

From Bedouin to billionaire: how this entrepreneur beat the odds



Marseille, France // The illegitimate Syrian-born son of a Bedouin tribal leader has triumphed over a wretched start in life to be named World Entrepreneur of the Year for 2015.

Mohed Altrad, who is around 65 but cannot be sure of his birth date, has built two prosperous businesses from scratch since arriving in France on a student scholarship.

His Altrad group, created from the ruins of a bankrupt scaffolding supply company, now has 170 affiliates worldwide, 17,000 employees and a turnover of US\$2 billion (Dh7.34bn), producing annual profits of around \$200 million.

He attributes his remarkable success in part to a business philosophy based on the belief that when workers are happy, they perform better and more efficiently. But he insists he has never forgotten his roots.

Mr Altrad was born in the desert outside Raqqa, now — to his immense sadness — controlled by ISIL. He says his birth was the product of rape, the second time his father, leader of a Bedouin tribe and representing its only lawful authority, had forced himself on a girl barely into her teens.

His elder brother, similarly conceived, died young. He was killed by their father's maltreatment, according to Mr Altrad.

Their mother was no more than 13 when she died, soon after Mohed's birth.

Mr Altrad knew no affection from his father and left the nomadic tribe to be brought up in poverty by his maternal grandmother in Raqqa.

"She saw no need for me to go to school," he said, "since I was just going to be a shepherd."

But the young Mohed Altrad was inquisitive and found a place in a local school, having been enthused when peering through cracks in the wall to see children being taught calligraphy.

Despite his humble origins, he became a model pupil and, in a country influenced by the French mandate that ended just after the Second World War, won a scholarship for the best baccalauréat results of his year in the region.

He was sent to the southern French city of Montpellier, unable to speak a word of French and having read only two French books, Arabic translations of an appraisal of General Charles de Gaulle, wartime leader and later president, and a Gustave Flaubert novel.

"It was a hard time," he said. "I'd imagined France as a beautiful country of great culture and history. Arriving in Paris and continuing to Montpellier, it was very different — November with clouds, rain and cold after being in the Syrian heat a day before."

"I started university unable to understand even 10 per cent of what was being said. Algeria had won independence from France, lots of French people had left to resettle in the south of France and there was great hatred of Arabs in general."

Mr Altrad remembers vividly how he rose above prejudice.

"One day I decided that for me to stay, it was not France that had to change for me, but me for France."

He mastered French and English, and committed himself to his studies, emerging with a PhD in computer science.

Jobs in telecommunications followed and, in the early 1980s, he answered a call for qualified Arabs needed in Abu Dhabi to help with the development of Adnoc.

"I had a salary, a car and a house and there was nothing much in those days to spend my money on except a cinema showing mostly Indian films," he said. So he saved.

Returning to France after four years, he joined a university friend in launching a company producing computers, nominally portable but each weighing 27kg.

The company flourished. But after devising a programme for an Arabic version of airport arrival and departure boards, which sold well to Arab countries, Mr Altrad felt he did not have the funds for the necessary business development.

The company was sold and, with his proceeds, Mr Altrad bought a bankrupt scaffolding business – one of what he calls *"life's series of accidents"*.

"My wife and I were having a break in a village near Montpellier and a neighbour told me about it," he said. Acquiring the stock and the debts cost him about €700,000 (Dh2.9m). The factory was his for a single franc, then France's currency.

Once he grasped the concept of scaffolding, hitherto unknown to him, he realised its universal demand. He added other building products and made numerous takeovers in a gradual expansion of the business.

Over the years, he has also published three books, including a novel inspired by his life story.

In 2011, he rescued his cash-strapped local rugby club, Montpellier Hérault, and is a regular at its games in France's Top 14 league, using his private plane when necessary. He has been listed as France's 61st wealthiest person.

Mr Altrad cares deeply about what has happened during recent years of conflict in his native country. He sympathises with the parents of young western Muslims drawn to fight with ISIL and other terrorist groups.

And he regards as aberrations of Islam the actions of the Kouachi brothers and Mohamed Merah, French-Algerians responsible, respectively, for this year's Charlie Hebdo murders and a 2012 wave of killings in and near the French city of Toulouse.

As for his *"world entrepreneur"* award, started by the international business services firm Ernst and Young, he sees it as a victory for France, not just himself.

"Yes I am proud," he said. *"It is an honourable achievement. My mission is to make people happy. I am successful, but whether I am happy is a different question. I think the only thing that could make me truly happy would be to be able to go back and revive my mother."*