

# Party politics and military deployments: explaining political consensus on Belgian military intervention

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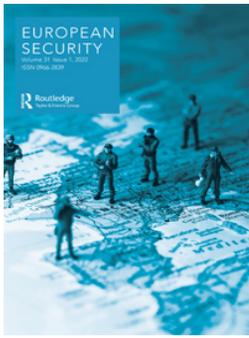
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## Party politics and military deployments: explaining political consensus on Belgian military intervention

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### ABSTRACT

While a comprehensive body of research provides evidence that politics does not always stop at the water's edge, the question "when does politics stop at the water's edge" has remained largely unanswered. This article addresses this gap in the literature by examining the level of agreement in Belgium's parliament on military deployment decisions. More specifically, the uncontested decisions to participate in the 2011 Libya intervention and the air strikes against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq are compared with the contested decision to participate in strike operations against IS over Syrian territory. The results of our study indicate that a broad parliamentary consensus will emerge if the domestic political context forces left- and right-leaning parties into negotiating a compromise that takes into account their preferences regarding the scope of the operation and if left-leaning parties have no reason to oppose the operation because it pursues inclusive goals and its international legal justification is not contested.

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Military intervention; party politics; parliamentary contestation; ideology, use of force

## Introduction

Over the past decades, a comprehensive body of research has emerged that provides strong evidence that politics does not stop at the water's edge. While comparative politics research suggests that international-level developments increasingly affect party-political competition (cf. *inter alia* Hooghe *et al.* 2019), international relations scholarship has shown that there are significant differences in the foreign policy preferences of political parties (Raunio and Wagner 2020). More specifically, there is increasingly a strong empirical support for the claim that parties matter for military deployment decisions (Haesebrouck and Mello 2020, Wagner 2020). However, as shown by Wagner *et al.* (2018), not all military deployment decisions are equally contested in national parliaments. Recent studies suggest that the pattern of political contestation of military deployment decisions results from a complex interplay between characteristics of the military operation and domestic-level conditions (Böller and Müller 2018, Haesebrouck and Van Immerseel 2020). So far, research has focussed predominantly on explaining the pattern of parliamentary voting on military deployments. In-depth studies of the parliamentary debates

and decision-making process that result in (non-)contested decisions remain scarce. Hereby, the rationale behind the political contestation of military deployment decisions remains largely unexplored (Wagner 2020, p. 97).

In this article, we examine why some military deployments are strongly contested in national parliaments, while others are not contested at all. This is accomplished by comparing two Belgian military deployment decisions that were subjected to a surprisingly low level of political contestation with a similar case that resulted in a high level of contestation. More specifically, the uncontested decisions to participate in the 2011 Libya intervention and the air strikes against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Iraq in 2014 were compared with one similar case that was politically contested: the 2016 decision to participate in strike operations against IS over Syrian territory.

Why did participation in the Libya intervention and the air strikes against IS in Iraq not result in contestation, contrary to the decision to participate in the strike operations against IS in Syria? Or, more generally, under what conditions do military deployments result in a high level of contestation in parliament? To answer these questions, we build on academic research on political parties, coalition politics and parliamentary involvement in troop deployment decisions to develop a theoretical model that aims to explain the pattern of political contestation of a deployment decision. We examine whether this framework explains parliamentary consensus and contestation, by combining a qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates in the Belgian House of Representatives with semi-structured interviews. The case-studies provide support for our theoretical expectation that a broad parliamentary consensus will emerge if the domestic political context forces left- and right-wing parties into negotiating a compromise that takes into account their preferences regarding the scope of the operation or if left-wing parties have no reason to oppose the operation because it pursues inclusive goals and its international legal justification is not contested.

## Theoretical framework

In line with prior research, we expect contestation to result from a complex interplay between characteristics of the military operation, in which troops are deployed, and domestic level conditions that determine the incentives and opportunities for government parties to secure a broad agreement on the deployment decision (Haesebrouck and Van Immerseel 2020).

### *Party-political preferences and divisiveness of deployment decision*

A considerable body of academic work provides evidence that political parties have different preferences regarding the use of military force. Studies, based on expert studies and parliamentary voting, conclude that right-leaning parties are generally more supportive of the use of force than left-leaning parties (Wagner *et al.* 2018, Haesebrouck and Mello 2020, Wagner 2020). However, empirical studies that explore the relationship between a government's ideological position and its military deployment decisions arrive at decisively mixed results. For example, while the analysis of Palmer *et al.* (2004, p. 16) demonstrates that right-leaning governments are more likely to get involved in militarised inter-state conflicts, Koch (2009) shows that leftist governments were actually

more likely to get involved in militarised disputes. Haesebrouck and Mello (2020), in turn, provide evidence that political conflict on military deployment depends on the type of operations in which troops are active, with left-leaning governments being more likely to contribute to for operations with inclusive goals, like peacekeeping operations and humanitarian interventions, and right-leaning governments more likely to contribute military forces to strategic operations, in which clear national interests were at stake.

Studies that focus on specific military operations also suggest that political contestation does not arise in the same way across operations. In an influential study on European participation in the military operations in the Balkans, Rathbun (2004) argues that leftist parties are generally more antimilitaristic, prefer operating under multilateral frameworks and have a broader conception of the national interest, which includes the promotion of human rights (Rathbun 2004, pp. 18–21). Right-wing parties, in turn, are generally more supportive of the use of force, but are more reluctant to delegate control to multilateral institutions and will only support military deployments if there are clear national interests at stake. Other studies confirm these expectations. While right-wing parties were more supportive of operations without a clear humanitarian component, like the 2003 Iraq War or the military operations in Afghanistan (Mello 2012, Auerswald and Saideman 2014), left-wing parties were more supportive of operations deployed under a multilateral framework that pursue humanitarian goals (e.g. Auerswald and Saideman (2014), Haesebrouck (2017), Haesebrouck (2018)), or supported a peace process (e.g. Haesebrouck (2015)). The analysis by Wagner (2020, p. 134) of parliamentary debates on the military mission in Afghanistan and the fight against IS confirms that parties on the right “tend to assess military interventions against the yardstick of national interests” and that international legal arguments are more frequently used by left-leaning politicians. However, his study also shows that parties across the entire political spectrum refer to humanitarian values.

More recently, several studies suggest that traditional left-right differences do not adequately capture party-political conflict on military deployments. The analyses of expert survey data by Wagner *et al.* (2018) and Haesebrouck and Mello (2020) show that support for military interventions follows a curvilinear pattern, with lower support among political parties at the two extremes of the political spectrum. However, there is no consistent confirmatory evidence that this lack of support for peace and security missions among extreme parties effectively translates in opposition to military deployment.

### ***Coalition politics, parliamentary involvement and political compromise***

Political contestation of potentially controversial deployment decisions can be avoided when political parties arrive at a political compromise and, hereby, secure a broad majority for an operation (Haesebrouck and Van Immerseel 2020). A political compromise can either involve restricting the mandate of the deployed forces, so the deployment decision is less controversial, or engaging in legislative logrolling, a process in which more reluctant parties can exchange support for a deployment decision for support on other policy issues or office payoffs (Beasley and Kaarbo 2014, p. 483, Oktay and Beasley 2017). Whether or not the mandate of deployed forces will be restricted or opposition support is sought is expected to depend on the level of parliamentary involvement in troop deployment decisions and the nature of the governing coalition.

First, governments can be expected to have stronger incentives to reach out to the opposition if parliament is involved in the troop deployment decisions. Comparative research on parliamentary war powers shows that the level of parliamentary involvement in deployment decisions varies considerably among established democracies, ranging from a legal obligation of *ex ante* parliamentary consent for all deployments to the absence of parliamentary involvement in decision-making (Wagner *et al.* 2010). The impact of parliamentary war powers is generally examined by assessing participation patterns in military interventions (Wagner 2018, p. 122). Dieterich *et al.* (2015), for example, demonstrate that high parliamentary war powers are associated with reduced involvement in the Iraq War. The study of Wagner (2018, p. 130) qualifies this conclusion by demonstrating that many states with parliamentary veto powers did participate in military operations in Iraq after the end of major combat operations. More generally, Wagner's (2018, p. 131) demonstrates that the impact of strong war powers depends on the character of the military mission.

Parliamentary influence on deployment decisions should not be equated with parliaments voting against military deployment. Strong parliamentary involvement encourages governments "to reach out, address concerns and ultimately compromise to secure broad support" (Wagner 2018, p. 123). Deployment decisions following strong involvement of the legislative branch can be expected to be politically less contested because they are likely to be a negotiated compromise between government and the main opposition parties (Fonck *et al.* 2019). Additionally, parliamentary involvement creates incentives and potential opportunities for engaging in legislative logrolling, a process in which opposition and government parties exchange support for each other preferences (Oktay 2018).

Whether or not government parties reach out to the opposition is expected to depend not only on the legislative branch's war powers, but also on the features of the governing coalition. Governments that suffer from structural or situational weaknesses have strong incentives to try to arrive at a broad consensus on deployment decisions (Oktay 2018). Oktay (2014) demonstrates that the structural weakness of minority governments increases the possibility of legislative logrolls, which can result in a lower level of contestation of their deployment decisions (Oktay 2018). Governments can also suffer from situational weaknesses (Oktay 2018, p. 110). More specifically, coalitions of ideological opposing parties are often fragile, which creates an incentive to reach out to opposition parties to secure a broader majority for military deployments (Auerswald and Saideman 2014, p. 69, Oktay 2018, p. 110). Heterogeneous coalitions can, therefore, also be expected to be prone to legislative logrolling.

The ideological composition of the governing coalition can also have an indirect impact on the level of political contestation: heterogeneous coalitions might take fewer controversial decisions because members from multiple parties need to agree on military contributions (Kaarbo 1996, Beasley and Kaarbo 2014, Oppermann *et al.* 2017). In their ground-breaking study on national behaviour in NATO's ISAF operation in Afghanistan, Auerswald and Saideman (2014, p. 26) argue that deployment decisions of ideologically less coherent governments, which include left- and right-wing parties, are likely to be the negotiated compromise between different coalition partners (see e.g. Auerswald and Saideman 2014, pp. 68–69). Therefore, they can be expected to be less controversial and enjoy more widespread support in parliament. More specifically, left-wing government

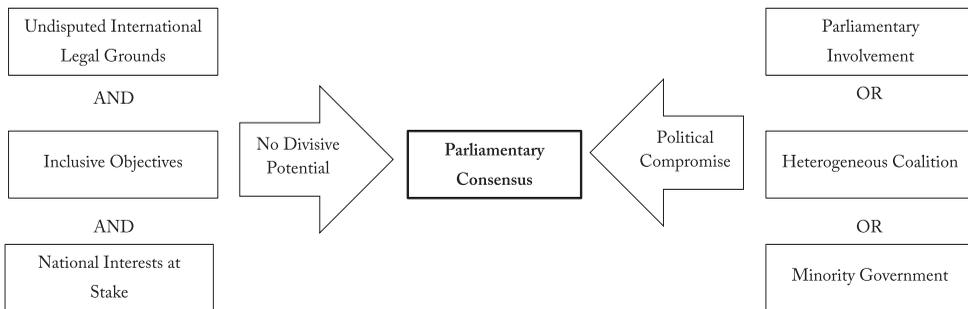
parties might ask to impose restrictions on the deployed forces if an operation does not pursue inclusive goals or if an operation does not have a clear legal ground. Right-wing government parties, in turn, might also favour national restrictions if there are no national interests at stake (Fonck *et al.* 2019).

**Explaining political consensus on military deployments**

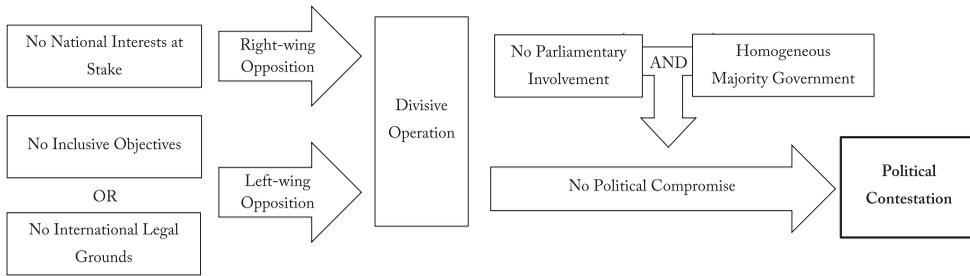
To sum up, whether or not there will be parliamentary consensus on a military deployment decision can be expected to depend on (1) the context of the military operation in which forces are deployed and (2) domestic political conditions. More specifically, literature on political parties, coalition politics and parliamentary war powers suggests two pathways towards parliamentary consensus. First, deployment decisions will not be contested when they concern operations that are in line with international law and aim to pursue humanitarian objectives and defend national interests. Second, an uncontested decision will result if left- and right-wing parties succeed in negotiating a compromise that takes into account their preferences regarding the scope of the operation or if government and opposition parties successfully engage in a legislative logrolling. A negotiated compromise is more likely to materialise if parliament is strongly involved in the decision-making procedure or if the country is governed by a heterogeneous executive, in which both left- and right-wing parties are represented, or a minority government. Figure 1 summarises the pathways towards parliamentary consensus.

Political contestation is only possible if the military operation, in which forces are deployed, is potentially divisive: left-wing parties have reasons to contest an operation if it does not pursue inclusive goals or is not in line with international law, right-wing parties no clear national interests are at stake. Potentially divisive operations will only be contested if government and opposition do not engage in legislative logrolling and the mandate of the deployed forces is not a negotiated compromise between left- and right-wing parties. Such a negotiated compromise will not materialise if the country is governed by a homogeneous government with a strong majority and if parliament is not involved in troop deployment decisions. Figure 2 summarises these expectations.

The model does not incorporate every possible explanation for differing levels of political contestation. First of all, given that members of parliament are expected to be more responsive to public opinion than members of government (Bennett *et al.* 1994), we would expect a greater level of political contestation if there is public opposition



**Figure 1.** Pathways to parliamentary consensus.



**Figure 2.** Pathways to political contestation.

towards the deployment decision. Second, the model does not take into account the risks involved for the deployed forces, which might have an indirect impact on political contestation through public opinion, which is expected to be more negative if deployed forces face higher risks (Eichenberg 2005). Public opinion and risks on the ground might be relevant for political contestation, but are not included because both variables do not vary among the examined cases. Both operations mainly involved air operations, in which the risk for deployed forces is relatively low. Likewise, in spite of the general risk-averseness of Belgium’s general public, there was no outspoken public opposition towards both deployments.<sup>1</sup>

### Empirical puzzle: Belgian Military deployment decisions

We test our theoretical expectations by examining the decision-making process in Belgium on three military deployment decisions: the 2011 military intervention in Libya, the participation in the air strikes against IS in Iraq from September 2014 up till July 2015, and the redeployment of the Belgian fighter jets in Iraq and extension of their mandate to Syria in June 2016. There was strong support in parliament for both the operation in Libya and the air strikes against IS in Iraq (cf. Table 1). In contrast, the 2016 redeployment of the fighter jets in the operation against IS was contested in parliament, with members of the main left-leaning parties abstaining or voting against the operation.

There are two main reasons that plead in favour of a focus on Belgium. First, “Belgium has one of the most fragmented party systems of any modern democracy” (De Winter *et al.* 2006, p. 933). In consequence, the Belgian House of Representatives has a large number and a wide variety of political parties, which makes it a particularly interesting

**Table 1.** Summary of cases.

Case	Parliamentary votes			Legal status	Objectives	Government	Parliament involved
	Yes	No	Abstain				
Libya Operation (2011)	125	0	1	Uncontested	Humanitarian	Heterogeneous minority coalition	Strong
Airstrikes IS Iraq (2014)	114	2	10	Uncontested	Strategic and humanitarian	Heterogeneous majority coalition	Strong
Airstrikes IS Iraq/ Syria (2016)	88	21	18	Contested	Strategic and humanitarian	Homogenous right majority coalition	Weak

case for testing hypotheses on the impact of ideological differences on military deployment decisions. Second, because of the strong grip of political parties on central government, Belgium is often referred to as a classical example of a partitocracy (De Winter and Dumont 2006). Members of the Belgian parliament are, above all, representatives of their party. Statements in parliamentary debates can, therefore, be expected to reflect the position of political parties, rather than the personal opinions of MPs.

The military operations were selected because they display relevant variation on the explanatory conditions. The proclaimed goal of the Libya operation was the protection of civilians against the violent repression of the Libyan uprising, which might explain the support of left-wing parties. Humanitarian motives might have played a role in the decision to participate in the operation against IS. However, this operation also balanced a security threat for Belgium, which has suffered from terrorist attacks linked to IS. The operations furthermore vary with respect to their legality under international law. Given a strong mandate from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the legality of the Libya operation was not contested when Belgium decided to participate. Military operations against IS over Iraqi territory, in turn, were legitimised by Article 51 of the UN Charter, which enshrines the right of collective self-defence, and the request of the Iraqi government for assistance. In contrast, the legality of the operations over Syrian territory was contested among international legal scholars, given that the Syrian government did not consent to foreign military action.<sup>2</sup>

The domestic-level explanatory conditions also vary among the examined cases. First, according to Article 167 of the Belgian Constitution, the decision to send armed forces abroad is exclusively in the hands of the executive. However, at the time of the Libya operation and when it decided to participate in the airstrikes against IS in Iraq, Belgium was governed by a caretaker government, which required the authorisation of the Belgian parliament before it could launch a military operation. Additionally, at the time of the Libya operation, the government did not have a majority of the seats in parliament and, therefore, needed opposition support. In contrast, Belgium was not in a period of government formation when it decided to redeploy its fighter jets and expand their operations to Syria in 2016. The decision was put to vote in parliament, but only a month after the Belgian government had made the deployment decision. In consequence, this was an *ex post* legitimisation rather than an *a priori* authorisation. Opposition parties, thus, had fewer opportunities to have an impact on the mandate of the deployed forces. It is also plausible that the lack of contestation in the first two cases is best explained by the fact that Belgium was governed by a heterogeneous coalition government that included both right- and left-wing parties. In contrast, when it decided on redeploying its fighter jets and also striking targets in Syria, Belgium was governed by a more homogeneous coalition.

**Table 1** summarises the pattern of variation on the outcome of interest and plausible explanatory conditions. The table suggests that characteristics of the operation and differences in domestic political conditions constitute plausible explanations of the pattern of parliamentary contestation of the operation. To examine whether parliamentary consensus is best explained by the political context, party-political preferences, or a combination of both, we combine a qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates in the Belgian House of Representatives with a number of semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> with high ranking members from parliament, political parties and the executive. This combination allows

for a deeper understanding of the impact of party-ideological orientations on the use of force.

## Case studies

### *Libya operation*

Military action in Libya began on March 19 2011, two days after the UNSC adopted a resolution that authorised the UN member states to use all necessary means to protect the Libyan population. Belgium participated in the operation with six F16 fighter jets, a mine-hunter and around 160 supporting military personnel. The parliamentary resolution that authorised the military deployment was almost unanimously adopted on March 21 2011, with only one non-aligned member of parliament (MP) abstaining in the vote (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011b).

Table 2 provides an overview of the parties in the Belgian parliament at the time of the Libya vote, their position towards the intervention, whether or not they were in government and their ideological position, based on the LRGEN-indicator of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, which assigns values between 0 (extreme left) and 10 (extreme right). Parties with a score above 5 on the LRGEN-indicator can be considered right, parties with a score below 5 are considered left parties.

### *Domestic context and mandate negotiations*

One of the two pathways towards political consensus of the theoretical model presented in Figure 1 expects consensus to result from successful negotiations on the mandate of the deployed forces or legislative logrolling. The domestic political context indeed provided the government parties a strong incentive to seek a political compromise. In line with literature on coalition politics, we would expect the mandate of the deployed forces to be limited because the government consisted of both left- and right-wing parties. In line with literature on parliamentary peace and the impact of coalition type on conflict involvement, the “temporary” war powers of the parliament provided the government a strong incentive to reach out to the opposition to gain widespread support for participation in the operation.

**Table 2.** Libya operation.

Party name	Region	Family	Left-right Ches	Government Party	Yes	No	Abstain
PS	Wallonia	Socialist	2.5	Yes	25	0	0
MR	Wallonia	Liberal	7	Yes	9	0	0
CD&V	Flanders	Christian Democrat	5.8	Yes	16	0	0
CDH	Wallonia	Christian Democrat	4.5	Yes	8	0	0
NVA	Flanders	Regionalist	7.6	No	22	0	0
Open VLD	Flanders	Liberal	6.9	No	8	0	0
SP.A	Flanders	Socialist	3.4	No	9	0	0
VB	Flanders	Extreme Right	9.8	No	12	0	0
Ecolo	Wallonia	Green	2.3	No	7	0	0
Groen	Flanders	Green	2.3	No	5	0	0
FDF	Wallonia	Regionalist	5.6	No	3	0	0
LDD	Flanders	Liberal	8.4	No	1	0	0
Independent	Wallonia	NA	NA	No	0	0	1
Total					125	0	1

With government formation in deadlock after the election of June 13 2010, Belgium was governed by a caretaker coalition of Flemish Christen Democrats and Walloon Liberals, Socialists and Christen Democrats. In consequence, the constitutional prerogative of the government to autonomously decide on military deployments was called into question. Therefore, the decision to participate in the Libya intervention was put to vote in parliament. Given that the outgoing executive only controlled 70 of the 150 seats in parliament, a parliamentary majority for the deployment decision required opposition support.

Interviews, indeed, indicate that the context of a resigning government led to consultations between opposition and government parties. On the initiative of the resigning prime minister, informal meetings were set up with the party leadership where delegates were expected to present their position on a potential military intervention (Interview 10). Members of the executive indicated that they consulted opposition MPs (Interview 1), while a parliamentary official argued that the usual government-majority dynamic was replaced by a situation of cohabitation of an “old government with a new parliament” (Interview 5). This was also felt by the political parties. A party president (and then MP) argued:

this was not a “normal” transitional caretaker situation, as there was no perspective on an assuming majority. Nobody was in charge, and at the same time everyone was in charge (...). [Therefore,] our party was able to introduce some items on the agenda of the parliament, including our views on international affairs, (...) as there were no instructions from the majority (Interview 6).

Strikingly however, neither Belgium’s heterogeneous coalition government nor the consultations between government and opposition parties result in a limited mandate for Belgium’s fighter jets, which, in contrast to the fighter jets of, for example, the Netherlands, were authorised to participate in strike operations. The resolution that authorised Belgian participation even included a statement that “conditions are fulfilled for a military action against the regime of Gadhafi” and, hereby, implicitly accepted the goal of regime change (Fonck and Reykers 2018, p. 99). The decision-making process that led to Belgium’s decision to participate in the Libya operation and the permissive mandate also does not suggest that the widespread agreement on the deployment of fighter jets was the result of successful negotiations on the scope of the mandate or logrolling (Fonck *et al.* 2019). In fact, the influence of the parliament on the resolution was very limited, given that the latter was drafted by the foreign affairs department and parliament had to decide on this pre-drafted resolution in a very short time-frame (Fonck *et al.* 2019). Neither the interviews nor parliamentary debates indicate that logrolling explains the political consensus on the broad mandate of Belgium’s fighter jets.

### *Party political preferences and the context of the intervention*

Was the consensus on Belgian participation in the strike operations over Libya a consequence of a strong cross-party consensus on the goals of the operation? Given the humanitarian goals and UNSC mandate, the support of left-wing parties is in line with our theoretical expectations. In contrast, the support of MPs of right-wing parties is more surprising, given that clear national interests were missing. However, the parliamentary debates that took place before the operation indicate that the lack of strategic interests

did not result in a negative attitude among right-wing parties towards participating in the operation.

The first extensive discussion in parliament about a possible military operation in Libya took place in the plenary session of March 17 2011 (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011a). All MPs that took the floor voiced their support for military intervention in Libya without referring to clear Belgian national interests. MPs of right- and left-leaning parties consistently referred to the need to protect the Libyan population. Further discussion on Belgian participation followed on March 18 in the Joint Committee for External Affairs and Defence. During the debate, MPs across the entire political spectrum strongly supported participation in the operation. This support was consistently justified by referring to humanitarian arguments and a desire to support democracy. The MPs of the left-leaning socialist and green parties did emphasise that the goals of the military operation should be very clear and limited to the humanitarian protection mandate (Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2011, pp. 13–16, 25).

On March 21, the parliament adopted the resolution on the operation during a plenary session. MPs belonging to the socialist and green fractions stressed that the operation should not pursue other objectives than the protection of Libyan civilians. Moriau of the left-leaning government party PS warned that the operation should not be offensive in nature, and that a *de facto* occupation should be avoided at all costs, while Van der Maelen of the left-wing opposition party SP.A explicitly warned against mission creep and De Vriendt of the opposition party Groen warned about any tendency to make use of the military operation to effectuate a regime change (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011b, p. 8, 14, 18). De Vriendt (Groen) and Moriau (PS) were also very explicit on the necessity to avoid any civilian casualties (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011b, p. 16, 8).

Rutten of the liberal opposition party Open VLD and Brotcorne of the centrist government party CDH stressed that all military action should remain within the mandate provided by the UNSC Resolution, but were much less clear on what constituted the actual goals of the operation (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011b, p. 22, 27). Francken of the right-wing opposition party N-VA contested that regime change was not on the agenda and argued that it is mentioned in UNSC Resolution 1970 (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011b, p. 10). Annemans of the extreme-right opposition party Vlaams Belang warned against mission creep, but meanwhile explicitly suggested to use the operation for avoiding the influx of refugees from North Africa. By doing so, he was the only MP that argued to use the operation to defend more narrow interests.

To sum up, there was support across the aisle for the deployment of fighter jets in the operation. In line with our theoretical model, MPs of left-leaning parties justified the deployment decision for humanitarian reasons, argued in favour of limiting the operation to the protection of civilians and, as the operation progressed, began criticising the government for overstepping the mandate of the operation. In contrast, the support of right-wing parties for the deployment decisions, and the fact that right-leaning parties justified this support by referring to humanitarian reasons rather than national interests, contradicts our theoretical model.

### *Explaining political consensus on the Libya operation*

The decision-making process and parliamentary debates on the Libya operation suggest that the widespread agreement on the Belgian contribution to the mission was the result of the strong support for the goals of the operation among all political parties, not of successful negotiations between political parties. Hereby, the first case study does not support the theoretical model. In contrast to our theoretical expectations, the strong right-wing support suggests that right-leaning parties seemed less averse to the use of force than their left-leaning counterparts, whose members more actively argued for limiting the scope of the operation. Moreover, the analysis also does not suggest that extreme right parties are less supportive of military operations than centre-right parties, although the extreme right support might be explained by the fact that the goals of the operation resonate with the anti-migration agenda of the party. The case-study also does not provide support for our theoretical expectations on the impact of coalition government and parliamentary involvement on mandate negotiations. Domestic political conditions seemed very conducive for negotiations between different political parties resulting in a more limited mandate of the deployed forces. Strikingly however, the mandate of the Belgian fighter jets was not restricted. As argued above, this can be a consequence of the very short time-frame the parliament had to decide on the resolution that authorised the deployment of the fighter jets.

### *Anti-IS coalition (1): participating in Iraq*

The first air strikes against IS were launched by the United States in August 2014, after the rise of IS began to pose an immediate threat to the Kurdish capital Erbil and IS forces carried out horrific attacks on Christian and Yezidi towns. Strike operations were initially limited to Iraq, but in September the US also started carrying out air strikes over Syria.

Belgium started contributing to the military operations in Iraq at the end of September 2014 with six F16 fighter jets. The resolution that authorised the contribution was adopted by a large majority of the parliament. Except for the 10 MPs of the green parties, who abstained during the vote, and the two MPs of the extreme-left PTB, who voted against the resolution, all members of parliament supported the resolution.

**Table 3.** Anti-IS coalition (1).

Party name	Region	Family	Left-right Ches	Government Party	Yes	No	Abstain
MR	Wallonia	Liberal	7	Yes*	17	0	0
Open VLD	Flanders	Liberal	6.9	Yes*	13	0	0
CD&V	Flanders	Christian Democrat	5.8	Yes*	13	0	0
CDH	Wallonia	Christian Democrat	4.5	Yes	8	0	0
SP.A	Flanders	Socialist	3.4	Yes	11	0	0
PS	Wallonia	Socialist	2.6	Yes	18	0	0
NVA	Flanders	Regionalist	7.8	No*	30	0	0
VB	Flanders	Extreme Right	9.2	No	2	0	0
Ecolo	Wallonia	Green	2.2	No	0	0	5
Groen	Flanders	Green	2.2	No	0	0	5
PTB	Flanders/Wallonia	Extreme Left	0.4	No	0	2	0
FDF	Wallonia	Regionalist	5.4	No	1	0	0
PP	Wallonia	Conservative	7.75	No	1	0	0
				Total	114	2	10

\*Indicates that a party was part of the government that came into power on October 11, 2014

Table 3 provides an overview of the parties in the Belgian parliament at the time of the Iraq vote and their position towards the intervention.

### *Domestic context and mandate negotiations*

Do successful mandate negotiations explain the strong political consensus on participation in the air strikes against IS? Government parties had a strong incentive to seek a political compromise and avoid political contestation. Belgium was once again governed by a caretaker government, which was an ideologically heterogeneous coalition of liberal (MR and Open VLD), Christian democrat (CDH and CD&V) and socialist (PS and SP.A) parties. Literature on coalition politics would expect the mandate of the deployed forces to be limited because the government consisted of both left- and right-wing parties. Moreover, although the caretaker cabinet had a majority in parliament, there was already a clear perspective on a new coalition government to be sworn in in the upcoming week, which would be a right-wing cabinet that consisted of liberal (MR and Open VLD), Christian democrat (CD&V) and regionalist (NVA) parties, led by Charles Michel (MR). The government, hereby, again had a strong incentive to attempt to secure a large parliamentary majority for its decision to participate in the operation: prior approval by a large majority of MPs would reassure that the new government would uphold the military commitment.

Interviews, indeed, suggest that the context of a resigning government led to consultations between opposition and government parties. A member of the defence minister's cabinet stressed that outreach to the future majority parties was essential to tie their hands as well (Interview 9). Resembling the Libyan context, informal meetings with delegates from all major political parties were organised on the initiative of the executive, which served to identify their stance on a military intervention (Interviews 2 and 7). Both members of the caretaker government and the future government coalitions were included in the talks, complemented with members of the green parties. Indicative of the importance of these meetings is that they served to provide impetus for a draft parliamentary resolution that later on was officially introduced by an MP in parliament.

In sharp contrast to our previous case study, these talks did result in mandate restrictions, which might be explained by the fact that parliament had more time to discuss the intervention and amend the resolution. In line with the preferences of the Socialist and Green parties (cf. *infra*), the mandate of the operation was limited to Iraqi territory. The Socialists also successfully argued against including references that would open up the possibility of deploying special forces, like "training, advising and assisting", or "special exploratory missions" (Fonck and Reykers 2018, p. 688). Moreover, (future) opposition parties managed to introduce a time limit in the resolution, which granted the government permission to actively participate in the operation against IS for the duration of one month (Fonck *et al.* 2019). In the case of the anti-IS coalition, Belgium's heterogeneous coalition government and parliamentary involvement resulted in mandate restrictions, which are a plausible cause of the lack of political contestation of the deployment decision.

While our case study supports expectations regarding the impact of domestic conditions on mandate negotiations, there is no evidence that government and/or opposition parties engaged in legislative logrolling. This is particularly striking given that Belgium was in the last stage of government formation, which, as shown by the

Oktay's (2018) case study of Dutch participation in the 2003 Iraq War, is a conducive context for legislative logrolls. However, it was already clear which parties would be in the governing coalition, so support for the military operation could not be traded for a place in the new government.

### *Party political preferences and the context of the intervention*

Were the limitations on the mandate of the fighter jets indeed necessary to arrive at a consensus on the Belgian contribution to the anti-IS coalition? Or, was the lack of parliamentary contestation a consequence of a strong cross-party consensus on the goals of the operation, as was the case in Libya? In fact, our theoretical framework would not lead us to expect strong party-political differences on participation in strike operations against IS over Iraqi territory. Given that the operation was deployed to balance a security threat to Belgium, which has suffered from terrorist attacks linked to IS, right-wing parties have clear reasons to support the operation. Left-wing parties were also expected to support the mission because of its humanitarian dimension, i.e. the military discussions took place after the IS attacks on the Yazidis in Northern Iraq. Nevertheless, the parliamentary debates prior to the operation indicate that the political parties did have different preferences, which could have resulted in political contestation in parliament if there would have been a more permissive mandate.

As was the case in Libya, MPs of left- and right-wing parties referred to the mass atrocities committed by IS as one of the main motivations for the intervention. However, left-leaning MPs were generally less supportive of the intervention. MPs of the extreme left opposition party PTB voted against the operation, MPs of the opposition Green parties abstained during the vote and MPs of the socialist parties, which were in the caretaker government at the time, only reluctantly voted in favour of the operation. The MPs of the extreme-left PTB stressed that the operation would only lead to the deterioration of the crisis and would not address the root causes of the conflict (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, pp. 49–50, Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2014, p. 16). Hellings and De Vriendt of the Green fraction argued that IS must be stopped, and also suggested that a military operation would result in many civilian casualties and could be counterproductive because it would increase the appeal of IS for potential recruits (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, pp. 29–32,40, Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2014, p. 13, 17). Members of the socialist parties only reluctantly supported participation in the operation. Crusnière (PS), for example, emphasised that the use of military force must always be a last resort, but that the urgency of the situation justified an intervention (Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2014, p. 8).

In contrast, parties situated at the right of the political spectrum more unambiguously supported the operation. Next to humanitarian motives, they also invoked clear national interests to justify their support.<sup>4</sup> Several MPs of right-wing parties argued that IS constituted a threat to Belgium (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, p. 20, 38, 44). Ducarme (MR) and Dallemagne (CDH) referred to the May 2014 terrorist attack at the Jewish museum in Brussels and the threat posed by the many Belgian “foreign fighters” that joined IS’ ranks, while Lijnen (Open VLD) argued that military action was necessary to avoid that the territory controlled by IS would become a safe haven for international

terrorism (Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2014, p. 16). Finally, Dewinter of the extreme right opposition party Vlaams Belang framed the intervention as an effort to balance the threat posed by radical Islam to Western societies (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, p. 45).

The international legal justification of the operation was also discussed during the parliamentary debates. In contrast to the strong consensus on the legal basis for air operations over Iraq, there was far less agreement on a possible extension of Belgium's military operation to Syria. MPs of the Socialist and Liberal parties, which were in government at the time, and the opposition Green parties argued against such an expansion for legal reasons. Given that there was neither an invitation by the Syrian government or a UN mandate, they maintained there was no legal basis for air strikes over Syrian territory. Members of the centrist CDH, the rightist NVA and the extreme right Vlaams Belang were more ambiguous and did provide some support for operations over Syria, without claiming operating on Syrian territory is in line with international law. Dewinter (Vlaams Belang) voiced his scepticism on the importance of an international legal mandate, maintaining that IS itself does not care about mandates of the UNSC (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, p. 47). Dallemagne (CDH) questioned the general legitimacy of the UNSC, which had not taken action in the Syrian conflict because of the vetoes of Russia and China (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, p. 38). Francken of the regionalist NVA, which was not in the caretaker government but would be in the new government, made a similar argument by suggesting that Russia was holding the UNSC hostage and arguing that his party was not principally opposed to taking action in Syria (Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2014, p. 23). Francken requested to be "pragmatic" on whether or not Belgium's F16s could cross the Syrian-Iraqi border (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, p. 7). This spurred a strong reply of De Vriendt (Groen) and Van der Maelen (SP.A), who demanded not to be pragmatic when matters of international law are at stake (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2014, p. 7, 25).

### *Explaining political consensus on the coalition against IS*

The decision-making process and debates on the airstrikes against IS over Iraq suggest that the widespread agreement on the Belgian contribution to the mission was only possible because the mandate of the deployed forces was limited. With the exception of the extreme left PTB, left-wing parties were not against Belgian participation in the operation, but more reluctantly supported the operation than right-wing parties. In close resemblance to the pattern of support for the Libya operation, this suggests that left-wing parties indeed support military deployments if these pursue inclusive goals. However, even if there is a humanitarian motive for an operation, parties at the left of the political spectrum are still more hesitant to support the use of force than right-wing parties. MPs of right-wing parties provided unambiguous support for the operation and, in line with theoretical expectations, also invoked clear national interests for this support. In line with our theoretical framework, left-wing parties also accorded more importance to an uncontested legal justification of an operation, resulting in clear opposition against allowing Belgian F16s from operating over Syria. In spite of these political differences between left- and right-wing MPs, there was no strong political contestation in the Belgian

parliament because the preferences of left-wing parties were taken into account in the mandate of Belgian forces. The second case-study, thus, provides strong support for the impact of coalition politics and parliamentary involvement on the mandate of deployed forces, which, in turn, explains the consensus on the deployment decision.

### *Anti-IS coalition (2): participating in Syria*

On June 30 2015, Belgium ended its contribution to the air operations against IS for budgetary reasons. However, in June 2016, Belgian F16s were redeployed in the coalition against IS. This time, the fighter jets also participated in operations over Syria. Compared to the previous two operations, the resolution that authorised Belgium's troop contribution was adopted by a smaller majority. Members of the government parties Open VLD, CD&V, NVA and MR, as well as the MPs of the centrist CDH and extreme right Vlaams Belang supported the resolution. In contrast, MPs of the left-wing opposition parties PTB, Ecolo, Groen and SP.A voted against the resolution, while members of the PS abstained.<sup>5</sup> Table 4 provides an overview of the parties in the Belgian parliament at the time of the vote and their position towards the intervention.

### *Domestic context and mandate negotiations*

In contrast to the two previous case-studies, the domestic context did not provide the government parties an incentive to engage in legislative logrolling or limit the mandate of the deployed forces. Belgium was governed by a full power government, which was composed of right-wing parties. This homogenous majority government did not impose limits on Belgium's contribution to the anti-IS coalition. There are also no indications that opposition parties were involved in discussions on the mandate of the deployed forces. In fact, by the time parliament voted on the redeployment of the F16s, the government's inner Cabinet had already approved the mission (Fonck and Reykers 2018, pp. 689–690). In that sense, this was not a case of prior parliamentary approval, but rather an ex post parliamentary legitimation of a government decision. The mandate provided by the parliamentary resolution was more permissive than the mandate provided for the previous deployment in the coalition against IS (Belgische

**Table 4.** Anti-IS coalition (2).

Party name	Region	Family	Left-right Ches	Government Party	Yes	No	Abstain
MR	Wallonia	Liberal	7	Yes	19	0	0
Open VLD	Flanders	Liberal	7	Yes	13	0	0
CD&V	Flanders	Christian Democrat	5.4	Yes	15	0	0
NVA	Flanders	Regionalist	7.8	Yes	31	0	0
CDH	Wallonia	Christian Democrat	4.4	No	7	0	0
SP.A	Flanders	Socialist	3	No	0	9	0
PS	Wallonia	Socialist	2.6	No	0	0	17
VB	Flanders	Extreme Right	9.2	No	2	0	0
Ecolo	Wallonia	Green	2.2	No	0	5	0
Groen	Flanders	Green	2.2	No	0	5	0
PTB	Flanders/Wallonia	Extreme Left	0.4	No	0	2	0
DFD	Wallonia	Regionalist	5.6	No	0	0	1
PP	Wallonia	Conservative	7.75	No	1	0	0
Total					88	21	18

Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016b). Not only did the resolution explicitly allow for air strikes on targets in Syria, but also did not include a clear time limit.

### *Party political preferences and the context of the intervention*

The parliamentary debate and pattern of voting on the redeployment of Belgium's fighter jets suggest that parliamentary contestation can be explained by our theoretical framework, which expected left-wing opposition towards operations for which a clear legal mandate is missing.

Two broad arguments were invoked against operating over Syrian territory. First, members of the leftist opposition parties questioned whether air strikes on Syrian territory would be effective, especially if there was no political solution for the Syrian conflict (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016a, pp. 70–73, 80, 83, Commissie voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen 2016, p. 11, 19, Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2016, p. 25, 30, 34–35, 45). Hedebouw (of the extreme left opposition party PTB) made a general argument against Western military interventions, referring to the failure of the intervention in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. De Vriendt of the left opposition party Groen, in turn, agreed with the majority parties that the fight against IS required military action, but expressed scepticism on whether air strikes would help defeat IS. Likewise, Hellings of the leftist opposition party Ecolo questioned whether air operations would help in finding a political solution for the Syrian conflict or to stop the refugee flows to Europe. Van der Maelen and Top of the socialist opposition party SP.A, in turn, questioned the added value of Belgian F16 activities above Syria.

Second, MPs of the left-wing opposition parties questioned the legal grounds of the operation. De Vriendt (Groen) and Van der Maelen (SP.A), for example, maintained that the right of self-defence only applies to interstate conflict and that Resolution 2249 did not provide a legal ground for the operation, because it does not refer to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016a, pp. 52–55, 59–60, Commissie voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen 2016, p. 20, Commissie voor De Landsverdediging 2016, p. 2, Verenigde Commissies voor de Buitenlandse Betrekkingen en voor de Landsverdediging 2016, 18, 30, 32–34). Likewise, Hedebouw (PTB) questioned whether the right of collective self-defence provides a legal ground to intervene against a terrorist group.

Members of the government parties justified their support for participation in operations over Syrian territory by referring to the threat IS poses to Belgian security and the humanitarian crisis caused by the terrorist organisation (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016a, p. 51, 81, Verenigde Commissies Voor De Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2016, pp. 20–21, 27). Yüksel of the right-leaning government party CD&V, for example, argued that the terrorist attacks committed by IS provide one of many justifications for the intervention. Ducarme of the liberal government party MR, in turn, referred to the threat posed by IS, and also argued that the intervention also aimed to help Syrian refugees. Members of the opposition centrist party CDH and right-wing government parties MR, Open VLD, NVA and CD&V also referred to the importance of respecting international law, but argued that article 51 of the UN Charter does provide a solid legal basis for the intervention in Syria (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016a, p. 51, 61, 63, Verenigde Commissies Voor De

Buitenlandse Betrekkingen En Voor De Landsverdediging 2016, p. 20, 21, 27). Miller (MR) claimed that he was shocked by the legalism of Van der Maelen and suggested that the lack of a legal basis for the operation should not allow IS to get away with mass atrocities (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016a, p. 62). Likewise, Dallemagne of the centrist opposition party CDH maintained that international law should not be used as an argument to avoid the country's responsibility to react to mass atrocities (Belgische Kamer Van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2016a, p. 74).

### *Explaining parliamentary contestation against the coalition against IS*

The decision-making process and parliamentary debates on the redeployment of Belgium's fighter jets and the extension of their mandate to Syria are in line with our theoretical expectations. Right-wing parties unambiguously supported the operation and referred to national interests to justify this support. The parliamentary debates indicate that left-wing MPs did not support the air strikes over Syria because the international legal grounds were contested. However, in the absence of a constitutional obligation or a political incentive to consult parliament prior to the deployment decision, Belgium's homogeneous right-wing government had few reasons to take into account the preferences of left-wing parties or engage in legislative logrolling. The political contestation of the deployment decision was, thus, caused by the combination of the different preferences of the right-wing government parties and left-wing opposition parties and the lack of incentives for government parties to limit the mandate of the deployed forces and, hereby, avoid left-wing opposition.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, we examined the diverging levels of political contestation of three recent Belgian deployment decisions and compared the uncontested decisions to participate in the 2011 Libya intervention and the air strikes against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq with the contested decision to participate in strike operations against IS over Syrian territory. The results of our study indicate that a broad parliamentary consensus will emerge if the domestic political context forces left- and right-wing parties into negotiating a compromise that takes into account their preferences regarding the scope of the operation (1) and if left-wing parties have no reason to oppose the operation because it pursues inclusive goals and its international legal justification is not contested (2). Whereas Belgium's participation in the Libya operation demonstrates that political consensus can emerge in the absence of negotiations and compromise on the mandate of deployed forces if left-wing parties support the goals of the operation, the first deployment in the anti-IS coalition indicates that mandate negotiations can result in broad support for potentially divisive operations. Conversely, the decision-making process and parliamentary debates that preceded the redeployment of Belgium's fighter jets indicates that contestation emerges if an operation is not in line with the preferences of all parties and the domestic political context does not provide reasons to compromise on the mandate of the deployed forces.

In contrast, our case-studies do not fully support the theoretical expectations on the preferences of political parties regarding military operations. In line with the theoretical

framework, right-wing parties more explicitly referred to national interests and left-wing parties accorded more attention to an uncontested international legal justification. However, while left-wing parties did support operations for humanitarian reasons, they did so more reluctantly than right-wing parties. Moreover, as shown by the Libya operation -and in line with the conclusions of Wagner (2020)- national interests were not necessary for right-wing support of a humanitarian intervention. One possible explanation for this conclusion is that right-wing support might also have been motivated by a desire to demonstrate Belgium's reliability as a loyal European and Atlantic ally (Pedersen and Reykers 2020). Right-wing parties might support operations in which no national interests are at stake to avoid sending the wrong signal towards allies and potential adversaries and negatively affecting their country's credibility. Future research could further examine whether status or reputation concerns indeed motivate right-wing support for military deployments.

Future research could also address some of the limitations of the present study. First, Belgian politics is characterised by very high levels of party discipline. While this allowed us to draw conclusions on party-political differences from parliamentary debates, this particular context complicate generalisation to countries with lower levels of party discipline, in which backbenchers of majority and opposition parties might be the main manifestation of political contestation. Two plausible explanations were not included in this study, because they did not vary among the cases, can as well be included in future studies: public opinion and risks on the ground. It would be particularly interesting to examine how increasing casualties and declining public support impact the level of political agreement on an operation.

## Notes

1. According to Ipsos survey data, 78% of the Belgian population supported the military intervention in Libya and 70% supported the air strikes against IS (Ipsos 2011, Ipsos 2014).
2. While some legal scholars argue that operations over Syria are legal for reasons of collective self-defence, others suggest that Article 51 requires an attack from one state on another (Ruys *et al.* 2019).
3. An anonymised list of the interviews is included in Appendix 1.
4. MPs of the left-leaning CDH also unambiguously supported participation, but with a score of 4.5 on the LRGEM-indicator, this party could be considered a centrist rather than a left-wing party.
5. Although the parliamentary resolution that authorised the deployment was still adopted by a relatively large majority, the deployment decision was clearly more strongly contested than the large majority of military deployments in Belgium and similar parliamentary democracies (Haesebrouck and Van Immerseel 2020, Ostermann *et al.* 2020).

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## Appendix 1 List of Interviews

Interview #	Function	Location, Date
Interview 1	Former member of government	Brussels, 26 February 2015
Interview 2	Defence cabinet official	Brussels, 4 March 2015
Interview 3	Member of parliament	Brussels, 6 July 2015
Interview 4	Member of parliament	Brussels, 7 July 2015
Interview 5	Parliamentary official	Brussels, 10 July 2015
Interview 6	Member of parliament	Brussels, 14 July 2015
Interview 7	Defence cabinet official	Brussels, 21 March 2016
Interview 8	Defence cabinet official	Brussels, 23 March 2016
Interview 9	Defence cabinet official	Brussels, 13 July 2017
Interview 10	Former member of government	Video, 17 July 2015