



CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

WASHINGTON, DC 20318-9999

19 August 2013

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Engel:

Thank you for your letter regarding the resources required and the risk of applying U.S. military force against the Syrian regime. Let me begin by assuring you that your military leaders are not reticent, weary, or risk averse. We are experienced in complex conflict, realistic about the cost we incur in blood and treasure when we apply the military instrument of national power, and we are pragmatic about the limits of military force.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, I was asked what it would take to tip the conflict in favor of the opposition and in so doing achieve the objective of convincing Bashar Al-Assad to leave power. I provided my views after consultation with the Joint Chiefs and U.S. Central Command.

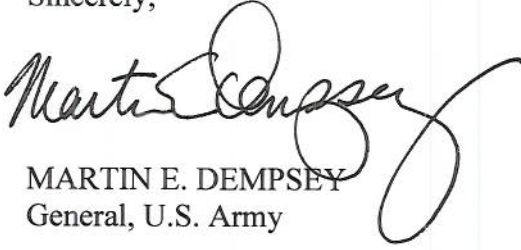
To the specific point in your letter, there are certainly actions short of tipping the balance of the conflict that could impose a cost on them for unacceptable behavior. We can destroy the Syrian Air Force. The loss of Assad's Air Force would negate his ability to attack opposition forces from the air, but it would also escalate and potentially further commit the United States to the conflict. Stated another way, it would not be militarily decisive, but it would commit us decisively to the conflict. In a variety of ways, the use of U.S. military force can change the military balance, but it cannot resolve the underlying and historic ethnic, religious, and tribal issues that are fueling this conflict.

Syria today is not about choosing between two sides but rather about choosing one among many sides. It is my belief that the side we choose must be ready to promote their interests and ours when the balance shifts in their favor. Today, they are not. The crisis in Syria is tragic and complex. It is a deeply rooted, long-term conflict among multiple factions, and violent struggles for power will continue after Assad's rule ends. We should evaluate the effectiveness of limited military options in this context.

We are helping Syria's neighbors contain the spillover effects that would render our allies and partners less secure. We continue to deliver humanitarian and security assistance to Syria's neighbors, as well as non-lethal assistance to the opposition. Moreover, I believe we can assist in the humanitarian crisis on a far more significant scale. We could, if asked to do so, significantly increase our effort to develop a moderate opposition. Doing so, in combination with expanded capacity-building efforts with regional partners and a significant investment in the development of a moderate Syrian opposition, represents the best framework for an effective U.S. strategy toward Syria going forward.

I would be happy to discuss this issue further with you in person. Thank you for your support for America's Armed Forces and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Martin E. Dempsey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

MARTIN E. DEMPSEY
General, U.S. Army