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Pakistani Media on the US-Israel War Against Iran: Part 1 – Strategic Anxieties and Regional Implications

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Abstract
As Iran's neighbour and with the second-largest Shia population in the world, Pakistan has not been able to escape the consequences of the US-Israel war against Iran. The conflict has impacted its economy and threatened domestic security as well. This *Issue Brief* examines how Pakistan's leading English and Urdu dailies portrayed the conflict and its consequences in its opening two weeks. The first in a three-part series, this article examines op-eds and editorials in the Pakistani press to argue that the coverage reveals deep strategic anxieties rooted in Pakistan's geographical proximity, Shia population, and nuclear status. Narratives of Muslim solidarity, regime change, and a perceived "Zionism-Hindutva" alliance reflect Islamabad's sense of being encircled and its struggle to balance competing regional powers.

Keywords: Iran; United States; Israel; West Asia; India; regional security; nuclear weapons; economic crisis; media narratives

The US-Israel attack on Iran has dominated global media discourse, including in Pakistan, which shares over 900 kilometres of border with Iran and is home to the world's second-largest Shia population. Understanding the Pakistani perspective is important not only for these geographic and demographic reasons, but because Pakistan is the only nuclear-armed country in the Muslim world and maintains a defence pact with Saudi Arabia, a regional rival to Iran that recently faced direct attacks from Tehran for hosting US bases. Tehran also reportedly acquired its initial nuclear weapon designs from Pakistan, an issue which is cited as one of the basic justifications for the US-Israeli Operation Epic Fury against Iran. This *Issue Brief* examines how the attack was covered and analysed in both English- and Urdu-language Pakistani newspapers in the first two weeks of the war while two subsequent *Issue Briefs* will examine the period between 14 March and 8 April 2026 when the temporary ceasefire came into effect looking respectively at the military, economic and political consequences for Pakistan and at Islamabad's role as a mediator between the US and Iran.

Leading Pakistani dailies such as *Daily Jang*, *Nawai Waqt*, Dawn, *Roznama Express*, *The Express Tribune* and *Daily Times* went beyond simply filing daily reports. Their editorial pages were dominated by broader observations and analysis about the war and its consequences for Pakistan, Muslim countries and for the rest of the world. Key themes that emerged from the discourse included the expansionist and hegemonic tendencies of Israel and the US, the fallacy of regime change in Iran, the so-called alliance between Zionism and Hindutva, the multi-front threat of encirclement facing Pakistan and the severe economic fallout of the conflict.

Assassination of the Supreme Leader

In the initial days, the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the first day of the attack was a centre point of media coverage. Several articles drew direct parallels between Khamenei and Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), presenting the incident through the spiritual and historical framework of Karbala. Several media immediately looked to historical and religious archetypes, framing the assassination through the lens of Karbala to galvanise public resentment against the US and Israel.

There were several articles which noted that the martyrdom of the Supreme Leader has united the Iranian nation in a single bond, and the flames of revenge have now intensified further.

Syeda Salma Tahir (*Daily Times*, March 7) argues that "in a world where Muslim leaders have, one by one, bent the knee to Western pressure... Khamenei stood apart. He stood upright. He refused to be bought, intimidated or silenced". Jawed Naqvi (*Dawn*, March 3) echoes a similar sentiment, saying that the leader has become "more powerful in death than in life," comparing him to "Banquo's ghost" because he chose to "die in harness at his office" rather than flee.

Sajjad Ahmed Rustamani (*Daily Times*, March 4) uses the metaphor of a "lone lion encircled by a pack of wolves," where the lion remains "wounded but defiant" against coordinated attacks. Meanwhile, Dr Saulat Nagi (*Daily Times*, March 6) describes the entire event as a byproduct of a crisis of hegemony. He also warns that this "adventure against Iran may open a Pandora's Box" leading to a "far greater catastrophe, perhaps even an eclipse of humanity from the face of the earth".

A common discourse across these op-eds suggested the attacks would unite Iranians as a nation, with even domestic opponents backing the regime during the crisis. Farmood Alam (*Daily Jang*, 10 March) observes that even "women who had removed their headscarves and taken to the streets against Khamenei are now clutching his photograph to their chests and weeping". Alam argues this reaction stemmed not from the religious leadership's success but the "stupidity committed by those who sponsor Reza Pahlavi," concluding that Khamenei will "remain a symbol of hatred against America for centuries to come".

The US-Israel Nexus, Expansionism, and the 'Regime Change' Fallacy

Another important theme which was debated in the Pakistani press was the true motives behind the war. The media frequently frames it as a blueprint for a "Greater Israel" rather than a campaign driven by non-proliferation concerns. Media articles pointed to a statement by U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee regarding Israel's biblical right to annex territory across West Asia as evidence. Abbas Nasir *in Dawn* (March 1) argues that the conflict's true intent is to ensure that Israel is "surrounded by compliant, friendly regimes with none having the military means to defy the apartheid state and question its occupation of Palestine and the genocide of the Palestinians." Nasir later expands on this (*Dawn*, March 8) and claims that the campaign's objectives remain deliberately obscured from the general public to facilitate Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's regional ambitions. This sentiment was echoed by Harlan Ullman in *Daily Times* (March 9), who warns of the dangerous precedent set by the US allowing "a foreign government to declare war on the part of America."

The pursuit of regime change in Iran was widely dismissed as a flawed Western fantasy that has no relation to historical realities. A *Daily Times* editorial (March 7) critiques this approach, saying that "Washington is once again pretending that a complex state can be broken, reordered and pacified by force from above." Analysts emphasise that the U.S. entered the conflict with a basic misunderstanding of the local people. Khurram Husain in *Dawn* (March 5) observes that Western leaders mistakenly believed "the local population will rise and finish the job by overthrowing the regime." Highlighting the structural depth of the Iranian state, Nusrat Javed in *Nawai Waqt* (March 3) remarks that "Iran is not Venezuela" because final authority rests in a deep-seated institutional process of religious

scholars rather than in a single leader. In his opinion, regime change is impossible without deploying troops on the ground.

Subsequently, several articles focus on how Iran's internal resilience caught its adversaries off guard. Kamran Yousaf in *The Express Tribune* (March 9) notes that despite the "decapitation of its top leadership," the state remained fully operational with a functioning wartime chain of command. This assessment of Iranian durability is corroborated by internal American data; Ansar Abbasi in *Daily Jang* (March 9) highlights a report from 18 U.S. intelligence agencies conceding that an air campaign alone could not trigger a domestic collapse.

The transition of leadership is viewed as Tehran's definitive message of continuity and defiance. Zahid Hussain in *Dawn* (March 11) explains that the appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei makes any hope of Iranian surrender highly unlikely, as "it is unimaginable that someone whose father, mother, wife, sister and son have been killed by the US and Israel would surrender to Trump's whims." Similarly, Nusrat Javed in *Nawai Waqt* (March 10) sees this transition as a spiritual commitment to resistance rather than a mere political shift, signalling a quest to "maintain Ali Khamenei's thinking" and face the conflict with courage rather than accept a humiliating defeat. Also, the discourse suggests the war is heavily driven by the financial incentives of the military-industrial complex, while Zarrar Khuhro in *Dawn* (March 9) concludes that for defence contractors, "war can result not in generational trauma, but generational wealth."

"The Ideological Twins": Zionism and Hindutva

Another focal point in the media coverage was Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel just before the US-Israeli strikes against Iran. Several Pakistani commentators interpret the visit not as a coincidence, but as evidence of a deeper geopolitical alignment of what they call a "Hindutva-Zionism nexus", claiming that they want to encircle Pakistan and neutralise Muslim solidarity. Writers even link the Pakistan-Afghanistan border clashes to a deliberate strategy by New Delhi to distract Islamabad while the US-Israel strikes on Iran unfolded.

Writing in *Daily Times* (March 1), Asif Mahmood characterises Zionism and Hindutva as "dangerous ideological twins". He argues that the strategic chemistry between Modi and Netanyahu poses a civilisational threat to the Muslim world since neither doctrine accepts regional coexistence, operating instead on "expansionist and occupation-driven" principles. *Nawai Waqt* (March 1) echoes this sentiment, framing both leaders as joint perpetrators of regional instability and human tragedy. The timing of Modi's visit also sparked speculation with Mirza Ishtiyaq Baig, writing in *Jang* (March 4), says that the trip just before the strikes against Iran was a coordinated plan "to keep Pakistan entangled on its western border through the Taliban so that Pakistan could not help Iran."

Former Pakistani ambassador Zamir Akram provides a structured geopolitical critique in *The Express Tribune* (March 10). He terms Netanyahu's proposed "Hexagon of Alliances" (that includes Israel, India, Greece, Cyprus, and some Arab/African countries) as a "hexagon of evil" designed for Indo-Israeli expansion. In the same publication, columnist Farrukh Khan Pitafi (March 14) argues that Modi's financial commitments during the visit "effectively unchained Israel from Washington's restraints." He says that the attack on Iran started within 40 hours of Modi's departure from Israel. Pitafi also took a psychological aim at Modi's rhetoric during the trip regarding "fatherland" and "motherland," taunting that "for a leader who hails from an ideological wellspring of unapologetic, misogynistic male

chauvinism... willingly bequeathing the 'father' role to another nation is a staggering psychological surrender."

The shift in India's traditionally balanced ties with Iran was widely condemned as a "strategic and moral catastrophe." Yasir Khan, in his article for *Daily Times* (March 5), claims that Modi's visit was not a coincidence but rather a coordinated move, adding that in Tehran's eyes, India now has "blood on its hands." This sense of betrayal was tied specifically to joint economic projects; as Rakhshanda Mehtab observes in *Daily Times* (March 9), New Delhi has "turned its back on Tehran and stabbed the hand that offered Chabahar."

The Economic Fallout: Pakistan's Exposure

Pakistani dailies expressed deep concern over the economic consequences, warning that financial instability could trigger domestic social unrest and security crises. They also discussed the fiscal pressure Islamabad was already facing. The potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial route for one-fifth of global oil supplies, was identified as the most immediate threat, exposing Pakistan's deep reliance on Gulf energy. Jawad Saleem, in his article in *Daily Times* (March 6), emphasises this vulnerability, saying that Pakistan "imports approximately 80 to 85 per cent of its petroleum needs and has limited strategic reserves that can sustain the economy for only a few weeks in the event of a prolonged supply disruption." Saleem argues the country's survival is linked to the geography it cannot control, saying "the lesson is painfully clear: as long as Pakistan's energy lifeline runs through a war zone, economic stability will remain hostage to events beyond its control," that means the economic model was "structurally vulnerable to external shocks originating far beyond its borders."

Some articles try to explain these geopolitical shocks as quantitative fiscal nightmares. Dr. Mirza Ikhtiar Baig (*Jang*, March 9) warns that if oil reaches $150 per barrel, "an increase in oil prices could raise Pakistan's annual import bill by billions of dollars, leading to a wider trade deficit, a decline in foreign exchange reserves, and further weakening of the Pakistani rupee." Media also highlight the threat to expatriate income. Baig notes that "millions of Pakistanis work in Gulf countries; economic slowdown due to tension in the region will affect employment opportunities, which may lead to a decrease in Pakistan's remittances." Sheeba Asad (*Daily Times*, March 11) gives a blunt calculation, observing that "analysts estimate a 30-40 percent disruption could reduce remittances by $500-700 million per month." She also cautions that the country "could face economic losses of nearly $3 billion per month."

Beyond macroeconomics, discourse focused on the immediate devastation for the common citizen. A *Daily Times* editorial (March 8) characterises domestic fuel price hikes as a "'petrol bomb' dropped on an already reeling public," terming the government's response as a betrayal. Mazhar Abbas (*Daily Jang*, March 11) echoes this sentiment, arguing the "economic devastation is clearly visible" and predicting that "the rulers will recover their 'tribute' from the public, so they have decided to squeeze the people dry..."

Expanding this perspective, Muhammad Akram Chaudhry (*Nawai Waqt*, March 1) predicts that in a global crisis, "developing countries will be the first to bear the shock." In another article, Chaudhry (*Nawai Waqt*, March 8) describes petrol as the lifeline of the modern industrial world, stressing the human cost, saying that for "countries like Pakistan, where millions already live near the poverty line, rising energy prices become a serious social issue. For a labourer surviving on daily wages, an increase in petrol prices is not merely an economic development, but a crisis affecting everyday life."

Regional Repercussions and Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma

Pakistani media also highlighted domestic unrest in Pakistan following the assassination of Khamenei, reporting 22 deaths, including ten protesters killed by U.S. security forces at the US consulate in Karachi. Reports criticised the broader Muslim Ummah's silence, warning that Gulf states risk severe economic destruction. Analysts related the conflict to Israeli expansionism with Muhammad Mehdi (*Daily Jang*, March 11) warning that Israel is advancing its expansionist agenda. There was consistent discussion across the media landscape about who could be the next target after Iran. Mirza Ishtiyaq Baig (*Daily Jang*, March 11) argues that "after Iran, Pakistan's nuclear program is now their real target" claiming that Pakistan's "nuclear weapons can reach Tel Aviv in just seven minutes." Uzma Gul (*Jang*, March 8) echoes a similar thought, saying, "if we go down, we will take half the world down with us."

Zulfiqar Cheema (*Roznama Express* 11 March) terms the dilemma faced by Pakistan as a 'tightrope' because Islamabad has positive relations with Iran and Gulf countries alike, and heavily relies on the $40 billion in foreign exchange, described as its economic 'lifeline,' sent by overseas Pakistanis working in the Gulf (primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE), meaning Islamabad cannot remain silent if these nations face an attack.

Several columnists see clashes between Afghanistan and Pakistan just before Israel and US attack on Iran as a distraction. Mirza Ikhtiar Baig (*Jang*, March 9) thinks that the attack on the Afghan border was aimed "to keep Pakistan engaged... so that it could not freely assist Iran." Muhammad Akram Chaudhry (*Nawai Waqt*, March 3) cautions that "the fire on one front can also heat up another".

Combining these geopolitical fears was the religious framing of the conflict; several articles warn that American and Israeli religious rhetoric risks a civilisational war. They also condemn the moral hypocrisy of Western action. Muna Khan (*Dawn*, March 8) argues, "you cannot bomb a civilian population into freedom... You cannot call it liberation when the liberated are not alive to receive it." Hamid Mir (*Jang*, March 9) thinks that "Trump's war benefits extremists on both sides." Apart from that, the media also debated Islamabad's balancing act. A *Daily Times* editorial (March 12) advises supporting Riyadh while using diplomacy to prevent regional expansion. This institutional caution is rooted in the toll of the War on Terror and the Pakistani parliament's choice in 2015 of neutrality in Yemen (*Daily Times*, March 3). Despite a recent Saudi defence pact placing Pakistan on a "tightrope," as noted by Muhammad Amir Rana in *Dawn* (March 8), Dr Shahid Raza (*Daily Times*, March 5) terms Islamabad's approach "survival-oriented statesmanship." T.M. Awan (*Nawai Waqt*, March 9) concludes that this balanced neutrality is a "long-term strategic necessity."

Conclusion

The portrayal of the US-Israel attack on Iran in leading Pakistani dailies reflects deep strategic, ideological and economic anxieties. It reflects that the media are not treating it as a distant war but as an existential threat to the country's security and domestic stability. The media consistently framed the conflict through a lens of extreme structural vulnerability, and their discourse was often emotional and speculative about the effects of this war on Pakistan, the West Asian region and the entire world.

Since Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei was assassinated in the initial days of the war, the media drew parallels between his assassination and Karbala. This framing sought to create wider solidarity with Iran rather than simply talk about the facts. Several articles and

editorials argued that the Supreme Leader's death would unify Iran, and the pursuit of regime change was widely dismissed as a flawed Western fantasy.

Pakistani analyses also linked the attack with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel and the recent Pakistan-Afghanistan border clashes and questioned the timing of both events. Many articles interpreted these events as coordinated manoeuvres and argued that these actions were designed to distract and trap Islamabad. The media viewed the Iran conflict as a proxy blueprint for Pakistan's ultimate isolation. This narrative reveals a deep fear of geographic and strategic encirclement, where conspiracy theories travel faster.

The analysis shows that the media heavily focused on the economic and political fallout of the conflict. It warned that regional instability would directly hit Pakistan's economy. The media projected that the devastating impact of rising oil prices and plummeting foreign remittances would expose a glaring national paradox. Pakistan projects immense pride as a nuclear-armed state, but the media discourse reveals that an economically paralysed nation can remain highly vulnerable to geopolitical events beyond its control.

The analysis of the first two weeks of war coverage highlights a severe domestic dilemma, where public sentiment demanded ideological unity with the broader Muslim world, but extreme economic fragility forced the state into a reluctant, survival-oriented neutrality. The media ultimately portrayed Pakistan not as a regional power shaper, but as a highly vulnerable bystander navigating an uncertain and hostile world.

Read Part 2.

Read Part 3.