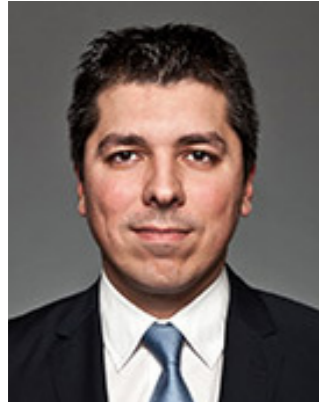


“Dubai truly acts as an assembly point to Africa”



FLORIAN GUAIS
Partner, **STEERING LAW FIRM - ARAGO LEGAL CONSULTANTS**



ELIAS BOU KHALIL
Partner, **STEERING LAW FIRM - ARAGO LEGAL CONSULTANTS**

Florian Guais, partner in charge of the law firm's African activities, and Elias Bou Khalil, partner in charge of the law firm's activities in the Middle East, have had long-standing experience in the UAE. The newly established Steering Law Firm structure will be active in the Gulf Cooperation Council in partnership with Arago Legal Consultant who has been providing services in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since 2009.

Leaders League. You just move from Arago to Steering. What changes does this introduce for you?

Elias Bou Khalil/Florian Guais. Our first international practice was launched from the Middle East in 2009 by Elias Bou Khalil, with an office in the United Arab Emirates. We have ever since consolidated our presence and practice in the United Arab Emirates by adding local lawyers to our teams and have established affiliations with local law firms in the region (such as Arago Beirut Law Firm) to spread our geographical scope. We started out our practice in the Middle East from scratch and have finally developed an established legal consultancy practice, able to assist and advise clients throughout the Middle East in different areas of laws. In the UAE, we have been known as Arago Legal Consultants. Thus, we did not want to change. However and in order to take into account our new brand (i.e. “Steering”), we decide to operate the MENA practice under the name of Steering Law Firm in partnership with Arago Legal Consultant.

Our Middle Eastern entity, called Arago Legal Consultants, has had an independent development for a few years now and we wanted to focus on this. This recent structural change occurred in France simply translated the change which has been going on for years, the Middle Eastern entities becoming more and more independent from the French entity. Steering will from now on operate throughout the Middle East in exclusive partnership with Arago Legal Consultants.

Leaders League. The activities of Steering Dubai's office are quite dedicated to Africa. Why this choice of implementation in the Middle East?

F. G. Dubai's legal system is close to ours and its banking system is very efficient. Also, Dubai truly acts as an assembly point to Africa. Same for Beirut, where we will be operating as well: it is easy to reach both Europe and Africa from Dubai and Beirut. That is why a lot of trade companies are based in Dubai; there is a huge consumer market – FCC and commodities reach through Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.

Like other jurisdictions such as Hong Kong and Singapore, Dubai is really international, structured and the big corporations trust this location. Our clientele consists in big corporations, broadly Western based corporations, with a considerable portion of French companies, who perceive the UAE as a convenient hub for their expansion and international activities. We thus advise them from their implementation, through their M&A, general corporate law and tax aspects.

E. B. K. Indeed, Dubai works very well as a hub with an easy access to any country in the world through its strong airline carrier - Emirates Airlines and a lot of routes are direct from Dubai to the African continent, at very attractive prices. This position has clearly helped out developing our activities from the Emirates to Africa, or directly from Europe to Africa throughout Dubai. If Morocco once appeared as an attractive

gate to enter Africa, Dubai has definitely become an alternative. Beyond the fact that it is a lot more international, there is no exchange control provision.

Leaders League. Can you tell us more about your African activities?

F. G. I have been developing our activities in Africa since then. We have put in place a partnership with Kadri Law firm at Niamey in Niger. Very soon we understood that when developing activities to Africa, it is crucial to partner with a local law firm that knows both the local culture and has connections, and obviously, it is necessary to have really good knowledge of OHADA law. The choice of Niger has been a question of encounter. We got along well and Oumarrou Sanda Kadri is an excellent lawyer, very proactive and able to plead in all WAEMU (UEMOA by its French acronym) zone. We have therefore developed projects and operations from the Emirates to Africa and directly in Africa.

Leaders League. How are the Middle East offices structured and what are your practices?

E. B. K. In the UAE, our legal status is “legal counsels” and not advocates. The difference is that only advocates can appear in courts. The advocacy activity is reserved in the Gulf and throughout the Middle East to nationals of every country. We have thus developed a network of affiliations and have added local lawyers to our team to be able to assist in courts whenever it is required. Our practice in the Middle East is focused on the client rather than on departments and activities. We are a client focus type of firms. Whenever a client becomes a client of our firm, we endeavor to cater all of its legal needs in a way as its general legal counsel. Whenever we are able to provide the service ourselves, we do it (for M&A, corporate law, contracts etc...). Whenever the need requires the adjoining of a specific skill or capacity, we find it or hire it.

F. G. Our organization is such that Elias is mostly based in the Middle East (mainly Dubai), and for a little part in Beirut and Paris. I moved in the Emirates in 2013 and I am still present in Paris some time of year. Our client-

tele consists of French and European clients. We help them in all markets of the region and connecting them in order for them to find out new opportunities.

Though our primary focus definitely is corporate, private equity and tax matters, we are also brought by our clients to explore other practices such as contract law, litigation, arbitration or employment law. We want to be the point of reference for our clients, whether we directly act as counsel or indirectly, through local lawyers – mostly Emiratis or Lebanese in the Middle East.

We have complementary skills: I act as counsel for the French clients with my corporate and tax background, and Elias, with his dual French/Lebanese culture and background helps out the clients in the MENA region.

Leaders League. How do you envision the future developments of your firm?

F. G. At this point, we can deliver any service a Parisian law firm can deliver. Like we said, our expertise relies on the client's needs rather than on departments.

E. B. K. We are a law firm free of debt. We have had a step-by-step progression, with a rational development.

At the very beginning of our Middle Eastern adventure we were two international, adventurous and entrepreneurial lawyers. This is our philosophy. We want to keep expanding that way. For now, we do not plan to open new offices. It is not a priority, but we never know - it depends whether we meet the right person to do so.

We believe a lot of international developments are still possible. There are good opportunities in Africa. We have really been focusing on mining and oil & gas but there are also new opportunities regarding railway installations with Bolloré Africa Logistics' project to implement railways in West Africa. We also have business opportunities in both the agribusiness and the mining sectors.

F. G. For the French part with Steering we have projects and new developments in the outlying regions.. There are truly dynamic and interesting SMEs outside of Paris and we want to help them out grow internationally. They can take advantage of our international network. We consider it is necessary to let the provinces regions have the interest they deserve. ♦

“WE DEFINITELY ACT AS A TOOLBOX FOR OUR CLIENTS. THIS IS PART OF OUR DNA”