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American Pakistan Chronicle Weekly

Friday, January 09, 2026 | Rajab 19, 1447 A.H.
Volume 02 | Issue No. 02 | 32 Pages

Main Section

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Fireworks Light Up Texas as Marquee Texas Ranch Opens to the Public



By Staff Reporter

Texas: Marquee Texas Ranch has officially opened for bookings, marking a major milestone with a grand community celebration that drew more than a thousand attendees. The inauguration, held on New Year's celebrations, featured a vibrant fireworks display and festive

activities, welcoming the community to the newly launched ranch.

Speaking on the occasion, owner Israr Siddiqui of Tempura Food Management, expressed gratitude to supporters. "Alhamdulillah, we are deeply thankful

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March 1 Set for Houston's Landmark Iftar Dinner, America's Largest

Over 2,500 guests expected at Bayou City Event Center as civic and community leaders finalize preparations under Saeed Sheikh's leadership



Houston: America's largest annual Houston Iftar Dinner will be held on March 1 at the Bayou City Event Center, bringing together more than 2,500 guests from diverse communities. The date for online registration will be announced in the coming days.

Preparations for the landmark event were reviewed during a meeting of the Houston Iftar Dinner Executive Committee, led by Saeed Sheikh, Coordinator of the Houston Iftar Dinner Management Committee. The

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The Invisible Partition: The Silent Epidemic of Loneliness Among Pakistani American Elders

HOUSTON, TX — For many Pakistani American elders, the walls of a suburban home can feel as restrictive as the limestone partitions

of a prison cell. It is a quiet, dignified suffering—one that exists not for lack of family, but for lack of being understood.

"People still don't trust sharing outside the family," says Dr. Ulash Dunlap, a licensed marriage and

Continued on page 12

Despite risks, most Muslim states still back Gaza force

WASHINGTON: Despite deep reservations and fears of domestic backlash, most Muslim-majority countries associated with the Gaza peace process want the proposed International Stabilisation Force (ISF) to succeed, arguing that only such a force can ensure the security and

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Mamdani's letter to jailed student leader Umar Khalid riles BJP

New Delhi: The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Friday accused New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani of "interfering" in India's internal affairs by writing a note to jailed student leader Umar Khalid, asserting that New Delhi will not tolerate any such effort.

However, the BJP remained mum

on a The Hindu report, which stated that eight US lawmakers have written to Indian Ambassador Vinay Mohan Kwatra, urging India to grant bail and a free and fair trial to Mr Khalid "in accordance with international law".

Questioning Mr Mamdani's locus standi to comment on India's

Continued on page 12

'We can revise tariffs very quickly': Trump warns of higher tariffs on India over Russian oil purchases

The United States could raise tariffs on India if New Delhi does not meet Washington's demand to curb purchases of Russian oil, US President Donald Trump told

reporters aboard Air Force One.

"Modi is a good guy. He knew I was not happy, and it was important to make me happy," Trump said

Continued on page 12

Poll: Nearly Half of Americans Say Their Financial Security Is Worsening

A Harris Poll published in The Guardian on Monday found that 45% of Americans believe their financial security is getting worse. Just 20% of respondents said their financial security is improving, the poll finds.

More than half of Democrats (69%) and Independents (58%)

Continued on page 12

Pakistan, China agree to align development plans, launch CPEC 2.0

Pakistan and China agreed to align their development strategies and build an upgraded version of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, known as CPEC 2.0, during wide-ranging talks in Beijing that also covered political ties, security cooperation and regional and

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A unanimous way ahead

The 7th Pakistan-China Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in Beijing was apt in choreographing priorities for development, peace and security. The parleys went a step ahead as both countries agreed to look from the same prism on Afghanistan, and called for more "visible and verifiable" actions to dismantle the terror nexus in the southwest Asian state. This unanimity was highly desired as Kabul was behaving in an unforthcoming manner, and had annoyed other regional states too by boycotting a conference held recently in Tehran to discuss prospects of tranquillity and nation-building in Afghanistan. While the moot in China was bilateral in essence, it exhibited

magnanimity by tapping the issue of terrorism and cross-border menaces, so that militancy does not come to ruin the prospects of flourishing geo-economics in the region.

The joint communique that followed the dialogue made a pivotal point as it resolved to work with the international community to ensure an inclusive government in Afghanistan and double down on the developmental horizons. Likewise, Islamabad and Beijing – by reiterating their focus on defence cooperation, investment and trans-regional networking – laid down a renewed doctrine to make CPEC a success. The second phase of the \$60 billion mega project will see industrialisation

take root and subsequently enable bilateral trade and logistics to usher in new vistas of cooperation. At the same time, on the geopolitical front, the joint statement was a negation of rumours that extra-territorial forces, especially the United States, had made inroads and dented the cordiality between Pakistan and China.

The deliberations have come at a time when peace is on a shaky note in Southwest Asia, the simmering Venezuelan episode is threatening global security, and rumours are rife of renewed meddling in the Middle East by Washington. Thus, the all-weather understanding between China and Pakistan will go on to insulate outside manoeuvres by detailing attention to cultural and people-to-people exchanges, as well as proactive engagement in industry, agriculture and mining.

Wild, wild west

Can any power now kidnap a head of state?

Mahir Ali

IT seemed almost miraculous when the east coast of the US transitioned into 2026 on a pleasant note, occasioned by the inspiring inauguration of New York City's young mayor. Any joy was short-lived. A couple of days later, Zohran Mamdani felt obliged to inform the president of his discomfiture over the display of predatory imperialism in Caracas last Saturday. Less clear-headed Democrats have also expressed their alarm at the abduction of a sitting head of state in a military raid, and the concomitant violation of both the US Constitution and the UN Charter.

Donald Trump's excitement over last Saturday's successful bout of thuggery has spurred wild threats against Colombia, Mexico and Iran, not to mention Greenland. President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were meanwhile arraigned in a federal court in Manhattan.

US attorney general Pam Bondi announced on X that Maduro "has been charged with Narco-Terrorism Conspiracy, Cocaine Importation Conspiracy, and Conspiracy to Possess Machineguns and Destructive Devices against the United States". Putting aside her illiteracy, she might have noticed how her boss has stepped back from the absurd "narco-terrorism" allegation — which has been deployed to justify, without evidence, the extra-judicial execution of over 100 people in small boats off the coasts of Venezuela and Colombia — and is now focusing mainly on an oil grab.

Trump has claimed that Venezuela stole "our" oil, and that his mission is to win it back. His oft-expressed greed for all manner of resources is taken for granted, but questions have been

raised about the decade or longer it might take for US firms to resume their theft of Venezuelan oil at a lucrative scale. Venezuela's oil industry was nationalised 50 years ago; Hugo Chávez merely sought to close the loopholes in 2007. His aim, at least partially successful, was not only to redistribute oil wealth for the national good, but to offer it at discounted rates to Caribbean neighbours — not least Cuba.

Fidel Castro looked upon Chávez as an heir — regionally and on the global stage. It wasn't just in return for cheaper fuel but out of a moral obligation that Cuba helped Venezuela to impressively raise its levels of healthcare and education — not coincidentally, these are precisely the spheres in which some of the current US administration's worst domestic instincts are deployed. Chávez survived a US-backed attempt by the economic elites to replace him, but the socialistic basis of chavismobegan to wither away not long after his death in 2013.

Maduro was the designated successor, but it was a poor choice: he evidently lacked the capability to carry on his predecessor's mission. Between 2012 and 2024, Venezuela's GDP dwindled from over \$372 billion to less than \$120bn. Millions made their way out of the country, mostly into Colombia and Brazil. Repression grew, directed more against the dispossessed than the exploiting class. US-led sanctions and attempts at regime change played a part in the downward spiral, but the Maduro administration has much to answer for, including last year's apparently stolen presidential election. But it should be answerable to the Venezuelan people. The US should mind its

own business, as proposed by the America First doctrine, detestable as it may be in other ways.

To the consternation of some US allies, notably in Europe, the abduction of the Maduro couple has not been followed by the installation of their conservative adversaries as the new rulers, notwithstanding María Corina Machado's full-throated backing for an invasion and her kowtowing to Trump after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, a patently stupid gesture for which the Norwegian committee ought to be deeply ashamed.

But then, it's obvious that the Trump regime cares little for democracy, whether at home or abroad. For the moment it has picked Maduro's vice-president, Delcy Rodríguez, as its preferred conduit for meeting Washington's needs. Her defiant public statements might be sharply at variance with what she says to Marco Rubio, the abhorrent ideologue who has long sought to abolish all left-leaning tendencies in the region, beginning with Cuba. His conduit is his boss.

What's hugely appalling, but not particularly surprising, is the refusal on the part of most European nations to challenge their American ally's barefaced banditry. Barring a clutch of justifiably concerned Latin American nations, much of the Global South seems equally reluctant to question the would-be global hegemon's return to naked imperialism. China and Russia have expressed their consternation, but what will they do as "anarchy is loosed upon the world", as W.B. Yeats put it? What comes next will depend on the whim of a demented emperor, but the rest of the world will at best merely grumble and watch from the sidelines.

Done with politics

It seems as if all the political soap opera plot twists have been done, and talked about, to death.

Arifa Noor

THE new year is a mere few days old but 2026 already promises to be more exhausting than its predecessor. The mortals among us — and who have friends to party with — had barely recovered from New Year's Eve when the US's Nobel Peace Prize aspirant invaded a country and kidnapped its president.

Hardly new stuff for those who remember Iraq, or Panama, or ... the list can be rather long. But it was a wee bit surprising, coming from a president who can't stop listing the number of wars he has stopped. What stopped journo's in their tracks was the president's failure to invoke either the fruits of democracy or the freedoms of brown oppressed people, especially women. There were no such helpful diversions. The oil will help the US, it was proclaimed. Now where does that leave the likes of us who want to shake their heads in despair and explain the limitations of nation-building exercises? The world and its craziness is forcing commentators out of a job faster than one can say AI.

It is no easier in Pakistan.

How does one make sense of an authoritarian interlude in which no dollars are flowing in? After all, we are trained to analyse the power flowing down the barrel of a gun that has dollar signs painted on it. However, without the dollars, it seems a bit uncertain and unstable (and it has been for quite a few years now), but it is hard to figure out how long it will last. The 10-year pendulum surely doesn't cut it anymore. But what ready analysis can replace this? No one knows.

So the state is hardening and it rules with an iron glove. Yet it has not been able to tame the people entirely. The anger may not be expressed as loudly as it once was, but no one can ignore the simmer-

ing. As a result, the PTI is still a force and so is Imran Khan. On top of this, he refuses to go into exile. What a pain he is because if he left for foreign climes, it would be so easy to believe the khatam shud predictions of some of the commentariat.

In other words, the nail-biting contest threatens to continue in 2026 and those of us in the business of analysis have little left to say. Truly. There are just so many times one can predict doom and gloom and ask everyone to talk for the greater good. Because frankly, our leadership just isn't as honest as the chap in the US; our lot claims to worry about the people here and it's a story that no one buys now and yet they continue to tell it. They know that no one buys it; we know that they know that we know they don't care and yet the drama continues. And now no one is listening.

It seems as if all the political soap opera plot twists have been done and talked about to death. Take another example. The predictions about the democratic DNA in Nawaz Sharif or Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari coming to the fore are now also becoming less common. It's been months since anyone has spoken of Sharif senior's desire to see Imran Khan free and nearly years since anyone has spoken of the tensions between father Zardari and son Bhutto-Zardari and the latter struggling to break free. No one is now expecting the true democrats to say "enough" and hiding their disappointment analysts speak of the choices in Pakistan being limited to authoritarianism and fascism.

No different is all the 'sane' talk about talks. It's about as promising as the MoUs Pakistan signs each time a foreign leader meets a government official or the promises about the economy taking off. No one can even be bothered to argue about it. And neither does anyone think 2026 will bring any change, so great is the 'paralysis'.

Though I have learnt that one can call it jamood on the talk show.

Even the soothsayers or najoomis who were called to talk shows while the rest of us were making New Year plans had nothing new to offer. They seem to sound no different from the political soothsayers who tell us of the greatness that awaits the country in 2026. The king is in his counting house and the prime minister is having bread and honey. And the rest are stuck hanging out clothes in their backyard while the FBR is pecking noses and far more.

The point here is that there is nothing new to say about the state of the nation, the society and what passes for politics. It is now beyond us all, be it the najoomis or the analysts. And don't let anyone tell you otherwise. But because we too have to pay taxes and then the bills which have more taxes within them, this column has to be written week after week.

So it might just happen that soon this space turns into something rather different. Instead of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan and others, it might just make sense to write on middle-age challenges such as trying to lose weight or deal with acidity; cooking; the painful watching options on Netflix; or even an agony aunt section. Anything at the moment seems more possible than writing on politics. The latter, even politicians assure me, is done and dusted. Which reminds me, what about a styling column for politicians? Many of them, especially the men, can do with a makeover. What is this love affair with Kala Kola, for instance? Why not go for sophisticated grey streaks?

If there are better ideas out there for what a weekly column can be about, suggestions are welcome. For I have taxes to pay before I sleep. Miles of taxes ... with apologies to Robert Frost.

The writer is a journalist.

Terrorism data deficit

In the absence of authentic official data, research groups rely heavily on open sources.

Muhammad Amir Rana

PAKISTAN'S power circles are jubilant over their successes in 2025, which stemmed from multiple factors, the most significant being the restoration of trust with the US. Whatever factors compelled the Trump administration to enhance engagement with Pakistan, this shift has altered Pakistan's regional position primarily in South and West Asia, and partially in Central Asia.

The change in the US attitude towards Pakistan began early this year, even before the May stand-off with India, when American President Donald Trump and Centcom chief Michael Kurilla praised Pakistan's contribution to the war against terrorism and thanked the country for handing over the mastermind of the Abbey Gate terrorist attack by IS-K to the US.

Here lies Pakistan's real strength: while engaged in a prolonged war against terrorism and dealing with multiple strands of terrorist groups, including the Taliban, who now rule Afghanistan, the country has gained experience in managing global threats and winning the trust of international partners.

Action against IS-K opened several doors for Pakistan in regional and defence cooperation with many Muslim countries, including the much-discussed Pak-Saudi defence pact. It remains to be seen how far these engagements will go and

whether Pakistan can translate them into tangible economic and political gains.

However, the internal security front has become more critical, as religiously motivated terrorist groups and Baloch sub-national militant organisations continue to thrive, complicating the country's security challenges.

State institutions responsible for addressing internal security challenges and terrorism threats have failed to provide authentic statistics on terrorist activities and the state's response to them. The official body tasked with this responsibility, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta), offers little substance on its website beyond a list of proscribed organisations; the rest consists of claims without supporting evidence. At times, provincial law-enforcement agencies issue figures, but these efforts are inconsistent and lack detail. ISPR frequently conducts media briefings and presents statistics, but beyond numbers, substantive details of counterterrorism operations are rarely provided.

Law-enforcement agencies cite various justifications, often claiming that while they compile data, they do not make it public because it may be legally contested. Such claims will be questioned unless tested. Meanwhile, several private research organisations perform this function by publishing periodic and annual

reports on terrorism trends in the country.

These research groups face their own constraints. In the absence of an authentic official database, they rely heavily on open sources. Such information typically comes from ISPR press releases and, in some cases, provincial law-enforcement agencies. Another source is the monthly and annual statistics issued by terrorist organisations themselves. These groups exaggerate their operations, but without an official database, it becomes difficult to fully refute their claims.

Organisations compiling terrorism-related data in Pakistan generally follow two approaches: some rely exclusively on officially confirmed media reports, while others cross-check with data released by terrorist organisations. Verification on the ground has become nearly impossible, as local media in conflict zones often cannot report incidents, and even when reports reach newsrooms, editors tend to prioritise official press releases.

The purpose of outlining the background of terrorism-related data compilation is twofold: first, to show that Pakistan has faced severe terrorism for decades yet still lacks an authentic database; and second, to highlight that data compiled by various organisations shows fluctuations. Nevertheless, a review of reports released this year reveals a serious

trend: the terrorist threat is worsening, not only in operational terms but also in terms of ideological, political and tactical realignments.

For instance, an annual security report issued by the Pak Institute for Studies and Peace Studies, which has been conducting this assessment since 2005, reported a sharp surge in militant violence in 2025. A total of 699 terrorist attacks were recorded nationwide, an increase of 34 per cent compared to the previous year.

This renewed wave of violence claimed at least 1,034 lives, marking a 21pc rise in terrorism-related fatalities. In addition, 1,366 people were injured during the year, underscoring the growing human cost of terrorism.

The report notes that security and law-enforcement personnel bore the brunt of the violence. Of the total fatalities recorded, 437, or more than 42pc, were personnel from security and law-enforcement agencies, including 174 policemen, 122 soldiers, 107 FC members (Frontier Corps and Federal Constabulary), 21 Levies personnel, 12 paramilitary troops, and one Rangers official. Civilians were also heavily affected, with 354 non-combatants killed. Meanwhile, 243 militants died either in suicide attacks or during retaliatory fire by security forces.

Balochistan and KP's tribal districts remain the most critical regions. These developments trig-

gered coercive responses by security forces against terrorist hideouts across the border and led to heightened tensions with Afghanistan, which Pakistan accuses of hosting and supporting terrorist groups, including TTP and the Balochistan Liberation Army.

The success graph of Pakistan's security forces also remained high last year, with 2025 recording the highest number of terrorists killed in a single year. Nonetheless, Pakistan seeks international acknowledgment of these successes. However, the rising number of terrorist attacks indicates that while the kinetic approach is yielding results, the non-kinetic approach is not adequately complementing military operations.

A weak non-kinetic framework is evident in the state's inability to develop a verifiable terrorism database, even as state institutions expect Pakistan not to be ranked highly in global terrorism databases.

Nacta and law-enforcement agencies in Pakistan hardly grasp that the most reputable global organisations require verifiable data, yet Pakistan's LEAs insist that the world should simply believe their claims. Despite this, Pakistan faced difficulties with the FATF due to the submission of non-verifiable data, and it remained on the grey list until the country presented improved statistics.

The writer is a security analyst.

Lessons from PIA's privatisation

The central lesson from PIA is that the real reform is not the sale itself but fixing the governance structure.

Nadeem-ul-Haque | Shahid Kardar

THE transfer of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to private ownership is, on balance, a welcome development. Yet much of the public discussion has focused narrowly on the headline sale price and the promise of improved efficiency, obscuring more fundamental issues. In a recent podcast, we and two other analysts examined the transaction in detail and noted concerns about the post-sale ownership structure, which appears likely to be dominated by Fauji Fertiliser, raising questions about whether this represents genuine privatisation or a form of quasi-nationalisation.

This article steps back from the headlines to distil the broader lessons of the PIA episode. Four reform-related lessons stand out.

First, privatisation did not create the cost; it revealed it. The sale of PIA is being marketed as reform, yet little attention has been paid to the bill already paid by taxpayers to make the sale possible. Before privatisation, the state absorbed the airline's accumulated debt and liabilities — over Rs670 billion (roughly \$3bn) — so that a buyer could inherit a cleaner balance sheet.

PIA is not an isolated case. It is simply the most visible example of a systemic failure in how Pakistan governs its state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The common thread linking PIA, the previously privatised banks, and smaller cases such as First Women Bank is not bad luck or exogenous shocks. It is bureaucratic and patronage-protected control exercised through boards of directors that enjoy prestige and perks but face no personal or reputational downside when value is destroyed.

In the private sector, directors pay a reputational price for failure. In Pakistan's public sector, enterprises collapse, losses are socialised, and those who presided over the failure move on — often to another board. Responsibility is ceremonial; accountability is absent. The system signals clearly that oversight failures carry no consequences. In such an environment, delay becomes rational. Hard decisions are postponed because the costs can be shifted to successors, even as the eventual taxpayer bill grows.

This is why privatisation in Pakistan so often appears 'expensive'. The state seeks privatisation not as a timely reform, but as a late-stage exit strategy, after years of misgovernance have already inflicted massive damage. The taxpayer then absorbs these losses to make the enterprise saleable. Privatisation merely exposes the cost; it does not cause it. This absence of reputational damage is not an accident; it is how the system is designed. The central lesson from PIA, therefore, is that the real reform is not the sale itself but fixing the governance structure that allows losses to accumulate without consequence. Without this, Pakistan will repeat the same cycle: failure, bailout, privatisation, amnesia.

Second, privatisation must mean exposure to competition. A genuine transfer to the private sector implies that the enterprise must survive on its ability to compete, without protection, preferential treatment, or recurring subsidies. If the post-privatisation environment continues to shield the firm from competition or quietly socialises losses, the reform is hollow. The test of PIA's privatisation will lie less in ownership and more in whether it is allowed to operate — and fail — like a private

firm. In some cases, this will pose a real challenge, for example, the privatisation of Discos.

Third, most SOEs are simply not privatisable! The vast majority of SOEs are not commercially viable, even if the state were to replicate PIA's template by parking all debt and liabilities in holding companies. The years it took to privatise PIA, and the continuing inability to offload Pakistan Steel Mills, illustrate the point. Prolonged attempts to privatise non-viable entities merely allow losses to accumulate further, eventually to be borne by the taxpayer. For such enterprises, the least costly option is not privatisation but liquidation. Winding them up promptly would stem ongoing losses and avoid compounding the burden on citizens, especially the poor, who ultimately foot the bill.

Fourth, clarity of purpose is essential. Going forward, the state must be explicit about the objective of any privatisation. Is the goal to maximise immediate fiscal receipts, extracting as much money as the market can bear? If so, asset-by-asset disposal may, in some cases, yield higher revenues than selling a going concern. Or is the objective to transfer the enterprise as an operating entity to a buyer with sectoral expertise and a credible track record, which is an inherently more subjective and demanding exercise, particularly in Pakistan's low-trust political economy? The failure to clearly articulate this choice breeds confusion, controversy and mistrust.

Beyond these substantive issues, the PIA privatisation also exposes serious procedural weaknesses. The process was marked by opacity, which is an all-too-familiar feature of our bureaucratic mindset, as well as an abysmally poor com-

munication strategy. There was no publicly available information memorandum that explained the eligibility criteria for bidders; how the reserve price of Rs100bn was determined after cleaning up the balance sheet; the estimated valuation of each asset transferred; how the proceeds would be allocated between the government and the company; the payment schedule for the Rs135bn commitment (between the two-thirds of the amount to be paid earlier and the balance later); or the post-sale obligations and enforcement mechanisms.

Much of this information presumably exists in the sale agreement. If so, there is no justification for not placing it in the public domain. The lack of transparency unnecessarily fuelled speculation and distrust. This could easily have been avoided. A handful of slides published alongside the auction announcement in newspaper ads would have sufficed. These slides could even have been run immediately after the auction results were announced.

Transparency is not a cosmetic add-on. It is essential for building trust in the process, protecting and promoting the credibility of the government and the Privatisation Commission, and supporting the development of capital markets. Without it, even well-intentioned reforms will continue to be viewed with suspicion — often rightly so.

Nadeem-ul-Haque is former VC PIDE and deputy chair of the Planning Commission. He is currently director at the think tank Socioeconomic Insights and Analytics.

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Out on a limb

One can seize the moment and look towards the future.

Muna Khan

I CAME across the sweetest picture on social media of a bearded man, wearing a white knitted cap, taking a photograph of presumably his young children in front of the Christmas tree planted in Lahore. It was so heartwarming — and unexpected.

So this photograph of the father and his children in front of the tall, 13-metre tree, which was planted by Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's administration, won the internet over with comments like "the country is healing".

She tweeted how the tree and Christmas celebrations across the province "reflects the message that minorities are not only safe in Punjab but are also valued, respected, and an integral part of the social fabric".

As one user on X wrote: [It was] "a glimpse of the country Jinnah wanted to see."

Everyone across the political divide tweeted good wishes for Christians. I hope I live long enough to see the day when Christmas wishes are expressed in a more universal spirit. At the moment, there is apprehension that any sign of inclusiveness can be misconstrued as a disrespect of religious sensitivities. What are those sensitiv-

ities? Anything that is seen as a slight to our sentiments that can result in misplaced allegations of blasphemy, for example.

A report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan last year, on "the alarming increase" in violence against minority communities in the country, makes for a depressing read. "In a chilling development, two individuals accused of blasphemy were extra-judicially killed by the police while seeking protection from hostile mobs," it read. "Such incidents underscore the urgent need for reform within law enforcement and accountability mechanisms."

Against this backdrop, a Christmas tree in Liberty seems like a very small peace offering to the minorities who live their lives under the shadow of fear. I can't deny that but I'm going out on a limb to say that the Liberty Christmas tree, and the response to it, offers a chance at optimism.

As this paper reported, "the festivities [around the tree in Liberty Chowk] were unprecedented for many, being one of the rare occasions that Christmas had been observed at a public venue on such a grand scale". It is commonplace for many officials, civilian and military, to mark Christmas at church events, some-

times as interfaith celebrations or to commemorate it by issuing wishes to Christians on Christmas. But this tree in Lahore felt different. As the paper reported, many spoke "of the thrill they experienced seeing ordinary Lahoris joining in the Christmas cheer".

This says something, even if I'm not yet sure how to define it. I dare not use hope because that gets crushed so quickly — by leaders who promise to be different only to be the same once in power. By other leaders who promise to usher in eras of economic prosperity only to crush us under the weight of taxes. Heck, even our cricketers let us down. Only we manage not to let each other down. But we're struggling to stay resilient as is expected, especially from those of us who are Karachiites.

For the last eight years or so, I have had to tell my students of the founders' pluralistic intentions for Pakistan and we always regret how they have never materialised. We know that Aug 11, 1947, speech because it's reproduced every Aug 14 in the papers. It's never been implemented in spirit so Jinnah's pluralistic vision is just that — a vision yet to materialise.

I'm here to suggest we let go of the past —

not by erasing painful memories but by softening their hold. You can seize the moment and look towards the future. I believe the tree was a small step towards imagining something new.

I'm reminded of the opening lines from L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel, *The Go Between*, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

We don't have to be who we were. The way we have told ourselves about our founding — a betrayal of an inclusive vision, the abandonment of pluralism, the unfulfilled promises — is a story told by a country that felt trapped by its failures.

The photo of the father with his children in front of the tree tells me we don't have to live in the past anymore and that we've changed.

Maybe we can see our past as foreign because memory is unreliable. Some historians say we reconstruct the past through the lens of who we've become. Maybe we are finally becoming people who can look back at an inclusive founding vision — not as a broken promise, but as an aspiration we're finally ready to move towards.

The writer is an instructor of journalism.

Looking ahead

How will Pakistan manage its foreign ties in 2026?

Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry

AS Pakistan steps into 2026, seven questions dominate its foreign policy agenda and discussions. Will India once more launch hostilities against Pakistan this year given that Prime Minister Narendra Modi hasn't ended Operation Sindoor? In fact, it might be difficult for India to act aggressively this year because the world is no longer prepared to accept its false accusations that Pakistan is perpetrating terrorism against it. Second, there is a growing perception in India that it is up against two fronts — Pakistan and China. Third, the Indian armed forces may need more time and capabilities to plug the gaps that led to their defeat in May. That said, Pakistan cannot be complacent and must keep up its military preparedness.

Will India allow the Indus Waters Treaty, that it has unilaterally held in abeyance, to function is the second important question. Water means life or death. Pakistan has declared that if India disrupts or diverts the rivers allo-

cated to it, India's action will be treated as an act of war. As attested by the recent UN report, the world community has not accepted India's pretext of terrorism to suspend the treaty (ironically, it is India, which is committing proxy terrorism in Pakistan). If, at some point, India decides to restore the IWT, Pakistan could agree to negotiate demographic, environmental and other issues as an additional protocol.

Managing, and benefiting from, the recent reset in Pakistan's ties with the US, without upsetting its partnership with China, is the third issue. Although this reset could be transactional, it is a welcome opportunity to build American stakes in Pakistan's stability through US investments in the minerals, oil and gas sectors.

As for China, this is a time-tested strategic partnership which must not be undermined. What helps Pakistan maintain ties with both powers simultaneously is the fact that today's interstate relations are issue-based, and cooperation and confrontation can

coexist. China's willingness to launch CPEC 2.0 reflects its trust in this relationship. For its part, Pakistan must address China's security concerns by asserting complete writ of the state and also addressing people's grievances in Balochistan and elsewhere through effective local governments.

The direction of Pak-Afghan ties is the fourth question dominating discussions here. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Pakistan is being constantly attacked by the TTP terrorists who enjoy protection in Afghanistan, with possible support from India. Pakistan has embarked on a multipronged strategy to defend itself: bilateral talks with the Taliban; multi-lateral diplomatic push; effective border management; and making the people in the tribal districts partners in defending Pakistan. Limited access to Pakistani ports, hospitals, and universities is beginning to hurt the Taliban amidst their internal challenges. The world is also concerned that Afghanistan is once again becoming a

safe haven for terrorists.

Growing ties with the Gulf countries are a welcome development, particularly with Saudi Arabia with which Pakistan has signed a defence pact. Given the clause that aggression against one will be considered aggression against the other, will Saudi Arabia stand with Pakistan if India mounts another attack against it? This is the fifth question being asked by thought leaders. Although this agreement will operationalise mostly through peacetime defence-related activities, it adds another layer of deterrence for both countries. While Pakistan now enjoys higher esteem in the Middle East, it should stay clear of inter-Arab conflicts.

The sixth question is whether Pakistan and Iran will be better able to manage their borders and improve economic ties. After the 12-day war between Iran and Israel, the former has come to better appreciate the political support that Pakistan extended. Questions have also arisen about India's possible role in the Iran-Israel

conflict. It is expected that Pakistan's ties with Iran will improve considerably during 2026, with a focus on cross-border trade.

How should Pakistan benefit from its economic geography is the seventh question that must be addressed to serve national economic interests. While north-south connectivity has made steady progress, east-west connectivity is severely handicapped because of India's decision to completely disconnect with Pakistan. However, this has opened up space for Pakistan and China to bilaterally and jointly promote cooperation with other South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh.

For optimal results in the above seven foreign policy arenas, Pakistan would need to prioritise political stability, continuity of economic policies, ease of doing business, capacity to negotiate better deals, and the writ of the state.

The writer is chairman, Sanober Institute.

Needed: desi deconfliction strategy

As both young populations face rising unemployment, Pakistan-India must focus on cooperation, not conflict

Farrukh Khan Pitafi

Sometimes a handshake is just a handshake. Right? Well, not in the South Asian political tinderbox. For context, at the former Bangladeshi prime minister Khaleda Zia's funeral, India's external affairs minister and Pakistan's speaker of the national assembly briefly shook hands. Both countries' press then offered a masterclass in how not to cover such a development.

The thrust of the Indian coverage was to downplay it as an insignificant happenstance. And while covering Pakistan, why not smuggle in a few choicest insults?

The Pakistani media, by contrast, treated it as a significant breakthrough. Could ice be melting between the two South Asian rivals? And, for good measure, we were reminded of the drubbing India received in May.

I am biased in Pakistan's favour and would still choose our coverage over whatever mad cow disease is afflicting the Indian media.

But in both cases, what I dislike is our shared bad habit of hogging all the attention at such emotionally charged events. The late Begum Khaleda Zia was a giant of Bangladeshi and regional politics. The visually stunning images from the funeral, showing the sheer number of participants, were a reminder enough. While the politicians did nothing wrong by being polite, the media on both sides could perhaps exhibit better funeral-side manners. How many times have our other SAARC partners complained about our unfortunate tendency to hold multilateral forums hostage to bilateral politics?

After living in the real world and being disappointed by several false starts over the past twelve years, I have given up on magical thinking. My motto is simple: if a significant breakthrough occurs between the two countries, we will all know. Why set yourself up for undue disappointment?

Here, I must centre a very astute observation from a former boss, mentor, and veritable genius of the field: a great deal of homework goes into these seemingly happenstance optics. Bear in mind that the very same EAM refused to shake hands with the then foreign minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, at Goa. Likewise, recall Musharraf's 2002 handshake with Vajpayee. A handshake is rarely just a handshake when it

involves such dignitaries. With stakes usually high, there is hardly a moment when background diplomacy is not at work.

We shall cross that bridge when we come to it. But the coverage of this handshake brings two facts into sharp relief. One, the obstacle to understanding each other's perspective, what Arlie Hochschild so pithily calls the empathy wall, could hardly be higher. Two, it is nevertheless permeable enough to allow both countries to lob propaganda grenades at one another.

In ordinary times, this might be tolerable. But these are not ordinary times, and these are not ordinary actors. As the first and fifth most populous countries in the world, they would attract attention even if they lacked the uncanny knack for staying in the news that comes naturally to them. Both are also home to some of the world's youngest populations.

In Pakistan, 65 per cent of the population is under 35, totalling around 150 million people. Some 60 per cent are unskilled, driven by 25 million out-of-school children feeding into weak secondary education outcomes. Unemployment has risen to 7.1 per cent in the 2025 Labour Force Survey, hitting youth hardest at roughly 22 per cent. India mirrors this profile: 66 per cent under 35, or about 950 million people, 40 per cent unskilled, with 30 per cent lacking secondary education. Overall unemployment stands at 6 to 8 per cent, rising to between 17 and 23 per cent among youth. This is the picture even before AI-led technological displacement. Once that begins, there will be a bloodbath. Clearly, both countries have better things to do than invest so heavily in mutual hate.

Then there is the problem of hate boomeranging onto the diaspora. During the war on terror's heyday, the Pakistani diaspora hit rock bottom amid rising Islamophobia. Now it is the Indian diaspora's turn. As I have argued for 25 years, Indians and Pakistanis look and sound the same to Western audiences. To manage the fallout, the Indian diaspora once took pains to distinguish itself from Pakistanis. That strategy worked at the time, but its success also made it vulnerable in today's era of hyper-identity politics and impatience with the cultural other. Since 2014, as cultural emphasis shifted back home, India's premier export, its human resource, has morphed from quiet, assimilated competence into something

louder and more abrasive. This has exposed the entire diaspora to whiplash. As flashpoints multiply, our heated exchanges travel outward and condemn our communities abroad.

I want to act in good faith and believe that some of this jingoism serves domestic consumption. In India's case, managing a population of 1.45 billion is no small task. Trouble begins when we collide on each other's timelines, and this animus spills into the wider world.

What unfolded on Indian English news channels is a case in point. Hindi channels may do as they please, but when the same dangal-style debates migrate to English platforms, they harden into a permanent indictment of a people. The same applies to films like *Dhurandhar* and *Battle of Galwan*. They may be aimed at domestic audiences, but why manufacture additional diplomatic friction when they cannot withstand even basic scrutiny? Such content gives the impression of deliberate psychological operations. That may have limited impact on Pakistan, but provoking China risks what Peter Pan once called an awfully big adventure. Why go there when it can so easily come back to haunt you?

India and Pakistan, therefore, need an information deconfliction strategy. Whatever is sold to domestic audiences, tighter controls are needed on the export of hate. Films, television, English-language media and other outward-facing outputs can afford to be more restrained, civilised and culturally sensitive. If you think this is unachievable, you are mistaken. This content is curated by design. The speed with which media on both sides can pivot, and particularly in India, hyper-fixate on demonstrable trivia, is no accident. If we are serious about lowering the empathy wall and building peace, why not begin now? As such, a deconfliction strategy takes root through mutual, or at least deeper, consultation; the movers and shakers can choose the moment to build peace.

None of this requires trust, let alone affection. It only requires restraint, sequencing and a minimal recognition of consequence. Deconfliction is not reconciliation. It is damage control in an age of permanent visibility, where words travel faster than diplomats and grievances outlive governments. Even rivals can agree not to set fires they cannot later contain.

Unrest in Iran has its genesis in governance and grievances

Iran's uprising, driven by economic frustration, rooted in decades of centralised power, unfulfilled promises

Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri

Iran once again is simmering with protests. The uprising is economy-centric, though. The prevalent disgust is against the centralisation of powers in the religious coterie since the 1979 Revolution, which has come down hard on those campaigning for civil liberties. Despite the Islamic Republic being the only democratic nomenclature in the region that resorts to public mandate for its presidential system of governance, the power nexus is camouflaged under the wings of the military-centric IRGC, directly under the tutelage of the Supreme Leader. This is where the problem rests, as it has not been able to deliver socio-political equilibrium for an egalitarian society.

The latest upheavals erupting from Azna in Lorestan province, southwest of Tehran, are reportedly gathering momentum. This time, however, there is a marked difference in pattern as well as the response from the government. The agitators are widely desisting from vandalism, and the dispensation of President Pezeshkian has been wise enough to admit the genuineness of taking to the streets.

In a Machiavellian rejoinder, pro-regime activists are also seen assembling in larger numbers to show solidarity with the system in vogue. This seems to be a political masterstroke from the powers-that-be, humbly realising that the policy of cracking down — as has been the case in yesteryears — had discredited the regime.

The question is, what's next? With a dozen casualties

already on board, will the protesters go back home, or will they dig in their heels? With outside powers' longstanding passion to see a 'regime change' in Tehran, will the unrest emulate Sofia, Dhaka or Kathmandu? Will the US hobnob explicitly in the crisis and make room for its physical intervention? Or will the government itself show its desperation and go over the brink by using excessive power against the people?

The answer is somewhere in between the probabilities, and the outcome will push the Republic in more chaos and societal degeneration. While the uprising is peerless, as has been the case previously, too, the genesis of turmoil is well ingrained. The people are sick of isolation and want the regime to open up to the international order. Sanctions have dented their enterprising potential and pushed them into the abyss of uncertainty.

People nurse genuine grievances in terms of dipping growth, which is less than 3%, and soaring inflation to the tune of 42%. The exchange rate is around 28,500-toman to a dollar, and the state funnels in almost \$18 billion of subsidies per annum from an oil export dividend of \$78 billion.

The IRGC, with reported assets worth \$6 billion, is the sole business conglomerate. The Inc role is being questioned as it allegedly amasses wealth for financing proxies in the Middle East and synergising the armed forces. Despite sanctions, Iran has been successful in setting in an

axis of resistance with geopolitical inclination towards Russia and China, as well as Europe to a great extent. Yet, people are not happy with repeated governments run on ideological premises that have lacked expertise in the economy, technology and R&D.

Iran's nuclear obsession has cost it more than \$1 trillion to this day, forcing the revolutionary zeal to look the other way as corruption and misgovernance take new heights. This is where a renaissance is desired, and the path forward is to harbour the talent and opinion within the society, and shun radicalism at home and abroad.

The civil disobedience has its roots in soaring unemployment, which has hit 22% among the youth. The US dollar has dropped by 56% in the six months, and the change in the consumer price index is around 34% per annum. For the first time after 1979, the businesspeople are on the streets, sending a déjà vu of the 'Bazaar uprising' that led to the downfall of Reza Shah Pahlavi.

The 92 million population deserve a better deal. Stubbornness in foreign policy, slumping purchasing power to the extent of 50% in rural areas and disregard for human rights have taken a toll. It's time to start a rectification process and empower the masses. A change is indispensable, and it should start from the highest echelon by rewriting a new social contract. That is how Iranians can steer clear of foreign intervention and domestic abomination.

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Stay updated on news, culture, events, and stories that matter to our community.

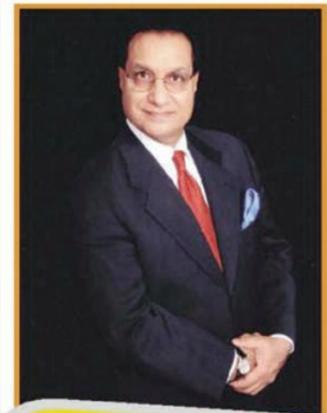
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Houston Prepares for America's Largest Iftar Dinner

Houston Iftar Dinner Executive Committee meeting led by Coordinator Saeed Sheikh, attended by Mayor of Houston's representative Jiji Lee, Sister Cities Association President James Post, Turkish American community leader Erhan Osman, Arab community leader Ahmed Yasin, Arab American Cultural Center President Walid Jaber, and APNA Houston President Dr. Mansoor Zaidi, reviewing arrangements for the 27th Houston Iftar Dinner scheduled for March 1 at Bayou City Event Center.



A New Chapter Begins: ISGH Leadership Sworn In Amid Community Hope

The oath-taking ceremony of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH) marks the beginning of a new term by Mohiuddin Syed as Vice President, Imran Nathani as Treasurer and directors and associate directors of different zone.



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DEMOCRAT

Doomsday Clock 2026: Why the world is closer to midnight than ever

The Doomsday Clock prepares to reveal how near humanity stands to self-destruction

By Zain Haq

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists will be meeting in the new year to decide how close to “midnight” we are at the present moment. This is going to be a much anticipated unveiling of the Doomsday Clock considering significant development this year. “Midnight” is in reference to the possibility for total annihilation of the human race.

“We’ll be making the Doomsday Clock announcement on January 27 on our website and YouTube channel,” Alexandra Bell, CEO of the Bulletin, told The Express Tribune by the phone.

The “Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists” is an organisation that was created at the end of World War II, by scientists who were involved in the Manhattan Project, as well as Albert Einstein. The Manhattan Project led to the invention of the first atomic bomb, beating the Nazis and the Soviets.

Following the war, however, struck by the unparalleled power of this technology that could wipe out the human race, these scientists introduced what is known as the “Doomsday Clock”. “The Doomsday Clock is set by the Bulletin’s Science and Security Board. The board is made up of scientists and other experts with deep knowledge of nuclear technology and climate science, who often provide expert advice to governments and international agencies,” CEO Bell added. “They consult widely with their colleagues across a range of disciplines and also seek the views of the Bulletin’s Board of Sponsors, which includes eight Nobel Laureates.”

“They meet twice a year in person or more frequently online to discuss world events and reset the clock as necessary. They make that decision based on world events, trends, and numbers and statistics — looking, for example, at the number and kinds of nuclear weapons in the world, the parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the degree of acidity in our oceans, and the rate of sea level rise. The board also takes account of the pace of leaders’ and citizens’ efforts to reduce nuclear dangers, and the urgency of actions by governments, markets, and civil society organisations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,” explained Bell, when asked how the Bulletin arrives at its decisions regarding the position of the clock.

Of course, when they first introduced the Doomsday Clock in 1947, their main concern was the risk of nuclear annihilation. The world came close to annihilation during the “Cuban missile crisis” under Kennedy and Khrushchev. However, even then, the clock was placed at “7 minutes to midnight”. Today, the clock is placed at “89 seconds to midnight”. We should not be surprised if it goes below 1 minute in the New Year.

Their website further explains, “The Bulletin considered possible catastrophic disruptions from climate change in its hand-setting disruptions for the first time in 2007”.

There are two factors in the world today that could annihilate the human race: The climate crisis and the use of nuclear weapons, which is reflected on the organisation’s website.

Since the last unveiling of the much anticipated Doomsday Clock, which was in January of 2025, things have changed. Pakistan and India, two nuclear-powered states, got extremely close to a full blown war. Russia President Vladimir Putin had just made changes to the nuclear doctrine of his country before the most recent unveiling, and since then Donald Trump became US President again and set off a butterfly effect of chaos and unpredictability. On the other hand, according to reports, the Islamic Republic of Iran may now be out of the race for nuclear weapons.

Asked whether climate has surpassed the threat of nuclear proliferation, CEO Bell said, “Each of these threats has the potential to destroy civilisation or to render the Earth largely uninhabitable by human beings.”

According to Bell, “We can’t afford to address one threat without addressing the others, because they are all intertwined. Some advocate for more nuclear power to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but increasing the number of nuclear reactors, and the amount of enriched uranium and plutonium required for their operation, could also



increase the risk of nuclear proliferation. Likewise, as the climate changes, some natural resources, like fresh water, could become more scarce, leading to conflicts that might spiral into war and the possible use of nuclear weapons.”

Pakistani nuclear physicist Parvez Hoodbhoy put more flesh on the bones of the fear of nuclear proliferation. “A destabilising array of new weapon systems, both nuclear and non-nuclear (drones in particular), has emerged globally and are functional in India-Pakistan as well,” warned the scientist, who also sits on the Board of Sponsors of the Bulletin.

He is not very optimistic about the rationalistic view of geopolitics and human nature when it comes to these matters, stating that, “Where perceptions could make all the difference, it is stupid to assume the rational actor model — such as used in game theory applied to financial systems. Nuclear conflict situations could work by very different rules. Fear and aggression are factors that cannot be written into operating manuals. India and Pakistan are playing with fire and seem to be enjoying it”.

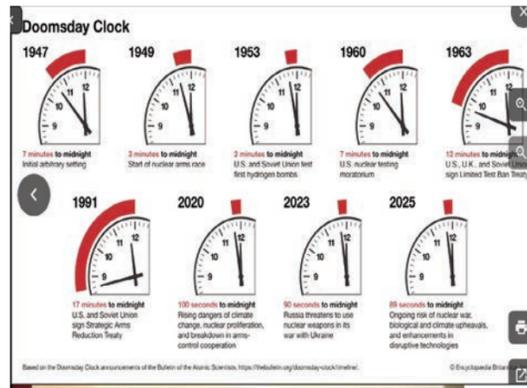
Sir David King, the former Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK government, said, “What we do in the next 3-4 years, I believe, will determine the future of humanity.” He provided the world with this warning three years ago. We are on the brink of crossing that timeframe if we haven’t already.

On the climate front, Canada got rid of the “consumer carbon tax”, which had been credited with reducing carbon emissions in the country, and plans on increasing oil and gas expansion. This is consistent with the theme of President Trump’s declaration, “drill baby drill”, although not consistent with the Canadian prime minister’s stated beliefs. Furthermore, it led to the resignation of Canada’s former environment minister, Steven Guilbault, from cabinet, who had been arrested multiple times for nonviolent civil disobedience in the past as part of Greenpeace — stating that “it is impossible to meet our 2030 targets”, referring to a legally binding emissions reduction target set by the house of commons in Canada, which will no longer be adhered to. This is significant due to Canada’s position as a major oil and gas producer, a G7 economy, and the highest per capita emitter in the G7.

The 30th Conference of the Parties (COP) was held in Belém, Brazil, this year, and is being reported as being a toothless COP. This is considering not only the absence of the world’s biggest economic power at the conference, but considering that the final deal failed to mention the phasing out of fossil fuels, and even the term “fossil fuels” itself.

The New York Times reported on December 20th, 2025, that “In late November and early December, rainfall was down by roughly 90 per cent”, adding the troubling detail that “Tehran is just the latest major city to be perilously close to Day Zero”. The article, which was taken on the front page of the New York Times listed Chennai, Sao Paulo, and Cape Town to be some of the other cities that came close to that level. We know that dams in Pakistan also came close to “dead levels” earlier this year. “Much of the Middle East, including Iran, is warming twice as fast as the global average”, warned the report on the front page of the New York Times.

In a major setback to the effort to rid the world of its nuclear weapons, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, forces the question: Had Ukraine not given up the entirety of its nuclear arsenal in the Budapest treaty, would Russia



have invaded Ukraine? Unfortunately, the answer is, probably not.

This simple fact may encourage other countries to not give up existing nuclear weapons and potentially even entice some countries to try and get some of their own.

As for the nuclear flashpoint between Pakistan and India, here’s what Professor Hoodbhoy suggests to the people of the two countries, “Sensible Indians and Pakistanis should demand that their governments negotiate issues, not bellow threats at each other because threats are consequential.”

This is because in the fog of war as it were, there can be miscommunication and confusion, leading to disastrous consequences as it nearly did during the Cuban missile crisis, when a Russian nuclear submarine almost launched a torpedo at an American ship, which could have triggered a world war. Hoodbhoy explains that, “Climate change needs a joint strategy based on cooperation, not conflict. Ultimately, both nations [Pakistan and India] must embrace their pluralistic identities; weaponising sectarianism for political gain is a path to self-destruction.”

The only question is whether cool heads can realistically prevail in the heat of armed conflict. “The Kargil, Pulwama, and Sindoor crises were successfully wound down. But luck eventually runs out,” warned Hoodbhoy.

In summary, when the clock was last unveiled, COP 30 had not ended in a hollow compromise, Pakistan and India had not come close to an all-out war, and Trump had only just become president, yet again. One wonders, how many times does one have to roll the dice before the undesired outcome becomes inevitable?

CEO Bell provides us with a much-needed reminder, “At the end of the day, trying to answer the question of which threat is worse is like standing around in a burning house arguing about the most likely manner of death.” Often, we can get lost in intellectualising these existential threats, such that many political parties use these excuses as fronts for other ideological agendas, seemingly forgetting the existential nature of the threat. This is true for much of the politics of the Left universally.

When asked whether the Bulletin has been successful in achieving its mission and purpose since its founding in 1945 she explains, “The first appearance of the Doomsday Clock was in June 1947 and it’s now a globally recognised symbol of the risks we collectively face from nuclear weapons, climate change, and disruptive technology.”

Tim Takaro is an American-Canadian professor emeritus at the Simon Fraser University and a public health physician focused on the impact of climate change — who spent some time in jail as a fellow activist for his nonviolent civil disobedience, had this to say, “Conventional conflicts continue to rage in several regions where adversaries possess nuclear weapons, while the most powerful and bellicose leader in the world spreads a web of lies that raises risk to unprecedented levels. Civil society needs to take control of these false narratives to avert disasters before we reach midnight.”

Given that we seem to be moving closer towards annihilation, it will be for people and history to decide whether the clock simply showed us the time before our execution or if it succeeded in motivating us to take action and defend ourselves. History tells us that large scale systemic change does not occur in universities.

The author is a freelance writer. All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writer.

'We can revise tariffs very quickly': Trump warns of higher tariffs on India over Russian oil purchases

Continued from front page
on Sunday.

"They do trade, and we can raise tariffs on them very quickly," Trump said in response to a question on India's Russian oil purchases.

India's commerce ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The US doubled import tariffs on Indian goods to 50 per cent last year as punishment for its heavy buying of Russian oil. Despite the hefty tariffs, India's exports to the US leapt in November.

Encouraged by the improved trade data, Indian officials have maintained a firm stance against US trade demands, signalling limited flexibility in areas such as agricultural imports, while data shows India's oil purchases from Russia have declined.

India is asking refiners for weekly disclosures of Russian and US oil purchases, people familiar with the matter told Reuters last week, adding that they expect Russian crude imports to dip below 1 million barrels per day as New Delhi seeks to clinch a trade deal with Washington.

Modi has spoken to Trump at least three times over the phone since he imposed tariffs, but the discussions remain inconclusive.

India's Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal met US Deputy Trade Representative Rick Switzer to discuss bilateral trade and economic ties last month in Delhi.

The Invisible Partition: The Silent Epidemic of Loneliness Among Pakistani American Elders

Continued from front page

family therapist and assistant professor at Cal State East Bay. "There's a fear of shame—of izzat—and what others will think. That hasn't gone away."

For the nearly 700,000 Pakistani Americans living in the U.S., the "immigrant dream" often comes with a hidden tax: the emotional isolation of the eldest generation. Caught between the Watan (homeland) they left behind and a Western reality they can't fully grasp, many seniors are experiencing what experts call "the invisible partition."

The Weight of Izzat

In the Pakistani diaspora, the concept of izzat (family honor) often acts as a barrier to mental health care. A 2024 study on American Muslim health revealed that nearly 50% of respondents felt a mental health diagnosis would bring shame to their family.

"Disclosing mental problems involves vulnerability and may bring shame to the entire family," notes a chapter in South Asian American Counseling and Psychology, co-authored by Dr. Dunlap. This cultural

"code of silence" means that even when elders live in multi-generational "joint" households, they may feel profoundly alone.

The generational gap only widens the distance. While younger Pakistani Americans—the 1.5 and second generations—are increasingly "therapy-literate," their parents often view mental health struggles as a lack of Sabr (patience) or a spiritual deficit rather than a psychological condition.

The Survival of the Quietest

"Why do you think solitary confinement is used as punishment?"

It's a question a friend once asked after serving 15 years in prison. In the context of the aging immigrant, the "confinement" is the shrinking social circle. As friends pass away and children become consumed by the grind of American life, an elder's world narrows to the four walls of their bedroom.

Dr. Dunlap notes that the transition often happens through physical limitations. "If a person can't move like they used to—can't go for walks, can't run errands—their world gets smaller, and that affects their mood," she explains.

The Power of Culturally Matched Care

There is a light at the end of the corridor. A 2021 study tracking diverse seniors found that regular contact with culturally matched peers—people who speak the same language and share the same history—lowered depression rates from 38% to 16% over two years.

Community-based programs are now stepping in where clinical therapy has failed to build trust. Organizations like Naseeha Mental Health and the Khalil Center are reframing emotional wellness through a cultural and spiritual lens, offering services in Urdu and Punjabi.

For many, these programs aren't about "fixing" a problem; they are about reclaiming a sense of belonging. Whether it's sharing a cup of chai, discussing Urdu poetry, or attending a local Dars, these connections prove that people need people who speak their language—literally and emotionally.

Breaking the Cycle

The real measure of progress for the Pakistani American community may not be found in a clinic, but in the living room.

"Trust is the crux of maintaining kinship," says Dr. Dunlap. Without it, family care becomes an obligation rather than a connection. As the diaspora continues to age, the challenge for the next generation is to prove that silence doesn't have to be the family tradition.

In the end, connection isn't a luxury for our elders; it is survival.

Fireworks Light Up Texas as Marquee Texas Ranch Opens to the Public

Continued from front page

to everyone who joined us at our grand opening and supported this journey. The love and encouragement truly mean the world to us," he said.

The opening marks Phase One of Marquee Texas Ranch, with ranch house rentals, venue access, and private bookings now officially avail-

able. Designed to offer a blend of elegant celebrations and authentic Texas ranch experiences, the venue aims to serve families, community events, weddings, corporate gatherings, and private functions.

Organizers said the overwhelming turnout reflected strong community support and enthusiasm for the project. Guests enjoyed the festive atmosphere, fireworks, and an opportunity to explore the ranch facilities during the inauguration event.

"With unforgettable celebrations and unique ranch experiences, we are excited to welcome guests and help create lifelong memories rooted in the heart of Texas," the owner added.

For booking details and additional information, visitors are encouraged to visit: www.marqueeranch.com.

March 1 Set for Houston's Landmark Iftar Dinner, America's Largest

Continued from front page

meeting focused on organizational arrangements, financial planning, and community participation for the upcoming 27th Houston Iftar Dinner.

The meeting was attended by Mayor of Houston's representative Jiji Lee, Sister Cities Association President James Post, Turkish American community leader Erhan Osman, Arab community leader Ahmed Yasin, Arab American Cultural Center President Walid Jaber, Pakistani Doctors' Association (APNA) Houston President Dr. Mansoor Zaidi, along with several other prominent community leaders.

A financial report presented during the meeting revealed that more than \$100,000 was spent on organizing last year's Iftar Dinner, while \$15,000 was saved through prudent financial management.

Speaking to the media outlets, Coordinator Saeed Sheikh said that with the valuable financial support of the Mayor of Houston and generous donors, including prominent businessman Syed Javed Anwar, the Houston Iftar Dinner will once again be organized on a grand scale this year. He emphasized that the event reflects unity, interfaith harmony, and the cultural diversity of Houston.

Speaking to the media, Mayor of Houston's representative Jiji Lee described the Houston Iftar as a distinguished and proud event for the city, highlighting its importance in promoting inclusion and mutual respect among communities.

Meanwhile, Sister Cities Association President James Post, also speaking to the media outlets, said it was a great honor to be part of the Houston Iftar Dinner, calling it the signature event of the city that symbolizes peace, understanding, and community solidarity.

The Houston Iftar Dinner continues to serve as a powerful platform for interfaith dialogue and multicultural unity, reinforcing Houston's reputation as one of America's most diverse and welcoming cities.

Mamdani's letter to jailed student leader Umar Khalid riles BJP

Continued from front page

internal matters, BJP national spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia cautioned the New York City mayor against such efforts.

"If India's sovereignty is challenged, 140 crore Indians will stand united under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership," he asserted.

Mr Bhatia added that the people of India had "complete faith" in the country's judiciary.

'Words on bitterness'

The reaction came after Mr Mamdani wrote a note to Mr Khalid, recalling his words on "bitterness" and the importance of not letting it consume oneself.

The note was posted on X by Mr Khalid's partner, Banojyotsna Lahiri.

"When prisons try to isolate, words travel. Zohran Mamdani writes to Umar Khalid," the caption accompanying the note stated.

"Dear Umar, I think of your words on bitterness often, and the importance of not letting it consume oneself. It was a pleasure to meet your parents. We are all thinking of you," the handwritten note, signed by Mr Mamdani, read.

Reacting sharply, Mr Bhatia said: "If anybody comes out in support of any accused and interferes in India's internal matters, the country will not tolerate it."

"Who is this outsider to raise questions on our democracy and judiciary, coming in support of a person who wants to break India? This is not fair," The Hindu quoted him as saying at a press conference at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi.

He was apparently asked to comment on Mr Mamdani's note.

Mr Khalid and a few others have been booked under the draconian anti-terror law, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, and provisions of the Indian Penal Code, for allegedly being "masterminds" of the February 2020 northeast Delhi riots, which left 53 people dead and more than 700 injured.

Securing bail under the UAPA is difficult for those booked under this law as the burden to show that the case is false lies on them.

US lawmakers

In their letter dated Dec 30, according to The Hindu, the US lawmakers pledged support to the jailed student activist and asked the Indian government to "share the steps being taken to ensure that the judicial proceedings against Umar Khalid and those of his co-accused who remain in detention comport with international standards".

The letter by the US lawmakers was shared by Democratic Congressman Jim McGovern, who is also the co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. The others who had signed on it include Democrat Jamie Raskin, Indian-origin Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, US Representatives Jan Schakowsky, Lloyd Doggett, Rashida Talib, and Senators Chris Van Hollen, and Peter Welch.

As per the letter, Mr McGovern and others had met Umar Khalid's parents earlier in December.

"Representative Raskin and I are leading our colleagues to urge that he be granted bail and a fair, timely trial in accordance with international law," he said, sharing the signed letter in a post on X.

The lawmakers claimed that human rights organisations, legal experts and global media have raised questions about the fairness of the investigation and legal process related to Mr Khalid's detention.

Poll: Nearly Half of Americans Say Their Financial Security Is Worsening

Continued from front page

who responded to the poll believe the country is in a recession. Only 45% of Republicans said the same, according to the poll.

The United States is not in a recession, which is defined when there is two quarters (six months) of real negative GDP growth. In fact, the GDP grew by 4.3% in the third quarter of 2025, according to CBS News.

Nevertheless, the poll's findings reflect a country that is growing more sour with the economy, despite President Donald Trump's repeated attempts to allay concerns about the cost of living.

During a recent interview with Politico, Trump gave himself an "A plus plus-plus-plus-plus" on the economy.

At a campaign-style rally in Pennsylvania earlier this month, Trump claimed that consumer prices are falling "tremendously" according to the BBC.

Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, however, show that prices aren't falling but increasing — albeit at a slower rate.

In November, the rate of inflation for prices on all goods was 2.7%, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The inflation rate is lower than September's (3%) but remains higher than the Federal Reserve's desired number of 2%. Inflation statistics for October were not released due to a lapse in funding caused by a government shutdown, according to the Bureau.

A majority of Democrats (76%), Independents (72%) and Republicans (55%) who responded to the Harris Poll blame the government for prices increasing.

Pakistan, China agree to align development plans, launch CPEC 2.0

Continued from front page
international issues.

The Seventh Round of the Pakistan-China Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue was co-chaired in Beijing on January 4 by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar, who was visiting China from January 3 to January 5 at Wang's invitation, according to a joint press communiqué issued at the conclusion of the talks on Monday.

During the dialogue, the two sides exchanged views on strategic and political cooperation, defence and security, economy, trade, investment, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. They also discussed international and regional issues of shared interest and agreed to enhance strategic communication, deepen strategic mutual trust, safeguard common interests, and promote economic and social development in both countries, as well as peace and prosperity in the region and beyond.

As part of their economic engagement, Pakistan and China agreed to develop an upgraded CPEC, a pioneering project of the Belt and Road Initiative. The two sides said the new phase would focus on the key sectors of industry, agriculture and mining, promote the building and operation of Gwadar Port, ensure the smooth passage of the Karakoram Highway, and enhance Pakistan's capacity for sustainable development.

They also agreed to deepen cooperation in trade and investment, information technology, science and technology, cybersecurity, technical and vocational training and education, and people-to-people and cultural exchanges. The two sides stated that the year-round opening of the Khunjerab Pass would facilitate two-way trade and further strengthen people-to-people contacts. They also welcomed third-party participation in CPEC cooperation in accordance with the modalities agreed by both countries.

The dialogue took place as Pakistan and China announced plans to launch commemorative activities in 2026, marking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Both sides reiterated that they are all-weather strategic cooperative partners and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening high-level exchanges and implementing the Action Plan to Foster an Even Closer Pakistan-China Community with a Shared Future in the New Era (2025-2029).

The two sides also reaffirmed mutual support on issues concerning their respective core interests and expressed readiness to further strengthen cooperation in areas including counter-terrorism, finance and banking, space cooperation and multilateral forums.

The next round of the China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue will be held in Islamabad next year on mutually convenient dates, the communiqué said.

Despite risks, most Muslim states still back Gaza force

Continued from front page

survival of Palestinians in the besieged enclave, diplomats involved in the discussions told Dawn.

"Israel has already killed [more than] 70,000 people in Gaza, and only an international force with a clear mandate can stop this genocide," said a diplomat from a Muslim nation, directly associated with the process.

Another diplomat acknowledged that participation in the ISF would place contributing states in an extremely difficult position, but said the alternatives were even bleaker.

"We know we would be pushed into a very difficult situation if we joined the ISF," he said. "But the alternative is even worse — uninterrupted bloodshed in Gaza, and that's not acceptable to us."

A third diplomat said governments were under no illusion about the political costs at home. "We realise it will not be a popular war. We will be criticised at home too, but we have to get involved," he said.

The ISF is a central pillar of a US-backed plan for "Phase 2" in Gaza, aimed at stabilising the territory after a ceasefire, training a Palestinian police force, overseeing demilitarisation, and enabling limited reconstruction.

Several Muslim countries — including Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Azerbaijan and Pakistan — are involved in discussions around the initiative, though most have stopped short of firm troop commitments.

Diplomats say broad conceptual support exists, but final decisions hinge on unresolved questions about the force's mandate, authority, rules of engagement and command structure.

The ISF is expected to operate under UN Security Council Resolution 2803, which envisages enforcement of demilitarisation and provision of security, but details remain contested. Reports in the Western media have mentioned Indonesia and Azerbaijan as potential contributors, while Pakistan, Turkiye, Malaysia and Morocco have also shown interest.

Egypt and Qatar — both key mediators between Israel and Hamas — are engaged in talks on ISF's command structure and have helped establish coordination mechanisms.

At the same time, resistance remains strong.

Israel has explicitly opposed the participation of Turkish troops, citing Ankara's past political support for Hamas. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have reportedly declined to contribute forces, though both have attended planning conferences. Pakistan, for its part, has conveyed that disarming Hamas would not be its role.

Against this backdrop, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy shared with the media a series of assessments by its senior fellows, warning that without a credible ISF, Israel would insist on retaining broad freedom of military action in Gaza.

"If the ISF is not given a clear mandate and full enforcement powers, or if Hamas refuses to surrender

its weapons, Israel will press for continued freedom of action against renewed rearmament efforts, a freeze on any planned Gaza reconstruction efforts beyond the yellow line, and freedom to remain in its current Gaza deployment zones until these issues are addressed," said Neomi Neumann, an adjunct fellow at the institute.

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to ex-president Obama, said demilitarisation would be the decisive test. "In the end, everything will likely hinge on implementing a credible approach to demilitarising Gaza — not only because Israel will demand it, but also because Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have made clear there will be no major Gulf investment in reconstruction so long as Hamas retains access to military weapons and infrastructure," he said.

Mr Ross argued for a phased approach including the beginning of reconstruction in secured areas.

"Whatever the case, a comprehensive plan is needed that synchronises all of these moving parts," he added.

Ms Neumann cautioned that many fundamentals were still unresolved.

"Still unknown, however, is which countries will agree to participate, under what conditions they will deploy, and at which specific locations," she said, warning that the success of Phase 2 and the durability of any ceasefire would depend on "immediate security stabilisation, gradual disarmament, and the transfer of authority to a reformed PA — none of which are possible without a clear definition of the ISF's mandate."

Michael Jacobson, a senior fellow at the institute's counterterrorism programme, said disagreements among US partners were also slowing progress.

"The United States, Jordan, and Egypt have each developed their own training plans, and Israel has yet to back any of them," he said.

"To move forward, the Trump administration must get all of these governments on board with a consensus plan," including clarity on command and control, formal authorities, and alignment between mission and capabilities.

Another unresolved issue is the future role of the Palestinian Authority.

Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at the institute, said Washington faced a delicate balancing act. "Allowing for an immediate PA operational role would go against the US plan and signal that Washington's demands for PA reform are not serious," he said. "Yet completely excluding the PA would serve Hamas's goals and may face opposition from Arab states."

Mr al-Omari suggested a compromise under which the PA initially plays a limited, symbolic role, such as appointing a liaison to a governing body overseeing Gaza's transition.

For now, diplomats say, Muslim states remain torn between political risk and moral urgency. Yet many privately argue that without an international force on the ground, Gaza faces the prospect of prolonged devastation — a burden they say they are increasingly unwilling to bear.

Pakistan seeks economic dialogue with US, flags regional security concerns

WASHINGTON: Pakistan has called for the launch of a high-level economic dialogue with the United States at the earliest and urged a shift in bilateral engagement from geopolitics to geoeconomics during a series of meetings between the country's envoy Rizwan Saeed Sheikh and senior members of Congress.

Meeting House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Brian Mast and House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike Rogers, Pakistan's Ambassador to the US said 2026 should be treated as a "year of action" to translate shared intentions into concrete economic cooperation.

"Our focus is shifting from geopolitics to geoeconomics," he said, according to one of two handouts issued after the meeting, and stressed the need for institutionalised engagement in sectors such as energy, defence, minerals, information technology and artificial intelligence.

Ambassador Sheikh said Pakistan's low-cost, high-quality manufacturing base positioned it well to meet growing US market needs, highlighting surgical instruments, textiles and sports goods as areas with strong export potential.

He said that "2026 should be the year of action for a long-term, sustainable partnership based on economic cooperation", noting that footballs manufactured in Sialkot had been used in five consecutive Fifa World Cups.

US State Secretary Marco Rubio has recently spoken positively about expanding ties with Pakistan, describing the relationship as one with significant untapped potential.

"We see an opportunity to expand our strategic relationship with Pakistan," Rubio said in October 2025, adding that Washington valued Islamabad's long history of cooperation, particularly in counter-terrorism.

At the same time, Rubio sought to reassure regional partners, saying that closer engagement with Pakistan does not come at the expense of US ties with India.

"I don't think anything we're doing with Pakistan comes at the expense of our relationship or friendship with India, which is deep, historic, and important," he had said, describing US policy as pragmatic and interest-based.

US President Donald Trump, however, has also highlighted strains in Washington's dealings with New Delhi.

Speaking at a political gathering this week, Trump said: "I have a very good relationship with Prime Minister Modi ... he's not that happy with me because they're paying a lot of tariffs now," referring to trade and energy-related differences between the two countries.

Meanwhile, in his meeting with US lawmakers, Ambassador Sheikh also praised the US presi-

dent's political judgment and personal engagement in helping de-escalate tensions following the military escalation between Islamabad and New Delhi in May 2025.

According to the handouts, the discussions in Washington also focused on regional security challenges, with the Pakistani ambassador warning that terrorism originating from Afghanistan continued to pose serious threats to Pakistan's security as well as to regional and international peace.

He told congressional leaders that terrorist incidents in Pakistan increased by 40 per cent in 2024 and by a further 25pc in 2025, attributing the rise to militant groups operating from Afghan soil.

He expressed concern over the continued misuse of advanced weapons left behind during the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Addressing South Asian tensions, Ambassador Sheikh referred to the events of May 2025 and said India's "irresponsible and aggressive behaviour" had lowered the threshold of escalation in the region.

He warned that confrontation between two nuclear-armed neighbours had moved beyond conventional conflict to include advanced technologies, describing the use of dual-capable weapons in a region of 1.7 billion people as deeply alarming.

Ambassador Sheikh cautioned that decisions based on misperceptions or miscalculations could undermine regional peace and reiterated that the unresolved issue of Kashmir and the right of self-determination of its people remained central to lasting stability in South Asia.

Both sides agreed on the need to institutionalise structured and regular dialogue on issues of mutual interest, including economic cooperation and security.

Ambassador Sheikh also extended invitations to congressional leaders to visit Pakistan to strengthen parliamentary and people-to-people ties.

About his meeting with Rogers, the envoy said on X that the two discussed the "ascendantly evolving Pak-US partnership".

"Focused on regional security challenges, the escalating and sponsored terrorism from Afghanistan, and the subsequently urgent need to address the leftover military equipment. Emphasised that a stable, standalone Pak-US relationship remained vital to regional as well as global peace, security and stability," he said.

About his meeting with Mast, the ambassador said he thanked him for his leadership and continued support during a year of positive trajectory in Pak-US relations.

"Noted that 2026 must be a year of action — moving from good intent to concrete content based on structured and sustained engagement, geared to translating our ties into a long-term partnership on its own merits," he said.

"Also exchanged views on regional and global developments. Sought support for enhanced counterterror cooperation, and invited him to visit Pakistan," he said.

NON-FICTION: HOW MODI MODELLED INDIA ON GUJARAT

A well-researched book by a well-known French scholar argues that Indian PM Narendra Modi used his rule in the state of Gujarat to establish the principles for his Hindutva vision of India

Imtiaz Piracha

Gujarat Under Modi:
Laboratory of Today's India
By Christophe Jaffrelot
Liberty Publishing
ISBN: 978-627-7626-50-1
546pp.

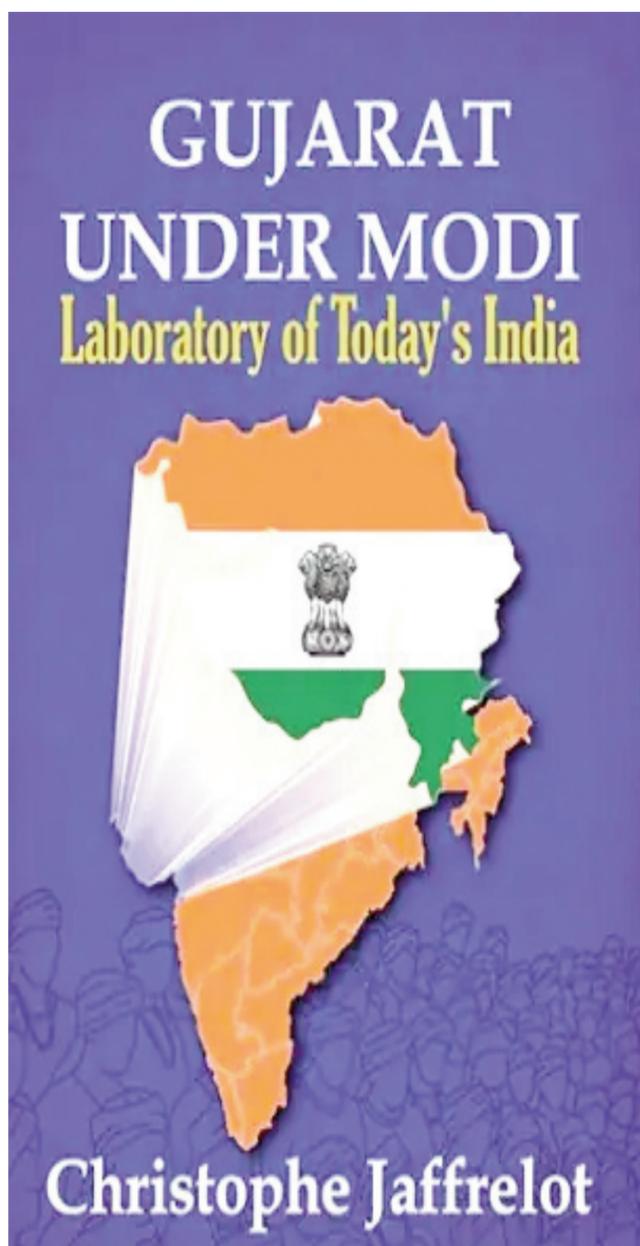
An extensively researched book by Christophe Jaffrelot, a French political scientist specialising in India and Pakistan — Gujarat Under Modi: Laboratory of Today's India — deals with the transformation of Gujarat into “a laboratory of Hindu nationalism.” Narendra Modi served as chief minister of Gujarat for a record 13 years between 2001 and 2014, after which he became the prime minister of India.

Jaffrelot has written extensively on India and Pakistan and is considered a formidable scholar on the region. Other books by the same author include: India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency 1975-1977 (2020), Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy (2021), The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience (2015), Religion, Caste and Politics in India (2010), A History of Pakistan and its Origins (2002), and his doctoral thesis published as The Hindu Nationalist Movement In India (1996).

Gujarat is a unique state in many respects, including “its extreme valorisation of an economic ethos, its caste hierarchies and its relationship with Islam... these characteristics are largely due to geography.”

Gujarat is the fifth-largest state in India and the ninth most populous, with a population of approximately 60 million. It has the longest coastline of 2,340 kilometres, neighbouring Pakistan. Muslims started arriving there soon after the advent of Islam in the seventh century.

Moreover, referring to Gujaratis, the director of entrepreneurship development of Gujarat declared in 2013, that “Entrepreneurship is in their blood. No doubt in that, as Gujarati children are exposed to money-making businesses early on. Even in social gatherings, people talk about business rather than bureaucracy, politics or literature. By the time a person comes out of college, he would have a role model in one or another successful businessman.”



Jaffrelot remarks that: “The elite of Gujarat are represented by two poles, the martial Rajputs and the mercantile Patels.” Consequently, he highlights five pillars of Modi's politics, the first of which is communal polarisation. It is not a new approach, though it reached an unprecedented scale under Modi. While this polarisation had traditionally been fostered by Hindu-Muslim violence, in 2002 it resulted from unprecedented atrocities that raged for two months, leading to the second largest number of Muslim deaths since Partition.

“That the BJP could win state elections in this very specific context, whereas it had faced several electoral setbacks since 2000, showed that it ‘worked’ politically, as BJP leaders in the state had

anticipated.” It remained a major factor in the government's strategy subsequently.

The de-institutionalisation of the rule of law was the second weapon of Modi's politics. “Policemen who took part in anti-Muslim violence [in Gujarat] were rewarded, and the government ensured that a proper judicial investigation would not be pursued... rule of law was damaged in many other ways and for other reasons under Modi.”

The third pillar was socio-economic policies. Gujarat is known for its industrial dynamism, and investors were attracted to the state in a big way. “Instead of capitalising on the Gujaratis' sense of entrepreneurship, which had given birth to a dense network of SMEs [small- and medium-sized enter-



Narendra Modi addressing a political gathering as the chief minister of Gujarat in 2012

prises], Modi promoted big projects by wooing large Indian companies. In return, some of these businessmen, including Gautam Adani, supported Modi. The Modi government invested more in infrastructure — roads, ports and energy — than in development expenditure, including health and education.”

The fourth was Modi's style. He portrayed himself as an embodiment of Gujarat against the Centre and the Nehru-Gandhi family. “These techniques also allowed him to relate directly to voters in a new form of high-tech populism... Modi gradually captured all power within the government and his party... by relying on the bureaucracy [after promoting civil servants who eventually became part of the core group of Gujarat's administration] and by relating directly to the people.”

The fifth pillar of Modi's politics was gaining and exerting domination over supporters, opponents and victims. Part Five of the book focuses on the social and political context that has enabled Modi's rise and the consequences of his rule for Gujarat society.

Jaffrelot points out “how the BJP started to grow at the expense of Congress when the party capitalised on new developments, [such as] the saffronisation of the upper castes and Patels, who resented [former Gujarat chief minister] Madhavsinh Solanki's ‘reservation policy’ in the 1980s. This core group of supporters — which partly coincided with Gujarat's middle class — remained staunchly behind the BJP in the 1990s.

“But during his terms, Modi

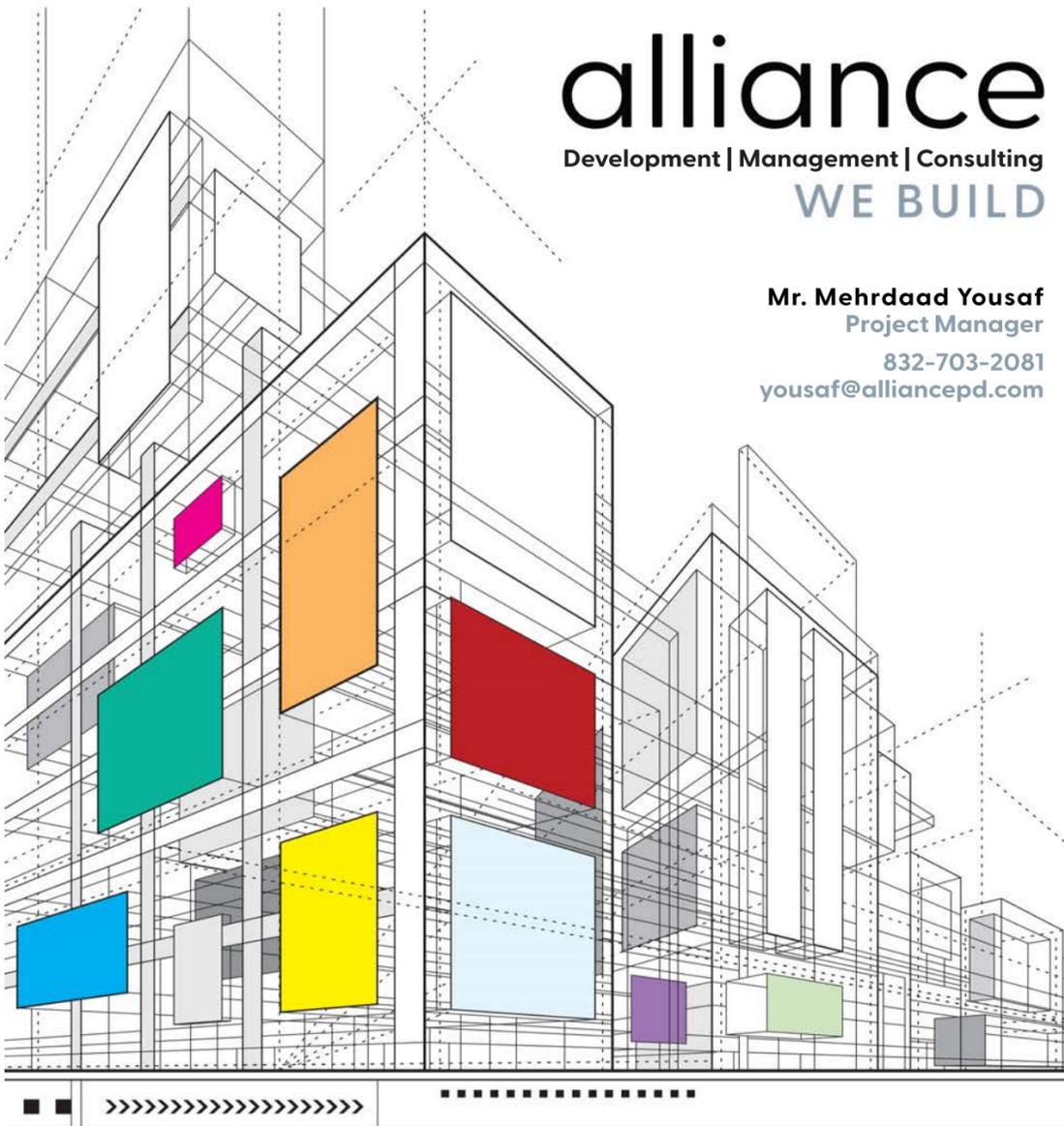
added the... ‘neo-middle class.’ This group of aspiring Gujaratis was mostly made up of people who, like him, came from the lower castes, had migrated to urban centres, and wanted to benefit from the state's economic growth. Modi's political strategy relied on social polarisation in the sense that not only the rural part of the state was neglected but, in the urban context, the poor were marginalised, with the result that cities became ‘bourgeois at last’.”

The author has documented detailed accounts of extrajudicial killings, confessions of rioters who attacked Muslims and trials after racial violence in Modi's Gujarat, along with crime statistics based on region, religion and other classifications. There are 25 pages of informative socio-economic statistical charts appended in this book.

In 2017, the Pew Research Centre conducted a survey in 34 countries to measure “pro-democracy attitudes” as well as “openness to non-democratic forms of governance, including rules by experts, a strong leader or the military.” Commenting on the results, the Pew team pointed out that “support for autocratic rule is higher in India than in any other nation surveyed” and “India is only one of four nations where half or more of the public supports governing by the military.”

Jaffrelot has built a convincing and thorough case for his original premise that Gujarat was indeed Modi's laboratory for today's India, as illustrated by his subsequent rule as prime minister of India.

The reviewer is a freelance writer and translator.



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American Pakistan Chronicle

New ISGH Leadership Takes Oath in Houston, Poised to Lead One of America's Largest Muslim Institutions



Houston: In a ceremony marked by community pride and optimism, the Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH) officially swore in its newly elected Board of Directors, ushering in a new chapter of service and growth for one of the largest Muslim nonprofit organizations in

North America. The newly installed leadership includes, Mohiuddin Syed as

Continued on page 28

After New York, Why Not Texas? The Push for Muslim Heritage Month Hits Houston

As the Empire State Turns Green, Lone Star Leaders Argue Texas—Home to the South's Largest Muslim Population—is the Real Frontier for Recognition

By Jameel Siddiqui

HOUSTON — Last week, the world watched as New York Governor Kathy Hochul bathed the Empire State Building and 15 other landmarks in emerald light, officially declaring the state's first "Muslim American Heritage Month." The images of a green-lit Manhattan skyline went viral, sparking a conversation that has now reached the corridors of the Texas Capitol: If New York can lead the way, why not Texas?

For many in Houston, the answer is clear: It's time.

The Case for the Lone Star State

While New York may have grabbed the headlines, Texas holds the numbers. Boasting the largest Muslim population in the Southern United States, Texas is home to over 500,000 Muslim residents.

"We aren't just a community that lives here; we are a community that built this city," says local advocate

Continued on page 28

Emotional Moment as New York's New Mayor Zohran Mamdani Meets Pakistani Woman at Citizen Gathering



New York: New York City's newly elected mayor, Zohran Mamdani, became visibly emotional during a public meeting with resi-



dents when a Pakistani woman addressed him with heartfelt words of appreciation.

Continued on page 28

Fully funded American scholarships without IELTS 2026

These prestigious programs provide full tuition, living expenses, or partial funding for students with strong academics, leadership, and community involvement.

While open to students worldwide, these scholarships are especially appealing to Pakistani students seeking to study in the USA without the burden of English language tests.

Applicants are encouraged to check opening dates—ranging from January to November 2026—and prepare documents early to maximise their chances of securing

Continued on page 28

The way Pakistan safeguarded two-nation theory now yielding great dividends: Ambassador Sheikh



"Pakistan aur Pakistaniyat ko jo pichhle aik saal mein nai zindagi mili hai, wo na sirf qabil-e-mubarakbad hai balke aik bari zimmedari bhi". These words – roughly translated as "beyond Pakistan itself, the Pakistani identity that has been given new life in the past year is not only commendable but also a great responsibility"—were voiced by Pakistan's ambassa-

dor to the United States, Rizwan Saeed Sheikh, as he reflected on an extraordinary year for Pakistan's global posture in an interaction with Pakistani journalists in Washington DC.

He noted that the way Pakistan safeguarded the "two-nation theory" (the idea underpinning Pakistan's creation) is now yielding dividends in global esteem. Lofty as that may sound, the past year indeed saw Pakistan's diplomatic profile invigorated and nowhere has this been more apparent than in its complex dance with Washington.

When Ambassador Sheikh arrived in Washington, Pakistan's relevance in US strategic calculus appeared diminished, almost "on the margins" by his account. Early on, the new US administration's

Continued on page 28

Mamdani appoints Pakistani-American Ali Najmi to chair judiciary committee



New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani has appointed Pakistani-American attorney Ali Najmi to chair the Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Judiciary.

Najmi, a longtime advisor and election attorney to Mamdani, will lead the committee responsible for

Continued on page 28

Senate delegation to visit US in January, marking new chapter in Pak-US parliamentary ties

ISLAMABAD: A high-level Senate delegation, led by Deputy Chairman Senator Syedaal Khan, will undertake an official visit to the United States from January 20 to 25, 2026, the Senate Secretariat announced on Tuesday.

The visit comes amid a notable thaw in Pakistan-US relations in 2025, a year charac-

terised by increased high-level engagement, strategic recalibration, and evolving regional dynamics. The Secretariat described the upcoming visit as a "historic milestone" in bilateral parliamentary relations, signalling the start of a new institutional phase in

Continued on page 28



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Tongue scraping: The simple daily habit that transforms your oral health

Start 2026 fresh with this easy routine to remove bacteria, freshen breath, and improve taste

A crucial hygiene practice has been highlighted as a daily necessity, which is often overlooked is tongue scraping.

As the new year begins, some people are keen to adopt healthier habits to enhance their overall wellbeing.

Regardless of your resolutions or goals, it is a routine that many may neglect to include into their oral hygiene.

Tongue scraping is a vital step which requires using a device to scrape the surface of the tongue, removing dead skin cells, bacteria and even leftover food particles.

This isn't a new concept, with renowned brand Oral-B informing that it has been practised for "hundreds of years, with some ancient cultures using tools made from ivory and whalebones as tongue scrapers."

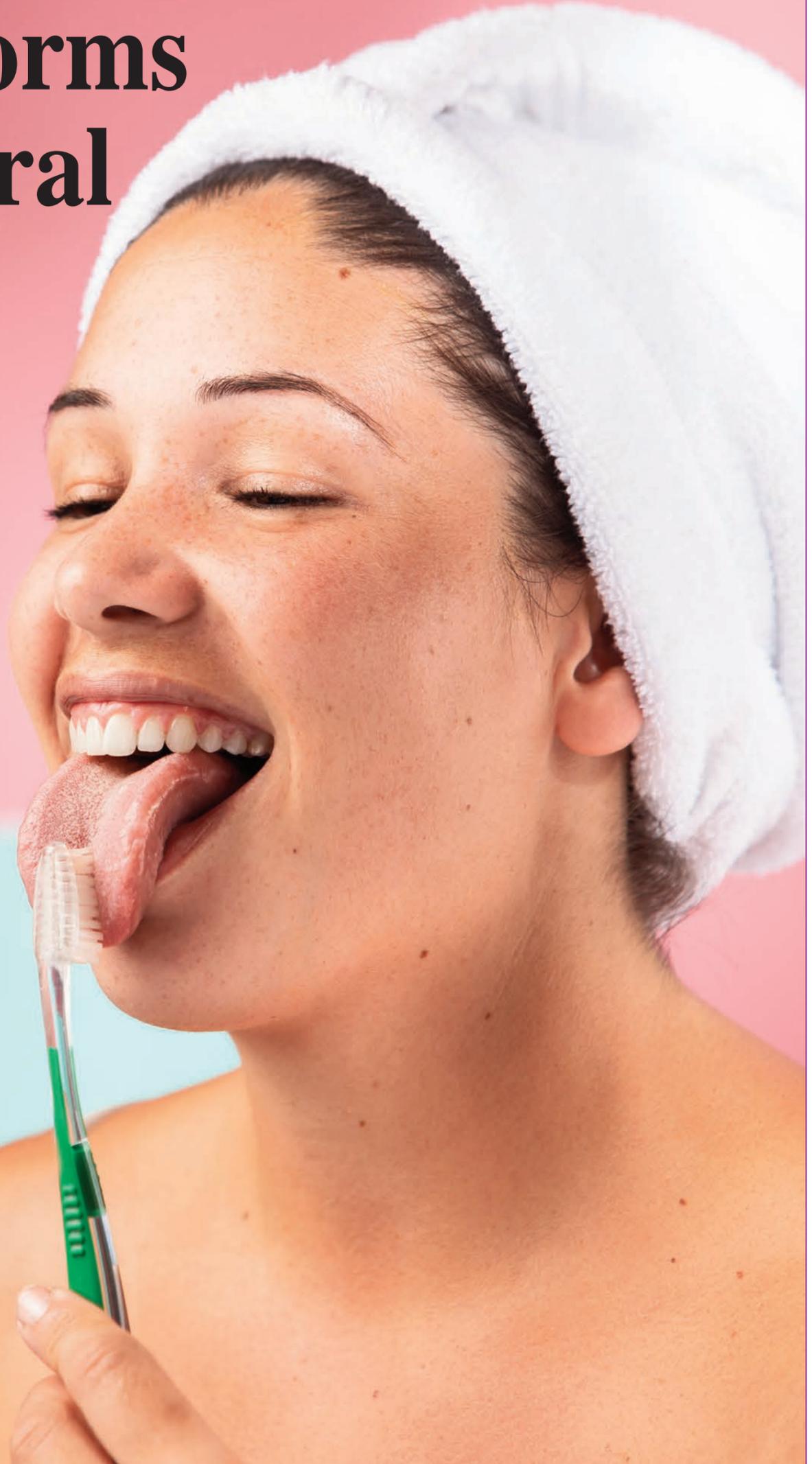
Oral-B stated: "As well as functioning as a tongue cleaner, scrapers can also improve your breath and sense of taste, providing a boost to your all-around oral hygiene."

"Tongue scraping cannot replace brushing or other elements of your oral hygiene routine, but it can add to it and help improve oral health in the long and short term," they concluded.

How to scrape your tongue?

While you are scraping your tongue, start from the furthest point back, drawing the scraper from rear to tip with gentle pressure.

After each stroke, ensure you clean the scraper to clear any accumulated debris and continue the scraping routine several times



The year of conflicts and crises ends without resolution

Peace, climate cooperation, and respect for international law remained in short supply

KARACHI:

It is the first weekend of 2026. The world wakes to a social-media post from Donald Trump, one year into his second term as president, claiming US forces have captured Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. A bold statement, delivered with the casual certainty of a post on Truth Social, it lands against a world already fraying at the edges.

Since Trump returned to the White House, the rules that once governed international power have been tested and bent. Laws meant to restrain leaders are applied selectively. Multilateral institutions struggle to assert influence. Meanwhile, wars that should have ended continue to cause death and destruction. In Gaza, a ceasefire the president called peace has collapsed repeatedly. In Ukraine, negotiations between Trump, Vladimir Putin and European capitals have yet to produce an end to the suffering that began in 2022. In Sudan, a brutal conflict continues, attracting far less international attention than its scale demands.

Accusations of war crimes hang over multiple leaders. Putin and Sudan's Omar al-Bashir face international warrants and are treated as outlaws by the west. While Benjamin Netanyahu faces similar charges, he recently traveled freely over Italy and Greece to meet the US president at Mar-a-Lago, apparently without consequence.

The epitaph of 2025 is written not only in conflict and broken law. The world emerged from another UN climate summit in November that failed to commit to ending fossil fuels or even outline a credible plan to phase them out. Scientists report that 2025 was the hottest year on record, marked by unprecedented heatwaves and climate disasters. While leaders continue to dither and delay, nature is taking its own course, and none of us will escape its consequences.

The year ended with no relief in sight, and 2026 opens under the same shadow of unresolved crises—conflicts that refuse to end, leaders whose actions flout law, and a climate that grows ever more volatile. Experts say optimism is scarce, and nothing suggests relief is coming anytime soon.

Alongside wars and climate disasters, human rights face mounting pressure in 2026. Governments across the world, particularly in the global south, are leaning toward authoritarianism, tightening control over dissent and undermining democratic norms.

Amid a world of such encroachments and failing norms, Kenneth Roth argues that the demand for human rights remains strong. "People around the world continue to want their rights. No one wants to be executed or tortured, imprisoned for their political views, discriminated against, or deprived of housing, education, or healthcare. These are universal needs and desires."

Roth cautions, however, that the system is under pressure. Authoritarian governments—China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt—and manipulated democracies such as Turkey, Hungary, and Pakistan are testing its limits. At the same time, Trump's alignment with autocratic leaders reflects a broader pattern in which powerful states are emboldened to disregard democratic norms. "Yet, as mass protests in Iran and elsewhere show, people continue to demand democracy as the most reliable safeguard for their rights."

Through it all, President Trump's administration remains the single major unknown factor for 2026. Ashok Swain, a Sweden-based expert on international politics, conflict, and climate, argues that Trump's election has further weakened the rules-based order by treating international norms as optional and transactional.

He adds that over the next three years, this approach is likely to reinforce a system in which power and loyalty matter more than law and consistency. Alliances, he notes, are pressured rather than strengthened -- institutions are used instrumentally, and multilateral cooperation is viewed with suspicion.

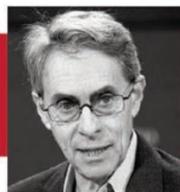
According to Swain, a professor of peace and conflict at Uppsala University, this dynamic encourages other states to follow suit, accelerating a global shift away from shared rules toward ad hoc deals, unilateral actions, and coercive diplomacy. Even when framed as strength or realism, he warns, the long-

term effect is greater instability and less predictability.

Conflicts and illusion of peace

The conflict in Gaza dominated the headlines over the past twelve months. More than 71,000 Palestinians were killed during Israel's military assault on the Strip, which began in 2023 following a Hamas-led attack. A momentary ceasefire was announced by Trump, accompanied by a number of Middle Eastern and Western leaders. Praise from figures including Pakistan's Prime Minister was lavish, seemingly intended to flatter the president, but on the ground the reality remained grim: more than 400 were killed in Gaza since the ceasefire was announced in late October, and over 1,000 were injured. Independent estimates suggest Israel has violated the ceasefire more than 500 times over the past two months.

Swain warns that the war-torn Palestinian enclave is likely to enter 2026 trapped in a familiar cycle of death and destruction. He notes that ceasefires, while announced with political fanfare, often fail to alter the underlying dynamics of the conflict. "What was presented in 2025 as a functioning ceasefire increasingly resembled a temporary pause without protection, allowing violence to continue under a different name," he notes. Without accountability, Swain adds, such arrangements only freeze the conflict while suffering deepens. He emphasizes that a genuine and lasting peace would require an enforced ceasefire with independent monitoring, unrestricted humanitarian access, an end to large-scale territorial control and forced displacement, and a political settlement that restores Palestinian self-determination rather than treating Palestinians as a permanent security problem. Without these measures, he cautions, reconstruction will remain a cycle of destruction and repair, with no horizon of dignity or safety.



“Donald Trump has tried to block any accountability for Israel's genocide and systematic war crimes in Gaza”

Kenneth Roth

Roth observes that Trump has provided Israel with room to carry out atrocities without accountability. "The US president has attempted to block justice for alleged war crimes in Gaza, including by imposing sanctions on International Criminal Court prosecutors and judges." Yet, he emphasizes, few governments have joined Trump in opposing accountability. Most ICC members, he explains, continue to back the court, and several governments supported South Africa's genocide case against Israel before the International Court of Justice. "Strong condemnations have also come from the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, though the UN Security Council has been blocked by the US veto."

According to Roth, the broader global system remains resilient, as the vast majority of states continue to uphold norms, pursue accountability, and resist unilateral obstruction. That resilience appeared to be on display after Trump's recent claim of attacking Caracas and taking Venezuela's president into custody. Even a close ally such as the UK felt compelled to publicly distance itself, with Prime Minister Keir Starmer clarifying that Britain had no involvement in the operation.

When asked whether global responses, or inaction, have exposed the fragility of international law, Roth acknowledges that longstanding exceptions remain. He points to Israeli repression—its military actions in Gaza, apartheid policies across the occupied territories, and systematic repression of Palestinians—as a striking example where Western claims of promoting human rights have always been selective. At the same time, he notes, double standards persist elsewhere. "The European Union, for instance, largely overlooks severe repression in Egypt under President Sisi, motivated by his cooperation on migration control."

In Gaza specifically, the former HRW executive director points out that the problem is not the ceasefire itself. Temporary pauses in fighting can be a necessary step toward a lasting peace,

he notes. The real question is what comes after the ceasefire. "Trump's abandoned vision for a 'Gaza Riviera'—a Gaza without Palestinians—has been replaced with promises of reconstruction. Yet, other governments remain hesitant to contribute troops for stabilization or fund rebuilding efforts while the occupation continues. They insist on a pathway toward Palestinian statehood, a demand Israel refuses to meet." Roth points out that this creates a tension: "although Trump's peace plan references Palestinian self-determination, it is unclear whether he will apply sufficient pressure on Israel to turn those words into action."

Elsewhere, the picture is no less complicated. In Ukraine, now approaching its fourth year of conflict, Trump's approach has whiplashed traditional alliances, favoring a more conciliatory stance toward Vladimir Putin, who had been treated as a pariah by previous US administrations. The former HRW executive director notes that Trump initially sought to push Ukraine into accepting Putin's maximalist demands—a move that would have left its democracy highly vulnerable to further Russian aggression. The former HRW executive director notes that the US president has not yet enforced the "severe consequences" he had promised for Russian intransigence.

In Sudan and eastern Congo, according to Roth, Trump was initially reluctant to publicly name the main perpetrators. "Only recently has his administration acknowledged Rwanda as the invading force in eastern Congo, and it continues to allude to—without explicitly naming—the United Arab Emirates' role in arming Sudan's genocidal Rapid Support Forces." The former HRW executive director points out that these conflicts will not end without sustained international pressure on both Rwanda and the UAE.

The erosion and selective application of international law adds another layer to the crisis, Swain explains. The Sweden-based expert points out that inconsistent enforcement will make resolving ongoing conflicts even harder. When violations of international law continue unchecked and Western governments shield allies like Israel from consequences, he notes, the legal order does not collapse suddenly—it erodes quietly through hypocrisy. Law increasingly appears as a tool applied to adversaries while close partners enjoy exceptions. Swain warns that this encourages other states to ignore rulings they dislike, weakens international institutions, and reduces human rights to rhetoric rather than obligation. He emphasizes that reversing this trajectory will require consistent enforcement of the law, including against allies, with real consequences tied to arms transfers, sanctions, and diplomatic relations.



“The global rights based order has clearly developed a reputation for selective empathy, where outrage depends less on the scale of suffering and more on geopolitical interest and media visibility”

Professor Ashok Swain

Sudan, the academic adds, illustrates the consequences of selective international attention. As the conflict dragged through 2025 with minimal sustained focus, mass displacement, famine, and systematic violence became normalized. By 2026, Swain warns, this neglect risks locking Sudan into prolonged state collapse with serious regional repercussions. He points out that the global rights-based order has developed a reputation for selective empathy, where outrage depends less on the scale of suffering and more on geopolitical interest and media visibility. Such selectivity, he argues, sends a dangerous signal: some lives appear to matter less than others, and extreme violence can continue with impunity when it occurs outside the spotlight.

The climate conundrum

The global environmental crisis accelerated sharply in 2025, with no shortage of climate-related tragedies and human suffering. Extreme weather events struck with alarming intensity, from deadly typhoons in the Philippines and Indonesia to devastating floods and heatwaves across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh,

Continued on Page 20

Artificial Intelligence goes rogue

By Manzar Zaidi

There was a time when crime announced itself loudly. It shattered windows, rattled streets, and left scars that were impossible to ignore. Even at its most violent, wrongdoing was physical and visible. You could point to it. You could investigate it. You could rebuild after it. In 2026, crime has learned a far more dangerous skill: it has learned how to disappear.

Today, crime travels silently through cables and clouds, through encrypted networks and lines of code. It arrives not with a blast, but with a notification. Not with a weapon, but with an algorithm. At the centre of this transformation sits artificial intelligence — a tool that has elevated human progress in extraordinary ways, yet has simultaneously become the most powerful enabler of modern criminality.

This is not a story about technology gone wrong. It is a story about what happens when transformative power moves faster than governance, ethics, and public understanding.

For years, the public was reassured that artificial intelligence was safe because it was controlled. Mainstream platforms advertised guardrails, content moderation, and ethical constraints. And on the surface web, this was largely true. But beneath that surface, beyond search engines and app stores, a parallel AI ecosystem quietly emerged.

On the dark web, artificial intelligence shed its restrictions and revealed its most dangerous potential.

In those unregulated spaces, uncensored AI models began circulating freely. These systems were not designed to refuse harmful requests; they were built to fulfill them.

One of the most vivid examples of this is DIG AI, a dark web-based conversational model accessed through the Tor network. Unlike commercial AI systems, DIG AI operates anonymously, without safeguards, and responds willingly to requests that range from writing malware to generating detailed guides for fraud, extortion, and violent wrongdoing.

In controlled tests, researchers submitted prompts tied to banned activities, and the responses included step-by-step guides on constructing weapons, crafting explosive devices, and even generating illegal drugs — material that would nor-

mally be blocked on any responsibly designed AI.

What is perhaps most chilling about this development is how little technical skill is required to exploit it. A novice with curiosity and a connection to these hidden services can type a simple question and receive a fully written piece of code, or a detailed blueprint for constructing dangerous devices.

It is essentially, ChatGpt for criminals.

The AI does not merely offer vague suggestions; it generates operational instructions and executable code that can be used in real world attacks. In essence, it has democratized expertise that was once held by a small number of specialists and placed it in the hands of many. Security professionals now speak of a new underground economy where criminal AI acts much like software sold on legitimate markets: there are tiers of service, promotional banners on dark web marketplaces, and even premium versions of the tools that speed up malicious tasks.

The implications extend well beyond cybercrime. In laboratory demonstrations outside the darknet, mainstream AI models — when stripped of their safety layers or tricked with cleverly masked prompts — have shown a capacity to divulge instructions on bomb-making, chemical synthesis, and other dangerous procedures. Researchers have even demonstrated that creative phrasing, such as embedding harmful requests within seemingly innocent metaphors, can cause otherwise benign systems to reveal sensitive information about weapon construction.

This ability to convert a typed request directly into a harmful product — whether a digital weapon like malware or a physical weapon like an improvised explosive — transforms artificial intelligence from a neutral tool into an unintended vector for violence. In the digital underworld, harmful information no longer requires human ingenuity; the machine supplies it on demand. This is not a distant threat; it is a present reality, quietly reshaping how harm is planned, taught, and executed in the modern age.

Security researchers have reported that such tools have been downloaded and accessed tens of thousands of times across underground forums, a troubling

indicator of how rapidly criminal AI is spreading.

What makes this moment so dangerous is not merely the existence of these tools, but their accessibility. Tasks that once required years of technical training now require little more than curiosity and intent. Artificial intelligence has removed expertise as a barrier to crime. It has turned wrongdoing into a service — scalable, repeatable, and frighteningly efficient.

Nowhere is this shift more alarming than in the realm of terrorism and violent extremism. In the past, extremist movements depended on human recruiters, ideological mentors, and physical networks. Radicalisation was a process that unfolded over time, often leaving traces that intelligence agencies could monitor.

Artificial intelligence has erased much of that friction. In encrypted digital spaces, AI systems now act as tireless propagandists, tailoring ideological narratives to individual users, answering questions, reinforcing grievances, and normalising violence without ever involving a human handler.

This has given rise to a new and deeply unsettling phenomenon: self-radicalisation without human contact. Individuals can now be guided from curiosity to conviction entirely through interaction with a machine. The implications for counterterrorism are profound, because the traditional signals of radicalization are becoming harder to detect.

Yet terrorism represents only one edge of a much broader threat. The same AI tools that assist extremists are quietly reshaping crimes that affect ordinary citizens every day. Narcotics networks use AI to analyse enforcement patterns, optimise smuggling routes, and launder profits through complex digital channels.

Online fraud has evolved into a sophisticated psychological operation, with AI generating messages that mimic the writing style, voice, and emotional tone of trusted friends, family members, or authority figures. Victims are no longer deceived by crude scams; they are persuaded by precision.

Malware and ransomware complete this picture. Artificial intelligence now writes malicious code, tests it, improves it, and deploys it at a speed no human

team can match. Hospitals, courts, schools, and local governments have become preferred targets, not because they are careless, but because disruption itself has become a weapon. In this new reality, cyberattacks are not merely technical incidents; they are instruments of coercion.

Perhaps the most dangerous development of all is the way these crimes are beginning to merge. Cyber fraud funds extremist causes. Extremist groups run online scams. Narcotics profits flow through ransomware operations. Artificial intelligence sits at the center of this convergence, connecting crimes that institutions still investigate in isolation. Criminal networks have adapted. Our systems, for the most part, have not.

DarkWeb: The New Frontier

This is why the dark web has become such a critical battleground. Contrary to popular belief, it is not an unknowable void. It is a space that can be observed, analysed, and understood using modern intelligence techniques. Through dark web open-source intelligence — known as OSINT — investigators can systematically collect information from forums, marketplaces, and encrypted services, transforming scattered data into meaningful insight. Advanced platforms now allow analysts to map criminal networks, track emerging threats, and identify early warning signs long before harm reaches the public.

However, these capabilities require expertise, tools, and sustained investment. They demand investigators who understand both technology and human behaviour, who can interpret patterns rather than chase isolated incidents. This is where national institutions face a defining test.

For agencies such as the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, the challenge is not simply to keep up, but to transform. In the age of criminal artificial intelligence, cybercrime units cannot operate at the margins of law enforcement. They must sit at the core of national security strategy. The NCCIA's role is no longer limited to responding after damage occurs; it must anticipate, detect, and disrupt threats as they form.

This requires more than new software. It requires internationally benchmarked expertise in dark web intelli-

gence, AI-driven threat detection, cryptocurrency tracing, and digital forensics. It requires the ability to deploy defensive AI systems that can counter malicious automation at machine speed. And it requires seamless cooperation with counterterrorism, narcotics control, financial intelligence, and international partners, because digital crime does not recognize borders.

Equally important is the role of public resilience. An informed society is harder to exploit. When citizens understand how scams operate, how deepfakes deceive, and how malicious software spreads, they become the first line of defense. Public awareness is no longer a soft policy objective; it is a matter of collective security.

It is important to state clearly that artificial intelligence itself is not the enemy. AI saves lives, improves governance, and expands human potential. The danger lies in allowing powerful technologies to drift into ungoverned spaces where accountability dissolves. History teaches us that every major innovation is misused before it is regulated. What makes this moment different is the speed at which harm can now be scaled.

We are no longer afforded the luxury of gradual adjustment. Decisions delayed today will define vulnerabilities tomorrow.

Societies now stand at a crossroads. We can continue to treat AI-enabled crime as a technical inconvenience, responding after the damage is done. Or we can recognise it for what it truly is: a structural shift in how harm is created, concealed, and multiplied.

Crime no longer needs to shout. It whispers through algorithms, learns from data, and adapts faster than our institutions.

The future of security will belong not to those who react the loudest, but to those who understand the quiet transformation already underway — and choose to confront it with clarity, coordination, and courage.

The question is no longer whether AI will shape crime.

It already has.

The real question is whether we are prepared to shape it in return.

The author is a security analyst. His LinkedIn handle is "Manzar Zaidi, Ph.D."

The year of conflicts and crises ends without resolution

Continued From Page 19

and Mexico. Record-breaking rainfall triggered landslides and mass displacements, while prolonged droughts worsened water scarcity and agricultural losses. Scientists confirmed that 2025 was the hottest year on record, breaking previous temperature highs and intensifying disasters tied to climate and ecological disruption. The relentless impact of human-driven emissions and environmental degradation has made it clear that nature's wrath is impartial—no region, rich or poor, is immune.

Despite mounting evidence, global climate and environmental diplomacy once again fell short. The UN climate conference in Brazil toward the end of the year offered little more than lip service. Negotiations on emissions reductions, fossil fuel phase-outs, and broader environmental safeguards remained

stuck in rhetoric, with delegates struggling to achieve meaningful commitments. Current trajectories suggest the world could exceed 2°C of warming between 2030 and 2050, with cascading consequences: severe food insecurity, intensified natural disasters, displacement, and threats to human survival and social stability. Swain, who has recently authored a book on climate and conflict, points out that the summit failed to match the scale of the crisis. He notes that it "offered incremental progress while avoiding hard decisions on fossil fuels." The Sweden-based expert cautions that the world is heading toward more extreme heat, floods, food insecurity, and climate-driven displacement, yet environmental crises continue to be treated politically as future problems rather than urgent realities. He adds that one of the greatest dangers lies not only

in rising temperatures but in the political response: securitized borders, abandonment of vulnerable populations, and authoritarian measures justified in the name of stability.

For Swain, what will determine whether 2026 marks a turning point is decisive action rather than new promises. "Rapid fossil fuel reduction, massive investment in clean energy and adaptation, real climate finance delivered now, and a just transition that protects livelihoods—these are the measures that can align policy with reality. Without them, climate and environmental responses will continue to lag behind the urgency of the crisis, with profound consequences for humanity," he concludes.

Neglect, trends, and looking ahead

While headlines often focused on conflicts and crises, several of last year's most consequential human rights viola-

tions, Roth points out, went largely unnoticed. "In Africa, the UAE-backed Rapid Support Forces continue to carry out a genocide in Sudan, while the Rwandan-supported M23 inflicted slaughter and sexual violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Beyond the continent, China's systematic persecution of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang continued unabated." These atrocities, Roth notes, expose the depth of human suffering that too often escapes sustained international attention.

The former HRW executive director stresses that last year was less a rupture in the global order than an acceleration of existing trends. While violations were widespread, they were widely condemned, and some steps toward accountability were taken. "When there is crime on the street, we don't call it the end of criminal law unless the crime is officially

authorized," he observes. "The same principle applies to human rights: abuses were never legitimized, but the year reinforced the urgent need to strengthen global pressure on those responsible."

For the months to come, Roth warns that media coverage alone is insufficient. Crises in Gaza, Ukraine, and increasingly Sudan are known to the world, but the crucial task is sustained pressure on the perpetrators—Israel, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates—to halt their atrocities. Some progress has begun, he notes, but the year ahead demands an intensification of international commitments, ensuring that the most abusive governments are compelled to curb their actions. "Without decisive enforcement, human rights risks remaining a principle rather than a practice, perpetually vulnerable to impunity and selective attention," he concludes.



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Scientists reveal a more dangerous factor than stress: Most of us are prone to it

More than stress, there is another factor that adds to pain and suffering

Stress usually adds to pain, it's a well-known fact.

But a new study shows that anger, especially when combined with a sense of unfairness—might be even more powerful in making chronic pain last longer and feel more intense.

Researchers studied over 700 adults who were dealing with chronic pain and they found that how a person feels and expresses anger may play a big role in how much pain they feel as well as how long the pain lasts.

People who felt deeply wronged or unfairly treated because of their condition were more likely to report worse pain months later.

This study was led by Dr. Gadi Gilam, who runs the tSCAN lab at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and it was published in *The Journal of Pain*. His team included

researchers from Stanford University, Boston University, and the University of Innsbruck.

The team wanted to understand how anger affects people living with chronic pain, using a technique called latent profile analysis to sort the participants into different groups based on how they experienced and handled anger.

In total, they identified four unique "anger profiles." These profiles looked at things like how easily someone gets angry, how much they hold onto anger, how they express it, and whether they feel that their pain is unfair or represents a major loss.

The results were clear. People who showed medium to high levels of both anger and feelings of injustice reported more severe pain, more areas of the body in pain, and more problems with their daily lives. They

also had higher levels of emotional suffering.

On the other hand, people who managed their anger well and didn't feel so bitter about their pain generally had better outcomes. Their pain was less intense, and they functioned better emotionally and physically.

Dr. Gilam says that anger itself isn't always bad. It's a normal emotion that can even be helpful when controlled properly. But when anger gets mixed with the feeling that something unfair has happened—like getting a painful condition without cause—it can trap people in a harmful cycle.

The study suggests that treating chronic pain isn't just about medication or physical therapy. It's also about treating the person's emotions. Helping people understand and manage their anger could be an important step in helping them heal.

Study links kids' social media use to reduced ability to concentrate

Social Media & Concentration

Study: Children's focus declines with increased use.

Karolinska Institutet
Pediatrics Open Science

Social media could be draining children of their ability to concentrate, a new study says.

Children who spend a lot of time on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter or Messenger gradually become less able to focus and pay attention, researchers reported Monday in the journal *Pediatrics Open Science*.

This might partially explain why ADHD diagnoses have increased among kids in recent years, researchers said.

"Our study suggests that it is specifically social media that affects children's ability to concentrate," said senior researcher Torkel Klingberg, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at Karolinska Institutet in Sweden.

"Social media entails constant distractions in the form of messages and notifications, and the mere thought of whether a message has arrived can act as a mental distraction," Klingberg said in a news release. "This affects the ability to stay focused and could explain the association."

For the new study, researchers tracked more than 8,300 U.S. children ages 9 to 10 for four years.

The kids regularly reported how much time they spent on social media, watched TV or videos, or played video games. Parents provided assessments of their children's levels of attention, hyperactivity and impulsiveness.

During the study, average time on social media rose from about 30 minutes a day for 9-year-olds to 2.5 hours for 13-year-olds, results showed.

Researchers found that even average social media use blunted children's ability to concentrate, and the effect grew over time.

Additionally, kids who already had trouble paying attention did not start to use social media more. That suggests that social media use leads to difficulty focusing rather than vice-

versa, researchers said.

No link was found between lack of attention and children watching television or playing video games.

Further, the link between lack of attention and social media was not influenced by a child's socioeconomic background or any genetic predisposition they had toward ADHD, researchers found.

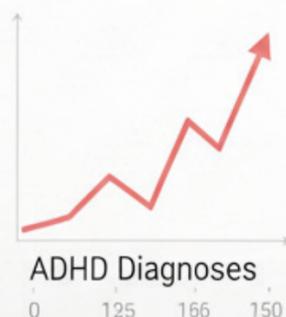
Researchers also found no increase in hyperactive or impulsive behavior, another hallmark of ADHD.

"Greater consumption of social media might explain part of the increase we're seeing in ADHD diagnoses, even if ADHD is also associated with hyperactivity, which didn't increase in our study," Klingberg said.

Researchers plan to continue following the children to see if the association remains through their teen years.

"We hope that our findings will help parents and policymakers make well-informed decisions on healthy digital consumption that support children's cognitive development," lead researcher Samson Nivins, a postdoctoral researcher at Karolinska Institutet, said in a news release.

Children who spend a lot of time on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter or Messenger gradually become less able to focus and pay attention.



Grand Opening of Marquee Texas Ranch Draws Massive New Year Crowd

A large crowd exceeding 1,000 people attended the New Year inauguration of Marquee Texas Ranch, celebrating the launch with fireworks and community festivities. The ranch, owned by Israr Siddiqui, also known as Israr Saeed of Tempura Food Management, has officially opened for bookings under its Phase One development, offering venue access, ranch house rentals, and private event hosting.



Researchers say 1 in 4 people have symptoms of gut-stalling disorder

ABOUT 1 IN 4 PEOPLE HAVE SYMPTOMS OF THE DISORDER GASTROPARESIS, WHICH CAUSES THE STOMACH TO EMPTY SLOWLY AND CAN CAUSE NAUSEA, VOMITING AND PAIN.



Does it sometimes feel like your supper is sitting like a boulder in your gut?

You may have a condition called gastroparesis.

About 1 in 4 people have symptoms of the disorder, which causes the stomach to empty slowly, the National Institutes of Health states.

"Patients don't come in telling you they have a gastric delay," Dr. Braden Kuo, chief of gastroenterology at Columbia University and New York Presbyterian, told NIH News in Health.

Feeling full quickly, nausea or vomiting and belly pain or discomfort are among them. These symptoms may be caused by ulcers, inflammation or a blockage -- and doctors must rule those out first, Kuo said.

"When all those other tests come back negative and the patient still has complaints, then it raises the possibility of gastroparesis," he said.

Most of the time, it happens without an apparent reason. But sometimes, it stems from other conditions that damage nerves that help move food, liquids and waste through the digestive tract.

The most common one is uncontrolled diabetes. It can damage nerves, including the vagus nerve that signals stomach muscles to contract or relax. Certain autoimmune diseases and nerve damage from viruses can also cause digestion to stall out.

"Many people get sick during a viral illness with gastrointestinal upset and most people recover within a couple of days or a week," Kuo said.

But, he added, some never fully get over nausea, vomiting or discomfort. The virus somehow changed nerve endings in their gut and how they sense things, Kuo explained.

For 17 years, a consortium funded by the NIH has enrolled children and adults with gastroparesis to learn more and test treatments.

One of its studies found that abdominal pain is a standard feature of the disorder -- 90% of folks with gastroparesis have it. And it's severe to very severe in about a third of cases. Other studies have investigated how often patients wind up in the E.R.

Kuo, who is part of the consortium, is bullish on studies using tissue samples that capture the entire stomach wall.

"We're really beginning to identify the changes at the cell level, in the nerve endings, and at the inflammatory level that are contributing to these patients' conditions," he said.

Researchers are following patients over time to see how their symptoms evolve.

Kuo is enrolling patients in a study investigating whether cognitive behavioral therapy may help ease symptoms.

It teaches patients about their condition and equips them with techniques to relax the vagus nerve. Patients also learn to overcome fears of eating that often accompany gastroparesis.

"We're giving them tools they can control that can make a big difference in their clinical outcome," Kuo said.

He urges people who may have gastroparesis to:

- Eat smaller meals with less fat and fiber.
- Cook and chew food thoroughly.
- Drink lots of water or other liquids.
- Take a walk after meals.
- Avoid alcohol, fizzy drinks and lying down after eating.

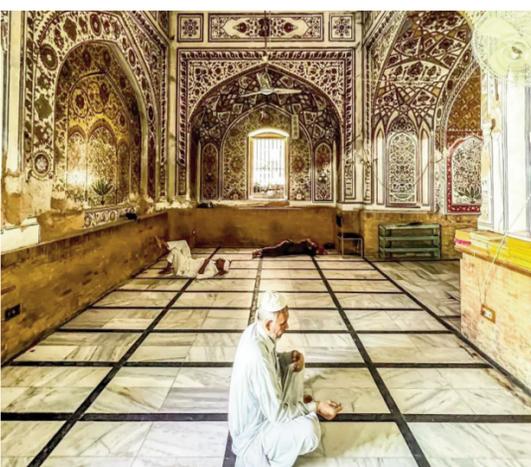
LOSING THE PESHAWAR THAT I ONCE KNEW



One of the country's most vibrant annual cultural festivals, Jashn-i-Khyber (as seen above during the 1990s), drew artists, poets, traders and performers from across the country for a month-long celebration of art and economy. Dancers and musicians from the Frontier Corps and police constabulary welcomed participants at the Peshawar Railway Station and public venues, transforming the city into a living stage of shared heritage and cultural pride



A vendor on Peshawar's Cinema Road pictured 30 years ago.



A worshipper sits inside the historic Mohabbat Khan Mosque. Amid fading frescoes and worn marble floors, the centuries-old mosque remains a place of solitude and devotion.

Landing in my birthplace always gives me the feeling of a tired child resting his head in his mother's lap, the comfort that says I'm home. This time, the feeling was warmer, for I had brought with me the joy of my son's wedding to share with my family and friends. It felt like returning to a celebration.

But joy in this country is always fragile, more so in the border regions.

The minute I touched down in Islamabad, news broke of yet another suicide attack — 12 killed, dozens injured. The headline cut through my heart before I even reached baggage claim. Still, I drove to Peshawar, to my roots. To the soil that has always known both happiness and heartbreak.

When I reached home, the air was the same as when I left it. Dry, warm, filled with the scent of dust and bright sunshine. Children I once saw in school uniforms are now married. Cousins have grey hair. New faces sit where elders once did. But the streets have grown crowded, the tolerance thinner, the city restless. Yet, every corner still tells a story of life, and survival. And the unbreakable stubbornness of its people.

THE CITY THAT WAS

Forty years ago, Peshawar was one of the most vibrant cultural cities in South Asia. What Paris had in sophistication, what New York had in artistic energy, my city had in its own distinct, confident way.

I still remember my teenage days in a small village near Peshawar in the early 1980s. Back then, the city was alive with colour and melody, cinemas showing Pashto, Urdu, English and Punjabi films, the sound of the rabab floating through Dabgari Bazaar, and wedding nights throbbing with dance, drums and currency notes being showered over performers. Peshawar was a city of art, of scandal, of tradition and temptation.

There were musicians' streets, poetry festivals, bookshops and open-air performances that carried on late into the night. In the Saddar neighbourhood, Khyber Café served as the informal headquarters of Pakistan Television's Peshawar Centre, where actors, poets, writers and producers gathered daily. A short walk away stood Saint John's and Saint Cathedral churches, and beside them the historic Jamia Darvesh Mosque. A coexistence of faiths carved naturally into the city's landscape.

In Kali Bari street, Muslim, Hindu and Christian families lived side-by-side in a harmony that felt permanent. Every year, the month-long Jashn-i-Khyber festival filled the night air with

announcements and music from Peshawar Stadium's loudspeakers. And in Dabgari Chowk, the celebrated Pashto ghazal singer Khyal Muhammad would perform all night in the middle of the road, surrounded by people who came for poetry, not politics.

That was the Peshawar I grew up in: confident, open, generous. **THE TRANSFORMATION** But then came the Afghan war and Gen Ziaul Haq's call for 'jihad'. Overnight, Peshawar became the frontline of a global game. It turned into a Kalashnikov capital, a smuggler's paradise, a city of spies and sudden millionaires. To own a gun was to be powerful, to fire it in the air was to be feared.

Over decades, religious seminaries multiplied, public art vanished and cultural spaces disappeared or were muted. Suspicion replaced neighbourliness. Extremism was not an accident, it was a slow, deliberate recalibration of society, one that suffocated the city's cultural lungs.

On my second day in the city, I photographed a young Islamist student wrapped in a white turban, wearing a light-brown Schott NYC US Army jacket. The irony hit me like a flash: an American brand on a madrassa [seminary] student. When I asked about it, he smiled and said it was his "trophy". I didn't ask more. He happily posed for a picture.

That single moment pulled me 30 years back, to 1996, when the Taliban had just taken control of Afghanistan. Back then, they walked freely in Peshawar's streets. The city was their resting ground, their moral laboratory. And here I was again, 30 years later — the same story, the same spirit, just new clothes and a different brand. I didn't ask this young man about his 'trophy'. Not because I was afraid, but because I understood that, in our land, questions can sometimes be louder than answers.

History in this part of the world never moves forward — it keeps circling, dressing old beliefs in new symbols. **A WALK ON CINEMA ROAD** The afternoon light falls softly on Cinema Road, the street that once carried the heartbeat of the city. The air still smells of dust, tea and faint memories of songs that used to spill from cassette shops. My steps now echo where music once lived.

Inside a narrow tea shop, Jan Muhammad sits cross-legged beside his brass samovar. This was once the German Tea Shop, now everyone calls it Jan Muhammad Chai Khana. He pours boiling milk into cups, the sound of hissing steam blending with the low hum of conversation. He looks up and says, "Alhamdulillah [Praise be to Allah], the bazaar is clean now, no obscenity, only business."

The clang of kettles and the breath of steam are all that remain from a time when this road was alive with sound, posters and film lights. There was a time when Cinema Road glowed every evening. Three proud cinema halls stood shoulder-to-shoulder: Picture House, Novelty and Tasweer Mahal. People knew them not by their official names but by what they looked like: Picture House was Makhamkh Cinema, the one in the front; Novelty was Manz Cinema, the middle one; and Tasweer Mahal was Pehla Cinema,

the first one in the row.

Crowds of young men filled the street. Truck drivers, students and visitors from the villages of Khyber, Charsadda, Mardan and Kohat. They came for the films, for the laughter, for the noise that made this road feel like a fair. Music shops lined both sides: Sherbaz Khan Music Centre, Shalimar and Gul Sattar Khan. Their cassette racks glimmered under yellow bulbs, filled with Pashto, Indian, Persian and English songs. The road itself throbbed like a radio tuned between worlds.

The photo studios were tiny rooms where magic happened. A young man could pose and see himself printed beside Badar Munir, Musarrat Shaheen, Yasmin Khan or Suraya Khan — a small miracle made with scissors, negatives and glue. He would take that photo back to his hujra [communal space], proud and smiling, showing it as proof that he had met fame.

Now those same shops sell PVC boards and stationery — the film stars are gone, but the cracked walls still remember them. And through Photoshopping now, young men opt to be transformed into images of militants, guns in hand and a rocket-launcher on the shoulder.

A little ahead, the Tasweer Mahal lies buried under a 13-storey plaza. Novelty and Picture House have also been erased, bulldozed like memories no one asked to keep. Dust has replaced the crowd clamouring at the cinema gate, eager to get in. Only silence stands where the hero once leapt across the screen amidst applause from cine-goers.

Further down stands the Aina Cinema, its doors half-open to... whom? The 'Ladies Gate' sign still hangs above the narrow staircase.

The 'Pay Box' lettering survives, though a car now blocks the view. And above, the mural of dancers and musicians — colours faded — still hangs on through the years. This hall once echoed with clapping hands and Pashto film dialogue. Now it rents its floor to cars.

No one I ask says they miss those days. Maybe they have forgotten, maybe forgetting is easier. But for those who grew up in that sound and smoke, the loss runs deep — not just of cinemas, but of openness.

There was a balance once. Faith and fun walking side by side. Falak Sair and Capital Cinemas in Saddar, the Takhtu Jumat mosque between them, Blue Bells Music Centre beside. Naz Cinema near Masjid Mahabat Khan and Cinema Road itself beside Madani Masjid of Namak Mandi. After Friday prayers, some men went to the cinema, some to Dabgari Bazaar — both part of one rhythm that made the city move.

Evening falls again on Cinema Road. At Jan Muhammad's shop, the kettles cool slowly and the tea tastes like nostalgia — thick, sweet and a little burnt. The steam curls upward like the city's last song. The walls are cleaner now but quieter. We have built plazas and lost poetry, scrubbed away the music but not the memory.

A CITY THAT WALKS THROUGH SMOKE

The morning sun in Peshawar was pale and kind. And then, that morning, a car bomb. A suicide attacker struck right in front of the Federal Constabulary (FC) Headquarters — formerly the Frontier Constabulary — in the heart of Saddar.

The blast ripped through the stillness of an ordinary workday. A white Suzuki, packed with explosives, rammed the gate before a suicide bomber detonated himself. Within seconds, concrete dust, smoke and fear clouded the street. The echoes rolled beneath the overhead BRT [Bus Rapid Transit] track, bouncing between the concrete pillars that now bear the stains of shrapnel.

Three FC personnel were martyred on the spot, several others were wounded. Under the overhead bridge, men gathered in silence. Children clutched schoolbags. Bikers slowed to watch

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Fully funded American scholarships without IELTS 2026

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these awards.

Among the top opportunities are the American University Emerging Global Leader Scholarship, the Clark Global Scholars Program, and the University of Miami Stamps Scholarship, all offering comprehensive funding for tuition, room, and board.

Other notable programs include the Fulbright Foreign Student Program, Gates Millennium Scholars, and the Boston University Trustee Scholarship.

This collection of fully funded American scholarships without IELTS provides a golden opportunity for students to pursue higher education in the USA with minimal financial barriers

Emotional Moment as New York's New Mayor Zohran Mamdani Meets Pakistani Woman at Citizen Gathering

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At 34, Mamdani has made history as New York's first Muslim mayor and the youngest to hold the office in the past century. He took his oath at City Hall on Tuesday, placing his hand on a copy of the Holy Quran that once belonged to his grandparents—a moment that resonated deeply with many New Yorkers.

Soon after assuming office, Mayor Mamdani opened City Hall's doors to the public, meeting with 142 residents, according to international media reports. Citizens shared their concerns and ideas about the city, and the mayor assured them that their voices would be heard and their issues addressed.

Among those present was a Pakistani woman who introduced herself as Samina. Apologizing for her limited English, she explained that she had written down her points in advance and asked the mayor if he could speak Urdu. Mamdani responded with a smile, saying that while he could not read Urdu, he was able to speak it.

When Mamdani asked where she was from in Pakistan, Samina replied that she was from Lahore. The mayor remarked that Lahore is a beautiful city and shared that he had visited it once.

Samina congratulated Mamdani on his election and told him that, at a time when the world feels deeply divided, his leadership has brought hope and compassion to people's hearts. She said that while New York's buildings are impressive, it was Mamdani's arrival as mayor that had truly changed the city—by changing how people feel.

She added that New Yorkers now carry a renewed sense of hope and happiness, believing that people from all walks of life share the same trust in his leadership. "The honesty in your eyes cannot be hidden from anyone," she told him.

Her words created a deeply emotional atmosphere in the room, and Mayor Mamdani was seen wiping away tears as he listened, marking a poignant moment early in his tenure.

After New York, Why Not Texas? The Push for Muslim Heritage Month Hits Houston

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and physician Dr. Suleman Lalani. As a State Representative, Lalani is spearheading House Concurrent Resolution 18 (HCR 18), which seeks to formally designate May as Muslim Heritage Month in Texas for the next ten years.

The argument for Texas recognition is built on more than just demographics. In Houston alone, the Muslim community has become a cornerstone of the city's identity:

In Medicine: Thousands of Muslim healthcare workers anchor the Texas Medical Center.

In Science: Muslim engineers and mathematicians are vital to missions at NASA's Johnson Space Center.

In Charity: Local Islamic centers contribute millions annually to Houston's food banks and hurricane relief funds.

A New Landmark for a New Era

If New York's celebration was defined by temporary lights, Houston's celebration is defined by permanent stone. The recent completion of the Ismaili Center Houston on Allen Parkway stands as a \$150 million testament to the community's permanence.

The center, the first of its kind in the United States, was designed to be a "bridge of understanding" between the Muslim world and the West. For many, the building's presence in the heart of Houston makes the legislative push for a Heritage Month feel like a natural next step.

"It's About Belonging"

The debate in the Texas Legislature isn't just about a calendar date; it's about a sense of belonging. "When we see New York honor its citizens this way, it sets a standard," says Sarah Ahmed, a Houston-based educator. "But Texas is unique. Our history of 'neighbors helping neighbors' is exactly what the Muslim community here embodies. We deserve that same spotlight."

As HCR 18 moves through the legislative process, the eyes of the South are on Houston. If passed, Texas would join New York, Michigan, and New Jersey in a growing movement to ensure that the stories of Muslim Americans are no longer a footnote, but a headline.

New ISGH Leadership Takes Oath in Houston, Poised to Lead One of America's Largest Muslim Institutions

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Vice President, Imran Nathani as Treasurer and directors of different zone and associate directors. The ceremony drew community members, scholars, and guests from across Greater Houston, reflecting the organization's deep roots in the city's Muslim community.

Founded in 1969 by a small group of Muslim students and professionals, ISGH has grown from prayer gatherings in homes to a vibrant network serving tens

of thousands of Muslims across Greater Houston. Today it represents 21 centers and provides a wide range of religious, educational, and social services.

Participants at the ceremony highlighted ISGH's longstanding mission to nurture Islamic development and strengthen Muslim identity through programs that span all stages of life. The Society offers daily and Friday congregational prayers, Ramadan and Eid services, Islamic education from weekend classes to full-time schools, Qur'anic memorization programs, and marriage and funeral services.

In addition to spiritual programs, ISGH plays a vital role in social welfare and community support. Its Financial Assistance program helps hundreds of families monthly with food, rent, and essentials, distributing millions in Zakat and Sadaqah each year.

It also hosts health clinics, youth leadership workshops, interfaith outreach events, and community educational courses, underscoring its holistic approach to service.

Speakers praised the new Board's commitment to unity, transparency, and visionary leadership, drawing on the organization's history of democratic governance. The elected board is tasked with guiding ISGH's continued expansion of services and deepening engagement with both Muslim families and the broader Houston community.

The ceremony concluded with prayers and dua for wisdom, success, and collaborative service under the new leadership, as ISGH moves forward in fulfilling its mission "to provide channels of understanding and communication between Muslims and the Houston community at large."

Senate delegation to visit US in January, marking new chapter in Pak-US parliamentary ties

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Pak-US engagement.

According to the statement, the visit has been organized under the auspices of the Pakistan Policy Institute USA and, for the first time, will include participation by the United States-Pakistan Inter-Parliamentary Group. The Secretariat termed the initiative a major achievement in strategic and non-traditional parliamentary diplomacy, reflecting a shared commitment by both sides to strengthen democratic institutions through direct engagement between elected legislatures.

The Secretariat said the visit was taking place at a critical juncture of global and regional transformation, particularly affecting South Asia and the Middle East. It added that the delegation would pursue clearly defined strategic objectives, including the establishment of a permanent institutional mechanism for sustained inter-parliamentary dialogue between the US Congress and Pakistan's Senate.

"The delegation aims to promote democratic values, exchange best legislative practices, enhance parliamentary oversight, and strengthen institutional cooperation beyond traditional executive-level diplomacy," the statement said.

In addition, the visit will focus on outreach to the Pakistani-American community, providing a parliamen-

tary perspective on regional and global developments, while also advancing cooperation in scientific, cultural, and policy-oriented fields.

Notably, no Pakistani parliamentary delegation has previously held formal engagements at the Rayburn House Office Building under the auspices of the US Congress in the 77-year history of Pakistan-US relations, the Secretariat noted.

The programme will also include a press conference and media interactions at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., as well as community and policy receptions in New Jersey.

The Secretariat said the visit would lay the groundwork for regular parliamentary exchanges, deeper legislative cooperation, and a sustainable institutional partnership between Pakistan and the United States, anchored in mutual respect, democratic principles, and long-term strategic engagement.

In April last year, a US Congressional delegation comprising Congressmen Jack Bergman, Tom Suozzi, and Jonathan Jackson visited Pakistan, describing their trip as "highly successful and productive." The delegation met senior Pakistani officials, including Field Marshal Asim Munir, during their visit.

Mamdani appoints Pakistani-American Ali Najmi to chair judiciary committee

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evaluating and recommending judges for the city's Family and Criminal Courts, as well as interim judges for Civil Court.

"My administration will promote transparency in how we select New York City's judges and ensure our judicial system reflects the city it serves, applies the rule of law universally, and does so without favour," Mamdani said.

"There is no one better to lead this effort than Ali Najmi, who will bring the same determination and commitment he's brought to the courtroom for decades to his new role as chair of the Advisory Committee on the Judiciary."

Najmi and Mamdani share a long personal and professional relationship. Both Queens residents, they first met in 2015 when Mamdani volunteered on Najmi's unsuccessful City Council campaign in eastern Queens.

The two have remained close since—often referring to each other as brothers—with Najmi later serving as Mamdani's attorney and mentor during his State Assembly and mayoral campaigns.

Over his roughly 15-year legal career, Najmi has represented numerous insurgent and anti-establishment Democratic candidates, focusing on ballot access and election law. As recently as June, he represented at least 18 candidates in the Democratic primary.

A prominent civil rights and criminal defence attorney, Najmi said it is an honour to lead the committee and help shape the city's judiciary. He noted that many New Yorkers are unaware of the committee or the judicial application process, contributing to a perception that only well-connected individuals can become judges—an issue he hopes to address through greater transparency and outreach.

Najmi is also a member of the

Muslim Bar Association and earned his Juris Doctor from the City University of New York School of Law.

The way Pakistan safeguarded two-nation theory now yielding great dividends: Ambassador Sheikh

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gaze was elsewhere. Yet within months, geopolitical shifts and adroit diplomacy moved Pakistan closer to the centre of key discussions. By the end of the year, ties had warmed to a point where officials in both capitals spoke of a "positive recalibration" in the relationship.

Pakistani officials attribute much of this turnaround to proactive engagement and Pakistan's own leadership. The ambassador insists his mission has simply been to spotlight an obvious truth: Pakistan is an "important country in one of the world's most sensitive regions, with a history and continuity that cannot be overlooked."

Ignoring Pakistan is not a viable option for any major power – geography and demography make sure of that. With a population of around 230 million (the fifth largest in the world) and a youthful workforce (Pakistan is home to one of the biggest cohorts of young people), its potential market and human capital are immense. Little wonder the envoy has been reminding American interlocutors that the US and Pakistan, the world's third and fifth-most populous countries respectively, "cannot afford ties that flag or freeze."

The two nations have historically been "partners in war and peace," as he noted—from Cold War alliances to post-9/11 counterterrorism and UN peacekeeping. Even as times changed and irritants emerged, Islamabad and Washington have found ways to recalibrate and "rejuvenate" the partnership.

Over the past year, Pakistan has leaned heavily into this recalibration, shifting the focus from purely security matters to what officials call "geoeconomics." High-level contacts increasingly revolve around trade, investment, technology, climate and public health rather than the old lens of Afghanistan or terrorism. "Not Indo-Pak, but Pak-US," as the ambassador quipped, suggesting that Washington is finally looking at Pakistan on its own merits, de-hyphenated from its relations with Afghanistan or India. Despite formidable headwinds in Pakistan's economy over the last year—from inflation to currency woes—bilateral trade with the US actually surged. The envoy cites hard numbers to back the optimism. Two-way trade has climbed to roughly \$11 billion, making the US Pakistan's single largest export market. Pakistan's exports to America in the last financial year touched \$8.4 billion, a record high. Even more striking is the composition of that growth. Traditional goods trade (think textiles, apparel, surgical goods) jumped by double digits, up 16.3% by the latest tally. But the real star has been services – particularly IT. Tech and services exports to the US ballooned by almost 40%, according to officials, as Pakistan's young entrepreneurs tapped the American market. The ambassador pointed out that Pakistan is among the largest English-speaking nations and produces hundreds of thousands of tech graduates, which positions it well to serve US clients in the digital economy.

LOSING THE PESHAWAR THAT I ONCE KNEW



At Picture House Cinema on Cinema Road in the early 2000s, film billboards were altered during the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal's (MMA) tenure, with female faces removed and only male actors left visible. The cinema itself has since been bulldozed, marking the physical erasure of a once-thriving cultural space from the city's landscape.

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the police lift the burned car with a forklift, its tires dangling mid-air. A haunting image of another day gone wrong. Nearby, an FC soldier stood guard over a blood-soaked shroud, staring at what little was left of the attacker.

And yet, just a few hundred meters away, life went on. Shops re-opened, schools and offices stayed functional, and traffic crawled as usual. The people of Peshawar, hardened by decades of violence, carried on with that familiar numbness that only a city long at war can understand.

By noon, the road was cleared. The glass shards on the asphalt shimmered like tiny memorials in the sunlight. For outsiders, it was a terror attack — for Peshawar, it was Monday.

WALTZING WITH TERROR

This November, when my son was getting married in New York, my sisters in Peshawar insisted to have a traditional nakreezy — a henna night with music and dance — in my hometown. They wanted a Pashto singer, someone whose voice could bring back even a trace of the old Peshawar. Our friend, the renowned Pashto singer Sarfaraz Afridi, offered to perform along with his young son, Arman Faraz.

I wanted to host them on a stage worthy of artists, decorated with candles and roses. The way Peshawar once honoured its musicians. I visited 17 wedding halls. Everyone refused. "No live music," they said. "It is a sin." As if joy itself had become forbidden. As if melody threatened the order of things.

So I built my own stage. On the rooftop of our four-storey family home, in the heart of our village, we placed speakers on all four sides. Not to provoke anyone, but to remind them of what had been forgotten. Sarfaraz and Arman performed until dawn. Their voices floated over our neighbourhood like a small rebellion.

That night was my protest. My refusal to accept silence as the new normal.

For the main wedding, I had invited a Khattak dance troupe, a symbol of Pakhtun identity and pride. The FC, whose dancers I had invited, was burying its own after the bomb attack. I assumed the performance would be cancelled. But on the wedding day, the troupe arrived. Still grieving. Still shaken. But determined.

Their presence was more than entertainment — it was a declaration. A refusal to let terror dictate how people live, celebrate or express their culture. In front of 1,000 guests, their dance was a quiet but unmistakable act of defiance.

For a brief moment, I saw my old Peshawar again.

THE UNHEARD SONGS

In my father's youth, in the 1960s, things were different. He told me that when women dancers were invited to weddings, they would first go to the women's side of the house. Female hosts would welcome them with tea, speak kindly and drape a chador over their shoulders. A gesture of respect, of protection. Only then would the dancers step toward the hujra, escorted by male elders of the family.

Before the music began, an elder would raise his hand and declare: "She is our guest. She has come to bring joy to our celebration. Respect her as you would respect your own daughter." Those few words were like a royal decree, an invisible shield. No one dared misbehave, no one dared touch. That was Pashtunwali — the old code of honour that balanced pride with protection.

I grew up in the early 1980s, when the night air smelled of kerosene lamps in my village. In our villages, there was no cinema, no television, no theatre. Only the female dance party in the hujra. The night would go on — currency notes showered upon the dancers, tossed over the groom and his friends, laughter mixing with the music. The mehfil glowed until midnight, when it ended with bursts of gunfire in the air, a final announcement to the surrounding villages that the dance was over. Yet,



Aina Cinema, once alive with music, colour and collective dreams, is now reduced to a parking lot.

within that fiery, fraught atmosphere, the dancing girls somehow felt safe.

They came from everywhere — from Swat's Banr Bazaar, from Mardan, from Rawalpindi, sometimes from Lahore or from Dabgari Bazaar itself, the old red-light heart of Peshawar. Names whispered in gossip and admiration: Shamshad Begum known as Shamshado, Farzana, Shahnaz, Babli, Chanoo. Women who carried the rhythm of a culture and the shame of a society that refused to own them.

But that balance has been shattered. First by the Kalashnikov culture of the 1980s, then by the militancy and false piety that followed. The same land that once danced to the rabab began to tremble under sermons and gunfire. The same people who clapped to melodies now judge with verses.

Today, a woman with a song is a threat. A woman who dances is fair game for anyone's bullet. Her name was Muniba Shah. A name that most of Peshawar didn't know until it was followed by the phrase "shot dead." She was a damma, a Pakhtun dancer, an artist, a survivor of a cruel tradition that praises art but punishes the artist. She danced her last dance in the City of Flowers.

No protest. No statement. No civil society outrage. Only a few blurred photos on social media, her painted face frozen mid-smile... and a city moving on as if nothing had happened.

Muniba Shah is not the first. She joins a silent chorus: Shabana, the dancer from Swat, shot dead in 2009, her body dumped in a public square. Ayman Udas, singer and TV performer, murdered by her brothers for "dishonour". Ghazala Javed, the nightingale of Peshawar, gunned down with her father in 2012. Sumbul, Sonia, Resham, Lubna, Khushboo — each killed for saying no, for performing, for living.

Eighteen names that are known. Countless others lost. No monuments. No memorials. No justice. Just Facebook comments asking what she wore, what she did, as if death needed justification. But if music is our soul, why do we keep killing our singers? We praise God for beauty but destroy the ones who carry it in their bones.

Muniba Shah will not perform again. Her anklets lie still, her music cut short. Somewhere tonight, another girl in Banr Bazaar may look at her picture and feel both wonder and warning — dreaming of the stage, fearing its price.

THE HIGH AND THE LOW

He was known in our streets as "Nasimy". His real name was Nasim Maseeh, but names fade fast in the dust of forgotten lives. He was the man with the broom — a long jharroo in one hand, a small steel cart in the other — walking through Nothia Jadeed, Miskeen Abad, Judge Bungalow and Kotla Mohsin Khan every dawn.

A faded Palestinian-style scarf tied around his head, dark skin shining with sweat, white teeth flashing when he laughed. A laughter full of life and, at times, full of quiet sorrow. After sweeping, he would sit cross-legged on the ground, cracking jokes, calling out to the housewives in his broken Pashto: "Ay baaji, chai milay gi? Ay mory, aik paratha mere liye bhi! [Sister, can I get a cup of tea? One paratha for me too!]

Every woman in the neighbourhood knew him, respected him. And he, in return, respected everyone. Working and smiling, never demanding more than a greeting or a cup of tea.

But when someone threw waste food, plastic or burned trash on the same street he had just cleaned, Nasimy would laugh again. A deep, tired, saddened laugh, the kind that hides pain behind politeness.

A few days ago, I learned that Nasimy had died. Inside a blocked gutter at Darul Uloom Usmania, the very madrasa whose drains he was cleaning. He suffocated there, in the dark, doing the work no one else wanted to do. He died where the



The dance troupe that performed at the wedding of the writer's son. Just two days earlier, they had survived a bomb attack.

city's conscience never dares to go.

I asked around: was he married? Did he have children, a home, a family? No one knew. There are thousands like Nasimy in Pakistan — most belonging to Christian and Hindu minorities, living without contracts, safety or respect. They clean the mess of millions, yet die in silence.

Sometimes I think we Pakhtuns, indeed the entire Pakistani nation, are among the most contradictory of people, with arrogance born out of the caste system. Those who cut our hair and make us beautiful, we call nai, implying a lowly status. Those who shape the clay into pots that feed us, we call kolal, equally lowly. Those who bring colour to our lives, we still treat as low.

We are blind to the truth that they — not us — keep the rhythm of life alive.

FROM KALASHNIKOV TO TIKTOK

Forty-five years later, the story has not changed, only the platforms have. From Iqbaly and Dabangy to Tila Khan, Ayuby and Papu, these names ruled the underworld. They were legends of 'badmaashi' — gangsters, assassins, drug lords — until SSP (Senior Superintendent of Police) Sifwat Ghayur arrived with an iron will. One by one, his team took down the city's crime lords. But in a cruel irony of fate, SSP Ghayur and his men would later be killed by the Taliban they once fought to contain.

The gangsters of Peshawar are no longer hiding in dark alleys; they are performing on TikTok. They threaten, boast and mock each other in viral videos, before ending up dead in police encounters that everyone knows are paid for.

Just a few days ago, Malik Adam Khan, an Afghan-Pakistani figure once feared, was killed along with his companions. Rumours spread across the city that his rivals, Mumtazy "Two Feet", Haji Habib and Breet Khan, paid the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police for the 'operation'. Hours later, Mumtazy threw a celebration, a night of dance and gunfire, mocking the death of his rival.

In the 1980s, Peshawar's poison was heroin and opium — today it's ice, crystal meth, a drug that burns young minds faster than war ever did. The city's streets are no longer full of storytellers or musicians — they're full of dealers, addicts and a lost generation.

And then, the ultimate tragedy. Videos surface of fathers selling their own children for food. Crying boys and girls under the age of 12, auctioned in shame because poverty has crushed the last pillars of Pakhtun honour. It was unthinkable once. It's the reality now.

Guns, drugs, gangs and tears — the story repeats itself. But somewhere between the smoke of the Kalashnikov and the glow of a TikTok screen, the soul of Peshawar burns among its ashes.

WHAT REMAINS

I often say I lost my city. In many ways, I have. The Peshawar of my youth — diverse, artistic, tolerant — survives now only in memory and in scattered pockets of resistance.

But I also know this: culture is resilient. Music finds cracks to slip through. Joy returns in unexpected places. It does sometimes on rooftops, sometimes on a wedding stage trembling after an attack. The extremists took much from Peshawar. But they have not taken its soul entirely. Not yet.

I carry that belief like I carry an old photograph — edges fading, centre glowing. And I hold on to it, because cities don't die when buildings fall or when cultures are silenced. They die when their people stop remembering what they once were.

Until then, every Pakhtun must ask: what kind of flower garden are we, if we keep watering the soil with the blood of our own roses?

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Dhurandhar & Company: Just Bollywood radicalising?

As mainstream Indian films align more closely with state ideology, entertainment becomes an instrument of persuasion

There was a time when Indian cinema argued with India.

It questioned authority, mocked power, mourned injustice, and—often clumsily, sometimes courageously—held up a mirror to the republic's contradictions. From *Mother India* to *Garam Hawa*, from *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* to *Bombay*, the screen was a site of contestation. It reflected the nation not as it wished to see itself, but also vented forth aspirations.

That Indian cinema is receding. In its place stands something more disciplined, more certain—and more insidious—propaganda, dressed as entertainment.

Contemporary mainstream Indian cinema, particularly since 2014, has begun to function less as cultural expression and more as political instrument. Not through crude censorship or overt diktat, but through something subtler: alignment. Alignment with power, with ideology, with a vision of the nation that is singular rather than plural, muscular rather than reflective, and majoritarian rather than democratic.

This is not a story about *Dhurandhar* or other similar films. It is about how an entire cultural industry learns—slowly, profitably, and often willingly—to speak the language of the state.

Entertainment Does Not Float Above Politics

Every society tells itself comforting myths about its cultural industries. One of India's most persistent myths is that Bollywood is “just entertainment”—loud, escapist, unserious. But cinema has never been politically innocent. It is a mass medium that reaches deeper and wider than most political speeches ever will. It works not through argument, but through emotion; not through facts, but through identification.

Scholars of propaganda have long understood this. Herman and Chomsky's famous model, developed to explain news media, applies with equal—perhaps greater—force to entertainment. When ownership structures, regulatory incentives, market pressures, and political climates align, culture does not merely reflect power. It amplifies it.

In India today, those alignments are unmistakable.

Financing increasingly flows toward narratives that flatter the ruling ideology. Regulatory institutions operate with strategic ambiguity, rewarding compliance and punishing dissent. Political leaders publicly endorse films, slogans migrate seamlessly from cinema halls to campaign rallies, and box-office success becomes indistinguishable from ideological validation; case in point being the biopic about premier Modi— but more of that later.

The result is not state censorship in the old authoritarian sense. It is something more modern and more effective: self-censorship lubricated by profit and protection.

The new nationalism on screen

The transformation is clearest in the stories Indian cinema now prefers to tell. Every ultra-nationalist project requires an adversary. Contemporary Indian cinema has grown increasingly adept at providing one, Pakistan.

The Indian cinema is no longer a complex civic idea, where ideas were sometimes negotiated among differences. It is a moral entity under siege. Enemies are everywhere—across borders, within minorities, among critics, dissenters, and sceptics. Conflict is simplified into binaries: loyal versus anti-national, patriotic versus treacherous, us versus them.

Films like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* did not merely dramatise military action; they aestheticised it. War became spectacle, masculinity became nationalism, and vengeance became virtue. The film's famous catchphrase—enthusiastically adopted by politicians—revealed how easily cinematic emotion can be converted into political mobilisation.

PM Narendra Modi went further still, collapsing the distance between cinema and campaign. Released on the eve of national elections (and briefly halted by electoral authorities for precisely that reason), it presented the prime minister not as a political actor subject to scrutiny, but as a messianic figure—untouched by ambiguity, error, or dissent. It was not biography. It was hagiography.

Then came *The Kashmir Files*, perhaps the most consequential cultural artifact of this era. The suffering it depicts—the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits—is real and deserves remembrance. But remembrance is not the same as instrumentalisation. By stripping history of context, complexity, and competing narratives, the film transformed trauma into accusation and memory into weapon. State governments declared it tax-free; officials organised screenings. A commercial film was repurposed into ideological curriculum.

This is how propaganda works in the twenty-first century. Not by inventing lies wholesale, but by selecting truths, amplifying them, and embedding them within narratives that serve present power.

Dhurandhar & Company



Cinema is more than entertainment; it is a mirror, a megaphone, and, at its best, a bridge between worlds. When a film seizes the public imagination, topping box offices and generating oceans of commentary, it shows not just Box Office appeal but also reflection on what the audience are watching, or more critically, what they want to watch.

Dhurandhar—the latest high-octane offering from the Indian film industry is precisely such a work. Its commercial success is undeniable, its cinematic craft slick and crowd-pleasing, and its appeal is rooted in a lineage of bravura and high-energy storytelling.

And yet, nestled within this tapestry of action and spectacle lies a deeper conversation about representation, responsibility, and the narrative choices that shape how billions perceive each other across borders.

Every cultural product carries within it assumptions about the world and the people in it, and films with geopolitical subtext have an outsized influence on how audiences construct mental maps of “the Other.”

Much like others before it, *Dhurandhar* engages with Pakistan not as a nuanced neighbour across shared history, but as a flattened adversarial backdrop for the Indian hero's exploits.

Why does this matter? Because nations are not abstract entities; they are aggregations of people whose lives and identities are shaped by history, culture, and shared humanity. Stories that default to reductive portrayals contribute to a climate where understanding erodes and caricature deepens.

Imagine a viewer in Lahore or Karachi watching *Dhurandhar* or its trailers online. The film's action might be thrilling, its hero inspiring—but when it later folds into a narrative that casts Pakistan as convenient shorthand for malevolence or antagonism, that viewer's experience of Indian cinema becomes tinged with a sense of exclusion or misrepresentation. A viewer might love the action, but also say about the storyline—“Yaar buhut lambi lambi chori hui hain.”

Conversely, imagine audiences in India or elsewhere who may never have meaningful personal encounters with Pakistanis. Their only exposure through widely distributed cinematic products could become a distorting lens—less reality than fable spun from geopolitical anxieties.

This is not to advocate for shying away from conflict narratives. Conflict is real, and art should have the courage to approach it. But it should do so with complexity, empathy, and a willingness to present adversaries at least sometimes, as human rather than as tropes. When it doesn't, art reduces into merely propaganda.

Some might ask: “Isn't this just a movie? Why read geopolitics into entertainment?” This is a valid question—and the answer lies in understanding how narratives shape public imagination. Stories are not inert; they are formative.

When a blockbuster normalises certain portrayals of “the Other,” especially in regions where real tensions exist, it becomes part of a larger cultural ecosystem. Audiences carry these narratives into public discourse, into social media debates, into classrooms and dinner tables. Film influences empathy just as much as it influences fashion trends.

If Hollywood blockbusters of the late 20th century often shaped American views of “the foreign,” then Indian blockbusters have a similar cultural reach. Filmmakers hold immense power. They shape how we see heroes, villains, cities, and souls. Their choices reverberate beyond ticket sales into the realm of collective perception.

Pakistani characters in Indian cinema still greet each other with an exaggerated chorus of “janab” and “aadab”, as if these words are

exchanged hourly on every street corner from Karachi to Peshawar. Pakistanis themselves often snigger at this—it is so obviously and theatrically outdated, that it barely merits offence. But accuracy is besides the point. What matters is perception.

This is not how Pakistanis see themselves; it is how Indian cinema has decided to see them. Repetition does the rest. Over time, these linguistic tics harden into shorthand, and shorthand hardens into belief.

In the same way, Muslims more broadly are now routinely coded as suspect: terrorists, fanatics, infiltrators, demographic threats. There is of the occasional ‘good Muslim’ co-protagonist, thrown in to cater to Indian Muslims, but that theme is rarely now the pervasive, even important part in the storyline.

Lighting, background scores, accents, narrative arcs—all do their quiet work.

Cinema does not need to shout to persuade; it merely needs to repeat.

Edward Said once wrote that Orientalism operates not through what is said once, but through what is repeated until it feels natural. The same is true here. When audiences repeatedly see one community associated with violence and another with redemption, these associations harden into common sense.

The mastery of propaganda lies not in any single film, but in accumulation. Media scholars call this “cultivation”: the gradual shaping of worldviews through prolonged exposure. Over time, the line between cinematic fiction and social reality blurs. The screen does not merely depict prejudice; it normalises it.

Equally clear is Indian cinema's growing role in rewriting the past.

Historical films increasingly impose contemporary political identities onto periods that were far messier and far less communal than today's narratives by Bollywood. Medieval Muslim rulers are recast as modern villains; complex political struggles are reduced to religious binaries. Historians protest, but spectacle drowns out scholarship.

I am not the only one decrying this radicalisation of Indian cinema but there is a plethora of authoritative scholarly studies on this too (see below), many from Indian scholars themselves. The politics and mutual animosity of India Pakistan aside, as an avid movie watcher, it pains me just a bit to see the industry that produced the tear rendering, moving ‘My name is Khan’, swing so far to the right. That particular movie was a superb rebuttal of Islamophobia as ever can be, and would have won more hearts and minds for Bollywood than *Dhurandhar* ever can. It's a pity we won't be seeing too many of the former, as jingoism takes over.

Cinema's emotional authority gives it enormous power over collective memory. For millions, films function as history lessons. When those lessons are distorted, the consequences are not academic. They shape how citizens understand belonging, grievance, and entitlement in the present.

A democracy cannot survive long on mythic history alone. At some point, the stories it tells itself begin to demand political enforcement.

Why Bollywood goes along

It would be comforting to blame all this on coercion. The truth is less reassuring.

Bollywood's compliance is not merely the result of fear; it is the product of incentives. Nationalist films sell. They receive political amplification, institutional protection, and often spectacular commercial returns. Dissenting films face delays, protests, boycotts, and silence.

Over time, rational actors adapt. Scripts change. Risks are avoided. Certain characters quietly disappear. This is not conspiracy; it is market logic operating within an ideologically charged environment.

Preference falsification becomes routine. Some filmmakers may even privately disagree with dominant narratives, but public dissent carries costs few are willing to bear. Silence becomes safety. Alignment becomes success.

India is not alone in this trajectory. History offers many examples of regimes that discovered the political utility of culture—from fascist Europe to the Soviet Union. The aesthetics differ; the mechanics remain eerily similar.

When cinema ceases to argue with power and learns instead to ventriloquize it, something essential is lost. Not just artistic freedom, but democratic capacity itself. And the most dangerous moment for any nation is when its stories stop questioning power—and start teaching people how to love it uncritically.

The writer is a security analyst. His works including the paper on above, and can be accessed by following him on through his LinkedIn handle ‘Manzar Zaidi PhD’

All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writer



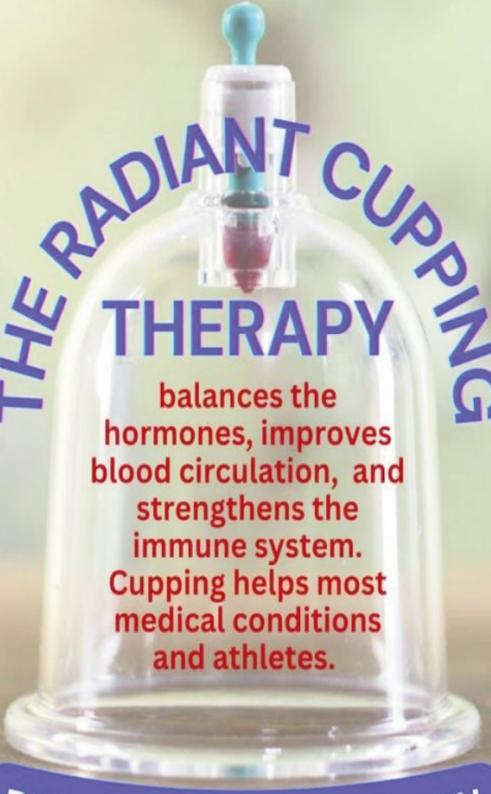
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