

Book Review

Hybrid Actors

(Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East),

Thanassis Cambanis, Dina Esfandiary, Sima Ghaddar, Michael Wahid

Hanna, Aron Lund, Renad Mansour,

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Reviewed by *Dergah Kısacık**

The hybrid actors, as a worldwide phenomenon, have become a topic that requires examination, especially with the state fragmentation in the Middle East and North Africa (*MENA*). In MENA Region, numerous militant groups and military actors have emerged including factions, brigades, forces, companies, detachments etc. These groups have been challenging the regime's monopoly of violence.

The claim of the book is that the phenomenon is not a simple civil revolt. The phenomenon is the reflection of an erosion of the state's superstructure and the definition of "non-state actors" is inadequate to explain the phenomenon. For this reason, the book adds the subtitle "hybrid actor" to the definition.

The book analyzes the hybrid actors based on two criteria. The first one is "acting like a state" (*Is it institutionalized?*) and the second one is "autonomously acting" (What is the *degree of obeying the boss. Do they have their own policies?*).

* Master Student, Police Academy International Security Institute, Department of International Security Studies, dergahkisacik@gmail.com.



The book evaluates the success of hybrid actors by their ability to “be long-lasting”, “influence the region”, “reflect its political and military power”, “institutionalism”, “permanent state relations” and “a coherent ideology”.

According to the authors, the hybrid actors are the armed groups which sometimes compatible with the state and sometimes compete with the state regarding legitimacy, ability, and power. They try to institutionalize themselves by forming a parallel structure inside and outside of the state. The parallel structure not only performs some local public services of the weakened government but also seeks ways to infiltrate the state. They are not neglect to benefit from the state. At the same time, they are ready to protect their privilege against the state power.

The hybrid actors play not only a security function but also have a political and economic role. In addition, they have their own ideological orientations and public services.

Although almost all have an abroad boss state (*sponsor state*), they also implement their own internal policies and decisions. Therefore, unlike proxy actors, they are not completely under the control of the sponsoring state. While experiencing the flexibility of not being a state, they penetrate the state authority over time and seek ways to seize control of some of the authorities.

The hybrid actors are not only serious obstacles for the state to re-establish state authority, security, and services, both also the precursors of instability and conflict. Therefore, the hybrid actors are both a symptom and an important pivot of state fragility, weak governance, and insecurity.

In the first part of the book, while the authors present the theoretical framework of hybrid actors, they only rely on case studies. In this part, the lack of literature discussion draws attention. This situation does not affect the consistency of the concept within itself but causes conceptual confusion in the literature about hybrid actors. For example, the majority of the literature says that the hybrid actors could be also the states. When

the states use hybrid tactics, they can be hybrid actors. However, the book claims that only groups with certain properties could be hybrid actors. In addition, the majority of the literature accepts the "grey area", a subtitle of hybrid threats, is a blurred area between war and peace lines. However, the book states that the "grey area" is the area where the hybrid actor is institutionalized by performing some public services that the weakened government could not fulfil.

According to the authors, "foreign actors" generally prefer instability in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya and support hybrid actors even though they have friendly relations with these states. The foreign actors compete in the region and have connections with hybrid actors and proxies, but in contrast to Iran, these foreign actors cannot develop direct relations with them. Iran is the most invested in hybrid actors due to its revisionist and revolutionary agenda. At this point, it can be said that the book mainly examines Iran's relationship with the hybrid actors and briefly compares Iran with other countries in supporting hybrid actors.

The authors state that Western politicians have avoided full support of non-state actors and "quasi-states", except for the temporary support to the YPG in Syria. Therefore, the authors advocate the international environment will hinder the international recognition of both "quasi-states" and non-state actors, as in the warlords of the past. In addition, the Authors advise that Western politicians should not ignore the new reality and should well understand the hybrid actors, so they can respond to them.

According to the book, the monopoly of the use of force has not been fully under the control of states in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, and Yemen due to the weakening of the unitary state and the erosion of the social contract and national identity.

In the MENA Region, hybrid actors such as the leader of the Conquest Coalition (*i'tilaf al-fath*) in Iraq (*the leader of the Iranian-backed Badr Brigades and entered the 2018 elections*) and Sadr (*the head of Ameri in the elections and controlled the Peace Brigade*) enter elections with

official political parties to gain access to resources and gain legitimacy.

Hybrid actors not only operate in their homeland but also abroad. Therefore, they may have an alliance relationship with the sponsoring state. Therefore, the hybrid actor is neither fully independent nor fully dependent. When the institutionalized hybrid actor uses these features correctly, it increases its legitimacy and power, while the state regresses. For example, some Lebanese people see Hezbollah as the only reliable defender of the nation. The authors say that Hezbollah protects its members even against the state and is above the rule of law. Hezbollah can trade illegally and there is no legal response to the crimes and military engagements of its members. They have a parallel political, social, and economic network.

In the second part of book, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (*Hashri Shaabi*), Sadr's Peace Brigade, Badr Organization, Lebanese Hezbollah, Syrian National Defense Forces (*Quwat al difa a al vatani*), Amal, Iraqi Awakening (*Sahwa*), KDP (*Kurdistan Democratic Party*), PUK (*Patriotic Union of Kurdistan*) and DAESH are discussed by authors in case studies. They discussed whether the cases fit the theoretical framework drawn in the book. According to their findings, DAESH does not fit the proposed conceptualization. KDP and PUK have a regional government, unlike other hybrid actors. The Iraqi Awakening (*Sahwa*) movement ended in time with the USA's withdrawal from Iraq in 2010. Amal voluntarily turned into a political party in Lebanon. The Syrian National Defense Forces (*Quwat al difa a al vatani*) could not be a hybrid actor because the regime adhered to it tightly.

In the third part, the authors discuss Iran's disproportionate state sponsorship and regional strategy. The authors say that Iran is the most successful state in producing hybrid actors in the region (*Hezbollah, Harshi-Shaabi, Fatimyun Brigade, Zeynep Brigade, Badr Brigade/Organization*). Iran developed a Shiism, anti-imperialist revolutionism and pragmatic regional policy based on proxies and non-state actors to deter conventional attacks against itself. Iran coordinates with non-state actors and conducts regional policy through the Quds

Forces within the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Iran does not desire full control over the actors and forms paramilitary groups based on trust and interest. Thus, Iran achieves to avoid any responsibility for their actions and has the flexibility to deny their involvements. When the interests of these groups do not match those of Iran, they do not follow Iran's requests and recommendations. Under this pragmatic approach, Iran can cooperate with all groups and Iran's influence increases in the region day by day.

It is understood that the definition of the hybrid actor in the book mainly emerged from so-called Iran-linked actors. The definition has completely different justifications from F. Hoffman's hybrid organization (actor) which is one of the two components of hybrid warfare in his "Rise of Hybrid Wars".¹ However only the Lebanese Hezbollah is the same as a prototype in both.

In the fourth part, the authors' advice to decision-makers is to focus on practical solutions rather than ideal ones, to engage and cooperate with hybrid actors, to encourage the sponsoring state to break their influence and to support the weakened government by strengthening institutions. They advocate that lists of terror and banned organizations of states make it difficult to communicate with the hybrid actors.

Finally, but importantly, the authors also touch upon some issues related to Türkiye. On page 134 of the book, the authors claim that neglect, irresponsible and lax border control of Türkiye has provided passive support to DAESH for years. However, I need to say that I am not on the same page with this claim. The statistics have revealed that Türkiye deported approximately 5000 people from 99 different countries, related to DAESH and trying to go to conflict zones, between 2011 and 2017. At the same period, Türkiye imposed ban on entry into the country 53,781 people from 146 countries. During 2016-2017, Türkiye conducted

¹ Hoffman, Frank G, *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*, (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 35-42, Erişim Tarihi: Mayıs 2023, <https://potomac institute.org/reports/19-reports/1163-conflict-in-the-21st-century-the-rise-of-hybrid-wars>.

military operations against DAESH and other PKK/YPG. During this period, the Turkish Army neutralized more than 4.000 DAESH members in Syria and Iraq. Besides, Türkiye joined the Global Coalition Against DAESH (DMUK) in 2014. All in all, these figures prove that the book's author's opinion may be considered unfair.