

## ARTICLE

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# Continuity and Change: Comparing the Securitization of Migration under the Obama and Trump Administrations

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### Abstract

*One of the most contested issues in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election was immigration: in particular, irregular migration across the U.S. border with Mexico. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which the securitization of immigration is an “isolated phenomenon” endemic to the Trump Administration, as opposed to a reality of U.S. policymaking that has pervaded previous administrations. By contrasting the immigration platform of the current administration with that of its predecessor, led by Barack Obama, this paper will assert that, despite the intensification of rhetoric against irregular migrants, much of the Trump Administration’s response to immigration from the Southern border has been informed by, and is directly continuous with, actions taken by Obama between 2008 and 2016. It will argue that the same three factors: the post 9-11 conception of migration as an inherent threat, the deportation regime and the securitization (and sometimes militarization) of the southern border, have rendered the last decade of American immigration policy more or less consistent, despite vastly different stated ideological underpinnings.*

### Keywords

U.S. immigration policy, deportation regime, homeland security, U.S.-Mexico border, securitization of immigration.

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## Introduction

The U.S. is irrefutably a country of immigrants, the very birthplace of the idea of a “melting-pot society.” However, the relationship between new arrivals and the U.S. has not always been a harmonious one: xenophobia has been a defining and unfortunate aspect of the migrant experience—particularly for those who arrive and are unable to take advantage of established immigrant communities or diaspora networks. U.S. immigration policy has routinely fluctuated between relatively welcoming and unapologetically discriminatory approaches, particularly when it comes to the policing of migration from America’s southern neighbors. While in some ways, September 11 added a whole new security dimension to migration policymaking, it also evoked existing fears: the migrant as a “welfare-parasite,” a “violent criminal” or a “job thief.”

This intensification of scrutiny over immigration has characterized nearly two decades of U.S. policymaking and has been both a result of, and contributing factor in, the polarization of public opinion. The triumph of “threat based initiatives”—the Patriot Act, the Real ID Act and the Department of Homeland Affairs for example—over what O’Keefe calls “humane approaches” (like community based supervision programs) has come about as a result of a lack of political will for permissive policy solutions,<sup>1</sup> both within the electorate and at a governmental level.

Nineteen years after the emergence of this new security reality, the U.S. has an administration triumphantly extolling its “tough on migration” policy credentials while admonishing its predecessor for an apparently lax approach to border security. This begs the question: does the Trump administration’s aggressive border-security policy represent a substantial deviation from that of the Obama administration? While White House rhetoric against immigration has unquestionably intensified, is this indicative of a new conceptualization of migration security or rather a different expression of the same approach?

I will begin by broadly outlining the approaches to immigration taken by the Trump and Obama administrations, as well as their election commitments. I will then go on to argue that the same three elements have informed U.S. immigration policy from 2008 to the present day: the “realities” of post-9/11 national security, the deportation regime and the securitization of the Mexican border. I will also assert that while the tone of the “speech-act” around the securitization of migration has undergone a significant transformation to

better suit the current political climate, its character and purpose have not. The security priorities of the U.S. have, for the most part, remained consistent.

As a final note, I would like to acknowledge that the three elements identified above considerably predate both administrations. The intention of this paper is not to provide a historical background to Trump's immigration agenda, but rather to identify policy continuities between two administrations that have, at least superficially, vastly different public attitudes towards migration.

### Trump 2016: Secure Borders, Bad Hombres

If one had to identify a single issue that dominated the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections, it would be immigration. Between talk of an “uncontrolled population flow of drug-dealing Latin Americans” and the border wall with Mexico, Donald Trump was able to effectively convince (predominantly white) voters that America was facing a serious crisis not only at its southern border, but also within. The two priorities of Trump's immigration policy were clear: deterrence, the restriction of both regular and irregular migration; and deportation, the identification and removal of the country's eleven million unauthorized migrants.<sup>2</sup>

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Taking office in January 2017, the President elect wasted no time in pursuing his immigration agenda. Within the first month of his presidency, he introduced Executive Order 13769, commonly identified as the “Muslim Ban.” This sought to bar nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the U.S. Following a challenge in the Supreme Court, the ban was repealed and revised, with a second travel ban (Executive Order 13780) also repealed upon review. A final, more limited travel ban was introduced and upheld in mid-2017.

To cite a recent example, the approach of the Trump Administration to the COVID-19 outbreak has been characteristically oriented around the minimization of perceived security threats from incoming arrivals. Citing “invisible enemies,”<sup>3</sup> Trump declared (via executive-order) the immediate suspension of immigration to the U.S., with the wording of the order specifically referring to the threat posed to the American labor market.<sup>4</sup> The administration's preoccupation with the apparent risk posed by migrants during the epidemic was reflected in an earlier decision, made in March, to

close the borders with Mexico and Canada (except for commercial traffic). Those who arrived at the border lacking the proper authorization to enter the U.S. (including asylum seekers) would no longer undergo processing, but would rather be immediately turned away.<sup>5</sup>

Trump's attempts at pursuing the most highly publicized aspect of his immigration policy—the border wall with Mexico—have been repeatedly frustrated by funding issues, precipitating the declaration of a national emergency (the first since September 11) and the diversion of public funds from the Department of Defense. Prior to this emergency declaration, the U.S. military was deployed to the border with Mexico (“Operation Faithful Patriot”) to intercept a wave of vulnerable would-be migrants from Central America. The Trump Presidency, like previous U.S. administrations, has detained migrants who attempt to enter the U.S. unlawfully. However, a much-criticized aspect of Trump's immigration reform has been the deterrence policy of family separation, incarcerating migrant parents and treating their children as unaccompanied minors. While this policy of zero-tolerance was officially reversed after considerable backlash, allegations of institutionalized family separations continue.

Critical to Trump's acceleration of deportations has been the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE). Created in 2003 in the aftermath of 9/11, ICE has been the most visible and controversial enforcement mechanism of Trump's immigration policy. ICE's work is described on the agency website as being: “critical to the enforcement of immigration law against those who present a danger to our national security (or) are a threat to public safety [...]”<sup>6</sup> Under the Trump administration, Greene states that ICE's mandate has been expanded to include “[...] virtually all 11 million people estimated to be living in the U.S. without authorization.”<sup>7</sup> This “elimination of enforcement priorities,”<sup>8</sup> or the expansion of what constitutes “a danger to national security,” has been complimented with a massive increase in personnel and funding: Greene cites a twofold expansion of the organization since Trump took office.<sup>9</sup> ICE has also, along with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), been embroiled in scandals surrounding the aforementioned family separations, along with allegations of sexual assault of detainees and multiple erroneous deportations of U.S. citizens. ICE has repeatedly operated outside of its jurisdiction, including in “sanctuary cities” where local authorities have introduced legislation specifically disallowing deportations. Even Catholic churches frequented by irregular migrants of a

predominantly Mexican, Central and Southern American background have been targeted, in spite of first amendment protections.<sup>10</sup>

## The Obama Administration: Hope, the Status Quo

In the context of the upcoming 2020 Presidential elections, and the promise of a return to “normality” after the unexpected ascension of Trump and far-right populist politics in the U.S., the present administration has drawn many comparisons to that of its predecessor, the Obama-led Democrats. While many have focused on superficial and abstract notions of “presidential-ness,” the Trump administration’s promotion of a crack-down on immigration and border security as front-and-center policy concerns has led to increased scrutiny of the Obama Presidency’s record on immigration.

The election of Barack Obama was heralded as a seminal moment in American politics and race relations. Despite his campaign being centered on hope, his administration was quickly bogged down by the worst economic recession since the Great Depression and a number of foreign policy concerns. The loss of the House of Representatives in the 2010 mid-term elections stunted his capacity to legislate through Congress. As a result, he was unable to pass a single item of significant migration legislation during his presidency.

Obama was a keen proponent of the DREAM act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors), a non-partisan piece of legislation first introduced to the U.S. senate in 2001. Although it has undergone a number of changes since its initial conception, the core of the legislation is the creation of a process by which irregular migrants that arrived as minors may apply for residency and citizenship. The Obama administration sought to reintroduce the bill a number of times between 2009 and 2012, however they were unable to pass it through the hostile Congress. Unable to enact meaningful immigration reform in the legislature, Obama, through an executive order in 2012, introduced DACA (Deferred Action for Children Arrivals). This

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policy allowed irregular migrants who arrived in the U.S. as children to avoid deportation and be eligible for a work permit. In 2014, he sought to expand this program to include the parents of lawful residents of the U.S. through DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans). However, this was challenged in the Supreme Court, which failed to make a ruling, before it was eventually rescinded by the Trump administration. DACA was also repealed.

Despite these efforts, Obama's attempts at positive immigration reforms are marred by his legacy as "deporter in chief." Describing the significant increase in deportations compared to the two previous administrations, Hing writes:

During his eight years in office, his administration formally removed more than three million noncitizens, compared to two million during George W. Bush's tenure and about 900,000 under the Bill Clinton administration... At the time he left office, Obama was definitely the reigning deportation champion.<sup>11</sup>

Hing attributes the steep rise in deportation figures to changing enforcement priorities: namely the formal removal of criminals and those who crossed the border unlawfully.<sup>12</sup> However the increase in deportations under the Obama administration dwarfs not only the figures associated with his predecessors Bush and Clinton, but also those of Trump. At its peak, the Obama administration deported 409,849 immigrants in 2012, while Trump's record, despite his rhetoric, amounts to little over half of that figure, with his administration managing to remove 256,085 deportees in 2018.<sup>13</sup>

### Securitization, 9/11 and the Enforcement Consensus

According to the Copenhagen School, securitization consists of two inseparable parts. The first is the "speech act:" an assertion made by a public official that particular problems, real or perceived, represent an existential threat to the state and its common values. In order to be "securitized," the issue in question cannot be resolvable through ordinary means. Securitization is not a natural process; rather, "by saying 'security' a state representative moves that particular case into a specific area; claiming a special right to use the means necessary to block this development."<sup>14</sup> What constitutes a securitizable issue varies from society to society according to its priorities and immediate concerns: Buzan notes, for example, that "some will securitize culture (the former USSR, Iran), and some will not (the UK, the Netherlands)."<sup>15</sup>

The second component of securitization is the response: if the threat in question is deemed significant enough for extraordinary measures to be legitimized, what public policy decisions are undertaken in order to resolve it? These might include the granting of extra-judicial authority to certain actors, the suspension of ordinary legislative proceedings, or actions that “violate the constitution, disregard international human rights norms, or even go against common sense.”<sup>16</sup> Securitization can be described as a performative process: it demands that the securitizing actor (generally a government entity, but potentially also lobbyists, bureaucrats or union groups) is able to adequately elevate a particular issue—“either as a special kind of politics or as above politics”<sup>17</sup>—in the eyes of its audience. Without the acceptance of the audience (the voting public or the controlling elite), the presentation of a particular issue as being of existential importance is not securitization, but rather a “securitizing move.”<sup>18</sup>

The securitization of migration is widely regarded as a relatively new phenomenon, associated with the conceptual broadening of security beyond a restrictive, militaristic understanding. Huysmans describes how the coalescence of migration and security concerns developed alongside the processes of Europeanisation. He goes on to identify European border policies such as the Schengen Agreement and Dublin Convention as connecting “... immigration and asylum with terrorism, transnational crime and border control.”<sup>19</sup> European institutional developments in transnational migration and intercontinental freedom of movement were informed by a problematized view of immigration: be it born out of concern over labor markets or the fear, pervasive in conservative discourse, of multiculturalism as precipitating “societal disintegration.”<sup>20</sup>

In an American context, immigration security rose to prominence alongside the concept of “homeland security” in the aftermath of 9/11: an umbrella approach to the combatting of a wide variety of threats to the U.S. and the way of life of its citizens. As the perpetrators of 9/11 were “foreign nationals who had entered the country through legal travel channels,”<sup>21</sup> immigration to the U.S. shifted from a largely economic issue to

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one of national security. In order to justify significant and immediate changes to visa controls, law enforcement and information collection (to name but a few areas of reform) the U.S. government deliberately drew lines of affiliation between international migration and terrorism. The September 11 attacks were the precipitating event used to justify an exceptional new attitude and approach to immigration.

This is not to say, however, that migration was an uncontested political space prior to 2001. Boswell identifies the three most common ways in which migration was negatively framed pre-9/11: existing border control as being ineffectual in preventing “hordes” of irregular migrants, the belief that migrants undercut the existing labor market and exploit welfare systems, and finally the criminal element: the international smuggling of people, arms and narcotics.<sup>22</sup> What is most apparent about contemporary U.S. migration discourse is that concerns about the link between migration and terrorism did not eclipse these perceptions. Instead, two changes occurred simultaneously: international terror became another element of the migration agenda, and the three existing “threats” became matters of national security by virtue of the broader securitization of migration.

These four issues have informed political attitudes toward migration since 2001 on both sides of politics. 9/11 effectively curtailed any prospect of comprehensive immigration reform, and sunk an existing proposal by President Bush in 2000 promising better regional integration with Mexico. This would have included an armistice on deportations and a huge expansion of the U.S. temporary worker programs.<sup>23</sup> Migration, be it from the Middle East or from the southern border, now represented a perceived threat, and enforcement became normalized as the default policy toward immigration.

One discernable difference between the Trump and Obama administrations is that, while both have actively increased the enforcement of immigration, the latter also promoted legislation that would have allowed for limited legalization of irregular migrants. In addition to the aforementioned DREAM act and the introduction of DACA via executive order, comprehensive immigration reform was floated a number of times between 2008 and 2016. For example, a paper released by the White House in 2011 argues for both greater enforcement and legalization. This document argues for four different reforms: the heightening of security measures on the Mexican border, legal sanctions against businesses that exploit undocumented workers, legal certification for seasonal agricultural workers and a pathway to legal status and eventual citizenship for irregular migrants.<sup>24</sup>

These proposed reforms cover a spectrum of policy responses to migration: enforcement, legalization and the disruption of institutional factors that motivate irregular migration. However, as noted by Rosenblum, “the American political system is strongly biased against comprehensive legislation of any kind.”<sup>25</sup> The short-term political considerations of the Obama administration, particularly after the results of the 2010 mid-term congressional elections, disrupted any serious attempts at reform. There were two immediate problems: the Democrats no longer commanded a working majority in the House of Representatives, and enforcement is considered to be the only politically popular migration policy amongst a majority of voters. Undocumented migrants are considered to be quantifiable manifestations of policy failure, while enforcement represents a concrete (albeit temporary) solution: “...every person detained and deported is one fewer unauthorized immigrant in the United States.”<sup>26</sup> As such, the only politically viable options for the Obama administration were those that adhered to the enforcement consensus.

With the repeal of DACA, Obama’s only lasting legacy on immigration was the expansion of enforcement mechanisms, a far cry from the sweeping and progressive reforms he promised to enact within his first year in office. Ultimately the Obama administration was constrained not just by political circumstance, but also by the way in which the post-9/11 attitude toward immigration has framed unauthorized entry into the U.S. as a crisis of security. Obama was, as Trump is now, beholden to an electorate whose views on migration are largely informed by the four perceptions we discussed earlier: that migration is linked to terrorism, uncontrolled population flows, worsening economic conditions and international crime. Trump has embraced this characterization of migration to the U.S., while Obama, despite arguing for progressive reform, quietly acceded to it.

## The Deportation Regime under Obama and Trump

It has already been noted that Obama oversaw more deportations than any other U.S. president in history, and that Trump’s massive expansion of ICE has not resulted in a numerical increase in arrests and deportations. This warrants examination in closer detail, not least given Obama’s reputation as a (would-be) progressive reformer and Trump’s as an anti-immigration nativist.

Deportation represents the sum total of two different actions: removal and return. Removal refers to a formal court-ordered ejection of an unauthorized migrant from the U.S., generally with an associated timeframe in which

the prosecuted person may not re-enter America. Return on the other hand, sometimes known as a “voluntary departure,” involves the immediate repatriation of irregular migrants without a term of incarceration or other legal sanction.<sup>27</sup>

The deportations conducted by the Obama and Trump administrations have predominantly consisted of removals, while Clinton and Bush’s were overwhelmingly weighted in favor of returns. To illustrate this point, in the

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last year of his presidency, Obama oversaw the removal of 333,593 irregular migrants compared with just 106,473 returns. The following year, Trump removed a similar ratio of 245,364 people and returned 100,754 others. In comparison, George W. Bush in

2008 removed 359,795 people, while returning 811,263. In 2000, Clinton removed 188,467 migrants, while 1,675,876 were returned.<sup>28</sup>

A convenient way to conceptualize the difference between “removal” and “return” is to consider the latter to be an informal ejection from the U.S., while the former is fully institutionalized, and frequently involves incarceration or other forms of legal sanction. Two factors can be said to have altered the balance of returns vis-à-vis removals. The first is the emergence of ICE as a removal-oriented law enforcement entity, and the second is a major decline in illegal border crossings.<sup>29</sup>

It can be argued that the emphasis on “formal” deportation is one of the most apparent continuities between the Obama and Trump immigration policies. Starting in 2011, the Obama administration began to refer to record levels of enforcement, explicitly synonymizing removal with deportation.<sup>30</sup> While ICE was founded by Bush, it was Obama’s expansion of the “Secure Communities” deportation program that allowed the law enforcement agency to proactively remove unprecedented numbers of undocumented migrants. Secure Communities, which was discontinued by Obama in 2014 and reinstated by Trump in 2017, was part of a targeted effort to deport irregular migrants living in the U.S. on the basis of their criminal record.

Described by Kalhan as “the largest expansion of state and local immigration policing in U.S. history”<sup>31</sup> the Secure Communities program combines local

law enforcement databases with those of ICE, meaning that any person brought into custody can have their residency status automatically checked. The automation of immigration policing is a primary factor behind the record number of removals under Obama. It is also an indication of the extent to which the belief in immigrant criminality as informing migration policy has been largely bi-partisan.<sup>32</sup> One often cited difference between the deportation regimes of Obama and Trump has been that the former prioritized the expulsion of irregular migrants with criminal records, while the latter expanded ICE's mandate to include the U.S.' entire undocumented community. However, as Velez notes, a majority of those deported through the Secure Communities program have committed either low-level offences or had no criminal record. She describes how Secure Communities has allowed "...police officers to pull over those who look Hispanic to ask them for their IDs, and then get them deported for merely driving without a license."<sup>33</sup>

The scope of deportations has widened significantly under the Trump administration, corresponding with the expansion of ICE as an immigration enforcement agency. Free from their enforcement priorities under the Obama administration, arrests by ICE increased by 42 percent in the first eight months of the Trump presidency.<sup>34</sup> Trump has, in spite of declining deportation figures, overseen an unprecedented expansion of ICE and its operational capacity when compared to other law enforcement bodies. He has also sought, through a now rescinded executive order, to target "sanctuary cities" that refuse to co-operate with ICE, limiting their access to federal funding. The Trump administration has clearly, both through its rhetoric and policing, expanded the scope of migrant criminality to include the entire non-documented population of the U.S.

However, there are clear continuities between the deportation regimes of the Obama and Trump administrations. The first, already discussed, is the prioritization of removal rather than return. The involvement of formal law enforcement and judicial proceedings effectively criminalizes re-entry to the U.S. and disincentivizes repeated border crossings. The second is the reintroduction of the Secure Communities program by Trump in 2017, although to considerably less effect. Finally, there is the association of migration with criminality, or rather the belief that migrants are more likely to perpetrate criminal acts than their naturalized counterparts. As has been identified earlier in this paper, the "criminal element" apparently inherent within migration has become a matter of national security. While Obama may have, in proposing

comprehensive immigration reform, stressed the virtues of immigration in keeping the U.S. “youthful, dynamic and entrepreneurial,”<sup>35</sup> his policies perpetuated the notion that migrants, particularly those arriving from the Mexican border, constituted a potential threat to U.S. communities.<sup>36</sup> It can be argued that Trump, a figure unapologetically opposed to immigration, has done little more than apply nativist rhetoric to an immigration policy framework that was already oriented around deportation.

### The Southern Border as a Security Issue: Obama and Trump

In 2006, then-Senator Barack Obama, along with a number of high-profile Democrats including Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer, voted in favor of a Republican initiative to approve seven hundred miles of fencing along the Mexican border.<sup>37</sup> Spokespeople for Donald Trump have identified this as a tacit recognition on the part of Democrats of the need for a border wall with Mexico. However, Obama’s role in the securitization of the southern border extends beyond this relatively innocuous vote prior to his assuming the presidency.

As has already been noted, illegal border crossings under the Obama (and Trump) administrations have declined dramatically. In 2006, 851,000 people crossed the border, while in 2016, around 62,000 people made the same journey. 2011 and 2017, the lowest years in recent record, saw this number fall well below 50,000.<sup>38</sup> In spite of these figures, however, both presidents have faced a “crisis at the southern border.” Between 2013 and 2014, there was a surge in unaccompanied minors arriving at the U.S. border, predominantly arriving from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In 2018, migrants from these same countries arrived at the U.S. border in “caravans.”

These arrivals in particular are complicated by virtue of their being part of the “complex migration phenomenon” of mixed migration, wherein no monolithic understanding of population movement can adequately account for the plethora of possible individual motivations for migration.<sup>39</sup> While the prevailing assumption is that migrants arriving in the U.S. via the southern border are predominantly motivated by economic considerations (the “pull” factors, particularly the prospect of gainful employment),<sup>40</sup> this fails to take into account that many migrants are driven by the “push” factors of violence, economic or physical insecurity or personal desperation. To illustrate this point, Obinna and Field cite an estimated poverty rate of sixty percent in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, while also noting that political instability and

high rates of gender-based violence are often motivating factors in the decision to migrate.<sup>41</sup> In the case of large mixed migration movements—“surges,” as they were often called in 2013 and 2018—a nuanced understanding of these diverse motivations is often lost or ignored in favor of a simpler narrative.

The arrival of the migrant caravans from the Northern Triangle of Central America coincided with the 2018 mid-term elections in the U.S. Trump actively politicized the issue and used it to push his own anti-immigration credentials, telling voters in November: “if you don’t want America to be overrun by masses of illegal aliens and giant caravans, you’d better vote Republican.”<sup>42</sup> Trump deployed five thousand U.S. military personnel and two thousand members of the National Guard to intercept the caravan, detain migrants who crossed the border and deter further crossings. Although the zero-tolerance policy of family separation had officially ended, it is believed that a large number of separations continued at the border. In effect, a potential humanitarian crisis was co-opted in service of the further militarization of the border with Mexico.<sup>43</sup>

There was a precedent for this, however. While the reaction of the Obama administration was largely more humanitarian, two direct lines of continuity can be drawn between the responses of the Trump and Obama administrations to their respective “crises.” Jeh Johnson, then U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, “emphasized the need for marked increases in detention and deportation in order to send a “message” to deter future migration.”<sup>44</sup> Many of the children and families arriving at the U.S. border had been led to believe, generally by their smugglers, that they would be granted asylum in the U.S. Instead, the Obama administration requested four billion dollars in emergency funding to expand the capacity of immigration courts and ICE detention facilities. Although Congress did not approve the release of these funds, ICE border detention facilities still underwent significant capacity upgrades, including the conversion of male adult prisons into detention facilities for women and children.<sup>45</sup>

These same border detention facilities, described as “modular barracks among open yards that torrential rains have turned into mud flats,”<sup>46</sup> continue to be used by the Trump administration, and have been subject to significant criticism. While the principle of “family detention as deterrence” has been expanded under Trump, it has its origins in 2014. Quoting Johnson again: “Our message is clear to those who try to illegally cross our borders: You will be sent back home.”<sup>47</sup>

There is also a precedent for the deployment of military personnel to the Mexican Border, although in a much more limited capacity. Operation Phalanx, carried out between 2010 and 2016, distributed 1,200 members of the National Guard along the southern border. These troops were responsible for the removal or return of undocumented migrants and the disruption of cross-border narcotics smuggling.<sup>48</sup> While the scale of Trump's deployment was much more significant, it is worth noting that the militarization of the southern border was also trialed under Obama.

## Conclusion

It is inarguable that the Trump administration has, in both its rhetoric and its expansion of enforcement mechanisms, pursued a considerably more aggressive policy toward tackling irregular migration when compared with its predecessor. It is impossible to divorce, for example, the deliberate separation of immigrant children from their families, from the administration's stated desire to deter the arrival of undocumented migrants to the U.S. The expansion of ICE and the CBP are ideological in nature: Trump campaigned, and was elected on, the belief that the U.S. was experiencing a migration crisis that threatened national security.

However, the Obama administration can be said to have legislated within the same parameters. While its intentions may have been different, as evidenced by repeated attempts at meaningful reform (institutional change and pathways to legalization), immigration policy within the U.S. has been effectively homogenized in the aftermath of 9/11. The American electorate has, for the time being, resoundingly rejected the idea of a comprehensive overhaul of immigration in favor of the concrete, quantifiable and short-term solution of enforcement.

In recognizing this political reality, the Obama administration established a number of precedents. The first, and most critical, was a wide-reaching system of deportation focused on the formal removal of irregular migrants to the U.S., informed by a tenuous connection between migration and criminality. The second precedent was the escalation of security at the Mexican border, including the deployment of the National Guard as a deterrent to a surge of migrants attempting to cross into the U.S. This escalation also included the detention of families in border facilities, a fact acknowledged by Trump in his defense of his own policy of zero-tolerance family separation.

Although it is disingenuous to present Trump's controversial immigration policy as a direct continuation of that of his predecessor, we can instead see the securitization of immigration under Obama as a framework on which the current president has been able to expand. While Trump's rhetoric around immigration is one of open hostility, it can be argued that it is little more than a radicalized expression of a belief that existed in previous administrations: namely, that migration is a potential threat to security, one that allows for the arrival of criminals and terrorists, undermines local labor forces and, if left unchecked, will result in an endless wave of undesirable and vulnerable people with whom the U.S. is ill-equipped to deal.

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## Endnotes

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