

The empire that Kuwaiti retail pioneer Abdulaziz Mohammed Al-Shaya built

Sun, 2020-12-06 22:22

LONDON: Abdulaziz Mohammed Al-Shaya, widely regarded as a titan of Kuwait's economic and commercial renaissance, has died at the age of 94, local media reported on Saturday. He leaves behind a legacy that underpins the emirate's reputation as the Gulf's retail industry pioneer.

Many of those paying tributes to Al-Shaya have described him as a trailblazer on the basis of the notable successes he notched up early in his career. He is credited with founding the National Bank of Kuwait, the Avenues Mall Complex and the Oberoi Madina in Saudi Arabia, as well as co-founding the Kuwaiti Red Crescent Society.

One of the early feathers in his cap was his role in opening Kuwait's Sheraton Hotel in 1966 – the firm's first managed hotel outside the US. Since then, his company, which his grandfather founded in the 1890s, has built an extensive portfolio of stores, cafes, restaurants and leisure destinations, real estate, trading and investments and car dealerships for Mazda and Peugeot.

Opening its first international franchise business in 1983, the group today manages more than 70 brands across 2,800 stores in the Middle East, North Africa, Russia, Turkey and Europe, employing 60,000 people, of which 45,000 are in the Middle East.

As a result of his legendary business acumen, the Alshaya Group has become one of the top brand franchise operators in the world, as well as one of the region's biggest retail conglomerates, counting The Body Shop, Starbucks, H&M, Mothercare, Debenhams, Victoria's Secret, P.F. Chang's, The Cheesecake Factory, KidZania, Le Pain Quotidien, Shake Shack, American Eagle Outfitters, Pottery Barn and Boots among its roster of well-known brands.



In 2017, the firm acquired a stake in the Emirati e-commerce platform Noon to retail its wide selection of fashion, health, beauty, home and lifestyle brands in the digital marketplace.

Al-Shaya's philanthropic instincts were reflected in the way the firm uses its profits to support charitable causes. In July this year, it donated more than 115,000 new clothing items worth around \$2 million to families supported by the Kuwaiti Red Crescent Society, and in August teamed up with the Starbucks Foundation to donate \$200,000 to the Lebanon disaster relief effort.

Through its membership of the World Economic Forum's Regional Action Group for the Middle East and North Africa (RAG MENA), the Alshaya Group joined governments, businesses and civil society leaders in September to endorse the Principles of Stakeholder Capitalism for the Middle East and North Africa, which are designed to inform an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery for the region from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Al-Shaya, or Abu Hamad as he was affectionately known, spent some of his formative years in India, where he was sent by his father in 1939 at the age of 12 to learn English. A year later he enrolled for a two-year secondary education at Saint Joseph School in Bombay (now Mumbai).

He would return to India again as a fresh-faced young businessman to seek opportunities in Bombay, where he would remain until 1952 following India's independence and at the onset of Kuwait's oil boom. Fond memories of that time were a driver of the warm economic relations he helped forge between India and Kuwait years later.

Global Brands held by Alshaya Group

- The Body Shop
- Starbucks
- H&M
- Mothercare
- Debenhams
- Victoria's Secret
- P.F. Chang's
- The Cheesecake Factory
- KidZania
- Le Pain Quotidien
- Shake Shack
- American Eagle Outfitters
- Pottery Barn
- Boots

The depth of those ties was summed up by Sibi George, the Indian ambassador to Kuwait, in a tweet. "My sincere and heartfelt condolences on the sad demise of Mr. Abdulaziz Mohammed Hamoud Al-Shaya, chairman of Alshaya Group. Our thoughts are with his family and friends. We pray for the departed soul; may his soul rest in eternal peace," he wrote.

Al-Shaya returned to Kuwait as the Kingdom was in the throes of a sweeping modernization, underwritten by the world's sixth largest oil reserves. Today, the Kuwaiti dinar is the highest valued currency in the world.

Kuwaitis used their new-found oil wealth to splurge on high-street and boutique shopping brands imported from the West and around the world, making the emirate one of the top destinations for retail and entertainment in the region. Nowadays, glittering malls, supercar dealerships and trendy night spots bustle with affluent locals and expatriates.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, confronted the group with a painful reality check. In a statement to employees in April, the acting chief executive of Alshaya's retail arm, John Hadden, said the firm had seen revenue plummet by 95 percent, as the pandemic closed nearly all of its stores.



“Together with the rest of the world we all face a common crisis,” Hadden said at the time. “In just a few weeks everything we know has changed, the spread of COVID-19 has disrupted countries and communities around the globe, the impact on the global economy has been catastrophic.”

Although lockdown measures have since been relaxed to help ease the pressure on businesses and employees, it has come too late for some brands.

Famous department stores imported from Europe, which were already struggling in the age of online shopping and cheap competition, suffered when their sales collapsed as lockdown measures forced customers to remain indoors.

For Alshaya Group franchises from the UK, such as fashion conglomerate Arcadia and department store giant Debenhams, the pandemic was the last straw.

Debenhams, which was established in 1773, announced earlier this month it was to start liquidating proceedings, putting at risk another 12,000 retail jobs in the UK. The firm operates 124 stores in Britain and is currently seeking a buyer for the 242-year-old brand as part of the formal liquidation process.

“Debenhams were already on very shaky ground prior to the coronavirus outbreak, and 2020 is unfortunately looking like its break year,” Nigel Frith, a senior market analyst, told Fashion United. “COVID-19 has brought all the retailer’s problems to head a little earlier than expected.”



The firm had only recently bounced back from going into administration in early 2019. In September of that year it appeared to be expanding, opening two new stores in partnership with Alshaya in the Middle East. It opened its first outlets in Oman and capped off 29 stores in the UAE.

Arcadia, which owns popular British high street brands such as Topshop, Topman, Dorothy Perkins, Wallis, Miss Selfridge, Evans, Burton and Outfit, and which employs 13,000 people, has also said it is to go into administration, throwing the future of its Middle East stores into question.

Alshaya Group insisted earlier this month that its Debenhams and Arcadia stores in the Middle East will continue to operate as normal, despite the financial challenges announced by the British retailers.

The builder’s legacy, though, is secure. Al-Shaya has bequeathed a retail empire like no other in the Middle East. Economic turmoil may be accelerating the move to online shopping and forcing customers to tighten their belts across the region for now. But once the coronavirus pandemic storm passes, behemoths such as Alshaya will likely get another opportunity to reinvent themselves and thrive in a new age of retail commerce.

• *Twitter: @RobertPEdwards*







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Pandemic teaches Kuwait's fitness industry a healthy business lesson
A Kuwaiti NGO fights food waste while feeding needy households

[Tunisia extends night-time curfew until end of year](#)

Author:

AFP

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1607283604471403900

Sun, 2020-12-06 17:55

TUNIS: Tunisia on Sunday extended a night-time curfew until the end of the year in a bid to tackle spiking novel coronavirus cases, amid growing discontent and anti-government protests in the North African country. Following a meeting of its anti-coronavirus taskforce, the government decided to "maintain the curfew from 8:00 pm (1900 GMT) until 5:00 am in all governorates, every day of the week," the health ministry said in a statement on Facebook.

Under the new measures, which take effect on Monday, masks "remain mandatory in all open spaces", the statement said, adding that private parties will be allowed with up to 30 people.

Cafes may remain open until 7:00 pm but must remove their chairs from 4:00 pm onwards, while shisha pipes remain banned in all public spaces, it added. The statement did not mention a previous ban on travel between governorates. Sunday's decision follows a series of angry protests to demand better public services, jobs and help from the state in the face of an economic crisis, days ahead of the 10th anniversary of Tunisia's uprising demanding political freedom and jobs.

Doctors demonstrated this week to demand the resignation of the health minister, after a young medic died in a hospital lift accident.

Badreddedine Aloui, 27, plunged to his death Thursday after the lift doors opened but with no elevator in place, witnesses interviewed by local media said.

Hundreds of doctors, health workers and medical students gathered in front of the health ministry in the capital Tunis on Friday, demanding the health minister and other officials be sacked.

On Sunday, a group of medical unions called for a shutdown of all non-emergency medical services and a "national day of rage" on Tuesday in protest at his death.

Tunisia had managed to keep its coronavirus outbreak largely contained early on, but cases have soared since it opened its borders in June, with hospital officials warning they are struggling to cope.

The country of 11 million has officially registered over 100,000 cases of the Covid-19 illness and more than 3,500 deaths.

The pandemic has battered the country's economy, with GDP set to shrink by seven percent in 2020, according to International Monetary Fund projections.



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Tunisia-Libya border reopens after seven months
French minister holds Tunisia talks on return of extremists

[Kuwaitis vote in first parliamentary election since accession of new emir](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-12-06 01:50

JEDDAH: Kuwaitis voted in parliamentary elections on Saturday for the first time since Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah became emir in September.

More than 300 candidates, including 29 women, contested 50 seats in the Gulf's oldest and most outspoken assembly with legislative powers. Results are expected on Sunday.

Campaigning took place mostly on social media and local TV channels because of COVID-19 restrictions. Voters wore masks and gloves, and had their temperature taken before entering polling stations where election officials stood behind glass barriers.

Waiting areas with chairs at least 2 meters apart were set up in the playgrounds of some schools serving as polling stations, the Interior Ministry said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Sabah toured polling stations and said he was happy with voter turnout and health measures.

He cautioned Kuwaitis against gathering to celebrate when the results are announced.

The main campaign themes included promises to fight corruption and address youth employment, along with debates over freedom of expression, housing, education and the issue of the stateless "bidoon" minority.

BACKGROUND

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"Kuwait needs development. The streets are broken and there is no development and no economy ... and coronavirus has affected everything in every way," said Ibrahim, a government employee, after voting in Kuwait City.

Hoda Al-Hassan, who voted in the Al-Rawda area of the city, said: "We want change, new blood, to encourage the youth. I also hope that the parliament will resolve the issue of the bidoon and that of the demographic imbalance."

Yousef Ahmed Safar, who voted in Al-Nazha, also hoped for reform.

"We want to improve our situation, including in employment and housing, as well as the issue of combatting corruption," he said.

Kuwait's economy, which is worth nearly \$140 billion, is facing a deficit of \$46 billion this year. A government priority is to overcome parliamentary gridlock on legislation that would allow Kuwait to tap international debt markets.

Kuwaiti analyst Mohammed Al-Dawsari said the emirate may witness a struggle between the new national assembly and the government over economic legislation.

"The people were not satisfied with the performance of the previous parliament, and there are many who are calling for a comprehensive reconciliation between the government and the opposition," he said.



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Kuwait parliamentary race kicks off under shadow of pandemic
Emir of Kuwait thanks King Salman for efforts to resolve Gulf dispute

[Massive funeral for slain Palestinian teenager](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-05 23:57

RAMALLAH: Hundreds of Palestinians attended the funeral on Saturday of a teenager killed in clashes with the Israeli army, defying a curfew imposed on the occupied West Bank to stem the coronavirus.

Ali Ayman Nasr Abu Aliya, 13, died on Friday after he was “shot with live rounds in the stomach” during clashes in the village of Mughayir, north of Ramallah, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

The boy, whose death drew Palestinian condemnation and was deplored by the UN and the EU, was hit during a protest against the construction of a Jewish

settlement.

A funeral cortege joined by hundreds of mourners took the body from a hospital in Ramallah to Mughayir where Abu Aliya was buried. His body, draped in the Palestinian flag and a traditional keffiyeh headscarf, was carried shoulder high by mourners, who also waved yellow flags of the Fatah movement of President Mahmoud Abbas.

The mourners defied a weekend curfew imposed by Palestinian authorities to stem the rise in coronavirus cases to pay their respects.

The West Bank has recorded 71,703 Covid-19 infections, including 678 deaths, since the first cases emerged earlier this year.

The EU delegation to the Palestinians on Saturday denounced the “shocking” killing of Abu Aliya in a tweet.

“This shocking incident must be swiftly and fully investigated by the Israeli authorities in order to bring the perpetrators to justice,” it said.

“How many more Palestinian children will be subject to the excessive use of lethal force by the Israeli security forces?”

UN Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov said on Friday he was “appalled by the killing” and also called on Israel to investigate the death of Abu Aliya calling it an “unacceptable incident.”

The Israeli army denied live rounds were used during Friday’s protest and clashes, but said dozens of protesters had thrown rocks at security forces.

The Palestinian Authority condemned “the cold-blooded murder” describing it as “the latest episode in Israel’s crimes against the Palestinian people.”

The Palestinian foreign ministry said on Friday it will file legal proceedings against Israel at the International Criminal Court over Abu Alya’s fatal shooting, the Palestinians’ Wafa news agency said.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967. Excluding annexed east Jerusalem, more than 450,000 Israelis live in settlements in the territory, which is home to more than 2.8 million Palestinians.



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Top diplomats from Jordan and Israel hold rare meeting on Palestine issue
Israeli defense minister calls on Palestinians to return to negotiations

[IISS Manama Dialogue examines Middle East's pressing security challenges](#)

Sat, 2020-12-05 23:24

LONDON: COVID-19's impact on governance, multilateralism and the rules-based global order topped the agenda on day one of the 16th annual Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, organized by the UK-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

Although the conference, running from Dec. 4-6, is exploring the broader themes of Middle East conflict and security, the strategic and geo-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic predictably dominated Saturday's discussions.

"This year we bore witness to a cooperation deficit in international affairs," said John Chipman, IISS director-general and chief executive, opening the conference, whose focus this year is on the themes of war, power and rules.

"We now swing perilously on the hinge between an old rules-based order that seems poorly maintained for contemporary purposes, and a new order that is yet to be well engineered and strategically designed."

Headlining Saturday's morning session, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan called 2020 an "unprecedented" year, with "challenges posed by a pandemic that is leaving a lasting mark both of state resilience and multilateral cooperation."



Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan addresses the Manama Dialogue security conference in the Bahraini capital, on December 5, 2020. (AFP)

It has also been a year of positive lessons, however, as “through collective action we have shown how the international community can come together during times of crisis,” he said.

Prince Faisal outlined Riyadh’s “whole-of-government approach” to tackling the pandemic, including an allocation of SR 47 billion (\$12.53 billion) for bolstering the Saudi health system; heavy investment in mass testing and contact tracing; and economic interventions to reduce interest rates, protect private-sector financing and banking liquidity, and ease tax burdens.

He also highlighted the role Saudi Arabia has played through its presidency of the G20 international forum, which has committed \$11 trillion in economic stimulus, pledged over \$21 billion to the fight against the pandemic, and offered debt relief to developing countries totaling \$14 billion.

“Given the multiple prospects of an effective vaccine, the Kingdom seeks to work with international partners towards ensuring a fair and speedy distribution of the vaccine globally, and especially to countries most in need,” he said.

Seconding Prince Faisal’s view, Kang Kyung-wha, South Korea’s foreign minister, identified the pressing need for closer cooperation as the coronavirus pandemic’s key lesson.

“Global governance was already at a low point when COVID-19 struck, with trust in multilateralism and the rules-based international order already

greatly eroded,” she said.

“COVID-19 is indeed a humble reminder of our interconnectedness and our shared vulnerability, and thus the critical importance of global solidarity and international cooperation.”



German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (R) and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan arrive for a joint press conference in Berlin, on August 19, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Kang urged countries to support each other in strengthening emergency health capabilities and guaranteeing equitable access to supplies, treatments and vaccines. More specifically, she cited the need for strengthening the global health architecture centered around the World Health Organization (WHO), upgrading health regulations, and motivating the UN to streamline efforts against future pandemics.

This must go hand in hand with economic cooperation ranging from expansionary budgets and stimulus packages to normalization of cross-border movement of peoples, Kang said.

Echoing the sentiments of his fellow panelists, Miguel Berger, Germany’s state secretary for the federal foreign office, described COVID-19 as the “biggest test of our generation” and “the most serious challenge” for the multilateral system.

“The erosion of global governance started even before the COVID-19 crisis,” he said. “The reason is not that multilateralism is failing but that some of us are failing to support multilateralism.”

Berger said he is especially proud of Germany's role in the quest to find a vaccine, hailing the achievements of BioNTech, which worked alongside the American pharmaceutical giant Pfizer to create the world's first licensed shot.

"The hope is that we are going to have very effective vaccines soon available as a very important first step," said Berger. "Now we must arrange a fair and even distribution. ... This will be a crucial test in our view for multilateralism."

Berger commended Saudi Arabia "for leading the G20 countries through this very difficult crisis with strong commitment and leadership."

FASTFACT

IISS

* Provides objective information on military, geopolitical and geo-economic developments that could lead to conflict.

"The Riyadh summit has taken very important decisions in order to counter the effects of this crisis," he said, referring to the virtual leaders' conference held last month.

One of the most interesting questions that emerged during the discussion was the widespread hesitance surrounding the vaccine candidates, including in the Middle East, which potentially makes the case for compulsory immunization.

"I think it is always better to give the choice to the people but you then need to provide the facts and the evidence that enables that choice," said Kang, highlighting the role of trust in crisis management.

Referring to the phenomenon of facts, rumors and fears mixing and dispersing, she said: "Infodemics are much more dangerous than pandemics. Because in infodemics, when you lose the importance of facts and evidence, you don't have any anchor to decide which direction to go."

"Fake news, misinformation, disinformation ... are something that responsible leaders really need to get our minds wrapped around."



Russian and Turkish soldiers walk together while clad in surgical masks due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic during a joint Russian-Turkish military patrol in the countryside near Darbasiyah along the border with Turkey in Syria's northeastern Hasakah province on November 30, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Kang added that with people so wrapped up in their own "misinformed universes," it becomes very difficult to build consensus.

The Manama Dialogue is taking place against a backdrop not only of the pandemic but also tectonic shifts in the power and diplomatic balance of the Middle East and the prospect of significant changes when the new administration of Democrat Joe Biden assumes office.

Central to these shifts are the Abraham Accords, which saw the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan normalize relations with Israel in September – only the third, fourth and fifth Arab countries to do so since Egypt and Jordan decades earlier. This in turn has given new impetus to resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict.

"Regarding Palestine and Israel and also whether we will at some point join the Abraham Accords," Prince Faisal said in his remarks, "for Saudi (Arabia), it is critical to get the Israelis and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. That is the only way to bring about lasting regional peace."

Delegates are curious as to how Joe Biden, one of the architects of the Obama-era Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), would handle future relations with Iran.



Turkish-backed Syrian rebel fighters, mask-clad due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, take part in a military parade marking the graduation of a new batch of cadets and attended by officials from the Turkey-backed opposition in the town of Jindayris, in the Afrin region of the northern Syrian rebel-held province of Aleppo, on November 14, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

The Trump administration has pursued a campaign of “maximum pressure” to force Iran to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and to stop its geopolitical muscle-flexing. Many worry Biden intends to turn back the clock.

“We learned the lessons from the prior administration’s appeasement. Sending pallets of cash didn’t change Iran’s behavior; rather, it funded and supercharged their terror campaigns,” Mike Pompeo, the US secretary of state, told delegates via video link on Friday evening.

“We know our campaign is working because now the Iranians are desperately signaling their willingness to return to the negotiating table to get sanctions relief.”

Germany is one of the core signatories of the JCPOA and among several European powers that have fought to preserve the deal since the US withdrew in May 2018. In his remarks, Berger said Germany and other signatories “will be waiting to see the direction of the new US administration.”

However, as a result of Iran’s non-compliance in important areas of the JCPOA and its recent advances in nuclear research and development, signatories recognize the deal will need to be updated, he added.

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Iran still a destabilizing influence in Middle East, Saudi Arabia committed to regional peace: Prince Faisal Emir of Kuwait thanks King Salman for efforts to resolve Gulf dispute