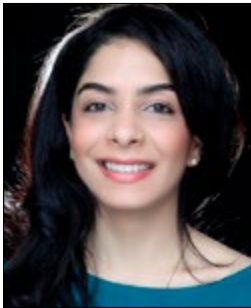


Empowering women

By **TARNEEM SAEED**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ALSOUG.COM AND HEAD OF STRATEGY, SAEED INDUSTRIAL & COMMERCIAL GROUP



TARNEEM SAEED

was educated in Sudan, Canada and the United Kingdom and holds a LLB from the London School of Economics. After working for Allen & Overy, she chose to return to Sudan as head of strategy for the Saeed Group. In 2016, she co-founded *alsoug.com*, of which she is now the CEO. *alsoug.com* is Sudan's largest online classifieds portal. Tarneem is an executive director of the US-Sudan Business Council and sits on the board of the Khartoum Breast Care Centre. She is also a member of the board of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC.

Believe it or not, I am far from being the only woman running a successful operation in Sudan. This is in fact one of the charms of Sudan: its paradoxical nature. No stereotypes apply here. Women have played a strong role in Sudanese society for millennia. In fact, there is a strong tradition of powerful queens, known as *Kandakas*, dating back more than a millennium. Ours is a culture where the Afro-Arab norm of patriarchy is tempered by a strong tradition of powerful matriarchs. My own great-grandmother was a successful businesswoman at the turn of the 19th Century, a rare occurrence at the time in many parts of the world.

Today, I play a key strategic role at board level in our family business, Saeed Industrial & Commercial Group, where I (and the rest of the board) are supported by multiple senior female managers. This is also the case in many of the businesses owned by our private-sector colleagues. My consumer internet start-up, *alsoug.com*, is also driven by strong female leaders. In the non-business world, I sit on the board of the Khartoum Breast Care Centre, Sudan's leading breast care hospital, which is run by an exceptional Sudanese woman, Dr Hania Fadl. No doubt women do face challenges to succeed in Sudan, including in relation to aspects of law and society that need to change to be in tune with the times. However, from my own experience, I can say that it is possible for women in Sudan to realise their potential and achieve their own success.

By way of background, my brother, Tamir and I spent our early years in Sudan and completed our higher education in the West. We then built lives for ourselves in Britain, he as a banker, and I as a lawyer. And thus, it could have remained. We could have wished Sudan well, bestowing on it not more than a few fleeting holidays and a hands-off approach to through charitable donations, but otherwise wholly embracing our new lives abroad.

A few years ago, however, a series of events disrupted our contented lives in London, and next thing I knew, I was on a plane back to Sudan. Before I could catch my breath, I found myself working on the production of a

coffee table book on Sudanese art with our family friend, Lina Haggag; helping to pull together a US-focused private sector outreach body (now the US-Sudan Business Council), and not least, getting to grips with the tremendous legacy my forefathers had left us in the shape of Saeed Industrial & Commercial Group, which fell to my father's generation and ours to carry into a new era.

Some two years into my return to Sudan, after travel for Saeed Group had taken me to many neighbouring African countries, I began to question why the consumer internet revolution had skipped Sudan. We had good mobile internet penetration rates, a



Right: Amanitore was a Nubian Kandaka or Queen regnant of the ancient Kingdom of Kush at Meroë, about 200 miles north-east of Khartoum

recently literate population, and a relatively high GDP. What was going on? Researching deeper into the subject, I realised that the reason tech start-ups had not, until that time, had much success in Sudan, was that there were in fact substantial hurdles in place, which continue to this day. These include no unified e-payment system, patchy internet service, a regulatory environment more geared to conservative business models, and not least the lingering after effects of the US trade embargo which was lifted in 2017 after 20 years. Brainstorming with Tamir, we decided that in order to do something about it, we had to start with something comprehensive, and self-sufficient, that didn't require any external infrastructure or support. Thus it was that we launched *alsoug.com*, which is now Sudan's largest online classifieds platform.

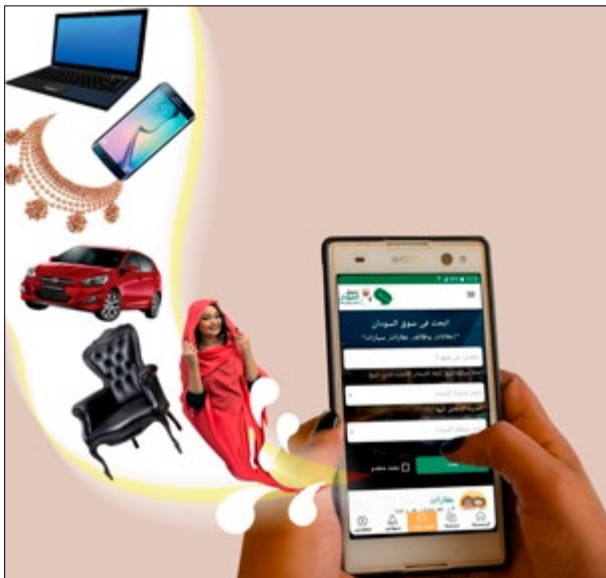
Alsoug.com is subtly transforming Sudan in many ways. For example, we found that key consumer sectors, like real estate, cars and electronics, are predominantly dominated by 'middle-men', many of whom operate

in close-knit and ambiguous circles. By enabling direct-dealing between sellers and buyers, *alsoug.com* immediately removed consumers' desperate reliance on the middle-men, making transactions much easier, and more efficient and beneficial to both the buyer and the seller. Moreover, *alsoug.com* increases the number of transactions carried out, by connecting sellers faster to more buyers – one regular user says he sells more real estate through *alsoug.com* in a month than he did in a year pre-*alsoug*. In addition, as the *alsoug.com* database has grown, it has become a pricing reference point, increasing transparency in the country and enabling consumers to understand better the value of what they are buying and selling. Especially in an inflationary environment where prices can change quite significantly even by the week, we offer consumers an extremely valuable (yet free) service.

Whilst I noted above the strong matriarchal tradition in Sudan, it is nonetheless conservative. There are domains in the public space such as stalls in markets and auction spaces which are traditionally more male-dominated. Female entrepreneurs try to overcome this restriction by operating their businesses from their homes, through WhatsApp or Facebook groups to advertise their goods and services - but the reach of these groups is of course limited. *Alsoug.com* has a special section for Sudanese women, with sub-categories tailored specifically to reflect their needs. This has hugely magnified the access of these female entrepreneurs to new customers. In addition, by moving traditionally male-dominated public spaces online, *alsoug.com* is also enabling women to take charge of key life-purchases, such as cars and real estate, without having to be reliant on a man. It was that a woman, no matter how powerful, wealthy or independent, needed a man to attend a car auction for her or even sometimes to contact a middle-man on her behalf. With the advent of *alsoug.com*, she can now search, choose, negotiate and buy, all by herself, using just the power of her mobile phone and *alsoug.com*.

The global media has not been too kind to Sudan in the past few decades. It is true that this is still a country with much room to progress, including in the areas of country-wide development and political inclusion. However, having lived here for four years now, I can say without hesitation that - notwithstanding the isolation that 20 years of US sanctions have imposed on the country – Sudan is a hidden jewel in Africa's crown, one that we, the companies and individuals featured in this edition, are determined to uncover.

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Top left: *Alsoug.com* provides a platform for the commercial empowerment of women

Bottom left: Dr Hania Fadl, founder of the Khartoum Breast Care Centre