

An Interview with Essam Al Tamimi: How Al Tamimi's Newsletter Evolved with the Legal Landscape it Represents

April 2016

Can you give a brief overview about how Law Update started?

25 years ago, we were a very small law firm. There was myself, a secretary, office admin and two assistant local lawyers and we mainly focused on litigation. I was, at the time, wearing two hats; one working with Clifford Chance and one handling my local advocacy before the Courts.

At the time, there was one legal newsletter, in English, that was circulated among the small legal community in Dubai, with updates about what was happening in terms of laws, regulations, draft laws and so on.

However, the newsletter had no updates about judgments, and I felt that it would be extremely useful for the community to have updates, in English, about laws and regulations, which included the details of our Ministers and the Cabinet, the heads of different authorities and departments, as well as three leading judgments each month that were released from the Court of Cassation.

At the time, my small team, who were at full capacity, would find the judgments for me and I would translate and summarise them, usually between 10pm and midnight when I had some free time at home. I would then bring them to my secretary on a floppy disk and we would then publish. We would print out our newsletter and send to our list of contacts, which at the time was about 50 people, and we also kept them at our reception.

Almost immediately, we received a very positive response from the expat legal community, who started asking for more and more copies, as well as from local and international universities who were hungry for information for their students.

Since day one, we have not missed a single edition of our newsletter. I continued to type them up myself for over a year at the beginning, and choose the judgments that were included for a further ten years. Every time I travelled by car to Abu Dhabi or by plane abroad, I would bring around 50 judgments with me and mark and summarise them, to ensure the right information was included in our newsletters. As the firm grew, ambitious young lawyers would write articles, usually about something happening in the community, and we continued to build on our newsletter, the design, the brand, the name, and so on. The newsletter helped us build up an excellent library of judgments, and as our business development and marketing teams have expanded, our Law Update has continued to develop, to resemble what it does today. It is now one of our best marketing and information tools and I'm very proud of what we've achieved.

What did the legal landscape look like when you started Al Tamimi over 25 years ago?

The legal landscape was very primitive with very few firms. There were only about four western firms across the UAE, a small pool of local lawyers and around three major local law firms, which predominantly focused only on litigation.

The courts were mainly Shariah courts, and civil courts only dealt with shipping and banking matters. There were very few databases available containing information on judgments, records, updates on the UAE laws and regulations. The majority of information came from the Law Gazette, however it was not published very regularly, so the Law Update filled a huge gap there.

What was your vision for the firm?

My vision for the firm has not changed at all. From day one, I have wanted to become the leading law firm in the UAE and the Middle East, offering the quality legal advice to our clients and the wider legal community.

Has this vision translated into what you have created now?

I am very pleased with what has been achieved so far, but we are not there yet. There are always new opportunities and new levels to reach. We have wonderful talent within the firm, very good lawyers, excellent ethics and a very high level of professionalism. We are also well established in the UAE and across the region. As I always say to my colleagues, we are not here to set up, we are here to lead, and I want to continue to strive to be the number one firm in every jurisdiction we have a presence in.

I am proud of the size of the firm we have created and the talent we have managed to attract, and also the type of partnership we have established. We are now 55 partners at the firm, with a unique and wonderful combination of minds that has helped the firm to grow. We have withstood challenges; economic and others, and during these times, we have remained true to our vision and become what we are today.

What is your proudest moment in relation to Al Tamimi, and can you discuss a few of your key achievements?

We started as a small litigation advocacy firm, and we have grown to become a firm providing the full range of corporate services to clients across various practices and sectors.

I am very proud that we have created such a dynamic firm, acting and representing leading multinationals on a local and regional basis.

How has the legal landscape in the UAE changed over the past 25 years, and what does it look like today?

25 years ago, the UAE had a small, village-type legal system, where local people learned how to do court work, drafting laws and litigation themselves. Today, the legal system in the UAE is extremely sophisticated, whether looking at the DIFC or the Abu Dhabi Global Market, and the country has grown to become a true international business hub. The UAE's legal sector is now home to some of the best talent from around the world, specialising in a range of industries including banking, insurance, technology and more.

What have been some key moments of change?

A major turning point for the UAE was the opening the Jebel Ali Free Zone, which saw a lot of international businesses starting to look to Dubai and the UAE as a base for their operations. The establishment of TECOM's free zones, such as Dubai Internet City and Dubai Media City which followed, attracted many companies operating in these sectors and of course, a highly skilled workforce to complement this. A major turning point, the DIFC, followed, which saw Dubai and the UAE become a hub for regional financial markets, and with this came the attraction of top talent and leading firms and institutions from around the world.

Looking at the legal system in particular, as different companies arrived in Dubai and the UAE, an international level of legal services was required. The opening of DIFC, for example, meant different levels

of laws were needed across to support this expansion, and the regulators responded which has seen the legal system operate on par with international centres. The expertise held by legislators and lawyers are also at a much higher level as a result, with over 80 international law firms operating in Dubai alone today.

What do you think the legal landscape will look like in the UAE in 25 years from now?

I believe we will see greater challenges, and as a result, greater opportunities. As internationals continue to focus on the UAE, the country will have to respond by further developing its legal system and policies. Whether this is relating to the role of women, human rights, labour, bilateral treaties, for example, the UAE will see that what was acceptable five years ago, will not be acceptable in 25 years from now. We therefore need a highly sophisticated legal system to support this growth and a very well designed strategy to tackle the challenges which I like to call opportunities.

In addition to this, with the growth of the digital environment, business is being conducted differently to the way it was and there will be another level of legislation required to protect this new environment – one that I don't think any of us are able to envisage right now.

What advice would you give to the business and legal community – any key tips to doing business in the region?

For the business community, my advice would be to focus on enhancing your internal corporate governance and ensuring your policies and procedures are of global standards. This is extremely important for the future. Business is changing and this requires appropriate business behaviour; sound human resources, accounting and reporting procedures, IT systems, and a very employee-friendly working environment.

On an international level, the UAE and the region provide wonderful opportunities for businesses, including tax advantages, re-export hubs, international treaties, exemption of tariffs and customs duties, and companies should take advantage of these, and look to structure themselves within the region to benefit from this.

For the legal community, we are still very short on local and regional talent. Most of the talent here is either western or western-educated, and we need to ensure that good training programmes are in place for the next generation of local lawyers. We need our law schools to be of international standard and to provide a level of education for our future lawyers and judges to be the best they can be. This is what will help us to succeed in the future. We also need to promote the legal profession to our young local students as a profession that is rewarding and attractive.