



State and Non-State Hybrid Warfare

Ahmed Salah Hashim

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Hybrid warfare has become a popular term in academic, military and policy circles. But what does the term actually mean and how is this approach to warfare harnessed by state and non-state actors in practice?

The term hybrid warfare (HW) came into prominence in 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimea, part of the Ukraine, proceeded to support autonomist Russian-speakers in the Ukraine, and crushed some Ukrainian regular battalions in border clashes. Barely six months later, hundreds of miles to the southeast, a revitalized non-state actor, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) trounced the Iraqi Army in a ‘blitzkrieg’ that unraveled four Iraqi army divisions in the most humiliating defeat of an army since the Six Day War of June 1967. ISIS forces seized Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul located in the north, and proclaimed their caliphate there on June 29, 2014. These events were seen by many to be hybrid warfare in practice.

Since 2014 there has been an explosion of op-eds, policy statements, policy papers and academic papers on the concept of hybrid war. Despite this plethora of literature, there is still a serious need to establish a better definition of HW, to describe its characteristics, assess the term’s relevance, and address the distinction between hybrid warfare as it is practiced by states and by non-state actors. This article addresses such issues.

What is hybrid warfare?

Despite gaining prominence since 2014, HW has been used to describe changes in the character of warfare since around 2005. The term was used to describe Hezbollah’s strategy in the 2006 Lebanon War. But some observers

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and strategic analysts have even argued that its contemporary origins lie in the Balkan War and the unraveling of Yugoslavia. Others have argued that elements of hybridity have occurred in many wars since the rise of ‘civilized’ warfare. In other words, there is nothing ‘new under the sun,’ except yet another term to describe the familiar.

Defining HW has also been a matter of debate. While there are not as many definitions of HW as there are gainfully employed strategic thinkers (although at times it feels like it), it would be safe to say that there are as many definitions of the term and concept as there are countries worried by it or seeking to practice it. But even this is contestable too because a number of countries deny that what they actually practice hybrid warfare. Indeed, for Moscow ‘gibridnaya voina’ is what others (Western powers) have done to Russia. The definition I offer here derives largely from the various iterations of it by [Frank Hoffman](#) and others and from a variety of doctrinal manuals from the United States of America and those of other countries. The term hybrid means something heterogeneous, multi-shaped or multi-varied. With respect to warfare, what does this mean? HW occurs when an actor practicing it against an opponent brings into play a ‘cocktail’ of conventional military capabilities, political warfare, terrorism, subversion, guerrilla warfare, organized crime, and, in contemporary times, cyber warfare. It may also include violations of international laws of war by the practitioner of hybrid warfare.

However, haven’t nations in the past used a ‘cocktail’ of measures against their opponents? Is it not true that Russia, which stands accused of using HW, is successor to a nation, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which used all kinds of measures and ‘skullduggery’ to advance its interests even times of peace? Hoffman argued that even though wars in the past, even the recent

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past, could also include **both regular and irregular elements**, these occurred in different places, were not coordinated, and often occurred in sequence or one after the other. In contemporary HW, all the above-listed elements are orchestrated to **act in coordinated, coherent and often simultaneous ways**. Hence, for the person or persons watching from outside as well as for the enemy, this ‘cocktail’ of measures – some designed to kill and others not to do so but just as deadly to morale and cohesion of the target – may become blurred into a unified force acting in a single and comprehensive battle-space. Thus, the practitioner of hybrid warfare achieves a synergistic effect against which the target is rendered *hors de combat* in lieu of a shooting war, before a shooting war starts, and during an actual war.

When the term first appeared to describe what a certain number analysts like Hoffman saw as **emerging trends** some of their colleagues literally sighed because they wondered – politely and often not so politely – whether the term added anything new to describe wars other than the *purely* conventional or symmetric force on force clashes between *like* armies. Others wondered whether the term added much to the existing plethora of terms that describe wars other than purely conventional: irregular, guerrilla, low-intensity, fourth generation, asymmetric, new wars, forever war, etc. I argue that each term has a purpose and most should have a specified life-span before gracefully disappearing into the shadows instead of lingering on like an unwanted guest. Each term brings out certain aspects of indirect war associated with particular technologies, operational art, tactics, environment and cultural context. The same holds true for HW; if it still in existence a decade from now, then strategists are a dull lot indeed. Indeed, HW is not a prediction of what future warfare is going to be like. In this context, we need to avoid the ‘reification’ of HW.

HW is also 'transcultural.' There are ways of warfare to be sure, but HW is not just Eurasian – Russian – or Oriental. This would be strategic ethnocentrism to borrow a recognized term from international relations scholar, Ken Booth. Russia is, indeed, right in arguing that the West, which sees itself as the target of HW, as being as much perpetrators of the genre as they are the victims. Russia perceives the West, rightly or wrongly, as making a 'big issue' of it in the last half decade because of the events in Ukraine where Moscow believes it has successfully blocked Western-inspired or even led HW against Russia's resurgence. Ultimately, HW is a useful term because it draws out/highlights certain characteristics of contemporary warfare by states and non-state actors.

HW is **not** replacing inter-state conventional warfare. The dominance of inter-state conventional warfare between roughly 1645 and 1945 has always been buffeted by forms of warfare that have been given various names throughout this three hundred year history. Many of these forms have actually been nothing more than appendages to conventional warfare; and HW is but one of the latest terms to describe certain characteristics of the contemporary conflict environment.

Ultimately, though, HW is a useful term because it draws out/highlights certain characteristics of contemporary warfare by states and non-state actors.

State and non-state hybrid war

There are clear-cut differences between state and non-state hybrid warfare characteristics. Indeed, even the definition for state hybrid warfare might not fit what non-state actors do in terms of hybrid warfare. Russia is not the only state that has developed hybrid warfare capabilities; Iran, North Korea and China come to mind. Even here, we can see wide disparities in military power

between these states that are alleged to be at the forefront of hybrid warfare developments. Similarly, IS was not the first to develop non-state hybrid warfare capabilities (nor will it be the last). In fact, when several American theorists, of whom the indefatigable former United States Marine Corps officer, Frank Hoffman, was in the lead in developing the concept, the focus was on groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

The output on hybrid warfare in 2014 and thereafter was almost overwhelmingly focused on the alleged hybrid warfare capabilities of these two distinctly different entities. This was, in fact, a huge problem: Russia on the one hand, and Islamic State are certainly not similar entities. Without meaning to state the obvious, one is a large and powerful legitimate state with a military establishment that has come out of the doldrums of the 1990s. Historically, the Russian military has engaged in some very innovative thinking, about which only a few Western experts are cognizant. For example, in the 18th century the great soldier, Frederick the Great of Prussia, was derisive of Russian military prowess. The Russians quickly disabused him of this derision when the Russian army trounced him in a major battle. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet officers formulated some very innovative military ideas, which those interested in current Russian military theorizing are revisiting. A considerable amount of literature has appeared in the West to address the matter of Russian hybrid warfare over the course of the past three years. This has elicited some humor and denials on the part of the Russians. Russian commentators argue that Russia, does not wage hybrid warfare, and that it is actually the West that is waging war against Russia. Russia is responding and developing its own approach to contemporary warfare, which Russians refer to as 'New Generation.'

For a state like Russia, hybrid warfare entails the composition of different elements of ways to wage war used simultaneously and in a coordinated manner to achieve one's goals. If the measures work without leading to an extended or large-scale war or indeed lead to the achievement of the goals at stake below the threshold of the legal definition of war with the victim or the victim's allies all the better as far as the state practitioner of hybrid war is concerned. Though the debate about evidence for Russia seeing contemporary warfare as being hybrid is still ongoing, for the sake of argument Russia's hybrid capabilities as exhibited in the Ukraine and Crimea can be described as a 'cocktail' of measures that were used to achieve one's goals *in lieu* of going to full-scale war, in shaping the theater of operations to one's advantage, and as a force multiplier if need be in an actual exchange of violence with an enemy.

HW is different for IS and entities like it. The literature on IS is now huge and almost unmanageable. Most of it, however, concentrates on its personalities, ideology and organizational structure. Very little deals with the military ideas or strategy of this entity, which is surprising because there remains the puzzle of explaining its military rise during the first Iraqi insurgency (2003-2011), its demise, which proved to be temporary, and then its rapid re-emergence from 2012 to 2015. Between 2016 and early 2017, it suffered enormous losses and has lost Mosul. However, the consensus is that the collapse of the caliphate in Iraq (and soon in Syria) will not be the end of that entity. How do we explain its military trajectory? Some analysts have argued that this is hybrid threat or hybrid entity. Unfortunately, the analysis of IS as a hybrid warfare has mainly been descriptive rather than analytical in that most of the literature narrates the trajectory of IS' war fighting over the years without conceptualization or context. The underdevelopment of the literature on the

hybrid threat posed by most dangerous current non-state actor then raises the question of how can we distinguish between the hybrid warfare capabilities of a state actor and that of a non-state actor.

HW for a non-state actor also involves building a 'cocktail' of hybrid capabilities. Among these capabilities are political warfare techniques for propaganda against enemies, recruitment of supporters and shaping the 'human terrain' on the ground in the conflict zone in their favor. However, while states have the resources to develop robust hybrid capabilities only a few non-state actors in the contemporary conflict environment have been able to develop and maintain effective revolutionary political warfare infrastructures. These include the FARC in Colombia, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and of, course, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. These groups have also incorporated terrorism to target civilians and to intimidate and terrify opponents or even force them to overreact. The practice of terrorism has, of course, been a subject of controversy even among its practitioners, some of whom have even distinguished between discriminate, which targets specific individuals or categories of people, and indiscriminate terrorism, which targets people collectively or whole communities. Indeed, indiscriminate terrorism became a source of contention even within the global constellation of violent jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State during the course of the war in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. These entities also develop robust guerrilla hit and run tactics for attacking small-scale enemy units. Finally, this limited set of non-state actors have moved up the spectrum of warfare to develop impressive semi-conventional forces, which have been able to conduct both offensive and defensive operations against seemingly more formidable conventional forces.

Conclusion

For an advanced and well-developed non-state actor hybrid warfare is part and parcel of their arsenal of war whereas for states it can be used *in lieu* of outright war. For a super-empowered non-state actor, hybrid warfare is scalar manner, defined as having ways of war – terrorism, guerrilla tactics, and semi-conventional war coupled with the requisite capabilities for each – necessary to go up and down the spectrum of conflict in accordance with environmental factors, enemy faced, operational art and tactics needed at a particular time. When a non-state actor like IS first emerges, it is invariably weak, lacking in resources, personnel, and territory to control. This leads them down the path of using the most primitive and illegitimate form of political violence, namely terrorism. As such an entity develops it moves ‘up the chain’ of violence, as it were, to guerrilla warfare, which is more ‘advanced.’ As it acquires territory, which is both a sanctuary and a base, this enables it to develop semi-conventional ways of war. This has almost Hegelian march up the ladder of progress was, indeed, the trajectory of people’s revolutionary war as espoused by Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap in China and Vietnam respectively. So what is the difference?

The key difference with hybrid warfare by contemporary non-state actors, like IS or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and state actors is that the progression towards a higher form of warfare is not one way; the lesser forms are not discarded. Indeed, they remain integral to the entity so that they can slide up and down the spectrum of violence when needed or when necessary. IS has its territory and Mosul, it will now revert to guerrilla warfare and terrorism. The ‘happy days’ of having a quasi-conventional military and a ‘state,’ are over, at least for now.

The future is likely to witness the further evolution of HW; it will be developed both by states, including powerful and weak ones, as well as non-state actors. If HW is really nothing more than the effective, efficient, and often simultaneous use of a set of measures, military and non-military to achieve one's goals before or during a war and if the use of these measures ultimately ensures that the lines between peace and war are blurred to the point of irrelevance, then we will see states scrambling to deal with this situation by devised offensive and defensive measures.

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Ahmed S. Hashim is Associate Professor in the Military Studies Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, RSIS, and specialises in Strategic Studies. He received his B.A. in Politics and International Studies from the University of Warwick, Great Britain and his M.Sc and Ph.D from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He has worked extensively in the fields of Strategy and Policy dealing in particular with irregular war and counter-terrorism for the past 20 years prior to taking up his current position at RSIS in 2011 where he teaches courses on insurgency and counterinsurgency, terrorism, and defense policies at RSIS and SAFTI Military Institute (SAFTI MI).

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