Passport Forgeries in Israel: A Case Study of a Series of Forged Lesotho Passports

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As a developed country bordering Africa, Israel is an attractive destination both for labour immigrants and asylum seekers. With several places considered sacred to all three monotheist religions, the country is also an attraction to pilgrims and tourists and serves as a passage from Africa to Europe for migrants in search of a better future.

Most African states' nationals entering Israel via Ben Gurion International Airport need to obtain a visa at an Israeli consulate. However, travelers carrying passports of South Africa and its enclaves Swaziland and the Kingdom of Lesotho are an exception to that rule, creating a high demand for passports of these countries.

The case

In the summer of 2015, I was head of the Document Examination Laboratory at the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) unit of the Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA). Whilst having a conversation with a colleague I glimpsed at the reception monitor to discover a recently registered asylum seeker who had presented himself as a national of Lesotho.

Having a few years of experience in secondary questioning at airport border control, I remembered two main issues regarding the Kingdom of Lesotho and its passports.

First, Lesotho was one of only three interconnected states in Africa whose nationals were not required to obtain a visa to enter Israel as they are all on a visa-waiver agreement. Consequently, the passports of these three states are quite commonly forged and carried by nationals of other African states attempting to enter the Israel illegally.

Second, I have only seen a couple of Lesotho passports in the past, both of them forged.

When I reached the reception room the gentleman had already left the premises with his passport. He was set to return at a later date. However, the passport photocopy he left behind revealed what I already suspected – the passport was forged.

Document examiners know better than to attempt to authenticate a passport by copying it. But since checking the control digits of the Machine Readable Zone (MRZ) require no special professional tools but a pen and paper or an MRZ reader available for any smartphone these days, I could not resist the temptation and wait until the original passport returned with its bearer. The discovery led our lab staff to conduct an investigation over a course of few months, digging out of the database all previously registered asylum seekers who presented Lesotho passports.

The findings were quite amazing – while there were only a handful of asylum seekers who presented themselves as nationals of Lesotho, all of them were deemed to have forged passports by our lab. Moreover, it seemed that all of them except one were forged using exactly the same method, leading us to conclude that they were all done by the same forger or group of forgers.

The forged passports were all based on genuine booklets of the same series of the Kingdom of Lesotho passports, which was first introduced in 1998. Back then, personalisation was done by needle printers and the passport photo was glued and pasted to the biodata page and then laminated. In 2006, the personalisation method was changed to inkjet printing, and this is the personalisation method the forgers attempted to imitate.

Naturally, being obsolete and outdated, passports of this series contain no electronic chip, and thus all that had to be done to forge them was a replacement of the biodata page with a complete counterfeit one. This is indeed the method of operation used in all forged passports.

Lab findings

The MRZ of the first passport read an error in control digits. This finding returned in most passports, but not all of them. Some showed correct control digits all over the MRZ bottom line, suggesting a possible learning curve by the forgers.

Under a microscope, all passports showed quite clear marks of detachment and sloppy cutting throughout the composition lines between the original passport booklets and the forged biodata pages. Under UV light, a residue of the original green-glowing stitching thread was clearly present in all of the original stitching punctures. Since changing the biodata page required unstitching the original thread all passports contained a replacement thread, which glowed in blue instead of the original green (see Figure 1).

Other than the security thread, the original passport contains two main security features under UV light: a UV ink drawing of a local succulent plant, the spiral Aloe Polyphylla, embedded in the biodata-page paper filling about 40% of the right side of the page, and a line of green-glowing coat-of-arms of Lesotho in the bottom half of the page.

This line of UV-glowing coat-of-arms originates from the biodata-page laminate. Over the fraudulent biodata pages, the laminate contained fake UV coat-of-arms security images, glowing in red under UV light, while the paper embedded UV image of the plant was completely absent (see Figure 2).

The background patterns produced by offset printing in the original passport had been imitated by an inkjet print pattern, making quite a good impression on the untrained eye (Figure 3).

Although not present in any of the passport databases consulted, a recent discussion with an industry colleague led me to a discovery that for a few years the issuing authorities in Lesotho used optical variable devices (OVDs) in the laminate. The high quality OVDs, spread all over the laminates of the fraudulent passports, led us to believe that there was a substantive possibility that the forgers obtained original laminates, and used them on the forged passports. This high-quality feature alone could fool almost any first line examiners, unfamiliar with the passports.

Last but not least, in all forged biodata pages, the nationality of the bearer was registered as 'Lesotho', while according to samples from various available databases, the nationality of the bearer is always registered by the official name of the 'Kingdom Of Lesotho'.

Summary

The forgers' aim was to enable the bearers to pass through border controls at airports by presenting falsified passports which would deceive the untrained eye due to the rarity of the examined samples. As Lesotho is a fairly small country with a population of just over two million people, many border control officers have never encountered a national of Lesotho. So the forgers could count on the assumption that most officers would be unfamiliar with the passports of this country.

Following in-depth questioning, as far as we could determine all bearers of the fraudulent passports were nationals of either Nigeria or Ghana and, in all likelihood exited their countries of origin by presenting fraudulent passports prior to boarding the planes for Israel. Most passports contained what seemed to be genuine exit stamps from the airports where the bearers boarded their planes.

With our investigation complete, a special bulletin was issued and distributed to colleagues in the country and around the world. The bulletin specified the means of forgery and basic guidelines for training first line examiners to inspect this type of forgery and transfer questioned passports to professional labs or second and third line examiners for further inspection.

The most important basic guidelines were to pay special attention to the machine-readable zone control digits, and if UV tools are available, to check for presence of the embedded UV ink plant drawing on the right side of the biodata page.

Utilising these guidelines and performing a follow up training of border control officers by our colleagues at the airport led to a few successful catches at the border and denied entries of more forged passport bearers.

One of the main issues still under examination is the use of the seemingly authentic laminate in forged biodata pages. As far as we could verify, this type of laminate was only in use on authentic passports for a couple of years and no samples were ever made available for professional databases. At first, its absence in databases led us to believe that the OVDs were in fact a figment of the forgers' imagination. It was a mere coincidence that we discovered this type of laminate was actually produced for authentic passports.

It was just another lesson for us, as document examiners, to always triple check and get as much information as possible on the original document prior to making a determination and writing a report.

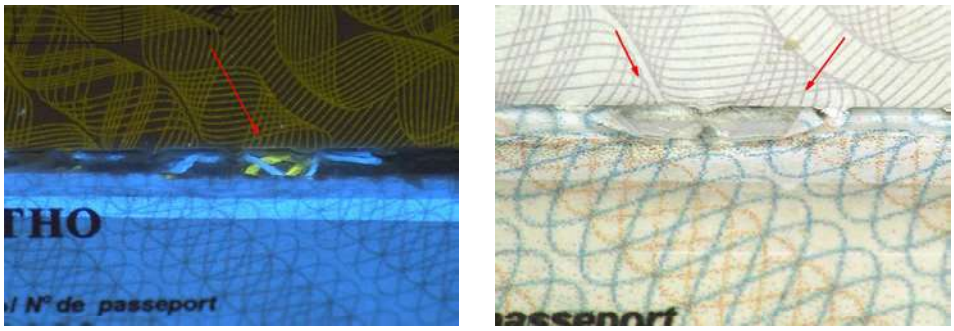

Figure 1: Marks of detachment and sloppy cutting between forged bio data pages and original booklets.

Figure 2: Fraudulent bio datapage (left) and genuine bio datapage (right) under UV.

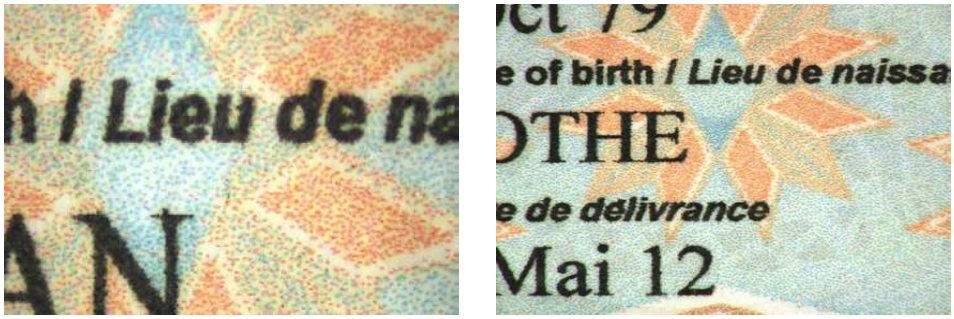

Figure 3: Background and fixed print in the fraudulent bio datapages produced by inkjet.

De La Rue Opens Global Centre of Excellence

De La Rue, the world's largest designer and commercial printer of banknotes and passports, recently opened its Global Centre of Excellence in Malta at an official ceremony inaugurated by Prime Minister Joseph Muscat. The new centre is designed to deliver the next generation of currency, identity management and product authentication solutions, making Malta a unique one stop shop for governments across the globe.

The centre forms part of De La Rue's review to optimise its global manufacturing footprint and create operational flexibility to improve efficiency and reduce costs. The centre is part of a global investment of €33 million in equipment, factory upgrades and skills.

De La Rue Malta has also achieved the highest global security accreditation of ISO14298 at central bank level, making the De La Rue Bulebel site one of the most secure facilities in the world. ISO14298 is the international standard for management of security printing (and foil production) processes and is the transposition of the former CWA 14641.

Welcoming the Prime Minister, Martin Sutherland, CEO of De La Rue said: 'Today gives me real pride - because this is yet another important moment in a relationship between De La Rue and the Government of Malta that stretches back more than 40 years.'

In addition to opening the site, the Prime Minister toured the facility. Martin Sutherland continued: 'Today we launch the High Security Logistics Centre, a new state of the art plate making facility and a new cutting edge technology polycarbonate manufacturing plant which we will launch into full scale production in the coming weeks.'

In November 2015, De La Rue announced the results of a major operational review, which involved the phasing out of banknote production in Malta and the development of the site as the company's main hub for the Identity and Security Printing divisions, relocating production there from other plants. It subsequently reversed the decision on banknotes, which will continue to be produced there, alongside passports and other documents.