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## Asymmetric War

Coral Bell<sup>2</sup>

I am going to define asymmetric wars as those in which the two sides have different weapons available to them, and pursue different strategies. Only the actual name is of recent origin. There have been many asymmetric wars in the past, on that definition. All the colonial wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, a point celebrated in Hilaire Belloc's, mocking little verse, "Always remember, we have got \The Maxim gun, and they have not". All the insurgencies of more recent years would also qualify, for instance the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) 30-year campaign against the British government.

But the conflicts most on people's minds at the moment when they talk of asymmetric war are, of course, those in Iraq and Afghanistan, or possibly those between the Israelis and the Palestinians and maybe Chechnya. Much of what I am going to say derives from the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. And I am going to start by arguing that those two sets of hostilities should be regarded as separate but related campaigns in a larger, longer, global struggle, which I am going to call 'the jihadists' war'. It started, according to Osama bin Laden [who should know because he started it] in 1982, and is likely to go on for quite a while yet, certainly the rest of this decade.

When I say that Iraq and Afghanistan ought to be regarded as separate campaigns in a larger conflict, I mean that in precisely the same way in which we would say that North Africa and the Pacific saw separate but related campaigns in the vast overall struggle of World War II. And we must, of course, ask of any campaign, in any war, whether that particular battle or campaign served the overall political endeavour of the war.

But before we get to those judgements, let me outline the reasons why I prefer to describe the conflict which dominates world politics at present as

the jihadists' war, rather than by a term more familiar in political speech, 'the war on terror'. Terrorism is a strategy or a tactic, not a political entity. And the adversary we need to understand is certainly a political entity, and a powerful one. There is a world-wide network of jihadists' cells, some of them in the great cities of the West, and with an underlying potential constituency, if we do not 'box clever,' of more than a billion people, most of whom live in our part of the world. The terms Islamic fundamentalist or radical, or Islamist, when talking of the military struggle ought to be avoided. They denote political or religious stances, not terrorist intentions. The government of Saudi Arabia is Islamic fundamentalist, yet it is under attack by the jihadists, and if it were brought down, they would account it a more vital success for the jihad than ever the 9/11 attacks. The jihadists are those specifically 'on active service' as warriors intent on overturning the contemporary power-structure of the world, and its institutions. So their quarrel is not just with the United States, but with the contemporary society of states, in the name of one minority interpretation of Islam. Actually I think President Bush conceded that point [on correctly defining the adversary] when he said during his election campaign that terrorism could not be defeated. Obviously, anyone with an elementary knowledge of chemistry, like Timothy McVeigh, can put a bomb together, and find a truck to deliver it, if he has enough of a grievance against the government. But the jihadists, as an organised political force, can be worn down by a process of attrition and their capacity to do damage contained and diminished. To my mind that is the likeliest way for the overall asymmetric war to be won. But I will return to that point later.

I stress that the jihadists at present represent a minority interpretation of Islam. The term jihad has many meanings in Islamic theology. It can mean just the effort of the true believer to live up to the teachings of the Prophet. But the meaning for those I would class as jihadists was defined for them by the cleric who inspired the first attempt, in 1993, to blow up the World Trade Center: "do jihad with the sword, with the cannon, with the grenades, with the missiles ... to break and destroy the enemies of Allah ... their high buildings ... and the buildings in which they gather their leaders".

The jihadists' war differs from most of the previous asymmetric wars or nationalist or religious insurgencies we are familiar with from past history in three important respects. Firstly, its political objectives are world-wide, not local. Secondly, so is its strategic and tactical reach. Thirdly, whereas most other terrorist organisations have been intent on what Margaret Thatcher called 'the oxygen of publicity', rather than mass casualties [which they regard as likely to alienate public opinion], this one sees itself as in all-

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out war, and feels justified in inflicting as much death and destruction as that war requires. Like World Wars I and II, it is a hegemonial war, a war to determine the order of power in the world, and it is the only such war in modern times to be declared by a 'non-state actor'. Plenty of civil wars and insurgencies have been conducted by such groups, of course, but their objectives have always been local, not global, like the IRA or the ETA<sup>3</sup>, or originally the Chechens. But that last conflict, I fear, has now been converted by bad Russian strategies into a third front in the jihadists' war. That is a danger we might face elsewhere, maybe quite close to home, if local insurgencies are badly handled, for instance in Aceh, or Thailand, or the Philippines – or even maybe in Central Asia.

So to sum up, the situation we are now in is asymmetric war with a non-state actor as adversary – an adversary very hard to hit, one for whom the whole world is the battle-space, and who has no material assets which can readily be put at risk by the concentrated weapons of modern war. In fact, I would be inclined to say that the only assets which can readily be targeted are the flow of financial resources, which in the past came mostly from Saudi Arabia [disguised as Islamic charities], and the actual jihadists themselves, especially the leadership. All that seems to me to underline the vital point that the outcome will in the end mostly be determined by the operations intelligence services and police forces, rather than military campaigns.

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<sup>3</sup>ETA: Euskadi Ta Askatasuna – the Basque separatist organisation