

Regional Initiatives

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▼ New biotech oasis?

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Wealthy oil nations in the Middle East hope to woo biotech talent and startups with money and other incentives.

It is said that the Sumerians were the world's biotech pioneers. Among other things, they were the first to apply directed fermentation to product development. In the 2,500 years since then, however, precious little in the way of biotech has come out of the Middle East. The fabulously oil-rich like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Saudi Arabia now aim to change that.

Building a viable biotech industry in places like these is part of a wider strategy to build a 21st century, knowledge-based economy whose gross domestic product is not based solely upon oil and gas. To get from here to there, oil wealth will be invested to build lab and office infrastructure and lure biotech talent from abroad.

Dubai-based DuBiotech aims to complete its master plan next month for creating what it calls a free-trade zone for biotech that will include a generous array of tax incentives, long-term government backing and new facilities, the first of which will be open for business next year.

DuBiotech would like to create a business-friendly culture conducive to biotech, so it has turned to the US and Europe for advice. "We are in negotiations with several international graduate schools in the USA, the UK and other parts of Europe," Al Khayat says.

“To get from here to there, [some in the Middle East] plan to use their considerable oil wealth to build lab and office infrastructure and lure biotech talent from abroad.”

The goal, Al Khayat says, is to create an environment appealing to young scientists, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, but admits that achieving these goals will take time, money and expertise. Time and money shouldn't be a problem. Finding the necessary expertise will be a challenge. Also, luring biotech-savvy talent is one thing—keeping them, at a time when nations around the world are looking for the same talent, will be quite another. Big money and freedom will help. So will infrastructure. Construction on a \$400-million, life-science industrial park is due to commence in October; tenants will be able to move in by the middle of next year. DuBiotech Executive Director Abdulqader Al Khayat says a dozen life sciences companies have already signed contracts for office and lab space.

Qatar has big biotech ambitions, too. It is keen on creating a culture conducive to biotech, but it is focusing, first, on building the research and academic environment necessary for fueling a biotech industry. "Right from the beginning, one of the standards on which we based our selection process for partners has been to select institutions with a focus on research education as the model," says Mohammed Fathy Saoud, a board member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community, based in Education City on the outskirts of the nation's capital, Doha.

The Qatar Foundation has already forged partnerships with several leading American institutions including Weill Cornell Medical College, which accepted its first premedical students at its branch campus in Qatar three years ago. In a few years, plans call for the completion of a 350-bed facility run along the lines of an American-style academic medical center, which will



DuBiotech

Executive director of Dubai Biotechnology and Research Park, Abdulqader Al Khayat, hopes biotech can become the new gusher.

receive long-term backing from an \$8-billion endowment fund. Grants will be allocated on a competitive basis and modeled on the US National Science Foundation grant-making system.

Both Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi have biotech in their sights, too.

"Abu Dhabi has not really made up its mind yet, and it doesn't have to because they have the financial muscle to wait and see what works best in the other cities," says Tobias Levey, executive director of the Zurich-based Global Medical Forum Foundation.

Levey is helping to broker relationships between the University of Zurich and the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich and the Persian Gulf states, through the Zurich Orient Foundation. The aim is to source Arab investment for startup companies spinning out of the Zurich institutes, which will, in turn, establish undergraduate and graduate programs in the Gulf.

“[Dubai, Qatar and Abu Dhabi] are basically the Switzerland of the Middle East,” says , executive director of the Zurich-based Global Medical Forum Foundation.”

Tobias Levey

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Levey says some Gulf states have what it takes to build vibrant biotech hubs. "[Dubai, Qatar and Abu Dhabi] are basically the Switzerland of the Middle East," he adds. This is probably true as far as money and attitudes towards business are concerned, but investors and entrepreneurs surely understand that there is only one Switzerland.

Levey admits that money alone won't be enough to guarantee success. He says that these nations in the Middle East need to put in place the legal and regulatory supports necessary to build true knowledge economies. Also, due to their historical lack of engagement with research, Middle East nations like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) face particular challenges in building a thriving research culture to enable them to compete for skills and resources with other global centers.

It will take decades to create such a culture not least because Westerners historically have a difficult time distinguishing between friends and foes in the region. Likewise, Israel already has a well-developed R&D culture and infrastructure conducive to biotech startup activity. Skeptics can be forgiven for wondering why anybody would bother with Qatar or the UAE when Israel sits just around the corner?

Time will show the extent to which money can buy a knowledge-based economy in which biotech figures prominently, in places like Qatar or the UAE. As the experiment in Singapore proves, it takes more than money, ambition and brains to create a thriving biotech hub. In the meantime, biotech startups can rejoice that there will soon be yet another region in the world opening up the welcome gates.

Web links

Websites referenced:

- [DuBiotech](#)
- [Qatar Foundation for Science, Education & Community Development](#)
- [Jeddah Biocity](#)

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