

M&A
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Skadden: Middle East has ‘high concentration’ of sophisticated clients

Michael Hilton, head of **Skadden**’s Middle East practice, looks ahead at the challenges and opportunities for the firm’s newly established office in Abu Dhabi’s ADGM from an M&A perspective



Skadden opened a new office in Abu Dhabi in January, its first in the Middle East. Heading up the new team and the firm’s Middle East practice is Michael Hilton. Hilton joined the firm after 23 years at Freshfields, most recently as its regional managing partner for the Middle East and Africa.

He explains the key challenges for Skadden as a new player in the region and how it aims to capture opportunities for inbound, outbound, and cross-regional work, particularly for M&A.

“We are seeing a robust pipeline of transactions as regional economies continue to open up and attract foreign investment, and as sovereigns continue to diversify,” Hilton tells IFLR.

“PE firms and corporates are also seeking strategic acquisitions and joint ventures to expand their footprints both regionally and globally, including for their portfolio companies.”

Hilton is optimistic about the M&A deal pipeline and adds that if this coincides with growing market confidence more generally, it could serve as a catalyst for a surge in activity in 2025, creating a dynamic environment for transformative deals.

Continued growth

While Hilton is based in the Middle East, he remains involved in the London and European markets, helping several Middle Eastern clients deploy capital.

Compared to the mature legal market in London which has well-established regulatory frameworks, the Middle East continues to catch up.

“We have seen the quality and complexity of transactions in the Middle East continue to grow year-on-year and, like London, the Middle East now has a high concentration of sophisticated clients who demand the highest service, both on transactions and disputes globally,” he says.

While transactions in London can be highly structured and process-driven, the Middle East has a more dynamic environment.

“Relationships and trust play a crucial role in deal-making everywhere – so from my point of view, this is something that remains the same wherever you are sitting,” he says.

The regulatory landscape in the Middle East can vary significantly between jurisdictions, requiring a nuanced understanding of local laws and practices.

Despite these differences, both regions demand the highest levels of service and expertise, and successful dealmaking hinges on the ability to navigate these unique challenges effectively.

“Ultimately, we will be focusing on delivering across the whole firm, meaning that clients get the same quality and depth of experience that is synonymous with Skadden across the US, Europe, and Asia, whether they are investing from, into, or across the Middle East,” says Hilton.

New player

As a new player in the Middle East, Hilton notes that it is a positive challenge to have as the region has experienced a consistent increase in the quality and complexity of transactions over the years.

Another positive challenge is binding together – and also continuing to develop – the new team in Abu Dhabi.

“Ultimately, we need to unite everyone, build relationships, establish traditions and systems, and create a unique culture and identity for our team – all while leveraging the strong foundation of the firm,” he says. “Challenging, but highly satisfying – and fun!”

One of the main challenges that clients face is navigating the complex and varied regulatory environments across different countries.

“This requires a deep understanding of the principles behind those regulations and the ability to work with local counsel to interpret and navigate the local laws and regulations, as well as the ability to adapt to changes quickly,” says Hilton.

Linked to this is the need to align with global standards and best practices, particularly in areas such as ESG, corporate governance, and compliance.

“This is increasingly important as Middle Eastern entities seek to attract international investment, invest alongside global players, and expand their global presence,” he says.

Building and maintaining strong relationships with key stakeholders, including government entities, regulators, and business partners, is also crucial for success in the region – something that the firm has been doing for decades.

“Skadden has a long history of serving sovereign, corporate, and institutional clients in the Middle East, spanning several decades – so we are entering this market from a position of strength,” says Hilton.