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Al-Rashed International Shipping has established its position as a leader in shipping services in the Persian Gulf. General manager Ravi Varrier explains to Gay Sutton why the human touch is so important

Modern-day Kuwait has come a long way from the small pearl fishing community of the early 1900s. Sophisticated and cosmopolitan, it is the world's eleventh richest nation, boasting a free and thriving economy, a well funded education system and the second highest literacy rate in the Middle East after Israel. Its population is also very diverse, 32 per cent being Kuwaitis and the rest expatriates drawn from around the world.



The echoes of the old pearl fishing tradition, however, continue to resonate strongly today. With its roots firmly based in a seagoing tradition, Kuwait has developed one of the largest shipping industries in the Persian Gulf, not only handling exports but also importing the vast array of materials required for industrial and commercial

development, along with goods and food for its multifaceted population.

One of the leaders of the Kuwaiti marine industry is Al-Rashed International Shipping, a division of The Al-Rashed Group—a long established trading company founded in 1911 by the highly respected Al-Rashed family.



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Launched in 1952, the International Shipping division initially traded as a shipping agent for the materials and goods required during the earlier years of modernisation and transformation. It wasn't until 1991 when Kuwait faced the challenge of rebuilding its devastated infrastructure following the depredations of the Iraqi invasion that the company saw the opportunity to diversify and build a much stronger and larger company.

“We saw significant opportunities to work with some of the world's largest and most respected companies on the reconstruction of Kuwait,” explains general manager Ravi Varrier, who has been with the company for 33 years. “But at the same time, we also had to rebuild our business from scratch when we returned to Kuwait after the war.”

The two reconstructions went hand-in-hand.

Building on the reputation it had gained over the previous 40 years for efficiency and service, the company established its credentials and expanded into all areas of international shipping.

Today, Al-Rashed International Shipping offers a wide range of services from shipping agency and charter work to warehouse & logistics, contract work and freight forwarding. Not only capable of handling all types of marine operations including chemical, military, oil, bulk and break bulk, the company also has considerable expertise and experience in air and land transportation. Operating to the highest international standards, it is renowned for the care and attention it gives to its customers.

Varrier attributes a significant element of this success to the people-oriented company ethos

of the Al-Rashed Group, and to the in-depth knowledge and experience of his own staff. “The key thing for us is the human touch. We employ 146 staff in our Kuwait office, and simply don't have the staff turnover that many of our competitors do. Many of our staff have 10 to 12 years' experience with the company and are prepared to work very promptly and very hard for our customers,” he says. “Moreover, if a customer, shipper or consignee is having any problems our top management will get involved and help find a solution. It is just part of our day-to-day business.”

In the weeks following the end of the second Gulf War in 2003, when urgent supplies were needed throughout Iraq, the company stepped in quickly to fill that vacuum. Managing the supply of items such as power generation and water purifying equipment as well as supplies to the international troops, it became the first company to establish a proven freight delivery system into Iraq. And this established a firm foundation for the company's second phase of expansion.

“Operating in Iraq was challenging in those early days because much of the local manpower had

been lost, and there was a considerable amount of looting,” Varrier admits. However, the company worked hard to establish an office in Iraq and to build a stable and secure business. What began as a requirement to import and move construction materials and equipment for the international contractors tasked with rebuilding the country's infrastructure soon developed into a full range of shipping, air and road services, and eventually included fulfilling complex projects for major multinational players in the oil and energy sectors.

Today, Al-Rashed International Shipping employs some 68 Iraqi nationals to run the Iraq office. Again, Varrier believes that it's the human touch that has enabled the company to build a strong and loyal workforce in what is essentially a deeply troubled region.

All the usual concessions are provided for the local staff, including attractive salaries and a healthcare scheme. But true loyalty requires stronger foundations than that. “The Iraqis are essentially building their nation,” Varrier says. “Therefore we put a considerable amount of money into their families, for example by supporting the education of their children. This builds loyalty to the company and confidence in our system.”

Suppliers and contractors play a significant part in supporting the company's reputation and influencing its efficiency, and they are therefore subject to the same principles of loyalty and honesty. “We don't allow anything under the table,” Varrier says. Neither does he believe in beating his suppliers down to the lowest price—it's loyalty and quality of service that matters the most. “We always demand the best service,” he continues. “But we ask for a reasonable price and we pay very promptly, and that's a great advantage in our negotiations.”

The company continues to invest for the future, and has recently spent approximately US\$150,000 on the implementation of a new ERP system. Meanwhile, the operations in Iraq were expanded in 2009 when a purpose-built 3,000 square metre warehouse was opened at a site just 10 kilometres from the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr.

“Our strategy is to invest in the growing market,” Varrier says. Apart from Iraq, though, the Persian Gulf is very much a saturated market and the company is therefore considering its options for expansion further afield. “We have initiated market reports for areas such as China and India, but such things are very much for the future,” he concludes. www.al-rashedgroup.com

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