

Border security, 9/11 and the enclosure of civilisation

REECE JONES

Department of Geography, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA

E-mail: reecej@hawaii.edu

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This article describes the impact of the events of 11 September 2001 on the practice of border security in the United States, India and Israel. It argues that the discourse of the global war on terror shifted the perception of border fencing from the anachronistic imagery of the Berlin Wall to that of a modern and essential way to secure the future of civilisation and freedom. The hardening of the border, in turn, legitimates and exacerbates exclusionary practices within each state.

KEY WORDS: borders, security, terrorism

As the 10-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York, Washington DC and Shanksville, Pennsylvania arrives there are many stories in the news that crystallise the significance of the event to the practice of border security in the United States, Israel and India – three countries that over the past decade were targets of attacks and pursued major new border security projects.¹ In the United States, the plan to build an Islamic community centre a few blocks from the site of the attacks in New York produced virulent debate about whether it was inappropriate to build what was described as a 'shrine to terrorism' on a site that is 'in the shadow of the Twin Towers where landing gear from one of the hijacked planes landed [and] is part of sacred, hallowed ground' (Sekulow 2011). An online petition in March 2011 gathered over 300 000 signatures against it. Never mind that the 'ground zero mosque', as it has come to be known, is not a mosque but a community centre, is a few blocks from the World Trade Center site, and that there was a Muslim prayer room in the World Trade Center previously. In Tennessee, the construction of another community centre was protested against and vandalised multiple times. In Florida, a pastor declared the ninth anniversary of 11 September 'International Burn a Koran Day'. In *The New Republic*, an editorial about Muslims concluded with 'So, yes, I wonder whether I need honor these people and pretend that they are worthy of the privileges of the First Amendment which I have in my gut the sense that they will abuse' (Peretz 2010). He later apologised. In Illinois, plans to use a mostly empty state penitentiary to hold prisoners from Guantánamo Bay produced immediate opposition.

Lamar Smith, a Republican from Texas, at the time the ranking member, and now the chair of the House Judiciary Committee, said in a statement:

This decision changes nothing but geography. The Obama administration is naive if they really think that simply changing the location of Gitmo will improve our relations with terrorists. Bringing Gitmo detainees to the U.S. gives terrorists access to additional constitutional rights. These new rights may help terrorists avoid conviction and even file civil suits against American officials.

Smith (2009, np)

The idea that basic human rights are only reserved for citizens also underlies ongoing debates about what do with 'illegals' crossing the border from Mexico, a term that dehumanises the individual and defines their entire existence based on this status (Nevins 2010).

These exclusionary discourses about citizenship and belonging are not limited to the United States. In Israel, discussions were ongoing about what to do with several hundred children born in Israel to foreign workers, a debate that is as much about maintaining the exclusively Jewish character of the state as immigration. As Israel has restricted the number of Palestinians from the West Bank who can work in Israel, they have been replaced by other foreign workers. The government plans to deport these children, who are not Jewish and do not have Israeli citizenship, because of 'the ballooning numbers of foreign workers that some fear could threaten the country's Jewish identity' (Hadid 2010, np). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded that the government wanted to 'take into our hearts children who grew up here and were educated here as Israelis', but will not,

because it might create incentives for illegal migrants 'to flood the country' (quoted in Hadid 2010, np). The government was also debating a loyalty oath for all new non-Jewish citizens that requires them to protect the 'democratic and Jewish nature of the state' (Lis 2010).

In India, reports in September 2010 described an 'invasion' or 'deluge' of migrants from Bangladesh. Illustrating the connections between the US view and India, on the US-based Foxnews.com a commentary about the threat of illegal immigration in India begins breathlessly:

They are crossing the border illegally and violently displacing the indigenous population whose homes and possessions they either destroy or occupy. They are attacking the young, the elderly, and especially the girls and women, whom they kidnap, forcibly convert, or traffic into brothels. . . . I am not talking about illegal immigrants to Europe or North America. I am describing Muslims who are penetrating India's West Bengal region. These Bangladeshi immigrants are becoming conduits for criminal activities (arms, drugs, and sexual slavery) which also fund global jihad.

Chesler (2010, np)

The key transition, 'I am not talking about illegal immigrants to Europe or North America', is stated so matter-of-factly, because the reader apparently already knows that those immigrants to Europe or North America 'attack the young, the elderly and especially the girls and women'. Unfortunately it is not just Americans writing about the threat of Bangladeshi immigration to India that describe it in these terms. Varun Gandhi, the grandson of late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and great grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, has also turned his attention to threat posed by cross-border movements from Bangladesh. In September 2010 he said in a speech that 'We have a big challenge before us. The challenge is to save our nation. If we failed to solve Assam's Bangladeshi problem, after ten years UP [Uttar Pradesh], Bihar, Haryana will face similar problem' (*Hindustan Times* 2010). 'We, India as a nation, should take care to ensure protection of social, economic and cultural rights of our citizens. We must fight for a system where interests of Indians come first' (Gandhi 2010). In 2009, during his campaign for the Indian Parliament, he threatened to cut off the hands and heads of Muslims, while using a communal slur (Page 2009). Despite being briefly jailed for inciting communal violence, he won the seat in a landslide and was selected as the National Secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2010.

The United States, Israel and India all represent themselves as leading democracies and examples of freedom and civilisation. However, these stories, often involving elected officials in leadership positions, underscore an increasingly stringent nativist debate

about who legitimately belongs in each state's territory. When taken together, these events can be understood as being primarily about defining the legitimate subjects of the state and drawing a symbolic boundary that keeps others out. They each also exploit the lingering feelings of fear and insecurity created by the events of 11 September, the violence of the Second Intifada in Israel, and the ongoing violence in India, which endured a major attack every year from 2001 until 2008. Each of these stories is also fundamentally about border security, because they rely on the idea that the state is a territorial container that is both descriptive, in that it indicates the origins of an individual's belonging, and normative, in that it indicates where people should continue to be. Although maps represent these containers as fixed and give the impression that they are eternal, most scholars have long since abandoned this position (Agnew 2009). Instead state identity categories and state territorial categories are human constructs that have to be iteratively reproduced through boundary-making narratives and practices, an ongoing process that is illustrated by the news stories above.

Brubaker *et al.* (2004) use the term groupism to describe the tendency to view the world as being made up of groups of people that are homogenous internally with sharp distinctions between them. They write:

By their very nature, classification, categorization, and identification create 'groups' and assign members to them; but the groups thus created do not exist independently of the myriad acts of classification, categorization, and identification, public and private, through which they are sustained from day to day.

Brubaker *et al.* (2004, 45)

Brubaker argues that the idea of groups of people is not a pre-given thing-in-the-world but rather a perspective-on-the-world that is created and reproduced through particular narratives and practices that elicit feelings of group membership and distinguish those who are on the outside. When understood this way:

Ethnicity is not a thing, an attribute, or a distinct sphere of life; it is a way of understanding and interpreting experience, a way of talking and acting, a way of formulating interests and identities. Nationhood, similarly, is not an ethnocultural fact; it is a frame of vision, a cultural idiom, and a political claim.

Brubaker *et al.* (2006, 358)

These ways of talking and acting that formulate identity categories, and rely on binary narratives of us and them, are not a novel aspect of the post-11 September world. On the contrary, the fear of marauding barbaric people outside 'the group' has been around at least since the time of the Barbarians. However, the

particular representations of 'the others' have changed through time, which has produced different responses in the group to the fear of the other. The fear and affect from the events of 11 September, and subsequent attacks in other countries around the world, played a critical role in shifting these inside–outside narratives.

Said (1979), for example, identifies these othering narratives as Orientalism, which created, defined and limited the idea of the exotic, oriental other. While the self of the 'west' was defined against the exotic and traditional practices of the orient, there was not necessarily a fear that those other practices could replace the west. It was, by definition, over there. David Campbell makes a similar point about Cold War narratives that were 'a code for distinguishing the "civilized" from the "barbaric"' (1992, 159). The good and evil framing of groups was deployed, but often towards the ends of containing the evil threat to territories over there. Although today two of the most common symbols of the Cold War period – the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain – evoke the imagery of closed borders on international boundaries, in practice the Cold War was a period in which border security was of relatively minor concern. Indeed, only 11 border security projects were begun worldwide during the 45-year period from 1945 to 1990, and some of these, such as the US fence at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, were quite short (Hassner and Wittenberg 2009).

The idea of 'globalisation' had already begun to shift the narrative construction of the other even before the events of 11 September. Initially, much of the concern, articulated by authors like Barber (1995), was that the process of globalisation could bring a homogenisation of the world in the form of Anglo-American cultural and economic practices. The worry was that the spread of these different values systems might result in conflict as traditional practices were defended, again, over there. The examples at the beginning of this essay highlight the opposite process as well, which was not as widely foreseen. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s, flows in the opposite direction from 'over there' into countries of extreme wealth were becoming an issue. In the US, for example, the number of Border Patrol Agents was doubled in the 1990s and new strategies of aggressive enforcement were being tested (Andreas 2009; Nevins 2010). Although the borderless world narrative came to symbolise the idea of globalisation, the 1990s saw almost as much border fencing as the previous four decades of the Cold War combined (Hassner and Wittenberg 2009). In the US, India and Israel aggressive border security projects were proposed but were still languishing unfunded because the political and public will was not yet there to support them.

The significance of 11 September in the context of border security, then, is that it shifted perception of fencing from the exclusionary and anachronistic

imagery of the Berlin Wall to that of a modern and essential way to secure the future of civilisation and freedom. The discourse of the global war on terror relies on civilisational narratives of good and evil that are similar to those of Orientalism and the Cold War, with a major distinction. In previous discourses there was fear of the other, and the self was defined in opposition to it, but it never really came home. Of course, in the US during the Cold War there was a substantial internal focus of the national security state, but it was primarily to keep citizens in line, rather than to secure against the perceived threat of outsiders entering the state (Neocleous 2008).

Borders are important sites for the performance of both security and citizenship. They are the line that symbolises the distinction between the 'homeland' and the outside world. Borders also mark where the citizens of the state belong and those on the outside do not. The flow of immigrants in the 1990s, then the violence of 11 September and other attacks around the world, demonstrated that 'the other' was increasingly over here. As Brubaker puts it, not specifically referring to 11 September:

Certain dramatic events, in particular, can serve to galvanize and crystallize a potential group, or to ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness. This is why deliberate violence, undertaken as a strategy of provocation, often by a very small number of persons, can sometimes be an exceptionally effective strategy of group making.

Brubaker (2002, 171)

In the aftermath of 11 September, the United States became a 'homeland' – a term that previously would have sounded strange to most people – and its borders became potential highways for terrorists to enter. In Israel, the violence of the Second Intifada was immediately linked to the global threat of terrorism, as Ariel Sharon put it on 16 September 2001 in a speech to the Knesset 'Arafat chose a strategy of terrorism and established a coalition of terrorism. Terrorist actions against Israeli citizens are no different from Bin-Laden's terrorism against American citizens. Terrorism is terrorism and murder is murder' (Sharon 2001). In India, on 14 September 2001, the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (2001) said in a nationally televised speech that 'Every Indian has to be a part of this global war on terrorism. We must, and we will, stamp out this evil from our land, and from the world'. This language describing a war of good versus evil was 'set in motion through mundane cultural forms and cultural practices that mark other people as irredeemably "Other" and that license the unleashing of exemplary violence against them' (Gregory 2004, 16).

In each country, this produced a range of responses from pre-emptive wars to new surveillance laws, including profound changes in border security policy (Dalby 2003). The United States Congress passed the Secure Fence Act of 2006, with bipartisan support

including then Senators Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. The act authorises a fence along 1125 kilometres of the 3169-kilometre border with Mexico. Previously only 128 kilometres were fenced, but since the act passed, over 1000 additional kilometres were completed. Israel began work on its 703-kilometre security barrier in the West Bank in 2002, without reaching any agreement on it with the Palestinian Authority, and by 2011 over 500 kilometres were finished. Israel also began a new fence on its border with Egypt in 2010. India, in addition to completing a fence along its 2308-kilometre border with Pakistan, also fenced the majority of its 4096-kilometre border with Bangladesh at a total cost of over US\$4 billion. Prior to 2002, the border with Bangladesh was open, relatively lightly guarded, and had less than 200 kilometres of fencing (Kabir 2005). In total, at least 22 border barriers were begun around the world in the 10 years since 11 September (Rosière and Jones forthcoming).

Beyond removing the stigma of building border fences, the events of 11 September are significant because they crystallised feelings of difference and allowed exclusionary narratives about civilised and barbaric behaviour to pervade the popular discourse. Borders are where these abstract notions of us and them are materialised. At the border the idea of a nation of people is reified in the form of a line on a map. The lines on the map become the containers for these categories and are where mental categories are solidified. The border also becomes the last defence to protect the privilege and perceived homogeneity of the state's population. Indeed, most of the new borders barriers are erected to fight against migrations, even if this dimension is often mixed with other concerns such as terrorism and security. In an unexpected twist, the movement that defines the concept of globalisation resulted in a pronounced trend towards the enclosure of wealthy societies around the world.

In the end, the discourse of the global war on terror that gained widespread currency after the events of 11 September is clearly implicated in the immediate justifications for many of these border security projects. Nevertheless, they were under consideration for many years before 11 September and achieved other goals beyond strictly providing security against terrorism. Therefore, rather than being understood as a novel aspect of the global war on terror, these walls and security projects are better seen as only the latest example of the long-term expansion of the sovereign state through the performance of sovereignty and the attempt to bring order to the people and practices within a particular territory. The dominant narrative of globalisation is no longer 'the borderless world', but rather one that describes the protection of civilisation in the US, Europe and other privileged societies through the prevention of dangerous flows from other places. Indeed, the confluence of the narratives of globalisation and the global war on terror produced the

most bounded and bordered world we have ever known.

Note

- 1 The argument sketched out in this piece is expanded in my forthcoming book *Borders, barriers, and the war on terror* (Zed Books, London).

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