The People’s Perspectives:
Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict

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The People's Perspectives:
Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict
Nicolette Boehland, Harvard Law School Fellow with Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), is the primary researcher and author of the report. Sahr Muhammedally, Senior Program Manager at CIVIC, was the report’s primary editor. Sarah Holewinski, former Executive Director of CIVIC and Naz Modirzadeh, Director of the Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict, developed the concept of the People’s Perspectives study and provided assistance in the editing process. Bonnie Docherty, Senior Clinical Instructor at Harvard Law School’s International Human Rights Clinic, edited the analytical overview and the case studies. Caroline Kavit designed and prepared the report for publication. Christine McCartney provided editing and production assistance.

The case study on Bosnia was researched and written by Lara Berlin, Luca Urech, and Nicolette Boehland, under the supervision of Bonnie Docherty. The case studies on Libya, Gaza, and Somalia were researched and written by Nicolette Boehland. In-country assistance was provided by Mohamed Buaisi and Sabri Ebdewi in Libya, Nidara Pašanović and Velma Saric of the Post-Conflict Research Center in Bosnia, Deema EL Ghoul in Gaza, and Aden Tarah and Leila Habai in Kenya.

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Written by Nicolette Boehland

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Image by Kate Holt. Armed groups and civilians stop outside of a shop in Mogadishu, Somalia.

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Note: To protect their anonymity, interviewees were assigned numbers. For the majority of interviewees, CIVIC recorded some descriptive elements such as age or place of residence or birth.
IF MY UNCLE IS ON DUTY, HE’S ONE THING, BUT WHEN HE’S IN LINE FOR BREAD, WHAT IS HE?
CASE STUDIES

BOSNIA: “THERE IS NO THINNER LINE”

Summary

This case study addresses civilian involvement in the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995. The findings of this case study are particularly relevant for understanding conflicts that involve a large number of paramilitary or irregular fighters, ethnic cleansing, or the siege of civilians in strategic cities.

Three findings of this case study merit special consideration by those debating how to interpret and implement the concept of direct participation in hostilities. First, Bosnia exemplifies a case in which civilians reported being heavily involved in the conflict, whether by fighting periodically, providing logistical support to armed groups or joining the local civil defense forces.

Second, the case study illustrates that many different factors can lead an individual to become involved in an armed conflict. Bosnian interviewees identified a range of motivations that underlay, and they believed justified, their involvement: they wanted to protect themselves or their families, they felt a duty to the Bosnian state, they were recruited, voluntarily or against their will, or they experienced social pressure to become involved. These motivations were apparent in some of the other conflicts covered in the People’s Perspectives study; however, one further motivation was cited only by Bosnians: several people reported that they became involved in the conflict to defend their communities or cities.
Third, the Bosnian case study demonstrates how an understanding of the law does not always clarify the complex issue of civilian status. The interviews suggested that Bosnians may have generally been aware of the concept of the civilian and the protections that are afforded to civilians under international humanitarian law (IHL). Despite this awareness, interviewees reported that the line between soldiers and civilians during the Bosnian war was extremely blurred. Furthermore, a large number of interviewees felt that the population during the war was defined not in terms of civilians or combatants, but instead in terms of ethnicity or religion.

**Methodology**

This case study’s findings are based on in-depth interviews with 62 individuals in Banja Luka, Bratunac, Mostar, Prijedor, Sarajevo, and Srebrenica. These interviews were conducted by a team of researchers from Harvard Law School’s International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), working in partnership with Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC). For reasons of confidentiality and security, this case study does not refer to interviewees by name.

The Bosnian translations of key terms used by the research team are as follows:

- Civilian: *civilni*
- Soldier: *vojnik*
- Bosnian-Muslim soldier: *Bosnjak vojnik*
- Bosnian-Croat soldier: *Hrvatski vojnik*
- Bosnian-Serb soldier: *Srpski vojnik*
- Involvement: *ucesce / sudjelovanje*
- Paramilitary fighter: *pripadnik paravojnih jedinica*

**Factual Background**

The interviews for this case study focused on the Bosnian war, in which Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs fought for territorial control of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. The conflict emerged in the context of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After the death of Josip Broz Tito, the architect and leader of the united Yugoslavia, nationalist tensions among the six Republics increased throughout the 1980s. In 1991, Slovenia was the first republic to declare its independence from the Federal Republic, followed soon after by Croatia. When Bosnia declared independence in March 1992, hostilities broke out almost immediately.

The major parties to the conflict included the Army of Republika Srpska, which was largely made up of Bosnian Serbs and supported by the Serbian government and the Yugoslav People’s Army; the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH), which was
largely composed of Bosnian Muslims; and the Croatian Defence Council, which was largely made up of Bosnian Croats and was supported by the Croatian government.188

The parties to the conflict were backed by a diverse array of other armed groups, including local and foreign paramilitary forces and “Territorial Defense units” (TO). These TO units originated in the former Yugoslav Federation, where all men of military age were required to undergo military training in the Yugoslav National Army.189 After the training, the men remained in the TO units so that they could be mobilized at a local level if necessary. The existing TO units supplemented each side in the conflict, particularly the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.190

The conflict in Bosnia was heavily localized, with differences from one area to another in terms of the parties involved and the dynamics and intensity of the fighting. In the countryside, the warring parties displaced members of certain ethnicities, attempting to create ethnically homogenous territories. This ethnic cleansing took place at the beginning of the war and in many cases, it was completed after only a few months.191 In some areas, concentration camps were set up, mostly for Bosnian Muslims, where civilians were detained, tortured, and killed. Meanwhile, strategically important cities such as Sarajevo fell under siege, exposing their inhabitants to sniper attacks and artillery shelling. In 1993, the United Nations (UN) Security Council designated the Bosnian Muslim cities of Bihać, Goražde, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Tuzla, and Žepa as “safe areas,” meaning that they should remain “free from armed attacks and from any other hostile act,” and armed groups within the safe areas were forced to demobilize.192 However, the fall of Srebrenica and the genocide perpetrated against its population in 1995 demonstrated that even in the UN-protected areas, civilians were not safe from attack and persecution.

After the initial phase of the war, the front lines did not alter significantly for many months. By the end of 1994, almost three years of fighting had produced a standoff.193 One year later, the reemergence of the Bosnian-Croat alliance and developments in Croatia shifted the military balance and set the conditions for peace talks.194 The Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war in 1995 and separated the country into two autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. The war took a heavy toll on the Bosnian population. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia estimated that the Bosnian war caused 104,732 casualties. An estimated 40 percent of these were civilians.195 The conflict also led to the internal displacement of more than a million people and created as many refugees abroad.196

Civilian Involvement

This section discusses the case study’s key findings regarding civilian involvement in conflict. It first examines various modes of involvement using accounts from CIVIC’s interviewees. In order to provide context, these accounts sometimes note the individuals’ motivations and views on their own status during conflict. The section then identifies and explores in more depth the primary motivations for involvement described by interviewees.

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193 Burg and Shoup, War in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
194 Ibid.
Modes of Involvement

The modes of involvement discussed below range from active engagement in the fighting, to provision of support, such as providing food and transportation for members of armed groups, to peripheral activities, including joining a civil defense unit. Some modes of involvement are purely civilian and would not be considered clear or even possible examples of direct participation in hostilities. However, the study addresses the full spectrum of involvement to demonstrate the number and diversity of ways in which civilians can become involved in conflict.

Fighting

Local Units

Interviews were conducted with several individuals who joined local units during the war. A 67-year-old man from Sarajevo reported that he had no training before he joined his Territorial Defense unit in Sarajevo. “We were young men in jeans and sneakers. We had 15 bullets split between us, and two guns between us. . . . We were given a bazooka, but we didn’t know what to do with it, so we sent it away, to another military unit,” he said. Of his own status, he said, “We all considered ourselves soldiers, but from our looks, we were not, we didn’t have uniforms. . . . It was a miracle that anyone stayed alive with that kind of spontaneous formation.”

A groundskeeper from Srebrenica said that he left high school to join his local TO unit, which was made up of around 50 people. When asked why he decided to join the unit, he explained, “When I saw Serb soldiers attacking us, I had no choice but to join.” Of his own status, he remarked, “I tried to be a soldier, but I was a kid. I never thought that war is such a dangerous thing. I thought it would be over quickly. . . . We are all soldiers when it is needed.” However, he enjoyed certain aspects of his post: “I had a white military police belt around my waist, which made me feel important. And having a gun made me happy.”

A 65-year-old Bosnian Serb man from Bjelovac, a town in the east of Bosnia, reported that civilians organized themselves into similar fighting units in his area. He explained, “We only had civilians to defend the city. After that, we organized ourselves as a unit from the army—the Army of Republika Srpska.” He remarked that this group’s transition into the Republika Srpska army was simply “a process of getting weapons” and being invited to join a larger unit in Bratunac. Although this interviewee later became a commander in the Army of

Definition of “Civilian Involvement” in CIVIC’s People’s Perspectives Study

In this study, “civilian involvement” refers broadly to all types of activities in which a civilian takes part during a conflict. By adopting this definition, the study aims to capture the experiences and perspectives of all those who fall somewhere between bystanders and combatants under Article 43 of the first Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions. In legal terms, the activities included under “involvement” in this case study could be classified as non-participation, indirect participation in hostilities, direct participation in hostilities, or exercising a continuous combat function. Because the parameters of these classifications are contested and can be controversial, the study intentionally avoids classifying modes of involvement.

197 Interviewees 6, 20, 27, 62.
198 Interviewee 6. See “Factual Background” for more information on the Territorial Defense units.
199 Ibid.
200 Interviewee 27.
201 Ibid.
202 Interviewee 20.
Republika Srpska, he believed that he and his community should not have been considered soldiers when they first organized. “We were militarily involved,” he said, “but we were not organized on any level.”

**Paramilitary Groups**

Three men discussed serving with paramilitary groups during the war. One of them, a 65-year-old Bosnian Muslim man, reported that he left behind his former life as a shopkeeper to join the Green Berets, a paramilitary group in Sarajevo. When asked what he considered his own status, he responded, “I saw myself as a defender of my city. I saw myself like a man who took a rifle in his hands to defend innocent people. I thought at least I have guts to do that.” As a paramilitary fighter, he also believed that his own chances of survival would increase. “You start to look around yourself,” he said. “If you are not stupid, you join. A lone wolf can survive, but a pack will survive better. You find your own pack so that you’re not alone.”

**Non-Organized Fighting**

Several people discussed how they or others engaged in fighting that was not organized or associated with an armed group, but was instead prompted by their circumstances. The first type of non-organized fighting was characterized by interviewees as self-defense. A man who was based in Sarajevo during the war offered an example of this kind of fighting:

The lines between the two armies were very close [in Sarajevo]. And sometimes right next to the lines you had civilians. For example, a very old woman had a house on the border. When the Chetniks attacked, they broke the first line of defense and almost came to Fata’s house. She somehow had hand grenades and threw them through the window. She killed 11 soldiers, even though she was a civilian.

A 50-year-old woman who lived in Sarajevo during the war recalled an instance in which one of her neighbors fought back against a sniper:

I had a neighbor who was a young mother of two children. It was summer and a quiet day, so her children were outside. Someone started shooting from her roof. She was so scared that this person would kill her children that she took a meat cleaver and found the man. She approached him from the back. When [the neighbors] found the two, she was still hitting him. She hit him beyond recognition.

Several individuals who were based in areas outside of Sarajevo said their families and neighbors used whatever weapons they had in order to protect themselves from incoming attacks. A 32-year-old woman who was a young girl in Prijedor when the fighting broke out in her area explained, “The men would take the families to a nearby house without windows.”
This was designed to keep the families safe. The only type of weapons we had would have been hunting rifles. . . . Men would be around the house, guarding it. 

Similarly, a Bosnian Serb man who grew up in the eastern part of the country recalled, “The fathers [of the families] were involved only in their villages’ defense. . . . For them it was natural, and they were not sent to other places.” A local city official based in Srebrenica during the war said that in response to news of incoming attacks, individuals in Srebrenica would do what they could to protect themselves. He explained, “[When] Srebrenica was attacked. . . [people] resisted with hunting rifles to protect civilians.

The second type of non-organized fighting described by interviewees involved efforts to obtain necessities for survival. Particularly in Srebrenica, interviewees described how humanitarian aid did not reach everyone who needed it. As a result, people would sometimes raid surrounding villages to obtain food and resources. A former soldier from Srebrenica described one of these expeditions: “One winter we decided to go into a Serb village because of food, so that we could survive. We were trying to search for food for 9,000 people in the municipality. We decided to attack the village to find food.” He described the group that attacked the village as being “mixed together” with civilians and soldiers. He explained, “The army would attack and civilians would find food. . . . We would collect food and leave the area.” According to this man, these attacks carried risks, but they were worth it. “We decided to organize ourselves because it would be better to be killed by a bullet than by starving,” he explained.

Logistical Support

Beyond fighting with an armed group or individually, many people were involved in the conflict by providing logistical support for armed groups. This support came in many different forms, at times voluntary and other times less so. For instance, interviewees who were in Sarajevo during the conflict reported that everyone had particular tasks or roles they were expected to fulfill. Non-military males were particularly expected to engage in activities that would be useful for the war effort. As described by a 31-year-old woman from Sarajevo, “During the war if you were not in the army and you were male, you would have to work for something of ‘state importance’. . . . So everyone had a card that said what they did for the state: it would say ‘army’ or ‘journalist’ or ‘doctor.”

Bosnians also supported armed groups, either formally or informally, through a range of activities including: driving, collecting and transferring bodies, digging trenches, acting as scouts or guides, cooking food, making clothing, planting food, providing medical support, carrying goods, translating, and even performing in musical and theater productions. These roles were often divided along gender lines. People described how women, although they did not usually participate in the fighting, often cooked and provided clothes to both civilians and soldiers. A female social psychologist who lived through the siege in Sarajevo

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209 Interviewee 2.
210 Interviewee 4.
211 Interviewee 22.
212 Interviewees 23, 24, 32.
213 Interviewee 24.
214 Ibid.
215 Interviewee 1.
216 See interviewees 4, 6, 7, 13, 24, 32.
explained, “Women were collecting water, trying to make meals out of nothing. . . . We had to come up with sneaky ways.” A man who was in Sarajevo during the conflict added, “It was common practice that women would make cakes or rice pies and bring that to the fighting soldiers, which boosted morale. Also, when our soldiers were fighting and it was snowing, women brought the white sheets to hide them.”

A 36-year-old woman from Bugojno, a town in central Bosnia, said that she and others—“old people, women, and those not in the military”—farmed the land in her village to provide food for the armed groups nearby. She continued, “Every day, when I finished school, I would go to the fields.” She then delivered the food they harvested directly to the military. When asked what she considered her own status during this time, she said, “We didn’t think about what we were, we just didn’t want people to be hungry. . . . People were just fighting for survival.” Still, she felt proud of her contribution, explaining, “Our men had something to eat, so that helped them.”

A 50-year-old Bosnian Muslim woman became a translator in a local military unit of the ARBiH in Sarajevo. She described how she first became involved with the unit:

I enlisted at 28 [years of age]. I thought to myself, ‘I don’t know how to shoot, but I can do something.’ My first task was to prepare the face camouflage. I put cream with green chalk. I did fancy myself a combatant. I stopped feeling helpless and alarmed. Sitting in the basement [before joining the unit] was so hard, and after I joined, I had a feeling that I was helping my baby. Ok, so it was just Nivea cream and chalk, but it was something.

Soon after she joined the unit, she became its translator and was responsible for liaising with the military commanders of other units and United Nations officials. When asked how she felt during her time with the unit, she responded, “I was not even terrified, I was confused. I felt like I had fallen through a hole. You fall, and you fall, and you end up in an unknown world where none of the laws from the old world applied. It was full of new creatures. Had aliens arrived, I would not have been surprised. You just can’t believe what’s happening to you.”

Membership in the Civil Defense

In addition to the Territorial Defense, local communities set up other structures to help coordinate tasks during the war. One of these structures was the civil defense force. According to interviewees, civil defense units were made up predominantly of men who were unable to fight in the war, along with some women. A woman from Sarajevo explained that her brother-in-law joined the civil defense because he was not physically able to go to war. He was responsible for distributing food. Her husband, a taxi driver in Sarajevo, reported that the civil defense units would perform different tasks, depending on the qualifications of those in the units. They “replaced factory workers and set up gas pipes for heating. When a grenade hit a building, they came to clean up the mess.” In addition to the tasks described above, individuals in the civil defense forces performed tasks such as growing food and cooking, distributing humanitarian aid, building shelters for refugees, and

217 Interviewee 32.
218 Interviewee 11.
219 Interviewee 49.
220 Ibid.
221 Interviewee 62.
222 Ibid.
223 Interviewee 9.
224 Ibid.
225 Interviewee 8.
digging trenches and graves. Each of the interviewees who discussed the civil defense characterized it as a civilian institution. As one interviewee put it, the duties of the civil defense were a part of a “civil initiative, so they weren’t considered soldiers.”

Motivations for Involvement

When asked why they or others became involved in the armed conflict in Bosnia, interviewees offered a variety of explanations. Five of these motivations emerged as the most common: protection of self or family, defense of community, civic duty, forced or voluntary recruitment, and desire to elevate social standing or avoid social stigma.

Protection of Self or Family

According to a large number of interviewees, they and others became involved in the conflict out of a desire to protect themselves or their families. Indeed, this motivation was more commonly cited than any other. A man from Sarajevo who joined his local TO unit explained, “We all felt the need to protect ourselves.” Several people said that during the conflict, they were faced with a choice between becoming involved or certain death. A social psychologist who lived through the siege in Sarajevo explained that civilians felt they had “nothing to lose,” as their options were to “either get killed or defend themselves.” A 31-year-old NGO worker from Sarajevo added, “In this war, you just had men protecting their families.”

Defense of Community

Several other people said that they became involved in the conflict to defend their communities or cities. People who lived in Sarajevo during the conflict often cited this motivation. For instance, according to the social psychologist from Sarajevo, “The community [in Sarajevo] was very cohesive. . . . At that time they realized [their own survival] depended on if their neighbor survived. The ultimate goal was defense and survival.” Another woman from Sarajevo added, “Nobody here thought, ‘I’m going to the army.’ It was instead, ‘I’m defending my city.’”

Residents of smaller towns and villages in Bosnia echoed this sentiment. For instance, a 41-year-old man described how the Bosnian Muslim residents of Bratunac, a town in the far-east corner of Bosnia, reacted to news that their town would be attacked. “When we realized they were going to kill us, we decided we had to do something. We had a community meeting and decided to organize ourselves. . . . We started making weapons out of water pipes,” he said. According to a 65-year-old man from Bjelovac, also a town in the far-east corner of Bosnia, he and his Bosnian Serb neighbors were also forced to defend themselves. He explained, “The soldiers came on December 14, 1992. Sixty-nine victims fell down in this place—that was the reason we organized a defense. . . . We didn’t have a big army, we only had civilians to defend the city.”

226 Interviewees 12, 27, 32.
227 Interviewee 7. Interviewee 8 also characterized the civil defense as a civilian institution.
228 Interviewee 6.
229 Interviewee 32.
230 Interviewee 1.
231 Interviewee 32.
232 Ibid.
233 Interviewee 24.
234 Interviewee 20.
Civic Duty

Some interviewees said that civic duty motivated them and others to get involved in the conflict. A Bosnian Muslim man who served in the ARBiH during the conflict explained, “It was difficult to survive for our people and state. So many civilians were killed. I felt I would be capable of protecting civilians and my country.” An NGO worker from Sarajevo echoed this idea, explaining, “It was our civic duty—together with the soldiers and international forces—to protect the city.” According to a former paramilitary fighter from Sarajevo, most of the ways in which civilians were involved in the conflict, such as sewing uniforms or transporting sandbags, were “not obligatory,” but instead were done “more out of a patriotic duty.”

Forced or Voluntary Recruitment

Many Bosnians discussed how civilians were recruited to become involved in the conflict by armed groups, whether by choice or by force. According to a 32-year-old woman from Sarajevo, “This war could have never happened without recruitment of civilians.” She said that many civilians were recruited into armed groups voluntarily, but the process happened “overnight, [and they were] in sneakers, no boots, holes in sweaters, and jeans. . . . It was the picture of most of those guys who were recruited.”

A man from Prijedor described a similar trend in his neighborhood. “Paramilitary forces would catch people on the street, and would collect them [to join their forces],” he recalled. “There was no escape from the fighting [and the] killing.”

Desire to Elevate Social Standing or Avoid Stigma

A few individuals said that they or others chose to become involved in the conflict because they sought to elevate their social standing or to avoid stigma. They explained that those who became involved were perceived as having courage or “heart,” whereas those who tried to stay out of the fighting were seen as cowards. For instance, a former paramilitary member from Sarajevo said, “Whoever had a heart went to fight.” Another former paramilitary member described his participation as “something that follows from your heart.” For a 65-year-old man from Sarajevo, involvement was “a question of honor. . . . [M]any people are very proud to go to the war.”

Some Bosnians noted that those who tried to stay out of the conflict were sometimes stigmatized. For instance, a journalist who was based in Bugojno, a town in central Bosnia, during the war explained that if his family had not supported the “cause,” they would have been “social outcasts. . . . It was a huge disgrace.” A university student from Mostar echoed this point. “It would have been humiliating if you were capable and you were not doing your part,” she said. According to some interviewees, there was pressure on men to become involved. A 36-year-old Bosnian Muslim man from Srebrenica explained that

235 Interviewee 28.
236 Interviewee 7.
237 Interviewee 8.
238 Interviewee 32.
239 Id.
240 Interviewee 30.
241 Interviewee 47.
242 Interviewee 8.
243 Interviewee 61.
244 Interviewee 30.
245 Interviewee 59.
246 Interviewee 58.
men who tried to stay out of the fighting were considered “cowards.” He continued, “people would talk about you as a woman.”

A retired mortician from Sarajevo said that while most men were involved in the conflict in some way, “[t]he cowards sat in the basement drinking coffee with the women.”

Understanding and Application of Legal Concepts

In this section, the case study explores interviewees’ understanding and application of legal concepts related to the principle of distinction. It first examines views on the concepts of civilian and combatant status. It then considers the challenges of classification outlined by interviewees when they applied the principle of distinction to the conflict in Bosnia.

Concept of the Civilian

The majority of interviewees in Bosnia seemed to be familiar with the basic concept of the “civilian” and the idea that civilians should be protected under international law. Still, interviewees offered different interpretations of civilni, the Bosnian translation of the word civilian. First, several individuals identified civilians on the basis of gender and age. A university student from Prijedor said, “Civilians were the children and women and men older than 70.” A radio announcer from Mostar agreed, “Civilians were the kids, the elderly, grandparents—who were saved in a safe place and waited for a better place, for tomorrow.”

Second, some Bosnians stressed that civilians were those who were not engaged in the conflict in any way. Exemplifying this view, the director of a research organization in Sarajevo said, “Civilians are those who did not participate whatsoever in the war.” Finally, other interviewees described the concept of the civilian in direct contrast to the vojnik, or soldier. As a 27-year-old man from Mostar said, a civilian is “someone who is in the middle of war and is not a soldier.”

Concept of the Combatant / Non-Civilian

When distinguishing a non-civilian from a civilian, interviewees most often referred to the presence of a weapon. A Bosnian Muslim man from Srebrenica said, “A combatant is based on the availability and amount of ammunition and weapons. If you have no weapons, how can you be a combatant?” An NGO worker from Prijedor said, simply, “[G]ive me a weapon and I am a soldier.”

Interviewees identified four other factors as distinguishing non-civilians or soldiers from civilians. First, several people looked to the presence or absence of a general command structure or organization in a unit. According to a former paramilitary fighter from Sarajevo, when “you had commanders, you became a soldier.”

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247 Interviewee 23.
248 Interviewee 6.
249 The People’s Perspectives study attempted to capture interviewee perceptions of the word “civilian” across the four conflicts. Therefore, in this case study, the researcher attempted to discern the interviewees’ understanding of civilni, the Bosnian word for civilian.
250 The basic criteria that interviewees used to distinguish soldiers from civilians will be discussed below.
251 Interviewee 47.
252 Interviewee 56.
253 Interviewees 17 and 51.
254 Interviewee 31.
255 Interviewees 25 and 55.
256 Interviewee 55.
257 Interviewees 5, 22, 24, 38, 45, 54.
258 Interviewee 5.
259 Interviewee 54.
260 Interviewee 61.
Srebrenica added, “When they are trained and prepared, they are soldiers.” Second, some interviewees emphasized the importance of a person’s location during the conflict, usually in relation to the “front line” or the “battlefield.” According to a 41-year-old man from Mostar, “Soldiers for us are the ones who are fighting on the front line. . . . It’s about where the person is.”

Third, other Bosnians highlighted whether the person was enlisted in the military as a soldier and whether that person had been registered and properly documented as such.

Finally, a few interviewees relied on the presence or absence of a uniform as a determinative factor. For instance, a 31-year-old woman from Sarajevo said, “When you put on the uniform, you are a soldier, but when you take it off, you are my neighbor.”

A university student from Mostar added, “Every male was a civilian until he put on a uniform to defend his country.” However, as explored below, several interviewees reported being confused by the variety and irregularity of the uniforms worn by armed groups in Bosnia.

### Challenges of Classification: Civilians or Combatants

#### General Views

While many interviewees said the Bosnian population could be classified into civilians and soldiers, others saw little distinction during the armed conflict in Bosnia. Many of the latter argued that there were no soldiers involved in the conflict; only civilians were involved. As a 67-year-old Bosnian Muslim man from Sarajevo said, “There was no army in the sense of the American army. Technically you could argue that they were all civilians.”

A 47-year-old Bosnian Serb woman agreed, “We didn’t have a professional or organized army. Civilians were acting like soldiers. We didn’t know how to act like an army—we still don’t know. We were all civilians trying to organize to defend ourselves, but we didn’t succeed.”

By contrast, some interviewees felt that there were only soldiers involved in the conflict. For instance, according to a man who served in the Bosnian Serb Army during the conflict, “During the war, everyone was military.”

According to other interviewees, the fighters in Bosnia fell somewhere in between soldiers and civilians. A man from Sarajevo said, “I feel that there is no thinner line between soldiers and civilians than in the Bosnian war. . . . When Bosnia was attacked, we did not have an army at all. The only organized force was the police, but they were minuscule in numbers. So the army was formed in the war. After four years of war, you still had soldiers with no uniforms, because of the embargo.”

A 40-year-old gardener from Srebrenica added, “The line between soldiers and civilians during war is invisible. . . . There is almost no line, no distinction.”

A large number of interviewees expressed their confusion about the blurred lines between civilians and soldiers during the conflict. For instance, a woman from Sarajevo said, “Many killed [during the conflict] were actually civilians, but I don’t know how to distinguish [them]. If my uncle is on duty, he’s one thing, but when he’s in line for bread, what is he?”

A 32-year-old woman from Kozarac, a town in northeast Bosnia, added, “The perception of
soldiers was very confusing. The Bosnian army was not really an army. It was very much ‘who was a soldier?’\textsuperscript{272} When a 64-year-old businessman from Banja Luka was asked how he distinguished civilians from soldiers, his response summarized the uncertainty many interviewees felt. “Only God knows,” he said.\textsuperscript{273}

**Periodic Fighting**

Bosnians expressed divergent views about how to categorize individuals who would travel to the front lines for limited periods of time and then return home. Some people believed that these individuals were soldiers on the front line and civilians upon their return. For instance, a 31-year-old woman from Sarajevo said, “There were schedules. Basically there would be something like two days on the front line, one day at home. If you have a free day, you went back to being a civilian.”\textsuperscript{274} An NGO worker from Mostar agreed that when a soldier returned home, “he is a civilian again,” and he is a soldier “only for the time he is engaging.”\textsuperscript{275} A man who runs an organization that counts and classifies fatalities in the Bosnian war echoed this view. This interviewee said that he and his research team focused on whether the individual was engaged in a civilian activity when he was targeted. He explained, “[I]f I am not actively participating in war, I am a civilian. . . . In the meantime I was a soldier, at the front line, until I came home. Although I am officially a soldier, if I go shopping, I am a civilian. They target me as a civilian.”\textsuperscript{276}

Other people believed that the individual remained a soldier whether he was on or off duty. A news editor who was based in Sarajevo during the war explained, “It’s the situation everywhere that you would have trips—seven days, 14 days—you’d go to the field and then come back. They were part of the army, that’s how the army functioned. When they were off the lines, they were considered soldiers, just off duty. If they were killed off duty, it would be counted as killing a soldier, not a civilian.”\textsuperscript{277} Another man from an organization that focuses on post-conflict issues in Sarajevo agreed that soldiers who were off duty were “always soldiers,” regardless of whether they were at the front line.\textsuperscript{278} Still other interviewees were unable to classify these individuals. For instance, a man from Sarajevo said, “I don’t know how to classify the person who manned the stationary gun and then returned home.”\textsuperscript{279}

**Uniforms**

Several interviewees noted that the uniforms worn by fighters in Bosnia were irregular and diverse. For instance, a 39-year-old man described the uniforms he saw when the military entered his small village, Biscani, which is located about three miles outside of Prijedor. He said:

Some of them had regular olive green JNA [Yugoslav People’s Army] uniforms. The other kind was camouflage. A third kind was the blue camouflage of the police uniforms. There were also a number of soldiers who we could clearly tell were paramilitary. They had markers like biker gloves with no fingers and bands around their heads. Then some of them had hats, which are specifically for Serb folk dancing—black with red tops and tassel. One had Montenegrin coat of arms. . . . Bosniaks had the American style. . . . [The uniforms] were like a peacock’s tail. . . . No particular sides were consistent with uniforms.\textsuperscript{280}

\underline{272} Interviewee 2.
\underline{273} Interviewee 45.
\underline{274} Interviewee 1.
\underline{275} Interviewee 30.
\underline{276} Interviewee 31.
\underline{277} Interviewee 12.
\underline{278} Interviewee 10.
\underline{279} Interviewee 11.
\underline{280} Interviewee 31.
A man from Prijedor echoed this view: “‘With a stick and a rope,’ we say. Some [uniforms] were only a green tee-shirt, some had a belt. It was improvisation.”\(^{281}\) A 50-year-old woman, who served with a unit of the ARBiH in Sarajevo, described her first uniform as “pink overalls and a helmet.”\(^{282}\) Two interviewees who served in paramilitary groups described a similar, ad hoc approach to uniforms. The first, a paramilitary fighter in Sarajevo, explained that he had no official uniform during the conflict, and instead wore only a black leather jacket.\(^{283}\) The second interviewee described himself as “a soldier in sneakers—I had black trousers, a black tee-shirt, [and a] camouflage jacket.”\(^{284}\) Another man, who worked as a medic in Srebrenica during the war, expressed his confusion about uniforms during the conflict and asked, “Who is a soldier when he doesn’t have boots or a gun, or a uniform? Nobody had a uniform or boots. So how can one tell?”\(^{285}\)

### Meaningless Distinction

Several interviewees expressed doubt that the categories of civilian and soldier had any meaning during the Bosnian conflict. An employee of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina believed the categories did not apply easily to the complexity inherent in the Bosnian conflict. “If you look at the Geneva Conventions, everything looks beautiful, but if you start to apply it, everything falls apart. How can you treat each of the categories in a proper way?” he asked.\(^{286}\) A 27-year-old man from Mostar agreed, “I don’t know, all those Geneva Conventions, other conventions, and then war starts, and there are no more conventions. It’s just pure animals.”\(^{287}\)

According to some, the classification of civilian or combatant was superseded and made irrelevant by other categories, such as ethnicity or religion. A social psychologist from Sarajevo cited a possible explanation for this phenomenon:

> The discourse used is “us” versus “them.” It wasn’t our soldiers versus their soldiers. There’s not a clear distinction. . . . It’s us versus them, perpetrator versus victim language. It’s not aligned with “civilian” and “soldier.” I don’t think they differentiate along those lines because they’re so blurred. Civilians became soldiers. It was not clear-cut. . . . Who were soldiers? A civilian yesterday, a soldier today.\(^{288}\)

According to a university student from Prijedor, categorizations during the conflict were “connected with ethnic identities and religious identities. If you are Serb you are going to fight against the Muslims. Nobody was thinking about civilians or soldiers.”\(^{289}\)

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281 Interviewee 47.
282 Interviewee 62.
283 Interviewee 8.
284 Interviewee 62.
285 Interviewee 25.
286 Interviewee 14.
287 Interviewee 55.
288 Interviewee 32.
289 Interviewee 47.
Annex 1: Baseline Questionnaire

Civilian Involvement

1. Did you find that (civilians / non-fighters) are becoming involved with armed groups in X country? Which groups? [SKIP if the person can speak about his/her own involvement instead]
   a. Details: In what ways did people become involved with armed groups? [How often? How do you know they did this?]
   b. Motivation: As far as you know, what were their reasons for choosing to support them?
   c. Perceptions: When they started supporting the armed group in that way, did people consider them fighters / soldiers / combatants?
      i. If not, what did people consider them?
   d. Risk: Did their involvement put them at greater risk?

2. Now we would like to ask you about your own role in the conflict. Have you become involved with any of the armed groups? [Which ones?]
   a. Details: In what ways were you involved?
      i. Can you name specific activities?
         1. How often? Every day, once a week, only once?
         2. Did you do this alone or with others?
         3. Can you describe any specific incidents of involvement?
   b. Motivation: Why did you decide to become involved?
      i. Was there any specific event that triggered your participation?
   c. Perception: How did/do you see yourself as a result of this involvement—(civilian), (soldier / fighter), something else? Why?
   d. Risk: Given your activities, did you feel at risk of being attacked and/or detained by other armed groups? Why / why not?
      i. What could you do to make yourself safer (if anything)?
      ii. Did any armed group do any harm to you or your family or house?
         1. Do you think this happened because of the activities you engaged in? (If appropriate)
         2. Details: type of harm, when, who was involved, outcome, current status (detention, property, injury, death)

3. Do you feel you had a choice on whether you become / became involved in the conflict?
   a. Does everyone become involved?
   b. If not, who does not become involved? Why? How are the people who did become involved perceived by others?
Key Actors

1. Which armed groups would you see in your neighborhood during the conflict?

2. How did you recognize the armed groups here?
   a. How would you categorize them—civilians, combatants / fighters, something in between?

Understanding and Application of Legal Concepts

1. What does the word (civilian) mean to you?

2. What does the word (soldier / fighter) mean to you?

3. How do you tell the difference between the two groups? Is it possible?

4. Do you think those concepts apply in the conflict in X?

5. There is a rule in the laws of war that says that civilians should be protected from being purposefully hurt or killed during war
   a. Are you aware of this rule?
   b. Do you think this rule should apply in X?

6. Do you think any of the parties we’ve discussed in this interview could do more to protect those who are not participating in hostilities from harm?
   a. If so, what and how?
About the report

The laws of war prohibit the intentional targeting of civilians. This principle, known as civilian immunity, is the cornerstone of international humanitarian law. Yet this immunity is not absolute: civilians are immune from being targeted unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities. Thus, a civilian may be lawfully targeted while directly participating in hostilities.

Military commanders, government officials, lawyers, humanitarians, and academics have engaged in a heated debate over how this rule should be implemented. In their debates—primarily focused on definitions, legal obligations, and criteria for targeting—they have argued about such key questions as which activities should qualify as direct participation and when a civilian should lose and regain legal immunity from direct attack.

In all of these discussions, the views of one group have been largely absent: civilians in conflict-affected countries. For these civilians, the issues of participation and protection during war are not abstract problems, but instead are a matter of life and death. As a step toward addressing this gap in the discourse, Center for Civilians in Conflict carried out the People’s Perspectives study on civilian involvement in armed conflict. This study is based on more than 250 interviews with individuals who have lived through conflict in Bosnia, Libya, Gaza, and Somalia. By shedding light on their perspectives and experiences, this study endeavors to inject civilian voices into this conversation about “the civilian”—and to ensure that this critical debate about warfare in the 21st century is inclusive of those most likely to be affected by its outcomes.

About Center for Civilians in Conflict

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) works to make warring parties more responsible to civilians before, during, and after armed conflict. We are advocates who believe no civilian caught in conflict should be ignored, and advisors who provide practical solutions to prevent and respond to civilian harm.

The organization was founded as The Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a courageous humanitarian killed by a suicide bomber in 2005 while advocating for Iraqi families.