

A gulf apart

United Arab Emirates

Al Tamimi & Company

An inimitable blend of international expertise and local intuition has given Al Tamimi & Company a razor-sharp competitive edge in an increasingly cut-throat legal market

Soaring oil and gas revenues were the rocket fuel of the fledgling UAE economy when the world's largest man-made seaport opened in Dubai in 1979. The sheer scale of the Jebel Ali port was a clarion cry to the world that the emirates were open for business. Over the following decade, international investors poured into the region, enticed by its strategic location as a gateway to the East and by the raft of free trade laws enacted to attract foreign capital.

As the hub of the UAE, the burgeoning city of Dubai became the living symbol of this economic boom. But even as its skyscrapers grew ever taller, the legal foundations on which they were built were stunted by a total dearth of law firms practising commercial property law. After a decade working as a commercial property lawyer in the United Kingdom, Lisa Dale moved out to Dubai in 2001 and quickly spotted this gap in the market. "I started waving my property flag around," she recalls, "but everyone said, 'There is no commercial property practice in the UAE.'" Dale was working in the commercial group at Al Tamimi & Company when a contact tipped her off about the groundbreaking Jumeirah Beach Residence project, about to take shape on the shores of the Arabian Gulf. The opportunity was too perfect to miss: the world's largest single-phase residential development was being built on her doorstep. Dale and a colleague responded with lightning speed to secure Al Tamimi & Co's involvement in this innovative new development, setting up a dedicated

commercial property department and winning the Jumeirah Beach Residence as a client. They then set to work introducing condominium law and the concept of a master community declaration to the UAE.

Several years down the line, commercial property is still the most visible indicator of Dubai's expansion. The iconic Burj al Arab, the world's tallest hotel, will soon be overtaken by the Rose Tower, while the elegantly spiralling Burj Dubai will dwarf them both when completed later this year and crowned the tallest structure on earth. The city's majestic skyline says it all: Dubai has triumphantly established itself as a towering presence on the global market. Gross domestic product hit \$46 billion in 2006 – with energy revenues accounting for just 6% of this figure, thanks to a diversified economic portfolio encompassing tourism, free trade, information technology and corporate headquartering. And with an illustrious client roster, a team of pre-eminent lawyers who have helped shape the very fabric of commercial life and now an accolade for client care, Al Tamimi & Company can rightly claim to be evolving hand in hand with Dubai into a rising powerhouse.

A worldly perspective

When Essam Al Tamimi set up shop in 1989, his strategy was clear and simple: to build an international practice through a multicultural workforce. Dubai itself is a melting-pot of cultures and influences, and this is reflected in the firm's distinctly international flavour. As Dale observes, the primary benefit of such a global outlook is felt directly by the client. "If we've got a new Jordanian client, we would naturally place them with a Jordanian lawyer," she explains. In the early years Al Tamimi & Co's client base was almost entirely local, but today 80% of the firm's work is international and the remaining local clients are all large corporations with international elements or interests in different parts of the UAE.

The foresight with which Al Tamimi handpicked his team was borne of personal experience. "When I trained with Clifford Chance," he explains, "I noticed how beneficial my culture was to the Western culture – how important it was to get two heads from different cultures

United Arab Emirates

across the table. From day one, the strategy has been with this blend.” Ultimately, Al Tamimi knew that a cultural mix can only enhance the quality of client care. He found that “with very little extra effort, you can actually achieve quality service. So the whole philosophy was based on structuring the service with that extra inch, to provide an extra service to the client in terms of the quality of work”.

Al Tamimi eventually hired lawyers from the United States, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom, as well as from across the Middle East. Hoda Barakat, another lawyer who cut her teeth on the UK legal scene, was persuaded to join up in 1995. Over the years she has built up a heavyweight IP practice and has now succeeded Al Tamimi as the firm’s managing partner. When asked about the secret of her success, Barakat points squarely to client care – the firm’s reputation in this field has proved vital in winning work, most notably in the relatively small IP community, where referral rules. “We look to the long term,” she says, citing Nokia and BMW as lasting clients. “We’ve never looked to make a quick buck from a multinational client.”

A local blend

Although Al Tamimi & Company is international in scope, its strengths draw directly from a local wellspring: a history intertwined with Dubai’s and 12 lawyers who are UAE nationals. Al Tamimi and Barakat are confident that the firm’s local origins will protect its position as Dubai expands and more international firms rush into the region. “I don’t think we are different from the international firms in our quality and style of work,” says Al Tamimi. “But we have deeper roots in the ground. We are very sensitive to culture and history and the way things are done.”

Meanwhile, the 12 local lawyers wield an invaluable weapon in the aggressive UAE legal market: a licence to litigate. In the UAE, non-nationals have no rights in court. Al Tamimi & Company can thus offer a full service where other international firms cannot. “We understand how the courts think, the decisions they make and how they see things,” enthuses Husam Hourani, a banking and finance partner. “That gives us the advantage. We always tell



clients we are a one-stop shop: we do the advice and the agreements, but if things go wrong, we will litigate for you. We are with you A to Z. We can go to court and protect you there; whereas international firms will do the advice and the agreements, and if there’s a problem they will bring it to us for solving.” And the skills honed through years of litigating are then brought to bear on each deal and transaction – says Al Tamimi, “Knowing the court system gives us a good backbone in everything we do.”

While their non-national status prevents international firms from appearing in court, the language barrier can also hinder their advisory capabilities. All the laws of the jurisdiction are written in Arabic, so as Hourani explains, “[International firms] have to read the translation, which is not always accurate or clear. When they want a court judgment, they ask us to translate. So that’s something we have and they don’t – the system doesn’t allow them to have that.”

Over the years Al Tamimi & Company’s local roots have additionally allowed it to forge close links with



Opposite page:
Essam Al Tamimi

Left:
Hoda Barakat

contacts in central banks, company boardrooms and federal institutions. Involvement in the drafting of new legal instruments – such as those prepared for the Jumeirah Beach Residence project – has strengthened the firm’s bond with the Dubai government. These key relationships have enriched the firm’s understanding of the shades and nuances of the legislative framework within which it operates, and its lawyers effortlessly translate this enviable knowledge into tailored solutions for the client.

A refined system

Al Tamimi formalized the firm’s commitment to global best practices early on by implementing a policy of self-regulation based on international benchmarks: an intelligent step in an unregulated jurisdiction like the UAE. “We’ve developed a policy which matches the highest standards in any other developed legal market,” he says. “We handle the clients’ files and money with the highest standards. This helped us move way ahead of our competitors, because we’ve adapted our standards to match those of our international clients.”

To further this end of self-regulation, Al Tamimi has hired dedicated managers to implement internal controls. “Getting the right people in place was one of the biggest decisions to make,” he explains. “They are the backbone of the firm today.” An international manager is tasked exclusively with assuring quality of service and advice, while general manager Kevin Hall is responsible for monitoring client satisfaction and feedback. The managers in turn ensure that this feedback system dovetails with Al Tamimi & Company’s transparent, tailored billing structure, so that invoices reflect the client’s experience: bills are discounted should the firm fail to deliver the required results. “This has always been an important part of our billing system,” Hourani explains. “Being small, we can always control it. That’s not standard practice.” And very occasionally, even the opposite can happen: Al Tamimi recalls how a client once phoned to say that he was so happy with the outcome, he wanted the firm to double its fees.

Technology plays a pivotal role in Al Tamimi & Company’s billing structure and Barakat recently directed

I don’t think we are different from the international firms in our quality and style of work, but we have deeper roots in the ground. We are very sensitive to culture and history and the way things are done

a major investment in the purchase and implementation of new technologies to streamline this process still further. The new finance system can also generate reports in varying formats, thus further enhancing transparency.

Across-the-board training

These well-oiled systems are yet another piece of the puzzle, but perhaps most central of all to the firm’s success is the skill and expertise at its disposal in the shape of its



Far left:
Lisa Dale

Left:
Husam Hourani

lawyers. Like many before her, Barakat mentions the hoary chestnut of how to maintain high standards alongside organic growth; in her eyes, training is the solution. Al Tamimi & Company's growth, like that of Dubai itself, has been exponential. When Barakat became managing partner two years ago, a primary concern was thus to implement policies that would allow for smooth expansion while – crucially – not compromising on client care. And today, the firm's client care philosophy is now being formally integrated into training programmes, for both new lawyers and veterans alike. "We ensure that a monthly workshop takes place dealing with laws, regulations and client relationships," says Hourani. "We also meet twice a month to go through transactions, client expectations and responses, unifying ideas and thoughts to make sure we're all at the same level."

And Al Tamimi & Company's lawyers put this training into practice with consummate care, always willing to go that extra inch which Al Tamimi believes makes a world of difference. Recently, Dale's team advised property developer Tecom in its bid to take control of a seven-tower development and sell it off simultaneously. The transaction gathered pace and, as it neared completion, Dale and her team spent a whole 24 hours in a client meeting in a bid to push it through. The UAE's thrusting economy can make exacting demands of the playmakers who drive deals forward, but the Al Tamimi & Company ethos means that its lawyers are on-call 24-7 to help the client seal the deal.

Reasons to be cheerful

Meanwhile, the Dubai success story continues to unfold. Jebel Ali is thriving, and the harbour will soon be matched by what is set to become the world's biggest airport: the first of six runways was completed in November and work on the ambitious project continues apace. Ultimately, this prodigious growth will only deliver more clients to Al Tamimi & Company's doorstep and consequently the firm must keep in step: 32 new lawyers were recruited last year alone, and 26 the year before. And as the ripple effect from Dubai gathers strength across the UAE, Al Tamimi & Company is aware that its expertise is also needed on more

distant horizons – its bases in Abu Dhabi, Baghdad, Sharjah and its associate office in Qatar have all accordingly benefited from lateral hires of late. But all the while – behind the complexities of rapid expansion, a flourishing yet unregulated legal market, and the quest to create the perfect blend of skills and expertise – Barakat explains that the cardinal rule which underpins the firm's success and guarantees the quality of the service it provides is simplicity itself: "To treat your client like they are your only client."

Al Tamimi & Company

Dubai International Financial Centre,
Sixth Floor,
Building 4 East,
Sheikh Zayed Road,
PO Box 9275,
Dubai
United Arab Emirates
Tel: +971 4 364 1641
Fax: +971 4 364 1777

www.tamimi.com

Contact:

Hoda Barakat
Managing partner
h.barakat@tamimi.com

Other offices:

Dubai World Trade Centre, Dubai Internet City, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Qatar, Baghdad