

U.S. Military Leaders Urge Restraint on Iran, Syria

Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a Feb. 19 interview with CNN: “I think it’s premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria because I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this point. And let me broaden the conversation a bit. Syria is an arena right now for all of the various interests to play out. And what I mean by that is, you’ve got great power involvement. Turkey clearly has an interest, a very important interest. Russia has a very important interest. Iran has an interest. . . .”

On Syria, Dempsey added that the U.S. should *not* arm the opposition, adding that “there are indications that al-Qaeda is involved, and that they’re interested in supporting the opposition.”

Asked about a pre-emptive strike on Iran, he replied: “I think it would be premature to exclusively decide that the time for a military option was upon us. I think that the economic sanctions and the international cooperation that we’ve been able to gather around sanctions is beginning to have an effect. . . .”

On Tehran’s leadership: “We are of the opinion that the Iranian regime is a rational actor. And it’s for that reason, I think, that we think the current path we’re on is the most prudent path at this point. . . . We also know—or believe we know—that the Iranian

regime has not decided that they will embark on the effort to weaponize their nuclear capability.”

Gen. James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence (DNI), in testimony Feb. 15, to the U.S. Senate, in response to a question from Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.), noted that the recent suicide bombings in Syria “had all the earmarks of an al-Qaeda-like attack. And so we believe that al-Qaeda in Iraq is extending its reach into Syria.”

On whether Iran intends to build a nuclear weapon: “It would probably take them about a year to be able to produce a bomb, and then possibly another one or two years in order to put it on a deliverable vehicle of some sort in order to deliver that weapon.”

Lt. Gen. Ronald Burgess, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), also testified to the Feb. 15 Senate hearing, where he said, “the Agency assesses Iran is unlikely to initiate or intentionally provoke a conflict.”

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, on Feb. 16, expressed “concern” about reports that al-Qaeda may be making inroads in Syria. “It means that I think we have to continue to work with the Arab League and determine what steps should be taken to try to deal with the situation in Syria. It does raise concerns for us that al-Qaeda is trying to assert a presence there, and that means that, you know, frankly, our concerns, which were—which were large to begin with because of the situation, the deteriorating situation in Syria—that the situation there has become that much more serious as a result of that.”