

## Middle East & North Africa (MENA) Market Entry Checklist

### Recommended Market Entry Steps

#### Step 1

##### Assess your Export Readiness

Analyse your current operations, based on your domestic activities, and look at whether you're as optimised as can be. From here, dedicate resources to capability development, upskilling yourself and your business in export fundamentals.

The shelves are full of Australian fresh produce and food products in Dubai and Kuwait. Investigate to see what other Australian, U.S. and U.K. exporters are selling and how their products match up with your value proposition. Think about which specific markets and countries your product is most suited to.

Do you have an export pricing structure in place? Look at the prices of similar products and identify where your product would potentially sit in the market. It can be useful to prepare a presentation or a slide deck to present to potential customers.

There are multiple resources to support you:

- Review the Agriculture Victoria Export Hub for further information and resources <https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/export/pathways-to-export>
- Sign up to the Pathways to Export Newsletter for the latest market insights <https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/support-and-resources/newsletters/pathways-to-export-newsletter>
- Assess your export capability with Global Victoria's Go Global self-assessment and upskill with one of their many courses and webinars <https://global.vic.gov.au/get-help-to-export>

#### Step 2

##### Do your homework

Understanding Middle Eastern culture and how differently it operates to Western culture can determine the success or failure of your business in the region. Remember that the Middle East is not one country, and each country has its differences.

Understand what the trends are, the dos and don'ts and how your product will fit in to the market. Is there a need for it? What is your unique selling point/point of difference?

#### Step 3

##### Understand Import Models, Market Access Regulations and Import Requirements

To sell food products, you need to find a reliable importer, agent, or distributor. They will assist with registering your products (including Arabic labels) with local authorities, a prerequisite for



importing into the region. Unlike in Australia and other international markets, you will often find the importer is also the distributor and the retailer as well. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Be willing to entertain smaller orders, to consolidate shipments, or to share a shipment with someone: In many cases, local importers will want to purchase small initial quantities, particularly for new-to-market products, to test the product's market potential and to develop the supplier/buyer relationship.
- Can your product be modified? Some ingredients are banned, and others attract import taxes (i.e., sweeteners) that can make the product less desirable to importers. Most food products entering a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country (from a non-GCC country) are exempt from tariffs or have a duty rate of five percent. Alcoholic products are subject to a 50 per cent duty and tobacco a 100 per cent duty. Select product are subject to a 50 per cent "sugar tax". Non-sugary carbonated drinks attract a higher tax in some markets.
- A halal certificate issued by an approved Islamic centre in Australia is compulsory for exporting any meat, poultry products or products containing gelatine. Each country has their own list of approved institutions. This documentation may also require attestation by the Australia Arab Chamber of Commerce and the local government embassy. While not all importers require Halal certification, if your products are certified, your business will enjoy a larger share of the booming halal food industry.

#### Step 4

##### **Understand Labelling, Product Claims and Registration Processes**

Labelling is one of the most critical issues for food exporters. Arabic labelling is a requisite and can be printed on a sticker in some markets but must be embedded in others. Your importer will have the most up to date information on import and labelling requirements for your products in each market.

As a guide, you are not required Arabic-only labels, but you must have an Arabic translation of key facts including product name, ingredient list, country of origin, storage, preparation and other special handling requirements. Labels must contain both expiry dates and production dates (original or sticker). Pet food labels must include the wording (in Arabic) 'not fit for human consumption.' Some words and images are not permissible on labels. Product claims such as organic must be certified from a recognised body.

Products must have a minimum shelf life when imported which can vary across countries, again your importer will have the latest information for your product. They will typically be looking for a product with a longer shelf life.

Some products are regulated and require special registration, such as water. In the UAE, water products are required to obtain the Emirates Quality Mark. Qatar is launching a similar registration process for regulated products. The process to obtain this additional special registration can be lengthy and costly.



Further information about registering your product in each market can be found here:

- [Dubai](#)
- [Abu Dhabi](#)
- [Saudi Arabia](#)
- [Qatar](#)

## Step 5

### Engage with *Pathways to Export*, Global Victoria and other government and industry bodies

The Pathways to Export team within Agriculture Victoria is dedicated to supporting small-scale and emerging exporters understand global market entry requirements and assist businesses to build capability to achieve sustainable export results. Emma Page is the In-market agriculture specialist who is part of Global Victoria's Victorian Government Trade & Investment (VGTI) Office team in Dubai who can support you with valuable in-market intelligence about doing business with the Middle East.

Connecting with the [Global Victoria](#) website is highly recommended. [Austrade](#) can also provide Australian businesses looking to grow their business in the region with their full suite of export services.

Importation of products into MENA require a 'Certificate of Origin' which must be stamped by an approved Chamber. The [Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#) and the [Australian Arab Chamber of Commerce](#) and industry offer this service. If you are planning to use a consolidator, they will organise this for your products.

## Step 6

### Visit the Region and Attend Trade Shows including Gulfood

Ask any successful exporter, and they'll agree – visiting the country you're thinking about trading with is essential. Travel to the region and see what it's like. If you can afford to, travel there regularly. Join a trade mission and attend a food trade fair such as Gulfood – the Middle East's largest food show. Trade missions provide unique business matching and networking opportunities and can include site visits (e.g., supermarkets, manufacturing facilities).

## Step 7

### Modify How You Do Business

Time moves in a different, more relaxed fashion in the Middle East when it comes to work schedules. For example:

- Don't be surprised if your business partner is late for a meeting. Be patient. Pressuring your business partners for a meeting at a specific time may not be well received.
- Negotiations are often likely to take a lot longer than we're used to in Western business culture. Try not to organise a meeting too far in advance and be sure to confirm the meeting by telephone a few days beforehand.



- Face-to-face meetings are essential for negotiating business in the Middle East to build up trust and establish rapport.
- Don't rely on email communications in the Middle East – you won't get far in this part of the world if you do.
- Be prepared for small talk - it's very important in establishing friendly business relations. An Arab businessman or woman will want to engage in small talk on a personal level before the purpose of the visit or meeting is even brought up. This is all part of a desire to understand you on a personal, friendly level, before discussing business.

Many laws in the region are based on Islamic principles. For example:

- Ramadan is considered the holy month by Muslims. Business hours are usually significantly reduced, so it's recommended to avoid doing business or organising meetings during this month.
- The weekend in most Middle Eastern countries falls on Friday and Saturday, and congregational prayers are held at noon, but there are some exceptions (i.e., UAE).

## Step 8

### Develop your Market Entry Plan

A Market Entry Plan will enable your organisation to better target opportunities, prioritise activities and frame financial budgets. You should also consider specific market channels for your products, whether it be traditional "bricks and mortar" retail, food services, eCommerce or a combination.

The Middle East is a very competitive market. Supporting your brand financially is essential to be able to grow your business. Get a full picture of any associated or hidden costs doing business in the Middle East. For example:

- Check out the costs of visa entry, sales and marketing costs, promotion listing and shelf fees, rebate and other marketing costs.
- Food and beverage import regulations vary from one country to another in the Middle East, and advice can vary across official websites and documents so refer to multiple sources.
- Always check the latest regulations with the buyer when you are planning to export products to the UAE.

Your plan should identify which markets you wish to target, your Unique Selling Proposition (USP), export pricing structure and marketing activities and budget to support your entry into market. Your plan should also take into consideration an appropriate engagement strategy using a mix of in-market events, promotions and PR.

Having a marketing budget and plan is crucial, as it is a very competitive market with products from all over the world and distributors and retailers need assistance to showcase your product.



Ensure at a minimum you have an allocation of products for Free of Charge (FOC) sampling when launching.

### Step 9

#### **Choose Your Business Partner Wisely**

Companies expanding into the Middle Eastern market will have to deal with bureaucratic minefields and an uncertain, ever-changing regulatory and tax climate. It is crucial to conduct a thorough risk analysis. For example, local laws can have an impact on how businesses and businesspeople need to operate. It's imperative to be fully aware of the legal environment in which you're operating. Working closely with your potential local buyer is essential to understanding their requirements and local import rules and regulations.

Don't be put off. Despite the instability in some parts of the Middle East, there are good reasons why the commercial outlook is promising. For example, an eight-hour flight from Dubai can put your business in contact with two-thirds of the world's population, including the 578 million people in the Middle East and North Africa.

Exercise due diligence concerning finding potential business partners and minimise any correspondence with middle-men or brokers. Check with the Dubai VGTI office before making any commitments. Once you're confident you've connected with the right person or people, take your time to build a genuine relationship.

### Step 10

#### **Continue building your in-market network and be present**

It is imperative to visit the market to build connections with the industry, evaluate partnerships, and identify new opportunities. The effort to make personal contact demonstrates commitment to the market. Once you've confirmed your intentions to proceed with your export programme, it is imperative you dedicate sufficient time and financial resources to build your professional network to maximise in-market opportunities. Regular communication and engagement with existing suppliers, as well as potential new ones, supports long-term relationships and overall benefits to your brand.

Inbound and Outbound Missions hosted by Austrade and the Victorian State Government are also another great way of expanding your networks.

**Meet your MENA In-market Specialist**

**Emma Page**  
**Dubai, United Arab Emirates**



Emma Page has more than 15 years' experience working in the tourism, hospitality, food, agriculture, environmental and government sectors. She is also a trade marketing and project management professional. Emma has a strong understanding of the agriculture and food sectors in the Gulf Cooperation Council area, with extensive networks across Australia and within the region. Emma is based in the Victorian Government's Trade and Investment Office in Dubai.

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