

Australian government rushes in visa ban on people trapped in Middle East war

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Having backed and now joined an illegal war in which the US and Israeli governments are pulverising Iran and Lebanon, killing thousands of people, the Albanese Labor government is rushing a bill through parliament this week to block anyone trying to flee to safety.

The clear intent of the legislation is to keep ordinary people trapped under the bombing, while offering visas to selected individuals, such as members of the Iranian women's soccer team, essentially for a pro-war propaganda purpose.

This further exposes Labor's claims to be supporting the war, and sending a warplane, missiles and troops into it, to free Iranians from oppression or protect people in the Persian Gulf region.

The bill hands extraordinary political powers to the home affairs minister, in collaboration with the prime minister and foreign affairs minister, to bar entry to people from any designated country, even if they hold a valid visa to visit Australia, whether for holidays, study, cultural or sporting events or business.

No country has yet been nominated to be subject to an "arrival control determination" but outraged refugee organisations have said the measures are intended to bar entry to thousands of people from Iran and Lebanon who may already have visitor visas.

At a media conference yesterday, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said the bill was particularly targeted at about 7,000 Iranians who currently have Australian visitor visas and were now living in a "war zone."

Beyond that, the legislation allows the home affairs minister to issue regulations to bar people from any country, with locations such as Gaza, Sudan and Afghanistan already suggested by refugee advocates as places from where people may seek safety or asylum.

As refugee groups have pointed out, this not only echoes the Trump administration's travel bans and violent mass deportations, it recalls Australia's blocking, together with the US, of Jewish refugees trying to escape the Nazi Holocaust in the 1930s.

Introduced under conditions of war, this bill is not an aberration. It takes Labor's historic anti-refugee record—from the Keating government's pioneering the introduction of mandatory detention of asylum seekers in 1991 to the Albanese government's reopening the imprisonment camp on the tiny Pacific island of Nauru in 2023—to new depths of reaction.

The Migration Amendment (2026 Measures No. 1) Bill was suddenly tabled in parliament on Tuesday, having been given "in principle" support by the Liberal-National Coalition to swiftly push through both houses. Both the government and the Coalition explicitly stated that the purpose is to prevent visa holders from seeking to stay in Australia or apply for refugee status.

As home affairs minister, Burke will be able to stop people from nominated countries entering Australia for up to six months, and keep renewing the bans every six months, effectively making them permanent.

No appeals are to be allowed. Like other recent Labor government legislation, the bill explicitly states that the rules of "natural justice"—that is the right to a hearing—do not apply. Even the normal provision for ministerial regulations to be disallowed by either house of parliament is expunged.

This is an open-ended power. The home affairs minister only has to be "reasonably satisfied that" due to "an event or circumstance" people from a designated country may "if they enter Australia on a temporary visa, remain in Australia after the visa ceases to be in effect" and that it is in "the national interest" to issue an "arrival control determination."

Burke will also have the personal power to exempt certain individuals from the ban by issuing a “permitted travel certificate” if “satisfied in all the circumstances that it is appropriate.” That is an arbitrary political discretion.

The only general exemptions under the bill—subject to vetting by the domestic spy agency ASIO—are for parents who have a child in Australia, those who have an immediate family member who is an Australian citizen or permanent resident, and people granted a temporary protection, refugee or humanitarian visa.

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre chief executive Kon Karapanagiotidis described the bill as appalling. “Australia and the US are sending our military to the Middle East in the names of liberating the people of Iran, while at the same time legislating so they can shut the door to those very same people who need our protection—even when already have a visa to travel to Australia,” he said in a media release.

Refugee Council of Australia co-CEO Paul Power said the legislation would “seriously undermine Australia’s commitment” to the principles of the 1951 international Refugee Convention. Drafted after the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II, that convention enshrined the basic right to flee persecution and obtain asylum.

Power stated: “The drafters of the Refugee Convention did not want to see the world repeat what happened in the late 1930s, when governments including Australia closed their doors to Jewish refugees trying to leave Nazi-controlled Germany.

“In 1938, Australia’s Trade and Customs Minister Thomas White attended an international conference in France on the fate of Jewish refugees, declaring that Australia would not help because it did not want to import a ‘racial problem.’”

That notorious turning away of Jewish refugees, shared by the US Roosevelt administration, was carried out by the Menzies Coalition government, in line with the bipartisan “White Australia” policy that was a cornerstone of the Labor Party’s platform from the inception of the Australian federation in 1901. This poisonous racism and nationalism remains in Labor’s DNA.

Since first taking office in 2022, the Albanese government has maintained “Operation Sovereign Borders”—dangerous refugee boat seizures and/or

“turnbacks” by naval or Australian Border Force vessels, conducted behind a wall of military secrecy. That militarised regime was first imposed by the previous Coalition government in 2014, as part of the inhuman “Pacific Solution” of detention on remote islands.

Increasingly, as the domestic social conditions have worsened, reflected in the cost-of-living and housing crisis, Labor has scapegoated refugees, together with other immigrants and international students, seeking to outflank the Coalition and the far-right anti-immigrant One Nation by slashing intake numbers.

These measures are now being intensified and interlaced with Labor’s entry into the criminal US-Israeli war for control over the strategic and resource-rich Middle East, which Washington regards as essential for a war against China.

The Albanese government has also prevented the return home of 11 women and 23 children—all Australian citizens with valid passports—who have been incarcerated in primitive concentration camps in Syria since 2019. This constitutes an historic assault on the core democratic right of citizenship, setting a precedent for wider use, particularly under wartime conditions.

Everywhere around the world, the media and political establishments are seeking to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment, nationalism and patriotism to divide the working class globally, and prepare for war.

Against this barbaric agenda, workers and young people must defend the basic democratic right of people to live and work wherever they choose, with full social and citizenship rights. This is an essential component of the fight for a unified mass movement of the working class globally against war and for the establishment of workers’ power to reorganise society on the basis of social need, not corporate profit.



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