THE NATIONAL INTEREST
Published on *The National Interest* (https://nationalinterest.org)

Why States are Turning to Proxy War

August 26, 2018 *Topic:* **Security** *Region:* **Global Governance** *Tags:* **war, Military, Technology, Conflict, proxy**

Often proxy war promises to hit the political sweet spot between doing too little and too high a cost. In reality, however, it is an imperfect form of warfare.

by Daniel Byman

The Syrian Civil War is the world's bloodiest conflict, and much of the blame can be laid at the feet of Syria's neighbors and the world's major powers. So far, France, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the uae, the United Kingdom and of course the United States have all intervened—and this long list of countries excludes the dozens of

other coalition members that back U.S. efforts or otherwise played smaller roles. These states have bombed their enemies in Syria, provided money, arms and training to allied government or rebel groups, offered a safe haven to fighters, pressed their preferred cause at international fora like the United Nations, and otherwise used their power to help a local group that acts as a proxy for their interests.

Syria's experience is not uncommon. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that all of today's major wars are in essence proxy wars. In Ukraine, Russia backs rebel groups who have proclaimed the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. Russia, Saudi Arabia and the uae back militia leader Khalifa Haftar, who seeks to control Libya while the United States notionally recognizes the rival government in Tripoli but works on a day-to-day basis with militias to fight the Islamic State in the country. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the uae back a motley mix of former regime military units, southern secessionists and tribal groups against Houthi forces, which Iran backs. In Afghanistan, Pakistan has long supported the Taliban, which has also received occasional support from Iran and Russia. The Congolese Civil War, which was the bloodiest conflict since World War ii, involved nine countries and twenty-five rebel groups.

Understanding the prevalence of proxy war is not hard. Proxies enable intervention on the cheap. They cost a fraction of the expense of deploying a state's own forces and the proxy does the dying. Because the costs are lower, proxy war is also more politically palatable—few Americans know the United States is bombing Libya, let alone which particular militia it supports in so doing. Indeed, using proxies is that rare foreign policy tool that seems to fit the approaches both used by Donald Trump and Barack Obama to foreign policy. For all their differences, both presidents are skeptical about large-scale U.S. troop deployments yet promised to fight terrorism.

Despite their many advantages, proxies often disappoint their sponsors. Rather than be grateful and obedient, local groups often go their own way, pursuing their own interests while pocketing the money and other support they receive. Their competence is often minimal, while their brutality knows few bounds. Some even drag their supposed masters into unwanted interventions.

Proxy war, however, is not going away, and the United States must have its eyes open both when using proxies and when fighting them. Proxies are messier and often costlier than

they appear. They can advance U.S. interests, but only when the United States approaches them realistically and structures its forces accordingly. Adversaries like Iran and Russia, for their part, also face problems with proxies, and better U.S. policies can exploit these divisions.

A proxy war occurs when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing the fighting in another country but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself. Proxy war stands in contrast not only to a traditional war when a state shoulders the burden of its own defense (or offense), but also an alliance, when major and minor powers work together with each other, making significant contributions according to their means. Washington's close work with Kabul against what's left of Al Qaeda and the Taliban more closely resembles a traditional alliance because of the major U.S. role, with thousands of American troops and hundreds of airstrikes. Meanwhile, Iran's relationship with Houthi rebels in Yemen should be counted as a proxy war because Tehran primarily provides weapons and funding, not large numbers of its own troops.

In practice, proxy war is a spectrum, and in a conflict the balance between the forces of a sponsoring state and a proxy often changes. In Vietnam, the United States went from having several hundred advisers to support the South Vietnamese army in 1959 to the deployment of over 500,000 U.S. troops in 1968 to a small presence backed by massive U.S. airpower at the end of the war. If the bulk of a state's military campaign is conducted through a proxy rather than with its own forces, then the proxy-war label works well. How much direct military support is too much to count as a proxy war is a bit in the eye of the beholder, but in general think the lower end of the involvement spectrum.

For countries like Iran, proxy war is the norm. In addition to using over 20,000 Shia foreign fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Syria, Iran backs the Lebanese Hezbollah, an array of Shia militias in Iraq and the aforementioned Houthis in Yemen, among others. Russia uses proxies in Ukraine, and the United States often does so in its operations in the Middle East and Africa, supporting Kurdish "People's Protection Units" (YPG) against the Islamic State in Syria and working with armed groups in Libya to fight terrorists there. Indeed, much of the U.S. struggle against terrorism in parts of Africa and the Middle East involves working with local forces or governments to get them to more aggressively go after groups linked to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. By design it is the proxy, not the

United States, that is doing much of the lifting, with Washington providing intelligence and using special operations forces and drones to keep its footprint light.

The Cold War was rife with instances when the United States or the Soviet Union backed a local power or group to gain a more favorable position on the global chessboard, whether it was in Angola, Nicaragua or Afghanistan. Today, most proxy wars involve a substate group, with the sponsor's primary efforts going to arm, train or otherwise help that group fight and gain power. At times, as in Yemen or Libya, one side may back "the government," but in such cases the officially recognized regime is just one faction of many—and despite the international support on the ground, it is just another band of fighters.

States use proxies for many reasons. For the United States, the issue is often cost: locals fight, and die, so that Americans do not have to. In addition, because they are local, they are often (though not always) more accepted by the affected communities, can better gain intelligence from them by drawing on community ties, cultural knowledge and a common language, and are less likely to promote a nationalistic backlash that so often accompanies foreign interventions. If the proxy is a guerrilla force, they often know the terrain better and can blend in with the population in a way that foreigners never could.

For states like Iran, proxies are often the only option. Most states lack the power projection capacity of the United States and turn to proxies as a way to influence events far from their borders. Iran lacks a navy or massive airlift capacity necessary to sustain large forces in Yemen: supporting the Houthis gives Tehran influence there nonetheless. Even major powers like Russia lack sufficient air- and sea-lift capabilities, limiting Moscow's ability to use its own forces far from Russia's borders.

Proxies also offer a way of fighting that can limit escalation. States often deny they are supporting proxies—Russia, for example, claims not to be involved in Ukraine despite funding an array of groups opposed to the government of Kiev, arming them and supporting them with its own forces. At times, other states may genuinely not know about foreign support, or at least the extent of support, but in others it is a convenient fiction: not knowing or at least not having the support trumpeted publicly allows a state not to respond when it would prefer to avoid the matter. The United States cooperates with Pakistan on counterterrorism and operations in Afghanistan, and Islamabad's denials of supporting the Taliban—despite having backed the group since 1994—allows a façade of amity.

Deniability makes escalation harder, or at least limited to a certain arena. Israel, for example, has warred repeatedly against the Lebanese Hezbollah but has not struck Iran directly despite Tehran's substantial financial and military support for the group. If Iran, rather than Hezbollah, attacked Israel with a missile, then Israel would feel compelled to strike Iran itself. This is especially important for Iran, which cannot match Israel economically, militarily or even diplomatically, given the Islamic Republic's global pariah status.

For many states, however, factors other than cost and fighting power come into play. Some of Iran's proxies, such as Hezbollah, are ideological soulmates, and advancing them helps advance Iran's broader revolutionary agenda. Even in Yemen, where the Houthis remain far from loyal Iranian servants, support for their cause has moved them closer to Iran, with the Houthis at times trying to emulate Hezbollah in their style and propaganda. States at times back proxies because they enhance a leadership's credibility at home: an array of Arab governments often backed Yasir Arafat or other Palestinian leaders, many of whom they loathed, in order to burnish their Arab nationalist credibility among their populations that saw the Palestinian cause as the beating heart of Arab identity. Similarly, Putin has used the Ukraine conflict as a way to burnish his nationalist credentials.

Yet for all these advantages, proxy warfare has many risks. Despite the power asymmetry, proxies almost invariably act according to their own interests and impulses. Right after 9/11, the United States asked the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, its key Afghan ally made up primarily of minorities, not to take Kabul so that a force composed of ethnic Pashtun, Afghanistan's dominant community, could do so and assuage the fears of minority dominance. The Northern Alliance took Kabul anyway. In 2017, the United States sought to kill Islamic State fighters as its local Kurdish and Arab proxies retook their territory, but the proxy was often pleased to let the fighters slip away from key strongholds like Raqqa and gain the territory without a bloody battle—they wanted the territory, not a high body count. This independence creates a tension for a proxy's patron. A stronger group is a more effective proxy, but a more effective proxy has a greater ability to hew to its own course.

Such independence often risks dragging the sponsor into an unwanted conflict on behalf of its proxy. Palestinian guerrilla cross-border raids sparked conflicts with Israel, leading to a back and forth that created political pressure on the guerrillas' erstwhile Arab state

supporters who hosted them and at least pretended to support their efforts. Wars in 1956, 1967 and 1982 grew out of these dynamics, with Syria and Egypt being sucked into the fray. Indeed, by giving a group money and support, it may become more reckless, knowing, or at least hoping, that a major power is behind it and would bail it out in the face of trouble.

Proxies are also often corrupt, brutal and incompetent. Just as sponsoring states are happy to fight to the last member of the proxy group, so too are many proxies happy to cash their sponsors' checks and do little in return. The United States spent millions training various Syrian opposition group members, but in the end only a handful showed up for the fight. Proxies' brutality may not matter to some: Russia and Iran, gross human rights violators themselves, presumably care little about the abuses of their proxies. The United States, however, is often tarred with the behavior of its proxy, making it difficult to sustain domestic and allied support.

Support for a proxy often leads other states to back their own favored horse, worsening the overall conflict. Lebanon, for many years, saw Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria and other powers regularly meddle and support rival factions, often solely because one of their rivals was doing so. This, in turn, increased the independence of the proxies as they could threaten to turn to other powers if they felt unsupported.

Once the spigot of cash and weapons to a proxy opens up, it becomes hard to close, particularly for a democracy like the United States. To gain or solidify domestic support for aid, the sponsoring power often talks up the proxy's cause and the supposedly heroic nature of the fighters, making it harder to walk away from them. Programs and even entire bureaucracies develop, creating vested interests in continuing the fight. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), for example, is tasked with supporting pro-Iranian revolutionary forces, and as its role outside the country expanded, so too did influence inside. Weak groups and states are often masters of the political dynamics in their patron's country, manipulating the media and domestic support there to get the sponsor to do their bidding. Pakistan, for example, whips up domestic sentiment against the United States in order to extract a higher price for its cooperation with U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

A state can impose intrusive monitoring and reporting requirements to ensure its proxy does its bidding, but these are often expensive, and in any event, they usually rely on the

proxy for information and reduce the level of deniability. Proxies can be pushed, educated or wheedled into better behavior, but too often the United States or other powers can only move the dial a little. States can try instead to choose the "right" proxies, but they are usually few and far between. At times, as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the United States is usually choosing among different degrees of bad.

The United States has long worked with proxy forces. Indeed, the very purpose of the legendary Green Berets was unconventional warfare, working with foreign resistance forces against their governments—think organizing Eastern Europeans during a U.S.-Soviet war. A host of other U.S. special operations forces, along with the Marines, elements of the Army and others in the military also regularly work with proxies.

Yet proxy warfare is not at the heart of American doctrine. This is in large part because the United States has a better option: conventional war. However romantic a rag-tag band of guerrillas may be, the smart money is on an Army armored division or Marine regiment. For countries like Iran and Russia, in contrast, conventional war is not always an option, especially when conducted farther from their borders. Not surprisingly, they have incorporated proxies closely into military forces and doctrines. For Iran, the irgc plays a prominent role in the country's politics and economy, and it is not surprising that they are well-resourced and the tip of the spear of Iran's foreign policy. Tehran has also long used the formidable Lebanese Hezbollah and its overseas networks to back rebel groups. In addition, by training over 20,000 foreign Shia to fight in Syria, Iran now also has a foreign legion it can deploy to other conflicts. Russia, for its part, now relies on a range of private security actors, ranging from warlords, newly constituted "Cossack" units and the quasi-state mercenary force known as the Wagner Group.

It is also harder for the United States and other democracies to embrace proxies. Russian-backed Ukrainian rebels can use a Russian-provided missile to down a Malaysian plane flying from the Netherlands and kill almost 300 with no outcry in Russia. If a U.S.-backed group did so with American weapons, the outcry would, rightly, be enormous. Thus, the United States is more circumscribed in its choice of partners and the support it will provide them. The Obama administration wrestled for years, largely unsuccessfully, to find a credible anti-Assad force in Syria that had the "right" ideology and no links to jihadist groups.

Just as states exploit proxies for their own ends, so too do proxies exploit states—but the cost for them is often heavy. Indeed, just as states are choosing among bad proxy options, so too are proxies often reluctantly working with foreign supporters.

Proxy forces, like the U.S.-backed Kurdish YPG in Syria, the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen or Russian-backed forces in Ukraine, seek outside support for many reasons. Resources are the most obvious one: outsiders will provide money, weapons and training, among other forms of support that groups sorely lack. Russian air defense weapons neutralize some of the Ukrainian government's advantages over rebels. Iranian ballistic missiles enable the Houthis to threaten Riyadh with attacks. And even limited training can give a coherence and level of skill to local fighters that rival militias often lack. Some governments also provide a haven, giving the leadership of a group a place to plan and organize with at least some impunity. Pakistan, for example, allows the Afghan Taliban to enjoy a rear base on its soil where the Taliban's leaders reside and where the group can organize its efforts to fight the United States and the Kabul government. At times, the military support can be massive. The United States conducted over 10,000 air strikes in Syria, helping the YPG drive the Islamic State from much of eastern Syria—a feat the group could not have accomplished on its own.

In a few cases, outside support may also help a group legitimize itself, though this can be a double-edged sword. Foreign recognition, even from a small state, can burnish a leader's reputation. This is especially so when the group's members admire or feel a sense of affinity for the sponsor. For example, Hezbollah gets bonus points as many Lebanese Shia identify with, or at least have a warm feeling for, Iran, the dominant Shia power. The situation is reversed for Palestine Islamic Jihad—a small group Tehran supports to attack Israel, because many among the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population of Palestine loath Iran for its support of the Syrian regime and its sectarian war against that country's Sunnis. Many Syrian groups resisted openly accepting U.S. support in the early years of the war, fearing the loss of their nationalist credibility—even as the Assad regime clung to power and then slowly strengthened its grip.

From a group or leader's perspective, losing this nationalist credibility can still be worth it because the outside support also offers independence from rivals. Small factions without a broader movement are able to pay higher salaries for members, arm themselves with more

powerful weapons, and otherwise distinguish themselves and avoid being swallowed by larger and more powerful groups. As such, the outside support may help the group at the expense of the movement as a whole, allowing divisions to grow and fester.

These groups, however, may gradually lose touch with their constituents because they do not rely on them to raise money or supply recruits who are not in it for the salary. Groups like Al Saiqa, a Palestinian group strongly backed by Syria, faded out in part because they could not replenish their ranks after Israeli strikes decimated the existing cadre.

These risks mean that it is often the most-desperate and least-popular groups that seek outside support—a proxy war version of adverse selection. It is not surprising then that the Palestine Islamic Jihad is willing to take the opprobrium associated with ties to Iran because it is broke and lacks the networks to acquire significant weapons on its own. Hamas, in contrast, also works with Iran, but as a far stronger group it was able to cut those ties for several years when Iran's support for the Syrian regime made it widely hated among Sunnis as war spread in 2012. In general, Hamas has proven it is not an Iranian puppet despite taking Tehran's money and weapons.

Even groups that retain their credibility often regret taking on foreign support. At the very least, many sponsors impose limits, fearing at least some retaliation or damage to their reputations. Iran and Pakistan, both of which rely heavily on proxies, have limited the arms they provide. Iran, for example, has not transferred chemical weapons to Hezbollah despite their exceptionally close relationship. Tehran also recognizes that if one of its known proxies attacks the U.S. homeland, America might retaliate by going after Iran. Not surprisingly, Iranian proxies have focused on American forces in war zones like Iraq, not the U.S. homeland, in order to limit the chances of unwanted escalation.

As various Kurdish groups can attest, foreign supporters are fickle. The United States turned its back on Iraqi Kurds, whom it had backed in the early 1970s against Saddam Hussein's regime, after the Shah of Iran cut a deal with Saddam in 1975. Washington is now reducing support for the YPG in Syria and may end it altogether, due to pressure from Turkey. The YPG successfully fought the Islamic State on behalf of the United States and, having succeeded (at least for now), they are no longer necessary while Turkey remains an enduring interest. As the Kurdish experience suggests, states are usually more concerned

with the policies and goodwill of other governments, and will sacrifice proxies as necessary to advance their ends.

States are particularly likely to abandon proxies (or back rival ones) when their goals differ. Pakistan provided support for the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in the 1980s when it rebelled against India. However, the jklf wanted an independent Kashmir, not union with Pakistan, so Islamabad supported its rivals that favored Pakistan's agenda. The JKLF eventually collapsed, caught between Indian security forces and pro-Pakistani militants. Support is often an alliance of convenience, not a close relationship.

Just as states should think twice about supporting proxies, so too should proxies think twice about relying on foreign powers. At best they can hope for resources and assistance, but they should never count on it lasting over time.

If the United States is going to engage in proxy warfare—and it will—then Americans need to recognize these limits and problems. At the same time, the United States should not overestimate Iran, Russia or other adversaries and the proxies they support. They too will face willful, abusive and incompetent proxies, and their abilities to achieve their goals are likely to suffer as a result.

One step the United States should take is to constantly highlight its adversaries' use of proxies to reduce the rewards of deniability. Hezbollah may be helping the Assad government in Syria, but it is doing so at the direction of Iran. Rebels in the Donbass may be fighting the Ukrainian government, but without Russian support they would have collapsed. Their fighting, and also the human rights abuses these groups commit, should be laid at the feet of their sponsors.

Similarly, if the United States and its allies choose to fight back, they should not feel compelled to limit their escalation to the narrow war zone chosen by the proxy's backer. If Iranian-backed forces attack Israel from Syrian or Lebanon, Israel should have the right to target Iran itself. States usually will decide such escalation is not in their interests, but when they do fight back their decision to target the sponsor should be seen as legitimate.

Even as it publicly ties proxies to their sponsors, the United States should recognize the common divisions and try to widen and exploit them. Some proxies can be bought off, and others can be diverted from the wishes of their would-be masters. The Houthis, for

example, are hardly loyal Iranian puppets, and the right mix of threats and bribes might drive the two apart.

When backing proxies, the United States should recognize from the start the risk of being sucked into a conflict. Proxy war may seem a cheap, indeed almost costless, way of waging war, but it can be the thin end of the wedge. Often, the political necessity of talking up the cause and the proxy's virtues translates into an obligation when the war goes south—how, after all, can this noble cause and these brave freedom fighters be abandoned in their hour of need? President Obama tried to avoid intervening in Syria and provided limited support to Syrian opposition forces as a way to limit U.S. involvement. Nevertheless, the U.S. role increased to air strikes and then the deployment of ground forces as the proxies, alone, did not achieve American objectives. At times, the United States may feel compelled to rescue an embattled proxy, as it did with the Kurds when Saddam Hussein's forces menaced them in 1996.

In addition, the United States can increase its own capacity to use proxies. Already, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have given special operators unparalleled leadership roles in the U.S. military. Given the prevalence of proxy war in the post–Cold War era, its nature should be elevated in professional military education and training. U.S. intelligence can gather more information on proxies, both foes and supposed friends, to learn their true goals and capacities. If they are working with America, it is vital to determine how much they cooperate in reality; if they are foes, then it is necessary to identify how to increase the differences they have with their paymasters.

Often proxy war promises to hit the political sweet spot between doing too little and too high a cost. In reality, however, it is an imperfect form of warfare. Better policies can improve our track record, but it is bound to disappoint many of its proponents, and at times put a country on the road to an unwanted conflict.

Daniel Byman is a professor and vice dean at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy.

Image: Kurdish fighters from the People's Protection Units (YPG) run across a street in Raqqa, Syria July 3, 2017. REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic