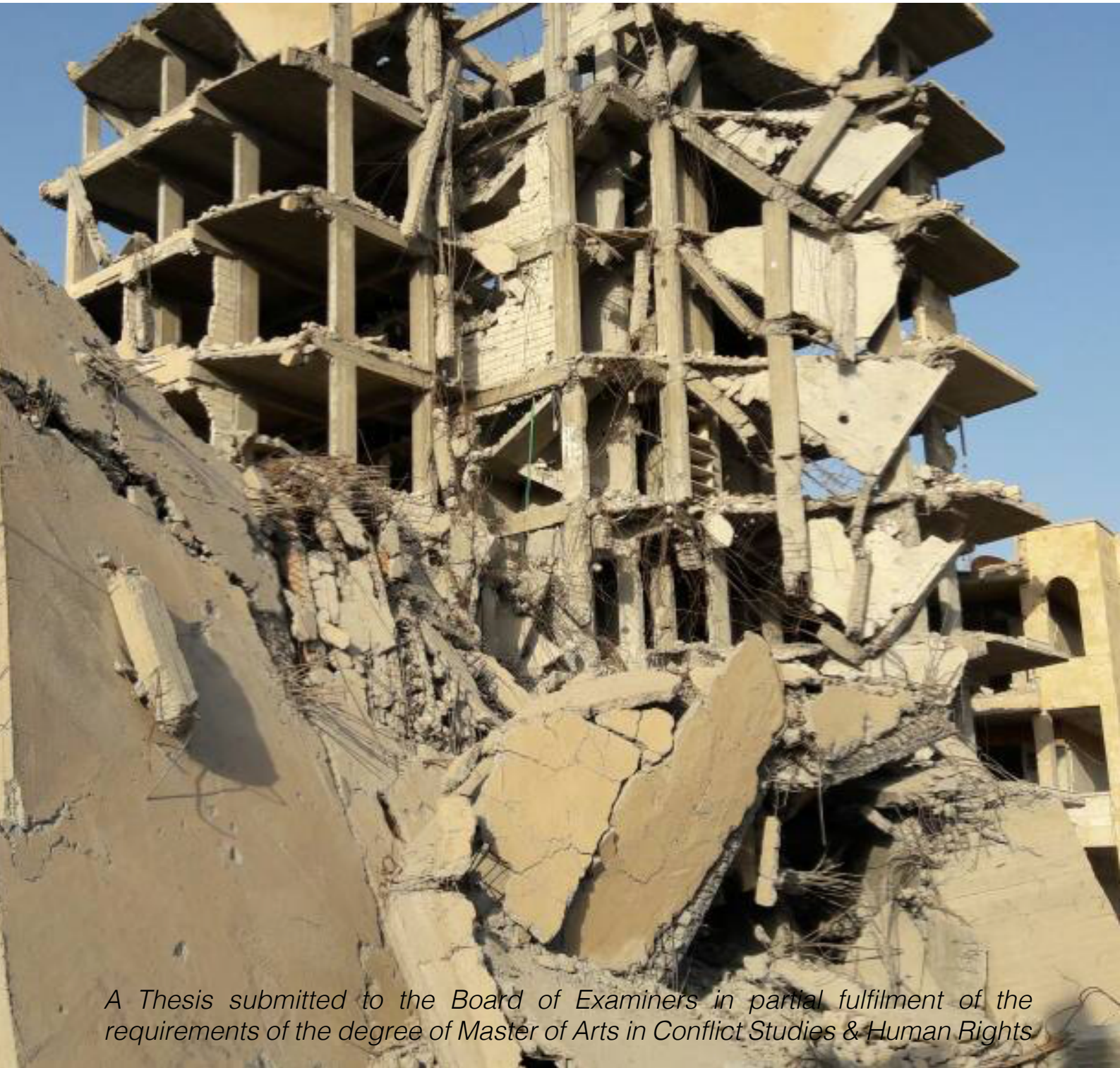


# THE LESSER TRUTH

Truth Construction on Remote Warfare and the Case of  
the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition in Syria



*A Thesis submitted to the Board of Examiners in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights*

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*Cover page picture: Bilal and Amina's house in Raqqa, as destroyed by the Coalition.  
Picture send to author by Bilal, taken by family members living in Raqqa.*

# ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with local interpretations of remote warfare as a 'new way of war' and the struggle over the meaning of this kind of violence. Taking the US-led international coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq as a case study, it explores how the Coalition's airstrikes are interpreted by Syrians at the receiving end of the violence, who now find themselves as refugees in the Netherlands. Using a Critical Discourse Analytic approach, this thesis analyses the dynamics between discourse and power through the lens of Foucault's concept 'regimes of truth'. Therein, it focuses on the notions of 'sanctioning' and 'status'. This research demonstrates that Syrians in the context of the Netherlands are constrained in contributing to truth construction on the Coalition. This is largely explained by the notion of three powerful discourses that underpin the Coalition's efforts as an example of remote warfare and that sanction contesting interpretations: the precision discourse, the War on Terror and the discourse of the discourse of humanitarianism. Moreover, it demonstrates that the status of Syrians in the Netherlands is generally expected to be one of the 'good victim', in which they express gratitude for the liberation of ISIS and the protection they enjoy in the Netherlands. Both dynamics show the constraints of Syrians to join in the struggle over the meaning of violence in the context of the Netherlands. Therein, this thesis contributes to our understanding of local interpretations of remote warfare and the power dynamics that decide what is generally understood as 'true' vis-à-vis remote violence.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

'[The Coalition] started airstrikes, airstrikes. They targeted everything, and civilians had to flee. But more than 300,000... they couldn't manage to flee, they were there. More than eighteen mass graves are in the city now, in Raqqa'. Raed laughs, but his smile is not one of joy, it is one of irony and frustration. His city, Raqqa, is reduced to rubble. I watch him running his fingers through his beard, as he always does while we are talking, while his other hand stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. 'It's gone. Destroyed. For 85%. So, this is why we are here'.<sup>1</sup>

Raed lived in Raqqa, Syria, a city that has been the theatre of occupation under self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS). At the moment of writing, ISIS has been expelled out of the city, largely by the efforts of the US-led international Coalition against ISIS. The Coalition did, as Raed tells, not only target ISIS members, but also civilians, private houses and infrastructure. Although the presence of ISIS in Raqqa has been given much attention in Western media, we often do not hear about the Coalition and its airstrikes.

In August 2014, an international coalition – as what I will refer to in the following as 'the Coalition' – of several nation states including the Netherlands, was established under the lead of the United States (US). Its goal was to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), that at that time was dominating media outlets all over the world. The Coalition predominantly operated through the means of targeted airstrikes from above and cooperation with local forces in Syria and Iraq (McInnis 2016: 1). Therein, its efforts fit within a broader trend of



Figure 1: Picture of Raed's neighbourhood in Raqqa, send to author by Raed. Originally posted by Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, 11 January 2019.

<sup>1</sup> interview Raed, 2 April 2019, Amsterdam.

modern Western interventionist wars. This new way of war, here called 'remote warfare', is characterised by risk-aversion through its shift away from 'boots on the ground' deployments. Instead, it mainly relies on air forces, making use of modern weaponry generally classified as precise and minimising civilian casualties, and alliances with local forces or private military companies (Biegon and Watts 2017). In other words, we observe that – predominantly – Western states distance themselves increasingly from the battlefield when fighting wars.

Coalition officials and member states repeatedly represented the war against ISIS as 'the most precise war in history' (Bonds 2018: 439). However, accounts such as those of Raed firmly contest that representation of accuracy. Outlining the destruction of his city and the number of civilian casualties, his interpretation of the Coalition is quite the opposite. Raed, together with many other Syrians, understands the Coalition primarily as being responsible for the fact that cities such as Raqqa have been reduced to piles of stone and rubble. As he showed me in the picture above portraying his neighbourhood, there is not much left of his city. Reports and investigations of organisations such as Airwars and Amnesty International support Raed's interpretation: the level of civilian casualties and destruction as a result of Coalition strikes is, as they present, at least ten times higher than the Coalition ever admitted (Amnesty 2019a).

Remarkably, we often do not hear about the realities of this war for those living under the Coalition's airstrikes. This is particularly noticeable, and one might even say painful, since many of the victims of the Coalition's war are now residing in countries that have been contributing to the Coalition, such as the Netherlands. As distanced, and remote, the battle field might be in terms of actual fighting, the relationship with the victims of this war becomes increasingly intimate through the fact that they find their refuge on Western soil. Making things more complicating, these victims find themselves in a country that is a Coalition partner, whilst the consequences of this war in terms of loss are mainly felt by those at the receiving end of the violence perpetrated. They find themselves in a country that predominantly interprets the fight against ISIS as a highly legitimate war, that strongly resonates amongst its civilians through its focus on fighting terrorism while adopting "risk-less" and "precise", remote strategies. What exactly are the consequences of this war against ISIS? And, importantly, how do those who were affected by the airstrikes by living under it, operate in relation to the dominant discourse on the Coalition's violence within the context of Dutch society?



This thesis is concerned with those at the receiving end of remote violence, and their interpretations of remote violence, taking the Coalition against ISIS as a case study. Moreover, it aims to study these interpretations in relation to the dominant interpretation within the Netherlands vis-à-vis the Coalition and the larger 'struggle over the meaning of violence' (Brass 1997). In doing so, I intent to give voice to Syrians who lived under the Coalition's airstrikes, and currently reside in the Netherlands, where they join in the struggle over the meaning of violence. Their interpretation, or 'truth', however finds itself on the losing end of that struggle. In this thesis, I present this 'lesser truth', and the way in which Syrians in the Netherlands present their interpretation as a contestation to the dominant interpretation of precision and the vital need to defeat ISIS.

In doing so, this research takes a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to violence, mainly as being discussed by Vivienne Jabri (1996). To further unravel the dynamics of power and discourse, the analysis is based on Foucault's concept 'regimes of truth' – or, what he calls the 'general politics of truth' (1977: 131). In focusing on his notions of 'status' (indicating the societal position someone takes in defining what is generally seen as 'true') and 'sanctioning' (how certain 'truths' or interpretations are received and reacted upon), I demonstrate how Syrians in the Netherlands are limited in their ability to renegotiate the dominant interpretation of the Coalition's violence. Taking this approach allows me to study the dynamics of power in the interpretation of a specific act of violence, as well as the larger discourses these interpretations are embedded in, vis-à-vis the case of the Coalition airstrikes as an example of contemporary modes of remote warfare. This resulted in the following research question:

*How do the interpretations of Syrians, from north-east Syria currently living in the Netherlands, on the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition's airstrikes conducted between 2014 and 2018, relate to the 'regimes of truth' on the Coalition in the context of Dutch society?*

Answering this question is academically and socially relevant for several reasons. Academically, this research contributes to our understanding of remote warfare, since it provides a study on the interpretations of remote violence by those who find themselves at the receiving end of that violence. Research on contemporary modes of warfare tends to critique the nature and character of remote warfare, but leaves aside the study of the actual

effects of remote warfare. Instead of reproducing the remoteness of contemporary wars in academia by studying its dynamics from the armchair, this study provides an inside in the very intimacies of remote violence. By applying and conceptualising Foucault's notion of 'regimes of truth', this research further contributes to the study of the dynamics of power in discourse, by introducing 'regimes of truth' as an analytical frame. On a societal level, then, this research provides insights in contemporary modes of violence and suggests to rethink the generally accepted application of remote violence and its continual reproduction, while giving voice to those who experienced remote violence themselves.

I unpack the research question in five subsequent chapters. In the first chapter, I provide the theoretical grounding of this research, by discussing the discursive approach to violent conflict, Foucault's concept of 'regimes of truth' that constitutes the analytical frame of this research and debates around remote warfare. The second chapter provides an overview of the methodological grounding of this research and its research design, and explains the utility of a qualitative approach. Chapter three first describes the context in which the Coalition was established, and continues to lay out the interpretation of the Coalition's violence as formulated by the Dutch state and the Coalition at large, as well as the contesting interpretation of monitoring agencies, by studying official documents and reports. In chapter four, I present and analyse the interpretation of the Coalition's violence as articulated by Syrians who lived under the Coalition strikes and currently reside in the Netherlands, based on data I gathered through interviews. In the final chapter, the dominant interpretation of the Dutch state is brought in dialogue with the interpretation of Syrians in the context of Dutch society. This is done by studying the moment in which Syrians contest that dominant interpretation. I conclude by summarising my research findings, answering the research question and with a reflection on the research within a larger academic debate.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

War as a social phenomenon involves individuals, communities and states and any attempt to uncover its genesis must incorporate the discursive and institutional continuities which render violent conflict a legitimate and widely accepted mode of human conduct

- Jabri 1996: 1

This thesis is concerned with local interpretations of violent conflict and the 'struggle over the meaning of violence', in which different actors aim gain voice in interpreting violence. Focusing on interpretation and meaning, and hence on discursive dynamics of violence, this thesis takes a discursive approach to violence. A discourse analytic approach provides a framework to study the way in which violence becomes understood and how it is given meaning, allowing it to be reproduced. In the quote above, Vivienne Jabri points out the importance of discourse in normalising and legitimising war and violence. As she stresses, studies of war should incorporate the 'discursive and institutional continuities' that make the exertion of violence possible in the first place and allow violence to be reproduced. In the following, I discuss how discursive constructions of violence are related to power and specifically so, how discourse and power are productive in our understanding of remote warfare. But, first, what exactly *are* discourses?

### A DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO VIOLENCE

Shortly stated, discourses are 'stories about social reality' (Demmers 2017: 133). Studies on discourse are concerned with the use of language in our everyday lives. Importantly, the assumption of discourse analysis is that these stories do not reflect our social reality, but that they actively construct that reality through language. Consequently, discourses are able to *do* things, having consequences on political and social levels (Jabri 1996: 95). As to my concern, discourse can construct meaning and in doing so, (re)produce war and violence. Discourse

analysis thus builds on social constructivist notions of reality; it sees our social world as constructed in the interrelations between people and groups of people.

Ontologically, the strand of discursive approach applied in this thesis builds on Giddens' (1984) understanding of 'structuration'. This approach suggests to not base our understanding of the social world on the action-taking individual or on restricting structures, but advocates a middle ground that connects both approaches to social life. Whereas the two approaches are often seen as a dualism, the structuration theory regards both agency and structure as (re)producing our social worlds (Jabri 1996: 76). Individuals are understood as purposeful actors, but within the limits of the structures they live in; we make the structures we live in, but we are also made by social structures (Demmers 2017: 127).

### *Discourse and Power: Critical Discourse Analysis*

My interest, here, is in a specific strand of discourse studies called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on the context in which discourses take place, particularly in the relation between language and power (Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1997; Wodak 2001). Building on Foucault's understanding of knowledge construction and its relation to power, the aim of CDA studies is to not only study discourses as such, but to 'disentangle the giant milling mass of discourse, to chart what is said and can be said in a given society' (Jäger and Maier 2009: 36). In other words, its aim is to study the limits and possibilities of discursive construction as related to social positions of power.

Power, within the CDA tradition, is understood in a Foucauldian sense. It refers to 'a whole series of particular mechanisms, definable and defined, that seem capable of inducing behaviours or discourses' (Foucault 1996: 394 in Jäger and Maier 2009: 35). This notion of power as being importantly connected to what 'we' generally understand as true – embedded in our discourses – is also accepted by scholars studying violence. Jabri (1996) in her book *Discourses on Violence* elaborates on the dynamics of dominant discourses on violence. Dominant groups in society discursively further their interests by manipulating the information and communication available to the larger public (1996: 96). This dominance is not simply observable in strategic conduct but is often operating in more subtle ways: by representing sectional interests as general ones; by denying contradicting discourses; and by presenting the current social orders as natural (1996: 96-7). What we thus see, is that in the construction of discourses, some discourses are more present and accepted than others, often as a result of power distributions in a given society. This notion is of relevance to the

study of war and conflict, since words are able to *do* things, such as legitimating war and the resort to violence. Let me elaborate on that.

### *Interpreting Violence*

We have seen how discourse works productively. In the context of discourses on violence, several scholars focus on the importance of language and discourse to make people join into violence by explaining the dynamics of discourse *prior* to violence (Apter 1997; Schröder and Schmidt 2001). However, the focus of this thesis lies in the stage *after* violent acts and how they are interpreted. Following Paul Brass (1996), my concern is with the function of discourse in interpreting violence after its occurrence. In his book *Riots and Pogroms*, Brass extensively examines how different acts of violence have been subject to a 'struggle over the meaning of violence' in its aftermath (1996: 45). Indeed, such interpretations do involve a certain acknowledgement and study of the causes or legitimatisation of violence prior to the actual acts, since a struggle over representation involves partly a struggle over its explanation. However, the focus here is on the understanding of violent acts after their occurrence.

Interpretations, as a form of discourse, are subject to power relations as much as other discursive practices are. In the aftermath of violence, several actors aim to gain control over a dominant understanding, or at least join in the processes of constructing that interpretation. This is especially relevant in the light of remote warfare as a mode of interventionism, since the resort to violence has to be represented as useful and necessary by a state to its public. However, as my data vis-à-vis the different interpretations on the Coalition illustrates, contesting interpretations aim to challenge the dominant understandings of violence. Often, the 'official story' of certain acts of violence, is subject to alternative interpretations of that same event (Auyero 2002; Bhatia 2005). This dialogue between dominant and contesting interpretations does not simply lead to some kind of 'truth' around violent acts; what matters more is the 'relations of power/knowledge which establish or fail to establish a consensus within a *regime of truth* about violence and riots' (1996: 45, my emphasis).

Contesting interpretations can however not always be publicly staged. In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott introduces his notion of 'hidden transcripts', defined as discourses that take place 'beyond direct observation by powerholders' (1990, 4). According to him, 'subordinates' are being caught up in systems of power that force them to speak and behave in certain ways in presence of powerholders, while they communicate differently in direct absence of these powerholders. If they would stage their

'hidden transcript' publicly, it would lead to a spectacular moment of resistance, often oppressed by powerholders. Although Scott provides interesting insights on resistance and power in discourse, his assumptions are incongruent with the case I aim to study. In fact, my data demonstrates that Syrians in the Netherlands not only communicate their contesting interpretations off-stage, but also contest the official discourse openly, without necessarily causing a revolution or spectacular moment of resistance while doing so. Rather, there seems to be a field of discourses, in which some succeed in gaining ground, whereas others are left outside of the public sphere.

Thus, we need an analytical frame that is helpful in understanding the relations between power and discourse, but that acknowledges the agency of several actors in discourse construction. This is relevant, since unravelling these power relations, means we can critically approach the ways in which violence becomes represented in the public space. Let me turn to what Brass (1996) called the 'regimes of truth', in which the struggle over the meaning of violence results.

### *Regimes of Truth*

In stating that the 'struggle over the meaning of violence' results not in a truth, but in a *regime of truth*, Brass (1996) borrowed his concept from Michel Foucault. Foucault (1977), in one of his interviews on power and truth, summarised his understanding of the connection between power, truth and discourse by introducing his notion of regime of truth. He defines 'regimes of truth' as the 'general politics of truth', meaning:

the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (1977: 131)

What I take from this, is that truth is not something that is "out there" that can be "discovered". Truth, instead, is something that is produced and that is subject to power relations that decide what is generally understood as true, through the 'general politics of truth'. These politics also include a 'battle "for truth", or at least "around truth"' (1977: 132), meaning that it is not truth

as such that is subject to battle, but rather the status of a certain truth. Truth, as I understand it, is thus a certain discursive representation of reality subject to power relations, that is deemed so salient that it becomes represented as an objective fact. Taking 'regimes of truth' as the centre of analysis, then, enables one to 'explain how different organizations of power, consisting of sets of articulated institutions that control force, create and utilize knowledge and truths' (Reyna and Schiller 1998: 333). The concept 'regimes of truth' is hence grounded in the wider CDA approach by its focus on discourse and power.

While the concept has been used by scholars in diverging fields ranging from Educational Sciences to Organization Studies (Hall and Noyes 2009; Krasmann 2018; Locker 2013), it has often been used in a rather taken-for-granted way and it has been poorly theorised as such – by Foucault himself as well as by other scholars. Even Reyna and Schiller, who stress the relevance of a regimes of truth analysis, did not further conceptualise regimes of truth. By using 'regimes of truth' as a main analytical frame, embedded in the larger context of Foucauldian discourse analysis, I aim to contribute to the theoretical use of the concept. In fact, this offers us a concise analytical tool that encompasses the interactions of representation in discourse, as well as its concern with power relations. Its use adds to studies of discourse, in the sense that it is more narrowed down and specific in pointing at the dynamics between power and discourse through the 'mechanisms and instances' that discern truth, 'means of sanctioning', 'techniques and procedures' to acquire truth and 'status' in saying what is true. However, to my knowledge, these have not been operationalised thus far. It is beyond the scope of this research to do so for the several constituents parts. Since my focus is on the abilities of a certain group to join in the general understandings of truth and hence in expression of contesting interpretations or 'truths', to my concern are primarily the understandings of *sanctioning* ('means by which is sanctioned') and *status* ('status of saying what counts as true').

Since current literature, for as far I am aware of, fails to provide a conceptualisation of the constituent elements of 'regimes of truth', it is necessary to define *sanctioning* and *status* otherwise, by drawing on existing literature. First, I suggest to understand 'sanctioning' as a 'reaction of others to the behaviour of an individual or a group' (Giddens 1987 in Hexmoor et al. 2012: 92). This reaction can be positive as well as negative, but often serves to uphold and enforce a certain norm within society. Lucas Introna, in an attempt to further explain the constituent part of sanctioning within 'regimes of truth', defines sanctioning as the evaluation



of a proposed truth and also underlines the way in which a certain proposed truth is reacted upon (2003: 237). 'Status', I argue, can be understood as the 'social role' of an individual within a given society. Sonja Foss and Ann Gill, in discussing Foucault's work on power and discourse, explain how Foucault sees the function of 'roles' in discourse as 'allowing certain rhetors in certain roles to be heard in that formation, while others are not' (1987: 389). These roles are again constructed by the 'rules' in society, that define who is allowed to speak. Hence, this perception of roles ties into what Foucault says about status in who is 'charged with what counts as true' (1997: 131). In other words, 'status' refers to the social role someone takes up in society that allows some to speak truth, and others not and 'sanctioning' to the way in which a certain truth is reacted upon. Using these notions to study the 'struggle over the meaning of violence' in the case of the Coalition, allows me to study the dynamics between dominant and contesting interpretations of violent conflict through the lens of 'regimes of truth'. To be clear: 'truth' is not an objective fact to be discovered. However, certain interpretations of violence might be represented as 'truths', that are all trying to find their place with the 'regimes of truth'.

### *Regime of Post-Truth*

A set of scholars is now pushing towards a more contemporary understanding of Foucault's 'regimes of truth' and call for updating his concept to 'regimes of post-truth' (Harsin 2015; Krasmann 2018). According to them, contemporary social media platforms enlarge the ability of people to join into truth production and reproduction, hence allowing a larger public to challenge dominant discourses. This observation in itself is not novel: digital platforms are enabling larger publics to reinterpret dominant discourses and disseminate challenging views (Bhatia 2005: 11). In an increasingly digitalising world, truth production becomes a matter of the masses and it is important to take into account the possibilities of digital spaces in countering discourses. Although the use of 'post-truth' is often used in relation to the increasing dissemination of 'fake-news', my understanding of post-truth is different: I aim to point out that, through digital platforms, more people are able to join into the construction and reproduction of truth.

However, as Knüpfer and Entman (2018) show, digital platforms are only limited in 'empowering the masses'. Novel forms of information flows increasingly challenge traditional hierarchies of power that normally decide discourse in the public sphere, but the same power hierarchies remain in place (Knüpfer and Entman 2018: 477). To study the role of digital

communication platforms in countering dominant discourses, they suggest four conceptual approaches: fragmentation of media environments; transnational information flows and publics; networked environments; and architectures of digital platforms (Knüpfer and Entman 2018). According to them, these four conceptual pathways result from digitalisation and increasingly influence contestation of dominant framings and discourses.

We thus see that similar power dynamics are at stake in an era of post-truth; the availability of spaces to contest dominant discourses is expanding, but this does not necessarily change the way in which power dynamics interrelate with what is generally understood as 'true'. Therefore, I do not base my analysis on the notion of 'regimes of post-truth', but follow Foucault in his understanding of 'regimes of truth'.

## FRAME ANALYSIS

We have seen how discourse, power and what we understand as 'true' are inextricably connected. But if truth and discourse are constructed, and not "out there", how can we define what these discourses are? How do we unravel "the" discourses into understandable stories that indeed reflect a certain understanding of this world?

To answer the first question, we have to look at 'stories' or 'linguistic resources' that give meaning to our social worlds, to find discourse (Jabri 1997). They appear in repertoires, or patterns, and are hence reproduced. Importantly, these stories are not only reflected in text and image, but also 'enacted in practices, materialized in tangible products and inculcated in forms of being' (Demmers 2017: 142). We thus have to study the way in which people *talk* about certain events, as well as what people *do* and the *material objects* these discourses are reflected in. Studying the discursive constructions of the Dutch government and the Coalition on their airstrikes, thus also means, for example, studying the way in which a course of action is decided upon in official documents or the weaponry that is used. However, since my concern is with the *interpretation* and *representation* of violence, my focus here is on the representation of discourse in stories and language.

Answering the second question, scholars in discourse analysis provide several toolkits relevant to systematically analyse the content of discourse and 'different tools can be used to analyse discourse methodologically' (Jäger and Maier 2009: 46). Since discourse studies are concerned with language in the broadest sense of the word, different tools are applicable

depending on the goal of the research. Since this research looks at the interpretation of violence, a 'frame analysis' offers the most useful tool (Caroll and Ratner 1996; Demmers 2017: 137).

Frames are 'schemata of interpretation' that people use to identify the world around them (Goffman 1974: 21). Among the extended literature available on framing, Benford and Snow (2000) provide an excellent oversight of framing literature. They identify, in the literature on framing, three core framing tasks: 'diagnostic framing', 'prognostic framing' and 'motivational framing' (2000: 615)<sup>2</sup>. Diagnostic framing, first, is the 'problem identification' of a certain situation, often referred to as 'injustice frames' (2000: 615). Here, the victims of a certain situation, as well as the source of injustice being done are diagnosed. Regularly, this happens through 'adversarial framing', in which the "good" and "evil" are clearly discerned from each other. Second, 'prognostic framing' refers to the way in which a solution to the problem is articulated (2000: 616). It describes what should be done and how it should be done. Lastly, 'motivational framing' is a 'call to arms' that aims to mobilise people into action (2000: 617). Since this research is not concerned with collective action, I will not take motivational framing into account when analysing discourse.

As Benford and Snow (2000) demonstrate, framing is a widely used analytical frame. Many scholars contributed to knowledge on the working of different kind of frames. My aim here is different: my objective is not to contribute to framing literature as such. Rather, I use the notions of 'diagnostic' and 'prognostic' framing as a methodological tool to disentangle the different discourses around the Coalition's actions. Therein, I understand framing as the way in which a certain event or set of events are interpreted. These framings, or interpretations, are in turn embedded in broader discourses about social life (Brass 1997: 15). In the following, I will refer to 'framing' when discussing the interpretations of specific case of the Coalition, and to 'discourse' when discussing the larger set of thoughts these framings are embedded in. I will use 'truth', to conclude, when these interpretations aim to find a place within the 'regimes of truth' on violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Although their focus is on the function of frames in collective action, I argue that their oversight offers a useful tool for studying framing in general.

## REMOTE WARFARE

The objective of this thesis is to contribute to a specific kind of discourse construction on violence and its power relations, namely on contemporary modes of warfare that rely on remote strategies. The case of the Coalition is exemplary of these contemporary modes of waging war. It is what I will refer to in the following as 'remote warfare'.

A new paradigm seems to be dominating contemporary warfare as currently being waged by Western states. Referred to as 'vicarious warfare' (Waldman 2018), 'surrogate warfare' (Krieg and Rickli 2018) 'risk-transfer warfare' (Shaw 2005) or 'liquid warfare' (Demmers and Gould 2018), scholars concerned with this 'new way of war' are all emphasising the current risk-aversion of – predominantly – Western states. In its core, the nature of this kind of warfare is characterized by a 'shift away from "boots on the ground" deployments towards light-footprint military interventions abroad' (Biegon and Watts 2017: 1). In short, it entails the observation that current interventionist wars are being fought from a distance. This principally manifests itself in two ways: first, in an adoption of drone strikes and airstrikes from above and second, in the formation of alliances with local forces or private military companies to whom the burden of war is strategically outsourced (Biegon and Watts 2017; Demmers and Gould 2018: 365). States, then, are able to tackle threats and risks abroad, while not having to engage in warfare themselves in a costly manner –economically as well as human. It is precisely the focus on distancing oneself from the battlefield through simultaneously spatial and human remote strategies that I believe to be the most consequential in its effects. Therefore, I follow Biegon and Watts (2017) in their adoption of the term remote warfare.

The 'remoteness' of war as understood as fighting by air and proxy is not new in itself. The Vietnam war might in that sense be the most salient example, through its large-scale use of air forces and proxies (Bonds 2018). Instead, the newness of remote warfare is most reflected in the heavy reliance on these earlier trends, now seen in the context of post-9/11 wars (Waldman 2018: 185). Risk-aversion is not a part of the strategy, but became a strategy in itself. Moreover, it is new in its way of adopting new technologies that are able to 'effectively' eliminate the enemy, such as surveillance and armed drones, 'smart bombs' and other weapons that make targeted killings a way of fighting wars at a distance (Bonds 2018: 441; Chamayou 2013: 93). War, then, becomes a matter not of conquering territories, but of removing the obstacle that threatens a 'Western way of life' (Waldman 2018: 186).

But what exactly make the remoteness of warfare a development worth of studying, beyond the newness of its nature? First, through its remoteness, new wars are fought in the shadows and rendered largely invisible to the wider public, making matters of (legal) accountability and responsibility increasingly difficult (Demmers and Gould 2018: 365). Additionally, the lack of transparency inhibits an actual democratic debate on the strategies adopted and fighting wars as such (Waldman 2018: 190). Second, we see a strong emphasis on the 'precise' character of remote weaponry. Airstrikes are referred to as 'surgical' and 'humane', by their perceived ability to nearly exclusively target the enemy, while reducing the risk of civilian deaths to a bare minimum (Espinoza 2018; Gregory 2011). Marina Espinoza refers to this representation of remote forms of warfare as the 'precision discourse', in which advanced technologies that shape contemporary weaponry are not only represented as unproblematic for civilians, but as beneficial for them, in reducing "collateral damage" (2018: 378). Eric Bonds (2018) demonstrates how this precision discourse, together with notions of 'care' and 'legality', legitimises airstrikes as a form of remote warfare in a 'humanizing discourse'. Through legal and administrative measures, warfare becomes a calculated act by centring on the 'proportionality' of airstrikes. In legal terms, this means that a "proper balance" between military objectives and civilian harm' is established by fighting militaries (2018: 441). Hence, the 'humanizing discourse' rationalises violence by its focus on precision and care. Civilians are then represented as being safe from airstrikes, but 'the humanization of violence in no way guarantees the unarmed civilians will not be harmed' (Bonds 2018: 441).

Coming back to the power of discourses, we thus see how discourses are important in representing remote warfare as a legitimate mode of contemporary interventionist war, by stressing its reliance on precision bombs and its humanitarian nature. However, despite contemporary technologies of 'smart bombs' and extensive surveillance of drones, civilians increasingly become the targets in contemporary warfare (Dexter 2007). As Eyal Weizan stresses, 'the "trade of" of risk means that reducing risk to the attacking military tends to increase the risk to civilians' (2011: 14). This is however largely obfuscated through the representation of contemporary Western interventionist wars as 'humanitarian', meaning that they become represented as 'an intervention for the purposes of human protection' (Dexter 2007: 1055). Especially in the context of the War on Terror, the West is presented as freeing the world from the evil forces it inhabits. This liberation or freedom is then presented as a 'gift', further rationalising the legitimacy of Western interventionism (Gilbert 2015; Nguyen

2012). The boundaries are clear: The West is fighting a good war in a 'humane', 'humanitarian' or 'humanitized' manner through clean and surgical strikes, opposed to the barbaric violence used by terrorists in suicide bombings or beheadings.

Consequently, we are entering a zone in which the use of violence by Western states is legitimised and rationalised through discourses of precision and humanitarianism, outlining the accurate, riskless, humanitarian and hence moral superior character of contemporary warfare. This increasingly enables the justification of contemporary interventions as a way of war that is the 'least of all possible evils' (Weizman 2017). The danger, then, lies in the perception that 'less brutal measures are also those that may be more easily naturalized, accepted and tolerated – and hence more frequently used, with the result that a greater evil may be reached cumulatively' (Weizman 2017: 10). Since the costs of contemporary war are not felt by the West, the strong discourses of precision and humanitarianism are easily upheld.

Although I agree with the scholars I have discussed that it is paramount to question and study the nature of remote warfare, I observe a serious gap in the empirical grounding of these studies regarding the actual *effect* of forms of remote warfare on the ground. Often, these studies fail to pay attention to local perceptions of remote warfare by taking a highly theoretical approach (Espinoza 2018; Krieg and Rickli 2018; Schwarz 2016; Waldman 2018), or an exclusively legal approach (Cullen 2017; Misra 2016; Ohlin 2017; Ruys et al. 2019). As I argue, it is exactly this effect that should be studied, in order to re-balance the remoteness of contemporary violence. By distancing oneself as an academic from the research field in studying high-level interactions of remote warfare, one draws into the same strategies of the drone pilot that distances oneself from the battlefield through remote technologies. My aim is then to study how forms of remote warfare are experienced and interpreted by those at the receiving end of the violence perpetrated. By studying exactly this, my objective is to contribute to our understanding of the intimacies of remote warfare and gain a deeper understanding of this new interventionist paradigm by offering an ethnography of remote warfare.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question, this research builds on qualitative data gathered in the period between March 2019 and May 2019 in the Netherlands. By taking a social research approach, the analysis of the data primarily involves a ‘dialogue between ideas and evidence’; the ‘analytical frame’ (as derived from ideas or theory) and ‘images’ (the patterns that evolve out of evidence or data) are synthesised in order to make sense of the data gathered (Ragin 1994: 55). The outcome of this synthesis is a representation of social life, pertaining to the specific research project. Before I engage in studying the dialogue between the data – or, ‘evidence’ – and the theoretical approach – or, ‘ideas’ – it should be clear how I gathered empirical evidence through systematic questioning, that allowed me to find patterns. In the following chapter, I explain and reflect upon the research design, data gathering techniques, method and limitations of the research.

#### RESEARCH PUZZLE AND SUB QUESTIONS

As formulated in the introduction, the research puzzle this research is concerned with is as follows:

*How do the interpretations of Syrians, from north-east Syria currently living in the Netherlands, on the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition’s airstrikes conducted between 2014 and 2018, relate to the ‘regimes of truth’ on the Coalition in the context of Dutch society?*

The research puzzle is broken down in three sub questions, that all aim to answer a part of this research question. Sub question 1 focuses on the way in which the Coalition’s airstrikes are officially framed by the Dutch government and the Coalition at large, and the contestation of this official frame by monitoring agencies:

*(1) How are the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition’s airstrikes conducted between 2014 and 2018 interpreted by the Dutch government in its official statements and by monitoring agencies in their reports?*



Sub question 2 focuses on how these airstrikes of the Coalition are interpreted by Syrians who lived in areas where the Coalition was active, but who now live in the Netherlands:

*(2) How are the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition's airstrikes conducted between 2014 and 2018 interpreted by Syrians from north-east Syria, who are currently living in the Netherlands?*

Sub question 3, then, focuses on how the interpretations of Syrians stands in relation to the official interpretation as formulated by the Dutch government. Hence, it is the final step to answer the main research puzzle and aims to examine the dynamics of the 'regimes of truth':

*(3) How are 'status' and 'sanctioning' enabling or constraining Syrians from north-east Syria, who are currently living in the Netherlands, to contest the official interpretation on the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition's airstrikes conducted between 2014 and 2018, in the context of Dutch society?*

It is important to emphasise that this question focuses on the 'regimes of truth' in the context of the Netherlands, and not in other European countries or the US. Although the Netherlands were amongst the most significant military contributors to the Coalition, they never contributed as much to the Coalition as the US did. Moreover, they shared their responsibility over the F16's with the Belgians, who took over the float between July 2016 And January 2018. It is however relevant to take the context of the Netherlands as a case study, since they have been a steady contributor to the Coalition between 2014 and 2018. Therefore, the selected time-frame this thesis focusses on is 2014-2018. As expressed by informants, the very fact that the Netherlands contributed to the Coalition and were supportive of its actions, makes them responsible for the effect of the airstrikes on the ground. Finally, it is noteworthy that, although, questions asked focus on the conduction of airstrikes in Syria, the Coalition has also been active in Iraq. The contexts of both countries are highly different, since Iraq has been suffering from war since 2003, and Syria from 2011 as a result of the revolution against Assad, making the research groups different in nature and not generalisable. I made the choice to study the interpretations on Coalition strikes in *Syria*, since the Syrian community in the Netherlands is larger than the Iraqi community, and Syrians are generally more proficient in English.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to answer the research questions, a 'plan for collecting and analysing evidence' should be carefully constructed in what Ragin calls a 'research design' (1994: 26). A research design principally includes the sampling method, the data gathering techniques and the way in which analysis has been taking place. In other words, it explains how a researcher has come to the knowledge he or she presents. I divided the research in three phases, based upon the different sub questions. The second and third phase were however intertwined, since I asked questions relating to both research questions in the interviews.

The first phase, guided by sub question 1, was to study the official interpretation by the Dutch government, and its contestation by the monitoring agencies (MA's) *Airwars* and *Amnesty International* (AI). In doing so, my aim was to analyse how the Coalition's actions are officially framed, as part of the 'regimes of truth'. As a data gathering technique, I conducted a small-scale document analysis of letters as published by the *Tweede Kamer*<sup>3</sup> (N=4) and reports as published by *Airwars* and *Amnesty International* (N=7). The *Tweede Kamerbrieven*, which are official documents published by the Dutch government, were sampled based on their dossier number 27 925<sup>4</sup>, that all pertain to international missions against terrorism. Considering the large number of documents within this dossier, I sampled those relating to the Dutch contribution to the Coalition published at key moments of decision-making. These included documents in which was decided upon Dutch contribution in the first place, the mandate to start fighting in Syria and moments in which was decided the prolongment of the mission. The reports as published by *Airwars* and AI were sampled based on their discussion of Coalition strikes relating to its activities in Syria. I did not include documents of Human Rights Watch, which might also be regarded as a MA involved in monitoring the Coalition strikes, since its research is less extensive and only repetitive of the information *Airwars* and AI provide. Additionally, I attended one lecture and workshop by *Airwars*, in which the outcomes of its freshly launched interactive website in cooperation with AI was discussed. This provided me insight in the way *Airwars* and AI regard and interpret the Coalition strikes.

Analysing the documents and reports, I made use of Altheide's (2000) notion of qualitative document analysis. Altheide suggests to code public documents by looking at

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<sup>3</sup> The Dutch equivalent of the House of Representatives.

<sup>4</sup>All officially published letters, debates, motions and summaries of debates are retrieved from <https://www.officielebekendmakingen.nl>

frames, that inform us about a larger discourse when studied systematically (2000: 291). In order to structurally analyse the official interpretation, I have used Benford and Snow's (2000) conceptualization of 'diagnostic frames' and 'prognostic frames'. As mentioned before, I used their understanding of frames as a tool to unravel the discourse, instead of a theoretical frame to which this research academically contributes. To systematically extract the frames, I coded the *Tweede Kamerbrieven* and reports in NVivo. I did so by starting with constructed codes derived from the literature, after which I continued adding 'in vivo' codes (Boeije 2010: 101).

The second phase of the research was guided by sub question 2, in which I collected empirical evidence on the interpretation of the Coalition as articulated by Syrians currently living in the Netherlands, who originally come from areas where the Coalition has been active (N=18). As data gathering techniques, I conducted semi-structured interviews and several informal conversations, that both enabled me to study the experiences of and perspectives on (social) life (Boeije 2010: 62). Conducting interviews, I made use of a topic list (see annex 2) to ensure consistency between the interviews. Other data gathering techniques, such as participant observation, were less suitable due to the fact that the experiences took place in a different area (Syria) than the actual research setting (The Netherlands).

The individuals that I interviewed were sampled based on their region of origin. I limited my research group to those people coming from places in north-east Syria, since this was here where ISIS controlled parts of the country and, thus, where the Coalition was active. These places include, among others, Raqqa (city as well as the province), Tabqa, Deir ez-Zor, Manbij and Kobani<sup>5</sup>. Most interviewees lived in the area during the Coalition airstrikes. Several interviewees had left Syria by the beginning of 2014 and consequently did not experience the strikes themselves, but all interviewees still had close ties with friends and family currently living in the area. Ideally, I would have only sampled Syrians who lived under Coalition strikes themselves. However, the sensibility of the research topic and the specificity of the research did not allow me to sample accordingly. As a result, I mainly found research participants through 'snowball sampling', by asking respondents to put me in touch with their acquaintances. This allowed me to find participants willing to talk about a rather sensitive political topic (Boeije 2010: 40). Additionally, I also spoke to several Syrians who originally do not come from north-east Syria, but who are knowledgeable people with an established

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<sup>5</sup> I did not find interviewees from Kobani or Manbij willing to talk to me. However, I have since the start of the research included these cities in my sampling group and I do acknowledge the importance of including experiences from Syrians coming from these cities.

position in the Syrian community in the Netherlands. They have been paramount in informing me on current dynamics in Syria and connecting me to research participants.

During the final phase, guided by sub question 3, I aimed to bring both interpretations together. I did so through semi-structured interviews, in which I posed questions on the need and ability of Syrians to publicly stage their interpretations in conversations. My focus here was on the moment of expression, since this allowed me to study how a certain 'truth' was reacted upon. Through studying these moments, I analysed the dynamics of 'regimes of truth' by focusing on how the interpretation of Syrians was 'sanctioned' (how their interpretations were reacted upon) and how their 'status' (social position that enables or limits one to speak) informed their ability to speak. Ideally, I would have studied the moment of expression in interaction, but since these conversations do not happen regularly, I had to rely on how Syrians remembered or experienced interaction at the moment of expression. The outcomes of sub question 3 are thus based upon the *experienced interactions* of Syrians when speaking out, and not on actual conversations as such.

To systematically analyse the interviews, I coded them in NVivo 12. Doing so, I used the notions of Benford and Snow's (200) 'diagnostic framing' and 'prognostic framing', and the notions of 'status' and 'sanctioning' to interpret the interviews. Coding the interviews, allowed me to find the patterns, or 'images' of my data, which I later brought in dialogue with my theory, enabling me to build my argumentation. I present the outcomes through quotes and vignettes, that both might seem anecdotal, but that I carefully selected in order to represent a cluster of voices as they appeared in my interviews. These are in several cases supported by pictures as made by informants, since visual evidence often was shown to me during interviews.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Social research in principal entails personal encounters with research participants, in which the researcher should reflect upon the ethical principles of the research. This is particularly the case when studying sensitive topics in a field such as Conflict Studies. Boeije underlines three main dimensions of ethical considerations within social research, that have to be taken into account in order to minimise 'unnecessary harm, risk or wrong' towards research participants, namely *informed consent*, *privacy* and *confidentiality* (2010: 45).

First, building on the principle of 'informed consent', I informed interviewees on my research goals, the structure of the interview and their right to withdraw, before we started the interview. Furthermore, I always asked permission to record the interviews. Second, considering 'privacy', I have been open and honest about my research objectives, and I have not observed private spaces without consent. Additionally, I made sure to conduct interviews on locations where we could not be interrupted or disturbed by other people. This also relates to the third principle, namely 'confidentiality'. In order to protect the privacy and safety of the research participants, I anonymised each individual I introduce in this thesis. Several participants expressed their agreement with the use of their full name, but since this research discusses a sensitive topic and involves a vulnerable group of, regularly, refugees without a permanent status, I decided to anonymise all participants.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this research concerns a distressing topic; interviews were directed at understanding the interpretations of Syrians of a violent conflict that they often had been victim to themselves. This required a careful working method from my side, which I established by adhering to interview topics that directly related to the Coalition's violence, and by avoiding other distressing topics, such as their experiences with living under ISIS or being arrested by Assad. It is noteworthy that the distressing topic also might have influenced the way in which research participants remembered their experiences. Talking about a traumatic period can obfuscate the recalling of events as they actually occurred. In order to make sure that the answers I received were useful, I made sure, as I will further elaborate on in the following, to triangulate in research questions and using external information from reports or investigations.

## **LIMITATIONS**

In conducting this research, I was limited in several ways. First of all, language became a limiting factor, since I do not speak the mother tongue of my research participants: Arabic. Therefore, I had to conduct interviews in English, limiting my research participants to express themselves optimally. As some participants did not speak English, or only on a basic level, I occasionally had to make use of translators. Although this never led to major limitations in the flow of the conversation, the actual meaning of the message might have been troubled by involvement of a third person. This is particularly important to acknowledge when studying a

topic on interpretation and discourse. I managed to largely overcome this by rephrasing and repeating questions throughout the interview or by asking for clarification, but ideally, I would have conducted the interviews in Arabic. I do not believe the use of translators withheld participants to fully speak out, since all translators were introduced on behalf of the interviewees and were friends or family members originating from the same region, which created a space for the interviewees to talk.

Additionally, my sample group was reasonably small, since I narrowed it down to Syrians who currently live in the Netherlands, but who originally come from a specific area in Syria. Not all people I reached out to felt comfortable talking to me, because of the sensitivity of the topic, the current political climate in the Netherlands – as will become clear in chapter 5 – or because they did not want to recall uncomfortable events. Therefore, I was not able to fully diversify within my research group, for example considering gender or religion.

Another limiting factor involved the way I was unable to use participant observation as a data gathering method to triangulate my data. Triangulation in methods allows the researcher to check or verify data by studying a social phenomenon from different angles (Boeije 2010: 176). Since I had to travel throughout the country to conduct interviews and a physical meeting place for people from north-east Syria does not exist as such, triangulation through participant observation became difficult. Hence, I had to triangulate differently, by repeating questions throughout an interview and by adherence to a topic guide (see annex 2) in order to cross-check the answers given in separate interviews. Furthermore, I could check my data with Raed and Hamid, both very knowledgeable on the topic, when I was in doubt of the usefulness of data.

Finally, my own positionality within the research should be reflected upon. As a Dutch woman, I find myself within the structures of the dominant discourse in the Netherlands. As Ragin puts it, when the objective of a research project is to 'give voice', one has to 'unlearn' his or her own thoughts, in order to be able to fully represent the participants voice (1994: 44). I managed to do so by not reacting normatively to what informants revealed to me and by challenging myself to note down what dominant discourses shaped my own understanding of ISIS and the Coalition, making myself aware of my assumptions. Additionally, one could argue that my position withheld people to talk to me at all, but in general, participants were glad to talk to me, since I was on 'their side' and knowledgeable about the topic. Three people I reached out to did not feel comfortable or safe enough to talk to me.

## 4. STATE FRAMES AND MONITORING AGENCIES FRAMES

### *PRECISION, THE WAR ON TERROR AND HUMANITARIANISM*

‘These bombardments you are talking about... they also destroyed schools, hospitals, innocent people’<sup>6</sup>, Brahim contradicts the Dutch Minister of Defence, Jaenine Hennis-Plasschaert, in an episode of the Dutch television program *The Dreamschool*. The minister leans forward, her expression full of indignation and disbelief. She just told him, and the other students in the room, about the vital contribution of the Netherlands in the fight against ISIS and their use of precision bombardments. ‘Are you saying that Dutch F16’s...’. Brahim looks down, sensing that the minister will not listen to what he has to say anyways. But he cannot let go. ‘If it’s the Dutch, or the American... they are one and the same’. A condescending smile appears on the minister’s face: ‘I’m afraid you are watching the wrong news channels’<sup>7</sup>.

In the vignette above, we see an example of how the Dutch government, in this case represented by then Minister of Defence Hennis-Plasschaert, officially interprets the Dutch contribution to the Coalition. This vignette might seem anecdotal, but it stands for the general and official interpretation of the Dutch airstrikes. As we will see, this is an interpretation of precise strikes, that avoid civilian harm at all times, and that are vital to the security of the region and the Netherlands specifically against ISIS.

In order to examine the way in which the interpretation of those at the receiving of the Coalition’s violence relates to the ‘regimes of truth’ on the Coalition’s violence, we should know how this violence is officially framed. In this chapter, I study this official frame, particularly as articulated by the Dutch government. As I demonstrate, the official framing of the Coalition’s violence as articulated by the Dutch government underlines the “barbaric” and “evil” face of ISIS, alongside with the emphasis on remote strategies to “surgically” defeat ISIS. This frame is embedded in three broader discourses: the precision discourse, the War on Terror discourse and the humanitarianism discourse. Although this official interpretation is

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s translation from Dutch.

<sup>7</sup> Fragment of the Dutch television program *The Dreamschool*, NPO, episode of February 12, 2017.



contested by monitoring agencies as Airwars and Amnesty International, their contesting frames are neutralised and incorporated by the Coalition, rendering the contesting frames ineffective to bring about change. Here, my objective is to draw the general understanding of the Coalition's violence in the context of the Netherlands, to which other interpretations stand in relation to. Before I elaborate on that, let me first draw the context in which the Coalition was established.

## THE CREATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION AGAINST ISIS

### *The US-led anti-ISIS Coalition*

In mid-2014, Western media were dominated by a new player in the Middle East. Referred to as Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)<sup>8</sup> or Daesh, this group of jihadi fighters was quickly gaining ground, besieging territories in Iraq and Syria. In June 2014, they had successfully captured Mosul, Iraq and they quickly expanded their territorial control (Cockburn 2015: x-xi). It is noteworthy that, although ISIS at first glance appears as well-organised force, carrying out attacks throughout the world, it is an idea rather than an organisation. The world-wide ISIS-attacks were often the result of lone-wolves, claiming to be attacking in name of ISIS, instead of under a top-down command (Cockburn 2015: 54-5).

ISIS, which at first was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, had the possibility to grow in the instable context of respectively the Iraq war since 2003 and the Syrian civil war since 2011 (Cockburn 2015: 8). Since 2011, Bashar-al-Assad was waging a war against its civilians in Syria. Helped by the activities of the US and European countries that kept the war against Assad alive, the situation in Syria soon became unstable enough for ISIS to expand its territory outside Iraqi borders into Syria (Cockburn 2015: 8).

At first, the international community did not intervene, largely because the situation in Syria was framed as a 'humanitarian situation' (Friis 2015). However, after the publication of the beheading video of American journalist James Foley, in 2014, the discourse in the US regarding ISIS and the situation in Syria started to turn. The understanding shifted from a

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<sup>8</sup> There has been much political debate about the right reference to 'Islamic State' and several names and abbreviations have been used, such as ISIL, IS, ISIS or the Arabic acronym 'Daesh'. In this thesis, since my primary objective is to portray the perceptions of those at the receiving end of the violence, I use the name as most often used by my informants: ISIS.

'humanitarian situation' to an issue of 'national security', hence legitimising military activities of the US (Friis 2015). In September 2014, Obama decided the US had to act:

'there can be no reasoning – no negotiation – with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force. So the United States of America will work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death' (Friis 2015: 737)

This crystallised in the forming of the Global Coalition against Daesh, also known as the US-led anti-IS Coalition or just shortly 'the Coalition'. Under the lead of the US, a Coalition of 60 countries and partner organisations was formed under five lines of effort: 1) Support of military operation, capacity building and training; 2) inhibit the flow of foreign terrorist fighters; 3) make finance and funding inaccessible for ISIS; 4) address the humanitarian crises and 5) 'expose ISIS' true nature' (McInnis 2016: 1). The Coalition was thus operating on military as well as humanitarian grounds. To my concern is the military part, that became known as Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) and included the contribution of more than 20 nations, of which thirteen are known to have contributed in airstrikes (Haesebrouck 2018: 254). It aimed at 'destroying ISIS's parent tumor in Iraq and Syria, combating its worldwide spread, and protecting all homelands' (McInnis 2016: 1). Therein, it largely relied on airstrikes and the training and equipping of local forces. Acknowledging the differences in the situation in Iraq and Syria, the Coalition however described the fight against ISIS as one and the same (Operation Inherent Resolve 2019).

About a year after its establishment, towards the end of 2015, the Coalition seemed to have underestimated the force and the ideological appeal of ISIS. Consequently, the Coalition increased its activities by targeting ISIS more directly, expanding its amount of operations and increasing the US budget for the Coalition (Airwars 2019a; McInnis 2016: 3). It successfully defeated ISIS in Mosul in 2016 and later expelled ISIS from their 'capital of the Caliphate' Raqqa in 2017 (Amnesty International 2018). Finally, in early 2019, the territorial defeat of ISIS by the Coalition was proclaimed, although it acknowledged the remaining ideological and operational force of the jihadist group.

### *The Dutch contribution to the Coalition*

On 24 September 2014, the Netherlands decided to militarily join the Coalition in its fight against ISIS. Initially contributing six operational F-16's and 150 military personnel in Iraq, the

Netherlands were amongst the largest contributors to the fight against ISIS (Airwars 2019a). One of their contributions was to lead the activities directed at stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (McInnis 2016: 1). Their F-16's were operational until December 2018.

The exact mandate of the Netherlands was not settled immediately at the start of their contribution. Molier and Hekkenberg (2016) provide an excellent study of the changing Dutch parliamentary discourse regarding the responsibilities of the Netherlands. As they show, the debate was mainly centred around the legality of the airstrikes and the territories of operation. First, until mid-2016, the Netherlands only acknowledged the legal grounds for operating in Iraq, since the Coalition was operating on invitation of the Iraqi government (Molier and Hekkenberg 2016). It was not until the attacks in Paris in the end of 2015, which were claimed by ISIS, that the Netherlands found an international legal mandate to also fight in Syria. In January 2016, the Dutch government concluded that on the basis of 'collective self-defence' – and as a reaction to the Paris attacks and the insight that ISIS was operating in a direct line between Iraq and Syria – there now was a legal mandate to use the F-16's in Syria.

It should be noted that the Netherlands were not entirely responsible for the F-16 float during the entire period between 2014 and 2018. They found a partner in Belgium, who took over the responsibility of the F-16 float between July 2016 and December 2017 (Molier and Hekkenberg 2016), meaning that the Netherlands were not involved in the often-discussed campaign to defeat ISIS in Raqqa between June and October 2017. Moreover, although the Dutch contribution was amongst the largest compared to other partners, the US was by far the largest contributor to the mission (Haesebrouck 2018; Amnesty International 2018). As will become clear in the following chapters, on the ground, the US was also regarded as the main responsible actor in the Coalition. I argue here, however, that this does not take away any responsibilities from the Dutch side. From 2014 to 2018, they have supported the Coalition in its actions and their contribution has been significant to the Coalition efforts.

How did the Dutch government report on its contribution and the Coalition's actions at large? What was their interpretative story on the activities against ISIS? In the following section, I will examine the official interpretation of the Coalition's violence as articulated by the Dutch government<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Although my focus here is on Syria, the Coalition's efforts in Syria and Iraq are often represented as one and the same. When possible, my focus will be on the framing of the CJTF-OIR in Syria.

## THE OFFICIAL INTERPRETATION: THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT

Here, I examine the official interpretation of the Dutch government vis-à-vis CJTF-OIR through Benford and Snow's (2000) frame analysis on 'diagnostic' and 'prognostic' framing. When studying the different interpretations of violence and the power relations that decide what is generally seen as 'true', the official statement of how a certain situation plays out should be studied. Namely, it is in official statements that certain interpretations become institutionalised and reified (Brass 1996: 5). I do so by examining several official statements published at key moments in the decision making: from the moment that the Dutch government decides to militarily contribute to the Coalition in September 2014 to the moment it decided to withdraw its F-16's in 2018<sup>10</sup>. The first of these documents reflect a legitimising discourse in order to take action rather than an interpretation of the violence already enacted. However, these two are inevitably related and hence the legitimising discourse that explains the situation and the consequential action to be taken, also informs us on the actual interpretation of the situation (Brass 1996: 2). Since the Dutch government's discourse is embedded in the official statements of the Coalition at large, I also include some of their general statements.

### *The problem: ISIS*

The 'diagnostic frame' or the problem as identified by the Coalition, already comes to the fore in its name: it is an international Coalition *against ISIS*. First, through 'adversarial frames' that denote the "evilness" of ISIS, clear boundaries are drawn between ISIS and, primarily, the West. US Secretary of State John Kerry clearly did so in a press statement following the beheading of Foley in August 2014: 'There is evil in this world, and we all have come face to face with it once again. Ugly, savage, inexplicable, nihilistic, and valueless evil' (Friis 2015: 735). ISIS, here, is demonized and separated from the West, by outlining its monstrous character. As Friis remarks: 'by condemning ISIS as "evil" and "inhumane", they indirectly attempt to convey a superior moral clarity and separate themselves and their own tactics from ISIS and theirs' (2015: 735). In the Dutch context too, ISIS was soon to be condemned. In a letter to the *Tweede Kamer*<sup>11</sup> composed by several ministries on 24 September 2014, ISIS is described as a terrorist organization that is 'unusually violent' and 'barbaric' (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 506 2014: 1-9).

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<sup>10</sup> The excerpts shown in the following section are translated by the author from Dutch.

<sup>11</sup> The Dutch equivalent of the House of Representatives.

A second aspect of 'diagnostic frames', namely 'injustice frames', are then functional in pointing out who suffers from the injustices done. The victims of ISIS are in the first place identified as the civilians living in the areas controlled by ISIS, that is committing 'horrible crimes against the population in Iraq and Syria' (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 506 2014: 2). Interestingly, and importantly, it is not only the people who have to live under ISIS in Syria and Iraq who are seen as victims. Also, the West, including the Netherlands, are identified as (potential) victims of ISIS. In the same letter of 24 September 2014, ISIS is described as being 'a direct threat to the region and causing instability at the borders of Europe, potentially threatening our own security' Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 506 2014: 1). Later, in a letter of 19 January 2018, when the Dutch government decided to extend its contribution to the Coalition, it was stated that the situation in Syria and Iraq has direct consequences for 'our safety and the safety of our partners and allies' (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 617 2018).

We thus observe a duality in the victim identification: there seems to be a local victim and a transnational victim, including a Dutch victim. Therein, the official framing strongly builds on the discourse of the War on Terror. This should be understood as a strong and appealing discourse that easily resonates with a larger audience. As Benford and Snow make clear, frames resonate, amongst others, when they are not too abstract and consistent with how people experience their everyday lives (2000: 621). Regarding terrorism, we see a constant flow of media messages showing terrorist attacks all over the world, making the 'War on Terror' one of the most prominent political discourses of this time (Bogain 2017). Therefore, terrorism, including the appearance of ISIS, becomes a threat to *us*: there is always a looming danger that our bus, airport or main square will be blown whilst we are there. This makes the labelling of ISIS a world-wide problem, that *has* to be fought, a strongly resonating story. Although not the object of my study, it can be stated that the official frame of the Coalition's violence is largely left uncontested within the public sphere (O'Brien 2019), underlining the strong resonance of ISIS as a vital threat to the world at large.

#### *The solution: fighting ISIS remotely*

How, then, did the Coalition, and the Netherlands specifically, frame the course of action to be taken based upon their understanding of the situation? Through 'prognostic framing', a solution to a problem is suggested (Benford and Snow 2000). In the case of the Coalition, the defeat of ISIS was framed as in need of 'coordinated air strikes, training and equipping local security forces, and targeted special operations' (McInnis 2016:2). It emphasised the need of

cooperation with local forces in order to successfully defeat ISIS. Furthermore, the Coalition relied on airstrikes, in particular on “precision weapons” that were intended to hit specific targets (Bonds 2018: 441). As they claimed, ‘our goal has always been for zero casualties’ and it repeatedly stated that the fight against ISIS is ‘the most precise war in history’ (Bonds 2018: 439). The Dutch Government reproduced this frame in its official statements, by outlining the importance of airstrikes and the precise character of its bombs.

In a letter of 19 June 2015, the government concluded that there is a ‘remaining need for air assets to support the campaign’ (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 539 2015: 7), thereby legitimising the Dutch contribution. Moreover, it repeatedly stated that it was taking all possible efforts to avoid civilian casualties, amongst others through a process of identifying when a specific location could be targeted (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 570 2017: 16). Importantly, the goal of the Coalition was to defeat ISIS through a combination of military and non-military efforts. As was stated by the Dutch government in the letter of 11 September 2017: ‘the government is convinced that the monstrous ISIS can only be effectively fought through a combination of means: political, diplomatic, stabilisation and militarily’ (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 570 2017: 1). However, since my focus here is on the military actions of the Coalition, my focus is on the framing of CJTF-OIR and specifically its airstrikes, rather than stabilisation or diplomatic activities.

What we thus see, is that the fight against ISIS is legitimised and interpreted by the Coalition, and the Dutch government as a member state, as a fight that needs to defeat the “evil” and “barbaric” ISIS through overwhelmingly remote strategies such as airstrikes and cooperation with local forces. The violence in itself is seen as precise and as severely minimising civilian harm. Therein, it draws, first, on the ‘precision discourse’, by emphasising the use of precision weaponry and the care taken in fighting ISIS. Second, we see how this ‘prognostic frame’ builds on the notion of ‘humanitarianism’, in that it accepts the hegemony of Western states to intervene in order to protect populations globally.

This official diagnostic and prognostic framing of the Coalition’s violence as articulated by the Dutch government is thus tapping into three larger discourses that legitimise and interpret the actions to be taken: the ‘War on Terror’ discourse, in which terrorism is represented as one of the largest threats in our contemporary society; discourses of ‘humanitarianism’, in which the West is portrayed as intervening to protect humanity; and finally a ‘precision discourse’, that represents contemporary war as minimising civilian harm.

However, the framing by the Dutch government is not *entirely* left uncontested. One significant group of actors, here called ‘monitoring agencies’, propose a different interpretation of the realities of the war against ISIS. Drawing on their own investigations on the ground, they contradict the precision of the Coalition by showing their assessment of civilian casualty numbers as a result of Coalition strikes. Let me elaborate on this in the following section.

## **CONTESTING THE OFFICIAL INTERPRETATION: AIRWARS AND AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

Monitoring agencies (MA) are organisations that aim to hold states responsible for their actions through independently gathered information (Fariss 2017). In the case of the Coalition in Syria and Iraq, there are two dominant MA’s that aim to contest the official statement of the Coalition: Amnesty International (AI) and Airwars<sup>12</sup>. The former is a world-wide known human rights organisation advocating justice and human rights, the latter is an organisation ‘monitoring and assessing civilian harm from airpower-dominated international military actions’ (Airwars 2019a). Both have been conducting their own researches vis-à-vis the Coalition airstrikes and civilian harm, and additionally released an interactive website together based on their co-conducted research on civilian casualties in Raqqa (Amnesty International 2019a). Where AI conducted on the ground research and interviewed civilians in cities as Raqqa and Mosul, Airwars mainly made use of open source investigations (Airwars 2019b). In short, the parts of their work that are to my interest focus on the realities of the Coalition’s actions on the ground. Since, as they argue, the Coalition is not transparent considering its activities, independent research has to be conducted. In doing so, they provide a contesting interpretation of the Coalition strikes. In the following, I examine several reports as published by AI and Airwars and disentangle their interpretation of the Coalition by identifying the ‘diagnostic’ and ‘prognostic’ frames in their publications.

### *The problem: civilian harm*

The ‘diagnostic frame’ as identified by the MA’s first and foremost problematises the number of civilian deaths as a result of Coalition strikes. First, the ‘adversarial frame’ as identified by

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<sup>12</sup> Although Human Rights Watch is also named as an organisation concerned with civilian casualties as a result of Coalition strikes, the most profound researches and series of publications are by Amnesty International and Airwars.

the MA's separating the "good" from the "evil", is not as apparent as in the framing of the Coalition towards ISIS: they do not describe the Coalition as an evil force. However, both MA's outline that the Coalition acted unjustly. They conclude, based on their researches, that the number of civilian deaths as a result of Coalition airstrikes is significantly higher than the number the Coalition presents based on its own investigations. For example, AI and Airwars found that the Coalition made at least 1,600 civilian casualties in their campaign to get ISIS out of Raqqa, instead of the 159 that the Coalition proclaims to have made in the same campaign (Amnesty International 2019b). In doing so, they debunk the precise representation of precision weapons, mainly as related to the fact that the Coalition was fighting ISIS in urban areas:

The careful use of precision munitions may play a role in reducing battlefield civilian harm. However, any such benefits diminish during urban fighting. Precisely targeting a high populated area – where the exact location of civilians is often unknown – risks similar effects to those caused by non-precision weapons (Airwars 2018b: 7).

It is what a former planning officer for the Coalition dubbed the 'precision paradox' of modern warfare: by employing and advocating precision weaponry, the idea manifests itself that war can be fought without making civilian casualties, but their evidence shows a different reality (Airwars 2018a: 8). In other words, as the MA's claim, precise wars are never as precise as they are presented to be – in particular the 'precise' war the Coalition says to be fighting in Syria and Iraq. What they cite as most problematic in this, is the fact that the Coalition does not acknowledge the 'scale of harm caused to civilians by the military campaign' (Amnesty International 2018: 8). The MA's attribute this difference in numbers on the fact that the Coalition assesses the impact of their airstrikes and possible civilian casualties on the video evidence of their strikes from above, instead of on the ground research.

Second, the 'injustice frame', functional in appointing the victims of the injustice done, is then in the first place directed towards civilians living in the areas where the Coalition is active and who lost lives and houses due to Coalition strikes. More indirectly, but also worth mentioning, is the fact that populations from member states of the Coalition are seen as victims who have the right to know what kind of war is fought in their name (Airwars 2017: 13).



*The solution: investigations and transparency*

The 'prognostic frame', that formulates the action to be taken, is then identified in the first place in terms of investigation: both MA's argue that the Coalition should undertake 'thorough investigations which are not limited to available video evidence. Every effort should be made to reach out to witnesses and victims of alleged strikes' (Airwars 2018a: 22). Until now, the Coalition – despite their promise to do so – has not been conducting ground research in the areas where they fired airstrikes, which however is important in knowing the effect of airstrikes, AI claims (Amnesty International 2018). Second, the MA's argue that the Coalition, and specifically the Netherlands, should be more transparent. They call on member states and the Coalition to release information on the locations, times, and dates of their airstrikes, in order to successfully conduct (independent) research (Amnesty International 2018: 67; Airwars 2018c).

The framing of the Coalition's violence as articulated by MA's, thus mainly relates to the civilian casualties as a result of Coalition strikes. Therein, they contest the official statement of the Coalition and the Netherlands that their strikes are precise and reduce risks to civilian harm to a bare minimum. On the contrary, they claim that the airstrikes in fact resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties and urban destruction. By advocating transparency and ground investigation to be conducted by the Coalition, they recognise that remote airstrikes as an aspect of contemporary warfare are consequential for civilians and that these consequences cannot be known by relying on video evidence from the air. How, then, does their contesting frame relates to the official framing of the Coalition's strikes?

**THE DIALOGUE**

I demonstrated that in identifying ISIS as an evil entity that has to be defeated in order to protect local, regional and transnational communities, the Coalition draws on the larger War on Terror discourse. Since this is a globally established discourse, the Coalition was able to easily sell the story of the pressing need to fight ISIS – especially so since it was done in a way that allegedly reduced the financial and human costs of war. Importantly, through remote modes of warfare based on risk-aversion (Biegon and Watts 2017), this war did not involve costs on the side of the Coalition and its member states. In other words, its approach was on the one hand helpful in *legitimising* the Coalition efforts, by reducing the costs of the war and

outlining the global threat of ISIS. On the other hand, it also *interpreted* the fight against ISIS as a precise one that had to be fought to eliminate a monstrous group. As I demonstrated, these discourses strongly resonate among a larger audience. But, however strong this discourse, it is not left uncontested. Airwars and AI identify a problem in the aerial strategies of the Coalition and its lack to investigate the effect of the airstrikes. Hence, they advocate for member states to be more transparent on their actions and conduct their own researches on the ground.

The contesting frame of the MA's is not simply ignored by the Coalition and its member states. As comes to the fore in, for example, the letter of 11 September 2017, the Dutch government is aware of the work of Airwars and states that it will include Airwars' research in its future reports (Kamerstuk 27 925, nr. 570 2017: 16). Furthermore, the Coalition as a whole has been using Airwars' information in their reports on civilian casualties (Operation Inherent Resolve 2019). Then, what does this tell us about the dominance of the official frame? When the official frame is rejected by MA's, and the contesting frame of MA's seems to be acknowledged by the Coalition and the Netherlands as a member state, do we then find a new established voice in the arena of truth construction on the Coalition's actions?

Not quite so. When we take Jabri's (1996) notion of dominance and discourse, we see that the three dynamics of dominance are at stake in the case of the Coalition: in presenting sectional interests as general ones; denying counter-discourses; and presenting current social orders as natural ones. First, the fact that ISIS should be defeated is presented as a general interest that is left unchanged in conversation with the counter-discourse of MA's: it is in the interest of the world at large that ISIS is completely defeated. Second, we see that the number of civilian casualties (1,600 for the case of Raqqa) that the MA's present, is denied by the Coalition (against 159 in the case of Raqqa). Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, who is commander of the US operations within the Coalition, responded to the criticism of Airwars as follows:

I challenge anyone to find a more precise air campaign in the history of warfare. The Coalition's goal is always for zero human casualties. We apply rigorous standards to our targeting process and take extraordinary efforts to protect non-combatants (Bonds 2018: 448).

Here, I observe a parallel with the conversation that took place between Brahim and the Dutch Minister of Defence: when confronted with a contesting frame, officials underline the precision and care taken to reduce civilian harm. Therein, they deny the contesting frame by emphasising. Third, the fact that the US is leading an interventionist international Coalition, while using remote strategies, is not questioned as such by MA's. Here, we see how the current social order – namely, the need of Western countries to intervene in Middle Eastern countries – is presented as natural. Western hegemony in interventionist practices is largely accepted by its reliance on a humanitarian discourse (Dexter 2007). In short, these three dynamics demonstrate how the framing of the Coalition's actions by the Dutch government and the Coalition at large, are rendered dominant through the dynamics of denial, common interests and naturalisation of Western hegemony in interventionism.

The above thus shows that dominance plays a role in constructing a discourse around the interpretation of the Coalition efforts. But if we take a step back, what then is the place of MA's contesting frames in the debate around the Coalition? Bonds (2018) provides a helpful study on the discourse of MA's in the case of the Coalition against ISIS, in relation to official Coalition discourses. As he observes, the counter-framing of the MA's pushes states to be more precise in their tactics, thereby only further rationalizing the 'humanizing discourse' of remote warfare. Issues regarding the nature of the violence or the way in which the violence might feed into more violence in the future, are not raised (2018: 9). In other words, MA's accept the logic of contemporary modes of warfare and consequently further rationalize remote warfare by advocating more precision in interventionist wars (2018: 13).

On the other hand, we see how MA's are slowly encapsulated by the Coalition's member states. Recently, the Pentagon invited NGO's, including Airwars, to provide information on civilian casualties, amongst others to set up a system to repay victims who were harmed in airstrikes by the US military (Mahanty and Siemion 2019). Thereby, they are not only able to neutralise MA's contesting frames by inviting them to the table, they also further reinforce the acceptance of civilian casualties in war. As Emily Gilbert stresses: 'economic *accounting* does not entail *accountability*' (2015: 404). Since states are not held legally accountable, such *ex gratia* payments will 'reinforce the international norms of war concerning "collateral damage"' (2015: 404).

What we thus see, is that the official framing of the Coalition's violence by the Dutch government specifically and the Coalition at large is contested by MA's, but that the outcome

is a dominant interpretation tapping into the strongly resonating discourses of the War on Terror, humanitarianism, and precision. As Jabri eloquently puts it: 'despite the proximity of contemporary war made manifest through the revolution in information technology, the effects of war are paradoxically sanitised through discourse' (1996: 109). Remote warfare is hence a highly dominant discourse, that resonates easily amongst a Western audience: the enemy will be eliminated, 'we' will do good by fighting the enemy, and there will be no costs of this war through reliance on remote airstrikes and cooperation with local forces. The cost of war, however, is not absent, and has to be borne by others. Let me turn to yet another, often neglected voice in the field of interpretations that struggle to define the meaning of the Coalition's violence: Syrians who found themselves at the receiving end of the violence perpetrated.

## 5. REALITIES ON THE GROUND

### *CIVILIAN CASUALTIES AND URBAN DESTRUCTION*

I am taking a bite of the freshly-baked almond cake in front of me, a sip of the glass tamarind juice next to it. Sugary, and even more sugary. The table is empty, apart from that one glass and that one saucer. I am the only one eating and drinking. It is mid-May and Ramadan has started a week ago, but Bilal and Amina were so kind to receive me during the day while they are fasting. And I am the guest, so I have to eat. We talk about life in Raqqa and the impact of war. In the midst of the conversation, Amina gets up and leaves the room, probably to prepare me yet another snack in the kitchen. Bilal looks at me: '[we] lost everything, all of our belongings. Our houses, our offices, our shops...'. He gets his phone out of his pocket and scrolls through his pictures. Yellowish colours fill the screen in front of me. 'My home is destroyed, which was in a building, it was 6 floors. The whole of the 6 floors were destroyed to earth'. He shows me another picture: 'And I also have another flat in there, also, it is destroyed. And my office is also destroyed to the ground – all of it'. In silence, we scroll through the pictures of what used to be his house, his office, his life. I suddenly lost my appetite for the almond cake<sup>13</sup>.



*Figure 2: Picture of Bilal and Amina's house in Raqqa*

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<sup>13</sup> Interview Bilal and Amina, 18 May 2019, Utrecht

Bilal and Amina, a middle-aged couple, both grew up and lived in Raqqa for many years. Although they later moved to Damascus when their children were older, they still owned houses in Raqqa to which they used to return to almost every weekend. At this point, they do not have much to return to: the city is reduced to rubble, the war has taken its toll. ISIS took their belongings and robbed their houses; Assad bombed the city. But the pictures Bilal showed me were not ISIS' or Assad's work. It was the Coalition who destroyed their houses. Family members of Bilal and Amina who still live in Raqqa found the houses to be completely destroyed and took the pictures Bilal showed me (see figure 1). The story of Bilal and Amina is just one out of the many stories of victims of Coalition airstrikes. Together, these stories constitute their own framing of the Coalition's violence, contesting the official framing as articulated by the Dutch government and the Coalition at large.

In this chapter, I examine how this official frame is contested by Syrians who lived in, or originally come from, areas where the Coalition has been fighting against ISIS. In order to analyse the 'regimes of truth' on the Coalition's violence, and particularly its airstrikes, we first have to know what the 'truth' is as expressed by Syrians in the Netherlands vis-à-vis the CJTF-OIR. As I demonstrate, the interpretations of the Coalition's violence by those at the receiving end of the violence are far from the picture that the Dutch government and the Coalition present: respondents largely interpret the Coalition's airstrikes as being responsible for urban destruction and civilian death. Their voice presents us insights in the intimacies of modes of remote violence as experienced by those on the ground.

I study this contesting interpretation by using Benford and Snow's (2000) 'diagnostic' and 'prognostic' framing. Here, my analysis is based on the 14 interviews I conducted with 18 Syrians in total who currently live in the Netherlands. Most of them left Syria between 2014 and 2016. It is noteworthy that the Coalition conducted many of its strikes in Syria – if not the majority – after 2016, meaning that many of my respondents did not live in Syria during the most intense period of Coalition strikes. Since they did not experience the airstrikes first-hand, or only partially first-hand, I always checked how they got to know what they were telling me about the Coalition and its airstrikes. All respondents, except one, still had friends and family on the ground, which was deemed the most reliable source of information. Let me now turn to the first set of frames as articulated by respondents: the problem identification vis-à-vis the Coalition.

## THE PROBLEM: CIVILIAN CASUALTIES AND URBAN DESTRUCTION

Regarding the complexity of the war in Syria, the ‘diagnostic frame’, or problem identification, as identified by Syrians I interviewed is manifold: Assad, Russia, ISIS, the Coalition – they are all seen as problematic actors responsible for victims in Syria. In conversations, it became clear that Assad was seen as the primary problem in Syria. It was believed that his regime also constructed the basis for other problems to grow: Assad allowed ISIS to rise, which in turn informed the creation of the Coalition. In the first place, Assad was then seen as responsible for the main problems in Syria by those I interviewed<sup>14</sup>. This is supported by numbers of civilian deaths in Syria; as the Syrian Network for Human Rights shows (SNHR), Assad has been responsible for nearly 90 percent of civilian casualties in Syria (SNHR 2019). Although it is important to acknowledge the responsibility of different actors in the context of the war in Syria, my focus here is on the Coalition as one of these identified problems.

The first diagnostic frame, the ‘adversarial frame’, delineates the boundaries between “good” and “evil” (Benford and Snow 2000). This is identified by my informants as the Coalition acting unjustly towards the civilians living in the areas it was active. The Coalition is on the ground often seen, and accordingly referred to, as ‘America’. As I demonstrated earlier, the US was indeed responsible for the greatest part of the Coalition strikes, and the Coalition is operating under its lead. Syrians I interviewed did recognise the responsibility of individual member states, including the Netherlands, for their contribution to the Coalition, but the US was generally seen as the main responsible actor.

The “evilness” of the Coalition and its member states was incidentally underlined by respondents in labelling it as ‘dogs’, ‘monsters’ and even as ‘murderers’. Although these words clearly indicate adversarial framing towards the Coalition, excluding them from the “good” (Benford and Snow 2000: 616), the adversarial framing was not as strong in all interviews. Often, the Coalition would be described as doing “good” and “bad” at the same time, or rather “good” and “bad” in different time periods. Let me elaborate on that by elaborating on the injustice frames as identified by my respondents.

‘Injustice frames’ denote the victims of a given situation (Benford and Snow 2000: 615). In this case, the victims identified by respondents are Syrians who are or were living in north-east Syria where the Coalition was fighting ISIS. In particular the cities of Raqqa and Deir ez-

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<sup>14</sup> It should be known that in other parts of Syria, depending on identity and background, Syrians might actually support Assad. However, all respondents have been expressing their disagreement with Assad’s regime.

Zor, that both were the theatre of severe urban destruction, were seen as places where most victims to the Coalition's airstrikes fell. Quite literary, one of the interviewees stated that '[they] are causing casualties and victims in Syria'<sup>15</sup>.

Interestingly, respondents did not regard themselves as victims of the Coalition in the early days of its establishment. At first, an international coalition to fight ISIS was welcomed – or at least tolerated – by many Syrians living in the areas controlled by ISIS. The establishment of the Coalition was described as 'a big day', since there was a need to expel ISIS from cities as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor<sup>16</sup>. On a warm April day in the park, I asked Karim, a young activist who lived in Aleppo, but originally comes from Deir ez-Zor, about his opinion on the Coalition. Although he lived in Aleppo and did not experience the airstrikes first-hand, he has heard stories about the Coalition strikes from friends and family members living in Deir ez-Zor. He explained to me that during this first phase, the Coalition was not seen as posing a threat to civilians:

In the beginning I thought, yes, this is the international coalition, they have smart weapons. So I was very sure that they were only attacking, let's say, armed targets or something. They will not target civilians. In the beginning, that's what they did<sup>17</sup>.

He thus regarded the Coalition's actions as helpful to defeat ISIS – an opinion shared by many Syrians I interviewed. There seems to be consensus among the interviewees that in the beginning, the Coalition's presence was rather beneficial and people were 'calm'<sup>18</sup> when the Coalition was striking. The exact duration of the "first phase" seems however to be a topic of discussion. It has been stated that it lasted a year, until 2016, while others point at the appointment of Donald Trump as US president in 2017 as the indicator of a change in the situation. Most likely, the "first phase" lasted until early 2016; afterwards, the Coalition increased its number of airstrikes and caused more civilian casualties in Syria (Airwars 2019a). After this initial period, the Coalition was seen as a threat to civilians living in areas where it was active.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview Osama, 4 May 2019, Zoetermeer

<sup>16</sup> Interview Layla, 30 March 2019, Den Haag.

<sup>17</sup> Interview Karim, 20 April 2019, Utrecht.

<sup>18</sup> Interview Raed 2 April 2019, Amsterdam.



The 'injustice frame' then, as described by Syrians who experienced the Coalition strikes, is twofold: first, in the targeting of civilians and second, as (urban) destruction as a result of the strikes. To begin with, the Coalition strikes were regarded as not exclusively eliminating ISIS fighters. As Bilal told me, visibly disconcerted, 'they were actually not really killing ISIS, they were killing the civilians'<sup>19</sup>. In Raqqa, for example, it was repeatedly stated by respondents that at least 3,000 to 4,000 civilians died as a result of Coalition strikes. When AI and Airwars released their interactive website in April 2019, declaring that at least 1,600 civilians died as a result of Coalition strikes (Amnesty International 2019a), I received several sceptical messages from respondents who deemed this number still too low.

Since the fight against ISIS was mainly taking place in urban areas, targeting of ISIS exclusively indeed became unlikely. The result, additional to civilian casualties, was complete urban destruction. Sayd, a lawyer who lived in Raqqa until late 2016 and who still has friends and family members living in the city, explained to me what the targets of the Coalition strikes were:

Airstrikes on schools. Not one, not two, not three, not four... it's a lot of schools. Hospitals. The bridges around the city. In Raqqa city, there are around 16 bridges connecting Raqqa with the outside cities over the Euphrate river. All the 16 bridges have been fully destroyed. All the hospitals in the city, the public hospitals as well as the private hospitals. More than 17 schools have been bombed by strikes, full neighbourhoods... the number of people, also women and children, [that died] is so big<sup>20</sup>.

In the areas where the Coalition was active, people did not feel safe anymore, but fleeing was often not an option, since ISIS controlled the streets and the Coalition had destroyed many of the roads to get out of the city.

What we thus see, is that the 'precision discourse' pertinent to contemporary warfare and often presented as beneficial for civilians on the ground (Espinoza 2018), is not experienced as such. To the contrary, the remote weaponry is seen as part of the problem. In the following section, I will elaborate on how respondents often outlined the way in which the

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<sup>19</sup> Interview Bilal and Amina, 18 May 2019, Utrecht.

<sup>20</sup> Interview Sayd, 23 April 2019, Zoetermeer.

Coalition was fighting by air as the main cause of their suffering and the suffering of civilians on the ground.

Outlining the civilian deaths and urban destruction as a result of Coalition strikes, many respondents questioned the actual goal of the Coalition. How could the Coalition proclaim to intervene – in part – to protect civilians, when the result of the intervention turned out to be more harmful to civilians? The Coalition's violence was then often compared to the Assad's strikes or ISIS' actions. Osama, a middle-aged man from Raqqa who left the city in 2015, reflected on the goal of the Coalition in relation to his interpretation of the Coalition's violence:

So the Coalition came and claimed that they are here to help people, to liberate the people. But what they did is destroy the city with its infrastructures, killed the people of the city and the number of the people killed by the coalition, is more than what ISIS killed during their era in the city. So, they should have done what they claim they are here to do. There is no gain... So the same, like the number of the casualties caused by the Coalition, is equal and more than the casualties by ISIS. What is the benefit? What do we gain?<sup>21</sup>

Osama, in outlining the destructive effect of the Coalition's strikes, contests the way in which the West presents itself as the liberator by fighting ISIS in Syria. Osama makes painfully clear how the Coalition, instead of liberating civilians on the ground, was actually bringing more harm. The phrase 'what did we gain', was repeated by other informants too. This demonstrates that contemporary wars that are represented as 'humanitarian', and hence claimed to bring freedom in a 'gift' (Gilbert 2015; Nguyen 2012), are not necessarily understood as such on the ground. The 'gift of freedom', then, was not experienced as an actual 'gift' – rather, as problematic to civilians on the ground.

The 'diagnostic framing' as described above thus shows a difference in framing between the Coalition and respondents. The Coalition framed ISIS as the problem that had to be defeated, but while doing so, its actions were perceived to be more destructive to civilians on the ground than ISIS was. As a result, the Coalition is seen as one of the main problems for the Syrians living under its airstrikes. That problem is mainly attributed to the way in which

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<sup>21</sup> Interview Osama 4 May 2019, Zoetermeer.

the Coalition is fighting. In other words, what the Coalition saw as the ‘solution’ for the problem called ISIS as articulated in its prognostic frame, has been contested by respondents. Let me elaborate on that in the following.

## QUESTIONING THE COALITION’S STRATEGY

Remote warfare is characterised by its reliance on remote technologies that enable states to fight by air, and its cooperation with local forces (Biegon and Watts 2017, Demmers and Gould 2018). This crystallised in Syria in ‘coordinated airstrikes, training and equipping local security forces, and targeted special operations’ (McInnis 2016:2), in which the Coalition cooperated predominantly with Kurdish forces. However, both strategies are highly contested on the ground and are part of the ‘diagnostic frame’ as identified by respondents.

First, the Coalition has always presented its reliance on air forces as a way to precisely target ISIS members while reducing civilian costs. However, as we have seen, civilians on the ground as well as monitoring agencies, highly contest this “precision” as proclaimed by the Coalition. In fact, several respondents attributed the amount of destruction and civilian loss to the very strategy of the coalition to fight by air. Nour, a young man from Deir ez-Zor, outlined the connection between the reliance of the Coalition on air forces and the number of civilian casualties in Syria. Sitting on the only furniture in his living room, the colourful Syrian floor sofa’s filling the room, he told me that ISIS, since it is not a ‘real army’, cannot be defeated ‘from above’. The fact that the Coalition is exactly doing this, resulted, according to him, in more civilian deaths:

[the Coalition] made a lot of mistakes, because they didn’t differentiate between civilians and between terrorists, and they always used airstrikes (...) When the airstrikes happened, the drone came for the first time and then came for a second time to make sure there’s nobody stayed alive. But what happened is that kids and women and old people stayed under the buildings, the stroked buildings<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Interview Nour, 8 May 2019, Krommenie.

Here, Nour is directly identifying the airstrikes as a form of remote violence as a main problem for civilian harm on the ground. In other interviews, respondents evaluated the airstrikes as ineffective or as not being able to defeat ISIS quick enough. Samir, a young man from Abu Kamal, a town on the border between Syria and Iraq, even told me that the use of airplanes was ‘the only problem’, because ‘airplanes don’t see who is inside this house’<sup>23</sup>.

Second, the way the Coalition was training and assisting Kurdish forces who were operating on the ground, was seen as problematic by interviewees. The Kurdish forces are generally not perceived as a legitimate force in Syria, and their current presence in Raqqa was regularly referred to as an ‘occupation’. In one interview, the Kurds were even accused of ethnic cleansing, by expelling Arab Syrians out of their cities. Moreover, it was understood that by supporting the Kurds, the Coalition increased segregation between Arabs and Kurds living in north-east Syria. Here, we see how a second characteristic of remote warfare that enables Western states to legitimise interventions to their own Western populations, the cooperation with local forces through training and assisting (Biegon and Watts 2017; Demmers and Gould 2018: 365), is contested as a legitimate way of fighting by audiences on the ground. Instead, this cooperation is perceived as reinforcing ethnic boundaries in Syria between Kurds and Arabs.

The Coalition’s strategy was also deemed, by informants, to be causing future backlash in the form of new radical groups to be formed as a reaction to the destructive effect of the Coalition’s airstrikes. In academia, and among politicians, such ‘unintended adverse results of a political action or situation’ is referred to as ‘blowback’ (Keenan 2017: 209). Although this thesis is not concerned with ‘blowback’, the prediction as made by respondents does underline the potential long-term effects of the Coalition’s airstrikes and the importance to acknowledge the harm that is done to civilians.

The above shows that respondents identified coordinated airstrikes and cooperation with local forces as the problem, whereas the same airstrikes and cooperation with local forces are part of the prognostic frame, or solution, as articulated by the Coalition. Additionally, we see a strong discrepancy in the interpretation of the effect of these airstrikes. The Coalition interpreted its use of coordinated airstrikes as more “humane” and “precise”. A very different rhetoric is developed by those living under the airstrikes, emphasising the Coalition strikes as being responsible for civilian deaths and urban destruction. Consequently,

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<sup>23</sup> Interview Samir, 20 May 2019, Apeldoorn.

the Coalition is identified as one of the sources of the injustice done to the Syrian people. How, then, did respondents propose a solution to the diagnosed problem?

## THE SOLUTION: SEEKING JUSTICE

The 'prognostic frame' articulates what has to be done, what the solution to a certain problem should be (Benford and Snow 2000: 616). Tapping into the problem of aerial fighting, several interviewees stated the need for ground-forces in Syria to defeat ISIS. However, since ISIS is at the time of writing reduced to a small fighting force, this is not necessarily the main need of the people I talked to. Proposed solutions, then, are mainly articulated in the light of the current situation and are directed to what should happen *now*, after the main battles against ISIS took place. This prognostic frame is articulated in three-fold: acknowledgement of the Coalition for the civilian casualties it is responsible for; suing the Coalition for its unjust acting; and granting refugees a place to live in Europe. These solutions, however, are only a Band-Aid on a bullet wound. The actual need as expressed by informants, as has been repeated over and over again, is the need to expel Assad from Syria.

Turning first to the three solutions respondents articulated as 'prognostic frames', we see, to begin with, that several respondents underlined the importance of the Coalition to 'speak the truth'. During an interview with Masoud, a passionate journalist from Tabqa, he expressed his frustration about the lack of reporting of the Coalition considering its actions. He underlined the need of the Coalition to acknowledge its responsibility for the civilian casualties. 'Say the truth! Only the truth, that is what Syrian people want. We need only the truth. Tell the whole truth to the people here'<sup>24</sup>. In other interviews, the specific role of the Netherlands to take responsibility for the result of their airstrikes was outlined by respondents.

Second, many respondents pointed at the need for suing the Coalition and its member states. Seeking justice, they want member states in the future to be 'punished' for their actions. Sayd, the former lawyer, stressed the importance of a future trial and even took the first steps to gather evidence by setting up a Facebook page in cooperation with friends and family in Raqqa. During the interview, he got his phone out and scrolled through the Facebook page. Dead bodies, destroyed buildings – dates, times and location included. One day, he

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<sup>24</sup> Interview Masoud, 4 April 2019, Nijmegen.

hopes to use the imagery as a way to sue member states. Several others too, expressed the need for legal justice. Feras, for example, a lively young man who studied in Raqqa, outlined that Dutch government, as one of the responsible actors, should be held legally accountable:

I think – one day it must – it is our right to go to the court, why did the Dutch government just attack our homes and they were involved and they said nothing (...). I think it's the right of the community, it's the right of Raqqa people at least, they must go to the court<sup>25</sup>.

When I asked respondents *how* they would think this would happen, or *what* the outcome of the trial should be, the answers often stayed vague, undefined or without consensus. Two respondents opted for victim payment, whereas several others strongly concluded that money could never rebalance the injustices done. As Gilbert points out, *ex gratia* payments to victims indeed do not bring about justice: 'economic *accounting* does not entail *accountability*' (2015: 404). Often, such payments lead to the opposite, by accepting the violence and victims through the 'gift' of money, withholding states from 'admission or acknowledgement of any legal obligation to compensate for any damage, personal injury or death' (2015: 416). The gift of money might then be perceived as offending rather than as a solution.

Finally, respondents stressed their right to live in Europe, or in the West in general. This was not necessarily seen as a solution, but rather as the bare minimum Western countries can do for the victims that they are partly responsible for. Many of my conversations were with Raed, a young man working for a humanitarian organisation and who lived in Raqqa all his life, until 2015. During one of our first conversations, I asked Raed about his perspective on the role of the Netherlands in the Coalition. Firmly, he related their responsibility for the airstrikes to the responsibility to welcome refugees:

When my city completely destroyed by you, by *your government*, how come you ask me to go back? To where?! To stay in the street? No, I am not gonna go back. That is my right. This is part of my right to come – to be here. At least allow me in your community (Interview Raed 02-04-2019).

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<sup>25</sup> Interview Feras, 16 April 2019, Nijmegen.

Feras and Mohammad also expressed their right to live in Europe as related to the responsibility of the Coalition. However, this right is not seen as a *compensation* for the injustices done. Rather, it is the *the least* Western countries can do for the Syrian people.

The actual need, emphasised by nearly all respondents, is that the Coalition should fight Assad. As Samir said to me during an interview: 'Why against Daesh? Assad regime also killed a lot of people for a long time, why you didn't fight him?'<sup>26</sup>. Here, we observe, again, a discrepancy between the official framing by the Coalition and the framing by those on the ground. The problem in Syria as diagnosed by the Coalition is ISIS, that *has to be defeated*, whereas among Syrian audiences the main problem is Assad. It demonstrates how strong the War on Terror discourse and the subsequent obsession of the West with ISIS as a global problem, result in a course of action that is contested by civilians on the ground. The other three solutions outlined above are thus rather cynical solutions, not tapping into the main problem as stressed by respondents; namely, the repression of Assad towards the Syrian population.

## DISCOURSES ON REMOTE WARFARE

To summarise, the diagnostic frame as described by Syrians from north-east Syria whom I interviewed, demonstrates that the Coalition is perceived as a problematic actor whose actions lead to civilian deaths and destruction. This is mainly explained by respondents as relating to the modes of remote warfare that the Coalition uses: by relying on airstrikes that are unable to discern between ISIS members and civilians, resulting in urban destruction, and through cooperation with Kurdish forces that reinforces ethnic boundaries in Syria. The prognostic frame, then, is articulated as the need for the Coalition to acknowledge its responsibility for civilian casualties, the need for legal repercussion towards the Coalition and the right for Syrians to live in Western countries. However, these three solutions are rather a band-aid to the bullet wound: what is expressed as the actual need, is the expel of Assad.

Hence, respondents therein indirectly contest the diagnostic and prognostic frames as identified by the Coalition at large and the Dutch government more specifically. First, respondents do not accept the diagnostic frame as articulated by the Coalition, namely the

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<sup>26</sup> Interview Samir, 20 May 2019, Apeldoorn.

identification of ISIS as the main problem. For them, Assad is the main problem. Second, the prognostic frame of the Coalition, that ISIS should be fought through remote violence of airstrikes and cooperation with local forces, is contested, since it is exactly these strategies that are framed as the problem relating to the Coalition's efforts in Syria.

Now, what is this telling us on a more abstract level about the interpretation, or 'truth' of the Coalition's violence by those at the receiving end of the violence perpetrated? First, remote forms of violence as adopted by the Coalition are interpreted as problematic for civilians on the ground, leading to death and destruction. Hence, the perception that remote violence through its reliance on airstrikes and 'smart bombs' would be precise, and therefore also beneficial for civilians on the ground (Espinoza 2018), is highly contested by respondents. Second, we see that Syrians do not regard ISIS as the largest problem in Syria, but rather Assad. The War on Terror discourse that helped legitimise the Coalition's efforts to fight ISIS, is contested by those on the ground. The need to defeat ISIS is not rejected as such, but seen as secondary to the defeat of Assad. Third, we see that the Western intervention is generally interpreted as doing more harm than good, and is certainly not protecting civilians on the ground. Thus, the three discourses of 'precision', 'the War on Terror' and 'humanitarianism' that legitimised and interpreted the remote warfare as being fought by the Coalition, are contested by those at the receiving of the violence. They interpret the remote warfare that the Coalition and its members states is fighting, as being far from risk-less: the risks are still present, however transferred to civilians on the ground. Therein, the 'gift of freedom' that the Coalition draws upon, is not perceived as a gift at all (Gilbert 2015; Nguyen 2012).

This gives us a compelling insight in the intimacies of remote warfare – an insight that importantly differs from the contesting interpretation as articulated by MA's. Namely, whereas MA's solely focus on the *numbers* of civilian casualties as a result of Coalition strikes, pushing for more precision by Western states, civilians who experienced the strikes attempt to contest the violence *as such*. The question remains how the interpretation of the Coalition by Syrians from north-east Syria, is joining in the struggle to define the Coalition's violence in the context of the Netherlands. Let me turn to the next chapter, and analyse what happens when Syrians stage their interpretation in the context of the Netherlands.



## 6. SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

### *THE LIMITS OF SPEAKING AND REGIMES OF TRUTH*

'But, of course, I cannot talk about this'. I was repacking my rucksack, we were about to leave the coffee place, but Abdul's comment makes me stop repacking. I look at him: 'why not?'. 'You know why', he says, smiling. I do think to know what he is hinting at, but I want him to say it in his own words. 'Tell me', I say. Abdul looks at me with an expression that lies somewhere between scepticism and discomfort, his dark eyes being however fierce. He keeps silent, but I keep silent too, encouraging him to put his thoughts into words. 'If I talk about it... I don't belong here. They will kick me out because they think I'm a radical. I cannot say anything. Only Dutch, white experts can talk, I'm an uneducated refugee in their eyes. They have no reason to keep me here if I speak out'<sup>27</sup>.

The first conversation I had was with Abdul, a knowledgeable, young academic from Aleppo. Since he did not live in an area where the Coalition was active, I did not regard him as a respondent and only wanted to pose him some general questions on the Coalition and the current situation in Syria. But the short conversation that took place when we were about to leave, was giving me highly relevant information. Apparently, he felt free to talk to me in a coffee place, but he did not feel free to openly stage his opinion, his interpretation of the Coalition's violence. Moreover, he attributed this to his role as a refugee in Dutch society. It is here we observe a hierarchy in truth construction relating to a certain social position: Abdul wanted to stage his interpretation, but he felt he did not have the right to speak. What defines when someone can speak out, and what does this tell us about the struggle over the meaning of violence?

We have seen, first, how the Coalition in general and the Dutch government specifically, frame the CJTF-OIR as a humane campaign that is vital to expel the evil called ISIS. They represent their airstrikes as 'accurate' and minimising civilian harm to a bare minimum. Second, we have seen how this official framing is contested on terms of precision and accuracy by both MA's and Syrian civilians, who directly or indirectly experienced the airstrikes. This contesting frame as presented by Syrians who lived under the Coalition airstrikes, interprets

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<sup>27</sup> Informal conversation Abdul, 7 February 2019, Utrecht

the Coalition's violence quite differently: as responsible for civilian deaths and destruction, eventually being more threatening to civilians than ISIS itself. Interestingly, Syrians who fell victim to these airstrikes and who contest the dominant interpretation of the Coalition's violence as humane, now find themselves as refugees in a country that contributed to their suffering – in this case, the Netherlands – but in which the costs of the war are not felt by the population of that country. Although there seems to be a need among Syrians in the Netherlands to communicate their interpretations of the Coalition's violence, and although there seems to be ample evidence in statistics (Airwars 2019; SNHR 2019) and imagery on civilian harm as a result of Coalition strikes, the Coalition efforts are barely a topic of discussion in the Netherlands – let alone the issue of civilian casualties. Other dynamics thus have to explain the rejection of the contesting frame as presented by Syrians currently living in the Netherlands.

In this chapter, I bring together the official framing as articulated by the Coalition and the contesting frame as articulated by Syrians from areas where the Coalition is active. Therein, I further unravel the 'regimes of truth', or 'general politics of truth' on the Coalition's airstrikes (Foucault 1977: 131). I do so, by studying the instances in which Syrians speak out their interpretations of the Coalition's violence in the context of the Netherlands. By taking the notion of 'sanctioning', that demonstrate how contesting frames are reacted upon, and 'status' that defines who has the right to speak, I unravel the power relations that are pertinent to a 'regime of truth'. I argue that the position of Syrians in Dutch society requires them to be what I will call 'good victims'. Moreover, the strong resonance of the framing of ISIS as the ultimate evil of our time, constrains Syrians to contribute to the truth construction on the Coalition in the context of the Netherlands. This results in a situation as experienced by Abdul: he underlines his status, or role, is that of the refugee that does not have the right to speak. These roles, as I demonstrate, are carefully tested and negotiated in personal encounters, but in practice remain effective in discerning between who has to be silent, and who can speak.

Although we have seen that monitoring agencies, too, contest the official framing of the Coalition at large and the Dutch government specifically, my concern is primarily with the contesting frame of Syrians in the Netherlands vis-à-vis the CJTF-OIR. Not only is it beyond the scope of this research to incorporate all actors in my analysis of truth construction around the Coalition, the contestation by Syrians provides an account of the airstrikes of those who actually experienced the consequences of remote warfare first-hand.

## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

'Also for me it's important'<sup>28</sup>, Masoud takes a long drag at his cigarette. We are smoking a cigarette at his balcony that is attached to the small living room in his apartment in Nijmegen. The interview is done, I just turned off the recorder and asked him how he felt doing the interview. He said that he is happy he could help me out with my research, but even more so, he hopes people will get to know his story now he shared it with me. His story, that is also the story of many of his friends, family members and other Syrians. He wants his experience, his truth, to be known.

Generally, informants expressed the need to 'tell the truth' to inform others about civilian deaths as a result of Coalition strikes. It became a habit to ask during interviews if the interviewee often talked about his or her interpretation of the Coalition. After several conversations, I started to understand that there is a great willingness to speak out, to show the world and the Dutch population specifically, that the defeat of ISIS has been at the cost of civilians on the ground. However, it also became clear that despite the willingness, not every Syrian in the Netherlands I talked to feels free to do so. Let me start with the largest group: Syrians who do feel free to speak out on the Coalition.

The interview-setting became a space to talk freely about the Coalition for almost all Syrians I tried to be in touch with. But outside that setting, too, most interviewees said that it is an 'open discussion' in which they would be able to express their opinion on the Coalition and the injustices they experienced. Often, they would outline the right to freedom-of-speech in the Netherlands specifically, and Europe or the West at large. Several informants shared their interpretation of the Coalition publicly, often in personal encounters with Dutch neighbours, language coaches, colleagues or even random strangers, and Karim, Raed and Masoud even talked to Dutch Members of Parliament and journalists.

Although this 'speaking out' takes place in face-to-face encounters, it also happens for a large part on social media and in digital spaces. During interviews, informants would often get their phones out and show me not only pictures of what happened, but also their Twitter pages, Facebook groups or YouTube clips. Often simply supportive of the story they wanted to tell me, the digital space also seemed to be an important place to stage their truth. Sayd, for example, created a Facebook group with other lawyers from Raqqa to gather evidence on

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<sup>28</sup> Interview Masoud, 4 April 2019, Nijmegen.

Coalition strikes, Feras created a specific hashtag on Twitter to call out the Coalition on civilian casualties, Raed was following Twitter daily as a source of information of what is happening on the ground, and Karim posted many pictures and articles on his own Facebook time-line. Digital space thus clearly constitutes a way of expressing certain frames, enabling the contestation of more dominant frames (Bhatia 2005: 11; Knüpfer and Entman 2018). Although social media offers new spaces to contest dominant discourses, hierarchies in discourse construction remain largely in place (Knüpfer and Entman 2018). In the following, I will show how this hierarchy plays out in personal encounters.

Others, however, were much more reluctant to share their interpretation of the Coalition. This was especially the case for more religious Syrians. They would be reluctant to speak to non-Syrian people, as well as Syrians who were not from their area. Like Abdul, some interviewees stated that if they would be open about their, often highly critical, perspective on the Coalition, they would be seen as radicalised. When I asked Samir, the practicing Muslim from Abu Kamal, if he talks with others about the Coalition, he said to me: ‘they will say: o, you are Daesh<sup>29</sup>. Because they look at my wife’s clothes, they look at my – I don’t shake hand – maybe they don’t say that, but they will think I am Daesh<sup>30</sup>. Here, Samir brings his Islamic appearance and practice in relation to the way in which he might be perceived as pro-ISIS himself, when he would openly critique the Coalition for its actions. This feeling of being seen as radicalised, up to the point of being in danger, was shared mainly among the more religious Muslim Syrians I spoke to, and was often related to the danger of being send back to Syria as a consequence.

Finally, two respondents made clear that they do not feel the need to speak out on the topic. However, when asking more questions on why they did not feel the need, their reserved attitude seemed to boil down to a feeling that it would not change anything to the harm done, or a feeling of powerlessness in the sense that nobody would listen anyways. I will elaborate on this in the following.

Now, where it becomes interesting, is what happens at the moment of expression, or, in fact, at the moment that the expression does not take place, despite the willingness to do so. Let me first elaborate on that by studying how, and if, the truth as expressed by Syrians in the Netherlands is sanctioned.

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<sup>29</sup> Daesh is the Arabic acronym for ISIS, regularly used by informants when referring to ISIS.

<sup>30</sup> Interview Samir, 20 May 2019, Apeldoorn.

## THE GIFT OF FREEDOM

To remind the reader, 'sanctioning' is the way in which a certain truth-claim is reacted upon, often serving to enforce a norm in society (Hexmoor et al. 2012: 92). It is, in other words, the moment in which a proposed truth gets the chance to be evaluated in a larger normative context (Introna 2003). When studying the moment of expression, we in fact study an instance of confrontation that allows a reaction. How is the contesting frame reacted upon, or, in other words, how is it sanctioned?

Asking respondents about their instances of speaking in the context of Dutch society, led me to the identification of three main reactions they received from Dutch citizens and Dutch officials. All three reactions sanctioned the proposed frame negatively: the reaction that civilian casualties were labelled as a 'mistake'; the reaction that ISIS is defeated now; and the reaction that they, Syrians, should be grateful of enjoying the protection of the Netherlands. As will become clear in the following, these instances of speaking are not always taking place as such – respondents also described expected reactions by Dutch politicians, citizens or Coalition officials in a more hypothetical situation.

First, when Syrians in the Netherlands share their contesting interpretation of the Coalition and its airstrikes, the reaction, or anticipated reaction, is often one of denial. Masoud, the journalist from Tabqa, told me how a conversation with Dutch firends proceeded when he confronted them with the number of civilian casualties in Raqqa. Cynically, he told me: 'They said: "ok, so, maybe [these numbers are] mistakes". Ok, mistakes killed more than 3,000 civilians? What a mistake!'. The reaction that Masoud received, that civilian casualties as a result of Coalition strikes are 'mistakes', brings his contesting interpretation back to the official frame as articulated by the Dutch government. Namely, it is underlined that the battle against ISIS is one of precision and accuracy, in which civilian casualties are avoided against all means; in the rare case that civilians were harmed, it was a mistake. Here, we see how Masoud's contesting frame is denied by reproducing the 'precision discourse'. This underlines the dominance of the official framing of the Coalition's violence – as precise and accurate – since the contesting frame is denied (Jabri 1996: 96-7). Moreover, we see how the reaction of the Dutch friends Masoud spoke to, is directing his interpretation back to the norm that understands the Coalition strikes as precise. Re-establishing the "norm", as Hexmoor et al. make clear, is an important function of sanctioning (2012: 92).

A second reaction Syrians in the Netherlands would get, or anticipated upon, when they would speak out, is that they should be glad that ISIS is nearly territorially defeated: “We liberated you from ISIS”<sup>31</sup>. Karim, the activist from Deir ez-Zor, told me he would see such reactions in Facebook comments reacting on articles he posted. It is a reaction several respondents claimed to have received when speaking out. Osama told me he was protesting in The Hague in front of the American embassy in 2016 to pressure the US to stop their fight against ISIS. When he explained by-standers why they were protesting, he was told: ‘why are you against the Americans? They are trying to help you’<sup>32</sup>. These reactions tie into the representation of the Coalition’s efforts as a ‘gift’. The ‘gift of freedom’, that is central to the narrative of the War on Terror (Gilbert 2015; Nguyen 2012), underlines the way in which the West is fighting a good war by liberating the world from the evilness of terrorism. Interventionist wars are then presented as ‘humane, generous and philanthropic’, while the realities of ‘brutal, often lethal, relations of self-interest, indebtedness and domination’ are concealed (Gilbert 2015: 414-5). The notion of the ‘gift of freedom’ therein legitimises and interprets the Coalition’s violence as a form of contemporary war, in which battles are presented to be fought in order to improve lives and liberate civilians from the evil force of terrorism. The truth as proposed by Syrians in the Netherlands is then sanctioned through a ‘rhetoric of benevolence’, that does not question the gratitude or consent of the receivers of the ‘gift’, but expects them to be happy (Gilbert 2015: 415). The contesting frame is hence sanctioned by directing it to the norm of what is deemed an acceptable discourse: the fight against ISIS as one of necessity and humanitarianism. Therein, dominance over the official frame is again set, but in this case by presenting sectional interests (the need of the West to defeat ISIS) as general ones (everybody benefits most from the defeat of ISIS). Moreover, current social orders are presented as natural ones (the West has the power to do so) (Jabri 1996: 96-7).

Finally, Syrians in the Netherlands expressed that they would receive a reaction, or anticipated upon a reaction, that emphasises the protection they currently enjoy in the Netherlands. ‘Ok, you’re here, you should be thankful, you are safe’<sup>33</sup>, is a reaction Masoud would receive when confronting Dutch people about the injustices he felt were done to him and other Syrians living in Raqqa. Such a reaction, too, sanctions the contesting frame, in this

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<sup>31</sup> Interview Karim, 20 April 2019, Utrecht.

<sup>32</sup> Interview Osama, 4 May 2019, Zoetermeer.

<sup>33</sup> Interview Masoud, 4 April 2019, Nijmegen.

case by stressing the 'gift' of protection, silencing the victims while doing so. In return for the gift, receivers are required to consent and 'be thankful' (Gilbert 2015; Nguyen 2012). Indeed, as Nguyen stresses, the refugee is asked to comply to the norms and institutions and 'be happy' (2012: 75). This creates an uncomfortable, yet very intimate relationship between on the one side the Netherlands as providing Syrians protection on their soil, while also being in part responsible for the suffering of Syrians, and on the other hand Syrians that are victim to that violence, but also depend on the protection as a 'gift'. This was observed and poetically described by Nour, who told me: 'The Netherlands have two hands. One hand with a flower, and one hand with a knife. In my land they are killing me, and now they are helping me here'<sup>34</sup>. The gift is thus rejected as such, but it is certainly not one that is received with pure gratitude.

What we thus see, is that at the moment of speaking, the truth as proposed by Syrians currently living in the Netherlands, is sanctioned in a way that enforces the official interpretation of the fight against ISIS: namely, one that is accurate, necessary and humane. Therein, the strong discourses of 'precision', the 'War on Terror' and 'humanitarianism' are underlined. Before I elaborate on what this is telling us about 'regimes of truth', let me discuss how status is playing out in the truth construction on the Coalition's violence in the context of the Netherlands.

## THE GOOD VICTIM

'Status', as we have seen, relates to the role someone takes in society and that defines who can speak within a certain discursive formation, and who cannot (Foss and Gill 1987: 389). The 'role' or 'status' someone has in society is decided by the 'rules' of a discursive system, that decide what kind of discourse is constructed and who is allowed to speak 'truth' (Foss and Gill 1987). Power, then, is present throughout the whole discursive formation.

In asking informants about their ability to speak out their interpretation, or 'truth', on the Coalition strikes, they would often explain their ability as related to their place in society, or status. This status is generally seen as constraining them to talk freely or to contribute to the truth construction on the Coalition strikes. This is, again, mainly explained in three-fold: as a feeling of being 'powerless' in the Netherlands; as the unstable position they experienced being a refugee; and as the need for being the 'good victim'. Importantly, what I discuss in the

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<sup>34</sup> Interview Nour, 8 May 2019, Zaandam.

following as ‘status’, is based on the perspective and self-evaluation of Syrians in the Netherlands, who come from areas where the Coalition was active, not as their objective status as such.

To begin with, many Syrians I interviewed expressed the feeling of being powerless towards speaking out their contesting interpretation. That feeling was attributed to not mastering the Dutch language, or not knowing the right way to express themselves in the context of Dutch society, and in general to the fact that they did know who to address. But eventually, these feelings boiled down to the perception that they would not be heard. One of my interviews was with Mohammad and Alice, two young-adults from Raqqa. Spending part of their youth in the Netherlands, their preoccupation was rather with enhancing a new life here, than talking about the destruction of their houses in Raqqa, which were both destroyed by Coalition airstrikes. But when I asked Mohammed if he *wished* to tell Coalition officials if he had the chance, he told me it did not make any sense to do so. When I asked for explanation, he said: ‘because... who’s gonna hear me? Who’s gonna hear *me*?<sup>35</sup>. Mohammed thus assumed not to be heard when he would stage a contesting frame, pointing at the feeling of being powerless. Thereby, he underlined his role in society, or status, as one that would not be allowed to speak, by posing the question who would listen to *him*.

Second, several informants felt that they could not speak out publicly, because there would be a danger to be send back to Syria. They shared Abdul’s statement, as being formulated in the introductory vignette: ‘they have no reason to keep me here if I speak out’<sup>36</sup>. This fear of being send back to Syria when critiquing the Coalition’s violence and particularly the Dutch contribution to the Coalition, also made some Syrians to reject my request to interview them. They attributed their reservation to talk to me to the current political climate in the Netherlands; at the time of conducting the research, a Dutch right-wing politician demanded to explore the possibility to send Syrians back to Syria, which became according to him a safe country (de Zwaan 2019). The status of being a refugee in the Netherlands, without the guarantee of being able to stay, hence limited people in speaking out in the first place. Here, we see again how the ‘gift’ of protection creates an awkward relationship of dependency between Syrians who fell victim to Coalition strikes and the Netherlands. As Nguyen states, ‘there is no gift without debt – which is to say, no gift without a claim on another’s existence’

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<sup>35</sup> Interview Mohammad and Alice, 5 May 2019, Utrecht.

<sup>36</sup> Informal conversation Abdul, 7 February 2019, Utrecht



(2012:18). Meaning, in this case, that the 'gift' of protection subjugates the receiver – namely, Syrians from north-east Syria who currently reside in the Netherlands – to a role, or status, of indebtedness that constraints him or her to speak.

Finally, the own status is evaluated as one without *rights* to speak. This closely relates to the previous point being made, but differs in that it is not focussed on the gift of receiving protection as a refugee, but on the gift of being liberated from ISIS. As Karim told me, he felt like 'you are a victim, your city is destroyed, but still you have no right to complain'<sup>37</sup>. Importantly, he added that he would not even be regarded or acknowledged as a victim of the Coalition – only as a victim of ISIS. This further complicates his ability to speak out, since the injustices done to him are not acknowledged in the first place. The 'gift of freedom', is making him being subjugated in a status that does not *allow* him to speak. Other interviewees referred to the same feeling of not being able to speak in relation to the 'gift-giving' of Western states: their status is one of receiving protection and rescue from the Coalition, not one of being a victim to the Coalition's actions. In fact, their expected role is that of what I call here the 'good victim': being grateful for the defeat of ISIS, and additionally the protection of Dutch society.

We thus see how the status, or role, of Syrians in the Netherlands who fell victim to the Coalition's violence, is constraining them to speak out their contesting frame. The feeling of being powerless, being dependent on Dutch protection in the Netherlands and as having to be a 'good victim', are all pointing at the constraints of their status to contribute to the truth construction on the Coalition's violence. It is primarily through the dynamics of 'gift-giving', pertaining to the protection of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and the way in which the 'gift of freedom' is denying Syrians to be victim to Coalition strikes, that their status is not allowing them to speak.

## REGIMES OF TRUTH ON THE COALITION

My fascination with all this, was the observation that the very victims of the Coalition's violence now live in a country that has been partly responsible for their suffering. This awkward relationship becomes even more painful, through the presence of dominant discourses that

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<sup>37</sup> Interview Karim, 20 April 2019, Utrecht.

heavily focus on ISIS as the evil force that has to be defeated and that interpret the Coalition's violence as precise and humane – if the Coalition's efforts are discussed at all. This, however, generally does not withhold Syrians in the Netherlands to contest that dominant interpretation. What, then, occurs when they speak out and attempt to contribute to the truth construction around the Coalition's violence?

I unpacked this question by analysing the dynamics of 'sanctioning' and 'status' as elements of 'regimes of truth'. A regimes of truth analysis aims to 'explain how different organizations of power, consisting of sets of articulated institutions that control force, create and utilize knowledge and truths' (Reyna and Schiller 1998: 333). By taking the moment of expression as the – indirect – object of analysis, I studied these power relations that pertain to the 'general politics of truth'.

First of all, my analysis of 'sanctioning' demonstrates that dominant discourses are supportive of sanctioning a contesting frame. The contesting frame of civilian deaths and urban destruction as a consequence of remote forms of violence, proposed by Syrians from north-east Syria currently living in the Netherlands, is often sanctioned by bringing in three dominant discourses: the precision discourse, the War on Terror discourse and the discourse of humanitarianism. The dominant discourses deny the contesting frame - civilian casualties are a 'mistake'; present sectional interests as general ones – the defeat of ISIS is beneficial for everyone; and represent current social orders as natural – the West naturally intervenes and therein offers the 'gift of freedom'. This not only confirms the salience and dominance of these discourses, but also demonstrates how dominant discourses are helpful in sanctioning, enforcing the norm within a given society of what can be said.

This shows us, again, how resonant these dominant discourses are, since they are also used as a 'means of sanctioning' by a larger public. It should be noted that the role of media in presenting a certain view on violence is paramount here, in reproducing and constructing discourses on the violence being perpetrated by the Coalition. It is certainly not the focus of this study, but others have repeatedly stressed the political and cultural practices involved in portraying an image of violence, influencing what the public gets to see and, hence, to know (Griffin 2010; Hallin 1986; Hariman and Lucaites 2007). Especially in times of war, as Michael Griffin states, this selection of images and information is supportive of wartime propaganda: 'we need to keep sight of (...) the commercial and overtly political forces that routinely bring some images, and not others, to the public's attention' (2010: 19). In the case of the Coalition,

the issue of civilian casualties turned out to be severely under-reported in media, resulting in a lack of general knowledge on the Coalition's violence amongst populations of member states (O'Brien 2019).

Second, my analysis of 'status' demonstrates that the role of Syrians in the Netherlands constrains them to speak their 'truth'. This is seen through dynamics of feeling powerless, dependency on Dutch protection and expectations of being 'good victims' by being grateful towards the Coalition for defeating ISIS. This status heavily relies, again, on the 'gifts' of the Netherlands that are offered through providing protection to Syrian refugees in the Netherlands *and* in freeing them from ISIS.

By unravelling the dynamics of 'regimes of truth' through the concepts of 'status' and 'sanctioning', I aimed to get insights in the 'struggle over the meaning of violence' (Brass 1996: 45). What, then, does the above tell us about the 'struggle over the meaning of violence'? First of all, it demonstrates that when interpreting the Coalition's actions, the official truth as expressed by the Coalition at large and its member states is contested by those at the receiving end of the violence perpetrated by the Coalition. However, while trying to address or debate this dominant interpretation, or engage with the 'regimes of truth' on the Coalition, Syrian voices fall silent vis-à-vis the dominant discourse which is regarded as a more legitimate truth. The strong discourse of remote warfare, is therein embedded in the different discourses of 'humanitarianism' ('we' will save 'you' from the evil called ISIS), the 'precision discourse' (we will do so by minimising civilian harm through our remote technologies) and the War on Terror discourse (global security needs to be defended by fighting terrorism). It, hence, presents the Coalition efforts in Syria as a 'good war', that is legitimised through the defeat of an ultimate evil by means of "humanitarian" efforts (Dexter 2007; Gilbert 2015).

That, in fact, the interpretations by those on the ground are highly differently, does not fit into the powerful, dominant discourses that understand ISIS as the ultimate evil and that requires Western intervention. Syrians in the Netherlands try to manoeuvre within these dominant discourses that they find themselves subject to, by negotiating, contradicting or denying the dominant interpretation of the Coalition. However, their subjectivation into being what I called the 'good victim' in which they are *expected* to be grateful for the 'gift' of being freed from the evil ISIS *and* for the protection they receive, constrains their ability to do so. In being subjected into the 'good victim', they are silenced in staging their contesting interpretation.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Acceptance of lesser evils is consciously used in conditioning the government officials as well as the population at large to the acceptance of evil as such... Politically, the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil

– Hannah Arendt 1964: 36-7

The current climate of interventionist wars is changing. We are finding ourselves in a time in which ‘remote warfare’ is becoming a strategy through which Western interventionist wars are fought in an increasingly remote manner based on risk-aversion, stressing the ‘humanitarian face’ of war. The best, or at least most recent, example of this ‘new way of war’ might be one that is still going on at the moment of writing: the US-led Coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In this thesis, I presented data on the interpretations of the Coalition’s violence as a case of contemporary modes of remote warfare by those *at the receiving end* of the violence perpetrated, together with the ‘regimes of truth’ on this violence. As I argue, it is paramount to seriously take into account these interpretations from those at the receiving end of violence. If not, Western states will quickly forget that, in choosing the lesser evil, they still chose evil.

By presenting qualitative data throughout three chapters, this research aimed to answer the following research question: *How do the interpretations of Syrians, from north-east Syria currently living in the Netherlands, on the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition’s airstrikes conducted between 2014 and 2018, relate to the ‘regimes of truth’ on the Coalition in the context of Dutch society?* My objective in answering this question was two-fold. On the one hand, I aimed to study the intimate realities of remote forms of warfare by ‘giving voice’ to those having to live under airstrikes. On the other, I aimed to unravel, through the dynamics of ‘regimes of truth’, how this interpretation by those at the receiving end of these airstrikes is part of the ‘struggle over the meaning of violence’ vis-à-vis the Coalition strikes as a form of remote warfare.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In chapter 2, I first drew the context in which the Coalition came into existence, after which I studied the official interpretation of the Coalition by the Dutch government specifically and the Coalition at large, through the adoption of a frame analysis of official statements. As I demonstrated, this 'official story', is largely directed towards ISIS as a threat (diagnostic frame) that has to be defeated through remote strategies (prognostic frame). These, as I showed, are two very powerful and resonating frames, that both build on broader discourses pertaining to 'precision', the 'War on Terror' and 'humanitarianism'. Officially, CJTF-OIR is represented as an accurate campaign, fought with care and technologies that minimise civilian casualties. Although Airwars and Amnesty International importantly contest this frame by providing investigations, numbers and reports on civilian casualties, their contestation only further rationalises the 'precision discourse', since it does not question remote violence *as such*.

In chapter 3, I illustrated on the basis of in-depth interviews and informal conversations, how Syrians who directly or indirectly experienced the airstrikes, interpret the Coalition's violence. By pointing at civilian casualties and urban destruction as a result of the Coalition strikes, they interpret the violence as highly problematic, particularly through the adoption of remote strategies (diagnostic frame). Syrians pointed at the need for legal repercussion towards the Coalition, together with the Coalition acknowledging civilian deaths, but in the end their main need is to have a Coalition fighting Assad. In fact, Syrians contested the problem definition, as well as the proposed solution as articulated by the Coalition. Their interpretation of the Coalition's violence is one of civilian deaths and destruction; therein, they mainly contest the official interpretation of precision and humanitarianism.

In chapter 4, I brought together the official and contesting interpretations, by studying the 'regimes of truth' on the Coalition in the context of Dutch society. Through the dynamics of 'sanctioning' and 'status', I demonstrated that Syrians are constrained to contribute to truth construction, or in providing a contesting frame that is received. First, through 'sanctioning', their proposed truth would be subjected to the dominant discourses of precision, the War on Terror and humanitarianism. Particularly the discourse of the War on Terror that outlines the evilness of ISIS, silences the counter-frame in referring to the 'gift of freedom' (Gilbert 2015; Nguyen 2012). Second, the 'status' of being a refugee impeded some to speak out in the first place, whereas it obstructed others in being seen as a righteous speaker. Most importantly, it was showed that the role of Syrians was expected to be one of compliance to the dominant

discourse. Syrians are expected to be 'good victims', by being thankful for the 'gift of freedom'. These dynamics show the power of certain discourses over others, and the power related to whom has the right to speak.

Answering the main question, we thus see how Syrians from north-east Syria are willing to contribute to the 'regimes of truth' on the Coalition's violence in the context of the Netherlands, by offering a contesting frame. Several of them in fact do so, but in the moment of expression, the 'general politics of truth' (Foucault 1977: 131), constrain them to contribute to truth construction on the Coalition's violence. Hence, their interpretation is not to be heard, since it does not fit in the official, and dominant, interpretation of the Coalition's violence.

## REMOTE WARFARE AND REGIMES OF TRUTH

Now, what do these findings tell us about, first, remote warfare, and second, about regimes of truth? To begin with, we see that remote warfare in the case of the US-led Coalition against ISIS is presented as a legitimate mode of violence, primarily by drawing on three powerful discourses. The precision discourse outlines the use of advanced remote technologies that allow for accurate airstrikes to minimise civilian harm to a bare minimum. The War on Terror discourse is built on the understanding that terrorism is the ultimate evil of our time, threatening populations world-wide, that has to be defeated. The humanitarianism discourse outlines that wars can be fought in a humane way by Western countries, who are bringing freedom to other countries. Drawing on these discourses of necessity and the moderation of the violence perpetrated, Western militaries tend to believe that the violence is adopted effectively and in a 'good way' (Weizman 2011: 11). However, on the ground, remote violence is not interpreted as such and Syrians from north-east Syria in fact reject strategies of remote violence as effective, beneficial and above all, precise and accurate. This gives us a novel and compelling insight in the effects and intimate realities of remote violence.

Regarding 'regimes of truth', we see that in the interpretations on the violence perpetrated, power relations are effective in maintaining dominant interpretations. Particularly the subjectivation of victims into 'good victims' that are expected to behave in a certain way, is highly constraining in participating in truth construction. This shows us not only that, indeed, 'sanctioning' and 'status' are reflecting the power relations that decide *what truths* can be spoken by *whom*, but also that a regimes of truth analysis is helpful to unravel power

relations in discourse construction by focusing on the specific dynamics of ‘sanctioning’ and ‘status’ (Foucault 131). Therein, power is not exclusively constraining the speaking out of a contesting ‘truth’ as such, but it does decide what ‘truth’s’ or interpretations are gaining more ground than others. It thus shows that people have agency in speaking different ‘truths’, but that structures of power are limiting this agency to constructively participate in truth construction.

Therein, this research makes two key contributions. First, it presents empirical evidence on the intimate realities of remote warfare for those at the receiving end of the violence perpetrated, which has not been done before. As I demonstrated, these realities are rendered even more intimate, since the victims of that violence are now residing in countries that have been in part responsible for the injustices done. Second, I conceptualised Foucault’s often used, but under-theorised notion of ‘regimes of truth’, and made a first contribution in applying this concept as an analytical frame. This adds to current understandings of discourse studies, since it lays out the dynamics of ‘sanctioning’ and ‘status’ within a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, enabling one to make a focussed and in-depth analysis of the dynamics of power within discourse construction.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Based upon this research, I can suggest several recommendations for further research. First of all, the use of ‘regimes of truth’ as an analytical frame should be applied in other studies, to test out its applicability in other cases. Therein, I push for a conceptualisation of the other elements of ‘regimes of truth’ as defined by Foucault, that I did not conceptualise in this research, namely: ‘the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements’ and ‘the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth’ (1977: 131). Furthermore, similar interpretations of the Coalition among Iraqi communities that also fell victim to Coalition strikes could be studied. Moreover, this research showed how social media can be important in communicating and disseminating interpretations of violence, but these dynamics have not been studied as such. Particularly regarding the ample visual evidence of the war in Syria, it would be relevant to study the circulation of images on social media, and how digital platforms enable or constrain contestation of dominant frames. Finally, it would be relevant to further study the potential of

'blowback'. As shortly referred to in chapter 5, the Coalition strikes might have serious long-term consequences for Western countries. This thesis shows how the victims of a war are silenced in their countries of residence, but also the suffering of victims to the Coalition remains generally unacknowledged. This might cause new radical groups to develop, but more research is needed to confirm, or reject this.

## THE LESSER TRUTH

This research thus shows, through empirical evidence, how remote warfare as a Western way of war legitimises and interprets Western interventionist war as precise, necessary and humanitarian, is highly contested by those at the receiving end of the violence conducted. However, in the 'struggle over the meaning of violence' (Brass 1997), this contesting interpretation is lacking the power to define the understanding of contemporary interventionist war. Even so in the context of Western states – here, the Netherlands – there barely seems to be acknowledgement of the realities of remote warfare. Thus, we find ourselves in a 'regime of truth', in which interpretations different than the dominant ones are sanctioned, and status defines who can speak and who cannot.

It is however important that Western states acknowledge the impact of their ways of fighting wars. First of all, this research points at the possibility of future blowback, yet it is suggested that more research is needed to study that actual effect. More importantly, and saliently, it suggests that the reluctance to study the effects of remote warfare on the ground, allows the reproduction of this kind of violence, without any considerations of the actual effectiveness, need and interpretation of that violence 'on the ground'. These interpretations matter, because they will form the basis of future policies to be drawn on the meaning given to violence (Brass 1997: 5). It is an illusion to think we are able to fight some kind of 'super war', in which civilian casualties are absent and wherein no "evil" is done. By distancing ourselves from the battle field, we not only tend to oversee the messiness of war, but the danger exists that we also legitimise war to an extent that we become unreceptive to realities on the ground by reducing these realities to a 'lesser truth'.

When I reached the finalising stage of the thesis writing, I was chatting with Hamid, a Syrian from Damascus who became a dear friend and important contact person throughout the research. He told me to distribute the information of this research to a wider public,



because he wanted more people, and especially politicians, to know. I reacted with reservation; I told him it does not feel as the right role for me. 'But you might be way more able than us to get access', Hamid said, 'you know how to operate in Dutch society, you speak the language, you are representable'. And there it was, again, another confirmation of how certain positions in society define the ability to speak. It felt awkward, and uncomfortable, because I wanted *him* to speak, not him asking *me* to speak. But now, for the first time, I fully realised that by gathering the stories as presented in this thesis, I was positioned somewhere in the void between those who lived the story, but could not speak out, and those who did not want to or could listen to that story.

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## 9. ANNECES

### ANNEX 1: LIST OF INFORMANTS

Date	Name	Gender	Category of conversation	Place of Origin	Translator
07-02-2019	Abdul	Male	Informal conversation	Aleppo	No
05-03-2019 and 02-04-2019	Raed	Male	Interview	Raqqa	No
08-03-2019	Hamid	Male	Informal conversation	Damascus	No
30-03-2019	Layla & Rami	Female & Male	Interview	Deir ez-Zor	No
04-04-2019	Masoud	Male	Interview	Raqqa	No
16-04-2019	Feras	Male	Interview	Raqqa	No
17-04-2019	Rana	Female	Interview	Syrian Kurdistan	No
20-04-2019	Karim	Male	Interview	Deir ez-Zor/Aleppo	No
23-04-2019	Sayd	Male	Interview	Raqqa	Yes
29-04-2019	Dan	Male	Interview	Deir ez-Zor	No
04-05-2019	Osama	Male	Interview	Raqqa	Yes
05-05-2019	Alice & Mohammad	Female & Male	Interview	Raqqa	No
08-05-2019	Nour	Male	Interview	Deir ez-Zor	Yes
18-05-2019	Hassan & Amer	Male	Interview	Al Jarniya	No
18-05-2019	Amina & Bilal	Female & Male	Interview	Raqqa	Yes
20-05-2019	Samir	Male	Interview	Al Bukamal	No



## ANNEX 2: TOPIC LIST

### Personal Background and Context

- Life in Syria
  - Occupation
  - Religious identity
- Region/city of origin
  - Role of region/city in conflict

### Coalition

- Knowledge on coalition:
  - First heard about coalition
  - Current knowledge
- Goal of coalition
  - Evaluation of that goal
- Location of airstrikes
- Recognition of coalition airstrikes
  - In relation to other parties
  - Between coalition members
- Targets
- Opinion on coalition
- Dutch role
  - Relation to other parties

### Speaking out

- Conversation on coalition
  - People who can be talked to
  - People who can't be talked to
  - Importance of topic in conversations on Syrian situation
- Expression on social media
  - Where would you post

- Who would be seeing it?
- Who would you like to see it?
- Sanctioning
  - How do other Syrians react when you speak out?
  - How do Dutch people react when you speak out?
  - How do you think Dutch officials would react if you would speak out?
    - Do you know of cases in which people spoke out?
    - Can you describe what happened?
- Status
  - Do you feel able to speak out?
  - How do you see the role of Syrians living in the NL in contributing to truth/speaking out?
  - How do you see your own role in contributing to the truth?
  - Why do you think we hear so little of Syrians/Iraqi's in the Netherlands?

#### Information on the Coalition

- Sources of information
  - What
  - Why
  - Reliability
- Relationship to other sources
  - Consistent or inconsistent
  - Evaluation of what is true