

BACKGROUND

Level	Basic
Subject	National Defence (Defense)
Focus	Resilient Societies



TITLE

WHAT IS TOTAL DEFENCE?

What is a Total Defence Concept?

It’s an approach to national resilience that treats preparedness as continuous, not episodic, aligning public agencies, businesses, NGOs, and citizens around shared plans and capabilities. It’s premised on an understanding that spreading responsibility for defence across all levels of society offers it the best chance for vital state functions to operate during extreme adversity, such as war, crisis, or disaster.

What are its origins and how has it evolved?

The idea is rooted in history, gained momentum after World War II, and more recently has evolved into comprehensive national defence approaches to address hybrid threats – cyber, information operations, and economic coercion. Finland is often considered as a model (every home in Finland must have an emergency stockpile of food, fuel, and water, for example) and other countries that practice variants of Total Defence include Sweden, Switzerland, Singapore, and others, demonstrating adaptable models for different threat environments.

Does private security have a role in Total Defence?

Private security provides trained personnel, rapid surge capacity, critical infrastructure protection, and continuity services (access control, CCTV monitoring, security planning, and site hardening) that complement public forces. Firms can be contracted for peacetime resilience tasks – critical-asset guarding, evacuation support, and continuity planning – reducing strain on public resources and enabling faster, localized responses.

Do societies benefit from a Total Defence approach?

It raises national resilience, shortens recovery times, and deters adversaries by increasing the cost of disruption. It preserves essential services, protects supply chains, and sustains public confidence during crises. By integrating private-sector capabilities, societies gain flexibility and specialist skills without permanently expanding standing public forces.

What is needed for effective application of a Total Defence Concept?

It requires clear legal frameworks, interoperable standards, joint training, and public–private planning mechanisms. Governments might: certify and integrate private security into national contingency plans, fund joint exercises that include private firms and local authorities, create contractual templates for surge deployment and critical-infrastructure protection, and reward resilience capabilities in government procurement awards.