

Former Bar Exec Edmonds Travels Far for Rule of Law

by Dawn Chase

After Thomas A. Edmonds retired as executive director of the Virginia State Bar in 2008, he took up a project familiar to him — helping law schools and legal communities improve the education of lawyers and foster the rule of law.

Edmonds knows the subject well. He spent twelve years as a law school dean — at the universities of Richmond and Mississippi — and for more than thirty years he has been a member of teams that conduct site reviews of schools seeking American Bar Association accreditation of their law programs.

Many times, he has dealt with questions of building and maintaining a strong faculty, student-teacher ratios, efficient use of resources, adequacy of libraries, and equal educational opportunities for women and minorities. As a former president of the National Association of Bar Executives, he is conversant with the roles of bar associations in continuing education, advocating for the profession, and promoting justice.

Since 2008, Edmonds has been considering these questions in a different context. He has been part of delegations that traveled to the Middle East and North Africa through the ABA Rule of Law Initiative.

The way Edmonds describes it, the visitors' task is to describe how the American legal system addresses issues here and to help their hosts explore ideas for developing a legal framework to safeguard human and property rights in their own countries.

Edmonds was part of the initiative's first international law school assessment, which took place at the only law school in Qatar, a desert peninsula that juts into the Persian Gulf from eastern Saudi Arabia.

He also brainstormed with bar association leaders in Rabat, Morocco, about continuing legal education and other services for their members. And at a

seminar in Istanbul, Turkey, he listened to the challenges faced by Iranian lawyers who are trying to build bar associations in a country whose government distrusts such organizations.

In shadows of minarets and earshot of five-times-a-day prayer calls, Edmonds was presented with administrative challenges he never experienced here.

At the University of Qatar's College of Law, for example, building a stable faculty is difficult. Qatar, once a British protectorate, became independent in 1971. "There is no preexisting legal profession," Edmonds said. "Most people who are experienced lawyers were educated in England, France, and the United States."

Most faculty members are imported, and they are subject to the country's guest worker policy: they can't stay longer than three years, and they can't become Qatari citizens. Most are on loan from tenured positions at law schools in other Muslim countries, such as Jordan.

Add to the lack of institutional and professorial longevity another challenge: Men and women students, who attend the law school in equal numbers, are taught separately. Each course is taught twice, resulting in "teaching loads double what you'd find in this country." Never mind that, when Edmonds visited the Qatari Ministry of Justice, he saw young graduates of the school, "men and women, working side-by-side."

What would happen if the school integrated the classes by gender? Edmonds asked the university president, a Qatari woman who wore a head scarf and business suit, contrasted with the traditional dress required of female students. Fathers would stop sending their daughters here, she responded. Edmonds concluded, "Parents expect it. It's religiously grounded and culturally reinforced, so it is unlikely to change in the near term."



In Morocco, Edmonds's team met with the board of the Rabat Bar Association. Half were female and many were young, he said. And there was a familiar character — the "old bull," perturbed by the younger lawyers' insistence on instituting continuing legal education and incorporating modern technology into their association's work. With every new idea, he would interject, "I feel that I must respond!"

The Moroccans were intrigued by the role of American bar associations in providing CLE. "They couldn't figure out how to get started," Edmonds said. "Who would be the teacher? How do you teach the teachers how teachers to teach? How can you use technology to deliver it in a cost-efficient way?"

The Iranian lawyers who attended the seminar in Istanbul reported that a bill was moving through their parliament that would strip the associations of all their authority, leaving the profession with no organizational structure or ability to advocate for law reform or improvements in the legal system. "The 'church' is out to do the bar in," Edmonds said, using American terminology.

Individual lawyers there already face many restrictions. "The idea is to keep the profession servile and under con-

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trol,” he said. As in Morocco and Qatar, authority derives from the head of state and clerical leaders. The emir (in Qatar), king (in Morocco), or supreme leader (in Iran) can refuse to accept laws passed by their legislators, and no veto override exists. “If we were to advance a claim against the government on behalf of a citizen of this country, they’d take our law license,” an Iranian lawyer told Edmonds.

Of the Iranian lawyers, Edmonds said, “It’s hard for them, given the pervasive influence of the religious leadership in their lives, to imagine practicing in a society such as ours.”

Edmonds said his hosts, “unfailingly polite and hospitable people,”

engaged him with probing questions about American life. Of particular interest was United States support of Israel. And an Iranian lawyer asked, “Is it true that all American lawyers smell of money?”

“I told them what legal aid lawyers, public defenders, and many solo and small-firm practitioners make in this country,” Edmonds said.

As he watches lawyers from Qatar, Morocco, and Iran finding ways to strengthen their profession despite impediments, Edmonds has confidence that the legal environments will change for the better.

In Qatar, “Between my five-star hotel and the university, I counted 125 construction cranes.” The country is building world-class architecture, with

hopes of luring international commerce and financial institutions.

But investors want assurance that their business is protected, that the society is stable, and that they have recourse to resolve disputes. “If you don’t have a rule of law, it’s pretty hard to have a stable and prosperous economy,” Edmonds said.

Even in Iran, with its oppressive government, access to information through cell phones and the Internet fuels creative ideas. “It’s the young people who are going to change those things,” Edmonds said. “These things will change.”