

Emphasizing safety and remorse reduces resistance to the return of Islamic State collaborators and their children

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Abstract

Since the Islamic State lost most of its territory in Syria and Iraq, thousands of foreign terrorist fighters, along with their wives and children, are trying to return to their countries of origin. Most of them remain in limbo in refugee or detention camps because political leaders fear a political backlash. Is this fear justified? Are people indeed strongly opposed to repatriation? And what drives public opinion on this contentious issue? We conducted a survey experiment in the United Kingdom, Norway, and Belgium to understand citizens' attitudes towards the return of IS collaborators and children. Specifically, we evaluated the extent to which citizens consider the returnee's profile, risks to national security, and expressions of regret when forming their opinions on repatriation. Our results reveal that while about 60 percent of respondents opposes the return of adults, almost half of our respondents support the return of children. Furthermore, emphasizing safety and remorse further increases support for repatriation by about 7 to 9 percentage points. Finally, these patterns largely hold across all countries, yet acceptance for returnees is substantially higher in Norway, especially regarding returning IS children. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of a controversial and timely but understudied topic.

Keywords: Islamic State, Risk, Remorse, Repatriation, Survey Experiment

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On 26 February 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) Supreme Court ruled that Shamima Begum, who left the UK for Syria to join the Islamic State (IS), would not be allowed to return to the UK to fight the revocation of her British citizenship. Her wish to return to the UK and the government's decision to strip Begum of her citizenship sparked a fierce debate over the treatment of returning foreign fighters and their families. Begum was banned from entering the UK on security grounds and the assumption she could claim Bangladeshi citizenship by virtue of her inheritance (UK Supreme Court 2021). At the same time, the deprivation of her citizenship raised concerns about human rights violations, especially when Bangladesh also denied her entry, rendering her stateless. However, the UK is not the only country facing this issue. Since IS lost most of its territory in Syria and Iraq, thousands of foreign fighters, along with their wives and children, are trying to return home. Many of them remain in limbo in detention or refugee camps, as political leaders fear that their repatriation would trigger a public backlash.

This situation is unsustainable and often in violation of international law, as human rights organizations have repeatedly pointed out (citations). Currently, many Western countries expect local authorities to solve the problem and actively prevent their nationals from returning home through measures such as stripping one's citizenship. Yet, limited to no access to defense counsel, the use of torture and application of the death penalty, and the collapse of the judiciary in Syria indicate that foreign fighters and their families may not receive a fair trial in Syria, if they receive one at all (Mehra and Paulussen 2019). Moreover, to end conflict and prevent future violence, it is important that members of violent extremist groups have a viable way out. Former fighters with nowhere to go may rejoin extremist groups or form new ones, and the lack of a viable exit deters current fighters from defecting (Blair et al. 2021, 1). Finally, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and limited access to health care have already led to high infant mortality in the refugee camps (International Rescue Committee 2019), which also provide fertile radicalization and recruitment grounds (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). For all these reasons, the most optimal option, from a legal, security and moral perspective, is to bring foreign fighters and their families home. Yet public anger and fear currently prevent many politicians from repatriating people, even the youngest, from their plight.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the urgency of repatriation and the role of public opinion in impeding it, our understanding of the factors that shape public opinion on this contentious issue remains incomplete. Recent experimental work has started to explain attitudes towards reintegration within *domestic* (post-) conflict contexts (Blair et al. 2021; Godefroidt and Langer 2022; Kao and Revkin 2021), but the issue of repatriating *foreign* fighters and their children, particularly in Europe, has not yet been addressed. As a result, we do not know whether the widespread assumption that citizens strongly resist repatriation

holds empirically, let alone how this resistance can be reduced. This study addresses these gaps by implementing a survey experiment across three European countries: the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Norway. The experiment serves two goals. First, it provides an empirical benchmark for the degree of resistance to repatriation across Europe, taking into account different profiles of returnees. Second, it evaluates two factors hypothesized to foster public acceptance of the repatriation of IS collaborators and their children: risk assessments and expressions of regret.

First, we investigate the degree to which citizens are swayed by a psychiatric report concluding that the individual does *not* pose a threat to national security. An extensive body of literature has documented how threat perceptions and safety maximization underlie a wide range of political attitudes and policy preferences, from exclusionism and intolerance (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; Stephan and Stephan 2000) to support for harsh counter-terrorism measures (Davis and Silver 2004; Huddy et al. 2005) and compliance with COVID-19 regulations (Jørgensen, Bor, and Petersen 2021). Threat perceptions also determine people's willingness to reintegrate former combatants, with citizens most affected by civil war being the most opposed to reintegration (Tellez 2019). Hence, we hypothesize that citizens will prefer the return of those ex-fighters and children judged as no threat to society compared to potential returnees where no information about a threat assessment is available (H1). However, the need to reintegrate former combatants is usually not questioned in a civil war context, and after undergoing an intensive reintegration program former combatants are generally welcomed back (Annan et al. 2011). Similarly, a recent study shows widespread willingness among people in and around Maiduguri, Nigeria, to accept former Boko Haram affiliates back in their communities (with acceptance rates ranging from 69 percent to 90 percent) (Littman et al. 2021). We have reason to believe that these figures will be starkly different when it comes to foreign terrorist fighters. IS collaborators and children form a particularly conspicuous and salient outgroup in our study contexts. Western media repeatedly report how men and women who have joined IS have been indoctrinated (Saleh 2021) and their children brainwashed (Omar and Smith 2017; Kington 2019). Moreover, the terrorist cells behind the deadly attacks in, for example, Paris and Brussels were mostly composed of foreign fighters returning from Syria (Renard and Coolsaet 2018). All of this is believed to reinforce fear of foreign fighters, fuel resistance to their reintegration, and—perhaps most importantly in the context of this study—render cues from elites that emphasize safety less effective.

Second, we examine the influence of expressions of remorse. Do expressions of remorse and the willingness to help prevent radicalization change public attitudes? Psychological theories of interpersonal forgiveness predict they do (Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag 2010; Mills et al. 2019). Expressions of remorse, including constructive efforts to repair the situation, foster forgiveness through several mechanisms. It

serves to dissociate the offender from the offense or, in other words, to see an offense not as an act of volition, but rather as the product of circumstance (Goffman 1967). It also signals that an offender may be less likely to re-offend in the future, thereby lowering anxiety (McCauley, Billingsley, and McCullough 2022). Finally, it induces victims to “perceive their offenders as people deserving of forgiveness rather than malicious evil-doers deserving of vengeance” (Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag 2010, 898). Hence, our second hypothesis states that citizens will prefer the return of those ex-fighters showing signs of regret and constructive efforts compared to potential returnees without such signs of regret (H2). Still, as with cues of security, we have reason to doubt the effectiveness of elite cues emphasizing remorse. First, the perceived agency behind the actions of foreign terrorist fighters is likely to be much greater (as most have traveled overseas to fight for the caliphate), making expressions of regret seen as insincere and therefore insufficient to counter strong predispositions. Second, apologies in the context of intergroup conflict have been shown to be less effective than interpersonal apologies (Philpot and Hornsey 2008; but see Leonard, Mackie, and Smith 2011).

Materials and methods

Research design

We fielded a pre-registered survey experiment in three European settings: the UK, Belgium, and Norway. The countries were selected to assess the generalizability of our findings rather than to test cross-country hypotheses. The issue of returning IS collaborators and their children is controversial in public and political debates in all three countries (add news citations), but the countries are characterized by different percentages of departed and returning foreign fighters and different prior experiences with terrorist attacks. The political-legal way of dealing with this specific problem, as well as the more general political system, also differs across the countries (Table I). Given this variation, we believe the countries are broadly representative of most countries in Western and Northern Europe.

The Norwegian sample is a probability-based, nationally representative sample as our experiment was part of the Norwegian Citizenship Panel, Wave 22 (2021). The British and Belgian samples were recruited from Dynata’s opt-in panel, using quotas to ensure that the samples are largely representative of their respective countries on gender, age, educational level, and region. While quota sampling cannot guarantee full representativity, experimental results based on opt-in samples like ours have been found to generalize well to the respective population (Mullinix et al. 2015). See Table I for more information on the countries and Table S1 for descriptive statistics of the three samples.

Table I. Descriptive statistics for selected countries.

	UK	Belgium	Norway
Returnees' numbers and policies			
Departed (absolute)	~850	~528	90
Departed (relative)*	1.265	4.552	1.673
Returnees (absolute)	~425	>123 to 170	>30
Return rate	50%	23% to 32%	44%
Policy response	Deprivation of citizenship. No repatriation	Initially repatriated only children; now also some mothers	Initially repatriated children and women; now unclear
Terrorist threat			
Global Terrorism Index (2021)	4.770	1.745	1.109
Deadly Jihadist attack? (2000-2020)	Yes	Yes	No
Terrorist threat perceptions (2021)			
Socio-political context			
Party system	Two-party	Multi-party	Multi-party
Moral values			
Sampling information			
Data collection (2021)	Nov 17 – Dec 10		Nov 1 – Nov 30
Sampling protocol	Opt-in sample, quotas used to match population on gender and age (interlocked), education, and region		Representative probability sample
Sample size†	3,191	3,309	1,594

Note: All sources are provided in the Supplementary Materials. *Per 100,000 inhabitants. †After deleting respondents with a missing value on the outcome variable.

After answering some standard socio-demographic questions, participants were assigned to one out of 12 experimental treatment groups (Table II; see the Supplementary Materials for full wordings of the experimental conditions and Table S2 for balance tests). The vignettes manipulated, first, the returnee’s demographical profile and, second, the elite cues. Regarding profiles, we manipulated the gender (m/f) and age (28/6 years old) of the returnee as these are the most prominent and recurrent characteristics featured in the media. Regarding the elite cues, we randomly assigned respondents to (1) a low risk versus no information condition and (2) high remorse versus no information condition. We included no information conditions to measure baseline attitudes towards repatriation and low risk/high remorse conditions to examine whether such cues can effectively foster public acceptance compared to the baseline. By definition, children born within IS cannot have regrets about traveling to Syria, and therefore, we only manipulate risk assessments when the vignettes pertain to children. After reading their assigned treatment, participants were asked whether they recommend the return of the adult or child on a 5-point scale ranging from “Definitely not (1)” to “Definitely yes (5)”. See Supplementary Materials for all question wordings and answer scales.

Table II. Overview of experimental conditions.

#	Risk	Regret	Age	Gender
1	Low	High	Adult	Male
2	Low	Control	Adult	Male
3	Control	High	Adult	Male
4	Control	Control	Adult	Male
5	Low	High	Adult	Female
6	Low	Control	Adult	Female
7	Control	High	Adult	Female
8	Control	Control	Adult	Female
9	Low	Control	Child	Male
10	Control	Control	Child	Male
11	Low	Control	Child	Female
12	Control	Control	Child	Female

Estimation strategy

For the main analysis, we fit the following ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model (Equation 1):

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{safety} + \beta_2 X_{remorse} + \beta_3 X_{safety} * X_{remorse} + \beta_4 X_{female} + \beta_5 X_{child} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

The original outcome variable is dichotomized, with the cut-off point representing a shift from a negative or neutral (1-3) response to an explicitly positive response (4-5). We chose to dichotomize the outcome variable because of the qualitative discontinuity between the negative and neutral ends of the scale (1-3) and the positive ends of the scale (4-5). Both scientifically and socially, the relevant shift is located on this boundary—what drives people to agreeing to allow returnees? Hence, we fit linear probability models and the β coefficients can be interpreted as the change in the probability that a person is allowed to return when an indicator changes from 0 to 1, holding the other indicators constant. We use robust standard errors since ϵ_i are always heteroskedastic in a linear probability model (Hanck et al. 2021). In the Supplementary Materials, we show how the results reported below are robust to running a logistic regression (to deal with estimates that exceed the boundary; Fig. S1), to excluding inattentive respondents (to fit complier average causal effects; Fig. S2), and to including pretreatment covariates (to increase precision; Fig. S3).

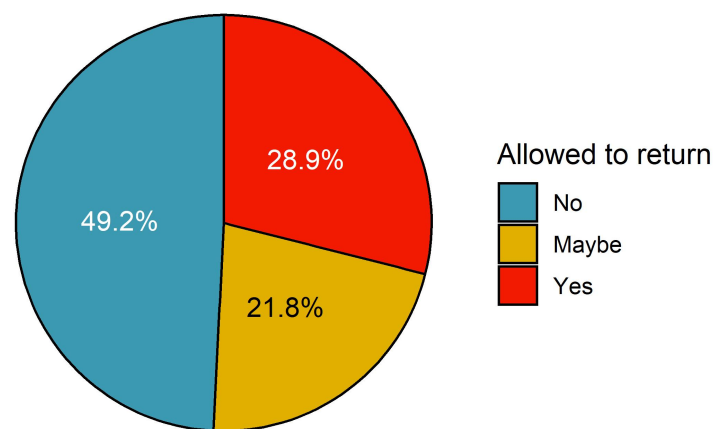
Preregistration information and deviations

The hypotheses, research design, and analysis plan were pre-registered at Open Science Framework (see <https://osf.io/8szqb/>) and approved by the KU Leuven Institutional Review Board (#G-2021-4148) before the data collection started. The recoding of the outcome variable (from a 5-point scale to a binary variable) was not pre-specified in our pre-analysis plan. In the Supplementary Materials, we report the results of our pre-registered regression models using the original 5-point variable (Fig. S4). Results remain substantively the same.

Results

We start by assessing general support for repatriation within our sample by inspecting the raw, unweighted distribution on our outcome variable (Figure 1). Pooling all countries, profiles of returnees, and vignettes with and without elite cues, we find that about half of our respondents would not recommend the repatriation of the IS collaborator or child they have read about, while nearly 30 percent would recommend such repatriation. Another 22 percent are still undecided.

Figure 1. Overall support for the return of IS collaborators and children.



However, these numbers gloss over important sources of heterogeneity. First, acceptance rates differ across countries, with acceptance being similar in the United Kingdom and Belgium but substantially higher in Norway, $\chi^2(4, N = 8,094) = 186, p < .001$ (Table III). Second, acceptance rates of returnees are conditional on the returnee's profile, $\chi^2(6, N = 8,094) = 832, p < .001$ (Table IV). While women are slightly more likely to be accepted for return (about 3 to 6 percentage points), children are about 30 percentage points more likely to be accepted compared to adults. Specifically, about half of the respondents who read about a child stuck in a Syrian refugee camp would recommend the child's repatriation. Finally, to further explore which citizens support repatriation, we estimate a linear probability model for adult returnees and one for children (Table S3). (*Note: socio-demographic correlates of acceptance still need to be added. Plus emphasis that these are exploratory results.*)

Table III. Public acceptance of returnees is higher in Norway.

Country	No	Maybe	Yes
Belgium	51.31%	23.36%	25.32%
UK	52.02%	22.19%	25.79%
Norway	39.21%	18.01%	42.79%
Total (N = 8,094)	47.52%	21.18%	31.30%

Note: Average support for repatriation across studied countries. Total percentages are weighted to give equal weight to each country and therefore deviate from the results in Figure 1.

Table IV. Public acceptance of returnees is driven by returnees' age, less by gender.

IS-collaborator or -child	No	Maybe	Yes
Mohammed, a 28-year-old man	61.19%	21.90%	16.91%
Fatima, a 28-year-old woman	57.25%	20.24%	22.51%
Malik, a 6-year-old boy	30.81%	23.26%	45.93%
Leila, a 6-year-old girl	27.58%	23.57%	48.85%
Total (N = 8,094)	44.21%	22.24%	33.55%

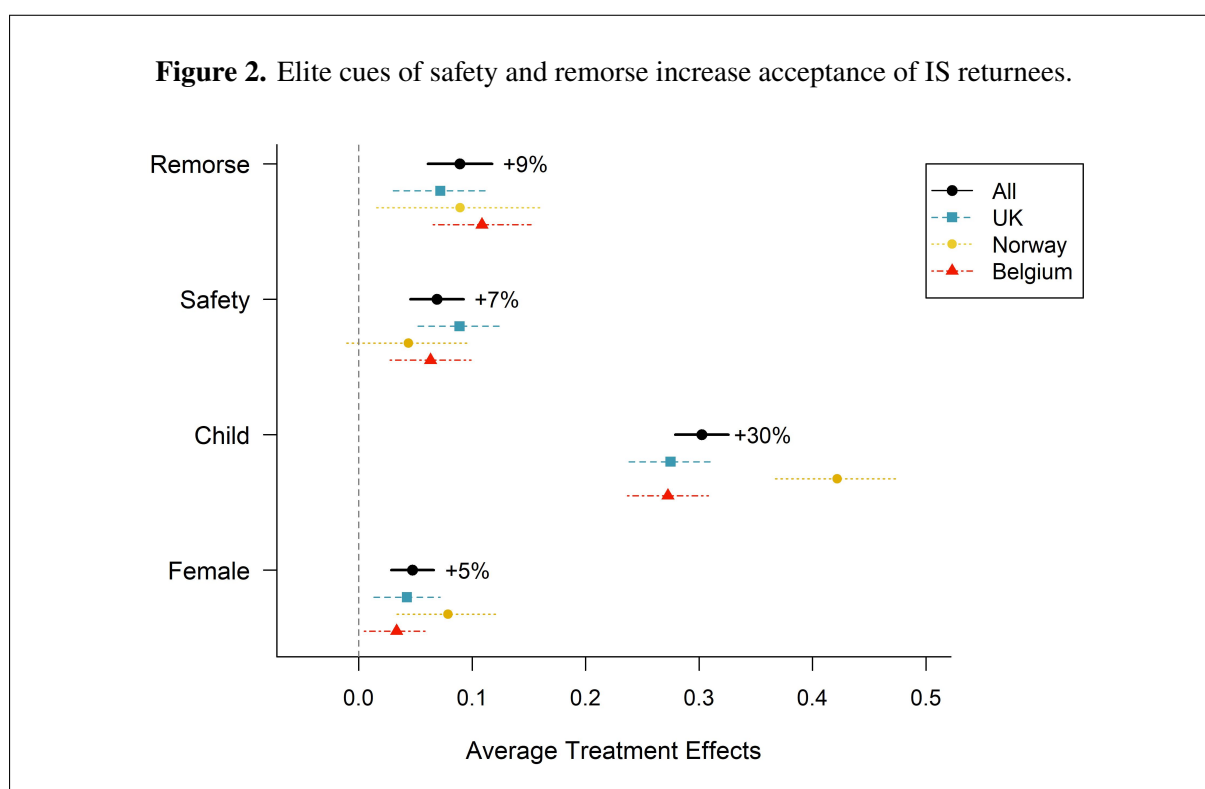
Note: Average support for repatriation across returnee profiles. Total percentages are weighted to give equal weight to each profile and therefore deviate from the results in Figure 1.

Assessments of risk and regret

We now turn to the effectiveness of emphasizing safety and remorse in reducing resistance against repatriation. Before estimating average treatment effects, we verify whether our treatments worked as intended using manipulation checks that measured risk and deservingness perceptions (Table S4). Compared to participants in the control group, participants who read that the individual is not considered a risk to national security were less likely to report that the returnee poses a future risk to their country ($b = -0.18, \beta = -0.10, SE = 0.05, p < .001$). Participants who read that the individual regrets traveling to Syria and wants to help preventing radicalization report higher deservingness perceptions ($b = 0.23, \beta = 0.12, SE = 0.07, p < .001$). Emphasizing safety also induces deservingness perceptions ($b = 0.13, \beta = 0.06, SE = 0.05, p = 0.014$), while emphasizing regret also reduces risk perceptions ($b = -0.23, \beta = -0.12, SE = 0.06, p < .001$). These results suggest that the elite cues successfully affected threat and deservingness perceptions. But do these cues reduce resistance against repatriation?

The experimental results suggest they do. The average levels of acceptance for each of the 12 vignettes

are available in Table S5, while the average treatment effects of the elite cues are displayed in Figure 2 (numerical results in Table S6). Turning to the first elite cue (H1), emphasizing safety significantly increases acceptance rates by about 7 percentage points. Similarly, cues about remorse (H2) increase acceptance with about 9 percentage points. In terms of standardized effect sizes, this amounts to increases in support of 0.15 standard deviations (95% confidence interval [0.10, 0.20]) for the safety cue and 0.20 standard deviations (95% confidence interval [0.13, 0.26]) for the remorse cue. These increases are considered “small-to-medium” or “typical” effects following conventional standards (Gignac and Szodorai 2016; Cohen 1988) and are indeed in line with or slightly exceeding much social science research (citations). Substantively, the effect sizes for both cues are slightly larger than the difference in acceptance rates for male versus female foreign fighters, which equals about 5 percentage points, but substantially weaker than the age difference which amounts to a remarkable 30 percentage points. Finally, while the size of the effect sizes differs to some extent across the countries, the interaction terms fail to reach conventional statistical significance (Table S7).¹ Following our most-different case selection approach (Table I above), we believe that our findings may generalize more broadly across Western and Northern Europe.



¹ With one exception: Norwegian respondents are more open to the repatriation of children compared to Belgian and British respondents. Furthermore, although the interaction term fails to reach statistical significance, the p -value of the safety cue estimate equals .11 in the Norwegian subsample.

Discussion

STILL TO BE ADDED.

Public opinion is crucial to creating the conditions for repatriation and peaceful reintegration. Our study highlights:

- Modest potential for increasing public acceptance of returnees by stressing safety and remorse.
- Quite some willingness to repatriate children (to some extent in contrast to what news reports assume). Difference between children and adults indicate that perceived innocence or deservingness may play a larger role.
- Future research (ours?) should examine whether providing details about what the adults did in IS could be more effective than stressing remorse and threat.

Important: We have some money left over for this project. Any ideas on what we can use it for are welcome. Our thoughts so far:

- In our study, we also asked respondents to write a short explanation for why they did or did not select their person for reintegration. We might hire a research assistant to code these open-ended question.
- Replication of the experiment in the UK and add a longitudinal component: How long do cues work and do they work accumulative (i.e., what happens if we expose respondents repeatedly over a couple of months to the same cue?).
- Add additional factors, e.g. on what the adults did in IS; adding a condition women with children.
→ Conjoint experiment?

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