

Unveiling the Middle East: The trailblazing Arabic models making history one bikini at a time

Written by Ruth Styles
Friday, 04 January 2013 14:24



Controversy: Arab-Israeli model Huda Naccache, seen here on the catwalk for Israeli designer, Michal Nagrin, caused a stir when she appeared on the cover of Arabic magazine, Lilac, in a bikini.

Mail Online

Stunningly beautiful and bearing a striking resemblance to Italian actress Isabella Rossellini, Hanaa Ben Abdesslem hasn't been modelling long but has already made an impact — both on the fashion industry and at home.

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"This whole year has been full of unexpected and sudden changes — for both myself and my country," the Tunisian supermodel and Lancôme spokesmodel said.

"We've both created our own revolutions."

The Middle East hasn't traditionally been the place to search for a supermodel due to opposition from conservative factions but a growing number have started to break through.

Now Tunisian Ben Abdesslem, arguably the most successful of the new wave of Arabic models, isn't alone.

Moroccan model, Hind Sahli, has made a name for herself on the catwalk at BCBG Max Azria, Hervé Léger and Vera Wang, while also appearing in the Spanish and Italian editions of Vogue.

Meanwhile, Arab-Israeli model, Huda Naccache, raised more than a few eyebrows when she became the first woman to pose in a bikini on the cover of an Arabic magazine.

Naccache, 23, is currently studying archaeology at the University of Haifa and attempting to put the furore behind her, although she says she intends to resume her modelling career once her studies are complete.

While the Lilac cover shocked many, more controversial by far was the appearance of German-Turkish actress and model Sila Sahin in the German edition of Playboy.

The first Muslim woman ever to be photographed topless for a magazine was applauded by many fans but she was cut off by her conservative family as a result of the shoot.

"I did it because I wanted to be free at last," commented Sila at the time.

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"These photographs are a liberation from the restrictions of my childhood."

That Muslim women are modelling at all is nothing short of revolutionary — especially in the Middle East, where attitudes to women remain old-fashioned.

But according to Sahli, while some of the reaction she's had has been negative, there has also been a considerable amount of support.

"Mostly, I have had positive reactions," the 22-year-old said.

"Most people think it's good to have a Moroccan model.

"I have also had some young girls sending messages by Facebook asking me how I did it and how I started.

"I have had just a few bad reactions from people but I don't mind — I'm happy what I'm doing." Huda Nuccuche added: "Conservative factions exist in Israel and our region but fortunately my family doesn't belong to these factions.

"I have every respect for every group of people and belief, but I have my independent way in life that I believe in."

For others, both male and female, the reaction to their choice of career has been one of bemusement.

"My brother supported me right from the start," says Ben Abdesslem.

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"I think it's a generational thing.

"I come from quite a conservative family and my parents didn't really know what modelling was about.

"I keep them updated about what I'm doing every evening, explaining how things work and how projects progress... I Skype with them every evening!"

According to male model, Sertac Tasdelen, 29, while modelling still isn't seen as the done thing in his home country, Turkey, it is becoming more widely accepted.

"It's not seen as [being as] stable as banking or as reputable as being a doctor — modelling is obviously a bold career choice. But still just another job and a way of living your life.

"Especially in recent years, with the rapid growth of the economy and developments in the fashion industry, modelling is becoming more acceptable."

"Before me, the profession simply didn't exist [in Tunisia]," adds Ben Abdesslem.

"They've had to create a new tick-box just for me!"

Part of the reason for the growing acceptance of modelling in the Muslim Middle East is the region's increasing appetite for Western luxury goods.

As a result, more and more brands are turning to Arabic models such as Ben Abdesslem and Tasdelen as a means of tapping in to the lucrative Middle Eastern market.

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"Designers and brands have to go where the money is — and at the moment quite a lot of the money is in the Arab states," Laretta Roberts, a trend forecaster at WSGN, told the BBC website.

"You only have to look at the couture market, which is right at the very high end of fashion. That market used to appeal to rich Americans.

"Nowadays, if you look at those shows, it's all about appealing to the Arab consumer because those are the ones who can afford it right now."

Tasdelen agrees, saying: "Designers and brands tend to incline towards where the money is — and at the moment quite a lot of the money is in the Arab states.

"Tastes and trends are being reshaped by shifting economic power."

But although money is moving and tastes are changing, for the Middle East's modelling sorority, there's still a long way to go before taking to the catwalk becomes a reputable — and accepted — career choice.

While Ben Abdesslem, whose next appearance is in the fully clothed but still risqué 2013 Pirelli calendar, says that she's proud of the achievements of her generation of Arab women, others are less sanguine.

"It's definitely revolutionary and a bold career choice, particularly because in that part of the world they are quite traditional," Shaista Gohir, a director of the Muslim Women's Network UK, told the BBC.

"You always need that first person to actually break the boundary, break the stereotypes that

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will inspire other girls."

Sahli certainly hopes so.

"The fact that I left, I'm working and I'm doing well, will give other young girls the courage to do it."