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# WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

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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](http://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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# Rising food insecurity: an existence challenge

Farhan Khan

It is an unfortunate and deeply concerning fact that food insecurity has been on the rise in Pakistan over the last few years, reflecting the combined impact of climate shocks, economic pressures and structural weaknesses in the food system.

Speaking at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) 2026 in Berlin, Federal Minister for National Food Security and Research Rana Tanveer Hussain drew the world's attention to this worsening situation and underlined the urgent need to strengthen water resilience in the climate-stressed region in which Pakistan is located. He noted that Pakistan's food security is under increasing threat from more frequent floods, prolonged droughts and extreme heatwaves, all of which have sharply affected agricultural productivity and undermined rural livelihoods.

Pakistan's food system is heavily dependent on the Indus River system, which supports agriculture, industry and ecosystems for more than 240 million people. The minister emphasised that water security is fundamental to food security and stressed that cooperation over shared water resources is essential not only for sustainable development but also for regional stability. Describing the Indus Waters Treaty as a cornerstone of regional water cooperation and stability, he expressed serious concern over India's April 2025 announcement to unilaterally hold the treaty "in abeyance." Calling the Indus River system a lifeline for Pakistan, he urged the international community to support the treaty's full implementation in letter and spirit. He also stated that Pakistan was ready to work with international partners to advance climate-smart agriculture and inclusive food systems, with the aim of transforming water from a source of risk and inter-state friction into a foundation for sustainable development, cooperation and peace for all.

According to the Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2024–25, the food insecurity situation in the country has deteriorated significantly. Roughly one in four people experienced some form of food insecurity in 2024–25, compared to about one in six in 2018–19. Available data indicates a notable decline in food security over this period, with moderate-to-severe food inse-

curity rising by 8.43 percentage points, from 15.92 per cent in 2018–19 to 24.35 per cent in 2024–25, representing an increase of 53 per cent. This sharp rise highlights the growing vulnerability of households to both economic and environmental shocks.

At the national level, moderate or severe food insecurity increased from 15.92 per cent in 2018–19 to 24.35 per cent in 2024–25, while severe food insecurity rose from 2.37 per cent to 5.04 per cent during the same period. Urban areas show a similarly alarming trend, where moderate or severe food insecurity increased from 9.22 per cent to 20.58 per cent, and severe food insecurity rose from 1.24 per cent to 5.12 per cent. Rural households were also adversely affected, with moderate or severe food insecurity increasing from 19.96 per cent to 26.72 per cent and severe cases rising from 3.05 per cent to 4.99 per cent.

Provincial data reveals stark regional disparities. Balochistan records high levels of

Significantly, urban food insecurity has more than doubled, jumping from 9.22 per cent to 20.58 per cent, largely due to soaring food prices, stagnant wages and the erosion of purchasing power. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) notes that moderate food insecurity is closely linked to poor diet quality and increased reliance on cheap, highly processed foods. Severe food insecurity, on the other hand, greatly increases the risks of physical illness, mental stress and long-term health damage. For children, repeated exposure to food insecurity results in stunting, wasting, impaired cognitive development and weaker educational attainment.

According to the FAO, moderate food insecurity reflects a situation in which households cannot reliably access sufficient food and are forced to compromise on the quality, variety or regularity of meals. Severe food insecurity represents a far graver condition, where households run out of food altogether

and may go a day or more without eating. Viewed through this lens, the HIES findings signal not merely rising discomfort but a growing number of Pakistanis experiencing sustained nutritional stress and outright hunger.

Needless to say, rising food insecurity in Pakistan implies a mounting public health and economic risk. With nearly one in four Pakistanis — over 60 million people — facing moderate or severe food insecurity, the country confronts the prospect of higher healthcare costs, reduced labour productivity and deepening

intergenerational poverty. The situation calls for targeted, well-funded interventions to stabilise food prices, protect real incomes and place greater value on nutrition, particularly for children and vulnerable groups. Without such a strategic shift, food insecurity will continue to steadily erode Pakistan's human capital and economic foundations.

To ensure long-term food security, Pakistan must, without further delay, undertake comprehensive reforms to improve water productivity through high-efficiency irrigation systems, climate-smart farming practices, and the adoption of drought- and heat-resistant seed varieties. Equally important are improved watershed rehabilitation and groundwater recharge efforts. Without sustained and coordinated action in this regard, the country risks facing an existential food and water crisis in the coming years.



moderate or severe food insecurity, affecting 30.26 per cent of households, or nearly one in three, followed closely by Sindh at 29.42 per cent. Punjab, with 22.58 per cent food insecurity, ranks third in terms of moderate or severe food insecurity, despite enforcing the much-publicised Rs14 roti rate aimed at providing cheap bread to the population. According to the report, an additional 5.20 per cent of Punjab's population falls into the severe food insecure category. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reports the lowest percentage of households experiencing severe food insecurity at 1.38 per cent, and also the lowest share of households facing moderate or severe food insecurity nationally at 21.54 per cent.

Among the major factors contributing to the worsening food insecurity are the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating floods of 2022, and persistently high inflation.

# Time to stop the flight of human capital

Nasim Ahmed

Pakistan has witnessed a massive wave of emigration in recent years. Millions of Pakistani citizens—especially skilled professionals—have left for better opportunities abroad, driven by economic instability, inflation, political uncertainty, limited career growth, poor governance, internet disruptions, and security concerns. While this trend brings substantial remittances, the long-term costs to Pakistan are significant, outweighing the short-term gains.

In the past three years, nearly 2.9 million Pakistanis have moved abroad, according to data from the Protector & Migrants Department. Rising inflation, lawlessness, unemployment, and challenges in starting businesses have driven people from all walks of life to leave. The migrants paid over Rs. 26.6 billion in protector fees to the government while departing. Local salaries no longer meet the cost of living, making it increasingly difficult to sustain livelihoods in Pakistan. The emigrants include professionals such as doctors, engineers, IT specialists, teachers, bankers, accountants, auditors, designers, and architects, as well as skilled workers like plumbers, drivers, and welders. Women form a significant portion of those leaving.

Cumulatively, over 14 million Pakistanis have officially migrated for work since 1972, with a sharp surge in the post-2021 period. In 2024, between 727,000 and 832,000 left for employment, of whom half were unskilled and 35 per cent skilled. In 2025, about 800,000 departed, including 20,000 highly educated professionals. During the last two years, 5,000 doctors, 11,000 engineers, and 13,000 accountants, along with thousands of IT experts, nurses, teachers, and technicians, left the country. The top destinations were Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Malaysia, with growing numbers heading to the UK, Germany, the US and other countries. The total Pakistani diaspora was estimated at 13–14 million abroad by the mid-2020s. This exodus ranks Pakistan high globally for skilled human capital migration — third in South Asia and among the top ten worldwide in some metrics.

Remittances from overseas Pakistanis are Pakistan's second-largest foreign exchange source after exports, providing crucial stability to the debt-ridden economy. In 2023, remittances totalled \$34 billion, constituting eight per cent of GDP. In 2024–2025, this amount surged to \$38.5 billion, with monthly records such as \$3.21 billion in July 2025. Rising remittances

provide vital support to families, boost foreign exchange reserves, reduce borrowing needs, stabilise the current account and ease inflationary pressures. They act as a buffer amid debt, energy crises and low growth, but remain vulnerable to global downturns, visa changes and host-country policies. The government also collects substantial fees from departing migrants, adding to immediate revenue. Migration further alleviates pressure on Pakistan's job market by absorbing a portion of the large annual increase in the workforce.

Migration is closely linked to rising unemployment, with 4.5 million Pakistanis out of work and youth aged 15–24 facing the highest unemployment rate at 11.1 per cent. As job opportunities shrink, many see migration as their only escape. While migrants contribute billions in fees and vital foreign exchange through remittances, the exodus of human capital weakens domestic sectors such as healthcare and education, slowing long-term growth. The brain drain is especially visible in the country's



healthcare system. Medical professionals are moving abroad in search of better incomes and access to advanced medical technology. As a result, Pakistan's already fragile healthcare system is facing acute staff shortages at local hospitals.

Despite the many benefits of remittances, economic experts have calculated a net economic loss from skilled migration amounting to an annual opportunity cost of \$4.2 billion. Other costs include the loss of education and training investments as public funds subsidise doctors and engineers only for them to benefit recipient countries. Experts also point to the shrinking middle class, which means reduced consumption, lower investment, a smaller tax base and weaker entrepreneurship. Fears of a deteriorating economic situation have also put Pakistanis studying abroad in distress. Previously, international students would return home to work, but now, with fewer jobs available, many choose to stay in their host countries and apply for permanent residency.

No doubt, remittances provide short-term economic relief, but they cannot substitute for domestic productivity, innovation or the intellectual capital needed for sustainable national growth. In this context, some economists have classified Pakistan as a "brain drain economy," exporting the professionals it needs for its own development. Economists have repeatedly warned against excessive dependence on remittances, arguing that it masks deeper structural weaknesses. An economy that relies on exporting its workforce rather than creating opportunities at home is not a sustainable one.

The fact that so many people see no future for themselves in Pakistan should be a matter of serious concern for the authorities. Over the years, the country has become an increasingly difficult place to live. Persistent economic instability, rising inflation and job insecurity have created an environment of uncertainty. For the younger generation, leaving the country appears to be the only option. Widening economic inequality has eroded social cohesion. Employment conditions are unfavourable, wages are stagnant and job security is scarce. On the other hand, even a difficult job abroad promises better purchasing power and greater financial security.

To stem the outflow of talent, the government must undertake long-overdue reforms: improve governance, create jobs, invest in research, development and education, offer incentives for returnees and adopt a new diaspora policy to convert brain drain into brain gain or circulation. Pakistan's young population needs tangible incentives to stay, including stable employment, fair wages, social mobility and a sense of belonging. Pakistan is a nation rich in talent, but this talent must be harnessed, nurtured and rewarded. The manpower export policy needs urgent review. Brain drain is a national crisis — a loss of people who could have built this country. A policy of inclusive growth is essential, as an elitist approach will continue to drive bright young people from the lower strata of society abroad in search of better opportunities.

It is time the government took concrete measures to create better economic opportunities at home for all. This calls for investing in technology hubs, industrial zones and start-ups, offering competitive salaries and creating a truly conducive environment for doing business. To achieve sustainable development, Pakistan must look away from crutches such as remittances and loans and instead retain and nurture its own indigenous capital — its productive human resources.

# The reform rhetoric vs. the Rs123b reality

Muhammad Hassan

The government has made fixing state-owned enterprises (SOEs) one of the loudest talking points of recent years. Every budget speech, every IMF review, every international lender meeting includes the same promises: comprehensive reform, privatization where feasible, better governance, and an end to the endless drain on the public purse.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's administration has repeated these commitments since taking office, often framing SOE restructuring as the cornerstone of fiscal sustainability and economic revival. Yet when you look at the hard numbers released last week (around January 9–10, 2026) by the Finance Ministry during a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on State-Owned Enterprises (CCoSOEs), the gap between rhetoric and reality feels almost painful. In FY2024–25 — the first full fiscal year under the current government — the cumulative net losses of SOEs ballooned by nearly 300%, rocketing from Rs30.6 billion in FY2023–24 to a staggering Rs122.9 billion. That's not a minor setback; it's a dramatic worsening of an already chronic problem.

The broader picture is equally troubling. Total revenues across all SOEs fell by more than 10% to roughly Rs12.4 trillion, even as the wider economy was supposed to be stabilizing after years of turbulence. Among the handful of profitable entities, aggregate profits slipped 13% to around Rs710 billion (some breakdowns put it at Rs709.9 billion). The loss-making ones showed almost no improvement — their combined losses shrank by a negligible 2% to approximately Rs833 billion — which is, in practical terms, no turnaround at all. To stop the bleeding and keep operations running, the government injected a massive Rs2.1 trillion in fiscal support during the year. The bulk of that went toward equity injections aimed at addressing circular debt accumulation, particularly in the power sector.

In other words, public money — money that could have gone toward schools, hospitals, roads, or targeted social protection — is being used primarily to manage ongoing distress rather than to solve the structural failures that keep producing it. This isn't a one-off emergency bailout; it's become a structural feature of Pakistan's fiscal landscape.

The Finance Ministry has pointed to falling international oil prices as a major reason for the revenue drop, arguing that lower global crude squeezed margins in the oil and gas sector.

That explanation carries some weight, but it only goes so far. Oil price movements can't fully account for the sheer scale of the deterioration or the fact that losses remain heavily concentrated in a small group of perennial underperformers: the National Highway Authority (NHA), which reportedly absorbed around Rs153 billion in losses, and several power distribution companies (DISCOs), which continue to hemorrhage cash year after year.

This concentration is telling. These entities aren't suffering from temporary market shocks; they're trapped in deep, long-standing structural decay. Nowhere is this more visible than in the power distribution companies. The DISCOs have become the textbook example of systemic failure in Pakistan's energy sector. Aging transmission and distribution networks lose enormous amounts of electricity through a combination of technical inefficiencies, rampant theft, and line losses that routinely exceed regulatory benchmarks. NEPRA's State of the



Industry Report for 2025 estimated that poor DISCO performance alone contributed roughly Rs397 billion to the power sector's circular debt pile in FY25 — even as overall circular debt in the sector saw some moderation (down to around Rs1.614 trillion by mid-2025 thanks to refinancing deals and tariff adjustments).

High depreciation charges on outdated infrastructure inflate balance sheets without delivering corresponding revenue. At the same time, DISCOs borrow heavily to cover cash shortfalls and service accumulated circular debt, piling on interest expenses that lock them into a self-reinforcing cycle of financial stress. Governance issues — political interference in appointments, weak accountability, and slow decision-making — compound the problem, making genuine operational improvement almost impossible without radical change.

Even the "profitable" SOEs raise serious questions. Many of them generate returns only because they operate in protected environments with guaranteed government contracts, regulated tariffs, or monopoly positions. Strip away

those protections and expose them to genuine market competition, and it's far from clear how many would remain viable without continued subsidies or special treatment. Given all this, the need for a bold, coherent, and urgently executed reform agenda should be beyond debate.

Yet progress on the ground has been frustratingly slow and fragmented. Some steps have been taken — the privatization of Pakistan International Airlines was hailed as a milestone, Utility Stores were shut down, and there have been approvals for handing over certain power utilities or airports to private management. The Asian Development Bank's approval of \$540 million in financing (a \$400 million results-based loan for SOE transformation plus \$140 million for coastal resilience in Sindh) in December 2025 is meant to support governance improvements, competition, and efficiency gains. But these moves feel more like isolated wins than parts of a comprehensive strategy.

Too often, reforms appear driven more by external pressure from the IMF and other lenders than by internal political conviction. Bureaucratic resistance, vested interests, and the fear of short-term political fallout continue to slow momentum. Meaningful change would require much more: a full sectoral reorganization in power and transport, genuine deregulation to allow competition where possible, the establishment of strong, independent corporate governance frameworks, and a clear roadmap for privatizing or restructuring the chronic loss-makers. Until that happens, the reform narrative will continue to ring hollow. The financial hemorrhage will persist, draining resources that the country desperately needs elsewhere. Each year of delay makes the eventual fixes more painful, more expensive, and more politically difficult.

Pakistan stands at a crossroads. The FY2024–25 numbers are not just statistics; they are a stark warning. Promises and roadmaps are easy to produce. Turning around deeply entrenched, inefficient giants like the DISCOs and NHA demands real political courage, sustained execution, and the willingness to confront vested interests head-on. Without that decisive action on governance, accountability, and — where appropriate — privatization, the SOE burden will keep growing, weighing down the national budget, crowding out productive investment, and ultimately hitting ordinary taxpayers hardest. The cost of inaction is already painfully clear; the question now is whether the government will finally match words with the kind of bold moves the numbers so urgently demand.

# Stabilisation without impact?

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan wrapped up 2025 on a note of tentative economic stabilisation — inflation eased off its brutal peaks, remittances stayed strong, and the external account looked a bit less shaky — but if you ask ordinary people, professionals, students, or business owners across the country, the picture isn't all rosy.

A fresh nationwide survey by the Institute of Cost and Management Accountants of Pakistan (ICMA) captures that split mood perfectly. The public is divided: some see real progress in pulling back from the brink, while many others feel the gains haven't really trickled down to everyday life.

According to the poll, which gathered views from a wide cross-section of society, 54.3% of respondents agreed that the economy did improve in 2025. They pointed to things like cooling inflation, steady inflows from overseas Pakistanis, and a more stable rupee and reserves picture — basically, the stuff that helped avert a full-blown crisis. But almost as many, 45.7%, described the year as turbulent, full of ups and downs. Weak agriculture output (still reeling from weather hits and other issues) and ongoing fiscal headaches meant that stabilisation felt uneven. Only a small slice — 10.3% — said the year turned out much better than they'd hoped, and just 12.1% called it steady. The takeaway? Macro stability is welcome, but consistent, inclusive growth that people can actually feel in their pockets remains out of reach for too many.

Looking forward to 2026, the vibe is cautiously optimistic, not wildly enthusiastic. Some 56.9% expect the economy to get better, while 43.1% think it'll hold steady. Digging deeper, 29.3% see it as genuinely promising, and 25% are banking on solid growth, mostly pinned on hopes for a stronger industrial sector, better exports, and firmer domestic demand. But only 2.6% are ready to call the economy outright strong right now. Deep structural problems — low investment, productivity drags, and lingering vulnerabilities — keep the long-term outlook feeling fragile.

What's really telling is what worries people most heading into this year. It's not just the economy itself. Political instability tops the

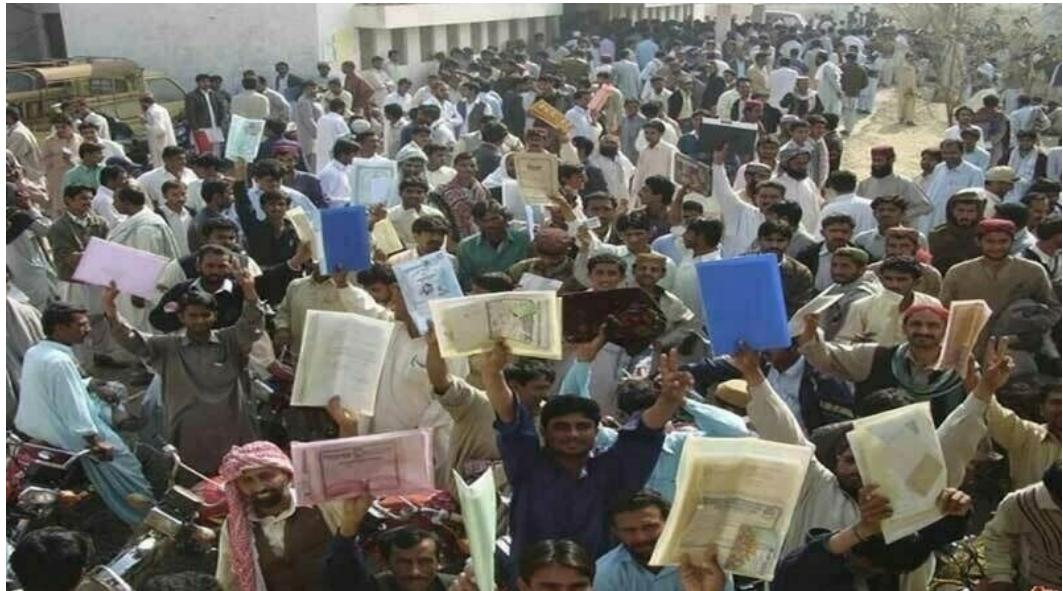
list at 33.6%, with fears that policy flip-flops, leadership tussles, or uncertainty could easily undo the fragile progress. Youth unemployment comes right behind at 29.3% — a huge red flag in a country with so many young people entering the job market every year. High inflation, even though it's moderated, still nags at 26.7%, while climate and extreme weather risks feel more distant to most (10.3%).

The survey also asked what Pakistan urgently needs to stop doing if we want real, lasting progress. Top of the list: 31% said enough with repeating failed policies and short-term bandaidsthat never deliver. 28.4% flagged political conflict as a major drag, creating investor nerves and uncertainty. Another 26.7% want to cut the addiction to foreign loans, pushing instead for self-reliance through better domestic

pragmatic about who we should lean on. China came out on top (44.8%), thanks to ongoing investment, CPEC projects, and infrastructure support. Neighbouring countries ranked next (26.7%) for the sake of regional trade and peace. Gulf states got 18.1% for jobs and remittances, while the US scored 10.3% for tech and education ties. Overall, foreign partnerships should deliver concrete economic wins, not just photo-ops.

There's also a growing sense of personal agency. More than half (56.9%) plan to pick up new digital skills this year to stay relevant in a tech-shifting world. Another 25% are thinking about starting a business or side project, showing real entrepreneurial spark.

ICMA sums it up well: the survey lays out a clear public mandate. Governance fixes, real



revenue collection and export growth. Neglecting basics like health and education also got called out as something that has to end.

When it comes to priorities for 2026, the message from respondents is loud and clear: put people first, not just big concrete projects. A whopping 84% said job creation and human development should come ahead of massive infrastructure builds. Breaking it down, 45.7% want urgent focus on generating employment, and 37.9% stress education and skills training to tackle youth joblessness and build a workforce that can compete. Infrastructure and healthcare matter, but they're seen as secondary to creating real opportunities and investing in people.

On the international side, people are

job creation, and efficient public services matter way more than flashy headline projects. With 62.9% demanding better delivery of basics like health, education, and utilities, 2026 won't be judged only by GDP numbers or reserve levels — it'll be measured by whether the stabilisation finally starts improving daily lives for regular Pakistanis.

This poll feels like a reality check and a roadmap at the same time. The stabilisation is real, but the real test is turning it into something broader and more tangible. If policymakers listen to what people are actually saying — jobs, stability, skills, and an end to the same old cycles — 2026 could mark a meaningful shift. If not, that cautious optimism might fade fast.

# Resilient world, vulnerable Pakistan

Shahid Hussain

As global economic growth struggles to stay afloat amid intensifying trade wars and geopolitical conflicts, Pakistan faces a narrow and uncertain path ahead. The World Bank's latest report projects modest global resilience but warns that emerging economies like Pakistan remain highly exposed to external shocks, tightening financial conditions, and escalating regional tensions.

The World Bank's latest Global Economic Prospects report offers a picture of a global economy that's hanging in there better than many feared, even with all the chaos from trade wars, tariffs, and escalating geopolitical tensions. They bumped up the 2026 global GDP growth forecast by a modest 0.2 percentage points from their June 2025 outlook, landing at 2.6% for this year — down slightly from 2.7% in 2025 — before ticking back up to 2.7% in 2027. It's a resilient showing, they say, but the growth is still heavily skewed toward advanced economies, and it's nowhere near strong enough to make a real dent in extreme poverty worldwide.

A big part of why they're feeling a bit more positive? The U.S. economy held up surprisingly well despite the massive tariff rollout that kicked off in early April 2025 — what Trump called "Liberation Day," slapping a 10% baseline on nearly all imports, with higher reciprocal rates on big deficit partners. There were threats of even steeper hikes (like 60% on China or 100% on Mexico), but negotiations dialed some back, especially after front-loading of imports and supply-chain adjustments cushioned the blow. Still, the report notes that trade tensions remain a major drag, and any further escalation could shave off more momentum.

The Bank's analysts are careful about diving too deep into politics, but it's hard to ignore how the geopolitical storm clouds are thickening. The Russia-Ukraine war drags on with no end in sight, and recent weeks have seen sharp escalations — like Russia's use of the Oreshnik hypersonic missile (an intermediate-range ballistic system boasting speeds over 10 times the speed of sound) in early January 2026 strikes on Ukraine, including one targeting the Lviv State Aviation Repair Plant that services Western-supplied jets like F-16s. Russia framed it as retaliation for an alleged Ukrainian drone attack on Putin's residence in the Novgorod re-

gion, which they claim couldn't have happened without Western backing.

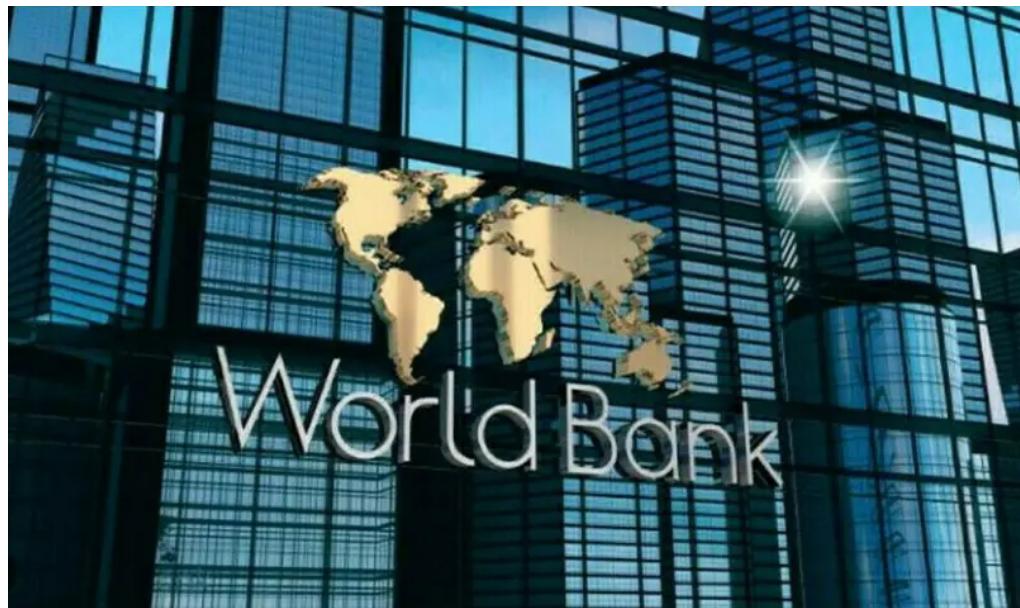
Then there's the Middle East mess: ongoing Israeli operations against neighbors, including the shocking September 9, 2025, airstrike on Doha, Qatar — a direct hit on a residential complex housing Hamas leaders during ceasefire talks. That move violated Qatari sovereignty, killed at least one local security officer, and rattled the Gulf region, even as Qatar tried to stay in its mediator role. Add to that rising talk of potential U.S./Israeli action against Iran amid its internal crackdowns on protests, plus European leaders piling on rhetoric.

Trade-wise, things are getting messier too. In mid-January 2026, Trump announced a 25% tariff on any country continuing to do business with Iran — a blunt secondary sanction

negative global territory.

For Pakistan specifically, the World Bank sticks to a cautious 3% GDP growth projection for FY26 (ending June 2026), holding steady before edging up to around 3.4% in FY27. That's basically "stay the course" on the tough IMF-backed mix of contractionary monetary policy (with the discount rate at 10.5%, well above regional peers) and fiscal tightening. Large-scale manufacturing is hurting — textile units alone reporting around 150 closures — and industry players are pushing the government for some relief if that target is going to hold. On top of that, ongoing Indian violations of the Indus Waters Treaty could hammer agriculture and water security, hitting farm output and quality of life hard.

Bottom line: the Bank's outlook is



aimed at isolating Tehran further. China pushed back hard, saying there are "no winners in a tariff war" and vowing to protect its interests (they're Iran's top oil buyer, after all). The UK is moving to seize "shadow fleet" tankers (those uninsured in London, which dominates 90% of global shipping insurance), and the U.S. just grabbed a Russian-flagged tanker (the Mariner, formerly Bella-1) near Iceland in early January for allegedly evading sanctions tied to Venezuela oil. Russia called it "piracy." All of this weaponization of sanctions and trade tools risks pushing advanced economies' collective growth below 2%, the Bank hints — and if any conflict spirals wider, we could even tip into

grounded in resilience so far, but it's fragile. The advanced economies' reliance on sanctions, tariffs, and military pressure might keep their own growth capped low, while the ripple effects — trade disruptions, higher energy prices, investor nerves — could hit emerging markets like Pakistan even harder. If the rhetoric turns to more action and conflicts broaden, we're looking at a much darker scenario for everyone. The report doesn't spell it out dramatically, but the undercurrent is clear: stability hangs by a thread, and the geopolitical risks are rising fast. For countries like ours, sticking to reforms while navigating this storm will be tougher than ever.

# Afghan Taliban rule and regional insecurity

Raza Khan

Despite repeated claims by the Afghan Taliban rulers that they are stabilising Afghanistan and placing the country on a path of development, independent observers largely agree that the unelected Taliban regime is instead pushing the country into a deep ditch of conflict, instability and violence.

Since their forceful takeover of state power in August 2021 for the second time, the Afghan Taliban have ruled primarily through the use of arms rather than consent. Although, initially, the Taliban did not govern as ruthlessly or draconically as during their first stint in power, they are gradually reverting to their old, coercive and violent modes of rule. Moreover, the Taliban have once again failed to behave as a responsible state authority. This is largely because, in essence, the Taliban are a non-state force or militia rather than a political movement grounded in institutional governance. Having not come to power through any democratic or representative process, they cannot realistically be expected to function like a modern state. This state of affairs has inevitably resulted in growing chaos within Afghanistan.

In terms of policy toward Pakistan, the behaviour of the Afghan Taliban has been particularly unexpected and deeply troubling. The regime in Kabul has been hosting the largest Pakistani terrorist network, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), referred to by Pakistan as Fitnatul Khawarij. Despite repeated diplomatic appeals and even limited armed action by Pakistan against TTP hideouts on Afghan territory, the Afghan Taliban have remained obstinate and unwilling to withdraw their support or deny sanctuary to the Pakistani Taliban. As a direct consequence, terrorist attacks in Pakistan have increased manifold, particularly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, severely undermining internal security and regional stability.

Against this backdrop, insecurity within Afghanistan itself is increasing with each passing day, while the Afghan Taliban appear either unwilling or incapable of addressing the situation. At the same time, the civilised world finds itself on the horns of a dilemma over how to respond to Afghanistan's continuing instability. Kabul frequently levels accusations against Pakistan for allegedly supporting anti-Taliban Afghan groups, yet it has done little to stabilise its own state institutions or restore political legitimacy. A closer examination

of the dynamics of insecurity under Taliban rule reveals that no foreign actor bears more responsibility for insurgency, political chaos and grave security challenges in Afghanistan than the Afghan political and social leadership itself. In other words, neither the US-led NATO forces, which occupied Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, nor Pakistan — often portrayed as the two most influential external actors — can be held as accountable as the Taliban regime itself for Afghanistan's current predicament. This reality is evident, but it requires open eyes and honest reflection to acknowledge. The world, and Afghans themselves, must understand this truth, for without such understanding there can be no hope of peace in Afghanistan, the wider region or beyond.

Interestingly, both the Afghan Taliban rulers and their opponents belong to the same nation and state, and they have been engaged in conflict for more than 25 years. Undeniably, the Taliban also fought US-led NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, steadily gaining territory by pushing back government troops. When the Taliban were waging an insurgency against elected Afghan governments, those regimes blamed Pakistan for supporting the insurgents. Today, with the Taliban in power, they themselves blame Pakistan for destabilising Afghanistan. This contradictory narrative is not only illogical but also deeply senseless.

Why would the Afghan Taliban — a purely Afghan entity — or anti-Taliban groups such as the National Resistance Front (NRF) choose to dance to the tune allegedly played by Pakistan, instead of engaging with their own Afghan compatriots and broader political leadership to resolve disputes through political processes? This question must be examined within its full context, without oversimplification. Historically, local and national insurgencies are neither created nor sustained solely by foreign states or non-state actors. Pakistan, in particular, has long been disliked, if not openly resented, by many Afghans, largely due to the belief that Pakistan — as a successor state of British India — occupies what Afghans consider to be 'Afghan' territory. Although Afghanistan's irredentist claims against Pakistan have no solid legal or political basis when examined through a thorough reading of history, many Afghans continue to believe in these narratives. This belief has contributed to enduring hostility toward Pakistan and is rooted in myths and unfounded legends rather than historical facts.

Therefore, no foreign actor that has had interests or presence in Afghanistan can be held more responsible for the country's troubles than Afghan rulers and Afghan society itself. This point bears repeating: unless the world and Afghanistan recognise and address the internal roots of insecurity, instability and political chaos, there can be no meaningful way forward — regardless of how many foreign troops are deployed, how much funding is committed, or how many international conferences on Afghanistan are convened.

When it comes to identifying the root causes of Afghanistan's multidimensional crises, the explanation is relatively straightforward, even if difficult to accept. A careful observation of Afghan political dynamics and a thorough reading of Afghan history reveal a consistent failure of successive Afghan rulers to consolidate the state and modernise society through institutionalisation, education and detribalisation. This persistent failure lies at the heart of Afghanistan's enduring problems. Due to weak state consolidation and social modernisation, Afghans have struggled to adapt to political, economic and social developments in the wider world. Sensing this inability to keep pace with changing global realities, Afghan society gradually developed a deep suspicion of everything foreign. This suspicion, coupled with disdain, has been actively reinforced by Afghan rulers, who instead of educating their people about global changes and the necessity of adaptation, chose to stoke fear and hostility toward outsiders. Over centuries, Afghan regimes have done so to protect their own vested interests, keeping the population illiterate, uninformed and easier to govern, rather than encouraging critical thinking and questioning of authority.

Foreign players may not have acted out of goodwill toward Afghanistan or its people, but the fragility of the Afghan state and the non-modern character of Afghan society provided fertile ground for external exploitation. In a world governed by realism, every state seeks to maximise its power and wealth, often at the expense of others. History teaches this harsh lesson repeatedly, and Afghans must also come to terms with it. Moreover, to pursue interests abroad, a state must possess adequate internal strength and coherence. Without first putting its own house in order and abandoning outdated myths and mindsets, Afghan leadership cannot hope to move the country in the right direction or achieve lasting peace and stability.

# From remote districts to global standards: Punjab's bold strategy for teacher reform

Rasheed Ali

For years, a government schoolteacher in a remote district of Punjab has relied largely on experience, intuition and inherited lesson plans to navigate an increasingly complex classroom — one where students are shaped as much by digital exposure, social media and changing learning behaviours as by traditional textbooks.

Like thousands of educators across the province, the challenge has never been a lack of dedication or commitment, but rather limited access to structured, high-quality and internationally benchmarked professional development. It is precisely this long-standing gap that the Punjab Education, Curriculum, Training and Assessment Authority (PECTAA) now seeks to address through a new international partnership that places teachers firmly at the centre of education reform.

PECTAA has partnered with the University of London to launch a landmark Teacher Training Masterclass aimed at equipping public schoolteachers and education managers with internationally recognised professional skills and modern pedagogical competencies. The initiative was formally announced during an introductory ceremony held at PECTAA Headquarters in the second week of January 2026, where senior officials described the programme as a strategic investment in human capital rather than a routine or short-term training exercise. Upon successful completion, participating teachers and managers will receive a Certificate of Achievement from the University of London, offering global academic recognition, enhanced professional credibility and new career pathways.

The masterclass has been designed to move well beyond conventional in-service training models. Its strong focus on reflective teaching practices encourages educators to critically examine their own instructional approaches, respond to diverse learning needs and engage students in more meaningful and inclusive ways. Alongside this, the programme places significant emphasis on innovative curriculum design, learner-centred methodologies and advanced classroom management techniques — areas that have become increasingly vital in managing modern, technology-influenced and hybrid learning environments. Education officials believe these competencies are essential for improving teaching quality, classroom effectiveness and student engagement

across Punjab's vast public school network.

To ensure wide, inclusive and equitable participation, the programme will be delivered through high-impact online sessions, enabling educators from all districts — including remote and underserved areas — to access training without disrupting their regular teaching responsibilities. This digital delivery model is expected to blend international best practices with the specific realities, challenges and constraints of Punjab's public education system, ensuring both relevance and practical applicability. By removing geographical, financial and logistical barriers, the initiative aims to create a shared professional learning experience and a sense of collective growth for teachers across the province.

At the policy level, the partnership has been welcomed as a strong reaffirmation of the Punjab government's commitment to improving educational quality and learning outcomes. Speaking at the ceremony, Minister for School Education Rana Sikander Hayat stressed that no reform can succeed without empowering teachers at the grassroots level. He noted that equipping educators with globally aligned expertise is one of the most effective ways to uplift classroom standards and prepare students for an increasingly interconnected and competitive world. His remarks reflected a broader shift in policy thinking, where teacher development is viewed as a long-term investment rather than a temporary intervention.

Representatives of the University of London echoed this perspective. Ms. Janie Kingsley described the collaboration as a valuable opportunity to introduce internationally benchmarked training frameworks that could help establish new standards of teaching professionalism in the region. Parliamentary Secretary Nousheen Adnan highlighted that the alliance would not only enhance individual teaching competencies but also strengthen institutional culture within public schools by aligning local practices with global expectations and quality benchmarks.

At the heart of the initiative lies PECTAA's evolving role as Punjab's apex education authority. Established by the Government of Punjab, PECTAA was created to unify curriculum development, teacher training and assessment under a single, coherent and integrated framework. By consolidating responsibilities previously managed by separate bodies, the authority aims to ensure consistency in

standards, improve accountability and embed continuous professional development as a permanent and systematic feature of the education system. Its mandate spans research-based curriculum reform, modern assessment practices and rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

PECTAA Chief Executive Officer Muhammad Musa Ali Bokhari described the masterclass as a practical and timely expression of the authority's vision to make continuous professional development the backbone of Punjab's education ecosystem. He emphasised that world-class teaching practices must reach every classroom if meaningful, sustainable and system-wide change is to be achieved. According to Bokhari, the initiative is ultimately about ensuring that every child, regardless of geographic location or socio-economic background, benefits from modern pedagogy, skilled instruction and improved learning experiences.

The involvement of the University of London adds a distinctive global dimension to the programme. Founded in 1836 by royal charter, the University of London is one of the United Kingdom's oldest and most respected higher education institutions. It has a long-standing history of expanding access to education and pioneering distance and flexible learning models, serving students across more than 190 countries. Operating today as a federation of 17 renowned institutions, it is internationally recognised for academic excellence, innovation and inclusive education.

By partnering with such an institution, Punjab's education system is being connected to a global knowledge network that values teacher professionalism, reflective practice and evidence-based learning. Education observers note that the collaboration symbolises a clear shift from fragmented and ad-hoc training initiatives toward structured, internationally validated professional development.

As the first cohort of teachers and managers prepares to begin training later this year, expectations across the education sector remain high. For educators long accustomed to working in relative isolation, the masterclass offers not only certification, but also renewed professional confidence and a sense of recognition. For Punjab's public education system, it represents a meaningful step toward aligning local classrooms with global standards — one teacher, one classroom and one school at a time.

# Pakistan's demographic crossroads

Fatima Khan

Pakistan stepped into 2026 at a pivotal moment, carrying the weight of a population that has surged well beyond 225 million — with the latest UN and Worldometer estimates as of mid-January putting the figure closer to 257 million while some projections from UNFPA and related reports hover around 240-255 million for recent years, reflecting ongoing rapid growth. This officially makes Pakistan the world's fifth most populous nation, a milestone that brings both immense potential and serious pressures on everything from resources and infrastructure to jobs, education, health, and the environment.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) issued a timely and thoughtful statement around late December 2025, right as the year turned, urging a fundamental rethink of how the country approaches its demographics. Instead of the usual alarmist tone that treats population growth as an unavoidable crisis overwhelming the system, UNFPA is pushing for a more constructive view: this large, predominantly young population can actually become a \*\*strategic driver\*\* of sustainable and inclusive development — if managed with smart, evidence-based planning and real commitment to rights and equity.

It's a refreshing shift in the conversation, especially when high fertility rates (still around 3.5-3.6 births per woman on average in recent data, though showing some gradual decline) remain closely tied to long-standing issues. Persistent gender inequalities limit women's agency over their lives, bodies, and choices. Access to quality reproductive health services is uneven at best — often nonexistent in rural and remote areas. Social protection systems are weak or simply don't reach millions who need them. And climate vulnerability adds another brutal layer: extreme weather like floods, heat-waves, and droughts hits women, children, and marginalized communities hardest, deepening poverty cycles, worsening health, and sometimes leading families to have more children as a form of security in uncertain times.

UNFPA stresses that population issues can't be handled in isolation anymore. They have to be woven into larger strategies around economic development, poverty reduction, and climate resilience. That's why one of their most concrete recommendations stands out: a serious overhaul of how population factors into national planning and resource allocation — specifically

through the National Finance Commission (NFC) formula, which divides federal revenues among provinces.

Right now, population size dominates the criteria (around 82% in the current setup), which sounds fair on the surface but can unintentionally reward higher growth rates instead of celebrating real progress in things like education, health, women's empowerment, or building climate defenses. UNFPA is calling for a more forward-looking NFC framework — one that ties funding incentives to measurable wins in gender equality, climate resilience, balanced population trends, and better service quality. If provinces got rewarded (with more fiscal space or bonuses) for lowering maternal mortality, expanding family planning access, closing gender gaps, or improving disaster preparedness, it could spark genuine investment in people and accountability. Provinces might actually compete to deliver better outcomes rather than just letting numbers

health-sector problems — they're rooted in deep social norms, governance gaps, cultural attitudes, and the massive urban-rural divide. Together, they explain why fertility decline has slowed in many areas and why human development indicators swing so dramatically from one province (or even district) to the next.

Turning this around demands real political will and a complete rethink of population policy at both federal and provincial levels. We need to move beyond rigid targets and slogans to genuinely rights-based, people-centered approaches that empower women and girls with informed choices about education, marriage timing, and family size. There are proven examples from other Muslim-majority countries that show it's possible: Bangladesh achieved a sharp fertility drop through community-driven, culturally sensitive programs with strong political backing and widespread access to services. Iran pulled off one of the fastest declines globally with committed investment and smart, non-coercive outreach.

UNFPA's core message is hopeful but urgent: Pakistan's demographic future isn't fixed or fated. With better planning, fiscal incentives that reward real progress instead of punishing restraint, and unwavering focus on gender equality, education, health, and human capital, this massive young population — one of the youngest in the world — could deliver a true \*\*demographic dividend\*\*. More workers, more innovators, more resilience — turning potential strain into economic strength.

The toughest part, as always, is bridging the gap from insight to action. It requires steady, sustained funding (not just donor support, but real domestic priority), smoother coordination between federal and provincial governments, reliable data systems to track progress, and the political courage to make short-term tough decisions for long-term gains. In a politically charged environment, that's easier said than done.

As we move through January 2026, this UNFPA statement feels like a clear call to action at exactly the right time. We're at a fork in the road: keep treating population as an endless crisis to manage, or start building on it as a genuine national strength. With over 257 million lives (and counting) depending on the path we choose, let's hope the momentum builds toward meaningful, sustained change. The window for turning this challenge into opportunity is open — but it won't stay open forever.



grow unchecked.

Of course, this idea has already sparked pushback — particularly from Punjab, the most populous and relatively more developed province, which stands to lose the biggest share if the pure population weight is diluted. It's a classic federal tension: no one wants their slice of the pie reduced, even if the long-term goal is healthier, more equitable national growth. Similar debates have cropped up before, with proposals to freeze population figures at the latest census or gradually reduce its weight to promote stabilization, but consensus remains tough.

The challenges UNFPA keeps highlighting are heartbreakingly persistent and interconnected: alarmingly high maternal mortality, millions of women with unmet needs for family planning, widespread early and child marriages, gender-based violence, and huge disparities in reproductive health care between bustling cities and far-flung villages. These aren't just

# In Iran, the US-Israeli addiction to hybrid warfare is on full display

Jeffrey Sachs and Sybil Fares

In the nuclear age, the United States has to refrain from all-out war since it can easily lead to nuclear escalation. Instead, it wages hybrid wars.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed two such conflicts: in Venezuela and Iran. Both have been waged through a combination of crushing economic sanctions, targeted military strikes, cyberwarfare, stoking unrest and unrelenting misinformation campaigns. Both are long-term CIA projects that have recently escalated. Both will lead to further chaos.

The US has long had two goals vis-a-vis Venezuela: to gain control over its vast oil reserves in the Orinoco Belt and to overthrow its leftist government, which has been in power since 1999. America's hybrid war against Venezuela dates to 2002 when the CIA helped to support a coup attempt against President Hugo Chavez. When that failed, the US ramped up other hybrid measures, including economic sanctions, the confiscation of Venezuela's dollar reserves and measures to cripple Venezuela's oil production, which eventually collapsed. Despite the chaos sown by the US, the hybrid war did not bring down the government.

US President Donald Trump has now escalated to bombing Caracas, kidnapping President Nicolas Maduro, stealing Venezuelan oil shipments and imposing a naval blockade, which, of course, is an act of war. It also seems likely that Trump is thereby enriching powerful pro-Zionist campaign funders who have their eyes on seizing Venezuelan oil assets.

Zionist interests also have their eye on toppling the Venezuelan government since it has long supported the Palestinian cause and maintained close relations with Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has cheered on the US attack on Venezuela, calling it the "perfect operation".

The United States along with Israel is also simultaneously escalating its ongoing hybrid war against Iran. We can expect US and Israeli subversion, air strikes and targeted assassinations. The difference with Venezuela is that the hybrid war on Iran can easily escalate into a devastating regional war, even a global one. US allies in the region, especially the Gulf countries, have been engaged in intensive diplomatic efforts to persuade Trump to back down and avoid military action.

The war on Iran has a history even longer than the war on Venezuela. The first US

intervention in the country dates back to 1953 when democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalised Iran's oil in defiance of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (today's BP).

The CIA and MI6 orchestrated Operation Ajax to depose Mossadegh through a mix of propaganda, street violence and political interference. They reinstated Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who had fled the country, fearing Mossadegh, and helped the shah solidify his grip on power. The CIA also supported the shah by helping create his notorious secret police, SAVAK, which crushed dissent through surveillance, censorship, imprisonment and torture.

Eventually this repression led to a revolution that swept Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power in 1979. During the revolution, students seized US hostages in Tehran after the US admitted the shah for medical treatment, leading to fear that the US would try



to reinstall him in power. The hostage crisis further poisoned the relations between Iran and the US.

From then onwards, the US has plotted to torment Iran and overthrow its government. Among the countless hybrid actions the US has undertaken was funding Iraq in the 1980s to wage war on Iran, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths but failing to topple the government.

The US-Israeli objective vis-a-vis Iran is the opposite of a negotiated settlement that would normalise its position in the international system while constraining its nuclear programme. The real objective is to keep Iran economically broken, diplomatically cornered and internally pressured. Trump has repeatedly undercut negotiations that could have led to peace, starting with his withdrawal from the 2016 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement that had seen Iran's nuclear energy activities monitored and

economic sanctions removed.

Understanding the hybrid war tactics helps to explain why Trump's rhetoric oscillates so abruptly between threats of war and false offers of peace. Hybrid warfare thrives on contradictions, ambiguities and outright deceit.

Last summer, the US was supposed to have negotiations with Iran on June 15 but supported Israel's bombing of the country two days earlier. For this reason, signs of de-escalation in recent days should not be taken at face value. They can all too readily be followed by a direct military attack.

The examples of Venezuela and Iran demonstrate just how addicted the US and Israel are to hybrid warfare. Acting together, the CIA, Mossad, allied military contractors and security agencies have fomented turmoil across Latin America and the Middle East for decades.

They have upended the lives of hundreds of millions of people, blocked economic development, created terror and generated mass refugee waves. They have nothing to show for spending billions on covert and overt operations beyond the chaos itself.

There is no security, no peace, no stable pro-US or pro-Israel alliance, only suffering. In the process, the US is also going out of its way to undermine the United Nations Charter, which it brought to life in the aftermath of World War II. The UN Charter makes clear that hybrid warfare violates the very basis of international law, which calls on countries to refrain from the use of force against other countries.

There is one beneficiary of hybrid war, and that is the military-tech industrial complex in the US and Israel. US President Dwight Eisenhower warned us in his 1961 farewell address of the profound danger of the military-industrial complex to society. His warning has come to pass even more than he imagined as it is now powered by artificial intelligence, mass propaganda and a reckless US foreign policy.

The world's best hope is that the other 191 countries of the UN besides the US and Israel finally say no to their addiction to hybrid war: no to regime-change operations, no to unilateral sanctions, no to the weaponisation of the dollar and no to the repudiation of the UN Charter.

The American people do not support the lawlessness of their own government, but they have a very hard time making their opposition heard. They and almost all the rest of the world want the US deep state brutality to end before it's too late.

# Peace boards and technocrats won't stem out Palestinian resistance

Refaat Ibrahim

Last week, just as Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip intensified, United States presidential envoy Steven Witkoff announced on social media that the “ceasefire” is entering its second stage. In the following days, the administration of US President Donald Trump unveiled the makeup of a foreign executive committee and a peace board that will oversee the provisional administration of Gaza composed of Palestinian technocrats.

This setup reflects the wishes of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that neither Hamas nor the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) would be involved in Gaza's future. Although the latter is mentioned in Trump's “peace plan”, it supposedly first has to carry out a set of unnamed reforms to have any role in Gaza.

What this means in reality is that Fatah, too, can easily be blocked from returning to govern the Gaza Strip with the excuse that these vague reforms have not been carried out.

The problem with the present setup and Israel's insistence on “no Hamas, no Fatah” is that they reflect a profound ignorance of the fabric of Palestinian society, its politics and history. The idea that a Palestinian political entity can be created by outside forces and fully integrated into the occupation to manage Palestinian affairs is unrealistic.

Over the past 77 years, various Palestinian national movements and revolutions have emerged, united by a single common denominator: the rejection of Israeli colonial presence. No Palestinian collective, regardless of its form, has ever publicly agreed to integration into the Israeli colonial project.

Within the framework of resistance, the collective Palestinian consciousness was forged, political parties were born, and the trajectory of public opinion was defined. While the tools and methods adopted by different segments of Palestinian society and political factions may vary, they all share a common commitment to the Palestinian cause and to Palestinian rights.

Fatah and Hamas remain the two most prominent political components of Palestinian society. Fatah emerged as the dominant national liberation movement before its political trajectory shifted following the Oslo Accords,

while Hamas has maintained its commitment to resistance since its inception. Between these two currents and other smaller factions, the Palestinian social fabric naturally rejects any leadership or entity that operates outside the framework of national independence or accepts foreign guardianship.

Israel has decided to ignore this deeply rooted reality, attempting to bypass it by imposing artificial facts on the ground. Consequently, it has continuously sought “local alternatives” for governance in Gaza.

Throughout the war, Israel attempted to empower and arm certain individuals and groups, hoping they could have a role in the postwar era. Many of them were people who were socially marginalised before the war, and some have extensive criminal records. One



example is Yasser Abu Shabab, a member of the Tarabin tribe, who was imprisoned for many years on drug-related charges and who during the war received substantial Israeli backing to create his own militia.

He looted humanitarian aid and collaborated with the occupation in a variety of ways in Rafah, including securing passage for Israeli troops. After he was killed on December 4, there were celebrations in Gaza; his own tribe issued a statement denouncing him. Israeli attempts to engage with other clans and empower them have also ended badly.

Prominent families and clans have repeatedly condemned in public statements the actions of individual members who have decided to collaborate with Israel. They have withdrawn protection and ostracised the collaborators, while affirming that Palestinian clans remain firmly committed to the Palestinian national struggle.

This rejection reflects the failure of Israeli policy to create any local extension aligned with its project. It also confirms Israel's inability to erase Palestinian national memory or break the collective will, despite genocide, starvation, and displacement.

The situation is similar in the West Bank. There, for three decades, the Fatah-dominated PA has collaborated on security with the occupation. As a result, its legitimacy today is extremely low. According to a recent poll, the PA has an approval rating of just 23 percent in the West Bank, while its president, Mahmoud Abbas, has 16 percent.

It is important to note here that despite the PA's close security ties to the occupation, it has failed to stem out Palestinian resistance in the West Bank. In the years preceding the

war of genocide, the West Bank witnessed the rise of armed formations that were independent of the traditional factions Fatah and Hamas, such as Areen al-Usud (Lions' Den) in Nablus and the Jenin Brigades.

These groups were organised by youth and enjoyed broad popular support. Their resistance campaigns reflected the continuity of the armed struggle approach outside traditional structures and the support it enjoys among the Palestinian people. What Israel and its Western allies who are trying to create a

new governance mechanism for Gaza fail to understand is that in the Palestinian context, legitimacy matters. It is something that cannot be created by foreign councils or Israeli-funded militias. That is because legitimacy in Palestine is derived from resistance, which ties national history and identity together.

Any attempt to bypass this reality is doomed to failure, as it would only turn Gaza into a zone of permanent chaos, internal conflicts, and comprehensive security collapse. It would also shatter Trump's legacy as a deal-maker and expose the present arrangement as nothing more than a political spectacle to cover up the fallout of an Israeli-executed genocide.

The only solution that can guarantee stability is full Palestinian administrative independence, based exclusively on the will of the Palestinian people in all their diversity and affiliations, with a clear path toward the establishment of a fully sovereign Palestinian state.

## Karachi's e-challan: The fairness test

The introduction of the e-challan system in Karachi represents a long-overdue attempt to break with business as usual in traffic governance. After decades of weak enforcement and habitual noncompliance, a measure of strictness is unavoidable.

However, enforcement cannot succeed on deterrence alone. The durability of any regulatory framework rests on its perceived fairness and consistency. When enforcement appears selective, even well-intentioned, reforms begin to lose their footing.

Currently, the burden of enforcement falls largely on private cars and motorcycles, while commercial and government vehicles often slip through the system. Smoke-belching buses, garbage trucks and dumpers over-speeding at night, and heavy vehicles occupying express lanes with little consequence send a damaging signal. When such violations are allowed to pass under the radar, public trust erodes and compliance becomes an uphill battle.

Public transport exposes even deeper cracks in the system. Minibus drivers operating without seatbelts, speeding buses, and the recent detection of an underage bus driver, point to systemic failures in licensing, verification and training. These incidents are not isolated bad apples; they are symptoms of a regulatory framework that has long been asleep at the wheel.

Motorcycles add another layer of concern as many of them happen to be without rear-view mirrors and functional tail lights. Ignoring these basic safety requirements while penalising other infractions puts the cart before the horse.

Ultimately, the debate is not about whether or not strictness is needed. In societies marked by prolonged regulatory decay, it clearly is needed. The real test lies in whether that strictness is applied across the board and in the right order.

Inder Kishan  
Hyderabad

## Punjab open courts: From directives to results

To resolve public grievances, district authorities hold open courts across Punjab under government directives. The initiative is commendable, but it needs to be made more result-oriented. In the open court system, plaintiffs or complainants present their cases before the relevant authority, which then issues directions to the officers or departments concerned to resolve their issues. As such, these cases are expected to proceed towards legal resolution, but in many instances, results remain pending for various reasons.

Consequently, the complainants are

compelled either to submit fresh applications, or to wait for the next open court session. This recurring delay undermines the very purpose of justice.

To enhance the effectiveness of the open court system, there is an urgent need to establish an online monitoring system to track the progress of cases discussed in these sessions. Such a mechanism would ensure accountability, timely resolution, and transparency.

Furthermore, introducing an effective feedback system is essential to the task of making society more just, and to truly strengthen the integrity of the framework. All officials who perform their duties exceptionally well should be recognised with medals to encourage others as well.

Muhammad Iqbal Awan  
Mianwali

## Pressure horns: A hazard on highways

The use of pressure horns by bus drivers is very common in Balochistan. No other vehicle has such types of horns. Bus drivers honk unnecessarily to either force their way ahead, or for seeking the attention of potential passengers. Passengers travelling for the first time in such buses are often taken by surprise. Those with heart problems are particularly affected by it. Pressure horns can cause accidents as drivers may lose balance or stop suddenly. The relevant authorities must ensure that bus drivers do not use such horns, and they avoid honking unnecessarily.

Aijaz D.K.  
Hub

## Small change, big loss

Coins of Rs1, Rs2, Rs5 and Rs10 have practically lost their value in Balochistan, and are no longer accepted in shops and markets despite being legal tender. As a result, people suffer repeated losses during routine transactions. In many cases, shopkeepers deliberately set prices in a way that earns them extra money. This practice unfairly shifts the burden on to ordinary citizens, especially low-income families, who make small purchases daily. Coins are designed precisely for minor transactions, such as buying tea or snacks. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) must ensure that coins are accepted and circulated properly across Balochistan.

Abid Rahmat  
Turbat

## Stolen sleep: The marriage hall menace

Marriage halls located near our residential community have been causing severe disturbances. Loud songs, music from speakers, and fireworks have made it increasingly difficult for the area residents to sleep or maintain a peaceful home environment. Despite informal

complaints, the situation persists, affecting the health, safety and wellbeing of the residents. This raises serious concerns regarding noise pollution regulations and enforcement in residential areas of Karachi. The authorities concerned should take urgent and effective action against these violations, and ensure that residential neighbourhoods are protected from such disturbances.

Attaullah Khan  
Karachi

## FGEHA: A broken promise

The federal government had recruited employees from across the country to settle in the newly established capital city, Islamabad. These employees were allotted official residences and they lived there for 30 to 40 years during their service. When these employees neared retirement, their children — born and raised in the clean and well-organised environment of Islamabad — refused to return to their ancestral and underdeveloped hometowns.

Sensing this situation, the government established an institution modelled after the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), known today as the Federal Government Employees Housing Authority (FGEHA). Its primary purpose was to ensure the timely provision of personal housing to retiring employees.

Unfortunately, this institution soon forgot its objectives and became a hub of incompetent officers, corruption, land mafias and contractors.

The first wrong step it took was to limit its role to allotting plots of land instead of building houses. The second was that senior officers, who are fewer in number, were allotted more plots, while the lower-grade employees, who are far greater in number, were given fewer plots. As a result, the officers received large plots after just a few years of service, while the lower-grade employees, despite depositing their savings, were left waiting helplessly.

In the present situation, the allottees of Green Enclave-I (2009), poor government servants who invested their life savings back then, are now retired, battling illness and poverty, and living in small rented houses. Even after 16 years, they are still waiting to get possession of their plots of land. Many of them have already passed away, and their widows are left to wander from office to office seeking justice.

In this dire situation, the executive committee of FGEHA is still considering imposing additional fines on these poor, retired employees. Where will these pensioners and widows find the money to pay such penalties? Should they sell their 40 years of service for a mere Rs1.5 million through property dealers? Is this justice? Is this how states are supposed to function?

Z.A. Zulfi  
Islamabad

## Newfound fossil is not a teen T. rex but a whole new species

Carolyn Gramling

For more than 30 years, researchers have debated whether a fossil of a small but fierce dinosaur came from a teen Tyrannosaurus rex or some other species. Now two new reports come to the same conclusion: Despite its looks, this was no T. rex.

Two paleontologists debuted the first evidence for this in *Nature*. Lindsay Zanno works at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Co-author James Napoli is at Stony Brook University in New York.

A little more than a month later, further support for their assessment emerged in the *Science*. Using a different fossil, a second research team showed that what they had assumed to be a young T. rex was actually an adult Nanotyrannus. Zanno and Napoli had been poring over an exquisitely preserved skeleton of a small tyrannosaur. It had been unearthed in Montana's 67-million-year-old Hell Creek formation. And what they found can finally end the debate over this dino's species, they say.

The skeleton was part of a famous fossil known as Dueling Dinosaurs. It features a small tyrannosaur entangled with possible prey — a horned, beak-mouthed, plant-eating dinosaur. Rock had entombed them together for millions of years. The tyrannosaur now turns out to be a long-sought missing link for researchers. Many had hoped to show Nanotyrannus was a discrete species. And at long last, here was proof: the first known adult Nanotyrannus.

A number of its features set it quite apart from any T. rex. The identity issue started, in a sense, back in 1942. That's when researchers unearthed the skull of a small, sharp-toothed dinosaur. At first it appeared to be a Gorgosaurus. But in 1988, scientists reinterpreted that fossil.



## Lift lighter weight, get just as strong: Here's why

Jen Ator

“Muscle” and “strength” and “lifting” as it all happens in your average local gym is what makes strength training intimidating for some. “Insta-trainers” and showoffs and pseudoscientists on social media only make it noisier with conflicting research, elaborate workout protocols, and stunt exercise videos to get eyeballs. But strength training is critical for health. We all need it. Keeping our bodies strong and functional is how we maintain health and achieve, hopefully, longevity.



So let's get away from the show of muscle. Some facts based on the most recent science: You don't have to lift heavy weights to get great results (unless you want to). You don't need complex equipment and workouts to get great results (unless you want those things).

In fact, lighter weights can give you the same muscle-building results as heavier weight if you know how to do it. You can also lift those lighter weights to achieve more muscular power, which, as you'll see, is something worth striving for as you get older. When it comes to building and maintaining muscle, two factors matter more than anything else: volume and loading. Brad Schoenfeld, PhD, is a professor in exercise science at CUNY Lehman College in the Bronx in New York City. He's also a researcher who has published more than 300 studies in the field of exercise science and sports nutrition. His studies have consistently found that total training volume — that is, the sum of all the sets performed per muscle group per week — is a key driver of muscle hypertrophy (a.k.a. growth). Individual differences such as training experience, recovery capacity, and even genetic factors can influence how much volume is optimal for you.

## Some Antarctic fish arrange their nests into odd shapes

Carly Kay

Antarctic fish build surprisingly organized neighborhoods of nests — and in some very odd shapes.



Scientists spotted this aquatic architecture in the Weddell Sea. Those waters, off the coast of Antarctica, are some of the coldest on Earth. The discovery shows that fish there plan where they group their nests. This helps them protect their eggs from predators. Researchers described the neatly arranged nests October 29 in *Frontiers in Marine Science*. The new findings add evidence that the Weddell Sea is home to complex ecosystems worth preserving. Many countries want to use natural resources in the Antarctic, notes Thomas Desvignes. He's a fish biologist at the University of Alabama at Birmingham who did not take part in the new work. An international treaty currently protects Antarctica's resources. Still, some nations want to begin seabed mining or fishing in the Antarctic. Such actions would put local wildlife at risk. The new research, Desvignes says, offers “one more reason why we should protect the Weddell Sea.” In 2019, researchers set out to explore a patch of open water near a sheet of ice called the Larsen Ice Shelf. Those waters had recently been exposed after a huge chunk of ice broke off from the shelf. The team dropped an underwater robot into the ocean to survey and film the seafloor more than 350 meters (about 1,150 feet) below.

## Fluoride is under fire. Should you be concerned?

Debbie Koenig

Until recently, you probably hadn't thought much about fluoride. It's been added to public water supplies since the 1940s to help prevent cavities. The CDC named water fluoridation one of the “10 Great Public Health Achievements” of the 20th century.



Now headlines are calling its safety into question. In January, a large study review linked high doses to lower IQs in children. This spring, Utah and Florida banned fluoride in drinking water. And last week, the FDA announced it would remove prescription fluoride supplements — for children at high risk of tooth decay — from the market. Suddenly, the cavity-fighting mineral has seemingly been deemed dangerous. Activists have warned for decades about potential risks of fluoride, even though research shows harmful effects only at very high doses. With the Trump administration, those voices have been amplified, starting with Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Before the election in November, he called fluoride an “industrial waste” linked to numerous health risks — claims that have been widely discredited by scientific research. His campaign against fluoride follows similar uproars over vaccines and autism. “We need to be judicious about the evidence and not just throw science out the window,” said Kevin Klatt, PhD, a research scientist at the University of California, Berkeley. “If you do, you get, essentially, the biases of an administration deciding what policy and regulations will be. It can lead to health claims that aren't true.” This public confusion can have a chilling effect. If you read only the headlines, you might assume that fluoride is simply dangerous. “We're seeing more and more people looking for non-fluoride toothpaste, refusing topical applications in dental offices,” said Scott Tomar, DMD, DrPh, the American Dental Association's spokesperson on community water fluoridation.

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