The following report is based on open source reporting.

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Introduction

The disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 underscores a security issue that has existed for a very long time: passport fraud. That two Iranian men boarded a plane belonging to a major airline in a modern airport using registered stolen passports begs two questions: 1) how is this done? and 2) why? The passports were reported stolen in Phuket, Thailand, and ended up in the hands of two Iranian men attempting to immigrate illegally to Europe. But, many other cases have a more malign intent. INTERPOL Secretary General Ronald K. Noble states that “in every major terrorist attack…you can find fraudulent travel documents tied or linked in some way” and called passport fraud “the biggest threat facing the world.”

Pick Your Poison

To understand how passport fraud works, it is important to understand the different methods of execution. Below are the most common forms of fraud:

- **Doctoring:** This involves changing the information contained inside the actual passport. It is the most easily detectable of the methods, as long as the inspecting authority knows what to look for.
- **Resemblance:** This requires obtaining a legitimate document from someone who has similar physical traits. This is a common fraud practice, and it is not easy to detect since there is nothing fraudulent in the passport.
- **Stolen Blanks:** These are real documents taken from official stock before they have been filled out. Brokers can buy them from corrupt officials or steal them and customize them.
- **Real Passport Issued to a False Identity:** Occasionally, a government agency will issue a genuine passport to someone who provided a false identity. Through different means, criminals have obtained fraudulent documents (birth certificate, social security card, etc.) to support the issuance of a legitimate passport.
- **Counterfeit:** Finally, counterfeit passports are those created from scratch. Most counterfeit passports may be useful for traveling in the developing world, especially at land-border crossings, but would likely not withstand the scrutiny of authorities in the developed world or at most airports. Travelers may find counterfeit passports in market stalls in much of the developing world.

Fraud Around the World

Because of its magnetism for tourists and its relatively lax laws, Thailand is one of the world’s hubs for passport fraud. Each year, Thai authorities struggle to track thousands of lost or stolen passports that often end up on the black market.

However, the problem is not isolated to Thailand. In 2010, police arrested seven people there and three in Spain for their part in an international document fraud ring. The network, which operated out of Thailand for 10 years, would steal passports from tourists (often targeting people in Barcelona and tailored to a requested nationality and age profile (i.e. resemblance fraud)) and send the passports to Thailand, where they would be delivered to terrorist groups such as al-Qa’ida, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the Tamil Tigers. The fraud ring is also believed to have had links to the 2004 Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people.

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2005, British citizen and terror suspect Samantha Lewthwaite, also known as the White Widow, purchased a fraudulent South African passport in Durban with the help of corrupt government officials. The intermediary who sold her the passport said he and a partner processed more than 3,000 fraudulent IDs and passports for mostly al-Qa’ida-linked networks, such as al-Shabaab. Other major cases of fraud have been reported in Ghana, Peru, Ireland, and Mexico. In fact, with a high demand and numerous means of production, document fraud is going on all over the world.

**Best Practices**

A U.S. passport is one of the most valuable identification documents in the world. Every traveler should treat carrying one as such, and there are a number of ways to ensure its security:

- In places like Phuket, tourists may be required to leave their passport as a deposit when renting recreational equipment. When the equipment is returned, crooked business owners can falsely claim that the rented item was damaged. If the traveler refuses to pay the collateral, they may abandon their passport by reporting it as stolen and request a new one from their embassy. Their old passport can then be sold on the black market.
- Another way to stay secure is to limit the number of people who handle your passport; the fewer sets of hands on it, the better. If you must surrender your passport (international hotel check-in for example), limit the amount of time it is out of your possession and be cognizant as to what is being done with it.
- When walking on the street, keep a copy of your passport on your person while leaving the actual document in your hotel safe or another secure area. It is more likely that a passport will be lost/stolen on the street than an official would require the actual document (although there are several countries that do require you to keep your actual passport on you at all times; this information can be found on each country’s [Country Specific Information](https://travel.state.gov) sheet.

If you do lose your passport overseas, immediately call 877-487-2778 to report it and please visit the State Department’s [travel page](https://travel.state.gov) for directions on what to do next. Swiftly reporting the passport as lost or stolen will reduce the possibility the passport will be misused to board a plan or to transit an international border.

**For Further Information**

Please direct any questions regarding this report to OSAC’s [Cross Regional Analyst](https://travel.state.gov).