

Iraq

Leading cellphone operator MTC Atheer has taken off against the odds. Its CEO tells why he is one of many in Iraq willing to ride out the storm.



Ali Al-Dahwi is a man for whom no mountain is too high. As head of one of Iraq's leading telco companies, the CEO has not only managed to build up a profitable company in the harshest of conditions, he is also committed to helping shape a better country.

In just over four years, the company has established a stronghold in Baghdad and the south, almost from scratch, and now plans to start operating in the north, east and western regions. It has the largest network in the country (close to 6,500 km) and 3.5 million active subscribers—subscribers who, Al-Dahwi says, are “not just looking for voice services.”

“Iraqi subscribers want the same services as any other subscribers anywhere else in the world,” he says. “They want entertainment, faster data transfer, Internet services and value-added services. So we are putting together affordable packages and building flexible technology that can be upgraded fast.”

At the present time, MTC Atheer (“The Mobile Telecom of Iraq”) is strengthening its position to become the “absolute number one operator in Iraq”, according to Al-Dahwi. He says: “We ended 2006 with 3.2 million active subscribers and two months later, we had 3.5 million. The growth in consumers and spending means we can introduce some highly required services. We are negotiating with top technology suppliers in

“Iraqi subscribers want the same as subscribers everywhere.”

the U.S. and Europe.”

In the meantime, the CEO is lobbying government to extend the duration of telecommunications licenses, which are currently being given on a three-monthly basis. He says: “This has got to end somehow, because with short-term licenses, we can't move forward. We need proper investment and funding and at least a medium- to long-term license so people can feel a return on their investment.”

Although MTC Atheer's customer base is primarily pre-paying, the climate is slowly changing. Growth in the numbers of small businesses entering the market will see an increase in credit facilities and modern banking practices, and, Al-Dahwi adds:

“Once the security issue is resolved, more businesses will come still, which will lead to an increase in contract customers. Business here is definitely growing and MTC Atheer is testament to that.”

Indeed, more businesses have been considering Iraq since the government approved a new investment law last October, which promises ten-year tax and fee breaks for U.S. businesses. Meanwhile, the Iraqi cabinet's recent decision to approve a draft oil law that will see share revenues from the country's oil revenues divided equally among the country's ethnic groups, will, it is hoped, go a long way towards fostering national unity.

“The climate is hard at the moment, but I still believe that private investors and companies coming through these times will be remembered by the Iraqis, not just emotionally, but by being there as a brand, [which means] they will lead the market. I invite enterprises to go and invest in Iraq and not worry, because the return will be high—within a decade, Iraq will be one of the strongest economies in the region.”

Al-Dahwi is quick to point out that it is not all about the financial returns however. His company is one with a proven social responsibility record towards the people of Iraq, shown by its decision to employ and train a majority Iraqi workforce and its support of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, among other projects. Al-Dahwi says: “We are also helping people with injuries caused by the conflict, and those with serious health problems, to get treatment in the U.S. or Europe. Moreover, we have extended help in those communities affected by bombing and devastation by providing aid for rebuilding or their wellbeing. There are many people being pushed out of their homes and we are helping them too.”

Al-Dahwi stresses this is not just a marketing exercise. “We have a great team that is devoted and dedicated to the Iraqi cause. Many of our staff put their lives in jeopardy.

“Any investor coming to Iraq will find there is enthusiasm, knowledge and a lot of motivated people. I would urge every corporate leader in the FORTUNE 500 to take a closer look at the opportunities in Iraq. The possibilities are enormous.”



Ali Al-Dahwi
CEO, MTC Atheer

