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Targeting Portuguese-Speaking Countries

An Anatomy of Proposed US Travel Bans

MIGRATION AND SECURITY | GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE |
STRATEGIC FRONTIERS



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1.

Introduction

A noteworthy part of the current US administration's policy direction is its approach to limiting immigration into the United States, especially from Africa. Since the first Trump administration, US immigration policy has increasingly relied on visa restrictions, and travel bans have become more commonplace. This shift brought African states into sharper focus in international affairs.. Many of these states are located in the developing world, particularly in regions perceived as linked to American homeland security threats such as terrorism. As such, tighter US border controls may worsen already uneasy domestic economic conditions, given that remittances and similar transfers from abroad sustain many of these nations. This framing situates US immigration restrictions not merely as domestic measures but as policies with direct implications for international governance and economic stability.

Previous studies show that former imperial networks provide important insight into how emerging markets operate in environments shaped by rapidly improving information and communication technologies (ICTs). Among these networks, the remnants of British and French empires usually receive the most scholarly attention. However, in post-colonial Africa, another cultural and historical heritage—the former Portuguese (Lusophone) empire—stands out. Four of the six African countries with Portuguese-speaking heritage—Equatorial Guinea (EG), Angola, Cabo Verde/Cape Verde (CV), São Tomé and Príncipe (STP)—were included in the administration's recent list of travel ban countries (Savage and Wong 2025). This historical legacy and strategic geography help explain why Lusophone states feature prominently in recent US immigration restrictions.



This analysis seeks to explain the rationale for including these states in the ban, framing it within the broader contours of the administration's immigration policy. However, the paper will not examine Equatorial Guinea in depth, given existing scholarship that highlights the country's high visa overstay rates in the US and the lack of sufficient vetting data available to US authorities (American Immigration Council 2025). EG is also officially a Spanish-speaking country, though Portuguese is widely used, and it is a member of the CPLP (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa), the multilateral organization of the Portuguese-speaking states (Gomashie 2019). It is worth noting that, as intended by Portuguese colonizers, these countries occupy strategic positions in the Atlantic that continue to attract US and global attention (Da Silva 2023). The following sections elaborate on how US relations and immigration concerns intersect with the specific Lusophone African countries affected by these restrictions.





2.

Admissibility Determinants

Given the aforementioned reasoning behind including Equatorial Guinea (EG) on the travel ban list, the administration outlines several components of the visa application process that it reviews when determining a nationality's overall admissibility into the United States. These include primary criteria such as identity documents, criminal records tracking, and passport security, all topics that will be discussed further below (Savage and Wong 2025; Bojang 2025).

2.1 Document Issues

Angola suffers from persistent problems in document access, accuracy, and security. This stems largely from decades of civil war, which created the absence of a central birth registry from which to furnish reliable birth certificates. In addition, institutionalized discrimination means that indigenous individuals and poorer Angolans are often denied access to proper identification. Recent reporting indicates that the situation is compounded by over fifteen thousand recorded cases of document fraud—including many involving foreign nationals—which, though specific cases identified by Washington are unknown, are difficult to prosecute because the government lacks the capacity to distinguish Angolan citizens from unauthorized migrants. As a result, the need for modernized document production systems and legal frameworks is widely recognized, yet reforms have not reached a level sufficient to persuade key international audiences such as Washington (Mutuki and Iyamu 2020; BTI 2024; World Bank Group 2024; VerAngola). For US policymakers, these documentation gaps are not merely technical issues but direct determinants of immigration admissibility.

Cabo Verde has also experienced documented cases of identification fraud, especially with visas and passports. One widely publicized case involved fraudulent attempts to obtain “replacement” passports while other cases involved forging visas from friendly Western countries and US allies such as Portugal. A related tactic is to request expedited processing over the phone, insisting that identification is urgently needed due to last-minute travel (Wehner 2025; McColgan 2023; Brava News 2025).



São Tomé and Príncipe has made earnest efforts to establish a digital identification system for its citizens, but data accuracy remains a major obstacle since no reliable registry has existed in the past. One promising development is opening up the birth registry to cell phone users although mobile entries are more difficult to verify. This effort is further constrained by costs: registering births after a child turns one year old incurs fees, which leads to underreporting of citizens (Macdonald 2025; Sindayigaya 2023; Humanium 2021; Boakye).

2.2 Criminal Records Tracking

Database and information-management deficiencies also contribute to these countries' struggles to provide security assurances at the international level. Angola and Cabo Verde, for example, are attempting to improve domestic security by introducing innovations like the "Safe City" project to integrate state-of-the-art surveillance technology to combat crime and political/social instability. However, these systems often originate from sources viewed as biased or unreliable by Western countries, especially when suppliers include geopolitical adversaries such as China (Boston University; Verde et al. 2021; AidData).

The core challenge remains the lack of effective criminal records tracking. Angola does not maintain a central database for criminals within its jurisdiction (GlobaLex), and Cabo Verde struggles with information sharing across law enforcement agencies. This is particularly problematic for Washington because those agencies are the primary points of contact for international information exchange in crime prevention. In Cabo Verde, bureaucratic inefficiency in retrieving customs data hampers border-to-border collaboration with US authorities (GIABA 2019; IMF 2009).

Further complicating matters are publicly available lists in Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe that identify "politically exposed persons" (Open Sanctions). These lists give outsiders insight into potential waves of political exiles, many with uncertain identities or backgrounds. If global patterns remain consistent (New York Times 2025), a common destination for such individuals would be the United States, particularly given for nationals of states with known diaspora clusters as is the case with Cabo Verdean populations concentrated in New England (Singer and Brown 2024).



2.3 Passport Security

Consistent with the administration's framing of immigration as a national security priority, passport standards loom large for those worried about migration flows from Africa. Cabo Verde's case is noteworthy because of its membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). For Washington, the concern is ECOWAS's weak accountability in enforcing border checks across a region with limited patrol capacity (Bouet et al. 2023). Similar concerns echoed across the continent, as states like São Tomé and Príncipe ratified international agreements such as the African Union's Free Movement Protocol (Administrator 2024).

Angola's case is perhaps even more troubling. The country's epidemic of document fraud extends to passports, raising questions about the validity of Angolan documents at foreign points of entry. High-profile cases include the exposure of a fake passport allegedly linked to one of the country's wealthiest elites, tied to Angola's resource industries. More broadly, widespread harassment of perceived immigrants complicates census-taking and fuels demand for fraudulent citizenship documents, including passports (Al Jazeera 2020, 2023; ANGOP; [Ecoi.net](https://www.ecoi.net) 2023).





3.

Immigration Standards

The administration also appears to be taking a data-driven approach to its policies toward these three states. These case studies highlight how Department of Homeland Security (DHS) statistics shape Washington policymakers' perceptions of how the US border is pressured from lesser-reported locations such as Lusophone Africa.

Table 1 provides a quick snapshot of these metrics, with Angola and Cabo Verde showing high values in the visa overstay category. São Tomé and Príncipe does not have recorded data for citizen visa overstays in the United States, which some observers may interpret as a function of its small population. However, this lack of data may itself raise concerns: a single recorded overstay could significantly skew percentages and highlight the potential for new migration pathways that could evade US immigration standards and enforcement.

Country	Percentage (Migrants)
Angola	13.9 (408)
Cabo Verde	25.71 (18)
São Tomé and Príncipe	0 (0)

Table 1. Visa Overstay Rates in the United States in 2024 (DHS 2023)

When working with these countries, the administration has also emphasized high-profile deportation policies for the White House as it seeks to establish streamlined deportation routes that align with its domestic enforcement priorities (Hallas 2025).



- Angola occupies a central place in these considerations, not only because deportations of Angolans in 2024 were three times higher than five years earlier (VerAngola 2025) but also because Luanda has agreed to accept deportees of various nationalities and has prior experience hosting flights commissioned by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (CBS News 2025; ICE 2024).
- Cabo Verde has also seen increases in deportees (CV Network), but its government has taken a more adversarial approach both domestically and in negotiations with external partners. Socially, Cabo Verdean culture has not been accepting of returning deportees, leaving many migrants mired in poverty (Dorchester Reporter 2008). As a result, Cabo Verde has shown less initiative in addressing immigration concerns from developed nations like the United States, prompting the administration to directly target CV and demand significant policy changes (Brava News 2025).

These enforcement dynamics illustrate how US immigration policy is operationalized in Lusophone Africa, with consequences that extend beyond border management to shape bilateral relations and domestic political debates within the region.





4.

National Security Concerns

One particular concern facing the administration is the allocation of citizenship in various foreign states to broad ranges of people. As noted above, such policies contribute to population registration and tracking problems that can lead to domestic and international security threats, given the unknowns surrounding a subset of the citizenry and its impact on state stability (and, consequently, on the United States upon immigration).

States like Angola recognize these effects: although there is no current legal program to sell citizenship to non-residents, it has received recommendations to establish such a scheme to attract expats for economic growth purposes (Golden Visas 2024; Creimerman Law 2024). This could be modeled on programs in other Portuguese-speaking states, such as Cabo Verde. In CV, US\$210,000 is needed to obtain citizenship through investments in business, government project development, tourism, and commercial real estate, following a successful background check and proof of a pre-determined “connection to Cabo Verde” (Meier 2025). These conditions, however, remain unattractive—even compared with the lower US\$86,000 investment threshold for permanent residency—because CV is considered a “weak” passport nation for travelers (Golden Visas 2024; IMI Daily 2024).

Terrorism is an even more fundamental concern for the US government in this area over the long term. Angola is of particular focus due to threats to its lucrative oil extraction industry in the province of Cabinda, making a key Angolan region a target for extremist separatists (Ojakorotu, n.d.). Consequently, Angola has been commendable in the eyes of states like the US for its focus on anti-terror laws and policy in addressing these threats ([UN.org](https://www.un.org/)). CV and STP do not inspire as much confidence. Although these states are not major targets in and of themselves, they are centers for terrorist financing and money laundering (FATF 2025; [UN.org](https://www.un.org/) 2023). Even though countries like Cabo Verde have taken steps in anti-money laundering efforts (FATF 2021), the clandestine nature of terror financing is potentially pervasive, especially given widespread corruption that obscures the volume of such activities. Analysts caution that these dynamics could enable illicit financial flows and heighten security risks in strategically located states like STP, where piracy in the Gulf of Guinea already poses challenges (OC Index). Such vulnerabilities strengthen Washington’s case for restrictive policies, framing immigration not only as a domestic concern but as a matter of global security.



5.

Broader Impacts

These realities highlight a number of non-immigration implications that could lead to negative outcomes for societal well-being in the United States. The most immediate are the economic impacts these three countries have on the US market:

- **Angola** is a known provider of oil essential to sustaining a carbon-based American economy and contributes to Western luxury markets through its supply of diamonds. On a smaller scale, the Angolan economy provides the US with aircraft parts and poultry (OEC).
- **Cabo Verde** participates in international food and beverage markets, particularly in fish and hard liquor (OEC).
- **São Tomé and Príncipe** contributes meaningfully to the lucrative Western chocolate industry (OEC).

Beyond economics, the current situation facing these Portuguese-speaking states underscores significant security risks, revealing a case study of reduced US engagement in world affairs. Their strategic positions along the Atlantic maritime routes make them critical for global power competition. This is particularly true for China, which has shown interest in leveraging the region's ports to foster a blue-water navy in the Atlantic (Da Silva; Suciú 2024). At the same time, anti-Chinese sentiment can emerge even without US engagement, fueled by concerns over dumping and export shocks from Chinese industry (Stevenson 2025). For its part, Russia has longer experience in Africa, especially in filling leadership vacuums in unstable states and economies (Ferragamo 2023; Riboua 2025). These dynamics may extend into Lusophone Africa, given the region's economic and geographic appeal. Immigration restrictions thus intersect with broader geopolitical contests, where reduced US engagement risks ceding influence to rival powers.



What remains most certain, however, is the threat of terrorism to US interests and the homeland, given evidence that these states may serve as points for terrorist financing. Of most immediate concern is the irony that an administration intent on reducing contact with these states through restrictive immigration policies is simultaneously making Washington less able to monitor shifts in fragile societies. Such shifts—political, economic, and security-related—can easily escalate migratory pressures toward wealthier destinations like the United States.

For policymakers, the lesson is clear: engagement with Lusophone Africa is essential not only to manage migration flows but also to preserve US strategic leverage in a shifting global order.



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