

A Letter to Our Fellow American Jews about the Humanitarian Crisis on our Border

Two weeks ago, we, the undersigned, returned from an intensive three-day fact-finding trip to the Arizona-Mexico border. Our goal was to better understand the factors driving the humanitarian crisis at the Southern Border and to advocate more effectively for sound immigration policies.

On our trip, we:

- Visited the Mexican Consulate to discuss its role in transnational migration matters;
- Walked along the Arizona-Mexico border fence, accompanied by a border militarization expert;
- Toured shelters for asylum seekers on both sides of the border;
- Learned from Border Patrol about current policies, processes, and challenges;
- Witnessed an Operation Streamline hearing, a federal program that fast-tracks the criminal prosecution and deportation of migrants caught between Ports of Entry; and
- Heard from those in the Jewish community who are coordinating the local humanitarian response.

We have returned to our local communities heartbroken yet determined to make a difference. Long committed to upholding generous immigration policies, the Jewish community has a significant role to play in addressing today's humanitarian and immigration crises.

Here's what we observed:

Observation 1: Border policy and migration are the result of numerous complex political, economic, and social factors.

The crisis at the border is the result of bipartisan immigration policies decades in the making. Consecutive U.S. Administrations contributed to this crisis, creating a complex web of counterproductive policies and turning the border region into a heavily militarized zone. The current Administration has further exacerbated immigration problems by cutting off avenues for legal immigration, criminalizing many migrants, threatening those who provide aid, separating families, and investing more resources in detention and deportation.

Since 2008, economic migration has decreased while the number of migrants seeking asylum, particularly from Central and South America, has expanded significantly. This uptick is rooted in failing states with rampant human rights violations, corruption, and drug and gang violence. The situation has been further aggravated by U.S. drug policy, climate change, and trade policies, which have devastated livelihoods.

There is no simple solution to this crisis. Our options cannot simply be "open borders" or "build the wall." We are in desperate need of bipartisan legislative leadership.

Observation 2: The border situation is a human tragedy.

We spoke with many people seeking asylum who have survived devastating violence and endured unspeakable suffering in their home countries and along their journey to the border. While many of them may qualify for an asylum hearing, only a small fraction will ever be granted asylum. These people are fleeing violence, corruption, and desperate poverty in their countries. They are not terrorists, drug dealers, or rapists. They are human beings searching for safety and better lives for themselves and their families.

In Mexico, we met a Venezuelan restaurant owner who had to flee with her husband and five children, including two infants, after the regime threatened her and her family for providing shelter to two young anti-government activists whose lives were in danger. We met two siblings from Mexico whose parents were assassinated while checking on their farmland. The 20-year-old brother immediately fled with his younger sister, as they were likely next on the hit list. If they make it into the U.S., they will be separated.

Observation 3: The U.S. has embraced a series of counterproductive and cruel policies.

Our current policies violate American and Jewish values. We observed an Operation Streamline hearing, a federal criminal court proceeding in which up to 70 migrants caught by Border Patrol, often merely days earlier, are brought before a federal judge, often in shackles, prosecuted *en masse* and sentenced to jail before deportation. This system of blanket criminal prosecution was designed to fast-track deportation and deter repeat offenders, but it manifestly fails to do so. It only drains resources and makes a mockery of our justice system.

More recent changes to U.S. immigration policy have forced tens of thousands more immigrants—including children and asylum seekers—into detention facilities and unlicensed shelters. The horrible conditions at immigration detention centers and border holding facilities violate federal law and standards. Abuse is systemic.

At the same time, new policies like “Remain in Mexico” and “metering,” bar vulnerable populations from entering the U.S. to seek asylum, a legal right enshrined in both U.S. and international law. Kidnapping, rape, and murder of those subjected to these policies is common, forcing many to chance the perilous journey of crossing between Ports of Entry. Most are fleeing unspeakable violence, trafficking, and coercion in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, countries with the world’s highest murder rates.

US Immigration policy is becoming even more draconian. On our flights home, we learned that the U.S. Supreme Court had just allowed the Administration to enforce a new policy denying asylum to most Central and South American migrants while the battle over the policy’s legality continues. We were devastated to learn that almost every person we met at the shelter in Mexico is now ineligible for asylum in the U.S.

How can the Jewish community help improve the situation?

Work to decriminalize migration. Our nation should stop criminalizing migration and make border crossing between Ports of Entry a civil offense. Decriminalizing migration would allow us to free up limited resources currently used to track, prosecute, and detain people who pose no danger.

Allow more asylum seekers and refugees into the country. With one of the highest GDPs in the world, this country can easily allow more people to enter legally through the asylum and refugee systems. As Jews, we know what it means to flee for safety and better lives, and we know what it means to be turned away.

End the detention and separation of asylum seekers, families, and children. This practice is immoral and unnecessary. Many families seeking asylum are released on their own recognizance while they await their immigration hearings. The overwhelming majority follow the rules. There is no reason to subject vulnerable people to such horrific conditions.

Ease the militarization of the border zone. Congress invests more U.S. taxpayer dollars to immigration enforcement agencies than all other enforcement agencies combined, including the FBI, DEA, ATF, and the Secret Service. Under current policy, a 100-mile zone from any external boundary of the entire U.S. operates under different Constitutional rules than the rest of the country. In this zone, border patrol agents may, without probable cause, conduct searches and seizures.

Stop Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids. ICE raids are cruel and unnecessary. They arrest people in their homes and outside their children's schools, and near houses of worship and courthouses. They often target people who pose no danger to society and separate children from their parents, often leaving them to fend for themselves.

Support Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and create a pathway to citizenship. Americans overwhelmingly support allowing Dreamers to continue to live, work, and study in the U.S. with a pathway to citizenship. Ultimately, America must, as it secures its borders, provide a pathway to citizenship for those who currently live here.

Volunteer help where help is needed. Numerous organizations provide humanitarian aid, shelter, legal representation and orientation, and medical care. There are asylum seekers in many, if not all, local communities. Our community can help them and their families build new lives, access the care they need, and navigate our complex immigration system.

We American Jews have a vital role to play in ensuring our country lives up to its values.

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