

# Coping with Illegalization in Norway

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Jengar was born in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan in 1984. He came to Norway as an asylum seeker in 2002. When I met him he had been in Norway for eight years, and he was now turning twenty-six. At the time he was living in a semi-open deportation camp for rejected asylum seekers.

The deportation camp was opened in 2006 as an effort to deal with the problems caused by restrictions in the

Norwegian asylum policies. The politicians had in 2004 decided to close down the possibility for rejected asylum seekers to live in ordinary asylum reception centres. To avoid migrants living on the streets, the government opened the deportation camp to provide a minimum of accommodation facilities. With a low standard of living, the camp was supposed to motivate people to return to their countries of origin, and to decrease the number of asylum seekers coming to Norway.

Having been rejected asylum for the second time, Jengar was supposed to leave the country, but he did not perceive it as safe to return to Iraq. His only option was to live in the deportation camp as an illegalized migrant. The authorities had not yet deported him by force despite the fact that Norway have a return-agreement with Iraq. The authorities might have had difficulties on deciding on his identity, or Iraq did not want to receive him.

## Jengar's Background

When asked about his past; the life in his home country, Jengar said that he tended to be more focused on the difficulties and struggles they had to face, but he acknowledged that there had been many good things during his previous life in Kurdistan. They used to have a car, a house and owned a couple of shops. He had many friends and he could be with his family. Jengar went to school for six years to learn Kurdish and Arabic. Later he earned some money working as a tailor.

Things changed in 1996. His father had become involved in political disputes and was threatened to be killed. Jengar and his five sisters, five brothers and parents had to run away. The family lost all their property, and they were living under harsh circumstances. When Jengar's father fled to Europe, the situation aggravated for the family left behind. Jengar remembers the fear and the lack of food. At some point Jengar's family had to run away to the Turkish border because of the atrocities that were happening in Kurdistan at that time. After a while, they could move back again. At that time, Jengar also got into difficulties and he decided to flee to Europe, Norway, just like his father. Jengar remembers

the journey as extremely difficult and it is not something he wants to talk much about. As with many other things he has experienced, he tries to forget them. Talking about them brings the troublesome memories back.

### Arriving Norway

Jengar spent his first period in Norway in an asylum reception centre near Oslo. Although he was constantly worried about his family back home, he also describes it as a good period of his life; he could work, and he felt included. He had a working permit and two jobs; one early in the morning, and one later in the afternoon. Thanks to regular income, he could afford to pay the required 2500 Norwegian kroner to live in the asylum centre. It was a good experience to be able to pay for himself. The centre was located close to work and to the city centre. Sometimes he would live with his father who had an apartment at that time. Jengar was glad to be able to support his family by sending remittances.

Jengar's life drastically changed when his asylum application was rejected for the second time in 2006. Should he return to Kurdistan? Jengar did claim that the situation had improved after the American invasion in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein, and that this opened up for the return of some Kurdish people who had fled earlier. However, Jengar stated that his problems were different. He knew that he could get up to 35 000 Norwegian kroner in financial assistance if he returned voluntarily. He could also get some small educational courses by signing a return agreement with the International Organization on Migration (IOM). But due to his cultural and political background, he was afraid of being hunted down and killed by certain groups in his home country. He decided to stay, and tried to cope with the situation in the deportation camp.

### In the Deportation Camp

When I first met Jengar he had been living in the deportation camp for four years. There is a great contrast between the living conditions he described at the asylum reception centre compared to the situation in the deportation camp. Although the government claimed that to stay in the camp was voluntary, Jengar said that he had no other options. He found the situation extremely difficult in many ways. However, he seemed to try to cope with it by bringing on a smile or by telling a joke, or by giving the impression that he was doing well. Jengar said that he often felt forgotten and that nobody saw him. As he described it, Jengar clearly felt that he was living "outside of the society".

For example, the camp was located in a way that made it difficult to reach the nearest towns, and to access any kind of pastime activity. With a weekly allowance of only 100 kroner, he had few possibilities to go away or to buy the things that he felt he needed to be socially presentable outside of the camp. He also told me that he felt like he was being punished. It was hard to



live under video surveillance behind a guarded gate. It was also difficult to live together with what he saw as psychologically unstable persons. As most people living in the camp, Jengar found it troublesome to be isolated, to have limited access to information about the society, in addition to have poor contact with neighbours, friends and family. He complained that his life was reduced to a static condition that was only controlled by the internal procedures of the camp. It seemed to me that he was not able to maintain a direction in his life.

*'It is a problem. If you just sit, eat and sleep. You get tired mentally. If you think much...aagh... As if I sit alone, I think much. I will think that it is eight years and I have not done anything. I just sit and sleep (...)  
You are in this camp. You have to eat. We have three times to eat. ...  
We have to eat at these times. If we want to or not. If we do not we have to wait until the next day. ...You can not have control. It is difficult to go out.'*

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There were few possibilities for meaningful activity and few possibilities to maintain a reasonable form of self. In this situation he claimed that the difficulties of his past were often brought up in his thoughts in the present, although he was trying to avoid thinking about both his past and his future. However, it seemed important for him to focus and talk about the life he was living now. To get a deeper understanding about what life was like in the camp I asked Jengar to take some photos of things that were significant in his everyday life in the camp. I wanted to involve him so he could shape the research process and the stories about his experiences through his participation. When I came back Jengar had taken 36 photos from the camp.



The first pictures Jengar showed me were of the bedroom he shared with three other guys; all of them rejected asylum seekers. In the room Jengar had a shelf with some CDs and movies. On the wall his clothes were suspended beside some pictures of his family. In addition to his laptop; these things were pretty much what he owned. He also had a Norwegian flag on the top of his closet. The flag symbolizes Jengar's identity dilemma. After eight years in Norway, he wanted to consider himself as a Norwegian, but to get recognized as Norwegian is difficult, both legally and socially, as other people would only see him as an illegal foreigner. He connected this to not being able to work and support himself.

*'Inside this camp we are only foreigners, they say I am Kurdish, because the Kurdish people never get a working permit.'*

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There was a small table beside the window where they had put a fan; an attempt to improve the air in a crowded room. It was sometimes difficult to sleep because of the other people snoring or making sounds. But compared to other rooms in the camp, Jengar said that he was quite satisfied with his room. The people he lived together with respected each other.

However they did not talk much. In the camp they easily ran out of things to talk about. Instead, Jengar liked to watch movies on the computer. One of the other guys, also from Kurdistan, read a lot of books. One spent little time in the room; Jengar thought he had a job, family or a girlfriend outside the camp. Jengar expressed concern about the mental condition of his last roommate; he was not activating himself in any way and was becoming passive. Jengar was clearly satisfied with his roommates, but he was not that happy with many of the other people living in the camp. According to him, many of them were not behaving properly. Jengar asked himself why he had to live here since he had not been doing anything wrong. For example, in many of the other rooms there was fighting, some would get drunk or stoned. People would insult each other, and often break and destroy furniture. With few legally recognized ways to participate in society, many of them would opt for criminal or illegal livelihoods. In a way Jengar also excused them, and said that they were tired of the situation. But he himself did not want to sell drugs nor steal from drunken people. He did not like what he read in the news that as much as 80 percent of the criminals in Norway were of foreign background. Because of this Jengar usually stayed in the camp.

*'I mostly stay here, but I understand the people who collect bottles, fix and sell computers that others have thrown away. I understand why people work in unauthorized jobs.'*

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When Jengar spoke about several of the other pictures he had been taking with the camera, he pointed out the ambivalence towards the other people in the camp, and noted how small problems became big because of lack of things to do. As in this description of the TV room:



*'Here is the TV room. They fight here as well. It is a small TV room, it is a small TV. Today everybody wants to watch football. Maybe 30 persons. It is a small TV and it might be difficult. Especially if you sit in the back. It is better with a big*

*TV. There are many problems in the TV room. Fighting among the people who sit in the back and the people in the front. When someone stands up they fight. It feels like being in the waiting room of an office. Small problems become big problems here. Somebody gets crazy, talk to themselves or to God, or they just listen to music all night.'*

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Also in the canteen there were many difficulties; he often related the canteen to noise and problems and how people used to break things or fight. He also said that they'd sometimes receive outdated food. Other difficulties related to how he was not able to decide what to eat or when. Jengar believed that the sum of all this could partly explain violence and vandalism. Jengar told me that some could go completely crazy. He seemed to

be afraid that something really bad would happen.

*'I have been here all the time so I know all the things that are going on here... They break a lot of stuff. Only four months ago a person I know broke all the windows in the restaurant and the TV room. All the windows.'*

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Jengar mentioned similar problems about the computer room, a room in which over a hundred persons had to share four computers. Except for rumours, the Internet was one of the few sources of information from the outside world. However, the computers were old and slow. Furthermore, the computer room was now closed because the people working in the camp felt that some of the migrants were sabotaging it. Before, they even had a wireless connection, but the password had now been changed; a punishment for having broken some of the computers. As Jengar said, people get mad when someone makes a mistake and everybody is blamed and punished. The only thing Jengar pointed out as a good thing in the camp was the training room. There were also some other activity options; football, basketball, volleyball and ping pong. However, Jengar believed that these activities were not very popular because of people's difficult situation.



*'The gym is good. I am using the room once in a while; they want us to use it so we shall not think so much.'*

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## Coping Strategies and Possibilities for Inclusion

To be included is to be able to participate in everyday life activities. In a way Jengar was included in the activities in the camp, but they were mostly, through their low standards, of an exclusive character. But an area where Jengar could experience some recognition was in his efforts to get included in the work of the staff. To help the people in the office with painting or interpretation was a good way to avoid thinking about difficulties.

*'The problem is that we have too much time. If I have something to do it is not a problem. Sometimes the people in the office ask if I can help... I say yes. It is good to do something. No matter what. I just like to do something to avoid thinking. Not just sit and sleep. One day they asked me to help, and I spent the whole day. I could have done the job in two hours, but I did not want it to end.'*

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Jengar said that he had a good relationship to the staff. However, there were some persons that he did not approve of.

*'Some of them are without empathy. Some speak to everyone, but others are not quite... not good (...) If we talk about something. For instance if we say the food is outdated and not good, they say: This is what we have for you. Go back to your country. This is not racist, but it is racist.'*

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Jengar's strategy is to behave according to given norms. He said that he did not want to be a criminal or to break the law, and that people who did such things did not deserve to stay in the country. In a way Jengar was trying to fight the stigma attached to asylum seekers, especially those living in these kinds of camps.

Jengar also had to deal with the challenges of being poor. For instance, it was difficult to stay in touch with friends. He found it difficult to contact people because he was afraid that he was no good for them. It could be said that this exclusion appears as self-chosen. However, it was difficult to be dependent on other people, and due to this Jengar often avoided contact. He also connected this to cultural differences. The reciprocity of the social relations is challenged and Jengar seemed to use a lot of effort to avoid the shame caused by not being able to maintain the reciprocity of the social relations.

*'...in my culture, if I have food and a place to sleep, I can not ask anyone about money. I only have 100 kroner a week to buy cigarettes, and I have some food. If I want to see my friends in town I walk for three hours to get there, and tree hours back again. I do not tell my friends that I walk. I tell them I come with buss. If my friends know that I am walking they want to give me money. But I don't want to receive money.... If my friend gives me money I cannot see him again. Because he gave me money he cannot be my friend anymore... I have to give him something back.'*

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Jengar told me later he could have lived with members of his extended family, but he did not want to bother them too much. They had however assisted him in finding a lawyer, which was okay since he had been helping them with some practical things in return. Becoming dependent upon others is a situation Jengar wanted to avoid. In the same manner, Jengar had gradually lost contact with his family in Iraq, due to economical, geographical and practical barriers. Jengar had obligations towards his family, and they wanted him to send money. As the family did not tell Jengar about their problems, Jengar also avoided telling them about his problems. This seemed to complicate the conversations and in this way they had less contact than before. As Jengar puts it:

*'The first question is always about whether I work or not. If I say yes they ask about money. Then they ask me about how it is going for me. They don't tell much about their situation. It is difficult to not know.'*

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What could have been an option for Jengar, given the tough situation in the camp, was to stay with his father. However, he had been rejected as well both in Norway *and* in Sweden. After many years living as an illegalized migrant Jengar's father got ill, and died from a heart attack in Sweden. Jengar related this to how his father suffered from psychological distress and how he was thinking much about the future.

*'He was in Norway for around 8-9 years before he went to Sweden. He got rejected there as well. He had a Norwegian passport for one year. But they took it away from him... He was part of a group who first got permission to stay, but then they later got rejected. He got sick and died in Sweden.'*

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## **Future**

When I asked Jengar to talk about his future he said that he was thinking about how his father ended his life. It was difficult to talk about it. He had a hope that the government would change their mind. At least he hoped for something. A passport, a working permit, something. However he seemed very concerned with the small things, and he hoped that I could spread the information about the need to improve some of the facilities in the deportation camp, for example to at least be allowed to access the Internet. When I later asked the staff about this they answered that they only followed policy. They could not give the migrants more than they already got. Jengar was on the other side concerned with the violent consequences in the camp.

A few weeks after my main interview with Jengar some of the rejected asylum seekers started a riot in the camp. According to Jengar, a small group of the people living in the camp came back drunk late in the evening. They started to make noise and to knock on the windows. However, this time the noise was not only temporarily. A couple of days later the group claimed that they wanted working permits, passports and recognition. Jengar told me they were tired of living this life, and that they saw what this life did to some of the people in the camp. However, when the group did not get their claims fulfilled they got violent and put the camp on fire. The police patrol, and the fire patrol which were already there had not been able to stop them. Jengar did not participate in the riots, but he knew that something

was going to happen before it started, so he stayed outside behind the main building together with some friends. Although he did not get hurt, he blamed himself because he forgot to rescue his things: his laptop, photo camera and his clothes. His worst loss was the photos of his family. He was especially concerned with losing the pictures he had of his father.

When I later met Jengar to show him this text he was living in a regular asylum centre. In a way he was happy that the camp had been burnt down, although he did not support the strategy. Life was a little bit better in the asylum centre. The people who were living in the centre were not that desperate. Jengar said that it was good to meet what he called 'normal people' again. For instance, to meet people in the office who asked what they could do for him, people who treated him as a person, and who were smiling. Jengar said that he still had problems with the economy and only got 945 Norwegian kroner every second week to cover all of his needs. They did not get food or clothes in this centre as they did in the deportation camp. However, there were more things to do, and 'normal people' to hang out with. There was also access to Internet and nobody was fighting in the TV room.

### **Jengar's Story**

Jengar's story highlights the intricate connections between narrated past, the present situation and the future. It also highlights how inclusion can be exclusive itself. In this way the case challenges the boundaries between the opposed categories of inclusion and exclusion. With a few exceptions Jengar was mostly included in activities that were meant to exclude him from the rest of the society. Furthermore, his story highlights how this exclusion leads to self-exclusion whereas Jengar often tended to withdraw from mainstream society while struggling not to see himself as he thought he was perceived by the society. We should add that Jengar's migration story is a highly politicized narrative. As he said, it was difficult and a risk to take, but sometimes necessary to talk to other people. In a way his future and his life depended on the story he told. Jengar said that he felt he could not completely own the story of his life. However, he seemed to appreciate that somebody would listen to him.