

Why are
asymmetrical wars,
such as iraq and
afghanistan so
difficult to win?
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An asymmetrical war is one in which one of the parties is far more economically, technically and militarily advanced. In recent times more and more wars have become asymmetrical and the disputed theory of a “ new war” includes asymmetrical wars as one of the main features that define it. Often we see these wars are picking up on the idea of a “ clash of civilisation” where many people of the same culture often come together and conflict with those of different views. This can be seen with the Taliban and Al Qaeda and also with the USA and the UK. This is one of the main contributing factors to why asymmetrical wars, such as Afghanistan and Iraq are so difficult to win.

Firstly, wars such as the Iraq war and Afghanistan war are now against insurgency forces, rather than the traditional war with countries. Within these wars many civilians often get accidentally hurt as Mark Curtis states in *Unpeople: Britain’s Secret Human Rights Abuses* “ an estimated 10, 000-50, 000 people including soldiers and civilians have died in Iraq. An estimated 10, 000 were civilians.” Asymmetrical wars ask for a different strategy than the military is used to. Fighting insurgency includes fighting the propaganda spread by these forces, and consequently winning the “ hearts and minds” of the populace. One of the main reasons these wars are so hard to fight is that civilians often feel a sense of injustice and of course don’t like the notion of their country being invaded. Therefore, these people may often join the insurgents or feel sympathy and apathy for them consequently making it difficult for the stronger side of the war by hiding them and joining their “ cause”.

In Vietnam we saw the USA struggle to win the hearts and minds of the people. This had many contributing factors such as the use of napalm which had a massive effect on the local populace, including death, destruction of crops and destruction of their villages. This is evident in the picture of Kim Phuc who is shown running naked from the violent un-necessary napalm attack. This is one of the reasons why the people often turn against the invading force and therefore make the war a lot harder and longer. Countries still try to apply the ways in which traditional wars can be won to the concept of asymmetrical warfare against insurgents.

When turning on the news nowadays a soldier being murdered by extremists planting IEDs is becoming a fairly common occurrence. Emphasising one of the main reasons why countries struggle to win asymmetrical wars such as those in Afghanistan, Vietnam and Iraq. Guerrilla forces were the main way that the Vietcong fought the Americans and made the war so hard to “win”. This change of strategy preserves more lives of the smaller forces instead of meeting the far larger armies head on in battles the common way in which the smaller force now fights these wars is with stealth and ruthlessness. As seen in Vietnam the Vietcong were prepared to dig tunnels and fight mainly within the jungle and in the habitat they are used to, the same now happens in Iraq and Afghanistan the insurgency hide away in locations such as caves that they are common with as they lived there. This causes wars to become drawn out as every mission becomes “search and destroy” and effectively means soldiers are getting killed while just looking where to find these insurgents.

Lastly, there are many more political pressures upon a government to make sure the wars are “ just” and that they do not use excessive force. Jodi Brown states “ soldiers have to positively identify a target before shooting even if that target is seen planting an IED.” This is just more evidence that political pressures have made this type of war much harder to fight and win. Also, countries cannot use a lot of the weapons available to them in their armory as they are deemed to use excessive force these include weapons such as nuclear weapons and even airstrikes are very rarely used now.

In conclusion we can see that there are many reasons and factors, why asymmetrical warfare has become so hard to fight. The main contributing factor would be the fact that, unlike previous wars, countries are not fighting a certain country in an “ old war” type style. However, the soldiers are fighting a “ new war” where they fight groups of insurgents. For this requires different tactics which mean that winning the “ hearts and minds” has become more important than killing the groups and therefore the wars take longer to win for a generally better long term outcome.