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INK; Dates With an Artist: An Iraq Installation

By KAREEM FAHIM

AN empty storefront on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn was filled with dates last week, and thus transformed into a place for reflecting on commerce, art, politics and Iraq.

The dates grow on palm trees and were brought to the storefront by Michael Rakowitz, an artist who also runs Davisons & Company, an import/export business. The store is an art installation and will be open only till the end of October. It sells four varieties of dates, all from California and available for purchase at \$8 for a large bag. Date cookies and date molasses, along with other items, are also sold.

In the long run, the dates, whether they are repackaged in Lebanon or harvested in the United States, all started out (or their ancestors did) as seeds in Iraq.

Mr. Rakowitz, whose store sits next to a travel agency specializing in flights to the Middle East, also ships items to Iraq free, an offer that several people have taken him up on.

"I wanted to sit in a place where dialogue would be available," Mr. Rakowitz, 32, said on a recent afternoon, wearing a dark suit and looking very much like a store's proprietor. Imagining a place where the families of American soldiers might interact with Iraqi Americans, for example, Mr. Rakowitz revived Davisons & Company, his grandfather's real commercial business, which closed in New York in the 1960's.

His grandfather, an Iraqi Jew, was exiled from Iraq in 1946, and eventually settled in Great Neck on Long Island, Mr. Rakowitz said.

The white walls of the store, at 529 Atlantic Avenue, include a mounted invoice for one ton of coveted Iraqi dates. That shipment, which Mr. Rakowitz ordered after finding the supplier, is presently stuck at the Iraq-Jordan border with other traffic headed out of the country. On the opposite wall, a history of dates, printed in Arabic and English, is also a history of the Iraqi people.

California dates came from Iraqi seeds, the wall says. And decades of war with both Iran and the United States decimated the date industry. At the end of the long timeline, a saying is printed: "A house with a date palm will never starve."