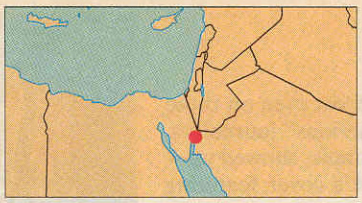
SCENE

The Gulf of Aqaba



Back from Behind Enemy Lines

After five months in Iraqi jails, an Egyptian migrant worker makes the slow journey home to his country

By DALTON CLARK CONLEY

Four ships are docked at the port of Aqaba in Jordan, but no one needs a sign to tell which one is about to head across the Red Sea to Nuweiba, Egypt. A line of cars leads down the pier into the belly of a huge ferry, the *Nour*. Pedestrians, their belongings slung over their shoulders, weave among the automobiles and clamber up the loading ramps. Pursers yank tickets from the passengers who are squeezing through narrow passageways; passports are thrown into a pile on a rickety desk. Some passengers complain about the lack of discipline and order, but Mohammed, an Egyptian migrant worker returning from Iraq, merely grins. "I love chaos," he says. "This is what I missed."

Like thousands of other Egyptians in Iraq, Mohammed, who had worked in a bank in Karbala, was imprisoned in Baghdad for the duration of the gulf war. When he was released he attempted to retrieve his confiscated passport and was once more detained, apparently as part of Iraqi revenge for Egypt's siding with the anti–Saddam Hussein coalition. During five months of detention, Mohammed and other Arab civilians were shuttled from jail to jail—a systematic game of musical cells played by the Iraqis to evade U.N. inspectors. Now, finally, Mohammed is headed home.

He climbs up to the next deck, which houses the ship's restaurant. Men wearing *'ama'im,* the white turbans of Upper Egypt and Sudan, sit cross-legged on tables, eating rice and lamb. Mohammed is famished, but does not linger. He has just enough money to get home—an allowance provided by Egyptian officials in Jordan, which he finally reached on foot after the Iraqis dumped him 10 km from the border. Instead, he ascends farther, into the harsh sun of the open deck. Some passengers sit on metal stumps to which plastic seats were once riveted. Others lie on the floor, swatting away flies. A few passengers are perched on barrels containing life rafts. In case of an emergency, the gear may not be of much help: the instructions are in Italian and English, not Arabic.

Mohammed has arrived late; many of the passengers have been aboard since early morning. With no place to sit, he slouches against the railing, seemingly hypnotized by the lap of water against hull. Around him the mood is upbeat, almost festive. Most of the returnees have not seen their families since the gulf crisis erupted a year ago. Some kneel in prayer, facing southeastward across the waters to Mecca. Others chat about the jobs they have left behind. One man hands Mohammed a cigarette and asks him if he is returning from work in Saudi Arabia. "No, not Saudi," says Mohammed, pressing his wrists together as if they were manacled. "Oh," the other nods, "Iraq."

The workers coming back from Saudi Arabia are loaded with gifts—mostly appliances and duty-free cigarettes. An accountant who has been working in Jidda says business was so good that he had to force himself to leave to spend some time with his family in Egypt. He shows off the gifts he is taking home: Japanese toasters, blenders, a microwave oven.

Mohammed has but one present for his mother: his life. "I am sure she has given me up for dead," he says. He hopes she will not be too shocked when she sees him—pale skin, scraggly beard, worn gray clothing. He has been dreaming about the homecoming for months. He says that thousands of Egyptians remain in Iraqi prisons, that he and others would still be there had Saddam not decided it was in Baghdad's interest to gain Egypt's support for easing international sanctions against Iraq.

Apart from the ticket home, Mohammed will get no compensation for his suffering. Yet when asked if he wishes Egypt had not gone to war against Iraq, he responds firmly, "No, the Kuwaiti people are a good Arab people. They needed our help." He pauses and, turning away from the sea, adds, "Actually, the Iraqi people are a good people too. They want Saddam gone." Would he ever return to a post-Saddam Iraq? Mohammed pulls out his passport and opens it to the Iraqi exit stamp, a jagged-edged circle indicating that he was deported. "Even without this," he says, as he snaps the green booklet shut, "I'll never go back."

At last, the *Nour* moves out into the Gulf of Aqaba. Sitting on the starboard side, Mohammed shields his face from the sun and points to Elat, the Israeli port clearly visible 5 km across the water. Since the *Nour* cannot cross Israeli waters, it must detour along the eastern edge of the gulf. Despite his isolation in Iraq, news of the wider world has reached Mohammed, and he is intrigued by what he has heard about Middle East peace talks. He runs his hand through his hair. "Soon," he says, "soon there will be peace. We Egyptians are tired of wars—Yemen, Iraq, Israel. Soon we will be able to walk across Palestine."

It's 8 p.m. when the ship pulls into Nuweiba. It has been a long day. Everyone surges toward the exits. Then port officials announce another delay: all arrivals must be checked against a blacklist of criminals and other unwelcome travelers. No one is exempt, though eventually everyone will be allowed ashore. In no hurry, Mohammed lights a cigarette. "I am here," he says. "I am home." ■

BILL LYONS—REA—SABA

Passengers endure the midday sun, waiting for the ferry to pull out of Jordan

"I am sure she has given me up for dead."