



# A prime mover

Saleh Baddad, a Jordanian engineer and the founder of Al-Ain-based Prime Engineering Projects, came to the UAE 20 years ago. Here he tells **Ehab Heyassat** how he made a success of the business of electrical engineering contracting.

## When did you come to Al Ain?

I graduated as an electrical engineer in Pakistan and then directly came to the UAE in 1990.

## How did you begin your stay in the UAE?

I joined a company in Al Ain and worked for it for two-and-a-half years. After that, I joined a second company, also in Al Ain, and worked there for seven years. My job profile involved setting up electrical networks, distributions and road lighting contracting.

In 1999, I decided to start my own business, as I had a disagreement with my employer. And so, I set up Prime Engineering Projects. I chose the name Prime because I wanted the company to be a prime mover in our industry. I believe we are moving in the right direction.

## What drove you to set up your own company after working as an employee for almost nine years?

When you are working for a company, you go by their rules, even if you do not agree with your employers. There are times when you feel that you could do things in a much better way, and yet you are not able to do it because your employer does not agree with the idea. I could not bring my own ideas into practice in the company that I worked for. So I decided to leave and start Prime. I have been able to execute my plans since then. It has been a satisfying experience and Prime has served my ambition professionally, socially and financially.

I have to say that having my own little company has been a dream ever since I was in university, but it crystallised into an action plan only two years prior to setting up Prime. And to answer your question, the trigger was a clash with my previous employer. By the time I left him, I had already made up my mind never to be an employee again. My resignation was also my opportunity to be independent, so I took that chance and set up Prime.

## How difficult was it to set up a company from nothing?

Well, I knew the market and the people. Dealing with them was quite easy, as they knew what I was capable

of. They knew that I was capable of delivering what I promised. Since I was one of the leading managers in the last company that I worked, I dealt with a lot of people and gained their respect and trust.

However, when you set up a company, the rules of the game are different. You have to comply as a company to certain demands that a project entails. You need to have a track record as a company and fulfil certain other criteria to bid for projects. That was the difficult part. But, fortunately, we were able to get around these issues and managed to close a few small contracts totalling AED400,000 in the first year of Prime's operation in 1999.

#### **It has been a modest start for you, then.**

Of course; it was a start with just seven people in the entire company. We were doubling our business every year since the beginning, but it was not until 2004 that we started noticing the big difference in our volumes. In 2004, our business grew to AED10 million, and in 2008 we were beyond AED100 million. This year we will be even bigger.

I am doing the same old business today. The only difference is that we are not just doing interchanges or small bridges, but entire roads.

#### **What is the formula for achieving success? What has yours been?**

I work very closely with our employees. I urge them to be part of the project and the company. I work closely with them to maximise their strength and to help them overcome their weaknesses. I bestow all my trust in their abilities, and when you do that, you get success in return.

I am having fun working in my company and seeing it grow day after day. Nevertheless, the pressure is also growing every day. You have to understand that work is not all about money. If you are chasing money, you will stop at a certain size. In my case, I am seeking the joy of accomplishing something.

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#### **Are joy and fun enough to make a successful company?**

Setting up a company and making a company successful are two different things. If you love your work, then you might succeed. I also don't believe in being a workaholic; you need to have other activities and hobbies along the way.

But work should give you pleasure. The very thought of it should bring with it the feeling of joy and accomplishment. And when that happens, I think you, as an entrepreneur, are on the right path.

#### **How do you pass your knowledge to new staff?**

I believe that if you want to teach somebody to swim, you need to throw him in the water. Any new engineer who joins us finds himself in the thick of it from day one. We leave him to work alone, watching over him from a distance. That is the best way to teach people how to use their heads, skills and capabilities.

#### **What would you do differently if you could start the company over again?**

To start this journey much earlier; I think at least two years earlier. The years between 1997 and 1999 did not do much for me. I should have started in 1997.

#### **You are mostly involved in government infrastructure projects?**

That's true, as government is the biggest spender when it comes to infrastructure development. Also, while bidding for government projects, we are sure about all criteria, as there is clarity in standards and rules. Our comfort level is also much higher, as we know what is acceptable to them.

But that does not mean that we do not undertake private projects run by private companies. But more often than not, we find ourselves facing the moods of owners of private projects, and that does become a headache at times. That's been the primary reason we have mostly focused on government projects.



**You have activities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, but most of your work is in Al Ain?**

We started here and we have good relations here. We also have a good track record in Al Ain. But we do want to work outside of Al Ain. Now we have projects in the western region of Abu Dhabi and we have our company in Dubai.

**Don't you think you will be affected if governments cut spending?**

It will certainly affect us, as it will affect everybody else. Fortunately, we have not seen anything of that until now.

**But it could happen in the near future. Have you thought about diversifying?**

We will continue to do what we have been doing on the government side, but I have already started thinking about diversifying the business. I intend to expand the business into high voltage cables and network jobs, as well as water networks, in the near future. I can think about diversifying now because I have qualified staff that I can trust fully. They make my life easy, and I need not spend all day taking care of the day-to-day activities of the company. Now I can find spare time to think of other activities.

**Have you already started diversifying?**

Not yet. The ideas are still on the drawing board. I am gathering information and talking to people. We might start this year. I also plan to expand regionally. Last year, I bought 25 per cent of a company in Dubai. This company is our entry point to Dubai's projects. We intend to expand towards Jordan, and we have ideas for Saudi and Libya too. Our expansion could be through partnerships, acquisitions or greenfield activities.

**Are you looking for investors in Prime?**

No. Our intention is to grow the company organically. We will definitely look for investors or

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co-investors in projects or in new companies that we might set up, but not in Prime.

But even when I am looking for investors in these projects, I want strategic partners who will bring technical expertise and value; not just money.

**What are the most important projects you have undertaken so far?**

We are working on our single biggest project this year. It is a 22-kilometre ring road project in Al Ain. The total project contract size is AED42 million.

However, the project that has been very close to my heart was one that we executed some years ago. It was an AED3 million project in the Al Mubazara area. The project was very important to me, as the late Sheikh Zayed took a personal interest in the development of that area.

I would also like to say that I am very proud of our track record. In the last 10 years, we have had just one case of injury at work among our employees. And that injury had nothing to do with the electrical contracting work that we do.

**Do you have children?**

Yes; three boys and one girl.

**Do you plan to bring them to work with you in future?**

They are still young. I hope that when they grow up, they will work with me.

**Do you do community service as a company?**

I believe that the local community starts here in the company. I am proud to say that we are like a big family. I am always ready to back up any initiative by the government or local associations. We have offered training to Sharjah university students. We always support activities by the Jordanian Association and the Al Ain Club. I am also a member of the Jordan Engineers Association Committee.