

OPERATION SOVEREIGN BORDERS

IMPACT: ‘Operation Sovereign Borders’ is a military-led border security operation established by the Australian Liberal government in 2013 to deter asylum seekers and refugees from arriving by boat in mainland Australia and its territories. OSB also reopened detention centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, where many detained asylum seekers have waited years for their cases to be processed, amid poor living conditions, untreated physical and mental illnesses, physical and sexual abuse, and deaths.

- **‘Operation Sovereign Borders’ (OSB) is a military-led border security operation established by the conservative Australian Liberal Party government in 2013.** OSB is under the jurisdiction of the Australian Border Force and the Department of Home Affairs. According to its government website, the stated aim of OSB is to “combat people smuggling, prevent illegal migration to Australia, and deter people from attempting unsafe journeys on people smuggling boats.”
- **OSB was established to address a key Liberal government promise at the 2013 election, that they would “stop the boats.”** This was partially in response to the arrival of approximately 38,000 asylum seekers by boat and over 300 confirmed deaths at sea in the years 2009–2013. OSB increasingly operates through a military structure. The current Commander of OSB is Major General Craig Furini (since December 2018) and OSB operations are carried out by military-led border security agencies.
- Under OSB, **any asylum seeker who attempts to reach Australia (inclusive of the mainland and its territories) by boat is automatically transferred to offshore detention facilities on the Republic of Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island**—both remote islands in the Pacific—where their asylum claims are processed. Since 2013, successive Australian governments have declared that asylum seekers who arrive by boat “will never be resettled in Australia.”
- **Since 2012, there have been an estimated 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including children, sent to Manus and Nauru for processing.** Many have waited more than five years for their asylum claims to be processed and to be resettled. Refugees and asylum seekers detained on Manus and Nauru are overwhelmingly from Iran, followed by “claimed stateless,” Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Somalia, Bangladesh, Sudan, Lebanon, India, Nepal, “other,” Myanmar, and Syria.
- The human cost of this policy has been high. **Twelve people have died while in detention, including deaths by suicide (among them, self-immolation).** Medical treatment has been delayed and denied, and detained refugees and asylees have been subjected to abuse by detention guards. Others experience mental illness stemming from their detention, and some have attempted suicide, including children. Some have been subjected to physical assaults and school bullying by local residents in Nauru, women are targeted for sexual assault and harassment, and LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylees face additional criminalization on Manus Island, as homosexuality is illegal in Papua New Guinea. Poor housing and hygiene, as well as inadequate to non-existent medical care are also rampant throughout the detention facilities. In 2016, Papua New Guinea’s Supreme Court declared that Australia’s detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island was illegal. **The Manus Island detention center was closed in 2017; however, asylum seekers have simply been moved to other centers on Manus Island, Nauru, and elsewhere in Papua New Guinea under similar conditions.**
- **A key mechanism of OSB is its ‘tow-back’ policy, supported by both major political parties in Australia.** The policy involves **Australian Defence Force personnel identifying and towing vessels carrying asylum seekers back to their port of departure, which is usually Indonesia.** This policy received condemnation from Indonesia, particularly when it was established that Australian Navy had “inadvertently entered Indonesian territorial waters on several occasions,” a violation of Indonesia’s territorial sovereignty.
- Operation Sovereign Borders has produced a number of marketing materials aimed at deterring asylum seekers from getting on boats to reach Australia. These include **‘Zero chance of reaching Australia’ under the Morrison Liberal government, and ‘No way. You will not make Australia home’ under the Abbott Liberal**

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government. These messages are also included in videos and flyers in other languages, particularly Arabic, that have been distributed in asylum seeker origin countries and refugee and asylum seeker holding countries such as Indonesia, as a form of deterrence for getting on boats to Australia.

- **OSB has been championed by far-right policymakers in Europe and the United States.** Dutch politician Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom have advocated a moratorium on immigration from Muslim-majority countries. He has stated that Europe should copy Australia's policy around migration and asylum seekers, and released a video that replicates Australia's OSB messaging. **The Australian Government has expressed support for President Donald Trump's Muslim Ban executive order** banning entry of refugees from Muslim countries in 2017. Australia's Foreign Minister at the time, Julie Bishop stated: "I'm confident that the Australian government and the US government will continue to support each other in ensuring that we can implement our strong immigration and border protection policies." **In June 2019, Trump expressed his support of Australia's border protection policy with a tweet that read: "These flyers depict Australia's policy on Illegal Immigration. Much can be learned!"**
- In her maiden speech to the Senate in September 2016, Pauline Hanson, leader of the One Nation Party, **called for a ban on Muslim immigration. She stated, "I call for stopping further Muslim immigration and banning the burqa."** In September 2016 a leading national polling company Essential Poll, found that **49% of Australians supported a ban on Muslim immigration to Australia.** In the aftermath of the Ōtautahi/Christchurch mosques shootings in March 2019, **Australian Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi connected the government's Operation Sovereign Border policy with "fanning the flames of racism and Islamophobia."** She said many of Australia's politicians had been "whipping up anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-asylum seeker sentiments."
- **Since OSB has been in place, it has been estimated that Australia has spent almost \$5 billion on its border protection policies.** In 2016–2017 alone, Australia spent \$1.82 billion on managing the offshore detention of asylum seekers who arrive by boat. Costs associated with OSB have been criticized for corrupt practices and the skyrocketing cost of detaining asylum seekers offshore.
- A Senate Estimates Committee report established that the **Australian Government had spent AU\$2.5 million on orange lifeboats to return asylum seekers who were traveling in unsafe boats.** Amnesty International documented allegations in 2015 that Australian officials had **paid approximately \$40,000 to the crew of a boat carrying asylum seekers to return to Indonesia.** Officials refused to either confirm or deny this allegation under questioning in a Senate Estimates Committee in May 2016.
- At first, the Government tightly controlled public information regarding the operations of the policy. **In 2013, then-Immigration Minister Scott Morrison conducted weekly briefings**, which were the only public comments the government has made on OSB activities. These weekly briefings were **discontinued in January 2014. Since then, the Australian Border Force have provided monthly updates** on Operation Sovereign Borders that provide limited detail on any arrival, departure, or refugee and asylum seekers claims that have been processed.
- **Operation Sovereign Borders has received considerable criticism.** A leading legal scholar has questioned the legality of some of Australia's border control practices such as intercepting boats in international waters and towing boats back to their port of departure. The UNHCR has accused Australia of violating international human rights obligations by forcibly returning asylum seekers to their country of origin, potentially putting their lives in danger. In Australia, there has been criticism of the secrecy surrounding OSB operations, particularly boat turn-backs, and the restrictive measures, including criminal liability, the government has pursued over the disclosure of information from within the offshore detention facilities.

This factsheet is published in collaboration between the Bridge Initiative and researchers at the Challenging Racism Project at Western Sydney University. More information about this project can be found [here](#).