

LAW

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COMMANDING THE KINGDOM

Kamran Bajwa is leading Kirkland's
bold Saudi expansion with purpose



COMMANDING THE KINGDOM

From Cairo’s seminars to Chicago’s boardrooms,
Kamran Bajwa has built a career on bold moves.
Now, he is driving Kirkland’s biggest yet in Saudi Arabia

By Aishah Hussain
Photography by Ajith Narendra

When Kamran Bajwa, partner and Middle East practice head at Kirkland & Ellis, packed his bag for Cairo in the mid-nineties to study Arabic and Islamic jurisprudence, he could not have foreseen the trajectory that would eventually lead him to launch the firm’s Riyadh office nearly three decades later. His journey to leading one of the world’s most powerful law firms in Saudi Arabia captures the blend of intellectual curiosity, entrepreneurial spirit, and strategic vision that define both him and the firm he represents.

FROM CAIRO TO CHICAGO—AND BACK AGAIN

The son of Pakistani parents who emigrated to the US, Bajwa grew up in Western Massachusetts before pursuing a career as a corporate lawyer. His entry into the profession, however, was far from conventional.

After graduating from the University of Michigan with a sociology degree, he moved to Cairo to immerse himself in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) learning under leading scholars at the Al-Azhar seminary. It was there, he recalls, that he realised he wanted to become a lawyer.

“I was captivated by legal thinking and

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debate—how text is interpreted and how there are different readings of the same legal codes based on higher purposes,” he tells me when we speak. “I found something that clicked with me, that I was passionate about, and that I wanted to learn.”

That intellectual spark led him to apply to law school, even taking the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) at the US Embassy in Cairo. He gained entry to the University of Michigan Law School, then progressed to Sidley Austin, and, soon after, Kirkland & Ellis in Chicago.

From the outset, Bajwa was drawn to the firm’s culture: “Kirkland made a pitch to me about its entrepreneurial spirit, its willingness to challenge conventional norms, and its business-minded approach to the law. That pitch appealed to me strongly—it is what drew me to the firm in 2000 and it remains true 25 years later.”

“I believe that is the secret behind our

ability to move up charts and rankings year after year, ultimately reaching the number one position,” he adds.

THE LONG ROAD TO RIYADH

By 2011, Kirkland had become a US powerhouse, growing steadily from Chicago and planting roots in cities including New York. It was also expanding across the globe, entering Munich in 2005, Hong Kong in 2006, and Shanghai in 2009. Yet, as Bajwa notes, “If you looked at the map between Europe and China, there was a conspicuous gap. The Middle East was the most important part of that—and it was not being served.”

Both Kirkland’s leaders and Bajwa agreed the Middle East should become a strategic priority and they should launch a practice there, but the firm’s conservative nature meant the approach had to be measured.

“We move slowly, but when we move, we move big. And once we commit to a region, it is for the long run,” he recalls of guidance he received from senior partners.

That long-anticipated move came in August 2023, when Kirkland, under Bajwa’s leadership, launched its Riyadh office and regional headquarters (RHQ)—with 20 lawyers on day one. “It was a big statement of confidence in the market,” he says. “We did not want to signal we were coming to test the waters. We came in with enough presence to service multiple deals at a time, just as we do in other offices.”

Being among the first to enter a new market came with unexpected challenges, but it also presented the opportunity to build the firm’s presence from scratch. “As the managing partner and founder, I was not above having to jump in a taxi and go to collect the first Kirkland mobile phones,” he says. “It was very much a hands-on, roll-up-your-sleeves effort.”

SAUDI ARABIA’S NEW LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Saudi Arabia’s decision to open its legal market to foreign law firms in late 2023 was pivotal. Kirkland had long serviced regional clients from abroad, but the new regulations aligned with the Kingdom’s broader

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2023

The year Kirkland opened its first Middle East office and regional headquarters in Riyadh

economic transformation under Vision 2030, and Kirkland’s long-term plan to launch in the region.

“For us, Saudi Arabia made sense because of its scale—it is the largest country in the region, with the largest population. It is the centre of business activity, offering potential for long-term growth.”

“We do not believe in ‘helicopter lawyering,’” he adds. “If we are going to commit to a region, it is critical for us to have local lawyers leading the work.”

This approach underpins Kirkland’s recruitment strategy. Saudi Arabia produces





thousands of law graduates annually, many of whom go on to study for a master’s in law (LLM) in the US. Bajwa sees in them the potential to replicate Kirkland’s global training model locally. “We are building Kirkland’s business and culture with Saudi talent at the centre,” he says.

ONE OFFICE, GLOBAL INTEGRATION

A recurring theme in our conversation is Kirkland’s “one-office culture”. “All clients of the firm are clients of the whole firm,” he says. “We integrate the best-suited colleagues from any office for a matter.”

The Riyadh office has already worked on matters with every other Kirkland office globally. “Our existing clients say working with us in Riyadh feels no different from working with Kirkland teams elsewhere,” he says. “That is a real validation of what we are doing.”

Moreover, Kirkland’s global leadership is deeply connected to the region, according to Bajwa. The firm’s chair, Jon Ballis, was recently in Riyadh, attending a business lunch among senior delegation during President Trump’s Gulf tour in May 2025.

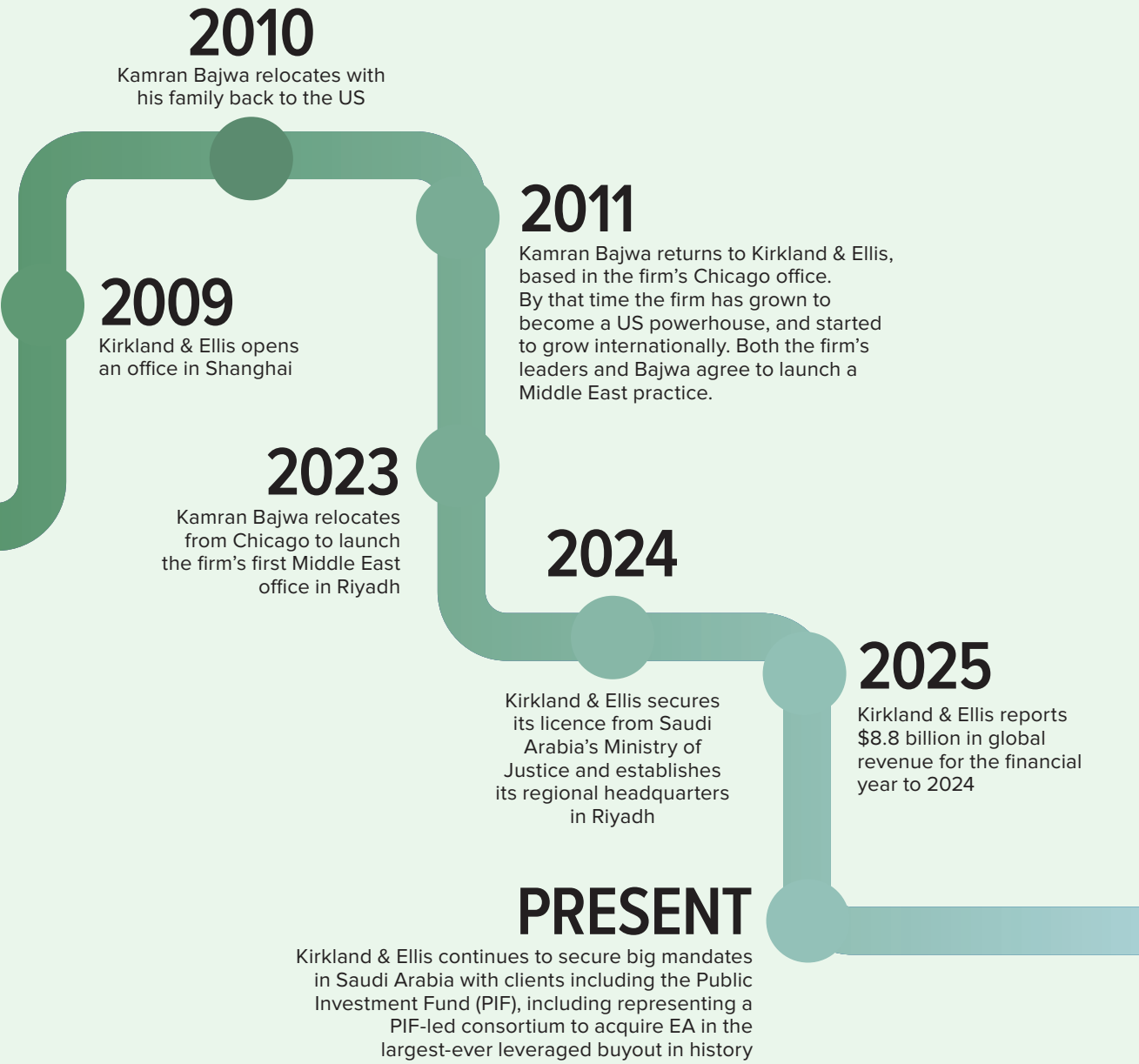
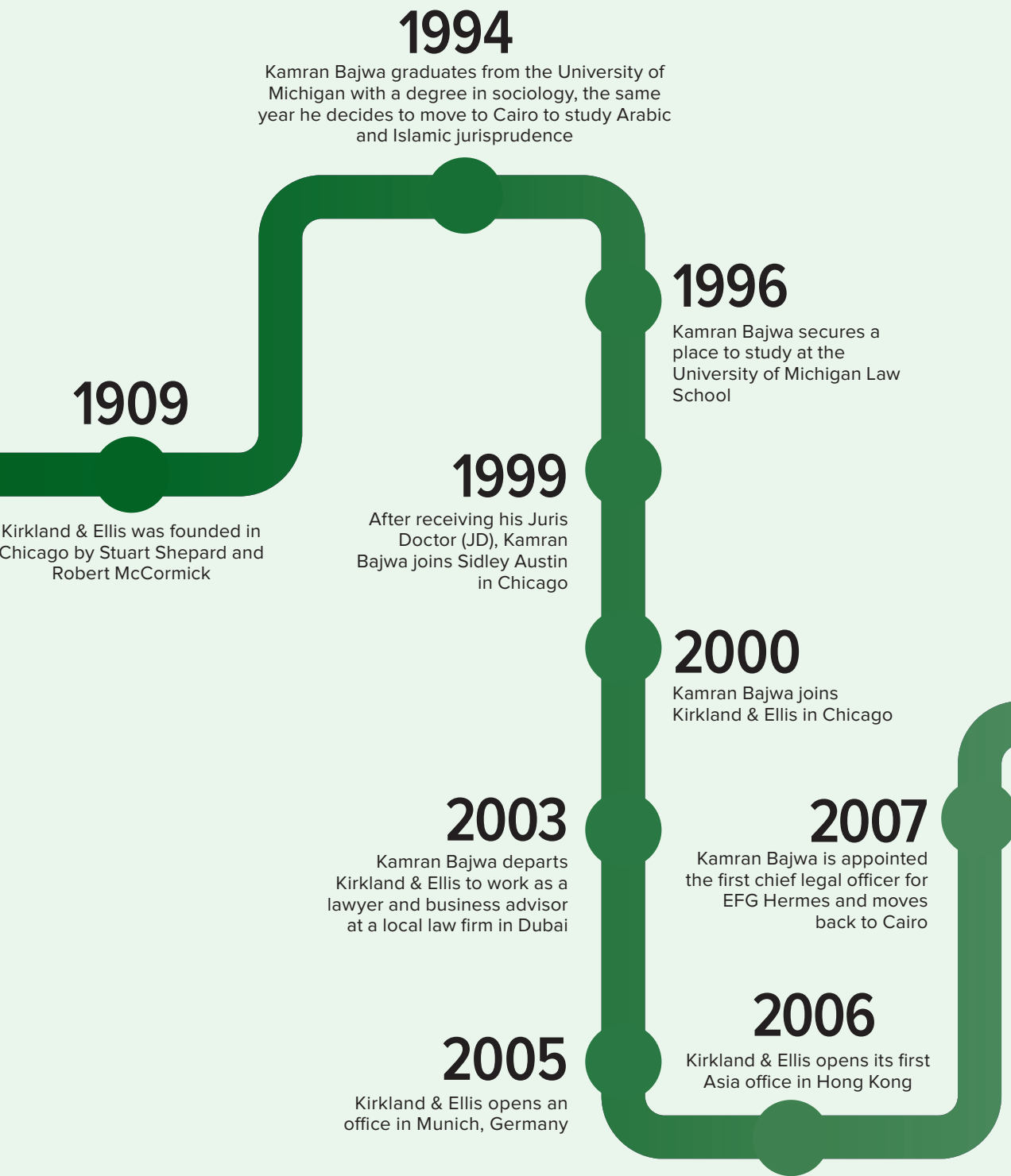
FOCUS ON QUALITY, NOT QUICK WINS

Many firms measure success by the fees they bill, but Kirkland takes a different approach. The firm does not have a regional profit and loss (P&L). As Bajwa explains, the firm priorities a long-term outlook over short-term gain. “If we raced for fees and sacrificed quality or reputation, that would be a big loss,” he says. “Kirkland is ranked number one in the world because of our quality and client service—maintaining that standard is the priority.”

Saudi Arabia’s economic transformation is marked by giga-projects, while the UAE is prioritising sectors such as artificial intelligence and healthcare. “We follow the priorities of each country,” he continues. “We go wherever our clients—particularly private equity firms and sovereign wealth funds—need us.”

“The key to Kirkland’s success is that we do not think about others. We focus on doing the work right and we let the market decide”

KAMRAN BAJWA’S CAREER AT KIRKLAND & ELLIS





COMPETITION, CULTURE, AND COMMITMENT

When asked how Kirkland differentiates itself from established firms in the region, Bajwa was respectful towards peers but firm in his conviction: “The key to Kirkland’s success is that we do not think about others. We focus on doing the work right and we let the market decide.”

Bajwa, 53, is focused on mentoring the next generation. “My mission is to help develop ten more people better than me, who can take the practice much further,” he says. “This is about investing in talent and developing the next leaders by being in the trenches with them.”

FROM CHICAGO TO CAIRO—AND BACK AGAIN

In 2003, Bajwa took what he calls the “biggest risk” of his career—leaving Kirkland. Although he was doing well as an associate, he left the firm to pursue opportunities in the Middle East. Dubai was beginning to emerge on the global stage, and the excitement of being part of that momentum was too compelling to ignore. He even took a pay cut to make the move.

For the next two years, he worked at a local law firm in Dubai before shifting into a business advisory role—“almost like a general counsel for hire,” as he puts it—for a range of companies. When Emaar undertook its first major US acquisition in 2006, the \$1 billion purchase of John Laing Homes, the board brought him on to lead the transaction. Off the back of that success, one of the Middle East’s largest investment banks, EFG Hermes, offered him the role of its first chief legal officer, prompting his return to Cairo in 2007.

“I never thought after studying in Cairo that my career would take me back there,” he remarks. “It was an incredible experience. I would sit in a corporate headquarters negotiating complex deals, and underneath my office, vendors with donkey carts would be selling fruit.”

By 2010, however, he hit what he describes “a plateau”.

“At that time, there was not much more room to keep growing, and I knew I had a long way to go,” he says. He relocated with his family to the US, reconnected with Kirkland, and returned to the firm a year later

20

The number of lawyers the Riyadh office launched with on day one

based in Chicago.

As it transpired, his years away from the firm ultimately shaped his future there. He returned to the Middle East with the firm’s support and a renewed sense of purpose.

“I am driven by meaning and value,” he says. “If I could not find meaning and value alignment with my professional career, I could not do it.”

Bajwa would also go on to become a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School, teaching a seminar on Islamic law—combining his passions for law and academia.

BEYOND THE BOARDROOM

For all the multi-billion-dollar deals he has led, Bajwa identifies a pro bono case as his proudest professional achievement. Following the George Floyd protests, he represented Carol Horne, an African-American former Buffalo police officer fired years earlier for intervening when a colleague began to choke a suspect during an arrest. With backing from Kirkland & Ellis and support from Harvard Law School, Bajwa helped overturn her termination and restore her pension.

“That was a great moment of pride,” he reflects. “The judge even quoted Martin Luther King in the ruling. It showed how institutions can come together to deliver justice.”

LOOKING AHEAD

As for what comes next, Bajwa is measured. While Riyadh remains the hub, he acknowledges future expansion is possible: “Wherever our clients need us, that is where we go. If we max out our ability to hire top-quality lawyers in Riyadh, and we need more to service the region, and those lawyers are based in places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, we would definitely consider it,” he says.

Ultimately, Bajwa envisions Kirkland’s journey to the region as the beginning of a century-long commitment. “We want to be able to say one day that in January 2024, Kirkland & Ellis officially launched in Saudi Arabia, and that was the start of a 100-year history in the region,” he says.

It is a vision both bold and patient, very much in keeping with Kirkland’s culture: move deliberately, and when you do, move big. LAW