Doaa Albarbari – Head of Pharma Division, Alphamed (AKI Investments), UAE



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AKI Investments, under the Alphamed brand, is one of the leading distributors and service providers for the healthcare industry in the Middle East. Doaa Albarbari, COO for AKI's pharma and consumer business, explains how the company has shied away from being simple "box movers" to become the partner of choice for distribution in the region.

Could you talk about what led you personally to join AKI Investments?

I have been in the pharmaceutical industry for over 20 years. I am originally from Palestine, where I grew up until I was 18 years old, at which point I moved to Iraq to get a BSc in Pharmacy. As a first step in my professional career, I joined The Jordanian Pharmaceutical Manufacturing, a company focused on generics, as a medical representative in Jordan.

I then moved to the UAE in 2002 to become a pharmacist trainee for Bin Sina Pharmacy, one of Al Khayyat Investments (AKI)'s retail chains and a leading brand in the market. Within six months, I was promoted to area manager, where I stayed until 2004. Subsequently, I worked as division manager at the Modern Pharmaceutical Company (MPC). Within four years, in 2015, we consolidated in the consumer and pharma sectors, and I was promoted to customer director for the entire MPC pharma/consumer business.

In 2018, I returned to AKI as general manager and I was recently appointed COO for the pharma and consumer business. I constantly look for new learning opportunities to develop my competencies, which is why I earned an MBA in marketing and a PhD in business administration.

What is the current standing of AKI Investments in the region's healthcare industry and how has it changed since your first period with the company?

In 2002, when I first joined AKI, it was an emerging company with a focus on pharma and consumer care. 15 years later, AKI has followed a corporate direction to become an investment company dedicated to a diverse number of fields: distribution, pharmaceutical, consumer products, contracting, landscaping, automotive, environmental services, food, fashion, retail and fitness. This transformation and growth are aligned with the UAE and Dubai's strategies.

In terms of regions, AKI's business covers the entire Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. For instance, we are agents for Mazda and Peugeot in Jordan, as well as rental cars in both Jordan and Iraq. Furthermore, we oversee hotel chains in multiple areas, including Saudi Arabia, and we have a marketing business in Kuwait.

However, historically, healthcare has always been the backbone of AKI. Pharma and consumer healthcare, the Bin Sina Pharmacies and the medical division account for more than 60 percent of AKI's business. In relation to the pharma business, we are mainly focused on the UAE and Iraq. In Iraq, we are an agent distributor of Abbott and, in the future, we are looking to become a distributor of more MNCs in the country.

What are the main growth drivers and focus areas for the company?

With regards to healthcare, AKI has two fields of activity: pharmaceuticals, under the brand name of Alphamed, and medical technology, under the name of Medlab. As I said, we also have our own retail chain called Bin Sina Pharmacies. We currently offer a large variety of consumer brands in the field of dermatology, while also trying to capture more opportunities in other research areas, including oncology and biosimilars. Here, we believe we can grow the business and offer more solutions and services to hospitals, patients and pharmacies.

We have been discussing with many of the biggest and most innovative multinational companies the possibility of collaborating with them to expand their oncology lines. We also have an important

partnership with a generics company who has recently stepped up to a multinational company standard with countless worldwide partnerships aimed at launching some new oncology products into the market. In the field of biosimilars, we are becoming a partner of choice as companies have recognized our focus on quality, expertise in the market and flexible solutions.

What is your key service offering that attracts such players to entrust Alphamed with their products?

We have been very focused on building up our reputation and product portfolio through strategic partnerships; companies choose to work with us because of our dedication, structure, and top-quality services. AKI is more than a distributor; it is a partner. We do not see ourselves as merely “box movers,” we ensure that the accessibility of products is simpler than before.

In the last two years, we have continued to introduce best-in-class products from many of the largest companies into the market. One particular company has decided to entrust us with one of their most important products, a gene therapy, and even though they partnered with another distributor in this region, they have chosen us specifically because of our focus on quality. It is a one-time gene therapy to restore functional vision for patients with an inherited eye mutation; it is a solution that aims to treat an otherwise progressive vision loss that typically leads to blindness. The treatment is expensive, around 1 million USD, and requires a complicated temperature-controlled supply chain strategy at -65 degrees Celsius.

The Ministry of Health, led by Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al Owais, is very interested in this product and so, we managed to register it in a very short period of time, between two and three months. The stock has already been delivered, and the first patients are expected to be treated shortly.

We are also in contact with another company that is developing a gene therapy to treat knee osteoarthritis.

What are some of the biggest challenges in this region and what strategy are you implementing to overcome such difficulties?

The market has evolved to become a mature one, with much more competition; consequently, the growth of the market slowed down. Our focus now is to continue expanding our product portfolio and growing our partnership base.

In terms of capacity, we currently have 250,000 square feet warehouse, and in order to accommodate the growing demand, we are now building a 1 million square feet warehouse in Dubai Industrial City, which is four times more than our current capacity. The first phase, spanning 330 square feet, will be finished by quarter three of 2021.

What are the key qualities you would like the global life sciences industry to have in mind when thinking about Alphamed?

I believe Alphamed is in a unique position to be one of the leading players in UAE. We have an excellent management team that is devoted to drive the growth of the business and dedicated to improving the accessibility of products in the market.

Our IT team is superior to that of competitors, wherein by one click you can track your business. We are also implementing the Manhattan Warehouse Management system, an innovative supply chain software used by the vast majority of European distributors.

Furthermore, our logistics team has extensive knowledge, experience and resources to meet the expectations of the principals and our finance team is fully equipped to take and mitigate risks. Last but not least, our teams are capable of registering a product within four to six months, contrary to the typical length of one or one and half years. Looking towards the future, in the next few years, Alphamed aims to be one of the top three leading players in terms of value in the country, and number one in terms of service quality.

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