



THE CHALLENGES OF HYBRID WARFARE

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There is a remarkable story in the Iraqi Perspectives Report from the US Joint Forces Command. The report is based on Iraqi documents captured by coalition forces in April-May 2003, in addition to an extensive number of interviews with people inside the Baath regime¹.

A prominent Iraqi general, Raad Hamdani, had proposed to Saddam Hussein to hide the conventional military units in Iraq's cities. In combination with the paramilitary Fedayeen they, should execute military operations amidst millions of civilians, that is, in the midst of hospitals, schools, living quarters, business streets, and markets. From this urban environment they should launch rockets, anti-tank and ground-to-air missiles, sniper attacks, hit-and-run-tactics, terrorist bombs, etc. They should certainly also, by implication, be feeding the media at home and international media with streams of selected or distorted information.

This kind of warfare would have been a nightmare on the ground, a nightmare for the US audience at home, and a nightmare in the international media. Luckily for the Americans and the coalition forces, Saddam Hussein refused the advice. He dismissed the US military capabilities and overrated the strength and effectiveness of the Iraqi forces in conventional battle – to an absurd degree².

In strategic history, lieutenant general Hamdani's advice is called defensive compound war – a combination of conventional and irregular warfare, known throughout recorded history³. If general Hamdani's strategy had been followed in 2003, Iraqi warfare might have been the

paradigm case of modern hybrid war, preceding Hezbollah's warfare against Israel in 2006 by three years.

The changing fashion of labels – compound, irregular, fourth generation, non-linear, hybrid – is not crucial here. More important is the question of how Hezbollah fought in the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006; which elements were new?⁴

The short story goes like this: From the south of Lebanon, the Shia militia, Hezbollah, fired rockets and conducted raids into Northern Israel. Two armored Israeli Humvees were attacked by mid-Summer 2006, leaving three soldiers dead, while two were abducted. Israel refused an offer of swapping prisoners and responded with air strikes and artillery fire into Lebanon. Then the IDF launched a ground invasion and imposed an air and naval blockade.

The Israeli military campaign was largely a failure. The IDF had overwhelming military capabilities, nearly complete air control, precision-guided missiles for response, technical superiority, but still failed to wipe out Hezbollah from their Lebanese strongholds. Hezbollah mixed conventional military action with guerrilla and terrorist attacks; they were entrenched in bunkers, urban foxholes and fortified rocket sites, firing a large amount of missiles into northern Galilee, conducting ambushes, sniper shootings and using hit-and-run tactics, inflicting heavy casualties on the invading Israelis.

2 Kevin M. Woods et al., *The Iraqi Perspectives Report . Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Official U.S. Joint Forces Command Report*, Annapolis, MD, 2006.

3 On the scale and details of the absurdity, see Kevin Woods, James Lacey and Williamson Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View From the Inside", *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2006.

4 The modern standard case, of course, is the tactics that bogged down Napoleon's army, employed by the Spanish *guerrilla* in the Peninsular War in 1807-1808. The modern usage of the Spanish word *guerrilla* – small war – goes back to this case.

4 See Williamson Murray, «Conclusion», in Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, eds., *Hybrid Warfare. Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, s.289-291.



Hezbollah also hacked into IDF communications and even into cell phone conversations from Israeli soldiers. In a wider combat theatre, they fought an information war on the Internet and in Arab broadcasting, creating an image of invulnerability and Israeli frustration. Hezbollah did not win, but they did not lose either, and in an asymmetrical contest that was good enough. Up to 2006, Israel had reformed the IDF in what seemed to be a wrong direction, focusing on the air force and the technical superiority of their conventional forces – a revolution in military affairs, US style. This was adapted to the requirements of deterring and fighting a new Arab invasion, but it was less relevant in the context of asymmetrical guerrilla warfare across the borders.

The hybrid warfare of Hezbollah led to a radical learning process for the IDF, and the build-up of a wide range of new capabilities for counter-insurgency, urban tactics, intelligence and cyber warfare. The IDF also learned that the fashionable doctrinal concepts of the time – systemic operational design, or effects-based operations – were not very useful in achieving Israeli goals in a new, complex environment. The concepts lacked operational precision.

The diffusion of hybrid warfare

The mix of military and non-military means – irregular wars, compound wars, hybrid wars – is all around in the areas of weak and failed states after the end of the Cold War. They haunt Somalia and across the borders, northern Nigeria and northwestern Cameroon, the Central African Republic, eastern Congo, Mali and elsewhere on the African continent – and certainly Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

The war in Donbass (Eastern Ukraine) has been called a prototype hybrid war, with a mix of military and non-military means. The combination of instruments is orchestrated to take the opponent by surprise, hide the motives, and make the counter-offensive hard to sustain both militarily and non-militarily. It was compound warfare from the onset: massing Russian soldiers along the border, border crossing by special troops without insignia, humanitarian

convoys with different types of support into the contested region, a mix of soldiers, paramilitary squads and local insurgents, with a distortion of information from all sides. Adding cyber assault and economic attempts of destabilization, this is a full-blown case of hybrid warfare in current terminology.

The conflict in the Middle East, at least in the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, brought the tactical evolution of the hybrid features of the Donbass War – the erosion of the distinctions between war and peace and between regular soldiers and covert operations. New information technologies and economic and other non-military measures were also developed in earlier conflicts and exposed in the Western debate on hybrid warfare.

One striking feature is the creation of competing narratives – the propagation of the character of the opponent, the contest about responsibility for the chain of events, the competing stories about how international law first was violated. These features are crucial to the types of warfare which are now characterized as hybrid – it is the soft power employed.

In the Donbass War, there is one problem with the label hybrid warfare⁵. The war may be less coherent than it looks. Different militia groups have competed for control, non-authorized warlords may have been operative in the anarchic areas between insurgent and government territory, regular and irregular forces may be orchestrated, but to some extent they may represent different interests.

There are lessons learned from the longer history of compound warfare, preceding the contemporary experiences in the Middle East, Africa and Donbass. Compound – or hybrid–warfare requires a political will to win. In the 1950s, the French army won the Algerian war militarily. French forces defeated the FLN on the two major fronts – driving a substantial part of their fighting units across the border to

⁵ One of the most thorough discussions of the Donbass War, including the conceptual question of hybrid warfare, is Lawrence Freedman's double article, "Ukraine and the Art of Crisis Management", *Survival*, 56/3, May-June 2014, s.7-41, and Freedman, "Ukraine and the Art of Limited War", *Survival*, 56/6, December 2014-January 2015, s.7-38.



Tunisia and Morocco, while rounding up the terrorist networks in Algiers and other cities. But the ruthless means employed to win militarily, undermined political support for the war in France. So politically, France lost.

The US won a spectacular victory against the Tet offensive by the North Vietnamese army and their southern FNL allies in 1968, but winning militarily was the signal for political defeat at home. Now resistance against the war entered a new stage. What followed was a drawn-out defeat from 1968 to 1975. Politically, the US lost. If the military weak has an unlimited time horizon and an unlimited tolerance for casualties – conducting hybrid warfare in urban settings with catastrophic consequences for the civilian population – it may create a stalemate and a quagmire for any great power, whatever the military superiority. Hybrid conflicts are often extremely nasty. Syria and Iraq in 2014-15 testify to that.

There are two crucial developments behind the rise of ISIS/IS as a territorial power in the Middle East. One is the stunning growth and recruitment into IS during a few months in 2014, from a few thousand to tens of thousands of so-called fighters. The other is the notorious weakness of the al-Maliki regime in Iraq from 2006 – the lack of legitimacy, the vulnerability of institutions and public services, as well as the corruption and inefficiency of government military forces. A failed state across the border supplemented the conditions created by the Syrian civil war. In Syria, moral hazard gave momentum to the insurrection, since a fragmented mix of insurgents fought under the impression that they would, eventually, gain Western support in defeating the Assad regime.

The power of hybrid tactics

The key to hybrid operations is either to neutralize the superior military force of the opponent by using a mix of hard and soft power, or to confuse the opponent as to the origins and objectives of the challenge, in a protractive test of will.

Irregular methods of warfare generally challenge the political and strategic patience of the opponent. It often has a very long time horizon, like the Islamist jihad in many parts of the world.

As Osama bin Laden stressed ever again on his videotapes to Al Jazeera, the jihad will go on for another ten years, for another fifty years, for as long as it takes.

Hybrid warfare also challenge the political and moral stamina of the opponent, since one side often has a very high tolerance for loss of lives, and a stunning disregard for civilian casualties.

Hybrid warfare, finally, magnifies the importance of manipulating information on a triple scale – the battle ground, the home audience of the opponent, and the international community. It is a battle of perceptions because the population – the conscious blurring of lines between military and civilian – is basic to the strategy. A prominent strategic historian, therefore, recently gave this advice based on the historical record: “Do not fight hybrid war unless the most fundamental interests of the state are at stake”⁶.

There are no uniform strategic or tactical answers to the challenges of hybrid warfare. They certainly require a broad range of measures and capabilities, as the IDF learned in the Second Lebanon War. This requirement, in a sense, is new. The historical solution was to create a desert of populated areas and calling it peace. That type of response is no longer an option for civilized countries, under the watch of international media.

Finally, a few notes on the wider context. The concept of war, even hybrid war, indicates a beginning and an end state, a delineation of war from a normal political situation. This may be misleading.

Many contemporary conflicts are continuous, either because war is floating in and out like a pendulum swing, as between Israel and its opponents, or because related actors emerge in different parts of the world, changing battle fields according to circumstances and opportunities. Some violent groups constantly reorganize and re-emerge like an entrepreneurial business idea,

6 W. Murray 2012 (ovenfor), s.307. Useful accounts of the discussion of *hybrid warfare* in modern tactics are Steven C. Williamson, “From Fourth Generation Warfare to Hybrid War”, *Strategy Research Project*, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2009, Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges”, *JFQ*, 52/1, 2009, T. McCulloh and R. Johnson, “Hybrid Warfare”, *Joint Special Operations University Report* 13-4, 2013.

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with what we call Al-Qaeda and its affiliates as a paradigm case.

Meeting these challenges requires mobilization on a continuous scale from military to political means, where warfare merges with police work, intelligence and regular political activity, blurring the distinction between war and peace.

In Afghanistan, the challenge turned out to be an anarchic situation with endless subgroups fighting for different reasons, constantly changing alliances⁷. Syria is a case in point, where hundreds of different groups – with different objectives and different connections to the outside – fight and compete for the same turfs and the same spoils. Some of these groups managed to merge into what is now IS⁸.

The global stage

International terrorism generally is a challenge with no stable end state, fighting hybrid wars

for territorial control in some parts of the world, notably in the Middle East, Yemen, the Horn of Africa and Nigeria/Cameroon, while performing occasional acts of terror in other parts of the world. The attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris had a temporal connection back to the civil war in Algeria in the early 1990s, as France supported the Algerian government in fighting the FIS after an election, and it seemed to have a geographical connection to the Al-Qaeda network in Yemen. Further, the Internet and cyber connectivity – the virtual dimension – is crucial to the diffusion of Islamist jihad.

In this context, there are aspects of hybrid warfare that haunt all Western countries. Failed states, failed cities, failures of public authority, and violent, anarchic areas, have global ramifications. There are diaspora groups from hotspots and crisis areas in all the richer parts of the world, terrorist fighters emerging from a breeding ground in the most unlikely places, and certainly a global audience as an extended compound battle space. Hybrid warfare, as we know it today, is a mixed challenge on the scale from military action to normal politics.

7 For both the details and the wider strategic implications, see Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up. Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics*, Hurst, London, 2012.

8 Charles Lister, «Assessing Syria's Jihad», *Survival*, 56/6, December 2014-January 2015, s.87-111.

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