

From Steel To Iron Man: Al Ahli Group's CEO Took The Family Business Into New Pastures

At first glance, the Dubai office of Mohammed Khammas, CEO of Al Ahli Holding Group, is much like any other. That is until a life-size Iron Man, casually lounging on a chair, catches your eye. Near him stands a full-sized Spiderman and busts of Thor and Batman resting in a room full of cartoon and comic book memorabilia.

Leaning against the wall are signed guitars from A-list artists Guns N' Roses and Ed Sheeran. Khammas was instrumental in bringing the hit singers to Dubai to perform sold-out concerts at the 117Live Arena—the over 40,000-person capacity venue that he built on site at his mega retail project, the Dubai Outlet Mall.

“Ed Sheeran is an extremely nice guy,” reveals Khammas as he pulls the musician’s guitar out of its case. “To be honest with you this is a joy for me,” says the Emirati CEO.

Khammas recently turned his passion for pop culture into a lucrative enterprise. His comic collectible store, Comicave, featuring over 5,000 comic and manga titles, was a step towards further diversification for the family business, which has interests as varied as steel, contracting and media. Today the wholly family-owned Al Ahli Holding Group has 27 companies operating in 20 countries that reportedly bring in annual sales of more than \$1.8 billion.

But as the business landscape in the Middle East changes, Khammas is steering Al Ahli Holding Group to focus on consumer experiences to remain relevant. His latest venture, Human X, aims to tap into the extremely well-connected U.A.E. population by using data collected through social media and other insights to understand the behavioral science behind consumer choices.

“When people have travelled, and they’re enlightened, and the internet has allowed them to see so many things, their lifestyle choices have evolved and if you don’t evolve with it then you’re stuck,” he explains. “That’s what we’re trying to change.”

Human X is not his first business experiment. Armed with a degree in International Business and Political Science from California State University, he returned home to the U.A.E. in 2000 to head the family group’s construction business.

Cutting his teeth on several projects across Silicon Oasis, Sports City and Dubai Investment Park, Khammas wanted to invest in the entertainment space. “I didn’t know what I was looking for,” he remembers.

At the time, Hollywood was using innovations in production and filming to reinvent the superhero genre, and following the global success of franchises such as Spiderman (Columbia Pictures) and X-men (20th Century Fox), Marvel Studios was looking to develop a

universe of its own. Khammas spied an opportunity and began venturing into various levels of investment with Marvel in 2005, three years before the first Iron Man movie hit cinemas. "It was a beautiful time to invest in that company," he admits. In 2009, Disney bought Marvel Studios for over \$4 billion—since then the film franchise has become the highest-grossing of all time. Khammas remains a partner and an active enthusiast of the Marvel multiverse.

He was on set when Iron Man—the first movie to be both produced and developed by Marvel Studios—was filmed. Two of his own cars featured in Tony Stark's garage. The old arc-reactor heart that Pepper (Gwyneth Paltrow) gives Stark (Robert Downey Jr) at the end of the movie is now sitting in his office. "My home is actually modelled on the Tony Stark house," Khammas reveals. "His came first."

By then, Khammas had also begun looking to break ground on something different back home. By the midnoughties, glitzy shopping malls were beginning to dot the U.A.E.'s landscape, driven by a booming population ready to splash their cash while increasing tourist numbers pushed up retail margins. While the Al Ahli Holding Group already had operations in the retail sector through the Al Ahli Supermarket in Sharjah and the Dana Plaza Shopping Complex in Abu Dhabi, it had not yet dabbled in a super mall.

It was while walking around the Ontario Mills Outlet in California with his father (the group chairman), that Khammas first suggested building something similar in Dubai. "He loves shopping malls," reveals Khammas. "He said great idea."

Vishal Mahajan, current Director of Dubai Outlet Mall, met Khammas when the mall was still at an initial stage. "The race for various shopping malls in Dubai had started and I had just completed work on a mega-mall project. With his thoughts in place, we met and discussed the vision—to do things differently—the rest is history," he remembers.

The original location for the outlet mall was earmarked for along a stretch of land between Global Village and Arabian Ranches, until Khammas decided to move it. "I was afraid that if the value of the land exceeded a certain amount, I would no longer be interested in developing it, I could just sell it for a good margin," he explains.

To move the site to its current location in Dubailand meant getting permission from the government. But more difficult was convincing others that it was a good idea to build a mall in the outskirts of the city. "Everybody, including family, thought it was crazy," Khammas admits. "There were people who took risks, and said ok we'll give it a try."

Khammas took over as CEO in 2007. Dubai's Outlet Mall opened the same year at 70% occupancy. Within 18 months it was at 100%, which Khammas says it still maintains, proving resilient to the global recession and market fluctuations in-between. "When people want to spend but have to save, they go to a value destination, they don't stop spending. We do good in good times, we do better in bad times," says the 42-year old.

Founded by Khammas' father, Nasser Ali Khammas, Al Ahli Holding Group started out as a general trading company in the seventies in the northern emirate of Fujairah. The family went on to open Al Ahli General Transport, Emirates Steel & Contracting and an advertising distribution division. It branched into real estate, retail, printing, plastics and engineering in the following years. Such diversification has helped the group to shelter itself from market turmoil.

“Our investments generally were split between Latin America and the entertainment business back in 2005, 2006 and 2007,” says Khammas. “During 2008-2011, those were the ones that outshined everything else because it wasn’t affected, tickets sales kept going. And anything we did in Columbia, Argentina, Brazil, Panama wasn’t affected because it wasn’t part of that economic grid.”

But Khammas still saw opportunity lurking in the home market. Between 2009 and 2012, the Al Ahli Holding Group went on to launch Al Ahli Aluminum, Golf Spring Contracting, Arabtec Consultants, Gaming & Animation and the Gold’s Gym franchise.

Growth didn’t stop there. In 2014, Al Ahli Holding Group launched a publishing & distribution firm, and a food and beverages subsidiary. That same year, with the Marvel multiverse now taking over movie theaters, Khammas looked to increase the group’s entertainment assets.

Acquiring a team of designers, Khammas launched Comicave Studios in Singapore in 2014 to specialize in conceptualizing, designing and manufacturing high-end collectibles and mass market toys, working with brands including Marvel, Warner Brothers, Disney and Transformers. To distribute these creations, the Al Ahli Holding Group opened the immersive Comicave Store in Dubai Outlet Mall, billed as the world’s largest pop culture superstore. “It allows us to build dreams,” says Khammas, who confesses to being a huge fan of comic books.

“Personally, I’m a collector,” he reveals. “Comic books, since I was probably six. My mum would buy it for me. [The publisher] would translate it into Arabic. It used to be sold in these thick covers and it had 100 pages each, but it was beautiful.”

In 2015, Al Ahli’s publishing & distribution arm launched the Ms. Marvel comic series—featuring Marvel’s first ever Muslim superhero—to 11 countries across MENA. It was the only company given the rights to publish Ms. Marvel in Arabic and English outside of the U.S. The group’s comic book collectibles business received another boost when the Al Ahli Holding Group announced a sponsorship deal with Marvel Studios that gave it the exclusive rights to display Comicave Studio merchandise and collectibles at the red-carpet Hollywood movie premiers, starting with Captain America: Civil War.

With an established foot in entertainment, Khammas expanded the family business into two new sectors—music and social media—in 2015. March that year saw Gun N’ Roses take to the stage at the 117Live arena—at that time called the Autism Rocks Arena. More than 40,000 people came to see them play. The following November, two days before Jennifer Lopez was due to perform and one week before Ed Sheeran, the venue announced that it would no longer be serving alcohol for the foreseeable future. The unexpected move was designed to make the venue more inclusive and familyfriendly. “We took risks,” says Khammas, “But it has proven to be a successful model for us.”

In September 2015, Khammas acquired LA-based startup theAudience for an undisclosed amount—a social media publishing company founded in 2011 that had previously focused on connecting brands with social media celebrities. “I was looking for a company that would not only understand social media and innovate in that space, but also did cultural landscaping,” he says. “That conversation evolved into saying how about I buy the company?”

Today, through cultural landscaping, Khammas is working with the Audience to understand the individual consumer needs for each of Al Ahli Holding Group's target audiences to drive the group's growth in revenues.

With his fingers in many pies, Khammas has no plans to stop investing and experimenting. "I think patience pays off and I think innovation is a costly thing, but at the same time it's even costlier not to think outside of the box," he says. "2019 is going to be extremely interesting."

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