

SHAMIMA BEGUM: MASS MEDIA'S AGENDA-SETTING POWER AND ISIS REPATRIATION POLICY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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This essay explores critical arguments for and against restrictions on immigration in the United Kingdom, thousands of British nationals have travelled to join the organisation Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With the downfall of the so-called caliphate in Syria, many of these fighters are attempting to return to their home country. Most notably, the recent case of Shamima Begum inculcated a public debate on what to do politically with “repatriating” these former ISIS members. This article examines the agenda-setting power of the media and its impact of determining repatriation policies towards former ISIS members in the United Kingdom. The paper will establish a theoretical framework based on previous agenda-setting literature, discuss the relationship between the media, public opinion, and policymakers, and link the Begum case with these factors. The findings illustrate a relationship between relevant media coverage and the policy outcome in the case study.

Introduction

Radical Islamic terrorism has been a dominant security issue in the last few decades. One of the most infamously prolific radical Islamic terrorist groups is known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS (as of writing) is holding onto their last strongholds in Syria and is currently fighting a Western military coalition led by the United States. In this moment, questions arise regarding what political action should be undertaken by particularly Western countries against former ISIS members that are nationals of said countries in a so-called "post-ISIS era". For the purpose of this paper, these measures are collectively defined under "repatriation policies". In these Western countries, the mass media has arguably had a key role in defining the public perception of this policy area through issue-framing, in particular. This paper seeks to answer the question "Does the content of the media shape the policy agenda set by bureaucrats and politicians?" in relation to the repatriation of these former ISIS members. Specifically, this paper looks at how the mass media has shaped the general public attitude towards this issue and how that has affected the enactment of counter-terrorism measures by Western politicians. This paper is placing a distinction on the term "mass media" as the scope of focus to eliminate aspects of social media that would be otherwise included in the general term of "media". This paper looks at the repatriation process of Shamima Begum (originally from the United Kingdom) and how the process was reported by the mass media as its case study. We will then look at how the government of the United Kingdom reacted in that instance and analyse how this connection between the media and the government sets the repatriation agenda in this particular case. This study will be structured in the following manner: defining key concepts, detailing of previous literature on the role of the media in agenda setting, specifying the theoretical framework for this study, expansion on Begum's story, discussion and analysis, and then the conclusion. In pursuit of this question, the paper aims to demonstrate that mass media does play a role in setting the agenda of counter-terrorism as a facet of ISIS member repatriation in the United Kingdom.

Defining Key Concepts

Before unpacking this research, we must first define a few key concepts that will be used in this

study. This paper utilizes the term terrorism to be the method by which intimidation is regularly used against civilian populations for political means (Norris et al. 2003). Terrorism is an extremely broad issue, so this paper aims to be as specific as possible by establishing radical Islamic terrorism as its main focus. The term of repatriation, in its most basic form, is a general term used to encompass the return of nationals back to their home countries (Bradley 2013). This term has been applied to the political science literature relating to refugee policy and describes the plight many refugees face in the quest for permanent resettlement. However, in the context of former terrorist group members, this concept, legally and politically, is still a developing topic. For ease, this paper adopts the basic definition of repatriation for its purposes. It is important to note that while radical Islamic terrorism is a global phenomenon, we want to concentrate on the media activity of British outlets and the framing of this issue in that area for the purposes of our research.

Literature Review

The agenda-setting literature extensively details the role of the mass media in setting the agenda. Iyengar (1990) details the influence of framing mechanisms utilised to display choice or decisions to the public. He details this within a world where political issues are multi-dimensional and up to various interpretations, framing of issues heavily influence the public responses to those issues (Iyengar 1990). Framing is used to streamline and prioritise certain stories over others, which promotes a certain interpretation of events unintentionally (Norris et al. 2013). Framing also organises the assortment of facts, events, and developments into regular patterns that are then easily understood (Norris et al. 2013; Rose & Baumgartner 2013). The side effect of this practice is a prevalence of "one-sided" stories that infers a broad consensus about how to react to a certain terrorist event (Norris et al. 2013). Furthermore, the public perceive political issues through the lens of the mass media (Iyengar 1990). Based on our previous detailing of framing in the media, this phenomenon extends the influence of the media on public opinion (Iyengar 1990). Within context, the effect of the media in framing terrorism as an overall issue is powerful in shaping public opinion. Specifically, the way the media shapes the stories of former ISIS members is forceful in determining

how people will perceive the overall issue of repatriation. This is incredibly notable in the United Kingdom as the discourse surrounding terrorist events systematically defaults to a widespread negative reaction.

The literature on the media framing of terrorism has been previously documented. Brinson and Stohl (2012) studied the impact of media framing of the 2005 London bombings on public attitudes towards civil liberties and Muslims. They also measured public support for counter-terrorism policies in the aftermath of the attacks (Brinson & Stohl 2012). When terrorism is framed as a domestic issue (or as homegrown, for instance), there is a greater sense of fear than if the issue is framed as an international threat (Brinson & Stohl 2012). This heightened sense of fear leads to greater support for civil liberties restrictions as a security measure (Brinson & Stohl 2012). This sensation reflects the powerful effect of media framing on public perception.

Theoretical Framework

There are certain assumptions regarding the agenda-setting framework guide the formation of this paper's argument. Primarily, we perceive the agenda-setting function of the media to operate in a "bottom-up" manner. This implies that the government's agenda responds to the agenda determined by the public (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg 1995). The model is based upon the idea that in a democracy, the public agenda is reflected in the agendas of the government's political parties (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg 1995; Hakhverdian 2012; Ford et al. 2015). Therefore, the actions of political officials are dependent on the will of their constituency (Hakhverdian 2012; Page & Shapiro 1983). This infers that democratic political officials respond to audience costs and are rational actors. In our case study, this would mean that government officials of the United Kingdom operate based on the will of the public because their agenda is in accordance with the public agenda. In a democratic regime where officials are publicly elected, this claim is plausible. The role of the media in this framework is to simply transmit the public agenda to politicians as an "information channel" (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg 1995).

In a world where policy issues evolve, the salience of policy issues fluctuates based on the amount of attention of the mass media, and therefore, the

public, give to it (McCombs 2004). It's important to note that this includes an assumption that the mass media and the public have a limited amount of focus on issues and therefore creates an environment of competition for attention between policy issues (McCombs 2004). This framework assumes that public opinion does have a significant effect on policy-making. It also assumes the policy-makers care about audience costs and cater their political decisions based on public opinion. Because we are using a democratic regime as our base for research, we will apply these observations into our framework. It is assumed that mass media accurately reflects public opinion and general sentiment on certain issue areas. This assumption is based on the idea that media outlets are pandering to consumers reading accurate information that reflects their own views. Perceiving this, politicians and bureaucrats then take in media outputs as a reflection of popular sentiment and create policy based on what they perceive in the media. In the case of ISIS repatriation, the mass media's reports of individual cases give way to issue framing of repatriation as a whole. This means that media outlets can frame how the information regarding these individual cases are presented and therefore, how the general issue is highlighted.

For this paper, we are also assuming that the mass media is the only form of contact for the public with politics. This is inherently ignoring the role of social media for the purposes of this argument. This allows us to have a targeted focus on the relationship between the mass media, the British public and the British government. The paper also utilises the assumption that media coverage operates as various "media storms", rather than as issue punctuations. Boydston et al. (2014) describe media storms as a "sudden surge in news coverage of an item, producing high attention for a sustained period." As a clarification, the item is used to describe a general event or issue. They then divide media coverage into storm and non-storm coverage (Boydston et al. 2014). This system of media coverage illustrates the media behaviour of the case study in this paper.

Case Study: Shamima Begum

There are various case studies of repatriation of ISIS members that expand all over the West. However, to preserve the integrity of this paper, we have elected to focus on just one case in detail of ISIS repatriation that reflects phenomena from

the literature instead of a case study from each of the described Western states. This paper will be focusing on the case of Shamima Begum, a British national who left the country as a teenager to join ISIS in Syria. We are focusing on this case study as it has a breadth of media coverage, which is easily observable. For this case, we look at the rescinding of her British citizenship by the Home Office as the official policy response to her attempt at repatriation. These policy responses are on the opposing side of the spectrum in comparison to a reintegration model.

Begum infamously left the United Kingdom with two of her East London school mates for Syria in 2015. Her group of friends had communally connected to ISIS members online and felt the need to join them on the front lines. In the aftermath of her departure, Begum subsequently married a Dutch ISIS fighter named Yago Riedjik and began having a family with him. She had two children, who subsequently died due to poor living conditions. In February 2019, she was awaiting giving birth to a third son. It is at this timeframe that the “media storm” regarding her repatriation efforts began, beginning with an interview with reporter Anthony Loyd from The Times, who had tracked her down. This is after she moved into al-Hawl refugee camp in northern Syria after fleeing intense war conditions. With the ISIS “caliphate” in Syria winding down, Begum sought to return home with her child so that they could have a better chance of survival. Shortly after her son was born, the British Home Secretary Sajid Javid revoked her British citizenship, and her newborn son subsequently died. The debate surrounding the decision gripped the British media and the British public for the duration of the media storm, which ended in late February.

Coverage

The coverage of Begum’s case was similar in the following way to various other cases of repatriation of former ISIS members and terrorism as a general issue: there was a distinct framing of the situation in a security-based context. Utilizing the assumption that the media’s relationship with the public is to reflect and communicate the general opinion to a wider audience, this shows that the British public are more inclined to think about Begum as a security threat rather than as a fellow citizen. After Begum first talked to The Times in February 2019, many aspects of her allegiance to ISIS were the core focus. Many people perceived her to be

unrepentant, especially when she did not attempt to apologize for her actions. She further claimed that she did not do anything wrong in joining ISIS (Sky News 2019) and that people should have compassion for her situation (Perraudin & Dodd 2019). She simply wished to return home to London so that her unborn son would be able to have a good chance at life (Sky News 2019). She said that it was “truly not possible” for her to spend the rest of her life in the camp she was in (Sky News 2019; BBC News 2019b; Perraudin & Dodd 2019). Culturally, many wondered about how “British” she really was after joining ISIS and if she was still a security threat. Headlines showing “Shamima Begum: you should have sympathy for me” (Burgess 2019) framed her situation as less than sympathetic. This negative coverage supports the idea that the policy reaction reflects public opinion through the vehicle of media framing based on the assumptions made previously. These headlines suggest that Begum’s story is framed negatively and that she is still a threat, which highly resonates with the public of the United Kingdom. This phenomenon supports the findings illustrated by Brinson and Stohl (2012) regarding the salience of homegrown terrorism in media framing.

Discussion and Analysis

This paper aims to demonstrate that mass media does play a role in setting the agenda of counter-terrorism as a facet of ISIS member repatriation in the United Kingdom. This section of this paper will attempt to connect the previously established theoretical agenda-setting assumptions to the case of Shamima Begum.

This paper assumed that the role of the media operated in a bottom-up manner and transmits information to politicians on behalf of the public. While this case study may not empirically show a causal relationship between the media and policy outcomes, there are certainly grounds for this assumption. Javid’s decision to revoke citizenship catered to a certain body of public opinion, which was amplified by the use of the media. Building off of Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg’s 1995 findings, we could argue that the Begum case study shows a policy outcome that occurred only after a heightened amount of media coverage. If Begum had not used the media as her method for wanting to return to the United Kingdom, the outcome of her case could have ended differently because there was not a heightened awareness of her story and

the underlying issue it represents. The amplifying nature of the media places political pressure on officials to act swiftly and effectively to respond to the heightened public awareness. Referencing Boydston et al. (2014), the media storm “are indeed consequential and can lead to heightened public awareness of the underlying issue.” This public awareness creates more social pressure for politicians to act accordingly.

The decision to revoke Begum’s citizenship can be seen as a popular decision. Javid’s penal moves against repatriation seemed to resonate with the British electorate based on various poll results. A Sky News snap poll indicated that approximately 78% of Britons approved of the move to remove Begum’s citizenship in February 2019 (Carr 2019). A YouGov poll demonstrated similar results at 76% approve of Javid’s decision (YouGov 2019). The same Sky News poll also indicated that 79% of Britons agree that the government of United Kingdom should have the ability to remove citizenship if a citizen joins a terrorist organization (Carr 2019). It should be noted that only 6% of Britons indicated “do not know” for that question, reflecting the firm stance of Britons responding on the issue (Carr 2019). Furthermore, the same poll asked if the respondent would approve of removing citizenship even if it meant leaving someone stateless, which is illegal under international law (United Nations 1961, p. 11). 65% of respondents indicated ‘yes’, showing clear support for a tough stance on repatriation (Carr 2019). In conjunction with public support for the decision, Javid went for a more hard-line tactic that was in support with the public, rather than what was advised by the Home Office itself (Awan 2019; Greenslade 2019). Some argue that this pandering to the electorate connects to a greater plan of Conservative Party leadership in his future (Greenslade 2019). This would be aligned with his participation in the Conservative Party leadership race in 2019. The public support for the hard-line response to Begum’s situation reaffirms observations from Brinson and Stohl (2012)’s research. Javid’s decision to make a popular decision catering to far-right Conservative party members supports our previous assumption that public officials respond to public opinion. While the poll results themselves cannot effectively conclude that the public opinion influenced Javid’s decision, there is still evidence that he made a decision that ended up being popular. Additionally, there is evidence that he acted in reaction to the

opinions of his party elites. Were this paper to implement methodologies such as content analysis or regressions, we may be able to more accurately say that there is a relationship between the media and policy outcomes.

The media, in this case study, based on the statistics stated previously, reflects this policy issue in accordance with public opinion. Many of the pieces written for the media outlets, while varying in opinion, share various themes in accordance with public opinion. Many columnists capitalize on the negative public attitudes towards Begum’s situation: articles titled “Jihadi bride”, “IS (ISIS) bride” (Carr 2019; Harker 2019; Sky News 2019), and “IS teenager (schoolgirl)” (Casciani 2019; BBC News 2019a; BBC News 2019b) stress Begum’s association with ISIS and shift focus away from a neutral description. The continued framing of Shamima Begum as a member of ISIS correlates her as a threat to Britons, and therefore reinforces negative attitudes towards her. This framing mechanism supports Iyengar (1990)’s and Norris et al. (2003)’s academic findings.

Implications

The goal of this paper was to answer the question; “Does the content of the media shape the policy agenda set by bureaucrats and politicians?” It argued that the media shaped the repatriation policy agenda in the case of Shamima Begum through reflecting and amplifying the public opinion. This paper detailed a comprehensive theoretical framework by citing previous literature regarding agenda-setting mechanisms of the mass media. This paper also made assumptions for the main argument that were then built upon through the detailing of Begum’s story and the succeeding media storm surrounding it. The policy decision on her case showed a possible connection between the public opinion and a desired policy reaction that was amplified by the mass media’s framing tools. The empirical evidence from this case study support the hypothesis and answers the research question in this context. This phenomenon arguably shows the power of the media in determining policy outcomes in coordination with public opinion. However, we should note that this is still a limited scope for analysis. While there are other similar cases, Begum’s story was extremely detailed and in-depth. Despite this, we want to illustrate the agenda-setting framework applied to this situation.

As ISIS continues to fall, we can expect more of its former members to try to return home and be repatriated. The media's constructions of former ISIS members clearly may have a more poignant role than was previously thought before. There is certainly room for further research into the different aspect of this phenomenon. In particular, there is room for analysis on the distinctions of gender and ethnicity in this situation. Would Shamima Begum be portrayed differently if she were an ethnically white man from a British family? Or does the media construction of terrorism transcend those identities and perceive repatriation as an even higher security threat if she were a man? There are certainly other instances of ISIS repatriation, especially in Europe and Australia, which could provide insight into this. The theoretical framework in this paper could provide the grounds for further research on the subject. In the near future, we can only expect higher numbers of ISIS member repatriation and, based on the findings in this paper, can anticipate that they will also end up in a similar result.

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