

The thing about ... Ahmad Bin Hezeem



Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the emir of Dubai, admires a statue of his father, the driving force behind the expansion of Dubai in the 1960s. The statue was discovered in one of the storage rooms of the Dubai Court and brought to light by Ahmad bin Hezeem

Recently in Dubai, Asian-mena Counsel's Patrick Dransfield photographed Ahmad Bin Hezeem, senior partner at BSA Ahmad Bin Hezeem & Associates (BSA) and also put to him a series of questions on behalf of the In-House Community.

ASIAN-MENA COUNSEL: BSA was founded in 2001 and you joined the firm in 2014. What attracted you to the BSA platform and how has it evolved under your leadership?

Ahmad Bin Hezeem: BSA was established by a group of ex-Clifford Chance lawyers wanting to harness their entrepreneurial spirit, energy, ambition, unique heritage and connections, and with that in mind, build a law firm with a difference. Ever since, it has excelled at achieving this vision and today we have offices in eight jurisdictions throughout the Middle East and rights of audience in every country in which we are based. BSA became the first UAE-based law firm to be registered by the DFSA to operate out of DIFC as an Ancillary Service Provider in 2006 – a highlight.

My predecessor Dr Rashid Bin Shabib offered

me a rare and very exciting opportunity to join BSA as senior. I took on this position because I found BSA's vision compelling and I wanted to be part of it. Under my leadership, the firm has strengthened its vision of working according to the pillars of providing local knowledge and experience, being ethical and approachable, and working with integrity and commitment.

I brought my extensive government experience and my practical experience of working as an official to the firm. My skills have integrated well with those of the other partners. This integration has become manifest in our unique approach to client satisfaction and service.

AMC: How has the local and regional legal market in the Middle East developed during



the past decade and what are the challenges for local and regional legal providers?

ABH: The UAE has undergone dramatic economic changes in the last 15 years – they have been felt in Dubai and Abu Dhabi particularly. The booming real-estate market and related economic activity dissipated during the economic crisis of the late 2000s. Many international law firms' response strategies were shown to be wanting. They did not fully take into account local culture; and ran into problems – especially in 2014.

For BSA, the economic crash was a time of expansion and business development. We were able to occupy the space left by the international law firms' rearrangements. We seized the opportunity to fill the gap they left. We successfully won and maintained clients as time and time again we proved our in-depth knowledge and intuition when delivering legal advice.

AMC: During your career you have held a variety of in-house role – how have these experiences helped in the development of client services at BSA?

ABH: I brought 25 years' experience and am fortunate to count myself among the top national lawyers in the UAE. I happen to be the only national lawyer to have served in all major

law-enforcement and judicial institutions – in the Dubai Police Department, the Crown Prince of Dubai's office and the Ruler Court of Dubai and working as Chief of Dubai Courts. These experiences provide a deep and unrivalled insight into the workings of UAE law and benefit my clients.

My qualifications have helped me to gain an accurate understanding of clients' needs. Additionally, the experience of studying abroad served to broaden my understanding of other cultures and their legal systems.

AMC: How has the in-house legal community developed? Are there special challenges facing Middle East and North African in-house counsel?

ABH: The in-house community in the UAE has developed into a well-established network of legal professionals. The community's main challenge is that they are required to play a generalist role while fulfilling their legal, ethical and compliance responsibilities. The role of in-house legal counsel encompasses far more than that of a private practice lawyer specialising in a certain area of law. At this stage of the country's development, it would serve companies well to accommodate more local lawyers in their in-house teams to benefit from their understanding of local laws.

AMC: Please describe the firm's regional and international footprint – in what ways does BSA attempt to provide an integrated service for clients and how do you link up with other law firms, both regionally and internationally?

ABH: We have a physical and actual presence throughout the GCC – beside Dubai we have offices in KSA, Oman, Ras Al Khaimah, Iraq and Beirut as well as one international office in Paris, which has extended into partnerships with firms in Morocco, Spain and Istanbul. We are committed to expanding beyond the GCC region and are focused on forming mutually beneficial partnerships with local firms who, like us, are deeply rooted in cultures of their respective countries and are able to provide in-depth local knowledge.

AMC: Richard Susskind has challenged law firms to be on top of technological advances to best provide value service to clients. How does BSA effectively use technologically-

advanced solutions in its services to clients?

ABH: We fully understand Professor Richard Susskind's viewpoint and our vision is aligned with his. Our perspective, however, diverges slightly. While we fully agree that technology is an integral part of providing legal services, it can never provide the same value as human interaction.

Here at BSA we pride ourselves on providing clients with top-level legal advice from our friendly and approachable staff and, this service cannot be replicated by technology. However, internally yes, we are intensively investing and paying great attention to technological advances and ways of using new technological platforms to improve our offering. In fact, we have recently at the renowned Gitex Convention, unveiled a VAT app. Our aim with this app is to solve our clients' VAT related queries and provide clarification on how the implementation of VAT will affect their businesses. We are proud to be the first law firm in the region to offer such a service to clients.

AMC: Recently Susskind has turned his attention to the development of "virtual courts". What is your view on the potential of technology with regards to the process of resolving disputes, in the Middle East and generally?

ABH: I believe that the future of dispute resolution lies in virtual courts. I introduced the e-judge and e-court system five years ago while working in Dubai Courts. Under this system, the judge and other participants in the legal suite would interact and communicate through a sophisticated network of databases and document management systems, improving efficiencies of time, cost and logistics. The system worked extremely well and provided lawyers and judges with a fresh approach to dispute resolution.

AMC: You also serve on the advisory board of the Law Department of UAE University – what advice would you give a young person interested in a career in the legal industry today?

ABH: Young people who choose a career in the legal sector should be aware that to be successful it no longer suffices to be well versed in the laws of their own jurisdiction – professionals also need to have a good handle

on international laws. The legal sector is developing an increasingly international focus. Students must be prepared to broaden their horizons and skills for international requirements. To succeed in this increasingly competitive market I would recommend proficiency in at least two languages since Dubai in particular, but also the UAE, is deploying a very ambitious strategy to become a central hub for international business and tourism.

AMC: What is your hinterland, your interests outside of the firm? How do you control your time so that you can pursue them?

ABH: My passion is sailing. I strive to strike a balance between work and leisure. It is important to have a clear separation of work life and home life. If you are bringing your work home I believe this can adversely affect your familial relationships so I always try to make time for relaxation in the evenings and on weekends. I love to spend my leisure time sailing my boat and allowing the fresh sea air to clear my thoughts, that's how I can come back to the office revitalised, refreshed and ready to approach our challenges from a new perspective.

Ahmad Bin Hezeem has more than 25 years' experience working in legal and judicial governmental institutions in Dubai. His litigation experience includes civil law, criminal law, family and private clients, and breach of contracts.

For nine years, he served at Dubai Police in various locations of law enforcement including the stations and headquarters, as well as teaching at the Dubai Police Academy. In 2005, he moved away from teaching and served at the executive office of the Crown Prince of Dubai as the deputy director general of the Ruler Court of Dubai Government.

Hezeem has also worked as the director general of the Dubai Courts, where he engaged in the daily operations of the courts and judicial institutions at the local and the federal level for more than eight years.

He is a former member of strategic governmental bodies such as the Executive Council of Dubai, The Judicial Council of Dubai, The Federal Judicial Council and the Dubai Judicial Institution's Board.