



# Interview

*Mohammad Gawdat is Vice President for Emerging Markets at Google. James Lewis caught up with him at the IBA's Annual Conference in Dubai.*

## JAMES LEWIS:

How does Google foresee the development of the internet in terms of search and smartphone technology in the regions that you oversee [Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle-East and Africa]?

## MOHAMMAD GAWDAT:

Emerging markets are, I think, the happening place. So, what you saw happening on the internet in the early 2000s and the late 1990s in the West, Western Europe and the US and so on is now at its peak in emerging markets globally.

If you take a region like the Middle East, for example, the users are growing at 20 per cent still year over year; online advertising is literally exploding; and penetration of mobile devices is actually at its break-out point. So, I think in the Middle East now, we have more than 31 million devices, which is almost as much as the UK. But the point is that as a penetration of the population, this is around ten per cent. So, if you just

take a normal progression of that into 40 per cent penetration, for example, which is happening sooner or later, you have four-fold growth.

This is not particular to the Middle East. It's also available in Africa, and all emerging markets around the world. In India, definitely the growth of usage of the internet is happening much faster now in the emerging market parts of the world.

## JL:

Yours is an enormous role when you talk about emerging markets. Can you just refine that for us a little bit? Is it global or is it circumscribed by a particular region?

## MG:

I do a few things. I manage the P and L of the business in what we call CEEMEA – Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa. But I also look at the global emerging markets strategy. So, from a planning point of view, I try to present a unified view of emerging markets to Google.

## JL:

How do you do that – take a unified view – when you're talking about, you know, such diverse countries as Lithuania, Liberia, Lebanon, for example, with different business cultures, governments and ways of doing business?

## MG:

Yes, it's quite interesting. As humans, we're very different in so many ways, but we're very similar in many ways. And we're very similar in the way we search. We're very similar in the way we watch video online; we're very similar in the way we seek information. And I think there is a revolution happening around the internet, and a big part of it is really to get that revolution to people. So, a big part of it is, 'Where do you focus first?'

So, if you take, say, 50 languages that you're trying to cover, in a few hundred domains, and tens if not hundreds of Google offerings and products, with a limited number



of engineers that can work on it: regardless of how many you can put in it, it's still limited for the size of the task. Then you basically try and prioritise and find ways to scale; find ways maybe to say, 'Look, if you do Polish and Czech, there are similarities maybe in the economy and usage patterns and so on'. If you do them together, you're probably able to move a little faster – Czech, and Slovak, and so on and so forth.

For Google, we believe that the Google mission is not fully realised in that part of the world yet, which makes things a little clearer, if you want. So, we don't believe that we have organised all of the world's information yet, especially in that part of the world. We definitely have not made it universally accessible for a billion Africans, for example, who don't have access to the internet. So, when you frame it within that mindset, it becomes really easy to understand where to go.

**JL:**

How come you're based in Dublin?

**MG:**

I'm not based in Dublin; I'm based in Dubai. Emirates Airlines, rather. So, I'm travelling all the time. With technology, it becomes quite interesting actually how we run the business. So, it's quite irrelevant, as a matter of fact, where I wake up today.

**JL:**

You travel an awful lot?

**MG:**

Yes, but I will still have quite a few video conferences with Russia, with Latin America and Europe and so on and so forth. And because we live in that cyber world, if you want, Google pretty much lives in the internet.

**JL:**

Right. But its headquarters are Dublin?

**MG:**

We don't think of it as headquarters as a matter of fact at all. We do not have that concept. Anyone, anywhere can do a good job. As a matter of fact, we are very, very encouraging of having people from across the world work on problems that go across the world.

**JL:**

Just focusing on the Middle East a little bit, what have been the regulatory challenges for Google establishing and growing in the Middle East?

**MG:**

I get that question a lot as a matter of fact. It's between two extremes. Actually, most of the time it's easy. The Middle Eastern governments tend to take things in their own hands in a way. So in a way, you would find that content that is not appropriate for the culture of Saudi Arabia or the religion and so on will be proxied by the Saudi regulatory authority; they will not ask Google to censor it. Which I think is something that we appreciate. I mean, they definitely need to respect their own culture and their own laws, but we also respect our need to do a good job in organising important information.

**JL:**

So, it's not censored by Google; it would be censored by the national authorities?

**MG:**

Yes. For example, in the UAE, if you search for something that's

inappropriate for the culture, Google will show you the result, but when you click on it, you will get a proxy that basically says, 'This is not appropriate for our culture'.

**JL:**

Is Google comfortable with that, or is that something you're trying to change going forward?

**MG:**

We don't manage the content of the world. We don't own the content. Our job is to organise it, as I said. Our mission is to basically say, 'Here is the information.' On the other hand, please understand that the world is a very complex place for one company to understand. And by definition, you have to imagine that certain cultures will not want to see certain things. You know, there was a case a few years ago around ridiculing *Atatürk*, for example, in Turkey. Something considered wrong by the culture, not by the government. Right?

And for Google to really learn all of this, what we do is we rely on the wisdom of the crowds and we provide the information as we see it. In respect of local laws and regulations, we would love to see a totally open internet, but we acknowledge that we don't know everything. So, it's also good for people to find an internet that fits their own needs.

**JL:**

One of the biggest challenges, I would imagine, is increasing the level of Arabic content. Five per cent of the world's population speak Arabic, and yet one per cent of the content online is in Arabic. There's a disparity there and there's a gap to be filled. How do you go about it, particularly in the context of what you've just said?

**MG:**

More than one per cent now; much, much better than five years ago when I started with Google. I'm happy to say that. Yet definitely still a gap.

**JL:**

Sure.

**MG:**

And if you do things algorithmically and mathematically like we do in Google, you would say, 'Look, I can try to increase all content or I can try to increase useful content.' I can give you many examples on that.

**JL:**

That's going beyond algorithms though, isn't it? That's editorial judgment and that's prioritising.

**MG:**

No, not to us. To us, everything's algorithmic. So, if a million people click on an article...

**JL:**

So, it's a numbers game?

**MG:**

Yes. If a million people click on an article and find it useful by referring it to somebody else or coming back or spending time on it and so on and so forth, you basically understand that this is something that's interesting for the community.

**JL:**

Is that possible in a context as you alluded to in Saudi or Turkey, where they can click on it but it won't be accessible?

**MG:**

Unfortunately, that's part of the problem, of course. Once again, a totally free internet is something that is, I think, going to happen; it's something that we more and more would like to see. At the end of the day, with the Arab world, I think the problem is slightly different. Arabs really started to come online in masses in Web 2.0. So, you could

see that penetration of the internet started to accelerate, going to the hockey stick part of the chart – 2004 and onwards.

The problem is that the usage patterns of those users are pretty much in the entertainment and social space, much more than they are in the information and commerce space. So, it's not something that you can ignore. Even in a country like the UAE, which is highly advanced and developed in most infrastructures, and definitely highly advanced in terms of internet penetration. Commercial use of the web is definitely comparable to the UK, even though internet penetration is higher.

Now, the challenge really is, 'How do you give users the ability to use the web in a way that makes their life better, not only more entertained?' Right?

**JL:**

So, you're talking about social, cultural, political kinds of things?

**MG:**

Yes. So, for example, how much of the literature is available online, how much of 'how to' videos are available on YouTube versus funny videos? So, we take that as a very interesting challenge.

Let me give you a few examples. Since the Egyptian revolution, for example, believing in freedom of expression and civic engagement, we started to put in place a few initiatives that we think are really valuable for useful content. One of them was 'Egypt Talks', which basically enables users to post their questions to politicians and decision-makers and allow a dialogue.

**JL:**

What was the take-up of that?

**MG:**

It's actually the second highest civic engagement platform ever on YouTube, following only Obama's 'Ask the President' channel. Which is very, very significant because it gives you a very strong signal that, for the

Arabs of the world, if you give them the chance to basically express their views and ask their questions, they engage in a very civilised way.

**JL:**

So, what you're doing there is you're answering my next question really, which is regarding Google's contribution to the Middle East as a whole. How would you describe Google's contribution to the Arab Spring?

**MG:**

I don't know if contribution is the right word. I can tell you that I think Google's mission has definitely been a very valuable thing for the region. So, we tend to believe that the more information you get, the more informed and hopefully correct your decision will be.

As a company, we acknowledge and understand that we don't know what the right choice is. We do not know, as a company, if it's better for Egypt to live without Mubarak or with Mubarak. We don't make those decisions, but we understand that Egyptians can make the best, informed decision if all information is available.

So, I think what we've done in the situation across the Arab Spring was not anything that we did not do in the rest of the world. It's just that we stood by our values. We said, 'Look, if you disconnect the internet, we'll try to find a way to get people information.' If you block reporters, like what happened during the Egyptian revolution, we will try to get people to post their videos on YouTube as a way of expressing their views. And I think this is really the type of freedom and democracy that really the Arab nations, the Arab people are starting to feel and live.

This is an edited version of a longer interview. To view it in full, and for more coverage of the Dubai conference, go to [www.ibanet.org](http://www.ibanet.org).