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PLAYING WITH FIRE:

Why Private Gulf Financing
for Syria's Extremist Rebels
Risks Igniting Sectarian
Conflict at Home



at BROOKINGS

Elizabeth Dickinson

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THE AUTHOR

ELIZABETH DICKINSON is the Gulf Correspondent for *The National*, based in Abu Dhabi. She previously served as assistant managing editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine in Washington, D.C. and as the Nigeria correspondent for *The Economist* in Abuja. Elizabeth is author of *Who Shot Ahmed*, a Kindle Single chronicling the murder of a 22-year-old videographer, killed in cold blood in the dead of night at the height of Bahrain's Arab Spring. She also the co-editor of the recent book, *The South-*

ern Tiger. Her work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Monthly*, *Atlantic*, *New Republic*, *The Mail & Guardian (South Africa)*, among others. She has reported from five continents and speaks fluent French, Spanish, and Krio, as well as basic Yoruba and Arabic. Elizabeth graduated from Yale University with a degree in African and International Studies. Follow her on Twitter @DickinsonBeth.

INTRODUCTION

*“The whole world is grappling in Syria at the expense of the Syrian people, and it is impossible for the army to unite when every brigade follows whoever is financing it. I am not only talking about the support of governments but this presents a real problem to the supporters in Gulf, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia... I mean this huge number of supporters has resulted in a serious problem: it made every brigade think that it doesn't need the other brigades. For example, Liwa al-Tawheed doesn't need Ahrar al-Sham, just as Ahrar al-Sham doesn't need al-Nusra, and this brought forth various armies inside the one army and caused a problem.”*¹

—Jamaan Herbash, former Kuwaiti Parliamentarian and supporter of Free Syrian Army brigades

Over the last two and a half years, Kuwait has emerged as a financing and organizational hub for charities and individuals supporting Syria's myriad rebel groups. These donors have taken advantage of Kuwait's unique freedom of association and its relatively weak financial rules to channel money to some of the estimated 1,000 rebel brigades² now fighting against Syrian president Bashar al-Asad.

This memo charts how individual donors in the Gulf encouraged the founding of armed groups, helped to shape the ideological and at times extremist agendas of rebel brigades, and contributed to the fracturing of the military opposition. From the early days of the Syrian uprising, Kuwait-based donors—including one group currently under U.S. sanction for terrorist financing—began to pressure Syrians to take up arms. The new brigades often adopted the ideological outlook of their donors. As the war dragged on and the civilian death toll rose, the path toward extremism became self-reinforcing. Today, there is evidence that Kuwaiti donors have

backed rebels who have committed atrocities and who are either directly linked to al-Qa'ida or cooperate with its affiliated brigades on the ground.

Conflicts and competition between donors also contributed to the splintering of rebel groups in Syria. Armed groups attracted financing by designating personal Syrian representatives in Kuwait, who channeled donations to them from Kuwaiti benefactors. But infighting among these agents—as well as their benefactors—quickly became common. At times, high profile disputes among donors prevented rebel factions from joining under the single umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Instead, a host of mini-alliances in individual provinces have been brokered, in some cases with the help or complicity of Kuwaiti donors. So alarming is the splintering that today some involved now express remorse at having backed disparate rebel groups.

Although it is impossible to quantify the value of private Kuwaiti assistance to the rebels, it almost

¹ Jamaan Herbash (member of Kuwaiti parliament), interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

² Charles Lister, “Syria's Insurgency: Beyond Good Guys and Bad Guys,” *Foreign Policy*, 9 September 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/09/09/syrias_insurgency_beyond_good_guys_and_bad_guys.

certainly reaches into the hundreds of millions of dollars.³ Donors based in Kuwait have also gathered contributions from elsewhere in the Gulf, where fundraising is more closely regulated. Early in the conflict, Kuwaitis used money transfers, exchange companies, *hawala* agents, and direct cargo shipments to convey their donations. Some groups may have used their legitimate businesses and investments in Syria to illicitly move money to allies in the country. Today, a great deal of the money and supplies gathered passes directly through Turkey, Lebanon, or Jordan before crossing into Syria. At least half a dozen Kuwaiti donors also continue to travel to Syria personally.

Meanwhile, there is also evidence that members of Kuwait's minority Shi'ite community may be financially supporting the Syrian regime. This is not the primary subject of this paper and remains a significant area for further research, as this could violate U.S. and international sanctions on individuals and entities linked to the regime.

Although the fighting is thousands of miles away, Kuwaiti involvement in the Syrian conflict is risky for Kuwait itself—a small country of just over three million, a third of which are Shi'a. Many of Kuwait's highest-profile Sunni and tribal opposition figures have been involved in fundraising; supporting the *mujahedeen* (military fighters) has become an important political gesture. Shi'ite figures allegedly involved are also high profile businessmen and politicians. But both Sunni and Shi'ite campaigns increasingly employ sectarian rhetoric, and residents of all sects report feeling increased communal tensions. Dozens to hundreds of Kuwaitis are also believed to have travelled to Syria to fight with the rebels directly.

Kuwait has taken steps to respond to concerns about financing to extremist groups. Over the sum-

mer, the Emir of Kuwait signed legislation that, for the first time, criminalizes terrorist financing and mandates the creation of a forensic Financial Investigation Unit (FIU) to track alleged misconduct. But much work is needed to fully implement the new law, and Kuwait's unique freedoms of assembly and association make it difficult to halt religious charities' activities. The challenge is compounded by the very significant and legitimate charity work that Kuwaiti groups are undertaking in and around Syria. Kuwait is currently the fourth largest donor to UN relief operations in Syria.⁴ Finally, the country's domestic politics also complicates the government's response; many individuals involved in financing have large and important constituencies. Hence, many of the individuals and groups who have publicly raised money are still operating in the open.

The U.S. Treasury is aware of this activity and has expressed concern about this flow of private financing. But Western diplomats' and officials' general response has been a collective shrug. Some have argued that the amount of private money is not significant in the broader context of the Syrian conflict. Even if that is true, this paper questions whether a dollar value alone is the most indicative measure given that Gulf donors have contributed to the ideological and strategic alignment of today's rebel groups, in which extremists have the military upper-hand.

This report captures what may be only a portion of the activity underway—that which is visible. It is possible that other or different funds have been gathered more discreetly. But because certain donors and fundraisers have chosen to use social media to broadcast their work, we now have a window into networks that may have existed for many years prior to the conflict in Syria.

³ My assessment is based on interviews I conducted in Kuwait, which is corroborated by an anonymous U.S. intelligence official. See Joby Warrick, "Private donations give edge to Islamists in Syria, officials say," *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-donations-give-edge-to-islamists-in-syria-officials-say/2013/09/21/a6c783d2-2207-11e3-a358-1144dec636dd_story.html.

⁴ Financial Tracking Service, "Syrian Arab Republic Emergencies for 2013," 8 November 2013, http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R24c_C206_Y2013_asof_1311080300.pdf.

BACKGROUND

Long before the Syrian uprising, Kuwait was a locus of non-governmental work in the Gulf. Private charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been allowed more freedom to organize and fundraise than elsewhere in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where many philanthropic organizations are either formed in partnership with the government or are subject to heavy oversight.⁵ Many of Kuwait's charities, by contrast, are autonomous and regulated with minimal interference by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Some of these groups, for example the International Islamic Charity Organization, are widely respected as among the best in the region and often partner with the United Nations in delivering relief. Other groups are directly linked to religious sects or organizations, for example, Mercy International which is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood's Social Reform Society, or the Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), a Salafi group. In addition, mosques and private groups often raise money without explicitly falling under the umbrella of a registered charity.

This extensive humanitarian network has allowed Kuwait to become one of the most generous donors

in the region, including charitable giving for the crisis in Syria, where Kuwait is the largest non-Western donor and the fourth largest donor overall. In addition to more than \$300 million in government grants, Kuwait's independent charities raised \$183 million⁶ for humanitarian aid work for Syria at the last UN donor conference, which Kuwait hosted. The country will reprise the event in early 2014.

Kuwait's political system has contributed to this open civic atmosphere. The country has a broadly empowered parliament that can introduce and block legislation and funding. In contrast to other Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, it has not outlawed organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, preferring to incorporate it into the political fold. Likewise, the country's expatriates—which make up roughly 68 percent⁷ of the population—are allowed freedom of religious practice. The country's diverse population lives largely without sectarian conflict.

Still, a relatively open political and social system has also occasionally allowed illicit financing to flourish. While countries such as Saudi Arabia implemented strict financial regulations after the 9/11

⁵ For a good summary of regional NGO regulations, see International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, "Survey of Arab NGO Laws," *Global Trends in NGO Law* 1, no. 4 (2010), <http://www.icnl.org/research/trends/trends1-4.html>.

⁶ "Breakdown of Syria aid pledges in Kuwait," *IRIN News*, 1 February 2013, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/97395/>.

⁷ "Kuwait to Reduce Expats by One Million: Minister," *Agence France-Presse*, 19 March 2013, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5if0IIj5n6ZjcT9IN2an0bio18ssg?docId=CNG.6be19aa25f576aa818844d0d0b5e299a.21>.

attacks in 2001, Kuwait's 2002 anti-money-laundering law did not explicitly criminalize terrorist financing and few prosecutions were undertaken for criminal activity.⁸ Indicative of the loopholes, in 2008, the U.S. Treasury placed sanctions on RIHS for involvement in terrorist financing in South

Asia, East Africa, and Eastern Europe.⁹ The charity has continued to operate openly in Kuwait. Some analysts also believe Kuwaiti groups and individuals were involved in funding armed groups in Iraq during the height of sectarian conflict there in 2007 and 2008,¹⁰ though this has not been confirmed.

⁸ Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, "Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism: Mutual Evaluation of the State of Kuwait," 24 June 2011, <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/countries/j-m/kuwait/documents/mutualevaluationofthestateofkuwait.html>.

⁹ "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al Qaida Network," U.S. Department of the Treasury, 13 June 2008, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1023.aspx>.

¹⁰ Some funders appear to have acquired a local reputation for funding insurrection; one logistics team member described his reasons for approaching Shafi al-Ajmi, saying the cleric is "a professional in this field." Noman Bentoman (President of the Quillam Foundation), interview with the author, February 2013.

2011: FROM PROTESTORS TO SOLDIERS

Private Kuwaiti involvement in Syria began in the summer of 2011, when protests in Syria were still localized. Some members of Kuwait's Syrian expatriate community—estimated to be more than 100,000 people¹¹—began to organize personal donations for those in need. Many of these transfers were simply remittances to family members or friends. However, as the numbers of arrested and killed in Syria began to grow, expatriate communities from Der'aa, Deir Ez Zour, Aleppo, and elsewhere began to organize.

“At first, we were activists, we helped those inside Syria with communication tools, we designed Facebook websites, we prepared for media,” explained one member of the Syrian community.¹² “After three months, the number of prisoners grew and the number of martyrs also, so we began to expect that people will need some humanitarian assistance. We had to prepare ourselves for the worst.”

Uncertain how the Kuwaiti government would react to their efforts, the Syrian community remained largely disconnected from local charities.¹³ Independently, they began to develop methods for

moving humanitarian goods such as food and medical supplies directly by land into Syria using unregulated bus stations and trucks on the outskirts of Kuwait City.¹⁴ Other transfers were made directly to Syria through banks or exchange agents.

As humanitarian needs compounded, members of the Syrian expatriate community began to approach Kuwaiti charities and individual donors in hopes of seeking their financial assistance.¹⁵ The advantage of seeking Kuwaiti help, from their perspective, was access to philanthropic businessmen with deep pockets and a reputation for generosity. Fundraising in Kuwait is largely based on networks¹⁶—tribal, economic, or religious—that Syrian expatriates could not independently navigate.

Kuwaiti charities were also keen to connect with the Syrian expatriate community, which could provide up-to-date, detailed information about the situation in individual communities. In several cases, Kuwaiti charities essentially contracted-out their Syria aid programs to Syrian expatriate groups that had the knowledge and know-how to reach those in need.¹⁷

¹¹ While there is no official census figure of individual populations of nationals, this figure is widely cited in the media, as well as by parliamentarians and members of the Syrian community.

¹² Logistics team member four, interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

¹³ “In the beginning, we were afraid of the two governments, from Kuwait and Syria. We didn't know what Kuwait's position would be” (ibid.).

¹⁴ “We used transport offices that operate like a bus station only not regulated. I got all the materials, and the owner of the vehicle would charge me according to the quantity. We designate people to receive the goods.” Logistics team member one, interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

¹⁵ Logistics team members one and four, interview, October 2013.

¹⁶ Sulaiman Al Shamsaldeen (former Head of IICO), interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

¹⁷ Logistics team members one, two, and four, interview, October 2013.

One such Kuwaiti was Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi, a Salafi cleric and member of the faculty at Kuwait University's College of Sharia and Islamic Studies.¹⁸ In the fall of 2011, Ajmi convened a large meeting of Kuwaitis and Syrian expatriates from a variety of provinces, including Der'aa, Deir Ez Zour, Damascus, and Idlib. Promising to help, he organized members of the Syrian community into committees—a financial group, media group, and charity group that would hold weekly meetings.¹⁹ One member of the financial committee described its work:

It was a league to support Syrian people. We just wanted to create a group that could arrange meetings with VIPs and traders for donations. We had weekly meetings ... we already had private groups [of Syrians] when we came to Shafi al-Ajmi. But we came to find another source of money. ... There was a schedule of people to collect donations from. Some people said they wanted their money to go to this, or to that, depending on what they like.²⁰

Other Kuwaiti charities that connected to the Syrian community included the Sheikh Fahad al-Ahmed Charity and RIHS, the Salafi group mentioned above that is currently under U.S. Treasury sanction for financing terrorism.²¹

By the fall of 2011, some Kuwaitis involved in charity work began to say they supported an armed

uprising.²² And by the winter, Kuwaiti individuals and charities, including Ajmi and RIHS, began channeling a portion of their funding into the creation of armed groups.²³ Each nascent rebel brigade would designate a Syrian representative in Kuwait, who was then responsible for dealing with the individual backers. Sitting for tea at Kuwait's *diwanias* (home spaces used for public gatherings), the representatives would make their cases for support:

The representatives were Syrian, imagine they were from one village or another and creating their armed group. They received monthly payments, which at that time were small, maybe 20,000KD per month [\$70,630], just according to the donations we received. ... From RIHS, it was 80,000KD per month [\$282,540]. At that time, in the creation stage, they didn't need much money.²⁴

It is unclear how the decision to fund the armed brigades began or why, but witnesses in early meetings described an "implicit desire" from the donors to create military resistance:

There was an implicit desire from [RIHS]. ... They wanted to shorten [the Syrian revolution] by creating defender groups. They wanted to do more than just to feed them; they needed armed groups to guard from the regime.²⁵

¹⁸ School of Shari'a and Islamic Studies, "Members of Teaching Staff, Department of Tafseer and Hadith" (a'daa hay'at al-tadrees – qism al-tafseer wa'l-hadith), <http://www.shariakuniv.com/members/> (22 November 2013).

¹⁹ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al Qaida Network," U.S. Department of the Treasury, 13 June 2008, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1023.aspx>.

²² Salafi cleric Hakim al-Mutairi, a fundraiser and founder of Kuwait's Salafist Ummah Party, endorsed an armed Syrian uprising as early as September 2011, see Shaikh Hakim al-Mutairi, "The Syrian Revolution and the Last Choice," (19 September 2011), <http://www.dr-hakem.com/Portals/Content/?info=TnpVMkpsTjFZbEJoWjVbU1RPT0rdQ==.jsp>.

²³ Logistics team members one and three, interview, October 2013. News account of a speech by cleric Hajjaj al-Ajmi, also involved in financing and claims to have begun supporting rebels sometime in early 2011 (source claims April 2011). While this date seems improbably early, it is likely that funds began moving by the end of that year. See Forums on the Syrian Revolution, "Shaikh al-Ajmi Assures Donors: I Will Personally Ensure Delivery of Weapons to the Rebels" (al-shaykh Hajjaj al-Ajmi mutma'inna al-mutabari'een: ashraf binafsi 'ala tasleem al-silah li'thawra), <http://www.syria2011.net/t33021-topic> (31 May 2012).

²⁴ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.

2012: DESCENT INTO CIVIL WAR

As new armed groups formed, Kuwaiti benefactors were keen to see that their money had been put to good use. So in early 2012, there was an explosion of videos, tweets, and photos on social media, announcing the creation of new rebel brigades—some even named after individual Kuwaitis who had contributed.²⁶

Visibly promoting Syrian rebel groups soon attracted a new cohort of donors to the cause, including some of Kuwait's most prominent Sunni and tribal leaders. Current and former parliamentarians, clerics, and other public figures were among those to join the fold. These new fundraisers each brought their own constituencies to the cause. Kuwait's largest tribes organized gatherings in 2012 pitched as competitions: which families could raise the largest sums.²⁷ Other fundraisers took place in the *diwanis* of prominent individuals. Examples include former

parliamentarians Jamaan Herbash of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing), Waleed al-Tabtabae, a Salafi, and current parliamentarian Mohammed Hayef, also a Salafi. Further fundraisers have been hosted by Salafi clerics including Shafi al-Ajmi, Nabil al-Awady, Ajeel al-Nashmi, among others.

There were up-starts too, most notably Hajjaj al-Ajmi, a young Salafi cleric who has been perhaps the loudest advocate of the Syrian opposition²⁸—though it is unclear how deep his capacities are. Various logistical interlocutors described him as “a kid”²⁹ and a media hound who “doesn't have experience.”³⁰ It is likely that high visibility on social media did not directly translate into high impact.

Kuwaiti figures advertised their campaigns on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. It is notable

²⁶ See “The Creation of Shaikh Hajaj al-Ajmi's Battalion in the Village of Bukamal” (tashkeel kateebat al-shaykh Hajjaj al-Ajmi fi reef Abu Kamal), YouTube Video, 1:49, posted by “Freesyriaali,” 14 June 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KN7pYgtgkak. “Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi Clarifies his Public Statement that he was Attacked for Saying at a Protest in front of the Lebanese Embassy” (Doctor Shafi al-Ajmi yoowadih tasreehaho al-lathi hujima bisababihi athna'a al-'itisam amam al-safara al-libnaniya), YouTube Video, 2:12, posted by “AlziadiQ8.com,” 14 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMF4fvBLxec>; Joby Warrick, “Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Sides,” *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-06-15/world/39993019_1_rebel-groups-united-arab-emirates-sheik.

²⁷ Elizabeth Dickinson, “Kuwait, ‘the back office of logistical support’ for Syria's rebels,” *The National*, 5 February 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/kuwait-the-back-office-of-logistical-support-for-syrias-rebels>.

²⁸ Ajmi has been cited as a key donor by Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group. See Human Rights Watch, “‘You Can Still See Their Blood’ Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside,” October 2013, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1013_ForUpload.pdf; International Crisis Group, “Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition,” 12 October 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition>.

²⁹ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

³⁰ Logistics team member three, interview, October 2013.

how open this fundraising environment was in 2012; groups posted bank account information on public posters.³¹ (Later on, they would ask donors to contact them first by WhatsApp or other social media services to receive this information directly.) Fundraisers posted photos of cars and jewelry that had been sold³² to support the *mujahedeen*. They also earmarked specific costs for weapons. For example, advertisements would state that an \$800 donation would buy a directed missile or an RPG for the fighters.³³ Several of these new donors—including Herbash,³⁴ Tabtabae,³⁵ and Hajjaj al-Ajmi,³⁶ also travelled to Syria to visit the brigades they helped fund, broadcasting their travels by social media.

The buzz attracted donors not just from Kuwait but likely from individuals across the Gulf,³⁷ including Saudi Arabia³⁸ and Qatar. As a U.S. Treasury official explained, “Use of social media also enables fundraisers to aggressively solicit donations from supporters in countries, notably Saudi Arabia, which have otherwise banned unauthorized fundraising campaigns for Syria.”³⁹ While it is extremely difficult to estimate the scope of these donations, the networks that ideologically support the fundraising are extensive. Many of the Kuwaiti donors who are

active on Twitter have regular exchanges with followers who claim to be located in other Gulf countries.⁴⁰ Shafi al-Ajmi, for example, has a representative in Qatar who is available to collect donations.⁴¹ Pan-Sunni web forums, Twitter accounts, and other social media have also facilitated the sharing of information about Syria’s opposition, and opportunities to support it.⁴² In a sense, social media facilitates and speeds up exchanges between the already extensive financial, tribal, and social networks overlapping across Gulf countries.

Whether Kuwaiti politicians and their networks gathered significant donations or not, they certainly helped create space for other fundraisers to operate by transforming the Syrian opposition into a cause célèbre. According to a prominent journalist:

The government cannot do anything because if they go against such activities, the Islamist parties will start shouting loudly against the government. Here in Kuwait, it is very easy to claim that the government is working with the Iranian regime against the Syrian people. The government is worried [about the private funding], but they cannot do anything.⁴³

³¹ See Elizabeth Dickenson, “Shaping the Syrian Conflict from Kuwait,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 December 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/04/shaping_the_syrian_conflict_from_kuwait.

³² John Hudson, “Islamists Auction off Cars to Buy Heat Seeking Missiles for Syrian Rebels,” *Foreign Policy*, 27 June 2013, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/06/27/islamists_auction_off_cars_to_buy_heat_seeking_missiles_for_syrian_rebels.

³³ See “Against Their Will, Against Their Will, Against Their Will, They Shall die in their Anger” (raghma anfihim, raghma anfihim, raghma anfihim, wa’lyamootoo bi-ghaythihim), YouTube Video, 4:44, posted by “alabeya,” 24 May 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=g_Zuqk4zCCs.

³⁴ “People’s Assembly Condemns Illegal Infiltration of Two Kuwaiti Parliamentarians to Syria,” *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, 17 October 2012, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2012/10/17/447677.htm>.

³⁵ Hudson, *Islamists Auction Off Cars*.

³⁶ “From the Land of Sham, Hajaj al-Ajmi answers Two Important Questions” (min ard al-Sham Hajjaj al-Ajmi yajeebo ‘ala soo’alayn muhimayn), YouTube Video, 7:44, posted by “al Hassani” 4 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6TpWthSSh0#t=27>, (22 November 2013).

³⁷ “On a regular basis, weekly basis, [Gulf citizens] used to transfer money to certain names in Kuwait, because in their countries it’s not possible, because in their countries they have very strict controls. In Saudi, they made it clear that anyone who tries to bypass this official process [would face penalties]. In Kuwait, it was like a back office in terms of logistic support,” Noman Bentoman, interview, February 2013.

³⁸ See for example al-Hay’ah al-Zakat al-Sha’biyah, Twitter post, August 17, 2013, 1:10 p.m., <https://twitter.com/alhayahalshabyh/status/368827241293037569>.

³⁹ U.S. Treasury official, interview with author, November 2013.

⁴⁰ Tweet from Shafi al-Ajmi, for example, has numerous re-tweets from Saudi-based users see Shafi Ajmi, Twitter Post, October 1, 2013, 6:11 a.m., https://twitter.com/sHaFi_Ajmi/status/385029171606728704#. Other examples of interaction include between Hajjaj al-Ajmi and Qatar-based user Mubarak Alajji, Twitter Profile, <https://twitter.com/MubarakAlajji>. Ghanem al-Mutairi’s interaction with Saudi and US based user see Muhamd al-Nour, Twitter Profile, https://twitter.com/a_lnoor.

⁴¹ Shafi Ajmi, Twitter Post, July 9, 2013, 9:42 a.m., https://twitter.com/sHaFi_Ajmi/status/354641649260961792.

⁴² See for example the account Shabakat Ahl al-Sunna, Twitter Profile, <https://twitter.com/ahlalsunna2>.

⁴³ Bashar al-Sayegh, (Editor of *Al Jareeda*), interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013. Shafi al-Ajmi has promised to expose any governments that prevent him from buying weapons for the rebels as conspirators of Iran and Hezbollah. See “Against Their Will, Against Their Will, Against Their Will, They Shall die in their Anger,” YouTube Video.

Yet while the new Kuwaiti support was welcomed by some Syrians, others working to provide both humanitarian and military aid to the opposition began to bristle at what they saw as opportunistic behavior by some Kuwaiti politicians, whom they viewed as armchair jihadists reaping the political and ideological benefits of battle from the safety of the Gulf. Some donors' amateur behavior also left rebels exasperated on occasion; one parliamentarian visiting Syria, for example, reportedly gave away a rebel position on Twitter while broadcasting his participation in the fighting.⁴⁴

The proliferation of donors also created a battle for resources among armed groups seeking Kuwaiti support. Witnesses to early meetings describe infighting among armed groups' representatives in Kuwait as they faced the perverse incentive of trying to prove their brigade had suffered more martyrs and fought more difficult battles. Jealousies and conflicts broke out among donors as well.⁴⁵ A flurry of brigades were thus created and ceased to exist in the span of months.

One way armed groups secured longer-term backing was by adopting the ideologies of their benefactors, as a series of brigades in Deir Ez Zour illustrate. With the support of RIHS, an unofficial Kuwait-based group calling itself the Deir Ez Zour

Revolutionary Association helped create three brigades with a moderate Salafi ideology similar to its own: Ahl al-Athar, Bashayer al-Nasr, and Allahu Ahkbar.⁴⁶ These groups were unified, again with RIHS's blessing, to become Jabhat al-Asala wa al-Tanmiya in the summer of 2012.⁴⁷

Other Kuwaiti donors also consolidated their support for specific rebel factions: Shafi al-Ajmi has backed Ahrar al-Sham,⁴⁸ arguably the largest rebel group in Syria⁴⁹ and one that frequently cooperates with Jabhat al-Nusra,⁵⁰ a branch of al-Qaeda considered a terrorist organization by the United States. Jabhat al-Nusra may receive funds from another donor group, led by Ghanem al-Mutairi, a relatively obscure tribal figure.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Herbash of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political wing of the Brotherhood in Kuwait, says he works with moderate factions of the Free Syria Army.⁵² (Other members of ICM denied that they are involved in supporting armed groups in Syria, saying that Herbash is working as an independent individual, rather than on behalf of their organization.)⁵³

Hajjaj al-Ajmi leads the People's Commission for the Support of the Syrian Revolution together with Erashed al-Hajri and Hakim al-Mutairi.⁵⁴ They

⁴⁴ Kuwaiti activist, interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

⁴⁵ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

⁴⁶ Logistics team members one, two, and three, interview, October 2013.

⁴⁷ Ibid. "The financing aspect of Jabhat al-Asala has, right from the start, been linked to a Kuwaiti Salafi group whose apparent aim was to create an alternative umbrella organization that would act as a more nationalist Salafi group, in opposition to the religious Salafis." Charles Lister (Analyst & Head of MENA - IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre (JTIC)), interview with author, November 2013.

⁴⁸ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013. This is also evident from the numerous videos posted on Ajmi's twitter feed all produced by Ahrar al-Sham, see Shafi Ajmi, Twitter Profile, https://twitter.com/sHaFi_Ajmi.

⁴⁹ Charles Lister, interview, November 2013.

⁵⁰ For a list of join operations between Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, see "Muslim Movement of Ahrar al-Sham" (harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya), <http://www.ahraralsham.com/?s=%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9+%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A9> (22 November 2013). "Mohammed al-Ajmi [brother of Shafi al-Ajmi], said that their group funded operations rooms for military campaigns and that the Nusra Front, a Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda, was free to work with them." Ben Hubbard, "Private Donors Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria," *The New York Times*, 13 November 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/13/world/middleeast/private-donors-funds-add-wild-card-to-war-in-syria.html?ref=middleeast&r=2&pagewanted=all>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Jamaan Herbash, interview, October 2013.

⁵³ Mohammed al-Dallal, former ICM parliamentarian, states, "ICM is supporting the charity but yes, individuals like Jamaan Herbash, he's announcing that [he is raising money for the rebels]. When he does that, he does it as Jamaan, not as ICM." Interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

⁵⁴ Al-Hay'ah al-Zakat al-Sha'biya, Twitter Profile, <https://twitter.com/alhayahshabyh>.

are reported⁵⁵ to support a brigade led by a Libyan fighter,⁵⁶ Liwa al-Ummah. In addition, the Commission has been associated with the construction of a number of individual operations and alliances involving an assortment of Salafi rebel factions.⁵⁷ Mutairi's involvement is particularly notable, as he was one of the first Salafi clerics in the Gulf to embrace the idea of multi-party politics.⁵⁸ His Ummah Party is illegal in Kuwait—as all political parties are—but maintains wide influence across the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Also of note is that the group appears to include a Qatari member, Mubarak Alajji, who as recently as October 31, 2013 launched a campaign to collect donations in Qatar for Ajmi's Commission.⁵⁹ Ajmi and Mutairi have repeatedly said that the conflict in Syria is a battle for the entire Muslim world.⁶⁰

Another Kuwaiti group of funders is led by sitting parliamentarians Mohammed Hayef al-Mutairi, a Salafi who has been among the strongest advocates for socially conservative policies locally in Kuwait. Hayef is secretary general of the Council of Supporters of the Syrian Revolution, a group that has provided support to several Salafi brigades in the Damascus countryside.⁶¹

All of these groups, with the exception of RIHS, support brigades that actively cooperate with al-Qa'ida's Jabhat al-Nusra. Hence, it is not surprising that the U.S. Treasury believes a significant portion of donations end up with extremist factions. "[T]he recipients of these private funds are often extremist groups, including al-Qa'ida's Syrian affiliate, the Nusrah Front, which operate outside the command structure of the Syrian Joint Military Command Council," a senior official explained.⁶²

These groups are likely not exhaustive; others may be operating without the same social media presence. It is also possible that at least some private Kuwaiti donors do not know exactly where the funds they raise will be channeled, entrusting logistics to existing groups or donor networks who share their ideology or political views.⁶³

As the armed groups consolidated, feuding between donors occasionally created problems between rebel brigades themselves. In late 2012, for example, Shafi al-Ajmi sparred⁶⁴ with Saudi-based Syrian cleric Adnan al-Arouf over the creation of military councils. Al-Arouf, a popular television

⁵⁵ "Kuwaitis Supported the Syrian Revolution with Approximately \$100 million" (Al-Kuwaitiyoona da'amoo al-muqawama al-Sooriya bi-nahwee 100 million dollar), *Al Hayat*, 5 November 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/568664>.

⁵⁶ Mary Fitzgerald, "The Syrian Rebels' Libyan Weapon," *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/09/the_syrian_rebels_libyan_weapon.

⁵⁷ In June 2012, for example, Ajmi backed the creation of the "Syrian Revolutionaries Front" (Jabhat Thuwwar Souriya) alliance. In the spring and summer of 2013, he raised funds for operations in Latakia. See International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," 12 October 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition> and Human Rights Watch, "You Can Still See Their Blood' Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside," October 2013, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1013_ForUpload.pdf.

⁵⁸ Tom Lansford, ed., *Political Handbook of the World 2012* (Washington, D.C.: SAGE Publications, 2012), 797.

⁵⁹ Mubarak Alajji, Twitter post, October 31, 2013, 9:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MubarakAlajji/status/395952803241148418>.

⁶⁰ See for example "From the Land of Sham, Hajaj al-Ajmi answers Two Important Questions" YouTube Video. Shaikh Hakim al-Mutairi, "The Syrian Revolution and Plans for the Ummah" (al-thawra al-Sooriya wa mashroo' al-ummah), (16 March 2013), <http://www.dr-hakem.com/Portals/Content/?info=T0RFMUpsTjFZbEJoWjJVbU1RPT0rdQ==.jsp>.

⁶¹ The brigades of The Brigades of Liwa al-Islam, al-Forqan, al-Habib al-Mustafa, al-Sahaba, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islami (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant) and Jaysh al-Muslimeen (Army of Muslims) thanked the Kuwaiti council for their support in setting up a Damascus operations room in September, 2013. See example, "Founding of the Damascus Operations Room: SCM," YouTube Video, 1:27, posted by "Syria Monitor" September 22, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-VRs5Ru4cs>.

⁶² U.S. Department of Treasury official, interview, November 2013.

⁶³ See "Case Study: Ramadan Campaign 'to prepare 12,000 jihadists for the sake of Allah,'" in this paper, 13.

⁶⁴ See "Clarification from Shaikh Adnan al-Arouf regarding Shafi al-Ajmi" (tawdeeh mawqif al-shaykha Adnan al-Arouf min Shafi al-Ajmi), YouTube Video, 7:59, posted by "the good person anas" 4 November 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArAF9xQA4WA>. See also "Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi Clarifies the Difference of Opinion with al-Arouf" (Doctor Shafi al-Ajmi yowadih sabab al-khilaf ma'a al-Arouf), YouTube Video, 6:28, posted by, "ajil alsudiya" 11 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2pLeWyKsNc>.

personality,⁶⁵ had pushed for rebels to ally themselves with the FSA—a change in name only, since the FSA would have little ability to control or manage them. Rejecting this notion, Ajmi accused Arour of collaborating with Western intelligence and instead supported (and possibly helped broker) alliances between individual Islamist brigades.⁶⁶ He narrated his view of the FSA's Supreme Military Councils in October, 2013.⁶⁷

“In the beginning, the Intelligence [organizations] met the jihad leaders individually then in groups, and they came under the orders of the small battalions and brigades. The leaders of brigades and battalions in general were aware of the cunningness and trickery of the Intelligence, but their sole aim was receiving weapons and support from them. In addition, the leaders of the brigades thought that they were ridiculing the Intelligence, but what they didn't know is that the Intelligence had other plans, which were revealed to them in the future: the Arab Intelligence was able to establish the Supreme Military Council and organize it in such a manner that it will dominate the military scope.”

Ajmi's views likely contributed to Ahrar al-Sham's refusal to join the military councils today run by General Salim Idriss and allied with the political opposition, the Syrian National Coalition.⁶⁸

Instead, the brigade has assembled a slew of working relationships with various groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra. Most recently, they have joined several “operations rooms”—which Ajmi has said he prefers⁶⁹ as a means to “to organize joint jihadist action and identify everyone's strengths and weaknesses.”⁷⁰ These operations rooms work largely outside the purview of any political body and pose a significant obstacle to unifying the opposition.

Trends within the private financing network were exacerbated by the international dynamic throughout the peak of Kuwaiti financing in 2012. The conflict metastasized into full-scale civil war by early 2012 when some Gulf countries also backed particular rebel groups.⁷¹ But because international opinion on the Syrian conflict was split, donors made little effort to unify their efforts. When the United States and its allies made a push to do so in the fall of 2012, the political and military opposition seemed incapable of coalescing, at least in part because the conflict had already decentralized. Lacking any overwhelming stream of support, each brigade and political faction depended on an independent funding stream.⁷² In order to unify the military component, members of the political Syrian National Council and later Syrian National Coalition (SNC) argued that they would require Western military aid, including anti-aircraft capabilities—enough to outbid individual donors.⁷³ Such assistance never arrived, and armed groups continued to rely on their own funding channels, as Herbash explained:

⁶⁵ For more information on al-Arou's role in the Syrian uprising see Phil Sands, “Sheikh Adnan Arour's Meteoric Rise From Obscurity,” *The National*, 5 July 2012, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/sheikh-adnan-arours-meteoric-rise-from-obscurity-to-notoriety#full>.

⁶⁶ Ajmi announces creation of ‘Syria Liberation Front’, see Shafi Ajmi, Twitter post, September 12, 2012, 10:49 a.m., <http://twitter.com/sHaFiAjmi/statuses/245942130621689856>.

⁶⁷ See tweets archived here: <http://inagist.com/all/395079046200967168/> (22 November 2013).

⁶⁸ “Competition among Islamists,” *The Economist*, 30 July 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21582037-one-islamist-rebel-group-seems-have-overtaken-all-others-competition-among>.

⁶⁹ Shafi Ajmi, Twitter post, November 2, 2013, 10:09 a.m., <https://twitter.com/sHaFiAjmi/status/396685497528897536>

⁷⁰ Manshour, “Showcasing of Shafi al-Ajmi Account” (al-mazeed min taghreedat Shafi al-Ajmi), http://mnshor.net/socialmedia/u/shafi_ajmi/s/304907 (November 2, 2013).

⁷¹ Ibid. Ahrar al-Sham, for example, is reported to have some Qatari backing.

⁷² For more on the fragmentation of rebel groups and how private donors contributed to this trend, see Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, CNA Strategic Studies, “The Rebel Alliance: Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify,” March 2013, <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/DRM-2013-U-004125-1REV.pdf>.

⁷³ Members of the political opposition, interview with author in Doha, Qatar, November 2012.

The whole world is grappling in Syria at the expense of the Syrian people, and it is impossible for the army to unite when every brigade follows whoever is financing it. I am not only talking about the support of governments but this presents a real problem to the supporters in the Gulf, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia... I mean this huge number of supporters has resulted in a serious problem: It made every brigade think that it doesn't need the other brigades. For example, Liwa al-Tawheed doesn't need Ahrar al-Sham, just as Ahrar al-Sham doesn't need al-Nusra, and this brought forth various armies inside the one army and caused a problem.⁷⁴

Recent attempts to unify the opposition to prepare for the so-called Geneva II talks have made it clear just how disparate the conflict has become. Many individual donors, including Ajmi, reject⁷⁵ the talks, which are backed by the United States and Russia and would aim to bring the parties of the conflict to the table to hammer out a political solution to the crisis. Without the support of large military groups within Syria, the SNC fears attending would be political suicide—and indeed some rebel groups have argued that joining the negotiations is tantamount to treason.⁷⁶

Back in Kuwait, the divisions are also grating. One logistics team member expressed remorse over having worked to fund armed groups:

The mistake was to create the armed groups. We cannot fight a professional army. In Afghanistan [in the 1980s] they got support from the United States, from the Gulf. The Syrian regime, they don't fear God, but they fear the Americans. But if we're alone, with AK-47s and light weapons, it's not effective. The different money contributed to divide the armed groups.

How Kuwaiti donors supplied their assistance to rebel factions during this period is murky. By the end of 2012, it was no longer possible to transport goods directly by land from Kuwait,⁷⁷ so at least some of the assistance is likely carried over the borders of Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon in the form of cash.⁷⁸

Exchange companies were and are also still used:⁷⁹

They send it [by exchanges] but they partition the money. We must hide ourselves, so we send it to 20 or 30 people, because if certain people received repeated transfers, the Syrian authorities will be suspicious. Some companies in Syria cooperate with the authorities ... Still, we know where to send the money and there are some tricks.⁸⁰

Another means of transferring resources may be through companies and investments owned by Kuwaitis in Syria. Saleh Ashour, chair of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee, alleged that some legal companies may list false employees or

⁷⁴ Jamaan Herbash, interview, October 2013.

⁷⁵ For example see Shafi Ajmi, Twitter post, November 8, 2013, 11:23 a.m., https://twitter.com/sHaFi_Ajmi/status/398893551259353088.

⁷⁶ "Syria rebel groups brand Geneva talks 'treason,'" *Agence France-Presse*, 27 October 2013, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iaUsCzhaTzVGMQJW0d07Le5UHmdg?docId=a726fa24-c5a3-44b4-8fd5-3a8a3a78fc1e>.

⁷⁷ Humanitarian worker, interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013. Logistics team member four agreed, stating, "At first, we had to change the cargo route to be shipped from Saudi to Egypt to Syria. Today, the route is Saudi to Jordan to Egypt, then by sea to Turkey and from there into Syria. It takes 15-20 days and it costs about 1,200KD, up from 200KD to 300KD before." Interview with author, October 2013.

⁷⁸ Hamad al-Matar (former ICM member of parliament), interview with author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

⁷⁹ Logistics team member four, interview, October 2013.

⁸⁰ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

projects on their accounts as a means to transfer wealth to intended recipients in Syria, though he declined to provide exact details or names of companies involved.⁸¹

Supporters of the Syrian opposition are quick to note that they were not the only ones holding events. “There are also Shi’a working to support Bashar [al-Asad],” said Mohammed al-Dallal, a former parliamentarian from the Muslim Brotherhood’s political wing, the ICM. “They go there also, maybe through the Damascus airport [instead of via Turkey], but everyone has their way to reach.”⁸²

One such forum in 2012 featured former parliamentarian and Shi’ite businessman Abdul Hameed Dashti, speaking in front of a large poster with Kuwait’s Emir pictured embracing Asad. “Kuwait, land of prosperity, your emir is the lord of the free,” a man in the crowd shouts, draped in a Syrian crowd. His call begins a chorus across the room. “Syria will not be shaken. Its protector is Bashar.” A video of the event mentions 23 million Kuwaiti dinars (\$81 million) for the regime, but it is not clear if these funds were raised, where they would come from, and how they would be directed.⁸³

Numerous political activists in Kuwait said they believed that the Shi’ite community is fundraising for the Syrian government and its allies, but likely on a more personal level with friends and acquaintances gathering amongst themselves.⁸⁴ Certainly, there are many Kuwaitis who have worked with the Syrian government in the past; Kuwait is one of the largest foreign investors in Syria, estimated at roughly \$800 million in 2010.⁸⁵

In an interview in June 2013, Dashti—who shares familial ties with the Asad family—said that he visits Damascus frequently and had seen the Syrian president personally just two months prior. He stressed that he was not interfering in the conflict and that he was using his relationship with the government to help, for example by encouraging prisoners to be released. A prominent investor in Syria, Dashti has continued to move funds to the country to pay workers, he said: “I am one of the biggest investors in Syria since 1985. I have 2,400 employees there. They are jobless [because of the conflict] but still taking salaries.” He declined to give further details.

This is a significant area for further research, as any funding to elements of the Syrian government could be both significant and in violation of U.S. and international sanctions on the regime imposed over the last two years.

CASE STUDY: Ramadan Campaign “to prepare 12,000 jihadists for the sake of Allah”

One of the reasons that private support to the Syrian opposition is difficult to control and regulate is its broad base of popular support in Kuwait. At least some of those who have donated or organized campaigns are unaware or uninterested in where exactly their money will end up.

During the holy month of Ramadan this summer, 19 clerics, politicians, and public figures participated in a collection “to prepare 12,000 jihadists for the sake of Allah.” Campaign posters promised that a donation of 700KD [\$2,500] would prepare one fighter for battle. Each *diwaniya* accepted donations on at least one night during Ramadan.

⁸¹ “They do several things: they have companies there [in Syria], they deal with these companies, but they employ whom? What do they [the companies] do? ... they don’t work using their [own] names, they work in another name: [if they are caught,] they say, it is a brother, we don’t know him.” Saleh Ashour (member of parliament), interview with the author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ “Kuwaiti Shia Donate 23 Million Dinar to Bashar Al-Assad in Syria,” YouTube Video, 4:26, posted by “SHIA SLAYER,” 3 June 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me0it469nP4>.

⁸⁴ Youth activists and politicians, interviews with the author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

⁸⁵ H. Sabbagh, “Press Conference on Investment Opportunities Available to Kuwaiti Private Sector in Syria,” *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, 15 May 2010, <http://213.178.225.235/eng/278/2010/05/15/288180.htm>.

KUWAITI DONORS AND THEIR RECIPIENTS

***Groups marked with a star either include or have collaborated with al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra**

Group leader: Shafi al-Ajmi

Other group members: Nazim al-Misbah, Ajeel al-Nashmi, Nabil al-Awady, Nayef al-Ajmi, Mohammed al-Ajmi

Known rebel alliances: Ahrar al-Sham* Ajmi has also expressed support for operation rooms outside Damascus including Jund al-Malahim* (Soldiers of Battles), al-Rabita al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Association), and al-Raya al-Wahida* (The One Banner)⁸⁶

Group leader: Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society aka Turath; operations run by Syrian Kuwait-resident Khaled al-Mohammed⁸⁷

Other group members: Deir Ez Zour Revolutionary Association

Known rebel alliances: Jabhat al-Asala wa'l Tanmiya, previously known as the individual brigades Ahl al- Athar, Bashayer al-Nasr, and Allahu Ahkbar

Group leader: Council of Supporters of the Syrian Revolution, led by Mohammad Hayef al-Mutairi

Other group members: Osman al-Khamees, Abd el-Manae al-Ajmi, Fahd al-Khinna, Farhan Obaid, Mohammad Dawi, Nayef al-Ajmi

Known rebel alliances: Salafi rebels operating outside Damascus, including the Brigades of Liwa al-Islam*, Liwa al-Forqan*, Liwa al-Habib al-Mustafa, Liwa al-Sahaba, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islami,* and Liwa Jaysh al-Muslimeen

Group leader: People's Commission for the Support of the Syrian Revolution, led by Hajjaj al-Ajmi

Other group members: Erashed al-Hajri (President), Hakim al-Mutairi, Mubarak Alajji (Qatar)

Known rebel alliances: Liwa al-Ummah,⁸⁸ individual operations and alliances

Group leader: Jamaan al-Herbash

Known rebel alliances: FSA-linked brigades, primarily in Idlib and Aleppo

Group leader: Ghanem al-Mutairi

Known rebel alliances: "A Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda,"⁸⁹ possibly Jabhat al-Nusra

Other individuals known to have hosted or supported fundraising events: Ahmad al-Qattan, Abdel Mohsin Zein, Jasim Mohalhil, Saleh al-Nami, Tarek al-Tawwari, AbdulAziz al-Fadly, Mosaed Mandani, Mohammad al-Anezi, Abdullah al-Hakkan, Mubarak al-Waalan, Owayd al-Mutairi, Waleed al-Tabtabae, Badr al-Dahoum, Hamad al-Matar

⁸⁶ Shafi Ajmi, Twitter post, 2 November 2013, 10:04a.m., https://twitter.com/sHaFi_Ajmi/status/396684343122206720.

⁸⁷ Logistics team members one, two, and three, interview, October 2013.

⁸⁸ Al-Jasser, *Kuwaitis Supported the Syrian Revolution with Approximately \$100 million*.

⁸⁹ Hubbard, *Private Donors Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria*.

One of those involved was former ICM parliamentarian Hamad al-Matar, who recalled the evening this way:⁹⁰

Once actually we collected some money for the people in Syria in my *diwan* ... I'm not involved actually honestly speaking in where this money goes, because there are so many people much better than myself. Even I didn't know the map [of Syria]. [But we have] some scholars like Mr. al-Ajmi and Nabil al-Awady. They know actually and they have connections—good connections ... I think we raised 100,000KD [\$350,000]. That's a great amount, and this is one *diwaniya* only. ...most of that money goes to the borders, Jordanian and Turkish. ... Honestly I don't know actually [where the money goes], I'm just helping them.

Matar said that this particular campaign was the only time he has participated in raising money for Syria. But he argued that private donors' activities served the interests not only of Syria but of Kuwait and fellow Gulf countries as well:

When I was a member of the foreign policy committee with our National Assembly, we went to see Crown Prince Salman [bin Abdulaziz al-Saud] in Saudi Arabia. He said very clearly, 'We are supporting Syria and we should support Syria, because we cannot stand the regime of Bashar. We [have] taken the decision to help the people to get rid of him. So we have to do that a) very quickly and b) very strongly.' The same message, we heard from Qatar... and Bahrain.

⁹⁰ Hamad al-Matar, interview, October 2013.

2013: TO EACH HIS OWN BATTLE

Kuwaiti support for the Syrian opposition began to decline by the end of 2012.⁹¹ Those involved in both military and humanitarian aid offered several explanations but the two most common were donor fatigue and disillusionment with the sectarian and military direction the conflict has taken. A humanitarian worker in Kuwait explained:⁹²

People say to me, this is not what we sent our money for, so they could kill each other. Some people have told me directly that, with what is happening, they wish Bashar would stay, because dictatorship is bad, but a political dictatorship is much easier than a religious dictatorship. Of course, there is a sect of people who are all for this, they say kill the Shi'a, but the enlightened people will say that this is not what we wanted.

The public fundraising that does continue has taken on a distinctly sectarian tone,⁹³ particularly since Lebanese Shi'ite militia Hizballah announced

in May that it had sent fighters to join the Syrian army.⁹⁴ More frequently than speaking about the Syrian people or a better future, donor rhetoric now focuses on expelling what they describe as foreign occupiers—Iran-backed Hizballah—from the greater Levant. Such rhetoric often vilifies not just fighters but Shi'ite civilians, and in recent months, Kuwaiti fundraisers have been linked to armed groups alleged to have committed sectarian atrocities.

Most alarmingly, Kuwaiti donors helped fund an offensive in Latakia during which several hundred civilians were massacred by opposition groups on August 4, 2013, Human Rights Watch later documented.⁹⁵ Shafi al-Ajmi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi⁹⁶ began advertising campaigns to raise money to “liberate the coast” in April. A later campaign poster shows that at least four other Syrian clerics - Nazim al-Misbah, Ajeel al-Nashmi, Nabil al-Awady, and Nayef al-Ajmi—also participated in this fundraising. Whether they directly encouraged the brigades to target Shi'ite civilians in unclear, but sectarian

⁹¹ Herbash, interview, October 2013. Logistics team members one, two, and three, interview, October 2013. Humanitarian workers, interview, October 2013. Sulaiman al-Shamsaldeen, interview, October 2013.

⁹² Humanitarian worker, interview, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

⁹³ See Will McCants, “Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism,” *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/09/30/the_gulf_s_sectarian_syria_strategy.

⁹⁴ Ahmed al-Sadoun (former parliamentary speaker), interview with the author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, June 2013.

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *You Can Still See Their Blood*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

rhetoric on several of these individuals' Twitter feeds⁹⁷ certainly offers the impression that they did not condemn it.⁹⁶ This individual incident may also be the tip of the iceberg, as many other battles go uninvestigated. Kuwaiti donors have publicly campaigned for dozens of operations ongoing to this day.⁹⁹

Some Kuwaiti donors have pushed back against the sectarian rhetoric in Syria, such as Herbash, whose public statements and Twitter feed¹⁰⁰ indicate he is alarmed by the infighting among rebel groups. He explained:¹⁰¹

We are actually keen on working with some of the moderate brigades, which we trust won't cause any problems in case the regime falls. I am talking about brigades that are keen on protecting the Syrian people, because for sure we don't want to repeat what happened in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet Herbash remains the exception rather than the rule, as another example illustrates. On June 11, dozens of supporters of the Syrian opposition gathered outside the Lebanese embassy in Kuwait City. Shafi al-Ajmi addressed the supporters, asking the *mujahedeen* in Syria to save ten captured Hizballah members for him, so he could have the 'pleasure'

of slaughtering them himself.¹⁰² After a massacre of Shi'ite civilians occurred in the Syrian town of Hatla the next day,¹⁰³ Ajmi tried to distance himself from sectarian behavior, claiming that a "bad man" had instigated the violence in Hatla and that instigator should be punished.¹⁰⁴ But he reprised his sectarian language not long afterward, telling an interviewer in September, "Among the beautiful things inside Syria is that the *mujahedeen* have realized that they need to deeply hit the Alawites, in the same way they kill our wives and children."¹⁰⁵

Some Shi'ite Kuwaitis have also played into this sectarian rhetoric. Dashti, for example, described Sunni supporters of the Syrian opposition in a derogatory manner in the context of Kuwait's own history. Landed, traditional families in the city center sometimes describe themselves as more authentically Kuwaiti than bedouins living on the outskirts of the capital. The rebels supporters "only joined Kuwaiti society in the last ten or twenty years," Dashti said in an interview, a reference to this narrative. (Opposition supporters have likewise accused Dashti of being Iranian and only recently naturalized).

This spillover into Kuwait has had a visible effect on inter-communal relations between Sunni and Shi'ite residents, said Sayegh, the newspaper editor. "Now the talk is about Shi'a-Sunni in Kuwait. It's

⁹⁷ On April 5, Ajmi tweeted that donations would go "To Support Homs and the Coast and buy what is needed to expel the Safavids," a derogatory term used to describe Shi'a. Nayaf al-Ajmi, Twitter post, 5 April 2013.

⁹⁸ See, e.g., Shafi Ajmi, Twitter post, 16 June 2013, 10:20 a.m., https://twitter.com/SHaFi_Ajmi/status/346316328212234240; "An Interview with Shaikh Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi about the Caravan to Syria, Victory is Near and Updates on the Syrian Revolution" (Liqaq al-shaikh doctor Shafi al-Ajmi 'abra hamla Sooriya iqtarab al-nasr wa tatawoorat al-thawra fi Sooriya), YouTube Video, 16:12, posted by "www.AlziadiaQ3.com", 15 September 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB9FkCFR8Kk>.

⁹⁹ See, e.g., the liberation of the Aleppo prison. Hajjalajmi, Twitter post, 16 October 2013, 3:16p.m., <https://twitter.com/hajjalajmi/status/390602127636434944>; The liberation of Der'aa city. Altabtabie, Twitter post, 30 September 2013, 1:41p.m., <https://twitter.com/Altabtabie/status/384780102036647936>.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Al-Herbesh, Twitter post, 23 October 2013, 11:41p.m., <https://twitter.com/AlHerbesh/status/393266018153684992>; AlHerbesh, Twitter post, 23 October 2013, 11:38p.m., <https://twitter.com/AlHerbesh/status/393265230027190272>.

¹⁰¹ Herbash, interview, October 2013.

¹⁰² Elizabeth Dickinson, "Sectarian Divides from Syria Extend their Reach," *The National*, 26 July 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/sectarian-divides-from-syria-extend-their-reach>.

¹⁰³ Hania Mourrada and Anne Barnard, "Dozens of Shiites Reported Killed in Raid by Syria Rebels," *The New York Times*, 12 June 2013, http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/06/13/world/middleeast/syria.html?from=global_home.

¹⁰⁴ "Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi Clarifies his Public Statement that he was Attacked for Saying at a Protest in front of the Lebanese Embassy," YouTube Video.

¹⁰⁵ Hubbard, *Private Donors Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria*.

become popular, very normal ... it wasn't like that in Kuwait. Now on Twitter and social media, you can see fights."¹⁰⁶ The conflict isn't just virtual. In November, Kuwaiti municipal authorities removed structures used by the Shi'ite community to celebrate Ashoura early and in a "rough manner," failing to leave them in place for the three days that are customary. "Such an act reflects the lack of respect the municipality has towards the Shi'ite people," parliamentarian Ashour was quoted as saying.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, some Kuwaiti funders also support the participation of non-Syrian fighters in the Syrian

conflict. Eleven Kuwaitis signed a document this June in Egypt¹⁰⁸ endorsing the necessity of sending fighters and weapons into Syria to wage jihad. Of these, at least five are on record—on Twitter, Facebook, or other promotional materials—requesting donations for fighters in Syria. Sayegh, who follows the news as editor of *Al Jazeera*, says he believes hundreds of Kuwaitis are now fighting with the opposition in Syria. At least three Kuwaitis—including a member of the al-Ajmi family—have died working with the rebels.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Al-Sayegh, interview, October 2013.

¹⁰⁷ "Abubakar A. Ibrahim, "MPs Lament Rush to Clear Ashura," *Arab Times*, 15 November 2013, <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleID/201345/refTab/73/t/MPs-lament-rush-to-clear-Ashura/Default.aspx>.

¹⁰⁸ For list of signatories, see Facebook post, posted by "Syria Justice And Freedom (Ghurfa Sooriya al-'adl wa'l-hurriya 'ala al-baltook)," 14 June 2013, 1:43p.m., <https://www.facebook.com/S1Y1R111A/posts/535598866499514>.

¹⁰⁹ "Haj al-Ajmi to al-Watan: Martyrdom for the Kuwaiti Messenger Fayez Sa'ood al-Haweela in Syria" (Haj al-Ajmi la'l- Watan, istishad al-da'iee Fayez so'ood al haweela fi Sooriya), *Al-Watan*, 24 July 2013, <http://kuwait.tt/articledetails.aspx?Id=293151>. See also Aaron Y. Zelin, Evan F. Kohlmann, and Laith al-Khoury, "Convoy of Martyrs in the Levant," The Washington Institute, June 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/convoy-of-martyrs-in-the-levant>. Also see "Many Kuwaiti Fighters Died in Syrian Civil War: Omar Bakri," *Arab Times*, 16 November 2013, <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleID/201375/refTab/73/Default.aspx>.

HOW MUCH MONEY IS RAISED?

It is nearly impossible to quantify the amount of money raised by private donors operating in Kuwait, but based on participants' accounts of individual events and projects, it is estimated that the values reach into the hundreds of millions of dollars, which corroborates the estimate of an anonymous U.S. intelligence official quoted in *The Washington Post*.¹¹⁰ It is, however, higher than a U.S. Treasury estimate; a senior official there said that hundreds of millions had been raised for the Syrian crisis but "much of this private fundraising is for humanitarian purposes."¹¹¹ The official declined to be more specific about the amount directed to armed groups.

Activists say the peak of fundraising occurred in 2012, as rebel brigades were beginning and expanding. Logistics team members recount monthly payments to brigades at this time of between 20,000KD and 80,000KD. On an annual basis, that would mean each brigade might take in between 240,000KD and 960,000KD annually [\$840,000 to \$3.4m]. This amount likely ebbed and flowed with donations, for example increasing after large tribal fundraisers took place. One such fundraiser, recounted by the *The New York Times* in November 2013, reportedly raised \$14 million in the course of just five days.¹¹²

By 2013, funding had consolidated around a few individuals. Yet the money these few individuals raise may be quite significant. In November, London-based Arabic daily *Al Hayat* quoted an activist estimating

that up to \$100 million had been gathered in 2013 alone.¹¹³ Fundraising remains ongoing, including a possible reprisal of the large tribal fundraisers that took place last year.¹¹⁴

One of the difficulties tracking these funds stems from their logistics. After in-fighting broke out between armed groups' representatives in Kuwait, donation totals that were previously announced on social media were kept quiet.¹¹⁵ Also, as of mid-2012, operation hubs largely moved into Turkey, where they could more easily filter over the border.¹¹⁶ Separating humanitarian relief from military assistance is also difficult. Herbash, for example, works with several hospitals that are run and used by the FSA. Such work may be humanitarian in nature but it clearly has partisan implications.

Kuwaiti officials insist that the amount reaching the armed Syrian opposition from private channels is limited and pales in comparison to humanitarian assistance. Minister of state for cabinet affairs, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah al-Mubarak al-Sabah, said:

These donations, if they do occur, are honestly insignificant ... yes of course it makes a good story in the press when \$10 ends up in the wrong person's hands. But unfortunately those \$10 are only \$10 of a million dollars. I'm just trying to give you the scope, I'm not signifying \$10 got there, it's just an example.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ See Warrick, *Private donations give edge to Islamists in Syria*.

¹¹¹ U.S. Treasury official, interview, November 2013. Based on interviews and testimony regarding individual projects and donations, I believe that hundreds of millions have been raised separately for each, humanitarian projects and military assistance.

¹¹² Hubbard, *Private Donors Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria*. See also "The Fate of the Brothers of the Woman (by) the Poet Othman al-Shahri" (maseer ikhwan al-hareer al-sha'er Othman al-shahri), YouTube Video, 6:29, posted by, "Gghanem Mter," 6 June 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVzG_iYc5mU.

¹¹³ Al-Jasser, *Kuwaitis Supported the Syrian Revolution with Approximately \$100 million*.

¹¹⁴ A sign posted outside of Herbash's *diwaniya* promised a new fundraiser for his tribe.

¹¹⁵ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah al-Mubarak al-Sabah (minister of state for cabinet affairs), interview with the author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

KUWAITI GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Kuwait has taken steps to respond to concerns about financing to extremist groups by passing and publishing new legislation that for the first time criminalizes terrorist financing. But gaps still exist and there is little indication that established funding channels have been affected by government actions.

Private donors began their operations in Syria under a previous 2002 law that did not criminalize terrorist financing and left authorities with few tools to combat potentially troubling financial activity. Nonetheless concerned about the threat of radicalization in their own country, Kuwaiti officials insisted before the new law was implemented that they had been monitoring the situation closely. Asked about private funding to armed groups, Kuwait's information minister in June replied:¹¹⁸

All Kuwaitis feel they have to support their brothers in Syria. We hope they will go for the humanitarian needs. For a long time, we are monitoring all those funds so that they go to the right places.

In the spring of 2013, the Kuwaiti government worked to push through new anti-money-laundering legislation, two years after a review by the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force had highlighted numerous deficiencies.¹¹⁹ The new rules had previously been opposed by Islamist and tribal members of parliament, but many of those parliamentarians boycotted a December 2012 election, and the resulting parliament passed the legislation in April.¹²⁰ Implementation began in late June, and the government has sent circulars to banks and financial institutions operating in Kuwait.¹²¹

Among the most important changes are the criminalization of terrorist financing and the establishment of a Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) to investigate illicit activity. Any person who “has directly or indirectly, willingly and illicitly, collected funds with the intention to use these funds for committing a terrorist act”¹²² can be charged under the new law. The public prosecutor also has the authority to “freeze or confiscate funds or instruments, if sufficient evidence exists to suggest that

¹¹⁸ Sheikh Salman Sabah Salem al-Sabah (Kuwait information minister), interview with the author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, June 2013.

¹¹⁹ Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, *Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism: Mutual Evaluation of the State of Kuwait*.

¹²⁰ “For 10 years, they [the Islamist opposition] didn't let the government to bring this law. In the last parliament, because there was the boycott, we could pass it.” Ashour, interview, October 2013.

¹²¹ Ibtissam Lassoued (partner, Financial Crime Department, Al Tamimi & Co.), interview with the author, November 2013.

¹²² Ibtissam Lassoued, “Kuwait, a New Stance on Financial Crime,” Law Update, Al Tamimi & Co., September 2013, <http://www.tamimi.com/en/magazine/law-update/section-5/september-3/kuwait-a-new-stance-on-financial-crime.html#sthash.CTu5zdyg.dpuf>.

they were obtained or used with regards money laundering or terrorism financing.”¹²³ Customs authorities can likewise seize cash in the instance that they suspect foul play, or if the person carrying the money fails to properly declare it.

Additionally, banks must now record the passport and/or identification number of anyone making an international transfer over the amount of 3,000KWD (\$10,500). They are required to check beneficiaries’ names against sanctions lists.¹²⁴ “Know your customer” rules also prohibit institutions from opening or operating anonymous accounts. All this data is kept so that it can be mined for irregularities if needed.

The primary challenge before the Kuwaiti government is now implementing its new, tougher rules. The country plans to work with the International Monetary Fund to set up its FIU, an indication they are keen to meet international standards. This fall, the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force also urged Kuwait to codify procedures for seizing assets and insuring the independence of the investigative unit.¹²⁵

Despite these improvements, critics worry that both the laws and their implementation remain among the weakest in the region. “We have been in contact with the government of Kuwait about this,”

the U.S. Treasury senior official said. “They have taken some steps but they could be doing more.” The official declined to comment on any specifics.

One possible loophole is *hawala* agents, who are not required to register under Kuwait’s new law, as they are, for example, in the United Arab Emirates.¹²⁶ *Hawala* agents operate similarly to a small-time Western Union or other transfer services, sending money from individual to individual—but cash rarely crosses borders. Rather, based on trust and often tribal connections, dealers tally their exchanges, which usually balance as cash crosses from one beneficiary to another. Deficits are often made up with cash payments. Since there is no paper trail, *hawala* agents have often previously been implicated in terrorist and other illicit financing.¹²⁷

Other Gulf countries have more specifically targeted terrorist financing than has Kuwait. Saudi Arabia, for example, has actively discouraged the religious establishment from becoming personally involved in Syria aside from state-organized humanitarian relief.¹²⁸ Perhaps in a bid to offer outlet to public sympathy, the country organized a massive telethon fundraiser in 2012,¹²⁹ broadcast on local news channels, praised in the press, and promoted on social media. Saudi Arabia has also put in place new incentives for whistleblowers. On November fourth, the Saudi cabinet approved a measure that would

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ “Commercial Bank of Kuwait, “Commercial Bank of Kuwait Policy Statement on AML & CFT,” www.cbk.com/en/media/AMLCFT.pdf (22 November 2013).

¹²⁵ Financial Action Task Force, “Improving Global AML/CFT Compliance: On-going Process,” 18 October 2013, www.fatf-gafi.org/countries/j-m/kuwait/documents/fatf-compliance-oct-2013.html.

¹²⁶ Suha Maayeh, “Hawala Money Transfers Defy Regulation Efforts,” *The National*, 26 August 2008, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/hawala-money-transfers-defy-regulation-efforts>.

¹²⁷ For more on Hawala agents, see “Cheap and Trusted: Homing in on Networks of Informal Money Transfers,” *The Economist*, 22 November 2001, <http://www.economist.com/node/877145>.

¹²⁸ In 2012, cleric Mohammed al-Arifi, a television personality with a wide international following, said that he was asked by authorities to stop fundraising for Syria. See Salah al-Mhamdi, “Saudi Arabia: No to Fundraising for Syria,” *Global Voices*, 9 June 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/06/09/saudi-arabia-no-to-fundraising-for-syria/>. Al-Arifi had been raising funds as a member of the so-called Scholars’ Committee to Save Syria, whose Facebook page has been dormant for over a year as of this publication. “The Committee of Scholars for the Victory of Syria” (Lajnat al-ulema li’nasrat Sooriya), Facebook community, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/447095431968813>. See also Fredric Wehrey, “Saudi Arabia Reins in Its Clerics on Syria,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14 June 14 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/14/saudi-arabia-reins-in-its-clerics-on-syria/bu10>.

¹²⁹ “Saudi National Fundraising Campaign Brings SR136 Millions for Syrians So Far,” *Al Arabiya*, 25 July 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/25/228232.html>.

grant a significant fiscal reward—five percent of any amount confiscated—to anyone who reports money laundering or terrorist financing operations, provided he is not party to the crime himself.¹³⁰

Those in Kuwait who would like to see the government do more allege that there are also domestic political obstacles to stopping private financing to Syria. Public opinion on the uprising is split, and some of the Shi'ite supporters of the Syrian regime are politically allied with the Kuwaiti government. Meanwhile, many of the constituencies most active in private financing to the Syrian rebels are among the most vocal opponents of the government. Balancing between those poles has proven challenging for the government.

Prior to 2011, Kuwait maintained good relations with the Syrian government, which was part of the coalition to liberate the country from Iraqi occupation during the first Gulf war. President Bashar al-Asad visited Kuwait on the eve of the Syrian uprising, in February 2011, praising the countries' "fruitful constant cooperation in various domains."¹³¹

After protests erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, Kuwait tried to maintain a neutral position, usually following the lead of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Kuwait's Emir offered to help mediate between parties in Bahrain to calm tensions there.¹³² In Egypt, Kuwait's government recently grabbed headlines with its \$4 billion aid package to the new military-backed government.¹³³ But in fact, Kuwait

had worked with ousted president Mohammed Morsi's government as well, signing several contracts for infrastructure projects to be funded by the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development.¹³⁴

On Syria, Kuwait has repeatedly called for a political solution, while criticizing the government for human rights abuses. The country followed Saudi Arabia in recalling its ambassador from Damascus in August, 2011. Six months later, in February 2012, Kuwait expelled the Syrian ambassador.¹³⁵ But Kuwait has not followed Saudi Arabia and Qatar in publicly backing efforts to arm the rebels.

Against this regional backdrop, Kuwaiti politics since 2011 have been tumultuous, locked in a power struggle between the Emir-appointed cabinet and the elected parliament, which can introduce and block legislation and question ministers. Beginning in 2009, a coalition of Islamist, tribal, and youth groups began to coalesce around the demand for an elected prime minister. In February 2012, these groups demonstrated the scope of their support in Kuwait by winning an overwhelming majority in parliamentary elections. After a series of legal challenges, two parliaments have been dissolved since then, and many in the opposition are now outside the system—having boycotted the last two elections. But their ability to draw people to the streets is still a looming reality in Kuwaiti politics. Angering this group—for example by cracking down on private funding to Syria—could exacerbate political rifts and spark new protests.

¹³⁰ Information Office of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, D.C., "Crown Prince Chairs Cabinet Session," 4 November 2013, http://www.saudiembassy.net/latest_news/news11041303.aspx.

¹³¹ "President al-Assad Arrives in Kuwait to Participate in Celebrating its National Day and Liberation Day," *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, 27 February 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/22/2011/02/27/pr-333795.htm>. "Bahrain Shuns Kuwait's Mediation Offer," *Al Jazeera English*, 28 March 2011 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011328111747469782.html>.

¹³² "Bahrain Shuns Kuwait's Mediation Offer," *Al Jazeera English*, 28 March 2011 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011328111747469782.html>.

¹³³ Heba Saleh and Michael Peel, "Kuwait Pledges \$4bn to Prop Up Egyptian Economy," *Financial Times*, 10 July 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/08cf0720-e95b-11e2-bf03-00144feabdc0.html>.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Dickinson, "Kuwait Loans \$60m to Aid Egypt's Gas Network," *The National*, 23 July 2012, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/kuwait-loans-60m-to-aid-egypts-gas-network>

¹³⁵ "Gulf Cooperation Council Countries to Expel Syrian Envoys," *Agence France-Presse*, 7 February 2012, <http://www.france24.com/en/20120207-gulf-cooperation-council-countries-expel-syrian-ambassadors-kuwait-bahrain-saudi-emirates-oman-qatar>.

Ironically, many of these same opposition supporters are also employed by the government—as most Kuwaiti citizens are. Ashour of the foreign affairs committee explained:

The Kuwaiti government could not stop [these donations]. It's a weak government that we have; they are chicken. ... Don't look at [who are] the ministers, see the person under the ministers, most of them are from these people [the Islamists].

Some involved in the funding argue that the government—or some individuals in it—are complicit in the donations. “They know, and they are silent,”¹³⁶ one said. Another added: “The government facilitates it, if not explicitly. They say, ‘do your work, just don't make too much noise.’”¹³⁷

But Sheikh Mohammed, minister of state for cabinet affairs, rejected this notion:

“We are now signatories of AML/CTF [anti money-laundering, counter-terror financing] agreement, so of course we review [transactions]. However, no one can review everything all the time. I will not state that we are aware of where every penny goes and how or where. I'm sure that certain funds go to certain entities that some might regard as on the extremes of the political poles, but it's certainly not supported or encouraged by the government and if we do find out that this happens, they are prosecuted under the laws that cover this activity in Kuwait. Howev-

er, these donations, if they occur, are honestly insignificant.”¹³⁸

The Kuwaiti government has reportedly pressured certain individuals to stop their work. Hajjaj al-Ajmi, for example, said in April this year that he has been sanctioned for his activities, including by being banned from one Gulf country.¹³⁹ But in the same speech, he also said he was told by a Gulf country that he would receive between \$60,000 to \$100,000 for the Syrian opposition, provided he work under the umbrella of “a certain country” and that the funds not go to brigades deemed terrorists by “the political bodies the United States has established.” In the same video, he claims that some of his colleagues have been taken to prison.

Kuwaiti officials have also publicly vowed to counter any threats to the country's unity. In a public address in June, Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah vowed, “We will not allow our country to be a place for sectarian conflicts and settlement of sick scores nor allow discord to poison our solid community.”¹⁴⁰ Elaborating on the risk, the minister of information explained:¹⁴¹

“The brutal fighting and killing going on [in Syria], this will somehow will give the radicals all over the Middle East and the world—it will revive them. We had several years of the declining of [al-Qa'ida chief Ayman] Zawahiri and al-Qa'ida and sectarian groups. Now you are fueling them. ... [Kuwait] will not forgive anybody who would like to interrupt our peace and unity.”

¹³⁶ Logistics team member three, interview, October 2013.

¹³⁷ Logistics team member one, interview, October 2013.

¹³⁸ Sheikh Mohammad al-Sabah, interview, October 2013.

¹³⁹ See “The difficulties of Shaikh Hajaj al-Ajmi with the Gulf countries after Support of the Syrian Revolution” (Mu'anat al-Shaykh Hajjaj al-Ajmi ma' duwal al-khaleej ba'id da'im thawrat Sooriya), YouTube Video, 10:20, posted by “Faisal Said” 2 April 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmM3JEN_N6k.

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Dickinson, “Sectarian Divides from Syria Extend their Reach,” *The National*, 26 July 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/sectarian-divides-from-syria-extend-their-reach>.

¹⁴¹ Sheikh Salman al-Sabah, interview, June 2013.

Furthermore, state religious authorities, including Khalid al-Madhkur, chairman of the Supreme Committee for the Completion of the Application of Islamic Law in the State of Kuwait, have discouraged Kuwaitis from undertaking jihad in Syria or elsewhere in the region.¹⁴²

Whatever measures it takes to target private financing, the Kuwaiti government is adamant that

it must protect the freedom of its humanitarian charities to continue the very substantial work they are doing, building hospitals and schools in refugee camps, providing medical care, and a host of other activities. It is important to differentiate these activities, particularly their regulatory framework. All charities are registered with the Ministry of Social Work and Labor and their books are audited, either independently or by the government.

¹⁴² “Video: President of the Committee of the Application of Shari’a in Kuwait Khaled al-Mathkur: Jihad does not exist in Syria or anywhere in the Islamic World” (ra’ees lajnat tatbeeq al-shari’a fi al-Kuwait Khaled al-Mathkur: la yoojad jihad fi Sooriya wala fi’l-alam al-islami), YouTube Video, 4:34, posted by “AlziadiQ8,” 8 October 2013, <http://alziadiq8.com/43142.html>.

CONCLUSION

Private funding to the Syrian opposition poses a serious risk to the unity and the moderation of the forces fighting the regime of Bashar al-Asad. Over the past two and a half years, Kuwait-based patrons have helped shape the path of the conflict with their monetary and ideological support for elements of the opposition. Such independent channels of financing have contributed to the confused situation on the ground in Syria today.

Some Western officials have argued that independent donors are both inevitable and insignificant in the course of the broader Syrian conflict.¹⁴³ The U.S. Treasury is aware of the Kuwaiti financing but the official with whom I spoke declined to comment on what actions it had taken—aside from consulting with the Kuwaiti government—to block transactions from ending up in the hands of extremist groups.¹⁴⁴ Among diplomats, “Where do you begin?” is a line commonly passed around.

The perceived impossibility of stopping private funding is exactly why it is attractive for extremist groups. This is particularly true in a conflict, where securing military financing is vital to an armed

group’s survival. Although Western countries have discouraged countries in the region from providing the rebels with advanced arms capabilities,¹⁴⁵ there have been no similar efforts to reign in private donations. It may be no coincidence that Jabhat al-Nusra and other more-extreme rebel elements—those who benefit most from private financing—are often described as the most effective fighters in Syria.

Unfortunately, it may be too late to undo the damage that private financing has done to the unity of the Syrian opposition. Armed groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra are increasingly independent from even their private backers in areas of Syria, for example in Deir Ez Zour where they control several oil wells.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, more moderate brigades—which lack the same financing networks—have lost credibility and territory on the ground.

It remains a question how or if extremist brigades which adapted their ideologies to donor preferences will moderate in a post-conflict scenario. There are some reasons to be optimistic that these ideologies are fluid. Even Jabhat al-Nusra has softened some

¹⁴³ Western officials and diplomats, interviews with the author, February–October 2013.

¹⁴⁴ U.S. Treasury official, interview, November 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Robert F. Worth, “Citing U.S. Fears, Arab Allies Limit Syrian Rebel Aid,” *The New York Times*, 7 October 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/world/middleeast/citing-us-fears-arab-allies-limit-aid-to-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0.

¹⁴⁶ Roy Gutman, “Nusra Front Militia’s Control of Syrian City Gives it Economic Clout,” *McClatchy Foreign Staff*, 11 September 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/09/11/201816/nusra-front-militias-control-of.html#.UjlyNWRAS7h>.

of its more austere social policies in order to boost public support; the group has worked to win ‘hearts and minds’ by creating a relief program and building tribal contacts.¹⁴⁷ Such measures could indicate a willingness to tolerate a more pluralistic environment than its stern ideology would otherwise suggest.

However, the rising humanitarian toll and brutality of the fighting may privilege extremist ideologies, which offer a framework through which to justify or understand the brutal acts committed by all sides in the Syrian conflict.¹⁴⁸ Numerous brigades also have members or offices intended to safeguard and propagate their ideologies, holding events, screening videos, or adjudicating local disputes.¹⁴⁹ Finally, the configuration of the extremist opposition at the moment is self-reinforcing: the most effective fighters are extremists, lending their ideology more credence and drawing more talented fighters and resources to their cause. Absent a game changing intervention, it is difficult to see how this cycle will be broken.

Private Kuwaiti involvement in the Syrian conflict poses risks to Kuwait and to the broader Gulf region. Extremist elements of Kuwaiti society have been newly invigorated by conflict in Syria, which they view as an existential conflict—in some cases for the entire Muslim world. Both Sunnis and Shi’a involved in the Syrian issue increasingly frame their points in terms of a broader sectarian conflict between Arab Sunnis, backed by countries such

as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Shi’a, backed by Iran. This broader narrative wraps around domestic politics, reimagining the histories of Sunni-Shi’ite relations in poisonous sectarian language. In such a context, donors’ very visible appeals for money to fund fighters abroad risk attracting a new generation of converts to the cause of global extremism.

Increasingly, these networks are not contained within any single country or even region; Kuwaiti donors have gathered funds from across the Gulf for the Syrian opposition. Indeed, there is also fundraising taking place outside of Kuwait, though again, the scope is unclear. One example comes from Bahrain. Around the same time Kuwaiti donors started visiting rebel-held areas of Syria, three members of Bahrain’s Asala political association, a Salafi group, travelled to Aleppo to show their support for the opposition.¹⁵⁰ The incident prompted an official Bahraini government reaction denying that politicians, including two sitting parliamentarians, were on an official visit.¹⁵¹ Bahrain’s Asala is still collecting donations for the rebels, however.¹⁵² In June 2013, Abdelharim Murad, one of the parliamentarians who visited Syria, tweeted that there was an “urgent need” to equip 2,500 soldiers for the “*mujabedeem*” fighting Hizballah.¹⁵³ At least four public figures were collecting funds for the campaign.¹⁵⁴

Back in Kuwait, sectarian rhetoric could strain Kuwait’s diverse society and generally liberal economic and political policies. The Syrian conflict indirectly

¹⁴⁷ Hassan Hassan, “All (Syrian) Politics is Local,” *Foreign Policy*, 20 December 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/20/all_syrian_politics_is_local.

¹⁴⁸ “The shift toward extremism for many groups is partly a result of the fact that conflict carried on in such a brutal manner for such a long time.” Charles Lister, interview, November 2013.

¹⁴⁹ See e.g., “The Sharia Office of Ahrar al-Sham Release an Amazing Video Hama Province,” YouTube Video, 10:45, posted by “TheAhraralSham,” 17 September 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=360d5DeTKNg>.

¹⁵⁰ “Bahraini MPs Visited Syria to Equip and Support Militants,” *Al Manar*, 7 August 2012, <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=3&cid=20&frid=23&seccatid=20&ceid=64051>.

¹⁵¹ “Bahrain Says Islamist MPs Made Unofficial Syria Visit,” *Agence France-Presse*, 7 August 2012, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/news/bahrain-says-islamist-mps-made-unofficial-syria-visit_8669.

¹⁵² For more on Bahraini involvement in Syria, see Husain Marhoon, “Bahrain Salafists Increase Involvement in Syria War,” *Al Monitor*, July 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/bahrain-salafists-syria-war-fighters.html#>.

¹⁵³ Murad_bh, Twitlonger post, 15 June 2013, <http://www.twitlonger.com/show/m276g2>.

¹⁵⁴ “Case Study: Ramadan Campaign ‘to prepare 12,000 jihadists for the sake of Allah’” in this paper, 13.

pits elements from Kuwait's Sunni and Shi'ite communities against one another—communities that have long agreed to disagree pragmatically in politics. But unlike policy agreements, the social implications of a sectarian conflict cannot be signed away with a political deal. Telling of the magnitude of the danger, policymakers in regional giants Saudi Arabia¹⁵⁵ and Iran have both expressed concern. As Iran's foreign minister, Mohamed Javad Zarif, recently told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), sectarian conflict is “the most serious security threat not only to the region but to the world at large.”¹⁵⁶

One indicator of this threat is that fundraisers for Syria have also begun to tout other causes. After the ousting of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, for example, the same networks that discuss sponsoring *mujahedeen* to fight against Bashar al-Asad began comparing the struggle in Syria to a new fight against military leadership in Egypt.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Kuwaiti supporters of the Syrian government have also been outspoken about the situation in Bahrain, arguing that Shi'a have been persecuted by foreign forces in both countries.¹⁵⁸

Despite the damage done, Western countries including the United States could do a great deal to

assist Kuwait in controlling private donations to extremist elements and/or figures linked to the Syrian regime. Perhaps the simplest way is messaging. In reaction to a recent piece in *The New York Times* on private financing, the U.S. State Department said Washington is and will “stress the need to—for Kuwait to have a robust anti-money laundering/counter terrorism financing regime.”¹⁵⁹ But at least one Western embassy in Kuwait said this issue has not been at the top of the agenda.¹⁶⁰ A high-level conversation could have the effect of accelerating work to implement new financial regulations. Kuwait's new FIU could also benefit from further international expertise and intelligence sharing.

Ultimately, however, deterrence may be the most effective measure. High profile prosecutions within Kuwait itself could help establish the boundaries of legitimate fundraising activity. But Western partners should understand how politically difficult this could be for Kuwait and move carefully to apply pressure. Done incorrectly, a crackdown could also encourage extremist elements to redouble their efforts—this time more quietly—in defiance of the state.

¹⁵⁵ “Preserve the Dignity of Islamic Nation, King Abdullah Tells OIC Leaders,” *Arab News*, 15 August 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/full-text-king-abdullah%E2%80%99s-speech-emergency-islamic-summit-makkah>.

¹⁵⁶ “Iran FM: Sectarian Strife is Worst Threat in World,” *BBC*, 10 November 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24893808>.

¹⁵⁷ Marc Lynch, “Gulf Islamist Dissent Over Egypt,” *Foreign Policy*, 18 August 2013, <http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/18/gulf-islamist-dissent-over-egypt>.

¹⁵⁸ See September 2012 speech by Dashti in which he argues that the Syrian conflict is a foreign conspiracy and blames Saudi Arabia for “most heinous massacres” of the Bahraini people. “The Kuwaiti Deputy Abdel Hamid Dishti: Syria is Paying the Price of its of its Positions that Embody its Greatness, Steadfastness, and Honor of the Arab Individual that does not Accept Humiliation” (Al-na'ib al-Kuwaiti Abdelhamid Dishti: Sooriya tadfa' thaman mawaqifaha al'lati tajsod 'izza, wa thibat, wa karamat al-insan al-arabi al-lathi la yaqbal al-khunoo'), *SyrianMasah.net*, 30 September 2013, <http://syrianmasah.net/arabic/articledetails20423.html>.

¹⁵⁹ Jen Psaki, “Daily Press Briefing,” U.S. Department of State, 13 November 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/11/217517.htm#SYRIA>.

¹⁶⁰ Western diplomat, interview with the author, Kuwait City, Kuwait, October 2013.

PROJECT ON U.S. RELATIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD

The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a research initiative housed in the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The Project's mission is to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners and the broader public on the changing dynamics within Muslim-majority countries and to advance relations between Americans and Muslim societies around the world.

To fulfill this mission, the Project sponsors a range of activities, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim states and communities around the world. The broader goals of the Project include:

- Exploring the multi-faceted nature of the United States' relationship with Muslim states and communities, including issues related to mutual misperceptions amongst societies;
- Analyzing the social, economic and political dynamics underway in Muslim states and communities around the world;
- Identifying areas for shared endeavors between the United States and Muslim communities around the world on issues of common concern.

To achieve these goals, the Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together key leaders in politics, business, media,

academia, and civil society from the United States and from throughout Muslim societies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The forum also serves as a focal point for the Project's ongoing research and initiatives, providing the foundation for a range of complementary activities designed to enhance dialogue and impact.

- An Analysis Paper Series that provides high-quality research on key questions facing Muslim states and communities.
- Workshops, symposiums, and public and private discussions with government officials and other key stakeholders, focused on critical issues affecting the relationship;
- Special initiatives in targeted areas of demand. In the past these have included Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, and Religion and Diplomacy.

The Project's Steering Committee consists of Martin Indyk, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies (currently on leave); Tamara Cofman Wittes, Senior Fellow and Director of the Saban Center; William McCants, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Saban Center; Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Saban Center and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland; and Salman Shaikh, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center.

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Founded in 2002, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy brings together the most experienced policy minds working on the region, and provides policymakers and the public with objective, in-depth, and timely research and analysis. Our mission is to chart the path—political, economic, and social—to a Middle East at peace with itself and the world. Current research in the Center includes:

- What Makes Two States Possible?
- U.S. Strategy in a Changing Middle East
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- The Future of Counterterrorism
- U.S. Relations with the Islamic World
- Natural Resources and Conflict in the Middle East

The Saban Center was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The Center was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles, and is part of the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings. The Center upholds the Brookings values of Quality, Independence, and Impact.

The Center is home to the *Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, which convenes a major international conference each year in Doha and a range of activities to educate, foster frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships among U.S. and Islamic communities. The Center also houses the *Brookings Doha Center* in Doha, Qatar—home to three permanent scholars, visiting fellows, and a full range of policy-relevant conferences and meetings.

SIGNATURE ACTIVITIES

The Saban Center organizes numerous events and conferences throughout the year, bringing together leading officials, scholars, business executives, academics, and journalists. Center events include:

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- **The U.S.-Islamic World Forum:** A premier annual gathering of U.S. and Muslim world leaders to advance constructive partnerships, held in Doha or Washington.

The Saban Center's analysis is communicated through a variety of publications that serve as a resource for policymakers and their staffs. Center publications include:

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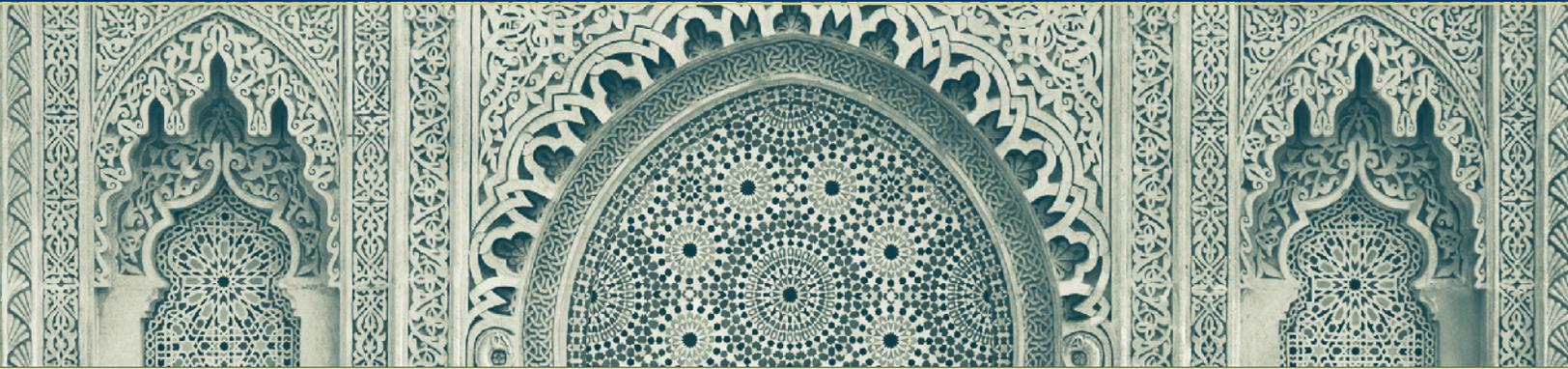
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Shibley Telhami, *College Park, MD*



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THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., NW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036-2103
www.brookings.edu