

# Combat charities or when humanitarians go to war:

Influence of non-state actors on local  
order of partially governed spaces

PAVOL KOSNÁČ



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## ABOUT THE RECONSTITUTING LOCAL ORDERS PROJECT

Led by Brookings Senior Fellows Vanda Felbab-Brown, Shadi Hamid, and Harold Trinkunas, the Brookings Seminar on Reconstituting Local Orders seeks to better understand how domestic political order breaks down and is reconstituted. It draws out policy implications and recommends more effective action for local governments and the international community. It examines these issues by bringing together top-level experts and policymakers.

The present disorder in the international system is significantly augmented by the breakdown of domestic order across a number of key states. Around the globe, the politics of identity, ideology and religion are producing highly polarized societies and deepening conflicts among non-state actors and between non-state actors and the state. In the Middle East, the Arab Spring disrupted long calcified political systems in ways that are still producing unpredictable effects on the regional order. The collapse of political order in Libya has wide-ranging consequences for governance across the Sahel, intensifying Mali and Nigeria's fragility and highlighting the many deficiencies of their states. Meanwhile, Russia's annexation of Crimea was facilitated by a breakdown of political order in Ukraine, and Russia's aggressive external posture also partially reflects and compensates for its internal weaknesses. But even emerging powers such as India and Brazil face profound and persistent governance problems, including in public safety and the rule of law. Among the topics explored in the Seminar are the construction of institutions and counter-institutions in the Middle East and South Asia; the role of external interveners and local militias in conflict settings; and forms of governance in slums and prisons, such as by criminal groups.

The Seminar is a collaborative research space that serves as a launching pad for cutting edge debate and research around questions of local and transnational order. The core of the analytical and policy-prescriptive exploration focuses on how political and social orders are reconstituted, the resulting impact on regional order and the international system, and what roles the international community should play. Among the products of the Seminar are analytical and policy papers as well as shorter articles and blog posts that examine cross-regional comparisons and identify policy implications and recommendations.



# Combat charities or when humanitarians go to war:

## Influence of non-state actors on local order of partially governed spaces

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### Introduction

“Combat charities,” or entities that seek to provide military and political assistance to weaker armed groups or minorities resisting the military onslaught of others, such as of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East and North Africa, are a rising phenomenon of the 21st century. They can significantly affect both local orders and international politics. Yet they remain understudied in both scholarly literature and policy assessments. This paper seeks to fill this analytical lacuna. Based on lengthy personal fieldwork consisting of participatory observation and interviews with leaders and members of combat charities in Iraq during 2015 and 2016, this paper analyzes the military and political effects of two different combat charities—Sons of Liberty International (SOLI) and Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA).

SOLI is the oldest and most established combat charity in the world. It is well connected in Iraq and Syria, and thanks to its founder and leader Matthew VanDyke, also in Northern Africa. This paper explores how SOLI has helped form, train, and to a certain extent equip the two largest Assyrian militias in northern Iraq. It also analyzes how SOLI helped one of the Assyrian militias be recognized by the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. Even though few analysts and observers noticed the impact of SOLI, SOLI thus significantly boosted the ability of the Assyrian community in Iraq to defend itself and have its defense forces recognized by Baghdad and taken more seriously by Erbil. In addition to altering the battlefield capacities of the Assyrian militias, SOLI has thus also had

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rather profound political effects on the ground. But its presence among the militias has had almost no cultural effects, mostly because its local Iraqi interlocutors have been well familiar with Western culture before the arrival of SOLI.

HDA may not be the first *de facto* combat charity, but holds primacy as the first combat charity legally acknowledged as such by a sovereign country. In comparison with SOLI, it is less oriented toward direct combat training of local groups. Rather it focuses on facilitating the embedding of specialized volunteers from abroad—whether with military background or without—into Kurdish units in need of particular skillsets. While anti-jihadist militias are able to obtain equipment at relatively low prices and with relative ease, intelligence gathering and communications capabilities are often more elusive. HDA focuses on boosting these capabilities of local anti-ISIS militia groups, such as peshmerga units, as well as providing specialized technologies.

Both SOLI and HDA also teach commanders and leaders of the groups with which they cooperate how to communicate with Western media. They assist them in promoting their narratives and attracting Western attention. Significantly, both combat charities taught and assisted the armed groups they mentor in how to engage officials in the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government.

In sum, combat charities thus alter not only local military balances of power, but also local political balances of power. They influence the internal prestige and authority of local commanders and leaders as well as the leaders’ international influence. At the same time, while combat charities thus may be seen as assuming the role of a local powerbroker, they can also be at times manipulated by local groups whom they assist.

Even though combat charities, at their current numbers and scale, do not have the capacity to alter the outcome of large-scale conflicts, they can and already do have significant effects on local orders and may significantly influence the shape and outcomes of smaller conflicts and the resulting political arrangements. Their emergence also has significant legal and ethical implications. Whether and under what circumstances combat charities improve humanitarian outcomes or spiral out of control and



generate new sets of humanitarian challenges and pernicious conflict dynamics will depend on local circumstances as well as international policies. Policymakers should no longer ignore the combat charity phenomenon. They should acknowledge their existence, analyze their impact, and devise policies for how to engage with them.

The paper proceeds as follows: I first provide the background of conflicts which combat charities have joined and discuss the choices that foreign volunteers have in deciding which armed group to join. I then unpack the term combat charity, discuss the controversies surrounding the term and explain why the use of the term is nonetheless appropriate. Third, I discuss why combat charities, a new phenomenon of the 21st century, are likely to persist and become an expanding trend. In the following section of the paper, I turn to two case studies of combat charities—those of SOLI and HDA, describing how they operate and assessing their influence on the military battlefield, local political order, and international relations. Finally, in the concluding section, I highlight key takeaways and policy implications.

## Foreign fighters in conflicts and combat charities: The background

In recent years, thousands of Western foreign fighters have travelled to the Middle East to join the fighting that has engulfed the region. They have overwhelmingly chosen to participate in the conflict on the side of the jihadi organizations like the Islamic State (ISIS) or the Nusra Front. However, a smaller and often unnoticed segment of these volunteers has embedded with groups that resist the jihadists, such as Kurdish, Assyrian, and Yazidi militias. These fighters vary in their motivations for joining the fight; some are driven by moral outrage and seek to prevent the atrocities the minority groups have suffered at the hands of the jihadists, while others are motivated by co-religionist solidarity. Some seek a sense of adventure and the adrenaline highs of military tourism, while others wish to escape problems at home, finding in the fight a form of self-medicating for post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental problems.<sup>1</sup> These fighters are recruited through a variety of means.

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<sup>1</sup> Bellingcat, “The Other Foreign Fighters: An Open Source Investigation into the American Volunteers Fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.” <https://www.bellingcat.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-Other-Foreign-Fighters1.pdf>.

Combat charities, the focus of this paper, are only one mechanism for foreign anti-ISIS volunteers to join the fight. Some try to directly join existing local groups, such as the peshmerga units of the official Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq. However, being accepted into these peshmerga units tends to be difficult as the KRG seeks to comply with the wishes of the United States that it not take in U.S. volunteers. Thus, for many volunteers, better chances lie with the two other Kurdish militia groups—the peshmerga units of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the second largest political party in Iraqi Kurdistan, or the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or YPG) of northern Syria. A *de facto* Marxist militia, the YPG in particular is famous for its fighting prowess against ISIS, thus making it attractive to Western volunteers. The PUK peshmerga too have occasionally accepted Western volunteers. However, their willingness to do so has dwindled to a certain extent after a series of bad experiences with them.<sup>2</sup>

Other militias which Western volunteers can join are Yazidi and Assyrian self-defense forces. The Yazidis and Assyrians are two small, independent ethno-linguistic groups who were viciously persecuted by ISIS in the Sinjar area and on the Nineveh plains of Iraq. The Yazidis are especially hated by ISIS since local Muslims (and not only ISIS sympathizers) see them as “Satanists.” The Assyrians are mostly oriental Catholic or Orthodox Christians. After brutal attacks and massacres by ISIS, both minorities decided to arm themselves and develop self-defense units. Because of their limited combat experience, they have been willing to accept foreign volunteers, particularly former soldiers.

Another route for foreign anti-ISIS volunteers to participate in the fight is joining existing foreign fighter groups embedded within larger militia groups. Among them were The 9th Brigade; Veterans Against ISIS; and the Peshmerga Legion.

The final mechanism to become part of the anti-ISIS military effort is to apply to combat charities. Although combat charities may seem akin to

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most famous blunders in the PUK’s acceptance of Western volunteers was admitting Michael Windecker, an American known in Iraq by his *nom de guerre* “Necromancer.” Windecker became a prominent personality of the war for a while, but it later turned out that he was convicted of sexual offenses in the United States. See Jacob Siegel, “An American Fighting ISIS Is Convicted Sex Offender,” *The Daily Beast*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/27/an-american-fighting-isis-is-convicted-sex-offender.html>.

foreign fighter groups, such as the three mentioned above, they rather fundamentally differ from them when it comes to their legal standing as well as their organization and mission statements.

## The term and concept of combat charities

The term combat charity may seem provocative and contradictory to some. Complex ethical and conceptual issues can be raised by adopting such a term. The term “charity” may imply non-violence to many. Likewise, applying the term “charity” to a group of fighters and labelling their actions as “humanitarian” is likely to be controversial. It can be easily argued that such a label goes against the essence of the humanitarian ethos, thereby damaging the trustworthiness of regular humanitarian organizations and potentially even endangering them. Some could regard the term “combat charity” as a perversion of the very essence of a humanitarian mission. Many Europeans, for example, strongly disapproved of the then Czech President Václav Havel calling NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 a “humanitarian” intervention, with the term “humanitarian bombing” originating in that conflict and evoking painful ironies for many.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, there are two main reasons why I use this term, despite its controversial nature. First, the term captures the actual self-perception of these groups. They firmly consider themselves humanitarian organizations conducting pro bono charity work in the area they know best—security. Second, the Internal Revenue Service, a bureau of the U.S. Department of Treasury, has registered one of these groups—HDA—as a public charity, making it the first combat group to ever be legally designated by a country as a charity. Thus, in addition to the groups’ self-description, there is also a strong legal basis for the term. Unlike HDA, SOLI is legally designated as a limited liability company that operates on a not-for-profit basis.

The stated missions and organizational structures of entities such as SOLI and HDA are also consistent with the use of the term combat charity. Their members are volunteers without salaries or only with living stipends, and thus they should not be considered mercenaries. Unlike private security companies, the organizations do not operate on a for-profit basis. Since

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<sup>3</sup> Václav Havel, “Moi aussi je me sens albanais,” *Le Monde*, April 29, 1999.

they are outsiders and usually numerically very few, often consisting of no more than five to 10 trainers, they should not be labelled a militia. Members of such entities must adhere to a certain code of conduct formalized in a mission statement of each “combat charity.” They are also expected to be motivated by normative or ideational causes, not pecuniary desires.

Furthermore, these organizations exist for extended periods, are officially registered with governments, and have administrative and organizational centers in their home countries, such as the United States. Their *raison d’être* is not to complete one particular mission or resolve a specific conflict, but rather to provide pro bono military assistance in as many conflict situations of the world as they can. As such, they are not stereotypical ad hoc formations of foreign fighters, which are often rather loose and permissive as to the motivations of their members and tend to have short life spans of just a few weeks to a few months.

The combination of these characteristics makes combat charities a unique type of actor operating on the military battlefields of the 21st century.

### Combat charities: Likely a growing trend

Combat charities are a new phenomenon of the 21st century, but one that is likely to grow substantially in the coming years for several reasons.

The pool of potential recruits for combat charities is large. Although SOLI selected less than 10, more than 1,000 applied. HDA too had several hundred applicants from which it chose a dozen. Over 7 percent of U.S. citizens (more than 22 million people) have served in the military at some point in their lives.<sup>4</sup> Many veterans miss the military camaraderie, lifestyle, and sense of a mission in life. And volunteers can also, of course, be potentially recruited from the civilian population as well as from veterans of other countries’ militaries, even though the combat charities have so far been a U.S. occurrence, with most of their members also being American.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs, “National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics,” undated, [http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran\\_Population.asp](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp); and Mona Chalabi, “What Percentage Of Americans Have Served In The Military?,” *Five Thirty Eight*, March 19, 2015, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/what-percentage-of-americans-have-served-in-the-military/>.

The emergence of combat charities is merely one element of the general trend toward the privatization of the security and military sectors. Private military organizations have become mainstream, and private military nonprofits may well follow this trend. Existing psychological barriers to the social acceptance of combat charities are likely to weaken, especially if there is no significant backlash from existing, respected charities and humanitarian organizations. So far that has not been the case, but the scale and visibility of combat charities has also been limited.

Crowdsourcing allows for independent and individualized funding, reducing constraints that charities in general have often faced before.

Domestic and international laws do not prevent the spread of combat charities. For example, the U.S. State Department Spokesperson Jennifer Psaki stated in October 2015 that she was unaware of a single specific law against combat charities.<sup>5</sup> While fighting on the side of the declared enemies of the United States constitutes treason and providing material support to U.S.-designated terrorist groups results in stringent U.S. law enforcement and legal prosecution, joining other wars or militant groups is not prohibited.

Globalization also favors the further growth of combat charities by shrinking the physical and virtual distances among people and conflicts around the world. Social media also allows for the substantial enlargement of personal networks—the large number of personal connections that were essential to the creation and existence of HDA and SOLI would hardly have been possible without social media. Social and traditional media also make conflicts around the world more visible, bringing distant, emotionally intense wars into the living rooms of the global public through TV as well as Facebook, Instagram, and LiveLeak, among others.

Extensive diaspora communities in the United States and the large U.S. diaspora communities throughout the world retain extensive emotional and other connections to their relatives, friends, and communities in other parts of the world. Members of these diaspora communities may well be motivated to take actions to redress the plight of those suffering from conflict. That may well be the case not despite, but particularly because

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Maurer, “Is it legal to go overseas and fight ISIS?” *Men’s Journal*, March 24, 2015, <http://www.mensjournal.com/adventure/collection/is-it-legal-to-go-overseas-and-fight-isis-20150324>.

**“Domestic and international laws do not prevent the spread of combat charities.”**

of, the large U.S. costs—in terms of blood and treasure—that were paid in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the United States and other NATO countries reduce their military interventions abroad, combat charities may well fill the emotional need of diaspora communities, military veterans, and others to help fellow humans caught up in the privations of war.

For these reasons, combat charities are not likely to be an ephemeral phenomenon, but rather one that will increasingly shape the military battlefields of local conflicts and local political orders, as well as potential international relations. The following section of the paper discusses how these dynamics have already become manifested in the case of two combat charities—SOLI and HDA.

### **Sons of Liberty International (SOLI)**

This section analyzes the emergence of SOLI, the world's first combat charity. It describes SOLI's philosophy of international intervention that mixes idealistic and pragmatic motivations, as well as its considerations when choosing its clients. Currently, SOLI clients are predominantly different Assyrian militias located in Nineveh plains of northern Iraq seeking to defend their villages from ISIS. This case study also discusses what kinds of assistance SOLI provides—from military training and assistance to communications, political, and diplomatic aid to social services. Finally this case study examines how SOLI increases the authority and legitimacy of the local leaders to whom it provides assistance, and assesses the impact of SOLI on local political order. I point out that while SOLI has substantial local impacts along these multiple dimensions of power, it has quickly become entangled in local power struggles with local actors seeking to manipulate SOLI for their purposes.

#### ***SOLI's background***

In February 2011, as part of the Arab Spring revolutions sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa, a revolution broke out in Libya aimed at ousting the four-decades-old government of Moammar Gadhafi. A young American by the name of Matthew VanDyke joined the rebels, but was captured by loyalist forces just before he could join the fighting, and

subsequently spent the larger part of the revolution in solitary confinement within the Maktab al-Nasser and Abu-Salim prisons in Tripoli. Following a NATO bombing raid, VanDyke escaped and rejoined the fight as a member of the Ali Hassan al-Jaber Brigade, despite being offered safe passage home. His experiences in Libya and later in Syria changed his outlook on conflict resolution, now favoring participation rather than simple observation. Had his friends—journalists James Foley and Stephen Sotloff—not been murdered by ISIS in Iraq, it is likely that VanDyke would still be based in Syria, where he was filming and documenting the war on the side of the anti-Assad opposition. VanDyke even tried to help form a militia in Syria in 2012, but changed his mind after being asked to commit actions like contract assassinations. Instead, he decided to support the most vulnerable side regardless of the group’s ethnicity or religious affiliation. He came to the conclusion that ISIS was a more pressing threat than Assad and that Iraqi Assyrian Christians were the most marginalized and defenseless group in both Iraq and Syria. He started exploring means by which he could help in the fight against ISIS in Iraq, and his local connections introduced him to several Assyrian militias. In October 2014, this chain of events resulted in the foundation of a combat advisory group named Sons of Liberty International, named after an 18th century society of individuals who sought to rebel against the British during the American Revolutionary War.

Sons of Liberty International thus became the first known not-for-profit private security consulting and training firm—or, in its view, a combat charity. It is a limited liability company, but one that does not charge for its services. Instead, all services are provided to clients free of charge and the group has a 501(c)(3) component that is tax deductible; its activities are fully funded by voluntary donations.<sup>6</sup>

Today, SOLI operates in the Nineveh region of northern Iraq working amongst the Christian population and seeking to defend it from ISIS. The Assyrian Christians of Nineveh lost their homes and a large part of their land after an ISIS offensive in July and August 2014.<sup>7</sup> A narrow strip of land to the north and west of Mosul was all the Christian Assyrians were able to

<sup>6</sup> Sons of Liberty International, “About Sons of Liberty International,” <https://sonsoflibertyinternational.com/about/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Des djihadistes prennent la plus grande ville chrétienne d’Irak,” *Le Monde*, August 7, 2014, [http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2014/08/07/des-djihadistes-prennent-la-plus-grande-ville-chretienne-d-irak\\_4467843\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2014/08/07/des-djihadistes-prennent-la-plus-grande-ville-chretienne-d-irak_4467843_3218.html).

hold onto, and only a few Assyrian villages remained untouched by combat. SOLI has tried to bolster the capacity of Assyrian self-defense combatants to resist ISIS and engage effectively in urban warfare so the Assyrian groups could preserve the remnants of their settlements, participate in coalition operations against ISIS, reclaim their homes, and assist in the offensive against ISIS in Mosul.

### ***Goals and philosophy***

With these goals in mind, in the fall of 2014, SOLI recruited a small group of trainers to go to Iraq to train the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU). In the beginning, the agreement with the NPU was secret, so the group of trainers consisted of U.S. veterans that VanDyke personally knew or who were directly recommended to him. Later, when SOLI became known, there was no lack of volunteers. Out of 1,500 volunteers that applied by January 2017, VanDyke handpicked less than 10 for his training team, which included former members of the U.S. Marines and special operations forces. In order to be selected, an applicant must believe in the SOLI mission of training local fighters of marginalized groups and helping them to become self-sufficient. SOLI rules out applicants whom it judges to be motivated by a desire for adventure and adrenaline rush as well as those who exhibit strong religious beliefs or ethnic affinities, considering thrill-seekers unreliable and a crusader mentality incompatible with working with Muslim or Yazidi partners.<sup>8</sup>

The main objective is to train the local population to fight their own wars rather than to rely on foreign assistance. VanDyke believes that foreign military intervention is not the correct approach; rather, locals must fight for themselves. This ensures that locals do not harbor suspicions of the desires of foreign fighters to occupy or carry out any hidden agendas. In addition, suffering for one's own cause ensures sound investment in the fight. SOLI wants a long-term solution, which means addressing underlying problems and ensuring locals are equipped to defend themselves now and in future. In Iraq, SOLI considers the primary underlying problem to be the lack of security due to the presence of ISIS. As a result, SOLI focuses on security rather than the provision, or technical training for the provision, of social services such as healthcare, shelter, or food. SOLI does not wish to

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<sup>8</sup> Author's email communication with Matthew VanDyke, January 2017.



participate in what VanDyke calls a “never-ending NGO [nongovernmental organization] cycle,” which consists of providing blankets and food to people who cannot return to their homes due to lack of security. According to VanDyke, “We teach them how to eliminate danger and sustain safety in their village or region, so they don’t have to run. We want to operate in a way, where we can move away as soon as possible, to another mission. That way we have to cure the illness, not the symptom. We don’t want to create a dependency of the local population, some cycle where they need us and we need them and we raise money as many NGOs do.”<sup>9</sup>

SOLI sees itself more as a humanitarian organization than a private security company. VanDyke considers private security contractors as some of his biggest potential opponents—in ethos as well as practice since he hopes to take the profit *out* of war. His combat charity thus challenges—in principle at least, if not in scale and impact—the business model of private security companies. He states that if he is able to bring some innovation into the field of military intervention and make the concept of “combat charity” sustainable, he will be content.<sup>10</sup>

SOLI has specific selection criteria to determine which client group to assist.<sup>11</sup> First is the group’s vulnerability, a criterion that includes whether or not somebody else is providing the group with sufficient aid. Second is the group’s effectiveness, defined as whether SOLI assistance would make a substantial difference in helping the group achieve tangible security improvements on the ground. This second criterion explains why SOLI does not operate and provide assistance in Ukraine. While SOLI leadership assesses that due to the strategic realities on the ground, training 100 Assyrians will have an appreciable effect, it similarly assesses that training 100 Ukrainians will not make a difference.

The third criterion is whether SOLI assistance will affect overall security in the region. The Assyrian self-defense groups are part of the United States-led international coalition against the Islamic State and SOLI assesses that they will be able to contribute to the security apparatus of the coalition. In SOLI’s analysis this means that training the Assyrians will not create detrimental effects on the overall security situation in the region, such as by

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<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview with Matthew VanDyke, Erbil, Iraq, March 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview with Matthew VanDyke, Erbil, Iraq, March 2016.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

creating a new faction of the civil war that may turn against other anti-ISIS groups and exacerbate political fragmentation. This criterion disqualified from SOLI assistance several groups from the Philippines and Pakistan that heard of SOLI through social media, TV documentaries, and word of mouth and requested SOLI help.<sup>12</sup> VanDyke argues that the aim is to help train those who have been already forced into conflict, not empower those who seek to create it, even if SOLI members may personally sympathize with their situation or motivations.

Finally, sustainability is the last selection criterion. SOLI involvement must help effect long-term change, meaning that the SOLI client's circumstances will improve as a result of the SOLI assistance and that the client group must be able to defend itself after SOLI leaves.

In the future, SOLI would like to offer its services to groups in other conflicts. VanDyke has already crowdsourced enough funding to support its operations in Iraq, and with its extra funds he intends to expand in Syria next. If there will be enough funds and volunteers, SOLI may try to support opponents of the Islamic State in Africa.

### ***Organizational structure***

In addition to being its founder, Matthew VanDyke is also the sole chief executive and owner of SOLI. The group has a small administrative support staff in the U.S., at times consisting only of VanDyke's girlfriend. Beyond these administrative headquarters, there is the small, aforementioned unit of trainers operating on the ground in Iraq at various times, but not on a constant basis. To a large extent, SOLI is still a one-man show heavily dependent on VanDyke. SOLI has a chief operations officer, several advisors, and a board of directors for the nonprofit section, but the organization depends on VanDyke for his fundraising ability, which is the result of his wide media presence. VanDyke plans to make SOLI self-sustainable before the end of 2017, but current conditions make the combat charity vulnerable to a certain extent should VanDyke become unable or unwilling to continue managing the charity or raising funds. This in turn raises questions about SOLI's sustainability. At the same time, however, this bare-bones structure centered around VanDyke makes the operational

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<sup>12</sup> SOLI has not disclosed the names of or other specific information about these groups.

practices of SOLI more flexible and able to respond quickly to changing circumstances, an adaptability of great value in a warzone.

### ***Services provided and effects on the ground***

SOLI's standard services consist of delivering basic advisory and military training, but SOLI activities can also go far beyond that. SOLI can occasionally provide social services to civilians such as clothes distribution. At various time, members of SOLI have also organized cultural events like Easter egg hunts or Christmas Eve celebrations for children.

### ***Military assistance***

Over the course of 2015, SOLI trained 330 NPU soldiers and also provided training for noncommissioned officers. A fundamental problem that plagues the Iraqi army (as well as other Arab armies) is that it does not consider noncommissioned officers important and thus does not invest in them at a level similar to Western militaries. Consequently, smaller units tend to suffer from a lack of leadership capacity, a problem that is particularly acute in urban warfare. SOLI expected that the NPU would participate in the Iraqi Army and international coalition efforts to retake Mosul, which did indeed come to pass. SOLI therefore considered investing in non-commissioned officers to be of high importance, not only for the NPU itself but also for the broader efforts against the Islamic State.

In addition to training the NPU, starting in February 2016 SOLI began training a platoon of 30 Nineveh Plains Forces (NPF) fighters. Both NPF and NPU fighters were battle tested for the first time in May 2016,<sup>13</sup> when a powerful ISIS contingent attacked and initially overran the Assyrian village of Telskuf, a SOLI training location. After a day of intense fighting, the NPU and NPF, supported by SOLI trainers, Kurdish peshmerga forces, a U.S. Navy SEAL unit, and airstrikes by the international anti-ISIS coalition, retook the village, allowing SOLI to resume its training in the village. As SOLI expected, both the NPU and NPF took part in the operations to retake the wider Mosul area in the winter of 2016-2017, though not fighting directly in the city.

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13 Matthew VanDyke, "Iraqi Christians Take On Islamic State," *The Blaze*, July 18, 2016, [http://www.theblaze.com/contributions/exclusive-video-iraqi-christians-take-on-islamic-state/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=story&utm\\_campaign=ShareButtons](http://www.theblaze.com/contributions/exclusive-video-iraqi-christians-take-on-islamic-state/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=story&utm_campaign=ShareButtons).

An important aspect of SOLI military assistance is the delivery of military equipment. SOLI-provided equipment has included training equipment such as airsoft guns and eye protection gear, as well as walkie-talkies and 40 sets of body armor, enough for an entire platoon. In the future, SOLI also aims to provide more sophisticated communication equipment with better encryption. It has already loaned body-armor and a vehicle to the NPU and NPF for the operation to retake Mosul.

Despite these contributions, SOLI does not provide weapons. The combat charity acknowledges that this decision is not completely practical. Nonetheless, it considers staying away from distributing weapons as necessary to avoid legal complications in the United States. Still, by covering food costs for a period of time and providing nonlethal equipment, SOLI liberates the finances of its clients so they can be applied to something of greater “tactical value,” including possibly weapons. SOLI is currently experimenting with a personalized funding system, whereby an individual in the U.S. or Europe (the “sponsor”) can pay for a particular piece of equipment for a specific local fighter. Thanks to a unique serial number printed on the gear, the sponsor may be able to track the piece of equipment and its use across the world. Sponsors are also able to build their own armories of equipment and, when logged into their accounts on the SOLI website, see photos of all provided equipment in use.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from training and equipment, SOLI has also paid for more than half of the NPU military base. NPU commander General Behnam Aboosh stated that having its own military base was essential in gaining the approval and support of the Iraqi central government in Baghdad.<sup>15</sup> Obtaining official status as an Assyrian self-defense force now allows NPU units to receive payment from the central government, operate openly, and officially receive arms shipments. Gaining such recognition and support greatly strengthened the NPU. It is quite possible that helping the NPU to obtain this official status was the most influential accomplishment of SOLI to date.

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14 Sons of Liberty International, “Buy equipment for SOLI” <https://sonsoflibertyinternational.com/app/equipment>.

15 “Matthew VanDyke: Growing Strength (Episode 7) | History NOW,” YouTube video, 2:33, posted by “History NOW,” April 28, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KUhpAGWJyc&index=7&list=PLiRuBL\\_i3RtIJdS90cLRdQ8lVNl1TBTED](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KUhpAGWJyc&index=7&list=PLiRuBL_i3RtIJdS90cLRdQ8lVNl1TBTED).

Looking ahead, after the fall of Mosul, SOLI plans to help the NPU and NPF transition from being militias to permanent security forces of the Assyrian community. VanDyke is also considering expanding SOLI operations to Syria and Libya.

### *Diplomatic and political assistance*

Spending an extensive amount of time with militia leaders and being entrusted to train their troops allows a group like SOLI to develop local relationships that surpass the influence they gain through their technical training. Indeed, in the case of the NPU, local leaders have come to request strategic advice from VanDyke on matters of their long-term policy development and their aspirations of more administrative and political freedoms. The requests for advice have included which steps the Assyrian groups could take to secure a favorable outcome in diplomatic decisions made in Erbil, Baghdad, and Washington. In addition, SOLI advises Assyrian leaders on issues ranging from the international protection of Assyrian territory to the various ways Assyrian groups can obtain the support of Western governments, particularly the United States. Thus SOLI members have accompanied Assyrian delegations to meetings with State Department officials on several occasions, engaged with influential and well-connected individuals in Washington, and helped them draft letters to foreign dignitaries.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, much of SOLI's international diplomatic effort has gone into persuading the United States government to work with Assyrians. This has been a tough sell in Washington, particularly when other regional governments with whom the United States does not have friendly relations have also been courting the Assyrians.<sup>17</sup>

Consistent with its efforts to gain support for Assyrians in the United States, SOLI also seeks to generate media attention for its clients and advises them on which media interviews to accept. SOLI has successfully garnered media attention and facilitated journalists' visits on multiple occasions, which has been crucial to their clients' cause. In this way, SOLI works to amplify the voices of the Assyrians in Iraq for Western audiences and highlight their plight at the hands of ISIS. To that effect, SOLI has built up an expansive network among journalists and media outlets; even the History Channel has produced a series about the joint work of the NPU and SOLI.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Matthew VanDyke, Erbil, Iraq, March 2016.

<sup>17</sup> SOLI members have refused to specify which governments these are.

<sup>18</sup> "Matthew VanDyke: Growing Strength (Episode 7) | History NOW"

SOLI's services are occasionally used to test the waters on local political issues, and also to provide advice on how the Assyrians should interact with Kurdish groups or peshmerga units. VanDyke believes that more unity among Christian and Yazidi minorities would increase stability in Iraq and Syria, and as such has initiated political outreach processes that SOLI calls "diplomatic groundwork." This local political outreach involves determining which factors would most enhance the security of the areas in closest proximity to Assyrian territories. Much of this "diplomatic work" among local leaders is not publicized. Beyond teaching a village how to defend itself, SOLI believes long-term peace lies in the development of good relations among neighboring villages, tribes, and political parties. Furthermore, as local Assyrian militia groups are often influenced or controlled by small Christian political parties or expatriate communities that provide funding to these parties, achieving progress on good neighborly village relations requires building positive relations among their sponsors as well. The success of SOLI in this political area has been modest so far, but the combat charity is nonetheless proud of having brought leaders of different groups together several times and persuaded them to discuss mutual cooperation.

The authority of SOLI members amongst locals is firmly dependent on the authority they are granted by local leaders. Members of militia groups respect SOLI trainers, and trainers discipline them when needed. Local people sometimes are unaware of SOLI's presence and actions since SOLI trains troops in villages abandoned by civilians, where only soldiers now reside.

The presence of SOLI has an indirect effect on the social order. It augments the authority and prestige of local leaders among their own people and also strengthens the authority and prestige of such groups with other local and international organizations.

Moreover, the more integrated combat charities become with local elites, the more appealing they may become to larger domestic and international actors who may want to work with them or retain their services, even if unofficially. According to VanDyke, such an increase in the desirability of SOLI as an on-the-ground interlocutor and broker is already underway. Influential and government-connected individuals from conservative and

Christian groups in the United States are also starting to develop relations with SOLI in order to communicate with the Assyrian groups in Iraq.<sup>19</sup> In short, the relationship between SOLI and its Assyrian militia client has become symbiotic—both empower each other.

Nonetheless, a major risk for SOLI is that it will become unintentionally, and often unknowingly, entangled in local politics. Of course, even the initial decision to provide military assistance to a particular armed group is a profoundly political act. Indeed, from the very beginning, SOLI has been in an unstated conflict with the American Mesopotamian Organization (AMO), an expatriate community affiliated with the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), the largest Assyrian political party, which also happens to be politically affiliated with the NPU. When SOLI started training the NPU, the ADM tried to persuade the NPU to terminate the partnership because VanDyke is well-known for his anti-Assad stance, while ADM is strongly pro-Assad. Indeed, the ADM supports another Christian militia in Syria, the Gozarto Protection Force (GPF), which split from an anti-Assad Christian militia affiliated with the Kurds, the US-supported Syriac Military Council (MFS). At one point, VanDyke had also been engaged in exploratory talks with the MFS about providing the group with military assistance. Delivering such assistance to the MFS would have run the risk of SOLI training ADM-affiliated militias in Iraq but opposing them in Syria. These political contradictions culminated in a heated public dispute between SOLI and ADM, with accusations, counteraccusations, and mutual recriminations, ranging from claims that the ADM hired a contractor to oust SOLI from training NPU who turned out to be a con artist with no military experience, to allegations that VanDyke was training the Nusra Front in Syria. As a result, SOLI's training for NPU forces has decreased since early 2016, while it has begun to support another Assyrian militia, the NPF.<sup>20</sup>

Not only does SOLI consciously alter local balances of power, it is also used by local actors to change local balances of power and engage in international diplomacy. For example, local Assyrian leaders have used SOLI's support and presence to claim that they have Americans on their side. Local fighters may take pictures with SOLI trainers, post them online, and then claim they are being trained by Americans, in order to

**“[L]ocal Assyrian leaders have used SOLI’s support and presence to claim that they have Americans on their side.”**

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Matthew VanDyke, Erbil, Iraq, March 2016.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

raise their prestige. Some leaders are also aware that the State Department discourages U.S. citizens to fight in Iraq and therefore use SOLI support to secure extragovernmental support from other independent groups or foreign fighter groups. The objective is to imply to U.S. officials that if the United States does not provide support, the particular local actor will invite independent groups instead. These types of political games cannot be stopped by combat charities which usually only discover later on that they have been manipulated by the local actors.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Social services delivery*

SOLI typically avoids providing social services since its fundraising strategy centers on promising potential donors that their contributions will be used to empower the war fighting capabilities of SOLI clients. Nevertheless, SOLI has on occasion provided and supported social services delivery and cultural events, for instance by distributing clothes in one area. In 2015, SOLI organized two children's events, an Easter egg hunt for an orphanage in Alqosh and a Christmas event for 3,000 Assyrian internally-displaced children. Six thousand gifts were distributed to the children during these two events, which were both repeated in 2016.

Nevertheless, the cultural influence of SOLI members on the areas of their operations is limited. SOLI does not have a "Westernizing" effect on local interlocutors when its members work with them. An important reason for this is that many local Iraqis with whom SOLI has engaged have already been widely exposed to Western popular culture. Many of them are familiar with Western music, movies, and clothing and often even deploy popular figures of speech in English. As VanDyke summed it up: "No culture shocks. Assyrians drink. We did the egg hunt, but that's about it."<sup>22</sup>

In sum, despite its small size, SOLI has had a rather pronounced impact on the local order in the parts of Iraq where it has cooperated with Assyrian communities. Its military impact has been most pronounced as SOLI has helped build and professionalize the Assyrian militia forces. Nonetheless, its political impact has been substantial and diverse as well. The willingness of the Iraqi central government to recognize the NPU as an official Assyrian militia thanks to the multifaceted facilitation by SOLI has significantly

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<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Matthew VanDyke, Erbil, Iraq, March 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Matthew VanDyke, Erbil, Iraq, March 2016.



enhanced the capacity of the Assyrian groups to mobilize for their political interests in the future. SOLI's role in generating international exposure and support for the Assyrian groups has also increased its political influence. At the same time, local interlocutors often seek to manipulate the presence and support of SOLI for their political advantage in ways that SOLI cannot fully control or anticipate. Indeed, the importance of local politics is no lesser for a small-scale combat charity than it is for a large-scale state intervention.

### Humanitarian Defense Abroad (HDA)

As in the case of SOLI, this case study of another combat charity—Humanitarian Defense Abroad—also explores its philosophy, goals, organizational structures, and crucially, its impact on the local military and political order, as well as its international dimensions. In contrast to SOLI, HDA has a very different approach to its mission even though it works only some 150 kilometers away from SOLI operations. HDA's philosophy is more utilitarian and opportunity-oriented than the axioms of SOLI. Its stated goal is nonetheless the same: to empower its chosen client—a Kurdish peshmerga force close to the frontline of Kirkuk—in the fight against the Islamic State. Because unlike the Assyrians, the Kurdish forces do not lack manpower or light personal weaponry, HDA concentrates its aid in the area of specialized military knowledge and civilian technical knowledge that the Kurdish units often lack. Thus rather than building entire militia units like SOLI, HDA focuses on locating foreigners with specialized military skillsets and civilian technical knowledge, and embeds them in peshmerga units. The embedded specialists range from sniper instructors to human intelligence (HUMINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) software specialists, drone operators, and specialists in military doctrine. The trainers and technologies that HDA supplies are intended to be force multipliers that build upon a group's existing capabilities. And as in the case of SOLI, HDA's embedded trainers and specialists affect local politics and balances of power, as well as the local commanders with whom HDA interacts. Like SOLI, HDA also provides public relations and diplomatic assistance.

**“[R]ather than building entire militia units like SOLI, HDA focuses on locating foreigners with specialized military skillsets and civilian technical knowledge, and embeds them in peshmerga units.”**

### ***HDA's background***

HDA's origins are once again connected to a highly personal experience of its founder, Lu Lobello. On April 8, 2003, Fox Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 23rd Marine Regiment of the United States found itself engaged in a heavy gun battle in front of the state security building in the Armenian neighborhood of eastern Baghdad. The battle was chaotic and bloody. Fox Company had 13 wounded in the first two minutes; the enemy wore no uniforms and hence could not be distinguished from their civilian counterparts. For many days before, rumors had circulated of hijacked cars loaded with suicide bombers. Thus when three cars started to speed toward them, the Marines opened fire. Tragically it turned out that the cars were transporting not suicide bombers but civilians hurrying home to their residences just a few meters away from where the battle raged. Three men in the cars were killed and one woman was injured. In the years that followed, psychological problems emerged and festered amongst 10-15 percent of the Marines from the company.

Trying to cope with what he went through and with personal moral dilemmas arising from that battle, Lu Lobello chose to leave the Marine Corps in 2006. Unlike his fellow Marines, Lobello decided to search for the family of the Iraqi civilians who were killed in the 2006 battle. Eventually, in 2009, he came across an article by U.S. war correspondent Dexter Filkins, who identified the family of one of the victims as the Kachadoorians, who Lobello later discovered had relocated to the United States. Lobello contacted Filkins and arranged to meet with the family. During the meetings, the Kachadoorians forgave Lobello, who subsequently informed some of the other members of the Fox Company about the reunion, thus helping to provide peace to the other fighters.<sup>23</sup> As a result of this experience, Lobello began to involve himself in veteran-help work and became active in several charitable projects focused on veterans, including helping to deploy veterans as humanitarians back to Iraq.

Step by step, the idea to set up HDA emerged. Lobello himself states that he decided to start HDA after he encountered Islamic State social media videos showing kidnappings and executions.<sup>24</sup> He would break into tears watching

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<sup>23</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Atonement," *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/29/atonement>.

<sup>24</sup> Author's Skype interview with Lu Lobello, March 2016.

them, thinking that if he and his platoon were still in Iraq, such atrocities could be stopped. A self-described man of opportunity, he realized that such tragedies had made the infantryman's skillset of problem-solving in austere and dangerous environments extremely valuable. "I was influenced by Hemingway during my life," he shared during a Skype interview, "so it didn't take much to connect the dots. This is the book. This is the *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It can be done—because it was done before. And I can go to the media just as ISIS can and get support."<sup>25</sup>

Thus in May 2015, the first combat charity was registered as such. Under its U.S. legal status as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit public charity, Humanitarian Defense Abroad declared its intentions to "organize and fund international volunteers who seek to intervene in human rights crises where genocide, arbitrary mass killings, and egregious human rights violations take place."<sup>26</sup>

### ***Goals and philosophy***

HDA seeks to advance humanitarian objectives in two ways: by helping a group or community under attack and by providing a sense of moral purpose to HDA members themselves. After studying issues of moral injury, Lobello concluded that many veterans suffer from a loss of purpose and mission after leaving military service, a situation that can be exacerbated if the veterans have also experienced a loss of religious, moral, or national belief. In Lobello's view, providing veterans with an opportunity to serve again and help others enables them to obtain new meaning in their lives.<sup>27</sup>

To accomplish these goals, Lobello tapped into informal veterans' networks to recruit individuals wishing to deploy to Iraq in order to assist the Kurds in their defense against the Islamic State. More than 100 volunteers, ranging from privates to colonels, signed up during the first 24 hours of Lobello's recruitment drive.

In establishing HDA, Lobello drew on humanitarian principles of protecting innocent civilians, including through the use of military force.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Humanitarian Defense Abroad, "About Us," <http://www.humanitariandefenseabroad.org/about-us/>.

<sup>27</sup> Luigino Lobello, *The Medical Model: Al Qaeda's Ally in Wounding America's Service Members 2*, Sociology class long form, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2012; Author's interview with Lu Lobello, April/May 2015 in Erbil, Iraq.

Referring to a 2003 pre-Iraq-invasion speech by General James Mattis, then the commander of the 1st Marine Division about to be deployed to Iraq,<sup>28</sup> Lobello argues that the main aim of warfare should not be to slaughter the enemy but rather to protect civilians from abuse.<sup>29</sup> While this may seem to be a contradiction, Lobello argues that the destruction of the enemy may often be an inevitable consequence of such an objective. Still, the death of the enemy is merely an indirect consequence, rather than the main goal. Lobello further interprets Gen. Mattis' speech to mean that the need for security supersedes other needs such as access to shelter, supplies, and health care. Consistent with psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs,<sup>30</sup> Lobello argues that without physical security, other basic needs cannot be satisfied. HDA thus regards itself as a crucial provider of security to victims of war in a way that is analogous to medical care provided by Médecins Sans Frontières. Conversely, HDA is able to provide its volunteers with a degree of the self-actualization that they seek, thereby helping both the former soldiers as well as the victims of war.

### ***Organizational structure***

While the organizational structure of HDA has changed over time, Lu Lobello has remained its centerpiece and principal representative. Mostly residing in the United States, Lobello focuses on organizing HDA. Because he has a family and is a practicing attorney in Las Vegas, Lobello only occasionally participates in combat operations in Iraq. His key partner in running HDA is Douglas Noble, while Stephen Civak was also an important figure who financially supported some of the HDA's projects. Lobello travels to Iraq every three to four months to work with local leadership on their diplomatic skills, check on the intelligence projects, build the HDA network, and explore new areas and opportunities for HDA engagement. Unlike SOLI, HDA does not have its own unit of trainers, though that may change in a near future. Rather it trains locals directly, or functions as a placement broker for foreigners who want to fight the Islamic State by embedding with local forces.

28 Gen. James Mattis, "Message to Marines at the Start of the Iraq War," *American Veteran's Memorial*, March 19, 2003, [http://americanveteransmemorial.org/Iraq\\_War\\_Speech.php](http://americanveteransmemorial.org/Iraq_War_Speech.php).

29 Author's Skype interview with Lu Lobello, March 2016.

30 See Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-96; and Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).

In the middle of 2016, HDA operations slowed down somewhat, in part due to the fact that the personal lives of Lobello and Noble became more time-consuming. Crucially, it was also because of disputes that had erupted within the organization—though not in the leadership—over the group’s philosophy and future direction, which eventually led several HDA volunteers to leave the organization. But in the second half of 2016, Lobello and his partners restructured their staff and drafted new volunteers specializing in human intelligence, informational technologies, and signals intelligence gathering. Perhaps indicating a new thrust of HDA priorities, the new recruits replaced prior specialists in combat and battlefield medicine. Lobello and several volunteers visited Iraq in the end of 2016 to participate in the Mosul offensive with the PUK peshmerga units and deliver another drone.

### *Services and effects on the ground*

As previewed above, the range and focus of HDA assistance has evolved dramatically over time. In 2015, HDA’s principal goal was to design and build an international platoon fighting on the side of the Kurds in Iraq, akin to a Kurdish version of the French Foreign Legion. This effort led to the creation of several groups of foreign fighters embedded within peshmerga units. However, by 2016, HDA’s understanding of the military needs of the peshmerga units were changed. In 2016, HDA thus came to concentrate on facilitating the deployment of foreign military and non-military specialists who could become force multipliers within the local units where they embedded.

Until now, HDA’s impact on local order has been mostly indirect and most pronounced on the military battlefield. Nonetheless, a significant increase in the military capacities of the Kurdish peshmerga units could yet translate into significant political effects as well.

### *Military assistance*

HDA’s strategy involves delivering military and civilian professionals to any place in the world where the skills of HDA volunteers could be of use. For now, however, HDA has concentrated on building up its name in Iraq. In 2015 and early 2016, HDA channeled most of its capacities toward

**“Until now, HDA’s impact on local order has been mostly indirect and most pronounced on the military battlefield.”**

assisting Kurdish units fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The clients have mostly been peshmerga units, but occasionally YPG has also received HDA assistance. The volunteers supplied by HDA have mostly been former members of the U.S. military. Occasionally, however, HDA has also facilitated the placement of non-U.S. veterans as well as civilians who have never served in the military but possess abilities that are valued in the battlefield, such as medical skills. In contrast with SOLI, HDA is more interested in the volunteers' technical skills than combat skills. This is because HDA now assesses that the anti-ISIS Kurdish units have sufficiently improved their basic fighting skills, but continue to lack intelligence capacities and sophisticated equipment and advanced military technology. Moreover, HDA now seeks to supply the Kurdish units with volunteers who can act as force multipliers, including snipers, medics, intelligence officers, and at one point even a Milan missile system operator.<sup>31</sup>

Altogether, as of January 2017, HDA has so far facilitated the embedding of about 100 volunteers from a pool of more than 1000 applicants. HDA's selection criteria include a background check and sometimes an in-person interview of the applicant conducted at Lobello's house in Las Vegas, which Lobello uses to assess the psychological and physical fit of the applicant with the characteristics of the possible placement location. Since the second half of 2016, HDA now requires candidates to undergo a week-long training course consisting of specialized skills testing depending on their expertise, basics of intelligence tradecraft, and also close-quarter combat training.

Beyond supplying military and civilian specialists, HDA has invested a lot of energy into supplying high-tech equipment to its local clients. In the case of intelligence support, the provision of commercial drones to its clients has been by far the most effective form of HDA assistance. In addition to purchasing them, HDA also teaches the local Kurdish units how to effectively operate the drones for aerial surveillance, target identification, and patrol security. The first HDA-provided drone has operated in the Kirkuk region of Iraq. In November 2016 HDA delivered a fixed wing drone to one of the PUK peshmerga units, a separate thermal camera, and a software-defined radio. Through the efforts and equipment, HDA was able to successfully tap into an ISIS drone feed and small unit communications.<sup>32</sup> HDA is already in possession of a DJI Mavic drone that

<sup>31</sup> Author's email exchanges with Lu Lobello, March 2016 and September 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Author's email exchanges with Lu Lobello, January 2017.

has triple the flight time compared to the previous drones, and which HDA has equipped with additional unspecified equipment. It was scheduled for deployment in March 2017.

The drone deployment as well as the use of mapping tools, also facilitated by HDA, allow the typically under-equipped Kurdish groups to gather detailed pictures of the battlefield and the surrounding areas at a comparatively low cost. Although the footage is of limited quality compared to that available to professional militaries, it nonetheless amounts to a significant increase in the groups' intelligence capacities and a force equalizer against the Islamic State's own drones.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond providing the technical equipment and operational skills, HDA also seeks to encourage its various clients in Iraq to share intelligence with HDA and among themselves against their common enemy—the Islamic State. However, this effort has been difficult, with persistent inter-group rivalries frequently hampering such intelligence sharing and other cooperation.

Typically, HDA clients prefer to receive equipment over being goaded to share intelligence. Local groups are most interested in receiving night vision tools, which the Islamic State possesses but anti-ISIS Kurdish units mostly do not, leaving them with a significant battlefield disadvantage. Other sought-after types of military equipment that HDA provided in undisclosed quantities to PUK peshmerga and the YPG include rifle optics, satellite phones, walkie-talkies, and decoders.

HDA often faces obstacles in delivering sufficient equipment from the United States. Instead, HDA has endeavored to teach the Kurdish beneficiaries of its assistance how to use existing resources in innovative ways to overcome equipment shortages. For instance, without night vision technology, HDA has retooled disused LED monitors and televisions to drown out ISIS night vision capabilities. In addition to reducing the disparities in battlefield visibility by creating shining areas through which the night vision goggles cannot see, such use of the monitors may also reveal the enemy's whereabouts when the Islamic State starts shooting at the monitors to destroy them. HDA is also preparing a simple manual on

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<sup>33</sup> Author's email exchanges with Lu Lobello, March 2016 and September 2016.

how to use scrap and unused satellite dishes (of which there are many in the Kurdish parts of Iraq) to intercept enemy communication over greater distances.

HDA supplements its military equipment and training by providing technical assistance. For example, HDA prepared a research paper for a YPG commander on how to better use and combine field intelligence with the analysis of online social media platforms. HDA also teaches the beneficiaries of its assistance how to conduct basic background checks of Western volunteers.

HDA has also taught Kurdish groups how to improve their operational security. For example, it has encouraged Kurdish operatives and observers in Islamic State territory not to send their reports through Facebook. Instead, it has taught them to use Telegram, SureSpot and other heavily encrypted services. It has shown Kurdish groups many apps that can be deployed for intelligence gathering or to help secure a combat outpost.

When local resources and HDA resources are insufficient, HDA teaches local groups and commanders how to use crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter and GoFundMe to bolster their funds. This is a simple and effective way of garnering financial support from Kurdish expatriates and other individuals.

In November 2016, HDA delivered a new fixed-wing drone for long-range reconnaissance to one of the PUK peshmerga units. Other promised technological improvements, installable on the drone, include a thermal camera, a device that can detect chemicals in the air (Kurdish groups have complained that the Islamic State was testing its own chemical weapons), and a motorized device that can drop small explosives from the drone. In order to boost peshmerga SIGINT capabilities, HDA has promised to bring multiple software-defined radios (SDRs) that can provide full spectrum data analysis, record electronic transmissions in an area, and intercept personal data while disguised as a cell phone tower. In addition, SDRs can protect peshmerga drones, drown out enemy drones, locate suspicious individuals in a city, and map out the inside of a building, such as for a planned assault.<sup>34</sup> These and further options are merely a matter of programming ability and imagination.

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<sup>34</sup> Author's email exchanges with Lu Lobello, October 2016.



### *Diplomatic and public relations assistance*

Like SOLI, HDA also provides diplomatic assistance, encouraging local Kurdish groups to cultivate Western support. To foster their public relations campaigns, HDA has urged them not to post online gruesome images of their dead adversaries or accompany them with rejoicing commentaries. Reversing this tendency is nonetheless a challenge as death on the battlefield has become banal and dehumanization of enemy is commonplace. Some peshmerga fighters obtain satisfaction from taking photos of themselves with disfigured corpses of ISIS combatants. They find their enemy brutal and terrifying, denying dignity to prisoners and the dead, and thus deserving of a worse fate. While in order to obtain Western support it is preferable to eschew taking such photos and peshmerga commanders therefore tell their troops not to do so, the orders are often ignored. Moreover, by sharing such images, peshmerga fighters also boost the group's morale. Western-oriented public relations thus may get in the way of élan.

Beyond this narrow component of public relations, broader media training is an important part of the services offered by HDA. Thanks to Lobello's personal story and former activities, HDA has successfully developed an expansive media network. HDA trains local commanders in writing press releases, contacting media outlets such as *Reuters* and *The New York Times*, and developing good relations with the press to empower and highlight their beneficiaries' narratives. Groups partnered with HDA thus develop a larger audience and media base.

Lobello states that HDA also teaches its beneficiaries how to interact with American politicians and engage with U.S. legislative processes, something local peshmerga leaders regularly request. They believe that HDA maintains active contact with U.S. federal government agencies and thus assume that by occasionally engaging with HDA representatives, they gain unofficial channels to the U.S. government and feedback on how the U.S. government perceives their units.<sup>35</sup>

**“To foster their public relations campaigns, HDA has urged [local Kurdish groups] not to post online gruesome images of their dead adversaries or accompany them with rejoicing commentaries.”**

<sup>35</sup> Author's Facebook chat exchanges with Lu Lobello, October 2016.

### *Social services and engagement with local populations*

As in the case of SOLI, HDA provides only limited social services to local populations as HDA is primarily focused on combat-related issues. However, when HDA deploys veterans with medical or engineering skills, it has also provided such services to local populations. For example, an HDA medic, also a member of the combat charity Shadows of Hope specializing in medical assistance in war zones,<sup>36</sup> halted the spread of diarrhea by locating the contaminated water source in a village close to the Kirkuk frontline and removing dead animals from it. Like SOLI, HDA also does not seem to significantly alter local cultural attitudes. Indeed, the Kurds with whom HDA works have long been familiar with Western culture.

### *Local political influence*

For many mid-ranking officers of the Kurdish peshmerga groups such as captains and majors, building a relationship with HDA is a crucial means of accessing specialized equipment and skills lacking in their units. Such access also improves their standing with their superiors and political leaders as it demonstrates their skills in garnering international support. Major Shorsh Salahaddin of the PUK peshmerga unit is an example of such influence-building. He is the only publicly known individual to receive one of the HDA drones, with some of its footage even appearing on the HDA Facebook page.<sup>37</sup> His unit also has several foreign fighters with specific infantry skills who were embedded through HDA facilitation. These foreigners boosted the morale of the unit by augmenting infantry and medical skills.

Overall, however, HDA does not have the same direct political influence on the ground as SOLI does. Its impact is more indirect since HDA does not have its own personnel group on the ground and thus cannot exercise the same level of influence as SOLI.

Nevertheless, like SOLI, HDA assistance affects the legitimacy and prestige of local commanders. Those who benefit from HDA cooperation see their authority boosted because they “acquire Americans” in their units,

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<sup>36</sup> Shadows of Hope, “Home Page,” <http://www.shadowsofhope.org/>.

<sup>37</sup> Facebook, “Humanitarian Defense Abroad,” <https://www.facebook.com/HumanitarianDefenseAbroad/videos/490483571161656/>.

perhaps even as personal bodyguards. Their authority with both superiors and subordinates is also boosted by having access to sophisticated and high-tech gear and better training. Both their superiors and subordinates often presume that units led by commanders successful in obtaining HDA support perform better on the battlefield. Furthermore, commanders who benefit from HDA assistance develop better intelligence that can be of interest to international coalition forces. By increasing their usefulness to the coalition forces, they put themselves on the map and can hope to secure some benefits from the coalition in the future.

In short, local groups supported by the combat charity HDA benefit in at least two ways. First and most significantly, the group's fighting capacities are enhanced as a result of better equipment, training, intelligence-gathering capacities, and the presence of Western volunteers. The overall fighting élan of the group also increases, and the group is assumed to perform better on the battlefield. The media and diplomatic outreach supported by HDA is also expected to generate further material benefits and domestic and international political support for the particular unit. Second, the authority and legitimacy of the commanders capable of attracting HDA assistance are enhanced both among their superiors and subordinates. However, cumulatively, these effects have not altered the local political order so far. However, they are subtly changing the hierarchies and balances of power within the peshmerga structures, privileging those who receive assistance from a combat charity such as HDA. Nonetheless, because the presence of HDA personnel on the ground is very limited—both in absolute terms and in comparison with SOLI—its local political influence and ambitions are also far more circumscribed.

## Conclusions and policy implications

Combat charities, an emerging phenomenon of the 21st century battlefield that is reshaping the concept of armed humanitarianism, can have pronounced military and potentially even political impacts in the areas where they operate. No doubt, combat charities have so far not altered local political orders in a significant way. The strategic character and developments of the wars in Iraq and Syria would likely not look significantly different in the absence of the involvement of combat

**“Such assistance [from a combat charity] can constitute the only available means to escape destruction, imprisonment, slave labor, displacement, dispossession, and death.”**

charities. The Islamic State would likely be able to overrun and massacre a larger number of Assyrian villages and kill a greater number of Kurdish militiamen, but the larger course of the wars would be the same.

Nonetheless, for particular militias and self-defense groups, the assistance from a combat charity can make a profound difference. For an Assyrian village to repel an attack by the Islamic State as a result of assistance from a combat charity can easily mean the difference between life and death. Such assistance can constitute the only available means to escape destruction, imprisonment, slave labor, displacement, dispossession, and death.

But a combat charity’s effects can be far more pronounced and lasting than just immediate survival. As a result of assistance from SOLI, the NPU became the only independent Assyrian self-defense unit in Iraq to be officially recognized by the Iraqi government. Thus for the first time in modern history, an Assyrian community in Iraq has its own military force for self-defense. Given that every other Iraqi military unit retreated from Assyrian towns and villages and abandoned the Assyrians to being slaughtered by ISIS, the presence of the combat-charity-supported independent Assyrian forces gives the local Assyrian population a sense of political empowerment and hope that it will not be annihilated. Conceivably, the growth of this self-defense force, as a result of the multifaceted assistance from SOLI, can eventually give Assyrians greater political bargaining power after the war and potentially greater autonomy within Iraq in the future. Similarly, the larger the territories and populations that Kurdish units are able to hold, the greater their political bargaining capacity will be within Iraq and Syria and with international actors after the war is over. The Kurdish units supported by combat charities thus derive a sense of empowerment from reducing—slightly, at least—their power disparity vis-à-vis the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

By raising financial and military resources, improving intelligence and battlefield capacities, and embedding highly specialized U.S. and foreign volunteers, combat charities can substantially alter local balances of power. Securing the assistance of SOLI or HDA is akin to obtaining the services of a small private military company, but at no cost or minimal cost for the beneficiary. While there are no guarantees as to the quality of the military assistance delivered, such risks may not be significantly higher

than in hiring a for-profit private security companies. The level of personal devotion of foreign volunteers sponsored by a combat charity to the local cause can in fact surpass the dedication of for-profit mercenaries. Moreover, many small self-defense and militia groups simply cannot afford to hire a private security company. So far at least, the performance of HDA and SOLI has been reliable and has augmented the fighting capacities of their beneficiaries. For a marginalized group of people with minimal resources and outside support, a combat charity may well provide a military bonanza.

These effects of combat charities may not be confined to the battlefield. They can be translated into political effects within the groups that receive assistance and beyond. The political effects include growth in the legitimacy, authority, and prestige of local commanders and groups benefiting from combat charities' assistance.

By raising the international profile of their beneficiaries through their support for media outreach and international diplomacy, combat charities can influence the sustainability of their beneficiaries' military and political power. Assistance from combat charities can thus catapult insignificant and unknown military groups into a regionally- and even—potentially—globally-recognized player, even if still a small one. Some local elites calculate that the more they embrace international combat charities, the more appealing they will be in the home countries of the combat charities, and thus the more likely they will be to get support.

Of course, the extent of these political and military effects is not uniform. It is a function of both the capacities and forms of engagement of the particular combat charity and of the pre-existing capacities, power, and orientation of the local client group. Nor are the power and influence effects unidirectional. The greater the military effectiveness and the growth in political power of its local beneficiaries, the greater the influence of the combat charity itself. Thus the relationship between the combat charities and their clients is mostly symbiotic; the increases in their influence and legitimacy are by and large mutual. And of course, the local groups are not puppets on the string of the combat charity. The local groups very much try to use the combat charities for their political purposes.

In assessing the impact of combat charities on local orders, it is important to recognize that the two combat charities analyzed in this paper, even though they are the oldest, have been in existence only for two years. Although their effects may yet prove to be ephemeral, it is more likely that both the phenomenon of combat charities and their political and military effects on local order will only grow over time. Large numbers of military veterans in the United States and in the West more broadly will likely facilitate the growth of combat charities. Many veterans look for further opportunities to spend some time training and supporting marginalized populations caught up in conflict. Analogous to standard humanitarian efforts to get affluent people to “adopt” a poor child in a developing country by paying for his or her living and school costs, some veterans, encouraged by combat charities, may come to sponsor a favorite militia fighter or group by providing them with resources and training.

As the leaders of combat charities look ahead, they envision a future of volunteer humanitarian combat forces that can be deployed immediately to fill the lacuna of regular militaries or peacekeepers.<sup>38</sup> While formal national militaries and international coalitions often take extensive time to be authorized and deployed to intervene in military conflicts, combat charities could arguably raise funds and send in advisors in a matter of days and deploy small combat units in a matter of weeks. Potentially, combat charities may thus play a role not only in shaping the military conflict, but also in conflict resolution. Conceivably, they could, under some circumstances, even determine the outcome of conflicts before they escalate, and by creating local balances of power, perhaps even prevent some conflicts by deterring potential attackers. Combat charities are thus likely to increasingly gain the attention of U.S. and international policymakers.

Indeed, this militarization of humanitarianism is not something to be taken lightly. Without careful analysis and evaluation and without developing policy guidelines and best practices, combat charities and this new version of armed humanitarianism could spiral out of control. Instead of protecting marginalized communities and helping to resolve conflict, they could exacerbate it and inadvertently increase human suffering. Such military “humanitarianism” of combat charities could also undermine the reputation and access of nonmilitary humanitarian organizations, a most undesirable outcome.

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<sup>38</sup> Author's interviews with Lu Lobello of HDA over Skype and Matthew VanDyke of SOLI in Erbil, March 2016.

Merely prohibiting or restricting combat charities is unlikely to provide adequate policy outcomes. A blanket restriction on combat charities could easily result in such groups finding legal loopholes to operate while escaping local and international accountability. For example, groups could follow the path of SOLI by founding a limited liability company that operates on a not-for-profit basis rather than registering as a public charity like HDA. Such legal designations could mitigate some of the potential reputational damage to the humanitarian sector. But many local populations and governments may not be able to tell the difference among combat charities registered as charities, limited liability companies, private military companies, and humanitarian NGOs.

Engaging with, closely monitoring, and eventually establishing legal and policy guidelines for the operations of combat charities promises a better way to manage them. Learning from the policies toward and assessments of the effects of private military companies provides a good basis for considering how to handle their pro bono equivalents. Engaging with local populations whose lives and futures they protect and bringing their voices into the policy analysis and the development of guidelines is equally imperative.

**“Engaging with, closely monitoring, and eventually establishing legal and policy guidelines for the operations of combat charities promises a better way to manage them.”**





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pavol Kosnáč is an independent scholar based in Bratislava, Slovakia. He studied comparative religion studies in Bratislava and Oxford, focusing on new religious movements, Christianity, and Islam. He is interested especially in new and alternative religiosity, as well as overlaps between religion, violence, and war. For the last three years, he studied motivations of foreign fighters and members of paramilitary organizations in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

