“Friends, Partners, Allies” at a Crossroad:
A comparative analysis of Canada, the United States, and Islamic State-affiliated citizen repatriation from Northeast Syria

Kaileigh Wenstrup

International Migration and Ethnic Relations
Master Thesis 15 credits
Spring 2023: IM636L
Supervisor: Anders Hellström
Word count: 15,038
Abstract

Since the 2019 territorial defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in northeastern Syria, thousands of foreign nationals affiliated with the Islamic militant group have been detained in refugee camps and prisons in the region - the humanitarian conditions of which have come under increased scrutiny. As a result, the repatriation of these individuals has become a contentious migration-related policy issue and has led to diverse state responses. In the North American context, there is a striking contrast between Canada’s ‘passive’ approach and the United States’ ‘active’ role in these repatriation efforts. Through a comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) using Fairclough’s methodological three-step framework and Balzacq’s sociological securitization theory, the public rationale of Canadian-American policy diversion is explored. As a result, this study contributes new knowledge to the field, providing unique insights on how and why two closely-allied countries justify their engagement with IS-affiliated citizens in fundamentally different ways.

Keywords: foreign fighter repatriation, northeastern Syria, U.S.-Canada relations, Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, sociological securitization

Word count: 148
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Aim and Research Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Relevance to the Field</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Terminology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1 ‘ISIS? ISIL? IS? Daesh?’</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2 Camps and Detainees</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Delimitations and Limitations</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Thesis Outline</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Contextual Background</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Phenomenon of Western Foreign Fighters, Collapse of IS, and the Repatriation of Detained Foreign Nationals</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1 Rise of IS and Foreign Recruitment</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.4 State Responses to Repatriation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 International Relations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Canada-U.S. Relations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Relationship with Syria and AANES</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Previous Research</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Fairclough’s Discourse as Theory</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Balzacq’s Sociological Securitization Theory</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Methodology and Material</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Comparative Approach</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Material</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 Overview</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 Types of Material and Methods of Data Collection</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Norman Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 Level of text (description)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 Level of discursive practice (interpretation)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Level of social practice (explanation)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Reliability and Validity</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Analysis</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Overview</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Threat Framing</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Responsibility</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Agency</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Conclusions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Discussion of Findings</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Further Research</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Bibliography</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANNEX</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to the children of all nationalities who are detained in northeastern Syria and who deserve protection, dignity, and a childhood of opportunity.

I owe everything to my parents for always encouraging me to forge my own winding path, which has led me to Sweden of all places. Thank you to my friends here in Malmö and back home in Canada for the endless support while completing this program. Tusen tack också till min partner i Stockholm, my calming force along the way.
1. Introduction

“States have a primary responsibility to act with due diligence and take positive steps and effective measures to protect individuals in vulnerable situations, notably women and children, located outside of their territory where they are at risk of serious human rights violations or abuses, where States’ actions or omissions can positively impact on these individuals’ human rights.”

Special Rapporteurs of The United Nations Human Rights Council, 2021

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the policy divergence between Canada and the United States – two closely-allied countries – regarding repatriation of foreign fighters and their family members from northeastern Syria. A comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been chosen to examine government policies, communication, and statements that reflect the repatriation ‘approach’ of both the Canadian and American administrations. The value of conducting such a comparison is that it helps clarify explanations for both variation and similarity (Simeon & Radin, 2010), which, in turn, will provide a more in-depth understanding of the unique nature of the Canadian and American contexts, their foreign policy decision-making, and their bi-lateral relationship.

This study focuses more specifically on the phenomenon of Western\(^1\) citizens who, due to their affiliation with the Islamic State, have been detained in the al-Hawl and Roj refugee camps and area prisons since 2019. The question of how to manage these foreign nationals has been a controversial topic among states, policy experts, human rights advocates, family members of detainees, and the general public. On one end of the debate, there has been an emphasis by governments on the security risk posed to repatriate and arrest or reintegrate citizens with (presumed) ties to terrorism and radicalization (Dworkin, 2020). On the other end, leading human rights organizations have noted the inhumane living conditions, prolonged, unlawful detention, and inadequate access to justice for individuals in these facilities - with a particular focus on these risks to women and children (Becker, 2022).

Despite the historical strength of their foreign policy collaboration, as well as their individual commitments to some of the same international treaties, Canada and the United States have pursued vastly different strategies concerning repatriation efforts of their citizens

\(^1\) Here, ‘Western’ refers to the modern meaning that includes most countries of the European Union, as well as the U.K., Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/western-countries
from northeastern Syria. Canada has faced criticism from human rights advocates for its passive role and apparent lack of political will in facilitating the return of Canadian citizens (HRW, 2020). In stark contrast, the United States has been perceived as a dominant, proactive force in these efforts, repatriating nearly all its citizens in the region, and even providing additional consular and logistical support to other countries to help repatriate their nationals (HRW, 2022). This contrast forms the departure point of my analysis, which seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How does the Canadian government justify its passive approach to repatriation efforts of IS-affiliated foreign nationals in northeastern Syria?
- How does the U.S. government justify its active approach to repatriation efforts of IS-affiliated foreign nationals in northeastern Syria?

**Delineating Repatriation ‘Approach’ and Justification**

Naturally, an ‘approach’ can be defined in many different ways, and for the purpose of this analysis, the term must be operationalized. Based on a preliminary review of the phenomenon, as it is portrayed in news media and governmental coverage, I have decided to define ‘repatriation approach’ in this study as consisting of two distinct parts:

1. **The process of (potential) repatriation**
   1.1. This includes the governments’ diplomatic relations with relevant political authorities, the consular presence and access that the country has in Syria, and the discourse surrounding detained foreign nationals

2. **The act of repatriation**
   2.1. This refers to the physical act and facilitation of repatriation, as defined by the number of individuals returned to Canada or the United States (relative to the number of the respective states’ detained nationals overall), as well as the discourse surrounding these individuals’ return

By focusing on the governments’ ‘justification’, I am seeking to explore the administrations’ attempts to publicly instill logic into their decision-making. In the study of foreign policy, it is widely agreed that public statements should not be trusted as “evidence of the private beliefs, motivations, and goals of decision-makers” and that governments often

---

2 In June 2020, Human Rights Watch released a 92-page report focusing specifically on Canada and the lag in the country’s repatriation efforts from northeastern Syria.
“say one thing and do another” (Anderson, 1981, p. 740). I am not intending to make any claims about the ‘true’ beliefs, motivations and goals of the Canadian or American government based on publicly accessible material. Rather, through the use of CDA (which incorporates an understanding of the linguistic, discursive, and social practice), I am interested in studying how the governments’ public positioning on repatriation (and explanation of such) fits within their broader socio-political context (Boréus et al., 2017). In doing so, I also aim to identify any notable disconnects between what is ‘said’ and what is ‘done’ in regards to IS-affiliated citizen repatriation.

1.2 Relevance to the Field

The field of international migration and ethnic relations (IMER) encompasses a wide variety of social phenomena. The presence of foreign nationals detained in northeastern Syria reflects the unprecedented migration flow of foreign fighters that occurred during the 2014 escalation of the Islamic State’s (IS) presence in the Middle East region (Lister, 2015). Repatriation, as defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), is “the personal right of a prisoner of war, civil detainee, refugee, or of a civilian to return to his or her country of nationality under specific conditions laid down in various international instruments” (IOM, 2019). This study’s focus on present-day IS-related repatriation is relevant to the field because it reflects an ongoing debate concerning states’ obligations to their citizens and the impact of return migration for this sub-group of nationals. As the IOM states, “migration is increasingly multidirectional… and the return of migrants to their countries of origin and their reintegration into the societies and communities that receive them are natural features of international mobility” (IOM, n.d). In a field dominated by the so-called ‘mobility bias’, this study focuses on a group of people who, at one time, exercised their migration capabilities and yet now are under “countervailing forces that restrict” their ability to return home (Schewel, 2019, p. 328). Much of the existing research has focused on the outward migration of Western citizens who opted to become foreign fighters; however, this multidirectional aspect of return (including the mobility prospects of detained nationals) is an increasingly important point of analysis and forms the motivations for this study.

This phenomenon is also intrinsically linked to the IMER topic of citizenship. By exploring how the Canadian and American governments treat their nationals abroad, it invokes further questions on the value of one’s citizenship (as a necessary instrument for international mobility). Is citizenship a right or a privilege? Should outward migration, on the basis of partaking in terrorist-related activities, negate one’s ability to return to their country?
of origin? More broadly, what makes a ‘Canadian’ a ‘Canadian’ and an ‘American’ an ‘American’? While this study does not seek to directly answer these questions, the notion of citizenship remains a vital aspect of analysis in understanding how the binary of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ arises in political discourse.

1.3 Terminology

1.3.1 ‘ISIS? ISIL? IS? Daesh?’

Over the last decade, the ‘Islamic State’ as an organization has been referred to in the media, political spheres, and academia by many different names. Its Arabic name, al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī al-ʻIrāq wa al-Shām (الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام), was adopted in 2013 and quickly led to confusion and inconsistencies based on the difficulties of translation between Arabic and English (Irshaid, 2015). In referencing the organization, it is crucial to acknowledge how different translations have been used as a political tool by state and non-state actors; Table 1 provides further context on the most common terminology used.

### Table 1

**Terminology related to the Islamic State**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘ISIS’</td>
<td>English acronym formed from ‘the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’&lt;br&gt;The term al-Sham in the group’s name is sometimes translated to ‘Syria’, ‘Greater Syria’, or even ‘Damascus’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘ISIL’</td>
<td>English acronym formed from ‘the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant’&lt;br&gt;The term al-Sham in the group’s name can also be translated to ‘the Levant.’ English speakers have historically used ‘the Levant’ to describe the eastern part of the Mediterranean; the term has a colonial association more specifically to post-WW1 nation-states, including Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and parts of Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘IS’</td>
<td>English acronym formed from ‘the Islamic State’&lt;br&gt;In June 2014, the group shortened its name from ‘al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham’ to ‘al-Dawla al-Islamiya’ or, in English, ‘the Islamic State’ to reflect the expansionist ambitions of its proclaimed Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Daesh’, ‘Da’esh’, ‘Da’ish’</td>
<td>Arabic acronym formed from the group’s previous...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on a review of Canadian and American publications, all four variations have been used by both governments at different points in time. I have chosen to employ an English acronym, maintaining consistent use of ‘IS’ and referring to ‘the Islamic State’ throughout this study. This is to improve readability of the overall material and reflect the most recent English terminology.

1.3.2 Camps and Detainees

This study focuses primarily on the al-Hawl camp in northeastern Syria, as well as the neighboring Roj camp - an overview of which will be provided in the contextual background of chapter 2. Across the literature, the al-Hawl camp has various English spellings, including ‘al-Hole’, ‘al-Hol’, ‘al-Hool’ and ‘al-Houl.’ Again, to maintain consistency, I have chosen to use ‘al-Hawl’ and make this change in any relevant excerpts where it is cited differently.

The population within the various detainment facilities (i.e. camps and prisons) is also diverse and detainees are referred to by many different terms. This includes the popular use of ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ (FTFs), as well as family members (primarily women and children) who were not necessarily directly involved in foreign fighting, and are most often referred to as ‘internally displaced persons’ (IDPs). However, there is political weight and theoretical debate attached to the concept of the ‘foreign terrorist fighter’ (Baker-Beall, 2019). The concept was coined by the Global Counterterrorism Forum in 2014 and quickly employed by international bodies (such as the UN and EU), various states, and the media (ibid.). However, the initial conceptual framing of FTFs failed to take into account a wide body of academic literature on ‘foreign fighting’ throughout history. Youngman and Moore (2017) argue that by uncritically adopting the language of ‘foreign terrorist fighters’, we fail to acknowledge the complexity of foreign fighter activity and, in doing so, cannot respond to present-day policy issues effectively. Given the lack of agreement on the legal meaning of ‘terrorism’, there is also no international consensus surrounding the level of involvement that constitutes ‘foreign
terrorist fighting\(^3\) - this is particularly true for women associated with the Islamic State who most often assume non-combatant roles (Brown, 2021).

With this theoretical debate in mind, I have chosen to use the broader term ‘foreign fighter’ rather than ‘foreign terrorist fighter’ throughout the literature review. Within my analysis, I also employ the all-encompassing term ‘IS-affiliated citizens’ to represent the foreign nationals in the region whose detainment is a result of either direct or indirect involvement with the organization. As a result, ‘IS-affiliated citizens’ can refer to men, women, and children throughout the study; further distinction is provided when relevant.

1.4 Delimitations and Limitations

In terms of research scope, this study will focus on the Canadian-American policy divergence and the governments’ justification of their respective approach more generally (i.e. passive vs. active). Naturally, these approaches have emerged within the context of individual cases that could be, in and of themselves, interesting points of analytical departure. However, there has been inconsistent media coverage across both countries and, due to the discreet and sensitive nature of the issue (Tayler, 2020), limited information has been provided on specific individuals. Therefore, this study will not provide a full chronological comparison of the concrete policy actions taken by both governments, nor will it situate itself within the stories of individuals.

There are also cases of Western foreign fighters who have been able to facilitate their own voluntary return to their home countries before and after the downfall of IS. While intrinsically linked to further issues of security, reintegration, and rehabilitation, this study does not focus on this subset of individuals. It has been taken into consideration in terms of how the Canadian and United States government view the overall phenomenon (including their counterterrorism strategies), but this study is focused on the repatriation of detained citizens who require direct government intervention for their return mobility.

Similarly, this study is also focused solely on the discourse surrounding northeastern Syria. This is because the Syrian camps and prisons hold the majority of foreign nationals and have dominated the public discussion thus far (HRW, 2022). However, it is worth acknowledging that there have been and still are other facilities in the region, including in

\(^3\) UN Security Council Resolution 2178 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, which requires countries to take certain steps to address the FTF threat, defines FTFs as “individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.” However, it fails to offer sufficient guidance on how to determine who falls within this category (Capone, 2019a).
neighbouring Iraq and Türkiye, with Western and non-Western IS-affiliated detainees (International Crisis Group, 2023). This is relevant to an understanding of the situation in areas where IS has had (and continues to have) influence, as well as the possibility of country-country transfers in the region.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize that the repatriation of these citizens is an ongoing, timely, and quickly changing phenomenon. Therefore, the analysis that I provide is indicative of a particular period and I am relying on available material at the time of writing. The material used for analysis (discussed further in the material section of Chapter 5) has been carefully selected based on existing parameters and limitations.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The next chapter provides contextual background to the phenomenon of Western foreign fighters affiliated with IS, their eventual detention in northeastern Syria, and state approaches to repatriation. It will then provide a brief overview of Canada-U.S. relations, as well as the countries’ relationship with Syria and the Kurdish authorities. Chapter 3 will then summarize previous research on the issue and identify gaps in the literature that this study aims to explore. Chapter 4 and 5 provide the theoretical and methodological framework, focusing on Fairclough’s model of CDA, the incorporation of Balzacq’s sociological securitization theory, and the material used in the study. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the analysis of all three levels of the Canadian and American discourse (description, interpretation, and explanation). The identification of three broad themes - threat framing, responsibility, and agency - help uncover the justification of each country’s approach to repatriation. Finally, Chapter 7 provides the reader with a discussion of the overall findings and opportunities for further research.

2. Contextual Background

Any study that embarks upon discourse analysis requires the researcher to have a “thorough understanding of the context of the discourse they are analyzing in order to situate their analysis and explain relationships” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 37). Within such an interdisciplinary field of study such as IMER, there are often multiple theoretical lenses that can be used to approach the same topic. My review of the literature was informed and guided primarily by critical security studies (more specifically the concept of securitization), as well as the contributions that feminist theory has brought to migration research.

There is an instinctive link between critical security studies (CSS) and this work.
Taking a constructivist approach, CSS broadens and deepens our understanding of security beyond the traditional view of the state as the referent object (Demirkol, 2022). Instead, within CSS, “security is about what is a threat, [focusing on how] the analyst can tell whether something really is a security problem and for whom” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 204). Since 9/11, migration, as a policy area, has become increasingly characterized by securitization, which refers to the overall process of turning a policy issue into a security issue (Faist, 2006). The resulting and enduring ‘migration-security nexus’ should not go unquestioned; it is important for scholars to critically examine why migration has become a matter of security and how this securitization process continues to reinforce stereotypes and cultural fears (ibid.). This study focuses on a very specific migration-related policy issue: the return of IS-affiliated citizens, specifically through the pathway of government-facilitated repatriation. It is a policy issue that has invoked fears of the returning ‘Other’ and calls into question how ‘ordinary’ citizens have (through their mobility) been transformed into potential threats by their own governments.

There is also an important link to draw between CSS and feminist theory. Narratives around who is ‘worthy’ of protection and the masculinization of terrorism have played a dominant role in migration and security studies, particularly since the beginning of the global ‘War on Terror’ (Åse, 2019). The concept of ‘vulnerable groups’ has been deeply gendered, leading to the single-merged concept of ‘women and children’ and its equation with innocence put forth and questioned by Cynthia Enloe (2014). Other feminist scholars have also challenged the pervasive notion of women as an inherently ‘protected’ category (Tickner, 2002) through intersectional analyses that consider how gender, race, and other axes of power play into the dynamics of difference and sameness (Cho et al., 2013). Therefore, the value of a critical feminist lens within CSS is that it allows the researcher to “broaden the scope of analysis and to show that particular phenomena have broad cultural and social and even biological determinants that shape their genesis, structure, functioning and have an impact on the consequences” (Gasztold, 2017, p. 187). The detainees within northeastern Syria are not a homogenous group; as a result, I remain mindful of gendered assumptions and the ways in which IS-affiliated men, women, and children are labeled as separate or (in some cases) interdependent categories in the political discourse and existing research on the topic.

Through applying these theoretical perspectives, the following two sections are a summary of the relevant information regarding the complex topic of Canadian and American IS-affiliated repatriation efforts. Its purpose is to provide the reader with a foundation for my emerging analysis. Section 2.1 focuses on the issue of IS-affiliated repatriation more broadly,
whereas section 2.2 redirects attention to Canada and the United States as the two states of analysis.

2.1 Phenomenon of Western Foreign Fighters, Collapse of IS, and the Repatriation of Detained Foreign Nationals

2.1.1 Rise of IS and Foreign Recruitment

As a transnational Sunni Islamist terrorist organization, the Islamic State’s roots date back to 1999 when it was primarily active in Jordan and Afghanistan (Orozobekova, 2016). However, beginning around 2013, IS began expanding its control over parts of Iraq and Syria with the determination to build a unitary state (i.e., ‘Caliphate’) across the entire region (Fuller, 2015). The rise of IS was dependent on the “distinct political and military vacuum in Syria as a result of the [ongoing] civil war, and in Iraq, as a result of the alienation of the Sunni population by the government” (Lister, 2015, para. 12). Over the last decade, IS has become infamous worldwide for its brutally overt tactics, including the massacres, executions, and killings of thousands of civilians and “literal modern-day enslavement” of women and minority groups (ibid., para. 2). Despite this, at its peak, the group attracted thousands of international volunteers to join its ranks (Hoffman & Furlan, 2020). This was in part due to a recruitment strategy that relied heavily on social media, which allowed IS propaganda to be spread worldwide and also provided potential recruits with logistical information and connections to coordinate their travel (ibid.).

It is worth noting that foreign fighters have played an important role throughout history. Over the last two hundred years, more than 335,000 foreigners were part of ninety-three separate conflicts (Schraeder & Schumacher, 2020). This calls into question the migration motivations for ordinary citizens who willingly partake in foreign conflict. These motivations are an especially prominent focus in the literature regards to foreign fighters who have joined extremist groups such as IS. According to the United Nations, in 2015, around 40,000 individuals from over 120 countries had traveled to Iraq and Syria, 80 percent of whom went to join and live under the IS Caliphate (UNODC, n.d.).

Research by Schraeder and Schumacher (2020) analyzed a dataset of over 25,000 foreign fighters from 75 countries who fought for the Islamic State. Their analysis showed that most IS foreign fighters came from countries with the following conditions: 1) higher levels of education and some form of domestic political instability 2) a predominantly Muslim population. As a result, they emphasized the need to draw on grievance, political opportunity, and social network theories, and they view foreign fighting as a distinctly unique form of
collective action (ibid.). While this study provides insight into the countries of origin for foreign fighters, it does not reveal much about their profile as individuals. This reflects an important conclusion drawn in the literature overall: there is no standardized profile of a foreign fighter. While many individuals who joined IS have been young males from poor economic backgrounds and social or political marginalization (UNODC, 2021), making the generalization that all foreign fighters are of the same profile ignores the diversity of IS recruits. During the group’s rise, entire families (of multiple generations) migrated to IS-held territory (Dawson, 2021). Similarly, an estimated 1 in 5 individuals who traveled to Syria from Europe to join the Caliphate at its peak were women (UNODC, 2021).

Given the diversity of IS recruitment, many scholars have sought to analyze the motivational ties that unite these individuals across regions. In doing so, a separation has been made between IS foreign fighters from Muslim-majority countries and individuals from Western countries, such as Canada and the United States (which serve as the focus of this study). While the mobilization process varies across regions, the literature shows that the main driver of mobilization in Western countries has often been ‘self-radicalization’ (Orozobekova, 2016). It is shown that a strong ideology, like that of the Islamic State, can be extremely enticing to young people, particularly those who are “dissatisfied with their social structure, available opportunities or their government’s principles and policies” (Capone et al., 2016, p. 200). However, intent is difficult to measure and ‘prove’; as a result, the motivations of Western foreign fighters remains relatively inconclusive (Dawson, 2021).

For Schraeder and Schumacher (2020), they theorize a growing class of well-educated and economically-able Muslims who, due to increasing discrimination and Islamophobia in anti-immigrant populist environments, have been driven to Islamic radicalization. Similarly, Benmelech and Klor (2016) cite ideology and the difficulties of assimilation into homogenous Western countries as a general explanation. Gurksi (2016), on the other hand, notes that not all individuals traveled to the region with the intent to join IS; rather, they may have traveled with the intent to join another organization or even provide humanitarian aid, only to become recruited by IS upon arrival. More confusingly, foreign fighters may lie and cite charitable intentions as a means to deflect state law enforcement or prosecution. Hoffman and Furlan (2020), among others, also raise the important dilemma of women and minors whose initial decision to travel and/or join IS “might have been the result of coercion or psychological subjugation” (p. 13). Through a review of 34 separate empirical studies on the motivational factors of IS foreign fighters, Dawson (2021) found that these judgements are admittedly subjective and there is a need for more primary data from interviews with returnees.
Within the context of this study, however, it is not necessary to understand the specific motivations of Western foreign fighters; they will vary (at least to some degree) across individuals. Rather, it is important to understand that, due to a myriad of factors, ‘ordinary’ Canadian and American citizens were part of this large migration flow and left North America to settle in IS-held territory during the early to mid 2010s. In doing so, they were marked by their respective governments as both a threat to national security and a challenge to global counterterrorism efforts (CSIS, 2022).

2.1.2 Collapse of IS and Detainment

Beginning in 2014, various international military coalitions, including one led by the United States, intervened in Syria and Iraq against IS (The Associated Press, 2021). By 2017, the Islamic State had lost most of its territorial claim in the region; in March 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led, US-backed armed force, defeated the last holdout of IS in Baghuz Fawqani, Syria (Becker, 2022). While large numbers of male foreign fighters were killed during these offensives, many of their family members (i.e. women and children) survived (UNODC, 2021). The question of what to do with remaining IS-affiliated Syrian and foreign nationals quickly became cause for concern. As a result, the SDF detained these individuals in existing refugee camps, prisons, and makeshift detention centers in the area, where many of them remain today (Becker & Tayler, 2023).

As of January 2023, almost 42,000 foreign nationals remain detained in the region, primarily in al-Hawl and Roj, two heavily guarded open-air camps. While the majority of these individuals are Iraqi citizens, there are an estimated 10,000 people in al-Hawl and Roj from approximately 60 other countries (Becker & Tayler, 2023). These camps, referred to as IDP or refugee camps based on their history4 are, in reality, cruel detention centers where individuals do not have any control over their own mobility (Spadaro, 2020). They hold the wives, other adult female relatives, and children of male foreign fighters, and have been sectioned off according to nationality; within al-Hawl, a fenced off area known as ‘the annex’ is reserved for third-country nationals (i.e. non-Syrian, non-Iraqi), which includes North Americans, Europeans, and Central Asians (Saad, 2020). Additionally, around 2,000 non-Iraqi foreign men are held in related SDF-administered prisons across northeastern Syria, including hundreds of young men who have been held there since they were children (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). These prisons are a mix of rehabilitated government-run prisons and other centers, such as schools, hospitals, and storage facilities, which have been

---

4 The al-Hawl and Roj camps were originally created for Iraqi refugees during the Gulf War (Saad, 2020).
transformed into makeshift holding areas. Some of the known prisons identified in the literature include: Dayriq (Al Malikiah), Al Kasrah, Ain Issa, Kobane, Al Hasakeh, Muheimidah, and Dashisha (Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, 2019).

Several United Nations agencies and international NGOs operate in these facilities to provide humanitarian services. However, all of the detention areas are managed by SDF authorities of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which is a de-facto autonomous region in the country consisting of several self-governing sub-regions (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). It is highly relevant to note that these individuals are detained “by a non-State armed group, with whom States [including Canada and the United States] have no formal diplomatic relations” (Spadaro, 2020, p. 265) - a point which will be further explored within section 2.2.

2.1.3 Humanitarian Situation in al-Hawl and Roj Camps and Prisons

Most of the research on the humanitarian situation within northeast Syria has been concentrated on the al-Hawl and Roj refugee camps as the primary centers of detainment. In terms of the prison areas where foreign IS-affiliated men are held, journalists and human rights investigators have had limited access over the years, but existing reports suggest that the conditions are equally dire for men, if not worse (Spadaro, 2020).

The humanitarian situation across these detainment areas is marked by three main aspects of concern: health, deprivation of rights, and the overall safety of migrants due to increasing violence. Maya Foa, director of the human rights charity, Reprieve, referred to the conditions of the refugee camps in saying: “It's like a Guantanamo in the desert, but it's worse because it is much bigger and full of children” (Lamb, 2022).

Health

When many of these individuals arrived in the spring of 2019, they were already arriving in vulnerable health conditions that were only exacerbated by the poor living conditions within the camps. The UN Commission of Inquiry estimated that at least 390 children had died of preventable causes in the first half of 2019, during their journey or upon arrival to the overcrowded al-Hawl camp (Cumming-Bruce, 2019). In recent years, these living conditions have continued to deteriorate and put the lives of detainees at risk. On multiple visits to the region between 2017 and 2022, Human Rights Watch reported

5 More information on the creation of AANES and its role in the region can be found at https://impactres.org/reports/PolicyPapers/Structure_and_resource_mapping_of_autonomous_administration_EN.pdf
“overflowing latrines, tents flooded with rain and sewage, contaminated drinking water, and rampant viral infections” (HRW, 2022). The health situation has been compounded and exacerbated by various infection outbreaks, along with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Saad, 2020). Mental health problems also run rampant, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, without the appropriate resources for support (ibid.).

**Deprivation of Rights**

There are severe movement restrictions enforced by the Kurdish authorities on third-country nationals in particular, meaning they do not have freedom of movement to other parts of the camp where basic healthcare is provided (MSF, 2019). Similarly, because of the affiliation with IS, some humanitarian organizations and donors have been unwilling to provide services to this population. Regardless of one’s perceived ties, the right to health is a fundamental human right preserved in article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (OHCHR, n.d.-a).

These individuals are also being unlawfully detained in the region, as “none have been charged with any crime, nor have any ever appeared before a judge to review the legality and necessity of their detention” (HRW 2022, p.15). Living in this indefinite and arbitrary limbo is prohibited by all international human rights texts, including Article 9 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 9 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which Canada and the United States are both signatories (Bouchet-Saulnier et al., 2014).

For the children in these camps, they are being deprived of their liberty every day. Enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 and 2396, children have the right to recovery and integration from conflict in “an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child” (Bagheri & Bisset, 2022, p. 374). According to a report by the Syrian Human Rights Network, only 12 educational facilities exist in al-Hawl to account for more than 40,000 children (SNHR, 2020). Additionally, there have been reports of boys as young as 10 years old being indefinitely separated from their mothers and transferred to prisons with adult men (HRW, 2022). It is clear that these detention facilities cannot provide an appropriate environment for the rights of children to be protected.
Increasing Violence

Finally, there has been a recent escalation of violence in the camps and prisons. Within al-Hawl, a reported 90 people were murdered in 2021 and 26 people within the first 8 months of 2022 (HRW, 2022). These attacks have often been carried out by women in the camps still loyal to IS who have formed their own religious police units known as ‘Hesba’ and see themselves as ‘enforcers’ of the extremist ideology (Soz, 2022). In January of 2022, with the aim of freeing detainees, IS militants also launched an attack against the Al-Sina’a prison in Hasakeh; the resulting 10 day operation left an estimated 500 people dead (including detainees, SDF guards, and civilians) and required the intervention of U.S. Forces (Yacoubian, 2022).

These increasing security concerns have two major consequences. First, they reflect the dangerous environment in which detainees are being held and the ongoing risks to their safety. Furthermore, these violent incidents also crystallize growing fears of an IS resurgence in the region (Yacoubian, 2022) - fears which have been of great importance in influencing state responses to repatriation.

2.1.4 State Responses to Repatriation

In the most basic of explanations, there are two main options for states regarding their foreign nationals detained in Syria: 1) to repatriate 2) to not repatriate. Of course, within these two decisions are related practices and activities (both ‘active’ and ‘passive’) that have been heavily debated in the literature in regards to moral and legal obligations. A state’s positive decision to repatriate includes the active facilitation of the individual’s transfer from Syria, followed by either home-based prosecution or rehabilitation and reintegration within their home country. In contrast, a state’s decision to not repatriate their foreign nationals may include active methods of citizenship stripping and burden transfer, or a more passive method of ignoring or delaying the need for a definitive policy response. The below section provides an elaboration of these methods.

Positive Decision to Repatriate: Prosecution or Reintegration

As the case of the United States demonstrates, some countries have decided to actively repatriate their nationals from northeastern Syria. However, whether or not this is an obligation under international law has been subject to investigation. Recent studies have concluded that the current international legal framework provides an evasive answer (Capone, 2019b). The Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and on Consular Relations list protection of
state nationals as a core function of diplomatic missions and consular posts abroad. However, there is no uniformity on what the extent of this protection entails and whether it is a legal right or merely an expectation (Capone, 2019b). Similarly, the right of return to one’s country, enshrined in Article 12(4) of the ICCPR, entails the right to be issued with travel documents to facilitate onward migration, but does not imply the right to active government intervention (i.e. repatriation) to exercise this mobility (Spadaro, 2020). As a result, repatriation is not currently seen as a legal obligation, but rather a state prerogative (Spadaro, 2020). Nonetheless, many have contended that states arguably have the moral obligation to care for their nationals abroad, considerations which may even be reflected in domestic law (ibid.). However, Hoffman and Furlan (2020) note that this moral dimension is discretionary and most often applied only to children or women and children, depending on how a state views women’s level of agency and vulnerability.

When the decision to repatriate IS-affiliated citizens is made though, there are two subsequent practices of note. First, in the case of adult citizens, states may seek home-based prosecution and imprisonment for IS-related crimes. Adopted in 2014, UN Security Council resolution 2178 required states to pass laws to mitigate the influence of foreign fighters, meaning most Western countries now have legislation in place to pursue prosecution of returnees for their affiliation with a terrorist entity (Dworkin, 2019). Alternatively, these individuals may be reintegrated within their home communities with or without restrictions (e.g. Canadian peace bonds). Building on pre-existing measures for ‘homegrown terrorism’, some countries have also turned to deradicalization programs for these citizens (Perešin & Pisoiu, 2021). The existing literature, however, shows that there are no existing agreed upon ‘best practices’ for either of these post-repatriation scenarios, which can further increase the hesitancy of states to repatriate in the first place.

**Negative Decision to Repatriate: Burden Transfer and Avoidance**

For the states who have chosen not to repatriate their nationals, they have instead transferred the burden to other states in two primary ways. First, because the SDF is a non-State actor without clear sovereignty to prosecute IS-affiliated individuals in Syria (Capone, 2019b), some states have considered outsourcing the judicial process to neighbouring Iraq (Rubin, 2019). This decision was highly publicized in the case of at least thirteen French men being transferred from Syria and tried in Iraq in 2019 (ibid.). Despite priding itself as an opponent of the death penalty, France handed their citizens over to a country where IS-related trials “fail to meet even the most basic markers of due process” and the accused often face
death by hanging (Wille, 2019, para. 4).

Another controversial method employed by states has been that of citizenship stripping for dual nationals associated with IS. In Article 15 of the UDHR, it is acknowledged that all people have a right to a nationality (Gunawan et al., 2022). However, in the case of dual nationals (where there is *not* a risk of statelessness), some countries have chosen to strip individuals of one of their respective citizenships (ibid.). The argument here is that citizenship is a privilege rather than a right, and that by choosing to partake in terrorist activity abroad, IS-affiliated individuals are essentially renouncing these rights. As Macklin (2021) notes, “securitization permeates this discourse, and racism and Islamophobia colour it” (p. 9). It is not a sustainable solution for controlling mobility, but rather a “race to revocation” where whichever state is able to make this decision first transfers the responsibility to another (ibid., p. 19). It is well known that Canada and the United States have many dual nationals within their borders. Consequently, it is worth outlining how citizenship revocation fits within both countries’ national security and identity discourse, as well as its relationship within the context of IS repatriation.

In the United States, citizenship is a birth right guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution; *naturalized* citizens, however, are at risk of citizenship stripping, but it remains rare and under specific circumstances (usually naturalization/citizenship fraud) (BBC, 2021). Hoda Muthana, an IS-affiliated resident of Roj camp, is the only case of US citizenship revocation that has permeated the news media (Shortell et al., 2019). The justification of this decision by the Trump Administration in 2019 was that her initial claim to citizenship was flawed because of her parents’ employment as Yemeni diplomats (ibid.).

In the Canadian context, Bill C-24 was passed into legislation by the Conservative government in 2014. Known colloquially as the ‘Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act’, it gave the government authority to revoke citizenship for dual nationals convicted of offenses related to terrorism and treason (VICE News, 2015). However, just three years later, the subsequent Liberal government passed Bill C-6 to amend the Citizenship Act, repeal the law of citizenship revocation, and reinstate citizenship for anyone who had already been stripped because of security concerns (Macklin, 2021). This was a promise made by now-prime minister Justin Trudeau in his election campaign, where in 2015 at a heated town hall meeting, he famously declared the following:

“A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian … the Liberal Party believes that terrorists should get to keep their Canadian citizenship… And I’m willing to take on
anyone who disagrees with that. Because the question is, as soon as you make citizenship for some Canadians conditional on good behavior, you devalue citizenship for everyone. The idea that we would say that we’ll give you your citizenship, but for the rest of your life you have to be on your best behavior... that principle that says the government can decide what you did means you no longer get to be Canadian is a very, very scary one” (VICE News, 2015, para. 2-5).

The most controversial case of a Canadian dual national has been that of Jack Letts (‘Jihadi Jack’), a British-born man who left for Syria in 2014 (Scherer, 2019). However, it was not Canada that stripped him of his citizenship, but rather the UK, leaving the Canadian government to express their disappointment in what they called “a unilateral action [for the UK] to offload their responsibilities” (CBC, 2019, para. 4). As of writing, the Canadian government is in the process of appealing a federal court ruling ordering the government to repatriate 4 Canadian IS-affiliated men, including Letts (Raycraft & Burke, 2023).

This court appeal by the Canadian government is representative of the final option states have for response: purposeful delay or avoidance. For countries not seeking to actively repatriate their nationals, their options are increasingly sparse. As mentioned, if they seek potential prosecution partnerships with Iraq, they risk facing international backlash because of human rights concerns; similarly, the legality and viability of citizenship revocation has come under increased scrutiny (Paulussen, 2021). Therefore, when faced with the question of how to handle their IS-affiliated citizens detained in Syria, their only other option is to continually ignore the question and hope it goes away.

2.2 International Relations

2.2.1 Canada-U.S. Relations

Turning now to Canada-U.S. relations, their bilateral relationship is well-known to be one of the closest and most extensive in the world (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2022). As noted by Global Affairs Canada, “the Canada-U.S. partnership is forged by shared geography, similar values, common interests, deep personal connections, and powerful, multi-layered economic ties. [The] two countries share a deep and long standing defense and national security partnership, providing both countries with greater security than could be achieved individually” (Government of Canada, n.d.). Similarly, the United States government has continually referred to Canada as its strongest and most ‘startwart’ ally, declaring that “the U.S.-Canada partnership benefits not only our people, but the world – and
by working together, there is nothing we cannot achieve” (U.S. Department of State, 2022; The White House, 2023, para. 2).

Multilateral Partnerships and Treaties

Beyond their close bilateral connection, the two countries are also active participants in many of the same international groups including the United Nations, G7, G20, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the World Trade Organization, Interpol, and the Five Eyes community (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2022). Notably, they are both members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum and the Global Coalition Against Daesh, of which the United States has been a leading member (ibid.). Both countries are also committed to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the optional protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict under the Convention on the Rights of Child (ICRC, n.d.). These commitments show a high level of not just regional but also international cooperation between Canada and the United States, as well as a general adherence to the same principles of human rights.

2.2.2 Relationship with Syria and AANES

Considering that both the process and act of IS-affiliated citizen repatriation hinges on certain diplomatic channels (Perešin & Pisoiu, 2021), it is also relevant to address Canadian and American presence in the region of focus.

In 2012, due to the ongoing Syrian civil war, both Canada and the United States suspended their consular operations in Damascus (Global Affairs Canada, n.d.; U.S. Department of State, n.d.). However, both countries have had military involvement in the region since. In fact, it is worth reiterating that it was a U.S.-led military coalition - Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) - that assisted the SDF to achieve the 2019 territorial defeat of IS (Becker, 2022). The coalition claims it continues to operate in Syria to enable the enduring defeat of IS, not with an invitation by the state of Syria, but with a mandate under international law (CJTF-OIR, n.d.). This shows that, despite no formal state-state ties, both countries continue to have a political presence and stake in the country, particularly within and through the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

---

6 The United States has signed but not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child - Canada has ratified both the Convention and its optional protocol.
AANES as a non-State entity, however, has important implications on the logistics of repatriation efforts. In general, these types of negotiations occur between a sending and receiving state that are both sovereign bodies; consequently, governments are often reluctant to engage in behavior that treats a non-State actor, such as AANES, like the de facto sovereign (International Crisis Group, 2019). In the case of AANES, there has been increased reluctance from states to engage with Kurdish authorities due to long standing reservations about other political ties in the region⁷, as well as the possibility that this engagement could be seen as direct recognition of Kurdish autonomy (ibid.).

When this negotiation does occur, AANES has required states to send representatives that can be *physically present* in the region for citizen handovers (HRW, 2020). However, they have offered states, including Canada and the United States, flexibility on this. If a foreign country designates a non-governmental delegate as their emissary, AANES can release IS-affiliated citizen(s) to this individual, after which they can be met by the respective country’s officials at the border with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (ibid.). This practice was evident when Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador, offered to help repatriate Canadian citizens from northeastern Syria across the border to the Canadian consulate in Erbil, Iraq (HRW, 2022). This was in response to the fact that many states, including Canada, have cited the instability of the region and the need for physical citizen handover as a security risk to their diplomats (ibid.); the alternative here offered by AANES provides a workaround, but it remains to be seen how often it has been employed. In the case mentioned above, Canada refused the American gesture.

### 3. Previous Research

In sum, the phenomenon of Western foreign fighters is not new within the literature - it forms the basis of the contextual background provided in the previous section (2.1). As mentioned, a considerable amount of research has focused on the socio-political motivations of this outward migration and the historical role of foreign nationals in terrorist organizations across the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, including IS. In recent years, the return migration of Western foreign fighters (and their families) has become a new focal point.

---

⁷ Namely the overarching relationship between AANES and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Türkiye
related to the threat they pose to national security. This literature, however, has primarily focused on Western individuals with the means of facilitating their own voluntary return (i.e. not detained) and the possibility of them committing further acts of terrorism on home soil.

As the humanitarian situation in northeastern Syria continues to deteriorate, the repatriation of detained IS-affiliated foreign nationals will continue to garner more attention. While this topic has begun penetrating the academic sphere, the perspectives remain limited. My review of the literature shows that, thus far, most scholars have approached this government-facilitated repatriation from three commanding perspectives:

First, there has been a dominant focus on the European context. Migration, both outward and return, is intrinsically linked to borders and geographical (in)accessibility. Given Europe’s closer proximity to the region, a higher number of European citizens joined IS relative to other Western countries, including Canada and the United States (Dawson, 2021). Similarly, a higher number of Western citizens detained in northeast Syria originate from Europe rather than North America (Becker & Tayler, 2023). As a result, scholars have gravitated towards these European cases because they can provide a rich amount of data and the issue has infiltrated the European media landscape to a greater degree (HRW, 2022). However, regardless of having a lower number of foreign nationals, the North American approach should not be ignored, especially in discussions of international cooperation and shared objectives; both Canada and the United States are important actors involved in global diplomacy and their political influence extends beyond their own borders.

The second dominant trend in the literature has been addressing the topic of IS-affiliated repatriation from a judicial perspective, focusing on states’ humanitarian obligations and adherence to international law (if any). This is often in an attempt to formulate a robust, international framework that can hold states accountable moving forward. Essentially, there has been a focus on the moral dimensions of state policy and what a government should do, rather than a critical analysis of their own rationale. This underrepresented perspective - an individual states’ framing of the issue and justification of their decision-making - forms an interesting point of departure.

Finally, through my own assessment, I found that single-country studies permeated the academic perspectives on IS-affiliated repatriation. As a result, these studies often neglect the important interactions and influence that occurs between states. By situating these two cases side-by-side, the similarities and differences between the Canadian and American discourses can be better explored.

With these dominant trends in mind, this study offers a different perspective and
provides important context to a growing phenomenon of study. In doing so, it also creates a stronger knowledge base for future analysis as the issue evolves.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Fairclough’s Discourse as Theory

While the method of discourse analysis will be further explored in the subsequent chapter, method and theory are inherently intertwined. In order to effectively use discourse analysis for my empirical study, I have to reflect on and accept its philosophical underpinnings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Norman Fairclough’s understanding of discourse is that language is a form of social practice, “which both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities, and social relations, including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 65). It rejects the view that our knowledge of the world can be considered objective truth, instead emphasizing that our knowledge is shaped by the constitutive abilities of language (Boréus et al., 2017). This social construction of knowledge means that different understandings or representations will lead to different social processes and outcomes (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, the focus of CDA is to move beyond strictly linguistic analysis and examine how discourse (as text) fits within the broader context and can initiate social change. However, as Fairclough notes, these discursive and non-discursive elements of CDA require, by necessity, the “transdisciplinary integration of different theories within a multiperspectival research framework” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 82). This has led me to further ground my theoretical framework using the concept of securitization.

4.2 Balzacq’s Sociological Securitization Theory

According to Thiery Balzacq, there are two important criteria of operational salience before commencing a study using securitization theory. First, the issue should be a focus of public attention or debate; secondly, the issue should be “a target for activities related to public opinion or legal and/or political action” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 32). The issue of IS-affiliated citizens in northeastern Syria (and their potential repatriation) fulfills this criteria because, as discussed in the literature review, it has been shown to be a highly contentious and publicly debated topic with widespread types of state responses. In turn, this confirms that securitization theory is an appropriate tool of use for my analysis.
Securitization as a theory gained traction through the so-called ‘Copenhagen School’ (CS) of security studies. The CS’s linguistic approach to security forms the traditional view of securitization theory, which places emphasis on the ‘speech act’ (Baker-Beall, 2019). The CS centers the symbiotic relationship between the political ‘actor’ who ‘speaks security’ and the ‘audience’ who accepts threat claims, thereby legitimizing the discourse and ‘securitizing’ the issue (Glover, 2011). However, the CS has faced repeated criticism for adopting such a narrow definition of security that “neglects the historical and social contexts in which security becomes possible” (ibid., p. 4). In the same way that Fairclough sees linguistic analysis as insufficient for understanding discourse, critics of the CS see reliance on the linguistic ‘speech-act’ as insufficient for understanding securitization. In their view, securitization is not a specific binary moment, but rather an ongoing political process encompassing both linguistic and non-linguistic elements (Salter, 2008). In other words, discourses of security cannot be understood outside of the social context in which they are produced (Baker-Beal, 2019).

The above mentioned Thierry Balzacq is one of the main critics of the CS and a leading scholar within the ‘new-wave, second-generation’ securitization branch. He has argued that there are two main approaches to securitization: 1) the philosophical variant, which views securitization related mostly to self-referentiality and speech acts (as the CS does), and 2) the sociological variant, which focuses on securitization as “argumentative processes and [a] web of practices” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 22). The focus, therefore, is on securitization as a sustained strategic practice with the aim of proving that something is threatening enough to warrant a specific policy response (ibid.). In understanding securitization as a negotiation of meaning, it is Balzacq’s sociological variant that this study turns to.

The critical question is not whether this discourse ‘does’ securitization, but rather “under what conditions the social content and meaning of security produces threats” (Rychnovská, 2014, p. 14). In this sense, the focus of analysis is on the contextualization of security. Based on the previous literature, I am conducting my analysis through partly-deductive reasoning with the assumption that securitization practices, including threat framing, play a role in shaping the Canadian and American repatriation approach. Seeking to uncover the ‘justification’ of such an approach, therefore, requires an understanding of what the ‘threat’ of IS-affiliated repatriation is perceived to be. This aligns with the main preoccupation of sociological securitization analysts, which is to “understand the political structuring of a threat image” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 38).
5. Methodology and Material

5.1 Comparative Approach

The goal of comparative analysis is to study certain types of ‘puzzles’, which can only be solved by comparing two or more cases (Pennings et al., 2006). The ‘puzzle’ in question here is the reality that Canada and the United States have taken two different approaches to IS-affiliated repatriation, despite their close working relationship on other issues of foreign policy. Therefore, the two ‘cases’ of interest here are the Canadian and American discourses (which reflect the justification of their respective approaches). This comparison is exploratory in nature and requires appropriate methods to investigate the proposed relationship empirically (Pennings et al., 2006). Using Fairclough’s CDA approach will allow me to study the ways in which these two discourses intersect and relate to other discourses and non-discursive areas (Boréus et al., 2017); Fairclough’s three-step design provides a precise, methodological framework to do so. However, this framework is best understood with existing knowledge of the material used for analysis.

5.2 Material

5.2.1 Overview

Conducting a comparative text analysis requires the researcher to collect similar types of material for both cases in order to improve the ability to make inferences between them (Pennings et al., 2006). For this study, it was important to find primary material that was representative of each individual case (i.e. the Canadian and American ‘approach’), as well as representative of each other in terms of source and content. The material used in my analysis can be categorized into three separate groups: 1) policy documents, 2) urgent appeal responses to the United Nations, and 3) political statements (both written and oral). A comprehensive list of the materials (including speakers and sources) can be found in the appendix, but the following provides an overview of the content of each category, its importance to my study, and the method of data collection that was used.

5.2.2 Types of Material and Methods of Data Collection

1) Policy Documents

In January 2021, the Government of Canada created their ‘Policy Framework to Evaluate the Provision of Extraordinary Assistance: Consular Cases in North-eastern Syria’. This is a document that guides the Government’s decision-making regarding Canadian
citizens detained in the region. Similarly, at the end of 2019, the United States Congress released the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, within which Sec. 1224 established a ‘coordinator for detained ISIS members and relevant displaced populations in Syria’. These two documents were chosen because they refer to the direct diplomatic actions proposed by both administrations and the overall policy framework in regards to IS-affiliated citizen repatriation.

The Canadian document was purposefully chosen, as it was mentioned throughout the literature and other material as Canada’s ‘existing framework’ on repatriation (Bell, 2022). However, it was not accessible anywhere on the Government of Canada’s website. Through a manual web search, I was able to extract a copy of the document from a Global News source (reporter Stuart Bell) who initially had to request the material through Canada’s Access to Information Act. I then conducted another manual search to explore whether or not a similar policy existed in the United States. The only accessible framework found was Sec. 1224 mentioned above, which was collected through the United States Congress database of legislature.

2) Urgent Appeal Responses

The second form of material used in my analysis is two urgent appeal responses to the United Nations Special Procedures. Special Procedures are independent human rights experts with thematic mandates to “act on individual cases of reported violations and concerns of a broader nature by sending communications to States and others” in order to uphold international standards (OHCHR, n.d.-b., para. 1). In January 2021, both Canada and the United States were sent the same urgent appeal, which raised concerns regarding ‘a registration and verification exercise’ of their nationals, deprivation of these individuals’ liberty, and a lack of humanitarian access in the al-Hawl and Roj camps (OHCHR, 2021). The states were asked to provide information on their knowledge of these conditions and the specific measures taken by the governments to safeguard human rights. These responses were chosen as material because they are unique in that they show how the two different administrations replied to the exact same correspondence. The responses were collected from the The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights communications database.

3) Statements / Remarks

8 While the urgent appeal responses are sourced in the appendix, the urgent appeal itself can be found here: https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25973
The last type of material used in my analysis is statements made by relevant political actors and governmental bodies regarding northeastern Syria and repatriation. The Canadian Government website allows search queries that show results across all department websites and agencies. This was able to generate results across Global Affairs Canada, Royal Canadian Mountain Police, and Public Safety Canada. This is not, however, the case for the U.S.

Therefore, separate searches were made using the same keywords on three department websites: the State Department’s website, Department of Justice, and White House archives. I conducted a search using ‘North Syria’ which also showed results for ‘northern Syria’ and ‘northeastern Syria’ and manually sorted through the results related to repatriation. Given the limited information on the Government of Canada’s website, I supplemented the Canadian material with oral statements given by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and relevant ministers on the topic. These were collected through a manual web search using the same keywords along with ‘Canada’ and I then transcribed the audio. I also limited my search to material from 2019 onwards, given the timeline of events in the region.

5.3 Norman Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model

Returning to Fairclough’s CDA framework, the above material will be analyzed through the following three dimensions: level of text (description), level of discursive practice (interpretation), and level of social practice (explanation). By focusing on these three separate (but interrelated) dimensions, Fairclough’s approach provides multiple points of analytical entry that are mutually explanatory (Janks, 1997). It promotes the idea that these texts cannot be understood in isolation, but rather in relation to other texts and in relation to the social context in which they reside (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The following subsections will cover the methodological purpose and role of each of these dimensions, as they relate to my ensuing analysis.

5.3.1 Level of text (description)

In the first dimension of Fairclough’s model, attention is paid to the syntax and linguistic nature of the chosen material. Stemming from Michael Halliday’s seminal work on functional grammar, Fairclough suggests numerous methods of linguistic analysis applicable to CDA (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Given the scope of my study, however, I have had to be selective and I have limited this part of analysis to two primary techniques. First, I will focus on modality, which analyzes the level of affinity with or affiliation to the statement at hand by the speaker (in this case, the Canadian and American administrations or
representatives) - this includes types of modality such as truth, volition, and obligation (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Doing so will help illuminate how the concepts of ‘responsibility’ and ‘agency’ are constructed in the material (ibid.). Additionally, I will note the repetition of specific words and phrases to better understand the political ‘language’ used by the administrations and their reliance on key statements to the public.

5.3.2 Level of discursive practice (interpretation)

In the second dimension, my analytical focus will shift to how the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed (Boréus et al., 2017). The two main concepts of use here are intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Intertextuality refers to how the material of analysis refers to and relates to other texts. Similarly, interdiscursivity concerns how different discourses are mixed within the primary text (ibid.). It is also important to note the accessibility and distribution of these texts to understand how this political discourse is ‘consumed’ by its intended audience.

5.3.3 Level of social practice (explanation)

In the final dimension of Fairclough’s approach, my analysis will focus on the broader social contextualization of the Canadian and American discourse. This includes acknowledging the overall network of discourses that it belongs to and mapping the non-discursive, ‘social matrix’ of relations, structures, institutions, and economic conditions that constitute the wider context (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). This level of analysis will be primarily supported by the aforementioned contributions of securitization theory.

5.4 Reliability and Validity

To ensure the soundness of my methodology, two relevant standards of reference are reliability and validity (6 & Bellamy, 2011). By remaining transparent about my choices as a researcher, including how I interact with the text, my goal is to reconstruct for the reader the pathway to my conclusions (Boréus et al., 2017).

Regarding the primary material used in this study, its selection has been limited by the pervasion of classified information unavailable to the general public, particularly for the Canadian case9. Similarly, the task of collecting material for two separate cases is inevitably

---

9 In my preliminary research, I requested all public information related to IS-affiliated detainees through Canada’s Access to Information Act. However, the information generated in response (over 400 pages worth) was overwhelmingly edited to remove all classified material in the text and was thus unusable. As a result, I have chosen to purposefully incorporate the difficulties of this data collection into my broader analysis; examining the lack of accessible material for the public’s ‘consumption’ of the discourse illustrates the covert and secretive nature of the discourse itself.
challenging when there are inherent differences in how and where information is published across countries. Despite these limitations, I have taken the following steps to ensure the reliability and validity of my material and analysis of such.

By focusing on three different ‘types’ of material, I have used data triangulation as a research strategy to develop a comprehensive representation of the discourse and improve validity (Carter et al., 2014). Through an external criticism of my sources, all of the material is directly connected to an official government agency or spokesperson, thus confirming its authenticity and improving its reliability (Boréus et al., 2017). By following Fairclough’s approach step-by-step, I have conducted the analysis for both Canada and the United States at each level before moving onto the next dimension - this is to ensure I am reading and interpreting all of the material in the same way for both cases and not prioritizing one over the other.

Taking a social constructivist approach to research is a complex task and, as a Canadian-American researcher, I also need to remain aware of the inherent subjectivity of my contribution. My personal connection to both countries influences how I approach the topic, including my analysis of the material. By widening my understanding of my own prejudices (and acknowledging their existence in the first place), I have sought to improve the validity of this study (Boréus et al., 2017).

6. Analysis

6.1 Overview

In my study of the gathered materials, I approached all three levels of Fairclough’s discourse analysis (text, discursive practice, and social practice) sequentially. However, given the interplay of these dimensions, I have chosen to present these findings through an interwoven narrative that focuses on three themes related to justification: threat framing, responsibility, and agency. The following sections will focus on these three themes within both the Canadian and American discourse, incorporating how each theme is identified through linguistic and non-linguistic methods of analysis.

6.2 Threat Framing

To understand Canadian and American justifications for their repatriation approaches, we have to understand how a state’s approach is linked to their conceptualization of threats in this specific context. I argue here that Canada and the U.S. articulate the real, or most pressing, ‘threat’ of IS-affiliated citizen detention and repatriation through two contrasting
perspectives. In essence, they have securitized the issue and identified the ‘threat’ differently in the discourse.

**Canadian Discourse**

In the Canadian discourse, the repatriation of IS-affiliated citizens is directly linked to the government’s definition of ‘Canadian Extremist Travellers’, “individuals with a nexus to Canada who have travelled, or attempted to travel abroad, to support terrorist organizations, including in Syria and Iraq” (Public Safety Canada, n.d.). When probed on the issue of potential return migration of their citizens from northeastern Syria, the Canadian government makes repeated references to these individuals’ past decision to leave the country. Reference is made to the Canadian travel advisory for Syria (implemented as a result of the civil war discouraging citizens to travel to the region) and the deliberate decision to “to leave Canada [and] knowingly support a terrorist group” (ibid.). The main concern regarding CETs is articulated as the possibility for them to return to Canada and conduct terrorist attacks, radicalize others to violence, or “serve as focal points for the inspiration of future or aspiring extremist travelers” (Public Safety Canada, n.d.). Their official policy framework regarding repatriation begins by introducing the concept of CETs to the reader and arguing that “protecting Canada from the threat of terrorism is a critical priority for the Government of Canada [and] CETs could pose a serious threat to national security and public safety if they were to return” (Bell, 2022). As a result, there is a strong sense of volition that these individuals “will face the full force of Canadian law” and “anyone who traveled for the purpose of supporting terrorism should face criminal charges” upon their return. The Canadian Anti-terrorism Act and Criminal Code sections 83.181, 83.201, and 83.18 are cited in the press releases as the basis for these charges.

Through this focus, the Government of Canada frames the detainees themselves (and the idea of their return) as potential threats to the “safety and security of Canadians” (Global Affairs Canada, 2023). In doing so, they are creating a binary between Canadians at home needing protection from threats and Canadian citizens detained abroad who are themselves the potential threat. Importantly, this particular distinction created in the discourse calls into question the “a Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian” rhetoric uttered by Trudeau in 2015, which implied an overarching sense of equality among all Canadians, regardless of their individual actions.

**American Discourse**
Whereas the Canadian framing is based primarily on the past actions of detainees (as CETs), the American government places more emphasis on the detainees’ vulnerability. The notable ‘threat’ in the U.S. discourse is not IS-affiliated citizens as individuals, but rather the possibility of IS resurgence more broadly. In their press releases, they make reference to other security-related discourses and worldwide concerns that view IS-affiliated return as a threat, acknowledging that “the risks of radicalization and recidivism [by returnees are] real” (Betts, 2022). However, they approach repatriation as a ‘balancing act’ of threat prioritization.

For the U.S., they focus on the region as a ‘hotbed’ of extremism and believe that the indefinite detention of these citizens will only enable more radicalization within the camps and prisons. They acknowledge the deteriorating security conditions in the region and connect the January 2022 Al-Sina’a prison break (mentioned in the literature review) to a prisoner break in Yemen in 2006 and in Iraq in 2013, whereby key Al-Qaeda and IS leaders were able to escape. This reflects their view that “prison breaks work” (Betts, 2022) and that there is an inherent connection between IS-affiliated repatriation and the larger counterterrorism discourse in their history.

Repeated mention is made to northeastern Syria as “the single largest concentration of terrorist fighters in the world” (Moss, 2022b; Patel, 2023). In a 2022 written press release, they make use of this wording again and (presumably) accidentally leave in directives for the speaker by saying: “The most direct pathway to the re-emergence of ISIS Core is the population of detained ISIS fighters in northeast Syria, which constitutes the single largest concentration of terrorist fighters in the world. (Repeat for emphasis)” (Moss, 2022). The “repeat for emphasis” left in the text is clear evidence that the U.S. government wants the audience to understand this key point - that the detainment of citizens should be viewed as the current threat to security because leaving them in a region where they are susceptible to further IS-influence could increase the strength of IS in the future. This notion of resurgence is the overall threat that needs to be mitigated and repatriation serves as an appropriate strategy to do so.

6.3 Responsibility

This section of analysis examines how the notion of ‘responsibility’ is connected to states’ repatriation approaches within the discourse. It examines how the Canadian and American administrations express responsibility to their IS-affiliated citizens in the camps and prisons, responsibility to the nationals within their own borders, and responsibility on the global stage.
**Canadian Discourse**

As indicated, the Canadian government creates a separation in the discourse between Canadians ‘at home’ and Canadians ‘abroad’ (i.e. those who are detained). They declare in the text that “Canada will always take its responsibilities seriously to protect Canadians, to protect Canadians in difficult situations overseas, but also to make sure [to do] everything necessary to keep Canadians safe at home” (CBC, 2019a). However, while they claim to have the responsibility of protecting all Canadians, including those abroad, the discourse also reveals a reliance by the government on the conviction that they have no legal responsibility to detainees: “The Government of Canada has no positive obligation under domestic or international law to provide consular assistance, including repatriation” (Bell, 2022; Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN and WTO, 2021). This is emphasized in both their response to the UN, as well as their policy framework.

In some of the press releases, statements are made referencing children from northeastern Syria that the government has repatriated. However, the language used is that these were “very complex” and “exceptional cases” whereby the Canadian government took “extraordinary steps to repatriate” under “unique circumstances” (CBC News, 2019a; CBC News, 2019b). There is a moral dimension attached to this part of the discourse, as Foreign Affairs Minister, Francois-Philippe Champagne, notes that “Canadians would expect their government to show empathy in cases like this” (ibid.). By ‘cases like this,’ he is referencing an orphaned child and the idea that her extreme vulnerability in Syria warranted protection by the Canadian government through repatriation. There is nothing within the discourse, however, that attaches this moral responsibility to other Canadian, IS-affiliated citizens beyond these ‘exceptional’ cases. Even within their official policy framework, there is no clear criteria for this ‘exceptionality’; instead, the policy reiterates that individual situations are assessed on a ‘case-by-case’ basis (Bell, 2022). As a result, there is a juxtaposition here, in that Canada claims to have a responsibility to protect all Canadians, regardless of their location, but also claims to have no legal responsibility and only elective moral responsibility outside of their territory.

**American Discourse**

In the American context, the concept of legal responsibility does not appear, but the idea of repatriation as a moral responsibility permeates the discourse. The repatriation of American citizens from northeastern Syria is explicitly referred to as “[the U.S. Government’s] moral responsibility to the American people and to the people of the countries
to which these terrorists traveled” (Office of Public Affairs, 2020b). Whereas the Canadian government identifies its moral responsibility to children as ‘exceptional’ measures, the U.S. argues that this type of repatriation is the bare minimum: “Already governments, many represented in this room, are returning some of their youngest nationals. Thank you for helping us make progress. But we can and must do more” (Moss, 2022a). The use of “we can and must” indicates a mode of both ability and necessity that reflects the American sense of responsibility. Beyond this, it reflects the U.S. government’s insistence throughout the discourse that this responsibility is not strictly American responsibility - rather, the “we” consistently referred to represents the international community at large. In nearly all of the American press releases, reference is made to the need for international cooperation to address the “collective action problem” of IS-affiliated detainment (Betts, 2022). Returning to the U.S. threat framing of possible IS-resurgence, the American discourse embeds the responsibility of repatriation within the overall counterterrorism mission of The Global Coalition Against Daesh (of which Canada is a part). Their main argument is that states, including their own, have a moral responsibility to address the issue ‘head-on’ with a proactive perspective: “We cannot ignore the serious concerns posed by the detainee and displaced person populations in northeast Syria, because those concerns will not ignore us” (Moss, 2022a). In facing this challenge, “the only durable solution…. is for each country to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and where appropriate, prosecute their national for crimes they have committed” (Moss, 2022b).

6.4 Agency

Stemming from the concept of responsibility, the idea of agency also appears throughout the discourse in connection to each state’s approach. This section builds upon the previous analysis by looking at how Canada and the United States view, relative to their sense of obligation, their respective capacity and role in the region.

Canadian Discourse

Somewhat unsurprisingly, a restricted sense of agency appears in the Canadian material. This aligns with the noted passivity of their approach, the minimal action being taken, and the previous analysis that showed a limited sense of responsibility to their IS-affiliated citizens. However, this agency is constructed in three forms in the discourse: logistically, related to the Canadian government’s diplomatic capacity in northeastern Syria; more abstractly, related to how they characterize their international presence in relation to
other actors in the region; and operationally, related to information sharing with the public.

Repeatedly throughout the material, but particularly within the UN response and policy framework, the Canadian government speaks to their lack of physical presence (i.e. the lack of a diplomatic mission) in Syria since closing the Canadian embassy in Damascus in 2012. As a result of this physical closure, as well as the role of AANES as a non-State actor and the ongoing political instability in the region, Canada claims that their “ability to provide consular support may be extremely limited” (Bell, 2022) and that “consular officials cannot guarantee Canadians’ safety and security abroad” (ibid.). They also reference both the Canadian Consular Services Charter, as well as the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to justify the need to prioritize - not the safety of IS-affiliated citizens - but the safety of Canadian diplomats abroad, thus reinforcing this tiered system of protection that minimizes the vulnerability of detainees and holds one group of Canadians above another. As discussed in the literature, other states have also recognized concerns related to the safety of officials abroad during repatriation negotiations. As we saw, however, even when offered clear solutions to circumvent the physical risk posed to their diplomats, Canada refused the support. As a result, this rationale within the discourse is muddled by this refusal in practice.

Canada’s apparent lack of agency is also manifested in the description of their relationship with AANES and humanitarian actors on the ground in northeastern Syria. The common phrasing in the material is that they are continuing to engage with relevant authorities and monitor the situation closely. Regarding the humanitarian situation in al-Hawl and Roj camps, they note that they are “concerned” and “aware” of the deteriorating environment — they even reference leading reports by human rights organizations that illuminate the most dire of these conditions (Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN and WTO, 2021). However, their choice of passive language creates an inherent separation between their acknowledgment of these realities and their need to do something in response. Delivering humanitarian assistance in Syria is something that the Government of Canada “supports partners” doing, not something that they are doing directly (or, rather, they do not consider any direct humanitarian support relevant to mention in this context). Similarly, in one of the press releases, Prime Minister Trudeau argues that “Canada spends a lot of time monitoring [detainees] with stakeholders and watch[ing] carefully what's going on” (Global News, 2023). The result is that their time is spent always monitoring, rarely acting, and their status becomes that of an ‘observer.’ In their UN response, Canada claims to “advocate for the well-being of all Canadian citizens” in the region and they claim an “expectation that all Canadian citizens in [Kurdish] custody be treated humanely, in line with the applicable
principles of international humanitarian law and international human rights law” by AANES (Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN and WTO, 2021). In doing so, they refer to themselves in an advocacy role with “expectations” of others, not responsibilities of their own.

Finally, in the Canadian discourse, there is consistent mention of the inability of political actors to fully ‘comment’ on Canada’s repatriation approach publicly. This is especially clear in statements made by Prime Minister Trudeau and related Ministers who assert “we cannot provide information about the individuals, and we cannot share details of the repatriation for operational reasons” (Global Affairs Canada, 2020). In these instances, they cite privacy concerns for individuals and they provide vague reference to the “established policies” and “existing framework” that guide the government’s repatriation approach, as if these guidelines were common knowledge. However, my own research showed that the official policy framework of reference was not made public until 2022 when it was requested by the news media (after many of these statements were already made). Returning to the level of interpretation in Fairclough’s methodology, this reflects the inaccessibility of the material; as a result, so much of the Canadian discourse has been inherently ‘hidden’ from the public and continues to be riddled with secrecy.

**American Discourse**

In stark contrast with the Canadian discourse, the American government represents itself as a leading force in the region, with full logistical capacity to support the return of IS-affiliated American citizens. Across the material of this analysis, the government says it “stands ready” to help other nations in their respective repatriation efforts, to “lead by example,” and to “share [their] expertise” (Moss, 2022a; Patel, 2023). They speak of collaboration with “US government and international partners” and their direct role in providing nearly $13 billion of humanitarian aid to Syria over the last 10 years (Moss, 2022b). Unlike the Canadian context, the U.S. government does not distance itself into an ‘observer’ role — they use dynamic and active language, they assume their own set responsibilities, and they confidently attach a label to themself as “practitioners and experts on terrorism and political violence” (Betts, 2022). At no point in this discourse does the United States waver in its convictions that they are a capable, important, and active player in northeastern Syria.

However, despite the ‘straightforwardness’ of this ‘agency’ in the American discourse (relative to that of the Canadian), it should still be contextualized within the broader socio-political and historical context. It is well known that the United States has a long and
complicated history of political and military intervention in the MENA region. While the
details of this history extend beyond the scope of this analysis, this context is worth
mentioning because it has a bearing on the country’s self-perceived capabilities. This distinct
sense of agency has not arisen in a vacuum, but has been (re)construed and solidified by the
United States through their decades-long counterterrorism strategy in the region. Moreover,
the Canadian government is not ‘new’ to the region per-se, but their military involvement and
counter-terrorism strategies have most often been subsidiary or in support of the United States
(CJTF-OIR., n.d.).

7. Conclusions

7.1 Discussion of Findings

Returning to this study’s two main research questions, the above CDA findings
provide grounding to understand how the Canadian and American governments justify their
respective repatriation approach.

In the Canadian discourse, the government justifies its passive approach to repatriation
efforts as a result of a lack of legal responsibility to their IS-affiliated citizens and a lack of
agency to facilitate their return. This is rooted in their framing of IS-affiliated citizens in
northeastern Syria as a threat to the security of Canadians ‘at home’ and the idea that
repatriation should only occur carefully on a case-by-case basis and under exceptional
circumstances. However, there are contradictions and an overall sense of secrecy embedded in
the Canadian discourse that complicates the logic of this (newly) public justification.

On the other hand, the U.S. government justifies its active approach to repatriation
efforts as a reflection of its moral responsibility and capacity to ‘lead by example’ in the
region. This is rooted in their perspective that repatriation is the only durable and long term
solution to combating IS resurgence, the idea of which threatens both national and
international security. In the American discourse, the government remains steadfast in its
convictions, which reflect a sustained role in the region, meaning their public justification is
both clear and explicit.

The result of these justifications is that there is inevitable tension between the two
governments regarding IS-affiliated citizen repatriation, even if it is not outwardly expressed
in the discourse. Canada is presenting a certain justification to the public, but fails to take a
hard-line stance on the issue. At the same time, not only does the United States justify the
decision to repatriate American nationals, they also openly argue that all states should adopt
the same approach. This is indirect commentary on Canada’s failure to do so. I argue that this discourse cannot sustainably co-exist with the discourse surrounding Canada and the U.S. as security partners working toward common objectives. How long can the U.S. declare Canada its ‘strongest and most startwart ally’ if their security priorities in northeastern Syria are articulated differently to the public?

7.2 Further Research
At the time of writing, there are new and rapid developments in IS-affiliated repatriation from northeastern Syria. As international pressure mounts for Canada to repatriate its citizens, the influence of the U.S. as a key security ally will become harder to ignore and Canada may begin to follow a similar track. Only time will tell.

As it has been presented, IS-affiliated repatriation is an issue that requires international cooperation among state and non-state actors and, for the protection of both human rights and security, consistency and clarity in response. For the sake of all individuals whose lives have been devastated by IS-related atrocities and whose rights have been infringed on in northeastern Syria, my hope is that future research will not focus on the ongoing policy decisions or discourse of IS-affiliated repatriation. Rather, my hope is that continued and sustained efforts by the international community, including Canada and the United States, make this type of analysis irrelevant.

Instead, I see an appropriate departure from this field of research to be concentrated on the rehabilitation of IS-affiliated individuals within their home countries and the applicable administration of justice. This includes social reintegration and deradicalization programming at the community level, as well as prosecution through due process when relevant. This should also extend to Syrians detained within their own borders who have been almost entirely neglected in the existing academic narrative. As former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, once said,

“The uncomfortable truth is that [foreign fighters] are not foreign at all. They may be foreigners in the countries where they are going to. But in reality they are our compatriots, our acquaintances, the classmates of our kids, the guys and girls we see in our supermarkets. They are part of our societies. Perhaps the only thing that’s foreign to us is their mentality” (Mehra & Paulussen, 2019).

10 The current most relevant Canadian policy development is that of the ‘Bring Our Loved Ones Home Litigation,’ through which the government has been ordered by the court to repatriate 26 Canadian citizens. More information on the background of this case can be found here: [https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/06/bring-home-canadians-unlawfully-held-northeast-syria](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/06/bring-home-canadians-unlawfully-held-northeast-syria)
8. Bibliography


CBC. (2019a). *Canada will do “everything necessary” to keep Canadians safe: Trudeau*. CBC. https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2190765635685


CBC News. (2019b). “*We know that Canadians would expect their government to show empathy...*” - Francois- Philippe Champagne, Minister of Foreign Affairs. CBC. [https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1800631875892](https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1800631875892)


https://doi.org/10.11610/connections.15.3.07


https://www.state.gov/u-s-welcomes-canadas-repatriation-from-northeast-syria/

https://doi.org/10.1017/s1816383121000278


Raycraft, R., & Burke, A. (2023, February 10). *Federal government appealing court order to repatriate 4 Canadian men detained in Syria*. CBC.  


https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=36134


https://bc-cb.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=2136&languageId=1&contentId=77176


https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87510


47


UNODC. (2021). Foreign Terrorist Fighters Manual for Judicial Training Institutes South-
Eastern Europe Foreign Terrorist Fighters Manual for Judicial Training Institutes
Middle East and North Africa.


https://www.state.gov/u-s-canada-relations-friends-partners-allies/


https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/al-hol-displacement-crisis-tinderbox-could-ignite-isis-20
## ANNEX.

### List of Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reference Code</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs on the repatriation of a Canadian child orphaned in northeastern Syria</td>
<td>Global Affairs Canada</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 5, 2020</td>
<td>Government of Canada Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C4</td>
<td>‘We know that Canadians would expect their government to show empathy...’ - Francois-Philippe Champagne, Minister of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Francois-Philippe Champagne, Minister of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 5, 2020</td>
<td>CBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C5</td>
<td>Canadian Extremist Travelers (NCSB)</td>
<td>Public Safety Canada</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>December 7 and 8, 2021</td>
<td>Government of Canada Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C6</td>
<td>Trudeau discusses repatriation of 2 Canadian women and their children from ISIS detention camp</td>
<td>President Justin Trudeau</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 25, 2022</td>
<td>CBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Trudeau, public safety minister condemn those who travel to join terrorist groups</td>
<td>President Justin Trudeau, Marco Medicino, Minister of Public Safety</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 26, 2022</td>
<td>Victoria News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C9</td>
<td>Trudeau won't comment on return to Canada of women caught in Syria during fight with ISIS</td>
<td>President Justin Trudeau</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>April 5, 2023</td>
<td>Global News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C10</td>
<td>Government of Canada repatriates Canadians from northeastern Syria</td>
<td>Global Affairs Canada</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>April 6, 2023</td>
<td>Government of Canada Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Author/Creator</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>Canada will do ‘everything necessary’ to keep Canadians safe: Trudeau</td>
<td>President Justin Trudeau</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>April 6, 2023</td>
<td>CBC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US1</td>
<td>SEC. 1224. ESTABLISHING A COORDINATOR FOR DETAINED ISIS MEMBERS AND RELEVANT DISPLACED POPULATIONS IN SYRIA.</td>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
<td>Policy / Bill</td>
<td>December 20, 2019</td>
<td>Congress Database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US3</td>
<td>Remarks by President Trump on the Situation in Northeastern Syria</td>
<td>President Donald Trump</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 23, 2019</td>
<td>White House Archives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US4</td>
<td>Repatriated ISIS Fighter Pleads Guilty to Terror Charge</td>
<td>Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>September 2, 2020</td>
<td>United States Government Database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US5</td>
<td>The United States Has Repatriated 27 Americans from Syria and Iraq Including Ten Charged with Terrorism-Related Offenses for Their Support to ISIS</td>
<td>Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 1, 2020</td>
<td>United States Government Database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US7</td>
<td>Repatriating FTF and Displaced Persons from Northeast Syria</td>
<td>Ian Moss, Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism m Responsible for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorist Detentions</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>September 29, 2022</td>
<td>United States Government Database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US8</td>
<td>The Importance of Detained Fighters and Displaced Persons in Northeast Syria to the Future of ISIS</td>
<td>Ian Moss, Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism m Responsible for Countering Violent Extremism and</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>October 20, 2022</td>
<td>United States Government Database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US10</td>
<td>U.S. Welcomes Canada’s Repatriation from Northeast Syria</td>
<td>Vedant Patel, Principal Deputy Spokesperson</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>April 6, 2023</td>
<td>United States Government Database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>