military forces and civilian sectors.

Following each of the major conflicts and mass atrocities in recent history, both states and civil society have made concerted efforts to enhance the protection of civilians in conflict zones and to hold accountable those responsible for harm. Specifically, states have supported the evolution of the laws of war to more effectively distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, thereby safeguarding the latter from attacks. This has been accompanied by the establishment of new international, national, and hybrid accountability mechanisms aimed at deterring war crimes and ensuring justice for perpetrators. To suggest that these measures could ever render war “humane” would not only be inaccurate but would also undermine the critical importance of pursuing peace.

The protective effect of international law is contingent upon the actions of states and armed groups. Despite the existence of

laws governing warfare, certain state armed forces (such as those of Russia and Sudan) and non-state armed groups (including the Islamic State) continue to carry out direct attacks on civilians.

Actions that fall within the boundaries of what states deem “legal” in warfare frequently lead to severe harm to civilians. Meanwhile, for various reasons, both state and non-state armed groups largely escape accountability to civilians for the damage they inflict, in an era aptly characterized as a phase of law enforcement failure, a statement from Miliband (2015), the International Rescue Committee’s president.

The outsourcing of military functions to private companies is not a recent development, but this trend has significantly expanded in recent years. Private contractors generally bolster a state’s capacity to project force or train foreign military personnel; in some instances, they enable the state to avoid accountability for committing or facilitating abuses. In an increasing number of contexts, both governments and non-state armed groups are restricting access to conflict-affected communities, thereby impeding the ability of international organizations, including the UN, to deter attacks on civilians and making it more challenging to exert pressure on conflicting parties to adhere to their obligations under international law.

Mahanty (2023) claims that historically, civilians caught in conflict have been compelled to make decisions based on conflicting, contradictory, and often unreliable information. The growing dependence on social media and mobile communications has significantly worsened this issue. Both deliberate disinformation campaigns targeting communities and civilians – utilizing misleading methods and a broad array of public and private channels – and government efforts to restrict the flow of information can have devastating consequences for civilians.

Given the ongoing crises in Israel, Sudan, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and numerous

other regions, the need to find more effective ways to protect civilians from the consequences of conflict has never been more urgent or pertinent. Additionally, many experts, like Buhaug, Benjaminsen, Gilmore & Hendrix (2023), Koubi, Sharifi & Simangan (2019), foresee an increase in conflict across a broader range of locations as climate change and other environmental challenges progressively impact livelihoods, displacement, governance, and food and water security. Despite these challenges, numerous actionable strategies exist that offer both hope and practical lessons. Among these, the following methods can be employed to enhance civilian protection.

First of all, when states fail to uphold their duty to protect civilians, local communities often adopt nonviolent strategies to ensure their own safety. The primary challenge lies in identifying ethical and secure methods for supporting these grassroots efforts. In Ukraine, the Washington-based organization Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) assists communities by providing small-scale grants aimed at enhancing shelter infrastructure and developing community-led self-protection strategies. Although such localized initiatives – ranging from early warning systems to unarmed civilian protection – do not absolve states of their legal and moral obligations, it is crucial that international donors and organizations significantly increase investment in safe, adaptable, and rapidly deployable forms of support for local civil society actors and at-risk populations. In the right circumstances, conflict prevention and peacebuilding in fragile states can be important in supporting community protection when conflict begins, intensifies, or spreads. The central focus on trust and community in these approaches can be essential in ensuring that external support mechanisms that have obtained local authorization are able to deliver life-saving assistance directly to civilians and communities, grounding their interventions in locally identified needs and community-driven strategies.

Secondly, external actors can enhance the efforts of local organizations by facilitating access to reliable information for civilians in crisis contexts and by strengthening early warning systems. Collaboration among humanitarian, human rights, and peacebuilding organizations is essential to advancing more robust standards of civilian protection. These actors should engage with both state and non-state armed forces – regardless of their initial willingness – to encourage the adoption and implementation of higher protection norms.

Safeguarding civilian populations from the consequences of armed conflict has long posed significant challenges – and, in many respects, these challenges appear to be intensifying. This reality underscores the imperative of prioritizing the prevention of armed violence as the ultimate objective. In the interim, however, states, civil society actors, and international organizations must draw on accumulated knowledge and experience to respond with greater coherence, efficiency, and solidarity in protecting civilians amid contemporary and future conflicts.

5. Conclusions

Certainly, threat of the future is represented by irregular and hybrid conflicts, namely the use of innovative asymmetric capabilities, terrorism and organized crime with the aim of destabilizing the attacked state, aiming to achieve political-military and economic objectives. On the other hand, the future conflicts will be focused only in achieving the proposed objectives, without really taking into account the physical and psychological state of the population.

Military conflicts lead to humanitarian crises, such as massive refugee movements, famine, epidemics and other urgent

humanitarian problems. Given the scale and degree of danger that this phenomenon has brought to the fore through recent conflicts, it is necessary to develop unitary strategies to combat irregular threats. Managing these crises requires careful approaches and often involves international efforts to prevent escalation and restore peace.

From the analysis of how civilians are affected during complex crises, I conclude that during armed conflicts, civilians are often directly affected. Attacks on populated areas can result in loss of life, injury and destruction of civilian infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and homes. Conflict causes massive population movements, and civilians are forced to flee their homes due to security threats. Forced displacement can lead to significant humanitarian problems, such as homelessness, limited access to food and medical services. In some situations, armed groups have been accused of using civilians as human shields to hinder the military actions of their opponents or to attract international attention.

After a conflict ends, civilians are often involved in the reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts of affected communities. This includes rebuilding infrastructure, restoring the economy, and managing the trauma caused by war.

Global leadership must guarantee adherence to international humanitarian law and safeguard humanitarian actors, enabling them to operate freely and provide critical assistance to populations in need. Significant attention should be given to emphasize that protecting civilians during conflicts is a crucial responsibility of the international community and parties to the conflict under International Humanitarian Law. Any act of violence against civilians must be condemned and should be actively avoided in order to minimize human suffering during conflicts.

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