Bitcoin tops $71,000: Meet Bijan Alizadeh, Phoenix Group CEO and Middle East cryptocurrency founding father

As Bitcoin races to further record heights, Arabian Business sat down with one of the region's biggest cryptocurrency players – Bijan Alizadeh, Co-Founder and Group CEO of crypto mining giant Phoenix Group

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As one of the founding fathers of the crypto industry in the Middle East, Bijan Alizadeh has spent over a decade pushing the boundaries of what was once deemed impossible. As Co-Founder and Group CEO of Phoenix Group, a pioneering crypto mining and infrastructure company based in the UAE, Alizadeh's journey exemplifies the perseverance and vision required to established new industries.

"A lot of people didn't believe in the potential of cryptocurrencies back in 2012 when I first got interested in Bitcoin," recalls Alizadeh. "But I had a feeling this was the future, and I was determined to play a role in building it."

Alizadeh's curiosity was piqued after receiving his first cryptocurrency payment for a transaction. Intrigued by the revolutionary technology underlying digital currencies, he spent hours educating himself on blockchain and decentralised networks. His conviction in this new paradigm led him to co-found Phoenix Group in 2017 alongside business partner Munaf Ali, with the goal of establishing one of the region's first cryptocurrency mining facilities.

"Munaf and I believed in the technology because we both came from a financial background," says Alizadeh. "We recognised blockchain's potential to transform how value is stored and exchanged, so we knew we had to move into this space quickly."

Their early 1-megawatt mining operation in the UAE was a humble start, but it served as the testing ground that would lay the foundation for Phoenix's exponential growth. As Bitcoin's price surged, Phoenix expanded aggressively by securing equipment and power supplies. Today, the company operates some of the world's largest and most sustainable cryptocurrency mining facilities.

"Success followed as interest in crypto grew, but the journey wasn't easy," recalls Alizadeh. "Regulations impacted mining sites worldwide, so we had to constantly adapt and relocate operations internationally."

When China abruptly banned cryptocurrency mining in 2021, Phoenix had to airlift hundreds of mining rigs out of the country overnight. But rather than deter Alizadeh, such challenges only reinforced his resolve and flexibility to position Phoenix at the cutting edge of an emerging industry.

Powering progress responsibly

Sustainability remains a cornerstone of Phoenix's ethos under Alizadeh's leadership. The company's facilities source over 60 percent of electricity from renewable sources like solar panels and hydroelectric dams.

"Too often people exaggerate mining's energy impact. As an industry, we account for just 0.3 percent of global power usage, with over half coming from cleaner alternatives," notes Alizadeh. "The consistent demand from our operations also helps utility providers manage variable loads on the grid."

Through strategic partnerships in the UAE, Phoenix secures competitively-priced renewable energy supplies to power its growing facilities. Alizadeh emphasises that "as the industry evolves, we're actively reducing our carbon footprint to set a benchmark for sustainable growth."

Regulatory collaboration

Alizadeh approaches regulation not as a hindrance but as an opportunity to foster trust and long-term viability. Throughout Phoenix's growth, he has proactively supported regional authorities in crafting balanced frameworks.

"Events like FTX prove why proper oversight protects users," says Alizadeh. "Regulators want discipline and stability, which is also our goal. So we embrace guidance and work closely with them."

This collaborative approach proved instrumental in Phoenix establishing regional headquarters in Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM), the financial free zone. Alizadeh credits ADGM and other UAE authorities for spearheading "progressive yet prudent" rules that avoided stifling innovation.

Beyond Phoenix, Alizadeh's regulatory advocacy extends through initiatives like UAE's first fully regulated crypto exchange, M2, which Phoenix founded with key Abu Dhabi stakeholders. As crypto gains mainstream traction, he believes platforms like M2 can become global household names.

"The leadership in Abu Dhabi deserves recognition for their foresight around crypto and blockchain's promise years before others," praises Alizadeh. "Their regulatory approach sets the stage for projects like ours to responsibly contribute to this new industry."

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Building the future ecosystem

While building a pioneering business, Alizadeh's ambitions have always extended beyond any single venture. Through the $100 million venture capital fund Cypher Capital and coworking facilities, his goal is actively mentoring the next generation of regional innovators.

"Our hope is to incubate local startups and help turn them into global household names rooted here in the Middle East," he reveals.
Phoenix also acquired a 25 percent stake in the social networking and content monetization platform, Lyvely. "Social e-commerce and the creator economy are growing exponentially, and our investment and strategic support backing Lyvely symbolizes our commitment to shaping the future economy and supporting UAE home-grown tech start-ups."

Similarly, events and partnerships with universities seek to foster awareness and educate talent that will shape tomorrow's decentralised economies. For Alizadeh, widespread knowledge is crucial to drive mainstream adoption.

"Education is how mass participation happens, which brings more awareness and unlocks the industry's true potential," he stresses.

In sharing his experience pioneering crypto internationally, Alizadeh aims to empower the builders of tomorrow. He believes the UAE's progressive policies and vibrant startup scene position it well to forge the future globally, provided regional talent has the right cultivation and exposure.

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A region rises

After a decade blazing trails, Alizadeh remains as optimistic as ever about the road ahead. Despite inevitable periods of volatility, his conviction in long-term trends like growing internet access, evolving business models, and technology's permeation into everyday life reinforce confidence in blockchain's trajectory.

"We've come a long way, but still only around 5 percent of people own cryptocurrency – there's massive potential as more get exposed to this new digital economy," he notes.

Above all, Alizadeh credits the UAE government's foresight in recognising blockchain's promise and establishing an environment where this frontier can progress responsibly.

"Abu Dhabi has superb infrastructure and a welcoming regulatory environment, making it ideally suited to become a hub for crypto innovation in the region. The emirate recognises the potential of blockchain technology and is proactively cultivating the ecosystem to attract entrepreneurs and startups working in this transformational space," Alizadeh explained.

"The UAE is well-positioned to lead – not just in the Middle East but globally – by supporting the future of decentralisation, blockchain, and innovation and by supporting local entities to become globally recognised."