

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Victim versus villain: Repatriation policies for foreign fighters and the construction of gendered and racialised ‘threat narratives’

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(Received 7 July 2021; revised 12 September 2022; accepted 27 September 2022; first published online 16 November 2022)

Abstract

State responses to repatriation of Islamic State (ISIS) foreign fighters and their children detained across Syria and Iraq are highly diverse. Repatriation policies implemented between 2018 and 2020 range from denying repatriation of nationals and revocation of citizenship to repatriation and subsequent gender-responsive rehabilitation programmes. What explains the variation in state responses? This article seeks to explain why repatriation policies differ despite the global challenges faced by all states. It investigates and categorises the repatriation policies for foreign fighters across 69 countries ranging from unconditional repatriation to denying repatriation. To explain the state responses to a common security and human rights dilemma, a mixed-method approach is employed involving an explorative statistical analysis to test key explanations and a narrative analysis. The findings reveal how diverse social constructions of gendered and racialised ‘threat narratives’ of foreign fighters in policy documents and the media explain variation in foreign fighter repatriation policies.

Keywords: Repatriation; Foreign Fighter; Gendered; Racialised; Threat Narrative

Introduction

State responses to repatriation of Islamic State (ISIS) foreign fighters and their children detained across Syria and Iraq are highly diverse.¹ The repatriation policies implemented between 2018 and 2020 range from denying repatriation of nationals and revocation of citizenship to repatriation and subsequent gender-responsive rehabilitation programmes.² Overall, states of the Global North seem reluctant to repatriate whereas Central Asian countries are taking a more proactive approach.³ Yet, beyond this observation it remains unclear how and why states behave

¹Foreign fighters are defined as individuals who commit to the ideology of a certain group and travel to another country to join an organisation. They do not necessarily need to ‘fight’ to be part of the group, but – just as soldiers – may also take on other logistical or recruitment work. The gendered understanding of foreign fighters – a male combatant – is deliberately challenged through the usage of this term. Children are not viewed as foreign fighters because they are minors. ISIS foreign fighters and their children are also referred to as ‘ISIS-affiliated citizens’.

²This timeframe is chosen because state repatriation policies were implemented from 2018 onwards. I acknowledge that some countries changed their policies since December 2020, which is not reflected in the dataset.

³Myriam Francois and Azeem Ibrahim, ‘The Children of ISIS Detainees: Europe’s Dilemma’, Center for Global Policy (2020), p. 5, available at: {<https://cgpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CGP-Children-of-ISIS-June-2020.pdf>} accessed 14 June 2021; Eric Rosand, Heidi Ellis, and Stevan Weine, ‘Repatriating ISIS family members: A North Macedonia

differently in terms of their approaches to repatriation of ISIS-affiliates. This article thus seeks to explain why state repatriation policies differ despite the common security and human rights dilemma faced by all states.

Repatriation of the twelve thousand foreign ISIS-associated women and children from the Syrian camps ran by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is the only comprehensive long-term solution. This is not only advocated for by the AANES but by experts from across the globe, including security experts,⁴ the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF),⁵ the Red Cross,⁶ and even victims of the 2016 ISIS Brussels attack.⁷ The food and health situation in the camps is dire and the detained are held without charges increasing the risk of (re-)radicalisation.⁸ This prolonged Guantánamo-like detention is a security risk as previous experiences show that unlawful detention can contribute to the development of ISIS, such as the Camp Bucca in Iraq.⁹ Moreover, the current regional and global developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the Turkish offences on northern Syria further increase the need of finding a timely solution to avoid increasing harm.¹⁰

This article investigates state repatriation policies of foreign fighters across 69 countries.¹¹ The policies are categorised ranging from unconditional repatriation to denying repatriation. To explain the variation of state responses a mixed-method approach is employed. First, an exploratory statistical analysis is performed drawing on conventional International Relations (IR) propositions.¹² The results of the analysis are inconclusive and find no compelling explanation. Thus, second, a narrative analysis informed by an intersectional gender perspective is employed to help explain variance that the statistical analysis cannot. The narrative analysis explores state policies and their social constructions of the security threat of foreign fighters in policy documents and the media. The intersectional gender perspective is crucial to examine how intersecting markers of identity, including gender, racial, religious, or classist dynamics are instrumentalised to frame foreign fighters as, for example, threatening. My analysis builds upon feminist security studies that highlight the gendered and racialised constructions of threat.¹³ This method enriches IR

model?, *Just Security* (14 September 2020), available at: {<https://www.justsecurity.org/72420/repatriating-isis-family-members-a-north-macedonian-model/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁴Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'The challenges of a new UN Security Council Resolution on Foreign Fighters', *Just Security* (17 August 2020), available at: {<https://www.justsecurity.org/72052/the-challenges-of-a-new-un-security-council-resolution-on-foreign-fighters/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁵United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF urges governments to repatriate thousands of foreign children stranded in northeast Syria', *UN NEWS* (4 November 2019), available at: {<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1050561>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁶Lisa Schlein, 'ICRC: Families of foreign fighters in Syria should be repatriated', *VOA* (7 July 2020), available at: {<https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/icrc-families-foreign-fighters-syria-should-be-repatriated>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁷Louis Colart, 'Des victimes des attentats de Bruxelles s'expriment sur le rapatriement des enfants belges en Syrie [Victims of the Brussels attacks speak out on the repatriation of Belgian children to Syria]', *Le Soir* (3 July 2020), available at: {<https://plus.lesoir.be/311254/article/2020-07-03/des-victimes-des-attentats-de-bruxelles-sexpriment-sur-le-rapatriement-des>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁸Joana Cook and Gina Vale, 'From Daesh to "Diaspora": Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State', *International Center for the Study of Radicalisation* (2018), p. 49, available at: {<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁹Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, 'From Bad to Worse: The Fate of European Foreign Fighters and Families Detained in Syria, One Year after the Turkish Offensive', *Egmont Institute* (2020), pp. 6–7, available at: {<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/from-bad-to-worse-the-fate-of-european-foreign-fighters-and-families-detained-in-syria/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁰Francois and Ibrahim, 'Children of ISIS Detainees', pp. 3–4.

¹¹Please find an overview of the countries in Appendix 1, Table A1.

¹²IR scholars commonly explain policy outcomes based on relative state behaviour in the international system, such as a state's military capabilities or record of human rights adoption.

¹³Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the War on Terror* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2008); Leonie B. Jackson, 'Framing British "jihadi brides": Metaphor and the social construction of I.S. women', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019); Caron Gentry, *Disordered Violence: How Gender, Race and Heteronormativity*

theorising by applying narrative analysis developed by critical and feminist security studies scholars in the context of foreign fighter repatriation. My narrative analysis reveals that gendered and racialised ‘threat narratives’ of foreign fighters are constructed by states to support and promote various repatriation policies, hence explaining the variation of state responses. These narratives, which, for example, victimise female ISIS members have far-reaching implications pertaining to access to rehabilitation and citizenship withdrawal. The article makes a distinct contribution to the field of feminist security studies as it not only employs a gendered, intersectionality-informed narrative analysis of foreign fighters’ repatriation but also demonstrates how such narrative analysis is essential to explain state behaviour in the context of an ongoing, unresolved crisis.

Categorisation of state repatriation policies

To explore states’ responses to repatriation of foreign fighters and explain why there is such wide variation among them, I analyse the policies of 69 countries between January 2018 and December 2020 (overview in Appendix 1, Table A1). A country is included in the dataset when citizens are currently or have been in the past detained in camps or prisons in Syria or Iraq.¹⁴ The data is gathered with open-source material, predominantly policy documents, news articles, academic articles and research reports. From the 69 countries almost half (33 countries) repatriated citizens from Syria or Iraq, though most of them only in piecemeal operations and not as a comprehensive policy.

The repatriation policies of the countries are grouped into four different categories: Unconditional Repatriation, Conditional Repatriation, Allow Return, and Deny Repatriation (overview in Appendix 1, Figure A1). Of the 69 countries, seven were grouped into the category Unconditional Repatriation, which implies that the countries agreed to repatriate all its citizens or have already done so, such as Kazakhstan. Countries in this category also allow their citizens to return on their own. Twenty-six countries were grouped into Conditional Repatriation, which refers to countries that have occasionally repatriated but do not aim to repatriate all their citizens. Crucially, most of the countries in this category have repatriated women and children but not men (70 per cent of countries repatriated only women and children and 50 per cent minors only). Conditional Repatriation countries also allow citizens to return on their own. Sweden is one example of a Conditional Repatriation country because it repatriated a few citizens – the majority were children – but does not aim to repatriate unconditionally.¹⁵ The third category is Allowed Return with 28 countries. This category includes countries that did not actively repatriate any citizen but allows them to return on their own. One example is Serbia since the Serbian government, unlike its Balkan neighbours, has allowed citizens to return but has not taken any active steps to repatriate its citizens nor addressed the issue of repatriation publicly.¹⁶ The fourth category, Deny Repatriation, consists of eight countries and refers to countries that actively

Structure Terrorism (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Harmonie Toros, ‘“Victim” or “Security Threat”: Gendered Narratives on Women Returnees to the MENA Region’, *The Southern Hub* (2020), available at: {<https://the-southernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/gendered-narratives-on-women-returnees-to-the-mena-region?fbclid=IwAR33ZsTnjTxHNRaf-TbXqXBoRjbs9xgPth7I3UBcE8HG3R1hZtqX21W5tII>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁴There are 69 countries in the dataset as several countries had to be left out because no reliable information could be gathered for various reasons, including ongoing conflict or no publicly available information (for example Libya, Yemen, and Turkmenistan). There are also many countries that are not represented in the dataset because the number of individuals travelling to ISIS was so low that there is no available information about the persons whereabouts, such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Iceland, Afghanistan, Madagascar, Somalia, or Kenya.

¹⁵Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects’ Families’ (23 July 2019), available at: {<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁶Maja Zivanovic, ‘After ISIS Collapse, Serbian Women Trapped in Syria’, *Balkan Insight* (25 April 2019), available at: {<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/25/after-isis-collapse-serbian-women-trapped-in-syria/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

prevent citizens from re-entering.¹⁷ This may take the form of stripping citizenship or legally banning citizens from re-entering the country, such as Denmark.¹⁸

It is important to point out that these categories should be understood as dynamic and changing and more viewed on a continuum ranging from unconditional repatriation to denying repatriation. This is because the topic is current and ongoing developments, such as geopolitical events in the region and locally within the camps and prisons continue to influence the states' repatriation policies. Moreover, some countries refrain from making their repatriation policy publicly available and others change theirs unannounced, making it challenging to assess the situation.¹⁹ Another limitation is that because the countries were grouped according to the publicly available information there is a chance that for instance, a country claimed to have repatriated its citizens but there are still some remaining in the Iraqi justice system or hidden in the camps. However, the categories should not be understood as implying, for example, that every single citizen has been repatriated but rather as describing a country's general repatriation policy and political willingness. The presented data and subsequent analysis should be regarded as a first attempt at explaining the variety in states' repatriation policies.

Explaining variation in repatriation policies: Conventional approach

To assess the factors behind the state adoption of widely varying policies, conventional IR propositions are operationalised as variables in an explorative statistical model. This is done because IR explanations have typically explained state behaviour including the international diffusion of state policies.²⁰ Thus, in an attempt to analyse repatriation policies cross-nationally, IR explanations could be pertinent.²¹ These explanations can be operationalised through the study of the presence or extent of a range of domestic and international conditions and factors, such as form of government, conflict, or international cooperation.²² As yet, no IR scholarship has explored or tested the various IR explanations for foreign fighter repatriation.

An explanation that has traditionally been used in the field of IR to understand various phenomena, including state compliance in international environmental agreements or economic well-being, is military spending.²³ Military spending is operationalised with the **military spending (per GDP)** variable from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's database.²⁴

¹⁷When a country's policy is grouped into the fourth category this does not mean that there are no returnees. Some might even have repatriated a few children but crucially, the general repatriation policy and political stance for a country in this category is that foreign fighters are prevented from entering the country.

¹⁸From a legal perspective, denying re-entry and citizenship withdrawal are two distinct mechanisms governed by different legislative provisions. However, for this article, the category 'Deny Repatriation' encompasses either citizenship deprivation and/or prevention of re-entry as both measures were often employed simultaneously.

¹⁹Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 'CTED Analytical Brief: The Repatriation of ISIL-Associated Children' (2019), p. 2, available at: {www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CTED-Analytical-Brief-Repatriation-of-Children.pdf} accessed 14 June 2021.

²⁰Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, 'Transnational networks and policy diffusion: The case of gender mainstreaming', *International Studies Quarterly*, 45:1 (2001), pp. 27–57; Frances S. Berry and William D. Berry, 'Innovation and diffusion models in policy research', in Paul Sabatier (ed.), *Theories of the Policy Process* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 169–200; Ann E. Towns, 'Norms and social hierarchies: Understanding international policy diffusion "from below"', *International Organization*, 66:2 (2012), pp. 179–209.

²¹Please note that the predictor variables that are presented in the following have a more detailed description in the respective datasets (for example military spending on the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's website).

²²Jacqui True, 'Explaining the global diffusion of the Women, Peace and Security agenda', *International Political Science Review*, 37:3 (2016), pp. 307–23 (p. 310).

²³Joel R. Carbonell, 'Military spending, liberal institutions and state compliance with international environmental agreements', *International Environment Agreements*, 16 (2016), pp. 691–719.

²⁴Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Military Expenditure by Country as Percentage of Gross Domestic Product', Military Expenditure Database (2019), available at: {<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>} accessed 14 June 2021.

It is expected that countries focusing on militarism (high military spending) might want to 'keep the terrorists out' and refrain from repatriation because foreign fighters could pose a security risk.

Another alternative explanation in the context of foreign fighter repatriation might be international cooperation. This is because membership in international organisations has been used by IR scholars to understand state's behaviour in global challenges, including with regard to developmental assistance or the protection of the ozone layer.²⁵ International cooperation is operationalised by coding membership in the **Global Coalition against Daesh**.²⁶ The organisation was founded in 2014 to fight ISIS military, its economic infrastructure, and to support liberated areas. It is expected that member countries are more likely to repatriate their citizens as this would help to stabilise the region and to literally decrease the number of ISIS members.

IR explanations for state behaviour also focus on human rights, such as its relationship with sovereignty or conflict.²⁷ The repatriation of citizens is a human rights issue because, among many others, UN human rights experts claim that the 'detention camps reach the threshold standard for torture, inhuman and degrading treatment under international law'.²⁸ Two variables from the Worldwide Governance Indicators provide the figures to assess the human rights records in a given country; namely the **Rule of Law** and **Voice and Accountability** variable.²⁹ These two variables provide an overview of the juridical system and the freedom of speech and media. Furthermore, two variables from the Human Freedom Index are analysed; the **Identity and Relationship** variable in order to assess rights around sexual orientation and gender identity, and the degree of **Religious Freedom** variable.³⁰ By analysing these four variables a range of human rights (and human rights violations) can be examined. It is argued that countries with a better human rights record are more likely to repatriate because they aim to evade that their citizens live in inhumane conditions.

Another alternative explanation for states' repatriation policies relates to concerns around national identity, which is 'socially constructed through interaction with other actors' and represents the state's self-understanding and interests.³¹ This is proxied by the states' **independence year** because newly independent states often have to find their identity and reputation in the international world order that can be influenced by, for example, foreign policy and internal politics, such as the choice to repatriate or not.³² It is expected that younger states may still wish to influence their image positively through repatriation.

²⁵Liliana Botcheva and Lisa L. Martin, 'Institutional effects on state behavior: Convergence and divergence', *International Studies Quarterly*, 45:1 (2001), pp. 1–26.

²⁶Membership as indicated on the official website: {<https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>}.

²⁷Jack Donnelly, 'State sovereignty and international human rights', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 28:2 (2014), pp. 225–38; Oskar N. Thoms and James Ron, 'Do human rights violations cause internal conflict?', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 29:3 (2007), pp. 674–705.

²⁸United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'UN Experts Welcome Return to Canada of Five-Year-Old Orphaned in Syria' (7 October 2020), accessed at: {<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26356&LangID=E>} accessed 14 June 2021; United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council (A/HRC/46/36), 'Human Rights Impact of Counter-Terrorism and Countering (Violent) Extremism Policies and Practices on the Rights of Women, Girls and the Family' (22 January 2021), available at: {<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/015/08/PDF/G2101508.pdf?OpenElement>} accessed 13 June 2022.

²⁹Daniel Kaufmann, Kraay Aart, and Mastruzzi Massimo, 'The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues', World Bank Policy Research Working Paper (2010), available at: {http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1682130} accessed 14 June 2021.

³⁰Ian Vásquez and Tanja Porčnik, 'The Human Freedom Index 2019', Cato Institute, the Fraser Institute, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (2019), available at: {<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/human-freedom-index-2019-rev.pdf>} accessed 14 June 2021.

³¹Sarina Theys, 'Introducing constructivism in International Relations theory', *E-International Relations* (23 February 2018), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/#:~:text=Constructivists%20argue%20that%20states%20can,in%20turn%20signals%20their%20interests>} accessed 14 June 2021.

³²Young Chul Cho, 'State identity formation in constructivist security studies: A suggestive essay', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 13:3 (2012), pp. 299–316.

More recently, IR scholars also consider measures of gender equality to be a determining explanation for phenomena, such as states' experience of terrorism.³³ Gender equality is operationalised by several variables from the Global Gender Equality ranking: **Economic Participation and Opportunity, Political Empowerment, Educational Attainment, and Health and Survival**.³⁴ Generally, states that institutionalise gender difference, meaning that women and men are fundamentally different from each other and that value traditional feminine stereotypes, such as vulnerability, have lower levels of gender equality.³⁵ It is argued that these countries are more likely to repatriate because viewing women as, for instance, vulnerable leads to the need for 'protection' and thus repatriation of women and children.

In IR scholarship the form of government is also thought to impact state behaviour, including, for example, in the context of durability of international military alliances.³⁶ The form of government is proxied by the **Democracy Index**.³⁷ It is expected that the more democratic a country is, the higher is the level of repatriation because democracies theoretically imply accountability, transparency, and public participation in politics.³⁸ Thus, in a functioning democracy the citizens are able to participate in political processes and can hold states accountable for, for instance, not adhering to international law and neglecting the duty of care for their citizens, which may foster governments to repatriate their citizens to avoid legal repercussions.

The salience of conflict and terrorism might also influence repatriation policies because it could lead to resources being focused on fostering peace or winning war instead of bringing 'terrorists back'. This dynamic is operationalised by the **Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict Domain** from the Global Peace Index and the **Global Terrorism Index**.³⁹ It is argued that if a country has experienced conflict or terrorism in the past years it is less likely to repatriate. Crucially, the Global Terrorism Index only measures terrorism executed by non-state actors and not by the state itself. Yet, governments are often the ones perpetrating terror like tactics.⁴⁰ Therefore, state violence, such as arbitrary detention and kidnappings is proxied by the **Political Terror Scale**.⁴¹ It is expected that states ranking high on the Political Terror Scale are less likely to repatriate citizens.

Analysis and results

To assess whether the IR explanations can explain states' repatriation policies a dataset was created based on the variables operationalised with above-mentioned proxies. The dataset was examined and analysed in two steps: First, I ran a correlation analysis with all focal variables. Second, I ran a multiple linear regression with all focal variables as predictors and level of repatriation as

³³Aneela Salman, 'Green houses for terrorism: Measuring the impact of gender equality attitudes and outcomes as determinants of terrorism', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 39:4 (2015), pp. 281–306.

³⁴World Economic Forum, 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020' (2020), available at: {http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFGGR_2020.pdf} accessed 14 June 2020.

³⁵Jacqui True, 'How effective is gender mainstreaming in international peace and security policymaking?', in Jill Steans and Daniela Tepe-Belfrage (eds), *Handbook on Gender in World Politics* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), pp. 457–66; Parashar, Tickner, and True, *Revisiting Gendered States*.

³⁶Kurt T. Gaubatz, 'Democratic states and commitment in International Relations', *International Organization*, 50:1 (1996), pp. 109–39.

³⁷The Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Democracy Index 2019: A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest', *The Economist* (2019), available at: {https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=democracyindex2019} accessed 14 June 2021.

³⁸True, 'Women, Peace and Security agenda', p. 310.

³⁹Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism' (2019), available at: {<http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>} accessed 14 June 2021; Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World' (2020), available at: {<http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁴⁰Richard Jackson, 'The study of terrorism 10 years after 9/11: Successes, issues, challenges', *Uluslararası İlişkiler-International Relations*, 8:32 (2012), pp. 1–16 (p. 8).

⁴¹Mark Gibney, Linda Cornett, Reed Wood, Peter Haschke, Daniel Arnon, Attilio Pisanò, Gray Barrett, and Baekwan Park, 'The Political Terror Scale 1976–2019' (2020), available at: {<http://www.politicalterrorscale.org>} accessed 14 June 2021.

the outcome variable.^{42,43} This was done to see if each of the predictor variables significantly predicts the level of repatriation while keeping all other factors that may affect level of repatriation constant.⁴⁴ All analyses were performed with and without controlling for country-level variables such as GDP per capita, Region, and Population Size. The results were unaffected by adding control variables, hence, the results are presented without control variables.

Results of the correlation analysis indicate that several of the predictor variables are intercorrelated, but that none were significantly correlated to repatriation policy (Appendix 2, Table A2). Results of the multiple linear regression with the identified key variables as predictors and level of repatriation as the outcome variable indicate that military spending is the only variable that has a statistically significant positive relationship with level of repatriation when controlling for all other factors (see Table 1). This indicates that countries with a higher military spending are less likely to repatriate their citizens fitting with the protectionist narrative that countries focusing on militarism might refrain from repatriation because foreign fighters could pose a security threat.⁴⁵

Table 1. Results of the multiple linear regression with repatriation policy as the outcome variable.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Democracy Index	0.12	0.24	0.31	0.49	.628
Coalition against Daesh	-0.51	0.27	-0.28	-1.87	.067
Military Spending*	0.83	0.34	0.40	2.44	.018
Independence Year	-0.11	0.14	-0.15	-0.76	.449
Gender Ranking	-1.09	3.10	-0.08	-0.35	.727
<i>Variables related to Human Rights</i>					
Rule of Law	-0.10	0.24	-0.12	-0.42	.674
Voice and Accountability	-0.14	0.61	-0.17	-0.22	.824
Religious Freedom	0.09	0.10	0.19	0.94	.354
Identity and Relationship*	0.25	0.26	0.18	0.94	.350
<i>Variables related to Conflict and Terrorism</i>					
Political Terror Scale	0.14	0.18	0.18	0.75	.458
Global Terrorism Index	0.00	0.09	0.01	0.03	.979
Conflict	-0.32	0.37	-0.23	-0.87	.390

Note: $N = 66$.⁴⁶; $R^2 = .19$; $Adj. R^2 = .01$; * after a variable indicates that the variable has been transformed through a log transformation. For the 'Gender Ranking' variable each subscale as well as the full Index of the Global Gender Equality ranking was tested and there was no difference in results. Thus, only the results with the full index are presented.

⁴²Repatriation policy is treated as a continuous variable ranging from unconditional repatriation to denying repatriation. This is because the categories should be understood as dynamic and changing and viewed on a continuum. Higher values reflect lower repatriation efforts and lower values indicate higher repatriation efforts.

⁴³To verify that the assumptions for the multiple linear regression are met various parameters were tested. Durbin-Watson and Cook's Distance was calculated and it was checked for homoscedasticity and the residual distribution. To test for multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each of the predictor variables was calculated. Several variables had a high VIF. From a theoretical standpoint, this was not surprising because, for example, several measures for human rights were included. The variables with a high VIF were removed and the calculations ran again to test for the robustness of the results. The results remained robust. Thus, the results are presented with all variables to provide the reader with a complete picture.

⁴⁴I also ran linear regressions with each of the predictors separately. Results show that none of the individual predictors significantly predict level of repatriation.

⁴⁵The significant positive relationship indicates that countries with a higher military spending are less likely to repatriate because repatriation policy is coded in a way that higher values indicate lower repatriation effort.

⁴⁶Three countries (Luxembourg, Sudan, and Maldives) had partial missing values and are therefore not part of the regression (but they are part of the correlations).

While IR propositions offer different explanations for why governments might choose to repatriate or not, statistical analysis of key variables shows none of them, except for military spending, have a significant relationship with the level of repatriation.⁴⁷ In addition to statistical analysis, taking a closer look at the individual categories reveals surprising patterns. For instance, although the variables measuring the human rights record do not have a significant relationship with the level of repatriation, the results reveal a counterintuitive picture. Countries that rank high on human rights, including Denmark and Australia, are not in the Unconditional Repatriation category but rather in the Deny Repatriation group. Moreover, countries that are not renowned for their human rights record, including Russia, have taken a proactive approach to repatriation. In particular, the Chechnyan leader Ramzan Kadyrov, infamous for his gross human rights violations, attempted to improve his record by repatriating children from the conflict zone.⁴⁸ This suggests that it is not the actual human rights record of a country (as indicated in the statistical analysis) that matters, but rather how repatriation is communicated with the intent of enhancing state reputation. Specifically, the repatriation of children – who are deemed most valuable and worthy of protection – might boost the international reputation of a country as repatriation signals that the country ‘values’ human rights. As such, the repatriation of children could be a strategic, calculated decision by political leaders and institutions to demonstrate a country’s awareness, if not record, of human rights.

Another interesting finding is that countries in the Unconditional Repatriation category demonstrate certain commonalities pertaining to independence year, region, and religion. Five out of seven countries are younger states – they were founded after 1991 – and six out of seven countries are from two regions, namely from the Balkan and Central Asia. A possible explanation for these trends could be that younger countries, such as Kosovo and Uzbekistan still need to define their national identities and the repatriation provides them with a window of opportunities to project, build and confirm these. Moreover, given that six out of seven countries are from two regions, peer effects – a phenomena that countries within one region ‘learn’ from each other⁴⁹ – might drive neighbouring countries to develop similar repatriation policies.⁵⁰ Additionally, six out of seven countries in the Unconditional Repatriation category are Muslim-majority states and five out of eight Deny Repatriation states are Christian-majority states. This might suggest that Muslim-majority states are more willing to repatriate whereas in Christian-majority states elements of Islamophobia might influence the repatriation policy.

The explorative statistical analysis that tested frequent propositions and explanations offered by IR shows they have limited utility in explaining why states choose to repatriate their ISIS-affiliated citizens or not. No strong pattern or common political, economic, or terrorism-related factor appears to explain the variation in policies. As a result, the question why some countries choose (not) to repatriate remains. This leads me to explore other possible explanations and relevant methodologies. Given the gendered and racialised nature of ‘terrorist’ framings, which I explore in the next section, I interrogate the policy narratives of states and employ an intersectional gender analysis to specifically examine the ‘threat narratives’ of foreign fighters. Such a nuanced, qualitative approach highlights significant and plausible explanations for the differing repatriation policies. Before moving to the narrative analysis of state repatriation policies, this next section explores feminist approaches to security studies, which promote the type of narrative analysis that I adopt in this study.

⁴⁷A limitation of this analysis is that domestic opposition to repatriation is not statistically explored. However, the public’s view on repatriation cannot be ascertained in every country as few conducted official polls regarding this topic. The countries that conducted these polls are presented in the narrative analysis.

⁴⁸Ilya Arkhipov, ‘Putin shows rare soft spot to rescue Russia’s ISIS children’, *Bloomberg Wire Service* (1 February 2019), available at: {<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2174140876?accountid=12528>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁴⁹True, ‘Women, Peace and Security agenda’, pp. 314–15.

⁵⁰Rosand, Ellis and Weine, ‘Repatriating ISIS family members’.

Feminist approaches to security studies

Feminist theorising has long demonstrated the importance of investigating intersecting gendered and racialised dynamics in international politics, because it can, for example affect the treatment of ‘terrorists’ by infantilising women or racialising ‘Muslim men’. Gargi Bhattacharyya has demonstrated this with her analysis of the ‘dangerous brown man’ in the War on Terror or, more recently, Caron Gentry has considered how gendered, racial, and sexualised assumptions frame ‘Western’ understandings of terrorist actors.⁵¹ In terms of ISIS foreign fighters, these biases are illustrated when considering the dominant terminology. Throughout the academic literature,⁵² UN reports and Resolution 2396,⁵³ policy documents,⁵⁴ and in the media,⁵⁵ the term foreign fighter refers to male foreign fighters – typically without acknowledging it. Female foreign fighters are referred to as ‘family’, conflating the categories ‘women and children’.⁵⁶ Assuming that women are family of the male foreign fighters carries wide-ranging implications. It alludes to the fact that men are the ‘actual terrorists’, whereas women are the benign family members who are just being carried along, influencing their culpability and equating the woman’s mental competence with a child’s.⁵⁷ This illustrates what Cynthia Enloe has been outlining for three decades, namely that women as a category seem to stay inextricably linked with children.⁵⁸ Although women have committed terrorist attacks across the globe, such as in Indonesia or the United States.⁵⁹ Indeed, most of the women who joined ISIS performed non-combat roles and most men fought. Nonetheless, scholars contend that female ISIS members should be referred to as foreign fighters because individuals who ‘join regular armies are classified as military personnel regardless of whether they perform combat duties’.⁶⁰ Besides, not categorising women as foreign fighters because they predominantly performed roles in logistics, propaganda, and childrearing underlines the gender-biased view that ‘supporting’ roles are not decisive for terrorist groups; although the longevity of organisations has always been connected to their female membership.⁶¹

Underscoring the significance of intersectional gender analysis, gendered terrorist framings have implications for the way we treat foreign fighters in criminal law and prosecution, in prison

⁵¹Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men*; Gentry, *Disordered Violence*.

⁵²Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan, ‘Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighter’, Program on Extremism – The Georgetown University (2020), available at: {<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf>} accessed 14 June 2021; Jackson, ‘Framing British “jihadi brides”’.

⁵³United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 2396’ (2017), available at: {[https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396(2017))} accessed 14 June 2021; United Nations Security Council (SC/14282), ‘Repatriating Detained Foreign Fighters, Their Families Key to Combating Threat Posed by Islamic State, Counter-Terrorism Officials Warn Security Council’ (24 August 2020), available at: {<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14282.doc.htm>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁵⁴Radicalisation Awareness Network, ‘RAN Manual on Responses to FTF Returnees’ (2018), available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁵⁵Arthur Martin, Jim Norton, and Ian Drury, ‘Now jihadi bride school is centre of terror probe’, *Daily Mail* (30 March 2015), available at: {<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3017345/Now-jihadi-bride-school-centre-terror-probe-Academy-four-pupils-left-join-ISIS-investigated-counter-extremism-officials.html>} accessed 14 June 2020.

⁵⁶Jessica Davis, ‘The Future of the Islamic State’s Women: Assessing their Potential Threat’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2020), p. 3, available at: {<https://icct.nl/publication/the-future-of-the-islamic-states-women-assessing-their-potential-threat/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁵⁷Davis, ‘Future of the Islamic State’s Women’, p. 6.

⁵⁸Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵⁹Cook and Vale, ‘From Daesh to “Diaspora”’, p. 54; Eleanor Gordon and Jacqui True, ‘Gender stereotyped or gender responsive?’, *The RUSI Journal*, 164:4 (2019), pp. 74–91.

⁶⁰Chelsea Daymon, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet, ‘Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies’, Resolve Network (2020), p. 13, available at: {<https://www.resolve.net.org/research/career-foreign-fighters-expertise-transmission-across-insurgencies>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁶¹Amanda N. Spencer, ‘The hidden face of terrorism: An analysis of the women in Islamic State’, *Journal of Strategic Security*, 9:3 (2016), pp. 74–98; Shuki J. Cohen, Thomas J. Holt, Steven M. Chermak, and Joshua D. Freilich, ‘Invisible empire of hate: Gender differences in the Ku Klux Klan’s online justifications for violence’, *Violence and Gender* (2018), p. 211.

terms, and with regard to the provision of social, psychological, health, and other services. For example, Jessica Davis stated that ‘the counter-terrorism response to women in the Islamic State has likely been influenced by the highly gendered language used by media when reporting on the subject.’⁶² Moreover, Joanna Cook and Gina Vale argued that for female ISIS members the media portrayals have varied between ‘active security concern’ and duped ‘victim’.⁶³ Indeed, Harmonie Toros examined the narratives of women returnees in Morocco and Tunisia and found that in Morocco, where women were described as victims, rehabilitation dominated the narrative, whereas in Tunisia women were regarded as a threat, which led to a criminal justice response.⁶⁴ Crucially, the legal system is similarly biased as women who engaged in terrorism have a lower chance of getting arrested, convicted, and receive lesser sentences due to prevailing gender norms.⁶⁵

The bias for girls and women, in particular for mothers, is underlined when considering that they are often referred to as ‘jihadi brides’ in the public discourse,⁶⁶ portraying them with a lack of agency.⁶⁷ Yet, referring to women through their marital status – bride – is not just terminology used in tabloid media but in official government documents as well. The United States Department of Justice released a statement where a repatriated foreign fighter is described as ‘given a monthly stipend, a Chinese-made AK 47, and an ISIS bride’.⁶⁸ Moreover, Alice Martini studied media narratives of British ISIS women and argued that the usage of ‘bride’ is not only infantilising but also carries neo-orientalist tropes that homogenises women’s experiences.⁶⁹ Carys Evans and Raquel da Silva found similar gendered, racialised, and Islamophobic narratives in the social media discourse around Shamima Begum, a British woman who joined ISIS as a minor.⁷⁰ Framing female ISIS members as brides is a narrative conveniently perceived by many as it aligns with the lack of political agency falsely assumed for women, specifically Muslim women in the Global North.⁷¹ Overall, the gendered and neo-orientalist narratives are showcased by the widespread lack of understanding in the Global North of why women were attracted to ISIS, because by joining the women rejected ‘the security, stability and gender-based freedoms of their lives ... [which is] deeply disturbing to established civilizational narratives of “West is best”’.⁷²

When researching the diffusion of states’ repatriation policies, it is also crucial to consider the gender power dynamics of the actor ‘implementing’ the repatriation policy, namely the state.

⁶²Davis, ‘Future of the Islamic State’s Women’, p. 3.

⁶³Joana Cook and Gina Vale, ‘From Daesh to “diaspora” II: The challenges posed by women and minors after the fall of the Caliphate’, *CTC Sentinel*, 12:6 (2019), pp. 30–45 (p. 31).

⁶⁴Toros, “Victim” or “Security Threat”.

⁶⁵Audrey Alexander and Rebecca Turkington, ‘Treatment of terrorists: How does gender affect justice?’, *CTC Sentinel*, 11:8 (2018), pp. 24–9.

⁶⁶Naureen C. Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai, ‘A Man’s World?’, *Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security* (2016), p. 179, available at: {https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULL.pdf} accessed 14 June 2021; Yasmin Ibrahim, ‘Visuality and the “jihadi-bride”: The re-fashioning of desire in the digital age’, *Social Identities*, 25:2 (2019), pp. 186–206; Jackson, ‘Framing British “jihadi brides”’; Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz, ‘Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh’, *European Journal of International Security*, 3:1 (2018), pp. 45–68.

⁶⁷Such gendered narratives are not new as Karla Cunningham outlines with the case of Chechen women who engaged in terrorism. See Karla J. Cunningham, ‘Countering female terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30:2 (2007), pp. 113–29.

⁶⁸US Department of Justice, ‘Repatriated ISIS Fighter Pleads Guilty to Terror Charge’, Office of Public Affairs (2 September 2020), available at: {<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/repatriated-isis-fighter-pleads-guilty-terror-charge>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁶⁹Alice Martini, ‘Making women terrorists into “jihadi brides”: An analysis of media narratives on women joining ISIS’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 11:3 (2018), pp. 458–77.

⁷⁰Carys Evans and Raquel da Silva, ‘#ShamimaBegum: An analysis of social media narratives relating to female terrorist actors’, *Politics* (2021), pp. 1–18.

⁷¹Loken and Zelenz, ‘Explaining extremism’.

⁷²Jackson, ‘Framing British “jihadi brides”’, p. 10

Gender power relations describe the socially constructed hierarchical order of masculinities and femininities that structure the state and the international political arena in which terrorism and counterterrorism measures takes place.⁷³ Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True, for example, argue that the state ‘speaks a gendered language, behaves like a patriarch, and enables gendered politics’.⁷⁴ Thus, the masculine state may act like a male ‘protector’ of its citizens.⁷⁵ This relationship becomes evident when considering counterterrorism and counter violent extremism policies where the state is regarded as a ‘bulwark’ against the threat.⁷⁶ Fighting ‘terrorists’ to protect citizens is, therefore, often viewed as legitimate, although a deeper analysis of how the racialised and gendered term of ‘terrorist’ comes into existence is lacking.⁷⁷ Hence, the masculine state upholds not only gendered, but also racialised and neo-orientalist structures that shape the policy narrative regarding the repatriation of foreign fighters. Feminist security studies argues for an intersectional gender perspective to adequately capture these power dynamics, and as such, the narrative analysis in the next section builds on this theorising.

‘Threat narratives’ of foreign fighters

To explain the variation in repatriation policies the national ‘threat narratives’ of foreign fighters are assessed with a narrative analysis informed by an intersectional gender perspective. The intersectional gender perspective is crucial to examine how intersecting markers of identity, including gender, racial, religious, or classist dynamics are instrumentalised to frame foreign fighters as, for example, threatening. The narrative analysis, which is now well established as a method, extends the traditional tools for policy analysis that typically explain policy diffusion through readily measurable indicators, such as governance arrangements, economic resources, or type of polity.⁷⁸ Based on the statistical analysis in the previous section, however, these factors do not appear to explain repatriation policy variation and therefore narrative analysis is used to develop an alternative explanation for the differences in repatriation policies.

Narrative analysis demonstrates the impact that key stories and ideas connected in a causal chain from politics and the media can have on the thoughts and behaviours of citizens in the context of, for example, policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic⁷⁹ or in LGBTIQ+ activists’ use of personal stories to change discriminatory policies.⁸⁰ Interestingly, to be convincing policies do not necessarily have to rely only on facts.⁸¹ Rather, to be persuasive policies need to be story-like and structured into a narrative ‘that includes setting the stage, establishing a plot, casting characters (heroes, victims, villains), and specify[ing] a moral’.⁸²

⁷³Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, ‘Female terrorism and militancy’, in Richard Jackson, *Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016), pp. 145–56.

⁷⁴Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True, *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 5.

⁷⁵Iris M. Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25.

⁷⁶Parashar, Tickner, and True, *Revisiting Gendered States*, p. 4.

⁷⁷Gentry, *Disordered Violence*.

⁷⁸Michael Mintrom and Ruby O’Connor, ‘The importance of policy narrative: Effective government responses to Covid-19’, *Policy Design and Practice* (2020), p. 2.

⁷⁹Anna Kuteleva and Sarah J. Clifford, ‘Gendered securitisation: Trump’s and Putin’s discursive politics of the COVID-19 pandemic’, *European Journal of International Security* (2021), pp. 1–17; Mintrom and O’Connor, ‘The importance of policy narrative’.

⁸⁰Deserai Crow and Michael Jones, ‘Narratives as tools for influencing policy change’, *Policy and Politics*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 217–34 (p. 219).

⁸¹Mintrom and O’Connor, ‘The importance of policy narrative’, p. 3.

⁸²*Ibid.*, originally from Christopher M. Weible and Paul Cairney, ‘Practical lessons from policy theories’, *Policy and Politics*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 183–97 (p. 191).

Feminist and critical security studies research shows the importance of narrative analysis in the context of, for example, surveillance, ‘counter-radicalisation’ strategies, or ‘violent women’.⁸³ My narrative analysis builds upon this tradition and focuses on states’ ‘threat narratives’ of foreign fighters that are employed to support and promote various repatriation policies. My analysis is informed by feminist security studies scholarship that highlights intersectionality, such as the gendered and racialised constructions of threat.⁸⁴ This method enriches IR theorising by applying narrative analysis developed by critical and feminist security studies scholars in the context of foreign fighter repatriation.

The ‘threat narratives’ are assessed through statements in policy documents and the media as well as their analysis in scholarship.⁸⁵ This includes different sources and media outlets depending on the respective country, such as *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian*, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC), or *Caravanserai*.⁸⁶ Moreover, public announcements from politicians regarding repatriations, such as on presidents’ websites, or videos of the repatriation itself, which was predominantly the case in Central Asia, are also taken into consideration. Further, the analysis of repatriation policies in terrorism and security studies research is assessed.⁸⁷ The sources are examined in a three-step process. First, as repatriation policies were implemented from 2018 onwards, I created a database of all articles and publications from January 2018 until December 2020. Second, I selected a subset of articles and publications that described or analysed the detention or repatriation of foreign fighters. Third, to analyse these sources, I specifically asked the following question: How can attention to the narratives used to support and promote policies help to explain the differences in repatriation policies? Here I aimed to identify the stories around foreign fighters to analyse variations in the ‘threat narratives’ across states.

The repatriation narratives are investigated in two categories, namely Unconditional and Deny Repatriation states because the analysis could not be performed on all 69 states of the dataset. Moreover, researching these two categories demonstrates the sharp difference between the narratives of states who favour and deny repatriation because the two categories present both ends of the dynamic continuum. The middle of the continuum is neglected because it is difficult to assess the narratives of countries in the ‘middle’ as there is often no public discussion around foreign fighters. As such, choosing to investigate Unconditional and Deny repatriation states guarantees a narrative as well as shows the difference between the two ends of the continuum.

I argue that the gendered and racialised narratives of foreign fighters are crucial to explaining why some governments repatriate foreign fighters. Specifically, I argue, as illustrated in Figure 1, that countries that pursue Unconditional Repatriation portray foreign fighters as *victims* and in need of rehabilitation, whereas states that Deny Repatriation frame foreign fighters as racialised *villains* and threats to national security. The hero in this equation is the state – the masculinist protector of its citizens. Either as the patriarchal sovereign under whose protection the citizens

⁸³Christopher Smith Ochoa, Frank Gadinger, and Taylan Yildiz, ‘Surveillance under dispute: Conceptualising narrative legitimisation politics’, *European Journal of International Security*, 6:2 (2021), pp. 210–32; Michelle Bentley, ‘Enough is enough: The UK Prevent Strategy and normative invalidation’, *European Journal of International Security*, 3:3 (2018), pp. 326–43; Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, ‘Reduced to bad sex: Narratives of violent women from the Bible to the war on terror’, *International Relations*, 22:1 (2008), pp. 5–23.

⁸⁴Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men*; Gentry, *Disordered Violence*; Jackson, ‘Framing British “jihadi brides”’; Toros, ‘“Victim” or “Security Threat”’.

⁸⁵Please find more details on the sources in Appendix 3, Table A3.

⁸⁶Caravanserai is a Central Asian Newspaper agency that publishes in English and is therefore targeted to an international audience. Thus, it might be particularly suited to investigate the ‘narrative’ countries want to foster.

⁸⁷Hoffman and Furlan, ‘Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighter’; Cook and Vale, ‘From Daesh to “Diaspora”’; Teuta Avdimetaj and Julie Coleman, ‘What EU Member States Can Learn from Kosovo’s Experience in Repatriating Former Foreign Fighters and Their Families’, Clingendael (2020), p. 4, available at: {https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Policy_Brief_Kosovo_experience_repatriating_former_foreign_fighters_May_2020.pdf} accessed 14 June 2021.

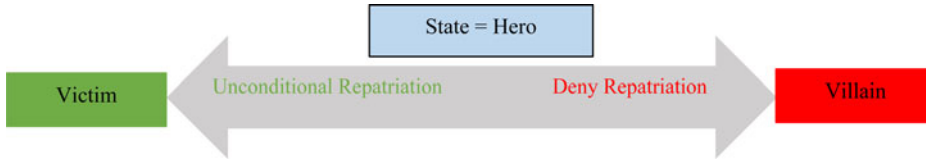


Figure 1. Narrative of Foreign Fighters Repatriation Policy.

are safe from the foreign fighters or as the institution facilitating rehabilitation to help foreign fighters, like prodigal sons and daughters, who took the wrong path.

The 'victim' narrative

Among the seven countries in the Unconditional Repatriation category a common 'Victim' Narrative appears where the foreign fighters are presented as victims in need of rehabilitation. In Kazakhstan, Ruslan Seksenbayev, the Director of the Peaceful Sky non-governmental organisation that counters violent extremism, stated that Kazakh citizens in Syria were 'enslaved'.⁸⁸ Similarly, then president Nursultan Nazarbayev referred to foreign fighters as innocent and argued that 'they were taken to this crisis-ridden country under false pretences and held hostage there by terrorists from the international terrorist organisation called IS.'⁸⁹ Importantly, it can be assumed that the former president only refers to women and children because the intelligence chief further argued that women will be rehabilitated and men will be prosecuted.⁹⁰ This entirely shifts culpability away from the women and presents them as naive, non-threatening, and being tricked into going to Syria or Iraq. In contrast, the returning men were all charged upon arrival in Kazakhstan, which presents them as a threat.⁹¹ This narrative is starkly reminiscent of Caron Gentry's and Laura Sjoberg's research who argue that women who are involved in terrorism are denied agency and political will.⁹²

The gendered narrative is further underlined by a seven-minute video released by the Kazakh government showcasing the repatriation of Kazakh citizens from Syria.⁹³ In the video, the male foreign fighters are brought into the open handcuffed and blindfolded whereas the women are shown holding their children with newly received toys. Moreover, all the Kazakh soldiers in the video are male, except for one soldier whose long, painted nails are supposed to suggest that she is a woman, and who is filmed changing the clothes of a baby.⁹⁴ This strongly underlines the gendered narrative not only of the threatening male perpetrators and the women victims holding their children, but the soldiers are also portrayed as gender conforming. Interestingly, none of the countries in the Unconditional Repatriation group allow women to be in military combat roles, whereas in the Deny Repatriation group several countries do, such as Poland and

⁸⁸ Aydar Ashimov, 'Kazakhstan praised for rescuing dozens of citizens from IS in Syria', *Caravanserai* (17 January 2019), available at: {https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/01/17/feature-01} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ A few Kazakh women were later prosecuted for terrorism charges. See Farangis Najibullah, 'The Women Who Came Home: Kazakhstan Tries To Rehabilitate Islamic State Returnees', Radio Free Europe (23 June 2019), available at: {<https://www.rferl.org/a/the-women-who-came-home-kazakhstan-tries-to-rehabilitate-islamic-state-returnees/30015082.html>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁹² Gentry and Sjoberg, 'Female terrorism and militancy', pp. 148–9.

⁹³ Казахстан вызволил десятки своих граждан, находившихся в Сирии в руках ИГ [Kazakhstan rescues dozens of its citizens who were in the hands of IS in Syria], *Caravanserai* (17 January 2019), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpq-twWJpN4&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=Caravanserai} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Denmark.⁹⁵ This aligns with the stereotypes of presenting women in need of protection rather than providing protection, thus emphasising their victimhood and peacefulness.⁹⁶

A similar narrative is established in Uzbekistan where an article about the ‘humanitarian operation’ to rescue Uzbeks from Syria and Iraq was posted on the official website of the President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. In the article the President argues that citizens left Uzbekistan ‘due to delusion’.⁹⁷ Moreover, featured photos depict children and women kissing the ground of the ‘homeland’ upon arriving in Uzbekistan whereas returning men are not shown. This narrative demonstrates how gender stereotypes are guiding the presentation of these foreign fighters, where women and children depict the benign, peaceful, duped citizens and the men are either not present or clearly portrayed as threatening. The gendered nature of the narrative is further reinforced by Bakhtiyer Babajanov, an expert from the Uzbek Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies, who states:

Almost all the repatriated women were low-performing students. I think their low level of education encouraged them to leave [Uzbekistan]. It meant they couldn’t assess the reality of the world or understand what was truly happening.⁹⁸

Presenting women as unable to understand the ‘reality of the world’ suggests that they are not ideologically committed or threatening but naive and stupid.⁹⁹ This depiction feeds into the narrative that women are passive family members who are being carried along, equating their mental competence with a child’s.¹⁰⁰ It clearly frames women as ‘duped victims’ who need to be guided in the right direction rather than as a threat. So, who is the actor that could guide the vulnerable, naive women? Who could be this hero?

In the foreign fighter narrative employed in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan there is one clear hero: the strong masculine state that provides protection to its citizens. This statist narrative is underlined in the glorified streaming of the rescue missions from Syria and Iraq through state channels.¹⁰¹ As outlined above, these missions were not presented as ‘neutral’ repatriation acts but rather as rescue missions from a war zone. Thereby the state and its military, embodied by soldiers in uniforms were rescuing the vulnerable women and children from the foreign land of ‘terrorists’. The pictures from the missions on the Uzbek President’s website show soldiers carrying children – who I argue could clearly walk themselves – out of the plane back to the praised ‘homeland’, signalling that the children are now safe with the soldiers.¹⁰² This narrative underlines what Iris Young calls the masculine state ‘protector’ who safeguards its citizens.¹⁰³

The gendered narrative of women and children being rescued by the masculine state is further emphasised by the celebrations that have taken place to welcome children of returning foreign

⁹⁵Sarah Percy, ‘What makes a norm robust: The norm against female combat’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4:1 (2019), pp. 123–38.

⁹⁶Anna Warrington and Frederik C. Windfeld, ‘Femme fatale: Analyzing the visual representation of the radical(ized) woman in Danish media’, *Journal for Deradicalization*, 22 (2020), pp. 38–65 (p. 51).

⁹⁷Official website President of Uzbekistan, ‘Benevolence, Humanitarian Operation as the Embodiment of Kindness and Grace’ (30 May 2019), available at: {<https://president.uz/en/2605>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁹⁸Maksim Yeniseyev, ‘Uzbekistan hosts Central Asian dialogue on reintegrating former extremists’, *Caravanserai* (11 March 2020), available at: {https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/03/11/feature-01} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁹⁹Jackson, ‘Framing British “jihadi brides”’, p. 8.

¹⁰⁰Davis, ‘Future of the Islamic State’s Women’, p. 6.

¹⁰¹‘Kazakhstan rescues citizens’, *Caravanserai*; Maksim Yeniseyev, ‘With latest pardon, Uzbekistan continues to rehabilitate those deceived by extremists’, *Caravanserai* (10 December 2019), available at: {https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/12/10/feature-01} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁰²Official website President of Uzbekistan, ‘Benevolence, Humanitarian Operation’.

¹⁰³Iris Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25.

fighters. The Uzbek Ministry of Preschool Education organised festivities with entertainers and gifts to welcome returning women and children.¹⁰⁴ But not only the children received gifts, also the women were treated with government benefits and gifts, including sewing machines.¹⁰⁵ Thus, whereas the Uzbek men were imprisoned the Uzbek women received rehabilitation programmes and benefits that suit feminine gender norms. These resources were provided by the state underscoring it as the masculine provider and protector who helps and rehabilitates the women – the prodigal daughters who took the wrong path. This fosters an understanding of the returning women ‘as passive and vulnerable, perhaps even victims ... [not] as active participants in the I.S. project’,¹⁰⁶ and the state as ‘patriarch’.¹⁰⁷ Importantly, the gender power dynamics between the state and the non-state actor ISIS underline the rhetoric of the strong, masculine state against the feminised, weak non-state actor.¹⁰⁸

Another interesting dynamic in the masculine state narrative is the nationalist component. The Uzbek foreign ministry contends that all citizens, regardless of where they are, are ‘under the protection of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and that the state will take all necessary measures to protect their rights and interests’.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, in Kazakhstan the spokeswoman for Kazakhstan’s Air Assault Troops stated: ‘Our country looks after its citizens.’¹¹⁰ In Kosovo, the justice minister noted after repatriating 110 citizens: ‘We will not stop before bringing every citizen ... back to their country.’¹¹¹ Crucially, in Kosovo the foreign fighters do not stem from a minority group within the population but are regarded as ‘simply Kosovars’, which might decrease the pushback against repatriation from the population.¹¹² The Kosovar National Coordinator for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism even argued that Kosovar foreign fighters – compared to other European countries where foreign fighters are typically second or third generation ‘immigrants’¹¹³ – are viewed as having shared traditions and history rendering the rehabilitation easier.¹¹⁴ Presenting the returnees as ‘one of us’ and underlining their nationality is a uniting narrative and does not present them as a threat.

The nationalist sentiment also fits with the observation that five out of seven countries in the Unconditional Repatriation category are newly independent states. The countries are, therefore, at an early stage of state formation and eager to legitimise themselves through the construction of distinct national identities. Importantly, state legitimacy requires both international recognition and domestic support and unity. The response to foreign fighters in Kazakhstan achieves both goals simultaneously by broadcasting a national rescue mission that emphasises national identity and unity through the projection of a strong masculine state both domestically and internationally. Additionally, in the Kazakh rehabilitation centres for women and children the women were

¹⁰⁴Maksim Yeniseyev, ‘Uzbekistan begins rehabilitation of repatriated “victims of deception” from Syria’, *Caravanserai* (11 June 2019), available at: {https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/06/11/feature-01} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Jackson, ‘Framing British “jihadi brides”’, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷Parashar, Tickner, and True, *Revisiting Gendered States*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸Gentry, *Disordered Violence*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹Yeniseyev, ‘Uzbekistan begins rehabilitation’.

¹¹⁰Ashimov, ‘Kazakhstan praised for rescuing citizens from IS’.

¹¹¹BBC Monitoring, ‘What is Happening to IS Detainees and Their Families in Syria’ (22 October 2019), available at: {<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2016du5>} accessed 14 June 2021, emphasis added.

¹¹²Avdimetaj and Coleman, ‘Kosovo’s Experience in Repatriating Former Foreign Fighters’.

¹¹³Importantly, the Kosovar official’s comparison disregards the foreign fighters that were not second or third generation ‘immigrants’ and/or did not stem from a minority group. Moreover, in Europe (and in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada) approximately 15 percent of ISIS recruits were converts for whom it is unclear whether they are from a minority group and/or have an immigration background. (Lorne L. Dawson, A comparative analysis of the data on western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who went and why?, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2021), pp. 1–52).

¹¹⁴Valerie Plesch and Serbeze Haxhijaj, ‘Kosovo is trying to reintegrate ISIL returnees. Will it work?’, *Al Jazeera* (9 June 2019), available at: {<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/06/09/kosovo-is-trying-to-reintegrate-isil-returnees-will-it-work/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

instructed to sing Kazakh songs, which highlights their Kazakh identity and solidifies the legitimacy of statehood.¹¹⁵ The repatriating Balkan states North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo may also still define their identities due to their ‘recently’ gained independence. Implementing a comprehensive repatriation policy might stress that the countries value human rights. Indeed, clearing the human rights record could be viewed as an attempt to come closer to European Union (EU) membership, a process that these countries have been involved in for years.¹¹⁶

The ‘villain’ narrative

Among the eight countries in the Deny Repatriation category a ‘threat narrative’ is clearly established. The foreign fighters and their children are framed as villains of the state who are a threat to national security, which serves to ‘justify’ hard measures, such as citizenship withdrawal. This narrative regarding foreign fighters is demonstrated by Andrew Laming, a member of the Australian parliament, who stated that returnees are trying to ‘get back onto welfare payments again’ and that they ‘walked away from Australia and our values’.¹¹⁷ Australia’s policy mirrors this narrative as they not only revoke citizenship from adults but also from minors from the age of 14.¹¹⁸ Similarly, in Denmark the children born to ‘ISIS parents’ do not receive Danish citizenship. The former Minister of Immigration Inger Støjberg stated: ‘Their parents have turned their backs on Denmark, so there is no reason for their kids to become Danish citizens.’¹¹⁹ In the United Kingdom (UK) the children are also thought to pose a threat, as a Home Office authority argued: ‘We feel there are legitimate security concerns here. Returnees, even children, are a security risk ...’.¹²⁰ Crucially, states that put forward such a narrative create fear and present the returnees and their children as a threat to legitimise their policies. This is epitomised by the British Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson who suggested that foreign fighters should be ‘hunted down and killed’, as ‘a dead terrorist can’t cause any harm to Britain.’¹²¹

The gendered and racialised dynamics of the ‘threat narrative’ are illustrated when considering how female foreign fighters are framed in the Deny Repatriation category. An infamous example is Shamima Begum who was stripped of her UK citizenship right after she had a baby in 2019.¹²² She had left the UK when she was 15 to join ISIS in Syria and is currently detained in al-Roj camp.¹²³ To strip Begum of her citizenship, although she left the UK as a minor, shows how convincingly the ‘threat narrative’ had to be constructed. The former Home

¹¹⁵Aydar Ashimov, ‘Former Kazakh militants returning from Syria face long prison sentences’, *Caravanseraï* (20 June 2019), available at: {https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/06/20/feature-01} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹¹⁶Granted EU candidates: Albania (2014) and Macedonia (2004); Potential Candidates: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. See André De Munter, ‘The Western Balkans’, European Parliament (2018), available at: {<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/die-lander-des-westlichen-Balkans>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹¹⁷I would like to acknowledge David Duriesmith who discussed this quotation during his presentation at the 2019 Monash Gender, Peace and Security Conference.

¹¹⁸Cook and Vale, ‘From Daesh to “Diaspora”’, p. 32.

¹¹⁹Hoffman and Furlan, ‘Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighter’, p. 14.

¹²⁰Dan Sabbagh, ‘No more orphans expected to be returned to UK from Syria’, *The Guardian* (23 November 2019), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/22/no-more-orphans-expected-to-be-brought-back-to-uk-from-syria-isis>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹²¹Carla Power, ‘“We have four generations of former terrorists here today”: Rehabilitating extremists in Indonesia’, *Los Angeles Times* (20 April 2018), available at: {<https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-indonesia-deradicalization-2018-story.html>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹²²Kevin Rawlinson and Vikram Dodd, ‘Shamima Begum: ISIS Briton faces move to revoke citizenship’, *The Guardian* (20 February 2019), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/19/isis-briton-shamima-begum-to-have-uk-citizenship-revoked>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹²³Interestingly, in the initial months following Shamima Begum’s travel out of the UK, she was considered a victim and the narrative focused on her being a minor. This narrative shifted, however, in 2017 once she was legally an adult.

Secretary who authorised the decision, Sajid Javid, argued that ‘dangerous dual nationals’ who ‘hate our country’ should be prevented from returning to the UK.¹²⁴ He further argued that Begum should go to Bangladesh as her parents are from there, which – from a postcolonial perspective – shows how fragile her citizenship was in the first place. Moreover, the UK Counter Terrorism Commander Neil Basu has publicly referred to her as a ‘bride’, which demonstrates the gendered and neo-orientalist tropes that risk to further bias investigations.¹²⁵ This narrative is echoed in recent research of Begum’s case where social media narratives were shown to reflect gendered and neo-orientalist dynamics of a ‘West is best’ rhetoric.¹²⁶ Overall, Begum’s case illustrates how the narrative for women foreign fighters shifts from a victimising one in the Unconditional Repatriation category towards a threatening one in the Deny Repatriation category, supporting the respective policy choices of the states. When considering the narratives for male foreign fighters in the Deny Repatriation category it does not seem to change – they continue to pose a threat.

So, if foreign fighters are a threat, even the young children – who remains to safeguard the citizens? Who could be this hero? Again, the state. Although the narratives of female foreign fighters could not be more different in comparison to countries in the Unconditional Repatriation category, the hero in the narrative remains the same. This is illustrated by Australia’s former prime minister Scott Morrison, who stated: ‘They [foreign fighters] have to take responsibility for those decisions to join up with terrorists who are fighting Australia. I’m not going to put any Australian at risk to try to extract people from those situations.’¹²⁷ This gendered narrative, which was prevalent in several countries, allows the strong masculine state to protect its citizens and to keep the ‘enemies’ away. Additionally, there are no videos or pictures of repatriations from Syria or Iraq because they are generally not performed in the Deny Repatriation countries. In rare cases where individuals were repatriated, such as a recent case in the UK where one orphan was repatriated due to public pressure,¹²⁸ the repatriation process is kept secret like a counterterrorism operation.¹²⁹

Othering and racialised dynamics in ‘threat narratives’

Another dynamic in foreign fighter ‘threat narratives’ is whether returnees are presented as belonging to society. As outlined above, in the Unconditional Repatriation states foreign fighters are framed as being ‘one of us’. Whereas in the Deny Repatriation group as well as in most Global North countries the narrative engages in a process of ‘othering’. This is achieved through underlining the descendancy of a person in the media or in political debates. For example, this occurs by stating that a Norwegian foreign fighter has Moroccan descendancy and not just stating that the person is Norwegian. Emphasising descendancy racialises the narrative because it underlines that a person is not actually ‘Norwegian’ (read: white). Ironically, the state’s ‘othering’ narrative plays into the hands of ISIS because it echoes their propaganda that foreign fighters (read:

¹²⁴Rawlinson and Dodd, ‘Shamima Begum’.

¹²⁵Martin Bentham, ‘Shamima Begum must be treated as a threat, anti-terror commander Neil Basu says’, *Evening Standard* (15 December 2020), available at: {<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/shamima-begum-threat-neil-basu-antiterrorism-b320306.html>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹²⁶Evans and da Silva, ‘#ShamimaBegum’.

¹²⁷Adam Harvey, Suzanne Dredge, and Tom Hancock, ‘Australian jihadi bride who fled Islamic State wants to bring her children home from Syrian refugee camp’, *ABC* (13 March 2019), available at: {<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-14/australian-jihadi-bride-in-syria-says-she-wants-to-come-home/10899040>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹²⁸‘Islamic State: British child rescued from Syria, foreign secretary says’, *BBC* (16 September 2020), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-54174367>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹²⁹It is important to point out that more recent details of repatriations are kept secret due to media reporting bans to protect the identity of children and relatives of foreign fighters. A limitation of this research is that the dataset created for this article does not take into account these more recent cases.

Muslims) never belonged to the state in the first place.¹³⁰ Besides, commonly cited push factors for joining ISIS have been racism, Islamophobia and the lack of the feeling of belongingness.¹³¹ Underlining the descendancy of foreign fighters plays into this narrative and emphasises that the person indeed does not belong.¹³² However, discrimination is not only a push factor in the Global North. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, 90 per cent of foreign fighters are ethnic Uzbeks who are subject to oppression.¹³³ Furthermore, discrimination against those who openly practice Islamic traditions has also been a push factor in Muslim-majority states. In certain parts of Tunisia, women wearing a niqab are discriminated against by secular women.¹³⁴ Overall, societal issues that confirm a discriminatory narrative of 'not belonging' can present a push factor for foreign fighters (back) into the arms of terrorist groups.

Alongside employing the narrative of 'not belonging', some states also strip (dual national) foreign fighters of their citizenship, which strongly underlines the belief that they are a security threat.¹³⁵ Countries in my dataset that make use of this measure are Bahrain, Israel, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, the UK, the United States, and Australia. Withdrawing citizenship as a counterterrorism measure is highly symbolic, however, at the same time, it also renders the foreign fighters someone else's problem.¹³⁶ For example, in Belgium it was reported that after stripping the citizenship of a foreign fighter the country has 'less terrorists', which is highly misleading.¹³⁷ Withdrawing citizenship appears more like a quick solution appeasing domestic citizens and allaying security concerns than an actual approach to counterterrorism.¹³⁸ It also opens pathways for discriminatory treatment because it is predominantly decided based on evidence of terrorism committed abroad (read: Islamist terrorism) and not cases of domestic terrorism (read: right-wing terrorism), therefore favouring right-wing terrorism.¹³⁹ Moreover, history reveals how revoking citizenship can turn out. In the 1990s foreign fighters in

¹³⁰Francois and Ibrahim, 'Children of ISIS Detainees', p. 12; Sabariah Hussin, 'Lessons Learnt from Indonesian and Malaysian Approaches to Terrorist Rehabilitation', East Asia Forum (10 May 2019), available at: {<https://www.eastasia-forum.org/2019/05/10/lessons-learnt-from-indonesian-and-malaysian-approaches-to-terrorist-rehabilitation/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹³¹Vera Mironova, 'The Challenge of Foreign Fighters: Repatriating and Prosecuting ISIS Detainees' Middle East Institute (27 January 2021), pp. 2–3, available at: {<https://www.mei.edu/publications/challenge-foreign-fighters-repatriating-and-prosecuting-isis-detainees>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹³²It is important to emphasise that of course not all individuals who radicalise have a 'black or minority ethnic (BME) background' and that motivations and grievances vary considerably. See Katherine Brown, 'Gender-Specific Approaches in Exit Work', Radicalisation Awareness Network (2019), p. 11, available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/page/ran-exit-gender-specific-approaches-exit-work-22-23-october-2019_en} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹³³Human Rights Watch, 'We Live in Constant Fear' (17 September 2018), available at: {https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/17/we-live-constant-fear/possession-extremist-material-kyrgyzstan#_ftn32} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹³⁴Azadeh Moaveni, *Guest House for Young Widows: The Women of ISIS* (Melbourne, Aus.: Scribe, 2019), p. 226.

¹³⁵Interestingly, the fact that some foreign fighters ceremoniously burnt their passports upon arriving in Syria and Iraq was not prevalent in the narrative in the Unconditional Repatriation states, whereas in the Deny Repatriation states it was repeatedly underlined that foreign fighters already 'renounced' their citizenship. See Shiv Malik, 'French Isis fighters filmed burning passports and calling for terror at home', *The Guardian* (20 November 2014), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/20/french-isis-fighters-filmed-burning-passports-calling-for-terror>} accessed 14 June 2021; see also Hoffman and Furlan, 'Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters', p. 14.

¹³⁶Christophe Paulussen, 'Repressing the Foreign Fighters Phenomenon and Terrorism in Western Europe: Towards an Effective Response Based on Human Rights', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2016), p. 21, available at: {<https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Paulussen-Rule-of-Law-Nov2016-4.pdf>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹³⁷Guy Van Vlieden, 'België telt 8 terroristen minder [Belgium has 8 terrorists less]', *HLN* (30 July 2020), available at: {<https://www.hln.be/binnenland/belgie-telt-8-terroristen-minder~a49647fb/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Ft.co%2FUm171nl798%3Famp%3D1>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹³⁸Paulussen, 'Repressing the Foreign Fighters Phenomenon', p. 19.

¹³⁹Kilian Roithmaier, 'Germany and its Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: New Loss of Citizenship Law and the Broader German Repatriation Landscape', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2019), available at: {<https://icct.nl/publication/germany-and-its-returning-foreign-terrorist-fighters-new-loss-of-citizenship-law-and-the-broader-german-repatriation-landscape/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

Afghanistan were prevented from returning home and some stripped of their citizenship as a security measure – Osama Bin Laden being the most infamous example.¹⁴⁰

The reasons why states withdraw dual nationals of their citizenship varies. Yet a common pattern is revealed among Global North states where it is typically discussed for, for example, British-Pakistanis but not for British-Americans demonstrating how neo-orientalist and racialised dynamics drive the policy.¹⁴¹ Shamima Begum's case is an illustration of this dynamic where her ethnic background renders her a 'second-class' citizen and suggests that she has always been 'foreign'.¹⁴² Or, as Shiraz Maher argues: 'British citizenship is a two-tiered system ... because ... anyone who can potentially claim another nationality can be stripped of their British citizenship. This impacts the children of immigrants such as myself, all Jews, and anyone from Northern Ireland.'¹⁴³ With the recent changes in the British citizenship bill this dynamic becomes even more pronounced, as the citizenship can be withdrawn without notice.¹⁴⁴ Crucially, over 80 per cent of the countries in this article's dataset that withdraw citizenship are democracies in the Global North, which pride themselves on their 'good' human rights records.¹⁴⁵ Yet these same states deprive citizenship of children of immigrants, thus creating a 'two-tiered' citizenship system. Overall, the racialised and neo-orientalist narrative of foreign fighters in the Deny Repatriation group and in Global North states is epitomised by citizenship withdrawal, which fosters marginalisation and echoes ISIS propaganda.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

This article employed several explanations and methodologies to assess the variation in state repatriation policies regarding foreign fighters and their children in Syria and Iraq. The explorative statistical analysis that tested frequent propositions and explanations offered by IR showed they have limited utility in explaining why states choose to repatriate their ISIS-affiliated citizens or not. No strong pattern or common political, economic, or terrorism-related factor appears to explain the variation in policies. The subsequent qualitative narrative analysis informed by an intersectional gender perspective examined the 'threat narratives' of various governments. The narrative analysis indicated why some states choose (not) to repatriate by uncovering the racialised and gendered narratives of foreign fighters. To be more specific: why Unconditional Repatriation states portray foreign fighters as victims needing rehabilitation and Deny Repatriation states as villains that threaten national security. Male foreign fighters were presented as a threat throughout the states' policy narratives. The narratives of female foreign fighters varied. In Unconditional Repatriation states the foreign ISIS-associated women were portrayed as

¹⁴⁰David Malet, 'ISIS Foreign Fighters: Keep Your Enemies Closer', Australian Institute of International Affairs (25 December 2019), available at: {<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/isis-foreign-fighters-keep-enemies-closer/>} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁴¹Usama Hasan, 'How would I deradicalise Shamima Begum? With Islamic scholarship', *The Guardian* (20 February 2019), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/19/trump-take-back-radicalised-britons-shamima-begum?CMP=share_btn_tw} accessed 14 June 2021.

¹⁴²Importantly, she never held a second citizenship, yet it was argued she would be able to obtain the Bangladeshi one due to her parent's heritage.

¹⁴³Shiraz Maher, 'How the Shamima Begum case reveals British citizenship is a two-tiered system', *The New Statesman* (2 March 2021), available at: {<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2021/03/how-shamima-begum-case-reveals-british-citizenship-two-tiered-system>} accessed 14 December 2021; see also Gina Vale, 'Shamima Begum, regardless of her new image, remains the UK's responsibility', *The Guardian* (16 September 2021), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/16/shamima-begum-uk-british-muslims>} accessed 14 December 2021.

¹⁴⁴Haroon Siddique, 'New bill quietly gives powers to remove British citizenship without notice', *The Guardian* (17 November 2021), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/17/new-bill-quietly-gives-powers-to-remove-british-citizenship-without-notice>} accessed 14 December 2021.

¹⁴⁵Vásquez and Porčnik, 'The Human Freedom Index 2019'; Kaufmann, Aart, and Massimo, 'The Worldwide Governance Indicators'.

¹⁴⁶Francois and Ibrahim, 'Children of ISIS Detainees', p. 12.

confused victims, whereas in Deny Repatriation states they were presented as threats. Thus, the narrative for female foreign fighters is dichotomous, they are either victims or villains but cannot be both simultaneously. This finding coheres with other research on women who engage in terrorism, including women returnees and supports the claim that more nuanced accounts analysing the women's degree of agency and exploitation are rare in the security literature.¹⁴⁷

In addition, the analysis demonstrated that the narrative of foreign fighters moves from a uniting, welcoming one – towards an othering narrative, often racialising and externalising foreign fighters. Crucially, in the 'Villain' Narrative the states' racial structures are evident because states' decision to, for example, withdraw citizenship reveals their two-tiered system where children of migrants' citizenship is predicated on good behaviour. The fact that most 'Victim' Narrative states are in Central Asia and the Balkans could suggest that they are less influenced by racially driven neo-orientalism, which should be investigated in further research.

Interestingly, the hero presented in the narratives, the state itself, remained the same across categories. Most of the countries demonstrate a masculinist protective view of the state who takes care of its citizens, in particular of women and children. This is either as the patriarchal sovereign under whose protection the citizens are safe from the foreign fighters or as the institution facilitating rehabilitation to help foreign fighters.

Overall, by showing how different gendered and racialised narratives construct repatriation policies, this analysis enriches IR theorising by applying a narrative analysis prevalent in critical and feminist security studies in the context of foreign fighter repatriation. An important implication of this analysis is that societies need to address underlying issues of national identity and social inclusion informing their narratives of returning foreign fighters, such as racism, Islamophobia, and gender discrimination. These structural systems of oppression that underlie states' narratives and practices can fuel the same grievances that attracted citizens to join terrorist organisations in the first place. These grievances include the subordination of women or the 'othering' of ethnic minority citizens.¹⁴⁸ Gendered and racialised 'threat narratives' undermine efforts to counter violent extremism. They must be taken seriously and rethought since repatriation, prosecution, and gender-responsive rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign fighters is important to resolve the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the north Syrian camps and relieve the burden from Iraqi and Syrian communities.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Jacqui True for her helpful comments and guidance in writing this article and developing the argument. As well as Dinah Gutermuth and Patricia Salas Sanchez for your invaluable support. I also want to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their pertinent reviews.

Disclosure Statement. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data availability statement. The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

¹⁴⁷Counter-Terrorism Committee, 'CTED Analytical Brief; Toros, "Victim" or "Security Threat"; Melissa Johnston, Jacqui True, and Zineb Benalla, 'Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya', Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre (2019), available at: {https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/monash_genderequality_violentextremism_paper_art2_pdf/13040732} accessed 14 June 2021; Martini, 'Making women terrorists into "Jihadi brides"; Evans and da Silva, '#ShamimaBegum'.

¹⁴⁸It is important to acknowledge, however, that this article does not seek to establish a direct link between addressing gender inequality, racism, or Islamophobia and lowering the threat of terrorism or radicalisation. As Amal Abu-Bakare points out: 'It is problematic to argue that, by accounting for racism within Western society, counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners are directly reducing the threat of radicalisation and extremism. Such reasoning ensures only a short-term connection between counterterrorism policymakers and the marginalised communities they hope to engage.' See Amal Abu-Bakare, 'Counterterrorism and race', *International Politics Reviews*, 8 (2020), pp. 79–99 (p. 93).

Appendix 1

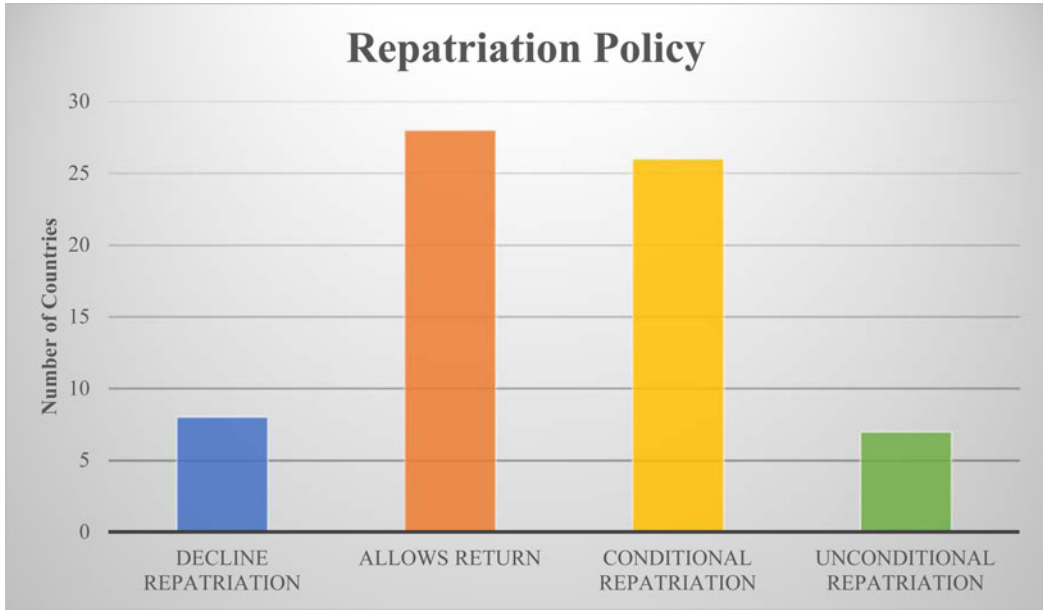


Figure A1. Overview dataset mapping repatriation policy.

Table A1. Overview dataset mapping repatriation policy per country.

Category	Countries
Unconditional Repatriation	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Malaysia
Conditional Repatriation	Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Tunisia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, South Korea, Canada, United States, Sudan
Allow Return	Algeria, Israel, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Bulgaria, Latvia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Kyrgyzstan, Austria, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Singapore, China, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Senegal, South Africa
Deny Repatriation	Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Poland, Denmark, United Kingdom, Indonesia, Philippines, Australia

Appendix 2

Table A2. Results of correlations.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) Repatriation	1.54	(0.83)												
(2) Democracy Index	6.23	(2.27)	0.093											
(3) Coalition against Daesh	0.70	(0.46)	-0.1	.450**										
(4) Military Spending (N)	1.04	(0.41)	0.171	-.431**	-0.05									
(5) Independence Year	2.52	(1.13)	-0.18	-.438**	-.281*	0.102								
(6) Gender Ranking (N)	0.72	(0.06)	-0.03	.729**	0.221	-.530**	-0.19							
<i>Variables related to Human Rights</i>														
(7) Rule of Law	0.40	(0.98)	0.098	.820**	.518**	-0.23	-.572**	.565**						
(8) Voice and Accountability	0.20	(1.05)	0.101	.975**	.473**	-.424**	-.485**	.728**	.847**					
(9) Religious Freedom	6.86	(2.08)	0.117	.680**	.427**	-.399**	-.257*	.591**	.557**	.712**				
(10) Identity and Relationship	1.93	(0.64)	0.107	.530**	.257*	-.405**	-0.11	.644**	.467**	.598**	.528**			
<i>Variables related to Conflict and Terrorism</i>														
(11) Political Terror Scale (N)	2.29	(1.13)	0.042	-.596**	-.424**	.319**	0.092	-.467**	-.579**	-.639**	-.524**	-.501**		
(12) Global Terrorism Index (N)	2.62	(2.17)	0.071	-0.18	-0.16	0.168	-.263*	-.291*	-0.19	-0.22	-.293*	-.317**	.664**	
(13) Conflict (N)	1.67	(0.61)	-0.04	-.610**	-.357**	.394**	.325**	-.544**	-.663**	-.650**	-.496**	-.441**	.764**	.597**

Note. *N* = 69; (N) indicates that the N for that Variable is < 69 due to partially missing data. Pearson's correlation was performed.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table A3. Sources for the narrative analysis.

Type of Source	Sources*
Media Outlets	Al Arabiya, Albanian Daily News, Al Jazeera, Associated Press, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, British Broadcasting Corporation, Benar News, Cable News Network, Caravanserai, Daily Mail, Euro News, EUobserver, Evening Standard, France 24, Het Laatste Nieuws, Independent, Los Angeles Times, Meydan TV, Radio Free Europe, Reuters, Rudaw, Save the Children, SDF Press, Special Broadcasting Service, The Astana Times, Tempo Co, The Jakarta Post, The Local, The Defense Post, The Guardian, The New York Times, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Telegraph, Voice of America
Government and Intergovernmental Policy Outlets	Australian Institute of international Affairs, Balkan Insight, Clingendael, Combating Terrorism Centre, East Asia Forum, European Eye on Radicalization, Human Rights Watch, Governmental Websites (including Foreign Affairs, Intelligence and Presidential Websites), Just Security, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, International Observatory of Human Right, Institute of War and Peace Reporting, Fact Sheets on the European Union, Middle East Institute, Newline Institute, Program on Extremism – The Georgetown University, Radicalisation Awareness Network, The Diplomat, The New Statesman, The Times, The Washington Times, UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate

*Please note that the sources are not provided by country as I often used one source for several countries. The sources are a selection and do not encompass all sources I have screened for the narrative analysis.

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