

Checkpoints and Militarised Humanitarianism

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CHECKPOINT: *A mobile dispositif of social control that regulates the mobility of migrant and non-migrant populations along migration routes, border areas, highways, and urban entry points. Operating through an entanglement of militarised logics and humanitarian rationales, checkpoints function simultaneously as instruments of enforcement and care, exposing people on the move to racialised and gendered forms of violence and human rights violations. Their flexibility and logistical feasibility make them key mechanisms in the internalisation, individualisation, and spatial expansion of border control.*

Keywords: checkpoints; militarisation; humanitarian governance; border control; migration control; Latin America; dispositif; Venezuela

In Latin America, borders have historically been embedded in territorial spaces characterised by transborder forms of community coexistence, which predate their delimitation by states as zones of control and restriction of mobility (Dilla Alfonso and Contreras Vera 2021). However, many states in the region have long histories of military involvement in social control and public life, including public security, which has significantly shaped contemporary forms of border governance (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). In recent years, the growing securitization of borders has further transformed both the technologies employed and the very conception of borders. As in the Global North, borders in Latin America are increasingly becoming mobile and extended beyond fixed geographical lines, expanding power dynamics through the embodiment of the border (Popescu 2011).

Changing Mobility Patterns and State Responses

Mobility patterns in the region have undergone significant transformations over the course of the twenty-first century. Migrations are complex and heterogeneous, encompassing not only movements within and between Latin American and Caribbean countries, but also migration flows originating from Asia and Africa (Herrera and Gómez 2022). The region is not merely a site of origin or transit; it has also become a destination for forced mobilities, thereby configuring migratory corridors or “transnational, contingent space of dispute- a product of the tension between mobility and control” (Álvarez Velasco 2022, 52).

State responses to changing mobility dynamics are commonly framed within public discourses of crisis (Blouin and Zamora Gómez 2022), which construct these mobilities as exceptional rather than as part of evolving patterns that arise from structural rather than contingent conditions. This framing legitimizes the simultaneous deployment of both compassionate and repressive measures (Stefoni et al. 2023). Within this context, I argue that checkpoints function as mobile *dispositifs* often operated through militarised logics that combine practices of control with forms of humanitarian assistance, while ultimately privileging enforcement-oriented strategies. A militarised approach thus prevails, subordinating humanitarian actions to security imperatives and, in doing so, exposing people on the move to heightened risks and forms of violence.

Militarisation and Militarism in Latin America

In Latin America, the histories and dynamics of militarisation and militarism as part of wider strategies of social control are particularly complex, and have a significant influence on how we approach checkpoints as mechanisms of border and mobility control and surveillance of people on the move. Governments of all political orientations—whether conservative or progressive—have increasingly turned to the military to carry out domestic law enforcement and public security duties (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). Across the region armed forces are taking on roles beyond traditional defense, involving them in social and political functions, while also becoming normalized through the legitimisation of force, the military’s political influence, and substantial public funding (Lutz 2007; Solar 2021). As a result, the armed forces are politically utilised as an instrument of governance—especially in areas at the margins of state authority—to reinforce and reclaim state sovereignty (Frederic 2020).

In the last decades, the region has witnessed two concurrent developments: the militarisation of police forces and the direct deployment of the Armed Forces in public security operations (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021; Hochmüller et al. 2024). “In the most extreme form of militarization of law enforcement, the armed forces take on public safety tasks themselves, including crime prevention (security patrols); crime fighting (drug crop eradication and interdiction, drug, and arms seizures, searches and arrests, evidence gathering and interrogation); and prison security” (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021, 522). In these operations, checkpoints and inspections of vehicles and individuals inside and outside cities pose high risks to migrants, as these authorities are generally not authorized or trained to

conduct immigration checks and often rely on racial profiling strategies (Campos-Delgado and Yrizar Barbosa 2023).

Moreover, in countries such as Mexico and Chile, migration routes and controls unfold in territories where the Armed Forces are simultaneously engaged in anti-drug operations and strategies to combat organised crime (Fernández de la Reguera and Del Río 2025; Skaar and Malca 2014; Vera Espinoza and Penchaszadeh 2026). This overlap situates border enforcement within broader security agendas, shaping the modalities through which mobility is governed. However, the militarisation of border control does not necessarily stem from an explicit construction of migrants as threats. Rather, it operates through intertwined logics of crisis, care and control that legitimise militarisation as part of humanitarian assistance (Ramos and Tapia Ladino 2024).

The Complexity of Checkpoints

It is difficult to provide a fixed definition of what constitutes a checkpoint in the Latin American context, as its functions as a mechanism of social control are diverse, ranging from the regulation of mobility for both foreigners and nationals to the provision of humanitarian assistance and the control of drug trafficking or organised crime. Given this diversity, when analysed from the perspective of migration control, checkpoints emerge as central *dispositifs*.

Due to their adaptability and flexibility, checkpoints are key mechanisms in the rapid transformation of the definition, management, spatialization, and expansion of borders, enabling their internalisation and individualisation (Bissonnette and Vallet 2022). Checkpoints may be either permanent or tactical, vary in location and infrastructure, and produce differentiated forms of harm, ranging from intimidation to temporary forced disappearance (Fernández de la Reguera and Del Río 2025). Whereas permanent checkpoints confine individuals within a defined space, temporary roadblocks generate fear and uncertainty (Castañeda and Melo 2019).

Checkpoints usually fulfill the security-oriented objectives of the war on drugs and organized crime, while also adopting a military-humanitarian approach that combines oversight and protective functions. In Brazil, Alexander (2023, 525) studies the coexistence of humanitarian practices of containment and registration towards Venezuelans which “[...] operate under the guise of ‘let live’, while simultaneously enacting ‘will not let die’ or ‘will not make die’, through the management of mobility.”

Although countries in the region differ in the type of roles and level of control the military holds at the borders—for example, in Uruguay the military has more limited territorial control compared to Mexico and Honduras—the constant is that the Armed Forces and militarised police routinely carry out identification checks on people and vehicles, as well as arrests (Solar 2021). At Argentina's borders with Paraguay and Bolivia, a situation unfolds similar to that of many other borders in the region: as these areas are labeled 'hot' and 'porous' by the media and governments, militarised police forces become overwhelmed, leading to the deployment of the Armed Forces to take control through patrols and checkpoints along access routes and border zones (FJEED et al. 2021; Frederic 2020).

Having the military in charge of these tasks leaves more room for abuse, as they are trained to identify and eradicate the enemy, and not to be the first responders for migrants, commonly in need of international protection (García Alanís 2024). My research focuses on the case of Mexico, where checkpoints are primarily deployed along highways and migration routes and are operated by a range of legal, extralegal, and illegal actors pursuing diverse objectives, including the control of migrant populations, which ultimately expose people on the move to serious human rights violations (Fernández de la Reguera 2025).

Military-Humanitarian Mobility Governance

To better understand recent dynamics of migration control and humanitarianism in the region, it is necessary to examine Venezuelan mobilities (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming). Over the past decade, Venezuelan migration has reshaped migration policies across the region. Many states have responded through *ad hoc* measures (Vera Espinoza et al. 2021), combining reception-oriented policies with increasing controls on mobility and, in some cases, the militarisation of borders. These trends were further reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most countries in the region closed their borders; in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, these closures were accompanied by processes of militarisation (Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Blouin and Zamora Gómez 2022).

One example of military-humanitarian governance (Pallister-Wilkins 2022) is the case of *Operação Acolhida* or 'Operation Welcome' in Brazil. Alexander (2023, 2024) analyses Brazil's federal response to Venezuelan migration, a humanitarian–military operation led by the Armed Forces with civilian and international partners, focusing on border screening, shelter and assistance, and relocation of migrants within the country. He proves that the military-humanitarian approach creates subtle forms of violence reinforcing migrant vulnerabilities and exclusion.

Conclusions

Checkpoints function as components within a broader assemblage of social control and policing that regulate the mobility of criminalized groups—both migrant and non-migrant—shaping everyday movement in border areas and interior regions. Framed within discourses that construct mobility as a product of crisis, rather than as part of evolving regional patterns, these *dispositifs* are increasingly legitimized as necessary responses to exceptional conditions. This framing reinforces the expansion of both militarization and humanitarianism through checkpoints. Due to their flexibility and logistical feasibility, they are deployed as punitive instruments that extend borders and intensify migration controls, contributing to the further criminalization of migrants, who become easy targets for identification and arrest in border areas, along highways, and at urban entry points (Díaz Prieto 2016). As a result, migrants are exposed to racialized and gendered forms of extreme violence and serious human rights violations (Fernández de la Reguera 2025).

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