
Introduction

The importance of international trade as an engine for economic growth and development across the developing world continues to increase. However, the Arab region remains one of the most under-represented in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Of the 22 members of the Arab League,¹ only 14 are currently WTO members.² Out of these 14 members, Jordan, Oman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Comoros have joined since the WTO came into being in 1995.

Nine countries became members when the WTO was created, having previously been members of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT): Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Seven Arab League countries have started the process of acceding to the WTO: Algeria, Iraq, the Lebanese Republic, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic. These countries have been in the accession process for, on average, over 18 years, while for some the process has been inactive for many years. Palestine, which is not engaged in the WTO accession process, has held ad hoc observer status at WTO Ministerial Conferences since 2005. This publication covers Arab League countries which are already members of the WTO as well as those which are in the process of acceding to the WTO.

This study concentrates primarily on the first four of the five Arab League members to have acceded to the WTO (See Annex I) since 1995 (under Article XII of the WTO Agreement): Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Information on the most recent new member, Comoros, is more limited due to its WTO membership only being formalized in 2024, so performance indicators are not yet available.

The desirability as well as the challenging nature of the process of accession have been subject to focused attention over recent years. Two High-Level Regional Dialogues on WTO Accessions for the Arab region, held in partnership with the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the WTO, in November 2020 and February 2022, respectively, have highlighted the challenges and difficulties faced by Arab acceding governments.

At the same time, the Dialogues also underlined the opportunities offered by WTO accession, as a vehicle for domestic reforms and an enabler for economic diversification and transformation. In this regard, the different accession and post-accession experiences of the five members to have acceded since 1995 are able to offer important lessons and may provide guidance to Arab acceding governments working to revive or advance their negotiations.

The aim of this study is to provide factual insights, lessons, conclusions and recommendations of past and ongoing accessions of Arab economies, as well as the post-accession experiences of the Arab members that have joined since 1995, including their participation in the work of the WTO. In preparing this study, the acceding governments, which are in different stages of the accession process, as well as the members that have acceded since 1995, have been consulted. Through interviews and questionnaires, they shared their specific challenges and concerns as well as their technical assistance and capacity-building needs, whether in relation to accession negotiations or participation in WTO work in general.

By drawing from the experience of Arab members having acceded since 1995, this study aims to better equip Arab acceding governments to navigate the accession process by incorporating lessons learnt and best practices. Furthermore, this study is expected to help the three co-publishing agencies (IsDB, AMF and Islamic Centre for Development of Trade), as well as other partners which are supporting the WTO accession of Arab economies, to design their future technical assistance and capacity-building programmes and activities for the Arab region, based on the specific needs identified in the study.

Set out in four sections, this study highlights the importance of trade and trade policies in Arab economies, and its conclusions are intended to inform policymakers on possible ways forward, including how to best utilize WTO membership to facilitate economic reforms and ensure policy coherence. The first Section analyses the policy context of the accession processes of Arab economies, Section 2 covers the main elements of the accession process and consequent reforms, the third Section assesses the impact of accession and what to anticipate and, finally, Section 4 concludes and looks at the way forward.

Endnotes

1. The Arab League, officially known as the League of Arab States, is a regional organization to promote cooperation among its 22 member countries in the Arab world. The League, which straddles two continents: Africa and Asia, facilitates political, economic, cultural, scientific, and social programmes designed to promote the interests of the Arab world.
2. The Kingdom of Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, the State of Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.