

Chapter 8. Explaining European Military Engagement in the Fight Against Daesh

Patrick A. Mello¹

Abstract

Military involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition has been characterized by substantial variance, particularly among European Union (EU) member states. Whereas several countries assumed leading roles in the airstrikes, others limited their contributions to the provision of training for local forces, and still others merely expressed their political support for the aims of the coalition or showed no involvement whatsoever. How to account for these differences? This chapter examines five potential explanations derived from the literature on alliance and coalition warfare. The results provide a differentiated picture, demonstrating that none of these can individually account for the observed variance. However, certain factors show up prominently across many of the countries that were involved militarily in the anti-Daesh coalition and others arguably served as effective constraints against military involvement. Specifically, countries with *foreign fighters* in Iraq and Syria and those with formal *alliance membership* were prone to become involved militarily. Conversely, the chapter underscores the policy relevance of institutional constraints such as *parliamentary veto rights* because most of the parliaments of countries that were involved in the airstrikes of the anti-Daesh coalition hold no formal right of involvement on matters of military deployment policy. This resonates with prior work that has emphasized that parliamentary veto rights can constrain democracies' war involvement if certain preconditions are met.

Keywords: coalition warfare, foreign fighters, Islamic State, legislative constraints, parliamentary veto rights

Introduction

In their introduction to this volume the editors argue that the actors, battlefields, and practices of war have seen substantial change in recent decades. What used to be located at the margins of armed conflict has become mainstream, as traditional boundaries of warfare have eroded (Robin et al. 2024). Against this backdrop, and drawing on previously published work (Mello 2022), the current chapter examines European involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition in Syria and Iraq, aiming to account for the observed variance in countries' military contributions to the

¹ Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
ORCID: 0000-0002-0751-5109

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fight against Daesh.² Among other potential explanations it has been suggested that the extent to which EU citizens from a given country joined Daesh as *foreign fighters* could help account for a country's response and willingness to participate in the *ad hoc* coalition against Daesh. The foreign fighters phenomenon prompts a number of intricate political and legal questions and it adds further complexity to contemporary warfare.

In the fall of 2014, US President Barack Obama announced the formation of a multinational military coalition, aiming to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the terrorist threat that emanated from the so-called “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria (WH 2014).³ Several months later, international diplomats met in Brussels to pass a joint declaration that laid out the aims in the global fight against the Daesh terrorist group, especially with regard to the support of “military operations, capacity building, and training,” and addressing the humanitarian crisis in the region (DoS 2014). In 2015, following a series of Daesh-related terrorist attacks in France, including a bombing at the *Bataclan* concert hall in Paris, and prior attacks against the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo*, the French government for the first time invoked Article 42 (7) of the European Union's Lisbon Treaty, requesting EU member states' solidarity and assistance in the fight against Daesh (EP 2015). Shortly thereafter, Resolution 2249 was passed in the UN Security Council, where Daesh was condemned for “its continued gross systematic and widespread attacks directed against civilians” and member states were called upon to “take all necessary measures in compliance with international law.” Notably, while Resolution 2249 entailed the phrase “all necessary measures,” it was not adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and hence it is questionable whether it should be seen as authorization of the use of force against Daesh (for a legal assessment of the resolution, see Akande and Milanovic 2015).

Since its formation in 2014, the multinational coalition against Daesh has been joined by 82 countries and five international organizations (as of January 2025).⁴ By March 2019, the last Daesh-occupied parts of Syria were taken by forces supported by the multilateral military coalition.⁵ However, the military involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition has been characterized by substantial variance, particularly among the EU member states. Whereas

² This chapter is based on my article “Incentives and Constraints: A Configurational Account of European Involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition” (Mello 2022). While the article provided a set-theoretic analysis with QCA, this chapter summarizes prevalent explanations and the empirical patterns of military involvement.

³ The terrorist group is variously referred to as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham), IS (Islamic State), or Daesh (*al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham*). While the US government primarily uses the term “ISIL,” the French and British governments have made it their policy to refer to “Daesh” since this term does not legitimize the group as an “Islamic state” and it further carries negative connotations in Arabic (Connable et al. 2017).

⁴ Among others, the aims of the anti-Daesh coalition have been supported by international organizations such as the European Union, the Arab League, NATO, INTERPOL, and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States.

⁵ As of December 2024, Daesh-related groups were still active in Syria, where they attempted to exploit the security vacuum that occurred after the fall of the Assad regime. For a recent analysis, see: <https://acleddata.com/2024/12/11/syria-which-groups-have-been-fighting-each-other-and-where/> (accessed January 8, 2025).

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several EU countries assumed leading roles in the anti-Daesh airstrikes, other countries limited their contributions to the provision of training for local forces, often within the Kurdish Training and Coordination Center (KTCC) in Erbil, and still others merely expressed their political support for the aims of the coalition, or showed no involvement whatsoever. For example, while the United Kingdom and France took leading roles in the airstrikes, Germany and Italy limited their involvement to air support and the training of local forces, while Spain just did the latter. Others, like Austria, Bulgaria, and Slovakia endorsed the anti-Daesh coalition but did not provide material support. How to account for this variation among EU countries' contributions to the anti-Daesh coalition? This chapter proposes five approaches culled from the literature, and examines how these approaches suggest and foreclose answers to that question.

Prior work has examined the initial phases of the multinational military coalition and identified conceivable explanations for the observed variance among Western countries' military involvement (Haesebrouck 2018; McInnis 2016; Saideman 2016), whereas other studies have concentrated on accounting for the contributions of individual countries (Doerer and Eidenfalk 2019; Massie 2019; Pedersen and Reykers 2020). Against this backdrop, this chapter conducts a comparison of EU member state involvement in the military coalition. When the Lisbon Treaty's mutual defense clause was invoked in 2015, this constituted a historical first. Hence, it is of particular policy relevance to conduct a comparison of EU member states and their involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition. With its focus on the nexus between domestic and international politics, the chapter also speaks to the dynamics of multinational military coalitions where what used to be at the margins of the battlefield is moving closer to the center of attention, in line with the broader aims of this volume as outlined in the introduction (Robin et al. 2024). Multinational military coalitions have become widespread in international security, since almost all contemporary conflicts happen in the context of coalitions, alliances, or under the auspices of international organizations (Auerswald and Saideman 2014; Karlsrud and Reykers 2020; Kreps 2011; Mello and Saideman 2019; Rynning et al. 2021; Schmitt 2019; von Hlatky 2013; Weitsman 2014). At the same time, the erosion of the state's monopoly on the use of force is not a new phenomenon (Kaldor 1999; Mello 2010), but the Syrian civil war underscored how "foreign fighters" can impact conflict dynamics and domestic political calculations in combatants' home countries (O'Connor and Piketty 2020; TSC 2017).

Drawing upon a framework I developed for a set-theoretic analysis (Mello 2022), this chapter explores the motivations for EU member states' military participation in the anti-Daesh coalition. Specifically, I examine five potential explanations for the observed military involvement, which are conceived of either as *incentives* for military participation or as *constraints* that counteract such involvement. These include (1) the extent to which EU citizens from a given country joined Daesh as foreign fighters, (2) the value that a country places on its alliance relationship, (3) the political position of its government on a left-right dimension, (4) the extent to which of parliament is involved in decisions on military deployments, and finally (5) an indicator of the degree to which citizens perceive terrorism and foreign fighters as challenges to their country's security. Empirically, the chapter starts out with a summary of EU

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member states' contributions to the military coalition against Daesh, whose involvement included participation in the air strikes, air support, training provision to local forces, and mere political and/or logistical support for the coalition. Notably, the coalition was also characterized by withdrawals and re-entries of some of its members and these temporal aspects naturally present a challenge for explanatory endeavors (cf. Rynning et al. 2021).

My results provide a differentiated picture, demonstrating that none of the five explanatory factors can individually account for the observed variance. However, certain factors show up prominently across many of the countries that were involved militarily in the anti-Daesh coalition and others arguably served as effective constraints against military involvement. Specifically, countries with foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria and those who highly value their alliance relationship with the United States were particularly prone to become involved militarily. Conversely, the chapter underscores the policy relevance of institutional constraints such as *parliamentary veto rights* because most of the parliaments of countries that were involved in the airstrikes of the anti-Daesh coalition include no formal parliamentary involvement on matters of military deployment policy (Peters et al.; Ruys et al. 2019). This resonates with prior work that has emphasized that parliamentary veto rights can constrain democracies' war involvement if certain preconditions are met (Dieterich et al. 2015; Mello 2019; Wagner 2018), which further underlines the political importance of this institutional constraint.

The chapter progresses as follows. The next section examines EU member states' military contributions to the anti-Daesh coalition. This is followed by a concise review of the literature on alliance formation and coalition warfare. The main part of the chapter introduces five explanatory factors and applies these to the (then) EU-28 with the United Kingdom and these countries' involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition. The chapter concludes by summarizing its findings and their implications in the broader context of this edited volume.

Military Contributions to the Multilateral Coalition against Daesh

The multilateral military coalition was formed under US leadership in September 2014 (WH 2014),⁶ following an official request from the Iraqi government. From its inception, the military campaign against Daesh was limited to Iraqi territory and only subsequently, throughout 2015-2016, expanded to Syrian territory. The combat intensity peaked in mid-2017, a time for which the British NGO "Airwars.org" reported civilian deaths from coalition airstrikes of up to 2,600 individuals in Iraq and 1,300 in Syria.⁷ Table 1 summarizes the primary military contributions of the then EU-28 member states (including the UK before Brexit).

⁶ General information and details on individual countries' contributions can be found on the official coalition website: <https://theglobalcoalition.org> (accessed February 22, 2024).

⁷ These estimates draw on varying quality of reporting. For the timeframe observed in this chapter, Syrian casualty data reached a high level of confidence, indicated by confirmation from several different sources and/or

[Table 1 about here]

The table essentially entails three groups of countries. The first group comprises those states that actively took part in the airstrikes, either through the bombing of targets in Iraq and Syria (the UK, France, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands) or by providing air support to those conducting the airstrikes (Germany, Italy, and Poland). Yet it should be noted that individual contributions in this category were made at different points in time. While France and the UK took part in airstrikes from September 2014 onward, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands only followed a month later. In November 2014, Italy deployed reconnaissance aircraft to the coalition, while Germany only followed in similar support functions in December 2015, and Poland even later in June 2016, also with reconnaissance aircraft.

The second group includes countries that restricted their contribution to the training of local forces, mainly at the Kurdish Training Coordination Center (KTCC) in Erbil in Northern Iraq, but also in other locations. While most of these deployments were small-scale training missions, several countries deployed substantial numbers of training personnel (between 30 and 500 soldiers, including Hungary, Finland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden), whereas others contributed merely a handful of officers to instruct local forces (the Czech Republic, the Baltic countries, and Slovenia). Finally, the third group contains countries that provided no material contributions beyond logistics (Cyprus and Greece granted overflight and basing rights) or declarations of political support (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Luxembourg, and Slovakia). Two countries did not provide official endorsements for the anti-Daesh coalition (Ireland and Malta).

Accounting for Military Contributions to the Anti-Daesh Coalition

Under which conditions are military coalitions formed and why do states decide to join them? The academic literature variously emphasizes the importance of threat perception (Walt 1987), alliance membership (Snyder 1997), alliance value (Davidson 2014), international hierarchy (Lake 2009), military effectiveness (Krebs 2008), or diplomatic embeddedness (Henke 2017) as some of the primary reasons why states decide to join military coalitions. Besides these general factors – which apply to a broad set of contemporary military missions and are not specific to the anti-Daesh coalition – in the context of the latter it may arguably have mattered that many countries did not want to echo their dismal experiences from the protracted military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (Rynning et al. 2021; Saideman 2016; Schmitt 2019).

Furthermore, studies have repeatedly shown that *domestic politics and institutions* have considerable influence on decision-making processes, especially in security policy (Mello 2014; Milner and Tingley 2015). Decisions on military deployments are commonly decided at the cabinet table, which means that these decisions are exposed to *party politics* (Haesebrouck

declarations of responsibility by one of the belligerents. Detailed assessments of the impact of coalition airstrikes can be attained at: <https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria/> (accessed February 22, 2024).

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and Mello 2020; Hofmann and Martill 2021; Rathbun 2004; Wagner et al. 2017), particularly in countries with coalition governments (Oppermann and Brummer 2020). Governments also operate under legal and institutional constraints, which may require advance *parliamentary approval* of decisions on military deployments (Peters and Wagner 2011; Ruys et al. 2019). What is more, most democratic leaders closely observe *public opinion*, which can thus constitute an additional constraint against war involvement (Baum and Potter 2015; Everts and Isernia 2015). Building on this body of work, this chapter investigates five potential explanations for the observed variance among EU member states: *threat perceptions*, *alliance considerations*, *political partisanship*, *institutional constraints*, and *public opinion*. These factors were selected not only because of their frequent appearance in the literature on military interventions but also due to their theoretical and empirical relevance in shaping policy outcomes. The enduring influence of these variables has been demonstrated across a range of contexts, from the post-Cold War era to more recent interventions, suggesting their applicability to understanding variance in EU member state behavior. Moreover, each factor represents a distinct yet interconnected dimension of decision-making: threat perceptions reflect external pressures, alliance considerations capture strategic interdependencies, political partisanship highlights domestic ideological divides, institutional constraints underscore legal frameworks, and public opinion embodies societal influence. While alternative explanations undoubtedly exist, these five factors offer a comprehensive and empirically substantiated framework for exploring the complexities of military deployment decisions. The theoretical premises of these lines of argument will be introduced in the next sections.

Threat Perception

If one adopts a realist perspective, then the primary driver of why states join military coalitions or why they intensify their alliance cooperation is their threat perception (Walt 1987). The emergence of the “Islamic State” together with increased terrorist activity in Europe and beyond surely increased governments’ willingness to “do something” to tackle this new phenomenon (Gerges 2016), particularly after the events in Paris in January 2015, when terrorists killed 12 people during their attack on the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* (though this was claimed by al-Qaida), and particularly after the series of terrorist attacks of November 2015, which included the bombing at the *Bataclan* concert hall where 130 people were killed (claimed by the Islamic State), which prompted the French government to invoke Article 42 (7) of the European Union’s Lisbon Treaty and call upon European solidarity to combat Daesh.

These events were compounded by reports about steady flows of foreign fighters arriving in Iraq and Syria to join Daesh (UNODC 2019). Though estimates vary, most reports agreed in their assessment that a considerable portion of the more than 25,000 foreign fighters who had joined Daesh came from Western Europe, containing large numbers of people from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as smaller numbers from Belgium, Denmark, the

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Netherlands and Sweden (Dodwell et al. 2016; TSC 2017).⁸ Because some of these foreign fighters had perpetrated extreme acts of violence in territory held by Daesh, and since others have engaged in terrorist activities in third countries, the eventual return of these foreign fighters to their countries of origin was perceived as a serious security threat to many European countries. In sum, the external threat perspective indicates that states with considerable numbers of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria had a particular incentive to contribute militarily to the anti-Daesh coalition.⁹

To which extent can the foreign fighters phenomenon help to account for the observed patterns in military participation? Table 2 shows data on citizens from EU member states who went to join Daesh in Iraq or Syria. The data stems from the Soufan Center and Global Strategy Network (TSC 2017). Due to the nature of the phenomenon, the reported numbers represent estimates, though most figures have been confirmed in later investigations (see UNODC 2019). In September 2015, about 30,000 foreign fighters from over 100 countries were estimated to have joined Daesh at various points in time. About 5,000 of these individuals came from EU member states. This provides a fairly clear-cut empirical pattern: 12 EU countries had citizens who joined Daesh as foreign fighters, many of these countries also experienced deaths from jihadi-motivated terrorist attacks on their own soil (GTD 2018). Of those eight countries that participated in the airstrikes (see Table 1), seven also had foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria (the sole exception here is Poland, a country for which no foreign fighters were reported). Yet, we also see that countries like Sweden, Austria, and Spain, and to a lesser extent Finland and Bulgaria, had substantial numbers of foreign fighters but their involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition was limited to the provision of training to local forces (Spain, Sweden, and Finland) or mere political support (Austria and Bulgaria).

[Table 2 about here]

Alliance Membership

A different line of argument focuses on the role of alliance membership as a motivating factor for decisions on whether to join a military coalition. Here, scholars typically emphasize the value that states place on their alliance relationship as an important driver of decisions about military contributions (Davidson 2014; 2020; Massie 2019). This is similar, but not identical to established arguments on alliance dependence (Bennett et al. 1997; Snyder 1997).¹⁰

⁸ For an analysis of the economic drivers of Daesh's recruitment of foreign fighters, see Brockmeyer et al. (2018). The role of women in Daesh is examined in Loken and Zelenz (2017).

⁹ This is not to imply that these dynamics were necessarily at play in all EU member states with foreign fighters. Arguably, states had the option to engage in other ways with the challenge of foreign fighters, besides military involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition.

¹⁰ Alliance dependence arguments traditionally emphasize the countervailing fears of abandonment and entrapment that states operate under when considering military participation (Bennett et al. 1997; Snyder 1984).

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Accordingly, states may value their membership in an alliance or their bilateral relationship with an alliance leader for diverse reasons (Lanoszka 2022). These may be rooted in their security needs, but the reasons can also originate from status seeking (Pedersen and Reykers 2020), reputational concerns (Oma and Petersson 2019), or financial incentives (Henke 2019; Newnham 2008). For instance, most Eastern European countries – especially Poland and the Baltic states – place great value on their membership in NATO and on their close relations with the United States, because this provides a credible security assurance against threats from neighboring Russia (Doeser and Eidenfalk 2019). Other countries, including Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, conventionally regard close relations with the US as a means to secure international influence and standing (Ringsmose 2010).¹¹ In his application of such arguments to NATO, Ringsmose (2010, 331) distinguishes between what he terms “Article 5ers” and “Atlanticists.” The first group includes states that perceive threats and insecurity and hence underscore NATO’s mutual defense clause. The latter group entails countries that conventionally uphold “special relationships” with the US. Generally speaking, countries in both of these groups would be expected to lend political support and contribute to military operations led by the US, even under conditions where the mission is happening outside the formal organizational framework of NATO, as in the case of the anti-Daesh coalition.

Are there discernable patterns for the relationship between alliance membership and coalition involvement? When we examine formal alliance membership in NATO, it is apparent that all eight EU countries that participated in the air strikes are also NATO members. Yet, while this may have been a necessary condition, it was not sufficient for military involvement in the coalition since numerous European NATO members did not contribute beyond the provision of training or political support (including Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Portugal, and Spain, among others). Besides formal alliance membership, we could also examine alliance dependence. Here, the Baltic states and Poland are clearly among those who are most dependent on NATO due to their conflictive neighborhood with Russia. Hence these EU countries arguably have the most pronounced interests in securing a steadfast partnership with the US and therefore they would seek to maintain their status as loyal NATO members. Poland did eventually contribute with air support, providing tactical reconnaissance throughout the second half of 2016. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania each contributed a handful of officers to train local forces. To some extent, these contributions reflect the capabilities of the involved countries, because the Baltic states do not possess fighter jets they could have deployed while Poland does have a sizable air force. However, due to the Russia-Ukraine war and tensions on their Eastern borders, these Eastern European countries emphasized that their attention had to remain in their immediate neighborhood, rather than deploying sizable military forces to Syria and Iraq (Doeser and Eidenfalk 2019, 19).

By contrast, arguments on alliance value further include considerations of prestige-enhancement, which can also serve as motivating factors for decisions on military involvement (Davidson 2011).

¹¹ On alliance value considerations in Canada, see von Hlatky and Massie (2019).

Parliamentary Veto Rights

There is an emerging literature that centers on the role of parliaments in security policy and which explores the impact of particular forms of institutional constraints, such as parliamentary veto rights and constitutional restrictions on security policies in democracies (Dieterich et al. 2015; Mello and Peters 2018; Peters and Wagner 2011; Raunio 2014; Raunio and Wagner 2015). Research in this vein highlights that military deployment decisions are often dependent upon structural and procedural restrictions, and also that parliaments are important collective actors in security policy, mainly, but not exclusively, under conditions where parliaments enjoy a formal veto right over military deployment decisions (Coticchia and Moro 2020; Kaarbo and Kenealy 2016; Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010; Mello 2019; Oktay 2018; Strong 2015; 2018). Even though it is acknowledged that mandatory parliamentary involvement can also yield unintended consequences, as in undermining the desired democratic deliberation (Lagassé and Mello 2018), the general expectation is that where legislatures have a say on military operations this imposes an additional hurdle for war involvement. Certainly, this should not be regarded as an absolute constraint. But whenever the public is strongly opposed to a planned military involvement, then one would not expect contributions to be approved by parliament.¹² Besides, because of the fusion between government and opposition in parliamentary democracies, preferences opposed to military engagement will typically be anticipated by governments. Hence, more often than not, the government of the day will refrain from submitting a motion when there is reason to expect a parliamentary veto on the military deployment issue.¹³

How do parliamentary veto rights relate to European involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition? For this institutional constraint, the key criterion is whether parliament enjoys the right to debate and decide upon military operations before the armed forces are deployed.¹⁴ Drawing on comparative data on parliamentary war powers (Dieterich et al. 2015; Wagner 2018; Wagner et al. 2010), 18 of the EU-28 members have parliamentary veto rights that apply to missions like the *ad hoc* coalition formed against Daesh. Notably, six out of eight countries that were involved in the air strikes did not feature parliamentary veto rights. This suggests that these have served as an effective *constraint* on executive decision-making, as only two countries with a legislative veto on military deployments, Denmark and Germany, participated in the airstrikes, and the latter restricted its military involvement to air support functions, arguably for political reasons. In Denmark, the broad political support for expeditionary warfare and involvement in US-led coalitions arguably outweighed the institutional constraint posed by mandatory parliamentary involvement (Jakobsen and Rynning 2019).

¹² An example is the Iraq War of 2003, where the combination of parliamentary veto rights and public opposition nearly always served as an effective constraint on war involvement (Dieterich et al. 2015).

¹³ In August 2013, the most prominent case of a parliamentary veto happened in the British House of Commons, where MPs voted against Prime Minister Cameron's proposal to engage militarily in Syria (Kaarbo and Kenealy 2017; Strong 2018).

¹⁴ Besides formal institutional rights it is also important to consider political preferences. Arguably, only the combination of both must be present for a parliamentary veto to be exercised (Mello 2012).

Party Politics

The realist assumption that “politics stops at the water’s edge” has long held sway over IR thinking on party politics and security policy (Gowa 1998; Milner and Tingley 2015). However, an emerging literature shows that ideological differences between parties on the left and right of the aisle also affect the way these formulate security policy and how they implement it once elected to government (Coticchia and Vignoli 2020; Hofmann 2013; Hofmann and Martill 2021; Mello 2014; Rathbun 2004; Wagner et al. 2017; Wenzelburger and Böller 2020). For example, the study by Wagner et al. (2017) finds that while rightist parties are generally more supportive of military operations, there is a curvilinear relationship with lower levels of support towards both ends of the political spectrum. Yet, when investigating governments’ actual involvement in military operations, Haesebrouck and Mello (2020) find that “left-wing governments were more inclined to participate” (2020, 581). Against this mixed evidence, it is challenging to derive clear-cut expectations on party politics for the anti-Daesh coalition. As outlined in the previous section of this chapter, multilateral coalition warfare is multi-faceted and involvement can range from participation in the airstrikes to the training of local forces and mere logistical support. On the other hand, the military effort of the anti-Daesh coalition was decidedly “robust,” and it took place outside the organizational frameworks of NATO or the EU. On this basis, we may assume that rightist governments were, by-and-large, more supportive of making military contributions than their leftist counterparts.

How does party politics relate to military involvement? To estimate the political positions of the EU-28 governments on a left-right scale in political space, I use data from the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2018), which originates from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES, Bakker et al. 2015). Because many of the observed countries have coalition governments, I use a weighted left-right score for the overall government, based on parties’ individual scores and their parliamentary seat shares. The general left-right variable in the CHES data runs from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). The results do not yield a discernable relationship between party politics and military involvement. If we focus on the eight countries that participated in the air strikes, we can see that these are positioned across the political spectrum with French (Hollande) and Italian (Renzi) governments to the left, Denmark (Thorning-Schmidt) left-of-center, centrist governments in Belgium (Di Rupo) and Germany (Merkel), and center-right governments in the Netherlands (Rutte) and Poland (Tusk), and the UK (Cameron) on the political right. This confirms the notion that the anti-Daesh coalition, with its combination of strategic and humanitarian aims, was not a partisan intervention that received support primarily from one side of the political aisle.

Public Opinion

For theories on the democratic peace and democratic conflict behavior more generally, public opinion and citizens’ attitudes are central building blocks (Doyle 1983; Everts and Isernia 2015; Ozkececi-Taner 2017). This reasoning rests on the idea of a “public constraint,” which goes back to Kant’s well-known proposition that ordinary citizens would decide against war if they

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had a say in the decision. This assumes that ordinary citizens would be the ones who have to shoulder the burdens of warfighting (Kant 2007, 100). However, when we apply this argument to contemporary contexts, we may question whether citizens' attitudes truly constitute a constraint on government policy, primarily because the population is not equally affected by the human and material costs of war (Kriner and Shen 2010). That being said, studies have shown that, when certain requirements are met, public opinion can indeed stop governments from unpopular military engagements. For example, Dieterich et al. (2015) find that war-averse publics combined with institutional constraints—such as parliamentary war powers mentioned above—prevented the involvement of many European countries in the Iraq War. In more general terms, Baum and Potter (2015) underline that public opinion and media access are central variables to understand democratic constraints on foreign policy. Hence, public support or its absence can be seen as a key contributing factor for explaining decisions on military engagements, in addition to institutional factors such as parliamentary veto rights.

What were public attitudes towards the fight against terrorism and Daesh? Early in 2015, the European Commission requested a Special Eurobarometer survey. The survey was conducted in March 2015, when the terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris (January 7), were still fresh on people's minds (EC 2015), even though these were claimed by al-Qaeda and not linked to the Islamic State. The Eurobarometer collected responses from about 28,000 Europeans across all EU member states. One survey question asked: "Would you say that the following challenges to the internal security of the EU are likely to increase, decrease or remain unchanged over the next years? Terrorism (including the "foreign fighters" phenomenon)" (EC 2015, T20). On average, 68% of the respondents said that the security challenge from terrorism and foreign fighters was likely to increase, with responses from individual countries ranging from 42% in Latvia and 44% in Lithuania to 79% in Germany and 80% in the Netherlands. Table 3 summarizes the survey results. We can see that most of those countries that participated in the airstrikes also featured high threat assessments. Out of those, the lowest rates were found in Poland (60%) and Italy (68%), but even these countries still had large shares of respondents who regarded terrorism and foreign fighters as an increasing security challenge. While certainly not conclusive, these survey results can be taken as evidence of a "permissive attitude" among the public when it came to questions of military involvement, at least in those countries that decided to become involved in the airstrikes against Daesh.

[Table 3 about here]

Conclusion

Resonating with the broader aims of this volume to identify how phenomena formerly located at the *margins* of the battlefield have moved closer to the *middle* (Robin et al. 2024), this chapter examined the dynamics of multinational military coalitions. Specifically, the chapter examined EU contributions to the military coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Following a concise (and necessarily selective) review of the broader literature on alliances and coalitions, the

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chapter explored a set of five potential explanatory factors, which were conceived of either as *incentives* towards military contributions or as *constraints* that work against military involvement. While certainly not conclusive, the results highlight the importance of threat perceptions and alliance membership, as well as the policy relevance of institutional constraints, specifically parliamentary veto rights in liberal democracies. With regards to the former, all EU members that took part in the airstrikes against Daesh did so either under the presence of a threat, as when some of their own citizens had joined Daesh as foreign fighters, or due to considerations of alliance membership. This broadly resonates with work informed by realism (Davidson 2014; Pedersen and Reykers 2020). However, it is also evident that domestic factors should not be disregarded, particularly institutional constraints such as parliamentary war powers (Peters and Wagner 2011; Ruys et al. 2019). It appears that these have posed effective *constraints* on executive decision-making, since merely two countries with a parliamentary veto on military deployments, Denmark and Germany, took part in the airstrikes, and the latter country restricted its military participation to air support functions, arguably for political reasons. In Denmark, the traditional political support for expeditionary warfare and participation in US-led coalitions possibly outweighed the institutional constraint posed by mandatory parliamentary involvement (Jakobsen and Rynning 2019).

Evidently, and this seems to be a larger trend that extends beyond operation “Inherent Resolve,” governments value the added legitimacy of parliamentary approval, also in states where parliament does not enjoy formal involvement in security policy and where there is no obligation on governments to subject missions to parliamentary debate and vote. For instance, this occurred in Belgium and the UK, where involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition was debated and voted upon by parliament (Fonck et al. 2019; Strong 2018). Remarkably, party politics and partisanship did not yield distinct patterns. In line with prior studies’ results, this should not be too surprising, because the anti-Daesh coalition did not constitute a traditional leftist military mission, such as a humanitarian military intervention, nor was it subject to purely strategic considerations, which the political right would support. Instead, the anti-Daesh coalition contained elements of both types of missions, and hence clear-cut partisan patterns could not be expected. Nonetheless, as Hofmann and Martill (2021, 322) recognize in their recent review, “party politics is more variegated in its effects than we might wish to accept.” Therefore, the lack of a clear-cut pattern of party politics should not be interpreted in a way that partisanship had no influence on decision-making for the anti-Daesh coalition.

With its emphasis on comparing European military contributions and five explanatory factors, it was beyond the chapter’s scope to investigate the multidimensional nature of the efforts against Daesh. Future studies could seize upon this with comparisons of capacity building efforts and humanitarian aid in the region. Besides, the human security dimension of the airstrikes deserves close scrutiny, for instance by examining the conditions under which civilian deaths occurred or by comparing the accountability mechanisms of the involved EU member

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states.¹⁵ Finally, one further aspect that deserves treatment is the temporal dimension of coalition warfare (Rynning et al. 2021), by taking into account the entry and exit of several allies as the military campaign evolved, also because we know that coalition withdrawal often occurs as a function of domestic politics. Recent studies have covered this phenomenon at the individual case level, for instance for the war in Iraq (McInnis 2019; Mello 2020), and it would be valuable to explore if similar dynamics occurred in the anti-Daesh coalition. Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, the US-led coalition was supported by 82 states and five international organizations. Prospective studies could investigate the involvement of other groups of countries, beyond the EU context, for instance in Sub-Saharan Africa or the MENA region, and also by comparing the involvement of democracies and non-democracies in the coalition.

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¹⁵ The UK-based NGO "Airwars.org" has collected a host of data on both aspects.

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