Università
di Genova

DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE POLITICHE E INTERNAZIONALI

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in:

Relazioni Internazionali

BEYOND *"JIHADI BRIDES"*: ISIS' WOMEN AGENCY AND STATE RESPONSES TO RETURNEES BETWEEN SECURITY AND RIGHTS

Politics of the Middle-East

Relatrice

Chiar.ma Prof.ssa
Guendalina Simoncini

Candidata

Costanza Panetti

ANNO ACCADEMICO

2024-2025

INDEX

Introduction

"I never did anything dangerous,
I never made propaganda,
I never encouraged people to come to Syria"
Shamima Begum .[1]

This statement, attributed to Shamima Begum, a British teenager who left London in 2015 to join the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), exemplifies the ambiguity and controversy associated with women who travel to jihadist conflict zones. The public response to her case highlighted tensions between perceptions of agency and victimhood, raising broader questions about gender and state responsibility in contexts of violent extremism. Begum was stripped of her British citizenship and remains effectively stateless, unable to return to the UK. This case strongly drew my attention by revealing how public debates often rely on simplified narratives, obscuring the complex questions about women's agency in extremist movements.

The involvement of women in jihadist organizations has become one of the most complex and contested dimensions of contemporary terrorism and security studies. Female participation in militant groups is not new, but the Syrian conflict and ISIS's rise brought a turning point. For the first time, women from different regions joined ISIS abroad, assuming roles from caregivers to, in some cases, combatants. This mobilization challenged traditional understandings of women's roles in conflict and drew worldwide attention to their motivations, agency, and responsibilities. With foreign fighter flows reduced, after the fall of ISIS, focus has shifted from recruitment to return. Women who joined ISIS or similar groups are now at the center of debates on repatriation, prosecution, reintegration, and deradicalization. Governments face complex challenges: whether to punish these women as active participants, treat them as victims of manipulation, or rehabilitate them as citizens with the capacity for reintegration into society. The answers carry weighty implications not only for counterterrorism strategies, but also for human rights and community cohesion.

This thesis critically examines the reasons behind women's participation in jihadist groups and tries to assess the multifaceted challenges of their reintegration and deradicalization processes. By combining analysis of radicalization pathways with an evaluation of reinsertion practices, the study provides a comprehensive account of women in the context of ISIS and

[1] Sky News, "*IS bride Shamima Begum full transcript: "I did have a good time there"*, 20 February 2019

beyond. The academic literature on terrorism and radicalization has long focused primarily on men, often portraying women as marginal, coerced, or exceptional participants.

This study addresses that gap by situating female mobilization within both Western and SWANA contexts[2], exploring how cultural narratives, state responses, and international law converge to shape women's post-conflict trajectories, through a gender-sensitive lens. It engages with radicalization theories, securitization studies, feminist international relations and post-colonial feminism, thereby expanding the interdisciplinary conversation around violent extremism. Female FFs have become a pressing issue for policymakers and security practitioners. Women's participation, in particular, has generated intense academic and policy debate.

Scholars have highlighted the gendered framing of female jihadists, often portrayed in media and legal discourse as *"misled"*, *"seduced"*, or *"brainwashed"*, which can obscure their agency.[3] Others argue for a more nuanced understanding, emphasizing that women may exercise significant choice while simultaneously experiencing structural constraints within extremist networks. The reintegration and deradicalization of female returnees also raise urgent security concerns, with debates over the risk of recidivism, the credibility of disengagement, the long-term sustainability of counterterrorism strategies and the consequential security-related problems. Gender-sensitive approaches are crucial: programs that ignore the unique experiences and motivations of women risk failure or unintended consequences. International organizations, local communities, and non-governmental organizations have increasingly become involved in designing interventions that balance security imperatives with human rights.

This thesis therefore speaks directly to the ongoing political and policy debates at both national and international levels. Women's experiences of radicalization and reintegration are shaped by gendered dynamics, including societal expectations, relational ties, and cultural narratives. The gendered discussions surrounding roles and the resulting responsibility for actions have likely affected judicial outcomes for these women. Despite ISIS notorious abuses and gendered violence, the group attracted many female recruits. Women who have joined ISIS have encountered disbelief and gendered commentary, and have been labeled as *"jihadi brides"*—a term that may diminish their perceived agency. By critically examining

[2] I adopt the term West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) rather than *"Middle East"*, which reflects a Eurocentric and colonial cartographic framing. SWANA has increasingly been used in critical and post-colonial scholarship as a geographically more accurate and politically conscious alternative

[3] Strømmen, E., "*Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Daesh – From Recruitment to Return",* PRIO Paper 1/2017, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017, pag 1

assumptions about female jihadists, this study endorses gender-sensitive approaches that account for both women's agency and their vulnerabilities.

The thesis focuses on the Syrian conflict and ISIS as a central case, while situating the analysis within broader patterns of female mobilization in jihadist contexts. The empirical chapter analyzes distinct approaches to women affiliated with ISIS through three representative case studies. The first examines the revocation of citizenship as a tool of legal exclusion, referring to the case of Shamima Begum, which sparked widespread debate about rights, security, and national belonging. The second case study analyzes an extreme punitive approach, linked to forms of prolonged or de facto permanent imprisonment, through the example of Umm Sayyaf in Iraq. The third case study instead focuses on processes of deradicalization and reintegration, examining programs developed in Spain and the Netherlands. In this last case, the analysis is based on institutional policies and programs rather than individual stories, as the beneficiaries have remained anonymous for ethical and security reasons. The choice of these case studies is not only due to their prominence in public and policy debates but also because they capture distinct variations in motivation, agency, and state treatment.

The research adopts a qualitative comparative case study methodology, drawing on both primary and secondary sources to analyse similarities and divergences across selected cases. Primary materials include interviews, official statements, policy documents, and United Nations resolutions; secondary materials consist of academic scholarship, think-tank reports, and journalistic investigations. A comparative case study method is employed to identify both commonalities and divergences across contexts.

Given the predominantly security-sensitive nature of the topic, this study is constrained by the limited availability of primary data, particularly direct access to returnees. As a result, the analysis relies heavily on secondary sources and policy documents.

The thesis is organized into five chapters: the first chapter situates the research within the Syrian conflict and the rise of ISIS, examining the FFs' phenomenon, focusing on the factors that enabled female mobilization and participation. The second chapter reviews existing research on radicalization, women in terrorism, and deradicalization efforts; it identifies key theoretical perspectives that inform the analysis. The third chapter analyzes reintegration and deradicalization programs in Western and SWANA states, assessing their effectiveness and degree of gender sensitivity. Through the above-mentioned selected case studies, the fourth chapter explores women's pathways into radicalisation and state responses to women

affiliated with jihadist groups, highlighting tensions between security and rights as well as the limits of current deradicalisation and reintegration practices.

My interest in the topic arises from an enduring scholarly engagement with the intersections of gender and security. Throughout my academic pursuits, I have observed that women's experiences within extremist movements are frequently oversimplified and stereotyped—often reduced to descriptors such as *"jihadi brides"* or *"misled victims"*. Such labels risk neglecting the nuanced complexity of their agency and motivations. The case studies foreground critical questions regarding how women conceptualize purpose and empowerment within extremist organizations, as well as how societal assumptions concerning gender influence public perception and judicial outcomes. This study facilitates a nuanced exploration of the tensions between agency and coercion, ideology and opportunity, as well as security and rehabilitation. At the same time, it's fundamental to understand that rehabilitation and deradicalization programs remain relatively new and highly context-dependent. Their complexity limits access to participants and hinders systematic, long-term evaluation, resulting in a persistent lack of comprehensive and comparable data on program outcomes. By using a gender-sensitive analysis of female radicalization and reintegration, this thesis aims to deepen scholarly debate and assist policy development that balances security and human rights while reflecting women's diverse experiences in violent extremism.

Chapter 1. Contextual Background

1.1 How did ISIS and the Syrian conflict create the conditions for mobilization?

The contemporary Syrian conflict is rooted in the political and institutional legacy of the Assad regime, shaped over more than five decades. Hafez al-Assad, who ruled from 1971 to 2000, established an authoritarian presidential system grounded in Ba'athist ideology, state-led economic control, and an extensive security apparatus. His governance relied on a coalition dominated by the Alawite minority, which occupied key military and intelligence positions despite representing a small fraction of the population. Upon Hafez's death in 2000, the presidency passed to his son Bashar al-Assad, whose rule continued this centralized and securitized model of governance. The regime exchanged political obedience for economic and security stability.

Over time, this balance increasingly broke down amid corruption, economic inequality, the marginalization of Sunni populations, widespread youth unemployment and rural–urban disparities.[4] Prolonged drought from 2006 to 2010 worsened migration to cities and fueled social discontent. In March 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring movements across the region, widespread protests erupted in Syria. Demonstrators demanded democratic reforms, political freedoms, and an end to arbitrary arrests; security forces responded with live ammunition and mass arrests, including minors. As protests spread across the country, the regime intensified its coercive strategy through forced disappearances and torture in detention facilities.[5] In the following years, government forces carried out indiscriminate bombardments of civilian areas, including internationally documented chemical attacks, despite the prohibition of such weapons under international law. This escalation transformed what had started as a domestic uprising into a devastating civil war. The progressive militarization of the conflict, coupled with the regime's loss of territorial control, opened space for the involvement of regional and international powers. Against this backdrop, the humanitarian toll was catastrophic: by 2015, over half of Syria's population had been displaced, with millions seeking refuge abroad (around 6.6 million internally displaced people).[6] As violence escalated and the regime

[4] Hinnebusch R., *"Syria: From 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?",* International Affairs, vol. 88, no. 1, 2012, pag 98

[5] UN Human Rights Council, "*Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic",* A/HRC/21/50, 2014, pag 7

[6] UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "*2016 Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal",* 2016, pag V

continued its widespread repression, the conflict rapidly evolved beyond spontaneous civilian mobilization. By late 2011, defections from the Syrian army increased, giving rise to the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—a loose coalition of military deserters and armed opposition groups seeking to overthrow the regime. Although initially perceived as the main armed expression of the uprising, the FSA soon fragmented into competing factions due to limited resources, ideological differences, and the growing involvement of foreign sponsors. Parallel to this development, Syria's Kurdish regions in the northeast experienced a distinct trajectory. Capitalizing on the regime's retreat from these areas in 2012, Kurdish political and military actors consolidated their own governance structures. The People's Protection Units (YPG)—backed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—emerged as the principal Kurdish armed force. Unlike other opposition groups, the YPG followed a project of local autonomy grounded in self-administration and security control, positioning itself as a key actor in northern Syria. The proliferation of armed groups coincided with the deepening involvement of regional and global powers, who aligned with different factions based on their strategic interests. Turkey supported segments of the Syrian opposition while opposing Kurdish advances along its border; Saudi Arabia and Qatar financed various anti-Assad factions; Iran and Hezbollah strengthened the regime militarily; and from 2015 onward, Russia's direct intervention decisively shifted the balance of power in favor of Damascus. At the same time, the US forged a partnership with the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), particularly in the fight against ISIS. Sectarian tensions between Sunni, Alawite, and Kurdish communities intensified the violence, providing fertile ground for extremist narratives. This primary phase of the conflict spanned nearly 14 years, culminating in the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, following a significant offensive by opposition forces. The conflict destroyed state institutions and displaced millions.

Sectarian polarization and the breakdown of law and order created ungoverned spaces vulnerable to extremists. ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) was a salafi-jihadist organization that emerged from the dynamics of the Iraqi insurgency and became further radicalized after 2011. They emphasized purification, takfir (excommunication of apostates), and the reestablishment of divine governance. Unlike Al-Qaeda, which advocated a gradualist approach focused on the *"far enemy"*, ISIS prioritized immediate territorial control and the creation of a functioning caliphate. Ideologically, ISIS positioned itself as the vanguard of a renewed global jihad, promoting an extreme and violent interpretation of Salafism. In Syria, ISIS was not the only salafi-jihadist group operating, but it quickly became the most significant in terms of military capacity, territorial control, and its ability to attract foreign

fighters. ISIS capitalized on the chaos of Syria's situation in 2011. It aimed to provide governance and security where the State had failed.[7] ISIS focused primarily on consolidating territory and constructing a viable caliphate, and this doctrinal shift served both theological and strategic purposes. It conferred legitimacy on ISIS's governance structures. The shift also provided a powerful mobilizing narrative for foreign recruits. These recruits sought to participate in what was framed as a divinely sanctioned state-building project.

Building on these factors, in 2013–2014, ISIS gained control over large swathes of territory in both Syria and Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who led the group from 2010 until his death in 2019, rebranded Al-Qaeda as ISIS. In June 2014, ISIS announced the establishment of the caliphate in a statement entitled *"This Is the Promise of Allah"*, read by its spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. The declaration emphasized both religious and political legitimacy.

It proclaimed that the caliphate's authority extended across Iraq and Syria. Unlike earlier jihadist movements, ISIS presented itself not only as an insurgent group. It acted as a functioning State with governance, taxation, and judicial systems. The group combined an ambitious state-building strategy with innovative social media and online propaganda. This approach helped attract thousands of FFs from over 110 countries.[8] On a broader scale, regional and international dynamics further facilitated the mobilization of fighters. Weak state control in neighboring Iraq and porous borders contributed to ISIS's growth. Additional support to various armed groups made the environment more permissive.

At the same time, the globalized information environment gave ISIS new tools. Social media and online magazines like Dabiq and Rumiyah let ISIS reach potential recruits worldwide. They used these channels to promote their ideological vision and operational successes. ISIS's propaganda was highly tailored: men were encouraged to join combat and jihad, and women were recruited with promises of belonging and empowerment in building the Caliphate.[9] This strategic use of ideology and communication helped amplify the conflict's capacity for mobilizing FFs. Beyond recruitment, the Syrian conflict also reconfigured gender relations, both within state-controlled territories and insurgent zones.

Pre-existing patriarchal structures and economic marginalization hit women hardest. The erosion of social safety nets pushed many women into dependence on armed groups for

---

[7] Lister C., *"Profiling the Islamic State."* Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 13, 2014, pag 7

[8] UN Security Council, *"Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat"*, (S/2022/576), 26 July 2022

[9] Ozeren S., Hekim H., Elmas M.S., & Canbegi H.I., *"An Analysis of ISIS Propaganda and Recruitment Activities Targeting the Turkish-Speaking Population"*, International Annals of Criminology, 56, 2018, pag 110

survival or protection.[10] Thus, gendered experiences of war became instrumental to the group's broader recruitment strategy.

ISIS became the first jihadist group to actively recruit women from the West on such a large scale, offering them a central role in building the Caliphate and promising a sense of sisterhood and empowerment.[11] The interplay of Syria's violent conflict, ISIS's claim to statehood, and the promise of a utopian community created the conditions that facilitated the mobilization of thousands of FFs, including women, into one of the most consequential extremist movements of the 21st century.

Sexual violence also became a defining feature of the Syrian conflict, used strategically by multiple actors to consolidate power and terrorize communities. From the earliest stages of the uprising, UN investigators documented how Syrian government forces and intelligence agencies employed rape and sexual torture in detention centres, during raids, and at checkpoints as tools of intimidation and punishment against individuals suspected of supporting the opposition.[12] These practices were not isolated incidents but formed part of a wider pattern aimed at forcing displacement and reinforcing the regime's control over contested areas.

As the war expanded and new armed actors emerged, sexual violence adopted different forms.[13] ISIS institutionalized rape and sexual slavery—particularly against Yazidi women—integrating it into its governance model and propaganda to reward fighters and attract recruits.[14] In this way, sexual violence became both a weapon of war and an instrument of social domination, reflecting the broader fragmentation and brutalisation of the conflict.

1.2 ISIS propaganda and recruitment

ISIS stood out for its uniquely sophisticated propaganda and recruitment network, setting it apart from modern extremist groups.[15] Through a strategic fusion of digital media and

---

[10] Loken M. & Zelenz A., *"Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh.",* European Journal of International Security 3, no. 1, 2018, pag 61

[11] Saltman E. M. & Smith M. *'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon",* London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, pag 16

[12] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *"I Lost My Dignity: Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Syrian Arab Republic",* United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 15 March 2018

[13] UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *"Syrian Arab Republic: Country profile on conflict-related sexual violence."*, 9 April 2021

[14] UN Security Council, "*Statement by the Permanent Representative of Vietnam to the United Nations, S/2021/460*, 12 May 2021

[15] Federal Bureau of Investigation, "*ISIS: The Threat to the United States",* Department of Justice, 2016

emotional manipulation, ISIS effectively attracted and radicalized global supporters. Its media operations exemplified mastery of contemporary communications, crafting a carefully curated image to serve its core mission.

At the core of ISIS propaganda was a radical reinterpretation of Islam that constructed a stark *"us versus them"* worldview. This binary vision legitimized violence by presenting it as divinely mandated. ISIS positioned itself as the heir to a long-lost Caliphate, claiming that its restoration was both a religious obligation and a historic mission. It heavily relied on victimhood narratives, arguing that Muslims worldwide were under siege by Western powers and corrupt regimes, framing jihad as a defensive necessity and portraying recruits as participants in a collective struggle to protect the ummah (islamic community).[16] Apocalyptic themes further enhanced this narrative.

ISIS committed to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse.[17] ISIS propaganda relied on utopian promises and apocalyptic warnings to elicit emotional responses from audiences, a dynamic noted to mobilize actions beyond conventional political motivations.[18] Together, these intersecting narratives cultivated a sense of purpose and belonging among recruits, particularly those who feel alienated or disillusioned. ISIS also tailors its recruitment strategy to different audiences and genders. Its propaganda portrayed men as *"lions of the caliphate"* and warriors in jihad, while women were depicted as essential contributors to the future generation of fighters, reinforcing the Caliphate's social and religious structure.

The Al-Khansaa Brigade's manifesto (2015) portrayed domesticity not as subordination, but as participation in the Caliphate's nation-building project.[19] Through promises of sisterhood, piety, and motherhood in service of jihad, ISIS redefined traditional gender roles within an Islamic framework, appealing to women disillusioned with perceived Western moral decay or gender inequality.[20] This dual narrative—militant masculinity and sanctified femininity—allowed ISIS to mobilize both genders in pursuit of its utopian vision. Beyond gendered messaging, ISIS devoted significant attention to youth indoctrination. Training

---

[16] Mahood S. & Rane H., *"ISIS, Victimhood, and the Construction of Identity: A Sociological Perspective"* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, vol. 39, no. 6, 2016, pag 515

[17] Wood G. *"What ISIS Really Wants"*, *The Atlantic*, 2015, para 5

[18] Winter C., "*The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy",* Quilliam Foundation, 2015, pag 22

[19] Pepicelli R., *"Ǧihād e donne: evoluzioni storiche e risignificazioni semantiche e teologiche in età contemporanea"*, in Manduchi P. & Melis N., "*Jihad. Definizioni e riletture di un termine abusato"*, 2019, pag 156

[20] Huey L. & Witmer H., *"#IS_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism",* Journal of Terrorism Research 7, no. 1, 2016, pag 1–10

camps and propaganda targeted at children—often labeled as *"cubs of the caliphate"*—framed participation in violence as heroic and divinely sanctioned.[21] This approach sought to secure ideological continuity across generations, embedding jihadist identity from an early age.

Online recruitment followed a multi-stage process, initially exposing individuals to propaganda on social media before moving them to encrypted platforms for ideological reinforcement and operational coordination.[22] ISIS's propaganda success was underpinned by a highly organized media infrastructure. At its peak, the group operated a centralized media bureau known as the Al-Hayat Media Center, responsible for producing multilingual content targeted at Western audiences, while regional media offices, such as Al-Furqan and Amaq News Agency, handled battlefield updates and local narratives. This structure allowed ISIS to synchronize global and local messaging, ensuring consistency in ideology while tailoring tone and content for different audiences. ISIS's media system *"functioned like a ministry of information"*, capable of responding rapidly to events both on and off the battlefield; the media strategy employed high-production videos and cinematic storytelling to glorify the Caliphate and martyrdom, appealing to identity and heroism. ISIS's videos used advanced visual rhetoric, operating with drone footage, slow motion, and dramatic sound design to aestheticize violence. Winter argued that such techniques *"transformed acts of brutality into moral spectacle"*, allowing propaganda to merge ideology with entertainment and appeal to audiences raised in digital visual culture.[23] ISIS also had claimed its actions followed a *"prophetic methodology"*, grounding its narrative in a theological framework that legitimized violence and presented jihad as a moral imperative.[24] Moreover, the propaganda was multilingual and globally adaptive, allowing ISIS to reach diverse audiences while tailoring messages according to local and international contexts.[25] The digital ecosystem surrounding ISIS extended beyond official media releases. Supporters known as *"media mujahideen"* translated, subtitled, and redistributed ISIS content across social and encrypted platforms,

---

[21] Bloom M., *"Small Arms: Children and Youth in ISIS",* The Strategic Use of Children in Armed Groups, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pag 50

[22] George Washington University, "*ISIS Online: Countering the Virtual Caliphate",* Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 2017

[23] Winter C., "*The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy",* Quilliam Foundation, 2015, pag 36

[24] Mahood S. & Rane H., *"ISIS, Victimhood, and the Construction of Identity: A Sociological Perspective"* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, vol. 39, no. 6, 2016, pag 502

[25] Fernandez E. J., *"The Islamic State's Strategic Communication and Media Operations",* Global Security Review, 2015, para 3

ensuring the group's visibility even after coordinated removals.[26]

As Conway noted, this *"peer-to-peer model of radicalization"* fostered virtual communities where individuals found belonging and validation, strengthening the group's global reach.[27] Collectively, ISIS's intertwining narratives and adaptive media strategies transformed alienation into devotion, illustrating how propaganda lies at the heart of its operational power. ISIS's online messaging has proven both resilient and adaptive, exploiting every available platform to radicalize and inspire.[28] The group's English-language magazine Dabiq, issued from July 2014 to July 2016, played a pivotal role in reinforcing its ideological framework, combining theological justification and apocalyptic prophecy to attract and indoctrinate followers. Named after the Syrian town believed to be the site of an end-times battle, Dabiq presented ISIS's struggle as a divinely ordained mission and framed its victories and losses within an eschatological context. Following Dabiq, ISIS launched its successor magazine Rumiyah (*"Rome"*) in September 2016, up until September 2017, symbolizing the group's enduring ambition to expand its Caliphate into the heart of the West. Rumiyah shifted focus from apocalyptic prophecy to practical guidance, offering ideological justification for lone-actor attacks and detailed instructions for carrying them out. It emphasized that *"the blood of the disbelievers is halal"* framing violence as both an act of faith and a personal duty.[29] Through Rumiyah, ISIS adapted its propaganda to a decentralized phase of jihad, encouraging global supporters to act independently while maintaining ideological coherence across its dispersed network.

Ultimately, ISIS's propaganda exemplified how modern extremist movements place media ecosystems at the center of their strategy. By merging religious narratives, emotional messaging, and technological sophistication, ISIS utilized communication as a means of warfare—demonstrating its enduring influence beyond the territorial Caliphate. ISIS's propaganda directed at women was deliberately crafted to weave together religious and psychological appeals, creating a coherent framework that facilitates both recruitment and ideological internalization.[30] At its core, the organization presented participation in the

---

[26] Bloom M., Tiflati H. & Horgan J., *"Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram",* Terrorism and Political Violence, vol. 31, no. 6, 2019, pag 1245

[27] Conway M., "*Determining the role of the internet in violent extremism and terrorism: Six suggestions for progressing research",* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 40(1), 2017, pag 82

[28] Federal Bureau of Investigation. *ISIS: The Threat to the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, 2016

[29] Winter C., "*The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy",* Quilliam Foundation, 2015, pag 8

[30] Almohammad, Asaad H., & Speckhard A., "*The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers*", International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017, pag 7

caliphate—whether through support work or adherence to prescriptive norms—as a religious obligation. Women were depicted as guardians of moral order whose presence in ISIS-controlled territories fulfilled a divinely mandated purpose, thereby transforming what is essentially a political project into a spiritual duty. At the same time, ISIS reframed traditional gender expectations as opportunities for empowerment within a bounded normative framework. Roles such as serving in the morality police, acting as educators, mothers, wives, or disseminating propaganda were portrayed as legitimate avenues through which women can exercise authority, acquire social recognition, and experience a heightened sense of purpose. In doing so, the group converted restrictive gender norms into mechanisms of mobilisation. Propaganda also relied heavily on affective and communal narratives: testimonial videos, personal stories, and multimedia content authored by women inside the organization cultivate a sense of belonging and solidarity, normalizing participation and strengthening emotional identification with the imagined community of the caliphate. Through this blend of duty and identity formation, ISIS constructs a persuasive and multidimensional appeal tailored specifically to female audiences.

1.3 The phenomenon of foreign fighters

Before analysing the issue of foreign citizens who travelled to territories controlled by ISIS, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by foreign fighters (FFs). Foreign fighters are individuals who travel to a state other than their own to participate in armed conflict, typically without ties of citizenship, kinship, or military affiliation in the conflict state. The definition of FFs is central to analyzing their role in global jihadism and counterterrorism policy. Definitional complexity in this category directly influences state and international responses to FFs' recruitment, travel, and attempts to reintegration. Over the past decade, academic institutions and international bodies have articulated diverse and sometimes contrasting definitions of FFs. These conceptual nuances influence both scholarly debates and policy responses, especially regarding the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS. International concern over the unprecedented influx of FFs became evident with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), which introduced the term foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and recognised their mobilisation as a threat to global peace and security.[31] The Resolution specifically highlighted that individuals were travelling to Syria and Iraq to join groups such

[31] UN Security Council, "*Security Council Resolution 2178 on threats to international peace and security caused by foreign terrorist fighters*", S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014, pag 1

as ISIS, intensifying regional instability and creating significant security risks upon their return. Despite its global impact, Resolution 2178 did not establish a unified or legally binding definition distinguishing FFs from other categories of transnational combatants. As a result, states continue to adopt divergent legal and administrative approaches: some prosecute FFs under counterterrorism legislation, while others rely on administrative detention, citizenship revocation, or rehabilitation mechanisms.[32] Hegghammer defines a FF as an agent who (1) has joined and operates within an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) is not affiliated with an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.[33] This distinguishes FFs from mercenaries, who are primarily motivated by financial gain, and from terrorists, who employ indiscriminate violence against civilian targets for political ends. The boundaries between these categories remain blurred, particularly in conflicts where insurgent groups adopt hybrid modes of warfare combining insurgency, terrorism, and state-building strategies.[34]

The Syrian conflict became the largest FFs mobilisation in modern history. Between 2011 and 2019, an estimated 40,000–50,000 individuals travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist organisations, mostly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.[35] According to the Soufan Group's 2015 report—widely considered the most authoritative open-source analyses of FFs flows—the phenomenon was truly global, with around 86 countries seeing at least one of their citizens or residents travel to Syria to fight for extremist groups.[36] The Soufan Group estimated that by late 2015 approximately 27,000–31,000 FFs had already reached ISIS- or al-Qaeda-controlled territories. The flow peaked between 2013 and 2015, when border permeability, Turkish transit routes, and the expansion of ISIS's proto-state enabled large-scale and organised movements. After 2016, tightened border controls and ISIS's territorial collapse reduced arrival numbers significantly, although the overall scale remained historically unprecedented. The largest contingents originated from the SWANA context, which together accounted for between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals. Tunisia alone is estimated to have contributed around

---

[32] Renard T. & Coolsaet R., "*Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?",* Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018, pag 22

[33] Hegghammer T., *"The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad",* International Security, vol. 35, no. 3, 2010, pag 56

[34] Hegghammer T., *"Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting",* American Political Science Review, vol. 107, no. 1, 2013, pag 6; Malet, D., "*Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts",* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pag 182

[35] STRATEGIECS Team, *"Foreign Fighters File in Syria: Between Entitlement and Risk",* 29 May 2025

[36] The Soufan Center, "*Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*", December 2015, pag 6

6,000 fighters—by far the most substantial national cohort—followed by significant numbers from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco. These flows were driven by a combination of longstanding political repression, economic instability, and the resonance of ISIS's religious and ideological narratives across the region.

Europe represented the second-largest source region, with approximately 5,000 to 6,000 recruits. Countries such as France, Belgium, Germany, and the UK were disproportionately represented, reflecting a complex interplay of social marginalization and the appeal of transnational ideological belonging. This European mobilisation has often been described as the most substantial jihadist recruitment wave on the continent since the war in Afghanistan of the 1980s, and it profoundly shaped European counterterrorism debates. A further 4,700 to 5,300 fighters originated from the former Soviet republics, including the North Caucasus (notably Chechnya and Dagestan) and Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Many of these recruits had prior exposure to state repression or regional conflict dynamics, and their arrival contributed a level of tactical experience that ISIS sought to exploit. Smaller but still significant flows came from Southeast Asia, principally Indonesia and Malaysia, amounting to roughly 800 to 900 individuals. The mobilization from North America was comparatively limited—several hundred individuals in total—but nonetheless reflected distinct recruitment patterns shaped by online radicalization and individualized pathways.[37]

While men constituted the overwhelming majority of those who travelled to Syria and Iraq, women accounted for approximately 10% of all foreign recruits, and their presence became one of the most debated aspects of the mobilisation. The largest female contingents originated from Western Europe, particularly France, Germany, Belgium, and the UK, where the phenomenon triggered intense public and governmental reactions. The departure of young women—many of them minors—provoked societal shock and political controversy, leading to intensified online monitoring, emergency counter-radicalisation programmes, and, in several states, the introduction of travel-related criminal offences.

Significant numbers of women also travelled from the SWANA region, especially Tunisia, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, often through family-based networks that facilitated collective migration. Smaller but notable flows came from Central Asia, where entire households left for ISIS-held territories, and from Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. Beyond the numerical dimension, the representation of female FFs became a central feature of the

[37] Barrett R., "*Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*", The Soufan Center, October 2017, pag 11

public and political discourse. Unlike male fighters—generally portrayed as combatants or security threats—women were frequently framed through gendered narratives: as *"jihadi brides"*, passive followers, romantically manipulated victims, or individuals *"brainwashed"* through online grooming.[38] These portrayals tended to obscure the variety of motivations and levels of agency involved, reinforcing assumptions that women's participation in jihadist groups was secondary or derivative. At the same time, media and policy debates rarely acknowledged the extent to which ISIS's own gendered propaganda deliberately targeted women, offering roles linked to domesticity, motherhood, ideological labour, and state-building. The contrast between the public representation of female recruits and the strategic importance attributed to them within ISIS's organisational project underscores the complexity of the phenomenon and provides a necessary background for analysing the roles women assumed once inside ISIS.

1.4 The roles of women inside ISIS

ISIS's ideological framework placed women at the heart of its state-building project. The Al-Khansaa Brigade Manifesto (2015) defined the woman's *"primary role"* as wife and mother, responsible for raising the next generation of fighters and preserving moral order within the Caliphate.[39] Despite the active and visible role of the brigade's members, the manifesto explicitly asserted that a woman's primary purpose is to serve her husband and family: *"(...) she was made from Adam and for Adam. Beyond this, her creator ruled that there was no responsibility greater for her than that of being a wife to her husband. (...) This is women's fundamental role and rightful place. It is the harmonious way for her to live and interact amidst her sons and her people, to bring up and educate, protect and care for the next generation to come"*.[40] In this framework, women's role was so important that they could to a certain extent be considered as *"agents of state-building"* that *"contribute to ISIS's expansion efforts as wives and mothers"*.[41] Domesticity was reframed as empowerment through piety and service to the ummah, enabling women to derive status and belonging within a patriarchal

[38] Strømmen E., "*Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Daesh – From Recruitment to Return",* PRIO Paper 1/2017, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017, pag 1
[39] Al-Khansaa Brigade, "*Women of the Islamic State: A manifesto on women by the Al-Khansaa Brigade",* Quilliam Foundation, 2015, pag 8
[40] Ibidem, pag 17-18
[41] Saltman E.M. & Smith M., *"Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon"*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, pag 14

hierarchy.[42] It is in private roles that women in the family unit, particularly as wives and mothers, were most active in ISIS.[43] Women were expected to manage households (as loving mothers and wives), ensure religious education, and maintain community cohesion while their husbands fought.[44]

In this sense, ISIS reconceptualized traditional gender norms as revolutionary duties, merging private roles with public ideology. However ISIS also recognized the necessity of female participation in certain institutional and operational spheres; these *"secondary roles"* were crucial for sustaining the governance of the organization. Women were employed as educators in girls' schools, universities, and religious institutions, with responsibilities encompassing both general education and ideological instruction.[45] Female medical personnel provided healthcare exclusively to women and children, thereby ensuring compliance with strict gender segregation.[46] Women also occupied administrative and policing functions: the Al-Khansaa Brigade, established in Raqqa in 2014, served as the regime's female morality police, enforcing dress codes, mobility restrictions, and segregation policies.[47]

Members conducted house-to-house inspections and punished perceived moral infractions. These units allowed ISIS to impose social control without violating its own gender-segregation principles, while also symbolizing the institutionalization of female authority within the Caliphate.[48] Constituents of the brigade also engaged in propaganda efforts and, according to some accounts, assumed auxiliary security roles as ISIS adjusted its operational tactics. Eyewitness testimonies, along with NGO reports and journalistic investigations, document instances of corporal punishment—such as beatings and floggings—carried out under the brigade's authority.[49]

Following ISIS's collapse, particularly after 2017 and the final loss of Baghouz in March 2019, the brigade's institutional presence in key urban centers such as Raqqa and Mosul

---

[42] Loken M. & Zelenz A., *"Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh*", European Journal of International Security 3, no.1, 2018, pag 61

[43] Margolin D. & Cook J., "*The agency and roles of foreign women in ISIS",* Center for Justice and Accountability, 2018, pag 19

[44] Lister C., "*Profiling the Islamic State*", Brookings Doha Center Analysis, Paper 13, 2015

Loken M., & Zelenz A., *"Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh"*, European Journal of International Security, 3(1), 2018, pag 65

[45] Hoyle C., Bradford A. & Frenett R., "*Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS",* Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, pag 18

[46] UN Security Council, "*Report on Women and the Islamic State",* (S/2019/239), 2019, pag 10

[47] Hoyle C., Bradford A., & Frenett R., "*Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS",* Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, pag 19

[48] Brown, K. "*Gender and the Islamic State*", Policy Brief 34, Brookings Institution, 2018, pag 14

[49] Counter Extremism Project, "*ISIS's persecution of women*", 2017

effectively dissolved.[50] Post-caliphate analyses indicate the disbandment and dispersal of its members, with some evidence of limited re-engagement in displaced-person camps or online propaganda activities. However, the brigade's formal policing function largely disappeared alongside the collapse of ISIS's territorial governance structure.

Women also played a pivotal part in online recruitment and propaganda dissemination. As media mujahidat (female jihadists), they used Twitter, Telegram, and Tumblr to attract other women, share logistical advice for migration, and promote images of sisterhood and pious adventure.[51] Female recruiters—including Umm Layth (Aqsa Mahmood), Umm Muthanna al-Britannia, and Hoda Muthana—cultivated substantial online followings by portraying hijra to Syria as simultaneously romanticized and religiously mandated.[52]

Women in ISIS played active and increasingly visible roles in direct combat and other high-risk operations. As the group's territorial control expanded and later came under sustained military pressure, women were deployed in roles that exploited both operational necessity and prevailing gender norms. In particular, female operatives were used as suicide bombers, carrying out attacks in urban or heavily secured areas where male operatives might have been more easily detected. These operations capitalized on societal assumptions that women posed a lesser security threat, enabling greater freedom of movement and access to sensitive locations.[53] Some female operatives were trained as assassins, responsible for targeted killings of key individuals, including suspected informants or perceived enemies of the organization.

Abu Rumman (2021) highlighted how evolving organizational priorities and ideological narratives expanded the scope of women's operational involvement.[54] Beyond these lethal tasks, women also participated in armed defense and security within ISIS-controlled territories, including protecting checkpoints or securing internal areas, though they rarely engaged directly alongside men on the frontline. These activities were framed within ISIS ideology as acts of martyrdom and religious duty, enabling women to reconcile violent

---

[50] Vale G., "*Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps*", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019, pag 1

[51] Huey L. & Witmer R.,*"Women as recruiters in the Islamic State"*, Perspectives on Terrorism, 10(6), 2016, pag 6

[52] Saltman E. M. & Smith M.*, "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon",* London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, pag 19

[53] Almohammad, Asaad H., & Speckhard A., "*The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers*", International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017, pag 7

[54] Abu Rumman M., *"Jihadist woman: Role and position shift in ISIS",* Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues, 2021, 24(1S)

participation with the group's gender norms.[55] While women generally held limited authority over male fighters, their roles were strategically significant, providing operational advantages such as access and surprise that men alone could not achieve.

1.5 The differences in experiences of women under ISIS rule

The experiences of women who lived under ISIS control were far from uniform, and any attempt to categorise them rigidly obscures the complexity of their trajectories. While some women travelled voluntarily to Syria and Iraq, others had no agency in their displacement, and many experienced forms of violence or entrapment once inside the group's territories. This diversity of experiences is essential for understanding the gendered dynamics of the organisation and the challenges that emerged after its territorial collapse.

A first and crucial distinction concerns the degree of agency women exercised in their presence under ISIS rule. Not all women who found themselves in ISIS-controlled areas had consented to live within the organisation's system. Thousands of Yazidi women and girls, along with other minority groups, were abducted, trafficked, and enslaved in a systematic campaign of gender-based violence that has been internationally recognised as genocide.[56] Survivors such as Nadia Murad describe rape, forced marriage, enslavement, and daily brutality, illustrating how ISIS deployed gendered terror as a tool of domination.[57] These extreme forms of exploitation coexisted with the comparatively more privileged, though still constrained, conditions experienced by foreign women who migrated voluntarily from Europe, North America, or parts of SWANA. Even among women who chose to travel to ISIS-controlled areas, experiences diverged significantly. Many recruits did not find what they expected, expressing deep regret once confronted with the harsh realities of life inside ISIS territory. The group's stringent system of surveillance, confiscation of passports, gender segregation, and threat of corporal punishment or execution for *"disobedience"* created environments of profound entrapment.[58] For many, the initial ideological enthusiasm soon clashed with the practical impossibility of leaving. This blurring of voluntariness and coercion complicates simplistic narratives of women as either passive victims or fully autonomous agents.

---

[55] Cook D., *"Women fighting in jihad?"*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 28(5), 2005, pag 380

[56] UN Security Council, "*Statement by the Permanent Representative of Vietnam to the United Nations, S/2021/460*, 12 May 2021

[57] Murad N., "*The last girl: My story of captivity, and my fight against the Islamic State*", Tim Duggan Books, 2017, pag 200

[58] Vale G., *"Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps"*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019, pag 1

According to a Europol report, *"Women feature noticeably more in IS propaganda ... both as a target audience and as authors in their own right"*.[59] Life under ISIS was further shaped by a racialised and stratified gender hierarchy. Research and testimony indicate that Western and other foreign women often occupied symbolically privileged positions within ISIS's gender order. They were depicted in propaganda as embodiments of exemplars of female piety and mothers of the next generation of fighters.[60] Consequently, they were typically assigned domestic or online recruitment roles, and in some cases participated in the enforcement of moral codes through units such as the Al-Khansaa Brigade.[61] Their foreignness, paradoxically, conferred prestige within the organisation's imagined global community. By contrast, local Syrian, Iraqi, and minority women found themselves at the opposite end of this hierarchy: they were more likely to be exploited for labour, coerced into marriages, subjected to physical violence, or forced into highly precarious and dangerous roles.[62] For many local women, joining ISIS was less a choice and more a strategy of survival amid war and poverty.[63] Reports by the United Nations document cases where women were trafficked, sold, subjected to violence and forced into marriages with fighters.[64] The intersection of gender, race, class, and proximity to conflict profoundly shaped these differentiated experiences.

The collapse of ISIS's territorial control created new and enduring challenges. While many male fighters were arrested and imprisoned by local or international authorities, thousands of women—both foreign and local—were left in a state of protracted detention in Kurdish-run camps in north-eastern Syria. Places such as al-Hol and Roj have become sites of indefinite confinement, marked by insecurity, ideological tensions, restrictions on movement, and severe resource scarcity.

As Vale (2019) noted, *"the status of its female members provides insight into how IS may navigate its post-territorial phase"*.[65] These camps have become spaces of indefinite confinement where women face insecurity, limited resources, and ongoing surveillance and

---

[59] Europol, "*Women in the Islamic State: Message and Report*", European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2016, pag 22

[60] Lahoud N., "*The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction",* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pag 219

[61] Pepicelli R., *"Ǧihād e donne: evoluzioni storiche e risignificazioni semantiche e teologiche in età contemporanea"*, in Manduchi P. & Melis N., "*Jihad. Definizioni e riletture di un termine abusato"*, 2019, pag 156

[62] Yılmaz Z., "*Critique of ISIS' Women Policy",* Journal of International Social Research, 10(51), 2017, pag 8-9

[63] Bloom M., "*Small Arms: Children and Terrorism",* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017, pag 142

[64] UN Human Rights Council, "*Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic",* A/HRC/21/50, 2014, pag 4

[65] Vale G., *"Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps"*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019, pag 5

control. Their legal status remains ambiguous, exacerbating humanitarian concerns and complicating accountability processes. These realities feed directly into the ongoing global debate over the repatriation of ISIS-affiliated women and their children. Repatriation is fraught not only with political resistance and public fear, but also with complex legal obstacles.[66] In many SWANA countries, nationality laws follow patrilineal descent, meaning children inherit citizenship exclusively through their father. As a result, children of ISIS-affiliated mothers—particularly widows or women with missing, unknown, or foreign partners—become effectively stateless. This legal exclusion is compounded by the collapse of civil registration systems in conflict zones, leaving many children without birth certificates or formally recognized parentage.

Even in cases where repatriation or return to countries of origin occurs, these minors may be classified as illegitimate or face protracted bureaucratic obstacles in securing identity documents, or access to nationality. Beyond legal precarity, such children often encounter intense social stigma linked to their parents' perceived affiliation with ISIS, which can affect access to education, healthcare, and community support. This human rights concern reflects the broader, unresolved legacy of ISIS's gendered governance and the global community's uneven response to its aftermath.

Chapter 2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used to analyse radicalization and women's participation in ISIS. Rather than offering a descriptive literature review, it develops an integrated analytical approach that connects radicalization theory, securitization, gender and postcolonial theories in order to explain women's involvement in the organization and state responses to their return. Section 2.1 reviews key theories of radicalization, a gradual and non-linear process shaped by individual, social, and structural dynamics. Section 2.1.1 focuses specifically on FFs, highlighting how transnational mobilization is enabled by different aspects. Section 2.2 introduces securitization theory from IR to examine how terrorism and FFs are constructed as existential threats through political and discursive practices. This framework helps explain the adoption of exceptional state measures—such as citizenship revocation and non-repatriation. To address the limitations of gender-neutral

[66] Renard T. & Coolsaet R., "*Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?",* Egmont Paper 101. Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018, pag 17

security approaches, section 2.3 draws on feminist IR theory, with a focus on postcolonial feminist perspectives. This lens foregrounds gender and context, enabling a more nuanced understanding of women's radicalization as constrained agency rather than deviance or coercion. To end the chapter, section 2.4 links the theoretical framework to the research methodology and case studies, clarifying how these concepts are operationalized in the empirical analysis.

2.1 Radicalization processes and theories

The concept of radicalization has become central to contemporary terrorism studies, especially in efforts to understand why individuals travel abroad to join extremist organizations such as ISIS. Despite its widespread use, radicalization remains one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences, with no single, universally accepted definition. In this thesis, the definition proposed by Schmid is adopted because it conceptualizes radicalization as a process encompassing ideological, and behavioral dimensions, without equating it exclusively with violence.

Radicalization can be defined as the (individual or collective) process whereby individuals or groups gradually adopt extremist political, social, or religious ideas and aspirations, with the intention of substantially changing society, including potentially through violent means.[67] Yet, scholars disagree on what constitutes radicalization and how it should be conceptualized.

As Neumann notes, *"radicalization is best understood as a process rather than an event",* involving multiple stages of belief and behavioral change.[68] The term tends to merge a number of meanings: disaffection, youth alienation, radical dissent, religious fundamentalism and propensity to violence.[69]

Research into radicalization expanded significantly after the London bombings in 2005, when homegrown terrorism revealed that radicalization could emerge within liberal democratic societies. This academic attention surged again in 2014, when ISIS declared the *"restoration of the caliphate"* and one of its members carried out the first successful attack in a Western country.[70] Given the conceptual ambiguity surrounding radicalization, scholars have developed various theoretical models to explain how individuals progress from grievance to

[67] Schmid A.P., "*Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*", ICCT Research Paper, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013, pag 18
[68] Neumann P., *"The trouble with radicalization"*, International Affairs, 89(4), 2013, pag 875
[69] Kundnani A., "*Radicalisation: The journey of a concept",* Race & Class, 54(2), 2012, pag 5
[70] Crettiez X., *"Penser la radicalisation: Une sociologie processuelle des variables de l'engagement violent*", Revue française de science politique, 66(5), 2016, pag 710

violent action. Moghaddam conceptualizes radicalization as a metaphorical staircase, illustrating how only a small number of individuals progress from general dissatisfaction to violent extremism.[71] The model describes society as a building with many people on the ground floor, experiencing perceived injustice, relative deprivation, or frustration. Most people remain there, expressing grievances through non-violent means. At higher levels, moral engagement with violent ideologies intensifies until the individual reaches the fifth floor, where violence is justified and enacted.

Wiktorowicz shifts focus from individual psychology to social and ideological transformation.[72] His four-stage model conceptualizes radicalization as a gradual process of cognitive and social transformation, emphasizing the importance of ideology, identity, and group dynamics rather than psychological predispositions, making it particularly relevant for understanding non-violent as well as violent pathways into extremism.

Borum provides a comprehensive review of social science theories explaining how individuals progress toward violent extremism.[73] He outlines a four-stage model that explains how individuals morally justify violence: (1) *"It's not right"*: The individual perceives that something in society or the world is wrong or unjust. (2) *"It's not fair"*: The perceived injustice is personalized and seen as unfair treatment toward oneself or one's group. (3) *"It's your fault"*: The blame for the injustice is attributed to an identifiable out-group, authority, or system, often leading to moral polarization. (4) *"You're evil, so violence is justified"*: The target is dehumanized or morally excluded, legitimizing hostility and, eventually, violence against them.[74] This cognitive progression illustrates how moral disengagement transforms grievance into perceived moral obligation to act violently. The individual perceives that something is wrong or unjust in the world (a sense of grievance or moral outrage).

McCauley and Moskalenko propose a *"pyramid model"*, distinguishing between layers of radical thought and action within a population — from passive sympathizers at the base to active terrorists at the apex.[75] Their framework emphasizes that radicalization is an emotional and relational process rather than a purely ideological one; this model underscores that not all who hold radical beliefs engage in violence.

---

[71] Moghaddam F. M., "*The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration",* American Psychologist, 60(2), 2005, pag 161

[72] Wiktorowicz Q., "*Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West",* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005

[73] Borum R., "*Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories",* Journal of Strategic Security, 4(4), 2011, pag 7

[74] Ibidem, pag 8

[75] McCauley C. & Moskalenko S., "*Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism"*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 20(3), 2008, pag 420

Collectively, these models contribute to a multidimensional understanding of radicalization as a non-linear, multifactorial process shaped by individual psychology, social interaction, structural context and policies.

This multidimensional understanding of radicalization is reinforced by Richards' critique of the concept's use in counterterrorism discourse. The author argues that the increasing focus on *"radicalization"* reflects a policy-driven search for early warning signs and preventive interventions, rather than a concept grounded in consistent empirical patterns.[76] This theoretical discussion is relevant because it provides the conceptual foundation for analysing women's pathways into ISIS without assuming a single or predictable model of radicalization. Since women's roles and forms of participation in ISIS often differ from dominant, male-centred models of extremism, it's fundamental to understand the differences in the trajectories of radicalization.

This focus on women's radicalization also lays the groundwork for the following chapter, which examines recent models of disengagement and deradicalization in order to assess how women exit extremist movements and how their trajectories are subsequently addressed by states and institutions.

2.1.1 Radicalization processes of FFs: a gendered perspective

The radicalization of FFs is widely understood as a multifaceted system involving personal, social, ideological, and structural dynamics that motivate individuals to join violent extremist groups abroad. Early models of radicalization, however, were largely developed on the basis of male-dominated trajectories, often assuming combat-oriented motivations and pathways. As a result, women's involvement in violent extremism was historically treated as marginal, exceptional, or frequently explained through narratives of coercion or emotional vulnerability, rather than ideological conviction or political agency. Only in the past decade—particularly following the unprecedented mobilization of women to ISIS-controlled territories—has scholarship begun to systematically interrogate whether female radicalization follows distinct patterns and gendered dynamics.

Researchers increasingly argue that while women are embedded in the same broad ideological and structural environments as men, their pathways into violent extremism are shaped by

[76] Richards A., *"From terrorism to "radicalization" to "extremism": counterterrorism imperative or loss of focus?",* International Affairs, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 91(2), pag 371–380

gendered social roles and relational dynamics.[77]

A growing body of literature identifies gender-specific push and pull factors in the radicalization of female FFs. Push factors include experiences of social marginalization, discrimination, identity crises, and perceived moral or cultural exclusion within Western societies. Pull factors, particularly salient in the case of ISIS, involve the promise of belonging, purpose, moral clarity, and empowerment within an ideologically framed community. ISIS propaganda explicitly reframed traditionally feminine roles—such as marriage, motherhood, piety and domesticity—as forms of religious duty and political participation, transforming private roles into mechanisms of ideological mobilisation.[78]

Rather than representing a departure from patriarchal norms, these narratives offered women a re-signified form of status and agency within a bounded ideological framework. To analytically capture these dynamics, scholars increasingly rely on process-oriented models of radicalization, which conceptualize engagement in violent extremism as unfolding across micro, meso, and macro levels (Moghaddam, Wiktorowicz, McCauley & Moskalenko, Borum).

At the micro level, individual vulnerabilities—such as identity struggles, grievances, and emotional dislocation—create receptivity to extremist narratives. At the meso level, social networks and relational ties play a decisive role[79]: close relationships and peer validation often function as the primary conduits through which radical ideas are normalized and reinforced.[80]

At the macro level, broader political and ideological grievances—such as perceptions of global injustice, Western interventionism, or the suffering of Muslim populations—provide the interpretive framework through which violence is morally justified.

Research further demonstrates that radicalization processes unfold within specific social and spatial contexts rather than in isolation. Early studies emphasized the role of physical spaces, such as radical mosques and informal religious networks, where charismatic preachers offered ideological framing and facilitated group bonding.[81]

The rise of digital communication technologies has expanded these interactions into virtual spaces, allowing extremist ideas to circulate far beyond immediate social circles.

---

[77] Loken M. & Zelenz A., *"Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh.",* European Journal of International Security 3, no. 1, 2018, pag 61

[78] Hoyle C., Bradford A., & Frenett R., "*Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS",* Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, pag 19

[79] Sageman M., "*Understanding Terror Networks",* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pag 115

[80] Kanol E., "*Contexts of Radicalization of Jihadi Foreign Fighters from Europe",* Perspectives on Terrorism, 16(3), 2022, pag 46

[81] Silke A., "*Holy warriors: Exploring the psychological processes of jihadi radicalization"*, in T. Bjørgo & J. Horgan (Eds.), "*Leaving terrorism behind: Individual and collective disengagement"*, London: Routledge, 2009, pag 107

Sageman conceptualized the *"leaderless jihad"* as a decentralized form of terrorism facilitated by online networks that connect and motivate self-radicalizing individuals.[82] These networks form virtual communities where they exchange ideas, share operational knowledge, and receive encouragement from like-minded participants. For example, at the height of the Syrian conflict, European FFs made extensive use of social media to share their experiences and inspire others to join jihadist movements.[83] Together, these findings illustrate how online propaganda not only reflects but also accelerates processes of social radicalization. Digital spaces thus function as powerful echo chambers, reinforcing ideological commitment and facilitating transnational connectivity among aspiring militants.

Recent research highlights that encrypted messaging applications and algorithm-driven content recommendation systems have further accelerated the dissemination of extremist materials and facilitated the formation of insular online subcultures.[84] Even so-called *"lone wolves"* often display indirect interpersonal or digital connections to broader extremist ecosystems, highlighting that radicalization rarely occurs in isolation: 78 % of the lone actors in the study by Schuurman et al. (2019) were *"exposed to external sources of encouragement or justification for the use of violence."*[85]

Beyond virtual communities, radicalization can also unfold in more enclosed or coercive environments that replicate similar dynamics of belonging and ideological reinforcement. Building on these insights, research on female FFs suggests that radicalization pathways are often characterized by distinct relational and spatial dynamics. While men's radicalization has frequently been associated with peer groups and physical meeting spaces, women's engagement more often unfolds through intimate social ties, online environments, and semi-private spheres.[86] Studies show that female recruits are disproportionately exposed to extremist narratives through personal relationships and affective forms of ideological transmission that emphasize belonging and moral duty, rather than combat participation.[87] These gendered pathways do not imply lesser ideological commitment, but rather reflect how

---

[82] Sageman M., "*Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century",* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, pag 69

[83] Carter J., Neumann P. R. & Maher S., "*#Greenbirds: Measuring importance and influence in Syrian foreign fighter networks*", London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2014, pag 47

[84] Tech Against Terrorism, *"Terrorist use of end-to-end encryption: State of play, misconceptions, and mitigation strategies"*, London: Tech Against Terrorism & Royal United Services Institute, 2021, pag 54

[85] Schuurman B., Lindekilde L., Malthaner S., O'Connor F., Gill P. & Bouhana N., *"End of the lone wolf: The typology that should not have been*", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 42(8), 2019, pag 775

[86] Huey L. & Witmer R.,*"Women as recruiters in the Islamic State"*, Perspectives on Terrorism, 10(6), 2016, pag 6

[87] Loken M. & Zelenz A., *"Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh.",* European Journal of International Security 3, no. 1, 2018, pag 61

access to extremist networks and roles is mediated by gender norms and expectations.[88] Recognizing these differences is essential for avoiding male-centred assumptions about radicalization processes and for accurately assessing women's agency within extremist movements.

2.2 Securitization IR theory

The securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *"Security: A new framework for analysis"*, 1998), has profoundly influenced the field of international security studies by reconceptualizing security beyond its traditional association with military threats. It offers a powerful framework for understanding how issues can be framed as security threats requiring extraordinary measures. Securitization is a set of interrelated practices, and the processes of their production and reception/translation that bring threats into being.[89] Rather than viewing security as an objective condition, securitization emphasizes that threats are socially and discursively constructed through political processes: *"security is a speech act"*[90], meaning that by labeling an issue a matter of security, policymakers justify exceptional measures—such as suspension of rights or military intervention—that would otherwise be considered unacceptable. The success of securitization thus depends on the interplay between three components: the securitizing actor, who articulates the threat; the referent object, which is portrayed as endangered; and the audience, whose acceptance legitimizes extraordinary actions. This perspective highlights how issues become defined as matters of *"security"* through language, institutional practice and depiction, and public acceptance, rather than through inherent danger. In doing so, the theory shifts analytical focus from material capabilities to the performative and communicative acts that frame certain phenomena as existential threats.

De-securitization, conversely, refers to the process by which issues are reframed as political or social concerns rather than existential crises, allowing for democratic deliberation instead of coercive control. It involves returning a topic from the realm of emergency and exception back into the sphere of normal politics, where it can be addressed through negotiation and

[88] Bloom M., Tiflati H. & Horgan J., *"Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram",* Terrorism and Political Violence, vol. 31, no. 6, 2019, pag 1245

[89] Balzacq T., "*Securitization theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve",* Routledge, 2011, pag 3

[90] Buzan B., Wæver O. & de Wilde J., "*Security: A new framework for analysis",* Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, pag 23-24

institutional mechanisms rather than through exceptional measures.[91]

The securitization of terrorism has been one of the most pervasive and enduring features of post-9/11 international politics. Through the global *"War on Terror"*, political leaders and institutions framed terrorism as an existential threat to civilization itself, thereby legitimizing extraordinary legal, military, and surveillance measures.[92] This process extended beyond 9/11, as the *"terrorist other"* became synonymous with foreignness, Islam, jihadism and cultural deviance. Within this context, FFs occupy a particularly complex position in the securitized landscape. They represent both the externalization of threat—citizens who join foreign conflicts—and the internalization of insecurity—proof that radicalization can emerge within liberal democratic societies. By casting FFs as existential dangers to national identity and social cohesion, states have justified exceptional policies such as the revocation of citizenship, indefinite detention, refusal of repatriation and possible participation in deradicalization programs.[93]

Securitization theory has been critiqued for neglecting the role of gender and power relations in the construction of security threats.[94] Scholars have argued that the theory often treats the securitization process as gender-neutral. The Copenhagen School's focus on the linguistic and discursive aspects of securitization overlooks the silences that shape both the construction of security and the ways in which gendered identities are implicated in security discourse.[95] Women, for instance, are frequently represented in gendered terms as either victims—those who need protection from the violence of extremism—or monsters—deviants who betray normative gender roles by engaging in violence.[96] This gendered binary limits securitization theory's ability to fully explain the agency of women in extremist movements. Women who engage in political violence are often framed as outliers to conventional femininity, either as victims of male-dominated groups or as irrational, emotion-driven actors who are exceptions to the general rule of peaceful female behavior.[97] This framing reduces women's involvement

---

[91] McDonald M., *"Securitization and the construction of security"*, European Journal of International Relations, 14(4), 2008, pag 573

[92] Huysmans J., "*The politics of insecurity: Fear, migration and asylum in the EU",* Routledge, 2006, pag 2-3

[93] Balzacq T., "*Securitization theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve",* Routledge, 2011, pag 3

[94] Hansen L., *"The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School"*, Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 29(2), 2000

[95] Ibidem, pag 288

[96] Shepherd L.J.*, "Victims, perpetrators, actors or agents? Gender, armed conflict and securitization"*, International Studies Quarterly, 52(1), 2008, pag 32

[97] Simoncini G., *"Bad mothers vs good mothers of the nation: The dual faces of Tunisian women in terrorism and in preventing extremism",* Mediterranean Politics, 2024, pag 504

in terrorism to individual pathologies or coercion, obscuring the political motivations, ideological commitment, social networks and friendship ties that might contribute to their radicalization.[98]

2.3 Feminist IR theory

The preceding discussion of securitization reveals the limited attention to gender within terrorism and security studies. In particular, existing frameworks often overlook how gender shapes both women's pathways into violent extremism and the ways in which female FFs are interpreted as victims or threats. Feminist IR theory addresses these gaps by foregrounding power and social construction, providing a more nuanced framework for analysing women's participation in ISIS. Feminist IR began to take shape in the late 1980s and gained momentum during the post–Cold War period, when the collapse of bipolarity encouraged a broader re-evaluation of traditional IR theories.

Within the discipline, feminist approaches are typically situated in the broader family of reflectivist perspectives, which stand in contrast to rationalist theories rooted in rational-choice assumptions. Reflectivist approaches—including constructivism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism—emphasize that state identities and interests are not fixed givens but socially constructed and continuously reshaped through interaction and evolving norms. It is important to note that feminist IR is not a monolithic approach; it encompasses diverse strands—including liberal feminism, which emphasises representation and inclusion; critical or structural feminism, which analyses gendered power relations; postcolonial feminism, which challenges Orientalist and racialised narratives; and queer IR, which disrupts binary gender categories and assumptions about heteronormativity.

A foundational text in this tradition is Cynthia Enloe's "*Bananas, Beaches, and Bases"* (Pandora Press, 1990). Enloe famously asked, *"Where are the women?"* (1989), urging IR scholars to pay attention to the spaces women occupy in global politics and demonstrating that women are essential actors in the international system.[99] Her core argument is that examining global politics from women's perspectives forces scholars to rethink assumptions about what the *"international"* consists of and exposes how IR's traditional focus obscures the gendered labour and power relations that underpin global politics.

---

[98] Sjoberg L., & Gentry C.E., "*Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics",* Zed Books, 2007, pag 33

[99] Smith S., *"Introducing Feminism in International Relations Theory"*, in McGlinchey S., Walters R. & Scheinpflug C., *"International Relations Theory"*, E-International Relations Publishing, 2017, pag 64

Traditional theories—particularly realism—tend to universalize masculine norms such as rationality and militarized power, while marginalizing or erasing women's experiences.[100] In the book Enloe also argues that international politics and violence are sustained through everyday, normalized practices that occur far beyond the battlefield, particularly within domestic, economic, and social spaces that are often rendered invisible by conventional security analysis.[101]

Tickner similarly argues that IR's supposed neutrality masks deeply gendered assumptions about who counts as a political actor and what constitutes legitimate security concerns. Both Enloe and Tickner show that security is not an objective or gender-blind category; it is shaped by assumptions that cast men as protectors and women as protected. This becomes especially significant in terrorism studies, where the female militant is often perceived as an exceptional figure whose violence *"violates gender expectations"*.[102]

Feminist IR highlights how female militants disrupt assumptions that women are inherently peaceful, prompting states to adopt paternalistic responses such as rescue and protection. Within such masculinized security frameworks, women's political agency becomes difficult to recognize or is interpreted as abnormal. This perspective fundamentally reshapes how women's involvement in extremist organisations such as ISIS is understood.

A key feminist insight concerns the public/private divide. Traditional IR places diplomacy, strategy, and warfare firmly in the *"public"* sphere while relegating caregiving, family, and intimate relationships to the *"private"*. Feminist scholars argue that this divide is artificial and political. Enloe's work shows that what happens in so-called private spaces has direct implications for international outcomes—including pathways to radicalisation. This is particularly relevant to female FFs, whose decisions are frequently framed through familial or romantic narratives rather than acknowledged as political choices.

Feminist scholarship also challenges the persistent myth that women are inherently less political or less violent than men. Rather than equating gender solely with women, feminist theorists highlight how dominant forms of militarized masculinity—associated with toughness and rationality—shape state behaviour and threat construction. Women who engage in political violence therefore appear especially unsettling: they disrupt the gendered

---

[100] Tickner J.A., "*Gender in International Relations*", Columbia University Press, 1992, pag 4-5

[101] Enloe C., "*Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*", Pandora Press, 1990, pag 6

[102] Sjoberg L., & Gentry C., "*Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*" Zed Books, 2007, pag 12

association between masculinity and the use of force. Sjoberg and Gentry identify three dominant representational tropes through which violent women are interpreted: mothers, monsters, and whores.[103] These gendered scripts reduce complex motivations to familiar stereotypes—the mother coerced into violence, the monster who is pathologically deviant, and the whore who has been sexually corrupted. Such narratives deny women political agency and reinforce patriarchal norms.

Shepherd likewise argues that portrayals of women's violence operate as boundary-making practices that reassert gender hierarchies by presenting female militancy as a breakdown of femininity rather than as political behaviour.[104] These patterns are particularly visible in representations of ISIS-affiliated women. The widely used *"jihadi bride"* narrative infantilizes women by framing their decisions in terms of romance, naivety, or emotional vulnerability.[105] Yet, when they demonstrate ideological commitment, the same women are recast as *"monstrous"*, having transgressed expected gender boundaries. These contradictory portrayals generate inconsistent policy responses that oscillate between compassion and punitive exclusion.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how gender interacts with race, religion, class, and citizenship to shape experiences of political violence and the state's response.[106] For female ISIS members, these intersecting identities produce layered forms of scrutiny: gendered assumptions may cast them as less responsible, while racial and religious markers position Muslim women as particularly suspect. Class can exacerbate these dynamics, as women from marginalized backgrounds often face harsher policing. Citizenship becomes an additional axis of differentiation, with revocation disproportionately applied to racialized individuals.[107] Intersectionality therefore helps explain why Western-born Muslim women face far more severe securitization than non-Muslim women involved in far-right extremism.

Feminist IR has also attracted several critiques. Some scholars argue that it places too much emphasis on discourse and representation[108], paying insufficient attention to material power

[103] Sjoberg L., & Gentry C., "*Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*" Zed Books, 2007, pag 21-22

[104] Shepherd L., "*Gender, Violence and Global Politics*", Routledge, 2008, pag 18-19

[105] Martini A., *"Making Women Terrorists into "Jihadi Brides". An Analysis of Media Narratives on Women joining ISIS",* in Critical Studies on Terrorism 11(3), 2018, pag 463

[106] Crenshaw K., *"Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color"*, Stanford Law Review, 43(6), pag 1245

[107] Macklin A., *"Citizenship Revocation, the Privilege to Have Rights, and the Production of the Alien",* In Queen's Law Journal, 40(1), 2014, pag 5

[108] Zalewski M., *"Well, What is the Feminist Perspective on Bosnia?"*, International Affairs 71(2), 1995, pag 339

structures and strategic behaviour in international politics—though many feminist theorists contest this characterisation. Others claim that early feminist IR tended to universalise Western women's experiences[109], a limitation that postcolonial and Third World feminists have worked to correct by foregrounding race and global inequality. Additionally, critics suggest that feminist approaches can be difficult to operationalise within mainstream security studies, contributing to their marginalisation within the discipline. This intersectional perspective is directly relevant to the thesis because it helps explain how female ISIS affiliates are simultaneously racialized and securitized in public and policy discourses. Feminist and postcolonial feminist approaches are essential frameworks for analyzing the case studies examined in the following chapters.

2.3.1 Postcolonial feminism

While intersectional approaches show how gender and race shape the securitization of female ISIS affiliates, they offer limited insight into the historical power relations that underpin these dynamics. Postcolonial feminism addresses this gap by situating contemporary security practices within legacies of colonialism and global inequality. Postcolonial feminism is a critical branch of feminist theory that examines how colonialism, imperialism, globalization and neocolonialism have shaped (and continue still today) gender relations and feminist thought.

The history of modern feminist movements is often described in terms of three waves. The first and second waves of feminism largely overlooked differences among women based on race and class, focusing instead on the experiences and concerns of white, Western women who led the movement. Postcolonial feminism (or third world feminism) emerged during the third wave of feminism, beginning in the 1980s, alongside other racially and culturally focused feminist movements that sought to represent the diverse realities of women's lives around the world. Feminist scholars from the Global South and women-of-color theorists increasingly argued that Western feminism often reproduced colonial assumptions by defining women outside the West through reductive categories of victimhood, tradition, or backwardness.[110] The central aim of postcolonial feminism is to expose how colonial powers not only dominated nations but also established and perpetuated gendered hierarchies. Under

[109] Mohanty C.T., *"Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses",* Feminist Review 30, 1988, pag 63

[110] Narayan U., "*Dislocating cultures: Identities, traditions, and Third World feminism*", Routledge, 1997, pag 13

colonial rule, women experienced what scholars describe as *"double colonization",* being oppressed both by colonial domination and by patriarchal structures within their own societies.[111] This intersection of oppressions is essential to postcolonial feminist thought, which critiques the enduring legacies of colonialism as well as the gender norms imposed by imperial rule.

One of the most significant contributions of postcolonial feminism is its critique of the category *"woman"* as a universal and homogeneous identity. Mohanty demonstrates how Western feminist scholarship often constructs the *"Third World woman"* as a stable analytical category—portrayed as oppressed, traditional, inoffensive and lacking agency.[112] This essentializing move not only erases the cultural and historical differences among women but also implicitly positions Western women as the normative subjects of feminism. By rejecting this universalist approach, postcolonial feminism insists that gender cannot be understood in isolation from the intersecting forces of class, culture, race, sexuality, and colonial history.[113] It redefines feminism as a plural and context-sensitive project, one that values difference and challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies within feminist theory. Postcolonial feminists argue that colonialism was not only an economic or political enterprise but also a profound restructuring of gender and racial systems. European colonizers imposed a rigid heteropatriarchal order that racialized gender and gendered race, dismantling precolonial systems of social organization.

With *"The coloniality of gender is central"*, Lugones (2010) underlines that contemporary gender oppression is deeply rooted in colonial histories and continues through modern global inequalities.[114] This insight broadens feminist analysis beyond patriarchy alone, revealing how capitalism, imperialism, xenofobism and racism collectively sustain systems of domination. Spivak's work is foundational in understanding how marginalized women are excluded or silenced within academic and political discourse. Her provocative statement that *"the subaltern cannot speak"* does not deny the agency of subaltern subjects; rather, it points to the ways dominant representational systems make their voices unintelligible within existing frameworks of knowledge.[115]

Postcolonial feminism, following Spivak, challenges the assumption that Western feminists

---

[111] McClintock A., "*Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest",* Routledge, 1995, pag 3

[112] Mohanty C.T., *"Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"*, Feminist Review 30, 1988, pag 65

[113] Loomba A., "*Colonialism/Postcolonialism",* Routledge, 1998, pag 147

[114] Lugones M., *"Toward a decolonial feminism"*, Hypatia*,* 25(4), 2010, pag 744

[115] Spivak G.C., *"Can the subaltern speak?"*, In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg, "*Marxism and the interpretation of culture*", University of Illinois Press, pag 298

can simply *"give voice"* to the oppressed without reproducing epistemic violence and colonial hierarchies of power. Instead, it calls for self-reflexive feminist practices that recognize privilege, question authority and political institutions, and create space for women to articulate their own experiences on their own terms.

Similarly, Trinh (1989) emphasizes the importance of allowing women to narrate their own stories, resisting the tendency of Western scholars to "*speak for"* others.[116] Narayan critiques the tendency within Western feminist scholarship to explain gendered practices in non-Western contexts solely through the lens of static cultural traditions.[117] Such cultural essentialism, she argues, ignores historical transformation, political complexity and grievances, and the agency of women within those societies. Her observation that *"cultural explanations often misrepresent women"* reveals how these narratives reinforce stereotypes of non-Western societies as timelessly patriarchal and backward. Moreover, they risk justifying paternalistic or interventionist attitudes, such as those seen in colonial and neocolonial *"saving"* discourses.

Postcolonial feminism also emphasizes that feminist movements are plural and historically grounded. Mohanty, Russo, and Torres argue that *"Third World feminisms arise from specific histories"*, challenging narratives that frame Western feminism as the universal model from which others derive.[118] This perspective highlights the agency and creativity of women across the Global South, whose feminist thought has often developed in resistance to both colonial domination and local patriarchal systems. By centering local and indigenous feminisms, postcolonial theory redefines feminism as a network of interrelated struggles rather than a single, Western-defined ideology. This pluralistic vision affirms the intellectual and political contributions of non-Western women, foregrounding solidarity through difference rather than sameness. Methodologically, postcolonial feminism also reshapes how knowledge is produced and validated. It calls for decolonizing research practices by recognizing that knowledge itself is a site of power.

Feminist scholars such as Harding and Smith stress the importance of reflexivity and accountability in feminist inquiry—urging researchers to question whose voices are centered

---

[116] Trinh T. Minh-ha., "*Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism",* Indiana University Press, 1989, pag 38

[117] Narayan U., "*Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism"* Routledge, 1997, pag 13

[118] Mohanty C.T., Russo A. & Torres L., "*Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism",* Indiana University Press, 1991, pag 1

and whose experiences are marginalized. Postcolonial feminist methodology therefore values narrative histories and lived experience as legitimate sources of knowledge, aiming to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies that have historically defined what counts as *"truth".*[119] This epistemological shift transforms feminism from a purely political project into an intellectual and ethical commitment to justice in knowledge production.

Another central theme in postcolonial feminist thought is the negotiation of cultural identity in the aftermath of colonialism. Women in postcolonial contexts often inhabit hybrid identities, shaped by the coexistence of indigenous and Western influences.[120] Postcolonial feminists thus reject binary categories such as *"modern"* versus *"traditional"*, instead focusing on the fluid and dynamic nature of identity formation. In contemporary discussions, postcolonial feminism has expanded to address the impact of globalization and neocolonialism, which continue to reproduce inequalities along gendered and racial lines.[121] While postcolonial feminism has made invaluable contributions to feminist theory by challenging Eurocentric assumptions and foregrounding the intersections of gender, race, and colonial history, it has also been subject to significant critique.

Scholars such as Narayan argue that in its effort to resist universalism, postcolonial feminism can at times overemphasize cultural difference, fragmenting feminist solidarity and making collective political action difficult.[122]

Others, including Gandhi, note that postcolonial feminism often remains highly theoretical and embedded within Western academia, which risks reproducing the elitism it seeks to critique.[123] Lewis further caution that postcolonial feminism may inadvertently essentialize *"Western feminism"* as a homogeneous and oppressive category.[124]

Similarly, African and Middle Eastern feminists such as Kandiyoti contend that an exclusive focus on colonial legacies can obscure the role of local patriarchies and internal power hierarchies in women's oppression.[125]

---

[119] Harding S., "*Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives",* Cornell University Press, 1991, pag 138-139

[120] Suleri S., "*The Rhetoric of English India",* University of Chicago Press, 1992, pag 24

[121] Mohanty C.T., "*Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity",* Duke University Press, 2003, pag 78

[122] Narayan U., "*Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism"* Routledge, 1997, pag 82-83

[123] Gandhi L., "*Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction"* Columbia University Press, 1998, pag 85-86

[124] Lewis R., "*Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation",* Routledge, 1996, pag 13-14

[125] Kandiyoti D., *"Bargaining with patriarchy"* in Gender & Society, 2(3), 1988, pag 280-281

2.4 Operationalizing theory: methodological implications and case studies analysis

The theoretical approaches outlined in this chapter provide the analytical foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis. Each perspective offers distinct conceptual tools that try to help understanding the motivations, trajectories, and post-conflict treatment of female FFs, and together they enable a multi-layered examination of radicalization and deradicalization.. The combination of radicalization theories, securitization theory, and feminist IR thus forms an integrated framework that guides both the methodology and the interpretation of the case studies. Radicalization theories inform the analysis of individual pathways into ISIS, offering a structure for understanding the cognitive, social, and emotional processes that shape women's decisions to travel.

Process-based models—such as those developed by Moghaddam, Wiktorowicz, McCauley and Moskalenko, and Borum—provide a framework for reconstructing how grievances, identity crises, social networks, and ideological exposure interact across micro, meso, and macro levels. These theories are used in Chapter 4 to interpret the trajectories of Shamima Begum, Umm Sayyaf and Emilie König, identifying both common mechanisms and case-specific dynamics. They also underpin the methodological choice to rely on qualitative sources—such as interviews, legal documents and proceedings, and policy statements—by emphasizing the need to reconstruct subjective experiences and meaningful making processes rather than assuming linear or universal pathways.

Securitization theory guides the analysis of state responses to returnees, particularly in Chapter 3. By conceptualizing security as a discursive and political construction rather than an objective condition, securitization theory helps explain why some governments frame female FFs as existential threats while for others there are the first attempts of repatriation and rehabilitation. The theory is applied in the case study chapter to examine how media outlets and judicial institutions articulate threat narratives that justify exceptional measures such as citizenship revocation or restrictions on mobility. It also sheds light on how public acceptance—or contestation—of these narratives shapes the success of securitizing moves. This theoretical lens clarifies why similar profiles of female returnees generate markedly different policy outcomes across Western and SWANA states.

Feminist IR theory, including postcolonial feminist insights, provides the framework through which gendered assumptions and power relations are analyzed throughout Chapters 3 and 4, which examine how gendered security discourses and policy frameworks shape the legal treatment of female ISIS returnees, combining a comparative policy analysis with in-depth

case studies. In Chapter 4, feminist and postcolonial perspectives help interpret how each woman's public portrayal—whether as a naïve teenager, manipulated bride, committed ideologue, or war criminal—constrains or enables their access to legal protection, humanitarian assistance, and reintegration mechanisms.

Chapter 3. Managing the Return of Women FFs: Legal and Social Responses

Following the analysis of women's radicalization and participation in ISIS, this chapter shifts focus to how states respond to women affiliated with extremist organizations like ISIS. Rather than examining securitization policies and indefinite detentions in refugee camps as the sole or dominant responses, this chapter adopts a broader perspective on the management of female FFs, encompassing legal and social policy approaches. States employ a wide range of measures to address the return—or continued exclusion—of women associated with ISIS, including prosecution, detention, citizenship revocation, controlled repatriation, rehabilitation programmes, and, in some cases, deradicalization initiatives.

This chapter therefore situates deradicalization and reintegration within a wider policy spectrum, highlighting that their limited or selective application reflects political priorities, legal constraints, and securitized threat perceptions rather than an absence of alternative models. Section 3.1 clarifies the conceptual distinctions between disengagement, deradicalization, and reintegration. Section 3.2 reviews the main policy models adopted across different contexts. Section 3.3 compares the responses of European and SWANA states to returning female FFs, and section 3.4 tries to assess the role of local communities, NGOs, and international institutions.

3.1 Disengagement, deradicalization and reintegration

The terms disengagement, deradicalization, and reintegration are often used interchangeably in public and policy debates, but they describe distinct processes with different methods and implications. Disengagement refers to behavioral change—the cessation of violent activity or withdrawal from an extremist organization.[126] Disengagement does not imply deradicalization[127]: individuals may leave extremist groups for pragmatic reasons such as disillusionment, burnout, family pressure, or survival considerations, while still holding extremist beliefs.[128] Disengagement is therefore a minimal threshold that states often prioritize because it is measurable and tied to immediate security concerns. Deradicalization, by contrast, aims at cognitive change. It involves the rejection of extremist ideology and

[126] Barrelle K., "*Pro-integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism"* Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 7(2), 2015, pag 131

[127] Horgan J., "*Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements",* Routledge, 2009, pag 152

[128] Bjørgo T., & Horgan J., "*Leaving terrorism behind: Individual and collective disengagement*", Routledge, 2009, pag 30

worldviews.[129] This process is considerably more complex and difficult to assess, since ideological beliefs cannot be directly observed and may not be expressed honestly in coercive settings such as prisons or detention camps, where individuals may conceal their views.[130] Deradicalization programs thus often incorporate ideological re-education, psychological counseling, religious dialogue and societal infrastructures. Reintegration is the long-term social, psychological, and economic process through which individuals re-enter their communities. It requires identity transformation, highlighting that it is not merely behavioral but relational.[131] Reintegration also depends heavily on the degree to which communities are willing to offer support, since communities are essential actors.[132] Successful reintegration requires community acceptance and access to services, and it's essential the restoration of personal significance without violence.[133]

These conceptual distinctions have shaped how states design their counter-extremism programs. Historically, deradicalization initiatives have evolved in waves, reflecting changing political and security contexts. According to El-Said (2015), the first decade of the 21st century witnessed three distinct waves of formal deradicalization initiatives.[134] A first wave of institutionalised programmes developed between 2002 and 2004, led by countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen and complemented by early initiatives in Singapore. A second wave, started between 2005 and 2010, saw the diffusion of these ideas to parts of Europe and North Africa, where governments began to introduce structured rehabilitation schemes that combined prison-based counselling with post-release support. A third wave developed after 2010 in response to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the resulting phenomenon of FF returnees, compelling both Western and SWANA states to rethink how to manage individuals associated with ISIS and similar groups.

Despite these expanding efforts, the overall impact on global levels of terrorism has remained modest. The Institute for Economics and Peace noted in its 2016 report that, notwithstanding extensive counter-radicalization and deradicalization policies, there was only a 10% decline in

---

[129] El-Said H., "*Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs: The Role of Religion in Countering Violent Extremism",* United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 335, 2015, pag 1

[130] Rabasa A., Pettyjohn S.L., Ghez J.J. & Boucek C., "*Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists",* RAND Corporation, 2010, pag 82

[131] Barrelle K., *"Pro-integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism"*, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 7(2), 2015, pag 135

[132] Schmid A.P., "*Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion",* The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013, pag 31

[133] Kruglanski A.W., Bélanger J.J. & Gunaratna R., *"The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks"*, Oxford University Press, 2019, pag 184

[134] El-Said H., "*Deradicalising violent extremists: Counter-radicalisation and deradicalisation programmes and their impact in Muslim majority states*", Routledge, 2015

terrorism in 2015[135]; moreover, this decline was largely driven by reductions in violence in Iraq and Nigeria following the weakening of ISIS and Boko Haram, rather than by successful rehabilitation programmes elsewhere. At the same time, research suggests that no less than one-third of the FFs who travelled to Syria and Iraq were already known to prison or security services before their departure, indicating serious gaps in both prevention and in-prison deradicalization efforts. El-Said distinguishes between two broad types of deradicalization programmes: explicit (ideological) or *"conservative"* programmes, which focus on correcting religious interpretations and refuting extremist doctrines, and implicit (non-ideological or *"secular"*) programmes, which target the socio-economic and psychological factors associated with violent extremism.

In Europe, both policymakers and practitioners have frequently assumed that ideology is the primary driver of violent extremism. Political leaders routinely frame the threat as stemming from a *"poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism"*[136], while many Arab officials similarly contend that militants are simply *"misled"* and have misinterpreted Islam. These assumptions have encouraged programmes centred on theological re-education or counter-narratives, rather than on the broader set of grievances and social dynamics that shape radicalization. Yet recent empirical work[137], including El-Said's interviews with policymakers and security officials across the Arab world, Europe, and Asia, suggests that the latest wave of terrorism associated with Syria and Iraq is *"even less influenced by religion or ideology"* than previous ones.[138] For many recruits, it is not the ideological narrative that initially draws them into extremist networks but rather personal motives, identity crises, marginalisation, and a search for belonging.

This finding resonates with wider research on radicalization processes. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sageman's work emphasizes that tightly knit social networks—friendship ties and peer groups—often function as the main *"conveyor belts"* into jihadist involvement, with ideology becoming fully internalized only after individuals are already embedded in these

---

[135] Institute for Economics and Peace, "*Global Terrorism Index 2016*", 2016, pag 14

[136] Cameron D., *"Statement on terrorism threat and Islamist extremism",* London: UK Government, 2014

[137] El-Said H., "*Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs: The Role of Religion in Countering Violent Extremism",* United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 335, 2015, pag 1

[138] Rapoport conceptualizes modern terrorism divided in four overlapping waves, defined by a dominant legitimizing logic. The Anarchist wave (c. 1880–1920), where violence was ideologically driven and symbolic, aimed at delegitimizing the state and triggering revolutionary change. The Anti-Colonial wave (c. 1920–1960) reframed terrorism as an instrument of national liberation. Violence was more strategic and collective, justified by self-determination rather than universal ideology. The New Left wave (c. 1960–1990) linked terrorism to transnational revolutionary identity. Marxist and anti-imperialist narratives provided a shared frame, though ideology increasingly functioned as a unifying language rather than a disciplined program. The Religious wave (c. 1980–present) justified violence through transcendent moral authority.

networks.[139] In this context, programmes that concentrate almost exclusively on ideological *"correction"* risk overlooking the relational and emotional drivers of extremism and may therefore have limited impact, especially for younger FFs and women whose pathways are strongly shaped by family and intimate relationships. Moreover, many European states still lack comprehensive deradicalization policies, particularly within prisons. El-Said notes that in countries such as France, Norway, Switzerland, Romania, and Austria, long prison sentences are often seen as sufficient. If offenders are expected to spend twenty or thirty years—or even life—in prison, policymakers may ask why deradicalization should be a priority at all.

This perspective not only neglects the risk of in-prison radicalization and networking but also fails to account for the possibility of early release, legal appeals, or the wider influence that incarcerated militants may exert on other inmates. It also stands in tension with the evidence that a significant proportion of FFs were already known to the authorities, suggesting that prisons can function as spaces of both radicalization and potential rehabilitation.[140]

El-Said therefore argues that deradicalization and primary prevention at the societal level are deeply intertwined. Effective rehabilitation inside prisons cannot succeed if individuals return to communities marked by exclusion and lack of opportunity; conversely, prevention policies that ignore the reality of radicalized prisoners and returnees risk leaving a critical gap in the wider counter-extremism architecture. A more holistic approach is required—one that integrates state actors (judicial, security, and welfare institutions) with local communities, religious authorities, NGOs, and international organisations. Such an approach treats deradicalization, disengagement, and reintegration not as isolated technical interventions but as part of a broader strategy to address violent extremism as a social and political phenomenon rather than solely a security threat.

3.2 Main policy approaches to women FFs

Approaches adopted by states to address women associated with FF mobilization vary widely across contexts, reflecting different interpretations of radicalization, deradicalization attempts, institutional capacities, and policy priorities. Importantly, not all responses are oriented toward deradicalization or reintegration. Instead, states deploy a broader set of policy approaches to managing FFs, ranging from security-driven containment to rehabilitative and community-based strategies.

---

[139] Sageman M., "*Understanding Terror Networks",* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pag 115

[140] Sageman M., *"The Stagnation in Terrorism Research"*, Terrorism and Political Violence 26, no.4, 2014, pag 570

Drawing on the distinction between narrow and broader approaches to countering extremism[141], as well as existing literature on counterterrorism and reintegration policies (Horgan 2009; Schmid 2013; Renard & Coolsaet 2018), this section identifies three broad policy approaches: security-centred approaches, psychosocial rehabilitation, and community-based reintegration strategies.[142] These approaches reflect different assumptions about risk, agency, victimhood, and the possibility of individual transformation. Security-centred approaches prioritize surveillance, prosecution, detainment and risk containment, focusing on threat management rather than deradicalization. Importantly, states are legally obliged—under international law and relevant UNSC resolutions—to ensure that individuals associated with terrorist organizations are subject to criminal investigation and judicial proceedings.[143] Within this policy framework, individuals associated with extremist groups are primarily understood as potential security risks whose behaviour must be controlled through legal and coercive measures. Typical measures within this approach include long-term imprisonment, citizenship revocation, travel bans, intelligence monitoring, and probationary control regimes, all designed to limit movement and communication while signaling governmental resolve.

Research on securitized counterterrorism strategies highlights that states often favor such tools because they are politically visible, administratively straightforward, and symbolically reassuring to the public.[144] These models dominate in many Western democracies, where public discourse frequently frames returnees—particularly women of childbearing age—as unpredictable risks whose reintegration could enable future radicalization.[145] As a result, prosecution and surveillance tend to outweigh efforts toward psychological or social reintegration, leaving limited provision for post-release support. Scholars have emphasized that this imbalance neglects the identity-based and psychosocial factors underpinning disengagement, reducing deradicalization to mere containment.[146]

Neumann's (2010) comparative study of prison systems demonstrates that incarceration

---

[141] Jarvis L., "*Time, memory, and critical terrorism studies: 9/11 twenty years on*", Critical Studies on Terrorism, 14(4), 2021, pag 510

[142] Schmid A.P., "*Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*", ICCT Research Paper, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013

[143] UN Security Council, "*Security Council Resolution 2178 on threats to international peace and security caused by foreign terrorist fighters*", S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014

[144] Neumann P.R, "*Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries",* London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2010, pag 14-15

[145] Sjoberg L. & Gentry C.E., "*Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics",* Zed Books, 2007, pag 168

[146] Nyaga J.M., "*Rehabilitation Over Retribution: A Path to Sustainable Peace in Countering Violent Extremism",* Riga: Generis Publishing, 2024, pag 12

without structured rehabilitation can reinforce extremist identities and foster radical networks rather than dissolve them, underscoring the limitations of purely security-driven responses.[147] Examples from national contexts illustrate this pattern.

In the UK, the Prevent strategy operates alongside coercive instruments such as *"Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures"* (TPIMs), citizenship revocation, passport confiscation, and MI5 surveillance, reflecting an institutional preference for prosecution and control over reintegration.[148] In France, post-2015 counterterrorism reforms intensified preventive arrests, intelligence surveillance, and specialized prison regimes for radicalized inmates, reinforcing a security-first paradigm.[149] In the US, counterterrorism policy similarly prioritizes surveillance and disruption over reintegration, exemplified by the Patriot Act's expanded intelligence-gathering powers, and the FBI's domestic counterterrorism task forces.[150] Although most states have a duty to subject returning women FFs to national criminal justice proceedings, security-based approaches and long term incarceration are not the only responses available.

In several countries, these measures are accompanied by dedicated deradicalization initiatives. Psychosocial programs treat radicalization as a multidimensional process shaped by personal vulnerabilities, disrupted identity formation, exposure to trauma, and distorted ideological interpretations.[151] Rather than viewing radicalized individuals primarily as security threats, these approaches conceptualize them as persons whose pathways into extremism are often rooted in unmet emotional needs, social isolation, friendships' influence or experiences of violence.[152] Interventions therefore aim to address these underlying drivers through a combination of psychological counseling, trauma-informed therapy, religious engagement with qualified clerics, vocational and educational training, and structured family counseling designed to rebuild trust and social stability.[153] Scholars highlight that psychosocial rehabilitation adopts a holistic understanding of disengagement: effective programs seek to

---

[147] Neumann P.R, "*Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries",* London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2010, pag 15

[148] Bartlett J. & Birdwell J., "*Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action*", London: Demos, 2010

[149] Hecker M., "*French Jihadism: An Overview*", Paris: IFRI Center for Security Studies, 2019

[150] Claussen C., "*U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy: Trends, Policies, and Legal Challenges*, Journal of National Security Law, 9(2), 2018, pag 50

[151] Horgan J., "*Walking away from terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements",* Routledge, 2009, pag 3-4

[152] Altier M.B., Thoroughgood C.N. & Horgan J., *"Turning away from terrorism: Lessons from psychology, sociology, and criminology",* Journal of Peace Research, 51(5), 2014, pag 650

[153] El-Said H., **"***New approaches to countering terrorism: Designing and evaluating counter radicalization and de-radicalization programs",* Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pag 67

transform cognitive frameworks, repair emotional and interpersonal functioning, and strengthen socio-economic resilience. Sustainable deradicalization requires simultaneous progress across these domains, as disengagement from extremist behavior is rarely possible without broader personal and social reintegration.[154]

The Netherlands' TER program provides individualized case management and counseling for radicalized persons, combining psychological and trauma-informed support, mentorship, vocational and educational training, and guidance on civic engagement. The program also works closely with families, local social services, and community networks to rebuild social ties and create supportive environments that facilitate long-term disengagement.[155]

Beyond individual-focused rehabilitation models, a third policy approach emphasizes the role of communities. Community-oriented models shift the focus from the individual to the social environments that enable or constrain reintegration. These initiatives operate on the premise that deradicalization and sustainable disengagement depend on local trust and community acceptance.[156] Rather than isolating individuals through securitized interventions, these approaches frame rehabilitation within existing community structures, emphasizing collective responsibility and mutual trust as foundations for resilience. Accordingly, community-based programs prioritize mentoring schemes, family reintegration initiatives, peer-support networks, dialogues with religious leaders, and municipal-level social services that promote belonging and reduce marginalization.[157]

A growing body of evidence suggests that community resilience and early intervention are central to long-term prevention, particularly when programs empower local actors to identify risk factors before they escalate. [158] Scholars emphasize that these efforts are most effective when they actively engage families, youth organizations, religious institutions, and civil society networks, creating dense webs of social support that discourage isolation and identity fragmentation.[159] The community's willingness to accept returnees is also critical: exclusion, stigma, and public hostility can undermine rehabilitation, impede reintegration, and heighten

---

[154] Rabasa A., Pettyjohn S.L., Ghez J.J., & Boucek C., "*Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists",* RAND Corporation, 2010, pag 74-75

[155] EU Commission, *"Team TER (Terrorists, Extremists and Radicals)",* Migration and Home Affairs, Netherlands, 2022

[156] Aly A., Taylor E. & Karnovsky S., *"Moral disengagement and building resilience to violent extremism: An education intervention"*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 37(4), 2014, pag 370

[157] Cherney A. & Belton E., *"Evaluating interventions to disengage extremist offenders: A study of the proactive integrated support model"*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 31(6), 2019, pag 1221

[158] Weine S., Abdi S., Kamaluddin M & Faiza A., *"Using Community-Based Approaches to Prevent Violent Extremism"*, Journal of Terrorism Research 7(3), 2016, pag 54

[159] Aly A., "*Terrorism and counter-terrorism: Contemporary debates",* Routledge, 2015, pag 119

the risk of recidivism.[160] As such, community-oriented models recognize reintegration not as an endpoint, but as a reciprocal process requiring sustained dialogue and shared responsibility between the individual and society.

Recognizing that no single model can fully address the multifaceted nature of radicalization, many states have increasingly adopted hybrid systems that integrate security, psychosocial, and community-based approaches.[161] These models are grounded in the understanding that radicalization is not driven by a single determinant, but by a complex interplay of ideological, social, psychological, and structural influences—ranging from identity crises and trauma to socio-economic exclusion and political grievance.[162] Consequently, effective interventions must move beyond purely punitive or security-oriented measures to include rehabilitative and reintegrative dimensions that address both individual vulnerabilities and the broader social context in which extremism develops.[163]

Hybrid frameworks typically rely on cross-sectoral coordination and multidisciplinary engagement, drawing together law enforcement, mental health professionals, educators, religious leaders, and community organizations to design individually tailored case management systems.[164] This collaborative architecture allows practitioners to balance monitoring and support, combining risk assessment with personal empowerment strategies that foster long-term behavioral and cognitive change.

The Aarhus model in Denmark is often cited as a leading example of this integrative approach. It has three main characteristics: (1) close and flexible cooperation among several already existing institutions and authorities; (2) a focus on early prevention; and (3) a systematic effort to reintegrate individuals who have been radicalized.[165] A key component is the use of risk factor assessment and intervention strategies based on empirical models that address individual, social, and structural vulnerabilities.[166]

Another illustrative example is the HAYAT program (meaning *"life"* in Arabic) in Germany.

---

[160] Williams M.J., Horgan J. & Evans W.P, *"Factors Facilitating and Hindering the Disengagement of Violent Extremists"* In LaFree G. & Freilich J., "*The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism"*, 2016, pag 468

[161] Khosrokhavar F., "*Radicalization: Why some people choose the path of violence",* The New Press, 2016, pag 143

[162] Horgan J., "*Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements",* Routledge, 2009, pag 153

[163] Horgan J. & Braddock K., *"Rehabilitating the terrorists? Challenges in assessing the effectiveness of de-radicalization programs"* Terrorism and Political Violence, 22(2), 2010, pag 277

[164] Cherney A. & Belton E., *"Evaluating interventions to disengage extremist offenders: A study of the proactive integrated support model"*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 31(6), 2019, pag 1228

[165] Bertelsen P., *"Danish preventive measures and de-radicalization strategies: The Aarhus model"*, In Gearon L.M., *"Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs",* British Educational Research Association, 2015, pag 242

[166] Ibidem, pag 251

It represents one of the most comprehensive family and community-based deradicalization frameworks. Founded in 2011 under the auspices of the German Institute for Radicalization and Deradicalization Studies (GIRDS) and the NGO ZDK Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur gGmbH, HAYAT operates as an early intervention and exit program for individuals involved in Islamist extremism.[167] HAYAT operates on the premise that families are critical partners in disengagement and that effective prevention requires trust-based, non-coercive dialogue between families, civil society, and authorities.[168] Its counselors provide confidential psychosocial support, risk assessments, and coordination with police and local welfare agencies while maintaining a voluntary and rights-respecting approach.[169]

Some of the programmes developed in Europe to address radicalisation and violent extremism have not targeted only radicalised individuals who have committed terrorist offences; rather, they have also operated within a pre-crime framework, intervening before any criminal act has been carried out. Within the UK's Prevent strategy, the Channel program represents one of the earliest and most institutionalized examples of pre-criminal intervention in Europe. Established nationally under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, Channel operates through multi-agency panels—including police, social services, and educators—to identify and support individuals deemed vulnerable to radicalization. The program is presented as a safeguarding mechanism rather than a punitive measure, offering voluntary referrals and tailored support packages encompassing education, mentoring, support and psychological counselling.[170] The program reflects the UK's distinctive attempt to fuse security and welfare logics: Heath-Kelly contends that Channel has securitized ordinary life, embedding surveillance within schools and healthcare institutions under the language of *"safeguarding".*[171]

Despite the diversity of deradicalization frameworks, a consistent gap emerges: most programs inadequately address the gender-specific needs of women associated with extremist groups. While policy debates often assume gender neutrality, empirical research shows that

---

[167] Koehler D., "*Family Counselling, De-Radicalization and Counter-Terrorism: The HAYAT Program in Germany. Journal EXIT-Deutschland – Zeitschrift für Deradikalisierung und demokratische Kultur"*, Vol. 2, 2013, pag 183

[168] Koehler D., "*Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism",* London: Routledge, 2017, pag 90

[169] Ibidem, pag 96

[170] UK Home Office, "*Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting Vulnerable People from Being Drawn into Terrorism",* London: UK Government, 2020, pag 5-6

[171] Heath-Kelly C., *"Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the 'Radicalisation' Discourse",* British Journal of Politics and International Relations 15 (3), 2013, pag 397

women's experiences of radicalization, participation, disengagement and deradicalization are deeply gendered, shaped by their social positions, familial roles, and embodied vulnerabilities.[172] Women often endure coercion, trauma, sexual and gender-based violence, and the pressures of motherhood in ways that fundamentally influence their trajectories into and out of extremist milieus.[173] Yet, many national deradicalization programs continue to treat women either as passive victims or as secondary extensions of male combatants, thereby neglecting their distinct psychosocial, reproductive, and community reintegration needs.[174] This gender blindness reflects deeper structural biases in counterterrorism policy, which historically frames female returnees primarily through tropes of maternal vulnerability or moral corruption, rather than as politically motivated actors.[175] Scholars argue that overlooking these dynamics risks producing ineffective reintegration and reinforcing gendered inequalities in security and rehabilitation policy.[176]

3.3 How do Western vs. SWANA states differ in handling female FFs returning?

The repatriation of FFs continues to pose a complex and enduring challenge for national governments and the international community. Despite its long-term nature, this issue has frequently been met with short-term or ad hoc policy responses driven by political pressure, security concerns, media debates and public opposition.[177]

Repatriation remains a politically sensitive and often unpopular undertaking; however, the establishment of coherent and well-resourced rehabilitation and reintegration programs is essential to ensure the safe and sustainable return of high-risk individuals to their home societies. Effective reintegration not only mitigates potential security threats but also upholds international legal and humanitarian obligations toward citizens detained abroad. Understanding the risks associated with returnees requires conceptual clarity between terrorist reengagement—the act of resuming terrorist activity following a period of disengagement—and terrorist recidivism, defined as two or more distinct convictions for

---

[172] Cook J. & Vale G., "*From Daesh to "Diaspora": Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State",* International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2019, pag 11-12

[173] Ibidem, pag 17

[174] Ní Aoláin F., *"The gender dynamics of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism",* Human Rights Quarterly, 38(1), 2016, pag 282

[175] Heath-Kelly C., "*Gendering terrorism studies: Feminist perspectives on countering violent extremism",* Routledge, 2020, pag 46-47

[176] Ní Aoláin F., *"The gender dynamics of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism",* Human Rights Quarterly, 38(1), 2016, pag 285-286

[177] Mehra T. & Paulussen, C., "*The Repatriation of Foreign Fighters and Their Families: Options, Obligations, Morality and Long-Term Thinking*", In International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 6 March 2019

terrorism-related offenses within a specified timeframe.[178] This distinction is critical for developing appropriate risk assessment and management strategies.

Research by Thomas Hegghammer (2013), drawing primarily on cases from the pre-ISIS era of jihadist mobilization, revealed that, although the overall rate of recidivism among al-Qaeda returnees was comparatively low, those who did reengage in terrorism tended to conduct more lethal and sophisticated operations, owing to the tactical experience and organizational knowledge gained during their time within the group.[179] These findings underscore the importance of developing long-term, evidence-based rehabilitation initiatives that combine security oversight with social reintegration and ideological disengagement measures.

The responses of Western and SWANA states to returning female FFs reflect contrasting political priorities, legal systems, public opinion's importance—when talking about democracies—and gendered narratives within counterterrorism governance. While both European and SWANA states frame returning female FFs as potential security threats and rely predominantly on security-centred approaches, their responses diverge due to differences in political priorities and contextual constraints.

European states have generally approached the issue through judicial prosecution and restrictive administrative measures within relatively stable institutional settings. By contrast, SWANA states—often operating in contexts of ongoing conflict or post-conflict reconstruction—have combined security measures with pragmatic forms of containment and, in some cases, moral or religious reintegration initiatives shaped by resource limitations and proximity to the conflict zone.

The UK

To illustrate these dynamics in practice, the analysis now turns to the UK case. Western governments have often justified their reluctance to establish comprehensive repatriation and reintegration programs for FFs by emphasizing the potential threat posed by released convicts and their perceived capacity to commit future acts of terrorism.[180] In the aftermath of the 2019 London and 2020 Vienna attacks, public and governmental anxiety surrounding terrorist

[178] Oehlerich E., Mulroy M., & McHugh L., "*Jannah or Jahannam: Options for Dealing with ISIS Detainees"*, Middle East Institute, 2020, pag 5

[179] Hegghammer T., "*Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting*", American Political Science Review, vol. 107, no. 1, 2013, pag 9-10

[180] Kumar R., "*Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Challenges in Repatriation, Prosecution, and Rehabilitation*, Counter Extremism Project, 2021, pag 31

recidivism intensified considerably.[181] Yet, empirical research challenges this prevailing narrative. In the Western context, the return of women affiliated with ISIS has provoked public anxiety and political controversy.

Counterterrorism legislation in the UK undertakes stringent responses to terror offenses. It is a criminal offence for any British national to travel abroad to engage in, plan, or receive training for terrorist activity, and individuals who commit or are suspected of committing such acts overseas can also be prosecuted under domestic law.[182] Returnees who are convicted of preparing or aiding the preparation of terrorist acts may face sentences of up to life imprisonment.[183] Additional measures include mandating participation in deradicalization programs and imposing Temporary Exclusion Orders to prevent the re-entry of British citizens suspected of involvement in terrorism abroad.[184] Under the Terrorism Act, police are granted powers related to terrorism prevention and investigative measures (TPIMs). These powers include the ability to impose travel restrictions, place individuals suspected of involvement in terrorist activities under house arrest, and stop and question those believed to be connected to terrorism.[185] Furthermore, the Home Secretary may exercise the Royal Prerogative to withdraw a person's British passport.[186] Under the British Nationality Act, the Secretary of State has the authority to deprive a person of British citizenship if it is believed that the individual has *"done anything seriously prejudicial to the interests of the U.K. or a British Overseas Territory—to deprive a person of his or her British citizenship, unless it would render the individual stateless."*[187]

Since 2009, the UK has implemented the One-to-One Terrorist Act Offender Rehabilitation (TACT) scheme, administered by The Unity Initiative (TUI), a private organization that collaborates closely with London Probation Services, the Prison Service, and the Home Office. The TACT program engages with some of the most complex and high-profile terrorism cases, emphasizing what it defines as *"ideological rehabilitation"*. In 2017, its mandate was expanded to address the growing challenge posed by FFs returning from Iraq and Syria. While TUI's approach reflects a nuanced appreciation of the ideological dimensions underpinning radicalization and disengagement, there remains, as with many

[181] Renard T., "*Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence*", In Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2019
[182] UK Government, "*Terrorism Act 2000*", 2000
[183] UK Government "*Terrorism Act 2006",* 2006
[184] BBC News, "*David Cameron outlines new anti-terror measures to MPs"*, 1 September 2014
[185] UK Government, "*Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011*", UK Legislation, 2011
[186] Gower M., "*Deprivation of British Citizenship and Withdrawal of Passport Facilities*", House of Commons Library, 9 June 2017
[187] UK Government, "*British Nationality Act 1981"*, UK Legislation, 1981

comparable rehabilitation initiatives, a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the program's effectiveness.[188]

Recognizing that prisons can serve both as sites of rehabilitation and as potential incubators for radicalization, the UK has increasingly focused on addressing extremist ideology within custodial settings. Concerns over inadequate oversight and limited intervention prompted the development of specialized deradicalization initiatives aimed at facilitating disengagement among incarcerated extremists. In this context, the Motivational and Engagement Intervention (MEI) and the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII) programs were launched in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Designed for individuals convicted of offenses linked to Islamist extremism or extreme right-wing violence, these programs seek to reduce susceptibility to radical influences by fostering self-reflection, promoting pro-social identities, and encouraging critical reassessment of ideological beliefs.[189] Complementing the MEI and HII initiatives, the Desistance and Disengagement Program (DDP) was introduced around 2016 as a collaborative effort between the Home Office and a network of experienced practitioners and non-governmental organizations. The program aims to facilitate the reintegration of individuals previously involved in extremist activity by providing tailored support that combines mentorship, psychological counseling, and theological engagement. Through these interventions, the DDP seeks to address the personal and social factors that contribute to radicalization, thereby promoting sustained disengagement from extremist beliefs and behaviors.[190]

The UK government has largely treated female returnees through a security lens, privileging prosecution and deterrence over rehabilitation.[191] In several high-profile cases, the UK has exercised its power to revoke citizenship, a measure that has been applied almost exclusively to individuals holding dual nationality or with an alternative claim to citizenship, in line with international legal prohibitions on rendering individuals stateless.[192] In this sense, citizenship deprivation functions as a securitizing tool of last resort, whereby formal membership in the political community becomes conditional upon assessments of loyalty and risk. While legally permissible under domestic law, the selective use of citizenship revocation has generated

---

[188] EU Parliament, "*The Return of Foreign Fighters to EU Soil",* May 2018

[189] Weeks D., "*Lessons Learned from U.K. Efforts to Deradicalize Terror Offenders*", In Combating Terrorism Center At West Point, March 2021

[190] EU Parliament, "*The Return of Foreign Fighters to EU Soil",* May 2018

[191] Heath-Kelly C., *"Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the 'Radicalisation' Discourse",* British Journal of Politics and International Relations 15 (3), 2013, pag 395

[192] UK Parliament, *"Deprivation of British citizenship and withdrawal of passports",* Research Briefing, House of Commons, 18 December 2025

significant criticism for its discriminatory effects and for undermining fundamental principles of equality before the law and the right to nationality. Powers such as Temporary Exclusion Orders and deprivation of citizenship are deployed to prevent individuals deemed dangerous from returning to the UK.[193]

The government has resisted large-scale repatriation, arguing that returns pose unacceptable security risks and that justice should occur *"in the region".*[194] The use of citizenship revocation as a counterterrorism measure raises significant legal and normative concerns. Under international law, including the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness[195], states are prohibited from rendering individuals stateless. As a result, citizenship deprivation policies have been applied almost exclusively to individuals holding dual nationality or with an alternative claim to citizenship. While formally lawful under domestic legislation, this selective application produces unequal outcomes by disproportionately targeting dual nationals and ethnic minorities, effectively transforming citizenship from a universal legal status into a conditional and revocable privilege. From a human rights perspective, such practices have been widely criticized for undermining the right to nationality, equality before the law, and due process guarantees, thereby illustrating the tension between securitized counterterrorism strategies.

In the UK, the repatriation of minors born to FFs has been shaped by a tension between child protection obligations and national security concerns.[196] Although these children are legally recognized as victims, policy responses have often prioritized security, resulting in restrictive custody arrangements and limited access to social and educational support. Local authorities and specialized agencies have sometimes struggled to provide consistent reintegration services, reflecting broader uncertainties over how to balance safeguarding vulnerable children with counterterrorism imperatives.

The US

In the US, repatriation decisions are typically assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors such as the individual's threat level, the availability of admissible evidence

[193] UK Home Office, "*Counter-Terrorism Disruptive Powers Report 2023*", UK Government, 2023, pag 13-14

[194] UK Parliament, "*Deprivation of Citizenship Status: House of Commons Debate",* Hansard, 20 February 2019, Available at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-19/debates/25061937000015/DeprivationOfCitizenshipOrders(EffectDuringAppeal)Bill

[195] UN, "*Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons",* Conference of Plenipotentiaries convened by Economic and Social Council resolution 526 A (XVII)28 September 1954

[196] Abbas M.S., *"British children associated with ISIS in camps in North-East Syria: counter-terrorism, security and children's rights concerns in repatriation decision-making",* Ethnic and Racial Studies, 2024, pag 5

and prospects for rehabilitation. Moreover, similarly to the practice in the UK and several Western European countries, naturalized US citizens convicted of terrorism-related offenses may be stripped of their citizenship, thereby reverting to the nationality of their country of origin.

At the same time, Western policy discourse has been deeply gendered. Media and political narratives oscillate between portraying women as *"victims of grooming"* and as *"female jihadis"*, resulting in inconsistent sentencing and reintegration prospects. As El-Said observes, early European deradicalization efforts were dominated by the belief that "*ideology was the main culprit"*[197], leading programs to neglect structural and psychosocial drivers. Courts have frequently imposed lighter sentences on women, reinforcing stereotypes of female passivity and violating the principle of equal accountability under UNSCR 2178[198] and CEDAW Article 5(a).[199]

Other examples show that, even when legal provisions are formally gender-neutral, practice often makes the picture more complex. The US provides a clear case in point. US authorities have repeatedly asserted that FFs should face justice in their countries of origin regardless of gender. Although female FFs are, in principle, subject to the same legal rules as men, judicial decisions and policy choices have at times incorporated gendered considerations—especially where coercion and victimization are invoked. This has produced a degree of inconsistency in sentencing: for comparable offenses, women often receive lighter penalties than men. A 2015 study found that women were 58% less likely than men to be sentenced to imprisonment, a gap frequently attributed to assumptions that women occupied primarily non-combatant or traditionally gendered roles within ISIS.[200]

In the US, debates over children of FFs have, similarly to the UK, centered on security risks versus child welfare. While children are formally treated as victims under international law, repatriation and reintegration processes have been prolonged and uneven, with access to family reunification and psychosocial support often delayed by legal and administrative hurdles.[201] These policy choices demonstrate the ways in which counterterrorism priorities can

---

[197] El-Said H., "*Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World",* London: Routledge, 2012, pag 2

[198] UN Security Council, "*Security Council Resolution 2178 on threats to international peace and security caused by foreign terrorist fighters*", S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014

[199] UN*, "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women",* General Assembly Resolution 34/180, 18 September 1979

[200] Overall, for providing material support to ISIS, average sentences have tended to fall in the range of three to four years of imprisonment, followed by roughly three years of supervised release

[201] Bagheri S. & Bisset A., *"International Legal Issues Arising from Repatriation of the Children of Islamic State"*, Journal of Conflict and Security Law, Volume 27, Issue 3, 2022, pag 381

shape the practical realization of children's rights, leaving many minors in extended limbo before full social reintegration can occur.

Spain

Spain's counter-terrorism legislation criminalizes both active participation in terrorist acts and preparatory or supportive roles, including recruitment, financing, and membership in terrorist organizations (Penal Code, Arts. 571–580). The country's approach to handling returning FFs is deeply rooted in criminal justice and security measures, aligning with the strategies adopted by other European nations. Individuals who are suspected of traveling to join ISIS are generally arrested upon their return and prosecuted under Spanish counterterrorism laws, even when there is no concrete evidence of direct participation in combat.[202] The legal framework does not allow the revocation of Spanish citizenship on grounds of terrorism: according to the Spanish Constitution and nationality laws, citizenship cannot be forcibly revoked for individuals who are Spanish by birth.[203] The Civil Code outlines specific cases in which nationality may be lost, such as voluntary renunciation or failure to maintain ties after naturalization. Political proposals, particularly from the far-right party VOX, have suggested amending the law to strip individuals of Spanish nationality if they acquire it and are subsequently convicted of terrorism.[204] However, these initiatives have not been enacted into law.

In 2023, Madrid started repatriating its citizens from Kurdish-controlled camps in northern Syria, marking a shift after years of inaction following the territorial defeat of ISIS.[205] Spain's repatriation efforts have increasingly focused on women and children from ISIS-affiliated camps. In January 2023, the Spanish government repatriated two Spanish women (Yolanda Martínez Cobos and Luna Fernández Grande), and thirteen Spanish minors from Kurdish-controlled camps in northeast Syria.[206] The two women are currently serving their sentences under semi-custodial conditions.[207] They have been placed in the Victoria Kent

[202] Italian Institute for International Political Studies, *"Foreign Fighters From Spain and the Criminalisation of Returnees",* 8 January 2020
[203] Spanish Nationality, *"La Nacionalidad Española"*, Diputación de Alicante, pag 8
[204] Vox, *"VOX exige que pierdan la nacionalidad española aquellos que hayan sido condenados por delitos de terrorismo y contra el orden público",* 19 April 2024
[205] Syrian Democratic Times, *"2023 Repatriations Begin as Spain and Barbados Repatriate Citizens*", 31 January 2023
[206] Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Union Europea y Cooperación, *"Government repatriates Spanish women and minors from Syrian camps",* 10 January 2023
[207] Russpain medios desde 1998, *"Two Spanish Women Returned from Syria to Be Released Early in Terrorism",* 7 December 2025

Social Integration Center in Madrid, where they are completing the final year and three months of their punishment under Spain's third penitentiary regime.[208] Authorities decided to ease their custodial conditions after an assessment of their individual circumstances and conduct during detention. The use of the third penitentiary regime in Spain reflects a gradual, risk-based approach that combines continued monitoring with limited reintegration into civilian life. Children are placed under the care of child protection services. They are receiving education, psychological support, and social reintegration programs to address the trauma experienced in conflict zones and the ideological influence of extremist environments. Many are temporarily placed in foster care or supervised residential settings while authorities work to reunite them safely with extended family or integrate them into communities.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands has taken a proactive and legally structured approach to repatriating its citizens, emphasizing both criminal accountability and security measures. Individuals suspected of traveling to join ISIS are generally prosecuted under Dutch terrorism laws, which focus on procurement, prevention, preparation, and prosecution of terrorist activities, even when there is no evidence of direct participation in combat.[209] The Criminal Code addresses both completed terrorist acts and inchoate offenses, such as planning attacks, traveling overseas to join terrorist organizations, or recruiting individuals (Art 140a: participation in a terrorist organization). This legal framework enables authorities to take preventive action before harm is inflicted and ensures that individuals returning from abroad can face prosecution under domestic law for their actions conducted elsewhere.

A notable feature of Dutch counter-terrorism law is the use of trials in absentia for individuals still abroad, allowing courts to initiate proceedings even when suspects remain in conflict zones.[210] This approach, however, has generated legal and human rights debates, particularly concerning fair trial rights and the rule of law. Dutch policies have been significantly shaped by judicial decisions: in May 2022, the Rotterdam District Court mandated the government to repatriate 12 Dutch women and their 28 children from ISIS-linked camps in northeastern Syria. This move was driven by the risk of losing the legal grounds to prosecute them, leading

[208] Fernandez Gomez C., *"A new approach for open prisons in Spain"*, Spanish Prison Governor and Spanish liaison of EuroPris, March 2023, pag 1

[209] Dutch National Government, *"Nationale Contraterrorisme Strategie 2022-2026"*, May 2022

[210] Paulussen C. & Gherbaoui T., *"Trials in Absentia of Foreign Fighters and their Families?",* ICCT, 1 August, Available at: https://icct.nl/publication/trials-absentia-foreign-fighters-and-their-families

to the country's largest coordinated repatriation operation so far.[211] Upon their return, the women were detained and charged with terrorism-related offenses in Dutch courts, reflecting the government's stance that individuals who joined or provided support to ISIS must be held accountable. Children were placed under the supervision of Dutch child protection authorities and provided with personalized support programs designed in collaboration with municipal youth services and the Raad voor de Kinderbescherming.[212]

SWANA states have generally favored pragmatic, containment-oriented responses to returning FFs, with policies calibrated according to geographic proximity, state capacity and legitimacy of power, and the need to maintain regime legitimacy.
Syria and Iraq occupy a particularly complex and paradoxical position in this landscape: rather than serving as agents of reintegration or repatriation, they function primarily as sites of detention and prolonged containment, effectively acting as holding grounds for FFs and their families. These approaches reflect the interplay of constrained institutional capacity, ongoing political instability, and entrenched gendered moral narratives that influence how female FFs are perceived and treated. Containment in this context encompasses a spectrum of security-driven interventions designed to restrict mobility, limit access to resources, imposing legal or physical incapacitation, including prolonged incarceration and ongoing surveillance frameworks. These measures prioritize risk management and societal protection over individualized care, ensuring that suspected ISIS affiliates remain separated from civilian populations while the state navigates legitimacy pressures and fragile governance structures.[213]

Iraq

Following the collapse of ISIS in 2017, Iraq embarked on one of the world's most extensive prosecution campaigns against suspected ISIS affiliates. Rooted in the US' era legal architecture of the 2005 Anti-Terrorism Law, Iraq's approach reveals the persistence of occupation-era securitization: counterterrorism remains the main idiom through which the state performs sovereignty and moral legitimacy.[214] Under the Anti-Terrorism Law (Law No.

[211] Euronews, *"Netherlands to repatriate 12 women and 28 children from Islamic State camps in Syria",* 1 November 2022
[212] Human Rights Watch, "*My Son is Just Another Kid: Experiences of Children Repatriated from Camps for ISIS Suspects and Their Families in Northeast Syria",* 21 November 2022
[213] Bigo D., "*Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease*", Alternatives, 27(Special Issue), 2002, pag 66
[214] International Crisis Group, "*Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State",* Middle East Report No. 188, Brussels, 2018, pag 26

13 of 2005)[215], particularly Article 4, trials of ISIS-affiliated women—often lasting less than ten minutes—result in life sentences or death penalties based solely on confessions or familial association.[216] The law's broad definition of terrorism criminalizes *"membership"* or *"support"* rather than proven acts of violence, collapsing proximity into guilt.[217] These trials reflect the *"moral retribution model"* of post-conflict justice, where the purpose is symbolic restoration of state authority rather than individual accountability.[218]

As Cook notes, *"Iraqi counterterrorism courts function as instruments of retribution designed to signal that ISIS's defeat was moral as well as military."*[219] The gendered nature of these prosecutions is striking. Women are rarely recognized as coerced participants or victims of trafficking; instead, they are portrayed as *"ISIS wives",* morally tainted by association. This judicial logic functions as a form of securitized moral cleansing, reasserting patriarchal and sectarian order destabilized by ISIS.[220]

Many foreign women are imprisoned alongside their children, some of whom are unregistered or effectively stateless, creating a population particularly vulnerable to neglect, poor nutrition, limited educational opportunities, and exposure to traumatic environments.[221] These children experience the punitive effects of counterterrorism policies indirectly, growing up within a system designed to publicly signal moral and state authority. These carceral conditions transform counter-terrorism into a *"gendered economy of punishment,"* where female bodies become instruments for displaying sovereignty and moral order.[222]

Reports by the International Crisis Group[223] warn that such collective punishment risks perpetuating radicalization rather than eradicating it. Iraq's model therefore exemplifies securitized moral restoration: through rapid, punitive trials and visible suffering, the state reasserts its authority in the aftermath of occupation and sectarian violence, with risks of perpetuating the very cycles of grievance that sustain extremism.

---

[215] Republic of Iraq, "*Anti-Terrorism Law (Law No. 13 of 2005)",* Baghdad: Council of Representatives, Official Gazette of the Republic of Iraq, No. 4006, 9 November 2005, Art 4

[216] Human Rights Watch, "*Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq*", New York, 2018, pag 3

[217] Ibidem, pag 5

[218] Cook D., "*ISIS and the Future of Jihadism*", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2020, 43(8), pag 781

[219] Ibidem, pag 781

[220] Vale G., "*Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps*", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019, pag 10

[221] Amnesty International, **"***The Condemned: Women and Children Isolated, Trapped and Exploited in Iraq and Northeast Syria",* London, 2020, pag 15

[222] Ní Aoláin F., *"Gendering Counter-Terrorism: Women, Human Rights and Humanitarian Law"*, Human Rights Quarterly, 43(1), 2021, pag 9

[223] International Crisis Group, "*Iraq's Post-ISIS Recovery: The Limits of Retribution",* Middle East Report No. 223, Brussels, pag 6

Syria

By contrast, Syria's fractured political landscape has generated a profound jurisdictional vacuum. The Assad regime, while maintaining nominal sovereignty over the country, exercised only partial control and primarily over territories in the west. It has prosecuted certain Syrian women accused of terrorism under broad and opaque counterterrorism laws, but its reach does not extend into the vast areas controlled by the SDF in the northeast.[224]

In these territories, the absence of a coherent and internationally recognized judicial authority has produced what can be described as a *"zone of suspended justice."*[225] Within this space, non-state actors detain thousands of individuals — mostly women and children affiliated, or alleged to be affiliated, with ISIS — without formal charges or due process.[226]

The most emblematic manifestations of this crisis are the al-Hol and Roj camps in northeast Syria, where tens of thousands of women and children remain confined under the administration of the SDF.[227] Quantifying the population is difficult, but credible estimates converge on very large numbers.

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) assessed in March 2025 that roughly 46,500 people—foreigners and Syrians—remained in SDF-run camps and detention sites.[228] While the mix varies by facility, women and children make up the majority in al-Hol and Roj, and a significant subset of the women are alleged to have had roles beyond *"spouses"*, including recruitment, propaganda, and morality policing. While the SDF frames its role as a security imperative — focused on preventing ISIS resurgence and gathering intelligence — this prioritization has come at the expense of humanitarian obligations and systematic rehabilitation programs.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has repeatedly condemned the conditions in these facilities, warning that *"conditions in al-Hol*

---

[224] The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a Kurdish-led, non-state military coalition operating primarily in northeast Syria. Backed by the US and allied forces in the fight against ISIS, the SDF exercises de facto territorial control over large areas but lacks international recognition as a sovereign authority. While it operates detention facilities and local courts, it does so outside a formally recognized state judicial framework, resulting in significant legal ambiguity regarding jurisdiction, due process, and long-term detention practices.

[225] Amnesty International, "*Iraq: The condemned: Women and children isolated, trapped and exploited in Iraq*", London, 2018, pag 45

[226] Vale G., "*Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps*", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019, pag 13

[227] Ibidem, pag 5-6

[228] Tayler L.M., "*ISIS suspects held in Syria: Repatriation reset under new US, Syrian leaders?",* The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2025

camp amount to collective punishment and arbitrary detention under international law".[229] Reports detail overcrowding, disease, malnutrition, and violence, particularly targeting women and children, many of whom are foreign nationals stranded without legal recourse. The SDF itself has acknowledged the untenable nature of the situation, calling on foreign states to repatriate their citizens. Its leaders have cautioned that the camps risk becoming *"breeding grounds for radicalization"*, perpetuating the very security threats they were designed to contain.[230]

What keeps this system in stasis is the collision of three logics. First is security containment: the SDF's original priority was to prevent an ISIS resurgence, a rationale reinforced each time there are killings inside the camps or attempted breakouts.[231] Second is jurisdictional fragmentation: the camps sit in territory outside Damascus's direct control, limiting any centralized judicial pathway and leaving local, non-recognized authorities as custodians of a global problem.[232] Third is external political risk-management: many home states fear the domestic politics and perceived security costs of bringing back women linked to ISIS, even when those women are accompanied by young children who have committed no crime.[233] Together these logics produce what rights bodies have long warned against: de facto, open-ended detention without individualized legal process (Amnesty International UK, 2024). As one analyst observed, *"no actor wants to take full responsibility for these detainees; the SDF cannot repatriate them, Baghdad cannot absorb them, and foreign governments refuse to bring them home."*[234]

The new regime in Damascus, under the President Ahmed al-Sharaa, has emerged following the fall of the Assad government, positioning itself as the central authority seeking to reunify Syrian territory under a single political and administrative framework. It has made clear its intention to reassert full control over Syrian territory, including areas previously held by the SDF. Recent agreements between the Syrian government and the SDF aim to facilitate this territorial consolidation, effectively ending semi-autonomous governance in the northeast.

---

[229] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "*Statement on the Detention and Repatriation of Individuals in North-East Syria*", Geneva, 2020, pag 4

[230] International Crisis Group, "*Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS*", Middle East Report No. 208, Brussels, 2019, pag 7

[231] Human Rights Watch, "*Northeast Syria: Camp Detainees Face Uncertain Future",* 7 February 2025, Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/07/northeast-syria-camp-detainees-face-uncertain-future

[232] Haid H., "*The Enduring Crisis of Governance in Northeast Syria*," Carnegie Middle East Center, 2023

[233] Tayler L.M., "*ISIS suspects held in Syria: Repatriation reset under new US, Syrian leaders?",* The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism , 2025

[234] International Crisis Group, "*Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS*", Middle East Report No. 208, Brussels, 2019, pag 8

However, the agreement does not explicitly address the issue of ISIS detention camps or the thousands of women and children held there, but it mentions: *"supporting the Syrian state in its fight against Assad's remnants and all threats to (the country's) security and unity."*[235]
This stalemate has effectively condemned thousands of women and children to an indefinite legal and humanitarian limbo—a state of neither trial nor release, neither rehabilitation nor reintegration. In both Iraq and Syria, containment has effectively become a substitute for policy. Rather than a deliberate strategy, it functions as a pragmatic default—an attempt to manage, rather than resolve, the legacies of ISIS.
Lacking the institutional capacity, financial resources, and political legitimacy required to design and implement comprehensive rehabilitation or reintegration programs, both governments have opted for indefinite control and surveillance of those associated with ISIS, particularly women and children. This approach reflects a defensive logic: by keeping these populations confined, authorities seek to minimize immediate security risks and public backlash, even as they perpetuate long-term instability.

3.4 Which roles do local communities, non-governmental organizations and international institutions play?

The management of returning female FFs and their families has increasingly depended on a complex network of local and international actors. The counterterrorism and post-conflict reintegration literature emphasizes that state hesitation has effectively produced a governance vacuum in which humanitarian organizations and local actors must improvise solutions to long-term security and rehabilitation challenges. Their interventions range from emergency humanitarian assistance to long-term psychosocial rehabilitation, legal support, and community reintegration.
The UK's approach has been dominated by a securitized framework emphasizing risk prevention and deterrence over rehabilitation. In this context —marked by the use of temporary exclusion orders, citizenship deprivation, and by official resistance to large-scale repatriation—NGOs and legal advocates have become key voices for humanitarian and legal accountability. Reprieve[236] and Human Rights Watch[237] have led public and legal campaigns challenging the legality and morality of indefinite detention abroad, arguing that citizenship stripping disproportionately affects women and children and undermines the UK's

[235] Times of Israel, *"Syrian government inks breakthrough deal with Kurdish authorities in northeast,* 10 March 2025
[236] Reprieve, *"About Us"*, Reprieve UK, Accessed 8 December 2025
[237] Human Rights Watch, *"How we work"*, Accessed 8 December 2025

international obligations.[238] These organizations also highlight that many women in camps may be victims of trafficking, a claim echoed by UN Special Rapporteurs.[239] Civil-society and community organizations play an equally vital role in reintegration for those who do return or are released.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue provides training and psychosocial support for women exiting extremist networks, while local councils and *Prevent*-related programs engage community mentors and social workers to facilitate ideological disengagement and social reinsertion. These NGOs often function as mediators, balancing community concerns with government priorities while advocating for more transparent, gender-informed rehabilitation models. International institutions have repeatedly criticized the UK's approach to foreign-affiliated women and children.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, emphasized that women and minors in conflict-affected areas, including those associated with ISIS, are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and statelessness and urged states to ensure their protection and access to justice.[240]

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has reminded states of their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child[241] and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women[242], emphasizing that deprivation of nationality and refusal to repatriate may violate these conventions.

The US has similarly pursued a securitized framework in managing returnees associated with extremist organizations, though it differs from the UK in its stronger emphasis on criminal prosecution and federal-level oversight. Since federal counterterrorism policy does not include a unified national rehabilitation program, NGOs and civil-society organizations fill crucial gaps that would otherwise remain unaddressed, particularly for women and children returning from conflict zones. Organizations such as the International Rescue Committee[243] support people affected by violence, especially vulnerable women and children, to access critical services such as counselling, health care and legal assistance. These services are

---

[238] Reprieve, "*UK court rules Shamima Begum must return to the UK to challenge citizenship-stripping*", 16 July 2020

[239] UN Human Rights Council, "*Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children: Promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*, A/HRC/53/28, 3 July 2023, pag 6

[240] Ibidem, pag 6

[241] UN, "*Convention on the Rights of the Child*", General Assembly Resolution 44/25, 20 November 1989

[242] UN, *"Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women",* General Assembly Resolution 34/180, 18 September 1979

[243] International Rescue Committee, Homepage, Accessed 8 December 2025

designed to address both the immediate psychological distress associated with displacement or exposure to violence and the long-term social barriers that can impede reintegration. Likewise, Women Without Borders[244] focuses on gender-specific rehabilitation pathways, recognizing that women's experiences in extremist environments differ substantially—many may have been coerced into travel, subjected to exploitation and violence, or isolated from support networks, requiring targeted interventions that standard security-led approaches do not adequately provide. If reintegration efforts are not inclusive and holistic, the risk of a resurgence of violent extremism cannot be underestimated.[245]

At the local level, community-based initiatives—ranging from faith groups to mentoring and youth outreach programs—work alongside law enforcement, social workers, and probation officers to craft individualized reintegration plans. These partnerships often emphasize practical reinsertion measures such as educational bridging programs, employment readiness, family counseling, and continued psychosocial support. Given that criminal justice responses may not always be possible or appropriate, recovery-focused approaches such as resocialization and reconciliation are recommended to minimize risk and foster resilience.[246]

The blend of security-driven oversight with civil-society interventions reflects an attempt to balance counterterrorism imperatives—such as public safety and risk mitigation—with broader objectives of rehabilitation and protection.

Nonetheless, critics contend that the framework still falls short in several areas. In particular, they argue that the system does not consistently prioritize the welfare and developmental needs of children, who may be repatriated alongside parents facing criminal charges or prolonged detention. In these cases, access to stable caregiving arrangements and long-term psychosocial support can be uneven, raising concerns about both rights protections and the long-term social outcomes for these children. Children are victims who require developmentally appropriate psychosocial and other forms of support to address their trauma and resocialize them.[247]

In Spain, the process of reintegrating women and children returning from ISIS-affiliated camps relies largely on the efforts of different actors. Women often serve parts of their sentences under semi-custodial arrangements in facilities like the Victoria Kent Social

[244] Women Without Borders, Homepage, Accessed 27 January 2026
[245] International Civil Society Action Network, "*Invisible Women: Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism"*, 2019, pag 104
[246] United States Institute of Peace, "*Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict",* Peaceworks Report No. 452, August 2019, pag 3
[247] Ibidem, pag 3

Integration Center.[248] Meanwhile, children are entrusted to municipal child protection services, with organizations like Save the Children and UNICEF Spain stepping in to provide help with family reunification. These efforts are closely coordinated with the Ministry of Interior and penitentiary authorities to ensure a rehabilitative process that also carefully manages potential risks. Spain has worked alongside international partners to develop reintegration models extending beyond its own borders.

In January 2026, the Spanish Government partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Iraqi Government to formalize an agreement aimed at facilitating the safe and sustainable reintegration of Iraqi returnees from the Al-Hol camp.[249] These initiatives are consistent with Spain's commitments under international frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). They emphasize the importance of balancing protection and rehabilitation with legal accountability and effective risk management.

In the Netherlands, the reintegration of women and children returning from ISIS-affiliated camps is managed through a multi-level network of actors. Women are prosecuted under Dutch counter-terrorism laws, while also taking part in structured rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives coordinated by the Ministry of Justice and Security[250], delivered in partnership with NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee and Women Without Borders. Children are placed under the supervision of the Raad voor de Kinderbescherming and municipal youth services.[251]

Faith-based organizations and neighborhood councils work directly with returnees at the community level to support social reintegration. In some areas, municipalities have launched *"Safe Return"* pilot programs that match returnees with trained mentors and volunteers. Meanwhile, schools and youth centers partner with social workers to help children reestablish connections with their peers and adapt to educational routines, promoting both developmental growth and a sense of social belonging

In Iraq, efforts to reintegrate returnees (especially women and children) from camps such as Al‑Hol Camp have increasingly involved a mix of governmental and civil‑society actors.

[248] Asociacion Victoria Kent, Homepage, Accessed 3 February 2026
[249] UN Development Programme, *"Spain, UNDP, and the Government of Iraq Strengthen Support for the Reintegration of Iraqis Returning from Al-Hol Camp",* 27 January 2026
[250] Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Justice and Security, Homepage, Accessed 3 February 2026
[251] Raad voor de Kinderbescherming, Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, Accessed 3 February 2026

The UNDP, together with the Iraqi government, has taken a central role. It highlights that mostly women and children, families perceived to be affiliated with ISIS require mental and psychosocial care, livelihood support, and often access to social services and housing options.[252] In August 2021 UNDP Iraq convened a workshop with 74 community and tribal leaders from multiple governorates (Anbar, Ninewa, Salah al-Din, Diyala) to prepare communities for the return of families from Al-Hol camp.[253] The aim was to build acceptance and reduce stigma against returnees. More recently (2024), UNDP with support from Italy signed a €3 million agreement to support sustainable reintegration of Iraqi returnees from Al-Hol — with a focus on economic empowerment, trauma-healing, livelihoods, and community-level reconciliation through engagement with local leaders and civil-society organizations.[254]

A 2024 programme by Human Relief Foundation[255] in northern Iraq was established to support refugee reintegration, livelihood training, and mental health/psychosocial support for returnees from Al-Hol — aiming to reach vulnerable families, including those associated with ISIS, with women often comprising a large proportion of beneficiaries.[256]

But reintegration in Iraq faces major structural obstacles. A 2025 report reveals that many returning women from Al-Hol — even after leaving the camp — lack stable housing or documentation; some are forced into precarious or even exploitative survival strategies.[257]

The UNDP and humanitarian-organization literature tends to use terms like *"families perceived to be affiliated with ISIS", "returnees from Al-Hol", "women and children"*, *"women heads of household".*[258]

Rarely there is a breakdown between: (a) women who were FFs/ active members of ISIS; (b) women who were in camps because of familial affiliation; (c) women forcibly displaced/ detained; or (d) women widowed or separated. This makes it difficult to reliably assess whether and how female FFs are receiving specific, differentiated reintegration treatment.

In Syria — particularly in the northeast and former IS-controlled zones — the situation for

---

[252] UN Development Programme, "*Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the return and reintegration of women and children"*, 24 October 2022, pag 1

[253] UN Development Programme, "*UNDP Iraq supports the Iraqi Government to prepare communities for reintegration of returnees from Al-Hol Camp",* Press release, UN Iraq, 18 August 2021

[254] IraqiNews, "*Italy, UNDP support reintegration of returnees from Al-Hol Camp",* 27 October 2024

[255] Human Relief Foundation, Homepage, Accessed 8 December 2025

[256] Human Relief Foundation, "*Human Relief Foundation project in northern Iraq supports refugee reintegration"*, November 2024

[257] Althuis J., Samarrai M., & Alzuber N., *"Struggling to Keep Up: Iraqi Returnees' Economic (Re)integration Progress Over Time",* UN Institute for Disarmament Research, Findings Report 45, Geneva, 6 August 2025

[258] UN Development Programme, *"Leaving No One Behind: Reintegration of Women and Children Associated with ISIS in Iraq and Syria"*, UN, 2020

returnees is deeply conditioned by structural fragility: destroyed infrastructure, weak governance, lack of documentation, economic collapse, and local communities traumatized by years of conflict. In this context, local NGOs, civil-society networks and grassroots initiatives play a critical role in reintegration and social cohesion.

IMPACT[259], among other organizations, provides support to women and children who leave Al-Hol. There is little known about the post return circumstances and challenges these women and children face, and more importantly, any assessment of the perceived usefulness of the reintegration programs delivered to them.

An important research is the report *"Reintegration Challenges for returnees from Al-Hol Camp"*, authored by IMPACT.[260] The study examined the experiences of women and children based in two localities (Hajin and Kasra) in Deir Ezzor, interviewing 83 women (both returnees and host-community residents). Returnees from Al-Hol face multiple, interconnected challenges that complicate reintegration. Access to health care, social services, and aid is not guaranteed and depends heavily on documentation; many women and children lack birth certificates, IDs, or civil registration, which in turn limits their ability to attend school, secure stable housing, or access formal employment. Livelihood opportunities are scarce for both returnees and local residents, and short-term reintegration programs, while helpful, rarely lead to sustainable economic stability. Social stigma and community suspicion further hinder reintegration, as returnee women are often perceived as *"associated with ISIS"*, with those married to FFs experiencing heightened distrust and marginalization within their communities. Housing remains a critical issue, as many original homes were destroyed or uninhabitable.

Among the key pillars of IMPACT's approach (through its programme *"Building Resilience to Extremism in Northeast Syria"*) are child-protection, psychosocial support, community engagement, and strengthening local civil-society capacity to lead inclusion initiatives.[261]

One of the backbones of the approach is the economic empowerment for women, which targets women both in host communities and returnees with livelihood projects through vocational training, in a safe space, a way to include them in social cohesion activities. Broader assessments of returning conditions in Syria underline that many areas remain not safe, and cannot offer stable reintegration: infrastructure and services are often destroyed or

[259] IMPACT Research, Homepage, Accessed 28 January 2026

[260] Procter C. & Barry S., "*Reintegration Challenges for Returnees from Al-Hol Camp",* IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development, 11 March 2024

[261] IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development, *"Building resilience against radicalization in Northeast Syria",* Project Brief, 2024

nonexistent, the economic collapse, inflation and sanctions further compound hardship, and the security risks, presence of militant residual networks, and weak or fragmented governance further complicate the situation.[262] Structural conditions in Syria remain deeply unfavorable for reintegration — making any hopes for *"normalisation"* fragile and uncertain.

[262] EU Agency for Asylum, "*Syria: Country Focus*", Country of Origin Information, March 2025

Chapter 4: Case Studies and Policy Implications

This chapter transitions from the theoretical discussions established earlier to an empirical examination of selected case studies involving women linked to ISIS. Through these examples, it analyzes how various states and institutions perceive women's roles in jihadist movements and how such interpretations impact accountability and human rights outcomes. The empirical chapter analyzes three distinct approaches to women affiliated with ISIS through three representative case studies.

The first examines the revocation of citizenship as a tool of legal exclusion, referring to the case of Shamima Begum, which sparked widespread debate about rights, security, and national belonging. The second case study analyzes an extreme punitive approach, linked to forms of prolonged or de facto permanent imprisonment, through the example of Umm Sayyaf in Iraq. The third case study instead focuses on processes of deradicalization and reintegration, examining programs developed in Spain and the Netherlands. In this last case, the analysis is based on institutional policies and programs rather than individual stories, as the beneficiaries have remained anonymous for ethical and security reasons.

The choice of these case studies is not only due to their prominence in public and policy debates but also because they capture distinct variations in motivation, agency, and state treatment.

4.1 Citizenship revocation: the case of Shamima Begum

This section examines the case of Begum through a qualitative, narrative-based analysis of her interviews, prioritizing her own account as a primary source for understanding the process of radicalization. Rather than treating Begum's life trajectory as a retrospective illustration of established theories, the analysis reconstructs her pathway inductively, following the chronology and meanings that emerge from her testimony.[263]

Shamima Begum was born in 1999 in London to Bangladeshi parents and grew up in a working-class household in Bethnal Green. She described herself as quiet and academically engaged, though her adolescence unfolded against the backdrop of diverse cultural influences and broader debates on British Muslim identity.[264] In February 2015, at the age of fifteen,

[263] Baker J., *"The Shamima Begum Story"*, BBC news, I'm not a Monster Series 2, Episode 1 *"It Felt Like a Dream"*, Podcasts, 2023

[264] Sotorra A., "*The Return: Life After ISIS*", Documentary film, Alba Sotorra Cinema Productions, 2021

Begum left the UK with two school friends and travelled through Turkey into ISIS-controlled territory in Syria.[265] After arriving in Raqqa, she was married to an ISIS fighter and later gave birth to three children, all of whom died in infancy.[266] Following the territorial collapse of ISIS in 2019, Begum was detained in the Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. Interviews conducted there indicate that she had become disillusioned with ISIS and no longer professed extremist views.[267]

Facing deteriorating conditions and lacking any viable prospects for release, she expressed a clear desire to return to the UK. In February 2019, however, the UK government revoked her citizenship on national security grounds, alleging that she had been an active participant in ISIS's activities. The decision rendered her effectively stateless, as Bangladesh rejected any assertion of citizenship through jus sanguinis.

Although Begum pursued legal appeals, UK courts ruled that she could not return to participate in her own appeal due to security considerations. Begum's case has since become one of the most contested examples of a female FFs' trajectory within ISIS, raising difficult questions regarding child recruitment, online radicalization, citizenship deprivation, and state obligations toward nationals involved in terrorism.

Public debate remains sharply polarized: some argue that she should have been repatriated and held accountable through due process, while others framed her return as an unacceptable security risk. Scholars note that citizenship revocation operates not only as a counterterrorism tool but also as a form of state discipline disproportionately targeting minority communities.[268] In this context, Begum's treatment reflects how postcolonial and racialized assumptions continue to shape the boundaries of British citizenship, enabling the marginalization and exclusion of individuals based on their identity and perceived allegiance.[269]

---

[265] Phillips A., *"Shamima Begum loses final UK court bid over citizenship",* BBC News, 7 August 2024

[266] Britton B, *"ISIS bride Shamima Begum will have her British citizenship revoked, family lawyer says",* CNN World, 20 February 2019

[267] Baker J., *"The Shamima Begum Story"*, BBC news, I'm not a Monster Series 2, Episode 1 *"It Felt Like a Dream"*, Podcasts, 2023

[268] Macklin A., *"Citizenship Revocation, the Privilege to Have Rights, and the Production of the Alien",* In Queen's Law Journal, 40(1), 2014, pag 5

[269] Masters M. & Regilme Jr. S.S.F, *"Human Rights and British Citizenship: The Case of Shamima Begum as Citizen to Homo Sacer"*, Journal of Human Rights Practice 12, 2020, pag 363

4.1.1 Radicalization trajectory

In Begum's case, pre-existing vulnerabilities do not suggest material deprivation or family dysfunction, but rather identity consolidation challenges typical of adolescence.

Her trajectory reflects several dynamics: the interplay between personal grievances and carefully curated extremist narratives that promise certainty in moments of transition.

For Begum and her friends, feelings of exclusion tied to Islamophobia, geopolitical grievances surrounding Syria, and the desire for moral purpose likely created a receptive ground. At the micro level, her age and social environment placed her within a developmental stage in which identity formation and emotional vulnerability are particularly salient. Research on adolescent susceptibility to ideological narratives underscores that this period amplifies the search for belonging and moral clarity—factors that ISIS exploited through highly targeted propaganda.[270] Begum was not a long-standing radical; rather, evidence suggests a period of intensified online engagement shortly before travel. Recruiters created an atmosphere of trust and emotional validation.[271]

At the meso level, her radicalization highlights the decisive influence of peer networks. Begum left the UK together with two school friends—Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase—forming what has become known as the "Bethnal Green trio".[272] Some sources suggest that, prior to the trio's departure, a close associate within the Bethnal Green circle had already undertaken the journey, subsequently shaping the others' decision to follow.[273] In the interview by the BBC, Begum explains she was drawn to Syria by the promise of an Islamic utopia, a sense of belonging, and the ideological allure of eternal paradise, alongside a personal sense of dislocation, a belief that fostered a degree of wilful naivety and enabled her to rationalise or minimise contradictory information. This implies that, while she exercised

[270] Bronsard G., Cohen D., Diallo I., Pellerin H., Varnoux A., Podlipski M.A., Gerardin P., Boyer L. & Campelo N., "*Adolescents Engaged in Radicalisation and Terrorism: A Dimensional and Categorical Assessment",* Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12, 774063, 2022, pag 9

[271] George Washington University, "*ISIS Online: Countering the Virtual Caliphate",* Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 2017

[272] Sultana is widely believed to have died in Raqqa in 2016, most likely as a result of an airstrike, although no independent verification of her death has ever been possible due to the conditions of the conflict. Multiple reputable news outlets report that intelligence and family sources conveyed this account while stressing the lack of official confirmation. By contrast, Abase's fate remains much less certain. Early reports, including statements attributed to Begum, suggested she was alive in ISIS-controlled territory as late as 2017, and subsequent accounts have been inconclusive about whether she survived the collapse of the caliphate.

[273] Baker J., *"The Shamima Begum Story"*, BBC news, I'm not a Monster Series 2, Episode 4 *"When You're in Love"*, Podcasts, 2023

some agency in her decision to leave the UK, she did so under the influence of a constructed utopian narrative that she accepted uncritically and later sought to defend through retrospective justification and denial. The three girls not only consumed ISIS propaganda together but mutually validated their grievances and aspirations, transforming private doubts into shared conviction.[274]

At the macro level, the broader sociopolitical context in which Begum and her peers lived cannot be divorced from their trajectory. Like many second-generation Muslim adolescents in Europe, they navigated tensions between local belonging and globalized Muslim identity. Experiences of discrimination and Islamophobic media narratives contributed to a perceived moral discrepancy between their lived reality and the utopian community portrayed in ISIS propaganda. Exposure to graphic images from Syria and propaganda portraying Muslims as globally persecuted may have intensified moral outrage and empathy for civilians framed as victims of Western aggression. For adolescents, such content can produce powerful emotional resonance, especially when mediated by recruiters who present travel as an act of protection.[275]

The reframing of violence as legitimate, even necessary, marks the critical boundary between radical belief and extremist action. While she maintains that her friends made their own decisions to travel, she acknowledged for the first time that she may have had some influence over their choices and could potentially have discouraged them. This recognition introduces a new, more nuanced understanding of her agency during that period.

Begum's statements also show signs of internal conflict. She at times both denounces and defends elements of ISIS, reflecting the lingering influence of years spent within the group. While she acknowledges that ISIS killings were wrong, she also offers partial rationalisations for some of the group's actions, suggesting an ongoing struggle to fully disentangle herself from its ideological framing.[276]

Her subsequent interviews from Al-Hol reveal a narrative of expectations unmet.[277] Disillusionment after exposure to ISIS's brutality suggests that the ideological commitment motivating her departure was fragile and contingent. This is consistent with research showing that many youths who join extremist groups do so with limited ideological depth and can

[274] Begum maintains that she viewed only a single ISIS video prior to travelling to Syria

[275] McCauley C. & Moskalenko S., "*Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism"*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 20(3), 2008, pag 420

[276] Baker J., *"The Shamima Begum Story"*, BBC news, I'm not a Monster Series 2, Episode 4 *"When You're in Love"*, Podcasts, 2023

[277] Sky News, "*IS bride Shamima Begum full transcript: "I did have a good time there"*, 20 February 2019

disengage quickly once confronted with the lived reality of violence and deprivation.[278] Ultimately, Begum's radicalization trajectory illustrates the entanglement of adolescent vulnerability, online recruitment, peer dynamics, and polarized socio-political environments. It highlights how ideological adoption is often secondary to emotional and developmental factors—a pattern that complicates rigid categorizations of agency and victimhood in the assessment of female FFs.

4.1.2 Gendered recruitment and life inside ISIS

Begum's experience inside ISIS further illustrates the organization's instrumentalization of gender. ISIS messaging targeted young women through a distinct grammar of desire. Online recruiters portrayed the caliphate as a space where religious authenticity thrived, where women contributed to the shaping of a political project, and where marriage to a fighter was framed as a noble partnership rather than a constraint.[279] Upon arrival, Begum was rapidly married to a Dutch ISIS fighter, reflecting the organization's practice of integrating foreign female recruits through early marriage to ensure their loyalty and reproductive contribution. Her pregnancies and the deaths of her three children exemplify the intersection of gendered expectations and the organization's instrumental use of motherhood. Building on Bloom's research on the strategic value of children within ISIS, reproduction functioned not as a private matter but as a political resource supporting long-term state-building goals.[280]

Women were expected not only to bear children but also to maintain households, ensure religious education, and uphold community cohesion—tasks embedded in the Al-Khansaa Brigade Manifesto's portrayal of women as guardians of the Caliphate's moral order.[281]

Upon arrival, however, the gap between narrative and reality became stark. While Begum's initial migration was voluntary, exit from the group became nearly impossible due to travel restrictions and the confiscation of passports—mechanisms that produced conditions of

[278] Bronsard G., Cohen D., Diallo I., Pellerin H., Varnoux A., Podlipski M.A., Gerardin P., Boyer L. & Campelo N., *"Adolescents Engaged in Radicalisation and Terrorism: A Dimensional and Categorical Assessment",* Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12, 774063, 2022, pag 8

[279] Pepicelli R., *"Ǧihād e donne: evoluzioni storiche e risignificazioni semantiche e teologiche in età contemporanea"*, in Manduchi P. & Melis N., "*Jihad. Definizioni e riletture di un termine abusato"*, 2019, pag 156

[280] Bloom M., *"Small Arms: Children and Youth in ISIS",* The Strategic Use of Children in Armed Groups, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pag 50

[281] Pepicelli R., *"Ǧihād e donne: evoluzioni storiche e risignificazioni semantiche e teologiche in età contemporanea"*, in Manduchi P. & Melis N., "*Jihad. Definizioni e riletture di un termine abusato"*, 2019, pag 156

entrapment even for those who joined willingly.[282]

During the occasions in which she was able to reconstruct the trajectory that led her to join ISIS and to share her experience through interviews and podcasts, Begum has consistently denied involvement in operational or violent activities within ISIS. She stated that she never carried or fired a weapon, and never attempted to encourage others to join the group.

She also declined to answer questions regarding whether she communicated with friends in London while in Syria, but maintained that any such contact was not related to recruitment or promoting ISIS. According to her account, she did not receive any form of military or ideological training during her time in the organisation.

Begum has reflected on how, despite not being responsible for ISIS's actions, she understood that she would inevitably be perceived as complicit. As ISIS continued to commit large-scale atrocities after her arrival in Syria, public anger intensified and extended to anyone associated with the group, making her an especially visible target. She describes feeling used by the journalist who interviewed her in 2019 and remains frustrated by how those early interviews were received. According to her account, the public did not understand the constraints she faced at the time, including her belief that she was obliged to speak and that deviating from expected narratives could place her at risk.

She initially avoided criticising ISIS because she feared being seen as a traitor, and she has since acknowledged that her comments—such as saying she had no regrets or framing the Manchester Arena bombing as retaliation—were shaped by this context rather than by settled conviction. Taken together, Begum's life inside ISIS reflects what feminist IR scholars identify as the gendered logics of armed organizations: women's bodies and labour become tools of governance, legitimacy, and ideological reproduction.[283]

Her case exemplifies how ISIS blended coercion with selective promises of empowerment, mobilizing women not through military participation but through tightly controlled forms of social, reproductive, and ideological labour that were central to sustaining the Caliphate.[284]

---

[282] Vale G., *"Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps"*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019, pag 1

[283] Sjoberg L. & Gentry C.E., "*Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics",* Zed Books, 2007, pag 29

[284] Shepherd L., "*Gender, Violence and Global Politics*", Routledge, 2008, pag 17

4.1.3 Citizenship Revocation, national security and human rights

UNSCR 2396[285] is highly relevant to the case of Shamima Begum, as it directly challenges the UK government's decision to revoke her citizenship and refuse her repatriation. While the UK has often justified such actions under UNSCR 2178[286]—arguing that preventing the return of FFs is essential for national security—Resolution 2396 outlines a different and more comprehensive strategy. UNSCR 2396 emphasizes that states should repatriate their nationals and ensure accountability within domestic legal systems, rather than leaving individuals in indefinite detention in foreign jurisdictions.

By stripping Begum of her citizenship and declining to repatriate her, the UK effectively circumvented its obligation to prosecute or rehabilitate her within its own judicial framework. This approach stands in clear tension with the resolution's insistence on using lawful, rights-based mechanisms to address the threat posed by returnees. Another central element of UNSCR 2396 concerns the prevention of statelessness. The resolution explicitly warns that rendering individuals stateless may exacerbate long-term security risks by creating conditions of marginalization that can contribute to further radicalization. This is consistent with broader international human rights instruments—including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[287], the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons[288], and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness[289]—all of which strongly discourage practices that leave individuals without a nationality.

The UK's decision to revoke Begum's citizenship, based on the contested assertion that she was eligible for Bangladeshi nationality, therefore sits uneasily within the international legal landscape. UNSCR 2396 also acknowledges that not all returnees pose equal levels of risk and explicitly recognizes that some individuals—particularly those radicalized as minors—may be appropriate candidates for rehabilitation and reintegration. Given Begum's age at the time of her departure (fifteen), the resolution's guidance suggests that states should at least consider specialized deradicalization and rehabilitation programs.

---

[285] UN Security Council, *"Security Council Resolution 2396 on threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts: Foreign terrorist fighters (returnees and relocators)"*, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017
[286] UN Security Council, "*Security Council Resolution 2178 on threats to international peace and security caused by foreign terrorist fighters*", S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014
[287] UN, "*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*", 10 December 1948
[288] UN, "*Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons",* 28 September 1954
[289] UN, "*Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness*", 30 August 1961

The UK's refusal to pursue any such alternative measures appears to contradict the resolution's more nuanced approach to managing returnees.

The British Nationality Act 1981[290] made deprivation of citizenship significantly easier, especially for individuals with potential dual nationality. However, the bill raises substantial concerns regarding due process and the risk of statelessness. These structural issues have led many scholars and human rights organizations to argue that these governmental powers have contributed to the establishment of a system that is both inconsistent and discriminatory, particularly in the context of penalizing individuals of non-British heritage.[291]

In this context, human rights organisations and watchdog groups played an important, though not easy, role. Opposition to the revocation of Begum's citizenship developed into a significant counter-discourse that challenged the legality and ethics of the government's decision. Human rights organisations and critical commentators argued that the ruling revealed the fragility and conditionality of citizenship for racialised Britons, particularly those with migrant heritage.

Amnesty International UK's refugee and migrant rights director, Steve Valdez-Symonds, described the ruling as *"deeply concerning,"* noting that Begum was *"now exiled in dangerous and inhuman conditions"* (Amnesty International UK, 2023) in the detention camp. He further argued that *"stripping Shamima Begum's nationality was profoundly wrong – she is and has always been British."* Liberty lawyer Rosie Brighouse emphasised that *"the right to a fair trial is not something democratic governments should take away on a whim, and nor is someone's British citizenship",* highlighting that deprivation of nationality without due process undermines core democratic principles.[292] Legal scholars also condemned the decision on constitutional and procedural grounds. Macklin argues that citizenship revocation operates as a *"civil death"*, making individuals legally non-persons while projecting an image of decisive state action.[293] Critics observed that she was denied recognition as a trafficked minor or potential victim of grooming because her perceived lack of remorse clashed with normative expectations of femininity and emotional expression.

Begum became a *"political symbol rather than an individual"*, used to demonstrate governmental toughness rather than to engage in a meaningful assessment of her vulnerability

[290] UK Government, "*British Nationality Act 1981"*, UK Legislation, 1981
[291] Zaman A., *"British Citizenship: A brief analysis of the Shamima Begum citizenship revocation",* Cranbrook legal, 25 March 2023
[292] Liberty, *"Liberty fights for fair trials at supreme court"*, Counter-terrorism, 23 November 2020
[293] Macklin A., *"Citizenship Revocation, the Privilege to Have Rights, and the Production of the Alien",* Queen's Law Journal, 40(1), 2014, pag 2

or legal rights.[294] Furthermore, several scholars argued that the government's actions were not merely about Begum herself but about signalling a stance of punitive nationalism amidst broader anxieties about multicultural Britain. As Kundnani argues in *"The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror",* contemporary British counter-terrorism discourse not only constructs Muslims as a security threat but also plays into broader anxieties about multiculturalism — framing Muslim communities as problematic and thereby dramatizing a perceived failure of Britain's multicultural experiment.[295]

4.1.4 Dimensions of the media and public discourse

The debate over Begum's citizenship marked a pivotal moment in the politicisation of female radicalisation in the UK. As emerges in the work by Vale, public discourse cast her not simply as a security threat but as a moral transgressor whose deviation from normative femininity rendered her unworthy of state protection.[296]

Rather than being framed within the continuum of coercion and ideological manipulation that characterised her time in ISIS, Begum was constructed as a uniquely culpable actor—an image reinforced by both media narratives and political rhetoric. Media coverage frequently employed reductive labels such as *"jihadi bride"* or *"IS schoolgirl turned terrorist",* emphasizing her voluntary embrace of extremism and her failure to fulfil conventional roles of womanhood and motherhood.[297]

As scholars such as Sjoberg and Gentry argue, women associated with political violence are often categorised through reductive tropes that position them as either naïve victims or hyper-agents responsible for profound moral disorder.[298] In Begum's case, the latter prevailed: she was portrayed as having deliberately abandoned British values and embraced a barbaric masculinity coded as antithetical to the nation.[299] This framing shaped the justification for

---

[294] Vale G., *"Shamima Begum, regardless of her new image, remains the UK's responsibility",* Islam Khabar, 12 October 2021

[295] Kundnani A., "*The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*", London and New York: Verso, 2014

[296] Vale G., *"Shamima Begum, regardless of her new image, remains the UK's responsibility",* Islam Khabar, 12 October 2021

[297] Strømmen, E., "*Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Daesh – From Recruitment to Return",* PRIO Paper 1/2017, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017, pag 1; Martini A., *"Making Women Terrorists into "Jihadi Brides". An Analysis of Media Narratives on Women joining ISIS",* in Critical Studies on Terrorism 11(3), 2018, pag 460

[298] Sjoberg L., & Gentry C., "*Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*" Zed Books, 2007, pag 21-22

[299] Masters M. & Regilme Jr. S.S.F, *"Human Rights and British Citizenship: The Case of Shamima Begum as Citizen to Homo Sacer"*, Journal of Human Rights Practice 12, 2020, pag 349

stripping her citizenship.

The case of Shamima quickly attracted substantial public and political attention.

It was extensively covered by UK and European media outlets and has also generated a body of academic scholarship. Begum's portrayal as a mother who endangered her own children intensified the moral panic, as she failed to perform the expected roles of care and restraint. She became an embodiment of gendered deviance, making the exceptional measure of citizenship revocation appear morally and politically defensible.[300]

Public opinion mirrored and amplified these narratives. Polls conducted by YouGov in 2019 found that a majority (78%) of the British public supported the government's decision to revoke Begum's citizenship, with many respondents citing national security concerns and moral judgment as the basis for their views.[301]

Social media platforms also became spaces where outrage was expressed in highly gendered terms, framing Begum as manipulative and emblematic of broader threats posed by radicalised women.[302] These dynamics reveal how gender, race, security and politics intertwine to shape the boundaries of national belonging. Begum's case became a site upon which anxieties about terrorism and multiculturalism were projected. The debate surrounding her was less about the specifics of her actions and more about what she was perceived to symbolise: the failure of multicultural Britain and the dangers of radicalised femininity. Public discourse thereby transformed her from an individual into a political metaphor, eclipsing the structural, gendered constraints that shaped her trajectory into and within ISIS.[303] In doing so, this gendered public criminalisation not only helped to legitimate the state's response, but it also positioned her case as a policy template that extends beyond Begum herself, normalising citizenship deprivation as a tool of governance and risk management in the prevention of political violence.

4.1.5 Policy implications

The outcomes of Begum's case has significant implications for UK counterterrorism policy, citizenship practice, the return of female FFs and the UK security.

One of the clearest consequences is the consolidation of citizenship deprivation as a routine

---

[300] Vale G., *"Shamima Begum, regardless of her new image, remains the UK's responsibility",* Islam Khabar, 12 October 2021

[301] Sky News, *"Shamima Begum: 78% of Britons support revoking IS bride's UK citizenship",* 20 February 2019

[302] Evans C. & da Silva R., *"#ShamimaBegum: An analysis of social media narratives relating to female terrorist actors",* Politics, 2021, pag 7

[303] Farnham H., *"What the media circus surrounding Shamima Begum can teach us about gender and nation"*, LSE, 3 April 2019

security measure. Although historically deployed only in exceptional circumstances, deprivation powers have expanded steadily since the early 2000s, transforming from a marginal administrative tool into a central pillar of contemporary counterterrorism governance.[304] This shift reflects a broader reconceptualisation of citizenship: no longer understood as a stable legal status, it increasingly operates as a conditional privilege that may be withdrawn when individuals are constructed as threats to national security.

This evolution must be understood through the lens of racialised governance. As El-Enany demonstrates, citizenship deprivation disproportionately affects racialised Britons and those with migration backgrounds, whose belonging is treated as contingent rather than inherent.[305] Begum's case makes this asymmetry particularly visible.

The legal basis for her deprivation rested on the assumption that she was eligible for another nationality, highlighting how dual nationals and children of migrants occupy a structurally more precarious position within the UK citizenship regime. The case therefore raises broader concerns about equality before the law and the racialised boundaries of Britishness in contemporary counterterrorism practice.

Beyond citizenship deprivation, Begum's case exposes a deeper policy tension between securitisation and reintegration of FFs. As outlined in earlier chapters, effective approaches to disengagement[306] and deradicalisation[307] depend on different factors: individualised assessment, legal accountability, support systems and rehabilitation mechanisms. However, once Begum was successfully framed as an existential security threat, her case was removed from the realm of normal legal and political process. In line with the securitisation theory, this framing legitimised exceptional measures and foreclosed the possibility of prosecution or structured deradicalisation.[308]

This tension is further evident in the UK's broader approach to FFs who are stuck abroad. International bodies, including UN agencies, have repeatedly warned that refusal to repatriate citizens generates destabilising effects.[309] It places significant burdens on local authorities in

---

[304] Macklin A., *"Citizenship Revocation, the Privilege to Have Rights, and the Production of the Alien",* Queen's Law Journal, 40(1), 2014, pag 4

[305] El-Enany N., "*Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire",* Manchester University Press, 2020

[306] Barrelle K., "*Pro-integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism"* Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 7(2), 2015, pag 131

[307] El-Said H., "*Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs: The Role of Religion in Countering Violent Extremism",* United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 335, 2015, pag 1

[308] Buzan B., Wæver O. & de Wilde J., "*Security: A new framework for analysis",* Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, pag 23-24

[309] UN Security Council, *"Ninth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat",* 31 July 2019, S/2019/612, pag 3

conflict zones, entrenches conditions of indefinite detention (Al-Hol Camp), and risks exacerbating trauma and radicalisation—particularly among women and children.

From a policy perspective, non-repatriation may therefore undermine long-term security rather than enhance it, while simultaneously weakening compliance with international legal obligations. Research on female FFs further illustrates the limitations of exclusion-based policy. As discussed in previous chapters, women's experiences within ISIS were diverse and shaped by a combination of ideological commitment, coercion, dependency, and constrained agency. Feminist security scholarship demonstrates that women associated with extremist groups are often evaluated through normative expectations of femininity, remorse, and emotional legibility rather than through evidence-based risk assessment.[310]

Begum's case aligns with these dynamics. Her failure to conform to the figure of the *"ideal victim"* in early media appearances contributed to her construction as morally deviant and ungovernable, reinforcing securitised narratives of threat.[311] In this context, her denials of operational involvement carried little weight, as gendered expectations shaped how credibility and danger were assessed.[312]

Taken together, these developments suggest that current counterterrorism strategies prioritise symbolic exclusion over sustainable security outcomes. The consolidation of citizenship deprivation, combined with the refusal to repatriate female FFs, limits opportunities for accountability and long-term rehabilitation. The implications extend beyond Begum's individual circumstances, raising fundamental questions about the future of citizenship, the perception of women involved in violence, the problem of returning FFs and the effectiveness of counterterrorism approaches grounded in exclusion rather than engagement.

4.2 Long-term incarceration: The case of Umm Sayyaf

The case of Nasrin Assad Ibrahim Bahar, also known as Umm Sayyaf, offers a critical lens through which to examine women's participation in ISIS beyond dominant narratives of victimhood. Her story is emblematic because she is considered one of the most influential women in ISIS.[313]

---

[310] Sjoberg L. & Gentry C.E., "*Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics",* Zed Books, 2007, pag 15

[311] Downing L., *"'She's Not Likeable': Shamima Begum, Sex Stereotypes, and Emotionalism in Public Discourse",* University of Birmingham, 24 August 202

[312] Shepherd L.J.*, "Victims, perpetrators, actors or agents? Gender, armed conflict and securitization"*, International Studies Quarterly, 52(1), 2008, pag 32

[313] Blavignat Y.*, "La veuve d'un responsable de Daech a aidé la CIA à traquer Baghdadi",* Le Figaro, 31 March 2019

Publicly available information about her early life is limited, reflecting a broader asymmetry in how the lives of non-Western women affiliated with ISIS are documented compared to those of Western recruits.[314] She is reportedly an Iraqi citizen born into a Sunni Muslim family (The Guardian, 2015).

Her public visibility emerged primarily through her marriage to Fathi ben Awn ben Jildi Murad al-Tunisi, also known as Abu Sayyaf, a suspected senior ISIS official and one of the group's most important administrators. He served as ISIS's minister of oil and gas, managing the group's energy infrastructure and financial operations. Through this role, he occupied a central position within ISIS's proto-state apparatus, and his household was embedded within the organization's elite networks.

On 15th May 2015, US special operations forces conducted a raid on the Sayyaf residence in Al-Shaddadi, Syria. Abu Sayyaf was killed during the operation, while Umm Sayyaf was captured and subsequently detained by US forces in Iraq.[315] She was interrogated by the High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group, reflecting an assessment that her position within ISIS afforded her access to information of strategic value.

US forces later transferred her to the custody of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil (Iraq), where details concerning her trial and sentencing have remained largely unclear. In early 2016, US authorities initiated criminal proceedings against Umm Sayyaf in the Eastern District of Virginia, charging her under federal counterterrorism legislation for conspiring to provide material support to a designated terrorist organization.

At the same time, parallel proceedings were undertaken by the KRG in Erbil. Available information suggests that these proceedings lacked transparency: no witnesses were reportedly called, the trial was closed to both victims and the press, and Umm Sayyaf was subsequently convicted in the spring of 2016 for an offense connected to ISIS membership.[316] Pentagon officials stated that she would not be transferred to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.[317] On 8th February 2016, Umm Sayyaf was charged by US prosecutors in Virginia with providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization resulting in death, an offense carrying a potential maximum sentence of life imprisonment and the US law applies extraterritorially.

It was reported by British media sources that she cooperated with US intelligence and Kurdish

---

[314] Yılmaz Z., "*Critique of ISIS' Women Policy",* Journal of International Social Research, 10(51), 2017, pag 8-9

[315] Weizmann N. & Ingber R., "*What happened to Umm Sayyaf?",* Lawfare, Foreign Relations and International Law, 11 June 2015

[316] The Center for Justice and Accountability, *"ISIL Atrocities Against the Yazidi: U.S. vs Umm Sayyaf"*

[317] Counter Extremism Project, *"Umm Sayyaf"*

forces by providing information on the movements, safe houses, intelligence information and networks of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS' leader. In February 2016, she reportedly identified a residence in Mosul believed to have been used by al-Baghdadi.[318] Despite the existence of an outstanding federal arrest warrant, there is no public evidence that US authorities have sought her extradition from Iraq in order to proceed with a trial before a US court.

4.2.1 Role inside ISIS: enslavement and violence

Extensive judicial records, survivor testimony, investigative reporting and legal proceedings indicate that Umm Sayyaf played an active role in the enslavement and abuse of Yazidi women and girls.[319] Together with her husband, she held multiple Yazidi captives in their home, as well as American humanitarian worker Kayla Mueller.

During the raid of 2015, US soldiers freed a young Yazidi woman who had been held by the couple as a slave.[320] The captives were subjected to beatings, torture, starvation, and sexual violence, and were confined in locked rooms under constant threat.

Women held in the Sayyaf household were made available to visiting ISIS fighters, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group's leader.[321] Evidence suggests that Umm Sayyaf exercised direct authority over the captives' daily lives.

During periods when her husband traveled on ISIS business, Umm Sayyaf assumed sole responsibility for controlling the captives, a role she later admitted during FBI interviews. These actions formed a central element of the criminal complaint filed by US prosecutors in 2016, which alleged her involvement in a conspiracy to provide material support to ISIS that resulted in the death of Mueller.[322]

According to the affidavit supporting the criminal complaint, she was kidnapped by ISIS fighters in August 2013 and remained in captivity until her death in February 2015.

The captives were at various times restrained with handcuffs and confined in locked rooms, and it's indicated that Mueller was subjected to sexual abuse by Abu Sayyaf prior to being taken as a forced wife by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Available evidence indicates that Umm

---

[318] Blavignat Y., *"La veuve d'un responsable de Daech a aidé la CIA à traquer Baghdadi",* Le Figaro, 31 March 2019

[319] UN Security Council, "*Statement by the Permanent Representative of Vietnam to the United Nations, S/2021/460*, 12 May 2021

[320] Argentieri B. & Serafini M., *"Chi è Umm Sayyaf (e che ruolo ha), la moglie del leader di Isis ucciso",* Corriere della Sera Esteri, 19 May 2015

[321] The Center for Justice and Accountability, *"ISIL Atrocities Against the Yazidi: U.S. vs Umm Sayyaf"*

[322] US Department of Justice, *"Wife of Deceased ISIL Leader Charged in Death of Kayla Jean Mueller"*, Office of Public Affairs, Eastern District of Virginia, 8 February 2016

Sayyaf was aware of Mueller's treatment while she was held against her will in the Sayyaf household.

Beginning in mid-June 2015, Umm Sayyaf was interviewed by FBI agents and acknowledged that her family had been affiliated with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the predecessor organization to ISIS, and remained members following its reconstitution. She further admitted to holding Mueller, two Yazidi women, and other individuals hostage on behalf of ISIS, assuming sole responsibility for their captivity during periods when her husband was traveling on business. In addition, she acknowledged hosting ISIS members, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, at her residence. Umm Sayyaf confirmed during questioning that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been Mueller's primary abuser.[323] This pattern of conduct illustrates how violence within ISIS was enacted not only through overt combat or public punishment, but also through the routine administration of captivity within domestic spaces. Recognizing domestic authority as a mechanism of violence is critical for understanding the nature of women's participation in jihadist organizations. While Umm Sayyaf did not engage in combat, her domestic authority was instrumental in sustaining ISIS's gendered and racialized system of domination. This challenges analytical frameworks that equate participation primarily with battlefield activity and underscores the need to broaden legal and conceptual definitions of perpetration. Feminist scholarship on political violence emphasizes that violence is not limited to battlefield activity, but also occurs through routine practices of coercion and normalization.[324]

4.2.2 Legal proceedings and accountability

The implications of this expanded understanding of violence become particularly evident when examining the legal treatment of Umm Sayyaf.

Despite extensive evidence indicating her involvement in systems of enslavement, torture, and sexual violence against Yazidi women—including her proximity to decision-making structures and her role within ISIS's domestic and bureaucratic apparatus—judicial proceedings ultimately focused on charges of material support to a terrorist organization.[325]

---

[323] Meek J.G., *"ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Sexually Abused American Hostage Kayla Mueller, Officials Say",* ABC News, 14 August 2015

[324] Enloe C., "*Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*", Pandora Press, 1990, pag 6

[325] Ní Aoláin F., *"The 'war on terror' and extremism: assessing the relevance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda",* International Affairs, 92(2), 2016, pag 281

The principal legal action initiated by the US was a criminal complaint filed in February 2016 charging her with conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization resulting in death. She was sentenced in 2021 to life imprisonment on terrorism-related grounds, without being prosecuted for crimes of enslavement or crimes against humanity. For several years, Yazidi survivors enslaved by the Sayyafs remained excluded from meaningful participation in legal proceedings.

US authorities initially maintained that protections under the Crime Victims' Rights Act (CVRA)[326] were inapplicable, citing Umm Sayyaf's non-extradition and her reported life sentence in Iraq. As a result, victims were not formally recognized within US proceedings, nor were they provided timely access to information related to the case. It was only years later that US federal courts formally recognized five Yazidi women as victims, acknowledging that they had been enslaved and subjected to severe abuse in the Sayyaf household.[327] This delayed recognition underscores the disjunction between the documentation of harm and its translation into legal standing.[328]

More broadly, Umm Sayyaf's case exposes how prosecutorial strategies centered on material support offenses can obscure patterns of direct perpetration, particularly when violence is exercised within domestic and gendered spaces. Crimes such as enslavement and sexual violence are often treated as ancillary to terrorism rather than as central components of extremist governance.[329] When combined with gendered assumptions that frame women primarily as dependents or coerced actors, this legal architecture contributes to accountability gaps in which women's roles as perpetrators of atrocity crimes remain under-addressed.[330] From a feminist and postcolonial perspective, this outcome reflects deeper structural limits within contemporary counterterrorism law. The reliance on material support charges prioritizes state security interests over victim-centred accountability and narrows the legal imagination of harm to forms that are legible within terrorism statutes. Gendered and racialized violence—particularly when exercised in private or domestic settings—remains difficult to prosecute within frameworks designed around combatancy or public acts of

---

[326] US Justice for All Act, The Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004 and the Federal Courts Federal Judicial Center, 24 October 2005

[327] Kurdistan 24, *"Five Yezidi women recognized as 'victims' of ISIS financers' widow",* Security page, 6 February 2021

[328] Macklin A., *"Citizenship Revocation, the Privilege to Have Rights, and the Production of the Alien",* Queen's Law Journal, 40(1), 2014, pag 4

[329] Grey R.. "*Prosecuting Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes at the International Criminal Court: Practice, Progress and Potential*", Cambridge University Press, 2019, pag 101

[330] UN Human Rights Council, "*They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis",* A/HRC/32/CRP.2, 2016

violence.[331] This action further demonstrates how women's perpetration of atrocity crimes is not denied outright, but is rendered legally secondary, reinforcing hierarchies of harm that marginalize survivors of sexual and enslavement-based violence.

This case underlines how existing legal frameworks struggle to reconcile counterterrorism priorities with the prosecution of gendered atrocity crimes, a tension that has broader implications for accountability and justice in cases involving female participants in extremist organizations.

4.2.3 Media and public discourse

Media and public discourse surrounding Umm Sayyaf heavily differs from that of Western female ISIS affiliates, not in terms of intensity, but in function. Her representation is largely confined to narratives of victimhood and testimonial authority, positioning her as evidence of ISIS's gendered violence rather than as a political or security subject in her own right.[332]

Her representation effectively depoliticizes her involvement in the organization, shifting attention away from questions of ideological alignment or responsibility and toward her instrumental value as a witness to atrocity. In reporting on Umm Sayyaf's interview with The Guardian, she is foregrounded as a source on ISIS leadership brutality—her own voice incorporated primarily to confirm narratives of violence rather than to explore her subjectivity.[333]As a result, Umm Sayyaf is depicted not as a potential threat to be managed, but as a moral figure through whom broader claims about ISIS brutality can be articulated.[334]

Importantly, Umm Sayyaf's visibility in public discourse is highly conditional, reflected in the limited and fragmented nature of available information about her personal history and lived experience within ISIS.

Unlike Western female returnees whose lives have been extensively scrutinized and narrativized across media platforms[335], Umm Sayyaf appears primarily through legal documents and mediated testimony. Furthermore, the contrast with Western female returnees highlights how discursive practices are unevenly applied: non-Western women are often

---

[331] Enloe C., "*Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*", Pandora Press, 1990, pag 10

[332] Nabut M.J.A, "*Through a gendered lens: women ISIS recruits in the media*", American University of Beirut, 2016, pag 21

[333] Chulov M., *"Isis wife and alleged Kayla Mueller jailer: 'Our husbands became like wild animals'",* The Guardian, 31 May 2019

[334] Balzacq T., "*Securitization theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve",* Routledge, 2011, pag 5

[335] Sotorra A., "*The Return: Life After ISIS*", Documentary film, Alba Sotorra Cinema Productions, 2021

rendered morally exemplary but politically silent, whereas Western women are scrutinized as security threats, demonstrating how media and public discourse reproduce hierarchies of visibility and risk.[336]

Her presence is largely restricted to contexts that advance humanitarian or prosecutorial objectives—such as documentation of sexual slavery or war crimes—while other dimensions of her experience, including her life prior to ISIS, everyday survival, constrained decision-making, and potential forms of agency within coercive structures, remain largely unexplored. This selective visibility produces a form of discursive opacity that is not incidental, but structurally embedded in legal practices. The lack of biographical detail surrounding Umm Sayyaf therefore functions not as an empirical gap to be filled, but as an analytical indicator of how power and security intersect in the governance of women emerging from violent extremist contexts.

Ultimately, the limited narrativization of Umm Sayyaf reflects broader security and media practices in which silence and absence are not incidental but constitutive.[337] Visibility is conditional, structured by legal and moral imperatives, and operates as a mechanism through which selective knowledge and authority are produced.

4.2.4 Policy implications

The case of Umm Sayyaf highlights the limits of prevailing policy frameworks that govern responses to women associated with ISIS. Unlike Western female FFs, Umm Sayyaf was neither a voluntary migrant nor a returnee to a country of origin. Her experience was shaped primarily by coercion, enslavement, and gender-based violence within ISIS-controlled territory, particularly within the group's system of sexual slavery against Yazidi women.[338]

As such, her case exposes a critical blind spot in counterterrorism policy frameworks, which are largely designed around questions of security risk, rather than around accountability for gendered crimes.[339]

From a legal perspective, Umm Sayyaf's prosecution underscores how international justice mechanisms tend to address women associated with extremist groups through a

---

[336] Nabut M.J.A, "*Through a gendered lens: women ISIS recruits in the media*", American University of Beirut, 2016, pag 100

[337] Hansen L., "*Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War",* Routledge, 2006

[338] The Center for Justice and Accountability, *"ISIL Atrocities Against the Yazidi: U.S. vs Umm Sayyaf"*

[339] Renard T. & Coolsaet R., "*Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?",* Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018, pag 19

victim-centered lens, particularly when sexual violence is involved.[340] This approach is essential for acknowledging and redressing crimes such as enslavement, sexual violence, rape, and genocide, which have been extensively documented in the Syrian context.[341] At the same time, it risks depoliticizing women's experiences by framing them exclusively as humanitarian subjects rather than as actors embedded—voluntarily or coercively—within a broader political system of violence.[342] Umm Sayyaf's experience illustrates how coercion and structural violence coexist within extremist systems, complicating simplistic legal and policy responses. Effective policy must therefore integrate counterterrorism, international criminal justice, and feminist legal perspectives, ensuring that women's experiences of ISIS are neither securitized indiscriminately nor stripped of political meaning.[343] By foregrounding gendered harm while situating it within the broader machinery of extremist governance, Umm Sayyaf's case offers critical lessons for developing more inclusive and analytically robust responses to women's involvement in violent extremism.

4.3 Deradicalization and reintegration processes in Europe

Considering the different trajectories of women associated with or exiting from ISIS, the analysis in this section cannot be limited to a singular case study or apply a one-size-fits-all analytical framework. Within the context of deradicalization and reintegration initiatives, focusing on just one individual is impractical, given the strict anonymity and confidentiality protocols that protect participants. Consequently, this segment explores approaches from Spain and the Netherlands, offering insights into broader institutional practices.

Both countries operate within EU-level coordination frameworks and actively engage with the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)[344], which facilitates the exchange of best practices and supports the development of prevention, disengagement, and reintegration strategies. While several European countries have developed formal deradicalization programmes—such as Hayat in Germany and Prevent in the UK—the availability of systematic and public data on

---

[340] Shea N. & Ispahani F., *"Don't Give Jihadi Brides Victimhood Status. Try Them",* Hudson, Rear Clear Politics, 20 March 2019

[341] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *"I Lost My Dignity: Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Syrian Arab Republic",* United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 15 March 2018

[342] Chinkin C. & Charlesworth H., "*The Boundaries of International Law: A Feminist Analysis",* Manchester University Press, 2000, pag 51

[343] Ibidem, pag 51

[344] Radicalization Awareness Network, *"Approaches and Best Practices",* 4th edn. Brussels, 2017

their implementation and effectiveness remains scarce. Furthermore, it is too soon to fully evaluate the success of these initiatives, as only about seven years have passed since the territorial defeat of ISIS.

4.3.1 The Spanish case

Spain has experienced significant jihadist attacks, including the 1985 El Descanso bombing, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and the 2017 Barcelona and Cambrils attacks. Despite these events, relatively few Spanish FFs joined ISIS compared to other European countries.

Female involvement in jihadist activities emerged in 2014, when two young women attempted to travel to join ISIS. This led to the dismantling of recruitment networks and the conviction of at least 20 women by 2024. Approximately 30 women ultimately traveled to Syria and Iraq, some of whom have been repatriated with their children and remain in custody, while others are still unaccounted for. The recent increase in female arrests highlights the evolving role of women in jihadist networks within Spain.[345]

The country employs a multifaceted strategy for preventing radicalization, blending early detection, community-focused initiatives, and post-intervention assistance. The approach centers on identifying individuals deemed vulnerable—such as incarcerated populations and marginalized communities—through collaborative efforts involving social workers, mental health professionals, educators, and law enforcement agencies. Prevention measures focus on fostering community participation and partnering with religious leaders and civil society organizations to challenge extremist ideologies. These efforts are bolstered by counterterrorism laws and advanced digital monitoring systems by promoting social and economic inclusion.[346]

García García's study, "*The Deradicalisation and Disengagement of Women Convicted of Terrorism Offences in Spain"*, examines thirteen women sentenced between 2017 and 2020, focusing on the factors that led them to disengage from ISIS or undergo transformations in their belief systems. The study indicates that none of the women participated in structured deradicalisation programs, since no such initiative was available in the country; instead, they were subjected to general rehabilitation measures applied to the entire prison population. Interviews with both the women and professionals working with them reveal the importance

[345] García García M.I., "*The deradicalisation and disengagement of women convicted of terrorism offences in Spain*", Perspectives on Terrorism, XVIII(3), 2024, pag 118-119

[346] Law Gratis, *"Radicalization Prevention Strategies In Spain",* 25 December 2025

of tailored interventions that account for age, family dynamics, and the presence of children, many of whom accompany mothers returning from conflict zones. García García's research highlights that their motivations often stemmed less from a profound ideological commitment and more from a combination of relational and situational influences.

Factors such as loneliness, emotional dependency, the pursuit of belonging, and family pressures played significant roles. Nevertheless, these influences did not override their personal agency. The choice to travel to Syria was ultimately taken by the women themselves as a deliberate and conscious decision. During incarceration, these women were placed in high-security units, as outlined in Article 10.1 of the Spanish Penitentiary Regulations.[347]

This classification is typically applied to all terrorism offenders, regardless of the specific crime or the inmate's behavior. As a result, women sentenced for relatively minor offences, such as self-indoctrination, often share space with inmates convicted of severe violent crimes, including murder. Despite these restrictive conditions, in the article the women reported their experiences of detention, discussing emotional responses at arrest, coping strategies, and attitudes toward ISIS ideology.

Key themes included disillusionment with the idealized life promised by ISIS and the crucial role of supportive social networks, while continued contact with radicalized family members emerged as a potential obstacle to disengagement. Key elements emerged as crucial in the deradicalization process. In the Spanish context, penitentiary and psychosocial measures steered away from focusing solely on religion or ideology. Instead, they addressed underlying vulnerabilities such as trauma, experiences of domestic violence, emotional instability, and low self-esteem, factors that previously facilitated engagement with extremist networks.

For many women, a reordering of priorities—often shaped by motherhood—became a turning point, helping them sever ties with extremist environments and cultivate a renewed sense of identity. Equally instrumental was the gradual reduction of social isolation through education, sports, and daily interactions with educators and professionals, fostering detainees' acceptance as *"ordinary"* members of society. This growing social inclusion tended to weaken emotional ties to extremist ideologies, while stigmatization and excessively repressive approaches were found to reinforce such connections. Many women re-engaged with education and began considering future career paths, reshaping their identities towards constructive and lawful roles. In this framework, disengagement from extremism occurred not through coercive

[347] Carou-García S., "*Primer grado penitenciario y Estado de Derecho. El estatus jurídico de los reclusos en régimen de máxima seguridad*", Barcelona: J.M. Bosch Editor, 2017, in García García M.I., "*The deradicalisation and disengagement of women convicted of terrorism offences in Spain*", Perspectives on Terrorism, XVIII(3), 2024

ideological change but through the creation of alternative life goals and the establishment of significant social connections.[348]

These findings are consistent with Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) studies[349] and literature on female criminal desistance. The study also highlights the influence of social stigma and media narratives, which often frame women convicted of terrorism as either dangerous *"monsters"* or morally corrupt *"whores"*.[350] Such stereotyping obscures the complexity of their experiences and can hinder reintegration. Importantly, some women's involvement in jihadist-related activities was driven more by personal circumstances than by ideology, emphasizing that not all offenders are motivated solely by extremist beliefs or religious interpretations.

Taken together, these findings highlight the complexity of the pathways that lead women to join jihadist networks; they underscore the importance of tailoring exit programmes to women's specific needs, including social services, labour market reintegration, psychological support, and treatment for emotional dependencies; rather than relying on approaches primarily focused on religious or ideological disengagement. The Spanish case illustrates that, even in the absence of comprehensive rehabilitation measures, gender-sensitive pathways can emerge that are adapted to women's specific trajectories into and out of extremism.

4.3.2 The Dutch case

The Netherlands has experienced fewer terrorist attacks than other Western European countries but has not been immune to extremist violence. The 2004 murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh marked a pivotal moment, with lasting societal repercussions. More recent incidents in Amsterdam, The Hague, and the Utrecht tram shooting underscore the ongoing threat of violent extremism.

Since 2012, over 300 Dutch citizens have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups, including approximately 100 women, of whom at least 80 joined ISIS—placing the Netherlands among Europe's countries with the highest relative numbers of female

---

[348] Sommers I., Baskin D.R. & Fagan J., *"Getting out of the life: Crime desistance by female street offenders",* Deviant Behavior, 15(2), 1994, in García García M.I., "*The deradicalisation and disengagement of women convicted of terrorism offences in Spain*", Perspectives on Terrorism, XVIII(3), 2024

[349] UN Peacekeeping, *"Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration"*, Homepage, Accessed 4 February 2026

[350] Sjoberg L. & Gentry C.E., "*Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics",* Zed Books, 2007

jihadists.[351]

At the European level, initiatives such as RAN coordinate counter-extremism efforts, but legal frameworks and concrete measures remain the responsibility of individual member states. In the Netherlands, authorities have developed a multi-layered strategy to address returning FFs, combining security measures with rehabilitation and reintegration programs.[352] The distinctive feature of the Dutch system is that prevention and reintegration programs are not managed by the state, but by the municipalities.

Nevertheless, Gielen's work[353] shows that despite national-level guidance, the establishment of Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) programs and multi-agency protocols remained recommended rather than mandatory. Many smaller municipalities, having seen no cases of violent extremism, were unprepared when young people—or entire families—joined ISIS.

A 2017 study by the Dutch Inspectorate for Safety and Justice found that 64% of small municipalities and 30% of mid-sized municipalities lacked a CVE program.

Since 2013, priority municipalities—those with higher numbers of returning FFs—have taken the lead, developing approaches ranging from legal and administrative measures, such as revoking passports and engaging child protection services, to holistic programs integrating mentoring, religious guidance, and psychological support. The effectiveness of these programs depends heavily on local context. Exit and preventative programs typically combine one-on-one mentoring to build empathy and self-reflection, structured dialogue to challenge extremist thinking, practical support such as housing and employment, psychological counseling, religious or ideological guidance, and family involvement to strengthen protective factors. In the short term, these programs aim to prevent travel to conflict zones; over time, they foster disengagement from extremist networks and contribute to broader deradicalization.

Gielen, in *"Exit Programmes for Female Jihadists: A Proposal for Conducting Realistic Evaluation of the Dutch Approach"*, argues that evaluating such programs requires a mixed-method, realist approach, capturing the interaction of context, mechanisms, and outcomes. The article draws on structured interviews with municipal case managers, analysis of administrative records, and discussions with professionals involved in program delivery. A case study illustrates this approach: a minor from a small municipality with no prior CVE experience attempted to travel to ISIS but was stopped at the border. She was placed under

---

[351] Vermeulen F. & Visser K., *"Preventing violent extremism in the Netherlands: overview of its broad approach",* Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 2021

[352] Gielen A.J, *"Exit Programmes for Female Jihadists: A Proposal for Conducting Realistic Evaluation of the Dutch Approach",* International Sociology, vol. 33, no. 4, 2018, pag 455

[353] Ibidem, pag 455

youth care, and a voluntary, tailored exit program was implemented through a newly established multi-agency collaboration. Interventions included returning her to school, limiting online contact with extremist peers, mentoring, addressing family conflict, and treating basic health issues. Over eighteen months, mentoring and social reintegration enabled her to develop self-reflection, gain insight into her radicalization, and build a non-extremist social network. There were no further travel attempts, demonstrating full disengagement. Building on Gielen's findings, this study further underscores that the most effective exit and disengagement trajectories are grounded in concrete social reintegration rather than purely ideological or religious re-education. Successful approaches focus on reconstructing everyday normality through access to education, employment, and stable social relationships, while fostering alternative social networks that replace jihadist milieus.

Disengagement from extremism appears to occur primarily when individuals are able to sever ties with radical environments and develop a functional social identity, rather than through cognitive or theological interventions alone. Conversely, exclusively repressive measures—such as incarceration or passport revocation—when not accompanied by sustained social and psychological support, risk proving ineffective or even counterproductive.

4.4 Concluding reflections on the case studies

This chapter has analyzed three distinct case studies to shed light on the challenges faced by women associated with ISIS: the revocation of citizenship for Begum, the long-term incarceration of Umm Sayyaf, and the deradicalization and reintegration efforts in Spain and the Netherlands. Together, these cases reveal that state responses are far from uniform and cannot be viewed purely through a security-focused lens; instead, they are significantly shaped by gendered assumptions. The first case study demonstrates how citizenship revocation is used as a securitized measure, prioritizing national security concerns while raising significant human rights issues. It also highlights how media coverage can intensify political debates surrounding such decisions. In contrast, the prosecution and extended detention of Umm Sayyaf illustrate a more punitive approach rooted in criminal accountability, particularly for women involved in severe acts of violence and enslavement. This case underscores the need to evaluate women's participation based on the seriousness of their actions and individual responsibility. The examination of deradicalization and reintegration initiatives in Europe offers yet another perspective. The approaches adopted in Spain and the Netherlands reflect efforts to balance security imperatives with rehabilitation

pursuits, employing gender-sensitive programs alongside sustained monitoring. These examples highlight the importance of integrating strategies that address ideological commitment, psychological trauma, and social acceptance as part of sustainable reintegration processes. As noted earlier, Spain lacks a centralized reintegration program solely dedicated to ISIS returnees, relying instead on a structured prison-based model complemented by broader preventive policies. Across all three case studies, one key observation stands out: policies addressing female ISIS affiliates are heavily influenced by how women are perceived—whether as victims, threats to security, or subjects suitable for rehabilitation. These perceptions shape the boundaries of what is considered appropriate or feasible in policymaking. This section argues that effective and rights-compliant approaches require a nuanced understanding of the diverse roles women play. Simplistic categorizations risk compromising both justice objectives and long-term security goals.

Conclusions

This thesis has explored women's participation in ISIS and the challenges associated with their involvement, accountability, return, deradicalization, and reintegration using a gender-sensitive, theoretically informed perspective. By applying radicalization theory, securitization, and feminist international relations frameworks, the study has shown that women's roles in jihadist movements cannot be fully understood through simplistic binaries of victimhood versus agency. Instead, these trajectories are influenced by a multifaceted interaction of ideological commitment, personal choices, structural barriers, and gendered expectations imposed by both extremist groups and state actors. The research reveals several interconnected findings. Firstly, the pathways that led women into ISIS were neither homogeneous nor accidental. ISIS deliberately recruited women as an integral part of its state-building efforts, assigning them roles considered essential for sustaining the Caliphate's existence. Despite being subjected to patriarchal constraints and violence under ISIS governance, many women exercised degrees of personal agency in supporting or enforcing the group's operations. This challenges reductive portrayals of these women as passive victims or *"jihadi brides",* highlighting their more active involvement as political actors, albeit within contexts marked by coercion. Secondly, the study highlights how gendered narratives profoundly shape state responses to female FFs. Through securitization theory, it becomes evident that women linked to ISIS are variably framed as security threats. These representations have often been used to justify exceptional measures such as revoking citizenship or denying repatriation, particularly in Western nations. Also SWANA states tend to adopt security-centered or punitive approaches influenced by domestic legal frameworks and resource limitations.

The first case study, the Begum case, demonstrates that, despite the fact that in several European states increasingly sophisticated prevention and deradicalization programs have been developed, governments have nevertheless resorted to exceptional measures that infringe fundamental rights, such as the revocation of citizenship. This policy calls into question European states' self-representation as guarantors of their citizens' rights when those citizens have a migrant background, revealing persistent hierarchies of belonging and the conditional nature of citizenship within the framework of counterterrorism governance.

The second case study, the Sayyaf's case exemplifies another way in which the state manages the return and accountability of women involved in terrorism: the use of very severe prison

sentences unaccompanied by any genuine rehabilitative or reintegration intent. Faced with what is constructed as a security emergency, states tend to resolve the issue through exemplary punishments aimed at deterrence. However, these women, sentenced to long prison terms, often come into contact with other women within correctional facilities, potentially radicalizing other inmates. Once released, they may continue criminal or extremist paths, thereby undermining long term security objectives.

The case studies on reintegration initiatives show that some states have indeed adopted genuine and effective reintegration policies, demonstrating that a third path exists between abandonment abroad and the use of particularly severe exemplary punishments. At the same time, they highlight a central conclusion of this research: deradicalization and reintegration programs struggle to be concretely implemented, as states tend to rely on rehabilitation tools that already exist at the state or municipal level.

In none of these cases is there evidence of gender oriented or gender specific strategies, nor of interventions designed on the basis of the particular trajectories and needs of women involved in processes of radicalization, detention, and reintegration. On the contrary, the policies analyzed tend to apply standardized models that are formally gender neutral, ultimately obscuring the relational, emotional, and socio economic dynamics that distinctively shape women's experiences in violent extremism.

Academically, this thesis contributes important insights by critiquing male-dominated models that fail to adequately account for the motivations and experiences of women in violent extremism. By incorporating feminist and postcolonial theories, it challenges securitized and Eurocentric perspectives on extremism, emphasizing how factors like gender and race influence both participation in and responses to jihadist activities. In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest that solely exclusionary approaches are unlikely to achieve durable security benefits. Instead, repatriation, prosecution, deradicalization, and reintegration processes should be integrated into a broader rights-based framework. Gender-aware deradicalization programs that address the varying roles and ideological commitments of women have greater potential to reduce recidivism and promote social cohesion.

The study does acknowledge certain limitations. Due to restricted access to primary data and interviews with returnees, most analyses rely on secondary sources, interviews, policy documents, and publicly available case studies. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, access to data on women who have participated in official rehabilitation programmes remains extremely limited. Additionally, given the relatively recent emergence of deradicalization and

reintegration efforts, there is limited availability of long-term outcome data and comparative evaluations. These constraints point to opportunities for future research. Conducting empirical studies that engage directly with women involved in ISIS, possible returnees, practitioners, and affected communities would provide richer insights into disengagement processes and reintegration difficulties. Future research could also focus on the unique experiences of children born under ISIS rule, whose legal status and societal stigmatization present pressing ethical and security issues. Expanding comparative studies beyond Europe and SWANA regions would further shed light on how diverse legal systems and cultural frameworks shape gendered approaches to violent extremism.

To conclude, this thesis argues that comprehending women's participation in ISIS necessitates looking beyond simplistic labels and adopting analytical approaches that consider both their agency and the constraints they face. Dealing with the aftermath of ISIS demands a careful equilibrium between security priorities, respect for human rights, the pursuit of justice, and the goal of ensuring long-term social stability.

Bibliography

Abbas M.S., *"British children associated with ISIS in camps in North-East Syria: counter-terrorism, security and children's rights concerns in repatriation decision-making",* Ethnic and Racial Studies, 2024, pag 1-19

al-Adnani Abu Muhammad , *"The Caliphate Has Been Established",* The Islamic State, 29 June 2014

Almohammad, Asaad H. & Speckhard A., "*The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers*", International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017

Althuis J., Samarrai M. & Alzuber N., *"Struggling to Keep Up: Iraqi Returnees' Economic (Re)integration Progress Over Time",* UN Institute for Disarmament Research, Findings Report 45, Geneva, 6 August 2025

Altier M.B., Thoroughgood C.N., & Horgan J., *"Turning away from terrorism: Lessons from psychology, sociology, and criminology",* Journal of Peace Research, 51(5), 2014, pages 647-661

Aly A., "*Terrorism and counter-terrorism: Contemporary debates",* Routledge, 2015

Aly A., Taylor E. & Karnovsky S., *"Moral disengagement and building resilience to violent extremism: An education intervention"*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 37(4), 2014, pag 369-385

Amnesty International, **"***The Condemned: Women and Children Isolated, Trapped and Exploited in Iraq and Northeast Syria",* London, 2020

Bagheri S. & Bisset A., *"International Legal Issues Arising from Repatriation of the Children of Islamic State"*, Journal of Conflict and Security Law, Volume 27, Issue 3, 2022, pag 363-385

Balzacq T., "*Securitization theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve",* Routledge, 2011

Barrelle K., "*Pro-integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism"* Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 7(2), 2015, pag 129-142

Barrett R., "*Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*", The Soufan Center, October 2017

Bartlett J. & Birdwell J., "*Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action*", London: Demos, 2010

Bigo D., "*Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease*", Alternatives, 27(Special Issue), 2002, pag 63-92

Bjørgo T. & Horgan J., "*Leaving terrorism behind: Individual and collective disengagement*", Routledge, 2009

Bloom M., *"Small Arms: Children and Youth in ISIS",* The Strategic Use of Children in Armed Groups, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Bloom M., "*Small Arms: Children and Terrorism",* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017

Bloom M., Tiflati H. & Horgan J., *"Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram",* Terrorism and Political Violence, vol. 31, no. 6, 2019

Bronsard G., Cohen D., Diallo I., Pellerin H., Varnoux A., Podlipski M.A., Gerardin P., Boyer L. & Campelo N., "*Adolescents Engaged in Radicalisation and Terrorism: A Dimensional and Categorical Assessment",* Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12, 774063, 2022

Brown, K. "*Gender and the Islamic State*", Policy Brief 34, Brookings Institution, 2018

Buzan B., Wæver O. & de Wilde J., "*Security: A new framework for analysis",* Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998

Byman D., "*Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know",* Oxford University Press, 2015

Carou-García S., "*Primer grado penitenciario y Estado de Derecho. El estatus jurídico de los reclusos en régimen de máxima seguridad*", Barcelona: J.M. Bosch Editor, 2017

Carter J., Neumann P. R. & Maher S., "*#Greenbirds: Measuring importance and influence in Syrian foreign fighter networks*", London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2014

Cherney A. & Belton E., *"Evaluating interventions to disengage extremist offenders: A study of the proactive integrated support model"*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 31(6), 2019, pages 1218-1240

Chinkin C. & Charlesworth H., "*The Boundaries of International Law: A Feminist Analysis",* Manchester University Press, 2000,

Claussen C., "*U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy: Trends, Policies, and Legal Challenges*, Journal of National Security Law, 9(2), 2018, pag 45-72

Conway M., "*Determining the role of the internet in violent extremism and terrorism: Six suggestions for progressing research",* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 40(1), 2017, pag 77-98

Cook D., *"Women fighting in jihad?"*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 28(5), 2005

Cook D., "*ISIS and the Future of Jihadism*", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 43(8), 2020

Cook J. & Vale G., "*From Daesh to "Diaspora": Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State",* International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2019

Crenshaw K., *"Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color"*, Stanford Law Review, 43(6), pages 1241-1299

Crettiez X., *"Penser la radicalisation: Une sociologie processuelle des variables de l'engagement violent*", Revue française de science politique, 66(5), 2016, pag 709-727

El-Enany N., "*Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire",* Manchester University Press, 2020

El-Said H., "*Deradicalising violent extremists: Counter-radicalisation and deradicalisation programmes and their impact in Muslim majority states*", Routledge, 2015

El-Said, H., "*Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs: The Role of Religion in Countering Violent Extremism",* United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 335, 2015

El-Said H., **"***New approaches to countering terrorism: Designing and evaluating counter radicalization and de-radicalization programs",* Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Enloe C., "*Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*", Pandora Press, 1990

Evans C. & da Silva R., *"#ShamimaBegum: An analysis of social media narratives relating to female terrorist actors",* Politics, 2021

Fernandez Gomez C., *"A new approach for open prisons in Spain"*, Spanish Prison Governor and Spanish liaison of EuroPris, March 2023

Gandhi L., "*Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction"* Columbia University Press, 1998

García García M.I., "*The deradicalisation and disengagement of women convicted of terrorism offences in Spain*", Perspectives on Terrorism, XVIII(3), 2024, pag 115-134

George Washington University, "*ISIS Online: Countering the Virtual Caliphate",* Program on Extremism, 2017

Gielen A.J, *"Exit Programmes for Female Jihadists: A Proposal for Conducting Realistic Evaluation of the Dutch Approach",* International Sociology, vol. 33, no. 4, 2018, pag 455-472

Gielen A.J., *"Rol gemeenten in integrale aanpak radicalisering"*, 2 June. Den Haag: VNG, 2015

Grey R.. "*Prosecuting Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes at the International Criminal Court: Practice, Progress and Potential*", Cambridge University Press, 2019

Haid H., "*The Enduring Crisis of Governance in Northeast Syria*," Carnegie Middle East Center, 2023

Hansen L., *"The Little Mermaid's silent security dilemma and the absence of gender in the Copenhagen School"*, Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 29(2), 2000, pages 285-306

Hansen L., "*Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War",* Routledge, 2006

Harding S., "*Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives",* Cornell University Press, 1991

Heath-Kelly C., *"Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the 'Radicalisation' Discourse",* British Journal of Politics and International Relations 15 (3), 2013, pag 394-415

Heath-Kelly C., "*Gendering terrorism studies: Feminist perspectives on countering violent extremism",* Routledge, 2020

Hecker M., "*French Jihadism: An Overview*", Paris: IFRI Center for Security Studies, 2019

Hegghammer T., *"The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad",* International Security, vol. 35, no. 3, 2010, pages 53–94

Hegghammer T., *"Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting",* American Political Science Review, vol. 107, no. 1, 2013

Hinnebusch R., *"Syria: From 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?",* International Affairs, vol. 88, no. 1, 2012

Horgan J., "*From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism",* The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 618(1), 2008, pages 80-94

Horgan J., "*Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements",* Routledge, 2009

Horgan J. & Braddock K., *"Rehabilitating the terrorists? Challenges in assessing the effectiveness of de-radicalization programs"* Terrorism and Political Violence, 22(2), 2010, pag 267-291

Hoyle C., Bradford A. & Frenett R., "*Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS",* London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015

Huey L. & Witmer R.,*"Women as recruiters in the Islamic State"*, Perspectives on Terrorism, 10(6), 2016

Human Rights Watch, "*Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq*", New York, 2018

Huysmans J., "*The politics of insecurity: Fear, migration and asylum in the EU",* Routledge, 2006

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *"I Lost My Dignity: Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Syrian Arab Republic",* United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 15 March 2018

Institute for Economics and Peace, "*Global Terrorism Index 2016*", Sydney, 2016

International Civil Society Action Network, "*Invisible Women: Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism"*, 2019

International Crisis Group, "*Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State",* Middle East Report No. 188, Brussels, 2018

International Crisis Group, "*Iraq's Post-ISIS Recovery: The Limits of Retribution",* Middle East Report No. 223, Brussels, 2021

International Crisis Group, "*Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS*", Middle East Report No. 208, Brussels, 2019

Jarvis L., "*Time, memory, and critical terrorism studies: 9/11 twenty years on*", Critical Studies on Terrorism, 14(4), 2021, pag 510-513

Kandiyoti D., *"Bargaining with patriarchy"* in Gender & Society, 2(3), 1988, pag 274-290

Kanol E., "*Contexts of Radicalization of Jihadi Foreign Fighters from Europe",* Perspectives on Terrorism, 16(3), 2022, pages 45-62

Koehler D., "*Family Counselling, De-Radicalization and Counter-Terrorism: The HAYAT Program in Germany". Journal EXIT-Deutschland – Zeitschrift für Deradikalisierung und demokratische Kultur"*, Vol. 2, 2013, pag 182-204

Koehler D., "*Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism",* London: Routledge, 2017, pag 89-112

Khosrokhavar F., "*Radicalization: Why some people choose the path of violence",* The New Press, 2016

Kruglanski A.W., Bélanger J.J. & Gunaratna R., *"The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks"*, Oxford University Press, 2019

Kruglanski A.W. et al, *"The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,* Political Psychology, 2014

Kumar R., "*Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Challenges in Repatriation, Prosecution, and Rehabilitation*, Counter Extremism Project, 2021

Kundnani A., "*The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*", London and New York: Verso, 2014

Kundnani A., "*Radicalisation: The journey of a concept",* Race & Class, 54(2), 2012, pag 3-25

Lahoud N., "*The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction",* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018

Lewis R., "*Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation",* Routledge, 1996

Lister C., *"Profiling the Islamic State."* Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 13, 2014

Lister C., "*The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency",* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Loken M. & Zelenz A., *"Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh.",* European Journal of International Security 3, no. 1, 2018

Loomba A., "*Colonialism/Postcolonialism",* Routledge, 1998

Lugones M., *"Toward a decolonial feminism"*, Hypatia*,* 25(4), 2010, pag 742-759

Macklin A., *"Citizenship Revocation, the Privilege to Have Rights, and the Production of the Alien",* In Queen's Law Journal, 40(1), 2014, pag 1-54

Mahood S. & Rane H., *"ISIS, Victimhood, and the Construction of Identity: A Sociological Perspective"* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, vol. 39, no. 6, 2016, pag 498–520

Malet D., "*Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts",* Oxford University Press, 2013

Margolin D. & Cook J., "*The agency and roles of foreign women in ISIS",* Center for Justice and Accountability, 2018

Martini A., *"Making Women Terrorists into "Jihadi Brides". An Analysis of Media Narratives on Women joining ISIS",* in Critical Studies on Terrorism 11(3), 2018, pag 458-477

Masters M. & Regilme Jr. S.S.F, *"Human Rights and British Citizenship: The Case of Shamima Begum as Citizen to Homo Sacer"*, Journal of Human Rights Practice 12, 2020, pag 341-363

McCauley C. & Moskalenko S., "*Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism"*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 20(3), 2008, pag 415-433

McDonald M., *"Securitization and the construction of security"*, European Journal of International Relations, 14(4), 2008

McClintock A., "*Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest",* Routledge, 1995

Mohanty C.T., "*Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity",* Duke University Press, 2003

Mohanty C.T., Russo A. & Torres L., "*Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism",* Indiana University Press, 1991

Mohanty C.T., *"Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses",* Feminist Review 30, 1988, pag 61-88

Moghaddam F. M., "*The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration",* American Psychologist, 60(2), 2005, pag 161-169

Murad N., "*The last girl: My story of captivity, and my fight against the Islamic State*", Tim Duggan Books, 2017

Nabut M.J.A, "*Through a gendered lens: women ISIS recruits in the media*", American University of Beirut, 2016

Narayan U., "*Dislocating cultures: Identities, traditions, and Third World feminism*", Routledge, 1997

Neumann P.R., "*Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*", London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2010

Neumann P., "*The trouble with radicalization. International Affairs"*, 89(4), 2013, pag 873–893

Ní Aoláin F., *"The gender dynamics of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism",* Human Rights Quarterly, 38(1), 2016, pag 271-313

Ní Aoláin F., *"Gendering Counter-Terrorism: Women, Human Rights and Humanitarian Law"*, Human Rights Quarterly, 43(1), 2021, pag 1-33

Ní Aoláin F., *"The 'war on terror' and extremism: assessing the relevance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda",* International Affairs, 92(2), 2016, pag 275-291

Nyaga J.M., "*Rehabilitation Over Retribution: A Path to Sustainable Peace in Countering Violent Extremism",* Riga: Generis Publishing, 2024

Oehlerich E., Mulroy M. & McHugh L., "*Jannah or Jahannam: Options for Dealing with ISIS Detainees"*, Middle East Institute, 2020

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "*Statement on the Detention and Repatriation of Individuals in North-East Syria*", Geneva: UN, 2020

Ozeren S., Hekim H., Elmas M.S. & Canbegi H.I., *"An Analysis of ISIS Propaganda and Recruitment Activities Targeting the Turkish-Speaking Population"*, International Annals of Criminology, 56, 2018, pag 105-121

Pepicelli R., *"Ǧihād e donne: evoluzioni storiche e risignificazioni semantiche e teologiche in età contemporanea"*, in Manduchi P. & Melis N., "*Jihad. Definizioni e riletture di un termine abusato"*, 2019, pag 139-164

Phillips A., *"Shamima Begum loses final UK court bid over citizenship",* BBC News, 7 August 2024, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2n8xv61x3o

Rabasa A., Pettyjohn S.L, Ghez J.J., & Boucek C., "*Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists"*

Renard T. & Coolsaet R., "*Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?",* Egmont Paper 101, Brussels: Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018

Renard T., "*Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence*", In Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2019

Republic of Iraq, "*Anti-Terrorism Law (Law No. 13 of 2005)",* Baghdad: Council of Representatives, Official Gazette of the Republic of Iraq, No. 4006, 9 November 2005, Art 4

Richards A., *"From terrorism to "radicalization" to "extremism": counterterrorism imperative or loss of focus?",* International Affairs, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 91(2), pag 371–380

Sageman M., "*Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century",* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008

Sageman M., *"The Stagnation in Terrorism Research"*, Terrorism and Political Violence 26, no.4, 2014, pag 565–580

Sageman M., "*Understanding Terror Networks",* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004

Saltman E. M. & Smith M., *'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon",* London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015

Schmid A.P., "*Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*", ICCT Research Paper, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013

Shaban S., "*Teenagers, terrorism, and technopanic: How British Newspapers Framed Female ISIS Recruits as Victims of Social Media",* International Journal of Communication 14, 2020, pag 535-555

Shepherd L., "*Gender, Violence and Global Politics*", Routledge, 2008

Shepherd L.J., *"Victims, perpetrators, actors or agents? Gender, armed conflict and securitization"*, International Studies Quarterly, 52(1), 2008, pag 29-46

Silke A., "*Holy warriors: Exploring the psychological processes of jihadi radicalization"*, in T. Bjørgo & J. Horgan (Eds.), "*Leaving terrorism behind: Individual and collective disengagement"*, London: Routledge, 2009

Simoncini G., *"Bad mothers vs good mothers of the nation: The dual faces of Tunisian women in terrorism and in preventing extremism",* Mediterranean Politics, 2024, pag 503-527

Sjoberg L. & Gentry C.E., "*Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics",* Zed Books, 2007

Sky News, "*IS bride Shamima Begum full transcript: "I did have a good time there"*, 20 February 2019, Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/is-bride-shamima-begum-full-transcript-i-did-have-a-good-time-there-11640278

Smith S., *"Introducing Feminism in International Relations Theory"*, in McGlinchey S.,

Walters R., & Scheinpflug C., *"International Relations Theory"*, E-International Relations Publishing, 2017, pag 62-68

Sommers I., Baskin D.R. & Fagan J., *"Getting out of the life: Crime desistance by female street offenders",* Deviant Behavior, 15(2), 1994

Sotorra A., "*The Return: Life After ISIS*", Documentary film, Alba Sotorra Cinema Productions, 2021

Spivak G.C., *"Can the subaltern speak?"*, in Nelson C., & Grossberg L., "*Marxism and the interpretation of culture*", University of Illinois Press, pag 271-313

Strømmen E., "*Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Daesh – From Recruitment to Return",* PRIO Paper 1/2017, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017

Suleri S., "*The Rhetoric of English India",* University of Chicago Press, 1992

Tayler L.M., "*ISIS suspects held in Syria: Repatriation reset under new US, Syrian leaders?",* The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2025

Tickner J.A., "*Gender in International Relations*", Columbia University Press, 1992

Trinh T. Minh-ha., "*Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism",* Indiana University Press, 1989

UN*, "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women",* General Assembly Resolution 34/180, 18 September 1979

UN, "*Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness*", 30 August 1961

UN, "*Convention on the Rights of the Child*", General Assembly Resolution 44/25, 20 November 1989

UN, "*Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons",* Conference of Plenipotentiaries convened by Economic and Social Council resolution 526 A (XVII)28 September 1954

UN Development Programme, "*Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the return and reintegration of women and children"*, 24 October 2022

UN Development Programme, *"Leaving No One Behind: Reintegration of Women and Children Associated with ISIS in Iraq and Syria"*, UN, 2020

UN Human Rights Council, "*Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic",* A/HRC/21/50, 2014

UN Human Rights Council, "*Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children: Promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*, A/HRC/53/28, 2023

UN Human Rights Council, "*They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis",* A/HRC/32/CRP.2, 2016

UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *"Syrian Arab Republic: Country profile on conflict-related sexual violence."*, 9 April 2021

UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "*2016 Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal",* 2016

UN Security Council, *"Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat"*, S/2022/576, 26 July 2022

UN Security Council, *"Ninth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat",* 31 July 2019, S/2019/612

UN Security Council, "*Security Council Resolution 2178 on threats to international peace and security caused by foreign terrorist fighters*", S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014

UN Security Council, *"Security Council Resolution 2396 on threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts: Foreign terrorist fighters (returnees and relocators)"*, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017

UN Security Council, *"Report on Women and the Islamic State",* (S/2019/239), 2019

UN, "*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*", 10 December 1948

United States Institute of Peace, "*Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict",* Peaceworks Report No. 452, August 2019

US Justice for All Act, The Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004 and the Federal Courts Federal Judicial Center, 24 October 2005

ale G., "*Women in Islamic State: From caliphate to camps*", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019

Van der Krogt & Christopher J., *"The kafir's blood is halal for you': The Doctrine of Jihād in Dabiq and Rumiyah.",* Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies, vol. 33, no. 3, 2020

Weeks D., "*Lessons Learned from U.K. Efforts to Deradicalize Terror Offenders*", In Combating Terrorism Center At West Point, March 2021

Weine S., Abdi S., Kamaluddin M & Faiza A., *"Using Community-Based Approaches to Prevent Violent Extremism"*, Journal of Terrorism Research 7(3), 2016

Wiktorowicz Q., "*Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West",* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005

Williams M.J., Horgan J. & Evans W.P, *"Factors Facilitating and Hindering the Disengagement of Violent Extremists"* In LaFree G. & Freilich J., "*The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism"*, 2016, pag 460-475

Winter C., "*The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy",* Quilliam Foundation, 2015

Yılmaz Z., "*Critique of ISIS' Women Policy",* Journal of International Social Research, 10(51), 2017

Zalewski M., *"Well, What is the Feminist Perspective on Bosnia?"*, International Affairs 71(2), 1995, pag 339-356