

DAVISON'S & CO.

Manufacturers Representatives

Import-Export



Michael Rakowitz, Proprietor

ديفيسونز وشركاؤه
ممثلو المصنعين
إستيراد وتصدير



Nissim Isaac David, Founder

Store Log

October, 2006-December, 2006

Introduction

In 1946 my grandfather, Nissim Isaac David, an Iraqi Jew, fled Iraq with his family. They settled in Great Neck, Long Island. His business, Davisons & Co., an import-export company that was among the most successful and active in the Middle East, found a new home in New York City through the 1960s, when it closed. Nissim Isaac David died in 1975.

In 2006, I reopened his company as a storefront at 529 Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn as a project titled *Return*, presented by Creative Time as part of their *Who Cares* initiative. The project was conceived in part to illuminate the logistical difficulties and roundabout methods of sending and receiving shipments from a country under foreign occupation and facing an uncertain future. A portion of the project budget was allocated to provide free shipping for Iraqis living in the USA (prices are exorbitant due to the deteriorating situation.) The store also addressed the absence of anything bearing the label "Product of Iraq" on store shelves in the United States and the reopened business succeeded in signing the first contract in nearly thirty years to import one ton of world-renowned Iraqi dates. The narrative of the dates' ill-fated journey to the US mirrored the plight of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees as they waited in a line of cars that was four days long at the Jordanian border, only to be sent back and forth to Baghdad, and then finally Damascus where the Baghdad-based company determined the dates had spoiled. While 10 new boxes of dates were airlifted out of Baghdad and into New York City in December 2006, the overall transaction served as a surrogate for a larger tragedy.

What follows is an account of the events that took place throughout the transaction, inside and outside the store.

Very special thanks to Creative Time for their support and presentation of this work, and for extending the project six weeks beyond its intended closing date, in order to accommodate the arrival of the dates; to Atlantic Assets and Art Assets for the donation of the storefront space, and for agreeing to the extension of the project; to Pat Whelan and Sahadi Fine Foods for their collaboration on the import of the dates and handling all bureaucratic channels, facilitating their already difficult arrival; to Rick Morana at C-Air Customhouse Brokers for courageously agreeing to oversee an import that most would have rejected; and to Bassam, Sameer, and Reema of Al Farez Co., Baghdad/Amman, and Fallah Farms in Hilla, Iraq, for collaborating with me and establishing a new business partnership that will hopefully open as many eyes as it will sweeten mouths.

**Due to security concerns for their families back in Iraq, the names of the agents working at the Baghdad-based company from which the dates were ordered have recently requested their real names not be used.*

Thursday, 8/10/06- I receive an e-mail from Bassam, General Manager of Al Farez Co., in response to an inquiry sent by my assistant, Chat Travieso on behalf of Davisons & Co. seeking information on any companies who may be able to export dates from Iraq to the US. In his response, Bassam says that my fascination with dates must come from my mother's side of the family, as it is said that every Iraqi has a date in their genes and that it is traditional in the first moments of a newborn baby's life for the parents to place a date in the infant's mouth so that its first taste of life is sweet. Bassam goes on to detail about 15 different kinds of dates and tells us the date harvesting season in Iraq happens at the end of September and the beginning of October. This would mean that our shipment of dates would probably not arrive until about the 10th of October.

Tuesday, 8/22/06- At Charlie Sahadi's suggestion, I make contact with his son-in-law, Pat Whelan at Sahadi Fine Foods to find out if the famed Brooklyn company could help me arrange the import of the dates through their import broker. Pat is wonderful, enthusiastic and encouraging. He says in principle, he's happy to help make this happen by bringing it in under their account in association with Davisons & Co. He says he will have to check with his import broker to make sure it can be done.

Thursday, 8/24/06- I receive an e-mail from Pat Whelan at Sahadi Fine Foods telling me that we can work together and to go ahead and make the deal with Al Farez Co. in Baghdad to export the dates to my company through Sahadi.

Thursday 9/7/06- Reema, the Sales manager at Al Farez Co. issues Offer No. 113A-06N, effectively putting into motion a deal to import one tone of Iraqi Khestawi dates from the city of Hilla to Davisons & Co. in Brooklyn. The client is listed as Michael Daoud Rakowitz. During telephone and email exchanges, many companies' representatives would call me Daoud, a reference to my grandfather's family name, David, as it was when they were still in Baghdad—Daoud.

Sunday, 9/10/06- I send an email to Bassam explaining my plans for September, which includes teaching at Northwestern University. He explains that this is yet another thing we have in common as he was a Professor at the Technical University of Baghdad and that he was pursuing a PhD in Laser Physics. He says that right now, it seems it will be impossible for him to continue his studies, given there is "no light" to see in the "dark tunnel that Iraq has entered into...maybe my son will complete it if I could not do it in my life."

Monday, 9/11/06- I transfer 1,920 USD to Al Farez Co. as a 30% payment to begin the execution of Offer No. 113A-06N.

Wednesday, 9/13/06- Monday 9/18/06- I receive no emails from Bassam, while the news from Baghdad gets worse and worse, and news reports surface that there is a plan to build a trench around Baghdad to control the entrance and exit of people from the city. I am worried and send several messages to Al Farez asking that they be in touch just to let me know that they are OK.

Friday, 9/15/06- I contact Mansour Tdros, the editor of The Future Times, a free Arabic newspaper distributed in Chicago to find out about advertising Davisons & Co. in the paper to engage the Iraqi community in Chicago. He comments that this is a great effort and goes on to tell me that he is

Jordanian and his wife is Iraqi. He spent a lot of time in Iraq and served three different Presidential Administrations in the USA as a liaison to Iraq and later, Jordan (Carter, Reagan, and Clinton.)

Concerning the importation of dates, he says that at one point, while serving under Reagan in the 1980s, Kellogg's commissioned him to investigate the possibility of using Iraqi dates in their new cereal, Müeslix, which was their interpretation of muesli. It seems that the prices for California dates were becoming excessive and the thought was that the Iraqi dates would be cheaper. However, the Iran-Iraq war had started to decimate the date groves in the al-Fao peninsula, so the idea was scrapped.

Mansour comments on how bad the situation had become in Iraq. He says that this is a war where both sides lost. Nobody won. And his family, he says, is the perfect representation of this loss, as some of his wife's relatives, Iraqi-Americans residing in the US, are serving or have served in the US Army in Iraq. Some came back wounded and traumatized by the experience. And many of his wife's relatives still in Iraq have also been wounded, have lost their homes, and have lost their lives.

"I was at a function recently where the guest of honor was Colin Powell. He could have stopped all of this from happening. He knew it was wrong, that all the intelligence was questionable or false...I approached him, where he received guests who wanted to shake hands and exchange some friendly words. I went up to him and I refused to shake his hand and I told him, 'you should be ashamed, you are a coward. You could have changed everything. You knew it was wrong.'"

Mansour says that his blood pressure has now risen and that he is getting upset all over again. He asks me what I do for a living, and I tell him I am an artist and that I teach at Northwestern University in the Department of Art Theory and Practice. He asks if I would be interested in writing art reviews for his newspaper, effectively making me the art critic for the Future Times. The reviews would be translated into Arabic and would also appear in the English section of the newspaper. I accept, and my first review will appear in November or December, once my project with Creative Time comes to a close.

Monday, 9/18/06- I receive an email from Bassam apologizing for being out of touch, that he was busy transferring his family from Baghdad to Amman, Jordan because Iraq had become too dangerous.

On this day, I also receive the artwork that they chose to put on the boxes of dates that they are exporting. As this is the first product in what some people estimate to be 25 years to bear the label "Product of Iraq" I asked them to choose whatever they felt should be on such a box. Their design is beautiful, featuring date palms in the background, a large stone statue of a lion from Babylon and a photo of the reconstructed Ishtar Gate (the original is in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the rumor is that Saddam commissioned the replica.) The khestawi dates hail from Hilla, which is where Babylon is believed to have stood. The box also features the Iraqi flag and the name of the new company is Babylon Iraqi Date Company, a subsidiary of Al Farez.

Saturday, 9/23/06- An advertisement for Davisons & Co.--announcing the storefront, the impending arrival of Iraqi dates, and also the free shipping to Iraq—is published in the Arab American Newspaper in Dearborn, Michigan, boasting the largest population of Iraqis in the USA. Many are Chaldeans, a Christian minority that experienced an exodus from Iraq in the 1960s.

Monday, 9/25/06- I receive a phone call from Ahmed Ftouni, an American of Lebanese descent living in Detroit. He was vacationing in Lebanon this summer, just before the Israeli invasion, and ate dates from Iraq. He asked how I knew about them and he went on to speak about how different they tasted from any date he had eaten before. He asked that I reserve some boxes for him when they arrive, and was worried they would sell out. I assured him that I would call him as soon as they arrive. (Note: those who pre-order the dates will be placed on a listserv and will receive updates as to their whereabouts.)

Sunday, 10/1/06- Davisons & Co. opens for business, but I leave early for the Yom Kippur holiday, leaving it in the very able hands of Jenn and Joemy, two interns that Creative Time has assigned to mind the store on days when I am not there. As I teach at Northwestern on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I fly into NYC from Chicago on Thursday nights, and I operate the store from 10-7, Fridays through Mondays. They will manage the store Tuesdays and Thursdays (we're closed on Wednesdays) from 10-7.

Thursday, 10/5/06- Jenn reports that Mae, a Sudanese woman visits the store and is very moved. She speaks about Darfur in relation to the project and mentions that she wants fellow congregants at the local mosque to break the Ramadan fast on dates at the store.

While in Chicago, I receive word from Bassam that the dates are on their way from Baghdad to Amman by truck. They will fly out of Amman to the USA via Egypt Air and this will only take 2-3 days of transit time. Bassam says that the border is unbelievable, that people are waiting for days, sleeping in their cars. Many get turned away. People are fleeing Iraq due to the civil war that they expect to only get worse. Amongst them now is a ton of dates, the product of only 3 million date palms, down from 30 million when the country, thirty years ago, was the proud leader of quality and production of one of the region's staple foods. Now, they were waiting in line with the people.

Wednesday, 10/4/06- I receive a telephone call from Najib, a man in Dearborn, Michigan who owns a gas station. He says he is Iraqi and that he is a Chaldean Christian. He says that he sees my photo and my grandfather's photo in the ad, and sees the name (David) and says, "I know why your grandfather left. And I want you to know how important the Jews were to Iraq. The Finance Minister for the King was Jewish. Many of our favorite musicians were Jewish. The man who taught my father how to play the oud was a Jewish man in Baghdad."

"When my father saw the government the way it was, and saw that the Jews were being made to leave, he turned to me and said we were next. He said 'You watch, they are getting rid of Saturday, next they are going to get rid of Sunday.'"

Najib puts in a pre-order for the khestawi dates.

Friday, 10/6/06- I send the remaining 70% of monies toward the order of the khestawi dates to Al Farez Co.

The store has its "Grand Opening," a reception for the project hosted by Creative Time. It's everything from sobering to celebratory and is very complicated for me emotionally. Knowing that my conversations with Bassam have gone from him speaking with me as an Iraqi to him now speaking with me as an Iraqi in exile grounds my understanding of my grandfather's forced departure from a place that was once home.

We are now both speaking as exiles.

Saturday, 10/7/06- visitors who read about the project in Metro Newspaper come by to see the store. Will return for Iraqi dates.

Mikaeil Haniquet stops in after reading the text in the window and walked around the store a bit. He is a Muslim attending Ramadan prayers at one of the local mosques. He pre-orders some Iraqi dates and mentioned that he would like to tell some of his fellow congregants to come to the store to break fast and begin the Iftar meal with a date.

At the end of the night, after the evening prayers at the local mosque I go to She Fao Bee Sunnah, a few doors down the street at 517 Atlantic Avenue. The man who runs the store is a devout Muslim, and the store sells black seed oil and Islamic goods, ranging from clothing, to Quranic books, to Islamic bumper stickers. I give him a bag of dates to break the fast, and he gives me a bunch of fresh green figs, cut from his tree in the backyard of the store. They are delicious.

Sunday 10/8/06 – The day begins with a young woman and her parents intently reading the signage in our window detailing the whereabouts of our one-ton shipment of Iraqi dates. As of 10/6, the dates were en route to Amman where it will be shipped out to JFK International Airport via Egypt Air. En route, however is a complex term here: the dates are in a truck that is waiting in a line of cars that is days-long, as Iraqis flee the current situation in their country. Through the window they ask, “So when do you think they will arrive?” I go out to meet them and explain the estimated time of arrival. They tell me they are from Egypt. Lydia, their daughter, explains that she just returned after spending one year in Iraq, working for the US. She has moved to Brooklyn from Boston, and is working with the NYPD. She says that she would love to explore the possibility of importing honey from Kurdistan, which she says is unlike anything she’s tried elsewhere. I put this on my list of things to speak about with Pat Whelan at Sahadi Fine Foods for a possible second shipment. Lydia and her family put themselves on the list to pre-order a box of the Khestawi dates from Iraq.

In the afternoon, a man named M. Bakir Altai, a surgeon from Wayne, New Jersey stops in, and spends over an hour speaking with me. He is originally from Baghdad, and speaks about the relationship between Jews and Muslims in the city during the time that my grandfather lived there, before his exile in ’46. After learning of my practice as an artist, and understanding the store as a hybrid artwork and quotidian shipping center and market, Dr. Altai tells me about his interest in Iraqi art. We speak at length about his plans to put together a group of people to create an Iraqi Cultural Center in New Jersey or New York. We discuss the date syrup industry, and he explains that the best way to make it is by piling fresh dates in the syrupy and wet rhutab stage on top of a porous cloth or screen, suspended like the plank of wood on a table (if using cloth the setup is more like a hammock, with the dates’ weight suspended instead of a body.) Underneath the cloth or screen would sit a large bucket or vessel to catch the syrup that “bleeds” out of the skin of the fruit, caused by the weight of the dates piled on top of each other. Bakir also says that he has tried multiple times to send six boxes of books he received from Johns Hopkins University to a university in Iraq, as a donation. He tried to arrange this with DHL in the past, but nothing came of it. He will ship the six boxes through Davisons & Co., and requests they be sent to the University of Hilla, which is the same city that the Khestawi dates hail from. Dr. Altai agrees to return next week and also mentions he’d like to meet my mother to speak about Iraq.

While Dr. Altai and I are speaking, a photographer from the New York Times takes photographs for an article to run this week in the Metro Section.

Monday, 10/9/06- In the morning, I speak with Hana Ali of East Petersberg, PA. She is an Iraqi woman who first contacted me back in February 2005 when I exhibited Return at the Longwood Art Gallery. Back then, she and her husband Qasim were initially skeptical about why I was doing this for free. As they got to know me better, they explained that they wanted to send several packages with items for babies to family in Diwaniya. In 2004, Hana’s niece died of cancer, leaving behind a commercial photographer husband and their newborn child. One year later, while the photographer was working in his studio, a group of extremists entered the store and told him that the photographing of human subjects was un-Islamic and executed him. Their baby, now an orphan, has no family and was taken in by distant relatives. Hana, a mother of three (now four!) had toys and clothing she wanted to send for the baby and we sent about five boxes to the family in Diwaniya.

This time, Hana wants to invite my wife, Lori, and I to travel down to Pennsylvania and have dinner with their family. She also says that she would like to send more things through Davisons & Co. Her

cousin will arrive in the US from London the last weekend in October, so she will try to arrange to come up to Brooklyn with packages at that time.

We speak a bit about the shipment of the Khestawi dates, and I explain that they are held up in traffic at the Iraq-Jordan border. Hana says that there is no one getting into Jordan at this point, that between the Lebanese refugees that fled during the invasion this summer and the worsening situation that Iraqis are desperately trying to flee, that hotel rooms in Jordan are scarce and that the border has been tightened. She wants to get her mother out of Iraq, and getting a visa for her to come to the USA is impossible, she says. She is trying to get her to Egypt, and many Iraqis are also regarding the North African nation the next possibility for refuge.

“When we had Saddam, at least we could show our faces on the street. Now, it is too dangerous to even go outside. Tell me, how is this better?”

“Every place in the world the saying is that tomorrow will be better than today. In Iraq, we know that yesterday was better than today, and that tomorrow will be even more horrible.”

Hana mentions that just the other day, one of her relatives' kids (about 7 years old) was going to school on the bus. As she was boarding, a man crossing the street was shot four times in the back by someone in a passing car. He pulled out his cell phone to call someone for help, but the phone fell out of his hands. He called to the child boarding the bus to help him reach the phone. She, along with the other children on the bus, was screaming and crying hysterically. The man was a teacher.

In the afternoon, a man named Hammadi comes into the store. He is from Morocco and wants to find a company to work with him to import Moroccan sardines. I explain Davisons & Co. as being focused on the Iraqi sector of trade, and he walks around the store asking questions and reading about the history of dates that is part of the timeline on the wall. “The dates mean so much to you,” he says. “It is a tragedy. They are like the Iraqis.” He is very moved and says the store is inspiring to him, He tells me to continue this effort and to get a booth at the Fancy Food Show at the Javits Center to take this venture further and to get other businesses to order goods from Iraq. He buys some Maamoul cookies.

Later in the afternoon, I take a cab to La Guardia Airport to return to Chicago for the week. It is very hard for me to leave, even knowing I will return on Friday.

Wednesday 10/11/06- In the morning, I call Al Farez Co. in Baghdad and Amman and they explain that the dates were turned away at the Jordanian border and sent back to Baghdad to be tested for radiation and also to receive a phytosanitary exam. It seems that Jordan will not allow any Iraqi produce to enter or pass through their country without proper documentation indicating it has been properly scanned by the Iraq Ministry of Environment Radiation Protection Center, and much of it has to do with the presence of depleted uranium in US and British bombs that were dropped during the 2003 war. Hopefully, the dates will arrive in Amman by next Wednesday, 10/18, and they will fly directly to JFK Airport from Free Zone Amman Airport.

Friday 10/13/06- On my way to the store, I pass by She Fao Bee Sunnah. I see the proprietor and we greet each other. I wish him “Ramadan Mubarak,” and he asks me how my Yom Kippur fast went a couple of weeks back. I tell him it was fine and I ask how he is doing with the fasting for Ramadan. He says it is going well.

Brooklyn Independent Television comes by to conduct an interview. While they are here, Hana Ali calls me to set a date for Lori and I to come down and visit. We settle for the second week in December, after Lori is finished studying for her oral exams as part of her PhD in Art History at NYU. We'll both be out east during this time and we can make a day of it. Hana then mentions that yet another relative was killed, this time a cousin who was taken by a group of men in track suits who said they were only

bringing him in for questioning because he was seen speaking to American soldiers. His dead body was found the next morning. Now, anyone interacting with US soldiers in any way can be suspected as a “collaborator” and as such, people in Diwaniya avoid leaving their houses, because they may need to pass through a military checkpoint or some other situation where they cannot avoid a public exchange with US personnel.

Afternoon- I leave the store early to give a talk on my work to architecture students enrolled in Krzysztof Wodiczko’s course offered through Cornell University’s New York City Extension Program. I speak about several projects including “Return.” A couple of the students had read about the project in the New York Times’ Metro Section on Tuesday. Krzysztof and the students will take a field trip and come to the store on 10/27/06.

Saturday 10/14/06- Another busy day with many visitors, including several congregants from the local mosques. One man, named Ibrahim, wants to come in one day and cook fresh Yemeni coffee, which “combines very well with dates.” He would roast the beans fresh, grind them, boil and serve. We make arrangements to be in touch. His friend, Rashan, wants to find out if there are any textile manufacturers in Iraq, as he designs clothing. I tell him about the Baghdad Business Center (www.baghdadbusinesscenter.org) and how crucial their help was in establishing contact with date companies in Iraq.

Lisa Selin Davis from Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz’s office comes to the store to conduct an interview for an article in their newsletter. As she prepares to leave at 6:30, a man named Zeyad Kasim, an Iraqi studying journalism at CUNY comes to the store to say “thank you for the effort.” He read about it in the Times. He would like to write about the project for his blog (www.healingiraq.com) and also places an order for the Khestawi dates.

Sunday, 10/15/06- I take the day off from working at the store to prepare four Iraqi dishes with my mother in anticipation of Creative Time’s event next Friday for the Creative Council. As an extension of “Enemy Kitchen,” a project in which I collaborate with my mother on compiling our family’s recipes from Iraq and teaching them to various public audiences, we will be preparing four dishes as a kind of tasting menu for the invited guests. The menu has some very good rarities, some of which I don’t ever remember trying, so I am very eager to learn more about these dishes. We go shopping together in the morning and spend the afternoon preparing (I’m not giving anything away here until after the dinner takes place on Friday.) At 4:00, I travel from my parents’ house in Great Neck to the New York Historical Society on 77th Street in Manhattan to give a talk on my work for the American Place Theatre who are staging an adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer’s book, “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” which is based on a boy who loses his father in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. After the production, I speak for about 45 minutes on some of my projects including “Return.”

Monday 10/16/06- An Egyptian man hurriedly comes in and asks for the Iraqi dates. I explain we do not have them yet but we do have the Californian dates that are grown from Iraqi seeds. He refuses. “No dates are like Iraqi dates.” He signs up for one box of the Iraqi Khestawi dates.

Later in the afternoon, I receive a phone call from a man named Ali who lives in Brooklyn. He asks if it is true, that we are to receive one ton of Iraqi dates. I tell him yes, but we are still awaiting their arrival. He says this is good, because he left Iraq over 25 years ago, and has not had one since and misses the taste. He also would like to send some things to family back home in Iraq and says he will come to the store on Friday 10/20 or Saturday 10/21.

Tuesday, 10/17/06- (Entry submitted by Jen Romaniszak, an artist and one of the interns at Creative Time who minds the store while Michael Rakowitz is in Chicago)

Khadim Mohamad visits from the local Mosque, and asks if we have Iraqi dates. I explain the situation to him and show him the Radiation Scan Certificate. I tell him he can sample what we have, and he says, no, that he has Iraqi dates that are his own personal stash at home. I mention that I never had an Iraqi date before and he tells me I must, and he will send some over before the end of the day.

Khadim is Iraqi and flies back and forth at least twice a year and volunteers at a medical clinic over there.

His young son is with him, and Khadim says he was born in Iraq. I ask the boy if he likes Iraq and he nods "yes." Khadim says his son was going to school there, and the administrators warned that he should not attend anymore, because he was an attractive target to be kidnapped since he was born in America.

Khadim is very excited about the shipping and asks if it would still be okay because he works with a charity. They receive clothing donations and the like and are interested in shipping those items. He also asks about shipping medicine and medical supplies to a clinic they have over there. I mention that I do not know what the restrictions on medicines are, but that you will get back to him about it.

He asks about the three flags on the wall, dated 1924, 1959 and 1963 and asks why the most recent one, featuring "Allahu Akbar" written in Arabic script between the three stars, is not included. I explain that Michael will also answer this query.

Khadim speaks about Iraq's fledgling date industry.

"Saddam destroyed the dates as he destroyed the man... he took the water away and pushed the people away... there was no one to take care of the gardens."

In Iraq "the trees used to be huge, 2 feet across, now they are half a foot, very small, very thin."

Wednesday, 10/18/06- The dates do in fact suffer the same fate as the Iraqi people at the border with Jordan.

By now, I have heard many stories from the Iraqis who have been in touch to either send objects to Iraq or to pre-order the dates and most have told me that entry across the Jordanian border does not even exist anymore. The people in cars, looking to flee the increasing violence, after waiting in line for days, are now being sent back without a conversation with Jordanian officials at the border.

The truck was sent back the first time because they did not have documents certifying it had undergone a scan proving it was free of radiation. This corroborates the report that the date groves are suffering because of the depleted uranium used in the allied bombing.

After sending the truck back to Baghdad to be scanned by the official Iraqi offices handling such exams the truck departed yet again to wait in line at the Jordanian border. The officials at the border abruptly refused the truck, stating only "security concerns." They are now sending it to Syria, to try their luck at that border and to see if they can get it out via Damascus Airport to Egypt, then onward to the USA. The sales manager, Sameer, says they are all running out of words to describe how awful things have become in Iraq and for people at the borders.

Afternoon- I speak by telephone with Khadim Mohamad, and he mentions how excited he is to know that the free shipping to Iraq may be available to him and his organization.

I explain that the flags in the store are meant to serve as a timeline, illustrating the years during which my grandfather operated the original Davisons & Co., for the 1920s until 1963, when he went into the hosiery business.

Khadim says he will visit the store on Friday, October 20.

Friday 10/20/06- Early in the morning, I receive word that the dates have successfully entered Syria and are on their way to be delivered to Damascus International Airport, where they will receive the first available flight to Egypt, and then from there will move onward to the USA.

The dates are now traveling the exact same path as many Iraqi refugees who are attempting to flee their country, as Egypt has become the next option after Jordan, whose borders have tightened and have become much more restricted. People continue to remark on how impossible it is to get a hotel room in Amman and other cities in Jordan, as the influx of Iraqis is monumental, and on top of all this, many of the Lebanese refugees from this past summer's war remain.

Khadim Mohamad visits the store and says he is happy to hear we will eventually have Iraqi dates for sale. He says he will return to arrange the shipments of goods to Iraq from his mosque.

Joseph Elkallassy, a Lebanese American and Brooklyn resident, comes into the store to discuss his family's business, Kallassy Best Wood Company (www.kbwc.org) located in Zouk Mosbeh-Industrial Zone, Lebanon. He is interested in perhaps working with an Iraq-based company to import different types of wood or other materials. He explains the history of his family's business, and I explain my grandfather's company and its resurrection as a cultural project. He remarks that he was taken with the fact that I included my grandfather's portrait as part of the company's logo, and he shows me the KWBC website, which also displays a photo of his grandfather. We speak for about an hour, agreeing that I will act as a Manufacturer Representative and make an inquiry on his behalf to the Baghdad Business Center to establish contact with appropriate companies.

As we are finishing, Ibrahim, a man from Kurdistan in northern Iraq, and Omar, a young man from Egypt who had visited the store the previous week return to speak again about the security requirements necessary in preparing an export of white paint produced in the U.S.A to Iraq. They explain to Joseph and me that while they do have white paint in Iraq, the American brands are of much higher quality and as such have become a much sought after and expensive commodity over there. They are sending a large shipment of paint (3 pallets worth) and they wish to send it as part of their own start-up business. They are not looking to use our service, but want to find out how to start exporting to Iraq. I search for the contact information for Frank DeFazio, a customs broker based in Jamaica, Queens who was very helpful and offered to arrange the necessary documents and all other paperwork for my import for a very reasonable price, before I decided to work with Sahadi Fine Foods. The Export Administration Regulations (EAR) Database is an overwhelming interface that is usually best approached with some assistance, and Mr. DeFazio, like most customs brokers, is well versed in the rules and regulations, as well as the Automated Import System (OASIS.)

As all this is happening, Joseph and Ibrahim are speaking in Arabic and exchanging contact information, as there might be some business possibilities between them. Ibrahim, who is from Irbil, Iraq, may know of some business contacts there that would be of interest to Joseph.

Ibrahim and Omar leave, and Joseph departs to go watch his daughter compete in a swimming competition.

Zeyad Kasim, a journalist from Iraq studying at CUNY, returns to the store to participate in an event for Creative Time's Creative Council, in which my mother has prepared four delicious Iraqi dishes as a tasting menu for members of the council and invited guests. It is a continuation of another project that I started over the summer called "Enemy Kitchen," where my mother and I compile her family's recipes from Baghdad and teach them to public audiences.

I produced a version of this project with Micaela Martegani and More Art (www.moreart.org) over the summer in which I taught a group of middle school and high school students who live in Chelsea and participate in after-school and summer programs at the Hudson Guild Community Center. Some had relatives in the US Army stationed in Iraq. In preparing and then consuming the food, it opened up another topic through which the word “Iraq” could be discussed—in this case, attached to food, as a representative of culture and not as a stream of green-tinted images shown on CNN of a place with which we have been constantly at war. The discussions were good, and while we were eating, some students brought up the topic of bullies in relation to how they perceive the war. I hope to finalize the project this spring, when I will teach chefs in the NYC Public Schools how to cook several Iraqi dishes so that they can be prepared and served as part of NYPS cafeteria menus on a regular basis. This cultural puncture as a result of the war is one that I would like to see happen on a larger scale. The invisibility in this country of Iraqi culture, beyond the daily news, is alarming. In Paris, it is hard to walk too far before finding a North African restaurant or market. There are no Iraqi restaurants in New York City. While this absence may be the result of the geographic distance between the USA and Iraq--thereby differentiating this example from the aforementioned condition in Paris, as North Africa is located directly south of France—the possibility of cultural visibility to produce an alternative discourse is, in my view, formidable. And what better vehicle than the consumption of food and the space of conversation that a meal can create?

For this event, my mother prepares:

1. Kubba Amba- Torpedo-shaped spiced meatballs that are stuffed with curried, pickled mangoes (amba) and served in a tomato sauce. One can buy amba at Sahadi’s in the same glass jars as are available in the Middle East. Amba is actually made in India, and it is one of the condiments that has become ubiquitous over the years and, as Zeyad can attest, is in the kitchen of many families in Iraq. My friend Emily has told me it also is very popular in Palestine.
2. Bathe ub’it’ u Badenjan- Hard boiled eggs, boiled for a long time in salt water, and wrapped with a fried slice of eggplant.
3. Bathe ub’ Lahm- Egg patties that are made with spices like curry and cumin, with sliced scallions and shredded chicken in the egg mixture. They resemble pancakes.
4. Kitchri- A rice dish that is boiled in a tomato base, spiced with cumin and curry. Soaked red lentils are then added, along with generous amounts of fried garlic cloves. The rice is then served with dollops of leben or strained yoghurt.

It is a nice evening that features good conversation. In attendance are artist Coco Fusco, whose performance, *A Room Of One’s Own: Women And Power In The New America* (http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_fusco.html) ran earlier in the month at PS 122 as part of the Who Cares initiative, and Jens Haaning, an artist from Denmark who created the Arabic Joke poster (http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_haaning.html) that is also being presented by Creative Time part of Who Cares.

Saturday 10/21/06- A husband and wife visit the store with their young child. The man introduces himself as Ibrahim, a man from Morocco, and says that they read about the project in the New York Times and asks if we have the Iraqi dates. I explain the latest situation and Ibrahim is exasperated. He says that with the subway delays during the weekend, it took them one hour from Manhattan to get to the store only to find that we do not have the dates. I tell him that I certainly understand this, but the shipment’s delay is representative of all that is happening on the ground in Iraq and the dates are a barometer for a worsening situation. He quickly agrees, and says, “of course, you can’t change what is

happening there. It is terrible.” They spend a long time in the store and sign up to be notified when the shipment arrives from Iraq.

Dr. Altai, an Iraqi surgeon from Wayne, New Jersey who visited the store two weeks previously, delivers nine boxes of medical books to be sent to the University of Hilla in Iraq. He also brings me a copy of Artist Magazine that features an extensive article on his friend, Ala Bashir, an artist who had an exhibition open recently in Hartford, CT. Ala Bashir is a famous Iraqi painter who served as Saddam Hussein’s dentist.

In the evening, I participate in a public event called “Conversations,” organized by Art In General, featuring Oliver Musovik, an artist and curator from Macedonia, and Hajnalka Somogyi, a curator based in Budapest, Hungary. I give a short presentation on “The Visionaries,” a project I completed as part of a two-month residency arranged with Art In General and Trafo Gallery in Budapest in April 2006.

Wednesday 10/25/06- I call Al Farez at 7:00 AM Central Time in Chicago, which is 4:00 PM in Amman. Bassam answers the phone and this is the first time we are actually speaking to each other. “So nice to hear you,” he says. We discuss the latest developments concerning the shipment from Syria. The first part of the week will mark the Eid al-Fitr celebrations, so nothing is expected to happen until Saturday, 28 October, at the earliest. “Syrian officials at the airport in Damascus claim that the driver neglected to fill out certain papers that are needed to send the shipment and are demanding 1200 USD to process the papers allowing the export.”

I ask what the papers are specifically asking for, because at this point, with the completed Bill of Sale, Packing List, and all the certificates, we have even more than we need to move the freight to the USA under USFDA and Customs regulations. Bassam replies that this document is needed in Syria only, for goods that are sent from there that are not product of Syria. We can avoid this charge and any delay as long as the documents will declare the dates are product of Syria.” I reply that this would be really problematic for the FDA and US Customs and Border Patrol, who upon inspection of the documents and the actual boxes would notice the boxes indicate “Product of Iraq” while the papers say something totally different. Regardless, I decide that I will check with Pat at Sahadi’s to find out if this is as big a deal as I am assuming.

Bassam apologizes for the delay, that he really thought that it would only take 21 days from the time we officially put our original agreement into motion, and we both remark on how much everything has changed since we first began our work together, what with the deteriorating situation in Iraq, his family’s move out of Iraq and into Jordan to flee the dangerous situation there, and now the exodus of Iraqis into Jordan and the subsequent tightening of the border.

“You know, this (delay) is your government’s fault,” Bassam tells me.

“I don’t know why the USA did this. This man (Saddam Hussein) was so afraid of the US. He was like their slave, and would have at least kept the stability of the country. Now look at it. Nothing normal can happen.”

I ask Bassam how his family is adjusting to life in Amman. He tells me all is OK, and describes the circumstances that inspired his family’s decision to leave. While sitting with her children at a café, his wife witnessed a man get shot by passengers in a passing car.

Bassam decides that perhaps the best decision is to send a 500 kilo shipment by air from Baghdad to Amman, and then onward to JFK airport via Royal Jordanian Airlines.

I describe the details of the Syrians’ terms for export to Pat Whelan, the importer at Sahadi Fine Foods who is my partner on this transaction. He confirms my assumption, that a contradiction of the point of origin as written on the documents versus what is listed on the boxes will create a problem with U.S.

Customs. He remarks that this demand for extra monies from officials in Damascus presiding over exports passing through Syria is consistent with recent incidents they have experienced at Sahadi's. It seems that in the wake of the summer 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, many of their pending shipments from Beirut were transferred to Syria, where customs officials realized they were in a position of power and could command extra "taxes." "Sounds like local authorities looking to collect money," Pat wrote.

Friday 10/27/06- Another phone conversation with Bassam. He believes the best strategy is to stand our ground and not pay the Syrians. "Eventually, these large stacks of boxes of dates will be blocking something they need. And then they will move it out to be shipped as we requested."

We must wait for our dates to become an obstacle.

The dates can last at least 3 months, and will not be affected by the delay.

Even so, he proposes sending the additional half-ton of dates by air from Baghdad, so that they can be in the store before it closes at the end of November. As the harvest is now complete for all different types of dates, he will pack many varieties in this shipment in addition to the Khestawi, which was the first to mature this year and the type that comprised the entirety of our initial shipment.

We discuss his pending visit to Ottawa, where Al Farez has developed a partnership with a laboratory technology company. As they are setting up this Canadian firm's labs in Iraq, they will travel to Canada for training. We make plans to meet there, and perhaps travel to Montreal, my wife's hometown.

"I once visited Montreal and then Quebec City. While there, we toured the fort, near the water. The tour guide explained to us that there was a war between the British and the French at this location. I asked how long the war lasted and the guide said 14 hours. I answered, 'Fourteen hours? In Baghdad, war lasts 14 years.' The difference is incredible."

I arrive at the store, and I call the New York State Department of Finance and Taxation to look into extending my Temporary Certificate of Authority to Collect Sales Tax. As I intended at first to only operate Davisons & Co. from 1 October-31 October, the certificate will expire on Tuesday, the 31st. They state officials inform me that such an extension does not exist, and that I will need to apply for another certificate, which can take up to 20 days to process. As we need to keep doing business perhaps beyond the date that the storefront will be open until (we are currently negotiating for the end of November), I decide to apply for a long term certificate. In addition, to fill the time during which I will be without a new license—potentially until 20 November—I call my gallerist, Lea Freid at Lombard-Freid Projects, to ask if the gallery would be willing to essentially purchase Davisons & Co., thereby presiding over all commercial sales using their license to collect sales tax. We agree, and an official document will be sent to their offices on Tuesday declaring the sale of the company to them for 1.00 USD. Once my new tax certificate arrives, I will buy it back for 4.00 USD.

Afternoon- Krzysztof Wodiczko's class from Cornell University visits the store. We speak about the way the project functions as a platform for conversation and the community interaction that has resulted from the mere presence of a storefront that communicates with text on the window its intention to do business with Iraq.

Saturday, 10/28/06- Ibrahim visits with me for more than an hour. We speak about the dates in transit, and their current status, held up in Syria. "This is completely normal now for us. Simple things like this transaction cannot happen. There is no government. There is no order."

He explains that back in 2002, he was working as a taxi driver in Toledo, Ohio. Sometime in February 2003, after Colin Powell made his presentation to the UN Security Council, he was driving a passenger who had a PhD and was a professor of Political Science to a lecture at the University of Toledo. "This

man said he supported the idea of going to war with Iraq. He said that it was clear from the evidence presented at the UN that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction. I said, 'how can you say this? He showed computer diagrams and a computer drawing of trucks that were believed to manufacture the chemical weapons.' These were drawings, and this man, with a PhD, was saying it was evidence."

The professor conceded that maybe Ibrahim was right, but claimed it was still imperative to disarm Iraq, because Hussein used chemical weapons against his own people.

Ibrahim, who is Kurdish, replied that he believes the American people are not getting the full story. While Saddam and his regime did commit atrocities against the Kurds, he believes that the Western media misconstrues some of the reports. For example, in Halabja in 1987, when the US Government claims that Hussein used the chemical weapons against the Kurds, Ibrahim says that the Ayatollah's militias occupied the northern city, and it was they who were targeted.

Ibrahim went on to say that Saddam was "stupid, the way he handled foreign affairs. He did not understand the West. He only visited Paris, once, on a state visit, and that was it. He didn't know that invading Kuwait, which was once territorially part of Iraq, was going to force a war. The U.S.A did not communicate this to him clearly. To us, it was like the US army invading one of its own states." Saddam was also "wrong in the way he disarmed. He never should have disarmed as much as he did. Every country in the world has weapons that can cause massive destruction. Who gets to choose who can have them or not? The UN kept asking for more, and he gave them more. Asked again to disarm more, and again, he did what he was told to do. It was too much. Eventually, he had nothing left, and they knew it was safe to invade again in 2003. We believe that if Iraq really had chemical weapons, the US never would have invaded and would not occupy. Why would they? Wouldn't it be too dangerous?"

Ibrahim asks to borrow the copies of the documents that the Iraqis produced for our shipment of dates, now in Syria, to Xerox for his own purposes. The Phytosanitary Certificate, Radiation Scan Certificate, Quality Certificate and all else will prove helpful in communicating to an Iraqi date farm in Sulaimaniyah what is needed for export, as Ibrahim is ordering 10 tons of what he calls the "best Zahidi dates to have ever grown in Iraq." It seems this year's crop is especially good, for reasons unknown. He will have them exported by sea, out of Turkey, to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. From my own research into the shipment I arranged with Bassam, I know that while Turkey offers the best option price-wise and geographically for Iraqi exports abroad, the big problem is finding a Turkish trucking company willing to pick up the freight from inside Iraq. The Turkish companies are not able to arrange for Iraqi trucks to deliver goods across the Iraqi-Turkish border due to security restrictions barring their entry. He asks if I can help to broker this shipment. I agree, and will speak to Pat Whelan at Sahadi Fine Foods on the specific requirements involved in moving this freight as a third party.

Sunday, 10/29/06- A Yemeni man named Nasser visits the store and asks if we have received the dates. I tell him the latest news concerning the shipment and he comments on how unbelievable the delays are that these innocent fruits are made to endure and how much it mirrors what is happening to the people.

He asks about the history of the store, and when he sees my grandfather's last name he says "Ehudi arabi?" which means "An Arab Jew?" I answer yes, and tell him the history of the family. We discuss the term "Arab Jew" and how it disappeared as an identity in the 20th Century.

He tells me that he operates a restaurant in Manhattan and that he would like to include the Iraqi dates when they arrive in new dishes he will develop for the menu. He signs up to be notified when the shipment arrives and asks to reserve a few 5 kg boxes. He leaves, and when I say "ma'salaam" he responds "shalom."

Monday, 10/30/06- A price checker from Fresh Direct, a food delivery service in New York City, visits the store, and tells me he read about the project in the New York Times and wanted to see if the Iraqi

dates have arrived. He buys a bag of the California Iraq-seed dates, a mixture of Barhi, Khedrawi, Halawi and Zahidi. He give me the name of the buyer for Fresh Direct and tells me that he will arrange the purchase of a portion of the 1,000 kg (one ton) shipment of the khestawi dates to sell through the company. In addition, he hopes to invest in future shipments we may be able to arrange to the USA.

Tuesday, 10/31/06- I speak with Pat Whelan at Sahadi Fine Foods to ask about Ibrahim's transaction, to move 10 tons of Zahidi dates from Iraq to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. He says that it is easier for Ibrahim to deal directly with an importer in Santo Domingo, rather than to create a third-party presence in what should be a direct two-way transaction. Pat also expresses interest in the honey from Kurdistan that Laila suggested we import when she visited the store in early October. He says that once we are finished bringing in this first shipment from Al Farez, we can open up discussions with them on future shipments, because if all goes well, the possibility exists for future dealings with them.

Wednesday, 11/1/06- I speak with Bassam in the morning, and he tells me that the Syrian officials have indeed, as of this morning, released the dates. They can now be arranged for shipment to JFK Airport. We are both very excited by this news and he informs me that Sameer, the Sales Manager for Al Farez Co. will travel to Damascus, Syria to oversee the transfer and arrange all the necessary documents, which, in this case, comprise a Certificate of Origin, Invoice, Packing List, and Airway Bill. In order for the shipment to be received without incident on our end, Pat Whelan at Sahadi's will need to have copies of these documents in advance to present to the officials at United States Customs and Border Patrol.

Bassam explains to me that he would prefer to have been able to accompany Sameer and make sure all is in order but it is too risky.

"Sameer has a Jordanian passport and I have an Iraqi one. If we go to the Jordanian/Syrian border, it is no problem to get into Syria. But when we come back from Syria into Jordan, the Jordanian officials would most likely send me back to Iraq."

Saturday, 11/4/06- In the morning, a man named Nick stops by to check on the status of the dates from Iraq. I tell him that the latest news was good, and that we expect the dates to arrive in the USA by week's end. He tells me that his friend is stationed in Iraq, and that he has never tried an Iraqi date, and that due to security restrictions, they very rarely leave the commissary for meals, where it is all hamburgers and French fries. He wonders if he would be able to send a bag of Iraqi dates to his friend's FPO and that way, he'd be able to sample one. We laugh about how absurd that would be, and then discuss the legality of sending food back and forth using services like Fed-Ex and DHL (as of August 2006, DHL would not send foodstuffs out of Iraq to the USA, making it impossible to bring in samples from Iraqi companies.)

Nick also tells me how his friend was in the Navy up until about a month ago, when he suddenly received word that he was being transferred to Army. This apparently is very unorthodox, and illustrates how chaotic the situation has gotten for the U.S. military.

I receive an e-mail from Sameer, the Sales Manager for Al Farez Co. informing me that he will travel on Sunday morning to Damascus to arrange all the papers for the transport of the dates to the U.S.A, and to make sure the quality of the khestawi dates are the same as when they were packed one month ago.

Stephanie Dworkin, the editor of an acclaimed film called "My Country, My Country," comes to the store and spends a while speaking with me about the film and my project. "My Country, My Country" is

a documentary directed by Laurie Poitras who spent over eight months in Iraq alone and focused on the stories of ordinary Iraqis after the U.S. invasion and living under occupation. Her primary subject is Dr. Riyadh, a physician who runs for political office and is a staunch opponent of the American occupation, but passionately believes in the establishment of a democracy in Iraq.

While we are speaking, a man enters the store and spends a long time reading the “History of Dates” timeline and samples the different types of dates. He asks me about the project and asks about my grandfather. He introduces himself as a Jewish Iraqi and says he came over to the United States in the 1960s.

“Seeing all this makes me nostalgic, sad, confused and sick to my stomach. When we left things were already bad, but look at what this country did there. It’s unbelievable, a disaster.”

We discuss my family’s history and I tell him that in 1945, my grandparents were living in Bombay, India, where my mother was born.

“There were a lot of Iraqi Jews in India around the time your grandfather was there, they just kind of settled in Bombay. Everyone knew the names of the Iraqi rabbis world wide, because they were the authentic ones, and knew the traditions, handed down generations in what was the world’s oldest Jewish community.”

I ask him what his family’s surname was, and he replies Shamoan. I tell him that this was my grandmother’s last name, Renée Shamoan.

“It was one of the two largest and wealthiest families in Baghdad,” Mr. Shamoan replies. Stephanie wonders if perhaps we are related.

Mr. Shamoan tells us he is in town for a conference on Iraqi Jewry being held in Manhattan. He explains that he is now retired and lives in the Catskills, but that he has a sister here in the city with whom he stays when he visits.

A couple enters the store and places an order for the khestawi dates. They explain that they were living in Baghdad in 2002, leading up to the war and then afterward, in 2003 for about six months.

“I was just reading the material on the wall about your store, your grandfather was from Baghdad?” the woman asks. I tell her yes. “We actually used to live in Baghdad, for about two years. We stayed not far from the Jewish quarter, where my husband was working.”

“It’s a shame, and absolute shame,” she says.

They want to support Iraq, and they confirm that Iraqi dates are the best in the world. The man says, “if you can ever get your hands these things they produce in Iraq, it’s the dates they stuff with walnuts ...Awesome! Dates stuffed with almonds or walnuts and if you can ever bring these things in, let me know.” I tell him I will try.

Mr. Shamoan pays for four bags of the different types of Californian, Iraqi-seed dates and tells me he intends to give them out at an event at the conference that evening. He also tells me he will send his sister to visit the store. I tell him I also had an uncle with the same last name who lived in London, Nyazi Shamoan. He passed away in 2000 but his wife Tiffah still lives there. He writes down the names. Shamoan tells me that his name, when he first came over from Iraq, was Shamoan Shamoan, which, while it was not odd to have the same first and last name in Iraq, seemed strange in the US. So he changed his last name to Salih.

“Which is curious, I don’t know why I chose it, it’s not a Jewish last name at all.”

I tell him that I have an uncle named David David, so I know what he means.

Later, I receive a phone call from Hana Ali, who will come tomorrow with her family and her cousin Haider to send items to their family in Diwaniya. I send her driving directions to our store from her address in East Petersburg, PA.

In the evening, I attend a concert of Simon Shaheen with my wife and my friend Suhail at the 92nd Street Y.

Sunday, 11/5/06- I wake up to find an e-mail from my friend Zeyad Kasim (www.healingiraq.com) telling me that I have been named 'honorary Iraqi' by a prominent, London-based Iraqi blogger posting under the name Salam Adil, for the Iraqi blog roundup that he regularly posts for Global Voices Online. You can find it here:

<http://asterism.blogspot.com/2006/11/landing-at-iraqi-blogdrome.html>

The entry reads:

My Honorary Iraqi for the week is Michael Rakowitz (well he is part Iraqi already!) who runs a shop in New York. When he tried to import a truck load of Iraqi dates he found that their journey was a metaphor for the plight of all Iraqis who try to travel out of Iraq and a strong statement about all the failures of the Iraqi economy. Follow their progress as the dates are initially delayed as the exporter evacuates his family from Baghdad; get stuck for 3 days waiting in a long queue at the Iraq/Jordan border; get sent back because they were not certified free of radiation (apparently depleted uranium munitions have had an affect on Iraqi agriculture); get refused entry into Jordan on the second attempt for "security concerns"; get routed via Syria as a last resort; enter Syria but get stuck at the airport because Syrian customs officials demand a \$1200 payment to process out the necessary export papers. He reports:

Bassam [the exporter] apologizes for the delay, that he really thought that it would only take 21 days from the time we officially put our original agreement into motion, and we both remark on how much everything has changed since we first began our work together, what with the deteriorating situation in Iraq, his family's move out of Iraq and into Jordan to flee the dangerous situation there, and now the exodus of Iraqis into Jordan and the subsequent tightening of the border.

“You know, this (delay) is your government’s fault,” Bassam tells me.

“I don’t know why the USA did this. This man (Saddam Hussein) was so afraid of the US. He was like their slave, and would have at least kept the stability of the country. Now look at it. Nothing normal can happen.”

Zeyad plans on coming by the shop today at noon, to spend some time catching up and to have lunch together.

Today is the New York City Marathon, so I am not sure what to expect. Will there be more visitors due to foot traffic or less? I know that the runners will come very close to the store, up 4th Avenue and into Fort Greene. I have always loved watching this event.

When I arrive at the store, I set up everything and take out my computer to do some work. When I check CNN’s web page, I am startled by the bold headline. They only use large, bold text when something important has happened.

HUSSEIN SENTENCED TO DEATH

I watch the footage of Saddam's reaction while the chief judge at his trial, Raouf Abdul Rahman, read the verdict, which was death by hanging.

It is hard for me to feel anything but more pronounced sadness by all this, and it is not because of any admiration or support for Hussein. Obviously, he was a terrible dictator that suppressed his people and was responsible for countless deaths across Iraq. But I cannot imagine how this makes anything better in Iraq, how life improves for Iraqis. With the verdict, I feel as though the U.S. has fully crossed a threshold, and effectively erased a country.

Hana Ali arrives with her family at around 3:00 PM. I go out to their car with her husband Qasem and her cousin, Haider, to fetch a bunch of large garbage bags filled with clothing and toys as well as two baby strollers to send to family and friends in Diwaniya. All in all, we pack approximately 12 boxes worth of goods to send out. In the past year, Hana gave birth to a baby named Yousif. I finally get to meet the whole family, including her older daughter Heba, her young son Haider, and her youngest daughter Zena.

While we are packing the boxes, a group of four people enter the store and greet me in Arabic. They are Americans, and one of the couples is visiting from Ithaca. They ask if I am Iraqi and they tell me they had spent some time in Iraq before the war and they have many friends there. We speak about the project, and I introduce them to Hana and her family. When Hana hears they spent time in Iraq, she asks them how they feel about the Saddam verdict.

"I...don't know how to feel," the man says. "I just feel sick. All I can say is that I don't feel very proud to be an American."

The two families spend about 15 minutes speaking to one another about Iraq, and Hana tells them about her family in Diwaniya and the relatives she has lost since the war began (reported earlier in this blog.) As they move over to the boxes of dates to load up some bags, the conversation also turns to food.

Before they leave, the couple from Ithaca buys four full bags of dates and some boxes of Maamoul cookies. They tell me that they are producing a play called Guantanamo upstate and will send me information about it once they return home. Their friends, a couple living in Park Slope, tell me they'll be back sometime in the next weeks. They all sign up to pre-order the Khestawi dates.

Monday, 11/6/06- I begin the day by checking Zeyad's blog (www.healingiraq.com) and I find an amazing collection of reactions across the Iraqi blogosphere to Hussein's sentencing. He has also posted many photographs of the subsequent protests and celebrations following the sentencing. From looking at the photos, I find it amazing that I can't tell which ones are protests and which ones are celebrations, if not for the captions.

While in the store, I receive an e-mail from Sameer, the Sales Manager from Al Farez who describes his long, rainy journey to Damascus from Amman. To his disappointment, he found that the dates, while still perfectly fine for human consumption, looked really bad. It seems the heat the dates had to sit in while being transported in a truck that was twice sent back from the Jordanian border after awaiting entry for days, plus all the back and forth, had taken its toll on their physical shape. He attached photographs to show me their current condition. I was struck by how the angle of the photos so similarly represented those that Bassam had sent when the shipment was first being prepared, over one month ago.

So fresh and robust back in late September, the dates were now withered and flaky, the skin peeling off the rest of the body.

In the e-mail, Sameer writes that even he and Bassam do not recommend sending these dates, and would prefer to send the best possible product to begin their relationship with a U.S.-based company, and to also avoid the very real possibility that the dates will be sent back to Iraq if U.S. Customs and Border Patrol inspections determine that the dates do not look good (Note: FILTH is an actual reason stated on the USFDA website for the return of shipments to a country of origin, and it can mean anything from a product not looking right to contamination. The importer assumes the full cost of sending the freight back to the country from which it was sent.)

Sameer and Bassam suggest sending a new 500 kg shipment of all different types of dates—there are hundreds more available, now that the harvesting season is over—and sending it express by air from Baghdad to Amman (avoiding the border situation that the truck delivery presented) and then on to JFK Airport.

I send an e-mail to Pat Whelan at Sahadi's informing him the of the latest sad news, and I ask him to look at the photos and determine if we should go ahead and attempt to bring these into the U.S. He writes back and says that the dates don't look good and he agrees with Sameer that a new shipment should be pursued. He also remarks that Al Farez seems incredibly reputable and responsible, as not many exporters would go out of their way to send photos of a shipment in questionable condition. As this initial shipment may lead to future dealings between their two companies, this is a very good development.

I send an e-mail to Sameer thanking him for his efforts in Syria and telling him that after conferring with Pat, we agree that the best course of action is to send an entirely new shipment of dates, if that is indeed possible. In a subsequent phone call to their offices in Amman, Reema Othman, their Sales Agent, informs me that the ability to send anything by air at this point depends on the re-opening of Baghdad International Airport, which had been closed since the announcement of Hussein's verdict (Baghdad and many cities were also under curfew the entire day.)

With my project extended one month through an agreement with Atlantic Assets, Art Assets, and Creative Time, it is still very unlikely the new shipment of dates will arrive before the store closes. Sahadi will be stocking whatever percentage of the shipment they wish to carry when it does arrive, and I know that I can arrange for customers who have reserved the khestawi dates in my store to have their orders fulfilled either at Sahadi's or at one of several cultural spaces around the city.

Still I think back on all that impeded the delivery of the dates, of the way in which a relatively simple task of setting up trade between these two countries serves as a barometer for all that has gone wrong.

The dates have traveled the exact same path as many refugees fleeing Iraq, who attempt entry into Jordan, only to be sent back and to try their luck at getting to Egypt by air through Syria (it is far less expensive for a flight from Damascus to Cairo than it is from Baghdad to Cairo.) And like so many refugees, the dates were unable to get to their destination.

In the first hours and days after receiving the news from Sameer that our initial shipment had met its end, some customers expressed disappointment, even aggravation that the shipment would not arrive. Many were hoping it would work out, that it would succeed. That we would have a happy ending.

And then I am reminded, that this is not an American story.

It's an Iraqi one.

Tuesday, 11/7/06- Election Day. In an email exchange with Sameer, we decide to move forward with the new 500 kg shipment and to send 10 boxes express to the United States. He believes I will have the boxes in the store by November 17, and the rest will come later.

Wednesday, 11/8/06- In the morning, I call Bassam to make sure he is OK after all that has happened with the shipment in Syria being abandoned, etc. He is fine, and expresses excitement.

“Michael, I think we will send you an extra box in the express shipment so you will have eleven. You must hand out dates to people from the extra box when they pass by your store to celebrate the Democrats winning the elections. Maybe now we will see a change in your country's policy in Iraq. We are very happy. Congratulations!”

It is an Arabic custom to hand out sweets when something good has happened.

Later in the day, CNN reports that Donald Rumsfeld has resigned as Secretary of Defense.

Saturday 11/11/06- (submitted by Charles Miller, artist and Davisons & Co. employee)

Namir Hamid, originally from the south of Iraq (Al Basrah) and now in North America for the past 25 years (between DC and Canada, engineer working for Citi-Group and previously World Bank), stops in and purchases some maamoul cookies. He expresses excitement about the project (he professes to becoming sentimental when reading the Date variety names; he has not been back in 25 years) and condolences as to the shipment's seemingly indefinite delay, as well as to the general unfortunate situation in Iraq now.

A rushed man of few words (although I did catch that he was Yemeni) buys a bag of dates and claims that he would be back. He is new to the area and might be starting a business, he seems interested in establishing contacts within the neighborhood.

Ariella Cohen, a reporter from The Brooklyn Papers, stops in and has a chat-- she is interested in doing a story on the store for the next issue.

Sunday 11/12/06- I speak with Sameer, the Sales Manager for Al Farez on the phone and we go over the details as he arranges the express shipment of dates from Hilla, which will leave directly out of Baghdad, via DHL. This is curious, as DHL told other Iraqi vendors who wanted to send me samples back in August that food was prohibited to be sent through their services. In the time that's elapsed since then, it seems that some new measures have been adopted.

“I think we made the right decision abandoning the shipment in Syria,” Sameer tells me. “Those dates will still be fine for baking, it tastes very good, it just didn't look good. Since we will make a first impression for our company, and our country, with this shipment to America, we wanted to be sure to send the best quality product. I brought back some boxes from Syria with me to show Bassam, and when I opened them I told him, ‘Ok, look. If we send this, the Americans will just feed them to the mules!’ Or maybe, it would be the fish, because they wouldn't even let the shipment in, they'd dump it in the ocean.”

Sameer tells me this shipment will be a variety of dates, as more types have been harvested since our first order was placed.

Monday, 11/13/06- I receive by email the Packing List, Invoice, and Air Waybill for the date shipment. The 11 boxes leave Baghdad that afternoon, and are on their way. The varieties and amounts are listed as follows:

16.4 kilograms of Ibrahime dates	(30.00 USD)
16.4 kilograms of Azraq dates	(30.00 USD)
11 kilograms of Kheyari dates	(20.00 USD)
11 kilograms of Ashrase dates	(20.00 USD)

I am especially keen to try the Kheyari dates, which are often considered to be the best amongst Iraqis and by date boutiques in the Gulf States.

I immediately send all the scanned documents to Pat Whelan at Sahadi's and I also draw up a letter of sale of the dates in transit so that their Customs Broker can handle Prior Notice to the USFDA and all other Customs issues.

Prior Notice is one of many post-9/11 import laws. Here is the description of the law, found on the USFDA website, www.fda.gov

"The Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 (the Bioterrorism Act) requires that FDA receive prior notice of food imported into the United States, beginning on December 12, 2003. Most of the prior notice information required by the interim final rule is data usually provided by importers or brokers to the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) when foods arrive in the United States. Now, the Bioterrorism Act requires that this information also be provided to FDA in advance of an imported food's arrival to the United States. FDA will use this information in advance of the arrival to review, evaluate, and assess the information, and determine whether to inspect the imported food. FDA and CBP have collaborated on the implementation of the prior notice interim final rule. Nearly all of the current imported food shipments can comply by using CBP's Automated Broker Interface of the Automated Commercial System (ABI/ACS). Prior notice can be submitted either through ABI/ACS or FDA's Prior Notice (PN) System Interface beginning December 12, 2003."

Furthermore, the ordinance dictates that the notice be given within the following timeframes:

No more than 5 days before arrival and no fewer than 2 hours before arrival by land by road, 4 hours before arrival by air or by land by rail, 8 hours before arrival by water.

Pat writes back, informing me that since DHL is handling the shipment, they act as in-house Customs Brokers and that there is no need for Sahadi Fine Foods to be involved in this initial transaction.

I check with DHL, and they do in fact operate in this capacity. I give the agent my FDA numbers as well as Al-Farez's FDA number, required for both the importer and exporter in any transaction. They tell me they will submit the Prior Notice on my behalf.

By day's end, the tracking number for the dates does not show up in DHL's system.

Tuesday, 11/14/06- I wake up early to check DHL's website and see if the packages have entered their system. They have. Throughout the day, I will check the DHL website to track the progress of the parcel.

11/14/2006
1:51 pm (Baghdad Time) Picked Up by DHL
4:26 pm Depart Facility, Baghdad, Iraq
8:39 pm Arrived at DHL facility, Manama, Bahrain

Wednesday, 11/15/06- I spend the day working on my project for Art Basel Miami. I continue checking the shipment's progress online.

11/15/2006

2:17 am Depart Facility, Manama, Bahrain

8:20 am Arrived at DHL facility, London, United Kingdom

8:52 am At Gateway. London, United Kingdom

11:25 am Depart Facility. London, United Kingdom

I can't believe it. After all this time, all the delays and re-routing, and the veritable impossibilities presented by this transaction, the dates were on their way to the New York City via London. Poetic, as my grandfather was raised in the British schools in Baghdad, and my grandmother's brother, my Uncle Nyazi, settled in London with his wife Tiffah after their exile in '46.

I count the hours. How long does a flight take to get from London to New York City, I ask myself, figuring it must be something less than the 8 hours I am used to out of Berlin or Milan. London is more like 5 or 6 hours, I tell myself. So that would mean the dates would land at 4:25 PM or 5:25 PM EST. I live in Chicago. That's 3:25 PM or 4:25 PM Central Time.

But what if it's going from London to another destination along the way? Would it go London-Reykjavik, then on to JFK International Airport in New York? Or perhaps London-Delhi-Moscow-Damascus-Amman, etc., etc.?

I decide to call DHL to be sure, and I receive confirmation that the dates are definitely on a London-New York direct flight. This will be one of several calls I make to DHL that afternoon, curious, worried, excited.

Around 4:30 PM Chicago time, I track the package again on the DHL website.

11/15/2006

5:17 pm Arrived at DHL facility. New York, NY

They're here.

Thursday, 11/16/06- I wake up early in the morning to check the status at DHL's holding facility and I speak to an import specialist. He tells me that it is being held due to inadequate paperwork for the FDA. What paperwork, I ask. It seems the brokers at DHL never submitted Prior Notice. I exhale heavily. This is the most lame of mistakes, I tell him, because this was the regulation that was the easiest to adhere to and follow. The agent tells me he never heard of Prior Notice before, and I begin giving him an impromptu workshop on the history of the law as an extension of the War on Terror and how to submit the required paperwork.

At a certain point, he tries to be helpful. "Oh yes, well, for these forms you should head over to www.fda.com, where you'll—" I interrupt. "Dot gov."

“Excuse me?” he says?

“Dot gov. It’s www.fda.gov. There’s no such thing as fda.com.”

He apologizes, and tells me that DHL is still relatively new at bringing things out of Iraq. I tell him I understand, but this error may result in FDA sending this shipment back to Baghdad, since failure to submit Prior Notice is a punishable offense. He assigns my shipment a number and tells me that a representative will be assigned to my case to figure out how to get the paperwork to FDA now that the dates are here. I thank him, but I am sure to once again register my annoyance with their incompetence.

As soon as I hang up with DHL, I call Pat Whelan at Sahadi’s to let him know what is going on. He says that while it is not good, it is not a disaster, and tells me he’ll call his broker, Richard Morana to find out what can be done. He asks me to send him everything I’ve got in terms of information, including tracking number, contacts at DHL, etc. and he’ll get back to me soon. As my classes begin at 9:00 AM, I need to leave by 8:15 to bike up from my house in Andersonville to Northwestern University. I realize that I won’t have time from the start of class until noon to do anything, so I try to think of any forms I might need to submit preemptively.

My hope is that Sahadi’s will step in and take over the shipment and brokerage, which is something they can do—DHL would effectively transfer over all authority in brokering the parcels’ passage through Customs, FDA, and USDA to Pat and his broker. This hasn’t been discussed yet as a possibility, but I proceed to draw up an official letter, on Davisons & Co. letterhead, granting the transfer of authority of the shipment from DHL to C-Air Customhouse Brokers. I send this to Pat just in case, along with a scan of my 1040 Tax form from 2005, showing my Social Security number. Since I am doing business as a sole proprietor, I do not need a Federal Tax ID for the business.

At 8:20 AM, just as my wife and I are about to leave on our bikes, I get a call from Karen at DHL. It’s a 718 area code that shows up on my caller ID, and she has a thick New York accent, so I imagine that she is actually at the DHL holding facility at JFK. I tell her the whole story, and how upsetting this is, after all the stuff that the shipment has been through and the hurdles it will inevitably need to go through if it clears at all.

“Don’t worry sir, the package hasn’t gone to Customs yet, and we can still submit Prior Notice before it goes there.”

“So unless it goes through to Customs, it’s not a problem?” I ask.

“Well, it’s better if it’s done before, but they do accept it once it’s here as long as it hasn’t been released from us.”

“So it won’t get sent back?”

“No.”

I am relieved. I get on my bike and head to Northwestern along the lake with Lori. My cell phone is up in my chest pocket in my jacket so I can hear it if anyone calls.

When I arrive at school, I tell the students enrolled in my Installation Art class that I apologize in advance, as I will have my cell phone on during the session and will have to field urgent telephone calls.

“The dates have arrived,” I tell them, and they all start applauding. From the beginning of the quarter, they have been witness to my process of setting up this installation, of the twists and turns of the import, and to my travel schedule, back and forth, from Chicago to New York City after class on Thursdays and back again on Monday nights, from the end of September until now.

At around 10:30 AM Central Time, I receive a call from Pat, telling me that he spoke to his broker, and that he will need the letter of authority that I sent earlier in the morning transferring brokerage rights from DHL to C-Air Customhouse Brokers. He will also use the letter of sale in transit of the shipment that I sent him on November 13, the day he determined that Sahadi's would not need to be involved because DHL does their own Customs work in-house.

With these letters, my company has now officially sold the dates to Sahadi Fine Foods and Rick Morana at C-Air is overseeing the clearance through Customs, USDA, and FDA.

Pat calls me back 20 minutes later. "I told Rick what happened, and while this will all most likely transfer over to us just fine, we both agree, it looks like DHL really boned on this shipment."

We speak for a while. I am curious as to how this all works. The boxes are held at a station separate from Customs where it will stay until the necessary paperwork has cleared. From there it will move to Customs. Then, the Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration will determine if they want to inspect it. "And I expect that they will," Pat tells me.

"So, it could be released tomorrow or it could take months?" I ask Pat. "Exactly," he says. "But—you know, Michael—you're trying to do something good here. This stuff (trade with Iraq) should be happening. It's not like you're trying to smuggle or do anything illegal here. My broker in all this is calm and confident. If he thought there was a problem, believe me, we'd know by now. What it comes down to is they can ask for all the inspections and holds that they want, and a lot of this depends on whom your USFDA or Customs representative is. Do have a personal vendetta against Iraq? Are they in a bad mood? But eventually, they should release this because all the necessary prep work is in order."

Pat tells me to call him for an update before I board my flight back to New York City later that evening and I do just that.

"The shipment's still on hold at DHL, but I heard this funny story from the broker. He tells me that one of the Customs Agents gets the paperwork from him, and comes back to him, saying, 'I don't think this is allowed. It says, Product of Iraq.' Rick tells him to look at the papers. 'You see the FDA numbers there, for both the US company and the Iraqi company? How the hell do you think the USFDA would allow for registration of a Food Facility located in another country if it wasn't legal? We're no longer at war with Iraq. We're supposed to be rebuilding Iraq. Go back and do your job.'"

Pat's story makes me realize that the dates are doing exactly what they are meant to do, in illuminating through their very existence the confusion, mythologies, inaccuracies and countless other murky beliefs that exist on the American side vis a vis the current situation in Iraq. A fruit that asks questions. A product that seems a cultural impossibility. A shipment that scandalizes the route through which it travels.

Pat says that he'll call me tomorrow morning when I am in the store. "I'll tell you, tomorrow's Friday. If we don't see any movement by 2:00 PM, then we'll talk again on Monday."

Friday, 11/17/06- Shamoan Salih returns to the store to find out the latest concerning the arrival of the dates. I tell him the 11 boxes are in JFK International Airport. "That's great news. I look forward to tasting them again." He buys some items he meant to purchase when he first visited, including a bottle of Al-Wadi Date Molasses, some maamoul cookies and baking dates.

I speak with Pat in the late afternoon. He tells me Rick is out sick today and that his partner is overseeing the latest developments, of which there are few. "Nothing really new here, but it seems that

Prior Notice was accepted by the FDA and now I can see the shipment in my computer. What we have here is a computer system that allows us to link directly with Customs, so I see what they see. Once something is given Prior Notice and is scheduled to come through off of a flight, we are all able to watch it before and after it gets cleared. The fact that it is showing up on my screen is a good sign. So, I see here two groupings of boxes that came through British Airways via London. That's got to be you."

Pat and I speak for another hour, about Brooklyn, his son's hockey league, the way he met his wife in High School. He's become a really great friend in all this, and I feel very fortunate to have met him through this project.

"Well, I've got to run," he says. "I hear my brother in the back. It looks like I've got some apricot issues."

In the evening, I attend the New York City Art Book Fair, organized through Printed Matter, where Creative Time holds the launch for the Who Cares book. For this event, we collaborate on producing another version of Enemy Kitchen, and caterers prepare both vegetarian and meat versions of my mother's Kubba Bamia recipe with rice. The recipe is printed in the appendix of the book.

Saturday, 11/18/06- Lydia Khalil visits the store again and brings bagels with cream cheese and coffee.

We speak about moving forward with her proposal to import honey from Kurdistan, which, according to her, tastes unlike any honey she's had anywhere else.

Lydia tells me about her time working for the Provisional Government under Paul Bremer. She was based in Baghdad, and had worked with politicians and authorities on everything from the building of the Iraqi Constitution to the preparation and implementation of the elections to aiding the elected parties. She traveled often to the North, spending a lot of time in Kurdistan.

Coming back to the subject of the honey, Lydia tells me that every town in Kurdistan has its own beekeeper. There is a sense pride connected to each town's honey.

Concerning the economics of trade with Kurdistan, I learn from Lydia that there are many laws and initiatives that are specific to Kurdistan, which maintains an autonomous existence from the laws of larger federal governing body of Iraq. If something is not specifically at odds with the language of the law in the Iraqi Constitution, things can happen in Kurdistan that may not be able to happen in the rest of Iraq, I am told.

In terms of getting the shipment out of Iraq, I tell Lydia about the problems I have experienced, attempting overland passage from Iraq into Jordan, then subsequently Syria. The only way to do this economically would be to go by sea, which is difficult because Basra and Umm Qas'r are very dangerous and Kuwait really isn't an option. The Turkish freight companies I dealt with in generating estimates for our original one ton shipment had reasonable sea-freight charges, but the charge for picking up the shipment by truck to bring it from Iraq to Turkey was exorbitant, due to the risk and danger. When I asked these companies if the Iraqi businesses could hire their own drivers to bring it in, they said the Turkish border guards would not allow large vehicles in from Iraq due to security restrictions.

Lydia thinks this is not accurate, and says that she will check and see if the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing between Iraq and Turkey prohibits such movement.

Lydia also tells me that she wishes to bring the honey out in bulk, as she figures canning or bottling can be achieved easier and cheaper here. I tell her that this decision makes her shipment easier in many ways as bulk items are not subject to as many restrictions as if one were bringing in a packaged, shelf-ready consumable. For starters, the cans and bottles would need to be labeled with a Nutrition Facts table as per US regulations. But this is not too difficult, as the company producing the label can just simply print

one out themselves consistent with the breakdown of information found on any existing food products. The big delays that one can experience, however, come from the mandatory samples that need to be sent ahead of a larger shipment to FDA and USDA authorities, which could take a while to receive their approval. Especially something from Iraq.

Concerning the labels, Lydia says that it would be best to label the honey according to the town or city that produced it. So, it would be called, "Irbil Honey" or "Dawodiya Honey." I ask if the label should say "Product of Iraq" or "Product of Kurdistan."

"The way to make everyone happy in this situation is to list it as 'Product of Iraqi Kurdistan.'"

I tell her I will speak with Pat about this new opportunity once there is some resolution of the dates' situation, and in the meantime, she should investigate some of the possible partnerships with companies in Iraqi Kurdistan. Before she leaves she tells me she is planning on visiting Kurdistan again this year, but that Baghdad is out of the question because of the danger it poses. She mentions that she met her husband in Baghdad, also a Coptic Christian of Egyptian origin but from Australia (Lydia was raised in Boston) and the two of them were married this past summer. I wish her "mabrouk," congratulations.

Later in the day, I receive a steady flow of visitors, including Allan and Ellen Wexler, both of them artists and architects, and later, artist Dennis Adams. Allan and Dennis are two of the most important mentors with whom I studied.

On my way home, early in the morning after a gathering with friends, I hear awful news while riding in a taxi. A suicide bomber killed 19 day laborers in the city of Hilla who had gathered around his car when he pretended to offer him work. He then blew himself and the car up. In addition to the dead, 49 were wounded.

I am so scared. I am so worried. Hilla is the same city the dates are from. What if some of the laborers were working the groves at Fallah Farms?

No. Please no.

I am so angry, and helpless.

When I arrive at my parents' house where I am staying, I try calling Bassam. Nobody picks up. Sameer is already away on business in Germany. It is 4:00 AM when I finally resolve to go to sleep and try to get some information in the morning.

Sunday, 11/19/06- I receive e-mail from Bassam, who has been tracking the package on DHL.

Dear Michael

Hope you are fine, what is the latest situation of the date shipment? I checked from DHL website, it is now in NY under clearance delay. Please inform us if you receive the shipment.

I will travel tomorrow to Quebec/Canada but I will still follow you by email, if you need anything please contact me

*Take care,
Bassam*

I write back to Bassam, giving him a quick update, letting him know that all is under control as much as can be. I ask him if everyone is OK at the farms.

I call the number for Al Farez, but again, nobody answers. I check the time on Bassam's message. He sent it on Saturday. He must be on his way to Canada already.

Monday, 11/20/06- Still no word from Bassam or anyone at Al-Farez on the situation in Hilla. I am exhausted and hardly in the mood to just conduct business as usual.

Then, in the afternoon, the first bona fide asshole to visit the store since it opened in October arrives. In a way, I can't believe it's taken this long. He introduces himself as a lawyer who works with artists. He is self-satisfied, ignorant, obnoxious and snarky. He asks, "Is this the Iraqi date store that is performance art?" I explain that the project functions as a complex layering of cultural devices. It is at once a quotidian marketplace that is invested in accommodating a social platform for discourse around the war and also a place to make visible the veiled goods from Iraq that show up on store shelves through channels that are darkly poetic. I also explain the shipment of dates as being the first goods to explicitly declare themselves as Product of Iraq, and the problems that declaration entails, as well as the trials of getting the shipment here, as it traveled the same path as a refugee fleeing Iraq.

He speaks 50 miles per minute. He could not care less what I say. "So this was originally your grandfather's store?" It is based on his import-export business, I tell him.

"You don't look Iraqi," he says. Fuck you, I think. "What is that supposed to mean?" I ask in response, offended.

"I don't know. You look...normal." Double fuck you, I think.

"Well, I wanted to get some Iraqi dates to bring home." I explain again that they haven't arrived, hoping he will go away. I am not in the mood to be patient today. I am exhausted. I still haven't heard anything about the people working at the farm in Hilla.

"What else do you have that is from Iraq?" I point him toward the date syrup and maamoul cookies and baking dates.

He keeps talking. He starts speaking about Israel, and gives his account of a difficult conversation he had with a Palestinian taxi driver who was apparently very angry about the current situation in Palestine. "So I told him, whoa whoa whoa, I'm Jewish. He said he didn't care, and kept going on. At the end of the trip, he tells me, 'it's great to meet you, nice talking to you...'"

"I never understood it," he continues, "you had these Jewish European immigrants who were educated and modernized, and they could have been useful to the Palestinians and the whole region." I tell him I disagree wholeheartedly with his point of view. I try to get a word in.

Nice try.

He keeps going. "It's anti-Semitism. If the Jews around the world got together tomorrow and bought Paraguay and Uruguay, which really could happen tomorrow, and moved everyone there, you'd have the same thing happen to them in South America."

I squint my face incredulously. Could he be this stupid? Is this Sacha Baron Cohen's new alter ego? Where are the hidden cameras? My mouth is gaping wide open. "Hunh?" I manage to say.

Maybe you really are a moron, I think.

He brings his items to the front, where I am waiting at the counter. Can I not sell to him, I ask myself? I reply in my head with a question: Isn't this part of the dialogue you are accommodating? Yes. I try to calm myself down.

He looks at the documents of the initial one-ton shipment, all written in Arabic displayed on the counter.

"Do you speak Arabic?" he asks. Shwe, very little, I reply. "Oh, that's too bad." I explain that my mother is fluent, but does not read or write the language as she was raised here.

I pack his goods in a bag and hand him his change.

"So are you a Muslim?" he asks.

"No, I am Jewish," I answer.

"That's disappointing," he says.

"WHY!!?" I answer angrily.

"I dunno...It would just be, you know...more authentic."

You have to be joking me. At this point, I want to throw him out of my store.

Get out of my store, I am thinking, as I am just staring at him now. Get out, get out. GET THE HELL OUT!!!!

"So, it's just 100% a performance, then" he says.

I try to cool down, but I am agitated and probably look and sound that way. I feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. I must be red. "LOOK," I say firmly, "the Iraqi Jewish community was the oldest and one of the largest in the world. Some held important government positions. Others were famous musicians and artists. We were Arabs. We were Iraqis. We happened to be Jews. We were all those things until it became a cultural impossibility thanks to events in the 20th Century. We lost the possibility of being an entity called an 'Arab Jew' the same way one would be considered an 'Arab Muslim' or 'Arab Christian.'"

He looks at the photos and emails displayed underneath the Plexiglas on the countertop. He looks at a photo of the 4-year-old boy, the son of the farmer in Hilla, holding a box of the dates in his hands.

"Is that you when you were little?" he asks.

"No," I explain, and when I think about Hilla and the boy in the photo, I start to feel my throat close up as I fight to choke back tears. "It's the farmer's son," I manage, and say it like I am pretending to cough.

"OK, well, nice to meet you" he says as he leaves.

Later in the day, I receive word from Pat that the shipment has now been designated for “Intensive Search.” What this means is that Customs and Homeland Security will X-ray and take apart the shipment of 11 boxes and go through all of it, handling each date to make sure that it is “safe.” Then they put it back together and charge the importer for time and equipment usage.

USFDA has a hold on it as well, and Pat and his broker think the Department of Agriculture will want to inspect it as well.

“I wish I had better news,” Pat tells me.

“Pat, can you imagine what would have happened if this was the one-ton shipment we originally ordered?”

“I know!” he tells me. “Hopefully, Customs and everyone else look at this tomorrow, see its 10 or 11 boxes and say ‘don’t waste my time.’”

Pat tells me this happens from time to time with full containers of goods, from Lebanon and Syria. “Especially from this part of the world. You can accrue thousands of dollars in Security Scan charges with customs when it is a big shipment.”

Pat explains that the fees obviously get factored into the retail price of the items in their store. “We try to do it across the board, with all the items in that container.”

I told him how I intend to make this visible in the store, with a price tag for the dates that show the breakdown of this mathematics, starting with the base price of the dates, how that increases due to the high shipping costs out of Iraq, the duties levies, security scan charges, etc.

Pat tells me we’ll speak tomorrow morning.

Tuesday, 11/21/06- Pat calls me to say that U.S. Customs has signed off on the shipment, Department of Agriculture has signed off, and USFDA has not signed off. The shipment will therefore be sent by truck tomorrow to Sahadi Fine Foods’ holding facility in the Brooklyn warehouse.

USFDA will most likely want to sample the product, make sure it’s packed properly, check for pesticides, etc.

“It’s mostly good news. We’ve got 2 out of 3 hurdles cleared,” he says. “Then we’re home free.”

Saturday, 11/25/06- Shamoan Salih comes back to the store. As per his request the previous week, I have brought with me from Chicago a bottle of Basra Date Syrup, which is the same brand as one that we have on display here in the store.

The label declares the syrup as “Product of Netherlands” which is hysterical, considering there are no date groves in Holland. This jar however, follows the same logic as others that are displayed in the store, such as Second House Products Date Syrup, a brand from Antelias, Lebanon that has been imported into the United States over the past several years. The syrup is actually made in Baghdad. In an effort to circumvent the U.N. Embargo on Iraq and sell to a western market, the manufacturer would ship the

date syrup to Syria to be packed in unmarked cans. It was then exported out of Lebanon, where the cans would receive the Second House Products label, identifying it as Product of Lebanon.

This practice continues to this day, with multiple brands bearing different locations of origin, even after the U.N. sanctions were lifted in 2003. As many U.S.-based importers attest, high shipping charges to bring anything out of Iraq, as well as severe trade regulations applied to incoming packages from the region—including security scans and the resulting charges for holding shipments in port to enable these searches—has made it cost prohibitive to import goods bearing the label “Product of Iraq.”

In the case of Basra Date Syrup, the syrup is produced in Basra, Iraq and lists the Netherlands as the country of origin. It is unknown where it is packed and labeled.

The photograph used on the label is actually a stock photograph that has been used numerous times to illustrate date harvesting methods in Iraq.

Basra Date Syrup is imported by Phoenicia Products in Quebec, Canada. Many items labeled Product of Iran found in the United States also pass through importers located in Quebec, who then sell the products to U.S.-based companies.

On March 6, 2006, a jar of Basra Date Syrup appeared for sale on eBay, under the category “Militaria.” The seller, located in the United Kingdom stated, “This is a jar of Basra Date Syrup brought back from one of Saddam Hussein’s Palaces in Basra by a member of the Armed Forces. I have not opened it since obtaining it and certainly not tasted its delights. But, fit for a dictator nonetheless.”

I give the date syrup to Shamoan, who is very grateful and tells me that according to his sister, there is a man in Forest Hills named Audy Zelka who is a Jewish Iraqi and a great cook and caters all the Iraqi-Jewish functions in the city. This is of interest to me, especially in relation to my “Enemy Kitchen” project.

“Date syrup, or silan as the Iraqi Jews call it, is delicious when you pour it on a kind of thick yogurt cheese that comes in a loaf called khaymar,” Shamoan tells me.

We discuss the whereabouts of the 10 boxes of dates. Shamoan says, “well, that’s not a lot that you’re getting, and you probably need to spread it around to all who signed up to receive them. I’d appreciate it if you could just hold on to a handful for me, just a little something for thikra.”

Thikra, Shamoan explains, means memory, nostalgia, a taste of home.

“We left Iraq, but Iraq shaped us and defined us in so many ways.”

Later in the day, a man comes into the store. Very tall, with red hair and a beard, he is very energetic and happy. He explains that he came into the shop because he is learning Arabic and when he walks down Atlantic Avenue, he makes a point of reading the signs as practice.

“Then I read your sign, saw the word ‘Iraq’ written in Arabic, and I thought, ‘what?!’ and decided to come in.”

He introduces himself as Thomas, and he works as a Visiting Scholar at the Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict. He has spent a lot of time in Kurdistan working with various groups and is frequently traveling back and forth.

He spends much of his time in Khanaquin. “Another thing to import would be Iraqi tomatoes, which grow all year long. They are quite different, and delicious. They also have incredible grapes.”

He mentions a businessman in Sulaymaniyah who has pondered the possibility of vineyards in the north to produce wine.

We speak about the shipment of dates, and how currently there are no goods on my shelves that are labeled explicitly as “Product of Iraq.” He tells me about a specific type of sauce in Iraq that he loves, kind of like A1 steak sauce or Lea and Perrins. He says he will return tomorrow with a gift.

Sunday, 11/26/06- An incredibly busy day, with many friends and passersby coming to the store to talk, buy dates, and maamoul cookies. I never knew the maamoul would be such a hot seller—they’re listed as being made with select Saudi dates, but they are, in fact, known to be Iraqi dates.

My friends Francois Bucher, his son Joseph, Brian Boucher, Heather and Dave Peterson, and their baby, Chloe, come by. Thomas, who stopped by on Saturday, comes in and pulls something from his bag. He places a bottle on the table, simply labeled “Hello” and “Sauce.” The label is baby blue background and has little color illustrations of deli meat being sliced on a cutting board, a pepper, tomatoes, onions and a big hamburger. I turn the bottle over. I read, “Produced by Star Foods Co. Baghdad, Iraq” and below it, “Made in Iraq.” Date syrup and dates are listed as two of the main ingredients.

“The Arabic on the label is a simple transliteration: ‘sauce,’” Thomas tells me. We all laugh, and I am incredibly happy to include this bottle on our shelf of products. It is the very first one that I have seen that bears a label from Iraq. But it does enter here illegally.

“I stuff a bottle each in my running shoes whenever I come back from Iraq,” Thomas says.

Monday, 11/27/06- I leave for Toronto to give a lecture at the Ontario College of Art and Design. While there, I speak with a very congested Pat by phone (he has a bad cold.) DHL should have at this point released the packages to Sahadi Fine Foods, where it would wait in their warehouse in Sunset Park for FDA inspection. They still have not responded to Pat or Rick’s phone messages to find out what is holding things up. As it is already 4:00 PM EST we decide to speak again tomorrow, as nothing is likely to get done in the next two hours.

During my lecture, I present both “Return” and “Enemy Kitchen.” When I mention that there are very few Iraqi restaurants in the USA, and none in Chicago or New York City, several of the students with laptops and wifi connections are keen to point out to me after the lecture that there is a restaurant in Montreal called “De Damas à Baghdad” that specializes in Syrian and Iraqi cuisine (for you chowhounds, it’s located at 170, rue Prince-Arthur Est coin L’Hôtel De Ville MONTRÉAL, Québec H2X 1B7.)

Tuesday, 11/28/06- I wake up and send Bassam another e-mail asking after the farmers in Hilla (I still haven’t heard anything) and informing him of the progress with the dates. Late in the day, I hear from Pat, who says that Karen at DHL has now released the shipment to Sahadi’s to be delivered to their warehouse.

Somehow, I think, it cannot be this simple.

Wednesday, 11/29/06- Back in Chicago, I check my e-mail first thing in the morning. A reply from Bassam. He states, “I am in Quebec. I am happy to hear the good news about the dates, and I wish I were with you to share in the celebration when they arrive. The weather is cool here but very nice. The people here are very friendly, the only problem is the language, most of them speak French.”

Thursday, 11/30/06- My first task this morning is to check on the packages through DHL's online tracking.

11/30/2006	1:00 am	Arrived at DHL facility.	Wilmington, OH
	3:22 am	Transit through sort facility.	Wilmington, OH

WHAT?!?!?! YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME!!!!, I think. Wilmington, Ohio? What the fuck is it doing in Wilmington, Ohio?

I call Pat at Sahadi's. I tell him what I read on my screen.

"What the hell is it doing in Wilmington, Ohio?!?!", Pat says.

"EXACTLY", I say.

"Alright. Let me call Karen at DHL."

I leave for Northwestern for the MFA students' final critiques of the quarter, which begin at 1:00 PM. At around 11:00 AM I track the package from my computer in my office.

11/30/2006	9:08 am	Partial Delivery	Brooklyn, NY
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I call Pat, figuring maybe I can actually deliver him some good news. Pat gets on the phone.

"Michael. You're going to like this."

"Yep," I say

"Five boxes arrived."

"Yep. I am looking at it on my screen right now."

"OK. So we're waiting for what looks like another one," Pat says.

"I figured. It's curious, why do you think it ended up in Wilmington, Ohio?" I ask.

"No clue. DHL, huh?"

I hypothesize that perhaps this is the absurd route they had to travel in order to clear it and send it on to Brooklyn from the DHL facility at JFK Airport in Jamaica, Queens. Maybe it had to go through Ohio to get here. I tell him about the time that, for fun, I tried to book a trip on Travelocity.com to fly from Newark Airport to Newark Airport. It worked, and Travelocity generated an itinerary that included a stop in Pittsburgh, PA for 232 USD.

At 2:43 PM, while I am on a break from the crits, Pat calls. "More good news. The second box arrived. I am keeping them by my desk upstairs, there's lots of craziness happening down in the warehouse."

Now, we wait for the FDA to decide whether or not they wish to sample 11 boxes of dates.

"It's crazy. It's like asking them if they want to sample a sample," Pat tells me. He explains that as long as a shipment is less than 100 pounds, it is considered a sample and does not need FDA or USDA approval, as those sizes of shipments are not usually for sale.

Friday, 12/1/2006- Big snow storm in Chicago today.

I get an email from Pat around midday concerning the progress of the dates and their yet-to-be-determined relationship with the USFDA.

"Nothing so far," he writes. "Rick after three calls spoke to the woman at FDA who then told him after three days, 'I don't handle that anymore.' The person who does isn't in right now. Saga continues."

Every time I have called FDA on my own, ninety percent of the time I never get anyone on the phone. And it is not the usual, run-of-the-mill transfer to voice mail. It sounds as if they actually have one phone and an answering machine at this government agency, which must be located in one room, with no windows. And when I do hear back from them or get someone on the phone, it is the exact same voice as the woman that is heard on their recorded message.

I tell Pat that I bet it's the same person who now no longer handles the FDA inspections.

Saturday, 12/2/2006- I wake up at 3:30 AM to catch a 6:15 flight from Chicago to New York City, where I will mind the store for 8 more days, according to our latest agreement extending the lease between Creative Time and Atlantic Assets, the owners of the building who donated the storefront.

Upon arriving at the store, I call Pat, who sounds a lot better than he did earlier in the week. We speak for about 45 minutes. His daughter is playing today in an all-star soccer game and he will take his son again to Syracuse for a hockey tournament.

He goes on to explain that it is really unclear whether or not USFDA will necessarily have the authority to sample the dates. It seems that in some cases, Department of Agriculture's decision on the sampling of shipments preempts any decision made by USFDA, which of course causes some tension between the agencies. He thinks it's quite possible that may be the case in our shipment, but we'll see Monday.

Tala Madani, a painter who is originally from Iran arrives while I am speaking with Cristian Alexa, the Director of Lombard-Freid Projects, the gallery that represents us both. It is the first time I am meeting Tala and we speak for a while about the project, about Iran and Iraq, and about her residency in Provincetown Rhode Island.

A woman named Leila Makhdiyyi enters the store and asks if we sell Iraqi *Mann Wa Salwa*. At first I don't recognize the name, but when she says it again and describes it as a kind of doughy nougat, covered in flour I nearly leap out of my chair. "OH! You mean manna!" I say.

"Yes!" Leila answers.

When I was growing up, at all the family functions that happened on my mother's side of the family, there was always this big loaf of white, flour-covered candy that you would pull off and eat, one pinch at a time. I loved it. It was made with rosewater and pistachios, too, and it was the thing I most looked forward to when desserts were served. My mother told me that the candy was based on the manna that fell from the heavens in the story of Exodus.

Tala is also familiar with this candy. It is called gaz in Farsi, and is sold in golden cardboard containers. The gaz is flat, round and sits in a box filled with flour.

I tell Leila that while we do not carry this, it is a great idea to consider as another item that could be part of a future import from Iraq.

Back in early 2001, I remember having brunch at my apartment in Long Island City with my friend Ayreen who brought me a few individually wrapped pieces of the Mann Wa Salwa brought in by her brother from Baghdad, where he worked for UNESCO. I gave them to my mother, who was very moved to receive them.

Later, I check my e-mail to find a new message from Bassam.

Dear Michael,

Hi, our people at Fallah farms are all OK after that bombing because they were far away from it, but I hear that one of them was killed on the road between Babel and Baghdad. He was kidnapped and killed, which usually happens these days in Iraq, every day we hear of such cases of people we know. The situation is starting to get worse and the US did not take the right steps until recently.

My heart sinks. Within the good news is the inevitable bad news.

I am speechless. I am so sad. I have no words. No words even in my head to express anything. It seems so useless to think or say I'm sorry.

Bassam continues.

For the dates, what is Sahadi's opinion of the quality? Have they tasted them? I hope you will receive the shipment soon and we can work on the remaining 75 boxes, and maybe this one can be used to get more orders from clients that we can add on to a second shipment.

Best regards,

Bassam

My hope as well. Working with Sahadi's, there has always existed the possibility that there may very well be a sustainable relationship between Al Farez and Sahadi Fine Foods, as well as with Davisons & Co., if the product is good and if the headache of the import seems surmountable given the channels it needs to pass through in order to enter the country.

I write back to Bassam, expressing how upset and sad I feel for his loss, the farm's loss, the worker's family's loss. I also tell him that we are still waiting for the dates to be released by FDA and it is technically illegal to sample anything until they release the shipment. I tell him he will be the first to know of our first taste of the dates.

10 boxes of dates made it through. And one of the farmers in the date groves who may have picked the dates, laid them out to dry, or packed the boxes was killed while the boxes were waiting to clear U.S. Customs.

10 boxes made it through.

Gavin and I discuss how complicated our feelings are about all of this. I know it is an intrinsic part of the project, the nature of this work. But I can't help being unclear and uncomfortable.

I met so many people in this project who went to Iraq, trying to do something productive. Brave people. Good people. Journalists who cover the continuing war and accommodate people's stories. Workers for peace. Activists. Watching, feeling, and experiencing all that I have heard and written about here. All of it happening in front of them, to them.

Here I was, all the while, having what many would consider a pen-pal relationship with Bassam, Sameer, and Reema, framed within a business transaction. Some part of me wonders, do I have the right to feel in all this? I have never set foot in Iraq. I don't know if I ever will.

Later in the day, Pat and I decide it would be best if I pick up the dates, as he'll never find room in the back of his vans to deliver it on Tuesday. I agree to show up early in the morning, after they open at 8:00 AM. I tell him to pull however many samples of the dates he wants from the four different varieties, as this will probably be useful in determining which ones to include in the order of 500 kg shipment spread over 75 boxes still slated to be sent from Al Farez Co.

"Sure. But this is a conversation I need to have with Rick next week to figure out what we're doing with those 75 boxes, and it's a lot more complicated than yes or no. Bottom line, this shipment ended up being much more difficult than we thought it would be. And that was only 10 boxes. Here we are, almost three weeks after they arrived in the States. And Rick had to pull some strings. If this is 200 boxes, you and I are in hell right now."

I feel a huge pit in my stomach open after he says this, but I thank Pat for his courage and perseverance in taking this project on, for putting himself, Sahadi Fine Foods and Rick on the line to import the dates from Iraq. I guess we'll know more next week.

Clearly, the US bureaucracy that was rumored to impede the presence of goods clearly labeled "Product of Iraq" was in place. To what extent it is ineptitude, unfamiliarity with this sort of transaction, or unwillingness to help it go through is not clear. It does, however, exist, and all the while, the project's intention was to illuminate this fact.

But somewhere along the line, with everything that the shipment went through in Iraq, at the Jordanian border, Syria, and DHL, I wanted so badly to believe that things would get easier once it reached the US. Through some kind of screwed-up karmic equation, I thought that the experience at U.S. Customs would be the antidote for all that had transpired.

After speaking with Pat, I quickly list all the Chicago-based importers I'd been in contact with, who were interested in this import, should Sahadi Fine Foods choose to decline the 75 box shipment. One store, the Middle East Bakery in Andersonville, IL, has already requested I return to Chicago with samples. The manager said that with all the Iraqi living in Chicago, Iraqi dates would "fly off the shelves."

I speak with Zeyad, and I invite him to come with me to pick up the dates from Sahadi's warehouse. I have really enjoyed getting to know Zeyad, he is very thoughtful and a new friend who saw this project through from the beginning. It seems only fitting for us to begin the end together. We decide to meet in the West Village where I am staying at 7 AM and take the subway out to Sunset Park.

I don't know if I'll be able to sleep.

Tuesday, 12/5/06- I wake up at 6:00 AM. I am expecting Zeyad to arrive at the apartment where Lori and I are staying at 7:00 AM and we will ride the subway together to Sahadi's warehouse in Sunset Park.

After showering and getting dressed, I spend what seems like a long time sitting on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the spot in front of me, where the wall meets the floor.

Nothing seems trivial. This is a big task for me today, and I am hit with emotions hard. These dates are not just dates, and as I turn to look back at Lori, lying awake looking at me in bed, I feel the tears starting to well up in both our eyes. We don't say anything.

In Bassam's first e-mail to me he mentioned a tradition in which the parents of a newborn child place a date in the baby's mouth, so that its first taste of life is sweet. How far from this we were, four months later, he living in Amman after fleeing Baghdad.

At 7:04, the doorbell rings. It's Zeyad. He comes inside, meets Lori, and we leave. We stop to pick up coffee and we head into the subway. I ask Zeyad about some of the more enjoyable things he's done in the city and I try to sell him on going to a baseball game in the spring. He scowls and shakes his head.

"I hate sports."

We speak about his parents, his brother and family in Iraq, and when we are above ground, walking toward the warehouse, I hear things that his family experienced during the war and ensuing occupation. Events so awful that I am not at liberty to elaborate on here.

Zeyad and I walk three long blocks from the subway until we reach Sahadi Fine Foods' warehouse, located on 42nd Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues in Brooklyn. The brick building is unremarkable, with a chain link fence. But I look at this building, and I think of what is inside. It contains a story that began four months ago. Three years ago. Fifteen years ago. Along the way, Zeyad and I speak about his blog, about how important the Iraqi blogosphere has become. They are plentiful, including Riverbend and Iraq The Model. I have become a daily reader of Zeyad's blog (blogspot.healing.iraq.com). It is everything from a gathering of reports from Iraqi newspapers, to acute in-depth editorials, to more intimate pieces that provide insight into his life and how he is directly affected by events back home. I remember one account in particular, about a former professor whom Zeyad and his other classmates called *arnoob*, meaning rabbit in Arabic, because of the wild hair on the sides of his bald head that used to stand up. The professor had recently been killed in a mortar attack while he slept, the explosive tearing his body in half. "I have only words left for the carnage back home," Zeyad wrote at the end of that entry.

I receive a call while we are walking from my close friend Brian, who knows that the dates are arriving. He wants to be there. I will be glad to have him there. There are already people waiting at the store: a TV crew from ABC television, a thoughtful radio reporter from American Public Media, and a very committed and intelligent writer from cbsnews.com who has followed the story from the first day we opened. This is the media, and they are all good people who came to the story in meaningful ways-- reading the blog accounts here, spending time at the store-- and who will share it with a wider audience. But I feel like I need family there, too. This moment for many reasons has so much behind it. It is impossible to regard it as uneventful, mundane, or business. Other things happened within the frame of

the transaction, and I can't help feeling the empty hurt, the dull pain that accompanies each step I take toward Sahadi's building. Zeyad's been a presence in this project from the second week, and we've developed a friendship. I am so happy he is with me to pick up the dates.

It is 8:30 AM. We enter the building. The same glass door with a rectangular pull handle that is everywhere. I recognize the receptionist. She greets us, and asks why we are there. Out of the corner of my eye, to my left, I see yellow shapes. I turn my head quickly. Two large DHL cartons labeled "MEGA BOX" that are standing one atop the other, with several layers of red "Re-Packed" tape on the tops and sides.

"I think I am here to pick these up," I say.

"Oh," she says. "Well, there they are."

"Is Pat around yet?" I ask.

"Let me check." She calls his extension. "He'll be right down."

I walk over to the boxes. I don't even dare attempt to lift a flap. There is something sacred about them, sitting here in a room with white walls and linoleum floors and drop ceilings.

I call a car service to come pick us up in 15 minutes to bring us to the store.

Five minutes pass, and Pat comes downstairs from the office. We greet each other and I introduce him to Zeyad.

"I just wanted to say thank you," I tell him. "This never would have been possible without you."

"It's no problem," Pat says, with typical modesty and generosity. "It's incredible the amount of work these 10 boxes took. Each time I walk by I just kind of look at those boxes and go 'grrrrr...'"

We speak a bit about the experience of the import, about the way in which Bassam and I came to know one another through the transaction. He concurs with his own experiences and says that commerce makes the world smaller.

"The guy on the other end of the transaction is just like you or me in the business, just trying to make a living through ethical trade. I have a guy in Lebanon, in fact he's on Instant Messenger with me right now upstairs, and we're on usually all day. I see the music he's listening to, there's this option that links to his mp3 player and whoever he is chatting with can see his selections. Sometimes it's music from that region, sometimes it's good jazz or rock, but then other times it's like the worst thing, Britney Spears or something like that. And I'm thinking, 'Really?!?! You actually listen to this?!?!' Even bad music is universal."

The car arrives. Pat and I walk over to the boxes and I ask Zeyad to take a photo of us together.

"Let me help you carry these out to the car," Pat says, as he motions for the driver to pull in closer to the building. Pat takes one box carrying half the cargo of dates, and I take the other. One box fits in the trunk, the other goes in the back seat. While the driver goes inside to use the restroom, Zeyad asks Pat some questions for his own article about the project.

One of the questions focuses on the difficulty of the import. Pat speaks about all the different hurdles it had to pass through before it was released the previous day.

“And this was only 10 boxes. It took almost three weeks to get it released. Normally, that’s our business (Pat points toward a large shipping container that is docked in Sahadi Fine Foods’ loading station, alluding to the amount that normally comes in.) If this had been what was initially ordered back in September, the 200 boxes or one-ton of dates from Iraq, then we’re still waiting for the FDA to release them in February.”

“By then, the dates would have been spoiled,” I add.

We say goodbye. I hug Pat, and I invite him to come by the store sometime during what will surely be its last week. He says he intends to and will try.

Zeyad sits in the back with the box and I in the front, as we begin the ride to the store.

We are stopped at a red light on 4th Avenue and Atlantic Avenue one block from the store. Before we make a left turn, I realize that for quite some time, we’ve been driving behind a big, yellow DHL delivery truck. Funny, I think.

We approach the store. The car pulls right up in front. I pay the driver. The TV crew is there, filming, along with the other journalists. So is Gavin from Creative Time. Good, I think to myself. More family. The entire staff at Creative Time has been so supportive, keeping up with the story from the beginning and signing countless extensions with Atlantic Assets to extend the project’s run in their storefront to accommodate the arrival of the dates. A project like this so often can be seen as just that: a project. But everyone involved with this has gone beyond their professional responsibilities. They have gone up and down in their own emotional responses to the various episodes. When the dates were turned away the second time at the Jordanian border along with countless refugees, Ann Pasternak, the President and Artistic Director of Creative Time wrote me a simple e-mail: “Just tragic. I really am speechless.”

I pick up the box in the back seat and Zeyad grabs the one in the trunk. I silently walk up the steps, balance the box against the door, turn the key in the lock and open the door. The box crosses the threshold. The dates are in my store. Zeyad and I place the two big DHL boxes near the table with the California dates.

“Time to move these away,” I say as we pack up the Barhi, Khedrawi, Zahidi and Halawi types that were the mainstays, from the Jewel Date Company of California. We remove the four boxes from the table, and place them on the shelves in the back.

I open the first yellow box. Everything seems surreal. I see the top of the first box, revealing the design that Al Farez had printed back in September, specifically for this transaction. Two photos on top of a background of fresh dates on palm trees. It is an art history lesson. One photo shows the Ishtar Gate. “Reconstructed,” it says in parentheses. The original stands in Berlin at the Pergamon Museum, excavated from 1902-1914, and finished in the 1930s. Saddam rebuilt it, and began a reconstruction project atop the ruins of ancient Babylon in 1985. An inscription is found on many bricks of the buildings: *“This was built by Saddam Hussein, son of Nebuchadnezzar, to glorify Iraq.”* “Genuine Lion” reads the other caption below a photo of the “Lion of Babylon.” This remains. This is real. This was not “acquired” by some foreign entity or lost. “Babylon Dates of Iraq” the text says in yellow, its Arabic translation right beneath.

I lift out the boxes, one by one. On the side of the first box a white space for text reads “5 Kg,” and the name of the date type, “Ibraheme,” written in blue permanent marker. “Product of Iraq,” it declares, with the Iraqi flag reproduced in color, the calligraphic “Allahu Akbar” written between the three green stars. The flag of Iraq we have all come to know was adopted on January 13, 1991, when a handwritten script version of the current flag first appeared. The handwriting was rumored to be that of Saddam Hussein himself, in an attempt to garner support for Iraq during the buildup of the first Gulf War. Prior to that,

the flag was designed after the Qassim government was overthrown in July of 1963. The three green stars were originally included for a proposed union with Syria and Egypt, which comprised the United Arab Republic. During this time, both of the countries had flags that featured two stars in the middle of a white background with a red band on top and a black band at the bottom (Syria still uses this flag.) Had Iraq joined and the Union remained intact, they all would have featured three stars.

Another failed visionary project.

I announce the names of each box to everyone as I place them on the table. I reach in for the second box. “Kheyara” type dates. These dates were listed in a trade newsletter in Iraq as being the best crop of 2005 and thus the most expensive and sought after.

I reach in for the third box. “Azraq,” the box says. The fourth reads “Ashrase.” I know from the e-mail that Bassam sent prior to shipment that these are the four types. The last one in the box is another of the Ibraheme type. A total of five in this first DHL package.

I open the second package. Another Azraq. Another Ibraheme. Another Kheyara. Another Ashrase. Yet another Azraq. Five in this package. A total of ten.

I guess Bassam was joking about the eleventh box. Lost in translation, I suppose. Or, perhaps, U.S. Customs.

I look at the four boxes sitting on the table. I exhale. The pain in my stomach grows. Everyone thinks I ask myself this all the time, and I never really do, but for the first time, the question enters my mind. “What would my grandfather think?”

He left. He fled. He never went back. None of us ever went back. Here were these dates. In front of me. Covered. From there. From the soil. The soil that is, as Shamooun paraphrased from an Iraqi Communist who was invited to return, *thikra—the memory of the dust of the beloved homeland*.

But whose homeland? I was raised in Great Neck, New York.

My grandmother told stories of Baghdad. Of the city. Of a scorpion in the cellar. I remember vague beauty, vague wonder. It was hard to know up until I was ten years old, when she passed away, that perhaps despair and fear accompanied those stories.

But isn't this what happens when the exile speaks of home?

In one of my first conversations by telephone with Bassam, after he moved his family to Jordan, after he fled, he spoke about Baghdad. About the good things. Punctuated by a long sigh. He then chuckled as he spoke. “Do I sound like your grandfather?”

I open the first box of dates. Ibraheme. Beautiful. Deep red. Like wine. Tiny. Little yellowish-brown circles on the bottom, where the dates are plucked from the stem.

The second box. Kheyara. The skin has gone a little dry, but it looks good. Amber. Huge. About the size of a California Medjool.

I move around to the other side of the table. I open the third box. Ashrase. Torpedo shaped. Hard and dry, like the Zahidi dates are supposed to be. A deep tan.

The final box. Azraq. It is deep, deep blue-purple. Almost black. I will learn later from my friend Suhail that Azraq means “blue” in Arabic. It is unlike any date I've seen, medium in size.

I look at the dates. There are all these people standing around. Two video cameras. Tape recorders. Everyone is quiet. But I wish they would all disappear. I don't know what to do.

What are these dates?

What is my relationship to these dates?

I need to be alone. My heart is racing, and if my stomach hurts any more, I don't know how I won't just curl up in pain. I feel dizzy.

ABC TV moves in to conduct their interview. The reporter, Stephanie, is very kind and sincere. The night before, when arranging the shoot, she told me she was in Iraq for quite some time covering the war and its aftermath. During that night on the phone, she asked me if I ever had an Iraqi date. Not to my knowledge, was my reply.

"Well, I have. And I know how good they are," she said.

She stands next to me. We are at one side of the display table, looking over the Kheyara and Ibraheme date. Perhaps 30 minutes have passed since I unpacked the dates.

She asks two very basic questions, what is the history of the project, why import Iraqi dates. Then comes the third question.

"So, the dates are in front of you now, after their long journey, four months in the making. We notice that you haven't even touched the dates, much less tasted one. What's going on?"

It's not a bad question. In fact, it's a very good one. My hands are on the table, outstretched. I am leaning over the boxes. I try to speak. My throat shuts and the tears well up. Everyone sees what's going on. I am silent. It is a long pause. I look down, trying to regain my composure. I look up. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

Another 30 seconds go by.

"They're not for me," I reply in a choked voice.

"Who are they for?" Stephanie asks.

Indeed, I think. Who are they for?

For people like Shamoan, who has had nothing sweet from his homeland in 45 years. For Hana, whose four young children only know Iraq to be a place where family members perish. For everyone who equates Iraq with bitterness. It is also for every person who has come into my store, with an open or closed mind, and has participated in the construction of meaning around the project.

"For my customers," I offer to Stephanie. "For the people who have come to the shop." It is a store, after all, I think to myself. Perhaps that sounds too simple, but it is all I can manage.

We take a break from the interview and prepare for another segment, where Stephanie requests that I read excerpts from this blog aloud. Before we begin re-shooting, Brian comes over from behind the counter where he was sitting and gives me a hug.

Meanwhile, Gersh Kuntzman, editor of Brooklyn Papers, a local weekly newspaper distributed for free, arrives for "a handshake and a snapshot." He has been following the course of the dates for weeks now,

and when he found out that the dates were being held by various government agencies one week after arrival in the US, he actually called U.S. Customs to inquire what they expected to find in 10 boxes of dates.

A week later, when the dates arrived at Sahadi Fine Foods' warehouse, he sent a photographer down to photograph the boxes awaiting their fate in Pat's office.

Gersh waits patiently for us to finish, along with the reporter for American Public Media and CBSnews.com.

The cameraman asks me if I am going to try a date. Not now, I tell him.

ABC TV finishes their segment with a few shots of me at the computer near the counter.

I pose for a photo for CBS news, and afterward, it is just Zeyad, Gavin, Gersh and myself in the store. Gersh asks Zeyad some questions about the dates of Iraq, and as Zeyad bites into a Kheyara date, he mentions that he does not even like dates, but these are quite good.

"When young people complain about the heat in Baghdad, the older people tell them 'the heat is for the dates,'" he explains, as it is believed that the especially hot weather in Iraq is one of the contributing factors for the unique taste and overall quality of the fruit.

Zeyad turns to me. "Come on. You must try these."

This continues for a bit. It feels right, I feel grounded. An Iraqi egging on a half-Iraqi, in Brooklyn to taste a date from home/there.

I bite into a Kheyara date. Gavin is video-taping the moment, and Gersh snaps several shots. The dry skin crunches as I bite down. My tongue lands on the fleshy part. It is like wind entering my mouth. I taste the sweet. My lips close around the sizable portion of the large date that my teeth have torn off. I feel the pit, and the papery white interior of the core. I chew. I try to divorce any emotion from the moment, for fear that it may contaminate the experience, make it better, more delicious than it actually is.

I remember back in November, when the dates first arrived in the USA, telling someone close to the project that I was really curious about how these dates would taste, wondering how different they would be after all this time and with such a reputation.

"They're going to taste like every other date you've ever had in your life," this person told me.

The taste *is* different. It is not syrupy or sticky or too sweet. There is a complexity in the taste and texture. The crumbling of the skin, like dough encasing the flesh, the nutty flavor that lingers almost aromatically in the mouth while chewing.

"It *is* different," I say while chewing. "It really is."

But I cannot go beyond that one Kheyara date. I can't bring myself to have any more than one. I make a deal with myself to try each type once before the store closes on Sunday 10 December.

Gersh and Gavin leave, and Zeyad stays. We step out briefly and visit the neighboring travel agency, that also functions as an Arabic/English translation service. I ask them to print up a sign reading in both English and Arabic "IRAQI DATES HAVE ARRIVED." The owner looks up, smiles, and says, *mabrouk*—congratulations in Arabic—as he, like all my neighbors, had been following the saga.

We return to the store. I place the sign in the window as Zeyad directs me from the outside, making sure it is straight and in the center of the window. We then both start working at our laptops, he continuing to write his article about the project, and I composing an e-mail to the list of people who reserved an order of dates. Once finished, it is about 1:30 PM. We are both very hungry, after having only coffee in the morning and a date each. We go to Sabaa, a no-nonsense take-out or eat-in restaurant that serves perhaps the best Middle Eastern cuisine I have had in the area. Their set-up is simple: trays of food, warmed throughout the day behind glass, and lamb cooking on a spit for the popular shawarma that you can get served through their front window. Customers point to what they want, and the servers pile it generously on plates or take-away trays. Zeyad and I both decide on the lamb shank in tomato sauce with cooked vegetables.

“With some extra *muruk*, please,” Zeyad requests.

“What did you say?” I ask.

“Extra sauce. The stew that the lamb is cooking in. *Muruk*.”

“Muruk!” I say excitedly. All my life, my mother has made a dish called muruk that consists of boiled chicken in a tomato broth with chickpeas and onions. It is like a stew served over rice. We eat it on Yom Kippur strategically, as it tends to make one thirsty and thus drink more. The hardest thing about the Yom Kippur fast, according to my mother, is not so much that eating is forbidden but so is drinking. This way, we load up the night before on liquids.

I explain all this to Zeyad, who smiles and explains that in Iraqi Arabic, it simply denotes any kind of sauce or stew.

We go back to the store with our meals and eat lunch. Zeyad tells me about a film called “Forget Baghdad” that was made about Iraqi Jews living in Israel who have retained all their customs from Iraq and continue to speak the Iraqi Jewish dialect in their neighborhood, sometimes referred to as Little Baghdad.

Elizabeth, a journalist who writes for the New York Times Magazine and has served as a correspondent in Iraq comes to the store. She and Zeyad speak about a panel on which they both had participated earlier in the fall and talk about a mutual friend from Iraq, who is also a journalist and apparently makes the best Iraqi tea.

In the later afternoon, more and more people start to show up, some of whom have received the e-mail announcing the arrival of the dates. A man named Josh, who two weeks ago visited the store with his son and considers himself a bit of a date aficionado, comes to fulfill his order, and I explain to him that due to the fact that only 10 boxes arrived, we are rationing each purchase to four ounces per person and the price reflects the cost of the shipping (1500 USD) with zero profit gained. So, we sell at 8.00 USD per quarter pound.

“That’s fine. I’ll take a mixture to sample each type.”

I fill a bag with approximately 16 dates. The different sizes and colors look beautiful together.

On his earlier visit, he spoke about his identity as a Jewish American with Sephardic roots. He traveled around the Middle East in the 1970s, and refused to let his religion prohibit his desire to visit places from Jordan to Morocco. Josh asks me until when we will be keeping the store open, now that our shipment has arrived and the assured quick speed of sales, given our low quantity and high demand. I tell him our last scheduled day of business will most likely be Sunday, 10 December.

“It’s going to be sad,” Josh says. “It’s only been 10 weeks, but you’ve become a bit of an institution on this block. ‘The date store.’ People in the neighborhood are talking about this place. I learned a lot here. I’ll miss you.”

Josh’s reaction to our imminent closing of shop makes me think of the many times I witnessed a good neighborhood shop close its doors to business, whatever the reason may be. Experiencing it from the other side makes me ask myself the question I have asked again and again in my mind: how would it be to keep this open, quit my job as a university professor, and take this on full-time? Mindful, of course, of the fact that the store is a cultural project that, by the very nature of its funding and presentation can only be temporary, and also by the fact that a recent count of monies in the cash box reveals that no profit has or really could be made by a shop devoted solely to the sale of five products (items like the veiled date syrup of Iraqi origin, but labeled as Product of Lebanon) plus the rare Iraqi date.

But throughout this project, the constant dialogue with visitors to my store, including the discussions and developing friendship with Pat at Sahadi’s, and my growing relationship with Bassam, has served as an important element of my life for the past four months.

Cindy Carr, a New York City-based journalist has been following the project since June and arrives to finally sample and purchase the newly arrived dates. All along, she has been coming every couple of weeks to the store, buying the California types that we have carried since the store opened. According to her, not only were we offering types that other stores were not selling—most stores stocked the common Medjool or Deglet Noor, while we offered the Barhi, Halawi, Khedrawi and Zahidi that were grown from Iraqi seed in California—but we also had the best prices in town.

Cindy and I speak about the latest happenings in the story of the dates’ arrival, bridging from the initial shipment’s demise in Damascus, to the new shipment’s detention at the hands of US Customs and other government agencies like the USFDA, and how the only way to make this transaction possible in the first place was to use cultural money, in the form of a grant that supported the project.

“The one-ton shipment cost 7,000 USD. That shipment is no more,” I tell Cindy. “The 10 boxes that made it through cost an additional 1500 USD. So all in all, 8500 USD yielded only 10 boxes of Iraqi dates. Or, more accurately, 50 kg. No business-person in their right mind would put forward that kind of money. Like Charlie Sahadi told me in August, it’s bad business. But maybe it’s really good art.”

Cindy, looking down at the correspondence between myself and Atheer displayed on the counter nods her head in disbelief.

A steady stream of people come to the store as the evening begins, as people arrive home from work. Omar, the young Egyptian man who was working to export white American paint to Iraq with his friend from Kurdistan, Ibrahim, walks excitedly into the store. He rushes over to the boxes and exclaims, “You got them! You really got them, finally!”

Omar bites into a purple-black Azraq date, and chews studiously, as if sampling a French cheese. “Mmm...Ibrahim is going to be so happy they came in. I will buy for both of us.”

As he is paying, Omar exclaims, “Oh! Did you hear? Remember the shipment of 10 tons of Zahidi dates that Ibrahim wanted to export from Sulaymaniya (northern Iraq) to Santo Domingo? Well, he sold them!”

I ask, “So, he managed to export them to the Dominican Republic?”

“No!” Omar replies, laughing. “That’s what’s so funny. Zahidi dates become more valuable the drier they get. So, while waiting for the shipment, they got drier and drier. Demand was so great for them in Iraq, that he ended up just selling them back to Iraq. He made a good profit!”

“Wow!” I am amazed.

“Yeah!” says Omar. “He made three hundred dollars!”

That’s quite a lot of money in Iraq, Omar explains.

A man named Chuck returns to the store. On an earlier visit, he placed an order for the Iraqi dates, hoping to send some to a friend stationed in Iraq, who had apparently not ventured beyond the canteen or tried anything other than the food they served.

“I got the e-mail and came over right after work,” he says. He fills two bags.

A journalist for an online political blog arrives at the store to interview me. It is the end of the day, and Brian has returned. I sit casually with him and Zeyad, all of us reflecting on the day’s events. Cynthia, the journalist, asks about some of the stories that came out of the project. As I tell her about the car bombing in Hilla back in November, and the reply I received from Bassam, that everyone working at the date groves were fine, but in fact a worker had been killed some weeks after in a kidnapping. Zeyad adds that this has become a very normal language of events in Iraq.

“It happens all the time,” he says. “In Baghdad, when you call to make sure that someone is OK after a certain attack or something of the sort, you’ll hear that. ‘Oh, they survived that but a stray bullet killed him on his way home from work two weeks later.’”

Echoing Hana’s words to me weeks earlier, Zeyad adds, “Over there, the saying goes that yesterday is always better than today.”

At 7:00 PM, I close the store after an intense and emotional day. I am exhausted. Zeyad, who has been awake since 5:30 AM, goes back uptown to his apartment. Brian and I go out for dinner not far from the store, to a Peruvian restaurant in Boerum Hill.

We agree to make it an early night. Tomorrow is going to be another working day, after all.

Wednesday, 12/7/06- A woman comes into the store in the late afternoon.

“I’ve been reading your blog. It’s very moving,” she says. She walks around the store and reads the different descriptions of the date syrup and samples some of the dates.

“You must be getting a ton of press,” she says. “Has there been a lot of television coverage?”

Some, I tell her. The most recent being ABC Television for their World News Report.

“I work in television,” she tells me. “I’m a Senior Location Researcher for the Colbert Report. I wanted to pitch you and this store for an interview on one of Stephen’s upcoming shows.”

For those of you who do not know, the Colbert Report is a satirical half hour “news” program on Comedy Central, a US-based cable channel, that airs late at night, Mondays through Fridays. The show began as

an offshoot of the incredibly popular Daily Show with Jon Stewart. The actor and comedian Stephen Colbert portrays a right-wing political commentator similar to those featured prominently on Fox News, and divides his show in two or three distinct sections, the first part of which focuses on his editorializing of the day's political events. The latter portion of the show features him interviewing guests while in character, his questions somewhat brilliantly managing to ask meaningful questions of guests ranging from Deepak Chopra to Bill O'Reilly while at the same time maintaining a hard-lined right-wing sensibility that is so extreme, it points out the hilarious absurdities (and naiveties) of this particular program of reportage or commentary.

As a fan of the show, I am flattered to be considered. Colbert is also a Northwestern University alumnus, so the connection is even more interesting for me.

"How much longer will you keep the store open?" I tell her that as of this moment, the plan is to keep it open until Sunday, 10 December.

"Oh, that's too bad, because we break for the holidays at the end of next week, and we are not back until mid-January. I don't think I could pitch it and have it happen until then."

I explain that the building is being renovated in January and that the store will effectively close once the last Iraqi date is sold. I thank her for the interest, but wonder how something like this could be made to comply with the show's sense of humor.

"Oh, we've made fun of sadder things," she says. She hands me her business card, printed with the show's logo. It's one of the coolest press inquiries I've ever gotten.

She says that she is from Port Washington, Long Island— a town very close to Great Neck where I grew up. She mentions a Middle Eastern grocery located there that I should contact as a potential partner for future imports of the Iraqi dates.

Thursday, 12/7/06- I leave the apartment in the morning, and head toward the subway to commute to the store in Brooklyn. Walking toward the West 4th Street station, I feel melancholic, knowing that in all likelihood, these are my last days operating the store. I know it's only been 9 weeks since the store opened, yet I can't imagine not keeping shop past Sunday: it's become such a huge part of my life. How much I want to keep having conversations with my customers. How much I want to arrange for more shipments of the dates to be imported into the United States. But with whom? My shoulders hunched, and walking slowly, I recall Pat's cautious words about the additional seventy-five boxes of dates that Al-Farez offered to ship after the initial 10 made it through and we had time to sample them and determine if we liked some better than others. In the store, I had already set aside about one pound of each type of date to bring back to Chicago with me in order to distribute samples to importers based in Cicero and others in Dearborn, Michigan, home to a huge Iraqi population.

Just before descending the steps to the Brooklyn-bound "A" train, I check my e-mail on my PDA. I receive the following message.

Dear Mr. Rakowitz,

I read with fascination this morning the tale on CBSNew's website http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/12/05/national/main2231675_page2.shtml of your attempt to import a ton of Iraqi dates. It reminded me of my own disappointment when Iranian pistachio nuts were no longer available after they seized our embassy.

I understand completely your motivation for attempting this project. How sad that money and power delayed the dates' arrival for so long. How inspiring that you were able to succeed at all!

Since you're going to try it again, I'm wondering if Bill Penzey might have some suggestions for you. Bill, of course, is the boss at Penzey's spices and he looks at food the same way you do...as an art form, something to be shared with one's fellow man and a way of communicating across cultures. I know you have Pat Whelan's help but maybe there's someone in Bill's network who has a suggestion.

We desperately need even some small semblance of normal relationships with Iraq. Good luck with your endeavors.

R.G.
Camanche, Iowa

My heart racing, I run down to catch the train. I feel inspired and hopeful. I realize that Christine's article must have been published on the CBS News website. When Christine first mentioned her interest in writing an article about the store, she told me that the readership on the website was large and diverse, throughout the United States and internationally as well. Christine had been carefully and thoughtfully following the store from the week it opened, and witnessed the moment the dates crossed the threshold and entered my store.

Arriving at the store a half-hour before my official hours of operation are to begin, I take out my laptop and, logging onto the open wireless signal that I had been parasiting off of since the beginning of October (thank you "linksys" at 529 Atlantic Avenue, whoever you are), I direct my web browser to cbsnews.com, where I find the article listed prominently on the main page. Right underneath the headline "It's Bad in Iraq," a quote attributed to George W. Bush for an article focusing on the findings of the newly released report by the Iraq Study Group, is another headline: "How To Get A Date—From Iraq."

Since the beginning of the project, it seems every journalist or writer reporting on the project has had some fun with the inevitable puns one can draw from the double entendre of the word "date." There were a few of them out there: "A Date With History"; "A Date To Remember"; even "Date With A Nut" and "Save The Date" were proposed but thankfully never accepted by their editors.

Christine's article is one of the most complete and generous documentations of the project's run. While emphasizing the poetry and symbolism in the work, her writing also brings it into the real world, contacting regular customers like Ibrahim, and speaking with Pat at Sahadi's about their perception of the transaction as both a statement and a viable business opportunity. In a nutshell, her article effectively conveys the interventionist nature of my work in the public sphere, complicating where the "art" and "real" intersect, collide or harmonize. The comments in the feedback section for the article reflect this problematization: "Well, at least somebody got something out of that hell-hole;" "This guy should be arrested"; "A beautiful story about a new beginning."

Soon after the story runs, I receive a call from a producer of CBS Evening News, anchored by Katie Couric inquiring about the store and asking for more information for a potential national story. It's hard to know how to feel about this, as I understand the importance of broadcast and the necessary vehicle for critical ideas that the press can become. But there always seems to be something consumable and too easily disposable about stories on the evening news and the thought of the project being understood as a curious snippet when in fact it has enlisted the voices and emotions of countless people here in the US and in Iraq makes me uncomfortable. Still, I leave the door open and answer the queries. The initial

request for information never comes to fruition. I probably would have willingly cooperated, but it seems the release of the Iraq Study Group Report rightfully preempts this type of coverage.

Friday 12/8/2006- I wake up early in the morning and make a call using Skype to Bassam in Amman. He picks up the phone and with much anticipation and excitement asks how the dates tasted. I tell him they are the best I've ever had, and that the customers who have had tried them echoed my sentiments. I tell him about Pat's positive reaction to the taste, reported to me via Christine at CBSnews, who said he was really a fan of the smaller Ibraheme dates. I also tell him about the obvious problems that arose with the shipment on the US side. Bassam is not surprised and jokes that maybe the US thinks the "weapons of mass destruction are in the dates."

I tell Bassam about some of the requests from the press who wish to speak with him about this transaction. He declines the requests and tells me that reprisal attacks have taken place in his old neighborhood in Baghdad. Just to be safe, he asks me to change his name on this blog to that of a pseudonym, to protect him and his family. We decide to also change the names of the other employees at the company.

Before getting off the phone, I tell Bassam how happy the customers have been to receive the dates and how much they love the taste. Delighted, he asks me to take pictures of the customers who purchase them to send to him and the company via e-mail.

I immediately think back to the first weeks of this transaction. In early September, as the dates were ripening in Hilla, Iraq, I would wake each morning to find an email from Bassam with a message saying "these are how your dates are doing today" and a photo taken by the farmer, who would climb one of the palms daily and document the ripening process.

I think back to the pictures of the box, when it came back from the printer. They were so excited about it that Bassam set the box up in all these different situations. On a table. On a chair. Open. Closed.

I remember the series of photos of the date farmers climbing the trees, cutting down the dates, the women sorting the dates, the dates being packed, the farmer's 4-year old son holding up one of the boxes. The two hundred boxes stacked in a warehouse in Baghdad, before their ill-fated journey.

Then, the pictures from the Damascus airport. The skin peeling off the spoiled dates.

This book-ended the project beautifully. The storefront, after all, was about a transaction. Titled "Return," the original proposal asked what return—financial or existential—could be yielded.

Return proved impossible. For my grandfather. For my mother.

For Bassam.

And, for millions of others.

But the project succeeded in furthering the notion of exchange.

With each purchase, I would ask customers to pose with their dates, holding up the brown paper Davisons & Co. bag filled with the fruit. Now, it was Bassam who would have images accompanying a message each morning. "These are how your dates are doing today."

Bassam would later comment that he was surprised and touched by the pictures.

"Most of them are Americans," he said. Americans standing proudly.

Holding tiny bags of Iraqi dates.

This was a portrait of my country I could get behind, I thought.

Saturday, 12/9/06- My first customer today is a large, old man, perhaps in his eighties.

The door slams open in the store, startling me. "Hello?" he yells. "Hello," I answer.

"Heard ya got 'em," he says in a thick Brooklyn accent.

"Yes, there they are," I say, directing him toward the dates.

He looks at the Ashrase and Kheyara dates, which are supposed to be consumed as a dry date.

"Whoa! These are all dried up!" He continues to yell. "These look like shit!"

"Well, they're supposed to be drier, it affects the texture and the taste," I explain.

"Yea, bullshit!" he answers.

I try to further explain this concept, along the lines of how certain wines are a little drier. Or how certain cheeses have soft textures or sharp, dry textures. He's not buying it.

"How much are you selling these for?" he asks. I tell him, \$8.00 per quarter pound.

"Are you fucking kidding me!?!? You'll never make a living selling this! HA!"

He nods his head back and forth, looking incredulously at the dates.

"When you come to your senses and drop your prices, I'll come back. You couldn't pay me to take these."

He leaves in the same way he came in. Loudly.

Sunday, 12/10/ 2006- This is officially the last day that the store is listed as doing business. Throughout the day, customers flock to the store, eager to try the much-awaited fruit that had now interrogated and scandalized every government agency from Baghdad to Damascus to New York.

A fruit that asked questions.

The store on this last day functions as a real gathering space. At one point, close to 30 people are in the store, engaging one another and having conversations. The volume of purchases is high, and so my wife Lori has jumped behind the counter to help make the transactions go quicker.

In the midst of all this, I check my e-mail. The subject heading on the message reads "Regarding your dates from Iraq story on Weekend America NPR." A seven-minute radio report on the store by Amanda Aronczyk has just aired.

Sir I heard the story about your attempt to import dates from Iraq.

The part about the box design for containing the dates was beautiful. Since you have these unused containers could I buy one from you?

I am rooting for the people of Iraq and feel that importing would empower them but I also realize the frustrations of this endeavor.

Life struggles and ups and downs if medical, income, social or geographical is something I am drawn to and feel kindred to.

I feel your effort a success because you tried and someone will try again in the future after hearing your story.

I feel just the purchase of the empty box is commemorative of human success in diversity.

M.G.

Omaha, NE

In the afternoon, Pat Whelan arrives. He compliments me on the store. "I love the signage," he says. "That picture of you in the window is funny!"

He asks me about the large timeline, detailing the ancient and modern history of the date and the date palm. "It would look great in Sahadi's down the road, but we have no wall space whatsoever." I know what he means. Sahadi's is incredible. Floor to ceiling, it is packed with olives, nuts, seeds, spices, olive oils, sweets, cheeses, breads, etc.

Before he leaves he says, "When the holidays die down, give me a call. Maybe in January. We'll talk about whether or not we can bring in the extra 75 boxes."

In the evening, just before the store closes, Shamoan Salih returns for his taste of *thikra*. He looks at the boxes, smiling slightly and nodding, assessing the four different varieties.

He slowly puts his first date in his mouth, closes his eyes, smiles, and softly says, "This is 46 years in the making."

I think back to Tuesday, when the dates finally arrived. Answering the reporter Stephanie Sy's question as to why I could not taste one of the dates, I said, "they're not for me."

"Who are they for?" she asked.

I had my answer.

Epilogue

Although December 10, 2006 was advertised as the last day of business for the store, I managed to keep it open until December 22nd. Those remaining 12 days saw a steady flow of people, and Davisons & Co. participated officially in the last-minute holiday season shopping rush.

Finally, I typed up one last message to post in the window. Sold out of Iraqi dates, I took down the sign stating “Iraqi dates have arrived!” I replaced it with the following.

To our valued customers,

After three months of intense and inspiring interaction with all of you, and the arrival of 10 boxes of Iraqi dates, we are closing our doors—for now but not forever. Look for Davisons & Co. to reopen permanently in Chicago in the future, along with the first Iraqi restaurant in the city, Enemy Kitchen.

We thank all of you for your support and interest, and we wish you all a peaceful and happy 2007.

Sincerely,

Davisons & Co.