



Otto Pohl for the International Herald Tribune

Abdelhadi Abdelhasoon, 62, wheeling a refrigerator through the check-in line at Port Rashid in Dubai before he traveled, with hundreds of others, by ferry to Iraq.

Dubai-Iraq ferry sails on a tide of wonder

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By Otto Pohl

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates: The passengers begin arriving around 3 p.m. for the evening ferry to Iraq. They bring refrigerators, bicycles and satellite dishes, piled high on oversize luggage carts.

For many, the journey will be a long-awaited opportunity to see a land they fled long ago.

"We haven't been back in Iraq for five years," said Muhammad Anjad, sitting in the front row of the waiting room at the Dubai terminal on a recent afternoon. He and his wife, Zdia Fouad, both barbers, were forced to abandon their shop in Baghdad and flee their homeland.

"I have no idea what we will find," he said. They did not know, they said, whether their shop was still standing.

The ferry, which runs between the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, is no ordinary transportation service. Launched in 1998, it was for many years one of the few points of international contact for a country choked from within by Saddam Hussein and from without by a United Nations embargo.

These days, Iraqis traveling outside the country in rising numbers are joined by expatriates visiting or returning to their homeland.

Some passengers arrive at Port Rashid in Dubai with truckloads of items, while others have little more than carry-on luggage. But everyone is freighted with opinions about the ferry's war-torn destination.

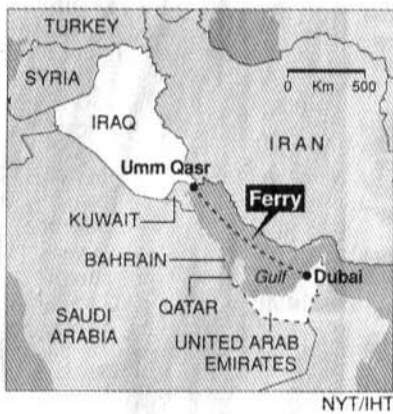
An Iraqi imam, Nasser al Sultan, who was seeing a friend off recently, insisted that he would not set foot on the ferry himself.

"There is no guarantee of life in my country," he said.

"Everyone is still afraid," said Majid al Sadun, an Iraqi doctor in a traditional white robe who overheard Sultan's comment. "Saddam Hussein killed 8,000 people."

That set the room buzzing.

"Eight thousand?" a man called out from a few rows over. "More like three



million!"

"Where do you get three million from?" the doctor retorted. He turned to an American visitor. "The regime of Saddam is finished. Now the problem is America."

Other passengers began arguing with the doctor, and then with each other.

Sultan pulled a visitor away from the commotion. "This guy is a Shia," he said, gesturing back toward the doctor. "I'm afraid to go back because I might be killed because I'm a Sunni."

The ferry service by Naif Marine Services began in November 1998 and quickly became an international lifeline for thousands of Iraqis.

Despite the turbulence in Iraq, the ferry stopped running only once, for two months, during the American-led bombing campaign in 2003.

Mindful of security in the volatile region, the ferry's Web site reminds passengers that "ammunition, military cargo, weapons of mass destructions, etc." are prohibited onboard.

Naif, based in Dubai, began offering the ferry service with small vessels but replaced them a few years ago with two modern, 130-meter, or 425-foot, ships with three classes of passenger cabins. The ferry can hold 1,100 passengers and 300 cars.

Limited plane service is now available to Baghdad, and some Iraqis make the long, often dangerous drive to neigh-

boring countries. But the ferry remains one of the few ways in and out of Iraq, and is probably still the most reliable.

It is also probably the cheapest. A round-trip ticket for the 36-hour journey costs 660 dirhams, or \$180.

The ferry carries 200 to 400 passengers a week in low season and is often at capacity on Shiite religious holidays, said the company's commercial director, Essa Bin Hadher.

Holiday business used to bring as many as 5,000 passengers a week, he said, but the difficulty of getting visas these days has slashed the number of non-Iraqi Shiites, like Bahrainis or Saudis, who are able to visit holy sites in Iraq.

Passengers are now almost exclusively Iraqis. They used to arrive at the Umm Qasr port from all over Iraq, when domestic flights were plentiful and roads were safe. Now, the security situation is so dire that Naif allows passengers to remain on board an extra night if the ship docks too late for the passengers to reach their destinations during daylight hours.

More and more Iraqi entrepreneurs use the ferry for foreign shopping. Muhammad Ali Jaber, 38, arrived at the Dubai ferry terminal with cardboard boxes filled with \$20,000 worth of computer parts.

"Many shopkeepers are asking me for this hardware," he said.

It was his first trip from Iraq, so he was not sure whether he would make money. "If I sell all this I will come again in a week," he said.

Another Iraqi had bought \$8,000 worth of satellite dishes in Dubai. He was taking it back to Basra to provide Internet service.

Layth Alkazzaz, 32, a portly, unemployed Iraqi civil engineer, uses the ferry for export purposes. On a recent afternoon he was returning to the ferry after selling a traditional Iraqi musical instrument, the aoud, which he makes in a small shop in Baghdad.

He and an assistant make four or five a month and sell them in Dubai for \$300 to \$500 each.

"My main market was Baghdad, but after the war this stopped," he said. "Nobody is interested in music there now."

Some passengers travel only with their anger.

"America came to Iraq to kill my people and damage my country," Amel al Tamimi told a visitor, her brown eyes burning with indignation. Her son, Abdul Aziz, 4, stood by her feet, hugging a can of sour-cream-and-onion Pringles.

"Does America have any feelings for the people in Iraq?" she said. "When they attacked, they cut our hearts."

Others were less allegorical. "I will kill you both," a man hissed at the visitor and his translator. Another man simply pulled up his pant legs, accusingly, to show the deep scars on his legs.

Most passengers, however, expressed anger only at the continuing unrest in Iraq.

Abbas Al Jiburi, a manager at Naif Marine who was sending three crates of gifts to his family in Iraq, spoke of his homeland in halting but eloquent English. "All damage, only dust and bomb and gun," he said. "No have stability, no have security, no have nothing."

He was a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Baghdad until he was forced to flee 10 years ago after refusing to join the Baath Party. He now works to support his wife and four children from a distance.

"My family very bad," he said. "I give them life to continue."

He has been able to visit them only once since he left.

As the check-in counter opened and the passengers filtered past customs toward the boarding area, quiet settled over the room. The imam watched the last of the passengers disappear.

"I wouldn't even go back even if there was security," he confided. "Iraq is always a problem."

Would he ever want to make the journey home? He shook his head.

"Never, never, inshallah, never," he said.