

Lord Wolfson speech: UK-Middle East Legal Services Week

Welcome, Ahlan Wa Sahlan, Broochim Habaim. I would like to start by saying how pleased I am to host the UK-Middle East Legal Services Week,

It's a pleasure be able to address so many esteemed colleagues representing law firms, chambers and international businesses from here in the UK and all over the Middle East, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Qatar and beyond.

I would particularly like to give a warm welcome to Derek Sweeting QC, Chair of The Bar Council and I. Stephanie Boyce, President of The Law Society of England and Wales, who will both be speaking to you during the course of the UK-Middle East Legal Services Week.

As minister, I have responsibility for the Ministry of Justice's international trading interests, including promoting the UK's legal services around the world. This brings me to the focus of this event – the Middle East legal market. Over the past year the region has seen rapid acceleration in multiple areas such as construction arbitration, TMT, financial services, litigation and project finance.

In short, the pipeline of opportunity remains buoyant and here, today, there are many exciting opportunities for us all to seize, all of which hold the promise of mutual future prosperity.

We have, through this forum, an opportunity to deepen the relationship between the UK and countries across the Middle East, by connecting businesses in our respective nations to potential new partners – whilst exposing ourselves to new ideas and perspectives along the way.

This year will see the rescheduled Dubai Expo 2020 come to life. Our colleagues at the Department for International Trade and in the GREAT campaign team are leading on the UK's involvement, including a country pavilion that will host a 6-month programme of business, cultural, educational and tourism activity.

Expo will put Dubai and the rest of the UAE in the global spotlight and set the pathway forward in terms of economic recovery and renewal post pandemic.

That's why we intend to take our campaign to Dubai in November with an in-person presence at the UK Pavilion within the Expo site. I know this will be a fantastic opportunity for the legal sector and one that I hope you can all get involved in.

Beyond the UAE, there are exciting mega projects taking place in Saudi Arabia as it strives to achieve its 2030 vision of diversifying the economy and reducing its dependence on oil and seeks to establish a global financial centre in the region.

With the World Cup on the horizon, Qatar has risen in international prominence and with that comes a greater demand for legal expertise. It's little wonder the likes of Allen & Overy, Dentons and Eversheds Sutherland have well established offices in Doha.

And the signing of the Abraham Accords has spurred a new wave of expanded business opportunities in and between Israel and the UAE in a wide range of sectors which rely on legal services.

Over the next few days, I would like you to sit back and enjoy what I expect will be some very lively discussions and personal anecdotes that are drawn from those experiences that have both challenged and shaped our legal careers.

It's an opportunity for colleagues across the UK to better understand the practicalities of working in jurisdictions across the Middle East and for in-country counterparts to hear more about the UK legal sector and the important role it plays at international level.

Before joining the government, my work at the Commercial Bar took me to many parts of the world, but few were as exciting, or filled with as much opportunity, as the Middle East. I acted for and against companies and investment funds throughout the region, straddling cultural, religious and political divides.

Many of you will have started your law career at a university here in the UK – I was fortunate to begin my journey at Selwyn College, Cambridge – where I, among my fellow scholars, made lasting connections that later played out in our professional lives as barristers, lawyers, solicitors and in-house counsel.

It's those networks, whether through our studies or our careers, that allow us to explore opportunities for collaboration and enable us as legal professionals to flourish within a highly competitive global market for collective economic benefit.

If the global pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we should continue to grow those networks, while defining where we can have the most impact and navigating the best course of action.

That is our gift as legal professionals and we should not take it for granted.

Finally, I want to thank you all for taking the time to attend our UK-Middle East Legal Services Week. I hope you find it as informative as you do useful, and I look forward to the prospect of meeting some of you in person over the coming months.

Thank you and enjoy!