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Global Mobility Is ‘The Starkest It Has Been’ As Countries Tighten Their Borders

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The global mobility gap between people of different citizenships has become wider than almost any point in history as more countries start restricting visa-free travel.



Afghanistan has the worst passport in the world. According to the Henley Passport Index its citizens ... [+] AFP via Getty Images

Japan has the best passport for international travel, allowing its holders to access 191 destinations visa-free, according to the Henley Passport Index, an annual ranking released on Tuesday by citizenship advisory firm Henley and Partners.

Conversely, the worst passport is Afghanistan, which only allows its citizens to enter 26 countries without a visa.

"Analysis of historical data from the index reveals that this extraordinary global mobility gap is the starkest it has been since the index's inception in 2006", says Dominic Volek, managing partner and head of Southeast Asia at Henley and Partners.

"There is a growing divide when it comes to travel freedom—a difficult truth that sits alongside the fact that globalization has made us more mobile and connected than ever before," adds Volek.

Another difficult truth is the fact that countries with the highest migration figures are being denied access to an increasing number of countries. Afghanistan has sat at the bottom of Henley's ranking for a decade, but, together with Syria and South Sudan, accounts for 60% of the world's refugees.

Nigeria is another country with an increasing number of refugees fleeing the country, according to the UNHCR. Its passport has dropped 19 places in this year's Henley Passport Index, more than any other country.



Nigeria's passport was the biggest faller in the Henley Passport Index while the number of refugees ... [+] AFP via Getty Images

The whole notion of citizenship has been further politicised since India (54th on the Henley Passport Index) passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which makes it easier for non-Muslims in neighbouring Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan to gain Indian citizenship. Protesters have taken to Indian cities, arguing that the law discriminates against minority Muslims.



Protesters take part in a demonstration against India's new citizenship law in Hyderabad on January ... [+] AFP via Getty Images

Mobility Is Money

The “haves” and “have-nots” of global mobility is a divide also exemplified by wealth. Those with deep pockets are able to “buy” other citizenships, normally through a property purchase or investment in the country's economy. These range from the \$16,000 Thailand Elite Residence Program to the [U.K.'s £2 million \(\\$2.6 million\) Tier 1 Investor Visa](#).

The price difference of citizenships often varies according to how many countries you can enter visa-free (though the U.K. has fallen in Henley's rankings from first place in 2015 to 8th place this year). Economy and quality of life also play a part.

This leave the “have-nots” at even more of a disadvantage. In much the same way that the poverty trap works to keep people poor, citizenship has the same effect on global mobility: Those without the means to move now have even fewer options to do so.

But as the refugee crises exacerbates around the world (there are more refugees today than at any point since the UN started tracking figures 70 years ago) more needs to be done to reverse this global mobility gap. Philip Reuchlin, program director at the Andan Foundation, a Swiss refugee foundation, says countries should start looking at refugees in a different light: "Globally, treating refugees as ‘burdens’ or ‘objects of care’ is slowly giving way to an understanding that refugees have an extraordinary wealth of talent and a desire to rebuild their lives."