

BRAVE  
NEW  
WORLDS

As North Africa and the Middle East undergo tumultuous change, **Robert Sullivan** sees the fashion landscape evolving, too.

**T**hough it would be no surprise if she moved—to Paris, London, or maybe New York—model Hanaa Ben Abdeslem appears to be staying in her hometown of Tunis. Fashion around the world may fete this new face of Lancôme, but she is determined to remain in Tunisia. “For me, it’s most exciting because I’m the first [Lancôme] model from the Arab world,” she said, speaking to me in French and English.

Fashion came to her incidentally. On a whim a few years ago, the former civil-engineering student went to Lebanon to compete on a program like *America’s Next Top Model*. When she came back to finish her university degree, she agreed to walk the second annual Tunis Fashion Week. The third Tunis Fashion Week looked as if it would be canceled last spring due to the Tunisian revolution, the Twitter-fueled public uprising that set off the Arab Spring, the region-wide series of democratic protests. Though you might think fashion would be the last thing on anyone’s mind, the 2011 Tunis Fashion Week went on—at the old cathedral in the city that was once home to Dido, heroine of *The Aeneid*. Designers, patrons, and fans saw the show as a chance to highlight not only their culture’s long tradition in textiles but themselves.

The world is looking at the political upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa, but alongside that narrative, a fashion story is playing out, some aspects discouraging (last November, Iran arrested 70 fashion designers for arranging shows), some positive, in terms of personal expression and *view* >408

## BUYER'S MARKET

HANAA BEN ABDESLEM, IN THE MEDINA OF TUNIS, WEARS A STELLA MCCARTNEY JUMPSUIT (\$2,495) AND HEELS: STELLA MCCARTNEY, NYC.

women's empowerment. In the capital city of Tunis, Fashion Week was an opportunity to celebrate a community long suppressed—no small gesture in a region where religious fundamentalism threatens personal creativity as well as personhood. There were star designer Salah Burka; up-and-comer Ahmed Talfit; and Berlin-based Moroccan designer Amine Bendriouch, whose line, ABCB, referenced religious clothing as a critique of the conservative ethos. “The political changes have helped the industry move to the next step,” Ben Abdesslem says. “Our revolution caught much attention, media-wise, that helped new talents express themselves in a more free and comfortable way.”

The changing landscape is noted in everything from the ANA MASRY (“I am Egyptian”) bracelets and T-shirts worn in Cairo to new malls everywhere. The goods-moving mechanisms of the world do not work in terribly mysterious ways, and where there are popular uprisings, there are companies seeing opportunity. The Chalhouh Group, which partners with the likes of Fendi, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Chanel, is just one luxury-brand marketer keen to expand beyond its 115 stores across the UAE. The Middle East's luxury-market size was estimated at \$5.7 billion in 2010, and it is expected to grow by at least 10 percent next year, an amount that is forecast to double in some Middle East markets in five years. “Luxury fashion slowly moves from being perceived as a status symbol to becoming a personal pleasure, which is

to draw fourteen million visitors—who might normally travel to Europe—to shop alongside Europeans looking to avoid taxes. Meanwhile, a number of royal-family members from the Gulf states are opening boutiques. At D’NA [see “Rock & Royal,” page 412], in Riyadh, “one of the problems I faced was convincing our customers that American designers are as so-

phisticated as European designers,” says Princess Deena Al-Juhani Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia. She has partnered with a long list of Stateside designers, including Rodarte and Prabal Gurung, sometimes to visitors' surprise. “They are usually taken aback by how current we are, and by the sophistication of the public.”

Of course, to call the fashion environment for women in the Middle East complicated is an understatement; in Saudi Arabia, a place where women face restrictions on what they wear and when, the Saudi king only last fall announced that women would be allowed to vote. (According to the World Economic Forum, Saudi Arabia remains among the lowest-ranking countries in the Middle East in terms of gender equality.) And yet, in the same decade that D’NA opened, there is a new Harvey Nichols and a Saks. Beirut

**NEW HORIZONS**  
THE MODEL, ON A ROOFTOP OVERLOOKING AL-ZAYTUNA MOSQUE IN TUNIS, IN A ROCHAS TOP: \$968; ROCHAS.COM. HAIDER ACKERMANN JACKET (\$1,309) AND PANTS (\$1,954); LUISAVIAROMA.COM

is commonly regarded as the fashion capital of the Middle East, making up for a dearth of oil money and emirs with buzz. In Beirut's Saifi Village, a CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund-like incubator called Starch mentors designers through a collection that is promoted at its boutique for a year. “We’ve been able to do a lot with zero funding,” says Tala Hajjar, who runs Starch with Rabbil Kayrouz, one of only two Lebanese designers accredited by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture. After meeting Paul Smith in London, Hajjar recently organized a seminar in Beirut taught by London fashion experts for Lebanese designers, who are restricted from travel at all but the upper-income echelon. “I’m hoping for a ripple effect,” she says.

Nadine Sabry, 27, is an Egyptian blogger who left a job in finance to enter the fashion-promotions business. view >412



“Our revolution caught attention that helped new talents express themselves in a more free and comfortable way”

beneficial to the business,” says co-CEO Patrick Chalhouh.

The controlled environment of malls is favored by big brands, and in Morocco, a Mall of America-size shopping center opened outside Casablanca last December, the culmination of almost a decade of work by Moroccan businesswoman Salwa Idrissi Akhannouch. “We wanted something big, something we did not have,” she says. Akhannouch expects