MASTER’S THESIS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

**To Keep Your Friends Close,**

**And Your Enemies Closer**

**Explaining the repatriation of IS-affiliated citizens**

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### Abstract

The rise of the Islamic State caliphate in the Middle-East has led to an influx of foreigners who joined the organization. When in 2019 Islamic State lost its last pocket of land in Syria, some of these foreigners were captured and put in local prisons. Both the authorities that captured them, and the foreigners themselves asked to be repatriated back to their state of origin. Few states have done so, and it remains unclear why some states repatriate and others not. Within this thesis a theory is suggested that the existence of a pre-existing internal conflict and the mobilization potential within its population can explain why states repatriate their civilians. Through a case study on the United States, which repatriated all known US-civilians from Syria, this theory is put under scrutiny. The result shows that at first no internal conflict seems present within the US. After closer examination it will be argued that the War on Terror comprehends a transnational conflict with characteristics of multiple conflict types, including those of intrastate conflict. Through this argument the case of US repatriation efforts can be explained.

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### List of abbreviations

AQI Al Qaeda of Iraq

ECHR European Council of Human Rights

ENP European Neighborhood Policy

EU European Union

FTF Foreign Terrorist Fighter

ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross

IHL International Humanitarian Law

IS Islamic State

SDF Syrian Defense Forces

UK United Kingdom

UN United Nations

US United States

WTC World Trade Center

# Chapter 1: Introduction

**“The global threat from ISIL is likely to increase if the international community fails to address pressing challenges.”**

*- Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UN News, 2020).*

## 1.1 Introduction

When in March 2019 the last remnants of the Islamic State (IS)[[1]](#footnote-1) fell at Baghouz it meant the end of a short-lived dream of some men and women to establish a khalifate in the heart of the Middle-East[[2]](#footnote-2). Within the last months of the fight against IS and during the collapse of the last remnants, most IS members either fled to surrounding refugee camps such as Al Hol in Syria, or were captured and put in Syrian and Iraqi prisons. What to do with this population of (former) IS-fighters and sympathizers remains both a pressing an unresolved issue in the light of the recovery and rebuilding of the region according to organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), The Soufan Center and Human Rights Watch. US Maj. Gen. Alex Grynkewich, the deputy commander of the US-led military coalition to defeat IS is quoted on the importance of a solution for these people: “*The real danger to me is it’s the next generation of ISIS that’s being programmed there in those camps*” (Seligman, 2019).One important element regarding a solution for the overall population of IS prisoners and refugees, is the presence of a group of foreigners that joined IS from all over the world and were a prominent feature of both IS ideology and the organization itself (Greenwood, 2017, pp. 89-92).

Other authors have already written about the existence of foreigners within the ranks of IS, and the existing attraction IS ideology has towards people all over the world to join the ranks of IS (Cook & Vale, 2019; Avdimetaj & Coleman, 2020). This fits the broader argument of the rise of a pan-Islamist community, in which the phenomenon of Muslim foreign-fighters is becoming more common (Hegghammer, 2010). Some of these foreigners choose to join the fight of IS by committing acts of terrorism in their home-state. Others travelled to states in which IS was involved in an insurgency, most notably the conflict in Syria and Iraq in the Middle-East. Estimates by the UN in 2019 have put the current number of foreign IS members in Syrian Defense Force (SDF) prisons at 1,000 while other estimates go up to 2,000 (Jenkins, 2019, p. 11; Seligman, 2019). Although the number of somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 foreign IS-fighters does not seems like a lot, this number is out of a total estimate of 44,279-52,808 foreigners who are believed to have joined IS since 2010 (Cook & Vale, 2019, pp. 4-5). The difference between the two estimates is due to the fact that most people, especially the male fighters, are expected to have died over the course of the conflict. A conflict in which sometimes Western states resorted to military means such as drone attacks (UK) or bombing raids (France) to eliminate their own citizens within the ranks of IS (Hugues, 2015; MacAskill, 2015).

In addition to the group of IS-fighters that is left within prisons, is also a group that does not necessarily fit the label of ‘IS-fighter’ but is somehow related to IS in another way. This accounts for the wives and children of IS-fighters and people who were not actually fighting but fulfilled other jobs within the organization or were forced to join. The size of this bigger population of IS-affiliates[[3]](#footnote-3) is better captured when the make-up of the population of several refugee camps in the region such as Al Hol in Syria. In 2019, this refugee camp, consisting of 60,000-70,000 people, was believed to be housing up to 10,000 foreign IS-affiliates, of which mostly children and women (Jenkins, 2019, p. 11; Seligman, 2019).

Local authorities such as the Iraqi government and the SDF have called upon states to repatriate these foreign citizens out of these refugee camps and the overall area. Not only because the SDF is somewhat in uncharted territory for otherwise having to trial foreigners as a non-state actor, but they also seem to lack the resources and facilities to offer these people an acceptable stay while awaiting a potential trial or repatriation (McKernan, 2019). Overall, they argue to be struggling with the huge number of prisoners it has captured in its fight against IS risking the escape of IS-affiliates (Yeung, Browne and Balkiz, 2020). In opposition to the SDF, we see the Iraqi government prosecuting much of its captured IS-affiliates and putting them to trial. A few issues remain however, as reports by Human Rights Watch (2019) about the detention and trial of IS-affiliates show cases of arbitrary detention, systematically violating process rights, torture, prosecution of children under the international recognized age of criminal responsibility and imposing the death penalty on over 3,000 individuals (something especially European states oppose). Following much of this criticism, Iraq became reluctant to continue prosecuting the remaining foreign IS-affiliates, especially the estimated 800 children within its prisons, and started requesting repatriation by the respective states (The Defense Post, 2018).

## 1.2 The Puzzle

So far, the request from the SDF and the Iraqi government is met with mixed results from the respective states of the foreign IS-affiliates. A variation is observed between two groups of states. The first group responded to the request without reservation and showed effort to repatriate as many IS-affiliated citizens as possible. A few examples of these states are most notably Kazakhstan which repatriated 516 IS-affiliates from Syria, Tajikistan that repatriated 84 children and Uzbekistan that repatriated 156 IS-affiliates (United States Institute for Peace, 2019). Also, Russia is making work of the repatriation according to Tanya Lokshina[[4]](#footnote-4): “*Globally, Russia had the most active program to return detainees from Iraq and Syria, notably children*” with a total of up to 500 returnees according to Cook and Vale (2019, p. 19). The same goes for Kosovo, the only European state to have unconditionally repatriated 110 of their IS-affiliated citizens (Avdimetaj & Coleman, 2020). Within the Western world so far only the US has unconditionally repatriated all of its IS-affiliated citizens (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). In addition to that the US also puts pressure on other states to do so by for instance offering help with any repatriation operations(Hooper, 2020). Other states that unconditionally repatriated their IS-affiliated citizens are Morocco and Turkey.

The second group consists of states that show no effort to unconditionally repatriate all of its IS-affiliated citizens. This group consists mainly of Western states such as France, Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands, Canada, Australia and the UK (Cook & Vale, 2019; Jones, 2020; Townsend, 2020). Besides the Western states it is also observed that both Tunisia and Jordan repatriate few or even none of their IS-affiliated citizens (Raghavan, 2019; Hasan, 2021). In addition to the general lack of effort it is also shown that if a state from this group does repatriate, they usually only repatriate (orphaned) children (NOS, 2019). Within the literature this is what Cook & Vale call a “hierarchy of victimhood” in which only certain poignant cases are repatriated while others are not (2019, p. 9). An exemplary case from The Netherlands shows two orphans who were repatriated by the Dutch government while at the same time 170 other Dutch minors remained in Syria (NOS, 2019).

Two important distinctions need to be made to be able to emphasize the difference between the first group and the second group. The first one being the fact that even if a state does not put effort in the repatriation of its citizens, it still means that these citizens can return on their own. All of the states are home to IS-affiliated citizens that have returned, albeit on their own. So it is important not to confuse the lack of repatriation efforts with the actual ability to keep these individuals outside the borders. The second distinction is related to the use of the word ‘unconditionally’. As already mentioned, most states don’t withold from repatriation competely, but only accept to do so in very few poigant cases as was described with the example of the Dutch orphans. The main difference between these two groups thus lies within the fact that one group chooses to repatriate unconditionally and facilitate the returnal of as many citizens as possible. While the second group is more selective and only picks certain cases to repatriate. In addition to this selective repatriation we also see that there exists a certain degree of variation between how strict states are in their general approach towards their IS-affiliated citizens. Some even go as far as stripping them off their citizenship (if possible) such as the UK and Australia (Doherty, 2020; BBC, 2021). This way these states are essentially abandoning any possible responsibilities towards their citizens and making it nearly impossible for those people to ever return home. Whereas *a priori*, we may hypothesize that democratic governments will respect their citizens’ rights, this observed variation shows that even strong democracies may abandon their democratic responsibilities. Of those the UK stands out the most as it also revoked over 150 citizenships in an effort to prevent these citizens from returning (The Guardian, 2017).

As we will see, even if the argument is made in favor of repatriation from a rational point of view, some states still will not repatriate. Some experts even have argued that repatriation of IS-affiliated citizens is an obligation states hold towards their citizens laid down in domestic and international law (Capone, 2019, p. 69; The Independent, 2019). Multiple UN resolutions seem to substantiate this claim, for instance resolution 2396 argues states to be the main responsible for the appropriate prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning IS-affiliates. More specific it argues to: *“highlighting the situation of individuals of more than one nationality who travel abroad for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, and may seek to return to their state of origin or nationality… and urging States to take action, as appropriate, in compliance with their obligations under their domestic law and international law..”*  (United Nations, 2017, p. 2). Other notions of this idea are found in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) such as described by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in rule 128a: *“Prisoners of war must be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities”* (ICRC, 2021). This is part of an underlying premise of international law regarding the governing of detention in times of conflict that assumes repatriation to be part of the process (Stigall, 2020, pp. 103-104). The European Council of Human Rights (ECHR) argues that it is in the interest of the community and the protection of the individuals’ fundamental rights to be brought before a competent legal authority. In the case of IS-affiliated citizens in Syria this lack of access to a competent legal authority is relevant as they are being detained by a non-state actor (the SDF). The ECHR thus concludes that due to these fundamental rights and the interest of the community these objectives could only be met in short-term notice if they would be repatriated back to their host-states and subjected to a fair investigation (Stigall, 2020, p. 82). So it isn’t just states that don’t repatriate, the ones that don’t also are going against what most experts would argue to be rational.

This variation in state behavior prompts a theoretically and substantively important question: why do some states repatriate all their citizens while others only repatriate limited amounts of citizens? The puzzle that lies within these questions relates to the following research question which shall be answered throughout this thesis:

*What can explain the different type of behavior of states towards their IS-affiliated citizens in Syria and Iraq?*

Based on the dataset created by Cook & Vale (2019) it is possible to estimate which states fall in one of two categories based on their overall efforts to repatriate their citizens. States that are included had to meet one requirement: access to reliable information regarding repatriation efforts (a requirement other states such as China, Saudi-Arabia, Egypt and others did not meet and therefore aren’t included in the table).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Unconditional repatriation** | **Selective repatriation** |
| Kazakhstan | Australia |
| Kosovo | Austria |
| Morocco | Belgium |
| Russia | Canada |
| Tajikistan | Denmark |
| Turkey | France |
| United States | Germany |
| Uzbekistan | Indonesia |
|  | Jordan |
|  | Netherlands |
|  | Sweden |
|  | Tunisia |
|  | United Kingdom |

Table 1. Repatriation behavior of states regarding their IS-affiliated citizens in Syria and Iraq (based on Cook & Vale, 2019).

## 1.3 Thesis outline

To answer the research questions proposed in this introduction we need to look at the conditions that make states behave the way they do. As we will discuss later on in this thesis, not much of the existing literature on the phenomenon of FTF’s, and IS-affiliated citizens in general, aims to explain the difference in repatriation efforts of the respective states of departure[[5]](#footnote-5).

It is therefore that in Chapter 2 a theory is presented in which it is argued that the behavior of states towards their IS-affiliated citizens in Syria and Iraq is best explained through the presence of a set of conditions. The conditions argued to predict repatriation efforts of states are: the pre-existence of a violent conflict within the borders of the state of departure, and the presence of a political community that could be mobilized to start a potentially new conflict. If these independent variables are present within a state, having citizens that joined a violent transnational organization[[6]](#footnote-6) outside direct state control (either internally through hiding or because they are abroad) is assessed as a security risk. The risk is the expectation that these individuals might serve as a catalyst to the existing conflict, or start a new one. Both believed to potentially threaten the survival of the respective state. The scope condition to this theory is that the identity on which the violent transnational organization is formed is compatible with the identity of communities involved in the existing conflict or the possible new conflict. In the case of IS, which is argued to be mobilized around a pan-Islamic identity, the pre-existing conflicts should relate to a conflict of which Islam plays a significant role. When related to mobilization potential the assessment of the potential is based on how compatible the group within a state would be to IS-ideology.

Looking at Table 1 we can expect this theory to hold in the case of IS-affiliated citizens as the category including Russia, Turkey and Morocco are known to have had pre-existing conflicts with successionist movements within their border (respectively the Chechnya region, the Kurdish region and the Western-Sahara region). The mobilization potential in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kosovo is considered high as they have a majority Muslim population that, often, holds a socio-economic marginalized position compared to the political elite. This theory would also be able to explain why Western states and some of the more ‘stable’ Muslim states don’t repatriate; they don’t meet the requirements and are therefore feeling less threatened by IS-affiliated citizens ‘on the loose’. The worst these citizens could do is conduct terrorist attacks on return, so considering this theory it then also would make more sense to affect the trade-off these states have to make in such a way that they prefer to leave these citizens within Syria and/or Iraq.

As a possible sharp reader already might have noticed, there remains one case within the category of unconditional repatriation that seems to be left unexplained. The possible exception to this theory included in Table 1 is the US. There is no pre-existing conflict within the borders of the US, and the mobilization potential is not expected to be that high compared to the other states who have a Muslim majority within their population. Therefore this thesis will revolve around the study of the US as a so-called ‘deviant’ case to see if it can disprove the theory formulated in chapter two. Within chapter three the research design is discussed which leads to the operationalization of the hypotheses based on the theory that are formulated in chapter two. Then, in chapter four the case of the US is looked upon more closely to see if it is indeed the possible ‘black swan’ to this theory. And finally, within chapter five the working of the proposed theory is reviewed and we will conclude if it works as intended or might need adjustment.

## 1.4 Scientific and societal relevance

Although it might seem preferable for a state to forget about IS-affiliated citizens in a conflict on the other side of the world, there are many actors who argue there to be good reasons for states to repatriate them. To understand why they do or do not follow these arguments is to then better understand how states behave and what drives them.

Multiple organizations, experts and scholars have argued that the remaining of IS-affiliates in Syria and Iraq will have a higher chance of leading to new instability opposed to a situation in which they were to be repatriated out of the region and put under the supervision of their respective host-states (Cook & Vale, 2019, p. 17; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; The Soufan Center, 2019). As argued the continued presence of foreign IS-affiliates might lead to a continuation of instability. The local circumstances in which these IS-affiliated citizens are now; a region destroyed by conflict, poverty, poor living conditions, lack of education and work are not likely to be the foundation for the recovery and rehabilitation of these individuals. As long as people are not convinced to turn their back on IS-ideology and IS as an organization, it enables IS to remain active in the region, albeit in a refugee camp or a local prison. While IS remains active within the region, they effectively continue to challenge local authorities. These local authorities in return seem to be unable to properly control, let alone trial, the captured IS-affiliates and contain the activities of IS putting the whole region at danger (Dent, 2019, pp. 2-3).

The danger of an active IS does not only threaten local authorities such as the states of Syria and Iraq but it also relates to the foreign states that are fighting IS through military campaigns. Almost all states have either suffered from terrorist attacks related to IS at home, and therefore are expected to have a big interest in reducing instability in the region where the origin of the ideology behind these attacks lies. Overall regional stabilization would decrease the need for military involvement and thereby reduce any costs related to this conflict in terms of financial resources and the chance of military or civilian casualties. An example of this logic is within the European Neighborhood Policies (ENP) of the EU. This collective policy aims for the EU to support and foster stability, security and prosperity in the countries closest to its borders as a way of improving its own stability, security and prosperity (European Council, 2015, p. 2). The same is argued by Lead Inspector General of the US Department of Defense Sean W. O’Donnell who argued: *“In Syria, conditions in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons remained difficult, taxing local security forces. The combination of these factors perpetuates instability, which may undermine military gains against ISIS”* (O'Donnell, 2020). This shows that where some would find it rational for a state to repatriate, it is puzzling that we don’t see this behavior across all cases. The theoretical relevance thus lies in understanding why states don’t respond to these arguments in favor of repatriation and what their behavior in the case of IS-affiliates means for our understanding of them.

In addition to the scientific side of better understanding state behavior in regard to this case is a more moral notion. The phenomenon of IS-affiliates and Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF’s) in general raises questions of what it means for a society to have members join an organization that is set out to destroy the very thing they grew up in (i.e. the society they came from). We can consider the way a state deals with the issue of IS-affiliated citizens as a way of signaling towards its own citizens and other states what it means to be part of a society, and how you are viewed after you turn your back on it. These values of identity and community are important ideas and relate to how a society views itself as much as how it views its adversaries. Understanding the behavior of states in regard to the case of IS-affiliates in general will thus have the chance of revealing some of these values. Through the knowledge of these values, it is then possible to reflect of what it is a state wants to propagate and what it is it is actually propagating.

Based on both the scientific as moral dimension it would also be possible to get an overall better understanding of the case of IS-affiliates in general and would enable states to possible formulate policy based on understanding that case.

# Chapter 2: Theory

To some the repatriation of IS-affiliated citizens might not seem like a rational thing to do for a state at first, especially if it views them as a threat. But this chapter will show that this is not the case, their behavior is very rational and the result of a specific trade-off between risks and benefits. This assumption of state rationality is rooted within the two most dominant grand theories within international relations: Realism and Liberalism. Realism and Liberalism. Both argue that the core goal of any state is to maintain security and control over its population and territory[[7]](#footnote-7) (Heywood, 2014, pp. 56-68).

This is also taken as the first assumption within this thesis on which the theory is built that will explain the variation in state behavior regarding citizens who have gone abroad to join foreign organizations involved in a conflict. It is assumed that the variation of state behavior is rational in the sense that it is the result of a trade-off between costs and benefits of different options with the ultimate goal of maximizing their ability to maintain security and control over its population and territory. These citizens thus present states with a security challenge: how best to deal with the possible threats these individuals might pose towards a state’s security. This threat can take the form of individual physical violent attacks on civilians or state institutions, the mobilization of a broader population to join the organization or adopt its ideology in an existing conflict. This can be done internally within the state, but also from abroad through channels such (social) media and transnational criminal and terrorist networks (Devetak, 2007, pp. 18-21; Malet, 2009, pp. 283-284; Ali, 2015, pp. 9-11).

Within this chapter a theory is proposed that argues that states that meet certain requirements regarding pre-existing internal conflicts and a population susceptible to possible mobilization will resort to repatriation of citizens that joined a foreign violent transnational organization. States that meet these requirements and asses both the ideology of the transnational organization as compatible with local communities it will assess them as a big threat to the survival of the central state institutions. They fear the possibility that these citizens might target the internal conflict or try to mobilize an already disenfranchised population around a compatible identity using the connections and resources it gained in the foreign transnational organization. The state then risks becoming the theatre of an internationalized conflict and possibly have more resources and recruits flown in from all over the world. The alternative of having FTF’s within the state’s sphere of control, preferably within its own territory, would then be preferable opposed to them being out of your direct control. Being within the sphere of control of the state then offers the state ways to monitor, prosecute and rehabilitate the their citizens if needed. States that see no risk of these citizens functioning as a catalyst in any possible internal conflict will assess the solution in a different manner and will prefer to keep their citizens outside their own territory.

The two variables of internal conflict and mobilization potential are expected to be able to explain if a state will repatriate its citizens involved in a foreign conflict or not. But if a state has no internal conflict and no population that could possibly be mobilized, the arguments for repatriation (monitoring, prosecuting and rehabilitation) would still seem more rational than to not repatriate or even object to a possible return. Especially as, like argued in the previous chapter, international law seems to support repatriation of citizens out of a foreign conflict. This is related to a trade-off assessed by the states. A state that might not feel threatened still might feel worried about possibly losing support of its population if it would not be able to keep them safe from possible terrorist attacks.

In the next sections within this chapter, we will dive deeper in the proposed workings of the two independent variables and how they relate to the described behavior of states. This will also lead to the formulation of two hypotheses that will be used to test the formulated theory in the case of the US. After that any existing literature regarding most of the central concepts of this thesis will be discussed. This might offer possible alternative explanations that will be revised and discussed as well.

## 2.1 Pre-Existing conflicts

The first independent variable part of the theory is the **pre-existence of a conflict** within a state’s borders. This variable describes a condition in which a state is involved in an armed struggle with a political movement over independence of the central government or for power over the central government.

Even in the most stable states in the world, state legitimacy is not something that is necessarily set in stone. Most of the states within the world have at least one political entity within their borders that challenges its legitimacy in general, or specific within a disputed region of its territory. The degree to which this opposition towards the central state authority exists differs greatly. In some cases, this opposition towards the central government exists only with a small group that is not willing to fight for it, but often this challenging of state legitimacy is one of the root causes for conflict and may even lead to a civil war. Since the turn of the century these types of conflicts have become more common compared to interstate conflict, leading to states being more wary for a potential civil war (SIPRI, 2020, p. 2). Due to the often-chaotic nature of these types of conflicts it is expected to be susceptible to radicalization. The conflict of Syria offers an example in this regard. It showed that a conflict that started out between an authoritarian regime that favored religious and cultural minorities and suppressed the majority of people eventually can become the breeding ground for more extremist violent non-state actors such as IS (Van Dam, 2017). A conflict with local political, economic and cultural causes then might add a religious component to its conflict risking the creation of a more tireless adversary that manages to find support, resources and recruits from all over the world (Malet, 2009).

This overall cautions of states from a deteriorating local conflict into a more intense religious conflict with international elements fits within a broader shift of classical accounts on state-formation towards more recent accounts on security and trans-national threats. Classical accounts on state-formation argue there to be an internal and an external component (Kaldor M. , 2012). The internal component rests on what is called ‘internal pacification’ and refers to the monopolization of violence and instruments of violence by the state (Devetak, 2007, p. 11; Kaldor, 2012, pp. 18-23). In addition to the monopolization of violence this process was expanded through the concentration of administrative power within state institutions and through forms of social control and surveillance using policy instruments (Devetak, 2007, p. 11).

Thomson (1996) argued that this internal process has become more intertwined with the external dimension of security, arguing that the divide between internal and external accounts of violence has been merging in recent decades and giving rise to trans-national violent actors. States are believed to be in an ongoing process of state-making which involves the consolidating of their sphere of control and legitimacy and thus expected by their civilians to deal with this increasingly difficult blurring of internal and external threats. It is expected from the state that they either eliminate or neutralize these threats of what is called ‘private international violence’ (Thomson, 1996). Kaldor (2012) and Devetak (2007) have expanded upon this notion of ‘private international violence’ and described it in terms of the ‘globalization of violence’, which leads to transnational notions of conflict through for instance transnational criminal networks, global terrorist organizations and private military firms. Furtherly blurring the division between the internal and the external element of threats to state legitimacy (Devetak, 2007, p. 18) and basically describing the same mechanism as Thomson (1996). While violence and conflict thus become more susceptible to internationalization and involvement of others beyond the direct control of the state, it becomes more challenging to deal with these actors if they remain outside states’ direct control. States can then solve this problem by bringing these threats closer to home, and keeping their enemies within their control. This can be seen as a form of damage control: the closer the origin of the threat is to the control of the state, the better the state is expected to mitigate any potential danger.

It is therefore argued that states that have a pre-existing conflict within their borders, are afraid of it becoming an internationalized conflict through the involvement of a religious inspired organization. Their expected reaction is to try to limit the possibility for citizens outside their own control to influence the conflict. Through repatriation a state then gains this needed control and be able to monitor, prosecute and rehabilitate individuals that might pose a problem. This is expected to reduce the overall assessed threat these individuals might pose to the security of the state. This leads us to hypothesize this theory as follows:

*H1: If a state has an existing violent conflict within its territory, it will repatriate its citizens involved in a foreign conflict.*

This hypothesis then also predicts that if a state isn’t involved in an internal conflict, it won’t repatriate any citizens currently involved in a foreign conflict. This is because they are expected not to be worried about any possible internationalization or radicalization of any internal conflict because they don’t have any. Their citizens in foreign conflicts are then kept there because the perceived threat to the state being uncontrolled outside the state’s sphere of influence is perceived to be smaller than when within the state.

## 2.2 Mobilization

In the previous section the independent variable of a pre-existing conflict was discussed to explain the repatriation of citizens involved in a foreign conflict. This would be part of the trade-off made by states in assessing the threat citizens involved in a foreign conflict pose. But it is argued that states who are not involved within an internal conflict, still might prefer repatriate citizens. This relates to the second condition that is argued to be part of the overall assessment: the expected **mobilization potential** within the population of the state. This potential is important because you could argue that if there was a pre-existing conflict within a state, this mobilization potential is already (partly) fulfilled. If there is no such conflict, this doesn’t necessarily mean that there is no potential within a state for certain political groups to be mobilized along certain political cleavages which might lead to such conflict. It is therefore believed that states will then look at this potential within their population and use this as a base to assess the risk of possible future conflict, leading them to either repatriate its citizens or not.

As mentioned earlier, the character of conflicts has been changing recently, more conflicts are becoming intrastate opposed to the more traditional interstate we know as the dominant form of conflict of the past few centuries (SIPRI, 2020). These intrastate wars, dubbed ‘new wars’ by Kaldor (2012), are more centered around the concept of identity politics (pp. 79-90). The concept of ‘identity politics’ is used to address movements which mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious characteristics (p. 79). Kaldor explains how identity refers to the label either put on people by others or by themselves, and how politics refers to a certain claim of political power (p. 80). This relates to the ‘mobilization potential’ as argued within this thesis. For such a potential to exist, it means that the citizen that is out and involved in a foreign conflict shares a part of their identity with other parts of the population of their state of departure. This could refer to a specific religion, culture, ethnicity or specific geographical location. The relation between this idea of a shared identity in relation to foreign fighters is mentioned by Malet (2009) in which he argues that transnational insurgencies have been based mostly on religious identity but also on ethno-nationalism and ideology (pp. 284-285). In addition to his observation, he also argues that this is due to increasingly globalized communications and transportation technologies linked to this particular identity community which deems its identity salient (p. 285).

The notion of globalization, transnational identity and new communications techniques are crucial elements for a state to assess the mobilization potential of its citizens abroad. Research on historical cases of foreign terrorist fighters show that the recruitment (similar to mobilization) process often involves a strong communications network (for instance social media), propaganda and elements of framing (Ali, 2015, pp. 9-11; Malet, 2009, p. 4). Essential is the framing of an existential defensive struggle for the preservation and survival of their identity and therefore also themselves (Malet, 2009, pp. 4-6). The cases of the communications efforts of IS in the past decade have also shown that it has become easier for a terrorist organization to communicate to people who share the common identity and can be mobilized (Ali, 2015).

It should be noted that the idea of a defensive struggle against a party that threatens your specific identity is so dangerous (to states) and popular (to use) because it is easily copied and applied to a different context. An example is the way in which IS used the idea of ‘Islam under threat’ in their conflict with other Islamist non-state actors and the governments of Syria and Iraq but how it led to being applied in other parts of the world with different adversaries of that ‘struggle’ such as in Nigeria, Somalia and the Philippines.

This leads us to expect that states with citizens that joined a foreign conflict, and did so for reasons such as a common identity, are worried about the potential of that citizen to further mobilize others. If it is due to a network-effect or (social) media, this threat is therefore believed to better be controlled for if these people are within control of the state. Much like the same reasons that were mentioned in the previous section: to potentially monitor, prosecute and rehabilitate these citizens. This leads us to formulate the following hypothesis:

*H2: If a state assesses citizens to be potentially mobilized through a transnational identity part of a foreign conflict, they will repatriate any citizens in this conflict.*

As argued, the theory predicts that if a state assesses the risk of its population to be susceptible to mobilization based on its identity and bringing a foreign conflict within its borders, it will repatriate its citizens within that foreign conflict. If there is only a small risk or even none of the foreign conflict to gain traction through foreign fighters into the local population, the states will not repatriate.

Now that both variables relating to states whose main threat is to their survival in general have been explained, we can look at how they interact with each other. In figure 1 the effect of both variables is captured and the combined effect they have is predicted. As is shown in the table we expect an internal conflict only to be reason to repatriate if it also holds a population susceptible to mobilization. If there is no active internal conflict within a state, we expect them to still repatriate any citizens if the mobilization potential is high, as this could signal the possibility of a new conflict.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Pre-existing internal conflict | |
| Yes | No |
| Mobilization potential | Yes | Unconditional repatriation | Unconditional repatriation |
| No | Unconditional repatriation | Limited repatriation |

Table . Interaction of variables.

As the table shows the two variables are expected to be complementary of each other. Both are different manifestations of an overall fear of losing control by the states and therefore also theoretically compatible.

## 2.4 Literature review

The theory that is formulated to explain why some states repatriate and why some try to prevent their citizens from returning out of a foreign conflict is rooted in existing literature. Within this section some of this existing literature will be discussed. The emphasis will be on the concept of intrastate conflicts, transnational non-state actors and how they relate to the conflict in Syria. Furthermore, the role of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF’s) will be discussed and what the current literature knows about their relation with their home state. This section serves the purpose of taking a closer look at the case of Syria in the light of existing theory. The aim here is to discuss some of the definitions and to serve as a bridge to the next section in which alternative explanations are discussed that were looked at during the writing of this thesis.

### 2.4.1 Intrastate conflicts and the Syria conflict

One of the biggest changes in theory on conflicts since the 20th century is the idea that the character of conflicts is changing. One of the most known authors who contributed to this change of thought is Mary Kaldor who published the first edition of her book ‘New and Old Wars’ in 1999. In this book she argues that conflict is a social phenomenon and that each time, place and culture has its own type of war (p. 15-17). She describes the type of conflict that the world knew during most of the 20th century: a total war in which the whole of society was dedicated to an inter-state conflict (p. 27-31). After the Cold War it was argued that interstate conflict would make place for intrastate conflict, and indeed it did (Cramer, 2006; Demmers, 2012; SIPRI, 2020). An important characteristic of this type of conflict is that it seems to take place along the lines of nations, tribes or religion (Kaldor, 2012, p. 71). She ascribes this change to the process of globalization that breaks up socio-economic divisions that earlier defined the state-focused patterns of politics (p. 72). Following this growing impotence of the modern state is then the rise of a form of political mobilization through identities around ethnicity, race or religion (p. 79). Linked to this development is the rise of more global consciousness and a sense of global responsibility among all different type of actors (p. 72). This gives rise to the question if possibly (state) religion or culture could also predict state behavior regarding the repatriation of citizens. Both repatriation efforts as repatriation obstruction could be the result of a match (or mismatch) between the culture or religion of the citizens that joined the foreign terrorist organization and the dominant culture and religion of the state. As mentioned, this will be more elaborated on within section 2.5.

In response to Kaldor and others there are researchers who claim that the importancy of identity is not new, but that traditional nationalism, tribalism or religious fundamentalism is of all ages (see Kaplan, 2005 for instance). But Kaldor argues that altough contemporary conflict might take the guise of these classic phenomenom, the link with globalization makes it fundamentally different (Kaldor M. , 2012, p. 72). According to Kaldor this is explained by a new cleavage within the broader population. Within a population a new demarcation can be observed between two groups of people. On one side there is a group of people that identifies itself as a part of the global community and who also benefit from globalization (p. 78). Usually these people are well-educated, international oriented, speak multiple languages and are working in information, technology or service sectors. On the other side of the cleavage are people who don’t benefit from globalization, are less educated, and usually work in a sector that operates locally (p. 78). This line of thought is becoming more agreed upon as you see in the works of Kriesie et al. (2012) in which the new divide of globalization ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ is empirically tested in Western-European democracies. However, it should be noted that although one side of the cleavage is identified as ‘losers’ because they missed the boat on globalization, we see seeds of politicalization on both sides (Kaldor M. , 2012, pp. 78-79). This means that it is not nescessarely specific communities that are able to benefit from globalization who are expected to be mobilized. It also means that communities that before were locked in state-focused cleavages are now able to link with other communities, for example on the basis of a transnational identity. With an argued diminishing power of the modern-state this then leads to an increase in intrastate conflict in which transnational non-state actors thus become more salient (Cramer, 2006; SIPRI, 2020).

In turn this would explain both the rise of intrastate and internationalized intrastate conflicts. The concept of an internationalized intrastate conflict is usually described as the involvement of a third state actor in an intrastate conflict in support of a local actor (Cramer, 2006, p. 62). The conflict in Syria already qualifies as this, but based on the increasing relevancy of transnational violent non-state actors such as terrorist organizations like Jabhat al-Nusra, Al Qaida and IS this definition should also include the involvement of non-state actors. This would then cover more of the different actors present and active in contemporary intrastate conflicts.

### 2.4.2 Foreign terrorist fighters

As already argued, one core phenomenom of this thesis and of transnational terrorist organizations and internationalized intrastate conflicts is the phenomenom of FTF’s. The term is defined by the UN as an individual who leaves their country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-state armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion, and/or kinship (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015). Altough this definition is defined as such as to be able to include people who join a foreign terrorist organization without functioning nescessarely as a fighter within the organization, it still leaves people out who were forced to join[[8]](#footnote-8) and the children of FTF’s. That is why Cook & Vale (2019) adopted the more broader term of IS-affiliate in the case of IS as to control for all the distinctions between both the roles of various persons within the group as well as the level of volition present in their joining of IS (p. 31). Within this thesis, as shortly mentioned in the introduction, the concept of IS-affiliate is deemed more appropriate for the same reasons as adressed by Cook & Vale[[9]](#footnote-9).

Recently, a lot of attention has been focused towards the phenomenom of FTF’s in the context of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. However, the phenomenom of FTF’s isn’t nescessarely a new phenomenom. There are recorded cases of FTF’s in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Russia’s North Caucasus region and Somalia (Bakke, 2014, p. 150). Some historical cases of for example the Spanish civil war are known for the participation of foreigners (p. 155). Over the years many scholars have studied the possible motivations for FTF’s to become part of a foreign conflict. Often this is a mix of both push and pull factors such as an individual search for meaning and purpose in life (push) or the lure of adventure, fed by images of ‘heroism’ of jihadi fighters on social media (pull) (Schmid & Tinnes, 2015, p. 38). Looking for more of a theoretical explaination of the phenomenom of jihadist FTF’s, Hegghammer (2010) argued it to be the result of a new pan-Islamic identity movement (pp. 89-91). This is in line with the idea that transnational identities are of growing importance in contemporary conflicts and in the case of FTF’s.

The body of literature on the relation between states and these citizens that join a foreign terrorist organization is vast. Within it are often hidden ideas about how this relation is constituted. In his work on FTF’s in the Ukraine conflict, Murauskaite (2020) argues the two greatest concerns with returning FTF’s are both their marginalization within society on return or becoming tools of external influence (p. 21). In addition to this he observes that European states were more harsh on returning citizens than the only non-European case included, Australia, was (p. 17). This gives rise to the question if the divide between repatriation efforts of states might be geographically bound. Another characteristic of states comes to mind as well: governmental type and political allingment of the government.

Another different take on the relation between a state and FTF’s is coined by Hegghammer (2010) in which he questions if FTF’s only exist because states let them (p. 68). He explores the idea that states saw an opening in the opportunity structure of foreign states for foreign fighter activism. He argues that if states wanted to keep FTF’s from joining foreign terrorist organizations they would, and he uses the example of Israel preventing FTF’s from joining Palestinian organizations in the 90’s and 00’s (p. 68). Could it then be so that the states that refuse to repatriate let their citizens travel to depose the Syrian regime? If so, we could argue that a state in support of the Syrian regime wouldn’t have any FTF’s in the region, and if they had that they would repatriate them. States that are opposed to the Syrian regime they wouldn’t want to repatriate their citizens as they would want to continue the fight against Assad. In other words, we should see state behavior as the result of state’s allignment with certain sides of the conflict or possible alliances.

## 2.5 Alternative explanations

Within the previous section a few alternative explanations were introduced based on existing literature. These will be discussed in this section, and also why they don’t seem to offer a complete explanation.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Unconditional repatriation** | **Selective repatriation** |
| Kazakhstan | Australia |
| Kosovo | Austria |
| Morocco | Belgium |
| Russia | Canada |
| Tajikistan | Denmark |
| Turkey | France |
| United States | Germany |
| Uzbekistan | Indonesia |
|  | Jordan |
|  | Netherlands |
|  | Sweden |
|  | Tunisia |
|  | United Kingdom |

Table 3. Repatriation behavior of states regarding their IS-affiliated citizens in Syria and Iraq (based on Cook & Vale, 2019).

The alternative explanations coined in the previous section on existing literature were: geographical location, government type, political alignment of government, dominant culture and/or religion of the state and the side of the conflict the state is aligned to.

Looking at Table 3 we can already conclude a few things. First of all, looking at geographical location one could make the argument that states that are overseas wouldn’t repatriate as they don’t expect their citizens to be able to return uncontrollably and stay under the radar of internal intelligence organizations. The risk therefore would be smaller, and there would be less need to repatriate. But looking at Table 3 we see that both Indonesia and the US unconditionally repatriate all of their citizens out of the conflict while they could be considered quite inaccessible for citizens to return. In both columns we see both states (relatively) close to Syria and Iraq and accessible over land as states that we could consider both further away and inaccessible.

The second condition discussed was government type. The argument could be made that authoritarian regimes are more afraid of conflict as it might lead to regime change than democracies which are more used to change of power. But looking at the table we see democracies in both categories. There are also authoritarian regimes such as Turkey, Russia and Jordan spread over the two categories (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). This shows that this variable isn’t conclusive either.

The third variable was political alignment of the government, by which is meant whether the government is more conservative or liberal. This argument is difficult because authoritarian regimes are less susceptible to terms such as conservative or liberal. Although we do see some (arguably) populist governments in both the US and the UK we also see more moderate parties in government in Germany, France and The Netherlands. This makes it difficult to really pinpoint state behavior to a specific political ideological regime such as liberalism, conservatism or populism.

The fourth possible explanation relates to dominant state religion. What we can observe from Table 3 is that all different kind of state cultures and religions are repatriating both unconditionally and selectively. We see a few Christian states that repatriate (US and Russia) and a few who don’t (all European states). The same goes for states that are considered Muslim states such as Morocco who repatriates unconditionally and Jordan and Tunisia who don’t.

That leaves the side of the fighting parties to which states might be aligned to as last alternative explanation. What can be observed looking at Table 3 is that both Russia who supports Assad and helps fighting against opposition and the US who wants to see regime change and supported the opposition fighting forces to repatriate unconditionally. On both sides we also see states that are not actively military involved against IS such as Tunisia and Morocco.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

In the previous chapter the theory was presented that the variables of a pre-existing conflict and mobilization potential can be used to predict repatriation efforts by states. It also showed that the US seems to be a difficult case to explain using this theory. Therefore this case is selected to be tested. Within this chapter the research design will be discussed, why it makes sense to study the case of the US and what type of data is expected to be needed to test the hypotheses.

## 3.1 Research design

Within this thesis a qualitative approach is used in the case of state behavior towards IS-affiliated citizens. The method of qualitative research is chosen because the alternative, a quantitative approach, can be argued to work better on a large population (John, 2010, p. 268). If one would want to use a quantitative approach to study the case of IS-affiliated citizens and their return, a larger size of clearly communicated reliable data would be needed. Looking at the dataset by Cook & Vale we see that some states don’t share reliable data on their IS-affiliated citizens or probably don’t know due to weak state institutions (Cook & Vale, 2019, p. 30). This makes the possible sample size too small for a quantitative approach and inadvisable to extend the sample to include additional cases (Gerring, 2017, p. 93). It is therefore argued that a qualitative approach better suits the available data and to draw a conclusion from it.

The methodology that is used is that of a single case study analysis in which the conditions that lead to the behavior of interest are studied. Because it is difficult to conduct an experimental research design which distillates two variables when studying states. Therefore the study also looks at the specific context in which the state behavior came to be. This way we not only study the preconditions of the behavior, but also try to achieve a broad understanding of the exact mechanism between the conditions and the behavior of the state (Goldthorpe, 2001, p. 2). Therefore it is necessary to observe other possible contributing conditions, create a broader context of relevant actors that influenced the decision-making process and if their motivations can be linked to the pre-conditions as set out.

Looking at the concept of a case study research it is argued that it is a type of research that sets out to both explain the selected case under investigation but also shed light on the larger population of cases (Gerring, 2017, p. 30). The first part of this definition relates to the demarcation of the case and refers to the facts that it is a method in which a spatially and temporally delimited phenomenon of theoretical significance is studied and attempted to be either described, predicted or explained through a theory (Gerring, 2017, p. 27). The second part of the definition by Gerring relates to the generalizable element of the study. It is argued that having an element within the study that makes it possible to generalize the outcome to other cases is what makes a case study different from a regular in-depth research on a certain topic. Within this research the variables of pre-existing conflicts and mobilization potential constitute the generalizable part of the research which will, depending on the outcome of the research, facilitate explaining other cases as well.

Within the overarching method of comparative analysis of multiple case studies a few different types can be distinguished. The two categories under which most type of case studies can be placed relate to the overall nature of the study: for it to be either descriptive or causal (Gerring, 2017, p. 40). As this thesis tries to explain variation of state behavior regarding repatriation of IS-affiliated citizens using multiple different variables, it is a causal type of case study. This category can again be divided in three sub categories: exploratory, estimating and diagnostic (Gerring, 2017, p. 41). These categories are also a further specification of the goal of the research, either to identify a possible hypothesis (exploratory), to estimate the causal effect of one factor on the outcome of interest (estimating) or to assess whether a hypothesis is true (diagnostic) (Gerring, 2017, p. 40). In addition, Gerring argues that cases ideally should be independent. This relates to the idea that cases should provide independent evidence, and that being affected by each other doesn’t provide this independent evidence. Although it is difficult for states to be completely independent of each other, it is important to acknowledge any potential influence there is and if it is significant or not.

As the goal of this thesis is to study the possible deviation of a expected causal pattern registering a surprising result the case study within this thesis can best be described as a deviant case study (p. 74). The goal of this type of study is to explain the ‘oddball’ case, that is poorly explained by the theory (p 74-75). This might lead to a new causal factor, a rework of the theory and possible new scope conditions (p. 75).

## 3.2 Case selection

The primary goal of studying the case of the US is twofold. First of all, within the spirit of Karl Popper, the selection of the US as a case enables us to possibly falsify the proposed theory. As Popper argued that for a scientific theory to be relevant it needs to resist being falsified (Popper, 1963, p. 2). Looking at Table 3 and the predictions based on our theory, the case of the US stands out as it is not properly explained through the theory. The theory predicts that a pre-existing internal conflict and mobilization potential lead to repatriation. But within the case of the US (that repatriated unconditionally) it is hard to distinguish a specific internal conflict or any potential mobilization potential at first sight. Although the US has a reasonable Muslim population, it isn’t necessarily a population looking to be susceptible to mobilization efforts as it is more diverse than the Muslim population in other states that fall in that category. To an extent the Muslim population of the US is probably even more like the Muslim population in much of the other Western states that didn’t repatriate. Therefore it would be interesting to look closer at the case of the US and if the theory will hold.

The second reason to study the case of the US is that even when it won’t be able to falsify the proposed theory, it will contribute to a better understanding of the proposed theory. As it offers an unique case, as the only Western state to repatriate, that it might be the missing piece of creating a fully generalizable theory.

## 3.4 Operationalization

The bridge between the theoretical part of the thesis and the practical research on which conclusions will be drawn is rooted in this operationalization section. In this section the concepts included in the hypotheses will be demarcated and the conditions that need to be met to be either confirmed or denied will be formulated.

As the first hypothesis revolves around the concept of conflict it is important to determine what constitutes a conflict. Within Demmers (2016) it is argued that a conflict is a contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both, where the use of force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year. Of these two parties, at least one has to be the government of a state (p. 3). Different definitions exist, especially the number of casualties that need to be met differ, but usually each definition knows three central components. The first one being that a conflict needs to have an element of incompatibility. This means that each actor involved believes that the realization of its goals is blocked by the respective goals of the other (p. 5). The second component relates to conflict attitudes. This includes both emotional orientations such as feelings of anger, fear and distrust and cognitive processes such as stereotyping and tunnel visions. The third component involves conflict behavior and encompasses all actions undertaken by an actor to make the other modify or abandon its goals (p. 6).

Different theories are interested in different aspects of conflict. Some theories focus on what causes conflict (such as economic scarcity or unequal distribution of resources). This is argued to be the motive-oriented approaches, while other theories tend to look at structure-based explanations. An example of this is the idea that conflict is the result of social change and the rupture of a collective belief system (Mitchel, 1981, p. 26). As the first hypothesis revolves around the determination of the existence of a conflict the definition of Demmers (2016) will be used. Although it is a bit arbitrary to determine 25 battle-related deaths to be the threshold there we could argue that every threshold is some way doomed to be perceived as arbitrary. It should be noted that the definition by Demmers is a rather narrow definition. Much research on other factors of influence such as economic incentives, access to weapons, socio-economic inequality and many other factors are often mentioned (see for instance Berdal & Malone, 2000 and Collier, 2000). But it is argued that whether a conflict is influenced by natural resources, racial violence, inequality or religion; it ultimately is about who gets what it wants and who doesn’t. The distribution of this happens through a form of government in which the territory over which authority is taken is essential. Therefore it is argued, although narrow in scope, to be the basis for identifying conflicts within this thesis.

The second hypothesis regarding mobilization potential poses a bigger challenge to capture. As shown in the previous section, contemporary literature regarding transnational organizations argues that transnational identities along the line of religion and ethnicity are at the core of this. This shows in more specific literature regarding the recruitment of FTF’s in the case of Al Qaeda and IS using a pan-Islamist identity, using religion as an instrument to mobilize (Hegghammer, 2010). The share of Muslims within a population therefore is essensential to determine the overall mobilization potential, as it might possibly include an already mobilized group that is already willing to enter a conflict. But this isn’t merely enough, looking at literature on individual motivations for someone to join a terrorist organization we see all sorts of condotions that might be usefull to look at. Overall literature takes two type of conditions into account: push and pull. These actors can be either on the strucutral level or on the individual level. On the individual level you’re looking at conditions such as low educational attainment, unemployment, dysfunctional or broken families and mental health issues (Azinović, 2017, p. 12). More structural components are for instance collective desire for (vicarious) revenge, based on humiliation and/or experience of discrimination and injustice, socio-economic marginalization and political exclusion (Schmid & Tinnes, 2015, p. 38). We can assume that if these actors are structural higher in Muslim populations than in other groups that the mobilization rooted in individual and structural problems is more likely.

## 3.5 Data

The thesis will rely on a wide variety of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources will include statements from government officials, domestic policy and surveys. The secondary sources include demographic data, scientific articles by experts and reports by NGO’s. By using multiple sources that have competing interests it is possible to wash out for bias or self-interest of individual actors who may have incentive to misrepresent. Using existing literature relating to the motivations of IS-affiliates to travel to Syria and Iraq we can study what is needed to mobilize an individual and how then it can be used to successfully mobilize a broader population. Scientific sources will be used to define what constitutes a conflict and to what degree the US has one. In addition to that we can trace the process of governmental policies over the coarse of multiple years meaning that we will look at the relevant governments of the US over the pas few years (especially Obama and Trump).

# Chapter 4: Empirics – The United States

The purpose of this chapter is to explore if the conditions formulated within Chapter 2 are present in the case of the US. Either a pre-existing internal conflict or a mobilization potential within the population. Although most would argue that there is no such internal conflict within the US there is one possible case that could offer an unexpected explanation. After all, it was in 1996 that Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden declared war on the US, and in response it was then US president George W. Bush that declared a war on terror. Much of it is was rhetoric and mostly of symbolic meaning, and some would even argue that a non-state actor is in no position to declare war on a state. But the act of attacking the US on its own territory on 9/11 and the years that followed might fall within the set parameters of the definition of conflict. Pettersson and Wallensteen (2014) even go as far as to argue that the US is involved in an internationalized intrastate conflict due to the attacks of Al Qaeda on its soil and the support Al Qaeda recieved from states such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi-Arabia (p. 537). Altough slightly far-fetched at first sight this signals the possibility of meeting the criteria of an intrastate conflict. Within the following sections we will take a closer look at this possibility. First we will look at the role of Al Qaeda starting in 1996 while we will also add IS to this in 2013 arguing that they are the two main adversaries of the US in the war of terror from the past decades.

The sections within this chapter will first offer an introduction in the overall relation between the US and modern Muslim extremism. This is to offer a much needed context that helps us understand the starting point of US behavior. Then follows a section on both independent variables, including the two hypotheses. This means that we will dive in any potential pre-existing conflicts within both states and the mobilization potential within their population.

## 4.1 Introduction

If you ask people what they consider the most recent turning point in Western history, chances are most of them would respond with the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York, US on September 11 2001 by Al Qaeda. The significance of this event was in the first place symbolic as it showed a transnational terrorist organization to be able to strike at the heart of the West and to inflict an unprecedented amount of casualties. But it was also significant because it led to what former US president George W. Bush argued to be a ‘war on terror’. This didn’t only led to worldwide adoption of new counter-terrorism legislation, but it also gave way to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the scope of the 9/11 attack has not been repeated ever since, there still was a continuation of smaller terrorist attacks aimed at the US and other Western states throughout the years that followed. Overall, the event of 9/11 fits in a broader context that is part of this ‘war on terror’, the existence of the phenomenon of FTF’s and more specifically foreign IS-affiliates.

But to be able to understand this contemporary phenomenon we also need to understand where it came from. Although, one could start with the rise of the Mujahideen guerrillas in the Soviet-Afghan war in the 80’s if in search of a complete understanding of modern Muslim extremism. To understand the case of IS-affiliates this is not necessary. The starting point to understand the case is 1996[[10]](#footnote-10) when Osama Bin Laden, head of Al Qaeda and one of the people behind 9/11, declared a war on the US. Reason for this ‘declaration of war’ was the influence of Western states in the Middle-East. He specifically addressed the presence of (in his view Christian) US troops in Saudi-Arabia since 1990, which he argued to be an occupation of the holy lands of Islam (Tierney, 2016). Back then not much attention was given to this declaration of war, but this changed in the years that followed. This especially changed after 9/11, but the case of Muslim terrorism aimed at the US was already gaining importance in the years before. The first serious attack on an US target was in 1998 when Al Qaeda bombed US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killing 12 Americans and 224 people in total. The US responded with cruise missile attacks in Afghanistan and Sudan killing six Al Qaeda personnel. Two years later the USS Cole was targeted by suicide bombers in Yemen in 2000 killing 17 Americans (Tierney, 2016).

This trend leading up to 9/11 shows that the US was not only a target at home, it was a target everywhere it showed itself. This enables us to better understand why the US was so motivated to go to ‘war’ with terrorist after 2001. Their logic was that if the US had become a target both at home and abroad, then it will fight those who want to harm it everywhere they are. Although not of the same scope as 9/11, these attacks continued both domestically and abroad in the years that followed (Kurzman, Schanzer, & Moosa, 2011, p. 466).

The wars that followed 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, proved relatively successfully in toppling the respective regimes but were not as decisive in fighting terrorism as was hoped. In both wars the US lacked a plan on what to do after the fighting was over, which was clearly a mistake. After the old regimes were gone and the US had no clear idea on how to rebuild both states, it gave rise to a power-vacuum (Burton & Nagl, 2008). Especially in Iraq this gave the Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda (AQI or the Islamic State of Iraq) the opportunity to strengthen its position within the region. When in 2011 the Syrian civil war started, AQI grabbed the momentum and consolidated itself within a big part of Syria as well. Splitting loose from Al Qaeda in 2013 it rebranded itself into what we now call IS (Shamieh & Szenes, 2015, pp. 366-367).

Although the name changed, not much else changed for the US. On one hand, it remained target of terrorist attacks by individuals inspired by IS at home (Lister, et al., 2018). On the other hand, the US remained active in fighting terrorist organizations worldwide and especially in Africa and the Middle-East. In the case of IS this mostly related to spearheading a Western military coalition against IS in Syria and Iraq (Fantz, 2014). This is done through a strategy that was formulated under the Obama government which revolved around the principle of working “by, with, and through” US-supported local partners instead of having to deploy a full force of American troops. The strategy continued under Trump although some additional American troops were deployed (Blanchard & Humud, 2018, p. 4).

Earlier it was mentioned that the ranks of IS were filled with up to 40,000 foreign fighters from all over the world. The US was no exception and was the point of departure for approximately 200-300 individuals (Homeland Security Committee, 2015; Cook & Vale, 2019). Of those around 59 are supposed to have returned both independently as with help of the state (Cook & Vale, 2019, p. 37). The difference between both numbers is due to the fact that a lot of them are expected to have died over the course of the conflict, or still remain active within the region as part of IS. In October 2020 the US Department of Justice stated that *“the United States has successfully repatriated all Americans held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)”* (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). In addition to repatriating all of its own IS-affiliated citizens, the US also has urged other states to do the same multiple times offering both protection and logistical help with the repatriation operation (Hooper, 2020).

Without a doubt the US stands out as the only Western state that is committed to bringing back all its IS-affiliated citizens from Syria. The motivations that lie behind the policy of repatriation seem to differ depending on which American you ask. US Maj. Gen. Alex Grynkewich in charge of the military coalition against IS in Syria and Iraq argues that the IS-affiliated foreigners within the region remain a security threat (Seligman, 2019). The US Department of Justice argues differently and views it as a “*moral responsibility to the American people and to the people of the countries to which these terrorists traveled*” (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). As already discussed these motivations to repatriate are probably true to a certain degree, but cannot explain why we see other states behave differently.

## 4.2 Pre-existing conflict

The theory formulated within this thesis argues that states that are involved in a pre-existing conflict within their borders threatening the survival of the state will repatriate their IS-affiliated citizens from Syria. The reason being that they fear that having these citizens outside of their direct control might enable them to function as a catalyst in the existing conflict. Within the operationalization section of Chapter 3, it was described that the definition of conflict by Demmers (2012) is used: a contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both, where the use of force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year. Of these two parties, at least one has to be the government of a state (p. 3). This section revolves around the question if the US is involved in an internal conflict as we would expect to be one of the two proposed possibilities argued by the theory. The parameters within the definition of Demmers are clear: a conflict revolves around government and/or territory, the use of force, 25 battle-related deaths in a year and one side has to be the government. Adding to this from the theory is the notion that it has to be an internal conflict.

### 4.2.1 Battle-related deaths

With almost 3,000 fatalities the attack on 9/11 was the biggest attack on US soil since the Second World War (Holmes, 2001). After 9/11 the years that followed were more modest in terms of fatalities. Between 2002 and 2010 there were 33 fatalities as the result of six Muslim terrorist attacks in the US (Kurzman, Schanzer, & Moosa, 2011, p. 467). In the years between 2010 and 2016 there were 63 fatalities due to Muslim terrorist attacks within the US based on a dataset by The Investigative Fund (Neiwert, 2017). In the years that followed, a few attacks on US soil happened such as the 2017 New York City Truck attack (8 fatalities) and the Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting of 2019 (3 fatalities). It is therefore clear that the terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda and later on IS do not meet the requirement of 25 battle-deaths a year except for 2001 and 2016[[11]](#footnote-11).

The big defect of this approach is the fact that this really encompasses only one side of the possible conflict between the US and Muslims extremism. Pettersson and Wallensteen (2015) argue that an intrastate conflict happens in the territory of one country, and an internationalized intrastate conflict is when an actor within the conflict is supported by troops of another state. We already argued that we should broaden the scope of internationalized intrastate conflicts to be able to include transnational non-state actors as part of the conflict as well (see section 2.4.1). But adding to this is the idea that the transnational character of these organizations might lead to an involvement in multiple theaters of conflict. Making the limitation of the conflict to only one country questionable. For instance, what happens if a state strikes back at the transnational non-state actor (or one of the supporting states) in another region or state? Or when it shifts some of its operations at other parts in the world where the transnational non-state actor is active as well? It is argued that any attack on a great power (such as the US) is not so much defined by the act in the first place but by the destructive reaction that follows in response to the act (Tierney, 2016).

As we would then take into account the response of the US as well we can look at the conflict that followed. The two most clearest operations that followed were the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq which had both more interstate conflict characteristics. But while the US was fighting the respective regimes of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, it also continued to fight transnational non-state actors in both those states and the rest of the world. Not only did it conduct military operations aimed against Al Qaeda, IS and affiliated organizations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. It did also conduct military campaigns and deploy troops in Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Cameroon, Somalia, Philippines (Savell, 2018). All aimed at local affiliates of IS and Al Qaeda and other types of violent non-state actors. Would it make sense to include other organizations not necessarily part of Al Qaeda (or IS) within the context of a war on terror? Thomas Joscelyn argues that it does, as drawing a firm line between Al Qaeda’s core and its affiliates[[12]](#footnote-12) would lead to underestimating any possible estimates on the organization itself. As Al Qaeda has always pursued a policy of geographic expansion the emergence of formal affiliates, or branches, has been a core objective in serving this broader goal (Joscelyn, 2013).

Research by the ‘Costs of War’ initiative by the Watson Institute on International Relations part of Brown University stated that 37% of the countries worldwide are somehow part of the American war on terror, either by housing military bases or having military operations conducted within their border by the US (Savell, 2018). If we would broaden our scope to these other theatres of the world in which somehow the war on terror had effect, we should take into account that over 15,000 Americans[[13]](#footnote-13) were killed in those theatres (Crawford & Lutz, 2019). Thus if we viewed the war on terror in its totality, reaching the threshold of 25 battle-related deaths would by no means pose any problem.

But would it make sense to study the so called US War on Terror on this scope? Concepts such as (internationalized) intrastate and interstate war seem useless to capture this totality and are only useful in describing different operations within this war on terror. Looking back at what Kaldor and others (see Cramer, 2006 and Devetak 2007) have written on contemporary conflicts, the so called new wars, as a battle between identities is a way to usefully interpret this ‘conflict’. The identities at play with the violent transnational organization fighting the US and the West within this are, despite the local war aims of some divisions, mobilized around a pan-Islamist identity. This identity also gave rise to Al Qaeda and IS in the first place[[14]](#footnote-14) (Hegghammer, 2010, p. 89; Joscelyn, 2013). The role of this pan-Islamist identity seems to be a constant characteristic of both IS and Al Qaeda and all its affiliated organizations and divisions, for instance ranging from divisions of IS in the Philippines (Abu Sayyaf) to Cameroon (Boko Haram) (France-Presse, 2015).

Stretching the classical notion of conflict to encompass the war on terror as a conflict in its totality will probably worry a lot of scholars. But there are good reasons to do so. It is argued that the most important reason is the fact that regular theories on war never really envisioned to cover a conflict between a non-state actor, such as Al Qaeda, and a state (Addicott, 2008). After 9/11 some states expanded their domestic criminal law to confront terrorist threats (such as France, Russia and the UK) but the US has both expanded its criminal domestic law and reached into the international law of war to motivate its fight against Al Qaeda and IS[[15]](#footnote-15) (Addicott, 2008). This is shown for instance in the 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism by the White House, in which it stated that: *“The struggle against international terrorism is different from any other war in our history. We will not triumph solely or even primarily through military might. We must fight terrorist networks, and all those who support their efforts to spread fear around the world… .”* (Roberts, 2008).

They justify this by arguing that Al Qaeda is not just a terrorist organization, but a ‘virtual state’. It exhibits many of the characteristics of a state such as having a political arm that directs its policy, a media division for propaganda, a military division, a treasury that raises funds across the globe, direct and indirect links to the leaders of states and a mission statement that reflects a desire to engage in global warfare (Addicott, 2008). The only difference is that it has no fixed national boundaries, and even this changed with the introduction of IS which was able to effectively rule over a specific territory in Syria and Iraq as if it were a real state for some time. Kaldor (2005) agreed[[16]](#footnote-16) that the war on terror indeed is a war, albeit a ‘new’ one opposed to the classic ‘old wars’ she described in her earlier works (496-498).

We can conclude that within a narrow classical approach the internal threshold of 25 battle-related deaths is not met throughout 2001 till 2021 except for the two years of 2001 and 2016. Even if the few dozen fatalities due to anti-Muslim terrorism in the US are included (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011). The only way we could argue the US to be in a conflict with an internal component is if the war on terror is studied in its totality with the attacks on US soil being a part of it.

### 4.2.2 War goals: government or territory

Even if we could argue that the War on Terror is a real conflict with both intrastate as interstate characteristics and therefore meeting the requirement of battle-deaths per year, we would also need to look at the other conditions of defining a conflict. Part of the definition of Demmers as described in section 4.1.2 is the role war goals play within a conflict. All goals of the actors involved contribute to the conflict through a perception of incompatibility of one’s own goals with those of your adversaries. According to Demmers these goals should involve at least a political dimension involving a claim on governance or territory. The fact that these two factors are taken as the most defining characteristics of conflict is an extension of the classic Clausewitzian concept of conflict, in which two entities fight each other for political motives (Von Clausewitz, 2008, pp. 32-33).

Both Al Qaeda and IS had clear motives related to government and territory. But there is a difference to be made between the two regarding their primary goal and their strategy to achieve this goal. From their start early on in the 90’s the focus of Al Qaeda was on the US, hence the declaration of war in 1996 and the focusing on US targets all over the world. It is argued that the ultimate goal of Al Qaeda is to overthrow the corrupt ‘apostate’ regimes set in place by the US in the Middle East, and then replace them with true Islamic governments. Its prime enemy is therefore the United States, which it sees as the root cause of these regimes and other Middle Eastern problems. By attacking the US everywhere it can, both in the Middle East and on US soil, it tries to induce the US to leave the Middle East. This is what is called a ‘far enemy’ strategy (Byman, 2015). The expulsion of foreign troops and influence out of the Middle East as the main goal and the accompanying strategy to achieve this by attacking the US is clearly political in nature. But even more clearly relating to an incompatible goal related to the idea of ‘government’ is the second goal of Al Qaeda. This goal relates to the creation of an Islamic state ruled by sharia law. They therefore clearly envision a different type of regime than we see in the Middle-East at this moment. This shows from statements made by Bin Laden and some other high-ranking officers of Al Qaeda that they view democracy as a ‘rival religion’ to Islam (Blanchard, 2007, p. 15). In addition they voiced multiple times that democracies and constitutional governments are unacceptable forms of governance for Islamic societies (Blanchard, 2007, p. 11).

Although having similar goals, IS takes another route. The primary target of IS has not been the US per se, but rather the Islamic community itself. While they agree with Al Qaeda that the governments within the Middle East are so-called ‘apostate regimes’ (and installed and supported by the US), IS chooses to fight these regimes and any other actor within the region that opposes their goals directly. They combine this with an aim to purify the Islamic community by attacking Shia and other religious minorities as well as rival jihadist groups. In effect this means that IS also fights against groups such as the Shia in Iraq, the Lebanese Hizballah, the Yazidis and rival opposition groups in Syria including Jabhat al-Nusra[[17]](#footnote-17) (Byman, 2015; Greenwood, 2017, p. 90).

Although they seem more locally focused at first through the absence of a clear ‘far enemy’ strategy, there are some IS members who have voiced threats aimed at the West. For instance German foreign fighter ‘Abu Qatada’ (Christian Emde) and member of IS was quoted saying: *“We will conquer Europe one day. It is not a question of if we will conquer Europe, just a matter of when that will happen.”* (Greenwood, 2017, p. 90). IS spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani said something similar and urged IS supporters in Europe and the United States to carry out individual attacks against those respective states (Blanchard & Humud, 2018, p. 5). Although these threats to Western states are not taken lightly, assessments shown that although some IS inspired plots occurred in the West its overall threat is nowhere near the level of Al Qaeda at its peak in the early 2000’s (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015).

To the US the importance of the region is clear as well and is considered an essential region in the US-led global security system (Jeffrey, 2017). Failure to resolve any of the conflicts abundant in the region is expected to have effect on US domestic security and that of its allies through terrorism, destabilizing refugee flows out of Syria, and threats from weapons of mass destruction (Otterman, 2005). In addition, the region's energy supplies still remain critical for global economic health. Lastly, the US has also shown to promote this security through the promoting of democracy through local partnership initiatives as a way of securing their influence and interests (Otterman, 2005).

### 4.2.3 Other Western states

If we would argue the war of conflict to be able to explain the case of the US, wouldn’t it then also falsify the cases of other Western states also involved within the war on terror in the category of limited repatriation? The same argued in the case of the US could especially be argued in the case of the UK, as the most important ally to the US in fighting the war on terror and the invasion in Iraq (Kramer, 2003, pp. 96-101). The UK has indeed also suffered from terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda and IS on its own soil. The first one being the London bombing of July 2005 when four British suicide bombers with rucksacks full of explosives attacked central London, killing 52 people and injuring hundreds more (BBC, 2015). This was already four years after 9/11, and the UK did not suffer much more attacks on its soil in the years after. This came to a halt in 2017 when a new wave of multiple attacks shortly followed up on each other. The biggest of the three, a bombing in Manchester, resulted in the death of 22 people (Phipss, Sparrow, Ross, Weaver, & Rawlinson, 2017).

It seems that a few differences arise when both cases are compared. First of all, looking at the relation between the UK and transnational violent organizations such as Al Qaeda and IS we see no formal declaration of war as was the case with he US in 1996. Although you could argue that this was just highly symbolic and rhetoric, it signals a degree of importance to the targeting of the US which is thus absent in the case of the UK. In addition to that the London bombings of 2005 and the Manchester bombing of 2017 were significant to the UK, but less so internationally. The 2001 terrorist attack seemed to come out of nowhere while the London bombings of 2005 happened years into the war on terror and just a year after the bombing of Madrid (Seidler, 2015). Another important difference was that with 9/11 the US became the center of terrorism and under attack from people outside the state. Therefore 9/11 was viewed as an attack from outside struck at a central symbol of US global power, cutting deep into the American psyche (Seidler, 2015). The London bombings of 2005 were conducted by British citizens which less sparked debates on international security regimes such as with the US, but more about the separate lives being lived by different communities in the UK. This also explains why the US after 9/11 moved the war of terror more in the traditional territory of war while other states, such as the UK, sought to combat terrorism more in the domestic dimension (Addicott, 2008).

Besides the moral aspect of the attacks we also clearly see less fatalities on UK soil due to Islamic terrorism. Overall the number of fatalities since 2001 in the UK is estimated around 100 mostly stemming from the 2005 London and 2017 Manchester bombings. This is significantly lower than both the amount of attacks on US soil and the number of fatalities (The Military Times, 2017). The same goes if casualties outside the US and UK territory are taken into account. While Crawford and Lutz (2019) estimated around 15,000 US fatalities abroad since 2001 the number of UK soldiers to have died since 2001 is estimated at around 700 (Fairhurst, Jones, & Overton, 2020). Although allies within the war on terror, the UK is significantly less involved in the war on terror and has suffered less from the conflict both within the UK and abroad. It would therefore be too far fetched to argue that the war on terror holds the same implications for the UK as it does for the US.

Concluding we can see that multiple states are involved in fighting terrorism. But few of them are as globally active or involved as much as the US. Including a significant internal dynamic of terrorist attacks and fatalities on US soil. The US is well invested in the Middle-East to serve its interests, more than any other Western state. This gives it a whole different dynamic with both Al Qaeda and IS than others. These violent transnational organizations ultimately share the goal to rid the Middle-East of outside (most specifically US) influence, and to create a just Islamic state based on Sharia law. Meanwhile, the US has been trying to continue its influence within the region and promote its democratic values This is clearly incompatible with the goals the US holds on democracy, constitutional governments and human rights in the Middle-East.

## 4.3 Mobilization potential

The second condition that was argued to influence repatriation behavior of states was the domestic mobilization potential by IS-affiliated citizens. This relates to one of the most threatening functions IS-affiliated citizens fulfill; the recruiting of others. Either from abroad through online communication or locally in person (Homeland Security Committee, 2015, p. 14). This would worry states as an increase in IS-affiliates might challenge stability and security of the state. The variable of mobilization potential tries to estimate how easy it will be for IS-affiliates to recruit new members if they would have free play. Obviously each individual that is being recruited would be one too many as you would need only one person to conduct a terrorist attack. But this variable relates to mobilizing a group of people, possibly a whole community, around a certain identity against another identity and thereby endangering the survival of the state. As argued in section 2.2, we see IS and Muslim extremism in general, mobilize around a specific ideology involving Islam. The scope condition regarding this variable was that the identity of the population within the state needs to be compatible with the identity around which the violent transnational organization is organized. It is therefore argued that people of Muslim descent will be more susceptible to be influenced to IS-affiliates. In addition to religion characteristics of ethnicity, nationality and culture might play a role as well (Kaldor, 2005). Important is to try to estimate to what degree this population is assimilated with the rest of society and if it is embracing non-Islamic values. This also relates to the conditions that were formulated in section 3.4: low educational attainment, unemployment, dysfunctional or broken families, mental health issues, socio-economic marginalization and political exclusion.

First of all, demographic data shows no characteristic relating to race or ethnicity that defined a majority of Muslims in the US. Also, in total the population of Muslims in the US is relatively small. In 2017 out of an estimated total population of 315 million 3,45 (1,1%) identified as Muslim in the US (Mohamed, 2018). This is for instance significantly less than in France and the UK in which it is estimated that Muslims account for at least 5% of the population, and Germany in which it is estimated at 6% of the population (World Population Review, 2021). Of the 3,45 million Muslims in 2017 no more than 15% originated from the same country. In addition Muslims defined themselves as Asian, African-American or White[[18]](#footnote-18) almost evenly (Mohamed & Smith, 2017, p. 35).

The socio-economic position of Muslim-Americans also does not seem problematic. They attain higher education and middle-class incomes at the same rate as the rest of society (Kurzman, Schanzer, & Moosa, 2011, pp. 471-472). Within a survey conducted as part of a research by the Pew Research Center 1,001 American-Muslims were interviewed[[19]](#footnote-19). Within the sample 43% regarded their financial position either “good” or “excellent”, while 56% say they are in “only fair” or “poor” shape financially (Mohamed & Smith, 2017, p. 44). These percentages are very similair when asked to the general US public.

Besides the demographics it is important to estimate possible grievances within the Muslim population as the result of marginalization or political exclusion. In the Pew Research Center survey by Mohamed & Smith (2017) American-Muslims were also asked if they were proud to be American, of which nine out of ten agreed with the statement (p. 51). In addition to this another nine out of ten felt both American and Muslim and 60% argues that they have a lot in common with other Americans (p. 50). Overall 80% of the questioned American-Muslims are satisfied with the way things are going in their lives (p. 53). An interesting finding by Mohamed & Smith is that 65% of the questioned American-Muslims sees no conflict between Islam and democracy (p. 89). While organizations such as Al Qaeda and IS portray democracy as a ‘rival ideology’ and incompatible with Islam, most American-Muslims seem to disagree with this statement (Blanchard, 2007, pp. 11-15). In addition, especially the part of the Muslim population that came to the US as immigrants for educational or economic opportunities still retains an optimistic view of the US as a land of opportunity (Kurzman, Schanzer, & Moosa, 2011, p. 472).

Furthermore the Muslim community in the US shows to be vocal in condemning terrorism attacks by Muslim both abroad as within the US. In 2005 a document[[20]](#footnote-20) drafted by the Fiqh Council of North America, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Islamic Society of North America and more than 130 Muslim organizations, mosques and leaders in the United States stated: *“We have consistently condemned terrorism and extremism in all forms and under all circumstances, and we reiterate this unequivocal position. Islam strictly condemns religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism. Targeting civilians’ life and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is haram — prohibited in Islam — and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not ‘martyrs’.”* (Kurzman, Schanzer, & Moosa, 2011, pp. 473-474). Furthermore, three quarters of Muslim-Americans say there is either little or no support for extremism within the American Muslim community. Of which 30% who say there is “not much” support for extremism and 43% who say there is “none at all.” (Mohamed & Smith, 2017, p. 99).

Lastly Muslim-Americans show no specific signs of political exclusion. On the contrary, Kurzman, et al. (2011) identify an increase in participation in democratic forums and integrated Muslim-Americans into the democratic system. Opposed to what Al Qaeda and IS have stated about the relation between democracy and Islam it is clear that Muslim-Americans treat democracy as part of the solution, and not part of the problem. This leads us to conclude that altough the US has given rise to homegrown terrorist, these should be considered exceptions. There is no bigger trend of political grievance, socio-economic marginalization and disenfranchising.

The only side-note that can be made is that we should disinguish between the empiric observations as presented through surveys and scientific articles, and the perception of related actors such as the American public (both Muslim as non-Muslim) and political actors. Altough the data shows that Muslim-Americans well assimilated, they still argue to be increasingly discriminated against (Mohamed & Smith, 2017, 74-76). From 2007 till 2017 there is an increase of almost 10% (from 40% up to 48%) of Muslim-Americans who argued to have been the victim of discrimination in the last 12 months (p. 76). In addition 75% of questioned Muslim-Americans argued there to be a lot of discrimination in the US (p. 74). It should especially be noted that this rise also took place within a time-period in which the then president of the US, Donald Trump, appointed a travel-ban on citizens from specifically Muslim-majority states ,and stating multiple times that radical Islam is a danger to America (Neiwert, 2017). This fits within a broader context in which Islamophobia is argued to have moved from the fringes of American society to the mainstream (Considine, 2017, p. 2). Not only present at the interactional level but also at the institutional level (p. 13). So the data shows that Muslims are doing well adopting to American live and are showing no signs of sensitivity mobilizing around a pan-Islamic political identity activated by IS-affiliates or others. But if the perception of the rest of the public and the political actors show a discrepancy with this, it might then also influence policy making and explain the increasing Islamophobia[[21]](#footnote-21). Even risking in effect marginalizing Muslim-Americans and becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

The case of the US showed promising in falsifying the theory that only states that are involved in an internal conflict or that have a population with a high mobilization potential through a pan-Islamic identity repatriate IS-affiliated citizens out of Syria and Iraq. It is clearly that the US indeed poses a difficult case to work with, as the first proposed independent variable of a pre-existing conflict was not fully present. Although the event of 9/11 was inherently a terrorist attack, it is also argued to have marked the start of a possible broader conflict that did partly take place on American soil. This conflict, named ‘the war on terror’, has taken multiple forms such as interstate conflict between the US and Iraq, insurgency conflict, targeted killings, acts of terrorism (including on American soil) and anti-terrorism operations. The difficulty lies in how this conflict should be viewed; within its totality or should we view every specific operation separate?

Every operation part of the so-called war of terror clearly has its own dynamic, context and causes. But authors such as Kaldor (2005), Pettersson and Wallensteen (2015), Savell (2018) and Crawford and Lutz (2019) seem to argue to view the war on terror in its totality of which then only a part takes place within the US. They argue that it is part of a broader identity based conflict between a pan-Islamic identity, as described by Hegghammer (2010) and the US, and therefore compatible with ideas on ‘new wars’ as described by Kaldor (2012).

The case made by these authors is reasonable. Identity conflict and new wars have proven itself to be able to explain contemporary conflict and have become the go-to frame of indicating conflict. Taking into account the theory proposed in chapter two, it is argued that states repatriate because they fear for the survival of the state and see IS-affiliates as a possible threat. We could argue that the US is a special case in this regard as well. As it is the only state in the world that is so heavenly involved around the world regarding security, economical and other political issues its influence is enormous[[22]](#footnote-22). Especially as the Middle-East specifically has shown itself crucial to global security housing multiple adversaries of the US, the cradle of anti-American sentiment, big economical importance and home to two important allies of the US (Israel and Saudi-Arabia).

The US as a global hegemon and the idea of American exceptionalism might have become rooted not only in its foreign policy but also within its collective identity. So even when IS or Al Qaeda will almost surely never threaten the survival of the US on its own soil, the US might be just as afraid of losing its influence within the Middle-East, and its role on the world stage. The crux therefore lies in arguing that the US is indeed feeling threatened for its survival by not controlling possible IS-affiliated citizens in the region or at home. Not only because of the threat to its classic state institutions at home, but also because of the influence the state is used to be able to exercise in the region. With adding this we can not convincingly disprove H1: *If a state has an existing violent conflict within its territory it will repatriate its citizens involved in a foreign conflict.*

The second independent variable was formulated as mobilization potential. For a state that is considered to be at war with a pan-Islamic identity and multiple Islamic transnational organizations Muslim-Americans are unexpectedly well assimilated. They show no signs of more socio-economic marginalization, dissatisfaction and political disenfranchisement than the overall US general public. Out of the conducted survey by Mohamed and Smith (2017) we can conclude that they also don’t perceive the American identity and state structures regarding a constitutional government and democracy as conflicting with their religion. However they seem to be the target of rising Islamophobia within the US. This might in time not only serve as a possible deterioration of the Muslim-American position within the US society, but it can also be the effect of a society-wide misconception about Muslim-Americans and the danger they pose to the state. If this would then spread to political actors and policy makers it could lead to assessing a different mobilization potential than demographic data and the survey shows. However, this is speculative and at this point no reason to therefore adopt H2: *If a state assesses more citizens to be potentially mobilized through a transnational identity part of a foreign conflict they will repatriate any citizens in this conflict.*

Concluding on both findings we can then place the US within the table regarding the independent variables and their interaction. Based on the findings of H1 and H2 we can place the US within the bottom-left square. Leading us to believe that the proposed theory is viable to explain all cases of states that did unconditionally repatriate their IS-affiliated citizens.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Internal conflict | |
| Yes | No |
| Mobilization potential | Yes | Unconditional repatriation | Unconditional repatriation |
| No | Unconditional repatriation | Limited repatriation |

Table 4. Interaction of variables.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Within this thesis a stance is taken on how to interpret the war on terror in an effort to explain state repatriation of IS-affiliates. People might disagree with the statement that the phenomenon of terrorist acts are sub-characteristics of a bigger conflict such as the war on terror. But this stance is not completely new and some researchers have had similar conclusions. Still the fact that there is no consensus on this shows that contemporary conflicts remain difficult to interpret. If individuals around the world are mobilized around a trans-national identity and picking up arms, it is interesting how specific characteristics such as terrorist acts, insurgencies and interstate violence within this phenomenon interact. Research that manages to conceptually define the war on terror in its totality is scarce, and being able to do so would prove valuable to the overall understanding of contemporary and future conflicts

More specifically regarding the case of IS-affiliates the threat perception of states remains an interesting phenomenon. As was argued within this thesis, many international actors, NGO’s, experts and others have argued in favor of repatriation. We have seen that some states that meet certain conditions don’t respond to this. To strengthen this theory it would be interesting to see if these conditions can account for other aspect of their foreign or state policy.

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1. The Islamic State (IS) is also known by the names: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Arabic name ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fil 'Irāq

   wa ash-Shām (DAESH). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although the khalifate has been defeated it is said that there are still around 10,000 IS-fighters active in the region, not even counting the ones that are active in different parts of the world such as Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, Indonesia and the Philippines. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term ‘IS-affiliates’ is adopted from Cook & Vale who use it to include as many people linked to IS as possible. This enables them to control for cases of forced membership and the different roles people fulfilled in relation to IS (Cook & Vale, 2019, p. 4). For instance it includes Foreign Terrorist Fighters as defined by the UN but also the non-fighting population and children affiliated with IS. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Human Rights Watch associate director for Europe and Central Asia quoted by Bloomberg in The Moscow Times (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The states of departure are either the states of which the IS-affiliates holds citizenship or their residential state before traveling to join IS. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The term ‘terrorist organization’ is not used within the thesis as the definition of the concept of terrorism is politically charged (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, & Breen-Smyth, 2011, pp. 100-105). In addition the term ‘terrorism organization’ suggest an organization which exclusively uses terrorism, this does not cover the full spectrum of contemporary organization such as IS who do much more than just conduct acts of terrorism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although differing on a lot of other assumptions, most notably about human nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Islamic State: 'Kidnapped' Dutch children taken to Syria. BBC, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31915142> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. However, two reasons exist why sometimes it is chosen to use the term FTF within chapter 2 as well. First of all, when reference is made to other literature that uses FTF then the same term is used as to avoid confusion. Secondly, the theory chapter is meant to be as generalizable as possible. So the term FTF is used more in chapter 2 as the term IS-affiliates already specifies towards the case of Syria and is therefore less generalizable. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It should be noted that Al Qaeda was already involved in terrorist attacks before 1996 most notably the WTC bombing of 1993 (Peltz, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Due to the Orlando Night Club shooting (BBC, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. All of the affiliates have publicly sworn bayat (an oath of fealty) to Al Qaeda’s senior leadership (Joscelyn, 2013). Affiliates to IS include for instance Boko Haram in Nigeria, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and organizations in Somalia, Libya, Algeria and the Caucasus. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Still arguably low considered the overall fatalities (including civilians) that is estimated to be more than 700,000 (Crawford & Lutz, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Although it should be noted that Al Qaeda and IS aren’t necessarily the only manifestations of this specific identity, and that is by no means is just a religious based identity. Within the work of Hegghammer (2010) it is argued that this pan-Islamic identity also holds nationalistic features (p. 89-91). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. You could argue how well this strategy really worked for them, but that is part of a different discussion outside the scope of this thesis. See Kaldor (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Although heavily criticizing the way the US tried to fight the war on terror. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The official Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The definition of ‘white’ also includes people who would describe themselves preferably as ‘Arab’, however this option is not given. This is the result of government policy dating back to the early 20th century when being white (or being classified as such by government) was argued to be important for immigrants who wanted to become citizens. It allowed many Arab immigrants from West Asia to avoid being racially classified as Asian, which would have hurt their chances at immigration or naturalization. Nowadays the US Census Bureau considering a new “MENA” category for people from the Middle East and North Africa for possible use (Mohamed & Smith, 2017, p. 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For the methodology of this survey see Mohamed & Smith (2017) p. 133-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The complete statement can be found at: <https://makkah.files.wordpress.com/2007/09/fiqh-council-of-north-america-issues-fatwa-against-religious-extremism.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This possible disconnect between the Muslim-American population within the US and the discourse regarding their threat and danger is further discussed in section ………….. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Yes, China is on the rise and challenging the US in different regions but not so much in the Middle-East. Also Russia is of course meddling in the Middle-East as well, but it is difficult to argue that they hold the same influence in the region as the US does. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)