

A Case Study of National Resiliency in Modern Conflict: The United Arab Emirates

By Anneliese Preske – Irregular Warfare Analyst

Anneliese Preske is a contractor currently serving as an analyst covering the CENTCOM and SOUTHCOM areas of responsibility for the Irregular Warfare Center.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has endured almost 3,000 [Iranian missile and drone strikes since February 28, 2026](#).

This volume of kinetic activity exceeds that of any other nation in the theater, including Israel. By predominantly targeting civilian infrastructure, this campaign has tested the limits of traditional defense. In response, the UAE developed a blueprint for national resilience, demonstrating how a whole-of-government approach can absorb asymmetric shocks, control the strategic narrative, and maintain internal stability amidst sustained conflict.

In an age of increasing complexity, resiliency calls for a whole-of-government model in response to crises. Nations must focus on building national resilience to counter the hybrid and multilayered threats that seek to undermine state structures from within. The UAE has highlighted itself as a key example of adaptation and resilience in modern conflicts by continuing to advance military capability, coupled with strategic messaging, economic maneuvering, and internal coordination.

National Defense

The foundation of any national defense rests upon the state's ability to protect its sovereign territory. In the face of the recent conflict, the UAE has shown itself to be resilient in several aspects, including air defense and law enforcement. The UAE Armed Forces demonstrated a robust air defense capability, forming the first line of its resilience

strategy. Recognizing that UAS technology is a defining and rapidly evolving tool of irregular warfare, the UAE is making significant forward-looking investments to harden its defenses. On March 28, 2026, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky [visited](#) the UAE and met with Emirati President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss security and defense cooperation. Ukraine became a trailblazer in developing resilience to unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and has now sent [counter-drone experts](#) throughout the Middle East to bolster their defenses. This engagement highlights the UAE's adaptability to seek cutting edge technologies that counter asymmetric threats.

Throughout this crisis, the UAE worked to strengthen its internal defenses through law enforcement. In April 2026, UAE's State Security Department (SSD) announced that it [dismantled](#) a terrorist organization that was connected to Iran's Velayat-e Faqih. The organization was accused of developing 'systematic terrorist and sabotage acts,' likely related to the broader regional conflict. In line with UAE's messaging, the [post](#) included names and images of the alleged terrorists providing a level of visibility into the Emirate's operations. The Emiratis have taken a proactive approach in identifying and neutralizing asymmetric internal threats before they can degrade national cohesion or sabotage critical infrastructure. By dismantling proxy networks while simultaneously strengthening its airspace against UAS threats, the UAE is demonstrating a comprehensive defense posture.

Strategic Messaging

Coordinated messaging among Emirati ministries and government agencies has been a key pillar in the country's national response framework. Since the onset of Iranian

strikes, the UAE's Ministry of Defense (MoD) has released continuous updates on air defenses engagements. These updates were posted on [social media](#), in multiple languages, nearly every day since the conflict began in February 2026. The initial alerts leaned towards official statements on attacks from Iran in combination with reports on missile and drone intercepts. In the subsequent weeks, the UAE continued to put forth updates on the various types of intercepts, in more detail, as well as civilian injury and death tolls. This transparency serves two functions. First, it provides tangible proof of the military's capacity to neutralize incoming threats, offering direct reassurance to the domestic population and international observers. Second, it acts as a powerful counter-narrative to adversarial messaging.

Beyond direct messaging, the UAE strategically reassured its population of safety. A few days after Iranian drones targeted the UAE, President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum visited the Dubai Mall for [coffee](#). The high-level visit seemed to be a show of solidarity and reassurance for the residents of the UAE beyond traditional social media posts or official releases. This projection of normalcy was likely a strategic act by the Crown Prince to reassure the population and highlight societal resilience which counters Iran's motivation to cause distress. Throughout the conflict, the UAE has taken a multifaceted approach to both domestic and international strategic communications.

In order to guide a nation towards national-level resilience in conflicts, a whole-of-society approach is critical. Sultan Al Jaber, the CEO of ADNOC, Abu Dhabi's oil company, called Iran's actions in the Strait of Hormuz "[economic terrorism](#)." While kinetic strikes cause immediate and tangible harm, their effects continue to progress even after action occurs. The Strait of Hormuz continues to draw international attention as the world watches oil prices [fluctuate](#). Leveraging public figures, including those in the industry sector, can be beneficial to reach a broader audience.

Economic Continuity

Iran threatened the tourist and entertainment sectors as potential targets of strikes, coming from a [warning](#) by Gen. Abolfazl Shekarchi, [stating](#) "no place in the world will be safe for you," including amusement parks, resorts, and tourist centers. Iran's explicit threats to the nation's tourism sector were an attempt at economic coercion, designed to harm UAE's wealth. The UAE's economic model, heavily reliant on its status as a global hub for tourism, finance, and logistics, is both a source of its strength and a primary target for its adversaries.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the

Iran conflict is projected to cost the travel and tourism sector worldwide at least [\\$600 million daily](#). UAE is a center point of tourism in the Middle East, with Dubai alone drawing in [19 million](#) visitors in 2025. The UAE's quick response highlights the country's adaptability and priority to maintain economic outputs. The government's announcement that it would [cover](#) the hotel and meal expenses for tourists stranded in the country due to flight cancellations can be considered an act of economic statecraft. This move achieved several objectives simultaneously. On a human level, it provided immediate relief to affected individuals, reinforcing the UAE's reputation for hospitality. On a strategic level, it was a direct financial backstop to the tourism industry, absorbing the shock and mitigating the damage to the nation's brand. It sent a message to adversaries and the global market alike that the UAE has the financial means and the political will to defend its economy.

This proactive intervention is part of a broader strategy to protect the UAE's hard-won reputation as a safe and reliable haven for business and travel. By refusing to allow external threats to dictate its economic climate, the government ensured that foreign investment would continue to flow, that its tourism industry would remain attractive, and that its status as a global economic hub would be preserved.

Resiliency in a Poly Crisis

In the midst of continued strikes from Iran, UAE had also experienced severe weather that spanned across the country. Late March brought heavy rain and [flooding](#) that disrupted daily life, causing the UAE government to coordinate across organizations to respond to simultaneous crises. NCEMA, the National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority, met with the Ministry of Interior and the National Centre of Meteorology to review the weather conditions. This highlights intergovernmental coordination throughout the federal and local levels. Coordination is a key facet of national resilience, and the UAE has continued to adapt to the environment accordingly. Navigating this "poly-crisis" required rapid, cross-organizational coordination. The NCEMA integrated operations with the Ministry of Interior and the National Centre of Meteorology to manage the domestic environmental crisis without degrading the state's external defensive posture.

The UAE is executing a strategic shift, moving beyond conventional defense models to a comprehensive "whole-of-government" approach. Modern and asymmetric threats are designed to bypass military perimeters and degrade core national strengths from within. The logical conclusion is that the national defense now requires the active, synchronized participation of every sector, rather than relying exclusively on the armed forces.

This broadened scope of national security necessitates inter-agency (or ministerial) coordination. Ministries traditionally viewed as entirely separate from the security apparatus, like finance, foreign affairs, and infrastructure, are now recognized as components of defense. Effectively managing layered crises require enhanced communication across all government bodies. By breaking down silos, the UAE ensures a unified, swift response, replacing fragmented reactions with a cohesive defense against irregular threats.

The views expressed in these articles are those solely of the authors and do not reflect the policy or views of the Irregular Warfare Center, Department of War, or the U.S. Government.

