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Why Bashar Al-Assad Remains in Power

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On a recent night in 2014, a phone conversation took place between Wolves of the Valley Commander Mohamed Zataar and the infamous ISIS commander Abu Ayman al-Iraqi. Both regiments are fighting against each other and against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The near 90-minute conversation between the two individuals provides the perfect microcosm of the current conflict in Syria. The two commanders engaged in everything from petty disagreements to deep discussions about the role of religion in state politics and perceived American intervention. Abu Ayman deeply believes that Islam is more important than the Syrian people. Zataar vehemently disagrees; saying the wellbeing of the Syrian people is before Islam. The following topics of discussion ranged from the treatment of prisoners to interpretations of the Qur’an. For a conflict that began in March of 2011 as a protest against the incarceration of students for displaying anti-Assad graffiti, the current conflict hardly resembles a unified movement for democratic principles. President Bashar al-Assad firmly remains in control of the country, although the cost for power could not have been higher. The country is in an open civil war that has cost the lives of 150,000 people and has displaced more than 2.5 million Syrian civilians who are unsure if they will have a country to come back to. In addition, there are the 5.5 million children whose lives have been disrupted by the conflict. Unfortunately, the Assad regime has been willing to pay this heavy price for control over Syria. However, it would be a mistake to interpret the conflict in Syria as a positive correlation between the brutality of the Assad regime and political control of Syria. How the Assad regime continues to remain in power is a consequence of factors present within the country and actions taken by international bodies, non-governmental organizations and individuals outside of Syria. Further discussions of these factors are necessary because of the impact Syria has on international relations.

There are many aspects to the Syrian conflict that exists today, which touch upon all levels of analysis in international relations. On the individual level, President Bashar al-Assad has defied international expectations and has remained in power. On the state level of Syria, power is concentrated in the military, and the lack of a strong civil service presents barriers to a transition of government and rebuilding of the country. On the international level, international bodies, including the United Nations and the Arab League, have made multiple attempts to effectively bring the conflict to an end. There are many areas within the Syrian conflict to examine and discuss. However, this article will focus on the central premise of how President Bashar-al Assad’s regime has remained in power.

There are three distinct events that have contributed to the Syrian regime’s control of the country. The first event was the French-mandated government that formed the political loyalties of the Alawite community. These loyalties continue to be a pillar of power for the Assad regime. The second event is the weak financial laws and regulations within Kuwait. These laws have led to the splintering and increasing extremity of ideology within the opposition forces. In addition to the financial issues in Kuwait, international aid has increasingly been scrutinized as ineffective. The third and final event is the unintended consequences of the compromise reached by United Nations to secure and destroy Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons. Although this compromise had good intentions, the end result has left President Bashar al-Assad in a better position politically. To complement the analysis of the factors, which have led to Assad’s continued control of Syria, this article will present two policy options to weaken the Syrian regime’s political control of the country.

The fundamental basis of power in Bashar al-Assad’s regime is the political loyalty of the Alawite Shia community. The beginnings of this loyalty are founded in the divide and rule history of Syria dating back to the conclusion of World War I. During the French mandate from 1920-1946, the French government’s primary concern was combating the spread of Arab nationalism found primarily in the Sunni Muslim population that currently makes up approximately 70% of Syria’s 25 million people. In order to ensure Syria would remain dependent upon the French government, autonomy was granted to local groups such as the Druzes, Ismalilis, and the Alawites. For a portion of time, these ethnic and religious groups were self-governed apart from Syria, which resulted in increased regionalism instead of one unified society. In addition, the French intentionally did not train bureaucrats within the mandated system of government, which placed a large amount of power in the hands of local leaders. The lack of a

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strong central government, which would have provided security and benefits to the population, contributed to the regionalism that is still an issue in the country. With what civil service the French did allow, strict rules were enforced so that one minority would not become more powerful than the other. This stopped minorities from learning how to dominate the others through the institution of government.\textsuperscript{8} The consequences of these decisions by the French government created a civil service institution with a governing outlook not for the betterment of Syria as a whole, but as a way to increase political power for the minorities who held positions of power within the bureaucracy. This outlook has continued into present day Syria, where government is used to secure power for the existing social structure and not for the betterment of the entire country. This drive to secure power first presented itself in the historical economic reality of the Alawite community during the French mandate period.

The Alawite communities suffered at the lowest peg of the socioeconomic ladder in the environment of divide and rule colonialism. The majority of Alawites were peasant farmers under the control of wealthier Christians and Sunni Muslims. The average farmer during this period would earn roughly 22 piastres per day while the cost of living required 50 piastres per day.\textsuperscript{9} This crushing poverty created strong incentives for the Alawites to pursue other occupations in order to provide for their families. The opportunity to do so came in the form of military service. The French government was in need of a regiment that specialized in suppressing local rebellions, which resulted in the creation of the Troupes Spéciales du Levant.\textsuperscript{10} Alawites jumped at the chance to be a part of this regiment for two reasons. The first was that this was the only available economic opportunity for them other than being a peasant farmer. The second was that the regiment provided a way to assimilate into the government, which would offer better representation and would consequently give more power to the Alawites. The chance for the Alawites to assimilate into government came with the military academy, which Sunni Muslims mocked as being for the lazy and uneducated.\textsuperscript{11} At the end of the French Mandate in 1946, a series of coups allowed for the Alawites to rise up the ranks of power. With each new change of government, the Alawites progressed farther up the socioeconomic ladder until the Assad family seized power, where the country still remains today.

The historical perspective of the Alawites is key to understanding how Assad has managed to remain in power. Their participation in the Troupes Spéciales du Levant is ironic given the fact that the Alawites are currently suppressing a rebellion. More importantly than the military training they received

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 2.  
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 4.  
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 3.  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 3.
from the French, however, was the regionalist system the French propagated upon the country. The pitting of one minority against the other created a competitive system where there were winners and losers. All of the minorities wanted to hold positions within the government because it meant power and the opportunity to rise out of poverty. Cooperation for mutual benefit was not a part of the Alawites vocabulary. The Alawites governing outlook is based upon the maintenance and collection of power, not the inclusion of all and welfare of Syria as a whole. This outlook can be witnessed in the way the Syrian government has chosen to handle the uprising in Syria.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, the regime of Bashar al-Assad has maintained military superiority over opposition forces. Since the inception of the conflict, one of the key problems for the opposition has been a unified force of finances, arms, and ideology. A common occurrence has been the splintering of opposition groups into competing sects due to a lack of unified resistance. The Western media has largely portrayed this fracturing as differences in ideology and ethnicities between the opposition groups. A widely under-reported explanation provides an alternative argument that suggests private donors in Kuwait have played a critical role in the fracturing of opposition groups. In recent years, Kuwait has emerged as a financial launch point for funding up to one thousand different rebel groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad. This is possible through Kuwait’s weak financial laws and regulatory system. Due to the nature of these donations being funneled through “religious charities,” it is hard to know exactly how many dollars have been donated; however, it is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions. In addition to the disputes on the ground between opposition forces, there have been high-profile disputes among donors in Kuwait. The discrepancy between the individuals fighting on the ground and disputes between competing donors acting through NGOs is sufficient to contribute to a confusing environment that splinters, rather than unifies, the opposition forces against Bashar al-Assad. From Assad’s perspective, the competing donors and opposition groups provide a divide and conquer environment, which the Syrian regime benefits from. Assad’s forces do not have to fight a well-organized opposition group, but instead they fight many opposition groups that also oppose each other. It is apparent in the state of warfare in Syria that private donors have

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14 Ibid., 1.
15 Ibid., 1.
contributed both to the splintering and the extremity of the opposition forces. This has made the opposition weaker, and helps to keep Assad in power.

The government of Kuwait has recognized this as a legitimate problem. Last summer, the Emir of Kuwait signed legislation that made the financing of terrorist organizations illegal and created a Financial Investigation Unit to track misconduct. However, the impact of this legislation will likely be marginal due to the lack of strong regulatory powers within the bureaucracy. Another barrier to the proper enforcement of this law is the fact that many of these organizations register as religious charities, which is an effective loophole within the law. It would be difficult to distinguish between legitimate and non-legitimate charity organizations in Kuwait. Any new law or intervention limiting the flow of money has the possibility of disrupting the continued support of the Kuwait government in funding relief efforts toward Syria. Kuwait is currently the fourth largest donor to United Nations relief efforts and the largest donor in the Middle East. In addition to this complicated web of financing, it is suspected that the Shia community in Kuwait may also be funding the regime of Bashar al-Assad. If this can be proven, it means that Kuwait is financing every area of the Syrian conflict, which overwhelmingly helps to protect the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The funneling of money to opposition forces has produced a serious risk to the unity and moderation of the resistance. In addition, money given to Assad’s regime may show that there is greater support amongst the Shia community than previously thought. The money coming out of Kuwait to support the United Nations relief efforts has little effect on the power of President Assad’s regime, due to regulations that are discussed further in this article.

Kuwait’s financial environment is without question a problem for sustaining a moderate opposition force in Syria. The former Kuwaiti Parliamentarian and supporter of the Free Syrian Army brigades, Jamaan Herbash, best describes the consequences of Kuwait’s financial environment: “it is impossible for the army [FSA] to unite when every brigade follows whoever is financing it….. 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.” This influx of private donations allowed rebel commanders to be able to bypass the moderate Free Syrian Army opposition structure. Rebel commanders were able to pursue their own ideological interests that aligned with private donors in Kuwait. This created rebel brigades that were more ideologically radical than the moderate Free Syrian Army and increased the total number of rebel brigades.

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16 Ibid., 2.
17 Ibid., 6.
18 Ibid., 2
19 Ibid., 1.
Differences between the rebel brigades became apparent, which directly led to infighting between the groups. It is evident that the emergence of private funding of rebel brigades resulted in increased control over Syria for the Assad regime. Private funding consequently caused the opposition forces to splinter and become more ideologically extreme.

One reason that contributes to the understanding of why private donors in Kuwait emerged as major players in the Syrian conflict comes from the failure of Free Syrian Army’s funding structure. In March of 2012, the United States, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia agreed to send millions of dollars per month to the Free Syrian Army’s Turkey-based leadership through the Syrian National Council’s office. The main purpose was to unify the financing so that the rebel movements would embrace Free Syrian Army leadership.\(^\text{21}\) According to a pro-opposition financier, the local brigade commanders swear allegiance to whoever is financing them. In addition, the number of fighters each commander can have is completely dependent upon whether he can pay them and their families. There is not a single brigade commander that has enough clout or money to form a single unified opposition force.\(^\text{22}\) According to this logic from the pro-opposition financier, this strategy to unify opposition forces should have worked. However, there were several factors that led to its demise. The first was that private donations continued to be funneled into Syria in greater amounts than what was available from the Free Syrian Army. The second was that informal methods of transfer payments became the norm due to corruption and high amounts of bureaucracy that came with the money from the Free Syrian Army. The moderate opposition forces began to find themselves underfunded. It soon became clear that there was a significant advantage to being informally funded rather than being funded through the Free Syrian Army mechanism. With informal funding through private donors, the money was placed where it was supposed to be: in the hands of rebel commanders. It is clear that in the Syrian conflict, the failure of the FSA funding mechanism explains why private donations were the favored form of funding. With the rebel brigades now competing for funds from private donors and attacking each other over differences in ideology, the lack of a unified opposition force continues to be one of the greatest benefits to the Assad regime.

Kuwait’s financial environment is not the only monetary issue that contributes to the support of Assad’s regime. International aid provided by the United Nations has come under increased scrutiny for its inability to direct the aid to civilian populations in rebel held areas. For example, on December 16th, 2013, the United Nations called for international donations to raise $6.5 billion to


address relief efforts. Of this $6.5 billion, $2.5 billion was to be distributed within the borders of Syria. The best-case scenario is that this money reaches the people it is intended for. The worst-case scenario is that it stays with the Assad regime. The most likely scenario is that some of the money will reach its intended destination, but a vast majority of the aid will be sent to people that are not in rebel held areas. This is due to the fact that money earmarked for Syrian relief efforts can only be used by United Nation agencies and regime-approved local and international humanitarian aid agencies. These organizations claim they are prevented from distributing aid to rebel-held areas less than fifteen minutes away from Damascus. The end result is that Bashar al-Assad is able to distribute the United Nations relief aid as he sees fit. It is completely within his power to punish areas that support opposition forces by withholding aid and to support other areas that are friendly to his regime. One report claims that innocent civilians are dying of starvation in rebel-held populations and have resorted to eating leaves. The control of relief-aid within Syria’s borders is without a doubt a significant way Bashar al-Assad has maintained power.

Western and Arab nations, which participate in international bodies such as the United Nations, have played a role in changing the collective policy objectives regarding Syria. Prior to the use of chemical weapons, the United States, Great Britain and other Western allies held the policy position of regime change. “Assad must go” was a rallying cry that was used in public speeches ranging across the globe. Both former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British First Secretary of State William Hague used this phrase repeatedly for building international support for regime change in Syria. However, this regime change never came to fruition. Instead, the narrative was changed by the use of chemical weapons. The conversation shifted from regime change to securing weapons of mass destruction. No longer was it a precondition that Assad must be removed from power. Instead, the most powerful countries in the world gave the Syrian government a platform to defend their version of events. The focus of international discussion regarding Syria was now on securing chemical weapons.

25 Ibid., 1
The compromise that was reached to secure and destroy Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons left the Syrian regime in a stronger position than prior to their use.

To further examine how the Syrian government benefited from the use of chemical weapons despite international outcry, an examination of the Geneva talks is necessary. The first Geneva talks resulted in a six-point plan for Syria agreed to by the Arab League and the United Nations. The six points called for a democratic government installed by a transitional body, a ceasefire, humanitarian assistance to all areas, release of political prisoners, an open media, and lastly to respect the rights of individuals to assemble and protest.\textsuperscript{28} This peace plan reflected the collective policy goals of Western and Arab nations in 2012, which were both good-natured and naive. Putting an end to the violence and helping to transition regime change should absolutely be the main goal for international bodies trying to bring an end to the conflict. However, to believe that President Bashar al-Assad would agree to carry out such a plan in good faith, which he accepted on March 27, 2012, ignores over a hundred years of history.\textsuperscript{29} Recalling the political environment of divide and rule colonialism, government was used as a way to gain power for minority factions. There are no factors today that suggest the Alawite faction would be willing to give up their role in government, which yielded them representation and socioeconomic benefits. Another assumption of the six-point plan claims that the “Action Group members are committed to the sovereignty, independence, national unity, and territorial integrity of Syria.”\textsuperscript{30} The critical misunderstanding in this statement is that national unity would occur without assistance or even force. Given Syria’s history, it should be clear that national unity would be a difficult policy objective to accomplish. Divide and rule colonialism provided a regionalist attitude in the population that is still apparent today. With so many assumptions taken by the United Nations and Arab League, President Bashar al-Assad most likely agreed to this plan because he knew that the Action Group members had seriously overplayed their ability to influence policy in Syria. In addition, Syria was protected from any of the six points being implemented by Russia’s permanent veto power on the United Nations Security

\textsuperscript{28} Six-Point Proposal of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States
\textsuperscript{29} United Nations, “Syrian government accepts UN-Arab League envoy’s six-point plan to end crisis,” UN News Centre
\textsuperscript{30} Action Group for Syria. “Final Communiqué” (June 30, 2012).
This meant that as long as the international bodies were discussing the six-point peace plan, Assad would be able to continue the conflict without a threat of losing power. In addition, the very real possibility that Syria might fall into sectarian violence during the proposed transition of government was never addressed. It is the fault of the United Nations and Arab League to offer such a plan that contained so many false assumptions. Historical analysis provides a counter argument that suggests Assad would not give up power and national unity would not occur. Offering the Syrian government the chance to agree and cooperate with the six-point plan only increased the duration of the conflict. It should have been clear that Assad had no intentions of removing himself from power. From the Syrian government’s perspective, agreeing to the six-point plan bought President Assad a significant amount of time from facing hard power, which eventually came in the form of a military strike by the United States.

Predictably, the six-point plan was a failure and resulted in the resignation of Kofi Annan as the United Nations-Arab League mediator. By June 2012, the plan was scrapped due to the lack of a cease-fire on behalf of Assad’s regime, a massacre in the Houla region, and the public announcement that the Free Syrian Army was resuming military operations. The conflict continued uninterrupted until Syrian opposition forces reported the use of chemical weapons on August 21, 2013. At this critical point in the conflict, the discussion surrounding Syria turned from implementing regime change to the elimination of Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons, suspected to be the largest in the world. This is a vast departure from the original six-point peace plan. This diversion of policy objectives in the United Nations mitigated the risk of the Syrian government losing power.

The chemical weapons attack helped the Syrian regime retain power in several ways. The first political consequence was a transition of discussion from regime change to securing chemical weapons. By engaging the Syrian regime directly on the intentional scale, the United Nations gave the Syrian government

standing. This inadvertently increased the legitimacy of Syria by giving President Assad the ability to argue his case and make a mass appeal to the worldwide public. Many Americans were able to get a firsthand look at President Assad’s perspective with a primetime interview conducted by Barbara Walters.\textsuperscript{36} Many people expected to see a butcher, but what they witnessed instead was a polished, highly educated and articulate leader that was able to make a case against American intervention in Syria. The second way the chemical weapon attack aided the Assad regime in retaining power was the ensuing agreement for Syria to give up its chemical weapons. It is difficult to argue for regime change when the target regime is fully cooperating with international demands. At the time of this writing, the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria has largely remained on schedule set forth by the timetable agreed to.\textsuperscript{37} The destruction of chemical weapons compromise gave the opportunity for the Syrian regime to be a fully cooperative partner, and they took full advantage of it. In addition, the loss of chemical weapons was not a threat to the power of the Assad regime. In an adjustment of military tactics, the Syrian army simply replaced chemical weapons with the use of barrel bombs, which have proven to be just as effective or even more effective in killing.\textsuperscript{38} The removal of chemical weapons in Syria is only a victory for the international community if it cares about the way people die and not the rate of killing. An argument could be made that the destruction of WMDs is inherently good, but the reality for Syrian civilians remains relatively unchanged despite this victory for the international community. Although the intentions behind the chemical weapons compromise were good, it worked to uphold rather than to weaken President Assad’s control of the country.

The conflict in Syria presents the world with a humanitarian crisis, which requires the response of nations. Many options have been considered in the short history of the Syrian conflict. Foreign aid, no fly zones, arms shipments, economic sanctions, and military actions have all been touted as policy solutions to the conflict. However, these actions have not produced any measurable results. Currently, there is not a cease-fire and many scholars are openly suggesting that Assad is in a better position to remain in power now than he was at the start of the conflict. Even the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, believes the

\textsuperscript{36} “Full Interview President Bashar al-Assad with Barbara Walters,” \textit{ABC News} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s8UrZhkJRQ (February 13, 2012).


chemical weapons compromise has strengthened Assad’s control of the country. However, this should not dissuade the international community from attempting to stop the killing in Syria. The international community still has many tools available that can have immediate affects for the thousands of civilians suffering from starvation. In addition, these measures can also help to limit the military capabilities of the Assad regime and help to weaken the power structure in Syria.

The first option the international community should consider is to pursue cross-border operations to deliver aid. Cross-border operations are when a state neighboring the target state agrees to allow non-governmental organizations to the move freely back and forth across their border. There are generally three ways this scenario can occur. The first is where the affected state has not given authorization but armed opposition groups within the target state and the neighboring state have agreed to the operation. The second is when the target state, the neighboring state, and the armed opposition groups agree to the cross-border operation. The third is when the United Nations Security Council, with the consent of neighboring states, imposes the cross-border operation forcefully.

The consequences of a cross-border operation would be twofold. As discussed previously, one of the ways President Assad has been able to maintain power is through the control of foreign aid within Syria’s borders. Currently any aid that is administered to an area has to be approved through the Syrian government. Cross-border operations would take away the Assad regime’s ability to lay siege to civilian areas that are held by rebels. It is safe to assume that there would not be cooperation from the Assad regime for any cross-border operation. This leaves two possibilities for such an operation to occur. The first would be a cross-border operation through an agreement between the armed opposition groups and the neighboring states, while the remaining option would be forceful implementation by the United Nations Security Council with the consent of neighboring states. So far, Russia has been able to protect Syria from any real international threat coming from the United Nations Security Council by the use of its permanent member veto. It is unclear as to what the crisis in Ukraine means for Russia’s standing among the Security Council and if it could be used as leverage for Russia to approve a cross-border operation in Syria. Russia may be interested in such a proposal in order to show a good-faith gesture in light of their occupation of the Crimean peninsula. Further discussion of Russia’s behavior

toward a cross-border operation is mere speculation, but it is important to note that it could be a possibility.

The most likely scenario involving a cross-border operation is one in which the Syrian regime objects to the operation while armed opposition groups and neighboring states agree to participate. A cross-border operation of this magnitude is not out of the realm of possibility. There are two examples in recent history where this type of cross-border operation has been affective. The first occurred in the Nigerian Civil War from 1967-70. Church groups and other NGOs became frustrated with the relief efforts of the Red Cross and United Nations and started a relief chain of their own. The end result was 66,000 tons of relief supplies delivered to suffering populations.\textsuperscript{41} The other example comes from the Ethiopian Civil War of the 1980s. Again, church groups were able to funnel in relief supplies through Sudan without the consent of the Ethiopian government. The coalitions that formed were able to meet the needs of the population in contrast to the Ethiopian government’s starvation strategy.\textsuperscript{42} There is no question that the Assad regime is using this same tactic to starve out populations in order to suppress support for opposition groups. Reports of malnutrition occurring in Syria prompted the United Nations Security Council to issue a presidential statement calling for the immediate access to humanitarian assistance. It was understood that if humanitarian assistance was not able to reach certain areas, causalities could be in the thousands.\textsuperscript{43} If the international community is serious about ending the Assad regime’s control of Syria, then a cross-border operation could help achieve this goal.

An affective cross-border operation coalition would most likely occur between the Free Syrian Army and other moderate opposition groups, Turkey, and organizations with staff willing to endure the risk presented. Typically, cross-border operations are operated by NGOs. However, there is no reason to believe that governments could not unofficially provide assistance to these organizations in the form of financial assistance and protection through private security firms. The political consequences for Assad could be devastating. The Free Syrian Army would no longer be just an armed military opposition group, but would also have the ability to administer benefits in the form of relief aid to civilians in devastated areas of the country. If a transition of government is ever to occur in the country of Syria, then giving the Free Syrian Army the capability to administer benefits is a great political tool to build a civilian following. All political movements have to be able to provide security and benefits. A cross-border operation would be a

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
small first step in the direction of building a moderate opposition group that would have both military and political capabilities while simultaneously undermining the power of the Assad regime.

Another policy option involves Kuwait. The international community could apply additional pressure to Kuwait to monitor the flow of money from Kuwait into Syria. Diplomats speaking with anonymity have claimed that the United States Treasury Department is aware of the situation. They have concluded that the flow of money to opposition groups by private donors is having only a marginal effect on the conflict. However, research and discussions conducted with legislators in the Kuwait government and people on the ground in Syria claim differently.44 They believe that the flow of money from Kuwait has been a significant factor in the growing extremism and splintering of opposition groups away from moderate ones. Additionally, steps should be taken to make it more difficult for the financial assistance provided by private donors to reach ideologically extreme opposition groups. International pressure could be placed upon financial institutions to freeze assets that are going towards ideologically extreme opposition groups. Another option could be to station foreign service officers from different nations in the Financial Investigation Unit to oversee operations. This would ensure that the watchdog agency in Kuwait was fulfilling the anti-terror funding law properly. The international community cannot ignore Kuwait’s role in the Syrian conflict any longer, and all actions should be taken to stop the private funding of ideologically extreme opposition groups within Syria.

Both of the policy options presented think outside the traditional international responses of economic sanctions, arms, and the funneling of aid through existing institutions. For three years, these responses have not effectively resulted in the removal of President Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria. Given the evidence provided, many of these policies have actually been counterproductive and have assisted the Syrian government in consolidating power in the country. The history of French colonialism through divide and rule governing tactics during the French mandate period can no longer be ignored. The French policies of the past explain the lack of a strong civil service, the manipulation of foreign aid, and why national unity is such an obstacle. The accepted explanation for the splintering of opposition forces is no longer acceptable. It is clear that the influx of private donors through Kuwait’s weak financial regulatory system has had a considerable influence not only on the amount of opposition forces present in Syria, but also the increase of ideological extremism within the opposition groups. Finally, the chemical weapons compromise actually worked to increase the power of the Assad regime in two ways. The first was that it allowed the Syrian government to present a convincing,

44 Dickenson, 2.
although incorrect, platform to defend their perspective. The second was that it effectively transitioned the international conversation away from regime change to securing chemical weapons. The Syrian government was more than happy to cooperate as this showed it was a good-faith partner in the international community. President Bashar al-Assad recognized the political reality that the United Nations would not be able to destroy a country that was cooperating with its demands.

If the United Nations and Arab League still want to pursue regime change in Syria, then new ways of targeting the power structure in Syria are needed. Two ways to accomplish this would be through cross-border operations and the strengthening of Kuwait's financial regulatory system. Cross-border operations would take away the ability for President Assad to use starvation as a tactic against civilian populations in rebel held areas. In addition, allowing the Free Syrian Army to administer benefits would not only help them militarily, but would add a political element by the added ability to administer benefits to the civilian populations. This would have a significant effect in the future when establishing a transitional government. In addition, if Kuwait's financial system could be strengthened enough to have the ability to shut out private donors, then the extreme opposition groups would lose financial assistance. This would bring the opposition groups back to the political center and strengthen the Free Syrian Army into a unified opposition group. There is a long road ahead for the cease of conflict in Syria, but every journey begins with a single step. Policy makers and foreign diplomats must pay attention to the underlying reasons for Assad's control in Syria and be willing to pursue non-traditional policy options if Syria is ever to become a flourishing nation in the future.