

Middle East practice head opens new firm in Cairo

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Karim Youssef and his new firm's logo

Egyptian **Karim Youssef** has left his role as partner and head of Middle East arbitration at Amereller Legal Consultants in Cairo and Dubai to set up his own firm with a “flagship” arbitration practice.

The eponymous firm, Youssef & Partners, opened in Cairo on 1 April.

“The firm is cosmopolitan in terms of its team, its culture and its caseload,” says Youssef. While it is a full-service firm, he says that commercial and treaty arbitration and diverse and high-end litigation will be its “flagship” areas of practice.

The arbitration team comprises members of his team at Amereller who moved with him and other experienced practitioners who have joined the new firm, including lawyers of various nationalities and Egyptians who have studied and worked abroad.

Youssef himself has law degrees from Cairo University, Yale Law School and Paris I University. From 2008 to 2010 he worked at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton in Paris but returned to Cairo in late 2010, a few months before the Arab Spring and Egyptian Revolution. In May 2011, he was one of several practitioners interviewed by *GAR* about the Arab Spring, describing it as “awe-inspiring”.

Over the past five years, he has worked in high-profile commercial and treaty matters relating to a wide range of industries and been involved in major disputes under state contracts in the Arab World.

He successfully represented Egyptian television station CBC in arbitration proceedings relating to the satirist Bassem Youssef and is currently advising investors in the former Egyptian Steam Boilers company in a four-year dispute over its privatisation, initially by a Canadian company.

He is also representing Spanish investor group Cementos La Union in treaty claims against Egypt at ICSID.

Youssef tells *GAR* there has been significant mobility in the Egyptian international arbitration market in the last few months, which he takes to be a sign of its “vibrancy” following the Arab Spring.

While Egypt has faced a surge of treaty claims since the fall of former president Hosni Mubarak, he praises the state for not reconsidering its international obligations under the

ICSID Convention or triggering sunset clauses in any of its 72 in-force bilateral investment treaties.

Egypt has also settled a number of treaty claims, he notes, including its recent privatisation dispute with Indonesian textile company Indorama.

“Dispute settlement committees established under the auspices of the Council of Ministers, starting in 2013, have been playing a major role,” he says.

Youssef adds that he continues to be optimistic about Egypt’s economic future and its future as a venue for investment and arbitration, describing Cairo as a hub of legal services in the region, along with Dubai, Manama “and now, Tehran”.

Commentators in the region are confident that Youssef’s new firm will soon be a key player in these hubs. **Karim Hafez**, senior partner at Hafez in Cairo, notes Youssef’s “considerable talent and resourcefulness in a series of cases over the past five years” and says that going independent will “help him reduce conflicts and give him even greater control of an expanding docket.”

Nassib Ziadé, chair of the Bahrain Centre for Dispute Resolution, describes him as part of “a rising generation of Arab arbitration specialists” who started his career “on a solid footing, having prepared a dissertation at Yale under the supervision of [US arbitrator] **Michael Reisman** and received guidance from [Egyptian arbitrator] **Ahmed El-Kosheri**.”

“Karim’s establishment of his own law firm is a logical step in a career that has so far been pursued admirably,” he says.

Youssef also receives praise from outside the region. **Bernard Hanotiau** of Hanotiau & van den Berg in Brussels describes him as “a brilliant advocate,” who is prominent both in his practice and as author of “several first-class studies of international arbitration”.

Jean-Pierre Harb, partner at Jones Day in Paris, says Youssef has “everything it takes to be successful in this new venture – brains and legal and social skills”, adding that he will bet on “brilliant success” for the new firm.

Philippe Leboulanger of Leboulanger & Associés in Paris calls him an “outstanding lawyer” who is “a perfect representative of the new generation of highly skilled Arab lawyers,” with background in Egypt, France and the US.

And Youssef’s former Yale professor **Michael Reisman** calls him “a superb international lawyer, as well as a brilliant scholar in the field”.