

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 14, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As the third anniversary of the Syrian uprising against Bashar Al-Assad's dictatorship approaches, we urge you to press forward with your Administration's reexamination of U.S. policy in Syria. The situation and our options may have grown more complicated, but we believe there is still strong, bipartisan support in the Senate for developing and implementing a comprehensive Syria strategy, one that will break the stalemate on the ground and enable a political solution that paves the way for Assad's exit.

The 2011 uprising in Syria followed waves of peaceful protests across the Middle East as citizens of the region rose up to demand political representation, economic opportunities, and social justice. In March 2011, Bashar Al-Assad could have engaged constructively with the Syrian people and responded to their legitimate aspirations. Instead he responded with violence, igniting a humanitarian crisis that our Director of National Intelligence described as "an apocalyptic disaster" that now endangers regional stability and poses an increasing national security threat. Assad has lost all legitimacy as Syria's ruler. U.S. leadership is needed now more than ever to set the conditions for his exit and prepare moderate opposition groups to lead the post-Assad transition.

Throughout the Syrian civil war, we have welcomed efforts to provide humanitarian support—both in terms of financial and material assistance. However, events on the ground are proving that this is not enough, as the Assad regime escalates its attacks against civilians and refuses to allow humanitarian relief to reach those in need. Assad's security services have brutalized, tortured, starved, and murdered tens of thousands of civilians, including thousands of children, in a conflict that has killed over 100,000 Syrians. His actions have caused the flight of more than 2.5 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees, and the internal displacement of more than 6.5 million inside Syria who are in desperate need of basic necessities.

A negotiated political settlement remains the best way to end the violence in Syria. Unfortunately the Assad regime has demonstrated in word and deed that it is not a reliable partner for peace talks, blocking every effort to reach an agreement in Geneva and going as far as to intimidate Syrian opposition delegates by illegally detaining their family members. While negotiators sat at the table, the Assad regime accelerated attacks against the Syrian people, indiscriminately killing hundreds of innocent civilians through aerial bombardment and barrel bombs. On February 4, Secretary Kerry rightly condemned these tactics as barbaric and said that

the regime's reprehensible actions undermined hope for peace talks. The only way to make Geneva a viable process is to change the current balance of power and alter Assad's calculus so that he no longer believes he can remain Syria's ruler.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139, passed on February 22, is a positive step. The true test of the resolution will be whether the Assad regime responds rapidly and effectively to legally binding requirements to stop the barrel bombs, demilitarize hospitals and schools, allow immediate humanitarian access to besieged communities, and permit humanitarian aid to cross borders into Syria. Just as with the agreement to remove, dismantle, and destroy Syria's chemical weapons program, Assad is likely to stall and shirk his commitments to the international community. Marginal improvements in the humanitarian situation, and progress in the destruction of the chemical weapons, will not change the current balance of power or Assad's commitment to the current, violent course. We must be prepared with options to increase pressure when Assad fails to meet his commitments.

Russia and Iran also carry responsibility for the current stalemate. Assad's willingness and ability to fight down to the last Syrian is possible only because of continued support from these two outside players and direct intervention by Lebanese Hezbollah. We urge your Administration to work with like-minded nations to increase pressure on both of these countries.

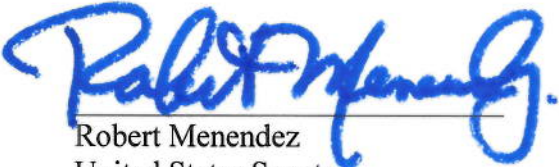
We commend the Syrian Military Council and Free Syrian Army for their courage and commitment to not only fighting Assad but also pushing back al-Qaeda and other extremist groups terrorizing Syrian communities. As the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Matt Olsen recently testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Syria is now the preeminent location for al-Qaeda affiliated or independent groups "to recruit, train, and equip a growing number of extremists, some of whom we assess may seek to conduct external attacks." As the Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson publically stated this terrorist threat is now a matter of U.S. homeland security, surpassing the tribal areas of Pakistan as "one of the largest training grounds now in the world." The moderate opposition forces are currently the only entity actively fighting against extremist groups pouring into Syria. Enhanced support to those forces engaged in the fight is needed to sustain their momentum and prevent the establishment of terrorist safe havens throughout north Syria.

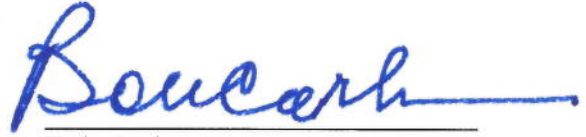
We call on you to engage Congress as your team moves forward in developing and implementing policy options. We share your desire to find new ways to stop the atrocities being committed by a brutal, illegitimate dictator in the heart of the Middle East. The U.S. should actively engage Syrians who reject violence and terrorism and embrace peace, representative government, and rule of law for all regardless of gender, sect, or ethnicity. This engagement should include options for empowering the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the moderate opposition forces so that their leaders can forge sustainable ties to local communities in Syria while shifting the stalemate on the ground. Concurrently, the U.S. should lead international efforts to develop a robust regional strategy that encourages cooperation, particularly on counterterrorism, and discourages regional rivalries that exacerbate the Syrian crisis.

We stand ready to help as your Administration moves forward. Persistence of the status quo is intolerable and runs counter to U.S. interests and those of our partners across the region. As UN


Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon recently stated, the Syrian conflict is “the most urgent security issue in the world today.” U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power has called it “the worst humanitarian crisis of this generation.” We must take steps to stop the escalating atrocities being perpetrated against innocent civilians, and improve the lives of Syrians inside and outside the country. We firmly believe this is an issue where real, serious American leadership is both vital and welcome.

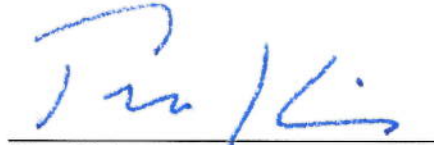
Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator

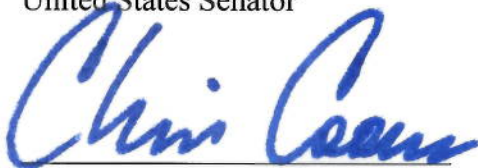

Bob Corker
United States Senator

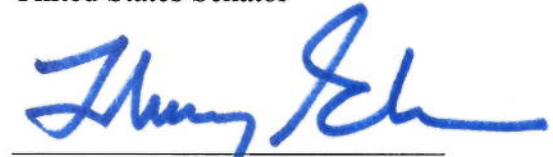

Carl Levin
United States Senator

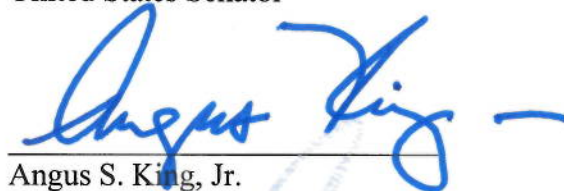

James M. Inhofe
United States Senator


Tim Kaine
United States Senator


John McCain
United States Senator


Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator


Lindsey Graham
United States Senator


Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator