

Transitioning to Civil Defence

CTIF Position Statement

Escalating concern on, the preparedness of fire and rescue services to face civil defence scenarios, has, following alarming incursions into the peaceful and sovereign Nations of Estonia, Poland and Qatar, received consideration by CTIF, the International Association of Fire and Rescue Services.

CTIF earnestly wishes to see an end to all military conflict and encourages further dialogue towards peaceful resolution. It has deep concern for all firefighters engaged in civil protection during all conflicts. The Geneva Convention clearly identifies and protects civilian protective services and CTIF seeks respect for the convention and cessation of armed conflicts.

Fire and rescue services have always evolved to meet threats in their operating environment. The current geopolitical situation, when linked with lessons from the past and present, questions 'Should fire services develop a more 'civil defence' centred approach to service delivery?'

Some Nations have already decided to adapt, others contemplate such a change. All jurisdictions should, in CTIF's view and given the concern that exists consider appropriate preparations. CTIF has identified a number of areas to address, offering some background, to assist in this matter.

Past lessons show, that preparedness for aggressive conflict, requires a high investment to realign public policy and secure adequate practical resources. It also presents for a global organisation like CTIF issues of transparency and equitability. CTIF member Nations will have a bias, especially when they are engaged in any war or civil conflict, and, as clearly demonstrated in Europe, fire services are also generally a sovereign service, i.e. they operate outside formal international jurisdiction.

Funding and resource models also vary enormously, some are National (or federal), others regional, state, city or county, with volunteer or career or combined workforce arrangements. Localisation, both in operational and political control, is therefore a key feature and adoption of a fundamental change in any proposed doctrine therefore requires understanding of each local context and consent.

These organisational requirements dictate principled, rather than prescriptive, operating practices founded on a shared doctrine to endorse, enable and permit mutual cooperation and interoperability.

CTIF recognises any new strategy requiring enhanced resilience functions like continuity of governance and essential services to civilians, aligned with support to military operations as required for civil defence, consequentially requires considerable debate and agreement.

Seeking to address the complexity of escalating from a civil resilience to civil defence perspective, CTIF has identified series of issues to consider that help in planning a transition pathway starting with engaged debate between CTIF members and the authorities responsible for a new strategic approach.

Transitioning to Civil Defence

1 Introduction

The role of fire and rescue services is one having to constantly evolve to meet new threats. Inevitably its foremost role is that of a community protective service, working alongside other partner services protecting community security and health. This overarching purpose and the functions undertaken, reflect how to prevent and respond to situations or circumstances impacting upon society's safety.

Those situations and circumstances have changed, sometimes dramatically, over the decades and currently circumstances involving geopolitical and climate factors are exerting a major influence whilst previously security and health concerns predominated, such as terrorism and the global pandemic.

Some role change has also resulted from evolution. The expansion of response from firefighting to using equipment to undertake humanitarian non-fire rescues; extrication from vehicles and assisting other first responders illustrate this process of evolution. A process that notably moved a few decades ago into fire safety, highlighting prevention, to inform and enforce fire safety in the natural and built environments through community education and the development of laws and codes to secure safe buildings, spaces and behaviour.

Change is therefore inevitable as globally fire services seek to both exploit opportunities, including technologies like artificial intelligence and drones, whilst also seeking to effectively prepare to address new threats to public safety from economic and geopolitical trends and events.

This cyclic situation, often referred to as a 'civil protection role' focused upon preparedness, resilience and recovery, is challenged by a relatively recent change in the global geopolitical situation. A situation that questions if the fire service should consider a more focused 'civil defence' centred strategy.

This paper explores the issues involved and suggests a possible approach. Background information from the past and present is attached in the Annexe.

2 The Geneva Convention and Fire and Rescue Services

CTIF is a non-governmental and non-political organisation that seeks to protect all people from harm. It therefore condemns aggressive military action against all people and believes in dialogue to avoid fighting, encouraging all governments to avoid military combat that harms civilians. CTIF fully supports the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention 1949¹ (Protocol 1), which reminds all combatant parties to differentiate between civilians and combatants.

Article 48 of Protocol 1 Nations as a basic rule: Parties to a conflict "shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives."

¹ Additional Protocol 1 relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts was added on the 8 June 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, updated and extended protection to civilians, under the laws of armed conflict in conflicts, including conflicts involving self-determination.

More specifically Article 61 defines civil defence as “humanitarian tasks intended to protect the civilian population against the dangers, and to help it to recover from the immediate effects, of hostilities or disasters and also to provide the conditions necessary for its survival”. Included in those tasks are: (v) rescue; (vi) medical services, including first aid, and religious assistance; (vii) fire-fighting; (viii) detection and marking of danger areas; (ix) decontamination and similar protective measures.

The combatant parties may exclusively assign organisations, personnel and materials to these civil defence tasks. National Nations that had not ratified Protocol 1 in June 2025 include Israel, India and Turkey. The Russian Federation revoked its ratification in 2019 due to ‘exceptional circumstances requiring urgent action due to the risk of abuse by unscrupulous Nations acting in bad faith’.

3 A European Union Perspective

Recently the European Commission has taken new steps towards enhancing preparedness throughout the Union. In addition to the Preparedness Union Strategy and Niinistö² Report 'Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness, the Commission has put forward a proposal to revise the Regulation governing the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM).

The update would bring together funding for health emergency preparedness and response under the same framework, aiming to strengthen the EU's ability to deliver a coordinated and comprehensive crisis response. As an early step in implementing the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, the new Regulation is designed to reinforce solidarity and support across the Union by linking civil protection with health emergency readiness and response.

The proposed Regulation foresees an allocation of approximately EUR 11 billion in common funding to reinforce civil protection and health emergency preparedness. This includes dedicated resources to address health-related threats, with a particular focus on strengthening surveillance capacities and ensuring the availability and accessibility of medical countermeasures.

This integrated approach is intended to deliver more effective and efficient responses to the Union's evolving risk and threat landscape. In addition to the revision of the UCPM, the Commission has adopted a "preparedness by design" approach to the whole Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), currently being negotiated for 2028-2034.

A 'Preparedness Union Strategy' was presented to the European Parliament in November 2024 and April 2025³

The European Union approach is further underpinned by the 32 members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO⁴) Nations recognise that civilian resilience is both a national responsibility and collective commitment whilst also noting military forces, especially those deployed during crises and conflict, depend heavily upon the civilian and commercial sectors for transport, communications, energy and basic supplies such as food and water.

² https://commission.europa.eu/document/5bb2881f-9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en

³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/772898/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)772898_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/772898/EPRS_BRI(2025)772898_EN.pdf)

⁴ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm

4 Civil Protection Civil Defence - What is the difference?

The term *civil defence*⁵ is commonly used during periods when a threat of military aggression is present. In such periods there is close coordination between military and civilian services with the central objective being to protect the national interest from physical attack and reduce the impact through rescue and damage limitation. Under such circumstances localised services may sometimes be reorganised to achieve greater response capabilities. An example in WWII was the UK nationalisation of over 1,400 local fire services into one National Fire Service with 43 Fire Forces to counter air raids.

In Europe political tensions in the aftermath of WWII resulted in what was known as a Cold War with a threat of nuclear attack. This continued the theme of civil defence in many firefighting and rescue services. Likewise, globally, Nations have historically developed and continue to organise fire and similar services within their military establishments, or utilise the similar military management structures and personnel ranks, and often as a consequence retain or adopt the term civil defence.

The term *civil protection* is generally seen as evolving after these post WWII period situations. Threats were seen arising from technical or environment failures, and more recently global impacts like climate change and pandemics. Emergency planning highlights preparedness, response and recovery, and is linked sometimes within the broader actions of resilience. As the frequency of emergencies from wildfires, flooding, health, cyber and infrastructure crisis, increase and security and responses become more integrated, there is also a tendency to incorporate and integrate – raising complexity.

Integrating resilience demands all first responders work with a myriad of a multiple agencies, each one tasked with their own planning, response and mitigation measures. The consequence of each organisation having primary and mutual support priorities, requires a high level of coordination, data sharing and clarity of common aims, to secure effective emergency response and continuation of their primary day-to-day functions. Each State has developed their own framework to harness all services together to 'act as one'.

Civil defence, the civilian response to armed aggression is seen as a further dimension to this critical process albeit with a need to consider important factors. As an example, civil protection often includes standing arrangements with local community organizations offering support for displaced or vulnerable persons, some having volunteers who are less physically able or who have cultural secular and political opinions that impact on availability or commitment. Many volunteer organisations have also reported recruitment has in recent years become noticeably harder.

This makes reliance on this sector increasing questionable given difficulties in securing adequate numbers of volunteers requiring time to learn, train and equip individuals. This is also replicated as an ongoing challenge if citizens are to be better involved in preparedness and response to armed attacks. Conscription may therefore be needed if reliance is to be placed on this civilian response.

⁵ See International Red Cross definition <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/civil-defence>

Some Nations, Scandinavian ones for example, recognise this issue and have formed cohorts of citizens, 'home guards', to provide a civil resilience and emergency response. Adopting this approach requires a dedicated organisation of individual citizens, who then undergo a training programme, which in turn requires financial and timely political investment. An example from Sweden is shown in the Annexe.

5 A New Climatic and Political Landscape

Climate change driven by human activity has seen destabilisation of polar snow and ice and increases in weather based disasters. Global reports indicate more heatwaves and greater temperature records with European heatwaves, wildfires increasing substantially; one result is an increase of heat-related deaths, 1,500 in 12 European cities over just 10 days during the record heatwave and forest fire season in 2025. Scientists predicted these outcomes and without reduction in harmful emissions of fossil fuels the situation and consequences will worsen.

Political change, initiated by the Soviet Union in Europe and in the Middle East by religious endeavour, has resulted in tremendous change in western government alignments in respect of defence and, more latterly, economic policy. Predominately focused around American and European political leadership reactions are now evident of governments coalescing around China, Russia and India.

Mechanisms, like membership of NATO and the European Union, have sought to stabilise this situation. However instability remains, as with Ukraine, raising fear of threats to security that are expanded to other internal state conflicts, as in Israel. The geopolitical situation is therefore fragile and will remain so until a 'new order' becomes established

This lack of a stable security and economic situation, evident in Europe with suggestions for greater military collaboration and increased defence spending in a European Commission, as mentioned in Chapter 3, is likely to dominate emergency planning going forward. The impact on civil protection will likewise need to adjust. Acceleration to change in this landscape is predictable, especially in Europe if some form of European defence agency emerges and creates an industrial base for armaments to support some form of an integrated defence force.

6 Issues of Concern

Operating under aggressive conditions, like armed conflicts, involves multiple precautionary considerations that extend standard operating practices for civil protection into a new paradigm of civil defence. The focus of threat to personal safety, usually mitigated by equipment and training becomes rapidly extended to cater for circumstances where the threat of harm has both psychological and physiological components; harming or killing the first responder is a real collateral consequence.

Summarised that threat arise from two exposures:

Presence of Weapons

Obvious threats from weapons, like explosive bombs and ignition devices containing phosphorus or other incendiary fuels are fully recognised. However the development and deployment of weapons is

one of continuous evolution, all intended to kill or disable through severe injuries and start or intensify uncontrollable fires.

Personal threats from small arms and explosives in live fighting situations between combatants are sometimes extended in events that involve motivated individuals, terrorists and lone gunmen. Extreme risks, include shelling, gunfire, unexploded ordnance, and risks from infrastructure or storage facilities and hazardous materials released by damage to infrastructure.

Complex evacuation and rescue missions often result following weapon use and the physical, psychological and tiredness threatens firefighters' health. Aggressor tactics can also greatly heighten personal risk with double strikes at on target deliberately aimed at striking first responders undertaking humanitarian actions a prime example.

Infrastructure Vulnerability

Loss of utility and civilian premises (water, power, roads, housing, education, health care, etc.) create complex scenarios for operations and recovery operations. Obstruction from damaged structures, destroyed bridges, loss of fire safety and control measures all inhibit effective response. Common impacts are slower response times due to route obstructions, increased danger to civilians and firefighters from fire spread and structural collapse, widespread destruction due to unchecked fires due to loss of firefighting water, disabled communications, etc.

The loss of public safety infrastructure and communications with material damage to supplies and firefighting resources requires extensive planning for alternative solutions capable of withstanding continuous and targeted attempts to disrupt, paralyse and create distress and weaken resolve to resist and recover.

Suggested solutions involve assessment and strengthening of these areas of weakness through actions that aim to introduce and optimise specific training, strategic planning, international cooperation, and use of technologies (AI, drones, robots, etc.) whilst raising awareness, investment, and collaborative activities including using public private partnerships. Integrating strategies, increasing professional cooperation, and exploring innovative technologies requires a new approach.

A suggested initial pathway to consider options to increase resilience would involve:

1. Clarification of legal foundation for fire service role within a civil defence approach.
2. Identification of key external military partners to engage in strategy development.
3. Agree a defence based risk profile to support a planning process.
4. Identify primary non-civil protection environment threats to incorporate in strategy
5. Identify and confirm new gaps and vulnerabilities
6. Research best practice of operating practices to meet new strategy
7. Propose overarching protocols and standard operating system requirements
8. Conduct analysis of likely acceptability and international application
9. Seek support to exercise the identified protocols and SOP
10. Advance post exercise to engage with public and other authorities

A New Strategic Approach – From Firefighting, Rescue and Civil Protection to Civil Defence BACKGROND ANNEXE

1 Lessons Learnt

There are many lessons to be gained from a brief review of previous responses to civil defence.

World War II

Significant features in this global conflict, which resulted in mass deaths of combatants and civilians, were the level of preparation for specific identified acts of aggression like aerial bombing and survival arrangements for continued resistance and renewal; phases now termed preparedness, resilience and recovery. Public awareness of basic survival precautions (carrying gas masks) and behaviour (blackout of all lights at night) was extremely high reinforced by public officials and mass communication. Linked to this communicated awareness were public warning alerts and shelter arrangements (sirens and government supplied private and purpose built public air raid shelters) for protection the population along with other risk mitigation measures protecting critical utilities and infrastructure (dual power supplies, temporary water storage, etc.).

A further example was the UK where localised auxiliary fire services were initially introduced to bolster pre-war fire service resources, often using innovative trailer based pumps drawn by modified vehicles. Subsequently these temporary systems were integrated as the whole fire service became nationalised and make-do resources were progressively replaced. Response vehicles, staffing and operating procedures, were managed within command structures operating as regional fire forces over large geographical areas to provide resilience and capacity to meet anticipated high level threats.

This heightened management coordination benefited development of standardised equipment and operating procedures enabling responses to the most serious attacks to be matched with equivalent response using all available capabilities. Water supplies, communications, incident command, etc. were likewise protected and enhanced to improve resilience to secure robust capabilities.

The Cold War

The post-World War II period was remarkable for creating circumstances that involved belligerence without aggression between major political ideologies. The existence of nuclear weapons on both sides of the conflicting political debate was sufficient for the threat of another catastrophic war to be considered a real possibility. The significant response and resilience preparations made were only to be dismantled as political relationships thawed.

Investment in fire services to meet the contingencies of this 'cold war' were made against a more defined risk assessment, one that suggested survival from attack would require stronger provisions (deeper more robust shelters and warning systems) with specific attention to radiological protection. Recovery systems also needed to reflect greater casualties, loss of sustainable habitation and infrastructure over much longer time durations than experienced in World War II. It is notable to recognise these investments were made in many cases only to become marginalised or removed in the post-cold war period as the geopolitical situation improved.

2 Post World War II Wars

In the period following the WWII many wars have been fought across the globe often on the basis of freedom, independence or to establish political ideologies. In the Middle East region a series of conflicts have continued (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran,); after the fragmentation of the Soviet Union the Yugoslavia conflict resulted in the Balkan War (1991); in Asia and Indo China there were wars in Vietnam and Korea; and in Africa (Congo, Rhodesia, Algeria, Angola, South Africa) wars continue. In South America similarly (Falklands, Chile, Columbia) wars have been fought.

In some instances major lessons have been learnt that impact upon civil protection practices and national policies. In the USA after the September 11 Twin Tower attack the Department of Homeland Security was established (2003) to coordinate civil responses. A year later new planning arrangements were established by the Civil Contingencies Act in the UK. These replaced earlier civil defence arrangements creating 2 categories of responders and new integrated planning and response system.

3 Current Armed Conflicts

The International Committee of the Red Cross estimate that currently over 120 armed conflicts are happening in the World according to their legal definition and that this trend is rising. Many conflicts are not international since they involve internal fighting in 60 Nations. These conflicts can however result in attacks in Nations not directly involved through acts of criminal aggression and terrorism.

Two major conflicts affecting Europe illustrate these circumstances, the aggression in Ukraine and Palestine.

Ukraine War

Following Russia's aggressive action in February 2022 war has existed in Ukraine and firefighters have faced immense challenges in responding to fires caused by attacks. Adapting to the ongoing conflict, and working in a constantly evolving environment the fire services engaged have had to evolve practices and techniques. Underlying the need for investment in any civil defence strategy suitable personal protective equipment, vehicles and operational response equipment Ukraine has and continues to receive substantial international support. Ukraine's has an integrated civil defence capability, the State Emergency Services of Ukraine⁶, administered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

This reflects the challenges now being considered in the European Union approach to civil protection invoking raised in Chapter 3.

Particular note should be made that in this conflict disinformation, disabling utilities and essential systems through technology (cyber-attacks) and use of artificial intelligence (AI), such as sophisticated unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV-drones), both as weapons, to gain geospatial and battlefield data or to reduce defence or reliability of response, has already been extensively exploited. It is estimated that Ukraine has some of the most advanced AI industries. This arises from a diverse private sector of many smaller companies with capabilities to innovate and develop warfare in this sphere of activity.

⁶ <https://dsns.gov.ua/en>

Israel Palestine Conflict

The ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict provides and insight into localised regional armed conflict and lustrates the devastating impact on fire services and the vulnerability of civilian infrastructure, which has not been 'prepared' to confront aggression from weapons and fighting.

Volunteers have also been deployed extensively on both sides in this conflict to assist existing first responders. In addition incendiary weapons have been specifically designed to set targets on fire. The weapons often utilise chemical reactions to produce intense heat and ignite larger fires causing personal injuries, wildfires in open areas, and, in densely populated areas, damage to structures that are difficult to control. Associated damage can destroy equipment and limit the availability of essential resources like water allowing uncontrollable fire growth.

Terrorism and Individual Attacks

Terrorism has long been with society and its impact on fire services, especially those that also deploying emergency medical services, is well recognised. More recent phenomenon have seen the threat of 'State sponsored' aggressive attacks and actions by individuals, sometimes but not always, associated with a 'moral argument' based upon an ideology or foreign cause. This threat has resulted in first responder organisations developing coordinated responses and introducing specialised procedures and operating practices, often within new legal frameworks.

Communication and shared intelligence between responders is critical in such attacks, which can lead to multiple casualties, with fires that cannot be tackled until security is assured for firefighters since an inherent personal risk exists while any armed individuals remain active.

4 Civil Preparedness in Europe

Over 25 years ago the European Commission established the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, with the objective of strengthening civil protection cooperation between the EU Nations and participating Nations to improve prevention, preparedness, and response to disasters.

The Mechanism enables any State, in Europe and beyond, to request emergency assistance in a disaster. A coordinated joint-EU response, using resources available either from EU Nations or provided by the EU, can then be deployed from a single contact point in the EU. Additional pooling of civil protection resources, tools, knowledge, and skills together with expertise ensures the maximum capacity of first responders and available equipment is effectively deployed rapidly to assist those affected.

Monitoring global events is an Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) in Brussels which is capable of mobilising assistance or expertise. Additional the EU, through a programme, coordinates disaster prevention and preparedness activities among national authorities, exchanges of best practices and facilitates the continuous development of common standards to build interoperability. The ERCC operates 24/7 and utilises satellite mapping to support civil protection operations providing geospatial information to assist on-the-ground operations.

Common to the Mechanism are emergencies involving disease outbreaks, wildfires, floods, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, and armed conflicts with typical responses providing aid in supplies (medicines, shelter items, water purification units, etc.); specialised teams of firefighters and search and rescue teams; experts assessing and coordinate on the ground operations and repatriation of EU citizens. Co-financing transport and securing aerial firefighting capabilities for wildfires form a significant part of the Mechanism.

5 Sweden's Civil Defence Approach

Sweden's civil preparedness combines emergency preparedness for peacetime emergencies and civil defence for war and armed attack. Together with military defence, this forms the total defence system able to mobilise the entire society under various levels of government-declared alert.

The overarching objective of Sweden's total defence is to:

- Safeguard essential public services.
- Protect the civilian population.
- Maintain critical supplies (food, energy, healthcare, communication, transport).
- Support military defence (including within NATO).
- Sustain societal resilience and the will to defend Sweden.

Many organisations are involved, such as; government and its agencies, municipal and strategic authorities in regions, industry, NGOs, and the public. There are also 10 Civil Preparedness Sectors, economic security, electronic communications-post, energy, finance, basic data, health-welfare, food-water, public order-security, transport, and civil protection, involved in long term capability planning. Currently civil protection is led by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency – MSB - which ensures planning across all administrative levels and coordinates with the Armed Forces for total defence. Other important areas of interest include psychological defence, compulsory schooling and migration.

Sweden operates 6 Civil Defence Regions, each led by a County Administrative Board, with responsibility to coordinate regional preparedness and civil–military cooperation. In Sweden's 21 Counties, regional councils (elected members) and county administrative boards (state-appointed members) manage localised and regional preparedness based upon risk assessments.

Three key principles underpin the Swedish civil defence approach:

- Everyone in Sweden shares responsibility for security and resilience.
- Civil defence relies on broad cooperation and structural reforms to strengthen coordination.
- Hybrid threats require flexibility and use of multiple tools (civil preparedness concept helps integrate responses).

Additionally there is a view that the response capacity and capability of the municipal fire and rescue services would need to increase, doubling in size, and grow its capability through conscription.