

TRANSCRIPT Episode 31 – Hana Al Khatib

Jonathan: Today I'm joined by Hana Al Khatib, partner at Global Advocacy and Legal Counsel's Abu Dhabi office. With over 15 years of experience, Hana advises local, regional, and international corporate clients and has particular expertise in dispute resolution, including arbitration, as well as civil and commercial litigation. She specializes in advising on corporate-related matters, including structuring and restructuring, incorporation and licensing, employment disputes, and commercial transactions. Hana is bilingual and is a member of AmCham Abu Dhabi and the Young Lawyers Association, which is where we know each other from. Hana, thank you so much for joining me today.

Hana: Thank you so much, Jonathan. First, thank you for the opportunity. I really love the idea of the podcast. It's my first time doing one, so I'm sure it's going to be fun. And thanks to AIJA for connecting us and bringing together different regions—like the U.S. and the Middle East—so we can discuss how systems work differently but also similarly.

Jonathan: The language of law is very similar across the world, across languages. It's something I didn't fully appreciate until I started doing cross-border work. I was just talking to another colleague yesterday, and even in Chinese, legal language maps over surprisingly well. Once you understand the concepts, they translate fairly easily.

Hana: Yes, exactly. And the stress we hold is similar everywhere.

Jonathan: I noticed that when I messaged you last night—it was well after 1:00 a.m. your time. Hana, I'd love to hear more about your background. Where did you grow up, and how did you get into law?

Hana: I have a very interesting background. I'm Jordanian-Palestinian and grew up in Jordan, where I studied law. Then I moved to Germany for my LLM, specializing in commercial arbitration and European law. I'm also a U.S. citizen, so there's quite a bit of diversity in my background.

I moved to Abu Dhabi in 2013 and started working with Global as a junior associate. I've been there ever since—about 13 years now—and I've grown with the firm. The work is very diverse, especially in disputes, and I've handled a wide range of matters. I'm also a certified legal project manager and serve as the Middle East and North Africa regional representative for AIJA, helping expand the network in this region.

Jonathan: That's great—and I'm hoping to visit your part of the world next year.

Hana: Please do, we'd love to have you.

Jonathan: So how did you get into law?

Hana: Since I was young, whenever someone asked what I wanted to be, I always said a lawyer. I didn't fully understand what it meant at the time, but I liked the idea of defending people and speaking up. That stayed with me, and I followed that path. I've never regretted it.

Jonathan: That's great to hear. A lot of lawyers feel stuck in the profession, so it's always good to hear someone who genuinely enjoys it. For me, I didn't love law school, but I loved practicing law—especially being on the business advisory side and feeling like part of the client's team.

Hana: Exactly. And I like that there's no routine. Every day is different, especially in disputes. There's always something new, something challenging. I don't like routine, so it keeps things exciting.

Jonathan: What types of clients do you typically represent?

Hana: It's a mix. We work with international companies entering the UAE, family businesses, government and semi-government entities, and clients across many industries—construction, hospitality, healthcare, and more. The UAE is a hub for investors, so we see a wide variety of clients from different jurisdictions.

Jonathan: With everything happening in the region, what's top of mind for people in the UAE right now?

Hana: At first, there was some nervousness. But the government acted quickly and effectively. Their defense systems were strong, communication was clear, and leadership was visible—even going out publicly to reassure people. Economically, we expected more disruption, but business has continued. Investors are still coming, companies are still being set up, and disputes are ongoing. Aside from some disruptions in travel, things have remained stable, which is reassuring.

Jonathan: That's really helpful context. Let's shift to dispute resolution. How do you help clients decide between arbitration and litigation?

Hana: The choice should never be automatic—it should be driven by the client's goals. I always start by asking what they need: speed, enforceability, confidentiality, cost control, or strategic leverage.

In the UAE, arbitration has become more attractive, especially after the 2018 Federal Arbitration Law aligned the system with international standards. Institutions like DIAC and Arbitrate AD have strengthened the ecosystem.

Arbitration works well when cross-border enforcement is needed, when confidentiality is important, or when technical expertise is required. But litigation can be better for urgent relief or simpler, lower-value disputes. The gap between the two has narrowed significantly, and both systems work well here.

Jonathan: What's the longest case you've seen?

Hana: I worked on a construction case that lasted eight years in court and another four years in enforcement—so about 12 years total.

Jonathan: And the shortest?

Hana: Around six to eight months for straightforward cases in court. Arbitration can be similar if simple, but more complex cases can take two to three years.

Jonathan: What about the business culture—are handshake deals still common?

Hana: It used to be more relationship-based and informal, but that has changed significantly. With international investors and larger transactions, everything is now much more formal and documented. Companies rely on legal teams much more than before.

Jonathan: What has your experience been as a woman in the legal field?

Hana: Honestly, I've been fortunate. I've always felt supported—both from my family and within my firm. We have strong female representation. At the partnership level, there are fewer women, but I've never personally experienced discrimination. There's a perception about the Middle East, but in places like the UAE, laws and workplace environments have evolved significantly.

Jonathan: What challenges do international companies face when entering the UAE?

Hana: The system is more complex than it first appears. There are multiple jurisdictions—onshore, free zones, and financial free zones—each with its own rules. Structuring decisions early on have long-term consequences.

Ownership rules, licensing, and regulatory approvals can also be tricky. While setting up a business can be fast, navigating the system requires careful planning. Lawyers add value by connecting the dots—aligning legal requirements with business strategy and ensuring the structure works in practice, not just on paper.

Jonathan: How do language and culture impact your work?

Hana: They shape everything—communication, expectations, and outcomes. Legal terms don't always translate directly, and cultural differences affect negotiation styles, decision-

making, and even what success looks like. In this region, relationships, reputation, and confidentiality often matter just as much as financial outcomes.

Jonathan: How has legal project management influenced your work?

Hana: It's changed my perspective completely. I now see legal work as a structured process with timelines, budgets, and milestones. It helps align legal advice with business realities and improves communication with clients. It also allows us to offer more predictable pricing models and manage matters more efficiently.

Jonathan: Final question—if you weren't a lawyer, what would you be doing?

Hana: I'd be a TV presenter or news anchor. I've always admired how they communicate, ask questions, and think quickly.

Jonathan: I love it. Hana, thank you so much for your time today.

Hana: Thank you, Jonathan. It was a pleasure. And whenever you come to this part of the world, you know who to call.

Jonathan: I'll take you up on that. Talk soon.

Hana: Thank you.