



Interview

Basima Abdulrahman **Founder and CEO, KESK**

Basima Abdulrahman is the founder and CEO of KESK, an Iraq-based green solutions company that provides green building and design and renewable energy solutions. Basima has a passion for sustainable development and making a positive impact on the environment. She has also been a board member of the World Economic Forum and is the 2021 Cartier Women's Initiative laureate on MENA Region.

Basima told the Business LANDSCAPE about her story, navigating through the main obstacles surrounding operating a startup in the green energy sector and securing her six figures seed funding. She also addressed how to raise awareness about the green energy sector and its prospects, the challenges of being a woman entrepreneur and founder of a tech-enabled business, and how to enable more women to enter this domain.

Who is Basima, and what is her story?

I am originally from Kurdistan but was born and raised in Baghdad. I lived in Baghdad until 2006 then moved to Kurdistan, where I finished my bachelor's degree in civil engineering.

Then I worked for a little bit in the public sector before telling myself that this could not be what I wanted to do. I was very young and did not know what else to do. Everybody wanted to work in the public sector; there was no culture of entrepreneurship at that time.

Later, I applied to the Fulbright program and got awarded the scholarship to finish my master's degree abroad. I thought this would be the best way to move forward.

As I was doing my master's in the United States, I was introduced to the concept of green buildings. I am really passionate about the environment, and I am concerned about climate change and mitigating its impact. I knew the green building would be the right career path for me.

I went back to Iraq in early 2015; at the time, the war with ISIS was taking place, and everything was different compared to the time I left. Therefore, I joined the UN, but I continued my passion for green building.

I would not say I was an entrepreneur because, back then, I was not thinking about entrepreneurship in particular, but I wanted to do something in that regard. However, the more I look, the more I see that nobody is doing it, nobody even knew about it, and nobody was considering it.

I went to the States twice and got my training to become an accredited professional by the US Green Building Council in 2016-2017. It was at my own expense to develop in that area. When I came back, I started considering starting a business in the domain of green building myself, and I began by offering my services as an independent consultant.

Since no one was doing that, and I was already taking the initiative to do so as a consultant, more people started to hear about the work I was promoting and wanted to be a part of it. So we started forming a small team, and from there, KESK was born.

Can you tell us about KESK? And the solutions you are offering?

KESK started as a green building consulting company. First, we established our headquarters in Erbil, and now we have another headquarters in Baghdad. We have not opened an office yet, but we have a new LLC developed in Baghdad. This is a part of our expansion strategy; when we have a company registered and based in Baghdad, it gives us more access to the rest of the country.

KESK started as a green building consultancy company, but since this concept is not very common in the country yet, it was somewhat confusing to the public. People are mostly acquainted with solar energy; hence, they think our services are limited to those. Therefore, we had to raise a lot of awareness and clarify that green building is an umbrella term that includes water, energy, waste, etc.

KESK is pivoting to be a green solutions company, including green buildings consulting. We also have a branded solar air conditioning entering the market under our name. In addition, we are planning to expand to other solar energy products, like solar street lights and water heaters. We provide smart solar energy products that come with built-in IoT technology and deliver general solar PV development projects. Our services include design, implementation, and after sales.

What is green building in particular, and what types of services fall under this umbrella?

A green building is a building that consumes less energy and water, produces less waste and CO2, and also has a healthy indoor environment.



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A green building should consume a minimum of 40% less energy, 50% less water, and generates 33% less greenhouse gases. It is the way the building is designed to be well insulated at an architectural design level to harvest all the resources in terms of water, sunlight, and other energy sources.

The green spaces and landscapes can include native or adaptive plants that do not need much irrigation outdoors or indoors. The appliances can be more sustainable. For example, instead of using a faucet that uses one gallon of water per minute, it can use half a gallon of water per minute.

A green building designed in Europe is different from one designed in Iraq because we account for summertime; our summers are long and hot. Moreover, if we are designing in Europe, we must account for the harsh winter, especially in the Scandinavian areas of Europe.

We look into all the different details and aspects. Various factors play a significant role in the design of the building. Even the direction of the sun that takes different angles and changes in different seasons is taken into consideration. We compute how much energy the building is consuming during the design stage and how much emissions it is producing to rely on this for the implementation stage.

I would assume that the awareness in Iraq about climate change and the importance of green energy solutions is still limited. With the services you are providing, how are you also trying to raise awareness about the importance of these solutions?

I have personally taken part, and still, take part in a lot of discussions and meetings that are happening. I try to shed light on the importance of sustainability and green solutions. It used to take most of my time, but now, it is tough for me to manage a team, follow up with clients and make sure the projects are going as planned while still doing what I used to do a couple of years ago.

However, I still participate in the conversation as much as possible, especially if it is something that I can do online and I do not have to travel.

I try to be vocal about my message and advocate for green solutions and a sustainable economy. It is not just a matter of trying to mitigate the effects of climate change but also a substantial economic win for our clients and the country.

As a team, we try to understand our clients' needs, we do our homework and let them know what we are addressing to reduce the amount of money and CO2 emissions. Whenever we are developing proposals for clients, there has to be a component that highlights the return on investment, environmental impact, and all other involved aspects, so that the clients have a comprehensive picture of the work.

What are the prominent challenges and obstacles you have encountered in running a company in the green energy field?

I would say that the lack of awareness is the biggest challenge. Many people do not understand what we are going through today regarding the lack of services. We have less than 12 hours of electricity a day coming from the



electrical grid, which is a huge issue that is only getting worse. This is not happening in a vacuum or for no reason; it is all happening because we are not developing and building sustainably. We are not considering the expansion of cities and the increase of population in certain areas, and their impact on the grid. Unfortunately, we as a country lack proper studies and assessments in order to address these issues.

There is also the issue of quality control. Many service providers have an inadequate understanding of the services they provide and insufficient quality control on the materials entering the country. At some point, this will reflect negatively on the trust of people in green solutions.

How do you evaluate the current regulations and legal framework in the domain of green energy? How was this reflected in the registration process?

The sector of green energy would have prospered quicker in Iraq if it was well regulated. Some excellent initiatives are running right now, such as the National Initiative by the Central Bank of Iraq, which is providing low-interest financing for solar energy systems. However, I am afraid that these initiatives do not address the people they intend to serve very well.

We have contacted many banks, and we realized that they do not want to spend their time and go through the paperwork to finance a project starting from \$10,000. They perceive that as a waste of time. They can only see value in bigger projects that might cost \$100,000 and above.

Yet, the ecosystem is not that evolved in this domain, and supporting smaller projects is essential to drive growth. Therefore, these finer details need to be well addressed among different institutions, the government, the Central Bank, and other key players. We think it is a learning process for everyone involved, and it is good that we have started to develop this sector. The only way to go from here is up.



I always strive to become better at leading the business and the team. I believe that a good leader aligns the team with the vision and makes sure that everyone is content at the company to drive the success of the business.



Regarding the registration process, we have faced some challenges in Erbil because the registrar does not identify the green building field. Hence, we had to register the company for services and consulting in sustainable and environmentally friendly buildings.

We had to come up with a long description because we were not allowed to use a concept like green building or its Arabic and Kurdish counterparts. So we had to break it down into simple and clear wording.

Updating the regulations and procedures to be more inclusive of the new emerging sectors would positively reflect on their growth. On the upside, there were no other obstacles to registering the company, and the rest went smoothly.

How was KESK's journey to securing investments? And how do you perceive the access to finance in the ecosystem?

In the very beginning, I put in my own capital and bootstrapped on that for two years. We developed small projects for good customers, which helped us build a good track record for a startup. From there on, we started to explore other financing options.

There were some financing opportunities coming out by different entities, which had some sort



of fund for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). But, there is a common misconception to view SMEs and startups as the same thing; we try to educate financing entities about the differences between the two.

For example, a startup does not have an asset of value that could be used as collateral for some financial support. There was a bit of struggle for us as a startup as we tried to obtain several financing opportunities that catered to SMEs. When I say SMEs, I am talking about the level of big factories and operations that are way larger than what a startup is.

It was challenging to convey to these financing entities that we have certain limitations. We had a lot of discussions in that regard. A lot of these entities appreciated the feedback and learned that they might need to create different forms of support that served startups.

As for us, we tried different fronts to get some financial support and expand our operations. At some point, we need to be a bit quicker and bolder to expand. This requires some capital, and we need this capital to come from certain entities.

We managed to secure some funds from Five-One Labs as a part of their acceleration and growth funding program. We also got the 2021 Cartier Women's Initiative award last year on the Middle East and North Africa region. Then, we received a pre-seed investment from Euphrates Advisors. 2021 was a really good year for us in terms of access to different financing opportunities.

How did the Cartier Women's Initiative empower you personally and professionally? And what value did it add to your business?

Cartier Women's Initiative is a great experience that is still ongoing. Part of the program is that we receive executive training by INSEAD, a business school with campuses in France, Singapore, Abu Dhabi, and San Francisco. They did not just provide us with a financial award. The capital was just a component among many other

services. Before receiving the award, there was a lot of due diligence, meetings, and discussions. After we had been selected among the top three candidates for each region, we were put through a training process, which enabled us to connect with experts from different fields.

After we received the award, we went through different training sessions to develop our personal skills as leaders of these companies. It was an enriching experience in terms of the volume of information and the quality of training we received. It helped me shape a lot of the documentation; my financial documents, pitch deck, financial models, marketing strategies, and sales strategies.

Aside from all of that, it was helpful for me personally as I took part in a lot of training catered towards female entrepreneurs and the challenges we face on a daily basis.

What are the challenges that you face as a woman entrepreneur and founder?

I would say that there are differentiating aspects to being a woman leader. I always strive to become better at leading the business and the team. I believe that a good leader aligns the team with the vision and makes sure that everyone is content at the company to drive the success of the business.

This is how I look at it, and this is how I feel about my business. The company is like my family, and I dive into what happens internally. I do a lot of business development, and I deal with many things outside of the company. However, what keeps me up at night is what is happening inside the company. I often try not to get too emotionally involved, but it is challenging, as a woman, not to get emotionally involved in the way I run the business and the team.

I am very invested in how happy and comfortable the team is and how their lives outside of work are taken care of. If I am not pleased with these aspects, it makes me less productive than I should be. Therefore, I need to find a balance, so both the team and the company are doing well.

I seek a lot of guidance and support to ensure that I am doing my best and constantly developing my leadership skills.

Personally, I think it is not very common to see women entrepreneurs in our society. Even when there are women entrepreneurs in different sectors, they are less likely to work in tech-enabled businesses or green energy building, and this case is global. Still, it is more pronounced in the MENA region.

How do you think we can empower women to break the glass ceiling and take leadership roles in tech-enabled businesses?

I have discussed this with some women who graduated from engineering schools. The problem that I found is that they, as women, do not feel comfortable pursuing such career paths because they feel that it is challenging. Although around 50% of graduates of those fields are women, statistically, they have higher grades than their peers. Unfortunately, they settle for office jobs in management, human resources, finance, or similar professions. Another reason for this issue is that many business owners believe that men can do a better job in these fields than their women counterparts.

So they would rather hire a man to fill the position than a woman. In order to bridge this gap, we need both women and business owners to take responsibility for this. Women need to start to get into those fields; if they feel passionate about them, they need to step up their game and overcome the challenges along the way.

While business owners need to grant women equal opportunities at work, provide them a chance to show their potential, encourage them, and give them access to resources.

Another major issue is the educational system. Our education system is grades-oriented and does not consider people's passions or talents. This leads many graduates to pursue career paths where they have no interest and feel less enthusiastic about joining the workforce.

Did you face any gender-specific biases during your work, whether during your operations or when raising funds?

I would not say that I experienced any discrimination. However, because it was uncommon for women to work in this sector, I had to work harder and needed to be very well equipped before getting into any discussion, whether during the registration process or while pursuing a client or any other type of work that I was conducting as a founder.

Some people would have a prejudice, thinking that I might not be able to do this job as required. Nevertheless, once we have a meeting and I am able to present them with all the needed information, numbers, and technical know-how, then I can feel that those prejudices are fading away. It becomes a normal conversation between two people on equal footing. I know my business very well inside out. I have more information than whomever I am talking to about our services and operations. Being qualified and prepared is key to shattering those prejudices against women in tech-enabled businesses.

Is it a challenge to find the human capital and skills in your domain of work?

Yes, definitely. Being a startup in itself is not conventional. So we cannot settle for traditional skills. We have a small team, so it must be very strong and well-skilled. Because we need to make sure that we are cutting off operational costs while maintaining maximum productivity and



efficiency. It is not easy finding the right skills for our startup, given the fact we are a tech-enabled startup operating in the field of green energy, and our services are related to engineering.

It is also very high-tech and very sensitive work, whether during the pre-design phase, design, installation, or even after sales. Thus, it is a challenge that we face to build and grow our team, so we try to find the right people and build up their capacity and skills to help us expand our operations all over the country.

How do you think we can equip the human capital with better skills that match the requirements of the modern job market?

I believe we can address this issue by creating very well-structured internship programs to develop the soft skills of the fresh graduates and also provide them with good work experience.

Moreover, educational institutions need to incorporate those internship programs for students in diverse fields to help them gain different skill sets. In addition to developing the current curricula to respond to the modern-day job requirements. Private sector companies, large corporations, and startups could be great options for those students, who are the next workforce, to learn and broaden their perspectives.

What is next for KESK? What is the future vision of your company?

We have already taken the first step and registered the company in Baghdad. The next step is to open an office there and then expand our operations to all of Iraq and extend our services to other innovative solar energy products.

We also have more innovative solutions coming up that we are excited about. Our vision is to be futuristic, sustainable, and relevant to the ever-changing scene.



I encourage people who might be working in different sectors and fresh graduates interested in the environmental field not to shy away from what they are passionate about and believe in.



What is your advice for those interested in working in the green energy sector?

As a country and as a whole region, we are making some initiatives towards the environmental sector, humble initiatives but good ones. It is an excellent first step that discussions on sustainable development and solar energy production are taking place.

The impact of climate change we are facing today will only exacerbate. I encourage people who might be working in different sectors and fresh graduates interested in the environmental field not to shy away from what they are passionate about and believe in.

Even if the job market does not provide many opportunities for them to pursue a career where they can lead a green energy business and positively impact society, they can still navigate this challenging scene and create their own opportunities.

In addition, intrapreneurship is another path that those people can take to mitigate the negative impact on the environment, which is being a part of an organization, whether public or private, then developing initiatives that could somehow steer that organization to be more environmentally aware and have a positive impact integrated into their operations and activities.

