

Photograph courtesy of Reuters /Mohammed Ameen



# The Iraqi Translator

The horror began in 1986 with a summary execution. Twenty years later, it came to a temporary end. From Baghdad to Stockholm via Damascus, the ghosts of another life still haunt the family who wait for asylum in Sweden. Here, in frozen suburbia, Wasan Al Husseini\* feels hopeless, homeless, powerless and depressed.

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE



**T**wenty years ago, Saddam's men, then the almighty rulers of Iraq, broke into Wasan's house at 2:30am on the morning of 15 January. Her husband was sleeping in the living room as she prepared breakfast. They accused him of being a traitor for helping Kurds, and put a pistol to his head. Wasan, then a young woman with three small children, pleaded with them to show mercy. They called him a coward, and shot him.

"I remember the sound of bullets," says Mohammed, her son. "I was crying, my mother was crying, begging them to

stop, then he just fell like a mountain, and then I saw the lake of blood flowing out of his head. My mother just screamed and screamed." It took her two years to recover from the shock and grief. Her three children stayed close by and helped her.

Their closeness remains today, tightly packed into a characterless, utilitarian one-bedroom apartment they rent in a distant and Soviet-style suburb of Stockholm, a safe and sterile city as diametrically opposite to bustling but deadly Baghdad as could be. 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 not because of a fallen regime but because Mohammed, her eldest son, worked for Titan Corporation, a United States-based contracting company that provides interpreters ("terps") for the United States army. (See box on page 31.) The contrast couldn't be starker. "A town of ghosts," says Wasan.

Back in Baghdad some nights Mohammed couldn't sleep because the "big ass" mortars that rained down on his Shia neighbourhood made so much noise. The situation had disintegrated to such an extent that his younger sister and mother did not go out of the house for six months, idling at home with nothing to do. At 10pm each night, the Mehdi Army (MA) would set up their fake checkpoints looking for Sunnis, only to melt into the background when the US Army patrols passed. When the Iraqi Police drove around, they would brazenly continue.

Mohammed would disappear for days or weeks at a time, staying in the camp, changing cars and routes regularly when he did return home. At nights, along with the fireworks that lit up the sky he would watch the MA that controlled his neighbourhood return to the Al Shoroofi mosque with Sunnis stuffed in the trucks/boot of their vehicles. Their mutilated, beheaded bodies would be discovered the next day. "Not a day passed in Baghdad that someone you had known wasn't killed," says Mohammed. His mother pleaded for him to quit Titan, although they needed the money.

On their street a sign read: "Death to spies and traitors." Wasan and Mohammed knew the message was for them. Despite all the precautions he had taken, he was eventually seen with Americans by both a neighbour who works as an Iraqi soldier and again by a cousin when he was doing a regular dismounted patrol in Mansour. Wasan's family members scared her the most though.

His mother tried to hide the truth. Neighbours would come to her house asking where Mohammed was, what he did, where he worked, why he was never around. The neighbours started to leave notes. "Your son works as an interpreter." When they saw her, they would always insinuate they knew. Even the MA knew. The neighbour's sons and husbands all worked for them. "They were ready to execute anyone," attests Wasan, who was stopped and searched regularly.

After the Al Hadi and Al Askari mosques in Samara were attacked by Sunni militants on 22 February, 2006, the MA swarmed all over the neighbourhood armed with RPGs (rocket propelled grenades). In the end it was simply too dangerous to continue.

They sold their house for a knockdown price, sold off the two cars, gave much away, and almost a year ago, slipped away one night, telling no one of their plan. They drove across the border to Syria. That was before it closed its border with Iraq and when Syrian visas could be easily obtained and extended. The trip was almost as harrowing as life in Baghdad, but it meant the first step on the road to freedom.

In Syria the serious search for asylum in Sweden began by seeking out smugglers who could get Wasan, Mohammed and his younger sister Malak, into Stockholm. They began by asking people in the Iraqi community that swelled Damascus. "Everyone was doing the same thing," says Mohammed in his near perfect English, honed on the job, his moustache shaved off after his departure from Iraq.

In the teeming streets of the Syrian capital, they finally made the connection.

Wasan met someone whose husband “knew people”. 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.”

At the clandestine meeting held at a local coffee shop, 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.



Mohammed in exile

In Stockholm, I met the smuggler who got Mohammed into the country a few months after his mother and sister arrived. 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 loves his mom. He left Iraq five years ago and went to Romania where he got into the business by helping the brother of a friend of his. Ali (he won't let me use his real name) and I had dinner with his girlfriend at her flat: 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. He carries four passports, and won't reveal which countries they are from. He likes what he

does and does it for the money, although he says he doesn't make a lot, claiming to have lost \$40 000 (R280 000) on one recent aborted venture. He also likes the risk, doesn't worry about getting caught, relishing the sense of victory when he makes it over the immigration line. He claims to enjoy helping Iraqis because they can't get visas.

Risk-free it isn't. He got a bit of a fright waiting to pick up visas at the Syrian embassy in Damascus. He picked

up a newspaper where the main story was about people smuggling. “Oh my God,” he said to himself. “I closed the newspaper and put it away.”

His family, especially his mother, remains 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, Ali “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 \$16 000 (about R110 000). This includes a passport, hotels, bribes, food, new clothes and escorted travel to Sweden. The passports are not faked but either stolen or sold: a

Canadian passport fetches \$500 (R3 500) and by the time they are doctored cost \$2 000 (R14 000). For Malak, Mohammed's 22-year-old sister, the original Swedish passport they used had a picture of a 12-year-old girl.

Ali or his partner always travel with their clients, but he is so nervous he drinks whisky the whole time, not too much, just enough to dull his senses. He says that when you start looking for passports, “they begin to fall like snow.”

Before Malak left for Sweden there was much work to be done. For hours she would practice doing her make up to look like the girl whose passport picture she was using. “She was much darker than me, with fatter lips and crossed eyes, but she wore a hijab,” says Malak. “Everyday for hours I would try different styles and memorise all the details.” They did three runs to the airport, all aborted because they got a tip off from inside the airport that it was too dangerous. The secret police (Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-'Amma) were on the look out. Each time they bought new tickets before finally taking off. There is no mercy in Syria.

According to Mohammed, Erfan is a notorious, high-ranking Baathist official, part of the Mukhabarat, whose beat is the Damascus airport and whose speciality is finding fleeing Iraqis. Erfan was on duty the first two times Wasan and Malak tried to leave. Ali was tipped off by a contact of his based at the airport. By the third try, Erfan, luckily, was off for a 10-day holiday. “Luck plays a big part in this game,” says Ali.

The intelligence officer who works with Ali takes \$5 000 (R35 000) per person. He was less successful and apparently now languishes in a Syrian jail. The day Wasan and Malak left he had breakfast with Mohammed and Ali. The deal was that once his mother and sister were safely in Sweden he would hand over the remaining \$12 000 (R84 000) further to the \$20 000 (R140 000) Mohammed had already paid.

Wasan and Malak used their Iraqi passports to leave from Damascus to take an internal flight to the ancient city of Aleppo, in the north of Syria. In transit, they tore up their Iraqi passports, and took out the Swedish ones that had fake stamps from Dubai.

Mohammed's journey was not quite so straightforward when he made his first attempt to leave weeks later. He and Ali got caught in Kuala Lumpur and thrown in jail. Mohammed remained behind bars for a month before he got deported back to Syria, and they questioned Ali for 18-hours before letting him go, telling him they knew he was a smuggler. Third countries pose the biggest challenges. It is here that things tend to go wrong.

Once there the general procedure is

from Iraq have been faked. "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?"

[His mother spent three days crying when she was rejected. "This is the fifth apartment we have had in six months," she says "We have no choice moving from one apartment to another because we were not residents, so we are renting on the black market."]



Wasan and Malak in exile

to act like a tourist, staying for a week, rarely leaving the hotel except to buy clothes in order to look more European. The fear is that they will get caught. Ali recommends chewing gum to help stay calm. Mohammed's next attempt a few months later was through Nepal, and ended successfully.

Wasan studies Swedish each day, going to the school provided by the government and loves the culture, although misses home. Her case, along with Malak's, has been turned down on the grounds that they are not at risk. Mohammed's immigration lawyer believes he has a very strong case. They are appealing against the decision and are all waiting for his results.

Some of the papers that Mohammed has presented to the Swedish officials

On the wall, tacked up high on the ripped wallpaper, is a small paper Iraqi flag, about the only reminder of home, along with a bunch of stuffed toys that Malak brought with her. "What is home?" asks Wasan. "It's land, family, friends, mother, grandchildren. I have left this all behind. But it is better for me here."

At the faceless three-story apartment block where they live, Mohammed 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."

For Wasan, this is the first time in their lives that they are free, she says, and sighs, "Iraq. Iraq." **TBI**

*\*Not their real names.*

## Titan Corporation.

Titan Communications, owned by L-3 Communications of Richmond, Va., provides homeland security, intelligence, enterprise IT and aerospace services and solutions primarily to the United States Department of Defence and the intelligence community. Its parent company, L-3 Communications, reported sales of \$14 billion for 2007.

With over 10 000 employees and 2 000 contracts worldwide, Titan Communications main source of income is its \$402-million translation contract with the U.S. Army's Intelligence and Security Command in Iraq. According to the company's website, 8 000 of the company's employees have security clearances.

Titan employs Iraqi as well as American translators. Titan's Iraqi employees are often in grave danger, as they often come under attack as traitors. As of 2005, Titan had the most amount of employees killed of any contractor in Iraq – 136.

Two Titan employees were implicated for torturing prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. They were acquitted in 2007, however, after US courts ruled that the employees were under the control of government officials and therefore the company was not responsible for the contractors' actions.

The company also paid out the largest penalty in history under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act – \$28.5 million – for illegally providing \$2 million for the re-election campaign of President Mathieu Kérékou of Benin.

According to the Centre for Responsive Politics in Washington, DC, in 2003, the year of the Iraq invasion, Titan Corp. spent \$500 000 on Congressional lobbying.