

Basel Thaher - Regional Head Middle East & GM Middle East & Africa, Menarini



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Head of the Middle East region and GM for the Middle East & Africa affiliate, Basel Thaher outlines his 18-year career at Menarini and discusses the Italian family-run company's footprint in the region where it has a direct presence in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt and plans to expand into South Africa and Morocco.

Could you start by introducing yourself?

I was born in Jordan and started studying to be a pharmacist in Italy. Following that, I began my career at Menarini as a Medical Representative – a role I spent four years in – before being promoted to Marketing Product Manager for the African and Middle Eastern markets with responsibility for five products. After two years in that role, I was again promoted to manage the North Africa and French Africa market. I was in that role for four years, before moving to the Gulf, which was one of the most important steps in my life.

I came to Dubai to help build the Menarini affiliate in this part of the world in 2015. I took the opportunity immediately and moved here with my family to become Business Area Manager for the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. We completed that project and in 2022 I was promoted to General Manager for the subsidiary here and head of the Middle East.

Having been with Menarini for 18 years, what is your continuing motivation to work with this company?

Menarini is a multinational company present in 140 countries worldwide with 17.700 employees and fully owned by the Aleotti family. They give you the security that we are all part of a family. From day one, in fact, I felt like it was mine. At Menarini you are always respected and treated with fairness. There is strong continuity in the business, as well as a common vision. Most importantly, you feel a sense of ownership, and when you have this, there is stability, and this is what we all look for.

There is a shared mentality that, 'We are Menarini,' and for diversity day, we put a video on LinkedIn to express that, 'We are Menarini, because we are different. We are family.' From the lowest level employee to the owner's family, we are one.

Can you provide some insight into the operations and footprint of Menarini?

Menarini now has a focus on Africa and the Middle East, with a direct presence in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt. We will soon have business in South Africa, and local production sites in Morocco. Since Menarini has been established in the UAE, we have set out to transfer the knowledge and benefits of our medicines to the patients in this region because we believe in this region's potential for our products

Can you outline how Menarini approaches partnerships?

We look for partners that can represent us and act as an extension of Menarini. They must be able to communicate the values and message of the company. Because the business frameworks in this region often oblige us to work with in-country partners, we must be highly selective when we choose them.

You have a diverse portfolio, including cardiology, oncology, neurology, and gastroenterology. How is the portfolio represented in the region?

We have four main therapeutic areas of focus: cardiovascular, pain, gastrointestinal, and men's health. We are always looking to expand the reach of our products and when we launch new ones, the Middle East and Africa will be a priority.

There are several high-demand markets in this region that seek innovative products, making these markets important launch destinations. Soon, we will launch new products in different therapeutic areas, including cardiovascular; one of the most important and growth driving therapeutic areas in the region.

What are the upcoming launches for Menarini in this region?

We have many product launches in the pipeline. For example, we are launching new cardiovascular and pain products in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. In some cases, we are launching extensions of existing products, such as reformulations or injections.

How do you view the regulatory framework in MEA, and the fast-track process for getting a product launched?

There are clear signs that several countries in this region are keen to secure the latest innovative products for their patients. For this reason, national authorities are becoming more developed and better equipped with knowledge to accelerate the registration of new products. This is something that everyone appreciates, not only the pharmaceutical companies, but also the patients themselves. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, for example, guarantee the access to the latest products, immediately after the registration in the country of origin, whether in Europe or the USA. This has put these two nations as leading global markets in terms of guaranteeing innovative products, which we should be proud of.

How will the privatization of healthcare and increasing importance of mandatory health insurance in the region's key markets impact your operations?

I believe that in some sense, it will be a benefit. For example, it could accelerate access to products. But it depends on how the government regulates and manages the private healthcare system. This will become clear in the future, how much they are regulated, and the scope of operations they will have. If the regulations are not clear for those private insurance companies, that will significantly

affect the strategies of the pharmaceutical companies.

Can you help our readers understand the performance of Menarini UAE over the last few years, and how the future looks?

We feel that once we came to this region to operate directly we succeeded in launching different products in different therapeutic areas and we noticed that our growth was significant. We attribute that to the quality of our products and the passion, engagement, and values of the Menarini Group, and notice that it has reflected positively on the market. Menarini has achieved double-digit growth in the last three years, especially in the Middle East, thanks to the new launches, growth of existing products, and new markets, such as Qatar, expansions in Kuwait, and the Saudi public sector. This is something we hope to continue in the upcoming years.

How do you cope with competition in the market?

We believe in the quality of the products that we are offering for different disease and the quality of education that we are offering to all healthcare professional is the right way to compete in these markets and innovation is the key word to compete in such well-developed market.

What does the UAE market mean for Menarini?

UAE is the second biggest market in the region, very open to all the innovative solutions and one of the most dynamic markets in the region. For Menarini it is important to be in this market in which we established a scientific office in 2013 that became a subsidiary in 2022.

Are there any plans for future investments in the UAE?

We have strategies for the region. The UAE is moving fast. The government and the Ministry of Health consider pharmaceuticals to be a national security issue. Menarini will merge with that vision, and with the needs of the UAE. I think we are going towards localization, and local production. That could be a fantastic investment for the multinationals based on their class therapies and facilities here in the UAE. That is likely to be supported by the government, because it will provide a step ahead for localization and local production.

How do you view the future of healthcare considering the dynamics and current transformative period, both in the context of the UAE and the broader region?

I saw the evolution of the Italian pharmaceutical healthcare system through the years, and when I started working in this region, I noted that we were going in the same direction, towards a full reimbursement system. However, while European states broadly cover the reimbursement of essential and critical medicines, the journey towards reimbursement for non-critical medicines is more fraught. Conversely, in the UAE, patients have access and reimbursement for almost all medicines, depending on their insurance, sometimes even for multivitamins.

I think this situation will not continue for years, because if we want to focus on critical medicines, and the population increases, we will eventually move towards a more European-style system. This is the most logical destination for the UAE market, but it will take time.

What do you want to achieve in the next two to three years?

We have only recently established Menarini in this region, my aspiration is to make Menarini one of the top 20 or 30 companies here in this region in the next five years.

Is there anything you would like to add to this interview that we have not already covered?

We are thankful for what the UAE offers in terms of facilities and support for the business at all levels.

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