

Feature: Fire & Rescue

6th November 2008

Building boom

Dr Kevin Towler, Managing Director of Chiltern International Fire/Director BM TRADA Middle East, discusses export opportunities for British manufacturers.

As a target for export, the Middle East ticks all the boxes. The region has a long-standing relationship with the UK and therefore recognises and accepts British Standards, but above all it has a buoyant economy and a thriving construction industry.

The potential, in fact, is so huge that it is drawing in people and companies from all over the world - in 2007, construction projects valued at US \$2 trillion were started in the Gulf region. Inevitably, competition is fierce, so it is crucial to take time to understand the market and to make contacts. You will need a local presence – just understanding how to get visas and labour cards, finding premises and recruiting people can make the start up very challenging.

Yet after the initial pain and difficulties, the rewards can be huge and satisfying. Dubai alone is targeting a 1.1 million increase in population in the next five years. People typically live in tower blocks, of around 25 to 150 storeys high. The country needs at least 400 tower blocks more to house this growing population, with supporting infrastructure and office space.

And the building projects already under way are impressive. The first section of a new, 200 km long metro will open in 2009. The \$20 billion Nakeel Tower Development, comprising apartments and offices to house 60,000 people, will reach a height of more than 1000m.

In addition, a third terminal has just been completed in the existing airport, which will now cater for some 40 million passengers a year, while the new Maktoum International Airport in Jebel Ali will handle three times that and, when completed, will be twice the size of Heathrow. The scale of these projects is easier to grasp when you consider that the temporary building erected for construction workers needed 30,000 doors.

In spite of all this, Dubai is deemed to be only 20% developed, while Abu Dhabi, seat of the federal capital, is investing its significant oil reserves in infrastructure and major construction projects. It too is aiming to increase its population, on a similar scale to Dubai.

Then there are the Gulf States:

- Qatar is oil and gas rich and is investing in its infrastructure – trying to become an educational hub.
- Bahrain is starting to develop and is already known as a banking hub.
- Kuwait is starting to grow and develop.
- Oman has wonderful natural history and scenery and is a natural place for tourism to develop.

In Saudi Arabia, covering half the land mass of Europe, the opportunities are hugely increased. Its economy is bigger than all the others put together and the country is starting to use its vast oil resources to develop its infrastructure.

In such a burgeoning market, it is more critical than ever to ensure safety on site and in the finished structure. And with so many people living in tower blocks, fire safety takes on added importance. High-rise constructions can be complex in nature, however, and have their own issues relating to fire safety, so fire doors have a critical role to play.

Over and above protecting property, fire doors save lives. They must therefore be specified, manufactured, installed and maintained correctly, as well as being rigorously inspected in situ. Third-party certification for both manufacture and installation is a key tool in ensuring that this happens.

BM TRADA has been established in the Middle East for seven years and the Q-Mark scheme for timber fire doors has grown strongly in the past four. One of the main drivers, without doubt, was the decision by Dubai Civil Defence to make third-party certification a requirement for fire door manufacturers, since when the Q-Mark has been introduced across the Gulf region as authorities and developers perceived the benefits that this internationally recognised scheme could bring.

We have always deemed it important, however, to emphasise the crucial link between fire door testing and certification. To this end, two years ago BM TRADA's sister company Chiltern International Fire invited a delegation of government and other representatives from Qatar to our joint headquarters near High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. The aim of the visit was to enable us to demonstrate to them fire door testing to British Standards. We believe that by witnessing the test process, it is easier to appreciate the importance of testing and, in turn, certification in reducing the real risks of fire.

Following on from the first successful visit, earlier this year, CIF welcomed a further delegation of more than 20 guests from the Middle East, including representatives of Bahrain Civil Defence, the Royal Oman Police, the Kuwait Fire Service Directorate and Jordan's Royal Scientific Society. This underlined for us the importance of building relationships and reinforced our position as a conduit for British products seeking to gain acceptance in the Middle East through certification.

Working closely with authorities and consultants/developers in the Middle East, is certainly one factor in enabling the Q-Mark for timber fire door manufacture to become accepted throughout the Emirates and in Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Oman and Lebanon.

And recognition of the Q-Mark across the region has in our view not only forced up standards, but has also greatly enhanced the quality and performance of fire doorsets being installed. Another benefit is that manufacturers and specifiers now recognise that fire doors are an engineered product, built to a specific design, and therefore require knowledge in specification, manufacture and installation.

For additional reassurance, BM TRADA is now rolling out its fire door installer scheme within the Middle East, a scheme which has a proven track record in the UK. The British Airports Authority, a blue chip specifier recognised internationally, has included in its specification that only BM TRADA Q-Marked fire doorsets may be installed at any of its airports, testimony indeed to the esteem in which Q-Mark is held.

Under the installer scheme, individuals will be rigorously trained by Chiltern International Fire and examined by BM TRADA. Doorsets installed by them will carry a unique label, identifying the installer, who assumes full responsibility for the installation of the doorset. Via the reference number on the label any problems can be traced back to the installer who will take responsibility for resolving them.

Even so, it is not all plain sailing in an expanding market where consultants from all over the world are involved in myriad projects, working to many different product standards. BM TRADA's local and technical knowledge has proven invaluable in helping to overcome the issues that can arise when British, American, European and ISO standards are mixed together. It needs someone who is able to interpret all of these standards and to try to bring them together in a logical fashion without compromising the fire safety of the project. Our ability to do this is one of our great strengths in developing close relationships in the Middle East.

Through Q-Mark we have been able to develop an effective framework for the manufacture installation of timber fire doors, enhancing quality and performance. This we believe will drive fire safety standards in construction ever higher, offering exciting opportunities for tried and tested British products.

- For further information visit www.bmtrada.com or email ktowler@chilternfire.co.uk.

Ends