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Elena Zhirukhina

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When society, identity, and security align: repatriation strategies in Central Asia

Elena Zhirukhina 

Department of Economics, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy

ABSTRACT

Thousands of nationals, referred to as foreign terrorist fighters and their families, who travelled to Syria and Iraq with the Islamic State and other groups, had remained in detention sites in north-east Syria from 2019 to 2026. This situation created humanitarian and security dilemmas for states of origin. While many governments resisted large-scale returns, Central Asian states repeatedly repatriated their nationals, though their approaches differed in scale, scope, and framing. To explain repatriation variation in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, this article analyzes the interplay of societal norms and traditions, state identity and branding narratives, and state security threat construction. The research draws on 63 semi-structured interviews with front-line practitioners, officials, international civil servants, and academics, conducted in 2022–2023 and 2024–2025. The findings indicate that repatriation strategies expanded when narratives of belonging, family responsibility, and preventive security aligned. When these factors conflicted, strategies became more securitized and limited in scope. The analysis also identifies recurring blind spots in gendered and age-based categories that undermined individualized assessment. The study contributes to debates on post-Soviet governance by linking counterterrorism to legitimacy, social order, and threat construction, and by specifying scope conditions under which similar dynamics may shape repatriation elsewhere.

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Between March 2019 and February 2026, tens of thousands of foreign nationals, many of them women and children, remained in detention facilities and camps in north-east Syria, a situation widely characterized as mass arbitrary detention (Ní Aoláin 2023). These populations ended up there after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Daesh),¹ and were commonly referred to as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)² and their families. To end this situation and enable accountability, the international community has repeatedly called on states to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and prosecute their nationals (UNOHCHR 2020, 2023, 2025). Yet most states have repatriated only small numbers. According to the Global Repatriations Tracker, as of September 2025, 36 out of 57 states repatriated up to 3,778 citizens (RSI 2026).

CONTACT Elena Zhirukhina  elena.zhirukhina@unive.it  Department of Economics, Ca' Foscari University in Venice, San Giobbe - Cannaregio 873, Fondamenta San Giobbe, Venice 30121, Italy.

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Against this uneven global response, Central Asia stood out. The region saw an outflow of approximately 5,000–7,000 citizens to Syria and Iraq (Zhirukhina 2019), yet several Central Asian governments moved from a peremptory stance of no return to state-led repatriations. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan repatriated about 2,100 citizens through multiple operations (UNODC 2025b). This pattern creates a puzzle: why did these states adopt proactive repatriation strategies when many others resisted or limited returns, and why did repatriation strategies vary across Central Asian cases in scale, scope, and public framing?

This article argues that variation in repatriation scale, scope, and framing in Central Asia results from the interaction of three key factors: societal norms and traditions, state identity and branding, and state security. These factors shape how governments classify returnees and manage risk. When these pressures align, governments conduct larger repatriations and frame them as legitimate. When these factors conflict, repatriation becomes more limited and securitized. This focus also highlights how repatriation strategies embed predictable policy biases, or blind spots, that affect policy design and outcomes. Repatriation in Central Asia is, therefore, best understood not as a binary decision but as a variable strategy whose scale, scope, and framing reflect the interaction of societal norms, state identity narratives, and security threat prioritization.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it explains why states that all chose to repatriate still differed in their strategies, moving beyond viewing repatriation as a binary choice. Second, it connects repatriation policies to broader debates in post-Soviet governance by illustrating how states manage security, legitimacy, and social order, and how they invoke narratives of belonging and responsibility to engage with societal norms. Third, it shows how gender and age structured the classification of returnees, as victims to be recovered or threats to be contained, across an understudied Central Asian context.

Methodologically, the article draws on 63 semi-structured interviews conducted in two phases (October 2022–March 2023 and July 2024–May 2025) in Central Asia and remotely, triangulated with documentary materials. The analysis employs a comparative within-region design focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

The article is structured as follows: The next section provides context on detention and repatriation and defines the empirical scope of Central Asian returns. The following section presents the conceptual framework explaining how core concepts lead to expectations about repatriation outcomes. The methodology section details the interview-based research design that underpins the empirical analysis. The analysis section applies the framework to demonstrate how different factors shape variation in repatriation strategies and to highlight the resulting blind spots. The conclusion summarizes the implications and scope conditions.

The Post-ISIS detention landscape and Central Asian repatriations

The global terrorist recruitment campaign attracted over 43,000 individuals from approximately 110 countries who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other groups (UNOCT 2025). In this context, Central Asia emerged as one of the largest contributors. Specifically, four case states reported an outflow of about 800 citizens from Kazakhstan (Radio AZATTYQ 2018), 850 from Kyrgyzstan (Toregeldi Uulu 2019), 3,000 from Uzbekistan (Yeniseev 2019), and 1,900 from Tajikistan (Najibulla and Ahmadi 2019). Additionally,

many Central Asians travelled to conflict zones with entire families, a phenomenon later named as “family jihad” (Karin 2020, 11–21).

After ISIS’s territorial defeat in March 2019, fleeing civilians, refugees, ISIS fighters, and their associates were concentrated in two detention camps and two dozen detention facilities administered by autonomous authorities.³ For example, Al-Hol’s population reached about 73,000 in 2019 (Achilles, Said, and Nova 2022; Amnesty International 2024), and some families were subsequently transferred to Al-Roj once Al-Hol exceeded capacity (Amnesty International 2024, 134). By 2025, the combined population of both camps was estimated at between 35,000 (US DOS 2025) and 42,500 (UNOHCHR 2025), consisting mainly of women and children. Notably, children accounted for 60% of the camps’ total population, and 80% of the children were under 12 years old (Becker and Tayler 2023). In addition to the camps, detention facilities held up to 10,000 detainees, predominantly adult men, alongside an estimated 800–1,000 adolescent boys or young men detained as boys (Becker and Tayler 2023; Commission of Inquiry on SAR 2022). By 2025, this number was closer to 8,500 (Tayler 2025).

Conditions in the camps were widely described as a humanitarian catastrophe (UNOHCHR 2023). Meanwhile, continuing pro-ISIS propaganda by some female supporters posed risks of further radicalisation (Orozobekova 2023). Recruitment dynamics reportedly persisted inside camps, with reports of known cases of people smuggling (De Azevedo 2020). Conditions at detention facilities involved torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and further exacerbated the situation (Commission of Inquiry on SAR 2020, 17–18; 2024a, 18–19; 2025, 8; Ní Aoláin 2021). Indefinite and arbitrary detention in camps and prisons amounted to unlawful deprivation of liberty, violations of children’s rights, and cruel and inhuman treatment (Commission of Inquiry on SAR 2022, 19).

By 2025, developments on the ground began to alter the scale and composition of detainee populations. Autonomous authorities expanded the release of Syrians (Commission of Inquiry on SAR 2025, 8), while Iraq committed to repatriating all Iraqis by the end of 2025 (Un 2025) and reportedly returned around 18,000 by early autumn 2025 (Shafaq News 2025). Consequently, by January 2026, Al-Hol allegedly hosted up to 24,000 detainees, including about 6,000 foreign nationals from up to 50 countries (Aljazeera 2026; Eriksson 2026). Prolonged exposure to these environments created favourable conditions for further radicalization, potentially leading to future global security threats. International experts repeatedly warned governments that the situation was neither stable nor sustainable (Ní Aoláin and Charbord 2026).

In early 2026, the detention infrastructure itself entered a period of acute disruption. In late February 2026, Al-Hol was closed following a chaotic and uncoordinated transfer of control to Syrian forces (Alsayed 2026b). During the takeover, hundreds reportedly escaped, while others were relocated to other provinces in Syria or transferred to Iraq (Alsayed 2026a; Salhani and Adler 2026). Al-Roj was also expected to close (Kotan 2026). Previously, in late January 2026, the U.S. transferred about 5,700 detainees from prisons in north-east Syria to Iraq (hrw.org 2026).

The failure to address the detention system’s fragility and inhumanity has prompted urgent and repeated appeals from the international community for immediate repatriation, rehabilitation, and the prosecution of nationals (UNOHCHR 2020, 2023, 2025), with these demands intensifying when the sites faced closure (UNOHCHR 2026). Instead of offering genuine solutions, such as pathways out or protection and accountability

mechanisms, camp and prison closures merely shifted the crisis, heightening risks for some affected populations (Eriksson 2026). As a result, the expeditious repatriation of foreign nationals is no longer just urgent but critical and overdue.

Central Asian states responded early to the UN Secretary-General's calls, in compliance with UNSC resolutions, to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and prosecute nationals, beginning in 2019. As of May 2025, four Central Asian states repatriated a total of up to 2,100 citizens (UNODC 2025b).⁴

Kazakhstan took urgent action as the first Central Asian state to begin repatriations, launching efforts in January 2019 after a pressing but unsuccessful attempt in October 2018 (Karin 2020, 127). In the years that followed, between 2019 and 2021, Kazakhstan rapidly executed five waves of "Zhusan" to repatriate citizens from Syria and carried out one wave of the "Rusafa" operation to return Kazakh children from Iraqi prisons. Through these determined efforts, along with several smaller returns, Kazakhstan repatriated up to 754 citizens, including 37 men, 191 women, and 526 children (UNODC 2025b).

Kyrgyzstan began repatriations in 2021, later than its regional neighbours. In that year, the state conducted its first operation, "Meerim," to bring Kyrgyz children back from Iraq. Six waves of the "Aykol" operation then repatriated women and children from Syrian camps between 2023 and 2024, followed by a smaller return from Syria and Turkey in 2024–2025. By 2025, according to the Secretary of the Security Council of Kyrgyzstan, the country had repatriated up to 551 citizens, including 145 women and 396 children (and an additional 10 women and children) (Tukuev 2025).

Between 2019 and 2021, Uzbekistan conducted five waves of "Mehr", repatriating up to 531 citizens from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan (UZ Daily 2024). During operations, officials stated the focus was exclusively on women and children, but later, they confirmed that men were also repatriated (Uzbekistan 2025). The overall returns comprised up to 24 men, 102 women, and 333 children (gazeta.uz 2021; kun.uz 2021; UNICEF 2023b; Uzbekistan 2025; uzreport.news 2020).

In 2019, Tajikistan organized one evacuation of Tajik children from Iraq (SPUTNIK Tajikistan 2019). Subsequently, the country conducted three evacuations from Syria between 2022 and 2024 (De Dominicis 2024; Radio Ozodi 2023; SPUTNIK Tajikistan 2022). Altogether, Tajikistan repatriated 381 citizens, including 88 women and 293 children.

The pattern of early, repeated, and largely women-and-children-focused repatriation across multiple Central Asian states raises a central explanatory puzzle. Although repatriation has long been framed internationally as a best practice, the design and implementation of these policies have changed over time, with variations across states in the scale of returns, the scope of categories included, and the framing used to justify repatriation domestically and internationally. The next section develops a conceptual framework to explain this within-region variation by examining how societal norms and traditions, state identity and branding narratives, and state security threat construction interact to shape repatriation strategies.

A three-factor framework for repatriation strategies

The response to FTFs and affiliated persons has ranged from citizenship deprivation to repatriation. Whether states have an obligation to repatriate and to what extent

remains debatable among scholars (McKeever 2022; Spadaro 2021; Unnikrishnan 2025; Widagdo, Indrayanti, and Ayu Nanda Saraswati 2021). At the same time, long-term security and humanitarian considerations for repatriation, alongside domestic prosecution, rehabilitation, and integration, have been advocated (Spadaro 2021; Widagdo, Indrayanti, and Ayu Nanda Saraswati 2021). International organizations and the expert community similarly call for repatriation of foreign nationals and accountability at home, including prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration, as the only feasible long-term solution (Mehra and Paulussen 2019; Orozobekova 2022; UNICEF 2021). Thus, developing national responses to FTFs and families has been a foremost priority (UNSC 2017).

Repatriation policies, however, have varied significantly across countries. Some states opened repatriation only to orphaned children, only to children in general, or to women and children (McKeever 2022). Others refused to repatriate women, refused to repatriate children separately from their mothers, or treated women and children collectively as security risks (Commission of Inquiry on SAR 2024b, 10). Adult males have rarely been repatriated.

Acknowledging the discussion on policy options, this article takes the debate further by identifying the determinants of state repatriation strategies. Existing scholarship offers partial explanations. Stenger (2023), for example, highlights the role of narratives around state identity: states that opted for repatriations often articulated a self-image as patriarchal protectors of citizens who had become “lost,” were framed as victims, and were portrayed as returning to the “nation-family” where they belong (Stenger 2023). By contrast, states that denied repatriation portrayed potential returnees as security threats with malicious intent, “the others” outside the national community (Stenger 2023). Stenger argues that such gendered and racialized narratives help explain variation in state policies from repatriation to its denial (Stenger 2023).

Ingram et al. (2022) propose a four-factor framework for explaining state behavior in FTF-related policies, including: the scope (e.g. the number of nationals, including FTFs and family members), geographic proximity and access to the conflict; the domestic legal framework for repatriation and reintegration; instruments for institution-building; and repatriation and reintegration strategies (Ingram et al. 2022).

Building on these insights, this article focuses on states that have decided to repatriate and explains variation in how they do so. It analyzes repatriation strategies in terms of *scale* (how many), *scope* (which categories of returnees), and *framing* (how repatriations are publicly presented). The three analytic dimensions are inductively derived from field-work (interviews and stakeholder engagement) and then formalized into a comparative framework.

This article argues that variation in the scale, scope, and framing of repatriation in Central Asia is produced by the interaction of societal norms and traditions, state identity and branding, and state security, which together shape how governments classify returnees and calibrate risk-management measures during and post repatriation. Although analytically separate, these three factors are empirically entangled: they may reinforce or counteract each other, and identifying which dynamic is at work depends on the national context. Where these factors align, governments pursue larger repatriation operations and frame them as publicly legitimating initiatives; where they conflict, repatriation becomes narrower and more explicitly securitized.

As the region of interest, the article focuses on Central Asia, which presents a distinctive and understudied case of continuous, large-scale repatriation efforts since 2019. The article focuses on four Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, which conducted large-scale repatriations.

More academic insight is needed to explain what factors shape repatriation strategies toward FTFs and their family members and to what extent understanding (or framing) those factors can help states develop sustainable national responses. The article further hypothesizes that considering these three factors helps capture biases, or blind spots, that affect policy design and implementation. Such insights can support more realistic assessments of repatriation outcomes and provide a more tailored and nuanced account of repatriation policies in Central Asia and beyond.

Societal norms and traditions

This factor captures how societal expectations, especially gender- and age-based norms embedded in local communities, shape repatriation strategies by influencing which returnees are seen as redeemable or dangerous, and how governments frame repatriation publicly.

Society and hosting communities

This article uses the term “society” broadly to refer to the public. It draws on the concept of civil society as a composition of citizens, associations, unions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Roy 2005, 1004), or “the realm of autonomous voluntary organizations, acting in the public sphere as an intermediary between the state and private life” (Diamond and Plattner 1996 in Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005). In this reading, civil society is situated between official state agencies, the market, and the family and is tasked, inter alia, with promoting democracy and ensuring local security (Ziegler 2016, 549, 552).

Civil society is sometimes contrasted with “traditional society,” which relies primarily on kinship and patronage networks (Roy 2005, 1004). Yet societies evolve through both preservation and transformation of “traditional” practices, institutions, and actors (1010). A communal reading of civil society negotiates between neo-liberal “civil society” and “traditional society” by acknowledging deep-rooted practices of mutual aid and informal local decision-making through kinship, friendship, and neighborhood networks (Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005, 212, 213). Communal civil society is thus “a sphere of social interaction where people come together on a voluntary basis, along interest lines, to exchange information, deliberate about collective action, and define public opinion” (213). This form of civil society tends toward conservatism and patriarchy, seeks to preserve community stability and security, and promotes observance of shared values and behaviors among group members (213). In Central Asia, well-known examples include the Kazakh *zhuz* and the Uzbek *mahallas*.

This article focuses on hosting communities, local communities from which FTFs and family members originated and to which they return, alongside active citizens and civil society organizations. The UN Security Council emphasizes the benefits of consulting civil society, local communities, front-line practitioners, and local NGOs on matters related to FTFs and families (UNSC 2015, 2017). This makes it important to trace the extent to which

civil society in Central Asia has impacted repatriations of FTFs and families and the degree to which states permit civil society participation in security-related policy domains.

Society and traditions

For the purposes of this article, traditions are understood broadly. Academic inquiries address what constitutes tradition, who claims authorship and ownership, and how tradition is promoted and enforced (Beyer and Finke 2019, 312). Without entering the broader definitional debate, it is useful to note that traditions have been contextualized in several ways: as a resource for nuanced development programming (Earle 2005; Roy 2005), as a pathway toward modernity, or as a tool in nation-building projects (Beyer and Finke 2019; Phillips and James 2001).

Traditional society can be understood as “networks of solidarity, based on primordial communities, kinship and patronage, that allow the population to resist encroachments from a strong authoritarian state, or to compensate for the weakness or corruption of the state” (Roy 2005, 1006). Traditions are not only “age-old, long-established, and often uncoded principles”; they constitute rooted, gender- and age-sensitive practices (Beyer and Finke 2019, 313). Traditional and modern traits of political, economic, and social life can therefore coexist in patterns of conflict, continuity, and change (Phillips and James 2001). Traditions are not fixed: they are negotiable and prone to develop, yet they also retain durability and are backed by expectations and sanctions for violation (Beyer and Finke 2019, 312).

Empirically, traditions are also instrumentalized in diverse domains. For example, development projects may promote “traditional” nomadic lifestyle experiences for tourists (Beyer and Finke 2019, 311). International donors have engaged with elders at the grassroots level to promote and legitimize projects among local populations (Earle 2005, 251). In counterterrorism or P/CVE contexts, state institutions and international donors have welcomed the participation of religious leaders to support de-radicalization efforts (OSCE ODIHR 2018; UNSC 2014).

Bringing these strands together, attention to society and traditions, helps specify mechanisms through which repatriation strategies take shape. For example, gendered perceptions can plausibly translate into differential assumptions about women’s agency and culpability, affecting criminal justice responses to female returnees charged with terrorism offenses (CTED 2019). Societal consent is also critical for reintegration: hosting communities can undermine rehabilitation if they alienate returnees and reproduce victimization (Bulan Institute 2021). Because returnees depend on social acceptance, especially in collective cultures, persistent stigma can undermine the effectiveness of rehabilitation. Conversely, hosting communities and family networks may support de-radicalization when provided with appropriate instruments and training (Ashraf and Aslanova 2021). Examining societal norms, therefore, adds analytical leverage by showing how community perceptions can shape not only post-return treatment but also the scale, scope, and public framing of repatriation strategies.

State identity and state branding

This factor examines how state identity and state branding shape repatriation strategies by influencing how governments define those who belongs, what responsibilities the

state claims toward returnees, and how repatriation is framed domestically and internationally. These identity and branding logics can affect not only the public presentation of repatriation but also design choices that determine scale and scope.

Scholars approach identity from multiple angles, including “individual, or personal,” “relational” (referring to a specific role), “collective” (belonging to a group), “national,” “state,” “self-identity,” and “us and others” (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011). Identity can be defined through embodiment in a role (Stets and Burke 2000) or through self-envisioning via internalized features distinct from “the other” (Ashizawa 2008). This article focuses on state identity as “the image of individuality and distinctiveness held and projected by the state within particular international contexts” (Ashizawa 2008, 575), while noting that state identity also targets internal audiences. State identity signals “what the country is and what it represents” and is shaped through interactions with state and non-state actors (575). It can influence policymaking through officials who share ideas about the country’s interests and values (576). Tracing whether and how such perceptions among officials, practitioners, and hosting communities influence the design and implementation of policies toward FTFs and families, particularly repatriations, is therefore important for understanding policy formation.

State identity is closely related to state branding, as branding technologies have long been applied to states, regions, and places (Gould and Skinner 2007; Jones and Kubacki 2014; Teslik 2007). Dinnie defines the nation-brand as “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie 2008, 15). Nation branding aims to build “an international reputation about a state and its people” (Marat 2009, 1124). Governments engage in nation-branding processes to improve legitimacy, credibility, and attractiveness to investments, tourists, and skilled labor (Viktorin et al. 2018). Because there is no universal model, nations emphasize different features (Herstein 2012; Simons 2011), often through revised national visions, ideologies, and values (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012), and by constructing a form of “competitive identity” (Anholt 2008).

Nation branding is often used to rebuild national identity by shifting from negative connotations toward a more positive image (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012). Some states seek to dissociate from violent histories, political turmoil, or poor human rights records (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012; Viktorin et al. 2018). Branding may be particularly salient for places associated with social problems, where it can boost local confidence, reshape behavior, and open paths to new opportunities, including investment (Jones and Kubacki 2014, 219). Building on a troubled past and internalizing lessons learned can contribute to a new national standing (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012). The re-emergence of nations after tragedies such as genocide, mass killings, wars, and other crises as attractive and trusted destinations has been shown to be possible (Carlsen, Hughes, and Hughes 2016). Negative experiences, in this sense, can be transformed into positive state agendas.

Applying this factor to repatriation casts light on whether repatriation policies reflect a predominant state identity and/or function as a tool for reinforcing it. Repatriation operations can also signal competence, humanitarianism, and responsibility, thereby contributing to nation branding and to foreign policy objectives. Attention to state identity and branding, therefore, helps explain motivations behind repatriation strategies that are not reducible to security logic alone.

State security

This factor examines how state perception of internal terrorism risks and prioritization of these risks shape repatriation strategies, including decisions about scale (how many), scope (which categories), and framing (whether repatriation is presented primarily as a security measure or a humanitarian initiative).

The threat posed by FTFs to international, regional, national, and human security is well recognized (Creta 2016; UNSC 2014, 2017). Pre-departure radicalization, engagement with terrorist groups abroad, and potential return have been associated with multiple challenges to state security (Gurski 2017, 105, 107). Beyond travel and return, linked threats include the risks of attacks by stand-alone actors and supporters, as well as increased societal polarization in countries of origin (Reed, Pohl, and Jegerings 2017). Exposure to indoctrination, specialized training, battlefield experience, and trauma in conflict zones can increase the perceived risk of terrorist activity at home (Gurski 2017, 106).

The perception of returning foreign fighters as security threats draws on a substantial body of evidence from the Western contexts. Historic data from the Europe, North America and Australia indicate credible risks: data from January 2011 to June 2015 shows that 16 out of 69 terrorist plots involved foreign fighters (Hegghammer and Nesser 2015). Even when attack numbers remain relatively low, incidents linked to foreign fighters can generate significant political and public resonance as “low-probability, high-impact” events (Bakker and de Roy van Zuijdewijn 2015). Some attacks committed by returnees in the EU were indeed large-scale and high-profile (Rigotti and Barboza 2021, 683; Wensink et al. 2017, 35). The globally evident Western experience impacts the construction of the risk profile for potential returnees in other regions, including Central Asia.

Debates about repatriation often differentiate between short-term and long-term security logics. Short-term thinking emphasizes heightened domestic terrorism risks if FTFs are repatriated and prosecuted at home (Hoffman and Furlan 2020, 10). This framing contributes to the continued securitization of the issue in state agendas (Hoffman and Furlan 2020; Reed and Pohl 2017). By contrast, long-term thinking advocates wider repatriation and accountability through prosecution for terrorism-related crimes and other serious international crimes, alongside rehabilitation and reintegration of victims of terrorism (Mehra and Paulussen 2019; Orozobekova 2022).

Importantly, returnees do not present uniform levels of threat. The complexity of gendered experiences among men and women, boys and girls under ISIS can be difficult for states to assess and manage (Author, upcoming). The victim–perpetrator distinction is not always clear-cut and often requires individual threat assessment (Capone 2023, 53). Therefore, determining which returnees pose genuine risk is difficult; this uncertainty can lead governments to monitor broad categories of returnees and commit significant resources to surveillance and risk management (Gurski 2017, 106).

In this article, the state security factor focuses on how governments develop a perceived hierarchy of threats and translate it into repatriation strategies, especially whether repatriation, domestic prosecution, and reintegration are treated as a “lesser evil” than leaving citizens in detention facilities or camps abroad. This approach also speaks to debates about the long-term security hazards associated with non-repatriation of citizens remaining in Syria and Iraq (UN Secretary-General 2021).

Taken together, these three factors, such as societal norms and traditions, state identity and branding, and state security, provide a framework for explaining variation in repatriation strategies among states that have chosen to repatriate. The framework directs attention to how governments classify returnees, justify responsibility, and calibrate risk management, which, in turn, shapes the scale of operations, the scope of repatriated categories, and the public framing of repatriation. The next section outlines the comparative research design and data used to trace these mechanisms across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Methodology⁵

This article used semi-structured interviews as its primary method (Brinkmann 2013). Following Miller and Glassner, this article treated interviews as a means of accessing “narrative accounts” of social reality and the meanings respondents attribute to their experience (Miller and Glassner 2004, 126, 137). The study draws on 63 interviews with 59 respondents, four of whom participated in both phases.⁶ Phase 1 (October 2022–March 2023) included 20 interviews and informed the analytical framework. Phase 2 (July 2024–May 2025) included 43 interviews and one written submission from the Public Foundation “AQNIET,” used to test and refine the framework.

Across both phases, interviews were conducted in Russian and English with respondents who had direct involvement in policy design and/or implementation related to repatriation, or who had relevant academic or professional expertise. For phase 1, respondents included 6 international civil servants working in or on Central Asia, 8 front-line practitioners, and 6 international experts and academics from regional and international think-tanks and universities. For phase 2, the final sample included 10 international civil servants, 11 academics, and 22 officials and front-line practitioners based in Central Asia.

Interviews were conducted in person and via video conferencing platforms. In phase 1, some interviews were video recorded, transcribed, and the recordings were then deleted, while for the majority, the author took written notes. In phase 2, interviews were anonymized by default and not recorded; instead, only notes were taken.

Respondents were recruited through snowball sampling, professional networks, and targeted outreach. Interviews took place in Vienna, Astana, Almaty, Bishkek, and Tashkent, as well as online. All interviews were conducted with informed consent. Given the sensitivity of the topic, respondents were assigned numerical identifiers. All respondents are cited using anonymized identifiers with the interview phase and respondent number (e.g. P1-R03; P2-R17).

A questionnaire was shared with participants prior to interviews, which structured the interview scope. The Phase 1 instrument contained 17 questions, while the Phase 2 instrument was broader in scope and contained 64 questions, including questions of interest. The phase 2 questionnaire expanded the phase 1 questionnaire; four overlapping respondents were engaged on a broader set of questions instead of following up on their earlier responses.

Interview data were triangulated with legal documents, official statements, publicly available materials, reports by key stakeholders, and media sources. Data availability presented limitations and varied across the four cases: more restrictive information

environments, particularly in Tajikistan, produced fewer accessible interviews and a heavier reliance on official sources.

The study combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis which is suited to questions concerning the factors behind social dynamics (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015, 225, 227). Analysis of the full interview dataset proceeded through thematic coding in two steps. First, the author used deductive coding to trace patterns linked to the three-factor framework: societal norms, state identity/branding, and state security. This step mapped how these factors related to variation in repatriation strategies. Second, the author used inductive coding to identify emergent themes and mechanisms not anticipated by the research design. These themes were then assessed to determine whether they refined, qualified, or extended the initial framework.

The analysis used a comparative within-region design, focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. These countries conducted multiple repatriation operations and provided comparable cases for examining variations in the scale (number), scope (categories), and framing (public presentation) of repatriation strategies. Restricted transparency in some policy domains was the main limitation of the study.

Society, identity, and security in repatriation strategies

This section presents findings from collected data assessing the applicability of the proposed framework.

Society and traditions

Respondents indicated that “traditional society” strongly influenced how policymakers designed interventions and how hosting communities perceived them. They most often linked this influence on tradition, family and community; tradition and gender; tradition and age.

Tradition, families and communities

Respondents noted the significant influence of civil society and informal social structures. To begin with, in Central Asia, policies were formulated by actors embedded in and influenced by traditional thinking, though not exclusively (P1-R6, R15). Furthermore, strong family ties were instrumental in activating bottom-up initiatives and generating pressure on governments. Specifically, parents and relatives used available public channels to urge decision-makers to support repatriation (P1-R8, R16, R19; P2-R4).

Social connections and diverse traditional practices have been foundational features of Central Asian societies (P1-R20). Across the case countries, traditions and strong family ties were widely perceived as enabling repatriation by creating expectations of family responsibility and support. As a result, governments assumed most families would accept returned relatives and orphaned children and could be relied upon as partners in post-repatriation interventions (P1-R1, R-14). In this view, extended families were expected to bear responsibility for returnees and their children (P1-R2). Importantly, this assumption, grounded in traditions and traditional values, likely, simplified decision-making for state institutions. Post-return reality, however, proved more complex and diverse

(Orozobekova 2023). Looking ahead, the role of civil society is likely to grow as state support for returnees eventually declines (P1-R12).

Interview evidence suggests that the perceived “positive potential” of traditional family ties was treated not only as a social resource but also as a prerequisite for repatriation and subsequent reintegration. Several respondents indicated that confidence in extended families’ willingness to support returnees functioned as a confidence-building premise for state agencies when designing post-return measures (P1-R2, R4, R14). The strong community ties and community-based support were commonly understood as historically rooted, as evidenced by references to inherited practices associated with nomadic culture, such as “sticking together and surviving together” (P1-R17). Respondents also noted that some states drew on prior experience with repatriation programs, including the repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs to Kazakhstan and large-scale returns to Tajikistan after the civil war (P1-R8; P2-R16). However, while states saw the family as a potential reintegration resource, they did not assume it was inherently protective and required its capacity to be assessed, supported, and monitored.⁷

In Kazakhstan, families of potential returnees applied social pressure on state institutions (P2-R4). They formed initiative groups and appealed to the Prosecutor General’s Office, the MFA, the National Security Committee (NSC), and other state bodies for assistance in returning their relatives (Current Time 2018). According to NSC, such appeals continued even after repatriations began (Weber 2022). MFA Deputy Minister Ashykbayev stated that, despite limited public support, repeated appeals from relatives pushed state institutions toward repatriation (MFA Kazakhstan 2021). Appeals to strong family ties and the use of a constructive home environment mattered in both the pre- and post-repatriation periods (P2-R7, R20).

The Kyrgyzstan case illustrates how family and civil society pressure interacted with negative public attitudes. Both state institutions and the public initially opposed repatriations (P1-R16; P2-R18). Nevertheless, relatives and civil society groups appealed to officials and pressured the state to assume responsibility for citizens in conflict zones (P2-R15, R19, R22, R28, R36). Mothers of prospective returnees adopted diverse strategies: some advocated for state-led repatriations, others appealed to law enforcement, while others organized protests, engaged with media, or, in some exceptional cases, travelled to Syria to retrieve their children (P2-R18, R19). These individual and collective efforts contributed to a broader societal call for repatriation (Eraliev 2022; Kulenbekova 2024). Focus on women and children eased the government’s decision to repatriate (P2-R36). So did preliminary work to secure families’ cooperation. According to First Deputy Minister of Health and Social Development Soltonbekova, Kyrgyzstan engaged families well before children were evacuated from Iraq, and as a result no family refused to receive a repatriated child (Bengard 2021).

In Uzbekistan, respondents pointed to *mahallas* as examples of strong social connections built on collective and traditional practices (P1-R20; P2-R21). Respondents emphasized that Uzbekistan relied heavily on families and communities in post-repatriation efforts (P1-R1, R20; P2-R-26). The Uzbekistani model has been primarily family- and community-based (Bulan Institute 2021, 30). According to Ilmuradova, Director of Barqaror Hayot, Uzbekistan’s approach concentrates on returnees’ acceptance by their families and relatives (UZTrend 2021). One respondent highlighted how repatriations

were justified through references to tradition, including “traditional family values,” which were used to advocate bringing returnees home (P1-R20).

Evidence for the Tajik case draws on official and media sources. As early as 2015, families reportedly partnered with state institutions in efforts to prevent the outflow (Government Tajikistan 2023, sect. 2.13). Tajik families also petitioned for relatives’ return from Syria, sometimes despite reputational costs, as in the case of a local imam whose three sons joined ISIS but who still sought the return of his grandchildren (Karim 2017). In one case, 34 Tajik women held in Syrian camps appealed to the MFA for repatriation through their relatives (Khovar 2019).

More broadly, respondents indicated that local community attitudes toward potential repatriations from Syria and Iraq varied. Fears that returnees would bring “negative experiences” from the war zone were common concerns (P1-R10; P2-R18). Despite variation in local attitudes and the complexity of post-return programming across the region, respondents repeatedly suggested that partnership with families and communities, or the state’s perception that such a partnership was possible, served as a rationale for repatriation. These dynamics primarily shaped the scope, scale, and framing of repatriation by foregrounding family responsibility narratives and supporting post-return reliance on kinship networks.

Tradition and gender

Repatriations to Central Asia had a highly gendered character (P1-R4, R7). Women were widely constructed as victims who posed little or no threat, while men were treated primarily as combatants and security risks (P1-R18). Gender became a decisive criterion shaping who was repatriated and under what assumptions.

These perceptions function within a landscape shaped by emerging modern norms and the resurgence of traditional and religious norms in Central Asia (Akiner 2009; Beyer and Finke 2019). While societies across the region vary, some accepted practices in so-called “traditional” families, characterized by “exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, . . . and violence” toward young married women (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva 2021, 236). Such narratives directly influenced interpretations of women’s agency in debates over conflict-zone travel and return. Specifically, persistent “structural oppression or systemic injustice, created and legitimized by informal, traditional norms and practices” shaped perceptions that women lack independent agency (236). The UNICEF study on minors repatriated to Central Asia revealed that harmful gendered practices such as child and forced marriages, and dysfunctional family dynamics influenced female vulnerability to recruitment and departure to Syria from Kazakhstan (UNICEF 2023a, 14–15).

Within this context, repatriations were frequently justified through a victim narrative in which women were explicitly depicted as lacking agency; they were portrayed as following husbands, being misled, or compelled by circumstances (P1-R1, R7, R8, R12, R15, R19; P2-R19). Additionally, associations of women with traditional roles were described as deeply embedded both socially and institutionally (P1-R11), often referencing expectations of loyalty to husbands and deference to male decision-making (P1-R13). Across cases, women’s agency was minimized as they were framed primarily as mothers (P1-R2), while men, treated as threats, were largely excluded from repatriation (P1-R16).

Victim framing was evident across the four cases, but emphasis and institutional translation differed. In Kazakhstan, officials cast women as victims of terrorism (P2-R27).

In Kyrgyzstan, authorities depicted women returnees as victims: of radicalization, patriarchy, and spouses' dominance in travel decisions, as well as of broader circumstances limiting their agency (P1-R19; P2-R15). State institutions described women as non-combatants accompanying men (P2-R19). In their study of female radicalization in Kyrgyzstan, Speckhard et al. noted that law enforcement and security officials referred to women who travelled to Syria and Iraq as "traditional wives", "obedient", lacking agency, and naïve (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul 2017, 10). In Uzbekistan, women were again labeled as victims of terrorism (P1-R1, R20; P2-R26). Officials categorized women as non-participants in hostilities or as far less involved than men (P2-R26). Women returnees were depicted as citizens in hardship, disillusioned with terrorist propaganda, and seeking pardon and reintegration (P1-R20). In Tajikistan, officials presented female returnees as passive followers of their husbands (P2-R6).⁸

Post-return patterns too were shaped by gendered expectations and practices. Marriage, rather than financial independence, was pursued by some female returnees (P1-R12), who used this as a strategy for material support for themselves and their children (P2-R22). Influenced by prior life choices, these patterns were reinforced by conflict-zone experiences, where marriage ensured basic survival under ISIS (P2-R22). In addition, some radical communities sought to remarry female returnees as "trophy wives" for status (P1-R6). Further strengthening these patterns were patriarchal traditions, limited education for girls, and constrained perceptions of choice.

Analytically, the victim narrative de-securitized and legitimized repatriations (P1-R7, R14). It reflected traditional gender roles and societal expectations, which can limit women's perceived agency and independence. This narrative also intersects with abuses and crimes women suffered in conflict zones, such as murder, execution, mutilation, torture, hostage-taking, rape, sexual violence, forced pregnancy, shooting, stoning, and sexual slavery (Eurojust 2020). Sexual and gender-based violence has been indeed recognized as a tactic of war and terrorism (UNSC 2019). Some women from Central Asia were trafficked to Syria by means of deceptive and forceful recruitment techniques, such as fake marriage proposals or job offers (OSCE 2021).

However, the victim narrative risks obscuring evidence of women's heterogeneous roles within ISIS and thereby flattening threat assessments and accountability frameworks (P1-R7, R8, R10). To illustrate, ISIS used highly gendered narratives and practices (Van Leuven, Mazurana, and Gordon 2016). For instance, while men mainly engaged in armed combat and women were often positioned as wives and mothers (Marije et al. 2017), women also served as nurses and educators, managed women's guest houses, acted as fundraisers and recruiters, joined female police units, and in some cases assumed selective military roles (Kumar 2021; Margolin and Cook 2024). Additionally, some women owned Yazidi slaves (Al-Tamimi 2024). Reflecting this complexity, the UN Security Council recognized that women may act as "supporters, facilitators, or perpetrators of terrorist acts," while others may be victims of terrorism (UNSC 2017). These complexities underpin arguments for case-by-case approaches as best practice (UNSC 2015).

In Central Asia, female victimhood was translated into varying forms of amnesty programs for women returnees. Within the region, Kazakhstan recognized this complexity to a greater extent in practice: despite the broader victim narrative, Kazakhstan prosecuted 18 women (AQNIET). Across the region, gender bias was intrinsic to policy design and implementation toward returnees, from repatriation through post-return measures

(P1-R3; P2-R3). Respondents flagged the strategic costs of assuming women's passivity (P1-R12, R14, R16; P2-R15) and identified gender stereotypes as a major blind spot shaping repatriation and follow-up programming (P1-R6).

Regional evidence likewise challenged the dominant framing of women as passive. In Kyrgyzstan, some women recruited both family members and other women (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul 2017, 10–11). In Kazakhstan, only four of 18 convicted women had followed their husbands, while the rest had decided independently (Mukhamedzhanov et al. 2023, 16).

These dynamics primarily shaped repatriation scope and framing by legitimating women returns through victimhood and family-role narratives, and they also shaped the scale of operations where such narratives reduced perceived political and social resistance to repatriation.

Tradition and age

Children constituted the most vulnerable group among camp populations in Syria and in Iraq. Under extreme conditions, many witnessed or experienced violence, suffered malnutrition, and had absent or very limited access to medical services and education (Achilles, Said, and Nova 2022; UNICEF 2023a). At the same time, children were targets of indoctrination and recruitment by terrorist organizations, including ISIS. ISIS employed a gendered approach to minors, as it did to adults. Many boys and girls were brought to conflict zones by parents, while other boys were recruited through abduction, coercion, and forced indoctrination (Vale 2018). Boys served as informants, couriers, fighters, suicide bombers, and executioners (Vale 2018, 2022, 2024). Girls were subjected to forced marriage, forced pregnancy, sexual and gender-based violence, and severe restrictions across all facets of their lives (Vale 2022).

Regardless of these lived experiences, children indoctrinated and recruited by ISIS were recognized internationally primarily as victims (UNOHCHR 2022). If abandoned, children exposed to extreme violence may form a future cohort of deeply radicalized and organized fighters (UNSC 2023b, 19). This concern underpins calls for repatriated minors to receive specialized post-trauma counselling and sustained access to health care and education (UNSC 2017). Central Asian states were among those states that recognized this logic and viewed children primarily as victims, as victims who cannot be held accountable for the environment into which they were brought or born (P1-R3, R5, R14). Repatriations were therefore focused primarily on children, to a lesser extent on women, with only a limited number of men returned. A strong sense of responsibility for minors and their national belonging supported repatriations: “they are ours, and ought to be returned” (P1-R1, R2, R10). Yet across the cases, older children, particularly male teenagers, raised concerns because of their potential or actual military training and/or involvement in hostilities (P1-R3, R4, R7, R8, R17, R19).

In Kazakhstan, children were framed as victims who should not be penalized for adults' actions (P2-R27) and as a responsibility shared by both state and society, and as deserving mercy (P1-R4). President Tokayev framed the repatriations around child welfare, insisting children should not “pay for their parents' mistakes” (President Tokayev 2019b) and that, brought to safety, they had “found a peaceful sky overhead” (President Tokayev 2019c). Respondents were nonetheless realistic about adverse experiences some older boys might carry (P1-R4, R12). Notably, one respondent stated

that these nuances were kept from public discussion to avoid inflaming hostility (P1-R12). Despite these concerns, this did not translate into restrictive age selection for repatriation: approximately one third of returned children were between 10 and 17 years old (UNICEF 2023a, 14).

In Kyrgyzstan, children were similarly treated as victims (P1-R17). Security Council Secretary Bekbolotov stated that repatriations aimed to give children a chance at normal life within their families (Presidential Office Kyrgyzstan 2025). The state logic was described as time-sensitive: the longer children remained in detention contexts in Iraq or in Syrian camps, the further they would become from Kyrgyz national and familial values (P1-R17). The return of older children, particularly teenagers, nevertheless faced more criticism (P1-R19). Despite this, the no-prosecution approach for minors was non-negotiable (UNICEF 2023a, 19). Kyrgyzstan started repatriations later than its neighbors and therefore had an opportunity to learn from their experience: the state ensured that extended families were willing to adopt orphaned or unaccompanied minors prior to repatriations (Orozobekova 2023, 201). UNICEF reported that none of the 79 children returned from Iraq without their mothers remained in state institutions; all were taken in by extended families (UNICEF 2023a, 20).

In Uzbekistan, minors were treated as victims of terrorism (P1-R20). Repatriations' guiding principle held that children bear no responsibility for their parents' mistakes (Akhmedov 2026). To support their recovery, authorities prioritized repatriation and upbringing within extended family networks, either with mothers or, in the case of orphans and unaccompanied minors, with legal guardians. This approach was accompanied by school enrollment and ongoing support, which were framed as the preferred options (P1-R20). Despite these efforts, 21 out of 64 unaccompanied minors repatriated from Iraq remained in institutional care (UNICEF 2023b, 8).

In Tajikistan, in contrast, the state failed to ensure legal guardianship for orphaned children in advance (Orozobekova 2023, 161). As result, 83 out of 84 unaccompanied children repatriated from Iraq remained at state residential care institutions (UNICEF 2023a, 12). Some families failed to meet adoption requirements, while others lacked financial means (Orozobekova 2023, 161).

The victim narrative surrounding repatriations of minors, like the framing used for women, streamlined public communication and helped justify returns (P1-R14). At the same time, treating infants and teenagers as equivalent categories, or failing to recognize the adverse experiences many children were exposed to, was identified as a key blind spot (P1-R1, R2, R3, R15, R17). Interview material emphasized the need for age-sensitive policy design that accounts for trauma and incorporates instruments to support children as they mature (P1-R2, R15, R17). More behaviourally nuanced approaches were advocated for individual children showing radicalized views (P1-R5, R8), while stigmatization and alienation were framed as risks that would worsen trauma manifestations (P1-R5).⁹ Repatriations were thus treated as a first step toward normalcy, but long-term post-repatriation programming was seen as a crucial component requiring sustained, complex, and nuanced interventions (P1-R8).

These dynamics primarily shaped repatriation scope and scale by prioritizing children's return on victimhood and belonging grounds, while also shaping framing by legitimating repatriation as a protective, future-oriented measure, yet producing implementation blind spots where age-specific risk and trauma differentiation was insufficient.

Across the three subsections, traditions and hosting communities shaped repatriation scope by making women and children legible as “returnable” categories, scale by mobilizing family pressure and expectations of kinship-based absorption and framing by normalizing repatriation as a moral obligation rooted in family responsibility and the protection of minors. At the same time, the same traditional logics contributed to blind spots, particularly where assumptions about women’s passivity or perceptions of the children as a uniform group flattened differences in agency, risk, and post-return support needs. The next section turns to state identity and state branding to show how governments framed repatriation within broader narratives of state responsibility, humanitarianism, and national distinctiveness.

State identity and state branding

State identity and state branding shaped repatriation strategies primarily through two linked mechanisms, including narratives of belonging and national responsibility that defined who belongs and what the state owes to them; and domestic and international branding logics that framed repatriation as evidence of state competence, humanitarianism, and responsible statehood.

Across the four cases, high political will was a decisive enabling condition for repatriation (P1-R4; P2-R2, R16, R19, R36, R41). Operations were frequently prepared and executed in secrecy, with the public informed only afterward. Political will, regardless of underlying motivations, enabled operations and allowed governments to manage domestic risks through controlled messaging. Repatriations also functioned as an opportunity to project a positive state image domestically and internationally (P2-R16). Central Asian states that repatriated citizens positioned themselves as gaining positive visibility on international platforms (UNODC 2025b).

Central Asian states portrayed repatriations as merciful actions towards their citizens. All case countries invoked humanitarian reasoning to justify repatriations, prioritizing the return of women and children (P2-R2, R15, R41). A recurring narrative portrayed the state as parental and protective (P2-R30). This framing drew on “leaving no one behind” rhetoric, which in practice applied primarily to women and children (P2-R28). Repatriations were thus positioned as a form of caretaking that enhanced state legitimacy and reinforced an image of governments as responsible guardians of citizens (P2-R14). Sharing repatriation experience and post-return programming created opportunities for states to gain international visibility through official venues and civil society contacts (P2-R14). This messaging also helped reframe the region’s image in more humanitarian terms while signaling alignment with collective security and counterterrorism priorities (P2-R6, R14).

The narrative of belonging was widely used to justify repatriation: “bringing our people back,” “they are our people,” “they are our children,” “they belong to us,” and “we cannot abandon them” (P1-R6, R14, R19). This narrative also functioned as a statement of state self-understanding, emphasizing paternalism and moral responsibility (P1-R14). Repatriations were used to craft a specific image of the state through national traditions and values, to build a new branding line for foreign audiences, and to generate a positive domestic agenda (P1-R4, R5, R6, R7, R15). To a certain extent, repatriation became an

instrument for positioning both the region and individual states in a positive light (P1-R8, R15). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan stood out as particularly active in this regard (P1-R4).

These patterns echo broader findings. Helen Stenger's analysis of repatriation approaches in 69 states suggests a connection: belonging narratives correlate with unconditional repatriation policies (Stenger 2023, 17). For Central Asia, it is important to trace how this narrative operated at the intersection of national and ethnic identities of returnees (P1-R19). This is especially important where ethnic diversity complicated a single national story.

In Kazakhstan, repatriations were driven by strong political will (P1-R1, R12; P2-R10, R27), first authorized by President Nazarbayev, and later continued by President Tokayev (MFA Kazakhstan 2021) and framed as humanitarian operations (KNB Kazakhstan 2021). Officials acknowledged that the returnees committed grave mistakes, but Kazakhstan would not leave "our own people" behind especially innocent children (P2-R10, R26, R27). In 2019, President Tokayev characterized the outflow as step taken under the influence of terrorist propaganda and affirmed the state's responsibility to help citizens in difficulty (President Tokayev 2019b). Kazakhstan linked repatriations to President Tokayev's concept of a "Listening State" (MFA Kazakhstan 2021) and promoted operations "Zhusan" and "Rusafa" internationally (Bulan Institute 2021). Media strategies reinforced this narrative, using repatriations for image-building and portraying Kazakhstan as a peacebuilder contributing to international security (P1-R7, R12).¹⁰ Kazakhstan even engaged female returnees at UN events to share their experience (MFA Kazakhstan 2026). Symbolic elements strengthened the message: the name "Zhusan" (wormwood grass) signified national connection (P2-R42). Post-repatriation programs also reinforced Kazakh identity, referring to female returnees and children adopting traditional clothing and participating in national celebrations (P1-R4). Kazakhstan further stressed its compliance with the UN Security Council resolutions and alignment with international security goals in countering terrorism and extremism (UNODC 2025a; MFA Kazakhstan 2022).

In Kyrgyzstan, repatriations were likewise driven by strong political will (P2-R18, R19, R36), being authorized by President Japarov, and framed in humanitarian terms (Presidential Office Kyrgyzstan 2025). Kyrgyzstan, the last country in the region to initiate repatriations, reached this decision after the special commission visited Al-Hol and described living conditions as "a fight for survival" (P2-R22). Humanitarian reasoning gained weight after that (P2-R41). One argument for repatriating children from Iraq was that a prolonged stay in other cultural settings would distance them from Kyrgyz national and familial norms (P1-R17). This narrative was used to soften public opposition (P1-R4). The image of a state that does not abandon "its people," especially vulnerable women and children, also played a role (P2-R28). Repatriations were framed as demonstrating a compassionate side of political leadership responding to appeals (P1-R19). Hence, the names of operations: Meerim means "mercy", "kindness" and Aykol means "open-hearted", "generous." However, national-belonging narratives carried sensitivity: many repatriated citizens were of Uzbek ethnic origin from southern regions, where memories of past conflict remained salient, complicating the construction of a unified story (P1-R2, R5, R7, R8; P2-R18).¹¹

In Uzbekistan, repatriations were likewise a high-level political decision (P1-R20; P2-R2), authorized by President Mirziyoyev (UNGA 2021) and framed as humanitarian operations, helping women and children "drawn into" terrorist organizations "through delusion"

(Presidential Decree Uzbekistan 2021). Symbolic timing and naming were used to reinforce the humanitarian and merciful framing: the first repatriation was associated with Ramadan (P1-R20), and the operation name “Mehr” (mercy, benevolence) embedded a message of forgiveness (P1-R4, R20). Repatriations were also framed as enabling returnees to regain full citizenship and to be re-integrated, protected and cared for by the state (P1-R20).¹² Uzbekistan assumed its full responsibility for its citizens “wherever they may be” and described its efforts to return women and children as systematic (UNGA 2021). Uzbekistan also had a strong media campaign to support repatriations, albeit post-factum, and promoted repatriation outcomes at international events, including by giving voice to female returnees (UNOCT 2023). UN Under-Secretary-General Voronkov commended Uzbekistan’s “sensitive, nuanced approach towards women and children returnees” and held the country up to others as demonstrating that a “dignified and safe return” is possible (Voronkov 2023).

In Tajikistan, repatriations were authorized by President Rahmon (Tajikistan 2023) and similarly framed as a political decision justified by responsibility for “our own” citizens (P2-R16). Repatriations served as an opportunity to reimagine the state in closer alignment with international security agenda (P1-R15).¹³

Belonging narratives did not end with repatriation; they were widely used in rehabilitation and reintegration phases (P1-R4, R7). Governments, often with support from international donors, sought to create a sense of belonging through national culture, traditions, and historical references (Bulan Institute 2021). Stenger’s discourse analysis suggested that practices such as national songs, poetry, and holiday celebrations reinforced national identity and formulated “the legitimacy of statehood” (Stenger 2023, 16). In this sense, repatriation framing contributed to strengthening distinct national identities and state legitimacy (15). National identity and belonging narratives also became central to media strategies aimed at justifying repatriations, reducing stigma, and nurturing compassion (Orozobekova 2023, 173). Furthermore, framing repatriation as the rescue of women and children promoted the image of a patriarchal “protector” state and served legitimization efforts and national unity claims (Stenger 2023, 14–15). At the same time, reputational narratives required continuity: when states initially framed those who left for Syria and Iraq as terrorists and criminals but later switched to a compassionate framing, societies were not always ready for the transition (P1-R5, R7).

These identity and branding dynamics primarily shaped repatriation framing (humanitarian rescue, belonging, responsible statehood) and, indirectly, scope and scale by expanding the categories of “returnable” citizens (especially women and children) and by enabling governments to justify repeated repatriation waves as legitimacy-enhancing and internationally reputable action.

State security

Although terrorist attacks in the region were low in recent decades, Central Asians committed attacks abroad, including high-profile (Tucker and Lemon 2024). The region has been continuously vulnerable to terrorist indoctrination (P1-R20; P2-R2, R8).¹⁴ While recruitment linked to ISIS in the Middle East has ceased, violent non-state actors, such as ISIS-K in Afghanistan, continue to target Central Asians (UNSC 2023a, 15–16), particularly Tajiks and Uzbeks (UNSC 2024, 15). Beyond recruitment, relocation risks were also

significant: the movement of FTFs of Central Asian origin toward Afghanistan increases proximity risks for Central Asian states (P1-R14, R20). States report Afghanistan as a source of insecurity for Central Asia, *inter alia*, due to terrorist organizations operating there (UNSC 2024).¹⁵ Risks also included using Central Asians in the terrorist attacks abroad (UNSC 2024, 15–16).

Given that FTFs were recognized as actors who can “increase the intensity, duration and intractability of conflicts” and “pose a serious threat to their States of origin, the States they transit and the States to which they travel” (UNSC 2014), state security emerged as a central factor. In this context, security provision was a key state function, and FTFs were consistently constructed as a security threat in Central Asia (P1-R15). Beyond discourse, threat construction in the region has translated into national legislation,¹⁶ including following the UNSC request to criminalize FTFs-related conduct.¹⁷

How states constructed these threats, whether they portrayed FTFs and their families as victims or as radicalized “villains”, shaped policy choices and helped explain the variation across practices (Stenger 2023). For example, Stenger argued that viewing potential returnees as victims correlates with repatriation, while viewing them as dangerous “villains” correlates with denial of return and even citizenship revocation (Stenger 2023, 19–20).

A significant feature of threat construction in Central Asia was a gendered security logic: women and children were framed as “safe,” or at least substantially less dangerous, while men were treated as high security risks (P1-R11, R17). This logic shaped scope decisions. By largely not repatriating men, states followed a short-term security rationale: fighters remained external security problem and could not radicalize others in domestic prisons (P1-R3).

Alongside short-term risk avoidance, a second security logic framed repatriation as a preventive measure against future threats.¹⁸ The longer women and children remained in camps in the Middle East, under conditions of hardship and exposure to terrorist propaganda, indoctrination, and recruitment, the higher the perceived risk of lasting radicalization (P1-R11) (Orozobekova 2023). A related concern was that children growing up in camps, feeling rejected and without a country to return to, might become future recruits and seek revenge (Orozobekova 2023, 202). Repatriation, from this perspective, contributed to long-term security solutions by removing individuals from a precarious and radicalizing environment (Orozobekova 2023, 202). By taking responsibility for them, the states also acknowledged existing push factors, including instability, unemployment, exclusion, and discrimination (P1-R2, R20).¹⁹

Security institutions played a central role in repatriation debates, and all case countries initially faced resistance from the security apparatus (P1-R2, R6; P2-R16, R18, R19). Over time, however, an alternative security logic gained ground. Leaving nationals in Syria and Iraq was framed as limiting state influence over their potential engagement with terrorist organizations, whereas repatriations were framed as making these risks more calculable and governable (P1-R12; P2-R14). State-led operations enabled governments to identify returnees, prepare, and monitor them closely (P2-R30). Individuals left in camps faced ongoing recruitment attempts and might ultimately join extremist groups (P1-R15). Even when concerns about returnee recidivism persisted, managing known risks at home was considered more feasible than confronting unpredictable threats abroad, including by

decreasing the danger of undetected re-entry (P1-R14; P2-R15, R28). This logic was articulated across cases.

In Kazakhstan, repatriation was promoted as a counterterrorism measure.²⁰ It was argued that leaving nationals, especially children, abroad increased their vulnerability to terrorist recruitment and fostered grievances against the state (P2-R26). Given this risk, authorities justified the selective repatriation of men, claiming that prosecution and monitoring at home were a safer approach (P1-R18). They also linked repatriation and prosecution with meeting international obligations for ISIS crimes and breaking the ties between returnees and terrorist networks to reduce recidivism (AQNIET). Altogether, policymakers presented the return of children, women, and men as a concrete step to prevent international terrorism (P1-R4; P2-R27).

Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, authorities concluded that leaving citizens in camps posed greater risks than bringing them back (P1-R17; P2-R28).

In Uzbekistan, the state framed repatriation within a broader acknowledgment of factors that may have contributed to departures, such as restrictive religious policies (P1-R20). Policymakers argued repatriation was essential because, without it, children would remain in conflict zones, be exposed to terrorist propaganda, and face an increased risk of recruitment (P1-R20). Additionally, Uzbekistan presented the disillusionment of returnees with terrorist propaganda and war-zone realities as a preventive tool that could discourage others from leaving (P1-R20). Notably, Uzbekistan was initially silent about repatriating men, only to later admit bringing back a few dozens (Uzbekistan 2025). Nevertheless, public messaging focused on women and children as “constituting 95%” of returnees (UZ Daily 2024).

In Tajikistan, similarly, repatriations were framed in terms of prevention (P1-R9), with the recognition that this framing necessitated state monitoring of returnees (P1-R10).²¹

These security logics shaped scale by making large repatriation waves defensible as long-term prevention, shaped scope of repatriation by privileging women and children as lower-risk categories and by downplaying the repatriation of men, and shaped framing by positioning repatriation as a calculable risk-management alternative to leaving citizens in camps beyond state control.

Other factors: capacity, resources, and partnerships

State capacity and resources differed among Central Asian countries. Variations in human, institutional, and financial resources, as well as prior experience, shaped how governments planned and decided on repatriations (P1-R11). Tajikistan, for example, had experience with reintegrating ex-combatants after the civil war that offered relevant perspectives (Orozobekova 2023, 161). This experience aided repatriations, even though FTF-related challenges demanded distinct risk assessments and methods (P2-R16).

Capacity differences also interacted with regional dynamics. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were early movers, generating substantial publicity around repatriation programs and positioning themselves as regional and global leaders. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan initiated repatriations last and, initially, lacked both resources and experience for repatriations and post-return actions (P1-R10, R16, R17; P2-R11, R28). Experience sharing, peer learning, and external support were contributing factors that eventually pushed Kyrgyzstan toward repatriations (P1-R19; P2-R2, R11, R22, R23, R28).

External support was pivotal in each case. Central Asian states received funding, logistics, and capacity-building assistance from the U.S. Government and international organizations, including the UN and ICRC (P1-R1, R8, R18; P2-R2, R11, R36). International donors played essential roles in both rescue operations and post-return initiatives (P2-R28). At the same time, regional cooperation was especially valuable: while external actors provided significant assistance, the multiple benefits originated from Central Asian collaboration (P2-R19). Exchanging information and expertise on repatriations and follow-up initiatives enhanced program effectiveness within the region (P2-R19). Platforms organized by international organizations also helped bridge institutional barriers and overcome distrust, facilitating deeper collaboration (P2-R19).

Decision-making around repatriations in Central Asia reflected both top-down and bottom-up forces. Governments balanced state security threat assessments with identity- and legitimacy-oriented narratives, framing repatriation as responsible statehood. At the same time, societal traditions and family or community pressures acted as critical catalysts. This made women-and-children-focused returns both politically and socially workable. A notable nuance concerned the repatriation of men by two of the four case countries: Kazakhstan announced it early and openly, while Uzbekistan initially denied any intention to repatriate men and later downplayed their return. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, by contrast, excluded men entirely from return operations. These dynamics shaped variation in repatriation strategies: scale through repeated waves, scope through how returnees were categorized and framing through humanitarian and belonging narratives. Enabling conditions, such as state capacity, resources, and external partnerships, affected how quickly and effectively strategies could be operationalized. Overall, repatriations resulted from the intersection of social, identity, and security mechanisms, all operating within specific institutional constraints.

Conclusion

Following other authors (Correa 2021; Mehra and Paulussen 2019; Orozobekova 2022), this article advocates for repatriation, case-by-case accountability, and tailored rehabilitation and reintegration in home countries as the most viable long-term responses to the challenge posed by FTFs and affiliated family members. Yet repatriations are not a uniform policy. Even among states that repatriate, strategies differed in scale, scope, and framing. Explaining these differences matters for academic debates on state responses to terrorism and return, and for recognizing predictable blind spots in policy design and implementation.

This article argued that three factors shaped the variation in Central Asian repatriation strategies: societal norms and traditions, state identity and state branding, and state security. Applying this framework to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan showed that repatriations were not driven by a single logic. Instead, strategies formed where narratives of family and community responsibility, belonging, and protective-state branding, and long-term security concerns intersected. When these pressures diverged, repatriation became narrowly focused and more securitized.

The framework clarified two under-acknowledged policy mechanisms. First, gender- and age-based narratives translated into policy categorizations that made women and children perceived as “returnable” victims while treating men primarily as security threats,

thereby shaping who was repatriated and how repatriation was publicly justified. Even when men were repatriated, as in the cases of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the latter opted to drive public attention away from this fact. Second, reliance on traditions and kinship networks enabled governments to frame reintegration as feasible but also risked over-reliance on families and communities and insufficient differentiation of trauma and risk across returnee profiles. These dynamics underlined why individualized assessment remains necessary even where women and children are treated as lower-risk categories (Capone 2023; Margolin and Cook 2024).

This article also highlighted the role of discourse and state identity work in making repatriation politically manageable. How states and media framed individuals who travelled to Syria and Iraq shaped public attitudes and the policy environment. Shifting narratives toward belonging and inclusion helped reintegration. State identity and branding are thus not superficial, but central to determining the feasibility and sustainability of repatriation strategies.

These findings have clear scope conditions. The framework is developed from the Central Asian region in which repatriation decisions were reached at a high political level, with limited public debate, and could be implemented with substantial control over public communication (P2-R30). The cases shared several broad characteristics, including a post-Soviet institutional legacy, Muslim-majority populations, the continued prominence of traditional social and family norms; alongside predominantly authoritarian governance (Markowitz 2012), that afforded states substantial control over public information (Anceschi 2015). This differs from the European context, where stronger constraints from public scrutiny and institutional checks limit the direct transfer of Central Asian practices (P2-R30). Nevertheless, this framework may extend to countries characterized by centralized decision-making and strong familial and communal ties, while the more constrained repatriation policies of European states may serve as contrasting cases for testing its boundaries.

The framework also serves as an analytical lens for anticipating and understanding variation in repatriation, supporting practitioners in designing context-sensitive interventions. Identifying how the three factors intersect helps locate blind spots and improve the chances of positive outcomes. Across the four cases, for instance, the intersection of societal norms and security considerations produced a gender bias in repatriation, a pattern the framework makes visible and that practitioners would need to address for interventions to be sustainable.

Future research can examine whether interactions among societal expectations, identity narratives, and security prioritization shaped scope and framing in comparable or contrasting contexts. The intersection of societal norms and state identity warrants particular attention: whether the formal or informal status of families, such as their ethnic origin, migration background, minority standing, or other status-related differentiators, conditions the state's receptiveness to familial appeals and impacts repatriations.

Finally, pursuing a long-term approach to security and accountability through repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration continues to face practical and political constraints. These include sustaining public support, organizing returns in complex security environments, allocating institutional and financial resources, supporting families and hosting communities, obtaining admissible evidence, and maintaining proportionate monitoring and support over time. To address these challenges, a more

nuanced reading of national contexts, along with explicit attention to societal norms, identity narratives, and threat construction, can help policymakers anticipate bias, leading to interventions that are more sustainable and less dependent on simplified categories.

Notes

1. Designated as terrorist organization by Russia, the United States, and listed in the UN Security Council Consolidated List (listed as QDe.115 Al-Qaida in Iraq, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant).
2. This article defines foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) as it appears in the UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014). This article also uses the term “returnees” understood as citizens actively repatriated by their states of origins from Syria or Iraq.
3. Autonomous Authorities: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), other security forces affiliated with the SDF, including the Internal Security Forces (ISF); and the SDF’s civilian wing, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) (Amnesty International 2024, 7).
4. The scale of Central Asian repatriations has been among the largest (RSI 2026), preceded only by Iraq. Iraq repatriated about 18,000 citizens from Al-Hol by September 2025 (Shafaq News 2025), facing diverse challenges in the post-return management of these populations (Revkin 2021).
5. The author acknowledges the use of AI-powered software Grammarly and ChatGPT-5.2 for English language improvement, proofreading and editing. The author verified every suggested language improvement. The author has opted out from training the models.
6. For phase 1, there were no formal ethics approval process. The author ensured informed consent and provided all information to respondents prior to interviews. For phase 2, the rigorous ethics assessment and data management plan were approved by the Research Ethics SubCommittee, the Ca’ Foscari University in Venice on 11.03.2024.
7. The regional framing of the outflow as “family jihad” (Karin 2020, 11–21) highlighted that family ties could also pose risks, prompting governments to assess families’ reintegration capacity before or after repatriation. For Kyrgyzstan, see the interview with Mrs. Soltonbekova (Bengard 2021); for Tajikistan, see the interview with Children’s Rights Commissioner Khabibullozoda (Aripov 2019).
8. The 2023 Program describes returning women and children as followers of husbands, most of whom did not directly participate in armed combat (Government Tajikistan 2023, sect. 2.4).
9. For instance, Security Council Secretary Orozbekov noted that Kyrgyzstan acknowledged the need to address stigmatization risk towards child returnees (Presidential Office Kyrgyzstan 2026), and Tajikistan’s Program 2024 recognised that concerns, anxieties, fears, and mistrust in host communities can impede success and must be addressed (Government Tajikistan 2024, sect. 3.21).
10. See President Tokayev’s UNGA Address (President Tokayev 2019a).
11. See (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul 2017).
12. See (President Mirziyoyev 2020, 2023).
13. For example, Tajikistan organized and participated in high-level international events addressing terrorism and extremism (MFA Tajikistan 2023; Presidential Decree Tajikistan 2021, 127).
14. Kazakhstan analysed terrorist radicalization and recruitment (Government Kazakhstan 2018; Karin 2020). Uzbekistan indicated Uzbek citizens abroad were most vulnerable to terrorist recruitment and relocation to conflict zones (Presidential Decree Uzbekistan 2021). Kyrgyzstan listed FTFs as a threat to national security (Presidential Decree Kyrgyzstan 2021), and confirmed risks of continuous recruitment among vulnerable groups (Cabinet of Ministers Kyrgyzstan 2023). Tajikistan flagged continuous risks of indoctrination and radicalisation (CT Secretariat Tajikistan 2023).
15. For Tajikistan, see (Government Tajikistan 2024; Presidential Decree Tajikistan 2021).

16. For example, Kazakhstan prohibited its citizens from participating in armed conflicts or military activities abroad (Article 172) and receiving terrorist training, including abroad (Art. 260) (Criminal Code Kazakhstan 2014), and introduced a new norm of citizenship deprivation for terrorist crimes and crimes against vital state interests (Law on Citizenship Kazakhstan 1991, art. 20.1). Kyrgyzstan prohibited its citizens from participating in armed conflicts or military activities abroad, and training for terrorist attacks (art. 256), as well as taking children to armed conflicts abroad (art 182) (Criminal Code Kyrgyzstan 2021). Uzbekistan prohibited training and travel abroad for the purpose of committing terrorist activities (art. 155(2)) (Criminal Code Uzbekistan 1994). Tajikistan prohibited illegal involvement of citizens in armed conflicts abroad (art 401(1)) (Criminal Code Tajikistan 1998).
17. UNSC required Member States to criminalize FTF-related crimes, including travel or attempting to travel for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, funding, or organization or facilitation of such travel (UNSC 2014).
18. For Tajikistan, see (Government Tajikistan 2026).
19. For Kyrgyzstan, see (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul 2017). For Kazakhstan, see (Mukhatayeva et al. 2026). For Tajikistan, see (Presidential Decree Tajikistan 2021).
20. Prior to repatriations, Kazakhstan acknowledged the risks of controlled and uncontrolled return of fighters to countries of origin. By 2018, 125 Kazakh citizens had returned, and 57 were prosecuted (Government Kazakhstan 2018).
21. See (Government Tajikistan 2023).

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ORCID

Elena Zhirukhina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2492-3689>

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