

# **BUSINESS EXCELLENCE AND COMPETITIVENESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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## **The Development of Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa: An Overview of Constraints and Perspectives**

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Little has been written about the question of why entrepreneurship development is slower in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region than elsewhere. This chapter discusses some of the key constraints and perspectives. The chapter draws from the literature and makes use of factual observations to show that an entrepreneurship development trend has yet to emerge in this region. Recourse to a strategic growth-based approach supports the argument that there is a particular need to emphasize technology entrepreneurship. Many factors make the MENA countries different. Among these factors, the cultural factor seems common in having a negative effect on their development of growth-based entrepreneurship. In a global competitiveness context, it is very important to discuss the deep-rooted factors blocking entrepreneurship development in the region. Awareness of such factors can help public authorities in acting appropriately to improve the general environment and promote the development of creativity in the region.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurship, technopreneurship, performance, growth, technological innovation, productivity, competitive advantage, small business, competitiveness, cultural impact, strategies, MENA region, Arab world, developing countries

## **Introduction**

Truly enhancing the development of entrepreneurship depends not only on the existence of entrepreneurs per se, but also on a range of institutional, legal, administrative, economic, social and cultural factors (World Bank, 2005). Where any of these factors is underrated, the impact on entrepreneurship development will be negative. World wide, the particular role of entrepreneurship in growth is widely recognized. In the (GEM, 2006) report, it is asserted that “just 9.8% of the world’s entrepreneurs expect to create almost 75% of the jobs generated by new business ventures”. More significant is that “small entrepreneurs are responsible for 67% of inventions and 95% of radical innovations since world war II” (Lumsdaine, 2005).

To enhance entrepreneurship, relevant education is also critical. The main objective is to expose trainees directly to the world of business so that they are armed with knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for success. The highly competitive offer of entrepreneurship programs, by higher education institutions worldwide, is a strong sign of the expected positive outcomes.

Altogether, the Arab countries are not advanced in the development of entrepreneurship, and they have done nothing to move towards technology entrepreneurship. The situation is even worse if one considers that many countries have been able to build advanced knowledge-based and digitized economies. From a strategic point of view, Arab countries must but take urgent action to boost entrepreneurship in general and technology entrepreneurship in particular.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, there are practically no educational institutions to provide training in entrepreneurship as a specific major or discipline. Moreover, in depth exposure to modern entrepreneurship is lacking. Institutionally, ministries, offices and chambers of commerce and industry do exist, but with no strategic orientation to promote entrepreneurship in its true sense, let alone technology and innovation-based entrepreneurship.

Due to their heterogeneity and the lack of data, the study of the MENA countries is, of course, not easy. In this paper, the MENA region refers to two sub-groups: the Middle East sub-group [1] and the North African sub-group [2]. By considering some of their differences, an attempt is made to identify the factors that really restrain the development of entrepreneurship in the region as a whole.

## **Theoretical background**

For a long time, entrepreneurship has generally been referred to as the simple act of undertaking economic activities by individuals having ideas. As success is not automatically guaranteed, Schumpeter (1939) has emphasized the critical influence of risk and uncertainty, particularly when innovations are introduced into the market place. Innovations can involve previously unknown or improved products, processes and services, and their degree of complexity can vary from incremental to advanced and radical. To be a successful entrepreneur will, accordingly, depend on the capability of the individual to confront the obstacles, so as to bring the project to a successful conclusion and achieve the desired objectives.

The so-called ‘technology entrepreneur’ or ‘technopreneur’ is significantly different from the general type of entrepreneur. While technopreneurs engage in high risk activities, involving innovations, others limit themselves to low risk activities, such as trading or providing ordinary services. As productivity is the fundamental source of growth, increased productivity is mainly achieved through the constant

introduction of innovations. And, when these are industrially and commercially exploited, they help enterprises and economies to gain competitive advantages.

It is a fact that not everyone can be or become an entrepreneur. Engineers may not necessarily be good entrepreneurs either. In general, entrepreneurs are described as individuals having a well-defined sense of their opportunities (Cheng and Low, 2006). Technopreneurs, by contrast, are specifically more inclined to activities based on technology and innovation. The degree of risk they take is high and usually linked with the importance, value and complexity of their endeavor.

The economic literature is rich with references to the issue of entrepreneurship in its broad sense. Many authors have stressed the role of privately owned, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in economic development. Others have drawn a distinction between the concepts of SMEs and entrepreneurship (Thurik and Wennekers, 2004). The most important distinction is that, while the managers of SME are generally of the 'business doer' type, entrepreneurs are often of 'opportunity seeker' type.

In the MENA countries, the business tendency which can be seen most widely, of undertaking straightforward commercial activities by providing all sorts of ordinary products and services, is much greater than that of exploiting innovations. Given their priority of reducing unemployment, governments encourage this tendency without any distinction. The consequence is evident, that only two [3] of the economies in this area are internationally competitive. Many authors and sources (Schlumberger, 2006; Nunempamp, 2005; Handussa and Reiffers, 2003; Adams and Page, 2001; Rivlin, 2001; Shafik, 1994) have, thus, argued that major growth weaknesses exist in all Arab countries, including those in the MENA region.

Everywhere, creating more SMEs is regarded as an effective way of reducing unemployment. The number of entrepreneurs in an economy is even taken as an indicator of its health (Draft 8, 2006). The existence of a large number of small enterprises is also regarded as particularly good for a healthy competitiveness. However, if reducing unemployment is a very important social objective, up-grading productivity and overall performance cannot be disregarded. Internationally, competitiveness cannot be attained without competitive advantages resulting from the exploitation of technological innovations.

In terms of the relationship between size and propensity to innovate, there is a strong one in favour of small enterprises (Pavitt *et al.* 1987). This means that in the innovation process, what feeds such enterprises are respectively ideas and funds. For a number of authors and education institutions, innovation and entrepreneurship are inseparable (John, 2005, Druker, 2006; Wharton Business School, etc.). Ideation (Vandenbosch *et al.*, 2006), involving the search and production of ideas, is common to both innovation and entrepreneurship. This indicates that technology-based entrepreneurship is of greater importance for growth than ordinary entrepreneurship involving self-employment or the creation of business in general.

### **The impact of differences between MENA countries**

According to Lofgren and Richards (2003), three particular factors make the economies of the MENA region diverse; economic structure or openness, standards of living and food security. In explaining the exogenous nature of the Arab countries, Nunnemkamp (2005) proposes other factors, including geographic distance from world economic centres, terms-of-trade shocks, and forced compliance with policy conditionality. It is important to note that he asserts that these factors can hardly

explain the divergent growth patterns across the Arab countries. Therefore, what is the role of the various differences in their respective development of entrepreneurship?

### ***Historical differences***

By contrast to Middle East countries, all North African countries were colonized. On average, each was colonized for at least two to three decades, although in the case of Algeria the French stayed more than thirteen decades. Whatever the case, it is argued that colonialism had a negative impact on the growth rates of the region (Abderrezak, 2004).

The above few historical facts would suggest different expectations of the development of entrepreneurship in the region. The following two examples support this point. Saudi Arabia, for instance, which was not colonized, should have reached comparatively advanced levels of entrepreneurship development, particularly considering that, before the sixties, trading was the dominant economic activity undertaken by Saudi families. Despite that, the country witnessed long periods of slow or even minimal development, before the discovery of oil (Farmer, 1959). Algeria is also well known for some areas which have distinguished trading and handcraft activities, yet small businesses remained extremely few, even after some years of independence. The other North African countries also had different private economic orientations. Morocco has always been well known for jewellery and leather manufacturing, Egypt for textiles, and the other countries for commercial agricultural products, namely olive oil, cereals, fruits and vegetables.

The past economic development history of the MENA countries has, therefore, had little impact on the emergence of a strong entrepreneurship trend. Consequently, private initiative has remained marginalized in the development efforts of the region, particularly in countries which opted for centralized planning. In the others, with liberal policies, by accident or design, opportunities for the private sector to contribute were much greater. But, even in those cases, the outcome has not had a positive effect on the development of entrepreneurship.

### ***Political differences***

Political regimes differ between the MENA countries. Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are republics. Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait are all kingdoms. In the republics, the State intervenes either directly or indirectly in economic activities, whereas in the kingdoms, private ownership is much more dominant. Accordingly, the expectation is that entrepreneurship development should have been more developed in the kingdoms than in the republics of the MENA region. At present, entrepreneurship in all these countries is still in its early stages. While private or small businesses can be created, entrepreneurship that goes beyond that to focus on individuals Kuratko (2003) has yet to be largely enhanced.

### ***Industrial policy differences***

During colonization, industrial development mostly involved the production of intermediate and consumption goods. This very fact, should have, in post independence phases, boosted the development of entrepreneurship, had the governments concerned had a clear understanding of the dynamics of the process of economic growth. For mainly ideological reasons, the private sector in some of the MENA countries has long been kept on the margin, and its direct involvement in the

development process has been prevented. Private businesses, which were allowed to exist, were limited to specific fields of activity (Oukil, 2004a).

In practice, small and independent inventors and innovators remain merely a source of national pride with no concrete support [4]. Ordinary established entrepreneurs are not much better off either, since they too often face various problems. The entrepreneurial spirit, which undeniably did exist in the past, has been blocked either for political reasons or by lack of strategies and economic difficulties, namely shortage of financing.

In terms of industrial infrastructure, the MENA region represents the core of the Arab world. The actual industrial base could have been stronger in the MENA countries, had their governments emphasized entrepreneurship at an earlier stage. Table 1 shows that important industries do exist in the Arab world, yet both industrial competitiveness and technological performance remain low or even negative (Nemat, 1988; Rivlin, 2001; Byrd, 2003; Bontis, 2004).

Table 1.

**Arab industrial base and outputs**

Domain	Products/Goods	% or number of countries
Petroleum:	Gas–Petrol	Above 50%
Petrochemicals:	Paint	In at least 9
Medicine–Pharmacy:	Equipment–materials	In at least 3
Data processing:	Equipment–software	In at least 10
Audio–visual:	TVs–radios	In at least 6
Household:	Fridges–heaters	In more than 7
Transport:	Lorries–bicycles	In at least 2
Agric. machinery:	Tracks–pumps	In at least 4
Construction:	Various tools	In more than 2/3

Some progress has been made in the last few decades in all the above countries, but this progress has also been criticised for as being limited by political orientation (Al-Ibrahim *et al.*, 2003; Oukil, 2005). Due to bad governance, economic policies have not yet produced significant results such as those that can be seen in Singapore and Malaysia, for example. Raw materials endowment, on its own, is not sufficient for growth. To promote more rapid progress, the investment environment needs to be greatly improved in terms of law enforcement, property rights and education (Michalet, 2006).

***Cultural and behavioral differences***

In general, culture includes language, values, customs, social settings and behavior. Among these elements, some cultural components could be argued to have a direct impact on productivity. For instance, it is reasonable to expect that, due to the hot climate in the Middle East, the late hours of social life at night would have a negative impact on an individuals' work. But the positively different climate in North Africa does not produce significantly higher levels of performance either (Handousa and Reiffers, 2003). The most plausible explanation seems to be that the attitude to work is generally not positive throughout the region. Hard work takes place only when self interest is at stake.

Morisson (2003) reports that there is a significant relationship between cultural specificity and entrepreneurship. Within the Arab world, cultural characteristics are not exactly the same and could, thus, have differential impacts on entrepreneurship. Lebanon, for instance, has more positive characteristics than Jordan. It has been stated that, while in Lebanon the culture is characterized as open, entrepreneurial, and communicative, in Jordan the tendency is for conservatism, risk aversion, resistance to change and dependency (Taher, 2004). In the case of Saudi Arabia, with a very long trade history, the implementation of entrepreneurship has yet to be effective, even though the challenge is there and it is not impossible (Gopal, 2002).

In many MENA countries, running small private businesses is often characterized as being a search for easy or quick earnings, informal or light undertakings and think-tank behaviour. In addition, self-employment is often preferred as a deliberate strategy to avoid working for other people or under the control of public authorities (Oukil, 2004b). In today's Arab and MENA countries, where oil does not resolve poverty, people may have to seek improvements in their living standards wherever and however possible, using all means and tactics. Due to all sort of obstacles, self resourcefulness is seen as the most practical resource in business. Each young man would have to find whatever ways of securing an income and maximize it as much as possible.

### **For better prospects**

In the current international context, the competitiveness of the MENA countries cannot be achieved without overcoming a number of obstacles. At the first forum on innovation and entrepreneurship in the MENA region (Muscat, 2006), the following six key actions were identified:

- Improve infrastructure to achieve global competitiveness;
- Empower human development to accelerate knowledge partnerships;
- Inspire minds to leverage our imaginative talents for sustainable development;
- Make innovations foster better governance and legal reforms;
- Share reports from leaders and entrepreneurs on stimulating growth ventures;
- and
- Explore the impact of innovation trends on our future lives.

In support of these necessary actions, short and long term strategies would also have to consider the following critical issues.

### ***Removing major obstacles***

Corruption and lack of transparency are real obstacles that give rise to all sorts of negative consequences. Within this context, the following particular examples are of great concern to many people who are thinking seriously about development. Firstly, taking responsibility, in the Arab world, is still a matter of acquaintance. As a widely spread practice, people who have relatives in governments tend to have greater chances to be employed and benefit from all sorts of advantages. Secondly, the growing brain drain is a serious threat with direct consequences for the development of entrepreneurship in the region

### ***Managing competencies and knowledge***

It is widely recognized that the MENA countries have produced a large number of competencies that have proved to perform competitively internationally.

Despite that, and because of bad working and living conditions, the brain-drain phenomenon has practically never stopped (Oukil, 2004b). The case of Algeria is striking, as it has recently been reported that over one hundred thousand entrepreneurs have emigrated (El-Watan, 2007). If the number were only one thousand, the loss would still be regrettable.

Specialized institutes or centres in modern entrepreneurship to train potential business men and women have yet to be created in sufficient numbers in the MENA region. At higher education levels, no specific courses or training directly devoted to technology ventures are provided. The available courses, on feasibility studies and project appraisal, are very theoretical, leaving students and graduates without adequate practical skills.

### ***Enhancing S&T, R&D and innovative activities***

Efforts in Science and Technology (S&T) need to be oriented towards solving problems, particularly at the local level. Research and Development (R&D) activities and their funding will have little or no impact if they do not lead to increased production and productivity. These are undeniably at the heart of the innovation process, and economic growth cannot, therefore, occur without them. In the MENA countries, innovation policies are not taking full advantage of the competencies that are present in the labour force. For the brain gain, it is practically insignificant and local patents are not exploited systematically.

Along with the recommendations of various international organizations, some of the MENA countries have adopted ambitious S&T and R&D strategies, but due to lack of follow up and networking, technological development [5] in the sense developed by Dahlman et al. (1987) has not reached its ultimate stage of innovation in the region. Despite the presence of important human and technical capital, the instability of management and governance systems slow down innovativeness and technological take-off. Remaining without support, these capabilities are often attracted by foreign organizations, leaving shortages behind and causing greater weaknesses.

### **Conclusion**

The MENA countries are really at a crossroads in their development history. Some have joined the World Trade Organization, and others are beginning the process to join, and they are shaping their future among all other nations. Individually and regionally, the MENA countries need to make greater and consistent efforts to overcome the various bottlenecks. Despite the differences, they do share the need to focus on productivity-based growth strategies. One best way is through technology entrepreneurship. Businesses need also to respond to external pressures in order to enhance their overall efficiency.

In order to promote growth, not only should entrepreneurship be developed, but a shift towards technology entrepreneurship should be considered. From a competitiveness perspective, this kind of entrepreneurship plays a greater role than creating businesses involving trade, services or any other rewarding activity. Potentially, the prospects could be brighter when university graduates, whether male or female, are exposed to business and given real chances to turn their ideas and innovations into useful outcomes. Examples where people with valuable competencies have resisted emigration, but have stayed to support the emergence of knowledge-based industries, such as in the information and communication

technologies, may be positive signs of change, subject also to promotion and government support (InfoDev, 2006).

The establishment of entrepreneurship institutions needs to be increased and should play an important role in animating and motivating the whole process. If success does not come from the establishment of such entities, establishing regional and international networks would also be important. The so-called 'triple helix' system, linking industry, government and higher education institutions, could be a useful platform that should be considered seriously.

Finally, and given the relatively modest efforts made across Arab and MENA countries, information should be made available to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of progress. This will be useful when comparisons are made, between the countries concerned themselves, and when comparisons are made with pioneering countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, India, China and the USA. In all these countries, entrepreneurship education has spread significantly and the number of technological small businesses has been rapidly increasing.

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### **Footnotes**

- [1]: Comprising Egypt and Jordan, in addition to the GCC countries, i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
- [2]: Comprising Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.
- [3]: United Arab Emirates and Qatar are described as more competitive than other MENA countries (Wilson, 2005).
- [4]: Arab patent statistics show hundred of patents are registered every year, but only a few are exploited, mainly encouraged by governments as the first clients.
- [5]: Including investment, engineering, production and innovation capabilities.