Civilian Resistance as a Cornerstone of National Resilience: Insights from Ukraine and Israel

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Abstract

Amid renewed interest in total defense frameworks within European strategic communities, this article explores the intersection of civilian-led resistance to external armed aggression and the broader concept of national resilience in contemporary warfare. Through a comparison of two case studies–the grassroots resistance of Ukrainian civilians to Russian aggression since February 24, 2022, and the mobilization of Israeli civilians in response to the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023–this article assesses the strategic and operational relevance of civilian resistance within total and comprehensive defense models.

Furthermore, our findings validate the applicability of total defense in the context of protracted conflicts while also revealing internal tensions and complexities. The study underscores the decisive role of decentralized, civilian-led resistance in absorbing the initial shock of aggression and shaping the early trajectory of war. However, it also argues that while civilian engagement is indispensable during the initial phase, it later becomes only one component within the broader framework of national resilience. Nevertheless, in the mid- and protracted stages of a conflict, the soft-power factor of civil society's will to fight is vital to sustain hard-power military capacity and societal functioning over time. Ultimately, the Ukrainian and Israeli experiences point to the need to

reconceptualize civilian resistance as a foundational, not auxiliary, pillar of national resilience and total defense, particularly in an era marked by the "civilianization" of armed conflicts and the resurgence of long wars.

Keywords: *Total Defense, Comprehensive Defense, Resilience, Civilian Resistance, Partisan Warfare, Ukraine, Israel.*

Introduction

Systemic shifts in the early 21st century security environment - including the resurgence of high-intensity and long wars, information warfare, large-scale terror attacks, epidemics, and climate change - have brought into focus the notion of resilience within Western strategic communities. Rooted in the Cold War-era focus on civil preparedness and its integration with military capacity and emergency planning (NATO's Article 3), resilience has traditionally been associated with civilian infrastructure protection, continuous functionality in times of emergency, and the capacity of civilian systems to absorb and recover from systemic shocks. In this approach, civilians are primarily seen as a passive line of defense, whose primary function is to withstand significant disruptions while supporting the broader military effort from the rear [54].

Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, however, defense thinking in Eastern and Northern Europe has evolved toward broader "total defense" or "comprehensive defense" frameworks. The total defense concept (TDC) - reviving Cold War models from Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland - seeks to mobilize entire societies to prepare for and respond to armed aggression. Unlike resilience, total defense expands the civilian domain from infrastructure protection and civilian preparedness to "whole-of-society" mobilization, emphasizing synergistic civil-military cooperation for a coordinated and integral response to external threats.

While NATO has primarily linked total defense to government

continuity, infrastructure protection, and civilian preparedness [47, 48, 49], Nordic and Baltic states have taken further steps. Finland emphasizes rapid civilian mobilization and territorial defense [39], while Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have embedded grassroots, volunteer civilian resistance to enemy aggression into national security concepts [15, 45, 46].

Against this backdrop of conceptual expansion and regional variations, the present article examines the strategic and operational significance of civilian-led resistance within total defence frameworks. Specifically, it investigates the operational efficacy of civilian resistance in absorbing armed aggression and sustaining long-term warfighting capacity. It explores how liberal democracies can incorporate this component into their total defense strategies.

To address these questions, the article provides a comparative analysis of two recent cases: the grassroots resistance of Ukrainian civilians to Russian aggression since February 24, 2022, and the widespread mobilization of Israeli civilians in response to the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Despite stark differences between a full-scale invasion by a major power and a surprise attack by a non-state terrorist group, both cases display comparable dynamics in the evolution of civilian resistance across three main warfighting phases:

1. *Initial phase*: Civilian volunteers and paramilitary units spontaneously assume front-line territorial defense functions during the early hours and days of aggression, often compensating for the overwhelmed or collapsing state and military institutions.

2. *Mid-term phase*: Civil society actors sustain the war effort through the enrolment or active support of military forces, logistics coordination, fundraising, technological innovation in key sectors, public communication, documentation of wartime atrocities, provision of essential public services, and stabilization of the wartime economy.

3. *Protracted phase*: As wars become protracted, civilian engagement faces attrition; tensions may emerge between civilian actors and the state, particularly around wartime conscription

and mobilization, the will to fight, long-term burden sharing, and public trust, particularly when public consensus on war objectives is fading away or lacking.

The study draws on selected academic literature on national resilience and total defense, while including seminal studies on Ukraine [36] and Israel [16], supplemented by reports documenting civilian engagement following the Russian and Hamas invasions of 2022 and 2023 [25]. It includes fieldwork conducted in Ukraine (2023), involving interviews with Territorial Defense actors, journalists, human rights organizations, and think-tank researchers, as well as on-site observation in the towns, villages, and open fields of the Western Negev in the immediate aftermath of October 7th, 2023. It also incorporates ongoing expert dialogues and exchanges with Finnish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian officials in 2022-2025.

This article further builds upon a previous study in which we examined the role of civilians in modern warfare during the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war [52], which emphasized the multifaceted nature of civilian mobilization in Ukraine's war effort, the importance of political communication in wartime resilience, the growing relevance of the digital front, and the emergence of civilians as a "sub-system within the broader ecosystem of conflict." Expanding on that previous research by including the Israeli case, the present article explores how grassroots civilian resistance emerges, crystallizes, and transforms under conditions of strategic disruptions and prolonged wars, distinctively marked by the blurring of civilian-military boundaries and the digitalization of the battlespace. Through a comparative analysis of the Ukrainian and Israeli experiences, this article contributes a phase-based approach to civilian resistance in the context of armed aggression, underscoring the various roles of civilian resistance within national resilience and total defence frameworks.

In the sections that follow, we first review the literature on resilience and total defense, identifying some conceptual gaps around civilian resistance. We then present a comparative analysis of Ukraine and Israel, focusing on three stages: initial, mid-stage

and protracted war. Finally, we reflect on the strategic opportunities and dilemmas posed by civilian resistance in contemporary warfare, concluding with policy recommendations for a proactive integration of civilian resistance into total defense frameworks.

From a State-Centric to a Civilian-Led Approach to National Resilience

Historically derived from the natural sciences, the concept of resilience refers to the "capacity of any system to successfully deal with a severe disruption/disaster (natural or man-made) to maintain reasonable functional continuity during the event, recover from it (bounce back) as quickly as possible, and subsequently rise (bounce forward) to a higher level of systemic functioning, while preserving the system's basic identity and values" [16].

In the 2010s, resilience emerged as a key concept in security studies, where it became associated with civil preparedness and societal cohesion during emergencies and recovery from major disruptive events [34, 67]. It has since been incorporated into major security doctrines, including NATO's Strategic concept (2022) [48], the EU Global Strategy (2016) [17], and various national strategies (e.g., The French White Paper, 2008 [60]; The White House, 2017 [61]; Cabinet Office, 2008 [11]; Federal Foreign Office, 2023 [19]). In NATO and EU documents, resilience is defined as the ability of societies to withstand shocks, support military operations, and maintain critical services while maintaining internal cohesion [14, 47].

NATO additionally frames resilience as a component of deterrence-by-denial, reducing vulnerabilities to prevent adversaries from exploiting civil weaknesses [28, 58]. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine further elevated resilience as a foundational security concept, with emphasis on resilience models operating at state, supra-state, and society levels [28, 36, 37].

However, most literature on resilience tends to adopt a state-centric lens, mainly framing the civilian sector as an amplifier of defense capabilities. Civilian contributions are often presented as

passive and indirect – managed by governments, institutions, and private companies [28, 31]. In this model, civilians are instruments of state capacity rather than autonomous, active agents. Even total defense frameworks are framed as efforts by the state to harness civilian resources for the war effort. The Cold War-born concept of total defense, originally aiming to protect a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity during military attacks, and adopted in Switzerland, Sweden and Finland as a shield against the Soviet Union, mainly focused on the "Nation-in-Arms" concept, involving the state capacity of rapid mass-mobilization of civilians into territorial defense units [6, 20, 57].

Total defense models waned in most Western militaries after 1991 until Russia's 2014 intervention and 2022 full invasion of Ukraine, which has renewed interest in the concept. Yet significant variations remain: about half of NATO member states have not adopted total or comprehensive defense frameworks, and among those that have, their interpretation differs significantly. Indeed, national resilience is accepted by all NATO member states, yet the emphasis is on "national," meaning that it is a member state's responsibility to build and manage implementation mechanisms in this realm [4, 49]. While "total defense" currently guides resilience-building and bolsters military-civilian integration in the Nordic and Baltic states, even those countries differ in their conceptualization and operationalization. In some countries (Finland and Sweden), total defense includes compulsory conscription and rapid mass mobilization; yet, the capacity and will of civilians to fight are rarely addressed in formal resilience planning [68].

At the micro-level, grassroots studies on societal resilience often focus on societal cohesion and immunity from foreign malign influences [9, 59, 64]. In NATO documents, civilians are seen as a "first line of defense," yet their most direct and active involvement is defined as assisting first responders like public emergency services [58]. While these frameworks stress attributes like patriotism, optimism, social integration, and political trust [12], they rarely address scenarios in which civilians serve as direct

combatants or resistance actors in the absence of fully functioning state and military structures.

In response to this conceptual gap, the idea of civilian resistance has reemerged in Western strategic communities, especially in the Baltic and Nordic regions, following Crimea's annexation. Admittedly, the notion of civilian resistance is as ancient as the history of warfare itself, and it gained academic prominence in literature on 20th-century warfare and during the Cold War, with a focus on partisan warfare to counter overwhelming attacks or occupation. However, this idea of civilian participatory warfare waned following the end of the Cold War, coinciding with the end of mandatory conscription in many Western states.

The resurgence of the concept in the post-2014 strategic landscape was influenced by the U.S. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), which, in dialogue with Nordic and Baltic expert communities, promoted the Resistance Operating Concept (ROC) [42]. It subsequently gained traction in the Baltic countries: for example, the 2020 Latvian National Security Doctrine refers to "civilian resistance," which includes mass evacuation from theatres of operations and "passive resistance," where civilians avoid cooperation with enemy institutions and units while covertly supporting national or allied forces [8].

The ROC reframed civilian resistance as an effort to actively compensate for a nation's military deficiencies when confronted with an overwhelming attack, with the goal of better countering aggression or fending off an invasion. In this sense, civilian resistance is understood as a complementary strategy to resilience: while resilience is designed to *maintain* national sovereignty (by preparing to, withstanding, and recovering from aggression), whole-of-society resistance aims to *regain* it and restore the pre-aggression situation [20]. The ROC emphasizes the central role of legitimate government control, whether in place or exile, in proactively preplanning and managing these civilian resistance efforts [20].

While ROC gained traction in the Baltic countries, its conceptual

boundaries remained blurry, and its operationalization unclear. Consequently, the nexus between the concepts of resilience and resistance to aggression did not gain much attention in security studies, nor did the ROC enter NATO's doctrinal framework and operational toolbox [18].

This article seeks to revisit the discussion around resilience and resistance by empirically analysing how civilian resistance functions as an operational component of national defense in times of systemic shock. Through comparative, phase-based analysis of civilian resistance in Ukraine and Israel, we explore how bottom-up civilian efforts sustain military functionality, complement national defense efforts, and further blur the boundaries between military and civilian spheres in contemporary warfare.

Civilian Resistance in Ukraine and Israel: A Multi-Phase Approach

This section presents the findings of our empirical analysis of the Ukrainian and Israeli civilian resistance efforts, examining their evolution and impact on war dynamics across three main stages: the initial stage, mid-term phase and the protracted, open-ended phase.

Initial Response: Civilians as the First Line of Active Defense

The opening stages of the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022, and of the Hamas assault of October 7, 2023, generated systemic shocks that paralyzed core elements of both countries' state security systems. In each case, national armed forces and state security systems were initially overwhelmed, unable to comprehend the situation on the ground, and failing to organize their defensive operations effectively. The attackers maximized the element of surprise to create a strategically paralyzing shock and exploit it in the opening hours and days.

In the absence of a sufficient military response, Ukrainian and

Israeli civilian volunteers spontaneously assumed national defense roles. In each case, they formed a human line of defense equipped with rudimentary military equipment. This involved both civilians who found themselves on the frontlines of the invasion and those who rushed in to fill the ranks of the military structures, caught off guard. In both cases, this grassroots civilian resistance was massive and involved active engagement in high-intensity combat during the onset of the invasion [16, 32, 53].

According to Ukrainian polls conducted between December 2021 and March 2022, the number of Ukrainians willing to participate in armed resistance to the Russian invasion rose from 33% to 59% [35]. In the first days of the war, dozens of thousands of volunteers received weapons from the government to form militia patrols in Kyiv and other cities [29, 33]. 100,000 volunteers reportedly joined the Territorial Defense units in the first two weeks of the war [35]. Many more joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) [23], admittedly against the backdrop of President Volodymyr Zelensky imposing martial law on February 24, 2022, banning men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country. Although some of the volunteers had previous military experience, many were freshly enrolled civilians, with little military training, and with light weapons or man-portable air defense or anti-tank missiles [41]. Yet the fresh recruits in various capacities had both important roles in defending their local communities and a wider effect of overstretching the Russian invading force, making the Kremlin order a withdrawal from Kyiv and the north of Ukraine five weeks into the war [29].

The rapid mobilization of Ukrainian civilians was not new. It built upon an earlier trend of "civilianization" of the armed forces of Ukraine during the war in Donbass (2014–2022), in which civilian volunteers had already assumed critical security and logistical roles amid shortages of financial and logistical resources (accompanied by widespread corruption) and institutional weakness in Ukraine's defense sector.

A similar dynamic unfolded a year and a half later in Israel. On October 7th, 2023, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were

caught unprepared to repel Hamas' simultaneous attacks that both surprised and blinded its units around the Gaza Strip. In terms of scale and intensity, the Hamas assault surpassed even the worst-case scenario previously outlined by the IDF. The Israeli army units near the Gaza Strip were only ready to thwart several squads of Hamas operatives attacking a few border villages or military outposts. However, on October 7th, some 5,500 Palestinian fighters – and Gaza civilians - attacked through 114 land breaches, accompanied by blitz sea and air incursions. Dozens of villages and towns, military bases, including the Nova rave festival site became scenes of mass massacres, rape, abductions, and arson. At the time of writing, it is confirmed that on October 7, 1,320 persons, mostly civilians, were killed, 251 kidnapped, and thousands sustained grave injuries [71].

Mirroring the Ukrainian case, Israel experienced a massive and spontaneous influx of self-defense squads *(kitot konenut)*, armed civilians, off-duty reservists, and regular army soldiers who scrambled to the area without a mandate from the army. In many assaulted villages and towns, these groups effectively filled the void left by the IDF, stepping in where IDF presence was insufficient, intervention was lacking, or troops had retreated. Fieldwork conducted in Be'eri on October 16, 2023, revealed that civilians fought for hours using kitchen knives and other rudimentary tools. The IDF's systemic failure to protect civilians in the assaulted communities – driven by a complex set of factors including inadequate situational awareness, severe command-and-control deficiencies, and a massive failure in intelligence and strategic planning – left civilians, armed volunteers, and off-duty reservists to confront the attackers unaided for many hours. The grassroots and sustained resistance efforts of these civilians played a critical role in containing the assault and mitigating casualties until the IDF gradually regained operational control [25, 63].

Intermediate Timespan: Civilians as Active Supporters of War Effort

When the militaries reorganized after the initial shock, direct civilian combat participation in ground warfare decreased. Yet in Russian-occupied territories (a fifth of Ukraine's territory), civilians continued to play a significant role in partisan resistance. In Israel, civilians assumed even greater responsibilities in defending border communities: the number of self-defense units in Israeli local authorities surged after the invasion. Before October 7th, there were 83 self-defense units in Israeli towns and villages; by December 2023, this number had skyrocketed to around 800 nationwide [62].

During this second, intermediary phase, the standing armies in both countries continued to depend on civil society to meet their mobilization objectives. In the summer and fall of 2022, Ukraine amassed a record 700,000 personnel, temporarily gaining a manpower advantage over Russia, which struggled to mobilize 300,000 men in September 2022 before subsequently losing vast territories to Ukraine [1, 7, 56].

Following the commotion of October 7th, Israel witnessed an unprecedented and voluntary military reserve mobilization of 220,000 soldiers, amounting to roughly 2–3% of the total population, which substantially reinforced the standing army, whose peacetime scale is assessed at 170,000 soldiers [22, 24, 44].

Several key historical and societal factors may explain the initial mass mobilization of Ukrainian and Israeli civilians into the military. Both nations exhibit a strong entrepreneurial spirit, a high degree of societal autonomy, and a deeply rooted relationship between society and the armed forces. In Ukraine, this relationship has evolved significantly since 2014, with a marked rise in civilian volunteerism.

In Israel, it has been a foundational component of national identity from the outset, embodied in the "people's army" model. One can also hypothesize that both countries share profound historical traumas – the Holocaust in Israel and the Holodomor in Ukraine –

that have ingrained a collective sense of existential vulnerability, further reinforcing their national resilience narratives.

The widespread mobilization in both Ukraine and Israel was also catalysed by the presence of family members already engaged in combat, which galvanized civilian support. Grassroots civilian–military initiatives rapidly emerged across diverse domains, including psychological support for wounded and demobilized soldiers, trauma care, and equipment procurement. In both conflicts, the digital domain proved critical: civilians became de facto "smartphone militias," contributing to real-time strategic communication efforts [52].

New digital transaction platforms facilitated grassroots international strategic communications campaigns aimed at supporting the war efforts and sustaining civilian crowdfunding campaigns for military equipment, ranging from light arms and protective gear to vehicles and UAVs. Ukrainian and Israeli civilians went so far as to personally deliver procured equipment and other necessities to front-line units, often at significant personal risk.

Ukrainian and Israeli civilians contributed technological innovations to military systems and played a central role in quickly adapting the digital space and weapon systems to new challenges encountered during the surprise attacks. The invaluable role of the Ukrainian business community, NGOs, and volunteers in drone military innovation, R&D, acquisition, and combat employment cycle throughout the war has been well-documented [55]. In response to vulnerability from Russian missile and kamikaze drone attacks, Ukrainian volunteers introduced and further developed a smartphone app to improve interception of Russian aerial threats. This application enabled citizens to capture images, geolocate, and classify drones, missiles, and aircraft, while reporting the information in real time to Ukrainian security services [10].

In Israel, amateur drone operators were mobilized as reservists and helped the Israeli infantry form rapid-reaction drone squads. Despite being considered a pioneer in military UAVs, at the beginning of the war, the IDF lacked sufficient personnel and

equipment to gain the level of situational awareness required to conduct large-scale urban warfare operations. Civilians assisted reservists in mounting "360-degree cameras for armoured vehicles", thereby increasing their survivability in the urban warfare environment [26].

Although it is difficult to measure the direct military impact of these donations and procurement campaigns on battlefield dynamics, these civilian initiatives materially and morally reinforced the combatant forces in the context of an attrition war, especially in Ukraine, when the US assistance was withheld for months. They also demonstrated the adaptive and creative potential of a digitally literate, entrepreneurial, and self-reliant civil society in prolonged warfare.

Open-Ended War: Civilian Will to Fight, Attrition, and Burden Sharing

As both wars evolved into protracted, open-ended conflicts, signs of declining civilian willingness to participate in combat began to emerge in both Israeli and Ukrainian societies.

Kyiv and Jerusalem adopted markedly different approaches to managing their mobilized populations, shaped by distinct operational, legal, and historical contexts. In Ukraine, demobilization was not a viable option; leave was infrequent, and official public reporting on casualties was minimal. Three years into the war, the effects of attrition among mobilized troops, declining morale, and increasing difficulty in recruitment became critical challenges. The failure of the 2023 Ukrainian counter-offensive and the prospect of a prolonged war of attrition exposed the Zelensky administration's shortcomings in addressing the urgent need to replenish the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF). A delayed legislative reform on conscription, enacted in April 2024, was accompanied by a government-led "charm offensive" to improve public perceptions of frontline service [51]. However, persistent social and political divides have rendered Ukraine's long-term mobilization capacity a key strategic vulnerability in its confrontation with Russia [66].

In contrast, Israel implemented a strategic approach involving planned cycles of reservist release and remobilization, designed to support both individual and national resilience in the event of a potentially prolonged conflict. This approach was historically devised to balance military necessities with minimizing damage to the national economy and disruption to the reservists' civilian lives. However, the unprecedented number of these cycles, reaching seven at the time of writing, brought the Israeli reservists' personal and professional civilian lives (and the routine of private and public entities employing them) into a state of protracted instability. The initial patriotic surge and public unity gradually gave way to renewed societal divisions. Debates resurfaced over the war's objectives, growing distrust in the impartiality of political and military leadership, and concerns regarding unequal distribution of the military service burden. Additionally, the intensity and duration of combat operations took a psychological toll on segments of the reservist force [22, 30, 69], especially as the spectre of a broader regional escalation continued to loom.

Both nations' security apparatuses required civilian supplementation in the initial stages of the war through active combat participation, equipment provision, and voluntary mobilization. However, these roles evolved differently. The IDF quickly reassumed all essential military functions, relegating volunteers to less critical roles. In contrast, in Ukraine, civil society has continued to play a vital role in equipping the military even three years into the conflict. Despite differing political cultures and institutional models, both countries faced a similar dilemma: while grassroots civilian mobilization proved indispensable in the opening phase of the war, it was increasingly difficult to sustain in the long term. As civilian participation waned, questions of societal and military burden-sharing, recruitment, legitimacy, human casualties, political leadership's war goals, and national unity became more salient. The military eventually reassumed most core functions, but it did so within an ecosystem profoundly shaped by the early, widespread, and sustained contributions of its civilian base.

Lessons for Democracies at War

Our comparative case study demonstrates that both Ukrainian and Israeli civilians embodied the core attributes of resilience as outlined earlier, while also adding a critical dimension of grassroots, active resistance. During the initial phase of war, when state institutions were overwhelmed, civilians exhibited exceptional internal cohesion, discipline, and rapid mobilization in response to external aggression. Their active engagement in the early fighting played a decisive role in enabling state security forces and military structures to recover and reassert operational control. These two wars underscore that initial gains by the aggressor – whether territorial advances or hostage-taking – can decisively shape the trajectory of a conflict, highlighting the strategic importance of robust, early-stage civilian resistance.

In the mid-term and open-ended phases of these conflicts, the operational efficacy of continued civilian resistance in the rear becomes less conclusive, despite its conceptual significance within total defense frameworks.

In both Ukraine and Israel, civilian engagement evolved from direct resistance to a more indirect, enabling role, supporting combat operations and sustaining the broader war effort. While this role proved indispensable, it lost the decisive character it held during the initial shock phase. Ukraine, for instance, lacked adequate prewar preparation for organized partisan warfare, which might have enhanced its ability to achieve strategic effects in Russian-occupied territories [5]. Meanwhile, Russia's occupation strategy has relied on sophisticated and brutal tactics, including the systematic use of war crimes to suppress resistance [40]. In contrast, Israeli territory was fully recaptured within days, rendering further civilian combat engagement unnecessary in subsequent stages of the war. Still, the need to recruit and remobilize reservists remained a continuous and central feature of what became Israel's longest war.

However, preserving the civilian populations' willingness to fight and join national military and security forces throughout the

second and third stages, is a crucial and direct factor in sustaining nation's military capability. Therefore, the soft-power factor of collective willingness to fight-typically associated with the domain of resilience emerges as an indispensable component of a nation's hard-power military capability.

The Ukrainian and Israeli cases underscore the ongoing "civilianization of armed conflict" in the 21st century – a phenomenon that extends patterns of civilian and partisan involvement observed in 20th century wars. This evolving trend is marked by the growing role of civilians on the battlefield, not only as victims but also as active participants [65]. Both examples reinforce the blurring of traditional distinctions between military and civilian spheres, combatants and non-combatants, as well as between the front line and the home front [3].

A further key dimension of civilian resilience and resistance highlighted by these two conflicts is the centrality of the digital front in modern warfare [13, 27]. Information technologies have enabled continuous, real-time interaction among civilians, armed forces, governments, and the international community – empowering civilians to shape the battlefield in new and strategic ways [52]. While civilian engagement in resistance is not a novel phenomenon, the contemporary information environment has fundamentally altered the nature of civilian-state relations in democratic societies during wartime, fostering a widespread, simultaneous, decentralized, and networked synergy between civilian actors and state institutions that reshapes the conduct of war and the architecture of national resilience [38].

Traditional risk-mitigation approaches – focused on strengthening civilian sector defenses and enhancing civil-military communication [70] – may no longer suffice in addressing emerging security challenges. Empirical evidence from Ukraine and Israel reinforces the need to bolster the paramilitary capacities of democratic societies and to develop sophisticated mechanisms for empowering civilians, including NGOs and private corporations, in countries and regions anticipating the possibility of a surprise

military attack. However, the expanded involvement of civilians in direct combat and support roles introduces critical complexities. It may complicate coordination with formal military structures, expose new vulnerabilities for both categories, and increase the risks of both normative and criminal misconduct.

Conclusion: The Imperative of Civilian Resistance

At the time of writing, the Russia-Ukraine and Hamas-Israel wars are ongoing, necessitating caution before drawing definitive conclusions. However, several preliminary insights can be drawn.

The Ukrainian and Israeli experiences showcase the self-generated, grassroots power of civilian-led resistance during state collapse, enabling militaries to reorganize, contain invasions, and trigger a psychological and social effect of mass mobilization to sustain the war effort, especially when an initial attack morphs into a protracted conflict. By slowing down and limiting the invasion through their resistance efforts, Ukrainian and Israeli citizens critically impacted the further course of the war. They enabled their militaries to subsequently reorganize and prevented scenarios that could have been far more disastrous. Most critically, by forming a human line of resistance at the pivotal initial stage of the invasion, they enabled state institutions to withstand aggression and rebound, which are two key dimensions of national resilience.

The comparative trajectories of Ukraine and Israel underscore the evolving role of civilian resistance in modern warfare. Both cases demonstrate that civilians can constitute a decisive component of national defense during the most critical early phases of armed aggression, particularly when state systems are paralyzed. Civilian-led resistance served not only as a last line of defense but also as a buffer that enabled state institutions to regain control, repel attackers, and shape the conflict's trajectory. However, the evidence on the long-term direct operational efficacy of sustained civilian resistance is less conclusive. In both cases, civilian roles transitioned from active resistance to supporting

military operations: logistically, psychologically, technologically, and symbolically. These functions proved vital but also underscored the limits of grassroots engagement in protracted warfare.

Furthermore, as the probability of high-intensity and prolonged wars increases, the Ukrainian and Israeli examples further illustrate that civil society's engagement in sustaining a state's fighting capabilities assumes a crucial role. The failure to preplan how to maintain high levels of mobilization amid attrition, setting obscure war objectives, and uneven burden-sharing might gravely undermine the civil-military synergy, the chances to prevail militarily, and to defend national security priorities.

Our empirical evidence confirms the relevance of a total defense approach, utilizing comprehensive and integrated civilian-military resources to contain overwhelming attacks or adversaries and sustain a long-term national military capability. The shifts in the 21st century strategic environment and the increasingly blurred lines between civilian and military domains create an imperative for a renewed discourse on civil resilience, including active resistance. Our case studies demonstrate that civilian-led resistance not only forms an indispensable component of resilience but also a key layer of a nation's defense architecture.

This study thus affirms the strategic relevance of participatory warfare, emphasizing that militaries cannot prevail alone in protracted conflicts. In an era once again defined by the importance of mass, both in terms of ammunition and manpower, broad-based civilian human capital emerges as a critical asset to cultivate. Mass civilian engagement, whether through accelerated wartime mobilization, combat support, logistical assistance, or digital coordination, significantly extends a nation's defense capacity and enhances its ability to endure and sustain long-term warfare.

Moreover, the Ukrainian and Israeli cases suggest that societies with a longstanding culture of mobilization are better adapted for civil preparedness and active resistance. Yet, recent data reveal wide variation in the willingness of Western populations to fight for their countries [50]. This highlights the need for governments

to proactively cultivate civilian engagement, confidence, and patriotism, especially through sustained, transparent communication between political and military leadership and the broader public. The complexity of the digital domain adds both opportunities and challenges for maintaining this civilian-state dialogue, which can either strengthen or strain these relationships.

At the conceptual level, as NATO countries "research ways and means to coordinate and integrate activities…in terms of conceptual aspects of the comprehensive defence framework" [49], we argue for deeper integration of civil resistance into national civil-military strategies. The willingness of civilians to fight emerges as a decisive variable, shaping both social cohesion and a state's ability to scale up militarily.

Drawing on the Ukrainian and Israeli experiences, we propose that dispersing national defense capabilities through a flexible and adaptive civilian-military network can enhance a state's ability to withstand external threats and sustain long-term warfare. In the early stages of hybrid or conventional conflict, decentralized civilian resistance may take various forms: appointing qualified civilians in key corporations to coordinate mobilization efforts; integrating volunteers into territorial defense units; and clearly defining civilian roles, hierarchies, and coordination mechanisms well before conflict erupts. Additionally, states should consider enabling civilian and paramilitary groups to act independently of formal command in the opening hours of an attack: an approach increasingly explored in Baltic strategic communities.

In an era defined by deliberate civilian targeting and the collapse of the combatant/non-combatant distinction, a hybrid model of active and passive defense (anchored in organized and well-prepared civilian resistance) can enhance national resilience and amplify military effectiveness. Admittedly, cultivating this civilian-military synergy within liberal democracies is complex and fraught with tensions. One central challenge lies in reconciling the military's expectations for professionalism, control, and legal accountability with the improvised, decentralized nature of grassroots civilian

action. This tension can be managed through public education, scenario planning, and deliberate institutional design.

While Baltic and Nordic states are often viewed as leaders in implementing total or comprehensive defense models due to their geographic proximity to Russia, interviews conducted with national security experts in these countries suggest a substantial implementation gap. Despite strong political rhetoric, practical resilience-building, particularly in civil–military cooperation and civilian resistance capacity, remains inconsistent across and within countries. Scholarly assessments also highlight this disconnect [2].

Ultimately, strategic surprise at the outset of hostilities is increasingly seen as a structural feature of modern warfare [21]. Authoritarian and revisionist actors – including Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and various terrorist organizations – have consistently demonstrated their willingness to target civilian populations and exploit democratic vulnerabilities. These threats reinforce the urgent need for worst-case scenario planning, including the consideration of civilians as the final line of national defense. While this proposition remains politically sensitive and rarely discussed publicly, it constitutes a strategic imperative in an era marked by the resurgence of long wars. This reality was recently acknowledged by an IDF general during a meeting with residents of communities near the Gaza Strip. He stated that "the community's ability to serve as a final line of defense, with residents capable of holding the line", is a critical element of defense in frontline areas. He further emphasized that "this should be part of our doctrine for border communities, so they can hold out for half an hour until the IDF arrives" [72]. Such remarks reflect a growing recognition within military leadership that civilian resistance must be operationalized not only as a moral and societal asset, but also as a functional component of national defense.

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