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Yimin Zhou


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ARTICLE



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Yimin Zhou

School of Marxism, Xi'an Technological University, Xi'an, China

ABSTRACT

Hybrid warfare refers to the use of conventional and unconventional ways and means, by any combination of state and non-state actors, within the same battle space. Russia has widely employed the concept of hybrid warfare in practice from Ukraine to Syria in the 2010s to advance its interests. The article is presented by solving the following problem: what does Russia's hybrid warfare in Syria mean to Middle East security issues? The answer to the problem could be obtained by evaluating the theory and practice of Russia's hybrid warfare. Though the concept of hybrid warfare/hybrid wars was first analysed systematically by Frank Hoffman, an American scholar, in 2007, Russian transformed its methods into a new version to accommodate their specific needs and named it after the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation, Vitalij Gerasimov. It is necessary to explain the features of Russia's hybrid warfare theory which helps us assess Russian actions in Syria. And these assessments could show us the efficiency of hybrid warfare. Both the theory and practice of Russia's hybrid warfare have demonstrated that states may deal with security threats from other state and non-state actors properly by conventional and unconventional ways to keep peace and stability or protect their interests. It may offer us a potential method to eliminate terrorism and extremism in order to save weak or failed states. Yet the aggressiveness of hybrid warfare could also sabotage the vulnerable security structure in the Middle East and cause more conflicts and insurgencies. If so, what should we do to alter the situation? The framework for avoiding the dark side of hybrid warfare is based on international cooperation and assistance to failed states.

KEYWORDS

Russia; Syria; Hybrid Warfare; Middle East

On 14 April 2018, US President Donald Trump tweeted about an airstrike launched by the US, France and UK on Syria in response to the Assad regime's chemical weapons attack, which provoked intense criticism from President Vladimir Putin. He called the action an "act of aggression" and a "destructive influence on the entire system of international relations". Moscow would offer Syria S-300 air defense systems as a response. Russia also planned to postpone pulling armed forces out of Syria that meant the risk of escalation of Syria's civil war.

Syria has become the most sophisticated battlefield in the world since 2011, with the al-Assad regime, the rebels, ISIS, Kurds and both regional and outside powers. The rebels arose fast when Assad lifted the curfew in April 2011 and received arms and other support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Iran and Hezbollah had to aid the Assad regime, which belongs to Alawites, that is a branch of Shia Islam, in order to resist the offensive moves of Sunnis. By 2014 the Islamic State had defeated both the regime and rebels and held much territory in northeast Syria. The US and Turkey stepped in to suppress the jihadists and restore order. The US also tried to end the al-Assad regime and Turkey remained concerned about the strength of the Syrian Kurdish forces which were supported by the US in the fight against ISIS. Since 2015 Putin has led Russian forces to become involved in Syria in the name of counter-terrorism but also to maintain the Assad regime.

The civil war has torn Syria apart. ISIS has been weakened under the attack of the US-led coalition but it is still active in the country. The rebels are unable to replace Bassar for lack of unity and US support. The Assad regime survives but binds itself deeply with Iran and Hezbollah who take Syria as a springboard to extend their influence as long as the Assad regime could defend the intrusion from Turkey, thus stirring further conflict with Sunnis. Turkey has changed its priorities in Syria fundamentally after dealing with the US and Russia on the retreat of the Kurdish forces. President Erdogan wants to establish a legitimate, democratic and inclusive political order without the Assad regime or terrorist networks like ISIS, Al Qaeda, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) or the People's Protection Units (YPG), despite weakening relations with the West.¹

The truth is that the survival of the pro-Assad forces and the rebels (despite changes in the composition of the two camps) after seven years of conflict shows that no one entity can win the Syrian war militarily.² However, Russia might gain the most among all the actors in Syria. Putin has tied Moscow to Damascus deeply during the civil war which could protect Russia's interests in the eastern Mediterranean. Regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran have been more closed with Moscow than before, which could help Russia reconstruct its power in the Middle East.³ Moscow is even relieved of its pressure in Ukraine and the Baltic. Russia's achievements in Syria are mostly ascribed to employing the concept of hybrid warfare in practice.

1. Defining the Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare, also known as hybrid wars or and strategic/new generation warfare, is the use of conventional and unconventional ways and means, by any combination of state and non-state actors, within the same battle space. It is considered a way to gain flexible and complex dynamics in international competition. The aggressor takes a combination of methods and tactics including conventional capabilities, irregular

¹S. Frantzman, 'Syria: the largest (and most important) conflict of the 21st century', *The National Interest*, (2018), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syria-the-largest-most-important-conflict-the-21st-century-25406>.

²L. Khatib, 'The West is still missing a strategy in Syria', *Chatham House*, (2018), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/west-still-missing-strategy-syria>.

³S. Niu and A. Ali, "'Islamic State' and the great powers' game in Syria", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 12(2), (2018), pp. 244–252.

tactics, irregular formations, terrorist acts, indiscriminate violence and criminal activity. There are two versions in the world at present.

1.1. US Version

US strategic experts considered that the global security environment was challenged by new factors after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. America's security and interest have been threatened by more complex and unpredictable enemies in this new era. Jihadists and terrorist groups grow rapidly in failed states and war zones. Non-state actors strive to expand their influence across countries and continents. Emerging powers have gained multiple capabilities that hinder the US attempting to rebuild the world order. Security issues have exploded both in virtual space and in reality. All the above produce a wide range and variety of complex issues which need to be dealt with by projecting all elements of US abilities, from traditional to untraditional methods.

Generals James N. Mattis and Frank G. Hoffman described this new situation as Hybrid Warfare in 2005. Then, Hoffman defined that Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.⁴ The hybrid war paradigm demands using armed forces for a broader and more comprehensive war of scale, ranging from purely peaceful humanitarian missions as preventive measures, to the development of hostile conditions, through traditional war fighting operations employing traditional combat strategies, to post conflict reconstruction and stabilization efforts, where security and peace derive from thriving economic and political status.⁵ Some experts listed a series of essential principles according to the definition of hybrid warfare including Omni-directionality, Synchrony and Asymmetry, and others explain it from five aspects.

1. Hybrid adversaries could be states or non-state actors including terrorist groups, independent organizations and proxies.
2. All kinds of tactics, methods and weapons could be used separately or mixed with other ways depending on particular situations in hybrid wars.
3. Advanced weapons and cutting-edge techniques are much accounted of against hybrid adversaries such as drones, trojans and viruses.
4. Hybrid adversaries are not fixed and adapt frequently. Civilians could launch strikes as well as militaries.
5. Lines between battlefields and no-war zones in hybrid wars are blurred which means hybrid attacks could happen at anywhere.

The US Department of Defense was cautious towards the new theory on warfare in the first several years because they required time to discuss the details of hybrid wars

⁴F. Hoffman, 'Conflict in the 21st century: the rise of hybrid war', Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, (2007), available at: <http://www.potomac institute.org/>, p. 31.

⁵M. Bond, 'Hybrid war: a new paradigm for stability operations in failing states', US Army War College, (2007), available at: www.armywarcollege.edu, p. 4.

and observe the facts to verify the validity. However, they have been convinced by the fact that the Russians gained the upper hand in Ukraine, Crimea and then in Syria through hybrid warfare despite the fact that they were the weaker side compared with the US. On the other hand, the DoD lacks a new theory to redefine wars to prevent disasters such as Afghanistan and Iraq happening again. Finally, hybrid wars were listed as one of the significant threats to national security in *National Military Strategy* (2015) which could help US armed forces study how to deal with and engage in them.

1.2. Russian Version

Moscow had paid much more attention to hybrid warfare than Washington in the previous few years. Russia spent a considerable amount of resources on the theory and practice of hybrid warfare which brought them many achievements that exceeded their own expectations. Some even consider that Russian studies on hybrid warfare are more systematic and fruitful than those of the US researchers who put forward the theory. Different Russian officials and experts interpreted the theory of hybrid warfare in their own way.

Dr. Konstantin Sivkov treated hybrid warfare as a strategy to accomplish political goals without traditional military methods. Hybrid methods including information struggle, special operation forces, economic war, espionage and sabotage by secret agents and civilians, and conventional wars could be mixed in hybrid warfare. But conventional military conflict will be replaced by information and economic strategy as the first option. The key of hybrid warfare is to shift the civilians' identity and loyalty to the enemy by the use of mass communication for propaganda. Then it is possible to topple the enemy's government by massive protests and obtain control of the economy and regime.

General M. Gareev held that hybrid warfare was not a new theory but he believed that information war was the decisive element of future conflicts. It is true that new methods of information war could allow the opposing side to attack without a declaration of war and gain serious advantages. Yet the fact that conventional forces are equally important has been proved in South Ossetia, Iraq, Crimea and Syria. General M. Gareev indicated that the integration of military and non-military entities along with their resources would achieve Russia's political objectives without sending mass armed forces and save the cost of war for the government.

General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, wrote in his article that in the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and have begun to proceed according to an unfamiliar template... The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals have grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.⁶ He believes that the use of high-tech weapons will lead to further change, and that classic military actions are becoming relics of the past.

⁶V. Gerasimov, 'The value of science is in the foresight: new challenges demand rethinking the forms and methods of carrying out combat operations', *Military Review* (96), (2013), p. 23.

Clearly, Gerasimov's point on hybrid warfare represents Russia's mainstream opinion, for this reason Russia's hybrid warfare theory is named the Gerasimov Doctrine. The doctrine contains three essential characteristics.

- a. **It economizes the use of force.** Recognising Russia would stand little chance of winning a protracted conventional conflict with NATO, Moscow seeks instead to pursue its interests without the overt use of military power if possible. Russia may still use its conventional and even nuclear threats as part of a hybrid strategy, but in general it prefers to minimize the actual employment of traditional military force. The use of cyber tools is an excellent example of the way in which Russia economizes on the use of force.
- b. **It is persistent.** Hybrid war breaks down the traditional binary delineation between war and peace. The reality of hybrid war is ever-changing intensity of conflict. Hybrid war strategies are always underway, although at certain moments they may become more acute and intense or cross over into conventional combat operations.
- c. **It is population-centric.** Russian military experts had adopted this policy when the US and its allies fought in the Balkans and the Middle East over the last quarter century. They seized upon opportunities with the importance of an approach that seeks to influence the population of target countries through information operations, proxy groups, and other influence operations. Russia uses hybrid warfare to work within existing political and social frameworks for the sake of Russian objectives.⁷

For now, Russia's hybrid warfare has already set up a number of targets in Europe and the Middle East. In Germany, Russian news media consistently propagandizes negative stories about Muslim immigrants to provoke racial tensions and religious conflicts which could undermine the Merkel administration which maintains a pro-immigrant stance in the face of a major influx of migrants from overseas and maintains sanctions on Russia over Ukraine. In the Balkans, most countries are concerned with economic stagnation and ethnic tensions which offer Russia opportunities to infiltrate these governments and shape their policies. In Hungary and Czechia, Russia plans to play a key role in the energy sectors by offering oil, gas and investment. In the Baltic, a bond of culture and blood covers Russia's activities in these states. In Syria, the al-Assad regime would like to exchange almost everything for Russian support. Moscow could take it as a bridgehead to step into the Middle East and reestablish its regional control. All the objectives show that Russia aims to expand its geopolitical space and power with hybrid strategies to ensure national security and national interest in particular areas.

We could detect the differences between US and Russian versions by comparing their theories and tactics about hybrid warfare. First, major targets – the US DoD intends to take military advantages against the whole world by the feat of hybrid warfare theory. Hence, the US new strategy should not only deal with the competition

⁷C. Chivvis, 'Understanding Russian 'hybrid warfare'', RAND Corporation, (2017), available at: [https:// www.rand.org/international/cmepp.html](https://www.rand.org/international/cmepp.html), p. 2.

from other powers but also strike back the threats of non-state actors such as terrorists which means they need a comprehensive hybrid strategy to defeat all rivals. Yet Russia's concerns mostly come from the US and NATO which concentrates on Eurasia, because Russia is not a global leader but a regional power. Moscow only needs a limited hybrid strategy to secure its border, keep social stability and strike Islamic extremists in the Caucasus. Tools of American hybrid Warfare and Russian hybrid warfare are different due to their respective major targets. The US DoD emphasises that cutting-edge technology and high-tech weapons are essential in hybrid war which means the US must increase military expenditure to keep technical advantage to win traditional and untraditional conflicts. On the contrary, Russia with insufficient investment tends to adopt untraditional tactics and means to gain asymmetrical advantages in hybrid warfare which could keep costs down. They attempt all kinds of methods to explore the existing resources to fulfill their targets.

2. How did Russia Launch Hybrid Warfare in Syria?

When Moscow completed the theory of hybrid warfare, the experts turned to probe into the details of hybrid warfare including its strategies, tactics, tools and how to meditate a hybrid war with an intricate system. In 2014, Russia launched typical hybrid warfare in Ukraine. Its theory of hybrid warfare was proved effective through the course of the war. Crimea has been reclaimed by Russia and Ukraine has actually been split into two pieces and is no longer a geopolitical threat to Russia. The practice motivated Putin's confidence in hybrid warfare but also improved the theory which affected the actions in Syria.

2.1. Toolkit for Hybrid Warfare in Syria

The main objective of Russia's hybrid warfare is to secure itself from the expansion of NATO and the proliferation of terrorism and extremism with its limited power resources. Hence, the Gerasimov Doctrine emphasizes that specific capabilities should be employed to impact key sectors and critical roles. Special Forces need to be linked up with internal opposition groups in the target country to create an opportunity that helps the military forces to extend throughout the entire territory of the enemy. High-precise weapons, drones and artificial intelligence should be widely used to reduce human cost and casualties. Military actions will be combined with information operations, cyber warfare, legal warfare, economic war, and any other activities that are directly linked to the designated strategic outcome. Russia also learned from the war in Ukraine that social media is a powerful propaganda and recruiting tool no matter whether the messages are true or not. As a result, cyber space has opened the door to the widespread use of asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy, particularly through the use of influence operations.⁸

Moscow has the sufficient tools and levers for hybrid warfare to defend itself and expand its interests (Table 1). Furthermore, it is skilled in employing hybrid tools

⁸T. Balasevicius, 'Looking for little green men: understanding Russia's employment of hybrid warfare', Canadian Military Journal 17, (Summer 2017), p. 24.

Table 1. Tools for Russia's Hybrid Warfare.

Tools	Directions
High-Precise Weapons	Wide use of Androids, Drones, S-300/S-400 missiles, Krasuha-4, Su-30SM, and other advanced weapons to destroy key objectives precisely and assist troops.
Information Operations	Shape inclination and political alignment through media and internet; fund think tanks and columnists to promote Russia's views; employ large numbers of Internet trolls, bots, and fake news farms.
Economic War	Employ energy levers such as oil and natural gas to lure targets or bribe sections of the elite to change their minds.
Political Influence	Support their preferred political parties and candidates by traditional diplomacy, offering high-level visits in Moscow and investment with soft terms.
Clandestine measures	Infiltrate other countries and launch hybrid warfare there with special forces and armed civilians by using asymmetric and indirect methods.
Military Forces	Simultaneously strike the enemy's units and facilities all over the territory including land, air, sea and in cyberspace.

selectively according to specific situations and targets as well, first in Europe and Eurasia and then in Syria.

2.2. Russian Actions in Syria (2015-2018)

On 30 September 2015, Russia declared its military intervention in Syria and started to carry out hybrid warfare step by step. Though hybrid warfare is characterized by flexibility and complexity, Russia's hybrid warfare has been formally articulated into 8 phases on the basis of Tchekinov and Bogdanov's research which provides a good template to study its actions in different cases.⁹ Each of these phases can occur in sequence or simultaneously, depending upon specific situations.

Phase 1: Non-military asymmetric warfare (encompassing information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic and economic measures as part of a plan to establish a favorable political, economic, and military setup). Russia took out almost the whole toolkit for hybrid warfare to engage in Syria's civil war in 2015 including propaganda, social media, military forces, financial aid and diplomacy. For instance, 'Russia Today' made a large number of news reports through YouTube, Twitter and Instagram on Syrian government forces. All of them intended to prove that Russia made significant progress in hunting down extremist groups and the intervention of Russian forces in Syria significantly helped reduce the activity of ISIS in the Middle East, showing that Russia had been a game changer and brought security back.

Phase 2: Specific operations are used to mislead political and military leaders by coordinated measures carried out by diplomatic channels, media and top government and military agencies. One of Russia's purposes in involvement in Syria was to relieve the stress in Ukraine and Crimea and then distract the international attention on East

⁹Tchekinov and Bogdanov, as quoted in J. Berzins, 'Russia's new generation warfare in Ukraine: implications for Latvian defense policy', Center for Security and Strategic Research, National Defence Academy of Latvia, (April 2014), available at: <https://www.naa.mil.lv/en>, p. 2.

Europe. Moreover, President Putin claimed that Russia was invited by the Syrian government to assist Syria in counter-terrorist war, obscuring his true target of improving Russia's international image. Russian soldiers in Syria sent food, footballs and other relief supplies to the residents of Aleppo to show their kindness as a role of peace-bringers to the world and the local people erected a monument named 'Believe in Aleppo' which indicated that Russia helped them restore their faith of life.

Phase 3: To intimidate, deceive and bribe the government and military officers with the objective of making them abandon their service duties. Russia chose the al-Assad regime out of all parties as its proxy in Syria. They tied Assad tightly with Russia by offering security and \$1 billion USD aid including weapons, equipment, medicine and other devices which will be repaid by Syria. This means that Syria will have to satisfy Russia's ambition in this region.

Phase 4: To destabilise propaganda to increase discontent among the population. This was boosted by the arrival of Russian bands of militants, escalating subversion. 'Russia Today' and 'Sputnik News' kept up accusations of the U.S. and Israel ruining the peace and security of Syria and promoting the spread of Islamic Extremism since the beginning of civil war. Bashar al-Assad even said that Russia prevented the collapse of Syria while the West and rebels attempted to sabotage the political process by supporting terrorists in his interview with Russia Today. These messages, as well as true and fake news which are delivered in cyber space by Russian Special Forces, are altering the identities of the Syrian people.

Phase 5: To establish no-fly zones over the country to be attacked, imposition of blockades and extensive use of private military companies in close cooperation with armed opposition units. The Russian Air force has launched thousands of strikes against ISIS and the rebels with Su-30 and other weapons since 2015 which helped the Syrian government forces reclaim many cities and towns. On the other hand, a Russian journalist named Maksim Borodin revealed that a private military company known as 'Wagner' offered over 1000 mercenaries to serve in the Russian forces and fight in Syria to aid Assad's army.

Russia's actions in Syria have only developed to this fifth phase for the time being, leaving us possibilities still to predict. However, if things went wrong in Syria, the last three phases might be presented in different ways. Even so, Russia has gained a lot during the past four years through hybrid warfare.

2.3. Russia's Achievements in Syria

Russia had spent probably \$4 to 5 million USD per day for the strikes in Syria since 2015, which totals over 5 billion dollars in 2018, accounting for about 10% of Russia's military budget in these years. In total Russia sent at least 12 Su-25 and 4S-30SM fighters, 7 Mi-24 helicopters as well as Tu-95MS/Tu-160 bombers and an aircraft carrier to Syria. Moreover, Moscow offered \$1 billion USD in aid to the Assad Regime for reconstruction. Besides, nearly 40 Russian soldiers, 1000 mercenaries and a lieutenant general died on the battlefields. What benefit does Russia thus gain for such an expense?

Firstly, they helped Bashar al-Assad consolidate his regime. The Syrian government had lost control of over half of its territory from 2011 to 2014 under attack from rebels

and ISIS. When Russia made the decision to intervene in Syria, its primary goal was to prevent regime change. In 3 years, Russia secured a long-term presence and improved a once decrepit naval facility in Tartus, as well as assisted regime forces in the recapture of vast swaths of Eastern and Southeastern Syria. Finally, it contributed to the degradation of ISIS forces in the Homs and Deir ez-Zor governorates. Syria is still a challenging, fragile, and fragmented country, but the regime in Damascus is seeking to regain control over the whole of the country.

Secondly, they have reshaped geopolitics in the Middle East. Russia's hybrid warfare has challenged the existing geopolitical structure in the Middle East. Russia not only established more bases in Syria but also guaranteed a permanent seat at the table in any negotiations to end the civil war. The increasing collaboration among Russia, Iran, and Turkey expanded Moscow's influence more broadly. Turkey has announced that it intends to purchase Russia's S-400 missile defense system, which is incompatible with NATO systems, jeopardizes NATO's missile defense capabilities and whose purchase likely violates US sanctions against Russia.¹⁰ Absorbed by the fight against the Kurds, Erdogan is ready to develop relations with Iran and Russia. Even King Salman has changed the old path and visited Moscow to develop cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia on trade and oil in spite of protest from the US.

Thirdly, they have improved the situation in Europe. The EU and the US imposed trade sanctions on Russia after 2014 punishing it for its hybrid actions in Ukraine and Crimea. Russia's key indicators on national economy declined sharply in 2014 and 2015. However, Russia diverted the attention on Ukraine at home and abroad by intervention in Syria. The West does not plan to cancel the sanctions, but actions in Syria boosted the confidence and cohesion of Russia to expand bilateral trade with Middle Eastern countries which helped stabilise its economy (Table 2).

3. Consequences Brought About by Russia's Hybrid Warfare in the Middle East

Given the Syrian Civil War's undoubted significance in the shifting geopolitical structure of the Middle East, it has become a global conflict which involves the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Whoever wins in Syria will determine the future of the region. Each side interprets a victory a bit differently. Though Russia has not taken the ultimate reward, its hybrid actions in Syria have impressed the whole world after what happened in Ukraine. Some experts and officials believe that hybrid warfare shows distinct characteristics that indicate a revolutionary shift of war in the future which will surely impact on every aspect of human society. What will hybrid warfare bring to the Middle East, peace or chaos?

3.1. Positive Effects

1. It will improve national military capabilities. It is obvious that most authorities in the Middle East deliver poorly in modern conflicts even though they maintain a

¹⁰Turkey's \$2bn arms deal with Russia faces hurdles, and possible sanctions', The Economist, (30 November 2017), available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21731832-vladimir-putin-wants-create-rift-within-nato-does-he-really-want-hand-russian>.

Table 2. Key Economic Indicators of Russia (current US\$, billion).

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
GDP	2231	2064	1366	1285	1578
Import	468.6	426.1	281.5	263.7	326.5
Export	592.5	567.7	391.6	329.9	410.9
Total Reserve	509.7	386.2	368.0	377.1	432.7

Source: Data, The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.

considerable number of troops. There are two explanations for this. On the one hand, countries across the Middle East, except for the oil producers, are not well-developed and cannot afford a large modern army. This means that they are not able to protect their security and interests with conventional methods. On the other hand, the oil producing countries have the ability to recruit soldiers and equip them with advanced arms but poor management and command drag them down. Take Saudi Arabia as an example – its military budget has been the fourth largest in the world for several years, only behind the US, China and Russia. It spent 69.42 billion dollars to buy equipment in 2017 which accounted for 10.15% of its GDP. Yet it still cannot change the fact that its army was defeated by Houthi rebels in Yemen. What Russia has done in Syria has shown the Middle Eastern countries an opportunity for improving their situation. Hybrid warfare strategy enables military leaders to take advantage of the strengths of each kind of force, thereby increasing pressure across the spectrum of conflict. In conflict, these apparent mismatches entice actors to adopt irregular and asymmetric methods in an attempt to circumvent their military opponents' strength and strike directly at their opponents' critical political, cultural, or population targets.¹¹ That is to say that using hybrid warfare states can throw out a minnow to catch a whale, with proper tactics which will improve weaker countries' capabilities to defend against security threats.

2. It will deal with terrorists and jihadists in this area effectively. Multiple contradictions and disputes that have lasted for centuries have given birth to terrorists and jihadists in the Middle East. These groups usually adopt unconventional and irregular tactics to launch attacks or get what they want. Powers like the US attempted to wipe them out with great military force and well-designed strategies, yet they failed in the end and left mass chaos to the local citizens. One of the most typical cases is the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Israel may have advantages on traditional battlefields, but Hezbollah leveraged mass communications, immediately distributing battlefield photos and videos and dominating the perception battle throughout the conflict. Israel did not lose the war on the battlefield but lost the information battle.¹²

However, if states realise the transformation of war and begin to carry out hybrid warfare, terrorists and jihadists will lose their advantages. As social, professional and personal lives move increasingly to cyberspace, the interconnectedness of all digital activity increases dramatically. Computers are good at recognising patterns and

¹¹F. Hoffman, 'Hybrid warfare and challenges', Joint Forces Quarterly (1), (2009), p. 36.

¹²F. Hoffman, 'Conflict in the 21st century: the rise of hybrid war', Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, (2007), available at: <http://www.potomac-institute.org/>, pp. 38–39.

solving needle-in-the-haystack problems, so with more data, computers can compute more precise predictions and correlations.¹³ States could integrate all resources and staff to hit terrorist and extremist groups with the help of information technology. It takes only one mistake or weak link to compromise an entire network for them. For states the advantages could offset the flexibility of non-state actors.

3.2. Negative Effects

1. It could stir competition among regional and external powers. Aggressiveness is one of hybrid warfare's characteristics, because new methods of information struggle allow the opposing side to attack without a declaration of war. In order to gain advantage, hybrid war will begin with precision strikes from the air on targets of military importance, such as command and control centres, as well as politically and economically significant places throughout the territory of the enemy, without the involvement of armed forces in direct confrontation.¹⁴ Sometimes, the first action of hybrid war is propaganda through mass communication, which is more undetectable. Another characteristic is the low cost. Due to the employment of civilians and cutting-edge technology, hybrid warfare costs much less than traditional war which will reduce concerns over the balance sheet.

Hence, states are inclined to strike first and frequently in the era of hybrid warfare to avoid being taken advantage of by adversaries, which will accelerate competition among the main powers. As it turns out, after three years of hybrid warfare in Syria, Russia is planning to project its power and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey intervened in Syria repeatedly, showed its ambition to solve the Kurdish issue and expand its influence, Iran is trying to bridge the Mediterranean Sea for the rebuilding of the Shia Crescent, Saudi Arabia has been actively destabilising the region while promoting repression and tyranny; and the US is considering engaging meaningfully to end the civil war in Syria so that Syria's internal issues will not threaten US interests or export instability throughout the Middle East and Europe. Ultimately, Russia's hybrid warfare in Syria is provoking both an arms race and new conflicts in the region. Even if there is no direct conflict among regional and external powers, such a chain of events could be quite unpredictable.

2. It could fuel conflict between religions. The major target in hybrid warfare is not to capture the enemies' particular territory, which is different from conventional warfare, but disturbing citizens' identities and loyalties in order to collapse their morale. In the end, it will exploit an adversary's weaknesses and undermine its strengths in order to convince the enemy's political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.¹⁵

¹³E. Schmidt and J. Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (London: John Murray, 2013), pp. 170–171.

¹⁴M. Banasik, 'Russia's hybrid war in theory and practice', *Journal on Baltic Security* (2), (2016), p. 168.

¹⁵T. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2004), p. 15.

The core identity of most people in the Middle East comes from religion, which offers opportunities to states and non-state actors who intend to launch hybrid warfare to provoke conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, or Muslims and others, which would deteriorate the security situation and international relations.

During the last seven years, the main powers in the region and those outside came to realise that jihadists and sectarians could be taken advantage of to meet their demands. Regional governments themselves encourage sectarian identity to build support for their foreign policies and enhance the stability of the regime. Sectarianism may be more of a tool for these states in achieving their foreign policy goals than a cause of their foreign policy orientations.¹⁶ The Assad regime released jihadist leaders from jail aiming to paint the whole opposition as in league with al-Qaida. The Saudis intervened in Syria mostly to empower jihadist forces against the al-Assad government. Meanwhile Iran supports Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Shiite rebels in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. These conflicts offer an opportunity for policymakers of external powers to consider whether using jihadists and sectarians is a better approach to intervene in the Middle East.

3. It may cause mass damage to economy and society. Hybrid war envisions the employment of a comprehensive and highly-nuanced variety of military activities, resources, programs, and applications, tailored to maximise a non-violent, persuasive use of economic and political influence to reform hostile governments, movements, or trends in politically, socially, and economically unstable conditions, characteristic of failing and failed states.¹⁷ It is emphasised that using unconventional methods such as economic means, social media and armed civilians would cost much less than the use of regular forces. Hence, the authorities tend to destroy the enemies' economic structure and financial system to create upheaval and turmoil in an attempt to overthrow hostile regimes by their own citizens, thus reducing expenditure and potential casualties amongst military forces.

The Middle Eastern countries have been troubled by unemployment, polarisation and other economic pressures for years (Table 3). Even the oil producers in the GCC are vulnerable in the face of economic struggles and trade war because of oil dependence and high spending. If economic war became a regular weapon in hybrid warfare, the fragile economic structure of most Middle Eastern countries would collapse one by one at a rapid pace. The increase of failed states would lead to mass unemployment and chaos rather like what has happened in Libya and Syria since 2011. The unemployed only have two options to survive in that situation: either migrate to other countries like Europe or join terrorists and jihadists. Neither of which makes for stability and prosperity.

¹⁶E. Ashford, 'The Saudi-Iranian cold war', ISS Forum, (20 February 2018), available at: <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/saudi-iranian-cold-war>, p. 2.

¹⁷M. Bond, 'Hybrid war: a new paradigm for stability operations in failing states', US Army War College, (2007), available at: www.armywarcollege.edu, p. 4.

Table 3. Gini Index of related countries.

Algeria	65.5	2012
Bahrain	59.1	2012
Egypt	80.4	2012
Iran	38.8	2014
Iraq	29.5	2012
Jordan	65.9	2012
Kuwait	73.7	2012
Lebanon	85.7	2012
Libya	77.7	2012
Morocco	79.6	2012
Oman	70.8	2012
Qatar	70.6	2012
Saudi Arabia	79.2	2012
Syria	66.1	2012
Tunisia	68.3	2012
Turkey	41.9	2016
UAE	89.2	2012
Yemen	36.7	2014

Source: Data, The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.

4. Conclusion: The Diffusion of Hybrid Warfare Is a Warning to the Middle East

This paper has argued that the concept of hybrid warfare was first put forward by James N. Mattis and Frank G. Hoffman in 2007 to deal with hybrid threats from non-state actors like Hezbollah and al-Qaeda who are good at countering a conventionally superior force with irregular methods. For now, Russia's hybrid warfare in Syria has achieved its aims, having killed 30,000 ISIS soldiers in three years. Does it mean that citizens in the Middle East will rid themselves of the nightmares of chaos and conflict made by terrorists and jihadists in a 'game of thrones'? The answer may be much more complicated than it seems to be.

4.1. Challenges from Salafi-Jihadist Groups

In spite of losing 99% of its controlled territory, ISIS still has the capability to carry out 75 attacks in one month in Iraq and Syria. Intelligence officials estimated that there were at least 1000 activists of Islamic State fighting in Syria and Iraq. Its major target for now has turned into establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate that extends from the Middle East into Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and Asia, rather than reclaiming its lost territory. Hence, the Islamic State establishes a 'virtual caliphate' across the world by communicating and diffusing its radical ideology through social media and other telecom channels. It has allowed ISIS to engage in propaganda, fund-raising, recruitment and communication.

Similarly, al-Qaeda also seeks to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate. They imitated Islamic State to spread their influence throughout the internet by uploading videos, audio recordings and messages to YouTube, Dailymotion, Vimeo, Telegram, Facebook and Twitter as well as maintaining its existing terrorist networks largely in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran in the use of old paths. Al-Qaeda leaders aim to educate Muslims across the world about the United States and its allied regimes. Besides, they plan to topple local regimes in the Middle East by inspiring Muslims and rebels with their affiliations in Yemen, Syria, Somalia and several other countries.

Therefore, the hybrid war strategy in Syria has played a significant role against Salafi-Jihadist Groups and gained a major improvement but terrorists and jihadists are still active in the Middle East and many other areas and even intend to strike back. Other Salafi-jihadist groups and individuals are anxious to join the terrorist networks or launch assaults, emboldened by the 'Islamic State' and al-Qaeda. The number of Salafi-jihadists in 2018 has been at a high level since the 1990s. There are 43,650 to 70,550 terrorists in Syria today after Russia's 3-year hybrid war against terrorism and 27,000 to 64,060 in Afghanistan, 17,900 to 39,540 in Pakistan, and 10,000 to 15,000 in Iraq. The number of Salafi-Jihadist Groups has dropped to 67 but 44 of them have switched to the network of Islamic State or al-Qaeda. That means Russia's hybrid war has not won the fight of ideology and identity in the Middle East because Salafi-Jihadist Groups are better at winning with the least cost by deploying all means including conventional and unconventional ones.

The hybrid war strategy was designed at first to help conventional military forces to adjust to new techniques and battlefields and win the counter-terrorism war. One of its essential characteristics is population-centric which intends to affect people's ideology and identity. Yet the data of Salafi-Jihadists and Salafi-Jihadist Groups indicates that hybrid warfare is not sufficient to prevent citizens in the Middle East from joining Salafi-Jihadist Groups. On the contrary, Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other groups are striking back dramatically with their own hybrid warfare strategy or tactics such as inspiring local Muslims, funding rebels and recruiting lone wolves. The Assad regime survived with the assistance of Russia during the civil war but Salafi-Jihadist Groups have spread to nearly all the failed states throughout the area posing a challenge to security and prosperity.

4.2. Chaos Brought by Power Competition

Putin and Assad's victory in Syria would bring more chaos rather than permanent peace to the Middle East as a result of chain reactions. To be specific, the chaos mostly derives from the power competition which has intensified after the hybrid warfare in Syria.

When Russia obtained an absolute advantage in Syria, President Trump took the opportunity and tweeted in December 2018: After historic victories against ISIS, it's time to bring our great young people home! He considered Syria as a strategic backwater which would make the US less powerful and seemingly more vulnerable. The Trump administration worried that engaging in multiple missions – to fully-eradicate ISIS, remove Assad and denuclearise North Korea – simultaneously would distract it from pursuing great power competition with China and Russia. After all, Washington's main objective should be to bring peace to America, not to micromanage the clashes of other countries. Though withdrawing from Syria, the White House still exerts influence in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf States. Hence, some experts and officials in Washington believe that Moscow or any other great power, regional or eternal, poses no threat to the US for now in Middle East.

However, regional powers in the Middle East may not share the same view. The Israeli military confirmed that it had struck Iranian military targets in Syria in the early

hours of the morning on 21 January 2019. It was the first time that Israel officials publicly acknowledged military operations in Syria which they generally did not do, to avoid undue involvement in the Syrian civil war. They attempted to reassert Israel's commitment to take their destiny into their own hands against Iran in the wake of the announced departure of the United States from Syria. In other words, they will have the whole world believe that they are fully prepared for a cataclysmic war.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia also intends to play a more critical role in order to balance geopolitics in the Middle East. Although the crown prince's countermeasures blunder over the Khashoggi killing has harmed Saudi's interests and his campaign in Yemen has been an unmitigated disaster, transforming the nation's civil war from bad to worse, Saudi Arabia is still an anchor keeping prices stable in the oil market and 'one of the world's most vital strategic lines of communication'. The withdrawal of the US under the Trump administration from the Middle East has emboldened an ambitious crown prince to seek dominating power against Iran and the Shiites which depends on military forces, oil and finance power, and Wahhabism (aka 'Hybrid Warfare' tactics).

In response to Israel and Saudi Arabia, the Tehran regime seeks to fulfill its larger goals, which include an increase in Iran's power and influence in the Middle East and maintaining the ability to deter adversaries from posing it an existential threat. As such, Iran also happens to be an expert on hybrid warfare which is adept in a blend of conventional and unconventional capabilities, as well as subversive tactics. Iran also uses its proxy relationships to infiltrate and influence national institutions in failed states or nations with bad governance, such as Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, while promoting Iranian ideology among local recruits. Iran's actions in the pursuit of its larger goals are no doubt to stimulate both other competitors and its supporters.

What could not be ignored is that Erdogan has demonstrated a strong emotion to send military forces into Syria to secure Turkey's interests. He even persuaded Putin to suspend the attack at Idlib by showing his determination to protect Turkey's southern border. When the Khashoggi Killing provided him another opportunity to sabotage Saudi's international image, he played tricks with it in no hesitation. It is within reason to suspect that when provoked, in an area of high priority, Turkey will respond with force.

In a word, the reasons why people join extremist groups are complex, often having to do more with the absence of a support network, the desire to belong to a group, to rebel, to seek protection or to chase danger and adventure. What defeats terrorism are really two things. One is the rule of law and the other is opportunity for the people,¹⁸ which requires social stability, efficient administration, foreign investment as well as emphasis on the education system. Apparently, hybrid warfare as an art of destruction will not accomplish these tasks on its own. On the contrary, it may be used by the authorities to fulfill their ambitions and cause more chaos and conflict. Hence, this double-edged sword should be held in cautious hands to prevent geopolitical catastrophe.

¹⁸E. Schmidt and J. Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (London: John Murray, 2013), pp. 178–179.

Since the aggressiveness of hybrid warfare could sabotage the vulnerable security structure in the Middle East and cause more conflicts and insurgencies, economic and political engagement to promote development of the economy and stability are essential to Middle Eastern countries, which requires international cooperation and a stable and secure global environment. Under such circumstances, military forces must be equipped and prepared to respond across the spectrum of hybrid war to restore and maintain stability and security. Once stable conditions are established, the main powers and non-state actors must be engaged in economic reconstruction to help the Middle Eastern countries recover, which will finally benefit global security.

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