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REVIEW

IFN Middle East: A triumphant return

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The Middle East is a global powerhouse for Islamic finance, and has been a force to be reckoned with for the past several decades as it drives forward the development of Shariah compliant provision in its own unique and varied way. From the might of Saudi Arabia to the innovation of Bahrain, the ambition of Dubai to the progression of Oman, across all the many countries that make up this richly diverse region, Islamic finance has blossomed from both cohesion and competition. IFN was delighted to return to the Ritz Carlton DIFC last month to welcome the leaders, creators and innovators from across the industry to dive deep into what Islamic finance means for the Middle East, and what the region can do to drive the future forward. LAUREN MCAUGHTRY writes.

COUNTRY ANALYSIS

The UAE: A major player

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The UAE boasts vibrant financial centers and strong ties with the big players of the global Islamic finance and banking industry, confirming its potential and commitment to becoming a hub for Shariah compliant financial products and services. NESSREEN TAMANO writes an overview of one of the largest Islamic banking markets in the world by assets.

Event Overview

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IFN Middle East: A triumphant return

The Middle East is a global powerhouse for Islamic finance, and has been a force to be reckoned with for the past several decades as it drives forward the development of Shariah compliant provision in its own unique and varied way. From the might of Saudi Arabia to the innovation of Bahrain, the ambition of Dubai to the progression of Oman, across all the many countries that make up this richly diverse region, Islamic finance has blossomed from both cohesion and competition. IFN was delighted to return to the Ritz Carlton DIFC last month to welcome the leaders, creators and innovators from across the industry to dive deep into what Islamic finance means for the Middle East, and what the region can do to drive the future forward. LAUREN MCAUGHTRY writes.

The day was launched with a keynote address from Omar Mustafa Ansari, the secretary-general of AAOIFI, who urged the importance of standardization as a means of moving forward. “For financial institutions, it lowers the cost of capital, encourages higher productivity, better legal security, higher interoperability of products and services between different organizations, better HR [human resources] ability, appropriate risk management and uniformity of processes



Omar Mustafa Ansari

— and a lot of bottom line benefits as well, improving basic profitability. People might think that standardization increases cost, but in fact it will lower it,” he urged.

A detailed discussion followed on the ways in which Islamic finance can improve livelihoods and create prosperity across the region. The Middle East is not all glitz and glamor, despite how it may sometimes seem, and financial inclusion is a very real challenge that Islamic finance has the power to solve. Qasim Aslam of Dentons led a distinguished panel into a frank and

forthright debate on just how that could be achieved — and how the Halal economy could create an ecosystem that goes beyond just finance to mobilize the real economy into a force for positive change. He was joined by Dr Hurriyah El Islamy, an executive board member



Mohamad El Khalil

of Badan Pengelola Keuangan Haji; Mohamad El Khalil, the director and head of prudential supervision at the Dubai Financial

Sohail Zubairi



Services Authority; Sohail Zubairi, the senior advisor of Islamic finance at the Department of Economic Development (Dubai Economy); and Ikbal Daredia, the advisor to CEO and acting director — global markets and fixed income and acting director — Treasury for the Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector.

Ikbal stressed the importance of the “determination to go back to normal” after COVID-19, and praised the encouraging response

Ikbal Daredia



and the leadership of the countries that have worked so hard to emerge from the pandemic. “Similar to the world economy, the Islamic economy has reeled under the COVID situation,” he said. “The key drivers have always been the large and growing Muslim population, with about 1.9 billion Muslims in the world, 2.1 billion by 2027, along with increasing adherence to Islamic values as a younger Muslim population is more and more convinced that the Islamic economy is a better alternative. Based on that sentiment, governments around the world are focusing more and more on the Halal economy, which is very encouraging.”



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Of course, the Middle East region is well known as a Sukuk hub and a hotspot for Islamic capital markets, and the day continued with an in-depth exploration of the GCC's corporate finance outlook and capital market performance. Led by Anita Yadav of Global Credit



Anita Yadav

Advisory, the panelists, including Asal Saghari of King & Spalding, Dr Issam Al Tawari, the founder and managing partner at Newbury Consulting, Dr Mohamed Damak, the global head of Islamic finance at S&P Global Ratings and Dr Scott Levy, CEO of Bedford Row Capital, shared their



Dr Issam Al Tawari

wealth of expertise and experience in these fields to paint a compelling picture of the Islamic capital markets over the coming years. Drawing on key influencing factors such as the oil price, investor demand, environmental, social and governance interest and product innovation, the conversation ranged from the importance of reputation for a listing center to the development and refinement of regulations to support further issuance. Dr Levy stressed how far the Islamic capital market had come in recent years, noting that: "We can now reach out to potential investors, we can reach



Scott Levy

out to the wider capital market, and I am not sure that discussion would have happened if it weren't for COVID. Yes, we have had a slowdown of issuance at the macro level, but from the ground up, from our perspective, at the corporate level, there is a realization that the problem is the gap in terms of expectation from a financing perspective — how do you get financial institutions to look at the ground level? There is a resistance to go sub-investment grade, but that makes making an impact through the capital markets very difficult." With no repo framework, for example, the toolbox for Islamic institutions is lacking, and that hampers liquidity and hampers the secondary market.



Asal Saghari



Dr Mohamed Damak

the Middle East region has a key role to play in the move toward net zero, and as a net exporter and major supplier of petrochemicals, with much of the region's wealth and influence deriving from this sector, diversifying into non-oil areas is not only advisable, but essential. How can these countries steward themselves away from an overreliance on oil? What role can Shariah compliant products and services play in the sustainability shift? These questions and more were asked by Jessica Robinson, the founder and managing director of Moxie Future. She was joined by a vocal group that included Dermot O'Reilly, the head of ethical finance at ARX Financial Engineering; Maya Marissa Malek, CEO of Amanie Advisors; Tayyaba Rasheed, the head of the Investment Banking Group at Faysal Bank; and Zalina Shamsudin, the general manager at Capital Markets Malaysia. Bringing such diverse and different experiences and perspectives to the table, the discussion was naturally energetic. "There's a massive amount of money coming into the sustainable banking space," pointed out O'Reilly. "Bloomberg thinks that by 2025,



Jessica Robinson

group that included Dermot O'Reilly, the head of ethical finance at ARX Financial Engineering; Maya Marissa Malek, CEO of Amanie Advisors; Tayyaba Rasheed, the head of the Investment Banking Group at Faysal Bank; and Zalina Shamsudin, the general manager at Capital Markets Malaysia. Bringing such diverse and different experiences and perspectives to the table, the discussion was naturally energetic. "There's a massive amount of money coming into the sustainable banking space," pointed out O'Reilly. "Bloomberg thinks that by 2025,



Maya Marissa Malek



Tayyaba Rasheed

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Zalina Shamsudin



Dermot O'Reilly

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There is a realization that the problem is the gap in terms of expectation from a financing perspective — how do you get financial institutions to look at the ground level?

Not even these days would be complete without a session on sustainability, and IFN Middle East Forum was no exception. The most pressing challenge of our time,

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one third of all assets under management will be sustainably linked. That's US\$50 trillion, that's an enormous amount. And there is a lot of overlap there so it's a big chunk of money for the Islamic industry to go after. But how would banks do this? Well first, adopt the SDGs [sustainable development goals], that's a big challenge. Choose something that closely aligns to your business strategy, choose two or three that you can do really well, and then eventually work towards all 17."

The afternoon sessions drilled even deeper into the nuts and bolts of execution, with an insightful exploration of the operational issues currently facing Islamic finance in the Gulf. Stephen Knight of Dentons was joined by Anita Wieja-Caruba, the associate director of strategy,

Stephen Knight



Anita Wieja-Caruba



policy and risk at the Dubai Financial Services Authority; Ijlal Ahmed Alvi, CEO of International Islamic Financial Market; and Rizwan Malik, the head of standards

Rizwan Malik



implementation and strategic developments at AAOIFI. Anita explored the current landscape in detail and the journey toward

Ijlal Ahmed Alvi



London Inter-Bank Offered Rate (LIBOR) reform, which she called a "seismic shift". Ijlal explained the differences in calculation methodology between LIBOR and the new risk-

We need more Islamic fintech accelerators. We need support to help build the entire ecosystem, and help these entrepreneurs, who are very enthusiastic, but they need mentors, they need business guidance. It's not going to happen overnight, someone needs to take the initiative

free rate. "The previous manipulations could succeed because the market was very thin for LIBOR, so the regulators came to play a role. So the methodology now is backward-looking instead of forward-looking, and that creates a challenge for Islamic institutions, because some transactions need a forward-looking rate. We need to find a solution

to structure the Islamic transaction, and we also need to work on hedging documentation."

Finally, the day ended with a bang: focusing on fintech and tracing the spectacular development of the sector in the GCC. With the strong commitment of most GCC governments to the fintech cause, the fintech arena in the region has exploded in recent years, with numerous sandboxes, accelerators, innovation drives and funding initiatives designed to set alight the sector and send Islamic fintech into the stratosphere. From peer-to-peer lending networks to new cryptocurrencies, technology has found a thriving home in the GCC and Islamic banks are, for the most part, enthusiastically embracing the drive toward digitization. IFN's very own Vineeta Tan led a lively conversation that spanned the breadth of this brave new world:

Vineeta Tan



Lawrence Oliver



joined by entrepreneurs and practitioners including Lawrence Oliver, deputy CEO at DDCAP; Dr Mohammed Alyami, the director of the Development Effectiveness

Dr Mohammed Alyami



Department at the Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector; Paula Tavangar, the co-founder and investment

Paula Tavangar



director of Genesis Capital LATAM; Sharjil Ahmed, the co-founder and CEO of Cykuba;

Zaineb Sefiani



and Zaineb Sefiani, the founder of Carrera Learning.

Sharjil Ahmed



"We need more Islamic fintech accelerators," urged Sharjil. "We need support to help build the entire ecosystem, and help these entrepreneurs,

who are very enthusiastic, but they need mentors, they need business guidance. It's not going to happen overnight, someone needs to take the initiative." ☺

For more detail on how the GCC and wider Middle East region is working to develop and promote Islamic fintech, and for detailed discussions and full recordings of each panel, head over to [Redmoney.live](https://www.redmoney.live) and check out the event.



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The UAE: A major player

The UAE boasts vibrant financial centers and strong ties with the big players of the global Islamic finance and banking industry, confirming its potential and commitment to becoming a hub for Shariah compliant financial products and services. **NESSREEN TAMANO** writes an overview of one of the largest Islamic banking markets in the world by assets.

Regulatory landscape

The UAE government continues to enhance the regulatory environment to be in line with its Islamic economy ambitions — the Central Bank of the UAE (CBUAE)'s regulatory framework for Islamic finance focuses on Islamic banks, liquidity support mechanisms and the wider UAE Islamic finance knowledge economy.

The Securities and Commodities Authority has also been working on new regulations for Sukuk that will comply with local laws instead of the common English or foreign laws, and the Higher Shariah Authority passed new resolutions to strengthen Shariah governance at Islamic financial institutions.

In May 2020, the Ministry of Finance, the IsDB and the Dubai Islamic Economy Development Centre (DIEDC) confirmed a collaboration on an initiative to create a unified global legal and legislative framework for the wider Islamic finance sector, using AAOIFI standards as a reference — a plan that now falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Economic Development, which absorbed all the functions, strategies and responsibilities of the DIEDC earlier this year.

Banking and finance

In terms of top jurisdictions for Islamic banking assets, the UAE is ranked the fourth-largest market, after Iran, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. There are seven fully-fledged Islamic banks, while some conventional banks operate Islamic windows.

In 2020, Dubai Islamic Bank (DIB) acquired Noor Bank, integrating the latter into the former's operations for combined assets worth over AED275 billion (US\$74.86 billion).

The first exchange-traded fund (ETF) tracking a Shariah compliant index in the UAE, the Chimera S&P UAE Sharia ETF, listed on the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange and the Dubai Financial Market (DFM). This year, the DFM also debuted REIT trading with the listing of Al Mal Capital's Shariah compliant REIT.

Sukuk

The UAE's Sukuk market is thriving, seeing much activity this past year despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. DIB notably issued two landmark Sukuk facilities totaling US\$1.5 billion within months of each other, Emaar Properties returned to the international Sukuk market with a US\$500 million issue and the Sharjah government issued a US\$750 million Islamic paper

The DIEDC had, before its dissolution this year, signed an MoU with the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), the DFM and the Climate Bonds Initiative to

collaborate in growing the green Sukuk sector, with the aim of promoting green Sukuk issuances in the UAE and across the world while developing the standards of green Sukuk certification along the lines of the Climate Bonds Standard and Certification Scheme.

Takaful

There are 12 Islamic insurers in the UAE market, all regulated by the Insurance Authority, which is currently in the process of being merged into the central bank. The Takaful sector has benefited from an increase in demand as a result of compulsory cover in the medical and liability businesses and regulatory changes such as setting a minimum pricing for motor insurance. Motor policies and health insurance make up a significant proportion of the overall contributions in the Takaful sector.

Some notable mergers and acquisitions include the following: in July 2020, Dar Al Takaful completed the acquisition of Noor Takaful General and Noor Takaful Family, while Al Hilal Bank's Al Hilal Takaful was acquired by private investment firm Siraj Holding.

Fintech

The UAE's keen focus on fintech start-ups is in line with its ambitions of becoming one of the largest global hubs for Shariah compliant fintech. Stepping it up this year, the central bank inaugurated a dedicated fintech department while the DIFC continued to nurture Islamic fintech start-ups in its accelerator program.

Also this year, Aqarchain announced the forthcoming launch of its Shariah compliant blockchain-powered real estate investing platform. Three Islamic challenger banks announced their plans to launch soon as well: Al Maryah Community Bank, Zand and Zurich Capital's REZQ-Baraka.

In 2019, the UAE and Saudi Arabia partnered to pilot an experimental joint cryptocurrency restricted to trading between a number of banks in both countries. In the same year, the CBUAE announced plans to establish a roadmap and a fintech office dedicated to developing financial innovation in the banking sector.

Outlook

The UAE remains one of the strongest Islamic finance jurisdictions in the Gulf region and also globally, particularly in the banking and capital market sectors, and shows no signs of stopping. Over 20% of banking assets in the country comprise Islamic assets, according to the IFSB, and this is expected to continue growing.



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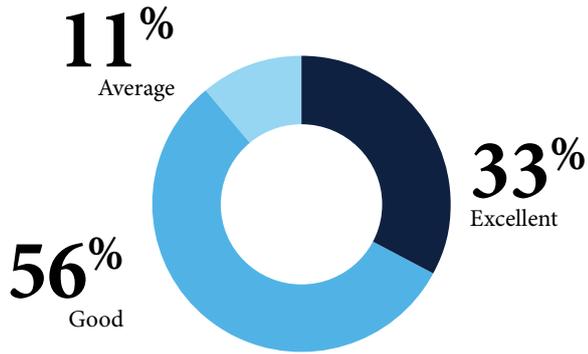
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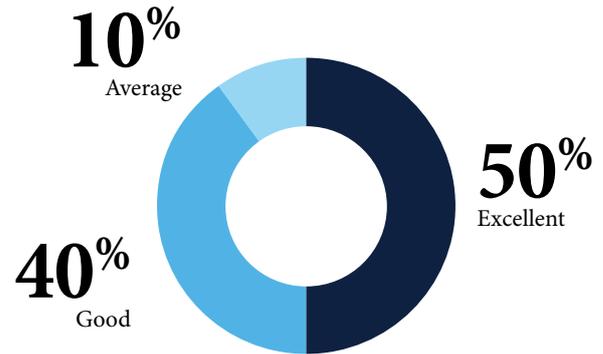
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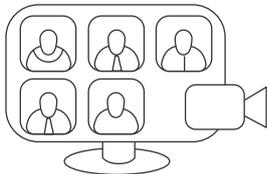
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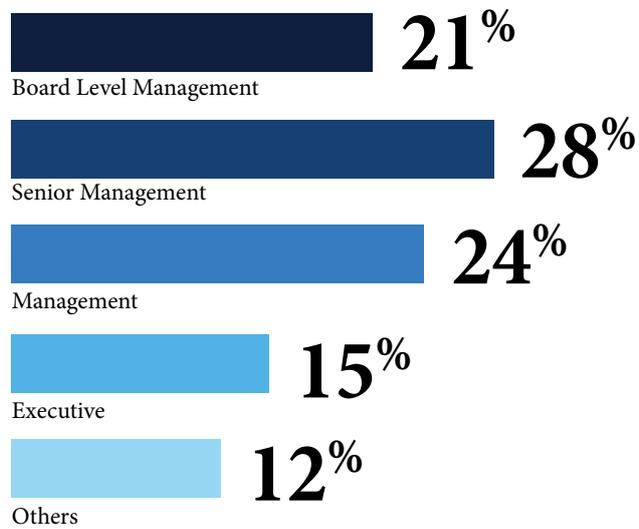
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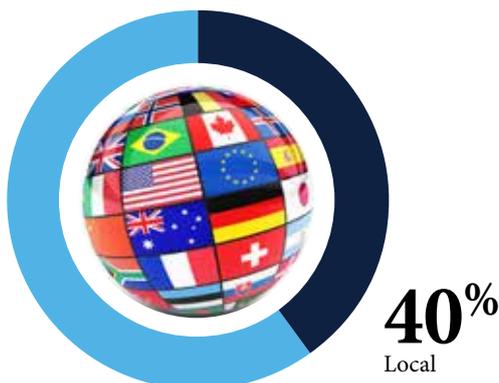
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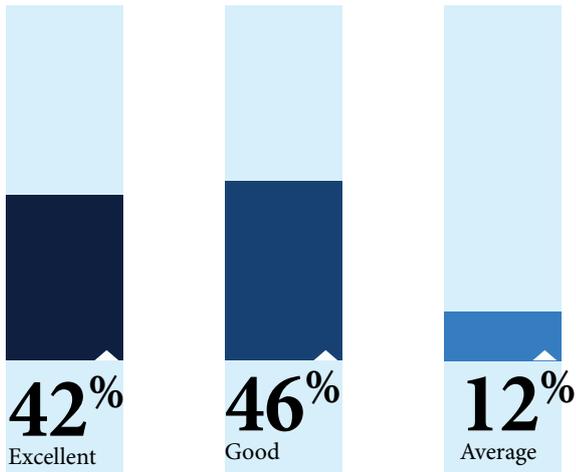
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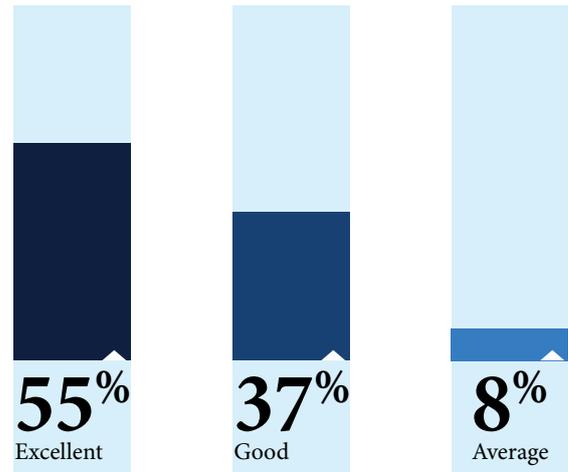
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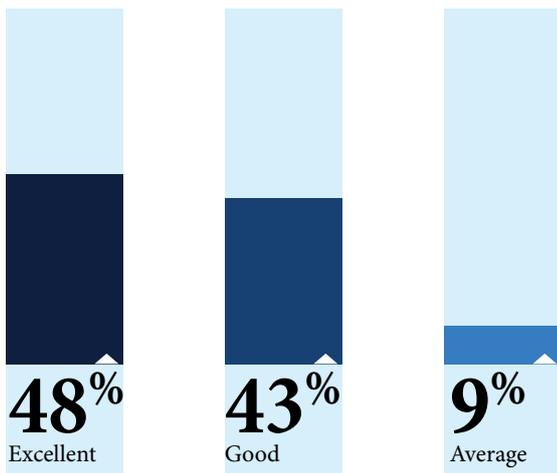
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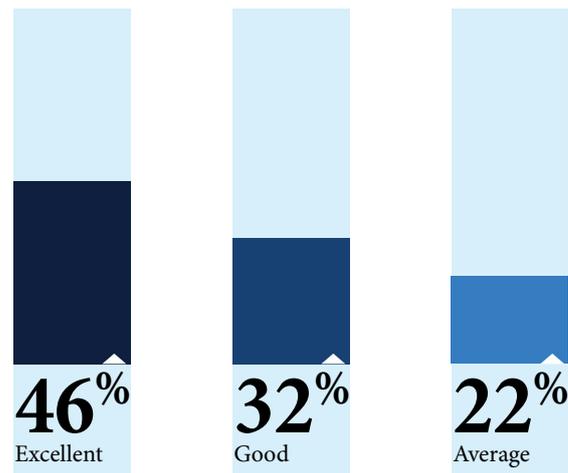
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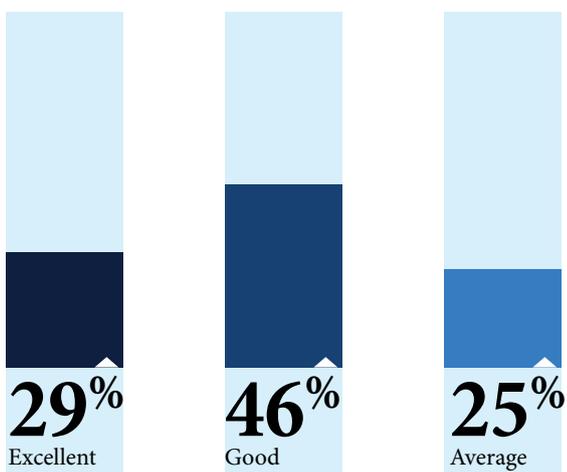
Green, Transition and Sustainability-Linked Finance and Investment – Shariah Compliant Options



Operational Issues Facing Islamic Financial Institutions in the Gulf



The Evolution of GCC Islamic Financial Technology - Digital Assets, Crowdfunding and Digitization



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IFN Thought Leadership Dialogue
26th May, Dubai

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30th May, Riyadh

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6th September, London

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