



Gen. Dempsey Favors Building “Moderate Opposition” in Syria

In an appearance before a reconfirmation hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on July 18, Gen. Martin Dempsey (shown), chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he favors a U.S. role in “building a moderate opposition” against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.



A report on the hearing in the U.K. [Telegraph](#) quoted Dempsey’s statement that President Obama had asked him whether the United States “could,” but not whether it “should,” stage a military intervention in Syria. The “issue is under deliberation inside of our agencies of government,” said Dempsey.

Dempsey, the Army’s highest ranking general, told the Senate hearing that under current conditions, he believed that Assad would still be in power in a year’s time, observing: “Currently the tide seems to have shifted in his favor.”

Also appearing at the hearing was Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral James Winnefeld. Both Dempsey and Winnefeld have been nominated by the White House for a second two-year term in their positions — nominations that require Senate confirmation.

During the hearing, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), the 2008 Republican candidate for president, was especially strident in his grilling of Dempsey, as the two exchanged remarks in debate-like fashion. [Bloomberg news](#) cited Brian Rogers, McCain’s communications director, as stating that McCain plans to hold up Dempsey’s confirmation until he gets satisfactory answers.

“You testified this February you had advised the president to arm vetted units of the Syrian opposition,” said McCain. “In April, you testified you no longer supported the position. Now we read in published reports that the administration has decided to arm the Syrian opposition units. How do we account for those pirouettes?”

“I wouldn’t accept the term pirouettes, sir,” Dempsey replied. “We have adapted our approach based on what we know of the opposition and if you recall, at the beginning of the year, there was a period where it was pretty evident that the extremist groups were prevailing inside the opposition.”

Dempsey continued: “Senator, I am in favor of building a moderate opposition and supporting it. The question whether to support it with direct kinetic strikes ... is a decision for our elected officials, not for the senior military leader of the nation.”

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs did not elaborate on the possible use of “kinetic strikes” against Assad’s forces, saying “it would be inappropriate for me to try to influence the decision” by “rendering



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an opinion in public about what kind of force we should use.”

Dempsey said he would let the Senate committee know what his recommendations are “at the appropriate time.”

Dempsey received pointed questions from not only McCain but also Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.), who told him: “There is a real uncertainty among some of us as to what your role is in terms of telling us your personal opinion on things — what your role is in terms of giving advice [on U.S. options for Syria] to the president.”

Dempsey responded by saying he would compile the list “as well as the framework of a strategy in which they might make sense.”

An AP report carried by the [Air Force Times](#) cited McCain’s statement that Dempsey’s response contradicted his commitment to provide the committee with his personal views, even if those opinions differ from the administration in power.

McCain told reporters after leaving the hearing room that he planned to put a hold on Dempsey’s nomination, effectively blocking further action on it until he gets what he considers an adequate response from Dempsey.

“I want to see him answer the question,” McCain said. “Hello!”

Admiral Winnefeld also provided his view of the course the United States might take in Syria. “There are a whole range of options that are out there,” he noted. “We are ready to act if we’re called on to act.”

The report in the *Air Force Times* noted that during his exchange with McCain, Dempsey commented that “situations can be made worse by the introduction of military force” without first understanding how the country would continue to be governed post-invasion and without assurance that government institutions don’t fail to function.

[Military.com](#) reported McCain’s rather confrontational approach to questioning the nation’s two top military leaders. “I must tell both the witnesses at the onset, I’m very concerned about the role you have played over the last two years,” said McCain.

The exchange between the senator and the general continued as McCain asked Dempsey whether regional destabilization would be a “good outcome” of the fighting in Syria.

“Senator, somehow you’ve got me portrayed as the one who’s holding back from our use of military force inside of Syria,” Dempsey said.

McCain, never one to refrain from acerbic comments, took a parting shot at Dempsey:

If it is your position that you do not provide your personal views to the committee when asked, only under certain circumstances, then you have just contradicted what I have known this committee to operate under for the last 30 years.

The question of how our government can justify military intervention in another nation without a congressional declaration of war, as required by the Constitution, was never discussed during the hearing.

Just one day before this hearing, another senator, Rand Paul (R-Ky.), contributed an op-ed article to Politico.com headlined “[Aid to unknown rebels in Syria carries U.S. threat.](#)”



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In his article, Paul pointed out that there currently are at least 17 armed jihadist groups engaged in the rebellion against the Syrian regime, one of them being Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate “that has emerged as one of the most effective rebel factions in Syria,” according to the Associated Press.

Therefore, noted Paul, the Obama government is about to arm an affiliate of al-Qaeda.

The Kentucky senator also raised the same point we made above: “Most important — if the Constitution still matters — the president needed to ask Congress for authorization to arm these rebels. He did not.”

Sen. Paul also brought up a point generally ignored among Western commentators, that the small but significant Christian population in Middle Eastern countries often suffers when rebellion against secular Muslim regimes is encouraged. He wrote:

There is also the question of what happens to Syria’s 2 million Christians. As a minority, these Christians have generally been protected by Assad’s regime, but have been targeted by some of the rebel groups. Imagine if the United States delivered weapons to extremists who, in turn, used them against Christians. Imagine the tragic irony of aiding the same Islamic radicals we have asked American soldiers to fight in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Paul also noted Gen. Dempsey’s change of stance since last year, when he reportedly endorsed a proposal by then-CIA Director David Petraeus to arm members of Syria’s rebel opposition. Now, noted Paul, Dempsey has said he is not sure that the United States “could clearly identify the right people” to aid or arm in Syria. Paul also quoted Dempsey’s testimony in April that “It’s actually more confusing on the opposition side today than it was six months ago.”

Noting that a recent Pew Research Center poll indicated that more than 70 percent of Americans oppose intervening in Syria, Paul wrote that he has introduced bipartisan legislation along with Sens. Tom Udall (D-N.M.), Mike Lee (R-Utah), and Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) that would prohibit the president from providing military aid to the Syrian rebels without congressional consent.

Photo of General Martin Dempsey before Senate Armed Services Committee: AP Images



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