

AZERBAIJAN



Mr. Vusal Karimli

*Chief Executive Officer at Gamepons Incubator
Next Step Innovation Center*

Vusal Karimli is a leading ecosystem builder and pioneer in Azerbaijan's startup landscape. With over a decade of experience in startups and innovation, he has been instrumental in shaping the country's entrepreneurial ecosystem. After spending three years in Seville, working within Spain's vibrant startup scene, Vusal returned to Azerbaijan and became a key figure in founding several innovation hubs.

He played a vital role in developing programs and mentoring startups at Next Step Innovation Center, Azerbaijan's first startup incubator, and SUP VC, the nation's first startup accelerator. As the CEO of SUP VC, he also helped establish INNOLAND Incubation and Acceleration Center, Azerbaijan's first Public-Private Partnership model, which significantly strengthened the local innovation ecosystem.

Currently, Vusal is building Gamepons, the first game incubator in the Caucasus region, continuing his commitment to fostering and accelerating startup growth across various sectors.



Mr. Jamil Huseynzade

*Co-founder & Editor-in-Chief at Tech.az Media
Next Step Innovation Center*

Jamil Huseynzade was born in 1998. He graduated from Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University in 2020. From that year, he started working as an Innovation project manager at SUP VC, Azerbaijan's first startup accelerator and corporate innovation company. While working at SUP VC, he implemented projects for the development of startups in different regions of Azerbaijan. During this period, he saw the gap in the ecosystem and founded Tech.az, the country's largest innovation media, together with his partners in 2022. Since 2024, he has left his job at SUP VC and has been fully focused on Tech.az Media. Jamil is currently engaged in collecting and publishing data in the innovation ecosystem. It builds the development of the ecosystem by bringing innovations in this field to a large audience.

Tech.az Media publish innovation news from that region and news broadcast in different countries of the world. Thus, it develops and informs the regional innovation community.

Currently, the media is the largest innovative media in Azerbaijan. Tech.az Media publishes innovation news from Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkey. Also, Tech.az Media has a special audience from Korea, America, England, and Germany. Tech.az Media publishes news in Azerbaijani and English.

Tech.az Media was chosen as "Technology Media of the Year" in 2023.



Mr. Mammad Karimov

*Managing Partner
Caucasus Ventures*

Mammad Karim is a seasoned entrepreneur and dedicated investor and currently serves as the General Partner of Caucasus Ventures, the pioneering investment fund focused on early-stage start-ups in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Turkey. His diverse and expansive personal portfolio spans across various countries, including Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Singapore, Estonia, Germany, the United States, and the UAE.

In addition to his role as an investor, Mr. Karim has been a catalyst for local startup growth. He previously led an accelerator and incubation program in Azerbaijan, actively assisting startups in their expansion to international markets. Beyond his current investments, he has made significant contributions to the global startup ecosystem through frequent visits to Silicon Valley. His engagement in the Valley involves not only bringing investors to the region but also actively investing in promising ventures, further solidifying his commitment to fostering innovation on a global scale. As a bridge between different startup ecosystems, Mr. Karim plays a vital role in connecting opportunities between the vibrant tech landscape of Silicon Valley and the burgeoning entrepreneurial scenes in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Turkey.



Ms. Alya Abbaszada
Executive Director
Technovate-Sabah Angel Investors Club

Alya Abbaszada is the Executive Director of Technovate-Sabah Angel Investors Club, with 6 years of experience in IT project management and 3 years in the startup and investment ecosystem. She has led numerous projects, events and is committed to making a positive impact in the startup and investment ecosystem. As a proud advocate for women in tech, she is dedicated to supporting and empowering women in the industry.



Mr. Ziyadkhan Khankishizade
Fundraising and Investor Relations Manager
Technovate Investment LLC

Ziyadkhan Khankishizade is an accomplished professional in business development, investment management, and venture relations. He holds degrees in International Studies, Business Administration (minor) from ADA University, and Education and Human development from George Washington University. As Fundraising and Investor Relations Manager at Technovate Investments, LLC, he manages investor relationships and supports global startups by connecting them with new investors and representing them at major events. Previously, he worked for Ministry of Science and Education and the Technovate-SABAH Angel Investors Club. As an executive director of the Club, Ziyadkhan developed the local investment ecosystem by connecting Azerbaijani investors with global startups and organized the Angel Investors School for training prospective investors.

KAZAKHSTAN



Ms. Zulfiya Aitkali
Project Manager
Astana Venture Club

Zulfiya Aitkali is a skilled project manager with extensive experience in supporting startups and fostering investor relationships. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Humanities from the Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages and a Master's degree in Social Sciences from Astana International University.

Currently, as a Project Manager at Astana Venture Club, Zulfiya focuses on coordinating initiatives aimed at supporting entrepreneurs by organizing pitch sessions, securing investments from business angels and venture funds, and

developing educational programs for startups. Her work includes analyzing venture market trends and representing the organization at key industry events.

Previously, she worked at Bolashak Corporate Fund, managing projects such as "Every Child Deserves School," supporting children with developmental disabilities, and "Travel Grants," which provided financial support for talented youth to participate in international competitions. Zulfiya's background reflects her dedication to enhancing Kazakhstan's entrepreneurial ecosystem and social development initiatives.



Mr. Uakhat Bastimiyev
Chief Executive Officer
Verigram

Uakhat Bastimiyev is a Co-Founder and CEO of Verigram, an AI-powered company that provides eKYC/biometric verification solutions to various businesses across Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

Uakhat drives the company's strategy and sales functions and works on expanding Verigram's business to new markets.

Verigram specializes in neural networks and computer vision, so Uakhat's particular focus is on implementation of AI-powered solutions. Before founding Verigram, Uakhat worked for 10+ years in the development and delivery of corporate IT projects within such companies as Kazzinc, Altynalmas, Lanit-Tercom and others.

Has extensive experience in software development, project management and IT advisory.

Has particular experience in IT transformation programs in the mining and transportation industries as well as the experience of implementation of AI solutions in the fintech and retail sectors.

Obtained his Master's degree in Software Engineering from Saint Petersburg State University.

Briefly about Verigram

Verigram is a Kazakhstani technology company. Since 2017, it has been developing AI-based engineering solutions in the fields of security, analytics, and customer experience. Our algorithms undergo regular testing at NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology in the US): we rank in the Top 3 out of 250 providers worldwide.

Verigram is an official vendor of the National Bank of Kazakhstan. A resident of Astana Hub. The company's solutions are currently provided in the markets of Southeast Asia and Central Asia.



Mr. Chingiz Kenshimov
Chief Technology Officer
Verigram

Chingiz Kenshimov is a Co-Founder of Verigram, an AI-powered company that provides eKYC/biometric verification solutions to various businesses across Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

As Verigram is actively pursuing plans for geographical expansion, Chingiz's main focus is on supporting international pilots from a technical perspective. He is responsible for adapting Verigram's services and solutions to the realities and needs of foreign markets, clients, and users.

As the Technical Director of Verigram, Chingiz is also responsible for the technical implementation of projects at the company's head office in Kazakhstan.

Chingiz holds a programming background, having studied at one of the leading universities in England, Imperial College London, specializing in artificial intelligence. Prior to Verigram, he was involved in another startup related to computer vision.

In addition to his business activities, he is also engaged in scientific work at the Institute of Information and Computational Technologies in Almaty. In the past, Chingiz has undertaken various technological projects for ABY Applied Systems, Samruk-Kazyna JSC, Corporate University "Samruk-Kazyna," among others.

Possesses extensive experience working with computer vision technologies, machine learning, and software development.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Ms. Romanna Dada
Shark @ Shark Tank Pakistan
Managing Partner- Vitality Capital



Romanna is a Forbes featured entrepreneur and Venture capital veteran. Romanna has founded and exited a number of startups whilst investing across a portfolio and advising regional governments and corporates on their venture capital and innovation strategy.

She is the founder of Vitality Capital and Women Collective, the first investor platform democratizing access to the highest yielding asset classes, a Shark at Shark Tank Pakistan, prior to this she was a Head of Ventures at PwC Middle East.

PAKISTAN

Ms. Shaza Fatima Khawaja
Minister
Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication



Shaza Fatima Khawaja is the Minister of State for IT & Telecommunications and core member of Prime Minister's economic team.

Ms. Khawaja is currently leading country's digitization and E-Governance Plan being the Minister of State for IT & Telecom. She is also leading country's IT export growth Plan to reach the mark of USD 25 billion in next 5 years. Through prioritizing Digital Governance and country's tech sector branding internationally, she is leading Digital Pakistan and Techdestination Pakistan campaigns. Currently, major reforms for Telecom Sector and IT Sector, led by her office, are underway to attract Foreign Direct Investment in the country and to showcase Pakistan as next Tech Destination in Global arena.



Ms. Samar Ihsan
Additional Secretary
Ministry of Economic Affairs

Ms Samar Ihsan is a senior civil servant (BS 21) with 30 years of government service. She passed her Central Superior Services (CSS) exam in 1994 and belongs to the Secretariat Group. She has an MSc in Development Studies from the University of Reading, UK. and MA French from Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.

Presently she is serving as Additional Secretary at the Ministry of Economic Affairs where she supervises matters pertaining to Asian Development Bank, United Nations' agencies, Paris Club Countries as well as NGOs/INGOs. Prior to this, she has served in the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Water & Power, Cabinet Division and Ministry of Women Development on senior positions. Besides serving in the Federal Secretariat, she has also worked in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as Social Counsellor and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a Gender Specialist.

She has represented Pakistan at a number of International Conferences, Seminars and Meetings and has presented papers and reports. Through her expertise and experience in International Development issues and economic diplomacy, she has led many Pakistan delegations to negotiate several donor funded projects as well as WTO Trade Agreements.



Mr. Saeed Ashraf Siddiqi
Joint Secretary (ADB) / CAREC NFP
Economic Affairs Division
Ministry of Economic Affairs

Saeed Ashraf Siddiqi is a senior member of the Civil Service of Pakistan and an accomplished development practitioner with over 27 years of diverse and enriched experience in areas of public policy, development assistance, governance, climate change, strategic planning, program design and implementation.

Saeed has a master's degree in 'Governance and development management' from the University of Birmingham, U.K., a post graduate diploma in 'Development Studies' from the Institute of Developing Economies, Chiba, Japan and a master's degree in English with distinction from the University of Punjab.

Saeed joined the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1996. His vast experience ranges from managing foreign aided projects during his stints in the Economic Affairs Division to designing and implementing projects for the rehabilitation of the earthquake affected people during his stint in the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA); from representing Pakistan at various international forums while working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to developing and managing the Democracy and Governance program while working as Senior Governance Advisor for USAID/Pakistan. He has also successfully steered a large USAID funded program as Chief of Party.

Saeed is currently working as Joint Secretary (ADB) at the Economic Affairs Division and also as National Focal Person for the CAREC Program. He has attended numerous international courses and conferences; and produced several research-based papers during his career.



Mr. Muhammad Bilal Abbasi
General Manager
IGNITE National Technology Fund

Muhammad Bilal Abbasi is an esteemed leader in Pakistan's IT sector, serving as the General Manager at Ignite National Technology Fund. With a rich background in technology and management, he has led significant initiatives to bolster Pakistan's startup ecosystem. His strategic vision focuses on innovation, indigenization in technology, and building a vibrant entrepreneurial culture, making substantial contributions to advancing Pakistan's digital landscape.



Mr. Faisal Aftab
Chief Executive Officer
Zayn VC

Faisal Aftab is a Pakistani-American who is a notable and respected figure in Pakistan's thriving tech industry, boasting an impressive 25-year career as an executive, entrepreneur, and venture investor. He is also a Shark in the Pakistan edition of the television show Shark Tank. He is a graduate of Oxford University.

His investment philosophy is centered on technological shifts that are driven by the complex interplay of global macroeconomic and geopolitical factors, along with the transformative potential of cutting-edge technologies such as blockchain and artificial intelligence. He was an early investor in both Bitcoin and Ethereum, recognizing their potential as digital commodities before many others.

Faisal has established two leading venture capital firms in Pakistan and has a proven track record of successful investments. His portfolio companies have raised over \$500m in Debt & Equity Funding. As the Founder, CEO and General Partner of Zayn VC, he is well-positioned to continue driving Pakistan's tech sector forward, fostering innovation, and attracting both local and international investors.

Some of Faisal's notable investments include Haball, NayaPay, PostEX, Krave Mart, Abhi Finance, AdalFi, KTrade, Laam.pk, Bookme.pk, Roomy.pk, EduFi, Bazaar-tech, SnappRetail, GrocerApp, Truck It In, Savyour, Bagallery, Trellis Housing Finance, Tazah, Zaraye, and Colabs.



Ms. Rohma Labeeb
Country Director
Accelerate Prosperity

Accelerate Prosperity- A Global Initiative of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)

Rohma is currently leading the Accelerate Prosperity Pakistan team to foster entrepreneurship and innovation across the country. Her work at Accelerate Prosperity has also entailed establishing blended learning systems for cross-border learning, as well as strategizing data-driven programs and innovative financing mechanisms for high growth and impact potential businesses. Through her previous work, Rohma has supported over 300 businesses in their growth journey, designed bespoke entrepreneur-focused programs and created strategies for support organizations in similar emerging markets. She has also had the opportunity to lead sustainability efforts within various grassroots level organizations in the country. Rohma holds a Master's in Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship from the London School of Economics and a BBA from the University of Toronto.

Linked: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rohmalabeeb/>



Mr. Naveed Iftikhar
Founder
Atomcamp

Naveed Iftikhar is the founder of atomcamp, a Data Science and AI training startup. He has been performing leadership roles to deliver data and AI solutions to national and international companies, governments and cities. He has delivered several executive trainings and taught at renowned business schools in Pakistan like IBA Karachi, KSBL and SDSB, LUMS. Naveed has also developed data-based policies and solutions for federal and provincial governments in Pakistan as a technical expert with the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and UNDP.

He holds an M.Phil in Economics and PhD in public policy with a focus on technology, cities and entrepreneurship.



Mr. Fasieh Mehta
Director
Epic Games

Muhammad Fasieh Mehta is a versatile leader with over 20 years of experience, spanning startup ecosystem development, digital transformation, and the creative tech industry. Fasieh co-founded Plan9, Pakistan's first government-backed incubator, and played a pivotal role in elevating the National Incubation Center to new heights. He has worked closely with founders, incubators, and accelerators across global ecosystems, from Southeast Asia to Silicon Valley. In addition to his work in startups, Fasieh has led digital transformation initiatives in government and, for the past four years, has been driving innovation with game and animation studios.



Mr. Shayan Yar
Founder and CEO
OVentures

Shayan Yar is an exited entrepreneur and innovation leader with a passion for driving positive change across borders. As the founder of OVentures, he empowers businesses and startups to thrive through a unique blend of innovation consulting, ecosystem building, and policy advocacy.

He has been a part of impactful initiatives like DigiSkills and award-winning Sohni Dharti Climateers campaign. Beyond Pakistan, Shayan co-founded the Sustainable Universities Network (SUN) in Australia and has worked on projects impacting diverse sectors globally. He brings a wealth of international experience and a commitment to solving complex challenges to the stage.

CAREC UNIVERSITY STARTUP GENERATOR 2024 (USG2024) WINNERS



Ms. Shahma Aroob
CEO
Filtresha

I'm Shahma Aroob, a 3rd-year biotechnology student at Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi, with a deep interest in research and innovation. I founded Filtresha, a startup that transforms poultry feathers into eco-friendly filter paper. My leadership experience began in secondary school, where I led project teams and completed leadership courses. Alongside my academic pursuits, I've excelled in sports, karate, and won numerous debate and quiz competitions. With strong public speaking skills, I've also earned 1st place in the CAREC Program '24 and the 'Built By Her 5.0' competition.



Ms. Abeer Rizwan
CEO
Genesis (Nature-Nest)

Abeer Rizwan, a Human Development Student from the College of Home Economics and Management Sciences, is a public diplomacy intern and public speaking coach with national recognition. She was a top contender at the CAREC Generation Startup Competition 2024 and has represented Pakistan in prestigious international speaking events. Passionate about social change, Abeer has led initiatives for underprivileged education and presented research on women's wellbeing. Currently, spearheading Nurture Nest, a child development app aimed at supporting parents in Pakistan.



Ms. Anika Ikram
CEO
Louq

I'm Anika Ikram, a business student who belongs to Hunza with a strong passion for sustainable startups. I'm dedicated to creating impactful solutions that focus on reducing environmental harm through innovative ventures. My work centers around promoting sustainability, empowering women, and driving positive change through entrepreneurship.

CAREC INSTITUTE



Dr. Ghulam Samad
Chief Research Division
CAREC Institute

Dr. Ghulam Samad is a Chief of Research Division at the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Institute, ADB. Before joining CAREC Institute, Dr. Samad was a Senior Research Economist at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives. Dr. Samad also served as an Economist at the Planning Commission of Pakistan. Dr. Samad holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Colorado State University, USA. He brings together an experience spanning over 20 years of high-level research and teaching and providing valuable contributions to peer-reviewed national and international journals and several international books on key economic themes. As a consultant, Dr. Samad worked for the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), and the UN World Intellectual Property Organization (WTO).

ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK



Ms. Lyaziza Sabyrova,
Regional Head
Regional Cooperation and Integration, Central and West Asia Department
Asian Development Bank
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Lyaziza Sabyrova leads the regional cooperation and integration team in the Central and West Asia Department of the Asian Development Bank. It includes the Secretariat for the Central Asia Regional Cooperation (CAREC) Program.

After obtaining her PhD degree in Economics from Indiana University (Bloomington, IN, USA), Lyaziza joined ADB in 2000. She worked on infrastructure projects in the People's Republic of China, and in Central Asia and South Caucasus regions. She was posted in ADB's Resident Mission in the Kyrgyz Republic from 2006-2008. In the following three years, she was on a special leave from the ADB, during which she was a Deputy Director of an independent private economic think tank in Kazakhstan, the RAKURS Center for Economic Analysis. More recently, she led the preparations of ADB's Country Partnership Strategies for several Central Asian and South Caucasus countries, steered the work of the CAREC Institute, and was involved in the Department's analytical work and knowledge management.

Mr. Khalid Umar
Regional Cooperation Specialist,
Regional Cooperation and Integration, Central and West Asia Department
Asian Development Bank
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Mr. Khalid Umar is a Regional Cooperation Specialist at the Central and West Asia Department (CWRD) of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Manila, Philippines. In his current role, he supports One-ADB project teams to strengthen the regional dimension of projects, CAREC Program's development effectiveness report (DEFr), organization of high-level events, digitalization initiatives under Digital Strategy 2030, serves as country focal for Pakistan on regional cooperation and integration (RCI) and leads the technical assistance on capital markets development in the CAREC region. Before his current role, Khalid worked with CAREC Institute, Urumqi, the PRC, for over seven years in

multiple capacities and roles, including formulating long-term strategies and operational plans and coordinating the flagship think tank development forum as chief of the strategic planning division. His professional interests include strategic planning, economic policy, regional cooperation and integration (RCI), financial inclusion, digitalization, and climate change.

Earlier in his career as a civil servant, he worked in various departments in the government of Pakistan, including the Prime Minister's office and the office of the Auditor General of Pakistan, on multiple assignments in economic policy and public financial management. Before joining the civil service, Khalid worked in the NGO sector in Pakistan.

Khalid is a Fulbright Scholar with an MA degree in International Economics and Finance from Brandeis University, USA, and another master's degree in economics from Quaid-e-Azam University, Pakistan. He attended two online courses, disruptive strategy, and strategic management, at Harvard Business School and Wharton Business School, respectively.



Mr. Nasruminallah Mian

Operations Planning & Team Lead Digital Transformation

ADB Resident Mission in Pakistan

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Nasr is leading business planning and Digital/ICT sector at ADB Pakistan Office. He is from the 23rd Common Civil Service (IRS) and has also worked with the private sector before joining ADB.

Nasr has a Management degree from The Australian National University (ANU), an MS, and LLB from Pakistan.



Mr. Naveed Durrani

Team Lead, Digital TA

Asian Development Bank

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For over 15 years as a consultant, Naveed has focused on fostering cross-border collaboration and driving digital transformation among diverse stakeholders from the public and private sectors. Throughout this time, Naveed has played a pivotal role in connecting entrepreneurs, investors, government bodies, and corporate entities, facilitating partnerships, and developing strategic initiatives that advance innovation and bridge ecosystems across borders, ensuring startups can leverage global opportunities and succeed in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

In the past four years, Naveed has worked as a senior consultant with the Asian Development Bank, leading a team of five influential consultants and driving the digital transformation of the CAREC Region. In this role, Naveed works with regional stakeholders to promote startup ecosystem development and regional collaboration, further advancing the goals of digital innovation and sustainable economic growth across the region.



Mr. Muhammad Muddassir Naveed

*Technical Assistance Coordinator, Digital TA
Asian Development Bank
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Muddassir is a skilled professional with over eight years of expertise in consultancy, project management, and business operations in sectors such as international development, banking and telecommunications. Currently, he serves as a **Technical Assistance Coordinator at the Asian Development Bank (ADB)**, where he leads key initiatives, including managing the **TA-6602 project for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) region**. His efforts focus on promoting digitalization and supporting start-ups across 11 countries. Muddassir's strengths include **strategic planning, financial analysis, stakeholder engagement, and cross-cultural collaboration**.

Additionally, his tenure at **Ufone Pakistan Telecom Mobile Limited (PTML)** and **App in Snap Private Limited** further refined his abilities in **business operations, team leadership, and customer service management**, contributing to organizational growth and operational excellence. With a proven track record of working in dynamic environments and managing high-impact projects, Muddassir brings a blend of innovation, adaptability, and a strategic mindset to all his roles.



Mr. Asmat Ullah Kakar

*CAREC Regional Cooperation Coordinator
ADB Resident Mission in Pakistan*

Mr. Asmat Ullah Kakar is a development professional with seven years of experience in overseeing projects related to human development, information technology, investment climate enhancement, and regional cooperation. He holds a degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science and is currently serving as the Regional Cooperation Coordinator at the Asian Development Bank.



Mr. Wasif Mullick

CAREC Advisor to the NFP in Pakistan

Wasif Mullick is a seasoned expert and strategic advisor with a strong background in regional cooperation and economic development, particularly within the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program. Currently an Advisor to the NFP in Pakistan with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), he is skilled in designing strategies that promote regional integration, infrastructure development, and innovative financing solutions. As a founding team member of the Center for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP), the country's leading policy think tank, he also conducted multi-year research on interdisciplinary public policy issues. Wasif specializes in fostering collaborations between governments, the private sector, and development partners, leveraging emerging technologies and sustainable practices to drive impactful, multi-country initiatives.



Mr. Shahab Ud Din Mirza
CAREC Web Administrator
Asian Development Bank

Shahab is an experienced IT professional with over 8 years of expertise in Web Administration and Technical Support. He is currently working as a Web Administrator for the CAREC Program at the Asian Development Bank. Shahab holds a bachelor's degree in Computer Science and has previously worked with organizations such as Alight International and the Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education. His key areas of focus include web development, web administration, IT support, and digital communications.