

Dar al-Handasah

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Dar al-Handasah (DaH) - Shair and Partners is a multidisciplinary consulting firm working in the fields of engineering, architecture, planning, environment and economy.

DaH (in Arabic: the House of Engineering) has more than 4000 employees. Headquartered in Beirut, Cairo and London, it has local offices in 84 countries. The firm was created in 1956 by five partners of Lebanese and Jordanian-Palestinian origins, four of them full-time professors at the American University of Beirut.
DaH is a global firm with deep roots in the Middle East. It was one of the first consultancy firms in the Middle East to be established according to the American model of partnership, while most local firms remained familial businesses. It grew on commissions in Kuwait and later, Saudi Arabia. There, oil was providing governments with high revenues, but projects in infrastructures and urban development were hampered by shortages in local skilled labour force. DaH's success and expansion were not unique. Various consulting and contracting companies led by Lebanese, Palestinian, Jordanian and later Egyptians were able to draw on the Gulf markets' rise; some of these being splits from the original DaH.
The next step in the expansion of DaH was towards Africa. Thanks to the oil boom, Nigeria and Algeria became in the 1970s two of its most profitable clients, with DaH planning and supervising the construction of new towns and infrastructures devoted to oil exploitation (Sokoto in Nigeria or Hassi Messaoud in Algeria). Later on, DaH expanded towards other African oil countries like Mozambique and Angola, and from the 1990s, to Asian countries, where it has been, for instance, in charge of master planning Astana, the new capital city of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, DaH's presence in the rising markets of Asia remains weak. Meanwhile, the reversal in oil price led to weakening in the oil states' economy. The recent trend towards liberalization resulted in new commissions for firms like DaH: local private groups investing in large developments and tourism as well as international organizations like the UNDP or the World Bank are now among DaH clients. Subsequently, DaH expanded much beyond the usual scope of Middle Eastern firms. In the 1980s, DaH had established the Dar Group, which bought a number of American and European firms active in Eastern Asia, America and Europe. According to the 2004 Engineering News Record ranking, it is the number one consulting firm for the Middle East and one of the leaders in Africa..
While a global firm, DaH remains strongly rooted in the Middle East: its chairman, Dr. Shair, and its main shareholders and partners originate and live in that region. DaH staff also include many Arabs, largely Lebanese. Mostly trained in western or western-style local universities, highly considered as professionals, multilingual (Arabic, English and often French), they illustrate the fact that being global is not adverse to remaining local. Local doesn't mean here being limited to one country but playing on various levels of identity and belonging, as well as actively participating in various networks, through and in spite of national borders.
Pan-Arabism seems to have been no explanation for access to the markets. But the deep knowledge of political leaders, administrations and business milieus that DaH's managers have been able to gather over time certainly helps. Dr Shair himself was

involved in Jordanian politics as a Senator, and is a Board member in various institutions. In Africa, DaH was able to rely on the Lebanese diaspora.
In Middle Eastern countries where public administrations, because of budget limitations, have difficulty in retaining their skilled professionals and therefore lack continuity in their vision, a firm like DaH not only works as a one-shot consultant. Thanks to its continued activity in the region, it acts like a kind of professional memory.
Thus, one cannot consider DaH only as a Trojan horse of an American or Western professional and liberal ideology, though of course it is. Its cultural role is more complex because of the ties it maintains in middle-eastern cities and countries, and beyond.

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