

From the Boston Globe 3/9/23

The incalculable moral cost of proxy wars

Appealing because they can be fought on the cheap. Appalling because they are so very hard to end.

By [Stephen Kinzer](#) Contributor, Updated March 9, 2023, 11:00 a.m.

Waging war is dangerous, so it's great if someone else will do it for you. That's what makes proxy wars. When enemies are reluctant to fight directly, they use proxies: local forces that serve their interest and weaken their enemy. It's war on the cheap.

Proxy wars have been fought since the days of antiquity. Several are raging today. The most intense is being fought in Ukraine. Western leaders are pouring weaponry into Ukraine mainly because Ukraine is wounding Russia, our geopolitical rival. Facing a common enemy, we make a grim bargain. The United States and Europe provide money and weapons, while Ukraine provides the soldiers who fight and die. This deal is part of every proxy war.

"The Russian army is being chewed up by the Ukrainians," Senator Mark Warner observed recently. "We're having the Ukrainians do that right now — in a sense, for us."

Another proxy war is devastating Yemen. For seven years, Saudi Arabia has been bombing Yemen with weapons provided by the United States. Yet neither country cares much about Yemen. We're at war against a faction supported by Iran. Not wanting to risk full-scale conflict with Iran itself, the United States and Saudi Arabia bomb Iran's allies instead.

The world's most complex proxy war is raging in Syria. Its government is allied with Iran and Russia. That makes it an irresistible target for an American proxy war. By attacking or weakening Syria, we strike an indirect blow against two of our main rivals. That's why the United States has used proxy forces, including Kurdish militias, to seize and occupy [one third of Syria](#). To complicate matters further, neighboring Turkey has also grabbed a slice of Syria, controlling it through its own local proxies. Syrians suffer and die while outsiders joust for advantage on their soil.

The Cold War was a golden age for proxy wars. Both superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, recognized that direct confrontation could result in nuclear holocaust. Instead, they fed wars in various parts of the world, sending guns to the people who live there to do the fighting and dying.

One of the most intense was in Angola. The Soviet Union and Cuba sponsored one side, the United States and South Africa sponsored the other. Fighting began in 1975. By the time it ended a quarter-century later, more than half a million Angolans had died.

During the 1980s, I covered an iconic proxy war in Nicaragua. America's Cold War rivals, Cuba and the Soviet Union, armed the Sandinista government. Unwilling to tolerate this incursion, the United States armed a rebel force, the Contras. Civil war raged for six years and took tens of thousands of lives. After it ended, amazingly, the two sides reconciled. The main Contra leader, Adolfo Calero, moved back into his formerly confiscated house and became a congressman.

Nicaragua's war was fomented by outside powers, he told me when I visited him there, and when those powers made peace, they called it off.

"The Sandinistas took up the banner of the moment, which was Marxism," Calero said.

"We aligned ourselves with the West. They got money and guns from the Soviet Union; we got ours from the United States. But now what divided us has disappeared. . . . What happened? The Cold War ended."

Ukraine embodies all that is appealing — and all that is appalling — about proxy war.

Countries that want to fight Russia can do so without sending their own soldiers, so there is little public backlash. We applaud the Ukrainians' willingness to die, but we don't share it. Ahead may lie the other great danger of proxy wars: It's hard to end them. They can become "frozen conflicts" or, even worse, "forever wars."

Afghanistan was for decades such a proxy battleground. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had much interest in the country. Nonetheless they devastated it to score geopolitical points. When the outsiders finally departed, they left behind a ruined nation and millions of suffering war victims. The same happened in Nicaragua and Angola. Today's wars in Syria and Yemen seem endless, destroying nations one day at a time. That may also be Ukraine's fate.

Some are already using the term "meat grinder" to describe the slogging battles in Ukraine. It is a terrible phrase but tragically apt. Battle lines shift slowly, as in World War I, when soldiers spent months dug into positions without moving more than a few hundred yards forward or back. No one expects a decisive breakthrough for either side.

Soon after President Biden took office, he ended the long proxy war in Afghanistan by withdrawing US troops. The proxy wars now destroying Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine are different in many ways, but like the one in Afghanistan, they will rage until big powers tire of them. In the meantime, blood will drench those countries' soil and their sons and daughters will continue dying.

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Saudi Arabia and Iran Agree to Restore Ties, in Talks Hosted by China

From the New York Times 3/10/23

The deal between regional rivals underlines China's growing economic and political importance in the Middle East, and what some analysts say is waning American influence.

A photograph released by Saudi Arabia's press agency on Friday showed Musaad al-Aiban, a Saudi minister of state, left, and Ali Shamkhani, Iran's secretary of the National Security Council, in Beijing. Saudi Press Agency, via Reuters

By [Vivian Nereim](#)

March 10, 2023

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — After years of open hostility and proxy conflicts across the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran have agreed to re-establish diplomatic ties, they announced on Friday, in a significant pivot for the two regional rivals that was facilitated by China.

China hosted the talks that led to the breakthrough, highlighting Beijing's growing role as a global economic and political power, and counterbalance to Washington — particularly in the Middle East, a region that was long shaped by the military and diplomatic involvement of the United States.

Seven years after cutting formal ties, Iran and Saudi Arabia will reopen embassies in each other's countries within two months, and confirmed their "respect for the sovereignty of states and noninterference in their internal affairs," they said in a joint statement published by the official Saudi Press Agency. Iran's [state news media](#) also announced the deal.

The two countries agreed to reactivate a lapsed security cooperation pact — a shift that comes after years of Iranian-backed militias in Yemen targeting Saudi Arabia with missile and drone attacks — as well as older trade, investment and cultural accords.

Whether the shift leads to a deep or lasting détente between governments that have long been in conflict remains unclear, but there have been signs that both nations wanted to find a way to step back from confrontation. Saudi and Iranian officials had engaged in several rounds of talks over the past two years, including in Iraq and Oman, but without significant steps forward.

For the United States, the agreement signals that it cannot take for granted the pre-eminent influence it once wielded in Saudi Arabia — an ally that is charting a more independent diplomatic course — and elsewhere, as China, a rising superpower, builds trade and diplomatic relations around the world.

While Washington views Iran as an adversary, Beijing has cultivated close ties to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and unlike U.S. officials, it does not chastise them about human rights. Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, visited Beijing last month, and China's top leader, Xi Jinping, visited Riyadh, the Saudi capital, in December. Mr. Xi's state visit was celebrated by Saudi officials, who often complain that their American allies are too critical, and are no longer reliable security partners.

John Kirby, a spokesman for the National Security Council, rejected the notion that the United States had left a void in Middle East affairs, now being filled by China. "I would stridently push back on this idea that we are

stepping back in the Middle East,” he said, adding that Saudi Arabia had kept the United States informed of the talks with Iran.

“We support any effort there to de-escalate tensions in the region,” Mr. Kirby said.

China’s most senior foreign policy official, Wang Yi, indicated on Friday in a statement on the Chinese foreign ministry website that Beijing had played an instrumental role in the resumption of diplomatic ties.

Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy

- **M.B.S.’s Vision:** Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler, has pursued [a muscular foreign policy](#), bombing [Yemen](#) and moving aggressively to jail activists and critics.
- **Restoring Ties With Iran:** The kingdom and Iran have [agreed to re-establish diplomatic ties](#) in a deal facilitated by China that could lead to a major realignment between regional rivals.
- **A Tilt Away From the West:** As U.S.-Saudi relations [take a hit](#), including over the [murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#), Riyadh has moved closer to an isolated [Moscow](#) and to [Beijing](#), with which it signed [a strategic partnership agreement](#).
- **Relations With Israel:** Saudi Arabia has been seeking security guarantees from the United States and help with developing a civilian nuclear program [in exchange for normalizing relations with Israel](#).

“This is a victory for the dialogue, a victory for peace, and is major positive news for the world which is currently so turbulent and restive, and it sends a clear signal,” he said.

Mohammed Alyahya, a Saudi fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard, said the agreement was a “reflection of China’s growing strategic clout in the region — the fact that it has a lot of leverage over the Iranians, the fact it has very deep and important economic relations with the Saudis.” He added: “There is a strategic void in the region, and the Chinese seem to have figured out how to capitalize on that.”

After years of tensions, Saudi Arabia cut ties with Iran completely in 2016, when protesters [stormed](#) the kingdom’s embassy in Tehran after Saudi Arabia’s execution of a prominent Saudi Shiite cleric.

The rivalry between the two Islamic nations, which are less than 150 miles away from each other across the Persian Gulf, has long shaped politics and trade in the Middle East. It has a sectarian dimension — Saudi Arabia’s monarchy and a majority of its populace are Sunni, while Iran’s people are overwhelmingly Shiite — but has predominantly played out via proxy conflicts in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, where Iran has supported militias that Saudi officials say have destabilized the region.

Tensions hit a peak in 2019, when a missile and drone assault on a key Saudi oil installation briefly disrupted half of the kingdom’s crude production; the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen claimed responsibility, but U.S. officials said that Iran had directly overseen the attack.

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In Yemen, a Saudi-led coalition has been at war with the Houthis since 2015. Saudi officials have also repeatedly expressed fear over Iran’s nuclear program, saying that they would be the foremost target for any attack by the Islamic Republic.

China wants stability in the region, with more than 40 percent of its crude oil imports coming from the Gulf, said Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow for Middle East programs at the Atlantic Council.

“Beijing has adopted a smart approach using its strategic partnership diplomacy, building diplomatic capital on both sides of the Gulf,” he said. “Unlike the United States, which balances one side against the other, and is therefore limited in its diplomatic capacity.”

Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, told Iran’s NourNews Agency that President Raisi’s visit to China in February had helped create the opportunity for the negotiations to move forward.

Mr. Shamkhani described the talks as “unequivocal, transparent, comprehensive and constructive.” He said he was looking forward to relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia that foster “the security and stability of the region.”

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For Iran, mending ties with a regional enemy would be a welcome relief after months of internal turmoil marked by antigovernment protests that Iranian officials have blamed in part on Saudi Arabia. The Iranian government spokesman, Ali Bahadori Jahromi, tweeted that “the historic agreement of Saudi-Iran negotiated in China and led entirely by Asian countries will change the dynamics of the region.”

The Israeli foreign ministry declined to immediately comment. But the news complicates the Israeli assumption that shared fears of a nuclear Iran would help Israel forge a formal relationship with Saudi Arabia. Benjamin

Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has repeatedly stated in recent months that he hoped to seal diplomatic ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia for the first time.

Saudi Arabia has pressed the United States to lower restrictions on selling it arms, and to help it build a [civilian nuclear program](#), as its price to normalize relations with Israel, according to people familiar with the exchanges. The agreement comes as China has been trying to play a more active role in global governance by releasing a political settlement plan for the war in Ukraine and updating what it calls the Global Security Initiative, a bid to supplant Washington's dominant role in addressing the world's conflicts and crises.

Political analysts took mixed views of the implications for the United States.

Mark Dubowitz, the chief executive of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington-based research institute, described the renewed Iran-Saudi ties resulting from Chinese mediation as "a lose, lose, lose for American interests."

He added: "It demonstrates that the Saudis don't trust Washington to have their back, that Iran sees an opportunity to peel away American allies to end its international isolation and that China is becoming the major-domo of Middle Eastern power politics."

But Trita Parsi, an executive vice president of the Quincy Institute, a Washington research group that advocates U.S. restraint overseas, called the agreement "good news for the Middle East, since Saudi-Iranian tensions have been a driver of instability in the region."

Saudi officials are not looking to replace the United States with China, said Yasmine Farouk, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington research group.

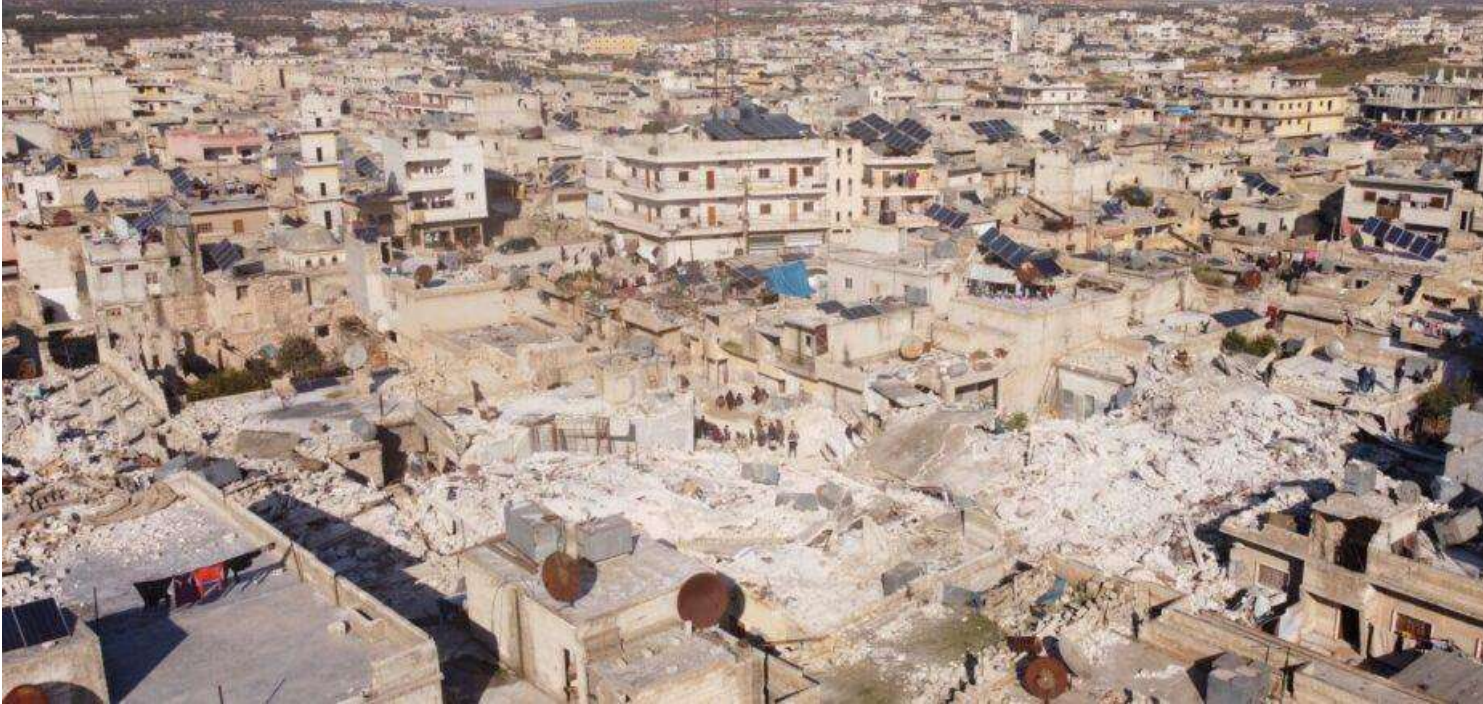
When it comes to defense and security, "Riyadh still thinks in English," she said. But after years of feeling that the United States has become a less reliable ally, the Saudis are expanding their alliances wherever they can.

Reporting was contributed by Keith Bradsher, Patrick Kingsley, David Pierson, Christopher Buckley, Michael Crowley, Farnaz Fassihi, Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Leily Nikounazar.

From the Mass Peace Action newsletter

Time to End the Cruel US Sanctions on Syria — and Everywhere Else

February 18, 2023 Jeff Klein Middle East Wars



Massive devastation caused by the earthquake that struck Syria and Turkey, leaving tens of thousands dead and injured. Aleppo, Syria February 8, 2023. Photo: Mohammad Bash/Shutterstock

by Jeff Klein

The horrific February 6 earthquake in Southern Turkey and northern Syria have shined a spotlight on the broad-based economic sanctions that the US has imposed on countries with supposedly “hostile” governments. It is not a pretty picture.

In Syria, the US has been promoting regime change for decades. Since 2012 it has spent \$billions to arm opposition forces, often including Islamic militants who are otherwise the enemies of the US and its allies as well as the Syrian government. The US has imposed brutal economic sanctions on Syria, which have further immiserated a population which was already reeling from 10 years of proxy war imposed on the country. At the same time, the US military and its allies occupy broad swaths of Syrian territory in the east and south, denying Syrians access to crucial oil and wheat resources. Turkey and local Syrians who are now effectively Turkish mercenaries illegally occupy much of northern Syria. And Turkish troops protect a NW Syrian enclave in the province of Idlib which is ruled by Al-Qaeda and its allies.

Sanctions are claimed to support the Syrian people – which would be laughable if it weren’t so tragic for the lives of millions in Syria.

The **openly-stated US policy** is to prevent any reconstruction in Syria as long as it continues to be governed by a regime which our elites disapprove. This has nothing to do with democracy, rather it is because Syria opposes and resists US hegemony in the Middle East and is hostile to Israel’s attempts to dominate the region.

Recent events have also exposed the lie that Syrian humanitarian relief has been exempt from the US sanctions all along. After the recent earthquake, the US announced a temporary loosening of Syria sanctions to allow rescue supplies and funds to enter the country without triggering US retaliation. Before that, countries and organizations wishing to provide humanitarian relief to Syrians faced the daunting task of trying to obtain licenses from the US State Department, which was costly, uncertain and time consuming. Most international banks simply refused to allow transactions relating to Syria out of fear of US sanctions, even for humanitarian purposes. As one **report** states: “While sanctions do not formally prevent humanitarian aid, they do prevent certain financial transactions leading to issues of over-compliance and the so-called ‘chilling effect’ both of which have consequences on the humanitarian sector” (more details [here](#)).

Map of earthquakes in Turkey, Feb 6, 2023. Credit: Henrick Pettersson, CNN, CC0 1.0 universal public domain dedication

Even before the earthquake, US-imposed sanctions had been severely punishing ordinary Syrians. According to UN statistics, **food insecurity** affects at least 12 million people in Syria, with an estimated 90% of the population now living in poverty. Fuel shortages, exacerbated by the US occupation and control of Syrian oil fields, have meant that most Syrians can expect no more than an hour or

two of electricity per day, while people are forced to shiver in [most homes without wintertime heat](#). The sanctions have also caused the Syrian currency to freefall, further undermining peoples' access to vital supplies.

Syria's public healthcare system, which was once the envy of the region, has been [especially hard-hit](#) and is now near collapse: *"Diagnostic equipment, such as MRI and CT scanners, are failing or missing vital parts. Ventilators and laboratory equipment are lacking. Cardiologists told me that endoscopes, cardiac catheters and coronary stents, along with renal dialysis facilities, are all suffering due to sanctions. Even private hospitals that can afford repairs cannot get them, as companies do not want to sell them the required equipment for fear of repercussions. Essential equipment and medicines are affected by sanctions in terms of supply, manufacturing and importing. Banks are refusing to open credit for importing urgently needed healthcare goods amid fears that sanctions may affect their business."* Vital medicines, and treatments, which were once free in Syria, are now either unavailable or priced out of reach for most people. Tragically, the recent earthquake threatens to totally [overwhelm](#) a medical system already weakened by years of US sanctions.

(I reported first-hand on some of the consequences of US sanctions against Syria during visits in [2018](#) and [2022](#), long before the earthquake.)

The claim that the punishment of Syria has anything to do with promoting democracy is transparently bogus. US allies in destabilizing Syria include authoritarian Turkey and the Gulf monarchy-dictatorships — as well as Israel which, in defiance of international law and numerous UN resolutions, rules millions of Palestinians who have no rights whatsoever. These same governments have been allowed to purchase tens of \$billions in US armaments, or in the case of Israel, weaponry is given free of charge amounting to hundreds of \$billions over the years.

The unrelenting sanctions on Syria would be bad enough, but the US also imposes punishing unilateral economic sanctions on numerous other countries. Accompanied by frequent direct or indirect military interventions, economic sanctions have long been the knee-jerk US policy around the world. Current targets include Cuba, Iran, Venezuela and Russia. Narrower sanctions have been imposed on persons or groups in a dozen or more other countries. These US sanctions are even more insidious because the centrality of the dollar and US financial institutions in the world economy allows Washington to threaten and intimidate third party countries from trading with targeted nations, even if they themselves have imposed no sanctions.

Even if one allowed, for argument's sake, that the human cost of unilateral US sanctions to pressure foreign countries were justified by some legitimate policy purpose, history shows that sanctions are ineffective in promoting democracy or even achieving regime change. Instead, they are a form of punishment against populations who happen to reside in countries whose governments are not subservient to US interests.

Cuba still survives — though at a steep cost — after 60 years of US sanctions. The Venezuelan government maintains its legitimacy with most of its population and the international community. The Islamic Republic of Iran has remained (for better or worse) intact as a US and Israeli adversary since 1979.

The sadistic intent of US economic sanctions were perhaps most vividly exposed when the US imposed a near total blockade against Saddam Hussein's Iraq after the first Gulf War in the 1990's. Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State in the Clinton administration, when confronted with UN statistics which showed that perhaps 500,000 Iraqi children perished as a result of US sanctions, responded simply and brutally that "It was worth it."

Sanctions do not work, even as intended, unless perhaps as a warning to people in countries likely to be targeted by the US in the future. Otherwise, they are nothing more than sheer cruelty masquerading as policy. Even if sanctions are nominally aimed at alleged or actual bad governmental actors, it is innocent multitudes in their countries who are made to suffer and die from the economic punishments imposed by the US. How many more millions will be victimized by these immoral sanctions? That is up to us and all the citizens of conscience in the US.

Demand and end to US sanctions against Syria and the removal of US troops by [using our easy tool to contact Congress](#).

For further background on the situation in Syria you can watch webinars Jeff Klein presented for MAPA in [2021](#), [early 2022](#) and [six months ago](#).

People of good will who want to donate to Syrian earthquake relief without political restrictions, including in government controlled areas of the country, can [donate to the Syrian Red Crescent](#) or support [the work of Oxfam in Syria](#).

— Jeff Klein is a retired machinist and member of MAPA's Board and of its Palestine/Israel Working Group. He lives in Dorchester and has travelled to the Middle East, including to Syria, many times in the past decade.