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Pakistani Media on the US-Israel War Against Iran: Part 2 – War of Attrition and Domestic Consequences

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Abstract
This *Issue Brief*, the second in a three-part series, analyses how Pakistani media portrayed the US-Israeli war against Iran from 14 March to 8 April 2026, when a temporary ceasefire was first announced. Based on op-eds and editorials in two of the country's major dailies, *Dawn* in English and *Jang* in Urdu, it traces a shift from shock at the war to deep concern and pragmatic evaluation of the consequences for Pakistan of a prolonged war of attrition. It examines five themes – Iran's asymmetric resilience, the Gulf's shattered economic safe-haven myth, domestic macroeconomic shocks, humanitarian and environmental costs, and rising sectarian pressures. A running thread in media analyses was the stress on national unity to navigate the pressures created by the conflict.

Keywords: Iran; United States; West Asia; regional security; energy chokepoints; regime resilience; economic crisis; sectarianism; environmental damage; media narratives

The US- Israel war against Iran entered a different phase by mid-March 2026. The initial shock of the attacks, the assassination of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the possibility of a quick military outcome had shaped the first two weeks. By 14 March, the conflict had become more protracted and uncertain. Iran continued to absorb air strikes while maintaining its military response and control over the Strait of Hormuz. The war increasingly become one of attrition with wider regional consequences.

Pakistani media coverage changed accordingly. The initial discourse was shaped by shock, grief and speculation but as the war continued and its direct consequences began to be felt at home, economic disruption, rising fuel prices, threats to maritime trade and growing regional insecurity received greater attention. Editorial and opinion pieces moved towards a more pragmatic assessment of the conflict and its implications for Pakistan which was taking place on the ground in real time.

This *Issue Brief* is the second in a three-part series. While the first examined how Pakistani media framed the conflict in its opening fortnight, this examines the period from 14 March until 8 April 2026 when the temporary ceasefire came into effect. The analysis focuses on five themes – asymmetric warfare, chokepoint geopolitics and the changing security environment in the Gulf, economic consequences for Pakistan, humanitarian and environmental costs, and internal security and sectarian cohesion.

The analysis draws on editorials and opinion pieces from *Dawn* and *Jang*. *Dawn* is Pakistan's oldest English-language newspaper and is influential among the country's policy and diplomatic circles while *Jang* is Pakistan's largest circulating Urdu daily and reaches a broad mass readership. Thus, together, they represent two important strands of Pakistani public discourse. The focus on editorials and opinion pieces is intentional because they reveal not only how events were reported but also how they were interpreted and judged.

Strategic Stalemate and Asymmetric Resilience

The Pakistani media portrays the war as a strategic stalemate where overwhelming American and Israeli military superiority failed to secure decisive political gains. Consequently, Iran's survival has emerged as the primary measure of strategic success. Abbas Nasir argues that Tehran only needed to "survive to claim the upper hand." This assessment is explicitly echoed by Maleeha Lodhi, who notes Iran could win "by not losing," and Hafizullah Niazi, who asserts "Iran cannot lose this war because its survival is at stake." Similarly, Sarwat Jamal Asmai observes that the expected regime change "has no signs of happening anytime soon". The main view thus is that Iran may suffer extensive destruction without accepting defeat.

This interpretation belongs to an approach to the war as a war of attrition or *jang-e-istinzaf*. Azam Malik and Ayub Malik note that Tehran prepared for a prolonged conflict rather than a decisive victory, systematically targeting regional defences to keep the enemy under continuous pressure. Similarly, Lodhi describes the American strategy as an "escalation trap" giving "diminishing returns". The war is thus framed as a contest of endurance rather than conventional superiority.

Geography and underground infrastructure are presented as crucial assets. Nasir notes that Iran adopted the "North Vietnamese playbook" by moving its warfare capacity underground. Ayub Malik similarly details how missile systems and drone factories are shielded in tunnels hundreds of metres beneath the mountains. This spatial advantage is weaponised through extreme economic asymmetry, with media highlighting how Iranian drones costing a few hundred dollars exhaust American missiles worth millions. Niazi accurately summarises this dynamic saying "America came for a conventional war; Iran, with great skill, turned it into a war of nerves, economics and time".

The failure of the decapitation strategy reinforces this narrative. A *Dawn* editorial warns that assassinating senior leaders risks producing "a new crop of even more hard-line and ideologically driven" generals. Usman Bhatti observes that "a new leadership emerged within days and the state structure remained completely intact".

Iranian resilience is attributed to nationalism and historical memory. Lodhi calls nationalism "arguably the most important weapon" against external aggression, while Hamid Mir invokes Karbala, arguing that sacrifice gives "a new life to the nation". Mansoor Afaq describes Iran as a civilisational story of patience and resistance. By early April, this analytical convergence became explicit, with Lodhi concluding that the United States is increasingly "mired in a no-win war".

Chokepoint Geopolitics and the Shattered Gulf "Safe-Haven" Myth

The Strait of Hormuz has been presented as more than a routine maritime passage, treating it instead as a strategic chokepoint whose disruption can paralyse global energy markets and the wider international system. Azam Malik describes it as "extremely important for the world's oil supply" and warns that any disruption could push oil prices to "extraordinary" levels. Mirza Ishtiaq Baig argues that the Strait of Hormuz is "not merely a sea passage but the lifeline of the global economy." He adds that any crisis there "does not remain merely a regional conflict but directly affects global politics, energy supplies and the international economy." Mansoor Afaq reinforces this, describing Hormuz as a route for the world's economy where, when it becomes unsafe, "not only do ships stop, but the world's movement comes to a halt."

The importance of Hormuz is linked to the changing security environment of the Gulf. Rafia Zakaria argues that the war has challenged the assumption that some Gulf cities could

remain insulated from regional conflict, saying that “the myths of who is safe, who is right, who is a friend or foe have altered”. She warns that the costs of the war are likely to fall on places that once believed themselves “above the squabbles and wars of the region”. This directly challenges the image of the Gulf as a protected economic space. Tariq Khosa states the outcome bluntly, arguing that “the bubble of secure investment havens in the Gulf has burst”.

A major driver of this vulnerability is the presence of American military bases. Suhail Warraich calls these bases a “torment,” a sentiment echoed by Mahmood Sham who questions why Washington failed to defend its host nations. Amar Jaleel also connects Iranian attacks on Arab states with the presence of American military facilities. He argues that the “secret has been revealed” because American forces were using bases in Arab countries to attack Iran. Mahir Ali presents a more cautious version of the same concern. He notes that while Gulf governments declared that their territories would not be used against Iran, they must understand why hosting “vast American military bases” makes them vulnerable to retaliation.

Therefore, American security umbrella is viewed with heavy scepticism. Maleeha Lodhi argues that Gulf states were confronted with the “practical value” of this umbrella once they faced Iranian retaliation. Defence cooperation with Washington, she says, had paradoxically “endangered them” rather than simply protecting them. This reality prompted notable diplomatic caution, visible in Saudi Arabia’s decision not to allow its territory to be used against Iran. Khalil Ahmed Nainitalwala describes Riyadh’s declaration as an important development, noting that Iran welcomed the position as a sign of greater unity among Muslim countries.

Furthermore, Western unity fractured during this war. Mirza Ishtiaq Baig notes that Britain, Australia, Japan, Germany and other NATO countries rejected the American president’s appeal for help in reopening Hormuz, saying that “this is not our war”. A *Dawn* editorial similarly highlights the deep reluctance of European governments to become directly involved in the military effort.

By late March, Pakistani media increasingly framed Hormuz as Tehran’s primary strategic leverage, noting the difficulty of converting American military superiority into a decisive outcome. Hafizullah Niazi writes that “the Strait of Hormuz is by no means closed; rather, it is under Iran’s control”. Hamid Mir similarly observes that closing the Strait of Hormuz created a global oil crisis that deeply damaged America’s reputation as a superpower. Hammad Ghaznavi takes this argument further by focusing on what the United States failed to achieve. He writes that despite “a month of continuous brutal bombardment,” America had been unable to “end Iran’s control over the Strait of Hormuz” or protect its military bases and allies in the region.

There also warnings that Gulf vulnerability extends far beyond oil terminals. F.S. Aijazuddin cautions that regional states rely on over 400 coastal desalination plants that remain exposed to strikes. The maritime confrontation also endangered Iran’s own primary export hub. Luqman Asad identifies Kharg Island as the “artery” of Iran’s economic system and warns of the wider consequences of confrontation there. However, Maleeha Lodhi cautions that an attempt to seize Kharg or other Iranian islands would be “the road to ruin” because it could expose American forces without guaranteeing a decisive result.

Domestic Economic Shockwave and Macroeconomic Strain

The war triggered an immediate economic shock in Pakistan, transmitting external geopolitical volatility directly into domestic inflation. Mushtaq Ahmed Qureshi describes this dynamic as a "distant war, nearby shock". Although Pakistan is "not directly involved in this war," he notes the disruption quickly manifested in the immediate increase in petrol and diesel prices, affecting the country "at the economic, security and diplomatic levels."

This energy vulnerability is deeply structural. Ishrat Husain explains Pakistan's vulnerability by noting that the country produces only "about one out of every 10 barrels of oil it consumes." With international oil prices around $100 per barrel, he estimated that the petroleum import bill could increase by "$3-4 billion over the year", placing further pressure on the trade deficit and foreign-exchange reserves. Mohamed Yahya similarly argues that "energy security is now national security for Pakistan." He points out that Pakistan spent about $12.1 billion on petroleum imports between July and March of FY2025, while LNG also remained an important part of the country's energy mix. Consequently, external maritime disruptions instantly threaten Pakistan's foreign-exchange reserves and trade deficit.

The macroeconomic strain was exacerbated by a severe lack of strategic buffers. Muhammad Khan Abro writes that the country's existing oil stocks could last only "a few weeks," arguing for strategic reserves sufficient for 60 days. The shortage of reserves made the external shock harder to manage and increased the pressure for rapid price adjustments. Furthermore, a *Dawn* editorial warns that disruption in West Asian fertiliser supplies could increase agricultural costs and reduce availability during critical sowing periods, creating another way the conflict could affect food prices.

This shock rapidly moved from the energy sector into everyday household budgets. Public and goods transport operators increased fares by "20 to 40 percent" after the rise in petroleum prices. Khaleel Ahmed Nainitalwala describes this sudden surge during Ramadan as a new "storm of inflation". To manage the crisis, the government implemented strict measures. Rafia Zakaria writes that the state was forced to hike fuel prices and shorten school schedules, ensuring the public directly felt "the bill that the US-Israel war on Iran has handed them". Shahid Hussain Bukhari adds that the state relied on reduced working days, temporary school closures, austerity measures and energy conservation to prevent total systemic collapse.

However, the state's capacity to shield the public remained severely constrained. Khurram Husain highlights that Islamabad's "fiscal envelope is too weak to carry the burden of fuel price subsidies for very long." After holding prices steady briefly, he says the government had to deliver "another major jolt to the people" in order to avoid "derailing its fiscal framework altogether."

Beyond fuel, Pakistan faced acute exposure through remittances. Mirza Ikhtiar Baig notes that around five million Pakistanis live in Gulf countries and that roughly half of Pakistan's remittances come from Gulf states. Baig warns that regional instability was already causing Pakistani workers to return home and could, therefore, reduce remittance inflows, threatening to cripple a vital economic lifeline.

Pakistan's media also presented the war not as a foreign crisis, but as an amplifier of the country's pre-existing structural flaws. *Dawn* mainly explains the consequences through structural dependence on imported energy, weak fiscal space and exposure to Gulf energy and remittance flows, while *Jang* gives greater attention to the immediate experience of the crisis – higher fares, inflation, limited reserves, possible profiteering and public anger. As Mazhar Abbas puts it, Pakistan has been burdened by decades of debt and poor policy, and questions why the consequences of "our failures and corruption, commissions and flawed policies" should be placed on the public.

Humanitarian Toll, Civilian Carnage, Environmental Destruction and Societal Cost

Pakistani media extensively documented the severe humanitarian and environmental costs of the war. Coverage quickly moved beyond the initial shock of the catastrophic Minab school attack to reveal a systemic pattern of civilian destruction. *Dawn* reports the displacement of between 600,000 and one million Iranian households, noting that urban families were forced to flee to rural areas because "relief cannot resolve a crisis created by war". Muhammad Naveed Nawaz says that the US and Israel executed approximately 15,000 attacks on more than 150 Iranian cities and towns. He notes these strikes killed around 2,000 Iranians, including nearly 170 schoolgirls, while systematically destroying the country's infrastructure.

They also criticised that way the civilian suffering was represented in Western media. Muna Khan observes that while Ukrainian civilians were humanised with "names, neighbourhoods, professions", Iranian civilians were reduced to a mere "backdrop". Calling out the BBC for leading its coverage with the killing of three American soldiers on the same day that 165 Iranian schoolgirls were also killed, she concludes that this hierarchy "was not incidental. It was editorial." Khan also challenges sanitised terms like "transform Iran", arguing that under international law, the precise term is "aggression".

Ahmer Bilal Soofi writes that the attacks targeted "protected persons, civilian infrastructure, political leadership, a girls' school... factories, nuclear facilities, civilian apartment buildings" and other sites. Citing the Iranian Red Crescent, he notes the destruction of over 85,000 civilian units, stressing that violations by one side do not remove the other's obligations under humanitarian law. Zahid Hussain adds that at least 30 Iranian universities and numerous scholars were directly targeted, actions he explicitly categorises as "war crimes" that violate international law. Naseer Memon applies the same legal framework to basic services, warning that striking water desalination plants "is no less than a war crime". Because these plants supply 90 per cent of the region's water, he argues their destruction could be "worse than the consequences of blasting oil stocks".

Media analyses also highlight the irreversible ecological and developmental costs of the war. Huma Yusuf describes the conflict as "environcide" noting that bombing Iran's fuel depots produced five million tonnes of carbon dioxide in just 14 days, triggering acid rain and prompting Pakistan's Meteorological Department to warn of worsening air quality in its western provinces. Dr Habibul Haq argues that while economic damage may eventually be repaired, environmental destruction will require "several decades" for recovery. He describes how toxic soot, heavy metals, and massive coastal oil leaks are devastating marine life and clogging clean-water facilities.

This structural violence also ensures generational trauma. Huma Yusuf stresses that the humanitarian toll extends far beyond immediate casualties. She warns that "missed vaccinations are but one consequence for children raised amidst conflict. Malnourishment, birth defects due to war-linked pollution, disrupted schooling, long-term mental health challenges" will inflict lasting developmental damage on children long after the conflict ends.

Internal Security, Sectarian Cohesion and Strategic Pressure

The war's consequences for Pakistan's internal security and social cohesion were increasingly discussed. The coverage shows that the conflict is deeply intertwined with

sectarian sensitivities, cross-border militancy and profound concerns over Pakistan's broader strategic position. The discussion extended far beyond Pakistan's relationship with Iran, focusing heavily on how the regional conflict could destabilise social cohesion and security within the country.

A recurring concern was the possibility that the conflict could reinforce sectarian divisions. Pir Farooq Bahawal Haq Shah acknowledges that Pakistan's Shia community has a "deep emotional attachment" to Iran and that the 1979 Iranian Revolution gave many Shias "a new identity". However, he draws a distinction between emotional attachment to Iran and political violence inside Pakistan, arguing that "love for Iran, or any other country, has its place, but Pakistan must remain our first and last priority". He further argues that support for violence and attacks on Pakistani institutions cannot be justified. Jawed Naqvi complements this by challenging the tendency to frame the conflict through religious divisions. He writes: "Shia-Sunni. Arab-Persian. Jew-Muslim. Christian-Muslim. These are false binaries being thrown into the mix in the context of the war on Iran", arguing that such binaries obscure the deeper geopolitical roots of the confrontation.

To manage these sectarian tensions, media closely followed state engagement with religious leadership. On the Pakistan Army chief's meeting with Shia ulema, Haq Shah notes that the meeting came against the backdrop of "rising regional tensions, emotional attachment to Iran, and the unfortunate incidents in Skardu and Karachi"[i]. It describes the meeting as highly significant because "if timely guidance had not been provided, the situation could have become even more complicated". Irfan Athar Qazi makes a similar appeal, arguing that with the armed forces engaged on several fronts, "interfaith unity and solidarity are the most important need of the hour". Khaleel Ahmed Nainitalwala also warns that "adding fuel to sectarian divisions in the present circumstances is equivalent to strengthening the objectives of hostile forces".

Analysts also question whether appeals to a wider Muslim unity could themselves simplify the political realities of the region. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar argues that "many well-meaning people in Pakistan and beyond continue to insist on projecting the idea of a 'Muslim ummah' that doesn't actually exist in practice". In his opinion, this romanticisation provides material for "clash of civilisations" narratives that ultimately benefit political leaders in the US, Israel and authoritarian rulers within Muslim countries.

The war also generated intense concern about Pakistan's strategic exposure to major powers. Hamid Mir argues that Washington is actively attempting to pressure Pakistan over its missile programme, asserting that "it is clearly visible that the Trump administration wants to use Pakistan against Iran". F.S. Aijazuddin raises a related concern by recalling a reported US list of countries targeted for regime change and asks, "Is Pakistan the next lamb?" He also describes Trump as having "pitted Muslims against Muslims", presenting the conflict as a situation in which divisions among regional actors are exploited to trigger wider strategic consequences.

Syed Zia Abbas presents Pakistan's position as a state squeezed by multiple simultaneous pressures, arguing that the country faces Afghanistan on one side, India on another, an unfavourable domestic political environment, and the need to avoid becoming involved in another conflict. In his words, "Pakistan must maintain political, regional and economic balance so that it can avoid becoming entangled in any conflict." This concern over being pulled into the war is also visible in the repeated emphasis on national unity and political stability. Ahmed Waqas Riaz argues that difficult circumstances require "trust and cooperation between the government and the people", because national unity is the ultimate shield when dealing with a crisis.

Conclusion

The coverage of the US-Israel war against Iran from mid-March to early April shows a clear shift in the Pakistani media narrative. During the first two weeks of the conflict, the media largely focused on ideological and emotional themes. The war was presented through shock, grief and ideological confrontation. At the same time, much of the early discussion was necessarily speculative. The conflict had just begun, and its military, economic and political consequences were still uncertain. In the following weeks, the coverage became more grounded in the concrete effects of the conflict.

The media increasingly portrayed the conflict as a war of attrition. Iran's ability to absorb attacks challenged the expectation of a quick military victory. Focusing asymmetric warfare, analysts noted that superior military technology did not produce a decisive political outcome. The longer the war continued, the more difficult it became also to separate military superiority from political success. This was presented as one of the central failures of the US-Israeli campaign.

The war also exposed the fragility of the regional security order. The Strait of Hormuz became a major concern. Gulf states could no longer be treated as insulated from the conflict. Unlike some of the early predictions, the economic consequences were no longer speculative. Fuel prices rose in Pakistan, markets faced uncertainty and the effects of the conflict became visible in everyday life. The destruction of civilian infrastructure added another dimension as Pakistani media increasingly questioned the human and environmental costs of a war that was producing no clear political settlement.

The coverage also brought the conflict closer to Pakistan's domestic politics. Sectarian tensions, cross-border militancy and economic pressure became major concerns. Pakistani media repeatedly stressed the need to prevent the Iran conflict from creating a new internal divide. *Jang* placed greater emphasis on religious solidarity, national unity and the emotional connection of Pakistani Shias with Iran. *Dawn* was more cautious about religious explanations. It questioned Shia-Sunni and Arab-Persian binaries and focused more on the political nature of the conflict. Thus, the differences between the two newspapers were mainly differences in style and approach rather than position. *Dawn* provided the analytical and structural argument; *Jang* provided the moral and emotional one. Yet, both newspapers reached the same basic conclusion. Pakistan needed internal cohesion to manage the external crisis.

Read Part 1.

Read Part 3.

ENDNOTE

[i] Protests erupted across Pakistan as the news of assassination of Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei broke. In Skardu in Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan, demonstrators attacked government buildings and torched local UN offices. Clashes with security forces left 14 dead, including one security personnel. In Karachi, protesters stormed the US Consulate General and breached the compound perimeter, setting fire to police posts and vehicles. Security guards and police opened fire, killing 10 protesters and injuring over 60 (Ali 2026; Bukhari and Sayeed 2026).

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