

THE SECURITY AND MIGRATION NEXUS IN THE UNITED STATES

Speech before the 10th International Metropolis Conference

Toronto, 19 October 2005

John Tirman

The security and migration nexus in the U.S. has grown in four years to include an enormous reconfiguration of the federal bureaucracy, *vastly* tightened and spatially expanded borders, the *creation* of borders to prevent the transmission of ideas and money; growing tension between federal law enforcement authorities and the targeted communities of Arabs and Muslims (including citizens and non citizens), and a general atmosphere of indifference to these momentous changes in US immigration policy by the American public. It is, overall, an effort at securitizing migration, including the “migrants” of settled communities of American citizens from predominantly Muslim countries, in such a way that may in fact have the opposite effect.

Let me expand on three aspects of this security-migration nexus. My comments are limited to the United States, but they apply in some ways to Canada, Europe, and other places where immigration is growing. But many of these observations apply *only* to America. And, importantly, they apply significantly to cities---Detroit and Dearborn, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles in particular.

The things I will not concentrate on are relatively well known---the absorption of immigration agencies into the Dept of Homeland Security; and the impact of this securitization on immigration itself---*e.g.*, the drift of foreign students from American universities to Europe and Canada and elsewhere; the relocation of businesses reliant on skilled employees; the interruption of trade, just-in-time inventory processes, and so on, not to mention the colossal direct costs of the military and homeland security bureaucracies. Private and public expenditures for enhanced security against terrorism, not including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are now approaching \$500 billion over

these four years. The incalculable costs are in the disruption of economic globalization itself, which of course includes many of the vectors of human mobility, communications, financial flows, and so on that U.S. officials fear are aiding terrorism. One can lament certain aspects of globalization and seek to slow it, but slowing it for these reasons seems a fool's errand, and an expensive one.

What does now seem apparent is that the United States has sought to expand or heighten the borders of the United States quite dramatically and in three different ways. First is the expansion of the border "envelope" to foreign shores. Second is the raising of barriers of entry to ideas, and barriers of export to money. Third is isolating, monitoring, prosecuting suspect communities in the United States. All these activities preserve and strengthen traditional functions of border controls, and expand them in new ways.

The expansion of borders

By the expansion of borders, I mean the creation of a much larger envelope of U.S. sovereignty that excludes unwanted migrants, that securitizes that envelope, and encourages other states to undertake similar actions. In its simplest manifestation, the visa application process has been severely tightened. It has also been temporally expanded, so that gaining a visa can take many months where it may have taken days or weeks previously. By redefining the rules of this process, by introducing new methods of surveillance, and by constricting and slowing the process, the U.S. Government has essentially extended the borders of the U.S. to the consular offices in Dubai, Amman, Frankfurt, Delhi, Toronto, and hundreds of other places.

In parallel with this is a military assertiveness that has found expression not only in Afghanistan and Iraq, but in other places away from the news cameras. In Central Asia, in Latin America, in Indonesia, and elsewhere, the US military and intelligence agencies are creating a new kind of perimeter: the attack on suspected terrorist

organizations through aggressive law enforcement mechanisms (such as interrogations), military assistance to a type of willing state familiar during the cold war, forward-based U.S. military installations, particularly intelligence gathering, and so on. In the president's familiar phrase, we are fighting them over there rather than fighting them here.

Raising the border

The second set of policies worth examining are another kind of metaphor for borders: creating new impediments not only for people, but for other things the USG considers to be dangerous. Two in particular are evident: the entry of ideas, and the exit of money.

The first can most clearly be seen in the case of Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss-born Muslim philosopher who, perhaps more than any other intellectual, has attempted to bridge the gap between East and West, challenging Muslims in particular to think anew about modernity, and to do so explicitly in the context of being migrants to the West. A year ago, he was barred from entry into the U.S. to take up a tenured post at the University of Notre Dame. The reasons given by Department of Homeland Security were disingenuously innocent, but it is likely that pressure from certain groups in the United States led to this action precisely because Ramadan represents an attractive set of ideas for Muslims to live in the West, yet hold on to their political beliefs about, for example, the war in Iraq or the Israeli treatment of Palestinians. It would be worth knowing if this case and scattered reports of other, similar actions represent a conscious policy of blocking the migration of ideas.

Going in the other direction is money, money from transnational workers, from settled Muslims and Arabs wanting to support political and social institutions in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere, and simple charities. The U.S. Government has taken a dim view of these money transfers. The Department of Justice and the FBI

have closed dozens of charities, frequently prosecuting those who manage them, on the supposition of support of terrorism. Perhaps more significant, however, is new action to prevent remittances. Small businesses transmitting money must register each client, an unbearable requirement for these proprietors. Concern about surveillance at the larger corporations may be leading to lower remittances or to cash transactions of the age-old kind. Keep in mind that remittances are now, by far, the largest source of money going into the developing world, three times the size of official development aid.

The creation of internal borders

The matter of charities and remittances is part of a larger effort to closely monitor and disrupt the social and political organization of Muslim and Arab communities in the US, whether they are citizens of many generations or new arrivals. This has been evident in the 400 indictments of supposed terrorists, the closing of the charities, the surveillance of mosques and religious schools, the special registration for men from 16 countries, and so on. This vast enterprise to weed out potentially violent people with ties to al Qaeda, Hamas, or other such organizations has yielded few if any actual evil doers. What it has created is an enormous amount of distrust, civil liberties violations, and alienation. This may be the intentional outcome of the policy.

A number of surveys of these populations confirms their growing sense of frustration and even bitterness. Most have led lives of typical assimilation, while maintaining their religious observances, old country ties, ethnic and religious social networks, and the like. Now, all these otherwise unremarkable elements of social life are under suspicion. Fewer now want to contribute to any Islamic charity or participate in their community. Many now tell others abroad not to migrate. Keep in mind that these are mainly metropolitan groups, who have carved out urban identities for themselves and reshaped the way their urban environment is perceived, in the classic American immigrant story. They, like generations of Irish, Italians, East Europeans, Mexicans, and others of the great cities welcomed their compatriots and helped them become part

of their community and part of their new country. This simple, human gesture is now under official attack.

There is no more onerous evidence of attack than the cultivated perception that these populations represent a mortal threat to American security. Hence, the legal barrage against the charities. Hence, the disruptions of remittances, charities, and other social organizations. Hence the threats, anecdotally reported, against those who voice political beliefs out of sync with mainstream America. Hence, 5,000 detentions of Muslim men for many months without charges. And, perhaps most pernicious of all, the indictments of hundreds of Muslims and other Arab-Americans on terrorism related charges. There is virtually nothing in this record of indictments suggesting anything like a conspiracy to commit acts of violence against the United States, yet the number of indictments and prosecutions on lesser charges are trumpeted as a triumph over home-grown terrorism. I might add that there was not a shred of evidence in the 9/11 Commission Report suggesting anything like a domestic threat. Yet the perception is widely believed, repeated in the best newspapers, and taken as a matter of fact by elites and the general population alike. You can only imagine what this is doing to the sense of siege in these communities.

On the face of it, then, it appears that the U.S. Government is engaged in a policy of pre-emptive deterrence against Muslim populations at home and abroad. This is, in effect, the creation of new borders---barriers against social and political organization, barriers to turn them away from their religion, barriers to welcoming and supporting family and friends from abroad---in short barriers impeding everything but surrender to what the Attorney General and Secretary of Homeland Security regard as being a loyal American.

So in answering the question posed by the conference organizers---“Do borders still matter?”---my answer is yes, but borders have changed. And they are changing in

highly dynamic ways. They are not fixed, but fluid and in fact not completely knowable to the outside world. They are not mere checkpoints but barbed wire barriers with special forces peering out from behind blinding lights. What they keep out, and in, are not limited to humans. And they do not just surround the US at its geographical boundaries, but extend as far as its military power extends, and as far as its capacity for internal surveillance and harassment will allow. The borders are everywhere and as forbidding as the USG wants them to be.

Now, I said at the outset that this securitizing of migration may not have the intended effect. And this may be the largest and most worrisome consequence of this enormously costly enterprise.

--- In extending the envelope, we have not only incurred economic costs, but may, through military actions, create more people intent on doing us harm than existed before. Killing 100-200,000 civilians in Iraq does not win friends.

--- In preventing transnational migration and remittances, we may be impoverishing more people in the very countries where this is most worrisome. At the same time, of course, our own national resources for development have been drained by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

--- In alienating and isolating 5% of the American population, and persisting, for political reasons unrelated to security, to demonize this population, we may be radicalizing a tiny fraction of their youth, and in fact creating a security problem where there was none before.

In a project I ran at the Social Science Research Council, which is ongoing, we surveyed Muslim and Arab-American community leaders, and, later, homeland security officials. (The results of this will be available on the SSRC web site.) Among

the findings of this inquiry is how wide the gulf is between what these two understand of each other, but what is especially striking is how little homeland security officials know, or care to know, about the communities they have targeted for special treatment. That is also a comment about how law enforcement views---or, more pointedly, how it fails to appreciate---the evolving nature of urban social environments. This goes for all immigrants, all of whom have been affected by post-9/11 policies, and all groups that fall outside the nimbus of the acceptable version of “the American dream.” So the first and only recommendation I make for this conference is for recognition of how profound the impacts on these urban immigrant populations have been. This impact now is an institutionalized and politicized set of initiatives, which are likely to persist, and possibly even worsen, in the coming years.

Immigrant populations must find modes of social and political action that put them beyond the dragnet of the anti-terrorist campaign; that preserve and replenish their community’s social capital; and that permit them to be religiously observant in peace.

Social and political and financial innovation is this essential for cultural survival and integration, and it is the task of many of you to facilitate and speed such vital innovation.

John Tirman is Executive Director of MIT’s Center for International Studies. He is coauthor and editor of The Maze of Fear: Security & Migration After 9/11.

John Tirman
+1.617.253.9861
tirman@mit.edu