

Anyone for desert?



INTERVIEW OF THE WEEK

Dr Afnan Al-Shuaiby of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce

By Colin Donald, Business Editor

AMID freakish economic turbulence and the aftermath of war, has there ever been a more interesting time to be overseeing the growth of British trading relations with the Arab world?

Not as far as Dr Afnan Al-Shuaiby is concerned. As the first woman and first Saudi national to be appointed secretary general and chief executive of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, the opportunities in these 22 countries for UK companies – Scottish ones prominent among them – are there to be plucked.

"We need to get more traffic between the UK and Arab countries. We need to plan, make decisions and go with it," she says.

Under her leadership, a revitalised ABCC is determined that no company should exclude itself through misunderstanding the vast scope and variety of the market, or out of an exaggerated – "stereotyped" is her word – sense of the cultural difficulties of doing business there.

"The Arab economies will continue to demonstrate dynamism despite the recent financial crises engulfing the rest of the world," she says.

"Over the past decade, they have adopted ambitious reform programmes designed to enable them to compete more effectively in the global economy. They have liberalised trade, sought to strengthen their private sectors and increase the efficiency of production."

Despite the oil price volatility and the well-reported property crash in Dubai, the real story of the Middle East is a promising background for what Al-Shuaiby and the ABCC's board hope to achieve. The global shake-up of the last 18 months has prompted renewed appreciation of the opportunities and resources in the region, which had been semi-observed as companies prioritised emerging markets such as China and Russia.

Of course, the multiform political difficulties of the Middle East have not gone away. But the events of the past year have re-emphasised the solidity, and the capacity to conceive mind-boggling mega-plans for the future, that the Gulf's mineral riches represent. Like Scottish Development International, which recently opened a Dubai office, the ABCC is determined to highlight opportunities in sectors such as renewables, health, training and education, as well as building on existing energy sector tie-ups.

Al-Shuaiby's job is to point out the opportunities that exist in this heterogeneous region of 350 million people for UK companies with the imagination to exploit them, and to direct Arab companies to corresponding investment opportunities in Britain. Scotland, and Scottish businesses, are very much in her sights, not least because she spent her early childhood in Glasgow, where her father was studying for a post-graduate degree in town planning.

She recently led a delegation of Middle Eastern business people to Aberdeen to bolster existing tie-ups. Companies such as Abu Dhabi energy specialist TAQA Bratani, based at Westhill, see the advantages of a strategic presence in the UK continental shelf, where technological entrepreneurialism is unmatched in the world. Arab countries, heavily reliant on US expertise, are keen to welcome UK players.

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BREAKING THE STEREOTYPE

Dr Afnan Al-Shuaiby studied English literature at King Saud University in Riyadh, then obtained a Saudi government-sponsored masters in educational administration and a PhD in leadership administration at George Washington University in Washington DC, where she was also adviser to the president of the US-Saudi Business Council. She has run a small business and been a director at Qorvis Communications, a US PR company and an advisor to the Abu Dhabi Investment Agency (ADIA) in Washington. She has also worked in education in Saudi Arabia.

10 different companies in Aberdeen, small medium and large, that have a connection with the Arab world, but this is a big industrial area the Arab world doesn't know a lot about. I have plans to bring a big delegation of Arab ambassadors and an energy sector delegation up there, and we are working on that."

Al-Shuaiby's forward-facing approach has already had a noticeable impact on the organisation she heads. Founded in the 1970s, the ABCC appears to have been a somewhat sleepy and latterly rudderless organisation, whose main raison d'être was the processing of export paperwork for UK companies. Although London has long been the Arab world's European entry point and recreational hub, the wider potential of Arab-British business co-operation has been disappointingly undersold.

Export admin for London's Arab embassies continues to provide the organisation's "bread and butter" income, but things have changed since Al-Shuaiby arrived at the ABCC's Mayfair townhouse, a few yards away from the US Embassy in London.

She and her team have been investigating what services would be useful to businesses, and to "win their trust" for a revamped programme of trade-promoting activities. One result of this organisational overhaul, also intended to boost membership, will be the first Arab British Economic Forum (ABEF) to be held in London in October, which is being treated as something of a coming-out party.

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countries, we need to plan, we need to make decisions and go with it," she says. "People in this country still don't know about the region – the potential of the food sectors in Morocco and Tunisia being a good example – and we need to rectify that. There is a strong appetite for British expertise, and the perception of British products and services is very strong. In IT, in real estate, in the financial sector, in renewable energy, there is a lot of money around for mutually beneficial deals."

Al-Shuaiby also cites the medical sector, where Scotland has world-leading expertise. Diabetes medicine for example is a particular research specialism of Scotland's life sciences sector, and also a particular problem in the Middle East.

She says: "I have found that British businesses are very interested in the region but they need to be motivated. Our job is to persuade them that, with

a bit of effort and creative thinking, you can find opportunities if you have products to sell and services to provide. Membership of the ABCC means that it becomes our obligation to serve your company and we will do the due diligence and set up the meetings. We need more people to know about what we do."

Of the perception that cultural differences form an unspoken barrier to companies which might want to investigate opportunities in the Arab world, she says: "The cultural barrier is a stereotype. Business is the same all over the world. It's a global market, but people still want to believe in these stereotypes. The things that you need to know about doing business in the Middle East is that things there are a bit slower to get going, but once they are rolling, that's it. You do need in-house intelligence but none of the logistics of doing business are significantly different."

Sir Roger Tomkys, the senior ex-Foreign Office Arabist who chairs the ABCC, enthuses at the gear shift that Al-Shuaiby's appointment represents:

"It's a very important symbolic step to have a Saudi lady in charge of a substantial organisation in Britain, particularly one as poised, fluent and impressive as Afnan, educated in an Anglophone context with business training to doctoral level, and who has the British and international contacts book."

Under such radically different management, UK perceptions of what the Arab world is, and what it can offer, are likely to change as rapidly as the desert landscapes themselves.