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BUILDING DEFENCE SYSTEMS

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BUILDING DEFENCE SYSTEMS

SECURING THE FUTURE

We all want to put our trust in our security measures, but how can we be confident in exactly who we put that faith in? We spoke with John Benton, Managing Director of Building Defence Systems (BDS) - who have prided themselves in helping secure the Middle East for over 10 years - about what inspired him to create BDS and what it takes to keep the region safe from any threat.

WRITTEN BY ALICE INSTONE-BREWER

BUILDING DEFENCE SYSTEMS

■ **HEADQUARTERED IN THE BAHRAIN INTERNATIONAL** Investment Park and with offices across the Middle East, BDS have supplied equipment to as far afield as Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Nigeria but their home turf is the GCC. In the words of their Managing Director, John Benton; “We are a supplier of Physical Security equipment to the regions Industrial, Governmental and Critical National Infrastructure sectors, put in simplistic terms, we put in barriers that stop people, vehicles, boats, bullets or bombs.”



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Such barriers are an important offering but this means more than just fencing. Although secure and resilient fencing of different kinds are a significant part of what they offer, it also involves security search and detection systems, vehicle restrictions and the required technology needed for entry point control. “This gives you a flavor of what we are about. To top this off, software and technology play a critical role in tying all the various systems together on a local, national and global scale.”

John maintains that confidence in their service is the easy part and insists that one of the greatest requirements and challenges of operating a company such as BDS is predicting demand; as soon as a product is sought after, you want to be the one who can provide it, but this requires a lot of what John calls “nimble thinking”. Staying on top of current or future threats, the latest solutions to these, and an understanding of which solutions the market is currently interested in is imperative: “You go to exhibitions and expos, and walk the floor and get a feel for what the market globally is looking at. You have to be open to anything, but you also need to have a good filter, because there is a mountain of products and solutions out there.”

He is also adamant that the key to good business is forging strong relationships and partnerships. “Hill & Smith's Bristorm product range is at the core of our perimeter security offering and they have developed products within the range based upon

strong input from BDS, so we've tailor made the range to reflect the requirements of the key markets we have exposure to. Harbor Offshore, another partner of BDS are specialists in marine security barriers and we were the first company to implement their solutions in Saudi Arabia but only after years of visits and remote communication whilst they waited for their solutions and market demand to line up together. Our technology partner VidSys are at the forefront in terms of making security management easy for the operators, and the ability to react to situations much more straightforward. Confidence like that in your products and partners is paramount and keeps this type of business on track."

One way in which John stays focused is by keeping the company centred around the area they have always worked in: physical security. "As an approved vendor to a large number of the world's leading Security and Defence contractors, we have delivered to and worked on some of the region's largest Industrial sites and that experience is not only priceless but as a result of BDS maintaining ourselves in what we are good at," he explains. Remaining anchored in what they do best allows BDS to resist the temptation of spreading themselves too thin, not being everything to every person, but instead knowing their product areas exceptionally well.

As well as staying on top of the latest developments in technology, regulations and potential threats, John and his team

must also stay aware of what the market wants – and surprisingly, these aren't always the same thing. "Quite often in security, people don't act until the threat has already appeared. That's not always the best thing to do – anticipation means you're ready, whereas doing something after the fact can take a bit of time, and that means you're vulnerable." This phenomenon isn't wise, but it is understandable; when an individual, company or even a government only have finite funds to apply to security, the priority naturally goes to threats that people are most concerned about, and preventative measures against a threat that has never been experienced may fall to the bottom of the pile.

Whilst this approach persists, it was this exact response to the perception of threat that sparked an increase in the demand for security measures in the early 2000s. John told us about his decision to start BDS, and the move was linked to a significant shift in attitudes towards security in the Middle East following the tragic events of September 11th 2001. "I was based out in Saudi Arabia doing some consultancy, which was essentially business representation and agency identification for a number of UK companies. I had a small portfolio that I represented, and the idea was to promote them and find suitable partners to get them into new regions. This became quite heavy in companies from the security related industries after the events in 2001."



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“The period of 2001-2003 saw a shift: what had felt like a very safe environment, very low key in terms of security, suddenly became focused on security as life changed.” Many of us remember this period of time, and the way that life changed as a result. From airport security to an every-day feeling, many countries felt their awareness of potential danger rise. From the news and politicians, it entered our rhetoric, and that in turn affected our outlook and choices. For John, a silver lining to this unwelcome change was that he found himself with a portfolio of interesting security companies, in a climate of high demand for what they could offer. Instead of playing the middle man between entities, he decided to represent these companies himself, and so BDS was born.

The world has of course not remained at the exact same state of alert that occurred in the early 2000s, but some things changed for the long-term. “Security precautions in Saudi Arabia between 2002 and 2008, and since then on and off in peaks and troughs of security risk, but between those years in particular there was a high security risk, with a lot of instances of issues directed towards Western interests and Western employees in particular.” John breaks the security market into three categories – governments, corporations and individuals – and the permanent change has been perceptible in all three ever since. “People’s memories don’t change, and we’ve all operated slightly differently from that point.

Individuals have certainly taken their security very seriously when they’re travelling to this region, and you think about it a lot more carefully than you would have done previously.”

Whilst this mentality has persisted, the sense of waiting for a threat to show itself before investing in a preventative measure still exists. A good example of this is marine safety: several years ago, BDS reached out to Harbour Offshore, after identifying the need for marine-side industries to protect themselves from threats at sea. However, it was some time before they felt the market was ready for their solutions:

“It goes back a number of years. In 2002, the USS Cole was attacked in Yemen by a very small craft that blew a hole in the side of it. It unfortunately killed several US service personnel and caused millions of dollars of damage. From that point, the US Navy developed their own harbor and marine protection barriers. In the late 2000s, I started thinking that something similar would be needed in the offshore facilities that we have along the coast of the Gulf. Many industrial sites are marine-side because they need to bring in cooling waters from the sea. They pump these cooling waters into power stations and a variety of different kinds of petrochemical plants etc., and it would be very easy to destroy or severely damage these sites by utilizing a small craft. There is a variety of remote-control technologies that would enable a small



unmanned vessel to move quickly across the surface of the water to damage these facilities.”

This is the sort of “nimble thinking” that John says is essential for predicting needs, and he began to research companies offering marine security. This search led him to Harbour Offshore, a US-based company, who have worked closely with the US Navy, which is a testament to their expertise and the quality of their solutions. They devised a marine barrier that serves as a sort of ‘floating wall’ - this sea-bound barrier requires almost zero maintenance once it is installed, and can stand for 25+ years. “We built up a long relationship with Harbour Offshore, which is a really positive story and we’ve been fortunate enough to represent them across the region for over six years. Industrial security teams are now treating marine security seriously, and this genre of products has become a central part of BDS’ business.”

As well as the unique complications of working in the security industry, BDS also navigates the ups and downs of being an SME in the Middle East. The government are incredibly supportive of SME’s by offering services and grants to provide training for your staff, assistance with marketing grants, upgrading your IT and if you hire local Bahrainis, they will assist with government payments to support their wages for the first two years.

“We have grown very quickly and many a learning curve was experienced but we have become a large enough company to remain a strong player in the region, whilst still being manageable so that BDS can continue to interact and work closely together with a core and experienced team. As an SME it is ingrained in us to never give up. We believe that sets us apart from our rivals as does the overall package of capability we offer which is designed to assist our clients deliver their project, from bid to project delivery.”

In looking to the future, BDS has the curious task of needing to predict where new threats may occur, or, more positively, where new developments will unfold and thus require protection. With conflict in much of the Middle East, such as in Syria and Yemen, John feels that eventually, these countries will need to rebuild their infrastructure, and that these could therefore open up as markets with new demand. He also told us that he believes that countries such as Oman and Kuwait may soon be raising the levels of their security to that of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the company is also looking into new technologies, such as solutions for the rising concern over drones. BDS seem set to keep expanding the ways they keep the Middle East safe, and may soon be keeping our skies as safe as our shorelines. ■

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