

## Meet Mouddar Khouja, Secretary General of the Austro-Arab Chamber of Commerce



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June 28, 2021



*I was committed to assisting Arab students applying to university, with any issues they might face.”/(C) Wikimedia Commons*

It was the beginning of 1981, when the Khoujas decided to leave Syria for Europe; suitcases were packed, and off they flew to [Germany](#).

The 15-year-old Mouddar and his family found the transition difficult. As they settled into an apartment in Hamburg, they were surprised that none of the neighbors invited them over, as would have happened in Syria. It was only later they learned that new residents were expected to invite the neighbors for a housewarming or a meal!

In Hamburg, Khouja went to a secondary school, where he enrolled in special classes for newcomers to learn German and, eventually, the other subjects taught in German. Eager to understand what was being said in school, on the news, or even in the streets, he picked up the language early on and excelled at it. His father, who had been a merchant in Syria, continued in his trade after moving to Germany. And soon, Germany became a second home for Khouja, who associated it with family and safety.

Some four years later, having finished high school, Khouja moved to Vienna to pursue a M.Sc. in Computer Science at the Technical University of Vienna (TU Wien). “Throughout that period, I was committed to assisting Arab students applying to university, with translations, interpretation, and any issues they might face,” he recalled. While Germany and Austria have many similarities, it took him two and a half years to finally feel at home in Vienna, a turning point that shaped his decision to stay.

There was a striking difference between Hamburg and Vienna from a cultural and aesthetic lens. “Hamburg was destroyed during WWII and thus most of its buildings are modern, whereas Vienna is a city with [mesmerizing architecture](#) and well-preserved old buildings,” he elaborated. Khouja

particularly admired the [Austrians' diplomacy](#) and savoir faire compared to the straight-forwardness typical of northern Germany.

Shortly after graduating, he started working at Siemens in telecommunications and management, gradually rising to become a team leader. He then moved to other companies, including Connect Austria 1, after which he founded his own company, offering ICT consultancy services in partnership with CISCO Systems, the largest Telecom Infrastructure provider in Central Europe and the Middle East. Later on, Khouja made a transition to business consulting and financing international projects, as well as providing solutions in the Islamic banking sector.

Then, in 2010, he was nominated by the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce for Secretary-General of the Austro-Arab Chamber of Commerce (AACC), a measure of his business profile and wide network of prominent Austrian and Arab economic and diplomatic connections. It was a popular decision, endorsed by both the Union of Arab Chambers and the League of Arab States, the umbrella under which Arab and joint chambers of commerce operate, followed by the approval of the Chamber's General Assembly, including the Arab Ambassadors Council. As Secretary General of AACC, his role lies in boosting mutual trade and economic relations between Austria and the Arab countries, as well as promoting scientific, academic and cultural exchange and cooperation.

"I do my best to bring the different perspectives closer and to create a solid foundation on which prosperous relations can be established and enhanced," he told Metropole. As such, Khouja supported the Integration Circle in Vienna's 21st district and launched the Arab Engineers Initiative in 2016, aimed at creating job opportunities for Arab engineers, mainly from Syria and Iraq.

Within his first year as Secretary-General, the Chamber's membership increased by 60% and turnover by 44%, as he went about fostering partnerships with ministries, municipalities and international organizations in Austria and the Arab countries. Eventually, the Chamber became the go-to point of reference for many Austrian and Arab companies and institutions seeking mutual cooperation, business partnerships and investment opportunities.

"Attracting Arab investors to Austria and presenting Austria as a pioneer and a role model in credibility and trust has also been a priority for me," he said. To do this, he goes beyond understanding both sides; in a very real sense he is both sides.

"When I am in Austria, I represent the Arab side, and when I am in an Arab country, I represent Austria: This is the motto I go by to build solid foundations and resilient bridges between the two. I believe that durable (business) partnerships require not only mutual understanding and respect, but also a genuine acknowledgment, appreciation and admiration of one another's culture." In his opinion, the personal dimension can often be indispensable for the success and flourishing of partnerships.



*Dr. Kurt Stürzenbecher, Chairman of the City Council Committee for Finance, Economy, Digitalization & International Affairs awarding SG Khouja the Decoration of Merit in Gold of the Federal State of Vienna 2019./(C) Wikimedia Commons*

In 2019, Khouja was [awarded](#) the “Decoration of Merit in Gold of the State of Vienna”, in recognition of his dedication and devotion to the city and state of Vienna through his personal initiatives and in his role as Secretary General of AACC.

And on a personal note, anyone who knows SG Khouja, knows well his fondness for Syrian cuisine, particularly Aleppo’s, something he takes enormous pride in. “Aleppian cuisine is all about fresh and healthy ingredients, and the more diverse a culture is, the richer and tastier its cuisine. All this is reflected in the cuisine of Aleppo,” he said, “an ancient city that once was the cradle of civilization and a strategic commercial and cultural hub.”

Although he has been living abroad for 40 years, SG Khouja remembers his childhood there fondly. In 2010, he went to Syria on an official mission, and spent three days in Aleppo, visiting his grandparents’ house near the [Citadel](#) and the [Al-Madina Souq](#), the largest covered historic market in the world (approx. 13 km).

“It was a hot summer day, the temperature was around 49°,” he remembered. “As I walked through the streets, the scent of jasmine filled the air, and a flashback of memories started running in my head.” Eventually, the road led him to his old school: “I found myself checking out each and every corner there, from the garden to the classrooms and sports center.”

Khouja truly hopes that the conflict in Syria will be resolved soon and that peace and security will again prevail in this country that has over the centuries been home to many civilizations, religions and ethnicities living harmoniously side by side. While Austria is the home he chose for himself, where his children were born, and where he plans to stay, neither Syria nor Germany will lose its special place in his heart.

Home is where the heart is, and the heart is everywhere one has ever lived...