

ARIC INSIGHT · VOL I · ISSUE 20 · POLITICAL ALMANAC · OPEN RECORD

# Doing Business in the UAE

*Enter the market — without a full launch.*

*A practical guide for U.S. companies weighing the Gulf: the ways to hold a real, lawful UAE presence without relocating, the choice that actually decides everything, and why the thing worth having first is a representative on the ground who answers to you — so you can stay remote.*

## FOREWORD · THE POSITION

U.S. inquiries about the UAE are arriving in volume, and the same questions repeat: mainland or free zone, how much, how fast, and do I need a local partner. Here is the position. We provide U.S. companies with GCC corporate and trade services, and the market we recommend is the UAE — supported through Dubai or Abu Dhabi. You can buy a licence directly from a free-zone portal; we advise against going direct, because the structure has to be right the first time, and because what protects you is not the licence — it is a representative in-country acting for your interest while you operate remotely. This note lays out the routes plainly, with indicative figures. It is a premium advisory framework, not a fixed quote: every engagement is scoped, and figures are subject to final scope and to whether your licensed activity carries additional approvals. Non-partisan; all guidance lawful and general; not legal, tax, or regulatory advice.

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# Contents & *Reading Plan.*

*A seven-part guide for U.S. companies looking at the Gulf — the market, getting the structure right, the lighter ways in, the full range of partnership and presence models, the costs as ranges, the separately-scoped services, and what a U.S. representative on the ground actually does for you.*

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## READING PLAN FOR THREE READERS

The founder testing the water reads Parts II and III first — the choice, and the low-commitment ways in. The operator ready to commit reads Parts IV, V and VI — models, real budget, and the services that come later. The principal weighing the region reads Parts I and VII — where to land, and who carries your file when you are remote.

*Two lenses get applied to the Gulf from America: complexity, and interest. This note is written to dissolve the first and serve the second.*

## NOTE I · THE RECOMMENDATION

# UAE first — *Dubai or Abu Dhabi.*

*Of the GCC markets, the UAE is the one we point U.S. companies to first. It is the easiest to enter, the most familiar to operate in, and it gives you two strong landing points rather than one.*

## WHY THE UAE, OF THE WHOLE GULF

The UAE pairs a genuinely open setup regime with a business culture that runs in English, deep U.S. commercial ties, and a tax position still among the lightest anywhere — a federal corporate tax of 9%, applied to profit above AED 375,000, and 5% VAT. For a company that has never operated in the region, it is the lowest-friction door into the Gulf.

## DUBAI — REACH AND SPEED

Dubai is the default for trade, services, media, logistics, and anything consumer-facing. It has the densest free-zone ecosystem, the fastest digital setup, and the broadest activity list through the Department of Economy and Tourism (DET). If your model is sell-into-the-region or showcase-and-scale, Dubai is usually where you start.

## ABU DHABI — CAPITAL, ENERGY, AND THE LONG GAME

Abu Dhabi is the capital and the center of gravity for energy, sovereign capital, industrial scale, and government-adjacent work. If your business is heavy-asset, defense-adjacent, or built around large institutions and government tenders, Abu Dhabi can be the better landing — and we support setups in both.

## THE HONEST FRAMING

The right emirate is downstream of one thing: who your customer is and where they sit. We start every file the same way — with that question — rather than selling a pre-packaged answer. The market is the UAE; the city is a function of your actual business.

*The market we recommend is the UAE, and we can land you in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. Which one is not a matter of preference — it follows from where your customer already is.*

## NOTE II · THE DECISION THAT GOVERNS EVERYTHING

# Structure it *right the first time.*

*This is the decision the whole entry hangs on — not prestige, but who you are lawfully allowed to sell to. The wrong route does not just cost money; it can make you incompatible with your own customers, forcing extra steps later to undo it.*

	MAINLAND — DET / DED	FREE ZONE — FZ AUTHORITY
SELL TO	The whole UAE, onshore customers, and government contracts — directly.	In-zone and international customers; cannot sell directly to mainland customers.
OWNERSHIP	100% foreign ownership for most activities since the 2021 reform; strategic activities excepted.	100% foreign ownership — always, by design, in every zone.
OFFICE & VISAS	Physical office with Ejari lease generally required; visa quota scales with office size.	Flexi-desk to fitted space; fixed visa quota per package (often up to ~3 on a flexi-desk).
TAX POSTURE	Standard: 9% on profit above AED 375,000; 5% VAT where applicable.	0% on a Qualifying Free Zone Person's qualifying income; the standard 9% applies to non-qualifying or mainland-sourced income.

## THE ONE QUESTION THAT SETTLES IT

Where does your customer sit? Onshore in the UAE → mainland, from day one. International, or you mainly need a credible licensed base → free zone, from day one. Answer this correctly at the start and your structure simply works. Answer it carelessly and you build the wrong entity for your own market.

## WHY THE WRONG ROUTE IS EXPENSIVE

Put a company that sells onshore into a free zone and it cannot lawfully serve its own mainland customers — it cannot do that business at all without restructuring. So it is pushed into bolt-on permits, second registrations, or rebuilding the entity to reach the market it should have been built for. Those are extra steps, extra fees, and lost time that correct structuring avoids entirely. The cost of getting it right is small; the cost of getting it wrong compounds.

*Mainland is access; free zone is reach. We do not sell you a cheap entity now and a patch later — we put you in the right structure the first time, so there is nothing to undo.*

## NOTE III · ENTER WITHOUT A FULL LAUNCH

## The lighter *routes in.*

*You do not have to relocate, hire, or fully commit to be present in the UAE. Several lawful structures let you hold a credible licence and test the market first — but each only works if it matches your customer. The route is chosen for fit, not for whatever is cheapest to sell you.*

### A LOW-COST FREE-ZONE LICENCE — PRESENCE, NOT HEADQUARTERS

The lightest real option, and only where it fits your customer: a flexi-desk free-zone licence giving you a registered UAE entity, an establishment card, and a small visa allocation — enough to invoice international and in-zone clients, sign, and showcase a licence — without leasing office space or moving people. The right fit when your buyers are not onshore.

### A MAINLAND LICENCE — WHEN YOUR CUSTOMER IS ONSHORE

If you will sell to UAE customers or government, this is the structure to start in, not to migrate to later. Going mainland from day one means you can invoice your market directly, with nothing to bolt on afterward. Slightly more setup; far less rework.

### A BRANCH OF YOUR U.S. COMPANY

A branch registers your existing company to operate in the UAE as the same legal entity — your U.S. track record carries directly, which matters in vendor qualification. Heavier on documentation (parent-document attestation) but lighter on reinvention; nothing new is incorporated.

### A REPRESENTATIVE ON THE GROUND — BEFORE ANY ENTITY

Before you license anything, a U.S. representative in-country can hold relationships, take meetings, and advance your interest in-region while you stay remote. For some companies this is the entire first phase — confirm the market is real before spending on structure. The licence is the easy part; representation is the protection.

*Entering the UAE is not a binary between "ignore it" and "move there." The useful middle — the right light structure, a branch, or a representative — is exactly where most American companies should begin, provided it is chosen to fit the customer from day one.*

## NOTE IV · PRESENCE &amp; PARTNERSHIP

# The full range of *models*.

*Full ownership is now the default for most activities, so partnership is a choice, not a requirement. Here is the honest menu — including but not limited to the models below, no single one pushed — with the constant being a U.S. representative who holds your interest while you stay remote.*

**100% FOREIGN-OWNED — NO PARTNER AT ALL**

For most activities you can own the entity outright, mainland or free zone, with no local shareholder. This is the cleanest model for companies that want full control. A partner is something you add for advantage, never because the law forces it.

**PRIVATE OFFICE SPONSORSHIP & REPRESENTATION**

Our own model: a Private Office arrangement where a U.S. representative on the ground sponsors and advances your file — relationships, government liaison, presence in the room — while you operate remotely. You keep ownership; you gain a principal in-country whose mandate is your interest.

**LOCAL SERVICE AGENT / NATIONAL AGENT**

For certain professional or strategic activities, a UAE national service agent is appointed for a fixed fee. The agent holds no equity, profit, or management role — purely a facilitation function. We structure these cleanly where an activity requires one.

**JOINT VENTURE & EMIRATI PARTNERSHIP**

Where it genuinely serves the goal, a JV — including with a prominent Emirati partner — can add relationships, access, and standing. It is one option among several, weighed on the merits of your objective, never a default we push.

**DISTRIBUTOR & AGENCY ARRANGEMENTS**

To reach the mainland market without an onshore entity, a distributor or commercial agent can carry your goods or services. Lighter to stand up; it trades some margin and control for speed.

*These are the common models, not the whole field — structures can be combined or tailored, and the right one is built around your activity and goal. Whichever you choose, the constant we recommend is the same: a U.S. representative in-country, representing your interest, so you can lead from anywhere.*

## NOTE V · THE NUMBERS

Indicative *ranges*.

*Ranges, not a quote. Government costs are indicative, billed at actuals, and subject to final scope and to whether the licensed activity requires additional approvals. Free zone spans a wide band — a bare licence to a fully operational, visa-ready Dubai setup.*

FREE ZONE — INDICATIVE	AED	MAINLAND LLC — INDICATIVE	AED
Licence-only, zero-visa (N. Emirates)	5,000–6,500	Trade name + approval + MOA	2,500–6,000
Dubai licence (Meydan / IFZA)	12,000–15,000	DET licence (activity-dependent)	10,000–20,000
Establishment + immigration card	3,000–4,000	Establishment card + Ejari	3,000–5,000
Flexi-desk (if visas needed)	~5,000	Office (flexi-desk to private)	220–28,000
Investor visa (per person)	4,000–6,500	Investor visa (per person)	5,500–6,500
<i>Dubai, 1 visa, operational</i>	<i>~18k–30k</i>	<i>Typical first-year, 1 visa</i>	<i>~18k–50k+</i>

## READING THESE HONESTLY

Free zone can start very low — a licence-only setup is real and cheap — but a credible Dubai entity with a residence visa lands around AED 18k–30k. Mainland's range is driven almost entirely by office: a flexi-desk keeps it near the free-zone band, a private office pushes it past AED 50k. Add 5% VAT where applicable. On tax: the standard posture is 9% on profit above AED 375,000 (this applies to setup nowhere — it is a tax on profit, not formation); a free zone can reach 0% on qualifying income but pays the standard 9% on non-qualifying income. All figures are subject to final scope and to whether your activity carries additional approvals. Our advisory fee is separate and fixed; the services on the next page are quoted only as needed.

*The right structure, not the cheapest sticker, determines your real number. We size it to your activity and your customer — and quote government fees at actuals, separate from our fee.*

## NOTE VI · BEYOND SETUP

# Separately-scoped *services*.

*The licence is the beginning. The work that makes an entity operate — and compete — is separate, premium, and quoted by scope. Each is optional and added only by written confirmation.*

SERVICE	WHAT IT COVERS · WHY IT MATTERS
Representative / Private Office retainer	Ongoing in-country point of contact: government liaison, renewals, visa cycles, presence in the room — your interest, year-round, while you stay remote.
VAT & corporate-tax registration	FTA registration and ongoing filing (5% VAT; 9% corporate tax above AED 375,000). Required once thresholds are met; penalties apply for late registration.
Accounting & bookkeeping	Audit-ready records and IFRS statements — the foundation for tax filing, banking, and ICV.
Emiratization advisory	For mainland firms reaching 50+ employees (most free zones exempt): Nafis registration, quota planning, and penalty avoidance.
ICV certification support	In-Country Value certification — decisive for government and semi-government tenders, where it can weight heavily in bid evaluation.
Golden Visa & residency	Eligibility assessment across the multiple 2026 routes — not only property (AED 2M, now by DLD valuation with mortgages and combined holdings allowed), but business owners, AED 30k+ salaried professionals, and the newer nomination route for talent and creators. 10-year, renewable, no national sponsor; stay abroad without losing it — the fit for an owner who leads remotely.
Banking, advisory & concierge	Corporate account introductions, market-entry advisory, and on-the-ground support, scoped to need.

## HOW THIS IS PRICED

The Tier 1 setup gets you licensed and registration-ready at a fixed advisory fee. Everything on this page — representative retainer, VAT/tax, accounting, Emiratization, ICV, Golden Visa, banking, advisory, concierge — is separate, premium, and scoped individually. We confirm which you need before anything is quoted firm. This is a premium service, and the figures here are indicative, not a final offer.

*A licence makes you registered. These services make you operational, compliant, and competitive — and each is added only when your scope genuinely calls for it.*

## NOTE VII · THE REPRESENTATIVE

# Whose interest is *in the room*.

*Everything above is procedure. This is the part that decides whether the procedure serves you. When you are not in the country, someone is — and the only question that matters is whose interest they hold.*

## THE LICENCE IS THE EASY PART

Here is the honest truth: you can do it yourself. The portals are online, and any of them will issue you a licence — that part is genuinely easy. What none of them gives you is representation, or a check on whether the licence you just bought is the right one. One wrong choice — the wrong activity, the wrong jurisdiction for your customer — costs far more to undo than it ever cost to set up. What you are paying for is not the licence; it is the person on the ground who takes the meeting, reads the room, flags the risk, and makes sure the structure is right the first time.

## A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FOR A U.S. INTEREST — AND YOU STAY REMOTE

We provide U.S. companies with GCC corporate and trade services, and the through-line is simple: an American principal who understands what you are protecting, on the ground in the UAE, advancing it in person — so you can lead from home. Two lenses, one mandate — yours.

## WHY THIS IS PERSONAL FOR ME

I ran for office in 2016 and spent that time interfacing with businesses — I saw how hard it was to operate in America, and it has not gotten easier. Americans look at the Gulf through two lenses: complexity and interest. My job now is the same as it was then — to represent your interest. I represented Americans when I ran; in the UAE, I represent yours.

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## FROM THE CHAIRMAN'S DESK

*Adam Roosevelt · Chairman, A.R. International Consulting · 30 June MMXXVI*