



A New Vision

As a third-generation head of the family business, Bader Nasser Al Kharafi is upholding a proud and powerful legacy, while at the same time using his considerable influence to encourage digitization and positive change to empower Kuwait's youth.

Bader Nasser Al Kharafi, 39, has been at the helm of his family empire, the Kharafi Group of Companies, since the death of his renowned father Nasser Al-Kharafi in 2012. Established in 1956, the diversified conglomerate bearing the name of one of Kuwait's most respected families today has more than 135 registered businesses spanning multiple sectors in 28 countries, and is currently last year of the company's 67% stake in the Americana food company, estimated to be worth over \$2 billion.

As Director of the Group Executive Committee, Kharafi is based at the heart of his home country where he oversees the family business—with the help of a handpicked team of senior executives—and directs operations as the Vice Chairman and (since March this year) CEO of Zain Group, a telecommunications giant that recorded revenues of \$3.6 billion last year and has been named the second most powerful brand in the Gulf, employing over 6,000 people. On top of this he is Chairman for Gulf Cable and sits on the Boards for Gulf Bank and Coutts, the wealth division of the Royal Bank of Scotland, as well as holding a number of other positions on Boards all over the world.

It adds up to a daily to-do list that could floor many other leaders, but as much as Kharafi doesn't like to be too high-profile, he also doesn't like to be bored. His team tells me he works up to 16 hours a day, every day. Except for a set time dedicated to his family, in which he becomes unreachable. He could choose to lead a more laid-back life, but it's the day-to-day challenges that keep him going.

"I have FOMO (fear of missing out) when it comes to work," Kharafi admits. "The passion comes from upholding a legacy, it gets you up in the morning." He credits his relationship with his people as the reason behind his success, as well as the constant and unwavering support of both his mother and his wife.

As a young protégé, Kharafi was destined for success from his early years. As a child, his acumen for operations became clearly apparent as his father began to prepare him for business, with his appetite for problem-solving earning him the nickname "solution". When the time came to step into his father's shoes, he was well prepared. "I had the best mentor," he says. "Because of him it seemed I was more prepared than I thought."

Despite walking into an already hugely successful family business, Kharafi has not taken a back seat. Aside from leading the business into further expansion he has a deep desire to give back to society and influence change. His plans are heavily linked to the progress of Kuwait and ensuring success for the coming generations.

Inspired by his children, Kharafi has the evolution of the education system close to his heart. A firm believer in the philosophy that learning should be a lifelong pursuit, he

achieved his own Master's Degree from the London Business School after many years of experience, and he encourages his executives to do the same, every year supporting two of them in pursuing their post graduate studies. "With the dynamic industries we operate in, it is imperative to stay abreast of changes, whether they be legislative, operational or technological," Kharafi explains. However, at the other end of the education system, he fears that the younger generation may not be taught the right skills considering the future responsibilities that will be handed to them.

With roughly 25% of Kuwait's population currently under 15-years-old, in the coming years it will fall to the Kuwaiti youth to drive growth in their country as it comes through one of the hardest economic battles in its history. To do that, they need to be taught the specific aptitudes which will help them take control and make decisions—and for this they must be allowed to learn by experience.

"We are building a generation of memorizers, not critical thinkers," says Kharafi. "6-12 year olds in particular are caught up in a culture of fear of failure, which they take through into their working lives. The youth need empowerment, they are the future of Kuwait. We must develop their appetite for challenges, where they realize that failure is an essential part of the journey of success."

As Vice Chairman of INJAZ-Kuwait—a non-profit organization that inspires entrepreneurship, financial literacy and work readiness among the Arab youth—Kharafi is offering support and guiding change through his own experience and business, planning further investment into schools, education initiatives and curriculums. With his leading role in Zain Group he has established schemes to encourage entrepreneurial spirit in the work place, such as setting up an innovation platform on which employees of all levels can submit their ideas, as well as inviting them to become partners with Zain on the initiatives they come up with.

With his own MBA, Kharafi made an unusual move. Rather than using it to progress up the ladder, he decided to embrace the experience and become more hands-on, spending time with the people running the day-to-day business. "The MBA transformed my way of thinking," Kharafi tells me. "I learnt new leadership disciplines, business models and trends. I wanted to take that back to the office and apply it fully." So, having been Vice Chairman of Zain Group since 2014, he stepped into the position of Group CEO three years later—keeping his Vice Chairman status, but also absorbing an operational role that enables him to support the company side-by-side with his team.

Under Kharafi's leadership, Zain Group is now seeking to be on top of the trends in the region's digital transformation. "With the shift in the telecoms industry, there has never been a greater need to apply agility, innovation and adaptability," he explains. The company is on the hunt to acquire businesses and individuals that are standing out from the crowd by innovating and integrating pioneering technology—it recently partnered with Iflix, a streaming service that enables expats to access content from their home countries on their mobile devices. Kharafi is also keen to explore opportunities in smart cities, education and healthcare. "We should be able to treat all our patients within our hospitals, instead of incurring major deficits due to expenditure incurred by flying out patients we can't treat," he says.

Looking ahead, Kharafi has high ambitions for himself and for Kuwait. "Our heritage is that of trendsetters, but we've lately become followers—we need to be leaders," he says. "We need to be more agile. We will become strong through diversification and empowering our youth." As well as recognizing an evolution ahead, Kharafi tells me he is extremely proud of

Kuwait's social responsibility and family ties, as well as the development of talent and gender equality. "We clearly have a huge pool of innovators, my only wish is to see them divert across many industries, especially those that can shift us to become an exporting economy," he says. "And although we are not there yet in terms of gender equality, I am very optimistic for the future. We are seeing female talent emerge from previously limited roles to express themselves and their skills across many platforms."

Even with so much already on his plate Kharafi is considering his future thesis for a PhD in finance when the time is right. "If I get 10% of my late father's legacy I'll be happy," he says. I think he may already have reached that.

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