



WHY DO ASYLUM SEEKERS DESTROY THEIR PASSPORTS?

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People often ask why asylum seekers don't have passports or other identity documents when they arrive. Some people think that if they destroy their passports they must have something to hide. There are a number of very good reasons why asylum seekers arrive without passports. But before getting on to that, it's worth remembering that this questioning of asylum seekers' motives reflects an unfair prejudice and suspicion against them. Politicians and the media perpetuate myths that asylum seekers could be terrorists or criminals, but there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that criminals or terrorists choose to travel in leaky boats disguised as asylum seekers. Think about it for a moment, if you want to travel incognito for the purposes of crime or terrorism, you're not going to disguise yourself as someone who'll come under immediate suspicion and scrutiny and who is likely to be locked up in a detention centre for a few years. If you heard a story about a US or UK traveller who arrived without their passport you wouldn't immediately think they might be a terrorist or a criminal, you'd assume they lost it or it was stolen.

So why do asylum seekers arrive without passports?

1. When you're fleeing persecution it's dangerous to be identified.

Asylum seekers arriving by boat are fleeing persecution. They come from countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka where opponents of the government or ethnic minorities are routinely arrested, tortured and killed. If they are caught before they can get away or in a country that does not accept asylum seekers, they will be returned and handed over to their government. Having tried to flee, the asylum seeker is viewed as a traitor as well as an opponent of the government and could be subjected to even worse treatment. For these reasons, asylum seekers often move without identity documents so if they are caught, there is a chance they can still get away. Sometimes asylum seekers need false identity documents to be able to get away safely, in this case, they destroy the documents once they no longer need them so they or the people who helped them get the false documents don't get into trouble.

2. The passports are often confiscated by the people who organise their passage.

Often the asylum seeker will be forced to hand over their passport for getting on the boat. There has been a huge amount of anti-people smuggler rhetoric from the Australian government and the media. It's true that some people smugglers exploit asylum seekers for profit. But many who are labelled people smugglers simply help arrange for asylum seekers to get to safety and do not make any profit. In either case, they are the only option available to asylum seekers and to be able to effectively arrange for them to get away, people smugglers need to protect themselves and their networks from prosecution. In some cases the smuggler may have supplied a false document at the beginning of the journey and needs to make sure it is destroyed at the end so they cannot be traced.

3. Some asylum seekers don't have a passport to begin with.

If you are an ethnic Hazara in a Taliban controlled part of Afghanistan and don't have a passport, you can't exactly go to the authorities saying 'I am afraid for my life and want to flee to seek asylum, can I have a passport?' It is the same situation for a Sri Lankan Tamil or Iranian democracy activist on a government wanted list. So if you don't already have a passport, you can't get one.

4. Asylum seekers often flee in fear of their lives and don't have time to pack.

If you're an Iranian democracy activist and you just heard that your brother has been arrested and the police are on their way to your house, you grab what you can and run. If your passport is not handy or you don't have one, there is no time to apply for a new one (even if you could safely) or to go back for it if you couldn't find it.

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