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FROM SALES TO CEO: AN INTERVIEW WITH
THE ARAB 'GODMOTHER' OF FASHION RETAIL
ASIL ATTAR

Honoured on lists of top business leaders year after year, Iraqi-British retail veteran Asil Attar has had an illustrious career, working with some of the biggest names in fashion and becoming the first female CEO of multiple MENA powerhouses.

BY DALIA AWAD - 26 Jun 2020

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Named by *Forbes Middle East* as one of the Top 50 International CEOs from the Arab Region in 2019, British-Iraqi Asil Attar has certainly left her mark on the business world. The distinction came off the back of Attar also featuring in the publication's Top 100 Influential Arab Women list a year prior, while *Arabian Business* has also recognised her as one of the 30 Most Influential Women in the Arab World, the Top Female CEO in Kuwait and one of the 100 Influential People Helping Shape the Emirates. A powerhouse in the retail and luxury retail industries, both across the GCC area and the UK, Attar has spent over 30 years helping bring brands to the top of their game. And with that, she's risen through the ranks and smashed some glass ceilings on the way. In fact, Attar has been the first female CEO at not one, not two, but *three* huge Middle Eastern retail groups.

"Let me tell you something. The road was paved with setbacks, rejections, frustrations, failures, you name it," she says. "But it was also filled with learning, success, the ability to change people's lives and affect positive change. And that's why it's called a *wealth* of experience." Today, Attar spends her time consulting the crème-de-la-crème of the fashion world, running her own emerging designer fashion retail concept, hosting her own digital business talk show and masterclasses, and empowering and nurturing young talent, with a special focus on female entrepreneurship.

The British-Iraqi business leader, who was born in Iraq and grew up between the UK and the USA, got an early start in her career thanks to academic success. She graduated from high school at just 15 years old, and university at 19 with a BA in interior design. "I was desperate to join the real world," she remembers.

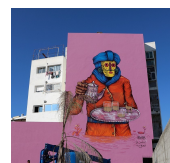
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“ *I have never been a typical CEO. This new era will have everyone thinking differently. But, for me, it is always how I've thought and acted.* ”

“I originally had my own business in interior design and was always entrepreneurial. I then decided that I needed to learn more about business, branding and retail and there was no better place to join than Harrods,” she says, explaining that the iconic luxury department store is regarded as the benchmark for luxury retail and brand experiences. Starting out as a salesperson on the shopfloor, Attar worked her way up the ranks to a buyer position, before moving through a succession of senior roles at some of the best-known names in British fashion, including Whistles, Karen Millen and Jigsaw.

“Throughout my career I have held different and diverse roles across the A-Z of retailing, which allowed me to learn everything about the business of fashion and brands, from buying and merchandising to marketing, retail, manufacturing, brand creation, turnaround and restructure,” explains Attar, who moved from the UK to the GCC to take on the General Manager role for Kuwait's Al Tayer Insignia Group (which owns and operates retail brands including Harvey Nichols, Bloomingdales, Armani and more in the region).

From there she moved to Majid Al Futtaim Fashion as CEO, overseeing hundreds of retail stores and international brands in the region, before taking on yet another fashion retail CEO position at Kuwait's AlYasra, the operator of the likes of Jimmy Choo, Maxmara and Fossil. Attar would soon break boundaries once more at Damas Jewellery, taking the helm as their first female CEO in their 100+ year history. Between all these demanding roles, Attar somehow managed to launch her own consultancy, an emerging fashion designer platform, SALT (which stands for Supporting All Local Talent), as well as a talk show and podcast, Turban Thinker, and has even launched her own masterclass, entitled *Shopfloor to CEO*.



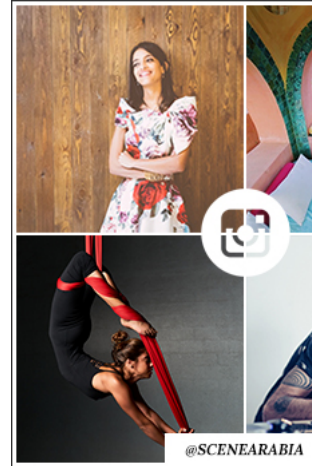
Attar attributes her success to a unique upbringing. Her mother passed down her love for fashion and design (“When I was ten years old, she gave me a handful of books, and little did she know they would inspire me forever to be part of the world of fashion... I would lose myself for hours and play dress up in her clothes,”) and made sure she grew up speaking, reading and writing Arabic fluently, staying connected to her heritage even though they lived in the UK and US.

Her father was a pioneer in solar energy engineering, selected to study and research at some of the world's most prestigious universities, but never forgetting where he came from (“He taught us to be outspoken if something was not just or fair, and always do the right thing. He changed so many people's lives, he supported so many families in Iraq and all over the world, giving, giving, giving”). With these forces shaping her early life – an appreciation for beauty and creativity from her mother's side, and science and social good on her father's side – it's perhaps no surprise that Attar sees her professional career as an extension of that amalgamation.

“I am a hybrid,” she says affirmatively. “Part creative, part commercial. So the first part of my career was focused on the creative side, as a buyer, creative director, buying director, brand director, and then the latter half as a senior executive and CEO for the last 14 years. I have now been in the industry for almost 30 years, and I stayed in this business because it is dynamic, inspiring, challenging and enables you to meet many inspirational people.”



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“ We need to be looking at taking the many amazing local brands internationally and investing to nurture their potential. ”

A seasoned retail pro, Attar has seen a shift in the industry in the MENA region unfold over the last few years. “There was a time when an influx of international brands entered the market, through franchise and joint venture agreements with large retail groups. However, fast forward, unfortunately many of these brands now manage the region directly and have renegotiated their partner terms. This has been frustrating for many groups as they now do not have a controlling right and all the hard work and efforts that they took to establish these brands has now gone back to the brand principal,” she explains. But this blow to the retail industry also presents an opportunity. “This should – I hope – get the groups to now focus inwards on developing their own brands and organic businesses, enabling their local economy to thrive and not depend on the foreign brands only. We need to be looking at taking the many amazing local brands internationally and investing to nurture their potential.”

Practicing what she preaches, Asil Attar’s **SALT** platform is designed to provide a space for emerging designers to develop and grow, and provides a marketing and e-commerce platform for them. “SALT retails its own label brands alongside scouting coveted emerging designers globally. SALT’s collections focus on modest fashion targeting the GCC, India, South East Asia, Europe and potentially the US market,” she explains, adding that successful Arab designers Ayesha Ramadan, Hussein Bazzaza and Effa El Dabbagh are among some of her mentees showcased on SALT.

This focus on a new generation of innovative designers, who do things a little differently, fits in with another trend in the fashion retail industry, which Attar points out. “COVID-19 has made millions of people stop and think about their focus and priorities, and fast fashion will no longer rule,” she explains. “This is a global trend and will affect the entire fashion industry: designers will move towards seasonless collections and slow fashion. I hope that brands will seriously consider that ethical sourcing and sustainable fashion genuinely must lead the way. Consumers will continue to look for meaningful brands with storytelling and a journey to share, that resonate around values and humanity. They will want to see the entire logistics and supply chain cycle, how products are made and by whom.”



Witnessing, predicting and being a part of the changing landscape of global retail, the fashion industry and consumer behaviour in an epic 30-year career has shaped Attar into a leading Arab voice in the ecosystem, leading her – quite naturally – to produce her own expert content. “My journey has allowed me to meet some of the most inspiring creatives, artists, designers, industry shapers and businessmen and women,” she explains about what drove her to create **Turban Thinker**, a video and audio platform which hosts interviews, debates and personal essays/talks surrounding fashion and related creative industries. “Prior to COVID-19, the concept was filmed, face-to-face interviews and discussions, however I launched podcasts as I did not want to lose time and felt it was important to inspire others, especially now.”

As many of us are working from home with more time on their hands, and others are unfortunately having to look for new career options, Attar has also seen this period of uncertainty as an opportunity to share her wealth of experience with those looking to break into the fashion or retail industries, or even budding entrepreneurs who can benefit from learning the ins and outs of marketing, sales and building a brand. “Over many years, people have asked me to do a **masterclass of all of my experience** especially because of my varied career. I have chosen to do this *now* as I feel, more than ever, that this is the right time. The world is going to change, though it feels like it has ground to a halt. It has also enabled many to rethink their work, their strategies, their passions, their capabilities. One thing that is certain is that things will change. How you

manage a business, launch a brand, gain customers and gain or maintain market share, stay ahead of the game... That is all going to change," she says.

"I have never been a typical CEO, nor have I conformed to the typical approach. This new era will have everyone thinking differently. But, for me, it is always how I've thought and acted."

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