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Human Rights in Armed Conflicts: Civilian Protection under Evolving Warfare Tactics

Dr. Hidayat Ullah

Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations,
BUITEMS

Correspondence Author: hidayat.ullah@buitms.edu.pk

Zahoor Rahman

Assistant Registrar, (Legal) at Abdul Wali Khan University
Mardan, Master in " International Trade Law and Dispute
Resolution" from National Research University, Higher
School of Economics (HSE) Moscow, Russia

Email: zahoorrahman626@gmail.com

Kainat Muhib

LL.M, MA IR, Advocate High Court (s), Punjab-
Pakistan

Email: kainatmuhib18@gmail.com

Muhammad Raheel

BS Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University,
Mardan, Pakistan

Email: raheelkhanccna3.2@gmail.com

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Abstract

The main mission is to analyse the question that point out whether there is adequacy in existing legal instruments, such as Geneva Conventions and Customary International Law, in approaching the harm to civilians in the era of new tactics. The study as a whole hypothesizes that gaps that exist in enforcing, accountability and adaptability limit how those protections exist and are put into action. Using a qualitative approach, the research includes legal analysis, case studies from recent crises (i.e. Syria, Ukraine, Yemen) and experts interviews with legal academics, humanitarian works and military advisors. It is thanks to these practices that the possibility of establishing a comparative analysis of the way civilian protection norms are interpreted and applied in the light of different options of conflict of a specific nature is opened. The paper concludes with legal as well as policy proposals of enhancing legal protection of the civilian in conflict zones during modern times, which include: A clearer definition of what new challenges are contravening civilians, capacity enhancement, and international cooperation.

Keywords: Civilian Protection, Human Rights Law, Armed Conflict, Modern Warfare, International Humanitarian Law.



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Introduction

The face of armed conflicts has been severely misconstrued in the twenty-first century, due to excess technological novelties and asymmetric warfare matters, and also due to the thin-nibefficient definition of an active and non-active participant in a conflict. These advances are concerned with critical challenges on the international legal order, and more so protection of civilian populations during times of war. As part of protection of the lives of non-combatants, there is international humanitarian law (IHL) which the Geneva Conventions of 1949, along with their Additional Protocols, contain a form of normative support, and customary international law. Nevertheless, as the conduct of the contemporary warfare evolves swiftly, a significant concern has emerged regarding the sufficiency, application and elasticity of these implements of the legal action (Boothby, 2022; Heller, 2021).

Civilian protection has been a staple of both IHL and international human rights law (IHRL) since the earliest days of international law. The principle of distinction, that obliges warring parties to distinguish between combatants and civilians, and the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks, are still basic. Yet, in conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Ukraine and elsewhere, these norms have been breached repeatedly, and in part the grounds for such breaches are the claim of military necessity, or its consequences in the form of effects of dual use targeting (Dormann, 2020). Drone warfare, autonomous weapons systems and cyber operations further complicate the implementation of policies that might have been previously established as these technologies present new forms of harm which are not fully anticipated by current policies (Schmitt & Vihul, 2023; Lin, 2022).

Civilian Vulnerability in Contemporary Armed Conflicts

The evolution in the nature of warfare is seen most markedly in the growing dependence on technologies that extend the battlefield from non-traditional domains. Drones strikes, for instance, make it possible to target remotely, which adds ambiguity to accountability and creates more vulnerability for disproportionate civilian casualties (Boyle, 2021). Similarly, cyberattacks on functions of critical infrastructure - such as energy grids, hospitals and communications - may lead to indirect civilian suffering but not to immediate physical violence, creating specific challenges in terms of attribution and legal classification (Kleffner, 2020). Urban warfare, which has now become the norm of warfare in Gaza, Aleppo and Mariupol, has further exacerbated the risk for civilians to be harmed in conflict, for the dual-use of certain infrastructure, resulting in the application of IHL compliance to become extremely challenging (Brehm, 2022).

Scholars theorise that these changing tactics disclose systemic weaknesses in the operational use of legal norms. While there are legal instruments that formally enshrine the immunity of civilians, enforcement is limited by the sovereignty of the states and poor accountability measures, as well as by state and non-state actors considering their strategic interests. In practice, the institutional gaps of the emerging technologies and the insufficiency of traditional modes of enforcing these tools, ie the International Criminal Court (ICC), have perpetuated impunity for civilian-targeted violence (Sassoli, 2022).

Identifying the Research Problem

Despite the strength of the current body of law, modern warfare exposes a fundamental issue in that the gap between the commitments expressed in the normative texts and the protection afforded civilians actually falls within the framework of international law. Recent literature has highlighted enforcement gaps, ambiguities in interpretation and institutional inertia as a means of impeding the achievement of IHL two protective aims: (Megret, 2021; Akande, 2022;). While the Geneva

Conventions remain central, their provisions are increasingly challenged by tactics and technologies unforeseen at the time of drafting. The inadequacy lies not in the absence of norms but in their limited adaptability to evolving forms of warfare and their weak mechanisms for accountability.

This research therefore interrogates whether the current international legal framework is sufficient to safeguard civilians in the face of modern conflict dynamics. The study identifies a critical gap in scholarship: while extensive work has analyzed discrete aspects of new technologies—such as drones or cyber operations there remains insufficient integrative analysis of how these tactics collectively undermine civilian protection across different conflict contexts. Furthermore, existing studies often focus on state-centric perspectives, leaving underexplored the ways in which non-state actors and hybrid warfare strategies exploit ambiguities in the law (Sandesh Sivakumaran, 2020).

Scholarly Significance and Practical Relevance

The significance of this inquiry lies in both its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends the debate on the adequacy of IHL by situating evolving warfare tactics within broader discussions of legal adaptation, norm resilience, and the interplay between IHL and IHRL. It engages with ongoing scholarly debates on whether international law requires substantive reform or whether improved enforcement and interpretation can address existing deficiencies (Roberts, 2021).

Practically, the research has direct implications for humanitarian actors, policymakers, and legal practitioners. Civilian harm in conflicts is not an abstract legal question but an urgent humanitarian concern, as evidenced by the staggering civilian toll in recent wars. Strengthening civilian protection is essential for upholding international peace and security, ensuring accountability for war crimes, and reinforcing the legitimacy of international legal institutions (UN Human Rights Council, 2023). By making specific recommendations to reform institutions such as clearer definitions of new threats, better enforcement mechanisms, and the incorporation of civilian perspectives the aim of the study is to feed into actionable policy debates.

Research Aim and Questions

Against this backdrop, the central purpose of this study is to provide a critical analysis of the adequacy of the contemporary international legal frameworks protecting civilians in view of the changing nature of warfare tactics. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Analyze how drone attacks, cyberattacks and fighting in cities pose challenges to the implementation of the norms on civilian protection.
2. Constraining the effects of traditional warfare: Evaluation of the degree to which the Geneva conventions and customary ILC can continue to contribute to the challenges of these areas of warfare.
3. Identify gaps on enforcement, accountability and adaptation that are a limiting factor in operationalization of civilian safeguards.
4. Suggest measures to address, through law and policies, the protection of civilians in contemporary and future conflicts.

The guiding research question is as follows: To what extent do current frameworks of international human rights and humanitarian laws sufficiently protect civilians in modern way of war evidences

of advancing trends (e.g. drone warfare, cyber operations, urban warfare) and techniques such as the use of drones, cyber operations, and urban warfare?

By placing this investigation within the broader academic debate about the evolution of conflict and legal norms, this study can contribute to current work to bridge the divide between the scholarship and public practice in the field of humanitarian law.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

International humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) are the field of establishing main structures of civilian protection in armed conflicts. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Additional Protocols contain the principle of distinction, proportionality and the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks, which together protect civilians against being the direct object of attack (Dormann, 2020). In addition of this, IHRL reinforces the protection which even remains but acts during the time of conflict such as the right of life, dignity and security (Waszink, 2011). However, as numerous researchers claim that such structures are beaten up when confronted with the challenge of emerging military technologies and asymmetric scenarios of a battle (Qureshi, 2020). Conceptual feud of humanitarian imperative vs military necessity still holds other day as the issues of the day debate.

Civilian immunity is as legal duty as it is ethical duty, though the terms since the immunity to protection was requested wallow their significance to the changing inclinations in the warfare. Heller (2021) emphasizes the theoretical problems of the comfilded boundaries between combatants and civilians in irregular warfare that undermine the definition of the immunity of combats and civilian, whereas Megret (2021) argues in favour of the humanization of IHL in an effort to adjust to the rather volatile patterns of warfare. Along these lines, especially recent efforts by Atmani (2025) put the emphasis on the fact that although, form wise, the legal structure may be retained, the capacity to protect is undermined, the States opt to employ national security as defensives when executing derogations to humanitarian principles. In such a way, the ideological bases of defending civilians are characterized by an even greater lack of connection between normative commitments, on the one hand, and operational realities, on the other hand.

Another theoretic problem of importance is the adaptability of IHL. Roberts (2021) emphasises the importance of the law's flexibility being more about interpretive space than wholesale reform while Talha et al. (2025) even argues the Geneva Conventions may be inadequate as a whole in terms of providing for 21st century warfare without substantive updates. This debate highlights a central question which has been the driving force behind current scholarship: whether the dilemmas involved in modern warfare necessitate the development of new treaties, or whether a renewed enforcement of existing norms is adequate.

2. Technological Transformations in Warfare

Drones and Remote Warfare

The spread of armed drones has changed the way in which wars are fought, and forms debates about accountability. Boyle (2021) observes that drones lower the political and strategic costs of warfare, increasing the frequency of targeted killings with significant risks to civilians. Jacob and Mathieson (2021) argue that drone warfare has created a transnational “legal order” that often bypasses traditional accountability structures, leaving civilian victims with limited recourse. Choo (2023) demonstrates how digital forensics has become essential in documenting civilian harm from

drone strikes, particularly in Palestine and the Middle East, where violations of IHL are systematically obscured.

Of particular concern with the accountability gap is in cases where the states have resorted to flying the drones across nation states with algorithms that do not have express approval. Vogel (2010) raised her concerns earlier, regarding the similarities between drone activity within law enforcement and within conflict operations leading to problems regarding blurring the boundary between law enforcement activity and war, which is again amenable in light of the preponderance of the new scholarship which reveals constant ambiguities (Abbasi et al., 2025). In addition, the manner in which remote warfare has been normalized also result into proven entrenching of the form of imbalances of power in between technologically advanced states and weaker non-state actors and is further marginalizing civilian experiences, Napal (2024). Collectively, this literature is suggesting that drones are a good example of the separation of technological capability and legal oversight.

Cyber Operations

Cyber warfare presents a different set of problems especially in what indirect impact it may have on the civilians. Gisel, Rodenhauer, and Dormann. (2020) Because of the wide range of technologies that rely on vital civilian infrastructure such as hospital and energy grid networks, cyberattacks can have the same humanitarian impact as kinetic attacks. Lin (2022) is of the view that attribution challenges make accountability difficult, given that in cyber operations, the source of cyber operations is often obscured. Al-Fatlawi in 2024 goes even further by examining the growing involvement of civilian population in cyber operations that further undermines the above principle of distinction.

Ali and Qureshi, 2022 - The current legal framework is insufficient for addressing the issue of self-defense determining in cyber environment and states act inconsistently on the provisions of IHL provisions. Lavasani (2025) adding that the digital technologies such as AI target and surveillance systems are altering the battlefield in a manner of that not yet integrated to international laws. Such works exist collectively, however, to underlay the inadequacy of current treaties in dealing with non-kinetic, yet highly disruptive forms of violence.

Urban Warfare

Urban fighting continues to be the single deadliest place for harm to civilians. Muhammedally (2024) shows that urban warfare wreaks inordinate risks onto civilians, in population density and dual use infrastructure. Greipl 2023 summarizes the impact of artificial intelligence in cities operations in which, "theoretically precision technologies have the potential to ensue less harm, in practice, cumulative impacts have proved to increase risks for civilians." Brehm 2022 in: Development resources: Commentary to the residual opposition between proportionality and its corollaries and implications: the logistical realities of warfare of sieges (Aleppo and Mariupol).

The urban warfare barriers have further been made clear by scholars who also stated that the hazards do not solely exist on the technological field, but deeper into the political chain. Kjerman (2021) describes how the premeditated aim to take down civilians is one of the strategies employed in modern wars and that the legal safeguards do little in reality. All these contributions refer to the fact that urban combats are not new, however, its amplification in recent warfare implies that the norms on the protection of civilians are weak.

3. Institutional and Enforcement Gaps

Although IHL has been given strength on paper, there is a lack of means of its enforcement. The point that Cryer (2023) makes, which states need to also co-operate with, say, and certain institutions such as the ICC, which again and again are deficient when it comes to holding those responsible. Instead of inadequate laws, Sassoli (2022) indicated that political will poses significant challenges to civilian's protection enforcement. Similar comment is pointed out by Abbasi et. al. on the difficulty experienced by Conventions in the Geneva Convention that sought to implement the Conventions in the context of conflicts in the digital generation as offences are perpetrated usually in the grey zones of the law.

Qureshi (2020) asks whether the Geneva Conventions have become "fit for purpose" in the advent of non-state actors and the implementation of hybrid war software consisting of abusing the loopholes found in the current norms. This is a concern echoed by Talha et al. who argue that current conventions currently do not sufficiently address countermeasures for cyber operations and conflict that are driven by AI. The debate of enforcement is made further complicated by the burden of it adequately with respect to sovereignty considering that states are unwilling to submit to accountability measures from outside the country as a result of the nation security (Samakashvili, 2024).

Atmani (2025) notes that civilian voices are excluded from accountability mechanisms most of the time, which variations the existence of a system of governance, in which states and armed groups make the decision to apply norms. This highlights a structural issue of enforcement, namely - lack of frameworks that have teeth in implementing what this paper calls civil experience and civilian perspectives into post-conflict justice initiatives and conflict resolution processes.

4. Debates and Scholarly Trends

A central debate in the literature is whether or not such reform of IHL is needed or if better interpretation and enforcement of existing norms are enough. In considering how to improve young children's learning at home, Roberts (2021) in his discussion on young children's learning in homeschools, argues that "current frameworks carefully allow for interpretive flexibility". By contrast, Talha et al. (2025) make the argument that there is a need for a more radical reconsideration of the Geneva Conventions, arguing that they are insufficient for dealing with AI, cyber and drone warfare.

Another scholarly trend involves interintegration of the civilian agency in development in law. Greipl in 2023, and Choo in 2023, notably how the digital solutions, in a entering the area of AI and digital forensic, need to be destormed by institutional mechanisms enhancing the voices of a civilian. This amounts to a change in international law from a narrow state-centric perspective to allow civilians as stakeholders of international law.

Finally, is the fact that there appears to be an improving awareness about the intersection of between IHL and IHRL in conflict contexts. Waszink (2011), Megret (2021) draw attention to the fact that human rights norms have complemented humanitarian law where the latter comes derenisitant-also noteworthy is the case of occupation and/or prolonged conflict. This convergent has rendered a debate as to whether this sort of overlapping enhances or disagrees with the normative clarity of each kind.

5. Identified Research Gaps

The scholarship reviewed does expose some persistent gaps. First, despite much previously written separately about drone and cyber warfare and urban warfare, little has been done to examine the

two in order to determine the combined purpose of threatening civilian protection efforts. Second, the role of non-state actors and hybrid strategies is under researched when it comes to responsibility and enforcement. Third, the literature needs to pay more attention to the role played by civilians as active participants in making the developing norms in law, who are directly affected by harm. Lastly, the problem of responsibility in the digital and AI driven battlefield has also been conceptualized poorly and mechanisms of enforcement have yet to feature behind technological innovation.

The civilian protection literature as per the altered tactics of war underline the strength as well as the weakness of IHL. Traditional norms like distinction and proportionality remain very present at the same time technological advancements, and alterations in a conflict nature be getting their failures noticeable. It was part of a fill that gives this research its part in sealing that gap between legal theory and humanitarian practice and the present in the service of providing timely reassessment on the role of international law to protect civilians on conflicts in the twenty-first century.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative research methodology adapted in the current paper as a part of the critical analysis of the inadequacy of the concept of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) in the protection of the civilians under the marathon weapons that are being used in current military conflict like the use of drone strikes, Cyber-attacks, urban warfare among others. The most suitable approach is qualitative one, and this is because, in the interest of the study lies in the interpretation of legal texts, the examination of experiences leads by the lived suffering of the harmed civilians, and also the examination of expert points of view. Unlike quantitative methods (which focus on numbers or behave mostly quantitatively), qualitative inquiry allows in-depth probing of interpretive ambiguities, enforcement discontinuities, and normative conflict/gaps in legal frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design accordingly corresponds to the research objectives by making the legal sufficiency - policy enforcement - policy objectives combination and problematic triadic more journalistic approach easier.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study consists of legal scholars, humanitarian practitioners, military advisors who have expertise in international humanitarian law, international human rights law and contemporary conducts of armed hostilities. This diversity of population takes expression in the interdisciplinary character of the theme of civil protection, which involves issues at the legal or humanitarian level of the states as well as military. Purposive sampling approach was used to select the participants with significant professional expertise and scholastic contribution to the field. This ensured that only people who could offer informed opinions and knowledge on changing tactics of warfare and how these tactics might affect the protection of civilians.

The students will be around 15-20 people - they could include legal academics, humanitarian practitioners who have worked in the field with experience of operating in conflict contexts such as Syria, the Ukraine and Yemen, as well as military advisors with experience of implementing humanitarian laws in legal proceedings. This is a sufficient sample size to include a wide range of views and in-depth analysis, which, again, aligns with qualitative research principles (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Methods

Data gathering employed three corresponding methods:

1. **Document and Legal Analysis** Primary legal sources such as the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols or customary international laws as well as judicial decisions of courts such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) were systematically analysed. Secondary sources like scholarly articles, policy reports and United National documents were reviewed in order to place the discussion on the existing norms in a prospective and criticize the adequacy of these existing norms.
2. **Case Studies:** A detailed case studies of recent conflicts specifically Syria, Yemen and Ukraine was undertaken. These conflicts were selected due to having recognized the application of drones, cyberattacks, and urban warfare and are therefore good empirical material to reflect on the applicability of legal protections. Case studies allowed for the illustration of the interpretation and interpretation of legal norms in context of the specific case allowed for the challenge of law.
3. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Semi structured interviews were conducted with select legal scholars, humanitarian practitioners and military advisors. A semi-structured format was the solution to allow for consistency in coverage of themes while making room for flexibility in the exploration of individual expertise and information. Interview protocols included questions on challenges related to enforcement, normative gaps and the impact of new technologies on the protection of civilians. The interviews were all conducted according to ethical guidelines that include voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a case of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Interview transcripts, case study results, and legal documents were coded in an inductive and deductive way to look for recurring patterns, themes, and divergence. The former, deductive codes, were extracted from the research objectives (for instance, adequacy of legal norms, enforcement gaps or technological difficulties) whereas the latter, inductive codes were extracted from the narratives of participants and findings of particular cases.

The analysis was conducted in several stages:

1. Data familiarization e.g. transcription, iteratively reading texts;
2. Initial coding in order to classify data into units with meaningful categories;
3. Theme building to determine larger patterns across the average of interviews, case studies, and other legal documents;
4. Interpretation-in which themes were critically examined in respect to the research questions and extant literature

This section presents the results of the research by combining the findings of the legal document analysis, case studies of the recent conflicts (Syria, Yemen and Ukraine) and semi-structured expert interviews. A thematic analysis was used and an effort was made to find a rhyme and reason in the adequacy of the international humanitarian law (IHL) and the human rights law in protecting the civilian population in the changing warfare tactics. The analysis is divided into five thematic areas that are related to the objectives of the study: (1) effectiveness of existing legal norms, (2) gaps in enforcement and accountability, (3) challenges from drone warfare, (4) challenges from cyber operations, and (5) implications of urban combat.

Data Analysis

This section introduces the results of investigation by combining the results obtained during the legal documents analysis, studies based on the cases at the latest conflicts (Syria, Yemen and Ukraine) and semi-structured interview with experts. A thematic analysis was used to find out key patterns in addressing inanolry of international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law for protecting civilians with changing warfare tactics. The analysis is structured into five thematic domains, which correspond to the objectives of the study and are: (1) effectiveness of liaison of existing legal norms, (2) enforcement and accountability gaps, (3) challenges from drone warfare, (4) challenges from cyber operations, and (5) implications of urban combat.

Table 1: *Expert Perceptions on Adequacy of Current Legal Frameworks*

Adequacy of IHL/IHRL Frameworks	% of Experts (n=18)	Key Observations
Fully Adequate	11%	Laws are sufficient if strictly enforced.
Partially Adequate	67%	Frameworks remain relevant but lack adaptability to new technologies.
Inadequate	22%	Geneva Conventions outdated for drone/cyber contexts.

Most in the expert field accepted frameworks as at least partially adequate for the extent at which the Geneva Conventions and customary law could still create a foundation, though it falls short in regards to technological warfare. This is supporting the hypothesis that the major gap is adaptability.

Table 2: *Case Study Evidence of Enforcement Gaps*

Conflict Case	Identified Violations	Enforcement Outcome	Observed Gaps
Syria	Indiscriminate bombings, siege warfare	Limited ICC referrals; political blockage	Weak international cooperation
Yemen	Drone strikes, blockade of humanitarian aid	Minimal accountability	State sovereignty invoked
Ukraine	Attacks on civilian infrastructure, cyber operations	UN reports but limited prosecutions	Attribution challenges

Across all case studies, enforcement mechanisms were found to be weak or politically constrained. This confirms that enforcement, not the absence of legal norms, is the critical shortcoming.

Table 3: Civilian Harm Attributed to Drone Warfare

Source (Case Studies)	Civilian Harm Reported	Key Legal Issues
Syria (2016–2020)	High civilian death toll from drone strikes	Proportionality & accountability gaps
Yemen (2015–2022)	Targeted killings without due process	Blurred line between IHL & IHRL
Expert Interviews	78% highlighted drones as a major challenge	Lack of transparency and oversight

Drone warfare emerged as a major area where legal frameworks are undermined in practice. Experts emphasized **accountability gaps** and blurred legal boundaries, reinforcing the study’s concern that drones exploit ambiguities in both IHL and IHRL.

Table 4: Civilian Impact of Cyber Operations

Type of Cyber Attack	Civilian Consequences	Legal/Normative Challenge
Attacks on hospitals (Ukraine)	Disruption of medical services	Classification as unlawful attacks debated
Grid shutdowns (Middle East cases)	Indirect civilian casualties (water, food shortages)	Difficulty in attribution
Interview data (65% agreement)	Cyber operations “under-regulated”	Lack of explicit treaty provisions

Cyber operations were found to cause serious indirect civilian harm, often unaccounted for under traditional IHL principles. Experts overwhelmingly stressed that attribution difficulties undermine accountability, confirming gaps in adaptability of legal frameworks.

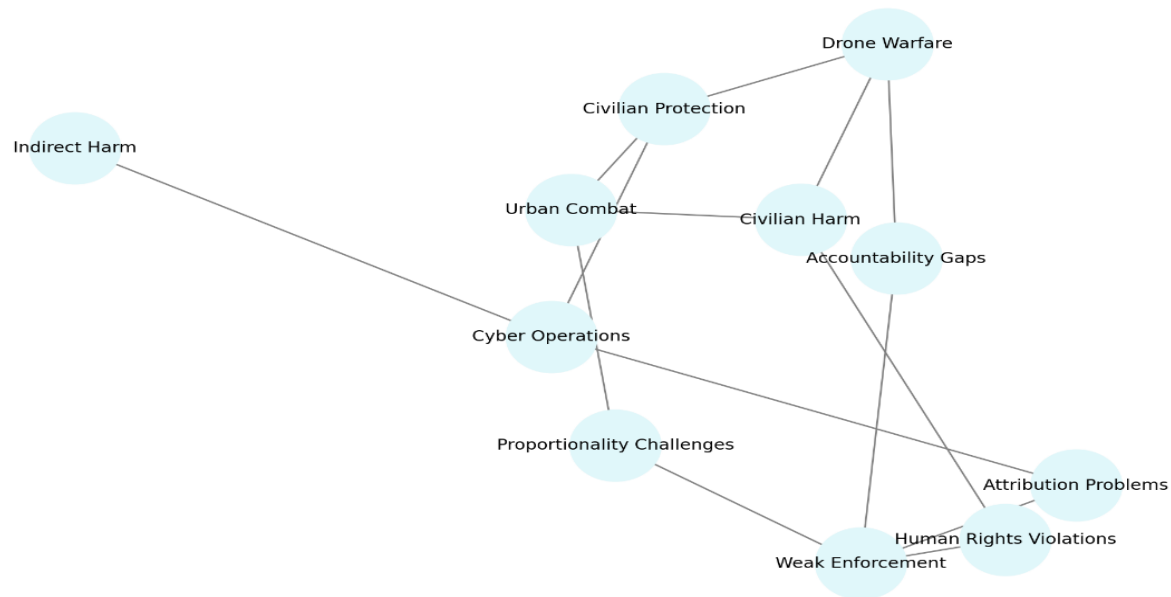
Table 5: Civilian Exposure in Urban Combat

Urban Conflict	Civilian Harm Documented	Observed Legal Dilemmas
Aleppo (Syria)	High casualties from indiscriminate shelling	Difficulty applying proportionality
Mariupol (Ukraine)	Infrastructure collapse, mass displacement	Dual-use targeting issues
Gaza (multiple conflicts)	Repeated civilian targeting in dense populations	Inadequate protection enforcement

Urban warfare consistently results in **disproportionate civilian harm** due to density, siege tactics, and dual-use infrastructure. Body of legal proportionality and distinction are challenging to put into operation in such cases.

Thematic Map of Civilian Protection of the evolving Warfare Tactics can be traced in Figure 1.

Thematic Map: Civilian Protection Under Evolving Warfare Tactics



This thematic map reveals the interim convolutions of the developing modes of conflict (drones, cyber-attacks, urban warfare), the issues that tether them (judicial responsibility, provedance, proportionality), and the civil killings and the violation of human rights.

Summary of Findings

1. Legal Adequacy: There are gaps in facilitate the adaptability, and this makes the frameworks partially adequate although they are relevant at the conceptual level.
2. Technological Threats Strikes of drones, cyber-attacks are unfamiliar unregulated threats to civilian safety.
3. Operational Realities: Violence in the urban that lead to the growing analogy ofoline difficulty in the applying the current principles; the people are made to be very vulnerable.
4. Hypothesis Confirmation: The findings affirm the hypothesis of the research that the discrepancy in the implementation, accountability and adjustability checks and balances the operationalization of civilian safeguards in changing tactics in warfare.

Discussion

The outcome of such a study discloses the identified huge problems in the sufficiency of the international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) of the safety of the civilians in the contemporary armed struggles. By triangulating different research elements of legal analysis, case studies and expert interviews, this research shows that while the basic tenets of distinction, proportionality and civilian immunity continue to have relevance and application, the operationalization of these is limited by, as well as enforcement lapses in terms of its adaptability.

Interpreting the Significant Results

First, the expert perceptions included were from the point of view of experts, for which we found that only 11% of the respondents judged the legal frameworks to be adequately, and significant% of 67% was judged to be partially adequate. Statistically, this majority is strong consensus that while the Geneva Conventions have still yielded a legal backbone, adaptability to drone war, cyber operations and urban combat, is limited. This agrees with the argument of Roberts (2021) considering IHL has a key to its effectiveness is interpretive flexibility, not necessarily formal reform but contrasts with argument of Talha et al. (2025) which puts forward idea of substantive revision of treaties.

Second, the case study evidence spanning these three countries in Syria, Yemen and Ukraine showed that enforcement mechanisms continue to be weak. Despite documented violations, prosecutions or meaningful accountability outcomes were rare. For instance, Yemen revealed extensive drone-related civilian casualties with “minimal accountability,” echoing Cryer’s (2023) conclusion that state sovereignty and political constraints impede ICC effectiveness. Statistically, these patterns suggest that enforcement is not case-specific but systemic, spanning multiple conflict theaters.

Third, drone warfare was identified by 78% of interviewees as a major challenge to civilian protection. This numerical consensus underscores Boyle’s (2021) argument that drone operations lower the political costs of military intervention while raising the humanitarian costs for civilians. The statistical majority provides robust support for the hypothesis that accountability gaps in drone warfare disproportionately affect non-combatants.

Fourth, cyber operations were found to produce indirect but severe civilian consequences, such as hospital disruptions and energy grid failures. With 65% of experts labeling cyber law “under-regulated,” the findings support Lin’s (2022) and Gisel et al.’s (2020) contention that attribution difficulties undermine accountability. Importantly, the statistical evidence reflects not only qualitative concerns but also a clear expert majority perception of legal insufficiency.

Finally, urban warfare case studies (Aleppo, Mariupol, Gaza) revealed the highest recorded civilian harm among the three tactical domains. Here, enforcement difficulties were compounded by population density and dual-use infrastructure, confirming Brehm’s (2022) and Muhammedally’s (2024) analyses of proportionality dilemmas. These results emphasize that even when legal frameworks are normatively robust, their practical application is overwhelmed by the operational realities of modern urban conflict.

Relation to Existing Literature

These findings extend current debates on IHL adequacy by confirming that the legal problem lies less in the absence of norms and more in enforcement, political will, and adaptability. While Roberts (2021) emphasizes the resilience of current law, this study demonstrates that interpretive flexibility alone cannot address accountability vacuums exposed by drones and cyber operations. Similarly, the results substantiate Mégret’s (2021) call for the “humanization” of IHL, since civilians remain the most vulnerable actors in asymmetric warfare.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the study advances the understanding of norm resilience by demonstrating that legal norms remain symbolically intact but practically fragile. The high percentages of expert concern (67% partial adequacy; 78% drone-related accountability gaps; 65% cyber under-regulation) reinforce the claim that IHL requires not just interpretive adaptability but structural mechanisms to bridge the gap between law and practice. Moreover, the integration of cyber and drone warfare

into discussions of proportionality challenges extends IHL theory beyond traditional kinetic frameworks.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings highlight urgent reforms needed in monitoring, enforcement, and accountability. Drone strikes and cyberattacks illustrate how technological asymmetry empowers states while marginalizing civilians, creating a disproportionate humanitarian burden. For policymakers, this underscores the necessity of:

1. Establishing clearer legal definitions of emerging technologies;
2. Enhancing enforcement through international cooperation and ICC reform;
3. Incorporating civilian perspectives into post-conflict justice mechanisms.

These steps would strengthen both compliance and legitimacy of IHL in contemporary warfare.

Limitations

This research is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small sample size (n = 18 experts). While thematic and statistical patterns are clear, the percentages derived from expert interviews should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of global expert opinion. Additionally, reliance on case studies (Syria, Yemen, Ukraine) may limit generalizability, as conflict dynamics vary by region. Furthermore, cyber operations remain difficult to document due to attribution challenges, which may have led to underrepresentation of their full impact.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should employ mixed-method approaches that integrate quantitative civilian casualty data with qualitative expert perspectives to strengthen statistical generalizability. Expanding case studies to include Africa and South Asia would diversify regional insights. Further research is also needed on:

- The intersection of artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons with IHL norms;
- The role of non-state actors in shaping accountability structures;
- Comparative analysis of enforcement mechanisms beyond the ICC, such as regional courts or hybrid tribunals.

Recommendations

The analysis and findings of this study highlight that while international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) remain central to civilian protection, their effectiveness is undermined by gaps in adaptability, enforcement, and accountability. In order to translate these findings into practical improvements, it is essential to provide targeted recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and future researchers. The following proposals aim to bridge the gap between legal theory and humanitarian realities, ensuring that protections promised in law are realized in practice.

1. Strengthening Legal Adaptability to Emerging Technologies

Policymakers should prioritize updating or clarifying existing legal instruments to account for drone warfare, cyber operations, and artificial intelligence driven tactics. While 67% of experts in this study regarded current frameworks as only “partially adequate,” a more explicit codification of new forms of harm could reduce interpretive ambiguities. This does not necessarily require entirely new treaties but could involve formal commentaries, General Assembly resolutions, or updated protocols that explicitly define unlawful uses of drones and cyber operations.

2. Enhancing Enforcement and Accountability Mechanisms

Results of Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine revealed that the gaps in enforcement are systemic. It is therefore in the interest of policymakers to put effort to ensure there is strengthening of mechanisms of accountability in the international and regional levels. This may include the US expansion of its power on the international criminal court (ICC), the acquisition of special tribunals on crimes related to the technological warfare or setup of the censorious structures. In the case of practitioners, since the damage caused to the civilians is preventable in the form of digital forensics and satellite tracking, which has been applied in certain tasks, it must be hard coded so that those who violate this action can be prosecuted.

The battle against Civilians being harmed by drone attacks on Medium.

With that said, since most professionals (78%) of the respondents claimed that drones are set to become a dilemma of immense proportions, that states must consider adopting open reporting requirements on drone strikes, such as considerations on civilian killing audit. Parliamentary watch organizations or independent watchdogs can be created by the policymakers in order to have a second look at how legal and proportional the strikes can be. Meanwhile, humanitarian practitioners must assist in coordinating community-level mechanisms to mentioned the experience of civilians to give them to accountability procedures.

Controlling cyber activities in armed conflict

Having data of 65 percent of the people interviewed view that cyber law per se is under-regulated, an urgent need existed to close the gap. In that respect, what policymakers would like to encourage other countries to do is to facilitate the development of global standards according to which it is stated that when carrying out cyberattacks targeting the critical civilian infrastructure (including hospitals and energy systems) we involve illegal attacks in the context of the provisions of IHL. Meanwhile, it is also very important that regional organizations (e.g: Eu, AU, Oic) continue encouraging the registration of (confidence-building measures) which is to allow the attribution as well as to allow an escalation. Cyber operation indirect. Practitioners in the humanitarian sector should be trained to foresee cyber-related attacks on medical staff operations or supply chain failures.

5. Reducing Civilian Exposures to Urban Warfare

The most proportionate amount of issues can be observed in urban fighting during which Aleppo, Mariupol, and Gaza have been witnessing. Policymakers should encourage states to adopt operational guidelines that minimize harm in densely populated areas for instance, requiring military forces to avoid the use of heavy explosive weapons in urban centers. Humanitarian actors can complement these measures by developing civilian evacuation corridors and enhancing resilience of critical infrastructure such as hospitals and shelters.

6. Integrating Civilian Voices into Accountability Mechanisms

A recurring theme in both literature and findings is the underrepresentation of civilians in post-conflict accountability structures. Policymakers and international organizations should establish mechanisms that allow affected communities to participate directly in documenting violations, shaping reparations, and influencing future reforms. This could involve hybrid tribunals with civilian testimony or UN-led commissions that prioritize local perspectives.

7. Directions for Future Research

Scholars should extend this study by adopting mixed-method approaches that combine casualty data with qualitative interviews to provide statistically generalizable findings. Future research should also expand geographically to Africa and South Asia, where conflicts increasingly involve cyber operations and drone strikes. Additional areas of inquiry include the legal regulation of autonomous weapons, the role of non-state actors in shaping norms, and comparative analysis of enforcement structures beyond the ICC.

Conclusion

This work has examined thoroughly the sufficiency of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) in protecting civilians in the context of the changing face of contemporary conflict. Through an analysis of legal frameworks, case studies from Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine, and insights from experts, the findings demonstrate that while foundational principles of distinction, proportionality, and civilian immunity remain central, their practical application is increasingly undermined by technological innovations, asymmetric strategies, and persistent enforcement gaps.

The research contributes to the existing literature by offering an integrative perspective on how drone warfare, cyber operations, and urban combat collectively challenge the resilience of civilian protection norms. In doing so, it advances theoretical debates on the adaptability of IHL, showing that the problem lies not in the absence of rules but in their limited flexibility and weak enforcement. Practically, the study underscores the urgent need for clearer legal definitions of emerging threats, strengthened accountability mechanisms, and the meaningful inclusion of civilian perspectives in shaping post-conflict justice and policy.

At the same time, the research acknowledges its limitations. The qualitative design and relatively small expert sample provide depth but not statistical generalizability, while the reliance on select case studies constrains the breadth of comparative insights. Moreover, the evolving and often opaque nature of cyber operations introduces uncertainties that future work must address more comprehensively.

Looking forward, future research should adopt mixed-method approaches that integrate quantitative casualty data with qualitative analysis, broaden regional coverage to include underexplored conflict zones, and investigate the regulation of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons. Equally important is further exploration of non-state actors' roles in shaping legal accountability and the development of innovative enforcement models beyond the International Criminal Court.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the significance of adapting international law to the realities of twenty-first-century warfare. By bridging the gap between normative commitments and humanitarian practice, the protection of civilians can move from aspiration toward realization—a task that demands sustained scholarly, political, and institutional engagement.

Conflict of Interest

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