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# WEEKLY **Cutting Edge**

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

## **HOW TO BRING BACK PAKISTAN'S OFFSHORE WEALTH**

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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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# How to bring back Pakistan's offshore wealth

Farhan Khan

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi has called upon businessmen to repatriate 20-30pc of their offshore wealth to meet Pakistan's external sector challenge. He estimated that as much as \$10bn could flow back into the country before the upcoming budget, if traders act decisively.

It is no secret that for decades, vast fortunes built on Pakistani soil have quietly migrated abroad, parked in gleaming Dubai apartments, London townhouses, Swiss bank vaults, and offshore trusts spanning three continents. The scale of this outflow is staggering.

According to educated estimates, Pakistani citizens hold over \$200 billion in assets outside the country. Former FBR Chairman Shabbar Zaidi — an expert on offshore assets — considers that figure inflated, putting his own estimate at \$150 billion. To put that in perspective: it is roughly equal to the country's entire stock of foreign debt. Of \$150 billion, Zaidi estimates that around \$100 billion has no traceable source — no money trail, no legitimate paper record linking it to lawful income. The assets include luxury properties in the United Kingdom, the United States, and continental Europe alongside Dubai real estate, portfolio investments in foreign banks, and shares in Pakistani companies held through elaborate offshore trust structures.

The geography of Pakistan's offshore wealth tells its own story. Dubai emerged as the primary destination after 2000, offering a combination of tax-free investment, real estate liquidity and minimal questions about the origins of capital. London and other European capitals attracted older money, often linked to industrialists and feudal landowners who dispatched wealth abroad during periods of political instability. More recently, government officials have identified approximately \$20 billion currently parked in the Middle East and Europe, much of which was declared during the 2018 and 2019 Tax Amnesty Schemes but was never actually repatriated to Pakistan.

Zaidi has described the composition of undeclared wealth as roughly equal across three categories, each approximating \$33 billion: foreign real estate, portfolio investments in offshore financial institutions, and indirect ownership of Pakistani corporate assets through

foreign holding structures. It is a sophisticated architecture, built not in a day but across generations of elite wealth management.

Islamabad has tried to get back this wealth abroad through various tax amnesty schemes — an offer of legal absolution in exchange for asset declaration and a nominal tax payment. In 2018, the government launched two parallel schemes: the Foreign Assets (Declaration and Repatriation) Act for offshore holdings and the Voluntary Declaration of Domestic Assets Act for undeclared local wealth. Tax rates ranged from just 2% to 5%, with the lowest rate reserved for liquid assets actually repatriated to Pakistan. Declarants received complete immunity from investigation under all other laws. In total, 82,889 declarations were filed, generating Rs194 billion in tax revenue.

The PTI government followed with its own amnesty in 2019. In 2025, the FBR

Bringing this money back has proven far harder than any government has publicly admitted. The obstacles are legal, political, and psychological all at once. The legal complexity is considerable. The FBR has acknowledged that under the Foreign Currency Accounts Ordinance 2001, sending money abroad and purchasing foreign assets is largely permitted and cannot always be classified as illegal. The grey zone between lawful wealth export and illicit capital flight is wide, and Pakistan's legal framework has historically struggled to navigate it.

Politically, the problem is self-reinforcing. A significant portion of the offshore wealth belongs to the same elite class that shapes Pakistan's legislative agenda. Critics have pointed out that amnesty schemes — while generating modest revenue — effectively reward non-compliance and punish honest taxpayers. The cycle of declaration, partial compliance,



unveiled yet another scheme — the latest in a long line of fresh starts. The new amnesty covers both residents and non-resident Pakistanis with undeclared assets at home or abroad, offering minimal tax liability with protection from NAB and FIA investigation.

On the enforcement side, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) announced in early 2026 a record recovery of Rs6.213 trillion (\$22 billion) in ill-gotten money during 2025, and has signed mutual legal assistance agreements with multiple foreign governments. Pakistan's anti-corruption body is also working through Interpol and the Global Operational Network of Law Enforcement Agencies to trace and repatriate assets held abroad.

and renewed amnesty has repeated itself so often that it has acquired its own cynical logic.

The stakes could not be higher. With Pakistan's total foreign debt hovering around \$124.5 billion and annual debt servicing obligations placing severe strain on foreign exchange reserves, the \$100 billion in untraceable offshore assets represents a haunting parallel universe of national wealth — enough, in theory, to transform the country's fiscal position. According to experts, until Pakistan creates the conditions — political stability, rule of law, institutional trust, and genuine international cooperation — that give wealthy Pakistanis a reason to bring their money home, Pakistan's wealth will remain parked in foreign banks.

# Mideast security: how the US-Iran war has redefined the region

Nasim Ahmed

The recent war involving the United States and Iran has fundamentally altered the security landscape of the Middle East. What was once a region defined by clear alliances, American military dominance, and Gulf dependence on external protection has now entered a period of profound strategic uncertainty. The conflict has not only tested military capabilities but has also exposed deep vulnerabilities in existing security arrangements. As the dust begins to settle, one conclusion is increasingly evident: the Middle East's security paradigm has changed—perhaps permanently.

At the center of this transformation is Iran's unexpected resilience. Despite facing coordinated military pressure from the United States and Israel, Iran demonstrated a capacity to absorb, respond, and sustain operations over an extended period. Its ability to withstand advanced airstrikes, cyber operations, and naval pressure has surprised many analysts. More importantly, Iran's retaliatory capabilities—particularly through missile and drone strikes—have signaled a level of military sophistication that has elevated its status as a regional power.

Rather than emerging weakened, Iran appears to have strengthened its deterrence posture. The war has validated its long-standing strategy of asymmetric warfare, reliance on indigenous weapons development, and cultivation of regional alliances. This perceived victory—military if not political—has enhanced Iran's influence across the Middle East and reinforced its image as a state capable of standing up to global powers.

Equally significant has been the experience of the Gulf Arab states. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, long reliant on American security guarantees, found themselves directly exposed during the conflict. Iranian strikes targeting critical infrastructure, including energy facilities and ports, revealed the fragility of their defenses.

Perhaps more troubling for these states was the realization that the presence of U.S. military bases did not necessarily guarantee protection. On the contrary, these installations became potential targets, increasing the vulnerability of host nations. The long-held assumption that American military presence

would serve as a deterrent has been called into question. Instead, it appears that such presence may, in certain scenarios, invite retaliation.

This shift in perception is likely to have far-reaching consequences. Gulf states may now reconsider their defence strategies, exploring alternative arrangements that reduce reliance on any single external power. This could involve diversifying security partnerships, investing more heavily in indigenous defence capabilities, and pursuing diplomatic engagement with former adversaries—including Iran itself.

Indeed, the war may compel a fundamental rethinking of Gulf-Iran relations. For decades, these relationships have been characterized by suspicion, rivalry, and proxy conflicts. However, the recent hostilities have demonstrated the high costs of direct confrontation. Moving forward, Gulf states



may seek to establish mechanisms for conflict management, confidence-building, and even limited cooperation with Tehran.

Such a shift would not be unprecedented. History shows that regions often move toward accommodation after periods of intense conflict. In this case, pragmatic considerations—economic stability, energy security, and domestic development—may drive Gulf capitals to adopt a more balanced approach toward Iran.

Beyond the immediate actors, the war has also accelerated the emergence of a new, more multipolar security architecture in the Middle East. Traditional Western dominance is increasingly being challenged by the growing involvement of other powers, including China, Russia, Turkey, and Pakistan.

Each of these countries brings distinct capabilities and strategic interests to the region. China, with its economic influence and energy interests, has already played a role in mediating regional disputes. Russia,

leveraging its military presence and diplomatic ties, remains a key actor in shaping outcomes, particularly in conflict zones such as Syria. Turkey, with its strategic location and growing defence industry, has positioned itself as both a regional power and a mediator. Pakistan, meanwhile, offers a unique combination of military capability and diplomatic flexibility, making it a strong and reliable partner in emerging security frameworks.

The inclusion of these actors suggests a shift away from a unipolar order dominated by the United States toward a more complex, multipolar system. In such a system, regional states will have greater agency but will also need to navigate a more intricate web of relationships.

Another important dimension of the changing security paradigm is the evolving nature of warfare itself. The recent conflict underscored the effectiveness of drones, cyber capabilities, and precision missiles in shaping outcomes. These technologies have lowered the barriers to entry for military power, enabling countries like Iran to challenge more technologically advanced adversaries.

This trend has significant implications for regional security. It suggests that future conflicts may be less predictable and more difficult to contain. It also underscores the importance of investing in new forms of defence, including cyber resilience and anti-drone systems.

At the same time, the economic consequences of the war cannot be ignored. Disruptions to energy supplies, damage to infrastructure, and heightened geopolitical risk have all taken a toll on regional economies. For oil-dependent states, maintaining stability is not just a security imperative but an economic necessity.

In this context, diplomacy will play an increasingly important role. The recognition that military solutions alone cannot guarantee lasting security may encourage greater emphasis on negotiation and conflict resolution.

The US-Iran war marks a turning point in the history of the Middle East. Iran's resilience has reshaped perceptions of power, Gulf states are rethinking their security strategies, and new actors are entering the regional equation. The result is a more fluid, uncertain, but potentially more balanced security environment. The Middle East is entering a new era, one in which power is more diffused, alliances are more flexible, and the rules of the game are still being written.

# Energy pricing: Deregulation may be best path forward

Muhammad Ali

In recent weeks, a sharp surge in global oil and petroleum product prices has sent ripples through Pakistan's tightly regulated energy sector, exposing structural weaknesses and reigniting debate over pricing mechanisms.

From the margins allowed to oil marketing companies (OMCs) to the final prices paid by consumers at the pump, the entire energy value chain has come under renewed scrutiny. The volatility has not only strained government finances but also raised fundamental questions about whether the current system remains viable in an increasingly unpredictable global energy market.

Until recently, the government had been cushioning consumers from rising international prices through subsidies, which reportedly climbed to around Rs130 billion. While this approach offered short-term relief, it proved fiscally unsustainable. Eventually, the government was forced to pass on the burden to consumers, leading to steep increases in petroleum prices—particularly diesel, which is a critical input for transportation and agriculture. The sudden shift from subsidized to market-linked pricing intensified the impact on businesses and households alike.

Against this backdrop, policymakers and analysts have begun revisiting the administered pricing framework that governs the sector. One key area of debate revolves around the margins allocated to OMCs. Currently, these margins are fixed in rupee terms per litre, a structure that becomes increasingly inadequate when international oil prices rise sharply. As costs escalate, OMCs find their profitability squeezed, prompting calls for a revised pricing formula.

Among the proposals under consideration is a shift toward a guaranteed return model for OMCs. However, this approach raises serious concerns. A cost-plus or guaranteed return system can reduce incentives for efficiency, encourage complacency, and potentially open the door to rent-seeking behavior. Historical experience offers a cautionary tale: during the 1970s, oil refineries in Pakistan operated under a similar cost-plus framework, which ultimately proved detrimental to both consumers and the broader economy. It led to inflated costs, inefficiencies, and a lack of innovation—outcomes that policymakers would be wise to avoid repeating.

The recent spike in refinery margins has

also fueled debate. During periods of extreme volatility, refiners can benefit from windfall gains, prompting calls for temporary regulatory intervention to cap profits while ensuring protection against downside risks. However, with global oil prices already showing signs of easing following geopolitical de-escalation, such extraordinary measures may not be necessary in the long term. Instead, the episode highlights the need for a more resilient and flexible pricing system that can adapt to market fluctuations without requiring constant government intervention.

One clear lesson from this period of volatility is the need to gradually reduce the government's footprint in the energy value chain. Moving toward deregulation could help create a more efficient and responsive system. In fact, Pakistan has already taken steps in this direction by deregulating the price of high-octane fuel, a move that has generally been viewed as successful. The experience suggests that market-based pricing, when properly monitored, can function effectively without leading to widespread exploitation.

Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) provides another instructive example. Although its pricing is technically regulated, market dynamics often prevail in practice, with limited reports of shortages or excessive profiteering under normal conditions. This indicates that, even within a partially regulated framework, market forces can play a stabilizing role.

A key factor supporting the case for deregulation is the dominant position of Pakistan State Oil (PSO), which controls more than half of the market share. As a state-owned entity, PSO can act as a counterbalance in the event of market manipulation by private players. Its presence reduces the likelihood of collusive practices and provides a degree of assurance that deregulation would not lead to unchecked profiteering.

In addition to deregulating prices, there is a strong argument for eliminating the Inland Freight Equalization Margin (IFEM). While originally designed to ensure uniform fuel prices across different regions, IFEM has become a source of inefficiency and leakage. The costs associated with this mechanism are ultimately passed on to consumers, while also removing incentives for companies to optimize their supply chains and transportation networks. Phasing out IFEM could encourage investment in infrastructure, such as the expansion of white oil pipelines, particularly in northern regions where logistical challenges

are more pronounced.

Conversely, retaining or expanding a cost-plus framework would likely entrench existing inefficiencies. If OMCs are guaranteed returns regardless of performance, they may have little motivation to innovate, reduce costs, or improve service delivery. Over time, this could lead to a stagnating sector that is ill-equipped to respond to changing market conditions. International experience suggests that deregulated markets, when supported by effective oversight, tend to be more dynamic and efficient.

The role of the regulator in such a system would not disappear but rather evolve. Instead of setting prices and margins, the regulator would focus on ensuring fair competition, preventing collusion, and maintaining transparency. This shift would align Pakistan's energy sector with global best practices, where market forces determine prices while regulatory bodies safeguard against abuse.

Deregulation of petroleum product prices could also pave the way for broader reforms across the energy sector. Once retail prices are market-driven, the next logical step would be to deregulate ex-refinery prices, allowing refiners to compete more effectively. Given that the largest refinery is also state-owned, the government would still retain a degree of influence during the transition.

Looking further ahead, adopting a market-based approach to exploration and production (E&P) policy could attract greater investment in upstream activities. This is particularly important at a time when energy security is becoming a critical concern amid growing global polarization. Encouraging exploration through competitive and transparent policies would help reduce reliance on imports and strengthen Pakistan's overall energy position.

In conclusion, the recent surge in oil prices has exposed the limitations of Pakistan's current energy pricing framework. While short-term interventions may be necessary during periods of extreme volatility, they should not substitute for long-term structural reform. Moving toward deregulation—supported by strong regulatory oversight and strategic state participation—offers a more sustainable path forward. By embracing market-based mechanisms, Pakistan can enhance efficiency, attract investment, and build a more resilient energy sector capable of withstanding future shocks.

# Uncertainty continues to undermine business confidence

Husnain Shahid

As Pakistan moves closer to unveiling its next federal budget, a familiar set of concerns has resurfaced in discussions between government officials and representatives of trade bodies and the broader business community. These exchanges have once again highlighted the structural weaknesses that continue to constrain economic activity, despite repeated assurances of reform and stabilization.

At the heart of the business community's concerns lies the persistently high cost of doing business. Firms across sectors point to tightening liquidity conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven progress on structural reforms as key impediments to growth. However, the most pressing and frequently cited issue remains policy uncertainty—a factor widely regarded as the single most damaging constraint on economic planning and investment decisions.

Government officials have increasingly pointed to global instability as a complicating factor. Ongoing geopolitical tensions and market volatility have undoubtedly added pressure to an already fragile economic environment. Yet, while these external dynamics are significant, they do not fully explain the depth of Pakistan's economic challenges. Long before recent global disruptions, businesses were already navigating a domestic landscape marked by unpredictability and inconsistency.

Frequent and abrupt changes in tax policy have been a major source of frustration. Instead of fostering stability, the tax regime has often shifted direction without sufficient consultation or clarity, making long-term planning difficult. A particularly contentious issue has been the reliance on presumptive taxation—where taxes are levied on estimated rather than actual income. This approach not only distorts incentives but also penalizes businesses operating on thin margins, discouraging formalization and transparency.

Compounding the problem is a complex and often opaque regulatory environment. Both domestic and foreign investors face a maze of procedures, overlapping jurisdictions, and inconsistent enforcement. Energy pricing, another critical input for industry, remains unpredictable, further eroding competitiveness. These distortions collectively create an environment where uncertainty becomes the norm rather than the exception.

The roots of this uncertainty lie in deeper governance challenges. Short-term decision-making, weak coordination between institutions, and the prioritization of political expediency over sound economic policy have all contributed to

the current state of affairs. Policy continuity—essential for building investor confidence—has frequently been sacrificed in favor of immediate, and often temporary, gains.

Tax policy offers a clear illustration of these systemic issues. Despite repeated commitments to broaden the tax base and improve revenue collection, progress has been limited. Rules are often poorly designed, inconsistently implemented, or revised midway, undermining their effectiveness. For businesses, compliance has become increasingly burdensome. High tax rates are compounded by a dense web of procedures and frequent regulatory changes, raising the cost of operating within the formal economy.

Moreover, the structure of taxation itself remains problematic. An overreliance on indirect taxes places a disproportionate burden on consumers and compliant businesses, while a complex withholding tax regime adds to administrative complexity. Minimum taxes on turnover, regardless of profitability, further strain enterprises, particularly during periods of low growth. Instead of expanding the tax net, authorities have largely focused on extracting more from existing taxpayers.

Meanwhile, significant segments of the economy remain under-taxed or entirely outside the formal system. Sectors such as retail, agriculture, and real estate continue to benefit from preferential treatment, often due to their political influence. Successive governments have hesitated to bring these sectors fully into the tax net, opting instead for short-term revenue measures that avoid confronting entrenched interests.

The consequences of this imbalance are evident in the allocation of capital across the economy. Real estate, in particular, has emerged as a preferred destination for untaxed and undocumented wealth. Rather than being directed toward productive investment, capital is often locked into speculative property holdings. Many of these assets remain idle, generating limited economic value while inflating land prices and distorting resource allocation.

This pattern is not accidental but rooted in policy choices. Historically favorable tax treatment of real estate has incentivized opacity and encouraged rent-seeking behavior. Although recent measures have aimed to address these distortions, they have yet to achieve meaningful change. The underlying incentives that drive speculative investment remain largely intact, limiting the effectiveness of reform efforts.

Investment policy more broadly reflects similar shortcomings. Investors—both domestic and international—seek environments character-

ized by stability, transparency, and predictability. In Pakistan, however, slow decision-making processes, bureaucratic hurdles, and weak coordination between federal and provincial authorities have created significant barriers. The result has been a persistent shortfall in investment inflows, constraining economic growth and job creation.

In response, the government established the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) to streamline processes and improve coordination. While the initiative has had some success in reducing procedural bottlenecks and expediting select projects, its overall impact remains limited. Concerns about transparency and a narrow focus on specific investments have prevented it from addressing the broader structural issues that deter investment.

This tendency to rely on ad hoc solutions rather than comprehensive reform has been a recurring feature of economic policymaking. Whether in tax administration, investment promotion, or energy sector management, the emphasis has often been on short-term fixes rather than long-term stability. While such measures may provide temporary relief, they do little to build the credibility and consistency that investors require.

What Pakistan needs at this juncture is a fundamental shift in approach. Policy coherence and credibility must become central to economic strategy. This means establishing clear rules, applying them consistently, and avoiding abrupt reversals that undermine confidence. It also requires strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring accountability in both policy formulation and implementation.

Equally important is the political will to undertake difficult but necessary reforms. Broadening the tax base, reducing reliance on indirect taxation, and addressing preferential treatment across sectors will require confronting vested interests. Similarly, improving the regulatory environment and ensuring energy pricing transparency will demand sustained commitment and coordination across multiple levels of government.

In conclusion, the concerns raised by the business community ahead of the budget are not new, but they remain unresolved. While external challenges continue to test the economy, the more enduring obstacles are domestic in nature. Without addressing the underlying governance deficits and restoring policy certainty, efforts to stabilize and grow the economy are likely to fall short. The upcoming budget presents an opportunity—not just to balance fiscal accounts, but to reset the policy framework in a way that fosters confidence, encourages investment, and lays the foundation for sustainable economic growth.

# Debt pressures and global uncertainty

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economic managers are once again navigating a delicate phase, as the country confronts external financing pressures, shifting global dynamics, and the stringent requirements of an ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme.

Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, in recent engagements with international agencies and media outlets, outlined a strategy centered on stabilizing foreign exchange reserves—particularly in light of the imminent withdrawal of \$3.45 billion by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This development has placed renewed urgency on Pakistan's ability to secure alternative financing while maintaining credibility with global lenders.

The significance of the UAE's loan recall extends beyond its immediate financial impact. Historically, Pakistan's participation in IMF programmes has acted as a catalyst for additional inflows from bilateral and multilateral partners. These partners typically interpret IMF approval as a signal of macroeconomic discipline and reform commitment. However, the current \$7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF), agreed upon in July 2024, includes a more explicit condition: sustained financial support from development and bilateral partners is essential for the programme's success. In this context, the withdrawal of UAE support raises concerns about whether Pakistan can continue to meet this critical requirement.

For years, financial packages from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and China have been rolled over annually, providing a cushion for Pakistan's external account. The potential discontinuation of one such pillar introduces uncertainty not only for the IMF but also for other international stakeholders who closely monitor the country's financing landscape. Any perception of weakening external support could complicate future negotiations and delay disbursements tied to programme reviews.

To offset the impact of the UAE's withdrawal, the government is exploring the issuance of Panda bonds and possibly Eurobonds. These instruments, while offering access to international capital markets, come with their own set of challenges. Unlike concessional loans from friendly countries or multilateral institutions, commercial borrowing is significantly influenced by market sentiment, credit ratings, and macroeconomic stability.

Pakistan's recent credit rating reaffirmation at 'B-' by Fitch underscores the risks involved. This rating indicates a material default risk and highlights the country's vulnerability to adverse economic conditions.

While participation in an IMF programme generally lowers default risk by imposing fiscal discipline, it does not eliminate market concerns. Investors remain cautious, particularly in an environment marked by global economic uncertainty and geopolitical tensions. As a result, any bond issuance is likely to carry relatively high interest rates, increasing the cost of borrowing at a time when fiscal space is already constrained.

Compounding these challenges is Pakistan's persistent external imbalance. The country's foreign exchange reserves are heavily reliant on debt inflows rather than sustainable earnings. A chronic trade deficit continues to weigh on the balance of payments, and recent geopolitical developments—particularly tensions involving the United States, Israel, and Iran—pose additional risks. These conflicts can disrupt global supply chains, drive up energy prices, and dampen remittance inflows from overseas workers, all of which are crucial for Pakistan's external stability.

Economic projections further illustrate the fragility of the current situation. The IMF has revised Pakistan's growth forecast downward to 3.5 percent, even before factoring in the full impact of recent global developments. At the same time, inflation is expected to rise to 8.4 percent, signaling renewed pressure on household purchasing power and business costs. This combination of moderate growth and rising inflation presents a policy dilemma for economic managers.

Monetary policy is at the center of this dilemma. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) currently maintains a policy rate of 10.5 percent, a level that reflects earlier efforts to contain inflation. However, with price pressures expected to intensify, the IMF has emphasized the need for a "tight and data-dependent" monetary stance. This could translate into further interest rate hikes if inflation expectations rise or if global commodity prices remain volatile.

From a domestic perspective, higher interest rates are often viewed as detrimental to growth. They increase borrowing costs for businesses, discourage investment, and can slow economic activity. It is therefore likely that both the SBP and the Ministry of Finance would prefer to avoid additional tightening.

Nevertheless, deviating from IMF recommendations carries significant risks. Failure to adhere to agreed policy frameworks could undermine confidence among international partners, potentially leading to delays or reductions in financial support.

The broader fiscal implications of replacing concessional loans with commercial borrowing are equally concerning. Issuing bonds to cover the UAE's withdrawal would increase Pakistan's debt servicing obligations, a major component of government expenditure. As debt servicing rises, the government may be forced to make difficult choices, such as reducing allocations for the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) or increasing domestic borrowing.

Both options carry economic costs. Cutting development spending can slow infrastructure projects, reduce job creation, and weaken long-term growth prospects. On the other hand, increased domestic borrowing can crowd out private sector investment and place upward pressure on interest rates. In either case, the result is likely to be slower economic growth and a deeper reliance on debt.

This cycle of borrowing to repay existing obligations has long been a structural challenge for Pakistan. Breaking out of it requires a shift toward sustainable sources of foreign exchange, including export growth, diversification of the industrial base, and increased foreign direct investment. While short-term financing measures are necessary to maintain stability, they must be complemented by structural reforms that address underlying weaknesses in the economy.

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a critical point where immediate financial needs intersect with longer-term economic priorities. The withdrawal of UAE support has exposed vulnerabilities in the country's external financing model and underscored the importance of maintaining strong relationships with international partners. While the proposed issuance of bonds may provide temporary relief, it also carries significant costs that could strain public finances.

Navigating this complex landscape will require careful coordination between fiscal and monetary authorities, adherence to IMF programme conditions, and a renewed focus on structural reforms. The choices made in the coming months will not only determine the success of the current programme but also shape the trajectory of Pakistan's economic future.

# Can Pak–Afghan talks deliver lasting peace?

Raza Khan

As the security situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan under the Taliban regime remains precarious, China has recently hosted peace talks between the two neighboring states, with the latest reports from Beijing suggesting that negotiations are progressing. The central questions, however, are whether these peace parleys between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban regime can succeed in the first instance, and more importantly, whether any positive or successful negotiations between Islamabad and Kabul could translate into meaningful and lasting conflict resolution.

With regard to the new round of talks between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban in China, they do represent a positive development. Although by April 5 Beijing was claiming that discussions between Islamabad and Kabul were moving forward, it is still too early to adopt an overly optimistic outlook. To properly assess whether the talks are genuinely advancing, one must closely examine and analyze the respective positions of both sides. Pakistan's stance has consistently been that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which it has labeled *Fitna-tul-Khwarij*, continues to receive tacit or overt support from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This support allegedly enables the group to carry out attacks inside Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, resulting in the loss of hundreds of civilian and security personnel lives. Therefore, Islamabad maintains that unless the Taliban regime decisively halts any support for the TTP, the prospects for durable peace with Kabul will remain bleak.

On the other hand, the Taliban regime has repeatedly described the TTP as an internal problem of Pakistan, arguing that Islamabad is attempting to externalize its own security failures by blaming Afghanistan. The Taliban leadership also claims that reining in the TTP, despite its presence on Afghan soil, is not entirely within their control. Notably, however, the Taliban have largely remained silent on the specific allegations of direct or indirect support for the group.

A closer examination of these opposing positions reveals significant inconsistencies in the Taliban's argument. If, as widely reported, a substantial portion of TTP fighters are operating from Afghan territory, it

becomes difficult to justify labeling the issue as purely internal to Pakistan. In reality, the problem assumes a cross-border and regional dimension rather than a strictly domestic one. Furthermore, if Afghan soil is being used as a base for launching attacks into Pakistan, the Taliban's position appears increasingly untenable. Their claim of inability to control the TTP could also be interpreted as an implicit admission of limitations as a governing authority. In this context, the Taliban regime finds it difficult to categorically oppose Pakistan's military strikes targeting TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan. While such operations may result in collateral damage, this remains an unfortunate but often unavoidable aspect of counterterrorism efforts, even when conducted with maximum precision.

Given these realities, it is imperative that the Taliban leadership reassesses its approach. Harboring or tolerating anti-Pakistan militant groups is not only detrimental to bilateral relations but also contrary to Afghanistan's own immediate and long-term interests. Ultimately, it is the Afghan population that bears the consequences of instability, isolation, and economic hardship resulting from such policies.

Analyzing the Taliban's inability to effectively control the TTP reveals that this argument may hold partial validity, but it is not entirely convincing. A key underlying factor is the nature of the Taliban regime itself, which lacks broad-based political legitimacy and remains more akin to a militia than a fully institutionalized state actor. Having come to power through force rather than a widely recognized democratic mandate, the regime faces structural limitations in governance and control. As such, it may not possess the institutional capacity required to decisively confront and dismantle entrenched militant networks, whether domestic or foreign.

In these circumstances, Pakistan's decision to conduct targeted strikes against militant sanctuaries inside Afghanistan can be viewed through the lens of self-defense. From Islamabad's perspective, such actions are necessary to safeguard national security and protect civilian lives. This may also explain why Pakistan's cross-border operations have not attracted widespread or sustained international condemnation, as many observers recognize the complexities

of the threat environment.

However, beyond the issue of capacity, there also appears to be an element of unwillingness on the part of the Afghan Taliban to act decisively against the TTP. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Taliban view the TTP as a form of strategic leverage. Historically, the TTP provided support to the Afghan Taliban during their insurgency against the former Afghan government, culminating in the fall of President Ashraf Ghani's administration in 2021. At that time, Pakistan itself had supported the Afghan Taliban, a policy that, in hindsight, can be seen as strategically short-sighted.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that successive Afghan governments have often maintained adversarial relations with Pakistan, a pattern that dates back to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. This historical mistrust has consistently shaped Islamabad's security calculations and contributed to its cautious approach toward Kabul.

For the Taliban, retaining ties with the TTP may serve multiple purposes. Firstly, it provides a potential auxiliary force in the event of internal challenges to their rule, especially given Afghanistan's history of factional conflict. Secondly, it offers a means of exerting pressure on Pakistan. By distancing themselves from Islamabad and supporting anti-Pakistan elements, the Taliban may seek to counter perceptions that they are overly dependent on or aligned with Pakistan. This is particularly relevant in the context of domestic legitimacy, where anti-Pakistan sentiment has often been used as a tool for political validation.

In light of these complex and deeply entrenched dynamics, it is difficult to be overly optimistic about the success of peace talks between Islamabad and Kabul, regardless of whether they are facilitated by China or any other external actor. While negotiations under Beijing's auspices may produce short-term de-escalation or a temporary cessation of hostilities, the prospects for long-term peace remain uncertain. Unless the Afghan Taliban fundamentally alter their strategic calculus—specifically by abandoning their support for the TTP and reframing their perception of Pakistan as an adversary—any progress achieved through dialogue is likely to remain fragile and reversible.

# Rebuilding primary healthcare in Balochistan

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

The recent admission by Balochistan's health authorities that more than 80 percent of the province's population lacks access to primary healthcare is not merely a statistic—it is a stark reflection of systemic failure. For years, the erosion of basic service delivery in the province has been visible, but official acknowledgment now removes any ambiguity. The crisis is no longer about recognition; it is about response, execution, and accountability.

Successive governments have offered familiar explanations for the state of healthcare in Balochistan. The province's vast geography, scattered population, rugged terrain, and resource constraints are frequently cited as structural barriers. These factors are undeniably real and have shaped policy challenges for decades. However, their continued use as justification, without corresponding improvement in outcomes, suggests a deeper issue. The problem is no longer a lack of understanding—it is a failure to translate understanding into effective delivery.

Budgetary limitations often dominate the conversation. Comparisons with larger provinces, particularly Punjab, underscore the disparity: Punjab's health budget alone exceeds Balochistan's total development spending. While this imbalance is significant, it does not fully explain the scale of deprivation. The issue is not only how much is spent, but how effectively those resources are allocated and utilized. Weak prioritization of primary healthcare, inefficiencies in expenditure, and insufficient oversight have all contributed to a system that struggles to deliver even the most basic services.

Among the most pressing challenges is the shortage of human resources. The healthcare system in Balochistan suffers from a chronic lack of doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff, particularly in remote and underserved districts. While recent promotions of medical officers may ease administrative burdens, they do little to address the core issue: the reluctance of healthcare professionals to serve in areas where infrastructure is poor, security conditions are uncertain, and career incentives are minimal. Without a comprehensive framework that links rural postings to tangible professional and financial benefits, these staffing gaps are unlikely to close.

Security concerns further complicate an already fragile system. In many parts of the province, healthcare facilities exist in form but

not in function. The presence of buildings and equipment does not guarantee service delivery when healthcare workers face risks to their safety. In such environments, absenteeism rises, morale declines, and communities are left without reliable access to care. Addressing healthcare in isolation from the broader security context limits the effectiveness of any policy intervention. Stability and service delivery must progress together.

Compounding these challenges is the province's low level of educational attainment. Healthcare outcomes are closely tied to public awareness, health literacy, and community engagement. In areas where literacy rates are low and awareness of preventive care is limited, even available services may go underutilized. This creates a reinforcing cycle: poor access leads to poor outcomes, which in turn deepen social and economic vulnerabilities. Breaking this cycle requires an integrated approach that combines healthcare delivery with education and public awareness initiatives.

In recent years, the government has signaled a shift toward reform, with particular emphasis on digitization and technological solutions. Plans to connect health facilities through satellite-based systems and expand telemedicine services reflect an effort to overcome geographic barriers. These initiatives hold promise, especially in a province where distances between communities can be vast. However, technology is not a substitute for a functioning healthcare system on the ground. Telemedicine can enhance access, but it cannot compensate for facilities that lack staff, essential medicines, or basic operational capacity.

The central challenge remains the gap between policy intent and actual outcomes. The problems facing Balochistan's healthcare system are well documented, and numerous reform initiatives have been announced over the years. Yet, progress has been limited, largely because of weak implementation. Policies are often introduced without clear timelines, measurable targets, or mechanisms for accountability. As a result, they risk remaining confined to official statements rather than translating into tangible improvements.

The consequences of this failure extend far beyond the health sector. When primary healthcare is inaccessible, patients are forced to seek treatment at higher-level facilities, often at greater cost and with significant delays. Preventable diseases escalate into serious conditions, placing additional strain on an already overburdened system. This not only increases

healthcare expenditures but also reduces overall efficiency. The economic impact is equally significant, as poor health outcomes limit productivity, reduce workforce participation, and perpetuate cycles of poverty.

There is also a broader national implication. Persistent disparities in access to essential services, particularly in a province as strategically important as Balochistan, undermine social cohesion and trust in public institutions. While the province's challenges are often framed in terms of geography and security, they also reflect a longstanding governance deficit—one characterized by inconsistent policy execution and insufficient institutional capacity.

Addressing this crisis requires more than incremental adjustments. A fundamental reorientation of priorities is needed, with primary healthcare placed at the center of policy planning. Investment in basic health infrastructure must be scaled up, ensuring that facilities are not only built but also fully functional. Equally important is the creation of incentive structures that attract and retain qualified healthcare professionals in underserved areas. Financial rewards, career advancement opportunities, and improved working conditions can help bridge the gap between urban and rural postings.

At the same time, efforts to improve security must be closely aligned with healthcare delivery. Without a safe operating environment, even the best-designed interventions are unlikely to succeed. Parallel investments in education and community awareness are also essential, enabling individuals to make informed health decisions and increasing the utilization of available services.

Above all, accountability must become a central pillar of reform. Clear benchmarks, defined timelines, and transparent monitoring mechanisms are critical to ensuring that policies are implemented effectively. Progress must be measured not by the number of initiatives announced, but by tangible improvements in access and outcomes.

In conclusion, the acknowledgment of Balochistan's healthcare crisis marks an important moment, but it is only a starting point. The scale of deprivation is now clear, and the constraints are well understood. What remains is the political will and administrative capacity to act decisively. The real test lies not in further diagnosis, but in delivery. Expanding access to primary healthcare within a defined timeframe is no longer an aspirational goal—it is an urgent necessity.

# The Iran war has exposed the limits of neutrality

Khalid Al-Jaber

The recent US-Israeli military confrontation with Iran is not merely a limited military operation or another round in the cycle of mutual deterrence. Rather, it presents a revelatory moment for the entire structure of the international order. This confrontation redrew geopolitical divisions in an unprecedented way, exposing the limits of assumptions that had governed the behaviour of major powers for decades, chief among them the belief that conflicts could be contained through neutrality or conventional diplomatic instruments.

What became clear in the earliest days of the war is that the world no longer operates according to the logic of managed tensions and deliberate restraint, but within a highly interconnected environment where geography intersects with transnational networks, and regional crises can rapidly transform into direct global shocks. Iran launched strikes across several countries in the region in the first few days of the war alone, targeting American assets as well as Gulf energy and other infrastructure – almost immediately causing global market disruption.

The course of the war demonstrated that the concept of “neutrality” is no longer viable in contemporary regional contexts, particularly in the Middle East. When the instruments of conflict extend through armed proxies, the closure of vital maritime corridors and threats to global energy supplies, any state, regardless of its efforts, finds itself drawn into the trajectory of the crisis in one form or another. Qatar, for example, had invested years in mediation between Washington and Tehran, keeping channels open with all sides, yet faced Iranian strikes on its civilian infrastructure and energy installations hours after the war began.

Neutrality is easier to declare than to maintain. Iranian strikes on energy infrastructure across Gulf states forced several producers to declare force majeure and suspend their operations. In Qatar, Qatar Energy halted LNG production, and the effects were felt almost immediately in Europe through a surge in gas prices of almost 50 percent in the Netherlands and the UK, a reminder that the global economy, energy security and supply chains are now directly tied to the stability of this region.

Engagement with difficult or intransigent regimes has remained a persistent challenge. Several NATO member states signalled

reluctance, or declined altogether, to support Washington’s request for expanded cooperation. At the multilateral level, divisions within the UN Security Council became evident: while some members condemned Iran’s strikes on Gulf states, the Council was unable to reach a consensus regarding the US-Israeli strikes, underscoring deep disagreements among major powers over how to approach and engage with Iran.

The ceasefire camp draws on a weighty historical record. Military interventions, such as those in Iraq and Libya, for example, have demonstrated that toppling regimes by force does not necessarily lead to the construction of stable systems; more often, it opens the door to chaos and institutional collapse. In both Iraq and Libya, external military interventions contributed to prolonged conflict, fragmentation and institutional collapse, from which both



countries are still recovering.

This camp holds that war is a crisis multiplier and that the priority must be to halt the humanitarian and economic toll and return to the diplomatic track, even if that means co-existing with a difficult or intransigent regime. It also considers relative stability preferable to chaos with no predictable outcome.

However, this argument faces a central dilemma: it assumes that the Iranian regime is amenable to containment within the rules of conventional diplomacy, an assumption that Iran’s own actions since February 28 have now called into question. For example, Iran struck several Gulf states, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which had both given explicit assurances that their territories would not be used to launch any offensive operations against Iran.

The regime change camp takes the opposing view, arguing that the war did not create the crisis but rather revealed its true

nature. It contends that Iranian behaviour, whether through targeting maritime corridors or expanding proxy wars, has proven that the regime cannot be contained or tamed through traditional instruments. Decades of diplomacy and sanctions did not prevent the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Proponents of this position maintain that decades of diplomacy, including the nuclear agreement and regional mediation, have helped expand Iran’s capabilities and expand its influence rather than contain them. For this camp, the solution lies in changing the very structure of the regime itself.

Nevertheless, this argument raises a profoundly complex question: what comes after regime change? Previous experiences in the region offer no successful model for state reconstruction following the overthrow of regimes, making this option riskier than its po-

tential gains may justify. The opening strike of this war, the assassination of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was itself premised on the assumption that removing the head of state would precipitate collapse. Instead, a successor was selected shortly after the initial strike, and state institutions continued to function.

Indeed, this war reveals a deeper transformation in the nature of the threats confronting the international order. Threats are no longer conventional or confined within state

borders; they have become networked and able to spread across military, economic and digital fronts simultaneously. They originate not only from regular armies but from the convergence of multiple instruments: militias, cyberattacks, economic targeting and the closure of maritime passages. This complexity makes it exceedingly difficult to rely on traditional tools, whether diplomatic or military, to address crises effectively.

Calling for a cessation of hostilities without addressing the root causes of the crisis may amount to nothing more than postponing the inevitable explosion, while pursuing radical change without a clear vision for the day after may open the door to even wider chaos.

Between these two options, the world confronts a fundamental question: How can it deal with a regime widely viewed by many states as part of the problem, without allowing the pursuit of its transformation to create an even greater one?

# Slavery reparations are just, but who exactly owes whom?

Femi Owolade

On March 25, the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the United Nations General Assembly passed a landmark resolution. Proposed by Ghana, it recognised the transatlantic slave trade as the “gravest crime against humanity” and called for reparations. A total of 123 countries supported the resolution; three opposed it, including the United States and Israel, while 52 abstained, Britain among them, and several European Union countries.

The UN’s slavery resolution is a historic moment, but what comes next is even more important. Leading up to the resolution, the African Union urged its 55 member states to pursue slavery reparations through formal apologies, the return of stolen artefacts, financial compensation, and guarantees of non-repetition.

This raises a question the resolution does not directly ask: reparations from whom, and to whom? If the answer is simply from European governments to African governments, then the reparations movement risks ignoring the long history of European engagement with Africa, and in doing so delivering justice to the wrong people.

The contemporary framing of the reparations debate is seductive in its simplicity: Europeans arrived in Africa, Africans were enslaved, Europeans grew rich, and Africans became impoverished. Therefore, Europe owes Africa. This narrative carries moral force, but it risks flattening the complex history of European engagement with the continent.

While European actors undeniably drove the demand for enslaved labour, African political and economic elites were not passive victims. They played a significant role in capturing, transporting and selling enslaved people to European traders.

In some cases, African states, seeking to expand their treasuries and consolidate territorial power, preyed on neighbouring communities, condemning them to enslavement for profit. The Oyo Empire, a powerful Yoruba state in what is now south-western Nigeria, expanded significantly in the eighteenth century through its participation in this commerce. Across the region, African elites who had the means sustained the system by exchanging enslaved people for European goods such as alcohol, textiles and other manufactured commodities.

None of this diminishes European culpability in the slave trade. The demand was Euro-

pean. The ships were European. The plantation system was European. The racialised ideology constructed to justify slavery was European. But it does complicate the story.

The transatlantic slave trade was not solely a narrative of African victimhood and European perpetration. It is a story of elite collaboration, which did not end when the slave ships stopped sailing.

European encounter with African societies can be understood in three broad phases, each distinct in form but similar in the underlying logic of collaborative extraction. The first phase was slavery. Europeans extracted human labour from Africa, often with the active participation of African political rulers. Britain emerged as the world’s leading slave-trading country, transporting roughly 3.4 million Africans across the Atlantic between 1640 and 1807. The abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 marked the formal end of this phase. But abolition did not disrupt the underlying logic of the elite collaboration. It reshaped it.



The second phase was colonialism. A less understood aspect of European domination in Africa is how seamlessly some African rulers transitioned from collaborators during the slave trade to intermediaries in the colonial period. In Nigeria, for example, regional African rulers became intermediaries for British administrators. As Nigerian historian, Moses Ochonu, demonstrates in *Emirs in London*, a study of Northern Nigerian Muslim aristocrats who travelled to Britain between 1920 and independence in 1960, these African figures were far from passive subjects of British rule. They actively leveraged their relationship with British authorities to reinforce their own authority at home. Such sponsored travel to the imperial centre helped solidify personal ties between

Nigerian elites and British administrators, reinforcing the system of indirect rule.

The third and current phase is the postcolonial era. While formal empire has ended, the structure of elite alignment endures. In countries such as Nigeria, the majority of citizens remain largely excluded from political and economic power. The institutional successors of intermediaries and collaborators during the eras of slavery and colonial rule are now running the African postcolonial states.

Rather than dismantling extractive systems, many have repurposed them. Similar patterns of exclusion and extraction that defined earlier periods have been reproduced, leaving the majority of Africans short-changed by a system that continues to serve elite interests.

Nigerian President Bola Tinubu’s state visit to the United Kingdom last month – complete with royal ceremony, photo opportunities and symbolic gestures – reflected this relationship whose origins lie in the very history the UN resolution condemns. While the

majority of Nigerians face difficult socio-economic conditions, the British government announced that Nigerian companies would create hundreds of new jobs in the UK.

This is not an anomaly but a continuation of the extractive logic that shaped the slave trade and colonialism. It endures, now recast in the language of diplomacy and partnership.

Reparations are just, and Britain’s debt is undeniable. But direction matters. If compensation flows from one set of elites to another, the oppressed majority of Africans will once again be excluded. True justice must run in two directions: from European states to formerly colonised societies, and from African elites to the citizens they continue to exploit.

# The EU must not wait till Israel starts executing Palestinians

Tamam Abusalama

Preparations for the implementation of Israel's new death penalty law have already begun. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has boasted that a new prison wing is under construction where the killings will take place, and new "red" uniforms for the Palestinian prisoners have already been ordered.

Meanwhile, the global "condemnations" have ceased. Like others, the European Union, which prides itself on high human rights standards, continues to look away. This is despite the fact that its Association Agreement with Israel has a clear clause that demands respect for human rights.

Official reactions have been nothing short of disgraceful. When the bill was cleared by the National Security Committee of the Knesset late last month, EU spokesperson for foreign affairs, Anouar El Anouni, described the measure as "deeply concerning" and affirmed the bloc's opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances.

Yet, in the same statement, the EU praised Israel's supposed "previous principled position, with its obligations under international law, as well as its commitment to democratic principles". It is as if Israel had never carried out a brutal decades-long occupation, illegal colonisation and genocidal campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon. The statement then "encouraged" Israel to meet the EU's conditions on human rights under the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

On March 30, just before the final vote on the bill, European countries, including the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, issued a joint statement expressing "deep concern" about the bill, without warning of any concrete steps.

On March 31, after the bill was passed, the EU released another statement recycling its talking points, adding only that the measure represented a "grave regression" of Israel's own commitments and practices – a claim that directly contradicts findings from EU investigations, international and Palestinian United Nations bodies, human rights organisations and the December 2024 and July 2024 advisory opinions of the International Court of Justice.

There was no mention of the Palestinian people, who are targeted by this law or the Palestinian prisoners who have suffered brutalisation and death at unprecedented levels in the past two and a half years. There was no acknowledgement of the suffering of the families of Palestinian detainees.

My own family reacted with a mix of heartbreak and bitter familiarity when the bill passed. We were sickened, but not surprised. My father was a freedom fighter in his youth and spent 14 years in Israeli jails for resisting the occupation before being released in a prisoner exchange. I could not help but imagine



my father's story unfolding in today's reality.

He would be one of the many Palestinian political prisoners awaiting execution after a ruling from a military court that finds 99 percent of Palestinian defendants "guilty". He would be punished for simply rejecting colonial domination, for standing up for his rights and the rights of his people. And in today's reality, the very institutions that claim to represent me and all European citizens, in the name of democratic values and human rights, would be complicit in allowing his execution.

It is important to note that the EU's stance is neither surprising nor a diplomatic mistake. It is yet another confirmation that the EU's professed commitment to human rights ends where Israel's impunity begins.

The contrast is especially stark when compared with the EU's position towards other allies and adversaries. It has repeatedly condemned the use of the death penalty in Iran, Belarus, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and recently, in Russian occupied Donetsk. In each of these cases, the EU has clearly linked

the death penalty to broader violations of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, and to the wider contexts in which each case is found.

The hypocrisy became even more striking when the decision was made to pause discussions on sanctions and the revision of the EU-Israel Association Agreement after the US-brokered so called "ceasefire" in Gaza in October 2025.

Since then, Israel has continued to defy international law and violate human rights, expanding its occupation to over 50 percent of Gaza's territory, advancing settlement

construction in occupied Palestinian land, banning and attacking UNRWA facilities built with EU funds, expelling international humanitarian NGOs from the Gaza Strip, forcibly displacing tens of thousands in the occupied West Bank, and hundreds of thousands in Lebanon, and Iran, and shutting down access to holy sites in Jerusalem. The well-documented list of violations only continues to grow.

But the EU can no longer ignore them because European citizens are increasingly rejecting Israeli

impunity. More than one million Europeans have signed the petition of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Justice for Palestine", calling for the full suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, making it the fastest-growing ECI to date. This demand has also been endorsed by over 60 human rights and humanitarian organisations, as well as more than 350 former diplomats.

The EU cannot continue to drift further from both its legal obligations and the clear demands of its people. It must act decisively. At the Foreign Affairs Council on April 21, several European states will again put the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement on the table. This is no longer a technical debate. It is a test of political will.

The rest of the EU member states face a simple choice: act, or remain complicit. Anything short of suspension is a failure to uphold EU law, a betrayal of its stated values, and a dismissal of the growing public demand across Europe to end Israeli impunity and deliver justice for the Palestinians.

## The erosion of academic freedom in Pakistan's universities

There is an unsettling shift taking place within Pakistan's higher education institutions — one that threatens not only academic freedom, but also the intellectual future of the country. Universities, once envisioned as spaces for inquiry, debate and a fearless exchange of ideas, are increasingly becoming environments marked by intolerance and a shrinking acceptance of diverse viewpoints.

A particularly worrying dimension of this trend is the deepening influence of rigid, dogmatic thinking, especially in matters related to religion. While faith remains a deeply personal and respected aspect of life, its imposition in academic spaces has begun to blur the boundaries between belief and scholarship. As a result, many academicians and teachers now operate under an unspoken pressure; one that discourages open discussion, critical questioning and analytical engagement.

In such an environment, teachers hesitate to explore complex or sensitive topics, not due to a lack of competence, but due to a lack of safety; intellectual and, at times, personal. Students, in turn, are deprived of the very essence of higher education: the ability to question, to reflect, and to develop independent thought. The consequences of this approach are far-reaching. A society that discourages critical thinking cannot innovate, cannot adapt, and cannot progress. It risks producing graduates who may hold degrees, but lack the intellectual resilience required to navigate an increasingly complex world.

It is imperative that the government and relevant educational bodies take concrete and courageous measures to safeguard academic spaces. Policies must be introduced that clearly protect intellectual freedom, encourage respectful disagreement, and ensure that higher education remains distinct from ideological rigidity. Universities must be reaffirmed as places of learning and research, not arenas of conformity. If we are to secure a future grounded in knowledge, creativity and progress, we must restore our universities as spaces where ideas are explored.

Dr Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah  
Missouri, USA

## Wildlife protection in Thar

Recently, poachers left a half-dead deer and carried away four others from the area between Smit and Mamchero near Nagarparkar. For the people of Thar, this was not merely the loss of wildlife; it was the loss of life that they regard as part of their own moral and ecological family. What is most disturbing is not the act of hunting alone, but the complete absence of accountability that allows such crimes to occur openly. Villagers, with limited means,

paid from their own pockets to travel and hold a protest on Dandhan Road, demanding protection for wildlife, while the state machinery remained conspicuously absent. When citizens show more responsibility towards conservation than institutions mandated to enforce the law, governance itself stands exposed.

Illegal hunting in Thar is not an isolated act of cruelty; it has become an organised business. Influential hunters, including local elites and foreign dignitaries alike, are facilitated by intermediaries who provide access, protection and silence in exchange for money and patronage. Equally alarming is the trade in deer and peacock fawns under the cover of legality. Wildlife protection cannot succeed if enforcement targets only those who pull the trigger while ignoring those who trap, trade and facilitate. This is fundamentally a human rights issue. Environmental destruction always strikes first at communities that depend on nature for cultural identity, livelihood and dignity. The people of Thar understand this truth intuitively: when deer disappear from the dunes, something vital disappears from their own lives as well.

The government and wildlife authorities must take immediate notice of the incident. Those responsible — hunters, facilitators and collaborators — must be identified and prosecuted without regard to status or influence.

Unfortunately, conservation laws lose all meaning when power determines who is punished and who is protected.

Asghar Ali  
Tharparkar

## Rebuilding family bonds

The family system in our society seems to be deteriorating. In many families, siblings do not see each other, disregard each other's feelings, and disagree with their parents on family matters. They take their parents for granted who raise them and provide them with the best of everything within their capacity.

The younger ones feel they are more intelligent and intellectual than their elders. They like to decide matters independently, believing that their elders have become old and cannot handle the challenges of the modern world effectively. As a result, the foundations of the family system are shaking. The elders seem helpless, and do not react in order to avoid any tussle with the young ones.

How to handle this situation? How can the younger lot be convinced to stay who they are and to appreciate the values of their elders and learn from their gained experiences? Schools as well as social media influencers, motivational speakers and, indeed, clerics should play their part and pay more attention to address the issue through their lectures.

Youngsters can, and should, share their opinions respectfully and may also give advice to their elders, but they should not act like de-

cision-makers in the presence of family elders. The more they remain obedient to their elders, the more they should expect to be successful in life. Likewise, elders should take youngsters of the family on-board and seek their advice in critical matters so they may not feel neglected. They should involve the young in all family discussions and decisions.

Faisal Ansar  
Karachi

## The death of shock

We come across war videos online, but no longer feel the same level of shock or empathy that we felt in the early days of the conflict in Iran. We watch, scroll past, and continue with our daily routines as if nothing has happened. This emotional desensitisation can be troubling. Constant exposure to violence and destruction reduces our sensitivity to human suffering, making distant tragedies feel less real. However, behind every video are real people whose lives are being frequently and deeply affected. We may feel powerless to change these situations directly, but awareness and empathy still matter.

Syeda Urooj Fatima  
Karachi

## Contaminants in plastic water pipes

Plastic pipes are increasingly used in Pakistan for water distribution due to their low cost, corrosion resistance, and ease of installation. These pipes contain additives, such as stabilisers, antioxidants and plasticisers, which can leach into drinking water over time. In addition, gradual material degradation may release microplastics and many other chemical contaminants, potentially compromising water quality. The problem is further aggravated by biofilms, increasing the release of microplastics into water. As Pakistan upgrades its water supply infrastructure, pipe materials must go beyond cost and durability.

Aiza Javed & Imran Hashmi  
Islamabad

## Climate disaster

Pakistan is increasingly vulnerable to climate-related disasters, and it is crucial that we address this pressing issue. Our unique geography, comprising mountains, rivers and coastal areas, makes us prone to floods, heatwaves, droughts and unpredictable monsoon rains. Recent floods have displaced thousands, damaged crops worth millions, and highlighted the need for preparedness. Climate change is taking a toll on our agriculture, economy and people, with devastating impacts on livelihoods and health. The government should take immediate and concrete actions to address climate change, prioritising the vulnerable communities.

Asifa Wali  
Hub

## Ancient process that created rare earth elements discovered

Sascha Pare

Researchers may have found a new way to locate deposits of rare earth elements that are vital to the tech and energy industries.

Rare earth elements crystallize in Earth's mantle inside blobs of magma that are rich in alkali metals, such as sodium and potassium, and carbonate minerals, such as calcite and dolomite. In a new study, scientists found that these types of magma, known as alkaline and carbonatite magmas, form above ancient subduction zones, where one tectonic plate dives beneath another.

"This research shows that the ingredients for these critical mineral deposits were put in place many million[s] to even billions of years ago," study lead author Carl Spandler, a professor of mineralogy, petrology, geochemistry and economic geology at Adelaide University in Australia, said in a statement. "By identifying where these ancient processes occurred, we can significantly narrow down the search areas for future discoveries."

The study, published in the journal *Science Advances*, challenges previous theories that linked rare earth deposits primarily to mantle plumes — giant, mushroom-shaped columns of red-hot molten rock that originate near Earth's core. It's possible that mantle plumes are involved in making rare earth elements, the researchers wrote in the study. However, there is no clear overlap between the two, and plumes may be too hot to produce alkaline and carbonatite magmas.

In the study, the team used advanced modeling techniques to reconstruct Earth's plate tectonics and subduction processes over the past 2 billion years.



## Four benefits of going out in the rain

Ally Hirschlag

From its distinctive smell to the negative ions it releases, rain has some fascinating benefits for our bodies — especially when it comes to our mood.

It turns out that after decades of studying the elements of rain's potential mood-boosting abilities, scientists have found some decent evidence to support it. And it's not the only benefit of rain: research shows rain also removes harmful substances from the air, while its unmistakable smell may even enhance our memories.

The predominant reason may be that rain releases negative air ions — oxygen molecules with an extra electron, which form as raindrops collide or hit a surface and split apart. In high levels, these are known to boost serotonin and alpha waves in the brain, leading to a happier, more relaxed state. When raindrops hit the ground, they can splatter and release negative ions into the air — a process called the Lenard effect. So if you're hoping to get a sizeable dose of serotonin-boosting negative ions, try taking a walk in a rainstorm. Just make sure to get inside if you see lightning — for safety's sake.

Some scientists believe these positive effects may be due to negative air ions increasing oxygen levels in the blood, resulting in a mood boost akin to what you experience from intense exercise. However, there still isn't conclusive evidence to explain exactly what mechanism is going on to produce these effects. Pam Dalton, a cognitive scientist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Pennsylvania in the US, notes it is still not well understood why negative ions have effects such as changes in mood as well as fatigue, cardiovascular status and blood pressure. Rain's negative ions also appear to clear the air of particulate matter such as pollution and allergens, making it easier to breathe.



## This humanoid robot does all your housework for you

Kenna Hughes-Castleberry

Could a humanoid robot perform household chores for you? Soon, that might be the case. Chinese robotics company UniX AI has announced the release of Panther, a humanoid service robot designed to help with common household tasks.



The robot — which weighs 176 pounds (80 kilograms) and stands 5 feet, 3 inches (1.6 meters) tall — can operate for up to 12 hours on a charge, its engineers announced in a statement. In addition to releasing a promotional video showing Panther performing chores like making the bed, cleaning countertops and toilets, and cooking breakfast, UniX AI has started commercial deliveries of the model — suggesting it's ready to be deployed in a real-world setting.

"UniX AI is not only building advanced technology and products, we are bringing robots into homes, hotels, public spaces, and security operations, making them reliable productivity tools for society," Fred Yang, founder and CEO of UniX AI, said in the statement. To accomplish household chores, Panther uses two of the world's first mass-produced 8-DoF bionic arms, which give the robot joints with 34 degrees of freedom, UniX AI representatives said.

At the end of its arms are intelligent "grippers" that adapt to different shapes and sizes of items that the robot can grab. In the promotional video, Panther is seen holding a plastic spatula when frying an egg and a toilet brush when cleaning the toilet. The robot even washes its hands in the sink at the end of the video, drying off its grippers on a bath towel.

## Pregnancy vaccine reduces baby hospital admissions for RSV by 80%

Philippa Roxby

A vaccine during pregnancy which protects newborns against nasty chest infections is cutting hospital admissions of babies by more than 80%, UK health officials say.



A virus, called RSV, affects many babies in the first few months of life and can leave them gasping for breath and struggling to feed, with more than 20,000 babies ending up seriously ill in hospital in the UK every year. Since 2024, women have been offered a vaccine from 28 weeks of pregnancy to protect their newborns. A new study analysing the impact of the vaccine shows it gives "excellent protection" to babies when they are most vulnerable to RSV, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) says. RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) is one of the main reasons young babies are admitted to hospital before the age of one. Half of newborns catch the virus, which can cause anything from a mild cold to a life-threatening chest infection because of inflammation in the lungs. Small numbers die from it every year. In babies with bad infections you can see their chest and lungs struggling, as they try to pull enough oxygen in, said Dr Conall Watson, national programme lead for RSV at the UK Health Security Agency. "This is very, very frightening as a parent, frightening with good reason." The new vaccine was introduced in the UK in 2024 after clinical trials showed it could boost a pregnant woman's immune system enough to pass on protection to the baby through the placenta.

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