

Ali Farooq Abdulqader Founder & CEO, AI-Hikma FZCO



We believe people in the region deserve higher standards of care, and we want to be part of that

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The AI-Hikma Group has grown from humble beginnings to today stand as one of the Middle East's premier pharmaceutical distributors under the watch of Founder and CEO Ali Farooq Abdulqader. Here, he describes the niches where the biggest opportunities for future expansion lie, what makes his company stand out to potential partners, and the importance of an entrepreneurial mindset.

You have an interesting story and have grown the company from the ground up. Could you introduce yourself and the AI-Hikma group to the international audience of PharmaBoardroom?

I am the founder and CEO of the AI-Hikma Group which currently exports to 25 countries, has more than 50 local distributor partnerships across the region and employs around 500 people that serve a population size of over 500 million. Dubai is home to the company's scientific offices and its regional headquarters.

My background is as a pharmacist and after graduating with a Masters of Clinical Pharmacy from the University of Mosul, I chose to go into business as this was the most exciting career pathway for me. Initially, I began as the owner of a small distribution company in Mosul but quickly worked to expand this footprint to other parts of Iraq. Furthermore, I was able to establish a scientific bureau in Mosul,

the first outside the capital, Baghdad, and this was an enriching way to give back to my city and provide local people with larger opportunities. In 2005, I set up the second group arm here in the UAE.

Thus far, throughout my career journey, I have always looked to undertake aggressive entrepreneurship, sought out new opportunities, and tried to find innovative ways to expand our company footprint. On top of that, I have always had trustworthy business minds around me that have given expert advice on which steps to take. It is always good to have a loyal base around you, especially when growing a business from the ground up.

It is a story of real entrepreneurial spirit and you have gone from strength to strength. How does the company's portfolio look today and where do you see the greatest expansion opportunities in the future?

We have a diversified portfolio but our main focus areas are wound management, food supplements and OTC products, generics, and medical devices. In some markets, we represent our own brands while in others we are present via partners. Our company vision has always been to deliver healthier lives to the broader community, and we do this by bringing high-end innovative products and new technologies to market.

In terms of growth, we are looking to do this both vertically and horizontally. On a horizontal level, we are looking to expand into new markets and undertake new partnerships with possible clients or distributors whether in the GCC or MENA region. Currently, we are very much interested in western and central Africa as possible expansion areas through partnerships as we believe this area has amazing potential. In fact, I see Africa, excluding northern Africa, as really a virgin market with untapped possibilities.

On a vertical level of growth, we are looking to increase our market share within our therapeutic areas for our existing partners while expanding our portfolio. We have recently signed with partners in a few areas. Within wound management with Flen Health and a Japanese company, Zuiko, which is bringing unique innovation therapies for second- and third-degree burns. For injectables, we have signed with Swiss Parentals, an Indian group, and with Unimed, a leading Tunisian manufacturer that supplies northern Africa and some European countries. As you can see, we are working hard to expand our portfolio and give our partners further opportunities to grow their reach

The future seems bright as you look to expand. How is the company performing today and how will Al-Hikma's structure change as it grows?

We are focused on the GCC and Iraq and financially they are our main contributors to revenue. As we move into 2023 and 2024, our business will shift more towards northern Africa, such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Libya, and hopefully the latter will have a politically stable future as it has vast potential.

As an organisation, we are going to be undertaking a corporate restructure in Iraq. Through my experience in the field, I see that to be taken more seriously by the leading stakeholders in any market, you must have clear systems and policies in place. Therefore, we are looking to transform how we are structured and work internally and externally to deal better with healthcare regulators and main providers. I feel very confident that with these changes we will become a top 3 company in terms of distribution. We also understand it is an exciting journey ahead with still a lot of steps to put

in place.

Al-Hikma, like many companies, has positioned its regional HQ in UAE, more specifically in Dubai. What do you believe are the clear advantages of doing so?

Firstly, it is an excellent strategic location that connects the world. This is coupled with world-class infrastructure such as seaports, airports, and leading telecommunications technology. As a business, you want to make sure the influence of external factors is limited, and in Dubai, this is the case. Business runs smoothly. Furthermore, Dubai is home to a diverse range of professionals, so finding new experienced employees is never really a concern. Another key point is that the UAE government makes business conditions very comfortable to operate here. Areas such as the banking system, tax and laws are all about promoting business and an entrepreneurial mindset.

Trust is important when setting up long-lasting partnerships. What makes your group stand out to potential partners?

We have a clear vision and an innovative business model that is always looking towards new technologies and products. The road for business in the region is not easy, but we are experts. It is a market which we know well and can be trusted to succeed with any potential business partners. Our record speaks for itself.

You talk a lot about your entrepreneurial mindset and being aggressive in growing the business. How do you make sure this approach cascades down across your 500 employees?

It is important as the CEO to make sure your workers trust you completely. This brings credibility to your actions and ensures staff members are all working together to reach the vision of the company. People must feel they are part of our success and that every day they turn up to work that we are working towards a common target.

Looking ahead, where will we see Al-Hikma in three yearsâ?? time?

A top leader in the region that is present in more therapeutic areas and has a growing team. We want to be the partner of choice across the MENA region and are open to partnerships to help create healthier lives in the community. We believe people in the region deserve higher standards of care, and we want to be part of that.

Saying that, it does come with challenges as working in such diverse markets means each country has its quirks. Furthermore, there is a less uniform system of regulations compared to say Europe, so we must adapt to every situation to make sure we succeed. We are aware of all these challenges, but we all work towards the common goal of delivering innovation to the region and a higher standard of healthcare.

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