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Iran's hybrid warfare capabilities

Rouzbeh Parsi

What is hybrid warfare?

There seems to be a certain allure in ignoring historic precedents when discussing developments in warfare. To be fair the art of war has in some ways changed quite significantly in the last 200 years. Technological advances such as the machine gun, aircraft and missile technology have transformed the battlefield into a battle space, adding a dimension as it were. These technological innovations have also affected classic constraints of time and space (logistics and geographical distance). In more recent times cyberwarfare has added yet another layer to how and 'where' war can be waged. But war is not a matter of 'mere' technology, it is an extension of the societies that fight them, and modern mass society has both generated mass conscription armies (French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars) and increasingly more specialized warfare requiring highly trained soldiers, matching expert-heavy modern civilian life.

In his article Mikael Weissmann¹ argues back and forth as to whether hybrid warfare is something new or just good old warfare in a new shape. His ambivalence is indicative of the difficulty in pinpointing a qualitatively new element that can be said to distinguish contemporary warfare from what preceded it. In essence most of the individual definitional elements of warfare have not changed much since the twentieth century; it is rather their combination that, today, results in a somewhat different beast, a synergy effect of sorts. This synergy is also intimately connected to the dynamics of the conflict, involving variables such as whether the driving actors are directly or indirectly involved, how they view their own actions and perceive those of the suspected enemy.²

Thus, to a certain extent the discussion about hybrid warfare³ is actually about how well warfare, in a historical perspective, is understood. What is it that supposedly sets hybrid warfare apart? Irregular forces have always been part of war, independent/unified command is an ebb and flow determined by the nature of the entities waging the war, when is there peace and how does war break out? Even the rules of war, when codified, define what is legitimate war and who is to fight it and hence the excluded forms of warfare are by definition irregular war and warfare. States were never wholly unified and are most certainly not rational actors. The notion that the modern nation state encompasses such traits is more Weberian ideal type than actual practice and historical experience.⁴

Threat perception and rational behaviour

While Iran is considered a revolutionary state, it has in many ways become a status quo power more intent on safeguarding its own survival than exporting the revolution. This is not surprising, as the revolution now has turned forty, and while the state still insists on the revolutionary framing and rhetoric, Iranian society has in many ways moved on. While Iran in Western narratives often is portrayed as the belligerent power trying to upend the international order,⁵ Tehran views itself as being under siege and believes that it is being deprived of its rightfully prominent position in the region. Be that as it may, it is clear that Iran is actually more in the cross hairs of the United States and its regional allies now than it was during the hot phase of the revolution and the war against Iraq. Today the United States has a much stronger military presence in the Persian Gulf and other countries neighbouring Iran. In addition, there is a history of secessionist groups in Iran, such as the Baluchi terrorist organization, Jundullah, having received material support from outside powers.⁶ Thus, the sense of threat in Tehran has not subsided regardless of its own growing ability to project influence in neighbouring countries.⁷

Tehran views the United States, more than any other country, as a hegemonic power, one that does not simply want to pursue its own interests but dominate and shape the international order in its own image. Thus, the threat from the United States is more comprehensive and multidimensional than, say, any double dealing on the part of Beijing or Moscow. There is also a sizeable element within the political and security establishment in Tehran that for ideological and domestic political reasons needs the United States to play the role of Iran's foremost deadly threat.

In fact, most inside observers of Iranian foreign and defence policy tend to situate themselves in the realist camp. The long-time analyst and academic, professor Kayhan Barzegar, refers to the defensive realism school in international relations in order to explain the strategic thinking of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The emphasis in this understanding of state behaviour is that states foremost want to achieve security and their own survival rather than conquest and hegemony.⁸ Offense requires offensive capabilities and the capacity to conquer, something Iran has not shown itself willing or capable of for more than two centuries. Instead, the aim of defensive realism is 'reducing the possibility of war by adopting defensive approaches, and not expressing offensive behaviours'.⁹ This includes 'network deterrence' and asymmetric capabilities. Thus, open and full frontal offence is not part of the tool box and the primary focus is on defence.¹⁰ The former aspect still allows for what we define as hybrid warfare, something that has developed more out of the Iraq and Syria campaigns than Iran's original mosaic strategy which was intended as a defence against a possible American attack.

Asymmetric warfare – mosaics and hybridity

More or less since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has had experience of war. Some of the revolutionary groups received guerrilla training from radical Palestinian

groups in Lebanon prior to the revolution in 1979. As the revolutionaries were starting to consolidate their rule after the fall of the Shah, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded the country in September 1980. The war was first fought on Iranian soil and from 1982 to 1983 increasingly on the border to, and inside, Iraq. The main feature of the war was a barely moving trench frontline war reminiscent of the First World War, but also the use of chemical gas (Iraq) and long-distance missiles primarily aimed at urban centres (Iraq and Iran). The Iranian revolutionaries had alienated just about every regional and global power and therefore suffered under a constant lack of war materiel. This would remain the case for many years. In essence, Iran had no shortage of men, but lacked sorely in technology. Over time improved relations with Russia and China allowed for arms trade and technology transfer. Despite feats of reverse engineering and building domestic arms manufacturing capacity, Iran is still several generations behind in jet fighter technology and its conventional navy is also less developed than that of neighbouring countries and Western powers. However, in view of the US wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003, the Iranian armed forces are again emphasizing the importance of the human element in the defensive and offensive capabilities, as Iraq's mass of conventional arms and military units had no significant effect on the American juggernaut.¹¹

In many ways, Iran's attempt at conventional warfare beyond re-taking territory occupied by Iraq was a failure. Iran did not have the capacity or means to develop a modern army in the conventional technological sense. Yet the harrowing war with Iraq made clear to the new political leadership that future attackers needed to be deterred before they reached the gates of Iran, as it were. From this flow two important strategic decisions and practices: (1) Iran needs to develop allies and capabilities beyond its borders to stave off potential enemies on their own home turf. This is very similar to the centre-periphery model that Israel developed early on after its inception as a way of creating strategic depth. (2) In turn, this requires not the projection of conventional military forces stationed in bases, which Iran could neither produce nor afford, but rather an extended guerrilla-like infrastructure together with local *partners*. These forces were never meant to challenge a foe in open battle as they were not equipped or trained for such warfare; nor would they have fared well in such scenarios. This approach was also reinforced by the nature of most allies and partners Tehran developed in the region. These local groups were usually weak in terms of finances and infrastructure and not in control of state-like institutions. They would build their capacities in the shadow of a, usually weak, central state. This periphery was not necessarily geographical as much as political, since the groups Iran allied itself with tended to be marginalized within their respective political systems.¹²

Partners and allies, not proxies and servants

There is a common misunderstanding that Iran has proxies, that is groups that are beholden to Iran in a direct financial/ideological relationship, which allows Tehran to direct and control them. This misunderstanding is part and parcel of a narrative which blankets out Iranian politics and threat perceptions and posits revolutionary ideology as the prime engine of Iranian behaviour. In reality, the interaction and relationship

between Iran and its Iraqi partners, as well as with Hezbollah in Lebanon, is much more complex and two-directional.¹³ Iran does support these various groups financially but their staying power in their environment is more tied to their local anchoring than Iranian largesse, real or imagined. Hezbollah is integral to political life in Lebanon and has an important and quite steadfast constituency in the population. In the end, this is more crucial to their survival than Iranian funds.

However, even Hezbollah, which has one of the more capable military forces in the Middle East, adheres to non-conventional military warfare; developing drone, cyber and covert operations capacities rather than trying to acquire the trappings of a conventional standing army. To a large extent this is due to the theatres and terrains where they expect to fight and prefer to confront Israel. When they test the enemy (i.e. Israel) or push the proverbial envelope they prefer to do so by covert and/or non-attributable means, and if they end up fighting an outright war it is primarily defensive, drawing the enemy into, for themselves, familiar ground where Israeli tanks and jet fighters are less effective.

Iraq is the other theatre where Iran has encouraged and supported the combination of political mobilization and military organization. The Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi) are a set of military outfits, with various degree of organizational cohesion, that were created as response to the rapid expansion of ISIS in 2014. The larger ones have a history that precedes ISIS and are connected to Iran. They also have political representation in the Iraqi parliament and control government institutions and departments (thus generating income).¹⁴ While they are formally part of the Iraqi state and were decreed to integrate into the regular army in 2019, they are by nature a hybrid phenomenon. Under the leadership of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis there were efforts to bring greater cohesion to the panoply of groups under the PMF heading. Al-Muhandis was killed in an US airstrike together with the commander of the Iranian Quds forces Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Soleimani was the pre-eminent Iranian official managing relations with officials and hybrid actors in Syria and Iraq. The net effect of the airstrike has so far not been the weakening of Iran in Iraq as much as an increase in insecurity and chaos. Tellingly, the development that has threatened Iran's political influence in Iraq the most has been the popular dissatisfaction with how the state mismanages its affairs and underperforms.¹⁵ In essence politics and governance rather than military and warfare. With al-Muhandis death the various PMF groups are back to primarily enhancing their own positions thereby making the situation more volatile and unpredictable.¹⁶ Iran used a very conventional means to retaliate against the United States – a missile strike on an air base in Iraq used by US troops. Later, in summer 2020, they used drones strikes and ship mines to reiterate their deterrence capabilities vis-à-vis two important regional US allies: Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Yet this was done with some initial deniability, that is, it was not fully clear who had perpetrated the attacks, Iran or one of its allies.

Necessity is the mother of invention

Iran's hybrid capabilities spring from a defensive tactic, developed in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003, which has turned offensive. While the US

forces quickly vanquished the Iraqi army, they failed to understand the complexities of actually governing a country. The occupation phase was beset by a series of inconceivably stupid decisions, but the one that stands out is the dissolution of the Iraqi army and the wholesale de-Baathification of the state apparatus (compare to the pragmatism of the United States in Germany after the Second World War where general Patton famously refused to let membership in the NSDAP disqualify civil servants from staying in their jobs). Tehran drew several lessons from the quick and ignoble demise of their most immediate and proven deadly foe, Saddam Hussein. First, a top-down hierarchical organization, Soviet style, is useless on the tactical level in modern warfare. The combat units must have greater independence of action to be able to deal with situations where they will have no significant air support and where communications will be unreliable at best – constraints due to US technological superiority that the Iranians have to assume are givens. Thus, in 2005 the Iranian military command structure was radically altered, decentralizing command by creating thirty-one regional commands and giving greater autonomy to brigade level commanders rather than division superiors, thus allowing for a more tactile response to any invading force.¹⁷

Second, while modern armies like that of the United States can quickly establish control of the skies and intercept/destroy communication lines, their ability to manage close quarter combat in urban areas is less impressive. An invading force will not have the agility of manoeuvre or intelligence to be able to pinpoint the enemy, it will rather rely on fire power and get the intelligence wrong as often as it gets it right. This will turn the local population against them and make their footprint in the local environment heavy and costly. Counter-insurgency tactics will allow them occasionally to capture or kill opponents but it will not enable them to hold territory in any meaningful sense. Like in Vietnam and Iraq, these calculations are as much about political costs and optics as they are about actual military warfare. The aim is to deny the invading force the ability to hold territory and thus establish a baseline of normalcy through a stable foothold. In this war of attrition, the goal is to increase the cost of operations for the invader as much as possible, thus making a sustained presence politically prohibitive.

From these lessons, Tehran developed what is called a mosaic approach to defensive warfare. It is in a sense characteristic of a state that for all its revolutionary rhetoric always falls back on expediency. In the foreseeable future Iran will not have a significant navy or air force and it must therefore rely on a multi-layered and decentralized form of defence that uses the advantages of being on literally familiar ground and various methods of agile and small-scale warfare. The emphasis is on denying access or operability in a specific war theatre using non-direct means of warfare where the objective is as much political as it is military in operational terms.¹⁸ This is the kind of passive resistance that is invoked on the political level, but operationalized: no open and direct engagement with the enemy, instead targeting supply lines and resisting in ways that will wear down the invader – in essence like the kind of attrition warfare and denial of access to geographical space employed by guerrilla forces.

A recent article¹⁹ published in an Iranian defence journal is instructive as to how hybridity is understood and envisioned in the country. The author has conducted a survey among military officers in the regular army on how to better prepare combat units for the kind of warfare that is employed in the region. The primary approach

is one of defensive capabilities, and an analysis of Hezbollah serves to illustrate the characteristics of modern warfare and its hybrid element. This is in many ways an apt case to use; it has the kind of ideological cohesion, hybrid political nature and military capabilities that fit the model for a hybrid actor. The author argues that the era of distinguishable military/non-military boundaries is over, and that the means of war and the units involved no longer follow established patterns. This creates extra fluidity in how the situation can change and escalate (compare with Weissmann's reasoning) making initial planning and scenario building essential for the ability of the involved actors to stay on top of the developments if not necessarily controlling it.

But it is also clear that the hybridity is not simply defensive in nature even though that may have been the original purpose. Today Hezbollah is heavily involved in the Syrian civil war and thus it is projecting various forms of military force and capabilities in a theatre that is neither its home turf, nor part of its defensive perimeter. In this regard Iran has followed a similar pattern. The main focus of Iran's mosaic/hybrid capability development has been defensive and the reviewed open access literature from Iran tends to pursue this line. The conflict against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and the support for Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war has forced Iran to further develop its capabilities and tactics. In Iraq Tehran was, like everyone else, surprised at the speed and scale of the ISIS conquest and the fall of Mosul. Tehran then quickly brought in arms to help the Kurdish forces and increased its support of various Shi'a militia groups. In the end it also tacitly worked side by side with the United States in pushing back ISIS, and here the Kurdish and Shi'a militias proved more effective than the regular Iraqi army. Iran has quite successfully switched its asymmetric guerrilla defensive capabilities into an offensive mode. The hybridity spans across the Clausewitzian understanding of war as an extension of politics. Many of the groups supported by Iran in Iraq are not just militarily capable outfits but also political organizations that participate in regular electoral politics and are now nestled in the institutions of the state apparatus. Thus they are not exclusively non-state actors, nor are they fully beholden to the state. Their hybrid nature is as much a political characteristic (proto-state in a manner of speaking) as it is a military capability. From having fought US troops to pushing back Daesh they operate on all levels of regular and irregular warfare and Iran has exported both the model and its participants to Syria, where some of the groups fighting for Bashar al-Assad are neither regular military nor simple militias but organized and trained by Iran as discreet offensive units.²⁰

Conclusion

Iran's threat perception has increasingly considered the United States as a direct threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic. This was especially tangible after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. As the situation in Iraq deteriorated, Tehran devised a multi-layered non-conventional defensive strategy called mosaic defence. It required a more flexible approach to the defence of the country's territory, utilizing non-conventional arms as well as tactics. Iraq became the battleground where Iran went from defensive measures to deter a potential US invasion to developing offensive capabilities based on the same

approach. The offensive mode of the mosaic approach in effect constitutes hybrid warfare (also in a political dimension) and was put to the test in the Syrian civil war. As the political confrontation between the United States and Iran escalated in 2019, Iran decided to employ these hybrid capabilities directly against the United States in order to showcase its ability to defend itself and attack US allies and assets in neighbouring countries. The intended purpose was not to escalate the situation but rather to deter the United States from further confrontation with Iran. In this regard, a hybrid approach with no clear attribution of culpability combined with the employment of advanced technological assets seem to have worked – the Trump administration did not pursue a kinetic response despite heavy political pressure to do so.

Notes

- 1 Mikael Weissmann, 'Hybrid Warfare and Hybrid Threats Today and Tomorrow: Towards an Analytical Framework', *Journal on Baltic Security* 5, no. 1 (2019): 17–26.
- 2 See Weissmann, 'Hybrid Warfare and Hybrid Threats', 22–5.
- 3 This conceptual span is also analysed in Iran, see Q. Qorbanzadeh Savar, H. Nateqi and S. Hosseini Koohkamary, 'Hybrid War: Postmodern Anarchic War', *Quarterly of Passive Defense & Security* 6, no. 22 (2018) [in Persian].
- 4 It is also clear that as Western societies have become less violence prone internally the phenomenon of violence and war has receded in the general sociological analysis, even to the point of underplaying how central it was to the early-twentieth-century thinkers that defined the field. For a brief summary of this see Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chs. 1 and 2.
- 5 For an interesting analysis of Washington DC epistemological myopia on Iran see Negar Razavi, 'The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington', *Jadaliyya*, 4 September 2019. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39946?fbclid=IwAR2RweuJ8Ry-XCwFiuNeyu-zPBqds8eIo5xIMB8kw7Blg2NExo8tW8ixbOo>
- 6 Muhammad Sahimi, 'Who Supports Jundallah?', *Tehranbureau, PBS Frontline*, 22 October 2009. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/10/jundallah.html>. For a different theory on the alleged US support to Jundallah, see Mark Perry, 'False Flag: A Series of CIA Memos Describes How Israeli Mossad agents Posed as American Spies to Recruit Members of the Terrorist Organization Jundallah to Fight their Covert War against Iran', *Foreign Policy*, 13 January 2012. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/13/false-flag/>
- 7 For an article arguing that Saudi Arabia is employing hybrid warfare against Iran see Naser Pourhassan, 'Saudi Hybrid Warfare Components against the Islamic Republic, 2015–2017', *Contemporary Political Queries* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2017) [in Persian].
- 8 For a quick introduction on the nuances of realism and the sub-schools of offensive and defensive realism see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2001).
- 9 Kayhan Barzegar and Masoud Rezaei, 'Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking', *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (Winter 2017): 27–54. For a similar, more recent, assessment see Hadi Ajili and Mahsa Rouhi, 'Iran's Military Strategy', *Survival* 61, no. 6 (2019): 139–52.

- 10 See also Robert Czulda, 'The Defensive Dimension of Iran's Military Doctrine: How Would they Fight?', *Middle East Policy* XXIII, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 92–109.
- 11 See Czulda, 'The Defensive Dimension', 5, quoting interview with Brigadier General Ahmed Reza Pourdastan, Commander of the regular military's land forces in 2013.
- 12 For Lebanon see Joseph Daher, *Hezbollah – the Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God* (London: Pluto Press, 2016) and Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). On the dynamics in Yemen and Iran's role see Thomas Juneau, 'Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment', *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–63; and Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 13 Rouzbeh Parsi, 'The US Withdrawal from the JCPOA and the Politics of Iranian Regional Engagement', in *One Year after the Re-imposition of Sanctions: Perspectives on the Strategic Implications of the US »maximum pressure« Campaign against Iran*, eds Achim Vogt and David Jalilvand (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Analysis, November 2019). <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/15761.pdf>.
- 14 O. Al-Nidawi, 'The Growing Economic and Political Role of Iraq's PMF', Middle East Institute, 21 May 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-economic-and-political-role-iraqs-pmf>.
- 15 For an overview of the political challenges see R. Mansour, 'Challenges to the Post-2003 Political Order in Iraq', UI Paper no. 8, 2019. <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-8-2019.pdf>.
- 16 R. Alaaldin, 'What Will Happen to Iraqi Shiite Militias after One Key Leader's Death?', Brookings Institute, 3 March 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/03/what-will-happen-to-iraqi-shiite-militias-after-one-key-leaders-death/>, and R. Mansour, 'In Life and Death, Iraq's Hisham al-Hashimi', *The World Today*, Chatham House, June–July 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/life-and-death-iraq-s-hisham-al-hashimi>.
- 17 Czulda, 'The Defensive Dimension', 95. For an overview of the Iranian military development and the Revolutionary Guards in particulars see: Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam. Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 18 On the specifics of the capabilities and arms utilized in this strategy, see Defence Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (DIA, 2019), esp. 32–3.
- 19 Davoud Azar, 'Explanation and Analysis of Factors and Indices of the Combat Power of the Iranian Military in Hybrid Warfare', *Quarterly Journal for Military Sciences and Arts* 12, no. 37 (2016). [in Persian]
- 20 On the composition of the various military units Tehran has created and/or supported in Syria see Ali Alfoneh, *Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 January 2018). For an exhaustive analysis of various aspects of Iran's role in the conflict, see Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds, *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict* (RUSI Occasional Paper, August 2016).