

FreightDesk's truck control system is a milestone for the company

High tech meets Lawrence of Arabia

BY ALAN M. FIELD

Jordan's only seaport was choking with traffic. Every day, more than 2,000 trucks entered the Port of Aqaba at five points, moving to about 300 destinations at terminals and warehouses. Long lines of trucks were backed up. Shipping agents had no say about which truck, trucker or type of truck they used because the cartel that ran the port had the right to refuse cargo. And the system didn't come close to meeting new global standards for cargo security.

Things are changing now thanks to an automated truck control system supplied by FreightDesk Technologies, a Virginia-based provider of cargo management software. The pilot program for the system began in 2006, and it will be implemented at all Aqaba gates by February. Rob Quartel, president and chairman of FreightDesk and a former Federal Maritime Commission member, said that during the pilot stage, the cost of inland trucking in and around the port dropped 20 percent and the average transit time for completing trips to and from the port declined 25 percent.

The new system works like this: Dispatchers log on to a password-protected Web site where they request a permit for each truck they want to send to the port or pick up there. The software, supplied free on demand in Arabic via personal computers, keeps track of a wide range of information about trucks travel-

ing within 25 miles of the port. It knows which trucks are in each terminal, their entry and exit points, and their specific routes. The software also validates when and where cargo is properly (or improperly) released to specific parties, matching port users against their IDs, license numbers and other security-related data.

For FreightDesk, the Aqaba implementation is a milestone in its attempts to bring its technology platform to commercial customers. It is also the first time the company is using its logistics control platform, FDFolio, to support a truck control system. FreightDesk's Jordanian subsidiary, NAFITH Logistics, has a 10-year agreement with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority.

Until the Aqaba project, FreightDesk's customers were the Defense Department, which uses the platform for tracking containers for intelligence purposes, and the Transportation Security Administration, which uses it to analyze cargo on passenger flights.

Quartel said the Aqaba implementation is important for the company because this kind of system can be applied anywhere, including the United States. "We collect, clean, integrate and analyze the data," said Dhiren Patel, president of FreightDesk. That process can be applied for any purpose, including truck control, Patel said.

Although FreightDesk faces competition from such technology

providers as Navis and Embarcadero, Patel says his company's approach is unique. The routing capability in other companies' software "does not have a security component," he said. Patel said FreightDesk is leveraging its experience with the Defense Department and the TSA to do a better job of analyzing information vital to port security.

The Aqaba project is also critical for Jordan, which is otherwise landlocked. There are no direct services between Aqaba and the U.S., but there is direct service from Aqaba to Europe, Africa (Mombasa, Kenya), and elsewhere in the Middle East (Dubai, Muscat).

Jordan's exports to the U.S. have soared in recent years as a result of the 2000 free-trade agreement with the U.S., one of the few bilateral trade deals to gain broad bipartisan support in Congress. The modernization of Aqaba has also become critical for the U.S. military because of its proximity to Iraq.

The Jordanian government has all sorts of big plans for Aqaba, including a high-tech park and a 200 percent expansion of its hotel sector within a decade. The goal is to lure high-income tourists with snorkeling and scuba diving and tours of the ancient ruins of Petra, and Wadi Rum, site of Lawrence of Arabia's greatest triumph. How well the plans pan out will depend in part on newfangled technology for reducing truck congestion in and around the port. ♦

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