In Danger or Dangerous?

A discourse analysis of representations of Swedish women and children affiliated with ISIS after the breakdown of the ‘caliphate’
Abstract

After the fall of ISIS ‘caliphate’, Sweden and other European countries are struggling with how to handle the group of people who left Europe to join the terrorist organisation and now seek to return. In traditional narratives of gender and war, women and children are commonly perceived as innocent victims in need of protection. This narrative now seems to be challenged by European countries hesitation to repatriate, not only men, but also women and children affiliated with ISIS. Drawing on securitization, feminist and postcolonial theory, this thesis examines political discourses surrounding women and children in Sweden after the fall of the ‘caliphate’ and considers how this seemingly discursive transformation allows for exceptional measures. The analysis finds that these women are foremost ascribed meaning in relation to the men of ISIS and appear to be portrayed as guilty perpetrators rather than victims. While the lives of the children are construed as more valuable, they are yet associated with different risks and problems. In these meaning-making processes, it is possible to identify hierarchies in relation to gender and race in which women and children are perceived as ‘the other’ and, to some extent, reabsorbed into the threatening mass of ISIS terrorists that Sweden needs protection from.

Key Words: ISIS, terrorism, securitization, gender, racism, discourse analysis
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1. Introduction

Women and children are commonly perceived as a group that has to be protected. Often, representations of vulnerability centre on ‘women and children’ and is reinforced by the suggestion that their deaths are the most upsetting (Gray & Frank 2019:279f). One recent example was the international outrage caused when pictures of the drowned three-year old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi spread across the world in the midst of the refugee crisis. However, when Swedish media in Spring 2019 reported that the seven children of the notorious Islamic State group (ISIS) fighter Michael Skråmo and his wife Amanda Gonzales were found orphaned, ill and malnourished in the Al-Hol refugee camp in Syria, the media hype surrounding the case was characterised by disagreement regarding whether the children should be brought back to Sweden or not (Klinghoffer & Thomsen 2019). Eventually, the children were permitted to return to Sweden and were initially brought under the care of social services. Yet, more than 50 Swedish children are still situated in Al-Hol, most of them together with their mothers, and the question regarding how to solve the situation for the children of ISIS affiliates remain highly debated (TT 2019).

ISIS came to international prominence in 2014 when it seized large areas in Iraq and Syria. The terrorist group imposed its brutal rule on nearly eight million people and carried out widespread and systematic abuses in areas under its control (BBC 2019a). Between 2012 and 2016, approximately 5000 European citizens joined ISIS (RAN 2017). Among them, approximately 300 were Swedes who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the group. 24 percent of these travellers were women (Säpo 2018:63, Ranstorp et al. 2018:109). Many children were also brought to Syria and Iraq by their parents or were born in the ‘caliphate’. In March 2019, ISIS ‘caliphate’ was declared defeated by an US-backed alliance of Syrian fighters after ISIS had lost its previously occupied territories in Iraq and Syria (BBC 2019). Consequently, questions regarding what to do with the remaining foreign fighters and their families have risen.

It is well established in literature that terrorism from violent Islamist extremism has been increasingly securitized since the 9/11 terrorist attacks which has legitimised a variety of counter terrorism measures (Van Munster 2004, Aradau 2008, Baker Beall 2019). Securitization occurs when an issue is constructed as a threat to the survival of a reference object leading to the issue being framed as a special kind of politics or above politics which

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1 Also known as IS, ISIL or Daesh
then legitimises exceptional measures (Buzan et al. 1998). Research so far shows that terrorism and other threat images are often constructed as implicitly or explicitly male and racialised which reflects long standing assumptions about gender and gender roles (Gray and Frank 2019, Sjoberg 2010 & 2018). For instance, the American intervention in Afghanistan expressed a distinction between the civilized USA and the barbarian terrorists in Afghanistan who attacked women and children. This discourse was thus set by gendered images where women were infantilised and in need of saving from the bad Afghan men (Shepherd 2006:20). Meanwhile, the construction of masculinities is linked to male power over women and is manifested in a discourse which construes women as victims and (some) men as perpetrators (Moser & Mcilwaine 2006). This discourse is thus based on familiar assumptions on gender that are products of power structures and social practices, existing in hierarchical relations that are intertwined with class, race and sexuality (Coleman 2007:204).

Yet, at least at a first glance, this classic narrative appears to be challenged by the West’s approach to women and children associated with ISIS so far. When the military campaign against ISIS reached its final phase, many civilians and ISIS members were transferred by the Syrian Democratic Forces to the Al-Hol refugee camp in which 730 000 individuals were living in March 2019 (OHCHR 2019:4, OCHA 2019:1). A report from UN Human Rights in September 2019 found that the living conditions in the camp remained ‘deplorable’ and that, at least, 390 preventable deaths had been recorded. Moreover, approximately 11 000 family members of ISIS fighters had been separated from the general population of the camp and testified of being denied food and prevented from accessing medical care, including for their infant children (OHCHR 2019:15). Since European countries have taken a variety of measures to hinder their travelling ISIS affiliates from returning, this current approach seems to not clearly fit into the traditional narrative of ‘womenandchildren’ which indicates that something is changing within the dominant narrative. Due to the recency of this issue, research on the topic is still under-developed which open up for interesting opportunities to investigate the unwillingness to repatriate European women and children affiliated with ISIS. Consequently, this thesis aims to explore the gendered and racialised images of threat and vulnerability through which women and children associated with ISIS appear to become securitized and seen as risks rather than at risk, focusing on Sweden. Since these are Swedish citizens, it is important to consider whether the actions taken by politicians correspond with the rule of law and human rights. This can be connected to Judith Butler’s (2004) concept of *Grievable life* which explores how societies create meaning around lives, and which lives that
in a given context are perceived as having value. To apply this perspective on former affiliates of ISIS, it is relevant to ask whether this group is simply cast as an existential threat and construed as ungrievable, which would constitute a fundamental break against traditional narratives of ‘women and children’ in need of protection.

Sweden can be seen as a particularly interesting case to explore given its reputation as an important actor in promoting human rights and as the first country in the world to launch a ‘feminist foreign policy’ in 2014 (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018:6). Furthermore, during the refugee crisis, Sweden had the largest inflow of asylum seekers per capita in Europe and has in some contexts been described as a humanitarian superpower (Witte & Faiola 2015). Despite this focus, the Swedish Government has not yet decided how to handle the situation concerning the families of the Swedish foreign fighters. The debate regarding this issue has been heated with some political parties arguing that at least the children must be brought home, while others maintain that the responsibility lies with the parents, and that all foreign fighters should be stripped of their Swedish citizenship (see Swedish Parliamentary Debate March 12, 2019).

1.1 Aim and research question

The aim of this study is to, against the backdrop of the traditional narrative of ‘women and children’ in need of protection, examine political discourses on women and children associated with ISIS and how this (potential) discursive transformation may allow for exceptional political actions. Drawing on securitization, feminist and postcolonial theory, speech acts performed by politicians from the two biggest parties in Sweden will be analysed through a discourse analysis. As I will further elaborate below, discourses are relevant to analyse since they constrain and enable actors through setting the boundaries for what is possible in social contexts and impacts what can be expressed and by whom (Wagnsson et al. 2010:8). Therefore, the thesis seeks to advance the understanding of how ISIS returnees are construed in the political discourse and consider the consequences of such constructions. The question to be answered is thus:

How are women and children affiliated with ISIS construed in the discourses of Swedish decisionmakers and how do these representations relate to dominant gender discourses (i.e. traditional narrative of ‘women and children’ as grievable lives in need of, and deserving protection)?
Furthermore, the following operational sub-questions will guide the research process:

- What, if any, traces of securitization of women and children appear to be at play and how are these gendered and racialised?
- How does these representations relate (resonate and/or dissonate) to previous securitization of terrorism and traditional narratives of ‘women and children’ as grievable lives and in need of protection?
- What might the potential consequences of securitization be on human rights for this group?

As will be further explained in the theory section, for securitization to be successful, the securitizing actor needs to have the capacity to ‘speak security’, which implies that the actor must be able to present a specific problem as an existential threat against the referent object (Buzan et al. 1998). In the Swedish context, politicians can be said to have this capacity since they are important actors in informing citizens about current issues and present solutions. I have chosen to include material from the two biggest parties in Sweden, according to the previous election results from September 2018; the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) and the Moderate Party (Moderaterna) (Valmyndigheten 2018). This provides a way to study this question both from a party that currently holds the power and one that is in opposition, and the chosen parties also represent two different ideologies. I considered to include the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) which was the third largest party in the election 2018. Since then, the party has increased its support and are in some polls, the second or the biggest party (val.digital 2019). However, given the Sweden Democrat’s profile as an anti-immigrant and anti-muslim party (Finch et al. 2019:6) the Sweden Democrats, was considered less interesting to study as a securitization of ISIS women and children would be less surprising.

2 Another argument for why the Sweden Democrats is excluded is that they have had less focus on traditional medias and instead been very active and successful on social medias such as Facebook (Schori & Adolfsson 2018). Thus, since the Sweden Democrats are less active in expressing their views in newspapers, which is the source examined in the thesis, this difference could potentially lead to bias.
1.2 Prior Research and Original Contribution of the Thesis

In this section, I will give a brief overview of the research fields that my study both relates and aims to contribute to, namely the vast studies on securitization, in particular threat constructions of terrorism and feminist research on narratives of ‘womenandchildren’ in need of protection. Central aspects of this research will be developed later in the theoretical part. Here, the aim is merely to give an overview of the research fields in terms of questions posed and main focus and thereby also highlight the original contribution of this thesis.

There is a rich body of research on terrorism as a threat and how these threat constructions have had effects on Muslim minorities in Western countries. Within security studies, this research has often focused on the ‘war on terror’ and how it has legitimised exceptional measures such as anti-terror legislation and immigration laws that have affected Muslim minorities the most (Powell 2011, Merskin 2004, Amoore 2007, Mavelli 2013, Cesari 2009). In political and scholarly debates, the ‘securitization of Islam’ has acquired increased relevance, for instance regarding the perceptions in Western societies that Islam represents a threat to the liberal-secular order (Mavelli 2013:159, Choudhury 2017). Moreover, research has examined the link between the perceived threat from Islamist terrorism and refugees and found that migration has become increasingly securitized (Huysmans 2006, Gray & Frank 2019, Fierke 2015). There are also studies about the securitization of migration in Sweden that has looked at the change in the political discourse during the refugee crisis in 2015 (Fierke 2015, Ericson 2018). For instance, during the refugee crisis, Swedish values were perceived to be at stake, leading to groups that had previously been perceived as vulnerable and in need of help, instead became construed as a threat to the Swedish identity (Ericson 2018:100).

While the threat from Islamist terrorism has been on the agenda for many years, research about ISIS has burgeoned in the last years, especially after the organisation declared its ‘caliphate’ in 2014. Current research has examined how new and controversial measures that sometimes are incompatible with human rights, have been adopted among EU member states to hinder ISIS affiliates from returning (Baker-Beall 2019, Choudhury 2017). Within feminist research related to war and conflicts, the gendered underpinnings of the threat from Islamist terrorism have been analysed (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, Sjoberg 2018, Gray and Frank 2019). For instance, results have shown that men affiliated with ISIS are perceived as barbaric...
fanatics while women are seen as innocent victims who have been lured into the ‘caliphate’ by the male members of ISIS (Sjoberg 2018, Martini 2018).

Children associated with violent extremism are still relatively unexplored. However, research about children in conflict, and especially child soldiers, is more developed (Ran 2017:69). For example, questions have been raised regarding how child soldiers are represented in the political sphere and highlighted that child soldiers commonly are represented as victims who need to be rescued by NGOs and IGOs (Wagnsson et al. 2010:12). In relation to this, gender and war studies have identified how the ‘women and children’ narrative is used to portray the victims of war through the dichotomy of private/public in which women are associated with children and not seen as political actors in warfare (Sjoberg 2016:9, Khalili 2011:1479). However, there are reports indicating that approaches to returning and reintegrating children of foreign fighters within the EU have become more punitive since minors at an early age are classed as foreign fighters in some EU countries and may be subjects of terrorism measures (RAN 2017, UNU 2018:19). However, these studies foremost consider the age of the children to measure this process. Consequently, my study contributes by analysing the discourses of securitization, and its implications for women and children who are related to ISIS.

To conclude, there is a plethora of research about the ‘war on terror’ and how it has had disproportionate effects on Muslims, and also contributed to the securitization of the (male) Muslim migrant. While it is shown that similar discourses have been reflected in the Swedish political discourse as well, there is yet no research on how women and children associated with ISIS have been construed in the political discourse after the breakdown of ISIS caliphate in 2019. This thesis is an attempt to fill this gap. Since former ISIS affiliates are now detained in refugee camps, it is relevant to study how representations of this group relate to previous securitization of terrorism and to consider the potential consequences of the current constructions on human rights. Through this approach, I also aim to contribute to the broad field of securitization.


1.3 Delimitations and Limitations

This study only examines Sweden as a case, and the findings cannot be directly generalised to other European countries. Still, several countries in Europe face similar problems as Sweden, and it is not unlikely that parallel discourses may be visible. In this thesis, a discourse analysis is conducted and there is no correct, natural limit regarding how much material should be collected. However, much time has to be spent on reading and rereading text, and discursive patterns can sometimes be created and maintained by just a few people, which motivate a smaller sample (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:120). Therefore, the material that is examined in this thesis will consist of 30 news articles from February to November 15, 2019. This demarcation of time frame and scope enables me to make a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the material studied, and to concentrate on the time that has passed since the caliphate fell. While the focus will be on the two biggest political parties and the findings will be presented separately, the aim of the study is not to conduct a traditional comparative study. Rather, the potential similarities and differences between the parties found in the material, is interesting, not foremost because they rest on different ideologies, but because they may say something about the processes of securitization.

Since human rights as a concept is broad and complex, only some aspects will be deliberated. For instance, although not all ISIS returnees with a Swedish connection have a Swedish citizenship, the legal aspects concerning specific cases will not be emphasised in the thesis. The point of departure is that the group of people studied are currently in need of help and protection since they are detained in overcrowded refugee camps without knowledge of what will happen next. The choice to focus foremost on women and children is motivated by the fact that it is already established in literature that Muslim men have been securitized in the political discourse and are, in general, not perceived as victims. I therefore believe that a focus on women and children contributes more to the research on this topic. Yet, and as will be further explained below, within discourse analysis, everything is perceived as relational and when women and children are analysed, it evidently relates to men. Finally, I would like to stress that this study concerns an ongoing process, and at the time of writing, the Swedish stance is not finalised and may change. It will thus be up to future studies to analyse later decisions concerning this matter.
1.4 Outline

This study proceeds as follows. Firstly, the theoretical framework is presented in which relevant aspects of the chosen theories are described. Thereafter, the methods section will cover discourse analysis as the methodological approach in addition to the operationalisation of the study, including discussions on the chosen material. The empirical analysis will present and analyse the findings and is divided in two main parts that respectively focus on current discursive representations of the two political parties and the potential consequences these may have on the analysed groups. Lastly, a concluding discussion will be presented together with a few suggestions regarding future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

Securitization theory is an important research field within threat construction and provides a way to analyse both how security issues appear and how they can legitimise exceptional political measures that distinguish security from normal politics. In this section, I will begin by outlining key parts of securitization theory and address some of the aspect in which it has been criticised. Thus, the theory will be utilised to highlight structures of threat constructions and its implications but also to connect gender to (in)security. Thereafter, relevant feminist and postcolonial research connected to the gendering of constructions of threat and protection will be described, which as elaborated above mainly is found within research on war and armed conflict. These theories have been influenced by poststructuralism which will be more deliberated in the method’s section. By integrating critique from postcolonial scholars, I also seek to identify structures related to race and racism which can contribute to a more comprehensive approach.

2.1 Securitization Theory

Securitization theory was originally developed by the Copenhagen School in the 1990s as part of critical security studies and rests on the separation between politics and security (Buzan, et al. 1998). The concept of securitization provides clear steps for identifying how referent objects in different sectors (e.g. migration, cyber, environment) become security problems and determining whether they should be securitized which makes the methodology useful to apply to different empirical areas (Howell & Richter-Montpetit 2019:2). The Copenhagen School views securitization as a decisive moment where an issue moves from normal politics
to the realm of security (see Buzan et al. 1998). For this to happen, several key elements are included. The first element is the securitizing move that consists of a speech act made by an actor with authority. Secondly, the actor trying to securitize an issue must present the issue as an existential or extreme threat to an audience in order to authorise the adoption of emergency security measures. Thirdly, for the securitization to be successful, the audience must accept the securitizing move (Buzan et al. 1998).

The relation between identity and (in)security is visible in how identity is reproduced through security practices and discourses. For instance, states construct their identity in relation to others which contribute to shape their view of perceived threats outside the state. Since the conditions for what is threatening continuously change, states always have to rearticulate their identity (Campbell 1998:12f). Subsequently, the threat to an identity is about constructions of ‘us’ being threatened by ‘them’ which contributes to the reproduction of ‘us’ (Buzan et al. 1998:120,124). The possibility of criticism and change within the approach, rests on the awareness that securitization includes logics of political normalisation and exception which builds securitizing narratives about ‘who we are’ by underlining what ‘we are not’ (Mavelli 2013:180). Thus, practises of (in)insecurity depends upon the identifications of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and these constructions are gendered, racialised, sexualised and classed (Pratt 2013:772). Moreover, it is important to explore the context of securitization moves since the performative power of speech acts cannot simply be grasped in the abstract but needs to be placed in a context within broader structures of meaning and power (Stritzel 2012:553). To exemplify, concepts such as ‘the state’ and ‘security’ are so deeply rooted structures that many considerers them either impossible or undesirable to change (Hoogensen & Vigeland Rottem 2004).

For securitization to be successful, the securitizing actor needs to have the capacity to ‘speak security’, that is, presenting a specific problem as an existential threat against the referent object (Buzan et al. 1998). This linguistic approach of securitization has become an established and much used approach to how securitization occurs but has also been widely debated and criticised from different angles, for instance with regards to its usefulness in different situations (Hansen 2000, Balzacq 2005, Hudson 2005, Wilkinson 2011). Lene Hansen (2000:294) argues that securitization theory has a methodological problem since speech acts cannot account for the gendered power dynamics that reinforce situations when the subject of security has limited or no possibility to speak. A consequence of this linguistic
element of securitization is that those who are constrained in their ability to speak security are hindered from ‘…becoming subjects worthy of consideration and protection’ (Hansen 2000:285). Moreover, it would be logical to expect gender to figure within the societal sector since it is related to questions about the construction of identity, and with groups whose security questions can be separated from, or in opposition to the political security of the state (Hansen 2000:297). Within this context, the actions of those who can speak security remain constrained but can also be empowered by prevailing discursive sedimentations (Mavelli 2013:180). This also relates to the critique scholars have posed regarding that securitization does not always represent a break when a question shifts from politics to security since this approach fails to consider the everyday bureaucratic constructions of security (Bigo 2002, McDonald 2008). These ideas can be applied to the Swedish setting, where some actors have the interpretative prerogative to decide which threats that become prioritised and focused upon (Eriksson 2004:72). To exemplify, some important actors that can ‘speak security’, or in other words, can influence the security agenda in Sweden, are the Swedish Government and parliament, but also government agencies working with security as well as the media (Eriksson 2004:87f). Drawing on these key concepts of securitization and how they have been criticised, both silence and identity constitute important parts of my analysis. When examining the securitization of former ISIS members, it is important to consider who is able to ‘speak security’, which identities are (re)produced when ‘speech acts’ are uttered in the Swedish debate and whether the voices of former ISIS members are heard in the debate.

Securitization theory has not only been criticised for overlooking gender, but also for being racist in itself. In a recent, widely cited article, the authors make the claim that the Copenhagen School’s securitization theory is in itself racist, and structured ‘…not only by Eurocentrism, but also by civilizationism methodological whiteness and antiblack racism’ (Howell & Richter-Montpetit 2019:1). In the article, the authors state that racism is inherent in the theory and cannot be removable. Moreover, they acknowledge that recent work has added race to securitization theory (see Amin-Khan 2012, Ibrahim 2005, Mofette & Vadasaria 2016) but concludes that this does not change the racism that is baked into the theory’s concepts and methods (Howell & Richter-Montpetit 2019:15). While this critique should not easily be dismissed, it must be problematised. Why is racism seen as something inherent in the theory that cannot be removed? Since meanings attached to theories and concepts are never fixed, but instead constantly re-articulated, the racism in securitization theory should rather depend on how the theory and concepts are used and applied in different settings and
not be perceived as something fixed. Instead of rejecting the whole theory, other scholars have arguably adopted a more productive approach and problematised the potential racial elements of securitization in a more nuanced way. To exemplify, Sarah Bertrand argues that while securitization theory is categorised as a critical theory, it yet sets up a colonial relationship where certain voices cannot be heard, and other voices try to speak for those who are silenced (Bertrand 2018:281). Another critique is that, while extremist movements as well as problems of integration and marginalisation are very present in literature, many write of securitization with only briefly mentioning the racially coded discourses at play (Mofette and Walters 2018:98). Hence, even though gender and race have been increasingly visible in studies of migration and borders, scholars have not fully succeeded in exploring questions of intersectionality (Basham and Vaughan Williams 2013:510). Engaging with the problems of the Copenhagen school therefore requires shifting perception from instances of securitization towards questions considering how security discourses are produced (Hansen 2000:297ff).

To conclude, securitization theory has, as all theoretical frameworks, been the subject of criticism from various angles. Yet, when speaking about how security issues are constructed and (re)articulated in the debate, securitization theory has had an important influence and also includes concepts which are highly relevant for the research question posed in this thesis. By highlighting different critiques against the theory, it is possible to be transparent about how the theoretical concepts are used in the thesis and to be aware of potential traps. Moreover, securitization theory and the concepts that come with it, can be interpreted in different ways. From this point of view, some of the problems highlighted should perhaps not only be blamed on the theory, but also take into account how the theory is used.

2.2 Feminist and postcolonial theory in relation to armed conflicts and the ‘war on terror’

Feminist scholars have drawn attention to how traditional narratives of how politics works are both implicitly and explicitly gendered and excluding toward women and values understood to be ‘feminine’ (Sjoberg 2010:55). An important contribution of feminist research is therefore to make the invisible visible and to put what has previously been marginalised in the centre (Reinharz 1992:248). As Carver (1996:4) states: ‘Gender is not a synonym, for women’!’. However, women’s experiences play an important part in gender analyses since women have been both disadvantaged and made insecure within present gendered power structures (Hoogensen & Vigeland Rottem 2004:164). Consequently, gender analyses can
expose assumptions that are often taken for granted about the structures we live within, including the state, society and security (Hoogensen & Vigeland Rottem 2004:163). A critique against feminist research is that oppressions rarely are one-dimensional and that other oppressive structures such as race, class and religion should be included when analysing gender structures (Hammersley 1992). While it is not possible to consider all structures in play within the scope of this thesis, I attempt to recognise intersectional formulations of oppression based on gender and race in order to understand Swedish decisionmakers stance towards former ISIS affiliates. I will begin by summarising relevant research by feminist and postcolonial scholars to identify mechanisms of the gendered structures in the framing of wars. Thereafter, these finding will be applied to the case of ISIS foreign fighters’ returnees.

**Feminist/gender perspectives on international politics and violence**

Jean Bethke Elshtain identifies the story that states tell about war as being about ‘just warriors’ and ‘beautiful souls’. In this story, the protagonist is the ‘just warrior’; a hero who protects his ‘innocent’ woman and children from the evils of the enemy and can even sacrifice his life for the life back home (Elshtain 1991). As Cynthia Enloe writes, patriarchal logics are articulated when the ‘real man’ is defined as a protector who must ‘suppress his own fears, brace himself and step forward to defend the weak, women and children’ (Enloe 2000:12). Within this narrative, women’s differences from men are emphasised, perceiving women as innocent, peaceful and life-giving which serves as a counterpart to the ‘masculinity’ that is connected with protecting, warring and killing (Enloe 2000, Goldstein 2001, Pin-Fat & Stern 2005, Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2013). Furthermore, women are considered to ‘belong’ to the sphere of home which is separated from the sphere of war meanwhile the femininity of women is used as a justification for war (Sjoberg 2010, Pin-Fat & Stern 2005, Masters 2009). Through these narratives, women’s roles as political agents are ignored and they are instead grouped together with children in the private sphere (Ericson 2018:97).

Feminist critique of the state and security highlight how protection works as a form of power relation which is permeated by masculine structures. In this relationship, the protector must control the lives of those to be protected to be able to protect them, and this mechanism is activated when societies are faced with crises and conflicts, for instance terror attacks (Ericson 2018:97). Each characterisation of women as peaceful and in need of protection implies that there are men responsible to protect the women and this narrative is then set up in opposite to the men threatening the ‘beautiful soul’ women (Sjoberg 2018:303). Iris Marion
Young (2003) points out that these positions rests on gendered and racialised logics. Besides the notion that protectionism is associated with masculinity and vulnerability and the need for protection is associated with femininity, white men are positioned as ‘good’ men protecting women from ‘bad’ and ‘foreign’ men. This position of being vulnerable also creates a demand to be loyal and grateful to the ‘protectors’ (Young 2003:13).

Just like women, children are often subordinated in the political sphere (Wagnsson et al. 2010:8). Wyness, Harrison and Buchanan (2004:82ff) explain children’s apolitical status by referring to three cultural constraints; the construction of children as ‘apprentice citizens’, notions of ‘childhood innocence’ and that children are located in the private sphere of the family. Thus, even though children take part, both in the making and breaking of security, they are assigned a limited set of roles, often as passive subjects or seen as irrelevant to political processes (Wagnsson et al. 2010:2). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that children may take on a number of roles, for instance as negative agents acting as child soldiers, positive agents that can contribute to post-conflict measures, and as focal points for different forms of international attention (Wagnsson et al. 2010:2). Therefore, Wagnsson et al. (2010:10) argue that there is a need to re-examine the traditional ‘myth of protection’, and to take into account how marginalised groups, including women and children, constitute a substantial proportion of the casualties of modern wars. To place non-traditional groups in the centre of the security sphere, can signify that these groups have capacity for agency, and would better reflect the current security situation (Wagnsson et al. 2010:12).

When men and women act outside the ideal-type role assigned to them, they often receive criticism. Men who are not perceived as masculine enough can sometimes be victims of hostilities and violence, and women who go outside the traditional feminine, for instance by joining military organisations, are seen as abandoning their primary roles as mothers, thus losing their ‘innocence’ or ‘purity’ (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007:7f). When women act violently, they are often either ignored or sensationalised which make their violence seem singular and outside the capacity of normal women (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007 & 2018, McEvoy 2009). Sensationalism of women’s violence often appear in three standard narratives; mothers, monsters and whores (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007:29,33). While the mother narrative explains women’s violence by referring to maternal instincts of protection and vengeance, monsters and whores are instead described as crazy, irrational or sexually deviant, often too masculinised to fit into the notion of woman (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, Eriksson Baaz & Stern
This corresponds with the two classic dominating narratives of the ‘other’ women. One is the ‘Madonna’ (who is chaste and pure), the innocent victim in need of saving, and the other is the ‘whore’ (promiscuous and seductive), the one whose body can be abused and murdered without impunity (Young 1993, Bareket et al. 2018, Masters 2009). Throughout these narratives, women are perceived as unable to independently and rationally make decisions to carry out violent political actions. Consequently, portrayals of women performing violence minimise their choices in it, while men’s violent acts are analysed as if their actions were chosen rationally (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007).

Eriksson Baaz and Stern argue that both women as perpetrators of violence and men as victims of violence can be categorised as uncomfortable subjects since they do not fit into our preconceived gender frames (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013:32ff). These uncomfortable subjects, they argue, often become invisible, particularly in policy discourses. They draw upon the work of Carpenter (2006) who shows that the idea that civilian women are the main victims of war is a myth and that civilian men and women rather are exposed to different forms of violence; civilian women and girls are more exposed to sexual violence while civilian men and boys are more exposed to killings and forced recruitment. Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013:34ff) further argue that the ways in which civilian men are victims of war time violence, including sexual violence, has been silenced. Given dominant gender discourses associating women as vulnerable, peaceful and in need of protection and men with strength and a capacity not only to use violence but to protect himself and others from it, male victims of violence do not fit into the preconceived frames. Because of this, they argue, violence against men and boys, including sexual violence has been neglected, both as men themselves are less likely to present themselves as victims (as that somehow implies ‘failed masculinity’) and as humanitarian organization and society at large have a difficulty to imagine male victims (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013).

**Feminist postcolonial approaches**

Postcolonial research has demonstrated the entanglements between gender and racism. The colonial project was legitimised through the discursive construction of the uncivilised other that had to be saved by the civilising, colonial mission (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013:92f). This process was gendered in the sense that women were perceived to be oppressed by the barbaric men in the colonies which provided an important civilizing mission for both men and
women in Europe (Spivak 1988, Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013). According to postcolonial feminist critics, this ‘mission’ has remained, and is reflected, for instance both in development practices (McEwan 2001, Syed & Ali 2011) and other interventions such as the ‘war on terror’ (Puar & Rai 2002, Shepherd 2006). Even in the context of the present research, racialised women are often perceived as uniquely vulnerable and in need of rescue from their oppressive cultures. To exemplify, during the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration justified the US invasion by arguing that Afghan women had to be protected (Tamang 2016:233, Shepherd 2006). Similarly, during the refugee crisis in 2015, the image of the feminized refugee persisted while incoming male refugees were often seen with suspicion and a fear that terrorist organisations exploited the crisis to smuggle (male) operatives into Europe (Gray & Frank 2019:283). Consequently, the ideas of racialised threat and vulnerability are formulated through gender and form a framework through which contemporary events can be made sense of within dominant discourse (Gray & Frank 2019:286). Subsequently, there are hierarchies at play where masculinity gets meaning by being differentiated from other, ‘lesser’ masculinities and femininities. These ‘masculine’ attributes are not fixed, but rather depend on context and are consequently provided by differentiations (Hutchings 2008:392).

This is well captured by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s observation that discourses, since colonial times, often have been legitimised as a mission where ‘white men are saving brown women from brown men’ (1988: 297).

Research has shown how these classic gendered and racialized discourses also are at play in relation to ISIS (Martini 2018, Sjoberg 2018, Chatterjee 2016). Although women in terrorist organisations is not a new phenomenon, it contradicts main gender constructions (Martini 2018:458). When women voluntarily join a terrorist organisation as ISIS, it challenges Western perspectives on Muslim women as vulnerable and passive subjects. Therefore, media make sense of these women through specific narratives by shifting their stories to personal issues, thus irrationalising them while constructing a terrorist that is neither credible nor political (Martini 2018:471). This claim is further supported by Laura Sjoberg’s (2018:297) study of media portrayals of female victims of ISIS and women in ISIS, which found that both these groups were seen as lacking agency. The female ISIS recruits were described as passive and manipulated by the male perpetrators and were in media perceived as apolitical victims. This narrative was also used to display how evil and inhumane the ideology of ISIS was and how it stood in contrast to the developed West (Sjoberg 2018:303f). These constructions have continuously been reproduced despite the fact that it is known that women
have taken on a number of roles in the caliphate. Besides the traditional expectations of giving birth and taking care of their husbands, women have also recruited new members to the organisation through different platforms and have played an important role in ensuring that the rules of the caliphate were upheld (Davis 2017:125, RAN 2017:21).

According to Debangana Chatterjee, female ISIS affiliates can be seen both as political agents and as victims, and it is impossible to grasp the full picture of their lives by stereotypically categorising them under any of these two subject positions. It can therefore be fruitful to move beyond ‘woman’ as a category and taking into account that the lives of a substantial population in some regions have been constantly undervalued, thus recognising that women’s roles are multi-layered and situational. When studying women as an identity, a gendered lens can help capturing the complexities of the communities in the region (Chatterjee 2016:215).

In my study, applying a gendered lens helps me identify existing hierarchies connected to gender and race. For instance, if women and children are not regarded as political agents, it is possible to assume that their actions cannot be recognised as existential security threats to the West. Moreover, I can examine whether the dominant narrative still considers women and children to be in need of protection or if they are instead being reabsorbed into the threatening masculinised mass of terrorists that their states of origin have previously been trying to protect them from. Since previous research has shown that race has been a contributing factor to the securitization of Islam, the issue of the group of ISIS affiliates can, in some ways, be seen as already racialised since this group is construed as Muslims and Arabs rather than as ‘ethnic Swedes’. Here, it is interesting to consider how potential racial hierarchies operate in this specific case, to examine whether any differentiations are made between women and children who were born in Sweden and are perceived as ethnic Swedes and women and children with a connection to a foreign country. For instance, how come that only the blonde and blue-eyed children of the ISIS recruiter Michael Skråmo have been repatriated and no other children? Were the reasons simply that they are orphans, and that their grandfather fought for them, or are there other racialised motives at play? This potential differentiation within the group of ISIS affiliates will be taken into account throughout the analysis and be further highlighted in the conclusion.
2.3 The value of lives and what is at stake

There is a rich body of work in relation to security studies on the topic on who is worthy of protection and who is not (see for instance Agamben 2005, Butler 2004 & 2009, Campbell 1998, Said 2003). I will draw on some of these findings to further illustrate how gender and race are important categories for analysing the case of the former ISIS affiliates and to consider what consequences different categorisations may have on how the lives of certain groups and societies are valued.

Judith Butler (2004 & 2009) develops a theory about how societies create meaning around lives. She asks who counts as human, whose lives count as lives and what makes for a grievable life (Butler 2004:20). From her understanding, an ungrievable life cannot be mourned because it has never lived and cannot quite count as a life (Butler 2009:31). Hence, some groups of people are cast as existential threats, rather than as living populations in need of protection. Since these people are already lost, they can easily be dismissed. Through this logic, the loss of such populations is necessary to protect the lives of ‘the living’. Yet, the norms that create these categories are deemed to reproduce their own failures, since there will always be those who depart from the norm (Butler 2009:7f). According to Butler, framing is a way of thinking of how a phenomenon is understood in a certain way and not in another, and frames of war can determine which lives are considered ‘recognisable lives’. However, since social phenomena are complex and changeable, frames must expand and adapt, and sometimes they break. This temporal dimension of frames constitutes the possibilities for what is perceived to be the correct response to the phenomenon that is behold by the frame (Butler 2009:10f).

In the ‘war on terror’, women have become much more visible, both as combatants but also those on behalf of whom war is being waged. Yet, there seems to be a paradox that in women’s very inclusion, they are excluded (Masters 2009:30). Drawing on the work of Foucault (1997) and Agamben (1998) Christina Masters discusses the concept of ‘bare life’; a body neither worth living nor worthy of sacrificing, and how the concept itself is gendered and racialised (Masters 2009:31). Agamben (1998:1), constructs the concept of the ‘homo sacer’, which is a human being who is reduced to his/her bare life and becomes excluded from political life. However, to simply capture women through the figure of ‘homo sacer’ is to make them absent since power operates differently on women’s bodies (Masters 2009:32). This would instead recreate some of those exclusions that feminists have worked to reveal in
subject positions that supposedly claim to encompass both men and women, for instance the category of ‘human’, but yet are gendered (Peterson 1990). Instead, the category ‘femina sacra’ is used to explain how women, as reproductive and as sexual objects, are used in particular ways in warfare. While race and gender operate in similar exclusionary logics, they have different specifics and are both worth unpacking critically (Masters 2009:32). It can therefore be helpful to recognise differences between the production of gender and race to ‘think together’ the two categories without misinterpreting the specific mechanisms of each (Feder 2007:60). One example that relates both to the unequal value of lives and to the ‘war on terror’ is denationalisation. Under international law, it is illegal to leave a citizen stateless. EU also has a stated aim to combat terrorism globally while respecting human rights (Baker-Beall 2019, Council of the EU 2005:2). Hannah Arendt (1994:296) describes citizenship as the fundamental right to have rights and defines citizenship as a status which creates the possibility of ‘action’ and ‘opinion’. Yet, denationalisation has increasingly been used as a policy tool within counter-terrorism policies, for instance in Britain. Since a citizenship cannot be removed if it renders a person stateless, it creates two classes of British citizens; a first-class secure citizenship for those without any other citizenship and a second-class insecure citizenship for those with a dual nationality that can be revoked (Choudhury 2017:234f). This way of foregrounding security over equality, echoes a colonial history of governing, seeing citizenship not as a right to be protected but instead as something that can be taken away if not complying with the government-defined accepted behaviour (Choudhury 2017:226). Hence, the act of removing a citizenship can be seen as taking away a person’s right to exist and to be (Kapoor 2015:108).

In the past, the issue of children who have engaged in armed conflict has been viewed mainly as a humanitarian concern and not a criminal matter. For example, and as mentioned previously, child soldiers tend to be victimised and not considered to be political agents (Wyness 2006:208). Although child soldiers are construed as a negative problem, they are commonly portrayed as victims of structural violence (Wagnsson et al. 2010:11). For instance, neither international nor domestic laws, punish children’s enlistments when they ‘voluntary’ join an armed force or group. Many states also refrain from prosecuting children for the crimes committed during their association with these groups even though many

*One example that has received a lot of attention is the case of the British citizen Shamima Begum who left Britain to join ISIS. Begum was stripped of her British citizenship on the ground that she also qualified for a Bangladeshi citizenship and would not be made stateless. However, the Government of Bangladesh has stated that she could potentially face the death penalty if she was sent there (Busby 2019).
domestic jurisdictions permit the prosecution of children when it is a matter of extraordinary international crimes (Capone 2017:173). Nevertheless, and as highlighted in the introduction motivating this thesis, there seem to be tendencies that this is changing with the children of ISIS. According to the European radicalisation network (RAN), all children are considered to have been exposed to some level of ISIS ideology and child returnees can therefore be seen both as victims and in some cases as perpetrators at the same time (RAN 2017:70). This claim is supported by the findings of the UN University which states that approaches to returning and reintegrating children of foreign fighters have become more punitive (UNU 2018:19). Through this narrative, military considerations to protect states national interests are valued over children’s wellbeing (Capone 2017:164,167). Wagnsson et al. ask whether the media and political authorities differentiate between ‘our’ and ‘other’ children. Do children in the West figure as referent objects in need of protection while children in war-prone countries figure as threats to ‘our’ security, for instance as child soldiers and unwanted immigrants, thus threatening national identity and welfare in Western countries? (Wagnsson et al. 2010:11). European countries attitudes toward children connected to ISIS suggest that they are not considered to be ‘ours’ but rather a threatening ‘other’. Drawing on the examples above, it is evident that the ‘war on terror’ represent an exceptional case that requires measures beyond ‘normal politics’. To examine if, and in what ways, this exceptionalism is manifested in the Swedish politics discourse, it is relevant to consider how political representatives portray the women and children associated with ISIS to examine whether their lives are cast as grievable.

2.4 Summary: Combining Securitization Theory with Feminist and Postcolonial Research

This chapter has strived to outline important parts of securitization theory, feminist theory and postcolonial studies in relation to conflicts and war to highlight the construction of certain issues and groups as threatening and to illustrate how societies create different meanings around lives. In these meaning-making processes, it is possible to identify hierarchies in relation to gender and race where the lives of some groups are cast as more valuable than others. Moreover, there is a temporal dimension in how issues are framed, and constructions of threats are not static but change over time. Securitization theory is considered to be useful since it provides a framework for questioning how security threats are constructed and inverted. Yet, securitization theory is not without flaws and by integrating a feminist and a postcolonial perspective, it is possible to study security in a more reflexive way and to reveal problematic tendencies, such as gender silencing. I aim to proceed by applying theoretical and
methodological tools from these fields of research to problematise how women and children are construed in the Swedish discourse. By investigating which arguments that are prominent in the political discussions concerning this issue and what meanings they express, I seek to enhance the understanding for how the dominant ‘women and children’ narrative has become increasingly challenged in the case of ISIS returnees.

3. Method and Research Design

In this part, I will begin by outlining why discourse analysis corresponds well with my research aim in addition to summarising some of the core characteristics of discourse analysis. Moreover, I will derive my analytical tools from the previously discussed theories and describe how these will be used in a manner that fits with both the epistemological assumptions of discourse theory in addition to my research question.

3.1 Discourse Analysis

Christopher Baker-Beall (2019) proposes two reasons for why discourse analysis is suitable to analyse processes of securitization. Firstly, it provides an adequate method to explore the relationship between language and policy in the securitization process by uncovering structures and practices that produce the threat image that is analysed. Secondly, it creates opportunities to problematise and critique the representations of threat which security actors articulate and also consider the broader political and societal implications of the policy discourse (Baker-Beall 2019:441). While the concept of discourse analysis is vague, Jørgensen and Phillips propose the following definition of a discourse as ‘…a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)’ (2002:1). Within discourse analysis, the social world, including knowledge, identity and social relations is perceived as constructed, and meaning is rendered understandable through social constructions (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:1f). There are different approaches to discourse analysis, but they all share certain key assumptions about how entities such as ‘language’ and ‘the subject’ is to be understood. Access to reality always goes through language. Language is not only a channel through which information is communicated; it also generates and constitutes the social world. This is extended to social realities and social relations. Thus, struggles at the discursive level also take part in, and change social reality (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:8). Meaning can change from discourse to discourse, and discursive patterns are
both maintained and transformed in discursive practices. These patterns can be explored through analysing specific contexts (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:12). Discourses can recommend certain actions and practices and they also change, depending on agents, context and over time. Consequently, when analysing the discourses on social groups in a particular context and considering the relative power and effect of these discourses, it is possible to gain an understanding of various outcomes (Wagnsson et al. 2010:8).

Discourse analysis strives to carry out critical research and to analyse power relations in society. Through critiquing such relations, it is argued that social change can be possible (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:2). The social world is produced through power relationships where objects are both separated and attain their individual characteristics (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:13). As shown earlier, the threatening terrorist is often constructed as male and racialised and separated from femininities associated with vulnerability. This kind of division can turn into binary categories, for example protector/protected, superior/inferior, public/private, strong/week or war/peace (see Young 2003, Pin-Fat & Stern 2005). For instance, if only women and children are construed as victims and this is set in opposition to the men threatening them, it is difficult for men to be considered victims.

Since language is relational, there is no presence without absence. A seemingly coherent representation is always unstable since it is both constituted and haunted by what is excluded, or in other words; the constitutive outside or other (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013:9, Pin-Fat & Stern 2005:35). To exemplify, representations of, for example ’masculinity’ and ’femininity’, cannot be complete since what is inside/possible must always rely on what is outside/impossible for its constitution. Hence, the meaning of ’masculinity’ and ’femininity must include, by exclusion, its opposite which makes a clear differentiation between the two impossible to maintain (Pin-Fat & Stern 2005:29). The language that is used therefore creates possibilities for some and restrictions for others. This implies that language is connected to power, which, drawing on the Foucauldian understanding, is seen as productive. Power is not perceived as belonging to particular agents, but is spread across different social practices, and constitutes discourse, knowledge and subjectivities, thus providing the conditions of what is possible in the social sphere (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:13).

According to poststructuralism, there is no ultimate fixation of meaning since discursive struggles are constant and meaning can always be articulated in different ways. The ways in which meanings are produced can therefore not be determined or predicted beforehand.
(Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:11f). Yet, it is possible to map how discourses may be (re)produced and articulated in a certain context, which I attempt to do when studying how the ISIS affiliates are portrayed in the Swedish political discourse during the analysed time period.

Within social sciences it has been common that language, more or less, has been perceived as an unproblematic medium. For instance, when ambivalence or contradictions appear in interviews, the aim of the researcher is often described as to reveal the ‘real’ or ‘true’ attitudes of the respondent (Eriksson Baaz 2005:15). However, when acknowledging how identities are discursively constructed, it is no longer possible to assume that people have fixed and consistent identities. Instead, since identities are constituted within discourse and discourses are open-ended, identities and experiences can be articulated in different ways. How a certain event or idea will be described therefore depends on the context. From this perspective, language can be said to generate a temporary understanding or version (Eriksson Baaz 2005:15). Consequently, even though I do not conduct interviews but rather analyse interviews, it should be acknowledged that this thesis does not try to reveal the ‘real’ thoughts of the politician’s views of this issue. Rather, it seeks to examine the temporary story of how the group of Swedish ISIS returnees is described through language and recognise that the ambivalences and contradictions that may appear also hold meaning.

3.2 Operationalisation

Since discourse analysis lacks a distinct methodology, a variety of different analytical tools can be applied. This creates opportunities for the researcher but can also be problematic since the method includes a comprehensive interpretation of concepts and expressions. It is therefore important to be specific in what analytical tools are applied and how they are used (Bergström & Boréus 2012:405f). In discourse analysis, theory and method are intertwined (Jorgensson & Phillips 2002:4). I will try to unpack how women and children affiliated with ISIS are discursively produced and map out representations of this group to better understand how they are ascribed meaning in the political discourses observed in this study. When reading the material, I map these differences and the discourses they represent by highlighting the various signs that contribute to give meaning to women and children and how these relate to men. I depart from the poststructuralist notion that signs derive their meaning, not from reality, but from their relationship with other signs and can change, depending on the context (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:11). For example, signs that would be likely to be present in the
narratives of ISIS affiliates could be words or characteristics such as ‘terrorist’, ‘bad mother’, and ‘dangerous’.

I construct questions derived from securitization theory, feminist and postcolonial studies. As noted earlier, feminist scholarship has shown how hierarchies are reproduced through gendered, racialised and sexualised language and practices (Baker 2017, Weber 1998). Drawing on these findings, concepts such as gender silencing, grievable lives and classic narratives of men, women and children were brought up in the theoretical chapter and will now be operationalised. Although masculinity and femininity are associated with different traits, this does not mean that these cannot be negotiated or change over time (Duncanson & Woodward 2015). Moreover, a sign can be seemingly absent but still be visible in the discourse since it tends to be continuously linked to a particular representation, that can be bodies, nations and/or identities (Ahmed 2004). Thus, when studying how representations of ISIS affiliates are ascribed meaning in the Swedish political discourse, it is important to, not only pay attention to what is being said, but to also be attentive to discursive silences and invisibilities, that may not be spoken of in the material but may yet be vital for the meaning making processes.

I strive to be transparent about how theory and method are used when interpreting the meanings found in the material. Moreover, the empirics constitute a vital role in the analysis to enable scientific critique. Since my research question relates both to threat constructions of terrorism and feminist research on narratives of ‘womenandchildren’ in need of protection, I have set up questions related to these themes to guide the analysis. Within each theme I have been attentive to certain key words such as terrorism, radical Islam, victim, perpetrator, us/them. The first two groups of questions concern the representations of women and children. These questions will be baked into the analysis when the two political parties are analysed separately. The last group of questions regard what potential consequences current discursive representations may have on both women and children. In this part, both parties will be discussed simultaneously.

1) What meanings are attached to women affiliated with ISIS? Do they emerge as (in traditional discourse) in need of protection (e.g. weak, defenceless, innocent) and as grievable lives (being recognisable as lives)? How are women construed in relation to men (who usually constitute the main constitutive other); who emerge as the constitutive other in relation to women? What kind of (if any) agency (capacity to act
independently) are women perceived as having? Are distinctions drawn between various types of women within ISIS (e.g. age, origin, gender)? Are women racialised in the discourse, and if so, how is grievable life and the right to protection racialised?

2) What meanings are attached to children affiliated with ISIS? Do they emerge as (in traditional discourse) in need of protection and as grievable lives? Are they construed as threats in any way and in relation to whom (i.e. the reference object to be protected); who emerge as the constitutive other in relation to children? What kind of (if any) agency are children perceived as having? Are distinctions drawn between various types of children within ISIS? Are children racialised in the discourse, and if so, how is grievable life and the right to protection racialised?

3) What kind of politics (allowing women and children to return, to return with conditions or to not return) could the current representations lead to? What (if any) political decisions are the political representatives suggesting and what potential consequences do they have on women and children?

3.2 Material

The material that the analysis will build upon consists of 30 news articles published in 2019. Since ISIS lost its last territories in the beginning of 2019 and the returnee issue was widely covered and discussed during that time, this makes a reasonable starting point for the analysis. In May, the seven children of the aforementioned terrorist Michael Skråmo was repatriated, but no other children have been brought back since then. It is therefore interesting to study the events during the time when discussions about the Skråmo-children were ongoing, but to also include material published after their return to find whether the problem continued to be spoken about or if it received less attention by political decisionmakers.

The material that will be analysed relates to the Social Democrats and the Moderate Party. As mentioned in the introduction, I made an active choice not to include the Sweden Democrats, although it is evident that they have influence in this debate. Smaller parties could have been included as well, but I chose to focus on the parties that have been most heard in the debate and therefore seemed most suitable to answer the research questions. Both debate articles written by representatives for the two parties and articles that contain interviews with people from the same parties are included. The majority of the representatives who figure in the articles have a seat in the parliament. However, articles with spokespersons from different
municipalities are also included, since municipalities are the recipients of returning foreign fighters and have different approaches to this issue. Hence, the main focus is to capture a broad understanding of the Swedish political discourses surrounding this issue, focusing on the processes of securitization.

Even though the Sweden Democrats will not be analysed in this thesis, there are still representatives within the chosen parties who are known to be more controversial than others. In my analysis, two of the articles were written by Hanif Bali, a representant for the Moderate Party who has received criticism for his strong opinions, not only from opponents, but also from within his own party (Borgert et al. 2019). However, since Bali is a parliamentary representant and has also been a prominent person within this debate, I have chosen to include these articles although his views may not always fully reflect the party’s official line.

I have chosen six of the largest newspapers in Sweden: Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Göteborgs-Posten and Sydsvenskan. Together, these newspapers have extensive coverage and also rest on different political ideologies which is considered to be an advantage to acquire a broad representation of the political discourses. The aim is not to compare the newspapers but to obtain varied articles from different sources. Therefore, the distribution of the articles is not entirely equal. In the analysis, further emphasis will not be placed on the ideologies or the political stances of the newspapers itself, but rather what is communicated in the material.

The process of selecting the material went as following. I began by using the media archive Retriever Research. To capture a broad spectrum of relevant articles, I used the following Swedish keywords:

(moderat* or socialdemokrat*) AND (kvinn* OR barn* OR återvänd*) AND (is OR “islamska staten”) AND syrien

In Mid-November, this search generated 79 published articles. Thereafter, I repeated the same procedure several times during November and December to see whether additional articles had been published that could be included. According to the last search in Mid-December, the number of printed articles amounted to 84. However, a great number of articles included the

4 Parantheses are used when there are several alternatives for which words are searched for, the * is used to include all conjugations of the word.
keywords but did not focus on ISIS returnees. Others were written by journalists that, for example, wrote about ISIS and the arguments presented by the parties, but did not provide any quotations or interviews from party representatives. Many articles were also very similar in content, which motivated the exclusion of several articles. Moreover, since this analysis concerns an ongoing debate and articles have been published during the time this thesis have been written, the choice of material was not finalised when I began writing the analysis. Instead, I have been going back and forth between the material and the analysis. Throughout this process, I have read and analysed the articles through the lens of the aforementioned questions and attempted to structure the material into themes relating to my overall research question. Consequently, after reading, and re-reading all articles, the final selection consisted of 15 articles from the Retriever Research archive which included articles from the six selected newspapers in addition to statements from several spokespersons from both parties. To broaden the scope of the material, I also turned to the webpages of the same newspapers to search for additional relevant material that had not been published in the press versions of the newspapers and were not included in the search from the Retriever Research archive. I therefore continued the search until I had 15 additional articles, leading up to 30 articles in total. Since all articles are in Swedish, I have translated the material while trying to maintain the accuracy and meaning of the original texts.

Table 1: Selected number of articles from each newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>Chosen articles</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aftonbladet</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagens Nyheter (DN)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressen</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Göteborgs-Posten (GP)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svenska Dagbladet (Svd)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydsvenskan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When I started to analyse the material, I had expected more significant differences between the two parties. This created a dilemma regarding how the material should best be presented. In order to be as transparent as possible in the analysis, I have chosen to present the findings separately, beginning with the Moderate Party. While the aim of the analysis is not to compare the parties, it is still interesting to see how two parties that represent different ideologies express their views on this matter. This way of separating the analysis may lead to repetition in the arguments presented due to the similarities between the parties. Yet, this structure makes it easier to identify similarities and differences which hopefully better capture contemporary discursive strategies than if the arguments of the parties would have been presented together. In the final part of the analysis, consequences of current policy suggestions and its implications on human rights will be deliberated. Due to the similarities of the discursive strategies presented by the parties, this part will encompass both parties simultaneously.

4. Empirical Analysis

In this section, the empirical findings will be presented and analysed. I will begin by providing a short background of the Swedish policy context in which these events are taking place before proceeding to the main analysis. The analysis is divided into two main part. The first part will review the findings of the two parties respectively and include a summary of the similarities and differences found in the material. Here, the findings will also be summarised and explored in light of the selected theories. The second part instead focuses on the potential consequences the suggestions presented by both parties may have on the group of Swedish ISIS returnees. While the theoretical framework will guide the analysis, a more throughout discussion of this thesis theoretical and empirical contribution is presented in the concluding discussion.

4.1 Background: The Swedish Policy Context

The focus on extremism and terrorism has increased in Sweden over time. When the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred, it received extensive media coverage but was not considered to be a severe security concern by Swedish politicians since Sweden had not taken part in the US-led attack on Iraq. Since then, this non-interventionist stance has changed gradually, especially after Swedish forces joined international forces in the intervention in Afghanistan (Finch et al.
The problem of violent extremism and terrorism became more recognised with the terrorist travellers who went from Sweden to Syria and it reinforced the Government’s concern for young Muslim’s with immigrant background who are mainly concentrated in marginalised urban areas (Finch et al. 2019). In 2018, a study looked at 267 of the approximately 300 individuals that travelled from Sweden to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS (Ranstorp et al. 2018:109). The researchers found that 71 percent of the travellers came from socioeconomically poor areas and that 75 percent of those who travelled were Swedish citizens but only 34 percent were born in Sweden (Ranstorp et al. 2018: 109f). In 2016, a law which criminalised travelling abroad to support terrorist groups was adopted (see prop. 2015/16:78). In 2018, the Government established a centre to work against violent extremism which unified measures and actions to prevent radicalisation and extremism (CVE 2019). The Government has also tried to prohibit membership in terrorist organisations, but this proposal has not yet been approved of the Council of Legislation and is still being processed (Justitiedepartementet 2019). These examples illustrate how violent Islamist extremism continues to be constructed as a severe threat in Sweden, leading to new and exceptional political measures being approved. Approximately 150 of those who left Sweden to join ISIS have now returned (Thomsen & Lärka 2019). The current debate foremost focuses on how to handle the situation with those who are yet in Syria and now wish to return after the fall of the caliphate. It is this discussion that this thesis seeks to analyse. Consequently, in the following empirical analysis, I will identify the main themes and thematic representations found in the material by using the method and operationalisation strategies previously outlined.

4.2 The Moderate Party

ISIS women: Bad mothers, monsters and whores?

In most articles, the sex of the ISIS perpetrators is not specified. The expression that is most commonly used is ISIS terrorists (see for example Expressen\textit{a}, Expressen\textit{b}, Aftonbladet\textit{a}, Aftonbladet\textit{b}, Sydsvenskan\textit{b}). Other descriptions are ISIS affiliates, ISIS returnees and ISIS parents. Most articles do not focus on particular people within the group of ISIS affiliates, but rather speak about the group as a whole. This way of not differentiating between women and children could be read as an expression of silence. As explained above, within poststructuralism, it is not only what is expressed that has meaning; what is not said has in itself meaning which will be further elaborated throughout the analysis. Therefore, I will begin by discussing a few statements that do not separate women and men to analyse what
this discursive strategy may stand for, before proceeding to articles where the political representatives explicitly refer to women of ISIS.

To begin with, there seem to be a consensus that neither men nor women affiliated with ISIS should be allowed to return. The party leader, Ulf Kristersson and Hans Wallmark write:

‘Some of them have apologised and asked for forgiveness. Others claim that they have ‘only’ served ISIS as a chef or ambulance driver. The Moderate Party’s response has been clear from day one: We will never contribute to those joining ISIS in Syria or Iraq and have violated everything that our country stands for are coming to Sweden. Not even as an accompanying parent’ (Expressen).

What signs then are attached to this group to prevent their return? As already noted, meaning is produced and reproduced by difference. In the political discourse, ISIS is discursively construed as opposed to Sweden, Swedish values and democracy. Consequently, this group can no longer belong to Sweden since they have turned against everything that is perceived as Swedish. The final sentence: ‘not even as an accompanying parent’, could potentially refer to women to emphasise that despite women generally being portrayed as victims of violence rather than as perpetrators, it does not apply to this particular case. On the other hand, this is not explicitly stated and may refer to parents in general. Overall, the choice to ‘turn against Sweden’ is repeatedly expressed and seems to suggest that this group are ‘traitors’ towards the free Swedish society. To exemplify, Axel Josefsson, chairman for the Moderate Party in Gothenburg states: 'We will of course not have ISIS affiliates here. They are not welcome to Gothenburg. Our city will never be their home (GPb). Consequently, it seems like Sweden is ascribed meaning in relation to ISIS returnees as the threatening ‘other’. Sweden appears as a country whose citizens hold values, rights and freedoms that are under threat from the dangerous ‘ISIS other’ which encompass the Swedish men and women who joined the organisation and now risk coming back.

Does the current discursive strategy to not distinguish between ISIS men and women suggest that women are equally guilty, or is it foremost the men that the politicians refer to? Since no differentiation is being made, the group become construed as homogenous. Hence, the current silence regarding women’s roles has meaning and consequences for how the problem is portrayed. This discursive strategy is visible when the representatives discuss the brutality of
ISIS and repeatedly express the importance that members of the organisation are put to trial and held accountable for the crimes they have committed (Expressen, Aftonbladetb, Sydsvenskan). Josefsson writes: *The people in Gothenburg should not have to wonder whether their tax money indirect goes to murdering people in other countries* (GPb). Through these descriptions, the signs that are connected to all ISIS affiliates appear to be, for instance ‘evil’, ‘guilty’ and ‘participators in a murder sect’.

A narrative that appears in the political discourse is the bad parenthood of the ISIS affiliates. Kristersson and Camilla Waltersson Grönvall write: ‘*It is the dead ISIS parents-not the children that have committed crimes*’ (Expressenb). Here, the use of the word ‘parents’ imply that both the mother and the father of the children are perceived as guilty. Another article describes how the children of ISIS parents are malnourished because of their parents’ choice to join ISIS (Expressenc). Thus, the parents are represented as responsible and guilty for the problematic situation that they have imposed upon their children. As will be further developed in the section concerning the children, one can ask how come that the children are not worthy of protection, despite the knowledge that their parents have used them as human shields? If a similar form of mistreatment would occur in Sweden and children would starve because of their parents, there would be no doubt that the social services would be involved. However, although the current representations present the situation as troubling, few suggestions are seemingly brought up regarding how the children’s situation could be handled.

While most articles speak about Swedish ISIS returnees as a group, a few articles depart from this pattern. Gunnar Strömmer and Johan Forssel write in a debate article: *There have already been reports that both terrorists and relatives to terrorists have left the camp or prisons where they have been* (DNf). While it is not defined who the relatives are, the statement indicates that these potentially could be women and children. From this point of view, the relatives may not be perceived as terrorists, but are still ascribed meaning as ‘terrorist-relatives’. In an article by Hanif Bali, he writes explicitly about the women:

*’Many of them* (Swedes that joined ISIS) *are women who went down to marry their jihadi-heroes. Most of them have had one or several kids at the scene. They are now using these children as *’Get out of Syria-free cards’* (Aftonbladetb).
Here, women seem to be perceived as having different roles. On the one hand, the reason that women went to Syria to marry their ‘heroes’ reflect a stereotypical image of women who search for a strong man to be protected by which is in line with the traditional narrative (Sjoberg & Gentry 2010, Enloe 1990). It also corresponds with Sjoberg and Gentry’s (2010) argument of how women can be construed as whores with a sexual deviancy which explains why they choose these kinds of men. Yet, that women are ‘using’ their children to ‘get out of Syria’, rather points toward a deliberative self-interest by these ‘bad mothers’, who are portrayed as using their children for their own gain. From this point of view, the women seem to make independent choices and have agency, which less clearly correspond with the traditional narrative.

**ISIS Children: Are they (or at least some) really worth saving?**

In several articles, the representatives maintain that it is the parents who are responsible, and that the children should not be punished for their crimes (Aftonbladetb, Expressena, Expressenb). For example, Kristersson and Wallmark write: ‘*Children are of course never responsible for their parents’ actions. It is the parents and only the parents who have committed crimes*’ (Expressena). This statement stresses the innocence of the children and differentiate the children from their parents. However, in a poll from April 2019, asking how to handle the situation with the children in the camp, the Moderate Party responded: *‘It is unclear whether it is even possible for Swedish authorities to operate in this area, as far as we know this has not been analysed’*. (GPa). It seems like the party not yet knows its stance due to the complexities of the settings, and from the statement above, there is no strong indication that they actively work to analyse the situation.

The children are continuously ascribed meaning in relation to their parents which appears as an overarching discursive strategy. Ulf Kristersson, leader of the party, and Camilla Waltersson Grönvall, socio-political spokesperson, argue that adoption is the best solution for orphaned children: ‘*The Government must immediately act for adoptions. Otherwise, these children-and ultimately Sweden-risk severe consequences*’ (Expressenb). From this statement, children appear to have rights, but are also simultaneously construed as potential threats to Sweden. Additionally, the same articles states that these children should receive help to return to Sweden and start over, but that this must be done in a manner that protects them from growing up in radicalised environments:
'When it comes to orphaned children who have lived in ISIS murder-sect, there are particular reasons to ensure that the children arrive to families that are well prepared for the difficult task to give the children a new and safe environment' (Expressenb).

These statements appear ambivalent in several ways. There seem to be a fear that the ISIS ‘murder sect’ is contagious and may already have influenced the children with radicalised thoughts, which risk leading to problems in Sweden in the future. At the same time, it is stressed that the children have not chosen their parents and upbringing, and therefore should have the opportunity to have a future in Sweden. Consequently, while the parents are simply viewed as threats, the discussion of the children is ambiguous since they are ascribed meaning both as innocent and as potential threats because of their connection to ISIS.

In another article, Kristersson and Wallmark take a more confronting approach towards children who have parents that are alive:

‘Does the Government plan to repatriate children of ISIS affiliates? Even if this means separating families, or that ISIS terrorists are given the opportunity to travel to Sweden? We cannot risk that Sweden becomes a safe haven for ISIS terrorists. Or that strongly radicalised powers are brought here’ (Expressena).

In this passage, children whose parent(s) are still alive are less ‘welcomed’ back to Sweden which indicates that differentiations are made between children affiliated with ISIS within the political discourse. To exemplify, Kristersson and Wallmark write:

‘If the children are brought back to Sweden, there is a great risk that relatives now, or with time get free access to Sweden. This would not only be incredibly reckless. It is neither morally defendable towards all the victims of ISIS’ (Expressena).

According to the Moderate Party, there seems to be two different risks at hand if children would be brought back. The first risk is the fear that these children may grow up in radicalised environments if they are placed with relatives who share this violent ideology, and that they may then become terrorists as well. The signs that are used to describe the children, thus seem to portray them as innocent now but also highlight how they could potentially become
dangerous in the future if the situation is not handled correctly. Secondly, if the children would be returned to Sweden, their terrorist-relatives might follow which is an even greater risk. One way of reading this strategy is that it seemingly is used as a means to legitimise the stance of not acting. Consequently, the depiction of the parents as monsters also, to some extent, stick to their children as well.

Throughout the analysed texts, there is no clear indication of whether there are any differences between the Swedish children in Syria, depending on their age, gender or origin. The children are consistently spoken about as ‘the children’ without mentioning signs connected to the categories above. However, in the portrayals of the children, their connection to Sweden is discussed and sometimes questioned. Hanif Bali asks: ‘Why should the children of the travelled ISIS parents have more right to come here than the Yazidi orphanage children who have become orphaned because of the ISIS terrorists?’ (Aftonbladetb). It is here acknowledged that small children technically do not have a Swedish citizenship since they were born in Syria or Iraq and Bali also highlights the problem of who should have the right to be Swedish and who should not (Aftonbladetb). This way of questioning whether the children of ISIS affiliates are really Swedish, emerge as a discursive strategy which suggests legitimising an approach that Sweden has no responsibility to help them. It also mirrors previously discussed strategies of racialisation regarding how hierarchies can determine how some lives can be valued more than others.

4.3 The Social Democrats

ISIS women: Only bad mothers and monsters?

The Social Democrats express a similar discursive strategy as the Moderate Party; to hinder all Swedish ISIS affiliates from returning and to not distinguish between men and women associated with ISIS (see for example Aftonbladetd, DNa, DNd, Sved). To exemplify, Mikael Damberg, Minister of Home Affairs states: ‘We have no plans on returning those who have participated in ISIS activities in the region’ (DNa). The use of the expression ‘ISIS activities’ can be interpreted as broad and could encompass both men and women. During a meeting in Washington in October 2019 Sweden was, among other countries, criticised by the US Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marc Pompeo for not repatriating citizens who have supported ISIS in the region and are now detained in the Syria and Iraq
In an interview regarding this meeting, Ann Linde, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Sweden responded: ‘The accountability for the crimes should be decided at the scene where the crimes were committed’ (Aftonbladet). It is thus argued that since the crimes were committed abroad, future prosecutions should preferably be held in the region to respect the judicial processes in Syria and Iraq (Svd). Morgan Johansson Minister of Justice and Migration claims: ‘These individuals may have committed a number of crimes there, such as murder, kidnapping, rape, arson. It is always most efficient to investigate it at the scene’. (Sydsvenskan). Consequently, although the Kurdish forces and other actors have encouraged countries to repatriate their citizens with a connection to ISIS, this is not something that the Government plans on doing (Expressen, Sydsvenskan).

Another reoccurring argument is that the safety in Sweden must be ensured. When writing about the fall of the caliphate, Damberg and Johansson state: ‘…the world and Sweden now face questions regarding how to contribute to justice and ensure the safety here at home’ (DN). The statements above are very clear regarding that people who joined ISIS should not be brought back, and there is no indication that this stance only concerns the men. As concluded above, this way of ‘grouping together’ men and women can be understood as a discursive strategy that may say something about the phenomenon since it has consequences for how the issue is perceived. For instance, it could be discussed as a potential discursive silence, where the different roles and crimes committed by men and women who joined the caliphate is consciously or unconsciously ignored.

This non-differentiation also emerges when the representatives motivate their approach to the adult ISIS returnees. Throughout the material, the atrocities of ISIS are repeatedly condemned by party representatives which appears as a strategy to legitimate that no adult returnees should be brought back. To exemplify, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven expresses:

‘These are terrorists who have committed mass-executions, crucified people, raped, beheaded, sold children and women as sex-slaves, they have thrown people from roofs and tried to mislead and crush people in all ways possible. This is pure and ritual evil and those who are guilty should take responsibility for this’ (Aftonbladet).

To begin with, the signs that are connected to the ISIS affiliates are for instance ‘evil’, ‘guilty’ and ‘participants in a murder sect’. This way of presenting ISIS as a murder sect, seems to
correspond with the narrative of the ‘war on terror’ and the barbaric actions of ‘the other’ which requires a strong response to protect Sweden at home. Regarding gender, this statement can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, men can be said to be the norm of violence and the crimes that Löfven brings up, such as the beheading of people and having women as sex-slaves, are known to have been committed by men loyal to ISIS. On the other hand, the statement above does not openly claim that only men are the perpetrators. A question that rise concerns whether women here are represented as guilty, even if they did not commit violent acts, since they supported the terrorist organisation despite their knowledge of how brutal it was? While it is not possible to find a ‘true’ answer, there are indications that women, at least to some extent, are perceived as guilty. To exemplify, Damberg and Johansson write: ‘Those who travelled to the conflict area to join ISIS knew what murder sect they gave their support to’ (DNd). Hence, there seems to be a consensus that all adult Swedes who joined ISIS did know about its brutality and therefore should be held accountable.

Yet, and importantly, in some articles the ‘womanandchildren’ narrative is visible with regard to the victims of ISIS. Beside that several articles mention how women have been sold as sex slaves, it is also discussed how children have been victims of ISIS and experienced terrible events, such as seeing their parents being tortured to death (Aftonbladeta, DNd). This implies that there is still a view that women and children are the most vulnerable and in need protection as in the classic gendered narrative. Yet, since the women of ISIS are not separated from the men, it appears like they are excluded from these portrayals of vulnerability. Through these images, victims of ISIS become constructed as the constitutive other in relation to the ISIS women.

In conformity with the Moderate Party, the Social Democrats also portray Sweden as the reference object to be protected. Damberg and Johansson write in a debate article: ‘We are a country with strong social institutions, and we should use this strength when it comes to handling the ISIS terrorists’ (DNe). Due to this progressiveness, Sweden and Swedish values have to be defended. It is not defined in the statement above what ‘Sweden stands for’, but in other articles, Swedish values are expressed together with terms such as ‘free society’, and ‘Sweden’s commitment to international law’ (Aftonbladeta, DNa DNd). Furthermore, the strategy to use the strength of Swedish institutions to combat this issue, enhances the prominence of Sweden and legitimises the need for tough policies to handle the situation. It is also mentioned how determination and long-term perspectives are required to face the threat
from terrorism (DNe). Throughout these statements, it seems like all ISIS affiliates are ascribed meaning as the ‘threatening other’ towards the progressive Sweden which is in line with the stance of the Moderate Party. This suggests that all people belonging to the group of ISIS returnees, have with their actions forfeit the possibility to receive any help from Swedish authorities and are viewed as traitors to the Swedish society. Furthermore, it corresponds with previous researched narratives regarding how the evil and inhumane ideology of ISIS stands in contrast to the developed West (Sjoberg 2018:303f), in this case Sweden.

In a few articles, the representatives explicitly refer to the women of ISIS (Sydsvenskanc, DNe). As a response to a Swedish ISIS woman detained in Syria who was interviewed and wanted to return to Sweden, Johansson said in the television news programme Aktuellt:

‘I am quite provoked by this woman who sits and says: help me home now. Yes, now Sweden suddenly fits. But a few years ago, she left from here to take part in one of the worst terror sects we have had in many years. We do not have an obvious responsibility for the people who are now sitting there’. (Expressenf).

This statement stresses how the commitment to ISIS was an active choice made by the woman and that she is responsible for her current situation. The woman appears to be construed as a traitor to Sweden and is therefore no longer entitled to support or protection from the Swedish state. Another article mentions the Swedish couple Filip and Aayan, who left Sweden for the caliphate and now have two children. After the fall of ISIS, Filip has been detained in the infamous prison Derik and Aayan and the children are situated in the Al-Hol refugee camp. Johansson write about the adult jihadists: 'Both him and her have decided to travel to a war zone a and to participate in a terror sect, despite our advice against it' (Sydsvenskanc). Since the couple chose to travel despite the warnings against going to these areas, their responsibility to have ended up in this situation is emphasised. The same article states: 'If you are an extremist and have decided to live with a terror sect in a caliphate it can be questioned whether you are fit to be a parent' (Sydsvenskanc). Here, the responsibility of both parents is brought up, which illustrates that also Aayan is attributed agency. Moreover, in this statement, Derik and Aayan are represented individually, suggesting that it was not him who forced her or lured her into the caliphate, but rather that she made a voluntary choice to travel to Syria and to join ISIS. Social Minister Lena Hallengren also makes a similar claim: If it is the case that they have committed the appalling crimes that we all have heard about in
the reports from ISIS strongholds, then they are hardly appropriate as parents (Expressen). The use of the word ‘parents’ indicates that this narrative includes both men and women. The portrayal of these women as ‘bad mothers’ relate to the familiar gendered narrative as discussed earlier (see Sjoberg & Gentry 2007) and is communicated in a similar way by both parties analysed.

**ISIS Children: Worthy of saving but can they be saved?**

While it is described how the Social Democrats hopes that more children can be brought home, the complexity of the situation and how it affects Sweden’s ability to help the children is repeatedly voiced. For instance, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, stated in April: ‘It is of greatest importance that the children’s situation is handled in accordance with the rule of law, focusing on what is best for the children’ (GPc). Moreover, Damberg said in an interview that ‘children’s rights are tremendously important’ but also upheld that Swedish authorities cannot operate in the area (DNa). Consequently, the party’s official line has been that the children ‘if possible’ should be brought to Sweden (Svdd). With Turkey’s strike in October 2019 against areas controlled by the Kurds, the situation has become even more complex (DNc). It is described how the camps where women and children are detained may be left without protection if the Kurds have to defend themselves from Turkey and also that ISIS detainees may try to escape (DNc, GPd). To exemplify, Johansson stresses that ‘it is complete chaos in the region’ (Sydsvenskan). Thus, while the children are ascribed meaning as important and prioritised by the Government, they are also linked to the problematic situation in the area which is communicated as one of the reasons for the Government’s inability to act. When the representatives talk about the children, it does not seem like the children are perceived as having agency now, rather it is discussed what is best for them. This raises the question whether the reason for this discursive strategy is that the children are too young to make their voices heard? It could also be analysed as a potential silence relating to the linguistic issue of securitization, namely how some voices are not being heard while others speak for those who are silenced (see Hansen 2000, Bertrand 2018).

The major question concerns whether and how the children should be brought home or not, and what would happen to them if they would return to Sweden. Linde said in an interview:
‘On one hand there are different laws that say that you cannot just take a child from a mother or take a child that has a Swedish mother and a father from another country. On the other hand, we have the international law. There are so many obstacles that I believe we have not been clear about from the beginning ’ (DNc).

The narrative of women as bad mothers here reappears, illustrating how the problem of the children is a result of choices made by their parents. Through these portrayals, the responsibility of the children’s situation lies on the parents who chose to leave Sweden for Syria and Iraq and not on the Swedish state. Additionally, when it is discussed whether children could be separated from their parents, it foremost concerns the legal perspective. From this standpoint, the consequences of a potential separation between parents and children are left almost unproblematised in the material. Thus, despite that the children are described as important and innocent, there are currently so many obstacles, in turn indicating how difficult it is to overcome this complicated situation.

The Social Democrats acknowledge that the Swedish state has a responsibility but the ambivalence regarding how the Swedish Government should act is repeatedly expressed (Svdb, GPC). For instance, Löfven said: ‘The children are not guilty to have ended up there, but we do not have the possibility to go to Syria and help the children. It is a special perspective that not yet has a solution ’ (Aftonbladet). Consequently, even though the children are portrayed as innocent, they are continuously ascribed meaning in relation to the situation in Syria and to their parents. This inconsistency is well captured in another statement by Löfven: Some of the children have parents who have very likely committed criminal acts, so for Sweden, it is not just about returning the children (Aftonbladet). Although this statement is not as straightforward compared to the Moderate Party, it yet seems to indicate that there is a risk that also the criminal parents will follow if the children would be repatriated. Moreover, the Social Democrats emphasise the importance of establishing the identities of the children and highlight the difficulty to do so. In an interview with Linde, she brought up the issue of knowing who the parents of the children are, especially in the cases when the parents are dead, or the children were not born in Sweden (Svdb). Hence, the representatives draw both on the legal aspects of citizenship as well as the ethical, adhering to the difficulties in establishing if the children are legally entitled to a Swedish citizenship. As a result, most arguments seem to point towards legitimatising a stance of passivity despite the party’s portrayals of the children as both innocent and important.
4.4 Summary: The Social Democrats, The Moderate Party & Discussion on Discursive Patterns

In this section, similarities and differences between the two parties will be discussed. Moreover, I will summarise how the representations found in the material resonate and dissonate with previous discourses on threat constructions of terrorism and feminist narratives of ‘women and children’ in need of protection.

The analysis has shown that there are strong resemblances in how the two parties describe women and children affiliated with ISIS. Neither the Social Democrats nor the Moderate Party make any clear differentiations between the women or children with regards to their age or origin. Consequently, the material does not display racialisation in terms of treatment of the people within the group. However, the seemingly overarching discursive strategy to not distinguish between men and women can be interpreted in different ways. As considered in the theoretical section, feminist researchers have found that women’s participation in violence (or as in this case a violent group), usually is either sensationalised or ignored (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007 & 2018, McEvoy 2009). If it is anticipated that the politicians solely refer to the men when they speak about the group of ISIS returnees, the findings of this thesis could be a case of the latter, namely that women’s violence is ignored. However, this seems unlikely for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the articles that explicitly mention men and women, signs are used to emphasise that women are, and should be held accountable for the crimes they have committed through their connection to the terrorist organisation. To exemplify, the analysis shows that ISIS women are described to have made an active choice to leave Sweden for Syria or Iraq which suggests that they have agency. From this point of view, they may also represent national security threats to Sweden. Hence, while men are the norm of violence, and usually portrayed as the main constitutive ‘other’, the dominant narrative in the current Swedish political discourse seems to indicate that women in ISIS are, if not as bad as the men, at least so bad that they should not be repatriated to Sweden, even if they are also mothers. In some ways, by not stating that it is the male ISIS affiliates that foremost have committed the most brutal crimes, the view of women as less guilty than men becomes invisible in the discourses studied. Through these representations, men and women become construed as a homogenous ‘other’ who barely is viewed as Swedish which indicate that racial identity constructions are at play within the political discourses. Whether this discursive strategy is conscious or not, the silence in terms of gender, has consequences for what is visible in the
discourse and which ‘monsters’ that appear. Here, it seems like the women affiliated with ISIS are already lost and cast as threats and therefore not recognised as grievable lives. In this temporary fixation of meaning, the view of female ISIS affiliates clearly departs from the narrative of women as in need of, and deserving protection.

Several of the articles acknowledge that the Swedish state has a responsibility for the children of Swedes who joined ISIS, but there is no consensus or clarity what this responsibility actually means. Although Sweden is put forward as a country which takes responsibility and prioritise children’s rights, there are contradictions regarding what, and how much should be done to help this group of children. It is the parents, and not the children who are currently perceived as threats to Sweden and Swedish values. Yet, the children are ascribed meaning in relation to their parents. While both parties acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, they somewhat rely on different arguments. The Social Democrats foremost claim that if the parents are alive, it is difficult to separate the children from the parents. They also emphasise the difficulties for Sweden to operate in the area. The Moderate Party instead stresses the difference between children depending on whether their parents are still alive and further articulates the risks associated with the children, both now and in the future. Thus, while both parties claim to argue for what is best for the children, the security perspective is yet very apparent. Subsequently, conflicting narratives seem to be present in the material, where the innocence of the children is weighed with the risks and problems that they are associated with, which open up for different responses to the problems presented. A difference from previous highlighted narratives that only represent children as innocent (for instance the example with Alan Kurdi), is that these children seemingly are constructed both as in need of protection and as potential threats due to their connection to ISIS. Hence, the children somewhat seem to be both included and excluded from the classic ‘womenandchildren’ narrative.

4.5 The potential Consequences

In this final part of the analysis, the potential consequences of the found representations of ISIS returnees will be analysed, focusing on human rights. As discussed in the method’s section, discourses and representations can be institutionalised and materialised in different ways. Thus, not only do discourses provide identities and events with meaning, they also make certain actions possible (Eriksson Baaz 2005:13). It is therefore relevant to scrutinise
the consequences of the current discursive representations presented by the two parties through examining what may appear as appropriate action given the representations above and to analyse what potential impact they have on human rights for this group of people. This section foremost concerns the adult returnees, since they made the choice to join the organisation and are suspected for having committed various crimes. Moreover, in the analysed articles, the adult ISIS returnees and the children are discussed separately, which indicates that the women of ISIS are ascribed meaning in relation to their men more frequently than with their children. Nonetheless, even though children are not the intended target of tougher policies, the suggested measures may also have implications for the children.

To begin with, the situation regarding the returning foreign fighters and their families is consistently expressed as a problem that requires new and extraordinary measures and both parties suggest sharpened legislation on terrorist offences (DNa, Expressen, Svd, Expressenda, DNf, Sydsvenskan, Sydsvenskanb). For instance, Löfven (S) pushes for the importance of accountability: ‘…if you commit terrorist crimes or war crimes, you should be convicted of such crimes, no matter where it happens. There should be nothing near impunity here’ (Aftonbladet). It is clear that sharpened legislation is understood as crucial, both as a solution to the problem, and to send a signal that this issue is prioritised. The Moderate Party takes a similar stand but claims that the Social Democrats have not done enough to combat the problem. To exemplify, Johan Forssell, spokesperson for migration, argues that the suggestions presented by the Government have already been realised in other countries and that Sweden needs to do more to combat terrorism:

‘What makes this grave is that Sweden might be the country that has the greatest problems with terror-travellers per capita. There is no quick fix against terrorism, it is about computer storage, secret data reading, signal intelligence and stricter consequences. It is problematic that everything is so delayed’ (DNa).

Even though the Moderate Party criticises the Government for acting too slowly, there seems to be a consensus in the discourse that the group of ISIS affiliates represent a severe threat to the Swedish society. In another article, Forssel (M) writes: How do we know that there will not be a new caliphate somewhere in a year or two? (Aftonbladet). Linde (S) takes a similar stance: ‘Even if they no longer have what they called a caliphate, they still exist and after the Turkish military offence, many managed to escape from prisons and camps. Therefore, the
coalition must remain’ (Expressen). The two last statements show that, although the caliphate has been defeated, there is still a fear that ISIS may become more threatening again, which in turn legitimises preventive measures.

In addition to different policy suggestions at the national level, some local representatives have implemented additional preventive measures. In Staffanstorp, the Municipal Council (consisting of M and SD) has gone to great length to prevent ISIS affiliates from returning by accepting a controversial proposal that hinders ISIS returnees from receiving any kind of support, financial or social, from the municipality (Sydsvenskan, DNb). According to juridical experts, this proposal goes against the constitution in addition to several other laws. Nonetheless, it was accepted even though the municipality is not expecting to receive any returning ISIS terrorists (Sydsvenskan, Sydsvenskanb). These kinds of preventive measures correspond with previous research (see Merskin 2004, Van Munster 2004, Aradau 2008, Baker Beall 2019) showing how the securitization of (Islamist) terrorism continues to legitimate controversial pre-emptive measures that, under other circumstances, would not likely have been approved.

The Moderate Party proposes to legalise the possibility to revoke citizenship for people with dual citizenships who have committed terrorist crimes (DNf, Aftonbladetc, GPb). Axel Josefsson. writes:

‘Sweden does not hinder terrorists from returning. Sweden does not-like other comparable European countries-take the citizenship from those who have chosen to fight for another power. I personally wish we could’ (GPb).

Here, other countries are brought up to further strengthen the claim that it is lawful to withdraw the citizenship from those who are not complying with the law. This proposal relates to Choudhury’s (2017) discussion regarding a first- and second-class citizenship in which the status of a citizen depends on whether the person has one or several citizenships. The Social Democrat’s response is that this question concerns the constitution and would take years to realise which does not solve the current problems. They also stress that it is important to maintain the rule of law while fighting terrorism (DNA, Aftonbladetd).
Although the Social Democrats does not seek to change the laws regarding the citizenship, they propose to make the obligations stricter for those who seek to become Swedish citizens and are currently investigating whether to include requirements on Swedish language and civics (Sydsvenskan). Johansson states: ‘I want to have better knowledge about who becomes a Swedish citizen’ (Sydsvenskan). Since this is discussed in relation to the ISIS returnees, there seems to be an underlying idea that these people were born elsewhere and are not ethnic Swedes. Thus, if the requirements for attaining a Swedish citizenship would have been stricter, they would perhaps never had become Swedish citizens at all. This discussion relates to the previous highlighted narrative that frames immigration and terrorism as twin issues, which in turn calls for stricter legislation (Fierke 2015, Gray & Frank 2019).

To conclude, the atrocities committed by ISIS members are frequently brought up by both parties as a strategy to motivate tougher policies in Sweden and to argue that this group should not be offered any consular or juridical help. This argument is partially based on the claim that the Swedish ISIS affiliates have chosen to turn against Sweden and a Swedish identity and therefore do not deserve any support. Yet, while this is the argument that is most visible in the discourse, there seem to be some disagreements between the two parties regarding how far Sweden should go to ensure that this group of men and women do not return. This is especially noticeable in the debate concerning the withdrawal of the Swedish citizenship, where the Social Democrats acknowledge that such legislation is problematic in relation to human rights, meanwhile other arguments are presented by the Moderate Party to justify the necessity of controversial legislation in this particular case. However, when these measures are discussed, the children are never brought up. This could be analysed as a potential silence since it is self-evident that children will be affected by what happens to their parents. For instance, if a woman who joined ISIS would lose her Swedish citizenship, would this also extend to her child(ren)? Consequently, the current debate raises questions about what is being said in addition to the potential silences at play. Since some of the suggested measures clearly are far-reaching, it is apparent that the current representations of the issue have consequences, not only for the men in this group, but for the women and children as well.
5. Concluding Discussion

This thesis has probed the question on how women and children affiliated with ISIS have been construed in the Swedish political discourse after the fall of the ‘caliphate’ and examined how these representations relate to dominant gender discourses through a theoretical framework guided by securitization, feminist and postcolonial theory. Since this concerns a current and ongoing question, there is still limited research on the topic, especially in Sweden, and this thesis has been an attempt to reduce this gap. By using the tools of discourse analysis, I have analysed statements from representatives of the two biggest parties in Sweden, the Social Democrats and the Moderate Party, that have been published in six of the biggest newspapers in Sweden. In this concluding chapter, the theoretical and empirical contribution of this thesis will be considered. Moreover, I will reflect around the choice of method and execution, and also present a few suggestions for future research topics.

The study has revealed that men, women, and to some extent children, are securitized in the dominant political discourses and portrayed as threats towards Sweden as the referent object. Throughout most of the material, the (adult) ISIS returnees are represented as a coherent group and no distinction is made between men and women. In the articles, crimes known to have been committed by male ISIS affiliates are brought up to give meaning to the men loyal to ISIS as the barbaric threatening other, which corresponds with previous research on the ‘war on terror’ and also with postcolonial feminist research that has exposed how some men are framed as racialised perpetrators that the West has to be protected from. However, contrary to the traditional narrative, women also appear as political agents that have made an active choice to leave Sweden for ISIS. Through these portrayals, it seems like women are held accountable and included in the description of the threatening ISIS returnees. This claim is further strengthened since the ‘womenandchildren’ in need of protection narrative is visible in the discourse when it comes to other groups that have been victims of ISIS. It thus seems like the traditional gendered narrative is applicable to other groups of women and children, but that the women of ISIS are excluded from this portrayal in the Swedish political discourse. Hence, drawing on Butler, neither men nor women associated with ISIS appear to be discursively perceived as grievable lives since they are construed as existential threats to Sweden and have forfeit their identities as Swedish and traits that are associated with Sweden. The analysis of the female Swedish ISIS returnees here indicates a departure from the classic
‘women as victims’ narrative. Given Sweden’s focus on feminism and humanitarian issues, it could be seen as surprising that the Government so strongly hinders women from returning from the Al-Hol, despite the humanitarian situation in the camp. While this thesis has attempted to highlight how the current discursive representations portray these women as a ‘lost cause’, it is up to future research to examine what the long-term consequences of these representations may be, for instance whether the current situation risks leading to more hate and radicalisation.

In the analysed material, the children are perceived as in need of protection, yet, there are conflicting ideas of what their lives are worth since they are associated with several risks and problems. When the children’s situation is brought up, the representatives seem to weigh what is the best option for them, from the perspective of Swedish (in)security. Nevertheless, in this thesis, only statements by politicians have been analysed and other media sources that may express different discursive strategies have not been included. Hence, there may be other forums where women and children are being heard in the debate that is not revealed in this material. The analysis also found how the political representatives often distinguish between children who have parents that are alive and children whose parents are dead. Overall, the portrayals of the children imply that their lives are perceived as grievable but also conditioned, since there are restrictions for what the Government is prepared to do to help them return to Sweden. However, as consistently brought up in the analysis, the situation is very complex and there are many factors determining this case which makes it difficult to analyse how the discursive strategies could be interpreted. This also relates to a limitation with this study, namely that this issue is so current. After I had analysed all articles included in the analysis, new reports came that the Government now has tried to repatriate a number of orphaned children, but that this attempt failed since the children could not be found (Malmén et al. 2019). While this shows that the Government now takes action, it yet follows the previously highlighted narratives in which the children are ascribed meaning in relation to their parents. It also reflects the stance of the Moderate Party, which could potentially lead to even stronger resemblances between the positions of the two parties.

Through the dominant political representations, exceptional securitizing measures become meaningful which has implications on human rights for this group of people. Throughout the material, the political representatives demonstrate how the ISIS returnees (them) cannot truly be Swedish (us) by illustrating how their actions contradict Swedish values which is used to
strengthen how good ‘we’ are. The result of these constructions is evident in the discussion regarding withdrawing the citizenship of ISIS returnees. If different degrees of citizenships would become a reality, one can ask whether integration can ever be possible? This further relates to the questioning of whether the ISIS returnees, both the adults and the children, are really Swedish. Here, the discussion of terrorism and ISIS returnees become intertwined with the discussion on refugees/immigrants since both parties propose to make the rules stricter for those who wish to become Swedish citizens. This kind of discussion may add to the debate on refugees and terrorism as correlated issues and risk increasing the suspicion towards those who are not portrayed as native Swedes.

In the beginning of this essay, I brought up the example with the orphaned Skråmo children, whose parents were affiliated with ISIS, and how it led to a widespread discussion in Sweden. While numerous articles were published about this case by journalists, none of the analysed articles in this thesis mention these children. Instead, they speak of all children related to ISIS as a group. Nevertheless, it is apparent that these children have had an impact on the debate, since most of the articles found were published in April and May, which was during the time discussions about these children were ongoing. The pictures that circulated, showed how the children were blonde and stereotypically ‘Swedish looking’. Since these are the only children who have yet been repatriated, one can ask whether their origin mattered, or if other circumstances were more important. However, the fact that the politicians do not differentiate between the Skråmo-children and other children, do not, at least at first glance, indicate a clear racialisation of the children within the group.

To conclude, this study has aimed to contribute to the vast research on securitization and gendered narratives of ‘womenandchildren’ in need of protection. While the thesis has identified a departure from the ‘womenandchildren’ in need of protection narrative, especially with regards to the ISIS women, further research would be required to strengthen this claim. Since this thesis only has examined the representations of this issue since the fall of the ‘caliphate’, it could be fruitful to consider a longer time period to see whether the representations of this group have shifted over time. Moreover, a suggestion for future research could be to capture a broader picture of discourses in Sweden, by including actors such as media, government agencies or other political parties. To increase the understanding of the question, it could be relevant to conduct a comparative study between Sweden and other European countries to see whether the similar representations of these groups are
prominent in other settings. To exemplify, Finland could be an interesting case to cover since the country is comparable to Sweden in many ways, but recently decided to bring back all Finnish women and children affiliated with ISIS from Al-Hol. Another suggestion for future research could be to consider whether the hesitation to place children of ISIS affiliates with relatives in Sweden could potentially be derived to the racialisation and securitization of Muslims. To exemplify, would children of Swedish right-wing extremists not be placed with their relatives because they may also be extremists? To assess this claim, a case concerning right-wing or other forms of extremism could be examined to see whether similar discursive patterns are visible. Finally, studying processes of securitization through a gendered lens, can help to better capture the context in which events are taken place. Hopefully, these kinds of studies can generate more nuanced understandings of the construction of security threats and its consequences on human rights for certain groups of people.
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