The People’s Perspectives: Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict
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Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict
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Cover photo:
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.
LIBYA: “THE FIGHT CAME TO US”

Summary

This case study addresses civilian involvement in the armed conflict in Libya in 2011. The findings of this case study are particularly relevant for understanding conflicts that are rooted in popular demonstrations or involve a widespread social movement against the government or leader of a state.

Four findings of this case study merit special consideration by those debating how to interpret and implement the concept of direct participation in hostilities. First, a large number of Libyan interviewees reported that they were heavily involved in the 2011 conflict, and that they had made the decision to become involved voluntarily. Their involvement ranged from fighting periodically, to transferring weapons, to manning checkpoints. Interestingly, only a handful of the 61 interviewees said that they had not wanted to be involved in the conflict. This finding is likely related to the particular nature of the conflict in Libya, which had its roots in a social revolution.

Second, civilians in Libya said that they were involved in the 2011 conflict for reasons they believed were justified: they wanted to protect themselves or their families, felt a duty to their country, or wished to elevate their social standing. Although these motivations were apparent in some of the other conflicts covered in the People’s Perspectives study, two further motivations were only cited by Libyans. For some interviewees, the targeting of peaceful protesters by Qaddafi’s forces sparked their outrage and inspired them to join the conflict. Additionally, several interviewees said that they became involved out of their desire to form a free and democratic state.

Third, CIVIC’s interviews suggest that the concept of the civilian—and the immunity from attack that civilians are afforded under IHL—may not have been understood by the majority of the population in Libya. Interviewees offered several different interpretations of medani, the Arabic translation of the word civilian, very few of which aligned with the definition under IHL, and only a handful of the individuals interviewed by CIVIC expressed awareness of the fact that civilians are lawfully protected during war.

Finally, many Libyans rejected the idea that the principle of distinction was applicable during the 2011 conflict. For some, combatants could not be distinguished from civilians in Libya because the population came together to fight Qaddafi. Those who expressed this view saw no difference between the people who fought on the front lines and those who supported them. For others, the principle of distinction was meaningless in Libya because the population considered itself an “armed people,” made up entirely of combatants. Additionally, interviewees noted that the lack of uniforms also complicated distinction.

Methodology

This case study’s findings are based on interviews with 61 individuals in Benghazi, Gharyan, Misrata, Tripoli, and Zawiya. A CIVIC researcher conducted the interviews from July 5–August 5, 2012.

Interviewees were based in various locations in Libya during the conflict, including Benghazi, Brega, Gharyan, Jadu, Janzour, Kabaw, Misrata, Nalut, Regdalin, Sabha, Sirte, Tajoura, Tawergha, Tripoli, and Zawiya. Due to the security situation in Libya in 2012, it was not possible to interview a significant number of Libyans who supported or continued to

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290 Please refer to the “Analytical Overview” for more information on the methodology for the People’s Perspectives study.
support the Qaddafi regime, as many of them were in jail or in hiding, had fled the country, or did not feel comfortable sharing their support of Qaddafi after his defeat. For reasons of confidentiality and security, this case study does not refer to interviewees by name.\textsuperscript{291}

The Arabic translations of key terms used by the researcher are as follows:

- Civilian: \textit{medani}
- Combatant: \textit{muqaTal}
- Soldier: \textit{jundi}
- Rebel fighters: \textit{thuwar}\textsuperscript{292}
- Qaddafi's forces: \textit{katayb}\textsuperscript{293}
- Involvement: \textit{musharaka}

\textbf{Factual Background}\textsuperscript{294}

The interviews for this case study centered on the conflict in Libya that lasted from February to October 2011. Anti-government protests broke out in the eastern city of Benghazi on February 15, 2011 and spread to the western cities of Tripoli, Misrata, and Zawiya. The government of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi responded to the protests with force.\textsuperscript{295} As several of Qaddafi’s military officers defected and opposition forces seized arms from abandoned government bases in eastern Libya, the uprising evolved into an armed conflict.\textsuperscript{296} By late February, a broad coalition of opposition forces had taken control of Benghazi as well as the coastal cities of Tobruk and Misrata.\textsuperscript{297} Qaddafi’s forces soon regrouped, and on February 22, Qaddafi ordered them, by televised broadcast, to crush the uprising.\textsuperscript{298} After engaging in heavy fighting in several coastal cities, Qaddafi’s forces made a rapid advance to Benghazi.

On March 17, the United Nations Security Council authorized a no-fly zone over Libya and the use of “all necessary measures” to protect civilians.\textsuperscript{299} Two days later, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States commenced airstrikes on Libya. NATO took control of operations on March 31 and prevented Qaddafi’s forces from retaking Benghazi and eastern Libya.\textsuperscript{300} Despite NATO’s intervention, Qaddafi’s forces continued to resist, retaking several coastal cities and laying siege to Misrata. In the weeks that followed, control of key cities swung back and forth.

On August 19, 2011, rebel forces retook Zawiya, a city about 30 miles west of Tripoli, and began an advance on Tripoli.\textsuperscript{301} Two days later, rebel forces culminated their advance on Tripoli by capturing Green Square and surrounding Qaddafi’s compound. Muammar Qaddafi
was killed in Sirte on October 20, at the hands of rebel forces. Three days later, the National Transitional Council, the oppositional interim government, declared the liberation of Libya and an official end to the war.\textsuperscript{302} NATO concluded its mission on October 31, 2011.\textsuperscript{303} The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than 550,000 people were displaced as a result of the conflict.\textsuperscript{304} As of April 2014, the UNHCR said there were still an estimated 63,985 internally displaced persons in Libya.\textsuperscript{305} Casualty estimates from the 2011 conflict have varied greatly; however, according to the National Transitional Council, approximately 25,000 Libyans were killed.\textsuperscript{306}

\textbf{Civilian Involvement}

This section discusses the case study’s key findings regarding civilian involvement in conflict. It first examines examples of the 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.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Mode of Involvement} & Description \\
\hline
\textbf{Fighting} & A 21-year-old dentistry student who joined a small militia, which was largely comprised of his friends and extended family, described his experience. He fought with this militia in battles \end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{302} International Crisis Group, “Holding Libya Together.”
\textsuperscript{304} UNHCR, “Fact-sheet.”
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid. This statistic is accurate as of April 2014.
\textsuperscript{306} For information on the controversy over the death toll of the conflict in Libya, see Nordland, “More Martyrs Than Bodies.” According to a CIVIC report, “Libyan Health Ministry officials initially estimated that nearly 30,000 Libyans were killed during the conflict with another 50,000 wounded. In October 2011, officials revised the death toll down to 25,000 dead and 4,000 missing. Figures released by the Libyan Ministry of Martyrs and Missing Persons in January 2013 adjusted the figures again after new research to 4,700 pro-revolutionaries killed with 2,100 missing. The latest statistics, however, do not include the final figure for fatalities on the Qaddafi side and may not include all civilians killed.” Center for Civilians in Conflict, “Issue Brief.” See also Black, “Libyan Revolution.”
across the country, including in Tripoli, Sabha, a town in southwestern Libya, and the Nafusa mountains, in the northwest corner of Libya. After receiving one week of training, he began fighting as a rebel soldier, though he did not initially carry a weapon. He explained, “In my first fight, I was just helping other people: watching, bringing them weapons. In my second fight, I was again just helping. In the next battle, I found a Kalashnikov inside a house. . . . I used it for my third and fourth battles. When we came to Tripoli, I changed my weapon to an anti-aircraft gun, and I used that in the next eight battles.” Of this time, he said that he has now “forgotten everything. . . . [I]t did feel very strange to be fighting in the beginning, but I guess I just handled it.” When asked why he decided to join the militia, he said, “I had to serve my country. . . . There were lots of people taking risks for the country: some people were helping with first aid, others organized things for the fighters like food, logistics, and others gave homes to the fighters. They all knew they were putting themselves at risk, and they did it anyway.”

A 22-year-old man from a suburb of Tripoli fought with a small militia in the south of Libya for the last three months of the war in 2011. He said, “There’s not really a ‘rebel’ versus ‘civilian’ distinction—you’re never enlisted as a rebel. . . . You can go in and fight, get out and go home, take a shower, eat some breakfast, play PlayStation, and then go back to the front. You can switch from one to the other in a moment, really.” According to an international aid worker, this interviewee’s experience was not uncommon for rebel fighters. “These fighters were not fighters,” he explained. “One shopkeeper would close his shop and fight, and then go back. Some people would go to front lines for just a few hours.” Another international analyst echoed this point, saying that many fighters in the conflict lived “a nuanced life. . . . It was just a question of having a weapon and going to the front for a few hours. They took up arms, engaged in battle, and then went back home.”

Logistical Support

Transferring Weapons

A 23-year-old woman from Tripoli joined a “coalition” tasked with moving weapons across Tripoli during the conflict. To coordinate the logistics of the transfers, she would speak with new contacts on the telephone in a code language:

The other person would say something like “I saw you last week on Monday,” and that would mean that we should meet on Monday. And then she would say, “You were wearing a pink and white shirt, and you were standing by the fruit stand on the corner.” In this way she would tell me what she would be wearing—the pink and white shirt—and where we should meet—by the fruit stand. Anyone who was listening would think we were girls having a chit-chatty conversation, but in fact we were arranging a meeting so that we could move weapons through the city.

She recalled one of these transfers in detail: “I remember I picked up one woman who was seven months pregnant. She had two Kalashnikovs under her dress. We traveled all the way from the west to the east of Tripoli. . . . That woman was risking her own life and the life of her unborn child. She was a rebel. Not all rebels have a gun. The journalists, people like us—we are rebels too.” This young woman felt it was “unfair” that people now view her

307 Interviewee 16.
308 Ibid.
309 Interviewee 15.
310 Interviewee 51.
311 Interviewee 56.
312 Interviewee 55.
as “just a supporter.” She explained, “We weren’t just the mothers and the daughters. That wasn’t all that we contributed. I fought for freedom. I traveled by myself. I did all of this, and they can’t take it away from me.”  

A 43-year-old man from Benghazi said that he also transferred weapons during the conflict. “I delivered weapons to the furthest point of the front line in Brega [a port town in eastern Libya],” he explained. When asked why he decided to become involved in the conflict, he said, “All of my friends were getting into it, and I saw pictures of my friends being killed. . . . I left my three kids and their mother. I knew what I was doing. I was ready to die. Once I went, I was at war. I knew I could be killed any time.” He reported that he was often at risk. In fact, on one occasion, his vehicle was badly damaged when a bomb struck nearby. As a result, he said, “My vehicle was totally burned. I found myself inside the battle. I circled around [in his vehicle], but I couldn’t get out. . . . I am still suffering up to now, psychologically, from all of that.”

Providing Security
CIVIC interviewed two men who were responsible for protecting strategic areas during the conflict. The first, a young man from Tripoli, reported that he joined a “security brigade” that supported the rebel forces. In this Tripoli-based brigade, he had two duties: first, to guard a centrally located bridge, where he checked pedestrians and cars for weapons; and second, to provide security for Al-Waddan Hotel, where reporters and high-ranking rebel soldiers were staying. The interviewee clarified that he would be considered by other Libyans “as security, and not a fighter, because I was not on the front lines.” He noted, however, “To be honest, I would really like to be considered a fighter.”

The second, a man from Rebyana, a small desert town in southern Libya, said that he provided security for the Sarir oil field in eastern Libya. He explained that he was based inside the oil field, “guarding a storage tank of oil from the road and stopping [Qaddafi’s forces] from getting the oil.” He explained that this job came with serious risks: “It was very dangerous. Qaddafi was 100 kilometers from us in the desert, and every night we were getting information about it. . . . Everybody was at risk.” Still, he was proud of his decision to become involved. “In our tradition, we are willing to help other people. And the revolution was the start of the new Libya,” he explained.

Manning Checkpoints
One man spoke of how he became the manager of a major checkpoint during the conflict. Before the conflict, he had worked as a dental technician in Nalut, a town of around 100,000 people in the northwest corner of Libya. He spoke of how the people in Nalut revolted, “burning flags, burning everything down. . . . [We] were taking control of the city. We became the police, the security forces. We organized ourselves from the inside.” During this time, he said, “People were randomly deciding to do things. Anyone who wanted to participate, could.” From this chaotic setting, he traveled from Nalut to a checkpoint on the border between Libya and Tunisia and became its coordinator. Although he admitted, “It was confusing [and] we didn’t know how to react,” he said he ultimately “learned that you just show up, and see what you can do.” He continued:

With the revolution, my dream came true—what can you expect me to do? I can’t stay at home. . . . For the first time I chose to join my brothers. I was ready to die with them.

313 Ibid.
314 Interviewee 40.
315 Ibid.
316 Interviewee 2.
317 Interviewee 53.
318 Ibid.
319 Interviewee 54.
320 Ibid.
I had a lack of experience regarding weapons or organizing, how to run a checkpoint, but I brought my TV, laptop, and put on Al-Jazeera live. I knew I could encourage people. I was actually controlling the officers—me—in my civilian clothes.\textsuperscript{321}

**Providing Medical Services**

Two Libyans who provided medical services to members of armed groups described their roles. The first was a medical student in a suburb of Tripoli when the conflict began. After two months, he joined his friend’s militia in Kabaw, a town in the northwest corner of Libya. There, he assumed the role for which he felt he was most qualified, as a field medic for the rebel forces. “There are two types of medics—one that is more on the outside—and they drive around with the guys in the ambulances [some distance away from the front lines]. Then there are the guys like me, the ones who took the guys from the front lines [to the clinic]. So I was on the front lines,” he explained. He did carry a gun, which he used on occasion to defend himself. He said that he “probably had to shoot 10 – 20 magazines at least” during his time as a field medic.\textsuperscript{322}

The second, a 23-year-old woman, said that she provided medical services for both Qaddafi and rebel forces in a Tripoli-based hospital during the conflict.\textsuperscript{323} At various times, she was a nurse, a pharmacist, a cleaner, and even a “very basic paramedic . . . keep[ing] the person in the ambulance alive until we got to the hospital.”\textsuperscript{324} She said that although she never carried a weapon of her own, several other nurses and doctors in the hospital where she worked carried rifles for self-protection.\textsuperscript{325}

**Providing Information**

Two of CIVIC’s interviewees discussed how they provided information to armed groups during the conflict. A military captain in Qaddafi’s forces who defected to join the National Liberation Army reported that he often gathered intelligence from ordinary people. “In some of the cities far from the coast, we would coordinate with the people. We got lots of tips from the shepherds. They could see Qaddafi’s forces, and where they formed. And then we coordinated with the tribal councils, since they could see who passed by,” he said.\textsuperscript{326} A man who served in the Military Council in Misrata said that he provided information directly to NATO. A businessman before the conflict began, he joined the Military Council in the early stages of the conflict. In this role, he informed NATO of the coordinates of Qaddafi tanks and weapons caches throughout Misrata and conducted “technical and strategic reconnaissance” at a local level. He said that when a small NATO intelligence unit came to Misrata, he also served as their “liaison” and “took them around and showed them what they wanted to see.”\textsuperscript{327} When asked why he decided to become involved in the conflict, he responded, “We had no choice but to become involved—it was forced on us. The fight came to us, and we had to deal with it. We had to respond.”\textsuperscript{328}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[321]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[322]{Interviewee 15.}
\footnotetext[323]{Interviewee 55. This interviewee was also involved by transferring weapons for rebel forces, as discussed above.}
\footnotetext[324]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[325]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[326]{Interviewee 41.}
\footnotetext[327]{Interviewee 60.}
\footnotetext[328]{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
Providing Food and Other Goods

A 48-year-old housewife from Benghazi said that she and her neighbors provided food and goods to the rebel forces near Benghazi. “We sent it day by day—not frozen,” she said. “The system was that we would go around and say, ‘If you want to help today, make this kind of food’ and it was collected every day. We would also send them clean clothes and toothpaste.”

When asked why she decided to take on this task, she responded, “The fighters were just kids, like my son. They didn’t even know how to fight when they reached the front lines. They needed clothes, food, people to tell them ‘our lives are with you.’” She said that these activities did not necessarily make her more at risk than anyone else in Libya, since “everyone was in danger.” Despite the dangers she faced, she still has some fond memories of the conflict in 2011. “We remember these days with the pain and the risk, but we love these days,” she said.

Media Coverage

Three people who provided media coverage of the fighting, whether through traditional or social media, described their roles. The first, a former colonel with Qaddafi’s armed forces, became a spokesperson for the rebel forces during the conflict. The interviewee saw his role as “building good relations with all of the media.”

To do this, he believed he should respond to the international community on their terms. “My first appearance on TV was on an American channel,” he explained. “All the questions were in Arabic, and I kept responding in English. By the fifth question, I think I showed that we have the capability of building a state.” He admitted that he was probably at risk during the conflict, but he “didn’t realize it” at the time.

Another former official in Qaddafi’s government hosted a popular radio program that covered ongoing developments in the conflict. “It was broadcast all over the country, and people trusted me,” he explained. “The NTC [National Transitional Council] would tell me, ‘I hear you daily, and if I miss it I get a summary from someone else.’ I put the facts, plain. And nobody else did this.”

He continued, “I was broadcasting all over the country. I was like an orchestra director, helping get things from place to place: ‘the boats are here, the weapons are there.’ In Tripoli, they cut the power off just because people were listening to my program. They were sent to jail for listening. So people started driving cars just to listen to me. I was the go-between for people.” As a result of his actions, he said that he was “in danger from the first day,” and received serious death threats. Still, he was glad for the results of his and others’ actions. “This revolution was a gift,” he said. “We got rid of a nightmare.”

A 27-year-old man from a suburb of Tripoli discussed how he provided information on the conflict through social media. “I kept tweeting and making Facebook statuses from Tripoli. I would say where the gas was for cars, I would talk about what was going on in the revolution,” he said. As a result of his actions, he became an informal spokesperson for Libyan civilians. “I had gone from 100 to 600 followers in no time. So I kept posting. On Skype, new journalists kept adding me. . . . I was a little scared, but I was not really thinking. I was high with the revolution,” he said. According to this young man, “The ‘internet rebels’ like me had the ability to reach a lot of people—we did something.”
Motivations for Involvement

When asked why they decided to become involved in the conflict, Libyan interviewees offered a variety of explanations. Five of these motivations emerged as the most common: protection of self or family, civic duty, outrage at the targeting of peaceful protestors, desire for democracy and freedom, and hope of elevating their social standing.

Protection of Self or Family

A large number of interviewees reported that they became involved in the conflict to protect themselves or their families. For instance, a university professor in Misrata said, “I carried a weapon to protect my family. . . . It was a matter of life and death.”\(^{337}\) Another interviewee from Misrata agreed. “Eighty to ninety percent of people here felt they must participate. You cannot sit and watch. It was very obvious for everyone. We had to fight together to protect our families. . . . There was no alternative; only one choice,” he said.\(^{338}\) According to an engineer from Benghazi, “[Qaddafi] forced us into military action. We had to do it just to protect ourselves. We picked up knives, sticks, stones, whatever we could find. Either he killed us or we killed him.”\(^{339}\) On a similar note, a housewife from Benghazi added, “We fight or we die.”\(^{340}\)

Civic Duty

Several other Libyans told CIVIC that they became involved in the conflict because of their civic duty, or their sense of responsibility to their people or their country. One young man explained, “I took risks, but it was my duty for my country.” This man, a university student who fought with a local rebel militia during the conflict, continued, “I have to serve my country. There were lots of people taking risks for the country.”\(^{341}\) An artist from Benghazi echoed this sentiment: “Yes, we put ourselves at risk. . . . The country—the country is everything to us.”\(^{342}\) A young Libyan man from a suburb of Tripoli who works for an insurance company added, “I am a soldier for Libya at any time. I must do it, and I have to do it. If I don’t have a gun, I will defend my country with a knife.”\(^{343}\)

Outrage at the Targeting of Peaceful Protestors

Some interviewees said it was Qaddafi’s forces targeting of “innocent” or “peaceful” protestors that sparked a shared sense of rebellion and outrage, which in turn brought about more widespread involvement in the conflict.\(^{344}\) According to a 31-year-old dental technician, “It was difficult in the beginning because we started out as civilians, and the regime changed us. They killed innocent people in front of us. . . . I was a civilian—I came to the protests peacefully—but the regime did not distinguish between men, women, children, armed, unarmed. That’s why I became involved.”\(^{345}\) A former government official from Tripoli agreed it was the failure by Qaddafi’s forces to spare the peaceful protestors that pushed him and others to become involved in the conflict. “There was a funeral, and the people in Benghazi were walking through the streets,” he said. “Then [the] Qaddafi brigades shot the
people. And once we reached the cemetery and buried the dead . . . we said we should fight back. We started by throwing stones, and then we moved to Molotov cocktails, then to bombs.”

Desire for Democracy and Freedom

Many interviewees attributed their involvement in the conflict to a desire to form a new, democratic state. For instance, according to a 33-year-old Libyan man who fought with a local militia in Gharyan, a town in northwestern Libya, “Our aim was just to remove the system. . . . We wanted to show our democracy to the world.”

His cousin added, “This was our weapon: democracy. This was our power.” Similarly, other interviewees attributed their involvement to the cause of freedom. “Suddenly on one day there were all these people [demanding] freedom,” an engineer from Benghazi explained. “Young, old, men, women—we all wanted freedom. Just like they had in Egypt and Tunisia.”

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Desire to Elevate Social Standing

According to several other interviewees, they or others became involved to elevate their status in society. An international aid worker described this motivation: “Before the revolution, many [rebel fighters] had no jobs. They were aimless. After [they became involved in the fighting], they had status, and women would look at them. They had sex appeal, these thuwars [revolutionaries].” According to some Libyans, those who fought for Qaddafi had similar motivations. A 45-year-old man from Tripoli explained, “I knew volunteers, guys who were my neighbors who went down there to Misrata and Sirte. . . . [Qaddafi] supported them and gave them food and money. They got promises that when things went back to normal, they would be the ruling class. He used the lowest classes by telling them they would be the highest. He gave them a chance at a new life—a chance to start over.”

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 their views on the concepts of civilian and combatant status. It then considers the challenges outlined by interviewees when they applied the principle of distinction to the 2011 conflict in Libya.

Concept of the Civilian

Individuals who CIVIC interviewed offered several different interpretations of medani, the Arabic translation of the word civilian. First, many interviewees described civilians as those who were peaceful. For instance, an artist from Benghazi defined a civilian as “an ordinary people. And once we reached the cemetery and buried the dead . . . we said we should fight back. We started by throwing stones, and then we moved to Molotov cocktails, then to bombs.”

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Concept of the Civilian

Individuals who CIVIC interviewed offered several different interpretations of medani, the Arabic translation of the word civilian. First, many interviewees described civilians as those who were peaceful. For instance, an artist from Benghazi defined a civilian as “an ordinary
person who lives in peace.” Second, according to a 27-year-old man from Tripoli, age was a determining factor of civilian status: *medani* was anyone under the age of 16, since at 16 all Libyans would undergo military training at high school. Third, for a local official from Misrata, *medani* was a specialized term to refer to former fighters who were reintegrating into society after the war. These views suggest that the concept of the civilian, as defined under international humanitarian law, may not have been fully understood by the majority of the population in Libya. A professional in an international humanitarian organization confirmed that the concept of the civilian in Libya “is not the same for all people. Former combatants feel they [were always] civilians. Many people don’t see themselves as weapons bearers, even if they were. . . . So there’s a murky picture.” Furthermore, only a handful of people expressed awareness of the fact that civilians are lawfully protected during war.

### Concept of the Combatant / Non-Civilian

Interviewees most often distinguished combatants from civilians by the presence of a weapon. Indeed, several interviewees identified soldiers as those who “carry weapons” or “have a gun,” while others identified civilians as those who are unarmed. A former military officer from Benghazi explained, “If anyone is carrying a weapon, he is a fighter. Also of course if anyone shoots at you, he is a fighter.” An accountant from Tripoli added, “Because civilians don’t carry weapons, they should not be killed.”

Several others cited an individual’s proximity to the battlefield: the closer he was to the battlefield, the less likely he was to be a civilian. For instance, a local employee of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya reported that an individual should be considered a civilian if he were driving a truck full of rebels to a restaurant, but not if he were driving the same truck full of rebels to the front lines.

### Challenges of Classification: Civilians or Combatants

When asked to apply the concept of distinction to the conflict in Libya, most people found that this principle of IHL was not applicable for the reasons explored below.

#### Conflict Not Traditional

According to several interviewees, the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants was irrelevant to the events of 2011, since these events did not constitute a traditional war. Instead, for these people, what happened was a “rejection” or a “social revolution”: a movement of the entire population of Libya against Qaddafi. Thus, because the population was aligned against Qaddafi, it made little sense to distinguish between the various people involved in that movement and to designate some as civilians and others as combatants.

A retired Imam from Zawiya, a town about 30 miles west of Tripoli, explained this logic. “You can’t compare what happened to a war,” he said. “It should be called a rejection—this was the only time we got the opportunity to show our rejection of Qaddafi. How could this be a war?”

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354 Interviewee 57. Also interviewees 24 and 54.
355 Interviewee 17.
356 Interviewee 59.
357 Interviewee 56.
358 Interviewees 13, 41, 54.
359 Interviewee 41.
360 Interviewee 13.
361 Interviewees 2, 41, 44, 54.
362 Interviewee 54.
363 The word used by the interviewee was *rafd*. (This interview pre-dated the emergence of the “Rafid Movement,” which emerged after the fall of Qaddafi. For more details on the movement, see Kamal Abdallah, “Mobilisation in Libya,” Al-Ahram Weekly, July 11, 2013.)
war? To get rid of this guy, everybody got involved. Even the international community got involved to get rid of him, he was so bad. A radio announcer from Benghazi added, “Most Libyans got involved in [the conflict]. . . . Almost seventy percent of the country was against him. So our conflict can’t be compared to any other. This was a revolution—not a war. There was just one side that was pushing here.”

As a result, the idea that the people who mobilized against Qaddafi could be separated into civilians or combatants was absurd for many people with whom CIVIC spoke. Indeed, for several interviewees, there was no difference between the rebel forces who fought in the conflict and those who supported their cause. For instance, a military official from Benghazi, who defected from Qaddafi’s forces to join the rebel forces, said, “The rebels and those who support the rebels are exactly the same.” An engineer from Benghazi echoed this sentiment, saying, “The term ‘rebels’ came from the media. We considered the rebels and ourselves just as the people of Libya. Al-Jazeera created the two parties.”

**Libyans as “The Armed People”**

According to some other interviewees, the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants could not apply in Libya, because Libyans saw themselves as “the armed people.” A 24-year-old resident of Tripoli explained, “It’s difficult to answer who was a civilian and who was not, since we were ‘al-sha’ab al-musallah’: the armed people. In fact we had a chant: ‘By god, by god, our leader: the people are armed.’ In World War II, there were civilians who were not fighting, but here [during the 2011 conflict] everyone fought.” He continued, “We have no concept of someone who is outside of the fighting. In Libya, everybody has to go through training for the military—we have an army of six million here. In high school, you wear the military uniform for three years. It’s a small country, so Qaddafi wanted everyone to be involved.” A university professor from Benghazi added, “We were called the ‘armed people,’ so you feel yourself a soldier always. Always on duty, always under pressure.”

**Uniforms**

Several people explained that while Qaddafi’s forces usually wore uniforms, rebel forces usually did not. An NGO director from Tripoli explained, “Some [rebels] got a military uniform, but most had jeans. . . . Someone wore a doctor uniform, just because that’s the only uniform he could find. We would find fighters with pink tee-shirts. Sometimes when we saw pictures, we would laugh: ‘How is he a fighter?’” A young Libyan man from a suburb of Tripoli confirmed, “The rebels fought in tee-shirts, flip-flops, Nikes. They were fighting in style.”

For several interviewees, the fact that rebel forces were not usually wearing uniforms made it difficult to distinguish the rebel fighters from the rest of the population. For instance, according to a biochemistry professor from Misrata, “I couldn’t tell which ones were rebel fighters.”

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364 Interviewee 18.
365 Interviewee 34.
366 Interviewee 41.
367 Interviewee 31.
368 This phrase was first put forward by Qaddafi in 1975 to signify the idea that Libyans should be ready to fight for their country at any moment. Additional details on this concept are available in Florence Gaub, “The Libyan Armed Forces: between Coup-proofing and Repression,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013).
369 Interviewee 3.
370 Ibid.
371 Interviewee 25.
372 For instance, interviewee 53 said, “Qaddafi’s forces were wearing military uniforms—they used the Libyan army uniform, with a green flag, or they would put Qaddafi’s photo on the door of the car.”
373 Interviewee 57.
374 Interviewee 17.
fighters and which were not. They wear the same clothes, have the same way of life. The only difference is how long they have between showers!”375 A dental technician from Nalut added, “The rebels you couldn’t distinguish at all—in fact most would ask not to wear the full uniform, because if you did, you would look like Qaddafi [forces] and be killed by mistake.”376 According to a taxi driver from Benghazi who fought with the rebels for a short time, “It was very difficult to tell the difference. . . . There was no organization at all. It was just chaos.”377

A 31-year old man from Benghazi who called himself a “field officer” for the rebel forces said that the lack of uniforms created problems on the battlefield, since “it was confusing to tell the difference between fighters and civilians.”378 He described his unusual solution to this problem: “We had to invent a technique: in our first battle in Sirte, I had everyone in my group shave his head. Three hundred and seventy-five fighters, all bald, marching into Sirte. That helped a lot.”379

375 Interviewee 47.
376 Interviewee 54.
377 Interviewee 39.
378 Interviewee 41.
379 Ibid.
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.