


## Hybrid War and Regional Powers: Iran

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### **Abstract**

The 21st century is characterized by the widespread occurrence of hybrid warfare among participants engaged in asymmetric conflicts, employing a variety of warfare tactics that are tailored to the specific scenario and context. Therefore, modern conflicts differ from classical conflicts in terms of their complexity, diversity, form, nature, and dynamics. This study examines the susceptibility of actors in hybrid warfare. Thus, the research question is, "What requirements does a hybrid war impose on international actors, and how should Iran be explained as a case study?" The data were collected through desk studies and analyzed based on a descriptive-analytical approach. The study findings showed that, given the assumption of changes in the nature of wars and the emergence of hybrid wars as a result of the combined nature of threats in the complex international system, hybrid war is the most difficult challenge for actors, particularly dissatisfied ones, in confrontation with the international system's power poles, particularly the hegemon. This includes a variety of conventional and unconventional wars that are fought anytime, anywhere, and with varying degrees of intensity by the military or civilians. Iran is under pressure from rivals engaged in this type of conflict to give up its demands and needs on the regional and international levels.

**Keywords:** Hybrid war, Non-linear, Conventional, Unconventional, Hegemon.

## Introduction

In practice, any threat may be hybrid, as long as it is not limited to a single size or shape. When any threat or use of force is defined as hybrid, the term loses its value and brings about confusion rather than clarifying the reality of modern war (Neag, 2016: 14). According to Clausewitz, war is the use of naked force to compel our enemy to do our will (Clausewitz, 1993). Hadley Bull defines war as organized violence carried on by political units against each other (Bull, 2012:184). Both definitions of war essentially include the use of organized force or violence by two sides against one another. This is indeed a classic definition of war. With the advancement of science and technology, the nature of warfare has evolved to include irregular, unconventional, and hybrid wars in addition to organized warfare.

In essence, each period is characterized by its own peculiar warfare, shaped by the prevailing circumstances, weapons, technologies, goals, forces, vulnerabilities, and nature of society. The evolution of technology and changes in war games and actors have led to a shift in the nature of warfare, making hybrid wars a necessary component of the international system. Since its introduction in 2005, the term *hybrid* has dominated the war discourse to describe modern wars and has been advocated as a fundamental concept for contemporary war strategies (Neag, 2016: 14). The occurrence of hybrid wars and hybrid threats, exemplified by the conflicts involving little green men in Crimea and little blue men in the South China Sea, suggests that the world will experience more international conflicts of this nature in the future. In fact, the term *hybrid warfare* has become part of the actors' defense-security lexicon (Giegerich, 2016: 65).

It has always been challenging to detect changes in the essence, patterns, and characteristics of war throughout political history, particularly following extended periods of tranquility. In the current global context, the prevailing types of conflicts are likely to involve insurgencies or operations occurring in both rural and urban environments, where the local population is supported by a dominant power. This has been observed in instances such as the Western coalition interventions led by the United States of America in the Middle East and Africa.

Alternatively, conflicts may involve insurgents who are supported by a foreign power in their bid to overthrow their own government (as exemplified by Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine), with the ultimate objective of advancing the interests of the

dominant power, particularly the hegemon. Henceforth, the conflicts in the contemporary world are indicative of the fact that we inhabit a realm of unconventional hybrid confrontations (Josan, 2015: 49; Johnson, 2014: 71).

In the contemporary complex landscape, classical conventional wars have taken on an additional proxy dimension. In broad terms, hybrid threats are threats that can draw on the symmetry and simultaneity of conventional and unconventional tools to achieve specific results and effects (Miklauci, 2011). These wars involve participation from diverse governmental, non-governmental, local, and global actors. Some conflicts may entail mass violence, symmetry, terrorism, cyberspace attacks, insurgency, pervasive crime, and widespread disorder (NATO, 2017: 2-11). NATO employs a comprehensive approach to addressing hybrid threats, involving the coordination of all available resources among allies, including diplomatic, economic, and intelligence measures. Therefore, the research question is, "What requirements are imposed on target countries, including Iran, in the current hegemonic and complex system of hybrid wars, and what strategies do the target countries need to deal with this system?" In response to this question, it is hypothesized that in the current hegemonic and complex system, hybrid warfare is a means to achieve goals, primarily applied by technologically superior powers in the territory of the target countries. We also presuppose that the hegemon of this type of warfare in the opponent's land, especially disaffected regional powers, takes advantage of its high benefits. This refers to the utilization of both conventional and unconventional, regular and irregular, and overt and covert methods to attain one's objectives.

In line with the research purpose, part of the hypothesis is related to Iran and its strategies against hybrid wars. Iran has regional and international demands and ideals as a regional power. However, given its foreign policy approach and basic principles, this country is engaged in a hybrid war in which it is under pressure from the hegemon and its ally regional powers to abandon its foreign policy demands and change its behavioral patterns. In order to defend against this type of war, Iran employs a variety of strategies and tactics to neutralize the hybrid actions of its regional and international rivals and enemies.

This paper aims to explain hybrid threats as a modern type of threat against international system players, particularly regional powers. The paper first elaborates on hybrid warfare and develops its analytical model. It also examines the benefits of this type of

warfare for hegemonic powers and its constraints on regional powers. Iran is presented as a case study to demonstrate the practical application of the research.

### **1. Hybrid Warfare and International Relations Literature**

Hoffman (2007) characterizes hybrid wars as having a predominance of terrorist acts and diverse criminal activities. Hoffman (2009) defines hybrid warfare as the simultaneous and adaptive utilization of irregular tactics, conventional weapons, terrorism, and violent elements in the battle space to attain political objectives. Hybrid wars encompass a variety of actors, threats, and tools, necessitating a diverse range of strategies to address them. Freier, McCuen, and Habermayer offer a comparable definition. These definitions rely on the efficient and concurrent implementation of diverse forms of combat (Freier, 2007). According to Kilcullen, the term hybrid warfare best describes contemporary conflicts. Kilcullen (2009) presents various definitions, asserting that hybrid warfare involves a combination of armed and unarmed, military and non-military, government and non-government, and internal and international actions, with or without the use of violence. Nemeth (2002) assumes hybrid warfare to be a new variant of guerrilla warfare that is heavily influenced by modern technology and mobilization techniques. McCuen defines hybrid warfare as the use of regular and irregular warfare methods to gain influence over populations in the conflict zone, on the home front, and in the international community (McCuen, 2008). Jacobs and Lasconjaris undermine the technological aspect. In addition, they maintain that in hybrid warfare, a variety of non-military influence tools are employed alongside military forces (Jacobs and Lasconjaris, 2015). Otaiku (2018) analyzes the expenses associated with hybrid warfare. Deep (2015) asserts that achieving the desired effects and outcomes in a hybrid war is accomplished by employing asymmetric tactics and techniques and synchronizing multilateral battles. Warden postulates that five concentric rings determine what targets are vital in war: leaders, processes (organic essentials), infrastructure, population, and fielded forces (Warden, 1995). He identifies unconventional war and color revolutions as the two primary pillars of hybrid warfare. McCulloh and Johnson (2013) have considered the cultural dimension and diversity of management centers. Lastly, hybrid warfare is classified as a form of irregular warfare, according to British doctrine.

The prevailing literature suggests that hybrid warfare involves a

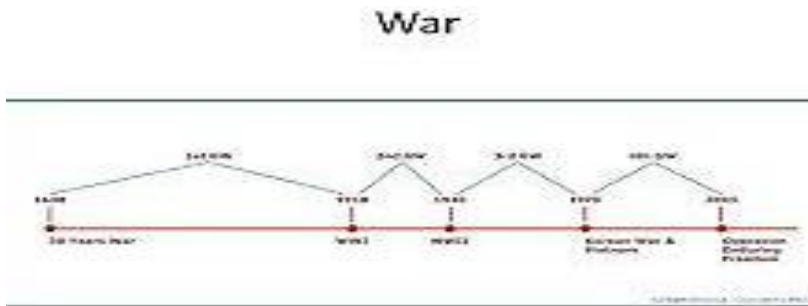
significant degree of penetration. Hybrid wars transcend the physical and conventional dimensions of warfare, encompassing aspects that have yet to be penetrated by traditional military forces. The crux of this warfare entails organizing and executing concurrent operations to attain the intended outcomes. Irregular armed forces engage in hybrid warfare, utilizing precision weapons and systems typically associated with regular forces. Hybrid warfare can transition between fields under appropriate circumstances. Moreover, irregular groups are assumed to seek superior weaponry and technology. As a result, government and military forces must contend with a wide range of threats. Hybrid threats operate not only in the physical domain but also in the cognitive domain, as conventional technologies are connected with unconventional tactics (Banasik, 2015). This study aims to build on the current literature to provide an explanation of hybrid warfare as a systemic reality in the relations between international actors. In addition to explaining hybrid warfare from a theoretical perspective, this study considers the problem from a practical perspective, with Iran serving as a case study.

## **2. The Transition from Classic to Hybrid Warfare**

Since the Peace of Westphalia, the world has experienced five generations of war<sup>1</sup>, with the current period representing the apex of the fourth generation and the onset of the fifth. Hybrid operations, typically carried out unconventionally by non-state actors, differ from classical symmetrical wars conducted by state actors. Following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the nature of warfare evolved from a focus on manpower (1st generation) to the utilization of artillery and firepower (2nd generation), then to war maneuvers (3rd generation), and subsequently to rebellion and terrorism (4th generation). Currently, warfare has shifted towards non-contact methods (5th generation) (Bahnareanu, 2015: 57).

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1. The term war generation has been defined and operationalized by American military experts.



Source: (Bahnareanu, 2015:58)

### **Figure (1): The Timeline of the Five Generations of Warfare**

The military technology revolution occurred a few years ago, featuring advancements in high-precision and smart weaponry, powerful explosives, space programs, nanotechnology, energy management and resources, advanced production techniques, sensors, and networks. There is currently no human activity that is unaffected by the development and growth of technology. Indeed, it is possible to combine lethal military products that are created in civilian environments with technologies that are easily accessible (Bahnareanu, 2015: 60).

Future wars will evolve and broaden due to the proliferation of technology, particularly information technology, and its extensive integration into military activities, as outlined below (Bahnareanu, 2015: 60).

- New forms of struggle: Future armed conflicts will involve new military operations, including information warfare, missile defense, and advanced electronic warfare with a robust cyber component.
- Development of weapons systems and other related equipment: The focus will be on the development of intelligent digital equipment with new technologies, long-range capabilities, and high-precision strikes.
- Structural organization: The trend is to utilize joint and combined forces that possess diverse capabilities and are flexible, rapidly deployable, and low in numerical terms. Additionally, these forces are highly efficient in terms of command and control.
- Combat support: There will be a greater emphasis on the use of modern digitized technical means to provide combat troops with accurate, rapid, qualitative, and timely support.

Currently, information superiority is viewed as a significant

competitive advantage. Information warfare and operations are crucial in both military and civilian conflicts. Future conflicts will involve obtaining information through intelligence tools and countering the enemy's information systems. Preventing insider systems from being penetrated by espionage and subversive actions will be a critical aspect of the national security strategy of actors.

The revolution in military affairs is linked with social changes, particularly in the realm of information and technology. The evolution of various fields, such as awareness and communication, concealment and robustness, accuracy and miniaturization, speed and undetectability, and automation and simulation, has resulted in changes to military capability. Future wars will involve four strategic confrontations: anti-access or area interdiction capabilities; threat cloaking and tracking technologies; stealth attack and missile defense capabilities; and intelligence/biological attack and defense against it. Hence, maintaining the confidentiality of critical information will be crucial in the future. The identification of enemy forces will prompt the development of novel stealth techniques, while the growing significance of intelligence infrastructure will enhance the value of information warfare capabilities. Furthermore, advances in molecular biology will intensify hybrid operations. More than two and a half decades ago, American military analysts identified four modern warfare domains that are currently prevalent. long-range precision strike, dominant maneuver, information warfare, and space warfare (Bahareanu, 2015: 61-62).

Hybrid warfare typically entails direct multilateral efforts aimed at undermining state functionality and creating societal divisions. As such, hybrid warfare's center of gravity is focused on society, unlike conventional warfare (Chivvis, 2017:2).

Hybrid war has characteristic elements that distinguish it from classic wars.

- 1- Military action starting in peacetime without a declaration of war
- 2- Conflicts between hybrid armed groups with no contact between them
- 3- Neutralization of military and economic force through strikes on critical infrastructure (civil and military)
- 4- The widespread utilization of precision weaponry, special operations, and new technologies
- 5- The deployment of armed civilians
- 6- Simultaneous attacks on military units and equipment

- throughout the opponent’s territory
- 7- Simultaneous fights on land, air, sea, cosmic dimension, cyberspace, and information sphere
  - 8- Asymmetric and indirect methods of influence usage
  - 9- Management of phenomena, especially in the information, cyberspace, and network spheres (Banasik, 2015: 28–29).

**Table (1): Classic and Modern Military Methods**

Classic Military Methods	New Military Methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The start of military operations after the declaration of war</li> <li>• The occurrence of direct conflict between competing forces</li> <li>• The failure of the military force and firepower meant the loss of control over regions and borders, and the opponent gained territorial control.</li> <li>• Destruction of economic power and territorial annexation</li> <li>• Conducting combat operations on land, sea, and air</li> <li>• Hierarchical management of forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Military operations starting during peacetime</li> <li>• The occurrence of indirect battles between troops</li> <li>• Destruction of military and economic power with precise attacks on military and civilian strategic infrastructures</li> <li>• Extensive use of high-precision weapons, special operations, and weapons that benefit from new physical principles</li> <li>• Use of armed civilian forces</li> <li>• Simultaneous strikes of enemy units throughout the territory</li> <li>• Simultaneous battle on land, air, sea, and information space</li> <li>• Use of indirect and asymmetric methods</li> <li>• Management of forces in terms of intelligence</li> </ul>

Source: (Bilban, 2015: 8)

The primary objective of hybrid warfare is to reduce the need for military forces while simultaneously compelling the adversary to use a great deal of force, thereby having a destructive effect on the opposing government, administration, and society. The term hybrid threat denotes a complex mixture of unlimited measures. The hybrid threat is characterized by decentralized command, the simultaneous use of military and civilian actions, a combination of asymmetric terrorist actions and dispersed criminal methods, and the use of time and space to make the best decision for a given situation (Glenn, 2008: 1–8). Hybrid threats refer to the use of both conventional and unconventional actions by one or more non-state actors to negatively impact the decision-making cycle of the adversary and achieve one’s own objectives (Anghel, 2011: 58).

Overall, hybrid warfare is a military strategy that integrates conventional, irregular, and cyber warfare. Hybrid warfare refers to

the complex and flexible dynamics of the battlespace, which demands a swift and suitable reaction. The concept of hybrid warfare is denoted by a range of terminologies, such as hybrid warfare, hybrid battle, hybrid threat, hybrid adversary, non-linear warfare, non-classical warfare, or special warfare. The military and academic literature differ in their terminology, with the former using hybrid threats and the latter using hybrid warfare.

### **3. Hybrid War and Disaffected Powers**

Wars are unique to each era and time because they are fought with unique weapons, against unique targets, using unique forces, exploiting unique vulnerabilities, and affecting unique societies. Currently, the nature of war is changing as a result of the evolution of technology, the types of actors and violence involved, and the nature of war games. Meanwhile, hybrid wars with two wings, namely color revolutions and irregular conflicts, are used by great powers who are content with the status quo to confront powers who are dissatisfied with the status quo. Hybrid threats and warfare defy conventional categorizations of war and peace. Hybrid warfare does not conform to the traditional conception of warfare, which states that a conflict concludes in a particular order after passing through various stages (Weissmann, 2019: 22).

The advancement of war technology has led to a shift in the nature of war, with hybrid wars emerging as a substitute for or supplement to conventional wars in achieving the objectives of the actors involved. War contains threats that cannot be directly characterized as classical war, but it poses a threat to the national security of the actors. Currently, deception is commonly utilized in warfare and is actively disavowed by the dominant power and major actors to the greatest extent feasible. Deception and adaptability are the two fundamental characteristics of hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare prioritizes unconventional methods of combat with the objective of achieving victory without resorting to direct military confrontation. Indeed, hybrid warfare poses a significant risk of miscalculations and misunderstandings. Accordingly, the slowdown of defensive measures can result in the actor's defeat due to inadequate knowledge of the opponent's actions (Weissmann, 2019: 23).

The new generation of warfare employs a blend of unconventional, non-linear, and asymmetric tactics alongside modern classical warfare techniques (Berzins, 2014). While these tactics are not necessarily new, the integration of conventional tactics with modern technologies offers numerous benefits to major

powers in dealing with their dissatisfied adversaries. The strategies comprise eight consecutive phases:

Phase 1: The war is asymmetric and non-linear (and includes informational, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, and economic operations).

Phase 2: This strategy involves using coordinated actions through diplomatic channels, the media, and high-level government and military officials to disseminate misleading information and instructions in order to deceive political and military leaders.

Phase 3: It comprises intimidating, deceiving, and bribing government and military officials in an effort to convince them to abandon their responsibilities.

Phase 4: This strategy involves using destabilizing programs (propagandas) to increase discontent among the people.

Phase 5: It entails establishing a no-fly zone for attacking a country, implementing sanctions, and utilizing private military companies to collaborate closely with military units.

Phase 6: This strategy calls for the use of military measures soon after the identification of sensitive points and the execution of subversive actions of all types, including special operations forces, electronic information, and diplomatic and spy services.

Phase 7: This phase entails collecting targeted information, engaging in electronic and aerospace operations, conducting air force attacks on the rival country's airspace for espionage purposes, and utilizing high-precision weapons from various platforms (e.g., long-range artillery and weapons based on new physical principles, including lethal and non-lethal biological weapons).

Phase 8: This strategy consists of eliminating any remaining resistance and neutralizing adversary forces through specialized operations (Weissmann, 2019: 20–21).

In general, the target actors involved in hybrid warfare face competitors with the following characteristics and parameters:

- A fluid, non-standard, and complex enemy;
- A hybrid enemy that uses a combination of conventional and irregular methods;
- A hybrid enemy that is flexible and quickly adapts to existing conditions;
- A hybrid enemy that uses advanced weapon systems and other destructive technologies;
- The enemy uses mass communication tools for propaganda

against the target country (Otaiku, 2018: 4).

The attacking power in hybrid war attempts to completely dominate the opponent by combining color revolutions and unconventional warfare, taking into account the rule of chaotic dynamics in the international system. The individuals responsible for color revolutions and unconventional warfare assume control of the offensive initiative of a coup, thus prioritizing the defense of their own territory and engaging in subversive activities in their opponent's territory. Color revolutions and unconventional warfare cause chaos in the targeted land. Moreover, unconventional warfare induces fear, which amplifies the combined impact of chaos and instability on the regime's performance (Korybko, 2015: 31). Hybrid warfare employs unique tools on the battlefield. This phenomenon amplifies the impact of proxy combat and the instability of the conflicting actors in hybrid conflicts (Korybko, 2015:31).

#### **4. Hybrid War and Iran**

According to Hart (1967: 321), war is a means to achieve national interests. However, no interest should result in war, nor should war be the means to achieving any interest. The contemporary international system's complexity and chaos have led to a transformation in warfare, replacing conventional warfare with modern warfare. This new form of warfare is characterized by distinct features. Hybrid warfare is utilized as a means to achieve objectives based on prevailing circumstances. Iran's strategic location in the volatile Middle East has made it a frequent target of conflict and invasion by major powers, particularly following the 1979 revolution. The Western conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran is a multifaceted and evolving issue, as evidenced by ongoing analysis. This evolution is one of the bases of hybrid warfare, which is founded on the principle of inflicting maximum pain on vulnerable areas and having cognitive effects (Eftekhari & Raji, 2022: 114). Hybrid warfare offers advantages that make it appealing to international actors, particularly to the hegemon in conflict with disgruntled regional powers. This type of warfare offers several benefits:

- Capacity to keep rivals from directly confronting one another;
- Preventing the war from escalating into a widespread conflict while pursuing interests without fanfare or provocative measures;
- Hybrid warfare being both cost-effective and capable of inflicting irreparable damage on the target nation;
- Because of guerilla tactics, hybrid warfare does not necessitate a

large military force or government actors.

- It is a tool used by superpowers to instill instability in target countries at a low cost (Ref. Lansezka, 2016: 3–9).

Being located in the heterogeneous environment of the Middle East, as well as demographic diversity, regional unrest, and revolutionary ideals, have all contributed to the possibility and creation of grounds for the emergence of a hybrid war against Iran. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution challenged the regional order desired by the West, it was natural that Western countries put pressure on this nascent political system from the beginning and made numerous efforts to destabilize it. In fact, enemies of Iran, led by the US, the Zionist regime, and some European countries such as England, have indirectly entered into an armed war against Iran with their financial aid and equipment since the beginning of the victory of the Islamic Revolution by supporting internal dissidents, trying to overthrow the ruling system of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a coherent plan using different methods, such as strengthening separatism by creating ethnic unrest, planning coups such as the Nojeh coup, direct military intervention such as Operation Tabas (Operation Eagle Claw), and launching internal terrorist operations with the help of MEK, in order to physically eliminate the leaders of the revolution (Eftekhari & Raji, 2022: 115-116).

#### **4-1. Hybrid Measures Against Iran**

Creating internal chaos in the actors who are dissatisfied with the order and macromanagement of the systemic order is one of the most fundamental justifications for hybrid wars and actions by the hegemon in confrontation with the powers that are unhappy with the status quo. Hybrid warfare is also inherently indirect and unpredictable in its targets due to its non-linear nature. When considering it from a geopolitical standpoint, one may recall Brzezinski's description of chaotic regions, which has applications in international relations and military science (Korybko, 2015: 24). This principle makes color revolutions and unconventional warfare far more effective than conventional methods of regime change (Korybko, 2015: 28). William Lind foresaw the future of warfare in an article published in the Marine Corps Gazette in 1989 (Gazette, 1989). He discussed the fourth generation of warfare and asserted that the subsequent generation of warfare would be more fluid, decentralized, and asymmetrical than previous generations (Gazette, 1989). In addition, Lind placed emphasis on psychological operations and information warfare, which are both fully realized in

color revolutions (Korybko, 2015: 19). He contended:

“Psychological operations may become the dominant operational and strategic weapon in the form of media and information intervention... A major target will be the enemy population’s support of its government and the war. Television news may become a more powerful operational weapon than armored divisions” (Korybko, 2015: 19).

The objective of a combined or hybrid war is to induce a state of severe and widespread chaos in the target nation, impeding the opponent’s policies and strategies to resolve the crisis. This results in a catastrophic situation in the target country, ultimately forcing the opponent to compromise or surrender. With this strategy, pressure is ratcheted up on the enemy’s governance structure until it collapses. Iran is currently engaged in an all-out hybrid war with its regional and global rivals and adversaries. In fact, Iran’s regional environment and its location in the chaotic environment of the Middle East, as well as the demographic composition of the region and the existence of regional heterogeneity, have resulted in the country being involved in a hybrid war that has included several stages or phases ever since the Islamic Revolution:

Phase One: The attack and full-scale war against Iran by Iraq. The first phase of Iran’s involvement in the hybrid war, known as the Inclusive War, began with Iraq’s attack on Iran. These measures created a potent and detrimental combination that inflicted significant and unparalleled harm on Iran and its fledgling revolution of 1979 (Zulqaderpour, 2023).

Phase two: It began in 1990 with the alteration of the international system’s construction. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about two substantial alterations: a transformation in the structure of the global system and a shift in the nature of power within it. These changes necessitated a shift in hybrid warfare tactics, which in turn influenced how the West would deal with Iran and the Islamic Revolution. During this phase, the hybrid warfare against Iran intensified, with increased emphasis on economic and political measures. The US and its regional allies applied economic and political pressure on Iran, including labeling Iran as part of the "axis of evil," presenting a horrific image of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the public, disrupting and sabotaging its military and nuclear programs with tactics such as the Stuxnet virus, and creating a negative global consensus against Iran. Additionally, they distorted facts and threatened military action as an option (Taefi and Janat Mekan Shad, 2019: 75).

Phase Three: Beginning in 2011, Arab nations began to undergo transformations. This phase aimed to curb Iran's regional influence. The key feature of this phase is the involvement of numerous actors with the backing of the hegemon. In this phase, it has taken on new dimensions as a result of proxy conflicts and wars, with multiple Arab, Western-Hebrew, or Western-Arab-Turkish coalitions waging a hybrid war against Iran. The current hybrid warfare strategy aims to isolate Iran within its borders and cause its collapse. This is being pursued through a range of tactics and tools. The tools and components utilized in the new hybrid warfare are designed to render Iran's political system ineffectual. These tactics include an all-out attack on Syria as the center of Iran's strategic interests in the region; Iran's border threat by terrorist groups; an ISIS terrorist attack in Iran, particularly in the Islamic Council; increasing propaganda and media attacks on Iran in regional issues; the continuation and intensification of economic sanctions; denying Iran's nuclear rights and threatening to destroy its nuclear facilities; and nuclear negotiation and diplomacy with an equidistant approach. Additional measures involve political and diplomatic sanctions by resorting to extreme measures, such as the attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran and efforts to incite labor and livelihood protests in Iran to foment rebellion against the regime (Zulqaderpour, 2023). Other tactics consist of internet surveillance, propaganda dissemination through virtual channels (Kulfam and Hosseini, 2017: 94), attempts to undermine international agreements, such as the JCPOA, the imposition of backbreaking sanctions against Iran, and targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists.

#### **4-2. Iran's Strategies in the Face of Hybrid War**

The new requirements essentially mandate that all actors create safeguards against hybrid threats. Alongside this, the comprehensive security approach, whose objective is centered on society, replaces the classical defense approaches, which were focused on government military forces. The comprehensive security approach involves political leadership and societal participation in defense measures. Valeriano and Vasquez (2010) suggest that preventing espionage and sabotage in a country requires a combination of expertise in identifying vulnerable points, access to credible information, and strategic efforts. Relying solely on military and security forces to address hybrid threats is ineffective, as the objectives of hybrid warfare target vulnerable aspects of

society beyond these entities. Hybrid defense requires a collaborative effort from all societal sectors. This model is alternatively referred to as a comprehensive security approach.

In general, in asymmetric and hybrid wars, the hegemon employs a combination of direct intervention, assisting allies' armies, and covert operations and espionage in the opposing country, depending on the existing situation, agents, and actor type. This assertion finds support in historical evidence. For example, the US has engaged in military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001; has entered into conflict with groups that do not accept the existing order (Hezbollah of Lebanon); has established bases in and deployed forces to allied countries (Arab countries of the Persian Gulf) to strengthen the offensive capabilities of its allies to neutralize the actions of the opposing actors; has tried to detect and track threats using its intelligence and espionage systems; and has carried out espionage in the territory of opposing countries and entered into conflict with the actor inside his own territory (Syria). In some cases, the US has attempted to involve competitors in the region and its surroundings in conflict in order to cause chaos and confusion in the surrounding environment of the opposing actor (Iran). Modern societies' heavy reliance on digital services and critical infrastructure renders them highly susceptible to vulnerabilities. (Cederberg and Eronen, 2015: 7). Cyberspace presents an optimal battleground, necessitating a military structure capable of addressing the resulting threats. In contemporary information environments, actors encounter a surge in the data and information required to strategize and achieve victory in warfare. The success of actors in battle depends on essential information such as their goals, involved forces, general conditions, available resources, and force dispersion (Neag, 2016: 15).

Iran, like other international actors facing hybrid warfare, prioritizes measures for hybrid defense, including:

- Neutralizing sabotage and espionage actions. This is crucial as the first line of defense against hybrid threats. To effectively counter hybrid operations, Iran must understand vulnerabilities and prevent attackers from accessing sensitive information and engaging in espionage activities. During crises, the goal of defense is to prevent attackers from accessing up-to-date information and succeeding in their actions and operations.
- Thwarting the formation of global and local coalitions targeting Iran. Hybrid warfare can involve international coalitions. To counter these actions, a flexible approach to foreign policy and

defense strategies is necessary to prevent the formation of such coalitions.

- Effective coordination and collaboration with regional actors, particularly the axis of resistance. To counter the formation of international coalitions against Iran, defense efforts can include a substantial international component. Similar to the mobilization of national resources, international cooperation results in the consolidation of dispersed actors' national resources and the improvement of the defense situation for all coalition actors.
- Hybrid defense may also involve disconnecting from affiliated groups. In this scenario, severing communication channels between domestic adversaries and foreign nations is required.
- Developing an active defense against attackers. These actions include modifications to the deployment of military forces, targeted strategic communications, and political actions aimed at combating the aggressor and neutralizing its ability to employ existing tools for hybrid operations.
- Developing a passive defense strategy against attackers. The measures encompass safeguarding critical centers, enhancing specialized human resources, bolstering national resilience, and promoting cyber literacy.

### **Conclusion**

In essence, a new type of war has emerged in the contemporary world as a result of the transformation and evolution of international actors and the development and expansion of new technologies, all under the influence of the information revolution and multilateral social, cultural, economic, and political processes. Modern warfare is significantly impacted by technology, which exerts a profound influence on its conceptual framework and organizational structure. Modern society's complex infrastructure renders international actors highly vulnerable to technological dependence. Technology enables new forms of power for both governmental and non-governmental actors. The current circumstances give rise to cyberspace, in which identifying the perpetrator is hardly possible. The international environment's complexity, the blurring of the lines between war and peace, the merging of military and civilian operations, and the integration of governmental and non-governmental actors have made low-cost hybrid war a necessity and reality in the international system. International actors consider this fact when formulating their military strategies.

Located in the heterogeneous Middle East, Iran is involved in

this type of conflict as a participant in the international system. As a result of the internal and regional environmental dynamics, reasonably speaking, it is required to have a defense strategy to counter these threats. As previously noted, the hybrid war is based on cultural and political pillars that incite state and non-state actors to violence. To effectively address and preempt unexpected developments in hybrid warfare, Iran should focus on cultural and political tactics. Cultural strategies promote national unity and social cohesion while deterring acts of sabotage and espionage. Political strategies involve strengthening the actor's internal base and utilizing coalition building and synergy to address potential threats of this nature.

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