

The Shifting Landscape of Passport Fraud

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By Scott Stewart

The recent case involving the arrest and deportation of the [Russian intelligence network in the United States](#) has once again raised the subject of document fraud in general and passport fraud in particular. The FBI's investigation into the group of Russian operatives discovered that several of the suspects had assumed fraudulent identities and had obtained genuine passports (and other identity documents) in their assumed names. One of the suspects assumed the identity of a Canadian by the name of Christopher Robert Mestos, who died in childhood. The suspect was arrested in Cyprus but fled after posting bail; his true identity remains unknown. Three other members of the group also assumed Canadian identities, with Andrey Bezrukov posing as Donald Heathfield, Elena Vavilova as Tracey Foley and Natalia Pereverzeva as Patricia Mills.

Passport fraud is a topic that surfaces with some frequency in relation to espionage cases. (The Israelis used passport fraud during the January 2010 operation to assassinate [Mahmoud al-Mabhouh](#), a senior Hamas militant commander.) Passport fraud is also frequently committed by individuals involved in crimes such as narcotics smuggling and arms trafficking, as well as by militants involved in terrorist plots. Because of the frequency with which passport fraud is used in these types of activities — and due to the importance that curtailing passport fraud can have in combating espionage, terrorism and crime — we thought it a topic worth discussing this week in greater detail.

Passports and Investigations

While the use of passports goes back centuries, the idea of a travel document that can be used to absolutely verify the identity of a traveler is a relatively new concept. Passports containing the photos of the bearer have only been widely used and mandated for international travel for about a century now, and in the United States, it was not until 1918 that Congress enacted laws mandating the use of U.S. passports for Americans returning from overseas and home country passports with visas for foreigners wishing to visit the United States. Passport fraud followed closely on the heels of these regulations. Following the American entry into World War I, special agents from the State Department's Bureau of Secret Intelligence became very involved in hunting down German and Austrian intelligence officers who were then using forged documents to operate inside the United States.

In the decades after World War I, the Bureau of Secret Intelligence's successor organization, the Office of the Chief Special Agent, became very involved in investigating Nazi and Communist agents who committed passport fraud to operate inside the United States. As the Office of the Chief Special Agent evolved into the State Department's Office of Security and then finally the Bureau of Diplomatic Security

(DS), special agents from the organization continued to investigate passport and visa fraud. In addition to foreign intelligence officers, they have also investigated terrorists, fugitives and other criminals who have committed passport fraud. Since the State Department is the agency that issues U.S. passports and visas, it is also the primary agency charged with ensuring the integrity of those documents. Therefore, in much the same manner that U.S. Secret Service agents are charged with investigating counterfeit currency (and ensuring the integrity of currency for the Treasury Department), DS agents are charged with investigating passport fraud.

DS agents are not the only ones who investigate passport fraud, however. As the FBI matured organizationally and became the primary domestic counterintelligence agency, the bureau also began to work passport fraud investigations involving foreign intelligence officers. Soviet and other Communist “illegals” — intelligence officers operating without official cover — frequently assumed the identities of deceased infants, and because of this, the FBI developed a particular interest in passport fraud investigations involving infant death identity (IDI) cases. However, passport fraud is only one of the many criminal violations that the FBI investigates, and most FBI agents will not investigate a passport fraud case during their career.

As the agency primarily responsible for border and immigration enforcement, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) also investigates identity-document fraud, including passport fraud, although many of the cases ICE agents work involve foreign passports. ICE also has a forensic document laboratory that is the best in the world when it comes to the technical investigation of fraudulent identity documents.

Another U.S. government agency that watches passport fraud with a great deal of interest is the CIA. Not only does it have an operational interest in the topic — the agency wants to be able to use fraud for its own purposes — but it is also very interested in being able to verify the true identities of [walk-ins](#) and other potential sources. Because of this, the CIA needs to have the ability to spot fraudulent documents. During the 1980s, the CIA produced an excellent series of unclassified guides on the terrorist use of passport and visa fraud called the “Redbook.” The Redbook was discontinued in 1992, just as the jihadist threat to the United States was beginning to emerge.

As in any area where there are overlapping jurisdictions and investigations, there is sometimes tension and bureaucratic jealousy between the various agencies involved in investigating passport fraud. The level of tension is frequently lower in scenarios where the agencies work together (as on joint terrorism task forces) and where the agents and agencies have become accustomed to working together. In the forensic realm, the ICE laboratory generally has an excellent relationship with the State Department, the FBI (and the document section of the FBI laboratory) and the CIA’s document laboratory.

Types of Passport Fraud

There are several different types of passport fraud. The first is the intentional issuing of a genuine passport in a false identity by a government. Real passports are often issued in false identities to provide cover for intelligence officers, but this can also be done for other reasons. For example, in late 1990, during Operation Desert Shield, the Iraqi government provided a large group of Iraqi intelligence officers with Iraqi passports in false identities so that these officials could travel abroad and conduct terrorist attacks against U.S. interests. These Iraqi teams were dispatched all over the world and were provided direction (as well as weapons and IED components) by Iraqi intelligence officers stationed in embassies abroad. The explosives and firearms were sent around the world via diplomatic pouches (which are exempt from search). Following failed terrorist attacks in Manila and Jakarta in January 1991, DS agents investigating the case discovered that the Iraqi operatives were traveling on sequentially numbered Iraqi passports. This discovery allowed a worldwide alert to go out and governments in several different regions of the world were able to arrest or deport scores of Iraqi agents.

A second type of fraud involving genuine passports is where the government is not knowingly involved in the issuance of the passport for the fraudulent identity. In such cases, an applicant uses fraudulent identification documents to apply for a passport. The group of documents needed to obtain a passport — called “breeder” documents — normally includes a birth certificate, a Social Security card and a driver’s license. A set of fraudulent breeder documents can be counterfeit, genuine but altered (this can be done by changing the name or date of birth) or genuine documents obtained by fraud.

This is where the IDI cases come in. In these cases, someone applies for a replacement birth certificate of a deceased infant or child of their approximate age and then uses the birth certificate to obtain a Social Security card and driver's license. The person applying for the replacement birth certificate usually claims their original birth certificate was lost or stolen.

Due to changes in procedure and technology, however, it has become more difficult in recent years to obtain a copy of the birth certificate of an infant or child who died in the United States. Birth-certificate registries are now tied electronically to death registries in every state, and if someone attempts to get the birth certificate of a dead person, it is quickly noticed and an investigation launched. Also, Social Security numbers are now issued at birth, so it is very difficult for a 25- or 30-year-old person to apply for a new Social Security number. Because of these factors, IDI cases have declined significantly in the United States.

Breeder documents are generally easier to counterfeit or obtain by fraud than a passport. However, as identity documents become more cross-referenced in databases, it is becoming more difficult to obtain a passport using a counterfeit birth certificate and Social Security number. Because of this, it has become more common for a person to buy a set of genuine breeder documents from a drug user or criminal looking for some quick cash. It is also possible to buy a genuine birth certificate and Social Security card from a corrupt official. While such documents are genuine, and can carry the applicant's true or chosen name, such genuine documents are much more expensive than the other options. Of course, passport office employees can also be bribed to issue a genuine passport with fraudulent breeder documents, though there is a remote risk that such fraud will be caught in an audit.

At the present time, it is far easier and cheaper to obtain a genuine foreign passport by fraud than it is a U.S. passport, but corruption and plain old mistakes still allow a small number of fraudulent U.S. passports to get into the system. There are still some countries where a genuine passport in any identity can be obtained for just a few hundred dollars. Generally, it is more difficult to get passports from more developed nations (such as those that participate in the U.S. visa waiver program) than it is from less developed nations, where corruption is more prevalent. Still, corruption is a worldwide problem when it comes to passports and other identity documents.

Stolen blank passports have also been used over the years. For example, after Operation Desert Storm, an Iraqi passport office in Basra was sacked and thousands of blank Iraqi passports were stolen and then sold on the black market. One of those blanks was bought by a Pakistani jihadist operative named Abdul Basit, who had the blank passport filled out with his photograph and the name of a fictitious Iraqi citizen named Ramzi Yousef. After he entered the United States, Basit organized the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The problem with stolen blanks is that they are usually reported fairly quickly and their numbers are entered into international databases. Furthermore, like a counterfeit passport, a stolen blank passport will not correspond to information entered into passport databases, and it is therefore difficult to travel using one. In the case of Basit, he used a British passport altered to include his photo to leave Pakistan but then used the Iraqi passport to make an asylum claim once he arrived in the United States.

This highlights another category of genuine passports used in passport fraud, those that are real but have been altered, usually by replacing the photo appearing on the passport. Passport fraud investigators refer to this as a photo-subbed passport. In the 1970s, it was fairly easy to photo-sub passports from most countries, but in the past couple of decades, many countries have taken great efforts to make this process more difficult. The use of high-tech laminates and now, in current U.S. passports, RFID chips that contain a photo that must match the one appearing on the passport make it far harder to photo-sub passports today. Of course, efforts to increase passport security haven't always worked as planned. In 1993, the State Department began issuing a new high-tech passport with a green cover that was supposed to be impossible to photo-sub. Within a few months of the first issuance of the passports, document vendors discovered that the laminate on the green passports could be easily removed by placing a block of dry ice on the passport, changing the photo and then pressing the laminate back down with an iron. Due to the ease of photo-subbing these passports, their value on the black market skyrocketed, and the "fraud proof" green passports had to be taken out of circulation after less than a year.

Finally, we have counterfeit passports, which are passports created from scratch by a document vendor. Like counterfeit currency, there is a vast range of quality when it comes to counterfeit passports, and as a rule of thumb, you get what you pay for. On the streets of places like Bangkok, Hong Kong or New York, one can buy counterfeit passports from a wide array of countries. There is, however, a vast difference

between the passport one can purchase for \$100 and the one that can be purchased for \$10,000. Also, like currency, some passport counterfeiters will even attempt to use elements of genuine passports, like the optically “dead” paper with little or no fluorescence used for the pages and the holographic laminates used on the photo pages. However, like photo-subbed passports, it is far more difficult to create a functional counterfeit passport today than it was several years ago. Not only does the passport have to be of high quality, but the number needs to correspond to the database of legitimately issued passports. Therefore, most counterfeit passports are useful for traveling in the third world but would not withstand the scrutiny of authorities in the developed world.

In spite of these problems, there is still a market for counterfeit and photo-subbed passports. While they may not be useful for traveling to a country like the United States or France, they can be used to travel from a place like Pakistan or China to a gateway country in the Western Hemisphere like [Venezuela](#) or a gateway country in Europe like Albania. Because of this, American and European passports still fetch a decent price on the black market and are frequently stolen from or sold by Westerners. Citizens of Western countries who travel to terrorist training camps are also frequently encouraged to “donate” their passports and other documents to the group that trains them. There are also many reports that Mossad makes use of the passports of foreign Jews who move to Israel and give their passports to the intelligence agency. Stolen or deliberately lost passports not only can be altered or cloned but also can be used for travel by people who physically resemble the original bearer, although once they are reported stolen or lost and entered into lookout databases, their utility declines.

A Shifting Focus

The difficulty in obtaining functional travel documents has affected the way criminal and terrorist organizations operate. With increasing scrutiny of travel documents, groups like al Qaeda have found it progressively more difficult to travel to the West. This is one of the factors that has led to their [increasing use of operatives who have the ability to travel](#) to where the planned attack is to be conducted, rather than sending a more professional terrorist operative to conduct the attack.

This difficulty in counterfeiting passports has even affected intelligence agencies, which are the best passport counterfeiters in the world. This is why we see intelligence agencies like Mossad having to clone passports — that is, create a counterfeit passport that bears the same name and number of a legitimate passport — or even resort to other types of fraud to obtain genuine passports for operatives. It has become difficult to fabricate a usable passport using a fictitious name. Mossad operatives have gotten in trouble for attempting to fraudulently obtain genuine passports in places like New Zealand. And Mossad is certainly not the only intelligence service experiencing this difficulty in obtaining documents for its operatives.

Because of these difficulties, intelligence agencies and militant and criminal organizations have begun to place increasing importance on recruiting assets involved in the issuance of identity documents. At an embassy, a consular officer is viewed as almost as important a person to recruit as a code clerk. A corrupt consular officer can make a great deal of money selling documents. But the threat can extend far from an overseas embassy. If an organization like the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (or the Sinaloa cartel) can recruit an employee at the New Jersey Office of Vital Statistics, they can arrange to have their agent occasionally issue a genuine birth certificate (camouflaged in a large stack of legitimately issued documents) in a fraudulent identity for their use. Likewise, if they can recruit a clerk at the Social Security office in Jersey City, they can get that agent to occasionally issue a Social Security number and card that corresponds to the birth certificate. These primary documents can then be used to obtain a driver’s license (the [key identity document for living in the United States](#)) and eventually a passport for international travel.

Of course, recruiting an agent who works inside an agency is not the only way to obtain identification documents. Several years ago, a cleaning company owned by a group of Nigerians placed a low bid on the contract to provide cleaning services to Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) offices in Florida. Shortly after the company began providing services to the DMV, the agency suffered a rash of thefts across the state that included not only blank driver’s licenses and laminates but an entire machine that took the photos and processed the blank licenses.

The advent of cross-referencing databases, machine-readable passports [routinely checked against such databases](#), radio frequency identification technology and procedures intended to prevent fraud have

helped curtail many types of passport fraud. That said, passports are still required to travel for nefarious purposes, and these security measures have caused resourceful criminals, terrorists and intelligence agencies to shift their focus from technical methods of fraud toward exploiting humans in the process. In many places, the effort made to vet and monitor employees issuing documents is far less extensive than the effort made to physically protect documents from counterfeiting. The end result is that humans have become the weakest link in the equation.