

## Interview

# An Interview with AIB 2026 International Executive of the Year Güler Sabancı

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## AIB Insights

Güler Sabancı, immediate-Past Chairwoman of Sabancı Holding, was selected as the 2026 AIB International Executive of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB). Ms. Sabancı was the first woman to lead one of Türkiye's most respected conglomerates, Sabancı Holding, for over two decades from 2004 to 2025. In this interview, she discusses with Saeed Samiee, Attila Yaprak and William Newburry the factors contributing to her career development, success as a female leader in an emerging market setting, and the establishment of Sabancı University.

## INTRODUCTION

Güler Sabancı, immediate-Past Chairwoman of Sabancı Holding, was selected as the 2026 AIB International Executive of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB). Ms. Sabancı was the first woman to lead one of Türkiye's most respected conglomerates, Sabancı Holding, for over two decades from 2004 to 2025. During this period, she led the Group's transformation in clean energy and spearheaded the creation of a national champion. Sabancı Holding operates in multiple sectors across 14 countries on four continents, including banking and financial services, energy production and climate technologies, mobility solutions, material technologies, and retailing, among others. In 2025, Time magazine named Sabancı Holding as one of the World's Best Companies, and Forbes magazine ranked it 51st on Forbes' "World's Best Employers - 2025" list.

In 2025, Ms. Sabancı stepped down from the Board of Sabancı Holding and continues her leadership as Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Sabancı Foundation, Founding Chair of the Sabancı University Board of Trustees, and Chair of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum. She is frequently included in "World's Most Powerful Women" lists. Her success has been recognized internationally with numerous awards, including the David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award, the Clinton Global Citizen Award, the Raymond Georis Prize for Innovative Philanthropy, and the European School of Management Responsible Leadership Award. In the excerpts below, Güler Sabancı discusses with Saeed Samiee, Attila Yaprak and William Newburry the factors contributing to her career development, success as a female leader in an emerging market setting, and the establishment of Sabancı University, among other topics.

*Interviewers: Saeed Samiee [SS], University of Tulsa, USA, Attila Yaprak [AY], Wayne State University, and William Newburry [WN], Florida International University, USA*

*Interviewee: Güler Sabancı [GS], Immediate-Past Chairwoman of Sabancı Holding, Türkiye.*

## INTERVIEW

[GS]: I am deeply honored and humbled to receive this award. I extend my sincere gratitude to the AIB Fellows for this recognition and for the confidence they have placed in my leadership journey.

### EARLY PERSONAL JOURNEY

**[WN]: Congratulations again, you've had a fantastic career. Can you describe the most important steps in your personal journey to your role as chairwoman of Sabancı Holding? What were the most important influential milestones in your development? Who were the most influential people in your journey?**

[GS]: I was the first grandchild of Hacı Ömer Sabancı. He had six sons and I arrived as the first grandchild – a girl. In that sense, my journey began with a certain uniqueness. I had a special place in my grandparents' home and in their hearts, and they were equally special to me. One of my earliest memories is my grandfather showing me his textile factory when I was three and a half years old. He believed I would be interested, and he was right. That experience planted a seed in me: a lifelong respect for manufacturing, for production, and for the discipline of creating value. I came to love industry not only as a business, but as a process of turning effort, knowledge, and courage into something tangible. I lost my grandfather when I was 12, but that early influence remained with me.

When I look back, I see my grandfather as a courageous man, someone who pushed the boundaries of his circumstances. He was born in Kayseri, in a small town, in the heart of Anatolia, in a geography that offered few opportunities, and he was orphaned when his father died in the war. As a young man, he had the courage to leave his hometown

in search of work. For him, work was precious. That belief - the dignity of work, the value of production, the courage to change one's life, and the determination to pursue opportunity - became one of the most important lessons of my upbringing.

I studied in Ankara and then in Boğaziçi University. I'm a humble BA major graduate. When I graduated in 1978 and began my professional career, I had the opportunity to choose among the different sectors already in the Group's portfolio. Many people, including my uncles, assumed I would gravitate toward textiles. My grandfather called cotton "white gold". He pursued the dream of white gold and came to Adana and found the gold, becoming first a successful cotton farmer and trader, and then an industrialist in cotton mills.

Interestingly, for this year's AIB meeting in Manchester, three of my uncles studied there, because Manchester was a global center for textiles, textile engineering, and textile chemicals. Returning there will therefore carry a special meaning for me.

Without being conscious of it, I chose what you in business schools would describe as a "blue ocean". I did not choose the established textile field, where my uncles were already deeply experienced and highly successful. But I chose to start with the tire company, which was a new investment of the holding company. There was some risk associated with it because of the economy, because of the time in Türkiye. It was not two years later we had a coup d'état. The factory was young, and we had a lot of difficulties. I chose to work there because it was something new. I thought I could grow together with the company.

That choice involved risk, and my uncles appreciated that I was willing to take it. I never complained about beginning in a complex, demanding business. The tire industry is sophisticated and operationally challenging, but it taught me a great deal. It also taught me something I often share with younger professionals: you may not always begin with the job you love, but if you approach it with commitment and curiosity, you can learn to love the job.

#### ASSUMING LEADERSHIP ROLES

Having an open mind in business is important, which I also learned from my uncles. At the age of 30, I received my first real leadership assignment. I was appointed general manager of Kordsa, which was then a relatively small company producing tire reinforcement materials, adjacent to the tire industry. Over time, Kordsa grew into one of the most important companies in our portfolio. With that assignment, I became part of strategy meetings and asked to join discussions about strategy going forward. It was an important step from managing operations to contributing to long-term direction.

After that period, the group was undertaking a strategic review of its portfolio. All these things were new for me, but I learned on the way. A key element: In 1987, Türkiye was led by Turgut Özal, whose market-oriented and outward-looking approach encouraged investment, entrepreneurship, and stronger connections with Europe. It was a very motivating and encouraging period for Türkiye with

increasing foreign investment. Sabancı was one of the pioneers bringing foreign capital and developing partnerships with European companies first, and then American companies second.

The governance dimension of those partnerships was particularly formative. As the local partner, we often encountered the assumption that foreign partners would control 51%. Our position was different: if they wanted Sabancı as their partner, the partnership had to be 50-50, because we saw ourselves as equals. And that principle became critical to Sabancı's growth, and in many ways, reflected Türkiye's own development journey. I feel very privileged that I was part of the team who negotiated 50-50 joint ventures. They raised the essential questions: What is family? What is business? What is right for the company? What is right for the partners? My uncles were brilliant businessmen and not only that, being six siblings helped make them collective decision makers because they had to convince each other, which improved the quality of decisions. In a 50-50 joint venture, you learn that fair governance requires humility. You leave your egos, your early recent judgments behind, and you focus on what is right for the business. What is right for the business is right for the partners. This was fundamental to my understanding of trust-based governance. It also showed me how leaders can discipline their personal preferences in favor of institutional benefit.

When we were founding the university, I heard a great deal about interdisciplinarity, and then when you look into it, interdisciplinary is to work together, to design, to think together first, then doing it. It's not like I bring my coffee and you bring your cake and we eat it together. No. It is building and making it together. I think it is important when you are building up teams because I believe that business is about teams. Developing businesses is about teams and a very important aspect of my career was that 50-50 joint venture journey.

In the 1990s, as competitiveness and globalization became central themes, we also undertook total quality journeys across the Group. The most important lesson I learned from total quality was simple: in lasting success, it is never "me"; it is always "we."

Globalization brought another dimension of learning: to be able to go to different countries, to work together with different cultures and to succeed together. By that time, we already had been partners with DuPont, with Bridgestone of Japan, with Bekaert of Belgium, so different cultures, partnerships, and started manufacturing going to Europe, to Indonesia, to Brazil, so going into different cultures, also Egypt. These were the first experiences we had being part of this global world. But there was so much merit about being a global player, that you can serve your customers the way you serve the world. This journey was critical for me. When my uncle Sakıp Sabancı passed away in 2004, two of my uncles were still alive and active, yet they chose me to succeed him as Chair of the Board. That marked a new era. In every company, transitions are important; in family companies, generational transitions are especially decisive.

## SABANCI LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

**[SS]:** Generational transitions closely relates to the theme of this conference. This is fascinating. This is the 100th year anniversary of the company's founding, and you have successfully transformed the firm into a professionally managed and well-respected one. As of last year, for the first time in its history, Sabancı Holding is led by a non-family member which is most remarkable. This type of transition in a family business is quite difficult, but it seems to have been managed quite well. What were the most important factors that influenced Sabancı's experience in managing generational succession in a family business while growing into a multinational enterprise.

**[GS]:** The answer is sensible, rational, and consistently applied governance. Of course, inside that statement there is a long history. Because my father had already died, transition was not so smooth because it was not an expected lifetime for my grandfather. He died when he was 60 years old. And my uncle who succeeded him was only 32 years old. So that was a sudden transition. And I think that experience taught the previous generation very important lessons. They've always been very sensible and rational and objective about good governance and how to lead the company for generations to come. That was always in their planning, and the desires and expectations of the founders are very important for a smooth transition and for smooth governance in the time during my uncle's tenure, who after my grandfather was chair for 36 years.

When my uncle passed away and I succeeded him, we had to ask again: how should this company be governed and how should this portfolio be carried forward? It had to be collective learning and decision making. We worked a lot together to define the next path forward for Sabancı. The 50-50 joint ventures had prepared us for disciplined governance, and our 1997 international IPO was another milestone. Becoming a public company significantly strengthened our sense of accountability. My uncles and my family took that responsibility very seriously. When I became Chair, we simply followed the requirements and discipline of a strong public company: how to build strategy, how to make collective decisions, and how to preserve management effectiveness while strengthening governance. The work of those 21 years created the foundation for the professional leadership transition that followed.

Hayri Çulhacı was already on our board. We've known him for many years, he was well known to the institution. And it was time. Equally important, the governance processes, decision-making mechanisms, audits, and management systems were in place. In that sense, Sabancı was institutionally ready for professional leadership. The transition was also well received by the investment community, which is essential for a public company. I'm proud of this because I hope that Sabancı will be a good example for the next family businesses that are coming out in Türkiye and also emerging markets: continuity is strongest when it is supported by trust, professionalism, and institutional discipline.

## LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

**[AY]:** You have led the transformation of the Sabancı group of companies all these years and you've been a role model in the position of a leader in this transformation. In your description of your growth as a businesswoman a few minutes ago, you touched upon some of the principles that guided your pathway. For instance, you talked about collective decision-making, having a blue ocean strategy mindset, about 50-50 joint ventures. You talked about good governance, trust-based, shared governance. I think these are very illustrative, teaching points to both our colleagues and our students. Could you tell us whether there were any other principles that guided your leadership? What made you the successful transformational leader that you were in developing and growing the Sabancı Group of Companies?

**[GS]:** I like the word "becoming." Leadership is not a fixed identity; it develops through experience, responsibility, and reflection. My own leadership evolved over time. Different moments require different leadership capabilities, and different people require different forms of guidance. One cannot claim to be and should not be always the same kind of leader. I have always considered important the team's skills.

Clarity is one of the most important responsibilities of leadership. Clarity is important both in communication and in direction. It's very important for a leader living in a country like mine where crisis is part of life. People often describe me as energetic and active, but in moments of crisis I can become very calm and quiet. I believe that it is the role of leadership to be aware of the circumstances and to be able to see the bigger picture.

Another principle is that leadership is never an individual performance. It's always together. I never talk about leadership about me. It's about the team. It's about the task. It's about the plan. I try to listen before making decisions, while also recognizing that there are moments when experience and instinct must be shared clearly. Leadership is more about giving space for creativity, for thinking and rethinking, which is important. Those are my insights. I believe good people make good business. Talent, trust, and shared purpose are the foundation of results.

Through my work in business and through Sabancı University, some academics have described my approach as anticipatory leadership. Others have called it transformative leadership. I see these as reflections of one central responsibility: to prepare institutions for the future. Anticipation of the future and building systems, developing people and achieving results for the future does require a lot of collective thinking together, collective designing together, and collective influencing of each other.

## EMERGING ECONOMY CONTEXT

**[WN]:** Considering your company operates in an emerging economy with all the characteristics of emerging economies, how has the local context influenced Sabancı Holding's accomplishments? What were the ad-

**vantages and disadvantages of being associated with an emerging economy in general and Türkiye specifically.**

[GS]: First, let's start with the positive part. Emerging implies that there are a lot of things you can do better. That excites me and my team. I know it excited my uncles that we can do something for this country that would make a difference, that will change something, that will be exemplary. That sense of purpose is a powerful source of motivation. It was present when we founded Sabancı University. Private universities were still new in Türkiye, and we were only the third. Our ambition was not simply to establish another institution, but to contribute to the improvement of higher education and to introduce a model that could make a difference.

Our energy business followed a similar logic. Electricity power generation and electricity distribution was in the hands of a government monopoly. But since Türkiye had grown at such a pace in the 90s, the public system alone could not meet demand. There was a lack of electricity and they had to give permission for the private sector to take part in this development. Sabancı entered this field with a sense of responsibility not only toward the company, but toward the sector and the country. We have a reputation of being a trusted partner in Ankara. We would not guide them or ask from them anything that is only for Sabancı. We advocated for what would be better for the country, the sector, and the company together. And that is how we were able to help build what is now one of Türkiye's largest and most successful electricity generation and distribution platforms.

Of course, there are challenges in an emerging economy. It's not only companies that are learning, but policymakers are also learning. In that environment, dialogue becomes essential. The challenge is to remain constructive, to protect trust, and to keep the long-term path open even when circumstances are volatile.

We have come a long way. I am proud that our portfolio includes one of Türkiye's most trusted private banks and one of its most trusted and successful energy businesses. They're both regulated, both requiring very sensitive relationship management, but I think we built up the principles and the standard operating procedures for these companies' businesses.

**[SS]: Continuing on that theme, firms in emerging markets by necessity have to respond rapidly to changing market conditions and they are more agile by necessity. How has Sabancı Holding's agility helped the firm in international market entry and ongoing operations across markets? As a part of that, how has Sabancı Holding navigated geopolitical considerations in international operations?**

[GS]: Agility is essential, but it must be balanced with institutionalization. As companies grow, they need stronger processes, committees, and collective decision-making mechanisms. At first glance, those structures may appear to slow agility. The leadership task is to build systems that create discipline without suppressing initiative. You need motivated people, clear processes, and space for innovation at the same time. This is one of the central dilemmas of leadership, like balancing short-term performance with

long-term resilience. Agility is necessary to compete, especially in a world where competition is intense and new global players are emerging. You need to be agile without disturbing, without working against having systems and defining processes.

**[SS]: Going a bit further, how has this agility assisted the firm in its geopolitical encounters in terms of expansion abroad and essential day-to-day business? It's an unavoidable external force as opposed to an internal decision.**

[GS]: Geopolitical complexity makes risk management a core leadership capability. Sabancı has always benefited from a strong banking culture, and the discipline of risk management from our financial businesses influenced the broader Group. But business requires taking risks. The issue is not to avoid all mistakes; that would be unrealistic. The issue is to recognize mistakes early and manage them professionally. We once acquired a small operation in Iran. In time, we understood that it was not the right decision. We wrote it off and exited. Timing is important and it's also not about not making any mistakes. We may make mistakes, but it is how soon and how professionally you manage yours.

#### WOMEN AS LEADERS

**[AY]: You have been recognized as a very successful businesswoman. For instance, you have been listed among the world's most powerful women as a female member of the European Roundtable for Industry, and you've been frequently listed on other lists as a successful achieving businesswoman. How has the role of businesswomen changed in corporate settings in Türkiye and especially at Sabancı? And what advice might you give to women who are rising in corporate settings in emerging markets for them to also advance, to excel in their corporate responsibilities?**

[GS]: My journey now spans nearly five decades. When I began, I really didn't have any woman role models. I have brilliant uncles, from whom I learned a great deal. My first and most important leadership skills came from my grandmother as she managed the house - six boys and then daughter-in-laws and then grandchildren - with authority, balance, and wisdom. We were a big family, and we all lived summers together in Istanbul, so during our summers together in Istanbul, I observed her leadership closely. It shaped my understanding of care, responsibility, and quiet strength.

What matters most is the purpose you want to serve and the values that guide you. I grew up in a family where business was taken seriously, and business results had to be objective; you have to make money. But you need to know that there is another world that needs your attention, especially those who are less fortunate.

That is why foundation and non-profit work being part of the community are very important. Philanthropy and being part of the community have always been central to the Sabancı identity. These are the values that I inherited, and I am grateful to those values when it comes to encouraging women. On the question of women in leadership, I under-

stand why lists such as “most powerful women” or “most successful women” can matter: they create visibility and role models. I hope they encourage younger women. My own awakening came in the early 1990s, when I was invited to a conference by DuPont in Wilmington, Delaware to talk to their women employees as a role model. Until then, I had not thought of myself in that way. That invitation made me realize I had something to say. So, the gender issue, diversity issue, they are business imperatives that any leader who wants to be successful should not miss them. It's good for business to have women at the table, on task forces, on committees. You can see the value of diversity in the results of businesses. So, it was when I woke up on this issue, I understood the value of my own contribution to the business.

And then, I became more vocalized and I worked on it in different platforms and now the numbers have improved. In my country, Türkiye, women engagement in business is increasing.

When people ask me about the future, I say the future will be better because we will have more women leaders in every aspect. There will be more women decision making in different places in the world. We are not yet where we need to be, and much work remains, but I think progress is there and I'm very proud of it. Women entrepreneurship is also very interesting in their ability to take risk and their desire to create something. In climate action, for example, I often see women leading with urgency, courage, and openness to change. That gives me confidence.

#### SABANCI UNIVERSITY

**[WN]: The Sabancı University story is particularly remarkable in institution building. As the founding chairwoman of the Sabancı University Board of Trustees, you led the creation of a globally ranked research-oriented university. Could you describe some of your efforts to develop the university into its position as a world leader? What were some of the difficulties you faced? And what advice would you give to leaders of universities in other emerging economies? At the same time, how has your university's partnerships with business helped contribute to talent development within Türkiye?**

[GS]: Founding Sabancı University was a great excitement and responsibility for not only myself, but for the whole family. My uncles were very excited and felt deeply the responsibility for creating something that will make a difference in the higher education of Türkiye. Our aim was not to repeat existing models, but to establish a university that would raise standards and introduce a distinctive approach. I believe we achieved that.

For anybody who would think about founding a university in an emerging country, the responsibility is even greater because the resources are so limited that there is no room to waste an opportunity or create something mediocre.

We were able to achieve that, and we were able to find a team that strongly believed in this. With my great respect, our first president, Tosun Terzioğlu was an extraordinary leader who left the head of TÜBİTAK to come to our uni-

versity as president. So, we started with great minds. We started with a research conference that is unique in its sense in the world. Instead of assigning a small committee to design the university, we organized a research conference attended by 52 people from different countries, different disciplines. After the research, the design of the whole faculties, we have three faculties, took about three years to really design everything. That is why I say Sabancı University was interdisciplinary from the first day of its design - not only as a concept, but as an operating principle. The university began education in 1999, and that founding discipline continues to shape it.

Ultimately, what makes a great university is the accomplishments of its alumni. Today, we can see Sabancı University's impact through the achievements of its graduates. Founding the university was challenging but commitment and having the right team made the difference. A university is never only about today. It's about tomorrow and it's about the community and it is about the country.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

**[SS]: Thank you for that explanation. Is there is a final word that you would like to add?**

[GS]: When I look at the future of international business, I believe we are moving from one era to another. The previous era of globalization was shaped largely by efficiency, scale and integration. These will remain important. But they are no longer enough. The next era will be shaped by trust, talent, sustainability, technology, institutional quality and stakeholder legitimacy.

This is why the work of educators and scholars matters so deeply. You are not only studying international business. You are helping shape the leaders who will define its next chapter. Future leaders will need knowledge, yes. But they will also need judgment, conscience, clarity and the ability to build trust across generations, cultures and institutions.

In today's diverging world, this may be the most important responsibility of leadership: to see change before it arrives, to prepare others for it, and to ensure that no generation is left behind.

I am deeply grateful for this honor. I hope my experience can contribute to the global conversation on international business, leadership and the future of institutions.

Thank you very much.

**[SS]: Thank you for sharing these details, which serve as a role model for future generations**

**[WN]: Thank you. This was very illuminating. This interview will be very much appreciated by AIB Insights readers.**

**[AY]: A heartfelt thank you. This was an amazing discussion, very informative about your remarkable career.**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Güler Sabancı** was the first woman to lead Sabancı Holding, one of Türkiye's most respected conglomerates. She transformed the company over two decades from 2004 to 2025. During this period, she led the Group's transformation in clean energy and spearheaded the creation of a national champion in this field. In 2025, she stepped down from the Board of Sabancı Holding and continues her leadership as Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Sabancı Foundation, Founding Chair of the Sabancı University Board of Trustees, and Chair of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum. She is frequently included in "World's Most Powerful Women" lists.

**William Newbury** is a Professor and the Ryder Eminent Scholar of Global Business at Florida International University (FIU) and an Academy of International Business (AIB) Fellow. Bill was founding Chair of the FIU Department of International Business (2018-2023) after chairing the Department of Management & International Business (2015-2018). He is Editor of *AIB Insights* and President of the Consortium of Undergraduate International Business Education. Bill is also a Past Chair of the Academy of Management International Management Division, the AIB Latin America Chapter and the Strategic Management Society Global Strategy Interest Group.

**Saeed Samiee** is the Collins Professor of Marketing and International Business at The University of Tulsa. His research has appeared in leading scholarly journals, including the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and *Journal of International Business Studies*. He is the 2017 recipient of the AMA Global Marketing SIG's Significant Contributions to Global Marketing Award and Excellence in Global Marketing Research Award, as well as Journal of International Marketing's Thorelli and Cavusgil Awards. He is an AIB Fellow and a Distinguished Fellow of the Academy of Marketing Science.

**Attila Yaprak** is a Professor of International Business and Marketing (Emeritus) at Wayne State University and an AIB Fellow. His scholarship has appeared in the *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of International Marketing*, and *Political Psychology*. A winner of the Academy of Marketing Science's Outstanding Marketing Professor Award, he is the recipient of the American Marketing Association's Thorelli Award. He has taught at universities in France, Germany, Spain, and Türkiye and has consulted for the World Trade Organization in China, Nepal, Philippines, and Thailand.

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