

# Mass Immigration Defeats Homeland Security

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The security challenges posed by immigration are usually viewed as discrete problems that can be addressed through better watch lists, for example, or through additional resources for consular staff who conduct visa interviews. But this is a mistake. Under modern conditions, mass immigration itself is incompatible with security. This is true for two reasons: first, immigration overwhelms our efforts to screen out security threats; and, second, it creates large immigrant communities that shield and incubate terrorists.

In the past, references to the “home front” were metaphorical, intended to create among civilians at home a greater sense of solidarity with soldiers at the war fronts. But advances in communications, transportation, and weapons technology mean that today—and in the indefinite future—the home front is no longer a metaphor, but is an actual war front. As President George W. Bush has said, “Our country is a battlefield in the first war of the 21st century” (White House, 2003).

This new context makes immigration a central issue—perhaps the central issue—in considerations of national security. The staff report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States on “terrorist travel” opens by stating, “it is perhaps obvious to state that

terrorists cannot plan and carry out attacks in the United States if they are unable to enter the country” (Eldridge et al., 2004). Enemy operatives not only need to enter the United States, or whatever country they are targeting, but also often need to remain under the radar, as it were, for an extended period of time. This means that keeping foreign terrorists out—and keeping them on the run or arresting them if they do get in—is a security imperative.

The fact that the home territories of the developed world are now, as they were in Europe during World War II, genuine theaters of war is a consequence of “asymmetric” or “Fourth-Generation” warfare, in which weaker countries or political forces use unconventional tactics against stronger opponents (Krikorian, 2004). These tactics are not new, but the success of the 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent bombings in London, Madrid, and elsewhere, have made high-casualty attacks on civilians in the homelands of Western nations the chief tactical goal of Islamic terrorists. Neither the United States nor Canada has experienced anything like this before, having long been protected by oceans serving “in the office of a wall,” to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. But, as the Pentagon’s *Quadrennial Defense Review* observed, “geographic insularity no longer confers security for the country” (United States Department of Defense, 2006).

It is important to note that this threat to our territory and our civilian population will not end when radical Islam is tamed or defeated. In all future wars, the enemy will at least consider using our immigration system as a means of attacking us, whether the enemy is North Korea, China, Colombia’s Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo (FARC), or any other nation or force with whom we may go to war.

### **Excessive immigration overwhelms our ability to detect threats**

One security problem created by excessive immigration is that it overwhelms a country’s ability to detect and exclude malefactors. In the United States, the lead agencies in this task are not part of the military. Instead, they fall under the State Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs (which

issues visas) and the immigration-related elements of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). When we examine the immigration histories of prior terrorists, the need for these agencies to be effective becomes clear. One analysis of the 48 foreign-born al-Qaeda operatives who committed crimes in the United States between 1993 and 2001 (including the 9/11 hijackers) found that they had penetrated almost every part of the immigration system (Camarota, 2002). Of the 48, one-third were in the United States on various temporary visas, one-third were legal residents or naturalized citizens, one-fourth were illegal aliens, and the remainder were former illegal aliens with pending asylum applications. Nearly half of them had, at one point or another, violated ordinary immigration laws. Another examination of 94 foreign-born terrorists in the United States, who belonged to al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups, found that about two-thirds (59) had committed immigration violations prior to or in conjunction with taking part in terrorist activity, and some had multiple violations (Kephart, 2005).

These statistics demonstrate that strict enforcement of regular immigration laws could yield significant security benefits by keeping terrorists out and making it harder for them to operate. Strict enforcement could also result in the arrest of terrorists who are already here, thus disrupting conspiracies and providing subjects for interrogation. This enforcement is related to but separate from security-specific tools such as watch lists.

## **The immigration control network**

The immigration control network has three layers of defense: (1) overseas, where visas are issued; (2) at the border, including inspection points at air, sea, and land ports of entry, as well as the long stretches between such entry points; and (3) in the interior of the country. Each of these layers faces huge, unmanageable demand, which breeds pervasive fraud and leads overwhelmed administrators to wave people through without adequate scrutiny. In the nineteenth century, it did not matter as much how effectively aliens were screened—after all, how much damage could a gang of Bolsheviks or anarchists do, given the primitive communications, transportation, and weapons technologies of the time? But today's volume

of immigration simply cannot be subjected to the level of scrutiny that is needed because of the modern security environment.

### ***Security filters overseas***

The first of the three security filters is the responsibility of visa officers working for the State Department, which has been described by one writer as “America’s other Border Patrol” (Wenzel, 2000). This layer is particularly important because the closer a foreigner is to the United States, the greater the practical difficulty of keeping him out. Rejecting a visa applicant who lives abroad is much easier than turning away a foreigner who has already made his way to the border because the burden of proof for turning him away increases.

However, the most difficult task is finding and removing people who have already come into the United States. In 2005, about 800 visa officers issued around six million visas to foreigners, an average of about 7,500 visas per officer, or roughly one visa issued every 15 minutes. Because of the large number of permanent and temporary visas allowed by current legislation, officers seldom have more than a few minutes to decide a case, leading to staggering rates of failure on the part of the officer to keep terrorists from entering. To wit, at least four million people who entered the United States with “temporary” visas simply stayed as illegal aliens after their time ran out (United States Department of State, 2006). In addition, an unknown number of people simply lied to obtain permanent immigrant visas.

The claim that proper immigration scrutiny would yield security benefits is not merely a supposition. Investigative reporter Joel Mowbray acquired copies of 15 of the 19 visa applications made by the 9/11 hijackers, and found that every application should have been rejected on ordinary, non-security grounds (2002, Oct. 28). They were improperly completed, included obviously absurd answers to questions, and the applicants were all young, unattached men with no income—precisely the kind of people who are likely to become illegal aliens if permitted to enter the United States.

The State Department, like any government agency, complains that its resources are inadequate for the job, and it is certainly correct. But

even massive increases in personnel—beyond anything that is actually feasible—would not ensure the proper vetting of applicants at the current level of admissions. The staff increases that have taken place since 9/11 are not what they seem, since many of the new officers are simply replacing locally hired foreign staff who never should have been part of the visa process in the first place.

The only way that the United States will ever be able to have a visa system that is appropriate, given modern security needs, is by reducing the number of immigrant and non-immigrant visas available. Even the State Department recognizes the trade-off between volume and quality. One staff report for the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States noted that “quality decisions can make the process less efficient, and, in the context of declining staff, posts have often been forced to choose efficiency over quality” (Eldridge et al., 2004). The report suggested that efficiency could be increased by approving a larger portion of non-immigrant (temporary) visas without interviewing the applicant—the exact opposite of what security demands.

### ***Security at the border***

The second layer of the immigration security filter is at the border, where the overload is even worse than at the visa offices abroad. In 2004, about 180 million foreigners were admitted into the United States as non-immigrants—visitors of all kinds—and that is only an estimate because the overwhelming majority were Mexicans and Canadians whose entry was not recorded (Grieco, 2007; United States Customs and Border Protection, 2006; United States Department of Homeland Security, 2006). In addition, about 169 million Americans and 75 million permanent residents (green card holders) returned from abroad (US Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Of the 32 million entries by foreigners that were actually recorded in 2005, about 24 million were tourists and nearly five million were business travelers. As well, in between

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1 These figures do not represent the number of individuals who crossed the border because these numbers include people who travelled back and forth across the border and thus were counted more than once.

ports of entry, mostly along the Mexican border, more than 1.1 million foreigners were arrested by the Border Patrol while trying to sneak in.

This massive workload has led to the same response as that in the visa offices overseas—a collective shrug by a demoralized bureaucracy and the normalization of massive lawbreaking by both inspectors and Border Patrol agents. At ports of entry, inspectors are simply unable to do their jobs properly. Referring to the busiest crossing on the entire northern border, a 2006 report noted that “US and Canadian inspectors on the Ambassador Bridge [in Detroit] and elsewhere say they are routinely told by supervisors to wave vehicles through checkpoints without scrutiny to satisfy commercial interests” (Audi, 2006, Mar. 29). At airports, when the inspectors’ computers are down, foreign visitors are admitted without being checked against the various watch lists because it would take too long and would lead to complaints from the airlines.

The overload is dealt with a little differently at ports of entry on the Mexican border. There, Mexicans are issued a “Border-Crossing Card”—colloquially known as a “laser visa”—for short local trips to shop or visit relatives. These are modern, high-tech cards with digitized fingerprints and the like, but they are almost never scanned because it would slow down traffic (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2005). The holders simply show the cards to the border inspectors as they pass through, which results in massive fraud, both through the use of fake cards and the use of genuine cards that belong to others. This is a major vulnerability because half of all non-immigrant entries by foreigners into the United States are Mexicans using a Border-Crossing Card.

The Border Patrol deals with its own massive workload by simply giving most Mexican border-jumpers what is called a “voluntary return”—i.e., the alien waives a hearing in exchange for not having a formal deportation on his record, which would make any subsequent penetration of the United States a felony. In other words, border policing is much like the old Soviet joke: “we pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.” The Border Patrol goes through the motions of law enforcement but does not actually punish anyone.

Border failures caused by overload have already had security consequences. For instance, the immigration inspector in Miami—one of the

nation's busiest international airports—who screened Mohammed Atta's return to the United States from Spain in January 2001 said "he knew that if he took more time than 45 seconds to determine a visitor's admissibility or if he made too many referrals to secondary inspection, he could receive a poor performance appraisal" (Eldridge et al., 2004: 17). Nonetheless, he referred Atta to "secondary inspection" for further scrutiny, after which Atta was eventually admitted, despite his lack of the proper documents and despite his having overstayed his visa during his previous visit. Steven Camarota (2002) notes that "the scale of illegal immigration creates a tacit acceptance by law enforcement, policy makers, and even the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] itself. For example, it was far easier for an immigration inspector to allow Mohammed Atta back into the country even though he overstayed his visa in January 2001 knowing that there have been millions of overstayed visas in the past decade and policy makers had done nothing about it."

### ***Security at home***

The third layer of immigration control is inside the country. Similar to the other two layers, the overload in this layer also results from a lack of enforcement. Because there so many illegal aliens already in the United States, the immigration enforcement bureaucracy simply goes through the motions of doing its job, but seldom attempts to actually reduce illegal immigration.

In addition to illegal immigration, this third layer of immigration control is also overloaded because of excessive legal immigration. While it may seem that terrorists would require only physical access to the United States—even as illegal aliens—this is not the case. As a former staff member of the 9/11 Commission has written, "once within US borders, terrorists seek to stay. Doing so with the appearance of legality helps ensure long-term operational stability" (Kephart, 2005).

Think of a foreigner's access to the United States as a ladder. At the bottom are those outside the United States, and at the top are immigrants who have become naturalized American citizens. Visas and border control are essential because they help keep malefactors from getting into the country in the first place. But once in, terrorists seek to climb

up the ladder—from illegal alien to short-term visitor, long-term visitor, permanent resident, and finally American citizen—thereby gaining additional opportunities with each step. Every time a foreigner tries to take another step up the ladder, the authorities—in this case, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—have another chance to screen him for security problems.

Unfortunately, massive overload makes proper screening impossible. In 2005, USCIS received 6.3 million applications for 50 different kinds of immigration benefits and adjudicated 7.5 million applications (United States Government Accountability Office, 2006). On any given day, USCIS processes 30,000 applications, conducts 135,000 national security background checks, and answers 82,000 telephone inquiries (United States Department of Homeland Security, US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2005). The immigration bureaucracy is so utterly overwhelmed that even DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff was forced to concede that “parts of the system have nearly collapsed under the weight of numbers” (Chertoff, 2005).

A particularly outrageous example of what happens if a bureaucracy becomes overloaded occurred in 2003 when contract workers at an immigration processing center in California decided to cope with the ongoing tide of paperwork by simply shredding immigration documents in order to wipe out a 90,000-document backlog there. After two months of shredding, the backlog was cleared, and they kept shredding as new applications came in to prevent the backlog from recurring (Broder, 2003, Jan. 31).

We can shake our heads at the irresponsibility of the people who would do such a thing, but the real problem is systemic; it is the result of excessive immigration. According to one government report,

It would be impossible for USCIS to verify all of the key information or interview all individuals related to the millions of applications it adjudicates each year—approximately 7.5 million applications in fiscal year 2005—without seriously compromising its service-related objectives. (United States Government Accountability Office, 2006)



## Excessive immigration reinforces enclaves

The foregoing discussion examined how excessive immigration has clogged the plumbing of a modern immigration control system. Another reason why high immigration compromises security is that it creates and constantly reinforces communities of foreigners that unwittingly but unavoidably provide cover and incubation for attackers. In his address to Congress after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush offered an apt analogy: “Al-Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime” (Bush, 2001). This comparison is instructive. During the great wave of immigration around the turn of the century, and for some time after immigration was stopped in the 1920s, law enforcement had very little luck with penetrating the Mafia. This was because Mafia-affiliated immigrants lived in enclaves, had limited knowledge of English, were suspicious of government institutions, and clung to Old World prejudices and attitudes such as *omerta*—the Sicilian code of silence. But with the end of mass immigration, the assimilation of Italian immigrants and their children accelerated, and the offspring of the immigrants developed a sense of genuine membership and ownership in America—what John Fonte (2003) of the Hudson Institute calls “patriotic assimilation.” This process eliminated the enclaves in which the Mafia had been able to develop, allowing law enforcement to become more effective and eventually cripple the Mafia.

The relevance of this phenomenon to security concerns is clear. As the chief intelligence officer for the DHS has said, “As previous attacks indicate, overseas extremists do not operate in a vacuum and are often linked with criminal and smuggling networks—usually connected with resident populations from their countries of origin” (Allen, 2007).

Even worse than the role immigrant enclaves play in shielding terrorists is their role in recruiting and incubating new ones. One disturbing example is that of Lackawanna, New York, where six Yemeni Americans—five of them born in the United States to immigrant parents and raised in an immigrant community—were arrested in 2002 for operating an al-Qaeda terrorist sleeper cell. The six arrested men had traveled to Pakistan in 2001, ostensibly for religious training, but actually went to an al-Qaeda terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. All of them are serving prison

terms for providing material support to terrorism. The seventh member of the cell—a naturalized American citizen—did not return after training in Afghanistan, was later jailed in Yemen, and escaped from prison in 2006. The ringleader of the cell, another American citizen, was killed in Yemen by the CIA in 2002.

The community that bred this cell has been shaped largely by immigration. As the local paper reported,

This is a piece of ethnic America where the Arabic-speaking Al Jazeera television station is beamed in from Qatar through satellite dishes to Yemenite-American homes; where young children answer “Salaam” when the cell phone rings, while older children travel to the Middle East to meet their future husband or wife; where soccer moms don’t seem to exist, and where girls don’t get to play soccer—or, as some would say, football. (*The Buffalo News*, 2002, Sep. 23)

Between 1996 and 2005, more than 18,000 Yemenis immigrated legally to the United States. In Lackawanna, the Arab population ballooned by 175% during the 1990s. The median household income in the Yemeni neighbourhood is currently 20% lower than the median in Lackawanna as a whole (*The Buffalo News*, 2002, Sep. 18).

A report at the time of the Lackawanna arrests said it was likely that more such groups existed among undigested immigrant communities. “Federal officials say privately that there could be dozens of similar cells across the country, together posing a grave danger to national security. They believe that such cells tend to be concentrated in communities with large Arab populations, such as Detroit” (*The Buffalo News*, 2002, Sep. 18).

Of course, Muslim immigrant communities are not alone in exhibiting characteristics that may shield or even incubate criminality. For instance, as criminologist Ko-lin Chin has written, “the isolation of the Chinese community, the inability of American law enforcement authorities to penetrate the Chinese criminal underworld, and the reluctance of Chinese victims to come forward for help, all conspire to enable Chinese gangs to endure” (1996: 18). The solution for Muslim immigrant communities

is the same for these other ethnic groups. William Kleinknecht, author of *The New Ethnic Mobs*, notes that “If the mass immigration of Chinese should come to a halt, the Chinese gangster may disappear in a blaze of assimilation after a couple of decades” (1996: 292).

## Conclusion

The idea that there is a connection between immigration and terrorism has been dismissed by many policy makers and activists. For instance, then INS Commissioner James Ziglar piously observed shortly after 9/11, “We’re not talking about immigration, we’re talking about evil” (United States Department of State, 2001). Similarly, Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza said, “There’s no relationship between immigration and terrorism” (Bunis, 2001, Sep. 13). Referring to 9/11, Jeanne Butterfield, executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and former head of the Marxist Palestine Solidarity Committee, echoed this denial of reality: “I don’t think the events of last week can be attributed to the failure of our immigration laws” (Martin, 2001, Sep. 19).

Indeed, to argue that a reduction in the level of immigration is necessary for homeland security may seem opportunistic, similar to how agricultural lobbyists used 9/11 to argue for farm subsidies by peddling the idea of “food security.” After all, the only immigrants who pose a threat to the security of the United States are Muslim extremists. But it is clear that under modern conditions of asymmetric warfare, mass immigration itself represents a significant security threat, both by overwhelming the United States’ ability to filter out undesirables and by constantly refreshing the immigrant communities that serve as havens for malefactors. While there is no question that other security measures are also needed—such as improved intelligence gathering overseas, greater cooperation with foreign governments, and continued military operations—if the United States does not reduce the levels of both permanent and temporary immigration, it leaves itself open to the enemy.

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