

Middle Eastern Refugeehood in the Happiest Place on Earth

Syrians and Iraqis Entering Finland's Welfare State Bureaucracy

Lindsay A. Gifford

Introduction

Finland annually resettles between 750 and 1,000 refugees, while receiving thousands more asylum applicants, many of whom hail from the Middle East (Finnish Immigration Service 2019a). Although southern and central European states are frequently portrayed as the hotspots of a refugee reception “crisis,” less is known about smaller asylum and refugee resettlement programs in northern European countries such as Finland (Degni, Koivusilta, and Ojanlatva 2006; Goda-Savolainen 2017; Keskinen 2016; Laine and Salmi-Niklander 2017; Liebkind 1996; Lillrank 2015; Puumala, Ylikomi, and Ristimäki 2017; Skirbutaite 2010; Valtonen 1998). This knowledge will become increasingly critical as international burden-sharing of refugee and asylum needs becomes more pressing, and as migrants adapt to new border security policies along established migrant routes through eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. How are refuge and asylum understood discursively and experientially in Finland, and how does this contribute to a broader understanding of Middle Eastern refugee resettlement in the Global North? More specifically, how do Syrian refugees and Iraqi asylum seekers experience and engage with the welfare state as newcomers, and do those experiences substantively differ even as both groups are fleeing persecution from war, sectarian violence, and militia activity?

Local discourses around refugee resettlement and asylum seeking tend toward binaries; as Benhabib (2007: 7) notes, “Cultures are formed through binaries because human beings live in an evaluative universe.” In this chapter, I identify the salient binary discourses related to refuge and asylum in Finland, and the ways these binaries are actually lived in a more fluid way than such stark dichotomies would suggest. Specifically, I examine local Finnish discourses about refugees and asylum seekers, as well as those of Syrian and Iraqi interlocutors, to better understand how experiences of the welfare state are highly variable and incumbent upon the specific ways that the politics of exclusion and inclusion in Finland structurally affect both individuals and groups. I argue that in Finland, Middle Eastern refugee inclusion and exclusion are not based simply around Othering practices toward Middle Easterners or Muslims in relation to a majority-Christian European state, or by the welfare state’s potential efficacy and beneficent values. Rather, they are organized by the specific relationship of various Middle Eastern refugee populations to bureaucratic rationality in the welfare state. Max Weber (1978: 223) classically identified bureaucracy as “the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings” and therefore the most efficient. In Finland, some persecuted groups become acceptable through these rational bureaucratic relations, while others remain beyond the pale.

Background

Finland was ranked the world’s happiest country of 2020 according to the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2020: 20), and regularly ranks among the top five. This ranking is determined based on measures of GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom of choice, generosity, and perceived corruption. These measures relate well to the Nordic welfare state model, which favors “extensive state intervention to achieve full employment and social redistribution” in the interest of achieving “social equality and fairness” through the universal provision of welfare and social security services to the population (Veggeland 2016: 1). The Nordic welfare model broadly describes state policies in Finland as well as in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland (Veggeland 2016: 3–4).

The Constitution of Finland (1999: 4–5) guarantees rights to all who fall within Finnish jurisdiction, not only citizens, so that resettled refugees as well as migrants and asylum seekers have access to welfare through “basic subsistence,” “adequate social, health and medical services,” housing, and obstetric care. Thus, despite the legal distinctions between resettled refugees and asylum seekers, the package of rights pertaining to both groups is similar under the constitution. Refugees have had their status determined abroad

by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and immediately begin integration processes in Finland, while asylum seekers apply upon arrival and await a legal decision. Refugees receive assistance with social, health, housing, and language services. Asylum seekers are placed in reception centers that provide accommodation, financial support, healthcare, and legal aid, plus a monthly reception allowance, and have the right to work.

From 2014 to 2017, nearly all of the quota refugees resettled in Finland were Syrian, and over half were Syrian by 2019 (Finnish Immigration Service 2019b). The country witnessed a large increase in asylum seekers in 2015, more than 30,000 up from 3,600 the previous year (Finnish Immigration Service 2019c). Twenty thousand of these were young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, 20,000 were Iraqis, and 27,000 were men, with only about 6,000 women. In the wake of this large-scale migration, the Finnish Immigration Service (2020) reported that 1,614 Syrians were granted asylum out of 1,759 applicants, a 92 percent acceptance rate. In contrast, 5,138 out of 19,010 Iraqis were granted asylum, an acceptance rate of only 27 percent.

While the material conditions of resettlement in Finland appear superb, the sociopolitical environment in which refugees integrate is complex and sometimes hostile. Finland is one of many European countries experiencing rising ethnonationalist sentiment and xenophobic politics. The anti-immigration Finn's Party has been ascendant (Kauranen and Virki 2019), and vigilante groups have formed to "protect" Finns from immigrants (Faiola 2016). In 2016, the Finnish Immigration Service declared that Iraq was "safe" for return (Lewis 2016), only to reverse this policy by 2018. Racist epithets and tirades against immigrants and refugees, and their Finnish supporters, are widely shared online. While refugees and asylum seekers may be expected to quietly accept generous material state provisions, the data presented here unsettle idyllic technocratic representations of resettlement in the "happiest place on Earth," while also demonstrating that Middle Eastern refugee resettlement in Finland is not simply shaped by universal welfare expectations, or by xenophobia, Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim racism (Grewal, this volume), as one may expect under these sociopolitical currents, but instead is broadly shaped by notions of bureaucratic rationality in the welfare state.

Methods

This chapter is based on six weeks of field research in the greater Helsinki metropolitan area in the summer of 2017. During this period, I conducted interviews with dozens of Syrian resettled refugees, Iraqi asylum seekers and immigrants, refugee service providers, nonprofit workers, Finnish Lutheran priests (the majority national church), asylum lawyers, Finnish and Middle

Eastern asylum activists, government officials, and refugee and migration researchers and academics. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and English, and all names used here are pseudonyms. Field research was conducted at the asylum seeker protest (the Demo) in Helsinki Central Railway Square, and I visited resettled refugees at home and in temporary reception centers.

Theoretical Framework

Refugees and asylum seekers who are granted entry into the welfare state system are likely to view it through a “humanitarian state” lens, while those rejected are likely to view it as “inhumane.” But the landscape of Middle Eastern refuge in Finland is far more complex than acceptance or rejection, nor are these binaries mutually exclusive. Those who have been legally accepted can face forms of rejection such as racism or discrimination, while those who have been legally rejected may encounter forms of inclusion such as social relationships or activism. Right-wing activists touting a politics of exclusion are included in asylum seekers’ afternoon tea. Leftist activists sometimes express concerns about the ability of Middle Easterners to integrate into Finnish society. Thus, asylum in Finland is not a simple question of inclusion or exclusion but is experienced in a fluid way by both resettled Syrian refugees and rejected Iraqi asylum seekers.

Keskinen (2016) distinguishes between welfare chauvinism and welfare exclusion in Finland. “Welfare chauvinism frames welfare provision as reserved only ‘for our own’” in a racialized sense, while welfare exclusionism refers to “discourses and ideologies in which welfare provision is reserved only for a part of those who live and work in the country, not for all with a residence permit” in tension with the Finnish Constitution (Keskinen 2016: 355). The concept of welfare exclusionism can be extended here to apply to Syrians, whose refugee pathways fit well within a rational bureaucratic model, and Iraqis, whose pathways mostly do not.

The binaries raised about the Finnish state range from idyllic, rational, fair, and equal versus inhumane, irrational, unfair, and unequal. The local binary of *rasisti/suvakki* (racist/hypertolerant idiot) maps onto this larger dichotomy as both conservatives and liberals claim that Finland should approximate the idyllic state, but fails to do so because of current circumstances surrounding Middle Eastern migration. Such migration raises the specter of various threats to essentialized Finnish lifeways: to white secular-Christian Finland from Middle Easterners and Muslims, and to liberal, egalitarian Finland from right-wing racist groups. Lévi-Strauss (1963) classically identified binary oppositions like us/them as formative of society and concepts of identity, but more recently Žižek (2017) has argued that the binary politics dominating immigration debates are unproductive and that Europe

should embark instead on a reimagining of the continental project. As large “waves” of refugees (Luu 2015) increasingly make their way to the “green zones” of the Global North (Klein 2007: 519), such a reconceptualization will only become more imperative to redefine the nation-state’s imagined community (Anderson 1983).

In the Finnish case, the bureaucratic state has more easily integrated the smaller numbers of controlled Syrian family units migrating through official refugee resettlement channels, in contrast to the large numbers of Iraqi and other asylum seekers who migrated through irregular channels and are most often single men. Syrians—most of whom are Sunni Muslim but may also be Shi’i, Druze, Alawi, Yazidi, or Christian—embody the “good refugees” of family units processed and controlled by the international refugee regime bureaucracy in the Weberian sense (Swedberg and Agevall 2016). “Bad refugees” are exemplified by young Iraqi men—most of whom are Sunni Muslim but may also be Shi’i, Christian, or Yazidi—who act agentically and autonomously to travel to Finland and apply for asylum outside of official international migration and refugee processing channels (Mamdani 2002; Topolski 2017), which is often viewed as “queue-jumping” despite its legality. Small numbers of organized quota refugees—even when they are Middle Eastern or Muslim—do not threaten the efficacy or purity (Douglas 1966) of the welfare state and its universal bureaucratic system. But large numbers of asylum seekers threaten the welfare state’s perceived capacity, and the Nordic welfare state model of a universal basic subsistence and life of dignity. Thus, it is not necessarily Middle Easterners or Muslims broadly who are perceived as potentially threatening the Finnish sociopolitical fabric, but rather those who fall outside of rational bureaucratic practices, such as refugee status determination procedures conducted by the international humanitarian regime; regular, controlled migration routes; and immediate legal residency with a pathway toward citizenship, in contrast to asylum seekers who occupy a liminal space outside the bureaucracy and may become undocumented in a state where such a legal status should theoretically be nonexistent.

Humanitarian Reward and Discipline: Syrian Refugees in Finland

Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Finland generally express hope and gratitude due to the near guarantee that they will be integrated into the Finnish state and system. A Syrian refugee family who resettled in Finland in 2015 described their situation. Jamal, a 35-year-old divorced father with two children explained, “We get the same benefits as Finns. I get about 900 Euro per month for my family of three. The welfare pays the rent, water, electricity, and there is free schooling. But there is no work here, and if I did

take a job, I would make less than on welfare If there was an opportunity, the best thing to do is open a restaurant.” Jamal’s mother, Wafaa, in her mid-fifties, reflected. “Some people complain about Finland, but we get everything here!” she said. “We have to do for ourselves. We cannot complain.” Zayn, Jamal’s father, in his mid-sixties, continued: “We escaped the war. We escaped destruction. What else can we want?”

Jamal went on to say, “There are good people in Finland, very welcoming.” To buttress his point, he added, “There are many Somalis here for many years, and they are *mahboub* [beloved]. They wear Somali clothes, and no one says anything.” Yet when I asked if he had ever experienced racism in Finland, he said, “Of course. Like when I go to the grocery store, and the security guard follows me around.”

For those who are accepted into the national community, there are ongoing active efforts to (re)fashion Finland as a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural state (Saukkonen 2013; Wahlbeck 2013). Finland has its own diversity as it recognizes Finnish and Swedish as official languages, is home to ethnic minorities such as Roma and Tatars (Koivukangas 2002: 3), and began receiving contemporary refugee communities of Vietnamese and Somalis in the 1980s and 1990s. I attended a Cultural Day at an elder care home with a group of Syrian refugee friends, where the attendees were encouraged to wear their “traditional” national dress. Lined up in the auditorium, the Finnish host in skirt and bonnet spoke about each individual’s costume in minute detail for two hours in an attempt to recognize and respect each participant’s sartorial practices.

In another example, the public transportation authority and the Finnish Human Rights Association posted large advertisements to stop harassment and discrimination on public transit, displaying photos of different Finnish phenotypes and migrants in the community. Despite such efforts, I witnessed several incidents of racially charged behavior. One time, my Iraqi interlocutor and I, a mixed-race woman, were on a Helsinki train, when two inebriated Finnish men drinking beer and slamming the cans against the walls yelled in our faces; they received no consequences for their actions. Another time, Finnish police officers confronted boisterous Somali teenagers for squabbling over a cell phone.

I interviewed a number of Syrian refugees temporarily housed in the Helsinki Reception Center. Most of these individuals had only recently arrived in Finland, although their flight out of Syria may have spanned years. All expressed hope and a positive outlook for their futures (see figure 4.1). A single Syrian refugee man in his mid-thirties reflected on his impressions:

Finland is nice. Its manners, its people are nice and good. There are no problems here such as in Germany or France, like assault. We’ll take residency, a house, everything is better in time. If I don’t find a Kurdish woman, I’ll take



Figure 4.1. Syrian Refugees Organize a Picnic at a Finnish Lakeside Park. Photo by the author.

a Finnish woman [to marry]. [Services are] not so good, but what can we do? Whatever they are giving us we are eating, we thank God. We came from war, so we'll do OK. The food sometimes is good, sometimes not . . . Even now I love Christians; there are no problems between Christians and Muslims. Religion is one . . . I love cold; I do not love the sun . . . Here they care about families a lot. If you have a wife and kids, they make procedures easier for you. Finnish people are good.

According to one 28-year-old Syrian refugee man, married with children,

[Finland] is a really nice country. Everything is good but the food. I have a daughter, and she has bone weakness, she needs surgery. God willing, [the government] will pay for everything. The Finnish people are good. I do not have any problems. Finnish, Syrian, we are all together no problems. Everyone has their own religion; it is their own. We will try to learn the language and intermingle with the Finnish people.

Indeed, I returned to the reception center the following week, and their infant daughter had returned from surgery. Her tiny pelvis and legs were splayed open in a cast, all paid for by the welfare system.

But not all refugees and migrants in Finland integrate easily, despite the many benefits of the welfare system. A young Syrian man who goes by the name Mariano escaped Syria after being beaten by regime agents. He made his way through Europe and changed his name, since he identifies as secular and did not want the association of “Assalamu alaykom” of his Arab-Muslim name. He claims, “I am ashamed that Arabic is my mother tongue,” even though he has worked as a translator. Mariano came to Finland as an exchange student about five years prior, obtained residency, and hopes to legally change his name. He avoids socializing with Arabs, and when he invited me to his birthday party, I saw that he had only invited Finns and other non-Arabs, including people he had just met (like myself). Reinventing himself as Mediterranean with an Italian name and ethnic European social network is one way to attempt to avoid the negative stereotypes of Muslims held by some in Finland.

Aisha, a Muslim university activist who wears a hijab, described having been spat on, yelled at, and followed while in Finland due to her head covering and foreign phenotype. She related an incident when she visited the government offices to obtain her social security card, to which she was entitled as an employed international student, but was denied by the receiving officer:

But I said, “You don’t know anything about me.” He said, “It doesn’t matter; you can’t have it.” So, I called my accountant, and I said, “Here, you talk to her.” So, she spoke to him over the phone. I don’t know if it was just that he didn’t want to look wrong in front of me, but he said I still couldn’t have it. So, I went home and applied online.

A Lutheran female priest named Eliisa described her thoughts on racism in Finland during brunch at her apartment, along with Iraqi Demo activist Ahmed, with whom she worked closely. She critiqued racism in Finland with biting sarcasm, a social current which she knows well since she herself has been subject to threats of rape and murder due to her work with asylum seekers. Eliisa offered her impression of Finnish racism:

Our country has everything, everything is perfect, everything works. But we are also the most racist country on earth. The gays, it looks good for us if we

say we like the gays, but really, we say there is something wrong with them in their heads. They are not normal. The Arabs, all they do is rape. Rape, rape, rape, rape, rape! The Iraqis, have you seen how they touch babies? They are pedophiles. The Roma, ooh, they steal everything. The Russians! We hate them because of the war. The Swedes! They are rich, and we want them here, but they can't take over even though they want to. The Saami, the indigenous people, thank God we pushed them north, that is where we want them to stay. They want to take the country back, but we can't let them. [The Somalis], ooh, they are the worst. All they do is take. Don't give anything back. They didn't pay taxes, but they came here and took.

In their many interactions with Finnish state and civil society, refugees and asylum seekers are socialized and disciplined by the state into more acceptable residents and potential citizens. Public signage indicates the ways that Finns attempt to mold newcomers into integratable subjects. A Football for Refugee Women Festival was organized by a local nonprofit—although refugee women may not be much interested in playing football, the Finnish state and nonprofits receiving government funding have determined that this is a laudable goal, with or without demand from the migrant community. Such efforts implicitly critique the presumed gender norms of Middle Easterners. Signs posted around the reception center indicate that parents need to monitor their children at all times in order to be “responsible.” This injunction comes up against some Middle Eastern practices where children are allowed to run freely outside (as are many Finnish children), but foreign parents are vilified if their children play independently. A sign posted in the courtyard of the reception center juxtaposes pavement littered with cigarette butts and refuse against a clean Finnish street, instructing newcomers how to properly dispose of their cigarettes as responsible residents. Instructional images on how to use a flush toilet are displayed around Helsinki bathrooms, explained by government officials and reception center staff, who stated that numerous toilets had been damaged by squatting—a curious claim given that upright toilets are widely used throughout the Middle East. Aisha, the Muslim student activist, argued that Finnish service providers need not be so patronizing to Middle Easterners, who know how to use toilets. For the relatively small numbers of quota refugees who have been selected to legally integrate into the welfare state, strong currents of socialization and discipline are evident in refugee experiences.

The Inhumane State: Iraqi Asylum Seekers and Local Asylum Activists

Iraqi asylum seekers in Finland live in a state of precarity. To protest rejected asylum claims, forced deportation, and falling into undocumented status, Iraqi asylum seekers and their allies initiated a protest at Helsinki

Railway Station in early 2017. The Demo, as they call it, is a utopian community uniting asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan and their Finnish supporters. The Demo began in February under freezing conditions, garnering media attention and public support with locals bringing tents, blankets, and sleeping bags to ensure that demonstrators did not freeze. It continued for 141 days until July 2017, when the police ordered its closure. The protest demanded for asylum seekers the rights to live, to access legal rights, to appeal negative asylum decisions, to cease deportations until appeals are complete, and to remain protected from eviction from reception centers until alternative accommodations are found. Finnish locals visited the Demo to show support for asylum seekers, bringing food, supplies, books, artwork, and potted plants. Demonstrators claimed that the state is not in fact benevolent despite its welfare orientation. The tent was decorated with images showing what the demonstrators view as the reality of Iraq: one of death, destruction, danger, and persecution. After each Iraqi bombing or attack, new images appeared in the tent and prayers for peace on the exterior. The asylum seekers asked, are these images of a safe country, as deemed by the Finnish Immigration Service?

The Demo was situated across the square from a counterdemonstration by Finland First, an anti-immigrant right-wing group, whose members attempt, often inebriated, to agitate asylum seekers by recording them closely on their phones or by verbally accosting demonstrators, all the while drinking asylum seekers' tea. The Finland First tent displayed signs declaring "Jihadists Out" and "Stop Taqiyya"—an obscure reference to Middle Eastern minority practices of hiding one's identity when life or religion is endangered. Finnish social divisions become apparent through the practices and discourses surrounding the Demo and asylum seekers. The "*rasisti*" versus "*suvakki*" binary describes those with anti-immigration views (*rasisti*) and those who are "hypertolerant idiots" (*suvakki*) toward migrants and asylum seekers. Both groups are essentialized, with anyone expressing fear or anxiety about migrants and asylum seekers suspected of harboring neo-Nazi affinities, while those who are tolerant are caricatured as delicate, effeminate, naïve "flower hat ladies," including men (Pyrhönen 2015: 149). Finnish women who support migrants and asylum seekers are ridiculed as "tolerant whores" online and accused of desiring the phallus of the exotic Other. Death threats and online harassment are commonly experienced by asylum seeker supporters, although elderly Finnish World War II adoptees attempt to remind their conationals that Finland was once in a similar situation (Virkki 2007: 132). A nonprofit Lutheran Church organization director working with asylum seekers shared how she went to the government registry to close the file on her personal information in an attempt to avoid being harassed and threatened.

Through this essentializing discourse, moderate Finns harboring concerns over large-scale migration while also protecting asylum seekers' rights

are largely drowned out. Trust in the system is threatened by asylum-related phenomena, where trust has been a pillar of Finnish society (Martela et al. 2020: 133). Undocumented persons on the street show that the welfare state is not providing. Questionable deportations challenge the humanitarian nature of the state, and police and migration agents tasked with carrying out arrests and deportations worry that politicians make decisions that compel them to break their oaths to protect peoples' rights.

In June of 2017, a young man named Lateef died of liver failure in a Finnish Reception Center. For weeks, his death was a source of shock and outrage among the Arabic-speaking community in Finland; when I visited or interviewed Middle Easterners, his case was invariably mentioned. Inspired by his death, Iraqi asylum seekers coined the Arabic hashtag "*Finlanda_bilaa_Insaniyya*" [Finland without humanity] on social media to commemorate and protest Lateef's fate.

Friends described his demise on social media. According to one Facebook post, "For more than a year Lateef suffered from liver failure. Day after day his health deteriorated. We appealed to the Finnish government for him, but no one heard us. And they didn't allow him to return to Iraq [to seek care] and they didn't help him. Today he lost his life in Lahti camp." Iraqis were convinced that Lateef had been deliberately neglected by the Finnish state, effectively left to die.

Two days after Lateef's death, I had a prescheduled interview with the Finnish Red Cross, which administers reception centers. I mentioned the controversy surrounding the death among the Arabic-speaking community, and the administrator responded that she was fully debriefed on the situation. She was adamant that the center had operated appropriately, and that death was an unfortunate possibility for anyone in medical need.

Red Cross (RC): No, no, we actually looked into that case, and one of our staff, the health adviser, she called the center and checked what is the issue, and we have not seen anything that was not done how it should've been done.

LG: So, he received the care he should have?

RC: Yes, yes, and of course there is a long queue because he needed a new liver basically. I mean there are more Finnish people. It is not like you would get it immediately, and for me, it seems that he received all the services he would've needed and just unfortunately did not get the transplant early enough.

LG: So, he was in the same line as Finnish people?

RC: Correct.

In addition to this testimony, the Finnish Immigration Service (2017) also posted a press release on its website titled "No Errors in the Reception Centre's Handling of the Situation." The statement bemoans the "rumors" circulating on social media, arguing that there is "no particular cause to criticize

its operations” (Finnish Immigration Service 2017). Finnish administrators involved in the case continued to view the state as functional, rational, trustworthy, and fair. In their view, it was *despite* the efforts of the Finnish state to provide medical care, not *because of* those efforts, that he had perished. Finns argued that anyone needing an organ transplant, Finnish or foreigner, could die during the waiting period. But for Iraqis, it was suspicious, and it strained credulity that an asylum seeker fell to this fate under the strong welfare state, renowned for its universal access to high-quality healthcare.

An Iraqi man in his early thirties shared his thoughts on the long, difficult process of seeking asylum and the bureaucratic roadblocks to establishing a successful asylum claim, such as an accurate and thorough medical exam:

I have spent two years here and still no decision. I don't understand why. Either give me an *iqama* [residency] or reject me! After eleven months they called me back into immigration to ask more questions. They say I can go back to Iraq; I am from Diyala. But there are gangs asking about me. If I go back, I am dead. I am Sunni, but now the country is influenced by Iran and controlled by the Shia. Sunni Arabs are imprisoned, killed, kidnapped, tortured. There is safety in the south for the Shia. There is safety in Kurdistan for the Kurds. But there is no safety anymore for the Sunni. If Iraq was safe, why doesn't Finland send their citizens there?

My brother was kidnapped a year ago. He disappeared. Until today, we don't know if he is alive or dead. I don't know where my father is either. He is still in Iraq, but I lost contact with him. I was tortured, they beat me and electrocuted me. I have pain all the time. When I saw the nurse, she didn't have any information in my file. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with me.

The issue of Sunni asylum was raised by many interviewees. One Iraqi woman in her fifties stated, “The majority of Sunni are leaving [Iraq] and the majority of Sunni are rejected,” noting the contradictory realities that Sunni Muslims feel that they face after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the ascendance of Shi'i political power and militias in the country, supported by the US coalition. The man mentioned above also critiqued the Finnish state's asylum application procedure:

They give a small income (*ratib*), and we get housing at the Reception Center. I was there with 1,000 other men. Everyone who was there, except me and five others, has been rejected. There is a guy in our center who was tortured, and it shows; he has scars and injuries all over his body. But he was rejected The situation in Iraq is killing, kidnapping, torture. It is obvious. It is all a lie, all contradictions. They may reject you based on your mood; if you are laughing, they will reject you; if you are angry, they will reject you.

Giorgio Agamben (1998) characterized his concept of “bare life” as the human body reduced to its natural physicality, living in a state of exception

excluded from political life. Human beings in a state of bare life have no access to political rights or protections and therefore are exposed to political violence (Agamben 1998: 4). Amjad, a 28-year-old Iraqi Sunni man, who lost an eye in Iraq's sectarian violence, hauntingly alludes to this state of bare life continuing from Iraq to Finland:

The [government] lawyers say that you, the Iraqis, are not humans. What is humanity? We took it off, we only look at you as material. All the decisions are negative for Iraqis. The lawyer says they know what I'm saying is true, but you can still live there [Iraq]. A parliament [member], he's from the same tribe [as me]. Some members of his family were assassinated and his brothers. He accused us of the incident, but this is completely wrong and there is no evidence. [The government] sent the army toward us, they prosecuted us, my dad and my uncles. It was terrorists who killed his relatives. My uncle died during the torture by the Iraqi army. I even have pictures of my uncle, how he was killed.

[Finland's] policies do not differ from those of Iraq. There's no human rights. In the [Finnish asylum] camp I was subject to abuse by one of the gangs. This person was granted residency. In the beginning, Finland's policy was very good. Settlement was faster. I heard that [Finland] was a leading country in research and education and it is a beautiful country in everything. A year and a half waiting, and they rejected my [asylum] request.

I expected [humanitarianism] but the policies are harsh and shocking. The Finnish government instilled no confidence on refugees in its people. They completely isolated us from the people. The problem is if an Iraqi made some trouble, they say all the Iraqis generally are [bad].

Many Iraqi asylum seekers see the application procedure as arbitrary and biased toward certain groups. Consistent rumors circulated among asylum seekers that asylum was more likely to be granted based on sexuality, gender identity, or Christian conversion, but these statistics are not recorded by Immigration. Asylum seekers reported that immigration lawyers advised clients whose applications were rejected to try reapplying as gay people or Christian converts. Eliisa, the Lutheran priest, said she was considering marrying a female asylum seeker to spare her from deportation, declaring loudly in the hallway of her apartment how much she loved her "fiancée" in case the neighbors were listening. A Finnish social researcher argued it was unfortunate that most Iraqi asylum seekers would not be "superstars" like the acclaimed Finnish-Iraqi filmmaker and author Hassan Blasim, implying that only if Iraqis were meritorious would their asylum claims be viewed more favorably, despite the fact that asylum is based on persecution, not merit or skill, and Syrian quota refugees by contrast are not required or expected to be "superstars." Iraqis who do not belong to these minority groups question why such lives are considered more valued or vulnerable. One interlocutor told me,

I will not lie. I applied, and it was the truth. My case is my case. I am not Christian, I am not gay, I am not third gender (*al-jins al-thalith*). Here is a picture of my town, Diyala [a mangled suicide bomber on his cell phone]. Where is the security? Even if I converted to Christianity, they would ask why I converted and would not believe it. I know someone who was third gender and they gave him an *iqama* (residency). Why? Why are they different? Where is the justice?

Although anti-immigrant groups in Finland often express fear over Islamic fundamentalism, Demo activists did not express much in the way of public religiosity. I conducted fieldwork during the Islamic month of Ramadan, which passed with little notice. Aisha, the Muslim student activist, organized one small *iftaar* dinner to support the protestors, for which they were grateful, but Demo participants did not take concerted action to highlight Islam or religion in their protest. When I asked participants if they were fasting for Ramadan, most stated that they were not for reasons such as diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiac issues, or work demands. Participants also mentioned that if they were to fast, they could follow the Hijazi clock of Mecca and Medina, rather than a strictly *halal* fast in the Arctic summer when the sun sets late into the night. There were no communal prayers at the Demo, and Iraqis stated that they were not in favor of the idea circulating to build a mosque to augment the many Islamic centers around Helsinki, since its construction was proposed to be funded by Saudi Arabia and would not reflect their values. Participants did not wear marked Islamic dress, such as a skullcap (*taqiyah*) or robe (*dishdasha* or *thawb*). In contrast, Iraqi men became well-known as skilled barbers in Finland for their stylish pompadour coiffure (Greig 2017; “Iraqi Brothers’ Mobile Barber Very Popular” 2020), which was sometimes targeted by extremists in Iraq (Worth 2005). In short, organizers and participants were most concerned with asylum seeker’s rights rather than with religious practice or Muslim solidarity, and they did not fit the anti-immigrant stereotype of Muslims as hyper-religious or fundamentalist and out of step with the largely secular Finnish society. On the contrary, many Muslims arriving in Finland consider themselves secular, Muslim “by name,” or from a Muslim family, but not particularly devout, having escaped the brutality of sectarian violence.

As they consider their options or lack of them, some asylum seekers convert, commit suicide, or opt to avoid documentation. The Finnish news source *YLE* reported hundreds of asylum seekers converting to Christianity from Islam in 2017 (“Hundreds of Asylum Seekers” 2017). Some of these individuals, like Mariano, feel a desire to distance themselves from Islam, while others are self-consciously seeking ways to be included in the Finnish nation. The greatest indication of asylum seeker desperation is through suicide or attempted suicide. In 2015, the Finnish Immigration Service reported between fifteen and twenty suicide attempts, with five resulting in

death; another source reports fifty-eight attempts in 2016 (Mirchandani 2017). In September 2017, two asylum seekers stabbed themselves in front of Finnish parliament (“Double Stabbing on Parliament Steps” 2017). Still others go undocumented trying to avoid forced deportation, a new phenomenon that contradicts the universal welfare state. Homeless rejected asylum seekers remind Finns of welfare gaps, since “Denmark, Finland, Germany and Sweden have tight registration systems with identity requirements operating in their homelessness sectors, making these services difficult for undocumented former asylum seekers to use” (Baptista et al. 2016: 56).

Despite their widespread bureaucratic rejection, Iraqi asylum seekers also forge strong social relationships with Finnish allies. The Lutheran priests who visited and supported the Demo are one example; they also express feeling Othered by the largely secular population. Priest Eliisa worked closely with Demo organizer and asylum activist Ahmed to ensure that the protest remained open in Helsinki Railway Square through summer by negotiating directly with police, although some city officials preferred to remove the Demo to make space for summer concerts and festivals. Finnish visitors to the Demo tried to ensure that protestors had donations of food and tea, chairs, tarps, and supplies. A pregnant Finnish woman visiting the Demo stated that she was “very concerned about what will happen to the demonstration. It is legal here, to demonstrate. I have friends who have even slept here.” Some Finns house asylum seekers in their own apartments, and the Lutheran Church provides sanctuary. Many Finnish asylum lawyers work hard to fight for their clients’ rights, to release them from detention, and to fight deportation (Puumala, Ylikomi, and Ristimäki 2017). Nonprofit professionals work to fill gaps they perceive in the universal welfare state—gaps that, in their view, should not exist. A local soccer league was formed so that Finns could meet their new neighbors, and romances are forged between asylum seekers and Finns as the communities interact in everyday life.

Conclusion

Finland poses an important case study to better understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of Middle Eastern refugees in the Global North. As one of the “happiest countries on Earth,” where citizens and residents alike enjoy the benefits of the welfare state, Finland is well-placed to successfully receive and integrate refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, xenophobic politics targeting brown, black, and Muslim immigrants complicate the universal welfare vision of basic subsistence and a life of dignity for all. While there is a strain of anti-Muslim racism evident in Finland, not all Muslim refugees and asylum seekers are viewed as a threat to state or society. Those who make their way through official refugee processing controls as

family units are acceptable in the state's rational bureaucracy, even if they are Othered as Muslims and Middle Easterners. Those who seek asylum autonomously and outside of the international refugee regime are viewed as suspect, as "queue jumpers," and as potential threats due to their identities as mostly young, single Muslim men, even though these men are also embedded within transnational family structures and hope for reunification in resettlement. Middle Eastern refugees and asylum seekers in Finland raise new questions about the polity's foundations of welfare for all within state jurisdiction. The imagined community of Finns is one of dynamic and contested sociopolitical debates in a state where the population has been viewed as relatively homogeneous but also de facto and de jure multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious.

Lindsay A. Gifford is an assistant research professor at the Pozen Family Center for Human Rights at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on critical refugee studies in the Levant, Middle Eastern diasporas, and refugee resettlement in the Global North. Gifford has conducted fieldwork with refugees in Syria, Jordan, Finland, and the Arab communities of California.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Baptista, Isabel, Lars Benjaminsen, Volker-Busch Geertsema, Nicholas Pleace, and Mauro Striano. 2016. "Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Homelessness: The Humanitarian Crisis and the Homelessness Sector in Europe." EOH Comparative Studies on Homelessness No. 6, December. Brussels: European Observatory on Homelessness. https://www.feantsaresearch.org/download/feantsa-studies_06_web1893761109777125727.pdf.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 2002. *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- The Constitution of Finland. 1999. "Section 19: The Right to Social Security." 11 June. Retrieved 3 July 2020 from <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731.pdf>.
- Degni, Filio, L. Koivusilta, and A. Ojanlatva. 2006. "Attitudes towards and Perceptions about Contraceptive Use among Married Refugee Women of Somali Descent Living in Finland." *European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* 11(3): 190–196.
- "Double Stabbing on Parliament Steps." 2017. *YLE*, 22 September. Retrieved 4 July from https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/double_stabbing_on_parliament_steps/9846555.

- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Faiola, Anthony. 2016. "Fear and Paranoia Lead Finns to Form Vigilante Groups That 'Protect Women' from Asylum Seekers." *Washington Post*, 31 January. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/fear-and-paranoia-lead-finns-to-form-vigilante-groups-that-protect-women-from-asylum-seekers/2016/01/23/c16f8646-b943-11e5-85cd-5ad59bc19432_story.html?noredirect=on.
- Finnish Immigration Service. 2017. "Death in Hennala: No Errors in the Reception Centre's Handling of the Situation." 30 June. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from https://migri.fi/en/press-release/-/asset_publisher/hennalan-kuolemantapaus-vastanottokeskuksen-toiminnassa-ei-sattunut-virheita.
- . 2019a. "Asylum in Finland: Quota Refugees." Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://migri.fi/en/quota-refugees>.
- . 2019b. "Services: Quota Refugee Selections." Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://migri.fi/en/quota-refugee-statistics>.
- . 2019c. "Statistics: International Protection." Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://tilastot.migri.fi/index.html#applications/23330?l=en&start=541&end=552>.
- . 2020. "Statistics: Decisions." Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://tilastot.migri.fi/index.html#decisions?l=en&start=553&end=564>.
- Goda-Savolainen, Margarita. 2017. "Social Support and Well-Being of Refugees in Finland." MA dissertation, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
- Greig, Rebecca. 2017. "Meet the Iraqi Refugees Shaking Up the Start-Up Scene in Finland." *International Business Times*, 6 March. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/meet-iraqi-refugees-shaking-start-scene-finland-1609645>.
- Helliwell, John F., Haifang Huang, Shun Wang, and Max Norton. 2020. "Social Environments for World Happiness." In *World Happiness Report 2020*, edited by John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, and Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, 12–45. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- "Hundreds of Asylum Seekers in Finland Converting from Islam to Christianity." 2017. *YLE*, 27 July. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/hundreds_of_asylum_seekers_in_finland_converting_from_islam_to_christianity/9744118.
- "Iraqi Brothers' Mobile Barber Very Popular in Corona Days." 2020. *Foreigner.fi*, 11 May. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://www.foreigner.fi/articulo/guide-for-entre/iraqi-brothers-mobile-barber-very-popular-in-corona-days/20200511135017005752.html>.
- Kauranen, Anne, and Tarmo Virki. 2019. "Finnish Social Democrats and Nationalist Finns Party Nearly Tied in Election." Reuters, 13 April. Retrieved 8 July 2020 from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-finland-election/finnish-social-democrats-and-nationalist-finns-party-nearly-tied-in-election-idUSKCN1RPORI>.
- Keskinen, Suvi. 2016. "From Welfare Nationalism to Welfare Chauvinism: Economic Rhetoric, the Welfare State and Changing Asylum Policies in Finland." *Critical Social Policy* 36(3): 352–370.
- Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

- Koivukangas, Olavi. 2002. "The Need for Multicultural Approach in Finland." Turku: Institute of Migration. http://maine.utu.fi/articles/045_Koivukangas.pdf.
- Laine, Sofia, and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander. 2017. "Volunteer Work among Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Finland from 2015 to 2017." *Gränslös* 8: 90–100.
- Lewis, Kayleigh. 2016. "Finland Says Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq are 'Safe' for Refugees to Return to." *Independent*, 18 May 18. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-finland-refugees-asylum-seekers-afghanistan-somalia-iraq-safe-to-return-a7036501.html>.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Liebkind, Karmela. 1996. "Acculturation and Stress: Vietnamese Refugees in Finland." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 27(2): 161–180.
- Lillrank, Annika. 2015. "Trust, Vacillation and Neglect: Refugee Women's Experiences Regarding Pregnancy and Birth Giving in Finland." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 5(2): 83–90.
- Luu, Chi. 2015. "Migrants, Refugees and Expats: How Humanity Comes in Waves." *JSTOR Daily*, 15 September. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://daily.jstor.org/language-of-migrants-refugees-expats/>.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 2002. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 766–775.
- Martela, Frank, Bent Greve, Bo Rothstein, and Juho Saari. 2020. "The Nordic Exceptionalism: What Explains Why the Nordic Countries Are Constantly among the Happiest in the World." In *World Happiness Report 2020*, edited by John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, and Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, 128–145. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Mirchandani, Maya. 2017. "Why Finland May Not Let Some Asylum Seekers Stay, Despite Needing Them." *The Wire*, 24 March. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/why-finland-may-not-let-some-asylum-seekers-stay-despite-needing-them>.
- Puumala, Eeva, Riitta Ylikomi, and Hanna-Leena Ristimäki. 2017. "Giving an Account of Persecution: The Dynamic Formation of Asylum Narratives." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31(2): 197–215.
- Pyrhönen, Niko. 2015. "The True Colors of Finnish Welfare Nationalism: Consolidation of Neo-Populist Advocacy as a Resonant Collective Identity through Mobilization of Exclusionary Narratives of Blue-and-White Solidarity." PhD dissertation, University of Helsinki, Finland.
- Saukkonen, Pasi. 2013. "Multiculturalism and Nationalism: The Politics of Diversity in Finland." In *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, edited by Peter Kivisto and Östen Wahlbeck, 270–294. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Skirbuitaite, Sandra. 2010. "Peculiarities of Cultural Integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Comparative Study of Finland and Lithuania." *Humanitariniai Mokslo* 1(26): 44–50.
- Swedberg, Richard, and Ola Agevall. 2016. *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Topolski, Anya. 2017. "Good Jew, Bad Jew . . . Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: 'Managing' Europe's Others." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41(12): 1–18.
- Valtonen, Kathleen. 1998. "Resettlement of Middle Eastern Refugees in Finland: The Elusiveness of Integration." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11(1): 38–60.

- Veggeland, Noralv. 2016. *The Current Nordic Welfare State Model*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- Virkki, Heidi. 2007. "The Identities of Young International Adoptees in Finland." *Finnish Yearbook of Population Research* 43: 131–146.
- Wahlbeck, Östen. 2013. "Multicultural Finnish Society and Minority Rights." In *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, edited by Peter Kivisto and Östen Wahlbeck, 295–324. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Worth, Robert F. 2005. "A Haircut in Iraq Can Be the Death of the Barber." *New York Times*, 18 March. Retrieved 4 July 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/18/world/middleeast/a-haircut-in-iraq-can-be-the-death-of-the-barber.html>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2016. *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror, and other Problems with the Neighbors*. New York: Penguin Press.