



# PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE CONSORTIUM POLICY BRIEF

## Hybrid Conflicts as an Emerging Security Challenge: Policy Considerations for International Security

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*The concept of hybrid conflict has been used to define the recent violent crisis in Ukraine, the civil war in Syria, and the recent Arab uprisings. The tactics and methods used by non-state actors such as Hezbollah and the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) have been used to illustrate the concept of hybrid conflict as well.*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Hybrid conflicts are complex phenomena that do not readily fit into today's security policy frameworks. Further aggravating matters is (1) the absence of an accepted legal definition and (2) the use of conventional and nonconventional tools by combatants to achieve their ends often coupled with a blatant disregard for international law. Such practices impede the ability of policymakers to pre-empt and resolve hybrid conflicts within traditional policy frameworks.*

*Despite difficulties, policymakers can recognize certain characteristics of hybrid conflict, such as the coordinated use of conventional and non-conventional means in conjunction with the use of media and other force-multiplier technologies to reduce the power of state response. When facing hybrid conflicts policymakers would be well served to (1) consider means to enhance human and cultural intelligence, (2) improve early warning and enhance understanding of technological developments and the increased role of social media, and (3) adopt a more comprehensive approach to better enable institutions to respond to hybrid warfare.*

#### **Introduction: What are hybrid conflicts?**

Given its complexities and variability, there is no single definition of hybrid conflict or warfare.<sup>1</sup> While some experts believe it simply represents old ideas applied in a new context, others point to a set of unique attributes – such as the convergence of multiple means of warfare, to include civilian and military infrastructures, in a common “battle space.” Different conceptualisations are also evident in the plethora of terms used to describe attributes of hybrid conflict, such as “crawling conflict”, “unrestricted warfare”, “compound conflict”, or “non-linear conflict.”

As is the case for traditional conflicts, hybrid conflicts frequently have multiple factors and reasons.

Necessary conditions may include long-standing local grievances, perceptions of inequality (as opposed to absolute poverty), decreased societal trust, weak national institutions, and disenfranchised demographic groups. The example of Libya is illustrative: Prior to the overthrow of Col. Qaddafi, the unemployment rate for 18-25 year old men was approximately 50%, creating a large cadre of disillusioned young men with unmet expectations. In the wake of other uprisings, long simmering grievances met with the reality of society offering no peaceful outlet for the airing of deeply felt challenges such as inequality, expectations gaps and failed trust in clearly weak institutions.

## Characteristics of Hybrid Conflict

- ***A fusion of means*** – during hybrid conflict, multiple actions are taken simultaneously that need to be carefully orchestrated and interrelated to achieve a synchronised effect. In addition, these actions can range from the strategic to the tactical level. Actors engaged in hybrid conflict will rely on both conventional and non-conventional tools to achieve their ends – including the use of technological, criminal, trade and financial means. Further, the opportunistic use of existing irregular warfare or an insurgency may be part of a larger hybrid conflict.

- ***Ambiguity*** – hybrid conflict often appears amorphous and ambiguous. It can include state and non-state actors and the use of irregular and not-easily predictable elements. An example of ambiguity may result from the use of non-uniformed combatants who can alternate between warlike engagements and seemingly normal life, blending in with the civilian population when it is convenient to hide their weapons and agendas. Attribution becomes difficult to ascertain, especially as deception and propaganda are regular characteristics.

- ***Constant adaptation*** – actors involved in hybrid conflict continually adapt their strategies and tactics to maximise effects in the battle space. There are no pre-conceived mental maps, rules or boundaries, which may result in prolonged conflicts that change shape over time. Winning without fighting represents an ideal goal.

- ***Lack of rules as a guiding principle*** – actions may not necessarily adhere to the “rulebook” of war or principles of international humanitarian law – such as ensuring proportionality between ends and means. To illustrate, civilians may be targeted with indiscriminate violence (e.g. the beheading of civilians by members of ISIL) for propaganda value to maximize fears and to force hasty reactions.

- ***Technological change as a constant*** – the evolution of hybrid warfare is impacted by the development of new technologies, such as social media and the ability to generate intelligence from public networks. Future technological developments are apt to change the characteristics of hybrid warfare substantially.

## Policy considerations

How should policymakers address hybrid conflict? A key starting point is to boost early warning capabilities. In the case of hybrid conflict, however, early warning may be difficult to achieve for a variety of reasons. First, there is usually limited predictability concerning *when* a spark might arise that ends up as the catalyst for hybrid conflict. As highlighted during the Arab Spring, similar conditions or events across neighbouring countries could lead to different results at different times. Second, hybrid conflicts may be characterised by inaccurate information flows that may alternate from slow information to rapid dissemination – something which is exacerbated through the use of fraudulent media outlets, duplicity and propaganda. Third, uncertainty and ambiguity make the job of noticing indicators of impending conflict – many of which may seem unusual from normal conflict – that much more difficult.

Given these challenges, policymakers should consider the following steps:

**1. Broadening the capacity for early warning:** Early warning capabilities that rely heavily on military / technological intelligence (e.g. SIGINT, MASINT) may be insufficient to gauge the likelihood or timing of forthcoming hybrid conflict. Access to individuals with local knowledge, specific language skills, or cross-cultural skills may be critical to gauge intent and understand how different factions may collaborate or not during hybrid conflict. Human intelligence is crucial.

**2. Engaging with diasporas to shape the evolution of hybrid conflicts:** An early identification and engagement with diasporas may help generate awareness and support – factors that indirectly enhance early warning and the possibility to shape hybrid conflicts. Additionally, ineffective management of diasporas – including giving too much weight to information that cannot be verified – may result in pronounced and rapidly evident negative outcomes, including enhancing the capacity by conflicting groups to recruit external combatants to their cause.

**3. Considering the role and impact of technology:** Science and technology regularly produces rapid and novel developments that may be used first by adherents of hybrid conflict. Furthermore, developments in science and technology have special characteristics like the ability to make the old seem new and to alter the

time-frame of action and reaction. Policymakers need to consider the science and technology landscape to mitigate surprise and produce meaningful responses.

**4. Understanding media and its role in conflict:** While the age-old dilemma of honesty versus lies/propaganda is a natural feature of any information exchange, new technologies of communication are altering the speed of conflicts and allowing for ever greater manipulation of contents and audiences. Pressure, in turn, can be rapidly put on political institutions to respond. Today's social media – and the fundamental alteration of journalism – has unique features that need to be better understood. While social media is unlikely to be a source of revolution, it should not be discounted as having effects that can rapidly change opinions and actions. People's ability to be aware of potential manipulation has not caught up with the pace of change in the media sphere. In today's dynamic, democratic institutions need to stay honest and transparent while balancing competing pressures to understand, explain, decide and act in a timely and responsible way. To this end, the relationship to responsible media has to be enhanced.

**5. Recognizing trigger and tipping points at an earlier stage:** While both trigger (usually the catalyst for hybrid conflict) and tipping points (when a local population/stakeholder switches its position, possibly hastening the arrival of hybrid conflict) are not usually visible until after conflict breaks out, greater attempts to identify these in advance are critical for early warning. New metrics may be required to understand the dynamic and unusual presentation of impending hybrid conflict.

**6. Preparing institutions for hybrid warfare:** To accurately diagnose and begin to address hybrid conflict, a whole-of-government approach is needed. To that end, policymakers may need to answer a number of questions, such as:

- Which government ministries and departments have the authority and responsibility to act at different times to address the effects of hybrid conflicts?

- How is success to be defined when addressing hybrid conflicts?
- How can such conflicts be anticipated, and what are likely indications and warnings?
- What responses are allowable in the face of actions that seek to undermine democratic institutions and principles?
- How best should changes in the technological landscape be included in models of hybrid conflict?

**This background paper has been prepared by the Co-Chairs of the ESCWG based on recent meetings of the Pfp Consortium's Emerging Security Challenges Working Group.**

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<sup>1</sup> There are a range of working definitions and academic definitions for hybrid warfare. For example, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Frank Hoffman argues that "hybrid threats incorporate a full range of modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts that include indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battle space to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict." Source: Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges", Joint Forces Quarterly, No. 52, 2009, 34-39.