

# Importing Iraq

Brooklyn art project uses dates to highlight country's history

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## DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN

Michael Rakowitz is expecting a shipment of dates he's importing from Iraq to arrive on Oct. 10. He believes it's the first time dates with the label "Product of Iraq" will be sold here in more than 25 years.

Though he will sell them at his temporary storefront — Davisons & Co. at 529 Atlantic Ave. — for roughly \$8 a box, this is no ordinary business venture.

It's a public art project the Northwestern University professor of art theory is staging this month. The dates are a visual representation of Iraq's past and the store display is a way to connect them to Iraq's war-torn present.

"People don't even know that you can now import from Iraq. The sanctions were lifted in 2003 quietly. But the shipping is exorbitant," Rakowitz said, adding there may be delays as the dates pass through security checks. "It's an experiment. This is where the art comes in. The red tape is a lot of the process. The dates are a surrogate for a larger story. Though I would like in that poetic framework for something practical to come out of it."

**MICHAEL RAKOWITZ'S** grandfather opened the original import/export Davisons & Co. in Midtown when the Iraqi Jewish family was exiled in 1946 and ran it until 1963. His storefront project at 529 Atlantic Ave. grew out of "Who Cares," a project by arts nonprofit Creative Time that brought together 37 artists, curators and scholars to discuss how artists are thinking about art and social action today.

## An earlier date

- For Rakowitz's opening day on Sunday, he offered dates from California that had an Iraqi past: seeds from Iraq that had been brought to Mecca, Calif., in 1911 helped spawn an industry on the West Coast. Rakowitz includes these details in the storefront's displays highlighting the once-prosperous Iraqi date industry.

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## Making the connection

Rakowitz — whose project is sponsored by public arts group Creative Time and who formed a partnership with Atlantic Avenue shop Sahadi Fine Foods to import and sell the dates — is paying \$3,400 for the dates and \$3,000 for the shipping.

He will also provide free shipping of goods to Iraq —

for the Iraqi diaspora and for families with military personnel stationed there — to connect both sides of the conflict.

"There used to be 30 million date palms in Iraq before the Iran/Iraq war," Rakowitz said. "At the end of the Gulf War, there were 3 million date trees left. The trees in Basra were

Importing goods from Iraq is expensive and the date industry — the provider of Iraq's once-prized export — continues to suffer because many Iraqi dates are sent to other countries to be packaged and labeled, cutting profits for Iraqi companies.

infected by [a bacteria] from depleted uranium. People said the fields looked like a Star Wars landscape."

## Family ties

The connections Rakowitz made with people in the date company have also become part of the project, with e-mail exchanges posted for visitors.

He received a scare when the company's general manager, Atheer Al Azawi, was out of contact for several days. It turned out he was moving his family to Jordan, but Al Azawi remained committed to the project.

"I think it is in your genes and you get it from your mother's family coz [sic] all Iraqi people have dates in their genes," Al Azawi wrote to Rakowitz. "It is traditional to put a date in the mouth of the baby after his birth, so it is the first food that the Iraqi people test [sic] in their wonderful life."



MICHAEL RAKOWITZ'S grandfather opened the original