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Passion for Adventure: Turning Zain into a Telecom Giant

Saad Al Barrak

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As the Arab spring sweeps the Middle East, old ways are disappearing. Communications technology is breaking down national barriers and undermining rulers, while the youth look to new role models. Instead of the litany of Arab political failures, they look to business and the arts for inspiration.

Saad al Barrak has been a pioneer of this Arab renaissance. In just seven years, he transformed a moribund ex-state-owned telecoms operator, MTC, from its base of 500,000 customers in Kuwait into the international giant Zain, a company with 72 million customers across 22 countries in the Middle East and Africa. Over the same period, revenues leapt from $400 million to a staggering $8 billion.

Saad al Barrak has followed a distinctive philosophy of leadership and management, insisting that the purpose of business is to create "a wonderful world." Indeed, leading global consultants McKinsey admit Saad al Barrak has changed their business models.

His approach has its origins in the souks of his native Kuwait, but is shaped by a US education; by invasion, occupation, and war in the modern Middle East and by modern management gurus like Steve Jobs.

His call to "be bold, be daring, be different" saw Zain operate in challenging markets like post-war Iraq and sub-Saharan Africa and, for the first time, in *A Passion for Adventure*, Saad al Barrak tells the inside story of the audacious, 2005 "Easter weekend" $3.3billion purchase of the African operator Celtel.

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