
Assessing Trump's aggressive deportation goals (part 1): how many migrants and which ones?

Rut Bermejo Casado | Senior Research Fellow, Elcano Royal Institute.

Eric Sigmon | Independent consultant.

Theme

One of the main themes of Donald Trump's electoral campaign in the recent presidential elections has been immigration. Following his victory, Trump has begun implementing his action plan. One of his key proposals was the execution of mass deportations of immigrants.

Summary

This paper analyses the feasibility and implications of Donald Trump's proposal to carry out mass deportations under the so-called 'Operation Aurora'. It examines how many and which immigrants would be targeted by the operation. The initiative is compared with the 1954 'Operation Wetback', highlighting its similarities and the risks of repeating historical mistakes.

Analysis

1. Introduction

During the 2024 electoral campaign, Trump not only promised to restore some of his previous immigration policies, such as the creation of a 'great wall' on the southern border, but he also introduced new proposals to combat irregular immigration to the US. One of the most repeated claims was that he would carry out 'the largest deportation operation in American history'. Thus, his plan is not only to work on the external dimension of migration control (particularly border controls or, in his words, 'sealing the border') but also to address the internal dimension, that is, to reduce the number of immigrants already within the country's borders.¹

Although the concept of mass deportations appears to conflict with the very historical identity of the US as a nation of immigrants (Cornelius, Martin & Hollifield, 1994; Martin & Orrenius, 2022),² from the day of his inauguration, he began signing executive orders to implement a restrictive immigration policy designed by his trusted advisor, Stephen Miller, and to fulfil the promised deportations.

¹ For an analysis on policies aimed at reducing irregular immigration, see <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/controlling-migration-in-southern-europe-part-1-fencing-strategies-ari/>.

² Bearing in mind that many of these initial immigrants did not arrive of their own free will but were forcibly transported (King, 2000).

Two main aspects of his immigration policy, particularly his deportation plan, are discussed below. First, the potential numerical scope of his plan is examined to answer the question: how many people are likely to be deported? Secondly, which individuals will be included in the operation?

Although the well-known Republican policy platform, 'Project 2025', clearly states that his immigration policy objectives are to 'secure the border, complete the construction of the wall, and deport illegal immigrants', the lack of clarity regarding these aspects or even the contradictory statements were frequent during the electoral campaign. These grandiose, yet detail-lacking proposals, combined with an avalanche and overlapping of measures in the first two weeks of his Administration, make it difficult to ascertain the specifics. Both elements appear to be deliberate to 'declare victory' regardless of the outcome of his so-called 'Operation Aurora', as the lack of precise objectives prevents the assessment of his achievements. However, his response to how many and which 'illegal' immigrants are deported will determine not only the economic cost –which is expected to be high– but also the human cost for the immigrants themselves and the impact on the fundamental values and liberties of US democracy.

This paper distinguishes, for analytical purposes, the questions of how many and which. However, both aspects are interconnected, and the response to one has an influence on the other. The total number of deported individuals is clearly linked and also determined by the second aspect: which ones will be deported? If the focus is placed on criminals, as Trump has occasionally said and as suggested by the first 'detention operations', that number will be lower than if it includes the entire population residing illegally in the US.

2. Deportations in the US immigration system

President Trump's statements regarding 'Operation Aurora' have recalled –indeed, he has explicitly referenced– President Eisenhower's 1954 'Operation Wetback' (García, 1981; Astor, 2009; Langham, 1992; Hernández, 2006). It is not clear how familiar he is with the operation or to what extent he considers it a model to follow; it may also simply be a nod related to his MAGA slogan, referencing the era that his movement holds as exemplary: the 1950s.³

'Operation Wetback' is, for many, one of the most shameful episodes in US democracy. This historical event has been described as follows: 'Eisenhower's mass deportation policy was a tragedy. Human rights were violated. People were transported to distant locations without food or water. Many unnecessary deaths occurred. On some occasions, even US citizens of Hispanic origin were deported. It was absurd. It was terrible. The immigrants were humiliated'.

That operation involved the use of the military and was led by retired military officer Joseph Swing, who implemented it in the summer of 1954. One million young Mexicans were deported (Hernández, 2006), yet its effects in reducing irregular migration appear rather minimal, as many of those deported soon attempted to re-enter, some illegally and others legally. 'Operation Wetback' was not only aimed at deporting undocumented

³ One of the moments when he explicitly mentioned it was in his interview with *The Times* in April 2024.

immigrants but also at redirecting their entry through legal channels, such as the 'Bracero' programme. The latter was designed to meet the demand for labour in specific sectors, requiring workers to meet established conditions to obtain temporary contracts. However, while the operation facilitated the return of some migrants through this system, it failed to curb irregular immigration, as many deportees continued to enter unlawfully. Thus, the operation can be assessed as a costly form of immigrant regularisation and an [inefficient method for reducing irregular migration](#).

As previously indicated, the primary target of the deportation operation was young, recently-arrived undocumented Mexican immigrants. Mexico cooperated closely with the US government, to the extent that it has been described as a 'binational' operation (Hernández, 2006). The reason for this intense and extensive cooperation was due to Mexico's labour shortages and its desire to recover its young workforce (predominantly men). In addition to stopping the influx of undocumented Mexican workers, the operation also sought to dissuade employers from hiring them. However, resistance arose from certain legislators and agricultural and livestock industry groups that lobbied Congress. Many legislators opposed one of the initiative's fundamental principles: penalising employers who hired undocumented workers, arguing that proving their knowledge of their employees' immigration status would be difficult. Furthermore, some legislators were wary of Brownell's militaristic approach, which proposed executing the plan as if it were a military invasion. Ultimately, Congress failed to pass legislation sanctioning employers who hired illegal workers but did [approve increased funding for the Border Patrol](#).

In summary, 'Operation Wetback' encountered legal and operational complications, as well as systematic violations of rights by authorities, including inhumane and degrading treatment, as well as torture. These factors, along with [high costs and logistical difficulties](#), led to its swift termination.

There is no doubt that Trump is no Eisenhower, nor is the context the same. Furthermore, certain details of the US immigration system, particularly deportation, have changed since then. Understanding how the system functions is crucial to grasping the new President's capacity and possibilities for implementing his deportation programme. In the US the deportation or removal system generally requires obtaining a judicial decision for violating immigration laws. To refer to individuals returned to their country of origin following such a judicial resolution, the terms deportation, removal or return are used. [It is estimated that in 2022 around 1,200,000 individuals](#) had a final removal order that had not been executed because immigration authorities were unaware of their whereabouts or due to the government's prosecutorial discretion not to enforce it.

In cases where an immigration judge is involved, legal safeguards are clear. Even if the judge determines that a non-citizen may be deported, denies some kind of 'relief from removal' and issues a removal order or grants voluntary departure, the individual still has the right to appeal. The deportation order is only considered final if the 30-day period for filing an appeal expires without one being lodged, if the individual expressly waives the

right to appeal, or if the [Board of Immigration Appeals dismisses the appeal or upholds the deportation order](#).⁴

This general system also includes expedited removals, which are primarily applied to individuals who have just crossed the border and entered the country, executed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Under the system established in 1996, these expedited removals bypass judicial authorisation if the deportation occurs within 14 days of entry for individuals apprehended within 100 miles of the land border unless the individual applies for asylum. These expedited removals, without judicial intervention, can also be applied to those who have been previously expelled (reinstatement of the removal order). The 2020 reform, under Trump's first term, allowed the DHS to expel such individuals without a formal deportation order. [That year expedited removals](#) accounted for 41% of total deportations, while reinstated removal orders constituted 40%. The remaining 19% were determined by an immigration judge.

The Trump Administration has once again modified expedited removals. The DHS has reversed the limitations imposed by Biden in 2022. [With the new notification](#), the DHS has regained its authority to apply this procedure more broadly. The new regulation allows individuals without legal status to be subject to expedited deportation if they cannot prove they have been in the country for the previous two years, regardless of where they are found within the US.

This measure has raised concerns among human-rights advocates and pro-immigrant organisations. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has criticised the expansion of expedited deportation, stating that this policy '[leads to the deportation of individuals without due process and without the opportunity to demonstrate their eligibility to remain in the country](#)'. Similarly, the [American Immigration Council](#) has warned that the lack of adequate judicial review could increase wrongful deportations, affecting immigrants with legitimate asylum claims or community ties in the US.

Title 42 expulsions were also used during the pandemic, from March 2020 to May 2023. This legal provision allowed for swift expulsions of irregular immigrants seeking to enter the US based on public-health risks without requiring a formal interview, thus preventing individuals from seeking asylum. Trump initiated the use of Title 42 and [Biden used it more than initially expected](#) until he finally terminated it (Sigmon, 2024).

The increasing use of expedited removals, including during the latter part of the Biden Administration, is linked to the termination of Title 42, as it seeks to ensure that immigrants can be [deported swiftly without a court hearing if they do not apply for asylum](#). If immigrants processed under expedited removals apply for asylum, they must pass an initial screening interview with an asylum officer to avoid deportation and proceed with their case in the immigration system.

⁴ For a summary of procedures, see <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/removal-system-united-states-overview>.

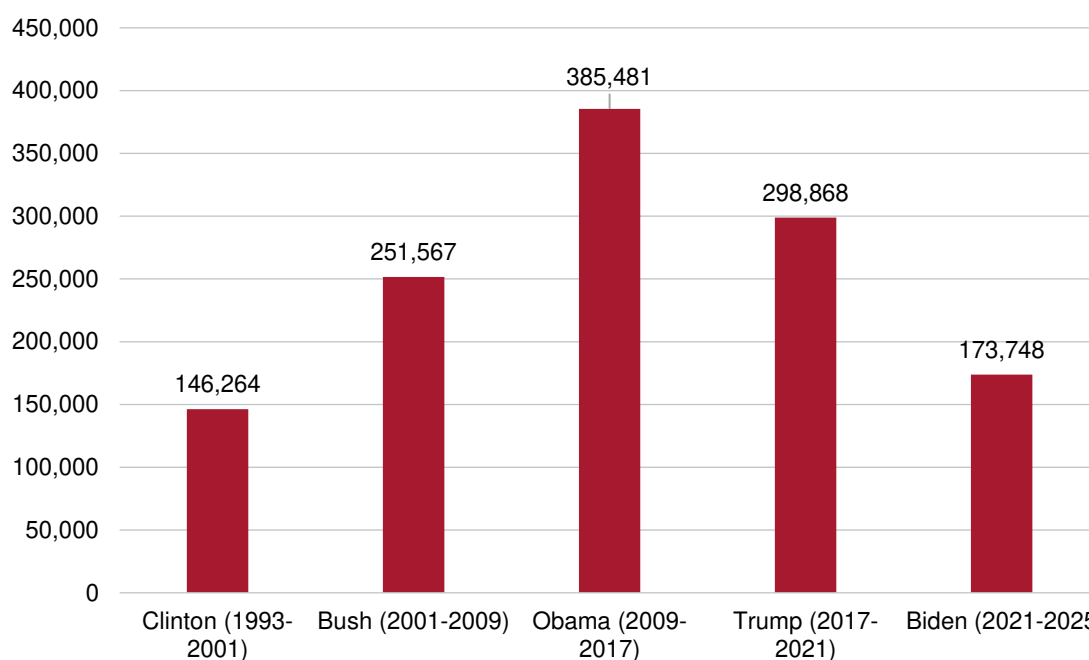
3. How many people can be deported under the new 'Operation Aurora'?

Although President Donald Trump has begun implementing his planned deportation programme immediately after taking office, one undetermined aspect is the numerical objective of his deportation initiative. In fact, during his campaign, [Trump spoke of deporting 15 million or even up to 20 million people](#), despite estimates from the [Pew Research Center](#) indicating that between 11 and 12 million undocumented immigrants reside in the US.

In the case of 'Operation Wetback', the [Immigration and Naturalization Service, the legacy US immigration agency, reported deporting 1,100,000 individuals](#), though there is no consensus on the actual number, with some sources citing 200,000 people (Langham, 1992), others 1,000,000 (Hernández, 2006) and some suggesting [as many as 1,300,000](#).

In the US immigration system, over recent decades, resources for the enforcement of immigration laws have steadily increased, both at the border and within the interior, leading to a rise in deportations. Figure 1 shows the average annual deportations under the last five Administrations. The annual average of deportations increased from the Clinton Administration through Obama's presidency. However, during Trump's first term, deportations decreased due to reduced cooperation between state and local jurisdictions with ICE officials, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the government's ability to detain and remove immigrants. This downward trend continued under the Biden Administration, which prioritised the deportation of immigrants with criminal records, as Obama had also done.

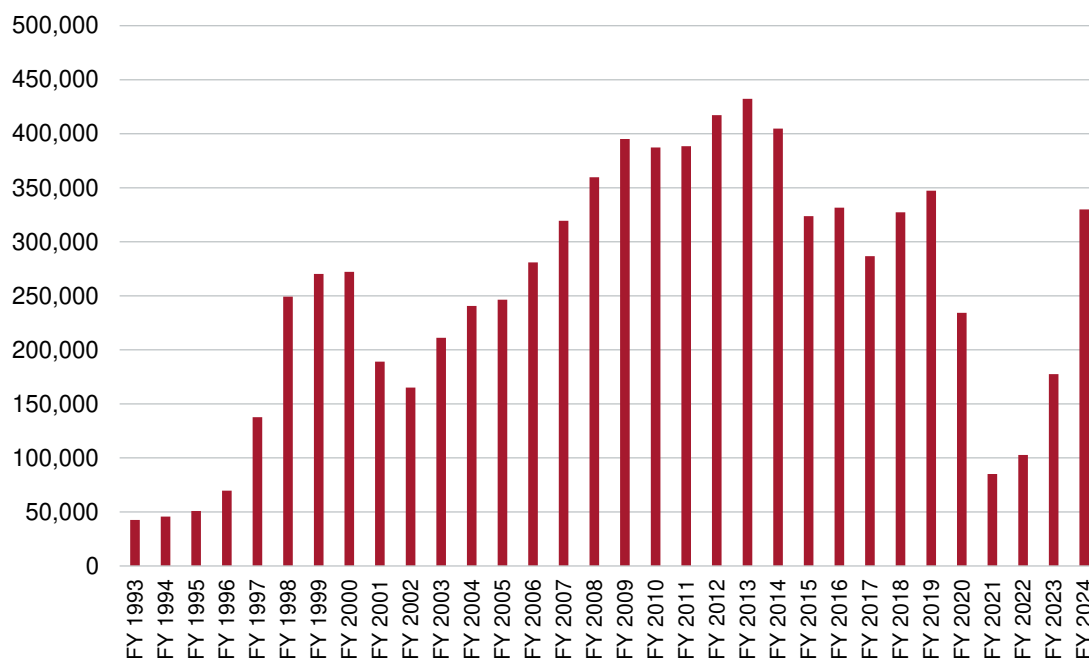
Figure 1. Average annual US removals of noncitizens by presidential Administration, FY 1993-2024



Source: US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, multiple years, [available online](#); OHSS, 'Immigration Enforcement and Legal Processes Monthly Tables - November 2024', updated 16/1/2025, [available online](#).

According to ICE data (see Figure 1), Obama deported more immigrants on average per year (385,000) than Clinton (143,000), Bush (252,000), Trump (299,000) and Biden (174,000). If these figures are broken down annually (see Figure 2), it is evident that during his previous term, despite promising to deport millions of immigrants, the highest number Trump achieved in a single year was 347,250 in fiscal year 2019. ICE's highest one-year total was 432,228 in 2013 under President Obama. This figure helped to earn him the nickname 'Deporter-in-Chief'. If Title 42 expulsions and expedited removals are included, Trump reached 393,000 deportations/expulsions in 2020, while Biden's total reached 1,083,000 (adding up the three years –2021, 2022 and 2023– during which Title 42 remained in effect, reflecting his Administration's reliance on Title 42. In total, from March 2020 to March 2023 more than 2.8 million immigrants were expelled from the US pursuant to Title 42.

Figure 2. US removals of noncitizens, FY 1993-2024



Source: US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, multiple years, [available online](#); OHSS, 'Immigration Enforcement and Legal Processes Monthly Tables - November 2024', updated 16/1/2025, [available online](#).

Considering both these averages and the annual figures, even Vance's estimate of [deporting one million people per year](#) seems quite difficult to achieve. Although it is still very difficult to determine how many people Trump will deport during his term, and how many he has effectively deported during his first week in office, [some sources point to approximately 7,300 individuals](#). Of these, Mexico received 4,094 deportees from the US, the majority of them Mexican nationals, [although individuals of other nationalities were also included](#). Undoubtedly, the operation that has received the most attention has been that of Colombia, which refused to receive two US military planes with approximately 200 Colombian deportees. However, [military flights have been a minority thus far –around six– while deportations via commercial flights have been far more frequent](#).

These deportations are attracting particular attention not so much due to their numbers, which some do not find abnormal, but rather because they are accompanied by raids⁵ in [sanctuary cities such as Miami or Chicago](#). ICE is also requiring state prisons to notify them before releasing detainees. This allows ICE to take custody of individuals and then place them in formal proceedings.

4. Who is being deported?

A mass deportation, as anticipated under 'Operation Aurora', would be highly divisive, [leading to family separations and potentially devastating effects on communities](#).

It is estimated that, on a national level, [more than 16.7 million people have at least one family member living with them in an irregular immigration situation](#). In fact, there are 5.9 million US children citizens who could potentially be at risk if these measures target their undocumented family members. The imagery of arrests within communities and family separations would be difficult to justify for a democracy like the US and would provoke strong opposition, such as the outcry during Trump's first Administration against his 'Zero Tolerance' policy, which resulted in the separation of immigrant children from their parents.⁶ Trump has spent months –if not years– laying the groundwork for this opposition, using rhetoric suggesting an invasion or a massive wave of immigration that would justify mass deportations,⁷ drawing parallels with 'Operation Wetback' (Hernández, 2006).

Mass deportation could even affect individuals with legal immigration status. [Some expect that the operation will not indiscriminately include 'any immigrant without legal status'](#) but will instead focus not on 'how many' but on 'which ones'. There is a significant difference between prioritising the deportation of individuals serving criminal sentences or those in immigration detention –or, as the President insists, individuals in mental asylums– and deporting people who have been living in the US unlawfully for 20 or 30 years, with spouses or children who are US citizens. Trump has talked about targeting immigrants who entered via the humanitarian parole programme the Biden Administration implemented for certain Cubans, Haitians and Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans because he believes the programme was illegal. By this logic, he could also target the so-called 'DACA children' and individuals granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS). It is worth remembering that, during his first term, Trump sought to end the DACA programme and eliminate TPS designations for certain nationalities.

⁵ It is important to highlight that arrests and deportations are two distinct processes. The deportation rate in relation to arrests tends to be significantly lower. In Greece, it stood at one-third of arrests in 2008 and dropped to 13% in 2008 (Triandafyllidou, 2010). In Spain, a person detained for deportation has a one in three chance of ultimately being sent back to his country of origin (Bermejo, 2018).

⁶ A US Government report of June 2021 estimated that at least 3,900 children were separated from their families between July 2017 and January 2021 due to the implementation of the controversial 'zero tolerance' policy by the Trump Administration (see <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/from-campaign-to-implementation-an-overview-of-bidens-immigration-policy/> and <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/trump-vs-harris-opiniones-sobre-la-inmigracion/>).

⁷ It should be borne in mind that the opinion polls used by the Republicans to justify this mass deportation show that support is not so widespread and that there is barely any support amongst non-Republicans, as some of them show. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/18/us/politics/trump-policies-immigration-tariffs-economy.html> and <https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/f548560f100205ef/e656ddda-full.pdf>.

During his first week in office, Trump has emphasised the need to deport criminals, dangerous offenders and members of organised gangs. However, this could be merely the beginning: 'the worst ones first'. Consistent with his focus on immigrants who have committed crimes, the first law he signed as President during his second term was the [Laken Riley Act](#), approved the day after his inauguration, which expands the DHS mandate to detain any individual who is in the US illegally or lacks the necessary documents upon requesting admission and who has been accused, arrested, convicted or admitted to having committed acts that constitute the essential elements of burglary, theft, larceny or shoplifting.

The Trump Administration has provided overall arrest figures for its first two weeks, but has not provided enough details to determine what proportion of the arrests were criminals or other details to help evaluate the kinds of operations ICE is conducting or the profiles of its targets. However, at the same time, reports of warrantless arrests have begun to emerge following the raids conducted during the first weekend in sanctuary cities such as Chicago and Miami. In this regard, Homan, known as Trump's 'border czar', has reiterated that [undocumented individuals apprehended during raids targeting criminals will also be deported](#).

As with 'Operation Wetback', the majority of individuals being deported are of Mexican nationality. However, unlike that operation, this one will also include citizens from other countries, mainly Latin American. Additionally, while 'Operation Wetback' was primarily concentrated in the south-western US –starting at the California and Arizona borders before expanding to Texas's southern border and later including Chicago (Langham, 1992)– the current US operations will be nationwide.

Conclusions

'Operation Aurora' presents various challenges, which are examined in the second part of this paper –budgetary, operational, diplomatic, political and legal–. However, the first two weeks of President Trump's Administration has already clarified some aspects regarding 'how many people will be deported' and 'who will be affected'.

The comparison with 1954's 'Operation Wetback' highlights numerous similarities, whether intentional or coincidental, and underscores the risks of repeating historical mistakes. That policy not only resulted in significant human and economic costs but also proved ineffective in reducing irregular migration as it focused solely on mass deportation without offering viable pathways for regularisation. In the present context, where Trump has restricted legal migration pathways, a policy that combines 'enforcement' with regularisation could avoid these pitfalls and align with the principles of justice and humanity that should guide a democracy like the US.

At present, it is not yet possible to describe this as a 'mass deportation'. For some, the initial figures do not indicate an exceptional level of deportation activity. However, it remains to be seen how events unfold as the Administration's efforts to pursue a mass deportation campaign present significant challenges, which will be analysed in the second part of this paper. Nevertheless, if the promised numbers are to be reached, the campaign will deeply impact social cohesion, employment in certain sectors (like

agriculture and construction), human rights and the democratic values of the US. Moreover, images of family separations and mass arrests, detentions and deportations would be difficult to justify and support for an extended period of time in any 21st-century democracy.

Bibliographical references

Astor, A. (2009), 'Unauthorized immigration, securitization and the making of Operation Wetback', *Latino Studies*, nr 7, p. 5-29, <http://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2008.56>.

Bermejo, R. (2018), 'From irregular stay to removal through detention: the case of Spain as a member state of the European Union', *Migration Letters*, vol. 15, nr 3, p. 321-332, doi.org/10.59670/ml.v15i3.355, <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/355>.

Cornelius, Wayne A., Philip L. Martin y James F. Hollifield (1994), 'Introduction: the ambivalent quest for immigration control', in *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*, Stanford University Press, p. 3-41.

García, M.T. (1981), 'Review of Operation Wetback: the mass deportation of Mexican undocumented workers in 1954, by J.R. García', *The Public Historian*, vol. 3, nr 2, p. 121-125, <http://doi.org/10.2307/3377235>.

Hernández, Kelly L. (2006), 'The crimes and consequences of illegal immigration: a cross-border examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954', *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 37, nr 4, Winter, p. 421-444, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25443415>.

King, Desmond (2000), *Making Americans*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
Langham, T.C. (1992), 'Federal regulation of border labor: Operation Wetback and the wetback bills', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 7, nr 1, p. 81-91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.1992.9695420>.

Martin, Philip L., & Pia Orrenius (2022), 'The United States: whither the nation of immigrants?', in James F. Hollifield, Philip L. Martin, Pia M. Orrenius & François Héran (Eds.), *Controlling Immigration. A Comparative Perspective*, Stanford University Press, 4th edition.

Triandafyllidou, Anna (2010), 'Controlling migration in southern Europe (part 1): fencing strategies', *ARI*, nr 7/2010, Elcano Royal Institute, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/controlling-migration-in-southern-europe-part-1-fencing-strategies-ari/>.