



# An Iraqi Odyssey

KHALID MOHAMMED / AP

**SELLING OUT:** A Baghdad resident sells the last of his possessions before fleeing Iraq for Syria with his family after his brother was killed in the violence plaguing the Iraqi capital

## A Baghdad family flees the bloodbath in their native city and seeks asylum in Sweden

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**T**HE HORROR BEGAN IN 1986 WITH A SUMMARY execution. More than twenty years later it has come to an end, at least temporarily. From Baghdad to Stockholm, via Damascus, Aleppo and Kuala Lumpur, the ghosts of another life still haunt Wassan Al-Husseini and her children, son Mohammed, 28 and daughter Malik, 22 (not their real names), Shi'ite Muslims, as they wait for asylum in Sweden. Here in the frozen wastes of Swedish suburbia, Wasan, a lovely attractive vibrant Iraqi woman, with long brown hair, originally from Karbala about 50 miles south of Baghdad, feels safe, but also homeless, powerless and depressed.

Wasan tries to mask her feelings with a jolly demeanor and an intense interest in all things Swedish. Her heroine is double Nobel prize winner Marie Curie, whom she first learned about in her Swedish classes and she takes great delight in seeing Curie's artifacts at the Nobel Museum in Stockholm. But her sense of hopelessness is close to the surface.

At 2:30 a.m. on January 15, 1986, Wasan was preparing breakfast, as she sometimes did in the very early hours of the day, her 11-month-old baby daughter sleeping nearby. Her husband, Ibrahim, was also sleeping in the living room. Officers of Saddam Hussein, then the almighty rulers of Iraq, broke into their home, waving their guns wildly. Threatening and screaming, they accused Ibrahim of being a traitor and helping the secessionist Kurdish rebellion against Saddam Hussein. They put a pistol to his head. Wasan, then a young woman with two small children, pleaded with them to show mercy. She screamed, she pulled her hair. She ran

out of the house, begging for help on the empty streets. But the man called Ibrahim a coward, pulled the trigger and shot him dead.

"I remember the sound of bullets," says Mohammed, who was 7 years old at the time. "I was crying, my mother was crying, begging them to stop, tearing her hair. Then he just fell like a mountain, and I saw a lake of blood flowing out of his head. My mother just screamed and screamed."

Wasan was not physically or emotionally able to attend Ibrahim's funeral and, for two years, she rarely left the house, unable to return to normal life. Her own mother took care of her and her children.

To this day, the family has few other connections. And now in Sweden, they remain a tightly knit family, packed into a characterless, utilitarian one-bedroom apartment they rent in a distant and Soviet-style suburb of Stockholm, a safe and sterile city, so different from cacophonous, bustling and deadly Baghdad. Few people walk the streets in the below-freezing winter.

They have sought asylum in this snowy, icy land with tens of thousands of other Iraqis. But the Swedish authorities have rejected Wasan and Malik's requests, on the grounds that their lives were not in danger. Mohammed, it appears, has a stronger case, since the Swedes have accepted his contention that he became a marked man "for collaborating with the Americans," having worked for Titan, a defense contractor that provides translators for army and marine corps units in Iraq and other countries under a linguistic services contract with the Army's intelli-

gence and security command. According to information provided by the company, Titan has more than 4,000 employees in Iraq, including more than 3,000 Iraqi nationals working as translators with U.S. military units. In 2005, Titan Corp. sustained the highest number of casualties of the 119 U.S. companies operating in Iraq, according to data provided by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Wasan and Malik, who wraps her *hijab* (scarf) tightly around her pretty face and, in apparent contrast, wears the same clothes as any of her Western contemporaries, have appealed the rejection, but it is unlikely that their requests will be granted. And so they wait, tense and frightened that they may have to return to Iraq, where, they believe, they will be murdered. Malik is smart and determined like her mother, yet keeps her stuffed animals around her room, a reminder of home. A small, paper Iraqi flag has been pasted high on the wall of their apartment.

**A**FTER THE AMERICANS CAME TO IRAQ IN 2003, Mohammed, like most other Iraqis in the war-torn country, needed work. The Americans were looking for translators, and, even though Mohammed's English, learned on the streets and from the media, wasn't very good, the Americans believed they could trust him – his family is dependent upon him and needed the good salary that American companies could pay. So they taught him English and gave him on-the-job training. Today, his English is fluent and colloquial.

But even with a secure job, Mohammed soon knew he would have to leave Baghdad.

Hundreds of Iraqi translators have been killed. These translators may be the eyes and ears of American soliders but their own countrymen view them as traitors, hunt them down and kill them. Only a handful of special visas has been granted by the American government who promised them protection.

The fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein has led to cataclysmic changes in Iraqi society, upsetting previous social orders. From their position as a privileged minority, the Sunnis have been relegated to a threatened minority. Although heavily outnumbered by the Shi'ites, the Sunnis had long ruled Iraq. And now in ascendance, the Shi'ites have established two paramilitary armies: the forces of the Badr Brigade, controlled by the Iranian-supported Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Mahdi Army, that worships the fanatical Muqtada Al-Sadr.

As the internecine violence persisted, during the years between 2003 and 2006, Mohammed couldn't sleep at night because of the shrieking of the mortar shells that rained down on his Shi'ite neighborhood. For nearly six months, Wasan and Malik remained imprisoned in their home, afraid to go out. And each night at 10 p.m., the Shi'ite Mahdi army, ignoring the Iraqi police, would brazenly set up checkpoints looking for Sunnis, and then melt into the background when American patrols showed up.

Mohammed kept a low profile, attempting to hide his place of work from his Shi'ite neighbors, since this would have invoked immediate retaliation in this violently polarized society. He would stay away from home for days or weeks at a time, remaining at the company compound in the so-called green zone, the heavily guarded diplomatic-government area of closed-off streets in central Baghdad, where U.S. occupation authorities live and work. He would change cars and routes when he did return home to ensure that no one would know where he was working.

Mohammed didn't think of himself as a traitor or collaborator. He thought of himself as a man who needed a job to take care of his mother and sister. And he also believed that he was actually helping his people, by explaining the situation to the Iraqis – preventing any misunderstandings that could lead to tragic deaths and unintended consequences and preventing misunderstandings. That way, he hoped, no one would get shot.

But neighbors starting coming to the house, asking where Mohammed was, what he did, where he worked, why he was never around. Then they began to leave anonymous notes. "Your son works as an interpreter," most of the notes said.

The Mahdi army began to be suspicious. "They were ready to execute anyone," attests Wasan, who was stopped and searched when she did venture outside. Mohammed would watch Mahdi militiamen drive around with Sunni men stuffed in the trunks of their vehicles. Their mutilated, beheaded bodies would be discovered soon after. "Not a day passed in Baghdad that someone you had known wasn't killed," says Mohammed.

His mother pleaded for him to quit, even though they needed the money. Graffiti appeared on their street: "Death to spies and traitors." Wasan and Mohammed knew the message was meant for them – Mohammed's work for the Americans was now public knowledge.

After the Al-Hadi and Al-Askari mosques in Samarra, one of the holiest sites in Shi'ite Islam, were attacked by Sunni militants on February 22, 2006, in a successful attempt

designed to raise the existing tensions between the majority Shi'ite and minority Sunni populations, the Mahdi army swarmed all over the neighborhood, armed with RPGs (rocket propelled grenades). Mohammed wasn't arrested – this time, but he knew that it was simply too dangerous to stay.

Secretly, the Al-Husseinis sold their home for a giveaway price and then gave away most of their possessions. And one night, in late 2006, they slipped away, on their way to Sweden, telling no one of their plans. These were the days before Syria closed its border with Iraq and Syrian visas could be easily obtained and extended [especially for a price]. So they drove across the border to Syria. But they knew that if they were caught, they would be sent back to Iraq and summarily executed as traitors.

Once in Damascus, they sought out smugglers who could get Wasan, Mohammed and Malik into Scandinavia. Refugees from Iraq were all over the Syrian capital and they found an apartment in a neighborhood with thousands of other expat Iraqis who were also trying to find asylum, many in Sweden.

"Everyone was doing the same thing," says Mohammed, a wiry, young man, with jutting cheekbones and a prominent nose that his sister likes to tweak. They lived – and continue to live – on cash, that they smuggled out of Iraq stuffed into a flour sack.

The smugglers' roles are well-defined – they take half the money up front, half on arrival in Stockholm. There, the smuggler leaves the refugees – at the airport, and they are allowed no further contact. Out of the dozens of 'smugglers' Mohammed and Wasan met, they trusted very few. "A lot of groups asked for money upfront, that was too risky."

Cautiously asking around in the teeming streets of Damascus, they finally made the connection. Wasan met someone whose husband "knew people" and they made a deal with someone they believed – they hoped – was a bona fide smuggler. At a clandestine meeting at a coffee shop,

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Mohammed brought pictures of his mother and sister. The next day the smugglers came to their apartment with a selection of passports for them to choose from.

Wasan and Malik spent four stressful months in limbo in Damascus. Iraqi refugees in exile face many problems, including deportation, detention, lack of food, housing and other aid, lack of security, lack of education and various kinds of exploitation. Before Malak left for Sweden there was much work to be done. For hours she would practice her make-up to look like the girl whose passport picture she was using – that of a 12-year-old Swedish girl. “She was much darker than me, with fatter lips and crossed eyes, but she wore a *hijab*,” says Malak quite ironically. “Everyday for hours I would try different styles and memorize all the details.”

They did three runs to Damascus airport. Two were aborted because they got a tip from sources inside the airport that it was too dangerous. The Mukhabarat, the secret police, were on the lookout. Mohammed says that it is well-known that a high-ranking Ba’athist official, who “specializes” in finding fleeing Iraqis as part of the Mukhabarat, is often on duty. He was on duty the first two times that Wasan and Malik tried to leave.

Each time they bought new tickets. On their third try, the official was on a 10-day holiday. Luck plays a big part in this game. So does bribery: A Syrian intelligence officer took \$5,000 per person to look the other way as they crossed through the airport.

Wasan and Malik used their Iraqi passports to leave Damascus and take an internal flight to Aleppo, in the north of Syria. While in transit, they tore up their Iraqi passports and took out the Swedish ones that had fake stamps from Dubai. From Aleppo they flew to Sweden.

Mohammed’s journey was not quite so straightforward. Mohammed used a different smuggler, starting his process only after his mother and sister arrived in Sweden safely. It took him another six months until he was able to leave. And to make it look less obvious and less traceable, Mohammed and Ali, the smuggler, flew to Kuala Lumpur, where they spent a few days acting like tourists and assumed their false Swedish identities. But the Malaysian authorities caught on to them and arrested them. Mohammed remained behind bars for a month before he was deported back to Syria. Ali was questioned for 18 hours, and then let go. On Mohammed’s next attempt, a few months later, they traveled through Nepal and arrived safely in Sweden.

**T**HE SWEDISH CAPITAL IS COLD AND DARK, SO different from the bright desert of Baghdad. Since they are not legally in the country, Mohammed and Malik work at odd jobs, making a few Swedish krona under the table. Living in a neighborhood with hundreds of other Iraqis, renting an apartment from an Iraqi who has lived in Sweden for years, still living on the cash they smuggled in from Iraq, they are isolated and often lonely. It takes over an hour by public transportation to reach the center of Stockholm. Wassan continues to cook Arabic food, yet she has also delved into Swedish culture, attending language classes each day, at a government-sponsored school for refugees. She says that she wants to become part of Swedish society and to make a contribution – she is, she says, grateful to Swedish society for taking her in, even if only temporarily.

But the threat of deportation hangs over them.

Attempting to look less foreign as if casting off the final vestiges of the old regime, Mohammed has shaved off his mustache since his departure from Iraq. He believes his case, based in part on fake Iraqi documents that he has presented to Swedish officials, is stronger than his

mother’s and sister’s. “The worse the story, the easier it is to get residency. They force us to do this. There is no question that my life and my family’s life was in danger, but how can I prove it?” he asks.

“I will never return and I will never let my mother or sister return to Iraq even if I have to hide them. But I don’t believe Sweden would deport them,” he declares strongly.

Wasan cried for three days when their application was rejected two months ago. “This is the fifth apartment we have had in six months,” she says. “We have no choice. We move from one apartment to another because we’re not residents, so we rent on the black market.”

And yet, curiously, safe in the drab three-story apartment block in which they now live, Mohammed, who spends his days hanging out with other Iraqis in a similar situation and surfing the web, watching TV, says he misses the action of Baghdad. “I got addicted to weapons and real-life action. I can’t live without risk, and I felt as if I was doing something good and useful for both sides.”

But Wassan says that this is the first time in their lives that they are free. “What is home?” she asks no one, maybe herself. “It’s land, family, friends, mother, grandchildren. I have left this all behind.

She sighs, “Iraq, Iraq.”

**I**N STOCKHOLM, I MET ALI, THE SMUGGLER WHO brought Mohammed into the country. He is well-built, tall, has a small scar on his left cheek, dark skin, cropped black hair, and wears a gold necklace engraved with a picture of his mother.

He left Iraq five years ago, and went to Romania, where he got into the smuggling business by helping the brother of a friend. He won’t let me use his name, but agreed to dinner in his North African girlfriend’s apartment in a less remote neighborhood of Stockholm. He’s happy to talk, a mark of his success, but gives little away.

What started out as a bit of a lark turned into a serious venture. Ali carries four passports, and won’t say which countries they are from. He says he likes what he does and though he’s in it for the money, he maintains that it’s not very lucrative. He claims to have lost \$40,000 on one recent abortive venture. He relishes the risk, and the thrill of victory when he gets his clients over the border. He is especially keen to help Iraqis because they can’t get visas.

Ali’s family, including his mother, remain in Baghdad because he doesn’t trust anyone else to get them out, and he is too nervous to do it himself. But for others, he “leaves his heart at home. I show them a tough face,” he continues. “After they arrive, if they call, I just press the disconnect button. It’s not in my interest to be their friend.”

Each person pays \$16,500. This includes a passport, hotels, bribes, food, new clothes and escorted travel to Sweden. The passports are not faked but either stolen or sold illegally (a Canadian passport fetches \$500) and by the time they are doctored cost \$2,000.

Ali or his partner always travel with their clients. He is so nervous he drinks whiskey the whole time, not too much, he claims, just enough to dull his senses. He says that he knows that he should be alert, but he needs to “take the edge off” his anxiety so that he “won’t be a nervous wreck.”

Finding passports is the critical link in the process, he says, but it isn’t difficult. When you begin to search for fake or stolen passports, “they begin to fall like snow.”

And, as they fall, there are thousands of Iraqi exiles, eager to pick these passports up. ●

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– Mohammed