

## ***The Role of Business Environment and Government Policies in Supporting the Growth of Startups: A Comparative Study Between the UAE And Tunisia in the MENA Region***

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### ***Abstract:***

*This research examines how government policies and the business environment in Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates may facilitate startup growth. It highlights the structural and institutional differences between the two countries via the use of PESTEL and SWOT analytical tools. Effective entrepreneurial ecosystems need a coordinated approach that considers local and national circumstances while combining digital infrastructure, legal frameworks, financial accessibility, and education. Recommendations to improve the entrepreneurial ecosystem in various situations within the Middle East and North Africa region have been proposed at last.*

**Key Words:** *Entrepreneurship, Startups, Government Policy, Business Environment, UAE, Tunisia, MENA, Comparative Analysis.*

## 1. Introduction

The digital revolution, technological advancements, and the shifting roles of states in the global economy are all contributing to the rapid economic and knowledge-based transformation taking place in the world today. Given their ability to innovate, high degree of adaptability to change, and rapid expansion and impact, startups have become one of the key pillars in the construction of the modern economy (Al-Hajiri, A., Adbella, G. M, Al-Yafei, H., Assel, S., & Hamouda, A. M, 2024). These businesses have drawn more attention from national and international governments and policymakers due to their perceived role as a major force behind boosting economic growth, generating job opportunities, and localizing technology.

However, a supportive business environment as well as an adaptable and enabling institutional and legal structure are necessary for startups to succeed; they cannot rely only on individual initiative or entrepreneurial ideas. Government policies, such as legal frameworks, financing availability, and cutting-edge digital infrastructure, are among the key factors that determine the success of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, according to recent research, particularly in developing environments (OECD, Entrepreneurship policies in the MENA region: Bridging digital and institutional gaps, 2022). Accordingly, studying the institutional and national context in which these businesses are founded is essential to comprehending the elements that go into creating a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The degree of development and responsiveness of national models to the needs of assisting startups varies throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While some Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have made great strides toward creating sophisticated and contemporary business environments through national economic visions such as Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Vision 2071 (WEF, MENA future jobs and entrepreneurship outlook, 2023), other countries, like Tunisia, are still working to change current systems and overcome structural obstacles that impede the expansion of entrepreneurship.

Through the implementation of contemporary laws, the creation of specialized free zones, the advancement of digital infrastructure, and the offering of tax and regulatory incentives, the United Arab Emirates can be considered a model for creating an integrated system that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship (Syed, R. T., Singh, D., Agrawal, R., & Spicer, D. P., 2023). Additionally, it has enacted laws to empower young people and women and to instill an entrepreneurial culture in the educational system. The country's top ranks in international competitiveness indices, especially in areas like investment attractiveness, ease of doing business, and governmental digital transformation, are a direct result of these efforts.

On the other hand, Tunisia is an example of a distinct situation that is shared by a number of similar countries. Even while significant legislative progress has been made, especially with the passage of the *Startup Act* in 2018—one of the first such laws in Africa and the Arab world—the actual application of these laws has encountered real difficulties (Ben Abdallah, K., & Marzouki, H, 2019). Issues with bank financing, administrative processes, integration between the various actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and political and economic stability are the main ones that have impeded both foreign and domestic investments.

In order to identify differences and draw conclusions that could improve the efficacy of entrepreneurship policies in the region—not just in the two studied countries but also in Algeria

and other Arab and neighboring countries—this study's significance stems from analyzing and comparing the role played by the business environment and government policies in supporting startups in the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia. In order to achieve this, the study critically reviews prior research and pertinent governmental practices before utilizing methodological analytical tools like PESTEL (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal) and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis.

Because these two experiences represent two different contexts in terms of resources, stability, and strategic vision, they are worth comparing. In contrast to Tunisia, which is a developing economy dealing with a number of difficulties and making an effort to keep up with advancements in the knowledge economy within the constraints of its resources, the United Arab Emirates has a rentier economy that seeks diversification and full digital transformation. Deconstructing the aspects of entrepreneurship policies and evaluating their efficacy in the particular circumstances of each country is made possible in the present study.

### **1.1 Main Problem Statement**

Although the number of startups in the MENA region has increased noticeably, the policies, infrastructure, and laws governing entrepreneurship differ greatly among its member countries. As a result, the main topic this paper aims to address is:

**What are the similarities and differences in business environments and government policies related to startup growth and sustainability in the UAE and Tunisia? And, consequently, what lessons can improve business environments in the MENA region?**

### **1.2 Sub-Questions**

The following sub-questions are suggested since the study examines how government policies and business environment help startups in Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates grow:

1. How much does the performance of startups in Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates depend on the advancement of digital infrastructure and the adaptability of the business environment?
2. What kinds of government policies encourage entrepreneurship in Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, and how do they affect the expansion and viability of startups?
3. How do the two countries' varying political and economic environments impact the effectiveness or shortcomings of their entrepreneurship policies?
4. What can be learned about the traits and factors influencing the startup environment in each country from the analytical tools PESTEL and SWOT?

### **1.3 Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses are proposed in order to address the primary problem statement and the sub-questions:

- **H1:** The growth of startups is positively impacted by the presence of a flexible and technologically advanced business environment.
- **H2:** The success and sustainability of entrepreneurship are greatly influenced by supportive government policies, such as financial and legal incentives.
- **H3:** The efficacy of entrepreneurship policies varies between the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia due to differences in their political and economic environments.

- **H4:** Analytical tools like PESTEL and SWOT are useful for identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats affecting the startup environment in both the UAE and Tunisia.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

This study's objective is to compare the UAE and Tunisia in order to examine the institutional and regulatory factors that affect the entrepreneurial environment in the MENA region. This is divided into the following specific objectives:

1. Examine how the business environment is currently developing for startups in Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.
2. Examine the laws and policies of the government concerning entrepreneurship.
3. Examine the various financial mechanisms in both countries, including government assistance, incubators, and others.
4. Identify the opportunities and difficulties experienced by entrepreneurs in each country.
5. Provide feasible recommendations for enhancing the entrepreneurship environment in the countries of the MENA region.

#### **1.5 Methodology of the Study**

By contrasting the cases of Tunisia and the UAE as two opposing experiences within the MENA region, this study uses the analytical comparative method in a descriptive approach and investigates how government policies and business environment support startup growth. The choice of UAE and Tunisia comes because they have two fundamentally different political, economic, and developmental contexts. This allows for an assessment of the efficacy of policies in different regulatory environments, especially with the MENA region experiencing a growing shift towards the digital economy and entrepreneurship, where startups have emerged as promising engines of economic growth and job creation.

A critical literature assessment of previous studies, an analysis of international publications (such as those from the World Bank, OECD, and GEM), and a review of national legislation and policies pertinent to entrepreneurship are all part of the study's secondary data analysis.

- **PESTEL model:** is one of the methodological analytical tools used to evaluate the contextual influences on the environment for entrepreneurship in each case, including political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors.
- **SWOT Analysis:** it is used to determine the startup environment's opportunities, threats, weaknesses, and strengths in both countries' business environments.

After that, a comprehensive comparative table covering ten important aspects (like funding, the legal system, digital infrastructure, social empowerment, etc.) will be developed in order to present a fair, fact-based perspective that identifies the advantages and disadvantages of each context, from which recommendations will be drawn.

It should be mentioned that the goal of this study is to extract lessons and flexible approaches to improve the entrepreneurial environment in the region while highlighting the unique characteristics of each country's business environment and its institutional and developmental context, rather than to make normative judgments.

## **2. Critical Review of Previous Studies on Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in the MENA Region**

Due to significant economic changes like the digital revolution, initiatives to lessen reliance on natural resources, and pressures to achieve economic development and promote job creation, the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been receiving more scholarly attention in the last ten years. In the post-oil era, entrepreneurship has emerged as both a strategic choice and a requirement for reorganizing national economies (Eshtreffi, 2022). However, there are still few comparison studies comparing the various business environments in the area, indicating a critical need for studies that look at the profound variations in implementation and results between various Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African countries.

Some scholars like Al-Owais focused on Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, showing how these countries have developed into examples of institutional maturity in assisting entrepreneurs (Al-Owais, 2021). The establishment of ambitious national policies like Saudi Vision 2030 and the United Arab Emirates' "Projects of the 50" initiative, which resulted in integrated systems for promoting innovation, including incubators, accelerators, funding schemes, and research institutions, was connected by the study to this progress. However, the quantitative implications of such initiatives on startup survival rates and their social effects—like integrating marginalized groups or guaranteeing regional equity in opportunity distribution—may not have been thoroughly examined in this study.

By analyzing the role of universities in entrepreneurship within Gulf countries, other scholars offered a more dynamic viewpoint. They emphasized the significance of universities in promoting business environments by cultivating entrepreneurial human capital and linking it to the private sector. The study concluded that universities are now crucial pillars for creating long-lasting entrepreneurship support networks, which increases the value of laws (Syed, R. T., Singh, D., Agrawal, R., & Spicer, D. P., 2023). In this regard, Algerian universities are taking a similar approach, establishing businesses and boosting the country's economy.

Al-Juhaimi and Abdelkader provided a structural view of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, emphasizing that supportive policies alone are not enough (Al-Juhaimi, M. & Abdelkader, N, 2020). Instead, a flexible organizational and financial structure is required, and early-stage entrepreneurial financing should come from a variety of sources, including venture capital and traditional banks. This study does not, however, examine how the efficacy of these channels differs based on the targeted sector or entrepreneurial stage; instead, it is primarily descriptive.

By showing that cultural, educational, and psychological aspects affect the quality of entrepreneurial outcomes, attention is brought to the socio-psychological dimension in forming entrepreneurial ambitions among Emirati youth (Al-Saiqal, N. Y., Ryan, J. C., & Parco, O. J, 2018). This research emphasizes the necessity of creating integrated educational environments that incorporate suitable training and education, rather than only economic ones.

In an analysis of the Startup Act in Tunisia (Ben Abdallah, K., & Marzouki, H, 2019), some structural issues were underlined such as bureaucracy, a lack of digitization, and inadequate funding, but this study also provided an analytical account of incentives like tax and administrative facilitation. The study did not, however, offer specific solutions to these problems or reform models that were modified from comparable local experiences.

By examining the entrepreneurial ecosystems in the Gulf and the Maghreb and taking into account the extent to which laws may be implemented in digitally and institutionally advanced environments, (Eshtréfi, 2022) emphasized the significance of any legislation's practical enforceability.

Education, funding, and digital infrastructure must all be integrated, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report, which also noted that the entrepreneurial environment is weakened when any one of these components is lacking (GEM, 2023). The ability of Gulf institutions, notably those in the United Arab Emirates, to turn education into genuine engines of innovation was also mentioned, especially through successful university-private sector partnerships.

Regarding digitization, the OECD emphasized the technological disparity among MENA countries, highlighting the UAE's leadership in implementing digital platforms for business formation, while Tunisia has experienced a decline in startup speed and efficiency due to administrative and technical obstacles (OECD, *Entrepreneurship policies in the MENA region: Bridging digital and institutional gaps*, 2022). The impact of digital transformation in the Gulf's conventional sectors, such as oil and gas, demonstrating how the digital environment can boost competitiveness and encourage economic diversification, even in rentier economies, was highlighted by scholars (Al-Hajiri, A., Adbella, G. M, Al-Yafei, H., Assel, S., & Hamouda, A. M, 2024).

The necessity of entrepreneurship policies being rooted in the local social and cultural environment has been emphasized in recent literature (Alnuaimi, T., & Warren, V., 2024). They cautioned against attempts to duplicate foreign models without sufficient adaptation to local conditions. Most academics concur that establishing an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem requires embracing digital governance, empowering women and youth, and encouraging an entrepreneurial culture through early education.

It is clear from this literature review that the development of an integrated, interconnected system that includes public policies, digital transformation, entrepreneurial education, and flexible financing is necessary for the success of an entrepreneurial ecosystem rather than relying solely on the proliferation of laws or symbolic initiatives. Countries that have made significant progress in integrating innovation, like the United Arab Emirates, have seen measurable outcomes, primarily as a result of combining important economic objectives with efficient platforms for implementation. In contrast, other experiences—like Tunisia—continue to have problems like a disconnect between the design of policies and their implementation, which lessens the real impact of bold frameworks like the Tunisian Startup Act.

Given the existence of comparable social and psychological variables, it is evident from these findings that a comparison approach between various experiences in the region is necessary in order to identify best practices and modify them for local conditions. The literature consistently highlights that empowering women and youth and creating institutional frameworks that guarantee continuity and consistency between public and private actors are essential to achieving a move toward an entrepreneurial economy. Therefore, the ability of countries to transition from fragmented, sector-isolated policies to interconnected ecosystems defined by innovation, flexibility, and inclusivity—thereby facilitating holistic growth across all sectors—will determine the future of entrepreneurship in the region.

### **3. Methodology**

Since the analytical comparative method can analyze phenomena in multiple contexts, especially those related to public policies and the institutional and economic environments that have a direct impact on the growth of startups in two different countries, it is used in this study in an attempt to understand the differences and similarities between the entrepreneurial environments of the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia.

#### **3.1 Type of Study and Method**

This study, which is a descriptive qualitative study, compares the UAE and Tunisia in order to examine how business environments and governmental policies assist the growth of startups, and it does so via an analytical comparative method. The national environments of the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia are evaluated using strategic analytical tools like PESTEL and SWOT along multi-dimensional axes that include political, economic, legal, social, technological, and environmental factors. In each case, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are identified to characterize the entrepreneurial business environment.

This approach goes beyond simply characterizing and evaluating policies and indicators; instead, it aims to look into the advantages and disadvantages of each country's experience, and examine opportunities and threats.

#### **3.2 Data Sources**

In the present study, high-quality secondary sources were used, classified within reputable scientific databases or leading international research institutions, and they are as follows:

**a. Peer-reviewed academic studies:** These consisted of recent research articles (2020–2024) from journals such as *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Small Business Economics*, and the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*. Studies were selected based on: coverage of national entrepreneurship policies, reliance on robust analytical models, and especially inclusion of the MENA region.

**b. International reports:** These reports were consulted to gather data on entrepreneurial business environment and startups in the two countries:

- *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2023/2024:* It provides detailed indicators on total early-stage entrepreneurial activity (TEA), motivations for business creation, startup financing environments, and assessments of entrepreneurial culture (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023, Executive Summary section). Its findings showed the UAE among the top performers globally in "Policy Support" and "Opportunities for Entrepreneurs," while Tunisia ranked moderately with financing and legislative challenges. (GEM, 2023)
- *OECD (2022) – Entrepreneurship Policies in the MENA Region:* This report highlighted the digital and legislative gap between Gulf countries and the Maghreb, with the UAE as an advanced model in digital integration and platform-based startup support, and Tunisia taking significant legislative steps (Startup Act) but facing structural obstacles (OECD, Entrepreneurship policies in the MENA region: Bridging digital and institutional gaps, 2022).
- *World Economic Forum (WEF) reports 2019–2023:*

- *The Global Competitiveness Report (2019)*: covering global competitiveness indicators, including innovation and infrastructure, and key components of the business environment (WEF, Global competitiveness report 2019, 2019).
- *The Future of Jobs Report (2020) and (2025)*: addressing labor market transformations due to digitization, it is relevant to assessing the impact of digital infrastructure on startup growth (WEF, The future of jobs report 2020, 2020) (WEF, Future of jobs report 2025, 2025).
- *Global Competitiveness and Risks Report (2022)*: providing updated data on economic resilience to crises (e.g., COVID-19) and its impact on entrepreneurship policies. (WEF, Global competitiveness and risks report, 2022)
- *The Global Risks Report (2023)*: offering insights into future risks and their effects on the business environment, including political, economic, and technological risks in MENA. (WEF, The global risks report, 2023)

In overall, these reports included indicators of technological readiness, infrastructure quality, and labor market dynamics. The UAE outperformed in digital infrastructure and innovation, while Tunisia lagged in digital transformation speed.

- *World Bank - Doing Business 2020 indicators*: showing that the UAE ranked highly globally in starting a business and investor protection, while Tunisia ranked lower in enforcing contracts and access to financing. (WorldBank., 2020)

**c. Governmental and legislative documents:** They offer more than just official data; they also function as analytical frameworks for comparing various national entrepreneurship support models:

- *Tunisian Startup Act (2018)*: One of the first comprehensive legislative measures in North Africa to foster technological entrepreneurship and innovative projects, it was enacted in April 2018 under Law No. 20 of 2018 (Tunisian Government, 2018, Article 5). Through initiatives like tax exemptions for up to five years, grants for product development and international market expansion, an "Entrepreneur Card" that offers administrative benefits (like work or study leave to start a business), and easier access to financing through venture capital encouragement and loosened restrictions on international money transfers, it seeks to create a regulatory and financial environment that supports startup growth. However, research demonstrates that its implementation encountered difficulties, such as slow administrative processes, inadequate digital infrastructure, and a lack of financing from banks, which limited its anticipated impact (Ben Abdallah, K., & Marzouki, H, 2019) (OECD, Entrepreneurship policies in the MENA region: Bridging digital and institutional gaps, 2022).
- *UAE Vision 2071*: A long-term strategy plan that was unveiled in 2017 with the goal of placing the UAE among the top countries in the world by its centennial. Knowledge economy (developing innovation sectors, high-tech industries, and attracting global talent), education and research (investing in a generation skilled in Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies), smart infrastructure (complete digital transformation of government services, including business registration and licensing), and financing and investment (methods to attract foreign direct investment and facilitate startup funding) are some of the

pillars that it covers and which have a direct impact on the business and startup environment. This strategy creates a secure and predictable environment for investors and entrepreneurs by integrating it with other national frameworks like Projects of the Next 50 and UAE Centennial. (Economy-UAE, 2023)

- *UAE National Innovation Strategy*: Introduced in 2014 and subsequently revised as the Advanced National Innovation Strategy, this strategy aims to establish the UAE as one of the world's most innovative countries (Economy-UAE, 2023). Its primary areas of focus are space, water, health technology, smart education, clean and renewable energy, and smart transportation. By implementing this plan, the UAE created accelerators and incubators, started financing initiatives like the "Mohammed bin Rashid Innovation Fund," and fortified ties with international research institutes and the private sector, all of which raised the country's ranking in global innovation indices (WIPO, 2023).

### 3.3 Analytical Tools

The analytical tools used in the present study are PESTEL model and SWOT analysis, providing an objective comparison between the two business environments:

**a. PESTEL Model:** used to analyze external factors influencing the business environment along these axes:

- **P – Political:** political stability, government policies, supportive legislation
- **E – Economic:** GDP, investments, financing, financial support
- **S – Social:** entrepreneurial culture, education, youth and women's participation
- **T – Technological:** digital transformation, technical infrastructure, innovation support
- **E – Environmental:** environmental policies relevant to new ventures
- **L – Legal:** legal and regulatory frameworks for startup formation and growth

**b. SWOT Analysis:** used to assess internal and external environments in the UAE and Tunisia, it deduces:

- **Strengths:** institutional success factors, legislative flexibility, infrastructure availability and quality
- **Weaknesses:** bureaucracy, limited financing, weak training or education programs
- **Opportunities:** innovation programs, new markets, partnerships and regional or local potentialities
- **Threats:** political instability, policy volatility, skills gap or brain drain

### 3.4 Methodological Considerations

- *Objectivity and neutrality:* The study avoids assumptions or assessments about either national experience in favor of an analytical method that is scientifically neutral. Reputable academic sources (Scopus, Elsevier) and trustworthy international reports (GEM, OECD, WEF) are the sources used.
- *Analysis integration:* This approach integrates the most recent quantitative and qualitative data available during the study period with traditional analytical tools (PESTEL, SWOT) to provide a dynamic and thorough reading of the entrepreneurial environment in both countries while considering the surrounding institutional, economic, and social context.
- *Analysis period (2019–2025):* a particularly noteworthy time span that includes pre-, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, is characterized by considerable changes in

economic policy and digital transformation, as well as global economic turbulence. This period of time makes it possible to evaluate how these changes affect startup dynamics and support policies.

### 3.5 Study Limitations

- *Qualitative nature*: Using statistical and documentary analytical readings of practices in the two countries, the research is restricted to qualitative comparative analysis and does not involve field surveys or in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs or officials.
- *Data heterogeneity*: While objectivity was unaffected, the availability, recentness, and quality of data differed between the two countries; some were transparent and detailed, while others were older or incomplete.
- *Limited access to official documents*: It was difficult to obtain some internal documents, especially those describing how some national programs were carried out. As a result, published secondary data had to be used instead of full primary data.

## 4. Characteristics of the Entrepreneurial Business Environment for Startups in the UAE and Tunisia

Based on recent field and statistical reports (2019–2025), peer-reviewed academic literature (Elsevier/Scopus), international reports (GEM, OECD), and government documents (e.g., the Tunisian Startup Act), this study employs a qualitative, descriptive, comparative analysis (UAE vs. Tunisia). A PESTEL model and SWOT analysis of the entrepreneurial environments are presented after the overall startup statistical data for both countries.

### 4.1 Startup Statistics in the UAE and Tunisia (up to 2025)

The table below demonstrates statistics about startups in the two countries where there is an obvious situation: the two experiences are not alike in number of created startups and scaleups, volume of funding and its sources, the ranking and the localization of ecosystem, for which further explanations will be provided after PESTEL model and SWOT analysis.

**Table 1. Key Statistics on Startups in the UAE and Tunisia up to 2025**

| Indicator                              | United Arab Emirates                                                                         | Tunisia                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Number of startups (up to 2025)</b> | More than 5,600 startups (as of Q2 2024)                                                     | 1,133 companies holding the 'Startup Label' as of 2024; expected to exceed 2,000 in 2025 |
| <b>Funding volume (2024)</b>           | USD 1.1 billion across 207 startups                                                          | USD 400 million (+60% compared to 2023)                                                  |
| <b>Funding (Q1 2025)</b>               | USD 872 million (+194% compared to Q4 2024), of which USD 760 million was late-stage funding | ---                                                                                      |

*The Role of Business Environment and Government Policies in Supporting the Growth of Startups:  
A Comparative Study Between the UAE And Tunisia in the MENA Region*

|                                                    |                                                                                           |                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Geographic distribution of funding</b>          | 96% of tech-related funding originates from companies headquartered in Dubai              | ---                                                                                                        |
| <b>Number of newly established companies</b>       | 127 new startups supported by the Dubai Digital Chamber (Q1 2025); +135% compared to 2024 | ---                                                                                                        |
| <b>Ecosystem ranking</b>                           | Among the strongest startup ecosystems in the Gulf region                                 | Ranked among the top 20 global startup ecosystems                                                          |
| <b>Economic value of the ecosystem (2022–2024)</b> | ---                                                                                       | USD 113 million                                                                                            |
| <b>Funding by sector (2024)</b>                    | ---                                                                                       | Fintech: USD 150 million; Agritech: USD 80 million; Green Tech: USD 70 million; Healthtech: USD 50 million |
| <b>Number of scaleups</b>                          | ---                                                                                       | More than 17 scaleups                                                                                      |

**Source:** (Economy Middle East, 2024), (Economy Middle East, 2025), (The Times of India, 2024), (Radioml.tn, 2024), (StandardMarketInsights.com, 2024), (Tracxn, 2025), (Khaleej Times, 2025), (IAB Group, 2025), (African Manager, 2024), (Mind the Bridge, 2024).

#### 4.2 PESTEL Analysis of Startup Business Environment in UAE vs. Tunisia

In the following table, startup business environments in UAE and Tunisia are compared in PESTEL model. It is obvious that the disparity in startup statistics between Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates can be explained by differences in PESTEL characteristics. Nevertheless, despite its modest stature, Tunisia is still competitive worldwide in the top 20 startup ecosystems.

**Table 2. Comparative PESTEL for Business Environment of the UAE and Tunisia**

| Dimension        | UAE                                                                                               | Tunisia                                                                                                       |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Political</b> | Stable environment, well-defined national plans (Vision 2071), and robust government support. For | The Startup Act provides regulatory support, but there are still issues with coordination and implementation. |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                      | foreign investors, geopolitical concerns are still a consideration.                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Economic</b>      | Significant late-stage finance and funds from both foreign and sovereign investors. Intense competition and inconsistent early-stage support.                                  | Dependency on foreign and developmental financing; limited resources in comparison to Gulf countries, fragile economy.                                                 |
| <b>Social</b>        | Both local and foreign talent find it appealing, and the dual local-international culture fosters creativity, yet local integration is still difficult.                        | Skilled workforce, high youth unemployment, limited entrepreneurial culture, weak education-market link, brain drain is still an issue.                                |
| <b>Technological</b> | Cloud adoption and AI promotion, e-government programs, and sophisticated digital infrastructure.                                                                              | Limited digital infrastructure, slow public sector digitalization, software and AI are developing fields; digital government services are still in their early stages. |
| <b>Environmental</b> | Balancing environmental regulations with economics; increasing emphasis on sustainability.                                                                                     | Weak integration of environmental factors, limited legislation, resources and infrastructure; some emphasis on AgriTech's green solutions.                             |
| <b>Legal</b>         | Strict investor protection, electronic registration systems, modern investment-friendly regulations; the differences between federal law and free zones may complicate things. | Startup Act incentives (tax exemptions, reduce bureaucracy); nevertheless, slow implementation, complex administrative procedures, weak IP protection.                 |

**Source:** (OECD, Start-up ecosystem and innovation policy report 2024, 2024), (OECD, OECD employment outlook 2025: Full report, 2025), (Economy Middle East, 2024), (Economy Middle East, 2025), (Enpact, 2019), (Economy., 2018), (LaunchBaseAfrica, 2024), (BICAfrica, 2023), (MAGNiTT, 2025), (MAGNiTT, 2025).

#### 4.3 SWOT Analysis of Startup Business Environment in UAE vs. Tunisia

As in the following, startup business environments in UAE and Tunisia described by SWOT analysis.

##### a. The United Arab Emirates

- **Strengths:** High liquidity, cutting-edge digital infrastructure, and a regulatory environment that is friendly to investment
- **Weaknesses:** Focusing on late-stage finance leaves early-stage gaps, high operating expenses, and fierce competition
- **Opportunities:** Innovative industries like FinTech and a strategic position that connects Africa, Asia, and Europe

- **Threats:** Possible market saturation, geopolitical threats, and a global downturn in venture capital funding

**b. Tunisia:**

- **Strengths:** Startup Act, youthful talented workforce, inclusion in the top 20 ecosystem worldwide, and success stories (like Instadeep)
- **Weaknesses:** Slow digitization, bureaucracy, limited local capital, and a small domestic market
- **Opportunities:** Historical networks, proximity to Europe, and a potential AI/AgriTech cluster in North Africa
- **Threats:** Brain drain, economic instability, and slow public and private funding allocation

As demonstrated, while Tunisia takes advantage of young talent and regulatory incentives, the United Arab Emirates has the advantages of high liquidity, sophisticated digital infrastructure, and regulatory assistance. The UAE faces early-stage finance gaps, whereas Tunisia faces market size and bureaucratic delays. The startup data illustrate the UAE's performance in comparison to Tunisia, reflecting differences in the business environment's advantages and disadvantages between the two countries.

High liquidity, a very favorable legal and regulatory environment, a highly developed digital infrastructure, and an unparalleled level of openness to foreign investment in the region—which also permits ongoing learning from the experiences of others—are all advantages for the United Arab Emirates. Conversely, Tunisia can rely on its youthful ambition, its startup ecosystem ranking among the best 20 ecosystems worldwide, and the promising Startup Act.

In terms of weaknesses, the UAE's primary issues include high operational expenses and a lack of early-stage finance, while Tunisia's are a small local market, constrained capital sources, and a slow pace of digitization.

In terms of opportunity, both ecosystems gain from advantageous geographic positions that link continents, giving access to local markets, as well as chances for hub expansion and specialization.

Threats in the United Arab Emirates include finance sources, the rentier economy's susceptibility to changes in the global economy, and the possibility of long-term sector saturation. The two biggest risks facing Tunisia are the delayed financial allocation and brain drain.

## **5. Comprehensive comparison between the UAE and Tunisia in supporting the startup ecosystem**

The following table provides a summary of the key distinctions between the two business environments for startups after comparing them using data, PESTEL, SWOT, and a review of the literature that addresses both experiences and the MENA region. Based on ten dimensions additionally to statistical indicators, this table will also indicate whether each dimension can be considered strength or weakness.

**Table 3. Comprehensive comparison between UAE and Tunisia supporting startups environments**

| <b>Dimension / Indicator</b>                    | <b>UAE</b>                                                                                                         | <b>S /W</b> | <b>Tunisia</b>                                                                                          | <b>S/W</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>1. National Strategy</b>                     | (Fifty-Year Initiative, Vision 2071) Ambitious supporting innovation and diversification.                          | Strength    | Startup Act as a pioneering initiative but with limited impact due to slow implementation.              | Weakness   |
| <b>2. Financing</b>                             | Venture capital and diversified funds, considerable substantial financing (USD 1.1B in 2024, USD 872M in Q1 2025). | Strength    | Traditional and limited financing, USD 400M in 2024 with difficulties in accessing early-stage funding. | Weakness   |
| <b>3. Digital Infrastructure</b>                | Highly advanced, integrated quick e-services.                                                                      | Strength    | Relatively late, digital transformation gap.                                                            | Weakness   |
| <b>4. Legal Framework</b>                       | Flexible and updated to context, free zones, golden residency.                                                     | Strength    | Startup Act incentives but slow implementation.                                                         | Weakness   |
| <b>5. Social Empowerment</b>                    | Strong programs for women and youth.                                                                               | Strength    | Limited-impact initiatives.                                                                             | Weakness   |
| <b>6. Education and Entrepreneurial Culture</b> | Entrepreneurship included in curricula, university support and partnerships.                                       | Strength    | Weak linkage between education and entrepreneurial market.                                              | Weakness   |
| <b>7. Bureaucratic Environment</b>              | Simplified, easy and fast procedures.                                                                              | Strength    | Complex bureaucracy and slow processes.                                                                 | Weakness   |
| <b>8. Institutional Integration</b>             | Close collaboration among entities (public-private).                                                               | Strength    | Weak coordination and fragmented support.                                                               | Weakness   |
| <b>9. Ease of Company Formation</b>             | Real formation within one day electronically.                                                                      | Strength    | Lengthy procedures, lack of full digitization.                                                          | Weakness   |

*The Role of Business Environment and Government Policies in Supporting the Growth of Startups:  
A Comparative Study Between the UAE And Tunisia in the MENA Region*

|                                             |                                                                                |          |                                                                                          |                       |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>10. Openness to Foreign Investment</b>   | Attractive environment for foreigners, ownership facilitation, tax exemptions. | Strength | Regulatory restrictions and ownership limits.                                            | Weakness              |
| <b>Number of Startups (until 2025)</b>      | More than 5600 (Q2 2024).                                                      | Strength | 1133 until 2024, projected to reach over 2000 in 2025.                                   | Relative Weakness     |
| <b>Newly Established Companies</b>          | 127 new companies in Q1 2025 (+135% over 2024).                                | Strength | —                                                                                        | —                     |
| <b>Geographical Distribution of Funding</b> | 96% of tech financing headquartered in Dubai.                                  | Strength | —                                                                                        | —                     |
| <b>Ecosystem Ranking</b>                    | Among the strongest Gulf ecosystems.                                           | Strength | Among top 20 globally.                                                                   | Strength              |
| <b>Ecosystem Economic Value (2022–2024)</b> | —                                                                              | —        | USD 113M.                                                                                | Relative Weakness     |
| <b>Funding by Sector (2024)</b>             | —                                                                              | —        | Fintech: USD 150M;<br>Agritech: USD 80M;<br>Green Tech: USD 70M;<br>Healthtech: USD 50M. | Strength in diversity |
| <b>Number of Scaleups</b>                   | —                                                                              | —        | More than 17 companies                                                                   | Relative Strength     |

**Source:** (Economy Middle East, 2024), (Economy Middle East, 2025), (The Times of India, 2024), (Radioml.tn, 2024), (StandardMarketInsights.com, 2024), (Tracxn, 2025) (Khaleej Times, 2025), (IAB Group, 2025), (African Manager, 2024), (Mind the Bridge, 2024).

By combining qualitative indicators (policies, legislation, infrastructure) with quantitative ones (number of companies, funding volumes, sector distribution), the table above provides a thorough and accurate representation of the structural differences between the startup ecosystems in the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia up to 2025. Most notably, the UAE has a completely integrated and adaptable entrepreneurial environment that is supported by a long-term strategic vision, cutting-edge digital infrastructure, and diverse funding that spans almost all phases of startup growth. The UAE is positioned as a regional hub for entrepreneurs, which makes it appealing both domestically and internationally. This is made possible by the simplification of government processes, the openness of foreign investment, and initiatives that empower women and youth.

Tunisia, on the other hand, has encouraging aspects, including the Startup Act, a ranking in the top 20 global ecosystems, and a diversity of sectoral funding (Fintech, Agritech, Green Tech, and Healthtech). However, the country still has problems with funding, digitization, and institutional integration, which slows the momentum of ecosystem growth.

At the statistical level, data show a significant gap in the number and volume of startups and funding between the two countries: Tunisia recorded USD 400 million in 2024, focused on Fintech and smart agriculture, while the UAE attracted USD 1.1 billion in 2024, with a 194% increase in Q1 2025. Despite Tunisia's progress in diversifying its supported sectors, startup growth is still significantly hampered by the lack of venture capital and the challenge of securing early-stage investment. The thorough comparison table shows a significant investment and startup number disparity between the two countries, which reflects variations in the ability to support fresh ventures and in the market readiness.

These findings suggest that by implementing a combination of measures that improve the competitiveness of respective entrepreneurial environments, MENA countries can gain from both experiences. This comparison is useful as a diagnostic tool for investors and policymakers in the MENA region because it goes beyond simply presenting statistics and includes an analysis of strengths and weaknesses. It clearly highlights where structural reforms are required and where countries might adopt effective approaches. At last, certain aspects can be shared despite differences, allowing for mutual learning.

## **6. Conclusion**

The ability of business environments and governmental regulations to support the growth and sustainability of startups varies in the Middle East and North Africa amid economic and digital transformations. This brings up the primary question that inspired this research: What are the similarities and differences in business environments and government policies related to startup growth and sustainability in the UAE and Tunisia? And, consequently, what lessons can improve business environments in the MENA region?

According to the comparative study, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates both recognize the value of startups as tools for job creation, economic growth, and program creation to encourage entrepreneurship through accelerators and incubators. Their funding sources, digital infrastructure, legislative frameworks, and targeted sectors' strategic orientations vary, nevertheless.

The results indicate that Tunisia might benefit from the UAE's experience in the following domains:

- **International Ecosystem Marketing:** Creating clear strategies to draw in international investors through promotional campaigns and international conferences like GITEX and STEP Conference;
- **Enabling Legal Framework:** Enacting laws that quicken company formation, protect intellectual property, and grant tax exemptions to entrepreneurs;
- **Integration between Incubators and Financing:** Systematically connecting incubator programs with venture capital funds so that projects receive funding immediately after successful incubation, with an emphasis on institutional integration between public and private entities;
- **High-Efficiency Digital Infrastructure:** Using government e-platforms and ultra-fast digital infrastructure to reduce bureaucracy;
- **Development of regional integration platforms :** that capitalize on existing ties with Africa and Europe for broader collaboration opportunities ;
- **Partnerships with the UAE for advanced training and professional development :** to enhance local skills.

On the other hand, even if some Tunisian-related components are context-specific and could not be entirely reproducible in the Gulf, the UAE might benefit from them:

- **Leveraging relatively inexpensive technical talent:** Tunisia provides highly qualified engineering and IT talent at competitive prices, allowing for flexibility in the stages of prototyping and development and also, leveraging low-cost digital innovation models to maintain and enhance technological leadership;
- **Focus on social and solidarity economy:** Initiatives supporting local development (smart agriculture, creative traditional industries) are accepted by the public and receive support from international donors, whereas in the Gulf, this is not as important, but still it is a challenge;

**Integration with African markets:** Tunisia's geographic location makes it an easy way to access francophone African markets, which may be less strategically significant to the United Arab Emirates. But the UAE may benefit from regional collaboration platforms by building on its global market openness for greater cross-border integration.

In order to boost local innovative diversity and mitigate potential risks, the UAE should also think about increasing early-stage (Seed) support. These risks include:

- **Widening the gap between elite and new entrepreneurs:** Funding aimed at well-established market players may limit the competitiveness of new entrepreneurs, weakening the dynamism of the entire ecosystem;
  - **Loss of innovation diversity:** Emphasizing mature-stage businesses may limit the chances for innovative ideas from small teams;
  - **Over-reliance on imported innovation:** If early-stage support is lacking, the UAE may be more likely to import pre-made companies from overseas rather than creating local ideas from the ground up, putting the country at risk of business migration during times of crisis.
- Regarding the research hypotheses:

**H1: The growth of startups is positively impacted by the presence of a flexible and technologically advanced business environment.** Accepted because UAE's experience shows that success depends on the integration of funding, legal framework, and digital infrastructure, whereas Tunisia's lack of these elements (funding and digital gaps especially) slowed growth.

**H2: The success and sustainability of entrepreneurship are greatly influenced by supportive government policies, such as financial and legal incentives.** Accepted because Tunisia's experience shows that without enabling finance and laws, having highly skilled human capital is not enough to support rapid startup growth.

**H3: The efficacy of entrepreneurship policies varies between the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia due to differences in their political and economic environments.** Accepted as we acknowledged that in order for the UAE model to be effective in Tunisia, it must be modified, and vice versa, since effective models from other countries cannot be entirely replicated without local adaptation.

**H4: Analytical tools like PESTEL and SWOT are useful for identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats affecting the startup environment in both the UAE and Tunisia.** Accepted because these tools, indeed, helped identifying characteristics of both business environments and emphasized regional integration to improve startup development and sustainability in MENA, highlighting similarities and differences as well as potential for mutual learning.

In account of the above, the following suggestions are made for MENA countries:

1. Creating startup-supporting policies that integrate improved digital infrastructure, broader finance sources, and legislative reforms;
2. Enabling women and youth to promote sustainable development in the digital economy by strengthening entrepreneurial education and connecting it to universities and innovation hubs;
3. Leveraging local advantages, including strategic geographic locations or high-quality human capital, to gain a competitive advantage over competitors;
4. Fostering early-stage innovation to diversify ideas and lessen dependency on imported innovation;
5. Establishing regional forums for collaboration to share knowledge and connect entrepreneurs with international investors and markets;
6. Adapting successful models locally instead of completely replicating them.

*In fine*, the study demonstrates that enhancing business environments in the MENA region requires a combination of investment in local specificities that bolster strengths, as seen in Tunisia, and lessons learned from leading experiences, such as the UAE. And in order to ensure sustainable growth and economic development for countries across the MENA region, this approach suggests the creation of ecosystems capable of fostering local innovation and extending it to regional and international markets.

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*The Role of Business Environment and Government Policies in Supporting the Growth of Startups:  
A Comparative Study Between the UAE And Tunisia in the MENA Region*

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