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Migration and Terrorism: Is Colombia Really a Key Actor in the United States?

Abstract

This article aims to examine the relationship between migration and terrorism from a Colombian context, analyzing whether Colombia can be considered a key actor in the United States' security discourse. Through a thorough investigation of international security theories, social integration, and the recent criminalization of migration, the article argues that there is no correlation between migration and terrorism. However, the political and media construction of the issue has led to restrictive measures that directly affect human rights and the integration of Colombian migrants. Colombia's context, marked by internal armed conflict and significant migratory flows, allows us to explore the effects of these narratives on the creation of migration policies and perceptions of security in the Western Hemisphere.

Keywords: Colombia, migration, terrorism, securitization, human rights

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the link between migration and terrorism has gained prominence in international political and media discourse, particularly in the Western Hemisphere. This phenomenon is not new: following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States ushered in a new era of national security focused on external threats. In this context, migrants began to be perceived not only as individuals in transit but also as potential risks to state integrity. The security doctrines adopted by the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama consolidated the notion that border control is also an exercise in managing fear.

Colombia occupies a particular position within this narrative. Unlike other Latin American countries with high migration rates (such as Venezuela, El Salvador, or Mexico), the Colombian case is shaped by a protracted internal armed conflict, the presence of insurgent actors designated as terrorist organizations, and a complex international migration dynamic with both economic and political dimensions. This article explores how the convergence of these factors has enabled the construction of a securitized discourse which, despite the lack of empirical correlation between Colombian migration and terrorism in the United States, has nonetheless led to concrete political implications.

This study seeks to examine the Colombian case as a lens through which to understand this intersection. Colombia presents a unique combination: an internal armed conflict that has displaced millions, alongside significant cross-border migration. Some armed groups, such as the FARC or the National Liberation Army (ELN), have been designated as terrorist organizations by international actors. This has prompted important questions about how Colombian migratory flows are perceived and managed—particularly from the U.S. security perspective.

The article argues that certain actors have interpreted Colombian migration through threat-based logics, despite the absence of evidence linking migration to terrorism. Instead, we propose that it is the political management of migration—rather than migration itself—that can shape security outcomes.

This research is framed within several theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, securitization theory, as developed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, suggests that “securitization occurs when an issue is presented as an existential threat to a referent object, justifying extraordinary measures” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). In this case, the political discourse linking migration and terrorism functions as an act of securitization that legitimizes restrictive measures. Complementing this view, Foucault introduces the concept of “governmentality,” referring to the ways in which the state produces subjects through discursive, statistical, and legal practices. In the migratory context, this is manifested in the use of lists, controls, and narratives that naturalize exclusion (Foucault, 2004).

On the other hand, scholars such as Didier Bigo and Huysmans address this logic through the lens of the “permanent state of insecurity” and “border biopolitics.” Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue that borders are not merely geographical lines but rather conflictive spaces where decisions are made about who deserves protection and who is criminalized. Huysmans asserts that “immigrants are increasingly treated as potential security threats rather than as rights-bearing subjects” (Huysmans, 2006, p. 45). Bigo, for his part, warns that “migration control not only acts upon the foreign body but also shapes the citizen’s perception” (Bigo, 2002, p. 70).

In this sense, exclusion is not accidental but functional to the security logic. Social integration theories, in contrast, allow us to examine how stigmatization undermines inclusion processes and has long-term consequences for social cohesion, access to rights, and the construction of citizenship.

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology, supported by document analysis and discourse analysis. The sources include reports by international organizations, migration legislation, institutional discourses, and media coverage focused on the period after 2010. To increase the validity and diversity of the data, future research should incorporate interviews with Colombian migrants in the U.S., as well as a comparative study with regional cases (such as Venezuela and Haiti), which would help contextualize the specificities of the Colombian case within broader regional trends.

2. The Colombian Armed Conflict and its Migratory Impact

According to the U.S. Department of State, the FARC has been included on the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations since 1997 (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Colombia’s inclusion on international security and watch lists has affected bilateral cooperation on security and migration policy, serving as a diplomatic and geopolitical tool to justify initiatives such as Plan Colombia and the militarization of anti-narcotics policies. It has also shaped the international narrative about Colombia and its migrants, especially in receiving countries.

Historically, Colombia has been a country of forced emigration. While violence has been the primary driver, economic and familial factors also play a role. Millions of transnational Colombian migrants have been recorded, primarily heading to the United States, Spain, and other Latin American countries. As of January 2024, over 810,000 international migratory movements had been registered (Migración Colombia, 2024). These flows are driven by a combination of violence, lack of opportunities, and family reunification. A 2021 report by UNHCR states that “Colombia remains one of the main countries of origin for refugees worldwide, due to the prolonged effects of the armed conflict” (UNHCR, 2021, p. 17).

Regarding victims, Law 1448 and the Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace, signed in 2016 between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, acknowledge that “victims of Colombia’s internal armed conflict have the right to full reparation, including guarantees of non-repetition” (Unidad para las Víctimas, 2018, p. 3). While primarily focused on internally displaced persons, the agreement also contributed to the state’s recognition of responsibility and to international demands for protection of individuals fleeing the conflict. Nevertheless, the victim narrative does not always translate into the international arena, where criminalizing stereotypes persist. The lack of effective mechanisms for international protection has left many Colombians in a legal limbo between refugee status, economic migration, and suspicion.

3. Migration, Security, and U.S. Policy

The United States has incorporated Colombia into its broader security agenda. Although data shows no correlation between Colombian migration and terrorism in the U.S., labels such as “narco-terrorism” and “threat” have influenced migration policies. Despite lacking a clear legal definition, “narco-terrorism” has permeated institutional perspectives on Colombian migrants. A report by the Organization of American States notes that “the tendency to link migration with terrorism has resulted in excessive use of security measures in receiving countries” (OAS, 2019, p. 6). Public statements by officials, reports by the U.S. Department of State, and media coverage have reinforced an image of Colombia as a risk-laden country, which has affected public perception as well as visa and asylum policies.

Risk categories have hindered the integration of Colombian communities, limiting access to services, labor rights, and consular protection. Human Rights Watch reports that “many Colombian asylum seekers face prolonged detention or rejections without fair assessment” (Human Rights Watch, 2023, p. 11). Stigmatization can lead to racial profiling and the denial of asylum claims. Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have documented cases in which Colombian migrants encounter disproportionate obstacles in regularizing their status in the U.S. due to unwarranted associations.

The role of the media has been central to shaping public attitudes and policies regarding Colombian migration. Through narrative frames that link migration with criminality, media outlets reinforce stereotypes. Media framing studies show that terms like “guerrilla,” “narcotrafficking,” and “terrorism” are frequently associated with Colombia. One such study found that “media coverage of Colombian migration often emphasizes connections with drug trafficking, generating a stigmatizing narrative” (Bullen, 2024, p. 3). This framing reinforces bias and can influence exclusionary policies. Rather than reflecting reality, media coverage helps construct it. Indeed, according to Pew Research (2022), most Americans believe that migration increases the risk of terrorism, despite the lack of empirical evidence supporting this view.

4. Conclusions

This study addresses a recurring gap in contemporary security debates: the political use of anti-immigration discourse as a tool of securitization. Although there is no clear empirical evidence linking Colombian migration with terrorism, public perception continues to be shaped by state and media narratives. Compared to other Latin American countries such as Mexico or Venezuela, whose migration flows have also been stigmatized, the Colombian case illustrates how labels such as “narco-trafficking” or “guerrilla” can have lasting effects on migrant integration.

The need for comparative regional studies is underscored, as they can help determine whether securitization follows broader patterns or specific bilateral strategies. This research may serve as a foundation for rethinking public policy from a human rights-based approach, both in the design and implementation of migration measures.

The Colombian case shows that the connection between migration and terrorism is rooted more in political and ideological construction than in verifiable empirical data. Security narratives—driven by media discourse, geopolitical interests, and national security agendas, particularly in the U.S.—have distorted public perceptions of migratory flows, erroneously associating them with security threats. This discursive construction has real consequences, not only for the development and enforcement of restrictive migration policies but also in the daily lives of migrants, who face increasing barriers to rights, services, and social recognition.

In the specific case of Colombia, this narrative becomes even more problematic as it overlooks the structural causes of migration—such as violence, inequality, armed conflict, and economic precarity—while portraying the Colombian migrant as a potential threat rather than a victim of difficult circumstances. This approach not only misinforms but also perpetuates stigmatization and discrimination, exacerbating the vulnerability of those seeking better living conditions abroad.

Given this situation, it is both urgent and necessary to critically reassess the relationship between migration and terrorism, focusing on methods grounded in solid empirical evidence and full respect for human rights. Migration policies should be developed from an integrated and humanitarian perspective, clearly distinguishing between real security threats and fear-driven political discourses. Only then will it be possible to build more equitable legal and social frameworks that effectively protect those forced to migrate, particularly in contexts of structural violence such as Colombia.

5. References

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