The pioneers of global gentrification

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24 October 2014

Does anyone feel genuinely at home in the age of global gentrification? Probably not, writes Agri Ismail, certainly not if the experience of the Kurdish diaspora is anything to go by. But so long as a Swedish song plays in an Irish pub in a chain hotel in Kurdistan, some sense of security remains.

We are surrounded by death and suffering: while only a few kilometres to the west the war in Syria is raging, to the south the consequences of imperialistic hubris can be observed in the postcolonial unraveling of a fiction named Iraq. These conflicts bleed into one another as thousands of militant Islamists conquer cities and threaten both countries’ existence under the flag of the Islamic State. In a few months these Islamists will have brutally murdered thousands of people, cleansed the city of Mosul entirely of Christians, buried members of the Yezidi community alive and enslaved hundreds of women in order to sell them to the highest bidder. Yet during the spring of 2014, though the symptoms are already there, it is still easy to ignore all of this in the Iraqi Kurdistan city of Slemani, while the collapse of the country remains unthinkable. We go shopping, go to the movies, discuss future projects over expensive hotel drinks. When we do glimpse the nearby suffering on TV screens that we would not be able to afford in the European countries we left behind in order to move here, the violence seems as distant as that of any other world crisis.

At an Irish pub managed by an international hotel chain, German beer is being served by Filipino waitresses. An Eritrean bartender is mixing a cocktail, his theatrical performance indicative of extensive industry training, a training that he has received somewhere other than here. Speakers relay Rihanna concluding her ecstatic confession of having found love in a hopeless place, which gives way to a western-inspired whistle soaring above a beat that is almost militaristic.

An alien’s love-thirst / A wonder who betrayed who first. “Oh, I love this!” someone shouts in Swedish from the other side of the pub, as the hoarse voice of singer Jocke Berg makes itself heard through the ambient noise. At another table sit a handful of young women, one of whom is explaining to the others that “this is a Swedish rock band called Kent”. Like so many of us Kurds who have moved here after growing up somewhere else she speaks English with her friends, supposedly the most obvious indicator that we are the pioneers of global gentrification, whereas it is in fact merely the language that we are
most comfortable speaking. Iraq, whose population the extreme Right’s rhetoric likens to swarming pests, was among the ten countries from where most people emigrated to Sweden in 2013. Meanwhile, Swedish emigration in general is at a level that hasn’t been seen “since the peak of the major emigrations to the USA in the 1880s”. [1] Two of the women at the table are, we will find out later that evening, amongst the 1,315 people who the Statistiska Centralbyrån (“Statistics Sweden”, an administrative agency that provides, inter alia, Sweden’s official statistical data) claims emigrated to Iraq from Sweden last year, only 70 fewer than the number of those who emigrated to Germany. “So…” someone wonders, “why are they playing a Swedish song in Kurdistan?”

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Before it became possible to order drinks from immigrant labourers at five star hotels, we were forced to witness the destruction of everything that had once been here. The cynical western argument against the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was that democracy wasn’t something that you “received” but rather something that was “earned”. [2] After what the Kurds were made to endure in the 1980s it is difficult, however, to claim that there was anything more that they could have done to deserve some form of self-governance.

The Islamic revolution in Iran was central to the formation of the Kurdish diaspora. The subsequent civil war took place in large part in Kurdish areas, areas that also became the battlefields of the war with Iraq. Simultaneously, the military coup in Turkey cemented the militarized society out of which the Kurdish guerrilla/terrorist organisation PKK grew. [3] These events, all taking place in 1979-1980, led to the beginning of the mass exodus that would characterize the following two decades for the Kurds. [4]

Between 1986 and 1989 Saddam Hussein implemented the so-called Al-Anfal campaigns, [5] a series of military gas attacks that were to “cleanse” Kurdish areas and which destroyed thousands of villages. Wells were poisoned, pastures burned, mass graves dug and then filled. During this period, many politically active Kurds received asylum in one of the neighbouring countries, and the entire region turned into a geopolitical game of musical chairs. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War when a new wave of ethnic cleansing forced almost half of Iraq’s Kurdish population to leave Iraq, [6] forced migration became far too widespread for countries like Iran and Turkey to handle on their own, especially in light of the fact that both these countries were deemed to have problems with their own Kurdish population. Both countries made submissions to the United Nations and the West, [7] which facilitated more extensive international migration.

Migration studies, from the earliest research in the nineteenth century, has generally shown that most migration takes place for financial reasons. [8] The models that were used to explain international migration were at first mainly based on neoclassical economic theories that stipulated that migration occurs when rural people seek to enter the various centres of the international growth economy in the hope of better financial opportunities. The Swedish mass exodus to the USA, for instance, which began after the bad harvest years from 1867 to 1869 caused by widespread crop failures, fits this explanatory model. It was a mass exodus where farmers chose the region in the USA that geographically most resembled Sweden: Minnesota. The major influx of refugees in the
1980s and 1990s into Sweden was a more directly forced migration but one that still produced only a fraction of the total number of migrants internationally: today only seven per cent of those who emigrate to another country are refugees and 90 per cent of these receive asylum in developing countries, rather than fleeing to the West. [9] When the question of integrating immigrants arises, the difference between immigrants who have chosen to move to another country and those who are forced to do so is often ignored: when someone doesn’t want to leave their country but is forced to do so in order to survive, is it then so strange that the person would rather keep their cultural heritage intact as long as possible? [10]

This heritage is often described as incompatible with a Swedish identity: in their manifesto, the extreme-right Sweden Democrats (“Sverigedemokraterna”) advocate “long term accountability and limited immigration, especially from countries where values and culture strongly diverge from Sweden’s”. [11] It was, however, not so long ago that Swedish migrants weren’t considered “white” and whose culture was deemed to diverge strongly from the western world’s. In a letter to his parents in 1901, a lumberjack by the name of Horace Glenn writes that there are at his workplace “probably 15 white men here to 60 Swedes”; the Swedes are described in the letter as “beasts”, they smell so badly of herring that “Walking behind a string of Swedes is something impossible to a person with a delicate nose”. [12] In the past, Finnish immigrants in Sweden have been thought to strongly diverge from Swedish culture and identity while Italians and the Irish were not thought of as “white” until only a few decades ago in the United States. Today, it is mainly Muslims who are deemed to be different and whose values are “strongly divergent”. That a society’s definition of what deviates from the norm always corresponds to those who have arrived most recently is not something that is emphasized enough.

The way from Iraq to Europe was identical for most people: you would sell your belongings and borrow the rest of the thousands of dollars that the smugglers would demand. You would then cross the mountains at night, hoping not to step on a landmine or be discovered by a soldier. If you were to get to Turkey, everything you had would be handed over to the smugglers who, if you were lucky, would allow you to step onboard a flimsy raft or rubber dinghy, and set sail towards Europe. If you survived this, which many did not, you would eventually get to Italy or Greece where you would spend an indefinite length of time in a refugee camp in the hope of one day being allowed to travel to one of the few countries that might receive you, which between 1986 and 1992 would primarily have been Germany and Sweden, later also the Netherlands. After that, maybe someone spits in your face outside kindergarten one day and shouts at you that you’re a fucking immigrant, but you will be safe, generally. You will be, overall, grateful.

In contrast to what extremists on the far Right want to demonstrate using the Orwellian Newspeak they employ so well, Sweden’s immigration policies are not very different, nor have they really ever been, from those of other European countries: it is based as much on ideology as it is on a need for cheap labour. [13] Official positions regarding immigration policy barely existed before the 1960s, as the Swedish government merely assumed that immigrants who came to Sweden would only be there temporarily or, if they stayed, that they would assimilate into Swedish society without any structural assistance. [14] The first attempt to establish an actual policy in this field was the so-called Immigration Inquiry (“Utlänningsutredningen”) that began in 1961. The aim of the immigration policy at the time was assimilation, making “immigrants learn Swedish and
conform to Swedish society as soon as possible.” [15] When the Kurds began arriving in Sweden at the end of the 1980s, however, Sweden’s Migration Board (“Migrationsverket”) had begun to reconsider the earlier assimilation policies, which had received criticisms from spokespeople for different immigrant groups, and instead formulate a more multicultural integration policy. [16] Newly arriving Kurdish groups could therefore easily form the core of the burgeoning diaspora in Sweden, a country where the libraries and cultural centres that the Kurds had been deprived of in their home countries could exist, where unlike the countries they had left behind it was not forbidden to teach children Kurdish but where it was rather encouraged and freely offered by the Swedish National Agency for Education (“Skolverket”). It is not a coincidence, then, that Sweden became the country where most Kurdish cultural activities took place. [17]

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On 7 October 2012, in an attempt to be fashionably nonpartisan, the leaders of the Swedish parliament’s eight political parties basked in the purple and yellow lights of a TV-studio behind tiny podiums as though they were on a gameshow. The question that the participants were expected to answer, in prime time on Swedish public service TV, was “How much immigration can Sweden tolerate?” In a prime example of petitio principii – a rhetorical fallacy where the conclusion is already presupposed in the premise – the politicians only needed to show up in order for the question’s implicit values to be realized as true, immigration being something that has a limit and something that either should or should not be tolerated.

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While Kurdish emigrants in the 1990s smoked cigarettes, talked about Marx, recited Kurdish poems published by one of the many Kurdish publishing houses in Sweden, and gradually transformed the real Kurdistan that they had left behind into an unattainable utopia, Iraqi Kurdistan continued to exist but completely separated from the world at large. After the Gulf War, the UN had implemented so-called no-fly zones in order to protect the Kurdish population from the Iraqi regime’s airforce without having to take any real moral stance beyond this. As part of the UN’s highly corrupt Oil-for-Food programme, [18] the Kurds – rather than receive assistance for rebuilding the villages destroyed – were handed monthly rations of rice, flour and tea. Rather than sweeping the areas that Iraq had mined heavily during the Iran-Iraq war, including with landmines manufactured in Europe, the UN’s Iraq Mine Action Program contented itself with merely indicating the areas where most of the mines were buried. Even now, over 25 per cent of the world’s undetonated landmines are to be found in the Kurdish areas of Iraq. [19] The Kurds could not legally leave – their passports were no longer valid and the Iraqi authorities would not renew them. Even the currency was an ad hoc solution, with obsolete Iraqi bills used as an improvised currency, bills that no bank in the world would accept as legal tender. The currency was capped at a certain amount – in a manner akin to today’s BitCoins – as no bills of this kind were printed after 1989. The Kurds were, then, economically, legally and socially separated from the rest of the world. While the diaspora dreamt of a zion to which to return, time stood still in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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On social media, a video is shared showing the singer Jason “Timbuktu” Diakité receiving the 2012 5i12-prize. He is standing in a small room in Sweden’s parliament; we can’t see those he is addressing but we see the flashes from their cameras. In his acceptance speech, Diakité shows his Swedish passport while describing his love for the country. “This is my proof, in any case”, he says, “that I am not a stranger”. Those who share the video on Facebook and Twitter seem to see this as a blow to racism. Few seem to feel discomfort at the sight of a Swedish man who feels the need – simply because he doesn’t look Swedish enough – to brandish his passport in order to prove that he belongs here.

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In Slemani, there is a pizzeria by the name of Mårtens café och pizza. The wood oven that the owners use was imported from Sweden via Turkey. Another pizzeria, Pizza Darin, has the Swedish flag as its logo. In the fashionable store House of Brands, exclusive Swedish brands like Tiger, Oskar Jacobsson and Filippa K are sold. Near Olof Palme’s park – named after the former Swedish prime minister – there is a furniture store by the name of EKIA, its name writ in blue letters over a yellow background. In the nearby city of Erbil there is a “Swedish village”, a residential area for the returning middle class. Young men and women sit in trendy cafés speaking myriad languages: Kurdish of course, but also English, German, Dutch and Swedish.

When we children of those exiled during the past 20 to 30 years end up moving to the source of our parents’ romantic ideals, we are not treated as people who are returning: rather, we have chosen to leave the country that most of us were born in, we have transformed ourselves from being exiles to expats. On the surface this may seem like a migrant’s dream scenario: to emigrate and then later return with capital and experience to invest back into the homeland that we have been forced out of. But what’s taking place is different from the dream that previous generations nurtured, as we have never lived here before. Some of us barely speak Kurdish. When a Kurdish friend in the Swedish city of Linköping heard “Go back to your country, bloody foreigner“, she was confused: Kurds don’t have a country of their own and even if they did she was born in Sweden and does not know any reality or affinity other than that. Our parents’ words resemble the extreme rightwing’s, that Sweden was never our “true” home, that there was always a country of origin to return to one fine day. The Kurdish diaspora’s idealized homesickness erases the home country’s reality, in accordance with Barthesian myth-making, where knowledge of the actual circumstances does not suffice to change the existing myth, a myth that is based on a selective interpretation of the past. [20] That the myth does not correspond to what is actually there confuses parents who prefer to continue believing in the myth. This is your home, they say, and show us a place we have never seen before, as if simply by naming a place home, it becomes home. Yet we expats are met by a population who, just like us, instinctively know the truth: we do not belong here. We have come to partake in a wealth that is not ours and should it one day no longer be safe to remain here, we have the possibility to leave. The Kurds in Slemani call us Swedi – Swedes – in the same way that we will forever be asked by well-meaning people in Sweden where we are from, with the presumption that there is a real or original identity. As the researcher Barzoo Eliassi claims, the construction of Swedish identity is implemented and determined daily through an “interrogating technique that demands answers to specific questions: ‘Where are you from?’, ‘…to begin with’ or ‘originally’. This ‘originally’ is almost regarded as the very biggest thing of all.” [21]
Representatives from foreign corporations fly over and talk about investment opportunities, about how exciting it is here, a place where - in contrast to the countries whence they’ve come - there is a lot of money to be made. [22] These young men and women repeat time and time again that northern Iraq is “booming”, and those of us who are not fluent in English idioms correct them: no, that’s exactly what Kurdistan is not. No bombs here. A British trade delegation, with representatives from HSBC and PricewaterhouseCoopers, described Iraqi Kurdistan as “full of potential for investment”. [23] They ask us questions about Kurdistan, about why we moved back here and we give them the usual answers that lead to satisfied nods and smiles: we feel like this is an exciting time, we want to give something back to our homeland, we want to feel like we’re actually making a difference. Of course the reality is somewhat different, even if some of us don’t want to admit it even to ourselves: we are here for the exact same reason as the western businessmen. Our motivation is closer to theirs than it is to the native Kurdish population. For us as well, Kurdistan is “full of potential for investment”.

According to Ernst Ravenstein, the father of migration theory, all voluntary migration consists of forces that attract migrants to a new place as well as forces that push them away from their original home. [24] With the economic prospects that currently exist in Iraqi Kurdistan it is easy to see what attracts us. We often talk about these driving forces, to each other and to the puzzled world around us. We rarely discuss, however, that which pushes us away from Europe, away from Sweden.

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When I graduated from university I sent off 70 CVs, overblown accounts of the little I had accomplished in life outside of my studies, easily fitting into one page. Out of the 70 jobs I sought that autumn, I received only a handful of automated responses. We thank you for your interest. No offers, no interviews, even. Finally, several months later, someone called from a recruitment agency. “You don’t have an accent, that’s great!” he said in such a contagiously enthusiastic tone that even I was momentarily pleased about this. He had no jobs to offer me in the fields that I had been educated in, nothing in law or finance, unfortunately, but if I wanted it, there was a telemarketing job available. I took the job. “Your name, by the way”, my boss said when I showed up later that week for the interview, “When you call people maybe it’s easiest if it is something else. Johan. David. I don’t know. It’s up to you.”

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The issue of immigration can be boiled down to the following question: as a small country such as Sweden, with limited manpower, experiences a period of growth, it becomes profitable to import labour, especially from countries that provide it cheaply. So then, during a recession when these jobs disappear, what should happen to the immigrants? That this is the crux of the issue can be demonstrated with the following statistic: during parliamentary elections in Sweden between 1960 and 1998, only once has more than one or two per cent of the time set aside for debates between the party leaders been allocated to the issue of immigration, and this was before the 1994 elections, right after the Swedish financial crisis, when suddenly ten per cent of the debate-time was spent discussing immigration. [25]
According to the philosopher Ingo Niermann, Dubai – the paragon of late capitalism – has solved this problem by treating the emirate as though it were a privately owned corporation. When in 2005 Human Rights Watch published a critical report on the treatment of migrant labourers, the labour minister of the United Arab Emirates responded:

Workers hosted by the UAE cannot be considered migrant workers (which would entitle them to rights stipulated in the UN’s migrant worker’s convention of 1990) as they work on a temporary basis and according to fix-term employment contracts [...] therefore, the immigration laws applicable in western countries cannot be applied to these workers.

Dubai’s immigrant population (over 90 percent of the total population) is thus only to be seen as employees of the privately owned corporation that is the United Arab Emirates. When these employees are then made redundant they must leave the firm immediately. It is not a coincidence that upon filling in a residency application in Dubai, you have to give a home address in another country. Dubai can never be your home.

This most unencumbered form of capitalism solves all immigration issues in this manner: invite people when you need them, throw them out when no longer the case. In Dubai it is completely normal to ask someone where they are from at a job interview and to pay them in accordance with their origin (even here, the face of post-colonialism shows itself: those from the “white” West, i.e. western Europe and the USA receive the highest remuneration for the same position, those from the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines the lowest). Nobody questions the fact that the UAE’s system is based on what people are worth and that the said worth can be read in people’s skin, ethnicity and gender.

What the architect Rem Koolhaas calls “generic cities” (young cities that have an identical neutrality to them, akin to international airports, where commerce is the only reason for the city’s existence and where only already known shops and restaurants can be re-created) have capitalism as the fountainhead of their principles and therefore do not need any immigration policies. Newly industrialized cities such as Kuwait City, Singapore and Dubai can thus content themselves with importing labour without giving labourers any rights in return.

Such behaviour is a luxury that older nations cannot treat themselves to: not even the United States, whose neoliberal philosophy has provided the United Arab Emirates with the inspiration for their version of capitalism, can ignore human rights to the same extent, where those who legally reside in their country are concerned. Instead of a bureaucratic structure that immediately makes sure that immigrants leave the country upon termination of employment, in our more “humane” societies we have other, more subtle, methods to get people to leave, to make them feel unwelcome.

These methods can include acts like those of our neighbours who, in the 1990s, put up stickers of the far-right party Ny Demokrati’s logo on our front door, or when faceless bureaucrats decided that our relatives were not allowed to visit us in Sweden. They can take the shape of a girlfriend’s parents who, after having seen Not Without My Daughter,
claimed that we may look nice enough, but you never knew, it could all be an act. The jobs that were never there, even though the grades were, the apartments that miraculously became available when partners with western names asked about them but were already off the market when we had asked previously. Our names and faces that will never be seen as Swedish. These methods are actualized in the prayers we pray every time something blows up in Europe: please, don’t let it be someone who looks like us. Finally we pack our bags and make parents happy by moving back to countries we never moved away from. Sweden, it turns out, can never be our home either.

“It’s like being in love with someone who doesn’t want you”, a friend says about her relationship to Sweden. She is waiting to leave the city of Uppsala for Kurdistan despite knowing she is bound to get a better salary and a better job in Uppsala. As a woman there are other things to take into consideration, and Iraq is for her the polar opposite of Sweden when it comes to equality. I try to convince her by mentioning that even as far back as the eighteenth century, Kurdish women have been known to enjoy the most freedom in the Middle East, [30] that more women receive education in Slemani than men, that the law stipulates that 30 per cent of the Kurdish parliament has to be comprised of women. That very few wear a veil. She shrugs: “Yeah but can I go out on my own at night to have a drink without men assuming that I am for sale? Can I have a friend of the opposite sex without people thinking that we’re in a relationship?”

She is right, there is a lot that remains to be done. This is part of the attraction, the so-called frontier myth that the geographer Neil Smith describes as one of the driving forces of the gentrification process in inner cities. [31] For what is happening in Kurdistan is actually a new kind of gentrification, where rather than higher income residents moving to traditionally poorer areas within the same city, people now move to entirely different countries. Gentrification thus becomes a global phenomenon where it is no longer Södermalm, Haga, Bushwick or Spitalfields that is transformed but rather Kurdistan, Qatar, Angola. [32]

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My fiancé tells people in Sweden that she would love to apply for Swedish citizenship when we get married. She is blonde, American. This statement is always met with an exalted “Oh how great!” Her faltering vocabulary fascinates people, as though she were a parrot reciting Wittgenstein. They are amazed that someone whose native language is English would even want to learn such an unimportant language. I say nothing, smile, think about what the reactions would have been if she looked like me, if her name was Aisha rather than Amanda.

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In Slemani my barber complains about how expensive everything has become: his son has asked for a chocolate that costs four dollars a piece (to get a haircut at the barber costs me less than three). Who can afford these things? he wonders. In passing, I ask if he’s been to any of the new hotels or restaurants, a question met with a laugh, too absurd to warrant answering. “Those places are for those other people.”

“Those other people” are people like myself, people whose mere presence in Kurdistan
automatically generates expensive cafés and restaurants, who cause old schools to be torn down so that a modern skyscraper can have a bigger entrance. We have brought with us the entrepreneurship of the hipster: if the things that we are used to do not exist here, we simply create them ourselves. We left Europe because we felt meaningless and unwelcome, now it is our turn to force arbitrary rules upon others about what to wear, how to act and look, it is our turn to make them feel unwelcome in their own homes. We call this growth, we call this progress.

We are having drinks in a bar located on the 34th floor of a new hotel. There seems to be a new one opening once a month these days. I mention to some friends that I am going back to Sweden for the summer and they sigh in overt displays of nostalgia. When I return here a few months later, a few of these friends will have fled the country, others will have joined the Kurdish peshmerga forces where many will have died in battles with the Islamic State. The Indian waiter mixing our drinks will no longer be allowed to remain in Iraq due to the Indian government’s travel ban, the cheap labour being too cheap to warrant risking their lives here. This very hotel will be empty, desolate. The trade delegations that doled out business cards and promises will no longer answer emails, promised investments in services and infrastructure will turn out to be nothing more than a mirage. This entire world is about to disappear. But we don’t know this yet, as we sit on a warm April evening drinking cocktails and talk of Sweden, thinking of what was once our home, a home where we no longer feel like we belong.

Footnotes

1. www.scb.se/sv_/Hitta-statistik/Artiklar/Utvandringen-till-Danmark-och-Storbritannien-okade/


3. Depending on who you ask.


5. Hussein, whose early works such as On Revolution and Education and On Democracy gave Iraq hope of socialist reform, frequently used Islamic terminology to describe his acts against the Kurds. Al-Anfal (“Spoils of war”) is the name of the sura in the Qur’an that describes appropriate behaviour during a Holy War. A few years later, when the West was about to intervene in the Kuwait War, Hussein wrote Allah u Akhbar on the Iraqi flag between the Baath party’s green stars, in an attempt to get the Muslim world’s support and in order to immediately transform any American desecration of the Iraqi flag into an affront to Islam.


7. Since the Kurds do not have a nation, they cannot bring any question to the United Nations: this therefore requires a country that considers it to be in its own interest to
speak on behalf of the Kurds to the United Nations, as the United States did during the buildup to its invasion of Iraq in 2003, where Saddam's acts of genocide finally became something that warranted an American reaction.


10. See e.g. Sofia Ali Suad Mohamed, *Kurd i hemmet men svensk i samhället: En studie av unga kurdiska kvinnors förhållningssätt till sig själva och det svenska samhället*, Linköping University, 2009, 13

11. Sweden Democrats Party Manifesto 2011, 15


16. That multiculturalism is therefore something new or a failure, as per the current mantra, is merely a fabrication. Sweden has, according to Kerstin von Brömssen, always been a multicultural society. It is the fact that this is now being problematized in political discourse that is actually a new occurrence. See Kerstin von Brömssen, *Tolkningar, förhandlingar och tystnader. Elevers tal om religion i det mångkulturella och postkoloniala rummet*, Göteborg University, 2003, 91


22. One issue is the lack of internationally accepted banks: Iraqi banks are renowned for their lack of liquidity since both Iraqi and foreign businessmen prefer to send their money to banks abroad and since foreign banks do not invest in a region that their compliance departments do not differentiate from the rest of Iraq, a region with no credit rating and whose regional government the KRG is unable to give sovereign guarantees. All the skyscrapers that slowly fill the horizons of Kurdish cities have hitherto been built without any access to credit.


24. Ravenstein, "Laws of Migration", 186-7

25. Dahlström, *Nästan Välkomna*, 76


28. Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai the City as Corporation*, University Of Minnesota Press, 2011, 46


**Published 24 October 2014**

Original in **Swedish**

First published in *Glänta 2/2014 (Swedish version); Eurozine (English version)*

Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/the-pioneers-of-global-gentrification/)

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