



KIRKLAND & ELLIS MIDDLE EAST HEAD: WE AIM TO ‘BUILD THE BEST LAW FIRM CULTURE AND BRAND’ IN KSA

Kamran Bajwa tells Law Middle East about his growth plans for the firm’s regional headquarters in Riyadh.

Law firms are racing to establish a foothold in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The oil-rich Kingdom is embarking on an economic diversification plan, attracting law firm investment at the same time as reforming its practice rules.

It has introduced a Regional Headquarters (RHQ) programme encouraging businesses to move their headquarters there if they wish to pitch for government work.

Kirkland & Ellis was the first international law firm to establish its Riyadh office as its regional headquarters in October 2023.

Under founding partner and Middle East practice head Kamran Bajwa’s leadership the office has grown to over 20 legal professionals, with core specialisms including corporate, capital markets, projects, and restructuring.

Right now his focus is on making the Riyadh office as successful as possible, and he tells Law Middle East about his growth plans as well as the opportunities awaiting law firms in the Kingdom.

Kirkland & Ellis opened its first Middle East office and regional headquarters in Riyadh in October 2023. Why did the firm decide on Riyadh for its RHQ?

Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and has been really driving the market and new growth in the Middle East. Many of our clients are active and growing in the

region and it became clear it was important for us to be here to service their needs.

How is it going nearly a year on?

It is still early days but it is going very well. The client response has been very enthusiastic, and we are focused on working together to build the best law firm culture and brand in the Kingdom. We are excited to be here partnering with the leadership of Saudi Arabia.

What are some of the challenges you/your firm encountered when setting up an office in the Kingdom? What challenges do you continue to experience or foresee in the near future?



▲ Kirkland & Ellis partner and Middle East practice head Kamran Bajwa

When entering any new market, there is a lot to do to set up a business. With Saudi Arabia, it is important to remember this against the backdrop of a country that is also going through historic and very rapid change. Some things may take longer here but it is because this very significant process of change is happening simultaneously.

How big is the Riyadh team, and do you have plans to grow?

We have about 20 attorneys covering corporate/ M&A, capital markets, debt finance, and restructuring. We expect some organic growth, but we do not approach new offices with a specific headcount in mind. Our focus is on assembling the highest quality team available to service our clients, and we will adjust as we see opportunities.

Speaking of which, what opportunities await law firms in the Kingdom?

We believe there is a really big, long-term success story ahead for Saudi Arabia and the region. Many of our clients are already operating here and have plans for further growth, and we want to be best positioned with the top talent to service their needs. Leading global law firms in Saudi Arabia also have the opportunity and the honour of helping to develop the legal sector in a variety of ways. For instance, there is tremendous demand for in-house counsel and law firms are well-placed to assist with training and support for in-house departments.

Does the firm plan to expand to other cities in the GCC/the wider Middle East?

We are an entrepreneurial firm and we grow sensibly. To the extent an opportunity in a new market fits our goals, we will consider it, but right now we are focused on making the Riyadh office as successful as possible. 🇸🇦