

# ICE in U.S. Airports: Focus Brief

March 31, 2026 — April 14, 2026

MAMBO — Monitoring and Analysis of Military and Border Operations

*A Project of About Face: Veterans Against the War*

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## About MAMBO and About Face

MAMBO (Monitoring and Analysis of Military and Border Operations) is a project launched by members of About Face: Veterans Against the War to monitor military and federal deployments involved in anti-migrant operations at the U.S. southern border and in the interior. About Face is an organization of post-9/11 service members and veterans who have organized to end a foreign policy of permanent war and the use of military force against communities at home and abroad. MAMBO was launched to monitor military and federal deployments involved in anti-migrant operations and has expanded to document the full scope of the unified domestic-international strategy. All information was obtained legally using publicly available sources. This report is designed to serve as an intelligence foundation for organizations, institutions, and individuals working to understand and respond to the current trajectory of U.S. governance. This report may be shared freely with attribution to MAMBO / About Face.

## How to Use This Report

For major donors and board members: Start with the Executive Summary (Section 1), the BLUF (Section 2), the Democracy Assessment (Section 15), and the Current State (Section 3). For journalists and investigative reporters, all relevant information was sourced at the end.

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## 1. Executive Summary

**Overall Confidence Level: MEDIUM-HIGH**— corroborated by federal court filings, official DHS/DOJ statements, Congressional testimony, and multi-source investigative journalism.

In March 2026, Donald Trump's administration illegally opted to post Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in airports around the United States. This overreach of executive power has resulted in mass absences and quitting from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), an organization that both employees and critics say have already received tax dollars aimed at securing infrastructure. ICE tactics have also already drastically-increased airport wait times due to passenger frisking and cross-referencing of demographic data. They have also drawn increased scrutiny from their passenger-sharing information program, which has begun partnering with TSA as of last year. In addition to the administration's increasingly-powerful stance on continuing this illegal enforcement, ICE acting officials have no interest in removing their agents from airports. **Based on this analysis, our confidence is Medium-High that the United States' Department of Homeland Security is actively attempting to use their posturing around airports as a deterrent for inbound and outbound immigration while preferring deportation instead, but also that using this deterrent on a national stage instead of isolated state environments signals a shift in their aggressive expansion.**

## 2. Details

### What:

#### Federal Posture:

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As of late March 2026, ICE agents remain stationed at major US airports despite TSA workers being set to receive back pay. <sup>1</sup> The ICE deployment was initiated during a partial-government shutdown which left DHS funding lapsed since mid-February, causing widespread absenteeism among TSA officers who continued working without pay. In response, the Trump administration deployed ICE agents to 14 high-traffic airports to assist with crowd control and lines. <sup>2</sup> This has been criticized as an executive overreach by employees and state actors who believe that TSA was founded with the intent to secure the transportation of US citizens and that this funding is not only superfluous but unnecessary.

- **Operational Friction:**

Between mass-absences, quitting of employees, and increased security checkpoints and airport wait times, ICE has drastically changed the average experience a person has when using American airports. TSA already instituted a data-sharing program for flagged passengers on inbound and outbound flights. <sup>3</sup> Despite White House claims that airport wait times have diminished, passengers report extra 4-6 hour waits for direct or connecting flights. Additionally, the operational risk of union and worker backlash signals to states themselves that the American public has a significant percentage of the populace against federal overreach.

- **Public Infrastructure & Safety:**

The federal strategy is a direct incursion into ICE involvement in public transportation, where critics say that federal tax dollars have already been spent guarding with TSA. The ISA-ICE data-sharing program, revealed in late 2025, allows TSA to flag passengers against ICE deportation databases. While TSA claims it does not directly send passenger lists, it does cross-reference data with ICE systems which enables rapid arrests. Critics have argued that this turns airports into de-facto immigration checkpoints, bypassing due process. The deployment also raises questions about federal law enforcement overreach. ICE's separate \$75 billion funding, untouched by the shutdown, means it operates independently, enabling its use as a flexible political

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2026/03/29/nx-s1-5765454/tsa-paychecks-ice-airports-tom-homan>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ice-agents-airports-us-9.7138882>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/12/us/politics/immigration-tsa-passenger-data.html>

instrument. This has led to concerns that ICE is evolving into a domestic police force with aggressive rules typically reserved for border zones. <sup>4</sup>

- **Political & Legal Conflict:**

The federal strategy is a direct incursion into ICE involvement in public transportation, where critics say that federal tax dollars have already been spent guarding with TSA. The TSA-ICE data-sharing program, allows TSA to flag passengers against ICE deportation databases. While TSA claims it does not directly send passenger lists, it does cross-reference data with ICE systems, enabling rapid arrests. Critics argue this turns airports into de facto immigration checkpoints, bypassing due process. <sup>5</sup>

- **Predicted Tactics & Risks:**

While using crowd control tactics such as managing lines and guarding exits, targeted arrests for those flagged (such as those with deportation orders or criminal warrants), and data-driven enforcements, ICE agents have no screening authority, meaning they cannot perform pat-downs, operate x-ray machines, or screen bags. <sup>6</sup> Despite White House claims that airport wait times have diminished, passengers report extra 4-6 hour waits for direct or connecting flights. Additionally, the operational risk of union and worker backlash signals to states themselves that the American public has a significant percentage of the populace against federal overreach. <sup>7</sup>

- **Community Response:**

State-level resistance to ICE deployment at U.S. airports in 2026 has been led by Democratic governors and officials, who view the move as political intimidation rather than operational support during the TSA shutdown. Over the weekend, anti-ICE demonstrators gathered at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, marching through Terminal 1 to demand the removal of federal immigration agents from airport operations. <sup>8</sup> The protest, organized by local immigrant advocacy groups, drew hundreds and was part of a broader wave of backlash against the normalization of ICE presence in civilian travel spaces. Similar demonstrations have been reported at Newark Liberty and Philadelphia International Airports, where activists argue that ICE's role undermines trust in airport safety and targets vulnerable communities. This happened after the most recent No King's Protest on March 28, 2026, which was the third No King's happening as of yet.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://luskin.ucla.edu/ice-deployment-to-u-s-airports-raises-questions-amid-shutdown>

<sup>5</sup> <https://patriotfetch.com/2025/12/tsa-ice-deportation-strategy-analysis/>

<sup>6</sup>

<https://creators.yahoo.com/lifestyle/story/ice-agents-will-be-verifying-travelers-identities-at-these-airports--heres-the-list-133021036.html>

<sup>7</sup>

<https://www.theringer.com/2026/04/01/national-affairs/airport-lines-tsa-ice-air-traffic-controllers-department-homeland-security-shutdown>

<sup>8</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/ice-arrested-more-than-800-people-after-tips-us-airport-security-agency-2026-04-07/>

## Who:

### Immigration & Customs Enforcement

- **Tom Homan (Border Czar):** Confirmed as recently as March 29, 2026, Homan stated that ICE agents might not leave US airports once TSA officers are paid. He also benefits from the increased ICE activity in airports which is causing staffing issues at TSA.
  - **Quote:** “We’re going to continue an ICE presence there, and until the airports feel like they’re in 100%, you know, in a posture where they can do normal operations,” Homan said in an interview on CBS News’ “Face the Nation.” “So if less TSA agents come back, that means we’ll keep more ICE agents there.”<sup>9</sup>
- **Acting ICE Director Todd Lyons:** Part of the planning team with Homan for deploying agents to airports.<sup>10</sup>
- **Lauren Bis (DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs):** Reported rising TSA absenteeism and resignations, highlighting the humanitarian impact of the shutdown.<sup>11</sup>

### Transportation Security Administration & Local Support

- **Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy:** Supported ICE involvement, suggesting agents could assist in screening, though this contradicted Homan’s statements about their limited role.<sup>12</sup>
- **Acting TSA Administrator Ha Nguyen McNeill:** Played central role during the 2026 DHS shutdown by warning Congress and the public about the severe consequences of unpaid TSA workers. Testified that over 480 officers had quit and absenteeism had surged from 4%-11% nationwide, exceeding 40-50% at major airports, leading to record wait times over four hours. Emphasized that the financial strain on officers. Many have been found sleeping in cars or selling plasma, which poses serious security risks and could force airport closures, especially with the FIFA World Cup approaching.
  - Testimony pressured the administration to restore pay on March 27, 2026.
- **Hydrick Thomas (President, AFGE TSA Council 100):** Condemned ICE deployment, arguing agents lack training and are ineffective, calling their presence a hindrance rather than help.<sup>13</sup>

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<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/border-czar-ice-agents-leave-airports-tsa-officers-paid-lines-security-rcna265693>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/03/30/metro/todd-lyons-ice-director/>

<sup>11</sup>

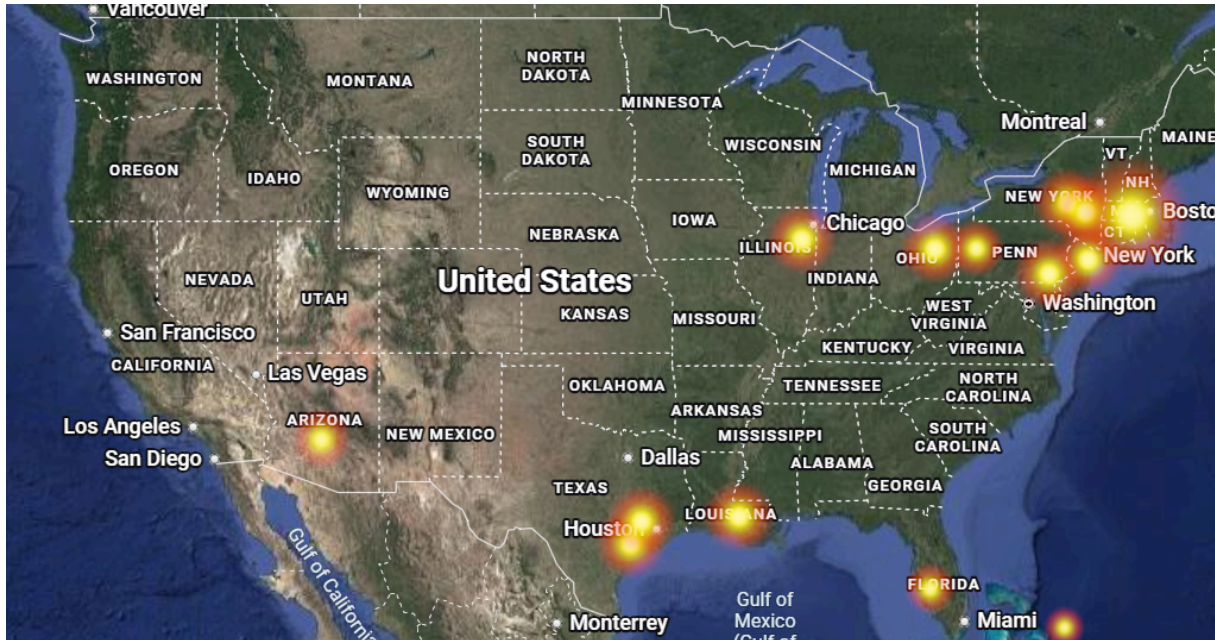
<https://www.kosu.org/news/2026-02-17/top-dhs-spokesperson-who-became-a-face-of-trump-immigration-policy-is-leaving>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.advocate.com/politics/national/trump-confusion-ice-tsa-airports>

<sup>13</sup> <https://thehill.com/policy/transportation/5799345-ice-deployment-tsa-criticism/>

- **Aaron Barker (President, AFGE Local 554, Atlanta):** Criticized ICE for receiving pay and per diems while TSA workers go unpaid, labeling the deployment a wasteful political gesture. <sup>14</sup>

**Map of Current ICE Deployment to US Airports**



### Confirmed Airports with ICE Presence:

The following airports were confirmed through reports from NBC News, USA Today, CNN, and Reuters, to have received ICE personnel:

- **Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD)**
- **Cleveland Hopkins International Airport (CLE)**
- **Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL):** One of the busiest airports globally, where ICE agents were seen at terminals, managing lines.
- **Houston's William P. Hobby Airport (HOU):** Reported absenteeism reached 43.0%, the highest in the nation.
- **George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH):** Absentee rate of 39.8% contributed to deployment decisions.
- **John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK), New York:** Absentee rate of 36.8%; agents were photographed patrolling terminals.
- **LaGuardia Airport (LGA), New York:** Absentee rate of 17.1%.
- **Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport (MSY):** Absentee rate of 35.6%; early reports confirmed ICE presence.
- **Luis Munoz Marin International Airport (SJU), San Juan, Puerto Rico**
- **Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR), New Jersey**

<sup>14</sup> <https://thehill.com/policy/transportation/5799345-ice-deployment-tsa-criticism/>

- **Philadelphia International Airport (PHL):** Absentee rate of 27.8%.
- **Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport (PHX):** Absentee rate of 18.8%.
- **Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT):** Absentee rate of 20.2%.
- **Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW), Fort Meyers**

Additional Airports where ICE was temporarily reported are:

- **Dulles International Airport (IAD), Virginia**
- **Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA), Virginia**

Current indications are that these were direct immigration arrests, and not general ICE postings. Analysis of current ICE postings indicate international airports in the areas surrounding Washington, D.C., and largely focused on Republican-controlled states in the south. The developing situation is under observation.

### 3. Current State (April 12, 2026)

#### Public Expansion Shift:

Critics argue that the TSA focuses too heavily on objects such as knives and liquids rather than behavioral indicators or threat-based profiling, allowed more determined attackers to adapt. Experts have argued that decentralized, adaptive security models, managed by airlines or airports, could be more effective than this one-size-fits-all federal system.

Additionally, the \$9 billion annual cost of TSA operations has drawn attention. Direct spending and opportunity cost of traveler time, estimated at roughly 250-300 million hours per year spent in lines, is equivalent to \$2 billion in lost productivity at minimum wage.

Congressional figures have attempted to combat this approach. Bennie Thompson (US House, D-Miss), ranking member of the House Committee on Homeland Security, denounced the plan as bringing a “tool of fascism” to American airports. He described armed, masked federal agents at checkpoints as a hallmark of dystopian regimes, not democratic societies. Demanded that President Trump “stand down with his secret police.”<sup>15</sup> Over 40 Democratic lawmakers have formally opposed the deployment of ICE agents to US airports, calling it an “unprecedented and unnecessary action” that causes chaos and fear. In a letter dated April 6, 2026, Representatives John Garamendi, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, Robert Garcia, and Ro Khanna led the effort, sending the letter to DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin, Acting ICE Director Todd Lyons, and White House Border Czar Tom Homan.<sup>16</sup>

Some travelers may accept TSA procedures as a necessary evil, but other public figures have spoken out against the TSA, choosing instead to view them as intrusive and ineffective. Libertarian and civil liberties advocates, such as Thomas Knapp of the William Lloyd Garrison Center, argue the TSA is a “25-year mistake” that infringes on personal freedom without delivering measurable security benefits.

This situation will remain under observation.

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<sup>15</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-threatens-put-ice-agents-airports-over-funding-impasse-2026-03-21/>

<sup>16</sup>

<https://garamendi.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-garamendi-joins-colleagues-opposing-presence-ice-agents-airports>