

Local Values, International Presence

An Interview with R. Seetharaman,
Chief Executive Officer, Doha Bank



R. Seetharaman

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining Doha Bank in 2002, R. Seetharaman held senior management positions in three banks in Oman. He began his professional career at the global consultancy firm Price Waterhouse & Associates, before moving to the banking sector. A graduate of the University of Madras, Seetharaman is a chartered accountant and holds certificates in IT systems and corporate management. The recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the 2007 Middle East Banking Industry's Banker of the Year Award and the 2006 Arab Asian Banker Excellence Award, Seetharaman is a renowned speaker and author on cross-border economic issues, and makes frequent appearances at conferences and in the global business media.

COMPANY BRIEF Incorporated in 1978, Doha Bank (www.dohabank.com.qa) is the largest private commercial bank in Qatar. Through innovative technologies, the bank enables individuals and commercial, corporate, and institutional clients across Qatar to do their banking and investing whenever, wherever, and however they choose, through an extensive network of branches and multiple access channels.

Doha Bank has consistently received various awards and accolades since 2003. How does it sustain this high level of performance?

Doha Bank had remained very conservative and modest since its inception. Its transformation story has become an example in the

region. In just five years, the bank has become a vibrant entity, with leadership positions in financial performance, range of product and services, technology deployment, innovation, and international brand value.

In five years, our shareholder equity has grown 4.4 times, our assets have grown more than four times, and our net profits have grown more than seven times. Our equity is in excess of \$1 billion, with an asset base in excess of \$8.2 billion. Doha Bank has some of the best performance indicators in the market, in terms of return on equity, return on average assets, and cost income ratio, indicating our profitability and productivity.

The bank's phenomenal rise in stature is clearly reflected in the awards and accolades it has been receiving from various respected financial sector publications, such as *Banker Middle East*, *Euromoney*, the *Financial Times*, and *World Finance*. Recently, *World Finance* named us the Best Bank in Qatar 2007, and *Banker Middle East* named us the Best Commercial Bank in the Middle East 2007. Our newly established Doha Islamic division has been given the 2007 Best Islamic Corporate Finance in the Middle East Award from *Islamic Business and Finance* of CPI Publications. Further, Doha Bank has been named the Best Internet Bank by *Banker Middle East*.

Could you summarize the strategy that has led to this success?

During the past five years, our strategy envisioned growth both locally and internationally, in strategic locations, and becoming known as the best performing bank with traditional local values and a strong international presence.

As the Qatar economy expands, both the retail and corporate segments are bound to expand too. International trade is also bound to grow. Accordingly, we have a strategy for growth in multiple banking domains. We have created many new strategic business units, such as Equipment Finance, Mortgage Finance & Real Estate Services, Project Finance & Equity Advisory Services, Islamic Banking, Bancassurance, and the International Relationship Center, to cater to growing customer needs. Recently, we set up a wholly owned insurance subsidiary, Doha Bank Assurance Company, which now offers general insurance services to our customers. It's the first of its kind in the Middle Eastern region. Further, we have taken a 49 percent strategic stake in the Indian brokerage firm, Doha Brokerage & Financial Services.

Does Doha Bank's global presence continue to grow?

As Qatar and the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] region is undergoing an economic transformation, the volume of international trade and commerce in the region is increasing tremendously. Doha Bank aims to be a preferred gateway to the Middle East for institutions and organizations throughout the world. We have full-fledged overseas branch operations in New York and Dubai, and very soon will have a new branch in Kuwait. In addition, we have established a strategic international presence in countries that have strong trade and commerce ties with the region – Singapore, Turkey, China, Japan, and Romania. This will help us leverage the expanding bilateral and multilateral trade and commerce throughout these regions. In addition, we have acquired stakes in a financial services company in India and are looking seriously at expanding into other markets as well.

You have proactively participated in initiatives to tackle global warming. Why?

I feel that banks have a critical role to play in the protection of the environment, both as a responsible corporate citizen and from the business perspective, by encouraging the corporate sector to undertake environmentally friendly projects and promoting investment in environmentally friendly sustainable business initiatives. Commercially, such projects are highly viable and rewarding, and provide decent returns.

At Doha Bank, we are preparing for a \$1 billion bond issue, creating a sustainable investment fund for green projects. The fund is expected to be launched during this year. It will invest in projects for sustainable energy, such as biomass and biofuel worldwide, and will support solar energy projects, especially in the Gulf region.

What is your outlook for the Qatari economy, and particularly the banking sector, in coming months?

Qatar has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The macroeconomic fundamentals are very strong, and with high energy prices, the government is consistently in surplus. The banking sector has a strong bond with the economic environment and, hence, is poised for multidimensional growth, both in the number of activities and in the scale of operations. A developing economy requires considerable financing, and, hence, the growth opportunity for the banking sector is strong. ●