Briefing

MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA
JULY 2015

Feature

Culture comfort

MENA region success lies in understanding not just the direction of trade flows, but how services are delivered

Strength in depth

Boris Martor picks out the path to a pan-African presence for Eversheds

Shifting sands

Letter from the editor

A particularly tricky piece in the jigsaw of international expansion is Africa.

It's a huge emerging market. Growing ranks of more affluent and mobile middle classes are drawing in all manner of clients to offer new services. But business barriers between the 54 countries are coming down very slowly – and the corridors to replace them will also take time. The pace of change and appetite for investment is hard to pin down into legal pipeline.

Then there's risk. It's impossible to ignore the tragedy in Tunisia just as this MENA special issue went to press. How do law firms weigh the promise of a presence against such potential threats to their people?

In both cases local knowledge is critical – of cultures and connections, as much as facts and figures. This issue's main interview is with **Boris Martor**, on the work of his **Eversheds Africa Legal Institute** to build knowledge-sharing activity that also results in referrals.

Manoeuvring in the Middle East is a touch less tricky of course – but times are changing there too, with both the UAE and Saudi Arabia rewriting some rules of engagement. This month we speak to leaders at **Addleshaw Goddard**, **Clyde & Co**, **Dentons**, **DWF**, **King & Wood Mallesons** and **Norton Rose Fulbright** about covering more ground and what's on their Middle Eastern horizons.

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Interview:
Boris Martor, Eversheds

The head of the Eversheds Africa groups tells **Briefing** how the firm's pan-Africa strategy is also helping to raise service levels for the increasing number of clients wanting in on the continent

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Feature:
Waves and means

The Middle East suffered a blow in the financial crisis – but it's still fighting its high-growth corner. Add in the links to Africa's future and it's a business hub that's hard to ignore

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This month's interview with Boris Martor was transcribed by: TRANSCRIPTIONSERVICES from IntelligentOffice

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The Briefing Interview

Growing strong

Law firms often use networks of local firms to build regional presence and business – and nowhere is this more of a mission than Africa. **Briefing** *catches up with Boris Martor, head of the Eversheds Africa Law Institute, about what it all means on the ground*

Words: Richard Brent
Photography: Jonathan Goldberg

You wouldn't say that Eversheds is a firm afraid to take a plunge or two.

Back in 2011 it merged its way into becoming the first UK top 20 firm to open in the Iraqi capital Baghdad. So in July 2013 it was ready to advise key client Citibank on the registration of a representative office in the city – helping it, in turn, to become the first US bank into the country. Citi had its sights set on expanding further – into Basra, and Erbil in the Kurdistan region. By November that year Eversheds was ready to open for business in Erbil too.

A mere month earlier it had unveiled a new strategy for another high-growth target that was getting more attractive to international investors for its potential each passing day. And as in Iraq, Eversheds would rely heavily on locally grown expertise to build effective presence. The Eversheds Africa Law Institute (EALI) began its life, in October 2013, leveraging a network comprising 14 other local member firms across Africa. Those that signed up most recently – based in Algeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Madagascar, Gabon and Burkina Faso – take the total to 39, spanning 45 offices in 37 countries.

The initiative already appears to have paid off. By the end of 2014, the firm's business involving the continent had grown by 75%, says Boris Martor, head of the Eversheds Africa group (based in Paris) and driving force behind the institute. "We are also seeing more

and more inter-African office referrals – growth of 33% either between the African member firms, or involving one of our own offices in Africa and a partner through the network.

"Many of these are firms we knew and were already working with on an integrated basis. The strategic decision was to formalise the relationships."

"It can be difficult to ensure people meet as often as necessary to manage cross-border matters efficiently."

Boris Martor, head of Africa group, Eversheds

Barriers to business

A strategy like this is particularly important for Eversheds and other firms in Africa, says Martor, as while the continent is awash with association arrangements, the development of individual countries tends to vary more widely than in other areas – and physical connection between them can be significantly harder.

"It's a vast continent of 54 countries – and there are often difficulties when travelling," says Martor. "It can be difficult to ensure people meet as often as necessary to manage cross-border matters efficiently. But telephone and internet may not suffice either – so the continual goal is to have enough matters connected on the ground at any one time to create the necessary momentum. The biggest challenge to building business on this continent is managing consistent communication."

And it isn't just the multiple arrangements between law firms. A large number of regional economic and legal system integration arrangements in force create their own complexity.

Since the 1990s, for example, the Organisation pour l'Harmonisation en Afrique du Droit des Affaires (OHADA) – Organisation for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa – has been at work to create a more predictable legal environment for stimulating trade in what are now 17 countries across West Africa. Some uniform acts, for example, now override any national laws in key areas of business, including general commercial law, debt recovery, insolvency, arbitration, accounting and transportation of goods by road.

But such harmonisations themselves create strategic considerations for legal business even as they try to incentivise business development in Africa. For example, firms need to identify how national regulations that still remain might affect a specific regional transaction's risk profile – and how that deal therefore needs to be governed.

On the other hand, some aspects of harmonised regulation may be of particular benefit to a company's intended investment, leading to some potential standardisation of projects or structure of documents for those countries.

Martor says that Eversheds is highly invested in the ongoing development of OHADA, including by drafting regulations and training lawyers. Last year it also helped to launch a pan-African OHADA law diploma in Paris.

Opening doors

As recently as 26 June, African leaders also finally agreed on the principle of a huge new free trade zone – a Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) – to enable a more fluid corridor of business stretching from Cape Town to Cairo. It's yet to be approved by parliaments – and Nigeria is a notable empty seat at the negotiating table – but the linking of three existing agreements in terms of export tariffs and customs would apply to the movement of 57% of Africa's population and goods worth 58% of the continent's total GDP.

"It's difficult to determine the speed at which this will now happen – but it's certainly a step toward facilitating greater connection between nations to create a more integrated market," explains Martor.

"With the exception of the biggest markets such as Egypt and South Africa, one of the main challenges to growing business in Africa is that each market stays quite small. There's a need to stimulate interstate commerce. Small businesses have the potential to grow into medium-sized or regional companies – but to achieve that they also need to grow beyond their borders. There are lots of regional organisations in Africa already – but owing to the connection issues, as well as questions of culture and harmonisation, there isn't one organisation that really promotes interstate commerce.

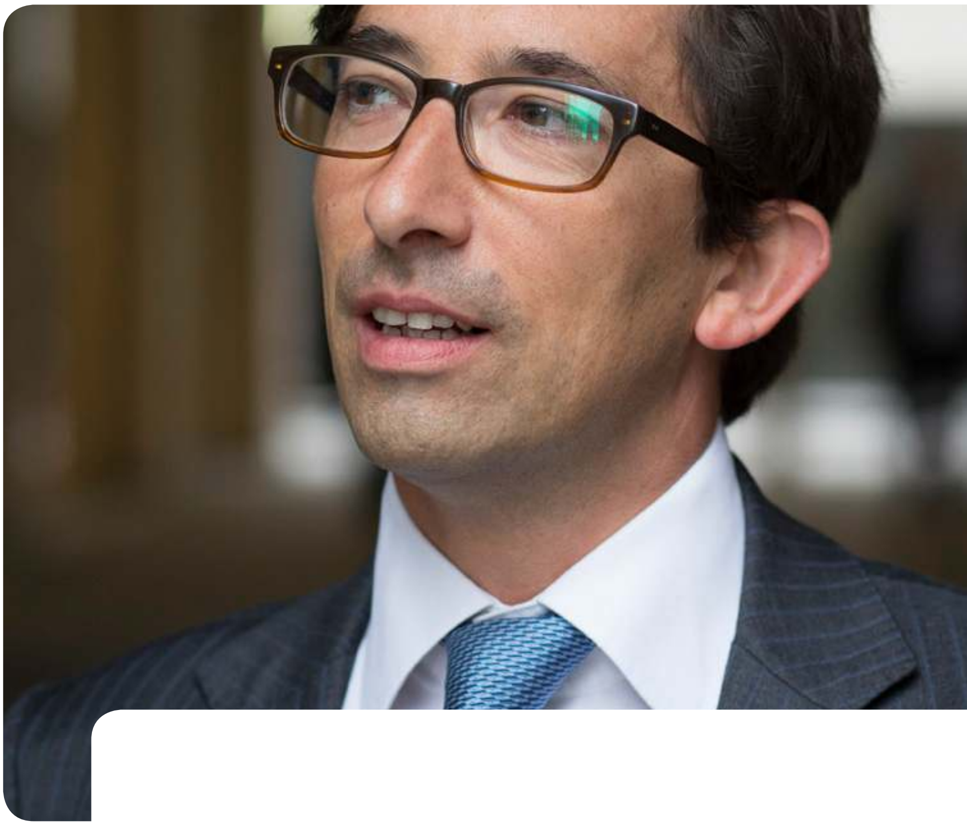
"A free trade zone also ought to facilitate more foreign direct investment into Africa. It should make it easier for foreign companies to enter by creating hubs, and then to replicate that across other attractive destinations."

Servicing seeds

The Eversheds Africa Law Institute increases opportunities to refer appropriate work across these current barriers – but it also sets out to help firms navigate the changing landscape as such new opportunities for local businesses emerge. Ultimately, says Martor, it tries to sow seeds for a new breed of local law firm to flourish.

"The network isn't just designed as reciprocal capacity to develop more business," he says. "And it isn't only a question of Eversheds feeding appropriate work through to the local firms. They are expected to share their knowledge with us too. We expect to work together on an integrated basis.

"We collaborate on business development. The African firms will propose ideas, contribute to education pieces, and participate in brainstorming sessions on key sectors of interest such as healthcare, waste or private equity development."



"It isn't only a question of Eversheds feeding appropriate work through to local firms. We expect to work together on an integrated basis."

Annual summits are held in both Europe and Africa, secondments between Eversheds and African firms build up stores of local knowledge and leverage relationships further – and protocols and document templates for some transactions are available via a bespoke extranet. "We also offer some specific training," says Martor. "But the overall idea is that if the local firms benefit from the experience of working with such new tools and instruments, we're also doing our bit to raise the bar of client service across the continent."

Without such interventions, changing approaches to service can be challenging, he explains – for the same reason that the firms' local clients in Africa struggle to expand operations. There's a historic lack of access to other markets. By extension, examples of new work processes or business models that can impact the client experience are likely to be limited.

"When I started 19 years ago around 80% of work carried out by most of these firms was still contentious," says Martor. "They were always difficult to reach because they were always at court – but over time we've managed to build some very successful local businesses." This, in turn, has led to the creation of some brand new firms on the market.

"In addition, there's now a new generation of professionals gaining influence in African business circles – people in their 30s or 40s who are of African origin but have trained internationally. These aren't people predominantly driven by contentious work – and one of our aims is to support them to establish some new standards and work processes if they decide to return to their home country."

Accounting for wins

That's not to say the local African firms can't do some of this work for themselves, of course.

In February a survey and report from Redstone Consultants (African and international law firms: friends of foes) found that African firms, while "highly dependent on referrals from international law firms", had also recently "invested in strategic thinking" on the back of growth rates commonly 25% or above (a combination of foreign direct investment and domestic demand).

But the responding firms also conceded a need to revisit some of their management structures, systems and accountabilities. Although all firms, for example, reported having succession plans in place (which was something of a surprise for independent firms in emerging markets, said Redstone), 80% anticipated that more management changes would be necessary to improve their prospects, including recruiting more heavily within business support areas – business development, finance, HR and IT. Almost two-thirds also identified a need to introduce more partnership accountability.

Understandably, however, one of the chief concerns for Eversheds is the client's experience – and their lasting impression – on doing business with any of the firms attached to the institute. In addition to a programme of training on best practice, therefore, the firm insists on imposing some principles and procedures that would apply to any other international office.

"We operate regular independent quality surveys, which apply as much to the independent members of the institute as to our Africa group as a whole," says Martor. "There's also a measurement of individual performance involving client input, where we award some bonuses on the basis of work actually delivered.

"That applies to some of the global clients we serve in Africa as well as elsewhere."

In line with the growing trend in the UK, the client's experience of value for money is also both proactively managed and advocated.

"Most of the time we work with fixed fees and estimated budgets, which are carefully scoped with the clients," says Martor. "There are specific matter-

"Most of the time we work with fixed fees and estimated budgets, which are carefully scoped with the clients."

Boris Martor, head of Africa group, Eversheds recorded instructions, on the basis of which we work jointly with both African and our other international teams."

Directions of travel

Frequent travel is, of course, par for the course with all this – but Eversheds also needs some feet of its own on the ground. These are planted squarely in what it calls its strategic hubs.

In February, for example, it formed a more formal co-operation agreement with South African law firm Walkers – adding Cape Town to bases in Durban and Johannesburg.

As you might expect, other hubs are in the North African destinations long popular with European tourists – Casablanca and Tangier in Morocco (both of which opened in December 2014) and Tunis, capital of Tunisia – with the island of Mauritius making up seven.

"Exclusive cooperation means that these offices are integrated fully into the Eversheds network," says Martor. "A number of management factors, from marketing to financial reporting, are closely guided by the firm's policy – which is true to a lesser extent for the key alliance firms, which can also work independently of us."

"South Africa is a fully self-sufficient mature market", he says, "but it's also a corner for investments into the rest of the continent. There are the obvious historic and ongoing business links with the UK – but also, increasingly importantly, with India and Asia."

And greater diversification of trade partners is a key reason for Africa's increasing business attractiveness as a whole, says Martor – Brazil and Malaysia, as well as the obvious hunger of China to gain growth beyond its borders. EY's latest Africa attractiveness survey reveals that the continent's overall regional share of foreign direct investment projects dropped 8.4% in 2014 – but the value of that capital investment, up 136%, is now the second highest in the world.

In spite of lower oil prices, sub-Saharan Africa is also set to post the second-highest regional economic growth rate in the world – 22 countries growing at a rate of 5% or higher.

And the 2011 Arab Spring doesn't appear to have done long-term damage to North Africa's prospects in the eyes of clients. EY says foreign investors are clearly regaining interest, in Egypt and Morocco in particular. North Africa today accounts for more than half (51%) of all African FDI capital inflows, a huge jump from the 19.1% it claimed in 2013.

This also means population growth. In 2014, creation of North African jobs that could be attributed to FDI activity more than trebled to 80,000. In Africa as a whole such employment increased 68%.

Combined with greater macroeconomic stability, says Martor, these growing urban populations – with more money in their middle-class pockets – are spurring on some big new business sectors for law firms to try to tap into – in pharmaceuticals, IT and telecommunications, mobile banking, credit products and agribusiness.

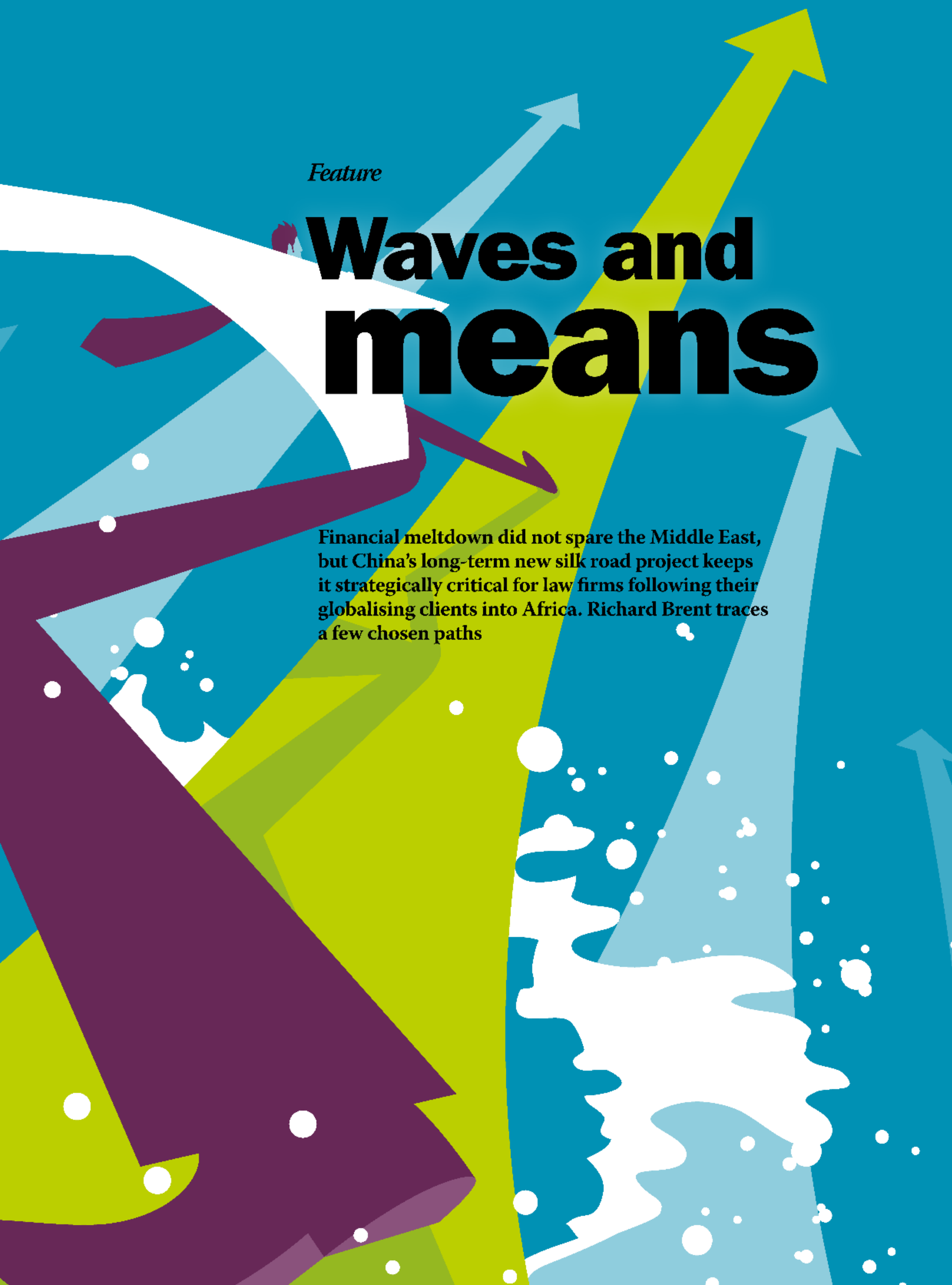
Backing this up, EY finds the largest share of FDI projects (in terms of project numbers) centres around three consumer-facing sectors – consumer products and retail, financial services, and technology, media and telecommunications. In terms of inflow value, construction, real estate and hospitality have surged 43.8%, and around a third of business leaders cited agriculture as a likely key driver of growth over the next two years.

In terms of adding members, Martor says the EALI has now "more or less acquired critical mass" for servicing any such increase in work. But might Eversheds need more power behind the second prong to its pan-Africa strategy – its own hubs?

"Any firm expansion develops on an opportunistic basis. It wouldn't necessarily make sense to have a Bamako [the capital of Mali] office, as it has for us to open in Johannesburg or Mauritius," he says.

"But if it does appear to make sense to enlarge the footprint, there are clearly some important hubs for business in general. That's probably Egypt in the north, Kenya and Tanzania to the east, Nigeria and Ivory Coast in the west, and Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo in central Africa."

The launch of any overseas office inevitably takes into account a complex mix of business factors and local conditions – and as we've seen, in Africa it's harder to be as confident in those calculations. But if the work does line up to favour a certain city as the map's next emerging market hub of choice, you'd expect Eversheds to be on it. ●



Feature

Waves and means

Financial meltdown did not spare the Middle East, but China's long-term new silk road project keeps it strategically critical for law firms following their globalising clients into Africa. Richard Brent traces a few chosen paths

The Middle East region was hit hard by the financial crisis and the effects are still being felt – as recently as May the IMF regional economic outlook suggested that a likely slight increase in GDP growth to 3% in 2015 wouldn't be enough to offset some persistently high unemployment.

The oil price drop is, of course, an important factor – and the IMF expects the region's oil-importing countries, including Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, to manage 4% growth. The earnings of oil exporters, however, are being eroded. Masood Ahmed, director of the Middle East and Central Asia at the IMF, said those governments need to moderate the pace of spending – albeit gradually, as such spending is itself a key driver of non-oil growth. Meanwhile, even the oil importers risk business being affected by ongoing regional conflicts – plus the competitive threat of a strengthening US dollar.

The UAE, of course, stands somewhat alone – as comparably it's that much more attractive than other regional risk profiles as a destination for growing investment from key markets, including China. And the work of preparing to host over 25 million visitors for a World Expo in 2020 means Dubai GDP growth is predicted to nudge upward from a steady 4.5% as the event nears, and create 277,000 jobs as it does so, according to the Dubai Economic Council.

Floating up

There are changes afoot to keep this buoyant renewed confidence afloat. A returning appetite for IPOs on the Dubai Financial Market, for example, was epitomised by that, last September, of Emaar Properties – owner of the iconic downtown Dubai Mall shopping centre. It was the largest IPO in the region for seven years – and the first to permit institutional and retail shareholders in the same offering.

The UAE government has since moved to shore up the momentum. An exemption was made for Emaar – but until this year the exchange required non-family-owned companies to float at least 55% of the business. But now a new UAE Commercial Companies Law issued in April cuts this to 30% for all companies. Underwriting of IPOs and rights issues has also been permitted, to price shares through a book-building process. And although a restriction to 49% foreign ownership of companies remains in force outside the country's free zones, in March the government unveiled plans for a new law that permits 100% for all in some industries. Foreign investment, it says, is key to diversifying the economy – and it wants to rank in the top 10 on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index. It's currently 22nd – so there's a way to go.

Michael Kerr, managing partner for the Middle East at Dentons, says: "The new law also allows businesses to create holding companies at the top of a group. Along with the change to local ownership percentages, this has been explicitly acknowledged as designed to drive more investment and listing activity.

"But they want to encourage a lot of the large family groups to put themselves into the market by helping them continue holding what are seen as important stakes in family heritage."

Kerr agrees that the overall mood is indeed on the optimistic side. "Governments across the Gulf have been quite clear that, while they aren't ambivalent to the oil markets, they consider themselves sufficiently well protected for the foreseeable future. They remain committed to developing programmes started prior to the oil price drop, particularly in social infrastructure and transport.

"The return of banking activity in the past two years has also been remarkable. Banking now accounts for around a quarter of our regional practice – and we're doing much more work with the local and regional banks, which are increasingly strong next to the big international players."

Of course, some firms have scaled back their Gulf presences in recent months. But one felt this was the year to launch its very first international office there. DWF Middle East managing partner Chris Ryan picked up his new title and pulled up a chair in the Dubai International Finance Centre (DIFC) in March.

Into Africa? There's an app for that...

Addleshaw Goddard's Africa group has taken a very different approach to working on the continent. Instead of trying to establish the ideal destination for a hub office it developed an award-winning app – which went live last September.

"It's fair to say that Africa is a unique challenge to the typical international law firm model of either opening offices or developing tight relationships with local partner firms," says Andrew Rosling, who heads the group. "Although there are the three platforms of English, French and Portugese law, the 54 countries all have very different local contexts, cultures, and simply ways of doing business. You can't open in Kenya and think you can easily work in Tanzania too – there may not be enough homogeneity to create an effective regional hub.

"Some markets, like Nigeria and Kenya, are also closed to non-national lawyers – and there's also the simple economics. You can't always predict where the work is going to come from."

So to create a pan-Africa network (with a small 'n', he stresses), you need to place "a lot of smaller bets – investing in many relationships rather than a few big ones". In an age of mobile working – and Africa crowned the 'mobile continent' for its adoption rate – why not place those bets by iPad?

"We also wanted something that would get us prioritisation for clients when we picked up the phone. It became clear an app would be mutually beneficial," says Rosling. Dual branded, a client reading app content can either turn to AG or go straight through to the local firm that provided it. "That firm gets the marketing opportunity of a global profile," he says. "And we're careful not to convey that this is any sort of preferred network. African firms want referrals from lots of firms – and we wouldn't want to narrow that down."

Another client benefit is that the app can quickly surface market information it might otherwise be hard to find.

"If you searched online today you could find lots of very detailed information about European competition law and wouldn't have to pay a penny for it," says Rosling. But he says that a lot of African legal information still isn't well digitalised. "We wanted to create something that could save an investor considerable energy from the outset – it can help them to understand their cornerstones, from foreign ownership restrictions to tax implications."

Global news coverage of Africa is often biased toward topics that reinforce perceptions, and could perhaps lead to missed opportunities, he adds. "You'll read a lot about Ebola, failing infrastructure, terrorism and corruption in Nigeria – but you'll see little on business developments." So AG's Nigeria firm wrote before and after app pieces on the impact of the country's election. With at least 10 more this year (including Tanzania in October), there's a lot more client content on the cards.

"A number of our insurer clients in the City have reinsurance offices in the DIFC. We'd been flying out for a number of years – but some had suggested it would be useful if we could now service some of that work on the ground," says Ryan. "In addition, we do a lot of construction and projects work in the Middle East. A hub is also useful for visiting those clients from the UK."

It's the clients that make the case, then. But the strategic decision-making process for DWF's launch began right back in 2008, Ryan explains. There was a moratorium as the banking crisis seized markets – and the authorities picked up the application again as it lifted.

Since those dark days, says Ryan, the regulatory environment for gaining entry has been quite formidable. "Like ourselves, a lot of firms will have found it takes longer than anticipated – but I suspect the regulatory tightening is itself a reaction to the crisis, when a lot of firms left Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

"Even as an offshore firm there are many local regulatory requirements," says Ryan. "Clearly it's a part of the world that can potentially be used as a conduit for money laundering and terrorism financing, too – so we have to be very careful in meeting what are different requirements in the DIFC."

The middle men

Some may have taken part in something of a 'Gulf rush' – but for Dentons the Middle East will play an even more prominent role in the flow of global work in future, says Kerr, as it proceeds to integrate processes more closely with China's Dacheng.

"There's a reasonable amount of Chinese activity in the Gulf – but nowhere near as much as is flowing from China into Africa," he says. "What has become clear is that the Chinese will take root in the Gulf, particularly Dubai, and use that as a stepping stone to expand into the African continent."

Since announcing its Chinese combination in January this year, Dentons has hosted events around the Middle East on what's being called a 'New Silk Road' economic belt – a surge in Chinese trade, from energy to consumer goods, getting carried through countries leading into the Middle East, as were the spices and silks of old. The events emphasised to clients that China has recently become a net capital-exporting country for the first time – and that seven of the top 25 contractors in the world by revenue are now Chinese, several of which are active in Middle East infrastructure projects. "It was interesting to see the rooms fairly evenly split between people interested in business either into or out

"Africa is a unique challenge to the typical international law firm model."

Andrew Rosling, head of Africa business group, Addleshaw Goddard of China, and those wanting to know the opportunities available here," says Kerr of the seminars.

Another firm expecting to gain more than a fair share of China's increasing interest in African infrastructure projects is Hong Kong-headquartered King & Wood Mallesons. The firm only has a small practice of its own in South Africa – focusing primarily on investment funds – but a more Eastern centre of gravity helps it to access the growing work of multinationals on the continent, says senior partner Stephen Kon.

"There's opportunity in Africa through a combination of the Chinese investment capital in play and the fact that the Chinese are operating many of the infrastructure projects themselves. Our level of finance expertise in Australia is also transferable and able to take part."

A tighter tie to business patterns in the Far East since combining via its verein structure provides better insight into how such Chinese-centric deals are done, says Kon. "We've created a cultural toolkit to spread insight into what are often fundamentally different ways of managing client relationships."

Business skills training, for example, now includes sessions where Chinese partners – albeit many with Western backgrounds – put sets of questions on cultural subtleties to gatherings of up to 100 European lawyers at a time, in person.

It may sound like an uncomfortable grilling, "but experience is ultimately the accumulation of mistakes", says Kon – and for the more junior there are less daunting exchange forums. "Associates and trainees are usually formally assigned a buddy in China, as well as other parts of the network, to help them compare notes in a practical and proactive way," he says.

Boundary bridges

Last year KWM also built a bridge by forging an exclusive association with a firm in Saudi Arabia.

"Saudi corporate and M&A activity is a major area of Middle East growth – and the country's stock exchange has just opened the doors to foreign investment for the first time," says Kon. "There's also a clear growing market for disputes. They're likely to be adjudicated in Dubai, and we can easily service them from there, but it became apparent to us that we needed our own presence in the kingdom."

Clyde & Co, meanwhile – which has just announced 14% revenue growth in MENA over the last year – is one of only two firms to take a relationship in Saudi Arabia right through to a directly owned operation.

"On a daily basis the business runs no differently – but conceptually it's very different," says Jonathan Silver, head of the firm's MENA operations. "There's a huge difference, from an internal and client perspective, between a sole proprietorship and a corporate entity majority-owned by an international law firm."

Most significantly, says Silver, a Clyde & Co employee's career prospects in Saudi Arabia will now be different. "Under the previous structure you couldn't technically be a partner in our Saudi operation – but it's part of the firm's fundamental philosophy that an associate can join us in any office and his or her chances of becoming a partner are exactly the same." All partners at the firm are global partners, he says – there are no purely local ones. More than half of current MENA partners were also previously associates in their respective offices (rather than lateral hires) – and in a clear sign of current cultural parity, over three-quarters of all the fee-earning staff at the Riyadh office are Saudi nationals.

Other firms, meanwhile, have decided to move into more Saudi cities – notably Jeddah. Firms are seeing a step-change in opportunities as the market matures, Silver agrees.

"Saudi is the second-largest individual market in the region, but also rapidly increasing in sophistication," he says. "Even two years ago senior people at large organisations might still never have used a law firm.

"Greater transparency of information globally – and deals that are simply bigger and more complex – means first-generation businesses are turning to legal counsel where historically they would have gone without."

Kerr at Dentons also identifies Saudi Arabia as a particularly important market. "It's really an attractive target for international investments from everywhere," he says. "It's opening slowly and the kingdom is understandably cautious, but once change takes hold it tends to do so with quite a big splash."

He adds that Dentons – like Clyde & Co – is also proud of what it calls its polycentricity – investing in developing talent in all regions. A good example of


Oyez Speech 7

this, he says, is expanding to Johannesburg in South Africa in February – where Dentons also became the first international firm to achieve Level 1 Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) status. It's 100% owned by local partners – plus it works with the country's Black Lawyers Association to increase access to legal training.

"It's getting easier to do business in Africa across sectors. Countries are talking to one another more, and our clients are seeing the benefit."

Rob Otty, managing director,
South Africa, Norton Rose Fulbright

As in Saudi Arabia, says Kerr, Africa's a region where political change is increasing potential. A report from the African Development Trade Group recently highlighted that foreign investment hit an all-time high last year – flowing in from China at high speed, but also the USA, Europe, India, Japan and Brazil.

"It's getting easier to do business in Africa across sectors," adds Rob Otty, managing director of the South Africa practice at Norton Rose Fulbright. "Countries are talking to one another more and exploring more freedom of movement across borders, and our clients are seeing the benefit." Collective effort is particularly yielding fruit in the East African community, he says.

In February NRF pushed further into this territory itself, signing up to strategic alliances with leading firms in Zimbabwe and Uganda, and by association Burundi. "Our ultimate plan has always been to find hubs in the four corners of Africa – but this latest development is very much client- and deal flow-driven," says Otty, who also oversees an office in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. "Oil and gas in Uganda is obviously of interest to us, but East Africa is also establishing itself in the technology space – Kenya, in particular, having an effect on its neighbouring countries.

"Clients in these sectors need to know they can absolutely trust us to provide a seamless service in new jurisdictions. These alliances enable us to connect and collaborate with the local firms more consistently to ensure that's the case."

So on top of the secondment exchanges and e-learning modules you'd expect, local lawyers also take part in training programmes run by NRF's international academies.

"They will spend a week training with us here – not in technical law, but in how to manage our business and understand the client from a commercial perspective," says Otty. "Trainers from our office will also visit Uganda and Zimbabwe. We equip them with the skills and information they need to add value for clients."

The challenge of working in African countries compared to elsewhere in the world is often overstated, he says – but the amount of resource available to local law firms is certainly one limiting factor. There are no simple Q&A tips or tricks that can be rattled through – but, as in the Middle East, taking the time to build mutual cultural awareness and appreciation as the markets mature is mission-critical. ●

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