

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Trevino-Rangel, Javier (2016) What Do We Mean When We Talk About the “Securitization” of International Migration in Mexico? A Critique. *Global Governance*, 22 (2). pp. 289-306. ISSN 1942-6720

Published by: Brill

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02202007> <<https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02202007>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/43744/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University’s research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher’s website (a subscription may be required.)

What are we talking about when we talk about the “securitization” of international migration in Mexico? A critique.

Javier Treviño-Rangel<sup>1</sup>

*Undocumented international migration in Mexico is facing a serious human rights crisis. Each year, hundreds of thousands of migrants, above all from Central America, cross Mexico to reach the United States. Their journey risks extortion, kidnap, torture, disappearance, and death. For activists and civil society organizations, this crisis is explained by what they call the “securitization” of Mexico’s migration policy. By “securitization” they understand a policy imposed on Mexico by the United States that treats migrants as a security threat. This article challenges this interpretation, arguing that the theory of securitization is insufficient to understand the many factors that make possible the systematic violence of the human rights of migrants in transit in Mexico. **KEYWORDS:** international migration, human rights, securitization, civil society, migratory policy.*

In 2010 the corpses of 72 foreign citizens were discovered in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in north-eastern Mexico. The massacre’s only survivor testified that they had been kidnapped by members of the local police who then handed them over to the criminal organization Los Zetas (an organization created and trained by former members of the Mexican military). They had been asked for money in exchange for their freedom, but they had none and so were shot in the back.<sup>2</sup> From here on, the issue of international migration in Mexico has gradually won some recognition in the media.

It would be hard to say that the San Fernando massacre took the different official bodies concerned with the issue by surprise. A year before, the country’s National Commission of Human Rights had presented to the public a report documenting how in six months more than 9,000 undocumented migrants transiting through to the United States had been kidnapped in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Since 2009, the shelters for migrants, journalists and human rights activists had also reported the grave abuses they suffer.<sup>4</sup> For Jorge A. Bustamante, former UN Special Rapporteur on Migrants’ Rights, there is simply “no other country in the world where more deaths of international migrants happen” than in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> So it is that some observers have described the situation of undocumented international migration in Mexico as “a holocaust,” “a humanitarian tragedy,” “a human rights crisis.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, the irregular international migration in transit through Mexico is a problem largely ignored by academia. Its absence is especially striking in the international relations (IR) literature, despite its being an issue that directly concerns this discipline.<sup>7</sup> The reports of activists and human rights organizations have covered the academic silence on the matter.

How have activists and experts tried to explain the human rights crises of migrants transiting through Mexico? Reviewing a significant number of documents published on this issue in the last years by activists and human rights organizations it is plain that there is a certain consensus among the authors on the principal cause supposedly explaining the deplorable situation of undocumented international migration: the “securitization” of Mexico’s migration policy.<sup>8</sup> According to them, the securitization of migration is a migratory policy imposed by the United States on Mexico after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001. This policy, the authors argue, is based on the belief that undocumented international migration is a national security threat, such that the Mexican state has deployed specific practices and laws to halt it.

Studies on the securitization of migration emerged over twenty years ago and have since influenced the discipline of IR.<sup>9</sup> These studies have been useful in understanding the process through which countries like the United States have adopted more restrictive migratory policies and practices with the aim of checking migration. However, as these same studies have demonstrated, the process of the securitization of migration in those countries has not brought with it a human rights crisis.<sup>10</sup> If Mexico is the country where more deaths of international migrants happen in the world, the explanation drawn from the theory of securitization would appear to be insufficient. If this is so, then what are the causes behind the deplorable situation of undocumented migrants in transit through the country? What are the factors generating the atrocities perpetrated against them?

Responding to these questions entails a substantial inquiry, one beyond the reach of this article. Furthermore, before trying to give a new answer to these questions, it is appropriate to stop and analyze the existing explanation: that is, securitization. Hence this article seeks to respond to two questions. First, how is the reality of international migration in Mexico explained by those authors who approach it through the concept of securitization? Second, what evidence do they have to demonstrate what they say they explain?

Hence the aim of this article is to explore the explanations framed by theories of securitization, their use in understanding what is happening with international migration in Mexico, and their validity based on the empirical evidence they offer to support what they affirm. To do this, this article is divided in four parts. First, I briefly describe the concept of securitization. Second, I critically analyze an important number of studies that, framed by securitization theories, attempt to explain the situation of international migration in Mexico. Third, I scrutinize the evidence used by the studies that talk of the securitization of migration in Mexico. There follows a section posing some of the weaknesses of these studies. The end offers a conclusion.

### **Conceptual and methodological notes**

Some preliminary conceptual and methodological clarifications are in order. Throughout I shall use the categories of activists and experts interchangeably as it is readily found that in Mexico academic experts on the migration issue frequently collaborate with civil society activists and organizations or are fully one with them. The same happens in reverse: academic research is coordinated, edited and published by activists who collaborate in research centers and universities. In some cases, these activists and experts furthermore participate as state agents. In this sense, as Nicholas Guilhot affirms, these actors are “double agents,” serving equally in the fields of the state, academia and the organizations of civil society.<sup>11</sup>

This inquiry draws on Michel Foucault’s genealogical methods.<sup>12</sup> This is an interpretive frame that seeks to unsettle the stability of explanations considered fixed, that attempts to fragment apparently solid and unified interpretations, and that shows the heterogeneity and contingency of events and ideas apparently homogeneous and consistent.<sup>13</sup> Thus, unlike all the documents consulted here, this article does not take securitization as something obvious and evident. Thus too, far from repeating the commonplaces of activists and experts, this article seeks to demystify the powerful argument that talks of the securitization of migration in Mexico, appearing to easily explain what is happening with the undocumented foreign citizens. My aim is to challenge those experts and activists who devoutly repeat that everything that is happening in relation to migration is conditioned by securitization. This is no small matter. This article attempts nothing less than to dismantle

the interpretation that in the last ten years has dominated analysis on international migration in Mexico.

To select the texts I analyze here I followed the “method for composing our world” established by Bruno Latour in his study on the pasteurization of France.<sup>14</sup> For Latour, this method “does not require us to decide in advance on a list of actors and possible actions. If we open the [...] literature of the time”, he claims, “we find stories that define for us who are the main actors, what happens to them, what trials they undergo.” This method proved very useful for this article. It suffices to open any document by some expert or activist for this to guide the reader on those texts and actors who have the monopoly on the discourse, on the explanations, on what is happening with migration in transit through Mexico. To avoid any bias, as may be seen in the footnotes here, there is citation of a large number of documents published by diverse organizations and experts, among who are the most renowned Mexican *migrantologists*.

Finally, a note on this study’s time limit: the analysis is of texts published by activists and experts up until December 2012. The changes since then in migration management are not part of this article.

### **The theory and practice of the securitization of international migration**

In 1995, Ole Waever coined the term securitization in reaction to traditional studies on security, to the realist and neo-realist theories of the discipline of IR that restricted the concept of “threats” only to dangers of a military type, generally between states.<sup>15</sup> For Waever, and others like Barry Buzan, it was not sufficient to analyze an apparently objective threat. For these authors what mattered was the study of: (a) the *process* by which certain actors, such as the press or the executive, present before the public the existence of supposed threats (military or not) as a pretext for deploying certain emergency measures; and (b) the results of this process: for example, an increase in the number of police, greater resources, more armaments.<sup>16</sup> In relation to the migration issue, these authors explored how in some countries international migration, with or without documents, went from being an issue of ordinary policy to a matter of security, one that demanded greater public attention and that legitimized urgent public policies.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of this theoretical focus is that it allowed an understanding of the securitization of international migration as a process in which multiple actors—government ministers, members of religions, journalists, academics, experts—intervene seeking to convince the public that migration is a latent threat to security. And, once migration comes to be seen as a danger by the public, these same actors can then justifiably design and dispose actions, laws, ad hoc rules, institutions, budgets and emergency mechanisms to end, avoid, halt, contain or control the danger—even if these dispositions violate the Constitution, international human rights norms, or if they go against common sense.

This interpretive frame of securitization won greater salience after the attacks of 9/11 2001. What occurred that day served—and serves—as a pretext for some states (the United States, for instance) to harden their policies vis-à-vis international migration, represented as an imminent risk to public security and, above all, to national security.

It is important to emphasize that the events of 9/11 have only been an excuse for the change in the policies of some countries towards international migration. That is, the link between migration and national security was only made to 9/11 in some countries, not in others. In France, for instance, as Philippe Bourbeau has shown, 9/11 had a very limited impact. French migration policy is restrictive enough, but the terrorist attacks had very little

to do with this: that is, there were no significant changes in laws, state agents (as was the case with the French ministers) almost didn't talk about the matter, and the leading newspapers seldom established the link between migration affairs and the attacks of 9/11.<sup>18</sup> Put another way, the French state has traditionally had a restrictive migration policy, but this has been so since before the terrorist attacks in New York.

By contrast, an example like 9/11 has been manipulated to “securitize” migration policies in the United States. Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer have shown that in the US, from 2001, there has been an explicit effort to link the migration issue with ideas of threats to national security. According to these authors, this is something that has been repeatedly affirmed in official speeches and documents like 2004's *National Border Patrol Strategy*, or in the discussion in Congress in the context of 2002's *Homeland Security Act*.<sup>19</sup> By this logic, “any illegal entry could be a terrorist.”<sup>20</sup>

This rhetoric, so these authors point out, has had concrete consequences through the creation of new institutions and special norms, and through a constant increase in the budget and the number of agents deployed to control international immigration. Evidence of this, according to Isacson and Meyer, is the 2002 creation of the Department of Homeland Security which joins together distinct agencies connected with border security, and the 2005 commencement of the Secure Border Initiative to reinforce the security of the border. Between 1992 and 2011, they observe, the number of agents of the Border Patrol at the southwest border quintupled. And the total budget of the Border Patrol increased by 102% from 2005.<sup>21</sup>

This is a very brief survey of the emergence of the theory of securitization, of its basic arguments and its use to explain, with greater or less success, what happens in practice in the sphere of international migration. I do not seek here to go any deeper into this theory. The point for now is to understand the source of the ideas and theoretical concepts that activists and experts collectively use when they try to explain what is happening in Mexico with international migration. Can it be said that the concept of securitization used to illustrate what happens in countries like the United States is of use in explaining “the humanitarian tragedy” of the migrants who cross through Mexico? How have those who affirm that the migration policy in Mexico is securitized demonstrated it? The following sections turn to these questions.

### **The answer that explains everything: “securitization”**

To understand how activists, NGOs and some academics interpret what is happening with the migrants in Mexico, the departure point is to explore what their publications say. Upon reviewing a significant number of these texts, it is easy to find that the majority of them coincide in their diagnosis: the deplorable situation of the migrants in the country is the result of what they call “securitization.”<sup>22</sup> Upon advancing in the analysis of these texts, it is evident that this concept has served to explain almost everything: the abandoning of a law (or the creating of another); the increase in the number of “operations” to carry out “migration checks,” but the reduction of migrants “detained” and “returned”; new dispositions on migration contrived by the federal government, along with their implementation (and manipulation) in the local sphere; the participation of organized crime in the field of migration; migration policies that occurred twenty, ten or three years since—and changes in the migration norms and practices that perhaps may come about in the future.

But what is securitization? Based upon the texts consulted, the concept brings together three central ideas. First: that the Mexican state deals with undocumented migration as an issue strictly of national security and that it has deployed certain specific policies for this. Second: that this is a policy that commenced after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001 in the United States and that it was “imposed” on Mexico. Third: that it—and only it—explains the increase in the violations of the human rights of the migrants.

The aforesaid may be illustrated by four examples. In the introduction that he wrote for a text published by an NGO, the scholar Manuel Ángel Castillo explains securitization in the following manner: “the incidents of September 2001 in United States territory led to” the promotion of “initiatives tending to confront ... threats” to “national security”. This affected “the manner of confronting the migration dynamic,” not only in the United States but also in its “immediate area of influence”—that is, in Mexico.<sup>23</sup>

In *Seguridad para el migrante: una agenda por construir*, the authors propose that “the policy of the United States fosters the perception that migrants are a threat to national security.” The “imposition” of this view of migration in countries like Mexico, they affirm, leads undocumented migrants to be a concern within “the agenda of the fight against terrorism.”<sup>24</sup> And this, they conclude, is one of “the central causes on account of which a situation of humanitarian crisis is currently being lived in the migration issue.”<sup>25</sup>

The topic is tackled in a similar way in the book *Migración y seguridad: nuevo desafío en México*: “starting from the attacks of 11 September 2001, migration has occupied an ever more outstanding place in security policies, on the argument of preventing the entry of possible terrorists. This process of securitizing migration ... has had influence in other countries, as is the case with Mexico.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, according to the document *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes y solicitantes de asilo detenidas en las estaciones migratorias de México*, “the repressive model” of migration control has been promoted by the United States “strongly through the last years.”<sup>27</sup> Hence Mexico’s migration policy, the authors affirm, “has had as its fundamental engine the interest in guarding the security of the Mexican state from the—unfounded—danger that foreign persons represent.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus far does the apparent consensus among experts and activists trying to explain the situation of transit migration in Mexico based upon securitization reach. The interpretation and use of this concept, however, changes from one text to another when the authors attempt to deepen their analyses. That is, upon thoroughly studying the arguments of the texts consulted on the securitization of migration in Mexico there appear a series of contradictions of which I underline three that are, in my opinion, fundamental.

#### *Securitization is and will always be*

The first transformation the concept undergoes has to do with its temporal origin. Securitization as a migration discourse and practice, so activists and experts say, arose starting from the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States (9/11). However, when they go deeper into the analysis of the situation of migrants in Mexico, these same activists talk of securitization as an atemporal phenomenon that explains the migration policies in the 1990s (a decade before 2001) or those migration practices deployed since 2011 (a decade after).

For instance, securitization supposedly serves to easily explain what has happened in Mexico “during the last two decades” (that is, from the 1990s)<sup>29</sup>; “in the current era and especially since September 2001.”<sup>30</sup> Others, following the idea that securitization started

after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, indicate a crucial example of it in “Plan Sur,” implemented by the Mexican government in 2001 with “a police and inquisitorial focus,” and that “oriented migration policy to augment the capacity to guard against, control, inspect and contain the migratory flows.”<sup>31</sup> The problem is that Plan Sur, as other experts observe, began in July 2001, that is, some two months before the attacks of 11 September.<sup>32</sup>

For others, securitization can explain any migration law or practice that has taken place in Mexico in the last ten years: in 2002, through the forming of the High Level Group on Border Security<sup>33</sup>; in 2007, through the mention of the migration issue in the *National Development Plan’s* section concerning national security<sup>34</sup>; in 2010, through the “formal” delegation of the capacity to carry out migration operations to the regional agents of the National Migration Institute; or in 2011, through the coming into force of the *Migration Law* which mentions the topic of national security.

### *Securitization is the origin of everything*

The second transformation the concept of securitization undergoes on being used by experts and activists to explain the Mexican case is that of its supposed effects in migration policy and practice. Originally, the idea of securitization assumes a discourse based on the definition of migrants as a prominent threat to national security. This implies the deployment of migration norms, laws, rules, institutions, authorities and practices to control this potential danger to security. In Mexico, securitization serves for the experts to interpret—today—norms, laws and practices that currently limit the trans-migrants’ human rights, even though the said dispositions have existed in the country at least since 1974, or even since 1930. For some authors, it is only owing to securitization that we can understand “the applicability of norms and practices of migration control and inspection that restrict the human rights of migrants.”<sup>35</sup> And yet, how to explain that exactly the same dispositions functioned in the country since before 11 September 2001? For instance, the power of the authorities to detain migrants unable to prove their legal stay in the country or to establish prison-like detention centers where migrants are deprived of their freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Securitization has been useful to talk of the deployment of practices that even run counter to each other. For example, it serves to approach, at the same time, the consequences of the *excess* and *absence* of border control—depending on which expert considers there to be excess or absence of border control. The authors who believe that the government has been inefficient in border control think this has forced the authorities to increase the number of raids and “migration filters” within the country, outside of international entry points. And “where there are greater [migration] controls, greater are the risks facing persons all along the migration circuit, because migrants have to fall back on the trafficking networks that are today controlled by organized crime networks.”<sup>37</sup> By contrast, those who think that there has been greater border control consider that this has “involved negligence in the effective control of the transit routes.”<sup>38</sup> And this negligence in the transit routes, in turn, has brought greater abuses against the migrants, as there are no authorities to protect them from organized crime.<sup>39</sup> How can securitization serve to support opposing explanations?

### *Securitization was imposed by the United States, although really it doesn’t matter*

The final distortion of the concept has to do with its origin. The consensus among experts and activists is that securitization was imposed on Mexico by the United States after 11 September 2001. This is an explanation that is believable but difficult to demonstrate. “I do not know for a fact if there were pressures or open demands from the United States to exercise

a greater control by the Mexican authorities in the southern border,” affirms Natalia Armijo.<sup>40</sup> The same is also admitted by Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint: “it is difficult to prove the influence of the United States policy of national security in the rise of the mechanisms of migration control in the southern border of Mexico.”<sup>41</sup> For these authors, the really important thing is that “starting from September 2001 there were significant changes that had implications for [the migration] policies and measures.” In equal fashion for Adam Isacson “Mexico has increased its securitization efforts along its border with the United States.” However, Isacson observes, “clearly” those securitization efforts have been carried out by Mexico “whether encouraged by the United States or not.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the irony is that the authors who affirm that securitization is something “imposed” on Mexico from the United States are exactly the same who then warn that this cannot be demonstrated, or really doesn’t matter.

In sum, upon reviewing a significant number of texts that talk about the situation of international migration in Mexico it is plain that “securitization” is a concept fully evoked and shared by activists and experts. With variations and nuances, the majority of the texts coincide on three basic components: that the Mexican state strictly considers international migration a problem of national security and that it acts in consequence through public norms and policies; that it is a view imposed from the United States that began immediately after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001; and that this explains “the humanitarian tragedy” of the migrants in transit through Mexico. None the less, in using this concept in their analyses, the authors as a matter of fact end up passing over these three factors. These texts produce the sensation that securitization has turned into less an explanation than “a dogma of faith”—an idea that frequently shows up in the rhetoric of the activists, that is easily believable, that appears to explain with certain simplicity what is happening (and what is not) with undocumented migration in Mexico, but that almost nobody really knows what is.

### **Migration control in Mexico: the available evidence**

To be able to talk about securitization in Mexico, the evidence presented by activists and experts ought to permit us to find three elements in the discourse and practice of the government. First: the notion that migration represents an existential threat to the security of the state and society. Second: the pre-eminence given in speeches and laws to migration as a threat to security. Third: the political and institutional effects of these ideas, which ought to have brought substantive changes in praxis: for instance, greater budgets, more immigration agents.<sup>43</sup> To know if these elements are present in the Mexican case, I shall take the examples and evidence that the same activists and experts normally use when they argue that migration in Mexico has been securitized.

#### *Securitization in official discourse?*

In Mexico, activists and experts affirm that migration is securitized. However, they do not offer examples of how this occurs in government rhetoric. In the texts consulted for this article it was not possible to find examples of speeches or at least key phrases pronounced during the terms of Presidents Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), Vicente Fox (2000-2006) or Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) that explicitly linked transit migration with security, or that represented migrants as threat to Mexico’s security.

This allows it to be inferred that the supposed securitization of international migration in Mexico is not present, at least, in official discourse. Neither the Presidents nor their



Secretaries of State, for example, are talking about migrants in transit as a danger for the country's security. At least not until before 2012.

*Securitization in legal dispositions?*

An example frequently cited by the NGOs that seek to demonstrate that migration has been securitized in Mexican norms and laws is the National Development Plan, the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo* (PND) of 2007-2012. This is due to its having “fused migration and national security,” as the activists affirm.<sup>44</sup>

In effect, the PND's section on “national security” mentions the migration theme: “a fundamental condition in the policy of national security consists in guaranteeing the order and legality of the migratory and commercial flows, or flows of any type, in the more than 4,300 kilometers that comprise our borders.”<sup>45</sup> This is the only time that the theme of migration is explicitly linked to national security. But this is what any state seeks to attain, as a matter of principle. Like any other sovereign country, Mexico has tried to control migratory and commercial flows and its borders since its independence, and it is not for this that anyone talked about securitization or policies imposed by the United States immediately after 9/11.

The PND's section on national security also talks of border control and again mentions migrants. However, in doing so it does not refer to them as a threat, nor does it represent them as undesirable or dangerous actors. To the contrary, it talks of “safeguarding security on the borders, along with the integrity and respect for the human rights both of the inhabitants of these zones and of migrants.”<sup>46</sup> It affirms that “the strategies of border security should focus on the protection of migrants,” for being exposed to “groups of smugglers and traffickers in people and drugs.”

But there is another section of the PND that mentioned the migration theme: *Effective Democracy and Responsible Foreign Policy*.<sup>47</sup> There it was affirmed that the government was seeking “the protection of Latin American citizens who enter the country, often in an undocumented manner and in deplorable security conditions.”<sup>48</sup> It even proposed “building a new culture of migration” that would promote “the co-responsibility between the countries that share with Mexico migration flows to foster economic growth and social development in the most underdeveloped zones, and guarantee at the same time the protection of the rights of the migrants ...”<sup>49</sup> Is this securitization?

Neither the Mexican Constitution nor the *Law of National Security* present a link between migration and security. So it is from a very secondary norm that the texts here consulted cite another example to try to demonstrate the securitization of migration—the Accord recognizing the National Institute of Migration, the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) as a national security agency.<sup>50</sup> Yet, while this is a frequently evoked example the authors who analyze the reasons why this disposition contributes to securitization are rare.

The main question that ought to be posed is how the formal identification of the INM as one of the multiple national security agencies was justified. The presidential decree giving rise to this disposition maintains that the laws in the framework for the INM have always been related with the country's security.<sup>51</sup> The INM can, for example, restrict the emigration of Mexicans when “national interest so demands”; guard the entry and departure of Mexicans (and foreigners), and check their documentation. Are these functions imposed by the United States on the Mexican government after 9/11? Were they designed with the objective of controlling the Central American migrants who are represented as a threat to security? In reality, these are dispositions that the INM has since its creation; functions that in distinct

forms have always been in Mexican legislation.<sup>52</sup> Besides, these measures equally affect Mexicans and non-Mexicans.

A last example is the *Ley de Migración* of 2011. In effect, this law mentions in its first article that it seeks “the preservation of national sovereignty and security,” although it never establishes how it is going to contribute to this or what is understood by security. Furthermore, the law affirms that it seeks “the respect for, protection and safeguarding of the human rights” of migrants.<sup>53</sup> In any case, the relation between security and migration in this law is not something new. As José A. Guevara correctly points out, this link has been present in the legal statutes in Mexico from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the 2011 law merely consolidates the views of migration and security that already existed in previous pieces of legislation: for example, in the *Law on the faculties of the Government relative to the expulsion of non-naturalized foreigners* of 1832, in the *Law on aliens and naturalization* of 1886, in the *Law of Immigration* of 1909, in the *Law of Migration* of 1930, or in the *General Law of Population* of 1974.<sup>54</sup>

The meticulous review by Guevara of Mexican migration norms thus reveals that the problem is not securitization, that the link between security and migration has always existed in Mexico, and that therefore it has not been imposed by the United States. Guevara’s study demonstrates that the problem--perhaps more disturbing--is xenophobia and racism, the pillars that have historically framed the link between international migration and security in the country.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Securitization in practice?*

For some activists, the administrative detention of migrants unable to prove their legal stay in Mexico demonstrates that migration is securitized.<sup>56</sup> The Migration Law of 2011 contemplates, for example, “presentation”--the peculiar term employed in the law to indicate that a migrant can be detained for no more than 36 hours. It also establishes “lodging”<sup>57</sup>—the euphemism used to refer to the detention of migrants from between 15 and 60 days in “migration stations,” which in their turn are the name given for the prison-like centers where migrants find themselves detained.<sup>58</sup>

However, these dispositions did not start in 2001 after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, nor have they been justified before the public with the argument that migrants are a threat to national security. These measures have existed since at least 1974, for so the General Law of Population established them. This law empowered the Ministry of the Interior to establish “migration stations” in places considered appropriate “to lodge” migrants.<sup>59</sup> The said law did indeed criminalize the foreigners who settled without documents in the country, providing for this case a sentence of up to two years in prison.<sup>60</sup>

For other activists a second proof of securitization in practice is related to the mechanisms by which certain authorities besiege migrants within the country, in places distinct from the internment points.<sup>61</sup> For this, The Migration Law of 2011 uses three terms: “control,” “verification” and “migration revision.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite the questionable—and perhaps unconstitutional—nature these measures may have, they were not designed as a response to the attacks of 9/11. The harassment of migrants has been authorized by law for at least three decades. For example, the General Law of Population of 1974 granted discretionary powers to the Ministry of the Interior to promote before other federal or local authorities measures “to subject the immigration of foreigners to the forms it judges appropriate, and to procure the best assimilation of these to the national setting and their adequate arrangement in the territory.”<sup>63</sup> Since 1999, the law empowered

the authorities to undertake “verification visits outside the established fixed revision points,” and “migration revision on routes or provisional points distinct from those established.”<sup>64</sup> These measures, moreover, affect both foreigners with documents and Mexicans. Furthermore, these migration “controls” would appear to be rather inefficient, according to official data. The number of Central American migrants detained and expelled by Mexico gradually diminished between 2005 and 2010. In 2005, Mexico detained and expelled 223,000 Central American trans-migrants, while less than 64,000 in 2010.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, one of the arguments of the civil society organizations to prove that in Mexico migration is securitized in practice refers to the INM’s capacity to undertake “operations” with the end of detaining undocumented migrants. However, despite the deployment of “operations” there were less migrants “retained” and “returned.” Between 2005 and 2010, there was a decrease of 72% in the number of Central American migrants detained and expelled by Mexico. In contrast, in the United States, in exactly the same period, there was an increase of 89% in the number of Central American migrants returned to their countries.<sup>66</sup> That is, in the United States the figures match with the policy of securitization: there is a discourse that represents migrants as a threat, more restrictive rules and practices, more people detained and deported every year. In Mexico exactly the contrary occurs: there is not an official discourse on securitization; the “operations” that supposedly demonstrate securitization in practice have existed for decades; and there were less people detained and expelled between 2005 and 2010 according to the available official information.

A third argument to demonstrate that in Mexico migration policy “has securitization as its cornerstone” is related to the participation of security agents distinct from the personnel of the INM in the migration “control”: for example, the Federal Police.<sup>67</sup> However, this questionable disposition has existed in the country since 1930. The Migration Law of that year authorized the migration authorities to solicit the aid of the public forces, federal or local, to carry out their tasks.<sup>68</sup> Something similar was ordered by the General Law of Population of 1999: “the Ministry of the Interior, through the personnel of the migration services and the Preventive Federal Police, shall be able to carry out ... verification visits” and “migration revision on routes or provisional points distinct from those established.”<sup>69</sup>

Finally, the evolution of the INM’s budget does not follow a coherent pattern. What can be known is that it has not substantially increased. Between 2005 and 2011, it could be said that the resources approved for the INM in the federal budget of expenditure did not go up in a significant way because they did not go up on average more than 20% in all those years.<sup>70</sup> In 2008, seven years after 9/11, the budget suddenly increased 90%. However, in 2009 the resources went down 14%. Can the budget cut also be explained by securitization? Since then and until 2012, it remained constant.

### **The insufficiencies of the discourse of securitization**

Despite the lack empirical evidence, the idea that Mexico’s migration policy is securitized has become a commonplace among many of the activists connected with the migration issue. We could believe that the explanation of securitization, like a dogma of faith, is a truth that does not admit doubts and that, therefore, does not require evidence to be believed. The problem is that the way experts and activists have adapted the concept of securitization in Mexico presents some problems.

*Immutable and pure*

The first weakness of the texts that explain the situation of international migration in Mexico through the theory of securitization is that they assume that the migration policy is immutable: that is, that it does not change with the passing of times. This allows the activists to explain events that happened in 2011, 2001 or 1990; and to predict situations that may occur in the future. As if the migration policy and its management were identical in the governments of Presidents Salinas and Calderón. As if the civil society organizations that promote and defend the human rights of migrants were today equal to those of the 1980s.

Immutability brings with it another weakness: the fantasy of purity. That is, the texts here consulted talk of securitization as something that is foreign to its historical, social, political or economic context. Securitization as a state policy passes across the years without seeing itself affected by economic squeezes, political instability, crises of violence, migratory flows or the work of civil society organizations or transnational lobbying networks. It walks on without getting dirty. Securitization would appear not to vary in intensity. Is there some change in the level of securitization of migration practice between the Law of Population of 1974 and the Law of 2011?

#### *Beyond the state*

One of the most serious insufficiencies of the securitization discourse of the activists and experts is that it ignores a multiplicity of elements that make possible the suffering and abuses that foreign citizens without documents in transit through the country systematically endure. The discourse of securitization concentrates on the performance of the state and its agents, along with the effects of restrictive laws that these design and implement. It implicitly assumes that upon the disappearance of securitization in the migration policy that has been imposed by the United States the situation of the undocumented foreigners in Mexico will improve. However, this overlooks that “the humanitarian tragedy” of the migrants in transit is also the result of other factors, some structural, others conjunctural, that have nothing to do with the supposed securitization nor with the state: for example, xenophobia and racism<sup>71</sup>; the fact that the kidnapping of transmigrants and what comes with it – extortion, torture, murder, disappearance – is a lucrative business for broad sectors of the population in Mexico<sup>72</sup>; the fact that criminal organizations are exploring new illegal markets (mass kidnappings).

#### **Conclusion**

A significant number of activists and experts found in securitization an argument apparently explaining with ease everything that happens to the migrants in transit in Mexico. And yet, all define what securitization is in a different and at times contradictory way; and almost always without proofs. What are we talking about when we talk about the securitization of international migration in Mexico?

The securitization that affects the migration policy and management in other countries has entailed three things: the public and extensive notion that undocumented migrants are a risk to security; the pre-eminence given in speeches and legal dispositions to migration as a threat; the materializing of policies and institutions designed to detain the danger that migrants represent. The adoption and adaptation of the theory of securitization on the part of many activists and experts who seek to explain what is happening in Mexico has involved three assumptions: that the government treats migration as an issue exclusively of security and that on account of this it has implemented restrictive policies; that this policy commenced

after the attacks of 2001 in the United States and was “imposed” on Mexico; that it alone explains the rise in the abuses against migrants.

However, these same authors have not provided convincing evidence to demonstrate that this occurs. There are no traces of an official discourse that explicitly portrays migrants as a potential threat to national security. By contrast with what happens in countries like the United States, in Mexico government rhetoric talks, ironically, of “protecting” migrants and of “respecting” their human rights. Not all dispositions that currently serve to control international migration—“revisions,” “lodgings,” “operations”—are necessarily more restrictive than in the past. Moreover, the majority of the dispositions have existed for decades; that is, they do not appear to have been “imposed” recently by the United States after the attacks of 9/11.

Beyond the absence of evidence, the argument of securitization is founded on assumptions that are not totally correct. For example, it assumes that migration dispositions, policies and management in Mexico are immutable, detached from their political, historical or social context. To claim that everything that happens with undocumented migrants can be understood with securitization obscures another type of more ranging explanations: the multiplication of criminal groups, the indifference of Mexican society to the drama of Central American migration, the fact that undocumented migration means great business for wide sectors of the population, the limited capacity of the language of human rights to represent the suffering that is not only caused by the state but also by ordinary Mexicans.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Kim Krasevac, Mario Bronfman, and Alejandro Anaya Muñoz. Without their support this article would not have been possible.

<sup>2</sup> Jesús Aranda, “Zetas ejecutaron por la espalda a los 72 migrantes; no pudieron pagar rescate,” *La Jornada*, 26 August 2010; Laura Poy Solano, “Ordena IFAI a PGR informar sobre policías detenidos por masacre en San Fernando,” *La Jornada*, 20 August 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, *Informe Especial sobre los casos de secuestro en contra de migrantes*, México, Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 15 June 2009, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Belén, Posada del Migrante, Humanidad Sin Fronteras y Fronteras con Justicia, *Quinto Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes en tránsito por México*, México, 2009; Federico Mastrogiovanni, *El negocio de la migración. Migrantes centroamericanos en tránsito por México hacia Estados Unidos*, MA thesis, Mexico, UNAM, 2013; Amnesty International, *Invisible victims. Migrants in movement in Mexico*, London, Amnesty International Publications, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Jorge A. Bustamante, “¿Son nuestros muertos?,” *Reforma*, 28 March 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Carmen Aristegui, “Holocausto,” *Reforma*, 27 August 2010; Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, “Las y los migrantes viven una tragedia humanitaria en México,” Boletín 288/2013, 2 August 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The only exception to this is the article published by Olga Aikin and Alejandro Anaya Muñoz, “Crisis de derechos humanos de las personas migrantes en tránsito por México: redes y presión transnacional,” *Foro Internacional*, 53 (1), 2013.

<sup>8</sup> For example, *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes y solicitantes de asilo detenidas en las Estaciones Migratorias de México, 2007-2009*, Mexico, Sin Fronteras I.A.P., 2009, pp. 11-12; Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, eds., *Seguridad para el migrante: una agenda por construir*, Documento de trabajo No. 2, Mexico, Instituto de Estudios y Divulgación sobre Migración-Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo, 2011, pp. 17-19; Natalia Armijo, ed., *Migración y seguridad: nuevo desafío en México*, Mexico, Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia, 2011; Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint, “Seguridad y

migración en la frontera sur,” in Arturo Alvarado and Mónica Serrano, eds., *Seguridad nacional y seguridad interior, Los grandes problemas de México*, Mexico, El Colegio de México, 2010, pp. 269-300; Maureen Meyer, *A Dangerous Journey Through Mexico: Human Rights Violations Against Migrants in Transit*, Washington Office on Latin America, 2010, p. 4; Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, *Beyond the Border Build-up. Security and Migrants Along the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Washington Office on Latin America, 2012, p. 15; Idheas, *En tierra de nadie. El laberinto de la impunidad. Violaciones de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes en la región del Soconusco*, México, 2011; *Informe sobre la situación general de los derechos de los migrantes y sus familias. Elaborado en ocasión de la visita a México del señor comisionado Felipe González, Relator Especial de Trabajadores Migratorios y Miembros de sus Familias de la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos*, Mexico, July 2011, p. 18 (available at: [http://www.sinfronteras.org.mx/attachments/1160\\_Informe\\_Final.pdf](http://www.sinfronteras.org.mx/attachments/1160_Informe_Final.pdf)).

<sup>9</sup> Ole Waever et al., *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Bourbeau, *The Securitization of Migration. A Study of Movement and Order*, London, Routledge, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers. Human Rights and International Order*, New York, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in Graham Burchell et. al., *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 77-83; Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986, pp. 76-104.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ole Waever, “Securitization and desecuritization,” in Ronnie D. Lipschutz, ed., *On Security*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 46-86.

<sup>16</sup> Barry Buzan et al., *Security: a new framework for analysis*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 23; Thierry Balzacq, “The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 11 (2), 2005, p. 175; Hogel Stritzel, “Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 13 (3), 2007, p. 360; Claire Wilkinson, “The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitization Theory Usable Outside Europe?,” *Security Dialogue*, 28 (1), 2007, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Didier Bigo, “Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease,” *Alternatives* 27, 2002, p. 64; Ayse Ceyhan and Anastassia Tsoukala, “The Securitization of Migration in Western Societies: Ambivalent Discourses and Policies,” *Alternatives*, 27, 2002, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Bourbeau, *op. cit.*, chapter 6.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Isacson, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection Office of Border Patrol, *National Border Patrol Strategy*, cited by Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> These texts are cited in footnote 7 above.

<sup>23</sup> Manuel Ángel Castillo, “Introducción,” in Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Natalia Armijo Canto, “Introducción,” in his book *Migración y seguridad...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

- <sup>31</sup> *Informe sobre la situación general de los derechos de los migrantes y sus familias...* op. cit., pp. 18-19. See also, Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, op. cit., p. 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Rodolfo Córdova Alcaraz, “Delitos cometidos contra los migrantes en la frontera sur de México: la relevancia de la participación ciudadana para combatirlos y erradicarlos,” in Natalia Armijo Canto, ed., *Frontera sur. Retos para la seguridad*, México, Secretaría de Seguridad Pública Federal, 2012, p. 129; Natalia Armijo, “Frontera sur de México...”, op. cit., p. 42; Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint suggest that Plan Sur started in 2003 (op. cit., p. 281).
- <sup>33</sup> Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint, *ibid.*, p. 291.
- <sup>34</sup> Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, *loc. cit.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes...*, op. cit., p. 16.
- <sup>36</sup> José A. Guevara B., “Conexiones entre los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes y la seguridad. ¿Es posible afirmar que el derecho mexicano criminaliza la migración indocumentada?,” *Cuestiones constitucionales. Revista mexicana de derechos constitucional*, forthcoming.
- <sup>37</sup> Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, op. cit., p. 35.
- <sup>38</sup> *Loc. cit.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Loc. cit.*
- <sup>40</sup> Natalia Armijo Canto, “Frontera sur de México...”, op. cit., p. 43
- <sup>41</sup> Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint, op. cit., p. 290.
- <sup>42</sup> Adam Isacson, “A Build-up in Search of a Threat. U.S. Policy, ‘Securitization’, and Migration Along a Dramatically Changed Border,” paper presented at the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ford Foundation Office for Mexico and Central America, 10 September 2012.
- <sup>43</sup> For the case of Canada and France, see Philippe Bourbeau, op. cit.; for the United States, see Adam Isacson, op. cit.
- <sup>44</sup> Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, op. cit., p. 15.
- <sup>45</sup> *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2007-2012*, p. 67.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>47</sup> For sure, because the PND talked about migrants and development or democracy does not mean that the government really did anything about them. Given the critical situation of the migrants, the most likely is that the government of Felipe Calderón did all too little about them—but this is not the theme of this article.
- <sup>48</sup> *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2007-2012*, p. 305.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.
- <sup>50</sup> Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer, op. cit., 15; Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint, op. cit., p. 278.
- <sup>51</sup> Poder Ejecutivo-Secretaría de Gobernación, “Acuerdo por el que se reconoce al Instituto Nacional de Migración como Instancia de Seguridad Nacional,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 18 May 2005.
- <sup>52</sup> José A. Guevara B., *Marco institucional y normativo en materia de migración internacional en México. Análisis y propuestas*, México, Instituto de Estudios y Divulgación sobre Migración, 2011, p. 92, n. 340.
- <sup>53</sup> Article 1 of the *Ley de Migración* of 2011.
- <sup>54</sup> José A. Guevara B., “Conexiones...”, art. cit.
- <sup>55</sup> Javier Treviño Rangel, “Racismo y nación: comunidades imaginadas en México,” *Estudios Sociológicos*, 26 (78), 2008, pp. 669-694; Javier Treviño Rangel, “Los hijos del cielo en el infierno: un reporte sobre el racismo hacia las comunidades chinas en México, 1880-1930,” *Foro Internacional*, 45 (3), 2005, pp. 409-444.
- <sup>56</sup> Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, op. cit., p. 18; see also *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas...*, op. cit.
- <sup>57</sup> Javier Cruz Angulo, “Ley de Migración y derechos fundamentales,” in Jorge A. Schiavon and Gabriela Díaz Prieto, eds., *Los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes en México. Estudio de caso para promover su respeto y defensa*, Mexico, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2011, p. 214.

---

<sup>58</sup> Articles 68, 99 y 111 of the *Ley de Migración* of 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Article 71 of the *Ley General de Población* of 1974.

<sup>60</sup> Article 103 of the *Ley General de Población* of 1974.

<sup>61</sup> “Accord delegating faculties to authorize migration proceedings and exercise diverse functions envisaged in the General Law of Population and its Regulation, to public servants assigned to the Regional Delegations of the National Institute of Migration in the states of Aguascalientes, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Coahuila, Colima, Chiapas, Chihuahua, Durango, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, México, Michoacán, Morelos, Nayarit, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Yucatán y Zacatecas,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 9 September 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Articles 81, 92 y 97 de la *Ley de Migración* de 2011.

<sup>63</sup> Article 3, part VI of the *Ley General de Población* of 1974. See also José A. Guevara B., “Conexiones...”, art. cit.

<sup>64</sup> Artículo 151 of the *Ley General de Población* of 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Ernesto Rodríguez Chávez et al., “Migración centroamericana de tránsito irregular por México. Estimaciones y características generales,” *Apuntes sobre migración*, No. 1, July 2011, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ernesto Rodríguez Chávez et al., op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Fabienne Venet Rebiffé and Irene Palma Calderón, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> José A. Guevara B., “Conexiones...”, art. cit.

<sup>69</sup> Article 151 of the *Ley General de Población* of 1999.

<sup>70</sup> My interpretation, with data from Rodolfo Córdova Alcaraz, ed., *Una mirada al presupuesto del Instituto Nacional de Migración en México: ¿Dónde estuvieron sus prioridades durante 2011?*, Mexico, Fundar, Centro de Análisis e Investigación, 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Javier Treviño-Rangel, “Racismo y nación: comunidades imaginadas en México,” art. cit.

<sup>72</sup> Federico Mastrogiovanni, op. cit.