

Waiting in Vain for “Moderation”: Syria, Russia and Washington’s Problem

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Region: [USA](#)

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The most unedifying spectacle since Russia’s full-blooded attempt to change the tide of conflict in Bashar al-Assad’s favour has been the lexical scrounging on the part of Western governments. They are on the hunt for excuses what, exactly, they are defending, let alone protecting.

There is little doubt that no intervention would be the best sort of intervention in Syria. That tends to be the rule for most countries where sectarian, brutal conflict takes place. Secular religions such as humanitarian intervention, or regime change in the name of human security, are no less dangerous than fanatics who have also resolved all contradictions in life.

Goodness at the end of a gun tends to end rather badly. But many sides with an ideological and religious gripe sees fit to have a stab in the Syrian conflict, the country has become a bazaar of contending, ultra violent factions.

In this bazaar, efforts are being made to locate fighters to ennoble. The United States has money, in literal and moral senses, riding on CIA trained elements who have tended to be better capitulators than fighters. The extremes in this conflict tend to be attracting poles, magnetically drawing in all who consider themselves moderate. Whether it is the al-Qaida branch formations, or those that Russia seems to be mainly targeting - Jaesh al-Islam, or ISIS itself, recruits will find their way into the ranks.

Efforts being made by Washington, Paris and London on this score have not been yielding worthy fruit. Weapons are being surrendered to such groups as Jabhat al-Nusra, a notable incident of which involved the Pentagon-trained Division 30 in northern Aleppo. Designated a “moderate” faction, its fighters stemmed from the poorly directed US-led training program in Turkey.[1]

In September, one Abu Fahd al-Tunisi, a member of Jabhat al-Nusra, tweeted with glee that “the new group from Division 30 that entered yesterday hands over all its weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra after being granted safe passage.” In no uncertain terms, this constituted, a “strong slap for America”.

The 70 graduates of the Syria “train and equip” program did not end up being particularly stellar, a few of whom were captured and executed, and the rest generally joining other factions. The program, and its students, flunked.

Throughout, the entire effort has been plagued by inadequate resources and a daring effort to kidnap one of its commanders, Colonel Nadim al-Hassan, and several of his companions.

A contemptuously daring effort against Division 30's headquarters by the Nusra Front left five dead and 18 others wounded. A statement from Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad al-Dhafer spoke of insufficient supplies, trainees and fighters, claiming that there was "a lack of accuracy and method in the selection of Division 30's cadres." Such is the outcome of the moderates in Syria.

They might have started with another one of its commander, Anas Ibrahim Obaid, who was more than willing to hand over US supplied weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra. As one of the latter's members, Abu Khattab al-Maqdisi, observed, Division 30's happily disgraced leader "promised to issue a statement... repudiating Division 30, the coalition and those who trained him."

None of this swirl of confusion seems to afflict the Russian effort. Convinced that Assad's regime is worth fighting for, the Kremlin has its own war to fight against those it regards as extremists. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov illustrates the broad nature of the program, which is an internalised version of Moscow's targeting of fundamentalism within its borders: "We have attacked targets from ISIS and other targets. We attack all Islamic terrorist groups, not just ISIS."

In one fundamental sense, the battle is focused on such fighters as battle hardened Chechens who may become the very imported Islamists that governments from the US to Australia have feared. As with campaigns waged in Chechnya, we can forget the softening role of humanitarian law in such missions.

There is one area that is thriving. The weapons trade is flourishing, and some US members of Congress, in moments when reason has truly taken a long holiday, think it wise to add to it. To sell or supply such weapons demands the brand label of moderate to pass muster - the humanitarians in Washington need justifications for murder. The advertising front man for such false solutions is Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) who believes Russia to be but a gas station masquerading as a real country.[2]

McCain's untidy reasoning on the Russian entry into the conflict serves to illustrate that wonderfully Hegelian view that history holds no lessons that we can truly learn, since we are bound not to learn anything from it anyway. A few points towards this end reared up in an interview with Fox News on September 30. The first is the suggestion that the Free Syrian Army, clearly defined, and irrefutably "moderate", has been a target of Russian missiles in Homs. This is odd, given that much of it has seemingly melted.

The second is even more dramatic and instructive. If, asked the interviewer, Russian planes were "attacking the very guys who we want to see topple Assad [would you] let American planes just pass them and let them do that?"

The response was out of the top drawer of the musty archive of CIA-orchestrated blowback, garnished with Cold War trimmings. "No, but I might do what we did in Afghanistan many years ago, to give those guys the ability to shoot down those planes. That equipment is available." [3] Those guys, McCain clarified, were the Free Syrian Army, brought back to life as modernised Afghans who "shot down Russian planes after Russia invaded Afghanistan."

That equipment, supplied in impulse, without a care about cultural or historical circumstance, can just as easily be used against US-led coalition aircraft, a feature that should not have gone unnoticed from the Afghanistan invasion in 2001. The Taliban,

bankrolled by US funds and its armoury, were ever so happy to repay their loans in using weapons, and resources, availed to them courtesy of Washington's Cold War gambles. So much, in such cases, for moderate assessments in a war that, by its very nature, repudiates moderation. Sponsors of revolutions and violence eventually get their due.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11882195/US-trained-Division-30-rebel-s-betrayed-US-and-hand-weapons-over-to-al-Qaedas-affiliate-in-Syria.html>

[2] <http://theweek.com/speedreads/456437/john-mccain-russia-gas-station-masquerading-country>

[3]

<http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2015/09/30/sen-john-mccain-calls-russian-airstrikes-disgraceful/>

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