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Fort Bend County Primaries 2026: Crowded Fields Set Stage for Fierce Races

FORT BEND COUNTY, TX – The candidate filing period has concluded for the Fort Bend County March 3, 2026 primary elections, which will determine the Republican and Democratic nominees for the November 3, 2026 general election. Both parties feature competitive races for key county offices.

On the Democratic side, the contest for Fort Bend County Judge includes J. Christian Becerra, Rachelle Carter, Cynthia Lenton-Gary, Dexter L. McCoy, and Eddie Sajjad. The District Clerk race fea-

tures Iris R. Lewis, Beverley McGrew-Walker, and Muzaffar Vohra. The County Clerk race is crowded, with Shah Haleem, Maria T. Jackson, Sonya Jones, and Montreal L. Peterson seeking the nomination. For County Treasurer, candidates include Jeffrey L. Boney, Sara Khan, Eric B. Lister, Rahim Rupani, and Pedro Valencia.

Democrats are also vying for commissioner positions: Precinct 2 features Larry Blackmon and Grady Prestage, while Precinct 4 has

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Pakistan witnessed 34pc increase in terrorism in 2025

ISLAMABAD: Despite record militant deaths, Pakistan saw a sharp escalation in militant violence in 2025, with terrorist attacks rising by 34 per cent and terrorism-related fatalities increasing by 21 per cent year on year. As many as 699 terrorist attacks were recorded countrywide during the year.

This violence claimed at least 1,034 lives and left 1,366 injured, underscoring a rising trajectory of militancy that has persisted since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. These are the findings of the "Pakistan Security Report 2025,"

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Leftist Mamdani begins first day as New York mayor

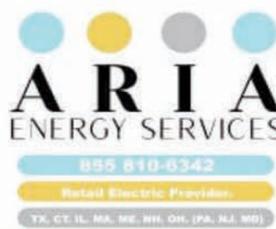


Zohran Mamdani is sworn in as mayor of New York City at Old City Hall Station, New York, U.S., Thursday, Jan 1st 2026.

Zohran Mamdani, the young star of the US left, started his first day as New York mayor on Thursday for a term sure to see him cross swords with President Donald Trump.

The 34-year-old Democrat — virtually unknown a year ago — was officially sworn in as mayor of the largest city in the United States

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Pakistan's first year on the UN Security Council: diplomacy tested in turbulent times

In 2025, Pakistan re-entered the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the eighth time, marking the beginning of a two-year term that would challenge the very essence of

multilateral diplomacy.

Wars raged, humanitarian norms eroded, and the Council — designed to prevent precisely such breakdowns

Continued on page 12

2026 will see Pakistan stepping on moon

ISLAMABAD: SUPARCO Director Shafaat Ali announced that 2025 will be remembered as a breakthrough year for Pakistan in space projects. The nation's sights are set on the Moon in 2026,

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1/4 of American families overwhelmed by medical expenses

More than 1 in 4 Americans are struggling with financial toxicity, with big medical bills dragging down both their money and their health, a new study says.

Nearly 27% of U.S. residents faced high medical expenses or skipped needed health care because they couldn't afford it between

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Trump says aspirin caused bruised hand, denies falling asleep

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump blamed aspirin for large bruises on his hand and denied falling asleep while attending public meetings, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal published on Thursday. In the interview defending his health, the US leader also

Continued on page 12

Analysis: After years of drift, 2025 brings thaw in Pak-US ties

THE year 2025 will be remembered in Islamabad and Washington as a period of surprising warmth in bilateral ties, marked by high-level engagement, strategic recalibrations, and complex regional developments.

After years of drift, Pakistan-US relations saw a notable thaw, but beneath the optimism lies a layered

and complex reality shaped by history, personalities, and shifting global alignments — prompting analysts to urge restraint in reading the moment as a lasting reset.

The year's diplomacy pivoted with an unprecedented White House meeting between President

Continued on page 13

World bids farewell to year of tariffs, turmoil and truces

SYDNEY: New Year's Eve revellers toasted the end of 2025 on Wednesday, waving goodbye to a year packed with President Donald Trump's tariffs, a fragile Gaza truce and vain hopes for peace in Ukraine, concluding one of the warmest years on record. In 2025, stifling heat stoked wildfires in Europe, droughts

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US think tank warns of Pakistan-India, Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions in 2026

An American think tank has warned of possible armed conflicts in South Asia in 2026. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) issued the warning in its latest report, "Conflicts to Watch in 2026", published by its Center for Preventive Action.

The report highlighted Pakistan's

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Correcting our consumption

Our consumption habits assault both human health and planetary systems.

Ali Tauqeer Sheikh

THIS new year, I've made a simple promise to myself — to cut back on chai, cheeni and ghee. It is not just about my own health — though my waistline surely needs it. It is a stand against habits that are quietly bleeding Pakistan dry. Sweet milky tea, sugary sweets and ghee-drenched parathas are everyday comforts that cost us over \$4 billion for edible oils, \$600 million for tea, and significant subsidies and spikes for sugar. They fuel our shocking 31.4 per cent diabetes rate, the highest in the world. And as climate-triggered disasters ravage us again, we see their hidden climate toll. What was once warmth and hospitality has become a national vulnerability. It is time to face facts and find fixes.

Our consumption pattern: Pakistanis drink a lot of tea. At 1.5 kilogram per person annually, we rank sixth globally — more than twice India's rate. That is four to five cups daily in most homes, loaded with sugar and milk. We consume over 25kg of sugar per head yearly, much of it in chai and mithai. Additionally, a major share comes from juices, sodas, confectionaries and bakery products. Over the last decade, this has caused our import bill to explode. Total edible oil imports exceeded \$4bn in 2024, with those high in saturated fat alone accounting for nearly \$3bn. To grasp the scale: this exceeds Rs1,100bn that is nine times Pakistan's combined federal budgets for education and health, and over 100 times what the treasury received from the PIA privatisation.

The combined import bill for tea and edible oils has surged over 40pc in five years. If consumption and population growth remain unchecked, this could hit \$7bn annually by 2030, entrenching the 'triple burden' permanently. This is money we cannot spare when climate catastrophes wipe out billions every few years.

Health-planet nexus: Our consumption habits assault both human health and planetary systems in parallel. The saturated fats in ghee and trans fats in cheap vanaspati drive up bad cholesterol, making heart disease the leading cause of death. We rank first globally for diabetes prevalence, with nearly 30pc of adults hypertensive. The sugar in our chai often exceeds 60

grams daily. It fuels diabetes in one in three adults. These non-communicable diseases drain our GDP as families spend heavily on medical tests, pills and doctors, a burden worsened for the poor by widespread adulteration of unpackaged, loosely sold ghee and fake tea. The economic toll is staggering: NCDs cost Pakistan an estimated 2-3pc of GDP annually in lost productivity alone.

These same habits devastate our ecosystems. Sugarcane dominates 1.5m hectares (3.7m acres) of irrigated land, straining the Indus even as freshwater flows shrink. This expansion occurs at cotton's expense that generates far greater export earnings per acre. Sugarcane's 2,000-litre-per-kilogram water demand depletes aquifers that should irrigate wheat. While cotton strengthens our industrial base, sugarcane thrives through a 'playbook of distortion' where mill owners secure near-free irrigation water, instead of paying a water-use levy based on cane procured that would internalise water costs into sugar pricing, thereby reducing reliance on subsidies.

Governance failures: Evidently, Pakistan's sugar, tea and edible oil sectors share a common playbook where artificial price supports and export quotas create shortages despite ample supply, while the dysfunctionality of oversight bodies enable smuggling and adulteration. In the sugar sector, operational mills benefit from near-free irrigation water. In the tea sector, the absence of the Pakistan Tea Board (defunct) enables annual smuggling losses via Afghan transit while some elite importers allegedly block local plantations through lobbying. Similarly, in the ghee sector, waivers sustain high margins despite global price drops, and loose ghee evades health regulations and enforcement. Collectively, these networks are believed to misallocate over \$4.6bn in annual forex, entrench elite capture and corruption at public expense.

These distortions amplify Pakistan's climate risks, particularly in flood-prone sugar belts. The governance failure extends into the climate crisis, where the sugar elite has mastered the art of turning climate-triggered disasters into profit. While the 2022 and 2025 floods devastated smallholders, destroying up to 61pc

of yields in some districts, the sector paradoxically saw an export boom and value increase of over 20pc. By leveraging flood-induced local shortages to justify stockpiling and price spikes, politically wired millers ensure their unquestioned profits. This systemic capture not only sidelines high-value crops like cotton but also entrenches a water-intensive monoculture that leaves Pakistan increasingly vulnerable to the very climate shocks these elites allegedly exploit for gain.

Cultural tradition: The Indus Valley civilisation knew sugarcane and produced gur for millennia, but today's industrial sugar dominance is recent. Pakistan's culinary past offers alternatives our grandmothers understood instinctively: carrying both ceremony and wellness. The path to breaking this 'triple burden' lies in dismantling the vertical integration and regulatory capture that have turned our kitchens into profit centres for the elite. We must move to shed the entire ecosystem of 'fried and sweet' consumption. A critical first step is to tax high-sugar beverages and industrial trans-fats, with revenues ring-fenced to fund public health awareness.

Finally, we must internalise the true cost of production by replacing near-free irrigation for sugar with a water-use levy that reflects our national scarcity. This would naturally pivot the agricultural economy back towards cotton and pulses. These crops build industrial capacity and food security instead of draining water for elite mills. Switching to canola and sunflower, which require far less water and yield per hectare in saline lands, could help cut import reliance and reduce our carbon footprint, and ease pressure on drying aquifers. Breaking this cycle requires more than technical policy; it requires the rejection of a governance model that leverages climate disasters like the 2025 floods to justify stockpiling and price spikes.

My promise to cut back on chai, cheeni, and ghee is a personal refusal to fund these cartels. My first plain chai tomorrow is small, but it's a start. Policymakers, join me. Turn this burden into strength. Our people — and our planet — deserve it.

The writer is a climate change and sustainable development expert.

RIP Shamshad Akhtar

Had it not been for the deft balancing act she performed in those months, Pakistan's inflation would have peaked far higher than it did.

Khurram Husain

SHE was the shortest giant I ever met. Yet she commanded stature and could dominate a room full of people simply by being in it. It was the quiet authority she exuded that was her signature, the kind that seeks no validation from anyone. She steered Pakistan's financial system through one of its most critical tests ever: the Great Financial Crisis of 2008, as governor of the State Bank at the time. And in doing so, she developed the template that was used by her successors more than a decade later.

The economy had been drifting towards crisis since 2006, when she came into the position of governor. She had already made history as the first woman governor of the State Bank, but little did she know that she would be called upon to make history one more time in dealing with the crisis coming her way. Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves were depleting fast, at an accelerating clip, and inflation was rising. In two years, the inflationary fire reached historic levels, and the reserve depletion brought the country's financial system to the brink of a full-fledged run on the banks.

The financial sector had changed by the time this crisis arrived. In 1997, for example, total financial sector assets were around 95 per cent of GDP. By 2007, they had risen to 125pc. Equally important, most of this lay in private hands. And on the margins of the big banks and capital markets, a slew of smaller players operated — insurance companies, non-bank financial institutions, smaller banks that had escaped the merger and acquisition drive of the 2000s, listed private bonds, and so on. Financial risk had taken complex forms with these changes, and improving banking supervision and surveillance had become critical tasks.

Akhtar focused hard on the sources of risk and their propagation channels, and worked to develop a surveillance regime as well as upgrade regulatory requirements to shore up the resilience of banks against possible crises. To do this,

she worked to identify risks to financial institutions, markets as well as infrastructure. The system faced wide-ranging risks along multiple fronts as it evolved out of public sector hands into private ownership, and strengthening banks' capital adequacy in addition to the regulators' visibility of systemic risk was becoming increasingly critical.

Her efforts bore fruit in the year 2008, when the Great Financial Crisis engulfing the world finally landed in earnest on Pakistan's shores. The financial system was hit by a wave of withdrawals so severe that it created a crisis that the country had never seen before: a full-fledged banking sector collapse. A number of developments began to unfold simultaneously. Widespread dollarisation began in 2007 as reserves fell and the current account deficit swelled. One devaluation in November 2007 triggered a flight into dollars, which accelerated all through 2008. Second, non-performing loans of the banking system began to skyrocket in the early months of 2008, reaching levels equal to what they were in the pre-privatisation days. Third, by the summer of 2008, banks stopped bidding for government debt paper in anticipation of an interest rate hike, forcing the State Bank to print more money to finance runaway government spending on subsidies that the Musharraf regime was unwilling to withdraw in the face of mounting challenges to the general's rule. Fourth, a global price spiral in oil and wheat was placing unprecedented strain on the country's external account, sending the trade deficit skyrocketing and draining foreign reserves further still.

A near-perfect storm was brewing until then, but it was completely overshadowed by the stormy political developments of the day. The economy did not stand a chance in competing for the headlines in days when the Lal Masjid crisis and the lawyers' movement were roaring ahead.

By the summer of 2008, the perfect storm began to take shape. Dollarisation gave way to dollar flight. Banks were hit by panic-driven withdrawals of rupee liquidity so severe

that the weaker among them began to shake under the strain. The government's fiscal crisis worsened and printing of rupees accelerated. The crisis landed in the first week of October, when Eid-related cash withdrawals from the banking system combined with panic withdrawals sent at least four banks into a liquidity crisis.

The real story of those days needs to be told properly. Four owners of small banks showed up in the office of Governor Akhtar to inform her that their banks were hit by withdrawals they could no longer honour. The interbank lending window had shut down. In short, a run on the banks had begun.

Akhtar knew that the banking system needed strengthening all along. It was the steps that she had taken earlier in her tenure, building on the work of her predecessor Ishrat Husain, that helped the banks weather the intense liquidity crisis they faced in 2008. But vulnerability remained when a few smaller banks were unable to sustain themselves in the face of the severe strains they were facing. And this is precisely how banking systems face total collapse, when the weakest among them fails, panic spreads, and soon everyone starts seeing panic-driven withdrawals.

Akhtar managed this situation, trying to prevent a fully-fledged financial meltdown while at the same time trying to prevent, as far as was possible, the full impact of the crisis hitting the common citizenry in the form of inflation. Had it not been for the deft balancing act she performed in those months, Pakistan's inflation would have peaked far higher than it did, at 25pc.

This was the first test of Pakistan's new, post-privatisation financial system. And Akhtar was the captain of the fleet who navigated them all through the choppiest waters they had ever traversed. She was a steady hand on the tiller, a firm captain of her will and a resolute central banker who put duty above ambition. May she rest in eternal peace.

The writer is a business and economy journalist.

Countering terror and proxies

Arrest of ISIS-K member highlights growing threat from cross-border militant groups in Balochistan and beyond

Imtiaz Gul

The recent arrest of ISIS-K member Mohammad Goran in a joint operation by Pakistani and Turkish intelligence should raise serious concerns for Pakistan and its neighbours on multiple fronts. Turkish media reported that Goran had pledged to carry out attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey and Europe prior to his arrest.

First, the arrest aligns with the Taliban's narrative, insisting on the allegations of the existence of terrorist camps in border regions. Goran's arrest was swiftly followed by Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid claiming that it resulted from intelligence shared by Afghanistan. He reiterated that the Islamic Emirate had formally objected to the presence of ISIS sanctuaries and called for their immediate dismantling, describing ISIS as a "sinister phenomenon" that must not be exploited against any country.

Second, Goran's arrest must be viewed in the context of clashes that erupted in mid-March between the banned Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) in the Chiltan mountain range between Quetta and Mastung district in Balochistan.

Fighting reportedly began around March 18-19, when hundreds of BLA militants, supported by fighters from the outlawed Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), attacked a training camp in the hills near Mastung.

The camp reportedly housed around three dozen militants affiliated with local and foreign jihadist groups, including ISKP and the sectarian Pakistani outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Local officials and private sources said the occupants included ISKP operatives from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan. BLA forces allegedly surrounded the camp for three days and killed most of those inside after they ran out of ammunition, effectively destroying the facility.

Militant sources disclosed that fighters from the BLA's Majeed Brigade had previously received training at the same camp. The Majeed Brigade is known for preparing operatives for suicide bombings and sniper attacks against Pakistani security forces and Chinese interests. The assault followed the BLA's loss of several senior commanders in military operations across Balochistan between February and March.

Third, the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring

Team's 35th report (2025) highlighted cross-linkages among the Majeed Brigade, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ISKP and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), including collaboration at operational bases in Afghanistan. The Afghan, Tajik and Uzbek militants killed in Mastung were reportedly part of ISKP networks in Afghanistan and had been invited to Balochistan to train jihadist fighters.

Mastung's rugged terrain has long rendered it a de facto no-go area, offering militants elevated positions for attacks and easy escape routes. Fighters from multiple militant organisations are believed to operate there. Local journalists largely refrain from reporting on militant activity, citing fear of reprisals from both militants and security forces, as well as undeclared restrictions on coverage of ISKP-related issues.

Fourth, Afghan sources point to the presence of at least two seminaries north of Kabul allegedly established for fighters affiliated with the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), formerly known as ETIM. One of its leaders, Abu Bakr al-Uyghori, and Abdul Salam, who oversees TIP's media operations, are reportedly

based at one such seminary in the Pul-e-Khumri area of Kunduz province, along the Salang Highway.

In November 2020, the US Justice Department removed ETIM from its list of designated terrorist organisations, raising eyebrows as to what might be the motive. A year later, the CIA created its China Mission Centre with the stated objective of containing China's growing influence. Did ETIM's de-designation have anything to do with the Centre, too? Unverified reports from Kunduz suggest that Uyghur militants now intend to openly project their campaign against Beijing, portraying their leader, Abdul Haq Turkestani, not as an Al-Qaeda affiliate but as a displaced figure seeking to reclaim Xinjiang through the TIP. Abdul Salam reportedly cited the US decision as validation that the group should not be viewed as a terrorist, an assertion China strongly rejects.

Finally, the cross-border affiliations and operational synergies among these militant groups underscore their proxy character. Balochistan's location at the intersection of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan makes it a natural transit and facilitation zone. ISKP operatives moving through or receiving

training there highlight networks of mobility, logistics and coordination rather than the presence of large, formal camps. Organised crime networks, particularly drug trafficking, arms smuggling and illicit trade, often act as enablers, creating a mutually reinforcing ecosystem that undermines regional counterterrorism efforts.

ISKP-linked activity in Balochistan thus signals broader regional spillover and illustrates how proxy militant groups and organised crime increasingly function as interconnected components of a wider terror matrix. The threat they pose is transnational and persistent, demanding sustained regional cooperation and a coordinated counterterrorism strategy to deal with groups that ostensibly are driven more by geopolitical realities than by the ideological claims of religion, nationalism or sub-nationalism by these terror groups. These threats also require authorities in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan to demonstrably go after any activity by any of these groups that represents a threat to any neighbouring countries. Mere statements and allegations won't impair the deadly work that these groups are involved in.

Play, not phones

Unstructured playtime fosters a sense of community and camaraderie.

Muna Khan

I'm opposed to bans because they rarely solve anything but I'm making an exception for a ban on mobile phones in schools as implemented in several countries. I will focus on the recent "bell to bell" ban on mobile phones in New York schools that has resulted in a "teen social revival", as the press is calling it. The ban, implemented in May, was done to create "a distraction-free environment" in schools. "Our kids will finally be free from the endless interruptions of social media and the mental health pressures that come along with it," said Governor Kathy Holcul.

The policy allows provisions for emergencies as well as methods for parents to contact their children. Students can carry a flip phone without internet capability and can use internet-enabled devices provided by schools. It is a well-thought-out policy but, more importantly, it has seen remarkable results.

"Within weeks teachers began to notice an incidental (and arguably, even more compelling) benefit: The teens were talking to one another ... there's a pleasant buzz in the lunchroom, chatter in the hallways," reported New York Mag last week.

Futurism magazine noted "actual human interaction flourishes" and teens are playing

cards at lunch, board games, learning dominoes, even sports; they are "discovering the joys of old-school analog tech, and even a little no-stakes gambling."

Cafeterias are no longer silent. School spirit is up, other publications note.

Teachers have reported greater interaction with students, positive class environments, better learning outcomes and they say they can teach more effectively.

The ban seemed almost inevitable. You couldn't escape research about the damning effects smartphones were having on children as young as 10: they were at higher risk of depression, insomnia, obesity according to Pediatrics journal. The diagnosis of ADHD was higher among children aged nine to 10 who spend a lot of time on screens. Children using ChatGPT suffered memory loss, procrastinated more and had low grades according to a study in the International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education.

But a ban alone isn't going to tackle the negative impact social media and/or screen time has on young people. The trick is to get them to spend less time on their phones, said Dr Victoria Goodyear, the lead writer of a study that examined phone use at school. According to their study, children in the UK,

where the study was conducted, were spending four to six hours a day scrolling on their phones.

The most concerning thing, I found, was the rise in loneliness among youngsters worldwide. Loneliness, an alien concept for most generations across South Asia, is a growing epidemic around the world and one that can be traced to increased use of smartphones.

One study found worldwide, "nearly twice as many adolescents in 2018 (vs. 2012) had elevated levels of school loneliness." The rise in smartphone use among teens has seen a decline in their mental well-being.

This isn't a First World problem.

A recent APP story reported on the increasing feelings of loneliness among Pakistani young adults. "This is the quiet paradox of our time, in an age built on digital connection, many are struggling with emotional disconnection," they wrote. A psychologist from Lahore quoted in the story said young people may be connected online but lack emotional support. We have a warped idea that families in the West do not spend time with their children. Parents are as disconnected from their children in Pakistan as anywhere else.

Some argue that banning smartphone use isn't a fix; instead administrators, as well as

parents, have to teach children how to use their phones better. They also say social media platforms have to be made safer, less addictive.

What can schools in Pakistan learn from the "bell to bell" ban in New York? Plenty, I think. Restrictive policies won't result in youngsters spending less time on their phones or social media but the reduction in time at school can be channelled into productive activities. Students at one school in New York, which witnessed several fights on campus, were quoted as saying that the ban had reduced violent incidents.

Playtime defines childhood and as one grows, unstructured playtime fosters a sense of community, camaraderie and strengthens bonds. I'm not supporting everyone playing poker but it's far healthier than situations that befit gang warfare.

The goal should be to encourage social interaction. This promotes both academic and emotional well-being. For this you need stakeholders to come together — from educators to parents, from psychologists to students themselves. So far, what we're hearing from them in news reports on the phone ban in New York is that they are feeling some relief, and are enjoying face-to-face interactions.

The writer is an instructor of journalism.

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‘Failed’ economic model

The staggering number of talented individuals leaving Pakistan would trouble any serious policymaker.

Shahid Mehmood

ABOUT two weeks ago, the head of the Special Investment Facilitation Council declared that Pakistan has a ‘failed’ economic model. As an economist, though, I was not surprised because the failure of our ‘economic model’ (whatever that is) has been known for long. Importantly, though, how did we end up with a ‘failed’ model? And, what does a ‘successful’ economic model look like?

I’ll address the second query first, partly owing to the recent award of the Nobel Prize in Economics to three economists (Joel Mokyr, Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt) and also because it will give us a fair idea of the first query.

The recorded history of mankind’s economic activities shows that real income growth followed a pretty flat trajectory, but saw a remarkable uptick in the 19th century as the Industrial Revolution picked up pace (the ‘hockey stick’ phenomenon). What factors underlay this stupendous transformation? The work of the three winners addresses this very question.

The two most famous long-term growth theories are that of Robert Solow and Paul Romer (both Nobel Prize winners). Solow identified population growth, savings, and technological change as the factors that drive economic growth. Of this, technology is the most important component since by itself, population and savings alone can drive growth to a certain level, but beyond that, as depreciation catches up, the economy reaches a ‘steady state’ beyond which returns of these two factors keep falling. It was persistent technological change that would keep the economy above its steady state level. However, for Solow, technolog-

ical change was ‘exogenous’ (the ‘black box’) — determined outside the system.

Romer came up with his theory in his paper ‘Endogenous Technological Change’ (1990). He agreed with Solow’s contention that technological change is the most critical input in long-term growth. Where he differed was that it was determined within the system by the ‘intentional’ actions of innovators who had incentives to innovate in order to earn more than average earnings. One of his contentions, which he called the ‘most fundamental premise of his theory’, was that the process of technological innovation has a fixed cost, meaning that an innovator can build upon that knowledge with zero marginal expense. At the heart of his theory were two variables — high-quality human capital, and the endless possibility of profits with the expansion of the size of the market, which would mainly come courtesy of international trade.

Aghion and Howitt wrote their seminal paper ‘A Model of Economic Growth through Creative Destruction’ around the same time (1992) as Romer. They based their work on the idea of ‘creative destruction’, a term coined by Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950) who hypothesised that the workings of capitalism are underpinned by “gales of creative destruction”; the most creative would survive but the less creative would not be so lucky.

If creativity also carries a destructive tendency, how did industrialised countries end up with steadily increasing real income growth? They answer this by pointing out that there are thousands of sectors functioning in an economy; creative destruction in one is

usually balanced out by creative growth in another. There are countless examples: BlackBerry replaced by iPhones and Netscape replaced by Google. Or take stock of the fact that Google or Amazon were merely blips on the vast canvas of the New York Stock Exchange at the start of the 21st century (few had heard of Elon Musk). Now, these three are some of the largest companies on the planet.

Many companies and businesses vanished, but new were born, thus balancing out the destructive tendencies. This process critically depends upon innovators who take risks, and also an enabling environment.

Mokyr’s work is the most phenomenal in terms of the broad sweep of technological history. One of the most interesting queries he propounds, amongst countless others, is why England (and Europe in general) took the lead during the Industrial Revolution. His answer, for the most part, rests on the importance of traits like curiosity, knowledge diffusion and exchange, a tolerant environment and persistent push by curious innovators. The price incentive, so important in Romer, Howitt and Aghion’s work, is relatively subdued in his hypothesis. Gautier, the inventor of the hot air balloon in the 1870s, did so out of curiosity. Bacon and Newton helped foster a culture of ideas and exchange, carried out by various scientific ‘societies’ founded in England, without any price or profit incentive. It was a cultural revolution (the ‘Enlightenment’) from whose bosom sprang the Industrial Revolution.

In his writings, we again find the critical role of high-quality human capital (‘upper tail human capital’) as in Romer’s, Howitt’s and Aghion’s theories

and why it is so important for long-term economic growth.

Although what I stated above does not do justification to the vast expanse of research of these three, it does give us a fair idea of the factors that constitute a ‘successful’ economic model. Now contemplate which of these factors are historically at play in Pakistan? None. For example, what of Pakistan’s ‘upper tail’ human capital? The staggering number of highly skilled individuals leaving this country for decades would deeply trouble any serious policymaker, except for those who revel in the prospect of more remittances.

And what of the tremendous opportunities afforded by the global economy, where the trade in goods and services stands at a staggering \$23 trillion? What’s our share? Not even \$100 billion. Can there be any bigger reflection of our calamitous failure?

But why take risks, for example, when it’s easy to make gazillions from export permits for commodities like sugar, create a shortage and then import the same at triple the price? Why incentivise upper tail human capital to contribute at home when pushing them out of the country would mean more remittances?

Suffice to say, economic growth does not rest upon accounting and PR gimmickry. Above all, any serious attempt at ‘successful’ long-term economic growth in Pakistan should begin with those in the state machinery sticking to their job requirements.

The writer is an economist. His current research focuses on long-term analysis of various issues plaguing Pakistan’s economy, economic reforms and history of economic thought.

India should fear its own media

Godi media, coined by Ravish Kumar, is now seen as a key driver of information disorder spread by Modi’s followers

Muhammad Faran

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”, said Franklin D Roosevelt.

The year was 1933, and the pivotal wartime president delivered his first inaugural address during one of the darkest periods in the history of the United States of America, when the great power was muddled in the Great Depression, facing a total collapse of its economic and psychological systems.

The point to take inspiration from the famous quote is to draw a parallel between two distinct yet similarly disruptive eras, the fear of fake news and misinformed media in the present-day world, India in particular.

While Roosevelt originally targeted fear as an unreasoning, internal barrier to economic recovery, today’s digital age has replaced that internal sensation with an external, information-driven challenge: infodemic.

The Godi media, a term coined and popularised by veteran Indian journalist Ravish Kumar to describe biased Indian print and TV news media, is now recognised as the foundational architect of modern information disorder being spread by Narendra Modi’s followers, thanks to modern technology, especially social media platforms.

But has this strategy paid dividends? The answer is a thumping no. On key issues like Kashmir, post-Pahalgam attack and the Bondi Beach tragedy, we witness India facing diplomatic isolation as the international community, particularly the West, is reluctant to accept its narrative due to inherent weaknesses in its initiatives and justifications.

Delhi has launched a sprawling and occasionally contradictory set of goals and rationales to respond to the Pahalgam attack, including “setting a new normal”. But the metaphor of a

diplomatic prism dismantles India’s disinformation warfare. This metaphorical prism helps the international community decipher the venomous propaganda into distinct, manageable components to understand its true intent.

Recently, Pakistan scored another diplomatic win when prominent UN experts branded India’s May invasion as a direct challenge to the international rule of law, sovereignty and territorial integrity - principles that are highly valued by the global community.

Second, we need to analyse the end results of fake media on the Indian society itself, and it would be interesting to make a comparison with the tools employed by Nazi Germany to hold its grip on power. Just as the Nazi propaganda machine relied heavily on scapegoating, blaming specific groups, Jews in particular, for Germany’s post-WWI struggles, to cultivate a unified national identity (the Volksgemeinschaft) based

on exclusion and racial purity, the Hindutva ideology targets Muslims, bordering its prejudice along the same lines the Nazis drew.

History bears us that blind faith in distorted facts acts as a seismic force that can destabilise social cushions, the shared norms, institutional trust and human empathy, that act as a balancing force to maintain order in a society. When these pillars are weakened by state-sponsored disinformation, even small tectonic shifts in the political or economic landscape can lead to total societal collapse.

We have started to witness this collapse. The niqab incident in Bihar is a direct result of the Hindutva ideology. Had it not been for racial hatred, the justification of persecution and violence that is allowed to flourish under the watchful eyes of Narendra Modi, Nitish Kumar would not have had the courage to commit

the shameful act.

India saw the unfortunate incident at Bondi Beach in Sydney as another opportunity to pitch the Big Lie technique at Pakistan. To its utter surprise, the whole dirty game boomeranged.

As did the Nazis, the BJP also understands the crucial role emotions play in shaping audience attitudes and behaviours in the field of journalism and communication. Modi’s followers have been pitching emotional contagion, a psychological term that refers to the automatic catching or sharing of emotions from one person to another, often unconsciously, to paint the Modi regime in a positive way, using generative Artificial Intelligence as an accelerant to supercharge the venomous nature of fake news.

Fake news and misinformed media thus carry with them the evil of all foolish, unpleasant and venomous things that India should fear.

MENA partnerships

Pakistan's role suits the architects of the new Middle East.

Muhammad Amir Rana

PAKISTAN'S renewed focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is beginning to yield tangible results, particularly in defence cooperation. What stands out in this outreach is its diversity: Pakistan is engaging simultaneously with countries experiencing active conflict as well as with relatively stable Gulf monarchies. More importantly, this evolving engagement raises an important question about how these varied relationships are shaping Pakistan's strategic outlook, policy choices, and approach to statecraft.

Pakistan's relationship with the Gulf has long rested on deep-rooted economic, political, and security ties shaped by history. However, the recent expansion of engagement reflects a more deliberate and pragmatic approach, suggesting that Islamabad is recalibrating its regional strategy. This recalibration is not only about defence exports or military diplomacy; it also offers Pakistan opportunities to observe and learn from different models of statecraft, both in contexts of stability and in situations marked by political fragmentation and conflict.

In this broader context, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's first official visit to Pakistan on Friday was particularly significant. It came after Pakistan signed a defence cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia in mid-September, an agreement that attracted considerable attention from observers who were closely watching how Pakistan would balance relations with other Gulf states, especially the UAE and Qatar, given their divergent positions on several MENA conflicts.

Sudan provides a clear example of these divergences. The UAE has been widely reported to be supporting the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), while Saudi Arabia has aligned itself with the Sudanese Armed Forces (several reports indicate that Pakistan, through its defence cooperation, has engaged in ways that benefit the SAF, effectively placing Islamabad alongside Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkiye, countries that have leaned towards supporting the Sudanese army against the RSF). This suggests that, despite its careful diplomatic language, Pakistan's security partnerships are

increasingly intersecting with specific regional power alignments.

Libya presents a different but equally revealing case. Here, Pakistan's position appears closer to that of the UAE. Islamabad has engaged openly with the eastern Libyan power structure led by Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, while Saudi Arabia's engagement with Haftar remains limited and largely pragmatic. Field Marshal Asim Munir's visit to eastern Libya, where he met Haftar, the commander-in-chief of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, was followed by reports that Pakistan had reached a defence deal worth over \$4 billion to supply military equipment to the Libyan National Army, despite the existence of a UN arms embargo.

The symbolism of this engagement was not lost on observers: the meeting of two field marshals, an exceptionally rare rank in contemporary global militaries, carried both political and military significance. Apart from Libya, FM Asim Munir visited Cairo, where Pakistan and Egypt reaffirmed their commitment to closer military cooperation, further underscoring Pakistan's expanding defence diplomacy across North Africa.

Beyond conflict theatres, Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to hold divergent positions on several regional and strategic issues, including the Abraham Accords. Except for a few limited exceptions, Pakistan's stance has generally aligned more closely with Saudi Arabia, particularly on the Israel-Palestine question. This alignment appears to be translating into more concrete outcomes for Pakistan, especially in defence exports and broader economic cooperation.

It is not clear how long this cooperation with the MENA region and other African countries will last, as conflicts in many states are still unfolding, and it is unclear which side will ultimately prevail. Although, as per global diplomatic norms, Pakistan is showing constraint and officially supporting peace initiatives, its tilt and deals will determine its character in the eyes of these nations. It is not certain that the UAE president's visit is to incentivise Pakistan in the context of the Abraham Accords, or to offer Pakistan some realignment in Islamabad's strategic priorities in MENA. But it has unfolded that Pakistan's new approach is cultivating results.

It has to be seen how Pakistan will create balance in its approach and relationship with its key economic and strategic allies in the Gulf, but Pakistan's realpolitik is in full swing, pragmatically pursuing its policies in the Middle East, as the Gulf states, including the Saudis and the UAE, were doing up till now in the case of India and Pakistan.

Pakistan's role suits the architects of the new Middle East, whether they are sitting in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, or beyond, not only because of religious brotherhood, but also military power, which is more accommodating towards their strategic and political interests. Pakistan has gained geopolitical and geoeconomic strength through its accommodative approach, but consolidating these gains has remained a challenge. Perhaps the answer lies in the country's state structure, which has similarities with many states in the MENA region that are facing chronic political disorder. A Middle Eastern scholar, Fawaz Gerges, in his book *The Great Betrayal*, sought to find the roots of this political disorder. What he found was that an overemphasis on strengthening security institutions creates two major problems.

First, it allows external actors to intervene in domestic affairs and shape policies. Second, and more crucially, doctrinal authoritarian regimes suppress natural ethnic, cultural, social, and religious divisions, which democracy allows societies to address through continuous dialogue. These divisions and divergences continue to thrive beneath the weight of suppression and eventually surface in the form of fractured ideologies, toxic narratives, and violent tendencies.

Gerges notes that the struggle in the Middle East is multifaceted, extending far beyond territorial disputes. It is ideological, cultural, and institutional, unfolding among a wide range of actors, including conservatives, Islamists, nationalists, and ordinary citizens.

Perhaps there are lessons to be drawn from the region, but this depends on political priorities. When certain policies appear to yield economic and political gains, states often ignore deeper structural similarities and the long-term risks they entail.

The writer is a security analyst.

In history's shadow

So much water has flown under the bridge since 1971 that much of the animus of that period has evaporated.

Abbas Nasir

HOW the country's and the region's history is intertwined with my family's personal history was underlined this week when Bangladesh Nationalist Party's leader Tarique Rahman returned home to Dhaka after 17 years in self-imposed exile in the UK and is now likely to be the country's next prime minister after the general elections, with the recently deposed Awami League, his arch-enemy, in disarray.

Tarique Rahman's mother, Khaleda and father Maj-Gen Ziaur Rahman, both led their country. He was killed by rebellious troops at the Circuit House when he went to Chittagong to placate the local army commander in 1981.

It was just over a decade earlier that my sister arrived in Chittagong after marrying a handsome army captain, an ammunition technical expert, who was serving in the Port's Embarkation Headquarters in August/September 1970. The handful of army and navy officers and their families who were posted at the Embarkation HQ had flats in the HQ compound.

The young couple met one of his seniors, (then) Major Ziaur Rahman and his spouse at the Chittagong Club. He was serving in Chittagong in the East Bengal Regiment.

The situation started to hot up after the general elections in December that year and soon the political stalemate that was rooted in the denial of power to the Shaikh Mujibur Rahman-led Awami League, the election winners, culminated in protest demonstrations that exploded into a full-fledged insurgency.

Major Ziaur Rahman invited some of his fellow officers to the EBR Mess for dinner. This was sometime in March 1971 and coincided with the docking of PNSC's MV Swat, carrying ammunition and supplies for the troops battling the insurgency that the locals saw as a war of independence.

My brother-in-law declined as he had to make sure the ship was offloaded safely. The few who did go to attend the dinner were never heard of again, as this was when Ziaur Rahman

declared switching sides and threw in his lot with the forces battling Pakistani troops.

According to an official citation, my brother-in-law led a heroic action to save the ship after an attempt by the rebel troops to set alight the ammunition. Outnumbered one to three, he saved the ship and many lives. But this operation meant he and my sister who was carrying their first child were separated for several days.

After remaining under fire from the heights overlooking the Embarkation HQ by the 'Mukti Bahini' and returning fire from various windows by crawling from one to the other to appear more in number, the families were rescued by reinforcements from the Pak Navy Base Tiger Pass. A kind Bengali worker carried a written message concealed in the sole of his shoe explaining that a handful of families and some dozen male civilians with the most basic of weapons were trapped there.

They were rescued and taken to the Chittagong airport, where for the first time in days my sister learned her husband had survived the shootout at the port. Before they were evacuated by sitting on the floor of the Fokker-turned freighter, her husband came briefly to see her off. She transited in Dhaka before taking a special connecting PIA flight to Karachi.

The sight of my heavily pregnant sister emerging from the airport brought such relief, but we were bemused to see her with a 9mm pistol tucked under her arm in a shoulder holster. She used to tell us how her husband taught her to safely handle the gun as rape, torture and mutilation were widely weaponised in that war. She wouldn't have needed much instruction. She was the only sister among three brothers, but outswam and outrode them with ease.

My father, himself a retired army officer, who was broken-hearted because his erstwhile Kharian-based IX Div, trained for mountain warfare 'to take Kashmir', was despatched to then East Pakistan to fight in the waterlogged terrain, had to convince my sister to part with the gun. A few weeks later my

brother-in-law had completed his tour of duty and was transferred back to West Pakistan.

As the 1971 war started he was posted as ADC to Lt-Gen Muhammed Sharif at his wartime HQ in Sahiwal Stadium where his exchanges with the then Multan GOC Maj-Gen Ziaul Haq are for another time. What his colleagues described as a brilliant career was cut short by a heart attack in 1979, the night Z.A. Bhutto was executed in Pindi.

He and my sister witnessed the murder of Bangladesh founder Shaikh Mujibur Rahman by junior coup plotters in 1975 from Quetta. They watched from a distance the rise to power and the murder of Ziaur Rahman, ironically in the city of Chittagong, where he'd ordered the execution of some of his colleagues from the Western wing.

My sister, who insisted on marrying the love of her life at 20, was widowed at 36. She had two young boys and dedicated her life to raising them. She was a force of nature who met adversity head-on and lived life and battled challenges with a zeal and a zest very rarely seen, and with pride. When her husband's PMA course-mate and old friend, who took over the country as chief executive, graciously inquired if he could do something for her during a course reunion: "Thank you for asking, Bhai. My sons look after me very well. I have everything." She lived frugally and was adored by all whether they called her Baji, Mamma or Phuppo.

Her laughter defined her as much as the tragedy that struck her so early in life. Her sons have grown up to be fine human beings and sound professionals with wonderful families. She left us this week, after witnessing history at close quarters.

The year 1971 was another country. So much water has flown under the bridge since 1971 and over the past half-century that much of the animus of that period has evaporated. And if Tarique Rahman does indeed become the leader of his country, as things stand, he will extend a hand of friendship which will be and should be clasped. And clasped firmly.

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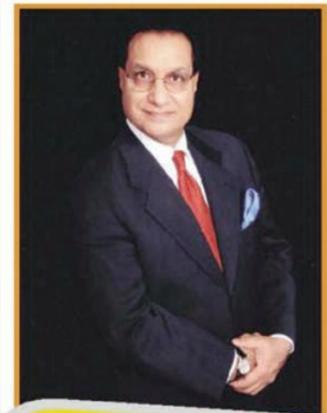
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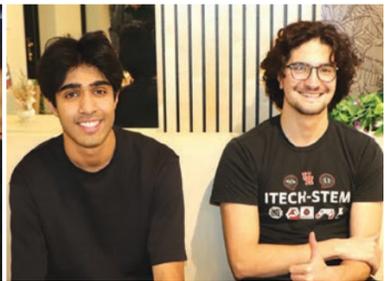
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Community Connects with Sara Khan at Fort Bend County Treasurer Meet & Greet

Community members gathered to hear Sara Khan discuss her motivation for running for Fort Bend County Treasurer, stressing that leadership must be rooted in trust, service, and standing up for the people who place their confidence in elected officials.



Houston's Pakistani Community Pays Tribute to Quaid-e-Azam on His 149th Birth Anniversary

The Pakistan Association of Greater Houston organized a special ceremony at the Pakistan Center, where community leaders, scholars, and Pakistani-Americans gathered to honor the life, vision, and enduring principles of the Founder of Pakistan.



ELECT



SARA KHAN

FOR FORTBEND COUNTY
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EARLY VOTING: : Feb 17-27

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DEMOCRAT

Genetics don't always lead to vision loss and blindness

Genetics aren't necessarily destiny for those with mutations thought to always cause inherited blindness, a new study says.

Fewer than 30% of people with these genetic variants wind up blind, even though the faulty genes had been thought to cause blindness in 100% of those with them, researchers said in findings published Monday in the American Journal of Human Genetics.

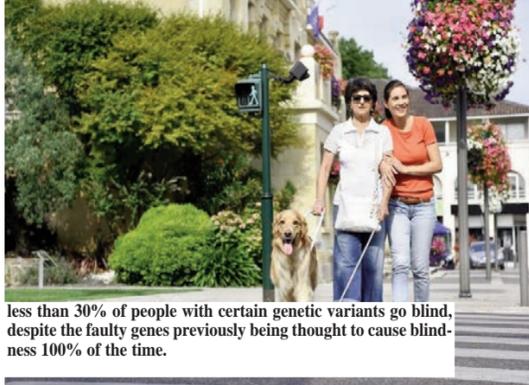
The results could shake up a central belief in genetics, that faulty genes always lead to rare inherited disorders. These disorders are called Mendelian diseases, named after the famed genetics researcher Gregor Mendel.

"These findings are striking and suggest that the traditional paradigm of Mendelian diseases needs to be updated," senior researcher Dr. Eric Pierce, director of the Ocular Genomics Institute at Mass Eye and Ear in Boston, said in a news release.

The study focused on inherited retinal degenerations, a group of genetic diseases that lead to progressive vision loss and eventual blindness. They cause the light-sensing cells along the back wall of the eye to break down and die off.

For the study, researchers created a list of 167 variants in 33 genes that have been previously linked to IRDs.

The team then screened nearly 318,000 people participat-



less than 30% of people with certain genetic variants go blind, despite the faulty genes previously being thought to cause blindness 100% of the time.

ing in a National Institutes of Health research program for the presence of those variants, and found 481 with IRD-causing genetics.

However, only 28% of those people had suffered any form of retinal disease or vision loss, and just 9% had a formal IRD diagnosis, results showed.

The team double-checked their work by using data on about 100,000 participants in another large-scale study, the UK Biobank.

Again, only 16% to 28% of people with IRD-linked genet-

ics had suffered definite or possible signs of vision loss or retinal damage, researchers said.

The results suggest that something else is happening alongside a person's genetic risk to make them wind up with IRD, including environmental factors or other faulty genes, researchers said.

"We think these findings are important for understanding IRDs and other inherited diseases," researcher Dr. Elizabeth Rossin, an investigator at Mass Eye and Ear, said in a news release.

"We look forward to finding modifiers of disease and using that new knowledge to improve care for patients with IRDs and potentially other inherited eye disorders," Rossin said.

Future studies will examine other Mendelian disorders, and look for other genetic and environmental factors that could cause these diseases.

"The large number of individuals that do not develop an IRD despite having a compatible genotype provide an opportunity to design well-powered research studies to discover disease modifiers, which could spur development of novel therapies," lead researcher Dr. Kirill Zaslavsky said in a news release. Zaslavsky performed this research during an Inherited Retinal Disorders fellowship at Mass Eye and Ear.

Afghan border closure brings down terrorist violence in Pakistan

CRSS report says most significant surge in violence recorded in KP

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has recorded a significant drop in cross-border terrorist attacks and violence-linked fatalities after it closed down the border to Afghanistan on October 11.

Terrorist attacks went down by almost 17 per cent in December, preceded by 9pc decline in November. Terrorist violence-linked fatalities among civilians and security officials also fell in the last quarter of 2025, by nearly 4pc and 19pc each in November and December, shows data collected by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) as part of its annual security report 2025.

With an almost 34pc surge in

overall violence, the year 2025 went by as the most violent year for Pakistan in a decade, says the report. The country has suffered a sustained escalation in violence for five consecutive years since 2021, coinciding with the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan; with almost 38pc in 2021, over 15pc in 2022, 56pc in 2023, nearly 67pc in 2024, and 34pc in 2025.

The comparative data for 2024 and 2025 reveals a sharp escalation in terrorism and counter-terrorism linked violence nationwide, with fatalities rising from 2555 in 2024 to 3417 in 2025, marking an increase of 862 deaths, or a roughly 34pc year-

on-year surge in violence.

The most significant surge in violence was recorded in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the fatalities rose from 1620 in 2024 to 2331 in 2025, an absolute increase of 711 deaths, accounting for over 82pc of the net national rise and marking almost a 44pc year-on-year surge in violence in the province.

Balochistan also had an upward trend, with fatalities increasing from 787 to 956; an additional 169 deaths, which are nearly 22pc higher than the previous year's figures.

Regional impact of violence

Violence remained heavily concentrated in the country's northwest-

ern KP and southwestern Balochistan provinces, with both accounting for over 96pc of all fatalities and almost 93pc of violent incidents recorded during the entire 2025.

KP was the worst-hit region, suffering over 68pc (2331) of the total violence-linked fatalities, and around 63pc (795) of the incidents of violence, followed by Balochistan, accounting for 28pc (956) of the fatalities and over 30pc (386) of the incidents of violence.

In contrast, Punjab and Sindh experienced comparatively lower levels of violence. The former recorded 25 incidents of violence resulting in 40 fatalities and 24 injuries, repre-

senting just 1.15pc of total casualties, while the latter saw 51 incidents causing 56 fatalities and 40 injuries; 1.73pc of the total.

In Azad Jammu and Kashmir and the Islamabad Capital Territory though incidents numbers remained minimal, the injury figures were relatively high, with the former recording 103 injuries, and the latter registering 38, from just five incidents at each location.

Gilgit-Baltistan remained the least affected region. Compared to last year, though small in absolute numbers, the region recorded a four-fold increase from one to four fatalities.

Household Integrated Economic Survey shows 57pc surge in internet users across Pakistan as access reaches 70pc of homes

Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2024-25 on Thursday revealed the surge of up to 57 per cent in the individual internet users in Pakistan as household internet access rate increased from 34pc to 70pc.

HIES — a yearly survey — conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) is focused on social and economic conditions of the country to provide data for policy making at the national and provincial levels.

The PBS released the results of HIES during a ceremony at the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Islamabad, today.

"The PBS has successfully completed and released the results of the Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2024-25, marking a major milestone in Pakistan's national data ecosystem," a statement from the Press Information Department (PID) said.

It further said that "the survey pro-

vides comprehensive insights to review the social and economic conditions of the country and serves as a key tool for evidence-based planning and policy-making."

PID said that "HIES 2024-25 is the First-Ever Fully Digital HIES conducted after Digital Population and Housing Census 2023."

"Field operation of the survey was completed in June 2025 by conducting on a quarterly basis, covering 32,000 households across Pakistan, representative at the provincial and national level," said PID.

"A fully integrated Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system was used for data collection, task management and real-time monitoring."

Key highlights

As per the key results and major highlights of the survey released by PBS, there was an increase from 17pc to 57pc in the number of individuals using

the internet in Pakistan.

It also said the household mobile or smartphone facility was increased to 96pc. Furthermore, household internet access increased from 34pc to 70pc.

PBS said that the gender parity at the primary level saw a rise from 92pc to 96pc in Pakistan.

According to the survey results, the neonatal mortality rate declined from 41 to 35 per thousand live births. Moreover, the infant mortality rate decreased from 60 to 47 per thousand live births, and the total fertility rate also decreased from 3.7 to 3.6 children per woman.

The survey said the use of clean fuels—such as natural gas, liquid petroleum gas, biogas, solar energy, and electricity for clean heating, lighting, and cooking—surged to 38pc.

PBS mentioned that household income and consumption increased to Rs82,179 and Rs79,150, respectively, in

Pakistan.

It said that the major part of the household consumption goes to food (37pc), housing and fuel (26pc), followed by restaurants and hotels (6.63pc), clothing and footwear (6.28pc) and transport (6.21pc) at the national level.

Pakistan Panel Household Survey 2024 had earlier revealed that only 19.5pc of households can always afford desired meals, while 30pc sometimes go without three meals a day.

"Major milestone for policymaking"

Federal Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal termed the survey as a "major milestone towards data-driven governance and evidence-based policymaking".

Addressing the launch ceremony, Iqbal said the Ministry of Planning had assumed ownership of clearing long-pending statistical backlogs and had

completed surveys that remained stalled for six to seven years.

Ahsan Iqbal said the availability of updated data would strengthen government policymaking while enabling researchers, businesses and youth to undertake better research, business planning and national analysis. "This survey is a milestone for the country," he remarked.

Referring to the findings of HIES, the minister said Pakistan had faced a series of economic shocks over the past six to seven years, beginning with policy disruptions after 2018 that derailed the growth momentum built between 2013 and 2018.

He said mismanagement, particularly the surge in imports in 2022 to around \$80 billion, resulted in a massive current account deficit and depletion of foreign exchange reserves, causing currency instability and prolonged inflation.

Pakistan's first year on the UN Security Council: diplomacy tested in turbulent times

Continued from front page

— struggled repeatedly to act. For Islamabad, the first year became as much a test of resolve and principle as a diplomatic assignment.

From the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and the widening confrontation between Israel and Iran to renewed tensions in South Asia, the Council's agenda in 2025 was dominated by crises that called into question the very purpose of international collective action.

For Pakistan, this was no ordinary diplomatic season.

At every turn, Pakistan advanced a simple but compelling argument: that the Council's credibility must be measured not by statements of concern, but by concrete action in defence of civilians and international law.

Backdoor diplomacy and strategic briefings

Behind the scenes, Pakistan engaged in intense backchannel diplomacy. Its mission conducted briefings for Security Council ambassadors on the India-Pakistan conflict, separate consultations with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab Group, and robust advocacy for the Indus Waters Treaty. These efforts helped ensure that Pakistan's concerns were understood beyond the formal floor of the Council and cultivated wider support for its positions.

South Asia's firestorm: India-Pakistan war and the nuclear shadow

In May, South Asia itself became a focal point of global concern when a sudden escalation between India and Pakistan brought the region perilously close to a wider conflict. During the confrontation, Pakistan formally requested closed consultations of the UN Security Council to brief members on the deteriorating situation and rising tensions across the Line of Control. It apprised the world body of what it described as aggressive actions by New Delhi and steps that, it warned, risked regional and international peace and security.

Pakistan's Permanent Representative Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad said Pakistan does not seek confrontation but reiterated that it is "fully prepared to defend our sovereignty and territorial integrity."

He stressed Pakistan's commitment to peaceful, cooperative relations with all neighbours, including India, and openness to dialogue based on mutual respect and sovereign equality. On the occupied Kashmir dispute, Ambassador Asim told reporters that this unresolved matter — which has simmered for more than seven decades — remains the "core issue" between Pakistan and India and must be resolved in line with the aspirations of the Kashmiri people if durable peace is to be achieved in South Asia.

The closed consultations — the first of their kind on this issue in 2025 — drew urgent appeals from the United Nations itself. UN Secretary-General António Guterres

said relations between the two nuclear-armed neighbours were at "their highest in years," and called for "maximum restraint" and a de-escalation of tensions.

Leftist Mamdani begins first day as New York mayor

Continued from front page

just past midnight as New Yorkers rang in the new year.

New York's first Muslim mayor took the oath of office during a private ceremony at a decommissioned subway stop under City Hall.

Later on Thursday, Mamdani is scheduled to take part in a larger, ceremonial inauguration with speeches from left-wing allies Senator Bernie Sanders and congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Around 4,000 ticketed guests are expected to attend the event outside City Hall. Mamdani's team has also organized a block party that it says will enable tens of thousands of people to watch the ceremony at street-side viewing areas along Broadway.

"This is truly the honor and the privilege of a lifetime," Mamdani told reporters after taking the official oath in the first minutes of New Year's Day.

But it remains to be seen if Mamdani, a self-described democratic socialist, can deliver on his ambitious agenda, which envisions rent freezes, universal childcare and free public buses.

Once an election is over, "symbolism only goes so far with voters. Results begin to matter a whole lot more," New York University lecturer John Kane said.

How Trump behaves could be decisive.

Trump says aspirin caused bruised hand, denies falling asleep

Continued from front page

changed his previous statement about receiving an MRI scan in October, saying it was instead a quicker CT scan.

Trump, who at 79 is the oldest person to assume the US presidency, told the Journal "my health is perfect" and expressed frustration with scrutiny of his well-being.

Trump has based much of his political image on projecting vigour whether through his frequent interactions with journalists, constant social media posting, or AI memes depicting him as a superhero.

However, the first year of his second term in office has raised growing questions.

His right hand shows persistent bruising, often covered with thick makeup and at times a bandage, and his ankles have appeared swollen.

On occasion, Trump has clearly struggled to keep his eyes open, including during a televised Oval Office meeting with health representatives in November, a politically sensitive issue for someone who constantly frames his Democratic predecessor Joe Biden as "sleepy".

Bruising and 'blinking'

The Republican explained the bruising on his hand as the result of aspirin that he takes daily to thin his

blood. "I don't want thick blood pouring through my heart," he told the Journal.

He said he applies makeup or bandages when his hand is "whacked". One cut, he said, was caused when his attorney general Pam Bondi hit the back of his hand with her ring while giving him a high-five.

Explanations of his health issues have been inconsistent.

Trump himself told reporters that he underwent an MRI scan in October, but said at the time he had "no idea what they analysed".

To the Journal, Trump said it was not an MRI, "it was less than that. It was a scan".

Trump's doctor, Sean Barbabella, confirmed to the newspaper that a CT scan a procedure that takes far less time than an MRI was done "to definitively rule out any cardiovascular issues".

Pakistan witnessed 34pc increase in terrorism in 2025

Continued from front page

April L. Jones, Brittanee Lashay Morris, Haroon Mughal, Robert Nnake, Nicole Roberts, Nabil Shike, and Maggie Salomon.

The Republican field is led by Daryl Aaron, KP George, Kenneth Omoruyi, Melissa M. Wilson, and Daniel Wong for County Judge. The District Clerk race includes Audrey Lee and John Minchew, while the County Clerk contest features J.J. Clemence and Tamara McFarlane. County Treasurer has one candidate, Bill Rickert. For commissioner seats, Precinct 2 has Antonio Aranda, and Precinct 4 features Abolaji Ayobami, Ramesh Kumar Chervirala, Ken Mathews, and Adam Schoof.

Election officials remind voters that the primary on March 3, 2026, will determine which candidates will represent their parties in the general election in November.

This year's races include several newcomers and familiar faces, setting the stage for competitive campaigns across Fort Bend County.

Fort Bend County Primaries 2026: Crowded Fields Set Stage for Fierce Races

Continued from front page

released by the Islamabad-based Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) on Thursday.

Besides rising border violence and militant resurgence, evolving militant tactics from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Balochistan fuel a widening security challenge, the report says. The burden of this violence fell disproportionately on the state's defenders as security and law-enforcement personnel suffered over 42pc of all terrorism-related fatalities, with 437 lives lost, the data shows.

The report notes that this stark figure highlights the frontline nature of the conflict and the relentless targeting of army, police and paramilitary forces. Civilians were also heavily affected, with 354 non-combatants losing their lives.

Meanwhile, 243 militants were

killed, either in suicide attacks they carried out or during retaliatory fire by security forces following some of the terrorist attacks. The PIPS report says that the conflict remained intensely regionalised, with over 95pc of attacks concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan.

In KP, a 40pc rise in incidents illustrated the entrenched presence of groups like the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates. The province experienced the highest number of terrorist incidents in the country in 2025, with 413 attacks. These violent incidents claimed a total of 581 lives and left 698 others injured.

The province faced not just more frequent attacks, but more complex ones, including a coordinated wave of assaults across 11 districts on Independence Day — a symbolic challenge to state authority, the report says. In Balochistan, the insurgency evolved qualitatively. The province experienced 254 militant attacks in 2025, resulting in 419 deaths and injuries to 607 others. A 26pc increase in attacks was accompanied by a shift towards high-impact, coordinated operations.

Militant groups like the proscribed Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) moved beyond hit-and-run tactics to execute highway blockades, sieges, and hijackings, directly targeting economic infrastructure and state symbols to amplify their political message and disrupt governance.

Sindh province recorded 21 terrorist attacks, including 16 in Karachi, two in Shikarpur, and one each in Hyderabad, Jacobabad, and Jamshoro. These incidents resulted in 14 fatalities and left 17 others injured. Punjab witnessed seven terrorist attacks in 2025, a decline from 11 incidents in the previous year.

These attacks killed five people including four militants and one policeman, and injured two policemen. A suicide blast outside the judicial complex housing the Islamabad district and sessions courts killed 12 people. Jamaatul Ahrar, a faction of the banned TTP, claimed the attack.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, three attacks were reported, including two in Diamir district and one in Gilgit. These incidents claimed the lives of three security personnel, including two Scouts and one Frontier Corps official, and injured six others.

1/4 of American families overwhelmed by medical expenses

Continued from front page

2018 and 2022, researchers reported Monday in JAMA Internal Medicine.

Additionally, more than half (53%) of people who died during that period racked up overwhelming medical bills, researchers found.

"Health care is even less affordable than previous studies have suggested. They've only looked at how many people are hit by unaffordable health care over one year. But the risks mount over time," said lead researcher Dr. Adam Gaffney, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

"And high medical costs don't just devastate finances, they force people to skip care - which often further worsens their health," Gaffney added in a news

release.

For the study, researchers tracked data on more than 12,600 Americans participating in the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, a federal project that tracks the cost of health care in the U.S.

The team looked specifically at three widely used measures of unaffordable health care:

"Cost burden," or out-of-pocket costs greater than 10% of family income or greater than 5% of income among the poor

"Catastrophic cost burden," or health spending greater than 40% of family income excluding food costs

"Foregone care due to cost," or skipping needed care because it was unaffordable

Results showed that the number of people who experienced each of these financial stresses rose as time passed.

For example, just under 4% of people incurred catastrophic costs within one year, but 10% experienced them after four years.

Likewise, under 6% of adults went without needed care during a single year, but over a four-year span, 12% wound up skipping care.

Overall, the share of people who experienced at least one of the three markers of unaffordable care rose from around 12% after one year to nearly 27% by the end of the fourth year.

People with incomes lower than 200% of the poverty line -- \$64,300 for a family of four -- were nearly nine times more likely to incur catastrophic costs than America's wealthiest, results showed.

Other groups most at risk included adults without a college degree, older adults, anyone who was hospitalized, and those with chronic health problems like asthma or high blood pressure.

"If you're not a billionaire you're just one serious illness away from financial ruin. Even if you don't need much care this year, you'll get sick or injured at some point, and then the medical bills will pour in," senior researcher Dr. Steffie Woolhandler, a professor of public health at CUNY's Hunter College, said in a news release.

"And health care is set to become even less affordable, with enhanced [Affordable Care Act] subsidies expiring and Trump's deep Medicaid cuts ahead," Woolhandler added.

There's one clear solution to the problem, Gaffney said.

"It's time America joined other nations and implemented national health insurance," he said. "That would save hundreds of billions on insurance paperwork and profits, savings that we could use to provide the complete coverage needed to protect families' finances as well as their health."

2026 will see Pakistan stepping on moon

Continued from front page

backed by the collaborative support of both Pakistani and Chinese governments.

While speaking with a local media channel, the Director called 2025 a turning point for Pakistan, marking significant progress in space technology and exploration.

He further emphasised that with continued collaboration between the Pakistani and Chinese governments, 2026 will see Pakistan make its mark on the Moon.

Analysis: After years of drift, 2025 brings thaw in Pak-US ties

Continued from front page

Donald Trump and Pakistan's army chief, Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, widely viewed as a game-changer. The meeting set the tone for renewed engagement and discussions on trade, security, and regional diplomacy.

Sherry Rehman, federal minister and former ambassador to Washington, described the shift as personality-driven but consequential. "In both countries, particularly in Washington, leading personalities have swung the pendulum back toward a warming of ties," she said.

She noted that the "Trump-Munir bromance" was a key ingredient in reshaping the dynamic, while other strategic plays had also tilted the graph to an upward trend.

Ms Rehman noted that the relationship would be best served by embedding it in the firm ground of strong commercial and economic ties.

She highlighted the US investment in Pakistan's mineral sector as a potential anchor for long-term engagement.

"The scale of investments, their contractual longevity, and capacity to generate local jobs will be critical in determining the trajectory of ties."

On broader foreign policy, she noted: "Pakistan's interests will be best realised by maintaining a classic policy balance amid growing multipolarity and conflict in global affairs."

She added that Islamabad should continue retaining its "bedrock friendship" with Beijing while avoiding being caught in any zero-sum competition arising between two leading global powers.

War and US's statements

The May 2025 India-Pakistan air war injected urgency to US's engagement with Islamabad.

In the aftermath of the ceasefire, President Trump publicly highlighted Islamabad's role in preventing the relationship to a wider conflict.

Pakistan also recognised President Trump's role in averting a nuclear crisis in South Asia and nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Analysts noted that President Trump's repeated public commendations — reportedly over 30 mentions of Pakistan's performance — strengthened Islamabad's diplomatic standing.

"A new president was more open and realised that Pakistan could play a role in furthering American strategic interests in both the economic and security domains," said Uzair Yunus, a Washington-based South Asia analyst.

The broader context included US-India tensions over trade, tariffs, and New Delhi's growing ties with Russia. These frictions, combined with the US's focus on Pakistan's stabilising role in South Asia, increased Islamabad's leverage in Washington's strategic calculus.

Regional diplomacy

The Trump administration also highlighted Pakistan's potential role in the Middle East, including possible participation in a Gaza peace force and mediation in Iran-related initiatives. While the force is still being

finalised, discussions underscore its emerging relevance.

Ms Rehman warned that regional volatility would test Islamabad's diplomacy. While Pakistan's hard power, demonstrated in the May conflict, had altered perceptions of it as a middle power, she said the real challenge lay in navigating partnerships without compromising core foreign policy values or domestic priorities.

Caution urged

Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's former ambassador to Washington, London, and the UN, urged caution against overreading recent developments.

"The recent warmth shows that a hopeful beginning has been made for a reset in Pak-US ties," she said, "but one should avoid hastily concluding ties are on a sustainable upswing."

She noted that the current turnaround rested heavily on a personalised relationship between Trump and Pakistan's army chief, making it short-term.

"Durable relations are built on shared interests and convergences between countries," she added.

"I see the hybrid government's US policy predicated on sycophancy, sweetheart business deals, and willingness to fall in line with Trump's Middle East agenda."

Michael Kugelman, senior fellow for South Asia at the Atlantic Council, echoed the need for realism.

He noted that while the resurgence in bilateral ties was certainly one of Islamabad's biggest surprises this year, it was important not to overstate the resurgence.

He noted that beyond a few memorandums on critical minerals and limited counterterrorism cooperation, substantive collaboration remained modest.

Looking ahead

Ms Rehman emphasised the domestic angle, stressing the importance of transparency, skills development, and social inclusion in managing international investment.

She also highlighted people-to-people ties, noting that even during downturns, travel, cultural exchanges, and diaspora links had sustained the relationship.

In the end, 2025 might not mark a full revamp of ties between the two countries, but it stands out as the year both sides found enough common ground to try again — a meaningful step for a relationship long defined by cycles of tension and rapprochement.

World bids farewell to year of tariffs, turmoil and truces

Continued from front page

in Africa and deadly rains across Southeast Asia.

Celebrations in Sydney, the self-proclaimed "New Year's capital of the world", carried a sombre tinge. Barely two weeks have passed since a father and son allegedly opened fire on a Jewish festival at Bondi Beach, killing 15 people.

Parties paused for a minute of silence at 11pm as the Sydney Harbour Bridge was bathed in white light.

"Right now, the joy that we usually feel at the start of a new year is tempered by the sadness of the old," Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said.

Hundreds of thousands of spectators lined the foreshore as nine tons of fireworks eventually exploded over the Harbour. Security was tighter than usual, with heavily armed police patrolling the crowds.

Celebrations rippled globally, starting in Pacific nations like Kiribati and New Zealand. More than 2 million people were expected at Brazil's Copacabana Beach, while Hong Kong cancelled its display to pay homage to 161 victims of a housing estate fire.

The transition follows a year of cultural shifts and loss. Labubu dolls became a craze, thieves plundered the Louvre and K-pop stars BTS returned.

The world also lost zoologist Jane Goodall, the Vatican chose a new pope and the assassination of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk laid bare deep US divisions.

Politically, Trump returned to the White House in January, launching a tariff blitz that rattled markets.

In the Middle East, US pressure secured a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in October. The war has killed more than 70,000 Palestinians, according to the health ministry in Gaza.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine grinds toward a four-year anniversary without a truce.

The coming months promise the Winter Olympics in Italy and the largest football World Cup in history across North America. Additionally, NASA's Artemis II mission intends to circle the moon, though investors face questions over whether the artificial intelligence boom has become a market bubble.

US think tank warns of Pakistan-India, Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions in 2026

Continued from front page

ongoing tensions with India over Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). It stated that rising violence and coercive policies in the region could lead to renewed hostilities. The report assessed the possibility as moderately likely. The impact on regional stability could be serious if conflict breaks out.

According to the CFR, India and Pakistan have a history of conflict over IIOJK. Last year, tensions escalated after an attack on tourists in Pahalgam. India claimed the attackers were from Pakistan. Pakistan denied the allegations and demanded a neutral investigation. The clash escalated into an 87-hour war. Pakistan reportedly shot down six Indian fighter jets, including three Rafale jets, and destroyed several drones. The conflict ended with a ceasefire brokered by the United States.

The think tank also warned about Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Cross-border militant attacks from Afghanistan's side pose a risk. These attacks could spark clashes along the border. Last year, border incidents resulted in the deaths of over 200 Taliban and affiliated militants. Twenty-three Pakistani soldiers were killed in those clashes. Pakistan responded with precision strikes in Kandahar and Kabul targeting terrorist networks. Several rounds of talks have failed to establish a lasting

ceasefire. The Afghan Taliban have been reluctant to act against militants operating from Afghan territory.

The CFR report also listed global hotspots beyond South Asia. Violence in Gaza and the West Bank, the Russia-Ukraine war, potential US military action in Venezuela, and political unrest in the United States were highlighted. The report stated that these conflicts collectively could pose serious threats to global peace and US national security.

Fresh clashes claim 6 lives amid Iran cost-of-living protests

TEHRAN: Protesters and security forces clashed in western Iran on Thursday, leaving six people dead in the first fatal violence since cost-of-living demonstrations erupted earlier this week.

The unrest, triggered by soaring inflation and a collapsing currency, has spread from the capital to other major cities.

The semi-official Fars news agency reported that two civilians were killed in Lordegan, following confrontations with security services. Meanwhile, state media confirmed that a member of the Basij paramilitary force was killed overnight in the city of Kouhdasht.

The violence marks a significant escalation in the demonstrations that began on Sunday, when shopkeepers in Tehran went on strike to protest economic stagnation and high prices.

By Tuesday, students from at least 10 universities had joined the movement, which has since expanded to include closing major bazaars across the country.

"Some protesters began throwing stones at the city's administrative buildings, including the provincial governor's office, the mosque, the Martyrs' Foundation, the town hall and banks," Fars reported regarding the situation in Lordegan.

The agency stated that police responded with tear gas after the buildings were "severely damaged" and arrested several people described as "ringleaders".

In Kouhdasht, state television cited Said Pourali, the deputy governor of Lorestan Province, reporting the death of a 21-year-old member of the Basij. The channel said the man was killed "by rioters while defending public order".

Mr Pourali noted that "during the demonstrations in Kouhdasht, 13 police officers and Basij members were injured by stone throwing".

However, accounts of the violence vary. The rights group Hengaw reported that security forces killed and wounded several people in Lordegan.

Regarding the death in Kouhdasht, the Revolutionary Guards accused demonstrators of taking advantage of the protests.

Contrarily, Hengaw identified the deceased as Amirhossam Khodayari Fard and alleged he was a protester killed by security forces.

Hengaw also reported that a protester was shot dead on

Wednesday in Isfahan province in central Iran. Reuters could not immediately verify these reports.

Protests also took place on Thursday in Marvdasht in the southern Fars province, the activist news site HRANA reported.

Hengaw said Wednesday's events included demonstrations and detentions across Kermanshah, Khuzestan, and Hamedan.

The unrest comes at a critical moment for Iran's clerical rulers.

The economy has been hammered by Western sanctions and a currency that has lost more than a third of its value against the US dollar over the past year.

Inflation reached 52 per cent year-over-year in December, according to the Statistical Centre of Iran.

The country is also recovering from regional tensions that led to a 12-day air war in June, during which Israeli and US airstrikes targeted the country's nuclear infrastructure and military leadership.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian sought to calm tensions on Thursday, acknowledging the protesters' "legitimate demands" and calling on the government to improve the economic situation.

"From an Islamic perspective ... if we do not resolve the issue of people's livelihoods, we will end up in hell," Pezeshkian said at an event broadcast on state television.

Despite the conciliatory tone, authorities promised to take a "firm" stance against disorder. Iran's prosecutor general warned on Wednesday that while peaceful economic protests were legitimate, any attempt to create insecurity would be met with a "decisive response".

"Any attempt to turn economic protests into a tool of insecurity, destruction of public property, or implementation of externally designed scenarios will inevitably be met with a legal, proportionate and decisive response," the prosecutor said.

Government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani announced on Thursday that authorities would hold a direct dialogue with representatives of trade unions and merchants, though she did not provide further details.

The current demonstrations remain smaller than the nationwide uprising in 2022, which was triggered by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini for allegedly violating Iran's strict dress code. That wave of anger left several hundred people dead.

Tasnim news agency reported on Wednesday evening the arrest of seven people allegedly affiliated with "groups hostile to the Islamic Republic based in the United States and Europe", claiming they were "tasked with turning the demonstrations into violence".

Local media coverage has been mixed, with some outlets highlighting economic hardships while others focus on incidents caused by "troublemakers".

The Wildness of Darolai

An unforgettable journey through Swat's most well-preserved and densely forested wilderness



By Ubaid Sahil

When we announced our plan to embark on an adventure into the dense and mysterious forest of Darolai, and more notably, that Sherin Zada would be joining us, we were met with a flurry of questions. Why are you taking a blind person on such a risky hike? Isn't bringing Sherin along just a waste of time and effort? Don't you know the forest is home to bears? What if you're attacked while travelling with someone who can't see?

And so on, the concerns kept coming.

Brushing aside all these concerns, we finalised our hiking trip to explore the spirit of community-led conservation in the dense forest of Darolai, one of the most well-preserved and thickest forests in Swat. With the possibility of encountering black bears and other wild species (if luck favoured us), we were excited to venture into this untamed wilderness, home to a rich variety of flora and fauna, and, above all, to enjoy the inspiring company of Sherin Zada.

Sherin Zada, my friend, lost his vision in childhood, yet he senses and feels the world more deeply than most of us ever could. While others see with their eyes, Sherin sees with his spirit, and on this journey, he became not only our guide in courage but also a reminder that true vision lies beyond what is visible. For him, embarking on this wilderness hike was like summiting his personal K2.

On the day of the trek, at exactly 3:35 am, my alarm woke me up. After offering the fajr prayer, I left behind the town of two rivers, Bahrain, and set out for the village of Darolai. From there, my younger brother Zakaria, Sherin Zada, our guide, and fellow adventurer Kashif, and I set off toward one of the wildest destinations we've ever dared to explore, in pursuit of our unquenchable thirst for adventure.

The enchanting forest of Darolai is exceptionally dense and remarkably well-preserved, thanks to the sustained efforts of community-led conservation. The locals have formed a committee of elders who act as guardians of the forest, strictly forbidding deforestation, hunting, and all other harmful activities. As a result of these protective measures, the forest has become a thriving sanctuary for wildlife, most notably black bears, which are commonly found in the area. In addition, a wide variety of plant species, animals, birds, and insects call this rich and untamed forest their home.

We soon found ourselves on a rugged, uneven trail strewn with rocks, surrounded by towering trees and immersed in the rich sounds and scents of nature. After a few minutes of ascent, we realised that the entire route was steep and rocky, a vertical climb that could take up to five exhausting hours to reach our first destination: Ghani Shai. It quickly became clear that this hike demanded more courage than common sense to pursue, as we pushed forward in search of a hidden natural treasure.

Since it was monsoon season, a dramatic interplay of fog, sunshine, and gentle breeze danced around us throughout the hike, a constant game of hide and seek between light and mist. Soon, we found ourselves climbing uphill, where the world below unfolded like a serene painting, breathtakingly calm and beautiful. Our path led us through cloud-kissing trees, in the quiet companionship of the mountains. Sherin Zada's warm presence added a special charm to our wilderness adventure. The forest was so wild and untouched that only four scattered homes existed within its vastness, each one tucked far away from the other.

After six hours of a tough hike and intermittent rests, we finally reached Ghani Shai, a tranquil and secluded forest glade, gently cradled by towering trees on all sides. The peace and charm of this hidden haven were so surreal, so serene, that we couldn't resist pausing there for a while to rest and enjoy our lunch. Ghani Shai is also home to Ghani Kaka, a man deeply attached to this wild and untamed realm. Though he was away in the valley below due to some personal matters, we were warmly welcomed by his gracious son, Zaiwar Khan, the guardian of this wild heaven, whose presence added a touch of local warmth to our wilderness journey.

Being the sole resident of the wild dense jungle, Zaiwar Khan was chosen as its guardian by the preservation committee down in the valley. Under his devoted supervision, a rich variety of flora and fauna



flourished in this untouched wilderness. Although he recently stepped down from the committee after a dispute, he continues to protect and preserve the ecosystem of this natural haven on his own. Our guide, Kashif, told us that Zaiwar Khan went as far as to stop livestock from grazing in the area to protect the grasslands. He also assisted local authorities in apprehending and punishing illegal loggers and timber smugglers.

He also shared with us some of his deep and indigenous knowledge of the wild. Zaiwar Khan mentioned that the jungle is home to black bears, as well as other species such as wolves, foxes, and jackals. In recent months, leopards have also been sighted, these are being reintroduced into the jungle by the wildlife authorities. He himself has faced several bear encounters and guided us on how to stay safe if we ever come across one. His advice, though valuable, instilled a sense of fear in our hearts, about the heavyweight bears that roam freely in nearly every corner of the jungle.

After enjoying Zaiwar's company, it was time to hit the trail again through this little-disturbed wilderness. From Ghani Shai onward, the path became less steep and slightly easier to navigate. The forest grew denser, the landscape increasingly lush with vegetation, and the mist thickened with every step. For the rest of the journey, we were wrapped in a heavy veil of smog that blended beautifully with the surreal serenity of the mountains. It all felt like a magical landscape, as if the planet had just received a new terrain update.

The landscapes kept shifting as we moved forward. With each change, we left behind several visible villages nestled deep in the valley, poor visibility due to thick smog and mist made them appear like faded sketches. We passed through dense forests, open plains, steep ascents, and narrow mountain passes. After another four-hour hike, we finally reached our destination for the day: Dabar Sar, a beautiful, uncharted, and untouched peak. The scenery was breathtaking, but what made it even more exhilarating was the intense fog surrounding us, limiting visibility to just two or three metres. It felt like standing at the edge of the known world.

As dusk settled in, and with the ever-unpredictable mountain weather threatening to shift in minutes, we decided it was time to pitch our tent and call it a day. But adventure had other plans. Just before setting up, we discovered that our tent was damaged beyond use. With no other choice, we turned to the wilderness for a solution. On the peak, we gathered what we could – five sturdy tree trunks, a rope, and a plastic sheet – and we built ourselves a makeshift shelter. It became our improvised home for the night, surprisingly more stable and reliable than we had expected. However, the night that followed had its own plans for us...

After setting up our primitive tent, we prepared a simple dinner and began gathering dried wood from around the peak to carry out the most important task of all: building a bonfire that would burn through the night, a necessary safeguard against bears. Only later did we discover that we were camping right in the territory of a heavyweight bear, one that could have paid us a visit at any moment. The bonfire, crackling in the cold mist, became the icing on the cake of our unforgettable adventure.

Camping here required more than just courage, it demanded a higher degree of confidence and calm. There we were: just the four of us, surrounded by thick mist, the flickering warmth of the fire, and the

haunting chorus of insects echoing through the wilderness. For Sherin Zada, and honestly, for all of us, it was a first-of-its-kind experience: wild, raw, almost off the charts.

First came a strange kind of insect, tiny, relentless creatures that swarmed our tent and irritated us endlessly. Their unwelcome company continued well into the night. Then came the rain. It poured heavily and relentlessly, drumming against our makeshift shelter. Thankfully, our primitive tent held strong and kept us dry through the downpour. But above all, it was the fear of bears that haunted us.

Every small rustle, every creak of plastic, was enough to send our hearts racing. We lay in silence, wide awake, imagining the shadow of a bear looming just beyond the mist. It was, without doubt, the most nerve-racking night of our lives. None of us managed more than a few hours of sleep. When the first pale rays of dawn finally broke through the mist, I turned to Sherin Zada and asked, "Are we alive?" He smiled and said, "Yes, we've made it."

When we opened our tent in the morning, we were greeted by a breathtaking sight, a vast, green mountaintop cradled gently by towering peaks on all sides. From this vantage point, nearly the entire Upper Swat region unfolded before our eyes. To the north, we could see Mankiyal Bazaar nestled in the valley, with the majestic peaks of Kalam standing proudly beyond. To the west, the scenic Daral Valley of Bahrain stretched out in quiet grandeur.

Eastward lay the special and cherished valleys of Chail, Bishigram, and Shanko, my birthplace – each vale basking in the soft morning light. And to the south, the town of Madyan was clearly visible, with even distant glimpses of Matta city shimmering faintly on the horizon. This never-ending panorama extended as far as our eyes could see; thankfully, the mist and fog had lifted with the dawn. Above us, the sky-kissing peaks of Swat stood like silent giants, whispering age-old secrets to the drifting clouds.

After having breakfast at Dabar Sar, it didn't take us long to head toward Yakh Kandaw. In Pashto, 'Yakh' means cold, and 'Kandaw' refers to a mountain pass or the boundary between two valleys. To the east of Yakh Kandaw stretches the Ulal River Valley, home to the beautiful Chail and Bishigram valleys, while to the west lies the expansive Bahrain Valley. Though both valleys are roughly a 20-km drive apart, they seem to converge here, separated only by this high-altitude pass.

True to its name, Yakh Kandaw was icy cold. Winds from both valleys collided at this very point, creating a dramatic and enchanting corridor of swirling air, an experience nothing short of spectacular. But our adventure was far from over. From Yakh Kandaw, we continued toward the final leg of our journey: the hidden paradise of Pathan Banda, perched high above this cold and windy mountain pass.

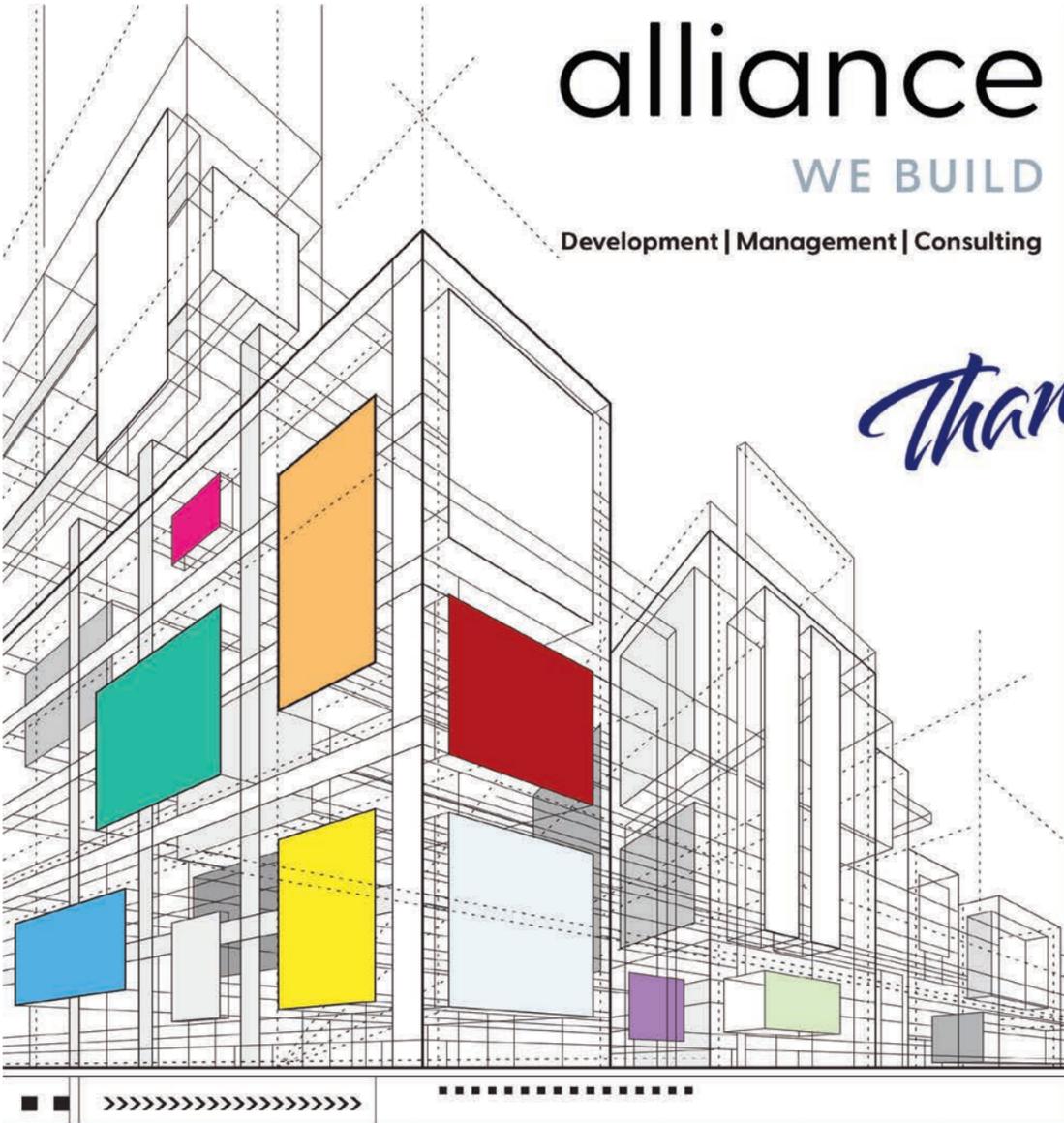
Pathan Banda is a lush green meadow, hidden deep within the dense forest, a secret haven of unspoiled beauty. After a grueling 13-hour hike, we were finally rewarded with the otherworldly landscape of Pathan Banda. It was so surreal, so breathtaking, that we could hardly believe our eyes.

We were exceptionally lucky to spot eagles soaring high above the meadow, adding to the magic of the moment. The forest was so remote and wild that over the course of our entire two-day journey, we encountered only four people. Two of them we met at Yakh Kandaw while returning from Pathan Banda. They were from Dabargi village on the other side of the valley. One of them shared something that sent a chill down our spines, he had seen a bear in the exact same spot where we had camped, just a day before our arrival.

It was time to head back home, but this beautiful, dense forest full of wilderness hadn't seen the last of us just yet. As we began our descent from the mountain, I turned to the hero of our journey, Sherin Zada and asked him how he felt about the adventure, what it meant to him. He paused for a moment, catching his breath, then replied with a few simple, yet powerful words:

"I may not have seen the views, but I lived the climb, and that's enough for me. You don't need sight to witness beauty; you only need courage. And courage grows wings when the spirit is willing. They said I couldn't, but now the wind, the peaks, and the silence all say I did."





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American Pakistan Chronicle

Community Meet & Greet Showcases Sara Khan's Campaign for Fort Bend County Treasurer



Fort Bend County: Residents and community leaders gathered at a meet and greet event to engage with Sara Khan, a candidate for Fort Bend County Treasurer, as she shared her

vision for transparent, responsible, and people-focused leadership.

During her address, Khan spoke about her strong ties to the community and her motivation for seeking

public office. She emphasized that her campaign is grounded in the principles of service, trust, and accountability, noting that public office is

Continued on page 28

Pakistani-American Community in Houston Commemorates Quaid-e-Azam's 149th Birth Anniversary



HOUSTON: The Pakistani-American community in Houston celebrated the 149th birth anniversary of the Founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, with great zeal at a special

event organized by the Pakistan Association of Greater Houston (PAGH) at the Pakistan Center.

A large number of community members, intellectuals, and

Continued on page 28

Houston Rings in the New Year with Dua's "Jeeto Houston" Family Night



Houston: The year-end festivities in Houston gained vibrant momentum with Dua's New Year's Eve Jeeto Houston, a lively family-oriented celebration held on December 28 at A Golden Tree Banquet. The well-attended event brought together

members of the Pakistani and South Asian community for an evening filled with games, live performances, food, and nonstop entertainment.

Hosted by popular media personality Dua Malik, the program

Continued on page 28

Trump canceled temporary legal status for more than 1.5 million immigrants in 2025

By Ariana Figueroa

Since Inauguration Day, more than 1.5 million immigrants have either lost or will lose their temporary legal status, including their work authorizations and deportation protections, due to President Donald Trump's aggressive revocation of legal immigration.

It's the most rapid loss in legal status for immigrants in recent United States history, experts in immigration policy told States Newsroom. The Trump administration curtailed legal immigration by terminating Temporary Protected Status for more than 1 million immigrants and

Continued on page 28

Quaid-e-Azam Day Observed in Houston with Strong Youth Participation



HOUSTON: The Quaid-e-Azam Foundation Houston observed Quaid-e-Azam Day on December 25 with a well-attended community event that highlighted

the continued relevance of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's principles among Pakistani-Americans, particularly

Continued on page 28

Haroon Mughal Kicks Off Campaign for Fort Bend County Commissioner Precinct 4



Primary election activities have officially commenced across the United States to finalize candidates for city and county offices. In this process, several Pakistani-American candidates have entered

the political arena, signaling increased civic participation from the community.

Haroon Mughal, a prominent Democratic Party candidate for

Continued on page 28

Houston PPP Chapter Commemorates Late Benazir Bhutto with Prayer and Tribute



Houston, TX – The Houston chapter of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) honored the 18th death

anniversary of Pakistan's first and only female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, with a commemorative event

paying tribute to her enduring legacy. Held at Dewan Restaurant,

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Community Leader Shakeel Khan Celebrates Birthday with Friends in Houston

HOUSTON: Community leader and businessman Shakeel Khan, owner of Maxx Builders, celebrated his birthday with close friends at a local restaurant in Houston, marking the occasion in a warm and friendly atmosphere.

The gathering brought together friends who shared in the celebration and extended heartfelt wishes to Mr. Khan. The evening was filled with camaraderie, conversation, and appreciation for his role as a successful entrepreneur and respected member of the

community.

Guests praised Shakeel Khan for his leadership, humility, and positive contributions to both the business sector and the local community. The celebration concluded with a cake-cutting ceremony and prayers for his

good health, happiness, and continued success.

The birthday get-together reflected the strong bonds of friendship and goodwill that Mr. Khan enjoys among his peers in Houston.





WHO KILLED BENAZIR BHUTTO?

December 27 marks a decade since one of the most traumatic events in Pakistan's recent political history.

Ziad Zafar

This piece was originally published on December 24, 2017.

Sarwar Khan struggled to breathe as he opened his eyes in the suffocating darkness. Only a few hours earlier he had been at his desk in Islamabad finishing up an ordinary day's work. Now the Ahmadi businessman was nailed inside a coffin, gasping for air. His captors had injected him with sedatives and were attempting to transport him out of the city in an ambulance, disguised as a corpse — but the dose was wearing off, giving way to Sarwar's blood-curdling screams. As the kidnappers stopped to subdue their human freight, a taxi driver on the highway witnessed the suspicious activity and called the authorities.

The police action that followed that day in February 2009 led to the capture of one of the most influential Al Qaeda strategists and ideologues in the organisation's history. Major Haroon Ashiq was arrested from the outskirts of Peshawar while trying to smuggle Sarwar Khan into the tribal areas. A former Special Services Group (SSG) commando, Haroon had left the army after 2001 and joined hands with the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) before graduating to the highest ranks of Al Qaeda's network in Pakistan. Major Haroon, it emerged, had been a mastermind of the Mumbai attacks the previous year and also a key player in some of the most spectacular militant operations in Pakistan in living memory. These included a sustained campaign of attacks on Nato supply lines, the murder of a former head of the elite SSG Major General Faisal Alvi, as well the kidnapping of Karachi-based filmmaker Satish Anand.

Haroon's role in Al Qaeda was not merely operational but also strategic and visionary. He was one of the only Pakistanis to be elected a member of the organisation's shura (council) and is credited with reviving its flagging fortunes after 2003 in a massive overhaul of the group's organisational structure and tactics. Kidnapping for ransom was also a new tactic developed under him to help Al Qaeda out of a severe financial crunch.

Major Haroon admitted his role in all these acts but one of the most important pieces of information he gave to interrogators was about a case in which he claimed not to have been involved at all: the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

The morning after the assassination 10 years ago, as the country convulsed with grief and chaos, the government of Gen Musharraf announced that secret agencies had intercepted a phone call to Baitullah Mehsud, the amir of the outlawed Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which indicated that the former prime minister had been assassinated by Mehsud's men.

The disclosure was met with severe criticism and incredulity by an angry public. Doubts focused on the speed at which the government had produced the intercept, only fueling speculation about who killed her. News that the crime scene was hosed down

minutes after the attack led to accusations of official complicity in the murder. The failure to conduct an autopsy compounded the situation and reinforced suspicions. Over the course of 10 years, these events have chronically overshadowed the case and ensured that the investigation into Pakistan's most controversial murder would always remain limited in scope.

In August 2009, the Benazir murder investigation was transferred from the Punjab Police to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) on the wishes of President Asif Ali Zardari. The Punjab Police inquiry under Additional IG CTD Chaudhry Abdul Majeed had been severely criticised for its incompetence by the UN Inquiry Commission among others. The new probe under DIG Khalid Qureshi of the FIA was able to piece together a much more detailed picture of what happened at the lower level of the plot.

According to investigators, there were at least five tiers in the planning hierarchy of the assassination. At the top of the pyramid were the masterminds, then came the planners, followed by the facilitators, then the handlers and lastly, the bombers themselves. In all, at least nine people are thought to have been involved. Another three people are accused of having knowledge of the plot. The perpetrators at each stage did not know the conspirators higher up and were only in touch with the cell directly above them. "You have to understand these people are the best in the world," says an FIA official who worked on the investigation. "Many of them have been trained in clandestine operations and know the protocols. There are natural 'cut-outs' built into the plan."

According to the official charge sheet, a key part of the attack was planned in Madrassa Darul Uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak by former students of the seminary: Nadir alias Qari Ismail, Nasrullah alias Ahmed and Abdullah alias Saddam. It is alleged that these facilitators were being run by a senior planner Ibad-ur-Rehman alias Farooq Chattan who also provided the suicide jackets. The Haqqania trio collected the suicide bombers, Bilal and Ikramullah, from South Waziristan and brought them back to Akora Khattak. Nasrullah then took the boys to Rawalpindi where they linked up with the handlers, locally based cousins Hasnain Gul and Muhammad Rafaqat, who were later arrested.

Copies of the sworn confessions of Hasnain and Rafaqat obtained by Eos reveal details of how the two 15-year-old bombers were transported to Liaquat Bagh and how the handlers conducted the reconnaissance of the venue earlier the same day. Forensic analysis of call data records of the accused, corroborated through mobile tower geofencing, confirm Hasnain and Rafaqat's accounts of their movements on 27th December.

'The Long-necked one': A Third Bomber?

According to the official investigation there were two bombers present in Liaquat Bagh on 27th December. Bilal alias Saeed and Ikramullah. These names are corroborated by the confessions of the handlers Hasnain and Rafaqat. The bombers were placed at alternative exits to ensure success in the event that Benazir took a different route out of the venue. In the end, investigators maintain that only one individual detonated his explosives and that this was Bilal alias Saeed. The other would-be suicide bomber, Ikramullah, escaped from the scene and has been declared a proclaimed offender.

DNA reports, however, appear to contradict the claim that there was only one assailant. Personal effects of the bomber recovered from the house of handler Hasnain Gul including a shawl, cap and pair of joggers, were tested against the remains of three individuals found at the crime scene. The DNA profiles of two individuals found on the shawl and in the joggers match the remains of two individuals from the crime scene. In effect, this means that another individual who came into contact with the shawl and joggers found from Hasnain's house, perished in the blast. Eos has obtained exclusive access to DNA reports that prove the existence of this possible third attacker. The report was prepared by the FBI's DNA laboratory in Quantico, Virginia, at the request of the FIA-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT). Its findings were originally included in an initial version of the challan submitted to the court, but this was later dropped without explanation. This version of the charge sheet states: "Comparison report of FBI Lab has corroborated Hasnain Gul's confessional statement by confirming that 02 terrorists who left shawl and pair of joggers and cap in Hasnain Gul's residence were killed in the blast on crime scene in Liaquat Bagh on 27-12-2007."

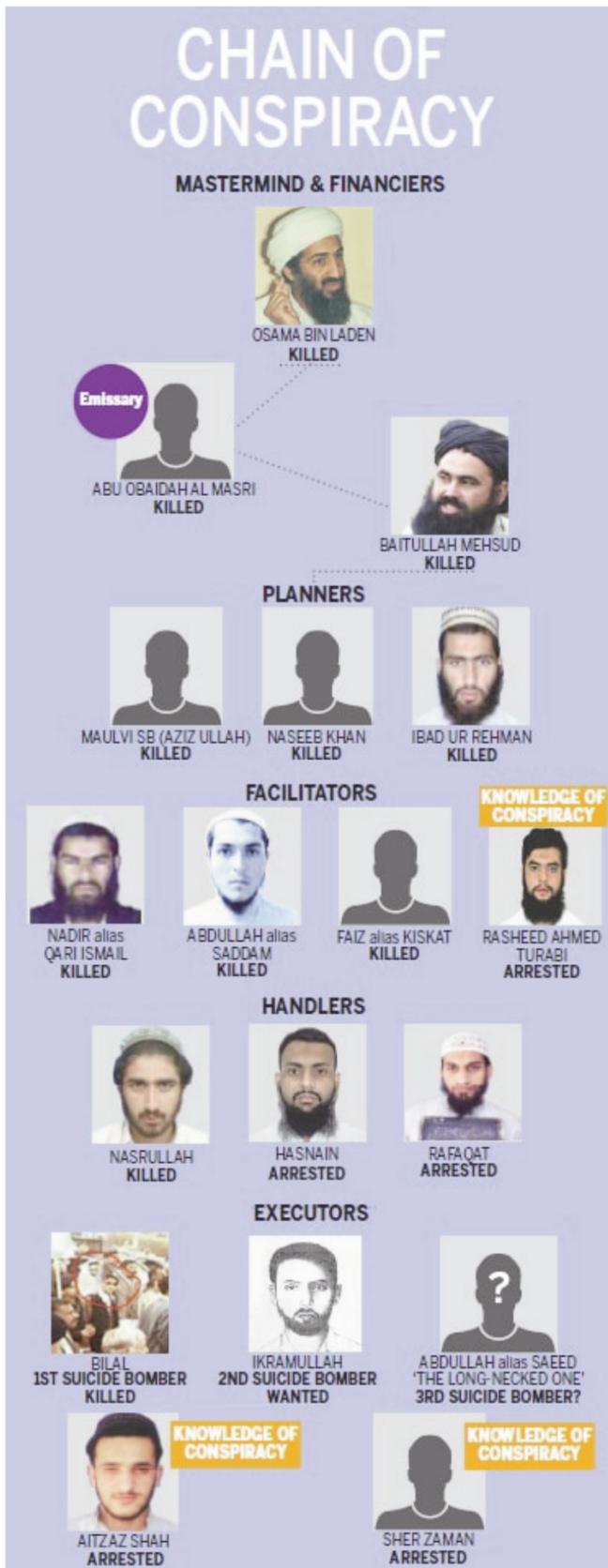
Sources close to the investigation say the report lost evidentiary value because representatives from the FBI refused to come to Pakistan to testify before the court, rendering the report inadmissible under Pakistani law of evidence. Another reason it became untenable was because Pakistani investigators could not establish a 'chain of custody' relating to the human remains which were first collected by officials of another agency, who were later untraceable by the FIA. "It is possible that the identity of Bilal and Saeed, has been collapsed into one individual," said one journalist who has followed the case closely. Evidence for the existence of a third bomber comes from two other sources. The phone call between Baitullah Mehsud and one Maulvi sahib, intercepted by the security agency, contains a reference to three bombers:

Baitullah Mehsud: Who were they?

Maulvi Sahib: There was Saeed, there was Bilal from

Continued on Page 20

WHO KILLED BENAZIR BHUTTO?



TTP chief Baitullah Mehsud (right) was immediately accused of orchestrating Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

Mehsud on the phone call intercepted by the security services in which he (Mehsud) is told of the successful operation by one Maulvi sahib. Though not made part of the challan, intelligence sources believe that Maulvi sahib is a man called Azizullah, also a prominent upper-tier planner. Another individual, Maulvi Naseeb, a former teacher at Madrassa Haqqania, was also involved in 'preparing' the boys 'for jannah' in Akora Khattak. His role has also not been established in the challan. Both Azizullah and Naseeb have been reported killed.

"There are many things we will never know now," said one investigator involved in the prosecution. "The links are broken forever." He was referring to the fact that virtually every single person of interest in the assassination conspiracy has been killed in mysterious circumstances. Only the lowest level operatives have been brought to trial.

Nasrullah and Qari Ismail were killed at a check post in Mohmand agency, on the 15th of January, 2008, as they tried to flee from police. They were transporting a 15-year-old suicide bomber who blew himself up in the car. Qari was killed instantly and Nasrullah died a few days later in hospital. Investigators say he (Nasrullah) was a key figure in the conspiracy with Al Qaeda links who knew the identities of people higher up in the chain. Analysis of call data records from Nasrullah's phone show he was constantly in touch with a number that was used in the ransom negotiations of Karachi-based businessmen Satish Anand and Aqeel Haji. Major Haroon Ashiq and his close comrade Ilyas Kashmiri were involved in these kidnappings.

Ibad-ur-Rehman alias Farooq Chhattan, the alleged chief planner, was killed in a drone strike in Khyber agency on 15th May, 2010. Officials says his case is particularly confounding as he always remained a step ahead of police despite solid intelligence about his location. It is also pointed out that he was killed in the first-ever drone strike in Khyber Agency.

Abdullah alias Saddam was killed while handling an explosive device on 31st May, 2008 at Mamad Gatt, Mohmand Agency and he was buried in his native village Lakaro in Mohmand Agency.

Baitullah Mehsud was killed in a

drone strike on 5th August, 2009 in South Waziristan during a conjugal visit with his second wife.

Baitullah's Denial

Soon after Benazir Bhutto's assassination Baitullah Mehsud denied he had any role in it saying it was against Pakhtun customs to kill a woman. His spokesman Maulvi Omar said: "We are sad over Benazir Bhutto's death. We do not have any enmity with Pakistani leaders and are only opposed to the US." Officials close to the investigation are not convinced by the denial. "Baitullah only denied it later after the backlash came," says one investigator. "He had to backtrack after the Sindhis started burning Mehsud trucks and tankers in Sindh. 90% of the trucks are run by the Mehsuds. It's a huge source of revenue for him. He said we don't kill women in our culture but that's obviously false. They have no such qualms. They have killed countless women."

Investigators have been able to piece together a fairly comprehensive picture of the lower sections of the plot, and also establish a prima facie case against Baitullah Mehsud. But the question of who was behind him has always remained elusive.

Eos has been able to obtain evidence that another hitherto unknown mastermind was behind the plot. The story begins with Major Haroon's confession.

Haroon told his interrogators that the assassination of Benazir Bhutto was ordered by Osama bin Laden and that Baitullah Mehsud had been tasked to carry out the plan. Haroon claimed the emissary between Bin Laden and Mehsud was a militant called Abu Obaidah Al Masri who was in charge of Al Qaeda's Pakistan operation.

Haroon said he was given this information by Ilyas Kashmiri. Kashmiri, himself a former SSG officer surged through jihadi ranks to become one of Bin Laden's closest lieutenants and was also tipped by US counterterrorism experts to replace him as leader of Al Qaeda after the Abbottabad raid. Kashmiri and Major Haroon were the principal architects of the Mumbai attacks and worked closely together on a number of operations. Eos has obtained a confidential FIA document containing details of Haroon's confession in which he confirms that the October 18th assassination attempt on

Benazir Bhutto was also master-minded by Abu Obaidah al Masri and carried out through Baitullah's men. The same network succeeded in assassinating Bhutto two months later in Rawalpindi.

In the document, Haroon also comments on the 'superb' planning and execution of the attack from an operational point of view and says he knew she would be vulnerable based on his assessment of her public rallies. "Benazir Bhutto was daring and bold lady and he (Haroon) was confident that she would definitely give chance to the assailants and that what she did [sic]," reads the report. Major Haroon is currently incarcerated in a special security block in Adiala Jail where he is considered one of the prison's most fearsome inmates.

These revelations did not come as a surprise to officials close to the investigation who had long suspected an Al Qaeda link in Benazir's murder, but were unable to establish it as part of the official investigation because of lack of evidence. Investigators who eventually brought the case against eight accused in the Benazir murder readily admit they were unable to prosecute the masterminds of the assassination, only nab the low level operatives.

"By the time the investigation came to us the evidence was destroyed, links broken," says a senior member of the FIA-led JIT that worked on Benazir's murder case speaking on condition of anonymity. "But the conspiracy began even before she set foot in Pakistan. The intelligence chatter was loud and shattering. It was the Arabs in the northwest...the Mirali/ Miranshah group who were entrenched there. The TTP was working for them." The investigator is convinced that there was a strong Al Qaeda link. "I believe Baitullah did [it] at the behest of the Arabs."

Al Qaeda's Target Pakistan Operation

Al Qaeda's dominant presence in the tribal areas post 9/11 and its role in reshaping centuries-old local dynamics there has been well documented by local and western scholarship. In particular, its ability to decapitate the vanguard of traditionally pro-establishment tribal leaders in favor of a younger group of ruthless but malleable anti-state warlords, such as Baitullah

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Badar and Ikramullah.

BM: The three of them did it?

MS: Ikramullah and Bilal did it.

The conversation makes a clear distinction between Bilal and Saeed. Elsewhere, in a document prepared by the Interior Ministry, Saeed is referred to as Abdullah alias Saeed 'the long-necked one'. The document claims that Abdullah alias Saeed, along with Bilal, Ikramullah and Nasrullah was also part of a failed plan to kill Benazir Bhutto in Arbab Niaz stadium in Peshawar on the 26th of December, a day before the assassination. The assailants were not able to get close enough to Ms Bhutto's vehicle because of tight security and decided to move overnight to Rawalpindi where they were picked up by local handlers Hasnain Gul and Rafiqat. The account relating to an attempt in Peshawar the previous day is corroborated by Hasnain Gul's confession

who says he was told by Nasrullah that they had tried to launch but failed in Peshawar. However, there is no mention of Abdullah alias Saeed in any of the confessions in which the handlers admit to receiving only two bombers. The 'long-necked one' appears to vanish from the face of the earth. Some speculate that a third, hitherto unknown, terrorist cell could have been used to transport the third bomber to Liaquat Bagh.

The other men standing trial are Aitzaz Shah, Sher Zaman and Rasheed Ahmed Turabi, all three accused of having knowledge of the conspiracy. Aitzaz Shah, then a 15-year-old boy, was arrested from Dera Ismail Khan in January 2008. Police say he admitted to knowing about the plot to kill Benazir Bhutto and was prepared as a suicide bomber to target her if the first plan failed. He also identified the voice of Baitullah



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WHO KILLED BENAZIR BHUTTO?



The weapon recovered from the scene of the crime. TV footage showed Bilal firing the gun at the former prime minister



Asif Ali Zardari attempts to control those who had arrived at Benazir's funeral

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Mehsud, changed the region forever.

Al Qaeda's power came from its ability to harness the potential and reach of local actors by introducing sophisticated techniques and improving the capacity of militant groups in Fata. From bomb-making and fundraising, to information operations and guerilla tactics, the organisation's foreign fighters turned the TTP into one of the most deadly insurgent groups on earth. In 2005, Al Qaeda was also able to convince the Taliban to accept the use of suicide bombing as a strategic weapon, a massive game changer.

Despite insistence from senior Al Qaeda ideologues such as Ayman Al Zawahiri, Bin Laden was at first reluctant to attack Pakistan — partly to maintain it as a sanctuary and recruiting ground, but mostly because he long believed the real war was against the 'far enemy' which was to be routed in the Afghan theatre.

A new book *The Exile* (Bloomsbury), about Bin Laden's years in hiding by award-winning journalists Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, argues that Ilyas Kashmiri played an instrumental role in putting Pakistan in Al Qaeda's crosshairs. At a top leadership meeting, Kashmiri argued that in addition to punishing its pro-western leaders, creating domestic chaos in Pakistan would ensnare the Pakistani security agencies who would then be less able to come after them. The argument was clinched after the siege of the Al Qaeda-linked Red Mosque in Islamabad which was to prove a watershed moment. The group's decision to take the war to Pakistani cities in 2007 was a turning point which ushered in an era of unprecedented carnage.

Bin Laden needed an experienced and dedicated head of operations in Pakistan to lead the new strategy. He appointed an Egyptian called Sheikh Abdul Hameed as Ameer-e-Khuruj [Leader of the Revolt] to direct the war inside Pakistan. Sheikh Abdul Hameed is an alias for Abu Obaidah al Masri, the man mentioned in Major Haroon's confession as the planner of Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

Al Masri was already the head of Al Qaeda's external operations and responsible for the London bombings as well as the near-successful attempt to blow up 18 transatlantic airliners mid-flight. It was now time to turn their guns on their host country. In the months that followed, Al Qaeda was to shake Pakistan to its foundations.

The Menace of Al Masri

Despite a career in militancy spanning three decades, relatively little is known about the man who would lead Al Qaeda's

revolt in Pakistan. No photograph of Abu Obaidah exists, but disparate pieces of information come together to form a clearer picture. Al Masri was originally from the Sharqia governorate in the Nile Delta in Egypt, but is thought to be a Sudanese citizen. Described as a 'journeyman fighter' from the first generation of jihadis, he was a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya. Al Masri was a seasoned operator in Pakistan. According to intelligence sources, he was a key planner in the bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad in November 1995 which killed 17 people. His mentor Ayman Al Zawahiri masterminded the attack. Benazir Bhutto was prime minister at the time and said the attack was "retribution for the extradition of Ramzi Yousef", an Al Qaeda militant who had been handed over to the US. Twelve years later, Al Masri would be back in Pakistan to kill Benazir Bhutto.

The Abbottabad Memo

The most crucial piece of evidence linking Al Masri to the assassination was recovered from Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad after the raid. The document seen by Eos contains a memo delivered to Bin Laden just two days after the assassination. The memo from Al Masri, delivered via courier, refers to the 'special task' and informs Bin Laden of the successful "operation in 'Pindi'", confirming it was his men who murdered Benazir. "More good is to come in revenge for our brothers and sisters in Hafsa and Lal mosques," reads the memo. Benazir was not directly involved in the Red Mosque siege, though she was the only politician who had openly supported the operation against it. In this context, however, the reference to the Red Mosque is a wide-ranging pretext for all operations against the Pakistani state and its leaders.

The courier goes on to discuss operational issues and conveys Al Masri's concern about a shortage of funds. The message asks for Bin Laden's permission to open a local branch in Pakistan. This is most likely a request to offer the franchise to a local group. The courier makes a supplication on behalf of Al Masri saying he is: "already taking care of the two jobs and his productivity would undoubtedly be higher should he be dedicated to one job only." Analysts who have looked at the memo believe this a reference to the fact that Al Masri was simultaneously running Al Qaeda's external operations and the organisation was suffering from an increasing dearth of leadership after the loss of a number of senior operatives.

The existence of this document was first revealed by investigative journalist

Azaz Syed in his book *The Secrets of Pakistan's War on Al Qaeda*. According to Syed, the document was among the material that American Navy Seals were not able to take with them from the compound and which was later catalogued by Pakistani investigators. "The most striking feature of this memo is the timing, delivered only two days after the assassination," says Syed. "The general impression about Osama in Abbottabad is that he was completely isolated, but this proves he was very much in touch with key figures of his network and getting updated virtually in real time."

An Arabic-language expert who was shown the memo is of the view that it was written by someone who knows Arabic but was not a native speaker. Syed believes this was most likely Abu Ahmad Al Kuwaiti, Bin Laden's trusted courier and one of the few people who had access to him in the last days. Kuwaiti was actually a Pakistani whose real name was Ibrahim Saeed. A speaker of Arabic and Pashto, Saeed lived with Bin Laden for a number of years in the Abbottabad compound and was his only link to the outside world. It was Saeed's phone calls that inadvertently led the US to Bin Laden's lair, where Saeed was also killed alongside his master.

Intelligence Intercept

Bin Laden's final years in Abbottabad, as revealed through the memo and a treasure trove of similar evidence collected by the Americans from the compound, reveal an astonishingly resilient picture of the Al Qaeda leader. Despite his isolation, and periods of great depression and scarcity, Bin Laden appears to have been deeply engaged with his network, issuing directives, confirming appointments and also monitoring developments in the region closely, particularly in Pakistan, which was of special interest.

Yet more evidence suggests he had monitored Al Qaeda's assassination program most closely. A secret security agency document leaked to Eos suggests that he personally oversaw the assassination of Benazir and attempts on other political leaders. The document dated 19th December, 2007, states that the agency has 'reliably learned' that Osama bin Laden has issued orders for the assassination of President Musharraf, Benazir Bhutto and Maulana Fazlur Rehman. According to the information, Bin Laden planned to send the explosives through a Pakistani national called Musa Tariq who was en route to Dera Ismail Khan. Citing the intelligence, the document also claims that "Osama bin Laden is personally supervising the operation and for this purpose has moved to Afghanistan."

Former Interior Minister Rehman Malik told Eos that after his party took government, he looked more deeply into the source of this information. "It came from an informant in Miranshah," he said. "There were reports that six people had been sent down from Fata to carry out the attack. That corresponds to the information we were subsequently able to gather about the bombers and their handlers."

In April 2008, US intelligence sources reported that Abu Obaidah Al Masri was dead. A US official told the BBC that Masri had apparently "died within the last two months, probably of hepatitis." Assassinated journalist and terrorism expert Saleem Shahzad wrote about Al Qaeda's disappointment at not being able to capitalise on the chaos in Pakistan in the post-December 27 situation because of Al Masri's demise.

Shahzad had previously reported the only claim of responsibility in the Benazir assassination when an Al Qaeda spokesman contacted him by phone. "We terminated the most precious American asset which vowed to defeat (the) mujahideen," he quoted Mustafa Abu Al Yazid as saying. Yazid, also known as Sheikh Saeed al Masri was known as Al Qaeda's chief paymaster since the 1990s but rose to greater prominence in 2008, after the death of Abu Obaidah al Masri. Yazid was also involved in the financing of the 9/11 attacks, though it is said he was initially against the plan. He was killed in a drone attack in May 2010.

On August 31 this year, an Anti Terrorism Court (ATC) in Rawalpindi announced a verdict in the 10-year long Benazir Bhutto murder case. The judgement acquitted the five TTP-linked suspects and handed down 17-year jail terms to two police officers for criminal negligence in ordering the hosing down of the crime scene and their failure to provide Ms Bhutto security. The ATC also declared retired Gen Pervez Musharraf an absconder in the case. The confessions of the five accused militants were declared inadmissible by the judge on procedural bases. The police officers who are out on bail have appealed against the verdict, whereas the prosecution has appealed against the acquittal of the five accused militants. While the appeals play out in court, there now seems little chance that this judicial inquiry will advance the public's knowledge about the larger conspiracy to eliminate Benazir Bhutto.

*The writer is a journalist and documentary filmmaker. He is also a producer of BBC's podcast series *The Assassination* presented by Owen Bennett-Jones.*

Jeeto Houston Lights Up Year-End Festivities with Umrah Tickets and Family Entertainment

A view of the lively atmosphere at Dua's "Jeeto Houston" year-end family night, where attendees enjoyed entertainment, fashion presentations, and prize giveaways, including Umrah tickets. The event was hosted by Dua Malik and attended by State Representative Dr. Suleman Lalani.



Honoring Quaid-e-Azam's Legacy Through Youth Voices in Houston

A view of speakers and attendees at the Quaid-e-Azam Day celebration organized by the Quaid-e-Azam Foundation Houston in Houston on December 25. The well-attended program underscored the values of unity, faith, discipline, law, and justice, while encouraging youth to translate Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision into action through education and civic engagement.



Haroon Mughal Kicks Off Commissioner Campaign with Strong Pakistani American Backing

The campaign launch reflected increasing political engagement among Pakistani Americans and a shared call for effective representation in Fort Bend County.



Some middle-age depression symptoms linked to dementia risk



A SMALL CLUSTER OF SIX SPECIFIC DEPRESSION SYMPTOMS IN MIDDLE-AGED PATIENTS HAS BEEN LINKED TO AN INCREASED RISK OF DEVELOPING DEMENTIA LATER IN LIFE.

Depression in middle age has previously been linked to an increased risk of dementia.

But this relationship appears to be driven by a small cluster of six specific symptoms, rather than by depression overall, new research in *The Lancet Psychiatry* suggests.

Focusing on these six symptoms might help people struggling with midlife depression avoid dementia later in life, researchers said.

"Dementia risk is linked to a handful of depressive symptoms rather than depression as a whole," said lead investigator Philipp Frank, a research fellow at University College London.

"This symptom-level approach gives us a much clearer picture of who may be more vulnerable decades before dementia develops," Frank said in a news release. "Everyday symptoms that many people experience in midlife appear to carry important information about long-term brain health. Paying attention to these patterns could open new opportunities for early prevention."

For the new study, researchers analyzed data from nearly 6,000 middle-aged adults participating in a long-term British health study.

Depression symptoms were assessed in 1997-1999, when all the participants were dementia-free and middle-aged, at an average age of 55.

The researchers then tracked participants for 25 years, recording diagnoses of dementia up to 2023. During this time, 1 out of 10 (10%) people developed dementia.

Analysis showed that people with depression in midlife had a 27% higher risk of later dementia.

However, this risk was driven entirely by a set of six symptoms:

- Loss of self-confidence
- Difficulty coping with problems
- Lack of warmth and affection for others

- Ongoing anxiety
- Dissatisfaction with the way tasks are carried out

- Difficulty concentrating
- In particular, lack of self-confidence and difficulty coping with problems were each associated with a roughly 50% increased risk of dementia, researchers found.

These six symptoms can lead to reduced social engagement and fewer brain-stimulating experiences, researchers said.

That, in turn, can affect the brain's ability to maintain normal thinking even when it's been affected by damage or disease.

On the other hand, other depression symptoms like sleep problems, suicidal thoughts and low mood showed no meaningful link with dementia risk, the study found.

"Depression doesn't have a single shape -- symptoms vary widely and often overlap with anxiety," senior researcher Mika Kivimaki, chair of social epidemiology at University College London, said in a news release.

"We found that these nuanced patterns can reveal who is at higher risk of developing neurological disorders," Kivimaki said. "This brings us closer to more personalized and effective mental health treatments."

However, more research is needed to confirm these findings, the team said.

Richard Oakley, associate director of research and innovation at the U.K.-based Alzheimer's Society, said the connection between dementia and depression is complicated.

"It's encouraging to see this new observational study begin to unpick how dementia and depression are interlinked," he said in a news release.

However, "it's important to note that not everyone who has depression will go on to develop dementia, and people with dementia won't necessarily develop depression," Oakley added.

Inside Hindutva's American headquarters

A Washington-based outfit is quietly spreading Modi's Hindutva by weaponising lawsuits, lobbying, liberal discourse

By Hamza Rao |

As the political air around India is thick with the threat of increased minority persecution at home and murmurs that Delhi is turning rogue abroad, an unexpected frontline of Hindutva is taking shape thousands of miles away: the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a US-based organisation that has mastered the art of cloaking a majoritarian project in the language of American liberalism.

The HAF has emerged as one of Hindutva's most diligent custodians on foreign soil, quietly and at times leaping at its critics' throats to fortify its ideological frontiers and assert an Islamophobic narrative, often in alliance with the American far-right.

Its leadership and founding personnel trace roots to older Hindu-right organisations, some of which are linked to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), such as the Vedic Foundation (VF) and Hindu Education Foundation (HEF).

More recently, the organisation openly rebuked Western media outlets, including the New York Times, for "whitewashing" the Pahalgam attack in Indian-occupied Kashmir, calling them out for ignoring the "religious element" of the attack.

Suhag Shukla, executive director of the organisation, even suggested a better framing of the attack: "Hindus massacred in Kashmir by Islamists in a terror attack by Pakistan-backed group".

A 68-page investigation produced by Rutgers Law School in New Jersey earlier this year offers a stark assessment of how the organisation does this.

The report, "Hindutva in America: A Threat to Equality and Religious Pluralism", traces how these groups have strategically ridden the currents of post-9/11 Islamophobia, leveraging the political and cultural climate generated by the so-called "war on terror" to normalise and advance an ethnonationalist project within American public life.

"By couching their rhetoric within the mainstream narrative that Muslims worldwide are presumptively terrorists and violent, Hindutva organisations join the chorus of other anti-Muslim right-wing groups."

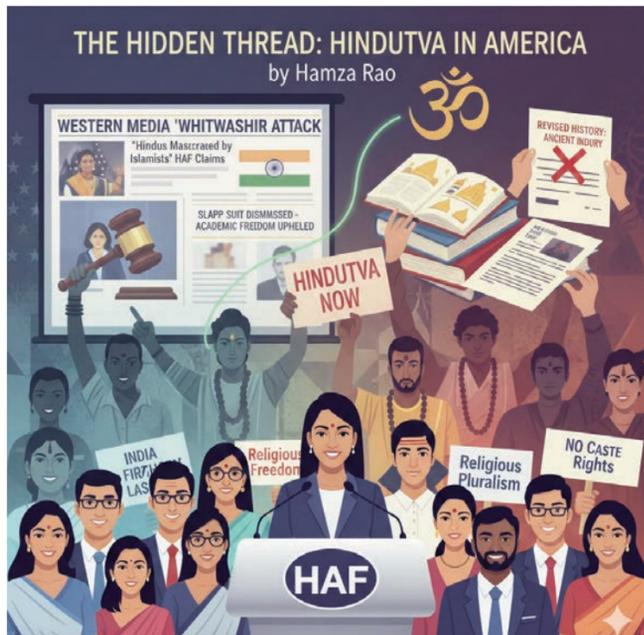
The study further identifies two core objectives guiding Hindutva's diaspora strategy in the US: the systematic construction of Muslims as perpetual outsiders and security threats, and a sustained effort to curtail academic freedom by intimidating scholars, policing curricula, and narrowing the space for critical inquiry.

On one side, HAF keeps a polished, liberal-friendly exterior, borrowing the vocabulary of pluralism and progressive inclusion while scrupulously smuggling in Hindutva's conceptual DNA. On the other hand, it lashes out at scholars, journalists and activists who try to expose the toxin hidden beneath its rhetoric.

Multiracial far-right

A report released last year by Political Research Associates (PRA), together with the Savera: United Against Supremacy coalition, pressed this into view.

Titled "HAF Way to Supremacy:



How the Hindu American Foundation Rebrands Bigotry as Minority Rights," the study argues that HAF's advocacy operates through a fundamentally antagonistic logic in which "the civil rights and religious freedoms of Hindus are framed in opposition to, and at the expense of, those of other communities".

The report situates HAF's role within a broader ideological assemblage of Hindu-right actors and supremacist currents in the US. Through this alignment, the organisation becomes a conduit for Islamophobia, casteism and other exclusionary narratives circulating within segments of the Indian American community.

The political effect is twofold: the erosion of coalitions among communities of colour, and the quiet recruitment of Hindu Americans into what the report describes as an emergent "multiracial far-right".

By resisting civil rights protections for caste-oppressed groups, amplifying dehumanising portrayals of Muslims and attempting to insulate the Modi government from criticism, HAF has, according to the study, entered into a shared ideological orbit with a range of far-right organisations.

The report shows that none of this is accidental or sudden. Rather, the organisation's trajectory reflects its origins: a project incubated by second-generation Hindutva activists who had been shaped by older and more openly supremacist formations.

HAF's public strategy, the report notes, was to offer a more polished, seemingly liberal-friendly face of Hindutva while continuing to maintain covert linkages with bodies such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHP-A).

The study concludes that the rise of a multiracial far right in the US makes it urgent for civil society to recognise the ideological threat posed by such groups, which undermine the possibilities of an authentically democratic multiracial political horizon.

"The Hindu supremacist movement is a dangerous and increasingly influential force within an emergent multiracial Far Right in the United States," said Tarso Luís Ramos, Executive Director of

Political Research Associates. "The Hindu American Foundation has cleverly exploited the general lack of awareness in this country about Hindu supremacism to present itself as a civil rights organisation. This report sets the record straight: HAF is a stalking horse for Hindutva and must be understood as an extension of the Indian Far Right."

Lawsuits and academic pressure

When the soft rhetoric does not suffice, HAF does not hesitate to deploy harsh tactics like lawsuits, reputational pressure and public condemnations.

In May 2021, HAF filed a defamation and civil-conspiracy lawsuit against a group of activists and academics, including co-founders of Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR), a Christian-organisation representative and Rutgers University Professor Audrey Truschke.

The suit followed Al Jazeera articles and associated commentary that described HAF as having ties to Hindu supremacist and religious-majoritarian groups in India.

The legal campaign was explicit as it involved the portrayal of HAF as aligned with extremist ideology — or as acting as an agent of majoritarian power — and was characterised as defamation.

HAF accused the defendants of misrepresenting relief-fund usage (they had allegedly misused COVID-19 PPP funds) and of labelling HAF as having "parent organisations" connected to extremist groups.

In 2022, the court dismissed the case. The judge found that even if some statements were "verifiably false," the suit failed on procedural grounds: lack of personal jurisdiction over the defendants, and failure to meet the high "actual malice" standard required when public-figure plaintiffs sue for defamation in the US.

Scholars and civil-rights advocates widely criticised HAF's tactics as a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP), aimed at chilling dissent and academic critique. That lawsuit, even though unsuccessful, worked as a warning.

Hindutva memory politics

"Many Hindu Right groups operate abroad, including in the United States. Some are registered as foreign agents in America, such as the Overseas Friends

of BJP, whereas others are registered non-profits, such as the HSS and VHPA," says esteemed historian and Rutgers University Professor Audrey Truschke. Dr Truschke was also sued by the far-right organisation merely over Twitter posts in which she criticised HAF and Hindu nationalist ideology.

According to Dr Truschke, Hindu Right groups in the US share some similar activities with those in India, and some are distinct. For example, all these groups attempt to spread Hindutva propaganda about Indian history.

"The HSS, for instance, disseminates pamphlets that offer mythologies of Hindu glory days... Hindu Right groups in the United States often focus on childhood education, perhaps reflecting the anxiety—common to many immigrant communities—of losing one's children to broader American cultural assimilation," says Professor Truschke.

"The US-based Hindu Right also allies with other alt-right movements in the US context, including Islamophobic groups and, perhaps more surprisingly to some, white nationalists."

One of the most consequential battlegrounds for diaspora Hindutva is the US classrooms. HAF, often in coordination with other Hindu-right-linked organisations, has repeatedly intervened in state-level textbook adoption processes, arguing for revisions to how Indian history, religion, and caste are presented.

As early as 2006, HAF (along with other Hindu organisations) challenged California's decision to reject most proposed textbook edits intended to sanitise or reshape presentations of caste, ancient history (e.g., Indo-Aryan migrations, which is a favourite of Modi supporters back home), the status of women and other contested aspects of the Indian past.

The court ultimately ruled against HAF's challenge, retaining the contested textbooks. It concluded that portrayals of Aryan migrations and the caste system did not violate legal standards of neutrality or fairness. The historical reality of caste and migration was deemed legitimate to teach.

Nevertheless, the process resulted in a settlement as the Board agreed to share some legal expenses and both sides claimed partial victory.

More recently, HAF again lobbied during the California textbook-adoption process, submitting letters, petitions, and commentary, aiming to influence how South-Asian histories, including Hinduism, caste and migration, are taught.

"Rewriting school textbooks to introduce alt-right propaganda is an activity we see pursued by Hindu Right groups in India and in the US," Dr Truschke observes.

Caste politics

Similarly, the politics of caste has become a central fault line in HAF's diaspora strategy. While caste remains a live, controversial issue in India and among South Asians abroad, HAF has consistently argued that caste-based protections (as civil-rights policy) are unnecessary, unfair, and discriminatory. This is a strategy that echoes caste-caste denialism and upper-caste defensive-

ness. In 2023, the California state legislature debated Senate Bill 403 (SB-403), which would explicitly add "caste" as a protected category under civil rights law. HAF formally opposed the bill. In a public letter to state lawmakers, HAF argued that the bill's "legislative intent and impact will result in an unconstitutional denial of equal protection and due process to South Asians..." and claimed it would amount to profiling based on national origin, ethnicity or ancestry.

HAF conceded that caste discrimination should be dealt with, but insisted that any incidents should be "investigated under existing law," rejecting the need for a specific protected category. Ironically, Dalit rights groups, civil-rights activists and other Indian-American organisations saw this as yet another attempt to erase caste as a systemic reality and deny structural discrimination.

When SB-403 passed the state legislature, HAF intensified its lobbying, and eventually the bill was vetoed by Governor Gavin Newsom in late 2023. HAF celebrated the veto as a vindication of its position.

Funding

As a 501(c)(3) non-profit, HAF has established institutional legitimacy and financial structures that anchor it within both Indian-American and broader US civil society landscapes.

According to Professor Truschke, Hindu Right groups in the US also serve some specific functions, including attempting to influence politicians in the country and fundraising from a notably wealthy diaspora. Indian Americans are about twice as wealthy as the average American.

The institutional embedding allows HAF to operate in multiple arenas: policy-advocacy, curriculum influence, media narratives, legal pressure, and fundraising from wealthy Indian diaspora donors.

Moreover, this embedding gives HAF access to resources, influence and respectability in the form of tax-exempt status, non-profit legitimacy and the ability to frame itself as a civil-rights advocate rather than a political lobby.

"The US-based Hindu Right is Janus-faced when it comes to majoritarianism. They argue against this in the United States, invoking a language of minority rights and religious freedom, while advocating for Hindu supremacy in India," Dr Truschke observes.

Moreover, the historian argues that the HAF uses its stance on the former to try to shield its odious politics on the latter from criticism. "Fewer people are buying into this bad-faith argument as India's treatment of its religious minorities continues to degenerate, with an increasing number of people warning of India even being in danger of a genocide."

Several scholars and journalists contacted for this article declined to speak on the record, even after the HAF's defamation case was dismissed. Some cited direct legal exposure, others pointed more vaguely to professional risk and sustained harassment. The reluctance itself is instructive.



Quaid-e-Azam Day Observed in Houston with Strong Youth Participation

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the younger generation.

The program began with opening remarks by Dr. Asif Riaz Qadir, Chairman of the Quaid-e-Azam Foundation Houston, who spoke on the historical significance of Quaid-e-Azam's birth anniversary and emphasized the timeless values of Unity, Faith, Discipline, law, and justice. He noted that these ideals serve as a moral compass for Pakistani youth growing up in diverse societies abroad.

Dr. Shabnam Lutfullah, addressing students and families, encouraged youth to translate their academic achievements and professional success in the United States into service, leadership, and advocacy for Pakistan. She emphasized that maintaining a strong national identity while engaging globally is essential for meaningful contribution.

Youth speakers played a central role in the program. Arisha Faisal reflected on Quaid-e-Azam's commitment to justice and the rule of law, describing how his vision continues to influence her educational goals and career choices. Aliha Ali shared personal experiences of migration, stating that while relocation presents emotional challenges, it also reinforces cultural roots and responsibility toward one's homeland.

Aiza Haris, along with speakers Suha, Remy Haynes, and Myra Saqib, spoke about identity, belonging, and the importance of active civic engagement as Pakistani-Americans. Their reflections underscored the need for youth participation beyond symbolic remembrance.

The event concluded with remarks by Aahil Ali, who highlighted education as the cornerstone for realizing Quaid-e-Azam's vision and building a society grounded in justice and opportunity.

The celebration reaffirmed the Quaid-e-Azam Foundation Houston's dedication to fostering informed, confident, and socially responsible youth committed to upholding Pakistan's founding ideals while contributing positively to their communities.

Houston PPP Chapter Commemorates Late Benazir Bhutto with Prayer and Tribute

Continued from page 17

the ceremony featured tributes highlighting Bhutto's pivotal contributions to Pakistan, her steadfast commitment to democracy, and her advocacy for social justice.

A Duya (prayer) was also conducted in her memory, allowing attendees to pay their respects and pray for her soul.

Leaders and members of the Houston PPP chapter reflected on Bhutto's role as a trailblazer for women in politics and her lasting

impact on the nation's political landscape. The event concluded with a call for service, dedication, and the preservation of her principles in both political and social spheres.

Houston Rings in the New Year with Dua's "Jeeto Houston" Family Night

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created an energetic and welcoming atmosphere for families, youth, and community leaders. The event was powered by Lush Café HTX and Houston Desis, and proudly presented by Ashar's Kitchen and DMRise Dua, with Shuja Qaiser serving as the official event partner.

One of the major highlights of the night was the distribution of Umrah tickets, which generated great excitement and enthusiasm among the audience. Participants also enjoyed a colorful fashion show, adding glamour and creativity to the evening and showcasing style alongside cultural expression.

A wide range of interactive games, stage activities, and performances kept the audience fully engaged, making the celebration a memorable pre-New Year gathering. Families appreciated the organizers for curating a wholesome event that combined entertainment, spirituality, and community bonding.

Adding further significance to the occasion, Texas State Representative Dr. Suleman Lalani attended the event as the Chief Guest. In his address, he commended the organizers for promoting unity and positive, family-friendly entertainment, and highlighted the importance of such community-driven initiatives in strengthening cultural and social ties among Pakistani-Americans.

Dua's "Jeeto Houston" concluded on a high note, with attendees stepping into 2026 with joy, excitement, and a strong sense of togetherness—marking the event as a standout highlight of Houston's year-end social calendar.

Haroon Mughal Kicks Off Campaign for Fort Bend County Commissioner Precinct 4

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Fort Bend County Commissioner, Precinct 4, formally launched his campaign with a kick-off event held at Crave Café. The event attracted a large number of supporters and community members.

Fort Bend County District Clerk Beverley Walker was among the notable attendees, along with representatives from the Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, and Hispanic communities, reflecting the county's diverse population.

Speaking to the media, Beverley Walker said that Haroon Mughal's outstanding record of public service and community engagement makes him one of the most qualified candidates for the position.

Addressing the gathering, Haroon Mughal stressed that unity within the Pakistani community

would play a decisive role in his success and help ensure meaningful representation at the county level.

Trump canceled temporary legal status for more than 1.5 million immigrants in 2025

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ending Humanitarian Parole protections for half a million more individuals.

"I don't think we've ever, as a country, seen such a huge number of people losing their immigration status all at once," said Julia Gelatt, the associate director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Program at the Migration Policy Institute.

The move to strip so many immigrants of their work authorization is likely to not only affect communities, but also batter the economy, both immigration and economic experts told States Newsroom.

"Seeing well over 1 million people lose their work authorization in a single year is a really huge event that has ripple effects for employers and communities and families and our economy as well," Gelatt said.

Dozens of lawsuits have been filed by immigrant rights groups and TPS recipients themselves challenging the terminations as unlawful.

"This is the continuation of the Trump administration attack against the immigrant community, and specifically about the TPS program, a program that, for many of us has been a good program, a life-saving program," said Jose Palma, a TPS recipient from El Salvador and coordinator of the National TPS Alliance, which is part of several TPS lawsuits.

Who is granted Temporary Protected Status?

A TPS designation is given because a national's home country is deemed too dangerous to return to due to violence, war, natural disasters or some other unstable condition.

When Congress created the program in 1990, it was initially meant to be temporary, which is why authorizations can be as short as six months and as long as 18 months.

Immigrants who are granted TPS must go through background checks and be vetted each time their status is renewed, but the program does not provide a path to citizenship.

Under the Biden administration, the number of TPS recipients grew, as did the category of humanitarian parole.

That policy decision was heavily criticized by Republicans, and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem vowed to reevaluate TPS country designations for terminations during her Senate confirmation hearing this year.

"This program has been abused and manipulated by the Biden administration, and that will no longer be allowed," Noem said during her hearing.

Before the Trump administration came into office in late January, there were more than 1.3 million immigrants in the TPS program, hailing from 17 countries. Under the first Trump administration, there were roughly 400,000 TPS recipients.

"Almost a million new people got

onto TPS protections under President Biden, so we saw a really rapid expansion, and now we're seeing a very rapid contraction, which is all to say that in the first Trump administration, there weren't so many people who had TPS," Gelatt said.

Noem has terminated TPS for immigrants from 11 countries, and the more than 1 million immigrants affected will lose their protections by February.

Noem extended six months' protection for South Sudan earlier this year, but decided in November to terminate protections by January. She most recently terminated a TPS designation for Ethiopia on Dec. 12.

The other countries with TPS termination are Afghanistan, Burma, Cameroon, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Syria and Venezuela.

"We've never seen this many people lose their legal status in the history of the United States," David Bier, the director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said. "This is totally unprecedented."

People losing their status are also concentrated in certain areas. Florida has more than 400,000 TPS recipients, and Texas has nearly 150,000. Bier said he expects certain industries with high TPS workers to feel the impact, such as construction and health care.

Haiti, Venezuela

Immigrants from two countries — Haiti and Venezuela — make up a majority of recipients set to lose their TPS protections, at nearly 935,000 people.

Venezuelans, who make up 605,000 of those 935,000 TPS recipients, were first granted protections during Trump's first term.

On his final day in office in 2021, his administration issued 18-month deportation protections for Venezuelans — known as Deferred Enforcement Departure, or DED — citing the country's unstable government under President Nicolás Maduro.

"Through force and fraud, the Maduro regime is responsible for the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere in recent memory," according to the Jan. 19, 2021 memo. "A catastrophic economic crisis and shortages of basic goods and medicine have forced about five million Venezuelans to flee the country, often under dangerous conditions."

After the Trump administration's 18-month DED designation, the Biden administration issued the TPS designation for Venezuelans who came to the U.S. in 2021 and again in 2023. The move created two separate TPS groups for Venezuelans.

"The bottom line is that removing the 935,000 Venezuelans and Haitians would cause the entire economy to contract by more than \$14 billion," said Michael Clemens, a professor in the Department of Economics at George Mason University.

He added that not all the TPS recipients are in the labor market. Some are children or elderly dependents who cannot work. Clemens said the TPS workforce population of Haitians and Venezuelans is about 400,000.

Humanitarian Parole program

Separately, under the Biden administration, nearly 750,000 immigrants had some form of humanitarian parole, granting them work and temporary legal status due to either Russia's war in Ukraine or efforts by the administration to manage mass migration from Central American countries.

Quaid-e-Azam's 149th Birth Anniversary

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local leaders attended the ceremony to pay homage to Quaid-e-Azam and reaffirm their commitment to his vision and ideals. The participants also marked the occasion by cutting a birthday cake, reflecting their deep respect and affection for the Father of the Nation.

The ceremony featured addresses by renowned Quaid-e-Azam researcher and author Hasnain Walji, Consul General of Pakistan in Houston Aftab Chaudhry, prominent literary figure Dr. Asif Qadeer, and President of the Pakistan Association of Greater Houston Siraj Narsi. The speakers highlighted Quaid-e-Azam's lifelong struggle, farsighted leadership, and the relevance of his guiding principles in the present era.

In his remarks, Consul General Aftab Chaudhry emphasized that the event focused on Quaid-e-Azam's golden principles of Faith, Unity, and Discipline, describing them as timeless values and a source of guidance for Pakistanis worldwide.

Author and researcher Hasnain Walji stated that Pakistan has the potential to secure a prominent place in the world if the nation and its leadership demonstrate determination, strong conviction, and integrity of character.

Speaking on the occasion, Pagh President Siraj Narsi noted that while Pakistanis frequently refer to Quaid-e-Azam's three golden principles, there is a critical need to implement these ideals in practice rather than limiting them to words.

The event concluded with a renewed pledge by the Pakistani-American community to uphold Quaid-e-Azam's message and continue promoting his ideals among future generations.

Community Meet & Greet Showcases Sara Khan's..

Continued from page 17

a responsibility to serve, not a position of privilege.

"This community matters deeply to me, and that is why I am running for Fort Bend County Treasurer," Khan said. "I am ready to lead from day one, but more importantly, I am committed to putting the people of Fort Bend first in every decision."

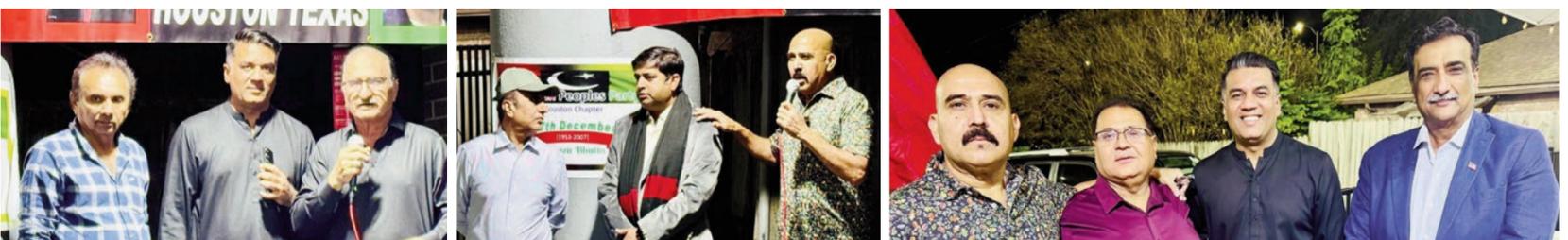
Khan highlighted her professional experience and qualifications, stating that she is prepared to manage county funds with efficiency and integrity. She outlined her focus on fiscal responsibility, transparent financial practices, and ensuring that public resources are handled with care and accountability.

The interactive session allowed attendees to ask questions and discuss issues important to them, fostering an open dialogue between the candidate and the community. Participants welcomed Khan's emphasis on ethical leadership and her commitment to serving residents with honesty and compassion.

The event concluded with Khan encouraging civic engagement and community participation, reaffirming her pledge to serve Fort Bend County with dedication, transparency, and a strong sense of responsibility to the people she hopes to represent.

Houston PPP Chapter Honors Late Benazir Bhutto on Her Death Anniversary

The Houston chapter of the Pakistan People's Party held a tribute and Duya at Dewan Restaurant, honoring the legacy of Pakistan's first and only female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. Community members and party leaders reflected on her contributions to democracy, social justice, and women's leadership.



When Justice Defined Leadership

IMAM ALI

A 7th century legacy of Governance and Justice that is relevant today

Why Ali ibn Abi Talib's leadership remains a moral compass for divided societies.

We live in an age of increasing polarization where political, ideological, and religious narratives divide societies into rigid camps of "us" and "them." These narratives thrive, unfortunately, because they are endlessly repeated—amplified by social media where misinformation is accepted as truths without verification, where echo chambers reinforce existing biases. Even some well-meaning people circulate these ideas and narratives with little pause for reflection, historical context, or critical inquiry. One visible consequence of this practice is the persistence of Islamophobia in the west, a fear rooted less in facts than in the lack of knowledge and ignorance of Islamic history and its ethical and intellectual traditions.

History, however, offers powerful counter-narratives grounded in our shared humanity. By overlooking the historical depths of Islamic thought, we miss the universal truths that could bridge the gap between faiths. We can find such universal truths in the legacy of Ali ibn Abi Talib—the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the fourth Caliph of Islam, and the first Imam in the Shia tradition. As Muslims around the world celebrate Youm-e-Ali on 13 Rajab (January 2), his birthday, this moment invites a renewed look at a dimension of his legacy that remains profoundly relevant today: his model of governance rooted in justice, accountability, and human dignity.

While Imam Ali was a religious figure, his approach to leadership and governance was rooted in a universal humanism that transcends religion and theology. At a time when fear and exclusion often dominate the headlines, looking back at Ali's philosophy offers us a refreshing blueprint for a society built on inclusion, equity and social justice. In an era of division and exclusion, Ali's governance philosophy offers a refreshing model for inclusion, harmony and equity. His core mandate was captured in a famous letter to Malik al-Ashtar, his appointed governor of Egypt:

"Among your subjects there are two kinds of people: those who are your brothers in faith, and those who are your equals in humanity." This single line shatters the idea of "extremism" and "exclusion." In Ali's eyes, a leader's duty isn't just to those who pray like them or belong to the "tribe", it is a duty to every human soul. This revolutionary stance is why the United Nations has cited this letter as a historical model for fair governance.

Imam Ali's instructions to his governor in the 7th century align remarkably with 21st-century ideals of transparency, meritocracy, and human rights.

1. The Power of Empathy over Authority

Ali warned his governor not to behave like a dictator over his citizens. He argued that a leader's heart must be filled with mercy, love, and kindness. In modern terms, this is empathetic leadership—the idea that authority is a responsibility to serve, not a license to rule.

2. Protecting the Vulnerable

Ali emphasized that the true test of a government is how it treats those who have no voice—the poor, the disabled, and the elderly. He advised to set aside a portion of the treasury specifically for them and to meet with them face-to-face, without guards or soldiers present, so they could speak their minds without fear. This approach corresponds to the social welfare aspect of modern governance ideas.

3. Economic Justice and Anti-Corruption

Ali believed that the development of the land (and people) was more vital than the collection of taxes. If the people are struggling, he argued, the state should lower taxes to help them



By Siraj Narsi

Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib taught that leadership is a trust, not a privilege. He emphasized equality of all people, protection of the vulnerable, merit over favoritism, and justice without fear or bias. He believed a state may survive differences of belief, but it can never survive injustice—an enduring lesson for governance today

recover. He also warned against "nepotism," telling Malik to never give special favors to his own relatives or friends at the expense of the public. This is akin to compassionate and transparent governance in today's context.

4. Choosing the Judiciary (The Judges)

Ali believed that the legal system was the backbone of society. He told Malik to pick people who cannot be bought or intimidated, whom flattery cannot influence and who do not get flustered by the presence of powerful litigants. If they realize they've made a wrong judgment, they must have the courage to correct it immediately. They don't settle for "surface" facts but they should be deep thinkers to investigate the root of a dispute. This speaks to the judicial integrity and merit in modern times.

5. Choosing Civil Servants (The Bureaucracy)

Ali warned against choosing staff based on personal intuition or because they seem polite and friendly. He suggested to look at their past performance and reputation among the people they served previously. He emphasized that there should be "test" period; a trial run to see how they handle responsibility. Ali also advocated for paying government officials well. His logic was that if they were financially secure, they would have fewer excuses to take bribes or dip into public funds. As can be seen, Ali preached meritocracy and integrity as we know it today.

6. The Military and Security

Ali viewed the army not as a tool of oppression, but as a protection for the people. He advised Malik to choose leaders

based on character, not rank; to look for those who are patient, don't get angry easily. He argued that the strength of the state doesn't come from the elites, but from the common people, the grass roots who make up the majority. This is yet another prevailing norm of contemporary democracies.

7. The Circle of Governance

Ali described the state as an interconnected web. If one part fails, the whole system collapses.

- The Taxpayers cannot thrive without the protection of the Army.

- The Army cannot survive without the revenue from the Taxpayers.

- Neither can function without Judges and Civil Servants to maintain order and provide services.

- And none of them can prosper without the Traders and Craftsmen who keep the economy moving.

Who would argue that this isn't the government concept as we know it in our times?

8. A Final Thought on "The Common Man"

Ali ended his advice by telling Malik to spend more time listening to the common people than the elites. He argued that the elites are often the first to complain, the most demanding in times of peace, and the least helpful in times of crisis. It is the ordinary citizens—the workers and the families—who are the true strength of a nation. This is yet another universal truth as relevant today as in Ali's 7th century model.

It is striking that Ali's core principles of Governance in the 7th century have strong parallels with 21st century ideals. He advised that the policy making should be based on consultation with the wise people in the society, should be evidence based, no nepotism or preference for kin and friends, instead govern with meritocracy, transparency and accountability. He emphasized strongly in equal rights for non-Muslims, which aligns with modern human rights ideals today. As one can see, Ali provides a masterclass in governance principles, justice and institutional integrity. In that, he gave Malik a roadmap for how to build a government that people could actually trust.

In the face of rising Islamophobia, it's easy to get lost in stereotypes. However, the history of Islam—through figures like Ali—actually contains some of the earliest arguments for pluralism, justice, equal rights and equity. Ali's governance wasn't about enforcing a religion; it was about enforcing justice and fairness. He believed that a state could survive "disbelief" (lack of faith), but it could never survive injustice. When we read his words today, we don't see an "ancient" or "foreign" ideology. We see a mirror of our own highest aspirations: a world where every person, regardless of their background, cast, creed and faith, is treated with dignity, where the law applies to the powerful and the weak equally, and where leadership is defined by service and integrity.

By rediscovering the shared values of equity and humanism preached by Imam Ali (and other leaders of Islam from that era), we can begin to dismantle the ignorance that fuels exclusion and phobias that divide us. Ali's message to us is simple: justice is the only bridge strong enough to hold us all together. This is as true today as it was 1400 hundred years ago, as it is a universal truth.

About the writer:

Siraj Narsi is a Business Finance professional, a Rotarian and an active community volunteer. He sits on the executive and advisory boards of several non-profit organizations. He is also a filmmaker and writer. Before moving to North America, he was a faculty member at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi.



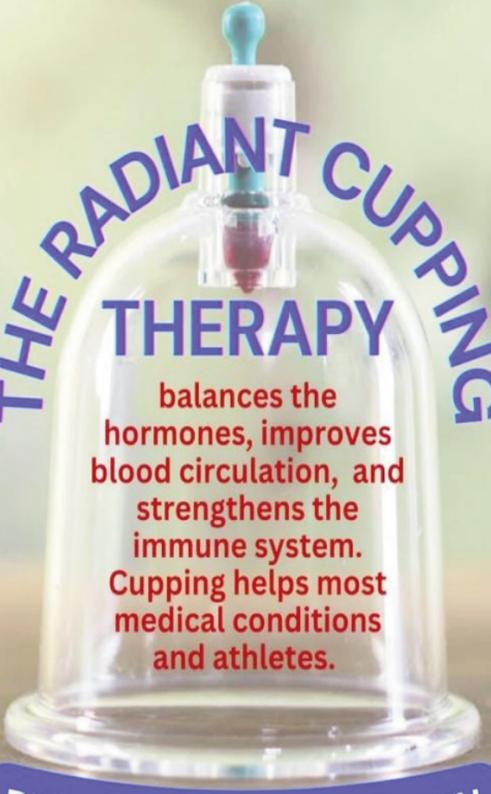
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