



THE LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

Real estate investment in Dubai

Contents

1. Ownership of real estate	3	6. Leases	10
1.1 Freehold ownership	3	6.1 Duration	10
1.2 Usufructs and musataha (bot agreements) interests	3	6.2 Rent	10
1.3 Leasehold	3	6.3 Rent review	10
1.4 Granted land	3	6.4 Operating expenses	10
1.5 Jointly owned property	4	6.5 Maintenance, repair and renovation at end of lease	11
2. Acquisition of ownership	5	6.6 Assignments	11
2.1 Formal requirements	5	6.7 Subleases	11
2.2 Registration fees	5	6.8 Termination	11
2.3 Asset deals	5	6.9 Sale of leased property	11
2.4 Share deals (purchase of property owning company)	6	7. Tax	12
2.5 Public auctions	7	7.1 Transfer taxes	12
3. Other rights to property	8	7.2 Value Added Tax (VAT)	12
3.1 Mortgages and charges	8	7.3 Other charges arising from the occupation of real estate	12
3.2 Easements	8	7.4 Real Estate Investment Trusts	12
3.3 Other unregistrable rights	8	8. Real estate finance	13
4. Zoning and planning law permits	9	8.1 Interest rate risks	13
5. Environmental liability	9	8.2 Assets held as security	13
		8.3 Further collateral agreements	13
		8.4 Taxation on the creation of security	13
		Contacts	14
		About DLA Piper	16

1. Ownership of real estate

1.1 Freehold ownership

Freehold, or absolute ownership, is the most complete and comprehensive right over real estate available in Dubai and akin to the common law concept of freehold. Such ownership in Dubai is subject to certain limitations based on nationality.

Prior to 2006 no foreign ownership of real estate in Dubai was permitted by law. The introduction of a freehold law in 2006 provided that non-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nationals and companies owned in part or wholly by them, may acquire a freehold interest in real estate in areas of Dubai designated by the Ruler of Dubai (His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum) as available for foreign ownership (Designated Areas). The GCC countries are, in addition to the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar.

Freehold ownership of land throughout Dubai is permitted for UAE nationals, other GCC nationals, companies wholly owned by GCC nationals and public joint stock companies (as designated under UAE law).

All real rights must be registered at the Dubai Land Department (DLD) in order to be valid. Upon registration, the DLD issues a title certificate which is absolute evidence of ownership.

Co-ownership of a freehold interest is permitted and the title certificate issued by the DLD will state the share held by each party.

1.2 Usufructs and musataha (bot agreements) interests

Usufruct interests (including a musataha interest) are interests in real estate which are limited in time and therefore similar to a leasehold interest, except that they constitute real rights rather than personal rights. A usufruct right is a right to exploit the property of another. Registration of usufructs must be completed at the DLD and a certificate evidencing such ownership is then issued.

A usufruct right of up to 99 years can be held by non-GCC nationals within Designated Areas. A musataha (which is a type of usufruct and similar to a build, operate and transfer agreement) may be granted for the development of land for a term of up to 50 years. For GCC nationals, usufruct rights can be acquired throughout the Emirate.

1.3 Leasehold

Leasehold interests can be acquired throughout Dubai by GCC nationals.

Non-GCC nationals may acquire short-term leases throughout Dubai but long leases can only be acquired in Designated Areas. The law treats any lease of ten years or more as being a long lease.

Registration of all leases is mandatory. For leases of less than ten years, registration on the eiar register is required and evidence of such registration is necessary in order for a tenant to be entitled to connect to utility and telecommunication supplies.

For long leases, registration at the DLD is required and a title certificate is issued.

1.4 Granted land

Granted land is a type of ownership whereby the Ruler of Dubai gifts a plot of land in the Emirate to a UAE national at no cost. The purpose of the gift may either be commercial (i.e. with the purpose of developing a commercial asset) or residential (i.e. for the purpose of building a home for the individual). Although the ownership is considered unlimited in time, the gift can be revoked at any time upon the direction of the Ruler.

Granted land is also subject to various restrictions. The individual to whom the land has been gifted cannot dispose of the land (e.g. by way of sale) or grant an interest in it (e.g. leasehold) that exceeds three years without special permission from the Ruler. In our experience, those who are gifted land are reluctant to seek such permission. Any transaction in contravention of this restriction will be deemed null and void. Therefore, an investment involving granted land needs to be structured carefully to avoid falling foul of the law.

Commercial (including industrial) land can be converted from granted title to private title (i.e. freehold title) by an application to the DLD and payment of a fee of 30% of the then-current market value of the land. If a transfer has already been made by the grantee to a third party, upon the third party applying for title, a payment of 50% of the then-current market value of the land will be required by the DLD.

1.5 Jointly owned property

A jointly owned property law exists in Dubai to deal with the common areas in a condominium or mixed-use property development (as commonly exist in Dubai, in particular in the Designated Areas, which tend to be master planned communities). The jointly owned property law provides that each owner of a unit within a development owns a share of the common parts proportionate to the size of its unit and pays a service or community charge in such proportion for the upkeep of the common parts.

From 2019, homeowners' associations were abolished and the responsibility for the management of a jointly owned property development or master planned community vests in the developer or a specialist management company approved by RERA. Where the project contains a hotel component, the building manager must be a licensed "hotel management company" with RERA approval. This is generally considered to be a company established by the hotel owner to perform this function, as distinct from a hotel operator appointed under a hotel management agreement.



2. Acquisition of ownership

2.1 Formal requirements

All transfers of ownership of real estate in Dubai must be registered at the DLD. All parties involved (e.g. buyer, seller, mortgagee, real estate broker etc.) must attend in person either at the DLD or a trustee office which is authorized to accept applications for transfers of real estate. A party not able to attend in person may appoint a representative by using a power of attorney either executed before a notary in Dubai or executed overseas and authenticated and legalized for use in the UAE.

The parties must sign the relevant DLD forms, including Form F, which sets out details relating to the transfer of real estate such as the details relating to the parties, the land and the real estate broker(s) acting on the transaction. Managers' cheques are commonly used to pay the purchase price and are required to pay the fees arising from a transfer of ownership.

Additional documents will be required by the DLD depending on the nature of the transaction. For transfer of real estate within a master community, a 'no-objection certificate' will be required from the master developer and this will only be issued if all service or community charges have been paid up to date by the seller and if there are no outstanding issues such as a breach of community rules and regulations. If the real estate being transferred is a plot of land to be developed then no-objection certificates are also likely to be required from the Roads and Transport Authority, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority and the relevant telecommunications authority.

Following attendance at the DLD or a trustee office, the application to transfer is processed. This may be completed on the same day or within a few days. Upon completion, the DLD will issue a new title certificate in the name of the buyer. If the buyer has granted a mortgage over the property, then the DLD will issue the original title deed to the mortgagee.

2.2 Registration fees

The DLD requires fees to be paid in the case of transfers of ownership and the grant of long leases. In each case, the law provides for such fees to be equally split between the seller and buyer (or landlord and tenant) unless otherwise agreed. It is commonly agreed in the market that the buyer will pay the entire amount of fees.

The fees for registration of a sale and purchase transaction are 4% of the value of the property. If the DLD does not think the sale and purchase agreement accurately reflects the market value of the property being transferred, it is entitled to determine the value itself and charge transfer fees calculated against the market value it determines instead.

Registration of the grant of a long lease or the grant of a musataha attracts a fee of 4% of the total lease value (calculated as the total rent to be paid over the duration of the tenancy).

If a mortgage is being granted against the property, the DLD will charge a fee for registering the mortgage of 0.25% of the loan amount together with a nominal knowledge fee. This is paid by the borrower.

2.3 Asset deals

In the case of an asset deal, the above formalities must be observed and the applicable fees set out above must be paid upon completion at the DLD or at a trustee office.

Apart from high-value property, it is common for lawyers not to be instructed by a seller or a buyer; real estate brokers tend to take a greater lead in the sale and purchase process. A brokerage company must be registered at RERA and each individual broker is further registered at RERA. If a company and individual are not registered at RERA, they are not authorized to carry on business as a broker in the UAE and, in the case of any complaints, the authorities will be limited in their actions against an unauthorized broker.

The DLD's register of real estate ownership is not available for inspection by the public and therefore due diligence is limited to the information that can be obtained from the seller (although the principle of buyer beware applies). Commonly, a buyer will request a copy of the title deed from the seller and this needs to be checked as referring to the seller and the correct plot number or unit number. It will also reveal whether a mortgage has been registered and therefore needs to be released upon completion. Public utilities searches cannot be performed by the public and therefore, again, a buyer is reliant on obtaining due diligence materials by request to the seller.

A valuation will be conducted by a bank if the buyer is seeking to grant a mortgage over the property – a new law has been issued regarding the credentials required in order to be entitled to act as a valuer, but at the time of writing, this has not been published in the Official Gazette. A survey is not commonly done in the case of residential property unless it is of particularly high value. It is common to undertake a survey in the case of commercial property.

Once due diligence has been carried out, the parties will enter into a sale and purchase agreement which will either be drafted and negotiated between lawyers (if instructed) or by a broker (if lawyers are not instructed). In the case of sale and purchase agreements produced by brokers, they are also commonly referred to as being a memorandum of understanding or a letter of intent. Regardless of the nomenclature, this will set out the basic details of the transaction (including the parties' details,

the property details, the purchase price and the timing for completion) and any details particular to the specific transaction. In a more complex commercial property deal, this may include details of leases the property is subject to, the details of any assignments of commercial contracts or warranties to be effected upon completion, etc.

Once the sale and purchase agreement has been entered into, a binding contract has been made. However, it is not possible for a buyer to lodge a priority notice at the DLD to ensure that the property is not transferred to another party before the completion date agreed between the seller and buyer. By requiring completion to take place by personal attendance at the DLD (or a trustee office), the risks associated with this are mitigated to a certain extent.

2.4 Share deals (purchase of property owning company)

It is permitted for real estate in Dubai to be held by a company. Outside of the Designated Areas, where real estate may only be owned by GCC nationals, it can be held by individuals or by companies (such as a limited liability company) wholly owned by such individuals. Within Designated Areas, the law permits foreigners and companies wholly owned by them to hold real estate. However, in practice, the DLD permits company ownership only if that company is either a limited liability company registered in the UAE (LLC); Jebel Ali Free Zone Authority (JAFZA) Offshore Company (JAFZA Offshore Company); or a UAE Free Zone company (FZ-LLC) approved by DLD. This is done in an attempt to prevent circumvention of payment of the transfer fee by undertaking a share acquisition rather than an asset acquisition.

Unless a JAFZA Offshore Company is used, the relevant company laws require a UAE national or company wholly owned by them to hold at least 51% of the shares in an LLC. Caution must be exercised when dealing with real estate in a non-designated area as any foreign shareholding will cause an LLC to no longer be entitled to hold such an ownership interest.

A JAFZA Offshore Company can be wholly owned by a foreign national. JAFZA is a free trade zone in Dubai whereby companies can be registered with 100% foreign shareholding and with a tax-free guarantee and therefore the JAFZA Offshore Company is a popular vehicle for holding real estate assets in Dubai. If a JAFZA Offshore Company is acquiring real estate in Dubai, an undertaking is required by the DLD at the time of acquisition that the shareholders will notify the DLD upon a change in the shareholding. In theory this means that a transfer in the shares will trigger a transfer fee at the DLD but, in practice, there is not much anecdotal evidence available as to whether such notifications are made.

In the event shares in a company are being acquired, there is additional due diligence that ought to be done by the buyer. As with property ownership, company ownership is not publicly available information. Therefore, a potential buyer commonly requests certain information from the seller. Such information includes requesting copies of company constitutional documents – in the case of an LLC, the trade license and memorandum of association (and its amendments) should be requested and in the case of a JAFZA Offshore Company, a certificate of incorporation and certificate of incumbency should be requested along with the memorandum of association and articles of association (and their amendments). As there is no public share register, for both LLCs and JAFZA Offshore Companies, due diligence must be undertaken to ensure that the shareholding information provided is up to date.

In order to effect a share transfer in an LLC, it will be necessary to first obtain an initial approval from the licensing authority. This is obtained by submission of an application (in Arabic) signed by the manager of the LLC and the transferors and the transferees (or their authorized representatives). If the transferee is an individual, then the authority will undertake background and immigration checks which can be time consuming in certain cases. Following receipt of the initial approval, it will be necessary for the transferor and the transferees (or their authorized representatives) to execute before the notary public in Dubai the relevant share transfer agreement, an amendment to the memorandum of association and the resolutions of the shareholders of the LLC approving the share transfer. The notarized documents, along with the duly notarized (and legalized, if prepared overseas) resolutions of the transferees and the legal documents of the transferees (memorandum of association and articles of association and the certificate of incorporation) should then be filed with the licensing authority in order for the license for the LLC to be amended.

After the issuance of the initial approval, the licensing authority will place an advertisement in the local newspaper for one day to give interested parties the right to make any claims or object to the share transfer. If no objections are received within 14 days of the newspaper advertisement, the licensing authority will issue the amended license and list of partners showing the names of the new partners. The fee payable to the licensing authority will be in the region of AED6,000 and that payable to the notary public will be in the region of AED4,000. The issuance of the LLC's amended license will take around three to four weeks from the date of filing of the documents and paying the applicable fees (provided that no regulatory approvals are required from other government departments).

In order to effect a share transfer in a JAFZA Offshore Company, it will be necessary to submit to JAFZA a letter from the registered agent of the JAFZA company, together with the relevant duly notarized (and legalized, if prepared overseas) resolutions of the transferors and the transferees. Also, three copies of the amendment to the memorandum of association and articles of association of the JAFZA Offshore Company should be signed by authorized representatives of the transferees before a JAFZA official (the resolutions of the transferees should include the relevant authorities in favor of its representatives in this regard) and the legal documents of the transferees (memorandum of association, articles of association and the certificate of incorporation) should be submitted to JAFZA. At the time of signing the amendment to the memorandum of association and articles of association, two originals of the existing memorandum of association and articles of association should be returned to JAFZA. The fees payable to JAFZA will be in the region of AED1,000.

2.5 Public auctions

Real estate is sold by public auction in the event that a lender enforces its mortgage over such property. The mortgage law provides that upon a default by the borrower, a lender must give the borrower 30 days' notice through a notary of its intention to commence execution proceedings. If the default in payment is not cured within such 30-day period, the lender will apply to an execution judge to order an attachment against the mortgaged real estate, which enables it to be sold at a public auction in accordance with the DLD's auction rules. It is possible for the execution judge to postpone the sale by auction for up to 60 days to allow the borrower more time in which to cure the payment default.

This is the only method of mortgage enforcement available in Dubai and it is not possible for a lender to instead acquire ownership of the real estate asset itself and deal with it thereafter, as is possible in a number of other jurisdictions.

Upon a sale by public auction, the proceeds from the sale are first applied to the DLD public auction fees and can then be used to settle the outstanding amount due to the lender. If any amount remains, this is returned to the borrower.



3. Other rights to property

3.1 Mortgages and charges

As set out above, mortgages can be created over real estate in Dubai in favor of UAE licensed banks and financial institutions only, and must be registered at the DLD. In order for a mortgage to be valid, a mortgage contract must contain details of the value of the property, the value of the debt, the mortgage term and the full details of the lender, the borrower and any guarantor. Following registration of the mortgage, the borrower cannot dispose of the property without the consent of the lender.

It is also possible for the holder of a musataha (the right to develop land for a period not exceeding 50 years) to grant a mortgage over the buildings it constructs, but not the underlying land unless the grantor of the musataha so agrees.

Regulations issued by the Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates have imposed lending restrictions for mortgages which distinguish between UAE nationals and non-UAE nationals. The regulations are aimed at home purchases and provide that a mortgage loan can be for a maximum of 25 years with the maximum age at which the final repayment can be made by an individual being 65 years old for non-UAE nationals and 70 years old in the case of UAE nationals. UAE nationals can borrow a maximum loan to value ratio of 70% and non-UAE nationals are able to borrow a maximum of 65%.

It is important to note that, unlike many other civil law jurisdictions, no concept of trust exists, the taking of security over future assets is not permitted and the concept of a floating charge over real estate is not recognized.

Although banks in the UAE commonly lend against property bought off-plan, a legal mortgage cannot be created until the property is completed and then the mortgage (along with the transfer of ownership) is registered at the DLD. For the period starting with the mortgage agreement being entered into until the registration at DLD takes effect, the off-plan purchase and the intention to create a mortgage should be registered on an interim register called oqood.

3.2 Easements

The concept of easements exists under the UAE Civil Code. An easement must be created in writing and in accordance with custom and practice.

Rights of easements can end upon the expiry of any term given to it, upon the dominant and servient lands being owned by the same person or if the relevant properties no longer exist. If the benefit of an easement is not used for a period of 15 years, it is treated as having ended.

Easements are not a registrable right in Dubai and therefore any such arrangement will take effect as a personal contract. Under UAE law, the courts will generally not grant specific performance and do not grant injunctions. Therefore, a breach of a contract creating rights of easement will generally only give rise to a claim for damages.

3.3 Other unregistrable rights

Rights frequently found in other jurisdictions such as pre-emption rights, options and overage rights cannot be registered at the DLD. Therefore, any parties wishing to enter such arrangements relating to real estate in Dubai have freedom of contract to do so, providing it is not deemed by the local courts to be contrary to public policy. However, as set out above, such parties should bear in mind that any such arrangement will take effect as a personal contract only. In the event a party breaches such personal contract, the local courts are most likely to award damages only rather than award an injunction (which is not a remedy that is available under the Civil Code) or order specific performance (which is available in very limited circumstances only).

4. Zoning and planning law permits

Dubai Municipality is the main authority regarding zoning and planning permissions. However, a number of the free zones also operate as planning authorities e.g. Dubai World Central (the location of Dubai's second international airport). The process of obtaining planning and zoning approval is not set out in law or regulations and is based on custom and practice.

In general terms, the owner of a plot of land can obtain an affection plan from Dubai Municipality which will state basic information such as the name of the owner, the nature of the owner's title, the size of the plot, the land use classification (e.g. commercial, industrial, residential etc.) and certain high level information regarding what type of building may be constructed. Such information typically includes how many floors are permitted, any setback requirements and whether parking must be included.

Additional approvals are commonly required, prior to commencing development, and these tend to be noted on the affection plan. Typically, one would expect further approvals to be required from the Dubai Electricity and Water Authority, Dubai Civil Defence, the relevant telecommunications provider (currently either Eitsalat or du), the master developer (if the land is located within a master community) and environmental approval from the environmental department of Dubai Municipality.

Unlike in many other jurisdictions, the planning process does not require any public consultation and can therefore be obtained relatively quickly. It is generally not dealt with by lawyers but rather by architects, project managers and similar professionals. The detailed designs that need to be submitted to Dubai Municipality are the subject of many circulars issued by Dubai Municipality and are closely inspected by officials prior to granting any approvals.

Once the affection plan and other approvals are obtained, a building permit must be obtained from Dubai Municipality. A building permit is also required prior to carry out any extensive works to existing buildings. When the construction or works are completed, a completion certificate needs to be obtained from Dubai Municipality in order for occupation of the building to be permitted. The process of obtaining the completion certificate is conducted in tandem with getting the approval of other authorities (including the Civil Defence) and involves a comparison of the drawings submitted to obtain the building permit with the completed building.

5. Environmental liability

Various laws of the UAE and Dubai relate to the protection, exploitation and conservation of the environment in Dubai, and Dubai Municipality takes the lead in enforcing them. However, desktop environmental reports that are common in various other jurisdictions are not yet common in Dubai and detailed environmental due diligence is not yet commonplace, although such awareness is increasing. Liability for environmental laws not being complied with falls to a buyer, even if it did not cause the breach. Therefore, to avoid fines and the costs of remedying a site, a well-advised buyer will carry out an environmental survey prior to acquiring land in Dubai.

In 2011 the government of Dubai issued the Green Building Regulations and Specifications, which apply to all properties in Dubai (including residential, commercial and public buildings) that are either newly constructed or being extensively refurbished or altered to effect a change of use, excluding large-scale (shopping malls) or

specialist projects (e.g. hospitals). Compliance now applies throughout the Emirate. When a building permit is applied for, a Green Building Declaration must be attached to it which contains an unconditional commitment to meet the requirements of the regulations. Evidence of compliance with the regulations must be demonstrated to Dubai Municipality in due course.

The regulations aim to improve the performance of buildings in the Emirate by reducing the consumption of energy, water and materials, improve public health and safety and enhance the planning, design, construction and operation of buildings.

Certification or a ratings system does not feature in the regulations and therefore developers in Dubai who want such certification tend to obtain a rating from LEED (Leadership and Energy and Environmental Design) or BREEAM (the British Building Research Establishment Environment Assessment Methodology).

6. Leases

The Emirate of Dubai issued a landlord and tenant law in 2007. The law does not distinguish between leases of residential property and commercial leases and registration of all leases is required – either at RERA if the term of the lease is below ten years or at the DLD for long leases. The difference in registration fee is material – a nominal fee (currently approximately USD100) is required in the case of lease registration at RERA and a fee equivalent to 4% of the total rent value is required to register a long lease with the DLD.

6.1 Duration

Typically a lease of commercial property is for a term of between one and five years. Certain industries require leases for a longer period due to the nature of their business, for example, schools and hospitals.

In residential leases, it is common to have a duration of one year.

There is no maximum duration for a lease set out in the applicable law. However, within Designated Areas, a non-GCC national may only be granted a lease of a maximum of 99 years and outside of the Designated Areas, it is not common to see long leases being granted as absolute ownership is preferred in the region.

6.2 Rent

Rent is commonly calculated on a per sq. ft. or per m² basis. Unlike in many other jurisdictions, it is fairly common to pay rent on an annual basis, although there is a slow shift in the market (and more acceptable in leases of commercial property) to pay three or four instalments of rent each year. Even if payment of rent in instalments is accepted by a landlord, it is common for a landlord to require post-dated cheques to be provided by a tenant upon signing of a lease.

Post-dated cheques are commonly used in the UAE and the law provides that criminal liability arises from a dishonoured cheque. As a result, it is common for individuals who issue cheques which are dishonoured due to a lack of funds to be arrested and potentially imprisoned. Therefore, it is essential for a tenant to ensure that sufficient funds are maintained in an account from which post-dated cheques have been issued to a landlord.

The United Arab Emirates introduced a VAT regime on 1 January 2018.

VAT is now applied to leases concerning commercial real estate at the standard rate of 5%, irrespective of where the parties are resident. If the property is partly commercial and partly residential, the rents payable on the residential are generally exempt but the rules can be complicated and advice should be sought.

VAT is due on each payment of rent as a separate supply triggered by the earlier payment or the issue of a VAT invoice. Leases of residential property do give rise to a housing fee charged by Dubai Municipality which is collected through bills issued to tenants for electricity and water by Dubai Electricity and Water Authority.

6.3 Rent review

In the majority of leases, it is common for the rent to be increased in accordance with the RERA rental index and the law states that rent can only be increased based on the extent of the difference between the current rent payable and the market rent as determined by the RERA index.

The RERA rental index is an index of the average rent applicable to properties throughout the Emirate of Dubai. It is easily accessed online and searched by entering the relevant neighborhood/suburb of Dubai, selecting the type of property (residential, commercial, industrial or staff accommodation), entering the size of the property (number of bedrooms in the case of residential property, square footage in the case of commercial and industrial property and number of rooms in the case of staff accommodation) and entering the current annual rent. When this data is entered, a calculation is made and information will be given on whether an increase in the rent is permitted. The index is updated annually.

In commercial leases, it is becoming more common for the parties to agree a different basis for rental increases and for retail leases to include turnover rent. The RERA rental index does not cover these more complex arrangements and it is generally thought that commercial parties are able to agree to alternative methods of increasing the rent payable under such leases.

6.4 Operating expenses

The parties to a lease are free to agree who is responsible for the payment of utilities and telecommunications for a leased property. It is common for leased properties to be individually metered and for tenants to pay the consumption charges directly to a provider.

A landlord will typically pay for property insurance (where the property is occupied by more than one tenant) and a tenant will pay for its own contents insurance.

A landlord operating a service charge will then recover the costs of the property insurance through the service charge.

Many neighborhoods in Dubai are master communities where property owners are obliged to pay a community service charge for the maintenance of the community. Again, it is up to the parties to a lease as to how this is dealt with. For example, a landlord may include its liability for

community charges in its service charge or a landlord may charge separately for this. It is important for a tenant to have some practical recourse to a landlord in the event that the landlord fails to pay the community charge as many master developers in Dubai take strong action when dealing with non-payment, which may include blocking access cards or preventing access to communal facilities such as car parking or swimming pools.

6.5 Maintenance, repair and renovation at end of lease

If a lease is silent on the issue of maintenance and repair of the property, the law provides that the landlord is responsible for the maintenance and repair of any defect or malfunction which affects the use of the property. This leaves tenants responsible only for minor repairs and maintenance.

Although it is common for a landlord to take a security deposit from a tenant, the law does not provide clear provisions on how such deposits must be held, when they can be utilized and when they must be returned. It is important, therefore, to ensure that a lease contains detailed provisions on dealing with the security deposit.

A tenant must return the property to a landlord in the same condition it was handed to the tenant, except for fair wear and tear or issues beyond the tenant's control. The parties may agree different arrangements in the lease, especially where a tenant has carried out fit-out works.

6.6 Assignments

Typically, a lease will either prohibit assignments by tenants or make them subject to the landlord's written consent to be given or withheld in its sole discretion. In circumstances where a tenant wishes to assign the lease to a third party and the landlord is agreeable, such arrangement commonly takes place by way of a surrender and grant of a new lease to the third party (in which the terms may differ from the original lease).

6.7 Subleases

As with assignments, leases tend to either prohibit sub-letting or make them subject to the landlord's consent to be given or withheld in its sole discretion. Sub-letting is not very common in the Emirate but the law does provide that if a sub-lease exists, it will expire upon the head-lease expiring.

6.8 Termination

If a lease expires and a tenant remains in occupation of the property without objection from a landlord, the lease is deemed to have been renewed for the lesser of the equivalent to the original term and one year.

If a party wishes to renew a lease, notice of at least 90 days must be served through a notary including details of any proposed changes to the term. The parties ought to agree the terms of a renewal and failure to do so allows either party to refer the dispute to the special judicial committee for the settlement of disputes between landlord and tenants. This is a committee made up from local business people who hear disputes between landlords and tenants and determine them. The parties tend to appear in person before the committee and will not generally be represented by lawyers. As a result of this, it is common for commercial parties to agree in the terms of their leases to refer disputes to arbitration.

6.9 Sale of leased property

The law provides that the sale of a property which is subject to leases, does not affect the leases other than the buyer of the property becomes the landlord under those leases. In practical terms, it is common for a buyer to issue written notices to tenants upon completion of its acquisition and any post-dated cheques given to the outgoing landlord need to be returned to the tenants and new ones issued to the buyer.



7. Tax

The UAE is generally referred to as being tax-free and, in many respects, this is true. For example, there is no taxation which arises from a capital gain upon the sale of real estate or the sale of shares in a real estate company, there is no income tax which arises from the receipt of rental income and no tax liability arises from dividends being paid to a shareholder in a real estate company.

However, there are some tax related issues which should be taken into consideration when investing in real estate in Dubai which we set out below.

7.1 Transfer taxes

As previously discussed, the DLD does charge fees to register the transfer of real interests. In the case of a sale and purchase transaction, the associated fee is a flat rate equivalent to 4% of the purchase price and in the case of a Long Lease, a flat fee equal to 4% of the total rental value is payable.

In order to register a mortgage, the DLD charges 0.25% of the mortgage value (up to a maximum fee of AED1.5 million) plus a nominal knowledge fee.

The DLD fees should be taken into account as part of the acquisition cost of real estate in Dubai along with brokers' fees and the fees of other professionals.

7.2 Value Added Tax (VAT)

On 1 January 2018, the UAE introduced a VAT regime and from this date, the sale of real estate by businesses which are registered for VAT will be subject to the following VAT rates:

- The sale of commercial property (whether new or existing) – 5% (standard rate).
- The first sale of residential property (within three years of completion) – 0% (zero rated).
- The subsequent sale of existing residential property – exempt (no VAT).
- The sale of bare land – exempt (no VAT).

In the case of investment properties, the transaction may be treated as “the transfer of a going concern” which does not attract VAT. The conditions for obtaining this treatment are complex.

Whether VAT can be recovered by the buyer will generally depend upon the use of the property. If the buyer is using the property to generate taxable supplies (e.g. charging VAT on rents) then generally the VAT can be recovered. However, the buyer should take advice as change of use of the property could give rise to adjustments. If the VAT paid exceeds the VAT for which the buyer has to account for, there may be a delay before it can recover the VAT.

7.3 Other charges arising from the occupation of real estate

LLCs with a trade license issued by the Department for Economic Development (DED) in Dubai are required to pay to the DED a renewal fee of 10% of its annual rent. For residential properties, tenants are charged a municipality fee (paid to Dubai Municipality) of 5% of the annual rent, payable each month, as part of their utility bill and all tenants are required to register their lease (where the term is less than ten years) on RERA's ejari system at a minimal cost.

7.4 Real Estate Investment Trusts

Despite the taxation position being very favorable in Dubai, the concept of a Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) exists in the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) free zone (i.e. a commercial zone where 100% of the shares in a company can be owned by non-GCC nationals). As the DIFC REIT does not offer a tax advantage to investors, the main attractions are that it allows investors to acquire a passive interest in a diverse range of income producing, professionally managed property. Under the DIFC law applicable to REITs, 80% of the profits from such investments must be distributed each year, property under construction cannot exceed 30% of the net asset value of the fund and borrowing must not exceed 70% of the net asset value of the fund.

DIFC REITs are considered foreign entities and therefore can only invest within Designated Areas in Dubai, unless granted an exemption. In 2013, the first DIFC REIT (Emirates REIT) was authorized by the Ruler of Dubai to own real estate throughout the Emirate of Dubai and therefore that REIT is no longer limited to owning real estate within the Designated Areas only.

8. Real estate finance

It is common for large real estate acquisitions and/or developments in Dubai to be financed whereby the principal debt is secured by the capital value of the property and the debt is serviced from the income generated by the occupation of the property.

The law provides that a bank seeking to take a mortgage over real estate in the UAE must be licensed by the UAE Central Bank. As a consequence, we sometimes see non-licensed banks lend the funds but take security through a security agency agreement whereby a UAE licensed bank will take security over the land as agent for the lending bank. Although not an uncommon structure, we are not aware of this having been tested in the UAE.

Typically a bank will carry out due diligence on the property including a review of the market, the location and an analysis of the covenant strength of the tenants.

8.1 Interest rate risks

In each real estate financing, there is a risk posed by interest rate fluctuations. There are methods of protecting against the risk of rising interest rates including to either select a fixed rate loan or to enter into a hedging arrangement. These are both commonly used in commercial real estate financing in Dubai.

8.2 Assets held as security

As discussed previously, a mortgage can be granted over freehold interests, usufruct interests and, in certain circumstances, granted land interests.

Registration of the mortgage at the DLD is mandatory and required in order for the mortgage to be valid. In addition, if the land is held in a free zone, no-objection certificates may be required from that particular free zone and there may be additional registration requirements in that free zone. In practice, a bank representative will attend in person at the DLD on the day a sale and purchase is completed. If the property being sold is also subject to a mortgage, a representative from that bank will be required to attend and issue a no-objection certificate evidencing that the bank has no objection to the property being sold.

8.3 Further collateral agreements

In more complex, high-value real estate financing arrangements in Dubai, it is common for banks to take additional forms of security.

Security is commonly taken over any relevant moveable property associated with the acquisition or development. Federal UAE Law No. 4 of 2020 on Guaranteeing Rights

Related to Moveables (and its amendments and regulations, together the "Pledge Law") governs how security is taken over certain classes of moveable assets such as accounts, trade payables, equipment and tools, goods and raw materials and agricultural products. The Pledge Law provides that security over such moveable property should be by way of written security agreement or mortgage and, contrary to the historical position in the UAE, allows security to be taken over property without demonstrating possession and also allows security to be taken over future property (including bank accounts with fluctuating balances). It is therefore possible to take security over such moveable property which is similar in certain respects to an English law debenture or floating charge (provided that the requirements of the Pledge Law are adhered to).

We note, however, that the Pledge Law does not govern security over all moveable assets, and so care should be taken when securing a particular asset class to ensure that the security is in the correct form.

A real estate mortgage may also be accompanied by a commercial mortgage, which is registered at the DED – the law provides for certain assets of the borrower to be secured without the bank being required to demonstrate possession (which is generally a fundamental requirement of perfecting security in the UAE). The registration at the DED lasts for five years and the commercial mortgage would need to be re-registered at that time if it were to continue beyond the five-year period.

In addition, it is becoming increasingly common for banks to look at taking share pledges. If the relevant borrower is registered in a free zone, then it is often possible to take a pledge over the shares in that company. In July 2015, the Companies Law was amended so as to make it possible to take share pledges over onshore limited liability companies, although the process for doing this has not yet been documented.

8.4 Taxation on the creation of security

No such taxation applies under the applicable laws in Dubai. However, there are fees arising from real estate security including the DLD fees relating to mortgage registration and notarial fees in relation to various security interests which are required to be notarized, for example real estate mortgages, commercial mortgages and share pledges.

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About DLA Piper

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In the UAE, we have has a real estate practice across both Dubai and Abu Dhabi which serves the UAE and the wider region through our the offices in the Middle East and our DLA Piper Africa network of the leading commercial law firms in Africa. They are experienced in both real estate practice in the Middle East and in other jurisdictions and are able to bring international best practice to Middle East-based real estate transactions. They advise on issues affecting all stages of the real estate investment and development cycle and work with a large number of both Middle Eastern and international clients.

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The guide was prepared in April 2026. Subsequent changes in law are therefore not taken into account. **This guide cannot be considered as a substitute for obtaining specific legal advice in individual cases.** DLA Piper does not assume any liability in connection with this guide.

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