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**Eye of Riyadh, The RFF 2024**

**Real Estate Future Forum**

**Boris Johnson – Former Prime Minister, United Kingdom**

**Moderator: Weam Al Dakheel, Journalist and TV Presenter**

**Wednesday, January 24, 2024**

(Break for direction.)

(Applause.)

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Your Excellencies, distinguished leaders from the worlds of business and politics, esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen, hello and welcome. My name is Weam Al Dakheel. I’m a Saudi journalist and TV presenter. And it's my great pleasure to moderate this highly anticipated session with a renowned leader like Mr. Boris Johnson, the former UK Prime Minister. A heartfelt welcome, please, to Mr. Johnson.

(Applause.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you very much. It's great to be here. Thank you very much.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** It's a great pleasure having you with us.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Absolutely wonderful.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Mr. Johnson, the Real Estate Future Forum aims to share global experiences and invite best practices, as well, from around the world, making your presence with us today be more significant as we seek to explore the UK's approach to real estate development. With the government focusing on levelling up the UK, how has the real estate sector benefited from levelling up funds round so far?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, thank you. Let me first of all say that real estate is absolutely crucial for the UK economy, indeed for the economy all over the world. And it drives all kinds of sectors, but it's also so important for people's emotional lives and their happiness, getting the homes that they need.

And the short answer to your question is that the levelling up agenda, helping businesses to invest all around the country has gone well so far, or it was going well when I was prime minister. I think it's still going well. I'm sure it's still going well, but there's more to do.

And the crucial problem is that in my country, in the United Kingdom, it's such a wonderful country to live and invest, as I'm sure many of you know, who've been to London. As somebody was just saying, I used to be mayor. The property prices have gone up and up and up, and the result is that you now have to have – and when I left university, you had to have about four times your income, annual income to buy a house, right, or buy a home. You now have to have on average, nine times, nine times.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** This is a lot.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** My kids, and I didn't have as many kids as some people around here, but I have a lot of kids and the ones in their 20s, they can't afford a house in the way that I could. Government needs to lead, and government needs to make it possible for young people to get their foot on the property ladder. And you can't just leave it to the to the market to sort out. You've got to put in all the levelling up incentives. And that's what we've been doing.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Absolutely. And this will lead me to the question of what do you see as the most pressing challenge for the UK real estate sector, with escalating property costs, a high demand for rental properties and, the most important, the imperative need to develop net zero compatible buildings?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, look, I mean, the problem is that it takes too long to build beautiful new housing in the UK. And I'm still encouraging you all to invest, and you'll get a fantastic return on your investment. Be in no doubt, it's the number one place to do it. But the problem is I’m trying to modernize a house I've just bought in Oxfordshire, a modest, modest place in Oxfordshire. And in order to put in a swimming pool, I've had to apply for permission from all sorts of bodies.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yeah, I read that in the news.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That's right. And I've had to build little kind of barriers to stop the newts. You know what I mean by a newt? Do you have newts in, in Saudi Arabia? A newt, have I got newts for you. A newt is a kind of amphibian that is much beloved in our country, and they're very rare. And I've had to build little newt motels in case the newts get lost on the way across the garden.

I was digging the swimming pool, and the council insisted that an archaeologist came and watched the digging of the pool in order to see that no item of historic interest was found. Nothing was found, but I've had to pay thousands and thousands of pounds for these.

Anyway, look, it takes too long to get this stuff done. Planning permission is absurdly delayed and that means extra costs. You asked me, I think, what's the number one issue. The number one issue is the planning system. We need to speed it up. We need to streamline it and make it work better for younger people to get their foot on the property ladder.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Planning, policy and therefore, delivery.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes, because then we'll get more built. There will be beautiful homes and the newts will have a great time, too, but it's just got to go faster.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Well, as the UK prime minister back in 2020, you revealed plans to cut the country's emissions by at least 68% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. And also, the UK government has a target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Now with buildings responsible for approximately 25% of all the UK emissions –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, more. Yeah.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Or more?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh no, maybe you're right now. Yeah, yeah. Go on.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Okay. That's the exact percentage. Then how do you envision the real estate sector supporting Build Back Greener UK, which is the net zero strategy?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** You've got to move away from carbon technologies, and it can be done. In 1970, I think I'm right in saying 90% of electricity in the UK came from coalfired power stations. And 1970, you all look much more young and thrusting than I am now, but 1970 is within living memory, right? Do you know how much we get from coalfired power stations now? Less than 1%, and we've moved hugely towards wind, towards solar, towards other forms of renewables. We're reviving our nuclear program.

And so, this is all doable, but what you've got to do is look at ways in which you can make it affordable for people. And when it comes to people's homes, the problem in the UK is it's pretty cold. It's very cold right now in Britain, and you can tell. I've got a cold actually, because I've been in the UK, it's so cold. And what you need is the ground source or the air source heat pumps. You need heat exchanger systems, but they've got to be much cheaper.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** More energy efficient and less carbon intensive.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes you can do that, absolutely.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** All right.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And you can do it very, very cheaply.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** How?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, if you do these things at scale. And if you've got a community that is all close together, then you can use ground source heat pumps to do heat and power systems for the whole neighborhood. You can put in air source heat pumps that are getting cheaper and cheaper. This thing will eventually take off. At the moment, there's a lot of consumer resistance, and I understand that, but there's only one way to go.

The reason why the net zero agenda is not something to be scared of, and people get very nervous about it, is, number one, it's technically possible, it can be done; number two, it generates millions of high quality, high wage jobs.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Definitely.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And so, I would urge people to, even though this is a wonderful, oil rich, hydrocarbon rich kingdom, I know that you're moving in that direction, too. And you're going to be doing green hydrogen, blue hydrogen.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yes, definitely, the biggest in the world.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It's going to be extraordinary.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** No doubt.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Even hydrocarbons can play a big part in the green future.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Definitely. Well, do you think now the existing UK government decarbonization policies are sufficient enough to have that sustainable real estate sector in the UK?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes, absolutely. I mean, well, I think we could always do more, and it will be tough to reach net zero by 2050. That's a very, very stretching target. But the way these things go, there's a sort of critical mass is reached, to borrow a meter from nuclear power, and suddenly everybody's doing it.

I just mentioned that we saw a huge reduction in the use of coalfired power stations. When I was mayor of London, we massively reduced the amount of CO2 that London produced. We reduced the amount of pollution, nitrous oxide particulates that London produced. Suddenly, when the technological fix is in, the big change starts to happen. And there's no reason to be superstitious about it. It will happen very fast.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Let's focus on driving up home ownership across the UK. Well, the Right to Buy marked a significant change of approach to housing in the UK. It's a flagship policy of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s government, elected back in 1979. Now the question is today, how will the revived Right to Buy scheme be tailored to meet the needs of the younger and new generations who are aspiring to own their own houses?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It won't, on its own, be anything like enough, is the answer. I mean, the Right to Buy was good for council house tenants back in the 1980s, and it enabled them to buy their own property. The extension that we're talking about that I brought in allows people who are part of a housing association to buy their own property, but we're talking about a comparatively small number.

The way to get young people on the property ladder is to make sure you're building enough homes that they can afford. And you've got to help them with the right financial support, the right mortgages to be able to do that.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Tools and products.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, that's right. They've got to have the 95% mortgage product, maybe even 99% mortgage products to do that.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yeah. Well, I remember in one of your speeches when you asked –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** You remember one of my speeches.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** (Laughter.) Yes, when you spoke about –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s an extraordinary thing. I bet you're the only person in this room. (Laughter.)

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** I follow up your news closely. You're an interesting leader.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Superb. Well, I wanted to hear that.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Honestly. Well, you said something I want to highlight here, that it's the moment now in the UK to widen the possibilities, and to give greater freedoms to those who yearn to buy. And the government would do everything and anything to enable this.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes. I mean, why are people renting? They pay all this money every month in their rent, when they could pay that money on a mortgage and actually be the owner of the property. We wonder why young people aren't interested in capitalism as much as they used to be. It's because we don't allow them access to capital in the form of housing, and we've got to fix it.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Well, let's shift from home ownership to housing development. As London mayor back in 2009, you had aspirations for developments that no longer sacrifice space and quality to unit numbers, in your own words. How do you view the NLV, the New London Vernacular, as part of your legacy?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I think it's a thing of great beauty, and I commend it to you. They said of the Emperor Augustus that he found Rome of brick and left it of marble. Well, I found that everywhere in London, they were building things with horrible composite cladding. And we needed to get back to the London vernacular, which is brick.

And if you look at the beautiful Georgian terraces in London, in Kensington or Pimlico or wherever, in Westminster, you see that they have these windows that are the golden ratio, right, the oblongs, rectangles. You know what I mean by the golden ratio?

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yes.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re all brilliant property guys. You know what I’m talking about. That’s what is pleasing to the eye, plus brick in a modern style. It looks great, and that became the style that we're building in now across London, and have been for, as you say, for 10 years or more. And A, it looks good, and B, it doesn't – I mean, tragically you saw what happened in the Grenfell fire, where we had a big block of flats that was made of these inferior cladding, composite materials, and brick is much better. Go for brick.

And by the way, I spent this morning at – I’m going to say it wrong, but the beautiful ancient capital, Diriyah.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Diriyah.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Diriyah. Correct, Diriyah. And I noticed that there's a very strong vernacular style there with the mud bricks, and then these beautiful white –

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Salmani, we call it.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What?

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Salmani approach.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Salmani approach. Anyway, we could do with some of that in London, too. That's beautiful.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Amazing.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And very durable, I understand.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Absolutely. And it’s, by the way, the birthplace of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Diriyah.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That's what I was informed. It’s fantastic.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yeah, it tells a lot about the jewel of the Kingdom.

Well, back to the NLV. It’s housing development style was observed back in 2010. Speaking of 2024, where do you see the long terms and the impact of NLV on future British housing design and urban development?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I hope it will be something that people pursue, and it's going to be – it’s safer, and it's more beautiful, and it represents a great long-term investment. I think it'll be around for a while.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** All right. Now, since we're reflecting on your distinguished career and amidst all the accomplishments, we have to reflect also and focus on the challenges. As the prime minister of the UK during COVID-19, the toughest period in recent history, you had to navigate a pandemic that actually led to the shutdown, not only the UK, but the entire world. How did this experience actually impacted and changed you, personally and professionally.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think that it just confirmed what I've always known, which is that in a crisis like that, you need continual, strong direction from the top. And I've been very struck by what's happening here in Saudi Arabia. And we've talked about Diriyah and the things you're doing here in Riyadh, but that's nothing by comparison to the vision that you have, the 2030 vision for the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has for the whole kingdom –

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** And beyond.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And beyond, it’s astonishing. And this is one of the few countries in the world, in my view, where things are really happening at scale, in a way that mobilizes the interest and emotions of the population, and which are going to drive economic growth. And that's a fantastic thing to see.

Now that, back to your question, requires leadership and focus. And I think the thing I learned from COVID, really, was how important it is. Whatever the decision is, you've got to take the decision, but you've got to have full autonomy to do it.

And we got through Brexit, and there's a lot of controversy about it, people still bickering about it. Actually it was a great, great thing to do because we took back control of our legal system and our ability to take certain decisions, and to do them fast.

And I'll tell you this, and you won't hear this very much, but it's necessarily from some of the people who opposed Brexit. But it's absolutely true that because we came out of the European Union, which we were in, we were able to get a COVID vaccine, an effective COVID vaccine, into somebody's arm faster than any other country in the world. And we were able to approve both the Pfizer, and the Moderna, and the AstraZeneca vaccine faster than any other European country, because we were outside the EU bureaucracy.

And that had a major impact, because –

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** On economic recovery?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Certainly, on economic recovery, because we were able to vaccinate our population faster than any other European country. I think by March 2021, we'd vaccinated 45% of the UK population, and the EU was still on 10%. And that made a material difference to our ability to come out of the pandemic and our ability to stage an economic recovery, and we did.

Whatever negativity that you may sometimes read, I'm not suggesting you believe it, but if you ever do, just remember, Brexit saved lives during that pandemic. And if we hadn't been able to manage our own vaccination program, we wouldn't have been able to help a lot of elderly people and to give them the protection that they needed.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Definitely.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Autonomy matters, taking the decisions, having a vision, and strategic autonomy.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Executing it strategically. In today's rapidly changing global landscape, how would you define effective leadership?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think it's the ability to have the vision, but also to communicate it and to enthuse it, to enthuse people about it and to get it done. And you can just look around this incredible kingdom. You can see a lot of things are being done.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yes. And this will lead me to knowing your perspective on the role of Saudi Arabia navigating the new compass, whether in the region or on global stage.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, I think that we're living, frankly, at a time when many of us who are used to American leadership in the world or worrying that we're not perhaps getting it in quite the way that we need, and we're seeing a more multipolar world. And in that world, there's no question that Saudi Arabia is playing a very important and a very beneficial role.

And just things that have changed recently on the foreign policy front, I've been very struck, actually, by the way that Saudi Arabia has stood by the people of Ukraine, and given substantial sums of money to help them in the face of the vicious attack that they have suffered. I really commend the government and people of Saudi Arabia for what they're doing there.

I think it’s been very important that Saudi Arabia has led the way on trying to achieve reconciliation in the in the Middle East. I think the process of the Abraham Accords discussions has been very far sighted. And clearly, I hope that that will all resume; if we can put the tragedy of what's been happening in Gaza and Israel behind us and find some solutions there. I think that what Saudi Arabia has been doing in Iran is very, very interesting and hopeful.

All these are all these are positive things. But I make no bones about it. What I would also like to see is the traditional leadership role played by our friends in the United States. And I think a lot of people in the world would like to see that, too.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Well, as Saudis, we reiterate and believe what His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, said that Saudi Arabia is the biggest success story of the 21st century.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I'm certainly not going to contradict that. (Laughter/applause.)

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** You believe it!

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m certainly not. How could I come to this incredible, incredible capital and be shown all the wonders I've seen this morning, and the prospectus for the line in Neom, and not agree with that.

By the way, about 10 years ago, I met His Royal Highness, and I was then a humble municipal politician, as you've mentioned. And I volunteered to come and help him run Neom in due course. And I'm an expert on mass transit systems, and social housing and sanitation. And if you need somebody to –

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** It's a land of dreamers and doers from around the world. If you're one, you're more than welcome.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Actually, I did go there, and this was years ago. I went to the site and there was nothing there. It was deserted. The vision is incredible.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Well, now we're talking about Neom. It is an ambitious undertaking, and it's taking shape. Now I want you to describe this –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** But seriously, it is an incredible thing.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yes, tell it.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Because you look around the world, which other country is actually doing something as big and imaginative as that?

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Only in Saudi Arabia.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I mean, it is true. I don't wish to sound unnecessarily ingratiating towards my hosts, but it is the case.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Well, if I would ask you to describe Neom, what would it say in just a sentence?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I would say it is a city that reveals a truth about all human progress, namely that sometimes, it can only be achieved by the vision of one individual. I’m afraid that is the…

(Applause.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And I’m not a communist, right, nor am I a totalitarian. But I really think that when you look at the great cities and great urban visions in the past, historically, from, as I say, from Augustus or Haussmann's Paris, or whatever, a single vision makes a huge difference.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Definitely. What about Riyadh?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What about who?

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Riyadh.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, Riyadh, yes.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Yeah. Did you feel the dynamism and the energy (crosstalk/inaudible) capital?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It's changed so much. And I don't want to sound sort of starry-eyed about this, but the change is obvious, the greater participation of females in all walks of life, which is, I would say, a wonderful thing. It feels like it's changing, changing, changing, and I would say very, very much for the better.

And speaking as a Brit, quickly, I just want to say how wonderful it is that we have so much toing and froing from Riyadh to London, and from Saudi Arabia to London. And I am proud, I am proud that I was the prime minister, I think – I definitely was the prime minister, and I was the foreign secretary.

Neom, just remind me, I put in the visa-free thing, didn't I? I did, so that people from this great kingdom of Saudi Arabia can go without let or hindrance, more or less, with visa-free access to the UK. And I think we had 380,000 last year, and I hope it's of some practical assistance to our relationship, which is incredibly, incredibly important.

I also want to say, just finally, because I can see that our time is more or less up, I also want to say on behalf of my sons, who, as I say, are finding it tough to get on the property ladder, but we're going to fix that, how grateful they are for the Saudi investment in Newcastle United, because they are both inveterate Newcastle fans. (Laughter.) And I'm delighted to say that they beat Paris Saint-Germain the other day, much to the pleasure of – I think I’m right in saying – I’m not a great expert on football, I hasten to say. But my kids are, and they are grateful for the support for Newcastle.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** It’s a new era.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Are you a Newcastle supporter.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** No, I am Manchester United.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, right.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Don't get offended. (Laughter.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** (Laughter.) Who owns Manchester United? Who owns Manchester United? I can't remember who owns Manchester United.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** A big number here. (Laughter.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** You do. No. Who owns Manchester United? I can't remember who owns it.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Well, at last, shall we anticipate your return back here in Saudi Arabia in the near future?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, be careful what you wish for. I would love to. Look, I haven't been here for too long, and it's wonderful to be back here. And I do hope that I'll be able to come back. And what I know is that the next time I am here, I will see a scale and a pace of change and improvement that, frankly, we need to emulate in some of our great European cities as well.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Absolutely. There is no doubt in this, and we welcome you, the British people and the world in Riyadh. It is the world's choice. Thank you so much, Mr. Johnson.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you very much for having me. Thank you.

(Applause.)

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** For your time, participation.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** It’s been a great pleasure, really. And yeah, to you, Miriam (ph). I think you have something to add in here, our great host. (Laughter.)

**MIRIAM:** Mostly.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you so much.

**MIRIAM:** Well, don't go anywhere, please, Mr. Johnson. Thank you very much. But can we also thank Weam Al Dakheel for the amazing moderation.

(Applause.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you.

**MIRIAM:** Thank you so much.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Thank you.

**MIRIAM:** We have a small token of appreciation for you. We'd like to invite Mr. Al-harbi (ph) to come up, please. He has a little, well, we call it a trophy, but I'm not sure if you've done something to deserve a trophy, or if it's not a token of thanks.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, not at all.

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** It is a present.

**MIRIAM:** Well, exactly. It’s a trophy.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you so much. Thank you, thank you.

**MIRIAM:** There we go. (Laughter.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, listen. That's superb. Oh, that is wonderful. Look at that. That's brilliant. Well, we have very low crime in London.

Thank is beautiful. Thank you so much. Thank you, Future Real Estate Forum.

(Break for direction.)

**WEAM AL DAKHEEL:** Can we please all put our hands together and thank Mr. Boris Johnson for his insights in that session. Thank you so much.

(Applause.) (Music.)

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