

# Border Management and National Security: Analysis of the Illegal Immigration Challenges in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Illegal immigration has become one of the most politically charged and institutionally demanding challenges confronting South Africa's post-apartheid state. Positioned at the southern tip of a continent marked by conflict, economic disparity and climate-related displacement, South Africa has for three decades functioned as the primary destination for regular and irregular migrants from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and beyond. This article critically examines the relationship between border management and national security in South Africa, situating the analysis within the country's distinctive geographical and socio-political context. Drawing on a qualitative desktop-based review of legislation, policy documents, parliamentary records and peer-reviewed literature, the article traces the evolution of South Africa's border governance architecture from a fragmented multi-agency model to the establishment of the Border Management Authority (BMA) in 2020, and evaluates the operational effectiveness of the South African National Defence Force's (SANDF) Operation Corona border-safeguarding mandate. The analysis finds that, notwithstanding legislative reform, border control in South Africa remains structurally undermined by chronic underfunding, ageing equipment, personnel shortages, corruption within Home Affairs, and an asylum-processing backlog that together erode the state's capacity to distinguish credible protection claims from irregular economic migration. These deficiencies have tangible national security implications, including exposure to cross-border organised crime, vehicle and stock theft syndicates, human trafficking and smuggling networks. At the same time, the article cautions against the securitisation of migration discourse, which has fuelled xenophobic mobilisation and risks conflating irregular migration with criminality in ways that violate the rights of genuine asylum seekers and documented migrants. The article concludes that effective border management requires an integrated approach that strengthens institutional capacity and inter-agency coordination while remaining anchored in constitutional and human rights obligations, and offers policy recommendations toward this end.

**Keywords:** border management; national security; illegal immigration; South Africa; securitisation; Border Management Authority; xenophobia

## INTRODUCTION

South Africa occupies a paradoxical position within the regional migration system. Since the transition to democracy in 1994, the country has simultaneously projected itself as a continental leader in constitutionalism and human rights while pursuing an immigration regime that successive scholars describe as increasingly restrictive and securitised (Peberdy, 2009; Vigneswaran, 2020). This tension is not incidental; it reflects deeper structural pressures generated by South Africa's relative economic weight within the SADC region, its 4,470-kilometre land border shared with six neighbouring states, and a long, only partially demarcated maritime coastline. These geographical realities, combined with political and economic instability in neighbouring Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho, have positioned South Africa as the principal destination for both regular and irregular migration flows on the subcontinent.

The question of how the South African state manages its borders is therefore inseparable from broader debates about national security, sovereignty and social cohesion. Government policy documents, including the White Paper on International Migration of 2017, explicitly link migration management to national security,

sovereignty and public safety (Department of Home Affairs, 2017). Yet the securitisation of migration discourse is itself contested: critics argue that framing irregular migration primarily as a security threat obscures its socio-economic drivers, fuels xenophobic sentiment, and diverts attention from the state's own institutional shortcomings (Duncan, 2020; Sibanda and Nyere, 2026).

This article addresses three interrelated questions. First, how has South Africa's institutional and legal architecture for border management evolved, and what does the establishment of the Border Management Authority represent in this trajectory? Second, how effective are current border control practices in addressing the national security concerns they are designed to mitigate? Third, what are the socio-political consequences of framing illegal immigration primarily through a security lens, particularly for social cohesion and the rights of migrants and asylum seekers? In addressing these questions, the article contributes to an established body of South African migration scholarship (Crush, 1999; Landau, 2010; Vigneswaran, 2020) by integrating recent institutional developments, including the operationalisation of the BMA and current parliamentary oversight findings on SANDF border-safeguarding capacity, into the analysis.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The article is informed by the securitisation framework associated with the Copenhagen School of security studies, which understands security not as an objective condition but as the outcome of a discursive process through which an issue is elevated from ordinary politics into the realm of existential threat, thereby justifying extraordinary measures (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998). Applied to migration, securitisation theory illuminates how South African political and bureaucratic actors have progressively framed irregular migration as a threat to sovereignty, public safety and resource distribution, a framing that has accompanied the tightening of immigration policy over the past two decades (Frontiers in Political Science, 2026). This lens is complemented by the concept of the migration-security nexus, which examines the empirical and discursive linkages between cross-border population movement and security concerns such as organised crime, trafficking and terrorism, while cautioning against uncritical elision of migration with criminality (Vigneswaran, 2013).

A second theoretical strand draws on institutionalist perspectives on border governance, which emphasise that effective border management is a function not merely of legislative design but of inter-agency coordination, resourcing and administrative capacity (Vigneswaran, 2020). This is directly relevant to the South African case, where the shift from a fragmented multi-departmental model to the centralised Border Management Authority represents an explicit institutional response to coordination failures identified over more than a decade of policy deliberation (BMA, n.d.).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

South Africa's post-apartheid migration policy has followed an uneven and often contradictory trajectory. The immediate post-1994 period was marked by two significant regularisation initiatives: an amnesty extended between 1997 and 2000 to undocumented Mozambican nationals who had entered during that country's civil war, together with a broader SADC amnesty for those who had entered before 1990, and the 2008 suspension of deportations of Zimbabwean nationals, which was later formalised through special permit dispensations (Klotz, 1997; Crush and Williams, 2005). Scholars have characterised the underlying policy paradigm during this period as oscillating between a securitised, control-oriented approach inherited from the apartheid era and a more developmental orientation informed by regional solidarity commitments (Danso and McDonald, 2001; Peberdy, 2001; Kabwe-Segatti, 2008; Vigneswaran, 2008).

The 1999 White Paper on International Migration, implemented principally through the Immigration Act of 2002 and the Refugees Act of 1998, established the legal architecture that governed migration for almost two decades. Academic assessments of this framework have been consistently critical, pointing to bureaucratic inefficiency, protracted asylum backlogs, and the persistence of attitudinal legacies from the apartheid immigration control regime (Landau, 2010; Klaaren, 2011; Vigneswaran, 2020). The 2017 White Paper on International Migration represented an explicit acknowledgement of these shortcomings, describing the prevailing policy as exposing South Africa to "many kinds of risk" and as perpetuating irregular migration,

corruption and human rights abuse (Department of Home Affairs, 2017). Notably, the 2017 White Paper also proposed a SADC-specific visa regime intended to formalise the historically significant flow of unskilled and semi-skilled regional migrants, a proposal that was never fully implemented and was effectively abandoned with the discontinuation of the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit dispensation in 2021 (Welthungerhilfe, 2024). A further Revised White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection, approved by Cabinet in 2026, proposes a points-based system for economic migration, indicating that migration policy reform in South Africa remains an ongoing and unsettled process (South African Government, 2026).

A parallel body of literature addresses the securitisation of migration and its social consequences. Empirical studies document a persistent association, in public and political discourse, between foreign nationals and crime, despite the absence of robust national-level data substantiating a disproportionate crime contribution by migrants (Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg, 2025). Other scholarship highlights the vulnerability of foreign nationals, including undocumented migrants, to victimisation, exploitation and institutionalised discrimination within South African labour markets and state service delivery (Tawodzera and Crush, 2023; Umeh, Olofinbiyi and Gopal, 2024; Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg, 2024, cited in Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg, 2025). This literature cautions that securitised border management, if not carefully calibrated, risks reinforcing rather than resolving the social tensions it is meant to address.

Finally, a growing institutional literature examines the establishment and early operation of the Border Management Authority. Commentators broadly welcome the principle of a single, centrally coordinated border authority as a response to the fragmentation that historically characterised South African border governance, in which approximately nine departments and roughly 9,000 officials exercised overlapping mandates without a unified command structure (BMA, n.d.). At the same time, independent assessments, including submissions by the Institute for Security Studies during the legislative process, raised concerns about the securitisation of the border function, the risk that corruption endemic to the Department of Home Affairs would be transferred into the new authority, and the substantial fiscal burden of full implementation, estimated at over R10 billion annually (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, desktop-based research design suited to a policy and institutional analysis of this kind. Data were drawn from three categories of source: primary legal and policy instruments, including the Border Management Authority Act 2 of 2020, the 1999 and 2017 White Papers on International Migration, and the 2026 Revised White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection; official and parliamentary records, including Parliamentary Monitoring Group transcripts of Joint Standing Committee on Defence briefings on Operation Corona; and peer-reviewed academic literature on South African migration policy, securitisation and border governance. Triangulating these source categories allows the analysis to move beyond the normative claims of policy documents to an evidence-based assessment of implementation and effectiveness, an approach consistent with prior qualitative studies of South African border governance (Tau, 2021).

## Geographical and Socio-Political Context

South Africa's border security challenge is shaped fundamentally by geography. The country shares land borders exceeding 4,470 kilometres with Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Eswatini and Lesotho, the latter entirely enclosed within South African territory, together with extensive maritime borders along the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coastlines that have assumed renewed strategic significance given global reliance on the Cape sea route for trade (The Star, 2026). A substantial proportion of this borderline runs through remote, sparsely populated and, in places, physically permeable terrain. Compounding this, numerous communities straddle the border itself, with shared kinship and chieftainship structures spanning informal crossing points such as Mbuzini and Tshidilamolomo, complicating any purely enforcement-based approach to border control (BMA, n.d.).

This geography intersects with pronounced regional socio-economic asymmetries. South Africa's relative economic weight, comparatively stronger institutions, and perceived opportunities have long made it the

primary destination for migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho, which together account for the largest shares of the foreign-born population and, historically, of deportations (Vigneswaran, 2020; Scalabrini, n.d.). Political and economic instability in Zimbabwe in particular has driven successive waves of migration since the early 2000s, prompting the South African government's temporary suspension of deportations in 2008 and subsequent special permit dispensations, before a shift toward more restrictive policy from 2021 onward (Welthungerhilfe, 2024). Because reliable data on unauthorised residents in South Africa do not exist, given the absence of any systematic or methodologically rigorous national estimation exercise, the scale of irregular migration remains a matter of contestation and political framing rather than settled empirical fact (Vigneswaran, 2020).

### **Institutional and Legal Framework for Border Management**

Until 2020, South African border management was distributed across at least six to nine organs of state, including the Department of Home Affairs, the South African Revenue Service, the South African Police Service, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, the Department of Health, and the SANDF, each operating under distinct legislative mandates with no single chain of command (BMA, n.d.). Parliamentary and academic assessments consistently identify this fragmentation as a principal driver of weak border control, exposing the country to smuggling, document fraud and coordination failures at ports of entry (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

The Border Management Authority Act 2 of 2020, gazetted on 21 July 2020 and made fully operational from 1 April 2023, was designed to resolve this fragmentation by consolidating border law enforcement functions, excluding customs functions retained by the South African Revenue Service, under a single national public entity accountable to the Minister of Home Affairs (BMA, n.d.; Polity, 2020). The Act empowers border guards to conduct immigration, health, agricultural and environmental control functions at ports of entry, and mandates cooperation protocols between the BMA and both the South African Police Service and the SANDF (Border Management Authority Act, 2020). The legislative process, beginning with the first Bill gazetted in 2015 and concluding with presidential assent in July 2020, spanned more than a decade and involved substantial revision in response to inter-departmental disputes, particularly between the Department of Home Affairs and National Treasury over the inclusion of the South African Revenue Service (BMA, n.d.).

Border safeguarding beyond the formal ports of entry, meaning the borderline, border posts and gates, together with maritime territorial waters, remains the constitutional responsibility of the SANDF under Operation Corona, a permanent deployment mandated to defend the territorial integrity of the Republic under section 200 of the Constitution (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022). The BMA and SANDF are required to coordinate through formal protocols, though the precise operational division of responsibility between the two institutions has itself been a recurring subject of parliamentary oversight (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022).

### **Effectiveness of Current Border Control Practices**

Assessed against its stated objectives, the current border management framework exhibits a persistent gap between institutional design and operational capacity. Operation Corona illustrates this gap starkly. Parliamentary briefings indicate that the SANDF's border-safeguarding footprint has been planned at 22 companies but has, at various points, fielded as few as fifteen, with a 2025 parliamentary oversight visit finding approximately 2,300 to 2,500 soldiers deployed across more than 4,470 kilometres of land border, a force the Minister of Defence has herself acknowledged to Parliament as insufficient (DefenceWeb, 2025b). Successive committee briefings have documented chronic underfunding, ageing vehicles and equipment, inadequate soldier accommodation, slow procurement processes, and, at various points, the near-total neglect of aerial surveillance capability due to insufficient budget for air assets and sensors (DefenceWeb, 2020; DefenceWeb, 2022). A 2026 parliamentary update confirmed continued resource pressure, with the bulk of the defence budget absorbed by personnel costs and only limited allocations, in the hundreds of millions of rand, available for border safeguarding technology, vehicles and maritime capability, despite explicit warnings that neglecting naval capacity risks strategic self-harm given the growing global significance of the Cape sea route (The Star, 2026).

The Border Management Authority itself faces analogous resourcing questions. Full implementation has been estimated to cost in the order of R10.3 billion annually, requiring a near-doubling of the Department of Home Affairs' existing personnel budget to bring some 21,000 border officials under a single command (Institute for Security Studies, 2020). Given the Auditor-General's prior findings of significant regression in the Department of Home Affairs' management of illegal migration, including an asylum case backlog that, at then-current processing rates, would take an estimated 68 years to clear even without new applications, independent analysts have questioned whether institutional culture, including susceptibility to corruption, will simply be transferred into the new authority rather than resolved by it (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

A further effectiveness concern relates to the character of cross-border crime the border regime is intended to interdict. SANDF reporting has documented highly organised vehicle theft and trafficking syndicates operating along the Mozambique and Eswatini borders, employing techniques such as cloned licence plates and registration discs to evade detection, alongside the smuggling of undocumented persons, contraband, and, in some cases, the illegal cross-border movement of schoolchildren (DefenceWeb, 2019). More recent academic assessment situates the Border Management Authority within a broader framework of security-network and evidence-based policing approaches, arguing that effective interdiction of such transnational crime depends on inter-agency information-sharing and coordinated operational responses rather than on any single agency acting alone (Longinus, 2024).

### **National Security Implications of Illegal Immigration**

The national security implications of weak border control in South Africa operate on several interconnected levels. At the level of transnational organised crime, porous and under-patrolled borderline sections facilitate the movement of illicit goods, including cigarette smuggling that intensified during COVID-19 lockdown periods, alongside vehicle theft syndicates and, per SANDF reporting, contraband and human smuggling networks concentrated along the Mozambique and Eswatini frontiers (Polity, 2020; DefenceWeb, 2019). These activities generate direct economic costs, undermine the rule of law in border communities, and in some instances intersect with broader regional instability.

At the level of state administrative capacity, the prolonged asylum backlog constitutes a distinct security concern, since an accumulation of unresolved cases, measured in decades under current processing rates, makes it functionally difficult for the state to distinguish between genuine protection claims and irregular economic migration, undermining both national security screening objectives and the rights of legitimate asylum seekers (Institute for Security Studies, 2020). Reports of immigration officials soliciting bribes from foreign nationals in exchange for fraudulent documentation further compound this problem, converting a protection and security function into a site of institutionalised corruption: a 2026 Special Investigating Unit inquiry into the Department of Home Affairs, covering the 2020–2023 period, traced R181 million in gains to fraudulent visa and permit applications, with four officials each earning under R25,000 a month found to have received a combined R16.3 million in direct deposits linked to expedited, bribe-facilitated approvals (Special Investigating Unit, 2026).

At the level of maritime and air domains, the neglect of aerial surveillance and naval capability, driven by sustained underfunding, represents a less visible but strategically significant vulnerability, particularly given the increasing global importance of the Cape sea route to international trade and the corresponding exposure to maritime smuggling and security risks that this implies (The Star, 2026; DefenceWeb, 2020).

### **Socio-Political Dimensions: Securitisation and Xenophobia**

The securitisation of migration in South African political discourse carries significant socio-political consequences that must be weighed alongside its stated security objectives. Scholarship on the legislative debates preceding the Border Management Authority Act notes that parliamentary and ministerial discourse disproportionately emphasised irregular migration, at times advancing causal claims linking xenophobic violence to inadequate border management that are not well supported by evidence. Xenowatch's longitudinal monitoring recorded 873 xenophobic violence incidents and at least 612 deaths in South Africa between 1994 and November 2021, disproportionately concentrated in Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal

(African Centre for Migration and Society, 2022); by contrast, the most direct empirical test of the presumed migration-crime link found that foreign nationals accounted for roughly 10.5 per cent of South Africa's sentenced prison population against 89.5 per cent South African citizens, concluding that foreign nationals "cannot be attributed as the predominant source of crime in South Africa" (Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg, 2024). This gap between the documented scale of violence directed at foreign nationals and their comparatively modest share of recorded crime is consistent with a broader tendency in South African public discourse to attribute social and economic grievances to foreign nationals (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

This framing has tangible effects. Academic studies of the lived experience of foreign nationals in South Africa document persistent vulnerability to victimisation, exploitation in informal labour markets, and institutionalised discrimination in access to services at Department of Home Affairs offices, alongside a public discourse that frequently associates migrants with criminality despite limited robust evidence of a disproportionate crime contribution by foreign nationals (Zitha and Jansen van Rensburg, 2024; Umeh, Olofinbiyi and Gopal, 2024). More recent scholarship explicitly frames the South African state's positioning of migration as an imminent security threat as a securitisation strategy that forecloses public scrutiny of the state's own institutional shortcomings while normalising extraordinary, and at times rights-limiting, policy responses (Sibanda and Nyere, 2026).

The tension between security imperatives and constitutional and human rights obligations is therefore not incidental to South Africa's border management challenge; it is constitutive of it. Effective policy in this domain must contend with the reality that measures calibrated purely to satisfy a securitised political narrative may do little to address the underlying drivers of irregular migration, while measures that ignore legitimate security and administrative concerns risk leaving the state unable to manage its borders responsibly.

### **Key Challenges**

Synthesising the preceding analysis, five interlocking challenges emerge as central to South Africa's border management and national security predicament:

1. **Chronic underfunding and capacity constraints.** Both the SANDF's Operation Corona and the Border Management Authority operate with resources that officials and parliamentary committees themselves describe as inadequate to their mandates, spanning personnel shortfalls, ageing equipment, and neglected aerial and maritime surveillance capability (DefenceWeb, 2025b; The Star, 2026).
2. **Institutional legacy and corruption risk.** The transfer of border functions into the BMA does not automatically resolve the administrative culture, including susceptibility to corruption, that independent assessors associate with the Department of Home Affairs, raising questions about whether structural consolidation alone can deliver the intended efficiency gains (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).
3. **Asylum-system backlog.** An asylum-processing backlog of a scale that would take decades to clear undermines the state's ability to distinguish protection claims from irregular migration, with consequences for both security screening and the human rights of asylum seekers (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).
4. **Transnational organised crime adaptation.** Criminal networks engaged in vehicle theft, smuggling and trafficking have demonstrated organisational sophistication, including document and licence-plate fraud, that outpaces the current enforcement capacity along key border segments (DefenceWeb, 2019).
5. **Securitisation and social cohesion risk.** The political framing of irregular migration primarily as a security threat, while administratively convenient, risks fuelling xenophobic mobilisation and diverting attention from the institutional reforms genuinely required to strengthen border governance (Frontiers in Political Science, 2026; Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Addressing these challenges requires a policy response that strengthens institutional capacity without abandoning constitutional and human rights commitments. The following recommendations follow from the

analysis above:

1. Ring-fenced, multi-year funding for border safeguarding. Given the demonstrated link between funding shortfalls and operational gaps in both Operation Corona and the BMA, National Treasury and the Department of Defence should consider multi-year, ring-fenced capital allocations for border technology, vehicles, and aerial and maritime surveillance assets, insulated from annual budget volatility.
2. Accelerated resolution of the asylum backlog. Investment in digitised case management and additional adjudication capacity within the Department of Home Affairs, potentially with time-bound targets subject to parliamentary oversight, is necessary to restore the asylum system's credibility as both a protection mechanism and a security screening function.
3. Strengthened anti-corruption safeguards within the BMA. Independent oversight mechanisms, rotational deployment policies and whistle-blower protections should be embedded within the BMA's operational design from the outset, in direct response to concerns that Home Affairs' institutional culture could otherwise migrate into the new authority.
4. Evidence-based public communication on migration and crime. Government communication on border management should be grounded in verifiable data rather than unsubstantiated causal claims linking migration to crime or xenophobic violence, in order to reduce the risk that securitised rhetoric fuels social tension.
5. Regional cooperation on migration management. Given that the large majority of irregular migration to South Africa originates from a small number of neighbouring SADC states, bilateral and SADC-level cooperation on documentation, labour migration pathways and joint border patrols, building on the stalled 2017 SADC visa proposal, would address structural drivers more effectively than unilateral enforcement alone.

## CONCLUSION

South Africa's border management challenge cannot be reduced to a simple question of enforcement capacity, though capacity deficits are real, well-documented and consequential. The establishment of the Border Management Authority represents a genuine institutional advance over the fragmented multi-agency model it replaces, yet its ultimate effectiveness will depend on resourcing, anti-corruption safeguards and coordination with the SANDF's Operation Corona that, on current evidence, remain incomplete. At the same time, the national security implications of illegal immigration in South Africa, spanning organised crime, human trafficking and asylum-system dysfunction, are genuine and merit sustained institutional attention. What the evidence does not support is a securitised political discourse that conflates irregular migration with criminality or attributes South Africa's broader social and economic grievances to foreign nationals. A durable approach to border management and national security in South Africa must therefore hold two commitments simultaneously: building the institutional, financial and technological capacity to secure the country's borders, while ensuring that the pursuit of security does not come at the expense of the constitutional and human rights framework that continues to define South Africa's post-apartheid identity.

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