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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

A WIDE GAP BETWEEN OFFICIAL CLAIMS AND GROUND REALITIES

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About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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A wide gap between official claims and ground realities

Farhan Khan

The National Accounts Committee (NAC) is reported to have approved GDP growth of 3.71 percent in the first quarter of FY26 (1QFY26) and revised upward the growth rate for the last quarter of FY25 to 6.17 percent. However, these official figures are being strongly disputed by independent economists and policy analysts, who argue that the numbers do not accurately reflect the prevailing economic realities.

According to available details, the reported 3.7 percent growth consists of 2.9 percent growth in agriculture, a robust 9.4 percent expansion in industry, while the services sector is said to have grown by 2.4 percent. A closer look at the agricultural sector, however, raises serious questions. Crop output reportedly declined by 3.7 percent, with important crops and cotton ginning all registering negative growth. Despite these negative indicators, it is claimed that agriculture as a whole posted growth of 2.9 percent, mainly due to an exceptional performance by the livestock sector. This claim appears questionable, as ground realities suggest otherwise. Beef and mutton prices have been rising sharply, prompting the question of how livestock production could have grown so strongly amid increasing prices and supply pressures.

The claim of 9.4 percent industrial growth is also contradicted by key indicators. Large-Scale Manufacturing (LSM) growth stands at only 4.1 percent, far below the headline figure. The highest reported growth within the industrial sector is in electricity, gas and water supply, which allegedly expanded by 25.5 percent, following growth of over 100 percent in the previous quarter. However, electricity consumption during 1QFY26 increased by only 1 percent. The higher growth in this subsector appears to be largely driven by increased subsidies aimed at clearing circular debt rather than by genuine increases in physical output. The second-largest reported increase is in construction, which grew by 21.0 percent, partially supported by a 15 percent rise in cement production. In contrast, the services sector grew by only 2.35 percent, while wholesale and retail trade expanded by a modest 3.1 percent, reflecting subdued

economic activity.

According to the well-known think tank Economic Policy and Business Development (EPBD), the economic growth figures released by the government for the first quarter of FY26 are exaggerated and fail to reflect the actual market situation. EPBD argues that the reported 3.71 percent Gross Value Added (GVA) growth for Q1FY26—with agriculture growing by 2.89 percent, industry by 9.38 percent and services by 2.35 percent—is “difficult to reconcile with ground realities.”

In the view of the think tank, the most glaring discrepancy lies between domestic output estimates and actual trade performance. Despite the reported growth in agriculture and food-related manufacturing, food group exports declined sharply by 25.8 percent during the quarter, while food imports increased

With regard to industrial sector growth of 9.38 percent, EPBD highlights that this expansion was largely driven by a more than 25 percent increase in electricity, gas and water supply, which was not the result of higher output but rather of heavy subsidies. These subsidies reportedly jumped from Rs 20 billion to Rs 118 billion during the period under review.

Similarly, the reported 21 percent growth in the construction sector does not fully align with supporting indicators. While cement production rose by 15.32 percent, imports of transport equipment more than doubled, indicating that construction activity is increasingly dependent on imports rather than on domestic supply chains. Meanwhile, declining cotton output resulted in a 12 percent drop in cotton ginning, while cotton exports fell by around 10 percent. EPBD has also drawn attention to

a reversal in the sugar sector, as Pakistan has shifted from being an exporter to an importer. The services sector growth of 2.35 percent further underscores a slowdown on a quarter-on-quarter basis, reflecting weak demand conditions.

According to EPBD, GDP figures now reveal a widening gap between domestic production and trade performance, raising serious concerns about the quality, credibility and sustainability of the reported economic recovery. The think tank concludes that the government's claim of economic recovery is not grounded in solid fundamentals, as the pace of recovery remains slow due to deep-rooted structural weaknesses in the economy. Rather than manipu-

lating or overstating figures, the government should adopt well-thought-out measures to address these fundamental flaws. The lack of economic dynamism is evident from rising unemployment and poverty levels. Over-taxation and excessive regulation are forcing both domestic and international companies to shift their operations abroad, a danger signal that should not be ignored. EPBD has rightly urged the government to pursue market-oriented and business-friendly policies and to create a stable and supportive environment for private sector activity. Ultimately, only the private sector-led investment and enterprise can deliver long-term, sustainable economic growth driven by industrial dynamism and expanding exports.



by 18.8 percent. As EPBD notes, “If domestic production were genuinely expanding, exports should strengthen rather than collapse.” This suggests that rising imports may be artificially propping up growth figures rather than reflecting real domestic expansion.

EPBD has also questioned the reported 2.89 percent growth in agriculture, pointing out that severe flooding during the middle months of 2025 likely resulted in stagnant or even negative agricultural growth. Contrary to official data showing expansion, important crops declined by 0.75 percent, driven by a 1.2 percent fall in cotton production and the absence of a wheat crop during Q1. These trends clearly point towards overestimation in several agricultural sub-sectors.

Household survey 2024-25: an eye-opener

Nasim Ahmed

The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) has recently released the results of the Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2024-25. This survey is significant as HIES 2024-25 is the first-ever fully digital, countrywide survey conducted after the Digital Population and Housing Census 2023. Field operations for the survey were completed in June 2025, covering a nationally representative sample of 32,000 households across Pakistan.

The survey provides comprehensive and detailed insights into the social and economic conditions of the country and serves as a crucial tool for policymakers, planners and researchers. HIES has been monitoring key socio-economic indicators at both national and provincial levels since 1963. The previous survey was conducted in 2018-19 and provided extensive data on income, consumption and living standards. HIES also plays an important role in tracking Pakistan's progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), covering 31 out of the 62 relevant indicators.

On the positive side, the survey highlights some notable improvements. Literacy has increased by three percentage points, out-of-school children have declined by two percentage points, and the use of clean fuels has risen by three points. Household internet access has surged sharply from 34 percent to 70 percent, while the proportion of individuals using the internet has jumped from 17 percent to 57 percent. Child immunisation has also improved by five percentage points, rising from 68 percent to 73 percent. One of the key findings of the survey is that average monthly household income in Pakistan more than doubled between 2018-19 and 2024-25, increasing from Rs41,545 to Rs82,179. This represents a substantial increase of 97.81 percent and suggests that, in nominal terms, households are earning more than before.

However, this apparent improvement masks a troubling reality. In terms of income distribution, significant inequality persists. In 2024-25, the poorest quintile earned an average of Rs41,851 per month, while the richest quintile earned Rs139,317—nearly three times higher. Inequality is even more pronounced in urban areas, where the richest households earned well above Rs146,920, while the poorest remained below Rs42,412, underscoring the

widening gap between rich and poor.

Over the past six years, average household consumption expenditure increased by a staggering 113 percent. In 2018-19, an average household spent Rs37,159 per month, which rose to Rs79,150 in 2024-25. A closer examination reveals a widening disparity: poor households in the first quintile recorded an increase of 84 percent in consumption expenditure, while rich households in the fifth quintile saw an increase of 131 percent. This clearly demonstrates that consumption growth has been disproportionately skewed in favour of the affluent.

These trends indicate that, despite higher nominal incomes, the average Pakistani household has effectively become poorer and is living a more difficult life. A comparison of HIES 2024-25 income data with 2018-19 prices shows that, in real terms, people are worse off today than they were six years ago. Except for the richest 20 percent of households, all other income groups in both urban and rural areas



have suffered a decline in real incomes. For instance, in 2018-19 the average poorest urban household earned Rs24,365, whereas in 2024-25 the same household earned only Rs18,820 when adjusted to 2018-19 prices. Overall, the average urban citizen became 19 percent poorer, while the average rural citizen became 7 percent poorer during this six-year period.

Rising poverty is directly affecting the daily lives of people, particularly in terms of food consumption. A major share of household income is now being spent on basic food items—36.72 percent—which is slightly higher than in 2018-19. Yet, despite spending more, households are consuming less food than they did six years ago. According to HIES data, per capita consumption has declined across almost all major food items. For example, in 2018-19 the average urban Pakistani consumed 6.12 kilograms of wheat per month, but in 2024-25 this fell to 5.67 kilograms. Per capita consumption of essential food items—including

rice, pulses, milk, mutton, beef, chicken, eggs, potatoes, onions, sugar and tea—has declined in both urban and rural areas. This implies reduced protein intake, lower dairy consumption and diminished dietary diversity, particularly for children, which may result in weaker physical development and lower earning potential in the future.

In simple terms, Pakistanis are spending more but eating less than they were six years ago. Alarmingly, food insecurity has increased from 15.9 percent in 2018-19 to 24.4 percent in 2024-25. Households are also spending less on education than before. Nearly 4 percent of household expenditure was allocated to education in 2018-19, which has declined to around 2.5 percent. Meanwhile, household health expenditure has marginally increased from 3.22 percent to 3.34 percent, largely reflecting rising medicine and healthcare costs.

HIES 2024-25 clearly demonstrates that macroeconomic stability is not translating into improved living standards for the average

Pakistani. The harsh reality is that macroeconomic stability has largely been achieved by impoverishing households through high direct and indirect taxes and exorbitant utility bills. The survey's findings indicate that the household economy is under severe strain. It is particularly concerning that the average number of earners per household declined from 1.86 to 1.72 between 2018-19 and 2024-

25. In urban areas, the figure fell from 1.75 to 1.62, while in rural areas it declined from 1.92 to 1.78. Punjab was the worst affected province in this regard, with earners per household dropping sharply from 1.63 to 1.34. At the same time, the share of salaried employees rose from 54.80 percent to 60.10 percent, while self-employment declined from 24.70 percent to 21.75 percent, indicating shrinking opportunities for independent livelihoods.

The findings of HIES 2024-25 should serve as a serious wake-up call for policymakers and rulers. Mere sloganising about macroeconomic stability is meaningless when the average Pakistani is poorer today and consuming less food than five years ago. This silent crisis is steadily building and carries the seeds of a potential future social explosion. The government must act before it is too late by formulating genuinely pro-poor policies instead of continuing to mollycoddle the rich and privileged segments of society.

Low oil prices, missed opportunities

Muhammad Ali

The energy sector in Pakistan has turned into a real tangle of circular debts, pricing distortions, and political expediency — and the latest moves around the petroleum levy (PL) are just the newest chapter in a very familiar story.

A few months back, the government tried to tackle the power sector's circular debt, which had ballooned to over Rs2.5 trillion, by slapping a hefty surcharge on captive gas users. That didn't raise enough money, so they turned to the PL on petrol and diesel, jacking it up to help cover power subsidies. Meanwhile, the gas sector's own circular debt kept climbing — it has now officially crossed Rs3 trillion, including late-payment surcharges — and the government is quietly backing away from any meaningful increase in gas tariffs for domestic consumers.

Instead, the plan is to raise the PL even further to plug the gas pricing gap and related costs. Officially, the levy is sold as a way to clear both power and gas circular debts, and sometimes it's even justified as funding road projects in Balochistan. But let's be honest: it's only a matter of time before someone comes up with another "noble" reason to push the PL higher still. The real driver is simple — the federal government needs the cash, and the PL is the easiest, most controllable way to get it.

Right now, international oil prices are sitting comfortably below \$60 a barrel, giving the government a golden window to hike the levy without immediately pushing pump prices through the roof. Public anger stays manageable, and the federal exchequer gets the money. It's no coincidence that GST on petroleum products is currently zero (meaning provinces get nothing from it), while the PL is around Rs80 per litre — with room to go up to Rs100. Under the NFC award, provinces take roughly 57.5% of GST proceeds, but the PL is 100% federal. That's why the government has zeroed out GST and piled everything onto the PL — it keeps the revenue entirely in Islamabad's pocket.

The same logic applies to gas pricing. Any increase in consumer gas tariffs would flow partly to gas companies (to cover their losses) and partly to the provinces (through the gas development surcharge and royalties). But the political heat for higher bills would fall

squarely on the federal government. So rather than face that backlash, the Centre prefers to keep gas prices artificially low for domestic users and shift the burden onto petroleum consumers through a higher PL. In effect, people filling their cars and running generators are being asked to subsidise households that use piped gas.

This is classic policy distortion. There are only about 10 million registered gas consumers in the country, while petroleum products power virtually every vehicle, generator, and industrial engine — a vastly larger base. Why should a relatively small group of gas users be shielded at the expense of everyone else? Why should gas companies' balance sheets keep de-

heavy lifting, and call it "reform" to keep the IMF happy.

True reform would mean passing on the real cost of gas to consumers, with targeted subsidies for the poorest, ending the cross-subsidy from petroleum users, and letting gas companies recover their legitimate costs so they stop bleeding cash. That would reduce wasteful usage, improve efficiency, and gradually shrink the circular debt. But it would also require the government to take responsibility for the political fallout — and that's precisely what it's avoiding.

As long as we keep relying on these patchwork, ad hoc fixes — higher PL here, zero GST there, another surcharge somewhere



teriorating while the government pretends the problem can be solved by tweaking petroleum prices? And why does the Centre keep using these indirect, regressive levies instead of taking the tougher but more honest step of letting gas prices reflect actual costs?

The answer, unfortunately, is politics. Raising gas tariffs would hit millions of households directly, especially in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where gas is used for cooking and heating. That's a tough sell in an election year or when public sentiment is already fragile. So the government opts for the politically softer option: keep gas cheap, let the PL do the

else — the underlying problems will only get worse. Circular debt will keep growing, policy will remain inconsistent, and consumers will continue to bear the cost of inefficiencies they didn't create.

The current low oil-price environment is actually a rare chance to do things properly: align prices with costs, phase out distortions, and start building a sustainable energy pricing framework. But if we just use it as another opportunity to raise the PL and kick the can down the road, we'll be right back here in a year or two, with even bigger debts and the same tired excuses.

From crisis to control: Pakistan's economy shows signs of life

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economy right now feels like it's finally catching its breath after a long, bruising few years. Things aren't perfect, but there's a real sense that the worst of the storm might be behind us.

The latest World Economic Situation and Prospects 2026 report from the United Nations is actually sounding a bit hopeful about Pakistan — forecasting 3.5% growth for 2026. That number isn't coming out of thin air; it's built on the fact that the IMF program is still being followed (even if grudgingly sometimes), economic management has become noticeably more serious, and — perhaps most importantly — we're starting to see recovery spread across different parts of the economy instead of being limited to just a few bright spots.

The UN experts don't sugarcoat it though. They describe the mood as "cautiously optimistic" — which is probably the most diplomatic way of saying "things are looking better... but please don't jinx it." They give credit where it's due: recent policy moves and the harder structural reforms have managed to restore at least some trust. People are seeing better control over the budget, the external account isn't bleeding as badly, and inflation isn't running completely wild anymore. Still, they're quick to add the reality check — Pakistan is still quite exposed. Another major flood, a sudden jump in global oil prices, political instability... any of these could knock the wind out of the sails pretty fast.

The most heartening part in the whole report is probably the external account turnaround. After years of living with one chronic current account deficit after another, Pakistan actually posted a surplus in FY25. Imports got disciplined, exports finally showed some life, remittances stayed strong (thank God for the overseas Pakistanis), and the overall macro grip tightened. That one change took an enormous amount of pressure off the rupee and let the State Bank start slowly rebuilding its foreign exchange reserves — something that had looked almost impossible just two years ago.

Fiscal performance has also surprised on the upside. The government actually beat its primary balance target in FY25 — something many people (including some inside the bureaucracy) didn't expect. Better tax collection,

fewer wasteful subsidies, tighter control over spending — all of it added up. None of this was painless. A lot of people felt it in their monthly budgets. But the numbers are starting to show that the bitter medicine is having an effect.

Inflation, which had become absolutely brutal for ordinary families, is no longer in the stratosphere. Food and energy prices still hurt, no question, but the crazy double-digit spikes we saw earlier have cooled off quite a bit. The central bank's tough stance on interest rates, somewhat steadier supplies, and a less panicked exchange rate have all helped. For the first time in a long while, people can at least plan their expenses without feeling like the ground is shifting under them every month.

And then there's the early data from this fiscal year that really makes you sit up. In

consuming more or the government throwing money around temporarily.

That industrial pickup matters a lot for jobs and exports down the road. More factory activity usually means more employment, more local value addition, and — slowly — less dependence on imported stuff. But everyone knows it's fragile. One serious power breakdown, one sudden policy U-turn, one external shock... and the momentum can disappear very quickly.

The report doesn't pretend everything is rosy. It repeatedly warns about climate vulnerability — the 2025 floods are still fresh in everyone's mind. One big disaster can wipe out agricultural output, wreck roads and bridges, drain the budget on emergency relief, and push millions more people into poverty. Without much stronger preparation and resilience, climate change could easily become the single biggest threat to whatever progress is being made.

There's also no escaping the difficult human cost of the adjustment. Removing energy subsidies, raising taxes, squeezing expenditures — these things hit ordinary households and small businesses hard. Food inflation is still the number one complaint you hear in markets across the country. The UN quietly points out that macroeconomic stability is essential... but so is protecting the most vulnerable people while the tough reforms are being carried out.

Looking ahead, if Pakistan can hold on to the stronger start it's had in FY26, there's a realistic chance of building something more durable. But the risks are still everywhere: inflation could flare up again, global interest rates or commodity prices could move against us, and external financing needs remain uncomfortably large.

In the end, the UN's message feels like a realistic pat on the back: "You're doing better — genuinely better — than you were. But this is still a very long road, and you're walking it with a limp. Keep the discipline, protect the poorest, invest in people and resilience, and maybe — just maybe — the next few years could start to feel different."

That's probably as close to encouragement as you're going to get from a UN report these days. And honestly, after the last few years, even cautious optimism feels like progress.



the first quarter of FY26, the economy grew 3.71% — more than double the 1.8% it managed in the same quarter last year. That's not just a statistical bounce; it's the first clear sign that momentum might actually be shifting.

Even more encouraging is what's happening inside factories. Large-scale manufacturing jumped 9.38% in that same quarter — compared to basically zero growth (0.12%) the year before. That's huge. Better power supply, slightly less crazy input costs, and — perhaps most importantly — businessmen starting to believe the government might actually stick to its plans... all of this seems to have woken the industrial sector from its long sleep. The UN called it a "qualitative change" in the nature of growth — basically saying that this time the growth is coming from real production, not just people

Signs of a turnaround, shadows of old fault lines

Husnain Shahid

The Ministry of Finance's latest Monthly Economic Update & Outlook paints a pretty encouraging picture of Pakistan's economy right now — moderating inflation, better fiscal numbers, and that 3.7 percent quarterly GDP growth in Q1 FY26, driven by what they call a broad-based pickup across agriculture, industry, and services.

On the surface, it really does feel like things are finally turning a corner after years of rough patches. But when you dig a little deeper into the actual data and the context, the story gets more complicated and a lot more cautious.

Let's start with agriculture, which the report highlights as showing resilience with 2.89 percent growth in Q1 FY26. That sounds solid, especially considering the 2025 floods hit crops hard — the government itself has pointed to those as causing major damage. Yet official figures from the State Bank and Federal Committee on Agriculture show several key kharif crops underperforming compared to last year. On top of that, DAP fertilizer offtake dropped sharply (over 16 percent year-on-year in some reports), which farmers usually cut back on when margins are squeezed, cash is tight, or risks feel high — not exactly a sign of booming confidence in yields.

Livestock is another puzzle: the national accounts claim 6.3 percent growth there, but prices for beef, mutton, and fresh milk have shot up much faster than the overall food basket over the past couple of years. With household budgets still stretched, that kind of price surge often points more to supply tightness than robust output. So, reconciling flood damage, falling fertilizer use, and sticky high livestock prices with 'broad-based strength' in agriculture feels like a stretch.

Industry gets the same upbeat treatment, with reported growth of 9.38 percent in Q1, boosted by large-scale manufacturing (LSM). The rebound is real — no denying that — but a big part of it comes from a very low base after heavy contractions in previous years. As import curbs have eased and inventories have normalized, output naturally bounces back; it's more of a mechanical recovery than proof of

deep structural change. Then there's electricity, gas, and water supply showing over 20 percent growth in the GDP accounts, which sits awkwardly next to ongoing tariff hikes squeezing demand, affordability issues for households and businesses, circular debt headaches, and pretty flat overall consumption trends in the power sector.

Services follow a similar script. Finance and insurance supposedly grew over 10 percent, but private sector credit has been mostly flat since early 2025, advance-deposit ratios are near historic lows, and banks are still leaning heavily on State Bank borrowing in open market operations just to park money in government papers. Real expansion in financial services usually shows up in stronger lending to the private sector, more long-term credit, and wider product reach — those signals just aren't there yet in the numbers.

On inflation, the headline CPI has definitely come down (hitting around 5.6



percent in December 2025, a big drop from last year's peaks), which is welcome news. But the ministry's update doesn't dwell much on core inflation — the stickier, underlying measure that strips out volatile food and energy. Non-food non-energy (NFNE) core inflation is still hanging around 7-8 percent in both urban and rural areas as of late 2025, well above the State Bank's medium-term target of 5-7 percent. Most of the headline drop so far has come from base effects (last year's high numbers dropping out) and earlier relief in food/energy prices. As those base effects fade in 2026, persistently high core suggests underlying price pressures haven't fully cooled. For everyday families, that means costs for things like milk, meat, education, health, and other services stay stubborn — the stuff that really hits monthly budgets. True price stability

won't feel real until core settles durably in target range.

Fiscal-wise, the consolidated accounts show a surplus in Q1 FY26 (around 1-1.6 percent of GDP depending on the exact framing), which looks impressive on paper. But zoom in, and a lot of it comes from one-off or exceptional items: massive profit transfers from the State Bank, higher petroleum levy collections, and provincial cash surpluses. Tax revenue growth has been there, but nothing dramatic in terms of broadening the base or deep structural changes. On the spending side, interest costs remain high, development outlays are still subdued, and things like pensions, subsidies, and bleeding public enterprises haven't seen major fixes. So the improvement is real year-on-year, but it's more about IMF discipline and windfalls than a fundamental shift toward sustainable fiscal health.

For the past few years, the big line has been stabilization first — absolutely necessary

when default was staring us in the face. But stabilization alone isn't enough; it can't be the finish line. The government isn't wrong to avoid reckless spending to force growth, but the focus does need to shift gradually toward fixing the deep-rooted issues that keep recoveries so fragile: widening the tax net properly, sorting out loss-making state-owned enterprises, rationalizing subsidies smartly, boosting energy and regulatory efficiency, and creating space for real private investment and productivity gains.

The Monthly Economic Update naturally reflects the Finance Ministry's view — it's their job to highlight the positives in monthly data. But it could be even more helpful if it went beyond reporting the numbers and laid out, plainly and consistently, the concrete steps being taken (or planned) to tackle those structural bottlenecks. That would move the national conversation from "look how much better the headline is" to "here's how we're building something that lasts."

The numbers are heading in the right direction — that's progress, no question. But turning stabilization into genuine, durable growth will depend on real movement on those big, tough reforms, not just monthly commentary on food prices or quarterly bounces. That's the real test ahead.

Violence, leadership vacuum and the quest for peace

Raza Khan

The use of force and violence is increasingly becoming a defining feature of our national and social life. Why this phenomenon has taken such deep roots is not an easy question to answer. One important aspect of violence and conflict in Pakistani society is that the basic structure of society remains authoritarian, patriarchal and tribal in nature. In such a social order, violence and conflict emerge as almost natural outcomes of everyday social interactions and relationships.

In a society where values are largely non-democratic, peace cannot realistically be pursued as a cherished value or collective goal. Instead, all those tools, mechanisms and institutions that can be used to coerce opponents into submission or force them to concede to one's demands are often valued and celebrated.

In those areas where peace in Pakistani society has prevailed, it has largely been a form of 'negative' peace, meaning merely the cessation or absence of open hostilities. Such peace has mostly been the result of a fragile 'balance of terror' among individuals, groups and communities. People have refrained from using violence against one another primarily out of fear that they would be met with equally violent retaliation by their rivals. However, peace that is achieved through a balance of terror is inherently unstable and unsustainable, particularly within a complex societal context. While in the arena of international politics the balance of terror—created through the development of nuclear weapons by rival superpowers such as the United States and the former USSR, as well as regional rivals like Pakistan and India—has proven relatively sustainable, its application within society yields very different results. In Pakistan, where the social structure is authoritarian and chronically conflict-prone, the balance of terror only produces an uneasy, brittle and fragile peace.

On the other hand, 'positive' peace—defined as the creation of social, political and economic conditions that eliminate the root causes of violence—has not been a defining feature of peace in Pakistani society. Only a conscious, democratic, politically engaged, educated and aware society can reasonably be expected to sustain positive peace. Unfortunately, these essential conditions do not currently exist within society and must therefore be consciously created from without. Since transforming society and its

people into conscious, democratic, political and educated actors is a gradual and long-term process, the attainment of positive peace inevitably requires considerable time and sustained effort. Nonetheless, it largely depends on the state and societal leadership how effectively they go about creating the necessary conditions for positive peace. If the vision is clear and policy priorities are correctly aligned rather than misplaced, achieving positive peace across society and the country is not an insurmountable task. In fact, the process can be significantly accelerated through clarity of vision and coherent policies. However, for such a vision and policies to exist, there is an acute need for genuine and capable leadership.

True leadership is that which possesses the necessary qualifications, abilities and skills to understand the dynamics and nature of violence and conflict, comprehend the magnitude and consequences of violence, and demonstrate the courage and conviction required to address the sources and driving forces of conflict. Such leadership generally emerges through two principal pathways.

The first pathway involves an objective and subjective realization within society and among its members that the prevailing situation has become intolerable and that the existing leadership lacks the capacity to respond effectively. This realization triggers a process within society to identify and seek alternative leadership, whether in the form of individuals or organized groups. At this stage, potential and conscientious leaders also step forward into the public sphere, and society gradually accepts them as credible agents of change and, in some cases, as its saviours.

The second pathway through which true leadership emerges is when circumstances themselves give birth to such leadership. In this scenario, there is little or no objective and subjective realization within society that the appalling situation is the result of a leadership vacuum. Consequently, there is minimal effort by society to search for alternative leadership. However, perceptive and responsible potential leaders, recognizing the gravity of the situation and the urgent need for direction, choose to step forward without waiting for public cues or invitations. They assume leadership proactively and attempt to guide society out of crisis.

Insofar as Pakistan is concerned, society and its members have been extensively and profoundly affected by violence at

multiple levels. There exists a subjective realization regarding the leadership vacuum and the need for new leadership. However, there is a glaring absence of objective or collective realization at the societal level. As a result, there is little organized or collective response aimed at ending violence. Although certain potential leaders have emerged, they have so far been unable to organize themselves effectively or mobilize society to respond meaningfully to the deteriorating situation. Consequently, violence has continued to spiral, proliferate and permeate every level of social interaction—whether domestic, communal or national.

True modern leadership in Pakistan—leadership that is fully aware of contemporary societal issues and understands viable and sustainable solutions—has failed to emerge due to a host of structural and historical factors. Foremost among these is the ultraconservative nature of society, where traditional figures of authority such as nawabs, khans, chaudhris and waderas have historically dominated leadership roles. Such figures are rarely democratic in outlook and do not attain authority through institutionalized or merit-based processes. As a result, their perspectives have often been narrow and short-sighted. Consequently, they have been unable to effectively address conflict and violence within their respective spheres of influence. While they may have managed conflicts through various tactics and manoeuvres, they have failed to prevent large-scale violence or address the structural causes underpinning it. As a result, conflicts have persisted, multiplied and intensified, producing ever-increasing levels of violence.

As Pakistani society has grown more complex due to rapid population growth, rising levels of education and the widespread availability of mass communication—particularly social media—traditional leaders and authority figures increasingly find themselves ill-equipped to address the multitude of emerging issues. The escalating violence within society, in particular, is a challenge that traditional leadership, with its outdated and repetitive approaches, is incapable of resolving. What Pakistan urgently requires is a new breed of leaders—truly educated individuals with strong academic and research backgrounds, extensive exposure to diverse cultures, and a deep understanding of the historical and social context of violence in Pakistan, along with the competence to devise and implement viable solutions.

Agriculture: Pakistan should learn from global leaders

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Pakistan, with its significant reliance on agriculture, faces the challenge of lagging behind its neighboring countries and other global leaders in agricultural production. While agriculture contributes a substantial portion to the national economy, the country has much to learn from nations such as India, Russia, France, Mexico, Japan, and Germany, which excel in various aspects of agriculture. By adopting modern techniques, implementing long-term policies, and drawing inspiration from successful agricultural nations, Pakistan can strive to secure a position among the top agricultural producing countries.

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in Pakistan's economy, being the largest sector and a major source of livelihood for the majority of the population. It contributes around 24 percent to the country's GDP and employs half of the labor force, while also serving as the primary source of foreign exchange earnings. Despite its significance, the condition of farmers in Pakistan remains dire, with their quality of life largely unchanged over the past seven decades. Wheat, cotton, rice, sugarcane, and maize are some of the important crops grown in the country.

It is disheartening to note that Pakistan, despite possessing fertile land and an extensive irrigation network, does not rank among the top 10 agricultural producing nations globally. China, on the other hand, leads the list as an agricultural powerhouse. With just 7 percent of arable land, China manages to feed 22 percent of the world's population. In the 20th century, China faced challenges in meeting its food demands, but advancements in farming policies and technologies enabled it to achieve self-sufficiency.

Surprisingly, Pakistan's arable land area, as reported by the World Bank in 2020, stands at a significant 40.12 percent, compared to China's 7 percent. This stark contrast raises questions for policymakers in Pakistan, as the country struggles to feed its own population, let alone export agricultural products. It is worth noting that China utilizes its land extensively for agriculture, even planting vegetables on roadsides and building walls. In the past, China lost one-fifth of its arable land, and currently only 10 to 15 percent of its land is suitable for agriculture. Despite these challenges, China remains the largest producer of rice and also cultivates soybeans, kaoliang (sorghum), wheat, millet, and corn.

The United States holds the second position among the world's top agricultural producers and is renowned for its advancements in agricultural science and technology. It serves as a role model for many countries in the agriculture

sector, constantly developing through scientific soil and crop analysis, innovative machinery, and increased use of computers. Although Pakistan has a longstanding association with the US, it has failed to make significant efforts to import agricultural technology from its American counterparts. Brazil secures the third spot on the list of leading agricultural countries and has a rich historical background in agriculture. Approximately 41 percent of Brazil's total land is arable, with a vast agricultural area spanning 867.4 million acres out of a total landmass of 2.1 billion acres. Sugarcane has been a priority crop for Brazil, with an annual production exceeding 600 million tonnes. Pakistan can learn valuable lessons from Brazil's successful sugarcane cultivation, as well as its expertise in soybean production, which the country exports worldwide.

In conclusion, despite its significant contribution to the national economy and livelihoods, Pakistan's agricultural sector faces numerous challenges. The country has vast arable land resources, but it lags behind in agricultural productivity compared to top-performing nations like China, the United States, and Brazil. To improve the situation, Pakistan must invest in advanced agricultural technologies, learn from successful models, and adopt modern farming practices. By doing so, it can enhance its agricultural output, improve the lives of farmers, and meet the growing demands of its population.

India, Pakistan's neighboring country, outshines it in agricultural production. Agriculture provides livelihood to around 58% of Indians, making it their primary source of income. In recent data, agriculture contributes 17% to 18% of India's GDP. India holds the title of being the largest producer of various fruits such as bananas, guava, mangoes, lemons, and papayas. It also excels in vegetable production, including chickpeas. Additionally, India is known for its production of spices like ginger, pepper, and chili. Furthermore, it holds the distinction of being the world's largest wheat-producing country. Given the similarities in the agriculture sector between the two countries, Pakistan can learn from its neighbor's best practices to increase crop production.

Russia secures the fifth spot on the list of top agricultural producing countries. Approximately 13% of its agricultural land is used for cultivating sugar beets, wheat, and potatoes. The primary crops in Russia are rye, barley, oats, and maize. Despite its focus on the industrial economy, Russia boasts a significant agriculture industry, occupying around 6% of its total GDP and providing employment opportunities to 16% of the population. Although France gained recognition as an industrial power, it remains prominent

as an agricultural nation. With approximately 730,000 farms, agriculture, fishing, and forestry sectors support about 7% of the population.

Agricultural activities, including the production of agricultural goods, engage a substantial portion of the French population. Mexico, known for its rich culture, ancient ruins, and stunning beaches, ranks seventh among the top 10 agricultural producing countries. Historically, Mexico has been a producer of avocados, beans, tomatoes, peppers, maize, and more. The country also has a significant presence in agricultural exports. Crop production is a major feature of Mexican agriculture, accounting for a significant portion of its agricultural output.

While Japan is recognized for its technological advancements, it is also the eighth-ranked agricultural nation. Around 10% of the Japanese population resides on farms, supporting the country's traditional food culture centered around rice, grains, fish, vegetables, and mountain plants.

Germany holds the ninth position among the top agrarian countries, excelling in the production of pork, poultry, potatoes, milk, cereals, beef, sugar beets, cabbages, barley, and wheat. Additionally, Germany cultivates vegetables, fruits, and wine in many regions. Forestry and agriculture occupy approximately 80% of the country's land, and around 87% of the population engages in farming activities on an average of 124 acres of land. Despite experiencing frequent earthquakes, agriculture remains Turkey's primary occupation. While industries and service sectors continue to grow, farming remains a major occupation in the country. Turkey is self-sufficient in food production due to favorable climate conditions, fertile soil, and significant rainfall that support the cultivation of various crops. Poultry farming is also prevalent in mountainous regions. Wheat takes the lead as the most produced grain in Turkey, followed by sugar beets, milk, and cows.

To overcome its agricultural limitations and join the ranks of the world's leading agricultural nations, Pakistan must embrace innovation, modern technology, and best practices. Learning from countries like India, Russia, France, Mexico, Japan, and Germany can provide valuable insights and strategies for improving crop yields, diversifying agricultural produce, and optimizing farming techniques. With a well-planned and sustained approach, Pakistan has the potential to enhance its agricultural sector, contribute significantly to its GDP, provide livelihood opportunities, and ensure food security for its growing population. By embracing change and implementing effective policies, Pakistan can forge a path towards becoming a prominent player in global agricultural production.

Integration of armed factions remains one of Syria's biggest challenges

Charles Lister

When Syria's civil conflict ended in December 2024 with the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, hundreds of thousands of citizens were still bearing arms. Throughout the nearly 14 years of war, armed factions proliferated: from the broad spectrum of armed opposition factions in the northwest and the regime's array of military and militia forces in central and western Syria, to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast and a complex network of militias throughout the south, and not to forget the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

In this context, the task of demilitarising society and reunifying the country has posed a truly formidable challenge for Syria's transitional authority. Indeed, the process of disarming, demobilising, and reintegrating armed groups while simultaneously establishing new armed forces and a reformed security sector stands at the core of Syria's transitional state building project. Days of heavy conflict between government forces and the SDF in Aleppo this past week highlighted the consequences of a failure to resolve the integration challenge. As a first step in December 2024, the al-Assad regime's armed forces were swiftly dissolved and a process of status settlement was initiated, whereby all previous soldiers – both officers and conscripts – could register using their national ID and apply for release to civilian life or to re-enlist in the new army.

Thousands of men chose to undertake this settlement process across the country, to clear their names and start life anew. But thousands of others abstained, especially in the coastal region, where the Alawite minority dominates. While many of those who avoided the process melted back into rural communities, hundreds ended up forming anti-government factions that conducted low-level attacks on government forces, culminating in a huge coordinated campaign on March 6 that killed more than 100 government personnel – triggering a chaotic and brutal week of violence that left more than 1,000 people dead. In the months since, several thousand former regime personnel have undergone training and joined Syria's new security forces across the country. Nevertheless, the fighting persists, due in part to financial support from prominent

al-Assad regime figures now in exile in neighbouring Lebanon, as well as in Russia.

That continues to undermine Syria's ability to heal ties with Lebanon and Russia, but also complicates the geopolitical standing of such countries among the wider region, which has stood squarely behind the new government in Damascus in the hope of transforming Syria into a base of stability and prosperity.

Meanwhile, Syria's transitional government is also seeking to rebuild the Ministry of Defence (MOD) with an army, navy and air force and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) with provincial public security directorates, and dedicated "counterterrorism", counternarcotics and cyber forces.

In this transitional phase, the MOD has emerged as the umbrella under which the broad spectrum of opposition armed factions have folded. While all former opposition groups have

improvements in some of the most challenging environments.

In fact, Syria's coastal region has transformed from being the most consistently dangerous and deadly region of the country in the first half of 2025 to the most stable and least violent region at the end of the year – even with a low-level rebellion continuing. That is almost entirely due to the MOI's assumption of security responsibility, and a months-long effort to engage and build trust with local communities. The most strategically significant challenge Syria's transition faces today is from its unresolved territorial issues in the northeast with the Kurdish-dominated SDF and in the southern Druze-majority governorate of Suwayda. In both regions, armed groups are presenting themselves as alternatives to Damascus's rule – and both are resulting in persistent tensions and conflict.

It is in Suwayda where geopolitics have proven to be most acute – with Israel's backing of Druze authorities presenting a direct challenge not just to Syria's transition, but to Jordanian security, to regional support for Damascus, and to the desire of US President Donald Trump's administration to see Syria's new government assume nationwide control.

The de facto Druze leader in Suwayda, Hikmat al-Hijri, is also in regular contact with SDF leaders in northeast Syria, with both sides appearing at times to be coordinating their positions vis-a-vis Damascus.

Alawite figures on the coast,

meanwhile, including protest leader Ghazal Ghazal, have also been in communication with both the SDF and al-Hijri in an attempt to unite behind a political vision that stands in opposition to Damascus.

Ultimately, Syria's process of resolving the challenges of armed factions is intrinsically political and tied both to the civil war and to the tensions and challenges that have emerged out of the transition itself. The fact that a vast majority of the international community has united in support of Syria's transitional government has helped to provide the time and space for dissolving and integrating armed factions and fighters across the country. However, as long as geopolitical challenges to the transition remain, the process of integration will remain incomplete and continue to be a source of instability.



technically dissolved, some remain largely in form, constituting the army's nearly 20 divisions. Those factions with longstanding ties to Turkey – particularly from the northern Aleppo-based Syrian National Army (SNA) – appear to have benefitted from greater levels of military support and arms supplies than others previously based in Idlib. Some have leaders with controversial pasts, including outstanding international sanctions designations for violent crimes and corruption.

Unlike the MOD's divisions, the MOI's forces are dominated by newly recruited men from across the country. While the MOI's specialist units remain dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) personnel, the relative lack of previous factional affiliations in the broader public security forces has led to significant

Trump is right. Europe is in crisis

Zeljko Jovanovic

After years of public criticism directed at Europe, US President Donald Trump put together a National Security Strategy (NSS) that reflected his twisted perceptions. Still, it is one thing to hear his stage rhetoric and another to see his worldview codified in official doctrine. Its core claim: Europe will be “unrecognisable in 20 years” due to “civilisational erasure” unless the United States, “sentimentally attached” to the continent, steps in to restore its “former greatness”.

Trump is right, Europe has problems. But they are not what he claims. Decades of underinvestment in people, persistent political incentives to ignore excluded communities and a reluctance to confront how demographic and economic decline interact, go unaddressed. Political leaders largely avoid this conversation. Some deny these problems, others concede them privately while publicly debating symptoms but not addressing the root causes.

A clearer perspective can be found among those who live with these failures. Across Europe, millions in the working class struggle to survive amid shuttered factories, underfunded schools, unaffordable housing and broken public services. Among them, the Roma sharpen the picture. As Europe’s largest and most dispossessed minority, their experience exposes the continent’s choice to treat entire populations as collateral damage. When Trump presses on Europe’s wounds, these communities confirm where it hurts.

The NSS argues that Europe’s “lack of self-confidence” is most visible in its relationship with Russia. Yes, Europe’s paralysis towards Moscow contrasts with its aggression towards weaker groups at home. This reflects the lack of confidence in European values.

Trump is right. We’re weak. If we were strong, we would stand up for European values of democracy and pluralism. We would not demonise our minorities. But we do. Across the continent, Roma communities face racist policies. In Slovenia, following a bar fight that spiralled into public hysteria, the national legislature passed a law in November to securitise Roma neighbourhoods.

In Portugal, Andre Ventura of the far-right Chega party put up posters saying “G****es have to obey the law” as part of his presidential campaign. In Italy, far-right politician Matteo Salvini built an entire political brand on anti-Roma paranoia. In Greece, the police shoot at Roma youth for minor crimes.

Leaders over-securitise the Roma while overcompensating for their caution towards Russia. The NSS also highlights Europe’s declining share of global gross domestic product, from 25 percent in 1990 to 14 percent today. Regulations play a part, so does demographic decline, but the deeper problem is Europe’s failure to invest in all its people.

Get instant alerts and updates based on your interests. Be the first to know when big stories happen. Twelve million Roma, the youngest population in Europe, remain locked



out of education, employment and entrepreneurship through structural barriers and discrimination, even though surveys show their overwhelming willingness to contribute to the societies they live in and their high success rates when they run businesses that receive support.

If Roma employment in Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria – where their unemployment rates are currently 25 percentage points above those of the majority population – matched national averages, the combined GDP gain could be as much as 10 billion euros (\$11.6bn). In a continent losing two million workers a year, letting this labour potential go unused is self-sabotage.

Trump is right about Europe’s declining share of GDP. If Europe were serious, it would not believe it can leave Roma people on the

scrap heap. The NSS further warns of “subversion of democratic processes”, and while he is not talking about minorities, it is true that Europe does fall short. Proportionally, according to our estimates at the Roma Foundation, they should hold over 400 seats.

The European Parliament includes seats for Malta and Luxembourg, states with populations of 570,000 and 680,000, respectively; yet, it does not include any seats for the Roma community. Trump is right that we have a democratic deficit. But it’s not because of laws against hate speech and constitutional barriers to the far right. The most pressing deficit is that 12 million Roma are not represented.

A continent that wastes its population cannot be competitive, and one that suppresses parts of its electorate cannot claim to be representative. Political exclusion reduces voter turnout and registration rates, leading to systematically underrepresentative institutions, while economic exclusion makes communities easier targets for vote-buying, coercion and political capture.

Trump’s proposed solution for Europe’s crisis would not resolve anything. He seems to assume that far-right pseudo-sovereignists, opposed to immigration and minorities alike, can reverse Europe’s decline.

The evidence suggests otherwise. Countries where xenophobia influences policy have not performed well. In the United Kingdom, where the far right drove a campaign to leave the European Union over fears of migration, experts have calculated that GDP is 6-8 percent lower than it would have been without Brexit. In Hungary, where the government of Viktor Orban has enacted various anti-migrant and discriminatory policies, there is stagnant economic growth, a high budget deficit and frozen EU funds. Exclusion weakens economies and makes democracies vulnerable.

Empowering the ideological heirs of forces that the United States once helped Europe defeat would not aid the continent’s recovery. In fact, this “restoration” to power of extremist right-wing ideology would deepen Europe’s dependence on Washington, then Moscow.

It is also true that Europe cannot survive global realpolitik, leaning on liberal nostalgia, multilateral summits or rhetorical commitments, either.

Israel's ban on NGOs operating in Gaza will be devastating

Yousef M Aljamal

I work for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organisation that has been present in Gaza for more than 77 years. AFSC began its work in 1948 when the United Nations asked it to organise relief efforts for Palestinian refugees who had been expelled from their land by Zionist forces.

For two years, AFSC's Gaza staff helped set up and run 10 refugee camps in al-Faluja, Bureij, Deir el-Balah, Gaza City, Jabalia, Maghazi, Nuseirat, Khan Younis and Rafah. They worked to provide food, shelter and sanitation as well as setting up educational programmes for children.

In the decades that followed, AFSC's programmes have provided support for agricultural development, kindergartens, midwife training, humanitarian aid and trauma healing. Since the start of Israel's genocide in 2023, AFSC staff members in Gaza have provided more than a million meals, food parcels, fresh vegetables, hygiene kits and other essential supplies.

Now, for the first time since 1948, AFSC along with dozens of other international organisations is threatened with a ban from the Israeli government that puts life-saving humanitarian work in jeopardy. This would have a devastating effect on the people of Gaza. And it cannot come at a worse time.

The mass killing in Gaza has not stopped. Despite a ceasefire, Israeli forces are carrying out ongoing raids, air strikes and large-scale demolitions across Gaza. Since the ceasefire began on October 10, these attacks have killed more than 420 Palestinians and injured more than 1,150. And it is not just the bombs. Floods in Gaza have destroyed tens of thousands of tents while badly damaged homes continue to collapse on residents. The absence of medicines and proper healthcare is killing people as well; about 600 kidney disease patients have died as a result of lack of treatment.

Meanwhile, Israel continues to prevent temporary shelters, medicines and other desperately needed supplies from entering. These actions have reinforced a longstanding Israeli policy aimed at depopulating Gaza and annexing the land. Israel's prohibitively restrictive

new registration policies and efforts to prohibit or limit international aid are part of this effort. Silencing independent humanitarian voices and dismantling humanitarian infrastructure serve to create conditions on the ground that make life in Gaza impossible. Gaza cannot recover or thrive without comprehensive reconstruction that restores its health system, education sector and critical infrastructure.

I first learned about the history of AFSC from my friend Ahmad Alhaaj, who benefitted from its work when he was a young refugee in 1948. Ahmad passed away in Gaza City in January 2024. It is heartbreaking that he lived his entire life as a refugee, recounting stories of Israel's 1948 massacres, only to spend his final days enduring a genocide. He died under siege and bombardment, ultimately losing his life

many Palestinians who chose Gaza, even under fire. It is a devotion to a place that defies siege, displacement and death. Ahmad's love reminds me of the dedication of my mentor and friend Refaat Alareer, who became Gaza's great storyteller, giving voice to its people and its pain. On December 6, 2023, Israel killed Refaat along with his brother, sister and nephews in a targeted strike on his apartment.

Like Ahmad, Refaat paid for this love – this unbreakable connection to land and memory – with his life. His poem *If I Must Die* has become a testament to this love and to an enduring hope – a message that has travelled beyond Gaza and transformed into a global story. Born of siege and resistance, the poem carries Gaza's humanity to the world, insisting on life, memory and dignity even in the face of death.

In 1948, the Greater Gaza District was home to 34 villages. One of them was Ahmad's. For our grandparents, Gaza was understood as something far larger than the narrow strip it later became. Their sense of place was expansive, rooted in villages, fields and continuous geography.

Our parents, however, witnessed Gaza steadily shrink. What had once been one of the largest districts in historic Palestine was reduced in 1948 to roughly



because essential medicines were unavailable.

The story of Ahmad in Gaza in 2024 is tragically similar to his story in 1948. Then, he was 16 years old, a barefoot refugee following evacuation orders to Gaza from his village of al-Sawafir. What changed were the years; what did not was the condition of dispossession, displacement and abandonment.

But Ahmad's story is not just about displacement. Ahmad's story is a story of love – love for his village. He lived his entire life in Gaza as a refugee in a rented house, refusing to own a home so he would never forget his village or the house his parents were forced to leave behind. For Ahmad, ownership elsewhere risked erasing memory; remaining a renter was an act of fidelity.

This same love has been embodied by

555sq km (215sq miles). It later shrank further, to about 365sq km (140sq miles) after Israel established a so-called demilitarised zone – land that was eventually annexed at the direct expense of Gaza's people.

Today, Israel occupies more than half of Gaza. It has imposed what is known as the "yellow line", which functions as a new de facto border that continues to expand, annexing new territory. Palestinians who cross it are executed. Even Fadi and Jumaa, ages 8 and 10, were not spared. Gaza is not just besieged; it is being physically erased, metre by metre, generation by generation.

The Gaza we love goes beyond lines and borders. Although the majority of Palestinians in Gaza are refugees from towns that today lie inside Israel, Gaza is the place we call home.

Modern geopolitical chessboard

In the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, where ancient trade winds once carried spices and silk, a modern geopolitical chessboard is unfolding. Dubbed the 'new great game', this rivalry echoes the 19th-century Anglo-Russian contest for Central Asia, but now pits the United States, China and India in a high-stakes struggle for maritime dominance. For Pakistan, straddling the ocean's northwestern rim, these shifting sands are not abstract; they directly imperil its sovereignty, economy and military posture. As Beijing fortifies its foothold through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Washington bolsters New Delhi's naval ambitions, and tensions simmer post-May Pakistan-India conflict, Islamabad faces a precarious balancing act amid escalating threats.

The Indian Ocean is not a peripheral theatre; it is the world's economic lifeline. Over 80 per cent of global seaborne oil transits its waters, alongside trillions in annual trade. Regional tensions add to the complexity of the matter. CPEC's \$62 billion infusion promises economic revival for Pakistan. Yet, vulnerabilities abound. India's alliance with the US, Japan and Australia equips New Delhi with surveillance software and facilitates the bid for undersea dominance. US arms sales to India have surged, slashing Moscow's share from 80pc to 38pc since 2010, signalling a realignment that sidelines Pakistan.

Security-wise, Pakistan confronts a two-front nightmare. The recent clash intensified the security dilemma, igniting an arms race. Islamabad's defence budget jumped 20pc to \$9 billion post-conflict. But non-traditional threats and climate-induced disruptions strain resources. Beijing's dual-use vessels, doubling as intelligence gatherers, enhance Pakistan's surveillance, but invite US patrols via Diego Garcia. Islamabad's options are narrowing. To navigate this, Pakistan must diversify its approach. Pakistan's progress hinges on astute diplomacy to turn its vulnerabilities into assets without alienating powers. As superpowers jostle, Islamabad's agility will determine if it emerges as a pivotal player or a pawn in the waves. In the maritime maelstrom of the Indian Ocean, security is not just about fleets and missiles; it is about outmanoeuvring the tides of rivalry.

Dua Zahra
Chakwal

Karachi's neglected sewers

Karachi last year lost 24 lives to the city's neglected sewers, manholes and drains. Eleven people died after falling into open drains and nullahs, seven fell into uncovered manholes, and six sanitation workers were effectively killed by a system that forced them to enter and clean toxic, clogged raw sewage gutters with their bare hands.

It ought to be difficult, if not impossible,

for all of us who live in this country to identify ourselves as human beings while silently watching these orchestrated and exploited deaths of fellow humans — with such utter cruelty and inhumanity. We could, however, reform this dilapidated and brutal governance system by taking at least three immediate steps.

There should be a survey to count and digitise every storm-water and sewage gutter and manhole across the city, and allocate a unique identity code that identifies location, type (storm-water, wastewater, combined sewer), depth, size, pipe connections, material, installation date and the owner department. Before the Sindh government senses another opportunity for 'tragedy capitalism' to obtain and blow up a fresh \$50 million World Bank loan under the pretext of streamlining the system, it may be appropriate to publicly state that open-source geographic information system (GIS) desktop software, such as QGIS and Map Window GIS, are available for free, for anyone to use for the management of manholes, storm drains, sewerage pipes and gutters. The Sindh government should enact legislation banning all forms of manual scavenging, and prohibiting workers from entering hazardous sewage gutters.

The current practices are inhumane, violate fundamental human rights, and need to be replaced by modern systems.

Naeem Sadiq
Karachi

Waste dumping in Islamabad

For several months now, the continuous dumping of municipal waste in Islamabad's sector I-11 has resulted in a persistent foul smell that spreads across the entire locality. This situation has not only made daily living extremely uncomfortable; it has also created serious health concerns for thousands of families residing in the I-10 sector as well.

The open accumulation of garbage, without proper segregation, treatment or disposal, is causing severe air pollution and the spread of insects and disease-carrying pests. Children, the elderly citizens and individuals with respiratory issues are the worst affected, as toxic fumes and an unhygienic environment are contributing to allergies, breathing difficulties and other health complications. The problem becomes even more intense during the evening and early morning hours when the stench becomes unbearable.

Despite a number of complaints from concerned citizens, no visible action has been taken by the Capital Development Authority (CDA), Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (MCI), or the relevant environmental bodies to address the issue. The ad hoc practice of dumping waste in residential surroundings is in violation of basic municipal duties and undermines the constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment. The CDA and MCI as well as the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency should immediately relocate the waste-dump-

ing site away from residential areas, introduce proper waste-management mechanisms, ensure daily sanitation, and explore environmentally safe disposal methods, such as composting, recycling as well as engineered landfills. Regular monitoring and public communication are essential elements to restore the quality of life for the area residents.

Asad Ullah Taimur Muhamand
Islamabad

Highway hotels or mafias?

Hotels along highways and motorways have turned into mafia businesses that charge exorbitant sums against their services. They thrive in the absence of state oversight, squeezing the already poor passengers of their meagre resources. The tragedy is that transporters work in collusion with the owners of these hotels, whereby the drivers and the staff of transport companies savour free meals in addition to getting some cash. When the passengers complain, which they hardly do, nothing happens. This is hardly surprising in the absence of state regulations. Unless these mafias are made to fear the consequences of their unjust actions, the passengers will continue to suffer.

Muhammad Ilyas Mandokhail
Zhob

Bank robberies

Bank robberies have become a recurring issue across all cities in Balochistan. However, Turbat and Panjgur have repeatedly emerged as the most targeted areas. A bank cash vehicle carrying a large amount of money in Turbat was recently attacked by armed robbers who managed to seize over Rs200 million. This shocking incident exposed the vulnerability of even heavily-guarded cash movements. Besides, three banks were recently looted simultaneously in Panjgur, raising further concerns among the account holders. As such, the robbers reportedly escaped with more than Rs1.5 billion. Such prevailing lawlessness shows poor security arrangements, and emboldens criminal elements.

Hasil Wahid
Turbat

Gilgit-Baltistan sewerage project

Gilgit city, once known for its cleanliness and natural beauty, is bound to turn into a foul-smelling urban centre due to the ongoing Gilgit-Baltistan sewerage project. It seems like those at the helm of affairs want to compel the residents to move out of the city because of the unbearable stench. Whether this is a deliberate attempt to push people out, or sheer incompetence and poor planning, the outcome is the same. The project must be stopped or to be carried out with due diligence.

Salman Rushdi
Gilgit

Global food systems driving twin crises of obesity and global heating

Caroline Brogan

A major review in *Frontiers in Science* highlights how tackling unsustainable food systems—reflected by our changing food environment—is urgent for both health and climate.

The paper reviews evidence that both obesity and environmental harms result from a profit-led food system that encourages high intake and poor health. The authors say that our food environment promotes high-calorie, low-fiber products such as some ultra-processed foods (UPFs)—the most calorific of which encourage weight gain. Those same production systems, especially involving animals, release large amounts of greenhouse gases and put pressure on land and water.

The comprehensive review, led by Prof Jeff Holly at University of Bristol, UK, says that addressing the food environment can therefore deliver double benefits for health and climate. The authors recommend using subsidies for healthy foods, taxes and warning labels for particularly unhealthy foods, and restrictions on aggressive marketing of high-calorie, low-fiber products, particularly in low-income communities and to children. They also counter the perception that weight-loss drugs are a panacea for obesity, as they do not address the systemic drivers which also harm the climate. “While obesity is a complex disease driven by many interacting factors, the primary driver is the consumption-driven transformation of the food system over the last 40 years,” said Prof Holly. “Unlike weight loss drugs or surgery, addressing this driver will help humans and the planet alike.”



What happens to your body when you drink green juice every morning

Zia Sherrell

Green juice is made from blended green vegetables like spinach, kale, celery, and cucumber. The ingredients provide a rich source of vitamins and minerals, delivering a boost of hydration and nourishment. Green vegetables contain vitamins A, C, E, and K. These nutrients support your immune system, skin health, and bone strength. They're also a good source of minerals like iron, calcium, and magnesium, which support energy and muscle function. Leafy greens like spinach and kale are particularly nutrient-dense. One benefit of juicing is that it concentrates these nutrients into a smaller serving, making it easier to consume more than you might typically eat in one sitting.

Vegetables like cabbage, celery, spinach, and lettuce are over 90% water. These ingredients make green juice an excellent source of fluids, helping you stay hydrated. You get roughly 20% of your water intake from the food you eat. Drinking vegetable-rich green juice contributes to your hydration needs while providing essential nutrients.⁴ Green vegetables contain plant compounds called polyphenols and flavonoids. These compounds have antioxidant properties that help protect cells from damage caused by unstable molecules called free radicals. Consuming leafy green vegetables may help reduce inflammation. The antioxidants in these vegetables may support overall health and reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases. Green vegetables contain compounds that can act as prebiotics. These nutrients feed beneficial bacteria in your gut, which may support digestion and immune function.



Chinese nuclear fusion reactor pushes plasma past crucial limit: what happens next

Mohana Basu

Researchers working on China's 'artificial sun' have reported breaking a long-accepted threshold that has limited the operation of nuclear-fusion reactors for decades.

China's Experimental Advanced Superconducting Tokamak (EAST) is a nuclear-fusion research reactor in Hefei. Researchers hope that it will one day produce clean, nearly limitless energy by replicating the fusion processes that power the Sun. In fusion reactors, light-weight atoms are compressed under extreme pressure and heat to form heavier atoms. This process releases energy, but it must be optimized carefully so that the reactor produces more energy than it consumes. One of the most promising reactor designs, the tokamak, confines plasma inside a doughnut-shaped chamber using magnetic fields. The plasma is then heated. To sustain fusion reactions, the plasma must reach an extremely high density—meaning many particles must be packed into a small volume.

But researchers thought that plasma could not exceed a certain density without becoming unstable. This upper limit—known as the Greenwald limit—has been a major obstacle for fusion research, particularly for tokamak-type devices. In a paper published in *Science Advances*, scientists working on China's EAST device reported pushing plasma densities beyond this limit, achieving densities 30% to 65% higher than those normally reached by EAST.



Salmon vs. chicken: Which protein source is better for heart health?

Carley Millhone

Salmon and chicken are nutritious sources of lean protein that can benefit muscle gain and heart health.¹² Both foods are great additions to a balanced diet, but they provide different nutrients.



Salmon is one of the best sources of polyunsaturated fats called omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3s like eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) are essential for brain function, eye health, and heart health. A 3-ounce fillet of Atlantic, farmed salmon contains about 1.24 grams of DHA and 0.59 grams of EPA.¹ Wild-caught salmon contains slightly less omega-3s, but is still a good source of healthy fats.

Just one 3-ounce serving of salmon can help you meet the adequate intake of omega-3s.¹ The American Heart Association recommends eating two servings of fatty fish, like salmon, per week to get enough EPA and DHA for heart and overall health. Both chicken and salmon are complete proteins—meaning they contain all of the essential amino acids your body needs to function and build muscle. This makes both foods ideal if you're looking to increase your protein intake to build muscle or support your overall health. Chicken contains more protein and less fat than salmon. A 3.5-ounce (100-gram) serving of boneless, skinless chicken breast offers about 31 grams of protein and less than 4 grams of total fat. Chicken breasts also contain only about 1 gram of saturated fat.⁶ Consuming less saturated fat helps you avoid high LDL (the “bad”) cholesterol, which can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

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