Mohammed Khalil – CEO, SAJA Pharmaceuticals



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SAJA Pharmaceuticals is aiming to grow from a regional player to a multinational entity, in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, leveraging strong partnerships, technology transfer, and strategic licensing to expand geographically. CEO Mohammed Khalil explains how the Saudi firm prides itself on its agility and commitment to high-quality, accessible medications, as well as the significant pipeline and manufacturing expansions planned for the coming years, especially in oncology and immunology.

Could you please start with a brief introduction to yourself and your journey in Saudi Arabia’s pharmaceutical industry?

I am a pharmacist by education; graduating from King Saud University College of Pharmacy in 1993. I embarked on my professional journey in Saudi Arabia’s pharmaceutical industry with SPIMACO, the first local pharmaceutical manufacturer in the country. Over the course of just over 13 years, I honed my Commercial skills by starting as a medical representative and advancing to eventually become a regional sales manager. This role exposed me to various facets of the business, from promotion to direct sales, and provided me with invaluable insights into the Saudi market – ultimately fostering a robust foundation for business growth.

In 2007, I transitioned to Novartis, where I faced significant culture challenges but achieved remarkable turnarounds. Within five months, I rose to the position of head of sales for all of

Novartis Pharma in Saudi Arabia. During my tenure, we doubled the business within three years, focusing on specialty products. Our efforts were recognized globally, winning a global Diversity and inclusion award.

Following my success at Novartis, I joined Sandoz in Saudi Arabia as a country head, where I substantially expanded the business in just 18 months. Despite being a smaller company, it presented immense growth potential, which we capitalized on through strategic restructuring and motivation initiatives. I can proudly say our progress even gained the attention of the global CEO of Sandoz at the time, Jiff George, who came to visit Saudi Arabia.

Seeking to diversify my expertise in manufacturing, I joined Baxter JV in early 2012 as a general manager. Despite initial challenges, including losses due to manufacturing issues, we implemented crucial changes that led to the company breaking even within a couple of years. My role expanded to encompass all Baxter businesses in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on enhancing the dialysis solutions segment.

By promoting the therapy rather than just the product and investing in patient and physician education, we witnessed a substantial increase in patients utilizing dialysis solutions. This strategy elevated the company to a sustainable profitable growing organization.

Overall, my career trajectory in the Saudi pharmaceutical industry reflects a steadfast commitment to excellence, strategic vision, and a relentless drive to overcome challenges and achieve sustainable growth.

About four years ago, you joined SAJA as CEO. What motivated you to transition from large international companies to SAJA – a unique joint venture between Japanese and Saudi firms?

All in all, I was driven by the desire to have a greater impact on society, my country, and myself. However, I was also inspired by SAJA’s story as the first joint venture pharmaceutical company in Saudi Arabia and the first to manufacture highly complex innovative medications. SAJA stands out because of its strong partners: The Tamer group as a strong healthcare player in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with Daiichi Sankyo and Astellas – two of the top performing innovative companies in Japan.

For me, it was a great opportunity because SAJA is not just a local company, but rather a successful regional player in MENA. I wanted to expand my reach further and move SAJA from a regional

player to a multinational company. This aspiration aligns with one of the government's objectives outlined the 2030 vision – to expand Saudi businesses globally.

SAJA's mission is to ensure that medicines are accessible to all patients. During COVID, we saw how vital it is to have drug security. Many countries closed their supply chains which severely impacted patients. Our goal is to ensure that the right medication is available at the right time and at a fair price.

I am proud of my team in Saudi Arabia and beyond who have embraced the SAJA vision and worked diligently towards it. The main success factor for any organization is having the right objectives, vision, and team. I can confidently say that our team is skilled, engaged, and understands the business – enabling us to capture opportunities efficiently and effectively.

In the past four years, considering the growth and dynamics of SAJA, what would you identify as the most significant milestones for the company?

Passion for success, where we all as humans deserve to grow and contribute.

Focusing on three main pillars; Top line (Revenue), Bottom line (P&L) and People (Culture)

Maximizing our market share, attention to optimization in our processes & resources, and creating a culture of performance-driven organization were the keys to success.

For our future pipeline expansion, we have four upcoming launches, with eight planned for next year, and sixteen more by 2026. Meanwhile, we are exploring 50 products aiming to have them ready by 2028.

We are also expanding our manufacturing capabilities, particularly for oncology and immunology products through a new facility in Jeddah.

What has driven this success for SAJA and what are your future growth prospects for the company?

What has been driving our success at SAJA is the cohesive teamwork we have cultivated. We have the right team size, clear objectives, and a shared commitment to achieving our goals. We are focusing on expanding our pipeline and presence, not just organically, but also through horizontal growth. This means broadening our offerings and increasing our geographic footprint. We have

recently inaugurated a new office in Dubai, with plans to expand further to new markets annually, whether it’s through SAJA Saudi, SAJA Egypt, or other affiliates.

Understanding market dynamics and leveraging incentives are crucial for growth which is why we invest in people who deeply understand the markets we operate in. Having insights, aligning with objectives, and delivering results are key. Ultimately, it’s the right combination of objectives, goals, and talented individuals that drives our success. With a clear and passionate vision and the right motivated people, I am confident in the continued growth and success of SAJA.

Focusing on Saudi Arabia, there has been a significant transformation in the Kingdom and many changes in recent years. What trends and opportunities do you foresee as a company operating in this evolving market?

There have been significant shifts, especially with the government’s support. There were good incentives for both multinationals and local firms to localize manufacturing and build local capabilities to sustain know-how. Agreements of up to seven years were granted for locally manufactured biologics, which was a big milestone for a drug manufacturer like us facing significant price reduction globally.

That being said, one of the key aspects contributing to our success has been technology transfer. Despite resource constraints, we managed to launch the first biosimilar in the market, specifically for osteoporosis. This achievement helped us to become a market leader within the first year of launch, not just in Saudi Arabia but also in neighbouring markets like UAE . We have even surpassed products with decades-long legacies in just four years. This success underscores the importance of having the right products and strategies, along with a belief in the market potential.

In general, Saudi Arabia stands out for several reasons. Firstly, it offers stability, both economically and politically, making it an attractive investment destination. Additionally, the government’s incentives further encourage both local and multinational companies to establish operations here. The recent trend of offering citizenship to expats shows the country’s commitment to attracting top talent.

However, investing in Saudi Arabia is also about aligning with government priorities. Localization is a key aspect, especially for companies wanting to participate in government tenders. While there were challenges in the past, such as delayed payments, the situation has vastly improved, with payments now processed within 120 days. This reliability and efficiency makes working with the

public sector more appealing, providing businesses with the confidence they need to do business here.

Of course, there are rules and regulations to adhere to, particularly concerning compliance and quality standards. The Saudi FDA's international recognition as a reliable regulatory body underscores the country's commitment to upholding healthcare standards. These changes showcase a more transparent and accountable business environment, where patient safety and regulatory compliance are essential. Overall, the evolving landscape in Saudi Arabia presents plenty of opportunities for growth.

You mentioned the new specialized unit for cancer treatment SAJA is developing. How critical is tech transfer in this initiative, especially given your strong partnership with Astellas and Daiichi Sankyo?

What sets SAJA apart is our commitment to technology transfer. For example, prior to the launch of the company our team spent a year in Japan learning and understanding our partners' processes, which enabled us to train our technical personnel accordingly. We have agreements in place for product supply for decades, during which we guarantee full technology transfer. This level of planning and transparency builds trust with our partners and ensures the success of these collaborations.

Our reputation for delivering on commitments and our customer and patient centricity further enhance our partnership potential. We prioritize win-win agreements with our partners, ensuring mutual benefits and long-term collaboration. The success of our licensing agreements in recent years reflects the quality and quantity of products we are getting to different markets, often being the first to market with high-quality products. In today's competitive landscape, our quality service and ability to expedite registration processes sets us apart in the pharmaceutical industry.

What are the opportunities for SAJA to expand geographically? What is your strategy to achieve this vision to evolve from a local to a regional and then a multinational entity?

Of course, we are exploring various avenues to achieve this vision of evolving from a local to a regional and eventually a multinational entity. Personally, I try to attend and participate in major international and regional events such as JP Morgan biologics event, CPHI and others where I engage with potential partners and suppliers, seeking opportunities for collaboration and learning

from industry peers. Networking is invaluable in discovering how we can mutually support each other and reach win-win outcomes.

As I mentioned, one strategy for expansion involves exploring new licensing opportunities with companies that align with our goals. We may even consider acquisitions to further broaden our reach given the right opportunity. SAJA has a strong legacy, backed by our main shareholder Tamer, with over a century of experience in the healthcare sector. Tamer's reputation and financial strength, along with the legacies of Daichi Sankyo and Astellas, lend credibility to our brand and facilitate partnerships. Our reliability and commitment to delivering on promises are key factors in fostering trust and securing collaborations.

Furthermore, being based in Saudi Arabia provides us with a unique advantage for expanding into neighbouring regions like the GCC, Levant and NA. We view ourselves as key players in these markets. Our geographical proximity and cultural familiarity enable us to capture opportunities in this region and contribute to the healthcare industry. We are also considering expansion into French-speaking countries in Africa and exploring opportunities in CIS countries and the Baltics and eventually access to European and US markets. Learning from past experiences, both successes and mistakes, guides our approach as we seek out new partnerships and alliances, whether for technology transfer or strategic alliances to complement our capabilities. Through continuous learning and adaptation, we aim to attract new talent, suppliers, partners, and alliances to support our growth and expansion efforts.

Is there any final message you would like to share with our international audience on behalf of SAJA?

I want to emphasize SAJA's unwavering commitment to ensuring high access to medication for patients. We strive to diversify our therapeutic offerings, ensuring a continuous and reliable supply of medication at reasonable prices without compromising on quality. Operating in this industry comes with significant costs, but we prioritize sourcing the best quality materials and maintaining stringent quality standards to deliver safe and effective medications to our patients.

Our heritage which is rooted in the success of our founders at Tamer, inspires us to continue innovating and adapting to meet the evolving needs of the healthcare community.

Despite SAJA is not yet a large corporation, we view our size as an advantage, allowing us to be agile, flexible, and responsive to changes in the market. SAJA remains committed to being an active partner in the healthcare sector, dedicated to delivering medications promptly and

efficiently to those patients who need them most.

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