

# STATE OF ELEGANCE

Fashion has long been synonymous with luxury in the MENA region, but a new cohort of designers are helping to shift the balance away from Western labels to locally grown high-end brands inspired by traditional aesthetics and materials.

BY SARAH ILLINGWORTH

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ami Kadi is a dreamer. The Lebanese-American ES-MOD-trained designer confesses that inspiration for his work often strikes, quite literally, after hours – while he's

asleep. For his latest collection, 'Standing in the Shadow of Women', Kadi's unconscious summoned a vision of three female personas: the woman as warrior, who is "fighting for her rights, and fighting for her freedom"; the woman as sexy, intelligent and business-savvy; and the woman as innocent. Black leather and silicone coexist with lace and florals, while brightly coloured sequins bridge the gap, reinforcing Kadi's reputation for being as skilled at catalysing the super feminine as he is the suave and seductive. A celebrity sweetheart, the couturier has created for fashion icons from Ahlam to Dita Von Teese, turning heads internationally via his knockout muses with the detailed, handcrafted motifs and exquisite fabrics that characterise his aesthetic.

**“We are seeing a shift in this trend with more regional buyers considering local talent for their rail space. Consumers are looking for smaller, individual boutiques and buys.”**

Tel Aviv-based Noritammy is known for its luxury jewellery reflecting the fascinating encounter between fashion and architecture.

For years, Faiza Bouguessa struggled to find abayas she felt fit her personal style, and decided to launch her own line. Today she is known for bold yet elegant designs.



Kadi's ever-increasing popularity reflects the growing desire of MENA fashionistas to move away from the traditional thirst for luxury imports, in favour of local brands that reference their own history and hold their own on the world stage. The impending launch of Vogue Arabia, incubator initiatives like Fashion Forward (FFWD) and Arab Fashion Week, and even the debut of an Arabic version of hit American reality show Project Runway (renowned Beirut designer Elie Saab, also a mentor of Kadi's, will be both a producer and a judge) also indicate this change.



Saudi Arabia-based designer Mashael Alrajhi's avant-garde styling manifests in quietly complex garments that encourage self-expression.

FFWD co-founder and director Bong Guerrero concurs, noting that while the Middle East is "notoriously very brand-focused", with larger retailers preferring to stock international brands, more and more regional buyers are considering local talent for their retail space. "Consumers are looking for smaller, individual boutiques and buys."

Mashael Alrajhi is another rising star, drawing international attention for her boundary-pushing approach and often androgenous bent. However, while her designs for her label Mashael forgo convention for modernity, they ultimately pay homage to her roots. Saudi-based, and the first woman in the country to produce menswear, Alrajhi explains that her label aims to capture the human element. "When clients respond to it, it's because they see themselves reflected in the outfits – at the same time, it allows them to explore a different kind of sartorial expression that isn't boxed."

Noritamy co-founder and creative director Elinor Avni brings a similar energy to the Tel Aviv-based fashion jewellery line. She describes the core clientele as designers, artists and architects with "a good sense

of fashion, who are very sure and confident with their style". Noritamy typically create sculptural pieces – wearable art for the woman who wants to make a statement. While the pieces are striking, they are also sophisticated, with a timeless quality. Known for working with somewhat brutish materials like leather, heavy metals and wood, Noritamy also recently launched a fine line called Toolbox that references the tools used to create their pieces. The gentle paradox between the grit of the process and the delicacy of the product makes for a stunning collection.

Having worked as a flight attendant before launching her namesake label in 2014, Faiza Bouguessa first encountered garment-making as a child, from her seamstress grandmother. Crediting her previous career for her cosmopolitan perspective, as an adult Bouguessa struggled to find abayas that fit her personal style, and says she turned to fashion design "to give women the feeling of being part of the global culture while still being able to observe tradition".

Often geometric and minimalist, her distinctive creations capture this forward-thinking sentiment. Beautifully tailored, they have an understated edge, often softened by the crepes, chiffons and satins Bouguessa deploys. The brand has already made its way into the wardrobes of many women looking for head-turning modest wear that is also light and breathable.

Karen Ruimy is also all about mixing luxury with comfort. With the launch of Kalmar, the musician, author and spiritual guide adds

**“I wanted to give women wearing our abayas the feeling of being part of the global culture while still being able to observe tradition.”**

fashion house owner to her résumé. Kalmar debuted at Milan Fashion Week, with a lush but wearable resort wear collection inspired by Ruimy's Moroccan heritage and deeply spiritual connection to her homeland. Made with high-quality silks and cottons, these dreamy pieces – which include caftans, slips and wraps – are as perfect for relaxing in at home as they are for wearing out. Ruimy has lived for lengthy periods in London and Paris as well as Marrakesh, and considers Kalmar a mix of their cultures: "You have the beauty of the colours, and the land, and the easiness of the Moroccan style of life, but with a twist of modernity."

It is this mix of modernity and tradition that makes the work coming out of the MENA region so exciting. Local designers are pushing fashion frontiers by referencing heritage styles, creating high-end contemporary designs that shake up convention without abandoning their cultural grounding. Fancy never fit so good.



Karen Ruimy's fashion label Kalmar proffers the beauty of the colours of her native Morocco with a twist of modernity.



In Rami Kadi's latest collection, *Standing in the Shadow of Women*, black leather and silicone coexist with lace and florals, while brightly coloured sequins bridge the gap.