

Tell me about your current roles and work.

My day-to-day work is as Co-Chairman and Partner at Dome Advisory, a leading Islamic finance and Shariah advisory firm headquartered in London. With the blessing of the Almighty, I am uniquely positioned as both a Shariah Scholar and an English qualified lawyer with the leading law firm Linklaters.

We provide full range of services including documentation, structuring and Shariah Opinions in all areas of law pertaining to banking, capital markets, insurance, property, funds and family offices. My expertise relates to litigation and arbitration, transactional, advisory and auditing work as well as providing professional training and setting up and serving on Shariah advisory boards in key markets globally.

As UK Government Department for International Trade (DIT) Business Ambassador, I have been asked to promote UK excellence internationally and the City of London in particular as a leading Islamic finance hub. I serve as Senior Adviser to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Islamic Finance and APPGs for several countries. I am also an Advisory Board member of the Middle East Association as well as serving as Vice Chair of the Mosaic International Leadership Program (Prince's Charities) and as Judge of both the UK Government Sirius Program for entrepreneurs and of the Asian Apprenticeship Awards.

With the grace of the Almighty, my work has been recognised and as a result I was recently ranked at number 7 in the SHARIA100 among the 100 most active scholars in the Islamic finance world. This comes after collecting a whole host of accolades, such as Top 8 Positive Role Model for Race, Religion & Faith at the National Diversity Awards 2016; Freedom of the City of London in 2014; Religious Advocate of the Year at the British Muslim Awards 2013; Takaful Scholar of the Year at the 2012 International Takaful Summit; and Zaki Badawi Shariah Scholar of the Year at the 2011 London Sukuk Summit. I was also invited to feature in the series 'Secrets of Success' as part of 20 London-based personalities showing on British Airways In-flight. This probably sounds all good, but it has meant shouldering a lot of responsibilities and travelling across the globe to speak and chair at international conferences which I was recently told is more than 50 conferences in the last couple of years. I recently visited Turkey where I was accompanying UK Government officials and The Lord Mayor of the City of London, speaking at the UK-Turkey Islamic Finance Summit in Istanbul.

What inspired you to pursue a career in Islamic finance?

At the time I was completing my studies, both religious education from Darul Uloom Karachi and professional education as a lawyer, Islamic finance as an industry was growing and the UK was looking to develop itself as a global centre. With my mentor Mufti Taqi Usmani being well established and as a pioneer in Islamic finance sharing similar educational backgrounds, I was inspired by his contribution and vision for global Islamic economy. Additionally, I was intent on sharing with the world the Islamic principles of fairness and justices given the succession of global economic crises based on a highly leveraged debt economy.

What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

The biggest challenge for anyone is delivering value-added quality contribution, which then speaks for itself. I was blessed to receive opportunities to be involved in high profile transactions and government work, which meant that my practical skills were being honed and at the same time I was getting exposure in the market. I mentioned before, public speaking at international conferences and appearing in the media in some way may have helped the profile, which they call a brand but I never set the stall out to do this. Opportunities came along and I was fortunate to be considered for various roles. However, now that the industry is saturated with so much competition, I can see numerous challenges for people wanting to enter and excel. Some people are viewing Shariah scholarship as just a profession with a view to making money and may think that doing a degree in Arabic or Islamic studies makes you a scholar. The reality is that this is a position of highest trust in the Muslim community and the expertise comes with countless years of education, training under supervision and recognition by the fraternity of the scholarly community.

What are the 3 most important things you've learnt throughout your career?

There is no substitute for purity of intention, hard work and integrity of character, which are increasingly becoming rare commodities.

Who has been your biggest inspiration/role model to date?

I mentioned Mufti Taqi Usmani as an amazing Islamic scholar, role model for many aspiring scholars and a true legal jurist in every sense. The great poet and philosopher of the Sub Continent, Mohammad Iqbal who has given me the most insight into the East-West politico-economic dichotomy. Of course my late father is the foremost outstanding person who influenced me the most in nurturing my character, inspiring me to memorise the Holy Qur'an at the age of 11 and study Islamic sciences, instilling in me the best of manners which is enshrined in the teachings of Islam.

You've made the transition from a traditional Islamic educational background to a highly successful career in the City and beyond - what advice would you give to young Muslims seeking to follow this path and pursue further/professional studies and careers?

The transition from a traditional student of Islamic sciences to a professional lawyer, government adviser and businessman is not actually a transition but rather a symbiotic relationship and a natural continuation of my learning and development. I have not ceased to be actively involved in one or the other. In fact, my religious work is my professional duty and my working life is governed by my religious commitment to the Almighty; with His grace, this has made me a better human being, a better family member and an all-rounded person for the collective good.

In your view, what are the essential skills and experiences needed for anyone looking to go into Islamic finance?

My advice would be to be true to yourself by analysing your skill set and whether you have an interest in this field, and never pursue the industry for monetary reasons only which is merely a by-product and is destined to come to you anyway. Become a giver and a contributor and you will always benefit and take so much away. But if the attitude is one of merely taking for yourself and not thinking of giving benefit to others, then you will not ultimately succeed.

To work professionally in this industry, you need some form of professional expertise as a lawyer, accountant or other such field unless you want to be a Shariah scholar, but the latter will only come if you have the traditional learning. Scholars can top up their knowledge by doing, for instance, the CIMA Islamic Finance Diploma and the Certified Shari'a Adviser and Auditor (CSAA) from The Accounting and Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI). Non-scholars can do the former, which will give you insights into the industry. Thereafter, you will need some practical exposure and experience, which can only be done by working on live deals and transactions in your chosen capacity. It is also worth meeting existing players of the industry to build your network, which can happen through referrals or attending conferences. However, be mindful that there are far too many conferences, which are merely to make money and not add any real value. The industry is unfortunately losing some substance, which is a big danger and so be guarded against this, as true Islamic finance is the one that follows both the letter and the spirit of the Islamic principles.