

# The Decade of Terror Globalization under Surveillance

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Danny Moloshok/REUTERS

The truth is that this optimistic reading did not include either the Arab countries or a large part of Africa, two regions that the hegemonic mind-set has not managed to situate or place in a dynamic of mutual understanding and collaboration. For some reason, however, harmony and prosperity was supposed to spread to other regions of the world, and so, all the peoples who had not arrived at “the end of history” would ready themselves to take that road.

Ten years ago the international system was still displaying the optimism that flowered in the West after the collapse of the Communist world. President George W. Bush’s proclamation that a new international order would follow the bipolar confrontation that dominated the second half of the twentieth century sparked great enthusiasm among broad layers of society. But it remained a mere proclamation.

People thought the international system, dominated by liberal democracies, tended to set up supra-national institutions and mandatory rules in the image of its national conflict resolution mechanisms to deal with differences and controversies among countries. This imaginary design also included the idea that the market economies would progressively form regional blocs, and the entire scenario seemed an inevitability for most countries.

Despite the fact that reality did not end up adjusting to the imagined scenarios, the advent of a new century injected optimism among the defenders of the project of a harmonious, cooperative globalization. However, the September 11, 2001, attacks brought that optimism to an abrupt halt. It is not necessary to go back over the details of what happened that ill-fated morning; we would just have to say that a good part of the suppositions that fed the dream of globalization collapsed. Let’s look at some of them.

The first was the conviction, widely held in the last decade of the twentieth century, that national states were on the road to extinction because of the advance of globalization. After the al-Qaeda attacks, those states turned out to be the most adamantly demanded form of organization by a terrified populace. In effect, the hegemonic power and main driving force of globalization dredged up out of its institutional and linguistic archaeological sites the concept of “homeland” to

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define a basic protective shield for its territoriality and population. In the same way, borders returned to the most traditional of their definitions, that of limits and barriers, even when Mexico and Canada were, in addition to being neighbors, trade partners and allies.

The second supposition was that the U.S. government should have little influence in economic and social life; but events changed the paradigm, making way for a series of security agencies to begin to control and supervise economic life, movement, and even the cultural and religious interests of different communities.

The third supposition was that the basic norms of the rule of law are immutable and are the essence of a democratic republic. Reality showed that even a country like the United States could close its eyes to despicable practices that violated its own Constitution. Some excesses, like torture, clandestine jails, and the passage of special pieces of legislation (like the USA Patriot Act), were justified by Republican and Democratic legislators alike as “the lesser evil.”

#### GLOBALIZATION UNDER SURVEILLANCE

It would be inaccurate to say that globalization stopped in 2001. But it seems to me indisputable that the United States’ reaction was very disturbing for the world economy. In other words, neither the attacks nor the reaction to them managed to stop the economy’s process of planetary expansion. Economic, technological, and cultural globalization has not stopped over these last few years. New globally inter-linked technologies, corporations, and communities continue to interact, although with growing restrictions. Trade has not stopped, but customs control devices, spending on technologies for following containers and GPS equipment, as well as constant scrutiny by security agencies are all part of a reality we are going to have to live with for a long time.

The same thing is happening in other areas like migration and tourism. People continue to move from one country to an-

other for economic reasons, but also for recreational or cultural reasons, or just out of pure consumerism. Although travel is becoming more and more complicated, and countries are spending enormous sums of money on security equipment for detecting if a passenger is traveling with certain liquids or to figure out if a nail clipper can be turned into a weapon to subdue a flight crew, the flow of tourists has risen again, and in any case, if it drops, it is more for economic reasons than out of fear or the bother caused by security checks.

One of the most lasting consequences of the 2001 attacks is that airport controls —bureaucratic and extraordinarily slow at times— and body searches are now habitual in airports all over the world. In some cases, these checks are done with technologies that many have labeled as frankly invasive.

In the same way, labor markets have suffered from a rather crude form of securitization. Among other things, this has meant that migrants and potential terrorists are lumped together. Based on the hypothesis of universal risk, according to which everyone is potentially a terrorist, the checkpoints overlook what the numbers and the clear trends show and opt for very general revisions. It is common knowledge that thousands of Mexicans cross the border every day by land, whether with legitimate or illegitimate aims, but until now, no one has shown that porous border to be the appropriate place for the movement of terrorists. Undeniably, something could happen, but the fact that, after millions of crossings, no important terrorist activity has been detected situates us in a scenario in which the probabilities of it happening are extremely low.

Certainly, statistically, the risk of a terrorist attack is low. However, Mexico, like few other countries, has faced a security apparatus that in the name of the anti-terrorist fight has multiplied its controls and stigmatized an economic phenomenon like undocumented migration all because our neighbor to the north has classified it as a matter of national security. This means that, if there ever was the possibility of an immigration reform that included what Mexico wanted, that hope vanished on that September morning, as did the possibility of discussing a new institutional architecture in North America that would lead to a new kind of integration.

#### DISTRUST AND UNILATERALISM

This kind of globalization under surveillance that encourages distrust is the most poisonous product of the attack by the group led by Osama Bin Laden. In addition to these restric-

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tions, a multidirectional conception of risk gained ground among a large part of the United States' leading class and media, injuring the country's relations with a large part of its closest allies and also with the world's multilateral institutions. This is not the place to delve into lengthy explanations, but it is the place to cite the bilateral slights caused with Canada, France, and a large number of its NATO allies, as well as the ill repute brought upon the group of inspectors headed by Hans Blix.

Since the risk could come from any part of the world and in any guise, anyone could become a suspect without any founded, articulated incriminating evidence. This multidirectional vision of risk implied that the security system was permanently in a state of tension. There was no frontier, nationality, or flight that was not *a priori* considered potentially dangerous. Technological utopianism promoted the illusion that with devices, computers, data bases, scanners, and other gadgets, it would be possible to control anything and everything, and make sure that no fundamentalist would ever be able to take advantage of some crack in the armor to strike against the great power again.

This delirium of control of all movement, entries into the country, planes, trains, and ships—and the supposition that it could be done by throwing money and technology at it—implied making the experience in risk management relative. What does this mean? That if traditionally a factor or group had not represented a security risk for the country, like, for example, seasonal workers, there was no reason to recalibrate upward the probability that that factor or human group would become terrorists simply because a gang of radicals decided to crash a plane into New York's World Trade Center. However, that is what happened, and, as a result, in the last decade, millions of workers and tourists have been treated like dangerous extremists.

A large part of the shifts in the security paradigm and the doctrines stemming from it, used to act unilaterally and without clear rules, can be explained by the fact that the great power unilaterally took on a kind of legitimacy based on the

irrefutable fact of being the victim. A country so viciously attacked adjudicated for itself the right to proceed as it saw fit, in accordance with the mood of a fearful, injured populace. To satisfy that mood, the George W. Bush administration did not hesitate to tamper with the proof, destroy reputations, or deliberately lie to further its aim of war with Iraq.

Over these 10 years, more than enough evidence has presented itself to say that the fact that the agenda for peace and security has been clouded by wounded sensibilities and an appetite for vengeance has become an enormous threat to the stability of the planet. The implications can be devastating for organizing the co-existence of nations, but also among the communities within a single country. That emotional and political predisposition spurred changes in the international system that 10 years later we have not been able to leave behind.

#### SOME LESSONS

After all this, in this decade, we have been able to draw some lessons that can be useful to us. The first is that in addition to killing innocents, terrorists also aim to destroy basic freedoms. How a government reacts to an attack is just as important as the attack itself; this is why it is an example to be learned from that countries like Spain and the United Kingdom have shown that a bloody attack can be responded to using the force of democratic values and the rule of law; that special tribunals are not needed, much less the suppression of spaces for freedom to be able to deal with the terrorists. It has become clear that good intelligence and special operations, like the one that put an end to the life of Bin Laden, are more useful than conventional wars that sweep away entire populations.

In addition, in the last 10 years, we have been able to see that promoting prejudices against other civilizations leads us to the blind alley of incomprehension and escalating violence, and, as a result, to back an ideology of hatred that actually encourages terrorists. And, last but not least, we have learned that underestimating certain risk factors to concentrate on counter-terrorism can be prejudicial in the medium term. The increased power and capabilities of drug traffickers in Mexico can be explained to a great extent by the relative neglect of U.S. security agencies, whose concentration on only one of the issues on their agendas changed the priorities. This was devastating for the stability of their southern border and Mexico. What is clear is that the twenty-first century began that September of 2001. ■■■