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International business research and scholarship in the Middle East: developments and future directions

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction we review the extant literature that demonstrate the importance of the Middle Eastern institutional and cultural context in shaping international business's (IB) strategies and practices across several countries. Drawing on the literature, as well as the five articles included in this special issue, we (1) outline the state of socio-cultural, historical and economic forces that shape international business in several Middle Eastern nations; (2) utilize institutional theory to evaluate the constraints of international business practices in the Middle East; and (3) highlight the key gaps in the literature and the challenges faced by IB scholars and practitioners in the Middle East. We subsequently propose an agenda for future research in order to lay the foundation for international business scholars to advance the theorizing and application of IB practices in the Middle East context.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; culture; GCC; institutions; international business; MENA; Middle East

The Middle East region has unique and interesting implications for scholarly interest. Firstly, the literature focusing on the Middle East has used several different terms to name the region, including the Middle East, Greater Middle East, Near East, the Arab World, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Arabian Peninsula, South-West Asia, and Levant (Budhwar et al. 2019). These different terms are important because in spite of certain commonalities in terms of social, cultural and historical characteristics, each member country has undergone its own socio-economic and historical developments, thereby differentiating themselves from one another in content (Budhwar and Mellahi 2018). Additionally, this region also attracts a large number of expatriates from around the world to work in both domestic firms and multinational corporations (MNCs) (Budhwar et al. 2019). However, it is important to note that certain workplace cultures, such as family networks and open relations and informal relations, are practiced by Middle Eastern organizations in order to build trust (Metcalfe 2008). This cultural attribute may have important implications for studying international business (IB) topics such as international human resource management (IHRM), firm internationalization and expatriate management. Thus, although the Middle East is usually known as the land of crude oil and gas, the levels of economic development, industrialization and diversification in this region vary from country to country (Budhwar and Mellahi 2018). For example, some countries, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE, are listed as high-income nations while others, such as Algeria and Jordan, are considered as low-income ones. Therefore, due to its rich historical and institutional attributes

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and a varied pattern of economic development, as well as the many other different facets of the business environment that include the role of religion and the workforce, this region provides a unique and interesting context for exploring and examining existing and new IB issues (Afiouni, Ruël, and Schuler 2014; Budhwar et al. 2019).

Given the limited existing literature on the Middle East on the one hand, and the growing geo-political and economic importance of the region on the other hand, there is a significant need for further development of theoretical and empirical insights into the Middle East. For example, it is not clear what the impact of cultural and institutional conditions is on the developments of IB in the Middle East and whether there is a differential institutional effect vis-a-vis the development of IB across countries. More specifically, the impact of the rapidly changing institutional conditions on socio-cultural elements, such as employee relations/unions within firms and management of expatriates, have yet to be explored (Budhwar et al. 2019; Metcalfe 2008). Another area that has received little attention in the literature is the nature, intensity and suitability of contingencies of management methods and approaches employed within firms as well as the context-specific nature of the HRM function in the region (Afiouni, Ruël, and Schuler 2014; Budhwar and Mellahi 2018). Finally, we also know relatively little about how institutional attributes affect IB activities such as innovation and internationalization strategies in the Middle Eastern context.

This special issue attempts to fill some of the above mentioned gaps in the literature. This introductory article, together with the five articles that are included in the special issue, use the institutional perspective to provide a review of the extant literatures and to highlight the importance of institutional and cultural conditions in shaping developments in the field of IB across countries in the Middle East. We seek to pursue three key aims. First, this article outlines the state of socio-cultural, historical and economic institutional conditions in a number of Middle Eastern nations that play an instrumental role in studying IB practices in this region. Second, we take institutional theory and synthesize the different insights from early work to systematically review and evaluate the constraints of IB practices in this context. Last, based on the analysis of current state of IB studies in the region, this article highlights the key challenges and gaps faced by the application and analysis of IB practices in the Middle East. We subsequently propose an agenda for future research in order to lay the foundation for IB scholars to advance the theorizing and application of IB practices in this context.

An overview of the articles

The five articles in this special issue offer theoretical and empirical insights into the unique challenges and opportunities for MNEs in the Middle East. More specifically, the included articles bring forward insights about sustainable international business practices in the MENA region, such as the drivers of CSR measurement and investment in the UAE, the nature of the association that corporate ethics and CSR have with organizational citizenship behavior, the extent to which firms in the Middle East engage in CSR reporting, the influencers of strategic change processes in the Oman, entry mode strategies in the UAE and Saudi Arabia and a systematic review and integrative framework of the past, present and future of mergers and acquisitions (M&A's) in the MENA region.

In the first article titled: "The Perceived Value of Measuring the Impact of CSR Performance on CSR Investment: Evidence from the UAE," Pietro, Mura, Mellahi, Rettab, and Pereira examine drivers of CSR measurement and investment in CSR. The authors employ survey data to explore the links between three underlying motives for measuring CSR performance and the impact of these motives on CSR investments in 307 firms in Dubai and the UAE. Their results show that while CSR measurement is a significant driver of CSR investments, there are varied associations between the level of complying with regulation, provision of management support and increase in

stakeholders' satisfaction and the investment in CSR practices. The authors offer several theoretical and practical implications that are based on their results.

In the second article titled: "Effect of Corporate Ethics and Social Responsibility on OCB: The Role of Employee Identification and Perceived CSR Significance," El-Kassar, Yunis, AlSagheer, Tarhini and Ishizaka explore how organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is related to corporate ethics and CSR in the Lebanese context. The authors derive a conceptual framework which includes the resource-based view of the firm and social identity theory. Based on this framework, the authors distribute a survey instrument to collect data from alumni of one of the leading universities in Lebanon who are employed in various companies and in different sectors in Lebanon and the region. One of the main results of the study is a set of perceptions of the respondents that are mediating and moderating the relationship between CSR and OCB.

In the third article titled: "Prevalence of CSR Reporting in Arab Countries: Exploratory Study and Causal Analysis," Ismaeel, Abdul Hadi and Zakaria explore the prevalence of CSR reporting practice of Middle Eastern firms in thirteen countries. Based on listed company information, the authors are able to show that CSR reporting is still at its early stages in the region. This is based on their results which show that CSR reporting is driven by linkages and openness to the global economy or by high public visibility, influenced by firms' size and certain industry affiliation. However, belonging to environmentally sensitive industries does not seem to have an effect on CSR reporting. These findings support the view that CSR reporting is a global practice that is adopted by companies in developing countries either to respond to global stakeholders or to imitate a global trend.

In the fourth article titled: "Market Entry Strategies in the Middle East: Unveiling the Sponsorship Strategy," Youssef and Diab utilize a qualitative approach to understand a unique market entry strategy of MNEs entering Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Based on semi-structured interviews of senior managers, the authors show that in addition to traditional entry modes, MNEs have developed ways of forming joint ventures with individuals rather than with corporations. The authors label this entry mode as a "sponsorship" strategy from which they derive a number of implications for research and practice.

In the fifth article titled: "Past, Present and Future of Mergers and Acquisitions in the MENA Region: A Systematic Review and Integrative Framework," Battisti et al. identify a gap in the review literature in the context of business strategies of mergers and acquisitions (M&A's) in a Middle Eastern context. They investigate the theoretical and practical aspects of M&A's and their features and diffusion in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, not clearly described in the literature, to date. The authors argue that this lack of clarity is the result of the recent transformation that member countries have been going through since the 2008 global financial crisis. They employ a systematic review of 37 articles on M&A and examine the characteristics of M&A operations in the MENA region. Based on this analysis, they then map the extant literature on the topic and present an integrative framework of these characteristics for researchers to further explore and expand the boundaries of the domain.

The Middle Eastern context: an institutional lens

Given the various terms used to represent this region, we follow Budhwar et al. (2019) in consistently referring to the Middle East and analyze 10 countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the MENA nations. These countries include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Overall, the Middle East has a population of more than 380 million and possesses about 65% of the world's known oil reserves (Budhwar et al. 2019). The Middle East is also known as the birthplace of the three main monotheistic religions, namely, Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

Given that the Middle East is institutionally complex in nature, we utilize the core tenet of institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Powell and DiMaggio 2012; Scott 2008) to provide a holistic literature review about the developments of IB strategies and practices in the Middle East over the last few decades. We build upon early work (Budhwar and Mellahi 2018; Budhwar et al. 2019) to better understand the institutional context of the Middle East by incorporating both the old and new institutionalism. With respect to the former, we take into account: (1) normative (i.e., cultural values that are characterized by commonly shared assumptions, beliefs and norms reflecting lifestyles); (2) regulatory (including topics such as legal frameworks and governance bodies); and (3) cognitive (i.e., shared social knowledge) aspects of the environment. With regard to the latter, we consider the isomorphism of organizational policies and practices in a particular context as well as three mechanisms, namely, coercive, such as political impact of key institutions, mimetic, such as the external forces that create uncertainties and affect organizational performance, and normative, such as acceptable routines and standards that influence institutional behavior (see Budhwar et al. 2019 for details). We argue that the mechanisms of isomorphism play a vital role in shaping and influencing the developments of management practices in the Middle East environment.

On the basis of the above theoretical grounding, as well as the ideas initiated by other recent work (see Do et al. 2020; Kim and Bae 2017), our review turns to the institutional context of the Middle East, including government, regulatory agencies, economic and political ideologies, cultural values and forces in the external environment. Although the Middle East is known to have Muslims, Christians and Jews, Muslims make up 95% of the total population (Budhwar et al. 2019). In regard to the political ideologies of the region, each nation follows its own form of government, such as constitutional monarchies (Jordan and Morocco), parliamentary republics (Algeria and Egypt) and traditional monarchies (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE,). It is also important to acknowledge that socio-economic developments of each Middle Eastern country vary from one country to another (see Table 1 for details). These institutional conditions make the Middle East a unique and interesting region that could impact the process of socio-economic developments at large, and IB practices in particular. Some nations, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have made a significant progress in economic development and have become high-income countries, while others, such as Algeria and Jordan, still remain low-income ones. Our review demonstrates that despite its limited progress in IB research in the region, the study of the field in this context is still underdeveloped in comparison with its potential in terms of quantity and quality of research as well as the level of theorizing and the application of sophisticated methodology. The Middle East region offers significant opportunities and areas for further research into the antecedents, challenges, effects and nature of different IB practices (Budhwar et al. 2019). More work is needed not only in exploring how institutional forces influence IB practices in the region, but also in theorizing how new themes of research, such as IHRM, expatriates, MNCs subsidiary management, innovation strategies and firm internationalization, can be incorporated into IB research.

Constraints of institutional conditions in management practices in the Middle East

Given the complexity of institutional environments in the Middle East, we conduct a comprehensive literature review to evaluate the current state of institutional context that influences IB scholarship in this region.¹ First, we adopted recent literature review techniques (Budhwar et al. 2019; Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019) to search and select published articles and studies which are closely associated with key IB themes and terms relevant for our analysis. We reviewed articles that represent IB scholarship such as IHRM, expatriates, firm internationalization and MNCs across the Middle East. We then supplemented this with varieties of Boolean filter searches using relevant terms of our topics of interest and thematic areas. Finally, we reviewed articles that relate

Table 1. Key issues, ideologies and institutionalism in Middle Eastern nations.

Country	Period	Key Historical Aspects	Dominant Ideologies	Institutional attributes	Key Sources
Bahrain	1971	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dependence on mainly oil industries Traditional monarchy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underdeveloped organizations including the government Poor administrative reform Very modest oil income Unstable society Violence Poor bureaucracy reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budhwar et al. (2019) Common (2008) Metcalfe (2007) Peterson (2004)
	1970–2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First Parliament election Governmental reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constitutional building Oil and petroleum production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underdeveloped enterprises Governmental efforts directed to reform its bureaucracy but remain unsuccessful Still political instability 	
	2000 onward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oil production Services and Tourism development Administrative reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Globalization Constitutional monarchy Open and vulnerable economy Industrialization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of MNCs Underdeveloped organizations (government, market and enterprises) High poverty rate Underdeveloped organizations (government, market and enterprises) Political uncertainty Standard of living improved toward economic growth Political instability and uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budhwar and Mellahi (2007) Ramdani, Mellahi, and Guermat (2016)
Algeria	Pre–1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> French colonization Wars/Civil war Political instability Poverty High rate of poverty Risk of food production reduction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Islamic characteristics Nationalism Dependence on agriculture Centrally planned economy Dependence on oil production and prices Modified socialist economy Privatization 		
	1975–2000				
	2000–Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human capital development Poverty reduction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dependence on hydrocarbons, oil and gas prices Open markets Tendency to Internationalize 		
Egypt	1952–1973	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military conflicts War 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parliamentary republics Transition from Egyptian economy to Arabian socialism Highly centralized economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High unemployment rate No clear path of economic development All organizations (i.e., government, companies ...) less developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kenawy (2009) Shechter (2008) Budhwar and Mellahi (2018) Budhwar et al. (2019)
	1974–1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic crisis Slow GDP growth rate External debt crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open door policy Centrally planned model to stop the crisis Dependence on oil exploitation Tourism development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advent of mixed enterprises Institutions experienced external debt rise, budget deficit 	
	Post–1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Spring Arab Structural and economic reforms Economic downturn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New economic reform Macroeconomic stability policy Economic nationalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private firms are enabled to develop and succeed 	

(continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Country	Period	Key Historical Aspects	Dominant ideologies	Institutional attributes	Key Sources
Jordan	Pre-1999	• High unemployment rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitutional monarchy • Dependence on foreign aid, tourism • Close economic model • Liberal economic model and policies • More open market • Industrialization • Globalization • Constitutional monarchy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All institutional efforts directed toward economic growth • All institutions (government, all forms of enterprises) less developed • Public debt • High rate of unemployment • All institutions started to improve and develop • Still experience in public debt, unemployment and poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Madanat and Khasawneh (2018) • Budhwar et al. (2019) • Afrouni, Ruël, and Schuler (2014) • Nusair, Ababneh, and Bae (2012)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unstable economic development • Scarcity of natural resources • High rate of population growth 			
Morocco	1999–present	• Starting its reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on agriculture, tourism leather, textiles, and clothing • Modernization • Development of information technology • Birthplace of Islam • Traditional monarchy • Dependence on oil production • Commercialization • Internationalization • Open markets • Traditional monarchy • Oil production • Priority on market capitalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government failure in creating new jobs for people • Other institutions less developed • All institutions (i.e., government, firms ...) started to develop but still very slowly • Not many organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hassi (2016) • Budhwar and Mellahi (2018)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic development • High unemployment rates • Middle-income nation 			
Saudi Arabia	Pre-1970	• High rate of population growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on oil production • Commercialization • Internationalization • Open markets • Traditional monarchy • Oil production • Priority on market capitalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government failure in creating new jobs for people • Other institutions less developed • All institutions (i.e., government, firms ...) started to develop but still very slowly • Not many organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiaiss and Elamin (2016) • Budhwar and Mellahi (2018) • Afrouni, Ruël, and Schuler (2014)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High rate of Unemployment • Low GDP • Starting its reform • Fragmented industry 			
Kuwait	1970–Present	• Discovery of oil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on oil production • Commercialization • Internationalization • Open markets • Traditional monarchy • Oil production • Priority on market capitalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All institutions started to develop • Advent of oil industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiaiss and Elamin (2016) • Budhwar and Mellahi (2018) • Afrouni, Ruël, and Schuler (2014)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Gulf war • Economic development • High unemployment rate • Economic development • Development of stock market 			
UAE	1970–1980	• Economic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on oil production • Commercialization • Internationalization • Open markets • Traditional monarchy • Oil production • Priority on market capitalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All institutions' efforts directed toward economic growth • Attraction of MNCs • All institutions (government, oil companies, financial firms) started to develop • Positioning itself in the marketplace in terms of oil export, finance, shares ... • All institutions developed well • Standard of living improved • Difficulty in dealing with polluted environment due to oil production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al-Sarawi et al. (2015) • Ali and Al-Kazemi (2006)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental contamination 			
UAE	Pre-1970	• The Gulf war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealth-management industry • Internationalization • Open economy • Globalization • Dependence on crude oil exploitation • Traditional monarchy • Establishment of a union to protect the group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations (government, enterprises, oil companies) started to develop • Improved quality of life • Initial investments in infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budhwar and Mellahi (2018) • Waxin and Bateman (2016)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline of pearling industry • Low-income country • Britain withdrew its treaty from the Trucial sheikhdoms 			

1970–2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence (1971) • Increase in population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on oil production • Industrialization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All institutions' efforts directed toward economic growth • Oil companies developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budhwar and Mellahi (2018) • Rodriguez and Scurry (2014)
2000–present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic development • High-income developing country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge-based economy • Open market • E-government services • Priority on tourism development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All institutions (government, private and public enterprises) well developed • Infrastructure effectively invested and developed • World-class hotels, ports and airports 	
Qatar				
Pre-1970	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on pearling industry • Petrol-based industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All institutions (government, market and enterprises, foreign companies) less developed 	
1970–1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional monarchy • Petrol-based industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low standard of living • All institutions (government, market and enterprises, foreign companies) started to develop 	
1980–1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downturn economy • Low price for oil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on crude oil exploitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved standard of living • Oil companies experienced their hardships 	
1990–present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth • Highest income country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic liberalization • Internationalization • Globalization • Exports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower income for laborers • All institutions' efforts directed toward reforms and economic growth 	
Oman				
1970–1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political independence • Underdeveloped nation • Modernization of the public sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic and Arab identity • Traditional monarchy • Oil production • More emphasis on public employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All organizations developed well • Higher standard of living • Organizations (government, market and enterprises, foreign companies) less developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budhwar et al. (2019) • Common (2008) • Ghouse et al. (2017) • Al-Hamadi, Budhwar, and Shipton (2007)
1990–2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning of reforms • Developing country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oil production • Infrastructure development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow modernization due to poor educational levels and overstaffing • Organizations such as government, public companies more developed but not private ones 	
2000 onward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High income country • Economic development • Globalization • Industrialization • Privatization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free market • Economic liberalization • Foreign investment • Tourism • Higher education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still immature market • All institutions' efforts directed toward economic growth and industrialization • Still underdeveloped private sector 	

to and focus on both relevant terms of our topics of interest and “institutional environments,” “institutional conditions,” “institutionalism” or “institutions” in Middle Eastern countries. Table 2 outlines the various studies included in our analysis.

It can be seen from the various studies in Table 2 that IB scholarship in the Middle East is influenced by its institutional context that includes cultural, socio-economic and political forces. Due to institutional differences, IB practices in this region vary from one nation to the next, depending on their cultural values, levels of economic development, political systems, and governance structures. Scholarly evidence further supports that firms tend to respond to the isomorphic forces of their institutional attributes in their pursuit of management/IB practices (Do et al. 2020; Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019). Our analysis suggests that IB practices are often influenced by institutional conditions such as cultural and political constraints on IB practices, institutionalization of IB practices, and others (Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019). Also, of interest is that countries that are rich in oil and gas, that have reformed their political, socio-economic and legal issues, and are integrating into the world economy seem to have achieved remarkable success. Oman, Qatar and UAE, for example, have become high-income nations. Therefore, firms that operate in these countries tend to effectively invest in IB activities such as internationalization, IHRM and expatriates. In contrast, those countries (i.e., Algeria and Jordan) that are not rich in oil and gas, and have yet to pay much attention to reforming their economic and political institutions, still remain low-income countries. In parallel, IB activities of firms in these countries are usually less valued and ineffectively invested. The implications are that firms that are highly embedded in such an institutional context may lose their interest in expanding their international markets in the long term. To this end, there is a dearth of research on IB in these nations, and thus more work is needed not only in identifying the gaps in this context in order to propose an agenda for future research but also in theorizing how institutional conditions influence MNCs business activities.

Future research agenda

On the basis of the above analysis and identified gaps in research in the Middle East, along with its unique institutional attributes, next we provide directions for future research.

Covid-19 and its influence on the Middle East's IB activities

Covid-19 is greatly influencing all kinds of organizations operating throughout the world regardless of their size, line of business and financial situation. This is especially true in the case of Middle Eastern organizations where oil and gas are the key lines of business for the majority of firms in the region. Covid-19 has a significant influence on the oil and gas industry as its global supply chain is down or disrupted. Firms operating in this region therefore are facing the risk and are most vulnerable to bankruptcy in such uncertain environment (Bapuji et al. 2020). In particular, Covid-19 has important implications for research on the topics of resilience and innovation because the pandemic changes the way people work and how organizations manage their staff in order to sustain business growth. The implications of Covid-19 accordingly become the topical need that calls for more research to be conducted in this region. We thus propose:

Research direction 1

What are the key challenges that IB is expected to face during and after the Covid-19 pandemic and what are the most effective methods/solutions to address them when it comes to the successful delivery of the localization agenda of MNCs?

Table 2. Examples of research on Middle Eastern institutional context: implications for IB.

Author(s)	Country/context	Type of study	Focus of study	Constraints of institutional environments
Al-Husan and James (2007, 2009)	Jordan	Triangulation of case studies	IHRM/MNCs	MNCs have difficulty in translating their home country HR practices to host country subsidiaries due to the political influence of key institutions such as the Jordanian government.
Haak-Saheem, Festing, and Darwish (2017)	UAE	Qualitative	International HRM	MNCs strategically align their HRM practices with the external environment to gain legitimacy in the host country subsidiaries rather than the home-country's institutional forces such as regulative, cognitive and normative. Headquarters struggle to feed their control mechanisms into the subsidiaries because of the host-country's institutional environment such as cultural differences.
Alharbi et al. (2016)	Saudi Arabia	Quantitative	International Management	The management of expatriates is constrained by the Qatarization institutional factors such as structural constraints and contextual attributes.
Rodriguez and Scurry (2014)	Qatar	Qualitative	Expatriates	Firms strategically align their talent management practices with localization rules to gain their legitimacy.
Sidani and Al Ariss (2014)	The Gulf Cooperation Council	Qualitative	Talent management (TM) MNCs/	Home-country companies try to develop their necessary knowledge relative to foreign institutional conditions to deal with foreign expansion challenges.
Cuervo-Cazurra (2011)	The Middle East	Quantitative	Internationalization	HRM practices are differently implemented from one country to another because of the national institutional differences.
Darrag, Mohamed, and Aziz (2010)	Egypt	Quantitative	HRM practices/ MNCs	MNCs attempt to strategically align their HR practices with their business strategies to gain their legitimacy.
Abdel-Monem (2012)	Egypt	Quantitative	HRM practices/ MNCs	Home-country expatriate managers have difficulty in transferring interpersonal and communication skills to host-country contexts because of the differences in cultural values.
Wang et al. (2017)	A mixed context including the Middle Eastern countries	Qualitative	Expatriate/MNCs	HR practices can secure a degree of social legitimacy and become taken-for-granted. However, the employment level of UAE nationals is not taken for granted, and HR practices tend to be localized.
Forstenlechner and Mellahi (2011)	UAE	Qualitative	IHRM/MNCs	That the institutional factors differ from one nation to another influences/determines the survival of the Japanese foreign equity ventures in the research context.
Demirbag, Apaydin, and Tatoglu (2011)	The Middle East and North Africa	Quantitative	Internationalization/ MNCs	HR practices are constrained by its institutional environment such as Islamic values, gender inequality and legal issues.
Metcalfe (2007)	Bahrain	Mixed methods	IHRM	

Research direction 2

How do organizations in the Middle East expect Covid-19 to influence their ability to strategically align HR management practices with their business strategies in order to respond to today's uncertain environments and achieve their set goals?

Research direction 3

What are the key drivers that enable Middle Eastern firms to increase their resilience? What are the implications for organizational innovation strategy, HR management and technology support?

Cross-national comparative study in IHRM practices

Our literature review finds that MNCs struggle to transfer HR practices implemented in their home-countries to host-country subsidiaries because of cultural differences and other institutional conditions. In this regard, future research should take into account cross-country comparative studies to assess whether and why country-of-origin may have implications for HRM practices in the Middle East. By doing so, MNCs are likely to be in a better position to understand the institutional context in which they are operating, thereby being successful players in the process of internationalization (Budhwar et al. 2017). We also observe that most early work in this regard is based on specific country samples, and thus we know relatively little about the extent to which MNCs standardize their HRM practices across Middle Eastern nations. We therefore propose that future studies should undertake cross-national comparative approach and investigate the impact of institutional conditions on the relationship between HRM and performance in countries characterized by unique institutional attributes. We thus propose the following.

Research direction 4

What are the key institutional forces that strongly influence HRM practices across Middle Eastern countries? What adjustments MNCs need to make in order to develop effective HRM practices in their Middle East subsidiaries?

Research direction 5

What is the nature and pattern of diffusion of international HRM practices that could be emulated in different global operations of MNCs and introduced into the Middle East? What are the implications of the same for both MNCs and domestic firms in the region?

Internationalization in startups and SMEs in the Middle east

Internationalization is especially essential for firms to expand their foreign market share and position themselves in the global marketplace. This is also apparent in the context of SMEs (small and medium size enterprises), which are generally resource constraint. It is for this reason that internationalization allows firms to be exposed to opportunism (Verbeke et al. 2019; Verbeke and Greidanus 2009). In particular, opportunism can help startup firms, including SMEs, to exploit and expand into foreign markets (Bagheri et al. 2019; Zhou, Wu, and Luo 2007), experience new opportunities in foreign markets (Chetty and Agndal 2007; Verbeke and Ciravegna 2018), and have new international partners (Ellis 2011). Scholars also note that there is a close relationship between innovation strategy and internationalization. Firms that invest in their innovative capabilities are more likely to successfully internationalize, and then internationalization allows these firms to increase the returns on their innovations (Hitt, Hoskisson, and Ireland 1994; Kyläheiko et al. 2011). This view therefore lays the foundations for IB research. However, little attention is

devoted to this topic in the Middle East context. We therefore build on this foundation and propose the following:

Research direction 6

What are the key challenges that influence internationalization of startups, including SME firms, in the Middle East? What are the best ways to enable these firms to successfully internationalize?

Research direction 7

How best can startups and SME firms in the Middle East prepare for their internationalization journey? What roles do the government and/or policy-makers play in facilitating these firms to successfully internationalize?

Research direction 8

What are the key determinants of internationalization in the Middle East? How, why and when do these determinants influence firm internationalization?

Management of expatriates

Expatriates are key players in the Middle Eastern workforce (see Budhwar et al. 2019). However, our observations suggest that there is no formalized program that focuses on the management of expatriates in the Middle East. Scholars therefore highlight the different issues that expatriates usually face and need to adjust to such as large cross-cultural differences between expatriates' home- and host-country cultures, short-term work visa and institutional factors, such as Islamic values and demographics (Afiouni, Karam, and El-Hajj 2013; Budhwar et al. 2019; Varma et al. 2016). All of these challenges may create great integration and diversity management challenges for the HR function (Budhwar et al. 2019). These issues have implications for the HR function, and yet we know little about them in the Middle Eastern context. We therefore propose the following:

Research direction 9

To what extent, and what kind of institutional and cultural conditions dictate the effectiveness of expatriate management practices across Middle Eastern countries?

Research direction 10

Can standardized expatriate management programs be designed for all Middle Eastern countries? If yes, what would be the template/key components of such a standardized model? If no, what factors/frameworks should be taken into account when designing expatriate management programs for each country in the region?

Research direction 11

What training and development programs can be implemented to enable expatriates to adjust and perform well in the work environment of the Middle East?

Research direction 12

Do local firms in the Middle East need to adjust or modify their HR practices in order for expatriates to deliver optimally? Why or why not?

Reconceptualization of institutional theory for the Middle east

Institutional theory is one of the most dominant theoretical frameworks in management studies. It has been widely applied in different fields of management scholarship such as IB, HRM, strategy and marketing. As institutional theory is in constant evolvement from its early form, it now entails old and new institutionalism (Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019). Old institutionalism comprises of regulatory, cognitive (focusing on topics like shared social knowledge) and normative forces (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2013). New institutionalism argues the isomorphism of organizational policies and practices in a particular context and is built upon three mechanisms of coercive, mimetic and normative forces (Powell and DiMaggio 2012). It therefore “provides a toolkit with which to understand how organizations and individuals are able to escape or redirect the normative, coercive, and mimetic isomorphic forces” (Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019, 317). Most importantly, scholars suggest that institutional theory should be extended and theorized as a multilevel theoretical lens (Do et al. 2020; Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019). Despite suggestive hints, institutional theory has yet to be fully applied as a multilevel theory in the Middle Eastern context. For example, relatively little is known about how multilevel institutional theory and/or the mechanisms of new institutionalism are employed in the field of IB in the Middle Eastern context, where it is likely that the multilevel perspective can help us to explore the top-down and bottom-up flows of influence between an organization’s social environment and the individual within the organization (Lewis, Cardy, and Huang 2019). On the basis of such assertions, we propose the followings:

Research direction 13

How can institutional theory be extended to the multilevel perspective to understand the macro-, meso- and even micro-level contexts of IB related research phenomena such as internationalization, expatriate management strategies and innovation strategies of firms?

Research direction 14

What are the key mechanisms of new institutionalism, such as coercive, mimetic and normative forces, that influence how IB practices respond to environmental perceptions and external environment pressures in the Middle East?

Concluding remarks

This introductory article aimed to evaluate the institutional forces and how they affect the current state of IB in Middle Eastern countries. To provide insights into how the institutional context impacts IB activities, we analyzed the available literature across a number of themes. On the basis of identified knowledge gaps in the literature, we proposed a set of potential research directions to guide future researchers to advance and develop the IB research stream in the Middle East and contribute to the extant literature. We also noted that the Middle East is unique and interesting in terms of its institutional factors that have the potential to formulate and answer many important research questions in order to understand the context and draw implications for international management practices. After decades the region is slowly opening up to better relations with Israel and its advanced technologies, something that was incomprehensible in the recent past. The UAE has led the way in opening up and is being followed by other Middle Eastern countries. It would be interesting to see how these developments affect and influence international business in the region with this geo-political change. In conclusion, research along the proposed areas offers a great potential to make useful contextual theoretical contributions, methodological

advancements and meaningful implications. We believe this is a starting point and more research should be pursued in the future.

Notes

1. The brief discussion here is only indicative and not exhaustive, as it only aims to show key areas. A more holistic view that represents a broader literature review can be based on [Table 2](#) in this article.

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