Start a business in the UAE: 8-step checklist

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Simple rule: clients inside the UAE → mainland. Clients abroad → free zone. A free zone company needs a permit to work on the Dubai mainland (Dubai Executive Council Resolution No. 11 of 2025) and, when selling directly to mainland customers, may need a local distributor or further approvals.

1. Choose your activity and jurisdiction

- [ ] Pick your activity: commercial, professional or industrial licence
- [ ] Clients inside the UAE → mainland; clients abroad → free zone
- [ ] Selling online: a free zone company may need a distributor or approvals to sell to the mainland
- [ ] Free zone 0% tax is only for qualifying income, with conditions

2. Get your trade licence

- [ ] Trade name approval, then initial approval
- [ ] Sign the memorandum of association (MoA) if your legal form needs one
- [ ] Licence issued; usually renewed every year (mainland: with a valid lease)

3. Office and visas

- [ ] Office or flexi-desk: it sets how many visas you can get
- [ ] Establishment card for the company
- [ ] Investor visa, medical test, Emirates ID

4. Open a business bank account

- [ ] Licence, MoA, passports, visas and Emirates IDs ready
- [ ] Compare digital and traditional banks
- [ ] Keep company and personal money separate

5. Register for corporate tax

- [ ] Register on EmaraTax within 3 months of incorporation
- [ ] 0% up to AED 375,000 of taxable income, 9% above
- [ ] File the return within 9 months of your year end, even with Small Business Relief

6. Check whether you must register for VAT

- [ ] Mandatory above AED 375,000; apply within 30 days
- [ ] Voluntary from AED 187,500 of sales or expenses
- [ ] Once registered: charge 5%, file by the 28th, keep supplier tax invoices

7. Issue your first invoice

- [ ] Use every mandatory tax invoice field
- [ ] Simplified tax invoice only if the buyer isn't VAT registered, or for AED 10,000 or less
- [ ] E-invoicing: appoint an ASP by 31 March 2027

8. Keep your books from day one

- [ ] Record sales and expenses as they happen; keep every supplier invoice
- [ ] Keep VAT records 5 years and corporate tax records 7 years
- [ ] Audited accounts if revenue is over AED 50 million, and always for a Qualifying Free Zone Person

Key numbers

Corporate tax registration	Within 3 months of incorporation · late: AED 10,000
Corporate tax rate	0% up to AED 375,000 taxable income, 9% above · return within 9 months of year end
Small Business Relief	Revenue up to AED 3 million, tax periods ending by 31 December 2029 · still register and file
VAT registration	Mandatory above AED 375,000 (12 months or next 30 days), apply within 30 days · late: AED 10,000 · voluntary from AED 187,500
VAT returns	5% VAT · usually quarterly, due by the 28th of the following month
Records	VAT 5 years · corporate tax 7 years
E-invoicing (revenue under AED 50 million)	Appoint an ASP by 31 March 2027 · go live 1 July 2027

Tax rules from the Federal Tax Authority and the Ministry of Finance, last checked 3 November 2026. Licence and visa steps vary by emirate and free zone; confirm with your licensing authority. The full guide links every source. General guidance, not legal or tax advice. Fatura Go is invoicing software and is not affiliated with the FTA, the MoF or any licensing authority. invoicefatura.com