

“Middle Eastern governments don’t care about entrepreneurs”



“I don’t believe any single government in the region cares about entrepreneurs. They care about big businesses. If they cared about entrepreneurs, they would change the law. The law is too prohibitive.”

Text: Tamara Pupic

Meet the straight-talking Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi. An Emirati columnist on Arab affairs, the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, and a recently appointed MIT Media Labs Director’s Fellow. He’s clearly a man of many parts.

“I don’t think that any Middle Eastern government has done enough,” he adds. “They’ve done very little and they talk much more about what little they’ve done than that they’ve done a lot.”

A minute before turning off the voice recorder, he is asked for his opinion on the current media hype around entrepreneurship in the Middle East.

“It’s important because perception is reality,” he says. “You send the message that you are entrepreneurship-friendly but go and start a business in any country in the Middle East and come talk to me.

“How much money will it cost you? How much bureaucracy? How many stamps? How many business departments you have to visit? Everywhere the same.”

Al Qassemi’s Middle Eastern origins are central to his identity as a writer, a digital influencer, an art foundation owner, and an entrepreneur.

He doesn’t remember a Guardian opinion piece he wrote back

in 2010, in which he wrote that the Internet had empowered Arabs to express their dissatisfaction "...in the hope that one day that some article or tweet that they post will capture the imagination of a young Arab somewhere who will think to himself: 'Enough is enough'". But when reminded of the article, he smiles with surprise and satisfaction.

The world first found out about Al Qassemi when he took to Twitter to translate into English news from various Arabic media sources covering the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring. In both countries, demonstrators used social media to organise and coordinate their protests and send their message out to the world.

"There was this need that people had to know as soon as possible," Al Qassemi says. "What I did is that I just offered a free translation service that was instantaneous, up to date, and largely accurate. I think I corrected myself maybe less than four or five times in that period of few weeks."

According to some estimates, he tweeted, on average, every 45 seconds on certain days. As the retweets and comments kept rolling in, the number of his Twitter followers grew. Before long, Time magazine included him in its list of the 140 best Twitter feeds. Today his Twitter account @SultanAlQassemi has around 437,000 followers. Looking back at those "interesting times", he adds: "What's interesting is that my friends working in some news organisations were sending me internal emails saying that the fastest breaking news was Sultan Al Qassemi, then the BBC, then CNN. They

were trying to beat each other, but I was always faster than all of them."

Another of his successful projects - the Sharjah-based Barjeel Art Foundation, a non-profit organisation built on his private collection of around 1,200 modern and contemporary Arab artworks - started with him posting images of artworks he liked on social media.

"People were asking me: 'Where can we see it?' and I thought: 'You know what, there is no space to see these works.' That was the start," he says.

The whole concept of the foundation was designed on Al Qassemi's discomfort with the negative stereotypes that have been associated with the region. As an independent initiative, Barjeel Art Foundation aims to build a publicly accessible art collection in the UAE in order to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region.

At the core of its mission is opening up Arab works of modern and contemporary art to international audiences, building cultural bridges with the rest of the world, and promoting Arab artists.

The foundation recently marked its sixth anniversary.

During that time he has witnessed artworks from the region becoming more political, more gender balanced and more modern. "Especially in the Gulf, art is one of the last mediums of free political expression," he adds. "Sometimes you can create an artwork, a painting or a sculpture or an installation or a photograph that says so many things that you cannot write in an article or say in a tweet because you might get

in trouble for doing that.”

On top of his agenda is also supporting the development of a culture of regional collectors becoming more open to loaning their artworks and thus sharing them with the general public.

Al Qassemi has repeatedly called on regional companies to include pieces by Arab artists into their corporate collections, but now he explains why start-ups should follow suit. “Even start-ups can begin by buying one or two artworks to differentiate their office by having an interesting artwork. That’s one issue.

“The second thing is that I believe that in the Middle East young people should support each other. So if you are a filmmaker shooting a new movie rather than putting some generic, unknown artist from Europe or any other region, why don’t you go to an artist [from the region] and tell: ‘Listen, why don’t you give us one of your artworks so that we can hang it when we film?’

“And this way you are contributing to the ecosystem. You advertise for that artist, the artist advertises for you, and it becomes a virtual circle.

“We need to invest in the current ecosystem rather than always bringing something from abroad.”

In terms of his own business, Al Qassemi says that it’s one that’s run from the heart rather than by the numbers.

“I run it as a money losing business, but when I look at the credit and debit statement in the end, for me, it’s always in the green,” he says.

“Not in the red even though

the numbers are negative. For me in the green is this goodwill, the successes, the number of places where you’ve shown, the number of artists whom you’ve promoted, and for me the green side trumps the red side.

“It makes me feel happy that when you search for the Arab world or the Middle East, you are getting at least one positive article even though there are another 50 negative. I feel that we are slowly contributing.”

The meeting with Al Qassemi takes place in the premises of Sharjah’s Al-Saud Co, his decades-old family business. However, he is also an entrepreneur in his own right. From his first business started at the age of 19, his interests have led him to set up Barjeel Securities, a brokerage and financial services provider, a few of photography studios, and more.

Committing to their family businesses, he says, should be the priority for regional youth, but advises them not to rest on their laurels. “Don’t rest and say: ‘I’m only going to work in my family business.’

“If you can afford the time and the money, start a start-up. No matter what you do, do something that reflects your interests.

“You don’t have to do it immediately, but start working on it because it will challenge you, it will keep you excited about waking up in the morning.

“Because family businesses have this knack of making you complacent, of making you say: ‘This job is guaranteed, I don’t have to do anything any more.’

“But if you have a side business, which I have at least four, it

makes you excited waking up.”

As our conversation comes to an end, Al Qassemi explains that artists and start-up founders in the Middle East have something in common. And when it comes to the local regulatory environment, it seems that – once again – he’s keen to say that enough is enough.

“First of all there’s a social stigma about being an artist. Families don’t want their kids to be artists but doctors and engineers and government employees because that means job for life. But I think that slowly it is changing, the social stigma,” he says.

“Number two, the laws and regulations, just like for any other start-up, need to change because you know that the number one enemy of start-ups in the Middle East is the law.

“The law is the one that stands in the way of all these start-ups. No matter how many governments tell

you: ‘We want start-ups’, the truth is that they don’t have the guts to change the laws because of the lobbies, because of the merchants, because of ... All these laws are really the biggest impediment to start-ups, and the same applies to artists as well.

“You want to take a leap of faith and become an artist you have to go through this minefield. So it’s a big risk.”

Luckily, many of them can rely on him. And for them, that is enough.

Tamara Pupic is Deputy Editor at Arabian Business StartUp.

This article was republished with the kind permission of ITP/Arabian Business.

Think about the text

Why is Sultan Al-Qassemi so critical about how governments in the region approach entrepreneurs?

Al-Qassemi is almost talking about artists as if they were entrepreneurs. What is your perception about entrepreneurship – how broad can the term be?

His foundation uses art to build cultural bridges between Arab artists and the rest of the world. In what ways can entrepreneurship help bringing communities and different societies closer together?