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Public concerns and benefits

Uzbek Business Women
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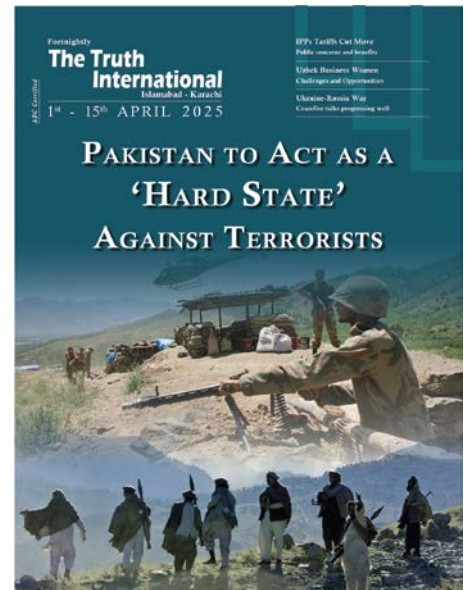
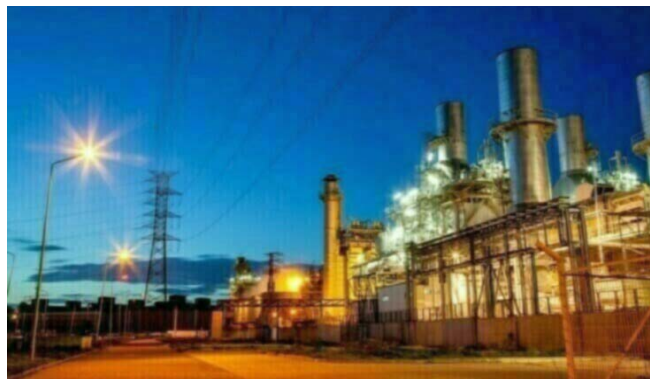


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Flawed Tax System Fuels Illicit Trade and Hurts Pakistan's Economy



Pakistan's tax regime is widely criticized for its inefficiencies and inequities, yet authorities remain reluctant or unable to implement meaningful reforms. As a result, the burden disproportionately falls on documented earners, while undocumented, cash-based sectors continue to evade taxation and oversight.

A recent report by economist Sakib Sherani underscores these issues by examining the tobacco sector, revealing how excessive taxation, regulatory loopholes, and weak enforcement have allowed the illicit market to flourish—ultimately harming legitimate businesses that bear the brunt of tax obligations.

Titled “Towards an Optimal Tax Regime for Pakistan's Tobacco Sector,” the report estimates that Pakistan loses Rs300 billion annually due to an unsustainable and imbalanced tax structure in the tobacco industry alone.

The formal sector is subjected to multiple levies, including federal excise duty, sales tax, and income tax, which have severely impacted profitability. Meanwhile, the illicit tobacco market, now comprising 56% of total sales, thrives as high taxes drive consumers toward cheaper, untaxed alternatives—many of which are smuggled from across Pakistan's western borders.

The report highlights that taxation in the sector has surpassed the “optimal tax point,” meaning that further tax hikes reduce revenue instead of increasing it. Despite contributing 98% of the industry's total tax revenue, the formal sector continues to shrink, while illegal operations expand unchecked.

This flawed taxation policy not only fosters the illicit tobacco trade but also undermines market competition, discourages investment, and fails to generate meaningful revenue for the

government. With only two major foreign firms and a handful of local manufacturers paying taxes, a large segment of the tobacco supply chain—from cultivation to distribution—remains largely untaxed.

Beyond harming the exchequer, the current tax regime creates a hostile business environment, raising concerns among companies about the long-term viability of operating under such punitive policies. Without urgent tax reforms and stronger enforcement, Pakistan risks further economic losses and the continued dominance of illicit markets.

A telling example of this issue is British American Tobacco's warning last year that it might reconsider its operations in Pakistan if cigarette taxes were increased further. If established players begin exiting the market, it would severely impact both domestic and foreign direct investment, further eroding investor confidence and reinforcing the perception that Pakistan's business environment is becoming increasingly inhospitable for legitimate enterprises.

Beyond the flaws in the tax regime, the government's failure to curb widespread tobacco smuggling remains a pressing concern. Additionally, the track-and-trace system, designed to monitor and regulate the industry, has proven largely ineffective in tackling the counterfeit tobacco trade.

Another critical issue is the public health risk posed by the easy availability of illicit tobacco. These unregulated products bypass quality control measures and, due to their lower cost, are more accessible to vulnerable groups, particularly minors.

A comprehensive and balanced approach is urgently needed—one that reduces excessive tax rates on compliant businesses expands the tax base, and enforces stricter measures to combat tobacco smuggling and counterfeiting.

Pakistan to Act as a ‘Hard State’ Against Terrorists



By Romana Afsheen

A Nation at a Crossroads

Pakistan is at a defining moment in its battle against terrorism. Years of deadly attacks, foreign-sponsored insurgencies, and cross-border militant activities have cost the nation thousands of lives and billions in economic losses. Despite previous counterterrorism efforts, the country continued to be targeted by terrorist groups operating with external support. However, a recent shift in national security doctrine has brought a new, uncompromising approach to dealing with these threats.

The turning point came with the Jaffar Express hijacking, which exposed direct links between terrorist networks and foreign handlers in Afghanistan and India. This single incident has catalyzed a dramatic shift in Pakistan's policy, from a soft state approach to a hard state doctrine.

Pakistan's civil and military leadership has now adopted an aggressive counterterrorism strategy that includes potential cross-border military strikes, intelligence-led operations, enhanced border security, and diplomatic offensives to expose external involvement in terrorism on Pakistani soil.

Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Syed Asim Munir, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, and DG ISPR Major General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry have all underscored this new doctrine, vowing that Pakistan will not hesitate to neutralize terrorists—wherever they may be hiding.

This cover story delves into the recent security developments, intelligence findings, political and military strategies, and Pakistan's resolve to act as a ‘hard state’ to eliminate terrorism permanently.

The Jaffar Express Hijacking: A Wake-Up Call for Pakistan

The hijacking of the Jaffar Express was a shocking display of terrorism that shook the nation. Armed militants stormed the train, held passengers hostage, and engaged in a prolonged standoff with security forces. The swift and decisive response by Pakistani forces led to the elimination of the attackers, but what followed was even more alarming.

Evidence of Foreign Involvement

Security and intelligence agencies uncovered critical evidence pointing to India and Afghanistan's direct role in facilitating the attack:

- Intercepted phone calls and digital communications confirmed that the terrorists

were in direct contact with handlers in Afghanistan throughout the attack.

- Banking records and financial trails traced funding to Indian intelligence agencies, proving that the attack was externally financed.
- Sophisticated weaponry and explosives recovered from the militants bore identifiable markings linking them to Indian arms manufacturers.
- Captured militants admitted during interrogation that they were trained in terrorist camps along the Afghan border.

These findings left no doubt that Pakistan was facing an externally sponsored terrorist insurgency aimed at destabilizing the country.

Pakistan Confronts Afghanistan Over Safe Havens for Terrorists

Following these revelations, Pakistan formally demanded an explanation from the Afghan Taliban government regarding the presence of terrorist sanctuaries on Afghan soil. The Foreign Office of Pakistan issued a strong statement:

"The involvement of Afghan-based elements in orchestrating terrorist attacks on Pakistani soil is unacceptable. Pakistan will take all necessary actions to ensure that its sovereignty is not violated."

This diplomatic warning was coupled with serious security measures, including:

- Increased surveillance and intelligence-sharing along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.
- Targeted strikes on suspected terrorist hideouts inside Pakistan.
- Heightened military readiness for possible cross-border action.

The Taliban leadership was put on notice: Pakistan will no longer tolerate the use of Afghan territory by terrorists targeting Pakistan.

COAS Munir: 'Pakistan Must Become a Hard State'

In response to the growing security threats, Pakistan's military leadership has shifted its stance from reactive defense to proactive elimination of terrorist elements.

COAS General Syed Asim Munir delivered a powerful message, stating:

"Pakistan can no longer afford to act as a soft state. We have sacrificed too many lives at the hands of terrorists. Our response will now be swift, decisive, and relentless. We will act as a hard state to ensure the long-term security of our people."

This statement signals a fundamental shift in Pakistan's security strategy:

- Terrorists will be eliminated before they can strike, rather than merely being pursued after attacks.
- Pakistan's response will no longer be limited to its borders—terrorists and their enablers will be hunted down wherever they operate.
- The state will use its full military and intelligence capabilities to dismantle terror networks at all levels.

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif Hints at Cross-Border Action

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif issued a stern warning regarding Pakistan's growing impatience with cross-border terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. He made it clear that Pakistan is no longer willing to tolerate attacks launched from Afghan soil, stating, "We have tolerated enough, but now our patience is wearing thin. If necessary, we will take cross-border action against terrorists hiding in Afghanistan. The time for leniency is over." His remarks underscore the mounting frustration within Pakistan's security

apparatus, which has repeatedly urged the Afghan Taliban-led government to act against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups operating from Afghan territory. However, repeated diplomatic efforts and security warnings have failed to yield results, prompting serious consideration of military action.

Pakistan has long maintained that terrorist outfits, particularly the TTP, have found safe havens in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Intelligence reports suggest that TTP militants enjoy direct logistical and operational support from elements within Afghanistan, using the country as a launchpad for attacks inside Pakistan. This has led to an alarming rise in terror incidents, including targeted attacks on security forces, police stations, and civilian infrastructure. The recent Jaffar Express train hijacking, which Pakistani intelligence linked directly to handlers operating from Afghanistan, has further solidified concerns about the Taliban's inability—or unwillingness—to curb terrorist activities within their borders.

With diplomatic engagement yielding little success, Pakistan is now actively considering military options to eliminate terrorist threats at the source. These options include precision air and drone strikes on militant hideouts, artillery shelling targeting cross-border infiltrators, and special forces raids to dismantle high-value targets. In extreme circumstances, a larger-scale military operation could also be initiated if terrorist networks continue to operate with impunity. Such actions, while carrying significant risks, have become a necessary discussion point within Pakistan's security establishment, given the escalating threat posed by TTP and affiliated groups.

A recent civil-military huddle reinforced this determination, with top military and political leadership concluding that Pakistan must take all necessary steps to ensure its national security. The message to Kabul is clear—either rein in the terrorists operating within Afghanistan, or Pakistan will be forced to take matters into its own hands. The coming weeks will determine whether diplomacy can

still play a role in resolving this crisis, or if Pakistan will move towards decisive military action to secure its borders and neutralize the growing terrorist menace.

PM Shehbaz Sharif: 'No Compromise on National Security'

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif reaffirmed Pakistan's unwavering commitment to national security, declaring that terrorism and its enablers, both internal and external, will be confronted without compromise. His statement, "Pakistan's security is non-negotiable. We will take on terrorists and their enablers, whether inside or outside our borders," signals a decisive shift towards a more aggressive counter-terrorism strategy.

This civil-military alignment marks a turning point in Pakistan's security doctrine. With terrorist groups like TTP, Baloch separatists, and Daesh-affiliated factions intensifying attacks—often with foreign backing—Pakistan is shifting from reactive measures to proactive security policies. Intelligence reports linking the Jaffar Express hijacking to handlers in Afghanistan, allegedly backed by India, have reinforced Pakistan's determination to confront not only terrorist organizations but also their regional sponsors. The government has raised this issue at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), urging global action against state-sponsored terrorism.

Internally, Pakistan is cracking down on terrorist facilitators, including those within political, religious, and criminal networks. The National Action Plan (NAP) is being revitalized, intelligence coordination strengthened, and border security enhanced, particularly along the Afghanistan and Iran borders. Financial monitoring mechanisms are also being tightened to disrupt terrorist funding networks.

Sharif's stance reflects a broader national security policy prioritizing preemptive action over passive defense. As Pakistan navigates an evolving security landscape, this civil-military unity will be critical in ensuring terrorism is rooted out effectively. The coming months will determine

how this hardline approach translates into action, with Pakistan making it clear that it will no longer be a soft target for terrorism.

DG ISPR's Declaration: 'We Will Take on Terrorists and Their Enablers'

Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (DG ISPR) Major General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry reinforced the military's commitment to eliminating terrorism, making it clear that Pakistan's security forces would spare no effort in dealing with threats—both internal and external.



"We will take on terrorists and their enablers, whether inside Pakistan or beyond our borders. The security and sovereignty of our nation are paramount, and we will respond with full force against those who seek to destabilize us," he stated.

He further highlighted that Pakistan possesses undeniable proof of India and Afghanistan's involvement in orchestrating terrorist attacks, including the recent Jaffar Express attack, which was directly coordinated from Afghan soil. Intelligence reports confirm that terrorists remained in contact with handlers across the border, a fact that Pakistan has now presented at the United Nations Security

Council (UNSC).

The DG ISPR also accused India of directly sponsoring terrorist operations to fuel unrest in Pakistan. Citing recent intelligence findings, he stated:

"The Jaffar Express attack and other recent acts of terror have a clear and undeniable link to Indian state-backed agencies. These groups are not operating independently; they are funded, trained, and supported by hostile foreign elements."

He stressed that Pakistan's security forces are prepared to neutralize every terrorist network operating inside and outside the country, warning that any state supporting such groups will face serious

consequences. This statement aligns with the civil-military consensus that Pakistan must now adopt a more aggressive stance to ensure long-term stability.

India's Role in Destabilizing Pakistan: A Coordinated Hybrid Warfare Campaign

National Security Huddle Exposes India's Involvement

A high-level national security meeting brought together military commanders, intelligence chiefs, and government

officials to assess the security situation. The conclusion was clear: India is actively funding, training, and directing terrorist groups inside Pakistan.

Key Findings from Intelligence Agencies

- Banking records and financial transactions show Indian intelligence agencies funding militant outfits.
- Captured terrorists confessed to receiving direct training and orders from Indian handlers.
- Weapons recovered from militants bore serial numbers traced back to Indian arms suppliers.

ing inside Pakistan. The statement read:

"We have presented irrefutable proof to the UNSC regarding India's role in funding and executing terrorist attacks on Pakistani soil. The world must hold India accountable for its state-sponsored terrorism. If left unchecked, such reckless actions will destabilize not only Pakistan but the entire region."

Pakistan's permanent representative at the UN provided intelligence dossiers detailing India's financial transactions, intercepted communications, and links between Indian intelligence agencies and terrorist networks operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Security officials highlighted how Indian agencies have been leveraging Afghan soil to orchestrate

financing terrorism. Diplomats from allied nations, including China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, have reportedly expressed concern over the growing evidence of India's destabilizing role in the region.

Furthermore, Pakistan's UN mission has engaged with key international players, including permanent members of the UNSC, to push for diplomatic censure and sanctions against Indian officials involved in terror financing. Islamabad has also hinted at escalating the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) if global inaction persists.

By taking this issue to the UNSC, Pakistan is not only exposing India's covert operations but also making it clear that it will not remain silent in the face of state-sponsored terrorism. This diplomatic offensive marks a new chapter in Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, signaling that the country will pursue all available avenues—military, diplomatic, and legal—to ensure its national security is not compromised.

The Future of Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy

A Multi-Pronged Approach

Pakistan's leadership has outlined a comprehensive national security strategy to counter internal and external threats:

- **Preemptive Military Strikes:** Terrorist hideouts will be targeted before they can launch attacks.
- **Border Security Enhancements:** Advanced surveillance systems will be deployed to monitor cross-border movements.
- **Intelligence-Led Operations:** Security agencies will intensify their intelligence-sharing efforts to track and dismantle terrorist networks.
- **Diplomatic Pressure on India and Afghanistan:** Pakistan will continue exposing Indian and Afghan involvement in global forums.



Pakistan Raises the Issue at the UNSC

Pakistan formally raised the Jaffar Express terror attack at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), urging the international community to take concrete action against India's direct involvement in cross-border terrorism. The attack, which saw terrorists hijacking the passenger train and later engaging in a deadly confrontation with security forces, has become a focal point of Pakistan's diplomatic offensive against Indian-backed terrorist activities.

A strongly worded statement from the Foreign Office emphasized that Pakistan had presented irrefutable evidence of India's financial, logistical, and operational support for militant groups operat-

attacks within Pakistan, particularly targeting civilian and military infrastructure.

The Foreign Office also underscored that this was not an isolated case but part of a consistent pattern of Indian interference, citing earlier incidents such as the arrest of Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav, who confessed to orchestrating acts of terrorism inside Pakistan. Islamabad demanded international accountability, calling for an independent UN-led investigation into India's support for terrorism.

Pakistan's move at the UNSC is aimed at building international pressure on New Delhi, particularly urging global bodies like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to scrutinize India's role in



COAS Munir's Final Warning: 'Terrorism Will Be Eradicated'

COAS General Asim Munir issued a final and resolute warning to all terrorist elements and their backers, declaring that Pakistan's fight against terrorism would continue with unwavering determination. He emphasized that the state's full power would be brought to bear against terrorist groups, their financiers, facilitators, and foreign sponsors.

"We will not rest until terrorism is eradicated from Pakistan. The full might of the state will be used to eliminate terrorist groups, their financiers, and their foreign backers. There will be no safe havens, no compromises, and no leniency for those who seek to destabilize our country."

COAS Munir further stated that Pakistan had suffered immense losses due to decades of terrorist violence, and the time for a reactive approach had passed. The military, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement forces are fully committed to proactively dismantling terrorist networks, both within Pakistan's borders and beyond. He reiterated that terrorist enablers—whether political, financial, or ideological—will be dealt with firmly. His statement comes at a time when evidence has surfaced linking foreign elements,

particularly from India and Afghanistan, to terrorist operations inside Pakistan. COAS Munir made it clear that if Pakistan's diplomatic efforts to address cross-border terrorism were ignored, decisive action would be taken to neutralize threats, no matter where they originated.

This declaration signals a clear shift in Pakistan's counterterrorism policy, reinforcing the message that Pakistan is now a hard state—one that will act decisively against any entity threatening its sovereignty and security.

Conclusion: Pakistan's Defining Stand Against Terrorism

Pakistan has reached a pivotal moment in its fight against terrorism, marking the transition from a reactive approach to a proactive, uncompromising stance. The state's leadership, both civilian and military, has made it clear that Pakistan will no longer act as a "soft state" at the cost of its national security. The days of tolerance toward terrorist sanctuaries, both within and beyond its borders, are over. With mounting evidence of external involvement in recent attacks, particularly India's direct sponsorship of terror activities, Pakistan is now responding with a firm and calculated strategy.

By raising the issue at the United Nations Security Council, Pakistan has taken a diplomatic offensive to expose India's role in fueling instability. At the same time, serious deliberations over cross-border action in Afghanistan send a strong warning to those who harbor and facilitate terrorism. The state's commitment to rooting out terrorist networks, dismantling their funding sources, and holding their foreign backers accountable demonstrates an unyielding resolve.

This new counterterrorism doctrine is not just about military operations; it is about reshaping the security landscape for lasting stability. To sustain this momentum, Pakistan must reinforce governance, enhance intelligence coordination, and ensure political unity. The internal enablers of terrorism will be dealt with just as firmly as external threats, leaving no room for compromise.

The message to adversaries is unequivocal: Pakistan will act decisively, with full force and national consensus, against any entity that threatens its peace and sovereignty. This moment is not just a shift in policy—it is a defining transformation in Pakistan's national security framework, one that will determine the country's future resilience against terrorism and foreign aggression.

New wave of terror attacks grips Pakistan

Pakistan is facing a backlash from terrorist groups, with 2025 shaping up to be the deadliest year yet for its security forces. So far, 255 personnel have been killed, as terror attacks against the Army, police, and intelligence agencies have escalated at an alarming rate.



By Javed Mahmood

Pakistan has witnessed a sudden surge in attacks from the terrorists in recent weeks. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Balochistan Liberation Army, and other militant outfits have suddenly become hyperactive and they are targeting security personnel and civilians. Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are the most affected provinces. The recent attack on the Jaffar Express train and hijacking of over 200 passengers has added fuel to the fire, leaving Pakistani civil and military leadership with no other choice but to crush the militants.

Pakistan Ranks Second in the Global Terrorism Index 2025 as Terror Attacks Surge

Pakistan has been ranked second in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2025, with a 45% rise in terrorism-related deaths over the past year, reaching 1,081 fatalities. The report, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), highlights a worrying escalation in terrorist activity, marking the largest year-on-year increase in a decade for Pakistan.

Rising Terrorist Activity in Pakistan

- **Terror Attacks Doubled:** The number of attacks surged from 517 in 2023 to 1,099 in 2024, exceeding 1,000 attacks for the first time since the GTI's inception.
- **Deadliest Terror Groups:** The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was responsible for 52% of deaths, making it Pakistan's most lethal terrorist group for the second consecutive year.
- **Regional Hotspots:** The provinces of Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) were the hardest hit, accounting for 96% of all terrorist attacks and deaths.

TTP: The Fastest-Growing Terrorist Group

The banned TTP has emerged as one of the fastest-growing terrorist groups globally, with a 90% rise in fatalities attributed to the group.

Key Statistics:

482 attacks in 2024, resulting in 558 deaths

— a 91% increase from the 293 fatalities recorded in 2023.

The group has capitalized on Afghanistan's instability, exploiting safe havens across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to intensify its operations. Security forces and infrastructure remain primary targets.

Pakistan's Counterterrorism Response

In response to the escalating crisis, Pakistan has launched Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, a counterterrorism initiative aimed at dismantling terror networks and securing the country's borders.

Balochistan Militancy on the Rise

Alongside the TTP, Baloch militant groups have significantly increased their attacks:

Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) carried out Pakistan's deadliest terror attack of 2024, killing 25 civilians and soldiers in a suicide bombing at Quetta railway station.

Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) & BLA attacks surged from 116 in 2023 to 504 in 2024, with fatalities soaring from 88 to 388.

Global and Regional Impact

Global terrorism trends:

Most deaths from terrorism were recorded in Burkina Faso, Pakistan, and Syria.

Lone wolf attacks now dominate the West, accounting for 93% of fatal attacks over the past five years.

The Gaza conflict has intensified instability in the Middle East, fueling hate crimes in the West.

With rising instability along its western border, Pakistan faces a growing terrorism crisis, making counterterrorism efforts more urgent than ever.

2025 is the deadliest year for security personnel in Pakistan

Pakistan is facing a backlash from terrorist groups, with 2025 shaping up to be the deadliest year yet for its security forces. So far, 255 personnel have been killed, as terror attacks against the Army, police, and intelligence agencies have escalated at an alarming rate.

Intelligence reports indicate that Pakistan has witnessed over 179 terror-related incidents between January 1 and March 11, 2025. These include 68 attacks in January, 90 in February, and 17 in March so far, including the recent Jaffer Express attack orchestrated by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

The death toll among security personnel—including the Army, Frontier Corps, Levies, Constabulary, ISI, and Police—has surged to 255. The trend is worsening, with 90 casualties in January, 116 in February, and over 146 in March alone. Additionally, more than 380 insurgents and over 100 civilians have been killed in the past 70 days. With security force casualties reaching 754 in 2024, this year is on track to surpass that number, raising serious concerns within Pakistan's military leadership and casting doubts over General Asim Munir's command.

The ongoing BLA operation in Bolan—where militants hijacked a train,

prompting a large-scale military response—has resulted in one of the deadliest confrontations to date, with at least 30 security personnel killed. The BLA, which recently unified its factions under the newly formed Baloch National Army, has intensified attacks against Pakistan's security forces, diplomats, and Chinese nationals.

At the same time, Pakistan is also contending with the growing threat of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), whose fighters continue to launch cross-border assaults from Afghanistan. These attacks have targeted soldiers, civilians, and institutions, prompting Islamabad to accuse the Afghan interim government of harboring the TTP and facilitating its operations.



Pakistan Army Crushes BLA Militants in Jaffer Express Attack, Rescues Hostages

The terrorist attack on the Jaffer Express train and the kidnapping of more than 200 passengers was one of the most horrific acts of terrorism in Pakistan which shocked the entire world. Dozens of BLA terrorists attacked the train and blew up the track of the Jaffer Express in the Bolan Pass area in Balochistan.

Nonetheless, the Pakistan Army, in coordination with the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), Frontier Corps (FC), and Special Services Group (SSG), eliminated all 33 terrorists responsible for the deadly Jaffer Express attack and the abduction of passengers near Bolan, Balochistan. The joint operation ensured the safe rescue of all hostages, marking a significant victory against militancy. However, the incident also

exposed critical vulnerabilities within Pakistan's national security framework.

Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, briefed the media on the attack, revealing that the terrorists derailed the train around 1 a.m. on March 11 and launched a brutal assault on passengers. Tragically, 21 civilians lost their lives in the attack. Security forces responded with precision, executing a well-planned rescue mission to minimize further casualties. "Targeting civilians on roads, trains, and markets cannot and will not be tolerated," DG ISPR declared, reaffirming the military's commitment to eliminating terrorism.

During the initial confrontation, four FC personnel embraced martyrdom while bravely engaging the militants. However, no soldier was lost in the final clearance phase. A bomb disposal unit was deployed to inspect the train, ensuring passenger safety. Investigations have linked the attackers to elements in Afghanistan, with some militants fleeing to nearby areas. Security forces continue operations to track them down. The Jaffer Express carried 440 passengers at the time of the attack. Despite the challenging terrain and the militants using hostages as human shields, the military executed a precise operation, rescuing 190 passengers unharmed. Suicide bombers among the terrorists had divided the hostages into three groups, but security forces successfully neutralized the threat without civilian casualties.

"This attack marks a turning point in Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy," DG ISPR emphasized, signaling a more evolved and intensified approach to

combating terrorism. He also condemned Indian media for spreading misinformation, stating that false narratives were disseminated within minutes of the attack to manipulate public perception.

Meanwhile, a relief train carrying 40 additional rescued hostages was dispatched from Quetta, with security personnel on board to ensure safety. The successful operation underscores Pakistan's unwavering resolve in the fight against terrorism, reinforcing its commitment to protecting its citizens and eliminating extremist threats.

Maulana Hamidul Haq Haqqani killed in suicide attack

At least four people were killed, including Maulana Hamidul Haq Haqqani, emir of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Sami (JUI-S), and 12 others injured in a suicide blast during Friday prayers at the Darul Uloom Haqqania mosque in Akora Khattak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, police confirmed on Friday. Moulana Hamidul Haq was the son of late Moulana Samiul Haq of JUI(S).

The explosion occurred in the front row of the mosque as worshippers gathered for the last Friday prayer before Ramadan. The mosque is located within the compound of the sprawling Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary, one of the country's largest religious institutions with over 4,000 students.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Inspector General of Police (IGP) Zulfiqar Hameed said that initial reports suggest the attack was targeted and carried out by a suicide bomber. Emergency services were placed on high alert at Peshawar's Lady Reading Hospital (LRH), where several of the injured were shifted for treatment. Police teams, forensic units, and investigation officers have cordoned off the area, with a search operation underway. The seminary was crowded at the time of the attack, as students were set to go on academic break for Ramadan.

Curfew Imposed in South Waziristan Amid Rising Security Threats

The district administration of South

Waziristan has announced a 12-hour curfew in both Lower and Upper South Waziristan due to escalating security concerns. The curfew will be enforced, restricting public movement in the affected areas. According to a notification issued by the office of the Tank Deputy Commissioner, the decision was made at the request of law enforcement agencies in response to heightened threats to their operations.

The curfew will specifically apply to the main route from Kaur Fort-Manzi-Khirgi-Kirri Wam to Jandola, District Tank, while the Kaur Fort-Gomal-Girdawi to Wana route will remain open for all types of traffic. Authorities have urged residents to comply with the restrictions and avoid travel during curfew hours to ensure the safety of civilians and security personnel.

Escalating Violence in South Waziristan

The security situation in South Waziristan has deteriorated significantly in recent days due to increasing militant activity. Just three days ago, the Pakistan Army repelled a terrorist attack on a checkpoint in Jandola, preventing a major security breach. According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), militants attempted to storm the checkpoint and later rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into its perimeter wall. Swift action by security forces resulted in the elimination of 10 militants.

Meanwhile, a day after this attack, a powerful blast targeted a mosque in South Waziristan, injuring four people, including the district emir of Jamiat Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F).

Nationwide Surge in Terrorism

The recent uptick in terrorist activities has raised alarms about Pakistan's worsening security landscape, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. According to data from the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), Pakistan witnessed a 42% increase in terrorist attacks in January 2025 compared to the previous month. The report documented 74 militant attacks nationwide, resulting in 91 fatalities and 117 injuries. Among the dead were 35

security personnel, 20 civilians, and 36 militants, while the injured included 53 security personnel, 54 civilians, and 10 militants.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa emerged as the most affected province, followed by Balochistan. In the settled districts of KP, militants carried out 27 attacks, causing 19 fatalities, including 11 security personnel, six civilians, and two militants. Meanwhile, the tribal districts of KP, formerly part of FATA, saw 19 attacks, leading to 46 deaths, including 13 security personnel, eight civilians, and 25 militants. With the security situation worsening, authorities are ramping up counterterrorism efforts, while civilians remain on high alert in volatile regions.

Strategy to overcome terrorism in Pakistan

Overcoming terrorism and militancy in Pakistan requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy that addresses both military and non-military aspects of the issue. Here's a structured approach to countering the menace effectively:

Strengthening Military & Law Enforcement Responses

- Intelligence-Based Operations (IBOs) – Enhance coordination between intelligence agencies (ISI, IB, MI, CTD) to identify and neutralize militant hideouts before attacks occur.
- Advanced Counterterrorism Training – Equip security forces with modern technology, training, and weapons to combat militants effectively.
- Border Security & Surveillance – Strengthen border fencing, surveillance drones, and checkpoints along the Afghanistan and Iran borders to prevent cross-border infiltration.
- Special Counterterrorism Force (CTF) – Establish rapid response units in every province to deal with terror threats proactively.

Political & Diplomatic Measures

- Dialogue with Local Tribes – Engage tribal elders, religious scholars, and

- local communities to isolate extremists and win grassroots support.
- Stronger Foreign Policy on Terrorism – Work with Afghanistan, China, Iran, and the U.S. to prevent terror financing and cross-border militancy.
- Counter Extremist Narratives – Regulate religious institutions and monitor madrassas to prevent extremist indoctrination.
- Zero Tolerance for Extremist Groups – Ban political support for extremist elements and enforce strict actions against sympathizers.

Economic & Social Reforms

- Employment & Education Initiatives – Provide jobs, skill development programs, and modern education in high-risk areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa & Balochistan.
- De-radicalization Programs – Launch rehabilitation centers for individuals influenced by extremist ideologies.
- Infrastructure Development – Invest in roads, hospitals, and schools in under-developed areas to improve living conditions and reduce militant recruitment.
- Monitoring of Social Media – Enforce cyber laws to track and dismantle online terror networks promoting extremism.

Strict Action Against Terror Financing

- Crackdown on Hawala & Illegal Funding – Block financial networks funding militant outfits by freezing assets and monitoring suspicious transactions.
- Strengthening FATF Compliance – Work with global agencies to ensure Pakistan remains off the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list by effectively targeting terror financiers.
- Punitive Measures for Facilitators – Implement harsh penalties for those providing logistical, financial, or ideological support to militants.

Winning the Information War

- Media Awareness Campaigns – Promote counter-narratives against extremism through TV, social media, and local influencers.
- Engaging Youth in Nationalism – Promote patriotic initiatives, cultural programs, and sports activities to deter young minds from militancy.
- Religious Reformation – Encourage moderate Islamic scholars to issue fatwas against terrorism and educate people on the true teachings of Islam.



Conclusion

Eliminating terrorism in Pakistan requires military strength, political will, economic progress, and ideological countermeasures. A coordinated approach involving the government, security forces, religious leaders, civil society, and international partners is essential to achieving long-term peace and stability.

The role of Afghanistan and India in fanning militancy in the region

The role of Afghanistan and India in regional terrorism, particularly concerning Pakistan, has been a subject of intense debate, diplomatic tensions, and security concerns. Both countries have been accused by Pakistani authorities of playing a role in destabilizing the region, while India and Afghanistan counter these claims by blaming Pakistan for cross-border militancy. Here's a breakdown of their alleged involvement:

Afghanistan's Role in Regional Terrorism

Safe Haven for Anti-Pakistan Groups

Pakistan has consistently alleged that Afghanistan harbors militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which frequently launch cross-border attacks.

The TTP, responsible for numerous attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians, operates from Afghan territory, despite Pakistan's demands for action.

Pakistan claims that Afghan intelligence (formerly NDS, now under the Taliban) facilitated TTP's activities against Pakistan.

Cross-Border Terrorism and Infiltration

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, border tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have escalated due to increased TTP attacks launched from Afghan soil.

Afghan Taliban leadership has denied involvement but failed to take concrete steps to dismantle TTP's network, which has further deteriorated Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Drug & Weapon Smuggling

Afghanistan remains a hub for illegal arms and narcotics trafficking, which funds terrorist activities in the region.

Pakistan's security agencies have intercepted large caches of arms smuggled from Afghanistan to militant groups in KP and Balochistan.

Refugee Crisis & Security Threats

Millions of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan pose security risks, with Pakistani officials accusing militants of hiding among refugees to evade detection.

The recent mass deportation of undocumented Afghan refugees by Pakistan led to heightened tensions, with Kabul warning of retaliatory actions.

India's Alleged Role in Regional Terrorism

Support for Balochistan Insurgency

Pakistan has long accused India's intelligence agency, RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), of supporting Baloch separatist groups like the BLA and BRA (Baloch Republican Army).

The arrest of Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016 was presented as evidence of India's direct involvement in fomenting unrest in Balochistan.

Funding & Training Anti-Pakistan Elements

Pakistan alleges that India provides financial and logistical support to anti-Pakistan militants operating from Afghanistan. According to intelligence reports, RAW has worked alongside NDS (Afghan intelligence) to destabilize Pakistan's western borders.

Destabilizing Kashmir & Proxy Warfare

India has accused Pakistan of sponsoring militancy in Indian-occupied Kashmir (IoK), while Pakistan counters by alleging Indian-sponsored groups attempt to create instability in regions like Balochistan and Sindh.

Pakistan has claimed that India uses terrorist proxies in Kashmir as a justification to continue human rights violations against Kashmiri Muslims.

Diplomatic & Hybrid Warfare

India has engaged in international lobbying efforts to isolate Pakistan diplomatically by accusing it of harboring terrorists.

Indian media and disinformation campaigns have been accused of spreading anti-Pakistan narratives, including through fake news and propaganda.

Pakistan's Countermeasures & Regional Challenges

Military & Intelligence Crackdowns

Zarb-e-Azb, Radd-ul-Fasaad, and ongoing counterterrorism operations have significantly weakened terror networks, but cross-border threats persist.

Pakistan has repeatedly demanded Afghanistan take action against the TTP, but the

Taliban government has been reluctant to crack down on the group.

Border Fencing & Diplomatic Engagement

Pakistan has fenced most of its border with Afghanistan to prevent infiltration, but attacks continue.

Diplomatic talks with Afghanistan have failed to yield concrete action against anti-Pakistan militant groups.

Strategic Response to India

Pakistan has strengthened alliances with China, Russia, and Muslim countries to counter India's regional and global lobbying efforts.

Pakistan has continued to expose Indian interference in Balochistan at international forums, though with limited success.

Conclusion: A Complex Security Challenge

Pakistan faces multi-front security threats from both Afghanistan and India, requiring a mix of military, diplomatic, and intelligence strategies to counteract them. While both countries deny involvement in terrorism, Pakistan has presented evidence linking militant activities to both Afghan and Indian elements.



7 IPPs File Joint Plea for Tariff Reduction: A Detailed Analysis of the Background, Public Concerns, and Future Prospects



By Hina Kashifz

In a significant development within Pakistan's energy sector, seven Independent Power Producers (IPPs) have filed a joint application for tariff reduction, seeking changes to their power purchase agreements (PPAs). These IPPs were established under Pakistan's Power Generation Policy of 2002, which aimed to boost energy production by encouraging private sector involvement. The move to file a plea for tariff reduction comes after significant efforts by both the government and the IPPs to negotiate favorable terms that benefit all stakeholders, particularly the general public, who have long been burdened by high electricity costs.

The plea was filed with the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (Nepra), signaling a formal request for a revision of tariffs under the hybrid take-and-pay mechanism. While this marks a positive development in addressing Pakistan's power sector challenges, it is essential to understand the background, the concerns of the common public, and the future implications of these tariff revisions.

Background: The Role of IPPs in Pakistan's Power Sector

Independent Power Producers (IPPs) have played a crucial role in Pakistan's energy landscape, contributing significantly to the country's electricity generation capacity. These companies operate under agreements with the government and are typically responsible for a large portion of the electricity supply. Their involvement is a product of the Power Generation Policy of 2002, a major initiative aimed at addressing Pakistan's growing energy needs by attracting private investments into the power sector.

Under these agreements, the government guarantees certain tariffs for IPPs, ensuring a stable return on their investments. However, these tariffs have been a subject of debate, particularly regarding their impact on consumers and the national economy. Over time, concerns have mounted over the high cost of electricity, which has been largely attributed to the tariffs agreed

upon between the government and these private producers.

The plea for a tariff reduction from seven of the 2002 IPPs is a response to the growing concerns over the unsustainable cost of power for ordinary citizens, who have been facing steep electricity bills despite frequent power outages. The current tariff structure has been a point of contention for both the public and the government, with the latter acknowledging the need for reforms to make electricity more affordable for the masses.

Problems Faced by the Common Public

The energy sector in Pakistan has been plagued by a series of issues that have directly affected the lives of the common public. These challenges include high electricity tariffs, frequent power outages, and an overall lack of efficient management within the sector. The general public has borne the brunt of these problems in the form of high electricity costs and unreliable service.

The main issues faced by consumers are discussed below:

1. High Electricity Tariffs

One of the most significant issues that ordinary consumers face is the consistently high cost of electricity. Despite the country's abundant energy resources, such as coal, wind, and solar energy, electricity prices have remained high, with Pakistan's tariffs being among the highest in the region.

For consumers, the high cost of electricity means that household budgets are stretched thin, especially in a country where a large portion of the population lives below the poverty line. Rising energy bills have forced many households to make difficult choices, either sacrificing basic necessities or opting for alternative energy sources like generators and inverters, which often come at a premium.



2. Inefficiency in Power Distribution

The inefficiency of the power distribution system has also contributed significantly to the high costs of electricity. Inadequate infrastructure, including outdated transmission lines, frequent breakdowns, and losses due to theft or mismanagement, has led to inflated operational costs, which are ultimately passed on to the consumers.

Furthermore, the financial health of power distribution companies is poor, with many facing severe liquidity issues due to unpaid dues and inefficiency in collecting payments. This lack of financial sustainability only exacerbates the high tariffs consumers have to bear.

3. Frequent Power Outages

Pakistan has long struggled with electricity shortages and power outages, which have become a regular feature in many parts of the country. Load shedding, or planned power cuts, is a common occurrence, particularly during the summer months when demand peaks. Despite the significant investments made in the energy sector, the country's power grid often fails to meet demand, resulting in hours of blackouts in residential, commercial, and industrial areas.

The unreliability of electricity supply not only disrupts daily life but also has a detrimental impact on productivity, particularly in industries that rely on a constant power supply. This has led to frustration and resentment among the public, who are left questioning the efficacy of the policies and agreements that have shaped the power sector.

4. Energy Crisis and Dependency on Imported Fuel

Pakistan's energy sector has also been heavily dependent on imported fuel, particularly oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), to generate electricity. This reliance on foreign energy sources has put immense pressure on the country's foreign exchange reserves and has driven up the cost of energy. Fluctuations in global fuel prices further compound the issue, making electricity costs unpredictable and volatile for consumers.

5. Lack of Transparency and Accountability

A major criticism of Pakistan's power

sector is the lack of transparency and accountability in the dealings between the government and private companies. Many believe that the agreements with IPPs, particularly those under the 2002 Power Generation Policy, have been signed without adequate scrutiny or consideration of their long-term financial impact on the public. This has led to a situation where consumers are paying the price for decisions made in the past without full accountability for their consequences.

The Plea for Tariff Reduction: A Step Toward Resolution?

The joint plea for tariff reduction filed by seven IPPs with Nepra represents a significant development in the context of Pakistan's energy crisis. These IPPs, which include companies such as Nishat Chunian Power Limited, Nishat Power Limited, Narowal Energy Limited, Liberty Power Tech Limited, Engro Powergen Qadirpur Limited, Sapphire Electric Power Limited, and Saif Power Limited, have all agreed to request a revision of their tariffs to reduce the financial burden on consumers.

The plea follows a series of negotiations between the government and the IPPs, facilitated by the government's Task Force, which is headed by the Minister for Power, Sardar Awais Khan Leghari. The Task Force has been engaged with the IPPs of both the 1994 and 2002 power generation agreements in a bid to reach a mutually beneficial resolution to the tariff issue.

Salient Features of the Joint Tariff Reduction Plea

The following are the key aspects of the joint plea filed by the seven IPPs:

1. Amendment Agreement Effective from November 2024

The agreement stipulates that the new tariff structure will come into effect from November 1, 2024. This provides a clear timeline for both the government and the IPPs to implement the necessary changes and adjustments.

2. Rebased Tariffs for O&M and Working Capital

The tariffs for operation and maintenance (O&M) and working capital will be rebased, meaning that the current cost structures will be adjusted to reflect more realistic and reasonable figures that better align with the current economic conditions.

3. Hybrid Take-and-Pay Mode for Return on Equity

The return on equity component will now be paid under a hybrid take-and-pay model, which means that IPPs will be guaranteed a return based on their actual performance, rather than receiving guaranteed payments regardless of their operational efficiency.

4. Waiver of Delay Payments

The government has agreed to waive any delay payments until October 31, 2024, providing some relief to the IPPs during the transition period.

5. Arbitration and Legal Adjustments

The agreement also calls for the withdrawal of arbitration under previous arbitration submission agreements and a shift to local arbitration under Islamabad's jurisdiction.

Public Reactions and Future Prospects

The joint plea for tariff reduction has been met with cautious optimism by the public. While the prospect of lower electricity bills is welcomed, many remain skeptical about the actual implementation of these changes. There are concerns that the government may not be able to fully enforce the new tariff structure due to the vested interests of powerful stakeholders in the energy sector.

Moreover, some critics argue that a mere reduction in tariffs will not address the structural issues plaguing the power sector, such as inefficiency, corruption, and mismanagement. They stress the need for comprehensive reforms that focus not only on tariffs but also on improving the overall functioning of the energy sector, including tackling power theft, upgrading infrastructure, and reducing dependence on imported fuel.

Despite these concerns, the joint plea for tariff reduction signals a step in the right direction. If successfully implemented, it could lead to a reduction in electricity costs for consumers, offering some relief to households and businesses alike. Additionally, it could serve as a model for further reforms in the energy sector, particularly in terms of improving transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the dealings between the government and private power producers.



Conclusion

The joint plea for tariff reduction filed by the seven IPPs is a significant development in Pakistan's power sector, reflecting the growing recognition of the need to make electricity more affordable for the common public. While the reduction in tariffs is a positive step, it is only one part of the larger puzzle that needs to be addressed. To ensure long-term sustainability and affordability, the government must continue to push for deeper reforms in the energy sector, focusing on efficiency, transparency, and the reduction of dependency on expensive imported fuels. Only then can Pakistan's energy crisis be truly resolved, and the benefits of these reforms be fully realized by the general public.

Why Public is Switching to Solar Panels: A Growing Trend Among Homeowners

In recent years, a noticeable trend has emerged among Pakistan's upper-middle-class households: a shift toward solar

power as a preferred energy source. While solar energy has traditionally been associated with high-end, environmentally conscious consumers, its adoption is now expanding across a broader demographic, particularly among those who are financially stable enough to make an upfront investment in renewable energy.

The decision to switch to solar panels is driven by several key factors, including the rising cost of electricity, the increasing

availability of solar technology, government incentives, and growing concerns about environmental sustainability. This shift is not only a practical move but also a sign of how the upper-middle class is adapting to the challenges posed by Pakistan's energy crisis. Below are the primary reasons why more and more members of the upper middle class are opting to install solar panels in their homes.

1. Rising Electricity Costs and Unpredictable Bills

The most compelling reason for the upper-middle-class demographic to switch to solar panels is the consistently rising electricity tariffs and the unpredictability of electricity bills. Over the past few years, electricity costs in Pakistan have soared, with significant tariff hikes that have made it increasingly difficult for consumers to manage their monthly utility expenses.

For households with larger energy consumption, particularly those with air conditioning systems, water heaters, and multiple electronic devices, these price increases have led to an unbearable financial burden. For example, many

upper-middle-class households, which often include multiple family members and extended relatives, can face monthly electricity bills in the range of several thousand to tens of thousands of rupees, depending on the usage.

This financial pressure is driving people to explore alternative solutions like solar energy, which offers the promise of more predictable and lower long-term costs. Although the initial installation costs of solar panels can be high, the long-term savings on electricity bills are significant. After the upfront cost is recouped, homeowners can enjoy free electricity, with only maintenance costs to consider.



2. Availability of Solar Technology and Government Incentives

Another significant factor contributing to the increased adoption of solar panels by the upper-middle class is the improved availability and affordability of solar technology. Over the years, the cost of installing solar panels has decreased due to advancements in solar technology and the increased availability of components. As a result, what was once seen as an expensive luxury is now a viable option for many households.

Furthermore, the government of Pakistan has introduced various incentives to encourage the use of solar energy. These incentives include net metering policies, tax breaks, and subsidies on solar installations, making it even more affordable for the upper-middle class to make the transition to solar power.

Under the net metering policy, consumers

can generate their own electricity and send any surplus energy back to the national grid in exchange for credits on their electricity bills. This creates an additional financial incentive for consumers, as they can sell excess power during sunny periods and offset their energy costs, further reducing their dependence on the grid. The long-term financial benefits provided by these incentives make solar panels a more attractive option for upper-middle-class families.

3. Environmental Awareness and Sustainability

There is a growing sense of environmental

consciousness among the upper-middle class, particularly among younger generations. Concerns about climate change, global warming, and the depletion of natural resources are prompting more people to seek sustainable alternatives to traditional fossil fuels. Solar energy is seen as a clean, renewable source of power that reduces carbon emissions and helps protect the environment.

For many people, installing solar panels is a way to align their lifestyle with their values, particularly when it comes to sustainability. By making the switch to solar power, these households are reducing their carbon footprint and contributing to the global effort to combat climate change. Additionally, solar power reduces reliance on the national grid, which is often fueled by non-renewable sources such as coal and natural gas.

For the upper-middle class, solar panels offer an opportunity to play a proactive role in promoting green energy and creating a

cleaner, more sustainable future for generations to come.

4. Reliability and Independence from the National Grid

Another key factor driving the shift to solar panels is the desire for a reliable and uninterrupted power supply. In Pakistan, power outages and load shedding are common, especially in the summer months when the demand for electricity peaks. These frequent power cuts can disrupt daily life, interfere with work, and cause frustration among consumers who rely on a steady electricity supply.

By installing solar panels, upper-middle-class households can gain a degree of independence from the national grid. Solar energy systems, particularly hybrid ones that include battery storage, provide an alternative power source during times of grid failure or power shortages. This added reliability is especially appealing for households that cannot afford to have their daily routines disrupted by frequent power cuts.

Moreover, solar panels are seen as a form of energy security, offering protection against the rising cost of electricity. As electricity tariffs continue to fluctuate, many upper-middle-class families are seeking ways to lock in lower energy costs and avoid future price hikes, and solar panels provide the perfect solution.

5. Long-Term Financial Benefits and Return on Investment (ROI)

While the initial investment in solar panels can be significant, many upper-middle-class consumers see it as a smart long-term financial decision. The return on investment (ROI) for solar panels is attractive, with many households recouping their installation costs within 5 to 7 years through savings on electricity bills. After this period, they can enjoy virtually free electricity for the remaining lifespan of the solar system, which can last 20-25 years or more with proper maintenance.

The cost of solar panels has dropped significantly over the years, making it easier for homeowners to afford. Additionally, with energy prices continuing to rise, the savings generated by solar panels only become more significant over time. As a result, the

upper-middle class sees this investment as a way to safeguard their financial future and protect themselves against the unpredictability of electricity prices.

Moreover, with government policies such as the net metering system, households can also generate income by selling surplus electricity back to the grid, creating an additional revenue stream. For many families, this not only reduces their electricity bills but also provides an opportunity to offset the cost of the solar installation.

6. Technological Advancements and Ease of Installation

The solar power industry has seen significant advancements in technology, which have made solar panel installations more efficient, reliable, and easier to maintain. Modern solar panels are highly efficient, with improved conversion rates that allow homeowners to generate more power from a smaller number of panels. This makes solar installations even more cost-effective for consumers.

In addition, the ease of installation has made solar panels more accessible to homeowners. In the past, solar installations were complex and time-consuming, requiring

specialized equipment and installation teams. However, advancements in technology and the growing availability of skilled solar technicians have streamlined the installation process, reducing costs and installation times.

These advancements have made solar energy a more attractive option for upper-middle-class homeowners, who can now benefit from efficient, low-maintenance systems that deliver reliable performance over the long term.

7. Increasing Property Value

Installing solar panels also adds value to a home, making it more appealing to potential buyers. In markets where energy efficiency is a priority, homes with solar panels are seen as more attractive investments. This is particularly relevant for upper-middle-class homeowners who may consider selling their property in the future.

Real estate agents have reported that homes with solar panels often sell at a premium, as buyers are willing to pay more for homes with lower long-term energy costs. This added value is another factor that encourages homeowners to install solar panels, as it improves the financial return on their

investment in the long run.

The decision to switch to solar power is not just a passing trend but a growing movement among Pakistan's upper-middle class. The combination of rising electricity tariffs, government incentives, environmental consciousness, and the desire for greater energy security is driving more and more homeowners to make the switch. Solar panels offer long-term financial savings, environmental benefits, and increased property value, making them an attractive option for families looking to secure their energy future.

As technology continues to improve and costs decrease, it is expected that the adoption of solar energy will continue to grow among the upper-middle class. In a country like Pakistan, where the energy sector faces numerous challenges, solar energy provides a viable, sustainable solution that can help reduce dependence on the national grid while promoting environmental sustainability. For the upper-middle class, solar panels are not just a way to reduce energy costs—they are a step toward achieving greater independence, financial security, and environmental responsibility.



Starbucks: A Journey of Growth, Challenges, and Resilience in the Face of Adversity



By Hina Kashif

Starbucks, the American coffeehouse giant, has been synonymous with quality coffee, a cozy ambiance, and a strong brand identity. Founded in 1971, the company has grown into a global phenomenon, with its unmistakable green logo and the signature aroma of freshly brewed coffee enticing customers across the world. However, despite its success, Starbucks has faced numerous challenges, including the impact of global events such as the pandemic, changing consumer preferences, and shifting market dynamics.

In recent developments, the company has decided to make tough decisions to ensure its long-term success. Starbucks will be cutting 1,100 corporate and administrative jobs as part of a restructuring initiative designed to rejuvenate sales and improve operational efficiency. But the company's journey has not been without setbacks, and the latest move reflects its ongoing efforts to streamline operations in an ever-evolving market.

The Humble Beginnings of Starbucks

Starbucks was founded in 1971 in Seattle, Washington, by three partners: Jerry Baldwin, Zev Siegl, and Gordon Bowker.

The trio opened the first Starbucks store in Seattle's Pike Place Market, primarily selling high-quality coffee beans and equipment for brewing at home. It was not until Howard Schultz joined Starbucks in 1982 that the company began its transformation into a global coffeehouse chain.

Schultz, who was initially hired as Director of Retail Operations and Marketing, had a vision for Starbucks beyond just selling beans. During a trip to Italy, he was inspired by the Italian coffee culture, where cafés acted as communal spaces for socializing. Schultz believed that Starbucks could be much more than a place to buy coffee—it could become a "third place" for people to gather, relax, and enjoy high-quality beverages. Schultz's vision led to Starbucks expanding its offerings to include brewed coffee, espresso-based drinks, and pastries.

The Global Expansion

The 1990s marked the beginning of Starbucks' global expansion. The company opened its first store outside the United States in Vancouver, Canada, in 1996. From there, Starbucks quickly spread its reach across North America, Europe, and beyond, bringing its signature coffee culture

to countries all around the world. As of 2024, Starbucks operates in over 80 countries, with more than 32,000 stores globally.

The company's rapid expansion was fueled by its innovative approach to retail, marketing, and customer experience. The iconic green mermaid logo, loyalty programs, and signature drinks like the Pumpkin Spice Latte and Frappuccinos created a strong brand identity that resonated with coffee enthusiasts everywhere.

Starbucks' stores can be found in major cities, suburban areas, and even smaller towns. Its coffeehouses are present in iconic locations like New York City's Times Square, London's Piccadilly Circus, and Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing. The company's reach extends to urban centers, airports, and even college campuses, making it one of the most recognizable brands in the world.

The Impact of War on Starbucks

Like many global corporations, Starbucks has not been immune to the challenges posed by war, geopolitical tensions, and economic instability. The ongoing war in

Ukraine has disrupted global supply chains, contributed to rising energy costs, and created an environment of economic uncertainty. In response, Starbucks has had to adapt to the changing landscape by adjusting its operations, making difficult financial decisions, and reevaluating its expansion strategies.

The war in Ukraine, specifically, has had an indirect impact on Starbucks. As the conflict has affected supply chains, particularly for food and energy products, the company has had to confront the challenges of rising operating costs. Additionally, the war has created a broader atmosphere of economic instability, affecting consumer spending patterns and altering the way businesses approach growth.

Starbucks has made adjustments to its operations to mitigate the impacts of the war, including cost-cutting measures and supply chain optimization. The company has also faced challenges in certain markets where economic uncertainty has led to decreased consumer demand for premium-priced coffee drinks. Despite these challenges, Starbucks continues to prioritize customer experience and adapt its menu to meet changing tastes and preferences, including offering more affordable options.

A Shift in Strategy: Restructuring and Job Cuts

Despite its strong brand presence and loyal customer base, Starbucks is facing some difficult decisions. In the latest move to reignite sales growth, the company has announced plans to cut 1,100 corporate and administrative jobs. The layoffs are part of a broader reorganization initiative aimed at streamlining operations and increasing efficiency. CEO Brian Niccol, who joined Starbucks in 2024, emphasized that the decision was a difficult one but necessary for the company's long-term success.

The 1,100 job cuts will be concentrated in support roles and unfilled positions, and will not affect Starbucks' front-line employees, known as baristas. As of September 2024, the company employed 361,000 people worldwide, with 16,000 in administrative and support positions.

Niccol's plan is to simplify the company's structure, remove layers of management, and create more agile, nimble teams. This restructuring effort is designed to improve accountability, reduce complexity, and foster better integration across Starbucks' global operations.

In addition to the job cuts, Starbucks will also scale back its menu offerings. The company will remove less popular beverages, such as certain Frappuccino-blended drinks, from its menu. These drinks are either not frequently ordered, are complex to prepare, or overlap with other offerings on the menu. The decision to simplify the menu is part of Starbucks' broader strategy to streamline operations and focus on core products that resonate with customers.



Impact of the Restructuring on Starbucks

While the job cuts and menu changes are significant, they reflect Starbucks' ongoing efforts to adapt to a rapidly changing market. The coffee giant is facing competition from both traditional coffee shops and new entrants into the market, including fast-casual and premium coffee brands. Consumer preferences have also shifted, with many customers opting for healthier beverage options or seeking more personalized, customizable drinks. Starbucks' restructuring efforts aim to meet these demands while ensuring that the company remains competitive in an ever-evolving market.

The job cuts are expected to save the company money, allowing it to reinvest in areas that can drive growth, such as technology, innovation, and customer experience. By streamlining its operations, Starbucks hopes to increase its efficiency and restore profitability after experiencing a decline in sales and profits. The restructuring is also intended to give the company more flexibility in responding to changing market conditions, including shifts in consumer behavior and global events.

Following the announcement of the job cuts, Starbucks' stock rose by 1.6% shortly after midday, signaling that investors are confident in the company's ability to turn around its fortunes. While the decision to eliminate jobs is always difficult, it appears

that the market is optimistic about the company's future prospects.

The Impact of Israeli Oppression and destruction on Gaza on Starbucks

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly the situation in Gaza, has generated significant international concern and outrage over the years. While the humanitarian crisis and the oppression faced by the people of Gaza are at the forefront of this issue, the broader geopolitical and economic ramifications also extend to global businesses, including multinational corporations like Starbucks.

Starbucks, as a major international brand with a significant presence in the Middle East and a global customer base, has had to navigate the complex political landscape and respond to the growing tensions and protests surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the company's primary focus remains on business operations and customer service, its position in the global market has inevitably been influenced by the wider social, political, and ethical challenges tied to conflicts such as the one in Gaza.

operations were initially franchised out to local partners), the perception of Western companies being tied to Israeli economic interests has led to negative publicity and calls for boycotts.

In countries with large Muslim or pro-Palestinian populations, such as in parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe, activists have called for boycotting Western companies like Starbucks in retaliation for Israel's actions against Gaza. Such boycotts can have a tangible impact on Starbucks'

For Starbucks, the power of social media has been twofold: on one hand, the company has used these platforms to engage with customers, promote its products, and highlight its corporate social responsibility initiatives. On the other hand, it has faced backlash from activists who accuse it of turning a blind eye to human rights violations in Gaza. In some cases, Starbucks has had to respond to negative press by reiterating its stance of neutrality, stating that it does not take a position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but remains committed to diversity and human rights globally.

Economic Implications for Starbucks

Although Starbucks' direct operations in Israel are limited, the broader economic implications of the ongoing conflict can affect the company's bottom line. The Middle East, which includes both Arab nations and Israel, is an important market for many multinational companies. Political instability, particularly in regions like Gaza, can disrupt local economies, supply chains, and even customer purchasing behavior.

For instance, the violence and instability in Gaza can lead to economic downturns in neighboring countries. This, in turn, could reduce consumer spending in regions like the Middle East, where Starbucks has an established presence. Additionally, the ongoing conflict has created a volatile environment that could make expansion plans or operations in the region riskier for global brands. A sudden flare-up of violence could disrupt supply chains, damage retail infrastructure, and force companies to suspend operations temporarily.

Moreover, the broader economic and political instability in the region could impact tourism and business travel, which are key drivers of Starbucks' revenue in cities with high concentrations of international travelers. If tensions surrounding Gaza escalate, Starbucks could face a decrease in foot traffic to its stores, particularly in high-risk areas.



Global Protests and Boycotts

In recent years, the Israeli government's military actions and policies toward Gaza have sparked widespread protests, and these protests have often targeted companies and businesses that are seen as being complicit in Israeli actions or as benefiting from operations in the region. As a result, multinational corporations like Starbucks, which operate in various parts of the world, have found themselves caught in the crossfire of these geopolitical tensions.

Starbucks, despite its efforts to maintain neutrality, has faced calls for boycotts in many countries. Some advocacy groups, particularly those aligned with pro-Palestinian movements, have accused Starbucks of indirectly supporting Israeli policies due to the company's business dealings in Israel. While Starbucks itself does not directly operate stores in Israel (its Israeli

brand reputation and sales in these regions. For example, in 2014, during a major escalation of violence in Gaza, Starbucks was among the companies named in global calls for boycotts, despite the company's position of neutrality on the political issue.

Social Media and Public Sentiment

The rise of social media has amplified the voices of critics and protesters who call for boycotts of companies linked to Israel.

Public sentiment on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has made it easier for people to organize campaigns against perceived corporate complicity in the conflict. As a result, multinational companies, including Starbucks, have had to carefully navigate the landscape of public opinion, particularly in markets with strong activist movements.

Ethical Considerations and Corporate Responsibility

As the situation in Gaza continues to unfold, Starbucks has also been faced with ethical considerations regarding its corporate responsibility. Many companies today are increasingly being held accountable not only for their business practices but also for their involvement in broader social and political issues. As a result, consumers expect brands to take a stand on issues such as human rights, social justice, and political oppression.

For Starbucks, this has led to increased pressure to show solidarity with oppressed communities and to align its values with those of its customers. While Starbucks has made strides in promoting corporate social responsibility, including initiatives related to sustainability, ethical sourcing, and diversity, its approach to issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains more cautious.

Starbucks has faced criticism for not taking a more vocal stance on the situation in Gaza, especially when compared to other companies that have been outspoken on social justice issues. Some activists and customers have called on Starbucks to take a stronger position, either by condemning Israeli actions or supporting Palestinian rights. However, the company has generally maintained a neutral position, stating that it aims to avoid getting involved in political conflicts and instead focuses on promoting peace, inclusion, and human rights in its operations worldwide.

The ongoing crisis in Gaza has undoubtedly had an impact on global businesses, and Starbucks is no exception. The company's exposure to public sentiment surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to calls for boycotts, social media backlash, and public pressure for the company to take a stance. While Starbucks has faced significant challenges in navigating these geopolitical tensions, it remains committed to its core business values, focusing on creating a welcoming environment for all customers while maintaining its neutral position on political issues.

As the situation in Gaza continues to evolve, Starbucks and other multinational

companies will likely have to contend with the increasing demand for corporate accountability in relation to human rights and social justice. Whether this will lead to more outspoken positions on political matters or whether companies will continue to focus on neutral approaches remains to be seen. For now, Starbucks remains focused on its global operations, customer experience, and commitment to corporate social responsibility, while navigating the complex landscape of international politics and public opinion.

The Future of Starbucks

As Starbucks navigates the challenges of the modern business landscape, it is focusing on its core values: quality, innovation, and customer experience. The company remains committed to its mission of inspiring and nurturing the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time. The restructuring efforts are intended to make Starbucks more agile and better equipped to face the future.



Starbucks is also exploring new avenues of growth, including expanding its presence in international markets, investing in sustainable practices, and embracing new technologies to enhance the customer experience. The company is doubling down on its digital and mobile platforms, allowing customers to order drinks and make payments through mobile apps. This focus on technology is helping Starbucks meet the demands of a tech-savvy, convenience-driven consumer base.

The company is also investing in sustainability and ethical sourcing initiatives, such as the Starbucks Coffee Sustainability Program, which supports coffee farmers and promotes environmentally friendly practices. Starbucks has long been a leader in corporate social responsibility, and it continues to prioritize sustainability as a key pillar of its brand.

Starbucks' decision to cut 1,100 corporate and administrative jobs is part of a larger strategy to streamline operations, cut costs, and reignite growth. The company has faced numerous challenges in recent years, including the impact of global events like the war in Ukraine, changing consumer preferences, and increased competition. However, Starbucks remains a dominant force in the coffee industry, and its commitment to quality, customer experience, and innovation positions it well for the future.

As CEO Brian Niccol works to transform the company, Starbucks is focusing on simplifying its structure, improving

efficiency, and driving better integration across its operations. While the decision to eliminate jobs is difficult, the company is confident that these changes will help it weather the challenges ahead and continue to grow in a competitive marketplace.

With a rich history, a strong global presence, and a loyal customer base, Starbucks is well-positioned to continue shaping the coffee industry for years to come.

Uzbek women entrepreneurs

Challenges and Opportunities



By Harry Javed

In her shop, Dono Zupparhanova carefully curates a selection of colorful bed linens and towels, each item a testament to her family's long history in the textile industry. Her journey began in 1996, when her mother opened the Demir Shopping Centre, introducing foreign textiles to Uzbekistan. Today, Zupparhanova continues that legacy as the newest entrepreneur running the business her mother started.

With a keen understanding of the market, she expanded her family's business by securing loans from Ipak Yuli Bank. This support allowed her to open three new shops and import premium brands. "Access to financing has transformed our business," she explains, noting the increasing demand from customers.

Zupparhanova's impact extends beyond her business. With plans to open four more stores by the end of the year, she is committed to uplifting other women entrepreneurs, sharing her experiences, and breaking down societal barriers in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan faces significant socio-economic challenges, particularly for women and women-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Despite representing

14-16 percent of total SMEs, there is an estimated credit gap of around \$916 million for these enterprises. The country ranks 108 out of 146 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, reflecting substantial gender disparity, with only 16 percent of firms having female ownership compared to higher rates in Europe and Central Asia. Local entrepreneurs, including women-owned businesses, struggle with access to financial resources, face cultural barriers due to traditional gender roles, and lack essential business support services, further complicating their efforts to balance business and family responsibilities.

Zupparhanova experienced a significant transformation in her life and business after receiving financial support from Ipak Yuli Bank. The loans enabled her to expand her family's textile business, and with the increased revenue, she has not only improved her own quality of life but also grown her family business to one providing jobs to more than ten people, lifting up her community, and fostering a sense of economic empowerment. "A working woman brings happiness not just to herself, but to her family and community," she emphasizes, highlighting the broader impact of her work. Zupparhanova's

journey has inspired many women around her, showing them the possibilities that come with entrepreneurship. She is not only advancing her own dreams but also cultivating an environment where other women feel encouraged to pursue their aspirations, contributing to a stronger, more resilient community in Uzbekistan.

Meet Fazilat Usmanova and Kamol Usmanov: Innovative Entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan's Culinary Scene

Usmanova and her husband are the driving force behind Ciao-Ciao Pizza, their family business that opened in November 2023 in Tashkent. Since then, they've successfully launched a second location, employing eight people and offering over 40 unique pizza varieties by chefs with restaurant experience from all over Europe. "We wanted to bring that authentic taste to Uzbekistan," she shares, inspired by their travels and Usmanova's brother's successful pizzeria in Sweden.

As a fitness club manager, Usmanova balances her dual roles while her husband, a retired colonel, leads operations at the pizzeria. With support from Davr Bank, they developed a solid business plan and received valuable management advice. Although there are challenges like ensuring customer turnout and managing finances, they are facing them together. Looking ahead, they hope to open more locations and expand into food trucks, eager to make their beloved pizzas accessible to neighborhoods across Uzbekistan.

Strengthening Financial Inclusion and the Role of Banks in Empowering SMEs in the Country

Financial institutions like Davr Bank and Ipak Yuli Bank play crucial roles in enhancing financial inclusion for SMEs in Uzbekistan. By offering tailored loan products and financial services, these banks empower entrepreneurs like Zupparhanova and Usmanova to expand their businesses. IFC's \$10 million loan to Davr Bank had a 80% carve out for women-owned SMEs, providing essential financing options that enable enterprise customers to acquire equipment and open new locations. Meanwhile, Ipak Yuli Bank launched tailored services to women-owned businesses, helping them navigate the challenges of accessing credit.

IFC has been working with local banks like Ipak Yuli and Davr to help them tailor and grow financial solutions for women entrepreneurs so that they, in turn, can expand their businesses and create more jobs. In line with this commitment, Ipak Yuli Bank is supporting micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) lending, ensuring that at least 25 percent of the total proceeds are directed toward on-lending to women-owned MSMEs, as part of the MSME Finance Platform Base of Pyramid (BOP) initiative. The collaboration is part of IFC's Banking on Women business, working not only with banks in Central Asia, but with over 250 financial institutions around the world.

"Thanks to our partnership with IFC, we have been able to expand our lending capacity, develop innovative financial products, and implement targeted

initiatives that empower women entrepreneurs. We believe that by prioritizing and expanding access to finance for women, we are fostering a brighter future for Uzbekistan, where every woman can thrive and succeed," says Saidabror Saydakhmedov, Chairman of the Management Board of Ipak Yuli Bank.

IFC's support to Davr Bank and Ipak Yuli Bank has streamlined loan approval processes and improved risk management practices, enabling both banks to better serve SMEs and women entrepreneurs. This collaboration has expanded their outreach, ensuring more businesses access the financing needed to thrive and contribute to Uzbekistan's economic development.



"By providing women with equal opportunities to access financial resources, we are unlocking their potential as entrepreneurs, job creators, and change-makers," says Wiebke Schloemer, IFC Director for Türkiye and Central Asia. "It is not just about financial inclusion; it is about empowering women to shape their own destinies and build a more equitable society."

Together, IFC and its partner banks are contributing to addressing financial inclusion challenges and enabling businesses like Ciao-ciao Pizza and traders like Zupparhanova to flourish.

"I'm not just growing a business; I'm empowering other women, reflects Zupparhanova. "We're breaking down barriers, challenging the status quo, and inspiring each other to reach our full potential. By

doing so, we are creating a ripple effect that will benefit generations to come. I can't wait to see what the future holds for my business and our community."

IFC Report

The IFC conducted a financial capability and inclusion survey in Uzbekistan in 2020. This report provides key findings of the survey and recommendations across three main areas: (1) financial inclusion, (2) financial capability, and (3) financial consumer protection. The other sections of the report provide a detailed overview of the results of the financial capability survey, summarize key findings of the report (executive summary), introduce the methodology of the survey in chapter one,

and focus on the overall level of financial inclusion in Uzbekistan in chapter two. Chapter three is an overview of the levels of financial capability in Uzbekistan, specifically the financial knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of respondents. Chapter four explores the relationship between financial inclusion and financial capability. The final chapter looks into financial consumer protection practices in the country.

Major Challenges for Uzbek Women Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan face multiple challenges that hinder their ability to start and grow businesses. While the government has taken steps to promote gender equality and support female

entrepreneurship, cultural, economic, and legal barriers persist.

1. Financial Barriers

A. Limited Access to Funding and Credit

- Many women struggle to secure loans due to lack of collateral, such as property or land, which is often registered under male family members.
- High interest rates and strict loan requirements make it difficult for women to access capital.

- Many women entrepreneurs face social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles instead of pursuing their business ambitions.

B. Limited Support Networks

- Women often have fewer professional networks and mentors, making it harder to gain business advice and support.
- Male-dominated industries can be less welcoming to female entrepreneurs, creating additional hurdles.

4. Limited Access to Education and Training

- While education levels among Uzbek women are relatively high, business-specific training programs are limited.
- Rural women often have fewer educational opportunities in entrepreneurship and digital skills.
- Many training programs are designed for men and do not address the unique challenges women face in business.

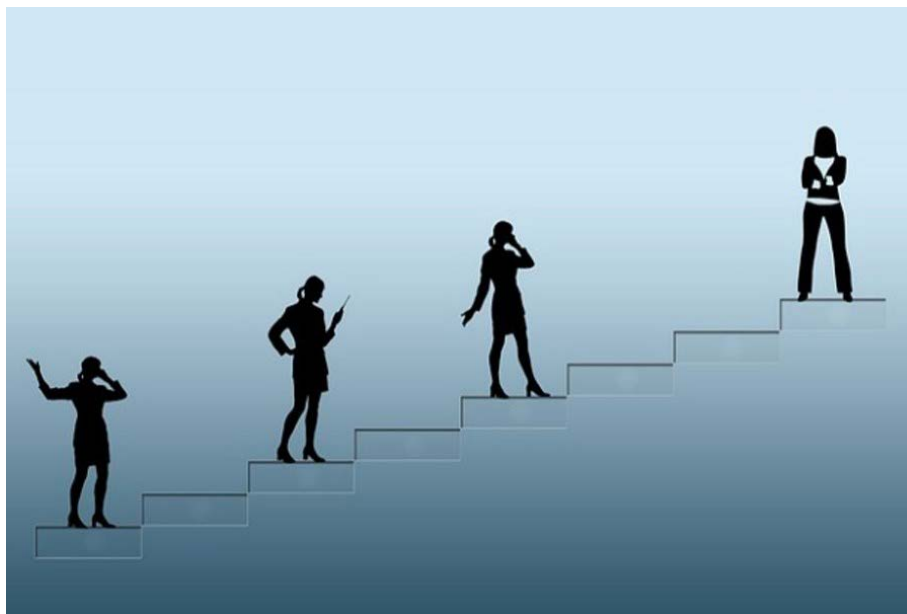
5. Balancing Business and Family Responsibilities

- Women are expected to handle family duties alongside running their businesses, making time management a major challenge.
- Lack of affordable childcare options makes it harder for mothers to focus on business growth.

Potential Solutions and Opportunities

1. Government Support – Expanding microfinance programs and loan opportunities tailored for women.
2. Entrepreneurship Training – More business workshops and mentorship programs for women.
3. Legal Reforms – Strengthening property rights and legal protections for female business owners.
4. Networking and Support Groups – Encouraging more female business associations and mentorship programs.
5. Digital and E-commerce Growth – Helping women leverage online businesses to overcome traditional barriers.

Despite these challenges, Uzbek women entrepreneurs are increasingly finding ways to succeed, particularly in e-commerce, fashion, agriculture, and small-scale manufacturing. With stronger support systems, they have the potential to contribute significantly to Uzbekistan's economic growth.



- Women-owned businesses receive less investment from banks and investors compared to male-led businesses.

B. Lack of Financial Literacy

- Many women have limited knowledge of financial management, investment, and business planning due to gaps in financial education.
- There is a lack of tailored financial products designed for women entrepreneurs.

2. Social and Cultural Barriers

A. Gender Stereotypes and Traditional Roles

- Uzbek society traditionally expects women to focus on household responsibilities and childcare, limiting their time and ability to run businesses.

3. Legal and Regulatory Barriers

A. Complex Bureaucracy

- Registering a business and obtaining permits can be time-consuming and difficult, especially for women who may lack legal expertise or support.
- Corruption and bribery in certain sectors can create additional obstacles for women entrepreneurs.

B. Weak Legal Protection for Women in Business

- Property rights issues often disadvantage women, as assets are frequently registered in men's names.
- Women face workplace discrimination and may lack protection against unfair business practices.

Ukraine-Russia War: 30-Day Ceasefire Amid Escalating Tensions

By Kanwal Munir

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has reached a crucial juncture, with the announcement of a 30-day ceasefire initially offering a glimmer of hope. The agreement, aimed at halting attacks on energy infrastructure, was seen as a step toward de-escalation. However, within hours of the ceasefire taking effect, Russia launched a massive drone attack on Ukraine's power facilities, casting doubt on the sincerity of the truce and raising concerns about its long-term viability.

This ceasefire, mediated by international stakeholders, including the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and European nations, was meant to ease civilian suffering and pave the way for diplomatic negotiations. However, Russia's immediate violation has intensified global skepticism about its true intentions. While Ukraine and its allies condemn the attacks, talks continue in Saudi Arabia to enforce the ceasefire and explore diplomatic solutions. The coming days will determine whether this truce leads to peace or merely serves as a strategic pause before renewed hostilities.

Background of the Conflict

The Russia-Ukraine conflict did not begin in 2022—its roots run much deeper, shaped by historical disputes, geopolitical rivalries, and territorial tensions. The conflict can be traced back to 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, triggering international condemnation and sanctions. This event marked the beginning of a major confrontation, leading to Russia's support for separatist movements in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. These separatists, backed by Russian military aid and intelligence, engaged in years of sporadic fighting against Ukrainian forces, creating a prolonged crisis with multiple failed diplomatic resolutions.



On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, escalating the conflict to an unprecedented level. The invasion resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of Ukrainians displaced, thousands killed, and entire cities reduced to rubble. Beyond the battlefield, the war caused economic turmoil and intensified geopolitical divisions between Russia and the West. The European Union and NATO imposed harsh sanctions on Russia, while Ukraine received extensive military and financial aid from Western allies.

Over the past two years, multiple ceasefire attempts have collapsed, as both sides repeatedly accused each other of violations. The war has devastated Ukraine's infrastructure, crippled its energy sector, and disrupted global markets, particularly in the food and energy industries. Failed peace talks in Turkey, Belarus, and other neutral venues have highlighted the complexity of finding a resolution.

However, the recent 30-day ceasefire agreement—though quickly violated by Russia—was initially viewed as a potential step toward de-escalation. Whether this agreement leads to further diplomatic progress or is simply another temporary pause before renewed hostilities remains to be seen.

The 30-Day Ceasefire Agreement

What Was Agreed Upon?

The 30-day ceasefire agreement between Russia and Ukraine was a significant diplomatic development aimed at reducing the humanitarian crisis caused by relentless attacks on energy infrastructure. The agreement, mediated by international stakeholders, sought to pause hostilities, particularly targeting power grids and energy supply systems, which had been severely damaged in the war. The primary objective was to halt attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, ensuring civilians had access to electricity, heating, and water—especially crucial as the country struggled with ongoing power shortages due to previous Russian assaults.

Another key aspect of the agreement was the facilitation of diplomatic talks between Russia and Ukraine, with Saudi Arabia stepping in as a neutral mediator. The Saudi government had been involved in previous negotiations and was seen as a potential stabilizing force that could help pave the way for a more sustainable peace process. The ceasefire also encouraged broader international diplomatic efforts to push both parties toward a longer-term

resolution. The goal was not just a temporary cessation of hostilities but a framework that could potentially lead to more substantive peace talks. However, given the history of failed ceasefires in this conflict, many experts and global leaders remained skeptical about whether this agreement would hold.

Who Were the Key Players?

Several key players were involved in negotiating, implementing, and reacting to the ceasefire:

- **Russia:** The Russian government initially agreed to the ceasefire but almost immediately violated it by launching drone attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure. Moscow's actions have raised concerns that the ceasefire was merely a strategic ploy to regroup its military forces rather than a genuine attempt at peace.
- **Ukraine:** The Ukrainian government, led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, accepted the ceasefire but remained highly skeptical of Russia's intentions. Ukraine had previously experienced multiple broken ceasefires, so the immediate violation of this agreement was not surprising to Ukrainian officials. Despite agreeing to the truce, Kyiv continued to call for stronger Western support and sanctions against Russia.
- **United States:** The U.S. played a crucial role in securing the ceasefire, with former President Donald Trump directly involved in the negotiations. Trump also proposed a controversial idea—that the U.S. should acquire Ukrainian power plants to protect them from Russian attacks. While the move was intended to shield Ukraine's energy infrastructure, it also raised concerns about foreign control over Ukraine's resources.
- **Saudi Arabia:** The Saudi government is set to host further discussions to ensure the implementation of the ceasefire. Given its neutral position and diplomatic ties with both Russia and the West, Saudi Arabia is playing a critical role in mediating between the two warring nations. However, with

Russia violating the truce so soon after its announcement, Saudi Arabia now faces an uphill task in ensuring compliance.

- **European Nations:** European leaders cautiously welcomed the ceasefire, hoping it would bring temporary relief to Ukraine's struggling energy sector. However, they also issued warnings that Russia could use this truce as an opportunity to regroup and launch further attacks once the ceasefire period ends. Countries such as Germany, France, and the UK have continued to provide military and financial aid to Ukraine while monitoring the situation closely.

Timeline of Events Leading to the Ceasefire

The lead-up to the ceasefire saw several key events unfold, shaping the course of negotiations and eventual violations:

- **March 15, 2025:** Preliminary discussions on the ceasefire take place between Ukraine and Russia, facilitated by international mediators, including the United States and Saudi Arabia. These discussions focus on the urgent need to protect Ukraine's energy sector from further Russian attacks, which had already caused widespread blackouts and humanitarian distress.
- **March 17, 2025:** Russia and Ukraine officially agree to a 30-day ceasefire to halt attacks on energy infrastructure. The agreement is announced publicly, with leaders from Europe, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia expressing cautious optimism. However, Ukrainian officials remain wary, given past experiences with Russian ceasefire violations.
- **March 18, 2025:** Russia launches approximately 150 drone strikes targeting Ukraine's power grid, violating the ceasefire within 24 hours. The attacks cause widespread power outages in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other major cities, severely impacting hospitals, water supply systems, and industries. Ukraine's military responds by shooting down some of the drones, but the

damage is already significant. The violation leads to global condemnation, with Western nations calling for immediate consequences for Russia.

- **March 19, 2025:** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy speaks with Donald Trump, seeking increased U.S. involvement. Zelenskyy demands that the U.S. and European nations impose stricter sanctions on Russia and provide more advanced air defense systems to protect Ukraine's infrastructure. Meanwhile, international discussions continue in Saudi Arabia, as mediators attempt to salvage what remains of the broken ceasefire.

The rapid collapse of the ceasefire has once again exposed the deep-rooted mistrust between Russia and Ukraine. With both sides now accusing each other of violations, the future of this truce appears bleak. While diplomatic efforts continue, the latest events have made it clear that Russia's willingness to abide by peace agreements remains highly questionable. The coming weeks will be critical in determining whether this ceasefire can be revived or if it was simply a temporary pause before a new phase of escalated warfare.

Ceasefire Violations and Challenges

Russia's Drone Attacks and Ukraine's Response

Despite formally agreeing to the 30-day ceasefire, Russia almost immediately violated the truce, launching a massive drone assault on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. The attacks caused severe blackouts in major cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Lviv, plunging millions into darkness. Critical services were severely impacted, with hospitals, water supply systems, and heating facilities suffering major disruptions. This has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, making everyday life even more difficult for Ukrainian civilians. Furthermore, these strikes have hampered Ukraine's economic recovery efforts, as damaged infrastructure will take months to repair.

In response, Ukraine acted swiftly by enhancing its air defense systems, using

advanced Western-supplied technology to intercept and neutralize Russian drones. The Ukrainian government also called for stronger international sanctions on Russia, urging the U.S. and European allies to impose tighter economic and military restrictions. Additionally, Ukraine's military launched counter-drone operations, successfully shooting down a significant number of Russian drones and reducing the scale of the damage.

Why Did Russia Violate the Ceasefire?

Experts suggest multiple reasons for Russia's decision to disregard the ceasefire so quickly:

1. **Strategic Military Advantage:** Russia may be testing Ukraine's defenses to assess vulnerabilities before a potential new offensive.
2. **Political Signaling:** The attacks could be a show of power ahead of the Saudi-hosted negotiations, demonstrating that Russia still holds the upper hand.
3. **Internal Divisions:** Some hardline factions within Russia's military might oppose the ceasefire, pushing for continued aggression.

This immediate violation of the truce has undermined trust in Russia's commitment to peace, raising concerns that the ceasefire was never meant to last.

International Reactions to the Ceasefire and Violations

U.S. and Trump's Role

Former President Donald Trump has taken an active role in the ceasefire negotiations, proposing a controversial idea—that the United States should acquire Ukrainian power plants to protect Ukraine's energy infrastructure from Russian attacks. Trump's suggestion, while intended to shield Ukraine's energy sector, has sparked significant debate.

Supporters argue that this would reduce Russia's ability to weaponize energy,

preventing it from targeting Ukraine's critical infrastructure. The move could also serve as a deterrent, as any attack on U.S.-controlled facilities would escalate tensions with Washington. However, critics warn that such a plan raises serious concerns about Ukrainian sovereignty. If implemented, Ukraine would have to cede some control over its energy sector to the United States, potentially complicating its domestic policies and independence.

Amid Russia's immediate ceasefire violations, Trump reassured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a recent call that U.S. diplomatic efforts remain focused on maintaining peace. He pledged continued American involvement in discussions, though the extent of direct U.S. intervention remains uncertain.



China's Position

As the war drags on, China has attempted to position itself as a potential mediator, unveiling a 12-point peace plan aimed at ending the conflict. The proposal includes:

- An immediate ceasefire to halt further destruction.
- Lifting of Western sanctions on Russia, arguing that they fuel economic instability.
- Security guarantees for both Ukraine and Russia to prevent future hostilities.

While China's involvement in diplomacy has increased, Western nations remain skeptical of Beijing's neutrality. Given China's close economic and political ties with Russia, many in the West doubt whether Beijing can act as a fair mediator. Ukraine, too, has been hesitant to embrace China's proposal, viewing it as favoring

Moscow's interests rather than pushing for a just resolution.

Europe's Cautionary Approach

European leaders have responded to the ceasefire with cautious optimism, recognizing its potential to provide temporary relief while remaining wary of Russia's long-term intentions. European nations have warned that:

- Russia could exploit the ceasefire to regroup and strengthen its military, only to launch new offensives once the truce ends.
- A fragile ceasefire without a comprehensive peace agreement could lead to another major escalation rather than a lasting resolution.

Countries such as Germany, France, and the UK have continued supporting Ukraine militarily and economically, even as they monitor the ceasefire's impact. Many European leaders believe that only a firm, enforceable peace deal—not just a temporary truce—can bring stability.

Saudi Arabia's Role

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a key player in ongoing negotiations, positioning itself as a neutral mediator with strategic ties to both Russia and Western powers. The country is set to host further discussions on implementing the ceasefire, aiming to clarify enforcement mechanisms and prevent further violations.

Given its economic leverage and diplomatic ties, Saudi Arabia is in a unique position to facilitate dialogue between Kyiv and Moscow. However, whether Riyadh can effectively enforce compliance remains to be seen, especially as Russia has already

violated the truce within hours of its announcement.

Potential Outcomes and Future Scenarios

Will the Ceasefire Lead to Lasting Peace?

The 30-day ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine war is a crucial but fragile moment, and its long-term impact remains uncertain. Analysts suggest three possible scenarios that could unfold in the coming weeks:

1. **Best Case Scenario:** The ceasefire holds, leading to extended peace negotiations. If both sides respect the agreement and external mediators such as Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and China push for diplomatic progress, this truce could pave the way for a more lasting peace agreement. This outcome, however, requires Russia to genuinely commit to de-escalation, something many experts doubt given its past actions.
2. **Middle Ground Scenario:** The ceasefire remains in place but remains shaky, with low-level conflicts continuing. While Russia and Ukraine may avoid large-scale offensives, minor violations and retaliatory strikes could persist. This scenario would keep tensions high and prevent full-scale peace talks from progressing.
3. **Worst Case Scenario:** Russia

completely abandons the ceasefire and resumes a full-scale war, launching even deadlier attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure and cities. If this happens, Ukraine will likely intensify its counterattacks, and Western nations may deepen their military involvement, increasing the risk of a wider regional conflict.

Risks of Renewed Conflict

While the ceasefire provides temporary relief, there are several risks that could lead to its collapse:

- Continued Russian violations could force Ukraine to escalate its counterattacks, leading to renewed fighting.
- Greater Western involvement—including additional military aid or direct intervention—could escalate geopolitical tensions, potentially drawing in NATO.
- Economic instability in Europe could worsen if Russia continues targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure, causing further disruptions in energy supplies.

Possible Diplomatic Solutions

To ensure stability, the international community must take proactive steps:

- Stronger international monitoring of the ceasefire to ensure compliance and hold violators accountable.
- Stricter economic sanctions on Russia for breaking the agreement, making continued aggression economically unsustainable.
- Direct U.S.-Russia negotiations to prevent further escalation and explore pathways for a longer-term resolution.

The next few weeks will be crucial in determining whether this ceasefire is a step toward peace or merely a temporary pause before another devastating phase of the war.

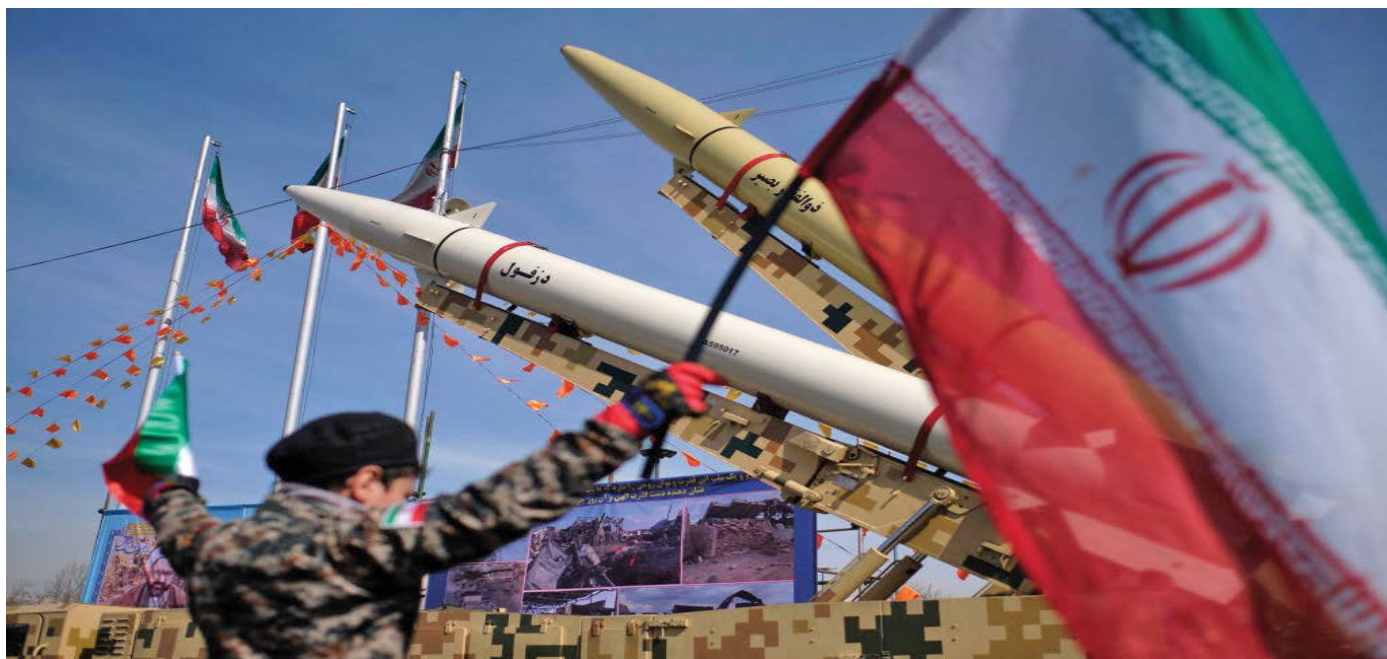
Conclusion

The Ukraine-Russia war remains a volatile and evolving conflict. The recent 30-day ceasefire agreement initially provided hope, but Russia's immediate violations have raised concerns about its sincerity. The international community remains divided on the best course of action. The U.S., China, and European leaders are all involved in shaping the next steps, but lasting peace remains uncertain.

For now, all eyes are on Saudi Arabia's upcoming diplomatic efforts, which could determine whether the ceasefire holds or collapses into renewed warfare. One thing is clear: the war is far from over, and its resolution will require sustained international pressure, strategic diplomacy, and genuine commitment from both sides.



Iran's Nuclear Program and Global Diplomacy: A Complex Geopolitical Struggle



By Romana Afsheen

Introduction

Iran's nuclear program has long been at the center of international diplomatic tensions. Over the years, global powers have oscillated between diplomacy and threats of military action, with Western nations, particularly the United States, applying pressure on Tehran to curb its nuclear ambitions. Despite multiple agreements and negotiations, the issue remains unresolved, revealing deep-seated geopolitical double standards. Iran continues to assert its right to nuclear development under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), while Western powers, particularly the U.S., selectively impose restrictions and threats.

Historical Background of Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's nuclear ambitions date back to the 1950s under the Shah's rule, when the U.S. and European allies actively supported its nuclear development through the "Atoms for Peace" program. The Western-backed Iranian government pursued nuclear energy with direct assistance from American and European scientists. However,

after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Western support ceased, and Iran faced growing hostility, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation over its nuclear activities. The program evolved under a security framework, particularly in response to regional threats and international pressure.

By the early 2000s, allegations emerged that Iran was secretly enriching uranium for weapons development. This led to prolonged negotiations, with Iran consistently denying any intentions to build nuclear weapons. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran Nuclear Deal, was a landmark agreement aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear capabilities in exchange for sanctions relief. However, the deal faced opposition from hardliners in the U.S. and Israel, leading to its eventual collapse under the Trump administration in 2018.

The Double Standards in Western Pressure on Iran

One of the most contentious issues surrounding Iran's nuclear program is the apparent double standard in how Western

nations enforce non-proliferation policies. While Iran has faced relentless scrutiny, severe economic sanctions, and rigorous inspections under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), other regional players, most notably Israel, remain outside the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) without facing similar restrictions.

Israel, despite being widely believed to possess nuclear weapons, has never officially confirmed its nuclear arsenal and is not a signatory to the NPT. Unlike Iran, which has had to subject its nuclear sites to routine inspections and comply with the Additional Protocol of the IAEA, Israel operates outside this system, free from international oversight. This glaring disparity has long been a point of contention for Tehran, which argues that the West's selective enforcement of nuclear policies undermines the legitimacy of the global non-proliferation regime.

Beyond the Middle East, the issue of double standards extends to the nuclear policies of Western nations themselves. While the U.S. and European powers continue to pressure Iran to limit its civilian nuclear activities, these same countries

maintain, modernize, and expand their own nuclear arsenals. The United States, for instance, has initiated multi-billion-dollar programs to upgrade its nuclear weapons capabilities, all while demanding that Iran restrict its nuclear advancements, which Tehran insists are purely for peaceful purposes. Similarly, France and the United Kingdom continue to uphold their nuclear deterrents while advocating for the curtailment of Iran's nuclear research and enrichment programs.

making diplomatic negotiations more difficult. Iran has repeatedly stated that it is willing to adhere to international regulations, if they are applied fairly and without bias. However, as long as Western nations continue to maintain double standards—demanding strict compliance from Iran while ignoring violations by others—Tehran remains skeptical about the sincerity of U.S. and European efforts to reach a just and equitable nuclear agreement.



Iran has consistently raised these concerns in diplomatic forums, arguing that its right to nuclear energy and peaceful enrichment activities are protected under international law. Tehran points to Article IV of the NPT, which explicitly recognizes the right of all signatory states to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, including uranium enrichment. Yet, Iran's efforts to exercise this right have been met with international hostility, including economic sanctions that have crippled its economy.

The inconsistencies in how nuclear policies are enforced have led Iran to question the motives behind Western actions. Iranian officials argue that the issue is not truly about non-proliferation but rather about maintaining geopolitical dominance. Tehran has accused the U.S. and its allies of using the nuclear issue as a pretext to exert political and economic pressure on Iran, while allowing favored allies, such as Israel, to operate outside the constraints of international agreements.

This perceived hypocrisy has fueled further mistrust between Iran and the West,

Iran has also criticized the role of international institutions, particularly the IAEA and the United Nations, for failing to address these double standards. While the IAEA has been rigorous in monitoring Iran's nuclear facilities, often exceeding its standard inspection measures, it has not applied the same level of scrutiny to other nuclear-armed states outside the NPT framework. This imbalance has reinforced Iran's belief that the non-proliferation regime is being used as a political tool rather than an impartial mechanism for global security.

In response to these challenges, Iran has sought greater cooperation with other nations, including China, Russia, and some members of the Non-Aligned Movement, to push for a more balanced approach to nuclear governance. Tehran has called for an end to discriminatory practices in nuclear oversight and has urged the global community to address the broader issue of nuclear disarmament rather than selectively targeting certain nations.

Ultimately, Iran's nuclear program remains

at the center of an international debate marked by contradictions and geopolitical maneuvering. Tehran continues to insist that it will not accept unilateral restrictions unless all nations, including those in the West and the Middle East, are held to the same standards. Until these discrepancies are addressed, Iran is likely to remain defiant in the face of Western pressure, insisting that its nuclear rights must be respected under international law.

Tehran and Tokyo's Diplomatic Push for a Resolution

Amid growing tensions over Iran's nuclear program and the looming threat of renewed U.S. sanctions, diplomatic efforts from various nations have sought to mediate a peaceful resolution. Among these diplomatic actors, Japan has taken on a particularly active role, leveraging its long-standing ties with both Iran and the United States to push for negotiations instead of confrontation. As a key economic partner of Iran and a historical ally of the U.S., Japan is uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between the two adversaries, advocating for dialogue to de-escalate the crisis.

Japan has consistently emphasized that the resolution of the nuclear dispute should come through diplomatic means rather than coercion or military threats. Tokyo has urged both Washington and Tehran to return to the negotiating table, stressing that an open line of communication is essential to achieving a sustainable and fair agreement. Japanese officials have repeatedly warned that further escalation—whether in the form of additional sanctions or the breakdown of diplomatic channels—could have severe consequences not just for the Middle East but for global stability, energy markets, and economic security.

During high-level meetings between Iranian and Japanese officials, Tokyo has reiterated its commitment to preventing military escalation in the region. Japan's leaders have expressed concern that heightened hostilities could trigger a wider conflict, destabilizing an already fragile Middle East and jeopardizing global trade routes. Given that Japan is heavily reliant

on Middle Eastern oil imports, any disruption in the region would have significant economic repercussions for Tokyo. Consequently, Japan has a vested interest in ensuring that tensions between Iran and the West are resolved peacefully.

Beyond its economic considerations, Japan's unique historical perspective on nuclear weapons shapes its diplomatic stance. As the only nation to have experienced the devastation of atomic bombings, Japan has consistently championed nuclear non-proliferation efforts worldwide. Tokyo strongly opposes the spread of nuclear weapons while also recognizing Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear energy under international law. Japanese leaders have urged Western powers to uphold the principles of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in a manner that is consistent and fair ensuring that Iran's nuclear rights are protected while preventing any potential militarization of its program.

Despite Japan's earnest diplomatic initiatives, Iran remains skeptical of Western intentions, particularly given past betrayals and unilateral actions by the United States. Iranian officials have welcomed Japan's mediation efforts but have also expressed concerns that Washington's history of renegeing on agreements—such as the unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018—undermines trust in any future negotiations. Tehran has made it clear that while it is open to dialogue, it will not engage in discussions that come at the cost of its sovereignty or national interests.

In response, Japan has attempted to reassure Iranian officials that it seeks a balanced approach—one that safeguards Iran's rights while addressing the security concerns raised by Western nations. Tokyo has underscored its belief that a renewed nuclear deal should not only prevent further escalation but also promote long-term stability in the Middle East.

To reinforce its commitment to diplomacy, Japan has engaged in multiple diplomatic initiatives, including hosting Iranian officials, dispatching special envoys to Tehran, and maintaining an active dialogue with U.S. policymakers. Japan has also played a role in encouraging European nations to remain engaged in nuclear

negotiations, recognizing that a multilateral approach is essential to achieving a viable agreement.

Despite these efforts, the success of Japan's diplomatic push remains uncertain. Iran remains steadfast in its demand for assurances that any future deal will be honored, while the U.S. continues to apply pressure through sanctions and political rhetoric. Nonetheless, Japan's efforts highlight the importance of diplomacy in resolving complex international disputes and serve as a reminder that peaceful solutions are still possible—provided that all parties are willing to negotiate in good faith.

In the broader context, Japan's diplomatic engagement with Iran also underscores a shifting global dynamic, where non-Western powers play an increasingly significant role in mediating conflicts. As tensions persist, Japan's role as a mediator may prove crucial in determining whether diplomacy can succeed or whether the world will once again witness the breakdown of a hard-won nuclear agreement.



Tehran's Letter to the United Nations

In response to the recent escalation in aggressive rhetoric from the United States, Tehran has formally lodged a complaint with the United Nations, emphasizing Washington's increasingly hostile stance towards Iran. The letter, addressed to UN Secretary-General António Guterres and the UN Security Council, highlights what Iran considers blatant violations of international law, including explicit and veiled threats of military action, as well as the

imposition of severe economic sanctions designed to cripple Iran's economy.

Iran's diplomatic correspondence argues that such coercive policies are not only unjustified but also set a dangerous precedent that undermines global peace and security. Tehran insists that the language used by American officials—ranging from calls for regime change to military posturing—violates the UN Charter's principles, which stress the sovereignty of nations and prohibit the use or threat of force against any member state.

In its letter, Iran underscores its commitment to diplomatic engagement, provided that Western nations, particularly the United States, honor their international obligations. Tehran asserts that despite persistent pressure and repeated violations of previous agreements by Washington, Iran has remained within the legal framework of international treaties, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal.

Moreover, Iran warns the UN that failure to address the aggressive stance of the United States could have dire consequences, not just for the Middle East but for global stability. Tehran calls on the Security Council to take a firm and impartial stance against U.S. intimidation tactics and urges the UN to reaffirm its role as a mediator in international conflicts. Iran also points out that similar aggressive U.S. policies in the past—whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya—have led to prolonged instability, regional conflicts, and humanitarian crises, cautioning that a repeat scenario in Iran

could have even more catastrophic consequences.

The letter also highlights the economic warfare being waged against Iran through sanctions, describing them as a form of collective punishment that disproportionately affects ordinary citizens. Tehran argues that these measures violate international human rights laws by restricting access to essential goods, including medicine and food. It accuses Washington of deliberately weaponizing economic policies to force Iran into submission, a strategy that Tehran insists will not succeed.

Iran's letter to the UN serves as both a warning and a plea for justice. It urges the international community to recognize the gravity of the situation and to take meaningful steps to curb the United States' unilateral and unlawful actions. Tehran reiterates that it remains open to diplomatic solutions but asserts that negotiations can only be successful if conducted based on mutual respect, adherence to international agreements, and an end to aggressive posturing by Washington.

Trump's Ultimatum: Pressuring Iran into a New Deal

Former U.S. President Donald Trump's

withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018 marked a turning point in the crisis. Trump imposed severe economic sanctions on Iran under the "maximum pressure" campaign, crippling the Iranian economy and escalating regional tensions. In his final months in office, Trump issued an ultimatum, demanding that Iran negotiate a new nuclear agreement within two months or face increased sanctions and potential military intervention.

Iran rejected this ultimatum, viewing it as an act of bad faith given Washington's history of reneging on agreements. Iranian officials argued that the 2015 JCPOA was already a product of intense negotiations and that renegotiating under coercion was unacceptable. The Trump administration's hardline stance further alienated Iran from the West and strengthened Tehran's resolve to continue its nuclear program.

The Current Geopolitical Landscape

Today, Iran's nuclear program remains a critical issue in international relations. The Biden administration has expressed interest in reviving the JCPOA, but progress has been slow. Tehran insists that all U.S. sanctions must be lifted before it returns to compliance with the agreement. Meanwhile, European nations have struggled to mediate the dispute, as internal political

shifts and external pressures complicate negotiations.

Regional dynamics also play a crucial role. Israel continues to push for a more aggressive stance against Iran, warning that Tehran's nuclear advancements pose a direct threat. The Gulf states, while wary of Iran's growing influence, have also expressed concerns over the economic impact of continued sanctions and potential military conflict.

The Future of Iran's Nuclear Program

The future of Iran's nuclear program remains uncertain. While diplomatic efforts persist, deep-rooted mistrust and geopolitical rivalries continue to hinder progress. Iran maintains that it has the right to peaceful nuclear energy and insists on fair treatment under international law. However, Western nations, particularly the U.S., continue to apply pressure through sanctions and military threats.

For a sustainable resolution, all parties must commit to genuine diplomacy, respect international treaties, and address the underlying double standards in nuclear policies. Whether Iran's nuclear program will lead to further conflict, or a new era of diplomatic engagement depends largely on how global powers navigate this complex and contentious issue.



Mark Carney Takes the Helm: Former Central Banker to Lead Canada as Prime Minister



By Javed Mahmood

Canada's Liberal Party overwhelmingly elected Mark Carney as the country's next prime minister on Sunday, and the former central banker wasted no time in taking a firm stance against threats from U.S. President Donald Trump.

Carney, 59, secured 85.9% of the votes in the Liberal Party leadership race, according to the final tally. He will soon take over from outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, but his tenure may be brief. With elections required by October, Carney could call a snap vote within weeks. Current polls suggest a close race, with the opposition, the Conservatives, holding a slight edge.

In his victory speech in Ottawa, Carney warned that the United States under Trump was attempting to assert control over Canada—an effort he vowed to resist.

"The Americans want our resources, our water, our land, our country," Carney told an enthusiastic crowd after his win. Trump, he said, is "attacking Canadian workers, families, and businesses. We cannot let him succeed."

Carney, who previously led both the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England,

decisively defeated his main rival, Chrystia Freeland, Trudeau's former deputy prime minister and a key figure in the Liberal government since 2015.

Mark Carney has been elected as the new leader of Canada's governing Liberal Party, replacing Justin Trudeau at a time of heightened tensions and fears of a potential trade war with the United States. An economist and former central banker, Carney is set to be sworn in as prime minister in the coming days. Despite having no prior experience in elected office, Carney is making his political debut at the highest level, with a federal election looming. He takes charge of a Liberal Party that has faced years of declining support and criticism over its handling of social and economic issues but is now experiencing a resurgence in political momentum.

"I will work day and night with one purpose—to build a stronger Canada for everyone," Carney declared in his victory speech on Sunday, after securing a decisive 85.9 percent of the vote on the first ballot.

Who Is Mark Carney?

Born in Canada's Northwest Territories and raised in Alberta, Carney has

positioned himself as a political outsider with the experience needed to navigate Canada through economic uncertainty. The country is grappling with steep U.S. tariffs on Canadian products, imposed by President Donald Trump on March 4, fueling fears of a recession and strengthening calls for steady leadership in Ottawa.

Carney holds degrees from Harvard and Oxford and spent over a decade at Goldman Sachs before transitioning into public service. He has served as chair of Brookfield Asset Management, where he spearheaded efforts to align investments with global climate goals.

However, it is his experience as a central banker during times of crisis that his supporters see as his greatest asset. As governor of the Bank of Canada during the 2008 global financial crisis, Carney took swift action to shield Canada from a severe downturn. In 2013, he moved to the Bank of England, where he remained until 2020, overseeing the British economy through Brexit.

Though he was credited with mitigating Brexit's economic fallout, Carney's warnings about its risks drew criticism from pro-Brexit conservatives.

"He was an innovative and inventive central banker," said Will Hutton, an author and president of the UK's Academy of Social Sciences. "He understood that central banks have a role in making capitalism as legitimate as possible by addressing its worst tendencies. And he was appalled by Brexit, which he thought was self-defeating."

As Carney steps into Canada's top political role, questions remain about his ability to boost the Liberals' fortunes in the upcoming election against a resurgent Conservative Party. His leadership will be tested as he navigates economic headwinds, trade tensions, and a shifting political landscape.



Carney's Biggest Challenge: Can an Economic Expert Succeed in Politics?

While Mark Carney's economic credentials are widely respected, his lack of experience in electoral politics has raised concerns about his ability to lead in Canada's high-stakes political arena. Carney previously served as an economic adviser to former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who stepped down amid growing frustration over his government's handling of a housing crisis and rising living costs. However, Carney has never run for office before, and much of his Liberal leadership campaign was spent introducing himself to Canadians.

"He's someone who's been behind the

scenes, an adviser," said Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University, who described Carney as a "technocrat on steroids."

A Vision Without a Test

Since launching his campaign, Carney has laid out broad promises, including curbing government spending, investing in housing, diversifying Canada's trade partnerships, and imposing a temporary cap on immigration. As a former United Nations Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance, he is also a strong advocate for private-sector leadership in tackling climate change and achieving net-zero emissions.

"I know how to manage crises. I know how to build strong economies," Carney asserted during a recent leadership debate. "I have a plan—a plan that puts more money back in your pockets, makes our companies more competitive, and builds an economy that works for you."

However, analysts say Carney's leadership bid faced little real scrutiny. His main opponent was former Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, a longtime ally, and their race lacked the intensity typical of competitive political contests.

"That's not the best test for someone with no political experience who is now heading into the lion's den," Béland said, referring to this year's federal election. There, Carney will face fierce challenges from Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre and Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet.

Insider or Outsider?

Despite framing himself as a political outsider, Carney's extensive experience in the financial world and his advisory role within the Liberal Party have led some to question that narrative.

"He is a consummate insider and a consummate elite," said Canadian political analyst David Moscrop. "At the same time, he's a highly respected economic thinker. If that's what you value, he's the best of the best. But if you don't, then he represents what some on the left and right see as a global economic elite that is out of touch with everyday people." As Carney prepares to face off against seasoned political opponents in the federal election, the key question remains: Can a career technocrat successfully transition into the rough-and-tumble world of electoral politics?

Earlier, Pierre Poilievre and his Conservative Party have capitalized on public frustration over rising prices, using it as a key attack against the Liberal government—and now, against Mark Carney. Poilievre, known for his combative political style, has sought to brand Carney as "just like Justin," linking him to outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's least popular policies. Chief among them is the Liberal carbon pricing program, which Carney once supported but has recently pledged to scrap in response to strong public opposition. Poilievre has labeled him "Carbon Tax Carney," emphasizing what he calls the "Carney-Trudeau Liberals."

The Conservatives have also accused Carney of misleading the public when he claimed he was not at Brookfield Asset Management—his former firm—when it decided to relocate its headquarters from Toronto to New York. Conservative MP Michael Barrett framed the move as "taking jobs away from Canadians."

A spokesperson for Carney's campaign dismissed the accusations, stating that the decision had no impact on Canadian jobs.

Ethics Questions

Carney has also faced scrutiny over ethics rules. Since he has never been elected to office, he is not yet required to disclose

private financial interests or place assets in a blind trust, as Canadian lawmakers must. However, opposition parties have urged him to comply with these regulations preemptively.

Carney's campaign responded to the criticism by stating that, if elected, he would not only follow all ethics rules but "surpass them." They added that Carney had already contacted the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner to ensure all necessary steps would be taken immediately.

The Trump Factor

Despite domestic political clashes, many Canadians are more focused on the uncertain future of Canada-U.S. relations, particularly in light of U.S. President Donald Trump's newly imposed tariffs. Concerns over a potential trade war with Washington have actually boosted support for the Liberals in recent weeks, narrowing what was once a 26-point gap behind the Conservatives.

Polls suggest the election's defining issue may be which leader is best suited to navigate Canada's relationship with the U.S. A recent Angus Reid Institute survey found that Carney holds a nine-point advantage on this front—43% of respondents said they trust him most to handle Trump, compared to 34% for Poilievre.

Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University, noted that Poilievre and the Conservatives will need to refine their strategy against Carney. "Just empty slogans probably won't work," he said, emphasizing the need for a more substantive approach to challenging the Liberal leader.

Key Political and Economic Challenges for Canada

Political Challenges

1. Canada-U.S. Relations & Trade Tensions

- The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency has heightened uncertainty over trade relations, with recent tariffs on Canadian goods sparking fears of a trade war.
- Canada must navigate a shifting geopolitical landscape while protecting key industries like automotive, energy, and agriculture.

2. Domestic Political Polarization

- Rising political divisions between progressive and conservative ideologies, particularly on economic policies, immigration, and climate action, are shaping Canada's political discourse.

- The upcoming federal election will be a critical test of whether the Liberals, under Mark Carney, can regain support or if Pierre Poilievre's Conservatives will capitalize on voter frustration.

3. Indigenous Reconciliation

- Addressing historical injustices and improving relations with Indigenous communities remains a significant challenge.
- Issues such as land disputes, resource development on Indigenous land, and the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations remain unresolved.

4. Immigration and Housing Crisis

- Canada's ambitious immigration targets have fueled concerns over housing affordability, infrastructure strain, and job market saturation.
- The Liberal government has proposed temporary caps on immigration, but debates over long-term solutions continue.

5. National Unity and Regional Tensions

- Tensions between the federal government and provinces, especially Alberta and Quebec, persist over issues like energy policies, equalization



- payments, and cultural autonomy.
- Western alienation remains a challenge as provinces push for greater autonomy over resource management.

Economic Challenges

1. Inflation and Cost of Living

- Despite a decline from peak inflation levels, the cost of living remains high, with rising grocery prices, rent, and mortgage rates squeezing household budgets.



- Interest rate policies by the Bank of Canada will play a key role in managing inflation without stalling economic growth.

2. Housing Affordability Crisis

- A shortage of housing supply, coupled with high interest rates and growing demand, has made homeownership unaffordable for many Canadians.
- Governments at all levels are under pressure to introduce policies that accelerate housing development and curb real estate speculation.

3. Energy Transition and Climate Policy

- Canada faces a difficult balancing act between reducing carbon emissions and maintaining economic growth, particularly in provinces reliant on fossil fuels.
- Policies around carbon pricing, clean energy investments, and resource sector regulations will be critical in the coming years.

4. Productivity and Economic Growth

- Canada lags behind peer nations in productivity growth, innovation, and private-sector investment.
- The country needs stronger policies to encourage business investment, boost manufacturing, and enhance its global competitiveness.

5. Aging Population and Workforce Challenges

- An aging population is increasing

pressure on healthcare and pension systems.

- Workforce shortages in key industries, including healthcare and technology, highlight the need for skilled immigration and workforce training programs.

Outlook

As Canada prepares for a pivotal federal election, both political and economic issues will be at the forefront of voter concerns. How the next government handles these challenges will shape the country's trajectory in the coming years.

Potential for Growth in Canada

Despite facing political and economic challenges, Canada has strong opportunities for growth across multiple sectors. With its vast natural resources, a highly educated workforce, and a stable financial system, Canada is well-positioned for future expansion.

1. Economic Growth Drivers

A. Energy and Natural Resources

- Canada is a global leader in energy production, including oil, natural gas, and emerging renewables like hydro and wind.
- The country's potential for critical minerals mining (lithium, cobalt, and nickel) is vital for the green energy transition, particularly in the electric vehicle (EV) and battery storage industries.
- Advancements in carbon capture and clean energy technology could position Canada as a leader in sustainable energy solutions.

B. Technology and Innovation

- Canada's technology sector, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and fintech, is experiencing rapid growth.
- Cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal have become global hubs for AI development and startup innovation.
- Government support for tech incubators and research centers is fostering entrepreneurship and attracting global talent.

C. Green Economy and Sustainability

- Canada's commitment to net-zero emissions by 2050 presents opportunities in clean technology, renewable energy, and sustainable finance.
- Growth in EV manufacturing, hydrogen fuel production, and green construction could drive job creation and economic expansion.
- The carbon pricing system and incentives for sustainable businesses are pushing industries toward greener practices.

D. Immigration and Workforce Expansion

- Canada's immigration-friendly policies help offset an aging population and provide a skilled workforce in

- key sectors such as healthcare, technology, and engineering.
- Increased immigration can stimulate demand for housing, consumer goods, and services, boosting overall economic activity.

E. Infrastructure and Housing Development

- Major investments in transportation, broadband expansion, and housing are expected to drive long-term economic growth.
- Government plans to accelerate housing construction and infrastructure spending will support job creation and economic expansion.

2. Trade and Global Economic Position

A. Trade Diversification

- While Canada has traditionally relied on the U.S. as its main trading partner, recent efforts to expand trade with Europe (CETA), Asia-Pacific

(CPTPP), and Latin America present new opportunities.

- Strengthening economic ties with India and Japan can open new markets for Canadian exports, particularly in agriculture, energy, and technology.

B. Agricultural and Agri-Tech Expansion

- Canada's strong agriculture sector has potential for growth in global food exports.
- Innovations in precision farming, sustainable agriculture, and food processing can increase efficiency and expand market share.

C. Financial Services and Fintech Growth

- Canada's banking system is one of the most stable in the world, and its fintech sector is rapidly expanding.
- Digital banking, blockchain technology, and AI-driven financial services offer growth potential for domestic and international markets.

Social and Economic Stability Advantages

- Canada's stable democracy, strong legal system, and economic resilience make it an attractive destination for foreign investment.
- The country has a high standard of living, strong labor protections, and a well-regulated market, fostering long-term business confidence.
- Government investments in education, healthcare, and digital infrastructure ensure a strong foundation for future growth.

Outlook: A Positive Future with Challenges

While Canada faces challenges like inflation, housing affordability, and political uncertainty, the country's strengths in natural resources, technology, trade, and sustainability provide a solid foundation for growth. If policies align with these opportunities, Canada has the potential to be a leading global economic player in the coming decades.



The Future of Pakistan's Education System: Is It Ready For The 21st Century Challenges?



By Saad Jadoon

Education is often considered the backbone of any society, providing the foundation for economic development, social stability, and cultural enrichment. In Pakistan, however, the education system faces numerous challenges that hinder its ability to prepare future generations for the ever-changing demands of the 21st century. The country is grappling with issues like inadequate infrastructure, outdated curricula, gender disparity, and a growing skills gap, making it uncertain whether Pakistan's education system can meet the needs of modern times.

Current State of Education in Pakistan

The current state of education in Pakistan is at the heart of this discussion. While efforts have been made in recent years to address various issues, a large number of students in Pakistan still face significant barriers to accessing quality education.

1. Access and Enrollment

In 2024, Pakistan's literacy rate was estimated at 60%, which is significantly lower than the global average. Despite substantial progress over the years,

Pakistan still faces a daunting educational crisis, with millions of children, particularly girls, unable to access quality education.

Out-of-School Children: Approximately 26 million children are still out of school in Pakistan, with 5.7 million girls and 5.06 million boys at the primary education level. This stark figure reflects the barriers to education, especially for girls in rural areas. According to UNESCO, Pakistan has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children in the world.

Enrollment Rates: Though enrollment has improved slightly, it remains far from the targets needed to achieve universal education. In 2024, the enrollment rate for children in school increased by approximately 3%, bringing the total number of students enrolled to over 56 million—but the dropout rate remains alarmingly high, particularly for girls in rural regions, where educational facilities are scarce.

Despite this, significant improvements in educational facilities in urban areas have been noted. Schools in Pakistan's major cities are relatively better equipped with resources, but they remain out of reach for many families

due to high tuition costs, further exacerbating the inequality in access to education.

2. Quality of Education

While enrollment rates have risen, the quality of education remains a pressing concern. Quality education is not just about access, but also about ensuring that students are well-prepared for the workforce and the future.

Outdated Curriculum: A significant issue is Pakistan's outdated curriculum. It still heavily relies on rote memorization, which limits students' ability to apply knowledge to real-world scenarios. According to a report by the Pakistan Education Foundation (PEF), more than 50% of students in Pakistan's public schools are not equipped with the basic literacy and numeracy skills required for success.

Inadequate Teaching Methods: In addition to the outdated curriculum, the teaching methodology in many Pakistani schools has not evolved in decades. Teachers often rely on traditional lecture-based approaches, which do not promote critical thinking or creativity—skills that are essential in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century. Studies show that in schools

with inadequate facilities and a lack of trained teachers, the dropout rate can be as high as 40% before students reach secondary school.

Gender Disparity: Gender disparity remains one of the most troubling issues in Pakistan's education system. According to a 2024 study by the National Education Policy Center, fewer than 50% of girls complete their secondary education, especially in rural areas. In some provinces, girls' education is still considered secondary to boys' education due to cultural and societal norms. However, progress is being made, and initiatives such as free education programs and scholarships for girls are helping to close the gap.

3. Infrastructure and Resources

Pakistan's education system faces severe infrastructure challenges, especially in rural and underprivileged areas. Many schools lack basic amenities such as electricity, clean drinking water, and functioning toilets, which makes the learning environment hostile for students.

Lack of Basic Facilities: As per reports from UNICEF and the World Bank, more than 30,000 schools across the country were damaged or destroyed by the 2022 floods, leaving millions of children without access to education. Rebuilding these schools and ensuring they are adequately equipped with modern facilities is a monumental challenge.

Teacher Shortages: There is a significant shortage of qualified teachers, especially in rural areas, where teachers are often untrained or undertrained. According to data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, one in every five public school teachers lacks a formal teaching qualification, which directly affects the quality of education students receive.

The 21st Century Challenges Facing Pakistan's Education System

In the 21st century, the landscape of education is rapidly evolving. While Pakistan's education system still grapples with traditional issues, it must also contend with newer, more global challenges.

1. Technological Disruption

One of the most significant changes in the modern world is the rise of technology. From the widespread use of smartphones and the internet to advancements in artificial intelligence and automation, technological disruption is reshaping how we work, learn, and interact.

Digital Divide: The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the glaring digital divide in Pakistan. As schools and universities shifted to online learning, millions of students from lower-income families were unable to access digital platforms due to a lack of internet connectivity and devices. In 2024, a report from Telecom Pakistan revealed that nearly 50% of rural areas still lack reliable internet access, hindering efforts to modernize education.



Skills Mismatch: The rapid development of artificial intelligence, automation, and digital technologies means that traditional careers in fields such as manufacturing and agriculture are being replaced by more technology-driven jobs. However, the education system in Pakistan has yet to sufficiently prepare students for careers in emerging fields like data science, machine learning, and cybersecurity. This skills gap threatens Pakistan's ability to compete in the global job market.

2. Globalization and Employment Trends

Globalization has altered the job market. No longer are young people competing solely for local jobs; today, the competition

is global. In this context, Pakistan's education system faces the task of preparing students not only for the local workforce but also for a global economy.

Global Competitiveness: Pakistani graduates often struggle to compete internationally due to a lack of globally relevant skills. For instance, many Pakistani graduates are not proficient in English, a key global language for business and higher education. A 2024 report from EF Education First ranked Pakistan 82nd globally for English proficiency, which is far below the global average.

Soft Skills Deficiency: Employers worldwide seek employees with strong soft skills, including communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. In Pakistan, however, the emphasis is still heavily on

academic qualifications rather than on developing these essential skills. Consequently, many graduates are ill-prepared for the evolving job market.

3. Environmental Education and Sustainability

Climate change is an issue that cannot be ignored. Pakistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate-related disasters such as floods, droughts, and extreme heat. The education system needs to prepare students to deal with the effects of climate change and work towards environmental sustainability.

Lack of Environmental Curriculum: Pakistan's education system does not place enough emphasis on climate change and

environmental sustainability. According to the Pakistan Climate Change Council, only 20% of schools in Pakistan include environmental education in their curriculum, despite the country being ranked 8th in terms of vulnerability to climate change.

Youth Involvement: With climate change posing such a significant threat to the country's future, it is essential to involve the youth in discussions around sustainability and environmental protection. Encouraging young people to engage in green technologies, sustainability efforts, and environmental policies should be a priority in the education system.



Reforms Needed for a Progressive Education System

To tackle these challenges and ensure that Pakistan's education system meets the demands of the 21st century, several reforms are necessary.

1. Curriculum Overhaul

Pakistan's curriculum must shift from rote learning to competency-based education, which emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Introducing subjects like coding, robotics, and climate change education will help students prepare for the future.

Focus on STEM: Schools should introduce more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects to prepare students for careers in high-demand fields like technology and engineering.

Incorporating Digital Literacy: Given the importance of technology, digital literacy must be integrated at all levels of education, from primary schools to universities.

2. Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teachers are the foundation of any education system. If Pakistan's education system is to meet future challenges, teachers need to be trained in modern teaching methods and technologies.

Training in Digital Tools: Teachers should be trained in using digital tools and e-learning platforms. Online teacher

training programs could be a cost-effective way to upgrade teachers' skills.

Specialized Subject Training: Teachers should receive specialized training in areas like STEM, environmental education, and soft skills to equip students for the modern world.

3. Infrastructure Improvements

The government must prioritize building and upgrading school infrastructure, particularly in rural and disaster-prone areas.

Digital Infrastructure: Investing in digital infrastructure, including the expansion of broadband and providing affordable access to laptops and tablets, is crucial for future education.

School Renovations: Many schools, particularly in rural areas, require significant repairs. The government should allocate more resources to rebuilding and upgrading these schools.

4. Gender Equality in Education

Gender disparity in education must be addressed through targeted initiatives such as scholarships for girls, safe transportation to schools, and awareness campaigns in rural communities to change perceptions about girls' education.

Pakistan's education system is at a crossroads, with numerous challenges hindering its ability to prepare students for the 21st century. However, these challenges also present opportunities for reform and growth. By overhauling the curriculum, investing in teacher training, improving infrastructure, and addressing gender disparity, Pakistan can create an education system that empowers young people to face the challenges of the future. The stakes are high, and the future of Pakistan depends on the education of its youth.

As Pakistan steps into the future, the need for an education system that is adaptive, modern, and inclusive has never been more urgent. The time for reform is now.

How to Modernize Education in Pakistan

Modernizing education in Pakistan is essential to equip future generations with the skills needed to compete in the global economy. The country's education system faces numerous challenges, including outdated curricula, lack of technological integration, limited access to quality education, and insufficient teacher training. Here's how Pakistan can transform its education system to meet 21st-century demands:

1. Curriculum Reform

- **Update Curriculum:** Align the curriculum with international standards by incorporating critical thinking, problem-solving, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), and digital literacy.
- **Vocational and Technical Education:** Introduce skill-based programs in schools to prepare students for various trades and careers.
- **Civic Education:** Include topics like climate change, human rights, financial literacy, and digital citizen-

- ship to make students more socially aware.

2. Technology Integration

- **Smart Classrooms:** Provide digital tools like tablets, projectors, and interactive boards in classrooms.
- **E-Learning Platforms:** Develop online learning portals offering free access to quality educational content, especially for remote areas.
- **Coding and Digital Skills:** Make coding and digital literacy a compulsory subject from primary school onwards.

3. Teacher Training and Development

- **Modern Training Programs:** Regular training workshops on the latest teaching methods, digital tools, and student-centric approaches.
- **Performance-Based Incentives:** Introduce merit-based promotions and performance bonuses for teachers.
- **Teacher Exchange Programs:** Partner with international institutions to offer global exposure to educators.

4. Public-Private Partnerships

- Collaborate with tech companies like Google, Microsoft, and local startups to provide free educational software and digital tools.

- Engage NGOs to improve literacy rates in underserved communities.

5. Inclusive Education

- Introduce special education programs for differently-abled students.
- Ensure gender equality by encouraging girls' education, especially in rural areas.
- Provide scholarships and free education programs for underprivileged children.

6. Higher Education and Research

- Establish more research and innovation centers at universities.
- Encourage university-industry linkages to promote entrepreneurship.
- Offer government grants for research projects in technology, agriculture, and climate change.

7. Education Governance

- Introduce digital attendance and performance tracking systems.
- Strengthen the role of School Management Committees (SMCs) in decision-making.
- Increase education spending to at least 4% of GDP — aligning with global benchmarks.

8. Promotion of Critical Thinking and Creativity

- Move away from rote memorization to inquiry-based learning.
- Incorporate arts, music, and sports as part of the core curriculum.

9. Global Collaboration

- Sign educational exchange agreements with top global institutions.
- Launch scholarship programs to send talented students abroad for higher studies.

10. Community Involvement

- Create Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) to bridge the gap between families and schools.
- Organize regular career counseling sessions and extracurricular activities.

Conclusion

Modernizing Pakistan's education system requires a holistic approach that combines technology, teacher training, updated curricula, and inclusivity. With the right policies, funding, and partnerships, Pakistan can create an education system that empowers its youth to compete on the global stage and drive the country's socio-economic development.

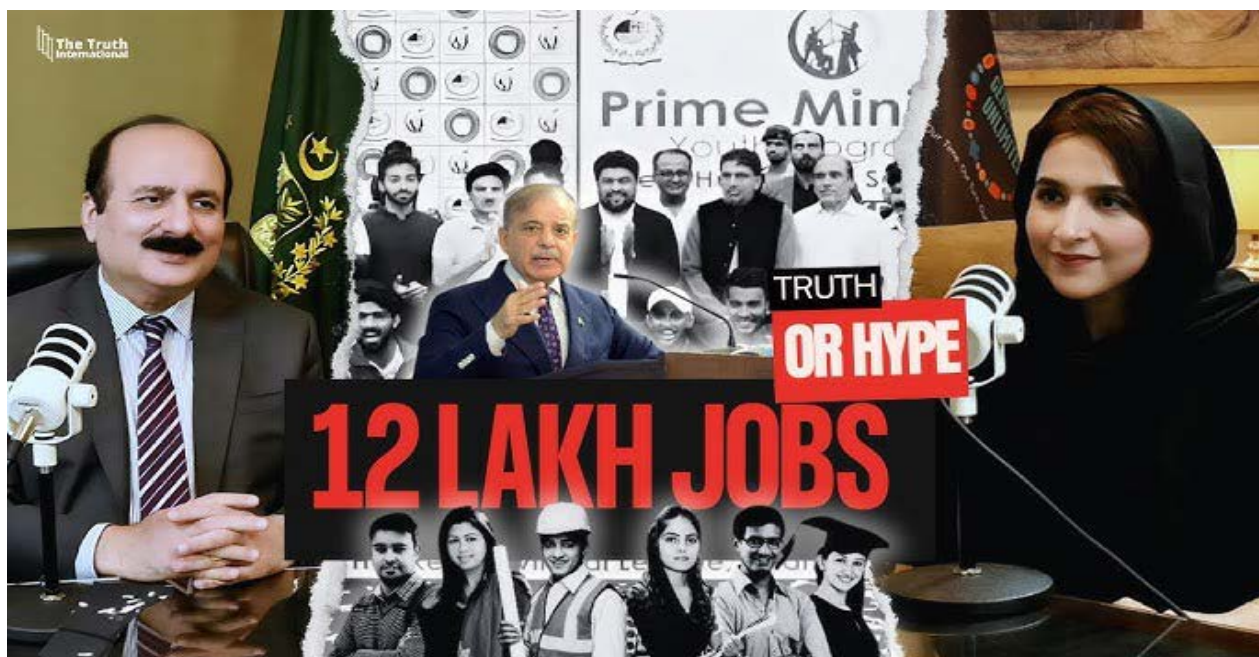
Would you like me to draft a comprehensive education policy proposal or a detailed action plan for education reform?



Empowering Pakistan's Future

An Exclusive Interview with Rana Mashood, Chairman of the Prime Minister's Youth Program

Part-I



By Saad Jadoon

In this exclusive interview (Part 1), we sat down with Rana Mashood, the dynamic Chairman of the PMYP, to discuss the program's groundbreaking initiatives, its vision for the future, and the challenges faced in bridging the gap between urban and rural youth. From the success of the Youth Business and Agriculture Loan Scheme to the launch of Pakistan's first Digital Youth Hub, Rana Mashood shares insights into how the government is working to unlock the potential of millions of young Pakistanis.

But this conversation goes beyond policies and programs. Rana Mashood, a seasoned politician and advocate for youth empowerment, opens up about his personal journey, the importance of merit and integrity in politics, and his vision for a Pakistan where every young person has the opportunity to thrive.

Whether you're a young Pakistani looking for opportunities, a policymaker seeking inspiration, or simply someone interested in the future of this

nation, this interview offers a deep dive into the strategies and stories shaping Pakistan's youth. Join us as we explore how the PMYP is turning challenges into opportunities and paving the way for a brighter tomorrow.

Rabia Hussain: Let's start with your politics, and then we'll move on to your personal life. Tell us if advocacy was your profession and how you entered politics.

Rana Mashood: Advocacy and politics go hand in hand. My father was also a lawyer and was actively involved in bar politics. He participated in national politics as well, and when the PNA (Pakistan National Alliance) was formed, he was the head of its legal committee. Later, he also served as the Secretary of the Muslim League in Punjab.

I grew up in a political environment, so you could say that politics was a natural path for me. However, I have always maintained an independent mindset. Coincidentally, my grandfa-

ther was also a member of the Kapurthala Legislative Assembly before independence. It was the circumstances and the events that unfolded that led me into politics.

Rabia Hussain: That's why I keep asking this question—how you were elected four times in a row. What is the secret behind it?

Rana Mashood: The secret behind this success, I believe, is that one must remain loyal to their party. No matter which party you belong to, you must remain sincere to it. This trend of frequently switching parties is not liked by the public.

Secondly, serving the people of your constituency. If Allah has given you the opportunity, serve the people as much as you can, because only Allah is the ultimate giver.

As for winning elections, people say that I plan extensively, but in reality, there is no special strategy. It is solely the prayers of the people and the

connection I have with them—Allah rewards that. This was the question about the strategy behind winning, and I've explained that it's only the prayers of the people and my relationship with them that are the real reasons.

Rabia Hussain: Alright, now regarding the Prime Minister's Youth Program, you are the Chairman; how did you reach this position? Was it your own choice, or were you given a responsibility that you accepted? What was the actual situation?

Rana Mashood: In 2006, when we were in the opposition and present in the assembly, we started working on youth-related initiatives on behalf of the party, and I was in charge of that program. Then, in 2008, when I became the Deputy Speaker, it was perhaps the first time that a Deputy Speaker was given the responsibility of four ministries simultaneously: Youth, Tourism, Sports, and Archaeology. Later, in 2013, when I became the Education Minister, those four departments remained with me, and extensive work was done on youth initiatives. We focused heavily on youth institutions. Pakistan's first youth policy, the Punjab Youth Policy, was launched by the then Chief Minister and current Prime Minister, Shahbaz Sharif.

We took many practical steps for the youth, such as:

- Laptop Scheme
- Scholarship Programs
- Interest-Free Loans
- Danish Schools

The first Technical Education University (Punjab Tianjin University of Technology)

We launched a massive movement for youth empowerment, positive youth engagement, and skill development. My entire life has been dedicated to working for the youth.

When Shahbaz Sharif became the Prime Minister, there was a lot of noise during the 2024 elections about Form 47 and Form 45, claiming that I had lost. However, according to the results I have, I won. My case is currently in the Election Tribunal, and Insha'Allah, the truth will come to light.

During this time, Shahbaz Sharif called me

and said, "You have spent your entire life working for the youth, and 62% of Pakistan's population consists of young people. We need to work for them, so come to Islamabad and work with me." That is why I joined him, attended his oath-taking ceremony, and took on the responsibilities as the Chairman of the Prime Minister's Youth Program. I am proud that we are introducing new programs for the youth with each passing day.

el seminars on youth and work on youth policy. Additionally, we are visiting all provincial assemblies, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Kashmir assemblies to ensure the youth agenda is harmonized at the national level. Since Pakistan's progress is linked to the progress of its youth, we are working on their empowerment and investment. We are aggressively bringing all provinces onto one platform to collectively address youth issues.



Rabia Hussain: You were previously working at the provincial level; now you are at the federal level. Do you think all provinces are working equally? And to what extent can you mobilize them?

Rana Mashood: After the 18th Amendment, youth and sports, in particular, became devolved subjects, meaning these matters now fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces, as does education. Therefore, the federal government no longer has the direct control it once had. However, if there is a will, the sky is the limit. We have engaged all provinces and are currently working on Pakistan's first National Youth and Adolescence Policy, which will include all provinces to create a unified youth agenda.

Our next step is to visit 25 major cities in Pakistan, where we will hold divisional-level

Rabia Hussain: You have taken many initiatives, but which one do you consider your best?

Rana Mashood: If I talk about the most significant initiative in the last 10 months, it would be that when the Commonwealth was established in 1948, Pakistan was one of its eight founding members. However, until last year, Pakistan had never been given the chairpersonship of the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Task Force. We opened those doors, and today, Pakistan is the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Task Force. Additionally, we established the Commonwealth Asia Youth Alliance, with its secretariat now in Pakistan.

What benefit did this bring? We opened doors for the youth of 56 countries, particularly strengthening ties with Asian nations in education, scholarships, employment, business, and trade.

We created Pakistan's first National Youth Council, comprising 100 young people (49 boys, 49 girls, and 2 transgender individuals) selected through a transparent process. We also included specially-abled individuals to ensure representation from all segments of society. Additionally, 13 Pakistani youth residing abroad were made part of the council. This National Youth Council has now become the Prime Minister's Youth Advisory Board.

Rana Mashood: This is not just about cricket; our potential has been neglected in every sport. Pakistan has immense talent among its youth, but they are not provided with opportunities. For example, look at Arshad Nadeem's success, who is shining Pakistan's name globally.

When I took charge, the Pakistan hockey team was in a bad state. There were two camps, and there was no clear direction for

some background. Pakistan had achieved independence from the IMF in 2016 during Nawaz Sharif's government. However, in 2018, when he was disqualified in a false case, the new government signed a strict agreement with the IMF. The conditions were so harsh that it felt like, "Out of the frying pan, into the fire." But if those conditions weren't met:

- The world would not have paid attention to Pakistan.
- Investments would not have come.
- The economy would have plunged further into crisis.

Pakistan was on the verge of default! However, we avoided external default by managing an internal default. As soon as the IMF agreement was signed, the world turned its attention back to Pakistan. Today, billions of dollars are being invested in Pakistan. This is not loans or charity but business-to-business deals and investments.

Why is the Digital Youth Hub necessary? Unemployment has become a major challenge in Pakistan. According to global standards, the unemployment rate should be between 4.2% and 4.6%. In Pakistan, it is much higher! That's why the Prime Minister has formed a special committee to address the unemployment issue, which I am heading. What are we doing?

- Bringing all provinces, ministries, and departments onto one platform.
- Connecting the private and public sectors.
- Building Pakistan's First Digital Youth Hub!

This will be one of the few unique digital platforms in the world, entirely based on artificial intelligence (AI). We are working day and night on this project, and today, I am sharing this news for the first time through you! This will be a revolutionary step, providing employment opportunities to the youth and improving the economy.

Prime Minister will inaugurate the Digital Youth Hub on the 24th of March. This project is being developed to provide employment and opportunities to the youth, whether in:

- The public sector



I am happy to share the news that the upcoming budget will be formulated after consultations with the members of the National Youth Council and all Pakistani youth. They will decide:

- What measures should be taken for education?
- How to increase employment opportunities?
- What steps are necessary for environmental improvement, sports, and recreation?

We have given this authority to the youth.

Rabia Hussain: Speaking of sports, Pakistani youth are quite concerned. The Champions Trophy came to Pakistan after 29 years, and our team was out in just 5 days. How do you see this?

participation in the Azlan Shah Cup. I met the team players, ensured merit-based selection, and sent the team to the Azlan Shah Cup after just 3 days of training. The result? After 12 years, Pakistan reached the final! This proves that our youth have talent; the problem lies in selection and facilities. The same issue exists in cricket.

What's the solution?

- Merit must be the top priority.
- Groups must be eliminated.
- Every player should be given equal opportunities.

Rabia Hussain: Pakistan is introducing the Prime Minister's Digital Youth Hub Initiative. What is it, and how will it work?

Rana Mashood: First, let me give you

- The private sector
- Within Pakistan Or abroad.

When we started connecting the missing links and improving these opportunities, I can confidently say today:

- Over 1.2 million youth have been provided dignified employment abroad.
- 600,000 to 800,000 youth have been employed within Pakistan.

Our goal is to increase this number to 3.5 million jobs annually. The Prime Minister himself has said that he will personally monitor this project every month to ensure its goals are met. This way, over 3.8 million youth will be employed annually without any recommendations.

Question: Are these projects just political slogans? What is the reason behind this?

Some people say that the Prime Minister's Youth Program (PMYP) is merely a political tactic and not sustainable. However, the reality is that the most significant initiatives for youth in Pakistan have been taken by the PML-N government. When I

took over this office, its structure was very weak, but today:

- Over 60 talented and capable youth have been recruited on merit.
- Separate teams have been formed for each project.

All our projects are not just talk but are working practically!

The most successful project is the Prime Minister's Youth Business and Agriculture Loan Scheme. Last year, we provided loans worth 100 billion rupees to young people to help them start their startups and businesses. These loans were distributed most transparently, resulting in:

- Growth in the cottage industry
- An increase in the number of freelancers
- Opportunities provided to youth through scholarships, incubation centers, and innovation awards
- Over 250,000 new jobs were created!

This year, we have a budget of over 150

billion rupees, and our goal is to create at least 400,000 more jobs.

Digital Youth Hub: A State-of-the-Art Project, this portal will be based on artificial intelligence (AI), where all opportunities for youth will be available in one place. Here:

- Innovation awards
- Incubation centers
- Support for startups
- Employment opportunities
- Opportunities for freelancers

Everything will be available in one place! Many young people who were previously left behind due to a lack of opportunities are now:

- Working in Silicon Valley
- Securing contracts with multinational companies
- Receiving million-dollar investments

These are not just claims but practical realities!





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