

## What Bangladesh should understand about Iran today

**As regional tensions continue to reshape the Middle East, former Bangladesh Ambassador to Iran Tariq Karim speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star about Iran's deep civilizational identity, the historical roots of its resilience, the misconceptions shaping Western policy, and why Bangladesh must rethink its strategic relations with Tehran. Ambassador Tariq Karim is currently Advisor to Independent University, Bangladesh and Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.**



Having observed Iran for a long time, how do you understand the country? I fundamentally believe that nations and societies carry history and culture deeply embedded within them. Human beings are like blotting papers; we absorb history, culture, and memory. These shape how we think and understand the world. A people cannot go against the grain of their historical development.

I was first posted to Iran in 1969, where I undertook a deep study of Iranian history through both foreign and Iranian sources. What I discovered was remarkable. Iran possesses a continuous civilizational history stretching back roughly 5,000 years. Throughout this period, it was ruled directly by only a few indigenous Persian dynasties. Most others were conquerors or invaders who arrived from outside.

Yet every conqueror who came was eventually "Persianized". The Iranians absorbed them culturally. The conquerors might have stayed for decades or centuries, but eventually they left transformed by Persian civilizational culture itself. Iran adopted some influences from outsiders, but never lost its core civilizational identity. That continuity is critical.

The Iranians are Persians first. To understand Iran, one must understand Persianness. The first great Persian empire was the Achaemenid Empire. After Alexander's conquest, the Greeks ruled for a period, but even Alexander became deeply Persianized. Later came the Sasanian Empire, another golden age of Persian civilization. During this era, the Persian language evolved significantly. One form of Middle Persian was known as Pahlavi (a name later assumed by the last Pahlavi dynasty). Then came the Arab conquest and the magnificent Safavid period, during which Persian culture became deeply intertwined with Shi'a Islam. This Islamized Persian identity became a critical defining layer added onto an already ancient civilization.

The Iranian sense of history and identity is extraordinarily strong. I witnessed two very different Irans during my career. I first served there during the Shah's era, when the state glorified pre-Islamic Persian civilization. Later, I returned during the rule of the Islamic Republic, when Shi'a Islam became the dominant ideological framework.

But even after the Islamic Revolution, Persianness remained deeply rooted. When I arrived in Tehran in 1991, it was just before Chaharshanbe Suri, the celebration held on the last Wednesday of the Iranian year. The Iranians still followed many ancient Zoroastrian traditions. Families gathered around bonfires and jumped across the flames, symbolically leaving behind the misfortunes of the past year before entering the new one purified. This revealed the depth of Persian cultural identity, which cannot simply be erased.

Iranian history also explains why the country reacts so strongly to external intervention. Iran has repeatedly experienced invasions, occupations, and foreign interference throughout its history. Yet each time, the nation survived and eventually reasserted itself. Iranians may criticize their government internally, but when faced with an external threat, they close ranks. They unite around the defence of Iran itself.

That is exactly what we are witnessing today. Shi'a Islam is central to Iran's national psyche. Martyrdom occupies a particularly important place within Shi'a culture, rooted in the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), during the events commemorated on Ashura. This historical memory reinforces a culture of sacrifice and resistance. Many Iranians view struggle and suffering as meaningful components of defending their identity and beliefs.

Do American policymakers fundamentally misunderstand Iran? Yes, very much so. American perceptions of Iran remain heavily shaped by the 1979 clergy-led Revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis. But the roots of modern Iranian distrust towards the West go back much further, to 1953, when the CIA and MI6 jointly overthrew Iran's highly popular nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh after he nationalized Iran's oil industry.

For many Iranians, 1979 was not the beginning of the conflict. It was the culmination of decades of foreign intervention. Americans often begin the story in 1979. Iranians begin it in 1953.

What makes Iran so strategically significant in global geopolitics? Iran's geopolitical importance stems from both its geography and its vast resources. If you examine the map, Iran sits astride one of the world's most critical energy corridors: the Strait of Hormuz. Twenty percent of global oil and gas shipments (and over 35 percent of global fertilizer supplies) pass through this narrow waterway. Much of East Asia, including China, Japan, and South Korea, depends heavily on Persian Gulf energy supplies. This gives Iran immense strategic significance.

At the same time, the global rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia is increasingly shaping the region. Iran's relationships with China and Russia have grown stronger because of shared geopolitical interests and opposition to American dominance.



**Naqsh-e Rostam. Rock relief depicting the triumph of Sasanian emperor Shapur I over the Roman emperors Philip the Arab (244–249), shown kneeling in submission, and Valerian (253–260), standing captive. Valerian's hands are concealed within his sleeves as a symbol of servitude. Circa 260 CE.**

What would a realistic path to ending the Iran-Israel-US conflict look like? All sides must work seriously to end this war. But any effort to resolve the conflict must acknowledge Iranian historical psychology. Iran is not likely to surrender under pressure. Its identity has been forged through centuries of resisting foreign domination. Every external attack tends to strengthen Iranian nationalism rather than weaken it.

The world also needs to confront the broader regional realities, especially regarding Israel and Palestine. Iran has consistently positioned itself as one of the strongest supporters of the Palestinian cause, even at immense economic and geopolitical cost. Whether one views that as inflexibility or principled commitment depends on perspective. If "Persianness" is the soul of Iran, its heart is Shi'a doctrine. Together, they give the Iranian nation a backbone of titanium to stand up to any foreign intrusion.

How should Bangladesh rethink its relationship with Iran in the changing geopolitical landscape? Bangladesh's greatest vulnerability is energy insecurity. We have become overly dependent on imported hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf rather than diversifying our sources or developing our own resources in the Bay of Bengal. We failed to think strategically and anticipatorily.

Iran has survived sanctions for nearly fifty years, yet it has achieved major advances in literacy, education, technology, and industrial development. The country is far more sophisticated and resilient than many outsiders realise.

Women in Iran, despite restrictions, are often highly educated, socially assertive, and deeply influential within families and society. Iran is not a country that can simply be ignored or understood through simplistic stereotypes.

Bangladesh needs to build parallel bridges to Iran while continuing its ties with all states on the western side of the Persian Gulf. Let us not forget that, once the war is over, Iran — a land almost the size of Western Europe, with a population of 93 million and vast hydrocarbon reserves — will focus on massive reconstruction. As in the past, it can once again become a source of gainful employment for Bangladeshi expatriate workers of all categories.

Also, citing Pakistan's growing ties with Saudi Arabia and 'meek' response to Iranian strikes on the UAE, Abu Dhabi demanded the repayment of \$3.5 billion loan from Pakistan. In late April, Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan with \$3 billion to repay the loan, and in exchange, Pakistan deployed 13,000 troops and 10-18 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia to shield it from potential attacks. Moreover, the UAE has expanded its ties with Somaliland, which is *de facto* independent but *de jure* a part of Somalia, and Abu Dhabi is reportedly lobbying other states to recognize its independence. In this case, the UAE is in sync with Israel, which recognized the statelet on 26 December 2025. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey and Egypt, supports Somalia's federal government and territorial integrity.

Thus, despite being firmly anchored in the US-led Western bloc, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are engaged in a 'cold war' against each other due to competing regional ambitions in Asia and Africa, differing strategic and economic priorities, and divergent policies towards Israel and Iran. The cold war has added a new set of complexities to the already volatile politics of the Middle East, and is detrimental to regional stability and international security.

**Implications for Bangladesh**  
Bangladesh shares close economic and political ties with both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively hosting 3.5 million and 0.84 million Bangladeshi citizens, mostly migrant workers. Moreover, Dhaka fulfills a substantial part of its energy needs by importing crude and refined oil from these two states. Accordingly, Bangladesh has so far pursued a balanced policy towards them and carefully avoided picking any sides in the intra-Gulf Arab cold war. This policy has served the country well. However, if the Saudi-Emirati cold war escalates, Bangladesh may face pressures from both sides to pick a side, as Pakistan has recently found out to its peril. The two Gulf Arab states hold considerable leverage over Bangladesh via the issue of migration, and it can be used to influence the country's policy. Hence, Dhaka should carefully monitor the developments in Saudi-Emirati relations, maintain cordial ties with both of them through rigorous diplomacy, and prioritize its long-term national interests over any short-term gains in dealing with this acute issue.

## The Saudi-Emirati cold war and what it means for Bangladesh

MD. HIMEL RAHMAN

On 1 May 2026, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) quit the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and OPEC+, and according to experts, it is planning to boost oil production by around 1 million barrels per day (BPD). The UAE, which is currently the 8<sup>th</sup> largest producer of oil and contains the 6<sup>th</sup> largest oil reserves in the world, insists that its decision was motivated by energy policy and not by political factors. However, the decision has widened its already growing rift with Saudi Arabia, which is currently the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest producer of oil and holds the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest oil reserves in the world. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are already engaged in proxy war against each other on several fronts, including Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia, and the energy rift has added a new dimension to the 'cold war' between the two influential Gulf Arab states.

**Saudi Arabia and the UAE as Sub-imperial Powers**

The rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE can be viewed as a conflict between two sub-imperial powers. According to Brazilian economist and sociologist Ruy Mauro Marini, when a state, which is not a global imperial power itself, pursues policies in accordance with the interests of imperial powers and acts in an imperial manner within its own region, the phenomenon is called 'sub-imperialism.' Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not global imperial powers. Both of the states have been under the security umbrella of the United States (US) — a global imperial power for decades, and both provided varying degrees of support to US policies in the Muslim World, particularly with regard to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Iraqi-Iranian War, the Persian Gulf War, the Yugoslav Wars, and the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Libya.

However, Saudi Arabia has been acting as a regional hegemon in and around the Middle East since its creation, illustrated by the Saudi-North Yemeni War (1934), the Saudi intervention in the North Yemeni Civil War (1962–1970), the bankrolling of the Syrian-led Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Saudi-led interventions in Bahrain (2011) and Yemen (2015–present), the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar (2017–2021), and the 'kidnapping' and forced resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Saudi Arabia in 2017. On the other hand, the UAE, despite being smaller in terms of size, population, and resources, has been flexing its muscles around

the region since the 2010s, demonstrated by its overt and/or covert interventions in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia, its growing economic and military footprints across Africa, and its confrontations with Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Hence, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are acting as sub-imperial powers within the same region.

**From Concord to Conflict**

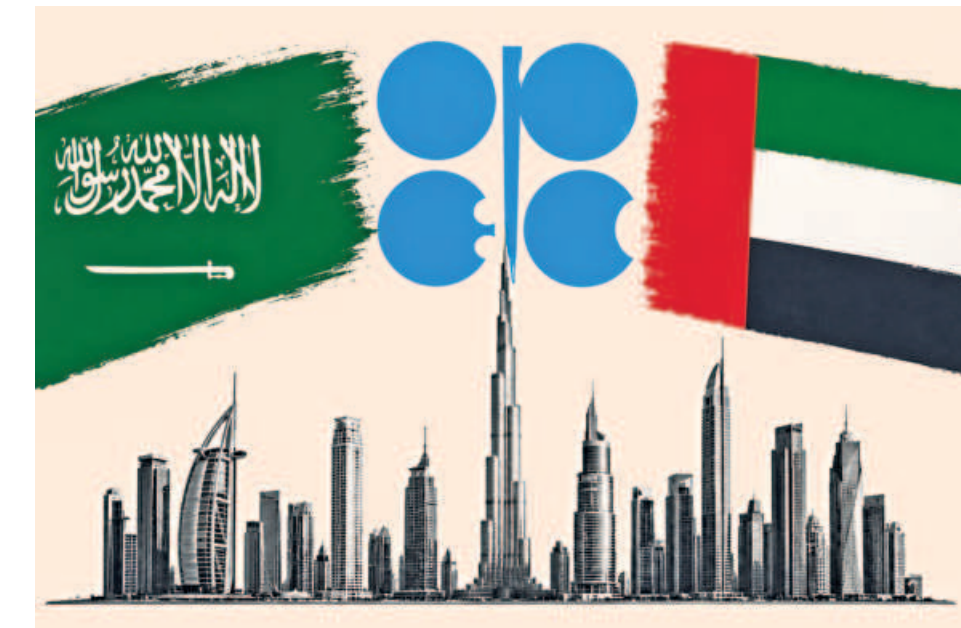
Until the mid 2010s, Saudi-Emirati relations and interests appeared perfectly synchronized, with both having strongman and modernizing rulers in the persona of Muhammad bin Salman (MBS) and Muhammad bin Zayed (MBZ), shared opposition to political Islam, common oil interests, close ties with the US, and shared antipathy towards Shia-dominated Iran. They closely cooperated with each other in opposing the Arab Spring and on the issues of Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Qatar. However, by late 2010s, their policies began to diverge, as the UAE grew more confident, and disputes arose on a set of issues ranging from economic rivalry and oil policy tensions to views on political Islam and normalization with Israel.

In 2011, after the start of the Syrian Civil War, Saudi Arabia and the UAE started supporting the insurgent groups against the Iranian-backed Syrian government to counter Iranian influence in Syria. However, in 2018, the UAE normalized relations with the Syrian government, diverging from the Saudi policy. In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with a number of Arab and African states, intervened in Yemen to protect the Saudi-aligned Yemeni government from the Zaydi Shia-dominated Ansar Allah, popularly known as the Houthis. However, Saudi and Emirati strategic objectives diverged: Riyadh prioritized securing its border with Yemen through its stabilization, while Abu Dhabi sought to control strategic ports and maritime routes. Eventually, by 2019, the UAE started to draw down its support for the Saudi-led coalition, and began supporting the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which sought to create an independent state in southern Yemen.

Still, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi cooperated to blockade Qatar in 2017–2021, and the Saudis backed the Emiratis during the intensive Turkish-Emirati proxy war in Syria and Libya in 2019–2020. Also, the UAE's decision to normalize ties with Israel in September 2020 appeared to have tacit Saudi approval. Riyadh itself was negotiating with the Israelis on possible normalization, but linked it to substantial Israeli concessions on the creation of a viable Palestinian state. However, the

expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank negatively affected Saudi-Israeli talks, and the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian War on 7 October 2023 resulted in their suspension. But the UAE continued to expand its partnership with Israel in spite of the genocidal Israeli campaign in the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, the eruption of the Sudanese Civil War in April 2023 further strained Saudi-Emirati relations, as Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt and Iran, is supporting the Sudanese government controlled by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), while the UAE is backing the insurgent Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which has been accused of perpetrating mass atrocities against the people of Darfur. In Libya, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi support the Libyan National Army (LNA) under Khalifa Haftar, but recently both have exerted pressure on the LNA to do their bidding. The



UAE supports the LNA to counter the rise of Islamists and to expand its influence in North and West Africa, and it has reportedly supplied weapons to the RSF via the LNA. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has nudged the LNA to cooperate with the Government of National Unity (GNU) to ensure stability and to stabilize oil production, and it, along with Egypt, has urged the LNA to stop arms supplies to the RSF. Moreover, Saudi Arabia signed the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) with Pakistan on 17 September 2025, and the UAE mirrored the move by establishing a Strategic Defense Partnership with Pakistan's

and their inability to directly oppose Saudi interests.

The US-Israeli-Iranian War, during which Iran struck both Saudi and Emirati territories, has ironically widened the gulf between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and indirectly helped the Saudis in their proxy war against the UAE in Sudan. As Iranian strikes caused serious economic losses and attrition of matériel in the UAE, their ability to arm the RSF declined considerably. As a result, the Saudi and Egyptian-backed Sudanese government has recently achieved a string of victories against the RSF, rapidly reversing its earlier gains.

Also, citing Pakistan's growing ties with Saudi Arabia and 'meek' response to Iranian strikes on the UAE, Abu Dhabi demanded the repayment of \$3.5 billion loan from Pakistan. In late April, Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan with \$3 billion to repay the loan, and in exchange, Pakistan deployed 13,000 troops and 10-18 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia to shield it from potential attacks. Moreover, the UAE has expanded its ties with Somaliland, which is *de facto* independent but *de jure* a part of Somalia, and Abu Dhabi is reportedly lobbying other states to recognize its independence. In this case, the UAE is in sync with Israel, which recognized the statelet on 26 December 2025. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey and Egypt, supports Somalia's federal government and territorial integrity.

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