

## Bonds of war

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### 'Mohammed risked his life to work with Seth, so how could we not welcome him?'

By Joseph P. Kahn, Globe Staff | December 2, 2007

**MARBLEHEAD** - On April 9, 2003, after Saddam Hussein's statue fell in Baghdad's Firdos Square, 22-year-old university student Mohammed Harba joined a cheering throng in the streets of Hillah, his hometown.

Harba spoke excellent English. An American military officer overheard him and offered him a translating job on the spot. Weeks later he was assigned to a young US Marine lieutenant from Massachusetts, Seth Moulton, whose duties included working with the newly liberated Iraqi media.

The two shared a strong desire to make a difference in post-Hussein Iraq. Beginning that June and for 10 weeks thereafter, they collaborated on an unusual television news show broadcast widely throughout Iraq. The 30-minute program, dubbed "Moulton and Mohammed," aired twice a week and reported with often surprising candor on the failures of the post-invasion period, along with its successes. In the process it made media stars out of its personable young coanchors.

#### A lasting friendship

Today, more than four years later, Moulton and Harba remain close friends - and deeply invested in Iraq's future. War and its consequences have carried them in markedly different directions, however, and herein lies a tale of intertwined paths and shifting perspectives on a conflict that has produced many deep personal bonds, if no lasting peace or political stability.

Now a Marine captain, Moulton, 29, is serving his fourth tour of duty in Iraq, this time under the direct command of General David Petraeus, America's top military officer in Iraq. His duties include rebuilding ties between US forces and Iraqi tribal leaders in the southern province of Qadisiyah, a Shi'ite militia stronghold. In a recent e-mail from Camp Echo, his provincial base, Moulton says that while he was pessimistic about the war's progress a year or two ago, he has seen "great gains" since his return in June.

"I think Mohammed and I have generally seen the war in the same light, because we've both been close to the facts," Moulton writes in response to a question about how his views of the conflict, and Harba's, have evolved over the past four years. "We disagree about certain strategies, but we tend to agree on when it's going well and when it's going poorly - something that most Americans don't seem to know well enough to understand."

Harba has left Iraq for America, where he is seeking political asylum. Living with Moulton's family on the North Shore, he hopes for a decision by year's end. If forced to go home prematurely, Harba says he is fearful he will be targeted by insurgents for having collaborated with the Americans. In the meantime, much of his earlier optimism about peace and democracy taking root in Iraq has been tempered by the sectarian violence and near-constant political turmoil that has roiled his homeland.

"Seth's views haven't changed, but mine have," says Harba, now 26, who entered the United States in 2005 on a Fulbright scholarship and has remained here since. "He believes in a free and democratic Iraq, in helping create a perfect state. It's not that I'm not hopeful, too. But I've been hit by the reality of what's happened there, and it really hurts."

Lately, he adds, "I have felt things are getting better, not just through what Seth says but other Iraqi friends of mine, too. But the [American troop] surge won't last forever. We need a political surge, or I'm afraid we cannot truly move forward."

Moulton has urged him not to go back, Harba continues during an interview at the home of Moulton's parents. By staying here, he says, "at least I'd be making sure my efforts to help my people would not end up in a grave. Meanwhile, Seth's fighting for a free and democratic Iraq, the perfect image I have of what my country could become."

The fact that Moulton is back in Iraq, working at great risk to make Harba's dream a reality, while Harba is in America, measuring much of the war's progress through his friend's eyes, has only strengthened their bond, both say. They keep in close touch by telephone and e-mail. Both are also writing books about their wartime experiences.

"Our discussions have never stopped," Harba says. "I have this Middle Eastern attitude of always being right. But Seth always wants to make sure I'm on the right side, too."

### **Working with the military**

When they met, Moulton recalls, he and Harba drove around Iraq discussing not just politics but subjects like movies and females. Four years later, he says, many Iraqi translators who worked closely with the Americans - particularly those who have embraced American culture to the extent Harba has - have become marked men. "Being famous is rarely a good thing in any war, and particularly in a war like this one," writes Moulton. "I believe Mohammed truly wants to return to Iraq someday and serve his country, but in the meantime, it is too dangerous."

Harba comes from a prosperous family in the Hillah-Babylon region of south central Iraq, a predominantly Shi'ite community of half a million. Once an aspiring filmmaker, he switched career paths after realizing that Iraqi filmmakers had essentially one job: to make movies that glorified Hussein. Raised on a steady diet of American films, however, Harba possesses a cultural knowledge of America and fluency in English that proved useful when coalition forces invaded Iraq. "People were really glad to be getting their chance for freedom - maybe their last chance," recalls Harba, who was studying linguistics and translation in Baghdad.

Harba's family did raise concerns about working with the US military, he says, especially on a TV broadcast seen throughout Iraq. But, he says, "I blamed former generations for being too lazy, which led to having a monster like Saddam. If members of my generation did not step forward, who would?"

Moulton earned a physics degree from Harvard in 2001 before joining the Marines in January 2002. He was deployed to Kuwait a year later and subsequently posted to Iraq, where he was a platoon commander during the 2003 invasion. His second tour of duty there began in mid-2004 and included action at the Battle of Najaf. Two years ago, he helped train Iraqi security forces. After being off active duty for much of 2006, he was personally recruited for a fourth tour by Petraeus and returned to Iraq last summer.

The "Moulton and Mohammed" show remains a high point for both its principals.

"Even in Baghdad, people would pick us out in the street," Moulton recalls. "Around Hillah, local shopkeepers refused our money, people asked for autographs and photos, and I even received a little fan mail through the re-started Iraqi postal service."

He adds, "Our show was initially envisioned as a propaganda tool, but we quickly learned that Iraqis had a keen eye for the truth. If we wanted to remain relevant and popular, I argued, we had to be as honest as possible, telling the bad stories as well as the good."

After broadcasting a piece on electricity shortages, Harba says with a smile, "We became a lot less popular with local officials."

The show ended when Moulton's unit left Hillah in September 2003. Harba returned to college, graduating the following June and then working as a media coordinator for the US Agency for International Development. He was awarded a Fulbright in mid-2005 and, leaving Iraq for the first time, enrolled at Binghamton University in upstate New York, where he earned a master's degree in comparative literature. Last summer, Harba had an internship at Harvard Divinity School and took a course on the Holocaust at Hebrew College in Newton, becoming the first Iraqi to attend that institution. Eventually, he hopes to return to Iraq and teach at a university.

### **An uncertain future**

Harba, who is in the United States on a student visa, cannot legally work here until a decision on his application for asylum is handed down. Moulton's parents say they're happy to house and feed him until then. "Mohammed risked his life to work with Seth, so how could we not welcome him?" says Lynn Moulton, Seth's mother. "For us, it's really been helpful to have him here, too. We spend a lot of time thinking about Seth."

Harba and Seth Moulton have spent the past two Christmases together in Marblehead. That is unlikely this year.

Moulton, who plans to attend graduate school at Harvard next fall, is scheduled to remain in Iraq until May at least.

In an e-mail last week from Iraq, Moulton reflected on their bond. "As for Mohammed, there are not many friends I have who have literally put their lives on the line for me - except for fellow Marines, of course. Mohammed and I have been through remarkable times and experiences, days we will never forget, many we would like never to repeat, but also many that were incredibly rewarding."

Our work together in Iraq had a tangible impact on people's lives - both Iraqi and American - and it had a surprisingly big impact on America's mission there."

Harba, meanwhile, is working with a local Rotary Club chapter to send badly needed school supplies to the Hillah-Babylon region.

"People here really want to make a difference," he says. "It makes me feel I should be doing even more."

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