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Trump's Immigration Reform Has Made It So the U.S. Doesn't Need a Border Wall

By [Nicole Rodriguez](#) On 11/18/17 at 7:20 AM

Who needs a wall?

Less than a year into his presidency, Donald Trump is moving swiftly to reshape the nation's immigration system in more concrete ways, curtailing illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border and sending a chill throughout Central America.

In a stark reversal from the Obama era, the administration has ramped up round-ups of undocumented immigrants regardless of age or criminal history, expanded detention space and stepped up workplace raids. Officials have also restricted the number of refugees allowed into the country while pushing to speed the deportation cases of hundreds of thousands of immigrants awaiting legal decisions.

Taken together, the policy changes have put the border wall debate on the backburner, advocates on both sides of the issue said.

"Expanded border barriers—whether you call them walls or something else—are not priority," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. that supports tighter controls on immigration.



A worker chats with residents at a newly built section of the U.S.-Mexico border fence at Sunland Park, U.S. opposite the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico January 26, 2017. JOSE LUIS GONZALEZ/REUTERS

“There’s no question the president has changed the tone of the debate and that caused a huge drop in illegal crossings,” Krikorian told *Newsweek*.

To be sure, the border wall has been bogged down by political obstacles, including the fact that Congress has not appropriated funds to build it. But the shifting sentiment is striking given how central the border wall was to Trump's political support in last year's presidential campaign. Its mere mention was an applause line at rallies and Trump himself said it was key to stemming the flow of illegal immigration.

But since his January inauguration, apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border have dipped, according to the most recent data from Customs and Border Protection. Agents apprehended 31,582 undocumented immigrants at the border in January, compared to 22,293 in August, the latest available data. April saw the year’s low, with just 11,125 apprehensions.

Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at The Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights advocacy organization, said news of the administration’s actions is spreading through Central America and discouraging crossings. At the same time, a climate of fear in the United States is gripping undocumented immigrant communities.

“People are avoiding going outside to get their groceries. They have friends to come and do that for them,” Isacson said. “They’re missing a lot of work when they learn that Immigration and Customs Enforcement is in the area and kids are not going to school as much. There’s real fear there.”



People talk to their relatives at a wall separating Mexico and the United States, as photographed from Playas Tijuana, in Tijuana, Mexico, April 10, 2016. Picture taken April 10, 2016. JORGE DUENES/REUTERS

Indeed, the immigration overhaul has come so fast that the ranks of federal immigration judges are pushing back on some elements. At issue are the administration's plans to impose "[numeric performance standards](#)" on judges deciding deportation cases.

The White House has said the quotas are necessary to help reduce a backlog of more than 600,000 cases, but judges say the standards will hamstring their ability to decide complex, life-and-death cases.

“[It’s] completely at odds with the kind of independence a judge needs,” Dana Leigh Marks, a spokesperson for the National Association of Immigration Judges and a federal immigration judge for more than 30 years, told *Newsweek*.



A man leans against the wall separating Mexico and the United States in Imperial Beach, California November 5, 2010. ERIC THAYER/REUTERS

The quotas could strip judges of their impartiality, Marks said, potentially opening the floodgates to legal challenges on the grounds that immigrants' due process rights were violated. "Not only will there be individual appeals, but we fear there will be class actions as well," Marks said.

The Department of Justice, which oversees the immigration court system, dismissed those concerns.

"Every adjudicatory system has goals, benchmarks, or metrics to ensure that cases are handled in an efficient, timely manner that do not compromise due process," said department spokesman Devin O'Malley. "The Executive Office for Immigration Review already has numerous case completion goals imposed by statute or congressional recommendation, and is developing additional benchmarks for immigration courts to assist in properly managing cases, increase productivity and reduce the pending caseload."

As for the border wall, the Department of Homeland Security says it remains "an important part of our efforts to keep the nation safe"—but just one part.

"The administration's investment in personnel, infrastructure and technology at the border will allow us to turn the tide against illegal immigration, keep Americans safe, and protect the homeland," a spokesman said.

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