

SAUDI ARABIA

The Fastest Growing Companies

While it would be easy for Saudis to sit back and enjoy the windfall revenues from high oil prices, there is an entrepreneurial spirit in the Kingdom moving it toward a future of hydro-carbon independence. The Arab Spring taking place across much of the Middle East is a clear sign that governments need to pay attention to the next generation's education and aspirations, and strive to create a diverse economy that offers real job opportunities.

As such, a far greater emphasis is being placed on encouraging entrepreneurs in the Kingdom, and testimony to that effort is a flagship endeavor entitled the Saudi Fast Growth list (SFG).

Founded by the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA), Al Watan, and NCB, and supported by knowledge partner PwC and strategic sponsor Abraaj Capital, the SFG is an annual ranking of the fastest-growing companies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The group is honored at the Global Competitiveness Forum held in Riyadh every January (www.gcf.org.sa).

The list shines a light on the next generation of companies that are creating jobs, spurring innovation, and growing consistently. By highlighting these companies, the SFG seeks to ignite the imagination of the country's entrepreneurs. An encouraging statistic for economic planners pushing for diversification in Saudi Arabia is that most of the SFG companies are from the non-oil sectors such as manufacturing, high-tech, IT, medical, education, construction, and real estate. Many of the companies have been on the list for three to four years, proving they are not one-day wonders but successful entrepreneurs with real business sense who will become future business leaders of Saudi Arabia.

By analyzing the companies on this list, SAGIA and the Saudi Arabian government hope to learn what policies they should enact to encourage new businesses to start up and thrive.

With 66% of its citizens below the age of 29, Saudi Arabia is home to one of the youngest populations in the world. It also has a rapidly improving business environment. Under SAGIA's leadership, Saudi Arabia has climbed in the rankings to 11th place out of more than 180 countries for overall "Ease of Doing Business," according to the IFC/World Bank's Doing Business report in 2010. Given that mix of youth and capacity, Saudi Arabia could be the surprising destination for many world-changing commercial ideas in the near future.

THE ARABIAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING GROUP

King Abdullah sees education as the heart of his government's plan for a more diversified and sustainable economy. In the past few

years, spending on higher education has increased significantly with about a quarter of each year's budget going toward education and vocational training. This year's allocations amount to almost \$40 billion.

It is perhaps no surprise then to see that a Saudi institution, The Arabian Education and Training Group (AETG), has grown to become the biggest training company and one of the most respected educational facilities in the entire Gulf region.

Having started its life as the Al-Faisal International Academy, the AETG was formed in 2001 to meet the growing demands for education and training in the Kingdom. Using state-of-the-art technology, and boasting competent and experienced educators, the institution now offers a wide variety of courses, qualifications, and majors ranging from IT and foreign language certification through preparatory programs for universities and providing an excellent learning environment for young men and women.

As Dr. Ahmad A. Al-Taweel, CEO of the AETG, says, "Education and training is a very long process of investment. From the beginning we built our company values on delivering high-quality services. We used our training centers as a prototype for new products, as I believe that training and education services are much like the IT sector in that there is a constant need to innovate."

One of the key factors associated with AETG's success is the caliber of the clients who work with the institute. "Our partners include the Princess Noura Bint Abdulrahman University, University of Dammam, Al Baha University, Al Kharj University, and the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), as well as the Saudi Ministry of Defense and Aviation. Internationally we work with companies like Cisco and Microsoft," says Al-Taweel. "We are ready to partner with other universities and institutes anywhere else in the world. We are looking for partners who will open new challenges and opportunities. We don't need funds but rather partners with added value in terms of services, know how, and connections to new markets."

Not content being the biggest institute in the Gulf region, Al-Taweel has ambitious plans. "We plan to expand our operations in different areas and we are focusing on new products. We are trying to expand into public education from kindergarten to high school. In addition, we are building an R&D facility and plan to open a university here in Saudi Arabia and another outside the Kingdom." ●



Dr. Ahmad A. Al-Taweel
CEO of AETG, the leading educational company with international ambitions

