

Interview: A moment with Essam Al Tamimi - Founder & Senior Partner of Al Tamimi & Company

Essam Al Tamimi did not build the region's largest Arab-owned law advisory and become recognised as one of his generation's brightest and most generous legal minds by luck, nor by "sitting on a beach reading a book" of the latter he is adamant. Like many of the best in this tough profession, his is a story of sheer, sheer determination, sweat and tears. It is a tale of great success born of long hours and clear vision. But unlike many of the most high profile of his peers, and lesser known to the public, his has been a journey coloured early on with academic failures, isolation and despair, making everything he has built today even more inspiring.

The early years

It will surprise many to learn that Essam was far from top of his class at school in the UAE. He was, in fact, one of the lowest achievers of his classes throughout, and across all subjects, at school. He can not recall what intrigued him about law originally, "Possibly a movie or something" he laughs. As fortune had it at that time, to encourage students in to law, lower grades were accepted and Essam made it into Al Ain University law school - where everything took a 360 degree turn. "My life totally switched. I was suddenly in the library four hours a day, every day. Law lit something in me. After being the lowest in my school classes, I became a star pupil at college and I was soon encouraged to consider applying to the Ivy League law courses in the US."

College in the States proved a tough and life defining path. "I thought I knew everything about law when I left for Harvard. But when I got there I was at a great disadvantage that could've threatened everything. Coming from a simple, Bedouin life, Harvard was a huge culture shock. I also struggled with the language and learning style." Essam recalls a heart-breaking misery and loneliness where he questioned his fundamental plan to follow law. But it proved to be an important challenge which honed the determination and single-vision focus that Essam attributes his many successes to date to. He made it through college in the US with a stronger determination to succeed than ever - "It became about more than surviving college. I decided there, I didn't want to become just a lawyer - I decided I would become one of the very best lawyers."

Building the Foundation

This meant hard work. It meant years of typing his own pleadings in his bedroom at night, with no money to afford a clerk. It meant years of working 16 hour days. This dedication of course paid off and today he and his partners - whose crucial part in the Al Tamimi & Company story Essam is keen to highlight - run the largest local law firm in the Middle East.

In light of the empire that Essam and his partners have built, he has been able to reallocate these hours so that one-third of his time is now non-billable. A third of this time is spent contributing to law and regulation development around the region, a responsibility he takes very seriously. "There's so much to be done and this work is a real passion of mine. You'll find an independent judicial system and set of laws at the heart of every peaceful and leading business market. Where my experience and passion for the cause can be of help, I give it - invited or otherwise" he says with a smile.

Strengthening the rule of law in the Middle East is a focus going forward at this stage in Essam's career. As is writing and lecturing. He is currently in the final stages of publishing another book on arbitration and researching for a paper on women and the law in Islam, something Essam feels has not been examined

sufficiently until now.

For the firm, he is working on nothing less than dominating every market in the Middle East. “We’ve chosen the best partners and people in all of our markets and even through the down-turn and Arab spring, we’ve never taken one step back. We believe that Al Tamimi will be the biggest Arab law firm in every market in the Middle East.”

Life outside the Law

Unbelievably, Essam does have ‘spare time’. He has learned the art of time management and the value of an hour which is vital when balancing a young family and such a busy work life. “I love to be with my family. I’m currently teaching the children archery, a shared hobby, which is great fun. I also love to be outdoors – to fish, to ride horseback, to camp. I am a date tree that needs to be in the desert. I love to travel, but I couldn’t live anywhere else in the world.”

And this home-loving nature extends to his favourite choice of restaurant, which he reports to be his home, and no less than his own cooking – “You’ll never eat better fish, anywhere in the world, than the fish I cook”, he boasts, interestingly, with the same energy that is apparent when he talks about law.

Essam considers himself a “simple man”, which is something very important to him. “I eat simply, I live simply and I must end every day simply”.

Do these increasing non-billable hours, all this camping, cooking and ‘simplicity’ mean that Essam may be losing his edge a little? Not at all, aside from his family, his biggest rush is always winning a case – “I’m a hunter. I need to hunt and I live for the kill.”

Despite early lifetime contribution awards under his belt, his mark firmly made on regional rule of law and surely nothing left to prove, Essam Al Tamimi still lives for the win. There’s nothing less than Al Tamimi’s regional domination and evolution of the Middle East’s judiciary on his plate now.