

# The Truth International

1<sup>st</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021

Technology Misuse  
Spying by India & Israel on politicians & journalists

Future of Afghanistan  
Taliban hold the master key to regional peace

AJK Election  
PTI stuns the world with victory

## Pegasus Project India's Himalayan Shame



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# Investigating the Pegasus Project

By M. Ziauddin



Spying and espionage are practices as old as human history itself. The need to know the enemy's strengths/weaknesses and the secret shadow weapons it wields has driven nations to think of ever more innovative methods.

A Dutch exotic dancer and courtesan, the (in) famous Margaretha Geertruida MacLeod, better known by the stage name Mata Hari, had worked as a German spy in World War I.

The cold war that had lasted for nearly 50 years ended with the Soviet Union disappearing from the face of the earth due to the American CIA's clandestine operations with its final drop scene in Afghanistan enacted with the active help from our own Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate.

Israel's NSO Group draws its strength from artificial intelligence (AI), a product of the 4th industrial revolution. The Group claims that its mobile phone surveillance software, Pegasus, is meant to help its clients combat crime and terrorism; but journalists, activists, opposition politicians, and dissidents are also known to have been abused by the software.

That's why more than 80 journalists, representing 17 media organizations around the world, have come together to investigate the Pegasus project. It began when journalism nonprofit Forbidden Stories and human rights group Amnesty International gained access to a set of more than 50,000 leaked phone numbers believed to be a list of targets of the Pegasus. Forbidden Stories then invited OCCRP, the Washington Post, the Guardian, and 13 other partners to help investigate.

Sixty-seven of these phones were subjected to forensic analysis to determine whether they had been infected, and 37 showed signs of Pegasus activity. Reporters identified potential NSO Group clients from more than 10 countries: Mexico, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Hungary, India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Morocco, Rwanda, and Togo.

Of over 1,000 telephone numbers whose

owners were identified, at least 188 were journalists. Many others were human rights activists, diplomats, politicians, and government officials. At least 10 heads of state were on the list, including Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The Pegasus gains entry to a target's mobile phone quietly, without alerting the owner in any way. Once installed, Pegasus can extract data, conversations, contacts, and call logs from the victim's phone. It can even switch on microphones and cameras to silently record live audio and video.

Pegasus in the wrong hands poses a direct threat to civil society at large. Until its antidote is developed the owners of phones suspected of being infected could avert being harassed by following the RSF (Reporters Without Borders) recommended steps:

Stop using your smartphone at once and buy a new one to continue communicating. Keep the potentially infected device far away from yourself and your work environment; Disconnect all accounts from the potentially infected phone and change all the passwords from another device; Contact Forbidden Stories or IT experts such as those at Amnesty International's Security Lab to see if your number is on the leaked list of 50,000. The Amnesty International expert group has also developed a tool, the Mobile Verification Toolkit (MVT), which can be used to find out if a smartphone has been infected with Pegasus. Note that its use requires good IT skills. Journalists can also send their phone number to [Share@amnesty.tech](mailto:Share@amnesty.tech) to be checked.

If you cannot replace your phone:

Restart the phone. Amnesty's experts have established that, on an iPhone, a restart can temporarily stop Pegasus from functioning on iOS; Perform a factory reset of the smartphone even if this does not guarantee Pegasus's removal. Note that this may also destroy evidence of an infection; Update the system software and all of the apps on the phone; Remove all unknown devices connected to the various messaging and online account apps (Signal, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, etc.); Compile a list all

the passwords that have been entered and stored in the smartphone. Then change them and never reuse the old ones; Protect your smartphone with a PIN. Use a six-digit PIN at least or, even better, a strong and unique sentence (different from your other passwords). Using an easy PIN such as "0000" or "1234" or your date of birth provides absolutely no security.

Update the smartphone's system software frequently:

Install a VPN. (But be aware that a VPN does not protect against certain types of attack.); Install antivirus software (Avast, McAfee or Kaspersky); Delete apps that are not used; Turn your smartphone off at least once a day. This simple measure may be enough to thwart the operation of many spyware apps; Enable two-factor authentication on your most important accounts (Twitter, Google, Facebook, etc.); Disable iMessage and FaceTime (which are known to be Pegasus points of entry); Avoid using Google Home or any other voice assistant; On an iPhone, uninstall such Apple apps as Apple Music, FaceTime, iMessage and Mail. Note that you must disable iMessage before uninstalling it; Whenever possible, use a VPN when browsing the Internet; Never click on links in a message from an unknown number; Do not use Wi-Fi in unreliable places, or use it only after previously activating your VPN; Only install apps from the App Store (on an iPhone) or Google Play (on an Android phone); Block notifications and requests for permission to access the address book; Do not allow your smartphone to save passwords. Use a secure password manager such as LastPass; Use Signal to communicate with your sources; For journalists dealing with very sensitive information, it may be a good idea to use a phone that is not connected to the Internet – an old mobile phone or a smartphone with no access to data; The Access Now digital security helpline can diagnose your problems and provide helpful technical advice in nine languages; The Digital First Aid Kit gives advice about a device that is behaving suspiciously, as does Surveillance Self-Defence.

# Pegasus Project and India's Himalayan Shame

*Did Modi's henchmen go too far when they targeted politicians, journalists, and activists at home with the military grade Pegasus spyware?*

By Umer Farooq

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has won India a place among repressive regimes using an Israeli spyware to attack foreign leaders and their own citizens.

Media reporting of the Pegasus expose has revealed that hundreds of numbers from Pakistan appeared on the Indian surveillance list, including a number once used by Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Indian citizens who came under illegal surveillance by the ultranationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) leader government include Modi's political rivals and critics, independent journalists, activists, and dissidents.

Among the targets are more than 40 journalists, three opposition leaders, and wait for it – two of Modi's own cabinet ministers.

However, probably the most unkindest cut of all is this: The foremost exponent of the Hindutva brand of nationalism or his aides seem unwilling to show remorse or regret for heaping the ignominy of being among perpetrators of surveillance abuse on the world's most populous democracy.

The scale at which Prime Minister Modi's minions unleashed the military grade espionage tool against his political opponents, journalists critical of his policies, and activists championing democratic causes has attracted huge backlash from the Indian politicians and civil society.

As well as Kashmiri freedom fighters, Modi's sleuths targeted Indian Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, and even an Indian Supreme Court judge through Pegasus.

## Pegasus Project

Throughout the past couple of weeks, there have been series of disclosures in international news stories about a company called NSO Group—an



Israeli software firm and its flagship product: A piece of spyware called Pegasus. Some of the stories have revealed that a fully updated smartphone can be hacked with a single text message.

Reports have said two women close to the murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi were among those targeted by a government agency using the spy tool.

A coalition of news outlets, including The Washington Post, Le Monde, and The Guardian is behind the reporting, and they're calling it the Pegasus Project. The project was led by Forbidden Stories, an organization of journalists that works on stories after the original reporters have been silenced in some way. Amnesty International ran detailed forensics on 67 smartphones to look for evidence that they were targeted by Pegasus spyware — and 37 of those phones tested positive.

"Pegasus is spyware developed by a private contractor for use by government agencies", a technical evaluation report on Pegasus has said. "The program infects a target's phone and sends back data, including photos, messages, and audio / video recordings"

Pegasus' developer, an Israeli company called NSO Group, says that the software can't be traced back to the government using it — enabling plausible deniability, a crucial feature for clandestine operations.

In short, NSO Group makes products that let governments spy on citizens. The company describes the role of its products on its website as helping "government intelligence and law-enforcement agencies use technology to meet the challenges of encryption" during terrorism and criminal investigations.

## India's Himalayan shame

Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's response to the disclosure was scathing: "Targeted surveillance of the type you describe, whether in regard to me, other leaders of the opposition, or indeed any law-abiding citizen of India, is illegal and deplorable", he said.

"If your information is correct, the scale and nature of surveillance you describe go beyond an attack on the privacy of individuals. It is an attack on the democratic foundations of our country. It must be thoroughly



investigated, and those responsible be identified and punished.”

According to Indian media New Delhi did not confirm nor deny whether it was a client of the Israeli firm NSO—which produced the software used in spying—or not. However, its laws do not bind the government to disclose the use of said technology.

India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, responding to questions from The Washington Post, said the claim that specific people were targeted “had no concrete basis or truth associated with it whatsoever.”

“Any interception, monitoring, or decryption of any information through any computer resource is done as per the due process of law”.

### Indian interest in hacking Pakistani officials

Indian security agencies used the Israeli spyware to hack a cell phone number once used by Prime Minister Imran Khan, an Israeli newspaper reported. The Prime Minister, however, does not seem to have been the only Pakistani of interest to India.

Indian intelligence agencies' interests in tapping communications of senior Pakistani military and civilian officials is not a new phenomenon. They have been trying to do this for a long time. One such attempt was made during Kargil conflict when an Indian newspaper published the transcript of conversation between the then COAS, General Pervez Musharraf and his Chief of General Staff, General Aziz Khan.

Musharraf was in Beijing and in the telephone call Aziz was briefing him about a meeting that took place at the Prime Minister House. This transcript raised a lot of hue and cry in Pakistani political and media circles.

Reporting from the project showed that hundreds of rights activists, human rights lawyers, journalists, dissidents, political leaders, officials and others were potentially compromised using NSO's Pegasus software, which the firm sells only to governments.

Human rights group Amnesty International confirmed the hacking on 23 out of 67 phones subjected to technical analysis, with 14 others showing signs of attempted penetration.

### Pakistan's position

Pakistan has condemned India's “state-sponsored, continuing and widespread surveillance and spying operations”, calling it a clear breach of global norms of responsible state behaviour.

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said Pakistan was investigating the possible hacking attempt and would raise the issue at unspecified forums if it is confirmed. Earlier, Chaudhry had expressed concerns regarding the revelations from the Pegasus Project, a consortium of news organisations producing stories based on leaks of NSO's internal documents.

“Extremely concerned on news reports emerging from [UK-based newspaper The Guardian] that Indian government used Israeli software to spy on journalists, political opponents and politicians, unethical policies of [the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi] have dangerously polarised India and the region,” Information Minister Chaudhry said.

In a statement, Foreign Office (FO) spokesman Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri said: “We have noted with serious concern, the recent international media reports exposing the Indian government's organised spying operations against its own citizens, foreigners as well as Prime Minister Imran Khan, using an Israeli-origin spyware.

“Keeping a clandestine tab on dissenting voices is a long-standing textbook ploy of the RSS-BJP regime to commit human rights atrocities in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) and peddle disinformation against Pakistan,” the statement said.

“The world has seen the true face of the so-called Indian ‘democracy’ when the reports of EU Disinfo Lab, Indian Chronicle, surfaced earlier last year,” the FO spokesman said in the statement.

“We are closely following these revelations and will bring Indian abuses to the attention

of appropriate global platforms. In view of the gravity of these reports, we call on the relevant UN bodies to thoroughly investigate the matter, bring the facts to light, and hold the Indian perpetrators to account”.

Pakistan has also said it would investigate the use of Pegasus malware against Prime Minister Imran Khan and senior military and government officials in the country.

A key aid of Prime Minister Khan said: “We see it as an attack on Pakistan's sovereignty over [cyber attack] and the country will protect itself at all costs.”

Shahzad Akbar said the Pegasus scandal was potentially bigger than the Panama Papers, and asserted the government was developing a legal strategy against India and the issue of Pegasus would be raised in international forums, including the United Nations and the European Union.

Akbar said that after this scandal, India's nefarious plans against Pakistanis have been exposed. “India wants to destabilize Pakistan. Earlier, we also saw the report of Disinfo Lab, which described how India used fake media houses and NGOs to lobby against Pakistan.

The adviser said that the Israeli firm NSO has been selling the Pegasus malware software to various countries for many years. However, this requires approval from the Israeli government.

“Spyware was provided to ten countries, including India. It was used against [Narendra] Modi's political opponents, including journalists, politicians and judges,” he added.

### Pakistani civil society's muted response

Pakistani concerns over tapping and hacking of Prime Minister Khan's phones are genuine. But the civil society has hardly raised a voice over the matter. Is it because Pakistan's own security apparatus is notorious for tapping the phones of government's opponents and dissenting voices? Countless times the crisis situation in Pakistani politics has revealed the intrusive nature of Pakistani intelligence spying operations. However, no accountability has ever taken place.



# Capturing Pegasus

*The lowdown on the Israeli spyware at the centre of a global surveillance abuse scandal.*

By Javed Hussain

## What's is Pegasus?

Pegasus is a military grade spyware that gives full access to the target's smartphone including to its data, images, photographs, and conversations as well as camera, microphone, and geolocation.

Experts say Pegasus is a zero-click Trojan virus – a type of malicious code or software that looks like a legitimate piece of software but is designed to damage, disrupt, steal, or in general inflict some other harmful action on your data or device.

## Who created Pegasus?

Pegasus was created by NSO Group, an Israeli technology firm founded in 2010 by Niv Carmi, Omri Lavie, and Shalev Hulio. The name NSO derives from the initials of the first names of the founders (Niv, Shalev and Omri). Based in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv, Israel, NSO employed almost 500 people as of 2017.

NSO Group is a subsidiary of the Q Cyber Technologies group of companies. Q Cyber Technologies is the name the NSO Group uses in Israel, OSY Technologies in Luxembourg, and in North America it has a subsidiary named Westbridge. It has operated through other companies around the world.

## Where is Pegasus used?

NSO claims that it provides authorized governments with technology that helps them combat terror and crime. The Pegasus spyware is classified as a weapon by Israel and any export of the technology must be approved by the government.

Practically, Pegasus is known to have been used by repressive regimes including India against in targeted attacks against human rights activists, journalists, and political rivals; and in state espionage against Pakistan, again by India. Researchers say surveillance through Pegasus played a role in the murder of Saudi dissident Jamal Kashoggi.



## How does Pegasus work?

The earliest version of Pegasus captured by a researcher in 2016 infected phones through what is called spear-phishing – text messages or emails that trick a target into clicking on a malicious link. Since then, however, NSO's attack capabilities have become more advanced. Pegasus infections can be achieved through so-called "Zero-click" attacks, which do not require any link to install.

In 2019, instant messaging company WhatsApp revealed that NSO's software had been used to send malware to more than 1,400 phones by exploiting a zero-day vulnerability. Simply by placing a WhatsApp call to target device, malicious Pegasus code could be installed on the phone, even if the target never answered the call.

In October 2019, WhatsApp and its parent company Facebook sued NSO and Q Cyber Technologies under the US Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA).

More recently, NSO has begun exploiting vulnerability in Apple's iMessage software, giving it backdoor access to hundreds of millions of iPhones. Apple says it is continually updating its software to prevent such attacks.

Technical understanding of Pegasus, and how to find the evidential breadcrumbs it leaves on a phone after a successful

infection, has been improved by research conducted by Android operating systems.

Recently, as the technical partner of the Pegasus Project, an international consortium of media organizations including the Guardian, Amnesty's Citizen Lab has discovered traces of successful attacks by Pegasus customers on iPhones running up-to-date versions of Apple's iOS. The attacks were carried out as recently as July 2021.

As Pegasus' fundamental purpose is to spy on the owner of the phone, one of its main operations is to gather data. The data-gathering functionality of Pegasus is among the most complete and comprehensive we have seen in any spyware package.

The software also gathers contacts from the system, dumping the victim's entire address book. Pegasus also constantly updates and sends the location of the phone:

One of the most significant sets of private data on a phone is stored in the various user keychains. Apple's KeyChain holds all of a user's stored authentication info (usernames and passwords). Pegasus loads the keychain and dumps all of the victim's data.

In addition to stealing all of the victim's passwords, Pegasus interrogates the list of every Wi-Fi network that the phone has saved and grabs all of the SSIDs and WEP/WAP keys and users.

Pegasus also grabs the router password for Apple devices like Airport, Time Capsule, etc.

### How do we know about Pegasus?

We know what we know about Pegasus thanks to the Pegasus Project – an international investigative journalism initiative that revealed governments' espionage on journalists, opposition politicians, activists, business people and others using the private NSO Group's Pegasus spyware.

In 2020, a target list of 50,000 phone numbers leaked to Forbidden Stories. An analysis of the list revealed it contained many numbers of non-criminal targets including leading opposition politicians, human rights activists, journalists, lawyers, and other political dissidents.

The Pegasus Project is an umbrella name 17 media organisations collaborating on the story. Reports by member organisations started to appear on 18 July 2021, revealing notable non-criminal targets and analysing the practice as a threat to freedom of the press, freedom of speech, dissidents and democratic opposition.

The world got its first inkling of Pegasus from a 2016 report by cybersecurity giant Lookout, who were in turn alerted by Citizen Lab. The 2016 report is an in-depth technical look at a targeted espionage attack being actively leveraged against an undetermined number of mobile users around the world.

The most detailed technical analysis of Pegasus so far has come from Lookout. The firm says it works with "100 million mobile sensors fuelling a dataset of virtually all the mobile code in the world", and claims it can predict and stop mobile attacks before they do harm.

On 20 July, 14 heads of state were revealed as former targets of Pegasus malware including Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, who has called for a United Nation's enquiry into India's use of the malware.

Calls have since been aired for further investigation into the abuses and a limitation on trading such repressive malware. Among groups airing these calls have been the newsrooms involved, the Committee to

Protect Journalists, the International Press Institute, and the persecuted American whistle-blower Edward Snowden.

Amnesty International's Security Lab has performed in-depth forensic analysis of numerous mobile devices from human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists around the world. This research has uncovered widespread, persistent and ongoing unlawful surveillance and human rights abuses perpetrated using NSO Group's Pegasus spyware.

As laid out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, NSO Group should urgently take pro-active steps to ensure that it does not cause or contribute to human rights abuses within its global operations, and to respond to any human rights abuses when they do occur. In order to meet that responsibility, NSO Group must carry out adequate human rights due diligence and take steps to ensure that HRDs and journalists do not continue to become targets of unlawful surveillance.

In this Forensic Methodology Report, Amnesty International is sharing its methodology and publishing an open-source mobile forensics tool and detailed technical indicators, in order to assist information security researchers and civil society with detecting and responding to these serious threats.

This report documents the forensic traces left on iOS and Android devices following targeting with the Pegasus spyware. This includes forensic records linking recent Pegasus infections back to the 2016 Pegasus payload used to target the HRD Ahmed Mansoor.

The Pegasus attacks detailed in this report and accompanying appendices are from 2014 up to as recently as July 2021. These also include so-called "zero-click" attacks which do not require any interaction from the target. Zero-click attacks have been observed since May 2018 and continue until now. Most recently, a successful "zero-click" attack has been observed exploiting multiple zero-days to attack a fully patched iPhone 12 running iOS 14.6 in July 2021.

Sections 1 to 8 of this report outline the forensic traces left on mobile devices following a Pegasus infection. This evidence has been collected from the phones of HRDs and journalists in multiple countries.

Finally, in section 9 the report documents the evolution of the Pegasus network infrastructure since 2016. NSO Group has redesigned their attack infrastructure by employing multiple layers of domains and servers. Repeated operational security mistakes have allowed the Amnesty International Security Lab to maintain continued visibility into this infrastructure. We are publishing a set of 700 Pegasus-related domains.

Names of several of the civil society targets in the report have been anonymized for safety and security reasons. Individuals who have been anonymized have been assigned an alphanumeric code name in this report.

### Technical analysis of Pegasus spyware

According to a technical evaluation of Pegasus, the software is professionally developed and highly advanced in its use of zero-day vulnerabilities, code obfuscation, and encryption.

It uses sophisticated function hooking to subvert OS- and application-layer security in voice/audio calls and apps including Gmail, Facebook, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Viber, WeChat, Telegram, Apple's built-in messaging and email apps, and others.

It steals the victim's contact list and GPS location, as well as personal, Wi-Fi, and router passwords stored on the device. The iOS version of the attack uses what we refer to as Trident, an exploit of three related zero-day vulnerabilities in iOS, which Apple patched in iOS 9.3.5, available as of the publishing of this report.

According to news reports, NSO Group sells weaponized software that targets mobile phones to governments and has been operating since 2010, according to its LinkedIn page. The Pegasus spyware has existed for a significant amount of time, and is advertised and sold for use on high-value targets for multiple purposes, including high-level espionage on iOS, Android, and Blackberry.

This spyware is extremely sophisticated and modular, in addition to allowing customization. It uses strong encryption to protect itself from detection by traditional security tools and has a vigorous monitor-



ing and self-destruct mechanism. Lookout's analysis determined that the malware exploits three zero-day vulnerabilities, Trident, in Apple's iOS

## Pegasus targets and perpetrators

According to an analysis by the German newspaper Die Zeit, the no less than fourteen incumbent and former heads of state and government have been targeted – implying possible full access to their mobile phones' data.

Prominent among the leaders targeted are President Emmanuel Macron of France, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, and Prime Minister Saad Hariri of Lebanon – besides of course PM Khan of Pakistan.

Many of the targeted numbers were clustered in 10 countries: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Hungary, India, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, according to the reports.

The phones of two Hungarian investigative journalists, Andras Szabo and Szabolcs Panyi, were found to have been successfully infected with the spyware.

In India, more than 40 journalists, three opposition leaders and two ministers in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government were reported to be on the list.

This included the key opposition figure Rahul Gandhi, with two mobile phone numbers belonging to him found in the list. Mr Gandhi no longer has the devices so it was not possible to analyse them to determine if he had been hacked.

More details about who has been targeted are expected to be released in the coming days.

## Israeli commission of enquiry

International civil rights groups have been raising hue and cry about the revelation made in these newspapers about the role Pegasus software is playing in spying important personalities internationally.

After coming under lots of pressure from international media and civil right groups,

the Israeli government constituted a commission of inquiry to review allegations that NSO Group's controversial Pegasus phone surveillance software has been misused amid a hacking scandal.

The announcement to this effect came from the head of the Israeli parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee came amid revelations that the Israeli firm's spyware appears to have been used by governments in the surveillance of heads of states, opposition figures, activists and journalists, whose names were among some 50,000 potential targets on a list leaked to rights group Amnesty International and Paris-based Forbidden Stories.

The revelations sparked calls for accountability and increased controls on the international sales of spyware technology. Pegasus can hack into mobile phones without a user knowing, enabling clients to read every message, track a user's location and tap into the phone's camera and microphone.



## A look at NSO

Apparently, NSO was laughing all the way to the bank already three or four years ago. From humble beginnings in 2010, NSO has become in effect a company that helps its clients spy on the world.

NSO's annual revenues were around USD 40 million in 2013 and USD 150 million in 2015. In June 2017, the company was put up for sale for USD 1 billion by Francisco Partners.

Founders Lavie and Hudio, partnering with European private equity fund Novalpina Capital, purchased a majority stake in NSO in February 2019. It was reported at that time that NSO had "finished 2018 with

revenues of \$250 million, and dozens of licensed customers".

The Pegasus project has raised new concerns about the scale and depth of the surveillance campaigns pursued by the company's government clients – and more generally the lack of regulations around the many firms that now sell military-grade spyware.

Hulio, who served in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), has said the idea for the company came after he and Lavie received a phone call from a European intelligence service, which had learned the pair had the know-how to access people's phones. "Why aren't you using this to collect intelligence?" the agency is said to have asked.

The proliferation of smart phones and encrypted communications technology, from Signal to WhatsApp and Telegram, meant intelligence and law enforcement agencies had gone "dark", unable to

monitor the activities of terrorists and other criminals.

"They said we didn't really understand, that the situation was grave," Hudio recalled. So grave, in fact, that when NSO began selling its technology, it quickly expanded, and currently employs about 750 staff. The company is the world leader in a niche market: Providing states with "off the shelf" cyber capabilities that allow them to compete with the National Security Agency (NSA) in the US and the UK's GCHQ" According to Daily Guardian.

The name NSO is derived from the initials of the men who launched it: the friends Niv Carmi, Shalev Hudioand, and Omri Lavie.

# Beware of spin doctors

By Hammad Ghaznavi

“Azad Kashmir has rejected the anti-security forces narrative of Nawaz Sharif,” said Federal Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry, analyzing the AJK election results last week, wherein Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf emerged victorious, defeating its arch political rival Pakistan Muslim League (N). Does the conclusion drawn by Fawad hold water, or is it just the PTI chief spin doctor at work?

PTI bagged 26 seats of the AJK assembly, garnered around 613,590 votes, which comes to around 31.35 percent of the votes polled; While PML-N won 6 seats, secured around 491,000 votes, that is, about 26 percent of the votes cast. (Pakistan People’s Party won 11 seats with its 350,000 votes, which comes to about 18 percent of the total votes cast.) Where do these figures lead us? Does it mean, according to the Fawad formula, around 500,000 voters of the PML-N supported the anti-security forces narrative of Nawaz Sharif? If Fawad is right, it’s scary.

AJK is still AJK, let’s have a look at the by polls in Pakistan. Every single by elections in Punjab has been won by PML-N. Can this be interpreted as triumph of Nawaz Sharif’s ‘anti-security forces’ narrative? Going by the Fawad formula, the country is faced with the gravest crisis of its existence. Mr Federal minister may throw some light on this.

Dilating upon his statement, the minister information said that off-late Mr Sharif fully came out of the closet against the security forces; and his recent contacts with the anti-Pakistan elements like Afghan national security advisor Muhib Hamdullah also proved an eye-opener for the AJK voters. The question still remains: did 500,000 kashmiris vote for the Sharif’s anti-security forces agenda?

In fact, Nawaz Sharif before leaving London for Pakistan in 2018, named the chief of a premium Pakistani intelligence outfit as someone violating his oath and meddling in politics. Even much before that he had coined the



famous phrase of our political lexicon – khalai makhloof. Last year, he named the chief in a Gujranwala jalsa and later his party won the Gujranwala and Daska elections. Likewise, Nawaz was dubbed ‘Modi ka Yar’ after Indian PM’s 2015 Raiwind visit; and Nawaz-Jandal meeting was also bandied about before 2018 polls. Interestingly, in 2018 elections, Nawaz bagged more seats in Punjab than PTI. What were people voting for in 2018, or for that matter, even today? Does voting for Nawaz Sharif mean voting against the security forces of Pakistan? It is a dangerous line of argument that, when analyzed deeply, leads to frightening conclusions.

It is pertinent here to look at the PML-N votebank. It is the petty bourgeoisie and the small businessman that form the backbone of the PML-N votebank. There are many other social and economic groups that support the party for different reasons, including the development work that these groups credit PML-N with, especially in Punjab under Shehbaz Sharif. No denying the fact that some groups, particularly in urban areas, that describe themselves as democrats, liberals and constitutionalists, also support PML-N. But declaring them ‘anti-security forces’ will be a little too much as they sincerely believe that rigged elections do not solve any of our problems but only multiply them. Or

they believe that following the constitution can lead us to safe shores. Supporting the constitution does not mean being anti-security forces. This is misleading to propagate that by criticizing the martial laws or the tinkering with the election process makes a group anti security forces.

Besides, the voters in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas, primarily vote for the biradri, clan and cast. It is mindless, for example, to describe over 111,000 voters voting for Nausheen Iftikhar in NA 75 Daska last April, as anti-security forces. Spin doctors are supposed to give interpretations to events that benefit their bosses; but not at the cost of dividing the society on such deceptive fault lines.

Either we have to believe Nawaz Sharif in this regard who says that his criticism of a few uniformed individuals who violate their oath, must not be interpreted as criticism of the entire institution. Or we are left with no choice but to believe that millions and millions of voters are voting for the anti-security forces narrative of Mr Sharif.

I believe the chief spin doctor is wrong here. People voting for PML-N are not anti-security forces. Painting them as such will divide the nation on most dangerous lines. Lots of damage has already been done – just stop it right here!





# AJK Win Cements Khan's Cred as Envoy of Kashmir

*PTI's control of AJK government and assembly portends smooth sailing ahead for the Prime Minister's party.*



By Zain Rihat

Historically, general elections in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) have been easy to predict. The political party at the helm of affairs in Islamabad is usually crowned in Muzaffarabad. This time too, there was no major upset in Azad Jammu and Kashmir elections held on 25 July — the first after India revoked the special status granted under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution to the Indian Illegally-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir on 5 August 2019.

As was being predicted, the ruling party in the Centre, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) secured electoral victory in the elections for AJK Legislative Assembly. It gained a simple majority in a house of 53. Traditionally, the Kashmiri vote swings in favour of the political party that is in power in Pakistan.

As many as 724 candidates including 13 women (9 from different political parties and 4 independents) directly contested for 45 seats of the AJK Legislative Assembly. A total of 261 independent candidates were also in the race in the 33 AJK constituencies while 56 independents were vying for the 12 refugees' seats.

PTI, PML-N and PPP were the main Pakistan-based political parties participating in the AJK elections while Jammu and Kashmir People's Party (JKPP), and the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (AJKMC) among others were the AJK-based parties.

The AJK-based parties won one seat each while the PTI won 25, PPP won 11 seats and PML-N secured six of the 45 seats. Jamat-e-Islami, one of the mainstream religious parties in Pakistan, has a sizable vote bank in the AJK, although the party has never been able to win more than a couple of seats.

In the 2016 elections, the PTI could win only two seats. It merits mention here that the PML-N got itself registered in AJK in 2010, PTI in 2016 while PPP was present in the AJK since 1970. Before 2010, Muslim Conference was considered to be the representative party of the Pakistan Muslim League in AJK.

Elections in AJK usually bear the prints of Pakistani politics. It has always been a true reflection of Pakistani politics but this time around, the political campaign was unprec-

edented in terms of polarisation, hatred, and loathing.

Never before had Pakistani politicians railed against one another with such abandon. Mudslinging and accusations of being anti-state remained the hallmark of the election campaign this time.

The three main political parties based in Pakistan took these elections as a matter of political life and death for them given the high political temperature in Pakistan. The respective party interests led the election campaign and sloganeering. There was little for the three political parties to establish that they were contesting the AJK elections for the Kashmir cause.

None of the contesting political parties presented any substantive socioeconomic programme for the development of AJK that could be publicly debated or discussed. All focused on just point-scoring with public-appealing slogans to do this or that once their party secures victory besides bashing of the political opponents.

It seemed that the three main political parties wanted to gain specific political



advantages out of the AJK elections and had little to do with the Kashmir cause and betterment of the AJK. The debate on the Kashmir issue remained so polarized during the election campaign and it would be fair to say that whatever was said was detrimental to the Kashmir cause.

The reason for the highly polarising election campaign in the AJK was the heated political atmosphere in Pakistan. The formation of the PDM in the recent months, scuffle between the parliamentarians in the parliament house and the statements of political leaders against one another led to a charged political atmosphere.

AJK elections or politics have little to no impact on the Pakistani politics. On the contrary, Pakistani political trends reflect in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani politics overshadows the AJK politics. Still, top Pakistani political parties want to be seen doing well in AJK polls for the sake of appearances and this race was no different.

For PPP, it was a chance to dispel the impression that PPP is shrinking at a rapid rate. It has shrunk to a regional party. To some extent it succeeded in its objective by emerging as the largest opposition party in AJK by securing 11 seats. The PPP also won the race for the main opposition party against the PML-N.

For PTI, defeat in the AJK elections at a time when they are in power in the Centre would mean they have really lost peoples' confidence in their policies. It was a good time for Imran Khan's party to counter the impression that the party's performance in terms of economy and 'failure' to control the rising inflation has caused irreparable dent to the ruling party. The electoral victory in the 25<sup>th</sup> July elections may set the pace for the PTI to secure another term at the Centre.

For the PML-N, it was a good chance to continue their winning spree. It was a trial of the 'Vote ko izzat do' mantra as Maryam Nawaz led the election campaign in the AJK. The party is passing through testing times with its top leadership out of the political arena. An electoral victory at this point could have strengthened the impression of stand-in leadership having filled the leadership vacuum.

Now that the PTI has won the AJK elections and is set to form its government there, it is hoped that the relationship between the Centre and AJK remains smooth in the coming days. There would be no hostility, no anti-Centre statements from the AJK. There would be no more anti-ruling party voices from the AJK. And the most important, the ruling party in the Centre can pass legislation through the AJK assembly as required under the changing political scenario in the region.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's aggressive stand on India's scrapping of autonomy to the Indian Illegally-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 would get stronger. Pakistan's Kashmir policy would get a new direction given the trust posed by the Kashmir people in the leadership of Imran Khan.

Pakistan's principled stand is that the accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir to India was neither final nor legal and the people of the state should decide through a plebiscite whether it should accede to India or Pakistan.

Successive governments in Pakistan have consistently reiterated this principled and Prime Minister Khan was speaking in this tradition when he said on the campaign trail in AJK: "When the people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir decide to accede to Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and the State shall be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of that State."

Khan put it aptly again when he tweeted on the very next day of the AJK general elections : "I want to congratulate all our successful candidates. As ambassador for Kashmir I will continue to raise my voice on all international forums incl UN to ensure the int community fulfills its commitment of self determination to the Kashmiri ppl through a UN-sponsored plebiscite."





# The Many Dilemmas of PML-N

*AJK polls may just be the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back – the camel in this case being Nawaz Sharif's maximalist position.*

By Ahmad Waleed

Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) is faced with multiple dilemmas at this juncture of history – but the foremost of them are two: Confrontational politics or appeasement policy? And who is in charge – Maryam Nawaz or Shahbaz Sharif?

The fissures within the party are widening after the 11-party alliance Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) crumbled. With exceptions of a couple of leaders in the party, nobody in the party ranks is ready to carry the burden of anti-establishment narrative of PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif.

The election results of Azad Jammu and Kashmir have left many points to ponder if the party has gained anything for being a bit 'soft' on the powers-that-be. Apparently, softening stance on establishment didn't work either. The party is in a fix.

A key part of the problem is that PML-N alone may not be able to mobilise street power to stage huge protests against the government for its failure in reigning in the galloping prices of daily-use items.

The younger brother Shahbaz Sharif is the party head and the opposition leader in the National Assembly. He is supposed to be at the forefront confronting the government on all fronts. On the contrary, more often Shahbaz Sharif goes into hiding and remains silent on key issues where an opposition leader is expected to raise his voice on the anti-people policies of the government.

Perhaps, his policy of appeasement is restricting him from coming out in the open and hitting the government and its backers from all sides. His son Hamza Shahbaz is also toeing his father's line. Hamza is the opposition leader in the provincial assembly of the largest province of the country. On the floor of the house, he has hardly given a tough time to the ruling PTI.

Even in Punjab, the party has failed to cash in on the impending issues like



sky-rocketing prices of essential commodities, resumption of load-shedding during the hottest time of summer, joblessness, etc. The father-son duo resurface for a brief period and do a media talk criticising the government and then again choose to keep a low profile.

The father has a very clear approach towards the establishment and he has expressed it very openly. He is a great proponent of a great dialogue to solve the country's problems which have hampered the progress. But there is no buyer, it seems.

Imran Khan and his backers have shown little interest in what Shahbaz Sharif has been saying for the last couple of years. Even then, he believes he can negotiate with the establishment. However, his political gestures, many hawks of the party think, will not earn goodwill among the voters

On the other hand, while Shahbaz Sharif remained out of picture, Maryam Nawaz single-handedly led the election campaign in AJK. However, during the recent AJK Elections, Maryam seemed to have shifted her criticism from what she calls 'selectors' to Khan in most of her speeches.

The election results are here and party stood at number three after PTI and PPP.

There are reports of growing concerns among the leadership who blame Maryam

for the poor showing in AJK election. They think party leaders must have been consulted to devise a comprehensive strategy to contest the elections instead of going solo and making aggressive speeches.

Insiders say now Maryam does not consult her uncle Shahbaz Sharif on many issues pertaining to the future course of action of the party. Although her approach against the Army has become less aggressive, she is considered the only leader within the party who is following the narrative of her father.

Many in the party believe Maryam has taken the full control of the party affairs and her hawkish style of politics has been accepted by a good number of party leaders if not all. The party is happy that at the federal level Imran Khan is making 'blunders' while in Punjab a weak chief minister like Usman Buzdar has failed to make his mark.

Some believe merely hard-hitting speeches cannot deliver and will lose value with the passage of time until a mass movement is launched against the present hybrid regime for bringing the country to a level where the poor has been crushed under the mountain of problems.

The heady days of mammoth PDM protest rallies are history now. The opposition must find a new platform to unite, which seems a far-fetched dream for now.



# No US Deal for Bilawal Bhutto

*No deal for now – and here's why it couldn't be otherwise.*



By Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri

The speculation centred on Bilawal Bhutto's much-discussed private visit to the United States came to nothing after all.

The charismatic young Chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) sojourned there for a week on private business – nothing about which is known. This allowed speculators ample opportunity to invent a reason for the visit, and they did not disappoint.

Also touring the United States those days were Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah and Health Minister Dr Azra Fazal Pechuho, an aunt of Bilawal. This provided further fuel to speculators, who purported that the PPP chief was out to lobby the powers-that-be in Washington for a role in the next government “at the pleasure of White House”.

This scribe tried to speak to many PPP leaders for their take on the situation but none had much to say. Sindh Minister for Local Government and spokesperson Syed Nasir Hussain Shah was unreachable despite repeated reminders.

However, all of them were confident that Bilawal is “not out to beg for power”, and termed the theory as “insecure thinking of the selected government.” The most emphatic rejoinder came from PPP-USA President Khalid Awan, who categorically said: “[Bilawal] Bhutto will not be travelling to Washington during his visit.”

But none of this mattered to the ruling PTI, who rolled out the big guns to target Bhutto. He was mocked for carrying a “curriculum-vitae” to the White House. The foremost of the fire-breathers was Special Assistant to the Prime Minister Shahbaz Gill, who apparently is a disciple of the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels.

Many others followed the stalwarts' lead, reflecting poorly on the government's stability – as if Prime Minister Imran Khan's days were numbered, if only Bilawal could tap the right connections in the United States.

These were the same PTI big-mouths who very recently had dubbed Bilawal and his party as a spent force. PM Khan's media management has always been a disaster,

and who needs enemies, when you have disgusting friends like these!

In any case, it has been debated in the Pakistani establishment for quite some time that state should not place all its eggs in one basket. This notion gained currency especially as Khan used the words “absolutely not” to an American journalist's query if Pakistan would “allow US to have bases for operations inside Afghanistan”.

The proponents of the doctrine argued that while President Joe Biden was reviewing his South Asia policy, Pakistan's interests would be best served if we could pitch an alternate leadership. This, plus the known fact that the PPP has always maintained good connections with the establishment, added up like two and two to make four: Bilawal was the alternate leader being pitched by Pakistan.

Whether or not Bilawal's trip was related to this pitch, it proved to be a googly on the domestic turf. Well-placed sources contacted by this writer said that the message of Bilawal emerging as the candidate for Prime Ministership at the





behest of Washington was meant to cow down the NAB, FIA and other prosecuting authorities going after the PPP leadership.

The need for such a signal is self-evident: The PPP is said to be increasingly worried about maintaining status quo in Sindh, its home province. Its vote bank is shrinking, and the unpopular government in Sindh has torn to pieces whatever credibility the Bhutto name commanded. Sindh and Karachi are two mutually exclusive fiefdoms of power, bereft of any coordination whatsoever.

Also, trials in the courts of law against PPP leaders on charges of financial impropriety are nearing conclusion. Legal pundits are said to have strongly advised the leadership to go for out of court settlement. What that means is anybody's guess. Under the new paradigm, the FIA now heads all prosecutions while the NAB looms large in the background as the watchdog.

Reports say the magnitude of the alleged corruption by the PPP top brass is to the tune of USD 33 billion, almost one-third of Pakistan's total international debt. The NAB has already recovered around PKR 35 billion from various proxy (Benami) accounts of the leadership; whereas hundreds of similar cash-stacked accounts are under the spyglass.

Last but not least, what sends shivers down the spine of the Sindh government is the

simple question now raised by the federal and prosecuting authorities: Where have the PKR 10,000 billion (approximately) of federal grants to Sindh gone? The Sindh chief minister, the provincial finance wizard during the yesteryears, is prima facie suspect; and from him the money trail leads upward.

Many say Bilawal and his illustrious father, have a plan of action. On one hand they are busy making inroads with the powers-that-be in Rawalpindi, evident from their softies delivered at military-drawn meetings in GHQ and Parliament House; and on the other, they also tend to read between the lines as Biden administration ignores Imran Khan.

The PPP is not new to lobbying. Rather, it has effective channels and they have worked too, previously. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had confidence in lobbyists to an extent that she wrote an email to one of her buddy lobbyists, making him a point man if she was assassinated.

Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in her book, admitted that on Benazir's behest "she initiated and facilitated a deal between President Pervaiz Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto for protection of US interests." Likewise, the father-and-son duo sought a 'Breakfast with Obama' invitation after reportedly paying a hefty amount to a lobbyist. As President Biden was sworn-in, it was said that Zardari

had been invited to the oath-taking ceremony but could not attend because of the novel coronavirus.

Even now the luck isn't on the PPP side. The regional paradigm changed well before Bilawal flew into the US. This is how God disposes! Taliban are knocking on the doors of Kabul. An civil war is likely imminent in Afghanistan. There are reports of the Doha Deal too becoming a victim of changed circumstances. The regime in Kabul is unrelenting and has launched an anti-Pakistan campaign. Slogans and national songs once played against the Soviets are being improvised to attack Pakistan.

This is where Pakistan has once again become indispensable for the United States. Whoever ignores Pakistan's influence or its geo-strategic vitality in the region does so at its own peril.

Washington will have to work with the leadership in Pakistan willy-nilly in an attempt to stabilise Afghanistan. While the civil-military leadership is on one page. Prime Minister Imran Khan has built a national narrative on Afghanistan and the US, and has gained high moral ground. The Army stands with him. This is why Bilawal was unlikely to find eager ears in Washington.

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# Does Pakistan Really Need Electoral Reform?

*Our democracy has its faults, but EVMs don't begin to solve the most fundamental of them: Our all-round failure to play by the book.*



By Khalid Wasim

The year 2021 can rightly be called a year of elections as the country witnessed four major electoral exercises in the last seven months, and that too, amid talks about electoral reform.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) used their constitutional and democratic right to elect their representatives for the next five years while the country got a new Senate with the election of half of its members in March.

Besides, by-elections were also held to nine seats of the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies in all the four provinces – most of them were held on the same day.

The outcome of all these elections remained as per expectation. Being the ruling party at the federal level, the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) emerged made gains in the Senate as well as in GB and AJK, the

two regions with special constitutional status. There were few upsets in the by-elections but these were also expected due to the regional and local political dynamics.

Interestingly, all the three major parties – the PPP, the PML-N and the PTI – accused one other of rigging and influencing the outcome of the elections in the constituency they lost. All the results of the Senate elections were as per expectations, except the defeat of PTI's Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh at the hands of PPP's Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani on the general seat from Islamabad.

The PTI leaders, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, got so upset over this lone defeat that they started lashing out at the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) for what they called its failure to prevent the alleged use of money in Gilani's election.

In his televised address to the nation, Khan went so far as to call for the resignations of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC)

and all the four Members of the Commission. The main reason for their anger was the opposition by the ECP to the plea taken by the government in the presidential reference before the Supreme Court, seeking open balloting for Senate.

This is the backdrop against which the political parties are set to begin consultations on the much-talked about electoral reform in the country.

The opposition parties, after initial reluctance, have forwarded the names of their representatives to the National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser for yet-to-be notified Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform.

The Senate Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs headed by PPP's Taj Haider has already started deliberations on the controversial bills amending the Elections Act 2017 which the government had bulldozed through the National Assembly.





The main emphasis of the PTI is on the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs), allowing dual nationals to contest the parliamentary elections, and providing overseas Pakistanis an opportunity to cast their votes during the general elections.

All three measures are facing opposition not only from the opposition parties but also from the ECP.

On 10 June, the government literally bulldozed legislation in the National Assembly by getting 21 laws approved, including the controversial Elections (Amendment) Bill 2020, after suspending the rules of business amid the opposition's strong protest and boycott.

Major changes proposed in the bill include more financial autonomy to the ECP; appeal to the court by any aggrieved person on delimitation lists; provision to challenge appointment of polling officers/staff within 15 days of appointment; increase in nomination fee for the candidates; delimitation on the basis of population, instead of registered voters; vacation of seats of returned candidate if oath is not taken within 60 days of the first sitting of the assembly; voting right for overseas Pakistanis; and the use of EVMs in elections.

Before this, the government had already promulgated a presidential ordinance in May authorising and binding the ECP to procure EVMs and to enable the overseas Pakistanis to exercise their right to vote while staying in their country of residence in the next general elections.

Defending the government's move, Federal Minister for Information Fawad Chaudhry reportedly explained the government had done it to provide the ECP ample lead time to make arrangements for the use of EVMs and for enabling the overseas Pakistanis to cast their votes in the next general elections.

He recalled that the ECP before the 2018 elections had argued that it had not been given sufficient lead time to make such arrangements. Therefore, he said, the ECP was being provided an opportunity to seek the assistance of Nadra or any other agency for making the arrangements before time.

He disclosed that a Spanish firm had

already been engaged for providing technical assistance to the ECP to facilitate voting by overseas Pakistanis. The minister claimed that the ECP was on board on both the issues.

However, the claim was rejected by the ECP. Daily Dawn quoted an unnamed ECP official to have stated that the Commission was not part of the meetings chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan on the use of technology in the elections.

He also claimed that the PM had been shown a nine-year-old "lab-produced voting machine" that the ECP had already rejected at the outset for lacking features of international standards. The ECP official



said internet voting was not in use anywhere across the world, except in Estonia, where 175,000 out of total 900,000 voters opted for it.

The official said there were around nine million holders of National Identity Card for Overseas Pakistanis (NICOP) of over 18 years in the world, with 1.8 million of them living in Saudi Arabia alone, followed by around 1.5 million in the UAE. The names of these nine million overseas Pakistanis are also on the electoral rolls.

He warned that employing the technologies in haste could be counter-productive and compromise quality of polls. He claimed that international and local NGOs, too, had endorsed ECP's stance on the record.

The ECP has formally conveyed its concerns to the government in writing over the controversial bill and raised objection against 45 out of the total 72 proposed amendments. It has termed 15 amendments repugnant to the Constitution and five inconsistent with the act itself, in addition to opposing 17 more on administrative grounds.

The ECP also has objections over the move to give Nadra a role in the preparation and revision of electoral rolls, terming this in conflict with the Constitution under which the registration of voters the exclusive prerogative of the ECP.

The PTI had been pursuing the issues of EVMs and voting facility for the overseas Pakistanis since the 2013 general elections. The PTI members in the previous parliamentary committee on electoral reform, under the then Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, had raised the issues on multiple occasions.

President Arif Alvi was also a member of the committee at that time and was in the forefront in convincing the ECP for the use of the EVMs and the voting by overseas Pakistanis.

The ECP conducted a mock exercise in 2015 in four countries and later commission officials informed the committee that the mock exercise carried out in Saudi Arabia, the UK, the US and the UAE had failed for a number of technical and legal reasons.

Addressing a news conference on 3 May, Adviser on Parliamentary Affairs Babar Awan said the EVMs had already been in use in the Lahore High Court Bar Association elections for four years. Similarly, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry claims that hacking of the EVMs is not possible as these machines will not be connected to the internet and be installed standalone.

Prime Minister Imran Khan had directly invited the opposition to "sit together" with the government and discuss the use of EVMs to "reclaim the credibility of elections".

"Unfortunately, no substantive [electoral] reforms were put in place," the prime minister had said in a series of tweets.



“Technology and use of EVMs are the only answer to reclaim credibility of elections. I invite the opposition to sit with us and select from EVM models we have available to restore our elections credibility.

“In NA-249 by-election, despite a low turnout, all parties are crying foul and claiming rigging. Same happened in Daska recently and in Senate elections. In fact, apart from 1970 election, in every election claims of rigging have raised doubts over credibility of election results”.

The Prime Minister also gave the example of last year’s presidential elections in the US, saying nobody paid heed to rigging allegations by former president Donald Trump only because of the use of technology in the process.

The opposition, on the other hand, is not ready to give any consideration to the EVM proposal. PML-N’s supremo Nawaz Sharif through a tweet himself opposed the idea when he said the issue was not of electoral reform, but the sanctity of vote.

“Everyone knows who is behind desecration of votes and stealing the mandate of the people. Unless this issue is resolved, EVMs will be useless like the RTS,” said Mr Sharif, demanding that the practice of changing the results through rigging and coercion must come to an end.

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari once questioned as to what guarantee the government had that the elections would not be hacked by India or RAW through EVMs.

Similarly, PPP Secretary General Farhatullah Babar is of the view that “the use of the EVMs is a non-starter in Pakistani context”. In a statement, he had said that a numerous studies had shown that it was “susceptible to manipulation and liable to be used for electoral fraud”.

“The computer-based system of voting requires computer literacy that is lacking in Pakistan. Even some of those countries which initially adopted it in some constituencies have discontinued it,” said Mr Babar.

Moreover, Mr Babar said, in a country where “state agencies switched on and off internet and social media platforms with impunity on the pretext of national security”, it was not easy to trust the EVMs. He said the slogan “We do not trust voting computers” that reportedly was first adopted in the Netherlands in 2006 was likely to become a rallying point in Pakistan also.

The PPP and the PML-N are of the view, and rightly so, that the use of EVMs will not work if the establishment does not agree

to distance itself from elections. Besides keeping the establishment out of politics, the parties are also required to adopt a democratic culture and learn to accept defeat when in order.

The PTI members cite examples of the countries like the US and India in support of their argument for the use of EVMs, but they forget that the elections in these countries are conducted under the sitting governments. Can Pakistan do it? Absolutely not.

Therefore, there is a need to change the mindset of the politicians and the nation as a whole as without it, no reforms or technology will work. Before the electoral reform, the country needs judicial reform. The failure of the judiciary in timely deciding election-related disputes is also one of the key failures of our democracy.

The time has come for the political leadership to sincerely focus on steps to empower the ECP in real terms and to ensure strict implementation of the existing laws, instead of making new ones. The recent elections held in the country have once again highlighted the real problem, i.e., the lack of implementation of the laws and the powerlessness of the Election Commission – issues that cannot be resolved through the use of EVMs.







Chaudhary Saqib Khan Chadhar, Candidate for chairman, Tehsil Bhowana PP96 District Chiniot, has joined Pakistan Muslim League (Q).

Under the leadership of Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain and Pervez Elahi, the country can progress fast. Performance of PML(Q) in the past is proof of this.

Developments during PML (Q) Government (2002-2007)

- Per capita income increased to \$925 from \$435.
- Revenue collection, which was at around Rs. 300 billion in 1999, crossed a record Rs. 1 trillion.
- Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), which hovered around Rs. 80 billion during the 1988-99 period, reached Rs. 520 billion.
- Remittances were at a record \$5.5 billion.
- Exports rose from \$9 billion to \$17 billion.
- Foreign Exchange reserves \$16 billion.



# Why the Taliban Hold the Key to Regional Peace

*A strong central authority in Afghanistan is essential to regional peace and stability.*



By Umer Farooq

A Pushtun dominated centralized state in Afghanistan serves Pakistan's strategic interests well—though. Pakistan's powerful security establishment has, of late, shown enough sophistication to make space, in its strategic thinking, for other ethnicities that form part of Afghan nation to join the Pushtuns in Kabul.

Pakistani military leaders, however, have displayed nervousness with regards to the possibility of increased violence in Afghanistan—which will have two adverse implications for Pakistani society. Firstly, it could lead to large scale displacement in Eastern and Southern Afghanistan leading to inflow of refugees in border areas of Pakistan.

Secondly, increased violence in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan could give a boost to the Pakistani militant groups, who the Pakistani military claims have been decimated by successive military operations, and who could now take a cue from Afghan

Taliban in unleashing a wave of violence on Pakistan's side of the border.

However, the post-US withdrawal in Afghanistan doesn't present a clear and neat strategic scenario for Pakistani security establishment. It is unlike the mid-1990s scenario when the Taliban military victories created euphoria in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. This time Taliban military advances could give Pakistan security planners a headache.

Taliban's military advances in Northern and Eastern Afghanistan, if they are not welcomed by regional players like Russia, Iran and China or if they fail to receive tacit approval of the regional players, the developing military situation inside Afghanistan could add to Pakistan's isolation at the international level.

True, it would be no different from the situation Pakistan faced in the mid-1990s at the time of Taliban's rise, but then, at that time, Pakistani

military establishment was not engaged in a campaign to attract Washington's support for its efforts to present the country as hub of regional connectivity.

There is a clear realization in Pakistan's foreign policy circles that the unilateral US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan indicates that Washington is no more fixated on terrorism related issues, which for all practical purposes mean dwindling strategic importance of Islamabad. Coupled with this is Islamabad's inability in sustaining the financial and political assistance from the country's chief patrons like oil rich Arab states, whose leadership no longer seems to be in a mood of supporting the so-called "Islamic causes" all over the world.

There are, however, weak signals emanating from regional capitals that Pakistani security establishment's "strategic assets"—as Afghan Taliban have often been referred to in international media—enjoy some support



among the regional countries like Russia, Iran and China.

During the peak of US presence in Afghanistan, the US intelligence reportedly presented Washington with the information that Iran and Russia both were providing weapons, intelligence support, and finances to Taliban for attacks on US forces inside Afghanistan.

As well, the Afghan Taliban, carried out operations against Daesh-affiliated groups in northern and eastern Afghanistan at the behest of Russians and Iranians in the period between 2014 and 2016, when there was a sudden rise in the profile of ISIS in Afghanistan.

Pakistani ISI even hosted the intelligence chiefs of Russia, Iran and China in Islamabad for a conference in July 2018 where it was agreed that the four intelligence services would coordinate their efforts against the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan.

Does this mean that Russia and Iran have a working relationship with Afghan Taliban? Does it also mean that for regional players the conservative Taliban are more acceptable than the radical ISIS and other Salafi groups which, according to reports, were emerging inside Afghanistan? No clear answers to these questions so far exist in the public realm.

Iran has welcomed the withdrawal of foreign troops and Russia has indicated willingness to use military force to protect its regional allies like Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Taliban are not mentioned as a threat in any of the Russian statements, though it is obvious that increased violence and instability will be disliked by these states.

A series of formal talks and visits of Afghan Taliban to regional capitals might have changed the image of the puritan militia. But its behaviour in the days to come will influence the policy these regional capitals will adopt towards Afghanistan. Most of the international experts predict a civil war likely in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan. What will make Afghan Taliban unacceptable to the regional players is its continued links with Al-Qaida.

In its 2020 report, the UN Taliban monitoring team said the Taliban still have strong ties with al-Qaeda. The Taliban provide al-Qaeda with protection in exchange for resources and training. Between two hundred and five hundred al-Qaeda fighters are believed to be in Afghanistan, although several of its leaders were killed.

The Taliban “regularly consulted” with al-Qaeda leaders during its negotiations with the United States, providing “guarantees that it would honour their historical

ties,” the UN monitor reported. Al-Qaida are affiliated with a large number of terror groups originating in Chinese Xinjiang and Central Asian States.

At the end of the day Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan will be strongly shaped by attitudes of regional players. Similarly Pakistani security establishment until recently was pitching the idea of Pakistan as a hub of regional connectivity to Washington. A civil war in Afghanistan will not be conducive to the success of this idea. Similarly too much reliance on Afghan Taliban, could utterly spoil the Pakistani move to project itself as connectivity hub, unless it can convince the Taliban to enter into a power sharing agreement with the Afghan government.

## International terror groups and Afghanistan’s neighboring states

There is a dreadful prediction in the western security experts forecast about what international terror groups like Al-Qaida, Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and ISIS could do in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan as the post-withdrawal Afghanistan is likely to plunge into a military chaos or anarchy in the coming days, weeks and months.



In what western intelligence officials, reportedly, are describing as spoiler's violence, the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan could use the remnants of international terror groups still hiding in different parts of Afghanistan to settle their scores with their rival countries.

In this regard, western intelligence is specifically mentioning the names of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan as countries whose security apparatus or intelligence agencies could settle old scores by using remnants of terror groups to carry out violence in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan.

American officials and leaders have variously described Al-Qaida in Afghanistan as a shadow of its former self or too weak to carry out terror attacks in mainland America. ISIS saw its peak in Afghanistan in the period between 2014 and 2016 when there was a sudden rise in its profile and groups and bands from Afghan Taliban started defecting their mother organization to join ISIS. ISIS in Afghanistan in recent days has also seen a declining profile as the groups and bands of former Taliban defect ISIS to re-join their mother organization.

According to several reports based on Western intelligence analysis of the situation: "Key members of al-Qaeda's central leadership continue to see Afghanistan as a strategically important base, despite the availability of more permissive potential bases and the considerable threat of U.S. counterterrorism activity. This is most obvious in the case of al-Qaeda chief al-Zawahiri.

"According to the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) Chief Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, the U.S. military assesses that al-Zawahiri is in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's once heir apparent Hamza bin Laden, the son of the movement's founder Osama bin Laden, also appears to have remained in Afghanistan before being killed in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. While much of al-Qaeda's central leadership appears to be outside Afghanistan, perhaps in Iran or Syria's Idlib Province, some al-Qaeda central leaders remain in Afghanistan".

The story of ISIS in Afghanistan is also one of persistent decline. A report based on western intelligence experts reads: "After a dramatic rise in Afghanistan from 2014 to 2016 with membership running into the thousands, it has been in steady decline.

"Over the last two years, the group has suffered back-to-back losses against U.S. and Afghan military operations in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar. These losses have been compounded by the Afghan Taliban's separate military campaign against the Islamic State.

"The Islamic State is reported to command around 2,200 fighters, but its overall trajectory is marred by defections of leaders and rank-and-file, loss of territory, and fragmentation of battlefield allies".



The spoiler's violence could take the form of terror attacks inside Pakistani territory and if Western intelligence experts are to be believed Indian intelligence could be instrumental in using remnants of terror groups against Pakistan.

This doesn't seem far-fetched when seen in the light of Pakistani allegations that India intelligence has penetrated Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and was instrumental in pushing the militant group to carry out terror attacks inside heartland Pakistan. There are countless reports indicating the webs that link TTP with international terror groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Similarly, this spoiler's violence could take the form of Pakistan using terror groups to carry out terror attacks against Indian interests in Afghanistan. Nothing seems far-fetched if the recent past is any guide—Indians using military and intelligence assets in Afghanistan against Pakistan is a well known and well documented reality. Similarly, the bitter memories of the US Administration holding Pakistani intelligence responsible for the terror attack on Indian Embassy in Kabul are still fresh in national as well as international memory.

This is another aspect of Afghan conflict which festers like a bleeding wound—Pakistani and Indian security apparatuses don't have any settled "rules of the game" to protect their interests in Afghanistan.

Pakistanis are nervous Washington wants to give India a disproportionate role in post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Indians are nervous that their bitter enemies in the shape of Taliban could disrupt their economic interests in Afghanistan. Spoiler's violence is not at all a far-fetched threat in this scenario.

Spoiler's violence has antecedents in Afghanistan. Consider, for instance, how US administration accused Russia and Iran of supporting Afghan Taliban to carry out violence against American troops in Afghanistan. Russian indirectly accused Americans of bringing and settling ISIS fighters in Northern Afghanistan close to the borders of Central Asian states, which Russia considers within its security parameters. The remnants of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan are hosting terror groups which originated in Central Asian societies and which have been engaged in military conflict with the Central Asian governments.

Chinese are no less concerned about the developments in Afghanistan: They know that the Chinese separatist elements are in alliance with ISIS, Taliban, and Al-Qaida. Some of these Chinese separatist elements are in alliance with Pakistani Taliban and were being hosted by the latter until recently. So the fears of spoiler's violence reaching Chinese territory are real.

A centralized Afghan state is absolutely necessary to control this threat. The international community must ensure that the regional countries don't play dirty and don't try to push forward their own proxies in Afghan power struggle.



# Taliban 2.0: Evolution?

*Siege instead of shock and awe is about all there is to distinguish the new Taliban from the old at this point.*



By Haq Nawaz Khan

While they admittedly control almost half of all Afghan districts by now, the Taliban have yet to lay claim to one of the country's 34 provincial capitals – something experts say is a dead giveaway of their strategy for extending their control over the whole of the country: This time around, they may be trying to take Kabul – and provincial capitals – not by storm but by encirclement.

This may be one of the ways the Taliban intend to justify the hype about the student militia having changed over time and learnt a thing or two from their days down and out. Another indication they are mindful not to alienate the global audiences is that this time around, the puritanical militia is not bent on beating righteousness into the populace – not for now at least.

In a sign their siege strategy may be working, reports suggest that supply lines between the ANA headquarters and district contingents have been cut off in many areas.

"Only military planes can fly in some provinces as ground access is cut off", an Afghan citizen told The Truth International (TTI) via phone from the Helmand province. "People are facing problems to move among the fallen districts".

"Except for one district out of 14, all have been taken by the Taliban", he added. "Almost 90 percent of the [Helmand] province is under the Taliban and the situation is quite similar in the nearby provinces like Kandahar, Nimruz, Uruzgan and Zabul".

The Afghan forces in the lost districts were left with no choice but to either surrender or flee the districts. In some provinces, the government writ is restricted to a few miles around the provincial capital cities.

The Afghan speaking from Helmand said "Unlike the past, the Taliban have not started implementing their strict laws, but only asking the local people to grow beards, and not to shave."

Other reports say Taliban have ordered suspended telephone, internet and mobile phone services. "No one can be seen as using a mobile in public," resident of the Kandahar province said.

There have been no reports of large scale killings by either Taliban or the ANA forces, although some isolated incidents of former members of military or police being killed or tortured have been reported. "Taliban are interrogating some former military and police personnel about their weapons depots," the resident of Helmand stated.

## Taliban unruffled by US airstrikes

The recent airstrikes in the southern provinces of the country by the US fighter jets opened a new debate whether the US will continue providing aerial support to the Afghan forces after pulling out of its troops or what it means?

Some analysts see it as a strong signal by the US to the Taliban that their troops are still in Afghanistan, and not fully withdrawn. Taliban have not strongly reacted to the airstrikes or use any 'threatening statement' but just a condemnation.

Professor Ramish Salemi, a political analyst in Kabul, shared his views on the airstrikes, "Taliban will not take these airstrikes seriously at least at this moment. So the question is, will the US keep up airstrikes or not."

"The US airstrikes in Kandahar show they are signalling the Taliban that they are still in Afghanistan, and their troops are not out of Afghanistan yet. They are giving the signals to the Taliban that they do not have the free run of the country just yet."

"Taliban advances are not in the interest of the US strategic position, as they are not

totally out of Afghanistan”, Mr Salemiad-ded. “This is a signal for the US and NATO troops presence in Afghanistan, and not there to support the Afghan government”.

## Afghan population moving to cities

Meanwhile, reports coming in from various parts of Afghanistan suggest large numbers of Afghans are being displaced by Taliban advances whether directly or indirectly because of disrupted supplies and the atmosphere of fear created by the prospect of their return.

This latest crisis sent worrisome signals across the world. The United High Commission for Refugees or UNHCR has recently stated that some 270,000 Afghans have been internally displaced due to the escalation of violence.

The neighbouring countries of Afghanistan have also been put on high alert of possible fallout. Pakistan and Iran have already been hosting millions of Afghan refugees for the last 4 decades. This could further bring their economies under pressure.

Afghans say some families from the war zones have already moved with necessary belongings towards the urban centres.

“My relatives have fled their native districts as they were facing food scarcity and poor law and order situation”, one resident from Kabul told TTI on the condition of anonymity as she is not allowed to speak to media.

“They came in the wearing clothes, and have rented houses in the outskirts of the capital city. One of my cousins went back to her hometown to collect some daily used items, but was shocked to see the empty streets and dried plants in her home”.

The common Afghans are confused and running for their safety from the violence hit districts to the relatively peaceful urban neighbourhood.

Professor Salemi stated, “Life under the Taliban is quite tense and people are fleeing the areas, fallen to the Taliban. People fled from the districts where intense fighting is going on, like from Kandahar, Farah and other provinces.

“People are running away from Taliban controlled territories, and Taliban have not

taken steps to take cities with the people. People are neither with the Taliban nor the Kabul government. They are fed up with the prevailing security conditions. The people are preferring to move to the Afghan government’s territories, which is becoming smaller and smaller day by day.”

A former civil servant and one-time Afghan ambassador to Pakistan Rustom Shah Mohmand in a television interview has said Pakistan stands to benefit the most if there is lasting peace in Afghanistan, but is likely to be the worst hit of the neighbours if the crisis deepens.

## Prospects for intra-Afghan peace

But there is some scepticism on the current situation of Afghanistan. Some analysts are not optimistic of the outcome of the ongoing peace talks. Some criticize Kabul for its unclear policy, while others say Taliban are not serious in talks but wait and see till the complete withdrawal of foreign forces.



A US based South Asia Security analyst Dr Asfandiyar Mir told TTI in an interview, “My understanding is that the Taliban are not engaging meaningfully and rebuffing both US and regional offers of power-sharing arrangements, which give them a major stake.”

“At the Tehran meeting some weeks ago, the Taliban leadership had put forward some firm proposals, which republic negotiators were keen on exploring further but in the more recent meeting at Doha, they backtracked from the progress in the Tehran track”

He said, “For now, it looks like the Taliban will engage in the peace process not to reach a power-sharing agreement but to probe for maximum concessions from the

republic while keeping up the pressure on the battlefield.”

The Taliban have a multifaceted strategy to win against the Kabul administration in the prevailing fluid situation. Taliban have been assuring the world of their commitments to have all sides agree to a peaceful settlement of the conflict, and not to allow anyone to use the Afghan soil against the US or any other country.

But on the other side, Taliban have launched aggressive military campaign across the country by taking over districts and key routes to build pressure on the Kabul government to fall or give a major share in the future political set up.

Dr Asfandiyar Mir said, “Since its campaign in the north and south, and capture of major border crossings like Spin Boldak and Qala e Islam, the Afghan Taliban is putting enormous pressure on the Afghan government.

“One interpretation of recent events is that the Taliban are trying to work around a

strategy of a violent military takeover and hoping to ramp up military and political pressure to induce a collapse of the republic.

“Yet my sense is that this approach may not be sustainable as the current campaign remains costly for the Taliban. In the last quarter, the Taliban suffered very heavy losses, especially in the south of the country.

“The Taliban are also struggling to govern some of the areas they have captured. In addition, for now, the Afghan military remains reasonably cohesive and won’t fold easily in case of a major Taliban push against provincial capitals.

“All of this is to say that the Taliban strategy remains a long shot and Afghanistan is poised to experience serious fighting in the coming months”.



# Crystal Gazing for the Future of Afghanistan

*High time the Afghan rivals started to look inwards in search of solutions for their mutual problems.*

By Syed Fakhar Kakakhel

Clouds of uncertainty are hovering over Afghanistan amid a complete US withdrawal and the Taliban marching towards capital cities, while the current regime is cursing Pakistan, having no idea where their own country is heading in the next couple of months.

Pakistan actually tried its level best to back any peaceful political settlement before the West left the Afghan theater of war. The situation now is that the Americans and their allies are evacuating Afghanistan. The Afghan government believes that the Taliban cannot harm them unless Pakistan backs them. In such cases, they forget that even their longest border is with Pakistan.

The problem with Afghanistan seems to be that they have always tried to find both problems and its solutions outside Afghanistan. Recently Afghan President Dr Ashraf Ghani tweeted about US support after a phone call with President Biden "We discussed the evolving but continuing relationship between the two countries. President Biden reassured me that support for the ANDSF will continue. We have confidence that they will protect & defend Afghanistan".

Historians in the region are familiar with the context in which Russia arrived and will confirm that Afghanistan was previously run by Russia and it was Russia which changed governments in Afghanistan. At that time, Pakistan had no role. When Russia came, Pakistan felt threatened for itself and then the whole world stood with Pakistan against Russia under the strategy of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.'

The problem is still not as simple as the Afghan government or analysts sitting outside the Afghanistan think. The Afghan government should think about what is happening in the region, how the Taliban is being welcomed by Iran, once the student militia's staunchest opponent; Russia, which was once at the receiving end of the Afghan jihad; and China, which has a simmering Sinkiang bordering Afghanistan.

The US has made an agreement with the Taliban but Pakistan has not. In that sense, the Afghan government's most effective grievance should be with the United States and its allies, not Pakistan. The provocative statements of the Afghan government are turning the Pakistani public opinion against the Afghan government and the Afghan

refugees within Pakistan. Afghan refugees already in Pakistan and any who arrive in the future will suffer the consequences.

Pakistan's Advisor on National Security Moeed Yusuf has already expressed concerns over the situation in Afghanistan. "Situation is extremely bad and out of Pakistan's control", he said. "I don't see the US offering a financial package to Afghanistan and in that case, only Pakistan can provide a trade route to the landlocked country".

The national security adviser also stressed that the UN Refugee Agency needed to set up camps for Afghan refugees.

As far as the Taliban's victories are concerned, they are also resorting to exaggeration and relying on propaganda. Afghanistan is no longer the Afghanistan of the old and neither are the Taliban. The Afghan Taliban have so far taken control of the border crossings of different countries as well as the suburbs of different districts, but have not yet moved to the cities.

The main reason, Taliban sources said, is that there are now large populations within the cities. They are home to businesses



worth billions of rupees. If they enter the cities using old-fashioned weapons, the public interest will be threatened and people will take up arms and go out to fight the Taliban, and public opinion too will turn against the Taliban.

That is why the Taliban are in no hurry. In this regard, the policy announced by Siraj Haqqani, the deputy commander of Taliban second only to their chief Hibatullah Akhund, is more to do with dialogue than fighting. In the likely scenario, the Taliban will try to cut off supplies by besieging cities. In this way, the people themselves will put pressure on the Kabul government to give up power.

Sources in Doha, Qatar, also said that the Afghan Taliban should minimize fighting and maximize their political gains. The Taliban also expressed readiness for a ceasefire during the Doha meeting, making it conditional on the release of their captives.

Taliban sources on the battlefield said that in the view of Taliban fighters, Kabul is of no importance and their eyes are on Kandahar instead. Kandahar was the real centre of Taliban power, the seat of Mullah Omar and the real capital of his caliphate. That is why the Taliban fighters have a romantic relationship with Kandahar, and if any city or province is to come under their control first, they want it to be Kandahar.

In 20 years, there is a new generation of Taliban on the battlefield who are equipped

with internet and modern technology. The Taliban leaders who were confined to Pakistani cities like Peshawar, Quetta or Karachi in the 1990s have now seen Moscow, Doha, Beijing, and Tehran. They held face to face meetings with the power circles of these countries.

The Taliban believe they have inflicted a military defeat on the United – and the government in Kabul insists this was made possible by Pakistani support for the insurgents. This is similar to what some people thought during the Afghan war that the Mujahidin and Pakistan defeated Russia. Many years later, Russia also realized how many powers were united against them.

The fray this time was no different, with many regional powers waging clandestine wars of their own against the United States and its allies. Taliban's newly public dealings with Iran, Russia, and China tell the story of long lasting ties under the rose. The problem with proxies is that it takes time to learn their reality. In fact, Afghanistan has been a stronghold of proxies since before the establishment of Pakistan.

It is still difficult for any power, including the Afghan partisans, to face the dilemma of what will happen to Afghanistan tomorrow. And this is not the first time. For a while during Russian the intervention in Afghanistan, night would bring news of a massacre, and in the morning someone new would rule.

Like other neighbours, Pakistan is under severe pressure. Despite Pakistan's reliance on CPEC and its relationship with China, Pakistan cannot afford a chaotic Afghanistan and our establishment has a clear view on this. This is probably the reason why Pakistan is showing restraint despite strong statements made by Kabul, because Islamabad has a clear vision for the future and wants an internal solution to the Afghan problem, which really is the only way to keep the Afghan conflict from spilling over the border into Pakistan.

In a situation where there is uncertainty and mistrust on all sides, another group is emerging. You can call it Wilayat-e-Khorasan or any other name, and it can take advantage of this situation. They will heat up the bloodbath by blaming the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government as the cause of chaos in Afghanistan.

In this regard, in the light of the instructions from Daesh, Wilayat-e-Khorasan has established its initial ranks, but they themselves are waiting to see where things go between the Afghan government and the Taliban. If it goes to war, that's fine, but if peace is established, there will be a movement like Daesh to challenge that peace. Readers will recall that the Taliban themselves started an armed movement in the 1990s against none other than the very mujahidin who fought against Russia.





# The Strange Case of Silsilah and Pak-Afghan Ties

*Investigators say Silsilah's original testimony about her abduction does not bear scrutiny – but that is no justification for the Interior Minister's impolitic media salvo.*

By Oroba Tasnim Siddiqui

The matter concerns the alleged abduction of Silsilah Alikhil, the daughter of the Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan Najib Alikhil.

As per reports on 16 July, Silsilah was kidnapped and held under duress for several hours by unknown assailants, leaving her with severe injuries and rope marks. It was reported that Silsilah was on her way home on Friday when she was allegedly kidnapped and severely tortured.

Pakistani authorities took the case in good faith and entered an investigation into the matter. However, according to recent reports, there is no reasonable evidence to suggest that the ambassador's daughter was abducted and held in captivity for several hours.

The investigation team is said to have scanned over 700 hours' worth of Safe City CCTV footage from across the town but were unable to find proof of her abduction.

From the picture pieced together by investigators, it appears that Silsilah voluntarily hired cab services throughout the city on that day and paid the requisite fare to each driver. Her claims of being held and forced inside the cab by a man already present have likewise been refuted by the drivers, who were arrested and interrogated in connection with the investigation.

This apparently provided the opening for Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed's unbecoming remarks. "There has been no kidnapping," he said speaking on Geo News programme Naya Pakistan. "I want to tell the entire nation, this is an international racket, an international conspiracy, this is the agenda of RAW".

The Minister termed the whole case a ploy to defame the country. "Pakistan will not back down from this case, even though there is a huge difference between her [claim] and our findings," Rasheed said.

While there is no denying the situation was more than a little iffy, one expects a cabinet



minister to be more responsible – and a seasoned politician of Sheikh Rasheed's stature to be more politic.

Equally important is the need to wake up the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to its responsibility in sorting out this matter. Pak-Afghan ties have been sensitive at the best of times. These days, they are fraught to say the least.

In the wake of the sudden withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan and the swiftly deteriorating condition of the state of Afghanistan, analysts say attempts to sabotage Pak-Afghan ties are to be expected.

It does not help that Afghanistan's Ashraf Ghani regime has pulled the Ambassador and diplomatic staff from Pakistan. Equally unhelpful is Ambassador Alikhil's refusal to cooperate with the Pakistani officials investigating the matter.

One hopes that better sense prevails sooner rather than later and Afghanistan wholeheartedly cooperates with the enquiry as well as restoring full-fledged diplomatic presence in Islamabad.

Pinning the blame on Pakistan's rocky security situation, the Afghan government has effectively crippled the investigation – with what appears to be deliberate intent to tarnish Pakistan's reputation abroad.

The authorities within Pakistan believe this is merely a teaser of what is coming forward once the withdrawal is complete. In this essence, it is important to mark our boundaries before the situation gets out of hand.

Under the circumstances, it is imperative for the authorities in Pakistan to ensure that this investigation gets to the bottom of the matter and its findings are made public so that no such incident occurs in the future.

There is no way to discount the findings of Pakistan Institute for Medical Sciences, who in its medical examination report confirmed there were indeed swelling and rope marks on Silsilah's wrists and ankles.

The report also said it appeared that Silsilah was held for over five hours and there was some swelling in the brain's rear occipital region, indicating blunt force trauma. The investigators must find out the truth and if the alleged kidnapping did indeed take place, all necessary measures must be undertaken to prevent a repeat of this kind of crime including strengthening of the security detail.

The need of the hour is for Pakistan to up its game against those working to tarnish the country's image internationally and to sour its ties with neighbors.



# Northern Areas A Haven on Earth in Pakistan

Northern Areas in Pakistan are full of mesmerizing and fascinating locations for the tourists. Every year more than 10 million people, locals and foreigners, visit northern areas especially Naran Kaghan, Hunza Valley, Naltar Valley, Fairy Meadows, Nathia Gali and Skardu Valley. In the summer season, thousands of Pakistanis rush to their favourite tourist spots in Northern Areas as a result of which every year we see crowded roads, streets, hotels and shops in these areas.

Millions of travelers from all around the world love to see the natural beauty in northern areas of Pakistan. Pakistan is listed amongst the best travel destinations in 2019 in the Forbes magazines. As it was the whole country listed for Best travel sites, here we have some of the most beautiful places to visit in northern areas of Pakistan.









# Ground Zero of Spiritual Wars: A Jewish Perspective

*Eschatology is the study of end times of human history.*

By Azmat Mumtaz Saqib

**A**brahamic religious, especially Jewish beliefs about end of human history impacts politics, diplomacy and within Israel, domestic policies. Middle East conflict, Jewish settlements in the occupied territories and fate of Jerusalem hinge upon ancient prophecies and how different sects of Jews interpret those prophecies.

Jewish beliefs originate from Tanakh, a canonical collection of Hebrew Scriptures, including Torah. End times predictions from Holy Scriptures give tidings that nation of Israel will dominate the earth at the end of Human history, under Moshiach (Jewish Messiah). Moshiach is still to come since Jews didn't accept Jesus as the messiah in 33 CE.

According to traditions, the Hebrew calendar started at the time of creation of humans, current Hebrew year (2020-21) is 5781. Jewish apocalyptic beliefs concentrate on one specific issue; the Moshiach and the messianic era will begin no later than their year 6000.

Jewish eschatology can be divided into four eras; Pre-messianic, Messianic, Resurrection and Olam Ha-ba (the world to come), the seven thousandth year.

Pre-messianic era can be compared to a pregnancy. Difficulties of Jewish diaspora are like pregnancy problems. As the coming of Moshiach gets closer so does the difficult times like birth pains. Hedonism, insolence, promiscuity, corruption, inflation, wars and lack of leadership will be commonplace under worldly rulers. Youth's attitude towards elders will be disgraceful. Common man's life will be miserable due to jacked-up commodity prices. Jews would not pay heed to Torah. Due to unending wars after 9/11 and Covid-19 virus impact, the whole world is in a mess and people's faith in the world systems has shaken. Jewish history of last millennium and wars on Israel bore heavy on the nation of Israel. The world is presently experiencing a destructive phase.



As the threshold of messianic era closes in, a renaissance for learning Torah and fondness of its practice are positive signs appearing among the Jews, Nations of the world are becoming friendly towards Jews and Israel. Without shedding an Israeli blood, through Gulf wars, regimes hostile to Jews have collapsed. Negotiators and peace keepers are helping nations to resolve centuries old conflicts, especially in Middle East. As if the world is getting close to a rebirth.

Ingathering of the exiled diaspora refers to the final return of Jews to Israel. This redemption will begin before the war of Gog and Magog and will not be complete until the defeat of Gog and Magog by Moshiach. Heralding the end of the Exile, Eliyahu (Elijah or Elias) will come to bring peace and unity among Jews. He will appear just before the arrival of Moshiach and facilitate the final redemption of Jews.

Gog, king of Magog (nations of north, Eastern Europe and central Asia) in coalition with Russia, Turkey, and Iran and according to some accounts North African nations will be poised to attack Jews of Israel. Gog Magog will be confronted by followers of Ishmael. Before this war, followers of Ishmael will instigate war against people of the north (some Jews indicate this to 9/11 attacks). European and northern nation (USA) will defeat the Middle Eastern nation (Gulf wars) and a

fourth region of Arabia (Afghanistan). Jewish eschatology anticipates the arrival of Moshiach soon. Messianic era will begin with his arrival.

Gog will eventually attack the land of Israel. Support will come from the lost tribe of Ben Joseph from east. Gog will kill Moshiach Ben Joseph, and also defeat the armies coming from far north (anticipated USA). People of Israel will be cornered and turn towards Moschiach. God will intervene and Jews under the leadership of Moshiach will defeat Gog and Magog. All empires of the world will crumble and God's authority will be introduced back to the world under the kingship of Moshiach.

Moshiach, belonging to the house of David will be a great scholar of Torah. He will motivate the Jews and the people of Israel to the study and practice of Torah. Jews believe that he will be an extraordinary human carrying God's divine spark, embodiment of spiritual perfection. His stature and honor will precede all the previous prophets. He will judge with righteousness and equity. A true king to the Jews and the world and bring all nations under God's rule, ending all wars in the world. Final redemption of the Jews to the land of Israel will take place. He will build the Temple, establish prayers and word of Yahweh (God) will spread from Jerusalem, whole world will pay heed to the word of



God. All the Jews who accept the Moshiah, including the dead will be resurrected in body and soul, immortality will be re-established and death will end.

From Redemption to last resurrections, messianic era will last for forty years. Righteous will be resurrected first and Jews with just circumcision will be resurrected last. Many Jews pay large sums to get buried on Mount Olive facing Eastern gate of the Temple Mount, so that when resurrected they are alongside the Moshiah when he enters the Temple.

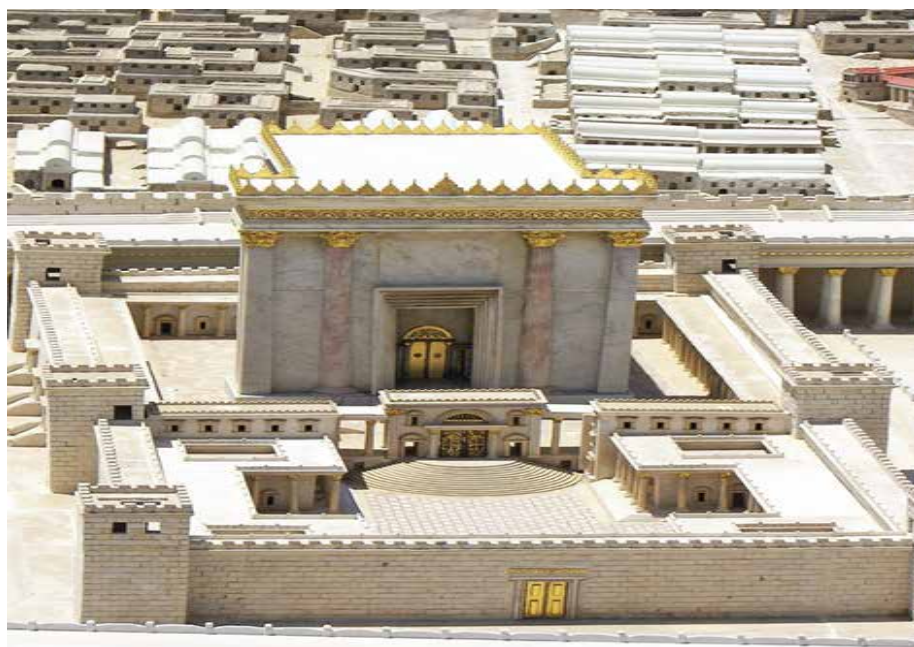
One of the main task of Moshiah will be to build the third Temple, if not built earlier. Traditional view is that commandment to build only applies when majority of Jews are living in the land of Israel. Then a prophet's presence is required to clarify Temple related religious matters and identify location of the Altar. To build the Temple, especially holiest of the holy, a high level of purity is required. Since every Jew who has come directly or indirectly in contact with a human corpse is impure. To get purified one needs to wash oneself with water mixed with ashes of a burnt Red heifer. Since 2015, the Temple Institute has produced several such heifers, but till date no heifer of ripe age has qualified. Then a special bluish color dye is needed for the garments of the holy men. Special vessels of holy temple including the holy Arc are lost and need excavation, but Muslim control of the Temple Mount prohibits this activity. Hence Moshiah is awaited for resolving such obstacles. Second view is that God will build the Temple and it will be sent miraculously from Heavens. Third view is that we don't have to wait for God's intervention or for the arrival of Moshiah, but the people of Israel will build the third Temple. Leading Torah scholars of every generation are competent to address the issues of the Torah law. They believe that they have solutions to all Temple related issues.

After Resurrection, a new perfect world will be created that will last for one thousand years, called Olam Ha-ba.

End of days Jewish beliefs came in the forefront of modern history due to Zionist movement, establishment of the state of Israel. Zionism was initially a socialist political movement and early leaders were anti-clerical. As the movement coalesced

into a modern state, however, rabbis, scholars, and statesmen gave rise to a vigorous debate that ranged from anti-Zionist fervor and vilification of the State of Israel to a new movement called Religious Zionism. The political conflict continues till date and how Jews relate to it depends largely on how the various sects within Judaism feel about End days.

Of the approximately 15 million Jews in the world today, majority of them can be categorized into four groups; Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed and Reconstructionist. Each of these groups have different perspective on prophecy, and within each group are numerous variations.



Orthodox Jews believe in the divine inspiration of both the written and oral law (Torah) and profess everyone to follow it strictly. They believe that Messiah will come and restore Israel. Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox sub-division) are against modern world and are hostile towards the State of Israel while modern Orthodox Jews are generally supportive of the State.

Reformed Judaism insists that religion must evolve with human progress and fully embrace modernity. Regarding the Torah, reformists view it more as a book of principles for good living and not a strict and mandatory document. Personal virtue for daily living and ideals of peace and love are considered more important than violence and racial undertones of apocalyptic literalism.

Conservative Judaism believes that the law was given by God and should be followed. Conservatives are friendly to modernism and believe that obedience to law can accommodate modern as well as traditional practices. Conservative Judaism is closely associated with Zionism. They believe that the state of Israel is central to the Jewish identity. Regarding Moshiah, some look for a personal Messiah while others anticipate a messianic age.

Reconstructionist Judaism teaches that Jews should be respectful to the ancient law, but it was not binding. It is friendly to modernism and insists that Judaism must evolve and adapt to human progress. They

do not believe in a futurist literal interpretation of the ancient prophecies at all. They embrace Zionism but also want "peoplehood" for the Jewish communities living in Diaspora. Their leader called for social justice within Israel, both for Jews and Non-Jews.

Jews in Israel and across the globe thus hold very diverse views on eschatology. These worldviews ingrained with regional politics effect the geopolitics in Knesset. Since Kadima, Likud and Labor parties have to net in several religious parties for coalition governments, these smaller parties exert disproportionate influence in Israeli politics. As western leaders strive to find credible solutions to the turmoil in the Middle East, it is clear that they must understand the role of religion and competing Jewish views about the end times.

# Return of the Boom-Bust Vicious Cycle

*With internal and external account balances in the red again, the rupee is under fresh pressure.*



By Mehtab Haider

Pakistan's much-hyped current account surplus has turned into deficit at the tail end of the year on account of a sharp increase in imports, The Truth International (TTI) can report. The country's imports bill gradually rose to cross USD 6 billion in June 2021.

The final quarter's rising exports brought fresh pressure on the exchange rate, causing the rupee to shed almost two rupees over the last couple of months.

The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) was using an exchange rate anchor for making imports expansive in order to suppress demands at a time when the central bank was keeping monetary policy unchanged at the level of 7 percent in post-COVID-19 pandemic with the intention to kick-start economic activities in the current fiscal year.

Pakistan's external account has so far been rescued by the highest ever remittances from expats in the range of over USD 29 billion that saved the country from a full-fledged crisis.

Amid Islamabad's inability to thrash out a deal with the IMF for the revival of the halted Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program, the economic managers are scrambling to build the country's foreign exchange reserves (FER) in order to create buffer stocks to tackle any challenging situation. In fact, this could be the key reason for Pakistan's keenness to issue Sukuk bonds.

Pakistan has persistently failed to boost exports in the face of a psychological barrier for exports of made-ups that have stagnated in the range of USD 20 to USD 25 billion over the last one decade.

Pakistan's current account deficit stood at USD 1.85 billion in fiscal year 2020-21 mainly because of jump in imports of POL products and food commodities. After POL import bill, the food commodities became the second largest item of the import bill as the food sector imports stood at over USD 7.2 billion after the country was forced to import wheat and sugar in bulk in addition to palm oil and pulses.

The deficit surfaced and the end of the year despite the current account balance remaining positive over the first 11 months of the fiscal (July 2020 to May 2021).

According to data of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), the current account deficit – the gap between foreign payments and income – stood at USD 4.45 billion in fiscal year 2019-20.

Exports of goods from the country rose by 13.73 percent from USD 22.5 billion in fiscal year 2019-20 to USD 25.3 billion in fiscal year 2020-21. On the other hand, imports of goods went up by 23 percent to USD 53.8 billion in fiscal year 2020-21 from the prior fiscal's USD 43.6 billion.

The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) in its latest Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting observed that after recording surpluses in the initial months, the current account deficit widened in the second half of FY21, reflecting the pick-up in domestic activity as well as seasonality in import payments, higher global commodity prices, and vaccine imports.



In addition, imports of capital goods rose, reflecting the improvement in the investment outlook of the economy. The rupee depreciated by around 4 percent over the last two months, largely in line with other emerging market currencies.

Pakistan's external position was at its strongest in several years. In line with SBP projections in March 2021, the current account deficit fell to only 0.6 percent of GDP. This is the lowest current account deficit in 10 years, supported by all-time high remittances and exports.

SBP's forex reserves rose by USD 5.2 billion during FY21 to close at over USD 17 billion or around 3 months of imports, a 4½ year high. Moreover, SBP's net external reserve buffers (gross reserves less forward liabilities) have risen by USD 14.1 billion since the beginning of FY20.

Now Pakistan has to repay over USD 36 billion over the medium term on account of loans and markup repayments to multilateral and bilateral creditors. Pakistani authorities are confident the IMF program would be revived as the sixth and seventh reviews under USD 6 billion EFF would be clubbed together come September.

If that does not happen, the exchange rate may come under pressures in the months

ahead because the rising imports bill upends the balance of payment position.

The SBP believes Pakistan's external financing needs of around USD 20 billion are expected to be more than fully met in FY22 with the contained current account deficit and healthy commercial, official, portfolio and FDI inflows.

As the government is eyeing a 5 percent GDP growth, there are expectations the economic activities would pick up pace in the months ahead. However, there are serious challenges confronting the national economy, not least because we are on the cusp of a fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, this time fueled by the Delta variant, which could potentially upset all macroeconomic projections.

Another serious challenge for Pakistan's economy is mounting inflationary pressures on account of rising POL and food prices in the international market. Despite being an agricultural economy, Pakistan has become a net importer of food commodities so increased demand may result in a surge in prices of food items.

The POL prices in international markets have also witnessed increasing trend so the government would be left with no other option but to hike oil prices in domestic

market so uptake in inflation is on cards. The depreciation of rupee against dollar will also increase inflationary pressures in the months ahead.

Now the government is all set to make last ditch effort for the revival of the IMF's halted EFF program and efforts are underway to convince the Fund staff to go easy on some of the program conditionalities.

Pakistan would like to avoid hiking of power and gas tariff as well as easing of the FBR's ambitious tax collection target of PKR 5829 billion without taking any additional revenue measures in shape of mini budget in fiscal year 2021-22.

If the Fund is not prepared to listen, Pakistan may have to swallow all the bitter pills to put the IMF program back on track and steer the economy out of crisis mode. Otherwise, the IMF program may be suspended and the government's compulsion to go on a spending spree ahead of the next general elections may further widen internal and external accounts deficits.

If that comes to pass, the next government will have to seek another IMF's adjustment program to stabilize the economy through adoption of tight monetary and fiscal policies.



# Pakistan & Russia Inch Closer to Rekindling Their Old Romance

*The inception of Pakstream Gas Pipeline Project comes over half a century after Moscow helped Islamabad build Pakistan Steel Mills.*

By **Khalique Ahmad**

After more than half-a-century of frigid political and economic ties, Pakistan and Russia on 15 July 2021 passed a major milestone to rebuild strategic cooperation. On the conclusion of four days of rather tense negotiations, they signed Heads of Terms (HoTs) of shareholders agreement for the construction of an 1100-km gas pipeline from Port Qasim, Karachi to Lahore at an estimated cost of USD 2.5-3.0 billion by end 2023.

To recall, Pakistan and Russia had started off economic strategic cooperation with two major initiatives. In 1961, Pakistan set up its largest exploration and production firm, the Oil and Gas Development Company Ltd (OGDCL), with the Soviet (then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics - USSR) technical expertise along with a long term financial support of RUB 27 million to finance equipment and services of exports for exploration.

This was followed by another strategic engagement for establishment of Pakistan's largest industrial complex. In January 1969, Pakistan took services of Tiajproexport of USSR for feasibility study and then techno-financial assistance in January 1971 for construction of Pakistan Steel Mills under the supervision of Soviet experts.

Despite such a strong take off, bilateral cooperation, however, remained almost non-existent for the following five decades due to diplomatic tensions associated with cold war politics. A few private sector business ventures remained bitter deals.

It is, therefore, a historic development that after a lot of challenges for almost eight years including those relating to certain US sanctions, Pakistan and Russia were able to sign the Head of Terms of Agreement for the implementation of the Pakstream Gas Pipeline Project – commonly known as North-South Gas project. The USD 2.5 billion gas pipeline is to originate from Port Qasim – the centre of LNG import



terminals – to load centre around Kasur near Lahore to meet energy needs of industry upcountry.

The project justifies the feasibility of new upcoming LNG terminals to create gas transportation capacity from ports in the South to consumption centres in the North. It should have been completed by 2017-18, according to original plans. However, the timelines to finalize the contractual agreements with Russia on 'strategic government-to-government' basis were changed six times between 2015 and 2020.

Under an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) signed in October 2015, the governments of Pakistan and Russia agreed on the cooperation of a milestone project to develop gas transmission infrastructure of 56" pipeline diameter, costing USD 2.25-2.5 billion to enhance the energy security of Pakistan to meet gas transport requirements for about 40 years.

Pakstream Gas Pipeline Project was announced in the Joint Statement of Pakistan-Russia Inter Governmental Commission in November 2014. With relevant approvals on both sides, the IGA was signed in Islamabad by Petroleum Ministers on both sides on 16 October 2015. In April 2015, ECC cleared the project model and constituted a price negotiation committee and then approved a financing model of 1.2 billion cubic feet per day (BCFD) capacity pipeline (LNG-III) by the Sui companies.

The ECC in February 2020 decided to fund the project through GIDC. The Supreme Court decision on GIDC followed in August 2020 for utilization of GIDC on such development projects. The Federal Cabinet ratified it. Meanwhile, an amended IGA has been signed on 28 May to replace the October 2015 IGA. At present, structure of Russian consortium has been finalized being seventh version in the last



five years in which Russian nominated entity has been identified as FSUE (Russian Ministry of Energy), ETK (Execution specialist), and PAO TMK (Production specialist) – with a company namely, PAKSTREAM LLC.

The two sides have now agreed over 74 percent shareholding to Pakistani gas companies and 26 percent to Russian firms in the special purpose vehicle (SPV) for the project. This envisaged both ‘put option’ and ‘call option’ to Russian side which meant its entities could move out of the project if the project is not found feasible or increase its shareholding to 49 percent if it is able to provide attractive financing arrangements acceptable to Pakistan. In any case, Pakistani entities would maintain majority shareholding.

Leaving out the 18 percent rate of return in foreign exchange, the two sides have agreed over a tariff calculation mechanism on cost plus basis already in vogue as explained by the chairman and members of Oil & Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) who were especially made part of the process. This meant all prudent costs both in terms of variable and fixed cost components as already permissible under third party access.

The Russian side would arrange funding for foreign exchange components through supplier credit or typical project financing to cover imported items like steel, consultancies, pipelines and related products and materials not available in Pakistan and the concession agreement for the pipeline would remain effective for 25-30 years.

There would be no throughput (gas quantity) guarantees but payment of tariff and return to the Russian entities to the consortium would be ensured through normal security package and standby letters of credit (SBLCs) as available to international investors including independent power producers (IPPs). The pipeline size was agreed to 56 inch diameter to cater for next 30-40 years of energy needs in the country that would ensure 700-800 MMCFD (million cubic feet per day) of free gas flow and could go up to 2000 MMCFD with compressors.

The arrangement would enable the two Sui gas companies to improve their capabilities to operate 56 inch pipelines and compete

for similar international projects. The post-construction operations and maintenance of the project would be the responsibility of the Sui companies whose staff would be trained abroad during the construction period.

The Sui companies did not have technical capacity to lay pipelines across canals, rivers and railway tracks, hence the requirement for Russian expertise.

The next steps would be the signing shareholders agreement, financial agreement, gas transportation agreement and lenders agreement during which time the Russian side would complete the front end engineering design (FEED) and the Pakistani side to arrange dollar financing of local currency component against Rs321 billion worth of Gas Infrastructure Development Cess (GIDC).



The two parties “defined the principles regarding shareholding structure, corporate structure, capital structure, and financing arrangements, options and guarantees as well as other essential clauses”, noted the minutes of the meeting. Furthermore, both the parties reviewed and exchanged the draft of the risk matrix of the project with a view to finalize the risk mitigation strategy.

The agreed and finalized heads of terms were signed by the authorized representatives of the Russian Nominated Entity (RNE) – Pakstream LLC and its consortium partners Federal State Unitary Enterprise (FSUE), Centre of Operations Services of Russian Energy ministry and Eurasian Pipeline Consortium Ltd and PAO TMK and managing director of Pakistani Nominated Entity – Interstate Gas Systems (ISGS).

The two sides committed to expeditiously implement the project to meet the emerging energy security scenario of Pakistan to

ensure investment commitments by upcoming LNG terminals. The results of the technical studies and route related work done through international consultants by Russian party were discussed and the Pakistan side was impressed with the quality and depth of analysis in the technical studies that would be ground to the FEED.

“It became clear that Russian party has a good level of preparedness for the offtake of the project”, the two sides noted.

The parties agreed to hold joint technical sessions of the nominated entities within 30 days to exchange information on the project implementation status, set technical specifications and prepare a project roadmap after the signing of the shareholding agreement. The format and time of the event will be mutually agreed to.

Sui Companies shared the preliminary work done on the project and expressed the technical limitations of Pakistan in building 56” diameter pipeline and desired to participate in the project via subcontracting or otherwise and be partners in the operation and maintenance (O&M) contracts.

The Russian party stated that due to in-depth understanding of the on-ground situation and experience in the gas pipeline industry, the Sui Companies will be in a better position to be the partners for O&M and sub-contracting the development work.

The Russian side undertook to utilize Pakistani resources to the maximum possible extent, engaging the Sui companies and other Pakistani subcontractors for the project and offering to train Pakistani human resources within Pakistan and in Russian training institutions as well as opportunities for development of local suppliers.

# Bitcoin glitters once again, gains value and worth after Tesla and Amazon support cryptocurrency

*Market capitalization of Bitcoin has also edged up by more than \$127 billion in just few days. On July 28, 2021, Bitcoin market cap was at \$747 billion till the filing of this report as against around \$620 billion market cap before fresh spike in Bitcoin.*



By Javed Mahmood

Once again Bitcoin has breached \$40,000 mark after several days of recession and fluctuations in its price ranging from \$30,000 to \$32,000. However, in the past few days, Bitcoin not only crossed \$40,000 for the first time since June 16 and was trading around \$39,900 till the filing of this report on July 28, Wednesday.

Details gathered by The Truth International (TTI) revealed that Tesla CEO Elon Musk and Amazon have boosted value and demand of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies in recent days. A few days back, Elson Musk said that his company Tesla could accept Bitcoin again.

Meanwhile, Amazon also announced that it was acquiring a block-chain system and experts to accept payments in cryptocurrency. Before these announcements, Bitcoin was trading around \$31,000. However, within few days, the price of the leading cryptocurrency has improved to above

\$40,000 for a gap of many days that has ended disappointment amongst investors and miners who have lost hope of good days of cryptocurrency.

From mid-April to 24th of July, American companies have increased their exposure in bitcoin to 80 percent while American share in mining of this currency too has doubled. During this period Bitcoin has seen a great fall, from \$63,000 in April to \$28,000 in June/July as China shut down its illegal mining centers throughout the country. Resultantly, cryptocurrency mining companies have shifted to Kazakhstan and Texas, USA, etc.

Market capitalization of Bitcoin has also edged up by more than \$127 billion in just few days. On July 28, 2021, Bitcoin market cap was at \$747 billion till the filing of this report as against around \$620 billion market cap before fresh spike in Bitcoin.

Like Bitcoin, value of Ether has also edged up and surged above \$23,000 after a pause of several days. Experts said the prices have continued to rally since July 21 with Sunday's current price rise representing the largest single daily gain in over six weeks. The world's oldest crypto is changing hands for around \$39,900, slightly after hitting a monthly high of \$40,000.

Datamish data show a short squeeze appears to have driven prices higher as those betting on bitcoin heading lower had to sell in quick succession to cover. The reason remains unclear.

"This price action is aligning with what we've been seeing the past couple of weeks," said Daniel Kim, head of capital markets at Maple Finance. "Borrowing rates for USD have started to increase from its lows."

"We've also been seeing a significant increase in demand for USDC from institu-



tional borrowers and the sentiment seems to be bullish following the news of Amazon participating in bitcoin,” Kim added.

Experts also claimed that retail giant Amazon is looking to accept bitcoin payments by year's end and is considering minting its own token by 2022. The retail giant is also seeking a Digital Currency and Blockchain Product Lead.

Others argue the rebound in crypto prices is a reaction to a range of good news coming from big tech and finance players from the U.S. markets.

“Most prominently, there were conversations held last week between Jack Dorsey, Elon Musk, and Cathie Wood at the Bitcoin Conference where they talked about where they see bitcoin and cryptocurrencies going with respect to their own organizations,” said Caroline Bowler, CEO of Australian crypto exchange BTC markets.

## Future Trading of Bitcoin

The future trading of Bitcoin at Binance exchange has surged to an unexpected level of \$48,000 which has stunned investors globally. Today, the actual price of Bitcoin is around \$37,300 till the filing of this report. However, the value of Bitcoin in future trading at Binance has increased to \$48,000 in anticipation of increase in value of the leading cryptocurrency in the backdrop of fresh spike in its demand in last couple of days.

There is almost \$10,000 difference in real price of Bitcoin in market and its future trading value. Market capitalisation of Bitcoin has been fluctuating around \$700 billion when this report was published on July 27, 2021. Binance is the largest crypto-exchange in the world in volume of trading of cryptocurrencies. The company is very popular in the world especially the Asian countries.

On Monday (July 26), Bitcoin breached \$39,000 mark after a gap of many weeks and it was being traded around \$37,300 on Tuesday. Two main developments have boosted demand and value of Bitcoin suddenly – Tesla CEO Elon Musk announced that his company can receive Bitcoin to sell cars while Amazon announced its plan of accepting payments in cryptocurrencies.

Ethereum (ETH) inflated its gains by over 6 per cent to break above the \$2,300, crossing the psychological resistance level at \$2,200. ETH has gained 23 per cent over the last seven days and is expected to continue its bull run in the upcoming days if it breaks out above the \$2,400 mark.

All the top 20 cryptocurrencies have registered significant gains at day's close. Dogecoin (DOGE) led the pack with a 15 percent gain, followed by Chainlink (LINK), Polkadot (DOT), and Polygon (MATIC), among others.

BTC's remarkable leg up also increased its dominance to 48 percent, with a gain of

Sunday's current price rise representing the largest single daily gain in over six weeks. The world's oldest crypto is changing hands for around \$38,700, slightly after hitting a monthly high of \$39,850.

Meanwhile, experts said that on July 26, 2021, the price of Bitcoin reached \$40,000 for the first time since mid-June, bringing traders back to the market. Daily trading volume for bitcoin reached \$9.2 billion, the highest since June 22, according to a report by Arcane Research. Trading volumes in bitcoin were previously trending downward, with some saying this was, in part, due to Wall Streeters “taking a break,” and heading out on summer vacations. Market



over 2 percent during the day. If BTC continues to hold above the \$38,000 level, it can potentially test its twenty-week SMA (simple moving average) at \$43,000 levels in the upcoming days.

From mid-April to 24th of July, American companies have increased their exposure in Bitcoin to 80 percent while American share in mining of this currency too has doubled. During this period Bitcoin has seen a great fall, from \$63,000 in April to \$28,000 in June/July. During this period, China has shut down its illegal mining centers throughout the country, resultantly, miners have shifted to Kazakhstan and Texas, USA, etc.

Like Bitcoin, value of Ether has also edged up and surged above \$22,200 for a gap of several days. Experts said the prices have continued to rally since July 21 with

action has been lackluster, with the price of bitcoin remaining stuck in a range between \$30,000 and \$40,000 since May. The recent spike in trading volume could signal that when there's a market move, interest and activity quickly return.

“The increasing volume amid bitcoin's strength suggests that the strong recovery was supported by an influx of buyers, a healthy sign for the market,” said Arcane's report. It's notable that trading volumes were trending downwards and saw four consecutive days below \$3 billion before yesterday's rebound, according to the report.

“Overall, the seven-day average trading volume remains substantially below its yearly average, and trading activity in bitcoin seems to be low so far this summer,” the Arcane analysts wrote.

# A Tale of Two Eids

*Animal sacrifice plummeted last Eid ul Azha but soared this year. Why?*

By Zainab Umer

Animal sacrifice in Pakistan plummeted drastically last Eid ul Azha because of the Covid-19 outbreak, wrecking livestock farmers all around. Paradoxically, however, animal sales this year soared despite a fresh wave of the outbreak.

Last year, when the coronavirus was still the new and only talk of the town, Eid festivities had remained low key as the virus brought with it a wave of bone chilling terror. Corona had caused numerous deaths and people had decided to sit home and find alternative ways to cope with the newfound Eid gloom.

Farmers raise cattle to sell at a premium in cities at the time of Eid to generate funds for purposes that cannot be covered by routine income. The annual bonus is often used for purposes like replacing old agricultural tools, home repairs, investing in assets, and marrying off children.

According to an article by DAWN, "In desperation to contain losses, many traders decided to return to the market early with the unsold stocks instead of waiting for buyers until the third day of Eid." There was no doubt as to why the market for sacrificial animals shrank and prices crashed last Eid Ul Azha. Market watchers noticed a 40-50 percent fall in the total volume of livestock trade. Prices of sacrificial animals soared forcing many aspiring buyers to return home empty handed.

Nevertheless this Eid seemed to turn the tables as the Karachi cattle market reported historic sales as a huge number of animals had been sold ahead of Eid al-Adha. The mandi media spokesperson cited the figure of 700,000 slaughter animals that were originally brought to the mandi this year and noted that only 5 percent of them remain.

Punjab this year expected the business of sacrificial animals to the tune of PKR 110 billion till the third day of Eid Ul Azha, which is PKR 20 billion or 20 percent higher than that of last year. Shahpur



Kanjran cattle market was projected to have a business of nearly PKR 30 billion this year.

However the Lahore Division Cattle Market Management Company Chief Operating Officer Rehan Ahmad said, "I think this year we cannot go more than 20 per cent higher than the last year's animals trade due 50 to 60 percent increase in the animals' price, impact of Covid and other issues," he added.

"Seasonal festivities related to Eid-ul-Azha generated over PKR 325 billion worth of economic activities, as Pakistanis slaughtered around 5.86 million animals during the three-day festival", The News daily reported. "Former chairman of Pakistan Tanners Association (PTA), Agha Saidan, who owns Royal Leather, said that the leather industry faced huge losses last year, when raw hides was destroyed by humidity [before they could reach processing plants]."

The question at hand is why the sales dropped last year but practically soared this Eid-ul-Adha despite the looming threat of coronavirus being very real. Observers say the reason could be that Pakistanis at the moment have been desensitized to the fear and terror that this epidemic brought with it.

However precautionary measures still stand as the Ministry of Health announced that Covid guidelines were to be followed on

Eid. The ministry also showed deep concerns about the cattle market being a source for the spread of the virus. "Social distancing should be ensured at the cattle markets besides also implementing directives regarding facemask". It was also made clear that those selling and purchasing the animals should be vaccinated. Government also advised citizens to refrain from going to large family gatherings as mass spreading of the virus is still quite a serious threat.

The Sindh government also issued guidelines to be followed this Eid. Under fresh SOPs, the government has advised the people to prefer collective sacrifice of the animals this Eid ul-Adha instead of individual fulfilment of the ritual in an attempt to contain the spread of coronavirus." The government even identified specific locations in the province for the collective sacrifice of animals on Eid-ul-Azha.

Last year's economic disaster led farmers to think smart as they took the sales of sacrificial animals online in order to have a successful festival. "Dozens of apps and websites have popped up to have animals delivered to doorsteps, slaughtered or donated to charity", DW (German News) reported. "Shakil Dehelvi, joint secretary-general of the Alamgir Welfare Trust, told Reuters that the charity received its target number twice as fast as compared to last year."





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# Killing the Goose that Lays Golden Eggs

*The FBR initiative to tax the online marketplace looks like a ploy to literally kill Pakistan's nascent eCommerce sector. What about PM Khan's Digital Pakistan?*



By Azeem Waqas

Apparently the temptation was too much to pass up. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has decided to go after the flourishing online marketplace and imposed a 2 percent withholding sales tax on the goods sold through these platforms.

FBR's decision has perturbed the individuals and businesses working the online marketplace, who have reacted strongly and termed it a counterproductive measure of the government which may result in flight of capital and growth of unregistered business in Pakistan.

Through the Finance Act 2021-22, FBR has defined the online marketplace as an electronic interface such as a marketplace, e-commerce platform, portal or similar means which facilitate sale of goods, including third party sale, in any of the following manner, namely: (a) by controlling the terms and conditions of the sale; (b) authorizing the charge to the customers in respect of the payment for the supply; or(c) ordering or delivering the goods."

Furthermore FBR has expanded the scope of Tier-1 retailers and included a retailer

operating an online marketplace supplying goods through e-commerce platform, whether or not the goods are owned by him; and a retailer who has acquired a point of sale for accepting payment through debit or credit cards from banking companies or any other digital payment service provider authorized by State Bank of Pakistan.

Also, Section 3(3) has been amended to impose liability to pay sales tax (in the case of supply of goods through online marketplace), of the person running online marketplace, whether or not the goods are owned by him.

According to FBR, Daraz has issued 391,343 cash invoices aggregating to PKR 292.394 million and it has charged a tax of PKR 34.446 million. Similarly, it has issued 7018 credit or debit card invoices having sale value of PKR 18.76 million and charged tax to the tune of PKR 1.974 million.

"This is against the Prime Minister's initiative of making digital Pakistan", Daraz Pakistan President Ahsan Saya told to The Truth International (TTI). "It will push online sellers to go offline".

"Online marketplace is a nascent industry it has not developed very much. It is the future of Pakistan and if it is not encouraged today, it would not grow," Saya said.

He added: "It is very difficult to pay taxes for the online marketplaces at the moment because most of the sellers are already registered; few are offline; some are exempted and FBR has data of those who are unregistered; FBR cannot simply shift its responsibility of collecting sales tax from unregistered to the online sellers".

The Daraz chief said FBR had increased the compliances for online marketplaces which will take around six to eight months to be implemented and as a result, new investment in the online industry would stop.

Ahsan saya has urged that FBR to revisit its decision as this will get only PKR 7.5 to 15 million as a tax but would create unsurmountable problems for online sellers.

"Daraz has more than 35,000 online sellers which were only 3,000 three years before. The government should facilitate online sellers. One seller is creating three to five jobs", he said.



Online market industry is worth more than USD 1 billion in Pakistan it has a huge potential and is growing with the speed of 50 percent to 80 percent annually. According to recent estimates around 1.5 percent of the retail market in Pakistan is online. Globally it is about 20 percent but in China it is 50 percent.

Saya says he has no doubt the FBR proposal will push online consumers to offline markets. Online marketplaces will founder, more than 50 thousands marketplace jobs will be lost, and foreign market will become more attractive to Pakistani consumers.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have helped startups worldwide lap quick growth. According to invest2innovate, in Pakistan as well, the onslaught of the pandemic this year has promoted an increased reliance on online shopping.

Fashion is the largest segment of e-commerce in Pakistan and accounts for 70 percent of the revenue. This is followed by electronics & media with 12 percent, food & personal care with 9 percent, toys, hobbies & DIY with 4 percent, and furniture & appliances with the remaining 4 percent.

“The world is moving to online markets”, says Zulfikar Thaver, President Union of Small and Medium Enterprises (UNIS-AME). “The government of Pakistan is trying to promote it as well but FBR’s policies are taking the opposite direction. General sales tax has already been imposed to discourage consumptions. If FBR wishes

to collect income tax from the online marketplace, it should withdraw GST”.

FBR measures will be discouraging in a way that there will be tax on every online merchant and this tax will be collected by the marketplace themselves from the customers. This will literally have such a negative impact on the ecommerce industry, he said.

Pakistan is the 46th largest market for e-Commerce with revenue of USD 4 billion in 2020, placing it ahead of Peru and behind Greece.

CFO Daraz Pakistan Ahmad Hassan said: “We believe that it would drastically hamper the industry. Without online marketplaces that help sellers effectively reach and engage with users by leveraging internet and leading technology, SMEs likely would not be able to compete effectively and complete as many transactions; therefore reducing the overall economic activities, number of jobs created, and tax collections”.

From consumers’ perspective, they would also lose convenient access to a large number of goods across categories that are important to their daily lives, negatively impacting the quality of their lives. This similarly would likely result in reduced level of economic activities, he added.

Pakistan has a predominantly young population with 65 percent below the age of 24 years, who have responded positively to the online retail format offered by modern online grocery retailers. Therefore, a retail

market worth USD 125 billion a year, out of which USD 48 billion attributed to groceries alone presents the startup ecosystem with an abundance of opportunities.

FBR measure have also provoked startup companies in Pakistan which termed it would discourage our young population’s uptake of the online marketplace.

According to Invest2Innovent, E-commerce accounted for the highest average ticket size (USD 6.6 million), followed by health-tech (USD 4.8 million), and Fintech (USD 3.5 million) in 2021

Pakistani startup ecosystem continues to reach new highs. Pakistani startups have raised USD 101.12 million in 2021; Top funded sectors in terms of total amount raised include e-commerce USD 84 million (44 deals), fintech USD 48.62 million (26 deals), transportation/mobility USD 44.53 million (12 deals), and health USD 19.07 million (24 deals)

Market expansion in Pakistan is expected to continue over the next few years, as indicated by the Statista Digital Market Outlook. It has been predicted that the compound annual growth rate (CAGR 20-24) for the next four years will be 16 percent.

Compared to the year-on-year growth of 84 percent, this decrease suggests a moderately flooded market. Another indicator of market saturation is the online penetration of 19 percent in Pakistan; in other words, 19 percent of the Pakistani population has bought at least one product online in 2020.



# EU Court's decision triggers controversy globally over wearing Hijab

By Javed Mahmood

Wearing Hijab (veil) by Muslim women has become a controversial issue in the western countries. On the one hand, western countries believe in upholding human rights of the individuals, while on the other, many western countries are imposing curbs on wearing Hijab.

There is a common perception in the world that when Christian Nuns wear headscarves and Jews are having beards, they are following the spirit of their religions. However, when Muslims do these things to uphold their religious traditions, they are termed extremists and uncivilized, which shows hypocrisy of the western world.

Recently, the European Union's top court has once again triggered controversy over Hijab. An European court has given a decision in favour of the companies operating in Europe which allows them to forbid the wearing of visible symbols of religious or political belief, such as headscarves at the workplace.

The Luxembourg-based tribunal said in its ruling that courts in the bloc's 27 member states should weigh up whether the ban corresponded to a "genuine need" on the part of the employer. They must also consider the rights and interests of the employee, including by taking into account national legislation on freedom of religion, it said.

"A prohibition on wearing any visible form of expression of political, philosophical or religious beliefs in the workplace may be justified by the employer's need to present a neutral image towards customers or to prevent social disputes," the court said.

However, that justification must correspond to a genuine need on the part of the employer and, in reconciling the rights and interests at issue, the national courts may take into account the specific context of their Member State and, in particular, more favourable national provisions on the protection of freedom of religion.

The verdict of the top European Court is related to the case that was brought to court by two working women in Germany who were suspended from their jobs after they started wearing hijab, a headscarf worn by many Muslim women who feel it is part of their religion.

Both Muslim women – a special need carer at a childcare centre in Hamburg run by a charitable association, and a cashier at the Mueller pharmacy chain.

They were told by their respective employer that this was not allowed, and were at different points either suspended, told to come to work without it or get a different job, court documents show.

Notably, the issue of the hijab has sparked controversy across Europe for years and underlined sharp divisions over integrating Muslims. In a 2017 ruling, the European Union court in Luxembourg had already said that companies may ban staff from wearing headscarves and other visible religious symbols under certain conditions. At the time, this had sparked a huge backlash among faith groups.

More than five million Muslims live in Germany, making them the largest religious minority community there. Headscarf bans for women at work have been a hotly contested issue in Germany for years, mostly with regard to aspiring teachers at state schools and trainee judges. This has not so far been a major theme in the campaign for this year's legislative elections.

Elsewhere in Europe, courts have also had to look into where and how headscarves can sometimes be banned at work.

For example, France's top court upheld in 2014 the dismissal of a Muslim daycare worker for wearing a headscarf at a private creche that demanded strict neutrality from employees. France, home to Europe's largest Muslim minority, prohibited the wearing of Islamic headscarves in state schools in 2004.





However, Austria's constitutional court has ruled that a law there banning girls aged up to 10 from wearing headscarves in schools was discriminatory.

## Amnesty International voices concern over ban on Hijab

In a recent statement, Amnesty said the new regulations planned under the law would lead to further discrimination against the country's Muslim minority.

"This law would be a serious attack on rights and freedoms in France," said Marco Perolini, Amnesty International's Europe researcher.

Macron's government says the law will tackle what the president has termed "Islamist separatism" and underscore the country's secular system. But critics argue it breaches religious freedom and unfairly targets France's Muslim minority, which at 5.7 million people is the largest in Europe.

The law does not specifically mention the word Islam, but French Muslims have for months protested against it, saying the measures single them out.

"Time and again we have seen the French authorities use the vague and ill-defined concept of 'radicalisation' or 'radical Islam' to justify the imposition of measures without valid grounds, which risks leading to discrimination in its application against Muslims and other minority groups," Perolini said. "This stigmatisation must end."

## Attack on rights and freedoms

In its current state, several aspects of the law raise concern for the protection of freedom of association and expression and the principle of non-discrimination in France, Amnesty said.

It cited several of its more than 50 articles as problematic – including Article 6, which states that any organisation that applies for a grant from the State or a local authority must sign a contract of "republican commitment", and Article 8, which will hand further power to authorities in dissolving organisations.

"It would allow public authorities to fund only organisations that sign a 'contract of

republican commitment' – a vaguely defined concept which is wide open to abuse and threatens the very freedoms of expression and association the French authorities claim to stand for," said Perolini, commenting on Article 6.

Elsewhere, the law aims to regulate homeschooling and foreign funding of religious organisations and crack down on polygamy and doctors who issue so-called virginity certificates.

## Human right activists resent ban on Hijab

A group of lawyers, NGOs and religious bodies from 13 countries have submitted formal complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Council Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), calling for action against France's "breadth of state abuse against Muslims" stretching back more than two decades. The coalition submitted its findings to the UN body on Monday, accusing France of violating "a number of basic rights that are protected in legislation that is ratified by Paris".

It said successive governments since 1989 had "entrenched structural Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims". As examples, it cited recent "illegitimate and violent" raids of Muslim homes and organisations designed to "send a message", French President Emmanuel Macron's plan against what he calls "Islamist separatism", an alleged backlash against Muslim communities in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US, the 2004 ban on the hijab in public schools, the 2010 ban on the niqab in public spaces and moves in 2016 – later overturned – against the full-body swimsuit worn by some Muslim women.

It also said a 2017 counter-terrorism law, SILT – Strengthening Homeland Security and the Fight Against Terrorism, fuelled Islamophobia, alleging it mainly targeted Muslim families, individuals and community centres. The group urged the OHCHR to act in the wake of its complaints and ensure France upholds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

UK-based CAGE, which campaigns against the injustices of the "war on terror" and calls

for due process, and legal groups such as the South Africa-based Muslim Lawyers Association are also part of the group. Feroze Boda, of the Muslims Lawyers Association, said: "These policies are not only counter-productive, but they are open to abuse, and have been abused – while also being completely out of touch with reality."

## France First Country in Europe which imposed ban on Hijab

In Europe, France is the first country that has imposed a ban on Hijab in public places from April 2021. The hijab is a headscarf worn by many Muslim women and has been the subject of a decades-long feud in France. The French move comes as part of Paris's push to introduce a so-called "anti-separatism" law which it says aims to bolster the country's secular system, but critics have denounced, arguing it singles out the minority Muslim population.

While debating the legislation, senators approved an amendment to the bill calling for the "prohibition in the public space of any conspicuous religious sign by minors and of any dress or clothing which would signify inferiority of women over men". A backlash to the amendment was swift, with some suggesting the rule amounted to a "law against Islam".

"Age to consent to sex in France: 15 Age to consent to hijab: 18 Let that sink in. It isn't a law against the hijab. It's a law against Islam. #Handsoffmyhijab #FranceHijab-Ban," one Twitter user wrote.

The issue also attracted the attention of several high-profile figures. On Instagram, Olympic athlete Ibtihaj Muhammad shared a post suggesting the Senate's amendment indicated "Islamophobia is deepening in France".

"This is what happens when you normalize anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim hate speech, bias, discrimination, and hate crimes – Islamophobia written into law," the post said. Amani al-Khatahtbeh, founder of Muslim Women's Day and the website Muslim Girl, also weighed in on the controversy.

Amnesty International last month warned the law posed a "serious attack on rights and freedoms in France" and called for "many problematic provisions" of the law to be scrapped or amended.

In Conversation with Fakher Tahir, Dyslexia Therapist

## Children with Dyslexia Can Do Wonders in School and in Life



By Haider Rifaat

**S**ome 12 million children in Pakistan are unable to learn reading and writing as taught at our normal schools because they suffer from dyslexia – a language-based learning disability.

Dyslexia is a learning disability, not a mental illness. People with dyslexia have difficulties with specific language skills, particularly with reading. Owing to a lack of awareness about dyslexia in our society and the stigma attached to its symptoms, children with dyslexia face insurmountable barriers to academic success, which in turn hampers their progress in life.

Thankfully, given parental commitment and expert help, instructional environments can be optimized for children with dyslexia, affording them an opportunity to achieve progress in school and in life.

We sat down with Fakher Tahir, a Certified Orton Gillingham Dyslexia Therapist from the Dyslexia Training Institute in the United States for a discussion of symptoms and management of dyslexia. Given below for your reading pleasure this fortnight is an abridged transcript of the interview.

**TTI: Fakher, tell our readers what dyslexia is.**

**FT:** Dyslexia is a learning difficulty involving trouble with reading and writing or interpreting words, letters and other symbols. However, it does not affect general intelligence.

**TTI: What are some early signs of dyslexia?**

**FT:** The early symptoms of dyslexia are as follows:

- A child may have difficulty learning nursery rhymes.
- He or she may experience difficulty paying attention, sitting still and listening to stories.
- There can be difficulty learning to sing or reciting alphabets.
- The child finds it hard to carry out two or more instructions at a time. For example, putting toys in the box then putting them on the shelf, but he or she is fine if tasks are presented in smaller units.
- Poor auditory discrimination.
- Difficulty in dressing. For example, tying shoelaces and buttoning clothes.
- Difficulty in catching, kicking or throwing a ball.

**TTI: Can this learning disability be treated if diagnosed early?**

**FT:** Dyslexia can be treated using specific educational approaches and techniques and I always say, the sooner the intervention begins, the better is the outcome. However, psychological testing can help the therapist or teacher build a plan for children with dyslexia.



**TTI: What are some coping strategies that parents can employ to help dyslexic children?**

**FT:** First of all, they should not compare their children with others and always believe in what they are capable of. Parents should give them extra time to grasp concepts better and help with reinforcing lessons. They should always celebrate their little steps towards improvement. This will help dyslexic children improve their self-esteem as well.

Intervals during studies are very important. Choose a quiet place for work as that would help children focus better. Use of chewing gum can also help regain focus. However, keep the child's age in mind for this kind of coping strategy.

Find out the whys while learning new information and try to make it interesting. Answer their queries patiently and listen to them very attentively. Appreciation and praise are very important to keeping dyslexic children motivated. Try to focus on a more logical learning approach than rote memorization.

**TTI: How important is creative learning in helping children with dyslexia?**

**FT:** I would say a creative approach to teaching with dyslexic kids plays a vital role in their progression. It also helps improve the overall education experience for them. However, dyslexic individuals are creative learners by nature.

Education itself has evolved greatly in recent times. It is a world of technology and teaching is no longer limited to chalkboards and books. There are so many interesting applications and manipulatives out there for dyslexic children that they can enjoy and learn with. Students with dyslexia learn faster through visually supported techniques and hands-on experiences. For these students, reading is labor-intensive, and so is writing.

Dyslexic students naturally see the bigger picture. They can spot patterns, think strategically and often outside the box. This is why so many dyslexic individuals thrive in creative and visual fields such as architecture and design. Their outside-the-box thinking explains why so many emerge as famous entrepreneurs including Richard Branson and the late Anita Roddick.



**TTI: What are some stigmas surrounding dyslexia in Pakistan, and what more can be done to ensure that people with dyslexia are not looked down upon and are rather considered a part of the society?**

**FT:** In Pakistan, there is this myth that dyslexia is a disease. That is absolutely not true! Children with dyslexia experience difficulty with reading and spelling. That is it! Nothing more, nothing less. It is so heart-wrenching to see most of us perceive dyslexic individuals as lazy, dumb or irresponsible. Most dyslexic children are called duffers.

I would like to proclaim that they are, in fact, the most creative individuals out there. Children with dyslexia should have the same right to education as other children.

Dyslexic individuals are a very essential part of our society and should not be ignored at all. If they get the right amount of support, they can do wonders. They just need extra support in schools and their homes. Schools should have trained teachers who can give remedial sessions. There should be dyslexia training institutes for teachers so that we are fully equipped to support dyslexic children.

I would like to request Pakistan's government to set up dyslexia centers where children can enroll for extra support and interventions.



# The Day of Delta is Upon Us

*It's official: After wreaking havoc in many other countries, the virulent Delta has arrived in Pakistan.*

By Noor Aftab

Given the statistics compiled by the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) and opinions of the medical experts, the federal government has announced that the fourth wave of Covid-19 is likely to hit Pakistan by July end or early August.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has also expressed fears the fourth wave was looming and requested people to take necessary precautions to contain the spread of new variants. The signs of another Covid-19 wave in Pakistan have already emerged amid the spread of the Delta variant that is being considered the most contagious and responsible for most of the recent corona-related deaths all over the world.

The Delta variant is highly contagious, largely because people infected with the delta strain can carry up to 1,000 times more virus in their nasal passages than those infected with the original strain. The Delta variant first emerged in India but later spread to Bangladesh, Indonesia and Afghanistan leading to a surge in cases and hospitalization, devastating much of the region.

The uptick in cases, percentage positivity and other parameters speak to the challenges that facing the healthcare system and the will of the government to combat the pandemic.

There are also two other variants found in Pakistan including Alpha and Beta. Alpha variant was discovered in the United Kingdom while Beta variant was first detected in South Africa.

## Clear early signs of a fourth wave

There are clear early signs of the fourth wave starting in the country due to poor compliance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and the spread of the Delta variant.

A health crisis driven by the Delta variant—the most dangerous and virulent form of the coronavirus to date—has emerged in Karachi and the similar kind of situation is also emerging in various other cities like Lahore and Gwadar.

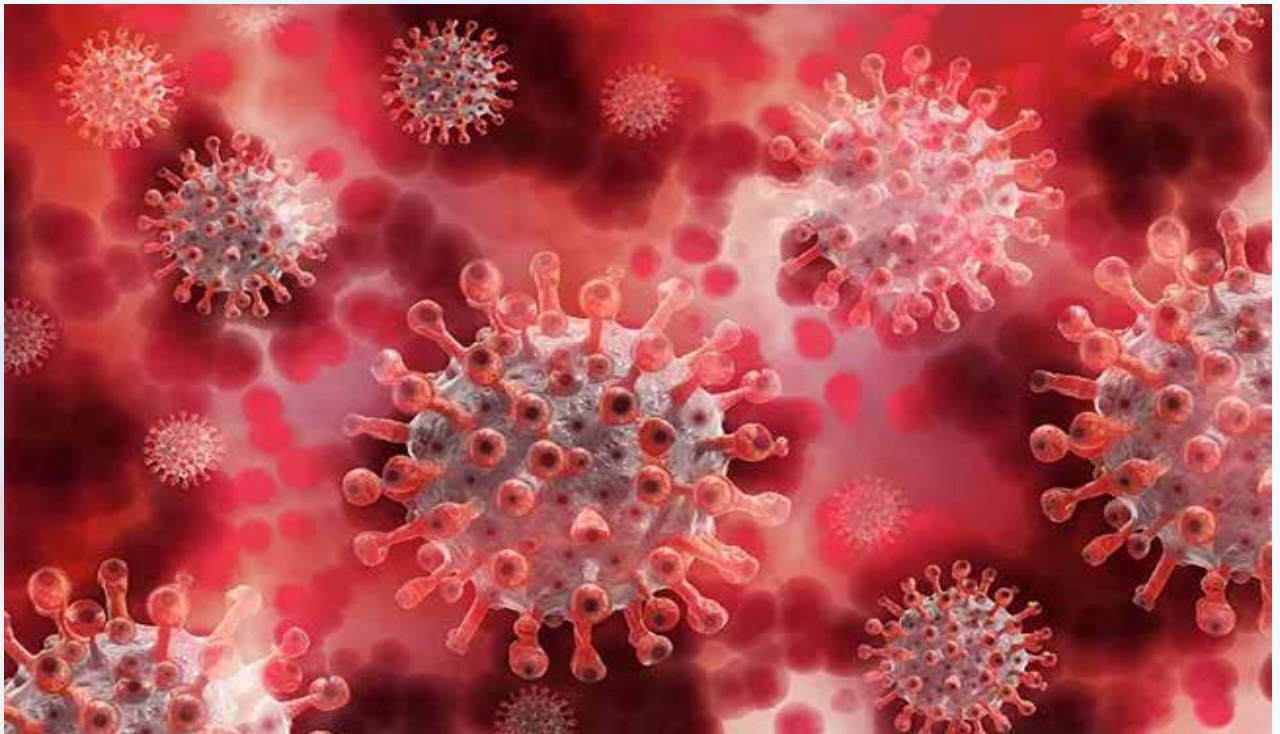
Karachi University's National Institute of Virology said the Delta variant of the novel coronavirus now accounts for

100 percent of cases in the metropolis. The positivity rate in Karachi has reached 23 percent.

The Balochistan government has also imposed a complete lockdown in Gwadar after a spike in case numbers – fuelled by the most contagious Delta variant. All shops, hotels and restaurants have been completely closed with the exception of some shops having essential items.

Only those people who have been vaccinated and are adhering to Covid-19 SOPs are being allowed in the exempted shops. All fish markets have also been closed whereas only vaccinated fishermen are being allowed fishing. Parks and playgrounds in the district have been closed while all gatherings have been banned in the coastal city.

The virus positivity rate in Lahore has reached 3.2 percent. According to the provincial health authorities the cases of the Delta variant are on the rise due to which necessary arrangements are being made in the hospitals and health facilities to cope with any surge in caseload.





## One million cases

Pakistan has now become the 30th country in the world to report more than one million coronavirus cases. After the country reported 1,425 fresh cases on 24 July, its total caseload went up to 1,000,034. The positivity ratio is 7.5 percent but it is steadily climbing.

The number of active cases in the country is 54,122 and total deaths are 22,971. As many as 924,782 patients have recovered from the disease. There are 2,942 patients in the isolation wards in 216 medical facilities across the country.

In all, 23,557 quarantine beds are available for patients while 35 designated tertiary hospitals are also providing services to the coronavirus patients.

The government has been continuously issuing statements about the looming threat of Delta variant and urging people to follow SOPs. But when it comes to implementation, the local and provincial governments come across as lacking the will to act to protect the health of the people.

Although the situation is not critical at the moment as the hospitals are still able to bear the burden, the statistics indicate that the pandemic may play havoc in the coming weeks. It must be kept in mind that no one is safe until everyone is safe in the country.

## New restrictions in Sindh

The Sindh government imposed new coronavirus restrictions in the province after the positivity ratio crossed 10 percent. According to a notification issued by the home department, general businesses, shopping malls, shops, and departmental stores were only be allowed to operate from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.

Exempted from this rule, however, are standalone grocery stores, milk shops, bakeries, fruit and vegetable vendors, and pharmacies. The provincial government has also placed a complete ban on all parties and gatherings, including weddings and related functions, whether held indoors or outdoors.

## New domestic air travel rules

The NCOC has declared Covid-19

vaccination certificates mandatory for domestic air travel. It has urged the public to get vaccinated by 31 July to avoid any inconvenience. As of 1 August, those not vaccinated will not be allowed to board domestic flights.

According to NCOC, from 1 August, travellers would be required to carry proof of vaccination when taking domestic flights. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued a notification in this regard, saying that it has communicated these guidelines to all airlines.

The restrictions are for only domestic air travel and people travelling from Pakistan to abroad or from abroad to Pakistan are exempted from them. Also exempt are connecting flights if these are within 72 hours of arrival or departure.

Partially vaccinated people, foreign nationals, Pakistani nationals having documentary proof of vaccination abroad and patients with clinical conditions will also be exempted from the restrictions.

## Vaccination

More than 4.5 million Pakistanis have been fully vaccinated, and more than 18 million people partially vaccinated so far against Covid-19.

Pakistan has received 3 million doses of the Moderna vaccine from the United States. Sent through COVAX, these are in addition to the 2.5 million doses of Moderna already donated to Pakistan.

The COVAX has so far provided five million Covid-19 vaccines under its equity scheme to Pakistan. It is encouraging to know that all these vaccines are also believed to be effective against Delta variant.

Separately, the government is working to secure additional vaccine doses from the United States because several host countries have not yet approved Chinese vaccines and require Pakistani expatriate workers to receive European or U.S. vaccines.

According to the Health Ministry, 24.5 million doses of the vaccine have so far been administered. The government plans to inoculate 70 percent of about 100 million Pakistanis deemed eligible for Covid-19 vaccine.

## Disregard for guidelines

Ahead of Eid ul Azha, the federal and provincial governments had decided to block entry of unvaccinated people to cattle markets. But it seems there is no one on the ground to implement this decision. Not only did the visitors to cattle markets make mockery of this decision generally, they also paid no heed to the SOPs introduced by the government.

Prime Minister Imran has said that government was asking people to follow precautionary measures but people have become careless.

Federal Minister Asad Umer also admitted that the field reports showed a complete disregard of the rules set by NCOC that only vaccinated people would be allowed to attend indoor weddings and go to cattle markets, indoor restaurants, and gyms.

The NCOC chief took to Twitter to urge people to follow coronavirus-related SOPs and get themselves vaccinated against the virus, warning the 'risk is not over'.

The expected fourth wave of the coronavirus can be extremely dangerous compared to the previous three waves. The people can save precious lives including those of their near and dear ones by taking preventive measures.

Everybody should wear a mask, maintain social distance, wash hands with soap frequently, and avoid crowded places.

## Conclusion

The health experts are of the view that there is a need to understand that the pandemic is not over yet, especially in Pakistan, where the vaccination rate is so low. The business centres and workplaces need to re-open to make a living, but they must observe SOPs, which minimize the risk of infection among the people.

Ensuring good ventilation at public and private offices, factories, and schools is also important. There is a need for a risk communication strategy because the fourth wave has probably already started. We can still reverse its course by accepting that Pakistan is still in danger – and acting accordingly.



# Islamophobia in the Time of Covid-19

*What feeds the global rise of paranoid politics of meat consumption by far right?*



By Hamzah Rifaat Hussain

Long known to feed on bigoted nativist and socially exclusionary ideologies including antisemitism, far right groups everywhere seem to be increasingly gravitating towards islamophobia. Their rise is particularly noted in Europe and Asia.

From the British National Party in the UK to right-wing members of the Sangh Parivar in India, groups of this ilk have sought to attack Muslim cultural activities, norms, rituals and festivities during the pandemic.

The festival of Eid Ul Adha which brings together thousands of ethnicities and races worth 23 percent of the global population from Pakistan to Germany has drawn the ire of these controversial lobbies, who continue to target practices such as animal sacrifice and relate it with policies on anti-immigration and populism. Although the arguments presented and the advocacy championed today lack merit that has not dulled the populist appeal of their Islamophobic approach.

The truth is that global meat production has resulted in billions of dollars being channelled to fast food restaurants which expose the hollow arguments of the far right regarding animal sacrifices during Eid Ul Adha by the Muslim community being a travesty. By demonizing and disparaging Muslims, the far right turns a blind eye to massive inequality and citizens lacking access to basic amenities such as clean

drinking water and sanitation across the world which makes the censoring of Muslim practices of sacrifice controversial.

Hyper capitalism and corporate practices which dollarize the meat industry in many countries stand in stark contrast to Islamic practices which hinge on charitable intentions and redistribution of meat to impoverished segments of the population. Yet ironically, demonization of such practices continues to date and is promoted by entities with limited knowledge of Islam and revisionist views on the role of Muslims in Western societies.

This revisionism centres on how Muslims are proliferating in multicultural societies through population growth and Sharia law with many of their customs such as those witnessed during Eid Ul Adha being controversial. Ironically, the claim that Muslim practices such as sacrificing animals are a threat to human rights and deserve to be stopped is not buttressed by the practices which are being targeted.

Many far right parties across the United States, Europe as well as in South Asia consider the liberal leftist lobbies in their respective countries to be 'communists' which are threatening a capitalist order which favours the enrichment of far right cadres. One of the main critiques of capitalism is that resources are dwindling with pervasive income inequality becoming

more and more stark due to lack of governmental oversight of income redistribution.

If the argument of the far right is that governmental policies are discriminatory against the white or Hindu majority then Islamic practices which preach, advocate for, and promote equality are ideal antidotes to these ills. Here lies the hypocrisy and contradictions from the far right. There is no concerted attempt to understand what Islam actually has to offer.

Beef lynchings, mosque shootings, and politicians turning a blind eye to the systemic and systematic discrimination faced by Muslims in multicultural societies across the world has become an alarming trend of the current pandemic era. Many neo-Nazi groups in the United States have leveraged the effects of the pandemic to promote bigoted ideologies which promote the 'Clash of Civilizations' concept by Samuel Huntington. Clashes with Muslims are considered to be inevitable and a direct consequence of their presence in multicultural societies yet the understanding of Muslim cultural beliefs and norms are almost non-existent.

It is clear that aversion to sacrificial practices on Eid Ul Adha from the far right is tantamount to racism and ideological perversion rather than anything substantial. Muslim practices are grounded in equality and unconditional access and nothing less.



# Dealing with Islamabad's Violent Streak

*Our response to incidents of violence against women must go beyond immediate enforcement action.*

By Malik Asad

While the federal capital was already shocked after the revelation of a video footage of harassment of a couple by a gang of scoundrels, beheading of a 27 years daughter of an ex diplomat by a son of leading businessman in a posh sector traumatize the society.

The case related to the harassment of a couple in a rented flat of Sector E-11 of Islamabad emerged earlier this month. However, on 20 July the police registered a First Information Report (FIR) of gruesome murder of Noor Mukadam, daughter of ex Ambassador Shaukat Ali Mukadam as her ex friend took her hostage and tortured her before beheading her in his home at Sector F-7.

A senior official who investigated high profile cases termed this gruesome case as of unchecked usage of drugs particularly the lethal ICE in Islamabad.

According to him, the initial information suggests the killer has a history of violence and on ICE, and has been treated for it. His family is influential and will probably use his illness as an excuse to reduce charges from murder with intent 302 to murder without intent.

The couple harassment case is registered against some 14 suspects, seven of whom have been apprehended and sent to Adiala Jail. Although these are the two different incidents, both the cases reflect irrational behaviour and a typical mind-set.

ICE is wreaking havoc in Islamabad and nobody seems bothered. There are rings and chains targeting single women, divorcees, free and independent women. These rings rent flats or bungalows in posh areas, invite their female friends, put them on ICE, and then the victim is morally, physically, mentally, and financially abused till her dreadful end.

The gang used similar strategy to harass the couple and extorting money from them. The victim Asad invited his Lahore based friend Emaan. He arranged a rented house for stay in E-11 for couple of days since local property dealers offer furnished flats on daily rent ranging from PKR 4000 to PKR 5000 per day.

However, while the couple was in the flat, the 14 member gang entered into the flat, since they had another key of the doors and then they manhandled and sexually abused the couple.

It is said that they were in habit of committing such crimes and making footages of the couple in order to blackmail them and to extort money from them. After filming the couple the accused were collecting extortion from victim's home at regular intervals.

The insiders said that accused shared the video within their hardcore group. However, last month, the principal accused Uman Mirza had some dispute with a group member over a business deal. Mirza lodged an FIR against his estranged friend. In retaliation, the friend leaked the video to another person who uploaded it to social media.

The video shocked the society and even the Prime Minister Imran Khan summoned the Inspector General of Islamabad Police Qazi Jamil ur Rehman and directed him to utilize all resources to prosecute the accused persons.

Though the police is prosecuting the accused persons, there are some legal issues involved in both these cases.

According to a legal expert, the case for harassment of couple may be registered under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) since making



video footage, preserving it in the laptop, sharing in the group and uploading in the social media are all offences falling within the ambit of cybercrime laws.

It is likely that sooner or later, one or more sections of PECA may be invoked in this case. Then the jurisdiction of the matter would be changed since the government has established special courts to try the suspects involved in cybercrime.

Hassan Javed Shorish, the lawyer of the victim couple also believes that because of electronic evidence, this case may eventually be transferred to PECA court. In such a scenario, not only the court would change, but the case will be transferred to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) the FIA's prosecution will pursue this in a PECA court.

According to the FIR registered in this case on 6 July, the police had applied section 341 (punishment for wrongful restraint); 354 A (assault or use of criminal force to woman and stripping her of her clothes); 506(ii) (criminal intimidation); 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman); 375-A and 375-D (rape), which entail death sentence or imprisonment of not less than 10 years or more than 25 years or imprisonment for the remainder period of his natural life and fine; 338 (punishment of extortion), which has three years' imprisonment, a fine or both, 342 (punishment for wrongful confinement) punishable with a year's imprisonment and a fine of Rs 3,000; 395 (dacoity) to get imprisonment for life or rigorous imprisonment for 10 years and a fine; 396-A (entic-

ing or taking away or detaining with criminal intent a woman) under which the convict could be jailed for up to seven years and is liable to a fine; and 377-B (sexual abuse), punishable with imprisonment of up to seven years along with a fine.

However, in Noor Mukadam case, the investigation is revolving around determining as to whether this was the intentional and planned murder or the suspect who may be a psychopath or a mentally ill person beheaded his friend unintentionally.

The intended or unintended murder has altogether different punishment, from capital punishment to a few years' imprisonment, the latter part would make the suspect to go for out of court settlement with the aggrieved family.

According to the preliminary investigation, the alleged killer used a knuckleduster to torture the victim before he beheaded her. Shah Khawar, counsel of Mr Mukadam said that in such cases several tactics are used to compel the complainant for out of court settlement.

He said that the police in this case did not invoke Section 311 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) since this was a gruesome murder. The First Information Report (FIR) was registered under Section 302 of the PPC which is a compoundable offence and could be settled under a compromise, he said, adding that Section 311 is related to Fisad-fil-Arz and it made the offence as non-compoundable, hence the matter could not be settled out of court.

Mr Mukadam, however, dispelled the impression that he is going for an out of court settlement saying that nobody offered him for any compromise so far and "he will not accept this at any cost."

The investigation officer informed the local court when he produced the suspect to obtain physical remand that the police has taken the accused into custody and recovered a pistol, a knife, and a knuckleduster from the custody of the accused.

He said that the clothes of deceased and blood samples have also been obtained from the crime scene, moreover, the statements of the witnesses have also been recorded under section 161 of the criminal procedure code (CrPC).

According to the FIR lodged on 19 July, the complainant and his wife had been away separately for errands. He said when they returned home, their daughter was not there, adding that his wife tried to contact her on her mobile phone but it was switched off. Later, Noor called herself and told them that she was going to Lahore with her friends and would return in a day or two and that they should not worry, Mr Mukadam said in the FIR.

On 20 July, he received a call in the afternoon from the accused who told him that Noor was not with him, the FIR said, adding that at around 10 pm the complainant was informed by Kohsar police his daughter had been murdered and to come to the police station.





# Talha Talib: Pakistan's Saving Grace at Tokyo 2020

*Talha's heroics promoted Pakistanis to finally ask the right question: Why?*

By Ali Abdullah

Ten athletes representing the world's fifth most populous nation – ten representing a population of over 220 million? Pakistan's Olympic deficit is truly mindboggling.

What is even more mindboggling, the nation woke up to this deficit in the middle of Tokyo 2020 (still so named although taking place in 2021) thanks chiefly to the heroics of a Gujranwala lad came within an inch of winning a medal.

Pakistan's saving grace at Tokyo 2020, Talha Talib, the first Pakistani weightlifter to show up at Olympic Games since 1976, was an invitation entry in the men's 67 kg category.

Pakistani sports fans will never forget 25 July 2021, the day when this virtual unknown from the city of wrestlers held the gold medal spot in the 67 kg category until the final round, when he was eliminated from the podium.

The only training Talha received was with his father in his old school as he did not had the funds to go to a gym. His steadfast determination and a stroke of luck landed Talha at Tokyo in Pakistan colours.

"Talib's lift of 151kg in Snatch category was the second-best of the round". "He failed in his first Clean & Jerk attempt of 166kg and even though he was successful for the same weight in his next attempt and also cleared 170kg later, his combined total of 320 was surpassed by others, including Zani, who lifted just 2kg more than Talib.

"For a little while during Clean & Jerk, he was in the lead, giving his growing number of fans back home a glimmer of hope." It mattered little that he finished fifth in the end. His plucky performance won him instant fame and admiration of the Pakistani Twitterati, with many wondering what he could have achieved given proper training and resources.

People took to social media to vent their disappointment. The country that produced legends like Jahangir Khan and Jansher Khan, and the best hockey team. Furious, they asked if it was a systemic issue or has sports talent indeed become so scarce in Pakistan.

Some pointed out rather pointedly that Pakistan Sports Board (PSB) hadn't organised a single camp for weightlifters in last three years; that Talha wasn't provided any special training program even after his qualification; and that he was attending Tokyo 2020 without a coach because president of Pakistan Weightlifting Federation (PWF) had availed the slot for himself to be at the Games.

The 2020 Games see the introduction of new competitions including 3x3 Basketball, freestyle BMX, mixed events in a number of sports, and the return of Madison cycling, baseball



and softball. Under new IOC policies, which allow the host organizing committee to add new sports to the Olympic Program to augment the permanent core events, these Games saw karate, sport climbing, surfing, and skateboarding make their Olympic debuts.

In a controversy surrounding the Games, for the first time ever director of the opening ceremony was sacked over an insensitive joke made in the past. Kentaro Kobayashi, a popular entertainer, was dismissed after a 1998 video clip resurfaced online of a skit in which he was seen joking about a game he called "let's play massacre the Jews", prompting laughter in the audience.

In 1940 Winter Olympic games were supposed to happen in Japan. Due to outbreak of war between Japan and China, Japan stepped back and did not host the event. In 1944 the event was scheduled in London. Even though there was an on-going war, the Germans allowed the prisoners to stage the event, though it was unofficial. The event happened as it was IOC's 50th anniversary.

Japan is on top in Tokyo Olympic 2020 with 8 Gold medals, 2 silver and 3 bronze. USA is in second number with 7 Gold, 3 Silver and 4 bronze medals. China is on number 3 with 6 Gold, 5 silver and 3 bronze medals. Despite being on number three, China has the most number of medals combined in Tokyo Olympics 2020.

This is the first time an iteration of the Olympic Games has been postponed and rescheduled, although the Games have been cancelled three times in the past. However, the event retains the Tokyo 2020 name for marketing and branding purposes despite taking place in 2021.

# Shaheens Out of England, Into the Caribbean

*Bruised by a plucky England, can the Green Shirts bounce back and take it out on the West Indies?*



After receiving a thorough drubbing at the hands of a rookie English squad, the Green Shirts are now in the Caribbean to test their mettle against the West Indies in two tests and five Twenty20 Internationals.

The T20I series was to originally comprised five but was reduced to four T20Is following the rescheduled One Day International (ODI) fixtures in the West Indies' series against Australia.

As we go to press, news has come from Bridgetown that the first T20i has been washed out due to rain after nine overs. As it turns out, that was enough for Pakistani pacers to set off some eye-popping fireworks.

Brought to bowl the second over in his debut match, right-arm pacer Mohammad Wasim pitched one short of length, getting it to angle in middle and off. The lift and pace was enough to catch Lendl Simmons, who tried in vain to pull, on the right side of his neck.

The physio rushed in and took Simmons off with a sling protecting his right arm. After Simmons was retied hurt, Wasim had his replacement Chris Gayle caught at long-on with a slower ball.

There was plenty of action for the nine overs of the innings as West Indies 85 for loss of 5 wickets, two of them going to Hasan Ali and one each to Wasim, Muhammad Hafeez, and Usman Qadir.

The downfall of the Pakistan Cricket Team throughout the three-match ODI series against England has been heavy on green's fans. This was not the only poor showcase of performances in the fifty-over format, but similar consistent results have plagued the team for a while.

In the last Pakistan vs England T20I series, the total put up by the men in green whilst batting first has astonished the viewers with terrific knocks. The batsmen played throughout the powerplay and put up mighty runs in the first ten overs, continuing with 152 runs in the second phase.

Henceforth, creating a record for Pakistan as no other team has scored 150+ in the last ten overs of a T20I match. The fiery innings have put up wonders for the crowd at Trent Bridge as they brought up their highest ever T20I total in the format.

After a break the teams were off to the second T20i game. Pakistan won the toss and elected to bowl first. The Pakistani team remained unchanged however changes were made in the English squad, including the regular skipper Eoin Morgan. England was lead by wicketkeeper batsman Jos Butler.

Shaheens did get wickets with new ball and took wickets timely, but Babar Azam felt like 30 runs were given extra. Pakistan was not as energetic in the field as they were in the first T20. England managed to reach the 200 mark. Pakistan needed 201 to win the second T20I and wrap up the series.

Pakistani openers Babar Azam and Muhammad Rizwan did give a good start to the team. Both openers left the crease and the responsibility was now on the middle order batsman. Batting line-up shattered and was unable to finish the game in their favor. In the end Pakistan lost the game by 45 runs and series was leveled 1-1.

The third and final T20I was played on 20 July in Leeds. It was the decider. Pakistan won the toss and elected to bat first. Azam khan and Haris Rauf were rested, Hassan Ali came back in the team and Usman Qadir also played the last T20I.

Pakistani openers Babar Azam and Muhammad Rizwan were not able to middle the ball timely. Skipper Babar Azam failed to put pressure on the opposition and got out early on in his innings.

Pakistani batsmen failed to set a difficult target for the English. Except Rizwan no batsman scored a fifty or played a respectable innings. A total of 155 was given to the English team.

English openers looked like they will finish the game in between 10 to 15 overs. Pakistani bowlers made a comeback and made the hosts struggle to finish chase down the target. In the end, the target wasn't big enough. The hosts won the T20I series as well.

By Ali Abdullah



## ‘People Are Talking About Sexual Harassment Now’

*Television star Zara Noor Abbas believes in the medium’s potential to bring about change through awareness.*



By **Kaukab Jahan**

**Z**ara Noor Abbas is one of those actors of Pakistan who won fame in the beginning of their career. The daughter of actor Asma Abbas and niece of veteran Bushra Ansari, Abbas made her acting debut at a very young age by appearing in short plays.

Zara made her television debut in 2016 in Hum TV's *Dharkan*. She gained critical acclaim for her portrayal of *Arsala* in 2017 series *Khamoshi* and established her as a leading actor in Urdu television. Thereafter, it was back-to-back plays like *Lamhay* (2018), *Qaid* (2018), *Deewar-e-Shab* (2019) and *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).

Her role of *Rani* in ISPR's *Ehd-e-Wafa* in particular bring humour and colour to the drama, although the story was based on some serious issues of our society. Currently she is appearing in Hum TV's drama serial *Phaans* as *Zeba*, a rape survivor who is fighting for justice and determined to see the culprit get punishment.

Abbas made her film debut with *Wajahat Rauf's Chhalawa* (2019) and later appeared in *Asim Raza's Parey Hut Love* the same year. Getting so much fame and achievements in a short span of time, critics called her a superstar-in-the-making.

The Truth International talked to Zara Noor Abbas about her role in *Phaans* and her future endeavours.

**TTI: Why and how did you accept the role in *Phaans*?**

**ZNA:** I got the script, I read it, liked it, had a meeting with the director but had to decline as I was occupied with some other project. As the circumstances would have it, I left that project and came back to *Phaans* – but I was pulled to another project which was also pending. Ultimately I left everything and joined *Phaans*. So actually I was in and out of *Phaans* for almost three months. I think there are some projects which pick you up. Same is the case with *Phaans*. The play adopted me.

**TTI: Did you meet any girl or woman who has been through these situations or incidents [of rape] before going to adopt the character?**

**ZNA:** I think the best research that you do for your character is getting the first hand information from the people you know. I talked to some women I knew who had suffered the pain and the trauma of being sexually harassed and raped. Moreover my co-actors were very supportive. I discussed with them the issues of the society we live in, its taboos, how things happen as a result of different incidents and what usually women (and men) think in these situations. So that was also a source of gathering information about the topic of my character.

**TTI: Do you believe that Pakistani television drama can bring up various social issues and create awareness among people?**

**ZNA:** Of course! In Pakistan the television is the most watched medium. How many films do we make? There's no denying the importance of television. So, if we want to convey a message through this medium, I am sure it will reach the target.

**TTI: Do you think Phaans can be a part of the movements for women's rights (especially MeeToo) to issues like sexual harassment and abuse at work place?**

**ZNA:** The MeToo movement for protecting the rights of women has just come into limelight because of social media in the last couple of years. It was there for so long. It is a winning situation for all of us now because a lot of women are coming out and talking about this. The most important thing is that if a woman goes through any kind of sexual harassment and abuse anywhere, she should talk about it. It is the taboo which we need to break.

**TTI: Do you think this drama will give courage to women to speak up about sexual abuse or even rape?**

**ZNA:** I think this movement has spanned years, but I believe that little drops of water make the ocean. So I think the more we try collectively, the easier our journey would be to our ultimate goal. Honestly, I think it will take quite a long time to break this taboo. But we must keep trying.

**TTI: Do you think the perception about sexual harassment and rape survivors is changing? Are more people talking about it?**

**ZNA:** Yes. Many parents, brothers and sisters and people in general are open to talk about the issue of sexual harassment. In the old days, people didn't want to talk about this. Even if unfortunately something like that happened with someone in the family, they would strictly be asked to remain silent. People thought it was fine to hide it without knowing its repercussions on the survivor and on the whole society.

That is why I feel we can encourage it more through our dramas. Pakistan drama is closer to life and people relate to them. That is why it is celebrated highly. Our dramas are the depiction of our society and I hope if we raise a real issue and suggest solutions, it will have a positive influence on people. It will bring change.

**TTI: Are you doing any film as well besides drama these days?**

**ZNA:** Right now I have a film with director Haseeb Hasan in the pipeline. It is scripted by Umaira Ahmed and my co-stars are Fawad Khan and Sanam Saeed. I signed it before the Covid-19 pandemic. Yes we are still destined to shoot it. Till now, we are shooting it on paper (laughs). Let's see.

**TTI: You did the role of a happy-go-lucky girl who loves to have fun and dance in your last two films. How are your fans going to see you in your next film?**

**ZNA:** Actually after the Covid as the world order is changing with a new development every new day, I have let everything go with the flow. Covid has changed the world. Now I am concerned about my characters more than my career graph. I feel that right now when the whole world is going through a difficult time, it is more important that we get out of this hole with healthy bodies, jobs in our hands, and food in our kitchens. Having a safe family is more important to me than anything else. This is the biggest blessing one can have at the moment.





# A farewell to printer's ink

By M.A. Niazi

It would not be right to write these notes without saying that they were given their name by Arif Nizami. They must have been a minor matter for him, as even I can realise, for he had many matters to deal with, many decisions to make, in the newspapers he edited. But these notes have been of importance in my own life, for I've been writing them now for more than three decades. I never had any idea of writing them, and was then a wet-behind-the-ears reporter out of college only the year before, when I was summoned by the editor. Mr Arif Nizami was then what I would now regard as a mere stripling, but I then regarded him as an old man, not as ancient as Ahmad Aziz Zia, the executive editor, or Jeff Plair, the news editor, but around the same age as Javed Nazir, our chief reporter, who was vigorous enough. But still old enough to have been my teacher in college.

Arif sahib briefed me about the happenings of an Iqbal Day function, The Nation had come out on the 1st of October, so this would be about a month after we had come into the market. I had not attended the function, but I took the brief, and scuttled off to write up the account. I batted it out on the old heavy-duty typewriters we then had. We went into the 1990 election computerised, but back then, in this very same galaxy, but a long, long time ago, it was those heavy old machines. Anyhow, once done, I took the result to Arif Sahib. He approved it, though I think he made a couple of changes with his pen. He then said that the piece should have a name. In fact, he said, I should keep doing write-ups like that, and that it should be called 'City Notes.' For better or worse, these notes were born.

I went to get briefed for a couple of weeks before writing them, but after a while Arif sahib turned me loose, and left me to make of these notes what I would. I did. I'm not aware of how much he had to tolerate on my behalf, and where and how he defended me, not in those notes I wrote, but in the reports I filed.

He backed us reporters to the hilt, that much I know. He had himself been one, which was probably the reason. He was also deeply committed to press freedom, as his activity in the All Pakistan Newspapers



Society and the Council of Newspaper Editors showed, and I found that he did not pass on the pressure he got to reporters. Let me assure you, if a reporter doesn't know what pressure he has created, he will be more fearless.

One result was that Arif Sahib insisted on knowing that his report was correct. He never claimed the editor's privilege of asking a reporter to disclose his source to him. My own experience was that he would ask the reporter questions that went around the source, but did not find out who exactly it was. I presume that the principle was that if you didn't know something, you couldn't let slip even a hint. Arif Sahib knew how to walk that minefield. He had been there.

I would not claim to be among his circle of friends. However, I do claim to know those who were his friends. And they were basically people he had known a long time. But I do claim to have been struck by something I heard from him (at one of those reporters' meetings so long ago), "the

graveyard is full of indispensable people." I don't know where he got it from, but apparently there's no firm attribution for the quote, which has been ascribed to people as diverse as Churchill, de Gaulle and Clemenceau. Anyhow, when he spoke it, little did I know that I would have to juxtapose it with him much more closely to him than as the source. And it is perhaps only right that, on this occasion, we remember that this is where we will go ourselves.

This space will not suffice to sum up an acquaintance going back over so many years, but I will leave it by saying that after school and college, which is the best time for making friends, Arif sahib was by the most influential presence in my life. Newspaper editors are, for they are part of the daily routine of all their readers. Arif sahib was a good custodian for them, whichever paper he edited, this or another. He will be sorely missed, not just by the very wide circle of his acquaintances, but also by those many who never met him, but those who have their lives touched by his paper.

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