Armed non-state actors in conflict: strategic decision-making in the 2014 IS-KRI conflict

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) Islamic State (IS)[3] and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)[4] took control over northern Iraq in June 2014. IS – then still operating under the name Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – and the KRI simultaneously challenged the Iraqi state. Still, armed conflict eventually emerged between IS and the KRI. This study answers the question how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during three critical events in their mutual conflict in 2014? Chapter 1 first answers why is it relevant to study ANSAs' strategic decision-making within the predominantly state-centric field of International Relations (IR), before elaborating on the central question and the methodology applied.

Chapter 1 addresses the setting of this study, and it sees the study's scientific relevance in the observation that ANSAs are under-researched within IR. Yet, the societal relevance is that ANSAs play a significant role within IR. The chapter briefly introduces four IR paradigms – elaborated on in chapter 3 – which this study applies to analyze strategic decision-making of ANSAs IS and the KRI: the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm,[5] and complexity theory.[6] The added value of this study concerns applying and merging these IR paradigms to understand IS' and the KRI's strategic

3 Cf. Ahmed Hashim, *The caliphate at war. Operational realities and innovations of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15-6; Simon Mabon & Stephen Royle, *The origins of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 6; Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of geography. Ten maps that tell you everything you need to know about global politics* (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2016), 162-3; Adam Taylor, "'Daesh': John Kerry starts calling the Islamic State a name they hate," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2014; Watson, "The conflict with ISIS," 7n*. Also see: Brian Fishman, *The master plan. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the jihadi strategy for final victory* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2016), 196. This study uses IS' names as synonyms, which refer to an organization and not the actual state or caliphate that the organization eventually claimed.

4 The KRI is sometimes referred to as Başur or Southern Kurdistan. To enhance readability, this study uses the KRI as a geographical name and political entity.

5 Graham Allison, *Essence of decision. Explaining the Cuban missile crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971); Graham Allison & Philip Zelikow, *Essence of decision. Explaining the Cuban missile crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

6 Cf. James Kiras, "Key concepts and terms of irregular warfare," in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 307.

decision-making within the context of their mutual conflict. While the study is descriptive and explanatory on the research subject, methodologically the study is exploratory and sensitizing in character. The methodology concerns a structured, focused comparison[7], with strategic decision-making as the unit of analysis, based on primary sources such as documents, media, and field research, as well as secondary and tertiary sources such as existing literature on the topic. Here, the chapter indicates the study's limitations: depending on translated primary sources and the authors' Western-biased positionality.

1.1 Setting

ANSAs existed before states did.[8] And wherever states emerged[9], ANSAs challenged them.[10] During the 2000s and 2010s, most armed conflicts involved ANSAs, leading to an expectation that most future conflicts will too. That includes conflicts between ANSAs.[11]

7 Cf. Alexander George & Andrew Bennett, *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67-72.

8 Rainer Baumann & Frank Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis, globalisation and non-state actors. State-centric after all?" *Journal of International Relations and Development* 17:4 (2014), 490.

9 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of war*, transl. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1521]), 306; Niccolò Machiavelli, *De heerser*, transl. Frans van Doorn (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2002 [1513]), 125-130; Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi. Gedachten over staat en politiek*, 2nd ed., transl. Paul van Heck (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1997 [1531]), 336-338. Also see: David Jones & M.L.R. Smith, "Return to reason. Reviving political realism in Western foreign policy," *International Affairs* 91:5 (2015), 939; Kees van der Pijl, *Wereldorde en machtspolitiek. Visies op de internationale betrekkingen van Dante tot Fukuyama*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995), 16-7. Machiavelli observed that individual Italian city-states could not rely on mercenary troops to defend their interests. Instead, he proposed to raise armies based upon nations.

10 Beatrice Heuser, *War. A genealogy of Western ideas and practices* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2022), 12-3; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Edward Luttwak, *Strategy. The logic of war and peace*, revised and enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001), 83; Hanna Pfeifer *et al*., "The politics of recognition, armed non-state actors, and conflict transformation" (Frankfurt am Main: *Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*, 2022); Rose Mary Sheldon, "Introduction," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31:5 (2020), 933. For example: Paul Jackson, "Warlords as alternative forms of governance," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 14:2 (2003), 134-7; Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Wagner's mutiny has century-old echoes of another Russian debacle," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2023. For other historical examples of ANSAs challenging states see: Caroline Elkins, "The Merchant's Leviathan. How the East India Company made the modern world," *Foreign Affairs* 102:5 (2023), 212-3; Richard Miles, *Carthage must be destroyed. The rise and fall of an ancient civilisation* (2011), audiobook. ANSAs challenging states ranged from the Indian Thugs, the Ottoman warlords, to the Wagner mercenaries of today.

11 Ersel Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics. A framework for analysis," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 28:3 (2015), 424; Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies. Comparing theory and practice* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015), 51-3; May Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis and armed non-state actors in IR. Lessons from the Middle East," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17:4 (2021), 1; Natasha Ezrow, *Global politics and violent non-state actors* (London: Sage, 2017), 3, 10, 201; Adrian Florea, "Rebel governance in de facto states," *European Journal of International Relations* 26:4 (2020), 1,014-7; Meirav Mishali-Ram, "Powerful actors make a difference. Theorizing power attributes of nonstate actors," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 14:2 (2009), 55-82; Amos Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 208-11; Stephen Powell & Adrian Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset (ANARD)," *Civil Wars* 23:2 (2021), 177; David Rapaport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," in *Attacking*

1.1.1 States challenged

One such conflict emerged after ANSAs IS and the KRI took control over northern Iraq in 2014. At first, IS and the KRI both challenged the Iraqi state. Later, they challenged one another, besides challenging other ANSAs and the state-dominated regional balance. According to some analysts, the rise of IS even 'marked the most revolutionary change in the Middle East's geopolitics since the implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement after World War I.'[12] States proved unable to effectively contain the emerging ANSAs and relied on other ANSAs to do so.[13] That reliance weakened the states' positions further and indicated that '[i]n the Middle East power does indeed flow from the barrel of a gun.'[14]

Around the same time, similar developments happened in Syria, where Lebanese ANSA *Hezb'ollah* supported the Syrian government during the Syrian Civil War (2011-present).[15] Beyond the Middle East, ANSAs challenged states as well: *al-Qaeda* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had challenged the Malian state in 2012 before being pushed back by an international coalition in late 2013, conducting attacks ever since[16]; in Nigeria, *Boko Haram* conducted raids daily in 2014[17]; and since 2014, the pro-Russian Donetsk People's Republic challenged the Ukrainian state in its goal to establish an independent country in eastern Ukraine.[18]

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terrorism. Elements of a grand strategy, Audrey Kurth Cronin & James Ludes (eds.), 52-6 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004); Ian Speller, "Introduction to the second edition," in David Jordan *et al*., *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2-7. Also see: Bruce Russett, & Harvey Starr, *World politics. The menu for choice*, 5th ed. (New York: Freeman, 1996), 17. The name IR implies a focus on nations, but as a field of study, IR does incorporate ANSAs.

12 Daniel Chigudu, "Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State (IS). Terrorism threat and policy issues," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6:9 (2022), 5,146-7. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 148.

13 Yaniv Voller, "Rethinking armed groups and order. Syria and the rise of militiatocracies," *International Affairs* 98:3 (2022), 853. Also see: Steven Simon & Adam Weinstein, "Iraq as it is. America can help the country, despite Iranian influence," *Foreign Affairs*, September 27, 2023.

14 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 186. Cf. Mao Zedong, *Problems of war and strategy* (November 6, 1938), n.p. Also see: Feike Fliervoet, "Fighting for Kurdistan? Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq" (The Hague: *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*, 2018), 7; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 940; David Jones & M.L.R. Smith, "The strategy of the mind. Maoism and culture war in the west," *Military Strategy Magazine*, 8:1 (2022).

15 Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis," 5; Lawrence Freedman, *Command. The politics of military operations from Korea to Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 488; Zafer Kizilkaya, "Hizbullah's moral justification of its military intervention in the Syrian Civil War," *The Middle East Journal* 71:2 (2017), 211-28; Robert Mason, "Strategic depth through enclaves. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah," *Middle East Policy* 28 (2021), 96-108; Hanna Pfeifer & Regine Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary in the study of (civil) war," *Civil Wars* 25:2-3 (2023), 445n5; Simon & Weinstein, "Iraq as it is"; Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria" (Wasington D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2014), 11-8; "The long haul. Hizbullah's involvement in the Syrian civil war," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, January 21, 2015.

16 Sergei Boeke, "Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," PhD diss., Leiden University, 2022, 14-5; Liesbeth van der Heide, "A group affair. Understanding terrorism involvement in Mali," PhD diss., Leiden University, 2022, 9.

17 "Boko Haram," *Counter Terrorism Guide*, accessed October 14, 2022.

18 Oliver Carroll, "Welcome to the people's republic of Donetsk," *Foreign Policy*, April 18, 2014.

IS and the KRI stood out among ANSAs: they controlled territories where they exercised monopolies of violence and collected taxes. They joined alliances and conducted warfare as part of what seemed autonomous foreign policies.[19] As such, they made strategic decisions as states would have done[20], connecting ends, ways, and means.[21] Much literature on both IS and the KRI considered their strategies as given, discussing them[22] without considering how IS and the KRI decided on their strategies. This qualitative study describes and explains how IS and the KRI conducted their strategic decision-making.

Next to their unique position among ANSAs, IS and the KRI reflected the religious and nationalist tendencies within international relations of the 2010s, respectively.[23] Both aspired to become independent states themselves[24] using opposite approaches:

> '[t]he international community is presented with two antithetical images of rebel governance: a "malign" rebel governance image whereby radical insurgencies, such as the one carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, secure territorial control, operate economies of warfare, engage in clandestine activities, forge bonds with the local population, attract ideologically committed recruits, and create a cauldron of instability across large pockets of territory; and, a "benign" rebel governance image whereby moderate rebellions, such as the one in Iraqi Kurdistan, successfully manage local affairs and provide order and security in what might otherwise be an anarchic environment.'[25]

This study analyzes three key events that involved both IS and the KRI, which are part of their mutual conflict. The first key event concerned both ANSAs trying to fill the power vacuum in northern Iraq after the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) had withdrawn from the area in June 2014. Although skirmishes occurred between the ANSAs, they were not in full conflict. That

19 Florea, "Rebel governance," 1,008, 1,015. Also see: Mark Leonard, *The age of unpeace. How connectivity causes conflict* (London: Penguin, 2022), 123; Ahmad Talha, "Administrative and judicial frameworks for armed non-state actors' law enforcement and organizational structures," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 5:4 (2022), 31.

20 Cf. Bridget Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy. Theorizing violent non-state actors' strategic use of talk," in *Rebel governance in civil war*, Ana Arjona *et al*. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 105. Also see: David Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking. The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq," *Kurdish Studies* 8:2 (2020), 343.

21 Luttwak, *Strategy*, 89. Also see: Hew Strachan, "The elusive meaning and enduring relevance of Clausewitz," in *The new makers of modern strategy. From the ancient world to the digital age*, Hal Brands (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 130.

22 For example: Benjamin Bahney & Patrick Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?" RAND, May 22, 2015; Yigal Carmon *et al*., "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the phenomenon of the Islamic Caliphate State," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, September 14, 2014; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Thomas Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far. How jihadist groups strategize, plot, and learn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 28, 233.

23 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity. Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition* (London: Profile, 2018), 74-5. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 103.

24 Florea, "Rebel governance," 1,008. Also see: Kiras, "Key concepts," 306.

25 *Ibid*., 1,026.

changed with the second key event, which concerned the battle for the KRI in August 2014. IS then advanced into the KRI, and the KRI defended its territory, which it eventually did successfully. After the threat of IS towards the KRI was no longer existential, in October 2014, the KRI decided to support Syrian Kurdish fighters in the Syrian town of Kobanî (Ayn al-Arab)[26], which was under siege by IS. When the odds turned against IS in Kobanî, IS decided to continue the siege, leading to massive losses among its ranks. The siege of Kobanî is the third key event in this study.

1.1.2 IR

Although this study borrows from numerous fields[27], it primarily concerns the field of IR. Within this study, the term international relations, in lowercase, refers to a political process: the actions – directed toward the external world – and interactions of actors, on a regional level or above. Capitalized, IR here refers to the study of these actions and interactions.[28] While IR originates in the classical world[29], a structured IR perspective focusing on power and security matured during the 1930s and 1940s. This IR perspective was state-centric and assumed that states pursue national interests – relative to other states – within a quasi-anarchic environment.[30] This perspective dominated IR during the Cold War (1945-1989), although scholars developed alternative views focusing on non-state actors.[31] With the end of the Cold War, an approach that suggested economic interdependence shortly emerged.[32] Yet, scholars

26 Tanya Goudsouzian, "Kobane explained. What's so special about it?" *Al-Jazeera*, October 21, 2014.

27 Including, but not limited to: history, regional studies, social movement theories, strategic studies, and terrorism studies.

28 Cf. Deborah Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al*. (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 18; Joshua Goldstein, *International relations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longmen, 1999), 4-6.

29 John Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken. Een masterclass over Herodotus, Sun Tzu, Von Clausewitz, Machiavelli en andere grote strategen*, transl. Willem van Paassen (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2022), 42-3; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 26. For example: Thucydides, *De Peloponnesische oorlog*, transl. Wolther Kassies (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2013 [c. 404 bce]). Also see: Jeremy Black, *Geopolitics and the quest for dominance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 278.

30 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11-5; Richard Little & Michael Smith, "Introduction. The study of IR," in *Perspectives on IR*, 2nd ed., Richard Little & Michael Smith (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1998), 3. Also see: Phil Haun, "Air power in the age of primacy. Air warfare since the Cold War," in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air warfare since the Cold War*, Phil Haun *et al*. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1.

31 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392. Also see: Goldstein, *International relations*, 6-10; Ole Wæver, "Figures of international thought. Introducing persons instead of paradigms," in *The future of international relations. Masters in the making*, Iver Neumann & Ole Wæver (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1997), 7-15. For Cold War, see: Richard Crockatt, *The fifty years war. The United States and the Soviet Union in IR, 1941-1991* (London: Routledge, 1996), 162; Wayne McWilliams & Harry Piotrowski, *The world since 1945. A history of international relations*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 93-100; David Petraeus & Andrew Roberts, *Conflict. The evolution of warfare from 1945 to Ukraine* (London: Harper Collins, 2023), 16.

32 Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 935-6. Also see: Francis Fukuyama, *Het einde van de geschiedenis en de laatste mens*, transl. Anna Kapteyns-Bacuna *et al*. (Amsterdam: Olympus, 1992), 269-70.

observed an increasing role of non-state actors within IR – in small wars and hybrid conflicts since the 1990s and terrorism since the 2000s.[33]

Three mainstream conceptual models – or paradigms – for analyzing strategic decision-making within IR provide the analytical frameworks for this study. The first model is the rational actor paradigm, which assumes actors behave as calculating, unitary entities. The second model is the organizational behavior paradigm, which assumes bureaucratic routines and standard operating procedures lead to strategic decisions. The third model concerns the governmental politics paradigm, which assumes power games take place among individual decision-makers.[34] Analysts usually applied the paradigms implicitly until foreign policy researcher Graham Allison observed and explicitly mentioned them in his 1971 study *Essence of decision*. Much academic debate has occurred on whether analysts can merge the paradigms.[35] The paradigms complement one another[36], suggesting that a merger has more explanatory power than the separate paradigms.[37] While combining the paradigms is an interesting avenue, this study instead applies complexity theory to the cases as an additional fourth analytical framework. Complexity theory acknowledges conflicts' multi-causal and multi-directional dynamics to provide explanations.[38]

1.2 Relevance

ANSAs remain under-researched and misunderstood within the predominantly state-centric field of IR, although worldwide, during the 2000s and 2010s, most armed conflicts involved ANSAs.[39] In particular, a lack exists regarding conflicts between ANSAs.[40] ANSAs remaining under-researched makes studying a conflict between ANSAs scientifically and socially relevant.

33 Black, *Geopolitics*, 272. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 138. For contrary views see: Thomas Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile. The war on terror supercharged state power," *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2021, 44; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 936.

34 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*.

35 Barton Bernstein, "Understanding decisionmaking, U.S. foreign policy, and the Cuban missile crisis. A review essay," review of *Essence of decision. Explaining the Cuban missile crisis*, 2nd ed. by Graham Allison & Philip Zelikow. *International Security* 25:1 (2000), 126. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 3n†; Nicolas Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason. Realism, rationalism, and political decision in IR theory after Thomas Kuhn," *Review of International Studies* (2015), 19.

36 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392.

37 Raymond Tanter, "International system and foreign policy approaches. Implications for conflict modelling and management," in *Theory and policy in International Relations*, Raymond Tanter & Richard Ullman (eds.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 12.

38 Cf. Kiras, "Key concepts," 307.

39 Cf. Jochen Prantl & Evelyn Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft for the twenty-first century of complexity. A case for strategic diplomacy," *International Affairs* 98:2 (2022), 468-9.

40 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 424; Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 51-3; Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis," 1; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3, 10, 201; Florea, "Rebel governance in de facto states," 1014-7; Mishali-Ram, "Powerful actors make a difference," 55-82; Perlmutter, *The military*

1.2.1 Scientific relevance: under-researched

1.2.1.1 State-centric IR

Studying ANSAs within IR is scientifically relevant because the topic is under-researched. IR as a field was and remains state-centric.[41] IR's state-centeredness is remarkable, not only because non-state actors prove the historical continuity and states the anomaly[42], but also because analysts have observed an increasing role of non-state actors within IR since the end of the Cold War.[43]

Foreign policy researchers Rainer Baumann and Frank Stengel observed a spike in academic attention for non-state actors in foreign policy research in the 1990s. In the 2010s, they observed renewed attention due to a '(complex, multidimensional and not at all unidirectional) transfer of authority from the state to various NSAs [non-state actors] of various kinds,' in which non-state actors 'also exert authority in foreign policy,' continuing that 'today almost no one in IR would doubt that NSAs make a significant impact in IR [...]. If anything, scholars argue that NSAs have been here all along and that in fact the state (still) is the "new kid on the block."' In fact, some non-state actors operated as 'autonomous actors that can have a serious impact on IR.'[44] Nevertheless, a lack of academic attention concerning strategic decision-making by non-state actors remained.

Baumann and Stengel analyzed to what extent authors mentioned non-state actors in a leading journal called *Foreign Policy Analysis* between 2005 and 2010. Adopting a categorization of actors within IR into four categories[45], they found that 'transnational actors are by far the least significant group of NSAs'[46]: of 138 articles, five addressed transnational actors; eleven articles international actors, twenty articles private actors, while the remaining 102 addressed state actors.[47] Baumann and Stengel observed that many scholars stuck to traditional topics, with some 'notable exceptions that highlight promising new avenues for FPA [foreign policy

and politics in modern times, 208-11; Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 177; Rapaport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," 52-6; Speller, "Introduction to the second edition," 2-7. Also see: Russett, & Starr, *World politics*, 17.

41 Erik Ringmar, *History of international relations. A non-European perspective* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), 1-4; Hajar Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum. The role of foreign policy in maintaining the de facto Kurdish entity in Iraq," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 23:3 (2023), 2.

42 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 490. Also see: Ian Bremmer, "The technopolar moment. How digital powers will reshape the global order," *Foreign Affairs* 100:6 (2021), 112-28; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3.

43 Moises Naím, *The end of power. From boardrooms to battlefields and churches to states, why being in charge isn't what it used to be* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 5-15. Also see: Prantl & Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft," 443-4.

44 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 490. Also see: Bremmer, "The technopolar moment"; Elkins, "The Merchant's Leviathan," 212-3; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3; Miles, *Carthage must be destroyed*.

45 Philipp Genschel & Bernhard Zangl (2011) "L'état et l'exercice de l'autorité politique. Dénationalisation et administration," *Revue française de sociologie* 52:3 (2011), 514-5. Chapter 2 elaborates on the categorization by Genschel and Zangl.

46 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 510.

47 *Ibid*., 506.

analysis] research, such as the attempts to utilise FPA's toolkit to analyse non-state actors' actions."[48] Baumann and Stengel suggested examining 'how decisions are made across policy fields and arenas [...] and to what extent and how exactly NSAs are involved."[49] Furthermore, 'foreign policy analysts should start analysing decision making in these different settings and probe to what extent their models are applicable, how they could be modified, etc.'[50]

Security studies scholar Ersel Aydinli agreed with the above: '[w]hen it comes to nonstate actors, however, we have far less comprehensive research on what they are, how they interact and how they may be changing over time. If we accept that a polity shift is occurring, we must develop a deeper understanding of this form of agency.'[51]

Additionally, foreign policy researchers Thomas Juneau *et al*. – focusing on foreign policies in the Middle East, not on ANSAs – found that the 'scholarly community's understanding of foreign policy dynamics in the Middle East is often poor, ad hoc, or mostly based on case studies, while there are few theoretically informed comparisons.'[52] This impacts understanding Middle Eastern ANSAs. Furthermore, the Middle East is a contested, Western-invented concept[53], and analysts have developed many traditional IR paradigms in – and for – Western contexts. Whether these same paradigms are applicable in non-Western contexts, such as the Middle East, is uncertain and requires research.[54]

1.2.1.2 Impact

While IR remained state-centric, scholarly research found that intra-state conflict historically happened more often than inter-state conflict. Moreover, the intra-state conflicts lasted longer and proved more destructive than the inter-state conflicts.[55] Researchers have observed an increase

48 *Ibid*., 509.
49 *Ibid*., 511.
50 *Ibid*., 512.
51 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 425.
52 Thomas Juneau *et al*., "Neoclassical realism. Domestic politics, systemic pressures, and the impact on foreign policy since the Arab Spring," in *Routledge handbook of internationalrRelations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 8.
53 Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 148.
54 Mohammed Ayoob, "Subaltern realism meets the Arab world," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 59, 65-7; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 16; Alex Mintz & Karl DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145. Also see: Emil Hokayem, *Syria's uprising and the fracturing of the Levant* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 32; Thomas Lawrence, *Zeven zuilen van wijsheid*, transl. Sjaak Commandeur (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2009 [1926]), 93-99; Ibrahim abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab thought. Studies in post-1967 Arab intellectual history* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 140-1; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978); Himmet Umunç, "A hope so transcendent. The Arab revolt in the Great War and T.E. Lawrence," in *The Great War in the Middle East. A clash of empires*, Robert Johnson & James Kitchen (eds.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 189. For example: Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 17, 21.
55 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3. Also see: Stathis Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge: Cambridge

in the number of civil wars since 1945.[56] Although different definitions of civil wars are in use[57], these definitions usually include at least one ANSA fighting either authorities or other ANSAs.

Political scientist Shanna Kirschner counted 128 intra-state wars in which an ANSA challenged a state actor between 1945 and 2008[58], while conflict researchers Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen calculated 240 armed conflicts in the same timeframe.[59] However, the number of ethnically motivated rebellions since 1990 decreased as states increasingly assimilated minorities. The exception to that trend is the Middle East, where minorities increasingly rebelled against states.[60] The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research counted 177 violent crises in 2014, including one limited war, eleven inter-state crises, 21 wars, and 25 limited wars.[61]

The statistics above referred to wars between states and ANSAs, implicitly acknowledging IR's state-centeredness. Yet, ANSAs engage in armed conflict with other ANSAs. The Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset (ANARD) contains 2,489 militarized disputes in 468 dyadic rivalries between Middle Eastern and North African ANSAs from 1993 to 2018.[62] ANARD analysis indicated that 2014 was the year that most inter-ANSA conflicts started, probably due to the Arab Uprisings (2010-2012) followed by IS' rise.[63] Some conflicts continued over multiple years. Applying this criterium, 2014 is the culmination point, again probably due to the Arab Uprisings and IS' rise.[64] Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre recorded 20,311 attacks by ANSAs in 2014, of which 51.2 percent occurred in Iraq and Syria. IS was the most active ANSA, with more than 2,000 attributed attacks.[65] IS activities might explain why, regarding IS, academic attention has focused primarily on the struggle against IS.[66]

University Press, 2006), 53; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 57; Petraeus & Roberts, *Conflict*, 3.

56 Lawrence Freedman, *The future of war. A history* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), xiv; Heuser, *War*, 63.

57 Freedman, *The future of war*, xviii.

58 Shanna Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars. Ending intrastate conflicts* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 34.

59 Lotta Harbom & Peter Wallensteen, "Armed conflicts, 1946-2008," *Journal of Peace Research* 46:4 (2009), 577. The criterium for armed conflict Harbom and Wallensteen used was at least 25 deaths in at least one year.

60 Lars-Erik Cederman, "Blood for soil. The fatal temptations of ethnic politics," *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (2019), 62. Also see: Ted Gurr, "Ethnic warfare on the wane," *Foreign Affairs* 79:3 (2000), 53; Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 433.

61 "Conflict barometer 2014" (Heidelberg: *Institute for International Conflict Research*, 2015); "Conflict barometer 2014" (Heidelberg: Institute for International Conflict Research, 2015); Speller, "Introduction," 6.

62 Stephen Powell, "The ANARD blog," *The ANARD blog*, accessed December 17, 2022; Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 177-9.

63 Powell & Florea, "Introducing the Armed Nonstate Actor Rivalry Dataset," 186-7.

64 *Ibid*., 187. This study's case studies resemble eight different cases within the ANARD.

65 "JTIC yearly data shows intensification of key insurgencies across 2014," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, January 20, 2015. Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) was the second most active (539 attacks), followed by Afghan Taliban (460 attacks), Communist Party of India – Maoist (358 attacks), and Syrian-Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (331 attacks; YPG, People's Defense Corps).

66 Burak Kadercan, "This is what ISIS' rise means for the 'Kurdish Question." *The National Interest*, September 9, 2015. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 461-90; Eitan Shamir, "Deterring violent non-state actors," in *Netherlands annual review of military studies 2020. Deterrence in the 21st century – insights from theory and practice*, Frans Osinga & Tim Sweijs (eds.) (The Hague: Asser Press, 2021), 263-86.

Nevertheless – perhaps as part of the struggle – some scholars wondered how to analyze ANSAs like IS.

1.2.1.3 Insufficient paradigms

Historian Jeremy Black studied IR from the fifteenth century onwards[67] and stated that 'it is far from clear that effective governance can be organized in alternative forms to that of the conventional state. [...] the state remains the key player in international and domestic politics, as well as a vital source for identity.'[68] Nevertheless, tensions between different ethnicities in the Middle East since 2003 made Black doubt whether existing geopolitical theories remained valid.[69]

Kurdish studies researcher Michael Gunter expressed similar doubts as Black, whether the traditional paradigms for analyzing foreign policy – assuming it to be the monopoly of states – still sufficed after the rise of IS and the KRI in 2014.[70] In particular, some analysts regarded IS as 'a unique and important case study through which to examine the achievements of a militant organization in an extremely competitive environment.'[71] Gunter suggested developing 'a new paradigm to classify and understand the changing geopolitical reality of the Middle East.'[72]

Others claimed that 'ISIS has established itself as a new paradigm' by its brutal behavior[73], urged 'to update the dominant paradigms of security' by adopting insights from other disciplines[74], questioned the 'state paradigm'[75] in general as they assumed several non-state actors to hold power, or wondered whether existing Western-centric IR paradigms applied to other contexts.[76]

During the 1960s, Allison observed three foreign policy analysis paradigms in IR. Allison's research became one of the most influential in the field of IR, and together with his later co-

67 Black, *Geopolitics*, 278.
68 *Ibid*., 272. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 138.
69 *Ibid*., 243-4.
70 Michael Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map of the Middle East," *Kurdish Studies* 3:1 (2015), 78.
71 Daniel Milton, "Structure of a state. Captured documents and the Islamic State's organizational structure," (West Point: *Combating Terrorism Center*, 2021), 1.
72 Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 243; Gareth Stansfield, "The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East," *International Affairs* 89:2 (2013), 259-82.
73 Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS. The state of terror* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2015), 235. Also see: Brian Jenkins, "ISIS's calculated barbarity," *RAND*, February 10, 2015.
74 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 204.
75 Bremmer, "The technopolar moment," 121-2. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 204.
76 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 344. Also see: Jeremy Black, "Strategic practice, an introduction," in *The practice of strategy. A global history*, Jeremy Black (ed.) (Società Italiana di Storia Militare, 2024), 13.

author Philip Zelikow, Allison claimed that the three paradigms are applicable in contexts other than state-level decision-making:

> 'the Rational Actor, Organizational Behavior, and Governmental Politics models can be applied beyond foreign policy to the domestic policy of national governments; state and local governments; nongovernmental organizations like the United Nations or Red Cross; schools, universities, andhospitals; business enterprises; and other aggregate actors whom one encounters in normal, everyday life.'[77]

The quote suggests that the paradigms mentioned are appropriate for ANSAs too. That implies that the paradigms can explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI. It also means that no new paradigms are needed, as suggested by Black and Gunter.

Existing IR literature has addressed strategic decision-making. This includes critical scholarship, which emphasizes eclectic theorizing to shed light on the complexity of strategic decision-making[78]; behavioralist scholarship, focusing on the implications of leaders for unit-level action[79]; comparativist scholarship, emphasizing the structure of governing mechanisms for unit-level action[80]; and, schools of institutionalism, especially historical institutionalism, focusing on path dependence, lock-in, and positive and negative feedback mechanisms[81], and sociological institutionalism, focusing on legitimacy.[82] In general, though, these studies have remained state-centric. When addressing non-state actors, it typically concerned supra-state actors. This urges for academic attention to ANSAs and whether existing IR paradigms suffice.

Embracing the suggestions by Baumann and Stengel to explore how non-state actors make decisions and whether existing paradigms suffice[83], this study aims to explain the strategic decision-making of both IS and the KRI in 2014 by applying the different foreign policy paradigms. As such, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of ANSAs'

77 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 7.

78 For example: Fred Chernoff *et al*., "Analytic eclecticism and International Relations. Promises and pitfalls," *International Journal* 75:3 (2020,) 383-91; Amandine Orsini *et al*., "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," *International Studies Review* 22:4 (2020), 1,008-38.

79 For example: James Davis, "Better than a bet. Good reasons for behavioral and rational choice assumptions in IR theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 29:2 (2023), 476-500.

80 For example: Charles Lees, "We are all comparativists now. Why and how single-country scholarship must adapt and incorporate the comparative politics approach," *Comparative Political Studies* 39:9 (2006). 1084-108.

81 For example: Stephanie Hofmann & Andrew Yeo, "Historical institutionalism and institutional design. Divergent pathways to regime complexes in Asia and Europe," *European Journal of International Relations* 30:2 (2023), 306-32; Peter Tangney, "Path contingency. Advancing a spatial-institutionalist perspective on decision pathways for disaster risk governance," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 59:1 (2024), 37-54.

82 For example: Mike Zapp, "The authority of science and the legitimacy of international organisations. OECD, UNESCO and World Bank in global education governance," *Compare. A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 51:7 (2021), 1022-41.

83 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 511-2.

strategic decision-making. This study also uses the foreign policy paradigms in a non-state and non-Western setting, thus examining whether the claim by Allison and Zelikow of the applicability of the foreign policy paradigms beyond state decision-making is correct or that a new paradigm is needed.

1.2.2 Societal relevance: ANSAs in international relations

1.2.2.1 Intra-state conflict

Whereas intra-state conflict historically happened more often, lasted longer, and proved more destructive than inter-state conflicts[84], practitioners of international relations remained state-centric, like the analysts of IR. A better understanding of ANSAs' strategic decision-making during conflicts in which they are involved could potentially contribute to avoiding intra-state conflicts, shorten them, or make them less destructive.[85] A better understanding could help international relations practitioners anticipate ANSAs' actions and decisions, yet 'conflict regulation has mostly focused on the obligations of states and less on how non-state actors ought to behave.'[86]

Political commentator Moisés Naím observed a decrease of power among traditional actors since the nineteenth century with a culmination point after the Cold War.[87] Instead, Naím observed so-called micro-powers emerging: benefitting from ongoing availability of transportation and communication means, 'small, unknown, or once-negligible actors that have found ways to undermine, fence in, or thwart the mega-players, the large bureaucratic organizations that previously controlled their fields.'[88] Fragmentation of power occurred in numerous fields, including international relations.[89]

Writing in 2015, but without mentioning a timeframe, a similar tendency was observed by Aydinli, who described a transfer of power from states to non-states in which states will eventually lose their predominance within contemporary international relations: a 'shift in the power of polities [...] from statehood to nonstatehood, or from the predominance of the state as the primary pillar to which international relations has been both practically and conceptually

84 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3; Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 53; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 57.
85 Cf. Jonathan Powell, *Talking to terrorists. How to end armed conflicts* (London: Vintage, 2014), 15-41.
86 Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 432.
87 Naím, *The end of power*, 5-15. Also see: Prantl & Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft," 443-4; Hew Strachan, *The direction of war. Contemporary strategy in historical perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42-3.
88 *Ibid*., 51. Also see: Ghassan Charbel, "We live in an age when small armies make large changes," transl. Middle East Media Research Institute, *Al-Hayat*, November 12, 2014; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, xi-xii.
89 *Ibid*., 97. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 82.

bound, to the rising importance and centrality of nonstate actors and transnational relations.'[90] Aydinli added that '[n]ot only are the numbers and types of actors proliferating beyond states, but, with these new actors' increasing involvement in transnational politics, most of the principal traditional concepts and patterns of relations can no longer be counted on as building blocks for scholarly enquiry or speculation.'[91]

The findings of Naím and Aydinli are reminiscent of IR researcher Hedley Bull's new mediaevalism. Originally writing during the Cold War, Bull explored alternative paths to world order, starting from the great powers' 'managerial functions in international society.'[92] One of the alternatives Bull foresaw was new mediaevalism, 'a return to the mediaeval model [...]: a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty.'[93] At the time of writing, Bull observed no indications leading to a new mediaevalism, such as the transfer of power from states to regional entities, disintegration of states, violence by organizations other than the state, rise of transnational organizations, or technological unification.[94]

Inspired by Bull, IR researcher Seyom Brown did observe indicators in post-Cold War international relations though: 'a highly interactive and interdependent, yet decentralized, system of many kinds of actors, large and small, state and non-state.'[95] Brown recognized this was partly because of domestic reluctance to commit to maintaining international order in the United States, international relations' sole superpower since the end of the Cold War.[96] It had led to a 'relative rise in power of the non-state actors'[97] away from nation-states, particularly in the Middle East during the 2000s and 2010s.[98] While the KRI had benefitted from the American-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, IS, in particular, benefitted from the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2011, allowing IS' predecessors to create an actual power base

90 Aydinli, "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics," 424. Also see: Michael Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," *Journal of South Asia and Middle Eastern Studies* xx:3 (1997), 1; Naím, *The end of power*, 51.

91 *Ibid*., 425.

92 Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society. A study of order in World Politics* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 221. Also see: Marshall, *Prisoners of geography*, 167, 311-2.

93 *Ibid*., 245. Also see: Seyom Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls of war by proxy. A systemic analysis," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:2 (2016), 245. Acknowledging Bull's Western-centric approach, this study maintains the term new mediaevalism as an indication of an environment.

94 *Ibid*., 254-66. Also see: Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 939.

95 Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls," 244.

96 *Ibid*., 243. Also see: Jo Bekkevold, "No, the world is not multipolar. The idea of emerging power centers is popular but wrong and could lead to serious policy mistakes," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2023.

97 *Ibid*., 244.

98 *Ibid*., 255.

in Iraq's Nineveh governate.[99] Brown worried especially about non-state actors increasingly gaining fighting capacity.[100]

The fighting capacity of IS and the Kurds in Iraq and Syria led to their battlefield successes in 2014.[101] Editor-in-chief of London-based *Al Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper Ghassan Charbel agreed, observing in 2014 that actors with 'small armies had taken over control in Iraq and Syria'[102] and caused a new dynamic in which regional state actors seemed to feel – or did feel – threatened by these ANSAs or the effects they might have.[103]

The potential to use violence creates leverage for ANSAs compared to non-state actors without such capacity.[104] In a zero-sum situation, the increasing influence of ANSAs implies state actors' power loss. By their mere presence, ANSAs challenge the idea that '[n]on-state actors can only flourish within a relatively peaceful and stable international system, with an underlying consensus about the rules of international interaction and the legitimacy of the state units.'[105] Specifically, within the Middle East, 'the capacity of central governments [...] and their monopoly on violence and territorial control was damaged by the rise of armed insurgent groups.'[106]

1.2.2.2 ANSA presence

IR researcher Ulrich Schneckener claimed that 'ANSAs can be seen as classical spoilers or trouble-makers for state-building and peacebuilding efforts, meaning the strengthening, reform or reconstruction of state structures and institutions. They have hardly any interest in consolidated statehood since this would inevitably challenge their position.'[107] However, one could argue that

99 Fishman, *The master plan*, 143-4; Kiras, "Key concepts," 302; Stephen Renner, "Air power in the Battle of Mosul," in *Air power in the age of primacy. Air power since the Cold War*, Phil Haun *et al*. (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 259. Also see: Abdullah al-Ghadhawi, "'Revenge for the two sheikhs'. ISIS renews itself in the Syrian desert," *New Lines Institute*, August 8, 2022.

100 Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls," 245-6.

101 Michael Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds. Geostrategic concerns for the U.S. and Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 22:1 (2015), 102. Also see: Simon & Weinstein, "Iraq as it is."

102 Charbel, "We live in an age."

103 For example: Henri Barkey, "What's behind Turkey's u-turn on the Islamic State?" *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2015; Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana, "Editor's notes," in *Inherently unresolved. Regional politics and the counter-ISIS campaign*, Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana (eds.) (London: RUSI, 2015), v; "Oil sales obstacles likely to undermine Kurdish ambitions to declare independence from Iraq in one-year outlook," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, August 14, 2014.

104 Cf. Jeffrey Mazo, "The pope's divisions," *Survival* 57:4 (2015), 203.

105 Daphné Josselin & William Wallace, "Non-state actors in IR. A framework," in *Non-state actors in IR*, Daphné Josselin & William Wallace (eds.) (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 4.

106 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign policy in the Middle East," in *The foreign policies of Middle East states*, 2nd ed., Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.) (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2014), 26.

107 Ulrich Schneckener, "Fragile statehood, armed non-state actors and security governance," in *Private Actors and Security Governance*, Alan Bryden & Marina Caparini (eds.) (Berlin: Berlin Lit-Verlag, 2006), 35.

IS and the KRI pursued 'consolidated statehood,' which concerned a position within a territory and towards the external world. As such, these ANSAs pursued foreign policies.[108] Foreign policies meant these ANSAs had regional relevance. Analysts had to include the ANSAs in political analyses and policy recommendations concerning the Middle East. Although sometimes argued differently[109], IS and the KRI acted independently because they pursued their interests.[110] In doing so, they sometimes worked in alliances or operated as proxies.[111]

IS and the KRI were two relatively new regional actors that starred in a conflict that gained global attention in 2014.[112] Arguably, in 2014, both had the potential to remain.[113] IS researchers Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan claimed '[t]he army of terror [IS] will be with us indefinitely.'[114] IS researcher Daniel Milton argued that IS was '[a] group that was able to construct such a comprehensive approach to fighting and governance,' thus 'unlikely to wither away absent sustained and targeted efforts to continue to undermine its organizational structure.'[115] While forced back between 2015 and 2017, from the late 2010s onwards, analysts concluded that IS might return[116], 'remain'[117], or already 'is back.'[118] IS reemerged in Syria at the end of 2019, when it increased its attacks there, including using sleeper cells and later benefitting from removing Russian forces since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.[119] Iraq remained IS' main area of operations in 2022. Since then, IS became less active there. Iraq no longer was its main area of operations.[120] Authorities and militias in Iraq seemed capable of containing IS.[121] Despite ongoing

108 Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," 1. Also see: Brown, "Purposes and pitfalls," 244-5.
109 Charles Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State" (Doha: *Brookings*, 2014), 20.
110 Gunter, "The foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurds," 1. Also see: Lionel Beehner, "How proxy wars work. And what that means for ending the conflict in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, November 12, 2015; Barbara Elias, "Local partners are not proxies. The case for rethinking proxy war," *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, April 20, 2023.
111 Cf. Elias, "Local partners are not proxies"; Idean Salehyan, "The delegation of war to rebel organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54:493 (2010), 494.
112 Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.
113 Cf. Christian Caryl, "The world's next country," *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2015; Stephen Walt, "What should we do if the Islamic State wins? Live with it," *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2015.
114 Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the army of terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 242.
115 Milton, "Structure of a state," v. Cf. James Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 357; James Kiras, "The historical practice of irregular warfare," in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 322.
116 Omar Ashour, *How ISIS fights. Military tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 66; Jennifer Cafarella *et al*., "ISIS's second comeback. Assessing the next ISIS insurgency" (Washinton D.C.: *Institute for the Study of War*, 2019); Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 252; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 5, 240; Hassan Hassan, "Out of the desert. ISIS's strategy for a long war," *Middle East Institute*, September 6, 2018.
117 Fishman, *The master plan*, 259. Cf. John Lynn, *Battle. A history of combat and culture* (Cambridge: Westview, 2004), 357.
118 Bernard-Henri Levy, "ISIS stages a comeback in Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2022.
119 Ghadhawi, "'Revenge for the two sheikhs.'"
120 Kamaran Palani, "The low likelihood of ISIS resurgence in Iraq," (The Hague: *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague,* 2024), 2.
121 Ghadhawi, "'Revenge for the two sheikhs.'"

tensions with Iraqi leaders, the KRI, since the conflict with IS, remained involved in fighting IS with the help of Western partners.

1.2.2.3 Labeling

Some scholars argued that ANSAs 'are more unpredictable and volatile' than state actors.[122] ANSAs appeared as irrational, unpredictable, and cruel actors.[123] In particular, IS was labeled as such[124], illustrated by remarks like 'ISIS's reign of terror'[125] and suggestive book titles such as *ISIS. The state of terror*[126], or *ISIS. Inside the army of terror*.[127] Beyond the cruelties that IS committed, IS also built strategic alliances and conducted complex military operations.[128] IS applied terror as a tactic within a larger insurgency also involving conventional warfare against superior military strength.[129]

Applying brutal tactics does not exclude a rational strategic decision-making process.[130] IS' violence 'was largely sanctioned and controlled at every level (when and where possible)'[131], indicating an actual decision-making process: 'ISIS beheadings of captured Western hostages in 2014 served a variety of organizational purposes, including expanding the conflict by provoking the West to respond with airstrikes; elevating the stature of the group from a perceived minor to a major threat; and horrifying a variety of audiences and bolstering the morale of others.'[132] On the other hand, as argued by IS researcher Craig Noyes, IS' 'decision-making is opportunistic, adaptive, and dependent upon its leaderships' shifting propensity to implement its ideology.

122 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3. Also see: Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 341-2.

123 Cf. Beatrice de Graaf, "Terrorists as monsters. The unmanageable other from the French Revolution to the Islamic State." *Perspectives on Politics* 19:2 (2021), 692. Also see: Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 105.

124 Chigudu, "Sectarianism and the ideology of the Islamic State," 5,148.

125 Sami Moubayed, *Under the black flag. An exclusive insight into the inner workings of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), xii.

126 Stern & Berger, *ISIS*.

127 Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS*.

128 Haroro Ingram *et al*., *The ISIS reader. Milestone texts of the Islamic State movement* (London: Hurst, 2020), 7, 37, 125; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 7; Milton, "Structure of a state," 1; Craig Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris. Organizational prioritization along Islamic State's ideological threshold," *Small Wars Journal*, July 26, 2016. Also see: Jacob Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma. Managing violent covert organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 19-20.

129 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 153. For example: "Ruining and destroying enemy possessions," *Islamic State*, no date, transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi. Also see: Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS is not a terrorist group. Why counterterrorism won't stop the latest jihadist threat," *Foreign Affairs* 94:2 (2015), 87-98.

130 Cronin, "ISIS is not a terrorist group," 92; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 27, 37, 91; Ingram *et al*., *The ISIS reader*, 7, 51; Jenkins, "ISIS's calculated barbarity." Also see: Pravda Parakkal, "Islamic State burns Jordanian hostage alive in retaliation for airstrikes," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, February 4, 2015. For example: "A message from Sotloff," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 47-51; John Cantlie, "Hard talk. The real story behind my videos," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 52-5; "The burning of the murtadd pilot," *Dabiq* 7 (1436H |2015), 6-7.

131 Craig Whiteside *et al*., "The ISIS files – The Islamic State's department of soldiers" (Washington D.C.: *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2021), 5.

132 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 361-2.

[...] Islamic State's actions depend primarily on the ideological prioritization of a topic and decisions' opportunity costs vis-à-vis the organization's strength.'[133] While unsanctioned violence occurred, making violence occassionally 'reactionary and vengeful, not purposeful'[134], understanding ANSAs' strategic decision-making potenitally enables international relations practitioners' options to engage with ANSAs in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.[135]

1.3 Research question

The main research question of this study is:

> *How to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during three key events in their mutual conflict in 2014?*

Although not mentioned explicitly in the research question above, this study addresses the research question from an IR perspective. Implicitly, the research question acknowledges that there might be other ways to explain ANSA strategic decision-making, beyond the IR approach of this study. Avoiding semantic debate, the research question is kept as straightforward as possible.

The Arab Uprisings undermined governments' authority and caused turmoil in the Middle East. New non-state entities emerged, and two fierce rivals benefitted most from that situation: IS and the Kurds.[136] IS forced ISF to withdraw from northern Iraq in early June 2014. IS forces and the KRI's *peshmerga*-militia filled the void that ISF had left behind. IS took control over Mosul; the KRI took control over Kirkuk, including its surrounding areas and parts of the countryside near Mosul.[137] After capturing Mosul in June 2014, IS' main thrust seemed to advance towards Iraq's capital, Baghdad. On August 1, 2014, IS attacked the KRI, though.[138] While already fighting Shia-dominated ISF, the Sunni militant organization IS unexpectedly advanced towards the KRI's capital, Erbil, and the vicinity of Mount Sinjar. With foreign

133 Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."
134 Fishman, *The master plan*, 109.
135 Coggins, "Rebel diplomacy," 98.
136 Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds," 102; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 65,78. Cf. Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS. A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 20; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 1. For the Arab Uprisings, see: Jasmine Gani, "From discourse to practice. Orientalism, Western policy and the Arab uprisings," *International Affairs* 98:1 (2022), 45-65. Gunter included both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds as benefitting from the new situation.
137 Gareth Stansfield, "The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region and the future of Iraq. Assessing UK policy options," *International Affairs* 90:6 (2014), 1,334. Also see: Sirwan Barzani, "Protecting Kurdistan. The Peshmerga before, during, and after ISIS," in *Iraqi Kurdistan Region. A path forward*, Sasha Toperich *et al.* (eds.) (Washington, D.C.: *Center for Transatlantic Relations*, 2017), 23. *Peshmerga* (those who face death) is the common name for the Iraqi Kurdish militia.
138 Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,337.

military support, the KRI could withstand and eventually push back IS. The KRI later sent *peshmerga* to help relieve the IS-besieged Syrian Kurdish city of Kobanî in October 2014. Against an ultimately overwhelming force, IS continued to besiege Kobanî[139], until Syrian Kurdish forces liberated the town on January 25, 2015.

IS and the KRI not only challenged states, but they behaved as states. Both controlled a territory and exercised a monopoly of violence. They joined alliances, collected taxes, and conducted warfare as part of what seemed a foreign policy.[140] Both took strategic decisions as states would. Much literature on these ANSAs considered their strategies as given[141], without considering how they made their decisions. This qualitative study describes and explains how IS and the KRI conducted strategic decision-making in northern Iraq in 2014.

This study addresses the central question during three key events during 2014 that involved both IS and the KRI: (1) filling the power vacuum after ISF had left northern Iraq in June 2014; (2) the battle for the KRI in August 2014; and, (3) the siege of Kobanî in October 2014-January 2015.[142] The first key event concerns the strategic decisions of both ISIS – IS' predecessor – and the KRI to fill the power vacuum in northern Iraq after ISF had withdrawn from the area in June 2014. Although skirmishes occurred between ISIS and the KRI, they were not entirely in conflict with each other then. That changed with the second key event. In August 2014, IS took the strategic decision to advance into the KRI, and the KRI took the strategic decision to defend its territory, which it did successfully. The third key event happened after the KRI was able to withstand the threat of IS when the KRI took the strategic decision to support besieged Syrian Kurdish fighters in the Syrian town of Kobanî in October 2014. Earlier, IS had taken the strategic decision to attack Kobanî. When the odds turned against IS, it decided to continue the attack.

This study identifies three key events due to their impact on the IS and the KRI conflict. Within the conflict, these events were the main theatres of combat.[143] Within international relations, the key events triggered strategic decisions by other actors, usually aimed against IS

139 Kyle Orton, "Islamic State discusses Kurds and insurgency," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, October 19, 2018.

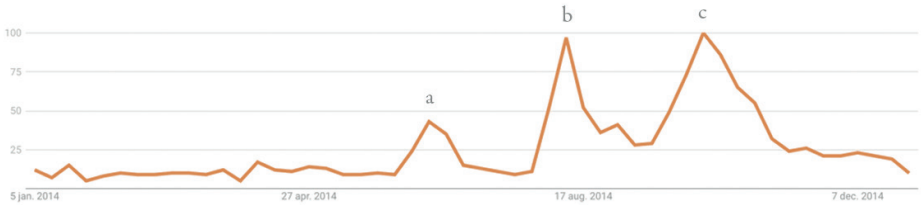
140 Florea, "Rebel governance," 1,007-8.

141 For example: Bahney & Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?"; Carmon *et al*., "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233.

142 Ali Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds in the Islamic State's media: 'Dabiq' magazine as an example," transl. Shkow Sherzad (Suleimaniyah: *Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center*, 2018), 11; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 1. Qaraman included key events 2 and 3. Sadoon focused on event 2.

143 Cf. Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, transl. Michael Howard & Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 [1834]), 566-73; David Jordan, "Concepts and characteristics of air and space warfare," in *Understanding modern warfare*, 2nd ed., David Jordan *et al*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 231-43. Also see: Sara Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. Political parties, opportunity and timing," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48:5 (2021), 891.

or in support of the KRI.[144] Global internet searches indicated the three events, as illustrated in graph 1.1. The graph shows Google internet searches for the combination of the terms 'ISIS' and 'Kurds' in percentages of the maximum attention during 2014.[145] It shows three peaks. Peak 'a' covers June 15-21, 2014, corresponding with the vacuum filling in northern Iraq by IS and the KRI; peak 'b' covers August 10-16, 2014, corresponding with the battle for the KRI; peak 'c' covers October 5-11, 2014, corresponding with the start of the siege of Kobanî, which was 'of critical importance in the conflict.'[146]



Graph 1.1: global internet searches for the combination of 'ISIS' and 'Kurds' during 2014. Peak 'a' covers June 15-21, 2014, peak 'b' covers August 10-16, 2014, and peak 'c' October 5-11, 2014.[147]

This study analyzes strategic decision-making regarding the three key events based on literature research using primary and secondary sources with additional interviews. The study emphasizes IS' strategic decision-making, applying a structured, focused comparison method[148] and addressing the KRI's strategic decision-making. In that perspective, the study is descriptive and explanatory: the analyst must first identify strategic decision-making to explain strategic decision-making. Therefore, it is essential first to address which strategic decisions IS and the KRI took before and during the three key events in 2014. As this study aims to contribute to the knowledge of strategic decision-making among ANSAs in a Middle Eastern context by applying different analytical paradigms, the study addresses different sub-questions for each model. The following section deals with these sub-questions.

144 For example: "About us. The global coalition to defeat IS," *United States Department of State*, accessed November 26, 2022; Patrick Cammaert *et al*., "Rapport," *Commissie van onderzoek NLA-programma in Syrië*, December 2022, 23; David Hudson, "President Obama makes a statement on the crisis in Iraq," *The White House – President Barack Obama*, August 7, 2014; "Resolution 2169," *United Nations Security Council*, July 30, 2014.

145 Google Trends, accessed February 8, 2020.

146 Cengiz Gunes, "The IS Factor. The Kurds as a vanguard in the war on the caliphate," in *Kurdistan. An invisible nation*, Stefano Torelli (ed.) (Milan: ISPI, 2016), 78; Mari Toivanen, *The Kobane generation. Kurdish diaspora mobilizing in France* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 3-5.

147 Google Trends.

148 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 67-72.

The strategic decisions within international relations triggered by the key events indicate that these events did not occur in a vacuum; other regional and global actors besides IS and the KRI were involved.[149] Examples included the Iraqi and Syrian states, other ANSAs, the United States, Turkey, and Iran. When applicable, the study refers to external actors. The focus of this study remains on IS and the KRI, realizing that the paradigms applied for the analyses concern simplifications of reality.[150]

1.3.1 Sub-questions: four paradigms

Three mainstream conceptual models – or paradigms – for analyzing strategic decision-making provide the analytical frameworks in this study. The first model is the rational actor paradigm, which assumes actors behave as calculating, unitary entities. The second model is the organizational behavior paradigm, which assumes bureaucratic routines and standard operating procedures lead to strategic decisions. The third model concerns the governmental politics paradigm, which assumes power games occur among individual decision-makers.[151] These paradigms focus on different actors and factors, therefore asking other questions, which this section addresses below.

The paradigms seem to complement one another.[152] The complementing paradigms suggest that a merger has more explanatory power than the separate paradigms.[153] While combining the paradigms is an interesting avenue, this study applies complexity theory as a fourth analytical framework. Complexity theory acknowledges conflicts' multi-causal and multi-directional dynamics to provide explanations[154] and implicitly incorporates relevant elements of the other paradigms. The following sections address the sub-questions that belong to each of the paradigms. Chapter 3 later elaborates on the paradigms and the sub-questions for operationalizing.

1.3.1.1 Rational actor paradigm

Applying the rational actor paradigm – assuming strategic decision-making as the result of cost-benefit calculations by unitary actors – involves the sub-questions below:

1. What are the objective (or perceived) circumstances that IS and the KRI conceive as threats and opportunities during each key event?
2. What are IS' and the KRI's goals during each key event?

149 Cf. Cammaert *et al*., "Rapport," 23; Hudson, "President Obama"; "Resolution 2169."
150 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 8.
151 *Ibid*.
152 *Ibid*., 392.
153 Tanter, "International system and foreign policy approaches," 12.
154 Cf. Kiras, "Key concepts," 307.

3. What are the objective (or perceived) options for addressing this issue?
4. What are the objective (or perceived) strategic costs and benefits for each option?
5. What are IS' and the KRI's best choices given these conditions?[155]

1.3.1.2 Organizational behavior paradigm

Applying the organizational behavior paradigm – assuming strategic decision-making as the outcome of bureaucratic processes of the relevant sub-organizations and focusing on standard operating procedures (SOPs) – involves the sub-questions below:

1. Of what organizations (and organizational components) do IS and the KRI consist during the key events?
2. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs create in producing information about international conditions, threats, and opportunities during the key events?
3. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs create in generating the menu of options for action during the key events?
4. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs establish for implementing whatever is chosen during the key events?[156]

1.3.1.3 Governmental politics paradigm

Applying the governmental politics paradigm – assuming strategic decision-making as the outcome of crucial individuals bargaining to satisfy their interests – involves the sub-questions below:

1. Who plays? That is, whose views and values count in shaping the choice and action of IS and the KRI during the key events?
2. What factors shape each player's (a) perceptions; (b) preferred course of action; and thus (c) the player's stand on the issue?
3. What factors account for each player's impact on the choice and action?
4. What is the "action channel"? That is, the established process for aggregating competing perceptions, preferences, and stands of players in making decisions and taking action?[157]

155 Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 389-90.
156 Cf. *Ibid*., 390.
157 Cf. *Ibid*., 390.

1.3.1.4 Complexity theory

This study addresses merging the abovementioned paradigms.[158] Existing research indicated that elements of different paradigms together provide better explanations and recognized multi-layered and multi-directional processes.[159] Although complexity theory emphasizes each case as unique in time, space, and context, these elements offer some form of structure and lead to the following sub-questions:

1. What time-specific actors and factors are relevant for IS' and the KRI's strategic decision-making during the key events?
2. What space-specific actors and factors are relevant?
3. What context-specific actors and factors are relevant?
4. Which multi-layered and multi-directional processes/links affect the outcome?

Complexity theory in this study is based on the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm. As such, complexity theory resembles constructivism and historical institutionalism, with their focus on perceptions, turning points, and pathways. Yet, complexity theory adopts a more eclectic, multidisciplinary, and self-relfective approach, beyond these phenomena.

Contrary to much quantitative research, qualitative research often does not explain the methodology used[160]; many analysts and policymakers 'think about problems of foreign and military policy in terms of largely implicit conceptual models.'[161] To test whether the paradigms described above apply to Middle Eastern ANSAs, this study uses them rigorously. The findings might lead to adjustments or additions to the paradigms.[162]

1.3.2 Claim to originality: apply and merge paradigms

The added value of this study concerns understanding how IS and the KRI made their strategic decisions within the context of their mutual conflict by applying and merging the abovementioned IR paradigms. Existing literature typically considered ANSAs' strategies as given, discussing what

158 Cf. *Ibid*., 392. For contrary views see: Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 6, 16.
159 Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Foreign policy making in the Middle East. Complex realism," in *International relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed., Louise Fawcett (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 258.
160 Michael Kenney, "Learning from the 'dark side.' Identifying, accessing and interviewing illicit non-state actors," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 28.
161 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 3. Original in italics.
162 Cf. *Ibid*., 7. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.

the strategies were[163] but hardly considering how they were decided on. Contrary to the rational actor paradigm, analysts hardly applied the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms to ANSAs in a Middle Eastern context[164] or to a conflict between two ANSAs.

The conflict between IS and the KRI was dynamic, with different stages of violence: skirmishes while sharing ISF as an adversary during taking over power in northern Iraq; conventional or regular type combat in combination with asymmetric tactics during the battle for the KRI; and proxy-type siege warfare during the siege of Kobanî. The different types of warfare that IS and the KRI conducted during 2014 indicated the complexity of these ANSAs.[165] Another dynamic concerned the dichotomy between existential wars of necessity versus non-existential wars of choice. The dichotomy indicates to what extent an actor is willing to commit. Whereas the KRI fought a war of necessity when IS attacked the KRI and a war of choice in Kobanî, the filling of the vacuum seemed somewhat in between; IS fought a war of necessity when it filled the vacuum and seemed to fight wars of choice when it attacked the KRI and Kobanî.[166] As wars of necessity are existential, the wars of choice are interesting from a strategic decision-making perspective: why risk people and resources in conflict, especially with an uncertain outcome against a peer or near-peer rival, as was the case between IS and the KRI.[167]

Asymmetries exist in every conflict.[168] That includes conflicts between ANSAs. Whereas IS was primarily religiously inspired, the KRI was predominantly nationalist inspired.[169] Other asymmetries might concern power, interests at stake, or technologies available.[170] Within IR, many studies involving ANSAs focus on asymmetric conflicts between states and ANSAs.[171] Still, ANSAs remain underexposed in academic research. In particular, this study aims to contribute to a 'more systematic and analytically oriented study of violent groups in Iraq.'[172] A better scientific understanding of ANSAs' strategic decision-making contributes to better practices regarding ANSAs in general.[173] Yet, this study's external validity remains limited to the two cases under study. IS and the KRI benefitted from developments and opportunities within a specific context.

163 Cf. Bahney & Johnston, "Who runs the Islamic State group?"; Carmon *et al*., "Understanding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 28, 233.
164 For example: Beatrice de Graaf & Ahmet Yayla, "The ISIS files – Policing as rebel governance. The Islamic State police" (Washington D.C.: *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2021).
165 Cf. Heuser, *War*, 25.
166 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 72-3. Also see: Stephen Biddle, "The determinants of nonstate military methods," *The Pacific Review* 31:6 (2018), 725, 734; Heuser, *War*, 65, 263; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 6.
167 For example: Stansfield, "The Islamic State," 1,334-7. Also see: Fuad Hussein & Falah Bakir, "Iraq's crisis and the KRG," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 11, 2014.
168 Haun, "Air power in the age of primacy," 1; Speller, "Introduction," 8-9; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 22.
169 Cf. Fukuyama, *Identity*, 74-5.
170 Cf. Haun, "Air power in the age of primacy," 15-6. Also see: Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 358-65.
171 For example: Freedman, *Command*, 464.
172 Bakker, *Terrorism and counterterrorism studies*, 200.
173 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3.

1.4 Methodology

This study conducts a structured, focused comparison method.[174] The focus is IS' strategic decision-making, but the study also addresses the KRI's. The study bases analysis of the strategic decision-making leading to and during the key events on literature research, using primary and secondary sources with additional interviews.

Awareness of paradigms[175] next to a careful research design in advance and a well-documented methodological outlay should avoid the pitfall of not explaining the methodology.[176] This study is descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive part adds to a lack of knowledge regarding the conflict between IS and the KRI, hopefully enabling future explanatory research.[177] This paragraph on research methodology concerns designing research procedures that allow empirical observations that represent the key concepts.[178] Applying the paradigms that Allison observed to this descriptive framework will lead to the study's explanatory (or 'evaluative'[179]) part.

Important here is what constitutes a paradigm. Allison and Zelikow defined a paradigm as 'a systematic statement of the basic assumptions, concepts, and propositions employed by a school of analysis.'[180] Although paradigms are '[w]eaker than a satisfactory theoretical model'[181], they improve previously used, implicit models.[182] However, paradigms 'have no explanatory or predictive power; they are neither testable nor falsifiable since no expectations or predictions follow directly from them.'[183] The lack of falsification implies operationalizing the three paradigms mentioned above is impossible. Each concerns a framework describing a general way of thinking, not a theory with independent and dependent variables. Valuable paradigms do contribute to developing sound theories, though.[184] Some authors described paradigms as summaries of a specific school of thought.[185] Referring to the study of IR, 'paradigms [...] meant that there was no need to feel sorry about the state of a discipline marred by fragmentation,

174 Cf. George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 67-72.
175 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 4.
176 Kenney, "'Learning from the 'dark side,'" 28.
177 Cf. Earl Babbie, *The practice of social research* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998), 91-2.
178 *Ibid*., 139.
179 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 3n†.
180 *Ibid*., 23n20, 114-115. Also see: Pijl, *Wereldorde en machtspolitiek*, 258.
181 *Ibid*., 23.
182 David Welch, "The organizational process and bureaucratic politics paradigms. Retrospect and prospect," *International Security* 17:2 (1992), 115.
183 Brian Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al*. (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 86.
184 Welch, "The organizational process," 116.
185 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

but that there was no need either to relinquish pretensions to scientific rigour.'[186] Academic disputes exist on whether paradigms consist subsequently[187] or simultaneously.[188]

Focusing on the paradigms themselves, this study conducts a congruence analysis, in which 'the researcher uses the insights gained in the case study for the debate on the relevance of theoretical approaches in the scientific discourse.'[189] The case studies 'provide empirical evidence for the explanatory relevance or relative strength of one theoretical approach in comparison to other theoretical approaches.'[190] Social scientists Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland argued that a congruence analysis can be used either 'as munitions in the struggle for hegemony between competing theories,' or 'as arguments for the adequacy and fruitfulness of new or marginalized theories or new combinations of theories.'[191] Whereas other researchers assumed successiveness of paradigms, arguing that, due to the different assumptions underlying the different models, there is 'no rational ground for comparing paradigms'[192], Allison and Zelikow argued that the paradigms they observed act complementary.[193] If that is correct, the paradigms can, or should, be combined into one larger model. Then, strictly speaking, congruence analysis does not apply, as the paradigms together constitute a single, larger model. Still, this study compares the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm, and complexity theory, acknowledging that the latter includes the other paradigms. Using complexity theory as a merger of the traditional IR paradigms forms the exploratory part of the study.

1.4.1 Unit of analysis: strategic decision-making

The unit of analysis[194] in this study is strategic decision-making concerning foreign policy.[195] How that foreign policy was produced differs for each of the paradigms mentioned above. The rational actor paradigm views foreign policy as a choice made by a unitary actor[196]; the organizational behavior paradigm as the result of relevant organizations' cultures, routines, and

186 Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 6.
187 *Ibid*., 6.
188 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392.
189 Joachim Blatter & Markus Haverland, *Designing case studies. Explanatory approaches in small-n research* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31.
190 *Ibid*., 144.
191 *Ibid*., 197.
192 Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 6, 16.
193 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392.
194 Babbie, *The practice of social research*, 93. Also see: Tyson Chatagnier *et al*., "The decision calculus of terrorist leaders," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6:4-5 (2012), 125.
195 Cf. Hans Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz. A critical rationalist between international politics and foreign policy," in *The future of international relations. Masters in the making?* Iver Neumann & Ole Wæver (eds.), 66-89 (London: Routledge, 1997).
196 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

procedures[197]; and the governmental politics paradigm considers foreign policy as the outcome of bargaining among the key decision makers.[198] Complexity theory views foreign policy as the outcome of multiple interacting processes on different levels, including feedback loops.[199]

The data for the analyses are the actors' 'intentions, statements, and actions [...] directed toward the external world and the response of other actors to these intentions, statements and actions.'[200] Compared to most state actors, the challenge with most non-state actors is that data is not always available. States usually have some form of accountability that non-state actors lack.[201] Despite its inherent ideological hostility towards outsiders[202], many different sources of information on IS are available, ranging from former members to captured documents, which are being translated into English and become known as open-source documents. Despite being considered a de facto state[203], primary sources in English regarding the KRI's strategic decision-making concerning the conflict with IS are less available.

1.4.2 Sources: focus on primary sources

This study explores primary, secondary, and tertiary sources to identify what happened, to map the relevant sub-organizations and decision-makers within IS and the KRI, and which strategic decisions IS and the KRI made.

1.4.2.1 Documents

Content analysis[204] of primary sources avoids using secondary sources, which sometimes prove incorrect.[205] Scholars observed that non-state actors are more challenging to analyze than state actors, as most non-state actors are not obligated to make all key documents publicly available. Furthermore, non-state actors often change messages, tone, or both, depending on

197 *Ibid*., 164.
198 *Ibid*., 294.
199 Cf. Bernard Burnes, "Complexity theories and organizational change," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 7:2 (2005), 74; David Byrne & Gill Callaghan, *Complexity theory and the social sciences. The state of the art* (London: Routledge, 2014), 22, 62, 128-49; John Holland, *Complexity. A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3; Deborah Stone, *Policy paradox. The art of political decision making* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 97.
200 Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," 18.
201 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 492, 502-3.
202 Cf. Michael Knights, "Conducting field research on terrorism in Iraq," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 119.
203 For example: Kamaran Palani *et al*. "De facto states engagement with parent states. Kurdistan's engagement with the Iraqi Government," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48:4 (2021), 770-1n1-2; "Kurdish peshmerga. Divided from within," *Harvard Politics*, September 5, 2015; Sadoon, "The Islamic State and the independence referendum," 1-2.
204 Qaraman, "The representation of Kurds," 11.
205 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 5.

their audience, creating inconsistencies in external statements.[206] Usually, non-state actors have less presence in media than state actors. Although non-state actors increasingly seek attention via (social) media, ANSAs' 'very functioning depends on secrecy.'[207]

IS proved different, though. It quite capably managed its presence in social media, using shocking images to address an audience of young people.[208] Following the example of other ANSAs, including *al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula's online *Inspire* magazine, IS started publishing the *IS Reports*. Later followed the *Dabiq* magazine, used for propaganda and recruitment and to spread messages of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[209] *IS Reports* and *Dabiq* are part of IS' asymmetric strategy in fighting opponents that are more capable militarily[210]: '*Dabiq* is a core tool for all sorts of Islamic State communications.'[211] As such, *Dabiq* is an essential primary source for IS' intentions, capabilities, and activities in this research. This study uses other sources to verify IS' propaganda tools – including *Dabiq* – as the propaganda merely indicates what IS wanted to show.[212] IS' primary opponent, the KRI, official organizations within the KRI, and many key individuals have official social media outlets that serve as primary sources[213], which need verification, too.

IS Reports and *Dabiq* primarily provide insight into IS' external communication.[214] Therefore, in addition to IS' *Dabiq* magazines, this study uses captured internal documents that are publicly available for analyzing IS' internal communications.[215] Next to the *ISIS Files* project of George Washington University and the New York Times[216], websites with translated IS documents by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)[217], Kyle Orton[218] , and

206 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 362.
207 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 503. Cf. Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 6, 11, 19; Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile," 48, 49-51.
208 Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 362.
209 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 2; Haroro Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017. Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications" (The Hague: *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2018), 11-21. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 71; Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 154.
210 Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017," 3-4.
211 Fishman, *The master plan*, 230.
212 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 15.
213 Examples include: "About Kurdistan Democratic Party," *Kurdistan Democratic Party*, accessed April 27, 2022; "Kurdistan Regional Government," *Kurdistan Regional Government*, accessed April 27, 2022; "Masoud Barzani," *Masoud Barzani*, accessed April 27, 2022; "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan," *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan*, accessed April 27, 2022.
214 Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017," 1. For example: "Reflections on the final crusade," *Dabiq* 4 (1435H|2014), 44. Also see: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 27; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 5.
215 Ingram *et al*., *The ISIS reader*, 8. Also see: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 183; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 23.
216 "Project overview," *The ISIS Files*, accessed April 27, 2022.
217 "About," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, accessed November 6, 2022.
218 Kyle Orton, "About," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, accessed November 6, 2022.

Aymenn al-Tamimi[219] are of great value. MEMRI, Orton, and Tamimi frequently provide comments on the translated documents. In such cases, this study refers separately to both the primary source and to the comments by the researcher. Although many internal IS documents are available, the collection is likely incomplete, and many copies still need translation.[220]

The challenge with all primary sources is verifying authenticity.[221] Transparency is needed to enable replication, where the data was acquired[222], and triangulation with other relevant sources might prove beneficial.[223] Such relevant sources include other primary sources, like interviews with (former) members of the ANSAs – elaborated on below – or other documents that the ANSA in question already made public, such as propaganda materials. Secondary and tertiary sources might also prove relevant. These include articles and books on (similar) ANSAs and observing the actual behavior of identified sub-organizations. Another relevant factor concerning IS is the extreme violence in IS' primary source material. For a sound analysis, it is necessary to approach the documents as objectively as possible.[224] However, this does not mean the harm done and violence applied is overlooked or unrecognized.

1.4.2.2 Field research

Field research is 'a matter of going where the action is and simply watching and listening.'[225] Field research enables a high level of verification of the findings. In line with this argument, it offers a way to conduct research beyond politically motivated messages or the often-biased perspective of authorities. These sources also provide the researcher with more in-depth knowledge than journalist reports. The possibility of asking follow-up questions might reveal new avenues for research. The field research might help the researcher understand the subject better by offering the context in which actors operate.[226] In sum, it 'is essential in verifying "circular" truths, debunking myths and information, and unlocking new perspectives into the specific research issue.'[227]

219 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Home," *Aymenn Jawad*, accessed November 6, 2022.
220 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 83. Also see: Michael Morell and Bill Harlow, *The great war of our time. The CIA's fight against terrorism from al Qa'ida to ISIS* (New York: Twelve, 2015), 316.
221 Ewen MacAskill *et al*., "Intelligence agents study cache of leaked Isis documents," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2016; Milton, "Structure of a state," 3n3, 5.
222 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 106.
223 Milton, "Structure of a state," 4.
224 Ingram *et al*., *The ISIS reader*, 7.
225 Babbie, *The practice of social research*, 290.
226 Adam Dolnik, "Introduction. The need for field research on terrorism," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 2-5.
227 Magnus Ranstorp, "Research challenges involved in field study on terrorism in the Middle East," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 48. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 88-9.

The methodology in this research borrows from what some scholars identified as high-risk ethnography (HRE). As its name implies, HRE focuses on potentially dangerous environments, which makes classical ethnographic approaches obsolete. HRE is 'the art of the possible where local conditions dictate which type of research can be conducted where, when, how, and by whom. A constant security assessment of the immediate environment necessitates great flexibility and the ability to handle stressful situations, but also to spot potential openings for new sources of social science data in an ever changing environment.'[228] The field research in this study consists of a limited number of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Third parties appointed the interviewees and the interlocutors, typically by coincidence. From that perspective, these interviewees and interlocutors resulted from opportunity sampling, which limits the validity of the interviews. Future research can obtain higher levels of validity by conducting more randomly conducted interviews with a target population. That requires a safe environment open for academic research, which Iraq has not always been.

Other critical notes on interviews as primary sources are needed. Most people interviewed for this study were Arab- or Kurdish-speaking and the author relied on interpreters. These interpreters applied their interpretations to what was being said. Sometimes, the interpreters affected the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. To some extent, due to the involvement of interpreters, these interviews count as secondary sources. Next to the participation of interpreters, a single interview is hardly enough to acquire the information needed for the research, especially when the topics concern sensitive issues such as politics and security. Despite these reservations, the interviews did offer interesting insights, in particular regular contacts offered beneficial information once a trusted relationship was established. For establishing a trusted relationship, the conversations were as informal as possible. The author took notes and asked whether to use them in the study.

Conducting field research requires pragmatism. Field research is a delicate balance between scientific transparency, ethics, and security concerns. Nobody should experience harm for being involved in field research, not the respondent, interviewer, or people facilitating an interview. The researcher has to respect security concerns from a practical and ethical point of view. Ignoring academic standards risks field research being rejected as a severe academic discipline. The researcher can overcome this dilemma by describing the methodology in as detailed manner as possible. To keep research as secure as possible, the researcher should scrutinize any publication scientifically and security-wise.

228 Michael Taarnby, "Professionalizing high-risk field research in academia," in *Conducting terrorism field research. A guide*, Adam Dolnik (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 207.

Although there certainly are ways to deal with the challenges of conducting field research, the discipline might not comply with the principles for ethical research as presented in the "European code of conduct for research integrity."[229] One possible way of dealing with this challenge is that researchers should recognize and explicitly mention the strengths and weaknesses of their field research. As such, researchers can recognize field research's added value.

One of the dilemmas regarding the interviews in this study was whether or not to sign letters of consent. For security reasons, and sometimes requested by the interviewees, within this study, respondents signed no letters of consent for the interviews. Respondents not signing letters of consent was assessed as acceptable as the number of interviews and informal conversations in this study is somewhat limited, and they serve mainly as illustrations. Nevertheless, this is recognized as a weakness within this study's research design and methodology to obtain honesty in communication and reliability in performing research. A similar challenge occurred as recording or taking notes was not allowed for some interviews for security reasons. The author wrote down notes as soon as permitted, recognizing that discrepancies would occur. Those notes did not reference the interviewee's identities in order not to compromise security, in line with the researcher's duty of care. When third parties chose interviewees, this was also referred to, acknowledging that the interviewee potentially took place involuntarily and could harm the study's impartiality.

IS-related interviews, in particular, show the main complexities of HRE field research. Researchers can overcome the dilemmas between science and security in field research by combining the two into a pragmatic *Realwissenschaft*. Secondary and tertiary sources need to provide the necessary context. These secondary and tertiary sources are as essential as are primary sources. Multi-source research should connect science and security in an ongoing dialogue.

1.4.2.3 Literature

Much has been written on the study of IR, IS and the KRI, and it is impossible to name every relevant book or article. Nevertheless, some books and articles are of significant importance to this study. Allison and Zelikow's *Essence of decision*[230] is essential for providing the paradigms of analyzing a conflict between two ANSAs. A valuable addition to this framework is offered by complexity theory, described by David Byrne and Gill Callaghan in their book *Complexity theory and the social sciences*.[231] Concerning IS, Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle's *The origins*

229 "European code of conduct for research integrity," Strasbourg: *European Science Foundation*, 2011; "European code of conduct for research integrity, revised ed.," Strasbourg: *European Science Foundation*, 2017.

230 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*.

231 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory and the social sciences*.

of ISIS[232] proved very useful. Adopting an objective approach towards IS, the authors applied complexity theory to IS. Furthermore, Fawaz Gerges' *ISIS*[233] stands out. A helpful introduction to the politics of the KRI is Mahir Aziz's *The Kurds of Iraq*.[234] Next to these books and articles, many other secondary and tertiary sources have been used, all mentioned in the bibliography.

1.4.3 Method: structured, focused comparison

This study applies a structured, focused comparison method defined by political scientists Alexander George and Andrew Bennett as:

> 'simple and straightforward. The method is "structured" in that the researcher writes general questions that reflect the research objective and that these questions are asked of each case under study to guide and standardize data collection, thereby making systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible. The method is "focused" in that it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined.'[235]

In this study, the strategic decisions of IS and the KRI during three key events in 2014 form the cases for explaining how the actors came to their strategic decisions. The key events involve IS and the KRI, but in different circumstances, with other organizational elements, and sometimes with different decision-makers.

The foreign policy paradigms provide standardized questions that allow a structured comparison based on the existing literature.[236] Due to this study's exploratory and sensitizing character, it is disciplined configurative: established foreign policy paradigms aim to explain the cases, with the additional purpose of testing analytical approaches and the heuristic purpose of exploring new analytical approaches to ANSAs.[237] The established paradigms concern the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm; the new approach concerns complexity theory.[238]

232 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*.
233 Gerges, *ISIS*.
234 Mahir Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq: Ethnonationalism and national identity in Iraqi Kurdistan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).
235 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 67. Also see: Lees, "We are all comparativists now," 1104n13.
236 *Ibid.*, 69-70.
237 *Ibid.*, 74-6.
238 Cf. Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1,009.

1.4.4 Language: (translated) English

This study's choice of words, names, and time indication is not intended as a political statement. This study uses words and names commonly used in English language academic literature and media outlets to enhance readability. Consequentially, inconsistencies occurred. Examples of such inconsistencies include referring to the leader of *al-Qaeda* (the base) by his actual name, including infix, as bin Laden, whereas referring to the leader of IS occurs by his *kunya* (pseudonym, alias, or *nom de guerre*)[239] and without the infix, as Baghdadi. Another example concerned the name of Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî: Ayn al-Arab is the Arabic name for the Kobanî city in Kurdish. This study uses the name Kobanî, which is applied in most English-language media outlets and journals. IS used Kobanî and Ayn al-Arab to indicate that it had renamed the town 'Ayn al-Islām.[240] As for language, indications for dates and time used in this study are – whenever possible – Westernized to enhance readability, fully realizing that this does not do right to all actors studied.[241] Years according to the Islamic calendar are indicated with the abbreviation H, for *Hijra* (the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 of the Gregorian calendar). Thus, the Islamic year 1435H corresponds to 2013-2014 and 2014 corresponds to 1435H-1436H.

1.4.5 Positionality

As for any study, the author's background proves relevant, potentially influencing interpretations of the analytical paradigms and the cases. The analyst needs to be aware of potential biases.[242] Complexity theory assumes that the analyst observes, interprets, and influences the studied environment.[243] This section discusses how elements of the author's positionality may have influenced research and data collection and how the author dealt with this. Overall, while acknowledging that the author of this study has missed peculiarities that he is unaware of at the time of writing, the elements of self-identification mentioned below need consideration. Awareness of the authors' positionality in the study helps readers assess the study's validity. Future research will prove how these elements influenced this study and to what extent the conclusions remain valid.

239 Vera Mironova & Karam Alhamad, "The names of jihad. A guide to ISIS' noms de guerre," *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2017. Also see: Moubayed, *Under the black flag*, 27.

240 "Islamic State reports," *Dabiq* 5 (1436H|2014), 15.

241 Cf. Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 130-1.

242 Cf. Graham Allison, "Conceptual models and the Cuban missile crisis," *The American Political Science Review* 63:3 (1969), 689; Cindy Otis, *True or false. A CIA analyst's guide to spotting fake news* (Dreamscape media, 2020), audiobook.

243 For example: Gani. "From discourse to practice," 46-7.

The author's non-religious, Western European background is relevant to this study. Furthermore, the author does not speak Arabic or Kurdish, which makes him rely on sources written in or translated into Dutch, English, French, or German. The author did have some situational awareness and situational understanding due to his political science study and military background. The author had worked as a United Nations military observer in the Middle East in 2011-2012, before regularly traveling to Iraq as an academic researcher on politically motivated conflicts in 2013-2017. As an academic researcher, the author experienced much cooperation and friendliness from local contacts – both Arabs and Kurds – and support seemed to increase when acknowledging ignorance from an unbiased but critical posture. In 2017, the author moved into a diplomatic position in Iraq, restricting the author from continuing field research to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

The author recognizes being privileged, as he was born and raised in a secure and prosperous country. As such, he has never been a victim of armed conflict and only experienced armed conflict from a relatively safe distance.

1.5 Outline of the study

Using the research design outlined in this chapter, chapter 2 conceptualizes ANSAs and strategic decision-making. Chapter 3 explores how to analyze these concepts using four analytical frameworks. Based on these analytical frameworks, chapter 4 further introduces the context and actors of the case studies. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 chronologically apply the analytical frameworks to the three critical events in the conflict between IS and the KRI in 2014. Finally, chapter 8 considers the conclusions of the previous chapters, reflects on findings and methodology, and suggests avenues for future research.