

## Lawyers Return to Middle East Offices as US–Iran Ceasefire Holds Amid Hiring Uncertainty

After a wave of temporary relocation that saw up to 70% of staff leave the region, lawyers at international firms are returning to the Middle East as the ceasefire holds. However, legal recruitment patterns suggest continued uncertainty.

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Dubai, UAE. Credit: frank peters/AdobeStock

The U.S.-Israel war with Iran, which spread across the Middle East and impacted Gulf states, has led many lawyers working at international law firms in the region to temporarily relocate amid the conflict.

Law firms saw their workforce reduced by between one-third and two-thirds during the 40-day conflict that shook the Middle East, with the United Arab Emirates being the Gulf state most affected by the war.

Now, as the U.S.-Iran ceasefire holds, law firms are pushing for them to return to the office, although uncertainty continues to affect activity levels and legal recruitment.

Law firms have been reluctant to publicly discuss recent disruptions, while emphasizing their continued commitment to the region. However, sources familiar with the situation told Law.com International most lawyers at Global 200 firms are now quietly returning to offices after temporary relocations abroad, with estimates that between one-third and two-thirds of staff—depending on the firm—left at the height of the disruption. Some firms have also encouraged staff to return under existing flexible working arrangements.

A lawyer working at a Global 200 law firm said that about one-third of lawyers at the firm, all associates, left the UAE, while partners remained. A second partner at an international firm said departures peaked at 70% but have since eased, with 35–40% still abroad, and that number is expected to fall to around 20% by early May.

A third lawyer said that the conflict, combined with Ramadan and Easter holidays, reduced lawyer presence in the region as many were already away, adding that clients didn't mind remote work as long as the job was done. But firms still prefer in-person presence to maintain client relationships and signal commitment to the UAE, particularly amid a slowdown in market activity, the lawyer said.

## **Economic Impact**

The war is hitting Gulf economies. The World Bank cut its 2026 Gulf Cooperation Council economies' growth forecast by 3.1%, to 1.3%, while the United Nations Development Programme warned the escalation could cost the Arab region up to \$194 billion in output.

Tourism has also been affected. The World Travel & Tourism Council said the conflict was already costing the Middle East sector at least \$600 million a day in international visitor spending, while Tourism Economics estimated a potential 2026 hit of \$34 billion to \$56 billion if disruption persists.

Tensions have also tested Global 200 law firms that have heavily invested in the Middle East. The region hosts more than 100 offices and over 2,000 lawyers, according to Law.com data, with Clifford Chance, Clyde & Co, White & Case, A&O Shearman, and Dentons each employing more than 100 lawyers there.

Law firms have been monitoring developments in the war and planning contingency measures, with some also sponsoring temporary relocations. One lawyer at a major international firm said their firm had covered lawyers' costs for temporary relocation.

Legal recruitment has continued, though. In recent weeks, Ashurst, Addleshaw Goddard, Clyde & Co, Freshfields, and A&O Shearman, among others, have announced promotions in the region.

Addleshaw Goddard has also hired Shyamal Jeewoolall as a partner and a team from Holman Fenwick Willan in order to launch its aviation finance practice in the region.

Robin Hickman, the firm's Middle East head, said the aviation market in the region is expanding, adding that although recent conflict had created some challenges, the region "remains a very robust, resilient place, and aviation remains at the core of the Middle East's future, so we're investing to get ahead of that curve."

Hickman also said only "a very small single-digit percentage" of their lawyers have chosen to work from overseas, while the firm's five offices across four countries largely stayed open, and all of them are now back.

## **Slower Recruitment**

Nevertheless, the war has caused some disruption to hiring processes, with delays to in-person assessments due to office closures or reduced staffing.

Ruchi Bhalla, principal recruitment consultant at Taylor Root, said recruitment has slowed slightly, with longer timelines for interviews, feedback, and final decisions, and with some firms delaying offers while monitoring the situation. Candidates have also become more cautious, seeking reassurance about safety before committing to roles in the region.

"Despite the instability, demand in the legal recruitment market remains strong," she said, adding that recruitment processes and notice periods mean candidates would typically relocate in six to seven months, by which time both firms and candidates expect conditions to have stabilized. But she warned that a prolonged period of instability "could deter international candidates from relocating to the region, particularly due to safety concerns, which could negatively affect hiring."

Some law firms have yet to feel any impact on recruitment. Sami Tannous, Freshfields' managing Partner for the Middle East and North Africa, said the firm continues to receive steady applications and ongoing recruiter interest, with no sign of candidates withdrawing from the region.

"I think the longer-term prospects for the region are still very positive," he said. "This remains a very attractive place to live and work, and while the conflict may bring some short-term repercussions, even if it continues for a while, the fundamentals of that attractiveness are still the same as before."

While legal recruiters have seen lawyers temporarily move abroad and now return, they are also observing shifts in the regional legal market.

James Lavan, executive director at Buchanan Law, said hiring is continuing but has become less opportunistic and more strategic and planned, with no change in overall volume, though greater caution now shapes both hiring decisions and mobility.

“Most firms are operating as normal on the surface, but behind the scenes, they are far more risk aware,” he said. “There is greater focus on contingency planning, remote working, and staff safety, and that is feeding into hiring decisions.”

The legal recruitment market is moving in step with shifts in the war.

Nick Aiyegbusi, head director of private practice in the Middle East at Beacon Legal, said that initial market reaction was to pause non-critical hiring, with about 60% of roles on hold, while urgent mandates continued and conditions are reviewed weekly. Activity has since picked up after the ceasefire and school reopenings, with staff returning.

“The main concern for law firms is where to allocate recruitment,” he said, adding that budgets are shifting away from corporate and project work towards areas such as disputes, regulatory, insurance, and shipping, as demand is expected to rise.

“Over the past weeks, firms have begun strengthening these teams, while real estate and projects work has slowed. The key question is how to respond to lower utilization—reallocate staff from underused corporate teams to disputes, insurance, or shipping,” he said.

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