Simona Grandits â?? Vice President EEMEA, QIAGEN

QIAGENâ??s role in supporting Saudi Arabiaâ??s Vision 2030 health transformation is to help strengthen prevention frameworks, ensure early detection, and provide solutions that empower the countryâ??s healthcare system

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Simona Grandits, VP of EEMEA at QIAGEN, reflects on the evolution of the German company whose revenues are now split between life sciences and molecular diagnostics, and the growing importance of bioinformatics for which QIAGEN is developing a data centre in Saudi Arabia. Grandits also reviews QIAGENâ??s preventive healthcare initiatives in the Kingdom, its biggest market in the Middle East, its work with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to address latent tuberculosis, and the talent recruitment landscape.

Could you please share an overview of your career journey and how it led you to your current role at Qiagen?

I have worked in MedTech diagnostics for about 15 years; starting my career in the in vitro diagnostics (IVD) field, focusing on the transformation from traditional clinical microbiology to more molecular methods. During the first 10 years of my career at bioMÃ©rieux, I began by promoting and using traditional culture media plates, growing bacteria in local hospital kitchens and institutes which was a very hands-on environment. Over time, I helped guide our customers from these locally made plates to standardized, pre-prepared plates with coloured colonies that made bacteria easier to identify. This was a major shift, as it moved many Eastern European markets from a local, home-based style of microbiology into a more commercial and standardized approach.

At the end of my time there, I was part of a delegation of bioMÃ©rieux to Utah where we signed the acquisition of a company specializing in syndromic PCR detection. This experience prepared me for what I am doing now at QIAGEN, and over the last nine years I have focused on transforming simpler diagnostic techniques into molecular biology-based methods. We have worked to build extensive networks across Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, helping hospitals, laboratories, and our partners introduce modern molecular biology tools.

Throughout my career, I have witnessed significant progress in QIAGEN. When we introduced a new version of syndromic testing in 2018, it was considered very advanced. Today, syndromic testing is a benchmark in most markets. In fact, Saudi Arabia has been one of the most successful in adopting these solutions. Our focus is now on making advanced technologies more accessible and affordable to improve patient care. With these methods, we can screen patients more thoroughly, often ruling out bacterial infections and reducing unnecessary antibiotic use. This approach has been very well received.

Over the past 15 years of my career, I have taken on increasing responsibilities across multiple regions. Now, starting in 2025, I will step into a new role where I will lead another phase of transformation at QIAGEN, expanding my responsibility to cover all entities in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

How did COVID-19 impact QIAGEN as a company, and how did the company respond to the unprecedented uptick in diagnostic need?

The pandemic was certainly an interesting journey. I had to question how to adapt, moving from traditional microbiology into advanced molecular techniques and clinical insights. After COVID-19, these methods have become much more familiar to everyone.

Going back to early 2020, I was still traveling as usual. During a kick-off meeting in Turkey for the entire region, and one of my commercial partners mentioned that he felt there might be backorders for extraction kits. I told him not to worry, because until that point we never experienced any issues. Our company was very well organized, with strict regulations and checks, even from the FDA, and having a backorder was almost unthinkable.

Soon after that meeting, the situation changed drastically. I started receiving calls from Russia requesting 150 PCR cyclers, when previously they would only order 40 or 50 units per year. Our CEO, who had strong connections in China, had warned us that a global health crisis might be unfolding.

He contacted our facility in Barcelona, where we had developed a machine that uses a single cartridge to test for a range of 23 respiratory pathogens. He insisted that the team add COVID-19 primers to the cartridge. As the testing cartridge was designed with flexibility in mind, we could quickly add new pathogens. The team put other projects aside and began working on integrating COVID-19 detection.

In this unprecedented situation, the QIAGEN teams managed to ramp up our production capacity for extraction kits 50-fold within a short period of time. In my role focused on public health at QIAGEN, I worked closely with organizations like the WHO, UNICEF, and the United Nations. The WHO asked me to ship extraction kits to 35 countriesâ??many of which were not even in our SAP system, meaning we had never shipped there before. We had to quickly open new markets and figure out complex logistics, going from regular business to an enormous, unexpected workload in a very short time.

Within six weeks of that initial realization, we developed a detection kit for COVID-19, and our CEO was one of the first industry leader on CNN to announce that QIAGEN had a cartridge for the virus detection. By then, we were completely sold out.

I stopped traveling in March due to travel restrictions. Managing the situation from Vienna, I had to decide how to allocate our limited kits. As an example, we produced 1,000 kits at a time, and I had to determine which countries would receive them. Thankfully, our CEO decided that we would not leave any country behind. We would distribute proportionally, ensuring that markets like the UK and Germany, as well as Nigeria, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia, would all receive their share of the kits. This decision helped maintain fairness and confirmed our commitment to supporting global public health during an unprecedented time.

Can you provide an overview of QIAGEN and its activities in Saudi Arabia?

QIAGEN was founded by scientists 40 years ago, beginning with the invention of spin columns which allowed for the separation of genetic material. This technology came from a university in DÃ¼sseldorf, Germany, and one of the original founders still serves on our supervisory board. This means we still carry over four decades of knowledge and expertise.

Today, QIAGEN is a mid-cap biotech company with around two billion dollars in revenue. We began in life sciences, and over the past 10 years, we have grown our molecular diagnostics business to the point that revenue is now split about evenly between life sciences and molecular diagnostics. In life sciences, we serve research laboratories, academic institutions, biopharmaceutical companies and emerging biotech. We even have Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) capabilities, allowing local initiativesâ??such as those in Saudi Arabia focused on localization and technology transferâ??to source components from us. This means we can support the countryâ??s efforts to build and strengthen its own biotechnology infrastructure.

In molecular diagnostics, we specialize in specific testing areas. For example, we focus on latent tuberculosis, syndromic testing for respiratory, meningitis and gastrointestinal infections. These are critical when patients show severe symptoms and when a quick, accurate diagnosis is needed. With our solutions, it is possible to distinguish between various infections in about one hour, allowing healthcare providers to give the correct treatment promptly and effectively.

A third area of our company is bioinformatics. We develop databases, software licenses, and interpretation tools that help manage and make sense of large amounts of genetic and genomic data. COVID-19 highlighted how quickly data can accumulate. In just six months of the pandemic, we generated more data than ever before due to the high testing volume. Managing this data, interpreting it, and drawing meaningful conclusions is essential.

In Saudi Arabia, where data privacy and national legislation are very strict, we are investing in a local data centre. This centre will ensure that all data we gather in the country stays in the country. By doing this, we comply with Saudi Arabiaâ??s regulations while providing local data interpretation capabilities. Essentially, our focus is on working from the sample through to the final resultâ??collecting, extracting, detecting, and then interpreting, all within a framework that supports local healthcare ecosystems and national priorities.

In the context of molecular diagnostics, what does innovation look like for QIAGEN, and how do you see the company contributing to this evolution?

For QIAGEN, innovation in molecular diagnostics is strongly tied to digitalization. This includes significant developments in bioinformatics, where we invest in software, licenses, and interpretation tools that can handle large amounts of complex data. We are also focused on bringing our instruments into the next generation. For example, we have a system called QIAsymphony which is an instrument designed to perform automated purification of nucleic acids for further molecular diagnostic and biology applications. Soon we will be introducing QIAsymphony Connect, which is designed to be more user-friendly and integrates further connectivity features into the system. Our vision is to become the most digitalized and AI-driven company in the biotech sector.

On the healthcare side, we believe innovation should support better prevention methods. Take latent tuberculosis as an example. Many countries still rely on the traditional skin test, which can be compromised by BCG vaccination, requires two doctor visits, and is less accurate. Our approach uses a blood-based test that can identify the potential development of tuberculosis before it manifests. This kind of preventive testing is especially important in countries with a young population, like Saudi Arabia, where there is growing awareness and appreciation for innovation in healthcare.

How do you define the role QIAGEN plays in Saudi Arabiaâ??s Vision 2030 health transformation, particularly in the realm of preventive healthcare?

We began working closer with the Ministry of Health (MOH) about two years ago, signing a memorandum of understanding focused on preventive healthcare initiatives. Our key targets are tuberculosis, meningitis, and women health, all of which align with the United Nations and WHO goals for elimination or significant reduction by 2030. At last yearâ??s Global Health event in Riyadh, we formalized our commitment with the MOH, and I was impressed by how quickly discussions turned into action. Immediately following the signing, we held educational workshops, engaged with vaccine manufacturers, drafted protocols, and organized two events to fine-tune the approach. Now we have a white paper in place and are moving into the implementation phase.

We are also working closely with the MOH to address latent tuberculosis, which is a silent killer often overlooked. In Saudi Arabia, where there is a large expat workforce and a focus on growing regional corporate headquarters, tuberculosis prevention is critical. Despite the global awareness raised during COVID-19, tuberculosis still claims many lives and presents a significant health and economic burden. Studies show that every dollar spent on tuberculosis prevention brings a fortyfold return to the country. Still, resources and initiatives have often fallen short.

Our partnership with the Saudi authorities aims to change this. By testing healthcare workers and integrating prevention strategies, we hope to set a strong example of how proactive public health policies can save both lives and costs. Ultimately, QIAGENâ??s role in supporting Saudi Arabiaâ??s Vision 2030 health transformation is to help strengthen prevention frameworks, ensure early detection, and provide solutions that empower the countryâ??s healthcare system to protect and improve the health of its population.

How is the Saudi market positioned within the broader Middle East and EEMEA region, and what factors contribute to its unique standing?

Saudi Arabia is a very significant market for us, and the biggest in the Middle East region. What is especially noteworthy is that we have been experiencing double-digit growth in Saudi Arabia for the past five years. This expansion is closely linked to the countryâ??s Vision 2030, which has placed a

strong emphasis on healthcare. As a result, there are dedicated budgets and allocations that support the adoption of new technologies.

Another key factor is education. When visiting laboratories in Saudi Arabia, I often meet young professionals who have returned after studying abroad. These individuals, including hospital CEOs, bring international insights and are eager to implement what they have learned elsewhere. This approach helps drive rapid adoption of innovative methods and ensures that the market is open to advanced technologies.

Moreover, there is a great deal of thoughtfulness about resource management. I recall meeting a doctor at King Faisal Hospital who specialized in stratifying patients to determine which tests they require. Instead of testing everyone with expensive technologies, she has strict protocols that ensure resources are used efficiently. This level of strategic thinking demonstrates how the country is not simply investing in the latest tools, but also considering how best to apply them.

Saudi Arabiaâ??s ability to combine strong economic support, advanced education, and well-designed protocols in healthcare makes it a standout example within the Middle East and the entire EEMEA region. If we continue to support the country with the right technologies and expertise, I believe it will serve as a model for other markets in the region.

What is your perspective on the talent recruitment landscape in Saudi Arabia and the wider region?

Saudi Arabia and the region have a strong pool of talents in our industry, but recruiting them presents both opportunities and challenges. I have opened about five positions recentlyâ??three of which have been filledâ??but the process is very lengthy. We receive a high volume of applications, and it often seems like many applicants are not fully aware of the skills needed for the role and experience required. This means we must do a great deal of initial filtering. Another gap is the need for more specialized talent acquisition partners who can help us identify the right type of candidates with the required skill sets.

When we aimed to hire talent for our Saudi regional headquarters who could also serve the Middle East, North Africa, and potentially the rest of Africa, it proved very difficult. Finding qualified individuals focused specifically on the Saudi market was much easier, and we did come across some truly capable and interesting candidates. However, the moment we tried to broaden our scope and look for professionals able to work across multiple countries, the search became much more challenging.

Looking forward, what is your strategic vision and aspirations for QIAGEN in the region and for the Saudi market?

My plan is to continue building an energetic and skilled team in Saudi Arabia, ensuring that we maintain strong double-digit growth for the next five years. I also want to work closely with the authorities and the Ministry of Health to help implement their healthcare reforms effectively. We have direct partnerships with institutions like King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and have recently qualified to partner with Neom University. This allows us to engage more deeply with life science research, diagnostic labs, hospitals, and companies in the region. My aim is to achieve broad coverage across the country, which is only possible by choosing the right partners.

We are collaborating closely with Abdullah Fouad Medical Services (AFMS), who serve not just as a distributor, but as a genuine partner. Through their efforts, we are reaching laboratories in every corner of Saudi Arabia. By segmenting the country and focusing region by region, we are bringing in experts from Europe and the Middle East to exchange knowledge with these laboratories and foster development.

Private partnerships are also important, such as our engagement with Suleiman Al Habib Hospital. Meeting with their higher management and CEO helped us understand their workflows and identify areas where we can help fill the gaps. Supporting such institutions and improving patient health is our main focus. Our mission is to make improvements in life possible. After seeing what we achieved during COVID and now working in the open environment in Saudi, I hope to extend similar initiatives to Africa in the future. This would further our mission of making improvements in life possible.

How would you sum up QIAGENâ??s commitment to supporting the regionâ??s healthcare goals?

QIAGEN is deeply committed to supporting the regionâ??s healthcare goals, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where we recognize the transformative potential of the Kingdomâ??s Vision 2030. We are actively expanding our presence in Saudi Arabia, establishing stronger collaborations, and investing in initiatives that create awareness about advanced diagnostics and their critical role in healthcare transformation.

With our global expertise in building national screening programs and our focus on technology transfer, we aim to equip local stakeholders with the knowledge and tools needed to implement sustainable healthcare solutions. Our agility as a mid-cap company allows us to respond quickly to evolving needs, making us an effective partner in this period of rapid change. We are confident that our collaboration with Saudi authorities and stakeholders will help accelerate progress toward achieving the Kingdomâ??s ambitious healthcare objectives.

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