

# ‘Hybrid Threats’: Neither Omnipotent Nor Unbeatable

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by F.G. Hoffman

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*Abstract: Hybrid threats have now joined a growing suite of alternative concepts about the ever evolving character of modern conflict. Here and abroad, the hybrid threat construct has found traction in official policy circles despite its relative novelty. It has been cited by the U.S. Secretary of Defense in articles and speeches, and by policymakers now serving in the Pentagon. Heretofore, the rapidly growing hybrid threat literature has focused on the land warfare aspects of the threat. Modern hybrid threats, including Hezbollah and Iran, have demonstrated the ability to employ irregular tactics and advanced naval capabilities along with illegal or terrorist activity. Thus, the hybrid threat is applicable to naval forces and the U.S. Navy needs to dust off lessons learned from its last experience in the Persian Gulf in the late 1980s to better prepare for an even more challenging future.*

The purpose of this article is to provide an interpretation of what is commonly referred to as hybrid wars, and extends the research base of this emerging theory by exploring a maritime case study. Heretofore, the research base for this topic has been limited to conflicts primarily centered on ground operations. Such a narrow suite of cases has the potential to exclude the unique contributions that naval forces might bring to bear against adversaries exploiting hybrid combinations of capabilities and tactics. Even worse, it might leave our naval forces unprepared for the complexities of hybrid threats in their particular domain.

Over the past few years, a number of very interesting conceptualizations of conflict have emerged. Mary Kaldor’s work on “new wars,” John Robb’s Open Source Warfare, and General Rupert Smith’s modern wars

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have joined the previous literature about so-called 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Warfare.<sup>1</sup> These conceptualizations routinely face strong criticism among defense scholars and the military officer corps despite their manifest relevance and relation to ongoing events in the real world.

Hybrid threats now have joined this pantheon of alternative concepts, but have received the usual short shrift from reactionaries enshrined in military institutions. However, here and abroad, the hybrid threat construct has found traction in official policy circles despite its relative novelty. It has been cited by the U.S. Secretary of Defense in articles and speeches, and by policymakers now serving in the Pentagon.<sup>2</sup>

It was also referred to in the new Joint Capstone Concept for Joint Operations, in Joint Forces Command's *Joint Operational Environment 2008*, in the latest Maritime Strategy signed by three Service chiefs. It is central to the Marine Corps' latest strategic vision.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the serving Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and the Commanding General at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) have acknowledged the utility of the concept. Allies in the UK, NATO and Israel are also studying this phenomenon as well. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gary Roughead, speaking at the Naval War College last summer, explicitly mentioned the need to study hybrid conflicts at the Current Strategy Forum.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars, Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006; John Robb, *Brave New War: The Next Stage of Terrorism and the End of Globalization*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007; Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, New York, NY: Knopf, 2007. On 4GW, see T.X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone, On War in the Twenty-first Century*, St Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004. For a full debate on modern war constructs see Terry Terriff, Aaron Karp and Regina Karp, eds., *Global Insurgency and the Future of Armed Conflict, Debating fourth-generation warfare*, New York: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Robert M. Gates, "The National Defense Strategy: striking the right balance," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2009, pp. 2–7; Robert Gates, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2009; Michele A. Flournoy, and Shawn Brimley, "The Defense Inheritance: Challenges and Choices for the Next Pentagon Team," *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2008.

<sup>3</sup>James N. Mattis, US Joint Forces Command, *Joint Operational Environment, 2008*; Admiral Mike Mullen, USN, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*, Version 3.0. Washington, DC: Feb. 2009. Conway James T., General, USMC, Admiral Gary Roughead, USN and Admiral Thad W. Allen, USCG, *A Cooperative Strategy For Maritime Security*, Washington, D.C., October 2007, James Conway, James, *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025*, Washington DC: Headquarters, US Marine Corps, June 2008. In the UK, see Richard Dannatt, "A Perspective on the Nature of Future Conflict," Chief of the General Staff's Speech to Chatham House, 15 May 09, prepared remarks. On the U.S. Army see Gen. Martin Dempsey, "Versatility as an Institutional Imperative," *Small Wars Journal*, March 10, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Admiral Gary Roughead, USN, Remarks at the Current Strategy Forum, Naval War College, Newport, RI on June 16, 2009. Accessed at [http://www.navy.mil/navydata/people/cno/Roughead/Speech/6.16.09\\_Current%20Strategy%20Forum%20FINAL.doc](http://www.navy.mil/navydata/people/cno/Roughead/Speech/6.16.09_Current%20Strategy%20Forum%20FINAL.doc).

## Hybrid Threats Defined

So what exactly are hybrid threats or wars? What are the implications for operational art, for educating future military or policy planners, and critically at this juncture in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), for force planning in the Pentagon? A number of defense scholars have described the emerging character of modern conflict as hybrid wars. This term attempts to capture the blurring and blending of previously separate categorizations of different modes of conflict.<sup>5</sup> Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.

There are various definitions of hybrid wars. My own is adapted from the National Defense Strategy of 2005 and the QDR of 2006 and focuses on the adversary's modes of conflict. That document notably laid out four distinct types of challengers that the U.S. military needed to prepare for; including *traditional threats*, *irregular foes*, *catastrophic threats*, and *disruptive challengers*. The last category sought to identify long range revolutionary breakthroughs that might pose "game changer" shifts in new weapons or technology that would totally offset American advantages today. This definition builds on the 2006 QDR and emphasizes the potential of combinations of threats as an *al la carte* menu instead of distinct and rigid bins.

Thus, hybrid threats can be defined as: "*any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives.*"

This definition displaces the catastrophic threat of the QDR, which focused on so-called rogue states with nuclear weapons, with the more likely element of terrorism, which could be catastrophic in its impact. This definition also explicitly eliminates the Pentagon's "disruptive technology" challenger and incorporates "disruptive social behavior" or criminality as the fourth modality. Many military theorists are uncomfortable with this element and do not want to deal with something our culture curtly dismisses as a law enforcement matter. But the nexus between criminal and terrorist organizations is well established, and the rise of narco-terrorism and nefarious transnational organizations who use smuggling, drugs, human trafficking, extortion, etc. to undermine the legitimacy of local or national government is fairly evident. The importance of poppy production in Afghanistan

<sup>5</sup> For other scholars see Michael Evans, "From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War," *Naval War College Review*, Summer 2003; Erin Simpson, "Thinking about Modern Conflict: Hybrid Wars, Strategy, and War Aims," conference paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 7, 2005; John J. McCuen, "Hybrid Wars," *Military Review*, April–May 2008, pp. 107–113; and David Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

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reinforces this assessment. Additionally, the growing challenge of gangs as a form of disruptive force inside America and in Mexico portend greater problems down the road.<sup>6</sup>

Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical *and* psychological dimensions of conflict. The novelty of this combination and the innovative adaptations of existing systems by the hybrid threat is a further complexity. As the original scholar on hybrid threats observed several years ago

Hybrid forces can effectively incorporate technologically advanced systems into their force structure and strategy, and use these systems in ways that are beyond the intended employment parameters. Operationally, hybrid military forces are superior to western forces within their limited operational spectrum.<sup>7</sup>

Hybrid threats incorporate combinations of different modes of warfare including: conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts involving indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal operations display a novel degree of operational and tactical fusion in time and space. They may confound purely conventional approaches and kinetic solutions, and may also foil today's emphasis on population-centric counterinsurgency strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Elements of this definitional and historical debate appear tedious or even counterproductive to some. Such a response may really be only a way for those who prefer conventional thinking and other conventional opponents to block out evidence that does not conform to their preferences. Others prefer the turgid compromises of *Joint Publication 1*, the U.S. military's official bible for definitions. This is reflective of the lack of imagination that has too often impeded our planning in operations against today's enemies, as well as doctrinal adaptation which has not kept pace with a more agile set of opponents. We *can* and *must* do better.

A change in terminology is required to stimulate both the hard thinking and the debate that precedes constructive adaptation in the

<sup>6</sup>For a superb assessment of this problem see Phil Williams, "Criminals, Militias and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq," Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, June 2009.

<sup>7</sup>On the earliest scholars in this area is LtCol William. J. Nemeth, USMC, *Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, June 2002.

<sup>8</sup>To assess the development of the concept see James N. Mattis and Frank G. Hoffman, "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars." *Proceedings*, November 2005, pp. 18–19; Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007. Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid warfare and challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 1st Quarter 2009, pp. 34–48; Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict," Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Forum 240*, April 2009.

profession. In the past, we changed our language and definitions to adapt to new technologies or unique approaches of our opponents. New language and new terms aids us in thinking differently and characterizing what is truly new, hopefully without overlooking what is enduring in war. Military cultures tend to cling to the past and tradition, providing a powerful prism through which current and future trends are seen. “Armed forces,” notes LtGen Sir John Kiszely of the British Army, “need to be highly aware of this prism, and the distorting effect it may be having on their perspective, if they are to see military affairs clearly and objectively.”<sup>9</sup> Up until 2003, the traditionalist camp was blinded by its distorted prism, and our military leaders were not able to see military matters with clarity and objectivity. We should ensure that the culture and its prism are reframed in order to prepare for a future characterized by a wide continuum of threats and not merely a false dichotomous choice.<sup>10</sup>

The hybrid-threat construct is a tool that has proven useful in evaluating what, up to now, has been an argument too often debated in terms of false choices between poorly defined positions in a binary or bipolar argument between “nation building” and counterinsurgency (COIN) on one end and conventional/large scale industrial war on the other. This is a woefully inadequate—if not distorted—set of lenses to look at the future through. What is “conventional” or traditional in war historically? What is different about Irregular Warfare, and why do some in our profession believe that the nature/character of war is inherently and solely related only to conventional combat between nation states?

There are those uncomfortable with the messy combinations of modern conflict, and those who like new notions or modifiers to traditional war, like hybrid threats.<sup>11</sup> Many defense specialists express concern about the proliferation of new terms regarding security issues. But the security profession evolves over time, and a new lexicon captures the changes better than hanging on to old terms with newer meanings. If we were still fighting in Phalanxes or using the tactics of Marcus Aurelius, we could cling to dated

<sup>9</sup>John Kiszely, in “The relevance of history to the military profession: a British view,” in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 31.

<sup>10</sup>I am indebted to Dr. Steve Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations on this point. Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, “The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy,” (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College), 2008.

<sup>11</sup>Other students of hybrid conflicts include Ralph Peters, “Lessons from Lebanon, The new model terrorist army,” *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 2006; Clyde Royston, “Terrorist to Techno-Guerilla: The Changing Face of Asymmetric Warfare,” *Joint Center for Operational Analysis Journal*, December 2007; Mackubin T. Owens, “Reflections on future war,” *Naval War College Review*, Summer 2008, pp. 61–76; Nathan P. Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century: Irregular, Catastrophic, Traditional, and Hybrid Challenges in Context*, Carlisle, PA: Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2007.

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definitions and conceptions. However, we are not, and the *gladius* and *pilum* have passed us by. Until very recently, poor doctrinal terms like “Low Intensity Conflict” and “Military Operations Other Than War” were the standard Joint terms. That was the best the U.S. military could do, mislabeling those conflicts short of our preferred big conventional conflicts as “other than war.” These terms were eventually dismissed as inadequate and the profession of arms benefited from their extirpation.

On the other hand, it is not clear what constitutes conventional or traditional wars or exactly who our conventional enemies might be. China, Russia, Iran and North Korea are often cited. Yet, while they field large forces that we might classify as conventional, few planners believe that a major conflict with any of these states will be confined to one of our preferred definitions. Their strategic culture and history suggest a much more complex range of operations, especially if pressed by our own military superiority. More distressing is the return of the idea of a “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) thinking in the literature. A reflexive return to the RMA and Transformation agenda of the 1990s with its excessive techno-centric solutions will never get us to where we need to go.<sup>12</sup>

### Historical Cases

The combination of irregular and conventional force capabilities, either operationally or tactically integrated, is quite challenging but it is not, necessarily, a new phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Nor is it restricted to the ground domain, solely. The war between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006 is often cited as an example of a hybrid threat.<sup>14</sup>

Hezbollah incorporated a maritime dimension to that conflict by successfully engaging and striking an Israeli corvette at sea with an Iranian supplied anti-ship missile, probably a Chinese variant of the C-802 Silkworm. The Israeli ship was not aware that it needed to activate its missile defense systems, and was completely taken by surprise. Israel has always had a maritime element to its counterterrorism defenses, but Hezbollah surprised them with such an advanced missile capability.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Horowitz, “The Future of War and American Military Strategy,” *Orbis*, Spring 2009; For a soldier-scholar perspective on this challenge see H. R. McMaster, “Learning from Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War,” *Orbis*, Spring 2008, p. 19–30. See also H.R. McMaster, “The Human Element, When Gadgetry Becomes Strategy,” *World Affairs*, Winter 2009, pp. 31–43.

<sup>13</sup> See my historical discussion in Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare*, Arlington VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Dec. 2007. For further discussion on historical case studies look at F.G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats Defined and Debated,” *Armed Forces Journal International*, Oct. 2009.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Andrew Exum, “Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment,” Washington, D.C: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* #63, Dec. 2006.

There is a warning here for other advanced naval forces: they cannot afford to overlook force protection and defensive requirements against maritime armed groups or hybrid threats that possess state-like capabilities despite their relative small size or non-state status. Irregular warfare is becoming increasingly lethal and complex, a tactic employed not just by the weak, but the cunning, as well. Moreover, irregular and hybrid threats are not just of concern to the Army and the Marines. It has not been, nor will it remain, a concern for those whose principal focus has been the land domain.

### **Maritime Hybrid Threat Case Study: Iraq and Operation Earnest Will**

The Iranians represent such a case study. In 1984, the protracted and costly Iran-Iraq War had spilled into the Persian Gulf and was threatening international trade and energy requirements. In desperation, and to pull in the international community, Iraq initiated the so called Tanker War. Saddam Hussein began by attacking Iranian oil tankers and Teheran responded by attacking ships destined for Iraq or to its supporters, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. On May 13, 1984, an Iranian F-4E Phantom attacked a Kuwaiti tanker, the *Umm Casbah*, which was laden with a cargo of oil bound for the United Kingdom. These attacks marked a major escalation in the war. For the first time ever, Iran had deliberately targeted neutral shipping. This was the beginning of a new and larger phase of the war, one in which by the end, Iran attacked nearly 200 ships and killed no fewer than 60 sailors.<sup>15</sup>

The American response to this crisis was diplomatic: providing security assistance to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). But in 1986, the growing conflict in the Persian Gulf forced Washington's hand. Iran had crossed the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and captured the al-Faw Peninsula. Iraq responded to its losses on the ground by escalating attacks on Iranian shipping. In turn, Iran retaliated by attacking any tankers headed to the Gulf States, especially Kuwait. Iraq, of course was being bankrolled by Kuwait.

Kuwait was hurt by these attacks, and in late December of 1986 formally asked for U.S. assistance. The Kuwaitis inquired if the United States would consider registering its tankers as U.S. vessels assuming that they would

<sup>15</sup>This section relies extensively on the historical research and insights of Marine historian Dr. David B. Christ, *Gulf of Conflict A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea*, Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus, June 2009; as well as Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 265–320. See also David B. Crist, "Joint Operations in Support of Earnest Will." *Joint Force Quarterly* Autumn/Winter 2002; Captain J.B. Perkins III, "The Surface View: Operation Praying Mantis," *Proceedings*, May 1989; Bud Langston and Don Bringle, "Operation Praying Mantis," *Proceedings* Vol. 115, May 1989; and Harold Lee Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone: The U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf, 1987–1988*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007.

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be protected or that Iran might be deterred from attacking them. American planners were worried about U.S. neutrality but also by a need to establish U.S. credibility in the region *vis a vis* expanding Russian interests. Over the objections of U.S. Navy officials, then President Ronald Reagan ordered the reflagging and naval convoys in March 1987.

The initial operations were not auspicious. The first tanker was reregistered by the end of June: the 400,000-ton *al-Rekkab*, now renamed the *Bridgeton*. The first convoy began on July 22, 1987. Eight naval combatants were assigned to the Gulf for Operation Earnest Will, with three providing a close escort for two reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, the *Gas Prince* and the *Bridgeton*, bound for Kuwait.

U.S. Navy P-3 surveillance aircraft and carrier-based tactical aircraft provided cover around the Strait of Hormuz. To avoid any accidental attacks by Iran or Iraq, the convoy schedule was published in advance. On the night of July 23, a small Iranian logistics vessel departed Farsi Island and laid a string of mines across the path of the convoy. The next morning, the *Bridgeton* struck one these mines.

The vestiges of the shah's once-impressive navy suffered from the U.S.-imposed arms embargo. By the beginning of the Gulf conflict, the Iranians had only one functioning *Harpoon* anti-ship missile, which was on board the missile boat *Joshan*. The principal challenge to the Joint commander in the Gulf was unconventional or hybrid: swarms of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) small boats, a combination of fast Swedish-built Boghammers, "Boston Whaler"-type small boats armed with a hodgepodge of rockets, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns. The highly maneuverable small boats could also function as improvised mine-layers in numerous shallow chokepoints along the five-hundred-mile convoy route.

Instead of posing what Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan might have preferred, in terms of a traditional blue water threat, the Iranians more closely resembled a "guerilla war at sea," as the CENTCOM commander called it. Not surprisingly, the U.S. Navy, configured as it was in the 1980s to confront its preferred opponent, the more demanding Soviet fleet, possessed neither the plans, doctrine nor the equipment needed to deal with the unique challenges posed by the Iranian threat. Iran's hybrid mixture of conventional frigates, fighter bombers, cruise missiles and Boston whalers complicated the sight picture of a force bred to satisfy John Lehman's Maritime Strategy and the 600-ship Navy.

Iran's seaborne war posed a particular problem in the northern Gulf, near where the *Bridgeton* met misfortune. The United States wanted to ensure protection for international tankers and shipping along the 50- to 70 mile long route running past Farsi Island. But with the spillover of the Iran-Iraq War and the presence of mines, U.S. military planners did not want to operate large American warships in such a hazardous space.

In August 1987, the U.S. naval commander, in the Gulf developed an innovative concept-of-operations based on classical COIN theory. He emphasized providing security for the Gulf and for its population of ships rather than dealing kinetically with the Iranian actions. “In my view, to be successful in the northern Gulf we must establish intensive patrol operations to prevent the Iranians from laying mines. I believe we can achieve the desired results with a mix of relatively small patrol craft, boats, and [helicopters]. . . .” Looking at the problem through a land lens, rather than as a traditional naval mission, is certainly indicative of an agile mind and one that draws upon experience in Vietnam. Bernsen’s concept was based upon a Sea Float practice utilized during the Vietnam conflict in which floating patrol bases were employed to establish a more permanent presence in strategic waterways. Admiral Bernsen recommended establishing waterborne patrol bases, or Mobile Sea Bases, and using U.S. patrol boats, helicopters, and Navy SEALs to conduct intensive patrols to prevent Iran from laying mines or using its IRGCN small boats to attack the convoys.

This approach would give the naval task force the means to control the northern Gulf through persistent but credible presence and active patrols via ships, boats and air assets. Instead of commuting from local ports, the Navy and the Joint Force would maintain a full-time presence in the combat zone, which several analysts have noted bears close relation to those tactics utilized in current counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American response to the hybrid threat was innovative. Two large oil construction platforms were leased from Brown and Root to serve as seabased platforms and patrol bases. They were the *Hercules* and *Wimbrown VII*. A unique joint force operated from the platforms, including: SOF units; Mark III patrol boats; three Army Special Forces “Seabat” helicopters; a SEAL platoon, and a reinforced Marine platoon.

These forces patrolled in their assigned area maintaining a 24-hour presence on the water to prevent penetration by Iranian small craft. Augmented with surveillance systems, the helicopters provided a quick reaction force and nighttime visibility. Doctrine for such operations did not exist, and certainly such an odd mixture of units had not previously trained or exercised together.

It did not take long for the concept to prove itself. On September 19, U.S. intelligence detected the Iranian logistical vessel *Iran Ajr* getting under way for another mining operation. The United States moved the USS *Jarrett* with two Army helicopters on board to monitor the Iranian ship. When Army pilots observed mines being pushed over the side, the helicopters opened fire with rockets and machine guns, killing at least three Iranian crewmen. The Iranians abandoned ship. The next morning, a SEAL platoon boarded and secured the *Iran Ajr*. Its capture was of great strategic communications value since her very obvious cargo of mines was hard to refute and the public revelation through the media undercut Iran’s protests and legitimacy.

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### **Nimble Archer**

On October 15, 1987 a Silkworm missile struck the American-owned Liberian-flagged tanker *Sungari*. The ship suffered extensive damage. The following day, the reflagged Kuwaiti tanker *Sea Isle City* was hit by another Silkworm. The United States decided it could no longer ignore the Iranian attacks. However, instead of striking the missile sites that threatened Kuwait and carried out the attack on *Sea Isle City*, the United States' government elected to avoid targets on the mainland and instead targeted the Iranian Rashadat oil platforms in the northern area of the Gulf. These were not active production facilities but had been used as an intelligence collection and staging area for attacks. Operation Nimble Archer began on October 19. A Surface Action Group comprised of six vessels commenced the operation by warning the platforms' Iranian occupants to abandon the platform, all of whom quickly complied. The American vessels then started shelling. One platform quickly caught fire, but the second remained standing after nearly 1,000 rounds had been fired at it. Ultimately, the platform was destroyed by explosives placed by a SEAL team.

### **Escalation of force in 1988**

Under new military leadership in the region, the United States began executing a more aggressive strategy against Iran. Over the next two months, U.S. warships aggressively shadowed their Iranian counterparts. In one instance, the Iranian frigate *Saband* nearly collided and exchanged fire with the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* during a high-speed game of chicken. The aggressive tactic worked, as Iranian attacks and interference in the Gulf declined.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) countered by launching another mining campaign against the U.S. naval forces in the region. On April 14, 1988, the frigate USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was operating on patrol and its lookouts identified three mines ahead of the ship. As the *Roberts* reversed engines to try to back out of the field, it struck another unseen mine. The blast caused extensive damage to the ship, wounding a dozen sailors. The ship itself was only saved by the heroics of its captain and crew.<sup>16</sup>

The White House again ordered a limited military response. U.S. forces destroyed two Iranian oil platforms, Sassan and Sirri, both important IRGCN staging bases. Sassan was a large set of Iranian offshore platforms. A proposal was made to add cruise missile strikes against selected IRGCN targets at Bandar Abbas, but Washington rejected the idea of initiating any attack on the Iranian mainland. The task force was ordered to strike at one Iranian naval combatant

<sup>16</sup> For an inspiring story about the damage control efforts that saved the *Roberts* see Bradley Peniston, *No Higher Honor Saving the USS Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006.

in order to signal Washington's displeasure. More pointedly, the Joint Chiefs chairman, Admiral Crowe, wanted to place one of theirs "on the bottom" in retaliation for daring to attack a U.S. naval combatant.

Operation Praying Mantis began on the morning of April 18. U.S. Marines and Navy SEALs simultaneously attacked Sassan and Sirri. A few dedicated defenders remained on both platforms, opening fire on U.S. warships from the Sirri with an Iranian 23 mm antiaircraft gun. U.S. vessels returned fire, silencing the gun; but the resulting fire prevented the boarding of Sirri by a U.S. SEAL platoon. Meanwhile, Marine Cobra helicopters and naval forces raked Sassan with gunfire. Marines fast-roped onto the burning structure. After securing it, the Marines withdrew and detonated a large explosive package to eliminate the platform.

The Iranian missile boat *Josban* was ordered out by its commander to reinforce Sirri. As previously noted, the *Josban* packed a powerful punch, with the only working American-made Harpoon missile in the Iranian inventory. The cruiser USS *Wainwright* issued warnings to the *Josban* not to approach the U.S. warships. The Iranian vessel declared that it had no hostile intent and continued to close on the Americans. The *Wainwright* issued a final warning. While waiting for a response from the Iranian skipper, the sole known Harpoon missile in Iran's inventory was launched. The *Wainwright* fired its countermeasures and watched nervously as the missile passed down her starboard just yards off board the U.S. ship. The American warships responded with six missiles—all reaching their target—reducing the *Josban* to a battered hull. Almost simultaneously, a Phantom F-4 headed out into the Gulf from an Iranian base with hostile intent. The *Wainwright* fired two surface-to-air missiles and scored one hit, which only damaged the fighter bomber.

A flotilla of Boghammers then sortied out of Abu Musa Island to attack the neighboring UAE Mubarak oil fields. After spraying several ships and a portable drilling rig with machine-gun fire and grenades, the Iranian ships returned to the island. An hour later, the IRGCN boats ventured out again to attack UAE facilities. This time, a pair of U.S. attack aircraft were ordered to intercept them. The fast small boats were driven back, with one boat sunk.

While the Sassan and Sirri platforms were being destroyed, another U.S. Navy surface action group, made up of the warships *Jack Williams*, *Joseph Strauss*, and *O'Brien*, were transiting the Strait of Hormuz looking for the *Sabalan*. In the middle of the day, the small Iranian surface force finally moved out. First was the *Saband* heading due south to attack the UAE-owned Saleh oil field. In order to obtain a positive identification of the Iranian ship, a Navy A-6 flew over the *Saband*. The Iranians responded by launching a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile. The A-6 climbed away and launched one of its own Harpoon missiles. The USS *Strauss* successfully engaged the Iranian frigate with a Harpoon of its own. Both missiles struck home destroying the *Saband's* command and control center. Late in the afternoon, the *Sabalan* finally steamed out of Bandar Abbas, engaging U.S. naval aircraft by surface to air

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missile. The U.S. planes were successful at avoiding the missiles, and responded by dropping a 500-pound laser-guided bomb on the *Sabalan* and rendering it dead in the water. The daylong fight had been a disaster for Iran. Its attack was utterly without effect and the outcome was never in doubt.

Another naval example of irregular warfare occurred in a final clash on July 3, 1988 between the Iraqi small boats and American warships. This engagement inadvertently exploited the aggressive captain of the cruiser USS *Vincennes* which accidentally shot a pair of missile at an Iranian commercial airliner killing 290 civilians. The circumstances around this mistaken decision were complicated by an active gunfight between the *Vincennes* and a number of IRGC boats.<sup>17</sup> However, the impact on American prestige in the region was devastating. Operation Earnest Will formally ended the following year after a slow wind down of Iranian activity.

### Current Case Study

Iran learned much from its experience and has had two decades and a lot of oil money to fund its own revolution in military affairs. Iranian military capabilities include a small fleet of frigates and fast patrol craft, and a few submarines (including Ghadir midget boats and Hahang littoral subs armed with torpedoes).<sup>18</sup> It also possesses the world's fourth largest mine inventory, estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000 mines. Its inventory includes as many as 1,000 Chinese EM11 influence mines and EM52 rocket-propelled mines. In addition to advanced mines from China, Iran bought 1,800 mines from Russia in 2000. The antique World War I-era contact mines used in the 1980s by Iran are a thing of the past.

U.S. planners must be prepared to deal with both the formal Iranian navy and IRGCN forces in these tight waters. The Iranian ability to constrict, if not deny, access is palpable given the geography of the Gulf and Iran's multiple means for producing maritime mayhem. Historically, the Iranians have proven to be tactically innovative with limited resources.<sup>19</sup> Iran's coastline and 17 islands provide numerous hiding places for small boats and fast attack craft. This is a classic "contested zone" and Teheran is fully aware of it.<sup>20</sup> In addition to mines,

<sup>17</sup> For greater detail of the incident see Will Rogers, and Sharon Rogers. *Storm Center The USS Vincennes and Iran Air Flight 655*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992; David R. Carlson, "The *Vincennes* Incident," *Proceedings*, September 1989; and Norman Friedman, "The *Vincennes* Incident," *Proceedings*, May 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, "Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz," *International Security*, Summer 2008, pp. 82–117.

<sup>19</sup> Again for a masterful grasp of both past and present Iranian developments see David B. Crist, *Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S. Iranian Confrontation at Sea, Policy Focus #95*, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, Summer 2003, p. 22.

the Iranian naval arsenal includes a modest inventory of Chinese anti-ship cruise missiles, largely upgraded versions of the Chinese HY-2 Silkworm, and the Noor, which is an upgraded copy of the Chinese C-802.<sup>21</sup> Iran is also fielding the Raad, which has replaced the HY-2 Seersucker. With its large (1,000 pound) warhead, and terminal maneuverability, the SS-N-4 Raad could prove deadly to even large warships. As one study recently concluded, the Iranians are dangerous but clearly not omnipotent.<sup>22</sup>

Iranian military doctrine suggests that they will employ asymmetric and highly irregular tactics that exploit the constricted geographic character of the Gulf and the advanced systems that they have acquired.<sup>23</sup> This doctrine applies a hybrid combination of conventional and irregular tactics and weapons to posit a significant anti-access threat to both military and commercial shipping. Swarming tactics employing the *Tareq* (Boghammer), *Zolghadr* speed boats, and *Azarakhsb* fast attack craft and the newer low-signature North Korean built IPS-16 torpedo boats could prove lethal to unsuspecting Western navies. Our Navy must be prepared to address this adaptive and hybrid form of threat.<sup>24</sup>

The Iranians are not the only potential hybrid threat at sea. A number of terrorist organizations have exploited maritime attacks including Hamas, Hezbollah, Abu Sayyaf, al Qaeda and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At one time, the last possessed a strong brown water force capable of both support and attack operations. Its recent demise eliminated its base of operations and has decimated its leadership, but not the example of its Sea Tigers. The LTTE fielded small boat squadrons for years, assisted by other states like India, and by hiding its boat production capacity in New Zealand.<sup>25</sup> The future will clearly exhibit other low and hybrid threats, not just conventionally oriented navies.

## Conclusion

In one of his well-regarded early works on naval strategy, the American strategist Bernard Brodie reminded us that “it is true that the gods favor the

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Mahnken, *The Cruise Missile Challenge*, Washington, DC Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2005, pp. 16–17.

<sup>22</sup> Frederic Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Fariborz Haghshenas, *Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus #87, September 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, “Iran’s Naval Forces: From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy,” Fall 2009; Walter Pincus, “Iran restructuring its naval forces,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 2009. p. A6. Despite its inapt title, the ONI report accurately captures the IRGCN’s growing clout and hybrid approach.

<sup>25</sup> On the Sea Tigers of the LTTE, see Martin Murphy, *Small Boats, Weak States and Dirty Money: The Challenge of Piracy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 310–322.

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bold,” but “they are notoriously harsh with the reckless.”<sup>26</sup> It would be reckless for our planning to focus on just one of the two extremes of the conflict spectrum—either entirely on conventional threats or protracted counterinsurgency. Doing so ignores the far more likely potential for combinations represented by the hybrid threat.

Some critics find the construct of hybrid threats as too vague or still premature for application in the ongoing QDR.<sup>27</sup> To the contrary, it’s the postulated conventional threat that is ephemeral—or at least speculative—in the near to mid-range.<sup>28</sup> Where are these conventional threats today? Clearly Secretary Robert Gates and his policy advisors have not found it so difficult to comprehend in terms of its definition or utility. While some observers have reservations about the complexity or relevance of hybrid threats, this case study and the ever evolving nature of the Iranian challenge to maritime security in the Gulf suggest otherwise. We can and should work through the definitional aspect of the debate, as well as ascertain its operational implications.<sup>29</sup> What we should *not* do is hide behind outmoded warfare categorizations of the past. That too would be reckless.

Certainly we do not want to lose sight of history, but as General of the Army Douglas MacArthur once rightly observed, “Wars are never won in the past.” He added that, “New conditions require, for solution—and new weapons require, for maximum application—new and imaginative methods.”<sup>30</sup> The identification of new conditions like hybrid threats is the first step towards the imaginative methods required. From this new terminology and new thinking should emerge to effect our doctrine and educational system.

The traditionalist camp has made poor use of history as a guide. As Sir Michael Howard has noted, “the soldier has to steer between the danger of

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Brodie, *A Guide to Naval Strategy*, New York: Praeger, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 1965, p. 257.

<sup>27</sup> Erin K. Fitzgerald and Anthony H. Cordesman, “The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, A+, F, or Dead on Arrival?,” Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 27, 2009, working draft; Gian P. Gentile, “The Imperative for an American General Purpose Army That Can Fight,” *Orbis*, Vol. 53, No. 3., 2009, pp. 457–470.

<sup>28</sup> For a provocative demonstration of the prevailing culture in the U.S. Navy, see James Kraska, “How the United States Lost the Naval War of 2015,” *Orbis*, Winter 2009, pp 35–45. Kraska, in a piece based partly on current trends, written in a fictitious context set in 2015, contends that “An entire generation of [its] mid-career commissioned and noncommissioned officers tried to learn counterinsurgency land warfare in the desert and mountains of central Asia while their counterparts in China conducted fleet exercises to learn how to destroy them.”

<sup>29</sup> For invaluable ideas on implications see Brigadier Michael G. Krause, “Square Pegs for Round Holes?,” Australian Land Warfare Studies Centre, *Working Paper No. 132*, June 2007; Michael Evans, “From the Long Peace to the Long War: Armed Conflict and Military Education and Training in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Australian Defence College, Occasional Paper No. 1, 2007; Michael Evans, “The Twenty-First Century Security Environment Challenges for Joint Forces,” *RUSI Journal*, April 2009 Vol. 154, No. 2, pp. 64–72; Robert H. Scales, *The Past and Present as Prologue: A View of Future Warfare Through the Lens of Contemporary Conflicts*, Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 154.

repeating the errors of the past because he is ignorant” of what has preceded us and the equally dangerous error of “remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete.”<sup>31</sup> Changes in condition have *not* made conventional theories obsolete, especially the necessity of applying combined arms against the enemy. However, this mode of conflict is not as dominant as it once was. The prism of the past should not be a mental prison that bars our ability to understand the present and the future of conflict.

The purpose of this essay has been to delineate and define the nature of hybrid threats and explain its relevance to today’s ongoing force posture debate, including the often-ignored maritime realm. Without any doubt, this case history from the U.S. Navy’s recent past remains an operational challenge worthy of further study.

Today, all armed forces, including the U.S. Navy, confront the challenge of a hybrid threat. Fortunately for its future endeavors, the U.S. Navy has faced the hybrid threat before, and crushed it with innovative thinking, adaptive tactics, and professional skills honed over many days at sea. It may have to do so once again in the Middle East before too long.



<sup>31</sup> Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars*, 2d ed., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 195.