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# A Guide to Living and Working as a Lawyer in the Middle East

## Includes:

- Introduction to the Middle East
- The Legal Market
- Visas and Relocation
- Salaries
- Requalification
- After Work



Nicholas Scott Legal Services

## Introduction to Middle East

Arabia, the areas made up of the Arabian Peninsula, is in the south-western region of the Asian continent. The main commercial centres in the Middle East are located in the Gulf and include the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Oman and Kuwait.

The UAE is where most expats settle, it is made up of seven Emirates including Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Abu Dhabi is the largest and the wealthiest of the Emirates and is the federal capital of the country. It is home to much of the energy and projects work for the region. In contrast, Dubai, which is relatively poor in natural resources compared with other Emirates, has developed a business culture that is somewhat more entrepreneurial in nature; its reputation as a commercial and tourist hub is widely known and well deserved.

Bahrain is the largest of an archipelago of 33 islands. The Bahrain economy is largely oil and gas based. Bahrain is a well-established centre of finance, particularly Islamic finance. The society is cosmopolitan and mixes on an equal and peaceful basis. Religious and academic freedoms are permitted, as is the right to drink alcohol. Westerners are warmly welcomed here and there is no fear of terrorism. Bahrain is a safe place and although not as well-known as the UAE, has more of a sense of community and is an attractive destination for families.

Qatar is the richest country in the world and is going through a phase of tremendous infrastructure development. Bordering the UAE and with a UK expatriate population of 10,000, Qatar enjoys a relatively liberal way of life albeit more conservative than somewhere like Dubai. With the recent increase in oil & gas prices, Qatar is now the fastest growing economy in the world, with many of the world's major project financings being arranged there.

There is a large expatriate population in Oman, which makes up about one quarter of the population. Muscat is the capital. It is full of splendid architecture and culture. The sea and beach are less than 10 minutes from almost any place in Muscat and the locals are tolerant and friendly. Oman is a hugely popular holiday destination and a highly attractive place to live. It is also unique due to its mountainous landscape as well as deserts and beaches.

Saudi Arabia is comfortably the largest of the Arab economies and thus remains an attractive market for Western law firms. From a lifestyle perspective, 30,000 Britons enjoy excellent facilities with spacious air-conditioned villas and modern facilities. Saudi Arabia is known for its impressive US-style shopping malls and entertainment complexes. Financially, life in Saudi can be very rewarding.



## **The Legal Market**

The Middle East offers lawyers superb career opportunities with law firms and in-house. It is fast-paced, exciting and continues to attract serious global organisations to the region. It offers lawyers cutting-edge legal work, great client contact, relatively small but high-quality teams and impressive salary packages with zero tax. Over the last few years a significant number of top-tier City and US firms have signalled their commitment to the region by opening offices in Dubai and other major cities. Local full-service firms also offer high quality work, with established links with a superb range of local clients.

The work on offer in the region typically embraces corporate, corporate finance/banking (with a particular emphasis on Islamic Finance), construction / projects / energy, IT/e-commerce and litigation. Opportunities in practice areas such as employment and, to a lesser extent, commercial property, are limited.

Many international law firms in the region are British and located in the UAE. Many firms such as Clyde & Co, Clifford Chance, Trowers & Hamblins, Allen & Overy and Denton Wilde Sapte (DWS) have been in Dubai for many years but have now been joined by well-known international brands such as Norton Rose, Ashurst, Simmons & Simmons, Freshfields, Herbert Smith, Lovells and DLA Piper amongst others.

The last few years has seen major US firms such as Latham & Watkins (Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar), Dewey & LeBoeuf (Dubai), Gibson Dunn & Crutcher (Dubai) and King & Spalding (Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia), make major in-roads into the market.

## **Visas and Relocation**



Citizens of countries such as the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, France, Germany and Ireland visiting the UAE can obtain an entry visa on arrival in the UAE. This, however, is only valid for 30-90 days, depending on your country of origin and will need to be extended once you arrive in UAE.

You will require a residency visa to obtain a work permit. If you have secured employment prior to moving to UAE your employer will usually deal with your residency visa and your work permit. To gain a residency permit you have to pass a health check.

Other foreign nationals wishing to take up employment in Dubai must obtain in advance an entry visa and a work permit, having first been granted sponsorship by the company offering employment.

Residence and work permits are valid for three years and may be renewed. Work permits issued in one Emirate are not transferable to another Emirate. A Residency visa is required in the UAE for obtaining a driving licence, health card, liquor licence and to rent accommodation.

### Salaries

Remuneration varies across the region, mainly due to living expenses, but the only location where there is an obvious uplift is Saudi Arabia. Personal incomes, including all forms of salary and capital gains wherever arising, are not subject to taxation in any of the Emirates, Qatar or Saudi Arabia.

The major UK firms will generally provide a package which equates to, or is close to, London gross salary, whilst the US firms have generally paid New York salaries and bonuses. Other items included in the general package provided by most firms or companies are very similar to those in other major cities - entitlement to bonus, medical insurance, life assurance, a flight home each year and a pension or end of service gratuity.

As to the cost of living, and while some aspects of life in UAE are cheaper than their UK counterparts, in general terms (and housing aside) this equates more or less to living in central London.

### Private Practice Pay Scales:

Per Month in United Arab Emirates Dirham (AED)

UK International Firms, Magic Circle Firms, US international firms as of July 2024:

PQE	UK International Firms	Magic Circle Firms	US International Firms
NQ	50,000 - 55,000	33,000 - 39,000	43,000 - 60,000
1	36,000 - 38,000	38,000 - 43,000	45,000 - 65,000
2	39,000 - 46,000	40,000 - 49,000	43,000 - 69,000
3	42,000 - 48,000	48,000 - 55,000	57,000 - 75,000

4	47,000 - 51,000	52,000 - 63,000	63,000 - 80,000
5	49,000 - 56,000	55,000 - 67,000	65,000 - 85,000
Partner	75,000 – 90,000+	95,000 –115,000+	145,000+

**Requalification**

Regardless of jurisdiction, although knowledge of Arabic will always be advantageous, given that many firms offer English legal advice, there are no re-qualification requirements to work in the Middle East. Business is conducted in English.

**After work**

Relocation to the Middle East, and Dubai in particular, offers what many consider to be the perfect blend of work and play; the emphasis on after-work socialising is strong. Dubai’s climate and first-class sporting facilities make it an ideal place to lead an action-packed life. Many types of sporting activities are on offer, including sand skiing, dune buggy racing, deep-sea fishing and ice-skating as well as plenty of world-class golf. In the space of just three decades, Dubai has emerged as the undisputed sports capital of the Middle East. Among the numerous top class events held in the emirate are the Desert Classic PGA Golf Tournament, UIM Class One Powerboat World Championships, ATP Dubai Tennis Open, Dubai Sevens Rugby Tournament and the Dubai World Cup horse race to name a few.



There are also a surfeit of shopping opportunities available. Dubai’s reputation as a shopper’s paradise extends to many aspects of the city’s bustling commercial life. One area where this is especially evident is that shopping centres serve both a regional and tourist - rather than purely local - market. Dubai’s retail prices are reasonable and the variety of products available matches that of any other major international city.

Dubai is a city that offers rare opportunities to experience local and ethnic cuisine from almost every region in the world for those who enjoy good food and a great dining experience. Only restaurants in hotels and leisure complexes are licensed to sell alcoholic beverages. Alcohol is also obtained from two suppliers, each of which has several outlets in Dubai. It is illegal to buy alcohol without a licence. Licences are issued by the

Police Department to non-Muslims holding a residency visa.

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