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## Complexity In Modern War: Examining Hybrid War And Future U.S. Security Challenges

Joseph Dvorak

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**COMPLEXITY IN MODERN WAR: EXAMINING HYBRID WAR AND  
FUTURE US SECURITY CHALLENGES**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Joseph Dvorak

December 2016

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# **COMPLEXITY IN MODERN WAR: EXAMINING HYBRID WAR AND FUTURE US SECURITY CHALLENGES**

Defense and Strategic Studies

Missouri State University, December 2016

Master of Science

Joseph Dvorak

## **ABSTRACT**

Hybrid warfare is a recently formed concept that focuses on the complexity of modern conflicts and those in the future. After the Russian Federation annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, US and Western analysts started using the term hybrid warfare to describe Moscow's strategy. Analysts and policymakers are starting to consider the approach and direction in Ukraine to be a new and unique type of warfare. This study discusses the usefulness of the term hybrid warfare and examines two case studies that reflect the characteristics of hybrid war, the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, to determine if hybrid warfare is indeed unique to the post-9/11 security environment. Both case studies have elements of hybrid warfare and involve complex military operations. Hybrid threats are not new, and it is important that policymakers are aware of the ongoing debates about the usefulness of the hybrid war concept before forming policies to counter them. Ultimately, hybrid war as a concept has limited use to the policymaker, but it does highlight the growing complexity of modern conflicts. The conflicts in Syria and Ukraine involve an increasing blend of unconventional and conventional strategies and tactics. In the future, the US will likely fight opponents that utilize a number of political, economic, and cyber capabilities that the US has not had to face in previous conflicts.

**KEYWORDS:** hybrid war, Russia, Syria, Ukraine, hybrid threats, complex conflicts

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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John Rose  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
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## INTRODUCTION

“Hybrid warfare” and “hybrid challenges” are recently formed concepts used to describe the characteristics of warfare in the current, post-9/11 geopolitical environment. At the end of the Cold War, various academics and military organizations created theories to understand and describe on-going conflicts and those that the US could be expected to face in the future. Hybrid warfare, asymmetric warfare, compound warfare, Fourth Generation warfare, unrestricted warfare, and low-intensity conflict are different terms used to describe the conflicts that the US is currently engaged in, or are likely to experience in the future. Many of these concepts were developed after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US and reflected the experiences of Western countries in the War on Terror.

The concept of “hybrid warfare” was first defined by Frank Hoffman, a Research Fellow at the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) at the Marine Corps Combat Development Command. Hoffman described hybrid wars in his 2007 paper “Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars” as wars that “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.”<sup>1</sup> According to Hoffman’s research, “hybrid wars” had the unique characteristic of blurring the lines between different modes of war. Recent conflicts do not replace or disregard previously established views on war, but do present new challenges that US defense planning must address.

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Hoffman, “Conflict of the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,” *Potomac Institute for Research Studies*, (Arlington, VA, 2007), 14.

Since Hoffman's article, hybrid warfare has become part of the common vernacular of the US Department of Defense. Other analysts, such as Nathan Freier, John McCuen, Helmut Habermayer, and Christopher Bowers, have devoted academic research to defining hybrid warfare and its effect on US strategic thinking.

US national security policy has already recognized that hybrid wars are a challenge that needs to be addressed. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, government officials in the US and NATO have used hybrid war and its various forms to describe Russia's strategy in the region. During a speech in Berlin in July 2015, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter asked his audience, "How do we confront cyber-attacks, propaganda campaigns and hybrid warfare?" The term was also featured in the 2015 US National Military Strategy, as well as a 2015 NATO Defence and Security Committee Draft General Report. As hybrid warfare becomes part of common US and Western strategic terminology, it is important to understand what the concept encompasses and if it is indeed a new way to engage in conflict. It would appear that future US defense policy may be influenced based on a concept that does not adequately describe current security challenges.

The use of the term hybrid warfare is becoming more popular within the defense community but is not accepted by all. In the view of some commentators, it is not a new concept, rather just a buzzword to describe complex conflicts and the use of asymmetric capabilities that is common throughout history. In the view of Dr. Damien Van Puyvelde, an Assistant Professor of Security Studies and Associate Director of Research at the National Security Studies Institute at the University of Texas at El Paso, "warfare, whether it be ancient or modern, hybrid or not, is always complex and can hardly be

subsumed into a single adjective.”<sup>2</sup> Colin S. Gray, the director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, warns that creating different categories for challenges, wars, strategies, and kinds of warfare are more likely to confuse than enlighten.<sup>3</sup> Divisions between analysts on the applicability of strategic concepts and categories can be debated at another time, but the main challenge to the concept comes from its similarity to other definitions of conflict.

US national security policy already recognizes that hybrid wars are a challenge and need to be addressed. The 2015 US National Military Strategy highlights hybrid conflicts as a distinct security challenge and illustrates the rising acceptance of the hybrid war concept. Future US defense policy may be influenced based on a concept that does not adequately describe current security challenges. Hoffman claims that recent conflicts indicate a blending of various modes of conflict, thus indicating a new type of war that challenges current US strategy and understanding of war.

There are numerous definitions of the hybrid warfare concept and the criterion for what constitutes a hybrid war is not universally recognized by academics, governments, and military organizations. It is important to recognize and examine how others view hybrid warfare and how they differ from one another. This concept is still evolving, and there may never be a universally accepted definition. Recognizing common characteristics from the various definitions is useful for discussing the differences

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<sup>2</sup>Damien Van Puyvelde, “Hybrid war – does it even exist?,” *NATO Review*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2015/Also-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/EN/index.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Colin S. Gray, *Categorical Confusion?: The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012), 16.

between hybrid war and previously established concepts of war. Some of the previously established theories will share similar characteristics with hybrid warfare, but at the definitional level, the term does have distinctive features.

While hybrid war is a new and unique term, its usefulness to US defense policymakers may be limited. US defense policymakers have acknowledged that hybrid war will be a future challenge, but it will be difficult to create effective policies to counter hybrid war when there is not even an agreed definition or criteria for the concept. There is a risk of creating a dogmatic concept that does not reflect the realities in future conflicts. Instead, the discussions of hybrid warfare illustrate how future wars will likely be more complex and require changes in US defense strategies and policy.

Recent conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, which have been described as hybrid wars, provide useful case studies for examining the complexity of conflicts in the post-9/11 security environment. The case studies illustrate that there is a fundamental difference between how current conflicts are fought today from those in the past. At an operational and tactical level, government forces in Syria, and separatist fighters in Ukraine are utilizing a combination of capabilities and strategies that present a new challenge to the US. It is debatable whether or not hybrid warfare is the most effective way to describe these threats, but the case studies show that the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria are more complex than those in the past and represent new challenges for US security policy.

Research for this thesis was conducted using a variety of sources. Due to the ongoing nature of the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, most information was gathered from secondary media, government, and think tank sources. In both cases, there is a significant

amount of propaganda from all sides and certain biases needed to be taken into account when conducting research on these conflicts.

## **HYBRID WARFARE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

There are various definitions of hybrid war, but most appear to be derived from Hoffman's works between 2006 and 2016. Hoffman's explanation of the concept is widely cited within the academic community and will be used as the base definition for this paper. However, Hoffman does not have a monopoly on the concept and other academics and government publications offer different views on hybrid war. It is important to acknowledge that there is no universally accepted definition of the concept and to recognize that there are differences between the various definitions. What academics in the United States view as hybrid war may not be the same as how US military researchers or analysts in Europe see the concept. Different perspectives need to be taken into consideration when analyzing a conflict or policy recommendations to avoid confusion. Examining and comparing definitions from European governments, think tanks, and analysts to those in the US provides a more complete understanding of how others view the concept.

### **The Definitions Of Hybrid War**

Hoffman is attributed with forming hybrid war, but other academics also provide different definitions for the concept. Retired Colonel John J. McCuen describes hybrid wars as

a combination of symmetric and asymmetric war in which intervening forces conduct traditional military operations against enemy military forces and targets while they must simultaneously—and more decisively—attempt to achieve

control of the combat zone's indigenous populations by securing and stabilizing them (stability operations).<sup>4</sup>

Like Hoffman, McCuen acknowledges that hybrid wars involve a combination of symmetric (or conventional) and asymmetric capabilities. However, McCuen places a greater focus on winning over control of the people within the battle space. The battle is not just physical, but is “a wider struggle for control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community.”<sup>5</sup> It appears that McCuen believes that hybrid wars require additional focus on winning the psychological battle, not just the physical fight.

From the British perspective, there is a greater emphasis on the proliferation of more sophisticated technology to irregular forces on the battlefield. In a white paper on irregular warfare, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defense notes that “hybrid warfare is conducted by irregular forces that have access to the more sophisticated weapons and systems normally fielded by regular forces,” and that “intervention forces will need to confront a variety of threats that have in the past been associated primarily with the regular Armed Forces of states.”<sup>6</sup> The British view hybrid war to be more likely used by an irregular force that has access to new technologies that counter traditional advantages

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<sup>4</sup>John J. McCuen, “Hybrid Wars,” *Military Review* 88, no. 2 (March 2008): 108, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.missouristate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=31413987&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (accessed December 3, 2015).

<sup>5</sup>McCuen, “Hybrid Wars,” 108.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Wilkie, “Hybrid Warfare Something Old, Not New,” *Air & Space Power Journal* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 14, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.missouristate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=58495364&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (accessed December 3, 2015).



by conventional militaries. Through this perspective, there is less of a chance that a state conducts a hybrid war because it already has access to the advanced capabilities.

Within the US military, there is even a variance in how the concept should be defined. According to the 2007 US maritime strategy “conflicts are increasingly characterized by a hybrid blend of traditional and irregular tactics, decentralized planning and execution, and non-state actors using both simple and sophisticated technologies in innovative ways.”<sup>7</sup> Similar to the UK Defense Ministry’s definition, this early US strategic view highlights the use of sophisticated technology used by non-state actors in conventional and unconventional ways. The key characteristic from both definitions is non-state actors have the capabilities of a conventional military but have the ability to use them in a variety of different ways.

One of the most recent US military descriptions of hybrid war comes from the 2015 National Military Strategy (NMS) of the United States. In the 2015 NMS, the US is expected to become involved in “hybrid conflicts” comprised of “overlapping state and non-state violence... where actors blend techniques, capabilities, and resources to achieve their objective.”<sup>8</sup> State and non-state actors may work towards shared objectives and employ a wide range of weapons.<sup>9</sup> The use of hybrid conflicts by aggressor states “serve to increase ambiguity, complicate decision-making, and slow the coordination of effective responses.”<sup>10</sup> As in previous definitions, there is a focus on regular and irregular

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<sup>7</sup>Wilkie, “Hybrid Warfare Something Old, Not New,” 15.

<sup>8</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, Department of Defense (June 2015): 4, [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf).

<sup>9</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, 4.

<sup>10</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, 4.

forces cooperating to complete the same objectives and the proliferation of advanced capabilities to the unconventional forces. The graphic below further illustrates how the US military distinguishes a hybrid conflict from other forms (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup>

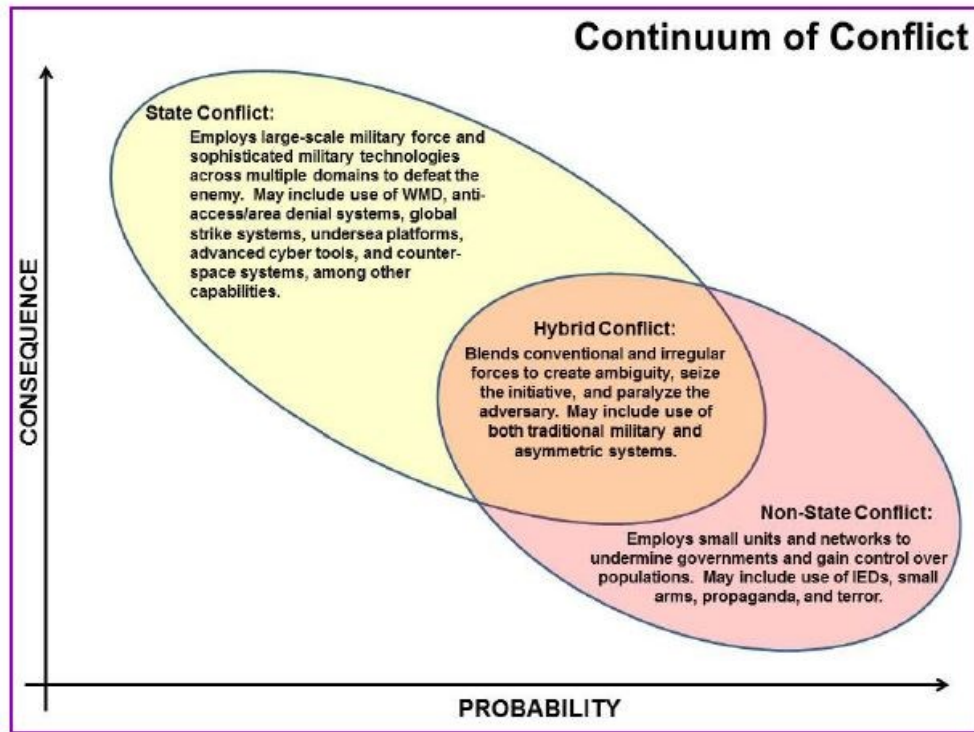


Figure 1. Continuum of Conflict according to the US Department of Defense<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1 shows how the Department of Defense defines a hybrid conflict and the different military capabilities that may be employed. Compared to the previously discussed definitions, the Department of Defense is focused on military operations, and does not place an emphasis on the non-military capabilities that are included in other definitions. The figure also recognizes that there is a new type of conflict that the US

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<sup>11</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, 4.

<sup>12</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, 4.

needs to prepare for, and it has a higher probability of occurring than direct military action against another state in the future. Hybrid conflicts also have greater consequence than non-state conflicts, indicating that military operations in the future are likely to be hybrid and pose a greater risk to national security.

Hybrid warfare may also be a largely Western construct and influenced by the recent and historical experiences of the US and European nations. Dmitry Adamsky, an associate professor at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy, and Strategy at the IDC Herzliya, argues that American, European, and Israeli combat operations in the Middle East form the conceptual base and intellectual inspirations for creating the hybrid warfare concept.<sup>13</sup> Adamsky describes “military hybridity as a simultaneous employment of conventional, sub-conventional, and possibly non-conventional warfare for the sake of political objectives, or as the blurring of political and jihadi identities of the actors.”<sup>14</sup> Unlike any of the other definitions, radical Islam is highlighted as part of the concept. Focusing on Islam may be an attempt by the author to expand on their argument that recent military conflicts in the Middle East have a disproportionate influence on Western thinking.

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US and its allies have been conducting a global war on terror focused on defeating al-Qaeda and Islamist terrorism and as a result, counter-terrorism dominates strategic thinking. US military and government officials consistently rank terrorism as the greatest national security threat to the country. After years of conducting counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism

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<sup>13</sup>Dmitry Adamsky, “Cross-Domain Coercion,” *Proliferation Papers* no. 54 (November 2015): 22, <http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp54adamsky.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2015).

<sup>14</sup>Adamsky, “Cross-Domain Coercion,” 22.

operations targeting terrorist organizations, it is possible that these experiences have heavily influenced the hybrid war concept. There is the risk that hybrid war is just a new way to explain how radical Islamists conduct war rather than how future conflicts, in general, will be fought.

Another useful framework comes from the International Institute for Strategic Studies. In their 2015 edition of “The Military Balance” the publication defines hybrid war as

the use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure.<sup>15</sup>

Again, there is the focus on using a variety of capabilities and tactics to achieve objectives. What sets this definition apart is the inclusion of gaining a psychological advantage and the use of economic pressure. Obtaining psychological advantages and using economic pressures have been used throughout the history of warfare, but some of the previous definitions have not specifically included them as characteristics of hybrid war.

Russian military leaders also provide a useful perspective on the future of war that matches many of the hybrid war definitions. Russia’s Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, published an article in VPK in February 2013, which outlined his perspective on future conflicts.<sup>16</sup> Gerasimov said that future wars would emphasize “the broad use of political, economic, information, humanitarian and other non-military measures, taken

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<sup>15</sup>“Complex Crises Call for Adaptable and Durable Capabilities,” *The Military Balance* 115:1 (2015): 5.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

along with the use of the population's protest potential.”<sup>17</sup> His comments are not a definition of hybrid warfare, but it shares many of the same characteristics as the previous definitions. Gerasimov focuses on the combined use of political, economic, and information capabilities with military force.

Across the spectrum of academic and military analysts, there is a varying degree of differences in defining hybrid warfare. Some focus on the use of advanced technologies by irregular forces, others on winning the political battle as well as the physical. Despite the variation in focus, there are themes that resonate throughout all of the previously described definitions. Conventional and unconventional tactics and units are used simultaneously to complete an objective or objectives that are political, military, or both. There is a blending or blurring between the traditional state and non-state actors and capabilities.

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<sup>17</sup>Leonid Bershidsky, “Moscow Strategists View World as War Theater,” *Bloomberg*, August 29, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2014-08-29/moscow-strategists-view-world-as-war-theater>.

## HYBRID WAR'S NEW VIEW ON CONFLICT

### Common Characteristics Of Hybrid War

Supporters of hybrid war argue that it is a new type of conflict that is different from previously established concepts. The lack of a standard definition of what a hybrid war is makes it difficult to compare it to other types of conflict. However, there are several common characteristics that are found in most definitions of hybrid war.

Recognizing these similar themes is useful because it allows hybrid war to be compared to the other concepts on war. The following characteristics represent the common themes of the various definitions of hybrid war:

- 1) Simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional forces at the strategic, operational, and tactical level;
- 2) Use of conventional and asymmetric tactics (including terrorism) and operations;
- 3) Incorporation of non-military tools, such as electronic or cyber operations, information campaigns, and economic pressure; and
- 4) Utilization of all capabilities within a battle space to achieve the objective(s).

While there is a growing acceptance of hybrid war as a legitimate concept to describe conflict, it may not necessarily be new to the other views of war. Hybrid war shares several key aspects with previously established concepts. Hoffman himself acknowledges that hybrid wars are not new and that “the combination of irregular and conventional force capabilities, either operationally or tactically integrated, is quite challenging, but historically it is not necessarily a unique phenomenon.”<sup>18</sup> In order to determine if hybrid warfare is indeed a new concept, its definition will be compared to other popular views on conflict.

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<sup>18</sup>Frank Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter, no. 52 (2009): 36.

## Previously Established Concepts Of War

There are several concepts on war that share similar definitional themes or aspects of hybrid warfare. They include: total war, low intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare, Fourth Generation Warfare, unrestricted warfare, and compound warfare. The previously listed concepts are not an exhaustive list of concepts of how wars are fought, but each one can be related to hybrid warfare. Most of these concepts were established within the past few decades to describe US operations outside of the traditional concept of war and can be applied to recent military campaigns. However, hybrid war may be the most accurate description of current security challenges.

Total war was one of the first concepts that recognized using a combination of economic and military capabilities during wartime to defeat an adversary completely. National economics are seen as a critical component of military success and are directly linked to the armed forces. According to one commentator, there are “three distinct traits” of total war: (1) interdependence between the armed forces and the productive forces of the nation, which necessitates large-scale governmental planning; (2) the extension of siege warfare enveloping the nation as a whole in both offensive and defensive actions; and (3) a general vilification of the enemy nation.<sup>19</sup> Total war also embraces the use of psychological and economic warfare along with the use of traditional military power.<sup>20</sup> Before the establishment of the total war concept, war was seen as a fight between armed forces that did not directly target population centers or the economy. The civilian

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<sup>19</sup>Hans Spier, “Class Structure and ‘Total War’,” *American Sociological Review* 4, no. 3 (1939): 371, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2084924> (accessed December 1, 2015).

<sup>20</sup>Henry William Spiegel, “Wehrwirtschaft,” *The American Economic Review* 30, no. 4 (1940): 713, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1805064> (accessed December 1, 2015).

population and the economy did suffer during conflict, but the ultimate objective was to defeat the opponent's military on the battlefield rather than the complete destruction of their military and economic capabilities.

Several conflicts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have been used as examples of total war. The First World War is the most significant example of total war, but the American Civil War and the Taiping Rebellion in China have also been described as the precursor of World War I.<sup>21</sup> In his memoirs after the American Civil War, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote that there were three tenants to total war: the destruction of civilian property and supplies shortened the war by depriving Southern armies of material support; depriving the Southern people of their spirit, and dousing their enthusiasm for war; and “the idea of collective responsibility, the belief that whatever happened, the South deserved it.”<sup>22</sup> Sherman targeted any aspect of society that would benefit the South and allow them to maintain their military campaign.

Total war shares some of the same aspects of the hybrid war concept, but significant differences remain. Both theories embrace targeting anything that benefits the enemy's capability to fight. National industry and other capabilities that support the war effort are legitimate targets. However, unlike in hybrid warfare, there is no mention of the use of irregular forces or asymmetric tactics. Within the total war concept, only conventional military forces are used during conflict.

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<sup>21</sup>Peter R. Moody, “Clausewitz and the Fading Dialectic of War,” *World Politics* 31, no. 3 (1979): 425, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2009996> (accessed December 1, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>Lance Janda, “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880,” *The Journal of Military History* 29, no. 1 (1995): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944362> (accessed December 1, 2015).



Low intensity conflict shares the irregular and unconventional characteristics with hybrid war. In 1988, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff defined low intensity conflict as a “political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states.”<sup>23</sup> According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, low intensity conflicts “are often localized, generally in the third world, but contain regional and global security implications.”<sup>24</sup> In another description, low-intensity conflict may involve “urban guerrilla wars, civil wars, separatist movements, communal violence, insurrection, coups d'etat, and terrorism.”<sup>25</sup> Low intensity conflict has limited goals and intentionally avoids escalating to conventional military operations.

Hybrid war and low intensity conflict share the characteristics of the use of irregular forces or terrorism. In low intensity conflict, there is a greater focus on conducting unconventional operations and utilizing non-military capabilities such as political, economic, and informational. However, low intensity conflicts differ from hybrid war because its purpose is to avoid engaging in a conventional war. Hybrid wars blend the conventional and unconventional while low intensity conflicts seek only to engage in irregular operations.

Asymmetric warfare is closely related to low intensity conflicts. In an asymmetric conflict, the opponent’s vulnerabilities are specifically targeted and operations “generally seek a major psychological impact, such as shock or confusion that affects an opponent’s

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<sup>23</sup>Howard Lee Dixon, “Low Intensity Conflict Overview, Definitions and Policy Concerns,” *Army-Air Force Center for Low Intensity Conflict* (Langley AFB, VA, 1989), 23.

<sup>24</sup>Dixon, “Low Intensity Conflict Overview, Definitions and Policy Concerns,” 23.

<sup>25</sup>Richard H. Shultz, “The Low-Intensity Conflict Environment of the 1990s,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 517 (1991): 121, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1047190> (accessed December 1, 2015).

initiative, freedom of action, or will.”<sup>26</sup> The conflict will be between a stronger military force and one far less capable, skilled or resourced. When one side recognizes that it cannot compete at a traditional level, it could “adopt idiosyncratic technologies or tactics.”<sup>27</sup> In essence, the weaker actor refrains from conducting operations that allow the stronger actor to use its capabilities that give it an overwhelming advantage. Instead of engaging in set piece battles, one side will determine the weaknesses of the larger power and exploit that weakness.

Low-intensity conflicts and asymmetric war share most of the same basic tenants. Both concepts focus on a weaker actor fighting against a traditionally stronger power. In an asymmetric conflict, the irregular force will not adopt a regular force structure or conduct traditional military operations because it is at a significant disadvantage.

Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) builds on the asymmetric war concept of a weaker actor bypassing the strengths of their opponent. According to Jason Vest, a senior correspondent for *The American Prospect* who specializes in intelligence and national security issues, the defining characteristics of 4GW are a “vast mismatch between the resources and philosophies of the combatants” where operations focus “on bypassing an opposing military force and striking directly at cultural, political, or population targets.”<sup>28</sup> The main objective in 4GW is to use “all available networks-political, economic, social, and military - to convince the enemy’s political decision makers that their strategic goals

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<sup>26</sup>David L. Buffaloe, “Defining Asymmetric Warfare,” *The Land Warfare Papers* no. 58 (September 2006): 12, [https://www.ausa.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/ILW%20Web-ExclusivePubs/Land%20Warfare%20Papers/LWP\\_58.pdf](https://www.ausa.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/ILW%20Web-ExclusivePubs/Land%20Warfare%20Papers/LWP_58.pdf).

<sup>27</sup>Paul J. Dunne et al., “Managing Asymmetric Conflict,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 28, no. 2 (2006): 184, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876996> (accessed December 1, 2015).

<sup>28</sup>Jason Vest, “Fourth-Generation Warfare,” *The Atlantic* (December 2001), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/12/fourth-generation-warfare/302368/>.

are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.”<sup>29</sup> One side using unconventional methods will use a variety of means to make their opponent capitulate to political, rather than military, pressure. The main strategic effort may focus on attacking more of the civilian base than the actual armed forces of the opponent if perceived as more effective.

There are more similarities between 4GW and hybrid war than there are with asymmetric warfare or low intensity conflict. Within the 4GW concept, there is a blurring of lines between military and civilian targets and capabilities, with “success depending heavily on effectiveness in joint operations as lines between responsibility and mission become very blurred.”<sup>30</sup> While there still is the focus in 4GW of one combatant having superior economic or military power, the concept acknowledges that there will be a blurring between what is considered regular or irregular.

The unrestricted warfare concept comes even closer to the definition of hybrid war. First proposed by two Chinese colonels in 1999, unrestricted warfare involves “diverse, simultaneous, asymmetric attacks on an adversary's social, economic and political systems.”<sup>31</sup> It includes “the employment of all lethal and non-lethal assets, including armed and unarmed, military and nonmilitary force to compel the enemy to

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<sup>29</sup>Scott A. Davis, “American Military History and its Insights into Fourth Generation Warfare,” (master’s thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2006), 11.

<sup>30</sup>William S. Lind et al., “The Changing Face of War,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 73, no. 10 (October 1989): 23.

<sup>31</sup>Steven Metz, “Strategic Horizons: In Ukraine, Russia Reveals Its Mastery of Unrestricted Warfare,” *World Politics Review* (April 16, 2014): 1, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.missouristate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=95668504&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (accessed December 1, 2015).

accept our interests.”<sup>32</sup> Within the unrestricted warfare concept, any and all actions that can contribute to victory should at least be considered. In essence, warfare no longer has any rules and any part of the adversary’s military or society can be targeted.

This concept shares more similarities with hybrid war than any of the previous concepts. It accepts that during conflict there will be a wide range of capabilities used and may include using both conventional and unconventional assets. However, it is also incredibly broad because anything and everything could fall under this definition. The Chinese authors saw this as the next stage of warfare that will replace current theories on conflict. Hoffman and other proponents of hybrid war do not believe that hybrid war will replace other theories of war.

Compound warfare is perhaps the most similar concept to hybrid war. Thomas Huber, a faculty member at the US Army Combat Studies Institute, writes that it is the "the simultaneous use of a regular or main force and an irregular or guerrilla force against an enemy.”<sup>33</sup> Another description of compound warfare is when “separate or complementary operations executed by regular and irregular forces are coordinated at the strategic level; the simultaneous fight under a unified command and control, in order to achieve a common objective.”<sup>34</sup> Regular and irregular forces are used at the same time to achieve the same goal. A single command and control center coordinates the efforts of

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<sup>32</sup>Valerică Cruceru, “On Contemporary Warfare,” *Revista Academiei Fortelor Terestre* 19, no. 3 (October 2014): 234, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.missouristate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=98692969&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (accessed December 3, 2015).

<sup>33</sup>Thomas M. Huber, “Compound Warfare: A Conceptual Framework” in *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot* ed. Thomas M. Huber (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>34</sup>Cruceru, “On Contemporary Warfare,” 233.

both forces and gains the advantages of both conventional and unconventional capabilities.

While compound warfare appears to be the same as hybrid war, there is a key difference at the operational and tactical levels. In both concepts, the simultaneous use of regular and irregular forces to complete a common objective is a defining feature. However, in compound warfare, the coordination is limited to the strategic level. Irregular units are used to support the conventional forces but in different areas of the battle space rather than combining with them. Hybrid warfare features the fusion of conventional and unconventional forces within the battle space.

### **Nature Of Past Conflicts Compared To Hybrid War**

The previously discussed concepts of war do share similarities with the criteria of hybrid war, but none share all four main characteristics. Table 1 illustrates the key similarities and differences between the previously examined concepts of war to the common characteristics of hybrid war. Each concept shares one or two key characteristics but lacks other critical components, making hybrid warfare a unique and different type of conflict. The four characteristics below were established for this thesis to highlight the main components of the hybrid war concept.

- 1) Simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional forces at the strategic, operational, and tactical level
- 2) Use of conventional and asymmetric tactics (including terrorism) and operations
- 3) Incorporation of non-military tools, such as electronic or cyber operations, information campaigns, and economic pressure\
- 4) Utilization of all capabilities within a battle space to achieve the objective(s)

Table 1. Comparing other concepts of war to the four characteristics of hybrid war

Concept	Key Similarities to Hybrid War	Key Differences to Hybrid War
Total War	Targeting economic infrastructure Using economic capabilities	Limited use of asymmetric tactics or unconventional forces
Low Intensity Conflict	Use of unconventional forces and asymmetric tactics Use of information warfare and propaganda	Little focus on combining regular and irregular forces No use of conventional tactics, limited goals
Asymmetric Warfare	Use of terrorism, unconventional forces and tactics Information warfare is critical	No use of conventional forces or tactics No use of economic capabilities
Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW)	Combination of political, economic, and military capabilities Use of conventional and unconventional tactics	Focused on striking civilian and economic targets Conventional and irregular forces not completely integrated
Unrestricted Warfare	Combination of military, political, and economic capabilities Use of conventional and asymmetric tactics	Extremely broad and not limited to a battlespace Believed to replace all other types of war in the future
Compound Warfare	Simultaneous use of regular and irregular forces Unified command and control	Conventional and unconventional forces do not combine on the battle space

Each concept shares some of the key criteria for hybrid war, but fail to include all four criteria. Total war and hybrid warfare both use economic and conventional capabilities, but total war only uses limited asymmetric forces and tactics. Low intensity conflicts place importance on asymmetric capabilities and the non-military measures like information and propaganda campaigns, which are key criteria for hybrid warfare. However, low intensity conflict intentionally avoids using conventional capabilities that are required in hybrid wars. Asymmetric warfare, like low intensity conflict, focuses on using irregular units but also lacks the use of conventional forces and tactics.

Fourth Generation Warfare, unrestricted warfare, and compound warfare appear to have the most similarities to hybrid warfare. The combination of political, economic, and military capabilities along with the use of conventional and unconventional forces are all aspects of Fourth Generation Warfare, unrestricted warfare, and hybrid warfare. Unrestricted warfare is incredibly broad and does not meet the criteria of all of the capabilities being used in a single battle space. Fourth Generation Warfare, and compound warfare, both fail to meet the hybrid warfare criteria of combining conventional and unconventional forces within the battle space.

The hybrid warfare concept is not expected to become the only way actors will wage war in the future. It will not replace asymmetric, compound, or low intensity aspects in conflict situations, but it may be a more effective way to analyze current conflicts. US policy is starting to acknowledge the hybrid war concept but has yet to apply it to a conflict.

The lack of a standard definition is one of the main challenges facing the development of the hybrid warfare concept. There are competing perspectives on what hybrid war is within the US and among Western allies, which can make cooperation between governments more difficult if there are contrasting viewpoints. It is unlikely that a universally accepted definition of hybrid war will be accepted by the US and its allies, but establishing general criteria for what constitutes hybrid war would help provide the framework for future security policies. If Western policymakers and militaries cannot agree on the criteria for hybrid war, there is a risk of each country developing security policies that do not fully address the current security challenges.



## **THE COMPLEX CONFLICTS IN SYRIA AND UKRAINE**

This section of the thesis argues that the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine are different than past military operations and attempt to illustrate the complexity within the battlespace. Military operations in both Syria and Ukraine share many of the characteristics with the hybrid war concept. Regular forces are usually combined with irregular units during major operations and a variety of conventional and unconventional tactics are employed in the battlespace. Neither conflict fully falls within the hybrid war concept, but both case studies provide examples of how modern military operations are becoming more complex.

### **The Rise Of Conflict In Syria And Ukraine**

The ongoing conflict in Syria has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. There are numerous internal and external actors that are either directly or indirectly involved in the fighting. Conventional and irregular forces are fighting each other as well as terrorist organizations in a complex environment. Within both the Syrian regime and opposition forces, there are multiple motives for fighting along with conflicting objectives, adding further complications to grasping a complete understanding of the conflict.

Syria's current violence grew out of pro-democracy protests that were met with a violent response by President Bashar al-Assad. Protests started in the southern city of Deraa after teenagers were arrested and tortured for painting revolutionary slogans on a

school wall.<sup>35</sup> By July 2011, hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets demanding Assad resign.<sup>36</sup> The regime responded with increasing force against demonstrators, causing opposition supporters “to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas.”<sup>37</sup> According to the UN, by August 2015 over 250,000 people have been killed due to the fighting.<sup>38</sup> What started out as political protests evolved into a multinational conflict that continues to draw in new actors.

In a broad sense, there are three main groups of actors involved in military campaigns in Syria, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), militias loyal the regime, and international allies who provide support to Assad’s regime. Outside of the SAA, Assad’s forces are augmented by Shia fighters from Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Russian regular forces.<sup>39</sup> Iran and Russia have also provided Assad with political and military support since the protests started in 2011.<sup>40</sup> As the conflict has progressed, the regime has had to increase its dependency on direct support from its international allies.

The rise of Ukraine’s separatist forces in the eastern part of the country in 2014 also provides a useful case study for this discussion because it is frequently called a hybrid conflict by the West. Russian soldiers are reportedly fighting directly with the

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<sup>35</sup>“Syria: The Story of Conflict,” *BBC*, Oct 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868> (accessed December 4, 2015).

<sup>36</sup>“Syria,” *BBC*, Oct 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>“Syria,” *BBC*, Oct 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>.

<sup>39</sup>Kathy Gilsinan, “The Confused Person’s Guide to the Syrian Civil War,” *The Atlantic*, Oct 29, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>.

<sup>40</sup>Gilsinan, “The Confused Person’s Guide to the Syrian Civil War,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>.

separatists, and entire Russian regular military units are also believed to be operating in the country. On August 28, 2014, NATO released a series of satellite images that showed Russian combat troops inside Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> Despite numerous investigations and claims by the West, Moscow categorically denies it has deployed Russian soldiers into eastern Ukraine.

These conflicting claims present a challenge to analyzing the conflict. Moscow and Kyiv are conducting significant information operations to send different messages to the international community. Both sides are accusing the other of being the aggressor and have a bias in their reporting. Like all conflict, the fighting is extremely emotional, and some sources are designed only to present certain perspectives. Despite these challenges, the conflict in Ukraine is important to analyze because it is already becoming the embodiment of hybrid war.

Unlike the Syrian civil war, which typically focuses on military action, the fighting in Ukraine provides a useful example of the incorporation of non-military tools, such as electronic or cyber operations, information campaigns, and economic pressure, in a modern conflict. Political instability throughout the country provides Russia with the ability to put internal and external political pressure on Kyiv. The conflict in eastern Ukraine grew out of a political revolution that started in 2013 known as the Maidan. Massive protests against the pro-Russian government in Kyiv and other major cities caused the president to flee the country.

During the political turmoil, Russia annexed the Crimea Peninsula, which likely became the model for pro-Russian separatist movements in Ukraine. On April 7, 2014,

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<sup>41</sup>“NATO releases satellite imagery showing Russian combat troops inside Ukraine,” *NATO*, August 28, 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos\\_112202.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_112202.htm).

protesters seized strategic buildings in the cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv.<sup>42</sup> Protesters were unable to hold Kharkiv, but unrecognized referendums held in Donetsk and Luhansk (also known as the Donbas) on May 11 voted for independence.<sup>43</sup> That same day, separatist leaders declared the formation of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).<sup>44</sup> However, unlike in Crimea, the Kremlin did not welcome the DNR and LNR with open arms. Instead of moving to annex the self-declared republics, Moscow called for caution and negotiations.<sup>45</sup>

The hesitation by the Kremlin to accept the DNR and LNR into the Russian Federation allowed Kyiv to organize itself politically and militarily. Presidential elections held on May 25 in most of the country, except in the Donbas area, resulted in Petro Poroshenko becoming the next president of the country<sup>46</sup>, who ordered the Armed Forces of Ukraine to begin offensive operations against the separatists in June 2014.<sup>47</sup> Referred to as Anti-Terrorist Operations (ATO), Ukrainian forces quickly recovered larger cities in the Donbas, including Slavyansk and Kramatorsk, and begin to encircle the city of

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<sup>42</sup>“Ukraine crisis in maps,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/02/27/world/europe/ukraine-divisions-crimea.html>.

<sup>43</sup>“Ukraine crisis in maps,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/02/27/world/europe/ukraine-divisions-crimea.html>.

<sup>44</sup>Simon Denyer, Michael Birnbaum & Fredrick Kunkle, “As Ukrainian separatists claim victory in self-rule vote, fears of all-out civil war mount,” *The Washington Post*, May 12, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/separatists-claim-victory-in-eastern-ukraine-kremlin-calls-for-talks-with-kiev-government/2014/05/12/135ceba9-824c-486d-98e1-e1aa49627fa3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/separatists-claim-victory-in-eastern-ukraine-kremlin-calls-for-talks-with-kiev-government/2014/05/12/135ceba9-824c-486d-98e1-e1aa49627fa3_story.html).

<sup>45</sup>Denyer, et al., “As Ukrainian separatists claim victory in self-rule vote, fears of all-out civil war mount.”

<sup>46</sup>“Ukraine Crisis: Timeline,” *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

<sup>47</sup> Boris Nemtsov, “Putin. War,” *Free Russia Foundation* (May 2015), 17.

Donetsk.<sup>48</sup> On June 25, the Russian Duma (Parliament) canceled its previous resolution authorizing the use of Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>49</sup>

ATO forces continued their advance until mid-August 2014 when the situation on the ground changed significantly. By August 19, the DRN and LNR lost three-fourths of their originally claimed territory, until the introduction of substantial Russian military equipment and regular forces.<sup>50</sup> According to a study conducted by the Atlantic Council, an estimated 4,000 regular Russian soldiers crossed the border with tanks and quickly halted the ATO advances.<sup>51</sup> Separatist forces, now bolstered by Russian troops, forced the Ukrainian troops to retreat until a ceasefire was reached in Minsk, Belarus on September 5, 2014.<sup>52</sup> ATO forces may have been able to break the separatist leaders' will before the middle of August, but after the deployment of Russian soldiers, the DNR and LRN solidified their positions.

The ceasefire, known as the Minsk Agreement, was not to last. In many areas, such as around the Donetsk Airport, fighting did not slow down.<sup>53</sup> The conflict would escalate until February 2015 when another ceasefire brokered by France and Germany was signed once again in Minsk.<sup>54</sup> Under the Minsk II agreement, separatists gained

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<sup>48</sup>Nemtsov, "Putin. War," 17.

<sup>49</sup>"Ukraine Crisis: Timeline," *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

<sup>50</sup>Nemtsov, "Putin. War," 17.

<sup>51</sup>Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova, and Damon Wilson, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine," *The Atlantic Council* (Atlantic Council: Washington D.C.), 5.

<sup>52</sup>Steven Pifer, et al. "Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression," *The Atlantic Council* (Atlantic Council: Washington, DC, 2015), 2.

<sup>53</sup>Pifer, et al. "Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression," 2.

control of an additional 500 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory and assurances by Kyiv that political steps would be taken to recognize the DNR and LNR.<sup>55</sup> As of this writing, the Minsk II agreement is still in effect but the political aspects have yet to be implemented, and separatist territory has not significantly expanded.

### **The Fusion Of Regular And Irregular Forces**

One of the main characteristics of hybrid war, as well as the fighting in Syria and Ukraine, is the combination of regular and irregular forces in military operations. In Syria, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is the conventional, state military controlled by the Assad regime. At the start of the conflict, the SAA was the regime's primary security force, but as the opposition gain more territory and control, it needed to be augmented with locally organized militias, an internationally recognized terrorist organization, and Iranian and Russian forces. All of these different organizations work together, creating a multifaceted force that can conduct a variety of operations and utilize the benefits of conventional and unconventional tactics.

**Irregulars Supporting Conventional SAA And Russian Forces.** On paper, the SAA at the beginning of the civil war was one of the most impressive militaries in the Arab world. In 2011, the army had an estimated non-reserve strength of 220,000 soldiers.<sup>56</sup> Many of the top commanders were trained by Soviet advisories and most units

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<sup>54</sup>Czuperski, et al. "Hiding in Plain Sight," 5.

<sup>55</sup>Czuperski, et al. "Hiding in Plain Sight," 5.

<sup>56</sup>Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," *The Middle East Security Report* (March 2013): 27.

use Soviet-era equipment.<sup>57</sup> However, once the protests evolved into open conflict, large numbers of soldiers defected and the regime could not depend on the loyalty of significant portions of the army. According to various sources, both from the opposition and Western think tanks, an estimated 65,000 to 75,000 out of the 220,000 soldiers remain loyal and dependable to the regime.<sup>58</sup> Other estimates in 2014 put SAA numbers at around 150,000, almost half of its pre-war strength.<sup>59</sup> Mass desertions significantly affected the regime's ability to hold and defend territory from the opposition and the Islamic State. After losing almost half of its manpower, and unable to trust some of the soldiers that remain, the regime turned to irregular forces from both internal and external sources.

The National Defense Forces (NDF) were originally created as neighborhood militias to protect the regime and maintain the status quo in Syria and their specific towns. While the militias support Assad, they also have their local interests that may contradict the strategy of the government.<sup>60</sup> These groups operate in a similar manner as the Popular Committee militias in Iraq and are located throughout most of Syria.<sup>61</sup>

Volunteers continue to join the NDF and form a significant irregular capability for Assad. Recent estimates put the NDF at a total strength between 60,000 to 100,000

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<sup>57</sup>Richard M. Bennett, "The Syrian Military," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, 3, no. 8 (August/September 2001), [http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0108\\_s1.htm](http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0108_s1.htm).

<sup>58</sup>Holliday, "The Assad Regime," 27.

<sup>59</sup>Christopher Kozak, "An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War* (April 2015): 12, <http://understandingwar.org/report/army-all-corners-assads-campaign-strategy-syria> (accessed December 3, 2015).

<sup>60</sup>The Carter Center, "Syria: Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces," (November 5, 2013): 6, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/Pro-GovernmentParamilitaryForces.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/Pro-GovernmentParamilitaryForces.pdf).

<sup>61</sup>Holliday, "The Assad Regime," 31.

fighters.<sup>62</sup> The regime started formalizing and professionalizing the militias in 2013, when it created the NDF, to fully utilize their capabilities.<sup>63</sup> Once integrated into the government's defense structure, the NDF started to receive better weapons and training from the Syrian military.<sup>64</sup> Before the formalization of relations between the regime and the militias, it is believed that Iran and Hezbollah provided training and equipment for many of the groups.<sup>65</sup> Many of the NDF units started out as proxies for Iran in its effort to prevent Assad from being overthrown.<sup>66</sup> As a result, the training the militias received focused on asymmetrical, urban, and guerrilla warfare, types of war that the SAA was unprepared to fight.<sup>67</sup> The NDF provides additional forces for the regime that are dependable, adequately trained, and are prepared to fight in a similar manner as the opposition.

Iran is also suspected of being deeply involved in not only training local paramilitaries but providing the regime with its forces and foreign fighters. Like the NDF, these irregular units augment the SAA throughout the country and provided additional reserves for offensive operations. Iranian soldiers also provide training and intelligence for the regime. It appears that Iran is becoming more involved in military operations in Syria and their support for Assad shows no sign of dropping off.

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<sup>62</sup>Kozak, "An Army in All Corners." 15.

<sup>63</sup>Holliday, "The Assad Regime," 31.

<sup>64</sup>The Carter Center, "Syria," 6.

<sup>65</sup>The Carter Center, "Syria," 4.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 8.



Most of the Iranian influence in Syria comes from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps- Quds Force (IRGC-QF). The US first acknowledged that the IRGC-QF was actively training paramilitaries in Syria in August 2012 and were forming a militia called the *Jaysh al-Sha 'bi*.<sup>68</sup> It is unknown how many IRGC-QF commanders are operating in Syria, but the numbers range from 60 to 70 to "a few hundred".<sup>69</sup> However, it is known that the leader of the IRGC-QF, Qassem Suleimani, is in Syria and most likely leading operations there.<sup>70</sup>

Open-source information does not provide many details into the complete extent of the IRGC-QF involvement in Syria, but Iranian forces are now participating in direct combat operations. Since 2013, there have been "157 IRGC members killed in combat in Syria, including Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani (the most senior IRGC commander killed in Syria), General Hamid Mokhtarband (head of an armored brigade combat team) and his chief of staff Farshad Hassounizadeh."<sup>71</sup> If recent estimates put Iranian advisors at most "around a few hundred", then the IRGC has suffered heavy casualties in recent years while fighting in Syria. Regardless of the number of commanders, the IRGC-QF has deployed to the region; it is important to recognize that Iran is directly involved in the military operations.

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<sup>68</sup>Holliday, "The Assad Regime," 30.

<sup>69</sup>Kozak, "An Army in All Corners," 18.

<sup>70</sup>Will Fulton et al., "Iranian Strategy in Syria," AEI's Critical Threats Project & Institute for the Study of War (May 2013): 10.

<sup>71</sup>Ali Alfoneh, "The IRGC Transforms into an Expeditionary Force," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, October 29, 2015, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/ali-alfoneh-the-irgc-transforms-into-an-expeditionary-force/>.

Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon further support regime forces and plays a similar role as Iran in Syria, providing advisors and leaders for militias and irregular forces throughout eastern Syria. Its involvement in the civil war has evolved and expanded with the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and pressure on the regime. Hezbollah deployments remain near the Lebanese border and the western areas of Syria.

Unlike the IRGC, Hezbollah's involvement started out as both a training and combat mission. Its forces operate alongside both Iranian and NDF troops, providing key leadership capabilities for pro-regime militias.<sup>72</sup> The first major deployment of militants occurred on June 12, 2014, two days after the fall of Mosul to IS.<sup>73</sup> According to a 2014 assessment by Israeli military officials, around 4,000 to 5,000 Hezbollah fighters are sent to Damascus, Qalamoun, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo, and southern Syria on a rotational basis.<sup>74</sup> Hezbollah is largely limited to regions along or near the Lebanese border but does participate in regular combat operations.

Similarly, to Iran, Hezbollah's role in the conflict has increased over the years. Currently, there is an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 fighters deployed to Syria, at least 1,000 more than in 2014.<sup>75</sup> In the past two years, Hezbollah has created two new commands, one on the Lebanon-Syrian border and another within Syria.<sup>76</sup> According to one analyst,

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<sup>72</sup>Kozak, "An Army in All Corners," 16.

<sup>73</sup>Kozak, "An Army in All Corners," 17.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>75</sup>Matthew Levitt, "Waking Up the Neighbors: How Regional Intervention Is Transforming Hezbollah," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 23, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/waking-up-the-neighbors-how-regional-intervention-is-transforming-hezbollah>.

<sup>76</sup>Levitt, "Waking Up the Neighbors," <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/waking-up-the-neighbors-how-regional-intervention-is-transforming-hezbollah>.

by 2015 Hezbollah was suffering 60 to 80 casualties a week in just the Qalamoun region.<sup>77</sup> Hezbollah's increasing number of troop deployments and casualty rate indicates that the group is dedicated to the fight in Syria and intends to maintain its presence within the country. Assad's regime can continue to depend on Hezbollah for support in its military operations throughout western Syria. The NDF, IRGC, and Hezbollah all provide regime forces with additional unconventional soldiers for a variety of operations.

Russia's current involvement in Syria has been in direct air support for the SAA and irregular forces throughout the country. The air campaign began on September 30, 2015, and according to the US State Department, "90 percent of Russian airstrikes targeted Syrian rebel positions rather than ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra during the first week."<sup>78</sup> Russian planes mainly fly out of the Bassel al-Assad International Airport near the port city of Latakia, with some helicopter gunships operating out of bases in Hama, Sharyat, and Tiyas.<sup>79</sup> Overall, the Russian forces contain up to 34 combat aircraft including advanced jets and attack helicopters.<sup>80</sup>

Recent troop movements in Homs may indicate that Russia plans to expand its presence in Syria. According to a local human rights organization, the Russians are "building new runways at the Shaayrat airport and reinforcing its surroundings in order to

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Hugo Spaulding, "5 huge myths about Russia's military intervention in Syria," *Business Insider*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/5-huge-myths-about-russias-military-intervention-in-syria-2015-11> (accessed December 5, 2015).

<sup>79</sup>Jonathan Landry, "Russia's Syria force grows to 4,000, U.S. officials say," *Reuters*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-idUSKCN0ST2G020151105#8rblMbbHODak88Lo.97>.

<sup>80</sup>Jeffrey White, "Russia's Military Strategy in Syria Becoming Clearer as Its Forces Engage in Combat," The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, October 9, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-military-strategy-in-syria-becoming-clearer-as-its-forces-engage-in>.

use it soon for operations."<sup>81</sup> A local media source reported that the Shaayrat airbase has around 45 fortified airplane hangars and two runways.<sup>82</sup> If these claims are true, Moscow may be planning to send additional aircraft or shift already deployed assets to the Shaayrat airbase. New deployments will provide regime forces in central Syria more effective air capabilities for future operations. It also illustrates Russia's resolve in the conflict and its willingness to commit significant forces to the fight in Syria.

**Ukraine's Irregular Separatists And Covert Russian Support.** In Syria, the SAA is overtly supported by the NDF, IRQC, Hezbollah, and Russia. Ukrainian separatists operate within a more covert environment. In eastern Ukraine, the separatists are largely an irregular force that grew out of anti-Maidan sentiments and the desire to remain politically close to Moscow. It was only after the ATO started making significant gains against the DNR and LNR that Russia covertly deployed regular forces into the region. The governments in Damascus and Kyiv both have to fight irregular opponents, however, in Ukraine the separatists are directly augmented with foreign regular forces rather than the government.

Since their formation, the separatists have benefited from having access to Ukrainian and Russian military equipment. Open source investigations have shown that over time Russia has sent more sophisticated and advanced weapon systems into the Donbas.<sup>83</sup> Ukrainian airpower was quickly negated due to the effective use of man-portable, shoulder-fired air defense systems (MANPADS), and advanced radar-guided

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<sup>81</sup>Jeremy Bender, "Report: Russia is building a second military airbase in Syria," *Business Insider*, October 3, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/russia-opening-second-military-airbase-in-syria-2015-12>.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Czuperski, et al. "Hiding in Plain Sight," 11.

surface-to-air missiles.<sup>84</sup> Separatists are also equipped with Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), specifically T-72s and T-64s, along with multiple rocket launch systems (MLRS), such as the BM-21 “Grad”.<sup>85</sup> Along with access to assorted small arms and support weapons, separatist forces either match Ukrainian military capabilities or at times, surpass them.

Not only do the DNR and LNR have a general parity in military capability with Ukrainian forces, but they also have similar overall force strengths. According to estimates from Kyiv, there are approximately 36,000 Russian and separatist fighters in the Donbas, compared to the 34,000 Ukrainian soldiers along the line of contact.<sup>86</sup> The separatist numerical advantage alone makes it incredibly difficult for Kyiv to launch successful offensive operations against entrenched and hardened separatist positions.

The DNR claims to have consolidated its forces under the control of its Ministry of Defense and are coordinated through its unified command. Various militia groups are now all working together as the Army of the DNR, rather than armed gang only subordinate to their leader. Most of the independent militias now operate as the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps, under the Department of Defense of the Donetsk People’s Republic.<sup>87</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps originally formed out of several of the major independent units such as the Slavyansk Brigade, Oplot, Kalmius, and others.<sup>88</sup> In September 2015, parts of the Republic Guard, another conglomerate of smaller groups, also joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Army

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<sup>84</sup>Pifer, et al. “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression,” 8.

<sup>85</sup>James Miller, Pierre Vaux, Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, & Michael Weiss, “An Invasion by Any Other Name: The Kremlin’s Dirty War in Ukraine,” *Institute of Modern Russia*, 2015, 14.

<sup>86</sup>Pifer, et al. “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression,” 12.

<sup>87</sup>Alexander Fedotov, “On the Reorganization of the Army of the DPR,” *Slavyangrad.org*, September 25, 2015, <https://slavyangrad.org/2015/09/25/on-the-reorganisation-of-the-army-of-the-dpr/>.

<sup>88</sup>Fedotov, “On the Reorganization of the Army of the DPR.”

Corps.<sup>89</sup> Over time, the DNR has tried to force all of the militias to at least appear to fight under one banner, rather than as a group of allied, but independent units.

One of the most famous units in the DNR forces, and possibly the most effective, is the Sparta Battalion. The group, led by Arsney Pavlov (who goes by the *nom de guerre* Motorola), has reportedly fought in some of the fiercest battles throughout the conflict.<sup>90</sup> An estimated 150-200 men fight in the unit.<sup>91</sup> Its fighters took part in the operations at Ilovaisk<sup>92</sup> and the Donetsk Airport.<sup>93</sup> Sparta Battalion is an infantry unit and is meant to operate in a conventional capacity.

Another conventional, and heavily armed, DNR battalion is believed to be from Chechnya. The Vostok (East) Battalion arrived in May 2014 and established their headquarters in Donetsk.<sup>94</sup> Fighters in the Vostok Battalion come from Chechnya, South and North Ossetia, and Russia.<sup>95</sup> It is also particularly well-armed, having been seen with surface-to-air missiles, 30mm automatic grenade launchers, heavy machine guns, and anti-tank weapons separatist leaders claim they took from a Ukrainian military base.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Fedotov, "On the Reorganization of the Army of the DPR."

<sup>90</sup>Jambul Tsulaia, "Real Talk With Russia's Fake Super Soldier," *The Daily Beast*, March 29, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/29/real-talk-with-russia-s-fake-super-soldier.html>.

<sup>91</sup>Vyacheslav Hryun, "Кто с кем воюет на Донбассе в октябре," [Translated from Ukrainian] *Insider*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.theinsider.ua/politics/544551695677e/>.

<sup>92</sup>Lucian Kim, "Massacre at Ilovaisk," *Newsweek Global* 169, no. 19 (2014), 45.

<sup>93</sup>Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, "Ukraine Live Day 335: The Battle for Donetsk," *Interpreter Magazine*, January 18, 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-live-day-335-the-battle-for-donetsk/>.

<sup>94</sup>Claire Bigg, "Vostok Battalion, A Powerful New Player In Eastern Ukraine," *RFERL*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/vostok-battalion-a-powerful-new-player-in-eastern-ukraine/25404785.html>.

<sup>95</sup>Gabriela Baczynska, "More foreign fighters break cover among Ukraine separatists," *Reuters*, June 1, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-vostok-idUSKBN0EC1LL20140601>.

The amount of foreign fighters within the unit, and its advanced weaponry makes it more unique among the separatist forces.

Many of the pro-Russian militias are designed to be conventional infantry units. However, some of the groups also have mechanized capabilities. One such unit is the Oplot (which means “stronghold” in Russian) Battalion, commanded by Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the current prime minister of the self-declared DNR.<sup>97</sup> The group is equipped with several Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), which may have come from Russia.<sup>98</sup> Oplot Battalion also has Grad MLRS deployed around the city of Donetsk.<sup>99</sup> Unlike the infantry-based Sparta Battalion, Oplot is more of an armored unit that supports other separatist groups.

Volunteer units in the DNR are also significantly diverse in the number of fighters who join them. Some groups have between 1500 and 300 fighters, but others can number in the thousands. The Russian Orthodox Army, led by former Russian intelligence officer Igor Strelkov (real last name Girkin), is believed to have up to 4,000 members.<sup>100</sup> It has participated in operations around the Donetsk Airport and may have shot down a

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<sup>96</sup> Andrew Roth, “A Separatist Militia in Ukraine With Russian Fighters Holds a Key,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/05/world/europe/in-ukraine-separatist-militia-with-russian-fighters-holds-a-key.html>.

<sup>97</sup> James Coomarasamy, “Ukraine crisis: Donetsk rebels retain appetite for war,” *BBC*, October 3, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29480628>.

<sup>98</sup> Falcon Bjorn, “The Lost Legion: Tanks of the Oplot Battalion,” *Inform Napalm*, March 6, 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/en/the-lost-legion-tanks-of-the-oplot-battalion/>.

<sup>99</sup> Ruptly TV, “Ukraine: See DNR Oplot unit unleash GRAD missile barrage,” *YouTube* video, 0:59, February 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZOnj3zMiNc>.

<sup>100</sup> Albina Kovalyova, “Meet the Russian Orthodox Army, Ukrainian Separatists' Shock Troops,” *NBC News*, May 17, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/meet-russian-orthodox-army-ukrainian-separatists-shock-troops-n107426>.

Ukrainian military helicopter.<sup>101</sup> According to members of the unit, around 20 percent of the fighters are Russian, and the other 80 percent are local volunteers.<sup>102</sup> It is an infantry unit and is not known to have significant armored or artillery capabilities.

Some of the volunteer groups in the LNR have joined to form larger and more formal military units. One of the first units to combine smaller separatist militias under one name is the Army of the South-East, or South-East Army, which formed in Luhansk on April 6, 2014.<sup>103</sup> Originally led by Alexey Mozgrovi, it has several thousand members from around a dozen smaller battalions.<sup>104</sup> In December 2014, the unit was renamed the Corps of the People's Militia under the command of Major-General Sergei Ignatov.<sup>105</sup> Creating the Corps of the People's Militia is an attempt by the separatist government in Luhansk to bring the militias under a more unified command, similarly to the DNR's 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps. The Zarya ("Dawn") artillery brigade, which was created and led by current LNR president Igor Plotnytski, joined the official LNR military structure after its

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<sup>101</sup>"Pro-Russian rebels down Ukrainian fighter jet ahead of talks," *ENCA*, August 17, 2014, <http://www.enca.com/pro-russian-rebels-down-ukrainian-fighter-jet-ahead-talks>.

<sup>102</sup>Kovalyova, "Meet the Russian Orthodox Army, Ukrainian Separatists' Shock Troops."

<sup>103</sup>"Eastern Ukraine: Questions and Answers about the Laws of War," *Human Rights Watch*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/11/eastern-ukraine-questions-and-answers-about-laws-war>.

<sup>104</sup>Cameron Gordon Judge-Becker, "Meet pro-Kiev and pro-Russian battalions fighting in Ukraine," *Russia Direct*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/meet-pro-kiev-and-pro-russian-battalions-fighting-ukraine#explanation-5>.

<sup>105</sup>Vladimir Socor, "Secessionist Forces in Luhansk 'Republic': Order out of Chaos?," *The Jamestown Foundation*, January 9, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43382&cHash=813bb04d5c0d8fed0553112d37db891#.VyzhFvkrKUK](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43382&cHash=813bb04d5c0d8fed0553112d37db891#.VyzhFvkrKUK).



creation.<sup>106</sup> One of the oldest and most well-equipped militias, the Dawn Brigade has around 1,000 men.<sup>107</sup>

Ukrainian forces not only have to fight against the irregular volunteer separatist forces but also against professional, conventional Russian military forces equipped with superior weaponry and capabilities. Many of these units are sent to bases near Russia's border with Ukraine then cross over the border.<sup>108</sup> A variety of Russian soldiers are believed to be operating with the separatists, including special forces of both the GRU (Russian military intelligence) and the Federal Security Service (FSB, the successor to the KGB).<sup>109</sup>

Moscow denies any direct military involvement in Donetsk or Luhansk oblast. The Kremlin also claims that it has not provided advanced military equipment to separatist forces in the Donbas. Both NATO and independent analysts have challenged Russia's denials of its direct involvement in the fighting in eastern Ukraine.<sup>110</sup> In response to the accusations from the West, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has

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<sup>106</sup>Yaroslav Tynchenko, "'Armed Forces of Novorossiya'. Who is fighting against Ukraine?," *The Ukrainian Week*, February 21, 2015, <http://ukrainianweek.com/Security/130732>.

<sup>107</sup>Vladimir Socor, "Luhansk: The Other 'People's Republic' in Eastern Ukraine," *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 15, 2014, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42757&cHash=af03f3d3b4dffde979d4dd285f10a793#.VyyeOfkrKUL](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42757&cHash=af03f3d3b4dffde979d4dd285f10a793#.VyyeOfkrKUL);

<sup>108</sup>Andrew Higgins and Rick Gladstone, "More Bodies Possible at Ukraine Crash Site, Forensics Officials Say," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/23/world/europe/malaysia-airlines-jet-ukraine.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/23/world/europe/malaysia-airlines-jet-ukraine.html?_r=0).

<sup>109</sup> Col Douglas Mastriano and Lt Col Derek O'Malley, "A U.S. Army War College Analysis of Russian Strategy in Eastern Europe, an Appropriate U.S. Response, and the Implications for U.S. Landpower," *United States Army War College* (March 26, 2015), 54.

<sup>110</sup>Annie Gowen and Anne Gearan, "Russian armored columns said to capture key Ukrainian towns," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-and-ukraine-troops-battle-in-south-prompting-fears-of-widescale-invasion/2014/08/28/04b614f4-9a6e-40f4-aa21-4f49104cf0e4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-and-ukraine-troops-battle-in-south-prompting-fears-of-widescale-invasion/2014/08/28/04b614f4-9a6e-40f4-aa21-4f49104cf0e4_story.html).

challenged Kyiv to present facts that Russia is sending military equipment to the separatists, and said that “before demanding from us that we stop doing something, please present proof that we have done it.”<sup>111</sup> Moscow can counter these allegations because the forces it has deployed across the border often operate without insignia.

Since the summer of 2014, Russia has redeployed various troop formation to the Ukrainian border. Some of the units include the “20th, 58th and 41st Armies, and the 76th VDV (Airborne) Division, which participated in Georgia in 2008.”<sup>112</sup> In March 2015, US Army Europe Commander Ben Hodges estimated that twelve thousand Russian soldiers, including “military advisers, weapons operators, and combat troops” are active in eastern Ukraine.<sup>113</sup> NATO estimates from January 2015 place between 250 to 1000 GRU officers in eastern Ukraine that advise and assist separatist forces as well as operate sophisticated weapons systems.<sup>114</sup>

The introduction of advanced MBTs from Russia, either operated by pro-Russian or regular Russian soldiers, have had a significant impact on the fighting. According to Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the leader of the DNR, Russian reinforcements in August 2014 including “150 units of combat armor, including about 30 tanks - the rest were AIFVs (Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicles) and APCs... were inserted here at the most critical

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<sup>111</sup>Gabriela Baczynska, “Russia says no proof it sent troops, arms to east Ukraine,” *Reuters*, January 21, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-lavrov-idUSKBN0KU12Y20150121>.

<sup>112</sup>Mastriano & O’Malley, “A U.S. Army War College Analysis of Russian Strategy in Eastern Europe,” 52.

<sup>113</sup>Czuperski, et al., “Hiding in Plain Sight,” 15.

<sup>114</sup>Steven Pifer, et al. “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression,” *The Atlantic Council* (Atlantic Council: Washington, DC, 2015), 10.

moment."<sup>115</sup> Throughout the conflict, armored forces provided by Moscow have been critical in major victories against the ATO forces. Despite the importance of these forces, the Kremlin continues to deny they are operating in the Donbas.

### **Joint Regular And Irregular Operations In Syria And Ukraine**

Hybrid war involves not just regular and irregular soldiers fighting the same enemy. What separates hybrid war from other concepts is when all of these different capabilities are coordinating their operations to achieve the same objective, in the *same battle space*. This creates an environment where it is impossible to independently target the irregular from the regular forces during combat. The joint forces in Syria and Ukraine previously described have conducted numerous significant operations that illustrate this complexity in modern conflict.

In Syria, almost all major regime operations involve the SAA operating with at least one other irregular force that has been previously described. These combined forces operate across all of the regime's fronts. In October 2015, a senior Iraqi politician announced that a joint information center between Iraq, Syria, Russia, and Iran was established in Iraq.<sup>116</sup> Another joint operations room was reportedly established in Damascus following talks in Moscow.<sup>117</sup> Regions in the north, particularly in Latakia, Aleppo, and Idlib provinces provide the best examples of joint operations. One video posted online showed the leader of the IRGC-QF Qassem Suleimani addressing Iranian

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<sup>115</sup>Boris Nemtsov, "Putin. War," *Free Russia Foundation* (May 2015), 17.

<sup>116</sup>"Iran, Iraq, Russia, Syria to Set Up Joint Operations Room Soon," *FARS*, October 4, 2015, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940712001478>.

<sup>117</sup>Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

military officers and Hezbollah fighters in Latakia.<sup>118</sup> During a television interview on September 22, 2016, IRGC Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi said that during operations, Russia provides the aerial support for the ground units, which Safavi describes as “the Syrian army, Syrian popular forces, and some advisory forces and/or Hezbollah forces.”<sup>119</sup> Safavi also said that the on-the-ground intelligence collection for the airstrikes is conducted by units under the supervision of IRGC or Hezbollah operatives.<sup>120</sup>

A major offensive in Aleppo Province provides an example of the conventional SAA conducting a joint operation with the irregular IRGC. On October 15, 2015, the regime launched an offensive to strengthen its foothold in Aleppo city.<sup>121</sup> SAA forces, with Iranian proxy fighters, ended the multiyear siege of the Kuweires Airbase east of Aleppo City.<sup>122</sup> At the same time, additional SAA units supported by both Russian airstrikes and “2,000 Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi’a militia fighters” assaulted opposition-controlled villages south of Aleppo City.<sup>123</sup> According to opposition forces, Russian personnel also participated in the attack and “directly supervised the operation

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<sup>118</sup>Bill Roggio, “Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani rallies Iranian officers, Hezbollah in Syria.” *The Long War Journal*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/qods-force-commander-qassem-soleimani-rallies-iranian-officers-hezbollah-in-syria.php>.

<sup>119</sup>Amir Toumaj, “Commander: IRGC supplies intelligence to Russia for airstrikes in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, September 27, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/commander-irgc-supplies-intelligence-to-russia-for-airstrikes-in-syria.php>.

<sup>120</sup>Toumaj, “Commander: IRGC supplies intelligence to Russia for airstrikes in Syria,” <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/commander-irgc-supplies-intelligence-to-russia-for-airstrikes-in-syria.php>.

<sup>121</sup>Christopher Kozak, “Regime and Iranian Forces Launch Multi-Pronged Offensive in Aleppo,” *Institute for the Study of War*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/regime-and-iranian-forces-launch-multi-pronged-offensive-aleppo>.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

via a joint Russian-Iranian operations room.”<sup>124</sup> The October 2015 Aleppo offensive is an example of a conventional force (the SAA) augmented by irregular forces (IRGC, Hezbollah) conducting an assault supported by a third additional actor (Russian aircraft) within the same battle space.

A similar offense occurred in Idlib Province in October 2015. During an offensive in early October, two Hezbollah commanders were reportedly killed fighting with regime forces near Idlib.<sup>125</sup> The assault started on October 11, 2015, when regime forces supported by Hezbollah fighters and Russian air power, attempted to cut off the opposition in Idlib.<sup>126</sup> The fact that two Hezbollah commanders died in the fighting indicates that the group is directly involved combat and is not taking an ancillary role.

Operations conducted by pro-regime forces in the southern provinces of Qalamoun and Derra are similar to those in northern and central Syria. Hezbollah fighters, along with Iranian proxies and regime forces, began to retake strategic ground throughout the mountain range in Qalamoun in 2013.<sup>127</sup> By March 2014, Syrian forces reported that they had taken the last opposition stronghold in the Qalamoun Mountains at

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<sup>124</sup>Christopher Kozak, “Joint Syrian-Iranian-Russian Offensive Achieves Only Limited Initial Gains,” *Institute for the Study of War*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/joint-syrian-iranian-russian-offensive-achieves-only-limited-initial-gains>.

<sup>125</sup>Fred Lambert, “Two Hezbollah commanders killed fighting rebels in Syria's Idlib province,” *UPI*, October 13, 2015, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2015/10/13/Two-Hezbollah-commanders-killed-fighting-rebels-in-Syrias-Idlib-province/3091444758679/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/10/13/Two-Hezbollah-commanders-killed-fighting-rebels-in-Syrias-Idlib-province/3091444758679/).

<sup>126</sup>Fred Lambert, “Russian-backed pro-Assad forces regain territories across Syria,” *UPI*, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2015/10/11/Russian-backed-pro-Assad-forces-regain-territories-across-Syria/8181444587253/?spt=sec&or=tn](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/10/11/Russian-backed-pro-Assad-forces-regain-territories-across-Syria/8181444587253/?spt=sec&or=tn).

<sup>127</sup>Jamie Dettmer, “Hezbollah Prepares for Syria Showdown in al-Qalamoun,” *The Daily Beast*, October 29, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/10/29/hezbollah-prepares-for-syria-showdown-in-al-qalamoun.html>.

Yabroud.<sup>128</sup> After losing territory to the opposition in early 2015, the regime and Hezbollah reported regaining “control of 300 square kilometers in the region” in May 2015.<sup>129</sup> All three operations involved a combination of the SAA and Hezbollah coordinating their efforts to retake and control territory throughout Qalamoun but did not involve asymmetric tactics.

In Deraa Province, Assad's forces work directly with Iranian soldiers and Hezbollah. An offensive launched on February 3, 2015, in northwestern Derra was reportedly preceded by IRGC and Hezbollah activity in the region, including sleeper-cell operations.<sup>130</sup> On February 10<sup>th</sup>, “approximately 5,000 Syrian soldiers, Hezbollah fighters, and Iranian militiamen seized several towns and hills in northern Dera’a Province, including Deir al-Adas and Deir al-Makir, following the launch of a regime offensive on February 9.”<sup>131</sup> The Syrian Defense Minister and IRGC-QR commander Qassem Suleimani reportedly visited the frontlines during the operation.<sup>132</sup> Suleimani’s presence suggests a high level of command and control coordination between Syrian and

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<sup>128</sup>“Syria claims to have captured rebel stronghold on Lebanese border,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/16/syria-rebel-stronghold-lebanese-border-yabroud>.

<sup>129</sup>David Schenker & Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai, “Hezbollah’s Victory in Qalamoun,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-victory-in-qalamoun-winning-the-battle-losing-the-war>.

<sup>130</sup>Jennifer Cafarella, “Syria Situation Report: February 03-10, 2015,” *Institute for the Study of War*, February 10, 2015, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%202015%20Feb%203-10\\_v4.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%202015%20Feb%203-10_v4.pdf).

<sup>131</sup>Christopher Kozak, “Syria Situation Report: February 10-17, 2015,” *Institute for the Study of War*, February 17, 2015, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%202015%20Feb%2010-17\\_V4.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%202015%20Feb%2010-17_V4.pdf).

<sup>132</sup>Kozak, “Syria Situation Report: February 10-17, 2015,” [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%202015%20Feb%2010-17\\_V4.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%202015%20Feb%2010-17_V4.pdf).

Iranian leaders to launch a successful joint offensive that captured territory from the opposition.

Separatist offensives in Ukraine, backed by Russian forces, also provide useful examples of joint operations. The Ukrainian defeat at Ilovaisk in 2014 marks the turning point of the initial conflict and the first significant use of regular Russian soldiers in the Donbas. Prior to the battle at Ilovaisk in Donetsk oblast, the separatist forces were being pushed back and rapidly losing ground to the ATO.<sup>133</sup> Fighting in Ilovaisk started on August 18 when Ukrainian soldiers started an operation to seize the town to cut a rail line to Russia and separate the DNR and LNR stronghold.<sup>134</sup> ATO soldiers occupied half the town while conducting fierce close-quarters combat with separatists in the town.<sup>135</sup> The regular Ukrainian soldiers were bolstered with the volunteer Dnipro and Donbas battalions but were not able to evict the separatist forces from Ilovaisk.<sup>136</sup>

In less than a week, the ATO forces faced total encirclement and annihilation. Starting on August 23, separatist artillery and rockets from Grad MLRS started to land around the ATO positions.<sup>137</sup> On August 29, ATO forces started to withdraw after believing that they had secured safe passage through a corridor out of the town, but were attacked as they left the area.<sup>138</sup> The massive losses at Ilovaisk shocked Kyiv. An

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<sup>133</sup>Lucian Kim, "The Battle of Ilovaisk: Details of a Massacre Inside Rebel-Held Eastern Ukraine," *Newsweek*, November 4, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/14/battle-ilovaisk-details-massacre-inside-rebel-held-eastern-ukraine-282003.html>.

<sup>134</sup>Alec Luhn, "Anatomy of a Bloodbath," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/06/anatomy-of-a-bloodbath/>.

<sup>135</sup>Luhn, "Anatomy of a Bloodbath."

<sup>136</sup>Kim, "Massacre at Ilovaisk," 47.

<sup>137</sup>Luhn, "Anatomy of a Bloodbath."

official study conducted by the military prosecutors announced the official death toll at 366.<sup>139</sup> It took President Poroshenko four days to acknowledge the defeat publicly.<sup>140</sup> DNR soldiers in the town and the surrounding area, most likely backed by Russian regulars, were able to stop the ATO advance into the town and start to envelop their flanks. During the fighting in Ilovaik, the Ukrainian forces captured a T-72 before retreating from the town, just one example of Russian tanks being deployed to support separatist operations.<sup>141</sup> The separatists formed a cauldron, a Soviet-era term for a full encirclement, around the Ukrainian soldiers and then destroyed them as they attempted to leave the cauldron.<sup>142</sup>

Throughout most of the conflict, major Ukrainian defeats occurred when the separatists were able to isolate and encircle the ATO forces. The offensive against Ukrainian soldiers in Debaltseve also involved pro-Russian forces forming a cauldron around the ATO position, backed by Russian armor.<sup>143</sup> Separatist forces slowly started to push towards Debaltseve in early January 2015. The town of Debaltseve sits on a strategic railway hub that connects Donetsk to Luhansk and Russia.<sup>144</sup> Starting in late

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<sup>138</sup>Carlotta Gall, "Ukraine Town Bears Scars of Russian Offensive That Turned Tide in Conflict," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2014.

<sup>139</sup>"366 Ukrainian fighters killed in Battle for Ilovaik last August: Military," *UA Today*, August 5, 2015, <http://uatoday.tv/politics/battle-for-ilovaisk-one-year-on-469594.html>.

<sup>140</sup>Kim, "Massacre at Ilovaik," 44.

<sup>141</sup>Max Levin, "Ilovaik: Chronicle of an Escape," [translated from Ukrainian] *LB.ua*, September 1, 2014, [http://society.lb.ua/life/2014/09/01/277952\\_ilovaysk\\_hronika\\_vtech.html](http://society.lb.ua/life/2014/09/01/277952_ilovaysk_hronika_vtech.html).

<sup>142</sup>Dan Peleshuk, "Ukraine is still at war — and its bloodiest battle isn't over," *The Week*, September 2, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/574972/ukraine-still-war--bloodiest-battle-isnt-over>.

<sup>143</sup>Hugo Spaulding, "Putin's Next Objective in the Ukraine Crisis," *Institute for the Study of War*, February 3, 2015, 5.



January 2015, pro-Russian armored units started engaging Ukrainian forces outside the town.<sup>145</sup> On January 23-24, separatists seized the villages of Troitskoye and Svtlodarsk, located near the M-103 highway that connects Debaltseve to the Ukrainian stronghold at Artemivsk.<sup>146</sup> Initial maneuvers by the pro-Russian forces intended to isolate and eventually surround the ATO soldiers in Debaltseve and force a surrender.

The unique location of Debaltseve allowed the DNR and LNR to launch a significant combined operation to capture the city. Initial attempts to move on the village from the southwest in Donetsk oblast by the DNR did not achieve significant results.<sup>147</sup> To the east, LNR units started to make progress and on February 10, the village of Logvinovo, also located along the M103 highway and northeast of Debaltseve, fell to separatists.<sup>148</sup> By February 10, the Ukrainian forces were effectively caught in another cauldron. The M103 highway, the most effective means of escape or resupply, was threatened on both sides.

Ukrainian forces tried to hold out as long as possible but decided to withdraw instead of losing thousands of troops in the town. The order to retreat came days after the

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<sup>144</sup>Meredith Hoffman, "Ukraine Ceasefire Ignored as Fierce Battle for Debaltseve Continues to Rage," *Vice News*, February 15, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/ukraine-ceasefire-ignored-as-fierce-battle-for-debaltseve-continues-to-rage>.

<sup>145</sup>Thomas E. Ricks, "The lessons of Debaltseve: Armored vehicles still matter; but they need to be mobile, lethal, and survivable," *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/19/the-lessons-of-debaltseve-armored-vehicles-still-matter-but-they-need-to-be-mobile-lethal-and-survivable/>.

<sup>146</sup>Falcon Bjorn, "The Battle of the Debaltsevo Bulge," *Inform Napalm*, February 5, 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/en/battle-debaltsevo-bulge/>.

<sup>147</sup>Cassas\_eng, "The battle for Debalcevo. Results," *Live Journal*, March 2, 2015, <http://cassad-eng.livejournal.com/132367.html>.

<sup>148</sup>Miller, et al., "An Invasion by Any Other Name," 39.

signing of the Minsk II ceasefire on February 14, 2015.<sup>149</sup> On February 18, ATO forces started to retreat from Debaltseve, and similarly to Ilovaisk; separatist forces opened fire on the convoys with artillery and tanks.<sup>150</sup> Using effective combined arms of infantry, artillery, and tanks, the DNR and LNR units conducted a joint encirclement operation and delivered a crushing blow to Kyiv. Separatist fighters admitted after the Battle of Debaltseve that Russian tanks had been decisive in winning the fight.<sup>151</sup> According to Kyiv, 66 Ukrainian soldiers were killed and 300 hundred wounded while DNR claimed that the Ukrainians suffered over 3,000 killed during the battle.<sup>152</sup> It is likely that both sides altered the numbers to support their narrative, but it is sufficient to say that the ATO suffered significant casualties and an embarrassing retreat.

At both Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, DNR and LNR forces were able to overpower and outmaneuver the ATO. These successes are largely due to the support provided by Russian forces operating alongside the separatists. According to Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the leader of the DNR, Russian reinforcements in August 2014 including “150 units of combat armor, including about 30 tanks - the rest were AIFVs (Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicles) and APCs... were inserted here at the most critical

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<sup>149</sup>“Ukraine crisis: Minsk ceasefire 'generally holding', say EU leaders,” *BBC*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31475744>.

<sup>150</sup>Alec Luhn & Oksana Grytesnko, “Ukrainian soldiers share horrors of Debaltseve battle after stinging defeat,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/18/ukrainian-soldiers-share-horrors-of-debaltseve-battle-after-stinging-defeat>.

<sup>151</sup>Tom Parfitt, “Separatist fighter admits Russian tanks, troops 'decisive in eastern Ukraine battles,’” *The Telegraph*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11506774/Separatist-fighter-admits-Russian-tanks-troops-decisive-in-eastern-Ukraine-battles.html>.

<sup>152</sup>Miller, et al. “Invasion by Any Other Name,” 40.

moment."<sup>153</sup> The introduction of regular Russian armored unit halted the ATO advance and allowed the encirclement of Ilovaisk. Russian tanks at Debaltseve provided the same advantage for the separatists, all while Moscow denied any direct involvement in the fighting.

### **Asymmetric Tactics Used By The Syrian Regime And Ukrainian Separatists**

Supporters of the hybrid war concept argue that another unique characteristic of the concept is the use of both conventional and asymmetric tactics and operations by the joint forces. Asymmetric tactics range from using irregular forces to infiltrate cities to terrorist operations. The Syrian regime utilizes the capabilities of its irregular forces to mount a variety of asymmetric operations against the opposition, including infiltrations, kidnappings, and the use of barrel bombs. Separatists in Ukraine have launched a number of bombing campaigns in major cities controlled by the government, and Russia is suspected of being behind significant electronic warfare operations. These asymmetric capabilities are sometimes used in support of major operations or to generally weaken the resolve of the opponent.

Fighting around al-Qusayr, Homs province, provides a useful example of regime forces using asymmetric tactics. In April 2013, a coordinated effort between the SAA and Hezbollah forced the opposition into al-Qusayr and isolated them in the city.<sup>154</sup> Regime forces combined with Hezbollah fighters and the NDF assault al-Qusayr in early May

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<sup>153</sup>Boris Nemtsov, "Putin. War," *Free Russia Foundation* (May 2015), 17.

<sup>154</sup>"Syria Update: The Fall of al-Qusayr," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 6, 2013 <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr..>

2013, supported by regime artillery and air support.<sup>155</sup> During the attack, the irregular forces infiltrated the city before armored-supported units moved in to secure it.<sup>156</sup> The capture of al-Qusayr involved Hezbollah fighters launching the main assault while being directly supported by SAA artillery and airstrikes.<sup>157</sup> NDF and Hezbollah units were able to launch a successful, asymmetric infiltration mission into the city to help neutralize defensive positions before SAA armored units conducted the conventional main assault.

A joint offensive in Quneitra Province in March 2015 also involved irregular operations. Regime forces along with IRGC and Shia militias “launched a violent attack on all towns and villages in the northern countryside of Daraa, the countryside of Quneitra and the liberated villages in the western countryside of Damascus.”<sup>158</sup> Part of the attack involved heavy rocket, artillery, and air strikes along with the use of barrel bombs.<sup>159</sup> In mid-October “the Syrian army, Hezbollah reinforcements, and local militias loyal to the regime” held back an opposition offensive, with Hezbollah reportedly contributing over 500 fighters to the defense.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup>“Syria Update: The Fall of al-Qusayr,” *Institute for the Study of War*, June 6, 2013 <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>.

<sup>156</sup>“Syria Update: The Fall of al-Qusayr,” ISW, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>.

<sup>157</sup>Nicolas Blanford, “The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped The Balance,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, August 27, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-battle-for-qusayr-how-the-syrian-regime-and-hizb-allah-tipped-the-balance>.

<sup>158</sup>Al-Hayat, “Assad Forces, Hezbollah Advance in South of Syria,” *The Syrian Observer*, March 2, 2015, [http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28736/Assad\\_Forces\\_Hezbollah\\_Advance\\_South\\_Syria](http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28736/Assad_Forces_Hezbollah_Advance_South_Syria).

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Nadav Pollak, “Russia in Southern Syria: Israeli and Jordanian Concerns,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-in-southern-syria-israeli-and-jordanian-concerns>.

The fighting in Quneitra illustrates the ability of the regime to use combined regular and irregular forces and the use of conventional and asymmetric operations or tactics. Regular SAA units combined with the irregular IRGC and Hezbollah forces to conducted offensive and defensive operations. During those operations, the combined pro-regime forces used conventional tactics along with the asymmetrical tactical use of barrel bombs.

After losing much of the countryside in northern Syria in 2013, pro-regime militias allegedly “kidnapped hundreds of civilians from rebel-controlled villages around Idlib city.”<sup>161</sup> Kidnapping civilians allow the regime to disrupt opposition plans without having to devote forces to the battlefield. According to the UN Human Rights Council in 2014, “government forces continued to perpetrate massacres and conduct widespread attacks on civilians, systematically committing murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearance amounting to crimes against humanity.”<sup>162</sup> In the same report, it is noted that “indiscriminate and disproportionate aerial bombardment and shelling led to mass civilian casualties and spread terror.”<sup>163</sup> The SAA and regime allies have used terrorism as a deliberate tactic in an attempt to force the civilian population to support the government and to combat the opposition.

Assad’s regime has also used chemical weapons against both civilian and opposition targets throughout the country. One Human Rights Watch report notes that “Syrian government forces used toxic chemicals in several barrel bomb attacks in Idlib

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<sup>161</sup>Holliday, “The Assad Regime,” 31.

<sup>162</sup>Human Rights Council, “Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” A/HRC/27/60, August 13, 2014, 1.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid.

governorate between March 16 and 31, 2015.”<sup>164</sup> Human Rights Watch investigated a sarin gas attack in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013, and determined that the evidence strongly suggested that the Syrian government conducted the attack.<sup>165</sup> The deadliest attack occurred on August 21, 2013, in Ghouta, when in a single chemical attack more than 5,000 people were affected and around 1,500 were killed.<sup>166</sup> While the use of chemical weapons against civilians or in a conflict is not a new phenomenon in war, it illustrates the regime’s deliberate use of asymmetric capabilities to further their military objectives in the civil war.

Throughout the conflict, the regime has depended on air power to protect itself and to strike opposition positions. Barrel bombs have become a standard tool in the regime arsenal to cut costs and expand the use of its air fleet.<sup>167</sup> Essentially, barrel bombs are barrels filled with explosives dropped from planes or helicopters. They are highly imprecise and are indiscriminately used by the regime in areas with high population density where opposition fighters are.<sup>168</sup> Government forces consistently and “systematically target civilians and civilian infrastructure, demonstrating the intent to kill,

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<sup>164</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Chemicals Used in Idlib Attacks,” April 13, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/13/syria-chemicals-used-idlib-attacks>.

<sup>165</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Syria,” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/13/syria-chemicals-used-idlib-attacks>.

<sup>166</sup>Jett Goldsmith, “Chemical Crisis,” April 17, 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/04/27/chemical-crisis-a-timeline-of-cw-attacks-in-syrias-civil-war/>.

<sup>167</sup>Human Rights Council, “Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” 16.

<sup>168</sup>Human Rights Council, “Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” 16.

wound and maim.”<sup>169</sup> The use of barrel bombs and heavy bombardments are intended to soften opposition military positions as well as spread terror amongst the population. In theory, either the civilians will leave the area or turn against the opposition to stop the attacks. Either way, Assad gains more control and weakens the opposition by using terrorist tactics.

Unlike the fighting in Syria, which features several instances of asymmetric operations at the tactical and operational level, asymmetrical tactics are used at the strategic level in Ukraine. Independent partisan organizations attack Ukrainian infrastructure outside of the Donbas, but with the ultimate objective of destabilizing the government in Kyiv. Russian special forces deployed to Crimea to secure key buildings but operated in a more asymmetric than conventional manner.

There are two main sabotage groups that operate outside of the territory controlled by the DNR and the LNR, one in the city of Kharkiv and another around the city of Odesa. Both groups have launched bombing campaigns that largely target infrastructure and buildings, but rarely people. Out of the two groups, the most vocal and active is the one operating in Kharkiv. The Kharkiv Partisans, as they call themselves, have been active since the fall of 2014.<sup>170</sup> According to media reports, the partisans are responsible for over 40 bombings that have resulted in at least five deaths.<sup>171</sup> In February 2015, the group claimed responsibility for detonating a mine during a parade celebrating the

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<sup>169</sup>Human Rights Council, “Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” 16.

<sup>170</sup>Howard Amos, “Ukraine fears spread of separatist conflict amid hostility towards Kiev,” *The Guardian*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/ukraine-separatist-conflict-odesa>.

<sup>171</sup>Amos, “Ukraine fears spread of separatist conflict amid hostility towards Kiev.”

anniversary of the Maidan that killed four people and the bombing of a local battalion commander's car that wounded the man and his wife.<sup>172</sup> Ukrainian security services believe that the group is equipped and controlled by Russian special forces operating out of Belgorod, Russia.<sup>173</sup> It is difficult to determine if the Kharkiv Partisans are indeed under orders from the Russian military. However, their activities do target pro-Kyiv organizations and ATO supporters.

The overall goal of the organization is to “liberate” the people of Kharkiv. In an interview with *Time*, Filipp Ekozyants, a former wedding singer and spokesman for the partisans, stated that the bombings in the city are conducted to weaken the authorities and inspire residents to join the separatist movement.<sup>174</sup> The targets of the bombings are mainly military and industrial installations in the city of Kharkiv and the surrounding region.<sup>175</sup> Ekozyants claims that his organization is part of the same network as the separatists in Donetsk, and they are fighting for the same cause.<sup>176</sup> His statement is interesting because it implies that the DNR leadership is ordering the bombings. Whether or not this is true, there is a reasonable chance that the Kharkiv Partisans are at least in contact with the DNR and share the same eventual objective of reuniting Ukraine with Russia.

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<sup>172</sup> “In the Fold,” *The Economist*, April 11, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21648033-ukraines-second-city-shows-no-risk-rebelling-it-far-secure-fold>.

<sup>173</sup> Maxim Tucker, “Russia Launches Next Deadly Phase of Hybrid War on Ukraine,” *Newsweek*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/04/10/russia-launches-next-deadly-phase-hybrid-war-ukraine-318218.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Simon Shuster, “Meet the Pro-Russian ‘Partisans’ Waging a Bombing Campaign in Ukraine,” *Time*, April 10, 2015, <http://time.com/3768762/pro-russian-partisans-ukraine/>.

<sup>175</sup> Shuster, “Meet the Pro-Russian ‘Partisans’ Waging a Bombing Campaign in Ukraine.”

<sup>176</sup> Shuster, “Meet the Pro-Russian ‘Partisans’ Waging a Bombing Campaign in Ukraine.”



A group similar to the Kharkiv Partisans is believed to be operating in and around the city of Odesa. Unlike in Kharkiv, there is no spokesman or video claims of responsibility for bombings in the city. Between July 2014 and January 2015, there were nine bombings, with seven taking place in December.<sup>177</sup> Many of the attacks target the offices of pro-Ukrainian organizations or volunteer battalion and typically occur at night to avoid causing casualties.<sup>178</sup> Other attacks have targeted railway lines and fuel tankers.<sup>179</sup> Ukrainian security officials claim that bombings are carried out by pro-Russian saboteurs to destabilize the country.<sup>180</sup> The targets and *modus operandi* of the incidents in Odesa share similar characteristics to those in Kharkiv. Both groups attempt to avoid casualties and specifically target pro-Kyiv organizations or infrastructure.

Regular Russian soldiers have also conducted asymmetric operations in the region. When unidentified gunmen appeared in Crimea in February 2014, Moscow denied they were Russian soldiers. President Putin argued that the equipment carried by the gunmen could be bought in a military surplus store.<sup>181</sup> The men appeared to be regular Russian soldiers without insignia and quickly received the nickname ‘little green men’ by the Ukrainian military due to the color of their uniforms.<sup>182</sup> A year after the

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<sup>177</sup>“Odessa Bombings Show Separatists' Limitations,” *STRATFOR*, January 8, 2015, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/odessa-bombings-show-separatists-limitations>.

<sup>178</sup> Dan Peleschuk, “Here's another part of Ukraine that Russia is allegedly terrorizing,” *Global Post*, April 16, 2015, <http://www.globalpost.com/article/6518432/2015/04/16/odessa-ukraine-explosions>.

<sup>179</sup>Christopher Miller, “Mysterious bombing rocks Ukrainian port city of Odessa,” *Mashable*, January 5, 2015, <http://mashable.com/2015/01/05/explosion-in-odessa-ukraine/#9QkmJpIEGkq0>.

<sup>180</sup>Miller, “Mysterious bombing rocks Ukrainian port city of Odessa.”

<sup>181</sup>Katie Stallard, “Putin Comes Clean On Crimea’s Little Green Men,” *Sky News*, March 10, 2015, <http://news.sky.com/story/1442038/putin-comes-clean-on-crimeas-little-green-men>.

annexation of Crimea, Putin admitted to ordering military forces into Crimea to returning the peninsula to Russia in late February after Yanukovich fled the country.<sup>183</sup> Within days, Russian Spetsnaz (special forces) units deployed to Russia's Black Sea Naval Base in Sevastopol.<sup>184</sup> This admission directly conflicts with the initial statements by Putin and the Kremlin following the referendum in Crimea.

Putin justified the deployment of soldiers to Crimea as a peacekeeping measure rather than an invasion. According to Putin, the armed forces were sent to Crimea to block Ukrainian soldiers stationed there "not for the purpose of forcing people to participate in the vote... but to prevent bloodshed, and to allow people to express their personal views on how they would like to see their own and their children's future."<sup>185</sup> The soldiers deployed to Crimea were also visibly well-armed, which deterred Ukrainian forces from moving against them.<sup>186</sup> Sending heavily armed, but unidentified gunmen, allowed Moscow to prevent the Ukrainian military from countering the pro-Russian sections of the population. By the time the referendum was held, the peninsula was largely under the control of Russian and pro-Russian fighters. At the time, Moscow was able to deny direct involvement plausibly because the special forces soldiers lacked any identifiable insignia.

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<sup>182</sup>"Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot," *BBC*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>.

<sup>183</sup>Simon Shuster, "Putin's Confessions on Crimea Exposes Kremlin Media," *Time*, March 20, 2015, <http://time.com/3752827/putin-media-kremlin-crimea-ukraine/>.

<sup>184</sup>Bret Perry, "Non-Linear Warfare in Ukraine: The Critical Role of Information Operations and Special Operations," *Small Wars Journal*, August 14, 2015, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/non-linear-warfare-in-ukraine-the-critical-role-of-information-operations-and-special-opera>.

<sup>185</sup>"Putin Admits Russian Troops Role in Crimea Annexation," *VOA*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/putin-admits-russian-troop-role-in-crimea-annexation/2523186.html>.

<sup>186</sup>Perry, "Non-Linear Warfare in Ukraine."

## **Creating Economic And Political Pressure To Support Military Operations**

The incorporation of non-military tools, such as electronic or cyber operations, information campaigns, and economic pressure is another characteristic of hybrid war. Assad's regime's two main tools for exerting economic and political pressure on the opposition are sieges and ceasefires. Sieges allow the government to target the economic capabilities and public support centers of the opposition. Ceasefires provide the regime with the ability to increase international pressure on opposition forces. The separatists in Ukraine also benefit from internationally organized ceasefires, as well as advanced electronic warfare and cyber capabilities. Political dynamics between Moscow and Kyiv place additional stress on the Ukrainian government as it fights in the Donbas.

Sieges are a critical part of the regime's campaign to put economic and political pressure on the opposition. Within the context of the Syrian conflict, a siege is defined as "when armed forces cut off access to a populated area, blocking the entry of food and medicine and preventing the free movement of civilians into or out of the area, including the evacuation of people in need of urgent medical care."<sup>187</sup> The regime is attempting to reduce the opposition's ability to fight by preventing necessary aid and food from being sent into the suburbs. This fits within the third criteria of hybrid war, the use of non-military capabilities like economic and political pressure. Extended sieges may reduce popular support for the opposition in these areas and force the opposition to come to terms for aid to be delivered to the suburbs.

According to PAX and the Syria Institute, two international organizations that closely monitor and report on the besieged areas, there were more than one million

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<sup>187</sup>"About Siege Watch." *Siege Watch*, <http://siegewatch.org/about-the-siege-watch/>.

Syrians in siege locations in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib provinces as of May 2016.<sup>188</sup> Another 1.4 million people live in areas that are at risk of becoming completely besieged by regime forces.<sup>189</sup> One of the most recent sieges occurred on July 7, 2016, Assad's forces took critical ground outside the city of Aleppo, and effectively besieged the opposition within Aleppo.<sup>190</sup> Throughout the civil war, regime forces have encircled enemy positions to prevent aid from entering opposition strongholds and cutting any economic prospects to the cities.

International peace talks and ceasefires also provide the government with the ability to put political pressure on opposition leaders. In 2016, the SAA announced a unilateral ceasefire to celebrate Eid el-Fitr, the end of Ramadan.<sup>191</sup> However, international observers noted that regime forces continued to attack opposition positions. In the last day of the alleged ceasefire, at least 50 people were killed by air strikes and artillery bombardments.<sup>192</sup> Assad can deny that his military is breaking the ceasefire, and use any instances when the opposition fights back as an example of them not attempting to work with the government to find a diplomatic solution.

Unlike the Syrian civil war, which typically focuses on military action, the incorporation of non-military tools, such as electronic or cyber operations, information

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<sup>188</sup>“Siege Watch,” *Siege Watch*, <http://siegewatch.org/#10/33.6501/36.1951>.

<sup>189</sup>“Siege Watch,” *Siege Watch*, <http://siegewatch.org/#10/33.6501/36.1951>.

<sup>190</sup>Lisa Barrington, “Air strikes kill 22 in Syria's Idlib province during ceasefire – monitor,” *Reuters*, July 8, 2016, <http://news.trust.org/item/20160708121958-pz17o/>.

<sup>191</sup>“Syrian government 'violates' Eid ceasefire,” *Al Jazeera*, July 6, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/syrian-government-declares-day-ceasefire-160706091945528.html>.

<sup>192</sup>Lisa Barrington, “Almost 50 killed in Syria on ceasefire's last day: monitor,” *Reuters*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib-idUSKCN0ZO1BZ>.

campaigns, and economic pressure, is a critical component of the fighting in Ukraine. Political instability throughout the country provides Russia with the ability to put internal and external political pressure on Kyiv. Ceasefires brokered by the international community appear to benefit the separatists more than the ATO forces, and allows Moscow to directly influence the politics in the Donbas.

The first ceasefire was called after the dynamics of the fighting in eastern Ukraine significantly changed. In August 2014, ATO forces were rapidly advancing in separatist territory, and by August 19, the DRN and LNR lost three-fourths of their originally claimed territory, until the introduction of substantial Russian military equipment and regular forces.<sup>193</sup> An estimated 4,000 regular Russian soldiers crossed the border with tanks and quickly halted the ATO advances.<sup>194</sup> Separatist forces, now bolstered by Russian troops, forced the Ukrainian troops to retreat until a ceasefire was reached in Minsk, Belarus on September 5, 2014.<sup>195</sup> ATO forces may have been able to break the separatist leaders' will before the middle of August, but after the deployment of Russian soldiers, the DNR and LRN solidified their positions.

Known as the Minsk Agreement, this ceasefire was not to last. In many areas, such as around the Donetsk Airport, fighting did not slow down.<sup>196</sup> The conflict would escalate until February 2015 when another ceasefire brokered by France and Germany

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<sup>193</sup>Nemtsov, "Putin. War," 17.

<sup>194</sup>Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova, and Damon Wilson, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine," *The Atlantic Council* (Atlantic Council: Washington D.C.), 5.

<sup>195</sup>Steven Pifer, et al. "Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression," *The Atlantic Council* (Atlantic Council: Washington, DC, 2015), 2.

<sup>196</sup>Pifer, et al. "Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression," 2.

was signed once again in Minsk.<sup>197</sup> Under the Minsk II agreement, separatists gained control of an additional 500 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory and assurances by Kyiv that political steps would be taken to recognize the DNR and LNR.<sup>198</sup> As of this writing, the Minsk II agreement is still in effect but the political aspects have yet to be implemented, and separatist territory has not significantly expanded.

Political pressure is put on Kyiv at the same time that Russian and separatist forces are launching offensive operations in the Donbas. The first Minsk Agreement was supposed to stop the fighting and allow discussions between Kyiv and the DNR and LNR to take place. Instead, separatist offensive maneuvers increased, and Ukraine forces lost ground while the ceasefire was supposed to be implemented. Separatist and Russian forces seized even more territory during negotiations for the second Minsk Agreement. Minsk II came into effect on February 15, 2015, but three days later separatist forces seized Debaltseve.<sup>199</sup> The ceasefires and political pressure prevented Kyiv from using its full military capability to stop the offensive because the government did not want to appear to be the first side to break the ceasefire.

Throughout the conflict in the Donbas, Ukrainian forces have noted significant electronic warfare and cyber operations against its forces and the country's infrastructure. Electronic operations targeting Ukrainian military forces have occurred since the annexation of Crimea. Once Russian forces started arriving in Crimea, Ukrainian soldiers

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<sup>197</sup>Czuperski, et al. "Hiding in Plain Sight," 5.

<sup>198</sup>Czuperski, et al. "Hiding in Plain Sight," 5.

<sup>199</sup>Hugo Spaulding, "Russian-Backed Offensive In Ukraine Looms As Ceasefire Breaks," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 28, 2015, 2.

reported being unable to use their radios and phones for hours at a time.<sup>200</sup> Russian electronic capabilities regularly block radar and GPS signals and disrupt command-and-control networks.<sup>201</sup> These jamming capabilities reduce the Ukrainian forces' ability to launch effective counter-battery artillery fire and communicate during operations. Electronic warfare capabilities usually support separatist assaults and provide an additional advantage over the Ukrainian military.

Critical infrastructure within Ukraine has also been the target of cyber-attacks during the conflict. The most significant event took place in the Ivano-Frankivsk region in Western Ukraine on December 23, 2015.<sup>202</sup> Unidentified hackers took control of the power grid computer system and shut down 30 substations, cutting power to more than 230,000 residents in the middle of a cold winter.<sup>203</sup> Ukrainian intelligence services blamed Russia for the attack, but it remains unclear who is responsible for the incident.<sup>204</sup> Regardless, the cyber operations are clearly anti-Kyiv and seek to further destabilize the government while they are fighting the separatists.

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<sup>200</sup>Laurie Moe Buckhout, "Modern Russian Electronic Warfare," *DRS Technologies*, 2016, <http://www.drs.com/sitrep/q1-2016-the-invisible-fight/modern-russian-electronic-warfare/>.

<sup>201</sup>Joe Gould, "Electronic Warfare: What US Army Can Learn From Ukraine," *Defense News*, August 4, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/warfare/2015/08/02/us-army-ukraine-russia-electronic-warfare/30913397/>.

<sup>202</sup>Kim Zetter, "Inside the Cunning, Unprecedented Hack of Ukraine's Power Grid," *Wired*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/inside-cunning-unprecedented-hack-ukraines-power-grid/>.

<sup>203</sup>Zetter, "Inside the Cunning, Unprecedented Hack of Ukraine's Power Grid," *Wired*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/inside-cunning-unprecedented-hack-ukraines-power-grid/>.

<sup>204</sup>*Ibid.*

## **Complex, Not Hybrid, Conflicts In Syria And Ukraine**

The conflicts in Syria and Ukraine have both been called hybrid wars, neither fully fits within the established definitions of the concept. At times, there are some regime operations in Syria that meet many of the qualifications for hybrid war, but ultimately fail. Ukraine has few instances that meet the characteristics of the concept. However, what these case studies do illustrate is the complexity of the conflicts and the new challenges that they present.

Fighting in Damascus provides the best examples of the multifaceted operations in Syria. Regular and unconventional forces all operate together, using conventional and asymmetric tactics, to fight the opposition around the capital. Economic pressure is applied to opposition-controlled areas through the use of sieges. All of these capabilities are used around Damascus with the ultimate objective of regaining control of the suburbs around the capital.

In the Damascus suburbs, the regime creates pressure on opposition forces by launching “including highly destructive artillery bombardments and air raids.”<sup>205</sup> Former opposition fighters have switched allegiances to Assad, such as Jaysh al-Wafa (Loyalist Army), created via the government’s “Reconciliation Committees.”<sup>206</sup> Jaysh al-Wafa uses insurgent and terrorist tactics when attacking opposition forces in Damascus and Eastern

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<sup>205</sup>Nicolas A. Heras, “Jaysh al-Islam and the Battle for Damascus,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 21, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews%5Bany\\_of\\_the\\_words%5D=Damascus&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44303&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=c2dd16d724f3c2ed1c4b53104df867b8#.VmNyv\\_krKM8](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=Damascus&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44303&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=c2dd16d724f3c2ed1c4b53104df867b8#.VmNyv_krKM8).

<sup>206</sup>Heras, “Jaysh al-Islam and the Battle for Damascus.”



Ghouta.<sup>207</sup> Instead of overextending the SAA forces tasked with protecting Assad, the regime uses the militias to launch strikes against the opposition.

The fighting in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar demonstrates the regime's ability to use a variety of conventional and asymmetric capabilities within the same battle space. In Eastern Ghouta, "the regime has also conducted a systematic effort to neutralize other opposition-held neighborhoods through sieges, starvation," and the use of chemical weapons.<sup>208</sup> Jobar is targeted by SAA heavy artillery, airstrikes, and ballistic missile attacks on a daily basis, and "both sides have used 'tunnel bomb' attacks to burrow explosives underneath opposing strongholds."<sup>209</sup> In many neighborhoods, the fighting is a mix of indiscriminate bombing, urban warfare, and terrorist attacks conducted by the SAA and its irregular allies.

Separatist operations in Eastern Ukraine include many of the characteristics of hybrid war, but not all aspects are involved in every operation. The major engagements at Ilovaisk and Debaltseve provide the best examples of hybrid war. At Debaltseve, the irregular separatist forces were supported by conventional Russian armored units<sup>210</sup> and advanced electronic warfare capabilities<sup>211</sup>, to defeat the Ukrainian forces. However, separatist operations in the Donbas do not feature many asymmetric tactics. This is a critical component of hybrid warfare that is missing in many of the separatist operations. Partisan groups in Kharkiv and Odesa provide the ability for separatists to launch

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<sup>207</sup>Ibid.

<sup>208</sup>Kozak, "An Army in All Corners," 24.

<sup>209</sup>Kozak, "An Army in All Corners," 25.

<sup>210</sup>Miller, et al. "Invasion by Any Other Name," 40.

<sup>211</sup>Miller, et al. "Invasion by Any Other Name," 38.

asymmetric attacks, but so far they have not been in support of major operations in the Donbas. While the separatists have not used many asymmetric tactics, they maintain asymmetric capabilities that can be used in the future.

## PREPARING FOR FUTURE COMPLEX CONFLICTS

### A New Type Of War

Military strategists from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz have viewed war as taking place on a linear battlefield; hybrid war does not follow this prescription. There are numerous factors that influence war and can provide advantages, but in the end, war was generally seen as one armed force fighting another armed force. The type of an armed force can range from a terrorist organization to a nation's military, but the conflict itself is linear in nature.

Hybrid warfare is more complex than using just an armed force to attack another armed force. Irregular forces provide new ways to exploit the weaknesses of a conventional force. Political, economic, and cyber capabilities provide non-military tools allow one side to put additional pressures on an opponent. All of these different abilities are applied at the same time, within the same battle space. Hybrid war allows the advantages of each capability to be used while countering those enjoyed by the enemy. Once the US military started to dominate the post-Cold War world, it is likely that potential adversaries understood that it would be difficult and costly to take on the American forces in a linear, conventional fight. Hybrid warfare is one way in which US advantages can be countered and negated.

However, the usefulness of the concept to the policymaker is arguably limited. There is still considerable debate among analysts, academics, and officials over what a hybrid war even is. Hybrid war is conceptually new, but hybrid conflicts involve many of the same issues that US policymakers and strategists have been facing throughout history.

Even if a standard definition is established, it is unlikely that future conflicts will fit within the established parameters.

The real usefulness of the hybrid war is how discussions of the concept have illustrated the growing complexity of modern and future conflicts. Fighting in Syria and Ukraine shows that the line between conventional and unconventional forces and operations are becoming increasingly blurred. Future opponents are likely going to use a number of political, economic, and cyber capabilities that the US has not had to face in previous conflicts.

### **Lessons From The Wars In Syria And Ukraine**

The Syrian and Ukrainian case studies provide examples of how war is becoming more complex and the challenges that the US may experience in future conflicts. Each conflict is unique and highlights how different capabilities can be used in new ways on the battlefield. Integrated regular and irregular forces are being deployed into the same battle space that use a variety of conventional and unconventional tactics.

Simultaneously, political and economic pressure is being applied overtly and covertly to reduce the opponent's ability counter the military forces on the ground. New cyber and electronic warfare capabilities also provide a new tool that adds more complexity to the conflict.

Both conflicts illustrate combined forces being used at the strategic, operational, and tactical level. The Syrian Army has integrated irregular forces on all of its fronts, and almost all operations use combined forces. Russian and separatist forces in Ukraine are more focused on fighting together at the tactical and operational level than the strategic.

The partisan groups provide the asymmetric capabilities, but they are not used outside of the strategic level.

Fighting in Syria has unique characteristics that are different from what is seen in Ukraine. In Syria, the conventional and irregular forces operate overtly and only make limited attempts to hide information. Russia and Iran do attempt to limit how much information is available regarding their troop deployments and how involved their soldiers are, but neither country denies involvement in the war. Hezbollah, a US-designated terrorist organization, openly fights alongside regime forces throughout the country. The regime regularly launches conventional and asymmetric operations with the SAA combined with irregular forces.

Pro-regime forces illustrated in Damascus, al-Qusayr, and Quneitra that combined forces using different tactics, including terrorist attacks, can operate effectively. The use of terrorism during military operations may occur in future conflicts and only makes the battlefield more complex. Hybrid war requires military forces to have the resources to effectively defend against several different types of conflict, all at the same time. In future conflicts, US forces may have to be able to conduct conventional and counter-terrorist operations at the same to counter a hybrid threat.

The fighting in Ukraine is an example of complex conflict that emphasizes covert conventional forces and capabilities. Unlike in Syria, Russia categorically denies any direct military involvement in the Donbas. Moscow insists that it has not deployed any regular forces across the border and that the separatists are operating on their own. This ambiguity limits how much support the US can provide to the government in Kyiv because Russia can continue to provide covert support without the US being able to

respond in kind. Ukrainian forces have to fight against irregular separatists backed by Russian armored units and advanced military capabilities. Major separatist victories all occurred with significant support from the regular, conventional Russian military. US forces in the future may become engaged in a similar situation where the main conventional enemy is working with irregular forces, but covertly, and an escalation of force may not be possible without potentially starting an even larger conflict.

Electronic warfare is becoming more advanced and can significantly reduce technological advantages in future wars. Jamming technology in Ukraine shut down military communication networks and prevented effective counter-battery fire during separatist maneuvers. The US military relies on digital communications and has not faced an enemy in recent conflicts with effective electronic warfare capabilities. In the future, this may not be the case, and the US and its allies need to be prepared to fight in an environment with limited or no digital communications.

Cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure may also occur in the future. The attack in Ukraine that shut down the power grid did not occur at the tactical level in Donbas, but at the strategic level, and proves that infrastructure is vulnerable to cyber operations. Future hybrid operations may include a cyber-attack that shuts down critical systems before, or during, an attack at the tactical and operational levels. Cyber-attacks could be like the one in Ukraine, where power is cut to a large segment of the population, causing the government to divert resources and time to fixing the damage from where the main hybrid operation is.

Ukraine's cyber-attack also illustrates how difficult it is to attribute responsibility for cyber operations. It is possible that Russia was behind the attack, and it would make

sense given the current situation in the Donbas, but so far the perpetrator(s) of the attack have yet to be identified. During a hybrid war, cyber-attacks could target the US without Washington being able to respond because the attacker is unable to be identified.

The Syrian and Ukraine case studies both show complex the security environment is in modern conflicts. Fighting in these increasingly tangled conflicts requires the ability to counter conventional and asymmetrical capabilities at the same time in the same battle space. However, military operations are only one facet of war. Controlling information at the local and international level is a critical component of complex conflicts. Recent counter-insurgency experiences in the Middle East have illustrated how important it is for the military to gain the trust of the people by countering the propaganda of insurgents and terrorist groups. Adversaries will try to control the narrative of the conflict, and the US needs to be able to counter an opponent's propaganda campaign effectively. If the US and its allies fail to conduct information operations, they risk losing international credibility and the support of the local population.

Extensive economic capabilities are not used throughout the Syrian and Ukrainian case studies but are another potential challenges in the future. The regime in Syria uses sieges to stifle the local economies in the Damascus suburbs, but it is a relatively limited campaign. These sieges affect the opposition at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels by limiting their ability to sustain their units in the area and could reduce local support. Future wars could involve extensive attacks on the economic base of the US or its allies. Economic pressure might come in the form of trade blockades or other acts, like a cyber-attack on financial infrastructure. Isolated economic attacks are a real risk, but if

conducted at the same time during a military operation, it would create additional stress for the government and the armed forces.

### **Countering US Advantages With Multiple Capabilities**

The US has had to face many of the same challenges that are high lightened in Syria and Ukraine throughout history. What separates potential future conflicts from the past is the combination of all of these threats occurring at the same time. The growing complexity creates a significantly more challenging security environment that will require extensive resources and flexibility to counter each threat effectively. Many of the current US advantages are at risk in this type of battle space, and US military forces will need to be able to adapt should it lose advantages in technology and conventional capabilities.

In the current post-Cold War security environment, the US has enjoyed a significant advantage in technology and information systems over any adversary, but utilizing diverse and complex strategies allows an opponent to counter those advantages and exploit their weaknesses. Few countries can achieve parity with the American military's advanced weapon systems, technical capabilities, and extensive resources. However, the current US military superiority may not be the most effective at countering complex threats.

US forces are focusing on organizing, equipping, and planning for future conflicts based on advanced air systems, digital information systems, and reduced ground forces. Hybrid war allows an enemy to use conventional forces and tactics to counter US technical advantages. Electronic warfare can disrupt or disable the extensive information



and space-based systems that US technology depend on to effectively operate. Command, control, and communication capabilities all need digital networks, and future enemies can target the networks to negate those advantages.

Conventional US military forces have been able to dominate the tactical battlefield in recent conflicts. However, as US land forces are reduced, they may become less effective in the new complex environment. Opponents are likely to employ forces that formed from integrated regular and irregular soldiers, allowing them more options to meet various conditions on the battlefield. Fewer ground units limit how much territory can be physically held, which is essential when fighting insurgencies or groups conducting terrorist attacks, tactics that are likely to be used during in future wars. US land forces need to be able to deploy against the enemy's conventional and irregular units at the same time.

The American conventional military dominance has also limited the exposure of US soldiers to experiences such as drone strikes, massed artillery fire, and massed tank formations. In future conflicts, it is likely that the enemy will possess advanced unmanned platforms that can launch precision-guided munitions or provide intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities. At least within the past decade, US forces have not fought an opponent that can field large tank formations supported by artillery and aircraft. American units have not had to face comparative advanced conventional capabilities on the battlefield for some time and lack the firsthand experience of being under massed indirect fire or being targeted by precision munitions.

## **Fighting In A Complex Environment**

In future conflicts, there is a possibility that the US will face an opponent that utilizes complex or hybrid operations. US military officials, as previously discussed at the beginning of this thesis, have acknowledged that there is an increasing probability the US will be involved in a hybrid conflict. Certain actions can be taken by policymakers to prepare American forces to fight in a complex security environment.

**Winning The Information War.** The current US technical abilities, based on space and information systems, provides the American military with unparalleled advanced capabilities. However, if those systems are disabled or disrupted, US forces need to be prepared to fight without access to the weapons and communications that run on the space-based platform. In a hybrid war, the enemy will likely be able to reduce at least some of the advanced capabilities using electronic warfare or cyber-attacks.

Maintaining extensive IRS capabilities will assist US forces in identifying the different components of each criterion of hybrid war. It is critical to understand the conventional and irregular forces of the enemy, what their capabilities are, and how they will operate. Some enemies may focus more on conventional units while others may use more irregular forces and asymmetric tactics. Understanding how the opponent plans to fight is critical in hybrid war so the appropriate US forces can be deployed to counter each threat.

Special operational forces (SOF) with experience fighting in complex environments can provide critical IRS capabilities. In a report released by West Point's Modern War Institute, Captain John Chambers argues that US SOF are "essential in providing understanding of the human terrain" and are "able to engage early, understand

what is happening, and identify options to shape, deter, and influence actors in the gray zone.”<sup>212</sup> SOF units were effectively deployed to northern Afghanistan to work with the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban and to northern Iraq in 2003 to coordinate with the Kurds. Chambers notes that the Special Operations Command is already working on re-establishing units that focus specifically on unconventional warfare and have been operating in anti-IS operations in Syria.<sup>213</sup> Maintaining SOF units that are trained to operate in complex environments rather than just in a counter terrorism or stability capacity will provide useful options of the US in the future.

The US can also utilize current defensive alliances such as NATO to improve its intelligence gathering operations. Intelligence sharing among NATO members exists, but current mechanisms do not provide quick and efficient exchanges of domestic intelligence. A general report released by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in 2015 highlighted the challenges in information sharing and called for creating “a point of access to each member state’s domestic intelligence agencies.”<sup>214</sup> The report also called for increasing cooperation between law enforcement and intelligence organizations which will “allow member states to better address a range of transnational security threats and shared issues.”<sup>215</sup> Creating regional intelligence sharing centers throughout NATO states could improve intelligence capabilities and cooperation.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>212</sup>John Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats,” *The Modern War Institute at West Point* (October 18, 2016): 32, <http://mwi.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Countering-Gray-Zone-Hybrid-Threats.pdf>.

<sup>213</sup>Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats,” 32.

<sup>214</sup>Julio Miranda Calha, “Hybrid Warfare: NATO’s New Strategic Challenge?,” (NATO Parliamentary Assembly General Report, Brussels, Belgium, 2015), 9.

<sup>215</sup>Calha, “Hybrid Warfare: NATO’s New Strategic Challenge?,” 9.

<sup>216</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

Ambiguous operations are one of the most significant challenges in the complex environment, such as the Russian deployments into Ukraine. Having an efficient and connected network of local sources across Europe could provide a type of warning system that alerts NATO to possible political or social situations that are conducive to manipulation from outside sources. If a conflict has already begun, the intelligence sharing centers could deliver the information necessary to counter covert support or operations. However, this system would likely only be effective in NATO spheres of influence. Complex environments are to be expected throughout the world, not just in Europe. Policymakers could consider increasing intelligence cooperation with allies outside of NATO.

The conflicts in Syria and Ukraine have also demonstrated the importance of strategic communications and information dissemination. Russian media portrays the separatist conflict as an oppressed section of Ukrainian society being unjustly attacked by the government. Kyiv is typically labeled as fascist or neo-Nazi and local grievances are specifically targeted by the media. The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence noted in 2016 report that social media was being used to “create confusion about the events in Ukraine” and “diminish the value of the truth.”<sup>217</sup> Social media and other information services can be used to disrupt messaging and spread alternative narratives that limit options for the US.

Developing and maintaining effective strategic communications capabilities would be useful in countering the opponent’s narrative and propaganda. NATO has created the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia to improve

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<sup>217</sup>Anna Reynolds, “Social Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare,” (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, Latvia, May 2016), 33.

information operations, but according to the Parliamentary Assembly reports, it does not fully coordinate strategic communications across the “Alliance, regional, and individual member state level.”<sup>218</sup> Similar to the intelligence network, focusing on improving coordinate between all member states could strengthen the entire alliance and provide a more effective counter to the adversary’s messaging.

**Creating Flexible Forces And Utilizing Alliances.** The conflicts in Ukraine and Syria have shown that states are able to deploy various types of units and operate in different ways, from a conventional offensive to terrorist attacks. Extensive ground forces are necessary to be able to meet any enemy formation that is used in a future conflict. Each future conflict will be unique and require a flexible force to counter a variety of threats. Reducing the number of ground forces hinders the ability of the US military to adapt and be effective in a complex environment.

US forces need to be able to quickly deploy into a variety of environments and be capable of engaging conventional and irregular forces. This is not a new challenge for the US military or its allies, and forward deploying units has historically been the solution. Forward deployments remain a useful tool and could reduce escalation in potential conflict zones. Chambers argues that that pre-positioning forces in at risk countries increases the risk for a potential aggressor to become directly engaged with US forces and reduces ambiguity.<sup>219</sup> During the Cold War, the US had static bases in Western Europe as a deterrent and to provide a force that could be quickly deployed. The rising tensions with Russia have convinced Eastern European allies to allow US forces to rotationally deploy into their country. Norway announced on October 24, 2016 that it

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<sup>218</sup>Calha, “Hybrid Warfare: NATO’s New Strategic Challenge?,” 10.

<sup>219</sup>Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats,” 36.

would allow US troops to be stationed at the Vaernes military base throughout 2017, and potentially into the future.<sup>220</sup>

Similar rotational deployments can be used by the US in the future to bolster allies and partners that are at risk to incursions. These forward deployed forces can train and work together with the host nation to better understand the security environment and conditions on the ground. Even if the US troops fail to deter an adversary from becoming more aggressive or conducting operations, they can be in a position to quickly react and adapt to the situation.

However, the US will not always be able to station forces in all situations. Forward deployments are expensive and cost restraints can limit resources or the political environment in the potential host country prevents direct deployments. Once a country is designated as at risk of becoming involved in a complex environment, the military could create an advance campaign already staffed and approved by the necessary authorities in both the US and the host country that can be quickly put into action.<sup>221</sup> Advance planning would reduce the amount of time it takes for the US to mobilize its forces and provide a clear outline of what the US forces will do once they are deployed. Confusion and ambiguity are significant challenges in the complex environment and pre-planned campaign could reduce some of the uncertainty.

It will not always be clear when a country is at risk of becoming involved in a conflict and advancing planning may not always be in place. Creating units that are specifically trained and equipped to be rapidly deployed into a complex environment

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<sup>220</sup>“Some 330 U.S. Marines to be temporarily stationed in Norway in 2017,” *Reuters*, October 24, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-norway-usa-military-idUSKCN12O2DM?il=0>.

<sup>221</sup>Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats,” 37.

would provide policymakers with the ability to quickly react to unexpected conflicts. Following the Russian involvement in Ukraine, NATO created the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which “will shorten the time necessary to bring significant firepower to any corner of the Alliance to deter and defend any member state.”<sup>222</sup> One of the shortcomings of the VJTF is that it is only focused on military operations. The US should continue to invest in the VJTF and could create its own independent versions that are prepared to deploy into regions outside of NATO. If able, the US could create different regional joint task forces with partners and allies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas based on the VJTF.

Rapid reaction forces in a complex environment need to be capable of countering not just the adversary’s military capabilities, but their political, economic, and informational capacity as well. This will require improving and building cooperation between the various government offices outside of the Department of Defense, including the State Department, the Intelligence Community, and other necessary departments. The State Department can integrate civil affairs officers into the force to provide political support and advice. Chambers offers a similar solution if soldiers are able to be forward deployed into a host country.<sup>223</sup> Complex conflicts require more than just military forces, and US troops need the support of non-military capabilities.

The US is likely to be engaged in a complex conflict in the future, and the military should prepare to fight in an environment without its current technological advantages. Not all conflicts in the future will be complex, but the trends in Syria and

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<sup>222</sup>Calha, “Hybrid Warfare: NATO’s New Strategic Challenge?,” 9.

<sup>223</sup>Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats,” 39.

Ukraine suggest that hybrid operations are effective and can counter America's conventional dominance. Failing to prepare for this type of security environment increases the risk that the US will be unable to effectively counter new security threats and challenges in the future.



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