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Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War

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ABSTRACT

The role of resources in war has been much debated. What happens when foreign patrons provide lavish amounts of cash to rebels, without mechanisms of accountability? This article analyzes three major sources of funding and their micro-level effects on insurgent-groups in the Syrian civil war. Recipients of funding demonstrated opportunism in actions, alliances, and ideologies, directly related to the funding source. Funders thus set the agenda of the war, promoting Islamist ideologies and regional over local issues. Private donors rivaled state sponsors, in what may be a harbinger of future globalization trends.

The role of resources in war has been much debated. What happens when foreign patrons provide lavish amounts of cash to rebels, without mechanisms of accountability? Observers and Syrian rebels have alleged that donations from the Gulf countries strengthened radical Islamist groups, diverting the opposition from its focus and dividing it.¹ Beginning out of the Arab Uprisings as a nationalist rebellion, the Syrian civil war is now sectarian and fragmented, dominated by violent, supra-nationalist Islamist opposition groups.² Oppositions are often divided, but the Syrian rebels have taken this to an extreme: an estimated 1,500 armed opposition groups have operated.³ Regional ideologies and animosities have replaced local goals and organizations. How did it get to this point? Many factors are behind this transition, but this article details a key factor in the transformation of the opposition: the role of foreign financial sponsorship.

This article examines the result of foreign financial patronage in the Syrian civil war, tracing funds to end-user insurgent group outcomes. The causal story indicates that financial incentives, unchecked and from multiple patrons – both states and individuals – resulted in opportunistic behavior among the Syrian opposition. Catering to sponsors and seeking personal gain significantly changed the character of the opposition, resulting in more divisions and changes in ideology. This method of funding the rebellion marginalized the group with the most support and roots in the country, a nationalist version of Islamism.⁴ Particularly

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fragmented are the secular armed groups, who were early actors in the conflict. As liquid resources and equipment drew the rebels, money trumped local legacy, disadvantaging existing groups and advancing new ones.

The effects of financial patronage become clear through detailed micro and group-level data.⁵ Both individual funding from the Syrian diaspora and Sunni Muslim Arabs at large, and competition between sponsors, contributed to transformations in the opposition. Saudi motives for entering the Syrian war were regional and sectarian. Foremost was restraining Iranian Shi'a influence and preventing Syria and Lebanon from joining Shi'a-dominated Iraq.⁶ Yet it was the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both Sunni Muslim and in the Gulf Cooperation Council alliance, which greatly affected opposition incentives in the Syrian conflict.⁷

As rebels diversified their resource portfolios, they simultaneously positioned themselves to be attractive to patrons, altering their ideologies and competing against other recipients in the process. Personalization of sponsorship added a new dimension to the conflict. Some opposition groups geared their actions toward specific individuals who provided significant resources, playing on the donors' desire for social prominence. Others pledged loyalty to certain versions of religion or allied in line with their sponsors. In the process, the overall conflict, its goals, and dominant ideologies shifted from local issues to regional ones. Opposition groups split off to form independent smaller factions, taking advantage of rich financing and differential relationships with donors. Rebel groups competed against each other. The resulting divisions complicate attempts to resolve the conflict as they increase the violence through outbidding. Abundant external financing prolonged the conflict as it enriched many involved in the fighting.

In what may be a harbinger of the future, private donors outside the Syrian diaspora played a major role. Historically, individual funding has not been able to rival state sponsorship and came almost exclusively from diaspora groups.⁸ Currently, the new information technology environment, coupled with extreme individual wealth and the desire for social prominence, allows rebel funding to be privatized.⁹ Instead of being limited to the diaspora, donations in this case spanned a social identity group larger than Syrian expatriates, encompassing the large Sunni Muslim Arab population as the civil war became interpreted as a regional sectarian war over social identity. Working through social media and tech-savvy individuals, these websites, apps, and programs are able to escape regulation. People using Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the dark web's equivalent of a "Gofundme" campaign, among others, took advantage of small individual donations as well as large ones to fuel a major private donor phenomenon. Totals are estimated in the millions and perhaps billions of USD. The implications of such vast and unregulated money are daunting.

This article first reviews the literature on resources in war and the effect of external sponsorship. The following section presents an overview of the Syrian opposition and external sponsors. Each country is examined in turn, including details on the relations between group military actions, changes in ideology, fragmentation, allegiance, and receipt of sponsor money. The conclusion highlights the findings from this data.

External Resources in Civil War

The effect of revenue sources in war has become a major topic of study. The type of resources affects the length of wars, motivations, and even the intensity of conflict.¹⁰ The so-called

greed versus grievance debate kicked off a wave of analysis, looking at whether certain natural resources generated a version of the “resource curse” for rebels in a civil war.¹¹ According to Weinstein, this rebel resource curse can lead to opportunistic as opposed to ideologically-committed members.¹² Not all resources have the same effect.¹³ Ross and others maintain that some resources are not linked to conflict, such as agriculture (excluding illegal drugs), while others are.¹⁴ Others maintain that competition for scarce primary resources causes conflict.¹⁵ However, the mechanisms of translating funding to outcomes have not been well specified. Some analysis has posited that the degree to which a resource is lootable – how easy it is to carry that resource off – determines which resources are associated with higher negative consequences for the populace and attract more opportunistic soldiers.¹⁶ Such moveable and highly valuable resources have also been linked to increases in infighting among rebel groups and lengthening the conflict’s duration.¹⁷ These same studies found that the resource base of the country affects duration, casualty rates, and location of key battles.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the causal debate for the origins of civil war, once begun the political economy of funding rebellion takes on an important role.¹⁹ Rebels need military materiel and money; how and when they get it matters to the course of the war.²⁰ Without natural or drug resources, funding can come locally, through crime or “revolutionary” taxation,²¹ or externally through state aid, diasporas, wealthy individuals and organizations,²² and even other insurgent groups. The effect of diaspora and remittance funding is highly context-dependent.²³ Diasporas can promote peace or war.²⁴ In civil war, scholars have not yet identified diaspora funding as significant enough to top state support, due to diaspora limitation of scope and scale.²⁵

External financing can have its own varying outcomes, depending on types of resources, sponsor actions and preferences, methods of delivery, and structure of the opposition group. Patrons can solve coordination problems, acting as a guarantor of collective action.²⁶ Lidow argues that supporters can, under some circumstances, empower leaders with the financial means to prevent abuses and looting in their ranks.²⁷ Others show that external sponsors often lose control over the groups they finance, particularly in de-centralized rebellions.²⁸ Salehyan et al. find that the principal-agent framework is central to understanding the relationship between sponsors and rebels regarding the treatment of civilians under rebel control. They note that numerous patrons lead to more independent action in rebel groups and less control.²⁹ Individual incentives for joining a war matter.³⁰ The goals and behavior of states that provide financing make a difference in rebel behavior also, undermining or supporting the balance of power between leaders and rivals.³¹ Sponsors can thus foster unity or fragmentation by their actions. In general, external backing prolongs conflicts and makes domestic rebel groups less amenable to negotiation.³²

Lack of control over sponsored groups appears to be more the norm than the exception. Patrons often lack the specific battlefield information needed to direct resources efficiently and cohesively. Once the resources have been delivered, the sponsor thus often has little influence over where that money goes. While some insurgency groups can and have united under the direction of sponsors, others with access to foreign resources appear to have little motivation to join other factions. The funding dynamic can lead to competition between groups in the same opposition movement, similar to valued natural resources, undermining any semblance of command and control. Diamonds may be lootable, but for liquidity cash is king.

The search for univariate explanations for rebel behavior has proved elusive. This article argues that the type of resources is the first cut into explaining opposition actions, but is not sufficient. Diverse sources of funding and how they are provided translate into differing levels of discretion for combatants, providing more or less leeway for individual self-serving behavior. Diamonds in a warlord zone are at one end of the spectrum, while revolutionary taxation, under some circumstances, can be at the other. Accountability mechanisms, or their lack, form the intervening variable. This distinction is demonstrated by comparison with the regime-supporting allies in the Syria conflict. Hizbullah and Iran had battlefield commanders and advisors, and were deeply involved in coordination and daily operations.³³ The result differed sharply from opposition conduct. Ways of ensuring compliance include presence on the battlefield, developing an effective chain of command, and professionalism. Generating rank and file command and control is no small feat, and much effort is placed in professional militaries on ensuring that individuals follow orders and do not act independently.

Foreign Funding and Syria's Rebel Movements

The story of Syria's opposition is indelibly linked to external resources. Money was no problem: the Gulf states and private funders of the opposition in the conflict had resources above and beyond what normal states and their citizens could be expected to contribute. Part of the story of the Syrian opposition groups is this abundance of resources compared to other civil wars.³⁴ Another part is the mistaken belief that accountability mechanisms were unnecessary, that wealth itself would attract and maintain allegiances.³⁵ This confidence on the part of patrons that money could buy loyalty is long-standing but defies historical experience: proxy organizations are assumed to be loyal to their funders. In this case, insurgents paid lip and ideological service to sponsors, but once the cash was received, they were unconstrained.

Resources limited the opposition in terms of ideology, but did not prevent self-seeking behavior. Islamism was the entrée to immense money. All the major funding was Islamism and oriented toward regional issues, and these sources attracted rebel fighters. Sponsors asked for signs of ideological alignment, public statements, and names of brigades, but they made no attempt to verify if the money was used for the intended purpose. Single-source cash may generate dependence, but lack of coordination of sponsors and competition among them created a vast arena of maneuver for rebels to pass from one patron to the next. Group divisions multiplied, as subordinates led new groups. Receivers of the same funding source did not fight each other – unlike the actions of groups with alternative resources later in the conflict – but neither did they need to coordinate. Sponsors strangely requested little for their money apart from YouTube videos, which would help raise more money for the funder.³⁶ “Battalions” could be only a few fighters. Fighters who established a relationship with a given donor left their units to branch out on their own, leading to continued fragmentation of opposition groups.³⁷

As a result, the trajectory of the opposition bears a striking resemblance to the dynamics of natural resource funding that spurred the greed literature. Economic motives and opportunities took over, generating businessmen out of fighters. The rebels ran grain and oil rackets to name but two. Military alliances were chosen to protect business interests, as militia leaders drove luxury cars and lived extravagantly.³⁸ “Mad Max meets The Sopranos,” one

observer described it.³⁹ The Islamists, with privileged relationships to the Gulf donors, attracted more money than secularists. Their gains drew fighters seeking weapons and money, and the cycle continued. Successes on the field drew still more support.⁴⁰

The most critical external support for armed movements consists of financial resources, political support, safe havens, and direct military support in the form of weapons and materiel, fighters, intelligence, and organization aid.⁴¹ For the circumstances of the Syrian opposition, direct financial support and military weapons have been most important, since safe havens abound and foreign military troop support for the opposition was scant during the period of this study. Whatever the historical legacy, without materiel and financial resources, collective action cannot be sustained and groups cannot survive. In this case, external funders arrived quickly and with ample resources. Alternative ways of self-financing did not need to be developed at the outset, and funders seemingly asked little but documentation of the rebels' operations and either political allegiance or social promotion.⁴²

At the start of the uprising, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was the opposition group with name recognition, decades of well-established networks, and street credentials.⁴³ Joining it soon after was an umbrella group termed the Free Syrian Army, an actor with direct experience with the regime. The latter represented more of a general Islamist nationalist point of view than a strictly secular one. These actors would dominate during the first two years of the uprising. These groups were not neat, unified groups that an opposition would desire, but neither did they compare to the fragmentation and fundamental ideological transformation to supra or non-nationalist Islam that followed. This opposition actively fought extremist tendencies among its ranks, and radical actors were not initially successful. After two years of war, rebels criticized, and news outlets documented, the effect of money interfering with military goals. Commanders lived extravagantly, were called warlords, and appeared to care mainly about their own incomes. Rebels complained about fellow soldiers leaving their command to become leaders of new groups, fragmenting the opposition further.⁴⁴ The Farouq and Tawhid Brigades demonstrate this change in the opposition, as they flip-flopped in ideology with the influx of Gulf money.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait account for the majority of all Sunni Arab materiel and financial support to the Syrian opposition, as well as humanitarian aid during the time period of this study. Numerous non-state entities, including members of Syrian expatriate communities, Salafi or puritanical Islamist charities, and private donors emerged parallel to Gulf state support for the Syrian opposition. Estimates of these elusive non-state contributions are in the hundreds of millions of dollars.⁴⁵ Qatar reportedly topped the list of state providers between 2011–2013, with up to \$3 billion.⁴⁶ Since 2013, Saudi Arabia surpassed Qatar.⁴⁷ These countries, while sharing the objective of ousting the Assad regime, have differed greatly over the type of support they provided and to whom. Kuwait has been the largest provider of humanitarian aid, and officially stood against arming the rebellion.⁴⁸ Yet as shown below, it allowed private citizens and groups to operate, some of which are classified by the U.S. government as supporters of terrorism, and became the center of private illicit funding to the Syrian opposition.⁴⁹

Saudi Arabia and Qatar backed numerous and different groups, in order to hedge their bets on influence in a future government, and to undermine particular opposition groups.⁵⁰ Saudi Arabia would not fund the dominant unified group in the opposition, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, finding alternatives that pledged loyalty to its specific version of Islam. Saudi's animosity toward the Muslim Brotherhood, and its accumulated experience from

Afghanistan, structured its views on the opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood was viewed as a threat to the Saudi monarchy, due to its emphasis on electoral politics and its combination of church and state.⁵¹ Further, Saudi sought to avoid mistakes made during the Soviet War in Afghanistan when it provided blanket support to jihadists such as Usama bin Laden, who later challenged the Saudi government.⁵² Qatar backed the dominant group within the opposition alliance, and subsequently funded more extremist Islamist groups. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar had no aversion to the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition to domestic considerations, its media *al-Jazeera* had a close relationship with the Egyptian MB, and appeared to be the winning team.⁵³

In addition to the intra-Gulf discrepancies over the recipients of funding, Saudi Arabia and Qatar used middlemen in Turkey to deliver the materiel and financial resources, who were unaccountable for the destination of the money. Financing was contingent upon the amount of personnel, leading groups to compete and inflate their ranks.⁵⁴ Providing aid through middlemen was better than having their own people on the ground, despite the multiple effects of intermediaries on the chain of funding. Arguably, hubris at the power of their money was a factor. Prior to the interventions of Iran and Russia, the regime's downfall appeared inevitable, and financial accountability did not seem important.⁵⁵ The Gulf sponsors lacked political will to stop individuals identified as aiding terrorist groups, and had no capacity to identify the numerous private individuals helping those same groups.

Saudi Arabia: Undermining Opposition Unity

The role of Saudi Arabia demonstrates how financing can be used to alter the initial configuration of advantages or exacerbate fragmenting trends. A major challenge the Syrian opposition faced at its start was uniting its heterogeneous factions. With the assistance of the government of Turkey, the opposition established the Syrian National Council (SNC) in August 2011, the first attempt to unite the interests of all Syrians opposed to the Assad regime.⁵⁶ The SNC, based in Istanbul, Turkey, attempted to present a united front to the international community.⁵⁷ It consisted of a broad range of activists such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), democratic and secular entities that included minority groups, and moderate Islamist groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB). From the onset, the SNC was plagued by factional infighting. The SMB spearheaded the SNC alliance and was the strongest and most unified group going at the start of the uprising.⁵⁸

Saudi Arabia, one of the first Gulf countries to provide materiel and financial assistance to opposition forces, opposed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia is staunchly opposed to any element of the Muslim Brotherhood because Saudi leaders view its version of political Islam as the most organized and capable threat to their rule.⁵⁹ As a result, Saudi Arabia was leery of the SNC and refused to work with the SMB. It began a pattern of backing specific groups within the SNC that were outwardly Islamist but were aligned with Saudi interests and its Wahhabi views.⁶⁰ Instead of supporting the opposition alliance as a whole, which included the SMB, Saudi Arabia funded alternative, small groups who pledged loyalty to its version of Islam. Groups were incentivized to adopt the Saudi agenda in order to obtain funding, and began to display outward Islamist tendencies in hopes of attracting support. They also began videotaping attacks to prove effectiveness on the battlefield, which provided incentives for escalating violence.⁶¹

The use of middlemen to disperse the funds exacerbated principal-agent problems. The go-between used by the Saudis did not seem to enact any safeguards to ensure money was not going to radical groups. Saudi Arabia chose the Lebanese politician Okab Sakr, affiliated with then-former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri.⁶² The Saudis and Hariri had a pre-existing working relationship in the region. Per Saudi guidance, Sakr identified a mix of capable groups between the FSA and various Salafi factions, and he offered Saudi support in exchange for pledges of loyalty.⁶³ Groups were offered Saudi support selectively.⁶⁴ Saudi's goals were two-fold: removal of the Assad regime as Iran's strongest Arab ally and ensure influence in a future government with an ideology similar to its own. Sakr established contacts inside Syria and entrusted them to deliver the funds to groups that were unable to send a representative to Turkey.⁶⁵ There was often no way of knowing exactly who received the money and weapons at the end of the logistics chain.

The Farouq Brigade demonstrates ideological alignment with funding sources and the leeway to avoid coordination among common rebel groups provided by sufficient cash. This opposition group was the most effective fighting force in the FSA in Homs, Syria, in 2011, and its core consisted of Sunni defectors from the Syrian Army.⁶⁶ Upon its formation, the Farouq Brigade presented a secular, nationalist agenda and appealed to Syrians regardless of sect.⁶⁷ After Saudi and Qatari money began to flood the opposition, the brigade slowly changed its discourse. The group switched its logo to a black flag with crossed swords commonly seen among jihadist groups and its leaders grew Salafi-style beards.⁶⁸ According to Joseph Holliday, the new Islamist version of these insurgents proved to be highly polarizing locally.⁶⁹ It refused to coordinate with other opposition groups it had worked with previously, and disrupted the FSA's ability to conduct operations coordinating the different opposition groups in Homs. With the infusion of money and weapons, the Farouq Brigade was able to carve out its own fiefdom and had no incentive to share power with others.⁷⁰

The Farouq Brigade deepened its ideological turn and further learned that multiple Islamist patrons provided even more money. In 2012 the Brigade joined the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), an alliance of moderate Islamist groups.⁷¹ Saudi Arabia generally favored the SILF over the other Salafi alliance the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). The SIF contained Ahrar al-Sham, among others, and had close ties to Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra).⁷² Both were radical Islamist groups with ties to al-Qaeda, which Saudi at this point was trying to avoid. Within the SILF, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar backed some of the most prominent groups, such as the Farouq Brigade, Jaish al-Islam, and al-Tawhid Brigade.⁷³ To Saudi annoyance, Qatar backed groups in the rival SIF at the same time, as Qatar was not picky in backing groups it felt could achieve the larger goal.⁷⁴ Adding more confusion and complexity to the matter, many of the groups in the SILF – including the Farouq Brigade – joined other alliances under regional military councils that were also receiving Saudi and Qatari funds. Thus, groups learned that if they joined more alliances, they could double dip on external support.

In 2013, the SILF dissolved, and many of its former groups, including Suqur al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, and al-Tawhid Brigade, joined the newly formed Islamic Front, a Salafi alliance led by Ahrar al-Sham.⁷⁵ The Farouq Brigade declined to join the Islamic Front alliance. Whatever the group actually believed, its decision to adopt an Islamist agenda coincided with others also competing for Saudi and Qatari support.

To offset the momentum of other disliked groups, Saudi leaders backed the SILF in the alternative SIF alliance. This move further sidelined the SNC's legitimacy. While none of the

groups in the SILF were considered radical at the time, half of them subsequently joined the Islamist Front alliance the following year. These groups had been receiving Saudi and Qatari money, and now became directly affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham. They conducted joint operations with al-Nusra. The prior support received from Saudi Arabia and Qatar transferred to the new more radical groups, and thus Saudi Arabia has been accused of enabling extreme Islamist groups.⁷⁶

At the non-state level, Saudi Arabia has been the most proactive on paper of the Gulf countries in curbing support from private, wealthy donors. It made private fundraising outside of official state channels illegal and banned its citizens from traveling to Syria to wage jihad.⁷⁷ However, private citizens simply redirected their funds to other countries with lax financial laws such as Kuwait. Saudi citizens that wanted to wage jihad in Syria seemed to do so unencumbered. Estimates of Saudi foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict range from 2,500 to 7,000, with Saudis forming the largest non-Syrian contingent in the conflict.⁷⁸ Most joined the so-called Islamic State.⁷⁹

Supporting the idea that Saudi Arabia did not attempt to effectively prevent more radical groups involved in the Syrian conflict, one of the most important early supporters of Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic Front alliance resides in the Kingdom. Adnan al-Arur, a firebrand Salafi televangelist originally from Hama, Syria, emerged as a key ideational figure in the Syrian conflict due to his strong sectarian discourse and theatrical style in his weekly talk show aired by several Salafi-affiliated channels.⁸⁰ Prior to the Syrian uprising, al-Arur (also transliterated al-Aroor) had a small following. Once hostilities erupted, his narrative and demands for armed insurrection against the Assad regime transformed his show into one of the most popular in Syria among rebel fighters.⁸¹ He is known to criticize non-Salafi factions and once infamously “vowed to grind the flesh of pro-regime Alawites and feed it to the dogs.”⁸² While he has at times reduced his anti-Alawite and anti-Shia rhetoric, his popularity undoubtedly added to sectarian divides. Al-Arur formally backs a variety of opposition groups, and was one of the most prominent Saudi private donors for Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic Front alliance.⁸³

Qatar: Sponsorship Flip-flopping

As the violence increased in 2011, Qatar quickly became one of the most prolific if controversial opposition benefactors of materiel and financial support to the opposition, and humanitarian aid to the refugees. Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar began financing and arming opposition elements in 2011 after the SNC was formed. Qatar used a similar process as the Saudis. It dispersed funds through its own middlemen in Turkey but differed with the Saudis on the recipients. Qatar preferred the SMB to other groups, and the basis for a Saudi–Qatari rivalry in the Syrian conflict formed as they began backing different Islamist groups.⁸⁴ Qatar’s decision was more pragmatic than ideological: Qatar recognized that the SMB was the most organized in the SNC and seemed to have established contacts inside Syria, which theoretically increased the likelihood of funding being delivered to local elements fighting the regime.

Qatar provided funding to the regional military commands in the SNC to distribute inside Syria as well and attempted to minimize favoritism, but its efforts led to complications.⁸⁵ In order to receive Qatari funding, groups under the regional commands had to submit lists of personnel to justify the quantity of money. Groups began inflating their numbers, which led

to a different type of internal competition and muddled accurate assessments of the opposition's strength.⁸⁶ Furthermore, groups under the SMB's and the regional command's purview received double Qatari funding than those that did not, which encouraged groups to adopt sponsors' agendas.⁸⁷

In 2012, Qatar abandoned neutrality and unabashedly supported its favored individual groups. Just as Saudi Arabia sought to hedge its position with potential winners in the conflict, Qatar sought multiple points of influence within a future Syrian government. Qatar provided extensive support to Islamist groups whether radical or not. Although most groups obtained funding from various donors, the billions of dollars Qatar provided between 2011 and 2013 turned Qatar into the dominant influence among donors.⁸⁸

As a result, Qatar's fingerprint appeared on many Islamist groups, funding both moderate and more extreme Islamist oppositions, while promoting their alliances. These coalitions merged moderate elements with more radical Salafi factions. The public statements and visible expressions of al-Tawhid Brigade are evidence that the more radical factions dominated. The group formed in mid-2012 in Aleppo when a number of smaller Islamist groups affiliated with the SMB merged at the behest of Turkey.⁸⁹ The groups previously received financing from Qatar via the SMB.⁹⁰ When the SILF formed in 2012 as a moderate Islamist alliance, al-Tawhid Brigade joined and collaborated with other moderate Islamist groups who also received funding from Qatar such as the Farouq Brigade.⁹¹ Meanwhile, Qatar was also providing direct support to Ahrar al-Sham.⁹² When the SILF dissolved in 2013, al-Tawhid Brigade and other prominent groups in the alliance joined Ahrar al-Sham and Salafi groups in the Islamic Front, an expanded version of the SIF. Scholars such as Zelin and Lister have asserted that the evolution of Islamist alliances, such as the SILF, SIF, and now the Islamic Front, is the result of Qatari efforts to portray a more organized Islamist opposition.⁹³

Drawn to Qatari funding that was provided also to more extreme elements, al-Tawhid Brigade transitioned from a moderate Islamist group whose fighters donned white headbands, commonly seen with SMB affiliates, and began to wear the black headbands normally worn by jihadists in extremist groups.⁹⁴ Additionally, aside from being in an alliance with Ahrar al-Sham, this brigade also began conducting joint attacks with al-Nusra in 2013. Their relationship progressed far enough that al-Nusra allowed its fighters to fight under al-Tawhid leadership for large-scale attacks.⁹⁵ This example not only traces the metamorphosis of al-Tawhid, but also shows how al-Nusra is indirectly leveraging Qatar's funding. Qatar's support of Ahrar al-Sham and al-Tawhid, among others who were close allies of al-Nusra, translated into al-Nusra and other radical groups using those weapons and resources.⁹⁶

Qatar began to change its policies in 2013 in response to protests from the international community, demonstrations of the adverse effects of its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, and domestic political changes. Accusations that Qatar was reckless with its funding grew louder from the international community. Saudi would repeat these complaints in 2017 when it broke diplomatic relations with Qatar. Aside from charges that Qatar was facilitating the rise of radical groups and encouraging others to adopt more Islamist platforms, Qatar also walked a dangerous line with weapons. In 2012, the Obama administration directed all Arab allies not to provide heat-seeking shoulder-fire missiles known as man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to the Syrian opposition. The United States did not want the weapons to end up in radical Islamist hands. Yet Qatar provided a limited quantity of Chinese-made

FN-6 MANPADS to unspecified FSA-affiliated groups.⁹⁷ Videos emerged online soon after depicting FSA groups using the FN-6s to the dismay of Western officials.⁹⁸

Battlefield losses demonstrated the damage created by the Saudi-Qatari rivalry and by the massive cash going to the insurgency. The competition reached a boiling point in April 2013 when Qatari-backed rebel forces abandoned their post during the siege of the Wadi al-Deif military base. Their retreat enabled regime forces to escape and mount a counterattack that resulted in numerous opposition deaths. An after-action report revealed that the commander of the Qatari-backed forces was pocketing the funds from Qatar and left his fighters vulnerable. The international community expressed outrage over the lack of accountability of Qatari money, finally motivating the countries to centralize their support.⁹⁹ A change in Qatari leadership further facilitated shifts in foreign policy. In mid-2013, the ruling Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani stepped down and peacefully handed power to his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who wanted to reduce Qatar's regional profile.¹⁰⁰ Qatar then reassessed its Syrian position and stated it would fall in line with Saudi Arabia.¹⁰¹

Instead of fully ending its support of Ahrar al-Sham as it declared, Qatar continued to support the group through the Islamic Front alliance at reduced levels.¹⁰² Aside from Ahrar al-Sham, there is no concrete evidence that Qatar has supported al-Nusra or IS directly. Its Gulf neighbors believe it has, and used this funding as rationale for diplomatic moves against Qatar. In 2014 Saudi Arabia and allies removed their ambassadors from Qatar over these and other allegations, and repeated them again with their isolation and boycott of Qatar in 2017.¹⁰³ Certainly, Qatar's private citizens have funded these extremist groups. According to the U.S. Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen, Qatar has become a "permissive terrorist financing environment" for Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra, and the so-called Islamic State (IS).¹⁰⁴ Terrorist fundraising networks based in Kuwait have representatives inside Qatar to solicit donations from wealthy individuals. The money is then transferred to Kuwait where it is routed to radical Islamists in Syria.¹⁰⁵

The Qatari government has done little to stop this private financing, and thereby implicitly condoned it. In one prominent case, the U.S. Department of Treasury imposed sanctions on the Qatar-based financier of al-Qaeda, Abd al-Rahman bin Umayr al-Nuaymi, in 2013. According to the Treasury Department, al-Nuaymi functioned as an intermediary between al-Qaeda and private Qatari donors. He previously transferred as much as \$2 million per month to al-Qaeda in Iraq (now IS) and most recently transferred \$600,000 in 2013 to al-Qaeda's representative in Syria, Mohammed al-Bahaiya, a.k.a. Abu Khalid al-Suri, an early member of Ahrar al-Sham.¹⁰⁶ Despite the U.S. designation of al-Nuaymi as a terrorist financier, Qatar has not brought charges. Al-Nuaymi operates openly in Qatar and is a well-known academic and businessman.¹⁰⁷

Similar to Saudi Arabia, Qatari residents provided ideational support unconstrained by the regime. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, deemed "the world's most influential Sunni cleric" by Hegghammer and Zelin, was the first celebrity cleric to label the Syrian conflict a legitimate jihad in May 2013.¹⁰⁸ Qaradawi called upon any Sunni Muslim with the ability to fight to go to Syria and wage jihad against the Assad regime. He joined Egypt's most senior Muslim clerics and representatives at a conference, calling for diverse forms of jihad in Syria and encouraged those who cannot fight to send money and arms to the Syrian opposition.¹⁰⁹ One of Ahrar al-Sham's founders, Hassan Abboud, was the only Syrian opposition leader at the conference.¹¹⁰ The significance of al-Qaradawi's calls for jihad, the subsequent backing from

other popular Muslim clerics, and the presence of Ahrar al-Sham's most publicly known leader was influential in spreading support for the rebellion. Furthermore, the backing of other well-known clerics added weight to his call for jihad. The presence and high press exposure of Ahrar al-Sham's leader Abboud at the conference put a specific face on the Syrian conflict. While Syria was teeming with foreign fighters before al-Qaradawi's call to arms, the numbers of such fighters doubled between 2014 and 2015.¹¹¹ Furthermore, al-Qaradawi and his associates blurred the legal lines of charitable donations. Donating money for jihad was now religiously justified, and Ahrar al-Sham positioned itself to monopolize the rewards.

Kuwait: Center of Non-State Funding

Kuwait demonstrates the power of private donations, both expatriate Syrians and others, in providing money to the opposition. Kuwait had a reputation as the most charity-friendly country in the Gulf even before the Syrian civil war. Its lax financial laws, freedom of assembly, and lack of government oversight made it an ideal location for private charities to base their operations, especially in a region known for stifling political environments.¹¹² Groups such as al-Qaeda have utilized this lenient atmosphere in the past. For example, in 2008, the United States blacklisted the Salafi charity the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) in Kuwait for financially supporting al-Qaeda.¹¹³ The RIHS still operates openly in Kuwait and was one of the first charities to begin arming Islamist groups in Syria in 2011.¹¹⁴ Countless Salafi charities like the RIHS exist in Kuwait that walk a fine line between promoting fundamentalist versions of Islam through charitable works and directly supporting radical groups.

When the Syrian uprising began, Kuwait took a different approach than Saudi Arabia and Qatar, focusing on political solutions, aid to the refugees, and humanitarian funding in general.¹¹⁵ Between 2011 and 2013, Kuwait sent more than \$500 million in aid as proof of its commitment, the most of any Gulf country.¹¹⁶ While the government focused on humanitarian assistance, Kuwait's Syrian expatriate community of roughly 100,000 collected private donations for the opposition and transferred those modest funds through their vetted contacts inside Syria.¹¹⁷ As the conflict intensified, the expatriates linked their efforts with professional fundraisers from experienced Salafi charities who had access to wealthy Gulf donors. The combination of both paved the way for private non-Syrian donors in Kuwait to make a significant impact on the opposition. Between 2012 and 2013, Salafi organizations and professional fundraisers with radical leanings hijacked the local initiatives and transformed Kuwait into the headquarters for illicit funding in the Gulf region. By 2013 Kuwait was the "epicenter of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria."¹¹⁸ Private donors based in Kuwait have sent as much as hundreds of millions of dollars, and a portion of the funds go directly to radical groups without restrictions or government interference.¹¹⁹ Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra, and IS, in that order, have been the primary recipients of the private funding from Kuwait's biggest Salafi donors.

Under intense U.S. pressure, Kuwaiti officials agreed to make terrorist financing illegal for the first time in 2013 and created a financial investigation unit (FIU) to identify violators.¹²⁰ However, given the exceptionally high number of Kuwaiti private donors and organizations as well as their organized networks, it will be difficult for the FIU to make a significant impact in the near term. Furthermore, separating charities that support extremists from those who partake in legitimate work is complicated and will take time. Lastly, one of the

biggest challenges facing the FIU is the means by which Kuwaiti donors send their funds. Along with individuals hand-carrying bags of money into Syria, Kuwaiti private donors use formal and informal exchange companies which are difficult to track.¹²¹

Among all Kuwait's Islamic organizations and networks, the Ummah Party and the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People have had the most influence in transforming the Syrian conflict. The Ummah Party is a Salafist organization founded by Hakim al-Mutayri in Kuwait in 2008. Since political parties are banned in Kuwait, the Ummah Party functions as an Islamic organization and represents a more potent Salafi version of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹²² It has branches in numerous Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and has been extremely active in Syria. Based on al-Mutayri's guidance, the Ummah Party quickly allied itself with the Salafist group Liwa al-Ummah that conducts joint operations with al-Nusra.¹²³ Additionally, according to Lund, al-Mutayri was one of the driving forces behind the formation of Ahrar al-Sham in early 2012 and the establishment of the SIF.¹²⁴ He remains one of the biggest donors to Ahrar al-Sham today.

In 2012, al-Mutayri named the Salafi cleric Hajjaj al-Ajmi as his organization's point man for Syria.¹²⁵ Al-Ajmi is from a wealthy Kuwaiti family and was one of the most public and prolific fundraisers at the private level for Syria. He is one of the managers of the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People, which is a fund that collects donations around the Gulf.¹²⁶ Along with al-Mutayri, he was also instrumental in the formation of Ahrar al-Sham and various Islamist alliances.¹²⁷ For example, Ahrar al-Sham has gone as far as to publicly thank al-Ajmi for sending donations totaling \$400,000 in 2012.¹²⁸ The Syrian Islamic Front acknowledged receiving \$600,000 from him in public statements.¹²⁹

Social media has played a role in this funding. Aside from al-Ajmi's regional fundraising efforts through his fund, he has also campaigned on Twitter. Prior to his account being suspended, al-Ajmi had roughly 475,000 followers.¹³⁰ During crucial times in the Syrian conflict, such as sudden advances or attacks by the Syrian military, al-Ajmi would send urgent messages over Twitter with status updates, pictures of dead civilians from the attacks, and a phone number for his followers to donate. He also regularly requested that his followers spread the messages. According to Warrick, the technique has been successful, and opposition groups in Syria took notice.¹³¹

Three events in 2013 demonstrate how far recipient groups were willing to go to receive funds from al-Ajami and al-Mutayri. First, in either a show of appreciation or to attract support, a Syrian rebel group named itself after al-Ajami: its leaders posted a video on YouTube proclaiming itself as the "Hajjaj al-Ajami Brigade."¹³² While the event may have been no more than a publicity stunt, it demonstrates how influential al-Ajami became within the opposition. Second, when al-Nusra and IS formally severed ties in 2013, al-Ajami immediately reached out to al-Nusra contacts and promised to finance the group.¹³³ This was important because according to *al-Jazeera*, IS provided al-Nusra with a significant portion of that organization's overall budget.¹³⁴ In exchange for al-Ajami's support, he requested al-Nusra appoint a Kuwaiti jihadist, Abu Hassan al-Kuwaiti, as one of its sharia officials, despite Abu Hassan not having the necessary credentials.¹³⁵ For a group like al-Nusra that employs a strict vetting process for new members, its willingness to accept al-Ajami's request is another indication of Ajami's importance as a benefactor. Third, as part of a public relations campaign, al-Mutayri rotated regional officials from the Ummah Party through Syria to take pictures with the rebels for fundraising efforts. During one of the trips in 2013, a

sniper killed Mohammad Abduli, the president of the UAE branch. Following Abduli's death, al-Mutayri took the unprecedented step of establishing a training camp inside Syria in honor of Abduli.¹³⁶ It remains the only instance where a private Islamic organization purporting to be a charity formed a training camp inside Syria.

Considerable overlap exists between public and private sector participation in Kuwaiti-based charities, complicating the analysis of the Kuwaiti state's role in financing the opposition. Aside from al-Mutayri's and al-Ajmi's joint efforts, the Kuwaiti organization the Council of Supporters has also facilitated a tremendous amount of financing to the Syrian conflict. Additionally, the Council demonstrates the links between Kuwaiti government officials and private funding networks. The Council was created in 2012 to lead fundraising campaigns in Kuwait.¹³⁷ While the Council consists of numerous clerics and activists, a current member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly Mohammad al-Mutayri leads it as the secretary general.¹³⁸ It was the main force behind a 2013 fundraising campaign that collected an estimated \$30 million for Syrian opposition groups.¹³⁹

While the Council supports numerous Islamist groups, it is a major backer of Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra.¹⁴⁰ One of the Council's board members Nayef al-Ajmi who was the Kuwaiti Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs in 2013 was featured in al-Nusra fundraising posters. While being advertised in conjunction with al-Nusra is not a definitive admission of guilt, al-Ajmi's longstanding ties to jihadist groups and his activity on the Council were enough for the United States to levy accusations at him.¹⁴¹ In 2014, al-Ajmi resigned his ministerial post after U.S. Undersecretary Cohen used al-Ajmi as an example of how the Kuwaiti government does not appear fully committed to ending unregulated funding.¹⁴² Overall, the Council and the involvement of these Kuwaiti members of government demonstrate the difficulty in delineating where official Kuwaiti support for charitable funding begins and ends.

Three other important personalities functioned as independent Kuwaiti fundraisers for Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra, and IS. The first is Shafi al-Ajmi who was one of the first Salafis to work in conjunction with the Syrian expatriate community in 2011.¹⁴³ Al-Ajmi is a well-known academic, Salafi preacher, and expert fundraiser in Kuwait. Thousands of people typically attend his sermons in the mosque on Fridays, and his television show is one of the most popular in Kuwait.¹⁴⁴ Similar to Hajjaj al-Ajmi, Shafi al-Ajmi is also Twitter savvy and had more than 300,000 followers before Twitter suspended his account for terrorism-related financing activities along with Hajjaj's.¹⁴⁵ Shafi al-Ajmi is known for his strong sectarian rhetoric and frequently teamed up with other renowned fundraisers to maximize efforts.

With their financial influence, individual sponsors have directed particular battlefield operations they felt were important from afar. In August 2013, Shafi al-Ajmi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi along with other clerics such as Nayef al-Ajmi from the Council of Supporters conducted a joint campaign to fund an offensive in Latakia, Syria, where many Alawites and Shia reside.¹⁴⁶ Islamist groups, including al-Nusra, agreed to the operation and massacred at least 60 Shia civilians in the village of Hatla purely for sectarian reasons.¹⁴⁷ Following the attack, al-Nusra proclaimed that it "cleansed Hatla of the Shia" while Shafi al-Ajmi exclaimed the Shia were slaughtered with Kuwaiti supplied weapons.¹⁴⁸ The Hatla massacre shows how uncontrollable private Kuwaiti sponsorship had become. In response, the United States formally designated Shafi al-Ajmi, Hajjaj al-Ajmi, and Abd al-Rahman Khalaf Ubayd Juday al-Anizi, discussed below, as key financiers of terrorism in 2014.¹⁴⁹

Ghanem al-Mutayri and Abd al-Rahman Khalaf Ubayd Juday al-Anizi are other prominent Kuwaiti financiers. Al-Mutayri keeps a low profile compared to Shafi al-Ajmi, but his efforts are no less noteworthy in supporting al-Nusra. According to Ben Hubbard, al-Mutayri staunchly supports al-Nusra and has amassed as much as \$14 million in donations from conferences he organized.¹⁵⁰ While most private Kuwaiti donors like al-Mutayri seem to favor Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra, al-Anizi dedicates his support to IS. In 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department identified al-Anizi as not only a financier for IS but also a foreign fighter facilitator.¹⁵¹ While his monetary contributions were not specified, his support to IS predates the Syrian conflict. He has operated out of Kuwait since 2008 and links Kuwaiti donors with IS-related networks in the region.¹⁵² The government of Kuwait may be committed to humanitarian support, but its officials and private citizens have brazenly supported the most radical elements in the Syrian conflict. In addition to financial support, the Kuwaiti donors have also reinforced sectarian identities and promoted as much fragmentation as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has been host to multiple competing sources of financing from states, non-state individuals, and non-state groups, fundamentally altering the ideology, behavior, and organization of the opposition. Cash and the lack of accountability combined to thwart effective opposition action. The insurgency became a virtual free-for-all, with the exception that all major players are now Islamist. Gulf priorities and orientation had everything to do with this, while not preventing self-interested defections with their competing and abundant resources.

Instead of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, often asserted as paramount in the fate of the Syrian civil war, it was the Saudi-Qatari competition that favored the rise of the Islamist groups Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra, and IS.¹⁵³ Indeed, the Syrian perspective demonstrates that the later diplomatic crisis between Saudi and Qatar in 2017 did not come from thin air. The Saudi-Iranian regional competition, often declared paramount to the dynamics of the Syrian civil war, was not the dominant factor. Radical Islamists benefited more as a consequence of the selective support of the Gulf states than as a deliberate strategic decision. Yet even when a decision was made to coordinate support, private money from Kuwait continued to bolster the dynamic already set in place, allowing Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra to maintain their prominence in the opposition.

Kuwait's private donors had the most direct impact in financing radical Islamist groups. Diaspora aid to civil wars has a long history, yet in this case aid went beyond the diaspora to the identity group of Sunni Arabs, and involved particular individuals giving large amounts. The technology of giving and aiding like-minded groups is now accessible to individuals, and social media allows tailoring messages to increase identification of a local conflict with that of a broader identity or social group. Profound individual wealth, combined with new technology to transfer money while evading detection, created opportunities for individuals to achieve social prestige.

Military equipment and financing, how to secure them, competing over them, distributing or abusing them, all permeate the history of Syria's opposition. The opposition has consisted of a dizzying array of new opposition groups, changing alliances, and transformed ideologies. The proliferation of groups receiving funding undermined military command and

control, creating divisions amid existing hierarchies and preventing organizational alliances. As the funding of war progressed, the dominant rhetoric and ideology went from local, national liberation to region-wide sectarian concerns. Nationally-oriented concerns were completely overshadowed by a foreign-based Islamism that views the conflict in apocalyptic, sectarian, and regional terms.

Money did not accomplish this alone – other factors were clearly present. But funding was a powerful factor shifting the balance of power on the ground to those preferred by Gulf sponsors. Tracing the finances of Syria's opposition demonstrates that actors ostensibly aiding the opposition have in fact done the reverse. External sponsors simultaneously fragmented the opposition and encouraged an Islamization and regionalization of that opposition. Lack of accountability mechanisms allowed individual self-serving behavior and fragmentation. Pulled by cash, fighters split off to lead their own groups, leading to a negative collective outcome for the opposition as a whole. Regardless of intention, all three countries undermined Syrian opposition unity by fostering group competition and disproportionately empowering the radical groups who reject negotiation. Islamist groups in Syria, both radical and moderate, have received more external support than secular elements in the opposition, which has translated into better equipment and flush financing for these groups. Outside interests became intertwined with and finally overshadowed local causes, making the conflict more intractable.

Notes

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