

## Arab Chamber working to innovate

As it turns 65, the organization seeks innovation, reinforces economic diplomacy, offers new services and increases the number of events to strengthen Brazil's ties with the Arab countries.

Alexandre Rocha\*

São Paulo – In the year it completed 65 years (July 2), the **Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce** has a lot in store for its members, clients and partners. Indeed, 2017 already started with some changes, such as the election of a new president in January and the inauguration of a new headquarters in April in the city of São Paulo.

“We’re preparing for a very promising, yet unpredictable future, not only for the Chamber, but for all sectors,” said the president of the organization, Rubens Hannun. “We’re preparing our staff for this. They are highly professional and motivated, and they share this vision for the future, which implies leaving our comfort zone.”

Hannun underscored that the work done by the Chamber’s employees includes the search for innovation and adding value to the services offered.



In this sense, one of the initiatives to be implemented is the membership of companies from the Arab world. Although the organization helps Arab entrepreneurs to do business in Brazil, its members are exclusively Brazilian.

To Hannun, this is one of the tools for improving bilateral relations, to put all the companies from both sides in the same “club” and match their complementary demands. “There’s a market of fantastic potential, the [Brazilian] domestic market, which is currently weaker, and the Arab market, which is a strong buying market. Let’s see how to achieve this potential,” said Hannun.

According to him, the Chamber already does part of this job by making Brazilian entrepreneurs aware that the Arab market represents a bloc and, thus, a much larger market than each country in the region individually. Together, the Arab nations from the Middle East and North Africa have

over 390 million people and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 6.45 trillion in purchasing power parity.

Rodrigo Rodrigues



Michel Alaby (L) greets guests at the inauguration of the new headquarters

According to the Arab Chamber's CEO, Michel Alaby, to attract Arab members, the idea is to offer support to these entrepreneurs in doing business in Brazil via the supply of information on Brazilian companies and trade procedures, market statistics, logistics support in trips to the country, plus the designation of a Chamber's professional to help them with business contacts.

Hannun added that the Arab Chamber will reinforce its "economic diplomacy", that is, to perform actions that encourage business directly, as well as indirectly, such as events for cultural, social and sports exchange. "Economic diplomacy focuses on trade, but also on everything that surrounds it, such as cultural, social and sports relations, for instance, that have trade as consequence. That's why we get involved in these areas," he said.

Hannun believes that the strengthening of the "Brazil Brand" can help in exploring the market potential, that is, to stick in the mind of foreign consumers that the products made in the country represent the guarantee of features such as quality and competitive pricing. "We have to work on this in the Arab world," said the president.

Another initiative planned by the Arab Chamber, according to Hannun, is to do a survey with companies that operate in trade in Brazil and the Arab countries to learn what their main demands are, and then plan new actions based on that.

## New headquarters

The Arab Chamber's new headquarters already partly serves these purposes. Located on Paulista Avenue, the ample facilities allow for a series of activities such as lectures, seminars, meetings, business matchmaking, product exhibitions, cultural presentations and social events.

Rodrigo Rodrigues



Yazigi (R): new venue measures up to the importance of the Chamber

According to Walid Yazigi, former Arab Chamber president and current president of the organization's Council, the old headquarters opened in 1966 with only one room, also on Paulista Avenue. As the organization and its staff grew, new rooms were purchased in the same building, "but without the planning it deserved."

With cash availability, the Chamber bought two floors in the building across the street [from the old office] and we opened a new headquarters planned in advance," said Yazigi on the facilities opened in 2017. "We had a wide area that allowed a new planning," he added.

The space was designed by architect Ruy Ohtake, who also designed the building. "Today, the facilities measure up to the grandiosity of the Arab Chamber," pointed out Yazigi.

To Hannun, holding events in the organization's headquarters will highlight the role in trade

promotion and in the relations of Brazil with the Arab countries in general, since these activities will gather in the same space the main players of the bilateral exchange, such as diplomats, government representatives and business owners. “With these events, not only trade, but relations tend to expand,” he said.

## Actions

Currently, one of the Chamber’s goals is to increase exports from Arab countries to Brazil and the organization’s planned actions take this into account. “The Chamber’s first focus was exports, but then later came the imports part. I believe that this is the only chamber of commerce to focus on both sides [promoting both exports and imports]” said the director of the cultural department of the organization, Sílvia Antibas, a historian and author of a book about the Chamber, launched during the celebrations of its 60th anniversary.

That’s an important demand by the Chamber’s Arab partners. The dean of the Council of Arab Ambassadors in Brazil and Palestine’s ambassador, Ibrahim Alzeben, wants to see more and more promotion of Arab products in Brazil. “We need to work harder for this and also for increasing investments on both ends,” said the diplomat. “There’s an enormous potential on both sides,” he said.

To do this, Alzeben supports holding trade and government missions from Brazil to the Arab countries and vice versa, and working together with the Brazilian government to encourage it to sign agreements on investment protection and to avoid double taxation with nations from the Middle East and North Africa.

Hannun underscored that the promotion of mutual investments is one of the Arab Chamber’s duties. “We will promote investments between the countries, we are working on that,” he said.

For the year’s second half, the Chamber has scheduled a series of actions to strengthen economic ties between Brazil and the Arabs, some original and some traditional ones. The highlights are the festivals of Brazilian products to be held at Yas Mall shopping mall in Abu Dhabi and at the supermarket chain Panda, in Saudi Arabia. “We will expand the concept of ‘Brazil’s week’ in supermarkets, not only for foods, but also for consumer goods in general,” said Alaby. In the past, the Chamber has organized this type of action along with retailers from Kuwait and Egypt.

On the other hand, the organization is expecting in Brazil missions from Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates, from Qatar, from the Dubai Islamic Economic Development Centre, from Dubai, to promote the “six pillars” of “halal economy” – which follows Muslim tradition – and it will also hold a seminar to discuss the Mercosur-Egypt free trade agreement, which goes into effect this year. “Let’s explore the opportunities that arise from the agreement,” said Alaby.

Also being planned is a Brazilian trade mission to



Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Mauritania, for entrepreneurs interested in exporting and importing products and services, and another to the seven emirates that comprise the United Arab Emirates. Also in the schedule is the construction industry fair Big 5, held in Dubai at the end of the year, among other actions. “The domestic market’s still in recession, so these are opportunities to search for markets abroad,” said Alaby.

the Gulf in May had a strong support from the Arab Chamber

The Arab Chamber is currently considered a landmark organization in the promotion of relations between Brazil and the Arab nations by government representatives, diplomats and entrepreneurs, but this did not happen overnight. [Click here to know a little bit of the history behind it.](#)

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