



Report on my visit to Istanbul: April 2008

Background information

- **Application processes:** From December 2007, Istanbul handles all decisions on applications made in Turkey, other than applications from diplomats. Applicants apply on line or on paper, submitting the application and fee when they attend, either by appointment or by walking into, Visa Application Centres (VACs) in Ankara or Istanbul. The VACs are run by Worldbridge, the UK Border Agency's partner. Worldbridge also provides 3 micro-vacs in Turkey where on-line applicants can submit biometric fingerscans.
- **Demand:** In financial year 2006-07, Istanbul received 56,341 UK applications an increase of 32.4% over the previous year. In the 2007-8 financial year, there was a further increase of 10.6%. Excluding children, whose applications cannot be counted separately, 69.9% of applications are for non-family visits.
Istanbul now handles decisions from applications made in Tel Aviv and anticipates that this will add 3,000 cases annually. These cases were not included in my file sample.
- **Refusal Rates:** In 2006-07, the overall refusal rate was 5.7%, rising to 6.3% from April 2007 to February 2008. I found that visit visa applications (excluding children) for January to March 2008 had a refusal rate of 5.7%, Short Term Students 13% and Student Visitors 11%. Non-settlement applications had an overall refusal rate of 9%.
- **Staffing:** There are two full time Entry Clearance Managers and 9 Entry Clearance Officers plus a complement of administrative support staff. The regional Director of Visa Services, Deputy Director Visa Services and Special Projects Manager are based in Istanbul.
- **Surplus and Deficit:** In 2005-06, the most recent figures available, the visa operation recorded a deficit of £2,594,682. Given the rise in demand, this figure, now 2 years out of date, is hardly relevant and I have asked the UK Border Agency to provide more up to date information.

The programme

On arrival I issued instructions for the file samples I wished to assess. I visited the current and new VACs. I talked with Entry Clearance Officers, Manager and Assistants and with the risk assessment team. I met the British Council representative and with immigration staff from the Dutch Consulate. The Consul General hosted a particularly useful dinner with a small number of guests who provided lively information and opinion to help me understand the context in which the visa section works.

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Information

Website: Using a search engine in Turkey for *visa UK* took me to the British Embassy website which has not been updated to reflect the December 2007 changes in processes. This could cause significant inconvenience, for example one person travelling to Ankara expecting that they could submit applications for other members of a group, such as family and friends. **I recommended** (1) that the information be changed without delay and was told that there had been problems getting colleagues to act promptly on requests to amend website information: this difficulty must be resolved.

UKBAIG response:

UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. The website is now fully compliant with UKBA instructions and fully aligned with the content on the UKBA and CP sites.

I also recommended (2) that information on passport requirements be corrected immediately; applicants are not required to have a passport with 6 months validity and UK visas issued directions to that effect last year.

UKBAIG response:

UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. The guidance has been withdrawn accordingly.

VAC: Although the VAC was due to close at the end of the week, there were no signs of packing up or neglect and the premises were smart and well maintained. All notices were matched by translations and all material had the new UK Border Agency logo. Information leaflets were in a rack out of direct sight and **I recommended** (3) that the rack be placed in the waiting area in the new VAC so that applicants could help themselves.

UKBAIG response:

UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. The information leaflets are on prominent display at the new VAC which opened the week after the visit.

I was concerned to see that the rack included uncorrected copies of the visit visa leaflet which had been withdrawn following my visit to Copenhagen last September and **recommended** (4) that staff follow the recent guidance because the leaflet is misleading about being able to study as a visitor.

UKBAIG response:

UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. A typed correction slip is now affixed to the relevant section of the leaflets.

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I thought that the loop DVD on the biometric process was a very useful way of briefing applicants who were waiting and suspect that the advance information will smooth the process. The move to the new VAC was on schedule and should be complete by the time this report is issued. I thought it looked stylish as well as being more conveniently located and I noted that considerable care and thought that gone into its design.

British Consulate General: For those called for interview, I thought it was helpful that the external notices are in the same style as the ones applicants will have seen at the VAC.

Accounting for monies

I was most concerned to see that cash was being taken from applicants at the first counter in the VAC and stuffed into a glass jar. I was told that it was for photocopying. Taking cash in that way is open to abuse and lacks the transparency that is required by the UK public sector. If there is an optional charge for copying, then the charges should be clearly displayed and no money should be taken from an applicant without providing a receipt. I thought that it created a very poor impression because other applicants could think that the money was for favourable treatment or a tip for good service. **I recommend** (5) that the UK Border Agency conducts an inquiry into how and when this practice started and how it was not spotted in the routine monitoring of the commercial partnership contract.

UKBAIG response:

UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. The practice ceased immediately. UKBAIG managers are investigating with CSC managers how it arose, and a full report will be forwarded to senior managers. We will share our conclusions with the commercial partner. Future photocopying and other services will only be introduced with prior, written approval from UKBA via the 'value added' services mechanism.

British Council

In a brief meeting, I was impressed by the commitment of the Council to working with agents and with visa staff to ensure there is accurate information on visa requirements for the growing market for Higher and Further education in the UK. There was less emphasis on the short term language students who are within my remit and having noted that there is a high proportion of Student Visitor applications, I thought that there might be the need to ensure agents understand the limitations of that category. I suggested that the visa team look at a sample of Student Visitor applications to see if there is a common agent and act accordingly if that is the case.

Decision quality file sample

I reviewed 32 files where visas had been refused, in March 2008, with information on limited appeal rights. Compared with the most recent global file sample, using a 10 point quality scale, Refusal Notices scored an overall 88%, placing Istanbul in the **Good** band (global average = 83%, regional average = 80%).

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I had asked for 50 files sifted by type of application. I found, however, that 40% were not within my remit as they were family visit applications. A quick skim showed that they had been provided with correct information on appeal rights and the problem was one of inaccurate data entry. The UK Border Agency does need firm management information, not least of all to ensure adequate resourcing, and a 40% error rate is a serious concern. Whilst some Entry Clearance Officers thought that it was the VAC's responsibility to enter the category of application, my view is that only Entry Clearance Officers are trained to assess whether an application is for a qualifying family visit, and thus it is their responsibility to make sure that the recorded category is correct after fully examining the application and supporting papers.

For the cases within my remit, I was pleased to see that Refusal Notices were far more balanced than the global average, with positive points in 34% compared with 17% globally. 24% of Refusal Notices included comment on verified information and I noted that such enquiries are recorded on a formal form with clear and adequate detail. In a group of cases, there had been imaginative use of an internet search engine to confirm that musicians were booked to perform in the UK, thus needing Work Permits, rather than the photoshoot that had been claimed.

Notices were generally neat and tidy, though they suffered from some lengthy and hard to understand standard paragraphs, some of which repeated other standard paragraphs. I thought that the team should develop simple and plain English versions aimed at applicants for whom English is not the first language.

The major area for further work is on careful reading of the evidence provided in the Application Form and supporting documents. Two cases illustrated the difficulties that can result from lack of care. In the first, the applicant stated that he wished to visit close family, providing a list of their relationships and contact numbers. The visit was to be a surprise, and he intended to stay in a hotel. The Entry Clearance Officer thought perhaps that the absence of sponsorship evidence had led her to count the application as a non-family visit and provide information on limited, rather than full appeal rights. **I recommended** (6) that the Refusal Notice was re-issued with correct information.

[UKBAIG response:](#)

[UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. A revised Refusal Notice giving the correct information on appeal rights was issued within 24 hours.](#)

The second case was a more significant error. The applicant stated in the VAF that he had been to the UK before, and when. The main ground for refusal was that he had stated that he had **not** been to the UK but a biometrics check had shown that he had. The Entry Clearance Officer thought, therefore, that the applicant had intended to deceive. If the application had been made in April rather than the end of March, then under the new Immigration Rules aimed at deterring deception (IR 320(7)), the assumption would have been that the applicant had a mandatory 10 year ban on being issued with a visa. I noted that the Refusal Notice lacked any detail about the circumstances and date of the biometric match and I find that to be particularly unfair. **I recommended** (7) that the application was reconsidered with the benefit of adequately detailed information.

[UKBAIG response:](#)

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UKBA accepts this recommendation. The relevant dates regarding the previous claim for leave to remain in the UK were established and a revised Refusal Notice sent to the applicant.

The visa team told me that it takes 3 weeks to obtain information on a biometric match so they go ahead without asking for it, but the most recent Business Assurance checklist says that Entry Clearance Officers are instructed to check all biometric matches. **I recommend** (8) that the visa team ensures that it follows UK Border Agency practice. Where there is a match which might show deception, it is vital that there is sufficient information in the Refusal Notice to confirm the circumstances. I noted good practice in this regard in my visit to Bangkok, and the new Immigration Rule makes this even more important.

UKBAIG response:

UKBAIG accepts this recommendation. Biometric matches are usually received within 30 minutes. It is not necessary for a case to be routinely deferred at this stage although, where the match indicates that deception may have taken place, the refusal notice should contain sufficient details confirming the circumstances of the deception.

I have raised concerns about risk assessment work being integrated across the visa business as a whole. I am therefore, pleased to report that in Istanbul I found the Risk Assessment Officer and Assistant to be fully part of the visa section's work. I noted that the risk assessment staff are working hard to be evidence based and understand fully the need to support the guidance they offer to Entry Clearance Officers with firm facts.

Complaint handling

I was not satisfied that the VAC keeps adequate records of applicant feedback. No formal or comprehensive record could be produced and there appeared to be uncertainty about recording complaints made by phone or in person. For example, I learnt that there has been a pattern of complaints of rudeness or abrasive treatment by VAC staff and there should, therefore, be a detailed record of the staff member and circumstances so that any necessary remedial action can take place. I thought that complaint handling at the VAC was Poor and I **recommended** (9) that the visa section ensures that a full record is now maintained.

UKBAIG response:

- UKBAIG accepts this recommendation and will ensure that the monitoring of complaints at VACs is carried out consistently across the region. A specific complaint about staff behaviour at the Izmir Micro-VAC was investigated by CSC managers in Istanbul, reporting to Deputy Director Visa Services (Projects). The CSC manager visited the Micro-VAC to address these issues. Since then there have been no further reports of the inappropriate behaviour described in this report. We continue to monitor the situation. Feedback provided to UKBA on customer service levels has generally been very positive. Between December 2007 - March 2008 we received 878 customer satisfaction survey forms from customers in Turkey. Of this statistically healthy return, and despite the interim VAC solution in Istanbul, 65% of customers described their experience as 'good' and 25% as 'very good'.

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I looked at a small sample of the complaints recorded by the visa section and found that most had had appropriate replies. I asked for one case to be further reviewed because the response had focused solely on a complaint of rudeness by VAC staff and had failed to respond to the other issues raised, such as errors in information provided by VAC staff relating to au-pair applications. Given that, I thought that complaint handling was Fair, though I note that the Director of Visa Services is finding increased expectations with regard to recording and responding to complaints to be a useful way of seeing what is going on in the business.

Overview

Istanbul has been recovering from a serious backlog in decision making which, I was told, was caused by the introduction of biometric data capture in December and 3 public holidays. Whilst managers have to make decisions on how best to use resources in such circumstances, I do find that cases refused with limited appeal rights were not treated fairly or equitably. Applications were reviewed on arrival and those that were going to be refused were put in a queue, whereas successful applications had the decision straightaway. Many of the March 2008 decisions that I looked at related to applications made in December and January and in some cases maladministration caused by unreasonable delay will have caused real inconvenience, such as an application to marry in the UK where the decision to refuse was two months after the intended wedding day. In my view, if there have to be delays, they should be applied evenly to applications that will be issued and those to be refused.

Istanbul scored Poor for website information, though Good for onsite information, Good for the quality of Refusal Notices and Fair overall for complaint handling. My overall assessment is that performance is **Fair**. The problems with attention to evidence that I found in the file sample may have been caused by too much rush in the effort to catch up but there is an overriding need for fairness, accuracy and thoroughness. There is, however, no doubt that the visa team have worked hard to get back to normal and by the time of my visit, turnaround times had recovered. I found the team to be open minded and responsive and am optimistic that with the worst of the queues behind them, they can now focus on quality.

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