Doing Business in the Middle East

A Research-Based Practitioners' Guide

Edited by Pawan Budhwar and Vijay Pereira

ROUTLEDGE

DOING BUSINESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East has for a long time been at the centre of global trade as well as political interest. Demographic and social change shifts in global economic power, rapid urbanisation, climate change and resource scarcity, and significant technological development make this region both complex and hugely important.

Doing Business in the Middle East highlights both the opportunities and constraints confronting foreign investors in the region and proposes strategies on how best to overcome them. The book explores the existing and emerging political and legal frameworks, sociocultural patterns, national infrastructures, regulatory environment, conflict resolution and how to negotiate in the Middle East. It also provides useful insights into how to approach advertising and marketing, promotion and distribution, and also at the strategies for investing in the region and appropriate modes of entry. With a number of features such as case studies, examples of effective and ineffective practices, clear takeaways, and a note on a future agenda on each given topic, this book is highly practical.

Based on robust research, this comprehensive guide to doing business in the Middle East is an ideal reference tool for potential foreign investors, those who are already doing business or intend to do so in the region, and for a range of business and policy decision-makers. The book is also suitable for students and researchers in the fields of international management and business, international and strategic HRM, cross-cultural management, and business communication.

Pawan Budhwar is the 50th Anniversary Professor of International HRM, Head of Aston Business School, and an Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor International (India) at Aston University, UK.

Vijay Pereira is Full Professor of International and Strategic Human Capital Management and Department Chair of People and Organizations department at NEOMA Business School, France.

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To Laxmi and Gaurav for their continued support and love (PB).

To Veronica, Anisha and Amelia, for their patience, support and love, as always, but especially during our five-year stint, as expatriates in the Middle East (VP).

To those who have interest in doing business in the Middle East region.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Mohammed Aboramadan is an Assistant Professor, School of Economics, Administration, and Public Policy, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar.

Fatima Al Ali is at the Department of Business Administration, University of Wollongong, Dubai, UAE.

Maryam Aldossari is a Senior Lecturer of HRM at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK.

Ahmad Said Al-Shuabi is an Assistant Professor of HRM at IMT Business School, Dubai, UAE.

Gita Bajaj is a Professor of OB & HRM at IMT Business School, Dubai, UAE.

Abdulrahman Basahal is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Economics and Administration at King Abdulaziz University, Riyad, Saudi Arabia.

Pawan Budhwar is the 50th Anniversary Professor of International HRM and Head of Aston Business School, Birmingham UK.

Sara Chaudhry is a Senior Lecturer, Department of Management, Birkbeck, University of London, UK.

Bhaskar Dasgupta is an Associate Director – Market Development, Financial Services Regulatory Authority, ADGM, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Abdul-Nasser El-Kassar is an Associate Professor of Quantitative Methods, Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon.

Ghada El-Kot is a Professor in Human Resources & Organizational Behavior, Graduate School of Business and Deputy President for Strategic Affairs, Arab Academy for Science &Technology & Maritime Transport, Egypt.

Tamirace Fakhoury is an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs and the Director of the Institute for Social Justice and Conflict Resolution at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon.

Alex Frino is a Professor of Financial Economics, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Innovation, Enterprise and External Relations), University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia.

T.P. Ghosh is a Professor of Accounting and Finance at IMT Dubai, UAE.

Shahina Javad is an Associate Professor in OB & HRM at IMT Dubai, UAE.

Prerna Kumari is a Doctoral Researcher at Abu Dhabi University, UAE.

Mike Leat is an Honorary Research Fellow at Plymouth Business School, Plymouth, UK.

Sophie Lythreatis is a Lecturer in Business Analytics, School of Management, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK.

Glenn Muschert is a Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Yassir Nasief is CEO Palm Ventures and VP Baseqat Consulting, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Vijay Pereira is a Professor of Strategic and International Human Capital Development and Head of People and Organization Department, NEOMA Business School, Reims, France.

Huy Pham is a Senior Lecturer in Finance at **RMIT** University in Vietnam.

Vikash Ramiah is an Associate Professor and Director of Research, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, Dubai, UAE.

Peter Rampling HDR Supervisor, School of Business, Excelsia College, New South Wales Australia.

Dimitrios Reppas is an Assistant Professor of Economics in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Susan Sayce is an Associate Professor at Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Melodena Stephens is a Professor of Innovation Management at Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, Dubai, UAE

Mohammad Ta'amnha is a Faculty at German-Jordanian University, Jordan.

Yama Temouri is an Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Olga Tregaskis is a Professor of International HRM and Head of Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Daicy Vaz is a Doctoral Researcher at NEOMA Business School, Reims France.

Albert Wijeweera is an Associate Professor, Department of HSS, College of Arts & Sciences, Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

PREFACE

Increasingly more and more countries in the Middle East continue to become important from a business perspective due to a variety of reasons, including a rapid growth in population and its spending power. As a result, the region is witnessing a significant growth in foreign direct investment, an increase in the number of business start-ups, incentives offered to foreign businesses to operate there, rapid developments with infrastructure to support the growth of businesses, low operating costs and high return, amongst others. Accordingly, there is a strong interest from foreign businesses to set up their operations in the Middle East. Due to a variety of factors such as massive sociocultural, politico-legal and economic diversity between different countries in the region, lack of reliable information for international managers on how to successfully operate in the region, the ongoing stereotypes and myths about the area, and regular regional disturbances, foreign firms planning to enter the markets in the region may find it very confusing, uncertain and even intimidating when they start their operations in the Middle East. Through this important book, we attempt to provide 'ready to use' information and tips for international managers to effectively deal with the challenges they may experience when they start operations in the region. Thus, the objective of this book is to provide the reader with an understanding of the dynamics of doing business in the Middle East. It should also enable the reader to understand in a better way the 'context-specific' issues and, possibly, ways forward on the same in order to operate successfully in the region.

To achieve our objective, we invited all contributions around a set framework. It included the aims of the chapter, why such a chapter is important for foreign investors/organisations/managers, coverage of the core topic of the chapter, key challenges for the given theme(s) and a sensible way forward. Each chapter also includes a short case study(ies), clear takeaway(s) for international managers and links to key resources. We believe the book consolidates, through a single source, key research-based input on the dynamics of doing business in the Middle East and in particular questions pertaining to the '*what', 'why'* and '*how*' of operating in the region. All the chapters in this volume are original contributions to the field and were specially commissioned for the handbook.

We would like to thank all those who have helped us in various ways to make this project a success. Our special thanks to all the contributors and colleagues at Routledge – Sophie Peoples, Rebecca Marsh and Terry Clague, who helped us to complete this work.

Pawan Budhwar
Aston Business School, UK
Vijay Pereira
NEOMA Business School, France

PART I

The Middle East Business Context

1

THE MIDDLE EAST CONTEXT

An Introduction

Pawan Budhwar and Vijay Pereira

The Middle East Context

The term Middle East is defined as a cultural area, which does not have clear borders and a variety of terms have been used to denote the region. These include the 'Middle East', 'Near-East', 'Middle East–North Africa (MENA)', 'Southwest Asia', 'Greater Middle East', 'Levant', 'Arabian-peninsula' or the 'Arab World' in a very general sense by both academics and policymakers (see Budhwar and Mellahi, 2016). A limited version of the region includes the Gulf state countries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, as well as Iran, Iraq and the Levant region. In some cases, the region extends to countries in North Africa, with a clear connection to and the use of Arabic language, which includes the countries Tunisia to the west and Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia to the south-east (see Britannica.com, 2022). For this volume, we use the last interpretation of the Middle East.

Expectedly, there are a few commonalities between the countries in the region; nevertheless, each nation has its own historical evolution and development, and a unique set of socio-economic features, which are an outcome of the interplay between sociocultural institutions, historical developments, demographic variables and political relations and systems core to themselves. Moreover, each of the countries in the region is at a different stage of industrialisation and economic and political development (Budhwar et al., 2021). Such contextual complexities should be kept in mind while operating in the region.

The Middle East is the birthplace of three main monolithic religions – Islam (followed by approximately 95% of the total population, out of which 85% are Sunnis and remaining Shias), Judaism and Christianity. It is also home to some of the oldest civilisations of the world, including Phoenicia, Babylon and Egyptian. The population of the Middle East in 2021 was around 472 million, representing

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about 6% of the total world population (World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZQ), with Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, respectively, being the most populous countries. The region also hosts around 65% of the world's known oil reserves. However, until the discovery of oil in the 1960s and 1970s, the region had the lowest levels of economic development in the world (Budhwar et al., 2019). The economic growth of the majority of the countries in the region has been flat. Through the sharp increase in oil prices since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the GDP growth of the Middle East now stands at 5.2% (ICAEW, 2022).

The Middle East then has a history of erratic economic growth which can be attributed to a combination of factors such as the so-called 'curse of natural-resource abundance' (over-dominance of the oil sector in oil-rich countries), structural imbalances, deficient political systems and political reforms, underdeveloped financial markets and slow integration into the global economy. These factors are compounded by a dominant and inefficient public sector where the bulk of locals gain employment, linked to growing unemployment, lack of creation of employable skills, underutilisation of skilled women, dated and inefficient government systems in the region to conditions of war and conflict and mass migration (see Budhwar and Mellahi, 2016; Budhwar et al., 2021).

The developments over the last decade or so in the region (such as the Arab Spring and the toppling down of governments in many countries in the region, amongst others) resulted in regional (and, to some extent, global) disturbances. These were witnessed in the form of deaths of hundreds of thousands and mass migration from the region – mainly from Syria both into adjoining countries and Europe (for details The Guardian, 2022). Such developments have serious implications for foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region, and due to serious concerns for security, a large number of multinationals pulled out of the disturbed parts of the Middle East, leaving a significant vacuum for economic growth. Nevertheless, many are now regularly entering the Middle East markets, with countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Israel and Oman in particular expected to lead on inward FDI (Patton, 2022).

Due to the above-highlighted developments, the business context of the Middle East continues to evolve rapidly, and foreign investors and international managers are regularly looking for information. This can help them to smoothly access the regional markets (e.g., by selecting ideal local partners); develop a good idea about the cultural nuances, cultural diversity, approach to effective communication, decision-making and related dos and don'ts of doing business; help to deal with conflicts and negotiate complex deals. Additionally, it helps to understand the global contemporary issues for the region such as disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging post-pandemic ways of doing business; security issues; move towards renewable energy and the impact of the new global tax accord signed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman (the last event resulted in multinationals requiring to pay a minimum of 15% corporate income tax for profits to the corporations with an annual revenue upwards of 750 million euros).

Looking at the various emphasis on economic development in different countries (e.g., Saudi Vision 2030, Dubai Industrial Strategy 2030, Qatar National Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040, Bahrain Economic Vision 2030), which, amongst many other things, is setting out both the roadmaps for development and to serve as a tool for its measurement (for details see Mogielnicki, 2022), are pushing countries in the region to pursue Industry 4.0, which now seems to have moved beyond political rhetoric (for details see ISI Consultants, 2022; PWC, 2022).

Evidence also suggests that most countries in the Middle East are now emphasising both human resource and organisational development. In particular, the oil-rich countries have been making serious efforts to reduce their dependence on this depleting natural resource and develop other sectors, which need skilled human resources. Similarly, many countries in the region have been emphasising the development of 'locals' and reducing the number of 'foreigners' due to the pressure of rapidly growing populations and to provide jobs to their natives as part of their nationalisation programmes (i.e., to reserve jobs for locals) such as Saudi Arabia. However, there are serious concerns related to employable skills and the mind-set of the locals who do not prefer to work in the private sector and on lower-level positions (for details see Budhwar and Mellahi, 2016).

To summarise, the Middle East region is now continuously in the news and is of interest to most nations of the world for a variety of economic, political, demographic challenges, migration, supply of oil, ongoing conflicts and security-related reasons. There is also a drive by most countries in the region to further assimilate into the global economy. The latest attempt was the hosting of the Dubai expo by the UAE (albeit delayed and held in 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in 2020). Nevertheless, a number of macro-level phenomena unique to the region (presented above) are creating challenges in this regard. Such developments have serious implications for foreign firms to successfully operate in the region. This book provides useful insights in this regard.

Topics Covered in the Book

The 16 chapters in this volume are covered under three broad themes of business context, conducting business – a functional perspective, and emerging themes. In order to achieve consistency and a comprehensive picture of each contextual scenario, we asked all the contributors to write along and coordinate with specific themes. These included the aims of the chapter, why such a chapter is important for foreign investors/organisations/managers, coverage of the core topic of the chapter, key challenges for the given theme(s) and a sensible way forward. Each chapter also includes a short case study(ies), a clear takeaway for international managers and links to key resources. Such features will help interested stakeholders gain useful insights from this book.

In Chapter 2, Reppas and Temouri cover the topic of economic environment and focus on themes of economic development strategies and economic challenges found in the Middle East region. Specifically, they provide a snapshot of the countries' current economic situation, in terms of their GDP per capita, GDP by sector and unemployment. They also discuss dimensions of economic development, particularly the ease of doing business. Some of the region's dominant economic characteristics include labour market imperfections, the lack of investments in education and human capital and the role of State interventions to control local markets. The chapter also gives a special emphasis on the GCC countries' initiatives to move away from oil-based economic dependence.

In contrast to Chapter 2, El-Kassar, Lythreatis and Fakhoury in Chapter 3 analyse the political environment of the Middle East. In particular, they provide a comparative analysis of three very different Middle Eastern countries (i.e., the UAE, Egypt and Iraq) with the aim of discussing relevant information on host country factors that influence inward FDI. The nations that constitute this strategic region are known to share some similarities in values, societal culture and religion, and also possess unique characteristics that contribute to the ease or hindrance of conducting business within their boundaries. The chapter explores political details and business specifics of each country in the interest of unveiling business opportunities. The chosen countries represent three different case studies as they highlight disparities in the Middle East and operate in different political environments. Due to the prevalence of different political systems, resulting in different diverse decision-making by the governments, the countries also display distinct rules and regulations, with varying imposed taxes, to operate a business. Such information should be helpful for foreign operators in the region.

Sticking to the theme of external environment, Ghosh, in Chapter 4, analyses the changing legal framework in GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. In particular, he focuses on reforms in the legal and administrative framework in the chosen countries, their diversification strategies and liberalisation of the FDI law, changes in the commercial company law and its impact on FDI. Ghosh further emphasises the need to improve the corporate governance mechanisms in firms operating in the Middle East region. The chapter also presents a summary of key regulatory reforms and their impact on inward FDI.

Continuing with the business context theme of the Middle East, in Chapter 5, Ta'amnha, Sayce and Tregaskis present the construct of 'wasta' – a social relational form of capital mechanism which is dominant in the Arabic business setting, particularly in facilitating business transactions and other social activities, though it is considered in many cases resulting in corruption. The authors present a practical instrument that can be used to not only understand the core aspects of wasta, but also to measure it. They support this by providing findings of an empirical study with professionals who work in the IT sector in Jordan. Their findings reveal an increase in the usage of Wasta due to the pressures created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter presents a 14-item 'wasta legitimacy scale' (WLS), which is developed around the dimensions of pragmatic legitimacy, normative legitimacy and cultural-cognitive legitimacy. This scale is helpful to understand the cross-cultural issues around the practice of wasta.

The focus of Chapter 6 by Pereira, Dasgupta, Vaz and Muschert is on entry modes to Middle-East-GCC markets. The authors caution foreign investors to carefully analyse the weak political, commercial and institutional environments of the Middle East in order to minimise substantial risks when deciding to invest in the region. They use the case of UAE to highlight how to identify, pre-empt, mitigate and manage risks while entering the Middle East markets via planned actions and while developing their internationalisation strategies.

In Chapter 7, Leat and El-Kot detail the employment relations scenario in the Middle East. Their presentation includes an analysis on labour markets and regulation, religious and cultural contexts, management in practice and collective employee relations. They conclude the chapter by drawing key observations regarding the current state of collective employee relations in the region which is an outcome of a complex mix of sociocultural, economic-politico and legal aspects of the Middle East.

Chapter 8, by Ramiah, Pereira, Dasgupta, Frino and Pham, provides useful insights into the background and mode of operandi of the banking and financial institutions in the GCC region. Utilising the patchy information available on the core topics of this chapter, the authors present the features of the banking regulatory framework prevalent in the GCC, the variety of different national legal systems and financial institutions existing in these nations, the similarities and differences in their roles of Central Banks and the reasons for which the region is vulnerable to crises. Like other chapters, this also provides a set of useful takeaways for decision-makers.

Rampling and Wijeweera, in Chapter 9, present an overview of the region's dominant accounting and taxation systems and the challenges foreign investors and multi-national companies (MNCs) may experience in adapting to these systems. The authors make a number of useful recommendations on how foreign investors may best approach accounting and taxation practices in the MENA region. The religious and cultural contexts of accounting and taxation systems in the MENA region are a pervasive theme throughout this chapter and reflect the vital role these play in determining how modern accounting and taxation standards both derive and manifest in the regional economies.

In Chapter 10, Budhwar, Pereira and Mohammed focus on the various aspects of managing human resources in the Middle East. The chapter provides useful insights into the present state of HRM (human resource management) practices, the forces contributing to the development of specific approaches to managing human resources, and highlights the HR challenges and how to tackle the same. Such information should assist HR practitioners operating in the region to generate context-relevant HRM policies and practices.

Chapter 11 is dedicated to conflict management and negotiations in the Middle East. Bajaj and Al-Shuabi highlight the usefulness of understanding the interests, desires, resources, influences and the working and decision-making styles of the people in the Middle East region, in order to deal with conflicts and conduct effective business negotiations. They present about how to identify the interests and aspirations of the interdependent entities, namely, employees, employers (companies) and governments and explain what empowers and challenges different entities during conflict and negotiation. Their analysis also reveals the nuances involved in how the Arabs resolve conflict and how non-Arabs can relate to their style. The authors make a number of useful recommendations regarding the approaches for effectively managing conflict in the Middle East.

Chapter 12 details various aspects of performance management in the Middle East. Javad provides an overview of the major factors that influence performance management practices, uses of performance appraisals in the Middle Eastern context and the key features of performance management systems in Middle East–based organisations. Via her analysis, the author highlights the key determinants of performance appraisals and performance management in the region. Such information should be helpful for foreign investors, line managers and human resource professionals for designing and administering effective performance management systems.

Kumari, in Chapter 13, deals with the topic of expatriate management. This chapter provides information regarding how to facilitate expatriate management, what challenges decision-makers will experience while dealing with expatriates in the region and how best to tackle the same. Furthermore, she provides useful advice on how managers and expatriates aim to achieve success in the Middle East region.

Chapter 14, by Aldossari and Chaudhry, examines the gender issues in the workplace in the Middle East. This chapter begins by highlighting the overarching trends in terms of women's employment in the Middle East, which is followed by a discussion of the social-institutional norms and cultural restrictions that impact women's employment in the Middle East. It also highlights the institutionalised gender inequalities, and the dynamic creation and interaction of visible and invisible inequalities, vis-à-vis organisational policies and practices. The authors also provide an overview of the current structural and institutional changes that are influencing women's employment in Saudi Arabia as an example. Finally, the chapter concludes with some recommendations that address these existing inequalities at the meso/organisational level of analysis.

Nasief and Basahal, in Chapter 15, reveal the key developments taking place within the broad topic of innovation in the Middle East. The authors use examples of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt to explore the rapidly emerging innovation systems in the region along with the creation of new knowledge in the form of patents. The chapter analyses the topics of technology transfer and innovation and how the three countries score on the global innovation index. The analysis also provides a clear takeaway for international managers interested in pursuing innovation in their organisations in the Middle East.

Building on the topic of innovation, the last chapter (Chapter 16) by Ali, Stephens and Pereira is dedicated to highlighting the e-services being pursued by the government of the UAE and its impact on the reputation of both the organisations and the country. The analysis reveals how the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a tipping point, pushing governments to digitalise faster, whether it was the adoption of health care, education, remote working or virtual courts. The authors further reveal how the UAE e-governance is utilising the ICT and other web-based technologies to improve efficiency in delivering and accessing government services for all kinds of stakeholders in government-to-citizen (G2C), government-to-government (G2G) and government-to-business (G2B) relations. The UAE case is being used by other countries in the region as a benchmark to develop their own e-governance mechanisms. The takeaway from this chapter should help international firms operating in the Middle East to build their own e-governance ecosystems suitable for operating in the region.

Useful Websites

World Bank: http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena

GCC: http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc

Middle East Media Research Institute: http://www.memri.org

Middle East Institute: http://www.mei.edu

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