

# THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF MILITARY ACTIONS IN AN OPERATING ENVIRONMENT DEFINED BY HYBRID THREATS

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**Abstract:** *This paper's theme comes from the necessity for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon called "hybrid warfare" that seems to have returned today with the inducement of the crisis in Ukraine in early 2014 and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. In this sense, starting from the assumption that the hybrid threat mix has the "potential" to change the paradigm of warfare, and Romania could be the target of such approaches, we set out to understand this type of war and identify possible prevention countermeasures.*

**Keywords:** *hybrid warfare; hybrid threats; of Crimea by the Russian Federation; the crisis in Ukraine in early 2014.*

## Introduction

The contemporary military phenomenon has highlighted the value of military actions' integrated character, validating that the use of all services, specialties, and military means in a modern confrontation leads to success.

One of the particular implications of the military phenomenon's evolution on military actions' physiognomy lies in the speed of action and reaction required in the current circumstances. The high rate of modern battlefield changes requires a short time for information, decision, and action.

The concept of "hybrid threat" is regularly used to express one or more actors' ability to apply a mixture of actions (conventional and unconventional) in the battlefield and beyond its sphere with negative effects on the opponent's decision-making cycle in order to achieve the expected objectives.

Reinventing or adopting new terms to describe or explain the threats we face today is a common practice among security analysts and experts. Like other terms that have become frequently used in various domains, the term "hybrid warfare" has been intensely accepted or contradicted. The lack of clarification is a real problem, as there is no unanimous acceptance of its evolution and its place in the equation peace – conflict – war. It tries to define the complexity of the actions that have been applied in recent conflicts. Although it has not been possible to define this concept and accept it unanimously, the special attention paid to this phenomenon creates the premises for understanding it and preparing effective methods to counteract its effects.

The concept of "hybrid threats" is not new if we consider the means used. At the same time, it brings elements of novelty that challenge current conventional thinking, highlights the range of the spectrum of contemporary conflicts, raises awareness of possible risks, and indicates the potential threat posed by the conventional military component.

The spectrum of hybrid threats and their development, especially after 2001, is related to the emergence of unconventional capabilities such as terrorist organizations, guerrilla fighters, organized crime organizations, insurgent elements, or separatism.

These distinct factors, added to the conventional elements of traditional conflict, multiply its versatility and give it a high degree of unpredictability. The evolution of hybrid threats is enhanced by globalization, discoveries in the field of technology, and, at the same time, by the knowledge explosion that is taking place globally.

Thus, unlike a classic conflict, hybrid warfare is characterized by using power tools available to a state or non-state entity in a dosed manner, following the proposed objectives and

vulnerabilities identified at the target. These tools can be divided into several categories (political, economic, military, intelligence) used in a synchronized and harmonized manner against the enemy's critical infrastructure and center of gravity. The primary purpose is to produce effects on the targeted state or its constituent elements, in line with the political level's objectives.

### **Attempts to define hybrid warfare**

The term hybrid warfare has received particular attention at the politico-military decision-makers' level and in the international media after, in 2014, the Russian Federation annexed Crimea. This term, used mainly in the specialized security field, has become frequently used in analyzes challenges facing the West.

The real problem with the term hybrid war is not necessarily that we need to define it, yet to clarify and understand it to find viable countermeasures.

In the Romanian Army's Doctrine, the concept of hybrid threat is indicated as "a potential danger, expressed through actions, gestures, words, which has a source/an author, purpose, objectives and a target".<sup>1</sup>

In the 2011 US Army doctrine, the hybrid threat is defined as "the diverse and dynamic combination of conventional, asymmetric forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these unified forces and elements to achieve and mutually benefit from the effects produced".<sup>2</sup>

At the NATO Allied Command (ACT) level, hybrid threats are defined in terms of an "ability of one or more state actors, or a group of non-state actors, to use a mixture of actions (conventional and unconventional) in the battlespace and beyond its sphere, with negative effects on the opponent's decision-making cycle, in order to achieve the intended objectives".<sup>3</sup>

A definition identified by Petre Duțu<sup>4</sup> refers to the hybrid threat as representing "the concerted activity of a state or non-state adversary that incorporates in an adaptive and rapid manner diverse and dynamic elements related to conventional, asymmetric, terrorism and organized crime, as well as non-military means, simultaneously, using the whole spectrum of conflict as a unified force to achieve its objectives".

Conflicts thus become a "complex hybrid of trends" that dilutes the distinction between "local" and "global" and thus exponentially amplifies and complicates the challenges in the operational environment.

Hybrid threats occur where conventional, irregular, and asymmetric threats overlap in time and space. Conflict may involve participants at the individual level, groups or states operating at the local, transnational or global level. Such conflicts may include acts of violence within communities, acts of terrorism, cyber-attacks, insurgency, crime or other disorderly conduct.<sup>5</sup>

From the study of these attempts to explain and define the "hybrid warfare", we appreciate that this is a fighting strategy that includes both a multitude of different actors: state actors, non-state actors, sponsor states, but also multiple dangers, risks, and threats, manifesting in the physical environment, of a conventional nature (conventional military forces, in the legitimate service of the states), unconventional (nuclear forces, special forces, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction - CBRN WMD and toxic industrial materials - TIMs, improvised explosive devices - IEDs) and asymmetric (guerrillas, insurgent, and separatist groups activated, terrorist and criminal organizations), as well as in the virtual cyber environment (informational), all engaged in fighting in a combined and coordinated manner against an opponent superior in military forces and means.

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<sup>1</sup> S.M.G.-103, *Doctrina Armatei României*, București, 2012, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Army, *Field Manual 3-0 Operations C-1* (GPO, Washington, DC: February 2011), pp. 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Anghel, Gabriel, *Particularitățile ale Conflictelor Viitoare. Amenințările hibride. Război/Conflict Hibrid*, Infosfera anul III, nr.1, București, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Petre Duțu, *Amenințări asimetrice sau amenințări hibride: delimitări conceptuale pentru fundamentarea securității și apărării naționale*, București: Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare "Carol I", 2013, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> AJP-2(A), *Allied Joint Doctrine for Intelligence, Counter-Intelligence and Security*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), Draft 2012, p. 1-2

## Characteristics of military operations in hybrid warfare

### *Characteristics of conventional operations*

In the hybrid conflict landscape, conventional operations can signify the general framework on which smaller - but no less critical - conflicts generated by hybrid asymmetric risks and threats will be grafted later. Conventional operations are carried out by regular military forces, those armed forces of states or alliances with specific offensive and defensive functions and capabilities. These forces are in the legitimate service of the state. Traditional military units can be directly or indirectly involved in conventional and unconventional operations, along with irregular forces that they can subordinate and coordinate.

If possible, the hybrid opponent will try to achieve its objectives without triggering the armed conflict. It will seek to achieve its objectives by applying pressure using power instruments other than military or paramilitary ones. It can threaten to use or even use force against opponents at the regional level. When non-military means do not prove to be effective, the hybrid adversary can trigger an armed conflict to create favorable conditions for achieving the desired endstate. Before the outbreak of the armed conflict and during its development, the hybrid adversary will carry out operations to prevent/prohibit the intervention in the area of other regional actors or a joint multinational force, superior from a military point of view.

*The joint character.* The joint character of the military actions derives from the combination of the forces' missions belonging to the land, air, and maritime components - with the special forces' contribution in executing the mission. Military actions' joint character is consecrated for the higher levels of military art (strategic level and operational level). However, recent military conflicts tend to achieve this type of action at the lower level of the tactical echelon. The situation impacts operations at this level, requiring the involved commanders' skills of planning, decision, preparation, and execution of actions in the tactical field, performing unforeseen response missions, unplanned by the upper echelons, with elements belonging to other services.

*Integrated character.* The military action carried out to defeat the adversary, destroy his means, and the fight must be carried out simultaneously with actions to eliminate hybrid threats, stabilize the crisis in the area, and ensure a sustainable security climate. In the post-conflict stage, the military's role is to restore and maintain a security level that facilitates the stabilization and allows other instruments of power in the context of a comprehensive concerted response<sup>6</sup> to restore governance, authority, and self-support of state institutions. Recent conflicts have shown that the transition from conflict to stability is exceptionally complex, long-lasting, and difficult to assess the timing and degree of normalization objectively. From a military point of view, it can be considered "stable" an environment that will allow actors other than the military to materialize other instruments of power (international organizations, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, and others) to exercise their stabilizing role.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, hybrid operations are performed in the context of integrated action of services and branches of the army, in a complex operational environment in which a multitude of actors operate - institutions, authorities, international organizations (IO), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), nations - which can influence the success of operations and which require a comprehensive approach<sup>8</sup> throughout the operations process. There are many types of actors or participants in today's global and complex security environment. Some of the actors are countries, also called nation-states; state actors are still the dominant actors, but power is "migrating" to non-traditional actors and global concerns. Therefore, they must be correctly

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<sup>6</sup> AJP-01(D), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, December 2010, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), p. 2-13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> \*\*\*, S.M.G.-65, *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, București, 2012, p. 15.

identified, studied, and understood. The interests, capabilities, and limitations of each organization should be approached from the perspective of common interests, identified established partnerships, and integrated all their capabilities so that joint action tonight shape military operations in the desired direction.

*International organizations (IOs)* are intergovernmental, regional, or global organizations governed by international law and established by a group of states. They have an international legal personality, conferred by international agreements, which create rights and obligations to fulfill the common function and purpose for which they were created. Exceptionally, the International Committee of the Red Cross, although a non-governmental organization formed under the Swiss Civil Code, is mandated by the international community of states and based on international law, especially the Geneva Convention, has an international legal personality or independent status and enjoys immunity and privileges for the fulfillment of its humanitarian mandate.

*Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)* are private, non-profit organizations, based on volunteering, with or without governmental or intergovernmental affiliation, established to carry out a wide range of activities, in connection with the development of private projects or the promotion of a particular cause, and organized locally, nationally, regionally or internationally.<sup>9</sup>

Overcoming the challenges imposed by the cultural variety, interests, and capabilities of all actors can be achieved only through constant dialogue and communication, understanding the situation and identifying issues of common interest, an open and direct approach. The integration and involvement of the representatives of all military and civilian components, national, multinational, or host countries, in planning, coordination, and identification of resources aims to achieve the unity of effort for fulfilling the commonly advantageous goals/objectives.

*Multinational character.* The multinational character is imprinted by the participation in the joint deployable military force of the units belonging to two or more nations, traditional partners or other nation-states "within alliances, coalitions or international commitments, to achieve common goals".<sup>10</sup> Multinational engagement enables adequate strengths and capabilities to combat diversified and cross-border hybrid threats, integrates and facilitates access to national and regional logistics capabilities and resources and their efficient allocation, and enhances the effect of information operations, improving national and international public perception and implicitly furnishes legitimacy to the operation.

*Expeditionary character.* The hybrid conflict's multinational character automatically generates the need to carry out military actions at great distances from the national territory, expeditionary actions for most participating actors. Supporting expeditionary military action is achieved by projecting modular forces belonging to different states in the theater of operations, which requires excellent mobility and flexibility for rapid grouping and compatible interface systems for integration and interoperability so that multinational and multifunctional components, operationalized at great distances from each other to be able to quickly form compact structures, under a single command, for the execution of specific missions.

The expeditionary operation is defined as the projection of military power beyond the extended lines of communication, in a remote operational area to meet a specific objective.<sup>11</sup>

When we talk about expeditionary operations, we have in mind that they can be executed both on the territory of the states belonging to the alliances and outside them. Future NATO operations will most likely be carried out outside the borders, but there is no difference for the Member States if they take place outside of their national territory. The operations'

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<sup>9</sup> AAP-6, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), 2012, p. 2-N-4.

<sup>10</sup> \*\*\*, *Doctrina Armatei României*, București, 2012, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> AAP-6, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), 2012, p. 2-E-6.

expeditionary character is more and more accentuated and imposes the fulfillment of the characteristics of deployability and logistical support in the theater of operations.<sup>12</sup>

The main advantage of expeditionary actions is that the sources of force generation and regeneration are taken out of the opponent's direct, "classic" strokes. However, they remain vulnerable to terrorist acts. Simultaneously, the logistics of joint multinational forwarding operations acquire a vital role for the insertion/extraction of forces in/from the theater of operations and the achievement of permanent and uninterrupted logistic flows over long distances.

In the context of the hybrid conflict, the extended logistical space is one of the essential vulnerable elements of its own forces, whose factions of the hybrid adversary will not hesitate to engage.

*Multifunctionality.* In order to face the multitude of challenges imposed by the operational environment specific to the hybrid conflict, we consider that in the future, the share of multifunctional action structures (in various fields) will increase with essential implications on how to fulfill missions. They will be structurally and functionally at the level of evolution of armament and technology, quickly and almost completely dominating the space of combat actions, increasingly dependent on the information system and logistical support, actively integrated into the struggle.<sup>13</sup> These aspects give these types of structures efficiency and significant action autonomy.

#### *Characteristics of unconventional operations*

The main feature of unconventional operations is that they will most likely be used against political and economic centers or tangible targets. Their destruction affects intangible centers of gravity to a greater extent than if they were used against military targets for purely military purposes.

Consequently, in our opinion, against these targets, the hybrid opponent will employ all the means at its disposal: diplomatic initiatives, political influences, economic pressures, information operations (INFO OPS), terrorist attacks, sponsored insurgencies, activated separatism, direct actions of special forces, precise shots of long-range systems and selectively even chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction (CBRN WMD).

These types of actions most often affect non-combatants, who are exposed to unconventional actions in order to put pressure on the political decision-maker.

A hypothetical hybrid adversary will intend to obtain and use the WMD CBRN, one of the most severe contemporary threats at the regional level or even on the territories of extra-regional powers. The means of attack that can use CBRN agents range from highly sophisticated weapon systems, such as nuclear bombs, to rudimentary improvised explosive devices loaded with toxic industrial materials (TIMs). Although high-power explosions are not traditionally recognized as WMDs, they – and in some cases, low-power explosions – can cause devastating effects on humans and the environment when produced in combination with CBRN agents.

Using any CBRN agent, the hybrid adversary will aim to achieve results ranging from mass loss of life to massive destruction of physical infrastructure and economy and the disruption of activities and the ordinary course of life. The use of WMD has a potentially significant impact on the unprotected civilian population. It aims to induce a harsh, intimidating psychological effect, cause mental and emotional stress, casualties, and large-scale damage, and the need for special protection measures and control of disorder, anxiety, and fears of the population and forces engaged against the hybrid adversary.

The threat of using WMD is present across the spectrum of operations in the hybrid conflict. The hybrid adversary has the opportunity to use these weapons as an individual act to

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<sup>12</sup> AJP-01(D), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, December 2010, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), p. x.

<sup>13</sup> Ion Mitulețu, Marilena Moroșan, *Protecția mediului în operațiile forțelor terestre*, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I”, București, 2013, p. 122.

cause damage to property or persons, or in a coordinated manner, in operations carried out by violent organized groups or failed states. An international terrorist network that owns WMD can strike an extra-regional force in one of the following situations: on the national territory or during the deployment in a theater of operations.

Regarding the general trends that are manifested in the behavior of the hybrid opponent regarding WMD, these are:

- *micro-actors*: there is an increase in the number of small, independent cells, able to manipulate advanced technologies for access to knowledge, technologies, and means necessary for the acquisition, procurement, and use of CBRN agents;

- *the complexity of the phenomenon*: the overlapping of all the elements such as the easy access to information, the origin of the financial resources, the relations with other asymmetric actors, the practical exchange of experience and ideas, the mutual support;

- *connections with organized crime*: cross-border crime is a network that assists and supports terrorist organizations in carrying out attacks on other states' territories.

Another important component of the strategy used by the hybrid opponent is the execution of *information operations*. In his vision, this type of operations is defined as encompassing those actions especially planned and integrated, carried out to obtain the informational advantage in the right place and at the right time. The purpose of these operations is to negatively influence the decision-making process, the collection and availability of information, processes and information systems. At the same time, it aims to maintain its ability to exploit its own information, based on processes and systems.

Although the hybrid adversary refers to this type of operation as a war, they also occur in peacetime. Therefore, it is not just a military function or concept. In the context of the „*total war*”<sup>14</sup> unleashed by the hybrid adversary, INFOWAR involves all the power tools: diplomatic, economic, military, and informational.

Before the outbreak of hybrid conflict, they include fighting and competition rather than war, representing state and non-state actors' posture to protect their interests, obtain advantages, or influence others' perceptions. In times of crisis and war, activities continue and intensify. Defensive measures are much strengthened while offensive elements gain strength. Even subtle elements can become more aggressive.

The hybrid adversary will wage the information war at all levels of the conflict, requiring special attention at the strategic level. At this level, INFOWAR is defined as the synergistic effort of the hybrid adversary to control or manifest IT events in the strategic diplomatic, political, economic, or military environment. The hybrid threat defines this type of war as any attack (digital, physical, or cognitive) directed against the opponents' nation's critical infrastructure databases.<sup>15</sup>

The ultimate goal is to destroy or inflict strategic damage on the opponent's strength. The action is focused on modeling foreign decision makers' action to support the objectives of the hybrid threat. Perception management activities are essential at this level. The hybrid adversary is expected to use all forms of persuasion and the media to act even on opponents' or member countries' territory in various military coalitions. The hybrid threat will also seek to involve third-party actors or external resources to support its global information strategy. Such obscuration networks are built, maintained, operated, and maintained since peacetime.

The hybrid opponent has integrated into its doctrine the following elements:<sup>16</sup> electronic warfare (EW); misleading; physical destruction; protection and security measures; perception management; information attack (IA); computer warfare.

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<sup>14</sup> T.C.-7-100, *Hybrid Threat*, Department of the Army Training Circular No. 7-100, p. 3-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

Usually, at the strategic level, the actions are mainly aimed at attacking critical nodes of the IT infrastructure rather than the entire infrastructure or network. These elements of INFOWAR do not exist in isolation from each other and are not mutually exclusive. The overall situation determines each element's use or a combination of elements depending on the strategic goals pursued.

From the above, it results that the hybrid adversary uses the tactics of terror in order to identify and exploit those discovered parts and vulnerabilities of the adversary, decidedly superior from a military point of view. Vulnerabilities will be engaged by employing a minimum of effort and energy and generate maximum, traumatic effects on the collective psyche, induce feelings of insecurity and distrust in the government's ability to protect the nation, and apply pressure on the political factor to achieve "victory" without the use of military forces.

*Achieving surprise.* In the context of the hybrid conflict, the achievement of surprise becomes an extremely important condition and is achieved by performing special combat actions, punctual, on well-defined objectives, with decisive effects on the morale of forces and leadership. The specialized forces constituted elite structures (teams or detachments of special forces or commando), prepared to execute actions with great destructive power, will have an essential role in achieving success.

*The tactic of terror* is one of the most effective methods of combat used by the hybrid adversary as part of the concept of "total war." Affiliated or independent terrorist groups can attack the opponent anywhere and anytime. Special forces can also use terror tactics for which they are well equipped, armed, prepared and motivated.

The sensitive elements mainly targeted by the hybrid adversary are the civilian population and the environment and therefore the key to counteracting this type of threat is to adopt those measures of education, surveillance, monitoring, protection and action to reduce their vulnerability.

#### *Characteristics of asymmetric operations*

The forces and actions specific to the irregular war create favorable conditions for the appearance and development of *asymmetries*. Most of the time, they manifest in the conventional confrontation plan and influence the opponent's forces' defeat. Some state armed forces, especially those belonging to totalitarian regimes or states with poor governance, may conduct concurrently with conventional also asymmetric actions, complementarily and support conventional military objectives. The effect of major combat operations can be exacerbated, perpetuated, or exploited through asymmetric actions, in order to maintain instability through insurgency, terrorism, crime, and social disorder.

Asymmetric operations include a wide range of military and paramilitary forces, which are usually long-lasting and conducted among, with or without the indigenous population's support. Irregular forces can demonstrate combined armed capabilities of separatist, insurgent, guerrilla, and criminal elements.

Irregular forces favor indirect and asymmetric approaches.<sup>17</sup> Irregular warfare usually is one of attrition, which erodes regional state and non-state opponents and can have ramifications and connections to transnational action due to political, economic, and financial globalization. Its purpose is to gain the legitimacy of actions and influence over the relevant population. Different types of irregular forces can use different levels of violent and non-violent actions to exert their influence. Access to technology will have an impact on their operations. In the context of hybrid conflict, especially at the tactical level, they can apply techniques, tactics, and procedures common to regular forces but will use asymmetric means and actions.

Even defeated, the conventional component can be reactivated or can be favored and sustained through the development of asymmetric actions. Asymmetric operations aim to attack

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<sup>17</sup> \*\*\*, *Conducere militară planificare operațională*, Curs universitar, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I”, București, 2009, p. 29.

abstract elements, such as the motivation to fight and the trust of combatants, political and diplomatic decisions, public opinion, private institutions' interests, the nation's will to fight and support the war effort, the will and collective involvement of alliances.

### **Conclusions**

A foray into military history shows us that hybrid warfare is, in many ways, as old as conventional warfare. Technology and globalization are the vectors that have transformed the characteristics of hybrid warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If in the past military force has often been decisive in achieving victory or defeat in battle, today, even the most powerful armies in the world are hampered by the asymmetric approach.

In "hybrid warfare", not only military weaknesses are essential, but especially societal, non-military weaknesses: ethnic tensions, weak and corrupt state institutions, economic or energy dependence. Based on these weaknesses, a "hybrid war" involves various actions, from terrorism to media propaganda, irregular and unassumed military actions. A weak state without solid institutions, with citizens disengaged from the state or even hostile to it, economically dependent on the potential enemy, crushed by corruption, so easy to infiltrate at the level of strategic decision is the favorite scene of a "hybrid war".

An important component is the approach of the legal aspect so that the engagement of power is done by exploiting the legislative gaps. In this sense, as a relevant example we can mention the direct consequence on the way of defense within the alliances, respectively the inapplicability of article 5 of the NATO treaty, of the right of self-defense and of collective defense.

As hybrid threats primarily affect the information, social, political, infrastructure, economic and military fields, we believe that measures to prevent and combat them must include and integrate all national instruments with responsibilities in these areas, in cooperation with NATO and EU. To date, a number of strategies, measures and plans have been adopted at both NATO and EU level to combat hybrid threats, aimed at increasing operational capacity, improving current awareness and strengthening bilateral cooperation between two international bodies.

At the national level, hybrid threat response mechanisms should integrate the following directions of action: increasing societal resilience as the main countermeasure, improving governance, increasing strategic infrastructure protection measures (energy, transport, communication and health) adaptation of national security and defense legislation, optimization of information community management, creation of early warning and strategic communication systems, development of procedures for training the military and civil society in terms of knowledge of the type of threat hybrid and how to act against it.

Regarding the way to counter hybrid warfare, we consider it appropriate to create a structure that identifies, analyzes and prevents any possibility and initiative of a hybrid type of the enemy. To this end, an operational center for the management of hybrid threats could be set up consisting of experts and specialists from all sectors of society vulnerable to this phenomenon.



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