

Article – IV

Non – Traditional Security Approach in International relations: Understanding Role and Impact of ISIS Brides

Arun Teja Polcumpally¹²²

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or IS) brides and tries to explain their role in global politics through the International Relations (IR) theories. Further, it argues that the approaches of critical securitization theory would be enriched by accommodating newer agencies into the explanatory models of IR. Historical agency considerations, the emancipation of the Islamic minorities in several countries, and deriving alternatives to the problem are much needed in the 21st century. With all such developments and the rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics, one must re-structure theories in understanding the changed geopolitics. It must answer how the nature and role of ISIS brides is critical in comprehending Middle-Eastern politics, European Islamophobia, etc. The factors mentioned above, even though considered in the traditional approaches, critical securitization theory provides an agency to them. Accordingly, the paper concludes that the critical theories are the product of decades of scientific debates and would be the priority framework to examine the international issues in future.

Keywords: *ISIS Brides, Traditional Approach, Critical theories, International Relations, Robert Cox*

Introduction

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the discourse of international relations, which was initially hinged on the State being a primary actor, has appeared to take the path of global cosmopolitanism with the rise of transnational capital investments. Terms such as *Global Governance, the triumph of the Liberal Order, Climate Change* have become the signs of first significant shift in geopolitics after the Cold War¹²³. The rise of extremist groups such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, especially after the 9/11 terror attacks, has again placed nationalism at the centre stage, making the first shift short-lived. Even though global politics appeared making a full circle, there was a different type of shift underway, in the manner in which it was being played. War on Terrorism has become the pivotal point of geopolitics rather than development politics, which was one of the

¹²² Arun Teja Polcumpally is currently a doctoral fellow at Jindal School of International Studies. He is currently working in the capacity of Research Associate at Centre of Excellence on Artificial Intelligence for Human Security (CoE AI) and as a Research Assistant at Centre for Security Studies (CSS). He formerly had a brief stint as an Editor at Jindal Centre for Global South. He also holds the advisor post at *TheDigitalFuture.in* & *ADSCV foundation*

¹²³ Cox. M & Campanaro. 2016. *Introduction to International Relations*. University of London. London: 70.

major geopolitical anchors during the cold war. Extremist groups have become principal actors and started acting at an agency level if looked at from the lens of constructivism. Constructivism emphasis on the functional communications between the societies, and the meaning they construct. From a constructivist view, extremist groups become agencies as their interactions with Islamic communities across the world creates generates a different set of functional communications for geopolitics. For example, if the identity, culture, and historical interactions between people are considered, then ISIS can influence cross-border societies. Their call to Islamic caliphate spanning continents, building of Islamic Ummah are not the way in which states interact. Left uncontrolled, they are set to disrupt the established political borders. A subset of an extension from ISIS is dealt with, in this article.

A significant development in international politics that recently changed geopolitical discourse is the rise of ISIS. It all started with the establishment of 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq' and grew significantly under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹²⁴ ISIS had occupied substantial territory from al-Bab in Syria's Aleppo province to Suleiman Bek in Iraq when it declared itself a 'Caliphate' under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi on June 29, 2014.¹²⁵ This (IS) non – state actor was significant because it took a combined strength of sovereign states such as Russia, Turkey, NATO, and also other non-state actors such as People's Protection Units (YPG)¹²⁶ and Kurdish militant groups to defeat ISIS as an organization.¹²⁷

Since its establishment, ISIS has produced many sub-groups from the perspective of the West. One such subgroup is ISIS brides. This is not a term coined by the Islamic extremists but a term assigned by the western media. There are opinions not to term them as 'brides'.¹²⁸ This term emerged in the aftermath of the defeat of ISIS. Thus, we call it as a sub-group from the perspective of west. Approximately more than 550 women have joined the ranks of ISIS travelling to Syria and Iraq.¹²⁹ By far this is the largest migration who left their home country and joined Jihadi groups. This subgroup, is the focus point of the article. Recently, Shamima Begum, an ISIS bride, was rendered stateless by the United Kingdom (UK) Supreme Court.¹³⁰ She was initially a UK citizen who joined the ranks of ISIS in 2015. On the grounds of national security, her citizenship has been revoked by the government, with the Supreme Court ruling in favour of the

¹²⁴ Chatterjee, Debangana. 2016. "Gendering ISIS and mapping the role of women." *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2: 201-218. Pp 3

¹²⁵ Lister Charles. 2015. *The Islamic State: A brief Introduction*. Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India. Pp 2

¹²⁶ According to Kurdish project, a non-profit digital agency, YPG is the combined defense forces of the Kurdish area of Syria. It emerged after the Syrian civil war and started to spill over into Syrian Kurdistan, now known as Rojava, or Western Kurdistan. Kurdish Project can be accessed at <https://thekurdishproject.org/>

¹²⁷ Lister Charles. 2015. *The Islamic State: A brief Introduction*. 2015 Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India. Pp 25

¹²⁸ The World. 2019. "The women of ISIS are more than just brides." *The World*. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-14/women-isis-are-more-just-brides>

¹²⁹ Perešin Anita. 2018. "Why Women from the West are Joining ISIS." *International Annals of Criminology*. 56:32-42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cri.2018.19>

¹³⁰ BBC News. 2021. "Who is Shamima Begum and how do you lose your UK citizenship?." <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-53428191>

government. The former ISIS Bride, does not have the option of moving back to the UK even if she undergoes the de-radicalization process. This issue cannot be brushed away as an internal matter of the UK. Many such women travelled to extremism-infested countries and went back to their home countries. This issue should be considered in order to take a re-look at the International Relations theories.

International Relations is an academic branch of Political Science that provides a framework to assess, analyze and solve complex global issues. Today, it appears that the state centric narratives are capable enough in explaining the geopolitics, given the recent geopolitical incidents like the annexation of Crimea, China's call for cyber sovereignty, and the trade war between the US and China. Though there is a temporary re-nationalistic tendency, adopting such a stance can be thought of as an escape from global problems (Harari, 2018).¹³¹ In the world where people are connected to each other with smart phones, traditional state centric theories might not be applicable. Political borders don't matter in the social media platforms, and internet. For example, Russia has the capacity to intervene in the domestic elections of the US; when the Brexit has its impact on the world economy, when India's social media intermediary law raises concerns across the global digital markets. None of these issues can be explained using the state centric theories efficiently. All the above issues have their root causes somewhere else in the foreign land. It is same in the case of ISIS brides. It is not a domestic problem in many countries. It has roots in a foreign land, thereby impacting the world. International relations theories should be scouted for a practical framework that explains the role of ISIS brides in the globalized world.

With this background, let us understand how the existing theoretical approaches tackle the issue of ISIS brides. The question this article aims to ponder upon- 'Does geopolitics need a new theory to understand the role and impact of ISIS brides in global politics?'

Who are ISIS Brides?

During recruitment by ISIS, women were usually driven by similar push and pull factors like their male counterparts.¹³² They would serve as 'wives' of combatants, hold domestic affairs, intelligence, and manage 'Sharia' in the areas captured by ISIS.¹³³ The factors responsible for the Hijra (migration/Departure to Mecca) of women to the self-proclaimed Caliphate can be understood by examining diverse elements in their individual lives that 'pushed' them out of their society and 'pulled' them toward ISIS.¹³⁴ If this is how scholars have defined ISIS brides, the securitization of ISIS brides has become troublesome as no definition includes them in the concept of being a terrorist. Securitization is the action of the state or an agency that deems a particular issue to be a cause of alarm to the status quo. ISIS brides cannot be placed within the United Nations (UN) designation of 'foreign terrorist fighters'. According to the UN, 'foreign terrorist fighters' include people who get involved in terror training and violent acts,

¹³¹ Harari, Yuval, Noah. 2018. "21 Lessons for the 21st Century." 134

¹³² Perešin, Anita. 2018. "Why women from the West are joining ISIS." *International Annals of Criminology* 56, no. 1-2: 32-42.

¹³³ Tami Amanda Jacoby. 2015. "Jihadi brides at the intersections of contemporary feminism." *New Political Science*. 37:4, 525-542,pg 12

¹³⁴ Cook Joana and Gina Vale. 2018. "From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State." *International Center for the Study of Radicalization*. King's College London.

where ISIS brides fall into neither categories. If they are not considered terrorists, there should not be a problem in reintegrating them. However, this is not an easy task as the stakeholders are diverse and ideology-based. ISIS brides are those who willingly joined the false cause of Islamic extremists. Integrating them into the liberal society would cause alarm within the society. Though they are legally accepted, they would face societal rejection.

It is still unclear whether these so-called ISIS brides, actively participated as an agency and what kind of impact they have had on Muslim societies worldwide while they are with the ISIS. Another major issue would be the return of the ISIS brides after the defeat of ISIS. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization¹³⁵ report, only 254 of 7366 people who have returned to their home countries, with the defeat of ISIS, were women. Out of total ISIS affiliates only 13 percent were women. Hypothetically, if returnees were to be accepted into their home countries, they might contaminate the social cohesion by inculcating hatred towards western cultures. They might also not adjust, and society might reject them even though the state allows them to settle. Some cases mentioned in the table below suggest that radicalized women, even without performing Hijra (migration to Muslim holy land), proved to be terrorists.

Table: Events showing ISIS Brides as a threat after 2015

SL No	Name	Incident
1	Tashfeen Malik	Killed 14 people in San Bernardino, California in 2015
2	Kenyan Women supporters	Three women in Mombasa were killed by police in 2016 after pledging allegiance to ISIS. They entered a police station and stabbed an officer.
3	<i>Morocco women incident</i>	October 2016, in Morocco, ten women were arrested for plotting a suicide attack during the parliamentary elections, a case which reflected aims of the Madrid bombings in 2006. Four of these women had seemingly married ISIS members in Iraq and Syria over the Internet.
4	<i>Dian Yulia Novi</i>	Suicide plot, Indonesia
5	<i>Diana Raminova</i>	Attack on police station, Turkey
6	<i>Paris failed attack, September 2016</i>	Five were arrested after a faulty car bomb near Notre Dame was found.

Source: ICSR report – *From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*

¹³⁵Cook Joana, Gina Vale. 2018. "From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State." *International Center for the Study of Radicalization*. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

There is a practical threat of bringing the returnee women extremists back into the mainstream society. Globsec, a think tank based in Slovakia, establishes in its report that once people become jihadis, they remain forever.¹³⁶ If they are not allowed in their erstwhile home country, it is a sign of pure re-nationalizing and rise in conservatism, anti-immigration sentiments, and of course, Islamophobia. The fact that there has been much controversy around ISIS brides, whether to allow them into their homelands or not – allows us to comprehend the change that has already happened in the world's IR discourse. This sometimes asserts that, are we approaching the world where Samuel P. Huntington's theory of clash of civilizations becomes a reality? How do we understand the current dynamics in international relations or, per se, international behaviour? Even though these questions appear to bring fundamental change in the approach towards radical Islam, there is no paradigm shift to understand IR in a better way. Every theory has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. However, with all such developments and the rapid 'rate of change of geopolitical dynamics,' one has to choose the theoretical framework which effectively explains the changed geopolitics. It must answer how to understand the nature and role of ISIS brides in understanding the Middle East politics, European Islamophobia, etc.

Contextualizing International Relations and ISIS Brides:

In his book 'Global Politics' published in 2011, Andrew Heywood started with an introductory chapter that says, how the 9/11 attack had re-established the supremacy of state when liberal theorists were shortly rejoicing the dawn of cosmopolitanism. Heywood's conception of the re-emergence of states' significance can be wedded with Saskia Sassen's re-nationalization.¹³⁷ With a vantage point of global immigration, Sassen says that nation-states are acting rigid in accepting the immigrations as they fear losing their identity and control. This phenomenon can be used in understanding the re-emergence of states' significance in international politics. In this article, the immigrations are to be seen in parallel to the influx of Islamic immigrants into the Europe. If we extrapolate the Sassen's hypothesis and Heywood's proposal, then does this mean that the end of the liberal order is near? Or, the global politics has become a mix of clash of civilizations with realpolitik nature? Leaving everything out, do the theories such as neo-realism and neo-liberalism again best suffice to draft a more meaningful understanding of the present world order?

Traditional IR theories take a Hobbesian or Machiavellian approach when it comes to determining the state of nature. They consider a state or a society as the embodiment of the mutual contracts made by the egoistic individual to have greater peace within a

¹³⁶ Rekawek Kacper et al. 2019. "European Jihad: Future of the Past? From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?" *GLOBSEC*. <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/European-Jihad-Future-of-the-Past-Final-Report.pdf>

¹³⁷ Sassen. S. 1996. "Losing control." Columbia University Press. Pp 63

society.¹³⁸ Such established states are considered to be the statics by Copenhagen school of securitization or problem-solving approaches of Neo-Realism.¹³⁹ Liberals, constructivists, feminists, critical schools come full circle emphasizing - state being the primary actor. All these traditional theories hold their principal actors same for years and they do not change their fundamentals even though the entire world is changing.¹⁴⁰ Post-positivist approaches (except Marxist theorists) consider the value-laden agency communications while analyzing the conflict. Theories anchored with the positivist approach or what we called statics would not. This is because, statics take an analytical approach with the agency status catered only to the states. Accordingly, realism, liberalism, and their successors would not explain the role of ISIS brides efficiently in international politics. Reason for the latter is that, ISIS brides become a sub-group of a non-state. Static theories reject even non-state actors being the principal actors or at least actors in geopolitics. If such approaches are considered to evaluate the impact of ISIS brides in non-Islamic societies, they establish ISIS brides as a threat to the existential object within society. Here the existential object means the conception of the society as an ontological reality. The presence of matter is an ontological reality but not the society. Society is more epistemological reality. Solutions emanated from a static approach involves non-acceptance of ISIS brides' return to their native countries, unacceptance into the non-Islamic society. A research correlating Canadian media narrative and Public opinion on ISIS brides has concluded that media narratives on the influx of ISIS brides would exacerbate the feeling of islamophobia.¹⁴¹ There is no harm in generalizing this conclusion to the western media and the western societies. If a static approach is considered in analyzing the impact of ISIS brides, its discourse will be inclined towards an anti-minority regime. The spillover effects would have far-reaching effects on secularism and globalization.

Thus, traditional theories do not effectively securitize the ISIS bride issue if one looks for a long-term solution. Historical agency considerations, the emancipation of the minority (Islam), deriving alternative solutions from new paradigms are much needed. Critical securitization schools consider these new methods.¹⁴² Here, the argument is not that the traditional approaches are not applicable. Each theory has its application based on the who is applying and for what. On the whole, this paper urges to focus on the critical theoretical approach to have a holistic understanding of the ISIS bride issue.

¹³⁸ Honneth, Axel. 1996. *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Mit Press, 1996. Pp.16

¹³⁹ Cox, R. W. 1981. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), 126-155. doi:10.1177/03058298810100020501 . pp 129

¹⁴⁰ Rosecrance Richard. 2009. "The Failure of Static and the Need for Dynamic Approaches to International Relations." in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*. Ed. Christian Reus-Smit, Duncan Snidal. 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219322.003.0043

¹⁴¹ Jiwani Yasmin. 2021. "Gendered Islamophobia in the Case of the Returning ISIS Women: A Canadian Narrative." *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. 6 (1): 52-77. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/islastudj.6.1.0052#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹⁴² Dikshaya Ali. 2013. "Towards a Critical Securitization Theory: The Copenhagen and Aberystwyth Schools of Security Studies." *E-IR*. February 1, 2013. <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/01/towards-a-critical-securitization-theory-the-copenhagen-and-aberystwyth-schools-of-security-studies/>

Critical theory approach

According to Robert Cox, critical theory questions the prevailing social & power relationships, and institutions "by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing".¹⁴³ In order to solve the issue of ISIS brides and get hinged to an answer of whether to reintegrate them, one has to side with either a critical school or problem-solving approach. With the whole episode of ISIS - brides, it is better to consider that the international politics has a new entrant as an agency. It prompts analysts to look at the global political conditions from a paradigm that accommodates state and non-state actors.

Frankfurt school of thought would be best suited in analyzing and understanding the role of ISIS brides in international politics and conflict resolution. According to Andrew Heywood, third-generation theorists of the Frankfurt school, such as Robert Cox and Andrew Linklater, explains international politics in three ways.¹⁴⁴

1. Critical theory suggests more reflexivity, recognizing that existing theories are a construct of the established norms.
2. Commitment to emancipatory politics, bringing in a problem-solving approach.
3. Moving away from the traditional notions of the state being the primary actor in geopolitics and be more inclusive considering non – state actors and societies.

Reflexivity:

Reflexivity concerning ISIS brides will i) explore the problem based on the historical roots and ii) how the modernization of the current world order would help solve the problem and iii) analyze the cause-effect cycle.¹⁴⁵ This reflexivity should not be generalized loosely. It must consider constructivist and communitarianism approaches. Constructivist approach will take the functional communications of the societies across the world and communitarianism would consider the cultural beliefs and social relations. Such approaches allow the analysis to consider the history, identity, culture, social and societal communications of the ISIS brides.

The recent upheaval regarding Shamima Begum¹⁴⁶, Whether to accept her return to the UK or not can be analyzed contextually using the above set of critical theories. Communitarianism analyzes the relation of an individual within the society. The functional or actions that are generated based on the communication between the individual and society will become the explanatory factors. Such factors asks to consider prospectus functional interaction of an ISIS bride with the society in consideration, in case of re-assimilation. Such analysis will not be only from the vantage point of the ISIS bride but also other individuals and society.

¹⁴³ Cox, R. W. 1981. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. 10(2). 126–155. doi:10.1177/03058298810100020501. pp 128.

¹⁴⁴ Heywood, Andrew. *Global politics*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2014. pp 75

¹⁴⁵ Al-Kassimi, Khaled. "Critical terrorism studies (CTS): State sponsored terrorism identified in the (militarized) pedagogy of (US) law enforcement agencies." *Cogent Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1586813. pp21

¹⁴⁶ BBC News. 2021. "Shamima Begum Case." Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/c347vzp58nzt/shamima-begum-case>

If the UK anchors on a constructivist view, the decision not to allow it immediately reflects the interaction between the society and structure, which is built on individualism. Accepting ISIS brides would trigger already existing Islamophobia which threatens the order of individualistic society. This was represented in the research on Canadian media mentioned in the earlier section. Nevertheless, the latter cannot be assumed to be true for countries like Turkey and India as the society in these countries has a nature of accepting diversity historically.

Thus, the reflexivity should have a synthesis of constructivism and communitarianism. For a comprehensive solution, both communitarianism and constructivism should be considered to evaluate the impact of the re-integration of ISIS brides reflexively. Such reflexive analysis will provide impetus to more accommodative and innovative policies.

Emancipatory:

From the viewpoint of feminism, ISIS brides cannot be looked from a dichotomous angle of victim and perpetrators.¹⁴⁷ Such paradigm would leave the policy makers to make a choice no matter what the reality is. Similarly, bi-linear explanation of men – women also will not suffice the conflict management or resolution strategies. In international politics, a pure feminist approach of considering women to be an agency in decision making and influencing the society makes the ISIS brides a primary actor. On the whole, a gender differentiation should be pure analytical but not fundamental to the policy making or research, when considering the ISIS impact on the non- Islamic societies. When it comes to ISIS brides being a victim or perpetrator, it would be better to consider them a nodal point without any pre-notions.

Post-Structural Approach:

Research on media reports from The Independent, The Guardian, and The Telegraph from 2014 to 2017 has revealed that religious radicalization makes the actions of jihadi brides apolitical. A research paper analyzed the above media articles concludes that the discourses are of two types. Low data (popular culture sources) and high data (provided by elite media/state institutions).¹⁴⁸ Low data provides the paradigm of non-traditional sources while the high data provides from the traditional power holds. Understanding ISIS brides from the media discourses need a poststructuralist approach as media discourse shall shape public opinion. Internet today is spreading rapidly, and in no time, all the world population would have access to it. Such a platform brings people and their communications closer, blurring the gaps between high data and low data. Accordingly, the media agencies are not restricted to only state press releases and registered media channels but also social media communications. This is because it provides a deconstruction approach while accepting the contextual nature of the discourses. ISIS brides would play a role of agency in the Islamic regions, where they have their societal role recognized by the culture and political systems of the land. Western laws provide liberty and are not communitarian systems. That would not allow brides to behave like

¹⁴⁷ Chatterjee, Debangana. 2016. "Gendering ISIS and mapping the role of women." *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2: 201-218.

¹⁴⁸ Martini, Alice. 2018. "Making women terrorists into "Jihadi brides": an analysis of media narratives on women joining ISIS." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3: 458-477. Pp6

an agency. This contextual nature would alter the role and impact of ISIS brides in international relations. It is essential to know what society, state, and individual think about ISIS brides. At the same time, it is essential to know the groups or individuals influencing specific images of ISIS brides.

Conclusion

A mixed approach within the critical school of securitization would suffice the void in solving the reassimilation issue of ISIS brides more holistically. This article has considered four approaches – the Frankfurt school as a framework and constructivism, feminism, and post-structuralism as an explanatory subdomain of the critical theory framework. This helps in understanding the role and impact of ISIS brides while considering their re-integration and reassimilation. Even though the method was explained taking each approach individually, the holistic analysis would be possible if all the four approaches are combined. The poststructuralist lens will provide a critical understanding of the situation, and the Frankfurt school approach shapes the attitude towards problematizing the issue. Feminism would take us away from the existing preconceptions and notions of society, and finally, constructivism shall provide importance for ISIS brides as an agency in international politics. The proposed method in no way encourages ISIS or its sub-groups. It is proposed to understand the issue more deeply and identify a solution to cripple the extremist groups permanently. As this approach considers historical, reflexive, and emancipatory perspectives, it is hoped that the solution emerging from this framework would encourage ISIS brides to give up their links to radical thoughts.

This approach might appear like that of a 'realist utopia.' John Rawl claimed that the latter is possible if global studies are based on few fundamental goals such as eliminating unjust war and eliminating poverty. Jürgen Habermas opined that realist utopia would be possible by deliberative democracy, but not at a global level. This paper wants to make another realist utopian approach towards ISIS brides, which is the critical school approach. It is no wonder if it appears to be dichotomous. Because, with the lens of Habermas on one side and Rawls on another, they respectively appear to focus on Islamophobia and emancipation of unjust groups, which in turn reveals conservatism and liberalism, which are opposite of the same coin.

It is urged to note that this paper does not take a stance as to allow ISIS brides to re-integrate into the society. As already explained in the main section of the article, the answer would vary with the societies and the impact assessments. This is an attempt to provide a method to make the decision.