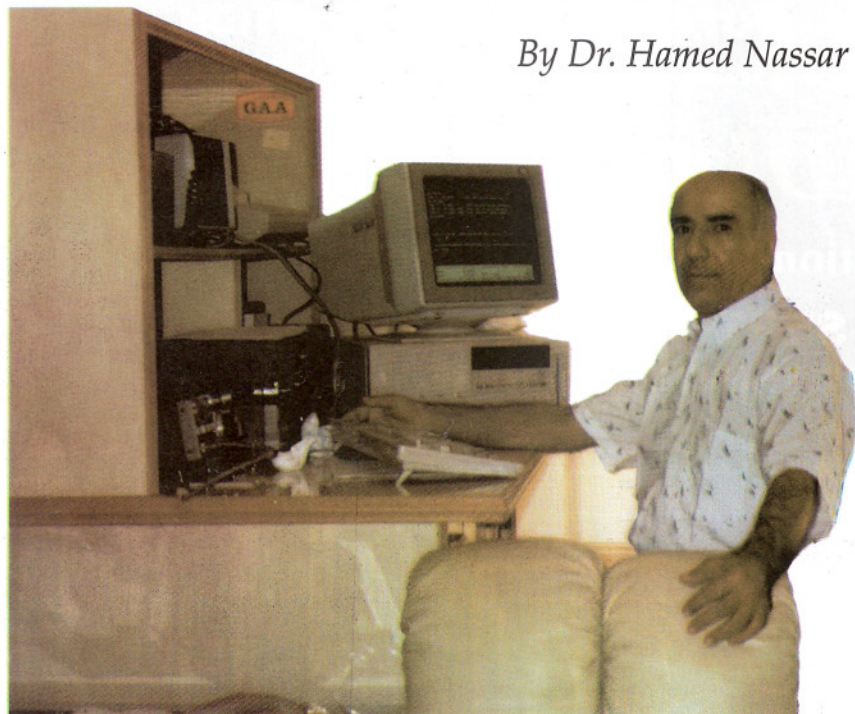


An Heroic Hobbyist

By Dr. Hamed Nassar



Using digital communications, Abdul Jabbar Marafi single-handedly kept Kuwait in touch with the rest of the world during Iraq's seven-month occupation of Kuwait

When Iraq invaded Kuwait last August, Abdul Jabbar Marafi was one of those Kuwaitis who decided to stay behind. His decision may have been one of the most significant decisions of the entire crisis, since he is the person who single-handedly kept Kuwait in touch with the rest of the world during the seven-month occupation.

For a long time before the invasion of Kuwait, Marafi had been operating a sophisticated Radio Bulletin Board System (RBBS) using a personal computer, sophisticated amateur radio set equipment, and the AMTOR mode of communications. He had also established backup power supplies to ensure continuous operation of the RBBS in the case of utility power failures, which were a rare occurrence in pre-war Kuwait. Impressed with the quality and stability of Marafi's RBBS, amateurs from all over the world had been logging into his RBBS daily to exchange messages and information.

When the Iraqis invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, Marafi refused to flee, hoping he could help his country by staying

behind. Sure enough, his hobby came to the rescue.

During the early days of the invasion, Marafi used his RBBS to provide details about the Iraqi invasion to dozens of other Arab, European and American amateurs. As telephone communications began to diminish, his RBBS gained even greater importance. And then when Iraqis completely cut off communications, his RBBS turned out to be the only link between Kuwait and the outside world.

News of this link spread by word of mouth among the Kuwaiti people, both inside and outside Kuwait. Kuwaitis inside the country began to give Marafi messages to send to their relatives outside the country. Marafi would record the messages on his RBBS, specifying with each message the name, address, and phone number of the person who was supposed to receive it. Foreign amateurs who logged onto Marafi's RBBS daily would relay the messages to the specified people.

Messages were also flowing by the thousands into Kuwait from the outside world. Kuwaitis outside the country

began contacting radio amateurs in the countries they lived, asking them to relay messages to their relatives back in their besieged country through Marafi's RBBS.

Marafi said he would wake up in the morning and find dozens of messages recorded over night by amateurs from all the the world. The messages were addressed to people of all nationalities living inside Kuwait. He said he took the time to relay each message to the specified person.

Besides transmitting health and welfare messages, Marafi also took it upon himself to expose the outside world to the horrors that were being committed by the Iraqis inside Kuwait. He started recording all the details of these horrors on his RBBS.

One day, an American radio amateur aboard the U.S. John F. Kennedy aircraft carrier in the Red Sea happened to run across Marafi's RBBS and saw the news about Kuwait. The amateur, Officer Scott Ward, had long been using the AMTOR mode of communications to send messages for himself and his 5000 fellow officers aboard ship to relatives



Left and top: Scenes of the Gulf War; bottom right, Fatan Marafi, the daughter of a radio-amateur hero.

and friends back home. When he saw the news about Kuwait, he quickly began downloading it. Excitedly, he rushed the news to his superiors onboard. They, in turn, relayed it to officials in the U.S. Departments of Defense and State in Washington. Ward also retransmitted the information to other RBBSs in the United States.

When the Iraqis found out that the news about their atrocities in Kuwait had leaked out, they began to suspect radio amateurs, since all other forms of communication had been cut. At that time, even foreign embassies in Kuwait were not able to use their radio facilities because the Iraqis had cut their electrical and fuel supplies.

As a result of the news leak, the Iraqis began interrogating Kuwaiti radio amateurs and confiscating their equipment, including Marafi's. But Marafi

had been foresighted enough to maintain another complete data communications radio station behind a false wall in his basement. He was thus able to continue communicating with the outside world.

Until the day Kuwait was liberated, Marafi continued playing his heroic role, much to the bewilderment of the Iraqi occupiers. It seems the Iraqis were too busy to monitor all the thousands of digital transmissions on the short-wave bands, thus allowing Marafi's messages to get through undetected. It might also be blamed on the Iraqis' ignorance of how amateur radio communications work, probably largely caused by previous Iraqi restrictions on amateur radio in Iraq.

News about Marafi and his radio station circulated in the world media during the occupation, but his name

was never revealed out of fear for his life. After the liberation, the story of the Kuwaiti amateur appeared in many leading newspapers, including the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Marafi was also interviewed by two American-based TV networks—CBS and CNN.

Though a Kuwaiti by nationality, Marafi has strong ties with Egypt. Aside from being a graduate of Cairo University, he also owns a home in Cairo and has an Egyptian amateur license using the call sign SU1DZ. His daughter, Fatan, has also just been granted an Egyptian license using call sign SU1FJ.

With his RBBS, Marafi has certainly proved to the world the value of modern-day data communications. He's also proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that even hobbyists can be heroes. ■