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Sharia advocate who fights to reform the law

SALAH AL-HEJAILAN, the flamboyant head of the Saudi law firm that defended the six Britons, is one of the best-known lawyers in the Kingdom and sees himself as a constructive critic of its justice system (Michael Theodoulou writes).

Although his firm's practice is mainly business-related, he has handled high-profile criminal cases. He made headlines in the West in 1996 when he defended two British nurses, who were accused of murdering an Australian colleague, and secured their release with the payment of "blood money" to the victim's family.

While he has been critical of his country's legal system, he has argued that Sharia advocates compassion and mercy. During the case of the British nurses, he pointed out that it was a Westerner, Frank Gilford, the brother of the murdered Australian nurse, who had been pressing for the death penalty, which is outlawed in Australia.

Mr. Al-Hejailan, 62, trained in the United States and Egypt and worked for the Saudi Government as a legal adviser for 12 years at the beginning of his career. "The main feature of my law firm is that it is a family firm now," he told The Times proudly yesterday. His three sons and one daughter, who trained in American and British universities, all work in the firm, which also employs five Western lawyers.

A colleague in Riyadh, explaining Mr. Al-Hejailan's success, said: "He always keeps in mind the big picture. He doesn't let himself get bogged down by the details."

His law firm, established in 1967, is the oldest and biggest in Saudi Arabia and he is extremely well-connected within the Kingdom. He is the legal counsel for the British Embassy, among others, and his firm is associated with prominent law firms in several countries. He has helped defend struggling Britons in Saudi Arabia for more than three decades.

"I have settled small debts, provided legal service to them, looked after them in many ways and I have a special fund in my law firm for this sort of goodwill work," he said. "I am particularly interested in cases that can have an impression on the legal system itself."

British donors, whose identities he did not disclose, had paid the defence costs. At the time of the case of the British nurses, he said that the high-profile murder case had highlighted the "clash of civilisations" between the Kingdom and the West, but said it could help reform the Saudi legal system.