

## Interview: Ersin Erfa - CEO, Centurion - Turkey

---



---

27.07.2015

Tags: [locals](#), [manufacturing](#), [exports](#), [generics](#),

---

*The CEO of Centurion shares his ambitious vision for the company's expansion into plasma products, biotech, orphan drugs, and generic injectables over the coming years, while simultaneously developing sales in more than twenty countries across the EU, CIS, GCC and MENA regions.*

### **As a company working on bringing biotech production to Turkey, what is your assessment of the support the government is providing?**

The government has been very supportive of companies developing biotechnology manufacturing, providing some financial support and cooperating in the regulatory environment. Of course there are other countries with more robust incentive programs, but overall Turkey has offered an effective set of incentives, and clarity as to their policy agenda to minimize uncertainty, which is much more than we could have said a few years ago. As a Turkish company that wants to invest in Turkey, they've done more than enough to encourage us to do so.

Of course, prices on the Turkish market will still be an issue for biosimilars, as they are for the pharmaceutical industry in general at present. Biosimilars are not as cheap to produce as most generics, yet they face the same level of discounts making it difficult for companies to find a commercially viable way of bringing biosimilars to Turkey. This means that for investments in biotech production to make sense companies have to plan on aggressively developing exports, because if such an investment is focused on the Turkish market, financial problems will likely be encountered. So, our strategy is to invest in Turkey, but sell abroad, and there are at least five

companies making such investments at present. At this point, it is just a matter of time, two or three years most likely, until Turkish companies will be manufacturing biosimilars.

**Last year you nearly doubled your sales from TRY 34 (USD 13.5) million to TRY 65 (USD 26) million; what are the key drivers of this growth?**

This was actually the third year in a row that we achieved such strong domestic growth, and we expect to double our revenue again this year. In reality, the reason we have performed so well is quite simple, despite our many business development initiatives; demand for our existing portfolio of plasma products has grown very strongly.

Today, this core business is built upon our strong partnership with Sanquin, a non-profit organization ran by the Dutch, Belgian, and Finnish red cross organizations. We have worked with them for more than 15 years, and are their partner for distribution in more than 20 countries across the MENA, CIS and Balkan regions, as well as some EU countries, although our expansion to these areas is still in the early stages.

**What are these business development initiatives?**

Over the next couple of years Centurion will be expanding into generic hospital injectables, biotechnology, and orphan drugs. Since 2011 we have had our own R&D department that has been focusing primarily on developing generic hospital injectable products, but is also involved in a variety of other projects. One of these projects is the development of a new orphan drug, a new molecule to treat pulmonary sarcoidosis, and we are also currently working with Tubitak on two projects, and will be starting a third one soon.

This new molecule is currently in phase III of clinical development, and we hope that it will become the first molecule to be developed by a Turkish company to reach the market, which should occur within the next two years. Once this molecule is approved, we will be working with a mid-sized European partner to commercialize the product in the EU.

As for our expansion in to biotech, we are working with a strong and reliable partner, Amega Biotech from Argentina, to develop a new biotechnology manufacturing plant. This 3200 square meter facility in Gebze, will produce, fill and finish injectable biosimilar products, in prefilled syringes and ampoules, and we hope that its development will be finished in about 30 months. We are most interested in some of the more advanced products, such as PEG Filgrastim and Follicle-stimulating Hormone (FSH), but we will be trying to bring most of Amega Biotech's portfolio to Turkey, including recombinant products, monoclonal antibodies, more commonly produced

biosimilars such as Erythropoietin.

This facility is a huge investment for Centurion and for Amega Biotech, and we will serve as a regional hub of sorts for them. As we are planning to focus on the European market, conducting phase studies is of the utmost importance, and we are confident that we will be able to access and compete in the European market.

**On the topic of orphan drugs, how did Centurion end up investing in developing a new molecule so much earlier than other, larger, Turkish companies?**

There are two parts to the answer. The first is that we wanted to have a different strategy from other companies, which defines many aspects of our business including how we work in niche plasma products. The second is the third generation leader of a family company, I had to do something different from before, and take the company in new directions. This meant that we ended up looking for potential investment opportunities and potential partners, and we ended up finding THERAMetrics, an R&D focused company headquartered in Switzerland. They were working on several projects in Cystic Fibrosis, Sarcoidosis and Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis, which fit well with our objectives in the orphan drugs area our business plan, so we signed an R&D collaboration agreement last year.

**How far abroad has your business expanded so far?**

We are very new to the export market and we have been learning a lot recently, but we have a strong niche portfolio in our hands, and are very well equipped in terms of human resources, so we have the necessary ingredients for success. Our plan is to use our current portfolio of plasma products to expand geographically and to begin establishing a presence in other countries, so that we are able to launch our generic hospital injectable, orphan drugs, and biosimilars across the entire region when the time comes. As such, we are doing our best to design our new product portfolios so that they fit together and complement each other, and are also taking into account the demand for different products across the region in countries like Saudia Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and the Balkans to some extent, as well as the demand in Turkey.

That said, we expect to have a satisfying level of performance with our current portfolio in the short run, and are in the planning stage for establishing a secondary HQ in Dubai to coordinate the MENA region. At present, we are working through the regulatory approval process in more than 20 countries in the MENA, CIS, Balkan, and EU regions, but have begun marketing and sales in Saudi Arabia and some other GCC countries, as well as some business in Iran and Iraq, and we should be able to begin sales in Poland and Serbia very soon.

## **Looking at the longer term, in line with Vision 2023, in 2023 where do you see Centurion and where do you see yourself?**

I want to see Centurion become a semi-global company, commercializing our portfolios of niche products in Europe and the MENA, CIS, and GCC regions. By 2023, Centurion should have completed the second stage of investment for our facilities in Gebze, perhaps even the third, as our ultimate vision is to develop three separate production plants for the three different therapeutic areas.

## **What drives you and your business forward day by day to achieve these ambitious goals?**

The answer for the driver of our business is easy; our team and our business planning in general. We have an efficient team that is successful, works hard, and is able to fully capitalize upon all the support we are getting from our manufacturers to maximize the growth of our business.

As for myself, and my team, we are all very passionate about our projects, which we all find to be very exciting. Each day we face new challenges and solve crises, and the key to doing this effectively is keeping up our speed and efficiency so we can continue to work, and when you work quickly on exciting problems, the hours fly right by. Of course, our financial success and rapid growth is also a strong motivator.

## **How did you first become involved with Centurion?**

YeniŞark group acquired Centurion in 2002, and I started working with YeniŞark in 1999 after finishing my post secondary education consisting of a BA from Marmara University and a MBA from Georgetown University in Washington DC. I am the third generation of my family to be involved with the company, and after joining the company I worked in a variety of positions over the years before taking over as CEO in 2013. YeniŞark is one of the oldest companies in the plasma product and vaccine market in Turkey, founded in 1979, and our acquisition of Centurion was made to acquire the licenses they held for plasma products. Today, we operate as Centurion in the plasma market, and we lead the market in many plasma derivative categories.

[Click here to read more articles and interviews from Turkey, and to download the latest free pharma report on the country.](#)

[See more interviews](#)