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# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

## The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

*In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).*

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## Immigration and Insecurity: Post-9/11 Fear in the United States

John Tirman

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The attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed the landscape of global security, none more than borders and immigration. The topography of citizenship, belonging, and suspicion instantly changed for Arab and Muslim communities in the United States. They drew the sharp attention of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence services, and that continues. But the public's focus has swung south to scrutinize the U.S.-Mexican border as a source of insecurity. For the most part, the alarms about immigrants as threats are exaggerated. And the policy choices driven by these concerns—much larger border security measures in particular—are costly in a globalized economy and unnecessary for security in any case.

The ferocious law-enforcement reaction to 9/11 overwhelmed Arab and Muslim communities. At the same time, other immigrants, legal or not, were affected, and most of those migrants are from Latin America, particularly Mexico. So the initial focus of attention, reflecting the ethnicity of the 9/11 attackers, actually affected a much broader swath of people in or hoping to enter the U.S. Only now are we seeing the consequences of this sweeping vigilance.

Muslims in America, about equally from South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Southeast Asia, were targeted along with their institutions. Several hundreds or thousands of men were detained for months or longer without being charged with crimes, and many were deported for minor infractions. Muslim charities were targeted by the FBI, with many of them closed down and a number of them prosecuted. Transnational labor migration was sharply curtailed. Student visas were more difficult to obtain. Mosques were and are under constant surveillance. Many Muslims and Christian Arabs felt intimidated

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about speaking out on foreign policy and security issues, particularly the Iraq war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The rationale for the U.S. Government's action was that these people potentially support terrorism. Yet we now know, through the Report of the 9/11 Commission, that there were no domestic conspiracies of any significance at the time of the attacks, and there have been none revealed since. Of the more than 400 U.S. prosecutions of individuals on terrorism-related charges, virtually none charged were involved in a plot against America.<sup>1</sup> "Another 500 people have been charged with immigration violations," said a *Washington Post* investigation last year, "after an initial report linking them to a terrorism or homeland security threat."<sup>2</sup> Still, little or nothing has come to light suggesting a domestic conspiracy—nor, indeed, terrorists coming into the country illegally.

## Insecure Borders

The effort to round up Muslim and other Arab men continues. It is preventative in many of its features, as with the Palmer raids of the 1920s: "a broad-based approach," writes legal scholar David Cole, seeking "to neutralize all persons who [the Justice Department] thought might pose a potential future threat. This preventive approach, unmoored from concepts of individual culpability, would prove to be a recurring feature of law enforcement in times of crisis."<sup>3</sup> This legal aggressiveness, notably, proceeds simultaneously with efforts to tighten airport and seaport security, which have been roundly criticized as inadequate, inept, or fraught with corruption.

It also proceeds while the attention of the public has shifted. Due to a harsh immigration control bill passed by the House of Representatives—which would make entry by unauthorized immigrants an aggravated felony—a sharp, new focus on the security of the U.S.-Mexican border is apparent.

Several factors are shaping the increasingly fractious debate about Mexican immigration. Security is most prominent: many politicians and commentators have posed the Mexican border as a security threat. Migration has long had security implications, but mostly linked to "social" security—jobs, welfare, etc.<sup>4</sup> Today it is the threat of terrorism that frames debate. The fear—thus far, unfounded—that al Qaeda will sneak across the "unguarded" 2,000-mile border accounts for the urgency.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the House bill is called the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005.

The security anxieties mix with the more ordinary opposition to Mexican migrants, a longstanding tendency in American history. Related to issues of overwhelmed border area hospitals and schools, competition for low-skilled jobs, and the effect on wages, this opposition focuses its ire on the 10-12 million who are "illegals." While the overall impact of immigration, including unauthorized workers, is a net positive for the U.S. economy, the localized effects can be difficult for border states, particularly as government support for social services has declined over time. The effect of unauthorized immigrants on wages of American workers, another hot-button issue, is uncertain.<sup>6</sup>

So measures such as electronic fences, deployment of national guard troops, roundups of unauthorized workers in places of employment, and expanded border patrols are advocated to keep illegal immigrants out and provide an added shield against al Qaeda. Some have suggested the same for the Canadian border. But do such policies work?

## Clash of Globalizations

Such measures have not worked in the past with respect to Mexican workers. As migration theorist Douglas Massey points out, the higher levels of security in heavily trafficked areas such as San Diego merely dispersed the entry points as well as the unauthorized migrants once they were inside the U.S. In effect, he notes, these policies have transformed a "regional movement affecting three states into a national phenomenon affecting all 50 states [and] a seasonal movement of male workers into a settled population of families."<sup>7</sup> Because these heightened-security measures raise the costs of entry, the workers tend to remain in the United States much longer than they once did, while the overall numbers continue to climb.

This reflects the powerful relationship between immigration and economic globalization, including the loosening or elimination of borders, a feature of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. When debated in the early 1990s, NAFTA was pictured as a solution to illegal immigration. As scholar Peter Andreas observed several years ago, this “solution” actually “fuels such immigration in the short and medium term. . . . The combination of NAFTA and the side-effects of Mexico’s own domestic market reforms will add as much as several hundred thousand to the number of Mexicans who migrate to the United States annually though at least the end of the century.”<sup>8</sup> This has proved to be precisely correct.

Nor should it be surprising, since the integration of the North American economy was one NAFTA’s goals, and that integration—in trade, capital and investment, communications, legal harmonization, etc.—must include the labor force as well. But another globalization, that of a worldwide security net and deterrent to violent, non-state actors, is at cross purposes with this long wave of economic reform. The “securitization” of migration, a global phenomenon of ever-expanding security envelopes, makes it much more difficult for migrants to cross borders, even as the world economy demands such movement.

### Effects on Communities

For Latinos in the United States, the perceived level of intimidation has gone up markedly since 9/11. In a lengthy survey of Californians taken a year ago, the University of Southern California reports that since 9/11, 55 percent of Hispanics felt “less secure.” Eighty percent said they “worry more about the future” than before 9/11. Thirty-seven percent report making less money than before 9/11, and 72 percent of those attribute those losses to 9/11.

Interestingly, perhaps paradoxically, of those Middle Easterners polled in this survey, 42 percent said they feel less secure since 9/11; 70 percent worry more often; 29 percent say they are making less money. All of these are about 10 percentage points lower for Middle Easterners than for Latinos. The one exception is in racial or ethnic discrimination: significantly more than half of Pakistani, Iranian, and Arabic respondents say they have been victims, which is much higher than for Latinos. For all groups, remittances—a source of income for developing countries that far exceeds official aid programs—have dropped sharply.<sup>9</sup>

These figures may reflect the impact of harsher immigration policies, rhetoric, news media coverage, and vigilante groups. “The ‘collateral consequences’ of such policies,” writes migration scholar David Hernandez, “inflict hardships on immigrants’ families,” such as “financial and emotional distress, increased risk of fatal disease, and increased social risks to vulnerable children. Many of these consequences of immigrant detention fly under the radar of public opinion or concern, and have been termed ‘invisible punishment.’” This may be true particularly of a mixed-status family in which one or more family member is a citizen and one or more is not. This mixture characterizes one in four families in California and one in six in New York.<sup>10</sup> The effects on families of criminalizing unauthorized immigrant workers would surely be devastating, especially for children, a very high percentage of whom are citizens.

A concern among some observers—particularly in light of what we know of the terrorist bombings in Madrid and London and the alleged plot in Toronto—is that deep disaffection among immigrant groups, aggravated by intense anger at wars in Iraq and Afghanistan particularly, create social volatility. A feedback loop of global scope may be feeding insecurity among immigrants and natives alike.

### Solutions and Non-solutions

The Department of Homeland Security, the most prominent domestic response to 9/11, is now seen as poorly planned and managed. Now it is likely to be given new border security tasks in response to the unsubstantiated concerns about the Mexican border spurred by a few politicians, anti-immigration groups, and supportive news media. DHS will post more border patrols and other highly visible (but ineffective) fixes. And like border militarization, making 11-12 million unauthorized immigrants into felons is a policy that cannot be implemented and would be haphazardly punitive. It is also unnecessary.

More promising ideas would forge a route to citizenship for the millions here and a guest worker program for those who wish to come. Both should appeal to those worried about security. The veneer of false identities would be stripped away from those here as they apply for citizenship. The criminal networks of human traffickers—“snakes” and “coyotes”—would be rendered useless by a guest worker program. (During the Bracero program, a guest worker scheme of 1942-64 occasioned by labor shortages of the Second World War, unauthorized immigration was reduced dramatically.) Border patrols can then focus on actual security matters, if any arise.

The security anxieties sparked by immigration are disproportionate to the actual problems posed. The arrest of people on legitimate terror lists was obviously an overdue measure. But otherwise there is little cause for alarm from immigrants. Economic opportunity, social cohesiveness, and national safety are not threatened by the ordinary labor migration that has enriched the United States for three centuries. Unauthorized immigration is well understood by scholars, and reasonably promising solutions are available. If the political process is working properly, the dislocations caused by previous mistakes in immigration policy should be readily and humanely correctible.

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#### article footnotes

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2 Mary Beth Sheridan, “Immigration Law as Anti-Terrorism Tool,” *Washington Post* (June 13, 2005): A1.

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6 G. H. Hanson, R. Robertson, A. Spilimbergo, “Does Border Enforcement Protect U.S. Workers From Illegal Immigration?” *Review of Economics and Statistics*. 84:1 (Feb. 2002): 73-92.

7 Douglas S. Massey, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, October 18, 2005; see also his article, “The Wall that Keeps Illegal Workers In,” *New York Times* (April 4, 2006).

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9 “Post 9/11 Survey,” USC Annenberg Institute for Justice and Journalism, July/August 2002; available at <http://www.ncmonline.com/media/pdf/911addendum.pdf>.

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