

Getting somebody else to fight while you watch is an old idea. \223Let me hold your coat,\224 says an onlooker in a bar fight. Even better is watching a prizefight in which poor, unfortunate idiots beat each other to a pulp for entertainment and prize money.

World War II was actually the last time that major powers were locked in deadly combat. Since that time, almost all wars have involved proxies: conflicts in which the actual beneficiaries are not doing the fighting. The entire Cold War was fought that way, starting with the Korean War and certainly with the war in Vietnam. One proxy war (between the US and Cuba) almost destroyed the world when it became apparent that the conflict was really between nuclear-armed military giants, the US and USSR.

One particular proxy war not only came to a bad end, but is still having dire ramifications: the Afghan War. The Russians invaded Afghanistan with the aim of providing one more buffer to its south, but also bring it closer to their aim of getting some warm water ports. The relative contrast of powers between USSR and pitiful Afghanistan made the outcome seem predictable, which would have been the case if the US had not decided to go after the Russians using a surrogate: the Afghan religious fanatics. Our agents provided these militants with shoulder-launched missiles that could take out low-flying helicopters and aircraft. Our gambit succeeded and the Russians left, licking their wounds. The wounds included a lot of Russian veterans hooked on Afghan narcotics and embittered by their experience, and an Afghanistan in the clutches of warlords and fanatics, giving birth to Al Qaeda.

The Middle East is rife with proxy wars, encouraged, paid for, and armed by the Saudis, Turks, Gulf States, and Iranians. The real antagonists are not fighting themselves (Shiites and Sunnis) but are arming all sorts of unsavories to do the fighting. Syria is a perfect example of this. Were it just a rebellion against the Assad government, Assad would have long since won and the country would once more be stable. Sad to say, dictatorships are much more stable than anarchy, which is the reason that the US (and even Russia) have for so long supported dictatorships. Where dictators have fallen, democracy does not follow; anarchy and proxy wars do. This is the main reason that President Obama is not letting himself get goaded into \223holding someone\222s coat.\224

The war in Gaza is another example of a proxy war. For the first time, a number of Arab states (the Saudis, Egyptians, Jordan) are not critical of Israel\222s response to Hamas; they support it. And Hamas would not have their trove of missiles were it not for Iran using them as a proxy for their Shiite fight against the Sunni Arabs. The Turks and, strangely enough, Qatar in the Persian Gulf, are funding Hamas. Hamas is a proxy for them in their resentment against the Saudis.

Another proxy war player, as always, is Russia, which supports the Syrian dictatorship with money and votes in the UN. This proxy, as well as the Ukrainian proxy, are a thumb in the eye of the US and the European Union. So far, Russia is counting on the reluctance of the EU to endanger their energy supply and the reluctance of the US to get embroiled in yet another war. However, this situation is fluid and the end game is not a good one for Russia.

The worst thing about proxy wars is that the players are almost always horrible and unpredictable. Russia\222s proxies in Eastern Ukraine are brutes, drunks, and incompetent. The \223moderates\224 in Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have turned into ugly Islamists whom nobody can control. Those who hoped for better have been disappointed. The Arab financiers supporting such Muslim Brotherhood groups as Hamas and the Iranians supporting Hezbollah are beginning to rue this support.

The Saudis once supported Al Qaeda. They now know that groups such as this are happy to take their money but then slit the throats of their benefactors. Let the buyer beware.

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