

For Refugees, No Direction Home

Text and photos by *Alessandra Garusi*

Though Sweden has long been among the most even-handed European states in regard to Iraqi refugees, it has started thinking twice.

When Baghdad was under a rain of American bombs in March 2003, the Iraqis who fleeing the country had one destination in mind: Södertälje, a small Swedish city (tennis champion Bjorn Borg's home town) about 30 kilometers from Stockholm. Södertälje. Over the last decade, this urban enclave has witnessed literal change of identity. Of its 87,685 inhabitants, 7,769 are Iraqis, earning it the moniker "Little Baghdad" or Mesopotalye.

Södertälje has two football clubs made up entirely of young Iraqis. It also has a satellite television network

called Suryoyo, which since January 2006 has been broadcasting Aramaic-language programs to more than 80 countries, with others in English and Arabic. The city has churches representing Iraq's major Christian denominations. So popular are its services that some of the churches broadcast the ceremonies widescreen TVs located outside for those unable to fit in.

Few are aware that Sweden has the largest Iraqi community in Europe, officially 125,499 people spread across the country and concentrated in Stockholm (18,140), Malmö (10,337), Gothenburg (11,348), and,

of course, Södertälje. Though the Swedish figure can't compete with the estimated two million displaced Iraqis living in Syria and Jordan, it's a huge number when compared to those in the United States and Canada.

The human tide that poured into tiny Södertälje was so unwieldy that the city's mayor, Anders Lago, publicly appeared before the U.S. Congressional Helsinki Commission in Washington, D.C. in April 2008 in an effort to generate a greater sense of global responsibility toward Iraqi exiles on the part of the United States. A month later, Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt

met with then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on the same subject.

The U.S. response, weighed against the dimensions of the exodus, was paltry. In May 2008, the Bush Administration agreed to take in 1,000 Iraqis. In all of 2008, the number of Iraqis given U.S. political exile was 12,000 (up from 1,608 the previous year). Over the span of the war, the numbers have remained consistently modest.

Sweden has always been proud of its generous approach to refugee needs. The process began in earnest in the 1970s, when the country took Chilean exiles after



Left-to-right:
An Iranian couple
at Kungliga Slottet (Royal Palace)
in the Gamla Stan neighborhood
of Stockholm.

The narrow streets of Gamla Stan.

Packed Hamngatan
on a Saturday afternoon.



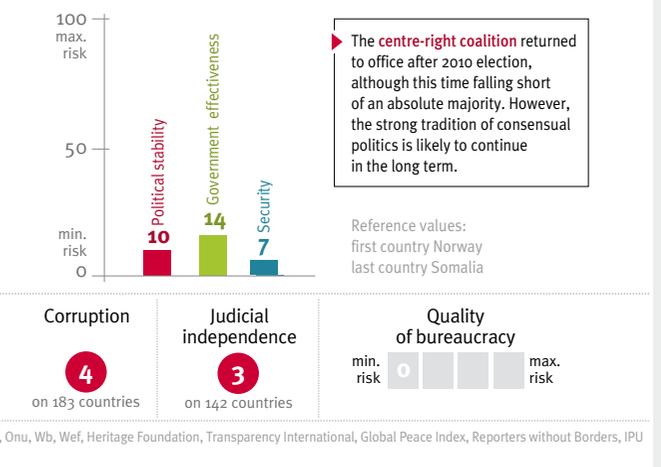
The Swedish justice ministry at Rosenbad 4.



SWEDEN

AREA	450,295 Km ²
POPULATION	9,103,788 (estimates 2011)
MEDIAN AGE	42 years
RELIGIONS	Lutheran 87%, other (includes Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist) 13%
FORM OF GOVERNMENT	Constitutional monarchy
SUFFRAGE	Universal (18 years of age)
HEAD OF STATE	King CARL XVI GUSTAF (September 1973)
HEAD OF GOVERNMENT	Fredrik REINFELDT (October 2006)
GDP (nominal)	\$ 523 bn (estimates 2012)
INFLATION	1.2% (estimates 2012)

Political indicators Political Risk & Country Analysis - UniCredit



the fall and death of President Salvatore Allende.

But even Sweden has tired of being the only European port in a storm. In July 2007, the Swedish Supreme Court ruled that the armed conflict in Iraq was over, making refugee status more difficult to obtain.

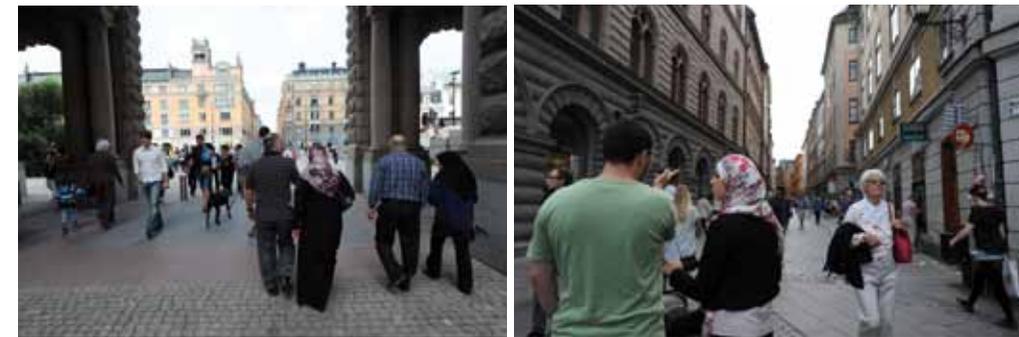
The ruling granted asylum only to those who could prove that they were suffering from verifiable personal persecution. Courts no longer viewed persecution as generic and thus without religious or regional provenance. The new legal approach dropped the number of “approved” refugees from 80 percent of applicants to 20 percent, says Mikael Ribbenvik, who heads Legal Affairs section of the country’s Migration Board.

Those who fail to earn admission and accept “voluntary return” to Iraq are given a one-way ticket home and enough cash to ostensibly reestablish themselves once back. But Amnesty International insists that many of the areas to which refused Iraqis return remain highly dangerous. Human rights organizations have also assailed Sweden for coming up

with terms like “voluntary return” to mask a harsher reality. Refugees unable to win entry into Sweden don’t return on a voluntary basis, but because they have no choice, says AI.

Many of the Iraqis who do make it to Sweden are penniless, having made the journey on a wing and a prayer. Getting a fake passport in Baghdad can cost as much as €12,000. Then there’s the high cost Scandinavian living, where even a McDonald’s meal can cost €8 and use of a public toilet runs 80 cents. The paltry sum received by refugees awaiting entry into the country is hardly a living wage. Those rejected by Swedish officials often grow quickly demoralized and accept the terms of the “voluntary return” program.

Sweden’s migration and asylum minister, Tobias Billström, has a different perspective on his country’s role and the return process. “From 2009 to 2012, the number of so-called ‘voluntary returnees’ dropped from 2,374 to 735. This shows us that the worst of the emergency is behind us and that there’s a good level of cooperation between the governments of the two countries.”



Right-to-left
An Iraqi couple walking in Riksgatan, near parliament in Stockholm.

Gamla Stan is a popular destination.

But Billström is at once a realist and an optimist. “The Iraq situation,” he admits, “is the worst humanitarian disaster in terms of Middle East refugees since 1948,” but he swiftly adds: “The future will show that integration is possible. For many, it’s already a given. Of course, many big questions still remain unanswered, in terms of education, the right to travel elsewhere in search of work, and so on.”

In terms of economics, Sweden and Iraq have forged strong links. “Many Swedish companies have branches in Iraq,” says Billström. “And just recently a Swedish company announced it had signed a \$75 million contract to help with the reconstruction of Iraq’s electric grid.”

Ties between the two countries at a cultural and artistic level are also blossoming. Stockholm remained sensitive Baghdad’s plight even during the Iraqi capital’s worst moments. Sweden, for example, was the first state to reopen its Baghdad embassy after the fall of Saddam Hussein, when few other states dared.

But Billström isn’t without his critics, some of whom don’t mince their words. “The majority of Iraqis in Sweden are not integrated,” says Urban Hamid, a 55-year-old freelance journalist with an Iraqi father and a Swedish mother. “This is probably due to unemployment and that most of the Iraqis end up living in areas that amount to segregated ghettos.” For the blunt Hamid, who considers himself a citizen of two worlds, “hatred toward Islam and aversion to foreigners are still on the rise in Sweden.”

In February 2003, Hamid’s desire to bear witness to the war and strong sense of guilt for the good life he’d lived first in Sweden and then the United States, led him

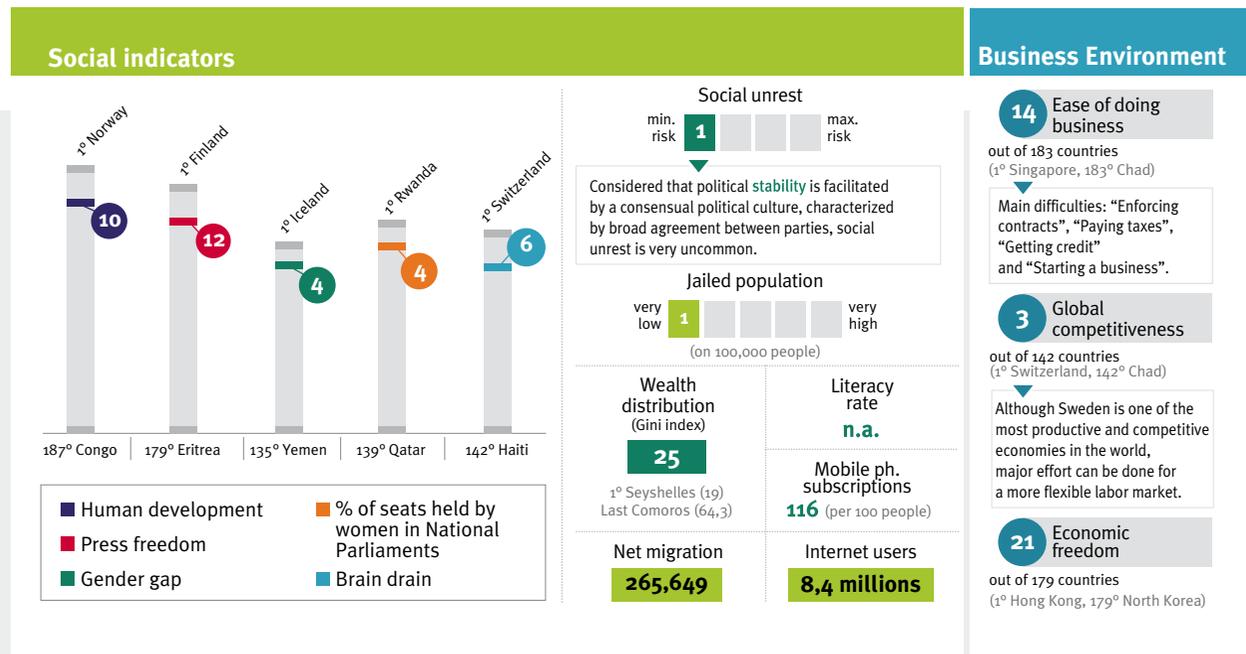
to return to Baghdad. He stayed on for the duration of the conflict, writing for Swedish tabloid “Aftonbladet” and living the war up close.

Since the end of the war, Hamid returns to Baghdad occasionally for work, and he’ll be going back this fall. Even now, he rejects the idea of going back to live. “Nine years after the official end of the conflict, the country isn’t safe, far from it, unless you travel to the far north, to Iraqi Kurdistan, to cities like Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.”

Modhir Ahmed returned home to Kurdistan in May, following a 32-year absence. The head of the most influential Iraqi school in Sweden, the Konstgrafiska Verstad in Falun, he was invited the Iraq culture ministry to meet students and artists. “It was as if I had left Iraq four days before and had just come home,” he says. “Aside from the destruction caused by the war, everything, the smells, the sounds, the clothes, the places, and the people, all remained the same.”

“It was great walking around and looking at shops where and seeing old photos on their walls, ones that portrayed human unity despite racial and religious differences. There were Iraqis, Kurds, Arabs, and Turks; Christians, Muslims, and Jews. There just weren’t any real differences because Iraqis never bought into the violent sectarian propaganda they were sold.”

Modhir Ahmed’s career began in Iraq, but led him to Poland, then Sweden. After attending Baghdad’s Institute of Fine Arts between 1974 and 1979, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw up to 1986, moving to Sweden in 1989. “At the end of the 1980s,” Ahmed recalls, “Poland was going through a period of political transition. It was a chaotic period



and Iraq was busy recruiting people from outside the country to increase its army in the war against Iran. I had a very young family and decided to put their safety before all else. So I went to Sweden.”

Most of the Iraqis who immigrated to Scandinavia in the 1980s were college graduates and professionals. Many had left Iraq as students and found themselves unable to go back.

“As is the case with all minorities, the integration process in any given country is an individual thing,” says Ahmed. He doesn’t know just how the Swedes perceive the Iraqi community. “Look, I’m in the arts. I have an international group of friends. I live among a cultural elite.”

So who are the Iraqis as seen by the Swedes? “I guess

they’re people with black hair ... I honestly don’t know.”

But he does know the feeling of exile.

“Over the past three decades, while our country was ravaged by war, occupation and political turmoil, Iraqis abroad tried in their own small way to raise the Iraqi flag and represent it with pride. Like any other Iraqi, I feel that Iraq is our blood. It’s our birthright. It’s deeply rooted in our culture, which can become great again.”

At 56, Modhir Ahmed doesn’t need abstract dreams to satisfy his ego. Ego isn’t a factor. He dreams instead of protecting the planet and shielding people from war, of eliminating those who oppress the poor and practice injustice. Above all, he works tirelessly to try to give happiness to others, starting with his family. ●

SCANDINAVIAN IMMIGRATION

FINLAND

Be on the lookout for Timo Soini, leader of the True Finns Party. In April 2011 general elections, he captured 19.1 percent of the vote, or 39 of the 200 seats in Parliament. The party’s position is stridently anti-European and anti-immigration. It is also conservative when it comes to gay marriage and women’s rights. True Finns seeks progressive taxation and a generous welfare state. Finland remains a “closed” state, its cost of living high and its language difficult for immigrants to learn.

Of Finland’s 183,133 immigrants, some 5.4 million (18.6 percent) are Estonians, followed by Russians (16.2), Swedes (4.6), Somalis (4.1), Chinese (3.4), Iraqis (3.1), Thailand (3.0), Turks (2.3), German (2.1), and Indians (2.1). More than percent avoid a national label.

NORWAY

Every bit a melting pot state, Norway hosts an estimated 547,000

immigrants and 108,000 people born to immigrant parents. These two groups account for 13.1 percent of the Norwegian population.

The Progress Party, a far-right party that strengthened in the 1990s, saw its vote totals halved after Anders Breivik, a member of the party’s youth wing, went on a mass murder spree in July 2011, killing 69 people at Labor Party summer camp. The Progress Party won only 11.4 percent in recent local elections.

SWEDEN

Sweden has always been justly proud of its generous approach toward asylum seekers. But Migration and Asylum Minister Tobias Billström never misses a chance to invite the United States and other European states to do their fair share.

The country’s right-wing Sverigedemokraterna Party opposes multiculturalism and has suggested incentives to induce immigrants to leave. But the

party remains on the political fringes and its “Keep Sweden Swedish” slogan is hardly mentioned.

In the 1980s, the immigration flow came mainly from Iran, Chile, Lebanon, Poland and Turkey. In the 1990s the former Yugoslavia entered the refugee picture. From 2000 on, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Ethiopia have been the key countries.

DENMARK

Denmark hosts 542,738 immigrants, corresponding to 9.8 percent of the population. The number has increased steadily over the last 30 years and is expected to continue rising, but only incrementally.

In 2002, the Danish People’s Party, in support of a liberal-conservative coalition, helped approve stricter European immigration laws. Pia Kjaersgaard, the party’s co-founder and leader, was a leading opponent of the euro, which was introduced in 2000.