

# Hugo Hagen - Senior Bayer Representative and Country Division Head Pharmaceutical, Bayer Middle East and North Africa

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*This interview explores Bayer's strategic initiatives across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, highlighting its commitment to innovation, local talent development, and sustainability. Over the next few years, Bayer aims to enhance accessibility to groundbreaking healthcare solutions while deepening relationships with local and international stakeholders. As Hugo Hagen, Senior Representative and Country Division Head at Bayer, emphasizes, "Our ambition is to make as many of these innovations accessible to as many patients as possible throughout the region."*

## **What has your career journey been up to this point, and how have your first two years in Dubai shaped your role at Bayer?**

My career in the pharmaceutical industry spans over two decades, during which I have held various leadership roles across marketing, sales, and management. For the past ten years, I've worked outside my home country of Norway, gaining extensive international experience in diverse and complex markets. This journey has provided me with a broad perspective on global healthcare challenges and opportunities.

In my current role at Bayer, which I assumed two years ago, I oversee operations across 17 countries in North Africa and the Middle East. This region is uniquely diverse, encompassing some of the wealthiest nations alongside those facing significant economic and political instability. The healthcare landscape reflects this disparity, with systems ranging from highly advanced to those grappling with basic infrastructure challenges.

Over the past two years, my primary focus has been to adapt Bayer's mission—"Health for all, Hunger for none"—to the specific needs of this region. This requires distinct strategic approaches, for example, what works in Saudi Arabia or UAE differs vastly from Sudan's needs. And while we've made significant progress, adapting to each market's unique dynamics remains an ongoing process, demanding cultural sensitivity and continuous learning. By aligning Bayer's mission with the unique needs of each country, we aim to deliver meaningful contributions to healthcare systems across the region, driving positive outcomes for patients and communities alike.

### **How is Bayer's portfolio strategy shaping its operations in the MENA region?**

Bayer's global focus spans oncology, cardiovascular health, ophthalmology, neurology, and rare diseases, with emerging emphasis on cell and gene therapies. The company also maintains its historic leadership in women's healthcare, where it pioneered breakthrough treatments including introducing the first menopause treatment and Europe's first contraceptive in 1962. This legacy continues in the Middle East, where Bayer's women's health brands are widely trusted. In line with this dedication, the company is set to launch a new product in this category next year, reaffirming its dual focus on heritage and innovation.

In the Middle East and North Africa region, Bayer's portfolio reflects a balance between global alignment and regional adaptation. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, are central to Bayer's regional strategy, given their proactive adoption of innovative therapies and robust healthcare systems. These markets facilitate rapid access to Bayer's solutions, creating an environment conducive to innovation, while other parts of the region present more nuanced challenges in terms of healthcare infrastructure and regulatory frameworks. By integrating global priorities with localized strategies, Bayer is ensuring its portfolio addresses the different needs of this complex region and continues to advance its mission of delivering impactful healthcare solutions across MENA.

## **What opportunities and trends in Saudi Arabia are shaping Bayer's strategy in the region?**

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a remarkable transformation, fueled by the visionary leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the ambitious goals set out in Vision 2030. This comprehensive initiative provides not only a clear direction but also a well-structured roadmap for realizing the country's aspirations, particularly in the healthcare sector. A key element of this vision is the commitment to providing innovative healthcare solutions that are both affordable and accessible to all citizens. The government is building the necessary infrastructure, expediting approvals, ensuring reimbursement, and creating a favorable environment for rapid innovation adoption—all of which align closely with Bayer's goals of improving patient access to cutting-edge therapies.

Vision 2030 positions Saudi Arabia as a key player in global healthcare innovation, but its unique dynamics mean that a one-size-fits-all market approach does not work. This is where Bayer's local presence becomes invaluable, ensuring that our solutions are not only approved but also made available to patients quickly and at prices that align with local expectations.

With 30 million people, Saudi Arabia is emerging as a crucial pharmaceutical hub. Its emphasis on innovation and strategic regional position makes it increasingly influential in global healthcare supply chains. By aligning with Vision 2030's healthcare transformation goals, Bayer is well-positioned to contribute to Saudi Arabia's healthcare advancement while pursuing promising market opportunities.

## **How do you view Saudi Arabia's access to innovation and its regulatory framework, especially in light of the recent achievements of the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA)?**

The Saudi Food and Drug Authority's (SFDA) recent achievement of Maturity Level 4 (ML4) from the World Health Organization marks a significant milestone for Saudi Arabia, positioning it as only the third country globally to attain this status in 2023. This accomplishment underscores the nation's strong commitment to advancing its healthcare system as part of the Vision 2030 initiative. By achieving such an impressive regulatory milestone, Saudi Arabia not only signals its ambition to become a global leader in healthcare but also demonstrates its tangible progress toward ensuring greater access to innovative treatments.

The ideal scenario in healthcare would be to see new medicines immediately available to all patients following regulatory approval. However, this remains a challenge globally, with no country having fully achieved this outcome. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is making substantial strides to shorten the timeline from regulatory approval to patient access. The SFDA's efforts to streamline processes and expedite approvals reflect the country's dedication to overcoming these barriers. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's approach of considering both European and U.S. FDA approvals accelerates the registration of new products, sometimes enabling faster access to treatments than in other markets, such as Europe.

In addition to this regulatory flexibility, Saudi Arabia's pricing environment is highly conducive to innovation. The country allows for differentiated pricing based on the medicine, supporting the affordability of new treatments while ensuring that they remain accessible to a broad range of patients. This favorable pricing structure not only benefits the local healthcare system but also encourages continued investment in research and development. By providing early access to innovative therapies, Saudi Arabia plays a key role in driving the pharmaceutical industry forward, ensuring that the cycle of innovation continues and contributes to improved global healthcare.

**What does Bayer's recent establishment of its headquarters in Jeddah reveal about the company's commitment to Saudi Arabia, and what are your plans for further expansion in the country?**

Bayer has had a long and established presence in Saudi Arabia, with a regional office operating in the country for many years. The recent opening of our headquarters in Jeddah is a clear demonstration of our deep commitment to the Saudi market and its strategic importance to Bayer. This move aligns with our strong support for Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, further solidifying our role as a key player in the country's evolving healthcare landscape.

As we continue to prioritize the launch of innovative products in Saudi Arabia, we are also exploring broader investment opportunities, particularly in local production. Saudi Arabia's business environment offers a promising foundation for establishing manufacturing operations, which we see as a vital step toward meeting the growing demand for healthcare solutions in the region. While we are still in the exploration phase, we are actively considering local production as part of our long-term strategy and anticipate making significant investments in this area over the coming years.

## **How does Saudi Arabia stand out to global companies like Bayer, particularly in terms of localizing production and contributing to the Kingdom's healthcare vision?**

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a highly attractive market for global corporations, particularly due to its efficient approach to access to innovation and a rapidly advancing healthcare system. One of the country's major strengths is its ability to fast-track the introduction of innovative products, unlike many other markets where regulatory hurdles often delay the process. Beyond regulatory approval, Saudi Arabia also ensures that once products are introduced, patients have access without the burden of out-of-pocket costs—a key differentiator that sets it apart from many countries around the world.

In addition to this, Saudi Arabia's growing, youthful population presents a significant opportunity for the pharmaceutical industry, particularly as the aging demographic, which typically requires more healthcare services, is also expanding. Coupled with the country's strong financial outlook and sustained economic growth, Saudi Arabia provides a promising long-term environment for investing in the health and well-being of its citizens.

For global companies, key factors such as market size, access to innovation, and the funding available for new treatments are crucial in assessing the attractiveness of a market. However, Saudi Arabia's investment in its healthcare infrastructure, including advanced medical facilities, skilled personnel, and strong innovation and early detection programs, positions it as a top contender. The country's commitment to building one of the best healthcare systems in the world aligns perfectly with Bayer's goals and makes Saudi Arabia a standout market.

On a more strategic level, Saudi Arabia is increasingly engaging in global conversations, hosting major events like COP 16 and playing a larger role in forums such as the World Economic Forum. These events, combined with the country's growing global influence, make Saudi Arabia an important hub for both political and economic dialogue. What truly sets the country apart, however, is its service-oriented, collaborative approach. The government actively seeks feedback from companies like Bayer, asking how they can work together to shape policies and improve the business landscape. This level of engagement and openness is rare and particularly notable within the GCC region, with countries like the UAE also showing a similar commitment to fostering strong public-private partnerships.

## **How do you see Bayer contributing to Saudi Arabia's national biotech strategy and fostering local talent in the process?**

Bayer's involvement in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reflects a strong alignment with the Kingdom's ambition to diversify its economy, particularly by emphasizing biotechnology. A notable aspect of our contribution has been our proactive investment in local talent. Bayer was among the first pharmaceutical companies to meet the government's Saudization targets, with 60% of our workforce now comprised of local employees. This early focus on talent development, supported by Saudi Arabia's robust educational system, positions Bayer to continue playing a key role in the country's growing knowledge economy.

In addition to developing local talent, Bayer is exploring opportunities for local production, particularly in the biotech sector. As Saudi Arabia works to reduce its reliance on oil and gas, the biotech industry is becoming increasingly central to its long-term strategy. Bayer is eager to contribute to this vision, knowing that Saudi Arabia's commitment to creating a biotech-friendly environment enhances the potential for success and innovation.

### **How is Bayer utilizing digital health technologies and innovations in the Middle East to enhance healthcare access and education?**

Bayer has long been a leader in embracing digital health, recognizing its significant role in enhancing awareness and broadening access to healthcare, especially in regions where healthcare providers may be less accessible. Through the strategic use of social media platforms, Bayer has effectively driven disease awareness and education. While regulations prevent direct promotion of medicines, these platforms enable Bayer to inform the public about various health conditions, reaching individuals in remote areas with limited access to medical professionals. This approach provides a vital educational resource, particularly in underserved regions.

Traditionally, healthcare education and professional development were confined to in-person interactions, such as conferences and hospital visits, often limiting participation for those unable to attend. Digital health technologies, however, have allowed Bayer to transcend these geographical barriers, facilitating global knowledge exchange. For example, healthcare professionals in the Middle East now have the opportunity to educate and collaborate with their counterparts in Europe and Africa, fostering an invaluable cross-regional dialogue that enhances medical expertise and patient care. This shift to digital has opened up new avenues for education, benefiting both patients and healthcare professionals who can now access essential information remotely.

Bayer's partnerships further underscore its commitment to expanding healthcare access through technology. One key partnership with Vezeeta, a leading digital healthcare platform in the region,

offers free telehealth consultations and facilitates patient bookings with cardiologists. Additionally, Bayer's collaboration with Huma Therapeutics, a global digital health technology company, emphasizes the integration of digital health solutions, leveraging technology to improve patient care and management of cardiovascular diseases. By integrating educational tools, telemedicine services, and AI-driven technologies, Bayer is making healthcare more accessible, efficient, and proactive across the Middle East.

### **How does Bayer attract and retain top talent in the competitive Middle Eastern markets, and ensure continued employee engagement?**

Bayer's strong brand reputation and legacy naturally attract top talent in the Middle East. However, the true challenge lies in ensuring that once talent is brought in, it remains engaged and motivated over the long term.

We offer diverse career paths, both vertical and horizontal, allowing employees to work across 17 countries and experience different markets and cultures. This flexibility, combined with our purpose-driven mission, particularly appeals to professionals seeking meaningful work and personal growth. But Bayer's commitment to employee well-being extends beyond career development and flexibility. The company offers competitive benefits, such as generous maternity and paternity leave, reflecting its dedication to supporting employees on both a professional and personal level. For those seeking vertical career growth, Bayer provides opportunities not only within the MENA region but also globally, with an increasing number of regional talents being offered positions in international roles. Another important part of Bayer's talent strategy is its emphasis on diversity, particularly in recruiting and retaining female talent. By investing in diversity and flexibility, Bayer ensures that it attracts and retains top talent, allowing the company to remain a competitive force in the dynamic Middle Eastern market.

### **What are the key milestones Bayer aims to achieve in the next 2-3 years in the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia?**

Looking ahead, Bayer is poised for significant growth, with an exciting portfolio of innovations spanning crop science, pharmaceuticals, and consumer care. Over the next few years, our primary objective is to make these innovations accessible to as many patients as possible across the region, ensuring broad access to the healthcare solutions we offer. In parallel, we aim to strengthen and deepen our relationships with stakeholders in the various countries where we

operate. Enhancing these connections and building greater visibility will remain a focal point of our strategy. Moreover, advancing Bayer's sustainability initiatives and reinforcing our commitment to corporate citizenship will be central to our efforts. These goals underscore our broader mission to drive positive change not only in healthcare and agriculture but also in the communities and environments we serve.

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