



## A Swedish 'Valhalla' for Iraqi Refugees

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Part One: Rosengård

Iraqi refugees -- there is no country outside the Middle East that has welcomed them as Sweden has. Four years after the fall of Baghdad, more than two million Iraqis have fled their country and there is no end in sight. What may be in sight are the limits of Sweden's open asylum policy, which has previously made the country Europe's odd man out.

The suburb of Rosengård in the southern port city of Malmö has come to symbolise Sweden's problems. Here fire engines and ambulances are apparently a regular sight on the street known as Ramelsvåg, where the residents are almost exclusively Iraqi refugees. Fires are a regular occurrence here, according to Bakir Ajlam of the Iraqi Cultural Centre.

What can you expect, with sometimes as many as 12 people to an apartment? But still they keep coming, around 80,000 of them across Sweden by the last count. Because they have friends here, or relatives. Long before the Iraq War, Malmö was already known as a miniature Babel on the Oresund (the stretch of water that separates Sweden and Denmark), housing as many as 150 different nationalities.

No tension... yet

There are no signs of tensions in the streets - not yet, at least. A small group of youths is hanging out at the Rosengård Mall. The lingua franca in the district is Arabic, and it has Iraqi shops such as 'Babylon Livs': Babylon fruit and vegetables.

But the situation compares favourably to the problem districts found in the average Dutch city. And yet, according to 22-year-old Anwar Ali, many Swedes feel intimidated. She arrived as a refugee from Iraq a few years ago, and now lives on the Ramelsvåg:

"I have Swedish friends who have never been here, who are very scared to come here. People make jokes that you need a separate passport to enter the district. I have myself never worn a headscarf, not even when I was living in Iraq. But once you have been living here for a while, everybody gets to know you, and sometimes people do look at me in a peculiar way. As if to say: 'She is from Iraq, isn't she? So why is she dressed this way?' It's very annoying."

"Especially of late, more and more strictly-religious refugees are coming to live here. They find Europe strange anyway, and then they are being confronted with an Iraqi women without a headscarf. They'll say: 'Oh, she probably wants to look Swedish.' Why do I continue to live here? It has taken me two years to get my own apartment. I am happy with what I've got and I don't want to lose it."

Sticking together

Meanwhile, Malmö's mayor has had enough. He has written a letter to the government demanding a better distribution of the refugees, enforced if necessary. Tobias Billström has been Sweden's Integration and Asylum Policy Minister since last year. He understands very well that the Iraqis want to stick together:

"That's what we Swedes do as well, when we go live in Spain after retirement. But it should not become an obstacle to finding a job. Because if people do not go and live in the regions where they have the most chance of finding a job, things will become really difficult."

"Employment is what makes a Swede a Swede. We get up at seven and go to work. Everybody contributes to social security, which is necessary to be able to show our solidarity with refugees from countries like Iraq. So it's a two-way street: we help people, but we expect them to help pay for our system."

Other countries

However, Tobias Billstrom would much prefer that other European countries do more rather than that Sweden has to resort to the forced redistribution of refugees. He wants to take up the issue with the United Nations refugee organisation, UNHCR. Senior official at the

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organisation's regional office in Stockholm is Dutchman Hans ten Feld:

"The Swedish government is following UNHCR recommendations, which say that most or nearly all Iraqis are in a position where they are likely to receive full recognition as refugees, or, should that prove impossible, at the very least shelter and protection because of the situation in Iraq. What we should be working on collectively is to persuade other countries to follow Sweden's example."

Mr Ten Feld says this would automatically reduce the pressure on Sweden.

## Building a new existence

It won't make much difference to the refugees in Rosengård, however. Their lives in Iraq are over anyway, says Anwar Ali, who does not believe the district will explode:

"The lives of many of the people who come here have been completely shattered. They want to build a new existence, being well aware that Sweden is the only country that will admit them. They are not about to create problems, not for themselves nor for the people who may want to come here after them."

"Even though the situation may be far from perfect, it has its good sides. You are allowed to go to school; there is adequate healthcare. It really is very good, all in all. So, compared to other countries, Sweden remains a Valhalla for refugees after all."

## Part Two: Södertälje

What can the rest of the world do for the nearly four million Iraqis who have been displaced by the conflict in their homeland, including two million who have fled the country? The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) is holding a two-day conference today and tomorrow to discuss the humanitarian crisis faced by Iraqi refugees.

The successful integration policies of the town of Södertälje, a suburb of Stockholm, are a shining example which UNHCR would be well-advised to follow. Södertälje has opened its doors to Iraqi Christians. The Assyrians are Aramaic-speaking Christians who live in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon. There used to be around 1.5 million Assyrian Christians in Iraq, but today only half that number remain. Sweden is one of the most popular destinations. Most active

The Assyrian community has its own radio programme, Qolo. According to its presenter, Gabriel Afram: "The Assyrian community here is the most active in Europe. The first Assyrian refugees arrived in the country from Lebanon in 1967. Now there are 80,000 of us and we have our own organisations."

Nearly a quarter of the 80,000 Assyrians which Gabriel Afram is talking about live in Södertälje, which is just outside Stockholm. One in five residents here is of Assyrian origin. They are active in local politics and Södertälje's Assyrian soccer team - Assyriska - even played in the premier division.

## Hardworking

The community has a reputation for being hardworking and successful. There are also no problem districts or ethnic tensions, as is the case in the port city of Malmö. On the contrary: Södertälje's Assyrians play an exemplary role in helping other refugees from Iraq.

"Even before the war, Muslim colleagues at work told me: 'just wait until Saddam is gone, then we'll kill all you Christians'." This is a typical story you can hear from a refugee in the waiting room at Södertälje's "citizenship office". On busy days up to 50 or 60 Iraqis come here looking for work or shelter. They all say the same thing: the doors in Södertälje are all wide open to them, for which they're thankful after all they've gone through in Iraq.

## Swedish language

Few people in the waiting room speak Swedish. An older woman who has lived in Södertälje for several years says she does not have the time to take lessons. She has to care for her husband who is ill, and her own health is not that good either. But she doesn't think it's a problem, since there is always someone who speaks Arabic or Aramaic who can translate for her.

It's given Södertälje the reputation of being a separate community. Sedi Malkey, who works at the "citizenship office" and is also a member of the Assyrian community doesn't think this poses a problem.

"The fact that so many other Assyrians can explain things to newcomers in their own language means they can learn about Swedish society more quickly." Many of the refugees were among Iraq's most highly-educated people. They are architects, doctors and teachers

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who are keen to renew their careers. "If they see how far the Assyrian community here in Södertälje has come then they think: Sweden has a good life in store for us." The real challenge is in the numbers. This year Södertälje expects twice as many refugees as last year, more than 2000. And these refugees also want their families to come over. If it keeps going at this pace then the possibilities for finding refuge in this town will be soon exhausted.

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