

Remote Warfare and Epistemic Politics:

The discursive response of the US and the Netherlands to claims of civilian harm caused by partnerships with local security forces



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Abstract

Remoteness has become a characteristic feature of warfare where states keep a safe distance by conducting operations from the air by using remote warfare weapons and operations from the ground by providing security force assistance to local security forces. Operation Inherent Resolve is a prime example of a remote warfare campaign where 80+ states are part of the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition. Nevertheless, remote warfare operations have caused both direct and indirect civilian harm. This thesis studies how the US and Dutch governments discursively respond to the claims made by civil society about direct and indirect civilian harm caused by local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021. A critical discursive approach will be used to analyze two case studies of Operation Inherent Resolve: The United States and the collaboration with the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Non-Lethal Assistance program of the Netherlands. By studying to what extent these two governments use epistemic politics when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by their partnerships with local security forces, this thesis provides a broader look at critical discourse analysis, where there is also a focus on what is not being said. Collecting data through public governmental sources, reports by human rights organizations, and public media sources, this thesis concludes that the United States and the Netherlands both use epistemic politics as a dominant discursive strategy when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by their partnerships with local security forces. Therefore, this thesis shows that it is important to not only analyze discursive strategies where words are being used but also to analyze discursive strategies where not much is being said at all when governments want to maintain power over the ‘truth’ that they have claimed.

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List of abbreviations

CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve
IS	The Islamic State
ISIL	The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NLA	Non-Lethal Assistance
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SFA	Security Force Assistance
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOF	Special Operations Forces
UN	United Nations
US	United States
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“Now, it will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL. And any time we take military action, there are risks involved – especially to the servicemen and women who carry out these missions. But I want the American people to understand how this effort will be different from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil. This counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground. This strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years. And it is consistent with the approach I outlined earlier this year: to use force against anyone who threatens America’s core interests, but to mobilize partners wherever possible to address broader challenges to international order.” (Obama, 2014).

Over the past decades, remoteness has become a characteristic feature of warfare (Demmers, Gould, & Snetselaar, 2020). Remote warfare refers to an approach used by states to counter threats at a safe distance (Watson & McKay, 2021). Instead of deploying large numbers of boots on the ground, remote warfare is characterized by operations from the air by using drone and precision strikes, and from the ground by providing Security Force Assistance (SFA) to local security forces. This thesis will focus specifically on SFA. SFA entails the training, equipping, and advising of local security forces (Tholens, 2021). By building up the security and military forces of allies and local partners in the receiving state like Iraq, the host state such as the United States (US) aims to build partner capacity (Riemann & Rossi, 2021). However, uncoordinated SFA creates empowered security actors which can lead to militarization of traditionally civilian tasks or unintended de-democratization of the receiving state (Santini & Tholens, 2018). Tholens (2021) argues that many of today’s SFA programs do not come with ready solutions and clear normative boundaries as they are just ‘made up in the making’. Especially Western democracies have resorted to remote warfare to govern perceived security threats across the Middle East and Africa in particular (Tholens, 2021). However, countries like Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye have also turned to remote warfare.

Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR, hereafter OIR) is a prime example of a remote warfare campaign (Demmers et al., 2020). The campaign was established in 2014 to formalize operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as IS, ISIL, or Daesh) (Humud, 2021). By using coordinated airstrikes and by providing SFA to local security forces that do the fighting on the ground, states that are part of

OIR maintain a safe distance while trying to defeat ISIS (Demmers et al., 2020). Even though more than 80 states are part of the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition (hereafter the Coalition) (The Global Coalition, 2023), this thesis will specifically focus on two states that are part of the Coalition and that have provided SFA to local security forces during OIR: the US and the Netherlands.

The decision to focus on the US and the Netherlands is because both states have collaborated with local security forces during OIR and even more interesting is that both states provided SFA differently. The US, which established OIR, has collaborated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Humud, 2021). Since 2015, the US has provided military and financial support to the Syrian armed group (Van Wilgenburg, 2020). The SDF has also received air support from the US when attacking ISIS territories (SNHR, 2017). Unlike the US, the Netherlands did not provide lethal weapons during its Non-Lethal Assistance (NLA) program in Syria. During the NLA program, the ‘moderate’ armed opposition was supported in the fight against ISIS and the Assad regime from mid-2015 to early 2018 (Hoekstra, 2022). The Netherlands provided non-lethal supplies to several armed groups in Syria such as Jahbat al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Brigade (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018b). In both case studies, several human rights organizations have accused local security partners of causing civilian harm. As these two states will be analyzed and compared to each other, a comparative puzzle will be used as the research puzzle (Mason, 2018). More information on OIR and the two case studies will be provided later in this thesis.

Civilian harm caused by using explosive weapons in urbanized areas has attracted increasing attention and concern over the last decades (Boer, Treffers, & Woods, 2020). Azeem, Gould, Bijl, and Demmers (2022, p. 27) define civilian harm as “negative effects on civilian personal or community well-being caused by using force in hostilities”. Their report discusses two types of civilian harm effects. Direct effects of civilian harm are the immediate and physical impact directly from the armed conflict (i.e., civilian deaths, physical injuries, psychological trauma, and material damage). Indirect or reverberating effects are not necessarily caused directly by the attack but are a product of the attack (i.e., displacement, economic harm, and damage to infrastructure which has consequences for health care, water, electricity, and education). Serber (2022) adds stigmatization and retaliation to the list of indirect civilian harm effects. These effects can happen when innocent civilians are suspected by their neighbors or local security forces to be ISIS members when being attacked by an airstrike (Human Rights Watch, 2022). CIVIC (2020) adds torture to the list of direct civilian harm and enforced disappearances to the list of indirect civilian harm. In this thesis, it will be studied which claims

civil society makes about direct and indirect civilian harm caused by local security forces and how the US and Dutch governments respond to these civilian harm claims.

There are several studies regarding how governments use discourses during OIR and how they respond to civilian harm caused by OIR missions. Demmers et al. (2020) studied how the Coalition frames the violence used by ISIS as vicious and barbaric, while the violence used by the Coalition is framed as clean and precise. Bonds (2019) discusses how the narrative of OIR being the most precise air campaign in the history of warfare and the goal of having zero civilian casualties is being maintained by the US even when being confronted with a significant number of civilian casualties. Additionally, the Coalition often fails to present the exact number of civilian casualties (Demmers et al., 2020). That is why human rights organizations such as Airwars and Amnesty International do their own research to contest the Coalition's discourse on the precision of remote warfare and care for civilian casualties. Besides that, it is often difficult to determine how substantial the support provided by governments to local security forces is (Human Rights Watch, 2018a). Governments are often vague in what they publish publicly about these partnerships. In some cases, they have issued contradictory reports on the size of the support. Gould & Stel (2021) studied how governments even choose in certain situations to not respond to civilian harm claims at all. In their study about the civilian deaths caused by the bombardment of an ISIS weapons factory in Hawija in 2015 under OIR, they found that the Dutch government used epistemic politics as a discursive strategy when confronted with civilian harm claims. Official narratives shifted from denying that civilians had died to keeping certain information secret to ignoring civilian death claims.

Since collaborations with local security partners have become a key foreign policy tool (Trenta, 2021), this thesis brings the topics of 'local security partnerships', 'civilian harm', and 'discursive responses of governments' together. This has not been done before. Besides that, since most studies focus on the civilian harm caused by air operations, this thesis will contribute to the academic debate by focusing on civilian harm caused by partnerships between Coalition members (i.e., the US and the Netherlands) and local security forces. Additionally, most studies only discuss civilian deaths and injuries as civilian harm. This thesis will include both direct and indirect civilian harm to expand the academic debate regarding civilian harm. Furthermore, this thesis specifically builds on the work of Gould and Stel (2021) on how governments use epistemic politics as a discursive strategy when responding to civilian harm claims. Therefore, this thesis not only pays attention to the words that are being said but also to what is not being said. This thesis aims to contribute to the academic debate on remote warfare by discovering how governments use epistemic politics as a discursive strategy when being confronted with

claims of direct and indirect civilian harm caused by partnerships with local security forces. Therefore, the following research question will be asked: *How do the US and Dutch governments discursively respond to the claims made by civil society about civilian harm caused by local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021?*

Four sub-questions were created to answer the main question:

1. How do the US and Dutch governments collaborate with local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021?
2. What discourses do the US and Dutch governments use to legitimize collaborating with local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021?
3. What claims are being made by civil society about direct and indirect civilian harm caused by local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021?
4. To what extent do the US and Dutch governments use epistemic strategies when responding to claims made by civil society about civilian harm caused by local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021?

In addition to the academic relevance, the answer to the research question is socially relevant. The frequent occurrence of remote warfare in urbanized contexts requires an understanding of the impact on civilians. As pointed out before, SFA has become a key foreign policy tool, which makes it essential to understand how local security forces that receive SFA can cause civilian harm to prevent civilian harm (Trenta, 2021). Additionally, since governments represent entire societies, it is important that these societies are aware of how their governments have partnerships with local security partners and how their governments discursively respond to claims of civilian harm caused by these partnerships.

The next chapter includes the theoretical framework, which is critical discursive approach, that will be used to analyze the two case studies. In Chapter 3 the research and data collection methods and their limitations will be discussed. In the fourth chapter, the Coalition's campaign OIR will be discussed. In Chapter 5 the case study of the US and the SDF will be analyzed. In Chapter 6 the Dutch NLA program will be analyzed. The thesis concludes by answering the main research question and by a reflection.

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

Critical discourse analysis will be used as the theoretical framework to understand how the US and Dutch governments discursively respond to claims about civilian harm caused by partnerships with local security forces. Critical discourse analysis aims to study the formation of discourses in and on war (Demmers, 2017). “It aims to give an explicit and systematic description of the ways in which people form discourse communities and how collective narratives on the origins of war, the enemy, victims, and perpetrators are formed and sustained” (Demmers, 2017, p. 132). Therefore, during a conflict where two or more entities perceive that they have mutually incompatible goals, powerful groups such as governments may try to convince their audiences that this incompatibility of goals is threatening them (Demmers, 2017). They try to turn this threat of the other into a dominant discourse. Critical discourse analysis can thus help to understand the onset of war and the step to violence in conflict.

This chapter explains critical discourse analysis with important concepts such as discourses and collective action frames, and how these concepts legitimize violent action and war. It will also be explained how a war on words can take place after violent events and how epistemic politics can be used as a discursive strategy by governments when being confronted with claims that do not fit their narrative.

Chapter 2.1 Discourse

To understand critical discourse analysis, it is important to understand the concept of ‘discourse’. Discourses are stories about social reality (Demmers, 2017). They give a representation of what is considered the ‘social truth’. According to Jabri (1996), discourses actively construct a version of objects, events, and categories (e.g., classifications such as race or terrorism). Discourses do things and therefore have social and political implications. Since people perceive certain classifications as real, they act upon them as real (Demmers, 2017). Therefore, discourses shape reality. This is the power of discourse: power is constituted through discourses. For a large part, the power of governments and organizations is based on their capacity to control the language in which people discuss societal problems.

Discourse is a powerful tool for governments and organizations (Demmers, 2017). “Discourse analysis hence is about the ‘politics of portrayal’, examining how names and images are made, assigned, and disputed, and how this battle at times translates into political and judicial measures and instruments (such as ‘terrorist listing’)” (Demmers, 2017, p. 134). One of the functions of these discursive representations of the ‘truth’ is to recruit supporters by propagating a divide between us and them (Demmers, 2017). This divide creates social

identities where during war ‘us’ is associated with civilization and courage, while ‘them’ is represented as barbaric and evil (Jabri, 1996). The categorization of us versus them thus derives from discursive and institutional continuities which are reproduced through everyday acts of categorizing and representations (e.g., we are the good guys, and they are the bad guys). Discourses are framed around exclusion and inclusion (Jabri, 1996).

Thus, discourses are reinforced, ritualized, policed, and institutionalized and turned into ‘truth’ and tradition (Demmers, 2017). Discourses can become so embedded in the political and cultural landscape that most people lose awareness of its constructed significance (Jackson, 2006). People may no longer be consciously aware of it being anything but reality. This is how power is constituted through discourses. Power consists of the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality (Gourevitch, 2000).

Chapter 2.2 Collective action frames

Several discursive strategies can be used to give a representation of the ‘truth’. Collective action framing is such a discursive strategy. In the early 1990s, Snow and Benford (1992, p. 137) argued that a frame is an “interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment”. Tarrow (1998, p. 111) reformulated the idea into the notion of collective action frames which “redefine social conditions as unjust and intolerable with the intention of mobilizing potential participants, which is achieved by making appeals to perceptions of justice and emotionality in the minds of individuals”.

Collective action frames have an action-oriented function by having core framing tasks: “Collective action frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615). There are three core framing tasks. First, diagnostic framing is the identification of the problem: what is the source of the problem, who is to blame? The second core framing task is prognostic framing which involves the proposed solution to the problem. It involves the strategies to carry out a plan of attack. Taking diagnostic and prognostic framing together, a frame makes sense of relevant events and identifies the problem and the solution (Cooper, Kuypers, & Althous, 2008). The identification of the problem tends to constrain the range of possible reasonable solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000). The third framing task is motivational

framing which provides a rationale for engaging in collective action. The first two frames facilitate agreement on what the situation is and how it should be solved (i.e., consensus mobilization) while the third fosters movement (i.e., action mobilization).

During the framing process, actors act to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, where there is an emphasis on some facts while ignoring others (Cooper et al., 2008). Alternative solutions can be muted through framing. However, the framing of the solution can also be refuted of its logic or efficacy by opponents who consider another ‘truth’ (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Chapter 2.3 Role of discourse and frames in legitimizing war

As explained before, one of the functions of discursive representations is to create a divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Demmers, 2017). Another function is to legitimize violent action against the other. “Legitimization refers to the process by which speakers accredit or license a type of social behavior” (Reyes, 2011, p. 782). For violence to start, it first has to be imagined before it can be carried out (Schröder & Schmidt, 2001). Through the imagination of violent scenarios, violence becomes a legitimate source of action. According to Reyes (2011), legitimization deserves special attention in political discourse because political leaders justify their political agenda through speeches. Politicians imbue their utterances with evidence and authority (Dunmire, 2012). This is how they achieve legitimacy.

Reyes (2011) has described several discursive strategies that can be used to legitimize ideological positionings and actions: (1) legitimization through emotions, like triggering feelings of fear (‘the West is under threat’); (2) legitimization through a hypothetical future by posing a threat (‘ISIS will grow in strength’); (3) legitimization through rationality by saying that decisions have been made after a heeded, evaluated and thoughtful procedure; (4) legitimization through altruism by saying that actions are beneficial to others (‘to protect the Iraqi civilians’); (5) legitimization through voices of expertise to show the audience that experts are backing the politician’s proposal with their knowledgeable statements. Actions are legitimized through discourses. These five legitimization strategies are effective because a society shares certain values and visions of the world.

Framing also helps to legitimize violent action (Benford & Snow, 2000). This discursive strategy puts moral claims on the legitimacy of violent conflict (Demmers, 2017). Collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the actions and campaigns of governments (Benford & Snow, 2000). As said before, alternative solutions and actions can be muted through framing (Cooper et al., 2008) Therefore, framing

strategies can deflect criticism and justify continuing the same actions (Skillington, 1997). Thus, discourses and frames are strategies to legitimize war.

Chapter 2.4 War on words after a violent event

As this thesis will focus on how governments discursively respond to claims of civilian harm caused by security force partnerships, it is also important to consider the discursive strategies that are used after violent events. As discussed in the introduction, civilians are harmed in several ways during war (i.e., direct and indirect forms of civilian harm). Brass (1996) states that one should not only focus on the interpretative processes before but also after violent events. He claims that we need to examine the discourses on violence and how politicians seek to explain incidents of violent action. That is, “the attempts to govern a society or a country through gaining not only a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, but to gain control over the interpretation of violence” (Brass, 1996, p. 45). The government tries to impose its ‘truth’ on others by controlling the interpretation of violence. For instance, governments try to present their actions as acceptable under international law (Finlay, 2018). By using discursive strategies such as framing, governments try to gain control over the interpretation of the outcomes of violent events. However, interpretations of a violent event can be contested with counter-truths (Demmers et al., 2020). This can be applied to civilian harm caused by governments during war. For instance, governments often underreport the number of civilian deaths according to Airwars (2023). Human rights organizations such as Airwars contest these numbers with their own research. As a result, a battle of words takes place after violent events which could delegitimize the use of violent action. Another discursive strategy that can be used after violent events to control the interpretation of the outcome is that of epistemic politics (Gould & Stel, 2021).

Chapter 2.5 Epistemic politics

Each society has its ‘regime of truth’: it is the general politics of truth (Foucault, 1980). According to Gould & Stel (2021), denial, secrecy, and ignorance are central to these ‘regimes of truth’. These three forms are part of the discursive strategy ‘epistemic politics’. Epistemic politics is the ‘truth of politics’ (Pingree, Brossard, & McLeod, 2014). Therefore, the theory of epistemic politics can be used to understand how politicians react to counterclaims about certain incidents that do not fit their narrative (Gould & Stel, 2021).

One of the reactions can be denial which refers to refuting knowledge claims (e.g., denying that there are civilian casualties). Denial mostly serves as a tactic of diversion or

stalling to buy time to develop ways to manage problematic situations (Aldrich & Richterova, 2018). Nevertheless, denial is hard to maintain because of increasing datafication and democratized information technology. For instance, reports by human rights organizations about civilian harm make it difficult for governments to keep denying civilian harm. Besides that, governments can use secrecy. For instance, governments can say that because of state secrecy, they cannot disclose numbers of civilian casualties due to security concerns (Gould & Stel, 2021). While classifying certain information as state secret might be accepted as legitimate in particular situations, it is never self-evident: “Secrecy, after all, goes against both political and legal understandings of the desirability of transparency, without which accountability, and ultimately democracy, are unattainable” (Gould & Stel, 2021, p. 62).

The third form of epistemic politics is the refutation of the possibility of knowing: denying that they (can) know of civilian harm altogether (Gould & Stel, 2021). In other words, politicians use ignorance as a discursive strategy. Denial and secrecy are part of ignorance. Ignorance can be an effective strategy to gain or maintain power. Gould and Stel (2021) make a distinction between offensive ignorance and defensive ignorance. Offensive ignorance is a way in which governments impose ignorance on others by obstructing the production of knowledge. An example of this is classifying a case as a state secret where the state cannot provide information about a case to others. However, a government can also impose ignorance on itself. Defensive ignorance refers to actively avoiding or denying knowledge. Governments might know a bit about something and choose to ignore this information and not know more about it (Stel, 2020). Examples are burying reports, shelving relevant questions, and disregarding inconvenient information (Gould & Stel, 2021). However, as governments maintain their own ignorance, they obstruct the production of knowledge by others. Therefore, defensive and offensive ignorance are crucially related: ‘You do not get to know this because we do not know it and we cannot know it’. By using epistemic politics (i.e., denial, secrecy, and ignorance) as a discursive strategy, governments try to legitimize future remote warfare regardless of the civilian costs according to Gould & Stel (2021). Ignoring and not knowing post-pones or even obstructs investigation and accountability. Widespread silence enables the continuation of highly profitable, however destructive, activities (McGoey, 2012).

In conclusion, governments use several discursive strategies to give a representation of their truth. When focusing on the discursive responses of governments when they are confronted with civilian harm claims, one might look for actual words. However, the theory of epistemic politics shows that a discursive response can also be to not actually respond to these claims at all (e.g., by ignoring civilian harm claims). Therefore, it is also important to analyze

what is not being said. This thesis will have a broader look at critical discourse analysis by analyzing collective action frames that legitimize violent action and by analyzing to what extent governments use epistemic politics when being confronted with claims of civilian harm caused by their partnerships with local security forces.

Chapter 3. Methods

Chapter 3.1 Research method and data collection method

To determine the appropriate research strategy, the ontological and epistemological stance of the research should be identified. According to Demmers (2017), critical discursive approach emphasizes how structures and agents stand in a dialectical relationship with each other. Both structuralism and agency are considered instead of only one. Therefore, the ontological stance taken in this thesis will be the relationship between individualism and structuralism. Additionally, critical discursive approach is fundamentally concerned with how people understand violence and war, and how they act upon this (Demmers, 2017). Therefore, the epistemological stance taken in this thesis will have an interpretative approach using a critical discursive approach as the analytical tool to understand the discourses used by governments when responding to civilian harm. By taking this ontological and epistemological stance, a qualitative research strategy was used to study the research question.

Three types of open sources were used. First, public governmental sources were used to answer the first, second, and fourth sub-question. Therefore, the collaboration between the government and local security partners, the legitimization of this collaboration, and to what extent the governments used epistemic politics when responding to civilian harm claims could be studied. Government papers, reports, letters, and statements of the US and the Netherlands were used. Several governmental websites were used and terms that were related to the case studies were used to find relevant governmental sources (e.g., the name of an armed group).

Second, reports by human rights organizations were used to answer the third sub-question about claims made by civil society about civilian harm caused by local security forces. Reports of the following four human rights organizations were used: (1) Airwars, which tracks, assesses, archives, and investigates civilian harm claims in conflict areas (Airwars, n.d.); (2) Amnesty International, which researches human rights abuses worldwide and campaigns to end these abuses (Amnesty International, n.d.); (3) Human Rights Watch, which investigates and reports on human rights abuses happening all over the world (Human Rights Watch, n.d.); (4) Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), which monitors and documents human rights violations in Syria (SNHR, n.d.). These organizations interview victims and eyewitnesses of civilian harm and publish these civilian harm claims in reports. In addition to that, these reports provide information about the armed groups and the collaboration between these groups and the governments and therefore were also used to answer sub-question one. The search bar on the websites of the human rights organizations was used to search reports about armed groups that were included in the case studies. Only reports that were based on interviews with victims

or eyewitnesses of civilian harm caused by local security forces that are part of the two case studies were included.

As said before, governments can be vague about the collaboration with local security partners and in responding to civilian harm claims. Therefore, public media sources helped to gain more information about a specific case. For instance, the case study of the Netherlands and its NLA program could not have been analyzed without using the findings of the investigation by public media *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*. Public media sources can also help to give an overview of a specific case study by bringing public governmental sources and reports from human rights organizations together. Therefore, public media sources were used to answer all four sub-questions. These sources were found by typing terms that belonged to the case studies in the search bar on Google (e.g., Dutch collaboration with Jahbat al-Shamiya).

The data collection consisted of four phases. The first phase was finding case studies where all sub-questions could be answered. Only when a case study had several sources for each sub-question, it was considered a potential case study. After selecting several case studies, the case study of the collaboration between the US and the SDF and the case study of the Dutch NLA program were selected in the end to analyze. Since these two case studies were not too similar to each other, it was decided to analyze these two case studies to show the variation in the research topic. The case study of the US focuses on just one combat group which received lethal supplies from the US, while the case study of the Netherlands focuses on several combat groups that received non-lethal supplies.

The second phase was gathering more data for these two case studies by using the three types of open sources until saturation occurred. The third phase consisted of coding the data. Qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to code the documents, reports, and website posts. For every sub-question, a code had been created which was then linked to the case studies. For instance, for the fourth sub-question the code ‘epistemic politics’ was created which had the sub-codes ‘epistemic politics of US’ and ‘epistemic politics of NL’. This way, there was a clear overview of every case for each sub-question at the end of the coding process. The final phase consisted of analyzing the coded texts through the lens of a critical discursive approach. By using a critical discursive approach to analyze the data, discursive strategies of the governments could be discovered, and patterns could be identified.

Chapter 3.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of the chosen methods could be that only open sources were used to collect the data. Other methods like qualitative interviews with victims or eyewitnesses of

civilian harm might have led to new information for the sub-question about civilian harm. There are three reasons why qualitative interviews were not conducted. First, the question of whether it is ethically responsible to discuss such a sensitive and traumatic topic with victims and eyewitnesses for a thesis played a big role. Besides that, it would have been difficult to find enough respondents since this research was not conducted during fieldwork in Syria and/or Iraq. Finally, for the scope of this thesis, there was enough information provided in the reports from human rights organizations about civilian harm to answer the third sub-question. A second limitation is that not all governmental documents that are out there were analyzed. However, many of the documents contain the same kind of information. The data collection of the public governmental sources stopped when saturation occurred. Lastly, only two case studies were included in this thesis. There are many more cases about how governments discursively respond to claims by civil society about civilian harm caused by local security partners (i.e., other cases of the Netherlands and the US within OIR, cases of other Coalition members, and cases of remote warfare outside of OIR). Different cases can be studied to get a broader sense of the similarities and differences in discursive responses between different states.

Chapter 3.3 Ethics

Since a significant part of my thesis is about civilian harm, it was important to treat the reports of human rights organizations carefully and not take them out of context. This was also the case for discussing the collaborations between governments and security force partners and the discursive responses of governments to civilian harm. Taking things out of context and treating information in an irresponsible way by not checking whether multiple sources share the same information, results in an unethically responsible way of conducting research. It is also important to note that the blame for civilian harm is often placed on the local security forces. However, the governments that provide SFA to these local security forces should also be held responsible. This thesis does not put blame on a specific party but aims to show how various parties are part of a system that causes civilian harm.

Chapter 4. Operation Inherent Resolve

Before analyzing the two case studies of the US and the Netherlands, it is important to give more context about OIR which is the campaign of which the two case studies were part. Following the capture of much of northern Iraq and eastern Syria by ISIS and the atrocities committed against civilians (Airwars, 2023), the Defense Department of the US established OIR in 2014 to formalize operations against ISIS (Humud, 2021). OIR is characterized by its remoteness because of air operations where remote weapons are used and because of ground operations where local security forces receive SFA (Demmers et al., 2020). Since 2014, some Coalition members have joined in the air campaign against ISIS, and others (also) have contributed by providing weapons, equipment, training, and advice to local security forces (US Department of State, n.d.). Local security forces both in Iraq and Syria have received SFA to defeat ISIS and to set conditions for long-term security cooperation frameworks (Operation Inherent Resolve, 2023). In addition to that, between August 2014 and December 2021, the Coalition conducted at least 35,045 airstrikes as part of OIR (Public Affairs Office, 2021). This intense air and ground campaign led to ISIS being driven out of almost all territory it previously held in Syria and Iraq (Airwars, 2023). However, the campaign continues (Operation Inherent Resolve, 2023). The Coalition remains supporting local security partners in Syria and Iraq to prevent ISIS from gaining territory again. Even though this thesis focuses on SFA during OIR, this chapter will also refer to air operations since dominant discourses about OIR are also based on the use of remote weapons.

Remote warfare is seen as the beginning of a new era of warfare with precision-guided bombs and missiles while suffering light military and civilian casualties (Elish, 2017). A Coalition member claimed in 2017 that “there has never been a more precise air campaign in the history of conflict” in comparison to OIR and that “the Coalition’s goal is always for zero human casualties” (Townsend, 2017). Meanwhile, the violence by ISIS is described as barbaric and brutal (Obama, 2014). The two functions of discursive representation as discussed by Demmers (2017) can be applied to this dominant discourse of OIR being the most precise and clean campaign. First, the Coalition tries to recruit Coalition members by creating a divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ by creating a distinction between ‘our’ violence as clean and precise and ‘their’ violence as barbaric and brutal. This shows how war actors like to understand their own violence and also how they try to create the ‘truth’ of the war against ISIS. Besides that, the Coalition creates the ‘us versus them’ divide by stating that “terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States” (US Department of State, n.d.). By using the word ‘terrorism’ it creates

classifications of ISIS being terrorist and Coalition members being the ones that fight against terrorism. Since Coalition members also represent their societies, the ‘us versus them’ divide goes further where there is also a divide created between the civilians represented by these Coalition states and ISIS.

The second function of discursive representations as explained by Demmers (2017) is the legitimization of violent action against the other. The Coalition uses collective action framing as discussed by Benford and Snow (2000) to legitimize violence against ISIS. The diagnostic framing is the identification of the problem: “... (ISIS) has dramatically undermined stability in Iraq, Syria and the broader Middle East and poses a threat to international peace and security” (US Department of State, n.d.). The prognostic framing, which is the solution to this problem, is to degrade and defeat ISIS by providing military support to partners, stopping the flow of foreign fighters, stopping financing and funding, addressing humanitarian crises, and exposing the true nature of ISIS (US Department of State, n.d.). By creating the motivational frame that this is the most clean and precise warfare campaign, alternative solutions are muted.

Nevertheless, the ‘truth’ that the Coalition has created of OIR being clean and precise has been challenged. Significant civilian casualties have been reported by human rights organizations such as Airwars. The Coalition claimed in 2021 that since 2014 at least 1,437 civilians were unintentionally killed by Coalition actions during OIR operations (Public Affairs Office, 2021). However, Airwars (2023) has estimated that at least 8,198 to 13,256 civilians were killed by Coalition actions. Even though the Coalition does not completely deny that there are civilian casualties caused because of its actions, the Coalition highly underreports civilian harm. Governments use epistemic politics to react to counterclaims about certain incidents that do not fit their narrative (Gould & Stel, 2021). Specifically, the Coalition uses defensive ignorance by underreporting civilian deaths. By only providing part of the story and therefore creating certain knowledge, the Coalition tries to maintain this discourse of OIR being a precise and clean campaign.

In the following two chapters, two case studies of collaborations between states and local security partners during OIR will be analyzed: the collaboration between the US and the SDF, and the Dutch NLA program where the Netherlands collaborated with several Syrian armed groups. These partnerships had clear remote warfare characteristics since the military personnel of the US and the Netherlands were far removed from the battlefield in Syria by providing SFA to local security partners. In these chapters, the main focus will be on SFA again.

Chapter 5. Case study: The US and the SDF

Chapter 5.1 Collaboration between the US and the SDF

In 2014, the Pentagon launched the Syria Train and Equip Program aimed at training thousands of Syrian rebels in the fight against ISIS (Glenn, 2016). In October 2015, the program shifted to supporting already existing vetted forces where US Special Operations Forces (SOF) were deployed to Syria to support these local forces (Humud, 2021). A US-backed coalition, known as the SDF, was set up to unite the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG) and a small number of Arab groups. Soon, the SDF would become the main partner of the US in the fight against ISIS. The US has provided military and financial support to the SDF (Van Wilgenburg, 2020). According to an OIR spokesperson, as of July 6, 2017, the US has delivered weapons and ammunition to the SDF and more than 400 vehicles and personal equipment for more than 40,000 fighters (RAND Corporation, 2022). Allegedly, the lethal equipment included small arms, heavy weapons, mortar systems, and anti-tank weapons. Because the SDF was too limited equipped to fight ISIS on its own, it received a substantial amount of air support. The SDF often needed US air power to bolster collective self-defense. The SDF also helped the US determine the targets on the ground by providing coordinates (SNHR, 2017).

Being active since the end of 2015, the SDF recaptured Raqqa in October 2017 (Glenn, 2016). In January 2019, the SDF recaptured the remaining handful of villages occupied by ISIS. Two months later, ISIS's physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria was ended. Even though ISIS was defeated on a territorial base, the US continues to support the SDF with higher-level advice to maintain pressure on ISIS (Blinken, 2021).

Chapter 5.2 Legitimization of collaboration

“So ISIL poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East – including American citizens, personnel and facilities. If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States. ... Tonight, I want you to know that the United States of America is meeting them with strength and resolve” (Obama, 2014). On September 10, 2014, then President Barack Obama made a statement about starting the war against ISIS. The three core framing tasks from Benford and Snow (2000) were used in his statement. The diagnostic framing (i.e., identification of the problem) is the global threat of ISIS. The prognostic framing (i.e., the solution) is to start military actions against ISIS. This would involve operations from the air by using airstrikes and from the ground by providing SFA (Obama, 2014). The motivational framing (i.e., the rationale for engaging in war) is that if nothing is done, the threat of ISIS will spread. Obama strengthened this motivational frame by

saying that “ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple. And it has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way” (Obama, 2014). Therefore, it is needed to “... degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy” (Obama, 2014).

Reyes (2011) would say that Obama used several discursive strategies throughout his statement. For example: “ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies” (legitimization through emotions); “If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States” (legitimization through emotions and a hypothetical future); “We cannot allow these communities to be driven from their ancient homelands” (legitimization through altruism) (Obama, 2014). To strengthen the legitimacy of collaborating with the SDF, he said about the US military that “they’re not going to be leading the fight on the ground, but they will be essential in providing the training and assisting local forces as they continue to drive ISIL back” (Rampton, 2016). These quotes are all ways to legitimize OIR and the collaboration with local security partners like the SDF. He made it clear that this operation and strategy is needed to eliminate the threat of ISIS and to keep the US’s military safe by removing them from the battlefield.

The SDF has proven to be successful in the war against ISIS (Humud, 2021). As said before, the SDF recaptured Raqqa and a handful of villages (Glenn, 2016). The reason to continue supporting the SDF is that the SDF has succeeded in showing that it can fulfill achievements against ISIS and its sleeper cells, which still deploy in east Syria (Tammo, 2021). The successes of the SDF legitimize the continuation of this partnership.

Chapter 5.3 Civilian harm claims

This section will discuss the claims that are made by civil society about civilian harm caused by the SDF. These claims are based on reports by Airwars, Human Rights Watch and SNHR. For instance, the report by SNHR (2017) ‘The Yellow Assault’ which tackles violations in the Raqqa governate between November 6, 2016, and June 30, 2017, will be referred to several times in this section. During this timeframe, the SDF was defeating ISIS in the Raqqa governate. Thus, all the claims of civilian harm that are made in this section are based on reports by these human rights organizations. These organizations have conducted interviews with victims and witnesses of civilian harm caused by various parties during the war like the SDF and report these claims.

Claims of both direct and indirect civilian harm caused by the SDF have been made. Direct civilian harm includes indiscriminate killing, injuring and torturing civilians, and the

destruction of infrastructure. Indirect civilian harm includes unlawful arrests, conscripting children, enforced disappearances, destruction of civilian facilities, displacement, and oil smuggling. Before delving deeper into these claims of direct and indirect civilian harm, it is important to note that these claims are made about the civilian harm being done by the SDF. However, the US is also responsible for these claims of civilian harm since the US supports the SDF. As a result, the frame of OIR being a precise and clean campaign and the US stating that "... we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by this terrorist organization" (Obama, 2014) are contested by these reports. The US tried to gain control over the interpretation of violence by stating that the violence of the US is clean. However, this interpretation of violence can be contested with counter-truths (Brass, 1996) such as reports on civilian harm. After discussing the direct and indirect civilian harm claims, it will be explained how the US has reacted to these counterclaims.

Chapter 5.3.1 Direct civilian harm

SNHR (2017) recorded that the SDF killed 164 civilians, including 31 children and 31 women, between November 6, 2016, and June 30, 2017. Some of these killings are because the SDF fired shells at villages and neighborhoods that were under the control of ISIS at the time of the attacks. Airwars (2022) reported on an incident of a man and his son that were allegedly killed in a raid carried out by the SDF with air support from the US while they were said to be grazing their sheep. Next to these civilian deaths, civilians were also wounded due to attacks by the SDF according to SNHR (2017). The SDF has also been accused of the destruction of infrastructure like houses, places of worship, hospitals, power stations, and energy sources by firing shells according to SNHR (2017). The direct civilian harm effect is the material damage to these buildings. However, there is also an indirect civilian harm effect of destroying houses and civilian facilities, which will be explained later.

Chapter 5.3.2 Indirect civilian harm

The SDF has arrested civilians without charge in violation of fair trial guarantees according to Human Rights Watch (2018b) and SNHR (2017). For example, in the first half of 2021, 369 individuals were detained according to Human Rights Watch (2022). Civilians that were arrested are suspected ISIS members, individuals who have relationships with individuals in the Syrian National Army and ISIS, and activists (SNHR, 2022). Human Rights Watch (2018b) has received claims of torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities controlled by the SDF (which are forms of direct civilian harm). The SDF has also arrested children intending to

forcibly conscript them according to SNHR (2022). Conscripting children has serious consequences for their mental well-being and prevents children from going to school. According to SNHR (2022), the SDF does not provide any public record showing the whereabouts of the arrested and detainees, even when they are underaged. This has major mental health consequences for their families who do not know where their loved ones are.

As said before, the destruction of infrastructure also has indirect civilian harm effects. According to SNHR (2017), the SDF has targeted places of worship like mosques by firing shells directly at mosques. As a result, civilians cannot go to the mosque to practice their religion which can have negative consequences for their mental health. Second, the SDF has targeted vital medical facilities like hospitals according to SNHR (2017). Because of this, civilians are not safe anymore when they need medical care or cannot even get medical care because the buildings are too unsafe or destroyed. This has major consequences for the health of civilians. The SDF has also damaged power stations, energy sources, and water systems by firing shells which have led to the power and drinking water being cut off on certain occasions according to SNHR (2017).

Entire communities have been displaced by the SDF as it cleared areas that were under control by ISIS according to UN Human Rights Council (2017). The indiscriminate killing, the destruction of houses and vital facilities, and the air operations from the US to support the SDF forced civilians to flee according to SNHR (2017). SNHR (2017) stated that by 2017, 120,000 Syrian civilians were forcibly displaced. Displaced civilians ended up in displacement camps in SDF-controlled areas. Human Rights Watch (2018b) and SNHR (2017) have claimed that these displacement camps have deteriorating humanitarian conditions. For example, civilians lived in open fields and were restricted from freedom of movement.

Finally, SNHR (2021b) has reported that approximately 50% of the oil produced in the areas under the SDF's control is being smuggled. The remaining quantity is often not enough to meet the needs of the regional population. Also, environmental pollution is caused by using 'oil burners' which result in the emission of many toxic gases into the atmosphere. This has negative effects on lands, livestock, and wild animals.

Chapter 5.4 The use of epistemic politics by the US

Because of these civilian harm claims, the 'truth' of a precise and clear campaign has been contested. This battle of words could delegitimize the use of violent actions. This section will analyze how the US discursively responded to these civilian harm claims and specifically how the US used epistemic politics as a discursive strategy.

According to RAND Corporation (2022), in Raqqa, neither the Coalition nor the SDF conducted in-person visits or interview witnesses to collect information about civilian harm incidents. Besides that, Airwars (2022) stated that in the Pentagon's annual report to Congress on civilian deaths and injuries caused by US military actions during OIR in 2021, the numbers of casualties are significantly lower than local reporting suggests. The discursive strategy that can be identified here is epistemic politics. Specifically, the US used defensive ignorance, which is a way in which a government imposes ignorance on itself (Gould & Stel, 2021). By using epistemic politics as a discursive strategy, the US tried to maintain its 'regime of truth' and the dominant discourse that OIR is a clean and precise campaign.

The US continued using defensive ignorance as a discursive strategy in several reports. Since 2016, the US government started releasing yearly reports on international religious freedom in Syria. In these reports (US Department of State, 2018, 2019b, 2022b), the US discusses the civilian harm caused by terrorist organizations like ISIS, the Syrian government, and the Syrian government's partner forces. These allegations of civilian harm are based on reports by organizations like SNHR. When the SDF is mentioned, the US puts the group in a positive light by stating in every report how it has been successful in defeating ISIS and how it has liberated Yezidi women (US Department of State, 2018, 2019b, 2022b). However, Human Rights Watch (2018b) and SNHR (2017) have claimed that when the SDF defeated ISIS, thousands of civilians were being put in displacement camps with deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Interestingly, these International Religious Freedom reports only discuss civilian harm caused by ISIS and the Assad regime while the claims of civilian harm caused by the SDF are ignored. It is nearly impossible that the US did not know about these civilian harm claims since the US used reports by human rights organizations like SNHR which also reports on claims of civilian harm caused by the SDF. The US actively avoided mentioning these civilian harm claims by using epistemic politics. Even in the report of 2021, after all these years of civilian harm claims, the US continued to ignore these claims in the International Religious Freedom reports and maintained their own ignorance regarding claims of civilian harm caused by the partnership with the SDF. It seems that the US tried to legitimize the collaboration with SDF by deliberately maintaining ignorance through evasion and by only focusing on civilian harm caused by the opposing parties while highlighting the successes of the SDF.

The US also started releasing yearly reports on human rights practices in Syria since 2016. Unlike the International Religious Freedom reports, the Human Rights Practices reports do mention the claims about civilian harm caused by the SDF (US Department of State, 2019a, 2022a). In the report on 2018, the US mentioned for example that the SDF "... reportedly

engaged in forced conscription, to include limited conscription of children” (US Department of State, 2019a, p. 2). It is interesting how the word ‘limited’ is being used when every conscripted child is one too many. Even when the US mentioned the allegations of the detainees being tortured, the US also stated that “detainees were provided with sufficient food and water, but medical care was lacking, reflecting the overall lack of medical supplies throughout the northeast region” (US Department of State, 2022a, p. 12). The tone in these reports when mentioning civilian harm caused by SDF is different than when civilian harm caused by ISIS or the Syrian government is mentioned: “ISIS attacked members of religious minority groups and subjected women and girls to routine rape, forced marriages, sexual slavery, human trafficking, and murder” (US Department of State, 2019a, p. 3). The US is very direct in its wording about the civilian harm caused by ISIS and only mentions a small part of the civilian harm caused by the SDF. When mentioning civilian harm caused by the SDF, statements are made like ‘limited conscription of children’. The US deflects attention to the harm caused by ISIS rather than to the harm done by its local security force partner. As Demmers (2017) has said, one of the functions of discursive representations is to create a divide between ‘us’ and the ‘other’. By using a different language for both groups, the US created a divide between ISIS and the SDF. In these quotes, it is noticeable how ‘their’ (i.e., ISIS) violence is barbaric and brutal and how ‘our’ (i.e., the SDF supported by the US) violence is more humanized. According to Finlay (2018), politicians tend to refer to civilian harm caused by other forces more frequently than civilian harm caused by their own forces. Discourses are actively used to maintain power over the ‘truth’ that the partnership with the SDF is a legitimate strategy to fight against ISIS.

Even though the US acknowledged partly the civilian harm claims, the other part is still being ignored. Thus, the US still used epistemic politics in these Human Rights Practices reports. Also, by diminishing the civilian harm claims, the US tried to avoid accountability. The US did not mention whether these allegations are true and how will be dealt with these allegations. The report on Human Rights Practices in 2018 (US Department of State, 2019a) mentions that in September the SDF issued a military order banning the recruitment of anyone younger than the age of 18. In October 2018, Geneva Call trained more than 200 SDF officers on the law of armed conflict and on the prohibition to recruit children. However, SNHR reported in December 2021 that the SDF still kidnaped children and forcibly conscripted them (SNHR, 2021a). The US also mentioned in its report on Human Rights Practices in 2021 about the SDF continuing to implement an action plan with the United Nations (UN) to prevent the recruitment of children (US Department of State, 2022a). The US did not deny or ignore that children are

still being recruited but does immediately state that the SDF is working on this issue. However, since 2018 the recruitment of children has been a problem and in 2021 nothing has changed. The US did not take accountability for the fact that it keeps happening throughout the years while supporting the SDF. The US also did not seem to have any consequences for the SDF. Besides that, by mentioning that the SDF is implementing an action plan with the UN, the US made the civilian harm done by the SDF less severe.

The dominant discursive strategy from the US when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by the partnership with the SDF is defensively ignoring these claims. Even when acknowledging part of civilian harm, the other part is still being ignored. Additionally, by using certain words, civilian harm caused by the SDF is made to appear less bad than the civilian harm caused by ISIS. This could be a way to continue legitimizing OIR regardless of the counterclaims presented by human rights organizations. Nevertheless, by imposing ignorance on itself by ignoring part of the claims of civilian harm, the US also imposes ignorance on others. As Gould & Stel (2021) state, defensive and offensive ignorance are crucially related. By using these discursive strategies, the US tried to maintain the power of the narrative that OIR is a clean and precise campaign and therefore can continue the partnership with the SDF.

Chapter 6. Case study: The Netherlands and its NLA program

Chapter 6.1 Collaboration between the Netherlands and Syrian local security forces

From mid-2015 to early 2018, the Netherlands implemented the NLA program in Syria where – as the government stated – the ‘moderate’ armed opposition was supported in the fight against ISIS and the Assad regime (Hoekstra, 2022). On April 7, 2015, a few Dutch ministries like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to the House of Representatives that they wanted to supply goods other than weapons to the Syrian opposition. These would be goods with a civilian character: food parcels, medical kits, clothing, blankets, and communication equipment (Koenders, Hennis-Plasschaert, & Ploumen, 2015). ‘(Medical) vehicles’ were later added to the list (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018b). The Dutch government has supplied more than 27 million euros worth of non-lethal relief supplies to the ‘moderate’ armed opposition in Syria during the NLA program (Van Dort, 2023).

The Dutch government acknowledged from the beginning of the program that one of the risks of the program was that by supporting the armed opposition the support could fall into unwanted hands (Koenders et al., 2015). This risk was claimed to be mitigated by only supporting carefully screened groups. Groups were selected by the following five criteria: (1) no operational cooperation with extremist groups; (2) sees a role for itself in a future inclusive Syrian governance; (3) seeks an overarching military command structure for the Syrian moderate opposition; (4) sees a political solution as the ultimate way out of the conflict; (5) familiarity with international humanitarian law or willingness to receive training therein and a commitment to comply with these rules (Commissie-Cammaert, 2022). When groups met these criteria, they were eligible to receive NLA and were considered as ‘moderate’. Besides that, only groups that were reliable according to allies and organizations that knew the situation well in Syria were considered to give NLA (Blok, 2018).

In this case study, it is first important to analyze how the Dutch government legitimized the NLA program before giving more details about which groups were supported. The findings of the investigation by *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur* into the NLA program contested the ‘regime of truth’ because it stated that the supported groups were not as ‘moderate’ as the Dutch government claimed them to be (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018b).

Chapter 6.2 Legitimization of collaboration

The Netherlands decided to start the NLA program and to support ‘moderate’ armed groups because of the degrading and geopolitically destabilizing situation in Syria: “This support stems from the belief that groups that make up the moderate opposition are the only credible

alternative to the Assad regime on the one hand and extremist groups on the other” (Timmermans & Hennis-Plasschaert, 2014, p. 1). The Netherlands wanted to protect the Syrian civilians from “... the barbaric and humiliating method of ISIS” (Timmermans, Hennis-Plasschaert, & Ploumen, 2014, p. 9). Besides that, it wanted to protect its own civilians and other civilians in the West: “... jihadist leaders and fighters ... have been calling for revenge against the West through attacks” (Koenders et al., 2015, p. 12). Additionally, the Dutch NLA program started because of Assad’s violence against his own people (Blok, 2018).

The three core framing tasks by Benford and Snow (2000) can be applied to these quotes. The diagnostic frame is that the violence of ISIS and Assad are the problem. The solution to this problem (i.e., prognostic framing) is that ‘moderate’ opposition groups will be the ‘only’ alternative to the power of both the Assad regime and ISIS. According to Cooper et al. (2008), alternative solutions can be muted through framing. The Netherlands tried to do this by saying that the moderate opposition is the ‘only’ credible alternative and to make this alternative possible, the NLA program is needed to support the ‘moderate’ groups. This only solution can also deflect criticism and justify continuing violent action (Skillington, 1997). The rationale for engaging in violent conflict is that ISIS and Assad need to be stopped because of the violence they commit against Syrian civilians and because of the threat of ISIS to the West. These motivational frames are already a means to legitimize violent action, but these frames can also be linked to other discursive strategies that can be used to legitimize violent action. As Reyes (2011) identified, legitimization can be achieved through emotions (‘ISIS has threatened the West’), altruism (‘protecting the Syrian civilians’), and a hypothetical future (‘moderate Syrian opposition being an alternative’). The collaboration with the moderate Syrian opposition got legitimized because it would be the only credible alternative within the future state system. In addition to that, the opposition would prevent the threat from ISIS in the West and would protect the Syrian civilians.

The Netherlands tried to maintain this discourse throughout the NLA program. In 2016, the government stated in a letter that “the current Dutch support helps the moderate armed opposition protect civilians and counterbalance extremist groups. It also enables the carefully screened groups to better position themselves as credible political and administrative alternatives within the future Syrian state system. The government, therefore, regards the support as effective.” (Koenders, Hennis-Plasschaert, & Ploumen, 2016, pp. 13-14). By reinforcing this discourse, the Netherlands tried to legitimize the continuation of the program. However, in September of 2018, media *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur* made publicly known that the NLA support also went to – as they stated – terrorists (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018b). By speaking

with around a hundred rebel leaders and others involved in the NLA program, both media discovered that many of the supported groups caused civilian harm, cooperated with extremists, and had jihadist ideologies. According to *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*, six of the groups that were supported by the Netherlands were the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Suleyman Shah Brigade, Suqour al Jabl, Division 13, Brigade 51, and Jahbat al-Shamiya. Pick-up trucks, uniforms, satellite phones, cameras, medical kits, tents, and rubber mattresses were the goods that the Netherlands supplied to rebel groups. While pick-up trucks were used to transfer combatants, they also had another important function by having a loading platform on which onboard guns and other machine guns could be mounted.

Three groups will be included in the analysis. First, the Netherlands provided Jahbat al-Shamiya with non-lethal supplies in 2017 according to Dahhan and Holdert (2018b). Jahbat al-Shamiya (also known as al-Shamia Front or the Levant Front) is part of the Aleppo Conquest (or Fatah Halab) which is a coalition comprised of around 30 armed groups that co-ordinate attacks against the Syrian government, ISIS, and the YPG in the Aleppo governorate. However, the Dutch Public Prosecution Service described in 2017 Jahbat al-Shamiya as Salafist, jihadist, and as a criminal organization with terrorist intent (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018c). Second, from 2016 to the beginning of 2018, the Netherlands provided pick-up trucks and uniforms to the Sultan Murad Brigade according to Holdert and Dahhan (2018a). However, this group had a military alliance with al-Qaeda in 2015. This alliance was publicly known before the Netherlands started supporting the Sultan Murad Brigade the following year. Lastly, worth including is Ahrar al-Sham. Even though the Netherlands stated that this group never received directly NLA (Blok, 2021), the Netherlands did support several ‘moderate’ groups that cooperated militarily and had close ties with Ahrar al-Sham (Holdert & Dahhan, 2019). The court bank in Rotterdam said in 2019 that Ahrar al-Sham is a terrorist organization, which was already the case during the NLA program according to the judge. Ahrar al-Sham also has worked together with Al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, as said before, one of the criteria for being supported by the Netherlands is that the group cannot operationally cooperate with extremist groups (Commissie-Cammaert, 2022) which thus has been violated by several groups that were supported by the Netherlands.

Chapter 6.3 Civilian harm claims

This section will discuss the claims that are made by civil society about civilian harm caused by Jahbat al-Shamiya, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and Ahrar al-Sham. The reason why the focus will be on these three groups is that these groups had more claims of civilian harm than the

other groups that were supported by the Netherlands. The claims discussed are based on reports from Amnesty International which are based on interviews with victims and witnesses of civilian harm caused by various parties during the war including Jahbat al-Shamiya, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and Ahrar al-Sham.

Claims about both direct and indirect civilian harm caused by these groups have been made. Direct civilian harm includes punitive measures based on an own interpretation of Shari'a law, summary killings, deaths and injuries due to indiscriminate attacks. Indirect civilian harm includes abductions, unlawful arrests, and enforced disappearances. Also in the case study, it is important to note that these claims are made about the civilian harm being done by Jahbat al-Shamiya, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and Ahrar al-Sham. Nevertheless, the Netherlands is also responsible for causing civilian harm since it collaborated with Jahbat al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Brigade and supported groups that collaborated with Ahrar al-Sham. The Netherlands has stated several times that one of the main reasons to start the NLA program was to protect Syrian civilians from harm (e.g., Koenders et al., 2015). Amnesty International contests this statement by these reports where the groups that were (in)directly supported by the Netherlands also caused civilian harm. These reports also contest the dominant discourse that the NLA program is needed to provide an alternative to Assad and ISIS in Syria.

Interestingly, the Netherlands constantly mentioned the supported groups as 'moderate' groups. One of the reasons why these groups are classified by the Netherlands as moderate is because they commit to complying with the rules of international humanitarian law (Commissie-Cammaert, 2022). However, Amnesty International contests this classification of the supported groups being 'moderate' with civilian harm claims. Thus, in the light of the contribution Brass (1996) made to the interpretation of violence: the Netherlands tried to gain control over the interpretation of violence by saying that only 'moderate' groups were supported (which also meant that they were committed to complying with the rules of international humanitarian law) by providing 'non-lethal' supplies. Amnesty International contested this interpretation of violence by making claims of civilian harm caused by these 'moderate' groups. After discussing the direct and indirect civilian harm claims, it will be explained how the Netherlands has reacted to these counterclaims.

Chapter 6.3.1 Direct civilian harm

In the absence of local government authority, groups like Jahbat al-Shamiya and Ahrar al-Sham became the effective rulers in the neighborhoods, towns, and cities which they took over in the Aleppo and Idleb governorates according to Amnesty International (2016b). They established

'courts' as part of makeshift 'justice systems' and have applied their own interpretations of Shari'a (i.e., Islamic law) to govern all aspects of public and private life. Examples of punitive measures on perceived infractions are stoning, amputation, flogging, the death penalty for apostasy, and executions.

Since 2014, there have been several allegations of summary killings carried out by groups such as Jabhat al-Shamiya and its affiliated courts according to Amnesty International (2016b). This means that people who are accused of committing a crime were killed without a full and fair trial. A few civilians told Amnesty International that they witnessed summary killings by gunfire of captured members of the Syrian government forces and pro-government militias by Jabhat al-Shamiya between 2014 and 2015. Executions were announced publicly, and the bodies were left for several hours or days on the street for people to see. These summary killings and public executions can have serious consequences for the mental health of civilians who witness these executions and see the bodies lying on the street.

Amnesty International (2016a) has reported on indiscriminate attacks where innocent civilians are being killed and injured. Between February and April of 2016, armed groups part of the Aleppo Conquest repeatedly carried out indiscriminate attacks in the Sheikh Maqsoud district of Aleppo city according to Amnesty International (2016a). Civilian homes, streets, markets, and mosques have been attacked. Therefore, infrastructure was also damaged during the attacks. At least 83 civilians, including 30 children, were killed during the attacks, and more than 700 civilians were injured according to Amnesty International (2016a). Video evidence seen by Amnesty International shows how the Aleppo Conquest carried out artillery shelling, rocket and mortar attacks, targeting the YPG controlling the area. Amnesty International accused the groups of not making a distinction between the YPG and innocent civilians. Some of the groups that were part of the Aleppo Conquest and the NLA program were Jabhat al-Shamiya, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and Division 13. For instance, the Sultan Murad Brigade posted videos on its YouTube channel where the group showed how it fired rockets at the Sheikh Maqsoud on February 20 and 23, 2016 according to Dahhan & Holdert (2018a). Ahrar al-Sham also took part in the attacks on Sheikh Maqsoud according to Amnesty International (2016a).

Chapter 6.3.2 Indirect civilian harm

Jabhat al-Shamiya and Ahrar al-Sham have carried out abductions and deprived civilians of their liberty without any legal basis according to Amnesty International (2016b). Those abducted include human rights activists, members of minorities, and individuals who are suspected to be affiliated with ISIS or the Syrian government. The victims also include women

and children. Journalists and media activists have been abducted and detained for expressing their opinion through social media and local newspapers, in particular for criticizing the rule of the armed group in question and reporting on issues that are deemed politically or socially unacceptable. For instance, according to Amnesty International (2016b), a media activist was abducted by Ahrar al-Sham in 2016 for criticizing the group on Facebook. He claimed that the group did not allow his family to see him and refused to disclose the reason for his arrest. Civilian harm is not only done to the abducted person but also to their loved ones by not telling them about their whereabouts.

Chapter 6.4 The use of epistemic politics by the Netherlands

In a letter to the House of Representatives, then Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok reacted for the first time to the findings of *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*. He said that information traceable to the supported groups and locations of NLA funding had been classified as a state secret (Blok, 2019). According to Blok, this was already the case from the very beginning because public information could make supported groups and their families a target for extremist groups like ISIS, the Assad regime, and/or their allies. Additionally, it could otherwise damage relations between the Netherlands and its ally states. However, in a so-called ‘Article 100-letter’, several ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised in September 2014 the House of Representatives a quarterly report on the NLA program (Timmermans et al., 2014). Article 100 of the Constitution states that the government must inform parliament about the deployment of Dutch military personnel in maintaining or promoting the international legal order (NOS Nieuws, 2014). The government does so in an Article 100-letter which is then debated in the House of Representatives. The decision to make the NLA program state secret during the summer of 2018 (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018b) and the promises made in the Article 100-letter are contradictory.

The Netherlands actively used epistemic politics as a discursive strategy by classifying the NLA program as a state secret. By using secrecy as a discursive strategy, Blok was able to avoid questions from the House of Representatives and the media. Even though secrecy might be accepted as legitimate in some situations, it goes against the desirability of transparency (Gould and Stel, 2021). This is especially the case after the Article 100-letter where transparency is promised. By obstructing the knowledge of others by classifying the case as a state secret, Blok also used offensive ignorance as a discursive strategy. Gould and Stel (2021) say that epistemic politics such as secrecy and offensive ignorance are used by politicians to react to counterclaims about certain incidents that do not fit their discourse. By not providing

information on which groups were supported and thereby not responding to civilian harm claims, Blok tried to hold power over the discourse that the NLA program only supported ‘moderate’ groups that were committed to complying with the rules of international humanitarian law.

Another important function of epistemic politics as a discursive strategy is that ignoring, secrecy and denial can post-pone or even obstruct investigation and accountability (Gould & Stel, 2021). At the end of 2018, the House of Representatives asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for an external, independent committee to investigate the NLA program (Commissie-Cammaert, 2022). Since nothing was done with this request, the House of Representatives asked again in 2020. At the beginning of 2021, two and a half years after the investigation by *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up the requested committee. However, Prime Minister Mark Rutte previously tried to prevent a further investigation into the NLA program (Holdert & Dahhan, 2021). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and even the Prime Minister actively tried to prevent further investigation into the program. By preventing further investigations, offensive ignorance was again used by the government as a form of epistemic politics where ignorance was imposed on others by preventing them from gaining knowledge. Offensive ignorance was thus used in two ways: (1) classifying the program as a state secret, where certain questions could be avoided during parliamentary debates and in parliamentary documents; (2) postponing and even trying to prevent an independent investigation into the NLA program.

Moving on to how the government specifically responded to civilian harm claims, the government was able to avoid questions about these claims because of state secrecy. Nonetheless, it can still be analyzed how the government discursively responded to these civilian harm claims. The dominant discursive strategy until now has been epistemic politics, and this is also when it comes to responding to civilian harm claims that were made during, after, and even before the NLA program. First, there were already claims that local security forces caused civilian harm before the NLA program started. The UN stated in a report in February 2015 that “anti-government armed groups have intentionally targeted civilian localities either in retaliation for government operations or owing to perceived support of those localities for the Governments” (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 8) and that despite all the precautions taken, the support given to the ‘so-called moderates’ ultimately would consolidate the dominance of extremist groups such as ISIS (UN General Assembly, 2015). On top of that, the Netherlands knew that there were claims that some of the groups that would later be supported caused civilian harm or were accused of having alliances with terrorist groups. The

report by the UN specifically mentioned that the Sultan Murad Brigade had a history of violating human rights (UN General Assembly, 2015). Since the Netherlands has a seat on the UN Human Rights Council and had regular contact with the UN Commission that investigates war crimes in Syria, the Netherlands was in detail aware of the human rights violations committed by the group before the NLA program started (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018d). Besides that, the Dutch Public Prosecution Service described in 2017 Jahbat al-Shamiya as a criminal organization with terrorist intent (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018c), and the military alliance of the Sultan Murad Brigade with al-Qaeda in 2015 was publicly known before the partnership with the Netherlands (Holdert & Dahhan, 2018a).

Regardless of this knowledge already before the NLA program, the Netherlands started the program a few months later and collaborated with Jahbat al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Brigade. The Netherlands decided to ignore this information. To be more specific, the Netherlands used defensive ignorance as a discursive strategy, which means that the government knows a bit about something and chooses to not know more about it according to Gould and Stel (2021). Interestingly, one of the reasons that the Netherlands started the NLA program was because it wanted to profile itself as a more obvious partner in the Coalition (Commissie-Cammaert, 2022). It seems like the government chose to ignore this ‘inconvenient’ information to gain more international political influence and visibility. When not ignoring this information, the Netherlands could have jeopardized its position within the Coalition by not being able to start the NLA program. As Gould and Stel (2021) also state: ignorance can be an effective strategy to gain power.

This dominant discursive strategy of epistemic politics was also used during the NLA program. According to Dahhan and Holdert (2018d), the Dutch government was aware of the crimes committed by Jahbat al-Shamiya in great detail. This is evident from an email exchange from 2016 between Amnesty International and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was viewed by *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*. On July 7, 2016, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Bert Koenders even reacted to the report of Amnesty International (2016b) by saying that Amnesty International is right to draw attention to the horrible human rights violations committed by several groups. A year later Koenders decided to support one of those groups: Jahbat al-Shamiya. While acknowledging the report and the claims of civilian harm caused by Jahbat al-Shamiya, the government still decided to support Jahbat al-Shamiya. While civilian harm claims were first not ignored, later the government chose to defensively ignore this ‘inconvenient’ information to support Jahbat al-Shamiya.

Finally, epistemic politics were used as the dominant discursive strategy after the NLA program stopped and the investigation by *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur* came to light. As said before, by classifying the program as a state secret, the government was able to avoid responding to claims of civilian harm caused by the groups that were supported during the program. Besides using secrecy and offensive ignorance as discursive strategies, the government used denial in one case when responding to civilian harm claims. Blok denied that the Sultan Murad Brigade was responsible for the attacks in the Sheikh Maqsoud district as reported by Amnesty International (2016a; Dahhan & Holdert, 2018a). According to Blok, other groups within the Aleppo Conquest were responsible for the shootings. Thus, when Blok did respond to civilian harm claims, epistemic politics was still used as a discursive strategy. In this case, he used denial. However, denial is hard to maintain (Aldrich & Richterova, 2018). Organizations like Amnesty International can come with counterclaims that make it hard to keep denying. In this case, besides Amnesty International, the Sultan Murad Brigade itself came with counterclaims by posting videos on YouTube with evidence that it was indeed involved in the indiscriminate attacks according to Dahhan & Holdert (2018a). Since the program was classified as a state secret, it is remarkable that he responds to the civilian harm claims of a group that the Netherlands supported according to *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*.

There is another case where Blok gave certain information about the NLA program while this was a state secret. Blok publicly said that the Netherlands did not support Ahrar al-Sham because it did not meet the requirement of the NLA program (Blok, 2019). However, when being asked about groups that were supported according to *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*, the answer is that information about the supported groups is state secret. Blok was quick to say that a group that was branded by the Court in Rotterdam as a terrorist movement was not supported, but when being confronted with questions about whether the government indeed supported Jahbat al-Shamiya as *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur* claim, a group who had terrorist intent according to the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, it was not possible to answer any questions because of state secrecy (Blok, 2019).

Thus, when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by groups that were supported by the NLA program, the Dutch government used epistemic politics as the dominant discursive strategy. The government defensively ignored civilian harm claims before and during the NLA program, then used secrecy and offensive ignorance by classifying the program as a state secret after the NLA program and by preventing an independent investigation, and used denial in one case when being confronted with civilian harm claims.

Chapter 7. Conclusion and discussion

Remoteness has become a characteristic feature of warfare (Demmers et al., 2020). One of the characteristics of remote warfare is SFA (Watson & McKay, 2021). In 2014, the Coalition started OIR where 80+ states trained, equipped, or advised local security partners in Syria and Iraq to defeat ISIS (Operation Inherent Resolve, 2023). The dominant discourse of OIR is that it is the most precise and clean campaign (Karabulut & Van Dort, 2020). However, this discourse has been contested since remote warfare has serious consequences for civilians. Several human rights organizations have reported on civilian harm caused by partnerships with local security forces. A common strategy of the Coalition to respond to civilian harm is by underreporting civilian casualties and injuries (Airwars, 2023). By underreporting civilian harm, the Coalition tries to maintain the legitimization of OIR and thereby continue with the campaign.

This thesis has discovered that governments use different discursive strategies to legitimize OIR and the collaboration with local security forces, and when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by these local security partnerships. Two case studies that are part of OIR were analyzed: the US and the collaboration with the SDF, and the Netherlands and its NLA program. The following research question was asked: *How do the US and Dutch governments discursively respond to the claims made by civil society about civilian harm caused by local security partners during Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 until 2021?* The US and the Netherlands do not have much of a response at all when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by their partnerships with local security forces during OIR. The discursive strategy that was used by both governments was epistemic politics which means that the governments denied these civilian harm claims, kept certain information secret regarding civilian harm, and/or ignored these civilian harm claims.

By using critical discourse analysis as a theoretical framework, this thesis has shown how discourses are used by governments to legitimize OIR and which discursive strategies are used to react to claims of civilian harm caused by local security partnerships. Discourses have the power to create a certain 'reality' that is believed by others (Demmers, 2017). The aim of the Coalition (and thereby the US and the Netherlands) is to let others believe that OIR is a precise and clean campaign. Collective action frames are used to mute any other solutions than the use of remote warfare in the fight against ISIS. Discourses and frames are both ways to legitimize OIR. However, this 'truth' of a clean and precise campaign gets contested with counter-truths by human rights organizations that report on claims of civilian harm caused by the partnerships during OIR. Nevertheless, the US and the Netherlands still try to maintain

power over the ‘truth’ of OIR as being precise and clean by using epistemic politics (i.e., denial, secrecy, and ignorance) as the dominant discursive strategy when responding to these civilian harm claims. Using epistemic politics is a way to maintain the legitimacy of OIR (Gould & Stel, 2021).

The US has collaborated with the SDF since 2014 (Blinken, 2021). The SDF has caused both direct and indirect civilian harm according to reports by Airwars, Human Rights Watch, and SNHR. Direct civilian harm includes indiscriminate killing, injuring and torturing civilians, and the destruction of infrastructure. Indirect civilian harm includes unlawful arrests, conscripting children, enforced disappearances, destruction of civilian facilities, displacement, and oil smuggling. The dominant discursive strategy from the US when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by the partnership with the SDF was epistemic politics. The US actively ignored the civilian harm claims by using defensive ignorance. The US maintained its own ignorance by actively avoiding certain information (Gould & Stel, 2021). The US did this by underreporting the numbers of civilian casualties during OIR according to Airwars (2022), and by not discussing (all) claims of civilian harm caused by the SDF in its yearly reports. In the International Religious Freedom reports, the US ignored the civilian harm claims completely by only discussing the successes of the SDF. The US did mention part of the civilian harm claims in its Human Rights Practices reports, but still ignored a significant part of the claims. By doing this, the US did not only impose ignorance on itself but also imposed ignorance on others. Besides that, when mentioning the civilian harm claims, civilian harm caused by the SDF was made to appear less bad than the civilian harm done by ISIS. The wording when discussing civilian harm by ISIS was very hard and straightforward, while more careful words were used when mentioning claims of civilian harm caused by the SDF. The US thus deflected attention to the harm caused by ISIS. By using epistemic politics (defensive ignorance and thereby also offensive ignorance) as a discursive strategy and by making the civilian harm done by the SDF seem less bad than human rights organizations claim it to be, the US tried to maintain power over its ‘truth’ that OIR is precise and clean and that the partnership with the SDF is legitimate.

The Netherlands supported several ‘moderate’ armed groups in Syria from mid-2015 to early 2018 during its NLA program (Hoekstra, 2022). The Netherlands supported groups like Jabhat al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Brigade and supported groups that collaborated with Ahrar al-Sham according to media *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur* (Dahhan & Holdert, 2018b). These three groups have caused both direct and indirect civilian harm according to reports by Amnesty International. Direct civilian harm includes punitive measures based on an own interpretation

of Shari'a law, summary killings, deaths and injuries due to indiscriminate attacks. Indirect civilian harm includes abductions, unlawful arrests, and enforced disappearances. The Netherlands also used epistemic politics as the dominant discursive strategy when responding to claims of civilian harm caused by the partnerships during the NLA program. First, the government defensively ignored civilian harm claims before and during the NLA program. The Netherlands, therefore, imposed ignorance on itself by ignoring reports with claims of civilian harm caused by Jahbat al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Brigade. Second, the Netherlands imposed ignorance on others by preventing them from gaining knowledge (Gould & Stel, 2021). Secrecy and offensive ignorance were here used as discursive strategies. This was done by classifying the NLA program as a state secret and by trying to prevent an independent investigation. Finally, the government used denial in one case when being confronted with civilian harm claims directed at the Sultan Murad Brigade. The Netherlands have thus used all forms of epistemic politics as Gould and Stel (2021) discuss in their article. By using epistemic politics as a discursive strategy, the Netherlands tried to maintain power over the 'truth' that the 'moderate' armed groups are the only possible alternative within the future Syrian state system and that therefore the NLA program is legitimized.

In these two case studies, the US and the Netherlands have both similarities and differences in their discursive responses to civilian harm claims. Both Coalition members used epistemic politics as the dominant discursive strategy to maintain the discourse that OIR is a clean and precise campaign. However, the US used defensive ignorance and offensive ignorance, while the Netherlands used all forms of epistemic politics: denial, secrecy, and defensive and offensive ignoring. Besides that, the US did mention part of the claims of civilian harm, while the Netherlands only mentioned the civilian harm claims in one case when denying these claims. Finally, the US has acknowledged that it collaborates with the SDF. Meanwhile, the Netherlands could not disclose any information on what groups were supported due to state secrecy. Part of this information is only publicly known because of the investigation by *Trouw* and *Nieuwsuur*.

The most important similarity is that both have not taken any accountability for the harm being done to civilians by their partnerships with local security forces. Gould and Stel (2021) state that one of the functions of epistemic politics is to avoid taking accountability. In addition to that, by using epistemic politics, governments try to legitimize future remote warfare regardless of the civilian costs. This thesis has shown that more civilian harm and denial, secrecy, and ignorance regarding this civilian harm is taking place than one would think. Every day civilians die, get injured, and go through traumatic events because of the war in Syria and

Iraq caused by actors like the Coalition and its local security partners, ISIS, and the Assad regime. Governments try to prevent society from knowing about this civilian harm caused by its partnerships to maintain the narrative of a clean and precise campaign by using epistemic politics when responding to civilian harm claims. This way, governments can continue with their campaigns and operations like OIR. Governments and local security forces should be held accountable for the civilian harm that is caused by their partnerships.

The results of this thesis have shown that it is important to not only analyze discursive strategies where words are being used, but also strategies where not much is being said at all like when using epistemic politics as a discursive strategy. This thesis has provided a broader look at critical discourse analysis by including epistemic politics as a discursive strategy. Governments undermine counter-truths by using epistemic politics when responding to civilian harm claims to maintain power over the 'truth' that they have claimed.

Much more needs to be done when it comes to studying how local security partners can cause civilian harm and especially how governments discursively respond to these civilian harm claims. This thesis was a first step to bring the topics of 'local security partnerships', 'civilian harm', and 'discursive responses of governments' together by showing how governments use epistemic politics as a dominant discursive strategy when reacting to civilian harm claims and thereby failing to take any form of accountability. However, the Coalition exists of more than 80 states. Many more case studies within OIR could be studied to gain more knowledge about how governments use discursive strategies to react to civilian harm claims. It would also be interesting to see whether every member of the Coalition uses epistemic politics when responding to civilian harm claims. In addition to that, this thesis has focused on the OIR campaign. There are also cases of other remote warfare campaigns that could be studied. As said in the introduction, there is often a focus on civilian harm caused by air operations. Therefore, it is recommended to continue studying the consequences of SFA.

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