

Fortnightly

# The Truth International

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## Palestine War

Geopolitical realities and strategic interests are framing foreign policy

## Bilawal Zardari Relationship

Bilawal's abrupt change of profile picture on X fueled speculation within political circles

## National Accounts Committee

Estimates indicated fluctuations across various sectors, leading to alterations in the GDP figures

# Truce on Coffins





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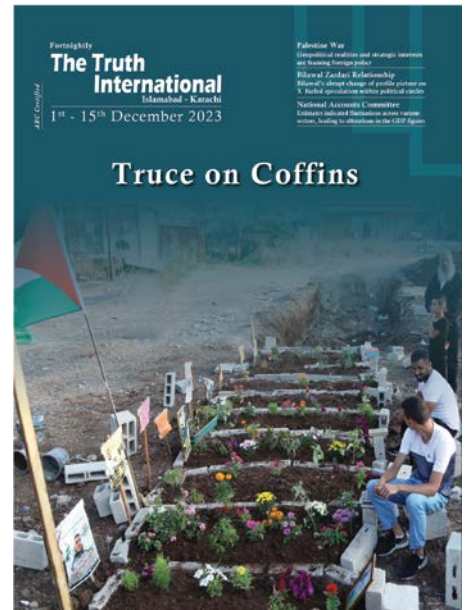
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# Navigating the Complexities: Unveiling Western Support for Israel in the Gaza Conflict and its Global Ramifications



By Umer Farooq

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has triggered a heightened examination of the unwavering support that the Western world, particularly the United States and Europe, extends to Israel. The swift appearance of Western political leaders in Tel Aviv following the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israeli territory has raised questions about the motivations, implications, and challenges associated with this support. This comprehensive analysis delves into the multifaceted dimensions of Western support, exploring its geopolitical roots, comparative dynamics with other conflicts, implications for Western European nations, reactions in Muslim societies, and the intricate interplay between emotions, dependency, and diplomatic manoeuvring.

## Geopolitical Roots of Western Support

The staunch backing of Israel by Western nations is deeply rooted in historical, strategic, and geopolitical considerations. The establishment of Israel in 1948 with Western support, particularly from the United States, has fostered a strong alliance. The narrative

suggesting that Israel's actions in Gaza wouldn't have been possible without American and European support necessitates an exploration of the motivations underpinning this alliance.

The United States, as a major global player, has historically aligned itself with Israel due to shared democratic values, strategic interests in the Middle East, and the historical context of the Holocaust, which contributed to international support for the creation of the Israeli state. The Cold War further solidified the relationship, with Israel seen as a reliable ally in a region where the Soviet Union sought influence.

## Comparative Analysis: Afghanistan and Gaza

To contextualise the Western response to Israeli actions, a comparative analysis with American military operations in Afghanistan is essential. Critics argue that the vigour with which the West opposes Israeli atrocities pales in comparison to the response to American actions in Afghanistan. However, such a simplistic comparison overlooks critical nuances.

The U.S. engagement in Afghanistan was framed by the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and a mission to dismantle the Taliban regime harbouring terrorists. The U.S. never indicated a long-term occupation, demonstrating a commitment to a timely withdrawal. In contrast, Israel's actions in Gaza are accused of ethnic cleansing, with a potential long-term occupation and displacement of Palestinian populations.

## Implications for Western European Countries

The potential escalation of the conflict, particularly involving regional powers like Iran, raises concerns for Western European countries. Two primary challenges emerge: the prospect of a refugee crisis and the threat of terror attacks on European soil. Drawing parallels with historical instances, such as the post-9/11 era and the Syrian civil war, emphasises the vulnerability of Europe to the spillover effects of conflicts in the Middle East.

Southern European countries, with



coastlines along the Mediterranean Sea, would likely bear the brunt of a refugee influx. The analysis underscores the need for Western European nations to carefully consider their positions, balancing support for Israel with an awareness of potential repercussions, both in terms of humanitarian crises and security threats.

## European Leaders' Caution and Unity

The visible unity displayed by Western leaders standing alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reflects a collective stance. However, this unity is not without reservations. European leaders, including those from France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, and Italy, have cautioned Israel against a ground offensive in Gaza.

The caution stems from a pragmatic evaluation of potential consequences, particularly the fear of another major refugee crisis in the Mediterranean region. The delicate balancing act between supporting Israel and urging restraint underscores the complexities inherent in Western responses to the Gaza conflict.

## Muslim Societal Reactions

Beyond the geopolitical arena, the analysis delves into the strong public reactions in Muslim societies, with a particular focus on Pakistan. The palpable anger in Pakistani society over events in Gaza is examined, with political leaders consistently voicing their concerns about Israeli atrocities. The idea of a united Muslim world is explored, drawing on the historical context provided by Cemil Aydin.

The concept of the Muslim world as a political unit is distinguished from the religious notion of the Islamic Ummah. Aydin's historical perspective traces the birth of the Muslim World during the World Wars and the Cold War, shaped by the interests of global powers like the Ottomans, Britain, and Germany. The analysis acknowledges the emotional resonance of the idea of a Muslim world but underscores the challenges in translating these emotions into meaningful political changes.

## Dependency and Intrusive Political Diplomacy

The analysis recognizes Pakistan's historical dependency on Western support, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. The narrative emphasises the influence these nations have wielded in shaping Pakistan's security paradigm. The complex relationship between nuclear deterrence and Western diplomacy is discussed, with divergent views on whether nuclear deterrence or Western intervention saved Pakistan from Indian military might.

Pakistan's leaders, understanding the intricacies of the global power dynamics, often welcome intrusive political

The analysis posits that Muslim societies, despite their emotional responses, currently lack the political, economic, or military wherewithal to assert themselves on the grand stage of world politics. This acknowledgment does not diminish the value of emotions but rather emphasises the need for a nuanced approach that combines the emotional pulse of societies with a pragmatic understanding of geopolitical constraints.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the ongoing Gaza conflict has laid bare the complexities of geopolitical relationships, particularly the unwavering support of the Western world for Israel. This comprehensive analysis has traversed through the implications and challenges associated with this support,



diplomacy from Western ambassadors. The analysis traces the historical context, highlighting instances since the 1990s when Western powers diplomatically intervened to prevent conflict in South Asia. The need for Washington's approval for loans and financial assistance further underscores the dependency factor in Pakistan's relations with Western nations.

## Geopolitical Realities and Emotions in Foreign Policy

The conclusion underscores the importance of considering geopolitical realities and strategic interests in framing foreign policy. It cautions against relying solely on emotions, acknowledging that while emotions are a valid expression of public sentiment, they may not be effective tools for shaping foreign policy or security strategy.

exploring the dynamics of Western reactions to Israeli actions, the potential consequences for Western European nations, the palpable reactions in Muslim societies, and the intricate interplay between emotions, dependency, and diplomatic manoeuvring.

As the situation continues to evolve, it remains imperative to navigate the intricate web of international relations with a keen awareness of the historical context, geopolitical nuances, and the ever-present interplay of strategic interests. The Gaza conflict, with its global ramifications, serves as a lens through which to examine the intricacies of alliances, the balancing act of political leaders, and the challenges posed by regional conflicts in an interconnected world. The path forward requires a delicate equilibrium between geopolitical realities and the aspirations of societies affected by the consequences of these complex dynamics.



# Desperate bid to take center stage

*The Gaza Conflict has prompted the United States to act unconventionally*



By Naqi Akbar

Ever since the implementation of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the escalation of tensions between the Jewish nation-state and the Palestinian enclave has been regarded as a temporary affair, which usually deescalates until the next time. The 2014 and 2021 escalations were followed by prolonged calm between the two antagonists. The recent escalation was exceptional on two counts, the element of surprise on the part of the Palestinian resistance and secondly the new face of the United States of America, which the world has been observing in disbelief for nearly two months!

Gone were the United States administrations of Jimmy Carter, Reagan, and Clinton; who still thought it necessary to tread a middle path when dealing with Israel on the one hand and with the Muslim and Arab world on the other hand. The JCPOA in 2015 finalized between the Democrats Obama administration and the reformist government of Hassan Rouhani would not have been finalized if the US

president had not held his ground despite all types of political gaming by the Jewish state to derail the process.

The change of face on the part of the United States foreign policy might be guided by short-term imperatives; however, it will take years for the world-warring great power to precipitate 'damage control'. The reluctance on the part of the United States to affect a ceasefire and continue with a forced demographic change (read massacre), points to the fact that the hawks have decided to put all eggs in one basket; for good or for bad. The relations with the Muslim world mean masses and not the leaders will take time to repair.

Despite disagreements of perception, the United States was able to carry an image, even after the Vietnam fiasco, that it decided with its head and was not overrun by emotions. Regretfully, the current crisis proved to the contrary. Practically, a waning power was found desperately holding its ground as a world-strong man, even when the facts were not helping. It

was an about-turn when that society witnessed the anti-war votes for Obama and even Trump proved that the United States Electoral College was looking inwards rather than looking outwards.

The reasons for this volte-face emanate from the fact that the United States, despite internal unwillingness to fight, still wants a brave face to show to its biggest liability; the Jewish state and the world at large. The inflating domestic debt in the United States going into trillions during the Republican war years 2001- 2004, created a voter reaction that flocked around Obama, and the potent outcome of that was the USA pulling out of Iraq in 2011 and subletting the Houthi threat to the Saudi Arabian and Emirati armed forces. At that point, in time, the Pakistani war machine tactfully avoided the 'international conscription' citing parliamentary disapproval for the Yemeni engagement.

Even Trump, despite his aggressive loose talk, still refrained from actual war plans against Iran, despite the fact that JCPOA



was scrapped as per the Israeli wishes. The only symbolic US expression was weekly B-52 sorties taking off from the UK or Germany-based NATO bases for a stroll along the gulf, dutifully escorted by IDF and Royal Saudi Air Force jets.

As opposed to that, today as a difficult brokered ceasefire might have lapsed by now, the United States Navy, Marines, and even a few boots might be in the war theater. A casual stroll on the following website, <http://www.flightradar24.com> along the Lebanese and Israeli coastline will reveal a flurry of RAF or USAF military transports either delivering logistics or ferrying troops from even desolate airstrips in Israel, besides in few cases engaged in reconnaissance. That level of non-combat days deployment by the United States, its administration discouraging any ceasefire in the first place, taking a hardline stance, which might still have dissenting opinions amongst the middle-income Israelis, strongly indicates that the United States is treating the occasion as a do or die, not just on behalf of Israel, but also the United States.

It is a fact that despite these expressions of strength on the part of the United States in the particular case of Israel, it has been Russia and China, which are proving to be more effective in the international scene. The temporary mending of fences between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the bid by the Chinese foreign office to take initiative over halt to relentless bombing by the IDF; all have created a feeling of the United States being left out, hence its reluctant approval for the ceasefire. Despite the fact that the United States would have certainly sabotaged that temporary peace between the two Middle Eastern Powers namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, it was practically helpless. Regards Ukraine, the USA's ineffectiveness has not been a secret.

Furthermore, on the trade front, the United States seems to be losing ground rapidly to the Chinese comparative advantage. The erratic anti-dumping duties have done little damage to the Chinese advantages. On the economic front, it has been the money printing option without backing, coupled with military diplomacy, which has kept the Dollar afloat, besides a shirking line of compliant nation-states like Pakistan, who still feel that it is worth a sound decision to

put one's eggs in the American basket.

The recent brokered ceasefire seems to be a diplomatic effort in a hurry. The intent is that with the current blind pro-Zionist thrust, the continuation of the same can be diplomatically suicidal in the long run. As things stand, the war in the Middle East is fast turning towards a long haul, like the Yemen conflict. The level of American mobilization in the first few weeks of war; when there were opportunities for de-escalation, seems to suggest that now the Biden administration in a desperate bid to flex its muscles has become the prisoner of its own stances. It cannot move forward without another big jump in spending courtesy indefinite mobilization of forces in the



Mediterranean. It might be definitely under pressure to escalate or widen the war; while trying to pretend, it does not want an escalation. The escalation will be a gamble as the United States prides its air firepower; which it feels can turn the tables in Israel's favor.

However, what it seems to ignore is that during the last two months, whatever gains have been accrued by the IDF has been through the air strikes. That too is a liability baggage; keeping in view the fact that during the period IDF with the support of the US has shown complete disregard for the Geneva Convention as well creating, as evidence, multiple instances of collateral damage.

The US contention that airpower will

cripple the resistance and results will be rapid are miscalculations. The IDF ground forces are relying more on F-16s support missions, than walking up to the helpless Palestinian civil targets. Even if there is escalation, the United States runs the risk of another Vietnam; a much wider Vietnam spread between the Mediterranean and the Gulf. Here the air power will fail to give results as ground operations will definitely bog down them. The United States will not be confronted by a single entity Vietcong, but rather a civilization with deep wounds on its body.

The volte-face as discussed in the article might well be the undoing of yesteryear's great power. Given the fact that China,

Russia, and countries like Turkey and Iran have read between the lines of the global trends, the United States and its trusted allies like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Pakistan might have boarded the wrong proverbial express train. If the United States had kept its classic, cool and tried to balance out things deceptively, much would have been different in terms of the outcome.

The desperation of the waning superpower has all the ingredients to change the scenario into a world war, with a chance to redraw the map; a thing, which US policymakers with hawkish tendencies have already drawn up. However, what they are missing out on is uncontrollable factors, which are not in the control of the United States either.



# Gaza Under Siege



By Anum Akram

The continuous airstrikes by Israel on Gaza have not only impacted the Gaza Strip but have also taken a toll on Israel's own economy, costing approximately \$260 million every day. The repercussions of the conflict extend far beyond mere economic considerations, delving into the profound humanitarian crisis that has befallen the region. As the conflict entered its sixth week, the disparity in casualty counts between Gaza and Israel became glaring, raising questions about the perceived favouritism towards Israel on the global stage.

In Gaza, the aftermath of the airstrikes is not merely about numbers; it is woven into the stories of the people, leaving indelible and disturbing effects on their minds. The scale of devastation is so immense that attempting to quantify it feels futile. The contrast in the damage caused by Hamas in Israel, which is somehow manageable to quantify, further emphasizes the disproportionate impact on the people of Gaza.

Approximately 1.6 million people in Gaza have been displaced from their homes during the six weeks of airstrikes. More than 566,600 people are living in 148

designated shelters under the UN Palestinian refugee agency. According to a UN report, about 42 per cent of housing units in Gaza have been destroyed, with 15,100 units rendered completely uninhabitable.

The number of casualties in Gaza, as reported by the Ministry of Health, is 84% higher than the total number of deaths during the 50 days of fighting in 2014, where 2,251 Palestinians lost their lives. The Hamas government of Gaza has claimed a total of 13,000 casualties, but the actual number is likely much higher, with many still buried under the rubble.

Of particular concern is the impact on Gaza's children, who make up around 2.3 million of the population. Since October 7, Israeli attacks have resulted in the deaths of at least 5,600 children, averaging one Palestinian child losing their life approximately every 10 minutes. Tragically, around 1,800 children are still missing beneath the rubble, with fears that many have lost their lives. An additional 9,000 children have suffered injuries, many of which have permanently altered their lives, creating a generation deeply scarred by the horrors of conflict.

The assault on Gaza's hospitals has expanded, with the Israeli military targeting healthcare centers. The Indonesian hospital in Gaza was bombarded, resulting in the deaths of fourteen Palestinians, including doctors. The last operating hospital in northern Gaza was surrounded by Israeli army tanks, and the casualties resulting from these attacks, as per UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, mark the largest slaughter of civilians since he took office in 2017.

As a result of the ongoing Israeli bombardment, all hospitals in northern Gaza are now out of service. The scenes are harrowing, with dead bodies left outside the morgue, premature babies dying in incubators, and doctors forced to operate by candlelight without anaesthesia. Israel's deliberate attacks on healthcare centres have exacerbated an already dire situation, leading to mass evacuations and further loss of life.

Since the commencement of the conflict on October 7, there have been 335 reported attacks on health facilities in the occupied Palestinian territory, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).



Among these incidents, 164 attacks occurred in the Gaza Strip, and 171 took place in the West Bank. Hospitals have undergone mass evacuations, resulting in deaths and injuries among patients, their companions, and displaced people seeking shelter in these facilities.

The dire situation extends to Gaza's education system, which is now almost completely erased. A report by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on November 15 revealed that 279 educational facilities, accounting for over 51% of the total number of educational institutions, have been reported as damaged. This means that none of Gaza's 625,000 students have been able to access education amid the widespread destruction.

Journalists from Gaza, such as Motaz Azaiza and Plestia, have shared distressing images showcasing the devastation of educational institutes, including the destruction of Al-Azhar University. These institutes, once the assets of the community, have been reduced to remnants in a matter of minutes. The destruction not only robs individuals of their presence but also annihilates the hope of building a future.

Mosques, churches, media offices, and industrial facilities have also been targeted by Israeli aggression. Most affected were the mosques in Gaza, and several damaged churches were of historical significance. The assault on these institutions further deepens the humanitarian crisis, erasing not only physical structures but also cultural and historical landmarks.



In stark contrast, while Hamas launched attacks on Israel, the impact on the infrastructure and civilian structures has been significantly lower. The focus on targeting hospitals, schools, and religious institutions by Israeli forces raises serious concerns about the disproportionate response to the conflict.

President Joe Biden has expressed optimism about nearing a deal for the release of Gaza prisoners, suggesting the potential for a ceasefire brokered by Qatar to enable the exchange of prisoners for a temporary halt in hostilities. While a truce is a welcome prospect, the people of Gaza continue to suffer, and the extensive infrastructure damage ensures that the impact will persist long after the bombs stop dropping.

The declared goal of Israel to occupy Gaza "for an indefinite period of time" casts a dark shadow over any prospects of a swift

resolution. The depressing reality is that not even the pretence of counting Palestinian lives seems present in discussions. While an Israeli civilian death toll of over a thousand was deemed intolerable, it appears that there is no limit to the number of Gazans who can be violently killed without sparking a comparable level of outrage.

The West's reluctance to engage in meaningful discussions about the human toll in Gaza adds to the sense of despair. The ongoing conflict not only threatens lives in the present but also jeopardizes the very foundation of a stable and prosperous future for the people of Gaza. As the international community grapples with finding a resolution, the urgency to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza becomes more apparent, emphasizing the need for empathy, dialogue, and concerted efforts to alleviate the suffering of the innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.





# Region in Turmoil: The ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict and its Regional Ramifications

By Kanwal Munir

The enduring conflict in Palestine, characterized by historical grievances and geopolitical intricacies, holds consequences that extend well beyond its borders. Its multifaceted impacts reverberate across the socio-political, economic, and humanitarian realms, presenting challenges that transcend regional boundaries. The deeply rooted nature of the conflict intensifies these repercussions, creating a complex web of interconnected issues. As violence continues to escalate and tensions persist, there is a growing apprehension about the potential spillover effect into neighbouring areas. The global community, recognizing the far-reaching implications, faces the imperative to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the conflict, fostering a collective effort to promote stability, justice, and peace in the region and beyond.

## Socio-Political Ramifications

The socio-political ramifications of the ongoing conflict in Palestine are profound and have enduring effects on the region. The struggle for self-determination and the quest for statehood by the Palestinian people have been central themes, with both Israel and Palestine claiming historical rights to the land. The unresolved nature of these issues contributes to a volatile regional atmosphere, with the potential to incite political instability in neighbouring countries.

One significant consequence is the impact on regional alliances. The Israel-Palestine conflict has long been a fault line in Middle Eastern geopolitics, shaping alliances and rivalries. The unwavering support that Israel receives from certain global powers has strained diplomatic relations in the region, leading to a polarization of nations. The Arab-Israeli conflict, of which the Israel-Palestine conflict is a core component, has historically influenced regional politics, and any escalation could further entrench these divisions.



Furthermore, the internal dynamics within Palestine are intricately linked to the broader regional landscape. The infighting between different Palestinian factions, such as Fatah and Hamas, not only weakens the Palestinian cause but also has repercussions for regional stability. The power struggle within Palestine has the potential to spill over into neighbouring countries, exacerbating existing tensions and complicating diplomatic efforts.

## Economic Implications

The economic ramifications of the conflict are dire, not only for Palestine but also for the broader region. The persistent violence and political instability have hampered economic development, leading to high unemployment rates and widespread poverty. The destruction of infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, further exacerbates the humanitarian crisis, placing an immense burden on neighbouring countries that may need to absorb refugees.

The economic interdependence of countries in the region means that instability in one nation can have a cascading effect on others. The disruption of trade routes, the decline in tourism, and the uncertainty

surrounding investments due to the conflict all contribute to an economic downturn that can extend beyond the immediate conflict zone. Regional economies, already grappling with various challenges, are further strained by the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

## Humanitarian Crisis

The Israel-Palestine conflict has unleashed a dire humanitarian crisis, with profound and immediate consequences. The displacement of civilians, loss of life, and deteriorating living conditions have reached alarming proportions. The Gaza Strip, a focal point of the conflict, bears the brunt of this crisis, grappling with a dense population and limited resources that intensify the suffering of its inhabitants.

However, the humanitarian fallout extends well beyond the borders of Palestine. Neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon have shouldered a significant burden, absorbing a substantial number of Palestinian refugees over the years. This influx places immense strain on the already stretched resources and infrastructure of these host nations. The challenges these countries face in providing for displaced



populations not only exacerbate social tensions but also create additional hurdles for maintaining stability in the region. The spillover effect underscores the interconnectedness of the humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the need for collaborative international efforts. Addressing the plight of displaced Palestinians requires a comprehensive approach that not only focuses on immediate relief efforts but also seeks sustainable solutions to alleviate the burden on both the directly affected areas and their neighbouring nations.

## Potential for escalation

The persistent concern over the potential spread of the Israel-Palestine conflict to other areas is rooted in the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The region is entangled in an interconnected web of alliances and historical animosities, where an escalation in one conflict hotspot can send shockwaves across the entire area. One of the primary risk factors for an expanded conflict is the involvement of external actors. Various countries, driven by geopolitical interests and historical ties, offer support to either Israel or Palestine. This external involvement transforms what might initially be a localized conflict into a broader regional confrontation. The proxy nature of some of these conflicts, with different nations backing opposing sides, significantly heightens the risk of a wider conflagration. As external powers vie for

influence, the local dispute becomes a battleground for geopolitical rivalries.

Furthermore, the unresolved nature of the Israel-Palestine conflict, coupled with the absence of a comprehensive peace agreement, creates a fertile ground for radicalization. The lack of a definitive resolution perpetuates grievances, providing a breeding ground for extremist ideologies. Radical groups may exploit the frustrations and discontents stemming from the conflict to further their own agendas. This radicalization not only poses a direct threat to the stability of the region but also has the potential to spill over into neighbouring areas.

The risk of radicalization is particularly concerning, as extremist groups may manipulate the complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict to recruit and mobilize supporters. This not only fuels conflicts in adjacent regions but also contributes to the broader spread of extremism, with repercussions felt on a global scale. Recognizing the potential for the Israel-Palestine conflict to act as a catalyst for regional instability, the international community must prioritize diplomatic efforts and constructive dialogue to address the root causes and work towards a sustainable and just resolution.

## Conclusion

The Israel-Palestine conflict stands as a crucible, boiling with historical, political,

and religious complexities that reverberate not only throughout the region but also far beyond its borders. The multifaceted nature of this protracted struggle manifests in socio-political, economic, and humanitarian ramifications, underscoring the urgent need for a comprehensive and just resolution. The potential for escalation and the ominous prospect of the conflict spreading to other areas highlight the profound interconnectedness of the Middle East. This underscores the critical importance of addressing the root causes of the conflict, as its resolution is not only pivotal for the immediate region but holds broader implications for global stability.

In navigating this intricate landscape, the international community assumes a pivotal role. Facilitating dialogue, fostering understanding, and supporting initiatives that promote peace are crucial components of a constructive approach. The urgency of finding a sustainable resolution necessitates concerted efforts to address the grievances of all parties involved, laying the groundwork for a lasting and equitable peace. The stakes are undeniably high. The repercussions of the conflict extend beyond the immediate suffering of those directly affected, impacting the stability and prosperity of the entire Middle East. As such, a collective commitment to diplomacy and conflict resolution is imperative, not only for the well-being of those living in the conflict zone but also for the broader global community invested in the pursuit of a more peaceful and just world.





# Pakistan's Complex Response to the Israel-Hamas Conflict



By Jannat Saeed

The global response to the Palestinian struggle has ignited widespread criticism not only against Western imperialist nations, but also influential Gulf States. The world mourns the plight of the innocents in Gaza, including children, women, and animals, with Free Palestine rallies spreading globally. This movement transcends borders, framing the conflict as a battle between right and wrong, humanity and inhumanity, and impartiality versus neutrality. Noam Chomsky, a renowned US academic, aptly states, "While not all evils can be rectified, ongoing ones should surely cease."

## Protests in Pakistan

Pro-Palestinian protests in Pakistan gained momentum in early October following the attack by Hamas, drawing strong reactions from across the political spectrum. Islamist and liberal parties alike organized large rallies, denouncing the genocide in Gaza. The Pakistani government, despite risking relations with key Western and Gulf countries, unequivocally condemned the Israeli actions. Interim Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, despite the potential strain on relations with key Western and Gulf countries.

## Political Quandary

For Pakistan, a nation often seen as a rent-seeking state, this response presents a dilemma. The pro-Palestinian protests have become a sanctuary for PTI supporters who use these rallies to show their support for Palestine and Imran Khan. The arrest of protestors using images of ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan, a critic of the West, reflects the delicate balance Pakistan aims to maintain between its domestic and foreign policy interests. Since

Khan's removal in a no-confidence motion, efforts have been made to mend relations with the West.

## Anti-West Stance

The pro-Palestinian protests in Pakistan have adopted an anti-West stance, exemplified by statements from leaders like those of Jamat-i-Islami, who threaten to besiege the US embassy in Islamabad if President Joe Biden persist in supporting Israel. Maulaa Fazl ur Rehman of JUI-F declared the October 7 attack by Hamas as a historic success and pledged aid to the group.

## Unanswered Questions

These developments prompt critical questions about Pakistan's position in the Israel-Hamas conflict. How will Pakistan navigate the delicate balance between domestic political gains from an anti-Israel stance and potential risks to key foreign policy interests? Does Pakistan's historical engagement with Israel, including informal interactions and intelligence sharing, indicate a level of complicity despite its refusal to recognize Israel until a Palestinian state is established?

As Pakistan grapples with these complexities, the world watches closely. The stance taken by the nation on the Israel-Hamas conflict not only reflects its foreign policy priorities but also underscores the intricate play between domestic sentiments and international relationships. The path ahead for Pakistan entails navigating carefully to uphold its principles, safeguard its interests, and contribute to the global conversation on justice and peace in the Middle East.



# The Afghan Refugee Conundrum and Its Impact

By Zainab Imran Malik

Pakistan has a lengthy history of providing refuge to Afghan nationals, dating back to 197 during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since then, millions of Afghans have sought shelter in Pakistan, escaping both inter and intra-state conflicts as well as political turmoil in their homeland. However, given the recent increase in terrorism involving Afghan nationals, the Pakistani government has opted to repatriate illegal Afghan residents back to their home country. This decision has raised concerns and criticism both nationally and internationally, with apprehensions about potential humanitarian crises.

The decision by the Pakistan government's Apex Committee on October 3rd, 2023, endorsed a systematic crackdown on illegal immigrants residing in Pakistan. These individuals may possess forged IDs and be involved in activities such as smuggling and drug trafficking. As per available information, approximately 3.7 million Afghans reside in Pakistan, with around 1.32 million holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, approximately 88,299 possessing Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC), and an estimated 775,000 considered unregistered or illegal immigrants. The decision targeted the repatriation of these 775,000 illegal Afghan immigrants by November 1st, 2023. However, the decision has sparked severe reservations.

Critics question the context in which the decision was approved. The Interior Ministry of Pakistan, for example, claims to have compelling evidence of Afghan nationals' involvement in 14 out of 24 major attacks in Pakistan this year. However, critics point to data from the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) showing that 2011 marked the peak of terrorism in Pakistan, with a score of 9.22/10, 653 incidents, 1503 fatalities, and 2825 injuries. In light of these statistics, questions arise about why Pakistan did not consider repatriation earlier. The decision was not solely driven by security concerns but also had economic implications.

Government officials argue that Afghan refugees have negatively impacted Pakistan's economic growth, as their unemployment leads to the availability of cheap labor, affecting local workers' wages and employment opportunities.

On the contrary, some argue that Afghan immigration and the availability of cheap labor have positively influenced Pakistan's economy. Cities like Quetta and Peshawar, for instance, have become business hubs, and informal businesses in border areas contribute significantly to Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Approximately 40% of GDP is generated from the informal economy, which plays a pivotal role in the current economic crisis. Therefore, the expulsion of Afghan refugees is expected to have adverse effects on Pakistan's economy.

In addition to questioning the decision, critics emphasize that despite hosting millions of refugees, Pakistan lacks domestic legislation on refugees. The country manages refugees without specific domestic laws, relying on collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and following some



protocols of the Geneva Convention as a non-signatory state. This lack of domestic legislation complicates the deportation and repatriation process, posing a high risk of unjust detention.

The status of Afghan refugees is currently in flux. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 300,000 Afghans have been repatriated to Afghanistan since Islamabad's announcement on October 3rd, 2023. Reports from OCHA indicate that the forced repatriation has led to severe humanitarian crises, particularly affecting children who constitute about 60% of those crossing the Torkham and Spin Boldak border between November 1st and 4th.

In contrast, the Pakistani government announced on November 3rd, 2023, that it had extended the legal status of about 1.4 million Afghan refugees until December 31st, 2023, providing relief to PoR card and ACC card holders. International organizations such as UNHCR, Amnesty International, and UNDP, however, urge Islamabad to halt mass deportations and detentions of Afghans, emphasizing the principle of non-refoulement.

Amidst the ongoing refugee crisis, it is crucial for Pakistan to formulate a comprehensive policy to manage the needs of refugees. The government should consider halting the crackdown on refugees, extend the repatriation deadline, and initiate a systematic repatriation process, categorizing refugees based on vulnerability. Special consideration should be given to PoR card and ACC card holders who are legally registered. Additionally, Afghans born and raised in Pakistan over the past four decades should be recognized as legitimate citizens under the Citizenship Act of Pakistan.

Lastly, despite the inclusion of a commitment to refugee management in Pakistan in the National Action Plan (NAP) of 2015, no comprehensive national policy or domestic legislation has been enacted. The state must prioritize passing necessary domestic bills rather than relying solely on international conventions to address the refugee issue.



# Navigating the Afghanistan-Pakistan Migration Crisis: Charting a Compassionate and Sustainable Path Forward



## TTI Report

In recent months, the Afghanistan-Pakistan migration crisis has unfolded with Pakistan implementing a mass deportation policy targeting Afghan nationals. This has sparked critical questions about the extent of deportations, the motivations behind them, and the challenges associated with ensuring that individuals do not return. As of the latest data available, the UNHCR reported that over 370,000 people have returned to Afghanistan since Pakistan started the deportation drive, prompting a nationwide crackdown on foreign nationals deemed to be residing illegally. The urgency and scale of the situation are evident, with daily returnee figures three times higher than usual.

Pakistan justifies the mass deportations by citing security concerns, particularly in light of the escalating activities of the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group with alleged connections to Afghan nationals. The recent attack near Chitral, where militants swarmed border posts, appears to have further fueled Pakistan's security anxieties. However, the motivations behind this dramatic step extend beyond immedi-

ate security threats. Pakistan's strained relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan, exacerbated by the TTP's resurgence and aggressive actions near the border, contribute to the urgency of the deportation policy.

Pakistan's decision to repatriate millions of Afghan refugees has the potential to exacerbate an already dire humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The lack of adequate space and infrastructure to accommodate such a massive influx of returnees poses a significant challenge. Afghanistan is grappling with overcrowded urban areas and informal settlements, and the sudden return of a large number of refugees could strain these resources to the breaking point. Furthermore, the housing shortage is likely to intensify, leading to makeshift settlements and increased competition for limited resources. This could strain fragile social structures, potentially triggering tensions and conflicts over access to basic amenities. The risk of displacement and homelessness for many returning refugees looms large, adding another layer of vulnerability to an already distressed population. Moreover, the strained healthcare system in Afghani-

stan is ill-equipped to handle a sudden surge in population, potentially leading to a public health catastrophe.

In addition, education is another sector that will be profoundly affected. The existing challenges in providing quality education to Afghan children are likely to be exacerbated by the return of large numbers of school-age children. The education system, already burdened by a lack of resources and security concerns, may struggle to accommodate the increased demand for schooling, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. The economic implications of the refugee influx are significant as well. The job market, already strained due to conflict and economic instability, may be unable to absorb the returning population, leading to increased unemployment and underemployment, deepening poverty levels and creating a breeding ground for social unrest.

The forced expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan has sparked a severe humanitarian crisis, drawing global attention. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has expressed deep



concern about the dire situation faced by tens of thousands of Afghans, especially children, who have been forcibly deported since the beginning of the month. Daniel Endres, the acting Humanitarian Coordinator, highlighted that approximately 60 percent of the 20,000-21,000 people who crossed into Afghanistan between November 1-4 were children. Many of these individuals are in desperate conditions, having traveled for days, unsure of where to go, and stranded at the border.

The international community has taken note of the forced deportations, with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressing concern about increased detentions and violence against Afghan refugee communities in Pakistan. Tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban have risen, with Pakistan's acting Prime Minister, Anwar ul-Haq Kakar, justifying the deportations by linking them to the alleged inability of the Taliban-led government to control extremists. In response, the Taliban rejected these claims, warning Pakistan against blaming the group for its security challenges. These strained relations and criticisms further complicate the already precarious situation.

Amnesty International has strongly condemned Pakistan's actions, urging an immediate halt to deportations, detentions, and harassment of Afghan refugees. The organization raised alarm over the lack of transparency, due process, and accountability in deportation centers, citing cases of individuals, including minors, being deported without proper documentation. Vulnerable groups, including women, religious minorities, and journalists, are disproportionately affected. The deportation measures not only jeopardize the safety of Afghan journalists in Pakistan but also create an atmosphere of constant anxiety for women in Afghan-majority settlements and religious minorities facing additional challenges amid the expulsions. The urgent need for international intervention to address this crisis is increasingly evident.

## The Need for a Comprehensive and Cooperative Approach

As Afghanistan's capacity to receive and accommodate massive numbers of return-

ees is strained, the Taliban government has urged Pakistan to refrain from forcibly deporting Afghans without proper preparation. The question of ensuring that deported individuals do not return to Pakistan presents a multifaceted challenge. One key element is to collaborate with international organizations, including the UNHCR, to facilitate the reintegration of returnees into Afghanistan. This involves supporting initiatives that provide economic opportunities, access to education, and healthcare in Afghanistan. By addressing the fundamental issues that drive migration, such as economic instability and lack of basic services, Pakistan can contribute to a more sustainable reintegration process.



Furthermore, Pakistan must engage in diplomatic efforts with the Afghan government to ensure a cooperative approach. Collaborative initiatives, such as economic development projects and joint efforts to enhance security along the border, can create an environment conducive to the returnees' successful resettlement. A diplomatic resolution to the root causes of migration is crucial for long-term stability in the region. In addition to it, international donors should play a pivotal role in supporting both Pakistan and Afghanistan in managing the returnees. Financial and technical assistance can aid in creating infrastructure, generating employment opportunities, and providing essential services in Afghanistan. The international community, including neighboring countries and major global players, should actively contribute to the resolution of this crisis.

To prevent a cyclical pattern of migration, effective monitoring and screening processes are essential. Pakistan should collaborate with international organizations to ensure that returnees are not only repatriated but also monitored for their well-being and successful reintegration. This includes screening for potential persecution, tracking economic progress, and addressing any emerging challenges in the returnees' lives.

While addressing security concerns is a legitimate aspect of this complex issue, a nuanced approach is necessary. Pakistan should collaborate with Afghan authorities to identify and address security threats while refraining from blanket measures that

may lead to the persecution of innocent individuals. An intelligence-sharing mechanism between the two countries can contribute to a targeted and effective security strategy.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan migration crisis, marked by mass deportations and forced returns, demands a comprehensive and cooperative approach from all stakeholders involved. Balancing security concerns with humanitarian imperatives, addressing the root causes of migration, and fostering sustainable reintegration are essential elements of a successful resolution. By engaging in diplomatic collaboration, seeking international assistance, and implementing monitoring and screening processes, Pakistan can contribute to a long-term solution that ensures the well-being and sustainable reintegration of Afghan returnees in their home country.



# Taiwan Issue: US Policy towards the Conflict

By Ayeza Areej

The Taiwan conflict, situated prominently within the Asia Pacific zone, emerges as a paramount geopolitical concern, exerting far-reaching implications on both global and regional security landscapes. This intricate territorial discord unfolds its complexities between mainland China and Taiwan, where China staunchly asserts its autonomy over Taiwan under the overarching principle of "Reunification." In stark contrast, Taiwan maintains its position through the lens of the "One China, One Taiwan policy," steadfastly pursuing an independent identity on the international stage.

Delving beyond the intricacies of political ideologies, Taiwan's strategic significance takes centre stage, fueled by its robust economic and technological prowess. Functioning as a linchpin in the global supply network and trade, Taiwan occupies a pivotal role, influencing not only regional dynamics but also reverberating across international trade routes. Furthermore, the coveted control over Taiwan holds paramount geostrategic importance for China, presenting the prospect of alleviating its military activities in the strategically vital South China Sea and substantiating the territorial claims encapsulated by the controversial CCP's nine-dash line.

The United States, a prominent actor in the Taiwan issue for decades, becomes a linchpin in this geopolitical theatre due to its vested regional interests. The U.S. adopts a policy of strategic ambiguity, deftly navigating the delicate balance between unofficial ties with Taiwan and the supply of arms to bolster its defence capabilities.

This paper endeavours to meticulously dissect the geopolitical puzzle inherent in the Taiwan conflict. By scrutinising China's policy evolution and stance over time, it aims to unravel the intricate layers of this enduring issue. Furthermore, a nuanced exploration of the One China policy becomes imperative, shedding light on its far-reaching implications for the regional and international security environment. As the narrative unfolds, a critical examination of the United States' shifting policy towards



Taiwan takes centre stage, culminating in a comprehensive analysis that propels the discussion towards a decisive and insightful conclusion.

## Geopolitical Puzzle: The Taiwan Conflict

In the seventeenth century, Taiwan witnessed a transformative shift in its political landscape as the Qing dynasty solidified its control over the island. Fast forward to the late nineteenth century, the first Sino-Japanese War of 1895 unfolded against the backdrop of Japan's ambitious quest to dominate Korea, ultimately resulting in Japan's annexation of Taiwan. The geopolitical chessboard took another turn during World War II when the U.S., discerning Japan's hegemonic aspirations, threw its weight behind China, contributing significantly to Japan's eventual defeat. Post-war, the reins of authority over Taiwan shifted, sparking a conflict between the nationalist and communist factions in mainland China. This internal strife culminated in the triumph of the Communists, heralding the establishment of the "People's Republic of China" (PRC), while the defeated nationalists sought refuge in Formosa. This historical chronicle lays the foundation for China's historical claim over Taiwan.

Efforts to maintain peace between mainland China and Taiwan faced numerous hurdles, exemplified by the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty and the deployment of U.S. troops to patrol the Taiwan straits. These initiatives, aimed at preventing conflicts, encountered challenges in the form of disagreements and ceasefire violations.

In the post-World War II era, the United States strategically supported Taiwan as a bulwark against the spread of Communism. The geopolitical landscape shifted when China secured a significant victory in the United Nations in 1971, leading to Taiwan's exclusion from the international body. Responding to this shift, the U.S. adhered to the One China policy, maintaining diplomatic ties with Taiwan. However, recognizing Taiwan's strategic importance, the U.S. enacted the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, signalling unwavering support for Taiwan's security.

The 1980s witnessed a notable escalation of tensions marked by arms sales and a visit from Taiwan's president to the United States. China responded with substantial technological investments, ballistic missile tests, and military exercises in proximity to Taiwan. In parallel, the U.S. deployed a carrier task force, a strategic move aimed at dissuading potential threats. This period



also witnessed a spike in defence spending by both nations as they sought to assert their regional interests.

The historical tapestry woven through these events underscores the complexity of the Taiwan conflict, shaped by a series of historical developments, geopolitical manoeuvres, and power plays. The subsequent sections of this analysis will delve deeper into the evolving dynamics of China's approach to the Taiwan issue and the United States' shifting policies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the present geopolitical landscape surrounding Taiwan.

## Decoding China's approach to Taiwan Issue

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has persistently pursued the "Reunification" of Taiwan under the framework of the One China Policy. The early attempt in 1950 faced a setback due to U.S. intervention, leading to a rational recalibration of CCP's approach in subsequent years. The Taiwan issue, intricately entwined with matters of national identity, state sovereignty, and security, became a focal point for China's strategic goals. Deng Xiaoping, a key figure in China's leadership, aimed to consolidate Taiwan with the mainland. However, negotiations remained elusive as only the PRC demonstrated intentions, while Taiwan adhered to the "Three Noes" principle, emphasising no official contact, no negotiations, and no compromise.

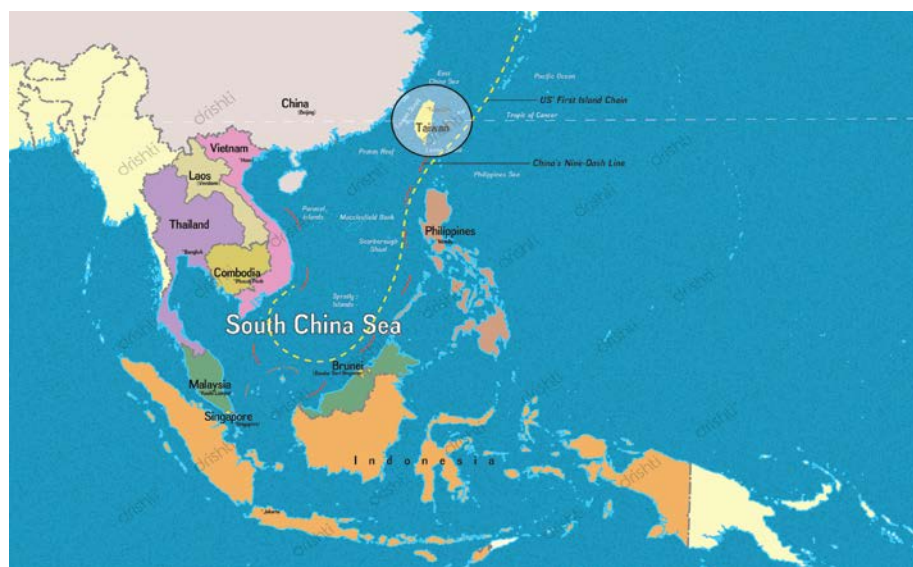
The Taiwan issue, a longstanding problem since 1949, has been a multifaceted challenge for China. Beyond the political intricacies, it encompasses questions of national identity, sovereignty, and the overarching concern for China's security. The failed attempt to liberate Taiwan in 1950, thwarted by U.S. intervention, prompted subsequent CCP leaders to adopt a more pragmatic approach, recognizing the economic and military challenges of a direct confrontation. The intricate web of historical claims and geopolitical considerations makes Taiwan a critical piece in China's broader strategic puzzle.

Deng Xiaoping, a pivotal figure in China's

leadership, sought to consolidate Taiwan with mainland China. However, the path to reunification faced significant hurdles. While the PRC demonstrated its intentions for negotiations, Taiwan adhered steadfastly to the "three noes" principle. This principle outlined Taiwan's commitment to no official contact, no negotiations, and no compromise with the mainland. The divergence in approaches and principles led to a deadlock in resolving the Taiwan issue.

Specific requirements were laid out by Taiwan for peace talks, including the abdication of Communism, a core principle that China adamantly rejected. China, in turn, proposed a nine-point solution under

The year 1995 marked a critical juncture in the Taiwan issue, with China suggesting a peaceful amalgamation while simultaneously threatening the use of force against Taiwan and any foreign interference. Military exercises near Taiwan followed, underscoring China's resolve to use force against perceived threats to its interests. A white paper from China's leadership urged the U.S. to adhere to the One China Policy, emphasising the importance of preserving commercial and cultural ties with Taiwan. China strategically positioned Taiwan within the broader context of its maritime strategies and American foreign policy, highlighting its significance in both regional and global terms.



the framework of "One Country, Two Systems," offering Taiwan a degree of autonomy upon reunification. This proposal, while ostensibly providing autonomy, faced scepticism from Taiwan, which remained wary of compromising its political system and principles.

In 1982, China's National People's Congress embraced a new constitution, introducing the concept of a special administrative region under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. This framework, initially proposed for Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, aimed to preserve the existing capitalist systems while integrating them into the broader Chinese governance structure. However, Taiwan, with its rising Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), became a focal point of opposition from the PRC, perceiving it as a threat to their claim regarding Taiwan.

The United States, a key player in the Taiwan issue for several decades, asserts that Chinese control of Taiwan could potentially undermine its military bases in the region. In contrast, China contends that its long-term goal is peaceful reunification under the One China Policy. Additionally, China perceives a threat from Taiwan's close relations with the U.S. and Japan, fearing that it could jeopardise Chinese influence globally and regionally. The ongoing complexities and divergent perspectives on the Taiwan issue underscore the intricate nature of this geopolitical challenge.

## Evolving US policy towards the conflict

Taiwan has consistently held a crucial position in the pursuit of U.S. objectives and interests in East Asia. The roots of this



strategic importance can be traced back to the aftermath of the Korean War in 1949 when the U.S. severed diplomatic ties with mainland China. Adding strain to their relations, the U.S. imposed an embargo on China. The dynamics, however, took a turn with border skirmishes between Taiwan and the Soviet Union and the Soviet annexation of Czechoslovakia, prompting a shift in relations. Subsequently, President Nixon signed the "Shanghai Communique" in which the U.S. reiterated the "One China Policy" and advocated for the peaceful reunification of Taiwan and China. This policy acknowledged China's sovereignty over Taiwan, sidelining the status of sovereign Taiwan.

The normalisation of ties between China and the U.S. in 1978 was catalysed by the escalating Soviet threat. Arms deals were forged between the two nations, yet the U.S. maintained unofficial support for Taiwan. In 1979, the U.S. enacted the "Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)" to uphold amicable relations and stability with Taiwan even in the absence of formal diplomatic ties. This act solidified cultural, commercial, and unofficial ties with Taiwan, including the supply of defensive weapons to deter potential threats jeopardising Taiwan's security. China, however, objected to the TRA, leading the U.S. to restrict the export of weapons to Taiwan under the "Communique of 1982." This measure, encapsulated in six assurances, was strategically undertaken to contain the Soviet threat.

Throughout the 1980s, the U.S. maintained a nuanced policy, extending support to both China and Taiwan. The Clinton era witnessed a strengthening of U.S.-Taiwan relations, emphasising Taiwan's participation in various international organisations.

Presently, Taiwan holds memberships in the WTO, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, and the Asian Development Bank, reflecting its increased global engagement.

The strategic significance of Taiwan was underscored by President George Bush's decision to export more than 150 F-16 aircraft to Taiwan, aiming to maintain military parity against China. Taiwan's status as one of the top ten trading partners of the U.S. further solidifies its importance in economic terms. The U.S. and Taiwan collaborate on joint projects spanning health, education, investment, environmental security, and development. Initiatives such as "The Pacific Islands Leadership Partnership 2012" and the "International Environmental Partnership Program 2014" exemplify their multifaceted cooperation.

Taiwan's economic strength is evident, generating nearly \$786 billion through exports and investing approximately \$137 billion in the United States. Notably, Taiwanese semiconductor companies have made substantial investments in the U.S. This economic interdependence has, however, been met with geopolitical tensions, as seen in the U.S.'s decision to supply \$1.1 billion in weapons to Taiwan, provoking strong objections from Beijing.

In 2021, during the "Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue," President Joe Biden asserted the U.S.'s commitment to back Taiwan in the face of any aggressive attack from China. The U.S. demonstrated bipartisan support for Taiwan through legislative actions favouring the island nation. However, these moves elicited an aggressive response from Beijing, marked by military exercises near Taiwan and the release of a White Paper emphasising

China's unwavering policy on Taiwan.

The United States' stance on the Taiwan issue appears ambiguous, navigating a delicate balance between acknowledging China's legitimacy over Taiwan and maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan. The strategic, economic, and geopolitical considerations surrounding Taiwan continue to shape the intricate dynamics between the U.S., China, and Taiwan.

## Conclusion

Keeping in view the strategic significance of Taiwan, different historical events have led to the current dispute and played a crucial role in influencing the behaviour of the states since 1949. Conflicts over the territories and relations across the straits between China and Taiwan are still controversial because of their distinct policies towards the issue. China claims its legitimacy over Taiwan by maintaining the One China policy and suggesting a "One Country, Two Systems" framework; however, Taiwan wants to preserve its autonomy and sovereignty. The intricacy of the conflict among the states gathered international attention. The American policy towards the Taiwan issue has evolved with the passage of time with shifting dynamics, interests, and regional concerns of the states. Traditionally, America has upheld the policy of "Strategic ambiguity" by admitting China as the only legitimate authority over Taiwan but maintaining informal ties with Taiwan as well. But in recent times, the U.S. has developed a more assertive approach by giving considerable military support and through defence agreements. This shift in the policy could be for the reorientation of U.S.-China relations.





## Father and Son at odds?



By Zahiruddin

The sudden departure of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to Dubai soon after his tour to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on 23rd November has caused to generate ripples in the pond of national politics in the critical juncture of time that may inflict irreparable harm on the party. The high-pitched remarks uttered by Asif Ali Zardari in an interview to a TV news channel about the incessant rhetoric of his son against the veteran politicians during his week-long tour is said to have acted as catalyst of the father-son feud simmering since long.

Bilawal's abrupt change of profile picture on his social media page, coupled with his unscheduled trip to Dubai following his father's TV interview, has fueled speculation within political circles and media outlets about a potential rift between the father and son. His decision to change his profile picture, is seen by many as a symbolic gesture of independence from Asif Zardari's influence. Bilawal's subsequent trip to Dubai, where he reportedly met with his mother's close associates has further heightened suspicions of a growing divide within the Bhutto family.

The young Bilawal having Baloch blood in his veins, felt too humiliated over the remarks of his father which belittled him and gave the impression that he was yet to come of age politically. The party's

central leadership has, however, tried to play it down to give an impression that there was nothing unusual in the current developments whirling around the father and the son. While Bilawal has publicly maintained that his relationship with his father remains strong, his actions have raised questions about the future of Pakistan Peoples Party and Bilawal's role as its leader.

The recent development of dissension between father and son is not an isolated incident of its nature but it has a sequence of events since the very days when the son stepped in as party chairman. Interestingly, Bilawal made headlines in the media when he flew to Dubai shortly before the elections of 2013 over discord with his father, the then President Asif Ali Zardari, over the affairs of the PPP, leaving the party without its star campaigner for Pakistan's general election.

Bilawal, who had newly been named patron-in-chief of the Pakistan People's Party, developed differences with Zardari and his sister, Faryal Talpur, over the party's handling of key issues, including militant violence, sectarian attacks against Shias and the award of party tickets for the polls scheduled for May 11, 2013. Bilawal discussed these matters with his father and sought authority to take decisions in party matters but Zardari told him that he would be handed over the command of the party after he is groomed politically

and this embarrassed him too much to flee the country. Like this time, one of the major reasons for his dissension with father was the issue of youth for whom he wanted a majority of party tickets in the election. Matters got so heated on one occasion that a source quoted Bilawal as saying: "If I had to vote, even I wouldn't vote for the PPP."

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has emerged as too bold and daring to express what deemed appropriate to him in the face of his mentor and father Asif Ali Zardari who is widely recognized as a shrewd politician of his own genre. Asif Zardari was clever enough to send a soft and sweet signal to his son through the TV interview when he felt that Bilawal was about to go beyond the elastic limit of his endurance. Earlier this year, Bilawal had caught the attention of the media towards himself when he said that his allegiance to his father and party co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari was solely limited to the confines of the household, independent from political matters.

Moreover, in April 2017, the father and son were found at odds regarding the holding of general elections and it was taken notice of in the media. The father asked the party workers to gird up for the general elections during that same year while the son was asking the party workers to prepare for the elections to be held next year. This time too, the



father and the son are not found in unison in regarding the date of the forthcoming general election as one (father) favored the contention of ECP to delay it for delimitations process while the other (son) was showing his utter impatience in holding the elections as soon as possible. Zardari maintained that the ECP is bound to redraw the boundaries of all constituencies after a fresh and updated census. "The ECP would conduct elections as per the Constitution, and my party has full confidence in the chief election commissioner and all ECP members," he said. Sticking to the demands of timely elections, Bilawal, however, made it clear that he held his ground when it came to politics, the Constitution, and party policy, putting him at odds with his father's stance over elections.

The hall of National Assembly reverberated by the speeches of Bilawal time and again during the last term wherein he asked the senior leaders like his father and PML-N's Nawaz Sharif to make decisions that facilitate a more conducive political

landscape for the younger generation. His attempt for championing the younger generation was gaining momentum and currency in the national scenario and it formed the centerpiece of his narrative during his public addresses in his recent tour of KP. The divergence of views between father and son were noticed in September last year when the father expressed his confidence over neutrality and efficiency of Election Commission of Pakistan which was opposite to the version of the son who persistently demanded level playing field for all the parties.

It is said that Asif Ali Zardari's interview was too embarrassing for his son who wanted to lead the party as per his aspirations and independently. Bilawal's ambitions were undoubtedly dampened by his father's remarks, in which Asif Zardari dismissed Bilawal's political acumen, despite Bilawal's superior education. He clipped Bilawal's wings further when he said that Bilawal was the chairman of three Ps (PPP) and the real powers vested in four

Ps (PPPP) whose chairmanship is retained by him and that party ticket to Bilawal will be awarded by him as well. The element of desperation was visible from the face of Mr. Zardari when he claimed that he holds the office of chairman as per the will of Benazir Bhutto. On the other hand, the displaying of Benazir's picture as Bilawal's social media profile picture with her hand on his back is being construed as a sharp response by the son to counter the claim of his father.

Meanwhile, hectic efforts are being made to dispel the impression of rift between the father and the son both by the senior level leadership of the party and the family. In a surprise move, Asif Zardari abruptly departed for Dubai to attend a gathering with his son and Sonam Bhutto. The party's media managers are actively promoting this event, casting the impression that the family's trip to Dubai was solely for this pre-planned occasion. The coming few weeks will make it abundantly clear the nature and magnitude of differences between the father and son but it is expected that as astute statesman, Asif Zardari will be able to control the situation as his mother-in-law Nusrat Bhutto had succeeded to do when friction with Benazir Bhutto had developed over the chairpersonship of the party. Nusrat Bhutto had wooed her daughter by assuming the office of co-chairperson elevating Benazir Bhutto to the office of chairperson who was preparing to fly to Dubai in anguish. The proverb "Nothing is dearer to an aging father than his son", will prevail upon Mr. Zardari to go to any extent to win over his only son again.





# National Accounts Committee approves new GDP data for Pakistan



By Javed Mahmood

The 107th National Accounts Committee (NAC) convened at the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives in Islamabad to scrutinize the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures. They examined the annual GDP estimates for 2021-22 (Final), 2022-23 (Revised), and quarterly estimates from Q1 2016-17 to Q1 2023-24. Chaired by the Secretary of the Ministry, the meeting delved into extensive discussions.

During the 106th NAC session in May 2023, they unveiled provisional GDP estimates for 2022-23 and revised figures for 2021-22, updated with the latest available data. The final GDP growth for 2021-22 was pegged at 6.17%, slightly up from the revised 6.10%. Growth in the agriculture sector saw a marginal rise from 4.27% to 4.28%, while industrial activities improved from 6.83% to 6.95%, and services escalated from 6.59% to 6.66%.

Notably, specific sectors like Mining and Quarrying and Electricity, Gas, and Water Supply contributed to this growth. In contrast, the revised GDP growth for 2022-23 shifted from a provisional estimate of 0.29% to -0.17%. Agriculture marked a significant improvement from 1.55% to 2.25%, despite certain crops witnessing a decline in production.

Conversely, industrial sector growth decreased, as did several segments within the services sector. The revised estimates indicated fluctuations across various industries and sectors, leading to alterations in the GDP figures.

An unprecedented move in Pakistan's macroeconomic statistics history occurred during this NAC meeting—the approval of industry-specific methodologies for compiling Quarterly GDP and the series of quarterly growth rates from Q1 2016-17 to Q1 2023, considering 2015-16 as the base year. The formulation of Quarterly National Accounts (QNA) began soon after adopting the new national accounts base in January 2022. PBS engaged with the World Bank for technical assistance and conducted extensive meetings involving various national experts.

IMF's inclusion of QNA compilation in its program further underscored the significance of this effort. To fulfill the IMF-SBA benchmark, PBS collaborated with stakeholders and data providers, presenting revised GDP numbers for 2022-23 and Q1 2023-24 before the NAC in November 2023. The committee approved the QNA series and the first quarter estimates of 2023-24, emphasizing the growth rates across agriculture, industry, and services.

Acknowledging the challenging task and collaborative efforts of PBS, the Ministry of Finance, and the State Bank of Pakistan, the forum lauded the compilation of revised GDP estimates for 2022-23 and the comprehensive quarterly GDP data since Q1 2016-17.

## GDP growth was negative during the PDM regime

In a pivotal revelation by the National Accounts Committee, Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has undergone a significant adjustment, contracting by 0.17% rather than the initially reported growth of 0.29% during the fiscal year 2022-23 under the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)-led coalition government. This recalibration underscores the economic challenges faced during the PDM rule.

The NAC, meeting on Tuesday, officially confirmed this economic shift and concurrently approved the first-quarter GDP growth rate for the fiscal year 2023-24 at 2.13%. Marking a crucial departure, the government has adhered to a strict deadline imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), releasing economic performance data quarterly. Contrarily, the revised GDP growth rate for the fiscal year 2022-23 stands at -0.17%, a stark contrast to the provisional estimate of 0.29% in May. The agricultural sector demonstrated significant improvement, but the industrial and services sectors experienced declines, reflecting challenges during this period.

# The Most Recent Major Economic Developments in Pakistan We Must Not Overlook

By Javed Mahmood

No doubt Pakistan has been facing a serious financial crisis for the past many months that poses some crucial challenges to the economic revival and survival of the country. The resumption of the IMF program has averted the risk of default for Pakistan. However, the overall economic scenario in the country is still fragile in the absence of adequate external financial and inflows of foreign investment.

In recent months, some positive economic developments have taken place in the country which indicate the possibility of an economic turnaround gradually though the consumers will continue to experience shocks in the tariffs of the gas, and electricity, and an unending vicious cycle of record high inflation.

On top of the positive developments is the record-breaking growth in the stock market in Pakistan in recent weeks, particularly after the launching of a nationwide crackdown against the hoarding and smuggling of dollars and other tradeable essential items.

On Nov 27, 2023, the KSE-100 benchmark index surged to above 59,500 points with a gain of more than 500 points amid a persisting bullish sentiment in the stock market. The KSE-100 index has reached around 60000 level ahead of the experts' anticipated deadline of December 2023. However, in view of the ongoing robust trend in the stock market, analysts believe that the KSE-100 index could hit 65,000+ points at the end of 2023.

With the beginning of the New Year, the KSE-100 index would be fluctuating above the 70K level. The important factors driving the market forward in a fast gear are the reports of a smooth transition of power post-elections, a fresh long-term funding initiative from the IMF, and an anticipated decrease in the interest rate.

Meanwhile, in the past four and a half months, the index has surged by a substantial 44%, marking a net increase of 16,500+



points in the last week of November 2023. The forthcoming February 8, 2024 elections are anticipated to provide crucial political stability, with initial assessments indicating a high probability of the PML-N and its coalition partners securing a substantial number of seats. The other important economic developments in Pakistan are mentioned below.

## Dollar-PKR exchange rate

In recent weeks, the value of the dollar has dropped to around 285 rupees in inter-bank trading and 286 to 287 rupees in the open market from a record high of 310 rupees in the inter-bank and 330 rupees in open market operations. The government's countrywide crackdown against smuggling and hoarding and blacklisting of dubious exchange companies has reversed the value of the mighty dollar. The recent staff-level agreement between the IMF and Pakistan further discouraged unwanted flight of the dollar and it supported the value of PKR. In addition to it, this development played a vital role in giving an unprecedented boost to stock market trading in Pakistan.

## \$700 Million IMF tranche

The State Bank of Pakistan is expected to receive a \$700 million next tranche from the IMF on December 8. The Board of the IMF is holding its meeting on this day and traditionally the tranche is transferred into the SBP's account immediately after the board's approval. The disbursement of the second IMF tranche will be a gateway to mop up more loans and foreign investment in 2024. As the IMF and Pakistan government have already signed the staff-level agreement, the next development will be the disbursement of \$700 million next tranche from the fund in the early days of December 2023.

## Saudi Company WAFI Acquires Shell Pakistan

WAFI Energy, a Saudi energy powerhouse, has completed the acquisition of Shell Pakistan. The company has disclosed it in a notice sent to the Pakistan Stock Exchange to meet a regulatory requirement. This agreement entails Shell Petroleum divesting its majority stake of 77.42% in Shell Pakistan Limited to WAFI Energy,



marking a significant milestone in Pakistan's energy sector for 2023. WAFI Energy has also corroborated this groundbreaking development on its official website today, solidifying the authenticity of the acquisition.

This strategic divestment by Shell aligns with its mobility network enhancement strategy, initially unveiled during Capital Markets Day in June 2022. The transaction, subject to regulatory approvals, is slated for finalization in the fourth quarter of 2024. Despite the shift in ownership, customers in Pakistan will retain access to Shell's premium fuel and lubricants through brand licensing agreements, ensuring continuity of service. Shell Petroleum Company Limited underscores its commitment to upholding safe and reliable operations amidst this transition.

In a separate announcement to the Pakistan Stock Exchange, Shell Pakistan Limited revealed the formal intent from WAFI Energy LLC to acquire a controlling interest, surpassing regulatory thresholds under Section 111 of the Act, encompassing up to 77.42% of voting shares. WAFI Energy LLC, the exclusive Shell Retail Network licensee in Saudi Arabia, boasts a rapidly expanding retail gas station network, signaling its strategic prowess in the energy domain. Arif Habib Limited, a brokerage firm, confirmed its appointment as the manager for WAFI Energy's offer, signaling its role in the acquisition bid and submission of a public announcement aiming to acquire the same substantial shareholding in Shell Pakistan Limited.

Earlier in June 2023, Shell Pakistan Limited had disclosed its parent company's intent, Shell Petroleum Company Limited (SPCo), to divest its stake in the Pakistani entity. This development had been assured to have no disruptive effect on ongoing business operations.

## Turkish Company Acquires Coca-Cola Pakistan

In October 2023, a Turkish company has successfully acquired Coca-Cola (Pakistan) for \$300 million. The Competition Commission of Pakistan (CCP) granted approval for this acquisition in a phase-1

review under the Competition Act, 2010, and the Competition (Merger Control) Regulations, 2016. Coca-Cola İçecek (Turkey) acquired a substantial 49.67 percent shareholding of Coca-Cola (Pakistan) through its subsidiary, CCI International Holand, from Atlantic Industries. With this transaction, Coca-Cola Turkey secures the majority of shareholding in Coca-Cola (Pakistan) along with managerial control. This acquisition signals a strong belief in the Pakistani economy's potential to yield substantial returns for international investors.



The Chairman and Mergers team have streamlined the merger system and process, expediting mergers and acquisitions applications to provide a smoother pathway for international investors seeking opportunities in Pakistan.

## Pakistan-UAE Investment MoUs

Prime Minister Anwaar ul Haq Kakar has set out on a bilateral trip to the United Arab Emirates from November 26 to 28, 2023, aiming to fortify relations and encourage collaboration through the signing of multiple Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs). PM Kakar is holding important meetings with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed and other top UAE officials. This interaction serves as a significant opportunity to bolster various aspects of bilateral ties, spanning political, economic, trade, investment, cultural, defense, and people-to-people connections.

The agenda includes the signing of MoUs between Pakistan and the UAE across diverse sectors such as Energy, Port Operations Projects, Waste Water Treatment, Food Security, Logistics, Mining, Aviation, Banking, and Financial Services to facilitate investment cooperation.

## Mega Saudi Investment Expected in Reko Diq

A Pakistani official revealed Saudi Arabia's keen interest in acquiring government stakes in Pakistan's Reko Diq gold and

copper mine, marking a significant prospect for the struggling \$350 billion South Asian economy. Barrick Gold Corp, holding a 50% stake in the mine, views it as one of the globe's largest untapped copper-gold regions. Pakistan had previously indicated Barrick's planned \$10 billion investment in the project. In August, Barrick expressed willingness to involve Saudi Arabia as a partner in the mine. Khan, a Pakistani official, highlighted the likelihood of Saudi Arabia and other traditional Middle Eastern allies contributing up to \$70 billion in investments across various sectors.

## The Current Account Deficit Shrinks Sharply

In October, the year-on-year reduction in the current account deficit (CAD) was a substantial 91%, yet on a month-to-month basis. The State Bank of Pakistan's most recent data indicated that the deficit stayed within the projected range. The SBP governor had foreseen the CAD to remain

comfortably below \$100 million in October and anticipated continued containment throughout 2023-24. October witnessed a CAD of \$74 million, a significant drop from the \$849 million recorded in the same month in 2022, marking a contraction of 91.2%. This alignment with the SBP's strategy occurred despite a relaxation in import restrictions.

The IMF, in its recent review preceding the Staff-Level Agreement for the second tranche release under the \$3 billion Stand-By Arrangement, stressed the need for Pakistan to liberalize imports. However, this move might raise the trade deficit and subsequently the CAD. In FY23, strict import bans led to an 87% reduction in the CAD. Despite the easing of import limitations, banks still face constraints in opening letters of credit (LCs) for imports. The scarcity of dollars in the interbank market persists, with many banks unable to supply sufficient dollars for sizable LCs. Although October witnessed a rise in remittances to \$2.5 billion, the four-month total experienced a 13.3% decline. This reduced influx could contribute to a higher CAD by the end of FY24.

Encouragingly, during the initial four months (July-October), the CAD shrank by \$2 billion, a positive signal for the country's economic overseers. SBP data from July-October FY24 indicates a CAD of \$1.06 billion, down from \$3.1 billion in the same period the previous year. This contraction might aid the government in meeting its foreign debt servicing obligations, which stand at \$25 billion for FY24. SBP data further notes a \$170 million rise in goods exports to \$9.77 billion during

July-October, while imports saw a substantial \$4.2 billion decrease to \$21 billion. Service exports and imports also experienced respective increases of \$78 million and \$534 million.

## Remittances show stunning growth in October 2023

Overseas Pakistanis sent a noteworthy \$2.46 billion in remittances in October, marking a seven-month peak and a substantial 12% increase from the previous month's \$2.21 billion. Compared to October 2022's \$2.25 billion, remittances also saw a year-on-year surge of 9.58%.

For half a year, remittances hovered within the \$2-2.2 billion range. However, October witnessed a widespread improvement, notably bolstered by contributions from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, jointly responsible for 60% of the month's overall increase. The government's crackdown on illegal foreign exchange trading, initiated in early September this year, followed by SBP-led structural reforms in the exchange companies sector, led to a narrowing of the gap between interbank and open market exchange rates.

## Forex Reserves Drop by mid-Nov

The foreign exchange reserves held by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) fell by \$217 million \_ to \$ 7.18 billion on November 17, 2023. The central bank attributed this decline in reserves to debt repayments. According to the latest data of the SBP, the

total national foreign reserves stood at \$12.30 billion during the week ending on 17th November 2023.

## Saudi Aramco Oil Refinery Project facing delay: The Energy Division says the project is intact

The Ministry of Energy's Petroleum Division took to social media platform X (formerly Twitter) on November 22, 2023, to dismiss media claims about Pakistan's \$10 billion refinery project with Saudi Aramco facing uncertainties. The Energy Division labeled such reports as 'baseless' and 'contrary' to the actual facts.

Emphasizing ongoing discussions with the company, the Ministry clarified that the government was actively engaged in finalizing the project's scope and is exploring opportunities to involve additional investors. This clarification followed recent media speculations hinting at Saudi Aramco's purported lack of interest in investing in the refinery project.

Earlier, in July 2023, the Oil and Gas Development Company Limited and Pakistan State Oil had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Saudi Aramco, solidifying a joint investment strategy aimed at establishing a \$10 billion Greenfield refinery project. The project, nonetheless, is still to take off despite much effort by the caretaker government in Pakistan.

By Javed Mahmood





# Pakistan Stock Exchange

## A Resilient Pillar in a Dynamic Market

The Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) stands as a testament to the nation's economic resilience and dynamism, with its roots deeply embedded in the historical tapestry of post-independence Pakistan. Its origins trace back to the establishment of the Karachi Stock Exchange (KSE) in 1947, a pivotal institution that played a crucial role in mobilizing funds and navigating the economic challenges accompanying the partition. Over the years, the KSE evolved, especially during the transformative period of the 1990s, when it embraced technological advancements and transitioned from traditional open outcry systems to modern computerized trading platforms. This shift not only bolstered operational efficiency but also ushered in a new era of transparency.

The turning point for the stock exchange came in 2002 when the Islamabad Stock Exchange (ISE) and the Lahore Stock Exchange (LSE) joined forces with the KSE, culminating in the formation of the Karachi Stock Exchange Limited. This strategic merger aimed to consolidate regulatory oversight, enhance market liquidity, and provide investors with a consolidated and seamless trading platform. The synergies created by this union set the stage for a more robust and integrated financial landscape.

The culmination of this evolutionary journey occurred in 2016 with the establishment of the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX), marking the integration of the Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad markets into a singular entity. This pioneering amalgamation was designed to fortify the capital market, creating a resilient and interconnected platform for both investors and companies. By fostering unity among the previously distinct exchanges, the PSX aimed to facilitate the diversification of holdings and streamline the process of raising capital.

Following the creation of the PSX, a commitment to adaptability emerged as a central theme in its operational philosophy.



The exchange implemented various initiatives focused on corporate governance enhancements, the introduction of innovative financial instruments, and comprehensive market reforms. These endeavours underscored the PSX's dedication to not only sustaining its historical legacy but also to proactively fostering growth and stability in the ever-evolving financial landscape of Pakistan.

As the PSX continues to navigate the complexities of the global economic landscape, its rich history serves as a guiding light. The exchange remains committed to staying at the forefront of innovation, ensuring that it remains a dynamic force in facilitating economic development and providing a platform for investors to participate in the prosperity of the nation. In the face of new challenges and opportunities, the Pakistan Stock Exchange stands as a resilient pillar, driving the nation's economic journey forward with unwavering determination and adaptability.

### The Current State of Pakistan's Stock Market

The Pakistani stock market has indeed been on a rollercoaster ride in recent years, navigating through a landscape marked by bouts of volatility intertwined with periods of robust growth. The current scenario presents an array of challenges, with rising inflation, political uncertainty, and a weakened rupee casting a shadow over market stability. These challenges, however, are met with glimmers of hope, as positive indicators emerge in response to the government's commitment to fiscal discipline and ongoing reform efforts.

Amidst the economic undulations, the KSE 100 index, a barometer of the market's health that tracks the performance of the 100 largest companies listed on the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX), has mirrored the global economic slowdown, the geopolitical tensions arising from the war in Ukraine, and the Federal Reserve's

interest rate hikes. These external factors have contributed to the market's fluctuating fortunes, creating an environment where investors must navigate with caution and astuteness.

In the face of these challenges, the resilience of the Pakistani stock market becomes evident. The government's unwavering commitment to fiscal discipline and reform initiatives is a beacon of stability, signalling its dedication to steering the economy through turbulent times. The ripple effects of such commitment extend beyond government policies, influencing investor sentiment and market dynamics.

Moreover, the PSX, as a critical player in the nation's financial landscape, has not remained idle. Ongoing efforts to enhance efficiency and transparency are underway, with the aim of fortifying the market's foundations. These measures, when coupled with the government's initiatives, have the potential to instil confidence among investors and foster an environment conducive to both local and foreign investment.

The government's pledge to fiscal discipline is pivotal in instilling confidence among investors. A commitment to controlling inflation, implementing structural reforms, and ensuring economic stability sends a positive signal to the market. Investors, both domestic and foreign, often seek stable economic environments where risks are mitigated through prudent fiscal policies.

In tandem with fiscal responsibility, ongoing market reforms contribute to the resilience of the Pakistani stock market. Improvements in transparency, governance, and regulatory frameworks are instrumental in attracting investors looking for a secure and well-regulated financial environment. The PSX's efforts to modernize and align with international best practices are crucial steps in this direction.

Foreign investment, a key driver of economic growth, is likely to be influenced by the perceived stability and attractiveness of the Pakistani stock market. The interplay of global economic factors underscores the interconnectedness of financial markets. Therefore, the resilience of the Pakistani stock market is not only a matter of domestic concern but also a reflection of its ability

to weather global economic storms.

While the Pakistani stock market grapples with challenges posed by inflation, political uncertainties, and currency fluctuations, it demonstrates resilience in the face of adversity. The government's commitment to fiscal discipline, coupled with ongoing reforms at the PSX, positions the market for potential growth and stability. Navigating the complex landscape requires a delicate balance, but the signs of positive change provide optimism for investors seeking opportunities in Pakistan's dynamic economic landscape.

## Developments in 2023

The year 2023 has proven to be a dynamic period for the Pakistani stock market, marked by noteworthy trends that are reshaping the landscape. One significant development is the noticeable surge in interest in small-cap stocks. Investors are drawn to these stocks due to their perceived relative value, the potential for higher returns, and the belief that they are well-positioned to benefit from the country's ongoing economic growth. This shift in focus toward smaller companies reflects a growing appetite for diversification and a willingness to explore opportunities beyond the more established players in the market.

Another prominent trend characterizing the 2023 market dynamics is the notable increase in the number of Initial Public Offerings (IPOs). Several factors contribute to this upswing, including a more favourable regulatory environment, a growing pool of capital available for investment, and companies' strategic initiatives to raise funds for their ambitious growth plans. The IPO boom signifies a robust entrepreneurial landscape and an increasing willingness among companies to tap into the capital market to fuel their expansion and development endeavours.

Furthermore, there is a discernible shift toward Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing, marking a growing awareness of ESG factors among investors. This trend is further fueled by the rising demand from institutional investors for ESG-compliant investments and the expanding availability of ESG data and analytics. As sustainability and ethical

considerations become integral to investment decisions, the Pakistani stock market is adapting to accommodate this evolving investor preference.

Looking ahead, these trends are poised to continue influencing the Pakistani stock market's trajectory. The interest in small-cap stocks, the surge in IPO activity, and the emphasis on ESG investing collectively contribute to a market landscape that is becoming more diverse, dynamic, and attuned to evolving investor priorities. As market participants navigate these shifts, the year 2023 is shaping up to be a pivotal chapter in the ongoing evolution of the Pakistani stock market, reflecting not only the current economic conditions but also the forward-looking strategies and preferences of investors.

## The Future of Pakistan's Stock Market

The future trajectory of Pakistan's stock market is cloaked in uncertainty, presenting a range of potential scenarios. A bullish market, propelled by sustained economic growth, improved investor sentiment, and increased foreign investment, stands as a hopeful prospect. Conversely, a bear market, triggered by a more severe economic downturn, political instability, or a continued depreciation of the rupee, looms as a cautionary possibility. The most plausible scenario, however, appears to be one of volatility, characterized by periods of growth interspersed with declines, dictated by a complex interplay of domestic and global economic conditions.

In the midst of this unpredictability, the youthful and dynamic nature of Pakistan's stock market presents significant potential. Strategic policies and reforms have the capacity to catalyze substantial growth in the years to come. Investors willing to navigate the inherent risks may find the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) an attractive investment destination. As a burgeoning market, the PSX offers opportunities for those with an appetite for dynamic investments. Despite the prevailing uncertainty, the future of the PSX is a narrative worth monitoring, as it unfolds within the context of the ever-evolving global economic landscape.

By Jannat Saeed



# Ahmedabad Apocalypse

By M A Niazi

I never thought the day would come when I would feel sorry for Narendra Modi, but I did. No matter whether the match was in the book, or maybe not. Everything was predicated on India winning the cricket World Cup. They didn't. In fact, they got beaten quite badly. Not just by six wickets, which is a considerable margin, but in 43 overs, which meant that it was done at leisure. Well, India learnt the hard way that you don't set Australia a total of 241 and get away with it.

It was that total which gave the impression that the match was in the book. But then, would even the Mumbai Matchfixers put the match in the book with Modi there to watch the final, which was happening in Ahmedabad, not exactly the centre of the cricketing world, but Modi's home constituency, which he represented as an MLA and then CM. It was also part of his Lok Sabha constituency in 2014. But he also contested in Varanasi in UP, and you can hardly find a safer BJP seat, won it, retained it, and gave up the Vadodara seat. He contested only Varanasi in 2019 and won. It seems in India there's none of that nonsense about the leader contesting a seat in every province. I mean, there are 28 states, so it would indeed be an uphill task to fight 28 seats.

This reminds me of the character back in the last century who gilded papers in every seat. And then threatened to commit suicide. Unless the other candidates paid him something. You see if a candidate dies, the poll is cancelled, and a new date is announced. There was no suicide, otherwise, you would have had a fresh election date for the whole country.

It was supposed to be a grand climax, taking place in the Narendra Modi Stadium, which was not a new stadium (the BJP was too tightfisted for that), but just the Vallabhai Patel Stadium renamed.

That reminds me of the renaming of FC College of various hotels. The student



leader doing the renaming of all the 'foreign' names ran out of an appropriate 'Islamic' name for the Ewing Memorial Library. Ewing was an old Principal of the College, so the suggestion from the crowds of the Mir Yaqub Memorial Library was not all that bad, for Mir Yaqub was a Principal, but being very much alive, the 'Memorial' was unkind. The student making the suggestion proposed that Mir Yaqub be scragged so that the 'Memorial' could be retained.

Similarly, before Modi had a stadium named after him, he should no longer be with us. Of course, he might have something to say about it. The FC Principal chose life, and the Library remained the Ewing Memorial Library. Mauve Modi will think for the greater good of India. I'm sure the Mumbai Matchfixers can work out something. Assassinations are not something they routinely deal in, but they can manage if they need to.

But Modi tried so hard. I mean, the whole point of having henchman Amit Shah's son, Joy Shah, become BCCI secretary was so he would do the razzle-dazzle with the wickets. It didn't help, for the Aussies steamrolled India.

I suppose Modi's solution should be to

have a Kshatriya captain, though, at a pinch, a Vaisya would do the trick. The Brahmin boy, Rohit Sharma, got rolled over. It was a Jat who got India its first Cup back in 1983, Kapil Dev Nikhanj, a Punjabi Jat, whose father had migrated to India from Dipalpur in Okara. The next winner was M.S. Dhoni, who was a Rajput from Uttarakhand. Jadeja is good because his wife is a BJP MLA. He would have had some regard for Modi's honour.

He only made 9 and didn't take a wicket, something which that traitorous Muslim Muhammad Shami and that no-good Sikh Jasprit Bumrah did. Apparently, Australia was involved in some sort of conspiracy against Modi, throwing its wickets away on the treasonous, and carting caste Hindus all over the ground.

Modi's hopes of contesting next year's election on the basis of the World Cup have been dashed, but we shouldn't get too chuffed about it, because his next go-to option is a war scare with Pakistan. The only hope we have is that he doesn't actually have to win anything. Modi knows that war is an expensive business, and India doesn't have the money. Nor do we, but then we're not going to war. If attacked, of course, we'll have to ante up, but Modi knows that.

# Will severing diplomatic relations with Israel work?

*The only country which has taken a firm stance against Israel in the ongoing conflict over Gaza is Iran*



By Dr Moonis Ahmar

“Long term and sustainable ceasefire was key to preventing other states from being drawn into the war. We call for the joint efforts of the international community aimed at de-escalating the situation, a ceasefire and finding a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And the BRICS states and countries of the region could play a key role in this work.”—Russian President Vladimir Putin.

A group of Arab and Muslim states which was formed during the recently held OIC-Arab League conference is actively examining a long-term ceasefire in Gaza; cessation of Israeli aggression against Gazans and reviving peace process leading to the formation of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. The group held meetings with the permanent members of the UN Security Council and other stakeholders in the quest for durable peace in the Middle East. Yet, Israel's intransigence which prevented ceasefire for more than a month following Hamas October 7 attack is now proceeding for a short-term truce, release of some Israeli hostages in the Hamas custody and

freeing some Palestinians held in Israeli prison.

The only country which has taken a firm stance against Israel in the ongoing conflict over Gaza is Iran. Unlike the monarchical regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi which maintained normal relations with Israel, the Islamic revolutionary government which came into power overthrowing Shah in February 1979 cut off its ties with the Jewish state and expressed wholehearted support for PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat for an independent Palestinian state. Israel and the United States accuse Iran of supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, the two deadly enemies of the Jewish state, and view Tehran's nuclear programme as detrimental to the interests of Tel Aviv and Washington.

On November 19, Iran's Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei urged the Muslim countries to at least temporarily sever diplomatic relations with Israel so as to compel that Jewish state to end its brutal aggression against the Palestinians of Gaza. Earlier, Iran had called for imposing

sanctions on Israel so that adequate pressure is exerted on Tel Aviv to cripple its economy. Yet, the OIC-Arab League summit held in Riyadh merely passed resolutions condemning Israel over its massacre of Palestinians including women and children in Gaza and the West Bank but failed to take practical measures having any meaningful impact on the Jewish state particularly its principal backer, the United States.

Will it help the Palestinian cause if the Arab-Muslim countries sever diplomatic relations with Israel? Is there any political will and determination on the part of the Arab-Muslim world to render practical support for an independent Palestinian state? Why is there the absence of will and determination among Arab-Muslim countries to take practical measures against Israel and its principal backer, the United States?

A paradigm shift in the Arab-Muslim stance against Israel and the United States took place following the oil embargo which was imposed on the Western supporters of



Tel Aviv after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. It was the dynamic leadership of the Arab-Muslim world led by the then Saudi monarch Shah Faisal which was instrumental in imposing oil embargo against the United States and those western countries involved in providing military, political and diplomatic support to the Jewish state. The second Islamic summit held in Lahore in February 1974 under the leadership of Shah Faisal and Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was termed a milestone in the context of Muslim unity. But, the assassination of Shah Faisal on March 25, 1975 by a member of Saudi royal family led to the erosion of leadership which had taken a firm stance against Israel and its principal backer. The West, which had neither forgotten nor forgiven the winter of 1973-1974 because of the oil embargo, decided to break the Muslim unity. Thus back-to-back events – like the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975, the Iran-Iraq war 1980-88 and the Iraqi attack over Kuwait in August 1990 – devastated the Arab-Muslim world, thereby weakening the Palestinian cause and strengthening the state of Israel.

One can analyse the question of severing diplomatic and other relations with Israel from three angles, as follows:

First, Israel's quest for seeking legitimacy got an impetus when Egypt, Jordan and PLO recognised Israel. Following the end of Cold War in 1991, Russia, China and India also granted legitimacy to Israel to the extent that a majority of the UN member



states which till 1990 had not recognised Israel because of its occupation of Arab territories changed their stance. By the year 2000, a majority of the UN member states had recognised Israel whereas a handful of Muslim countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Indonesia had refused to grant legitimacy to the Jewish state unless an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital was established. Israel's quest for legitimacy in the Arab world got an impetus when the Abraham Accord was reached in 2020 between Israel and the Gulf states of the UAE and Bahrain, followed by Morocco and Sudan which granted recognition to the Jewish state.

Second, after Hamas's attacks on Israel killing 1,400 people and taking 250 hostages, there is no Arab-Muslim state which had severed its diplomatic relations with Israel. Turkey merely announced recalling its

ambassador from Tel Aviv but has maintained its diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. In the resolution passed by the UN General Assembly calling for ceasefire in Gaza on October 27, two Arab countries Iraq and Tunisia abstained which reflected a division within the Arab world on the issue of the Israeli brutalities against Palestinians.

Third, out of the 195 UN member states, only 29 don't have diplomatic relations with Israel which means unlike in 1990, now majority members of world body have granted legitimacy to the Jewish state. If Third World countries sever their diplomatic relations with Israel then one can expect some qualitative change on the issue of delegitimising the Jewish state and compelling it to agree on an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. There is no harm in pursuing that dream!



# IMF deal: a boon and a burden

*While the feel-good sentiment is there in the economy, the IMF obligates the government to implement policies that lead to inflation and joblessness*



By Afshan Subohi

The caretaker government is jubilant, feeling a sense of vindication. The market, in turn, embraced the International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreement with warmth. The deal unlocked the critically needed second \$700 million tranche, bringing the total disbursement to \$1.9 billion, within the \$3bn bailout framework deemed essential for Pakistan's financial stability.

While the business community expressed qualified support, ordinary Pakistanis dread further hardships due to the inherent conditions of the package. The IMF obligates the government to implement stabilisation policies, leading to increased taxes, levies, elevated energy rates and reduced development spending.

To address the substantial budget deficit, the donor often recommends a halt on government recruitment and advocates leaner state-owned enterprises before a potential sale. Unfortunately, the resulting impact, including inflation, job losses and

cuts to development spending, disproportionately hurt the working masses.

It's not surprising that people in Pakistan resent the IMF. The memory of all previous programmes is unpleasant, marked by the anticipation of gains that never materialised despite enduring the pain of stabilisation", observed an analyst.

While the feel-good sentiment is there in the economy, the IMF obligates the government to implement policies that lead to inflation and joblessness

Since July 2023, when the IMF approved a nine-month \$3bn bailout package for Pakistan, fuel, electricity and gas prices have risen, contributing to crushingly high inflation and unemployment rates. Since the caretakers assumed power in August, petrol and diesel prices increased by Rs58.6 and Rs55.7 till the end of September.

Although revised down in October and November, the overall balance remains

higher by Rs16.2 and Rs23.2 compared to mid-August prices. Both electricity and gas tariffs rose astronomically, impacting even the lifeline consumers of gas, who were charged Rs10 per month and will now pay a minimum of Rs500.

In response to inquiries about the growing economic discontent, Dr Shamshad Akhtar, Caretaker Finance Minister, conveyed over phone, stating, "Economic and price stability will pave the way for benefits for the poor."

Upon successfully engaging with the IMF team, she remarked, "There has been a broad recognition of the government's commitment to the IMF standby agreement and its strict adherence to stipulated quantitative and structural benchmarks.

"Following the standard operating procedure, the second tranche of \$700 million will be released after approval of the IMF Management and Executive Boards.



"The staff-level agreement and its forward-looking directives will bolster macroeconomic stability, fostering growth and facilitating expansion in social safety nets for the vulnerable."

After reviewing Pakistan's situation, the IMF said, "A nascent recovery is underway, buoyed by international partners' support and signs of improved confidence". It anticipated a further decline in the inflation rate, which fell from 38 per cent in May to under 27pc in October, but cautioned about susceptibility to external risks, including intensification of geopolitical tensions, resurgent commodity prices, and further tightening in global financial conditions. It advised focusing on building resilience.

The capital and currency markets celebrated the IMF deal by propelling the Pakistan Stock Exchange's benchmark index to over 57,000 mark, and the rupee showed resilience by gaining value against the dollar, albeit marginally.

Ehsan Malik, CEO, Pakistan Business Council, voiced the corporate sector's apprehensions about the escalating cost of doing business. He responded to criticism of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) and emphasised the inevitability of a 24th programme next year.

"In our discussions with the IMF, we have consistently championed the cause of equitable distribution of tax, be it in the

realms of energy or other areas. We contend that the front-loaded targets merely address the symptoms and not the cause of Pakistan's problems, which primarily stem from a lack of political will and the Federal Board of Revenue's (FBR) capacity to expand the tax base while curbing theft, transmission and distribution inefficiencies in the energy sector.

"The IMF's measures disproportionately burden the formal sector, fostering greater incentives for evasion by the informal sector. Likewise, an orthodox monetary policy, lacking fiscal expenditure controls, pursues inflation driven by cost-push, supply-side pressures and devaluation impacts. This results in a higher cost of funds for the formal sector, borrowing from banks, collectively hindering the formalisation agenda of the economy.

"This time, the IMF has been more receptive, focusing on taxing untaxed sectors for sustainable revenue. We wish a similar approach had been taken for energy tariffs."

Defending the new body, he stated, "The SIFC is a pragmatic solution to government decision-making fragmentation and red tape. Both we and the IMF envision sustainable institutional strengthening, and we believe the SIFC could pave the way".

"We remain concerned about the looming debt challenge as standby assistance and deposits from friendly nations offer temporary support, yet a near-term funding gap

persists. Clarification is needed on the proposal regarding the debt reprofiling. While a challenge for an incoming government, the caretaker regime could seek advice from sovereign debt advisors, with potential private sector assistance to fill any gap in government resources."

Former Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Nasser Hayat Magoon cautioned, "Further power hikes may force closures of textile units as it will become impossible to compete with countries like China, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Indonesia in the global market. While welcoming fair taxation for retailers and realtors, the question remains whether FBR can effectively implement it."

Karachi industrialist Majyd Aziz derided the convoluted language and numerical jargon in economic statements that elude common understanding. While criticising the recurrent increase in power rates, he offered support for the SIFC.

"The recent gas rate increase has severely impacted domestic and industrial consumers. The mention of the necessity of free and fair elections is a positive development, removing uncertainty. IMF's scrutiny of SIFC is puzzling. The rationale of its establishment is to create a comfort zone for mega investors, recognised for sustainable guarantees and prioritising indigenous sectors like agriculture, mining, and information technology."

Courtesy Dawn



# Punjab Amidst Toxic Atmosphere



By Nimra Atiq

As the sun struggles to pierce through the haze, Punjab finds itself entangled in a suffocating veil of smog, setting off health alarms and prompting urgent calls for action. The once-vibrant landscape is now obscured in a shadowy scene, saturated with a mixture of pollutants that is thrusting the region into a hazardous environmental crisis.

Punjab, renowned for its fertile fields and rich cultural history, is currently embroiled in a battle against an unidentified adversary. Once-clear skies have surrendered to a stifling haze, compelling residents to don masks and cities to grapple with compromised air quality.

This toxic haze has become a recurring guest, returning year after year and embedding itself seamlessly into our lives. It's disconcerting to realize that this perilous environment has seamlessly integrated into our daily routines, as if it's an unavoidable aspect of living in the city.

As winter approaches, a dense layer of smog blankets both urban and rural

areas, pushing Punjab's air quality to perilous levels. This has spurred individuals and the government to address the issue head-on.

Unraveling the Tapestry of Factors:

1. **Agricultural Residue Burning:** The annual ritual of burning residue after the harvest season unfolds as a significant contributor, casting a ghastly hue across the skies. The pungent smoke, a byproduct of this practice, ascends into the atmosphere, merging with pollutants and thickening the ominous veil that persists.
2. **Industrial Emissions:** Punjab's industrial heartlands, brimming with activity, emit a toxic blend into the air. The unregulated release of pollutants compounds the existing challenge of mitigating smog.
3. **Vehicle Exhaust:** Urban centers pulsate with vehicular activity, emitting exhaust fumes that amalgamate with the atmospheric

mixture. The continuous flow of cars and trucks adds another layer to the suffocating haze, making each breath an endurance test.

Lahore's smog is more than a seasonal inconvenience; it extends beyond the visual haze, affecting the health of millions. Respiratory illnesses surge as citizens contend with the noxious air, with vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly bearing the brunt of health risks. Hospitals report a surge in admissions due to respiratory issues, underscoring the need for immediate action to mitigate the escalating health crisis.

On certain days, when smoke cloaks Lahore in orange and brown hues and the scent of smoke permeates the air, people feel as if they are in a nightmare. Environmentalists and academics emphasize India's role in Punjab's smog crisis, citing trans-border pollution from the burning of agricultural residue in the Indian state of Punjab.



According to the Air Quality Index (AQI), which monitors air pollution levels, Lahore's air quality is so poor that it is expected to reduce inhabitants' life expectancy by seven years. This demands immediate attention to alleviate the negative impacts of air pollution on health and well-being.

Designated a "calamity" by the Punjab Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), an "emergency" has been declared throughout the province. Lahore, maintaining its status as the world's most polluted city, had an alarming Air Quality Index (AQI) of 439, according to global air quality monitoring portal [iqair.com](http://iqair.com). The AQI hovered around 325 throughout the day, indicating a grim situation.

Consequently, there has been a surge in fatal health problems, exacerbating asthma, allergies, eye infections, respiratory tract infections, and cardiac illnesses, ultimately leading to death. As productivity drops and medical expenses rise, the economy bears the brunt.

To combat smog, air filtration devices will be installed in 12 locations throughout Lahore, and a high-powered environmental commission will be established. Chinese experts, experienced in reducing smog in Beijing, have been invited to consult in Lahore. In collaboration with these experts, research and technology will be employed to control smog, with the cooperation of the Chinese Consul General.



Chief Meteorologist Chaudhry Aslam of the Meteorological Department announced the expectation of artificial rain in Lahore next month to combat the city's escalating pollution. This plan, part of several preventative steps announced on November 16 by the Punjab interim cabinet's anti-smog committee, will be implemented next month. However, Aslam emphasized that no artificial rain is anticipated on November 28-29.

While a pollution emergency is declared throughout the state, the Punjab Directorate of General Public Relations has mandated masks for students in all public and private institutions for one month. Essential services, including medical facilities, grocery stores, and gas stations, remain open, with locals advised to wear masks when venturing outside. The

burning of crop residue, a major source of air pollution, underscores the need for long-term solutions. The Environment Department has closed 3,495 industrial entities, filed over 2,000 FIRs, and imposed fines totaling Rs 220 million.

The call for immediate action resounds as Punjab grapples with this environmental crisis. To safeguard the health and future of the region's residents, a united, dedicated, and proactive effort is essential in combating the pollution cloud.

Public awareness and individual responsibility are paramount. Citizens must actively advocate for change by adopting eco-friendly practices, reducing their carbon footprints, and holding governments and industries accountable for their environmental impact.

The significance of public awareness and participation cannot be overstated. Communities must actively engage in understanding the causes and implications of smog, enabling them to demand and implement ecologically sound practices and policies. Educational initiatives, community endeavors, and civic involvement all play crucial roles in fostering a broader movement toward a cleaner, healthier Lahore.

In the battle against suffocating smog, collective consciousness must rally, acknowledging that the cost of inaction far surpasses the challenges of change. Only through collaborative efforts and unwavering commitment can Punjab aspire to restore its clear skies and ensure a breathable tomorrow for generations to come.



# Pakistan's Water Crisis: A confluence of Climate Change and Governance Failure

In the heart of South Asia, Pakistan stands at the crossroads of a water crisis that not only imperils its economic stability but also jeopardizes the fundamental human right to access clean water. Positioned among the top ten nation's most profoundly affected by the reverberations of climate change, Pakistan is hurtling toward the disconcerting designation of becoming one of the globe's most water-stressed countries. The ongoing Kharif season serves as a poignant reminder, accentuating the gravity of an impending water shortage ranging from 27 to 35 per cent, a crisis exacerbated by recent floods.

This article embarks on a journey to unravel the complex interplay between water security and human rights, delving into the nuanced state of water management in Pakistan. It meticulously examines the intricate challenges that contribute to the looming water crisis, casting a spotlight on the urgent need for a comprehensive roadmap that steers the nation toward sustainable water management practices.

## Water Security and Human Rights

The intrinsic connection between water security and human rights is undeniable, as access to clean water is unequivocally recognized as a fundamental entitlement. This imperative transcends geographical boundaries, impacting both affluent and impoverished nations alike. Global dynamics, including population growth, irresponsible water use, and climate-induced weather pattern changes, contribute significantly to the escalating water scarcity crisis. According to the United Nations, the scale of this challenge is staggering, with three billion people worldwide grappling with water shortages. The consequences reverberate beyond thirst, as one billion individuals experience hunger due to inadequate water resources.

This crisis underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, collaborative solutions that recognize water as a shared global resource. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of



human rights and environmental sustainability, demonstrating that the repercussions of water scarcity extend far beyond geographical borders. The call for action becomes even more critical in the face of a changing climate and growing population demands. As the world contends with this complex challenge, a collective commitment to responsible water stewardship is essential to ensure that the basic human right to clean water is preserved for current and future generations.

## State of Water Management and Challenges in Pakistan

Pakistan's water scarcity crisis is multifaceted, and deeply rooted in rapid population growth, the impacts of climate change, poor agricultural water management, inefficient infrastructure, and pervasive water pollution. The country currently ranks 14th among 'extremely high-water risk' nations, with over 80 per cent of the population facing severe water scarcity for at least a month each year. The ominous spectre of groundwater over-extraction, primarily for irrigation, looms large, posing a severe threat that could lead to nationwide water scarcity by 2025.

The reliance on the Indus River system, contributing to 95.8 per cent of renewable

water resources, leaves Pakistan vulnerable, particularly when 78 per cent of water inflows originate from outside the country. This underscores the interconnectedness of water security and climate change, where global shifts impact local vulnerabilities.

## Factors affecting Water Security

Pakistan's water security challenges are a confluence of multiple factors, each contributing to a complex and precarious situation. The nation grapples with heightened vulnerability to climate change, experiencing erratic weather patterns that strain water resources. With a population exceeding 220 million, rapid growth exacerbates the demand for water, placing immense pressure on existing supplies. Inefficient irrigation practices further intensify the issue, leading to excessive water usage and diminishing reserves.

Compounding the problem, inadequate water treatment exacerbates the quality of available water, posing health risks to the population. The prevalence of waterborne diseases adds an alarming dimension to the crisis, highlighting the direct impact on public health. The timeless adage, "We never know the worth of water till the well is dry," poignantly captures the essence of Pakistan's predicament, emphasizing the



critical importance of proactive measures to address these multifaceted challenges and secure a sustainable water future.

## The Way Forward: A Comprehensive Approach

Addressing Pakistan's water crisis requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond immediate fixes to address the root causes. At its core, the crisis is a governance failure rather than a genuine water shortage. Bridging the gap between policies, reforms, and implementation is imperative, demanding a detailed and actionable plan.

### I. Governance Reforms:

The initial stride toward sustainable water management necessitates robust governance reforms. This encompasses a thorough review of water policies, the enhancement of regulatory frameworks, and the cultivation of collaboration among government entities, local communities, and private stakeholders. The establishment of transparent and accountable water management institutions emerges as a pivotal component, ensuring effective oversight and the fair distribution of this vital resource. By fortifying the foundations of governance, a more resilient and equitable water management system can be laid, serving as a cornerstone for addressing the intricate challenges of Pakistan's water crisis.

### II. Technological Innovations:

Harnessing technology is pivotal for efficient water utilization amid rising demand and climate variability. Precision irrigation methods, exemplified by drip irrigation, offer a transformative solution, markedly reducing water wastage while enhancing agricultural productivity. Strategic investments in smart water management systems and monitoring technologies are imperative, offering real-time data that enables the optimization of water distribution and consumption. Embracing these technological advancements not only addresses the immediate challenges posed by water scarcity but also establishes a sustainable framework for managing water

resources in the dynamic context of Pakistan's evolving climate and agricultural landscape.

### III. Agricultural Paradigm Shift:

Revolutionizing agricultural practices stands as a paramount strategy for water conservation. Substituting water-intensive crops with those requiring less water represents a crucial step in alleviating the strain on water resources. Moreover,



advocating for agroecological approaches, including sustainable farming practices like crop rotation and cover cropping, proves instrumental. These practices not only contribute to water conservation but also enhance overall soil health and water retention. By embracing such transformative approaches, Pakistan can chart a course towards sustainable agriculture, ensuring the judicious use of water resources and fostering resilience in the face of its impending water crisis.

### IV. Public Awareness and Education:

A fundamental aspect of tackling the water crisis lies in elevating public awareness and education. It is imperative for communities to grasp the intrinsic value of water conservation and embrace water-efficient practices on both individual and communal levels. Educational campaigns play a pivotal role in empowering citizens, transforming them into stewards of their water resources. By instilling a culture of responsible water use,

these initiatives not only contribute to immediate conservation efforts but also establish a lasting ethos of environmental stewardship, crucial for navigating the challenges presented by Pakistan's water scarcity and ensuring a sustainable water future.

### Conclusion

In summary, Pakistan's water crisis presents a multifaceted challenge that necessitates a holistic and integrated response. The urgency extends beyond

immediate solutions; it requires addressing root causes through governance reforms, technological innovations, and a transformative shift in agricultural practices. The consequences of inaction are profound, not only jeopardizing Pakistan's economic prospects but also underscoring the global challenge of managing water resources amid climate change.

Standing at the brink of severe water scarcity, decisive and comprehensive action is imperative. Pakistan's journey toward water security demands a unified effort involving government bodies, communities, and the private sector. This collaborative endeavour is essential to ensure a sustainable and equitable water future, echoing beyond national borders and resonating as a global imperative. Time is of the essence, and only through collective commitment and immediate action can Pakistan forge a path towards resilience in the face of its water crisis, securing a vital resource for the prosperity of generations to come.

By Kanwal Munir

# In Pakistan, one of the world's oldest Juniper Forests is facing lurking threats



By Amir Latif/Anadolu

**I**t takes slightly over three hours to reach the serene Ziarat valley from Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province, where stands one of the world's oldest and largest juniper forests. As the road swerves through mighty mountains, there is a sudden change in the atmosphere as the wind starts becoming cooler and crisper, and the rugged terrain gives way to greenery.

The mountains are covered in clusters of juniper trees, offering a remarkable and soothing sight to sore eyes.

Junipers and Ziarat, for locals, are one.

But this ecological treasure is facing a slew of lurking threats, ranging from climate change ravages to growing demand for land, and from human habitation to compromised regeneration.

Located at a height ranging from 1,181 to 3,488 meters (3,874 to 11,443 feet) above sea level, and spanning over 247,000 acres, Ziarat has the largest contiguous natural

juniper forest in Pakistan and the second-largest of its kind in the world.

It has some of the world's oldest trees dating back to between 1,500 and 2,500 years.

The forest is also home to several endangered wildlife species, including the Himalayan black bear and the markhor wild goat.

It was added to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves by UNESCO in 2013, though the global body, according to Balochistan Forest Department, has not provided any funds for its protection ever since.

## Economy over ecology

Multiple anthropological factors, according to ecologists, have contributed to the degradation of the forest in recent years.

Demand for land for both agriculture and human settlements has increased exponen-

tially over the past two decades, significantly reducing the forest cover, according to Rafi-ul-Haq, a Karachi-based ecologist.

Speaking to Anadolu, Haq, who has been associated with projects related to juniper forests, cited climate change as another potential threat to the existence of the millennia-old forest.

"The juniper ecosystem is known to withstand the microclimatic brunt, but the current extent of climate change poses an extra burden. Potentially, a compromise in the resilience of this ecosystem seems imminent in recent years," he explained.

Also, he further said, a significant area of the forest has been transformed into farmlands and orchards over recent decades.

"These orchards and farmlands have not only reduced the forest cover, but they are also sharing the water, minerals, and other natural resources with the juniper ecosystem, which would otherwise get all of it,"



Haq said, adding that this affects the lifespan and strength of juniper trees.

Sharing a similar view, Hamid Sarfraz, an Islamabad-based environmentalist, observed that an improved road network over the past decade has prompted locals to convert forest land into cherry and grapes orchards, as they can now easily transport their produce to other cities.

Recent climate-related changes, he added, have also improved wheat cultivation conditions in Ziarat.

“Keeping its ecological value aside, juniper cannot benefit them (locals). But the land juniper trees are covering can benefit them very well. That’s why the agricultural land area there is increasing day by day,” he told Anadolu.

“Simply put, economy has superseded ecology and natural beauty.”

## Lack of data

Umar Farooq, a conservator with Balochistan’s Forest Department and a native of Ziarat, said there are no exact estimates of the forest cover lost over the years, mainly because there have not been proper surveys in decades.

“What I can tell you on the basis of my and my father’s observation is that huge portions of the forest, which in our childhood used to be covered in thick clusters of juniper trees, are nowadays completely bare,” he told Anadolu.

The cold Ziarat valley has long been facing electricity and gas shortages, compelling people to cut trees for domestic use, particularly in winter.

According to locals, the city gets electricity for eight to 10 hours and gas for only a few hours a day, which is quite insufficient to meet their heating and cooking requirements, especially on bitterly cold nights.

“These trees are like a part of us. But we have no other choice. It’s impossible to survive in the winters when there is no power and gas for heating,” Abdul Waseh, a local shopkeeper, told Anadolu.

Endorsing his view, Farooq said that until locals are not provided an alternative in terms of both economy and civic facilities,

they will keep cutting down trees.

“We have to be realistic about it. How can we stop this phenomenon when only 30% of the people here have gas facilities to keep themselves warm in minus 23 degrees Celsius (minus 9.4 degrees Fahrenheit),” he said.

“Whatever forest area is protected, it’s because of the forest department, and without any external assistance,” he added.



## Compromised regeneration

Haq, the ecologist, said there is a huge gap between the number of trees being uprooted or chopped down, and the efforts for regeneration, mainly because of the treacherous terrain.

The slow growth rate of junipers is also a major issue in maintaining the status of the ecosystem.

“The natural regeneration of juniper tree is dependent on the climatic regime and assisted reforestation techniques have many difficulties, mainly influenced by the climatic, social and traditional composition of the mountainous nature of forest terrain,” he explained.

“Let’s say if trees are cut down or uprooted (because of flash floods or other natural disasters), the chances of replenishment are disproportionate and there is also the very slow growth rate of junipers.”

Farooq, the conservator, however, disagreed with Haq’s view, saying that

regeneration is actually higher than the number of trees being felled.

“But why these trees are not seen or not able to reach maturity is because of grazing,” he said referring to the presence of livestock, a key source of livelihood for locals.

A local tradition is also adding to the problems as people cut down juniper branches to cover graves.

However, Farooq said that has slightly reduced in recent years with the help of younger religious scholars.

Another additional burden on the juniper forest ecosystem is coming from the reduction in migratory trends of the local population.

Until recently, many locals would move to warmer areas of Balochistan in winter and return in the summer, reflecting the agro-pastoral characteristic of the area’s ecosystem.

However, improved communication networks and increasing permanent settlements have disrupted this centuries-old tradition, according to Haq.

“That (seasonal migration) meant less cutting of trees and human intervention for at least half a year. But the gradual decrease in temporary migration has added to an increasing burden on the forest,” he said.

Courtesy: Anadolu Agency

# Pakistan and the Implementation of Children's Protection Laws



By S. Zeeshan A Shah

On this year each year, the UN marks World Children's Day across the globe, signifying a special event that goes back to 1989, marking it as the "Convention on the Rights of the Child". Titled UNCRC- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, this is a promise that binds all nations, countries, and communities to protect the children of the world. This convention further states that all children have the right to live, survive, and develop, and to be protected from abuse, exploitation, violence, and death.

Decades later, the world today has failed its children. As we watch our children die helplessly in the Middle East, nations and governments are mercilessly watching this game of death. In Pakistan today, we need to re-visit our oath to this convention by standing up for child rights.

Pakistan was one of the first countries to ensure UNCRC ratification in 2010 but has since failed to fully implement

the legal framework design policy into law. Has Pakistan failed to protect the rights of its children?

*According to Article 12 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, state parties shall ensure that all children stand capable of forming his or her views freely on matters that affect them and that the views of the child are given due importance as per age and maturity of the child.*

The majority of the younger population has zero access to quality education, with one of the lowest primary school enrollment in the world. Instead many children are forced into child labor, to earn for their families instead of being sent to schools as compulsory state laws under the convention do not exist. Public sector schools are not being developed by the state to serve the majority of the child population while private education in schools is beyond the reach of the common man.

In a country plagued by poverty, our children are being deprived of access to

basic education and are being brainwashed into going on the streets to beg for money. The state refuses to inject investment into education for the young.

As per our constitution under Article 25-A, it is the responsibility of the state of Pakistan to provide free and compulsory education to 'all children aged between 5 and 16 years'. By law, this is a basic violation of our constitutional rights and the rights of the child under UNCRC. Furthermore, very few governments in the past have taken up this agenda seriously by taking drastic reforms to improve basic access to primary education within public schools.

There should be zero tolerance on this issue by the state and the government and strict punishment should be set under law, for those who have been responsible for crushing the education system in the country.

For starters, there needs to be a



nationwide re-assessment of the education standards that currently apply to our public schools. Why is everyone opting for private schooling when the public is unable to afford it? In other nations, the public sends their children to public schools where the school fees are regulated by the state and law-breakers are punished under the law. In Pakistan, less than 3% is spent on education.

Then there is another deepening crisis in Pakistan. A lot of children are living in conflict zones within the country. Ninety percent of children living in rural Pakistan are not attending proper schools, as schools are slowly being destroyed. There are many ghost schools in the country, where teachers are only present on paper.

According to experts on education and literacy, there is a very high number of children today exposed to a negative violent society without any legal protection. Increased exposure to negative media and online content is a high risk followed by other social evils like extremism, youth crimes, beggary, child sexual abuse, and child recruitment in criminal activities.

One of the challenges today is the illegal trafficking of children which is increasing day by day leading to severe mental and physical trauma in early childhood for most children born to parents who are poor, unemployed, or uneducated. The search for food security, shelter, access to water rights, and access to safe and secure neighborhoods is a rising challenge today for most children.

Poverty and civil disorder are further escalating the misery, leading to increasing insecurity in children today, leading them to a negative path, in the absence of strict laws to regulate the education system. Moreover, the increased number of on-the-street children exposes them to extreme risk of child recruitment in war zones.

As per the UN Charter of Human Rights under Article 31 on children's rights, all children have the right to live, learn, and be educated in a secure environment with access to basic rights such as clean drinking water in schools. Can the government check on how many listed schools provide clean drinking water access to children?

According to Human Rights Watch, the UN has refused to hold accountable the countries who are responsible for 'not making any efforts' to protect the children living in conflict zones and sub-standard conditions, without healthcare and education. UN's B-list of countries has a seriously flawed human rights history. Shockingly, the USA is one of the countries that have not implemented UNCRC, despite the UN being housed in the USA.

*It is estimated that there are over 2.5 million bonded laborers in Pakistan and most of them are children, who travel from rural villages to big cities in countless numbers with zero access to education, illegally recruited in various menial jobs, or smuggled to be part of the street criminal gangs.*



It is time for the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to activate the state's response to modern slavery by activating a robust national action plan through its anti-trafficking unit as they have the budget, capacity, and power to take on this massive mission to protect our children, with focus on child slavery inside Pakistan and transnational trafficking.

The Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) needs to be aligned with this task force to ensure an effective mechanism to win this battle to save our children from harm.

Pakistan has one the lowest conviction rates on crimes related to forced labor and is

not in abidance to the BLSA (Bonded Labor System Abolition) Act of 1992. The state has the responsibility to ensure that children are given the right cultural and social environment to protect the future generations of this highly populated nation where the majority of the youth population is looking for honest leaders as mentors and teachers.

Pakistan has a poor track record on ensuring children's rights, whether it is children's basic rights in schools or outside on the streets. Parents are misguided and do not analyze the root cause. Children who are ignored at home by parents or in school by teachers or the lack of teaching in schools, develop negative traits often leading to severe criminal behavior or anti-social lives,

leading them into drugs and away from their families.

On this day, Pakistan must take action and improve 'education' across the nation. The media must its part to produce child-friendly content while social media must enact strong monitoring and evaluation procedures through strict regulatory measures, to ban the use of negative imagery, text, and content that is harmful to a child and fulfill all obligations as per laws under UNCRC-Rights of the Child.

We are battling an inside war and we must unite to win this war against corruption and illiteracy by protecting the health and well-being of our children which in turn is the actual health of the nation.

# Refugees' Train - 1947

(A diorama in Army Museum Lahore depicting the plight of refugees)



By Syeda Aamna Nadeem

After about a hundred years of colonial occupation, on the fateful day of August 14, 1947, the status quo ante was re-established with the rebirth of the land of Indus as Pakistan. The nation, which had started building its villages, towns, and cities over 9000 years ago, created a civilization, fought invaders from the east and west, built the world's first university, and sustained itself through unmatched tenacity and perseverance, was again sovereign and free. However, this did not come easy. The struggle for the rebirth of the nation cost an untold number of Muslim lives in planned genocidal massacres, ethnic cleansing, rape, and abduction of Muslim women, and destruction of property. The Indian invasion of Muslim-majority Kashmir began even before freedom was granted by the British, resulting in massive human suffering and undermining regional stability. The unfair and inappropriate division of boundaries, economic and military assets impacted Pakistan's integrity and security. At the outset, Pakistan had to face numerous political, economic, and

security challenges. The struggle to preserve nationhood had just begun again.

The theme of the gallery revolves around pre and post-August 1947 events. One of the most important displays of the museum, the Refugees Train, is also showcased in this gallery. All the events of the gallery thematically revolve around the "Refugees Train".

In 1947, Muslim refugees used a variety of transportation modes like foot columns, bullock carts, trucks, private cars, trains, and aircraft to move to Pakistan. Initially, trains moving from India reached Pakistan relatively unharmed. However, organized Indian violence against Muslims triggered one of the largest human migrations in history and resulted in planned and organized attacks on trains moving to Pakistan. In October, Pakistan and India prepared a Joint Evacuation Movement (JEM) plan. It was planned to complete the evacuation of millions of Muslim refugees in Punjab by the end of December 1947.

The Joint Evacuation Movement (JEM) plan for the evacuation of refugees entailed running 5-6 trains on a daily basis. A Movement Control, based on military lines, was set up in Lahore to facilitate the rail movement of Muslim refugees. These refugee trains were known as 'Pakistan Special' and 'India Special'.

As organized Indian violence gained control, Pakistan Special trains were frequently attacked on Indian territory through well-planned measures, resulting in wholesale slaughter and massacre of Muslims. One of the most disturbing aspects of Muslim refugee trains was that the Indian Railway Staff, Police, and Indian Army troops accompanying these trains openly assisted the attackers. Even an Indian Minister of the Indian Punjab Cabinet, during an Emergency Committee meeting, acknowledged that, on occasions, the trains had been delayed on pretexts because attackers were not ready. In many cases when these trains arrived at Lahore Railway Station, they had more dead than



survivors. Many of these dead were buried in mass graves in front of Lahore Railway Station.

The diorama of the Muslim refugee train is displayed inside the Rebirth of a Nation gallery in the Army Museum Lahore, which is a masterfully created life-size poignant replica, reminding people of Pakistan and the agony of Muslim refugees for freedom in 1947.

For making a realistic train diorama, Pakistan Railway Authorities were approached to sanction a train boggy, but all our efforts went in vain. Ultimately, it was decided that Mr. Changezi would create a Refugees' train arriving at Lahore Railway Station. All research on the train, its markings, its equipment, dress of people, luggage details, and the general environment was carried out by Mr. Khan Ahmed Sufyan (Late), Dr. Sayyambin Saeed, Ms. Samar, and me. The challenge for Mr. Changezi, Ms. Samar, and their team was to make this a reality. Mr. Changezi worked tirelessly with his team to turn it into a masterpiece. We decided to check the details of the trains on the spot, in addition to references in books, magazines, and on the internet. Dr. Sayyam had detailed discussions with Pakistan Railway authorities. As it's not an original train, all the references were double-checked by Railway Authorities.



One day, our team decided to visit the Mughalpura train junkyard. The team, including Mr. Aftab Changezi, Dr. Sayyam, Ms. Samar, Ms. Mehwish, Mr. Arshad Pervaiz, and me, went from our project office to Mughalpura. After getting to the place, we saw two vintage trains in very bad condition. The place was truly a train junkyard. We parked our cars at a distance and went near those trains. Nearby those trains, we also saw some drug addicts (who ran away after our arrival). We continued looking inside each and every carriage of the train and got a fair idea about the trajectories of different parts of

the train. This visit to the junk was "intelligently" used by our team.

During a visit to the museum (construction phase), Lieutenant General Sadiq Ali sanctioned additional funds for Mr. Changezi for the "Train diorama." He asked him to add more characters, equipment, luggage items, and dresses, etc. An old cycle of 1947, trunks, utensils, and bags, etc., were procured from the "Landa Bazar of Lahore." The night before the inauguration, a 'Hokkah' was donated by the father of Ms. Tahreem, an artist in Mr. Changezi's team. In short, it was a team effort to complete this undertaking.



# From Full-Time 9-5 to Flexible Gigs



By Sara Danial

In today's dynamic professional landscape, individuals at various career stages are grappling with profound questions about their jobs and occupation, the amount of time they wish to spend on it, and its significance in their lives. These questions arise, in part, due to the declining adherence to the conventional concept of life divided into three distinct phases: an initial, brief period focused on learning, a lengthy middle phase dedicated to work, and a subsequent stage reserved for enjoying retirement. However, in recent times, we notice an increasing transition between different jobs and career paths, seeking educational opportunities, and setting aside time for relaxation and holidaying.

This isn't a midlife crisis, which occurs at a specific age and is permanently resolved. The rapid advancement of technology and the emergence of AI have transformed the nature of jobs and the structure of organizations. This necessitates an ongoing process of career adaptation. Therefore, one will soon become obsolete until Pakistanis learn to develop the skills to effectively navigate the frequent changes that will define a lengthy career.

It is highly likely to perceive the process as emotionally fraught during the transition, primarily marked by confusion, loss, insecurity, and adversity. While some changes can be invigorating, they can also evoke fear and apprehension.

## Transition is Hard

The challenges during the transition to a new career are usually centered around the absence of support from established institutions and the unsettling experience of losing one's professional identity.

Until recently, most career progression was guided by well-established institutions, in which clear pathways were carefully crafted by the professions that governed them. To become a doctor, lawyer, or top-tier business professional, there was a visibly defined system through from the educational journey to the retirement, with reasonably precise duration of each phase, with peers and elders guiding the youth, and gatekeepers marking progress with degrees, credentials, promotions, and, eventually, gold watches.

Today, as non-linear career trajectories become more prevalent, the transitions lack well-established institutional support, without any fixed sequence of actions for the necessary transformation, and it's challenging to predict the duration or gauge the advancement, all of which is topped by unstructured job markets. Moreover, professionals are increasingly transitioning from traditional full-time employment to more flexible, individualized portfolios of gigs and part-time roles. Such a shift has provided Pakistanis with a perpetual feeling of limitless opportunities, something that was non-existent before.

Nearly 15 years ago, one's identity was primarily defined by the profession. So, emotional highs and lows are a typical aspect of any transition. Sadly, today's professionals may have to deal with these for a longer duration than initially anticipated. A seasoned executive is likely to possess highly specialized skills and knowledge, which can make the process of finding a suitable new role more challenging.

This notable shift in the employment



landscape is a rapid movement and is driven by several factors, prominently including the desire for greater flexibility and autonomy in work schedules. Many individuals are drawn to the freelance lifestyle as it offers the freedom to choose projects, set their own hours, and work from virtually anywhere in the world. With technological advancements enabling seamless connectivity, professionals now find it more feasible to pursue freelance opportunities that align with their skills and interests while maintaining a work-life balance that suits their preferences.

Moreover, the evolving nature of work itself has contributed significantly to this shift. Companies are increasingly outsourcing tasks to freelancers to gain access to specialized expertise without the commitment of full-time employment. The gig economy has expanded across various industries, providing a plethora of opportunities for skilled individuals to market their talents and services independently. This trend is not only seen among the younger generation seeking non-traditional career paths but also among seasoned professionals looking for a change from the confines of a structured corporate environment.

The allure of increased earning potential is also a driving force behind the migration towards freelance gigs. Freelancers often have the opportunity to negotiate rates for their services, potentially earning more

than they would in a salaried position. Additionally, the ability to take on multiple projects simultaneously allows freelancers to diversify their income streams, providing a level of financial stability that may not be attainable through a single full-time job. As a result, the appeal of the freelance lifestyle continues to grow, enticing more individuals to explore the possibilities of working independently in today's dynamic and interconnected global economy.

To relay an example, Ali followed a traditional career in finance within a prominent bank until he reached 48 years of age, with substantial annual bonuses, higher performance evaluations, and more responsibilities, until he reached the Director level. After his company was dismantled, Ali struggled to find a new job. Lateral moves were scarce, and he was deemed overqualified for junior roles. Eventually, he accepted a temporary position with a midsize firm to avoid a significant gap on his CV. After his gig ended, Ali joined friends in launching a freelance advisory business during the job search. The startups didn't take off, so he, with his family, relocated to a more affordable city, and invested in rental properties. During tough times, Ali identified a gap in the market - a shortage of assisted living facilities for the elderly. He became a key player in this sector by connecting with industry leaders and facilitating deals. However, with rising

interest rates, currently standing at 22% as of September 2023, and a slowdown in deal activity, he now seeks an operational role to apply his skills.

## Charting the path

To avoid what Ali went through, Pakistani professionals must feel liminality. It is uncomfortable, especially for those accustomed to pursuing well-defined objectives along a familiar path. However, this is a world of chaos. And it is here to stay. So, the current economic state and subsequent, constant need to stay abreast is the best time for businesses, educational institutions, professionals, students, industry shifters, technocrats and thought leaders to provide valuable time and space for questioning old conventions. Consider it a hiatus from an established identity, allowing exploration of possibilities of who one could become more creatively.

This economic uncertainty is essential, even necessary, for identifying and recognizing any hindering habits, building the necessary skills, experience, and connections that will be needed in the next decade. Rather than rushing to secure the next job role, Pakistani businesses must allow professionals to embrace the liminal phase. It requires the willingness to navigate and endure being in an undefined state for a while. And be okay with it.



# Understanding and Addressing Depression: Strategies for Recovery and Suicide Prevention

By Romana Afsheen

**D**epression, a widespread mood disorder impacting millions globally, is marked by enduring emotions of sadness, hopelessness, and diminished interest in previously enjoyable activities. Its origins are diverse, stemming from genetic predispositions, life events, and neurochemical imbalances.

Certainly, depression is a mental illness characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a lack of interest or pleasure in daily activities. It affects the way individuals think, feel, and handle their day-to-day lives. This mental health condition can range from mild to severe, impacting various aspects of a person's well-being. It is a complex condition influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors. Seeking professional help is crucial for diagnosis and the development of an effective treatment plan, which may include therapy, medication, and support from healthcare providers and loved ones.

Depression is common in people of all ages, races, and genders. However, some people are more at risk than others. Risk factors for depression include a family history of depression, a history of abuse or trauma, chronic illness, and substance abuse.

Depression can lead to suicide, but not everyone who is depressed will have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2 % of people ever treated for depression in an outpatient setting take their own life. Among those ever hospitalized for treatment of depression, the rate of death by suicide is twice as high (4 per cent). Among those hospitalized for depression because of suicidal ideation or suicide attempt, 6 per cent eventually take their own life.

Most suicides are linked to some form of psychiatric illness, particularly depression, and the more severe the depression, the greater the risk. However, most people with major depression do not die by their own



hands. Studies show that about 5 per cent of depressed people may have thoughts about suicide—suicidal ideation. Only a small percentage of them actively make plans to end their lives.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the suicide rate in Pakistan is estimated to be 8.9 deaths per 100,000 people. In September 2022, Karwan-e-Hayat, a mental health institution, organized a seminar in Karachi to create awareness about the alarming issue of suicide in Pakistan. The seminar revealed that the suicide rate in Pakistan has alarmingly crossed eight per cent and that one out of 200 people attempting suicide dies.

Depression is also a growing concern in Pakistan. Approximately 3.4% of total deaths are caused by depression, and the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in depression among the youth in Pakistan.

Depression can manifest in various forms, each with its own set of symptoms and characteristics. Here are some common types of depression:

**Major Depressive Disorder (MDD):** This is the most common type of depression. Individuals with MDD experience persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a lack of interest or pleasure in activities. Symptoms can interfere with daily life and may include changes in appetite and

sleep patterns, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and thoughts of death or suicide.

**Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia):** Dysthymia is a chronic, long-term form of depression. While the symptoms may not be as severe as in MDD, they last for a longer period, typically lasting for at least two years. People with dysthymia may experience fluctuations in mood but generally feel low most of the time.

**Bipolar Disorder (Manic-Depressive Illness):** Bipolar disorder involves cycles of depression and mania (periods of abnormally elevated mood and energy). During depressive episodes, symptoms are similar to those of MDD. Manic episodes may include increased energy, impulsivity, racing thoughts, and decreased need for sleep.

**Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):** SAD is a type of depression that occurs at specific times of the year, usually during the fall and winter when there is less natural sunlight. Symptoms often include low energy, irritability, weight gain, and an increased need for sleep.

**Psychotic Depression:** This type of depression includes symptoms of depression along with psychosis, such as hallucinations or delusions.

**Postpartum Depression:** Experienced by some women after giving birth, postpartum



depression involves feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion that may interfere with their ability to care for themselves or their newborn.

**Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD):** PMDD is a severe form of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) that includes significant mood disturbances, such as depression and irritability, in the weeks before menstruation.

**Atypical Depression:** This subtype of depression is characterized by symptoms that don't fit the typical pattern of major depressive disorder. It may include mood reactivity (mood brightens in response to positive events), increased appetite or weight gain, hypersomnia (excessive sleep), and a heavy feeling in the limbs.

It's important to note that depression is a complex condition, and individuals may experience a combination of these types. Additionally, each person's experience with depression is unique, and not everyone will fit neatly into these categories.

Fortunately, depression is manageable, with recovery being a feasible outcome. Effective approaches involve a combination of lifestyle adjustments and medical interventions, constituting an ongoing management process. The following strategies and treatments can aid in combating depression:

**Learn about depression:** A person with depression can try educating their friends and family members about what triggers their episodes. The more a person knows about depression, the more empowered they will be to find a treatment that works for them. It can be helpful to learn about depression in general, including its causes and symptoms. It is also important for people to get to know their own symptoms and warning signs so that if they are feeling worse, they can identify this. Knowing what prompts depressive episodes can help people avoid or manage triggers, which may reduce future depressive episodes.

**Talk to someone:** Reaching out to loved ones can help people get through difficult times. Simply talking about what is happening can help. Also, connecting with others helps reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. If it does not feel possible to talk to a friend or family member, people may

wish to join a support group or see a therapist.

**Keep a journal:** Keeping a journal is a powerful strategy for fighting depression. Writing down thoughts, feelings, and problems can allow individuals to identify patterns, triggers, and warning signs relating to their depression. It can also give people perspective on issues and help them generate solutions. Writing things down can be especially helpful before bed, especially if distressing thoughts are hindering sleep. If people do not feel comfortable keeping a journal due to privacy concerns, they can destroy the paper afterwards. Some people find the act of writing itself cathartic. Another journaling option is to



make a list of things for which a person is grateful. Researchers noted positive effects on the brain in people who kept such a list. People sometimes refer to this as keeping a gratitude journal.

**See a doctor:** Seeing a doctor for diagnosis and treatment is an important part of treating depression. A doctor can provide support, guidance, and medical treatment options. Depending on the individual's symptoms and their wishes, a doctor may prescribe medication or recommend psychotherapy. Anyone experiencing severe depression should see a doctor as soon as possible, while thoughts of suicide should prompt a person to call 911 or contact the National Suicide Prevention Line at 800-273-8255.

**Try psychotherapy:** Psychotherapy is a type of talk therapy that can help people with depression. It involves talking with a mental health professional about one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. There are several types of psychotherapy, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT),

interpersonal therapy (IPT), and psychodynamic therapy. CBT is a common type of psychotherapy that focuses on changing negative thought patterns and behaviours. IPT focuses on improving communication and relationships with others. Psychodynamic therapy focuses on exploring unconscious thoughts and feelings.

**Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness is a type of meditation that involves focusing on the present moment. It can help people with depression by reducing negative thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness can be practised in several ways, including meditation, yoga, and tai chi.

**Connect the body and mind:** Exercise is a

great way to improve both physical and mental health. Exercise releases endorphins, which are natural mood boosters. Exercise can also help people sleep better, which can improve mood. Yoga and tai chi are also great ways to connect the body and mind.

**Relaxing:** Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization can help people with depression. These techniques can help reduce stress and anxiety, which can improve mood.

In conclusion, depression is a widespread and complex mental health issue. While suicide risk exists, not everyone with depression experiences it. Recognizing diverse forms of depression is crucial for accurate diagnosis and tailored treatment. Managing depression involves lifestyle adjustments, psychotherapy, and if needed, medication. Encouraging education, open communication, and supportive environments are key to recovery. Together, we can contribute to a world where individuals facing depression find understanding and hope.

# Australia's Triumph in the 2023 ODI Cricket World Cup: Head's Heroics and the Fall of India's Dominance

By Ali Abdullah

Australia scripted a captivating chapter in cricket history as they brought an end to India's dominant streak in the 2023 ODI Cricket World Cup. In a low-scoring final that held the hopes of millions, Australia emerged victorious with a six-wicket win, reclaiming their status as the undisputed champion of one-day cricket. The hero of the day was Travis Head, whose outstanding 137-run innings, coupled with a resilient partnership with Marnus Labuschagne (58 not out), showcased the indomitable spirit of the Australian cricket team.

As the sun set over the colossal cricket arena, Head and Labuschagne's 192-run partnership became the cornerstone of Australia's pursuit of the 241-run target. What began as a stumbling start at 47-3 after seven overs transformed into a masterclass of determination and skill. The duo weathered the storm, silencing the crowd officially declared at 92, 453 and guided Australia to their sixth 50-over global title.

In a nail-biting finish, Head attempted to seal the championship with a boundary but was caught in the deep off what turned out to be the final ball of the tournament. The anticipation reached its peak as Glenn Maxwell stepped in, scoring two runs off his opening delivery, setting off fireworks that illuminated the night sky above the largest cricket stadium in the world. Australia's triumph was not just a victory; it was a spectacle that etched itself into the memories of cricket enthusiasts worldwide.

India, with a cricket-crazy population of 1.4 billion, entered the final with high hopes, having won all ten matches leading up to the ultimate showdown. However, their dreams were dampened on slow ground as Australia's battle-ready performance outclassed them. The toss, lost by India, proved crucial as they were limited to 240 all out, with only Virat Kohli (54) and KL Rahul (66) managing to cross the half-century mark.



Reflecting on the loss, India's skipper Rohit Sharma admitted, "We were not good enough today. We needed 20-30 more runs." Despite Kohli's exceptional tournament performance, amassing 765 runs at an average of 95.62, India fell short in a game that demanded more.

In the midst of India's batting struggles, Pat Cummins, Australia's captain, emerged as a standout performer with brilliant bowling figures of 2-34 in 10 overs. Cummins played a pivotal role in dismissing key batsmen, including the prized wicket of Kohli. Australia's successful campaign saw them finish the tournament with nine straight wins after initial setbacks against India and South Africa.

Travis Head, rightfully named the man of the match, not only played a crucial role with the bat but also contributed significantly in the field. His diving catch while rushing back from cover to remove Sharma (47) proved to be a turning point in India's innings. In achieving 100 off 95 balls, Head joined an exclusive group that includes cricket legends Viv Richards, Clive Lloyd, Aravinda de Silva, Mahela Jayawardene, Ricky Ponting, and Adam Gilchrist.

Head's journey in the tournament was nothing short of extraordinary. Having started on the sidelines due to a broken

left hand, he overcame adversity to become a key player for Australia. "What an amazing day, I'm just thrilled to be a part of it," Head expressed. "To be able to do that on the biggest stage, in front of a full house, under all that pressure is something I'll be able to look back on later in my life."

The tournament itself was a spectacle that brought together cricketing excellence and global camaraderie. Prominent politicians, including Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, graced the match alongside former cricket captains and movie stars. The 2023 ODI Cricket World Cup wasn't just a sporting event; it was a celebration that transcended boundaries and united nations in the spirit of competition.

Australia's triumph echoed beyond the boundary ropes, marking a significant chapter in the country's cricketing history. It signified the resilience of a team that refused to be defined by initial setbacks and showcased the prowess of individuals like Travis Head and Pat Cummins. As the fireworks lit up the sky over the massive stadium, Australia stood tall as the ultimate victor and the 2023 ODI Cricket World Cup etched itself into the annals of cricketing glory.



# Pakistan's Soccer Saga: Triumphs, Trials, and the Road to Redemption



In the past month, the Pakistan National football team engaged in three FIFA World Cup Qualifiers against Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia, and Cambodia.

Following a hard-fought 1-0 victory over Cambodia in Islamabad, the men's football team made history by advancing to the second round of the World Cup qualifying tournament. The triumph at Jinnah Sports Stadium in the Pakistani capital, marked by Harun Hamid's decisive half-volley in the 67th minute, ignited exuberant celebrations on the field and in the stands. This victory was especially significant as it was Pakistan's first home game since 2015, breaking a goalless streak from the first leg in Phnom Penh.

The journey to this historic win wasn't without challenges. FIFA imposed a 15-month ban on the South Asian country in April 2021 due to "undue third-party interference," marking their second ban in four years. Pakistan, ranked 197th globally, had not secured an international victory since 2018, enduring a 13-game losing streak. The recent appointment of Englishman Stephen Constantine as the new coach brought hope and change to the team.

Constantine, previously managing India's national side, played a pivotal role in India's qualification for the 2019 Asian Cup, elevating their ranking from 173rd in 2015 to 97th in December 2018. His

recent appointment aimed to bring about a positive transformation for Pakistan's football.

Despite a challenging track record, Pakistan played eight games between November 2022 and June 2023, including five friendlies. Unfortunately, they faced defeats in all eight games, conceding 18 goals while managing only one. However, with Constantine at the helm, there is optimism for improvement in the team's performance.

The road ahead for Pakistan in the World Cup Qualifiers includes the second round, where nine more teams will join following the two-leg, home-and-away series for the 20 lowest-ranked teams in the Asian Football Confederation. After their 1-0 victory, Singapore progressed by defeating Guam 3-1 overall, while Afghanistan secured a 2-0 overall win against Mongolia. Yemen, ranked 202nd in Asia, drew 1-1 away from home against Sri Lanka but advanced 4-1 overall based on their first-leg performance.

Pakistan's next challenge is against Jordan in March, with the team aiming to turn their fortunes around after consecutive losses against Saudi Arabia and Tajikistan. The journey signifies a resurgence of international football in Pakistan after an eight-year hiatus, coinciding with their exceptional victory against Cambodia.

By Ali Abdullah

# Barbie, Oppenheimer and Killers of the Flower Moon: The 20 best films of 2023

*Actor says her previous post about praying instead of posting was misinterpreted; fans say she's still not doing enough*



By Nicholas Barber and Caryn James

## 1. Saint Omer

This tough-minded, heart-breaking drama about race, class and motherhood was France's entry to last year's Oscar race, and I'm still mystified as to why it wasn't nominated. Alice Diop puts her experience making documentaries to good use, as she bases her story on the real-life case of a young Senegalese woman in France charged with abandoning her baby on a beach to die. Diop invents Rama, a pregnant novelist who goes to the town of Saint Omer to witness the trial, which plays into her own doubts and fears. As Laurence, the mother on trial, Guslagie Malanda is unnaturally calm, almost frozen in resignation. Kayije Kagame as Rama lets you see her mind racing and her heart pounding as she watches, even though her face is impassive. Diop based her dialogue on court transcripts, but the results go far beyond dry facts on the page to create an enthralling film with two profound and vivid women on screen. (CJ)

## 2. Holy Spider

Ali Abbasi's grisly Holy Spider is based on the true story of a married builder (Mehdi Bajestani) who murdered 16 sex workers in Iran's holy city of Mashhad in 2000 and 2001. Starring Zar Amir Ebrahimi (winner of the best actress award at Cannes) as the determined journalist investigating the crimes, it seems at first to be an atmospheric companion piece to Silence of the Lambs and other big-screen serial-killer dramas. The provocative twist is that some citizens and

politicians see the murderer as a local hero on a moral crusade. Behind the generic thrills, Holy Spider is an examination of society-wide misogyny that seems all the more astute in the wake of the Mahsa Amini protests. (NB)

## 3. Polite Society

A culture clash comedy of manners with a horror meme twist, Nida Manzoor's (We are Lady Parts) film is one of the freshest, most fun-to-watch of the year. Manzoor's first inventive choice is to create an unlikely teenage heroine, Ria (Priya Kansara), a London girl of Pakistani descent, who is determined to become a stuntwoman, adding martial arts flair and action to the movie. Then Manzoor ramps up the stakes, when Ria's older sister decides to marry a rich, handsome man whom Ria suspects is not what he seems. His over-the-top, controlling mother has a sinister smile worthy of a Disney villain. As the outlandish elements pile on, the film gleefully blends all its elements, from Ria's comic schemes to thwart the wedding, to her Bollywood-ready dance scene and nuanced portraits of her understanding parents, creating a smart and thoroughly enjoyable romp. (CJ)

## 4. How to Blow Up a Pipeline

Inspired by Andreas Malm's non-fiction book, this unbearably tense indie thriller introduces a rag-tag group of eco-activists who are planning to bomb an oil pipeline in West



Texas. They have all been hurt by pollution, corporate greed, and the climate crisis, and this, they believe, is the only way they can fight back. Cutting between their nervous preparations and the back stories that led them to Texas, Daniel Goldhaber's tightly focused film echoes several classic heist movies – *Reservoir Dogs* in particular – but it has some crucial differences. The criminals aren't motivated by greed, the details of their amateur bomb-making are fascinatingly specific, and, because they are handling explosive chemicals, they are always in danger of killing themselves by accident. (NB)

## 5. Past Lives

Celine Song's lovely, nuanced first feature is a romance that rejects the clichés of the genre. Nora (Greta Lee) and Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) were best friends, closely bonded forever as children in Korea, until her family immigrated to Canada. Years later, when she is married and living in New York, he re-enters her life. Their reconnection is at first wavering, and their meeting in New York full of deep feeling along with sharp realism, as the film recognises both the allure of a long-ago love for Nora, and the strength of her marriage to Arthur (John Magaro). Through Nora and Hae Sung's deftly portrayed relationship, Song also unveils themes of memory and cultural identity, but it is the love story that dominates and lingers, demonstrating that romance doesn't always lead to a kiss in the rain. Sometimes it is wrapped in a beautiful wistfulness. (CJ)

## 6. Suzume

Suzume is a teenage schoolgirl who discovers that the derelict doors in abandoned towns all over Japan can be used as portals to another dimension. Now it's up to her to stop a destructive monster getting through those doors, with the help of a boy who has been turned into a chair, and a talking kitten that could well be a goddess. Yes, the apocalyptic new anime from Makoto Shinkai (*Your Name*, *Weathering with You*) is a dazzling feat of imagination, but the writer-director balances magical fantasy with warmth, humour and deep concern for his country. Suzume's mythical exploits are set in a gorgeously painted, recognisable Japan, and she and her friends are ordinary people with ordinary hopes and regrets – and that includes the boy who's been turned into a chair. (NB)

## 7. Oppenheimer

Christopher Nolan's magnificent film is among the best of his career. He combines all the elements he has brought to other films – the volatile action of *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the cerebral layers of *Memento* and the absorbing narrative of *Inception* – in this character study of the conflicted American hero J Robert Oppenheimer (the flawless Cillian Murphy), the physicist known as the Father of the Atomic Bomb, who grappled with the moral consequences of his actions for the rest of his life. With fiery tension Nolan depicts the first testing of the bomb, and throughout interweaves the drama of Oppenheimer's politically ambitious nemesis, the government bureaucrat Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr), who orchestrated false suspicions of communist involvement that shadowed the scientist's post-war life. Nolan long

ago mastered the balancing act between artistic accomplishment and commercial success, and *Oppenheimer* stands as the finest example of a movie that is both freshly imagined and hugely popular. (CJ)

## 8. Broker

*Broker* is as bittersweet and nuanced as the previous films from Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Shoplifters*), but it's also his funniest, most crowd-pleasing work: the Japanese writer-director's first Korean production is a romantic road movie reminiscent of *Little Miss Sunshine* as well as the Coen brothers' crime capers. Song Kang Ho from *Parasite* plays a Busan launderette owner with an unusual side hustle. With the aid of a big-hearted sidekick, he sells unwanted infants to couples who want to circumvent the legal adoption process, but only after he's satisfied that they are the ideal parents for the child. When one infant's birth mother wants to get involved in the business, and two police detectives start following them, secret motives are revealed, sympathies shift, mysteries deepen and dangers multiply, all the way to the poignant, elegantly plotted finale. (NB)



## 9. Anatomy of a Fall

Winner of this year's Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, Justine Triet's drama about a writer accused of killing her husband is a brilliant oxymoron: a film made with remarkable clarity even as it explores a search for truths that may never be found. Sandra Huller plays the accused, also named Sandra, whose husband tumbled to his death from the window of their house in the French Alps. Whether it was accident, suicide or murder is the question driving the plot and its courtroom scenes, but at its heart the film deals with the couple's crumbling marriage and with Sandra's flinty personality. Huller's bracingly original performance makes her enigmatic even while revealing her fierce independence, selfishness, and lies. The elusiveness of truth itself eventually extends to the motives of the couple's 11-year-old son, sympathetic to both his father's memory and his mother's jeopardy, in a film as coolly detached yet as beautiful as its snowy landscape. (CJ)

## 10. Reality

In June 2017, FBI agents visited the home of Reality Winner (her real name, unlikely as it may seem), a US Government translator who had leaked a classified document to the press. Tina Satter's ingenious debut film dramatises their encounter, with Sydney Sweeney in the lead role, and dialogue taken wholesale from recordings made at the time. What this means is that the low-key interrogation has the repetitions and hesitations of actual speech, which makes Reality seem close to reality (one of several ways that the title applies), yet also weirdly nightmarish. It's somewhere between an art installation, a documentary, and a nerve-racking horror movie. Some news outlets branded Winner a treacherous radical, yet Satter's haunting film depicts a vulnerable, confused, but brave young woman who is trapped in a bare white room with two men twice her size. (NB)



## 11. Killers of the Flower Moon

Martin Scorsese's epic is as ambitious as anything he has done. Drawing on David Grann's non-fiction book about the murders of dozens of members of the oil-rich Osage tribe in 1920s Oklahoma. Scorsese places a jaw-dropping story of a marriage, power and money into an expansive Western landscape and the cultural sweep of the era, in all its violence, racism and ethnic hatred. The film's lead actors are at their stunning best, which is saying a lot. Robert De Niro is stern and callous as the powerful cattle baron William Hale and Leonardo DiCaprio is vibrant as his mercenary nephew, Ernest. In a performance of serene eloquence, Lily Gladstone is Mollie, whom Ernest marries and plots to murder for the money she has as part of the Osage nation. Mollie is the heart of the story, and Scorsese and Gladstone do her real-life story justice. (CJ)

## 12. Barbie

Could Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling bag Oscar nominations for playing plastic toys in a candy-coloured advert for branded merchandise? It's certainly possible, given the success of what has become the highest-grossing film of 2023 so far, as well as the

highest-grossing film ever to be directed solely by a woman. And those are just two of its achievements. Barbie was overseen by Mattel, the company which manufactures the dolls, but its director and co-writer, Greta Gerwig, seems to have been granted the freedom to bring her own quirky vision to the screen. She upended expectations not only by commenting on commercialism and the patriarchy (much to the annoyance of some internet commentators), but by leaping into the realms of postmodern, Charlie Kaufman-ish weirdness. Beyond that, Barbie is a genuinely funny feelgood comedy – and how many of those do we see in cinemas these days? (NB)

## 13. American Fiction

In his audacious first film, writer and director Cord Jefferson blends nuanced family drama with a brash, funny satire of racial stereotyping. In a perfectly balanced performance, Jeffrey Wright grounds the film as a novelist and academic so disgusted by the state of the culture and so tired of reductive images of black people that he writes a book playing into every stereotype, only to have his angrily written tease become a bestseller. Meanwhile, he is dealing with his ageing mother, played with poignancy and grace by Leslie Uggams, and his siblings, played by Tracee Ellis Ross and Sterling K Brown, perfectly cast. Loosely based on Percival Everett's 2001 novel, Erasure, the film makes its publishing and academic racists too cartoonish, easy targets, but Jefferson's skill still makes American Fiction one of the year's most bracing comic-dramas. (CJ)

## 14. The Creator

What a treat to see an original science-fiction blockbuster, for a change, rather than an adaptation or a reboot of some over-used, decades-old intellectual property. Even better, The Creator works as a self-contained one-off at a time when most films of this kind are blatant attempts to set up franchises. Directed and co-written by Gareth Edwards (Rogue One: A Star Wars Story), it's set in the all-too-near future, when humanity is battling for survival against artificially intelligent robots, and a commando (John David Washington) is given the task of destroying the enemy's ultimate weapon. The likes of The Terminator, Blade Runner and The Matrix had similar premises, of course, but Edwards has crafted a gritty war epic with its own sombre mood, and with hazy imagery that makes even the most far-fetched androids and spaceships look real. He also opts for a sprawling, philosophical plot that mixes doom and gloom with a dash of hard-won optimism. (NB)

## 15. Origin

Ava DuVernay's deeply engaging and emotionally wrenching Origin is something only a filmmaker with her imagination and vision could have made. She transforms Isabel Wilkerson's rigorous non-fiction book Caste – which argues that caste, even more than race, subjugates people worldwide – into a personal story about Wilkerson's process of researching and writing the book while grieving the recent deaths of the most important people in her life. Aunjanue Ellis's performance as Wilkerson creates a character both cerebral and heartfelt. And the film always keeps the book's sweep-



ing historical argument in sight, giving it dramatic shape with scenes from a World War Two Nazi book-burning, to untouchables cleaning sewers in 20th-Century India and the 2012 killing of the black teenager Trayvon Martin, which appalled the US. As she did in the series *When They See Us*, here DuVernay turns reality into an intensely moving drama. (CJ)

## 16. The Holdovers

Christmas, 1970. A resentful teenage boy (Dominic Sessa) is forced to spend the holiday without friends or family in his grand boarding school, so it falls to a curmudgeonly classics teacher (Paul Giamatti) and a bereaved cook (Da'Vine Joy Randolph) to look after him. Packed with jokes and colour by its screenwriter, David Hemingson, this warm festive comedy is directed by Alexander Payne. Because of its tone, its relaxed setting and its period setting, it has been compared to various 1970s indie classics, but *The Holdovers* is also a pleasing throwback to the early 2000s, when it wasn't unusual for the likes of Payne, Richard Linklater and Noah Baumbach to make mid-budget, grown-up comedy dramas about relatively ordinary people. Indeed, Payne and Giamatti collaborated on *Sideways* in 2004, and *The Holdovers* could be the most delightful project that either of them has been involved in since. (NB)

## 17. All of Us Strangers

Andrew Haigh had already established himself as a writer-director of great sensitivity with films including *45 Years* and *Weekend*, but *All of Us Strangers* takes him to a new level. Andrew Scott has never been better or more touching, as a middle-aged writer Adam, who starts a relationship with a younger man, played with energy and vulnerability by Paul Mescal. Writing about his late parents (Claire Foy and Jamie Bell), Adam imagines that he can enter the past and meet them as an adult, although they haven't aged since he was 12. Beautifully filmed to create an ethereal quality, from Adam's childhood home to his austere high-rise London flat, *All of Us Strangers* is not a ghost story, but an immersion into memory and the painfulness of love and loss that, remarkably, rejects mawkishness and creates piercingly real emotions in the hero's past and present. (CJ)

## 18. Poor Things

The *Favourite* was directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, co-written by Tony McNamara, and it starred Emma Stone. Now the three of them have reunited for *Poor Things*, a raucous adaptation of Alasdair Gray's fabulous comic novel – and it's even more inventive and over-the-top than *The Favourite* was. Stone plays Bella, a drowned woman who is brought back to life by a Frankenstein-like scientist (Willem Dafoe). As she has no memories of her previous existence, she has no hang-ups or inhibitions either, so she can push aside the conventions of Victorian Europe – or the film's surreal, picture-book version of Victorian Europe, anyway. Stone is magnificently odd as the fearless Bella, and yet somewhere beneath the wackiness of this rollicking fairy tale is a piquant commentary on the ways in which women are tied down by a patriarchal society. (NB)

## 19. The Boy and the Heron

The master of animation, Studio Ghibli co-founder Hayao Miyazaki, returns after a decade with another dazzling, majestic work that moves between reality and fantasy and weaves together many strands from his life and previous films. Set during the World War Two period of the 82-year-old Miyazaki's own childhood, the story centres on a boy named Mahito, whose mother is killed by a bomb in Tokyo and whose father works for a company creating Japanese military planes. Like the heroines of *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), Mahito enters a magical, often terrifying world, where his mother might be calling to him – and where he encounters ominous giant pink parakeets and other dangers. Through the lonely, fearless Mahito, the film explores grief and the fuzzy line between life and death in Miyazaki's unmistakable style, with hand-drawn images of delicate beauty and colours. (CJ)



## 20. Maestro

Bradley Cooper follows his directorial debut, *A Star Is Born*, with another in-depth account of love in the music business, proving in the process that he isn't just a heart-throb actor who is having a go behind the camera, but a major director in his own right. His vibrant and technically dazzling biopic of Leonard Bernstein is distinctive in several ways, not least in that it ignores some of the composer and conductor's most famous achievements (such as scoring *West Side Story*) to focus instead on his long and complicated marriage to Felicia Montealegre. Carey Mulligan's sparkling performance as Montealegre is a career highlight, and Cooper is almost as impressive in the central role. He shows just how exhausting and egocentric Bernstein could be, but the film glows with his deep affection for the maestro. (NB)

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