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Refugee to Dh1 million winner: UAE Great Arab Mind awardee finds solutions for cleaner air, water

Yaghi has made groundbreaking advancements in reticular chemistry, resulting in pioneering applications for pressing global challenges

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By Waad Barakat



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From humble beginnings as a refugee, Professor Omar Yaghi was one of six exceptional individuals honoured with the Great Arab Minds Award on Thursday, sharing the Dh6 million prize for their groundbreaking contributions to their respective fields.



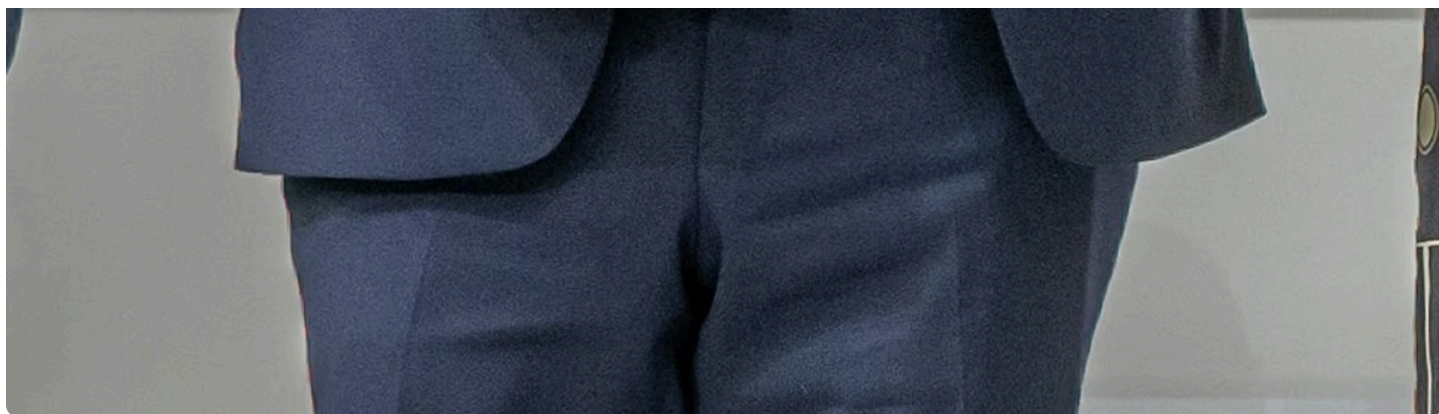
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Honoured by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of UAE, and Ruler of Dubai, Professor Omar reflected on his journey, "I didn't wait for ideal circumstances to pursue my passion for molecules. From the simplest drawings in my youth, I saw beauty and potential. Today, my work has led to solutions for clean air, water, and energy," he told *Khaleej Times*.





Born into a refugee family, Professor Omar rose to become a professor of Chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, and a world-renowned scientist, known as the father of reticular chemistry. "This award is a testament to the power of persistence and the belief that discovery can begin anywhere - even in a refugee camp," he added.

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Yaghi has made groundbreaking advancements in reticular chemistry, resulting in pioneering applications for pressing global challenges. He has published over 300 research papers, with more than 250,000 citations of his work.

The Great Arab Minds initiative, now in its second edition, seeks to recognise and honour exceptional Arab individuals whose remarkable contributions drive progress and enrich knowledge on both regional and global scales. The initiative encompasses six distinct categories, including medicine, engineering and technology, economics, natural sciences, architecture and design, and literature and arts.

In the medicine category, Professor Yasmine Belkaid was recognised for her pioneering work in immunology, infectious diseases, and microbiology. Trained in Algeria, Belkaid attributed her success to her father's unwavering belief in education.

"This award celebrates collective resilience and determination. I dedicate it to the extraordinary women of the Arab world - mothers, grandmothers, and leaders - who inspire and drive change every day," Belkaid shared.

Her research at the Pasteur Institute has bridged science and humanity, addressing pressing global health challenges while inspiring the next generation of scientists.

Iraqi artist Dia Al-Azzawi was honoured for his contributions to art and literature. Al-Azzawi's works combine calligraphy, poetry, and tradition in a contemporary context.

"This recognition affirms the importance of Arab art in shaping cultural identity and addressing humanitarian issues," he said. He expressed gratitude to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, whose vision of honouring Arab achievements extended beyond the conventional domains of science and technology to include the often-overlooked field of the arts.

"In many parts of the Arab world, art is not always given its rightful place in the process of development and cultural preservation. This award not only validates the role of art in society but also sends a powerful message that creativity and cultural heritage are integral to the progress and identity of our region."

Architect Sahel Al Hiyari was celebrated for his innovative blend of modern design with traditional Arab architecture. His projects emphasise sustainability and cultural preservation.

"Through architecture, we honour our heritage while building for the future. This award reflects our collective commitment to shaping spaces that inspire," Al Hiyari remarked.

In the economics category, Professor Yacine Aït-Sahalia was recognised for developing cutting-edge methods for analysing financial markets, forecasting trends, and evaluating risk. His work has become a cornerstone for central banks, regulators, and financial institutions worldwide.

"This award is a celebration of decades of dedication to advancing knowledge and its practical application," he stated, emphasising the transformative power of data-driven insights.

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