Beyond Borders: Revisiting the Concept of 'Frontier'
in the Age of Global Terrorism

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President Donald Trump's recent and repeated efforts to enforce an executive initiative regarding migrants from several Muslim countries have sparked an intense debate among politicians, media pundits, national security and academic experts both in and outside the U.S. Broadly speaking, the argument opposed—as it usually does—two groups: those who see immigration as a potential threat and consider it should be strictly controlled and those who believe that welcoming immigrants is an American tradition and is a vital part of its identity.

Interestingly, the executive order *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States* of January 2017 (often qualified as the 'Muslim ban' or 'travel ban') has been characterized as a blow to American efforts to combat terrorism (for a timeline of the ban, see McGraw *et al.*). For the neophyte, this may well sound like a strong contradiction: how can an immigration policy aiming to protect the nation by keeping potential terrorists out of the country, be labelled as favorable to terrorism?

The short answer is that immigration is no longer—if it ever was—an exclusively domestic issue, based on unilateral decisions, and even less so in a globalized world where modern communication tools make it possible to report anything happening anywhere on the planet. Immigration is not just a question of bodies crossing borders, and restrictions on movement always lead to questioning the motives behind what limits *free movement*, increasingly considered a fundamental human right (Miller, Hamid, Hines). As democracies struggle to justify restrictions, they often end up with

plans that exclude categories of migrants. That creates a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' migrants, and can generate a feeling of rejection for the second category that can later be highly destructive not just for the unsuccessful candidates but also for the entire pool of potential migrants. When Donald Trump portrays Muslim migrants as terrorists or Mexicans immigrants as criminals, it upsets millions of people who identify or sympathize with them.

As evidenced by the 'Muslim ban' and the debate that followed, the association of the terms 'immigration' and 'terrorism' is now well-established in public discourse. Unfortunately, most debates have displayed a common mistake: while much attention is paid to the material and physical dimension of national security—typically border and airport security—law enforcement and military strikes, the political and symbolic aspect of the issue does not receive the attention it deserves.

Yet, one of the biggest challenges for democracies confronted with terrorism is their ability to address a polymorphic and constantly-changing threat that feeds on mutual hate and stigmatizing discourse. Given its global position and involvements in world affairs, the United States should be particularly concerned by the "security frontier," a both concrete and symbolic line where American security interests meet the geopolitical constraints that define its "global threat status." I will argue that the symbolic component of the "security frontier" is particularly responsive to images and representations, especially in the manner immigrants and foreign citizens are depicted in the public and political discourse and treated by American authorities both in and outside the U.S.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to show that the current—but not new—immigration discourse and representations in the U.S. harm the American potential to advance its interests on the "security frontier" and exercise sufficient leadership to influence outcomes. Before addressing this topic, immigration will be examined as an issue that is inherently both national and international and that requires to be studied in a global perspective. The relevance and operability of the concept of "security frontier" will be discussed in the second part.

1. The international or global impact of immigration policy: recent developments

The traditional immigration narrative has long been constructed by a complex combination of messages that mixed information flows about the perception and treatment of immigrants in the U.S. These information flows were, before and for most of the 20th century, largely controllable by the U.S. government and its allies through the traditional diplomatic conduits and mainstream media. That explains, to some extent, the contradiction summarized by the University of Washington's geographer Charles Hirschman (Schwarz):

> Even though the American government and people have not always embraced immigrants with open arms, the image of the United States as a land of opportunity and refuge has become the focal point of the nation's identity at home and around the world.

However, the development of modern information technologies, the Internet and social networks, has made it increasingly difficult to control the billions of megabytes that are exchanged daily on the global information network by private and non-state actors, including terrorist groups. To paraphrase Joseph Nye, "information is power, and modern information technology is spreading information more widely than ever in history" (Nye 2004, 3). What remains to be discussed is the kind of power information pertaining to immigration may bring and to whom.

As long as the government had the power to control the immigration narrative (Snow), stories of discrimination and humiliation at American ports of entry were unheard of in the public discourse, for obvious reasons. Early on, the U.S. used its power of attraction to serve its interests. As Joseph Nye and the disciples of cultural and public diplomacy explain, the power of attraction (*soft power*) is oftentimes more pertinent and efficient than coercion and the use of force. Immigration can be a very efficient tool in terms of soft power and public diplomacy (Nye 2004, 2012).

In 2015, Donna R. Gabaccia published *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* where she showed how immigration is better debated when examined from a global perspective. "Immigration is an important, continuous, and contentious relationship between the United States and rest of the world" (Gabaccia, i). What she underlines is the strong connection between the American immigration policy and the nation's international leadership: "Americans' ambivalence toward China, toward the world, and toward their country's exercise of global power are central

themes in a history of American immigration written from a global perspective." (Gabaccia, xxii).

For much of our history, work on immigration has failed to study immigration as both a domestic and international issue. What is usually the core of most studies is the impact on the migrant and on the source or destination countries, issues that are generally studied separately. And yet, by essence, immigration is what Bayless Manning defined as "intermestic" (both international and domestic). On this subject, James Rosenau writes that: "powerful communications and transportation technologies are rendering the world ever more interdependent and the boundaries that divide local, national, and international communities ever more porous." (Rosenau, 78). Victor Cha concurs and shows how issues such as security are deeply affected by globalization as it "creates an interpenetration of foreign and domestic ('intermestic') issues such that national governments increasingly operate in spaces defined by the intersection of internal and external policies" (Cha, 391). When one considers immigration, attention should be paid to the potential impact of policies and discourse on the global scale because it directly affects the complex equation that mixes domestic, foreign and transnational matters. Although quite recent, the awareness of this reality advances in the minds of experts, decision-makers and politicians.

In 2009, the influential Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) published a key report simply entitled "U.S. Immigration Policy" stating that "Immigration's emergence as a foreign policy issue coincides with the increasing reach of globalization. [The] view of the United States as a place of unparalleled openness and opportunity is also crucial to the maintenance of American leadership. There is a consensus that current policy is not serving the United States well on [several] fronts." (CFR, ix).

The *front* that interests us here is security. Although not obvious for the neophyte, the relationship between immigration and national security was established long ago. The *Alien and Sedition Acts* of 1798, the *Anarchist Exclusion Act* of 1908 are only two examples of how immigration laws used national security to exclude certain categories of immigrants on national security grounds. Interestingly, the destiny of immigration affairs demonstrates how it became increasingly connected to security concerns: immigration was transferred from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Justice in 1940 where it remained until it was incorporated into the newly created Department of Homeland Security in 2003. It is also the opinion of the authors of the CFR report that "[the] link between immigration policy and national security was

institutionalized with the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in 2003" (CFR, 21).

The difficulty to design a sensible immigration approach, as evidenced by Washington's failure to reform an obsolete immigration system despite numerous attempts, precludes the adoption of measures that would help achieve major 'intermestic' goals, including national security. The CFR underlines that "the continued failure to devise and implement a sound and sustainable immigration policy threatens to weaken America's economy, to jeopardize its diplomacy, and to imperil its national security" (CFR, 3).

2.   The "Security Frontier": the international dimension of homeland security

Of course, as Pierre Mélandri wrote, national security has always been a primary concern for the United States, but even more so since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As underlined by the different National Security Strategy documents published since 2000, transnational terrorism is now one of the greatest threats that the American people face today.

J. F. Kennedy famously declared in his frontier speech: "we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960's—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats." What Kennedy had in mind was "not a set of promises… [but] a set of challenges." Kennedy's frontier was to be pushed back towards the "uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war." I believe the concept of frontier is well adapted to the current national security status of the U.S.

What I call the "security frontier" is the multidimensional and elastic line that separates the U.S. from the rest of the world on national security matters. It is along this line that traditional experts such as American officials, diplomats, intelligence officers have worked to negotiate (or impose) the terms of an interaction model that would better serve the interests of the U.S. But today it is also where non-state actors such as NGOs intervene and where debates are constantly redefined by the endless flow of uncontrolled information that can influence the outcome. Drawing from recent work on public diplomacy and globalization, it can be argued that public opinions now also participate in the shaping of the security frontier, for example through national and international mobilizations (Gabaccia; Hady and Singer; Castells).

This security frontier can be defined by multinational agreements and alliances (NATO) or bilateral partnerships (bilateral security agreement between the U.S. and Afghanistan). This frontier is most unstable and uncertain in areas where the U.S. fails to establish a dialogue that would make its partners sympathetic to its arguments and open to cooperation—where the American soft power operates the least. Typically, that is the case of Middle-East countries where a majority of people have very unfavorable opinions of the U.S. and where the rhetoric of Islamic terrorist groups continues to recruit jihadists. It is where the worst anti-American rhetoric can be found and where each faux-pas is heavily used to demonize the U.S. government.

Homeland security, because of the nature of the threat, involves action within and beyond the national borders and more generally a global/international perspective. It is safe to assume that national or homeland security stretches beyond the natural borders of the U.S., which means that there are both a domestic and international dimensions to the security frontier.

Fighting terrorism involves a wide range of strategies to identify, track and eliminate individuals and groups that plan attacks against U.S. interests. But the elimination of individual threats is not enough: if one wants to durably eradicate the problem, the response needs to be not systematic but systemic. That is what it takes to annihilate the recruitment, indoctrination, training and logistical support of current and future terrorists.

The only efficient way to do so is to control the early stages of the process of terrorist engineering (recruitment, radicalization, organization, training) and experts in counter-terrorism underline the importance of two dimensions: intelligence of course, and maybe less commonly known, what is labelled "soft power" or "cultural diplomacy." In both cases, high-technology or heavy weaponry cannot solve the problem in the long term. The heart of intelligence gathering and soft power is *people*. Immigration policy, representation and discourse can enhance or undermine both.

3. Immigration discourse and representations in the U.S.: how it impacts counter-terrorism efforts

Several examples taken from American history can be used to illustrate how immigration matters both at home and abroad. David Scott Fitzgerald and David Cook-Martin argue that the 1965 immigration reform that put an end to national origin quotas was mainly the result of pressures from the international community and national

security concerns in the context of the Cold War. To preserve its credibility as the leader of the free world, the U.S. could not afford to condone racial bias in its immigration system. This opinion reminds us of Nobel Prize laureate Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* in which he considered that segregation and racism against African-Americans would weaken the "American international prestige and power" (Cohen).

In that regard, the "war on terror" launched by the Bush administration had disastrous results both in and outside the U.S. Although the Bush administration warned against retaliations against the Muslim community, numerous reports have documented how aggressive law enforcement policies impacted immigrants in general and Muslim communities in particular, violating their civil and constitutional rights (Chishti *et al.*). That deeply weakened the American soft power at home and abroad. It also made it more difficult for American diplomats to do their job, and more broadly for the government to get the support they needed in the countries where terrorist groups prepared their attacks and where local authorities often are already reluctant to help (Boduszynski).

Conscious of the growing anti-Americanism in the Middle East, the U.S. Congress held two important hearings in 2007 and 2008. The titles of the reports underline well the concerns that led to those investigations: the first one was entitled *Declining Approval for American Foreign Policy in Muslim Countries: Does it make it more difficult to fight Al-Qaeda?* (U.S. Congress 2007) and the second *The Decline in America's reputation: Why?* (U.S. Congress 2008).

Both hearings show that immigration policy was key in the decline in approval of the U.S. The evidence presented to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs underlined the widespread feeling expressed by immigrants (not just Muslims) that they were discriminated against in the immigration process and their visa applications, and several reported humiliations at ports of entry. The interesting point is that these stories, shared with friends, colleagues and family contributed to the dissemination of a highly negative image of the U.S. Customs and Border, and by extension, of the United States (U.S. Congress 2008). Thomas Melia, after interviewing numerous American diplomats including ambassadors, concluded that:

> [The] new U.S. visa procedures have adversely affected (or at least greatly complicated) political relationships, trade and tourism, and such staples of public diplomacy as student, scholarly, and cultural exchanges. In consequence, visa and

immigration issues now intrude to a greater extent than previously on almost every other aspect of embassy operations.

In other words, the American territory on the security frontier greatly receded during the two terms served by George W. Bush.

In the light of these reports, the statements made by Donald Trump during the presidential campaign and the executive order establishing a "Muslim ban" appear to run against the interests of the U.S. by stigmatizing and alienating populations the American security community needs to do its job.

Although the Trump administration tried to refute the idea that the president had intended to target an entire community, this defense was shaken when he tweeted his most direct attack on Muslims on December 7, 2015: "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Six months later, on June 15, 2016 he reiterated his attacks by expressing his belief that Muslims cannot assimilate in the United States (Johnson and Hauslohner):

Assimilation has been very hard. It's almost—I won't say nonexistent, but it gets to be pretty close. And I'm talking about second and third generation. They come— they don't— for some reason, there's no real assimilation.

This statement was used as evidence by the State of Hawaii in their response to the Trump administration's challenge of the temporary restraining order (TRO) against Donald Trump's second travel ban (State of Hawaii):

Throughout these judicial proceedings, the President has continued to make generalized, often inflammatory, statements about the Muslim faith and its adherents. On the night that his revised Order was enjoined, President Trump publicly reiterated his view that it is "very hard" for Muslims to assimilate into Western culture.

While these statements may have played well to secure votes from people who view Muslims as the greatest threat, their violence, both in form and content, was a blow to social cohesion, turning communities against one another. One report by California State University's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism in 2016 analyzed data across 20 states and reported 196 incidents of hate crimes against Muslims in the U.S. in 2015. That represented a 78 % increase over the previous year, while incidents overall increased by about 5 % (Levin and Grisham). Although the causes for such an increase are multifactorial, the authors underline that "underlying prejudicial stereotypes that broadly paint Muslims in a negative light are pervasive, making them among the most disliked, distrusted and feared groups in America" (Levin and Grisham, 22). They also noted an 87.5 % increase in anti-Muslim hate crime in the

days directly following Donald Trump's call for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims" and qualified it as a "troubling development and worthy of concern" (Levin and Grisham, 33).

Obviously, hate crimes against Americans and legal residents—albeit Muslim—are a problem that goes beyond moral or philosophical considerations. Such incidents weaken the American position on the security frontier *within* the U.S. Lyons-Padilla *et al.* recently published a study based on the survey of 198 Muslims in the United States about their cultural identities and attitudes toward extremism. They found that immigrants who identify with neither their heritage culture nor the culture they are living in feel marginalized and insignificant. Experiences of discrimination make the situation worse and lead to greater support for radicalism (Lyons-Padilla *et al.*,1). The researchers posit that discrimination may be a strong factor in the radicalization of Muslims who, because they are marginalized and discriminated against, look for opportunities to regain significance and improve their self-esteem and self-worth:

> [Many] of the counterterrorism initiatives and surveillance policies currently being used to identify violent extremists may actually paradoxically fuel support for extremism. Recent examples of homegrown plots lend support to this notion. For example, the failed Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, felt angry about the treatment of Muslims in the United States and the West more generally following the September 11 attacks, as well as about American military intervention in Iraq under the pretense of searching for weapons of mass destruction. He told authorities that he had struggled to find a peaceful but effective way to cope before ultimately attempting to set off a car bomb in 2010. Racial profiling and spying programs in the post-9/11 era that target Muslims are likely to induce feelings of perceived discrimination or exclusion and contribute to a sense of significance loss. (Lyons-Padilla *et al.*, 9)

Interestingly, terrorist groups understood the "domestic" component of the security frontier a long time ago. Many supporters of terrorist groups backed the Trump candidacy and cheered when he won the election. Analysis of social media content showed that jihadists were confident that if Donald Trump won the election, he would contribute to their war although it is very unlikely that they would have supported a more liberal candidate. Of several motives advanced by jihadists and recent defectors whom *Foreign Policy*'s Mara Revkin and Ahmad Mhidi interviewed, two are of particular interest. First, ISIS hopes that Trump will radicalize Muslims in the United States and Europe and inspire them to commit lone-wolf attacks in their home countries. A concept that is more and more debated, as several lone-wolves have proved to receive logistical support from terrorist organizations. But whether ISIS

sympathizers and homegrown terrorists receive logistical support from abroad or not, their decision to act can be triggered by the same circumstances (Burke).

This is consistent with findings by Lyons-Padilla *et al.* who documented the link between discrimination—including verbal attacks and policies that ostracize Muslims—and the desire of certain Muslims who experience *significance loss* to engage in terrorism (Lyons-Padilla *et al*, 2). More recently, Sarah Lyons-Padilla and Michele Gelfand authored an article in *The New York Times* where they affirm that:

> the most important objection [against the ban], given the ostensible goal of protecting national security, is that these are precisely the sort of policies that can increase radicalization of Muslims already on American soil. […]
> Trump's ban may very well promote the psychological conditions that fuel the radicalization he seeks to combat.

A word should be said about the Muslims—about three million—who live in the U.S. and who are not tempted by the jihadist rhetoric. While researching the impact of the war on terror in the aftermath of 9/11, Chisti *et al.* underlined in their report for the Migration Policy Institute how damaging the aggressive methods used by law enforcement authorities to track potential terrorists were. The result had been a growing distrust between Muslim communities and the government when both needed each other to achieve mutual goals. Haglund and Byman agree that working with local Muslim communities is key to the eradication of the terrorist threat:

> [The president] should press state and local officials to work with Muslim communities, not just to stop radicalism in their ranks […]. Good relations […] will help ensure that radicalization remains low and that, when it occurs, the community cooperates with law enforcement. (Byman)

One advantage associated with a strong presence of immigrants is that bridges can be built with the source countries. The flow back and forth of people and information between Muslim countries and the U.S. is a way to cultivate mutual understanding and offer a narrative, different from the terrorist groups', more consistent with a peaceful and constructive approach. When the same immigrants feel treated badly and unfairly, threatened and discriminated against, they can become sensitive to the jihadist rhetoric and choose to fight the U.S or at best choose to do nothing when they could help identify potential threats or keep easy preys out of the Jihadists' reach.

Second, the interviewees considered that "Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric plays into ISIS's narrative of a bipolar world in which the West is at war with Islam" (Revkin and Mhidi). This argument made the news on a regular basis, backed by former officials and intelligence experts, including in members and sympathizers of the Republican

Party. Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) and Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) said in a joint statement that the "executive order [may well] become a self-inflicted wound in the fight against terrorism." They concluded by rejecting "apocalyptic ideology of hatred" and warned that the executive order establishing the ban "sends a signal, intended or not, that America does not want Muslims coming into [the U.S.]" and that it may do more "to help terrorist recruitment than improve [security]." Similar arguments were published in papers across the political and ideological spectrum, drawing the lines of a consensus among intelligence and foreign policy experts (NPR, The National Interest).

Former NSA and CIA director Michael Hayden—who served Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama in top intelligence posts as director of the National Security Agency and CIA and deputy director of national intelligence—added:

> What [the government is] doing now has probably made us less safe today […] because we are now living the worst jihadist narrative possible, that there is undying enmity between Islam and the West. Muslims out there who were not part of the jihadist movement are now being shown that the story they're being told by the jihadists—they hate us; they're our enemy—that's being acted out by the American government. (NPR)

Hayden confirms that policies that stigmatize immigrants are used by enemies to offer a *competing* narrative in order to undermine the American leadership and turn the situation around by making the U.S. the "great Satan." This strategy was not invented by Islamist radicals. During the Cold War, the USSR used immigration laws prior to 1965 and segregation to weaken the American leadership by spreading propaganda about the hypocrisy of a country that professed freedom and equality abroad while practicing racial discrimination at home. While this argument did not prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union in the long run, it certainly received enough attention in Washington to impact domestic policies (Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin).

In 2016, Harvard Professor Stephen M. Walt authored an article in the *Chicago Tribune* asking the question: "Why is America so bad at promoting democracy in other countries?" His answer is that "America's democratic ideals are more likely to be emulated by others if the United States is widely regarded as a just, prosperous, vibrant, and tolerant society, instead of one where inequality is rampant, leading politicians are loudmouthed xenophobes." Although from a different school of thought, Walt seems to concur with Nye's *soft power* theory: leading by example is always more efficient. Islamophobia, especially when sanctioned by leaders, makes it more difficult

to advance the interests of the U.S., whether they are diplomatic or strategic. Again, it weakens the American position on the security frontier.

As evidenced by terrorist groups' use of statements made by Donald Trump, it could be argued that the current U.S. president, through his comments on the campaign trail, his attempts to impose tough regulations on immigrants in general and Muslims in particular, his proximity with people who spread anti-Islamic sentiment in public discourse and on media outlets like Fox News and Breitbart News, participates in co-radicalization. Pratt calls "reactive co-radicalization" the "mutual rejection and exclusionary circle currently evident, in particular, with respect to many Muslim and non-Muslim communities." Other researchers, mainly social psychologists, have documented this mutually-feeding hatred between competing groups. According to Reicher and Haslam, "people are more likely to support a bellicose leader if their group faces competition with another group that is behaving belligerently." In that regard, the case of Republican candidate Donald Trump's suggestion that all Muslim immigrants are potential enemies who should be barred from entering the U.S is enlightening: "Far from weakening the radicals, such statements provide the grit that gives their cause greater traction. Indeed, after Trump made his declaration, an al Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab, re-aired it as part of its propaganda offensive and labelled the U.S. a "racist society" (Reicher and Haslam, Ap).

Concluding remarks

The world in which we live is more interconnected than ever. The digital media and social networks produce a constant flow of information and provide a global forum where publics can engage and mobilize. As a result, people have become less dependent on government-tied media and their official narratives that try to shape public opinions. Public diplomacy developed as a response to these new challenges.

However, when nations through their governments interact with foreign publics, they need to prove their sincerity if they want to be taken seriously. As stated before, nothing is more destructive in terms of international political communication that a breached trust and perceived hypocrisy. We saw how this played against the U.S. and how it can be used by terrorist groups to undermine the American diplomatic efforts.

The stakes are high for the United States. Despite Trump's promise to restore economic nationalism and focus on "America first," the U.S. economy remains highly dependent on global markets. Domestic sectors such as higher education may suffer

from the current official discourse of the U.S. government on immigration. A significant drop in enrollment of international students (40% of U.S. colleges have reported a decline in enrollment) means a lot less money for universities (Saul). Because students and high-skilled workers usually have easier access to visas, they are a good bellwether in the attractiveness of a given country. In this regard, the international competition for the best and brightest students and much sought-after advanced skills is an argument that policy makers just cannot ignore (Ouaked).

Equally important is the argument that this drop also means a decline in the soft power capital of the U.S. across the world. Fewer students going back to their home country means fewer potential supporters for the U.S. abroad (Nye 2005).

We argued that immigration policy and discourse that disregard their global impact is counter-productive. If we accept the assumption that the U.S. government should consider the opinions of foreign publics to preserve its influence and leadership in the world, it means that the center of gravity of decision-making is shifting from Washington towards a new station in the "frontier area". Given the meaning of this potential change in terms of sovereignty and the positions of the current president of the United States, it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. However, statements about putting "America first" and threats to withdraw from international agreements should not obscure the fact that the U.S. has not abandoned its desire nor has it obliterated its need to remain a global power well-anchored in the international landscape, and recognized by the international community.

In the long run, if the U.S. is to keep its global leadership durably, it will have to prove to the rest of the world that its intentions are less about "branding" and more about "wisely using American resources to improve the health, education, and day-to-day lives of people who may love American culture and technology but have come to despise American power" (Seib).

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