# ASSEMBLING (IN)SECURITY

## COUNTERING THREATS THROUGH SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE: THE ANTI-ISIL CASE

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Cover photo: 'A Dutch Marine instructing an Iraqi soldier'. Photo MCD, Hille Hillinga. Retrieved from I.L. Wiltenburg, 'Security Force Assistance: practised but not substantiated', *Militaire Spectator* (20 February 2019).
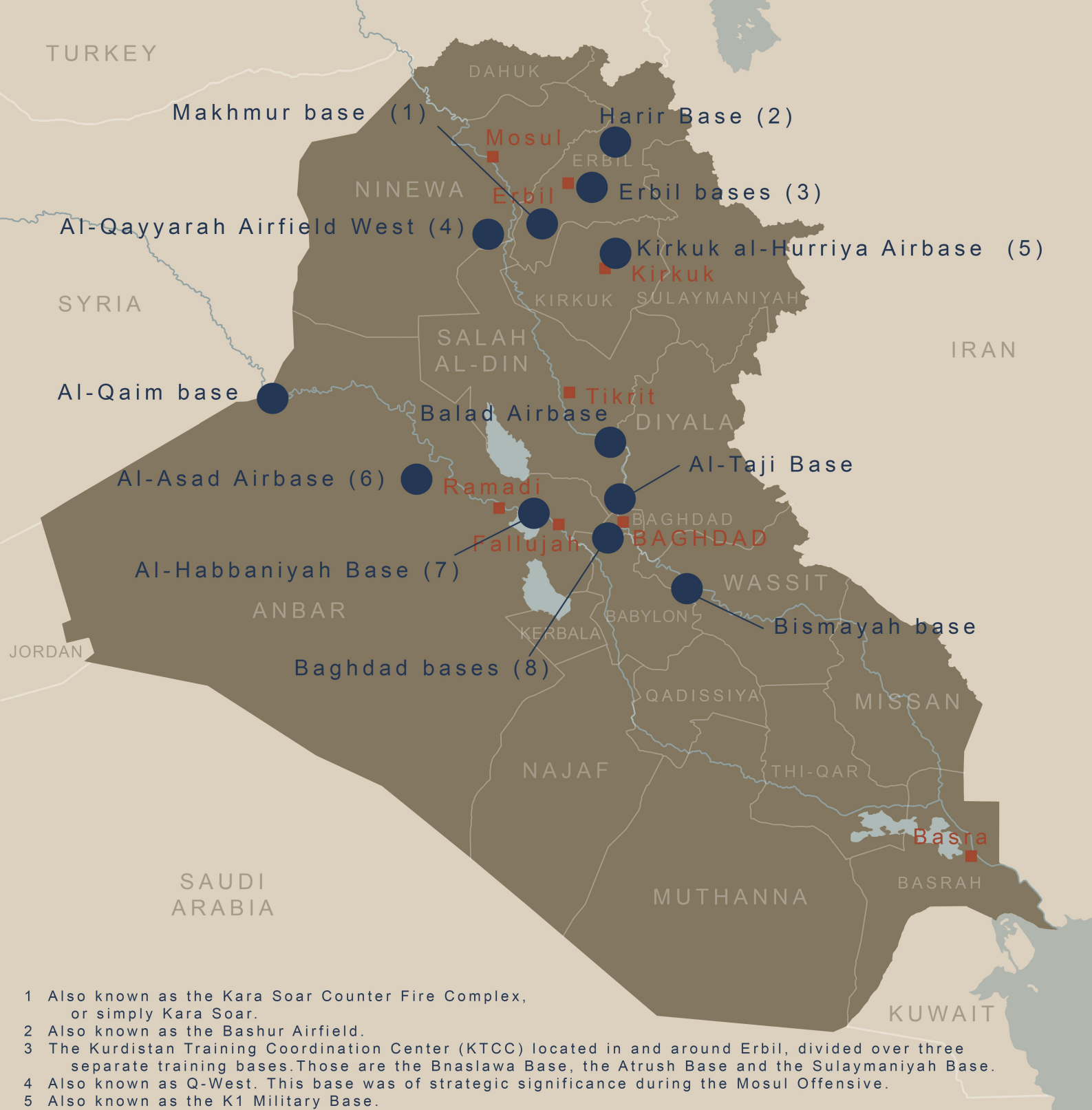
# Acknowledgements

Although submitted as the final requirement to fulfil the Master in International Relations, this thesis is embedded in a much longer academic journey that started at Utrecht University in 2013. In fact, my first steps into academia were because of an introductory lecture on military history given by Prof. dr. Isabelle Duyvesteyn.

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Last but certainly not least, I thank David Snetselaar. You taught me to never stop questioning and not to be afraid to prod boundaries of understanding with curiosity and wonder. Thank you for your never-ending support, both intellectually and emotionally.

TURKEY

Makhmur base (1)

Harir Base (2)

Mosul

DAHUK

ERBIL

Erbil bases (3)

Erbil

NINEWA

Al-Qayyarah Airfield West (4)

Kirkuk al-Hurriya Airbase (5)

Kirkuk

SYRIA

KIRKUK

SULAYMANIYAH

IRAN

SALAH
AL-DIN

Tikrit

Al-Qaim base

Balad Airbase

DIYALA

Al-Taji Base

Al-Asad Airbase (6)

Ramadi

Al-Habbaniyah Base (7)

Fallujah

BAGHDAD

BAGHDAD

WASSIT

Bismayah base

ANBAR

BABYLON

JORDAN

KERBALA

Baghdad bases (8)

QADISSIYA

MISSAN

NAJAF

THI-QAR

SAUDI
ARABIA

MUTHANNA

Basra

BASRAH

KUWAIT

1  Also known as the Kara Soar Counter Fire Complex,
     or simply Kara Soar.
2  Also known as the Bashur Airfield.
3  The Kurdistan Training Coordination Center (KTCC) located in and around Erbil, divided over three
     separate training bases. Those are the Bnaslawa Base, the Atrush Base and the Sulaymaniyah Base.
4  Also known as Q-West. This base was of strategic significance during the Mosul Offensive.
5  Also known as the K1 Military Base.
6  Previously known as Qadisiyah Airbase.
7  Also known as Camp Taqaddum.
8  There were two specialized training sites in this capital.

Disclaimer: This infographic is based on non-governmental,
open access sources and should not be treated as an exhaustive list.
The actual number of bases may diverge.

infographic: Geeske Illustrations

# Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| BPC | Building Partner Capacity |
| CJTF-OIR | Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve |
| CTEP | Counter-ISIL Train and Equip Program |
| CTS | Counter Terrorism Service in Iraq |
| DoD | U.S. Department of Defense |
| DoS | U.S. Department of State |
| ERD | Emergency Response Division in Iraq |
| FP | Federal Police in Iraq |
| GPPi | Global Public Policy Institute |
| HRW | Human Rights Watch |
| IP | Iraqi Police |
| ISF | Iraqi Security Force |
| ISIL | Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant |
| | *Da'esh* is Arabic |
| ITEF | Iraq Train and Equip Fund |
| KRG | Kurdistan Regional Government |
| MoD | Ministry of Defence in Iraq |
| MoI | Ministry of Interior in Iraq |
| OIR | Operation Inherent Resolve |
| PA | Principal-agent |
| PMU | Popular Mobilization Units, also known as the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) |
| | *Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi* in Arabic |
| SDF | Syrian Democratic Forces |
| SFA | Security Force Assistance |
| TMF | Tribal Mobilization Force |
| | *Hashd al-Asha'iri* in Arabic |
| VNSAs | Violent Non-State Actors |

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# 1 | Introduction

After years of intense American investment in the training, advising and equipping of the armed forces that operated in the complex Iraqi security architecture that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Lieutenant Colonel John Tien reported in 2013 that '[t]he Iraqi security forces are definitely capable of securing their country' (Tan 2013). Ironically, only a year later, in June 2014, at least 30,000 Iraqi soldiers and military leaders fled in less than 48 hours when 'a band of fewer than 1,000 "terrorists" smashed their way into Mosul' (The Economist 2014).

The seizure of Mosul marked the 'crowning achievement' of the rapid takeover of a Sunni jihadist group that announced itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). There, within the country's second largest city – home to more than 1.2 million people and the historical centre in the Middle East region – ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic caliphate and the revival of the medieval Muslim theocracy in front of the city's Grand Mosque of al-Nuri (Hauslohner 2014). Beside the symbolic importance, the takeover of Mosul also brought a significant military leverage. The American multi-billion dollar investment in force equipment fell into the hands of ISIL fighters, which made them even more lethal.

Hundreds of civilians died during the battle for Mosul and another half a million were displaced (Lafta et al. 2018). Yet, instead of being framed as a failure, the loss of civilian life and the stories of the victims were framed as the justification to incentivize an international campaign 'to military defeat DA'ESH in the Combined Joint Operation Area *by, with, and through* regional partners in order to enable whole-of-governmental actions to increase regional stability' (CJTF-OIR n.d., my own emphasis). The fall of Mosul meant the beginning of the formally established Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), or simply Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), by the U.S.-led Global Coalition against Daesh (hereinafter referred to as the Coalition). Ironically, this group of, at the time of writing, 82 partner states resumed the same strategy that had been used before the fall of the city: 'training and equipping trusted local forces' (Secretary of Defense Testimony 2015).

This indirect way of engaging in the fight against ISIL became a central component not only of OIR, but in many other global conflicts in the modern era all around the world. The assistance of local forces is, according to former President Barack Obama (2015a), today's panacea to 'achieve a more sustainable victory' while 'it won't require us sending a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil'. The unfortunate reality is, however, that little is known about the sustainability of this military strategy. Available studies on Security Force Assistance (SFA) predominantly assess the effectiveness on the battlefield, but there is surprisingly

little academic research – let alone public debate – on its long-term effects and the kind of security it creates.

As a first attempt to rectify this relative inattention in the literature, this study will investigate what has been described by the then Commander of the Coalition, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Townsend, as 'the most significant urban combat to take place since the Second World War': the Mosul Offensive (Michaels 2017). The outline is as follows. In the first chapter the shift toward SFA as a key strategy is discussed and the main- and sub-questions of this research are specified. The second chapter then turns to a more abstract discussion on how this shift has been and can best be understood theoretically. Before turning to the case study, the third chapter presents the methodology, data, and limitations of this research. Subsequently, the fourth chapter analyses the way different actors worked together, exercised power, and assembled (in)security. Finally, the conclusion evaluates the impact of SFA, reflects on the ontology of security and avenues for future research.

# 2 | The debate

*2.1 The trend*

Following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the Global War on Terror legitimated extraordinary costs and casualties to be made to stop an enemy that was like a 'cancer' and prompted major transformations in the field of security (Obama 2015a). Terrorist networks were operating anywhere and everywhere, which led to – in the words of Zygmunt Bauman – the end to the era of space. Instead, it marked the beginning of what became known as 'forever wars' (Filkins 2008), 'permanent or perpetual wars' (Bacevich 2010), 'everywhere wars' (Gregory 2011), and 'endless wars' (Duffield 2017) – terms that refer to the long U.S. military presence in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Somalia.

Though initially confined to academic debates, these descriptions now resonate within American politics. Disillusioned by the costly and counterproductive military operations, the conviction that U.S. foreign military affairs should be characterized by a so-called light- or small-footprint received wide public support. In fact, this stance seems to be 'one of the few principles uniting actors as diverse as foreign policy realists, progressives, nearly all of the presidential candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary, and President Donald Trump' (Fontaine 2019).

Already, the U.S. and its Western allies have increasingly shifted to a form of military interventionism that counters threats at a distance. The NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, for instance, reduced its troops to 17,000 in 2019 which once was at a height of 140,000 in 2011 (BBC 2015; NATO 2019). Concurrently, remote technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles and the use of private military companies increasingly enabled Western actors to physically withdraw from the battlefield (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2019).

Economic and political risks for Western troops in foreign conflicts gradually decreased, but it also left military strategists and policy advisers with a dilemma of how to achieve the interests that prompted the military interventions in the first place. How to stop global terrorism without physical interference? How to 'seize, clear and hold terrain' during international interventions without boots on the ground (Knowles and Matisek 2019, 10)? It is in this context that William McRaven, former head of the U.S. Special Operations Command, argued that it will be the 'indirect operations that will prove decisive in the global security arena' (Robinson 2012). This meant, for instance, that with the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, the U.S. started to heavily invest in training and equipping Afghan forces to conduct counterterrorism operations under the supervision of the remaining Western troops. This enabled the U.S. to use Afghanistan as an outpost to not only counter threats inside the country, but also terrorist networks in neighbouring countries like Pakistan (Petraeus and Serchuk 2020).

Before turning to the results of these practices, it is important to make explicit what is referred to when speaking of the indirect approach to accomplish security objectives. This approach is primarily executed through building the capacity of foreign security forces with activities that aim to train, organize, equip, rebuild and advise – all together called Security Force Assistance (SFA). The ultimate goal of SFA activities, as defined in the U.S. Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-13 and later used by NATO members in the Allied Joint Doctrine (AJD) 3-16, is to create security forces that are 'competent, capable, sustainable, committed, and confident, and have a security apparatus tied to regional stability' (Joint Doctrine Note 1-13, x). Eventually, this should make the host nation strong and stable enough to resist internal and transnational threats.

Even though building partner capacity has its roots in the Cold War period, the resources invested in training and equipping local groups to combat violent extremist organizations has skyrocketed since 9/11. Exemplary is how the funding for the State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance program, one of its SFA programs, has grown more than threefold in the past decade,[1] which enabled the U.S. to run multiple military training facilities in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Donati 2019). In an attempt to map the overall costs spent by the State Department, *The Costs of War Project* at Brown University estimated that since 2001 at least $127 billion is invested in assistance programs that are implemented in more than 40% of the world's countries (Savell 2019). The financial investment clearly reflects how SFA became 'a major pillar' of America's security policies (Biddle 2017, 18), and yet these numbers reflect only part of the actual money spent. Other activities or programs are run separately or covertly by the Department of Defense, its Special Operation Forces, or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

All together, these extraordinary investments in establishing peace and providing security might come across as altruistic endeavours, yet the practice is not solely concerned with assisting. Instead, it helps the U.S. and its Western allies with – in the words of the DoD – 'shaping the internal security environment in ways that promote and protect U.S. interests' (U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense 1997, 9). This double agenda (discussed in the context of proxy warfare in chapter 3) is not always appreciated or successful. Referring back to the Afghan case, it is important to mention the recent peace negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban. One of the requirements the Afghan non-state actor set before signing the deal on 29 February 2020, was that all Western troops that are still present to support Afghan forces will also withdraw from the country in a period of fourteen months. Remarkably, the imposed exodus was presented to the American population as the fulfilment of one of Trump's presidential promises ('It's time after all these years to bring our people back home', BBC 2020), while the agreement primarily meant the jettison of its indirect approach.

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[1] The Anti-Terrorism Assistance program started with $38 million in 2001 compared to the $128 million it requested for 2020 (Donati 2019).

Local actors, like the Taliban, are not the only ones that take a critical stance vis-à-vis the indirect approach. Western scholars and journalists voiced questions and concerns because of the profound risks it involves. The dilemmas raised will be discussed below.

*2.2 The puzzle*

Meant to strengthen recipient actors that lack the capable institutions, the will, or the legitimacy that enables them to address threats that are in the interests of the U.S. (such as terrorism or illicit drug trafficking), security assistance is mostly provided to so-called 'weak states' and 'ungoverned spaces'. The instability of host-countries that face internal problems often creates a context in which violent non-state actors (VNSAs) thrive, which has led to failing missions in the past. Similar to the example of Mosul given in the introduction, an American SFA program in Syria was supposed to train 5,400 fighters but in reality had only been able to train a little more than hundred local men, who – to make matters worse – soon surrendered the provided war materials worth millions to a military group linked to al-Qaeda (Brooks 2015; Martinez 2015; Sullivan 2017).

Besides the risk of failure, the SFA provider can never be a hundred percent sure that the actions of the trained foreign force will consistently align with their goals (Sullivan 2017). Weak states, for instance, might see rival elites or the state military itself as its primary threat, whereas the U.S. interests are typically focused on hybrid threats, like terrorism (Ibrahim 2009; Biddle 2017). Moreover, it is known that the military personnel or the state apparatus of weak states are often involved in practices of bribery, abuse or corruption, and yield control through partnerships with local strongmen and militias (Goodman and Arabia 2018; Knowles and Matisek 2019, 15; Matisek and Reno 2019, 65-73). This context contains the risk that the intervening actor becomes instrumental to the very behaviours that fuel the instability that the SFA tries to address.

In addition to the already complicated context, the past decade witnessed a new trend outlined by the Security Assistance Monitor (SAM). That is, irregular 'moderate' forces also increasingly receive SFA – based on the conviction that local non-state actors in some cases are better embedded in the context of conflict and thus in a better position to counter transnational terrorist organizations. The SAM estimated that circa '14 percent of the publicly disclosed security assistance, and an unknown amount of covert assistance, currently goes to non-state actors', such as insurgents, paramilitary groups, or warlords in Afghanistan, Angola, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere (Sullivan 2017). Inherent to the nature of these groups, non-state actors are often difficult to monitor and experience has shown the dangerous character of this endeavour.

For example, anti-Taliban militias empowered by the U.S. Special Forces during counterinsurgency missions misused their training and position, and turned to 'kidnappings and extortion' (Goldstein 2015). Other examples, like the infamous Dutch non-lethal assistance program that sponsored groups like al-Jabhat al-Shamiya, demonstrate how both lethal and non-lethal material

support to 'moderate' militias has ended in the hands of hostile actors like ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front (see for instance McLeary 2015; Amnesty International 2015; Holdert and Dahhan 2018). The vicious character of VNSAs and the lack of good monitoring options enlarge the potential hazards already associated with engaging in SFA.

*2.3 The question*

The examples above do not stand alone and raise fundamental questions. Why is the practice of SFA so popular despite its drawbacks and risks? Can security force assistance and building partner capacity programs ever realize their desired effects? Is it worth the diffusion of the state's monopoly on the use of force? These are all relevant questions, but to better understand and value this trend it is important to begin with addressing three other questions that deserve greater analytical scrutiny.

First of all, how does the development toward SFA fit into the broader discussion on recent shifts in warfare? Second, how can we understand the dynamic between the sponsor and the beneficiary? Third, and crucially, what implications do these understandings have for the conceptualization of security governance efforts? To answer these questions, the following chapter will discuss the literature focusing on *proxy warfare*, *principal-agent theory, security,* and *assemblages*. Building on these academic debates, the thesis will than take the battle for the city of Mosul, being an illustration of SFA in Iraq channelled through the Counter-ISIL Train and Equip Programs (CTEP) in practice, as its case study to address the following research question:

> *How and with what effect has the U.S.-led Global Coalition against Daesh tried to govern security outcomes in Iraq through the SFA programs that were central to Operation Inherent Resolve between 2014 and 2018?*

To answer this question, the research addresses four main sub-questions. First of all, what alliances were formed by the Coalition in order to successfully execute the Mosul Offensive? Second, how did the Coalition used SFA to overcome conflicting interests among the forged alliances, both at the local and the international level? Third, how has security, being a derivative concept, been understood by all actors? Lastly, the thesis will reflect on what kind of security is created in and around Mosul through SFA.

# 3 | Literature review

*3.1 Understanding the trend*

The shift toward training and assisting partner militaries in fragile states – the new 'ideological and security challenge of our time' according to former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (2010) – led to what some call a coining-competition amongst scholars who attempt to define this 'new' method of military intervention. Most notably is the concept of 'proxy warfare', also referred to as 'war on the cheap' or 'surrogate warfare' (Krieg and Rickli 2018). Though the appeal to proxy warfare most likely has existed as long as war itself, the conceptual genealogy in the field of international relations and strategic studies is much younger than the practice.

'Proxy warfare' as a concept was developed during the post-1945 period, when the use of proxies became particularly prevalent. In the wake of the Second World War, a new era of great-power rivalry began that was marked by the threat of using nuclear weapons. With the risk of a catastrophic all-out war being too high, policy makers considered proxies an essential factor for obtaining their strategic goals, exerting influence, and maximizing utility. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the indirect strategy remained undiminished. As mentioned before, especially in the post-9/11 world order that was characterized by some as divided between the 'axis of evil' and the 'coalition of the willing', local actors were increasingly believed to play a crucial role.

Despite the increased attention for and use of proxies since the Cold War, Andrew Mumford (2013, 1) indicates that it remains 'chronically under-analysed' in academia. This is reflected in the definitional contention surrounding the concept. In some debates, proxy warfare is described as a tactic in a broader military trend, like *remote warfare* – a strategy that refers to 'the countering of threats at a distance, without the deployment of large military forces' (Watson 2018) – or *network wars* – a term that defines modern wars as reflexive network enterprises that move away from the traditional state monopoly on the legitimate use of force towards new forms of governance based on complex networks comprised of state and non-state actors (Duffield 2002).

Both debates provide explanations to the question *why* states resort to the use of proxies. Long and costly total-wars contributed to war fatigue and risk aversion that made proxies appealing. Besides, the 'enemies of the state' are working through so-called transnational shadow networks which, according to some, have required state militaries to respond in kind (Niva 2013, 186; Demmers and Gould 2018, 365). Few scholars, however, have discussed the practice of proxy warfare as a 'separate and unique category of war' (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984, 264). Consequently, it remains contested what exactly defines a proxy war. In 1964, Karl Deutsch spoke of 'an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means

for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies' (1964, 102). Deutsch' definition represents the premise that at the time was predominant in the field of political science, that is: states are the key actors in the international order.

During the post-Cold War era, the erosion of the Westphalian state gave rise to what Seyom Brown (2016, 244) calls a *polyarchic* international world order. Power became diffused and exercised in 'a highly interactive and interdependent, yet decentralized, system of many kinds of actors, large and small, state and non-state'. Definitions that presented sponsors as monolithic and powerful in contrast to proxies described as 'third-party tools of statecraft without any agency, intent, or (...) interests' (Innes 2012, xiii) became increasingly criticized. Instead of adopting a state-centric approach, Michael Innes (2012, xv) argues that sponsor-proxy relations should be defined as a 'symbiosis between state and non-state actors' that can take many different forms and shapes.

Correspondingly, Mumford (2013, 11) explains that proxy warfare is the 'indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome'. Undertaken to maximize interests while simultaneously minimizing risks, proxy wars are 'constitutive of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and their chosen proxies who are the conduit for weapons, training and funding from the benefactor' (Mumford 2013, 11). Moving beyond state-centrism, this definition became prevalent in today's studies of proxies.

Nonetheless, discrepancies still exist over how sponsors and proxies, be they state or non-state actors, relate to each other. First of all, Mumford (2013, 17) argues that '[t]he fulfilment of a strategic goal by proxy does not necessarily have to be a conscious or deliberate act', whereas Anthony Pfaff (2017, 311) advocates the opposite: 'the proxy relationship must be intentional'. Second, another point of disagreement arises in case the proxy relationship *should* be seen as intentional. Related to how the burden of war is divided, some qualify the sponsor as an actor '[w]illing to wound, and yet afraid to strike',[2] while others portray the sponsor as 'a treaty-bound friend willing to share in the blood cost of a war to achieve a shared strategic vision' (Mumford 2013, 16). Third, more recently scholars like Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss argued against conventional wisdom that portrays sponsors as superior: 'Surrogates have done their fair share of manipulating presumably stronger partners' (Moghadam and Wyss 2018). In fact, in 2020 they demonstrated that proxy relationships are asymmetrical and can just as well be forged among two non-state actors.[3]

Yet, despite these and other contestations over proxy-relations, one aspect seems to be universally accepted. That is, the principal-agent (PA) theory facilitates the best framework to find

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[2] To quote from Alexander Pope's 'Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot' published in 1735.
[3] In their article, Moghadam and Wyss discuss three cases of non-state sponsorship: al-Qaeda's engagement with Sunni Bedouin tribes in Yemen; the the Kurdish People's Protection Units' sponsorship of the Syrian Democratic Forces; and Hezbollah's engagement with the Lebanese Resistance Brigades.

answers to the gaps and disagreements in the literature (Rondeaux and Sterman 2019, 20; Fox 2019, 5). Seen as a form of proxy warfare, SFA is often (if not always) situated in the same theoretical framework of PA theory (e.g. Salehyan et al. 2011, 711; Biddle 2017, 126; Rittinger 217, 396). Though this approach has provided insightful explanations on the short-term effectiveness of SFA, the following paragraph identifies and analyses how this approach restricts the scope of the empirical analysis of SFA and our understanding of the complexity of contemporary security governance. First, the PA theory and its application to SFA will be explained, after which the underlying (ontological) assumptions will be challenged.

*3.2 Principal-agent theory*

Originally developed by economists to understand and explain the interaction between parties to a contract, PA theory centralizes the relation between one actor (the principal) that delegates authority to another (the agent) to act on its behalf. Problematized is the fact that the interests of both actors are very unlikely to align completely. The principal – who is typically motivated by the desire to minimize costs, displace responsibility, and/or improve the efficiency by delegating responsibilities to experts in the field – can try to overcome this discrepancy in interests by conditional (rewards) or enforcement (sanctions) measures, applying selection criteria, or for instance through audits. The resources required to align the principal's interests with the agent's behaviour, or the losses imposed on the principal when alignments fail, are defined as the 'agency costs' (Jensen and Meckling 1976, 308-310; Miller 2005, 204).

When reviewing the literature on SFA within the broader debate on proxy warfare, we can distinguish two main perspectives on the agency costs dilemma: a realist perspective and a constructivist perspective. The realist PA theory is firmly grounded in the tradition of rational choice modelling that frames both the principal and the agent as utility-maximisers that act upon a costs-benefit calculation. Though this does not necessarily mean that the actors will always chase self-interests instead of collective goals, it does assume that both actors act rationally and will always seek their own goal achievement (Delreux and Adriaensen 2017, 11-12).

In addition, realist PA approaches take 'goal incongruity' as the starting point of analysis, presuming that the principal and the agent will, from the onset, have inherently different interests (Byman 2006, 112; Salehyan 2010, 502). Hence, the principal will contract the agent who most likely will meet the principal's goals with 'the least possible costs, the greatest possible returns, and in a timely manner' (Burchard and Burgess 2018, 342). In such accounts, SFA is solely provided when it is thought to be successful in pursuit of the principal's desire to increase power in the international world order. Security assistance, like Joe Wills (2017, 56) similarly explained for the case of human rights, is solely 'the epiphenomenal expression of distributions of power and interests'.

By contrast, constructivist theorists emphasize the historical and social specificity that is largely ignored by the realists focus on goal incongruity between the principal and the agent. By questioning what ideas and processes preceded the incongruity and what influenced the principal's decisions, preferences, and interests, constructivist PA theorists destabilize the realist assumption of fixed and predetermined relations and goals. The focus is shifted from 'goal incongruity' to the social and discursive process that materializes this incongruity into practice, to paraphrase Eric Rittinger (2017, 397).

Rittinger applied this constructivist approach to analyse the variety in the American understanding of raising, training and arming proxies over the years. To understand this variety, he argued, one has to look at how the U.S. actively attributed identity to its agents, which in turn (though maybe subconsciously) defined the agency problems as well as the appropriate countermeasures to change the agent's undesired behaviour. For instance, the U.S. portrayed its agents as 'racial inferiors' and 'partisans' before the Second World War, while this discourse changed to 'human rights abusers' in the post-war period. The first typology suggests a 'biological rooted' character that can only be tempered and managed, while the second description implies room for transformation (Vitalis 2010, 929; Rittinger 2017, 397).

The conceptualization of recipients as potentially being transformed remains dominant within the U.S. approach to SFA. Although some policymakers advocate that behaviour can best be changed through training and education[4] and others through punishment,[5] goal incongruity is in both cases historicized as socially constructed – revealing the contingent nature of agency problems (Fierke and Jørgensen 2001).

### 3.3 The alternative

Both the realist and constructivist approaches to PA theory explanations of SFA have strengths and weaknesses. The realist argument that the creation of international norms and alliances are directly related to the material interests of the actors involved has been proven a vital aspect in modern warfare (e.g. Christia 2012; Kaldor 2012). At the same time, the constructivists viewpoint on the

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[4] Policymakers in the so-called modernization school would argue that too many sanctions during security force training will work counterproductive, resulting in the relapse of agents into even worse performances. Much rather, argues the modernization school, producing modern military forces while minimizing the agency costs is effectively established through military and human rights training (Burchard and Burgess 2018, 344).

[5] The accountability school, on the contrary, is convinced that not training but punishment will lead to more efficient militaries and operations. Foundational to the accountability school is the Leahy Law, proposed by Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy in 1997 to guarantee that '[n]o assistance shall be furnished under this chapter or the Arms Export Control Act [22 U.S.C. 2751 et seq.] to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights' (Foreign Assistance Act, 1961). In 2010, the Leahy Law became accompanied by the obligatory process of vetting (a practice explained in chapter 5), to ensure that no recipient has a record of allegations. Only when violators are held accountable, implemented sanctions may be lifted, according to this school (Gaston 2017a).

agency problem as an empirical question highlights the fact that norms and interests are not static and objective but formed by social and historical processes.

Nevertheless, it is important to outline that both accounts within the PA studies of foreign force assistance centralize a dyadic and hierarchical relationship between the principal (predominantly the U.S.) and the host nation or non-state actor as agent. Oftentimes, this framing results in descriptions of the principal and the agent, as well as their relationship, as being stable and consolidated. This made PA studies often insensitive to fractionalizations within groups or alliances that continuously change, even though this happened time and again in the well-known case of Afghanistan, be it based on ethnicity, religious convictions, or the anticipated strategic benefits (Christia 2012).

Secondly, the focus of PA studies on the act of delegating the principal's authority to the agent foregrounds the question of who capitalizes the shifting balance of power most. Emphasizing the power ratio redirects the discussion towards the asymmetry within the playing field, whereas the complexity of the interaction between all (and not just two stable) actors involved as well as the agency at different levels seems to get lost.

Lastly, but crucially, the PA studies approach *security* as a stable entity 'out there' that can be reached when a set of pre-given actors are able to overcome the potentially conflicting interests and instead successfully align and cooperate. Though this assumption is often made implicitly, it has had real consequences on how SFA has been studied thus far, as the ontological question of *what* and *whose* security should be achieved, as well as how it should be organized, remained largely unanswered.

Based on the above, this thesis provides an alternative that attempts to widen the scope of SFA research by moving away from the traditional PA approach. Building on critical security studies insights, it approaches security not as a static end-goal, but as an 'essentially contested' concept. This means refraining from a priori theorizing its ontology, and instead focus on empirical questions (Hazbun 2016, 1054). In doing so, SFA is first and foremost studied as a practice, as opposed to a concept or a policy, that involves a variety of actors who operate in a dynamic context influenced by both material interests as well as norms shaped by social and historical trajectories. This can be analysed by using the analytical concept of assemblages. The next chapter will elaborate on this alternative theoretical framework and explains how it will guide the data analysis.

# 4 | Research design

The design of this study is built on a concept that originated in the discipline of art and was adopted in the 1980s by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. In the field of social sciences, they advocated in favour of describing and understanding social phenomena as the interaction between dynamic and dissimilar elements. The purpose of this chapter is to indicate how the assemblage approach can also be applied to security studies, and specifically to studies of SFA as an alternative to the dominant PA theory. After outlining the theoretical framework, the data collection and its limitations will be presented.

## 4.1 Theoretical framework

An assemblage approach resonates to some extent with the turn to practice in the discipline of international relations, but differs in that it does not primarily focus on 'routinized security practices' (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6; Schouten 2014, 26) or the resultant formation such as the 'community of practice' (Bueger 2013). Instead, an assemblage approach aims to shed light on the 'mode of ordering heterogeneous entities so that they work together for a certain time' (Müller 2015, 28). The resulting social and material formations – here referred to as assemblages – are by no means stable nor consolidated, but are continuously re- and disassembled, driven by the desire to govern. Seen from this perspective, security is itself at stake and the outcome of plural security governance that tries to 'exercise power in complexity' (Demmers and Gould 2018, 367).

Though security governance traditionally refers to the coordination efforts between security apparatuses of hegemonic states, the theoretical framework of assemblages moves away from rigid 'institutional and spatial boundaries' (Schouten 2014, 86) and instead allows for a rich analysis of today's fragmented and complex security architecture. The relational processes and practices of stabilizing (in)security becomes the central object of research, that typically involves an array of both local, regional, national and international actors, as well as material aspects.

Applying this to the case of SFA, it is possible to not only define the role of the principal and the agent, but also of material components (e.g. weapon systems, ammunitions, intelligence, or communication technology), multiple authorities or principals (e.g. the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Defense Department, the CIA, NATO, or international anti-terrorism coalitions), SFA facilitators on the ground (e.g. militaries or private military and security companies), and shifting recipients (e.g. warring leaders and militant that switch sides) – to name but a few of the (often competing) actors.

In addition, an assemblage analytic approaches the above-mentioned set of heterogeneous elements not as related to each other through set hierarchies or rules, as is often the case in PA studies. Much rather, actors are approached as situated entities that operate in a broader political and

socio-economic context and are limited by the rules, roles and the 'logic of appropriateness' assigned to their social positions (Jabri 1996, 70). Though this does not imply that powerful structures or the rational individual/state do not exist, the argument made is that security governance arises from the continuous interactions between these elements, while acknowledging that some actors are more capacitated and powerful than others.

Accordingly, a key feature of assemblages is that phenomena are studied as created out of disparate elements that are brought into 'shifting and unstable relationships' (Dewey 1991, 140) which essentially represent a 'governance formation that is neither "global" nor "local"' (Demmers and Gould 2018, 367). These formations should not be seen as the expected result of a uniform global governance logic. Rather, hard work is needed to keep social and material formations together and govern through interventions that cultivate desired outcomes and avert undesired ones, to paraphrase Tania Murray Li (2007, 264).

Interventions, to be more specific, are defined by Li as consisting of six significant practices that are required to assemble and exercise power, but received little attention by scholars. The first practice is 'forging alignments', a term that refers to all endeavours undertaken to connect the interests and objectives of all actors to 'an assemblage', as she calls it. The second practice, 'rendering technical', refers to the framing of problems and solutions as technical, straightforward, and easy to solve, in order to present the assemblage more rational and coherent than is the case in reality. Third, Li defines 'authorizing knowledge', which concerns qualifying and accepting knowledge that reinforces the assemblage as true and legitimate, while rejecting knowledge that critiques and therefore threatens the assemblage. The fourth practice is 'managing failures and contradictions'. To keep the social and material formation together, failures of and contradictions in the assemblage are presented as the result of rectifiable rather than fundamental deficiencies. Fifth, Li describes the need for 'anti-politics'. This term refers to all practices concerned with avoiding political questions on, or debates about 'how and what to govern'. Lastly, Li outlines the importance of 'reassembling', a practice predominantly exercised by means of language. Old discourses and fundamental terms are modified, revised or utilized for new ends (Li 2007, 265).

Based on the above, the assemblage approach will be used to examine how power is exercised and security is assembled through the continuous interaction between the various departments of the U.S. government and its allies, SFA facilitators on the ground, and the shifting recipients of the CTEP during the Mosul Offensive. This analysis will provide insight into how, through the six practices of assemblage, the Coalition forged alignments and overcame conflicting interests to cultivate a desired outcome, in this case to 'degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL' (Secretary of Defense Testimony 2015). As such, security governance is not understood as the result of a static, hierarchical relationship between the principal – the U.S.-led Coalition – and the agent – the recipients of the CTEP programs.

Rather, security is governed (and experienced) during the Battle for Mosul by an assemblage of local, regional, national and international actors and material formations, that are here referred to as the 'anti-ISIL assemblage'.

It is important to note that on an operational level a distinction can be made between the training and equipping of local forces and the actual execution of military operations, where the latter is often taken as a measurement for the success of the SFA. However, an assemblage analytic provides a social-political analysis of the continuous interactions between the actors before, during, and following the military operations. Success is therefore not measured as the effectiveness of an operation or offensive, but as the continued ability of an assemblage, despite conflicting interests and internal tensions, to produce the desired outcome and avoid undesired ones.

## 4.2 Data collection

To study the case, a variety of sources are used to trace and investigate the multiple components of the anti-ISIL assemblage. First of all, due to the contemporary character of the case chosen, the thesis could only build on a small body of literature that studied the Mosul Offensive (e.g. Plebani 2017; Lafta et al. 2018; Broekhof et al. 2019). As a consequence, the following chapter is primarily based on document analysis of a range of primary sources.

Official policy documents published by the CJTF-OIR, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), and U.S. Department of State (DoS) on the situation in Mosul between 2014 and 2018 formed the starting point of this research. Besides (joint) statements by the Coalition published online and the U.S. Fiscal Year overviews and requests for the Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF), official policy documents predominantly included the Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) quarterly report to the United States Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve. The quarterly reports are important as they reflect the envisioned security and the indicated means and methods needed to materialize the envisioned security, as well as how this changed over the course of the mission.

Beside the official policy documents, the publicly available press briefings by the Coalition between 2014 and 2018 have been key primary sources for this research. These documents provide a valuable reflection of the concerns and questions in Western society represented by journalists from different newspapers or platforms (varying from the New York Times, CNN and NPR to Kurdistan24 and Anadolu Agency) on the one side, and the Coalition's way of either confirming or countering the knowledge spread to the wider public on the other side.

In addition, information is gathered and triangulated as much as possible with sources derived from experts on the ground. On the one hand, the thesis draws on the investigative journalism and research of organizations like the Rise Foundation, the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), the Afghanistan Analyst Network (AAN), and the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS)

at the American University in Sulaimani in Iraq, who all researched local, hybrid and (sub)state security forces through fieldwork and conducting interviews in and around the Nineveh Governorate (also referred to as 'Ninewa') and its provincial capital Mosul. On the other hand, the work of investigative journalists and local research institutions is compared and contrasted with (translated) statements and speeches by Iraqi and Iraqi-Kurdish leaders as well as Iraqi non-governmental organizations like the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Mosul Eye, and the New Iraq Center who all publish bilingual reports (English/Arabic).

Before turning to the case study that is built on the above-mentioned sources, the following subparagraph will first briefly discuss the limitations that have to be kept in mind when reading the analysis.

*4.3 Limitations*

It is important to underscore that each of the primary and secondary sources discussed above have been gathered and analysed not to provide an exhaustive account of the events and actors involved in Mosul during and after ISIL's occupation. Instead, the information is used to explain how and with what effect the *U.S.-led Coalition* tried to govern security outcomes in Iraq through SFA while this inevitably involved engaging with multiple state and non-state actors with different or conflicting interests. In doing so, each practice as defined by Li will be discussed and explained based on separate sub-case studies in order to understand how the Coalition tried to exercise power and govern. It is important to note that the different sub-case studies provide in-depth analytical insight, but do not offer a chronological, comprehensive historical account of the Battle for Mosul.

Also, the focus on the Coalition means that the role of regional power like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran – who also established training camps to train local Iraqis in the fight against ISIL – is often covered less extensively, or in some cases not at all.[6] Further research into the practices of such actors involved (especially when studied through sources published in the mother tongue of the referent object, for instance Arabic) is warranted because it could provide a valuable, more complete representation of how ISIL was fought at different levels and in geopolitical spheres. At the same time, such an account is not strictly necessary to understand how *the U.S.-led Coalition* tried to align opposing (non-state) actors and exercised power through the assemblage.

Even though the focus is on the Coalition and the 'hard work required' to keep the assemblage together, the theoretical framework enables to not solely link the outcome to either the principal or the agent. Instead, the six practices guiding the analysis allow to acknowledge 'the autonomous role of different types of actors and institutions, (...) and then to explore how the

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[6] On the rationale of regional powers that engaged in the fight against ISIL in Iraq, see the work of Marina Calculli, 'The Liberation of Mosul in the Middle Eastern Balance of Power', in: Plebani, Andrea (ed.), *After Mosul: Re-inventing Iraq* (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2017).

interactions among these actors and institutions can explain outcomes' (McKeen-Edwards and Porter 2013, 25), thus placing agency at multiple levels.

# 5 | Case study: Countering the Islamic State in Iraq

On request of the Iraqi government and united under the motto 'One Mission, Many Nations', an international coalition of over sixty states and partner organizations was formed in September 2014, in response to the fall of Mosul. The rapid takeover of Shi'a territory had also spurred an immediate response from both Iran and Turkey, but according to the official website of the U.S.-led Global Coalition, they provided more assistance than any other actor operating in the battlefield.

Besides significant air support, the assistance consisted of what Brigadier General Dave Anderson described as 'everything that they need to be able to shoot, move and communicate, which is all that you need to defeat an enemy' (Press briefing 2016d). Military vehicles that got lost when ISIL took over cities like Mosul – such as battle tanks, engineering vehicles, fighter jets and helicopters – were replaced by the Coalition. Equipment also included ammunition, personal protection, missiles, and what else was needed to fortify combat units (e.g. Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2014; Smith 2014; Defense Industry Daily 2016). In addition to the equipment, the Coalition opened multiple so-called Building Partner Capacity (BPC) training sites to supervise the recipients on how to use the combat materials and execute large military operations, such as the Battle for Mosul.[7]

Iraqis dubbed this mission 'We are coming, Nineveh', drawn from Prime Minister al-Abadi's pledge to liberate Mosul in 2016, 'which will be the fatal blow to Da'esh', he said (Freeman 2015). However, the Coalition presumed that this 'fatal blow' would not be materialized by the Iraqi Security Force (ISF) alone, given their earlier collapse when facing ISIL, and decided to also engage with the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF) that formed a part of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). This idea was strengthened by the Coalition's conviction that fighting ISIL with local forces would be more effective, as they, in the words of Colonel Steve Warren 'understand their neighborhoods and their towns and are much, much more able to counter these type[s] of insurgent or guerrilla campaigns' (Press briefing 2015b).

Yet, letting these armed groups act together under a common threat perception formed a major challenge for the Coalition. Using the assemblage analytic, the following paragraphs will attempt to unravel how the dissimilar actors were temporarily aligned under a common objective; how SFA allowed the U.S. and its partners to play a large role herein; and how the envisioned process toward security is reflected on the ground. In doing so, the following paragraphs and subparagraphs are structured by practice and actor. The order in which the practices and actors are discussed reflect

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[7] In the beginning, two bases were opened in Baghdad, one in Erbil and later also in Taji, Bismayah, and the Al Asad Airbase. The amount of SFA training bases grew over the years, but unfortunately there is no complete list available. Based on open access sources, an infographic is created and included on page iii of this thesis, in an attempt to fill this gap.

the author's choice, rather than a linear reality in which the practices of assemblage took place. In fact, Li outlined that the practices of assemblage usually interact with each other and can exist simultaneously. Where possible, this will be highlighted.

## 5.1 Forging alignments and rendering technical

By offering two perspectives, the following two subparagraphs analyse how the anti-ISIL assemblage was formed. The first perspective will focus on how the Coalition, acting on the invitation of the Iraqi government, sought to align with and unite the ISF, thereby expanding and building the capacity of the Iraqi armed forces. The second perspective focuses on how, in the meanwhile, the Kurdish Peshmerga attempted to forge alignments with the Coalition, securing international military and material support and a prominent position in the assemblage. Crucial to this analysis are the practices of 'forging alignments' and 'rendering technical' that highlight finding a common objective (the defeat of ISIL in Mosul) and framing obstructions to this common objective as technical problems that require simple, practical interventions – such as supplying equipment, offering training and providing air support. As will become clear, the biggest obstruction to realizing the common objective of retaking Mosul was the lack of unity and the persistent tensions within the assemblage.

### 5.1.1 The Iraqi Security Force

Under Saddam Hussein's reign, the national security force was proudly presented as the fourth-strongest military force worldwide. According to Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar (2017), many Iraqis today claim that the ISF 'is lucky if it can be considered the fourth-strongest army in Iraq – behind the PMU, Kurdistan's peshmerga forces, and Iraqi tribal fighters'. Since its collapse during the fall of Mosul between 4 and 10 June 2014, the Iraqi army struggled to regain its strength as well as its legitimacy. Investigations on state corruption demonstrated that at least 50,000 men had received army salaries without doing the actual work. These so-called 'ghost soldiers' hastened the Iraqi Army's failure and subsequent disintegration when facing ISIL (Evans 2014). Feelings of distrust against a government that failed to protect its citizens became amplified when two days after the fall of Mosul thousands of unarmed (mainly Shi'a) cadets were killed by ISIL militants at Camp Speicher (Alkhudary 2019). In the ensuing months, many Iraqis decided to find alternative ways to combat ISIL and secure themselves. As a consequence, the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force started to crumble – a trend that the U.S.-led Coalition sought to reverse.

The ISF became a prominent actor trained by the Coalition who explicitly placed all trained forces under the official Iraqi command: 'Every force that's going to fight ISIL in this country should be doing so in coordination with the government of Iraq' (Press briefing 2016a). This claim by Colonel John Dorrian on 8 February 2016 echoed earlier statements of his colleagues. Lieutenant

General Gary J. Volesky, for instance, stated on 10 October 2015 that 'the coalition only supports those -- those elements that are under the direct command and control of the Iraqi security forces' (Press briefing 2015a). It appears that in this way, the Coalition could forge alignments with different, in some cases even opposing, non-state actors without breaking the sovereignty of the government that invited them to intervene.

However, even though the Coalition tried to link all non-state actors to the ISF, aligning with the ISF itself turned out to be no easy task either, given the high level of fragmentation. Whereas some units reported to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) operated outside of their oversight and instead reported directly to the Prime Minister. Since its formation after the American intervention in 2003, the CTS has been trained by U.S. Special Operation Forces. The Iraqi population long mistrusted the CTS' autonomy and secretive, partisan operations, and infamously described the force as the *al-Firqa al-Qadhira*, meaning 'The Dirty Division' (Morris 2016; Krauss 2016). Only when the counterterrorism elite unit took a leading role in countering ISIL forces in 2014, they gained a new reputation as the country's 'most professional, technically capable force', or simply 'The Golden Division' (Neuhof 2016).

This renewed popularity spurred resentment from other Iraqi security forces operating under the MoD and the MoI that all struggled for 'resources, power, influence, and prestige' (Witty 2018, 33; Kenner and MacDiarmid 2017). Tensions came to the fore three weeks into the Mosul Offensive when approximately half of the CTS had been killed or injured and U.S. Central Command officers 'worried that the grinding battle is slowly destroying the division itself' as other forces largely stayed on the south-eastern periphery (Perry 2016; OIR Oct/Dec 2016, 5). Allegedly, the MoD divisions, who were already competing against each other,[8] avoided the dangerous areas not only out of fear of having to endure heavy casualties but also to disprove the image created of the CTS by the media (Witty 2018, 33-34; Perry 2016).

Similar situations occurred in western Mosul, where the forces under the MoI played a larger role. Resentful of the successes of the Golden Division, three armed infantry divisions that were trained by Coalition partners and played a key role in the Mosul Offensive started to treat the conflict 'as a competition' (Witty 2018, 34). The Federal Police (FP),[9] the Iraqi Police (IP),[10] and the

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[8] Three MoD controlled divisions, the 9th, 15th and 16th, were crucial in the battle to retake Mosul. The 16th Division had the official operational comment, but to their frustration it was the armored 9th Division that was seen as the most capable. Tensions not only existed among the divisions, but also within. The 15th Division, for instance, consisted of several Brigades that also cherished close ties with Iranian-backed Shi'a militias like Kata'ib Hezbollah (Dury-Agri et al. 2017; Knights 2016).

[9] The FP predominantly received training from the Italian Task Force 'Carabinieri', a Coalition partner assisted by the Czech Police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

[10] The IP, also known as the Nineveh Police, is a local force predominantly trained by Spanish Coalition forces, who helped them build a legitimate position which they lacked prior to ISIL's takeover. The Shi'a PMU (addressed below), however, were often working alongside the police, for instance at checkpoints (Rise Foundation 2017, 12-13).

Emergency Response Division (ERD)[11] all tried to recklessly retake as many neighbourhoods from ISIL as a way of proving their strength and legitimacy. The forces were competing against each other over key strategic buildings, while no holding forces were positioned within the conquered neighbourhoods. As a consequence, ISIL was often quick to reposition its snipers in and on the buildings while the CTS was battling ISIL alone (Morris 2017) – a situation clearly opposite to how the Coalition had envisioned it and which illustrates the need to better manage the internal tensions and conflicting interests rife in the assemblage.

When analysing the Coalition's response to the disunity in the ISF and specifically the contempt for the CTS, two different modes of ordering can be distinguished, aimed at keeping all the actors of the assemblage together, both locally and internationally. Firstly, in response to questions posed by Western critics on whether the damage inflicted on the CTS was becoming untenable, commanders consistently underlined the 'truly extraordinary work' of the counterterrorism force who were still 'firmly in the fight'. They 'applaud the courage and the determination and the military skills' of the group that, they acknowledged, was indeed bearing 'the brunt of the fighting in -- in almost every single scenario'. They were, however, fighting for a 'truly righteous cause' (Press briefing 2016e; 2017d). Though the tensions between the CTS and other ISF forces could be seen as a failure in, or negative consequence of forging alignments, the Coalition placed the emphasis repeatedly on the success of the CTS – despite the contrary messages received from the battlefield. Structural problems of fragmentations were avoided and hidden from the public as much as possible. Instead, the shared threat perception (the 'truly righteous cause') was highlighted in order to keep the assemblage together and legitimize its existence.[12]

Secondly, the Coalition responded to the fragmentation with a form of rendering technical. Whereas questions on the need to adjust the tactics or strategies of the ISF were structurally put aside on the pretext of Iraqi sovereignty,[13] Major General Rupert Jones did acknowledge in November 2016 that the Coalition itself decided to change its tactics. In order to let all actors work together toward the defeat of ISIL, the Coalition provided 'better and better fire support' (Press briefing 2016e; see also OIR Jan/March 2017, 7). Interestingly, contrary to other decisions that were framed as being made with the consent of the Iraqi authorities, the decision to increase the Coalition airstrikes was not framed in this light and thus appeared to fall outside of Iraqi sovereignty. Rather than an engagement with political consequences, Coalition airstrikes were described as a technical solution to 'keep them

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[11] The Coalition trained the ERD with the idea to eventually incorporate the force into the CTS, but the division was also known for its close ties to the Badr Organization, a Shi'a militant group that is considered 'Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq' (CISC 2019; Dury-Agri et al. 2017).

[12] The denial of failures and tensions among alliances can simultaneously be seen as a form of authorizing knowledge (see chapter 5.2).

[13] The deployment of additional forces, for example, was presented as 'very much a matter for the governor of Iraq' (Press briefing 2016e).

in the fight' against ISIL (Press briefing 2016e). The increase in airstrikes in and around Mosul during this time period is indeed reflected in reports published by Airwars, an NGO that is monitoring and assessing civilian harm caused by Coalition strikes.[14] Experts have argued, however, that instead of forging alignments for a 'truly righteous cause' (defeating ISIL), this technical solution could potentially result in blowback: the collateral damage caused by an increase in airstrikes could lead citizens to sympathize with ISIL who portrayed the West as indiscriminate evil killers (Crowley 2014; Kaplan 2014).

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that the assemblage not only consisted of a myriad of groups, but also that these groups were themselves far from united. The ISF lacked a clear command structure to accommodate the wide variety of actors that reported to different ministries. Technical solutions put forward by the Coalition – like the increased air support – to overcome the military failures due to the disunity on the ground, created new challenges to respond to. On top of this, the Coalition had to not only forge alignments with and within the ISF, but also between the ISF and other tribal forces. The following subparagraph therefore turns to the Kurdish Peshmerga, giving insight into how besides the Coalition, other non-state actors engaged in the same practices – forging alignments and formulating technical descriptions – to pursue their own goals.

### 5.1.2 The Peshmerga

The fall of Mosul provoked a strong Kurdish response. Forces loyal to both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) engaged in defending the Nineveh Plains, from the western Sinjar to the southern Hamdaniyya (Rudaw 2014). Though the Kurds have long been able to not only protect themselves but also other Iraqi minorities living in these areas, like the Christian (Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians), Yezidi, Kakai, and Sabaean-Mandeans, the Kurds could no longer uphold their defence line against ISIL at the beginning of August 2014 (European Parliament 2016). The horrific events that followed – the torturing, crucifixions, mass executions, sexual slavery and kidnappings (HRW 2014; Callimachi 2015; Barker 2016; Smith 2016) – blamed the Kurds on the lack of equipment to fight against a force that fortified itself with the weapons taken from the Syrian and Iraqi army in the preceding months (ICG 2015, 3).

Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), started an international campaign to solicit support and forge alignments from within Iraq. He presented the Kurdish Peshmerga as the 'only force in the area with the means and will to protect thousands of lives from the horrors that these terrorists bring', and as a 'trusted standard-bearer of secular Western

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[14] The month November saw 'the greatest number of alleged civilian casualty events from Coalition airstrikes yet reported in the 28-month war' (Hopkins 2016). Airwars not only reports on the Global Coalition but also tracks the military actions of states, like Russia and Turkey, that are engaged in conflicts in e.g. Syria, Libya, and Somalia.

values' battling for the right cause (Barzani 2014). At the same time, Barzani argued in the Washington Post that they would not be able to win the fight against ISIL alone (Barzani 2014). In fact, the longer the U.S. withheld its military support, 'the more difficult the fight will become' that would eventually lead to another 'genocide and the slaughter of innocents', he argued (Barzani 2014). Moreover, ISIL was not just posing a perilous threat to Kurdistan but to the international stability as a whole.

Clearly, this discourse was deployed with the aim of forging alignments with the U.S.-led Coalition and Barzani's endeavours appear to be effective. Western policymakers were quick to respond, even by-passing or relaxing existing policies or legislation to offer material support. The military training and equipment of the Kurdish Peshmerga became framed as an 'indispensable tool in an existential struggle in the defence of Western security and values' (ICG 2015, 17-18). What once started as an internal political crisis with deep historical and ethnic roots now became a global existential threat by 'medieval barbarians' (Shlapentokh 2015) and 'psychopathic, murderous, brutal people' (The Guardian 2014) that could only be resolved with a military response. Beside forging alignments, this threat representation allowed the Coalition to render the violent conflict as well as the solutions put forward technical, as the following will explain.

Assistance provided by the Coalition was organized through the Kurdistan Training Coordination Centre (KTCC) in and around Erbil, where Italian, German, British, Dutch, Finnish, Norwegian, Canadian, Hungarian, and Slovenian militaries trained unified brigades under the Ministry of Peshmerga (Gaston and Derzsi-Horváth 2018, 65). Though the latter formally selected who took part in the training, the U.S. – as the main provider of weapons – applied its own vetting procedures. In practice, this meant that all units supported through the Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) had to be screened for 'associations with terrorist groups or with groups associated with the Iranian government, and must commit to promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law' (Congressional Research Service 2015). Meant to reduce the risk that sponsored VNSAs would misuse and discredit the Coalition's presence, the vetting procedure was also systematically used to legitimize alliances with such actors. On 5 October 2016, for instance, when journalists questioned the effectiveness of forging alignments with the Peshmerga, General Anderson argued:

> 'First of all, as I keep stating, the only people that have been trained and equipped by us are those that have passed some fairly stringent vetting, that ensure that they have not only agreed to, but have shown in the past respect for the law of armed conflict. There have been no human rights abuses; have not acted against the Coalition or Coalition members before-hand. So we're very, very careful about that' (Press briefing 2016d).[15]

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[15] For similar argumentations, see for example the press briefings of 2014; 2016b; 2017b or 2018.

Though it may not appear as such on first sight, this is again a form of what Li (2007, 265) described as rendering technical: 'extracting from the messiness of the social world, with all the processes that run [through] it, a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c), a beneficial result'. The vetting procedure is often treated as a *carte blanche* for not addressing the potential moral hazards of SFA as outlined in chapter 2.2.

Exemplary is that – despite being 'very, very careful' to vet the recruits – there appeared to be no end-user conditions nor follow-up with regard to the distribution of arms (ICG 2015, 20). Questions on the consequences of providing support to a group that for years had tried to obtain independence from the Iraqi state remained unanswered, according to one European diplomat (ICG 2015, 19-21). But, what would be the consequences of working with groups that clearly have a different tolerance for risk, that operate according to different standards, ascribe to different norms, and have different perceptions of the appropriate use of force (Congressional Research Service 2016)?

Not surprisingly, it quickly became clear that an assemblage that includes both the Kurdish Peshmerga and the ISF provoked an incompatibility dilemma. What the Coalition saw as a 'quick security fix' led to the rapid expansion of claimed Kurdish territory, something Barzani himself described as 'regaining what was originally ours' (ICG 2015, 20; Sky News 2016). Because the Kurds were expected to take part in the battle for Mosul, the Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi issued a statement to articulate that 'the aim of the battle should not be territorial conflicts but to free the citizens from the persecution of Daesh' (Middle East Monitor 2016).

Such tensions between Baghdad and the governmental capital of Kurdistan, Erbil, were not new to the Coalition. In fact, in July 2014, the Coalition reconsidered its approach in supporting the Peshmerga when Barzani called for independence. The motivation put forward was the conviction that Iraq's unity needed to be preserved. To reinforce the territorial integrity of the Iraqi government, logistical provisions to the Kurds first needed Baghdad's approval. This principle became widely reiterated by the Coalition: 'we want military assistance to be in line with Iraqi sovereignty. (...) Each plane transporting weapons to the Kurds needs prior approval from Baghdad. For us, this is a red line' (ICG 2015, 20-21). But rather than awareness of the 'the messiness of the social world' and of the political consequences of providing foreign force assistance, the Coalition's revision toward Iraqi sovereignty was explained by some European diplomats as a way of forging alignments: 'a message meant to reassure Baghdad, where there are many suspicions about this operation' (ICG 2015, 21). Indeed, rather than a political sensitivity, the practices of the Coalition sketch a different motive than presented during speeches or press briefings.

The Kurdish forces, for instance, occasionally kept receiving the OIR military support directly, and Western diplomats continued visiting Erbil, sometimes without informing Baghdad (ICG 2015, 20). The KRG, in turn, was quick to frame these visits as the recognition and legitimization of

Kurdistan (ICG 2015, 20; Kurdistan Region Presidency 2017; Goran 2016). On 16 March 2016, they declared a federal state in northern Syria and Carla Babb, journalist at Voice of America, asked Coalition Commander Warren that same day how this affected the overall operation against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In response, Warren, like the rest of the Coalition representatives, isolated the military aspects from the political: 'This is a political matter, not something that OIR really has a hand in. That's really internal Iraqi politics' (Press briefing 2016b). Babb, not easily convinced by this depoliticizing answer, continued by asking whether Warren was 'not concerned that they could potentially just switch from going after the Islamic State to just defending their territory that they claim is their federal state?' (Press briefing 2016b). 'Well, as of now', Warren replied, 'they've given us no reason to believe they will stop fighting ISIL'. A statement meant to keep all actors together, but soon became contested because the Coalition was only in part able to form an assemblage.

The two perspectives discussed in chapter 5.1 show that the common objective – liberating Mosul and defeating ISIL – often suffered at the expense of conflicting interests of individual groups and organizations. Though the Coalition attempted to render these obstacles as problems requiring a technical solution, the disunity persisted and jeopardized the military operations underway. These perceived failures threatened the Coalition as a whole, to which the following section will now turn.

## 5.2 Authorizing knowledge and managing failures

The specification of the 'requisite body of knowledge' while 'containing critiques' and presenting contradictions and failures as 'superficial rather than fundamental' became more important as the conflict proceeded (Li 2007, 265). Serving to justify the existence and the actions of the assemblage, the Coalition adopted different methods to authorize knowledge and manage failures, which will be analysed and explained using the example of the third recipient. Referred to by Iraqis as the *Hashd al-Asha'iri* or the *Tribal Hashd*, this militant group is commonly known as the Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF) and fell under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) – also known as the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) or *Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi* in Arabic. The analysis will demonstrate how the perceived failures of the assemblage and the international critique were contained and rendered superficial, relying in part on distinguishing between reliable, authorized sources of reporting and discrediting critical sources.

### 5.2.1 Tribal Mobilization Force

In addition to the mobilization of the Western and Kurdish actors, the fall of Mosul made both Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani and the then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki call for volunteers to strengthen the Iraqi army and defend the country against ISIL. The prime minister's inquiry and the

religious fatwa that declared the fight a 'sacred defence' (*al-difa' al-muqaddas*) resulted in the mobilization of both old and newly formed militias that organized themselves as a parallel military organization of approximately 150,000 Iraqis, predominantly Shi'a. Together this group was called the PMU and was led by pro-Iranian Shi'a Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Gaston and Derzsi-Horváth 2018, 16-17).

After several battlefield successes, the group earned strong popular support in Nineveh and was granted legal status when al-Abadi passed Executive Order 91 in February 2016, which officially integrated the PMU forces into the ISF as an 'independent military formation' (Roggio 2016).[16] However, no clear command structure was implemented with the incorporation of the PMU, and according to the Rise Foundation the different militias were 'largely organised by individual alliances, depending on how closely one militia's goals may align with another' (Rise Foundation 2017, 15). Some Shi'a groups were loyal to al-Sistani, others to Muqtada al-Sadr (an Iraqi religious leader of the Islamist movement called Sadrism), and yet others were loyal to the Iranian Ayatollah Khameini – something that both al-Sistani and al-Sadr rejected.

Already before clashes broke out, the opposing loyalties and interests raised critical questions by civil society and Western journalists, given that the Coalition who supported the Iraqi government was now (directly or indirectly) supporting the PMU too. Would not the support to the PMU create the very conditions that gave rise to the extremism of the so-called Islamic State, with Sunni origins? And could the incorporation negatively affect the Mosul Offensive, as the city's pre-ISIL population was predominantly Sunni? In order to turn down these critical questions, the Coalition carefully constructed a discourse built on two pillars.

First of all, criticism was dismissed by Coalition commanders on the pretext of responding to a greater goal, that is, defeating terrorism. The alignments forged were supposed to transcend the Shi'a and Sunni divide. This belief had been authorized from the very beginning. Former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, for example, argued in 2015 that Prime Minister al-Abadi, Iraqi Kurdistan President Barzani, and Iraqi parliamentarians like Salim al-Jabouri all fully understood 'the need to empower more localized, multi-sectarian Iraqi security forces' to ensure sustainable security and a definite defeat of ISIL (Secretary of Defense Testimony 2015).

Second, and related to the first, the Coalition responded to the critique by emphasizing the *raison d'être* of their intervention in Iraq: not simply to counter terrorism, but to counter terrorism on the invitation of the sovereign state. Accordingly, the Coalition followed their orders. On the incorporation of the PMU into the ISF, General Jones commented during the first press briefing following the legislation that this was 'a decision by the government of Iraq and we clearly are here to

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[16] The original document of Executive Order 91, published in Arabic, is accessible at: www.moj.gov.iq/view.2899/.

support them' (Press briefing 2016e). When concerns regarding the conflicting interests were not tempered, General Jones reassured his public that:

> 'Prime Minister Abadi is giving clear orders and instructions to the PMU. (...) Whatever orders they are given as part of the operation, we will work closely with the government Iraq. *We'll support the Iraqi security forces in whatever -- whatever that mission might be*' (Press briefing 2016e, my own emphasis).

The rationale that '[the Coalition's] role is very much to support the government of Iraq' has been repeated over the course of the entire mission.[17]

However, this unconditional support had turned out to be critical as the Iraqi orders were not always obeyed by the PMU. That same year, in June 2016, the Shi'a PMU militia fought alongside the ISF in the battle for Fallujah, a city west of Baghdad, but eventually the group had turned to torturing and executing local Sunnis – disregarding al-Abadi's orders to take measures in protecting Fallujah's citizens (Lindborg and Hamasaeed 2016; HRW 2016; Press briefing 2016c). The PMU's wanton destruction of the city's infrastructure and people's life and livelihood had taken place before in Tikrit, Dour, and al-Alam in March and April 2015. At the time, the FP had even facilitated or at least not prevented the abuses (Reuters 2015; HRW 2015; Gaston and Maas 2017).

Quickly after the atrocities in Fallujah were brought to light, Colonel Christopher Garver announced that the Coalition was very concerned about the reports and that they expected their partners 'to operate within [...] the international norms, the laws of armed conflict' (Press briefing 2016c). Referring back to its technical solution, Garver added that all those trained by the Coalition are subject to vetting procedures and receive training on how to behave in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict. The fact that some militias had operated outside the command and control of the ISF is 'a significant problem', confirmed Brett McGurk, the State Department's special presidential envoy for the anti-ISIL Coalition (Hennessy-Fiske and Hennigan 2016).

Fortunately, Prime Minister al-Abadi had started an investigation, which was 'the right course inside the Iraqi chain of command to look into these incidents', according to Garver (Press briefing 2016c). Though added as an afterthought, this sentence marks an important tendency. While commanders frequently repeated that decisions were made by the Iraqi government, and that the Coalition was only there to assist them in whatever that decision might be, this gave leeway to apply a similar line of reasoning to allegations of human rights violations by the sponsored actors. 'Any

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[17] See for instance also the press briefings of 19 October 2015; 8 June 2016; 5 October 2016; 12 October 2016; 22 October 2016; 28 October 2016; 30 November 2016; 8 December 2016; 25 January 2017; 8 February 2017; and 6 July 2017. Full references are listed in the bibliography.

allegations, we take very seriously', argued Colonel Ryan Dillon, but it was the responsibility of the ISF to do the same (Press briefing 2017c).

This argument was deployed at great length. In April 2017, the Iraqi photojournalist Ali Arkady had provided astounding evidence of acts of torture and execution committed by the ERD. While Coalition commanders disapproved of the atrocities and withheld further assistance, they also said there was 'no legal reason the U.S. cannot continue to work with the unit' (Meek et al. 2017). No actions were implemented to hold the group accountable. In fact, the responsibility was again placed by the ISF itself: 'Any time we see any weapons in the hands of those units or elements that should not have it we address it with the Iraqi Security Forces', said Colonel Dillon (Meek et al. 2017). Here, the lines of responsibility seem to deliberately be diffused.

In addition to containing critiques at the international level by legitimizing the assemblage based on its mission goal and the necessary precautions taken to prevent human rights violations, the Coalition also tried to manage failures at the local level. Crucial in doing so, appears to be the initiative of a Sunni Tribal Mobilization Force.[18] This move went against previous reluctance to work with actors associated with the PMU, but the idea was that the TMF could provide counterweight within the predominantly Shi'a armed group. Some policymakers even called it a form of 'grassroots reconciliation' (Gaston 2017b), based on the conviction that local Sunnis would not only be essential in liberating Mosul but also in stabilizing the post-ISIL process, for instance by taking up policing roles in the areas where they came from (Gaston 2017b; Holmes et al. 2014).

Working together with the TMF enabled the Coalition to hold back PMU forces from the liberation of Mosul. Given their behaviour in cities like Tikrit and Fallujah, the plan as approved by al-Abadi was 'for them to remain outside of Tel Afar and disrupt the egress route from Mosul towards either Tal Afar or Syria' (Press briefing 2016f). PMU commanders of the Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) – both Iranian proxy forces who had committed human rights violations in the past – nonetheless claimed that they would redeploy more than 2,000 militias fighters from Syria to join in the fight for Mosul (Martin 2016). The news was picked up and led to even more critical questions for Coalition commanders. In defence, Major General Joseph Martin discredited the 'rumours' by arguing that the PMU was 'operating under the command and control of the government of Iraq', and that he was 'not aware of them being inside of the city' (Press briefing 2017a). By recognizing the authority of Iraqi government not only in its command of its troops but also in its reporting, Maj. Gen. Martin affirmed the government as a source of knowledge.

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[18] Officially, the TMF program fell under the authority of the Iraqi government but the U.S. channeled equipment and salaries directly to the TMF through its Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF). The Spanish, Dutch and British Coalition partners trained Sunni fighters at the Taqqadum base in maneuvering and weapon tactics, battalion collaboration, disarmament, emergency aid, and international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL).

In hindsight, the claim that only the Coalition-trained Sunni forces would enter the city has been proven wrong. The GPPi, for instance, interviewed senior ISF officials in 2018 who led the Nineveh operation and acknowledged that Shi'a PMU forces in practice obeyed the orders from senior Shi'a leadership over the ISF officials. Besides, in the past the Shi'a PMU militants had frequently collaborated with the FP who, in turn, granted them de facto presence in places where the PMU was officially suspended. Previously forged alignments between (non-state) actors continued to exist within the anti-ISIL assemblage brokered by the Coalition. 'In fact', argued one Iraqi commander, 'there is not a big difference between the Federal Police and the PMF because sometimes [when] the PMF are not asked to be part of a battle, they just change their uniform and become a Federal Police' (Gaston and Derzsi-Horváth 2018, 31).

Reflecting on this, we see how the leadership of the different components of the assemblage acknowledged and highlighted or disregarded and ignored specific reporting, thereby carefully specifying a body of 'requisite knowledge' and recognizing some but not all sources as 'authoritative'. In doing so, failures (such as alleged human rights violations committed by U.S. sponsored militias) were either not recognized or portrayed as superficial and not fundamental for the assemblage. While the previous analysis gave insight into how the actors were assembled under a common objective, this analysis of how critique was contained and failures were managed offers insight into how SFA facilitated the continued involvement of the U.S. and its international partners despite the alleged human rights violations and atrocities committed by the recipients of their support.[19] Crucial here was the ability to not only accept some and discredit other sources of information, but also to deflect responsibility by pointing to the sovereignty of the Iraqi government, and to strengthen the alignments with the TMF and attempting to sideline the PMU.

### 5.3 Reassembling and anti-politics

The final paragraph turns toward the question of security and how the assemblage analytic helps to understand how the envisioned process toward security is reflected on the ground. To do so, the analysis will look at the practices of reassembling and anti-politics. The former gives insight into how the logic of the assemblage shifts in the aftermath of the Mosul offensive and the change in security priorities of the U.S. by looking at how the assemblage is (re)arranged: how new actors are introduced or excluded, and how existing discourses are used for new ends. The latter zooms in on the shifting security priorities of the Coalition; the change in the official discourse; and the neglect of the problematic security situation in Mosul by looking at how political questions are reframed and critical

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[19] Human rights violations not only happened in Fallujah, Tikrit, Dour, and al-Alam, as outlined above. In November 2016, Amnesty International published stories of men wearing federal police uniforms who had tortured, abused, and extrajudicially executed citizens in Mosul. In March 2017, Human Rights Watch reported that MoI forces were holding more than thousand detainees, including children, without charge in 'horrendous conditions' in Qayyarah, close to Mosul.

debates on 'how and what to govern' are closed down (Li 2007, 265). What becomes clear in the years following the liberation of Mosul is that instability, human rights violations, crime, and the fragility of the Iraq government persist, while the U.S. has become preoccupied with maintaining a presence on the ground to secure its interests from a foe other than ISIL.

### 5.3.1 'A true unity of effort'?

On 10 July 2017, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced that Iraq had recaptured ISIL's de facto capital (Coker and Hassan 2017). Mosul was liberated and the Coalition congratulated the country on its 'historic victory' (Townsend 2017) which had been, in the words of Colonel Dillon, 'a true unity of effort under Prime Minister Abadi's direction' (Press briefing 2017e). The Coalition's vision on security was that this unity would be preserved and institutionalized within the ISF even though the defeat of ISIL had dissolved the common goal of all state and non-state forces. The post-ISIL process, however, revealed that the Coalition did not establish unity amongst the plethora of armed groups brought together in SFA programs, but rather created a 'hyper militarized environment' (ICG 2017; Kenner and MacDiarmid 2017).

Different actors started jockeying for influence in the post-ISIL power vacuum, which hampered the process of stabilization and reconstruction of the city (Hamasaeed 2017). Local and international organizations like the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Mosul Eye, and HRW reported allegations of war crimes against nearly all the different military groups. Soldiers were accused of using sexual violence at checkpoints against women and children (Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights 2019); counterinsurgency practices were reported as beyond proportion, leading to civilian death (OIR Oct/Dec 2018, 33); and the UN Security Council expressed its concern over revenge measures against suspected sympathizers of ISIL and their families (UN Assistance Mission for Iraq 2017).[20]

In addition, so-called Islamic resistance militias like the Asaeb Ahlu al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, al-Imam Ali Brigade, Sayyed al-Shuhadaa brigade, and the Badr group all tried to profit from the political and security vacuum. These militants started trading war remnants, monopolizing the monuments and antiquities that remained intact, and illegally seized civilian property, according to Megahed al-Taey (2019) of the New Iraq Center. Some residents of Mosul even feared that PMU militias would repopulate the city by dispossessing them of their homes and forcing them to leave (Brammer and Milton-Edwards 2017).

At the same time, tension between Baghdad and Erbil escalated when Barzani voiced his vision on the desired security outcome by issuing another referendum for independence in which the

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[20] Acts of torture and mass executions against those allegedly affiliated with Deash were widely reported, as well as attacks and threatening letters or signs on houses saying 'you should leave within 72 hours' (See for instance Von Hein 2017; Lekas Miller 2017; Mostafa 2017; Kossov 2017).

majority of the Kurds voted in favour (Deutsche Welle 2017a). Germany, the Coalition partner that predominantly assisted the Kurdish Peshmerga, stopped its SFA as long as secession instead of unity would be pursued (Deutsche Welle 2017b). The ISF, on the other hand, responded to the referendum by launching a military operation in collaboration with the PMU to regain disputed territory that was controlled by the Kurds and stretched from the provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Saladin and Diyala. The rivalry between Baghdad and Erbil risked allowing ISIL the opportunity to regroup, as in some cases happened (Kenner and MacDiarmid 2017; Hussein 2018; Spyer 2018).

The fact that a myriad of military actors had been able to work together for a certain time to win the war from ISIL, but were not able to win security, incentivized a reassembling of the international mission by the Coalition. Whilst Carter in October 2016 stressed the importance of withdrawing Coalition forces after the 'expulsion of ISIL from Mosul', this stated mission changed in 2017. Driving ISIL out of Mosul was no longer the end goal, because the 'enduring defeat' of ISIL had to be ensured. In order to obtain this goal, the Coalition had to stay – a decision that was legitimized not by publicly recognizing the fragmentation and competition amongst all recipients strengthened by the Coalition (that would be a failure), but paradoxically by stressing that the Iraqi security forces were not yet strong enough. The ISF in particular was 'years, if not decades' away from becoming an independent force that could 'manage insurgent threats without Coalition support' (OIR July/Sept 2018, 24).[21]

Following this remarkable decision of Obama's successor to stay (which stood in contrast to the rest of the U.S. foreign policy in the region), President Trump's usual discourse of 'loser wars' (Leonnig and Rucker 2020) and 'ridiculous Endless Wars' (Trump 2019; Associated Press 2019) shifted to accommodate this new objective. On 6 October 2019, the U.S. started to withdraw its troops from Syria, but when the Iraqi government voted to do the same in Iraq, the Trump administration announced that their presence would be prolonged rather than shortened. In fact, President Trump argued that pulling back the estimated 5,000 American troops would be 'the worst thing to happen to Iraq'. 'At some point, we want to get out', he continued, '[b]ut this is not the right point' (Lamothe et al. 2020).

But what is the right moment? In August 2018, – almost a year after al-Abadi officially announced victory over ISIL – Colonel Sean Ryan, a spokesman for the Coalition, explained that their forces remain active in Iraq 'as long as we think they're needed' (Khalid 2018). What the exact need is, has not been defined. What should be seen as the end state of the mission? And what made Iraq the exception compared to the U.S. foreign policy in the rest of the Middle East? On 3 February 2019,

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[21] The Iraqi security forces were still suffering from 'systematic weaknesses' like 'poor management of intelligence; corruption and "ghost soldiers"; overlapping command arrangements with conflicting chains of command; micromanagement; and inefficient and inadequate systems for planning and stransmitting order' (OIR July/Sept 2018, 24).

during an interview with the BBC, President Trump suggested the American troops should stay at al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq as it was a 'fantastic edifice' that had cost Americans a fortune. 'We might as well keep it', he argued (Brennan 2019).

Apart from the fact that this base, previously known as Qadisiyah Airbase, was predominantly paid for by former Yugoslavia (Air Force Technology n.d.; Gilsinan 2020), it is Trump's statement that followed that is compelling: 'And one of the reasons I want to keep it is because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is a real problem' (Brennan 2019). Under the guise of 'enduring defeat', 'systematic weaknesses of the ISF', and the 'fortune spent on an incredible base', the U.S. now shifted its priority to paying close attention to Iran and its so-called proxies with whom it had collaborated during the fight against ISIL. Clearly, elements of the anti-ISIL discourse were taken out and redeployed to serve new ends.

Lately, Shi'a military groups backed by Iran responded to this shift and started targeting the U.S. embassy, while proclaiming 'Soleimani is our leader' and 'Death to America' (Al Aqeedi 2020). Tensions rapidly escalated and eventually resulted in the execution of both the Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani and PMU leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020 by an American drone strike. While the U.S. claimed it 'exercised its inherent right of self-defense' (Craft 2020), experts have stressed that the strike entails a violation of what the U.S.-led Coalition had continuously stressed as the most important requirement for all military actions taking place in Iraq: the Iraqi sovereignty. The strike represented the crossing of the 'red line' that they had drawn for others. Ironically, this violation resulted in the turning point of the Coalition's relation with the government: 'Iraq's parliament voted to expel American troops from Iraqi soil, a core objective of Commander Soleimani before his death' (Yousif 2020).

These events underline what President Obama (2015b) acknowledged five years ago: 'no amount of military force will end the terror that is ISIL unless it's matched by a broader effort -- political and economic -- that addresses the underlying conditions that have allowed ISIL to gain traction'. Underlying political and ethnic causes remain poorly addressed and a military response seems to be the key-focus, a practice what Li defined as anti-politics. Former statements and end goals became replaced, or reassembled, with new meanings that allow for an extension and an open-endedness of the mission that continues until the moment of writing. This raises the important question of what kind of (in)security is achieved, leading to the conclusion.

# 6 | Conclusion

The resemblance between the Coalition's response to the fall and later the liberation of Mosul from ISIL is remarkable. Like in 2014, the Coalition emphasized the shortcomings of the ISF to protect the city from sectarianism, reprisals and rivalry, and decided to invest in *more* assistance without questioning to what extent SFA was part of the problem. This paradox makes it important to critically reflect on the main research question that asks what the effects are of the Coalition's attempts to govern security outcomes in Iraq through SFA programs between 2014 and 2018. The following will do so by answering the sub-research questions.

First, what alliances were formed by the Coalition to successfully liberate Mosul? The thesis emphasizes that none of the alignments with the ISF, the Peshmerga and the Sunni tribal forces were hierarchically imposed, consolidated, nor isolated from the actors and formations that constituted the anti-ISIL assemblage. Instead, working 'by, with and through' these actors required the Coalition to juggle multiple alliances to allow the assemblage to act as one during the Battle for Mosul. On the international level, the Coalition continually tried to dismiss scepticism regarding its strategy by arguing that the training and equipping of multiple actors that work to pursue often conflicting interests served a higher goal: to dismantle the threat ISIL was posing to the local, regional *and* international security. In its attempts to overcome the disunity on the local level, the Coalition had to walk a fine line between reinforcing Iraqi sovereignty and making sure that this would not lead to losing its non-state partnerships. The thesis demonstrates that although the alliances were presented as coherent and operating under ISF command, the assemblage in reality was characterized by fragmentation, competition, and fluidity.

Second, this raises the question how the Coalition used SFA to overcome conflicting interests among the forged alliances? The thesis illustrates how practices of SFA can be understood not just as efforts by the Coalition to create 'competent, capable, sustainable, committed, and confident' forces. Through vetting procedures and education in international human rights law; emphasizing the individual responsibility of non-state actors and the sovereignty of the Iraqi state; and offering conditional military support as a means to reward or sanction behaviour, the Coalition was also able to assign itself a supervising role, literally and figuratively, in assembling the components in such a way that it would suit the mission. These practices would be explained by realists PA-theorists as efforts to overcome goal incongruity and by constructivists PA-theorists as efforts to transform the agent. Although not untrue, this does not illuminate with satisfaction the complexity of SFA. Using the assemblage approach, the thesis emphasized the relational process in enacting these practices and thus also the agency at all levels. This agency entails a continuous interaction that creates an interdependency within the assemblage in pursuing the common objective.

Third, this raises the question what outcomes each actor desires and how security, being a derivative concept, has been understood differently. The aftermath of the Battle for Mosul revealed that through SFA the Coalition framed security as the military defeat of ISIL. This vision, however, enabled a form of militarization which neglected the socio-political interests and the long-term security objectives of the individual actors in the name of keeping the assemblage together. It is therefore not surprising that the reconquering of Mosul simultaneously marked the fragmentation of the assemblage. The militarization enabled a wide variety of actors to empower themselves. After the defeat of ISIL in Mosul, the Kurds deemed their force necessary to protect themselves against the PMU and ISF; the TMF sought to guarantee the defence of Sunni minorities in and around Mosul; while the predominantly Shi'a PMU considered its existence vital to strengthen the ISF. This underlines the importance to not measure success as the effectiveness of the military operation, but as the continued ability of an assemblage to produce desired outcomes. Clearly, this is not what happened in Mosul, which brings up the last question on the impact the diverse perceptions of security have had on the ground.

Fourth, what does the case study tell us about the kind of security created through SFA? The thesis highlights a number of things. First, the resulting (in)security in Mosul does not reflect an either successful or unsuccessful exercise in overcoming the conflicting interests of the sponsor and the recipient to reach a form of security that is a stable entity 'out there'. Instead, this thesis argues that security is negotiated through the continuous interaction that made the assemblage possible. Second, the continuous interaction is reflected in the mission that changed and mutated over time. This meant that the Coalition was able to (re)frame and (re)assemble security and its referent object in ways that it required the Coalition to stay. The shift in focus to the *enduring* defeat of ISIL legitimated a prolonged presence and an open-endedness of the intervention. Third, in this particular case of SFA, responsibility was very difficult to trace which had negative implications for the security on the ground. Although the Coalition ensured that it would take its responsibility by excluding any perpetrators from the SFA program, they did not hold them accountable. This was deemed to be the responsibility of the sovereign Iraqi state, which in turn was keen on deflecting the responsibility to its local military partners.

Theoretically, these observations shed new light on the concept of proxy warfare. If the effect of the SFA is the permanence and open-endedness of an anti-ISIL assemblage, in which security is continuously negotiated and characterized by fluidity making responsibility hard to place, the assistance cannot simply be presented as a panacea 'to achieve a more sustainable victory' – even if the military operation is executed successfully. How, then, *can* SFA and proxy warfare more broadly be presented? Following the assemblage logic, SFA was part of a broader effort to govern security outcomes, which created a space for competing parties to pursue their interests by contesting what

security exactly entailed. The contestation of security not only had disastrous implications for the security of those on the ground, but also resulted in what others have called 'mission creep' through the re-framing of security threats and objectives. This logic of pursuing contested (and therefore changing) security objectives indefinitely by continuously (re)building coalitions around them, resonates with the remarks made by the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (2001) following 9/11. He envisioned future anti-terrorist coalitions as alliances that 'may change and evolve' given that 'the mission will define the coalition – not the other way around'. 'Forget about "exit strategies"', he continued, 'we're looking at a sustained engagement that carries no deadlines'. Though not new, this logic of military interventions and its implications needs to be scrutinized in public debate and by further academic research, especially on the recent case of the international anti-ISIL Coalition.

More specifically, further research is needed on the actors excluded from this research but that were nevertheless actively trying to assemble their own governance formations. Think of Russia, Iran, Turkey, but also other non-state actors like the many defence contractors who profited from supplying the arms for the SFA programs in Iraq.[22] The multi-billion dollar industry built around SFA received hardly any scrutiny. This raises another avenue for further research. Whereas this thesis focused on the socio-political aspects, it is important to also examine SFA within the global economic order. Who is benefiting economically from the open-endedness that it creates? Lastly, more research is needed on the local perspective on the shift toward SFA. What do non-Western citizens, scholars, and practitioners think of this shift in interventionism? What do those on the receiving end see as the short- and long-term effects of it? Together, these perspectives are vital to better understand the prominent practice of SFA in today's complex interconnected conflicts.

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[22] Think of the British BAE Systems, as well as the American Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon.

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