



2 December 2024

Oliver Smith

BY EMAIL: foi+request-11910-b926c1ba@righttoknow.org.au

In reply please quote:

FOI Request: FA 24/08/01037

File Number: FA24/08/01037

Dear Oliver Smith

Freedom of Information (FOI) request – Decision

On 16 August 2024, the Department of Home Affairs (the Department) received a request for access to documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act).

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with a decision on your request for access under the FOI Act.

1 Scope of request

You have requested access to the following documents:

Revised Scope - 26 August 2024

*Under the FOI Act, please provide a signed copy of the brief titled “*Hamas-Israel conflict - visa processing update*” sent to the Minister for Immigration’s office on 12/12/2023 with the PDR number: MS23-002455.*

Original Scope - 12 August 2024

*Under the FOI Act, please provide a copy of the brief titled “*Hamas-Israel conflict - visa processing update*” sent to the Minister for Immigration’s office on 12/12/2023 with the PDR number: MS23-002455.*

2 Authority to make decision

I am an officer authorised under section 23 of the FOI Act to make decisions in respect of requests to access documents or to amend or annotate records.

3 Relevant material

In reaching my decision I referred to the following:

- the terms of your request
- the documents relevant to the request
- the FOI Act
- Guidelines published by the Office of the Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the FOI Guidelines)
- advice from Departmental officers with responsibility for matters relating to the documents to which you sought access
- advice from other Commonwealth Departments

4 Documents in scope of request

The Department has identified one document with two attachments, as falling within the scope of your request. These documents were in the possession of the Department on 16 August 2024 when your request was received.

Attachment A is a schedule which describes the relevant documents and exemption claims in relation to each of them.

5 Decision

The decision in relation to the documents in the possession of the Department which fall within the scope of your request is as follows:

- Release three documents in part with deletions

6 Reasons for Decision

6.1 Section 22 of the FOI Act – Irrelevant to Request

Section 22 of the FOI Act provides that if giving access to a document would disclose information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request, it is possible for the Department to prepare an edited copy of the document, modified by deletions, ensuring that the edited copy would not disclose any information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request.

On 19 August 2024, the Department advised you that its policy is to exclude the personal details of officers not in the Senior Executive Service (SES), as well as the mobile and work telephone numbers of SES staff, contained in documents that fall within scope of an FOI request.

I have decided that parts of document marked 's22(1)(a)(ii)' would disclose information that could reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to your request. I have prepared an edited copy of the document, with the irrelevant material deleted pursuant to section 22(1)(a)(ii) of the FOI Act.

The remainder of the document has been considered for release to you as it is relevant to your request.

6.2 Section 33 of the FOI Act – Documents affecting National Security, Defence or International Relations

Section 33(a)(i) and Section 33(a)(iii) of the FOI Act permits exemption of a document if disclosure of the document would, or could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the international relations of the Commonwealth.

For the reasons set out below, I consider that there are real and substantial grounds for expecting that the disclosure of the documents exempted under section 33(a)(i) would cause damage to the security of the Commonwealth.

Security

‘Security’ is a concept with a fluctuating content which can depend upon the circumstances as they exist from time to time.¹ ‘Security of the Commonwealth’ is defined in section 4(5) of the FOI Act as follows

- (5) *Without limiting the generality of the expression security of the Commonwealth, that expression shall be taken to extend to:*
 - (a) *matters relating to the detection, prevention or suppression of activities, whether within Australia or outside Australia, subversive of, or hostile to, the interests of the Commonwealth or of any country allied or associated with the Commonwealth; and ...*

I also consider that the definition of ‘security’ in the *Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation Act 1979* (the ASIO Act) is relevant. This view is in accordance with the guidance provided by *Staats and National Archives of Australia*,² in which Deputy President Forgie found that it would be ‘consistent with the scheme of regulation established by Parliament to interpret the word “security” in both the Archives Act and the FOI Act in a way that mirrors its definition in the ASIO Act’.

The ASIO Act defines ‘security’ as:

- (a) *The protection of, and of the people of, the Commonwealth and the several States and Territories from:*
 - (i) *Espionage*
 - (ii) *Sabotage*
 - (iii) *Politically motivated violence*
 - (iv) *Promotion of communal violence*
 - (v) *Attacks on Australia’s defence system; or*
 - (vi) *Acts of foreign interference;*
- Whether directed from, or committed within, Australia or not; and*
- (aa) *the protection of Australia’s territorial and border integrity from serious threats; and*
- (b) *The carrying out of Australia’s responsibilities to any foreign country in relation to a matter mentioned in any of the*

¹ *Church of Scientology v Woodward* (1982) 154 CLR 25 at [19].

² *Staats and National Archives of Australia* [2010] AATA 531 (16 July 2010) (austlii.edu.au), at [99]

subparagraphs of paragraph (a) or the matter mentioned in paragraph (aa).

For a document (or part of a document) to be exempt under s 33(a)(i), I must be satisfied that, on the balance of probabilities, disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to the security of the Commonwealth.

I consider that the disclosure of the information contained within **Document 1.1** is exempt under s 33(a)(i) as it could cause damage to the security of the Commonwealth by compromising operational functions.

As such I have decided that parts of the information marked 's33(a)(i)' in **Document 1.1** is exempt from disclosure under section 33(a)(i) of the FOI Act.

Section 33(a)(iii)

The phrase 'international relations' has been interpreted as meaning the ability of the Australian Government to maintain good working relations with other governments and international organisations and to protect the flow of confidential information between them. The expectation of damage to international relations must be reasonable in all the circumstances, having regard to the nature of the information; the circumstances in which it was communicated; and the nature and extent of the relationship. There must be real and substantial grounds for the conclusion that are supported by evidence.

I consider that the release of the information marked 's33(a)(iii)' in **Document 1**, could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the Australian Government's international relations.

I am of the view that the disclosure of **Document 1 in Attachment A** could reasonably be expected to inhibit future negotiations between the Australian Government and Palestine.

As such I have decided that the information redacted and marked 's33(a)(iii)' is exempt from disclosure under section 33(a)(iii) of the FOI Act.

6.3 Section 47C of the FOI Act – Deliberative Processes

Section 47C of the FOI Act provides that a document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure would disclose deliberative matter relating to the deliberative processes involved in the functions of the Department.

'*Deliberative matter*' includes opinion, advice or recommendation obtained, prepared or recorded, or consultation or deliberation that has taken place, in the deliberative processes of an agency.

'*Deliberative processes*' generally involves "*the process of weighing up or evaluating competing arguments or considerations*"³ and the "*thinking processes –the process of reflection, for example, upon the wisdom and expediency of a proposal, a particular decision or a course of action.*"⁴

³ *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [18]

⁴ *JE Waterford and Department of Treasury (No 2)* [1984] AATA 67

Documents 1 and 1.1 contains advice, opinions and recommendations prepared or recorded in the course of, or for the purposes of, the deliberative processes involved in the functions of Department being:

- the approach taken for the processing of visa applications from people declaring Palestinian citizenship, and
- Post-arrival support options for persons from Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories affected by the Hamas-Israel conflict

I am satisfied that this deliberative matter relates to a process that was undertaken within government to consider whether and how to make or implement a decision, revise or prepare a policy, administer or review a program, or some similar activity.⁵

Disclosure of this deliberative information could reasonably be expected to inhibit full and frank advice from the Department to its Minister, and, as a result, full consideration by the Government on any potential future consideration of amendments to legislation. Disclosure of some deliberative information, on which a decision has not yet been taken, could also reasonably be expected to prejudice consultations with relevant stakeholders.

Section 47C(2) provides that “deliberative matter” does not include purely factual material. I am satisfied that the deliberative material is not purely factual in nature.

I am further satisfied that the factors set out in subsection (3) do not apply in this instance.

I have decided that the information is conditionally exempt under section 47C of the FOI Act. Access to a conditionally exempt document must generally be given unless it would be contrary to the public interest to do so. I have turned my mind to whether disclosure of the information would be contrary to the public interest, and have included my reasoning in that regard below.

6.4 Section 47E of the FOI Act – Operations of Agencies

Section 47E(d) of the FOI Act provides that documents are conditionally exempt if disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency.

I consider that the disclosure of parts of **Documents 1, 1.1 and 1.2**, marked ‘s47E(d)’ would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of the Department.

Any disclosure resulting in the prejudice of the effectiveness of the Department’s operational methods and procedures would result in the need for this Department, and potentially its law enforcement partners, to change those methods and/or procedures to avoid jeopardising their future effectiveness.

Confirming an applicant’s identity through alternative means, rather than a valid passport, requires the Department to expend additional resources. For instance, it could mean conducting

⁵ *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General’s Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962

more extensive identity verification checks, using data-matching tools, or relying on other, potentially more costly, methods to confirm identity.

If the information about alternative identity verification processes were released, it could encourage applicants to bypass standard procedures or omit certain documentation, increasing the complexity and burden on the Department's operational workflow. This could delay processing times and potentially lead to risks of identity fraud or misuse of the visa application system, which would directly impact the efficiency, resource allocation, and integrity of the Department's operations.

Furthermore, it could have a substantial adverse effect on the operations of the agency by:

- **Disrupting operational strategies:** If the Department's prioritisation of grant-ready applications is disclosed, it could alter how visa applicants or their representatives approach the process, potentially influencing trends in application submissions, appeals, or behaviour by applicants in anticipation of certain outcomes.
- **Compromising the impartiality of the visa processing framework,** by revealing details about criteria or decision-making processes.
- **Trigger adverse behaviours or reactions:** Knowing that refusals may increase for a specific group could encourage behaviours that complicate the Department's operational workload, such as an influx of appeals or rapid surges in applications intended to avoid perceived restrictions.

Therefore, I have decided that parts of these documents are conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act. Access to a conditionally exempt document must generally be given unless it would be contrary to the public interest to do so. I have turned my mind to whether disclosure of the information would be contrary to the public interest, and have included my reasoning in that regard below.

6.5 The Public Interest – Section 11A of the FOI Act

As I have decided that parts of the documents are conditionally exempt, I am now required to consider whether access to the conditionally exempt information would be contrary to the public interest (section 11A of the FOI Act).

A part of a document which is conditionally exempt must also meet the public interest test in section 11A(5) before an exemption may be claimed in respect of that part.

In summary, the test is whether access to the conditionally exempt part of the document would be, on balance, contrary to the public interest.

In applying this test, I have noted the objects of the FOI Act and the importance of the other factors listed in section 11B(3) of the FOI Act, being whether access to the document would do any of the following:

- (a) promote the objects of this Act (including all the matters set out in sections 3 and 3A)*
- (b) inform debate on a matter of public importance*
- (c) promote effective oversight of public expenditure*
- (d) allow a person to access his or her own personal information.*

Having regard to the above I am satisfied that:

- Access to the documents would promote the objects of the FOI Act.
- The subject matter of the documents does have the character of public importance and that there may be broad public interest in the documents.
- Insights into public expenditure will be provided through examination of the documents.
- You do not require access to the documents in order to access your own personal information.

I have also considered the following factors that weigh against the release of the conditionally exempt information in the documents:

- Disclosure of the conditionally exempt information under section 47C of the FOI Act could reasonably be expected to prejudice the ability of Departments across government to provide full and honest advice to stakeholders, and to manage future policy making processes. I consider that the disclosure of this type of deliberative material would inhibit the Government's future deliberation, which is contrary to the public interest, and this factor weighs strongly against disclosure future proposals to legislative amendments.
- A Ministerial Submission plays an important role in the relationship between a Department and its Minister. Its purpose is to provide frank and honest advice. It is inherently confidential between the Department and its Minister and the preparation of a Ministerial Submission is essentially intended for the audience of that Minister alone. A precedent of public disclosure of advice given as a part of a Ministerial Submission would result in:
 - concerns existing in the open and honest nature of advice being provided which may then hinder future deliberations and decision making processes for the Department and the Government as a whole and
 - future Ministerial Submissions being prepared with a different audience in mind, which would compromise the quality of the advice being prepared for the Minister.
- I consider that the public interest in protecting the process of the provision of free and honest confidential advice by a Department to its Minister has, on balance, more weight, than the public interest that might exist in disclosing the deliberative matter. Endangering the proper working relationship that a Department has with its Minister and its ability to provide its Minister with honest advice confidentially would be contrary to the public interest.
- Disclosure of the parts of the documents that are conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act could reasonably be expected to prejudice law enforcement functions and, as a result, the ability of the Department to protect Australia's borders. I consider there to be a strong public interest in ensuring that the ability of the Department to conduct its law enforcement functions is not compromised or prejudiced in any way. I consider that this would be contrary to the public interest and that this factor weighs strongly against disclosure.

I have also had regard to section 11B(4) which sets out the factors which are irrelevant to my decision, which are:

- a) *access to the document could result in embarrassment to the Commonwealth Government, or cause a loss of confidence in the Commonwealth Government*
- b) *access to the document could result in any person misinterpreting or misunderstanding the document*
- c) *the author of the document was (or is) of high seniority in the agency to which the request for access to the document was made*
- d) *access to the document could result in confusion or unnecessary debate.*

I have not taken into account any of those factors in this decision.

Upon balancing all of the above relevant public interest considerations, I have concluded that the disclosure of the conditionally exempt information in the documents would be contrary to the public interest and it is therefore exempt from disclosure under the FOI Act.

7 Legislation

A copy of the FOI Act is available at <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2004A02562>. If you are unable to access the legislation through this website, please contact our office for a copy.

8 Your Review Rights

Internal Review

You do not have the right to seek an internal review of this decision. This is because section 54E(b) of the FOI Act provides that, when an agency is deemed to have refused an FOI request under section 15AC of the FOI Act, the applicant does not have the right to seek an internal review of the deemed decision.

The Department was deemed to have refused your request under section 15AC of the FOI Act because it did not make this decision within the statutory timeframes for the request.

While the Department has now made a substantive decision on your request, section 15AC of the FOI Act continues to apply to your request, which means that any request you make for internal review will be invalid.

Information Commissioner Review

You can instead request the Australian Information Commissioner to review this decision. If you want to request an Information Commissioner review, you must make your request to the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) within 60 days of being notified of this decision.

You can apply for an Information Commissioner review at: [Information Commissioner Review application form on the OAIC website](#).

If you have already applied for an Information Commissioner review, there is no need to make a new review request. The OAIC will contact you shortly to give you an opportunity to advise whether you wish the review to continue, and to provide your reasons for continuing the review.

You can find more information about Information Commissioner Reviews [on the OAIC website](#).

9 Making a complaint

You may make a complaint to the Australian Information Commissioner if you have concerns about how the Department has handled your request under the FOI Act. This is a separate process to the process of requesting a review of the decision as indicated above.

You can make an FOI complaint to the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) at: [FOI Complaint Form on the OAIC website](#).

10 Contacting the FOI Section

Should you wish to discuss this decision, please do not hesitate to contact the FOI Section at foi@homeaffairs.gov.au.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Michael', written in a cursive style.

Michael
Position number 6016694
Authorised Decision Maker
Department of Home Affairs

ATTACHMENT A

**SCHEDULE OF DOCUMENTS
REQUEST UNDER FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982**

FOI request: FA 24/08/01037

File Number: FA24/08/01037

No.	No. of pages	Description	Decision on release	
1.	7	Ministerial Submission - MS23-0024555	Exempt in Part	s.22(1)(a)(ii) s.33(a)(iii) s.47(C)(1) s.47E(d)
1.1	3	Attachment A	Exempt in Part	s.33(a)(i) s.47(C)(1) s.47(E)(d)
1.2	2	Attachment B	Exempt in Part	s.47(E)(d)