

# **Saudi - Bangladeshi Relations in Perspective**

Written by Robert Mason

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ROBERT MASON, FEB 27 2014

Early relations between Saudi Arabia and the newly independent state of Bangladesh were lacking substance from 1971 due to Saudi Arabia's close relationship with Pakistan with which it had just fought a 9-month war of independence, claiming the lives of 3 million Bangladeshis and displacing 10 million in India.

Subsequently, Bangladesh suffered a famine due to flooding, government mismanagement and distributional failures.[i] Pakistan recognised Bangladesh in 1974. However, Bangladesh instituted a policy of developing closer ties to the US, China and Saudi Arabia which were not particularly successful under Prime Minister Mujib, probably because he had committed himself to Socialism in the Constitution and was therefore ideologically too close to the USSR. When President Ziaur Rahman re-orientated Bangladesh away from Socialism by favouring the opening up the private sector in 1975, it paved the way for Saudi recognition, and subsequently a more Islamic and anti-Indian national identity.

Remittances represent more than ten per cent of Bangladeshi GDP, coming mainly from the US (the US is now the number one Bangladeshi expatriate market after 9/11 due to the forced clamp down on remittances from Bangladeshi expatriate workers in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf States). Corruption is still rife in Bangladesh (Transparency International put Bangladesh at 136 out of 177 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index in 2013).[ii] Complaints from Bangladeshis have pointed to aid primarily from Saudi Arabia and the US having been taken by bureaucrats, consultants, politicians and contractors at the expense of the country's self-respect. Bangladeshi - Saudi economic relations continue to develop from a low base, but the Bangladeshi government is passing more legislation in an effort to attract more inward investment. With Riyadh investing heavily in higher education, there are also options for Bangladeshis to take advantage of more education and research-related opportunities in the Kingdom, thereby contributing to their own economy back home.

### **Bangladeshi Leadership**

Successive military regimes governed Bangladesh from 1975-81 (Ziaur Rahman) and from 1982-90 (General Hussein Muhammad Ershad), with a heavy emphasis on Islam which was also reflected in the constitution. Civilian rule was re-established in Bangladesh in 1990 following a temporary alliance between the main political parties: the Awami League, Jatiya Party and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Since then, politics has become hierarchical and leaderships entrenched. Consequently, other institutions and interest groups are rarely able to influence policy making. Tensions between religious and secular supporters has increased as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has sought to restore more secularism in Bangladeshi politics and in the constitution and banned violent Islamist groups which reject western values and aim to establish Sharia law in the country.

### **Saudi Objectives**

Saudi objectives towards Bangladesh are rooted in history, cultural and religious bonds and based on the fact that 90 per cent of 150 million Bangladeshis are Muslims. Around 1.2 - 2.5 million Bangladeshis work in the Kingdom but mostly as blue collar labourers.[iii] Although there is plenty of common links to build on, the strategic importance of Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia is limited. Cooperation can easily be fulfilled through Riyadh maintaining support for Islamic causes and political parties and building significant economic relations. There is a Wahabi influence in

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Bangladesh Qomi madrasas, but Bangladesh has quite a strong national identity (along with other sufi and Hindu influences) which means a certain amount of resistance to it. Two-way trade is likely to top \$1 billion in 2014 based on current estimates.[iv] Bangladesh has been an ardent supporter of the Kingdom and even if the Prime Minister is trying to promote a reorientation to secularism, it would be impossible to abandon such links. The issue remains that unlike India and Pakistan, Bangladesh does not possess the same economic, political or security related resources (e.g. nuclear weapons) which would make it a more attractive ally.

## Bangladeshi Objectives towards Saudi Arabia

Bangladeshi policy is clearly defined by economic imperatives. The country receives about \$3.7 billion per year in remittances from Saudi Arabia alone (up to 29 per cent of total remittances) which is more than it attracts in foreign aid.[v] However, in 2009 Bangladeshi expatriate workers dropped off substantially to number just 14,500 or the equivalent of \$200 million in remittances.[vi] The reason for this sudden fall is Sheikh Hasina's policy of likening Jamaat-e-Islami, the Wahabbi party in Bangladesh and with the closest links to Riyadh, to a terrorist organisation.

The challenge for the government in Dhaka is not only to develop bilateral relations but to do so in competition with Pakistan – a highly strategic asset for Saudi Arabia during the current Saudi – Iranian Cold War. Furthermore, by pursuing Jamaat leadership for war crimes carried out in 1970s war of independence from Pakistan and attempting to implement a more secular political agenda, it could make matters much worse with Saudi Arabia. That is before the Saudi crackdown on illegal workers is taken into account, which could represent a further blow to Bangladeshi expatriate workers.[vii]

## Policy Outcomes

It appears that the government in Dhaka will make little inroads into changing Saudi policy on reducing the number of its expatriate workers in the Kingdom without clear recognition of Islam in national politics and in the constitution. Should Saudi tensions with Iran ease, it is conceivable that relations with Bangladesh could pick up as Ministers in Riyadh feel able to further diversify relations in South Asia. However, given the combination and intensity of the perceived Iranian threat, the labour pressures associated with the Arab Revolutions, and the availability of other expatriate communities to work in the Kingdom, it is hard to see Bangladeshi workers becoming a preferred group in the near term.

[i] James Melik, 'Bangladesh at 40: The Challenges Ahead', *BBC News*, 16 December 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16179871>, accessed 25 February 2014

[ii] Transparency International, 'Corruption by Country: Bangladesh', available at <http://www.transparency.org/country#BGD>, accessed 25 February 2013

[iii] Saudi Gazette, 'Bangladesh – Saudi Ties Rooted in History, Religious Bonds', 26 March 2013, available at <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130326158570>, accessed 12 December 2013; The Economist, 'Revenge of the Migrants' Employer', 26 May 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/03/bangladesh-and-saudi-arabia>, accessed 12 December 2013

[iv] *ibid*

[v] The Economist, 'Revenge of the Migrants' Employer', 26 May 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/03/bangladesh-and-saudi-arabia>, accessed 12 December 2013

[vi] *ibid*

[vii] The Economist, 'Revenge of the Migrants' Employer', 26 May 2013, available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/03/bangladesh-and-saudi-arabia>, accessed 12 December 2013

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**Robert Mason** is Associate Professor and Director of the Middle East Studies Center at the American University in Cairo. His most recent book is *Reassessing Order and Disorder in the Middle East: Regional Imbalance or Disintegration?* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).