

Master Thesis



Universiteit
Leiden

Study: MA International Relations
Specialization: Global Conflict in the Modern Era
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Theme: Children of foreign fighters of the Islamic State (ISIS)
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Date: 3 July 2020



ISIS children: doomed childhood?

An analysis of Dutch foreign policy on non-active repatriation of Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters.

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Disclaimer:

The term 'ISIS' children' is used throughout this research. Bear in mind that I acknowledge that the term 'children of ISIS fighters' is better to use, in order to not to stigmatize the children. But due to word limitations 'ISIS' children' is also used.

List of abbreviations and use of terms:

AIVD: The General Intelligence and Security Service

Anti-ISIS coalition: is a coalition of 82 countries, led by America to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria

Children: International agreements in the CRC regard children as all human beings in the category from 0 till 18 years old

CRC: The International Convention of the rights of the child

ECFR: European Council of Foreign Affairs

EU: European Union

ISIS: also known as IS or ISIL; the Islamic State

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

NCTV: National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism in the Netherlands

NGO: Non-governmental organisation that works non-profit, independent of the government

OCHA: Office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

PM: Prime Minister

UN: The United Nations

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

VVD: literally translated as the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, referred to as the Liberal party currently in rule in the Netherlands

WHO: World Health Organisation

Chapter 1: Introductory Section

1.1 Problem Statement

The words *for every child* ('voor ieder kind') are a prominent eye-catcher on the doormat at the entrance of UNICEF's office in the Netherlands, the Hague. It is a motto that all employees try to live by: improving the lives of children by standing up for their rights. For just one purpose: children are the world's future. It was at UNICEF that my commitment to the fate of children in camps in Northern-Syria arose. During the period of almost a year as an intern and my first professional work experience as Junior children's rights specialist, I learned first-hand how NGO's lobbied behind closed doors for the sake of all children, without any exceptions.

I have to confess that my personal commitment to the ethical cause of UNICEF initially caused quite an obstacle to let go of my personal activist opinion on this subject. At UNICEF I noticed that most of my colleagues at the Advocacy & Programs department shared a proactive repatriation stance regarding the children. Almost all colleagues shared the vision that children are innocent and that they should not be suffering from the consequences of their parents' actions. And I agreed with that vision, but at the same time I felt that there were implicit complications laying behind the firm Dutch policy, than what first meets the eye.

During my research on this matter I noticed my personal opinion shifted from being incredibly critical on the Dutch government towards a more nuanced opinion, as a consequence of the expert viewpoints I revealed in my research. I still share the opinion that the Dutch government makes it hard to believe that they do care about the children of suspected ISIS fighters. However, there are also deeper reasons that clarify the current Dutch foreign policy, contrary to what media sometimes depict. During the writing process of this thesis, my personal view continued to be in a constant state of struggle. After all, children of suspected ISIS fighters are innocent *and* could be potential future threats to our Western society indeed. The positive effect is that this constant personal doubt coincides with, and feeds, the required scientific critical curiosity in this research.

During the writing process of this thesis I felt perfectly at ease to prioritize my objective scientific stance above my already existing subjective personal stance. It has been my first and only objective to meet the scientific standards in this Master thesis. I can perfectly live with the enriched insight that these are two different domains.

International law and especially children's rights are clear on this issue: repatriation has to be active. The crucial discussion centers around politics and morality. The moral debate questions if the Dutch government wants to rescue these children or not. Unfortunately, such a question will not be easy to answer, because it is hard to prove with facts. Therefore I decided to focus on the political debate and apply foreign policy analysis to try to understand the current policy. This leads to the research question of this thesis: *Why does Dutch foreign policy on Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters not entail active repatriation?*

This thesis will start with an introductory section explaining the problem that justifies my research question. It is followed by the historical background on the children, the literature review tells the counter voices on the current Dutch policy and the section ends with a methods & methodology paragraph explaining how I will solve my research question.

The second part is the core of the thesis and entails the empirical section. This part analyses the Dutch foreign policy concerning children of suspected ISIS fighters, explains how the policy is justified by the Dutch government, how the Dutch public looks at the issue and what other countries have done.

The third and final part of the thesis entails the conclusion and discussion.

It is a fact that about 3,580 foreign children from more than 30 nationalities reside in camps in Northern-Syria.¹ Only 90 children of that total amount are Dutch nationals or can claim Dutch citizenship. The remaining amount of Dutch children reside outside the camps in Syria and Turkey (as can be seen from the graphic image below). This adds up to a total of about 210 Dutch children in need of immediate help.²

¹ Counted in May 2019. Reliefweb. "Number of foreign children in North-East Syria camps up almost 45% in less than a month", 14 May 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/number-foreign-children-north-east-syria-camps-almost-45-less-month>, accessed 10 May 2020.

² It is hard for the government to verify how many children with a Dutch link have been born in Syria/ Iraq, since these children were never officially registered. The actual number might even be higher. AIVD, "Uitreizigers En Terugkeerders", AIVD, 4 June 2020.

Aantal kinderen met Nederlandse link Aantal kinderen moet worden gelezen als 'ten minste'	Amount of children with a Dutch link Amount of children must be regarded as 'at least'
	Kinderen (0-18) in en rond Syrie Children (0-18 years) in and around Syria
In Syrisch-Koerdisch vluchtelingenkampen In Syrian-Kurdish refugee camps	90
Bij jihadistische groeperingen in Noordwest-Syrie With jihadist groups in North-West Syria	55
Elders in Syrie Elsewhere in Syria	30
Turkije Turkey	30

The total in this image is not 210, of some children it is still unknown where they are located exactly.³

More than half of Dutch children are less than 4 years old. Thus, the majority of Dutch children is still very young, below school-age. About 10% is 9 years or older, meaning that they might have attended ISIS' military trainings. Over 75% is born there, while less than 25% were taken to ISIS territory by their parents.⁴ These 210 children have no future prospects and are left to faith, and while these children are Dutch, they do not receive any help from their national government in order to return home. Hence, it is easily assumed that the only reason for not actively repatriating these children, is because they are (suspected) family members of ISIS fighters. Their link with ISIS is the burden the children are carrying.

The current policy of the Dutch government upon children of suspected ISIS fighters entails a 'non-active' repatriation stance. This does not mean that the Dutch government does not repatriate at all, but it means that the Dutch government is repatriating children only after they have reached a Dutch embassy or consulate themselves.

But, barriers are being set up that make it harder for the children to return home. The Dutch children's Ombudsperson prof. dr. Margrite Kalverboer rang the alarm bells in April 2018. She argues that the Dutch government offers a fake solution by saying that first children first need to reach a nearby embassy or consulate, before they can be offered help with their repatriation to the Netherlands. Dutch embassies exist in Turkey or Iraq, but crossing borders is impossible since the children often have no valid papers or passports. It is also a dangerous journey to partake, children might end up being arrested, incarcerated, in the worst case they

³ Rijksoverheid. "Beantwoording Kamervragen over Nederlandse IS kinderen en het terugsturen naar IS-gebied", 26 June 2018, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2018/06/26/antwoorden-kamervragen-over-nederlandse-is-kinderen-en-het-terugsturen-naar-is-gebied> , accessed 3 December 2019.

⁴ AIVD, "Uitreizigers En Terugkeerders", Ibid.

are killed. Kalverboer, like many academic experts, expects the Dutch government to take the lead in Europe by starting active repatriation of the children.

Reasons for expecting the Dutch government to actively repatriate boils down to the argument that the Netherlands is a western democracy and a protagonist of human rights. The Netherlands has become the international centre for justice in peace. In the Hague, hosts permanent UN institutions such as: the Peace Palace and the International Criminal Court. Dutch activist humanitarianism led to The Netherlands becoming the well known international centre for justice and peace.⁵ But that same government now violates signed international treaties for human rights and children's rights.

This blatant injustice of our government to refuse to repatriate stranded children with Dutch nationality inspired me to become activist on this topic. As a Dutch citizen I expect my government to speak up more clearly on this topic, and to pursue a more consistent and uniform policy.

Reason for me to assume this, is because the Netherlands has been through similar situations like this in the past, upon which Dutch children were actively repatriated out of post-conflict zones. The Netherlands has accepted various controversial groups of Dutch children back into their society in the past. Such as the reacceptance of young Dutch boys joining a holy battle for the Pope by fighting in another country.⁶ And the evacuation by the Dutch government of Dutch children after having suffered in camps of the Japanese enemy ('Jappenkampen') during the Indonesian struggle for independence between 1945-1949 in Indonesia. Back then, the Dutch government evacuated a total of 21.500 Dutch citizens to the Netherlands, including Dutch child soldiers.⁷ Contemporary proof lies in the reintegration of European (mostly male) young adults that joined terrorist groups across the Middle East as fighters in wars in Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Iraq, etc.⁸ This proves to me that any other Dutch child would have already been repatriated by the Dutch government.

⁵ J.J.C. Voorhoeve, *Peace, Profits and Principles : a Study of Dutch Foreign Policy*. Martinus Nijhoff, 1979.

⁶ The Papal Zouaves in 1860's/1870's. Radio Interview 'Nooit meer slapen'. "Beatrice De Graaf over Nederlandse strijders in het buitenland", *VPRO*, 19 June 2014. www.npostart.nl/beatrice-de-graaf-over-nederlandse-strijders-in-het-buitenland/19-06-2014/WO_VPRO_565959, accessed 2 May 2020.

⁷ Some Dutch boys (aged between 7 to 15 years) were recruited to join the battle against the Indonesian enemy as 'extremely young child soldiers' of the KNIL division ('KNIL strijders') of the Royal Dutch-East Indies Army. Rémy Limpach. *De Brandende Kampongs Van Generaal Spoor*. Boom, 2016, p.75.

⁸ Jeanine De Roy Van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker. "Returning Western Foreign Fighters: The Case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia." *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, 2014.

Also, when comparing policies with other countries, it is clear that some countries have actively repatriated ISIS' children, such as Russia, Kosovo, Indonesia. The Dutch government might be able to learn lessons from their policies. There is proof that the Dutch government can overcome this issue.

My argument is that because a centre-right wing political party (VVD) is ruling the government, a pro-active stance towards the repatriation of the children of ISIS will not be happening under their rule. The political climate is not suitable for an active repatriation to be accepted as a policy. Dutch politics shifted towards a more right-wing stance in the past three decades.

The Dutch public is informed about the severe inhumane circumstances in the camps, various media outlets have informed Dutch public on this issue. Even the children's Ombudsperson has criticised the Dutch policy for being inhumane and a lack of respect for international children's rights. Nevertheless, the Dutch government has not changed its policy of non-active repatriation of the children.

1.2 Historical background

This paragraph offers background information on the situation of the children and their living conditions. It will further elaborate on the problem statement by emphasizing the severity of the problem of non-active repatriation of Dutch children in camps in Northern-Syria.

After the fall of ISIS in March 2019, suspected family members of ISIS fighters -often consisting of only mothers with children- fled to seek shelter in (what some call refugee camps, others refer to as detention) camps in Northern Syria, or they were arrested and deported to the camps as prisoners. Most fathers of the children, the ‘terrorist fighters’, were killed during battles or incarcerated.

A total of three camps in northern Syria are known to be holding children of foreign ISIS’ fighters. These are Al Hol, Al Roj and Ain Issa camp. Al Roj is the smallest camp providing shelter to some 1,700 foreign women and children⁹; Al Hol is the biggest camp with a population of 68,744 people¹⁰ and Ain Issa is mediocre in size (12,901 inhabitants) but regarded as the most dangerous one. People residing in Ain Issa camp refer to it as a ‘horrific concentration camp’. Clothes are not provided and people have to sleep in broken tents.¹¹ The situation in all three camps is described as appalling and inhumane by UN officials.¹²

The camps are an unsafe and unhealthy environment for a child to grow up in. There is no proper access to healthcare. Mothers are suffering from dehydration, exhaustion, some are even reported to have died, leaving children behind as orphans. Children’s lives have been lost too: *“Between December 2018 and September 2019, nearly 340 children died in al-Hol - most from preventable diseases such as severe diarrhoea or malnutrition, according to the International Rescue Committee.”*¹³ People suspected of being ISIS’ family members are not allowed to leave the campground and most children lack birth registration documents that are

⁹ Last counted in May 2019. Reach, “Camp Profile - Roj, Al-Hasakeh governorate, Syria, April - May 2019”, *Reliefweb*, 12 Jul. 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/camp-profile-roj-al-hasakeh-governorate-syria-april-may-2019> , accessed 2 May 2020.

¹⁰ Last counted in November 2019. *Reliefweb*. “OCHA Situation Report North East Syria: Al Hol Camp”, *OCHA*, 21 Nov. 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/al_hol_snapshot_21nov2019.pdf , accessed 3 May 2020.

¹¹ Reach, “Camp Profile”, *Ibid*.

¹² UN News, “UN report on Syria conflict highlights inhumane detention of women and children”, *UN News*, 11 Sep. 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1046102> , accessed 2 May 2020.

¹³ Letta Tayler. “Fear grips women and children trapped in Syria camps”, *Human Rights Watch*, 18 Oct. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/18/fear-grips-women-and-children-trapped-syria-camps> , accessed 5 May 2020.

required to be allowed to travel. These children are literally stranded in the camps with no way out, unless their national government decides to help them to return home.¹⁴

Especially Al Hol camp is known for being a humanitarian crisis. Another example: families and unaccompanied children that fled to the camp arrived there with war wounds; they had bullets or parts of grenades in their bodies or were even missing body parts, but were left untreated upon arrival.¹⁵

Basics of primary needs are lacking and the camps consist of very limited resources. UNICEF has the lead in taking care of these vulnerable children. Shortages in basic needs such as electricity, space, healthy food, clean water, latrines and sanitation facilities are the main concern. The lack of hygiene is an issue that causes problems, therefore diseases in the camps spread quickly.¹⁶ Together with WHO, UNICEF tries to help undernourished children. They vaccinate against polio, tuberculosis, offer additional medical care to (pregnant) mothers and children, and provide warm clothing and lamps in order to survive. The winters in Northeast Syria get incredibly cold (snow) while the summers are extremely hot and dry. It is a hard time working for humanitarian organisations since their work is continuously suspended by local authorities.¹⁷ Also, there is no certainty if children are offered any form of education in the camps and there is no view on what the health condition (physically and mentally) of the children looks like.¹⁸

The Kurds do not have the resources to take care of all children in the camps for a long period of time. They have continuously asked the international community to step in and help them with resources and to repatriate their national citizens out of the camps. This is an obstacle for the Dutch government because of the diplomatic international tensions that lie in cooperating

¹⁴ Save the Children, "Syria: Children dying in freezing conditions in camps as more than a quarter of Idlib displaced", *Reliefweb*, 18 Feb. 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-children-dying-freezing-conditions-camps-more-quarter-idlib> , accessed 10 May 2020.

¹⁵ Al Jazeera, "Red Cross: Hundreds of unaccompanied children flood Syria camp", *Al Jazeera News*, 3 Apr. 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/red-cross-hundreds-unaccompanied-children-flood-syria-camp-190403094923776.html> , accessed 4 May 2020.

¹⁶ Reliefweb. "OCHA Situation Report North East Syria: Al Hol Camp", *OCHA*, accessed on 21 Nov. 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/al_hol_snapshot_21nov2019.pdf , accessed 1 May 2020.

¹⁷ AIVD, "Uitreizigers En Terugkeerders", *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Magrite Kalverboer. "Position Paper: Nederland Moet Kinderen in Kampen Beschermen." *De Kinderombudsman*, 19 Apr. 2018, www.dekinderombudsman.nl/nieuws/nederland-moet-kinderen-in-kampen-beschermen , accessed 10 April 2020.

with the Kurdish officials, they are not considered an official entity by the UN. The situation in post-civil war torn Syria is complicated.¹⁹

¹⁹ Rudi Vranckx, “Voor de zonden van de vaders”, *VRT NWS*, 16 Nov. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sY6Gz3VUbU#action=share> , accessed 12 May 2020.

1.3 Literature review: the counter voices

Because the current policy of the Dutch government already entails a *passive* repatriation position, most available literature on this topic countermands the Dutch policy by advocating for an *active* repatriation. The academics and professionals mentioned in this paragraph are worried about the situation in the camps for the children and hope that governments start seeing the severity of the situation and start repatriating actively, or as an alternative to arrange reception in the region.

These experts have spoken out about their discontent with the current Dutch policy through media outlets by participating in television debates or bringing their opinion forward in their columns in newspapers. No deep studies on this topic have been done by academics or experts yet, therefore I rely heavily on media outlets in this paragraph. One has to bear in mind that all of the following people mentioned have their own agenda to advocate for or against active repatriation.

Professor in International Children's Rights Ton Liefwaard elaborates further on the claims of the Children's Ombudsperson and investigated if the Dutch policy is in conflict with international legal agreements. The Dutch government justifies their non-active repatriation by claiming that the international convention of the rights of the child (CRC) does not force states to bring the children back.²⁰

International Criminal Defence lawyer Geert-Jan Knoops refers to the Dutch policy as a tactic of 'burying your head in the sand' ('struisvogelpolitiek'). The Dutch government is avoiding to accept the politically unwanted consequences that lie in active repatriation. But still, the responsibility to act remains and each state should protect their national citizens, Knoops says.²¹ But political courage is required.²²

There are two important reasons that do oblige the Dutch government to start active repatriation, according to Liefwaard: Nationality is what binds these children to the Netherlands. The children either already have a Dutch nationality if they were born in the Netherlands, and when they are born in Syria / Iraq they have the possibility to claim Dutch

²⁰ C.M. Sandelowsky and T. Liefwaard. "De Verantwoordelijkheden Van Nederland Voor Kinderen Met Een Nederlandse Link in Voormalige IS-Strijdegebieden Bezien Vanuit Het Internationale Kinderrechtenperspectief." 44, 2019.

²¹ NPO, "De Nieuwe maan. Seizoen 6, afl 5. Moeten we jihadstrijders en hun gezinnen terughalen?", *NTR*, 1 Mar. 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/de-nieuwe-maan/01-03-2019/VPWON_1301675 , accessed 10 May 2020.

²² Marion van San. *Kalifaatontvluchters*. Prometheus, 2019.

citizenship (with proof through DNA-tests) because one or two of their parents are Dutch. The Dutch government is responsible for Dutch citizens.

Second of all, because the rights of the children are at stake. Based on reports of the UN and Human Rights Watch, various international children's rights are being violated by (non actor) states in Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Especially the right to; life, development and survival (article 6 CRC) are currently at risk.²³

Liefaard also says that the CRC law that children are not allowed to be separated from their parents, has exceptions. If it is in the best interest of the child to do so, the government can decide to precede the right of the best interest of the child over the right for the child not to be separated from their parents.²⁴

One of the greatest concerns of the Dutch government is the right to family reunification, that could apply whenever the children are taken back to the Netherlands.²⁵ ISIS' families are seen as a threat to Western society so no Western government is awaiting their return with open arms. The Children's Ombudsperson counterarguments this statement by saying that when the children are brought to the Netherlands (with or without parents) they are protected from their parents here, something that is not possible if they remain in the camps.²⁶

The potential security threat that children of ISIS might pose, according to the Dutch government and reports of the AIVD & NCTV, is another issue. Liefaard believes that threat is very small, especially considering the youngest children.²⁷

Their traumas could be a solid reason for governments to start active repatriation soon, according to Psychology and (Counter-)Terrorism professor Anne Speckhard. During her interviews with ISIS' child defectors, she noticed these boys suffered "*more than a lifetime's quantity of traumatic bereavement and horror*". Immediate help is needed to help the children get back on their feet.²⁸

Child psychologist Gerrit Loots is specialised in the treatment of traumatised children. During his two visits to the camps in Northern-Syria, in October 2018 and in June 2019, Loots has

²³ C.M. Sandelowsky and T. Liefaard. Ibid.

²⁴ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *OHCHR*, 2 Sep. 1990, www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx, accessed 5 January 2020.

²⁵ C.M. Sandelowsky and T. Liefaard, Ibid.

²⁶ Margrite Kalverboer. Ibid.

²⁷ AIVD & NCTV, "Minderjarigen bij ISIS", *AIVD*, 6 Apr. 2017, p.6.

²⁸ Anne Speckhard. *ISIS Defectors: inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. Advances Press, LLC, 2016.

done psychological tests with a group of Belgian ISIS children.²⁹ The aim was to observe if the children are traumatised and indoctrinated by their time living under ISIS regime and in a war zone.³⁰ In comparison to their last visit in 2018, the situation had worsened and the children had a hard time concentrating, they were fighting more often over toys and started throwing it around; signs of psychological stress, but no extreme aggressiveness.³¹ Only few children observed seemed to be ‘heavily traumatized’, but according to Loots’ previous research on children in war, these children can function perfectly normal again in a safe environment. Therefore the children need therapy, “*there is no time to loose*”.³² None of the examined children were found to be indoctrinated by IS ideology. Especially the younger children (younger than 6 years old) can not have been radicalised to such an extent that it is irreversible. Loots thus observed that the children in the camps are no danger to Western society³³

Counter-terrorism expert and professor International Relations Beatrice de Graaf agrees with Loots’ theory, according to her the children will adapt easily once they return to the Netherlands. Children are resilient and flexible.³⁴ But, “*The longer these children stay in the camps, the sooner they will become ‘ticking timebombs’*”. The camps are a breeding ground for radicalisation.³⁵ De Graaf adds to that notion that leaving the children in the camps will do them more harm. “*When bringing them here, we can keep an eye on them*”³⁶. Leaving them in Syria will make their movements unpredictable and untraceable, they might return illegally and stay under the radar to plan a terrorist attack.³⁷

²⁹ After contacting dr. Gerrit Loots via e-mail, he pointed me at the website of his research team. Youth at Social Risk. “Research Projects in Syria”. *Voice*, <https://youthatsocialrisk.be/projects/syria/> , accessed 7 April 2020.

³⁰ Hassan Bahara. “Komen De IS-Kinderen Ooit Nog Terug?” *De Volkskrant*, 6 Nov. 2018, www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/komen-de-is-kinderen-ooit-nog-terug~b927dd12/ , accessed 5 Feb. 2020.

³¹ Anneke Stoffelen and Hassan Bahara. “Haal Je Vrouwelijke Syriëgangers En Hun Kinderen Niet Terug, Dan Is Het Wachten Op Aanslagen.” *De Volkskrant*, 6 Aug. 2019, www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/haal-je-vrouwelijke-syriegangers-en-hun-kinderen-niet-terug-dan-is-het-wachten-op-aanslagen~bab200de/ , accessed 7 January 2020.

³² Rudi Vranckx, *Ibid*.

³³ Gerrit Loots has done previous research on the reintegration of child soldiers in North-Uganda and Colombia. Loots, G., Viaene, C., Jamaï, H., Quaghebeur, S., & Ryckx, S. (2018). *RAPPORT BEZOEK AAN BELGISCHE KINDEREN IN KOERDISCHE VLUCHTELINGENKAMPEN IN NOORD-OOST SYRIË 13 – 21 oktober 2018*.

³⁴ Beatrice de Graaf, “Reïntegratie IS-Strijders Na Celstraf Is Niet Kansloos.” *NRC*, 28 Oct. 2019, www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/10/28/reintegratie-is-strijders-na-cel-is-niet-kansloos-a3978273 , accessed 12 December 2019.

³⁵ Anneke Stoffelen and Hassan Bahara. *Ibid*.

³⁶ Beatrice de Graaf, *Ibid*.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

Belgian Jihadi- and Islam expert Montasser Alde'emeh is one of the few academics that openly speaks against any form of repatriation of children of ISIS' fighters.³⁸ *"These members of ISIS do not deserve to be repatriated. They do not even deserve a debate."*³⁹

Alde'emeh believes that because of the horrible crimes ISIS committed, the ISIS families have lost their right to be repatriated. He says its best to leave them in Syria.⁴⁰ *"It is plausible that children with jihadist parents will ask about their father and who killed him. What will their mother respond? And what if they hear that it were Belgian or Dutch bombs that killed their father in Syria, would that child not want to take revenge when becoming older?"*⁴¹

Alde'emeh points out that the breeding ground for radicalisation also exists in Europe, which is a risk for returning children of ISIS. For example: returnees are believers of Islam, but upon return they would have to live in a democratic, mostly non-religious, polarized, Western society where their beliefs are not always felt to be understood. Besides, their socio-economic status remains living in poverty and having low job prospects. Such factors do not provide a proper ground for a 'fresh' start in the Netherlands.⁴²

The least the Dutch government can do, as Liefwaard proposes, is to use diplomatic measures to prevent the violation of children's rights in the camps.⁴³ Alde'emeh proposes that: *"Europe can help by investing money into their housing and education there"*. Being raised in a Muslim society will make the children able to show their identity without causing any stir.⁴⁴

The Dutch government is claiming it has to choose between one of these two: bringing the children into safety and prioritizing the best interest of the child, or prioritizing the safety of Dutch society and leaving the children in Syria.⁴⁵ According to Gerrit Loots the real struggle rather exists between going for revenge or pursuing justice for the children.⁴⁶

Liefwaard concludes his plea by stating that it is unclear if the best interest of the child has been taken in consideration during the formation of the Dutch policy.⁴⁷ That is where the gap lies

³⁸ Cyril Rosman. "Jihadexpert Alde'emeh: Jihadisten terughalen naar Europa is naïef" *Algemeen Dagblad*, 14 July 2019, <https://www.ad.nl/wetenschap/jihadexpert-alde-emeh-jihadisten-terughalen-naar-europa-is-naïef~ad17c210/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>, accessed 3 May 2020.

³⁹ NPO, "De Nieuwe maan." Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cyril Rosman. Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ C.M. Sandelowsky and T. Liefwaard. Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Rudi Vranckx. Ibid.

⁴⁷ C.M. Sandelowsky and T. Liefwaard. Ibid.

in the existing literature on this topic. In the empirical section I will research if the Dutch government is prioritizing the best interest of these children and how.

1.4 Methods, Methodology and Sources

In this paragraph, the methods, methodology and the sources used to study the research question are discussed. My research question is as follows: Why does Dutch foreign policy on Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters not entail an active repatriation? The answer unfolds in three sections.

The first section highlights the context of the problem, the execution of the research and essential background information on the topic. The core section of the thesis entails the empirical section. It offers an analysis of the current Dutch policy by means of process-tracing, looking at the public debate and a comparative analysis of policies of (European) countries. The third and final section presents the discussion and conclusion.

The primary method of approach is foreign policy analysis (FPA). By analysing the process and outcomes of Dutch foreign policy we can understand the diplomatic and political reasons behind the current foreign policy of non-active repatriation of Dutch children of ISIS. FPA is the most appropriate method to answer the research question because it allowed me to approach the issue from a national perspective while simultaneously zooming out and looking at the broader international picture. This approach generates the following set of sub-questions:

- What is the current Dutch policy on children of ISIS?
- How has the current Dutch policy been established?
- What arguments does the government use to justify their policy?
- What do proponents and opponents say about the issue?
- What does the public debate entail?
- What do the policies of other (European) countries entail?
- For what reasons do other countries pursue active repatriation over passive repatriation?
- How is the current policy holding stance and do not lead to adjustments?

Hence, the methodological approach of this thesis is to gain more in-depth understanding of the contemporary policy of non-active repatriation. In order to answer these questions I have conducted qualitative literature research and focus on content analysis.

Besides academic literature I also rely on media articles. The reason for that is that this topic is so very much up-to-date that policies kept evolving during the writing process of the thesis. Not as many academic research as hoped could be found on the research topic yet, therefore more media articles were added to supplement shortcoming resources. The sources

were collected through the University Library and search engines on the internet such as Google (Scholar), the University catalogue, databases such as J-Stor, SAGE journals online and through the use of reports by UN bodies such as OCHA, UNICEF and the UN Security Council. Thanks to hints of former colleagues of the UNICEF office in the Netherlands I consulted the academic works of Thomas Renard and Ton Liefwaard on this issue. I also contacted professor dr. Gerrit Loots, Child psychology Professor, by e-mail in an attempt to trace his reports of his visits to the camps in Northern Syria. He sent me the link to the website of his organisation that provided valuable additional information.

This topic touches upon various fields in society and should not be looked at from one perspective only. I thus involved a great variety of academics, scholars and professional from different backgrounds. Therefore I included the views of experts on children's rights, human rights, international laws and agreements in international relations, politics, (counter-) terrorism, child psychology and jihadism. Also, a mixture of Dutch and international (mostly in English, some in Flemish, French or German) sources were used to develop an unbiased and complete overview on the matter.

The primary sources used are government researches by the institutions AIVD and NCTV and transcripts of debates in the House of Representatives ('Tweede Kamer'), informative letters by the Ministry of Security and Justice on this topic, all of which are publicly accessible. Most of this original material was used for the empirical section.

Through process-tracing I managed to trace the origins of the current policy, and the justifications the government uses to legitimize their policy. The aim of process-tracing was to unravel the current aversive sentiment towards an active repatriation, which prevails in the Dutch government (and are mostly kept behind closed doors). By looking at the evolving policy and analysing that process step by step, I exposed the unwillingness of the Dutch government to change their policy.

Secondary sources in this thesis are books and articles composed by (contemporary) historians that focus on Dutch foreign policy and Dutch international relations. In addition, expert opinions are conducted through the use of mainly high quality media outlets like NRC Handelsblad, De Volkskrant and the Dutch public broadcast NOS (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting). These sources also offer (online) news articles on events concerning the situation of the children and expose the public opinion on this matter.

Secondary sources were needed for the comparative analysis of Dutch policy with other (European) countries, to find out what lessons the Dutch government could learn from other governments facing this same politically sensitive issue.

As explained above, most literature quoted in this research is quite recent due to the fact that this topic focuses on current affairs. Therefore no study using the FPA method to approach the issue of the *children* has been conducted yet.

2.1 What is the policy and how is it justified?

In this paragraph the method of process-tracing is applied understand how the policy of non-active repatriation of Dutch ISIS' children has emerged. Because the Dutch government has not openly talked about it in the media or brought statements forward, I aim to find out through process-tracing, what the sentiment is in the House of Representatives. It is a step by step analysis of all government discussions concerning this issue, during the period of March 2018 till November 2019. I have decided to limit my scope to this period because the discussion is still ongoing. This period marks the beginning of discussions within Dutch politics about the repatriation of Dutch ISIS' children until the day that case was taken to Court.

This timeline is conducted by searching the website of the House of Representatives for all official documents in which ISIS children are discussed. I filtered by looking at issues handled by the Ministry of Security and Justice and Foreign Affairs and searched for terms like 'children of ISIS', 'orphaned children' in Dutch.

Timeline:

2018

The first time the House of Representatives began asking questions concerning Dutch children of ISIS' fighters was during the general consultation in the House of Representatives on **28th of March 2018**. One of the reasons for politicians to start asking questions about the children, was the documentary by Dutch journalist Sinan Can 'The lost children of the Caliphate', that was broadcast on tv only two days before.⁴⁸ The Minister for Migration (Mark Harbers) was asked to give more openness about the children: what are their nationalities, how many have a Dutch passport and how many are orphans.⁴⁹ In other words, politicians asked: What can the government do for these children?⁵⁰

The Minister for Migration replied that this was not the time nor the moment to ask

⁴⁸ Sinan, Can. 'De verloren kinderen van het kalifaat', *NPO*, 26 Mar. 2018.

⁴⁹ Overheid. "AO Opvang, Terugkeer en Bewaring op 28 maart 2018", 11 Apr. 2018, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-32317-512.html>, accessed 10 December 2019.

⁵⁰ Overheid. "Kamerstuk 19 637 nr. 2383", 26 Apr. 2018. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-19637-2383.html>, accessed 14 May 2020.

such questions since *“These people are not asylum seekers nor refugees”*, and admitted that he was not able to answer properly.

Therefore, the case of ISIS’ children was handed over from the Minister of Migration to the Minister of Security and Justice.

On **10 April 2018**, the Ministry of Justice and Security stated that as a member of the European Union, the Dutch government aims for the creation of a common European approach in repatriating ISIS children. The Dutch government claims that the children need to be treated as victims. And in case of their return to the Netherlands, they must be taken care of by the Dutch government. Therefore, a team of the Child Protection Council has been set up to help the children’s care takers and foster families.⁵¹ The Minister of Justice and Security (Ferdinand Grapperhaus) also admitted that they do not know exactly where the mothers with children are at the moment, how many we are speaking of and if they are still alive. Some are still with ISIS, some are in (refugee)camps. And *“It can not be said with certainty that there are any orphans with a Dutch link currently in Syria and Iraq, due to the circumstances there”*, the embassy of the Netherlands in Syria is closed, so diplomatic ties with the Syrian authorities do not exist.

The Children’s Ombudsperson, Margrite Kalverboer did not accept this answer, so on the 16th of April 2018 she brought forward her position paper on the topic, as mentioned before.

On the **26 of June 2018**, Grapperhaus finally responded to the questions asked in April. In this letter, for the first time, he elaborates on the three main reasons that contribute to the policy of the Dutch government towards the children: unsafe situation in Northern-Syria, complicated international relations that are at stake (with the Kurds) and the safety of the repatriated can not be fully guaranteed. The Minister⁵² says that children are victims of decisions their parents made, but the indoctrination and military training at ISIS of some children poses national security risks. The Minister agrees with the Children’s Ombudsperson that the best interest of the child has to be taken into account when it comes to repatriating, but when looking at the International Convention of the Rights of the Child, the government is not bound to act for these children in any way. The Netherlands wants to realize international cooperation on this issue but will not start actively repatriating the minors in

⁵¹ Rijksoverheid. “Kamerbrief over Nederlandse inzet in EU-besprekingen over ISIS vrouwen en kinderen”, 10 Apr. 2018, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2018/04/10/tk-nederlandse-inzet-in-eu-besprekingen-over-isis-vrouwen-en-kinderen> , accessed 10 May 2020.

⁵² From now on with Minister is referred to the Minister of Security and Justice, Ferdinand Grapperhaus.

Syria themselves. ISIS' families have to report themselves to the nearest Dutch consulate. The Dutch government is not offering help to its citizens in Syria and Iraq, not to children either. Grapperhaus does say that he will keep an eye on the situation, and keep talking with the parties (authorities and NGO's) involved. For the first time the argument is used that the safety of the people to be repatriated, can not be guaranteed once a European arrest warrant has been issued. Concluding, the Minister said that taking children back would mean taking the parents back as well, because separating children from their parents is just not legally permissible.⁵³

Starting from this moment the children have always been mentioned in connection to posing a terrorist threat to Dutch society.

In **October 2018** Grapperhaus responded to questions asked by the House of Representatives on 26 June 2018. In his response he repeated that the Dutch government will not actively repatriate ISIS fighters, families and minors due to the major threat they might pose to Dutch society. He clarified that the criminal investigation executed by the Dutch government does not apply to minors. But that, according to an 'Open terrorism research' the children might pose a threat.⁵⁴

6 December 2018: The Minister mostly repeats what he already said before about the important factors to not actively repatriate. It is an unsafe area to travel to, look at the travel advice, it says do not travel to Syria. The safety analysis done by NCTV is what the Minister keeps referring to as the reason behind the Dutch governments position towards not taking the children back.⁵⁵

2019

In the beginning of 2019 it seemed like the Ministry of Justice and Security was starting to change its point of view towards the children of ISIS' foreign fighters, specifically concerning *orphaned children*.

⁵³ Brief regering. "Reactie op het verzoek van het lid Buitenweg 19 april 2018", *Tweede Kamer*, 26 June 2018, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2018Z12461&did=2018D36174, accessed 18 May 2020.

⁵⁴ Rijksoverheid. "Openbare samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 47", 26 Mar. 2018. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2018/03/26/openbare-samenvatting-dreigingsbeeld-terrorisme-nederland-47>, accessed 7 April 2020.

⁵⁵ Overheid. "Kamerstuk 29754 nr. 483", 10 Dec. 2018. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29754-483.html>, accessed 10 April 2020.

When in February the Dutch media reported the death of an ISIS mother who left behind two orphaned children, Grapperhaus reported to the media that he had been talking with the Kurdish authorities to find a way to bring the children into safety.⁵⁶ This was a reason for the House of Representatives to ask for clarification, since Grapperhaus never informed them of a renewed policy, but the policy did already seem changed as to what he reported in the media. In his letter of the **21st of February 2019**, Grapperhaus informed the House of Representatives that the responsibilities laid down in the CRC towards orphaned ISIS' children are more profound. Therefore, Dutch officials are in touch with Kurdish officials in Northern Syria to investigate how these children could be repatriated. But still, the situation remains complex and very little actions can be taken in the dangerous region.⁵⁷

Noticeable is that from February 2019 on, various members of the Parliament began to ask questions about the situation of Dutch ISIS children on a regular basis, not just sporadically. So, political pressure from inside the Parliament started to be noticeable. Grapperhaus' statement in the media could be regarded as a slight opening towards a more proactive stance.

On **16 April 2019**, Grapperhaus responded to questions asked by members of the Parliament on 21 March 2019. He was asked to clarify the situation of Dutch orphans in Syria. Grapperhaus informs about the repatriation of a few young French orphaned ISIS children (on 15 March 2019) and children whose parents are imprisoned in Syria. The French government has not changed its passive repatriation stance, and used military means to accomplish this. Grapperhaus explained he is in close contact with French officials on the issue, as well as with other European states. The Netherlands is investigating how the Dutch children of ISIS could be repatriated, maybe with the help of the International Red Cross.⁵⁸

It seems like the French example is mentioned as a precursor to what is going to happen by repatriating a few Dutch ISIS children in the future.

16 May 2019, Grapperhaus answers to questions asked by members of the Parliament on 8 April 2019 concerning the fact that a daughter of Dutch ISIS fighter has died in a camp in Syria. The Minister acknowledges that the situation in the camps is severe, repeats that the

⁵⁶ NOS. "Nederland onderzoekt terughalen vrouwelijke Syriëgangers en kinderen", *NOS Nieuws*, 1 Feb. 2019, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2270059-nederland-onderzoekt-terughalen-vrouwelijke-syriegangers-en-kinderen.html>, accessed 2 January 2020.

⁵⁷ Overheid. "Kamerstuk 29754, nr. 492", 21 Feb 2019, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29754-492.html>, accessed 6 April 2020.

⁵⁸ Overheid. "Kamerstuk 29754, nr. 499", 16 Apr. 2019, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29754-499.html>, accessed 4 May 2020.

Dutch policy remains the same and stresses that parents are first and foremost responsible for their children. The fact that repatriation of the children would mean repatriating the parents too, is once again stressed to be an important factor in maintaining a restrictive policy.⁵⁹

But, on **10 June 2019** Minister of Security and Justice and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Stef Blok) announced that on that day the French government handed over two Dutch orphaned children to be placed under a legal guardian in the Netherlands. The ministers stressed that this was only a unique exception to the rule, since these children could not be taken care of in the camp.

One could argue that after the repatriation of two Dutch orphaned children, the government's assertion that it is too dangerous for Dutch officials to travel to northern Syria to repatriate was no longer thought to be believable. It might be risky, but clearly it is possible.⁶⁰

11 June 2019 a member of the Liberal Party asked more information to be shared about the repatriation to the Minister of Foreign Affairs during 'question time' at the Upper House. Blok emphasized that these children are too young (2 and 4 years old) to have been indoctrinated with ISIS' ideology, therefore they do not pose a risk to Dutch society. Passive repatriation policy remains, no new policy will be implemented. Northern-Syria continues to be very unsafe, the operation was highly secured. This repatriation was an exceptional circumstance.

26 June 2019: Minister of Foreign Affairs Blok and Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Aid (Sigrid Kaag) replied to questions asked on 5 April 2019. These Ministers acknowledged that it is almost impossible for a child to reach a Dutch embassy in Turkey or Iraq on their own. Also, the situation in the camps was explained to more detail: the situation is severe, camps are over capacitated and humanitarian help is minimal. The Dutch government donates money to NGO's to improve reception in the region. The Red Cross has initiated it wants to help with repatriation in the future, but Ministers stress that is not likely to happen soon, because the repatriation of the parents is considered a national security risk.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Kamervragen. Antwoord op vragen over het bericht 'Dochtertje van Nederlandse Syriëganger overleden in vluchtelingenkamp', *Tweede Kamer*, 16 May 2020, <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/kamervragen/detail?id=2019Z06995&did=2019D17905>, accessed 5 March 2020.

⁶⁰ Joop. "Weeskinderen uit IS-gebied overgedragen aan Nederland", *BNN Vara*, 10 June 2019, <https://joop.bnnvara.nl/nieuws/weeskinderen-uit-is-gebied-overgedragen-aan-nederland>, accessed 12 May 2020.

⁶¹ Overheid. "Kamervragen: VVD en CDA zien geen heil in terughalen IS-kinderen", 26 June 2019, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20182019-3176.html>, accessed 5 May 2020.

It shows that the Dutch government contradicts its own policy. On the one hand it is acknowledged that children need to reach an embassy or consulate before offered help with repatriation. But on the other hand the government sees that children are, in many cases, not able to reach an embassy by themselves. Thus the Dutch government does not offer a proper solution.

3 July 2019, Grapperhaus answered questions that were asked on 20 June. Most information he shared was nothing new. Noticeable was that he avoided answering the question that insinuated that it is no longer unsafe for Dutch officials to actively repatriate children out of the camps, ever since orphans have been repatriated and the Kurds offered the Dutch government an agreement to help bringing Dutch ISIS children into safety. Grapperhaus' answer was that policy still remains the same.⁶²

It seems that the Dutch government keeps needing to defend their non-active repatriation policy by saying two orphans were really just an exception. They have opened a so called 'can of worms' by repatriating a few, but not all children. Also, the fact that children can not be taken away from their parents according to the CRC, and that parents have to repatriate together with the children, is what refrains the Dutch government from taking on a proactive stance. It is a way of circular reasoning consisting the fact that children need help, but help can not be offered unless the children go to an embassy themselves, which in most cases the children can not do.

11 September 2019, Grapperhaus and Blok answered questions asked on 19 June concerning the fate of two very young Dutch children (3 months and 3 years old) stuck in a camp without their parents. The answer is that individual cases can not be discussed in public. These children are probably not eligible for active repatriation, they have to go to a nearby embassy alone. The question was raised how children of that young age are believed to undertake that travel alone, and avoided offering a proper solution by saying that the Ministry of Foreign affairs does not act as legal guardian of these children.⁶³

24 September 2019, Grapperhaus answered questions asked on 13 August. It is true that America has offered to help repatriate Dutch ISIS members out of Syria. On 28 June 2019 the

⁶² Overheid. "Kamervragen over het bericht dat Nederland met kinderlevens speelt", 9 July 2019, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20182019-3320.html>, accessed 4 June 2020.

⁶³ Tweedemonitor. "Antwoord op vragen van de leden Ploumen en Kuiken over de baby en peuter van een Nederlandse vader die zich zonder ouders in een kamp in Noord-Syrië bevinden", 11 Sep. 2019, "<https://www.tweedemonitor.nl/kamervraag/2019D32962> ", accessed 5 June 2020.

USA offered to facilitate the transport of 10 Dutch women and their children, but the Dutch government refused the offer. It would take away the issue of Dutch officials needing to travel to dangerous area, but the danger still exists for the returnees. Also, a new issue is presented: deciding to repatriate is a danger for all European States, the Dutch government does not want to jeopardize this relationship. The US has offered to help all European states with repatriating, until now only Italy has accepted that offer upon the return of one national citizen.

On **8 October 2019**, Grapperhaus and Blok answered questions asked on 21 August about the repatriation of German ISIS' children. The Netherlands did not know about this German initiative, even though the government is in close contact with all other EU-states about the repatriation of ISIS' families. Every country takes that decision individually. The Ministers also admitted that it is not known how the children are doing (mentally and physically), but that there is a plan for each child. Upon return children will be monitored and helped to overcome their traumas and reintegrate by a team of experts.⁶⁴

It seems that even if the greatest obstacles are taken away, the Dutch government presents another (new) argument for not changing its policy into active repatriation.

What happened from 11 November 2019 onwards:

On **11 November 2019**, 23 Dutch mothers combined strengths to demand repatriation of themselves and their 56 children out of the camps and back to the Netherlands.⁶⁵ The decision of the Court ('Rechtbank') got great media attention since the decision turned out to be in favour of repatriating the children.

The Court had ruled that the Dutch state is obliged to make an effort concerning the children, but that the state is not obliged to help the mothers. The judge emphasized that the case of the children is a great emergency, and that children are the victims of the decisions of their parents. The judge claimed that protecting Dutch children in Syria is the concern of the Dutch state, but it must not lead to taking unnecessary security risks in Syria⁶⁶ The majority of the

⁶⁴ Kamervragen. "Antwoord op de vragen over het terughalen van Duitse kinderen uit Syrië door Duitsland", 8 Oct. 2020, <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/kamervragen/detail?id=2019D37961&did=2019D37961> accessed 17 May 2020.

⁶⁵ Lennart, Bloemhof. "Uitspraak over IS-Kinderen Zorgt Voor Vraagtekens En 'Lichtpunten'." *NOS*, 11 Nov. 2019, nos.nl/artikel/2310037-uitspraak-over-is-kinderen-zorgt-voor-vraagtekens-en-lichtpunten.html , accessed 7 January 2020.

⁶⁶ De Rechtspraak. "Uitspraken ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2019:11909", 11 Nov. 2019, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2019:11909> , accessed 5 April 2020.

Cabinet was not satisfied with the outcome of this case and appealed the case to the Court of Justice.⁶⁷

When the case was appealed, the Court of Justice ('Gerechtshof') in The Hague decided on **22 November 2019** that a judge can not force the Dutch state to repatriate children and their mothers out of Syria. The former decision on November 11th 2019 of the Court therefore destroyed.⁶⁸ Conclusion of this outcome is that the Dutch government is not allowed to be legally compelled to make an effort to repatriate the children nor the mothers, since it is a decision too political for law to intertwine with.⁶⁹

Many politicians (especially VVD) were relieved and said to be happy with the outcome of the appeal, especially the Minister of Security and Justice, who has the lead in this case. He said it was the decision of the mothers to join a terrorist organisation, so there will be no active repatriation for no family members.⁷⁰

PM Mark Rutte also expressed his satisfaction with the outcome in the weekly press conference on 22 November 2019. Rutte mentioned that the outcome of the Court on 11 November had already surprised the Cabinet, because a judge can not force the Dutch government to seek cooperation with the United States to facilitate active repatriation. He said: *"It is crazy for a Court to intervene in a state's foreign policy."* Rutte added that international diplomacy is not a suitable topic to be openly discussed, suggesting that it should be discussed behind closed doors on top political level only. He also pointed out that other European countries are not repatriating either, so the Netherlands will not risk putting that relationship at stake.

By replying to the question if Rutte wants ISIS' supporters to return to the Netherlands he replied: *"I would rather not see them return. But if they turn up reporting themselves at one of the Dutch embassies in the region (Turkey or Erbil in Iraq) than we will help them return."*

⁶⁷ NOS. "Kamer ook na uitspraak rechter verdeeld over terughalen IS-kinderen", *NOS Nieuws*, 11 Nov. 2019, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2310000-kamer-ook-na-uitspraak-rechter-verdeeld-over-terughalen-is-kinderen.html> , accessed 5 June 2020.

⁶⁸ De Rechtspraak. "Zaak over het terughalen van Nederlandse kinderen en hun moeders uit opvangkampen in Noord-Syrië versneld behandeld", 10 Jan. 2020, <https://www.rechtspraak.nl/Organisatie-en-contact/Organisatie/Hoge-Raad-der-Nederlanden/Nieuws/Paginas/Zaak-over-het-terughalen-van-Nederlandse-kinderen-en-hun-moeders-uit-opvangkampen-in-Noord-Syrie-versneld-behandeld.aspx> , accessed 17 May 2020.

⁶⁹ De Rechtspraak. "Uitspraken ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2019:3208", 22 Nov 2019, <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2019:3208> , accessed 5 April 2020.

⁷⁰ BNN. "Staat hoeft Nederlandse IS-kinderen toch niet terug te halen", *BNN VARA*, 22 Nov. 2019, <https://www.bnnvara.nl/zembla/artikelen/staat-hoef-nederlandse-is-kinderen-toch-net-terug-te-halen> , accessed 17 May 2020.

*This also happened this week with two mothers with children. So I can not guarantee they will not be coming back on their own.”*⁷¹

The mothers of the children of ISIS fighters have taken their case another step further by appealing in cassation at the Supreme Court (‘Hoge Raad’) in The Hague on **26 June 2020**. This has resulted in the confirmation of the former decision. It means that Dutch ISIS women with children have officially lost their case through legal means. The Dutch policy concerning the repatriation of Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters remains unchanged.

⁷¹ Integrale persconferentie van Mark Rutte, 22 Nov. 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuHtrsJhS5Q&t=1052s22> , accessed 31 May 2020.

2.2 What is the public debate in the Netherlands?

This paragraph explains the rise of anti-Islamist sentiment in the Netherlands, through secondary sources. Sociologists have researched the origination of this phenomenon through the rise of populism, the rise of right-wing political parties in Dutch politics and a rise of Islamophobia expressed in Dutch media.

Rise of populism

Not only in the Netherlands, but in whole of Western-Europe a shift has taken place toward a more right-wing party ruling. Populism (also known as right wing nationalism) is on the rise in Europe.⁷² And some say that is because citizens are concerned about immigration and national identity.⁷³ The fear of the influence that Islam has on Dutch society, and the fact that terrorist attacks in Europe increased, caused polarisation in the Netherlands. Right-wing politicians started picking up on that and focused on the failure of the integration of Muslim newcomers.⁷⁴ Especially Islamic immigrants from Arab descent, coming from the MENA-region became topic of discussion.

It started with the rise in popularity of anti-immigration politicians like Islam criticist Pim Fortuyn. He criticised the Islam for being a backward and retarded religion that threatens the Dutch western, democratic values.⁷⁵ The Muslim population in the Netherlands began to feel like an outsider, which created a great division in Dutch society.⁷⁶ After the first terrorist act in the Netherlands: the assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004⁷⁷, people began to think that the multicultural society in the Netherlands had failed.

Worries that Fortuyn already expressed, about preserving Dutch identity, echo in Geert Wilders PVV's (Party for Freedom) election campaigns today. Wilders contributes to the polarisation of Dutch society.⁷⁸ "*PVV presents itself explicitly as an anti-Islam party*

⁷² Stijn van Kessel. "Explaining the Electoral Performance of Populist Parties: The Netherlands as a Case Study." *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, p.68.

⁷³ BBC Europe, "Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide", *BBC News*, 13 Nov. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006> , accessed 10 June 2020.

⁷⁴ Stijn van Kessel. Ibid. p.69.

⁷⁵ De Volkskrant, "Fortuyn: grens dicht voor islamiet", *de Volkskrant*, 9 Feb. 2002, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/fortuyn-grens-dicht-voor-islamiet~b1867f23/> , accessed 7 February 2020.

⁷⁶ Martijn de Koning. "Een ideologische strijd met de islam – Fortuyns gedachtegoed als scharnierpunt in de racialisering van moslims", *Research Gate*, Apr. 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301700058_Een_ideologische_strijd_met_de_islam_-_Fortuyns_gedachtegoed_als_scharnierpunt_in_de_racialisering_van_moslims , accessed 24 February 2020.

⁷⁷ Leo Lucassen, et al. "The Strange Death of Dutch Tolerance: the Timing and Nature of the Pessimist Turn in the Dutch Migration Debate." *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2015, p.76.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p.73.

directed at ‘de-Islamising’ Dutch society”.⁷⁹ Wilders recalls a sense of Dutch nationalism through saying that Dutch identity, culture and heritage are at stake because of dangerous Muslim intruders.⁸⁰

During the elections in 2017, the fast uprising of another populist party emerged: FVD (Forum for Democracy) with leader Thierry Baudet. Their sudden gain of support was caused by defected PVV voters now supporting FVD.⁸¹ Baudet also implied the vision that immigration has to be restricted, and that a policy on integration has to become stricter. “Immigrants from Africa and the Middle-East are not educated well enough to apply for jobs here, they do not add value to our society.”⁸²

Liberal Party moving to the political right:

During the 2017 elections, the Liberal ruling party imitated some of Wilders stances on immigration, to appeal to PVV voters and simultaneously trying to exclude PVV from future participating in the Cabinet.⁸³ So, in order to continue being the ruling party, the Liberal Party was pushed more and more towards the political right, becoming less receptive to immigrants over the years. VVD came with proposals to ‘get a grip on migration’.⁸⁴

In August 2019 the government implemented a law that banned all clothes covering the face to not be worn in public spaces,⁸⁵ so Wilders partly got the ban on burqa’s he strived for.⁸⁶ Even though PVV has struggled to join and remain in government, it still had considerable influence on immigration policymaking in opposition.⁸⁷

The Liberal party had a difficult time creating a coalition after the 2017 elections, it took seven months to come to an agreement. The parties seemed unable to agree on a migration

⁷⁹ Sipco Vellenga, “Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the Netherlands: concepts, developments, and backdrops”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 23 July 2015, Volume 33, 2018 - Issue 2, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537903.2018.1469257> , accessed 18 December 2019.

⁸⁰ K. Vossen, Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn: Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders compared, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 2010 11(1), pp. 22–38.

⁸¹ Nu.nl. “De vijf conclusies na de grote verkiezingswinst van Baudet”, *NU*, 22 Mar. 2019, <https://www.nu.nl/weekend/5805720/de-vijf-conclusies-na-de-grote-verkiezingswinst-van-baudet.html> , accessed 18 December 2019.

⁸² FvD. “Als de campagnetijd aanbreekt, wordt immigratie van stal gehaald”, *FvD*, 11 Jan. 2020, <https://www.fvd.nl/als-de-campagnetijd-aanbreekt-wordt-immigratie-van-stal-gehaald> , accessed 10 February 2020.

⁸³ Tjitske Akkerman. “The Impact of Populist Radical-Right Parties on Immigration Policy Agendas: A Look at the Netherlands”, *Migration Policy Institute*, Report July 2018, p.11.

⁸⁴ VVD, “Standpunten Immigratie”, <https://www.vvd.nl/pijlers/immigratie/> , accessed 27 March 2020.

⁸⁵ Rijksoverheid, “Gedeeltelijk verbod gezichtsbedekkende kleding”, 1 Aug 2019, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gezichtsbedekkende-kleding-in-de-media-boerkaverbod/gezichtsbedekkende-kleding-gedeeltelijk-verbieden> , accessed on 14 March 2020.

⁸⁶ Tjitske Akkerman. *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.16.

and asylum policy in the first place. Especially left-wing party GreenLeft did not want to compromise to the strict immigration rules of the VVD.

Going back to the debate about repatriation of ISIS children today, political parties in the Coalition are divided in two camps for quite some time already when it comes to the issue of the repatriation of ISIS' families. VVD and CDA (Liberal Christian party)⁸⁸ are against it, while D66 (social-liberal party) and CU (Christian democratic conservative party)⁸⁹ strive for active repatriation.⁹⁰

Islamophobia in the media

Muslims notice that they are being stigmatized in the Dutch media as aggressive, untrustworthy, misogynistic fanatic, they feel discriminated on a daily basis.⁹¹ This underlying fear against the 'other' (Muslim, Arab) might be a factor influencing current Dutch policy towards the Muslim population. Islamophobia is a term that re-emerged after the terrorist attacks in Europe by ISIS supporters.⁹² Islamophobia is the "*aversion to Muslims, based on negative stereotypes and prejudice against Muslims*".⁹³ In Dutch politics, Geert Wilders is known for applying and nourishing Islamophobic discourse.⁹⁴ This form of discrimination is expressed in media and politics by distinguishing immigrants ('allochtoon') from the native Dutch ('autochtoon'), dividing them in separate groups.⁹⁵ In the Netherlands Islamophobia is politically organised and goes hand in hand with populist parties that fear Muslim immigration.⁹⁶

Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments are issues not only felt in the Netherlands, but across Europe the last few years. Populist leaders such as Marie Le Pen (France's Front

⁸⁸ CDA: Call of christian democracy.

⁸⁹ D66: Democrats 66. CU: Christian Union.

⁹⁰ NOS. "Kamer ook na uitspraak rechter verdeeld over terughalen IS-kinderen", Ibid.

⁹¹ Lofti Abdel Hamid. "Moslims horen in het Westen niet thuis, is de boodschap", *de Volkskrant*, 21 May 2016, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/moslims-horen-in-het-westen-niet-thuis-is-de-boodschap~bec82ad9/>, accessed 18 April 2020.

⁹² Martijn de Koning. "Waarom islamofobie wel degelijk racistisch is", *de Volkskrant*, 7 May 2016, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/waarom-islamofobie-wel-dekelijk-racistisch-is~b8c64a50/>, accessed 3 May 2020.

⁹³ Ineke van der Valk, "*Islamofobie en discriminatie*", Pallas Publications, 2012.

⁹⁴ Ayhan Kaya. "Populism and Heritage in the Netherlands", *Populism and Heritage in Europe: Lost in Diversity and Unity*, 1st ed., vol. 1, Routledge, 2020.

⁹⁵ Zihni Özdil. "Typisch Nederlands, dat begrip allochtoon. Racistisch ook", *NRC Nieuws*, 2 Apr. 2016, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/04/02/typisch-nederlands-dat-begrip-allochtoon-racisti-1603368-a1064220>, accessed 5 June 2020.

⁹⁶ Sipco Vellenga. Ibid.

Nationale) for example, used these sentiments to their advantage, they won more than 20% of the vote in presidential elections.⁹⁷

Concluding observations

Looking at the sentiment in Dutch society towards Islam immigrants, it could be concluded that there is no majority in society that would back a decision of active repatriation of Dutch children of ISIS fighters. Based on these secondary sources, we know quite well that the notion of repatriating ISIS children is going to get a lot of opposition, because the Dutch public is afraid of it. A proactive repatriation would not give a lot of credit to the government and it would go against the stance of the Cabinet. Like PM Rutte once said himself: *“If I had to choose, I would rather have them die in Syria or Iraq than to return and carry out attacks here.”*⁹⁸ It is more a lack of political will and courage to not prioritize the lives of the children, the incentive or political urge is missing.⁹⁹ There is almost no public voice that urges the government to do something, very little political pressure is existent on this topic. So, even though there is enough evidence that shows that the government should act on this, there is actually very little pressure and a lot of reasons why they should not take the chance with active repatriation.

⁹⁷ Tjitske Akkerman. Ibid. p.3.

⁹⁸ San, Marion Van. *Kalifaatontvluchters*. Prometheus, 2019, p.238.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p.237.

2.3 What are other countries doing?

This paragraph entails a comparative policy analysis based on secondary sources. The comparison is between the Dutch policy with policies of other states. This analysis will help to answer my research question, by exposing what is happening in other countries one can see what lessons the Dutch government can learn from them.

Countries that actively repatriate:

The following governments have taken on a different approach than the Dutch government and have decided to actively repatriate their national children of suspected ISIS fighters out of the camps in Northern-Syria. I am to find out what their reasons are for taking on this stance.

Kosovo has already repatriated 32 women, 74 children and 4 male fighters in 2019 and are planning to eventually repatriate all national citizens that joined ISIS. A total of some 400 Kosovo citizens joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq.¹⁰⁰ The government has said to have a system in place to reintegrate ISIS members upon their return, some have said it is rather an experimental programme.¹⁰¹ Maybe because Kosovo is such a small country, it has taken this proactive repatriation approach: “[...] in bigger European countries returnees could easily become absorbed into the local population.” Also, the fact that Kosovo has a population of 90 percent Muslims plays a role. Part of the idea behind active repatriation, is to re-educate ISIS families with the right perception of Islam. But main reason given is because Kosovo wants to give ISIS children a second chance, to avoid them from joining an ISIS-alike organisation.¹⁰²

Central-Asian countries such as **Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan** have also actively repatriated 756 citizens in June 2019, the vast majority being children.¹⁰³ These three countries are known for its great state control. Another worrisome element is that their ISIS nationals are suspected to have ties with terrorist organisation Taliban in neighbouring country Afghanistan, thus fear is that their ties with terrorism continue. Uzbekistan’s

¹⁰⁰ Belhaj, Sheily. “Terugkeren of Niet? Hoe Landen Worstelen Met Hun IS-Strijders En Kinderen.” *NOS*, 17 Nov. 2019, nos.nl/artikel/2310803-terugkeren-of-niet-hoe-landen-worstelen-met-hun-is-strijders-en-kinderen.html , accessed 19 May 2020.

¹⁰¹ Sara Manisera. “After ISIS”, *New Internationalist*, 4 March 2020, <https://newint.org/features/2020/03/04/after-isis> , accessed 8 April 2020.

¹⁰² Sara Manisera. “After ISIS: how Kosovo is rehabilitating women and children repatriated from Syria”, *N World*, 25 July 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/after-isis-how-kosovo-is-rehabilitating-women-and-children-repatriated-from-syria-1.890533> , accessed 22 June 2020.

¹⁰³ Dworkin, Anthony. “Policy Brief: Beyond Good and Evil: Why Europe Should Bring ISIS Foreign Fighters Home.” *European Council on Foreign Affairs*, 25 Oct. 2019, www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/beyond_good_and_evil_why_europe_should_bring_isis_foreign_fighters_home , accessed 15 April 2020.

strategies for deradicalizing are known to be very controversial, the state has extreme control over religious expression and practices. Also on Islam, even though Uzbekistan has a great Muslim majority. Therefore worries are that ISIS families will easily radicalise again, because their religion is highly suppressed.¹⁰⁴

Morocco stated in October 2019 to welcome ISIS families back. But there have been no signs of the Moroccan government starting active repatriation yet. A total of 671 women and children of Moroccan descent are estimated to have joined ISIS.¹⁰⁵ Reason behind the implementation of this policy, is that there has been a strong outcry by families of these children in Morocco whom have repeatedly asked their King for help. This has resulted in a royal pardon for some of the nationals that joined ISIS. A while later, one political party has stepped up for Moroccan ISIS members stuck in Syria. This party acknowledged that the Moroccan government is responsible for its own nationals, thus also for these families.¹⁰⁶ In Morocco there is a political push that urges the government into the direction of active repatriation.

Malaysia has stated that nationals are allowed to return home. Some will be detained upon arrival, others will have to follow a rehabilitation programme for a month and afterwards they will be monitored. Since October 2019, Malaysian authorities have repatriated some 40 Malaysians and continues to bring back the remaining nationals too. But it is questioned if Malaysia has the expertise that is needed to properly deradicalize ISIS families, they have not really had to handle a similar case before.¹⁰⁷

Tunisia has only brought back orphaned children. In 2017,2018 and January 2020 small groups of children of suspected ISIS fighters have been repatriated out of Libya. Tunisia has ties with the Libyan Red Crescent that is supervising these camps in Libya. Other Tunisian children in Libya are detained with their mothers, the mothers do not want their children to be

¹⁰⁴ Ruchi Kumar, “Uzbekistan’s ISIS problem: persecution at home may be radicalising young Muslims”, *N World*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/uzbekistan-s-isis-problem-persecution-at-home-may-be-radicalising-young-muslims-1.995701> , accessed 12 May 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Belhaj, Sheily. “Terugkeren of Niet? Hoe Landen Worstelen Met Hun IS-Strijders En Kinderen.” *NOS*, 17 Nov. 2019, nos.nl/artikel/2310803-terugkeren-of-niet-hoe-landen-worstelen-met-hun-is-strijders-en-kinderen.html.

¹⁰⁶ Yabiladi. “Moroccan families want the King to intervene for the repatriation of their loved ones in ISIS”, 4 Feb. 2020, <https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/88782/moroccan-families-want-king-intervene.html> , accessed 20 May 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Amy Chew. “Malaysia offers citizens conditional return as ISIL crumbles”, *Al Jazeera*, 12 Mar. 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/malaysia-offers-citizens-conditional-return-isil-crumbles-190312012544910.html> , accessed 28 May 2020.

taken away from them. Tunisian children in Iraq and Syria have not been repatriated. But, government officials have said that they might be willing to take all of the children back.¹⁰⁸

Russia is an exceptional case, it is the most flexible country considering the children. The Russian government decided to only repatriate children and has been doing so for two years already. Out of **Chechnya** (an Islamic state within Russia) around 4000 Russian citizens departed to join ISIS. Chechnya holds the record for having the highest amount of national citizens that travelled to Syria. Some say that Russia's exceptional policy is due to the fact that president Putin needs the support of the Islamic inhabitants in order to continue his rule.¹⁰⁹

Indonesia has repatriated a handful of families with children out of Syria. But the policy stays that -due to terrorist attacks of ISIS supporters in the past- the adult terrorist fighters are not welcome back. Children are considered a different story, under 10 years old they are welcome, depending on their case. Deradicalization schools for children exist in Indonesia, but the problem is that these are expensive and require a long-term mentoring program, therefore political commitment is lacking.¹¹⁰ It looks like the Indonesian government pretends to have suitable deradicalization programmes in place, but actually it has never been proven to work.

The United States of America is the only Western country that has brought some nationals back, aiming to set the example for their anti-ISIS coalition partners to follow. USA is reported to have repatriated at least eighteen Americans – six men, three women and nine children. Reasons for USA's repatriation are unique. First of all, the amount of Americans that joined ISIS in Syria is significantly lower than that of European countries. Therefore it is easier for the US to manage the risks that lie in repatriation nationals. Secondly, their criminal laws are more strict and can result in higher prison sentences than in other countries. But, most important argument for repatriating national citizens is that the American army has put great effort into bringing stability in the Syrian region, by leading the anti-ISIS coalition. So in order to continue to secure the region, foreign detainees have to be repatriated out of Syria

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch. "Tunisia: Six Orphans Brought Home from Libya", 6 Feb. 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/06/tunisia-six-orphans-brought-home-libya>, accessed 22 May 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Daan Kool, Sacha Kester et al. "Zo Denken Ze in Andere Landen over Het Terughalen Van IS-Kinderen." *De Volkskrant*, 11 June 2019, www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/zo-denken-ze-in-andere-landen-over-het-terughalen-van-is-kinderen~becce0d6/.

¹¹⁰ Greg Jennett, "Indonesia Locks out Legion of Former ISIS Fighters." *ABC News*, 11 Feb. 2020, www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-12/indonesia-rejects-return-of-is-fighters/11956424, accessed 8 April 2020.

to put a halt to their further radicalisation with terrorist organisations.¹¹¹ In February 2019 the USA called upon EU nation states to repatriate their ISIS' family members.¹¹²

European countries' ambiguous policies:

Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands only regard a very small number of children of ISIS fighters as potential security threats to their national societies. From 6 years old on the children might have been indoctrinated with ISIS ideology and from 9 years old on the children can have participated in ISIS military camps. Teenagers are the most worrisome group. But children are looked at on a case by case basis.¹¹³ According to Thomas Renard, around 1000 European children joined ISIS or other terrorist groups.¹¹⁴ When the first terrorist attacks hit Europe (2014-2015) many European countries hardened their policies towards returning ISIS' families.

In **Belgium**, the discussion about the return of ISIS families is more open than in the Netherlands, perhaps that is because Belgium has "*the highest ratio of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) per capita in Europe*", and subsequently also of returnees.¹¹⁵ Therefore, the issue can not be overlooked.¹¹⁶

Belgium's approach to the children is related to that of the Netherlands: they are treated with a welfare and childcare approach.¹¹⁷ The difference with the Dutch policy is that orphaned Belgian children are very unlikely to be acknowledged of their Belgian nationality. Strict Belgian law does not grant them immediate Belgian nationality, not even after proof with a DNA-test. Another difference is that children under 10 who have proof of their Belgian nationality are automatically allowed to return, while children between the ages of 10-18 are to be decided case by case in Belgium. So, while Belgium has made a clear distinction between ages, the Netherlands does not apply an age-related policy yet. In Belgium, as well as in the Netherlands, remaining family members (parents and grandparents) have filed cases

¹¹¹ Crisis Group. "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS", <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/208-women-and-children-first-repatriating-westerners-affiliated-isis> , accessed 12 June 2020.

¹¹² Chris van Mersbergen. "Amerika: alle landen moeten Syriëstrijders terughalen en zelf berechten", *AD*, 4 Feb. 2019, <https://www.ad.nl/buitenland/amerika-alle-landen-moeten-syriestrijders-terughalen-en-zelf-berechten~a76a411ac/> , accessed 5 April 2020.

¹¹³ Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard. "Returnees: who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands", *Egmont Paper 101*, 2 Feb. 2018, p.74.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.71.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.19.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.20.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 36-37.

against their government to demand active repatriation for the children. All without success.

But, recently the Belgian government has made a promise to repatriate the youngest Belgian ISIS children out of Syria, although the priority lies on repatriating orphans. End of June 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Reynders has disclosed that Belgian officials have arranged for ISIS children up until twelve years old to be repatriated in the coming weeks and the children will be cared for by Belgian family members.¹¹⁸ Belgium is starting to take on a more proactive policy towards the children of ISIS.

*“Germany is one of the European countries with the highest numbers of persons who travelled to Syria or Iraq out of Islamist motivation.”*¹¹⁹ But, still deafening silence prevails in Germany on this topic, resulting in less public available data. The German government is very protective in revealing information that might jeopardize security measures. Their intelligence services warned for returnees, the issue was mostly discussed as a security issue by national authorities.¹²⁰

What is known about the German policy concerning ISIS’ children, is that the different states (Länder) are allowed to apply their own strategies for deradicalization and the fact that jail times in Germany are not as high in neighbouring countries is a problem. “[...] Thus measures need to be taken on a high level first, for it ever to come to active repatriation.¹²¹ Until a coherent strategy is in place in Germany, child services just try to develop an individual approach for each child.¹²²

It is clear that Germany is keeping the issue of returning ISIS families behind closed doors. It has no official policy yet and the government has never allowed for the government officials to publicly comment on the topic. Noticeable is that the German media is also not on top of it. While for example Belgian and Dutch officials have sporadically spoken out about this topic in the Media.¹²³

France has been reticent when it comes to bringing back ISIS’ children, since they strongly believe children participated in ISIS’ battles. France had to cope with the most terrorist attacks, which is why the French government does not apply an active repatriation policy at

¹¹⁸ Le Soir. “Des enfants de djihadistes pourraient être rapatriés dans les prochains jours, selon Didier Reynders”, 12 June 2019, <https://www.lesoir.be/230227/article/2019-06-12/des-enfants-de-djihadistes-pourraient-etre-rapatries-dans-les-prochains-jours> , accessed 18 June 2020.

¹¹⁹ Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard. “Returnees”, Ibid. pp.41-54.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. p.51.

¹²² Ibid. p.54.

¹²³ Ibid. p.74.

this moment.¹²⁴ But, exceptions exist and it seems as if the French policy is shifting towards a more proactive stance in repatriating ISIS children. Every so often French officials cooperate with local NGO's to actively repatriate French children out of the camps in Syria. Reason for this shift is the fact that these children grow up unaccompanied in dangerous camps.

Mainly groups of orphans have been repatriated, Macron defended himself by stating that these children were isolated or orphans, they are the exception.¹²⁵ End of June 2020 media reported that recently not only orphans, but also ten French children whose parents are imprisoned have been brought back to France. The mothers had to give permission for their children to be repatriated by French officials. This is a very new development in European repatriation, an option that is also investigated by other European states. Just no country seems to want to try this option because it is controversial. Apparently France is volunteering as 'the guinea pig'.¹²⁶

It is a known fact that France already has some detailed protocols in place, just like the Netherlands, in case the children do come back.¹²⁷ the role of each actor at every stage is clear. But the fear of the mothers returning with the children prevails in maintaining a passive repatriation of the France government.¹²⁸

The **United Kingdom** acts like Germany in keeping the entire issue behind its political closed doors. Their Ministry of foreign affairs has admitted that a very small amount of children have been taken to the UK, but nothing is known about the children. The only statement made thus far is that the UK is 'investigating if the children can be brought back', but there is no active repatriation.¹²⁹ This policy statement resembles the Dutch government's stance.

Conclusions comparative analysis

It seems that there is a correlation between countries that have taken the difficult decision to actively repatriate ISIS children and countries with a high Muslim population. All I know is that after studying the Dutch policy, I noticed that the public stance holds anti-Islam

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Daan Kool, Sacha Kester et al. "Zo Denken Ze in Andere Landen over Het Terughalen Van IS-Kinderen." *De Volkskrant*, 11 June 2019, www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/zo-denken-ze-in-andere-landen-over-het-terughalen-van-is-kinderen~becce0d6/, accessed 17 April 2020.

¹²⁶ Daan Kool. "Frankrijk haalt tien 'kwetsbare' kinderen van Syriëgangers terug", *De Volkskrant*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/frankrijk-haalt-tien-kwetsbare-kinderen-van-syriegangers-terug~bda54fdf/>, accessed 22 June 2020.

¹²⁷ Coolsaet, Rik and Renard, Thomas. "Children in the Levant: Insights from Belgium on the dilemmas of repatriation and the challenges of reintegration", *Security Policy Briefs*, 11 July 2018, p.8.

¹²⁸ Daan Kool, Sacha Kester et al. Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

sentiments, which unfolds in a lack of political support for active repatriation of ISIS children. I presume that Islamophobia is not existent to such an extent in countries with a bigger Muslim population, that it refrains their government from active repatriation of national and fellow Muslim (ISIS supporting) citizens.

Another element for active repatriation in European countries, but not so much of an argument for countries with higher Muslim populations, is the faith that governments have in their own deradicalization system. European governments are more likely to think it is too risky to repatriate children if they do not have the proper reception programmes in place to rehabilitate or deradicalize the children to such an extent that they will not be a threat to their society anymore. Countries with a Muslim majority rather prioritize the argument of the severe circumstances in the camps; the humanitarian crisis in Northern-Syria, over their fears of a lack of proper deradicalization programmes. Or maybe, but these are just speculations, these countries do not acknowledge that their deradicalization programme is not functioning properly. But in order to prove that, in depth research in the policies of the Muslim-majority countries is needed.

So, countries with a Muslim majority engage the problem from a humanitarian point of view by focussing on the suffering of human beings and their need for immediate help. European countries rather focus on the security element; the fact that the children of ISIS fighters might be dangerous. That might be because the danger that lies in returnees wanting to take revenge is higher for European countries, since ISIS has indoctrinated its supporters with anti-Western sentiments that have been outed in terrorist attacks (in capital cities) all over Europe. As a reaction, mostly Western countries (but also Russia) have joined the anti-ISIS coalition, which has given ISIS more reason to hate European countries that bombed ISIS supporters.

The USA is just an exceptional case, they want to set the right example to other Western states (mostly aimed at European states) by repatriating. The UN continuously asked the international community to repatriate their national citizens out of Syria. As well as the European Parliament that called upon nation states to start repatriation the children.

Unfortunately this has not resulted into jointly action being taken yet. ¹³⁰

¹³⁰ ANP. “EU-Parlement roept lidstaten op IS-kinderen terug te halen”, *Het Parool*, 26 Nov. 2019, <https://www.parool.nl/wereld/eu-parlement-roept-lidstaten-op-is-kinderen-terug-te-halen~b0812bab/> , accessed 10 March 2020.

In comparing European countries in their policy on ISIS' children, two crucial points seem to be present. First of all, exceptions that are made are mostly made for orphaned children only. Children without parents are easier to repatriate because it means that the fear of return of the (even more dangerous) parents is excluded. And second of all, all of the mentioned European states prefer a tailormade approach, rather than taking on a clear policy that could be applied on national all children returning.

Striking is that in the Netherlands and France the debate is highly politicised, but much less in Belgium and it is not even a topic of public discussion in Germany or the UK.¹³¹ Main explanation for differences in the approach is that each European state deals with a different amount of national returnees.¹³²

Most European countries maintain an ambiguous position: they see that children in the camps suffer dire conditions, but do not repatriate actively because of the security threat. Some European states slowly began to see that their policy is untenable. France has started taking on a proactive stance, Belgium has started to repatriate all Belgian ISIS children until 10-12 years old.

The problem with all of the European policies is that a comprehensive policy is missing. Vertical cooperation between government institutions in all European countries is a crucial tool to exchange as much information as possible and to monitor the development of returning children together. Cooperation between nation states could contribute to make active repatriation happen sooner and it would lead for no foreign child to be excluded from repatriation.¹³³

¹³¹ Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard. "Returnees", Ibid. p.58.

¹³² Ibid. p.73.

¹³³ Ibid. p.71.

Section 3: Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

The research question at the start of this thesis was: *Why does Dutch foreign policy on Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters not entail active repatriation?* The answer to this question can be found in one main argument substantiated by four sub arguments.

The main argument is the decision of the cassation appeal on 26th of June 2020. Although international treaties and laws clearly state that repatriation of the children must be active, since they are Dutch underaged citizens and therefore have to be protected by the Dutch government, the Supreme Court has judged in the cassation appeal that the implementation of active repatriation is a strictly political decision. Jurisprudence has no say in the assessment if local circumstances in Northern Syria are safe enough to start active repatriation. This authoritative decision provides the Dutch government a license to continue its current policy of non-intervention. The Dutch mothers and children in the camps have depleted all legal options in their struggle to force the Dutch government to bring them back home.

Now that the judicial consequences have been set aside, the moral and political debate remains. We have to wait and see if this cassation appeal means that the discussion on active repatriation has ended now. One might expect that the families of suspected ISIS members will not give up. Their living conditions and prospects are so low, that they will keep striving for a human perspective, at least for their children.

The Dutch government persists in its non-repatriation policy with the following arguments:

Firstly, it is hard to determine how dangerous the children are. Uncertainty about their mental and physical stability prevails. Indoctrination with ISIS' ideologies, military trainings, the traumas due to their time live in a war zone and totalitarian state might effected the behaviour and development of the children. AIVD and NCTV warn the Dutch government about possible (terrorist) threats that children of suspected ISIS fighters can pose to Western democratic societies in the future. Therefore, the Dutch government regards this as a national security argument: for the sake of protecting Dutch society, these children will not be picked up from the camps.

Secondly, it is unsafe for Dutch government officials to travel to Northern-Syria due to ongoing political tensions between the Kurds, smaller sectarian groups, the Assad regime and the Turkish army. The war in Syria is not over, the situation continues to be unstable. The Dutch embassy in Syria continues to be closed, therefore it is too big of a risk to jeopardize the lives of Dutch officials to rescue these children. ISIS' families have chosen themselves to travel to a war zone to join a terrorist organisation, therefore it is their own responsibility to travel to the nearest Dutch embassy or consulate.

The **third** argument is closely linked to the second argument. Cooperation with the Kurds is complicated, it might be interpreted as if the Dutch government recognizes the Kurds as a diplomatic partner. International political tensions have risen since the Kurds struggle for an independent state, the UN does not recognize the Kurdish officials as a governmental entity. Therefore, the Dutch government is not willing to risk their international relations with partners in the Middle-East over an active repatriation of children of ISIS. This is the Dutch government's foreign policy argument.

Fourth and last argument is that the political support for an active repatriation is lacking. Within the Dutch Parliament, but also in the public opinion within the Netherlands. During the past three decades Dutch politics has shifted into the direction of the right on the political spectrum. The rise of populist parties encouraged nationalism by holding on to Dutch traditions and demanding a hold on the influx of refugees. Populism has fuelled polarisation in Dutch society. In trying to confront this threat, the ruling Liberal Party (VVD) also moved to the right on issues like immigration and integration of newcomers, to avoid its voters from defecting to more extreme right parties. In the current polarised political climate, the political centre parties fear that Dutch voters will not be very receptive to embrace active repatriation policy of ISIS' children.

The strength is, that these are all military and diplomatic sound protective arguments based on the current dangerous situation in Syria. The weak spot in the governments stance is that the Netherlands has to fulfil its legal commitments to the ISIS children as Dutch civilians.

Discussion

With these four formal arguments listed above, the Dutch government bolsters its non-interventionist stance. In this discussion section I will criticize the non-active repatriation policy on Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters by highlighting the various opponent's counterarguments on this policy and arguing why active repatriation might be a more effective policy.

It makes sense that it is assumed that these children are dangerous, because they have been part of one of the most dangerous terrorist organisations the world has encountered. However, as AIVD & NCTV reports mention, every child's experience has been different from their timing living under ISIS' regime. Not all children were indoctrinated through Salafist education, only part of the boys did undergo military trainings, and most children were too young to be heavily traumatised by war or ISIS that they could pose a threat upon return. We should avoid generalisation. The Dutch government does not face a group of 200 ISIS' children, but 200 individual persons.

The International Children's Rights argument stated that children at fist instance should be regarded as innocent and victims of the situation. They can not be punished for decisions their parents have taken, they deserve a future independent from their past with ISIS. In the Netherlands proper care, educational facilities and expertise exists to help children get their lives back on track again. The fact that the Dutch government has instructed the Child Protection Council to develop a personalised plan for each child (that investigates the family situation back home), shows that the Dutch government and Dutch child care system is willing and prepared to help Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters.

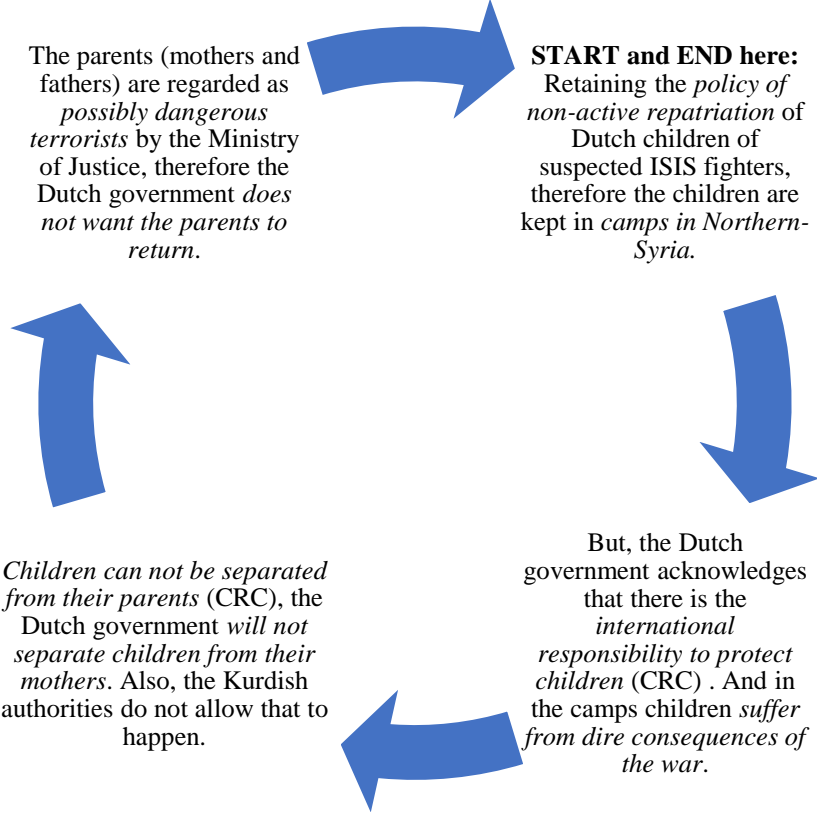
Another argument mentioned by experts, is that monitoring their developments and movements *here*, to help them overcome their traumas and indoctrinations is far more effective than letting them grow up of a war-torn area with no help *there*, stranded in camps that are a breeding ground for radicalisation.

The current policy on the children of suspected ISIS fighters is not coherent but rather contradictory, unclear and inconsistent. It causes confusion.

Two orphaned children have been repatriated, does that mean that Dutch policy can be adjusted in the future and that more children will be brought back home? Or will this practice stay limited to just these two children? The Dutch government found a loophole in its own

policy by repatriating some orphaned children and they stress that this was an exception to the rule only. This way, the Dutch government keeps the current formal policy in tact. Only time will tell us what will happen in the near future. One of the scenario's – although this is not very likely – is that circumstances in Syria change into the direction of enduring peace. If so, the argument of the Supreme Court that the situation is too unsafe would no longer apply, and a revision of that decision can be expected. That revision could maintain the obligation of the Dutch government to repatriate Dutch children of suspected ISIS fighters after all.

The following elements characterize the current Dutch policy: children are the victims and therefore states are responsible for offering them protection, but children are not allowed to be separated from their parents, and the Dutch government does not want the parents to return since they are considered dangerous to Western society; thus the Dutch government will not actively repatriate. The current policy of non-active repatriation thus can be explained as circular reasoning, as explained in the following graphic image I created:



The possibility rate and pitfalls of the Dutch government in changing its formal point of view on children of suspected ISIS fighters to an active repatriation policy can be summarised in the following table I created:

Options:	Amount of children	Possibility rate of success
1)	Repatriation of <i>0 children</i>	<p><u>Very small</u>, since a few children already have been brought back to the Netherlands.</p> <p>Then what is the consequence, letting them grow-up in post-conflict area where radicalisation easily happens?</p>
2)	Repatriation of all (circa) <i>210 children</i>	<p><u>Small possibility</u>. Best option when looking at international agreements (CRC), but almost impossible to execute if each child's case has to be judged individually by Dutch authorities.</p> <p>Issue: huge uncertainty on how Dutch public opinion will react if this happens.</p>
3)	Repatriation of <i>some children, but not all.</i> eg: 50 repatriated; 150 not.	<p><u>Likely possibility</u>, because the Dutch policy currently entails a case-by-case analysis of each child to distinct children from being a possibly dangerous threat to the Western society and children that seem to have not been severely indoctrinated yet.</p> <p>Counterargument: <i>where should the Dutch government draw the line?</i> This option is highly subjective and requires arbitrary decisions. It ends up rescuing part of the group of Dutch ISIS children, but not all of them. What will be the decisive factors for repatriation? The specific camp where the children reside in? This suggests random selection and pure guesswork. It is most unlikely that the Dutch government is willing to legitimize what justifiable selection criteria would look like.</p>
4)	Repatriation of exclusively <i>orphaned</i> children .	<p><u>Likely possibility</u>. Currently this option is already executed, according to the obligations laid down in the CRC, orphans require obligatory government aid once parents have deceased.</p> <p>But, if the Dutch government sticks to this policy, it would mean they are literally waiting for parents to die in the camps, in order for them to bring Dutch children into safety. This is not a tenable policy perceived from a human rights perspective. This might raise the expectance that children whose parents are alive, should receive government aid as well.</p>

This model illustrates that the government has opened a ‘can of worms’ by repatriating orphaned children. Legitimising the repatriation of one selection of children has opened up an avalanche of ethical arguments to why eventually all children should be repatriated. If a similar research would be done in half a year or maybe even in a few years time, it is more likely that academics and experts have researched this topic further than it has been done today.

This research has some limitations that need to be specified. Due to a limited amount of time and a limit to the amount of words I haven't been able to conduct more in depth research, through for example interviews with experts or members of the parliament, or by conducting a survey amongst part of the Dutch population to measure their receptivity to an active repatriation stance of the Dutch government. The question would then have also been how many politicians would have wanted to openly discuss it with me, since it is a very sensitive topic.

Due to the fact that this topic is recent and political developments are still ongoing, it turned out harder than expected to conduct academic sources in articles and books. I thus rely heavily on media outlets.

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic and the consequential closing of the University buildings like the essential infrastructure of the University Library, I have not been able to loan books since March 2020. Therefore I did not have access to all the books I wanted to use, and in the online extensive database these books were not always available.

Future research should compare the existence of Islamophobia; anti-immigrant sentiments in Dutch society, with the current passive policy of the Dutch government to repatriate ISIS' children, to prove there is a connection. Another research suggestion could be to dive deeper into media coverage of this topic, research how often the topic is mentioned in newspapers or on tv shows to further investigate if there is enough public pressure on the government to change its policy.

One might consider to also conduct a quantitative sociology study. This will add additional value to the methodology (FPA) applied in this paper. It could clarify the ongoing sentiments in Dutch by using interviews or polls for example.

Also, other research should cover the topic of the few repatriated children, maybe even compare the different approaches of various governments again. Are the children integrated or do they continue to be dangerous to society? This can be done by elaborating on child psychologist Gerrit Loots reports for example. Depending on the outcome, this might generate

more evidence for the Dutch government to start active repatriation immediately, or to stick even stronger to non-repatriation.

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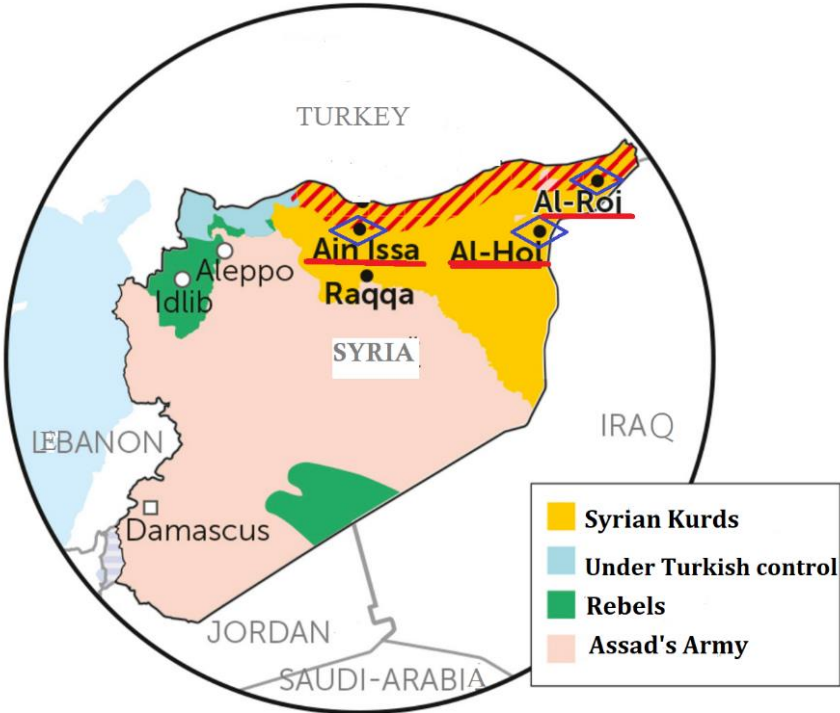
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Appendix: map and photos of the camps



Geographical map pointing out the three camps in North-East Syria controlled by the Kurds



Overview of the biggest camp Al Hol © UNICEF/Al Hol Camp in Syria/2019/Hawa



Children in camp Ain Issa are preparing a meal © AFP



Children filling up bottles with drinking water in Al-Hol camp © AFP