Look Beyond the Five-Star Hotel

What Companies May Get Wrong About Doing Business in Dubai, and How to Get It Right

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The first time a Western executive lands in Dubai, the reaction is almost always the same: "This feels so much like home." The hotels could be in Miami. The financial district looks like Midtown Manhattan on a particularly sunny day. The infrastructure works. The signage is in Arabic and English, and the surface of daily life is polished to a standard that rivals any major Western city.

It feels familiar. It feels comfortable. And that false sense of security can be treacherous.

I have been preparing for and living in Dubai for years. Despite my preparation, it's important to note that I still encounter surprises.

The surface familiarity of Dubai is often a trap. Companies coming here for the first time can get lost in the views and surface allure if they aren't careful to understand what is actually required to successfully do business here.

Patience Is Not a Virtue Here. It Is the Price of Entry.

We have seen hedge fund managers arrive in Dubai expecting to close investment discussions over a dinner or two. These are people who have built careers on speed and decisiveness, and they cannot understand why the family office on the other side of the table, whose principals built their wealth across three generations and consider (artificial) time pressure to be the worst advisor, does not share their urgency.

Spoiler alert: They never will.

Gulf families did not accumulate their wealth by rushing decisions for the convenience of a visitor with a return flight on Friday. If you arrive in Dubai treating relationships as a means to a transaction, you will leave with a lot of business cards, polite invitations to come back and not much else.

This is not a cultural quirk to be managed. It is the operating system. Relationships here precede transactions, and the companies that understand this, and invest accordingly, are the ones that eventually get the deal. Success in Dubai, as everywhere else in the Gulf, favors companies that prioritize long-term commitment over immediate returns.

The Details You Didn't Know to Ask About

Cultural fluency in Dubai is not just about patience. It is about the small things that nobody thinks to mention in a pre-trip briefing. In many meeting settings, seats are arranged around the perimeter of a large room with an open center. You do not stretch your legs. You do not show the soles of your feet to the people across the room. It communicates something you do not intend to communicate, and while a sophisticated local (and most of your counterparts will be sophisticated) will understand that you simply did not know better, they will take note. These moments accumulate.

I attend client meetings in Dubai not primarily to bill hours, but because I have learned to recognize the exact moment when something is about to go sideways that my client cannot yet see. Sometimes it is a phrase or a joke. Sometimes it is a posture. Sometimes it is just the way a question was answered that signals the meeting is no longer going where anyone in the room thinks it is. That recognition comes from time spent here, not from reading about it.

One more thing worth knowing: never assume the people across the table lack sophistication. Many Gulf business leaders were educated at the finest American and British universities. They know the West thoroughly, and any cultural awareness deficit in these meetings almost always points in a singular direction.

Why Now, Despite the Headlines

It's important to be direct. The recent regional conflict has given a lot of people a reason to hesitate. But our firm stayed and our clients stayed. New clients decided to make the move to Dubai in the midst of the conflict. And the UAE government never flinched. Emirates Airlines and Etihad flew almost throughout. The government's response to the crisis was to make it easier, not harder, to establish a business presence here. Even golden visas seem to have become, if anything, more accessible and as a result, more doors opened.

Dubai and the UAE as a whole have been successfully tested, dusted off the debris and are moving forward with or without you. The companies that show up now, while others read the headlines and wait, are the ones the government will remember. That issue is critical in a market where relationships with authorities are as important as relationships with clients. Not to mention that the current adjustment to the real estate market (rental and purchase, residential and commercial) will not remain forever.

The window of opportunity is open.

A Five-Point ‘Doing Business in Dubai’ Readiness Checklist

For companies seriously considering a Dubai or Gulf market entry, consider this checklist and self-assessment before booking your flight:

01 **Have you calibrated an honest, realistic timeline?** If your business case depends on closing relationships or transactions within the first six weeks, reconsider. Build a timeline around the reality that trust-building here moves at its own pace, not yours. The companies that succeed in this market plan in years, not quarters.

02 **Do you have a local guide, not just a local office?** There is a big difference between having a name on a door in Dubai and having someone on the ground who knows the market, the players, and the cultural landscape from the inside. Find the latter before you arrive. The former won’t save you from the mistakes that matter.

03 **Have you educated your team on what they don’t know they don’t know?** The business professionals you send here are competent, experienced, and almost certainly underprepared for the specific cultural dynamics of the Gulf. A pre-trip briefing on behavioral expectations, meeting protocols, and relationship norms is not optional. It may be the difference between a meeting that builds credibility and one that quietly costs you the deal.

04 **Have you chosen the right legal and regulatory structure for your presence?** Not all free zones are created equal (and a free zone may not even be the best choice for you), and the choice of where and how to establish your entity has implications like dispute resolution and compliance infrastructure. Make a deliberate decision, with counsel who understands the landscape, that’s not based on which option has the fastest setup time, the lowest cost, or the highest number of (golden) visas you can issue under the relevant license.

05 **Are you prepared to stay when it gets uncomfortable?** The Gulf will, at some point, present you with an unexpected challenge. This could be a regulatory surprise, a delayed transaction, a counterintuitive administrative process. The companies that build lasting presence here are the ones that treat those moments as the cost of operating in a market this dynamic, not as a reason to reconsider their commitment. Resilience, as much as preparation, is what this market embraces and rewards.

Why This Matters, and How Cohen & Gresser Can Help

The Gulf region represents one of the most significant concentrations of institutional capital, deal activity, and strategic opportunity in the world today. It is also a market that rewards depth of presence over transactional visits. Cohen & Gresser established its Dubai office because we believe that serving clients well in this region requires being here, understanding it, and building relationships that make a real difference when the stakes are high.

Whether you are a General Counsel navigating your company’s first Gulf transaction, a multinational evaluating a regional presence, or an investor assessing opportunities across the GCC, the legal and cultural complexity of this market demands counsel with firsthand, on the ground experience. Our team brings decades of cross-border transactional expertise, multilingual capability, and a practice built on genuine regional knowledge.

If you are thinking about Dubai, the Gulf, or what the right moment to move might look like for your organization, we would welcome the conversation.

Johannes Jonas is the Managing Partner of Cohen & Gresser's Dubai office. He has over 35 years of experience advising European, Asian, and North American clients on complex cross-border transactions and is admitted to practice in Paris, New York, Germany, and Dubai.