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## **Kuwaitis' night out: Eat, drink, be wary**

Men retreat in desert tradition to unwind, discuss world's woes

By JIM LANDERS  
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NUWAISEEB, Kuwait – The cool breath of the sea winds sweeps the campsite, and Walid puts another log on the fire. After sunset, as the green and white fluorescents flicker along the fence line, Monther and Sultan and Rashed and the others will come.

They will shed their shoes outside the large tent floored with old Persian carpets, sing out, "Peace be with you all!" to their friends, and duck to enter this relic of desert caravan life to replies of "And also with you."

It's boys' night out in Kuwait.

Khaled Al-Odah has invited a pair of Americans to join in the fun. From now until 1 a.m., the 17 men who share this campsite will sing and dance to the lilting chords of an oud and drums, clap their hands like castanets and drink endless cups of tea and Arabic coffee. They will dine on goat; lamb and okra stew poured over saffron and white rice; shrimp; lightly curried pasta; fresh fruits; and Kuwaiti truffles, white fungi that grow beneath the sand in the winter rains.

It's a 60-mile drive to the desert camp. If there is a journalism agenda for this evening, it is our host's story of his son Fauzi, one of 12 Kuwaiti prisoners held by the U.S. government in Guantánamo, Cuba. Khaled tells the tale slowly as we drive to the camp, with no trace of bitterness or anger. He is optimistic, he says, that 25-year-old Fauzi will be released.

"I still, still have faith in the Americans," he says. "They are the champions of human rights, of the rule of law, of democracy. It will take time. Nobody blames the United States for its swift reaction to Sept. 11."

### **A nation of campers**

Hundreds of campsites and tents pass by the window as Khaled's story of his son unfolds. Kuwaitis flock to the desert in winter to enjoy the cool temperatures and fresh air. Families will camp together. Children fly kites. Fathers launch fireworks into the night to the delight of their youngsters. Mothers walk with their daughters to neighboring camps to steal a glimpse of a prospective suitor.

Fauzi graduated from Kuwait University with a degree in religious studies and joined the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. In the summer of 2000, an Islamic charity educating children in Afghanistan appealed to Fauzi to join them. He came to his father and asked Khaled for his permission. Khaled said yes.

Fauzi came back enthusiastic about the work that charities were doing under the Taliban regime. And as the summer of 2001 came, he returned.

### **Tents out; troops in**

Southern Kuwait has more campers than ever this year. The far north, along the Iraqi border, was cleared of tents as tens of thousands of U.S. troops arrived to build camps and ready for a

possible invasion of Iraq. Some are making a return visit 12 years after Desert Storm, when they evicted Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Some of the highway signs are topped with a bright yellow message: "God Bless U.S. Troops."

Afghanistan was turned upside down after Sept. 11, 2001. Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda fighters retreated to the mountains to wait for the Americans to retaliate.

Fauzi and several other Kuwaitis retreated to Peshawar, Pakistan, to try to get home. As war began, Pakistani and Afghan tribesmen looked on the Arabs in their midst as bounties to be collected once they were handed over to the Americans.

### **Treated with scorn**

Khaled lost track of his son, and the family feared he might have been killed in the war. Later they learned from a Newsweek account that Fauzi and four other Kuwaitis tried to cross back into Afghanistan and flee down the mountains near Mr. bin Laden's Tora Bora stronghold. Their Afghan guides treated them with contempt, complaining that Kuwaitis were too soft and that they would be stuck with carrying them on their backs across the mountains. The guides left them. Not long after, the five were handed over to the Pakistani military.

Before a Kuwaiti diplomat could reach them, the Pakistanis handed them over to the Americans. They dropped out of sight for several months before they were allowed to send word to their families from Cuba.

### **Believed but detained**

Fauzi's story is similar to accounts given by many of the Guantánamo prisoners – an Arab volunteering with a charity, caught up in war, betrayed for a military bounty. Khaled says U.S. officials have told Kuwaiti ministers they think Fauzi and eight other Kuwaitis are telling the truth. But still they remain locked up, with two 15-minute breaks each week from solitary confinement. Militants in Kuwait who have shot several Americans, killing a Marine and a civilian defense contractor, issued a statement admiring Mr. bin Laden and demanding the release of the 12 Kuwaitis – a setback for Khaled's legal campaign with the Kuwaiti Detainees' Committee.

Lawyers in Washington are pressing the Kuwaiti cases before the U.S. government. There is not much Khaled can do, meanwhile, but wait and tell the story to anyone who will listen.

### **Keeping it light**

At the camp, Khaled dons an extra coat and pulls a stocking cap over his ghutra head scarf. No more will be said about the Kuwait 12 this evening. It is instead a night of bonhomie and music. Ahmad Al-Qatamy, the head of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education's music department, sings and plays two beautifully made ouds, a fat-bodied troubador's guitar with a neck bent at the tuning prongs.

He sings ballads warning Kuwaitis not to marry a foreign wife, old Iraqi songs about life in the desert, old folk songs for which the men make up new choruses as they sing along.

After much goading from the others, Mr. Al-Qatamy gives a dead-on imitation of Saddam Hussein's flabby, monotone speech, asking the Americans: "Why do you care about tiny little Kuwait? Don't worry yourselves. Uncle Saddam will look after it."

Everyone roars with laughter.

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