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The Incoming Anniversary of 9/11: Al-Qaeda and Migration Politics in the United States and Spain

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Nearly ten years ago, al-Qaeda surfaced on the world stage with the terrorist attack of 9/11 and other attacks in Europe and around the world. What did this phenomenon represent for politics? In particular, how did the al-Qaeda threat affect migration politics of Western democracies?



Scholars have argued that the emergence of al-Qaeda represented a turning point in world affairs that had international and domestic consequences. The task of addressing al-Qaeda required a reconceptualization of security, which needed to be extended to other areas, including migration (Keohane 2002). Many observed that the al-Qaeda attacks led to the securitization of migration issues; migration entailed an existential threat that required exceptional measures. Other scholars preferred to speak of 9/11 as a catalyst event that accelerated a process to securitize migration issues already in motion before the terrorist attack (Bigo 2002).

Questioning these interpretations, my project compares the impact of the terrorist attacks committed by al-Qaeda in the United States and Spain on September 11, 2001, and March 11, 2004 (11-M) on the migration politics of the two countries.¹ I performed qualitative research of U.S. and Spanish migration politics, combining discourse and historical-institutional analysis. I examined newspapers, government documents, and political speeches. I conducted interviews with politicians, migration officers, and representatives of migrant associations.

9/11 and 11-M sparked distinct responses from Washington and Madrid in the area of migration politics at both the institutional and policy levels. U.S. migration agencies were reorganized and transferred to the new Department of Homeland Security, and their main missions were revised to include preventing terror-

ist attacks. In contrast, after 11-M, Spanish agencies providing migration services were transferred from the Interior Ministry, where migration issues were considered from a law and order perspective, to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, where, as explained by officers of these agencies, security concerns were not their responsibility.

At the policy level, U.S. migration law was used as a weapon against terrorism. The fight against al-Qaeda led to the targeting of the migrant population, especially undocumented migrants. During the 9/11 investigations, suspected migrants, mainly Arabs and Muslims, were arrested, detained, and deported for minor migration violations. A new antiterrorist law, the PATRIOT Act, deprived migrants of rights (Cole 2003). The migrant population experienced heightened security checks and was subjected to new monitoring practices such as the US-VISIT system, which registers the entry-exit of foreigners and permanent residents, and the SEVIS, a system to track foreign students. Terrorist concerns were invoked to bolster the enforcement of migration law, and millions of dollars were spent fortifying the U.S. borders, especially the border with Mexico. TV comedian Jay Leno joked that al-Qaeda was getting serious by learning Spanish. Furthermore, attempted reform of the migration system, including a program of amnesty for undocumented migrants, failed and was criticized for permitting the regularization of terrorists.

While U.S. migration issues were securitized in terms of the terrorist threat, migration politics in Spain followed a divergent trajectory. During the 11-M investigations, police carried out profiling practices against Arab and Muslim migrants, but migration policies were not employed systematically in the fight against terrorism, nor were they modified for this purpose. Instead, Madrid enacted new migration rules, which included a program of amnesty, similar to that rejected in the United States, through which 580,000

undocumented migrants were regularized. Moreover, the government opened up channels for documented migration and provided millions of euros for the social integration of the migrant population. Government officers I interviewed clarified that in Spain, migration issues and antiterrorist policies were separate, and that nothing in the new migration rules linked migration to the terrorist threat. In sum, 11-M did not greatly affect Spanish migration policies. Instead, at the end of 2007, the global financial crisis hit Spain, and Madrid responded by developing a more restrictive approach to migration.

In my investigation, I related the U.S. and Spanish reactions to the terrorist attacks to two factors: the governments' political discourses surrounding terrorist and migration issues; and the historical and political context as related to migration issues. In the United States, the fight against terrorism was presented as a war against a tangible foreign organization. Migrants, especially undocumented ones, came to be associated with terrorists because both were external elements that challenged the sovereignty of the state and its capacity to control the borders. In Spain, where migrants were considered a workforce that challenged Spanish social cohabitation, al-Qaeda was presented as a transnational idea. The focus of Spanish antiterrorist strategies was to impede the spread of terrorist ideals within Spanish society.

Regarding the historical-political context, before the 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States was characterized by the presence and activities of social and political antimigrant forces that blamed migrants, especially undocumented ones, for bringing crime into the country, stealing jobs, and exploiting public services. These antimigrant forces took advantage of the way that 9/11 and the fight against terrorism were represented to justify the need for toughening migration policies. In Spain, however, the arrival of migrants was related to the remarkable economic development experienced by the country in the past decades. Although there had been social and political conflicts regarding the phenomenon of migration since 2000, at the time of 11-M, there were no strongly held antimigrant positions. The way that the terrorist threat was presented did not provide an opportunity to change this situation. Moreover, the party that was most prone to pursue an anti-migrant agenda, the rightwing Partido Popular, lost its chance by blaming ETA, the Basque separatist group, for being behind the terrorist attack.

A comparison between the United States and Spain forces us to reconsider state responses to the al-Qaeda threat. In particular, my research demonstrates that the terrorist attacks did not require a securitization of migration issues. The emergence of al-Qaeda on the world stage did not herald a turning point or a catalyst moment for migration politics. Instead, this research reevaluates political agency by showing the importance of issues of language and clarifies that security concerns were only one of the dimensions at play in the forging of migration politics. ■

NOTE

1. There were objective differences in the dynamics of 9/11 and 11-M, but they should not be overemphasized. In the United States, the terrorists entered the country with a nonmigrant status, such as a student visa, with the intention to execute the terrorist attack, while most of the 11-M perpetrators had resided in Spain for many years as documented or undocumented migrants. However, even in the United States, there were al-Qaeda terrorists who had resided in the country as migrants for many years, and in Spain, there were also members of al-Qaeda who had come from abroad with terrorist intentions.

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Andrea Carlà is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of political science of the New School for Social Research in New York. He studies comparative politics and American politics, focusing on migration politics, national security issues and ethnic politics. Currently, Andrea is working on his dissertation, entitled "Victim or Threat? Terrorists and Migrants in the USA and Spain," in which he compares and analyzes how the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States and March 11, 2004, in Spain impacted migration politics of the two countries. While at the Centennial Center, Andrea researched government documents in the INS/USCIS Historical Reference Library.

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