Marwa Taher – Executive Director, Swiss Egyptian Business Association



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Marwa Taher, executive director of the Swiss Egyptian Business Association (SEBA), explains how the association is promoting trade relations between the two countries. She also highlights initiatives of both SEBA and Swiss companies to improve healthcare and the wellbeing of Egyptian citizens.

Could you please introduce yourself to our global audience and explain how your prior experience helps you run the Swiss Egyptian Business Association?

I spent most of my career, over 15 years, working for Swiss Airlines and I took over the executive director position at SEBA in April 2017. During my time at Swiss Airlines, I was collaborating very closely with the embassy of Switzerland, as Swiss Airlines was sponsoring different cultural events by the Swiss embassy. Due to some organizational changes, I decided to change my career path, as I was looking for a position which allows me to have a better direct impact. The work at SEBA is very fruitful; we are finding solutions for different challenges and work closely as the link between the companies in the government – we can see the results straight away. Our task is to provide our members with a solid platform for networking and exchange, with the support of the Embassy of Switzerland we managed to solve some problems the companies are facing by connecting them to officials in the government.

What is the scope of services and activities provided by Swiss Egyptian Business Association?

The Swiss Egyptian Business Association is a non-governmental organization that has been founded and established in 2004, working under the auspices of the Embassy of Switzerland. It is the only official organization representing Swiss businesses here in Egypt. The main objective of SEBA is to serve our members, which are investors from different companies and businesses. We also work to develop bilateral economic and business relations between Switzerland and Egypt. SEBA currently has 140 members, and our key responsibility is to offer solutions and solve problems by working closely with the government, regulatory agencies, other stakeholders and the members itself.

We hold monthly meetings with our members to learn about their challenges, most pressing needs and problems. Other events include seminars, networking events, round tables. In 2018, we introduced an online platform for our members, where they can promote their products and services, as well as sharing news and achievements. Especially for pharmaceutical companies, one of the key challenges is the intellectual property right, so we try to facilitate the conversation with the government and help them solve the issues.

Finally, another key mission is to foster business relations between our countries and fortify investment areas between Egyptian and Swiss counterparts. In 2017, the Embassy of Switzerland received State Secretary of Economic Affairs Marie-Gabrielle Ineichen-Fleisch, who signed the Swiss-Egyptian Cooperation Strategy in Egypt with Minister of Investment and International Cooperation Sahar Nasr. We also invited both Ms Marie Gabrielle and Dr Sahar Nasr to our annual SEBA Awards, during which some Swiss and Egyptian investors received an award as a recognition for their efforts and social contribution in Egypt.

There is strong initiative from both countries for profound cooperation in the future, on different levels and involving different sectors. Our strategy is aligned with the political agenda and we are here to provide the most beneficial services to our members.

You have mentioned in a previous interview that SEBA and the Swiss Embassy are planning to organize a trade mission to Switzerland to promote investment in Egypt in 2019. What is the latest status of this project?

We recently had a pleasure to speak with Minister of Investment and International Cooperation Dr Sahar Nasr and she agreed to visit Switzerland this year. Considering her focus on small and medium enterprises, we believe it will help to attract more investment from Egyptian companies interested in doing business in Switzerland. We also want her to meet the private sector of Switzerland, to hear about needs, requirements and challenges as well as their feedback in regard to enabling them to come to Egypt. Currently, there is a lack of information for businesses that might be interested to invest in Egypt. We want to bring both parties together and make sure we communicate the message of why Swiss companies should come to Egypt and vice versa.

In terms of the Egyptian-Swiss business relationship, how have the dynamics changed recently?

The trust in the Egyptian market and the Egyptian economy is back. After the revolution, Egypt was a red flag for international investors, but with the current reforms, we are on the right track. While changes will probably not show right away, we must be aware that the government is now aiming for sustainable, long-term development. More transparency is still needed, however, especially to update the industry and population on the recent status of national campaigns and initiatives, to avoid rumours and give a clearer picture on the plans driving forward the country’s development.

Despite its small size, Switzerland is the 12th biggest investor in Egypt. What makes Egypt such an attractive destination for investment?

The economic cooperation between the two countries has started 110 years ago, so there has always been a strong bond between the countries because of this history. We will have an official delegation from Switzerland visiting this year to celebrate this anniversary and further deepen our relationships. The investment climate is quite friendly due to the current reforms and the economy being back on track, which has resulted in the rising interest of Swiss companies in the country. Additionally, Egypt is seen as a gate to Africa; not only by Swiss companies but by many other companies looking to invest in this continent. Especially in the logistics and the renewable energy sector companies see big opportunities.

How can associations like SEBA help to promote public-private partnerships, especially in the healthcare area?

Our role is to pull the private sector towards initiatives by the government. Many Swiss companies have followed this road; for example, Nestlé is organizing nutrition and health awareness programs, while Syngenta provides crops to Egyptian farmers and also runs awareness campaigns. Additionally, Swiss companies are very active in the life sciences field having established water and sanitation programs in Upper Egypt. Switzerland also founded the National Center of Blood Transfusion in Egypt in 2017

How is SEBA supporting healthcare initiatives in the country?

One of our initiatives includes supporting people with disabilities, which helps people with autism. We also supported a project which started in 2017 that was offered help for people with Down Syndrome. I am personally very happy to see those projects on top of our agenda, having a true impact on improving the situation of Egyptian citizens. This year SEBA has put education as a top priority, with the aim of better-integrating people with disabilities into the educational system. Hence, we support the ADVANCE Society for developing skills of children with special needs, which provides training to support teachers, educating them on how to support people with disabilities in schools. Moreover, we work with the Swiss Embassy on retaining talent in Egypt. Through education, we do our part to stop the migration of the Egyptian youth and help them find opportunities here in Egypt.

Where do you see the role of SEBA in developing the Egyptian Market during the next five years?

I believe success in Egypt cannot be only achieved by one institution, so we are actively looking for partnering with other associations like the French Chamber, Injaz, Rotary or Misr El Kheir. We are trying to bring forces together in our joint effort of reaching the common goal, which is to provide information to foreign investors. Due to the economic development, our role is expanding, and the Swiss investors see Egypt as a more attractive destination than before. Hence, we have more responsibility towards the Egyptian government and Switzerland, so we must be a reliable partner connecting the public and private sector.

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