

An aerial photograph of the Dubai skyline at sunset. The Burj Khalifa is the central focus, reaching towards the top of the frame. Other prominent buildings include the BurjDubai and several modern glass skyscrapers. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and purple. A semi-transparent blue box is overlaid on the top half of the image, containing the title and author information. Another semi-transparent blue box is overlaid on the middle of the image, containing a paragraph of text.

Lawyers in Dubai

An Essential Guide by Radha Stirling

Leading UAE Expert Radha Stirling, founder of Detained in Dubai and Due Process International, has helped more than fifteen thousand individuals who have faced sometimes unbelievable situations in the Emirates. With her expert knowledge and veteran experience, Stirling has produced this guide to help prevent legal abuse.

Common Client Complaints

Lawyers in Dubai: A guide to finding the best legal advice in a minefield of legal sharks.

When living, working or investing in Dubai, you will inevitably need legal guidance and assistance but many have found it's not quite that simple. The quality of legal advice in the UAE varies greatly and in civil litigation or criminal proceedings, the lawyer you choose can make or break your chances of winning.

Expats have been bewildered by the difference in service standards and methods of practice, leaving them feeling like they haven't been taken care of, or prioritised.

Common Client Complaints

High fees

It is quite usual for lawyers to offer a fixed quote for their services and the amount or method of charging can be arbitrary. One lawyer may offer to take on a case for AED 25,000 while another may quote AED 100,000 and it can be difficult to determine whether one is of a higher quality or whether they are simply quoting based on their 'feeling' of what you can afford or how vulnerable you may be. Are you in prison? Are there children involved? Do you stand to lose your fortune? Rather than charging a standard hourly rate, most lawyers will quote based on other determining factors or on their feeling. Paying a higher price does not guarantee their focus on your case.

Some lawyers just take your funds and barely see you again. People left in this situation will not have residual funds to instruct a new lawyer and they will never be able to get a refund from the one they hired. This can leave them disadvantaged and put them at serious risk.

Fees keep increasing

It is more common than not, that a lawyer will offer a fixed fee but quickly find a 'reason' to increase their fees. Once a client has invested in a lawyer, if they do not pay the new unexpected fee increase, they will have to go back to the beginning and instruct a new lawyer. If they instruct a new lawyer, they will have to pay from the beginning again and have therefore lost the investment made into the first lawyer. This leaves the lawyer in an obvious advantageous negotiation position and the client will be compelled to pay their increased quote.

AED 50,000 becomes AED 100,000 overnight or that AED 100,000 was a 'mistake', the lawyer *meant* US\$100,000. Lawyers are in an optimal position to extort their clients and sadly, a great majority of them, do so. There is no recourse through the courts, the police, or any regulatory body. It is the wild west, and it's profitable.

By Radha Stirling

Common Client Complaints

Lawyer seemed to want an appeal

It is not uncommon for lawyers to provide sub-optimal service in the first instances of a case, where clients would prefer the matter be resolved. Lawyers can 'forget' or delay speaking to counter-parties or prosecutors, just letting the case run its course. If the case is lost in the first instance, the lawyer will be able to charge the client to appeal, thereby doubling their fees. There is little incentive for a lawyer to work hard to resolve a client's case in the early days, but this can be disastrous and end up with the client being jailed or travel banned. The further a case has progressed, the more of a challenge it will be to turn it around. But lawyers who focus on profit over people, have no conscience. They are difficult to spot and will sweet talk a client at the initial stages, selling them 'the world'.

Lawyer did not file the correct paperwork on time

'Lawyer laziness' is a huge problem in the UAE, particularly so because there is zero accountability for negligence. In other countries, a lawyer might be sued for professional negligence, or even lose their practicing license. But in the UAE, a client will find it next to impossible to seek remedy. This provides the perfect climate for lawyers to be lazy, negligent and self focussed.

Failing to submit paperwork to a regulatory body, a bank, immigration, or the DIFC can completely prejudice a client's position and even lead them to being criminally charged for failing in their own duties and obligations.

Lawyers tell their clients they have submitted the required paperwork but the client later finds out this was never done. Excuses are made or the negligence is outright denied. If a client pushes too hard or becomes upset, the lawyer righteously threatens to resign or threatens to report the client for being 'rude' to them.

The knock on effects can be drastic when in business, dealing with banks, suppliers and clients.

Lawyer becomes unavailable or unresponsive once fees have been paid

Dubai Lawyers are amazing salespeople, many of them 'ambulance chasers', scouting prisons for business. They are sympathetic and personable, promising that they have connections, that they will solve the case very quickly and the client's needs will be taken care of with the utmost professionalism and care. They just need to sign the Power of Attorney, pay the fees and they will be taken care of. These words of confidence are a huge relief to a client, who is probably experiencing the most stressful time of their life. They can breathe.

And for a few days, they are told the lawyer is 'working on it, it will be resolved soon, relax, relax'. This buys them a little while longer. Soon, they are asking the client to 'be patient', to trust. But weeks pass and nothing has changed. The original promise of days became weeks and now the lawyer is unsure how much longer it will be. The false promise leaves the client feeling betrayed and desperate. They feel the lawyer is neglecting them and that if they increase their calls and emails, asking for updates, the lawyer will refocus on their case. The lawyer becomes increasingly unavailable and the client feels abandoned.

Common Client Complaints

As the communication decreases, the lawyer is focussing on his next sale, rather than his existing clients. This neglect can leave the client wishing to instruct a new lawyer, causing him to double up on fees, or it can leave the lawyer in an excellent bargaining position, to ask for additional fees for 'this and that'. When they do, the client may even feel some relief that the lawyer has started communicating again.

This lawyer-client relationship has been the case of significant additional and unnecessary stress and anxiety for people in such strenuous situations already. The lawyer may have dealt with these cases a million times before, but it is usually a client's first time.

Lawyer does not want to keep the client informed or with their client

Lawyers do not operate in the same manner as clients are often used to. They do not 'work' for the client. They do not take 'instructions' from the client. They are the professionals, the leaders, and they don't need the client questioning their every decision. The more a client is involved (or informed) of the case, the more they will question, second guess and irritate the lawyer.

But some lawyers take this too far. They visit the client once, speak to them for a couple of minutes, take the Power of Attorney, promise to visit again, but rarely (or never) do. The client might be in custody, wondering how their lawyer can possibly defend them in court, when they haven't even taken the client's story, their statement or discussed the defence with them.

Perhaps the lawyer will try to settle the case, present their own opinion of what the defence should be, or perhaps they are complacent about winning or losing. They have the money, and of course, they can always appeal.

The attitude shift can be shocking to clients. They can not adjust to the local notion of surrendering to the 'professional', particularly when they are the one's paying. Usually, the money supplier is the boss, but lawyers in Dubai feel they should be more treated like a medical professional and their advice should be taken without question. Again, this clash in expectations, can lead clients to become an irritation to their lawyer and lead to the lawyer walking away with their money, or becoming less amenable to taking their calls or even working on their case.

Lawyer threatens to resign from the case

Legal proceedings are intense. They take a huge toll on the participants, whether they are civil or criminal. This leads to heightened emotions, that the lawyer is often on the receiving end of. Families and loved ones put a huge amount of pressure on lawyers, want regular and sometimes constant interactions and their questions answered. Of course, they have just parted with sometimes significant amounts of cash, perhaps even their life savings. Their loved ones are facing prison and they need more than just an advocate. They need to know their advocate is doing everything they can, that they care about the case and can offer moral and emotional support too.

Common Client Complaints

But lawyers have many clients and providing this additional support is time consuming and can be draining to them. They want to be able to get on with their job in peace and they simply cannot answer every single question every single client has. When emotions are high, this can lead to tension in the lawyer-client relationship and can lead them to throw in the towel, often unfairly.

Clients need to be communicated with on a regular basis, but also need to be aware that it's counterproductive to text their lawyer throughout the day with a million different questions. It's up to the lawyer to set the client's expectations and let them know how often they will be available, but they have usually given the impression at the point of sale, that they'll be on this case full time.

Resigning from the case after taking the money and providing no proportional refund is a huge risk to clients. It can leave them without legal representation in the middle of a crisis. Walking away from a case in an unethical manner will not hurt the lawyer's reputation. Each client is a one time case he has to deal with. If he already has the money and the client becomes a 'problem', it's all too easy to call it quits.

Lawyer seems disinterested in pursuing counter criminal allegations

Many people have been wrongfully accused of a crime in Dubai, usually for ulterior motives. This could be to harass, punish or extort the victim, or to detract from their own crimes. Some people report a crime to the police quickly, to ensure they get in first. If someone has engaged in road rage, for example, and believes they are going to be reported by another driver, they might rush to the police station and report the innocent party for the crimes they have actually committed. Getting in first means they are more likely to be believed by the police than the person who reports them second.

In cases of harassment, this is especially prevalent. A perpetrator might report a victim to the police for say, a rude WhatsApp message. The police will arrest that person and when they seek legal representation, the lawyer will advise them not to open their own allegations against their accuser, even if their claim is well evidenced. They advise them to 'deal with it later'. In one such case, a woman seeking to open a serious harassment case against her accuser, was discouraged and blocked by her lawyer at every moment in time.

She had paid him. She had sent him 200 pages of hard evidence of the crimes against her harasser and she was told the evidence had been presented. The lawyer kept assuring her that it was in the legal process, that it was going ahead, even that the accuser had been charged, but none of it was true. He had not pursued it at all.

Most lawyers advise victims of false allegations to defend themselves and move on. This leaves people who have been victimised by the legal system, without any recourse to file charges against the actual criminal.

This is especially true where the perpetrator is a local resident. The problem is that gives people the green light to make false allegations and literally, puts innocent people in jail.

Common Client Complaints

Lawyer doesn't seem to be doing what was promised

Some lawyers have completely failed in their obligations to the client. They have failed to file paperwork on time (or at all). They failed to file appeals within the deadlines, have failed to even apply for the return of a confiscated passport. In many instances, they've even failed to show up in court.

Again, Dubai lawyers are barely accountable. They are not going to face disciplinary proceedings with any "law society" or legal ombudsman and they are not afraid of a client trying to sue them for their failings.

Lawyer has been dining with the opposition

Dubai is a small place in essence, and the legal community is tight. Your lawyer will likely dine with the opposition's lawyer, the prosecutor, the police and even the judge. They might even do it in the middle of your case and right in front of you. This kind of unethical practice would be horrific in many other countries, but in Dubai, anything goes.

It's highly concerning to see your lawyer is friends with a prosecutor or opposing counsel in your case. It's even more disconcerting to see them laughing and playing golf together. On the one hand, you think it might help or improve your chances. On the other hand, you wonder what deals they may be making and whether they are at your expense.

It's important to be able to secure representation where this ethical dilemma doesn't even cross your mind. You know for sure, that your lawyer is your corner. Many times though, they are not.

Lawyer appears too close to the police

It has been known. Police are given incentives for arrests and prosecutors are given incentives for convictions. Foreigners have long been seen as wealthy visitors to the UAE who can easily afford extortionate fees.

Although corruption has been largely clamped down on, there is certainly still a culture that thrives on taking money from unsuspecting visitors.

Lawyers can also benefit from this process. When the police see an innocent foreigner arrested for a crime they obviously haven't committed, rather than simply closing the case, they would rather drain their funds and inject it into the local community. Cases that should have been resolved instantly, are deliberately kept open so lawyers can swoop in and charge \$50,000 to resolve the 'very serious charges,' with kickbacks all round. All prosecutors are Emirati and their family members and friends are often lawyers. It's not difficult to see how this can create a problem for visiting foreigners.

Common Client Complaints

The police and prosecutors threaten their foreign victims, wait for them to hire legal representation, then negotiate their release. The charges are dropped once the fees are paid.

In drug raids, the police are incentivised to make broadsweep arrests, people who have nothing to do with the accused but have simply crossed paths with them at a function once upon a time. When each of those innocent parties hires legal representation, it is highly profitable for the individuals and for the country. Lawyers and law enforcers are ever so happy.

This can be very dangerous for the victims and the wealthier they are perceived, the more dangerous it can be.

Lawyer appears to be sabotaging the case

Lawyers with ulterior motives may even go so far as to sabotage or deliberate prejudice their client's position. They can do this for a variety of reasons. It could be that they prefer the case to go on for a longer time so they can raise more fees. It could be because they have made a secret deal with the opposition's lawyer or with the prosecutor. It doesn't always need to revolve around money either. Sometimes, it is a strategic move to advance their career, standing or influence within the community, their 'wasta', meaning the influence or clout one has within the UAE.

There is no consideration as to the consequence for their client. If a lawyer is willing to sacrifice their client for their own self interests, they will have no qualms about whether their client is financially ruined, their business lost, their life savings or their freedom.

It is a sad reality that without regulation, without consequence and accountability, this remains a serious risk to investors and visitors to the UAE.

Lawyer is too slow, just telling me not to worry

Lawyers who have not taken a case seriously, are just as much of a threat to a client as the corrupt money hungry type. When clients are seeking remedy, intervention, negotiations and representation, today or tomorrow can be the difference between winning or losing.

Clients can be told not to worry for a short time, but when it becomes ritualistic, this phrase becomes a relationship aggravator and can quickly lead to a breakdown.

'After, after' is a phrase most clients are familiar with. It's a standard response to any attempt to nail down a timeframe to get something done. It's the equivalent of Spain's 'mañana' and it is by no means acceptable when the outcome of a case is often dependent on the speedy response of a lawyer. Clients are shocked that this attitude doesn't seem to change, no matter how high a fee is paid or how 'top rated' a law firm.

Common Client Complaints

Lawyer didn't even show up

It's almost unfathomable that a lawyer doesn't show up to meet their client at a detention facility. Even worse when a lawyer doesn't show up to represent their client in court! This is a surprisingly common issue though.

Imagine being in a completely foreign legal system, in Arabic, not knowing what is going on but having faith that at least you have a lawyer. You are transported in the heat, shackled, to the courtroom where your hearing is likely to last just a few minutes. You're presented to the judge but your lawyer is nowhere to be seen. This is absolutely frightening.

The client might get word after the court hearing that 'it wasn't important, don't worry'. This is quite an outrageous situation and any lawyer who fails to turn up in court without a very good reason, should indeed be accountable to a regulatory body. If a delay was granted by the judge, the client will now have to wait for a new court hearing and perhaps stay in prison for longer.

If the hearing was not delayed, the client may have been sentenced without being granted a chance to argue their innocence. At this point, the modern city of Dubai, is looking like something out of the stone ages.

Lawyer has threatened to open cases against client

When things get bad, they get really bad and sometimes these threats come very early and unfairly. A lawyer's lack of communication is going to provoke frustration from their paying, despairing client and when they have been told 'after, after', one too many times, they may start complaining about the lawyer's performance. They are often promptly met with the threat of opening a criminal case for offending them.

This also gives the lawyer justification to resign from the case. He's managed to take the client's money, do very little work, and keep the spoils. This is quite a good cycle for lawyers who prefer to be paid without working, always looking for the next client to defraud.

Embassy Recommendations

Embassy recommendations for law firms are only lightly reviewed every four or so years. Embassies do not actively supervise or seek feedback from citizens. Complaints have been disregarded by Embassies and their "list of lawyers" is by no means an endorsement.

How have we helped to make lawyers accountable?

With no regulatory authority, with widespread legal corruption and essentially zero culpability, there is no other way to make lawyers accountable, except financially.

Embassy Recommendations

We have created our own database of legal representatives in the UAE, who have proved themselves to be professional, reasonably priced, trustworthy and results driven. Our network is based on ongoing customer feedback and is subject to change.

However, we are able to endorse several lawyers who value being 'whitelisted'. They know good performance will mean future recommendations and that a lack of attention to a single case, could mean the suspension of their membership.

We oversee their performance throughout a case and actively seek customer feedback during and after their instruction. If the client is satisfied, we note their rating. The more clients give positive ratings, the higher that lawyer is ranked.

We also rank the lawyers based on their performance. For example, if a lawyer has achieved a significant sentence reduction, from life to a few months, they will be especially noted for their success in those types of cases and a case of a similar nature will be escalated to them.

We received applications from lawyers to build relationships with us on a regular basis, but prefer to work with a small number of firms at any one time. We welcome new firms to contact us and offer some pro-bono assistance to clients to get their ratings up.

This system provides positive incentives for ethical lawyers who strive for client satisfaction, and exemplary legal results and is the *only* true system of accountability present in the UAE now.

What kind of law do you cover?

We provide a variety of services directly and work with partners in specialised areas of law. Often, we work in collaboration with a local advocate, instructing and managing a case for the best possible outcome.

We also work with lawyers in other Middle Eastern and European countries, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Australia, Canada, and the United States.

We undertake most elements of criminal and civil cases, working with clients to resolve their dispute and preserve their reputation.

A comprehensive list of services is on the next page.

Areas of Practice

- Interpol Red Notice Removal;
- Expert Testimony;
- Extradition Defence;
- Serious Criminal Cases;
- Emergency Response to Criminal Arrests;
- Fraud and White Collar Crime;
- False Allegations, Scapegoating;
- Bounced Cheques, Business Fraud;
- Breach of Trust, Embezzlement, Theft;
- Smuggling, Money Laundering
- Drugs, Drug Dealing, including Pharmaceuticals, Prescribed Medicine, Contraband;
- Immigration and Visa issues;
- Debt Negotiation;
- Debt Recovery / Outstanding Recovery;
- Arbitration in DIAC, DIFC, Abu Dhabi Global Market and abroad;
- Corporate Annual Legal Services;
- Drafting contracts including MOU, Tenancy Contracts, Sale, Purchase & Lease Agreement, NDA, Labor Non-Disclosure and Non-Compete, Partners agreement, Wills;
- Commercial and Civil Litigation;
- Employment Disputes;
- Real Estate Cases, Rental Disputes;
- Construction Cases;

- Maritime Law (Precautional Attachment of Vessels, Civil/Commercial cases);
- Labor cases;
- Insurance cases;
- Car/Motor Accidents claims/ Health damages recovery;
- Criminal cases filing and defense, Bail Requests;
- Support with Arrested Containers and Goods at Customs;
- Aviation Cases;
- Information Technology and E-commerce cases;
- Trade Mark Registration;
- Bank Disputes, Cheque Guarantee Disputes, Settlement Disputes;
- Police and Legal Status Checks;
- Deportation Resolution, Ban Lifting;
- Family Law, Divorce cases (divorce settlement, financial and material compensation, Children Custody, Inheritance issues, etc.);
- Legal Notices and Response to Legal Notices;
- Representing the Client in matters of negotiation and settlement;
- Legal correspondence, Preparing replies to correspondence, warning, or claims;

Radha Stirling, CEO of Detained in Dubai

Meet Radha Stirling, the author.

Radha Stirling is a leading human rights advocate, crisis manager and policy consultant, focusing on the UAE and the wider Middle East. She is the founder and CEO of British based organisation Detained in Dubai (which have helped almost twenty thousand victims of injustice over the past 13+ years), Due Process International and IPEX (Interpol and Extradition) Reform. Stirling also hosts the Gulf in Justice Podcast.

In 2010, Ms Stirling expanded her work beyond the UAE, dealing with both civil and criminal cases internationally. She has provided expert witness testimony in several high profile extradition and arbitration cases, while lobbying for Interpol reform.

Given her breadth of experience in financial disputes, Ms Stirling also provides expert risk assessment for investors and advice on business strategies in the Gulf. She has actively negotiated on behalf of corporate clients and investors, assisted in recovering stolen assets, and intervened to secure their freedom from unlawful detention.

Ms Stirling frequently appears in international media to discuss human rights and legal issues in the Middle East and abroad. She recently addressed the United Nations and worked closely with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Ms Stirling has provided policy advice to both the Australian, the US, Canadian and British governments, and is a frequently invited speaker on foreign policy issues related to the Gulf states and broader region.

Her high-profile media campaigns and legal work have influenced the release of countless high profile prisoners in the UAE, notably David Oliver, Richard Lau, Ellie Holman, Matt Joyce and Marcus Lee, Safi Qurashi, Scott Richards, Conrad Clitheroe, Gary Cooper, Farzan Athari, Billy Barclay, Jamie Harron, André Gauthier in the Gold AE fraud, Laleh Shahravesh, Derrin Crawford, Andy Neal, Peter Clark, Sheikha Zeynab, and more. Stirling acts in a number of cross jurisdictional commercial litigations including Oussama El Omari, Karam Al Sadeq, Jihad Quzmar, Dr Mohammed Haddad, Dr Khater Massaad, and Najib Houry.

Ms Stirling publishes regular articles and reports, often covering human rights issues, political prisoners, Middle Eastern finance and debt laws, social media laws, cybercrime laws and Interpol red notice abuse. Stirling's articles and op-eds have been published in major news outlets, including The Times of Israel, Haartz, the Independent and Inside Arabia.

Radha has worked extensively at parliament level and closely with Senators and MP's. Her work at Australian Parliament ensured provisions to safeguard citizens against human rights violations were included in their extradition treaty with the UAE. Stirling hosts MP's on her Gulf in Justice Podcast, and works closely with the US State Department, Senators, Congressional representatives and law enforcement personnel.

Radha Stirling, CEO of Detained in Dubai

Stirling acted for HRH Sheikha Latifa Bin Rashid Al Maktoum and Hervé Jaubert which led to an international media campaign and a United Nations investigation into her disappearance from a US yacht in international waters. Stirling addressed the United Nations and continues to make submissions on behalf of aggrieved clients.

Stirling delivered a speech at a Frontiers of Freedom conference in November 2018, focussing largely on the increased influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE into American politics and media, questioning whether these US “allies” are acting in the best interests of the States. The OffshoreAlert conference hosted Stirling as a speaker who presented the inherent risks of investing in the UAE, to an audience of high profile lawyers, investors and financial advisors. An Interpol expert and veteran, Stirling also regularly addresses an Interpol reform group in Washington DC that guides policy at the highest level.

Stirling’s work has become so high profile that she and her clients have been the target of UAE led intelligence and security attacks via Israeli spy companies.

Since founding Detained in Dubai in 2008, Radha Stirling has held various senior roles in law firms in the Middle East and was most recently described by Daily Beast as running "an extraordinarily slick - and convincing - PR campaign ostensibly designed to free her [Princess Latifa]".