America's Smart Hybrid War Strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract:

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the United States of America, in accordance with its interests, has adopted extensive aggressive approaches and strategies against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Analyzing the characteristics of hybrid warfare and comparing them with the concrete and practical actions of the United States since the beginning of the third millennium reveals the intelligent use of hybrid warfare by this country against the Islamic Republic of Iran. This study aims to answer the question: what is America's objective in hybrid warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran? This study utilizes a descriptive-analytical method, documentary and library studies, as well as questionnaires and interviews with university professors and political and cultural elite. The findings indicate that the United States' strategy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 Revolution has been pursued at three levels: "containment," "behavior change," and "structure change," each implemented through both soft and hard approaches. Although the United States, at certain times, has managed tensions with the aim of maximizing its own interests, avoiding immediate attribution of the overthrow or collapse of the Islamic Republic of Iran to itself, an examination of its step-by-step strategies shows that the country has aimed, through multi-layered strategies and comprehensive containment, to change the behavior of the people and rulers and alter the value and civic structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran, thus putting the country in a strategic bind and expanding the groundwork for internal collapse through intensified comprehensive pressures.

Keywords: Strategy, United States of America, Islamic Republic of Iran, Hybrid Warfare

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Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of hybrid warfare has become one of the most challenging and complex international phenomena. Hybrid warfare combines military, economic, cyber, informational, diplomatic, and other tools. It is used by major powers like the United States in countering regional and global rivals as a dynamic and multi-dimensional strategy. The Islamic Republic of Iran has always been a primary target of these strategies. The United States has aimed to achieve its strategic objectives against the Islamic Republic of Iran by employing hybrid warfare.

This research is significant due to the increasing challenges posed by hybrid wars and the intelligent strategies of the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hybrid warfare, as one of the most complex and multi-layered modern war tools, employs a set of tactics executed simultaneously and on different levels, from economic sanctions targeting the livelihood of the Iranian people to psychological and media warfare aimed at undermining public trust in the government. Additionally, cyberattacks and informational threats target the country's critical infrastructure as part of this war, directly threatening Iran's national security. Therefore, an accurate analysis of these strategies and their execution methods is crucial, as these tools often operate indirectly, requiring a deep understanding of their function and practical applications to identify and counter them effectively. The necessity of such research lies not only in identifying the various dimensions of the United States' hybrid strategies against Iran but also in offering practical solutions to counter them. In facing these threats, the Islamic Republic of Iran needs to devise and implement appropriate defensive and offensive strategies, which

are only possible through a correct understanding of the tools employed by the United States in hybrid warfare against Iran. Furthermore, this research can assist Iranian policymakers and decision-makers in leveraging opportunities in the international arena and utilizing similar tools, such as soft and hard power, effectively to counter hybrid warfare.

This research aims to explore the lesser-known dimensions of hybrid warfare, contributing to a deeper understanding of the United States' hybrid strategies against the Islamic Republic of Iran and playing a crucial role in developing new and practical perspectives in countering them. This study can serve as a reliable scientific reference for designing defensive and counter strategies by relevant institutions and, especially under current conditions where hybrid warfare and intelligent strategies have become an integral part of U.S. foreign policy against the Islamic Republic of Iran, can play an important role in enhancing Iran's defensive capabilities.

1. Research Background

Ghaderi Kangavari (2023), in an article titled "America's Hybrid War Against the Islamic Republic of Iran as Portrayed in Diplomacy and Negotiation: From Coercive Diplomacy to Informational Deterrence," mentions that alongside the use of conventional and unconventional tools of hybrid warfare, such as economic warfare, informational warfare, internal insecurity, and destabilization, "diplomacy" and "diplomatic warfare" are also among the main and important aspects of this type of hybrid war. The main question of the article is how the nature and dimensions of America's hybrid war against the Islamic Republic can be

outlined and framed within the realm of diplomacy and negotiation. The findings indicate that despite significant achievements in defense and military deterrence, the Islamic Republic of Iran has not been very successful in informational deterrence. Thus, the lack of information deterrence capabilities has generally led to surrendering to coercive diplomacy or paying heavy and sometimes irreparable national security costs.

Ebrahimi (2020), in an article titled "Hybrid Warfare: The United States' Approach to Confronting the Islamic Republic of Iran," points out that the failure of the United States in hard war tactics, such as the Tabas raid, the Iraq war, the attack on the Iranian passenger plane by the USS Vincennes, as well as threats of military action and soft war tactics like propaganda and psychological warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran, led the country to adopt a new approach towards Iran in the late fourth and early fifth decade. This approach, known in political and military circles as hybrid warfare, is examined through the study of its indicators, demonstrating that most aspects of hybrid warfare are prominently reflected in U.S. actions against Iran during this period.

Karami er al., (2019), in a study titled "The Perspective of Hybrid Warfare: A Foundation for Understanding the Trump Administration's Strategy Against the Islamic Republic of Iran," examine the U.S. actions against Iran during the Trump era, noting that Iran and the United States experienced intense tensions during this period. The intensity of these tensions was such that some speculated about the possibility of an unintended war in the region. The study's findings also indicate that Trump's strategy against Iran was explained with more precision within the framework of the concept

of "hybrid warfare" rather than maximum pressure policy.

Otkinkova (2021), in her master's thesis titled "Cyber Attacks Against Iran as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare," examines whether cyberattacks against Iran can be considered evidence of hybrid warfare by certain states. To answer this question, she reviews data and reports on cyberattacks, outlining their fundamental characteristics and comparing them to the definition of hybrid warfare, concluding that cyberattacks against Iran cannot be considered hybrid warfare due to the failure to adhere to the basic principles of the hybrid warfare concept.

Wiseman et al., (2021), in their book "Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations," describe hybrid warfare as the combination of various types of war, such as conventional, irregular, and cyberattacks, along with other influential methods like fake news, diplomacy, and foreign political intervention. A strength of this book is its analysis of the perspectives of key Western actors such as NATO, the United States, and the European Union regarding hybrid warfare, as well as an examination of the hybrid warfare capabilities of Russia and China.

2- Theoretical Framework: Smart Power

To conduct a scientific and precise study, choosing an appropriate and guiding theoretical framework is of special importance. A theoretical framework, as a roadmap, guides the researcher in the right direction and provides a conceptual tool for better and more accurate analysis of the subject. In examining the current research topic, which investigates the U.S.'s hybrid warfare strategy against the

Islamic Republic of Iran, selecting the theoretical framework of smart power is of particular importance. This theoretical framework serves as a guide to understanding the complex and multilayered nature of the combined strategies that the U.S. employs against the Islamic Republic of Iran. This theoretical framework comprehensively and multidimensionally analyzes the tools (hard, semi-hard, and soft) used by the U.S. in hybrid warfare. In such circumstances, the smart power framework can help the researcher understand how these tools synergistically and coherently threaten the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Through the smart power framework, the researcher will be able to systematically and comprehensively analyze how these two dimensions of power, in the form of a combined strategy, have effectively and optimally acted against the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, the theory of smart power allows the researcher to go beyond traditional analyses based on hard power and also consider the indirect and long-term effects of soft power. Consequently, this framework not only helps to better understand the complex methods of hybrid warfare but also enables the researcher to evaluate Iran's defensive and deterrent strategies based on the combination of hard and soft power.

Given the importance of the smart power theory in analyzing the U.S.'s hybrid warfare strategies against the Islamic Republic of Iran, examining and understanding the components and propositions of this theory is crucial for a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the topic. Therefore, before addressing the main subject of the research, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive definition of the concept of smart power.

The emergence of the concept of smart power dates back to 2004 when Suzanne Nossel published it under this title in 'Foreign Policy' magazine. (Mohammadian and Abedi, 2017, p. 25) She used the concept of smart power to mean the purposeful and wise combination of hard and soft power to counter threats, arguing that coercive and persuasive resources, including military, economic, cultural, and ideological advantages, must be coordinated in one direction to ensure the country's continued dominance. (Saleh Nezhad, 2019, p. 16) Later, Joseph Nye, a political scientist and former assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration, defined smart power as an approach in international relations that can combine hard and soft power and turn their combination into a winning strategy. "Since Nye first coined the term 'soft power' in 1990, he himself has refined and expanded the concepts of hard and soft power, and later in the early 21st century, smart power, in response to criticism and global changes." (Harley, 2021, p. 28) Nye's smart power theory has a strategic nature. He defines smart power as a set of intelligent strategies that combine the tools of hard power (using coercion and payment) and soft power (achieving desired outcomes through attraction). (Nye, 2009, p. 162)

3- History of the Emergence and Transformation of the Hybrid Warfare Concept

Hybrid warfare has a historical background. In this regard, it is clearly not a new concept. There are numerous examples of hybrid techniques and approaches at tactical, operational, and strategic levels that date back at least to the Peloponnesian War and the writings of the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu in the 5th century BC. (Wither, 2016, p. 74) However, the first mention of the term "hybrid warfare"

goes back to 1998 when R.J. Walker used the term in his master's thesis on the U.S. Marine Corps and special operations, describing hybrid warfare as consisting of two distinct elements: "special operations" and "conventional operations." (Walker, 1998, p. 5)

Another instance of the term hybrid warfare was in 2002 when Nemeth used it in his master's thesis titled "Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare." In it, Nemeth illustrated the nature of hybrid warfare in relation to the specific situation of Chechnya during its violent struggle for independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. (Nemeth, 2002, p. 65) Although R.J. Walker and Nemeth can be considered pioneers of hybrid warfare, their work largely went unnoticed.

In 2005, Frank Hoffman and his colleague J. Mattis, the most influential authors on hybrid warfare literature, described this type of warfare in purely military terms as "the integration of various modes and means of warfare." Hoffman and Mattis further developed their concept based on a previous idea by General Charles Krulak, called the "Three Block War," and based on past experiences of the U.S. Marine Corps during previous missions. Krulak stated that "battle" is only one of the three "blocks" of warfare that American forces find themselves in. Thus, beyond conducting purely military actions, they must be prepared to engage in two other areas: "peacekeeping" and "humanitarian operations." (Hoffman & Mattis, 2005, p. 1) It seems Hoffman and Mattis agreed to add a "fourth block" to Krulak's three-block war, emphasizing the need to manage the information space of the battlefield, akin to a "battlefield of ideas." (Pinkas, 2021, p. 7) Hoffman referred to the 2006 Hezbollah war in southern Lebanon as an example of hybrid warfare by Hezbollah, which successfully resisted a much stronger conventional adversary (Israel). (Hoffman, 2006b)

In 2008, John McCuen proposed that hybrid warfare consists of two symmetric and asymmetric wars and three battlefields: "the population in the conflict area," "the domestic front population," and "the battlefield consisting of the international community." To win a hybrid war, all three battlefields must be controlled. McCuen emphasized the cognitive and psychological aspects of this warfare more than Hoffman did. (Pinkas, 2021, p. 10) Nathan Freier, in 2009, reflected on the appropriateness of the term "hybrid warfare," as he believed it unnecessarily limits our understanding of hybrid warfare to its purely military aspect. Freier suggested focusing on broader "hybrid threats" such as political, military, social, economic, and natural. (Freier, 2009, pp. 7-8)

4- The Nature, Objectives, and Tools of Hybrid Warfare

The essential features of hybrid warfare include conventional and unconventional actions; military and non-military; overt and covert with the aim of creating ambiguity and confusion regarding the nature, origin, and objective of the threat; the ability to identify and exploit the vulnerabilities of targets; and the capacity to keep hostility levels below the "threshold" of conventional war. (Andersson and Thierry, 2015, p. 2) The multifaceted nature of hybrid warfare distinguishes it from other types of irregular warfare, such as compound warfare or guerrilla tactics. However, the question that always arises is whether non-military hybrid methods truly constitute warfare. Hybrid warfare is often used to describe

wars that are not entirely conventional. Thus, it can be said that the term hybrid warfare is very ambiguous for analysts and policymakers. As the Latvian analyst Janis Berzins states: "The word hybrid is attractive because it can signify a hybrid of anything." (Berzins, 2015a, p. 24)

General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, described the new generation of warfare in February 2013 as "the extensive use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military tools hidden among local population discontent and armed forces." (Gerasimov, 2015, p. 12) NATO defines hybrid warfare as "a war that is barely war, a deliberate strategy of deception that combines the use of force with misinformation and instability to create ambiguity in leaders' minds about the best responses." (Lindley, 2015, p. 4)

In hybrid warfare, traditional physical domains such as land, sea, air, and space increasingly combine with social and constructed spaces like political, economic, cultural, infrastructural, and cyber spaces. Achieving political and strategic objectives is no longer solely limited to traditional military means, as cognitive and psychological spaces have become a significant aspect of warfare. At the same time, the convergence of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military tools that can lead to desired strategic effects reduces the necessity for deploying hard military power. (Berzins, 2014, p. 6) The objectives of an actor employing hybrid warfare include creating surprise, seizing the initiative, creating deception and ambiguity, avoiding attribution or maximizing denial of responsibility for aggressive actions,

disrupting the target's situation, encouraging economic instability, fostering population dissatisfaction, inciting minority divisions or affecting vulnerable populations, creating conditions that encourage controlled or uncontrolled migration, suppressing civil resistance, and disrupting critical infrastructure. (Utinková, 2021, p. 8)

In hybrid warfare, the main battlefield is the mind, and as a result, new generation wars are dominated by informational and psychological warfare. The primary goal is to minimize the necessity for hard military power deployment and to reduce the military force to a minimum. In this scenario, the civilian population supports the attacker to the detriment of its own government and country. (Berzins, 2015, p. 24) Therefore, one of the key objectives of hybrid warfare is "reflexive control" or "perception management." (Wither, 2016, p. 82) It can be said that the main goal is not the destruction of the army or the destruction of the military capabilities of the opponent country in order to surrender, but the main goal is the perception of key decision-makers and policymakers and the cognitive space of key populations (domestic, international or in the operational area).

5- The Role of Hybrid Warfare in the U.S. National Security Strategy

In 2005, General James Mattis—then the commander of the U.S. Marine Corps Combat Development Command—and Frank Hoffman from the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities in Quantico, Virginia, argued that "future adversaries of the United States are likely to 'mix and match' forms and methods of warfare to neutralize the power of the United States' conventional military

battlefield." Therefore, it is clear that the term hybrid warfare is a complex and ongoing effort to understand and express the ever-changing nature of war. This is important because if it is properly understood, it allows for the development of a future force capable of deterring and defeating potential adversaries who seek new ways to achieve victory. As Hoffman and Mattis stated in 2005: "The United States' conventional superiority provides a compelling rationale for both state and non-state actors to move away from traditional warfare and seek some unexpected hybrid capabilities of technologies and tactics to gain an advantage" (Mattis & Hoffman, 2005, p. 2). However, in the discourse of U.S. smart power, hybrid warfare has taken on a much broader concept, utilizing various tools ranging from cyberattacks to propaganda and subversion, economic extortion and sabotage, support for proxy forces, and creeping military expansion. This term somewhat surpasses Mattis and Hoffman's ideas about the evolving nature of armed conflicts. As a Swedish analyst states: "The term hybrid warfare has traveled far in its definition" (Gunneriusson, 2017, p. 111).

6- The Nature of America's Hybrid War Against the Islamic Republic of Iran

One of the critical operational nodes of the United States in the covert power battlefield, in the face of great world powers to establish a new world order, is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran, as a Gordian knot in the Middle East and within the strategic depth of the United States, is vital for victory in the Middle East and the establishment of a new world order. For the United States, Iran is paradoxical and contradictory. Therefore, it cannot be subdued with the use of hard power alone. The lack of

U.S. soft power penetration into the rigid layers of Iranian acceptance is due to two factors: "xenophobia" and "Western distrust." The intensification of these two factors, due to the Islamic Revolution and its redefinition in response to U.S. support for the Pahlavi regime and various negative actions against the revolution over its duration, is evident. These two strategies have led the Americans not only to stand against Iran but also to recognize on a global level the damage to their value image, prompting them to place smart power strategies against Iran on the agenda and to intelligently combine hard and soft power, utilizing new tools on the battlefield. (Motaharnia, 2009, p. 2)

The behavioral performance of the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran reinforces the idea that, over time, with the enhancement of contextual intelligence, the U.S. has not only paved the way for the replacement of hybrid strategy over conventional war but has also managed to upgrade its policy-making capability for formulating smart strategies. This enables it to simultaneously harness all its superpower potential and align tactics with its objectives in the Persian Gulf region and in opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this context, the use of a complex, asymmetric, flexible, fluid, and agile network structure, ambiguity in time, ambiguity in identifying the exact location or battlefield (physical including land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace, and psychological including public opinion), ambiguity in fighting methods, ambiguity in the tools used, and the use of complex and simultaneous methods are features of the new U.S. hybrid strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The country is well aware of the weaknesses, strengths, nervous reactions, and hidden desires of the

Islamic Republic of Iran in the region and the world and has acted in such a way through a range of smart actions under the banner of hybrid warfare that Iran simultaneously faces serious challenges in various domains.

7- Research Methodology: Combining Document Studies, Questionnaires, and Interviews

In this study, to achieve a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the U.S. hybrid war against the Islamic Republic of Iran, three data collection methods were used: documentary and library studies, questionnaires, and interviews. The combination of these methods not only deepens the analysis and enables a more precise evaluation of the dimensions and components of hybrid warfare but also facilitates the gathering of multi-purpose and reliable information from various sources. Documentary and library studies were used as one of the primary sources in analyzing historical and political data. This method provided access to scientific articles, official reports, and strategic texts, offering a precise and documented view of U.S. actions and policies. Additionally, questionnaires were used to collect quantitative and measurable data. This method allowed the researcher to derive scientific and consistent results from the responses of various groups, including elites and experts, presenting perceptions and opinions related to hybrid warfare strategy in the form of analyzable data. Finally, qualitative interviews with experts and elites in various diplomatic, security/military, cultural, and social fields played a significant role in completing and strengthening the data. This method provided the opportunity to gain deep insights and practical experiences from specialists, adding to the documentary and library analyses to paint a

more comprehensive picture of the U.S. hybrid strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. These three methods were combined to provide a multi-dimensional examination of this complex issue, ensuring that the research results are based on solid and reliable data.

7-1- Findings from Documentary Studies: Reviewing Sources and Analyzing Library Data

Documentary and library studies, as one of the main research methods in this study, played a crucial role in analyzing and examining the U.S. hybrid strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. This method provided access to credible sources, official reports, scientific articles, and specialized books related to the topic, offering a foundation for deeper and more documented examination of U.S. actions and policies against Iran. In the U.S. hybrid war against Iran, a diverse and complex array of tools have been employed, each playing a specific role in achieving the strategic objectives of the U.S. These tools, combining traditional and modern methods, are designed to exert pressure simultaneously on Iran's internal and international weaknesses. The most important tools the U.S. uses in implementing this strategy will be discussed in detail below.

> 1) Utilization of Regular and Conventional Military Forces: Nowadays, the deployment of regular and conventional military forces alongside other methods is one of the tools of the United States' hybrid warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The U.S., by establishing numerous military bases in countries surrounding the Islamic Republic of Iran and expanding surface and subsurface

combat vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, has stationed a wide range of military equipment and forces in these bases.

2) Terrorism: Terrorist groups have always played significant roles and functions in global, regional, and domestic competitions among rival actors and are thus considered a geopolitical tool. Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, various terrorist groups, such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Jaish al-Adl, have been used as tools and weapons by countries like the U.S. against the Islamic Republic of Iran. These terrorist groups have even been exploited by regional powers like the Zionist regime, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to counter the regional presence and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the power of the resistance front. (Hosseininasrabadi, 2020, p. 161)

3) Cyber Warfare: Cyber warfare is a key element of hybrid warfare. The U.S., being the most advanced country in this field, possesses considerable power. (Groll, 2019) The U.S. cyber warfare campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran began widely in a covert campaign codenamed "Olympic Games" in 2006, under the leadership of George W. Bush's administration, initially targeting Iran's nuclear capabilities. The next U.S. president, Obama, expanded the Olympic Games campaign to include the use of offensive cyber weapons against Iran's nuclear enrichment

facilities. (Kaminski, 2020, p. 64-70) In total, over the past two decades, numerous cyber-attacks by the U.S. and its allies, such as the Zionist regime, have been carried out against Iran's critical infrastructure, causing extensive damage. Some of the most notable attacks include the Stuxnet virus attack on Iran's nuclear facilities in 2010, the Duqu or "Son of Stuxnet" virus attack on Iran's telecommunications company and several electronics manufacturing companies, and the Flame virus attack in 2012, as well as the Wiper virus attack in 2011 on the Iranian Ministry of Oil's website and some of its subsidiaries.

4) Color Revolution: Russian researcher Andrew Korybko, in his book Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach to Regime Change, mentions that Iran's most significant potential for a successful color revolution lies in the revival of the Green Movement, ethnic and racial conflicts, intensifying cultural differences, and the emergence of a divisive event such as a presidential election. The simultaneous involvement of domestic pro-democracy organizations alongside social media campaigns, especially if protests begin simultaneously with the announcement of election manipulation, news of a major economic corruption scandal, or any similar event, could impose heavy costs on Iran's government. (Korybko, 2015, pp. 30-45)

5) Irregular Forces and Unconventional Warfare: Unconventional

warfare can enable a movement or insurgency to control, disrupt, or overthrow an independent government through underground and guerrilla forces in areas where successful classic operations are not feasible. Unconventional warfare imposes conditions that lead to the independent state's acceptance of defeat or the surrender of any governing authority. (Petit, 2012, p. 13) The United States and its regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia and the Zionist regime, have used and organized irregular forces to carry out widespread and comprehensive support for armed and terrorist groups against the Islamic Republic of Iran, aiming for armed attacks and terrorism inside Iran and creating insecurity along Iran's borders. Therefore, the extensive support and reorganization of the terrorist MEK group in Albania for backing terrorist operations inside Iran, as well as supporting other terrorist groups like the Ahvaz Arab Liberation Movement in southern Iran, Jaish al-Adl in southeastern Iran, and the PJAK group in northwestern Iran, which occasionally engage in armed conflicts with Iran's military forces or conduct terrorist activities within Iranian territory, can be assessed in this context.

6) Intelligence Dimension: The U.S. intelligence war against Iran is one where not the recognized commanders of the American army but the unknown intelligence officers design and execute operations against Iran. The main domain of the new intelligence war is Iran's economy, with the aim of weakening or perhaps destroying it becoming the main objective of the opposing side. U.S. intelligence officers and spies, using various tactics and disguises such as businessmen, tourists, students, researchers, and even university professors, infiltrate Iran. These individuals are, in effect, spies whose activities result in gathering information about Iran and eventually closing Iran's remaining economic bottlenecks. (mshrgh.ir/969096)

7) Internet Espionage: Christopher Soghoian, a senior security expert at the American Civil Liberties Union, said in an interview with The Guardian: "The U.S. government pursues disturbing and secretive practices to hack into computers and steal their data." (Organization for Passive Defense, 1394, p. 13) The leak of classified Iranian military information on American websites in November 2009 is an example of U.S. cyber espionage against the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the time, it was announced that some classified information related to Iranian missiles, including the Hoot missile, had been posted online.

8) Promotion of Digital Democracy and Inciting Iranian Society to Electronic Civil Disobedience: The promotion of digital democracy by the U.S. is another threat stemming from America's hybrid warfare strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this regard, several research institutes and media outlets, such as "Freedom House," "Washington Prism,"

and the "Foundation for Defense of Democracies," have been established and supported alongside several websites and other satellite media. (Abdollahkhani & Kardan, 2011, pp. 35-40) Virtual demonstrations, infiltration of popular websites, and posting images, news, and political content against the government, as well as the use of search bombs, are among the most important methods of electronic civil disobedience against the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Mahpishanian, 2009, p. 125)

9) Political Support for Domestic Unrest in Iran: With the beginning of the fifth decade of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and due to the significant growth in information exchange globally through technological advancements by leading countries, particularly the United States, these countries have been given the opportunity to use this as a weapon against dissenting countries like the Islamic Republic of Iran. With the new communication tools, creating managed chaos and insecurity within the rival nation's territory has gained special significance in hybrid warfare. (Korybko, 2015, p. 25)

10) Psychological Warfare and Propaganda: The United States has always sought to launch satellite networks, virtual social networks, and other means to incite popular demands and even ethnic movements in Iran by disseminating provocative content. Accordingly, it has attempted to wage a soft war against the Islamic Republic of Iran using tools such as propaganda, rumor-mongering, misinformation, and psychological manipulation, intelligently combining public demands with its political and ideological goals. (Mahpishanian, 2009, p. 127)

11) Economic Warfare and Smart Sanctions: With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and due to the hegemony's assessment of its inability to confront the Islamic Republic of Iran militarily, the United States has utilized economic warfare and sanctions as a powerful tool, in coordination with other hybrid warfare tools against the Islamic Republic of Iran, increasing their scope and intensity over time. The U.S. aims to create economic constraints for the Iranian government and prevent structural reforms in Iran's domestic economy by using economic weapons in hybrid warfare against Iran. "Following the inauguration of Barack Obama, a dual-track foreign policy of 'engagement and containment' or 'engagement and pressure' on Iran led to the introduction of new sanctions known as 'smart, targeted, or crippling sanctions." (Fashandi & Ghaderi, 2017, p. 135) This approach has been pursued by subsequent U.S. administrations as well.

12) Iranophobia: Iranophobia is a strategic plan aimed at constructing a major threat from Iran, not only for the region but also as a significant threat to global peace and security. It seeks to instill fear and, by influencing the

behavior of international actors against Iran, aims to weaken, undermine, and marginalize the country. This phenomenon expresses opposition or hostility toward Iran's policies, culture, society, economy, or international role. Besides the Western countries, Iranophobia has also expanded among the Arab countries in the region and has been driven by extensive political movements in Arab media and networks. This plan is based on exaggerating some existing realities in the Middle East, along with various fabrications and distortions. In this context, it is suggested that if the Islamic Republic of Iran gains power, the countries of the Middle East will be forced to bear significant costs and face serious dangers. (Shariatinia, 2010, p. 193)

13) Containment Policy: One of the soft strategies adopted by the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran is the "Containment Strategy," which was approved during George H.W. Bush's administration and continued through subsequent U.S. presidencies. The containment strategy pursued six main objectives: "building an iron wall around Iran," "isolating the country," "applying external pressure to cripple the economy," "spreading public dissatisfaction," and "reducing the popular base of the regime and proving its inefficacy to disprove the theory of Islamic governance." The pillars of this strategy were also based on weakening Iran's financial strength and national capabilities, crippling the country's economy

through comprehensive sanctions, and striking at the country's most crucial sources of income, namely oil and gas. (Akhavan & Seraj, 2013, p. 11) Thus, in the third decade of the Islamic regime's existence, the soft containment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, under the title "Delta Project," was put on the U.S. agenda. In this regard, Mark Palmer explicitly opposed the idea of a military invasion against the Islamic Republic of Iran, stating that due to Iran's vast territory, large population, quality human resources, substantial military capabilities, abundant natural resources, and its strategic geographical location in the Middle East and the heartland of the international system, it has become an almost unparalleled power that can no longer be overthrown by military aggression. (Seraj, 2007)

14) Behavior Change: Behavior change is a process in which the target, either through coercion or persuasion, alters its approach, rhetoric, and political behavior. The ultimate goal of employing the behavior change strategy is the "retreat of the target country from its national objectives." This process has been part of the U.S.'s overall strategy since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, and considering the identity-based and discourse-driven nature of the Islamic Revolution, changing the behavior of the Islamic Republic means deviating from its original path aligned with its ideological foundations and, in reality, changing the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ayatollah

Khamenei states: "The U.S. view of the Islamic system is one of denial of existence. The behavior change they speak of, even though they don't always insist on it, means denying identity. In other words, the fundamental behaviors that are the markers of being Islamic must change." (Supreme Leader, 08/18/2010). He also states: "The significance of this issue lies in the fact that directional changes are gradual and imperceptible. It is not as if this change occurs with a 180-degree turn from the start. The change begins with much smaller angles, and the longer it continues, the further the path diverges from the main route, which is the straight path, and this deviation grows day by day." (Supreme Leader, 06/04/2010)

15) Structural Change: Changing the structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran through hard and soft approaches has been one of the oldest and most repeated methods of confrontation by the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to the Supreme Leader: "The enemies of this system and revolution have targeted the structural change of the core of the system, and in their view, reforms mean changing the system and transforming the Islamic Republic into a dependent and subservient regime to arrogant enemies." (Supreme Leader, 03/21/2004). Regarding the historical trend of the various subversive methods used by the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran, he says: "In that first 10-year period, they began with a hard overthrow plot— the

imposed war and economic sanctions— but they couldn't achieve anything... In the next period, they pursued a soft overthrow— cultural invasion and cultural offensive— which also led nowhere." (Supreme Leader, 06/19/2006). Ayatollah Khamenei further states: "The objectives they pursued were, first and foremost, the fall of the revolution and the fall of the Islamic Republic system. The primary goal was overthrowing. The next goal was that if the overthrow of the Islamic Republic did not materialize, they would seek to transform the revolution, meaning that the appearance of the revolution would remain, but the essence, the spirit of the revolution, would be eradicated." (Supreme Leader, 02/04/2011). In recent years, White House politicians have used a combination of hard and soft approaches in the three processes of "containment policy," "behavior change," and "structural change."

7-2- Results and Analysis of Data Collected from the Questionnaire

To prioritize the components of the United States' hybrid warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran, a questionnaire was used as one of the reliable and efficient research methods. This questionnaire was designed and distributed to collect data and opinions from experts and analysts in political, military, and economic fields. In designing the questions of this questionnaire, an effort was made to comprehensively cover the eight dimensions of hybrid warfare, including information, economic, psychological, diplomacy/political, cyber, regular military forces,

special/irregular forces, and support for internal conflicts. The target group for this questionnaire included 60 experts and specialists with experience in related fields who possess knowledge and experience in analyzing U.S. strategies and developments related to Iran.

The results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaires provided a comprehensive and accurate picture of the prioritization of the components of the United States' hybrid warfare strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. This analysis, based on valid data and expert opinions, clearly shows which components are most significant in the United States' hybrid warfare strategy against Iran and the effectiveness of each component.

Based on the obtained results, some components are clearly at the top of the U.S. priorities in its hybrid warfare strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran, while others are seen as less important in these strategies.

These differences indicate the United States' varying focus on different components of hybrid warfare against Iran. Each of these components plays a unique role in U.S. policies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

After identifying and examining the most important tools of the United States' hybrid warfare against Iran, some of which were mentioned in the documentary studies section of this research, these tools have been categorized into 8 essential components: 1. Informational; 2. Economic; 3. Psychological; 4. Diplomatic/Political; 5. Cyber; 6. Regular military forces; 7. Special/Irregular forces; and 9. Support for internal conflicts. In the section related to the questionnaire, the goal was to determine the priority of using each of these components by the U.S. against Iran and then determine the effectiveness of each on Iran's national security. The results obtained from the questionnaire analysis are shown in the chart below.
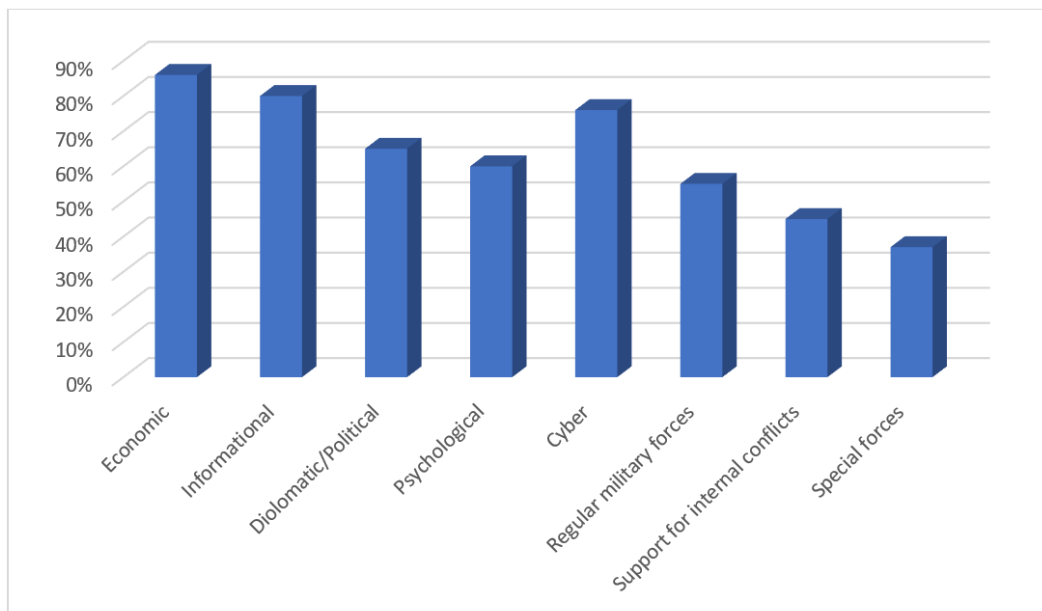
Chart 1: Priority in exploitation and effectiveness of America's hybrid war components against the Islamic Republic of Iran

As shown in the above chart, from the perspective of the statistical community of this questionnaire, among the eight components of U.S. hybrid warfare against Iran, the economic component is identified as the top priority with high effectiveness compared to other components. Additionally, the special/irregular forces component is identified as the lowest priority with low effectiveness compared to the other components. An important point in this chart is related to the cyber component, which, despite being ranked fifth in importance by the statistical community of the questionnaire, ranks third in effectiveness in the U.S. hybrid warfare strategy.

7-3- Results and Analysis of Data Collected from Interviews

Understanding the nature of hybrid warfare as a complex and multifaceted strategy of the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran requires a comprehensive investigation through the aggregation of opinions from experts in various fields such as diplomacy, politics, defense, security, culture, and society. This method not only helps uncover the in-depth perspectives and direct experiences of individuals but also plays a crucial role in examining complex issues like hybrid warfare. These interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to gather diverse and specialized views on hybrid warfare from knowledgeable and experienced individuals to reach a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of this complex phenomenon. Given that many aspects of this strategy are not observable or examinable at the public level, interviews with specialists and individuals directly or indirectly involved in this field play a fundamental role in uncovering the hidden and unknown layers of hybrid warfare.

The necessity of conducting these interviews is highlighted from several aspects. First, many components of the United States' hybrid warfare are not properly reflected in public data and academic reports due to the secrecy and concealment involved in using various tools. These tools are employed using complex methods to penetrate and influence Iran, and only individuals or organizations directly confronted with these phenomena can provide accurate information about their functioning and impacts. In fact, interviews with experts and analysts have enabled the researcher, alongside examining library documents and questionnaire-related data, to gain deeper insights into the U.S. hybrid warfare strategy against Iran.

To extract concepts and keywords related to the data collected from the interviews, the qualitative-quantitative content analysis method (identifying main categories and counting and repeating related themes around the key concept) was used. In the first step, the keywords and themes used by the interviewees were openly coded. In the second step, with axial coding, the themes and keywords were categorized and differentiated, and in the third step, with selective coding, the U.S. hybrid strategy was analyzed. The results are presented in the tables below.

Table 1: Beliefs of the interviewees about the objectives of America's hybrid war against Iran

	operational goals	Themes and related indicators	Abundance
	Direct and indirect subversion	Hard regional war, irregular war, information war, proxy war, economic war, cultural war, propaganda war, psychological war, media war, cognitive war, drone war, electronic war, environmental war, diplomacy war, space war, ethnic war, drug war, microbial war, ecological war, terrorism	160
The general objectives of America's hybrid war against Iran	containment and control policy	Economic containment, political containment, cultural containment, influence containment, regional containment, international containment, missile containment, coalition-building containment, tension management policy with the aim of obtaining maximum benefits from the existing situation, limitation, compliance, compromise, surrender. Building, nuclear containment, companionship	44
	Change policy	Changing people's behavior, promoting western patterns and western lifestyle, socio-cultural changes, changing beliefs and values, changing the behavior of rulers, complicity, passivity, submission, indifference, management multiploidization. Change of value, religious, cultural, social and cognitive structures	51

| | | Change of legal structures, legal and political system | |
| | collapse | political collapse, psychological collapse, structural collapse, social collapse, economic collapse, cultural collapse, identity collapse, security collapse | 30 |

Table 2: Belief of the interviewees in the tools used by America in new hybrid strategies against Iran

America's hybrid war tools against Iran	Operational tools	Themes and related indicators	Abundance
	Hard tools and methods	Hardwar, military action, terrorism, proxy groups, military coup, assassination and physical elimination	23
	Semi-hard and soft tools	Media, media battle, virtual networks, virtual space, internet, satellite, culture building, state building, cyber war, civil coup, elitism, electronic war, religion building, psychological war, biological war, diplomacy war, Human rights excuses, regional and international consensus building, political isolation, sanctioning of political and security officials and figures, ecological war, environmental war, space war, information war, distrust of the government, war cognitive, making the system ineffective, economic war, import and export ban, commercial and financial sanctions	170

8- Integration of the Results from Documentary Studies, Questionnaires, and Interviews

The results from the integration of information obtained from documentary and library studies, along with data collected from various questionnaires and interviews, indicate that the ultimate goal of the United States in its confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran is the overthrow of this regime. Although the official policies and public statements of American officials often focus on containing, controlling, and pressuring Iran, a deeper and more precise analysis of the United States' hybrid strategies against the Islamic Republic of Iran reveals that all the tools and measures employed are ultimately directed toward weakening the governing structure and collapsing the Islamic Republic.

One of America's primary objectives in this regard is to create public dissatisfaction and reduce the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic system within Iran. The United States, using a combination of hard, semi-hard, and soft tools, has launched a hybrid war against Iran, designing all these tools meticulously and simultaneously to create continuous pressure on Iran's economic, military, and social sectors.

A more precise integration and analysis of all the data collected from the three studies—documentary, questionnaire, and interview—show that although the United States does not seek the immediate overthrow of the Islamic Republic in the short term and advances its policies gradually and intelligently, the country's ultimate goal is the overthrow of the Islamic Republic system and its replacement with a government aligned with Western interests and the unipolar international order led by the United States. The ultimate objective of the United States is to remove the Islamic Republic, as one of the main obstacles to establishing a unipolar world order led by the United States, from the international scene and replace it with a regime aligned with American interests and its allies.

It can be said that the United States' strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran is built on "gradual attrition." Instead of a rapid collapse, the U.S. aims to gradually weaken the power structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran until they reach an irreversible point where the collapse occurs domestically without the need for direct external intervention.

9- The Strategy of America's Hybrid War and the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The application of modern strategies by the United States against the existence and national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran has long been accompanied by paradoxical policies and dualities. These strategies have sometimes created ambiguity and challenges among the Iranian public. These hybrid strategies, characterized by complex, simultaneous, fluid, multi-dimensional, multi-stage approaches, accompanied by attractive slogans and humanistic and cultural appeals, mixed with pleasing and exciting but populist and appealing behavior and slogans, have, at times, succeeded in establishing hegemony in the realms of ideology, culture, society, economy, and behavior. The use of such deceptive and ambiguous strategies, often accompanied by complex and unsolvable issues, has sometimes led to the injection and promotion of unconventional, incorrect, and misleading contradictory information, even pushing the

country's management domains toward inappropriate orientations. Consequently, this has led to hypothetical, hasty, and fluid planning, increasing the defense costs of the Islamic Republic of Iran at various levels and dimensions.

The results of this research indicate that the continuation of current trends, neglect of solutions, and the failure to adopt appropriate offensive and confrontational strategies by the Islamic Republic of Iran could result in damaging and threatening political, security, economic, and social challenges for Iran. Therefore, serious attention to the strategic depth of America's hybrid war is of paramount importance. By carefully assessing threats and especially the internal weaknesses of the country, it is possible to restore the people's damaged hope and trust, which are primarily caused by the disastrous and destructive effects of American sanctions.

Conclusion

Today, it is impossible to confine the foreign policy directions of the United States toward the Islamic Republic of Iran to one or a few fixed and unchangeable rules, as everything is rapidly changing. The changes related to the explosion of technology, the replacement of military weapons and equipment, the development of security concepts, the adjustment of strategic objectives, the ambiguity of battlefield boundaries, and the expansion of the scope and scale of non-military means and personnel involved in warfare have all altered the nature of threats and the methods of fighting and even threatening, to the extent that many scholars refer to it as the strategy of hybrid warfare. This research aimed to answer the question of how the United States employs the strategy of hybrid warfare against Iran. The findings indicate that past experiences of American actions have led the country to move beyond the traditional meaning of war in its confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, initiating coordinated, simultaneous, and complex actions across various political, military, economic, cultural, informational, and other domains, under the new battle title of hybrid warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The results of integrating data from documentary, library, questionnaires, and interviews indicate that the U.S. strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 revolution has been pursued at three levels: "containment," "behavior change," and "structure change," each implemented through both soft and hard approaches. This strategy has always been based on a combination of "containment" and "pressure" or balancing between "containment" and "controlled collapse." The findings indicate that the United States has not sought the rapid and overt collapse of Iran's regime, so that an action could have led to unpredictable and destructive regional and global reactions. Another goal of this strategy was to prevent the collapse of the Islamic Republic from being attributed to the United States, as Washington aimed to maintain its image as a balanced power in the region. Thus, the objective has been for the process of Iran's regime erosion to occur internally without direct American involvement, ensuring that the ultimate responsibility lies with Iran's own structure. For this reason, Washington has tried to implement step-by-step and phased strategies, indirectly and in the long term, to push the Islamic Republic toward weakening and eventually collapsing from within. America, relying on non-military methods and tools, including

economic sanctions, soft warfare, support for opposition groups, and more, has sought to intensify public dissatisfaction and internal divides in Iran without being directly responsible for the collapse. One of the main pillars of this strategy has been to control Iran's economy through economic sanctions and isolate the country from the international financial system. By targeting key sectors of Iran's economy, particularly the oil and gas industry, the U.S. has aimed to weaken the Iranian government's economic capabilities while simultaneously increasing domestic pressures on the population. This economic pressure, in turn, has exacerbated livelihood problems, increased public dissatisfaction, and set the stage for social and political movements.

In this context, the United States, rather than solely focusing on aggressive foreign policies, has also paid attention to social and cultural changes within Iran. Promoting liberal democratic values and expanding opposition media to gradually shift public opinion has been another layer of this multi-dimensional strategy. The United States has aimed to weaken the social, value-based, ideological, and moral foundations of the Islamic Republic. It has worked over time to push Iranian people and elites toward accepting Western models and reducing their support to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This combination of such external pressures and internal social changes has targeted a form of "internal collapse," where the structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran gradually disintegrates without the need for direct military intervention by the United States.

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