

# **14. Victims: The human cost of violent conflict**

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**This chapter explores civilian harm from the perspective of the women, men and children affected by armed action and examines how violence has impacted them. Throughout the chapter, we draw insights from Part I and raise various questions for further discussion. Beginning with a brief general reflection on what has been presented in the empirical section of this book, we will consider specific findings in relation to victims, namely how civilian harm is not only physical, can have long-term and cascading effects, is often closely intertwined with damage to infrastructure and livelihoods, and how the impact of the use of violence may be worse for specific population groups depending on the context or on the method of attack.<sup>1</sup> We will present our 'six signatures' based on the preceding, encompassing six characteristics of civilian harm that require more consideration, as a tool to better describe and understand civilian harm.**

## **14.1 Case overview**

Across thirteen empirical accounts of civilian harm events (Part I), we see a wide range of victim groups and of the suffering armed violence has caused them. Central to each case are the questions who is harmed and how victims are harmed. With regard to the first question, in some cases entire communities are harmed – sometimes intentionally or sometimes by being 'in harm's way' – whereas in other cases a selected group or category of people is deliberately targeted. The former can be seen in the case of the Yemeni civilians in Hudeidah who all suffered under the siege tactics and airstrikes used by the Saudi-led coalition in 2017 (chapter 1); in Qayyarah, Iraq, where an entire town was affected by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) deliberate destruction of oil refineries and subsequent oil fires in 2016–17 (chapter 2); in the Gaza Strip, where people's access to clean water was dangerously reduced when the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) bombed a power plant, as well as water and wastewater management systems in 2014 (chapter 4); or in relation to the residents of Khan Sheikhoun who fell victim to a chemical attack by the Syrian Arab Army in 2017 (chapter 5). In other cases, we see how specific sections of a community are harmed. Examples include the specific targeting of non-Dinka women and girls in South Sudan in 2016 (chapter 3), of Yazidis in Iraq in 2014 (chapter 8), of Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017 (chapter

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1 A more comprehensive discussion of our deliberations in using the term 'victim', as well as other key terms, can be found in the Introduction, section 3 on the discourse on civilian harm.

13), and the deliberate displacement of peasants and peasant community leaders in Colombia's Cesar region, dating back to 1997 (chapter 10).

Yet, the juxtaposition of cases that affect whole communities as opposed to cases where particular sections of a community are harmed is often too simplistic and may misrepresent events on the ground. While actors may have a specific target in mind, an attack often has repercussions that extend beyond the immediate objective – both in space and time, and thus affects additional people. One such example is the Taliban's use of suicide bombs in Kabul in 2015 (chapter 11). The objectives of these type of attacks by the Taliban vary from intentionally harming as many people as possible without distinction, to seeking out more specific targets, for instance buildings or people associated with institutions such as the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces or NATO. Yet even such targeted attacks often injure or kill regular security guards or passers-by as well, or instead of, the anticipated target. Another example is the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects by armed actors in eastern Ukraine: While aiming for each other, the nature of such weapons makes it likely that the impact of the armed actors' fighting extends beyond the original target; for instance damaging a hospital through indirect fire, as happened in 2015 (chapter 7).

The belief that women and children are universally more vulnerable to the effects of use of violence than men – who are sometimes assumed to be less innocent and more 'deserving' of violence – is a similar oversimplification of reality, and obscures gender-based vulnerabilities of boys and men (Carpenter, 2005). The cases in this book demonstrate that victims of harm include all age, gender and professional groups; rural as well as urban residents; minorities and ethnically mixed general populations; regime supporters and opposition affiliates; as well as non-political civilians. Depending on the type of conflict, the weaponry chosen, and the intentions of the perpetrators, specific groups may be more vulnerable to sustaining harm than others. Alternatively, if a particular area is in the line of fire, the entire local population may be at risk of harm.

On the question of how civilians are harmed, the cases reveal that regardless of who is targeted and of whether it is deliberate or not, the reverberating effects of the use of armed violence go far beyond the immediate and directly visible physical harm we tend to be confronted with in the media, in political discourse, and in war and conflict-related narratives. We have, for instance, a general idea of

what genocide is and the type and scope of violence it entails. Many of us recall the images of Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar, besieged and persecuted by ISIS following its invasion in Sinjar in 2014, or stories of Yazidi women sold into sexual slavery (chapter 8). But many of us are unaware of the plight of the Yazidis today, several years after the conflict, such as the high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among survivors, the hardship and limited prospects of many Yazidis still living in displacement camps, continued behavioural problems in formerly kidnapped children, and the manifold problems impeding return to their homes in Sinjar. The persecution of the Yazidis represents just one example where harm endures beyond the immediate physical harm; the other twelve events included in 'Cases of civilian harm' tell comparable stories and lay bare the diversity of civilian harm. They show that negative effects from the use of violence against civilians are not limited to physical injuries or deaths. Civilians are harmed in myriad ways including by long-term psychological trauma, disrupted livelihoods, and lack of access to basic needs, education, or healthcare.

## **14.2 The characteristics of civilian harm**

Accumulating the findings of Part I, we identify five characteristics of civilian harm that deserve careful consideration when we build a common understanding of violent conflict and its effects on civilians:

- Harm to civilians caused by armed violence often is not exclusively of a physical nature.
- The harmful effects of violent conflict are more long-term than is often perceived.
- Attacks on infrastructure have underestimated yet damaging consequences for civilian life.
- In urban environments in particular, cascading effects may exponentially increase civilian harm.
- The impact of violence on civilians varies significantly depending on pre-existing vulnerabilities of certain population groups.

### **Civilian harm extends beyond the physical**

'The cases of civilian harm' shows that civilian harm is more than just the physical effects of armed action on life and health. To fully understand the phenomenon, we must go beyond describing civilian harm as an accumulation of events and beyond the use of obscuring language like 'collateral damage' or 'civilian casualties'. A solely physical interpretation of civilian harm is problematic for three main reasons. First of all, it fails to take into account that war and violence often have a significant and long-lasting psychological impact. The attempted genocide against the Yazidis of Sinjar in 2014 is a particularly telling example (chapter 8).<sup>2</sup> The scope of the violence ISIS employed against the Yazidi people was overwhelming: ranging from mass executions, enforcing death by dehydration, large-scale sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), to physical abuse of children and their forced recruitment as child soldiers. Yet, the psychological harm and mental trauma inflicted on ISIS' victims during the conflict was equally overwhelming and continues to impact their lives to this day. The prevalence of suicide attempts, depression, PTSD, social exclusion and stigmatisation, and behavioural disorders among survivors is alarming (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Clearly, the impact of ISIS' violence has left traces that are not only physical. Exacerbating the trauma of the Yazidis – and of those who are harmed in many other conflicts – is the lack of psychosocial support available to them, compounded by the difficult living conditions for refugees and IDPs, neither of which are conducive to proper recovery.

In addition, limiting ourselves to physical manifestations of civilian harm is problematic because it excludes the negative socio-economic effects on civilians that typically occur as a result of conflict. The cases in this book provide empirical evidence of how widespread and varied these impacts can be. The harm caused by the suicide bombing in Afghanistan on 7 August 2015 – a type of violence very typically identified with visible, physical impact – included a socio-economic dimension (chapter 11). In an instant, a local shopkeeper practically lost all his savings and income when his shop was damaged by the explosion. It moreover provoked ripple effects into the lives of the entire family dependent on this business, disrupting or hindering their ability to sustain themselves with food and

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<sup>2</sup> The actions of ISIS against the Yazidis have been recognised as genocide by several entities, amongst others by the European Parliament (2016) and the UN in 2016 (UN Human Rights Council, 2016).

medicine, for the children to access education, and so on. This demonstrates how the death or injury of a (primary) breadwinner or the damage to or destruction of personal property can have specific, long-term financial consequences, especially in societies where life and property insurance are not prevalent. Moreover, socio-economic effects can lead to harmful coping strategies. In the case of the Yazidis, for example, failure to meet basic needs among Yazidi survivors has led to further problems, including reduced food intake and malnutrition, child labour, and forced early marriages (chapter 8).

Inflicting physical harm or damage may also not be the primary goal of a perpetrator's strategy. Therefore, reporting and analysis that only take into account the physical manifestations of harm risk to neglect critical aspects of the situation, and will neither adequately reflect the reality of the problem nor the full spectrum of people's torments. Paramilitary violence in Colombia is a case in point: While the paramilitary group United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) carried out targeted killings in 1997, the overall and intended impact was the mass displacement of peasants to clear lands (chapter 10). Using terror to force farmers to leave, provided the AUC with access to their land that could then be sold to multinational companies seeking to exploit the land for coal. Strategic use of displacement has, in fact, been one of the main features of the Colombian conflict. Similarly, in ethnic cleansing – although of a much larger scope of violence – we know that force is used to achieve the objective of coercing people through terror to leave their land (Kjeksrud et al., 2016).<sup>3</sup> A different example concerns Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) soldiers' use of sexual violence against non-Dinka women in South Sudan in 2016 (chapter 3). The objectives went beyond the direct effects of the physical assault, as the soldiers committing the violence used it to create fear, to stigmatise women, and to destabilise communities. Reporting only on the sexual violence itself, would forego this important aspect of the intended harm.

Other non-physical forms of harm might include the effects on health and nutrition, water and sanitation, damage to the natural environment, destruction of cultural heritage, or effects on the social fabric of societies, such as missing persons and

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnic cleansing as a type of violence is examined in this book in chapter 13 on the expulsion of Rohingya from Myanmar.

separated families. Evidently, taking notice only of the physical harm resulting from violence does not reflect the full scope of harm that is inflicted on civilians in most conflicts and, as such, does not do justice to their plight.

### **Civilian harm extends beyond the immediate and short-term**

Part I shows that, in addition to immediate human casualties, the harmful consequences of the use of violence may not always be directly apparent and may continue to affect civilians for a long period. In the news we are shown images of immediate and physical harm from conflict: of smoking rubble, grieving people, lines of injured persons at hospitals following an explosion. But while deaths and injuries may be caused in an instant, their effects certainly are not over once the bodies are buried and the wounds are treated. The death of a breadwinner or primary caregiver can be a severe blow to that family's survival; injuries may lead to permanent disability, complicating the running of family duties or generation of income. Destruction of key facilities for the functioning of society are another source of long-term harm to civilian life, as we will see below. Psychological trauma takes years to overcome – provided there are mental health care services available. Civilian harm caused by the use of violence may even be transgenerational: Consider the social stigmatisation of children born of rape in times of conflict, a prevalent issue in South Sudan, Iraq and Myanmar (chapters 3, 8 and 13). We discuss three distinct types of long-term civilian harm in more depth: displacement, effects on the living environment, and effects on the natural environment.

Displacement of people is a particularly complex long-term manifestation of civilian harm as a direct consequence of armed violence. In fact, becoming displaced is one of people's greatest fears during armed conflict (Ipsos & International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2009, p. 40). The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017 demonstrates both how violence caused civilians to leave their homes, and how that displacement was another form of harm in and of itself (chapter 13). Displacement caused Rohingya to endure bad living conditions, largely lose access to healthcare and education, and made them vulnerable to trafficking schemes. At the same time, displacement also adversely affects the host nation – in this case Bangladesh – where there are ripple effects of the large refugee community on local economic and security conditions, on politics, and on the availability of resources. Yet, general discourse often approaches (protracted) displacement as a separate, new issue, instead of



**There can be staggering consequences to civilians if we do not report, study or take into account other negative impact from fighting besides injuries and casualties.**

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a direct and harmful consequence of the use of violence in conflict. The framing of displacement as a political and humanitarian problem rather than as a result of possibly intentional actions by armed actors, risks making any debate on the responsibility of causing displacement and taking mitigating measures irrelevant.

Another form of long-term harm that deserves more attention is damage to people's living environment, which can create harmful effects that only reveal themselves over time. Civilians in Cambodia to this day run the risk of being injured or killed by landmines and other explosive remnants of a war that was fought decades ago (chapter 6). The long-lasting implications of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) include casualties or physical injuries caused by accidentally triggered explosions, the stigmatisation of disabled persons, and adverse socio-economic effects of land no longer safe for agricultural or industrial purposes due to the presence of explosives. Limited capacity to cope with such residual contamination exacerbates the problem. In order to feed their family, people may have no choice but to take their livestock into a contaminated field; or, in the absence of official mine clearance, people will take matters into their own hands and start demining their terrain themselves at great personal risk. Toxic remnants of war are also known to harm civilians in the long term. Airstrikes in urban settings generate millions of tonnes of rubble. Asbestos, cement, heavy metals, domestic chemicals and combustion products may all be present and can have detrimental effects on the environment and public health if not properly managed. In Gaza, the United Nations Environment Programme reported that many civilians were still living amongst or close to bombing debris caused by the actions of the IDF in 2014 (chapter 4). The resulting prolonged exposure to various harmful dusts, some of which may be chemically and physically damaging to respiratory health, puts civilians at considerable risk (Garrity, 2014).

In addition to harm caused by damage to the living environment, the use of certain weapons or strategies during conflict can also have severe repercussions for the natural environment, which can affect income generation and protection against natural disasters. In Qayyarah, Iraq, ISIS militants destroyed and set fire to oil refineries (chapter 2). The effects of these actions over the course of 2016–17 on the environment and, by extension, on civilians are numerous. Free-flowing oil has contaminated agricultural land, destroying people's livelihoods and polluting the Tigris river – an important source of drinking water for Qayyarah's inhabitants. This, in turn, caused the spread of water-related diseases. The soot from the

fires caused burns and respiratory problems among civilians, and in the long term, health experts expect an increase in cases of lung cancer and pulmonary fibrosis. Beyond that, however, it is difficult to estimate the exact longer-term environmental impact.

In Gaza, in 2014 – where the IDF bombed water and wastewater management systems, (chapter 4) – we again see the environmental impact caused by military action. The bombing induced raw sewage to flow into the Mediterranean Sea, which is likely to affect the environment and civilians for years to come. Fishing and swimming activities have been restricted because of health-related concerns, the average (clean) water intake among Gazans is now below minimum standards, and water-related diseases are spreading more rapidly. The case illustrates how violent conflict can even have transgenerational harmful effects: Lack of drinking water has caused disproportionate levels of stunted growth in children, which is especially worrying with the apparent link between stunted growth in mothers and stunted growth in their children. Overall, deliberate targeting of water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure appears to be a trend in modern conflict and needs to be halted in order to prevent large-scale damage to the living environment.

### **Damage to critical infrastructure causes harm to civilians**

Equally crucial to a better understanding of civilian harm is the critical role of infrastructure. We know that civilian harm from conflict is not always caused directly by armed action itself but manifests itself through reverberations. This is often the case when infrastructure is damaged or destroyed by force. The use of siege tactics and airstrikes in Hodeidah, Yemen (chapter 1), the weaponization of drinking water in Aleppo, Syria (chapter 12), and the destruction of power plants, water and wastewater management systems in the Gaza Strip (chapter 4) all demonstrate the immense and harrowing consequences for civilians when perpetrators cause damage – whether deliberately or not – to civilian infrastructure. In the case of Yemen, the casualty figures are particularly illustrative: By 2018, approximately 6,800 Yemenis had died and 10,700 had been injured through direct fire by the Saudi-led air campaign. Indirect casualties from the conflict are, however, estimated to have reached a startling minimum of 60,000 (BBC News, 2018; Reinl, 2019). The majority of these casualties can be attributed to starvation and disease, linked to the targeting of infrastructure.

Several factors contributed to the increase of starvation and acute malnutrition in Yemen, which were particularly prevalent in young children. Blockades and bombing campaigns by the Saudi-led coalition reduced food availability considerably: Bombs damaged markets and agricultural sites, while blockades decreased the import of food and fuel. The latter is significant as lack of fuel has impeded food production within Yemen itself, further reducing the already limited availability of food. At the same time, continued active fighting, widespread infrastructure destruction, and the collapse of the Yemeni economy have caused many people to lose their jobs or means of livelihood. Besides a lack of available food – by itself a cause of rising food prices – many Yemenis' ability to pay for food or drinking water has also been reduced, compounding an already dire situation.

Disease is the other main cause of indirect casualties in Yemen, and is closely related to the lack of available food. Public health has significantly deteriorated due to infrastructure destruction. Lack of food, in combination with limited access to healthcare has allowed diseases to spread unchecked, evident for instance in a large cholera outbreak during the conflict. To make matters worse, health care facilities have been destroyed, are understaffed because of displacement, and generally lack the equipment and resources needed to provide sufficient medical care. In addition, the deliberate or accidental strikes on water and electricity systems have often put these services out of order, further impeding health care. Yemen is a grim example of the potentially far-reaching and inter-related effects of the destruction of such infrastructure as hospitals, water and electricity networks, sanitation plants, agricultural sites, and irrigation systems. Unfortunately, the problems in Yemen are representative of many other conflicts.

**In urban environments, violence can create cascading effects of civilian harm**

The findings regarding Yemen raise important questions about the vulnerability of our urbanised world, an issue that warrants additional attention due to the prevalence of urban conflict. In 2018, 55 per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas. By 2050, that number is projected to reach 68 per cent (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). As human activity continues to concentrate itself in urban areas, so too does conflict. Estimates put the number of people in cities affected by conflict in 2015 at 50 million globally (ICRC & Interaction, 2017). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), among other organisations and institutions, has raised alarm about the dangers of urban warfare to civilians and calls for more attention for the vulnerability of civilian

infrastructure and systems in urban settings during conflict, because of the potentially devastating consequences of their destruction for civilians.<sup>4</sup> Several characteristics make cities and their inhabitants particularly vulnerable to the effects of conflict, such as the proximity of civilians to military targets, which makes it more likely that civilians (inadvertently) get harmed during armed action. This is recognisable in the damage to hospitals in eastern Ukraine, where shelling directed at military targets also hit healthcare facilities in the vicinity (chapter 7). In addition, urbanisation makes it more difficult to distinguish between civilians and combatants: a fundamental principle in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (ICRC & Interaction, 2017).

Urban landscapes pose additional challenges where infrastructure is concerned. The 'interconnectedness' of urban services can create cascading effects that may negatively affect large numbers of people. The ICRC and Interaction (2017, p. 3) provide the following practical example of the cascading effects from interconnected service systems:

*[I]f a power supply is destroyed during fighting, all the services and infrastructure connected to that power supply may cease to function – potentially affecting a wide range of key services such as hospitals, water supply, wastewater collection and treatment, mass communication mechanisms, schools, and public transportation. These reverberating effects build upon one another, resulting in cumulative impacts that may render an area unlivable and reverse development gains by years if not decades.*

This illustrates how even a single explosion can create ripple effects that extend far beyond the original target, harming large segments of an urban population. A specific form of such indirect effects is what is sometimes referred to as compounding effects: when two or more separate events or forms of harm – for instance the destruction of both a power plant and damage to water wells – combine to create an exponentially more harmful effect for civilians. In this case, by significantly decreasing the availability of water. The targeting of water and

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<sup>4</sup> Urban warfare as a phenomenon that contributes to high levels of civilian harm in contemporary conflict is also discussed in chapter 16, 'Key factors: Causing or mitigating harm', section 16.2.

power facilities in Gaza in 2014 caused not only water shortages for the population but also pushed up fuel prices, making it unaffordable for people to boil water, leading to an increase in health problems as a result (chapter 4).

The role of critical infrastructure and the risk of cascading effects is currently not sufficiently integrated in studies about the impact of military activity on civilians and, by extension, in military planning and decision-making. Taking both into account is essential for better mitigation of civilian harm, as well as for the stabilisation and eventual rebuilding of a society, as the cases in our book underline.

### **Existing vulnerabilities can exacerbate harm**

A final observation concerns the variability of harm. Many of the cases in this book look in detail at harm on an individual level. This is intentional. Too often, the harmful effects of armed violence are discussed in generalising terms, assuming that all members of a community are affected in the same way. By looking in depth at a number of cases, it becomes clear that harm is to be understood in relation to the vulnerabilities of each particular individual or group within a community. One type of violence may put young people more at risk than adults, or in a different way. An act of violence may trigger a specific vulnerability for women more than men, or vice versa; or it could put a particular ethnic group or people with a particular form of livelihood at risk.

This assertion is supported by the evidence of the 'Cases of civilian harm'. In South Sudan, IDP women of Nuer ethnicity experienced a heightened risk of (gang) rape and other forms of sexual violence around July 2016 (chapter 3). While SGBV is a widespread and recurrent feature of the conflict in South Sudan, two factors contributed to the group's increased vulnerability at that time. First, looting in the preceding days of conflict had depleted food resources for IDPs in UNMISS Protection of Civilians sites. People were therefore forced to venture outside the sites to collect food, exposing themselves to possible attacks. Second, among those daring to leave the camp, Nuer women were especially vulnerable to attacks by SPLA soldiers and allied militia. This was because the Nuer community at large had come to be associated with the SPLA's rival force, the SPLA-IO, meaning that the Nuer men were at risk of being killed outright as SPLA-IO combatants if they left camp. It therefore fell to the women to take on the task of foraging for food unprotected. The Nuer women were extremely exposed, resulting in severe and large-scale harm. Chapters 8 and 13 on violence against the Yazidis and the

Rohingya respectively likewise show that perpetrators can adapt their strategies depending on who they target.

Part I also highlights events where the type of violence used against civilians is the same, but where the implications vary greatly depending on the existing vulnerabilities of an individual or group. An example of this was observed by academic and former politician Michael Ignatieff, concerning the life of women with physical injuries or scarring caused by ERW (chapter 6). He discusses the stigma surrounding victims from ERW, expressing that, 'I'm very struck by the way in which injury to women ruins their lives to a degree that it doesn't ruin men's lives. A woman without a leg is human refuse in patriarchal societies' (Monin & Gallimore, 2011). Here, while the type of harm may be the same, the outcome and long-term impacts are distinct as there are different expectations regarding women within certain societies. We also see this in cases of female victims of SGBV choosing not to come forward about the harm done to them, as it is likely that they – instead of their assailants – will be blamed, such as is often the case in South Sudan (chapter 3). It is important to note here that relatively little is known about male victims of SGBV in conflict settings because of the overwhelming stigma surrounding this topic in general (Human Rights Watch, 2019; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2012).

Socio-economic status or forms of livelihood generation may also cause people to be more vulnerable to certain types of armed action. When oil refineries were deliberately set on fire in Iraq (chapter 2), two population groups were disproportionately affected. Farmers and livestock keepers lost their livelihood as their lands were damaged and their cattle died due to the environmental impact of the fires. The other group suffering disproportionately were children with a weak socio-economic background. When the large professional oil refineries were targeted and destroyed, artisanal refineries appeared as a means for people to make a living. Since pay was low, children were sent to work these jobs and were exposed to a myriad of health-related risks due to lack of regulation of the dangerous work and highly toxic environment.

## 14.3 Describing civilian harm: the 'six signatures'

Having taken stock of real consequences that people face in the course of conflict, this chapter has distilled five key concerns regarding the position of victims when it comes to the consideration of harm. The examples cited stem for the most part from Part I, 'Cases of civilian harm'. However, these cases are not exhaustive. Conversely, every conflict or violent event contains or engenders some or all of the aspects elaborated above. Unfortunately, these aspects often remain out of focus and are not sufficiently accounted for in military planning and mitigation measures. The purpose of this chapter is not only to outline the nature of the problem, but also to make suggestions for a common language and for civilian harm mitigation. We therefore identify six aspects to enhance shared understanding of civilian harm. While we do not presume that these aspects are comprehensive, they make reference to civilian harm characteristics that are often underreported, go unnoticed, or are ignored.

The overview below can aid in finding a shared language to describe civilian harm events, but may also help military planners. It includes the established practice of counting or tracking civilian casualties, as well as the five characteristics discussed in the previous section. Proper assessment and investigation of these aspects, both pre- and post-conflict, provide insight in the true nature of civilian harm, enabling adequate reporting, and potentially prevention and mitigation. The aspects are a tool to properly and fully identify the occurrence of civilian harm in conflict. They are the traces, the 'signatures', that conflict leaves in societies:

1. **Casualties:** The number of lives directly physically affected by the use of violence, i.e. deaths and injuries. Example: efforts by an organisation like Human Rights Watch to collect and publish the names of civilian casualties of the Coalition airstrike on a school building in Al Mansoura, Syria (chapter 9).
2. **Form:** The different manifestations of civilian harm: physical, social, economic, psychological, cultural, and so on. Examples: enduring trauma after having witnessed a suicide bombing in Afghanistan (chapter 11); the continued inaccessibility of large plots of agricultural land in Cambodia due to the presence of ERW (chapter 6); the disintegration of a society after ethnic cleansing of Rohingya in Myanmar (chapter 13).



- 3. Duration:** The effective length of time that civilians are affected by the consequences of armed action: days, weeks, months, years, generations. Examples: long-term interruption of health care due to the shelling of a hospital in the Ukraine (chapter 7); stunted growth in children in Gaza (chapter 4); the stigma on children born from sexual violence in South Sudan and Iraq (chapters 3 and 8).
- 4. Object:** The inclusion of damage to property, land, and infrastructure, both public and private, as a form of civilian harm, and carefully weighed in relation to the other aspects listed here. Examples: damage to water sanitation facilities in Gaza in 2014, affecting thousands of civilians (chapter 4); the imposed blockade on Hudeidah, Yemen, creating a large-scale famine (chapter 1).
- 5. Systems:** The triggering of a chain of events due to the use of violence, whereby damage to one element reverberates onto other, interconnected, elements. Example: the destruction of a power plant in Gaza in 2014, severely affecting the water sanitation systems that depended on the power station (chapter 4).
- 6. Variability:** The variable impact of the use of armed violence against civilians based on existing vulnerabilities, identity, and other group or personal characteristics. Examples: the particular vulnerability of rural rather than urban residents with regard to ERW in Cambodia (chapter 6); the disproportionate impact of destroyed oil refineries in Iraq on farmers, livestock keepers, and children with weak socio-economic backgrounds (chapter 2).

In the interest of better protection of civilians from the harmful effects of violent conflict, we propose that these six signatures of civilian harm be integrated specifically in civilian harm studies. They should be an integral part of analyses of specific civilian harm events or the examination of particular patterns of harm, of reporting, and of the planning and preparation of any action that involves the use of armed violence, as well as in planning and preparation for anticipated use of violence by adversaries. While we recognise how challenging of a task it may be for security actors to take into account all of these aspects, we strongly encourage more attention for them and factoring them into planning to the greatest extent possible.

## 14.4 Conclusion

While all the characteristics of civilian harm discussed in this chapter may appear to be self-evident, they are in practice often overlooked and insufficiently considered in the planning and conduct of armed operations in a violent conflict. Harm to civilians other than deaths and injuries, is generally not taken into account, understudied or underreported. The consequences of overlooking additional factors that contribute to, or are part of civilian harm, can be staggering, as the examples in this chapter illustrate. It is important for security actors to understand and consider as many facets of their armed action and their implications for the civilian population as possible, even when such actions may be considered to fall within the legal parameters set by IHL. At the same time, the consequences of actions by adversaries should also be taken into account, a topic taken up in the next chapter. This chapter proposes a new, structured approach to understanding and describing civilian harm in its specific context. The systematic inclusion of the six 'signatures' of harm – casualties, form, duration, object, systems, and variability – will allow for detailed mapping of the consequences of the use of armed violence for civilians. These six signatures are a tool to achieve common understanding, and will aid in the identification of strategies for protection of the population and the mitigation of harm, hopefully being a step towards a significant reduction of civilian harm in violent conflict.