

“Whoever controls digital currency will direct the future of money”, Op-ed in Arabian Gulf Business Insight (AGBI), 18 Sep 2025

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Whoever controls digital currency will direct the future of money

CBDCs are tools of sovereignty in a world shifting eastward, edging away from dollar dominance

We are living in a rapidly transforming financial landscape.

In July the US passed the Genesis Act, the first formal federal framework for stablecoins. It mandates full reserve backing in US dollars or short-term treasuries – a bid to make America the “crypto capital of the world”, funding deficits while reviving the dollar’s long-cherished “exorbitant privilege”.

The prize is tempting. Global cryptocurrency value has rocketed from just [\\$5 billion in 2015 to more than \\$3 trillion by mid-2025](#), fuelled by technology, institutional adoption, exchange-traded funds and speculative fever.

Yet crypto’s story is one of boom and bust. Volatile prices,

thin reserves and fragile pegs have repeatedly triggered bank-run dynamics. Stablecoins, e-money and cryptocurrencies are “currencies” in name only: they lack the unit of account, the store of value and the state guarantee that underpin true money.

That’s why the next chapter won’t be written by private tokens but by central banks.

The digital economy already accounts for [\\$16 trillion](#) – 14 percent of global GDP – and it is being supercharged by artificial intelligence. Such a system demands infrastructure with security, trust and scale.

Enter central bank digital currencies (CBDCs).

CBDCs come in two forms. Retail CBDCs extend digital cash to the public. Wholesale CBDCs streamline interbank payments and settlements. Both can cut costs, enhance security and integrate seamlessly with tokenised assets.

More strategically, they are becoming tools of sovereignty in a world shifting eastward, fragmenting and edging away from dollar dominance.

For many states, CBDCs are no longer optional – they are defensive shields against US financial power and offensive tools for economic inclusion.

The [UAE has grasped this early](#). Its planned digital dirham could be live by the end of 2025, supporting domestic payments, cross-border trade and e-commerce.

It builds on the UAE’s role as a crypto hub – home to Vara, the world’s first independent virtual asset regulator and to pioneering tokenisation projects in real estate. Fractional ownership platforms let investors buy into Dubai property for as little as AED2,000 (\$550). Tokenised assets are moving from theory to practice.

A digital dirham will make the payment system more efficient, facilitating transactions between individuals, businesses and governments, securely and at a lower cost.

It will widen access. Millions of expatriate workers and small businesses in the Gulf remain excluded from formal finance.

A state-backed digital currency can bring them into the fold securely, lowering remittance costs and expanding economic participation. Smart contracts will add automation, creating new efficiencies in trade and finance.

Globally, the race is on. As of July, 137 countries are exploring CBDCs; 72 are in advanced development and three have already launched.

China leads with its e-CNY, piloted in 29 cities with transactions topping \$986 billion. The UAE, meanwhile, has conducted joint CBDC trials with Saudi Arabia and China [through the Bank for International Settlements-backed mBridge project](#), and with Riyadh through Project Aber.

These efforts hint at an alternative financial architecture – one not reliant on the dollar.

Today, the greenback still accounts for nearly half of all international payments and dominates trade finance with an 82 percent share. But 98 percent of stablecoins are also pegged to the dollar, reinforcing its grip.

The stakes are geopolitical as much as financial. Imagine a trade transaction flowing between China and the UAE, settled instantly in e-CNY and digital dirham without touching dollars or the Swift payments system. That is no longer hypothetical – it's already been tested.

Such flows foreshadow a future in which cross-border transactions are faster, cheaper and less dollar-dependent.

The UAE is well placed. It is the third-largest crypto adopter

in Mena and among the top 40 globally, handling more than \$30 billion in transactions in the year to June 2024, according to Chainalysis.

Decentralised finance usage in the country has grown 74 percent year on year, and the Dubai Land Department predicts tokenised real estate could reach \$16 billion by 2033.

But the opportunity is also a challenge. Unless the UAE and other forward-leaning economies scale CBDCs quickly, they risk ceding ground to dollar-denominated stablecoins.

Washington has made its intentions clear. Beijing has already built its alternative framework. The global financial system is being redesigned – and whoever controls it will shape trade, power and trust in the digital age.

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