



# Resilience Under Fire: The UAE's Emerging Model of Total Defence

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## **Resilience Under Fire: The UAE's Emerging Model of Total Defence**

*By Kristian Alexander*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*This commentary on how the United Arab Emirates has responded to the US/Israel-Iran war highlights its ability to maintain stability, economic continuity, and public confidence under pressure. It argues that, while not officially labelled as such, the UAE has effectively adopted a "Total Defence" approach – integrating military capability, crisis management, economic resilience, and information control – offering a relevant comparative case for Singapore and other small, globally connected states navigating an increasingly volatile security environment.*

### **COMMENTARY**

When missiles and drones began targeting the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the wake of the widening confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, Abu Dhabi found itself in a position it had long sought to avoid: direct exposure to regional conflict. For a state that has built its global reputation on stability, connectivity, and economic openness, the war was not a strategic choice but an external shock.

The UAE's response provides a useful example of how a small state with middle-power ambitions handles a crisis. More importantly, it sheds light on a concept that strongly resonates in Singapore: Total Defence.

### **A Small State with Big Ambitions Under Pressure**

Like Singapore, the UAE has spent decades cultivating an image of predictability in an unpredictable region. Its economic model depends on openness, investor confidence and perceptions of security. War, particularly one that threatens infrastructure, airspace and shipping, runs counter to that vision.

The UAE did not seek escalation. But once exposed to the spillover effects of regional conflict, it had little choice but to respond decisively while maintaining domestic stability and international confidence.

This balancing act, defending the state without disrupting the system, lies at the heart of modern resilience strategies.

### **Defence in Practice: Efficiency, Layering and Real-World Performance**

On the military front, the UAE's response has been measured but effective. Air and missile defence systems have intercepted incoming threats with a high degree of efficiency, while rotary-wing assets, including helicopters, have been deployed to neutralise low-flying drones. The Ministry of Defence activated its air defence systems with notable precision, and authorities in cities such as Dubai reassured residents that the sounds of interceptions overhead signified successful defence rather than imminent danger.

By early March 2026, UAE authorities reported intercepting the vast majority of incoming threats, including over 170 ballistic missiles and several hundred drones, reflecting interception rates exceeding 90 per cent for high-end threats.

Not all threats have been fully eliminated. Debris from intercepted projectiles caused limited but visible damage, including fires at energy-related facilities and impacts near critical infrastructure zones. However, these incidents underscore an important point: defensive operations prevented much more serious outcomes, avoiding potential major disruptions to energy supplies and urban centres.

Mandatory military service for Emirati males has also contributed to a broader culture of preparedness, ensuring that the armed forces are not only well-equipped but also well-trained and socially integrated. The UAE introduced compulsory national service in 2014 for male Emirati citizens aged 18–30. Service duration has evolved over time but currently ranges from approximately 11 months for high school graduates to shorter periods for those with higher education qualifications. While the majority of conscripts serve in military support and training roles rather than in direct combat positions, the system has significantly increased the pool of trained personnel. Military service remains mandatory for men and voluntary for women, who can also enlist and undergo similar training.

### **Crisis Governance and Information Discipline**

Equally important has been the UAE's approach to crisis management beyond the battlefield. The National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority (NCEMA) has once again taken centre stage, coordinating a whole-of-government response that integrates civil defence, public communication, and contingency planning. Building on experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, NCEMA has applied a similar model of centralised coordination and regular public guidance to the current security crisis.

Communication has been deliberate and tightly managed. Authorities have actively shaped the information environment, issuing timely updates while warning against the spread of misinformation. Legal measures, including fines of up to AED 20,000 (US\$5,400), have been introduced to deter the dissemination of false or misleading content online. Beyond financial penalties, authorities have also arrested several individuals accused of spreading misleading, fabricated, or digitally manipulated content related to the attacks, including AI-generated videos designed to exaggerate damage or incite panic. In a country where expatriates make up nearly 90 per cent of the population, such measures serve not only as control mechanisms but also as tools to maintain public confidence and prevent panic.

This approach has proven effective. While some foreign nationals have opted for repatriation flights, the overwhelming majority have remained in the country, many shifting to remote work arrangements as advised by their employers. Ports and airports experienced temporary disruptions, including brief airspace closures and rerouted flight corridors, but continued operating with phased resumptions, ensuring that the UAE's role as a global logistics and aviation hub was maintained. This continuity demonstrates both trust in state institutions and the strength of the UAE's digital and logistical infrastructure, which has allowed a nearly "business-as-usual" environment despite ongoing security issues.

### **Total Defence Without the Label**

Taken together, these measures point to a broader framework that Singapore knows well: Total Defence. While mostly associated with Singapore, it is also practised in countries such as Sweden and Finland. The concept emphasises a whole-of-society approach that integrates military, civil, economic, social, digital, and psychological resilience.

The UAE has not formally adopted this terminology. In practice, it is applying many of its core principles. Military readiness is evident in its advanced defence systems and trained forces. Civil defence is demonstrated through NCEMA's central coordinating role. Economic defence is seen in efforts to sustain operational continuity across ports, airports and financial systems. Meanwhile, strict controls on misinformation and the emphasis on official communication channels reflect key aspects of digital and psychological defence.

In effect, the UAE's response represents an integrated model: military capability, civil preparedness, economic continuity and information discipline operating in tandem. This is Total Defence in practice, if not in name.

### **Lessons from Singapore and the Limits of Transferability**

Singapore's Total Defence model offers a useful point of comparison. Built on multiple pillars such as military, civil, economic, social, digital and psychological, it is designed to mobilise society as a whole in times of crisis.

The UAE's trajectory intersects with many of these elements. Its conscription system and investment in high-end military capabilities align with the logic of military defence.

NCEMA's coordinated emergency response mirrors aspects of civil defence. The determination to maintain economic activity during disruption demonstrates an implicit economic defence mindset within a trade-dependent system. Meanwhile, firm action against misinformation closely corresponds to Singapore's emphasis on digital and psychological resilience.

At the same time, direct replication is neither feasible nor advisable. Singapore's model is rooted in its unique historical experience and societal structure, while the UAE must adapt resilience strategies to a context characterised by a large expatriate population and a different governance framework.

What is emerging instead is a hybrid approach, one that borrows selectively while remaining tailored to local realities.

### **A Quiet Convergence in an Age of Crisis**

The ongoing conflict highlights a broader lesson: resilience in the 21st century goes well beyond conventional defence. It involves the ability to withstand shocks, uphold public confidence and maintain continuity despite disruptions.

In the UAE, the crisis has shown that a whole-of-government approach is already in place. By ensuring that NCEMA, the military, and the private sector work together seamlessly, the state has effectively carried out a Total Defence strategy without explicitly using the label. It also sends a clear message: The UAE did not seek this conflict, but it is ready and able to bear its consequences.

In this respect, there is a quiet convergence between Singapore and the UAE. Both are small, globally connected states that depend on stability but must also prepare for instability. Both recognise that security now encompasses the battlefield, the economy, and the information space.

The UAE's experience shows that Total Defence is not merely a doctrine to be adopted. It is a mindset to be practised. And in moments of crisis, that distinction becomes decisive.

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