

## Stolen passport use exposes lax security

By Julie L. Kessler

The world now knows that last weekend Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 went missing less than an hour after takeoff from the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, bound for Beijing with 239 people aboard. Literally vanished into thin air, without a trace. There were no distress calls or transmissions from the flight deck, no apparent spontaneous combustion, and as of this writing, no wreckage. Just a suspicious oil slick 100 miles west of the jet's intended flight path, and possible fragments of the aircraft's tail. But both the oil slick and the fragments were determined not to have come from debris of the Boeing 777-200. No real information on this incident despite the benefit of a massive international collaborative effort: military, maritime, air safety and search-and-rescue operations involving resources from Malaysia, China, Vietnam, the U.S., and a half-dozen other countries. Incredibly, we simply don't yet know what transpired with Flight 370 at 35,000 feet during clear weather.

### Cultural Commentary

What we do know, however, is this: There were two passengers on board with stolen passports. One passport originally belonged to an Italian, and the other to an Austrian. The passports were reported stolen by their European owners while each was traveling in Thailand in 2012 and 2013, respectively. Once those reports were made, the data in those passports was entered into the international police-coordinating agency's database. However, Interpol reported that no checks of those two passport numbers were made by any country between the time those passports

were entered into its database and the departure last week of Flight 370.

At first, the state news agency of Malaysia, quoting Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, said that the two passengers using the stolen passports were of Asian appearance. This, of course, only leads to many

more questions. Why didn't the Malaysian immigration officials input the passport information once they saw that not one, but two Asians were traveling on European passports? Did the two Asians using these passports have Chinese entry visas? If so, the Chinese government would have had possession of those two stolen passports well in advance of the flight, and the European/Asian matter should have raised all kinds of questions requiring answers prior to the issuance of a Chinese visa. Or was it that the two were only

"in transit" to Beijing since they were both booked on the same connecting flight to Amsterdam, and therefore would not require a Chinese visa? And why were two Asians traveling on European passports — that we now know were stolen — booked to travel on the very same connecting flight onward to Amsterdam?

On Monday, however, the director general of Malaysia's Department of Civil Aviation stated that the two were "not Asian-looking." This weakened the possibility that Uighur separatists (responsible for the mass stabbing in China earlier this month) were possibly involved in Flight 370's disappearance. Then Tuesday it was reported that two Iranian nationals were known to have used the stolen passports — and that while it appears there are no links to terrorism, there could possibly be links to human trafficking,

though officials are merely speculating at this point. This also leads to many, many questions, and sadly as of now, no answers.

It is true that when faced with this kind of terrible puzzle, especially one in which there is as yet no physical evidence to analyze and help us cope, human nature requires some kind of explanation, no matter how conspiratorial, remote or flimsy. It may turn out that these two Iranians who were traveling on the stolen European passports were just garden-variety thieves who purchased those passports on the black market, and nothing more. However, until we have more concrete information, we are left to continuously visit our worst nightmares of what may have really happened on Flight

---

Only the U.S.,  
the U.K. and  
the United Arab  
Emirates are  
regular users  
of the Interpol  
stolen passport  
database ... It is  
hard to imagine  
why other  
countries ...  
would not avail  
themselves of  
this extremely  
valuable  
resource in their  
quest for airline  
safety.

370. This is, unfortunately, part and parcel of the mindset of every frequent flyer in the post-9/11 era.

Perhaps most incredible in this tragic scenario is that only the U.S., the U.K. and the United Arab Emirates are regular users of the Interpol stolen passport database. It is reported that U.S. officials search the Interpol database for just this reason approximately 250 million times a year, the U.K. searches 120 million times a year, and the U.A.E. around 50 million times a year. It is hard to imagine why other countries, especially ones with major, well-regarded airlines such as Malaysia, would not avail themselves of this extremely valuable resource in their quest for airline safety.

I am frequent flyer to Asia and have flown on every major East Asian and Southeast Asian carrier — from Malaysia Air to a whole slew of minor ones. Some airlines are, of course, better than others, but even as a veteran traveler, I still get religious at every take-off and landing; this is a fairly well-known phenomenon amongst my frequently traveling colleagues and friends. In terms of passport controls and checks in Asia, with the exceptions perhaps of Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore, many seem to be lacking, and many passport control officers — like many of their colleagues the world over — seem mind-numbingly bored. They often barely make eye contact with travelers, if they raise their heads at all. Of course, the traveler cannot see precisely what information the officer has on his or her screen, but I can certainly picture the passport control officers in Kuala Lumpur not even noticing that two Iranians were traveling on Italian and Austrian passports. If they did notice, it apparently did not strike them as odd enough to warrant running the passport numbers through the Interpol data base.

The black market for Western passports is an undeniably thriving business in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, and



The image of two Iranians who were traveling with stolen passports on Flight 370 is displayed at the Interpol headquarters in Lyon, France, on Tuesday.

most notably for U.S. and European passports. I had my own passport stolen long before 9/11 while on an aircraft from Hong Kong to Manila (I put it down on the seat next to me during landing to stuff my sweater in my bag, and when I turned to pick up my passport, it was gone.) It was the July 4th weekend, and the U.S. Embassy was closed for four days. I was denied entry into the Philippines, and being then "stateless," I also could not get on a plane to leave. So I spent the entire long and miserable weekend in the airport waiting for Monday morning to come and the embassy to open. I finally did get a replacement that Monday afternoon, but only after a serious grilling by the U.S. consular attaché in Manila, who informed me at the time that the "going rate" for U.S. passports on the black market was about

\$3,000, a veritable fortune in local currency in those days (now it is around \$6,000). I got another long and stern lecture in a closed office upon my reentry to the U.S., which came complete with the most intense search of my belongings I have ever experienced, before or since. But I understood the importance of it then, and of course post 9/11, those lectures and searches may be deemed positively quaint.

Traveling for work or pleasure is no longer for the faint of heart; that is a post-9/11 reality. Many things can go wrong while cruising the sometimes-unfriendly skies in a large metal tube at 35,000 feet, but most of the time, thankfully, they don't happen. However, in the case of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, something truly awful transpired, and we've been told to assume the worst. If this tragedy

was a terrorist act and could possibly have been avoided had passport control duly checked the Interpol database for the two people traveling on stolen passports, that should serve as an international wake-up call of the highest possible order, and should mandate that such protocols be put in place immediately and be made routine — and not just for the U.S., the U.K. and the U.A.E. And if it turns out that this tragedy instead resulted from a mechanical failure, freak weather or indeed due to any other reason, there is still not a single good reason to permit traveling on stolen passports.

**Julie L. Kessler** is an attorney based in Manhattan Beach, and is the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty, The Clarity of Hindsight." She can be reached at [www.JulieLKessler.com](http://www.JulieLKessler.com).



**JULIE L. KESSLER**  
Manhattan Beach