

The digital assets opportunity in MENA



The term

“digital assets”

refers to a collection of seven different types of financial instruments that are typically addressed and settled digitally using distributed ledger technologies (DLT), such as blockchain. DLT uses complex cryptographic computations, enabling computations, enabling immediate and irreversible transactions, thereby removing settlement risks associated with more traditional financial instruments.



Cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum are the most known type of digital assets, associated with a high degree of volatility and several well-publicized controversies (e.g., as in the case of the FTX and Binance exchanges). More recently, they have undergone a renaissance of sorts, with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) authorizing the issuance of exchange traded funds (ETF) linked to cryptocurrencies. In MENA, regulatory attitudes toward cryptocurrencies vary, but individual trading in these volatile assets remains widespread, facilitated by platforms such as Coinbase and Binance.

Other types of digital assets, such as tokenized assets and digital currencies, are more likely to have a bigger impact on economies and financial services by transforming the way firms recommend investments and payments. Global financial institutions have focused

on digitally native securities and tokenized assets, which includes tokenized bank deposits, as well as physical assets such as real estate or commodities. The Dubai Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority (VARA) has a well-defined framework for regulating such digital assets, and several international firms are exploring issuing bonds backed by tokenized assets under these regulations, e.g., with the HSBC Orion platform to tokenize Sterling bonds and the Euroclear Digital Securities Issuance platform. Banks across MENA are also exploring Shariah-compliant Islamic finance versions of tokenized assets and securities.

Non-fungible tokens (NFT) are another class of digital assets relevant for ultra-high net worth (UHNW) clients at MENA banks and asset managers, but with potentially lucrative mass-market applications, such as unifying disparate loyalty programs for consumers.

EY research suggests that digital assets represent a US\$1.3t market globally, with even the relatively small tokenized assets forays from global banks so far driving US\$3b in value. According to the World Economic Forum, tokenization can add US\$230b annually to MENA GDP.

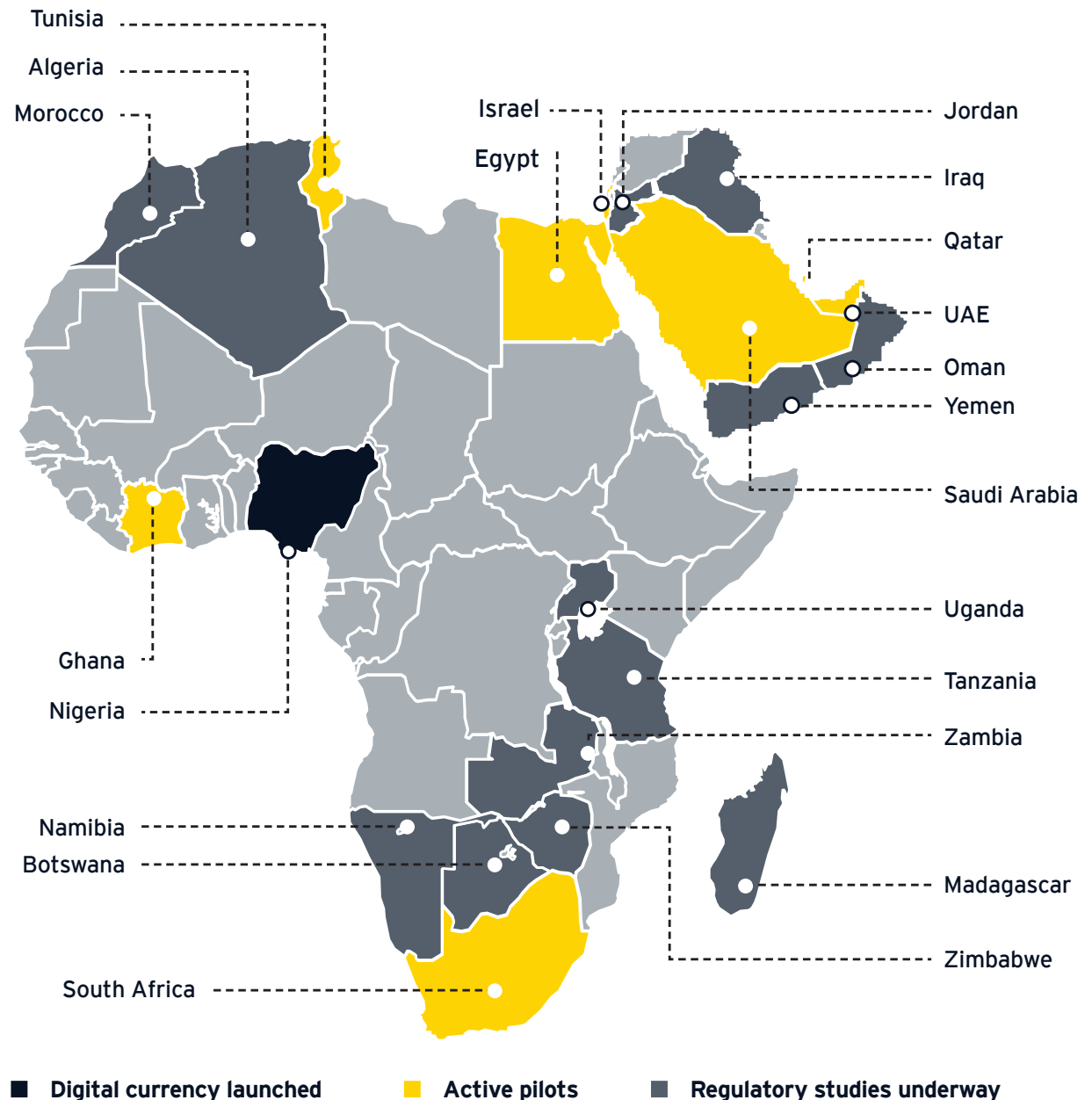
Figure 1: Seven different types of digital assets

Cryptocurrencies	Stablecoins	CBDC	Tokenized assets	Digital native securities	Non-fungible tokens (NFT)	Other blockchain
Native	Fiat-backed	Retail CBDC	Tokenized deposits	Digital native securities	NFT art	KYC/digital IDV
Bitcoin Ethereum	USD Coin (USDC)	eNaira	Onyx	Allied Irish Banks	First 5000 days	
Governance	Crypto-backed	Wholesale CBDC	Tokenized securities		Metaverse	Treasury, cash management
Maker (MKR)	Dai	E-CNY	Blockchain Capital		Decentraland	
Utility	Commodities-backed		Tokenized real world assets		Loyalty and branding	Insurance claims, fraud
Basic Attention Token	Tether Gold		RealT		Nike Cryptokicks	
	Algo-backed	Focus for CBUAE Digital Dirham initiative	Examples of global banks dealing with tokenized assets J.P. Morgan UBS HSBC Citibank Goldman Sachs Societe Generale Opportunities for MENA financial institutions			
	Ampleforth (AMPL)					

Stablecoins and Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) represent another US\$240b market globally. Many regulators across the Middle East and Africa (MEA) are focused on CBDC, with active pilots in the UAE, Qatar, KSA, Israel, Egypt, Ghana and South Africa, and a live development in Nigeria called eNaira. Across MENA, regulators are exploring CBDC to drive innovation in payments, reduce the high cost of payments for merchants (interchange costs in MENA remain one of the highest in the world), make cross-border payments more affordable, and increase the transparency and traceability of payments. Beyond the more affluent Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), other MENA regulators are also keen to improve financial inclusion, e.g., with offline CBDC payments in rural areas with patchy mobile connectivity, as well as increase accountability and traceability of social welfare payments. Central banks also have an incentive to reduce risks from the emergence of new forms of private money; CBDC protect the role of national currency, while also improving the availability and usability of central bank money.

The Central Bank of the UAE (CBUAE) is focusing on operationalizing its domestic CBDC, called the Digital Dirham, and is encouraging all commercial banks and payments processors in the country to participate in a pilot integration with the CBUAE node for issuing Digital Dirham; the regulator has also decreed Digital Dirham adoption by all UAE licensed financial institutions (LFI) by 2026. In the immediate term, banks, payments processors and FinTech participating in the Digital Dirham pilot will need to demonstrate readiness to integrate with the CBUAE Digital Dirham issuing node, and to develop use cases in the sandbox.

Figure 2: National regulators across several MEA countries exploring CBDC



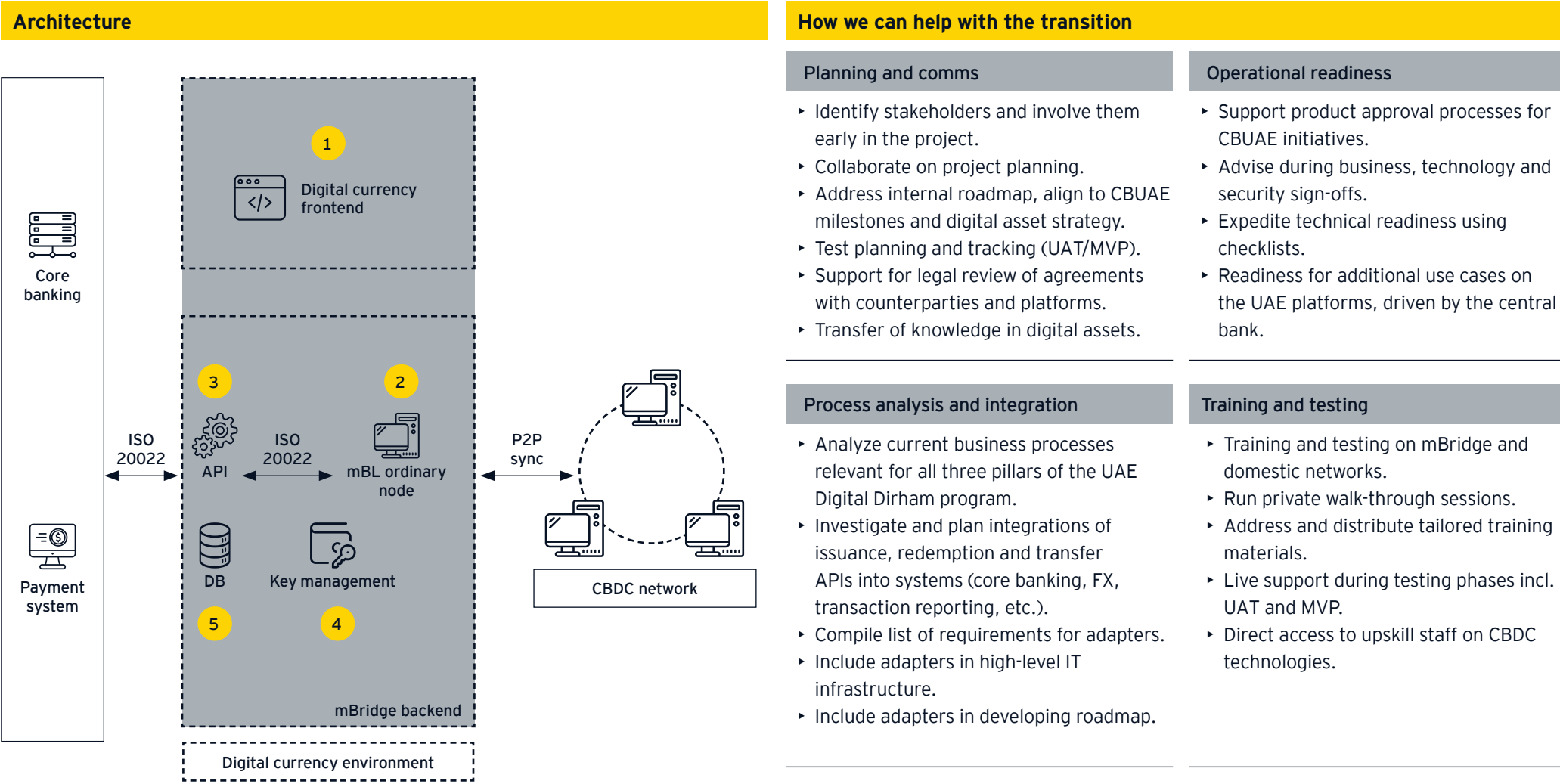
Beyond fulfilling the terms of the CBUAE mandate for the pilot, however, most banks are adopting a wait-and-see approach. While CBDCs resolve the inherent volatility of cryptocurrencies with a fixed peg to a fiat currency, commercial banks are still unclear on the impact on their deposit base and increased volatility in times of crisis, for instance, if consumers rush to convert their holdings

into the CBDC guaranteed by the central bank. CBDCs are typically also designed to be non-interest bearing, and most commercial banks are still thinking through their business cases for supporting digital currencies.

In contrast, mobile money operators such as MTN Group in Africa are moving ahead with plans to support CBDC

as a natural extension to their mobile money offerings; in particular, it assists new transaction fee-based revenue opportunities by extending mobile money to more remote rural customers, and increasing the immediacy of cross-border remittances.

Figure 3: Potential reference integration architecture for CBDC pilots



Payment processors have historically provided outsource processing services for traditional card and online payments to banks, as well as FinTech, online marketplaces and mobile money operators. The opportunity now exists to provide similar white-label CBDC processing services,

with a packaged CBDC wallet-as-a-service proposition providing highly secure, scalable CBDC wallet infrastructure for both banks and mobile money operators to provision custodial or non-custodial wallets for end-customers. It would enable banks to provision and manage wallets

using simple application programming interface (API) and integrate wallets into their own app, to provide a better end-user experience. This packaged proposition could offer a gateway to different types of CBDC wallets, e.g., Single Key, Multi Sig and MPC wallets.

Figure 4: Initial perspectives on value, feasibility of digital assets use cases in MENA

		Revenue potential	Cost of implementation	Time to profit	Implementation feasibility
1	Retail, wholesale CBDC: focus for CBUAE Digital Dirham	High	Medium	Short Two to five years	Medium ²
2	Asset tokenization: tokens (e.g., real estate) rights to physical assets on blockchain using tokens	High	Medium	Medium Two to five years	Medium ²
3	Custody: The process of storing crypto, NFTs and other digital assets safely and securely	Medium	Medium	Medium Two to five years	High ¹
4	Trading: Allowing investors to buy, sell and hold cryptocurrencies with improved security and insurance	Medium	Medium	Medium Two to five years	High ¹
5	Stablecoin issuance: pegged to fiat currencies	Medium	Medium	Medium Two to five years	Medium ²
6	Trade finance: Tokenized invoices, allowing investors to purchase and trade them, providing capital to businesses	High	Medium	Medium Two to five years	High ¹
7	Syndicated loans: Easier access financing, improved fractional ownership, liquidity, transferable ownership	High	Medium	Medium Two to five years	Medium ²

¹ Building blocks exist, are tested and can be lifted and shifted

² Building blocks exist but need additional work

At the global EY organization, we have developed an initial perspective on the potential value and feasibility of several digital assets use cases beyond CBDC, for financial institutions across MENA, based on discussions with several banks and payment processors across the region, and drawing upon the experiences elsewhere, e.g., with the Regulated Liability Network (RLN) in the UK.



Figure 5: Opportunity for payments processors to offer packaged CBDC processing and wallet propositions

Digital currency payments and value-added-services (VAS) ecosystem

Clients

Merchants

Financial institutions

FinTech

Mobile money operators

Governments



Network international Digital Dirham platform

Client experience: Onboarding, API self-service, assisted support

Product catalogue: Consumer payments, B2B VAS for merchants/telcos/marketplaces/FinTech

API library for rapid product integration and configuration

Partner VAS services



Capability partners

Global and domestic schemes

CBDC technology providers, e.g., R3, Fireblocks, Hyperledger Besu

Other payment tech companies

Source: EY analysis

To start exploring the opportunity from these use cases, it is essential for MENA financial institutions to identify a common understanding of CBDC and digital assets across their stakeholders with targeted education and alignment programs. The global EY organization can assist with the EY Digital Assets, Insights and Analytics (DAIA) platform. This platform is currently used by 15 of the world's largest financial institutions. Its functions include tracking the development of digital assets across markets, understanding global and per-asset class market sentiment

for digital assets, defining and exploring new use cases, assessing risks and controls across the value chain and examining the impact of digital assets on technology and process infrastructure. It also helps in gaining a detailed understanding of the regulatory and legal framework for digital assets, training staff and management on different aspects of digital assets, and adapting financial models and risk appetite frameworks appropriately.

The next priority should be to address functional knowledge within each financial institution on different

aspects of digital assets across product management, finance, risk, operations and technology functions. Most financial institutions underestimate the potential impact of CBDC and digital assets on their technology landscape. Our research finds that enhancements to several existing core platforms are likely to be required (e.g., to advice CBDC as an additional financial instrument in bank ledgers), in addition to several new systems that would need to be integrated, for instance, CBDC key management solutions.

Figure 6: EY Digital Assets, Insights and Analytics (DAIA) platform

EY Digital Assets Insights and Assessments

Getting ready to develop and accelerate your Digital Assets initiatives

Contact us

A one-stop shop to manage your Digital Assets activities

The purpose is to help you understand the opportunities, challenges and transformation needs of Digital Assets through deep expertise & insights, access to best practices and curated news, cutting-edge learning, and the ability to assess where you are versus your peers and the EY Digital Assets Index and Maturity Model.

Digital Assets Index

What are the Digital Assets opportunities and capabilities?

Market Sentiment

What is the latest Digital Assets market sentiment?

Digital Assets Learning

How can we better understand the world of Digital Assets?

Digital Assets Share

What are the current practices in Digital Assets?

My Assessment

What is my view of the Digital Assets world?

As banks start on this journey, they are exploring setting up Digital Assets Labs as a focus for integrating, broadening and deepening such functional experience into one place, while also setting up clear governance for digital assets product roadmaps and commercialization.

Finally, a digital assets lab would also provide the initial technology assets and sandboxes required for bank stakeholders to tangibly explore CBDC and digital assets use cases, e.g., using the EY tokenization platform, and the Starlight platform for managing privacy and security issues. The EY global organization has been at the forefront of digital assets industry collaboration, for example, with the CBDC Tracker initiative, as well as through collaboration with technology providers through which we can enable clients to rapidly set up and operationalize Digital Assets Lab infrastructures.

Digital assets represent one of the most far-reaching opportunities for innovation in financial services, with the potential to upend identified regulatory and commercial models. Established financial institutions, in particular, need to take action to assess both the commercial opportunities from digital assets and CBDC, and to assess the threat posed by a potentially disruptive change. Banks should embark on this journey with five key steps:

1. Define your digital assets operating model:

Options to build digital asset capability, either through an internal dedicated team, or a standalone entity focused on digital asset offerings.

2. Identify promising product opportunities:

Address and review the digital asset products catalogue based on the alignment with overall bank objectives and estimate the additional value for the firm. Design and bring to market the products that are most aligned with your business strategy and value proposition (e.g., Sharia compliant digital assets products for Islamic financial institutions).

3. Assess the case for investment: Assess market dynamics and assess potential impact (e.g., potential upside, decrease in operational cost).

4. Identify gaps in execution capabilities: Examine practical aspects of the approaches and capabilities required to recommend a target state in line with industry due practices.

5. Bring executives, staff and clients along on the journey: Align stakeholders and assess demand from clients. Actively drive client understanding of products, services and approaches.

The immediate starting point should be targeted education and alignment sessions with both senior executives and functional leaders within the Bank, as well as with key clients, to identify a common understanding of digital assets and their implications for different areas.

The global EY organization assists in designing and providing leading class learning programs for executives and functional leaders at financial institutions. As EY organization has developed a bespoke approach, provided through engaging face-to-face learning events, with optional activation sessions designed to drive the right outcomes for your senior and board level executives. We can outline specific technical learning in line with the agreed topics to develop the pathway further. This includes:

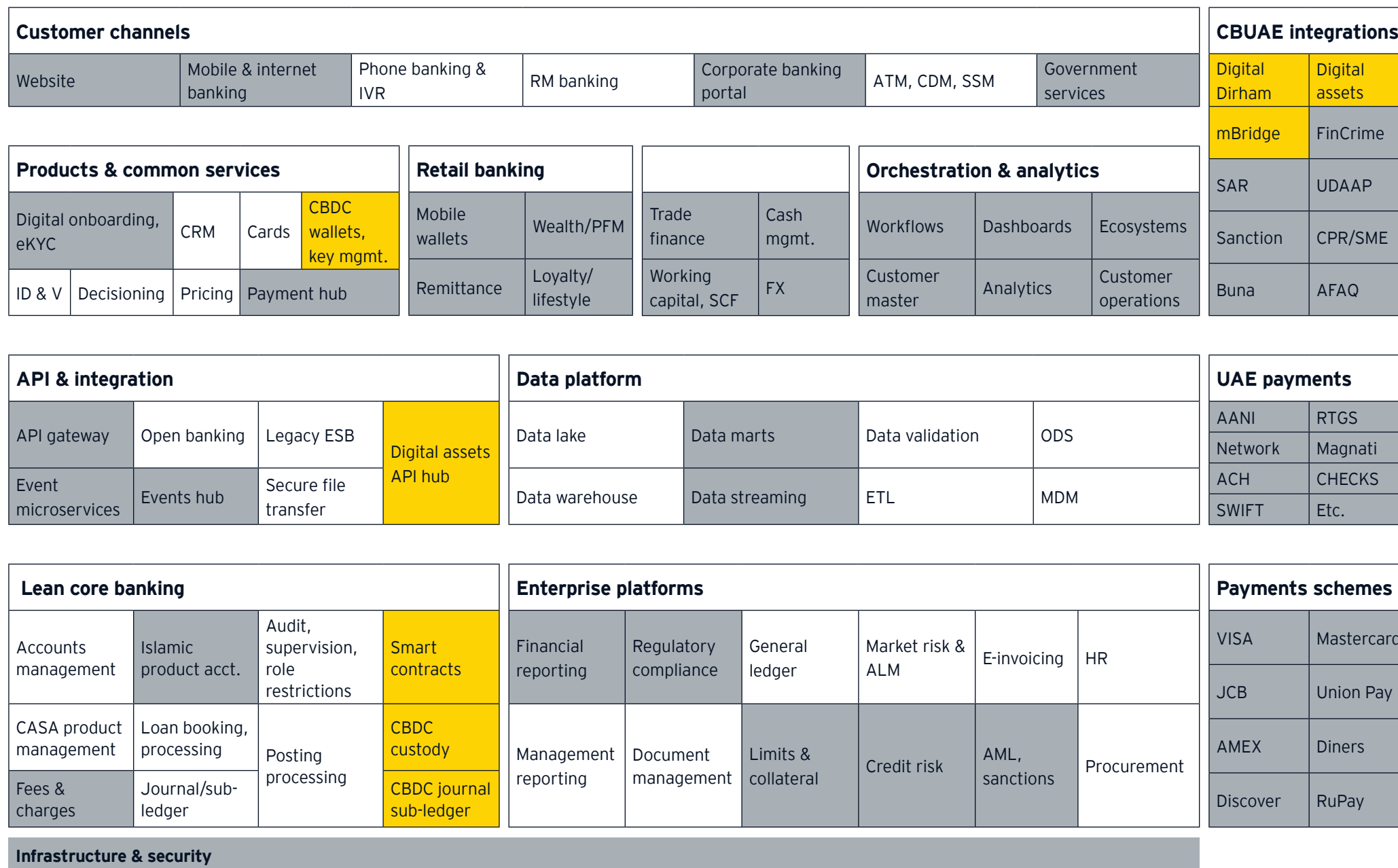
► **Case studies and challenges:** Leaders will be asked to work with real life problem situations to drive the objectives of each of the workshops and to make the learning impactful and personally relevant.

► **Continuous learning:** Leaders can engage with other training collateral and resources, identify a small forum to connect with each other through a learning hub, test ideas and collaborate.

► **Access to EY subject matter resources:** Leaders will have access to the most up-to-date and thought-provoking insights through the group of regional and global subject matter experts (SMEs) in each area.

This level of alignment and education is critical, given the potential for a significant transformation of a bank's strategy, risk and operations. The global EY organization offers multidisciplinary capabilities and services to support you through the different stages of this journey. These include distinctive capabilities in digital assets strategy, change management, regulation, legal matters, risk management, control and technology.

Figure 7: Banks will need to integrate CBDC and digital assets into existing technology landscapes



New components for CBDC/digital assets



Enhancements to existing systems

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