

SKA: How to succeed doing a difficult job in a difficult place

The key to being successful in Iraq is establishing solid personal relationships with the locals.

"Iraq is a challenging and difficult place, not just because of the security issues. Despite them, we believe the opportunity is so big that we cannot afford not to be here. The potential in terms of business is huge" points out Michael Douglas, SKA International Group's Director & CEO. SKA is a world class provider of aviation services and logistics (ground, fuel supply, security services, etc.) whose specialty is moving people and equipment safely in challenging environments. Its motto, "Doing difficult jobs in difficult places", says it all about this firm that has been operating in Iraq since 2003. "We can offer unique solutions to the bigger companies that struggle to obtain results. We have a unique footprint in Iraq and we can get things done that other people can't" he explains. One of the reasons for its success is that it is one of the few companies that stepped outside the wire –the secure environment –, building solid relations with the Iraqis. "In my opinion everything in Iraq is developed through relationships. You cannot do business in Iraq from a distance or electronically. You have to be here, spend the time and understand the problems and issues that people face on a daily basis."



Michael Douglas, SKA International Group's Director & CEO.

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The key word in Iraq seems to be "change", a constant in the country that forces you to continuously move forward and adapt to different situations. As a consequence of this, SKA's business model has shifted slightly in recent years towards the import of refined products. They built the first privately owned fuel storage facility in the Khor Al-Zubair free zone (in the South, near the border with Kuwait). They are also importing gasoil and have contracts with some of the major IOCs and the Ministry of Electricity to supply power stations. Presently the company is further investing in the construction of additional fuel storage tanks. They have recently signed a JV agreement with BP for the management of the fuel storage terminal. Future plans include the building of heated

storage tanks for exporting fuel oil, a by-product of Iraqi refineries. "We are investing serious money in the future because we see the potential. We also have a vision to develop a chain of modern gas stations in Iraq" comments Mr. Douglas.

SKA is thriving in Iraq, however the CEO states that "life is not just about making money all the time, it is about job satisfaction; achieving something. I always like to think that every project that we have been involved in in Iraq for the past 11 years has been for positive reasons and that people benefitted from what we did". Private companies cannot change the status

quo, but the local community can benefit from their entrepreneurial activities. "We have retained a very loyal workforce for many years and anybody that has worked for us in Iraq has had a good experience. We look after our people and that is something that is a great part of our wealth". Out of the 750 people the company employs around the world, 400 of them are Iraqis whom they have trained heavily, not only in terms of know-how, but also in health and safety standards.

There is a shortage of certified and trained personnel in Iraq, a challenge many companies have faced when

trying to find local expertise. However, despite the difficulties, SKA has managed to build great teams of local staff. "Iraqis have a very hard working ethic. The country has lived through 30 years of isolation and tremendous hardship giving way to a lot of desensitisation. You have an entire generation that did not have the benefit of getting the kind of international training and certification that is required today" tells Mr. Douglas. But today, Iraq has a very young population that benefits from access to information, the Internet, etc. They are very keen to learn, acquire certifications and training expertise, especially when there is an opportunity to do so abroad. "The key to the future is to build a very capable Iraqi management team", he says.



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