On the five year anniversary of the Iraq War, political scientists, politicians, social movement organizations, humanitarian organizations, the media, and people throughout the world contemplated the consequences of the United States’ decision to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power. Indeed, the many ways in which this war has affected social and political order in the Middle East, international security, world economies, and foreign relations have been the topics of both scientific inquiry and journalistic investigation. Although recent analyses have focused on the relationship between the war and political schisms within the European Union as well as the future of EU-USA relations, relatively less attention has been paid to the effect of the war on the social structure and politics within European countries.

Ninety-five percent of the four million displaced Iraqis still live in the Middle East. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, most of the rest have found asylum in Europe. In fact, Iraqis became the largest nationality to seek asylum in Europe in 2006. The 1951 Geneva Convention specifies that a refugee is a person “who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.” Nevertheless, not all applications of this law have been equal. While most EU member states require that refugees prove that their lives are in extreme peril, Sweden had, until July of 2007, made an exception for Iraqis, who needed only demonstrate that they were fleeing central or southern Iraq to receive asylum.

In 2006, over 40% of all Iraqi applications for asylum in Europe went to Sweden, and according to Statistics Sweden, 91%, or approximately 9,500 Iraqis, received residence permits. This increased the number of Iraqis residing in Sweden to approximately 83,000. Then, in 2007, 18,000 Iraqis applied for asylum, and, according to the Swedish Migration Board, 93% were granted permits. Statistics Sweden puts the number of Iraqis currently living in Sweden at 97,513, which, for a country of only 9.1 million people, is no small thing.

Moreover, unlike other European countries that have been reluctant to recognize that immigrants do not necessarily desire to return to their countries of origin, Sweden’s universalist policies have made it relatively easy for refugees to obtain citizenship. In fact, it is easier for foreigners who come to Sweden with asylum permits to apply for citizenship than it is for those who come with work or study visas. Granting citizenship, of course, stimulates more immigration, and according to the Swedish Integration Board, family reunification is the most prevalent reason

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for immigrating to Sweden.

While it is easy to sing the praises of Sweden and recognize it for its generosity and humanitarianism—especially when the United States took in only 1,600 Iraqi refugees last year—I would be remiss to paint this picture entirely in hues of rose. In recent years, Sweden has transitioned from a relatively homogenous country to one of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity—engendering economic, social, and political challenges for all involved. Currently, 16.7% of the population is either foreign-born or Swedish-born with two foreign-born parents. As a percentage of the total population, the largest numbers of foreign-born people reside in the county of Stockholm, which includes the capital city of Stockholm, its districts, and 26 other municipalities. However, the municipality with the highest concentration of foreign-born residents includes the southern city of Malmö, located only a bridge’s distance from Copenhagen, Denmark. Segregation in and near these cities is common, and the vast majority of foreign nationals and foreign-born living in suburban ghettos, such as Stockholm’s Rinkeby or Malmö’s Rosegård. Employment rates differ greatly between native Swedes and the foreign-born population, and the Swedish Integration Board finds these differences cannot be explained fully by variation in age, education, or length of stay in Sweden. In other words, even with anti-discrimination legislation on the books, ethnicity plays a role in one’s life chances even in the world’s most democratic nation (as ranked by The Economist). Finally, while no right-wing parties with a xenophobic platform garnered enough votes to earn a seat in Parliament, the 2007 election did result in a historic shift toward more liberal economic policies and the ousting of Social Democrats from the prime minister Post and the government’s ruling coalition.

Political unrest, war, genocide, and religious persecution in other regions of the world have dramatically increased the number of asylum-seekers throughout Europe, creating new challenges to EU institutions and member states. Currently, the European Union is working to create a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) to make the EU a single protection area for refugees. This system would standardize protection for refugees as well as foster burden sharing across member states. Although variation in member states’ refugee policies certainly helps explain why some states, such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium, receive a larger per capita share of asylum applications, it is not the only reason. Indeed, the refugees that are brought to EU member states on the basis of UN quotas do not represent the vast majority of asylum seekers in some EU member states, while in other states they do. Many asylum seekers arrive in host countries and register themselves at asylum reception centers (over fifty such centers are scattered across Sweden). Standardizing reception procedures for all refugees coming to the EU should decrease the current imbalances created by states’ policies, refugee preferences, and the interaction of the two; however, this also means that member states would lose autonomy in their refugee resettlement policy. For example, Denmark and Germany both distribute refugees on the basis of regional populations, while Sweden’s current policy allows refugees to settle where they wish. In theory, differences in these policies are due to the preferences and political economies of member states, and a common system will therefore affect some states more than others.

In an increasingly globalized world, the butterfly effect is no longer the stuff of Ray Bradbury’s imagination or the plot device of an Ashton Kutcher movie. A decision made in Washington does more than irrevocably alter the lives of Iraqis and American soldiers. Indeed, this war has had significant consequences for other countries far beyond the borders of the U.S. or Iraq. Of course, I am not suggesting that immigration to Sweden or EU politics are driven primarily by U.S. foreign policy; one variable can never fully explain a social, economic, or political phenomenon. Such outcomes are caused by the existence and interaction of multiple variables—the majority of which have been excluded from this article. Nevertheless, on this fifth anniversary of “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” we should also examine the impact the decision to go to war has had on other countries. We should acknowledge that the world is shrinking—that a flap of a butterfly’s wing in Brazil, or carbon dioxide emissions in China, may actually create that tornado in Texas…or Trosa.

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