

Paving the way

INTERVIEW WITH IHAB IBRAHIM OSMAN

CHAIRMAN, US-SUDAN BUSINESS COUNCIL



IHAB IBRAHIM OSMAN is General Manager of NADEC New Businesses, one of the largest vertically integrated dairy companies in the world. He is also the Chairman of the US-Sudan Business Council. Previously, he was CEO of Sudatel Telecom and has worked for Kuwait Finance House (Bahrain) and Verizon Communications in the US. He serves on a number of corporate and non-profit boards, including the UN Global Compact Business for Peace Steering Committee and the Khartoum Breast Cancer Centre Hospital, he also founded the Impact Hub Khartoum. Osman holds a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University, an MBA from Oxford University and a BSc in Electrical Engineering from the New York Institute of Technology.

Please give us an overview of the origins of the US-Sudan Business Council (USSBC), and the objectives of the organisation. In terms of objectives, what are your aims for developing business relationships and for the development of Sudan?

A strong private sector is the surest path to stability and inclusive, equitable, and sustainable economic development. It is with this belief that the US-Sudan Business Council (USSBC) was founded in September 2014 in Washington DC by a group of like-minded independent Sudanese private sector companies.

USSBC was actually the product of a concern that the then impasse between the US and Sudanese governments would continue. We therefore proposed creating an independent forum compliment the political dialogue in an independent manner across a broader and deeper stakeholder base in the private sector and civil society in both countries.

When we reached out to the American Embassy to hear their thoughts on the matter, it was a pleasant surprise to find they were not only open to the idea, but in fact extremely encouraging of it. We reached out to nine of the leading private sector enterprises in Sudan, many of whom are featured in these pages, and were delighted to see them embrace the idea with vigour. With the guidance of the US Embassy, the USSBC was incorporated in the US, with a formal mandate of facilitating and enabling a strong business, cultural and educational dialogue between Sudan and the United States.

Does the USSBC work exclusively on the Sudan-US relationship, or with companies and institutions from other countries? How can your role also serve / benefit the relationship with Europe for example?

Over time, as the USSBC established a successful track record, we started being the go-to private sector institution in Sudan not just for the US Embassy, but also the Embassy of the United Kingdom, the European Union, and many other diplomatic missions. This is because the Council provides valuable, actionable business insights and grassroots intelligence, while facilitating meaningful partnerships between foreign investors, business and Sudanese entities across the spectrum of Sudanese society and economy. Today, the USSBC is the

leading Sudanese private sector business council for outreach to all Western countries.

Does the USSBC have other objectives outside the business sphere, such as in the education and cultural exchange arenas?

When we started the USSBC, the country was still subject to the US trade embargo, meaning we were limited in the activities we could undertake in the business sphere. Thus, we realised that we had to start first by building meaningful civil society relations. Accordingly, we reached out to think tanks, universities and other civil society institutions in the West, encouraging them to reappraise Sudan and facilitating access for them to their equivalents in Sudan. This allowed for a new, non-governmental perspective on Sudan to be voiced in the West, which we found was highly effective. We continue to be supportive of not for profit activities, including by providing complimentary membership for those non-profits we believe to portray the strengths of Sudanese culture and civil society.

Please give an overview of the benefits that the USSBC offers, particularly to foreign companies and organisations seeking out opportunities in Sudan?

USSBC membership offers new market entrants a trusted local partner for advice, alongside a range of high-level services to strengthen working relationships in Sudan. The USSBC facilitates and enables exclusive access to meetings and events, executive business intelligence and opportunities to leverage the influence and advocacy of the council's founding members.

The USSBC works across three streams to encourage responsible, reliable engagement within Sudan's business environment. Firstly, we provide a platform for a rich dialogue between all representatives of Sudanese civil society to encourage credible partnerships with global firms. Secondly, we incentivise: the strength of our network between Sudan, the UK, US and other Western countries encourages firms to explore new commercial and cultural opportunities and gives our members the tools to make partnerships successful. Thirdly, we initiate: we believe that a strong private sector not only creates stability but instigates greater transparency and accountability, helping our members create long lasting, reliable and prosperous partnerships.

What type of companies belong to the USSBC and what is the criteria for joining?

The USSBC's nine founding members were selected for their track records for successful operations, their high corporate governance standards, their strong contributions to the communities they operate in, and their desire to see Sudan more integrated and connected to the international community. We follow these principles when considering any applications for membership.

We were insistent, from day one, that the USSBC be established and operated to the highest global standards of a business council. To this end, we are fully compliant with all US laws and regulations applicable to such bodies, including those covering transparency, accountability, lobbying activities, due diligence and governance. We believe membership of USSBC must bring with it a positive reputational impact for each of its members.

What recent successes has the USSBC had?

The USSBC has been widely acknowledged as playing a pivotal role in the lifting of the US trade embargo, and prior to that, to the implementation of a general licence from OFAC in relation to ICT for Sudan. Over the years we have successfully hosted business and banking conferences in Washington DC, New York, London, and Khartoum in collaboration with highly respected partners including from global law and consulting firms, valued think tanks and the US Chamber of Commerce.

Not least, we have created a well-respected face for the Sudanese private sector in international capitals from Washington, DC to London, which has had a substantial contribution to changing the narrative on Sudan.

The United States has recently fully lifted sanctions against Sudan. What impact has this had on the business links between the two countries and how do you see these links evolving over the short to medium term? Are there any legacy issues as a result of the sanctions which are proving especially challenging to overcome?

We have already seen US companies re-entering Sudan in a variety of sectors from agricultural equipment to restaurant chains. This is a strong indication of the appetite from the US for business opportunities in the country.

The lifting of the trade embargo has also brought revitalised interest from European, Asian and regional companies and institutions, again in a range of sectors including healthcare, infrastructure, oil and gas and agriculture.

There remain however, legacy issues particularly in relation to the banking sector. Global banks continue to take a very conservative position on Sudan. In this respect, Sudan is unfortunately a typical example of the global


'overcompliance' issue. We have been working with the US, UK and European governments to try to overcome this, and we are confident that as investor interest in the country increases, so too will we see an increase in the global banks' appetite for Sudan exposure.

Sudan offers, potentially, many opportunities. Which sectors of the Sudanese economy are particularly ripe for invigorating and where do you see the short and medium-term opportunities for building mutually beneficial building relationships?

We are particularly focused on promoting and re-invigorating the following sectors in the Sudanese economy: agriculture, education, healthcare, banking, mining and ICT. We believe these have the strongest potential in the short to medium term, particularly agriculture and mining, not least because the government is strongly encouraging of any ventures which could lead to increased national exports. Our founding member base has much experience in each of these sectors and so we are well positioned to be guides and partners to any incoming companies.

How do you envisage the USSBC's role once the relationship with US companies is normalised?

With sanctions no longer a barrier to full bilateral trade relations between the US, UK and Sudan, USSBC membership offers new market entrants a range of services to strengthen their decision-making process vis-à-vis Sudan investments.

Sudan is the next frontier, but all great opportunities come with many challenges. The USSBC is focused on helping those with positive interest in Sudan to navigate these challenges and unlock the great potential Sudan offers. 

Parties interested in doing business in Sudan can contact us via our website, www.ussbc.org, or directly by email to tsaed@ussbc.org

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The bridge to Tuti, an island in the heart of Khartoum, where the White Nile and the Blue Nile merge.

