

# MOUFEH



## INFLUENTIAL

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Alia wears dress and jacket by Arwa Al Banawi, and has long promoted the work of modestwear fashion designers

# PRET-A-COVER: A NEW APPROACH TO MODESTY

Islamic Fashion Design Council (IFDC) founder Alia Khan seeks to fill gaping holes in the fashion industry by creating a retail category for modestwear, and providing an alternative to the traditional fashion week model

Words by Hafsa Lodi

Modesty: it has become a buzzword in the fashion industry over the past two years, as international designers are increasingly showing more covered-up creations on the catwalks of Milan, Paris, London and New York. But it's far more appreciable than a mere hashtag or fleeting trend. Modesty is a lifestyle, that requires the creation of a global organisation that can oversee and support fashion designers in the field – or at least that's the thought that had been on the mind of Dubai-based Alia Khan five years ago. In 2013, her brainchild, the Islamic Fashion and Design Council (IFDC), was born. Now, after almost half a decade of promoting the work of modestwear designers, the council is introducing what it promises to be “the world's first revolutionary modest fashion and design show,” taking place March 28 – April 2 at City Walk 2 in Dubai. Titled the Pret-a-Cover Buyers Lane, the event provides an alternative platform to fashion week, where designers are exhibiting their

modestwear collections without the use of a catwalk. The project has attracted the attention of sponsors like Emirates Airlines, Aston Martin and Pullman Hotels, who will be bringing in their own contacts and clientele, making the event a networking opportunity that some would consider to be even more beneficial than a spot at Paris Fashion Week. Historically, 'Islamic' clothing has not been portrayed in a very fashion-forward light. “If people want to stereotype, they will tell you that it's a black abaya and a black shayla, so what's the big deal about modest fashion? But that's not even a small fraction of what the real scene is,” says Alia. Women who opt for a modest lifestyle are hardly happy with drab, shapeless or colourless clothing. They look for innovation in silhouette, texture, textile and colour, and will splurge on their well-kept wardrobes. While some European designers may dabble in modest attire subconsciously, influenced by the overarching ‘granny-chic’

style trend, the modest fashion movement is thriving not because of trend-savvy women in the West, but because of these wealthy, modesty-conscious consumers in the Middle East – a spending power that international designers and retailers are now growing more aware of. According to the 2017 Thomson Reuters State of the Global Islamic Economy report, consumers spent Dhs893 billion on Muslim clothing in 2015 (11 per cent of the global sales on clothing), and that's expected to reach \$1,352 billion by 2021. Khan emphasises that the council is not a solely Muslim organisation. “We have a very strong secondary following of the Christian and the Jewish, the Buddhist and the Hindu, and even just mainstream, modest people who don't necessarily do it for faith-based reasons,” says Alia. “We believe that everyone, at some time in their life, has to refer their style to a modest level. Whether it's because they have to go to a big meeting that's going be a little more conservative or go see their grandparents and be more conservative – everyone is touched by that in some way or another.” To enhance the shopping experience of the modest consumer, the IFDC launched its Pret-a-Cover programme in 2015, aiming to help retailers display and market their modestwear more effectively. “Mainstream stores did have key pieces that people would have really appreciated from this market, but it just wasn't really well explained to the modest consumer, and the modest consumer has the biggest spending power,” says Alia. She believes that the Pret-a-Cover Buyers Lane will bring about more awareness

Photography: Borna Altadi. Stylist: Sophie Pasztor. Location: Ninive in Emirates Towers Hotel



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*Alia Khan*

to the need for an organised, modestwear retail category in stores. “We do believe that retailers are taking a bigger interest because it makes good business sense and this event will really help to catapult these efforts,” says Alia.

While the IFDC has offices in New York, Toronto, Milan, Moscow, Cape Town, Istanbul and Karachi, Dubai is the home of its chairwoman, who says that the council shares many goals with the Dubai government. “It was fortuitous [when we launched] because it was the same time when Sheikh Mohammed came out with his mandate to make Dubai the global hub of the Islamic economy,” says Alia. Timing is everything, and location plays a big role too – the fact that Alia is based in the heart of the region's fashion and design scene has helped her pave the way for the council's activity in the Middle East, and beyond. When the council partnered with Torino Fashion Week last July, it marked the first time that an Italian fashion week had ever included a modestwear-dedicated segment, and LA-based brand Al Nisa, Pakistani Nida Azwer and Indonesian Dian Pelangi were among the labels to receive luxury awards from LVMH. Now, Alia is looking at newer ways to support her designers. “We've partnered with almost 100 summits and events and fashion weeks and the one thing I quickly realised was that the fashion week model is broken. It's a bit of an antiquated model, that really does leave a lot of the participants disappointed,” she explains. Indeed, many designers put lots of time, effort and money into their collections, not to mention transportation

and accommodation costs, but after the hype of the show is over, they question whether it was all worth it. “They usually walk away pretty dismayed because they haven't left with orders, or exposure. So, the challenges that a fashion week presents haven't been fully addressed, in our opinion,” says Alia. Dubai-based Saudi designer Hatem Alakeel, who has taken part in numerous fashion weeks, is participating at the IFDC's Pret-a-Cover Buyers Lane. “Fashion shows have become obsolete, with lots of investment but no return: you never cover your expenses,” he says. “The whole idea of a show doesn't make sense anymore.”

Rather than having designers parade their creations down a catwalk, the IFDC has asked each to prepare a video, giving them total creative freedom, within a time limit and modesty-based guidelines. “You can go up to 18 looks or you can just show one look and create a story around that one look. There are no rules – you use the components of your film to tell a narrative that will help us connect to you and your vision,” explains Alia. Designers have also been given pop-up spaces at the event, where they're meeting consumers, buyers, media members and government representatives. Creatives have travelled from all over the world to take part in the Pret-a-Cover Buyers Lane, bringing their couture, eveningwear, ready-to-wear, loungewear, athletic-wear, leatherware, headscarves and even gloves, to the UAE. “You're going to see a nice array of designers, from the GCC and from countries like Turkey and Jordan, India and Pakistan, France and Italy, and America and Australia, so

I think we've pretty much covered the world, which speaks to the fact that it truly is a global play,” says Alia, who promises that the event will be well worth the time of participating brands. Rather than pour blood, sweat and tears into producing samples, arranging fittings, sourcing models and organising a runway show that may or may not result in any traction with buyers or press, emerging and established brands will come face-to-face with one of the strongest consumer markets in the world, opening doors to potentially career-defining opportunities.

“Each one should get exposure – we're doing a lot of VIP introductions for them so that they can meet key players in the region – our government partners are very important to know at the Dubai Islamic Economy Development Centre (DIEDC), and we think this event is a strong opportunity to build a B-to-C client book, because of our high calibre partners, like Aston Martin, Emirates Airlines and Pullman Hotels. They'll be bringing their GCC clientele to this event, and that's a huge spending power that otherwise may not have been realised by these participants.”

Even though the Pret-a-Cover Buyers Lane has not yet come to a close, Alia reveals that the council has already been contacted by organisers in Milan, Beverly Hills and London, who are keen to host the event in their own cities. Modesty may be in vogue right now, but by the looks of it, the movement won't be losing any momentum – at least not while Alia and the IFDC continue to disrupt the industry, shatter stereotypes and revolutionise the retail landscape.





# ONES TO WATCH

Alia Khan discloses which designers she thinks are the future of modest fashion



## FRINGADINE

Practical and purposeful, this Parisian label gives an elegant, French flair to thobe-inspired silhouettes. Garments are cosmopolitan but discreet, with shirt-dresses and trapeze skirts designed with utilitarianism in mind. The brand works with denims and linens, and creates dresses crafted from floral mousselines. Blouses featuring quintessential Peter Pan collars or exaggerated pussy-bows, are styled with A-line maxi-skirts and cropped pea-coats. A simple, natural and unfussy appearance is what the label's self-taught designers, H  l  ne Agesilas and Malika Maza, strive for with their designs.



## MINNOW ZOLA

A monochrome palette guides the aesthetic of this Melbourne-based brand helmed by Zara Hassan. Pieces are classic and versatile: a white, floor-length shirt dress, for instance, can be worn closed and belted, or loose and open. Timeless striped patterns and chic layering techniques feature in her upcoming autumn/winter 2018 range, however Zara isn't restricted by basic styles or black-and-white fabrics. A pastel-pink dress splattered with birds, or black eveningwear adorned with sequins, may seem out-of-character, but Minnow Zola's muse is one that leads a well-balanced lifestyle.



## UNDER-RAPT

Inspired by much-loved millennial brands like Vetements and Yeezy, Under-Rapt makes trend-driven modest athleisure. The London-based label, which has even made an athletic hijab, works with sustainable textiles and ensures high quality, breathable, cooling and sweat-resistant fabrics. The brand's founder and creative director, Yasmin Sobeih, is a stylist-turned-buyer-turned-designer, and her background in fashion can be accredited for the stylish appeal of Under-Rapt's sport pieces. Athleisure staples like raincoats, crewnecks, harem pants, tracksuits and T-shirts are designed with relaxed fits that are loose, yet flattering: ideal for the modern, multifaceted and modesty-focused female.

## DOSOUGI DESIGNS

'Millennial Muslims' are the target audience of this American fashion label. But that's quickly apparent once you see a few of the brand's designs, like its metallic knit two-piece sets, and gowns adorned with corset-inspired belts and oversized eyelets. Designer Huda Eldosougi, who debuted her line at New York's Harlem Fashion Week in 2016, has an eye for easy-to-wear textiles and cool, minimalist adornments, which she pairs together to appeal to mainstream consumers who may not even realise that the brand is one that focuses on modest fashion.



## TALABAYA

Award-winning Czech designer Mirka Talavařskov   is the brains behind this Prague-based label. Female empowerment is engrained in the DNA of the brand, and pieces exude confidence and power, sometimes even playing with androgyny. Mirka creates for the contemporary businesswoman, but expect more than your typical power suit from this modestwear label. Necklines are crisp, collars are stark, and shoulders are strong. Tuxedo-inspired jackets feature artful pleating and work shirts are upgraded with balloon-like sleeves. Designs are completed with bold buttons, strips of graphic prints and, occasionally, men's tie-inspired bows at the neck.



## PHI CASA

With an emphasis on expert tailoring balanced with feminine allure, designs from this South African fashion label are both playful and practical. Expect to see belted prairie dresses, peplum blouses, drop-waist tunics, trendy trenches and floral dresses galore. The designer, Aneeqah Stellenboom, cites New York City as a key inspiration. She doesn't focus purely on modestwear, most of her designs are adaptable to a modest lifestyle.

