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OBITUARIES

Former Chase Banker Founded Investcorp, Oversaw Acquisitions of Tiffany and Gucci

After leaving his native Iraq, Nemir Kirdar created Investcorp as a bridge between Middle East investors and opportunities in the West

By James R. Hagerty

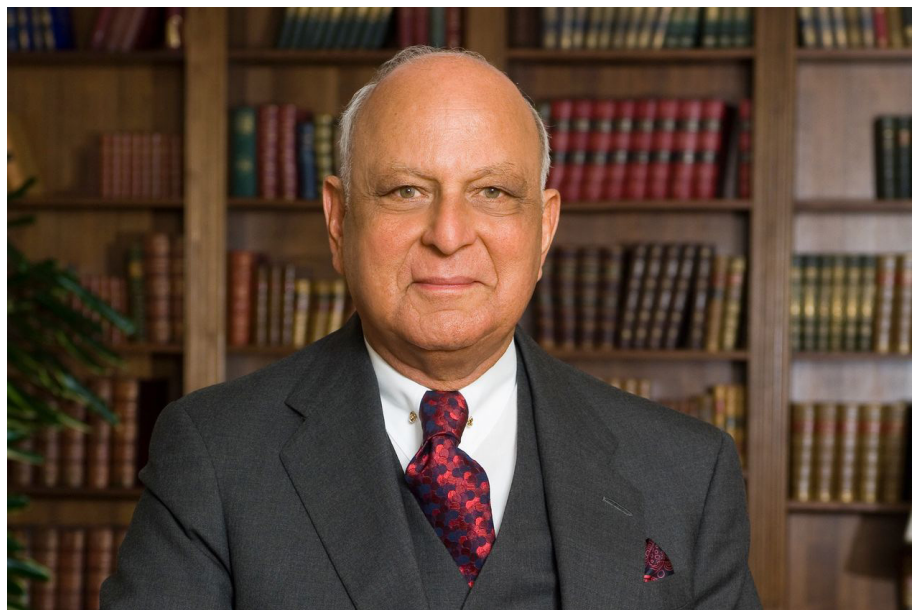
Nemir Kirdar grew up expecting to help govern his native Iraq. His childhood playmates included King Faisal II. His father, whose family had been allied with the ruling Hashemite clan since Ottoman Empire days, was a member of parliament.

That career plan crumbled when the king was executed during a July 1958 coup. "I could see no future for myself in Iraq," Mr. Kirdar wrote later. He moved to the U.S., earned an economics degree at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., and found a job as a bank teller in Arizona, whose landscape vaguely reminded him of home.

Charisma and ambition propelled him into an international career with Chase Manhattan Bank. In 1982, he founded his own Bahrain-based company, Investcorp. Its mission was to link wealthy families in the Middle East with investment opportunities elsewhere.

Mr. Kirdar headed Investcorp for more than 30 years as it bought and sold stakes in companies including Gucci, Saks Fifth Avenue and Tiffany & Co., as well as less posh operations such as real estate, Circle K convenience stores and a maker of valves and pumps. During the 2008-09 financial crisis, Investcorp's hedge-fund investments crashed, but the firm managed to rebuild its capital by selling preferred shares.

The founder, who retired from the board in 2017, died June 8 at his home in Cap d'Antibes, France. He was 83 and had dementia. Mohammed Alardhi, a former head of the Omani Air Force,



Nemir Kirdar's expected course in life changed after Iraq's king was executed.
PHOTO: Investcorp (photographed by Roger Moukarzel)

has served as executive chairman since 2015.

In a 2013 Memoir, "Need, Respect, Trust," Mr. Kirdar said he followed his father's formula for success: "You must be needed. You must be respected. You must be trusted."

The third of five sons, Nemir Kirdar was born Oct. 28, 1936, in Kirkuk. He studied at a high school in Baghdad run by American Jesuits and later at Robert College in Istanbul.

After completing his degree in California, he moved in 1960 to the Phoenix area, where he had cousins. While working as a bank teller at First National Bank of Arizona, he set about making connections through Lions and Rotary clubs. At the bank, he won

a contest by signing up the most new customers and was promoted into a management-training program.

He returned to Iraq in 1962 and began starting businesses, including a bakery and a plastic-molding factory, and then selling them. In 1969, he was suddenly arrested and held in a jail for more than two weeks without any explanation, until authorities sorted out a misunderstanding involving a U.S. company he represented.

He fled to Beirut and then New York, where he found work in banking and earned an M.B.A. degree at Fordham University.

Chase asked him to develop a strategic plan for the bank in the Middle East. He visited 14 countries and slept

(over please)



Nemir Kirdar, second from left, at the document signing for Investcorp's 1984 purchase of Tiffany & Co.

Photo: Investcorp

in the sauna at Tehran's Hilton Hotel because no other room was available.

Chase promoted him to oversee banking in part of the region. By the early 1980s, he was searching for Arab tycoons to form what would become Investcorp. Many were interested, but only if they could control the company; he insisted no single investor would hold sway.

Once a few influential families signed up, others stampeded in. Mr. Kirdar set up temporary headquarters in a Holiday Inn suite in Bahrain. Later, he bought a rundown hotel and converted it into

a headquarters with walnut paneling, marble floors and Oriental rugs.

His first hires were former Chase bankers—Michael Merritt, an American, and Elias Hallak, from Lebanon—along with Cem Cesmig, from Turkey, who had studied in Switzerland and worked at Bankers Trust.

In 1984, when Avon Products Inc. was selling the Tiffany jewelry business, he interrupted a family vacation in Marbella, Spain, to seal the purchase for \$135.5 million in a buyout also involving the management. Investcorp helped expand the business internationally and

took profits through a listing of Tiffany shares on the New York Stock Exchange.

Investcorp acquired half of Guccio Gucci SpA in 1988 and soon began squabbling with the other main owner, Maurizio Gucci, over how to manage the maker of luxury loafers and handbags. After a series of court showdowns and mutual threats, Investcorp finally bought his shares in 1993 and later sold the company at a large profit.

Some investments flopped. In 1993, Investcorp bought Camelot Music Inc., then the third-largest U.S. recorded-music retailer. Discounting on compact discs by Best Buy and other big-box stores destroyed Camelot's profit margins. It filed for protection from creditors under chapter 11 of U.S. bankruptcy law in 1996.

Even so, Mr. Kirdar's initial idea proved sound. Investcorp had \$31.1 billion of assets under management as of Dec. 31. "My objective has been to build an organization that will last, not to make money," he told Institutional Investor in 1991. He ended up doing both.

His survivors include his wife, Nada, their two daughters and three grandchildren.

Thwarted in his hope of becoming a public servant in Iraq, Mr. Kirdar used his wealth and prominence to become a freelance internationalist. He was a regular at Davos conferences, raised funds for the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University and was a member of the United Nations Investments Committee.

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