

Afghan entrepreneur defies war to squeeze out a juice empire

BY **ROB TAYLOR**

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1 OF 10. An Afghan man makes pomegranate juice at the Omaid Bahar fruit factory in Kabul October 9, 2012.

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(Reuters) - From a gritty walled compound in a fringe of Kabul better known for bombs and violent demonstrations, Mustafa Sadiq is building a global empire on fruit, selling Afghan produce to the health-conscious in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Gaudily painted trucks line up outside Sadiq's 'Omaid Bahar' factory and workers in juice-stained clothes unload sacks of pomegranates. The fruit's dark red seeds are prized in Europe for their abundant antioxidants, and in [Japan](#) where many believe they can help fight cancers in the aftermath of last year's Fukushima nuclear catastrophe.

"Besides a thousand things negative said about [Afghanistan](#), no one can ignore the quality, the taste of our fruits, that everywhere it is admired," says Sadiq, a quiet 47-year-old with ambitious plans to expand his two-year-old, \$30 million (18 million pounds) venture into a \$100 million Afghan-born fruit behemoth.

Omaid Bahar, or 'Spring Wish', is a rarity in war-racked [Afghanistan](#): a mid-sized [business](#) employing almost 1,000 people and thriving even as many entrepreneurs eye the country's

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exits, worried about what will happen when NATO combat troops leave in 2014.

Underscoring fears of a Taliban resurgence or worse, a renewal of the bloody ethnic civil war that raged through the early 1990s, Afghans carted \$4.5 billion in cash through Kabul airport last year to safety abroad, according to the central bank, much of it ending up in Dubai.

The company is a huge gamble for Sadiq as other businesses fall around him, including many which relied on making military boots and uniforms, but whose orders have recently been cancelled or scaled back.

Where others fret about instability, Sadiq sees opportunity, selling fruit juice concentrate and fresh produce to Britain and western Europe, as well as Canada, Dubai, [Pakistan](#), India, and markets in Southeast Asia.

He has advanced plans for joint ventures in the United States, and sales of juice in neighbouring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well as at home, where Afghans are mostly unaware of how highly-regarded their homegrown pomegranates are by health food aficionados.

"We have a premium product here and it is almost organically produced. Because of the climate and the taste we are a step ahead of our competitors," says Sadiq.

"People talk about the health benefits. But unfortunately in our country, people are not that much aware."

BIBLICAL FRUIT

Pomegranates, a staple in the Bible and in Homeric tales, and whose edible pulpy seeds are laden with health-giving antioxidants, vitamins and fibre, have been cultivated for thousands of years. Their deep red juice, also used in cocktail-mixing and Middle Eastern cooking, is sweet with a sour finish.

Afghans argue that the fruit originated in the country's fertile river plains and valleys, where insurgents have battled NATO and Afghan security forces for 11 years.

Sadiq has had to overcome the myriad problems thrown up by the war and Afghanistan's history of conflict, including Taliban insurgents blocking access to farms, Stone Age agricultural techniques, potholed supply routes riddled with landmines, and the bureaucratic torment of its notorious kleptocracy.

"If we had peace and security in the country, we would be in touch directly with the farmers. Now we cannot reach many places that we want. But overall, we try our best," he says.

Inside his factory, fist-sized pomegranates tumble into water for cleaning before bobbing onto conveyors and into a stainless steel crusher where they are pressed into juice concentrate by machinery imported from [Italy](#) and Sweden.

The concentrate is packed into vacuum bags which then fill huge green drums shipped in from [Russia](#). Next door a separate factory squirts fresh juice into shop-ready packs at a rate of 7,000 250ml cartons an hour.

Winning export [business](#) is vital, given almost all Afghanistan's food is imported, meaning Omaid Bahar must comply with quality standards enforced in Europe and elsewhere - no easy task amid the chaos of his country.

"Here we don't have an insurance system. Police at the Tajikistan border wanted to open

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our containers and I said if they open it, the concentrate will spoil in 24 hours. We had to turn around and take another way to [Kyrgyzstan](#)," says Sadiq's troubleshooting factory manager Abdul Rahman, smiling broadly.

PILOT FARMS

Sadiq's factory is only the first stage of a plan he expects to cost another \$70 million and deliver new lines in yoghurts and fruit-flavoured milk, as well as jams and jellies.

He is close to agreeing a new venture to sell concentrate in smaller packets into the United States, he says, while distribution offices and warehouses in 12 Afghan provinces will expand next year to all 34 provinces.

The company is also negotiating with the 350,000-strong Afghan security forces and NATO to supply them with fruit juices in what would be a multi-million-dollar coup.

To secure his supply lines from around 35,000 farmers who sell Omaid Bahar 40,000 tonnes of fruit each year, along routes that pass through Taliban strongholds in the south, Sadiq is also shifting Afghan [farming](#) practices from horse and plough to modern methods.

He is testing pilot farms with yield-improving drip irrigation and mechanised harvesting, and looking to import dairy cows to supply milk products, which would reduce reliance on imports via [Pakistan](#) after cross-border security closures.

"It is already, I would say, a profitable business. It can become much more profitable," he says, without offering hard figures which he worries could benefit his competitors. "The intention is that all the products that we used to import, I'm trying my best to produce locally."

In its most recent [Afghanistan](#) assessment the World Bank said while growth reached 8.4 percent in 2010/11, bolstered by big aid flows, the NATO pullout could halve that rate.

Sadiq said Afghans and foreigners tended to over-react to the dangers the country faces, including his own parents who fled to Europe when the Soviet Union invaded in 1979. He fled the 1990s civil war after returning briefly as the Soviets withdrew from their Afghan quagmire.

"I myself expect that these troubles, these uncertainties, (will last) for the next 50 years and for the next generation to come. But it is our country, we have to build it, we have to live here. And only then we can bring peace," he says.

(Additional reporting by Mirwais Harooni and Miriam Arghandiwal; Editing by [Daniel Magnowski](#))

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