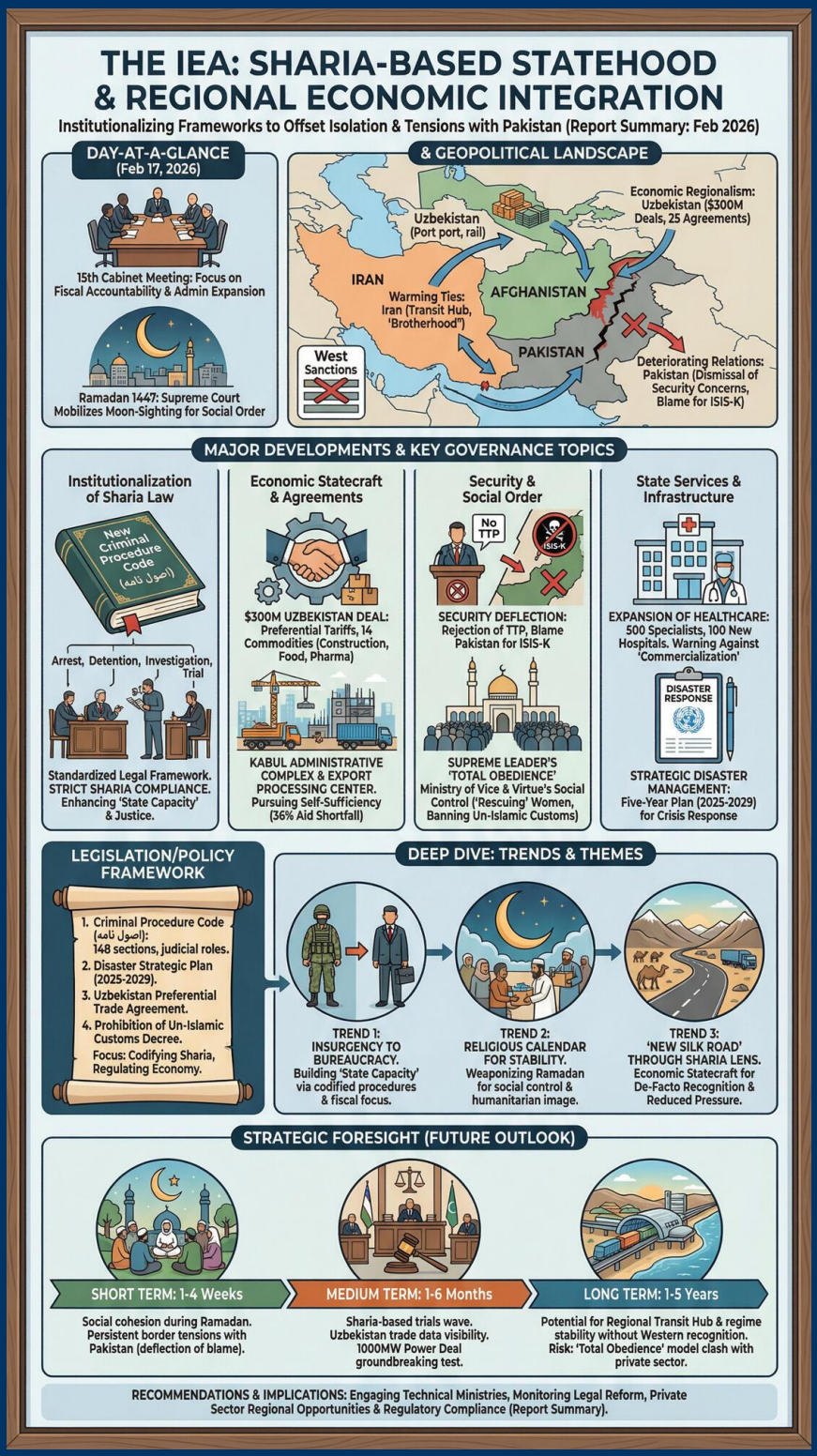
TODAY'S MEDIA TRENDS

RTANEWS

FEBRUARY 17, 2026

THE GDELT PROJECT



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THE TALIBAN ADMINISTRATION IS INSTITUTIONALIZING SHARIA-BASED LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND PURSUING REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION TO OFFSET INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION AND ESCALATING TENSIONS WITH PAKISTAN.

DAY-AT-A-GLANCE

On February 17, 2026, the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) demonstrated a concerted effort to transition from a revolutionary movement to a structured state through high-level governance meetings, the promulgation of comprehensive legal codes, and significant regional trade initiatives. The 15th Cabinet meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, focused heavily on fiscal accountability, specifically central and provincial non-tax revenues, and the expansion of administrative infrastructure in Kabul (Source, Source). Simultaneously, the IEA is leveraging the commencement of Ramadan 1447 to reinforce social order and religious legitimacy, with the Supreme Court mobilizing moon-sighting committees across all 34 provinces (Source, Source).

Geopolitically, the IEA is navigating a complex regional landscape characterized by warming ties with Iran and Uzbekistan alongside deteriorating relations with Pakistan. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian’s rhetoric of "brotherhood" and regional connectivity suggests a strategic alignment aimed at creating a transit hub that bypasses Western-led sanctions (Source, Source). The signing of 25 trade agreements worth $300 million with Uzbekistan highlights a shift toward economic regionalism (Source, Source). Conversely, the IEA’s aggressive dismissal of Pakistani security concerns—blaming Islamabad's "ISIS-supporting" policies for domestic attacks—signals a hardening stance on the Durand Line and a refusal to compromise on the presence of militant groups (Source).

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

- **Institutionalization of Sharia Law:** The IEA officially published a new Criminal Procedure Code (اصول نامه) in the official gazette. This code details the stages of arrest, detention, initial investigation, and trial, aiming to provide a uniform legal framework based strictly on Sharia to enhance "state capacity" and public perception of justice (Source, Source, Source).
- **Major Economic Agreements with Uzbekistan:** A high-level trade forum resulted in $300 million in deals across construction, food, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals. This includes preferential tariffs on 14 key commodities, marking a significant step in the IEA's "Economic Statecraft" (Source, Source, Source).

- **Security Deflection and Tensions with Pakistan:** Spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid rejected claims of TTP presence in Afghanistan, instead accusing Pakistan of fostering ISIS-K. The IEA also released three Pakistani soldiers to a Saudi Arabian delegation as a "gesture of mercy" for Ramadan, subtly utilizing Saudi influence to bypass direct bilateral talks with Islamabad (Source, Source, Source).
- **Expansion of State Healthcare and Infrastructure:** The Ministry of Public Health announced the graduation of 500 medical specialists and the procurement of 100 new district-level hospitals. Officials warned against the "commercialization" of medicine, emphasizing a state-led social welfare model (Source, Source, Source).
- **Strategic Disaster Management Planning:** The National Disaster Management Authority unveiled a five-year strategic plan (2025-2029) developed in coordination with international organizations. This plan seeks to standardize responses to Afghanistan's chronic environmental crises, such as earthquakes and floods (Source, Source, Source).

KEY GOVERNANCE TOPICS

Geopolitics and Regional Diplomacy: The IEA is actively courting "non-Western" partners. Iran's President Pezeshkian emphasized that Iran views Afghanistan as a "brother," advocating for the development of the Chabahar port and rail links as vital for both nations' economies (Source, Source). Belarus also entered the fray, with its Deputy Foreign Minister meeting IEA officials to discuss exporting agricultural and industrial equipment (Source, Source). Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) held a "Contact Group" meeting, reinforcing the consensus that Afghanistan must be integrated into regional security and transit corridors despite the lack of formal recognition (Source, Source).

Domestic Stability and Social Order: The Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, held a massive gathering in Kandahar with scholars and officials, emphasizing that "obedience" (اطاعت) is the bedrock of the Islamic system. He urged scholars to root out "customs of jahiliyyah" (pre-Islamic ignorance) and ensure the populace follows Sharia strictly (Source, Source). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Vice and Virtue reported "rescuing" 12 women from domestic violence across six provinces, attempting to showcase a Sharia-compliant protection mechanism for women (Source, Source).

Economic Statecraft and Trade: The IEA is aggressively pursuing self-sufficiency. Beyond the Uzbekistan deal, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce received 100 acres of land in Kabul's Qasaba area for a "standard export processing center" (Source, Source). However, the Minister of Economy noted a significant shortfall in international aid, stating only 36% of the required $2.4 billion budget for 2025 was received, necessitating a shift toward private sector stimulation (Source, Source).

Legislation and Policy:

- **New Criminal Procedure Code (اصول نامه):** A comprehensive document defining the legal process from arrest to sentencing. It emphasizes Sharia compliance and seeks to reduce corruption within the judiciary by standardizing procedures (Source, Source).

- **Ramadan Price Control and Ethics Policy:** The Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Commerce issued directives to stabilize prices and ensure "medical ethics" are not compromised by profit-seeking during the holy month (Source, Source).
- **Anti-Narcotics Coordination:** The Ministry of Interior met with tribal elders to coordinate the enforcement of the ban on poppy cultivation and the arrest of drug traffickers, framing narcotics as a "central nervous system" threat to the Islamic social fabric (Source, Source, Source).

LEGISLATION/POLICY

The IEA's legislative focus has shifted toward codifying Sharia into state law and regulating the economy through trade-specific agreements. The most significant move is the formalization of the Criminal Procedure Code, which aims to provide a "golden era" of judicial clarity based on the Quran and Sunnah.

BILLS/LAWS DISCUSSED:

- **Criminal Procedure Code (اصول نامه):** Defines legal roles for the Ministry of Interior and Judiciary; outlines 148 sections covering investigation, detention, and trial procedures (Source, Source, Source).
- **Five-Year Strategic Disaster Plan (2025-2029):** A policy framework for managing natural disasters, involving coordination with the UN and international NGOs (Source, Source).
- **Preferential Trade Agreement with Uzbekistan:** Lowers tariffs on 14 specific goods (8 Afghan exports, 6 Uzbek imports) to stimulate cross-border commerce (Source, Source).
- **Prohibition of Un-Islamic Customs Decree:** A directive from the Supreme Leader aimed at abolishing local customs deemed contrary to Sharia (Source, Source).

HEARINGS & PRESS EVENTS:

- **15th Cabinet Meeting:** Reviewed quarterly fiscal reports and approved the Kabul Administrative Complex project (Source, Source).
- **Kandahar Scholars Assembly:** Address by the Supreme Leader on the importance of "Total Obedience" and state-building (Source, Source).
- **Afghan-Uzbek Trade Forum in Kabul:** Attended by Minister of Industry and Commerce and the Governor of Uzbekistan’s Sirdaryo region (Source, Source).
- **Medical Specialist Graduation Ceremony:** Minister of Public Health warned doctors to separate "trade from medicine" (Source, Source).

DEEP DIVE: TRENDS AND THEMES

Transitioning from Insurgency to Bureaucracy: The focus on "non-tax revenue" and quarterly fiscal reports indicates the IEA is attempting to build a self-sustaining state budget independent of foreign aid. By codifying criminal procedures, they are moving away from ad-hoc commanders' justice toward a centralized, albeit strict, judicial system. This institutionalization is essential for the "State Capacity" needed to manage large-scale projects like the 1000MW power deal with Azizi Energy (Source, Source, Source).

Weaponizing Religious Calendar for Social Stability: The IEA is using Ramadan as a vehicle for both humanitarian distribution and

social control. The release of Pakistani prisoners and the distribution of aid to 1,200 families in Parwan (Source) are framed as acts of "Islamic mercy," while the Supreme Court's moon-sighting mandate serves to unify the country under a single religious authority, suppressing sectarian or local variations (Source, Source).

The "New Silk Road" through a Sharia Lens: The rhetoric from the Uzbekistan and Iran meetings suggests a developing "Resistance Economy" bloc. By focusing on transit (Chabahar port, rail links to Uzbekistan and Belarus), the IEA aims to make Afghanistan indispensable to the regional economy. This "Economic Statecraft" is their primary tool for de-facto recognition. If Uzbekistan and Iran rely on Afghan transit corridors, the pressure for political concessions (e.g., on women's education or inclusive government) diminishes (Source, Source, Source).

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Short Term (1-4 Weeks): Expect heightened social cohesion and relative domestic peace during Ramadan, bolstered by state-led food distributions and religious programming. However, border tensions with Pakistan are likely to remain high as the IEA continues to deflect blame for TTP/ISIS activity, potentially leading to sporadic border closures or skirmishes (Source, Source, Source).

Medium Term (1-6 Months): The implementation of the new Criminal Procedure Code will likely result in a wave of standardized Sharia-based trials. Internationally, the Uzbekistan trade deals will start showing in customs revenue data. Watch for the 1000MW power project to break ground, which will be a litmus test for the IEA's ability to manage large-scale foreign investment and critical infrastructure (Source, Source, Source).

Long Term (1-5 Years): If the IEA successfully establishes Afghanistan as a regional transit hub (linking Central Asia to the Indian Ocean via Iran), they could achieve long-term regime stability without Western recognition. The primary risk remains internal: the "Total Obedience" model demanded by the Supreme Leader may eventually clash with the pragmatic needs of the urban technical class and the private sector (Source, Source).

RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLICATIONS

For International Policy:

- **Security Awareness:** The IEA's overt hostility toward Pakistan's security narrative suggests that counter-terrorism cooperation with the West or Islamabad is unlikely. Regional intelligence should focus on the burgeoning ISIS-K vs. Taliban rift as the primary driver of instability (Source).
- **Engaging with Technical Ministries:** The success of the Five-Year Disaster Strategic Plan indicates that technical, non-political engagement (e.g., on climate and health) remains the only viable path for international influence (Source).
- **Monitoring Legal Reform:** The new Criminal Procedure Code provides a baseline for monitoring human rights and judicial standards, even within a Sharia framework (Source).

For Private Sector/Investors:

- **Regional Opportunities:** Investors from neighboring states (Uzbekistan, Iran, UAE) are securing first-mover advantages in energy and transit. Western-linked firms face significant regulatory and reputational risks but may find opportunities in sub-contracting for regional hubs (Source, Source).
- **Regulatory Compliance:** Any business operation in Afghanistan must now navigate the newly codified Criminal Procedure Code and increasingly strict "medical ethics" and "commercialization" bans in the social sectors (Source, Source).
- **Supply Chain Resilience:** The ban on Pakistani pharmaceutical imports (Source) and the shift toward Iranian/Uzbekistani/Indian alternatives signal a permanent realignment of Afghan supply chains away from Pakistan (Source, Source).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Today's Media Trends is a public interest experiment in applying deep thematic trend analysis to television news coverage from around the world to explore how responsibly applied advanced AI can help journalists and scholars better understand the overarching trends, themes and patterns of our global world.

No data is used to train or tune any AI model.

Each morning, in collaboration with the Internet Archive's TV News Archive, we apply Google's Gemini 3 to deeply examine yesterday's coverage from each television news channel to tease out the overarching themes and trends of its news coverage into a richly annotated thematic analysis. Each high-level insight is connected back to the original broadcast, allowing journalists and scholars to understand the dominate themes and trends and instantly click out to the underlying sources for details.

By helping journalists and scholars see the broader trends and patterns of global news coverage, this analysis helps them identify relevant stories and coverage they might not otherwise have encountered and uncover connections, emphases and narrative shifts that enable more comprehensive reporting and deeper, evidence-based research.

This report is entirely machine generated using Gemini 3 and may include errors and omissions. Please verify all findings. No data is used to train or tune any AI model.

For questions or suggestions, please contact kalev.leetaru5@gmail.com. You can also learn more about the GDELT Project at https://blog.gdeltproject.org/ and the Internet Archive's TV News Archive at https://archive.org/details/tv.