



With international ambitions, Techno Q has recently begun its first external project in Oman, and executive director Abdullah Al Ansari would like to see more Qatari companies develop outside of Qatar's borders. "It makes you feel really proud. If there is an opportunity for us to participate in the competitive global market, let's do it," he says.

# SMALL BUSINESS SENSE



While supportive of Qatari start-ups following Techno Q's example, managing director Zeyad Al Jaidah feels that because Qatar's population is so small SMEs are not as crucial to the economy as many might think. "We don't have a large population where we need to worry about job creation and SMEs having to absorb part of the work force," he says.

## ENTREPRENEURS AL ANSARI AND AL JAIDAH OFFER A DOSE OF REALISM REGARDING QATAR'S OFTEN-HYPED SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISE SECTOR

There is nobody more passionate about small and medium enterprise (SMEs) and the subject of starting up and growing a company than those who have done it themselves. Techno Q's managing director **Zeyad Al Jaidah** and executive director **Abdulla Al Ansari** are two Qatari entrepreneurs who have marshalled their Doha-based firm from a two-man operation to a thriving concern. They also have some strong views on the direction in which entrepreneurship is being steered in the country, the start-up ambitions of their countrymen, and whether SMEs are all that important here, as *TheEDGE* recently found out.

**T**echno Q was created with the aim of providing home theatre systems in Qatar, and has evolved since into an ever-expanding business specialising in systems integration solutions – for individual customers to large clients across various sectors – that now employs more than 270 people.

Having guided Techno Q to where it is today, starting in a time when Qataris founding their own hands-on enterprises was far less common, Al Jaidah and Al Ansari are well-qualified to comment on the apparent rapid rise of entrepreneurship and the small business sector in Qatar, which they understandably encourage. Indeed both have been in contact with related organisations, such as Silatech, Bedaya and Enterprise Qatar (EQ) and the Qatar chapter of Enterprise Organization (EO), the latter of which Al Jaidah was a member until recently.

"Here in Qatar entrepreneurship is finally being recognised by the government and the authorities," Zeyad Al Jaidah says in reference to the formation of EQ and other similar organisations that have been established to promote small businesses. But while both Al Jaidah and Al Ansari are positive about these initiatives, they also feel that the so-called thriving culture of entrepreneurship in Doha is at times overhyped, and are sceptical that many of their countrymen actually have an interest in

forming start ups, and being hands-on when it comes down to running a day-to-day business operation as these business partners have been for the past 15 years.

Al Jaidah and Al Ansari also question whether the government funding is indeed reaching those who need it to the extent that has been proclaimed, and whether the Qatar market is even large enough to warrant or support an 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' as it has been called.

"The problem is the mechanism – the vision is there, but who is there to take that vision and realise it, to motivate and inspire a generation to start their own businesses?" asks Al Jaidah. Companies such as Techno

Q, he says, are willing to be involved on an advisory level, but they feel that there is neither an actual cohesive organisation nor sufficient funds being allocated in support of such initiatives.

"We are willing to mentor but there needs to be a support system put in place, partly comprising of individuals with hands-on related business experience to make it functional and successful," adds Al Jaidah.

### A COMFORT ZONE

Part of the issue, he says, is that Qatar's large public sector coupled with semi-public business entities that employ most of the local population offering high-paying jobs, therefore not creating enough interest and motivation to change the underlying mindset to gravitate towards the private sector. "For a young person it is much more secure and financially rewarding to have a job working for the government sector or a semi-government organisation than starting their own business," he furthers.

Abdulla Al Ansari agrees, adding that there is a lack of need in Qatar to gravitate towards creation of entrepreneurship in comparison to other countries that do not have a vast hydrocarbon-funded public sector to rely on. Though Oman does have some oil resources it does not have a massive economy and its public sector salaries are at lower levels. This, explains Al Ansari, has meant that its population has had

# 270

THE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES CURRENTLY EMPLOYED BY TECHNO Q, ONE OF QATAR'S MOST SUCCESSFUL SMES, WHICH STARTED 15 YEARS AGO WITH A STAFF OF JUST TWO: MANAGING DIRECTOR ZEYAD AL JAIDAH AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ABDULLA AL ANSARI.

to adopt a more entrepreneurial mindset.

As Techno Q is involved in a project in Muscat (their first large-scale initiative outside of Qatar), on a recent visit to Oman, Al Ansari was impressed by the business idea his Omani taxi driver talked to him about during the drive from the airport to the hotel, and his idea was to start producing and selling prime grade beef by feeding livestock quality food. “He had no money nor the know-how to start his business, but he did have the idea and the motivation,” says Ansari, adding that in Qatar just the opposite is true. “Why should people consider taking a risk or even bother trying? They don’t feel the need to because they are very comfortable.”

Indeed, adds Al Ansari, many of his Qatari friends and contemporaries think that he and Al Jaidah – both of whom in fact left similar posts to pay full time attention to Techno Q – are “crazy” for working so hard in the private sector, and regularly asked why they do not come back to work in the public sector.

Al Jaidah, though, is also not convinced SMEs are as important to Qatar’s economy as it has been claimed. “People of Qatar are very fortunate because our country is rich with natural resources,” he explains. “This I would say is the number one reason. Number two: we don’t have a large population where we need to worry about job creation and SMEs having to absorb part of the work force.”

Al Ansari agrees. “Small businesses are more likely to succeed in markets and countries with larger populations; if you come up with an idea in the United States (US) or any country [where] you have a massive population you will find buyers no matter what you are selling,” he says. “There are some entrepreneurs here in Qatar who have thought about businesses in recycling for instance, but the limitation was the size of the population which did not make it feasible, so they had to come up with an alternative idea that can suit the market size.”

#### OVERSEAS EXPANSION

For Al Jaidah, another part of the problem in Qatar is not that the attention is not being paid to start ups, but that the Qatari government must actively facilitate the expansion of Qatari companies, specifically

## Al Jaidah and Al Ansari are positive about recent initiatives supporting entrepreneurship in Doha, but are also sceptical as to whether many Qataris are interested in forming start-ups.

SMEs, to expand overseas.

“Even large international corporations like Total and Shell need their governments’ intervention and political influence to sign contracts abroad, so what about smaller companies? We need even more support. Qatar is executing many projects abroad, like in Egypt, Morocco, and Sudan, but none of the Qatari SMEs are given an opportunity to take part in these projects. Why not make it mandatory that the majority of the works in these projects must be done by Qatari companies?”

He continues by saying these types of supportive initiatives from large organisations such as Qatari Diar, for example, are lacking. “It’s not on their agenda to consider involving Qatari SMEs in their projects to make it easier for the Qatari private sector to expand in the region, or even globally; for us to go global. Yes, Techno Q is going to go global, but it is going to be a challenge. Now we have taken our first project outside of Qatar, in Oman, which we are truly very proud of. And we want to continue that momentum of growth and expansion. We are determined to do that inshAllah (God willing), but we are doing it without support.”

“In the US and Europe,” Al Ansari adds, “because companies pay taxes, the government is relying on them as a source of revenue, so there it is an automatic partnership, and it is in the government’s interest to ensure the profitability of these companies in order to secure continuous revenue. For this reason, these governments will always support businesses, establish legislatives in favour of companies, and ‘bail’ them out during difficult times.”

When *TheEDGE* mentions it is interesting to hear Qataris discuss these kinds of issues and be happy to go on record about it for a magazine interview, Al Jaidah responds with candour. “To solve the problem we have to talk about it. Putting it under the rug and hiding it is not really going to help this generation. We are saying this because we love our country and we love seeing the progress, which is taking place, but we want it to really happen in the right way. As we said, the money is there, two billion [Qatari riyals] was allocated by HH the Emir. But who is realising these initiatives? Where is the gap?”

#### THINKING BIG

Nevertheless, Al Jaidah and Al Ansari remain optimistic about those Qataris who are motivated to enter the private sector. Qatar, they feel could be a good place from which to launch a regional or international business, perhaps one with franchise potential. “We would like the country to develop more companies. It is nice to see something grow outside of Qatar’s borders; it makes you feel really proud. If there is an opportunity for us to participate in the competitive global market, let’s do it,” says Al Ansari.

“For an entrepreneur, really one word of advice: be innovative, think big, be bold in your ideas, come up with a new idea, don’t just think that I am going to do this in Doha,” says Al Jaidah to young Qataris or potential local start-ups. “Why not make a franchise, for example, if I am opening a restaurant. Even at Techno Q, a few years after we started our business, right there and then we started thinking big, making an organisation and structuring the company

in such a way where growth is factored in, by building procedures, even when we had only 20 employees, we implemented the ISO quality assurance system and started setting appropriate procedures, because we wanted our business to develop further and grow in the right direction.”

For his part Al Ansari underlines the need for good partnerships in business. “Advice I would give to anyone who wants to think about starting a business is to stop thinking about it from a passionate standpoint, because sometimes the idea comes from a dream, something that you would love to do, but on the other hand, there has to be somebody else who plays a role of a mentor, an advisor if you will, someone who will assess things more realistically, someone who can crunch numbers and offer sound and objective advice. Even we have tried realising ideas in the past that have failed, mostly because we were thinking about them passionately.

“The key,” Al Ansari continues, “is really in finding the qualified people to do the job right. Let’s say somebody wants to create a company that designs and manufactures mobile phones. The business produces a product that is great, but if there is no one hired who is skilled and knowledgeable in selling and marketing of those products the company will fail; in such a case, the need for a talented sales and marketing person is highly necessary. Therefore, the right people with the right skill sets must be hired in order for the business to succeed.”

Finally, both Al Jaidah and Al Ansari want to underline that while they acknowledge there are challenges in starting businesses in Qatar and that the likelihood of failure is high, the rewards gained from starting and running

your own business and the contribution it makes to the Qatar business sector and society are the best reasons for doing so.

This is something they would like to make their countrymen more aware of, says Al Ansari. “Although when you run a company you’re responsible for your employees and their families, so it is a lot of stress and mental preoccupation to deal with, but from that you find the satisfaction and the motivation to go on, when you look back at your career and realise what you have achieved. That is what makes it all worthwhile, and it is what drives you to go on; knowing that you have worked hard and have accomplished something. When we participate in exhibitions or seminars in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and we see that we are known and highly regarded there by the people in our industry, we are thrilled, because we carry Qatar’s name abroad.

“This alone gives us the sense of satisfaction that we are really looking for and this is what motivates us to continue, this is our driving force. It wasn’t about the money when we were starting out and it is not about the money today, it is about feeling gratified because we have achieved something. We also feel satisfaction, because we are not relying on a government job, we try to rely on ourselves to create opportunities and to lead a productive existence by contributing to our country in a positive way.

“We also believe that creating our own opportunity to earn a living relieves some strain from the government to support those who perhaps really do need to rely on the government.”

“For me the real satisfaction and sense of accomplishment comes from,” agrees Al Jaidah, “when I see Techno Q’s installations in places such as Qatar National Convention Centre or in institutions like Qatar Foundation Education City Universities or Qatar University. I think to myself, Techno Q is a part of this great progress; this is our work, our know-how. And that feeling for me is indescribable, leaving our mark and contributing to the progress of our country.” ■



It is both the satisfaction of job well done, such as this light installation at the Qatar National Convention Centre, as well as the feeling they are contributing to the growth of their country in a meaningful way, that inspires Techno Q’s directors Al Jaidah and Al Ansari to action. (Photo courtesy Techno Q)

## Al Jaidah and Al Ansari remain optimistic about Qataris who are motivated to enter the private sector and they feel the country is a good place to launch a regional or global business.