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The Rohingya Migrant Crisis

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*Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters*

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Introduction

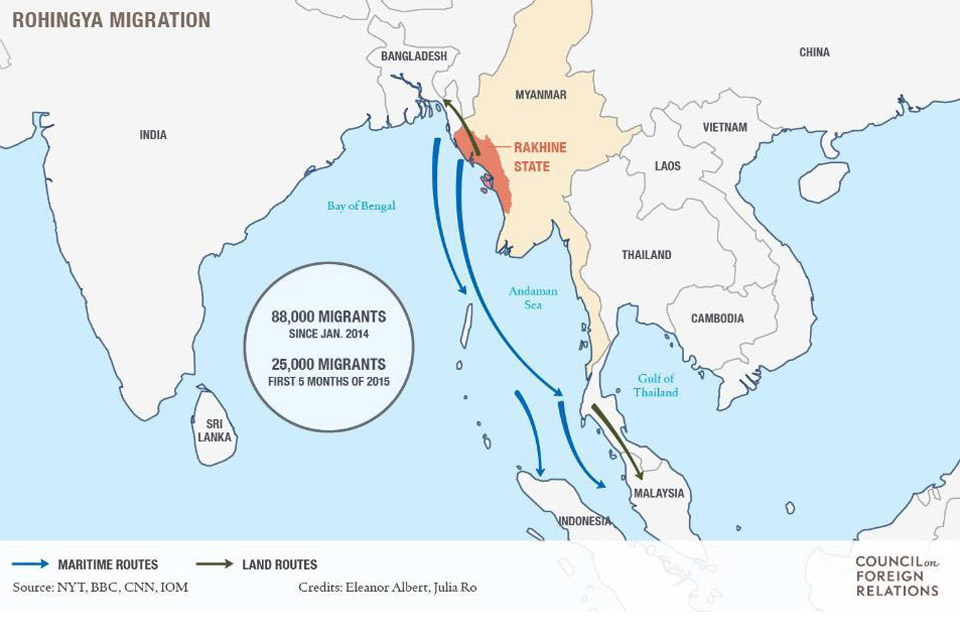
Thousands of Muslim Rohingya have fled Myanmar, many taking to the sea to try to reach Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The latest surge in refugees was prompted by a long-building crisis: the discriminatory policies of the Myanmar government in Rakhine state, which have caused hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee since the late 1970s. Their plight has been compounded by the responses of many of Myanmar’s neighbors, which have been slow to take in refugees for fear of a migrant influx they feel incapable of handling.

Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority group living primarily in Myanmar’s western Rakhine state; they practice a Sufi-inflected variation of Sunni Islam. The estimated one million Rohingya in Myanmar account for nearly a third of Rakhine’s population. The Rohingya differ from Myanmar’s dominant Buddhist groups ethnically, linguistically, and religiously.

The Rohingya trace their origins in the region to the fifteenth century when thousands of Muslims came to the former [Arakan Kingdom](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21654124-myanmars-muslim-minority-have-been-attacked-impunity-stripped-vote-and-driven). Many others arrived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Bengal and the Rakhine territory were governed by colonial rule as part of British India. Since independence in 1948, successive governments in Burma, renamed Myanmar in 1989, have refuted the Rohingya’s historical claims and denied the group recognition as one of the country’s [135 ethnic groups](http://www.embassyofmyanmar.be/ABOUT/ethnicgroups.htm). The Rohingya are largely identified as illegal Bengali immigrants, despite the fact that many Rohingya have resided in Myanmar for centuries.

Both the Myanmar government and the Rakhine state’s dominant ethnic Buddhist group, known as the Rakhine, reject the use of the label “Rohingya,” a [self-identifying term (PDF)](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/261-myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf) that surfaced in the 1950s and that experts say provides the group with a collective, political identity. Though the etymological root of the word is disputed, the most widely accepted origin is that “Rohang” is a derivation of the word “Arakan” in the Rohingya dialect and the “ga” or “gya” means “from.” By identifying as Rohingya, the ethnic Muslim group asserts its ties to land that was once under the control of the Arakan Kingdom, according to Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, a Thailand-based advocacy group.

[](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/Rohingya-Migration-Map-BGR.jpg)

What is the legal status of the Rohingya?

The Myanmar government refuses to grant the Rohingya citizenship status, and as a result the vast majority of the group’s members have no legal documentation, effectively making them [stateless](http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/interview-the-stateless-rohingya/). Though Myanmar’s 1948 citizenship law was already[exclusionary](http://www.irinnews.org/report/97966/activists-call-for-review-of-myanmar-s-citizenship-law), the military junta introduced a citizenship law in 1982 whose strict provisions stripped the Rohingya of access to full citizenship. Until recently, the Rohingya have been able to register as temporary residents with identification cards, known as “white cards,” which Myanmar’s regime began issuing to many Muslims (both Rohingya and non-Rohingya) in the 1990s. The white cards [conferred (PDF)](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/261-myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf) some limited rights but were not recognized as proof of citizenship. Although the temporary cards held no legal value, Lewa says that the IDs did represent some minimal recognition of temporary stay for the Rohingya in Myanmar.

In 2014 the government held a UN-backed [national census](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2014/04/pictures-myanmar-census-bars-r-2014413114633189492.html)—its first in thirty years. The Muslim minority group was initially permitted to self-identify as “Rohingya,” but after Buddhist nationalists threatened to boycott the census, the government decided the Rohingya could only register if they identified as Bengali.

Similarly, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists protesting the Rohingya’s right to vote in a 2015 constitutional referendum, then-President Thein Sein [cancelled](http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13106-president-backtracks-on-white-cards.html) the temporary ID cards in February 2015, effectively revoking their newly gained right to vote—white card holders had been [allowed to vote](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/revoking-white-card-holder-voting-rights-counter-reconciliation-us-official.html) in Myanmar’s 2008 constitutional referendum and 2010 general elections. In the 2015 elections, which were widely touted as being free and fair by international monitors, [no parliamentary candidate](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/03/no-vote-no-candidates-myanmars-muslims-barred-from-their-own-election) was of the Muslim faith. “Country-wide [anti-Muslim sentiment (PDF)](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/261-myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf) makes it politically difficult for the [central] government to take steps seen as supportive of Muslim rights,” writes the International Crisis Group.

Despite the documentation by rights groups and researchers of systematic[disenfranchisement](https://www.amazon.com/Rohingyas-Inside-Myanmars-Hidden-Genocide/dp/1849046239), violence, and instances of [anti-Muslim campaigns (PDF)](http://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20150505-Burma-Report.pdf), Muslim minorities continue to “consolidate under one Rohingya identity” says Lewa.

Why are the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar?

Government policies, including [restrictions (PDF)](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0413webwcover_0.pdf) on marriage, family planning, employment, education, religious choice, and freedom of movement have institutionalized systemic discrimination against the ethnic group. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Parliamentarians for Human Rights wrote in April 2015 that “the longstanding persecution of Rohingya has led to the [highest outflow](http://www.burmapartnership.org/2015/04/open-letter-to-asean-heads-of-state/) of asylum seekers by sea [in the region] since the U.S. war in Vietnam.”

Rakhine state is also Myanmar’s least developed state, with more than [78 percent](https://www.iom.int/appeal/iom-appeal-myanmar-rakhine-state-april-2016-april-2018) of households living below the poverty threshold, according to World Bank estimates. Widespread poverty, weak infrastructure, and a lack of employment opportunities exacerbate the cleavage between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya. This tension is deepened by religious differences that have at times erupted into conflict.

A woman walks among debris after fire destroyed shelters at a camp for internally displaced Rohingya Muslims in the western Rakhine State near Sittwe, Myanmar May 3, 2016. (Photo: Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

Violence broke out in 2012, when a group of Rohingya men were accused of raping and killing a Buddhist woman. Groups of Buddhist nationalists burned Rohingya homes and [killed](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/12/up-to-6000-rohingya-bangladeshi-migrants-stranded-at-sea.html) more than 280 people, displacing tens of thousands of people. Human Rights Watch described the anti-Rohingya violence as amounting to [crimes against humanity (PDF)](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0413webwcover_0.pdf) carried out as part of a “campaign of ethnic cleansing.” Since 2012, the region’s displaced population has been forced to take shelter in squalid refugee camps. More than [120,000 Muslims](http://www.fortifyrights.org/jointstatement-20160808.html), predominantly Rohingya, are still housed in more than forty internment camps, according to regional rights organization Fortify Rights.

Many Rohingya have turned to smugglers, choosing to pay for transport out of Myanmar to escape persecution. “The fact that thousands of Rohingya prefer a dangerous boat journey they may not survive to staying in Myanmar [speaks volumes](http://www.amnesty.org.au/news/comments/37179/) about the conditions they face there,” says Amnesty International’s Kate Schuetze. Fleeing repression and extreme poverty, more than eighty-eight thousand migrants [took to sea](http://www.iom.int/infographics/southeast-asia-migration-routes-19-may-2015) from the Bay of Bengal between January 2014 and May 2015, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The flow of migrants slowed in the second half of 2015 after thousands were abandoned at sea. Though [volume (PDF)](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20-%20Mixed%20Maritime%20Movements%20in%20South-East%20Asia%20-%202015.pdf) of migration has abated and the crisis has fallen from international view, little has been done to address the status quo for Rohingya in Myanmar and for those who brave the maritime journey.

*“An international response that consists primarily of assigning blame for this humanitarian tragedy is no longer tenable. It is time for the international community to organize a realistic, workable solution.”— Priscilla Clapp, senior advisor at the United States Institute of Peace and former U.S. mission chief in Myanmar.*

Where are they migrating?

* **Bangladesh**: Many Rohingya have sought refuge in nearby Bangladesh, which [hosts (PDF)](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Bangladesh%20Factsheet%20-%20MAR16.pdf) more than thirty-two thousand registered refugees; more than two hundred thousand additional unregistered Rohingya refugees are believed to live in the country, according to UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates. However, conditions in most of the country’s refugee camps are [dire (PDF)](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0413webwcover_0.pdf), driving many to risk a perilous voyage across the Bay of Bengal.
* **Malaysia**: As of June 2016, more than [90 percent](http://news.trust.org/item/20160830030159-t1h1q/) of Malaysia's 150,700 registered refugees are from Myanmar, including tens of thousands of Rohingya, according the UN. Rohingya who have arrived safely in Malaysia have [no legal status](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/06/rohingya-children-malaysia-undocumented-life-160620042659161.html) and are [unable to work](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/world/asia/rohingya-malaysia-myanmar.html), leaving their families cut off from access to education and healthcare.
* **Thailand**: Thailand is a hub for regional human smuggling and trafficking activities and serves as a common transit point for Rohingya. Migrants often arrive by boat from Bangladesh or Myanmar before moving on foot to Malaysia or continuing by boat to Indonesia or Malaysia. A 2013 Reuters report [found](http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/12/05/uk-thailand-rohingya-special-report-idUKBRE9B400920131205) that some Thai authorities were colluding with smuggling and trafficking networks in the exploitation of detained Rohingya. In its [2016 Trafficking in Persons report (PDF)](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf), the U.S. State Department upgraded Thailand to Tier 2 Watch List, from the bottom Tier 3 ranking, after having been identified as a source, destination, and transit country for men, women, and children who are subject to trafficking. (In 2016, Indonesia ranked as Tier 2, Malaysia as Tier 2 Watch List, and Myanmar was downgraded to Tier 3.) Since taking power in 2014, the military-led government in Bangkok has [prioritized](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Trafficking-fight-national-priority-30257406.html) a crackdown on smuggling and trafficking rings after the discovery of mass graves in alleged detention camps. But some experts say that new punitive measures directed at traffickers were responsible for the uptick in abandoned vessels at sea—a development that worsened the humanitarian crisis.
* **Indonesia**: The Rohingya have also sought refuge in Indonesia, although the number of refugees there remains relatively modest. During the spring 2015 migration surge, Indonesia’s military chief expressed concerns that easing immigration restrictions would [spark an influx](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/05/15/407048785/why-no-one-wants-the-rohingyas) of people. Amid international pressure, Indonesia admitted one thousand Rohingya and provided them with [emergency assistance](http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/10335?y=2016#year) and protection.

At the height of the migration crisis in May 2015, international pressure peaked and Indonesia and Malaysia offered [temporary shelter](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/21/world/asia/indonesia-malaysia-rohingya-bangladeshi-migrants-agreement.html) to thousands of migrants, Malaysia [launched](http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/21/asia/malaysia-migrants-rescue/index.html) search-and-rescue missions for stranded migrant boats stranded, and Thailand agreed [to halt push backs](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/thailand-won-t-push-back/1860500.html). Myanmar’s navy also conducted initial [rescue missions](http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1806944/myanmar-conducts-first-rescue-migrant-boat-208-people) at the end of the month. Joe Lowry, the Asia spokesman for the IOM, characterized the ad hoc regional response to the crisis as, “a game of [maritime ping-pong](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/world/asia/burmese-rohingya-bangladeshi-migrants-andaman-sea.html).”

*“The two major communities have to move beyond decades of mistrust and find ways to embrace shared values of justice, fairness, and equity.”—Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General*

What is being done to address the migration crisis?

Myanmar’s first civilian government—led by Aung San Suu Kyi’s opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party—won in [landslide elections](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/aung-san-suu-kyi-wins-myanmar-landmark-election) in November 2015. While the cabinet ministers include a mix of political and ethnic representatives, critics say the NLD has been reluctant to advocate for the Rohingya and other Muslims because of the party’s need to cultivate support from Buddhist nationalists. Nevertheless, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has long vowed to push for national peace and reconciliation, established a [nine-person commission](http://www.voanews.com/a/kofi-annan-to-lead-comission-on-myanmar-s-rakhine-state/3478917.html) in August 2016, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to discuss options for resolving the ethnic strife in Rakhine state. The advisory committee, whose final report is expected by the end of August 2017, is intended to make recommendations to reduce communal tension and support much-needed development efforts in the impoverished state. “To build the future, the two major communities have to move beyond decades of mistrust and find ways to [embrace shared values](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/kofi-annan-vows-stay-impartial-leading-commision-160907074315313.html) of justice, fairness, and equity,” Annan said on his first visit to Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine.

Some analysts are skeptical that the democratic election of a civilian government will do anything to change the fate of the Rohingya, while others have said the creation of the new advisory body offers a rare glimmer of hope for resolving the problem.

Regionally, no unified or coordinated ASEAN response has been proposed to address the deepening crisis. States in Southeast Asia [lack established legal frameworks](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e4884c6.html) to provide for the protection of rights for refugees.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand—all ASEAN members—have yet to ratify the UN Refugee Convention and its Protocol. ASEAN itself has been silent on the plight of the Rohingya and on the growing numbers of asylum-seekers in member countries largely because of the organization’s commitment to the [fundamental principle](http://www.asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview) of noninterference in the internal affairs of member-states. Lilianne Fan of the London-based Overseas Development Institute says that while ASEAN has the capacity to manage this crisis, member states lack the [political will](http://www.irrawaddy.org/asia/boat-people-crisis-a-test-for-aseans-humanitarian-resolve.html) to resolve it.

Advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch, the Arakan Project, and Fortify Rights, a Southeast Asia-based advocacy group, continue to appeal to major international players to exert pressure on Myanmar’s government. Some, like *New York Times*columnist Nicholas Kristof, argue that the United States should not have [normal relations](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/opinion/nicholas-kristof-crisis-at-sea.html) with the country until its persecution of the Rohingya ends and that investment and aid should be linked to progress on the protection of minority rights. Others, like senior advisor at the United States Institute of Peace and former U.S. mission chief in Myanmar Priscilla Clapp, say that placing sole blame on Myanmar [oversimplifies](http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/rohingya-08032012124109.html) and misrepresents the complexities of the country’s historical ethnic diversity. “An international response that consists primarily of [assigning blame](http://www.usip.org/olivebranch/2015/05/27/se-asian-migrant-emergency-cries-global-solution) for this humanitarian tragedy is no longer tenable. It is time for the international community to organize a realistic, workable solution,” writes Clapp.

To date, the United States and other global powers have [urged the central government](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-usa-rohingya-idUSKCN0IY0VN20141114) in Myanmar to do more to protect ethnic minority groups from persecution. Still, experts say more must be done to address the plight of the Muslim minority to prevent it becoming “a flashpoint for further social and religious destabilization,” as Clapp writes in a [March 2016 CFR report](http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/securing-democratic-future-myanmar/p37681). She argues that Washington should assist economic development and conflict mediation in Rakhine state: “The United States should be leading an international effort to find a humane solution to their plight, not only in Myanmar but in other countries as well.”

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## Authoritarianism in Eritrea and the Migrant Crisis

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*Darrin Zammit Lupi/Reuters*

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Tens of thousands of Eritreans have arrived at Europe's shores in recent years seeking asylum. They make up a significant share of the unprecedented stream of migrants and refugees making their way to the European Union, undertaking dangerous journeys while [challenging the bloc](http://www.cfr.org/migration/europes-migration-crisis/p32874) to find a collective response consistent with the protection principles embodied in international law.

Many more Eritreans reside in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan, bringing the diaspora to about half a million, and making the country of six million people “one of the world’s [fastest-emptying nations](http://www.wsj.com/articles/eritreans-flee-conscription-and-poverty-adding-to-the-migrant-crisis-in-europe-1445391364?alg=y),” according to the Wall Street Journal. The scale of the migration has heightened Western interest in conditions inside one of the world's most closed countries, where those who have fled describe a long-standing system of forced labor, among other human rights violations, that a [UN commission](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIEritrea/Pages/commissioninquiryonhrinEritrea.aspx) said “may constitute crimes against humanity.”

*Five thousand Eritreans leave the country each month, the UN commission found, making it one of the world's top producers of refugees.*

##### How is Eritrea governed?

Eritrea, Africa’s second-newest state, came into being in 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) broke away from Ethiopia after [three decades of guerrilla struggle](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/horn-of-africa/ethiopia-eritrea/163-eritrea-the-siege-state.aspx). Its independence was codified in a 1993 popular referendum backed by the UN. Isaias Afwerki, a guerrilla leader, became president and remade the EPLF as the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The PFDJ remains Eritrea’s only legally sanctioned political party.

Eritrea's political culture was [forged in the liberation struggle](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/horn-of-africa/ethiopia-eritrea/163-eritrea-the-siege-state.aspx), when the guerrilla movement had little international backing and considered any dissent a threat to its survival, according to the International Crisis Group. The one-party system, a holdover from Eritrea’s tumultuous birth, became entrenched as the military and ruling party refused to relinquish their privileged positions, citing external threats to the young country's survival. National development, rather than democratic governance, was the first priority for the economically ravaged country. Though the country’s rulers convened a legislature, which ratified a draft constitution in 1997, the legislature remained without authority and the constitution was never implemented. Nor were promised national elections ever held.

A UN Human Rights Council [commission of inquiry](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIEritrea/Pages/ReportCoIEritrea.aspx/) established in 2014 characterized the regime's methods as "[rule by fear](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIEritrea/Pages/ReportCoIEritrea.aspx)." According to the UN inquiry and rights groups, the country has widespread networks of informants, coerced by the state, and those suspected of treasonous behavior are subject to arbitrary arrest, forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and torture. Individuals who run afoul of the authorities are often held in harsh conditions in [makeshift prisons](http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/eritrea_-_20_years_-_afr_64.001.2013.pdf). Citizens face restrictions on internal movement and speech, and domestic media is controlled by the state.

The Eritrean foreign ministry called the report's allegations "[totally unfounded](http://www.raimoq.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Press-Statement-09-06-2015.pdf)," and said they were part of a "politically motivated campaign to undermine the political, economic, and social progress the country is making." The state of exception, Eritrea says, is necessitated by the extraordinary external threats it faces, including Ethiopia’s occupation of Eritrean territory and UN sanctions.

In its 2016 [follow-up report](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIEritrea/Pages/2016ReportCoIEritrea.aspx), the UN Council’s commission recommended that the International Criminal Court consider the matter for prosecution, but the UN Human Rights Council instead took the softer measure of requesting that the General Assembly[forward its findings](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/154/51/PDF/G1615451.pdf?OpenElement) “to all relevant organs of the United Nations for consideration and appropriate action.”

##### Is Eritrea at war?

No, but residual tensions from a 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia remain, experts say. That war, in which tens of thousands were killed, ended with the Algiers Accord in 2001, but Ethiopia does not recognize the border demarcated under the agreement. Eritrea considers some territory that remains under Ethiopian control as illegally occupied (Ethiopia rejects that claim) and there have since been smaller border clashes between them. The ongoing state of hostility, which the Eritrean regime characterizes as one of “no war, no peace,” fostered a siege mentality that provided Afwerki with a rationale for entrenching the police state, experts say.

In 2009, the UN Security Council [sanctioned](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1907(2009)) Eritrea for its alleged support of [al-Shabab](http://www.cfr.org/somalia/al-shabab/p18650), an Islamist militia in Somalia, as a means of undermining the much larger and more powerful Ethiopia. The UN measures include an arms embargo and travel bans and asset freezes for designated individuals. By 2012, UN monitors found that Eritrea had[stopped supporting](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/545) al-Shabab, but said the country continued to lend support to Ethiopian antigovernment militias.

This finding raised pressure for the Security Council to rescind the sanctions, but the veto-wielding United States has opposed such measures and the sanctions remain in effect. This U.S. position stems, at least in part, from its close security ties with Ethiopia. Watchdog groups have recently called attention to a [declining human rights situation](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper) in Ethiopia, and some experts say that if the United States were to temper its support for Ethiopia in response to rights concerns, it might change its stance on Eritrea.

##### Why are people fleeing the country?

Conscription in the [national service program](http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=4174976&jid=MOA&volumeId=47&issueId=01&aid=4174968&bodyId=&membershipNumber=&societyETOCSession=) is the factor most commonly cited by asylum seekers who have fled the country. The state has justified the mass mobilization with the need for national development and to foster a common sense of national identity. A statutory requirement of eighteen months of military or civilian service was extended in 2002, following the war with Ethiopia, so that it has become, in practice, indefinite. Many adults reportedly [serve the state into their fifties](https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/04/16/service-life/state-repression-and-indefinite-conscription-eritrea). Conscripts have reported earning less than a subsistence wage.

The UN commission of inquiry found that national service often entails “arbitrary detention, torture, sexual torture, forced labor, absence of leave, and the [sic] ludicrous pay,” calling it “an institution where slavery-like practices are routine.” For many, leaving national service is only possible by deserting the military and fleeing the country, the commission found.

Eritrea has little foreign investment, but the [extractive industry](https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/01/15/hear-no-evil/forced-labor-and-corporate-responsibility-eritreas-mining-sector), one of its few exports, has raised concern from Human Rights Watch. The Canadian mining firm Nevsun Resources has contracted with the PFDJ-owned Segen Construction Company to [build infrastructure](https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/01/15/hear-no-evil/forced-labor-and-corporate-responsibility-eritreas-mining-sector) around a mine it operates. Nevsun faces a lawsuit by Eritrean refugees in Canada alleging its complicity in forced labor. The company has denied the allegations.

“The Eritrean government pushes strongly for these companies to contract work out to state- and party-affiliated contractors, which themselves make heavy use of forced labor through the country's national service program,” says Christopher Albin-Lackey, a researcher at Human Rights Watch who wrote the report.

##### How many people have fled?

Five thousand Eritreans leave the country each month, the UN commission found, making it one of the world's top producers of refugees. The government has taken an ambivalent stance toward the outflow, the International Crisis Group reports, in part because it benefits from the large diaspora. Through consulates or party affiliates overseas, it collects a 2 percent income tax from many émigrés, reportedly on the threat of denying them consular services, like travel documents, or services to family members who remain in Eritrea. In 2011 the UN Security Council called on Eritrea to “cease using extortion, threats of violence, fraud, and other illicit means” to collect this tax, which yielded [$73 million](https://www.un.org/sc/committees/751/mongroup.shtml) for the state from 2010 to 2013, the UN monitoring group found in 2014.

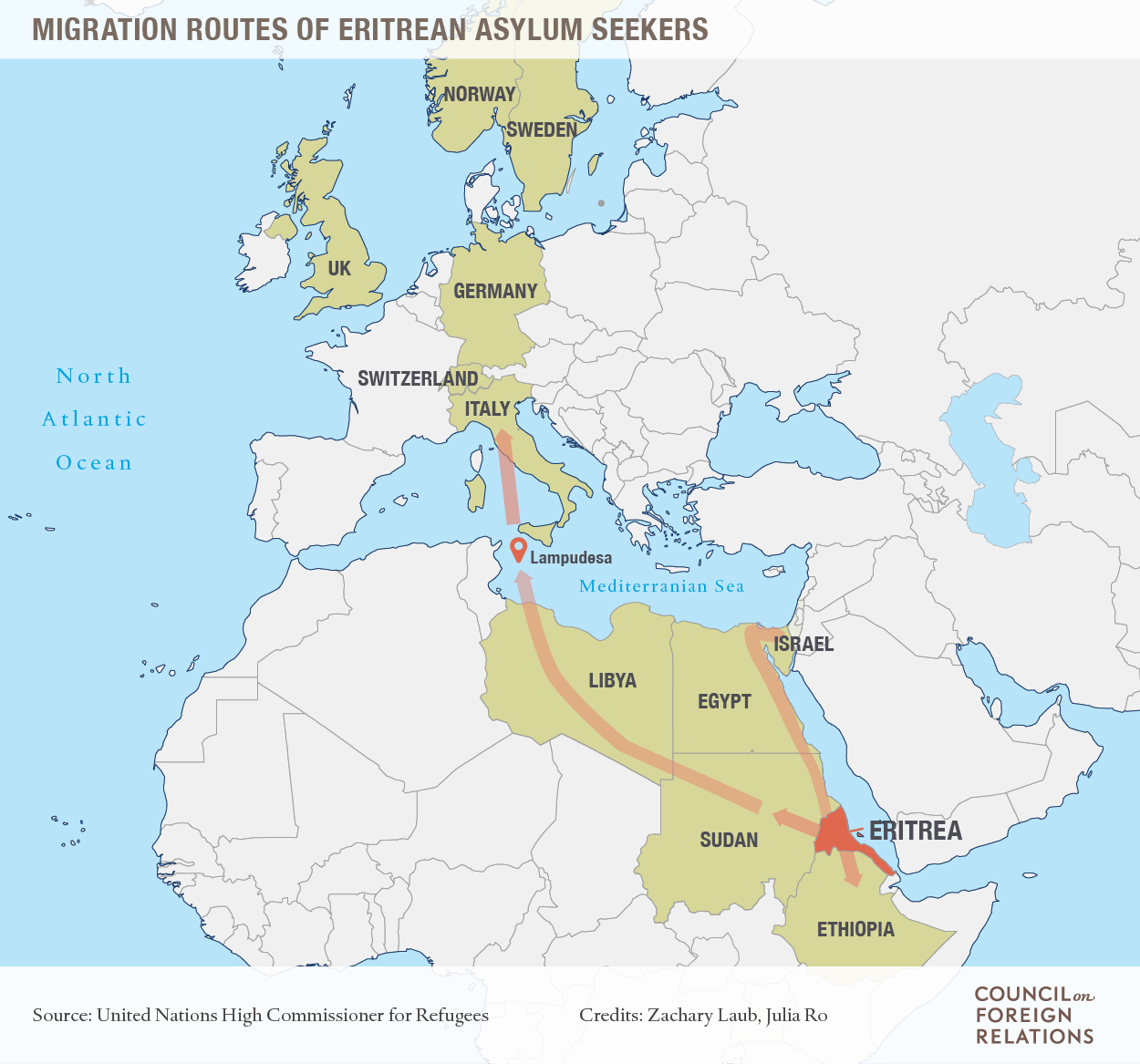
Eritreans in the diaspora also contribute to Eritrea's economic survival by sending their families remittances, which provide the country with foreign reserves and keep families afloat. (The UN Development Program [ranks Eritrea 182](http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ERI) out of 187 countries and territories for human development, but limited access for humanitarian agencies and organizations means there is little reliable information.) Yet the UN commission, among others, has also reported on border guards acting on a “shoot-to-kill” policy toward those caught trying to flee.

##### Where do the refugees and asylum-seekers go?

A quarter million Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers have settled in refugee camps and cities in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan. A shortage of services and few educational and employment opportunities there, as well as protracted and seemingly indefinite stays in refugee camps, cause some to take the risky journey to Europe. “Deprived of any prospects for a better future and feeling that they have nothing to lose, many fall prey to unscrupulous smugglers,” [the UN said](http://www.unhcr.org/5465fea1381.html), calling particular attention to a rise of unaccompanied minors.

The major route to Europe takes asylum seekers through the Sahara Desert to war-torn Libya, where they board [often-unseaworthy vessels](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/apr/21/escaping-eritrea-migrant-if-i-die-at-sea-at-least-i-wont-be-tortured) bound for Italy. The UN refugee agency reported 11,564 Eritrean arrivals in Italy in the first seven months of 2016, representing 12 percent of arrivals there—second to Nigeria. (In 2015, a full quarter of arrivals in Italy were Eritrean.) In the same period, another 2,692 migrants were[reported dead at sea](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean) along that route.

During that period, EU countries, including Italy, fielded 17,810 asylum applications from Eritrean nationals. In 2015, the top recipients of asylum applications from Eritrean nationals were Germany (10,990), Switzerland (9,965), the Netherlands (7,455), and Sweden (7,230). (EU countries [grant asylum](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report) to more than 90 percent of Eritrean asylum seekers, and there have been [reports](http://www.igad.int/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1284:the-human-smuggling-and-trafficking-on-the-horn-of-africa-central-mediterranean-route-re-port-launched&catid=45:peace-and-security&Itemid=128) of Ethiopian migrants in Europe claiming to be Eritrean in order to receive asylum.)

[](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/EritreaRefugees_RTP.jpg)

Another oft-traveled route goes through Egypt to Israel. In the Sinai Peninsula, Eritreans face torture, extortion, and rape at the hands of traffickers—at times with the collusion of police and military, [Human Rights Watch reports (PDF)](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/egypt0214_ForUpload_1_0.pdf). From Sinai, they cross into Israel, where some thirty-three thousand Eritreans reside, the country's interior ministry said in August 2015. But Israel does not recognize avoidance of military service as a legitimate reason for seeking asylum, says Sigal Rozen of the Israel-based aid and advocacy group [Hotline for Refugees and Migrants](http://hotline.org.il/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-en/). Rather, Rozen says, the predominantly young men who constitute most of the arrivals are seen as “work infiltrators” and initially face detention. Several thousand have been returned to Eritrea or third countries, like Rwanda, where they often face unsafe conditions and lack legal status, she says.

##### What are the EU and U.S. policies toward Eritrea and Eritrean asylum seekers?

Eritreans have [prima facie designations](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=52fc6fbd5&id=55d181a55) from the UN refugee agency, meaning they are presumed to have legitimate asylum claims. Eritrea denounced the designation, saying it misrepresented national service as forced labor and made the UN an “[unwitting catalyst](http://www.tesfanews.net/eritrea-says-unhcr-is-part-of-the-problem-of-illegal-migration/)” of the exodus, putting it in league with the country's adversaries.

“In refugee law, it can be tricky to draw the line between an economic migrant and someone who is fleeing persecution,” says Felix Horne, a researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Eritrea is the best example of that,” he says, noting cases of minors who have fled the country. Many are anticipating conscription, though they have not yet served. They raise the question of whether they are fleeing the abuses of forced labor, or an apparent lack of work opportunities outside of the national service program.

*“It can be tricky to draw the line between an economic migrant and someone who is fleeing persecution.” —Felix Horne, Human Rights Watch*

U.S. refugee policy prioritizes those Eritreans seeking protection on the basis of religious persecution. In its October 2015 [report to Congress](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/247770.htm), the Obama administration called attention to what it says is Eritrea’s repression of those subscribing to evangelical sects, as well as government control of state-sanctioned Christian and Muslim denominations. In all, the United States admitted 1,488 Eritreans in FY 2015, just over 2 percent of its total refugee admissions.

In December 2015, the EU [concluded a five-year aid program](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6298_en.htm) worth 200 million euros ($214 million) with Eritrea—nearly five times what it had given it in the previous five years. By easing Eritreans’ economic plight at home, it hopes to reduce the migrant and refugee outflow toward Europe. Meanwhile, some Africa experts call for ending Eritrea's isolation, which they believe could allay the ruling party's sense of siege and begin a process toward domestic reforms. Others prioritize the [normalization of Ethiopia-Eritrea relation](http://africanarguments.org/2013/12/16/time-to-bring-eritrea-in-from-the-cold-by-hank-cohen/)s. That would allow Eritrea to step back from its war footing and invest more in non-military spending.

[Editor’s Note: This Backgrounder is part of a series related to global migration issues.]

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## U.S.-Cuba Relations

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##### Introduction

On April 11, 2015, Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro shook hands at the Summit of the Americas in Panama, marking the first meeting between a U.S. and Cuban head of state since the two countries severed their ties in 1961. The meeting came four months after the presidents announced their countries would restore diplomatic relations, and gave rise to President Obama's [March 2016 visit](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/international/obama-in-cuba) to Cuba, the first by a sitting president in over eighty-five years.

Since the 1960s, successive U.S. administrations have maintained a policy of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation of Cuba. The change in the countries' relations, initially marked by a prisoner swap and Havana's release of a jailed U.S. subcontractor in December 2014, prompted some experts to point to better prospects for Cuba’s economy and U.S. relations more broadly in Latin America. But the U.S. trade embargo, which requires congressional approval to be rescinded, is unlikely to be lifted any time soon.

##### Historical Background

The tumultuous U.S.-Cuba relationship has its roots in the Cold War. In 1959, Fidel Castro and a group of revolutionaries seized power in Havana, overthrowing Fulgencio Batista. Despite misgivings about Castro's communist political ideology, the United States recognized his government. However, as Castro's regime increased trade with the Soviet Union, nationalized U.S.-owned properties, and hiked taxes on American imports, the United States responded with escalating economic retaliation. After slashing Cuban sugar imports, Washington instituted a ban on nearly all exports to Cuba, which President John F. Kennedy expanded into a full economic embargo that included stringent travel restrictions.

In 1961 the United States severed diplomatic ties with Cuba and began pursuing covert operations to overthrow the Castro regime. The 1961 [Bay of Pigs invasion](http://blogs.cfr.org/lindsay/2012/04/17/lessons-learned-bay-of-pigs-invasion/), a botched CIA-backed attempt to topple the government, fueled Cuban mistrust and nationalism, leading to a secret agreement allowing the Soviet Union to build a missile base on the island. The United States discovered those plans in October of 1962, setting off a fourteen-day standoff. U.S. ships imposed a naval quarantine around the island, and Kennedy demanded the destruction of the missile sites. The [Cuban Missile Crisis](http://blogs.cfr.org/lindsay/2012/10/16/twe-remembers-learning-more-about-the-cuban-missile-crisis/) ended with an agreement that the sites would be dismantled if the United States pledged not to invade Cuba; the United States also secretly agreed to remove nuclear missiles from Turkey.

*Following the events of 1961–62, economic embargo and diplomatic isolation became the major prongs of U.S. policy toward Cuba.*

Following the events of 1961–62, economic and diplomatic isolation became the major prongs of U.S. policy toward Cuba. This continued even after the Soviet Union's collapse. Washington strengthened the embargo with the 1992 Cuba Democracy Act and [1996 Helms-Burton Act](http://cuba-embargo.procon.org/sourcefiles/1996-Cuban-Liberty-and-Democratic-Solidarity-Act.pdf) (PDF), which state that the embargo may not be lifted until Cuba holds free and fair elections and transitions to a democratic government that excludes the Castros. (Raúl has said he will [leave office in 2018](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/25/world/americas/raul-castro-to-step-down-as-cubas-president-in-2018.html).) Some adjustments have been made to the trade embargo to allow for the export of some U.S. medical supplies and agricultural products to the island. But the Cuban government estimates that more than fifty years of stringent trade restrictions has [amounted to a loss of $1.126 trillion](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2013/10/un-urges-end-us-embargo-cuba-20131029181034233544.html).

##### Obstacles to U.S.-Cuba Diplomacy

U.S. President Barack Obama came into office seeking greater engagement with Cuba, and in 2009 [reversed some of the restrictions](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103030021) on remittances and travel set by his predecessor, George W. Bush. During his first term, Obama also permitted U.S. telecommunications companies to provide more cellular and satellite service in Cuba and allowed U.S. citizens to send remittances to non–family members in Cuba and to travel there under license for educational or religious purposes.

Both countries appeared [open to further engagement (PDF)](http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/reports/2009/4/cuba/0413_cuba.pdf) until Cuban authorities arrested Alan Gross, a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) subcontractor, in Havana in 2009. Gross had traveled to the country to deliver communications equipment and arrange Internet access for its Jewish community. Cuban authorities alleged he was attempting to destabilize the Cuban regime and sentenced him to fifteen years in prison. At the same time, Raúl Castro wanted to secure the release of the Cuban Five, Cuban intelligence officers arrested in Miami in 1998 and convicted in 2001, who had become national heroes in Cuba.

Another contentious issue between the two countries was Cuba's designation by the U.S. State Department as a [state sponsor of terrorism](http://www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm), a status first assigned in 1982 in light of Fidel Castro's training of rebels in Central America. Castro announced in 1992 that Cuba would no longer support insurgents abroad, and the State Department's [annual report for 2013](http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224826.htm) stated there was no evidence that the country provided training or weapons to terrorist groups. Cuba’s continued inclusion on the list was a major obstacle to talks about restoring diplomatic relations following the 2014 rapprochement. In May 2015, Cuba was removed from the list.

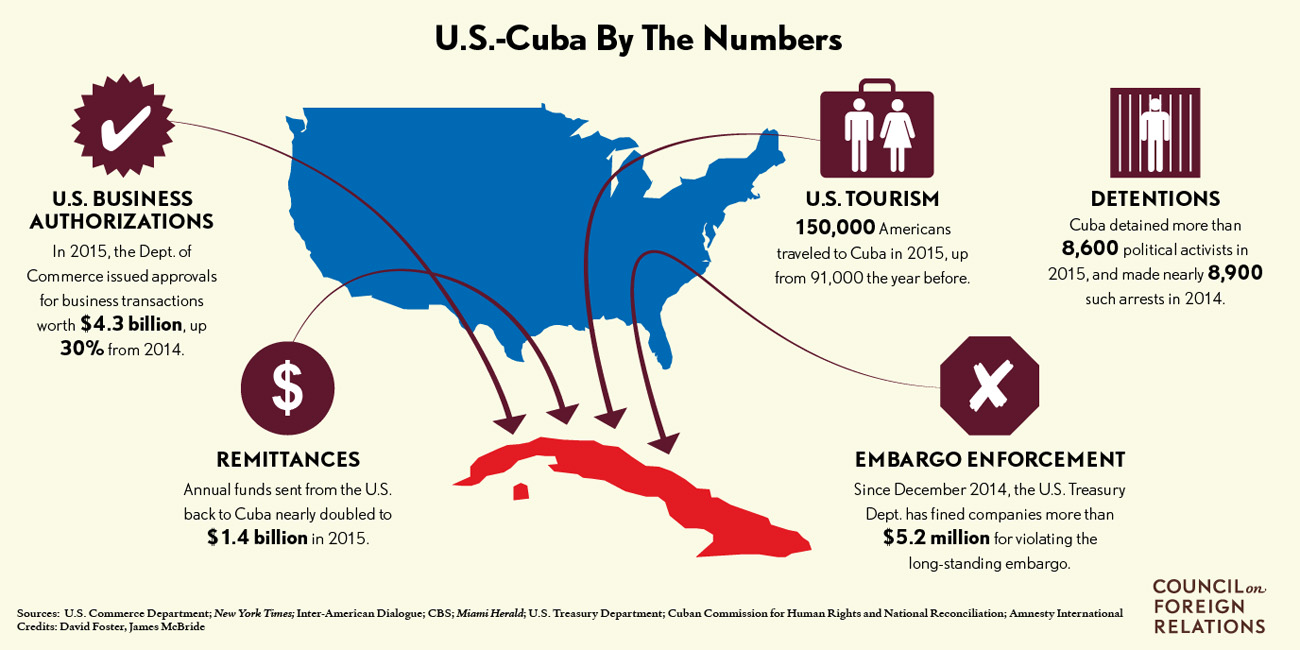
Human rights in Cuba continue to be a concern for U.S. policymakers. In a [2014 report](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/cuba), Human Rights Watch said Cuba "continues to repress individuals and groups who criticize the government or call for basic human rights" through detentions, travel restrictions, beatings, and forced exile. In 2015, according to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN), the Cuban government [carried out](https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/americas/cuba/report-cuba/) more than 8,600 detentions of political activists.

U.S. domestic politics in the United States long made a U.S.-Cuba détente politically risky. The Cuban-American community in southern Florida traditionally influenced U.S. policy toward Cuba, and both Republicans and Democrats have feared alienating a strong voting bloc in an important swing state in presidential elections. The Cuban exile community in the Miami area, which makes up about 5 percent of Florida's population, has been "[a pillar of Republican support](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/05/not_your_fathers_cuba) in presidential elections since 1980," writes Arturo Lopez-Levy in Foreign Policy. However, recent trends suggest that may change: Obama [won the Cuban-American vote](http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/11/07/latino-voters-in-the-2012-election/) in Florida in the 2012 elections.

##### U.S.-Cuba Rapprochement

On December 17, 2014, Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced that the United States and Cuba would restore full diplomatic ties for the first time in more than fifty years. The announcement followed a prisoner swap: The three still-jailed members of the Cuban Five (one had been released in 2011 and another earlier in 2014) were released in exchange for a U.S. intelligence asset, [Rolando Sarraff Trujillo](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/19/world/americas/cia-mole-now-out-of-prison-helped-us-identify-cuban-spies.html), who had been imprisoned in Havana for nearly twenty years. Gross was also released that morning on humanitarian grounds. The agreement came after eighteen months of secret talks between U.S. and Cuban officials that were encouraged and brokered by Pope Francis.

In addition to the prisoner releases, the United States agreed to further ease restrictions on remittances, travel, and banking (see accompanying graphic). Cuba also agreed to release fifty-three prisoners that the United States had classified as political dissidents. U.S. officials confirmed in January 2015 that [all fifty-three](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/12/us-usa-cuba-prisoners-idUSKBN0KL10K20150112) were released. The United States and Cuba reopened their embassies in each other's capitals on July 20, 2015, effectively restoring full diplomatic ties. As of early 2016, the White House had not yet named an ambassador to Cuba.

[](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/Cuba-infographic-4-1300x650.jpg)

On March 20, 2016, Obama [arrived in Havana](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/international/obama-in-cuba) for the first visit by a sitting U.S. president since Calvin Coolidge visited the island in 1928. In a [keynote address](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/world/americas/obama-cuba.html), broadcast live with Raúl Castro sitting in the audience, Obama reiterated his call to lift the embargo. But he also pressed for reforms to open Cuba's political system, saying, "Even if we lifted the embargo tomorrow, Cubans would not realize their potential without continued change here in Cuba." The U.S. president also made a point of meeting with political dissidents.

Beginning in January 2015, the United States enacted new travel and trade regulations allowing U.S. travelers to visit Cuba for specific purposes without first obtaining a government license, and to spend money there. In August 2016, commercial airlines offered service between the United States and Cuba for the first time in more than fifty years. The [new rules](http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl9740.aspx) also chipped away at economic sanctions by allowing, among other things:

* Travelers to use U.S. credit and debit cards;
* U.S. insurance companies to cover health, life, and travel insurance for individuals living in or visiting Cuba;
* Banks to facilitate authorized transactions;
* U.S. companies to invest in some small businesses; and
* Shipment of building materials to private Cuban companies.

The United States eased trade and travel restrictions [a second](https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2016/01/commerce-and-treasury-announce-further-amendments-cuba-sanctions) time in January 2016, and[again in March 2016](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cuba-regulations-idUSKCN0WH1L5) ahead of Obama's visit. Yet Congress maintains control over U.S. economic sanctions, and experts say the repeal of Helms-Burton is [unlikely to happen anytime soon](http://www.cfr.org/cuba/after-thaw-next-us-cuba-relations/p35864). Several members of Congress from both parties, including Cuban-American Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ), denounced the détente, arguing it would do little to [improve human rights](http://www.politico.com/story/2014/12/marco-rubio-says-cuba-talks-are-absurd-113639.html#ixzz3PNuMBRoN) on the island.

##### Public Opinion

[](http://www.cfr.org/cuba/timeline-us-cuba-relations/p32817)

Polls conducted shortly after the U.S.-Cuba announcement in December 2014 found that a majority of Americans supported reestablishing diplomatic ties. A Pew Research [poll found](https://rap.cfr.org/2015/01/16/most-support-stronger-u-s-ties-with-cuba/,DanaInfo=www.people-press.org+) 63 percent of Americans supported resuming diplomatic relations, and 66 percent would like an end to the trade embargo. A Washington Post–ABC News poll found [74 percent](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/12/23/poll-support-increases-for-lifting-cuba-embargo-travel-restrictions/) of respondents were in favor of an end to the travel ban. A June 2014 Florida International University poll indicates a majority of Cuban Americans [also support](http://news.fiu.edu/2014/06/cuban-americans-favor-a-more-nuanced-policy-toward-the-island/78799) normalizing ties and ending the embargo, signaling a generational shift in attitudes toward the island. A 2015 poll conducted by the U.S. firm Bendixen & Amandi International found that 97 percent of Cubans [favor](http://fusion.net/story/116226/historic-poll-top-25-findings-from-major-cuba-survey/) the restoration of ties. Normalization between the United States and Cuba has been celebrated in much of Latin America, where U.S. policy toward Cuba—particularly the embargo and designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism—was deeply unpopular.

*A majority of Cuban Americans support normalizing ties and ending the embargo, signaling a generational shift in attitudes toward the island.*

Global support for the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations was also overwhelming,[particularly in Latin America](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/latin-americans-praise-obama-easing-cuba-embargo-colombia-rebels-set-cease-fire/2014/12/17/cbccbdd6-8607-11e4-abcf-5a3d7b3b20b8_story.html). In 2013, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution [condemning the U.S. embargo](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/un-general-assembly-votes-against-us-cuba-embargo-for-the-22nd-year-in-a-row/) for the twenty-second consecutive year, with 188 member countries backing the resolution and only two—the United States and Israel—opposing.

##### Domestic Reform in Cuba

Since taking office in 2008, Raúl Castro has spoken of the [need to reform Cuba's economic system](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139458/julia-e-sweig-and-michael-j-bustamante/cuba-after-communism). Facing an aging population, heavy foreign debt, and economic hardship amid the global economic downturn, Castro began to liberalize parts of Cuba's largely state-controlled economy and loosen restrictions on personal freedoms, including ownership of certain consumer goods and travel outside the country. Some of Castro's reforms included:

* Decentralizing the [agricultural sector](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/americas/changes-to-agriculture-highlight-cubas-problems.html?pagewanted=all);
* Relaxing restrictions on [small businesses](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/01/AR2010110105357.html);
* Liberalizing [real estate markets](http://world.time.com/2013/07/24/as-communist-cuba-slowly-reforms-capitalism-takes-hold-of-its-real-estate-market/);
* Making it easier for Cubans to obtain government [permission to travel](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139458/julia-e-sweig-and-michael-j-bustamante/cuba-after-communism) abroad; and
* Expanding access to [consumer goods](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/americas/7295714.stm).

Cuba's private sector has swelled as a direct result of these reforms, and in 2014 was reported to be [about 20 percent (PDF)](http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2013/11/cuba%20emerging%20entrepreneurs%20middle%20classes%20feinberg/cuba%20entrepreneurs%20middle%20classes%20feinberg.pdf) of the country's workforce. Cuban figures estimate that the number of self-employed workers [nearly tripled (PDF)](http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2014/08/cubas%20economic%20social%20reform%20mesalago/cubaseconomicsocialreformsmesalago.pdf) between 2009 and 2013.

##### Prospects for U.S.–Cuba Ties

[Regional powers](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/17/leaders-in-latin-america-_n_6343524.html) and many [rights groups](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/18/uscuba-obama-s-new-approach-cuba-0) have praised the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations, arguing that engagement instead of isolation could help improve human rights in Cuba. In 2014, Jose Miguel Insulza, then secretary-general of the Organization of American States, [welcomed](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-usa-latinamerica-idUSKBN0JV2XK20141217) the announcement. "Cuba is undertaking a process of economic reforms that will, I hope, lead to political reforms," he said.

Experts say Cuba’s participation in the April 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama signaled a “[new era](http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2015/cumbre-de-las-americas-debe-de-marcar-nueva-era-de-dialogo-meade-1091217.html)” of hemispheric relations. Obama and Castro’s meeting was cordial, with Castro saying he believed Obama was “honest.” Members of civil society, including high-profile Cuban dissidents, also participated in the summit, a move that some say signaled increased political openness. Yet even with such developments and the release of political prisoners, some analysts are cautious about how rapidly Cuba’s political system will change. They point to the [acceleration of political detentions](http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-02-18/cuba-s-dissident-crackdown-peaks-ahead-of-obama-s-historic-visit) that took place in the weeks leading up to Obama's 2016 visit.

Many observers, including foreign leaders and rights activists, argue that the United States should go further and [lift the economic embargo](http://time.com/3642109/us-cuba-embargo/). That is unlikely to happen in the near future, experts say, due to strong opposition in the U.S. Congress.

Despite the embargo, the United States has become Cuba’s fifth-largest trading partner since 2007, boosted in part by U.S. President George W. Bush’s 2003 decision to [reauthorize the export of U.S. agricultural products](http://fortune.com/2015/01/14/the-winners-of-cubas-new-economy/) to the island, writes CFR’s Jennifer Harris. The U.S. agriculture and telecommunications industries stand to gain the most from expanded trade to Cuba, she says.

In the short term Obama will continue to use executive authority to open U.S.-Cuba ties around trade, investment, banking, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and travel, says Julia Sweig, a Cuba and Brazil scholar at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in Austin. This, she [predicts](http://www.cfr.org/cuba/after-thaw-next-us-cuba-relations/p35864), may create "a political dynamic that would ultimately shift opinion inside Congress to eventually repeal, or no longer enforce, Helms-Burton."