



## Borders Divide: Fencing the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border and the Question of Political Identity of Mohmand Tribe

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Safder Nisar \*

Syed Sami Raza †

**Abstract:** *In the northwestern borderland of Pakistan, there live several tribes. Mohmand tribe is one of them, and it lives in the north of this borderland. The tribe is administratively divided into a district (formerly tribal agency) named Mohmand in Pakistan and the province of Nangahar in Afghanistan. For a long time, even when the international border existed, the tribal people did not face many hurdles to moving across the border. In this way, they kept their ethnic and political identity as one people. In 2017 when the government of Pakistan decided to fence the border, especially in the wake of cross-border terrorism, the tribesmen began to face a number of challenges, including one about their political identity. They have been indirectly made to question whether they are Pakistani people or Afghani, both on individual and collective levels.*

**Key Words:** Border Divide, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mohmand Tribe, Nangahar, Political

### Introduction

In 2017, the Pakistan government took a decision to fence the 2,611-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan. This project costs billions of rupees, and the main aim of border fencing is to stop the infiltration of terrorists, illegal movements and drug trafficking of others from across the border (Yousaf, 2021). Pakistan-Afghanistan border fencing commenced from high threat zones like Bajaur and Mohmand agencies along the international border. Apart from fencing the border, the Pakistan Army and the Frontier Corps (FC) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also constructed new forts and border posts to improve security and defence. More than 1000 border posts and forts were constructed, and another Sixty three posts and forts remain under construction. The border fencing project also involves the installation and use of a radar system, sensors, and high-end scrutiny gears to monitor cross-border movements.

It needs to be mentioned that the borderland that is being fenced is inhabited by

several Pashtun tribes such as Mohmand, Wazir, Safi, Shinwari, Afridis, Bangash, Kakar, and so forth. The mountainscape of the borderland is such that there doesn't exist any natural border that could divide the tribes. However, for the purposes of the territorial state, especially during the colonial time when the state project was initiated by the British in India as well as Afghanistan and also due to the imperatives of the Great Game, the British drew an artificial border in this borderland called Durand Line. It splits mountains and valleys that are otherwise contiguous. The tribal people living on the borderland also got divided by the Durand Line. These tribal people on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border are linked socially and culturally. They are connected through intermarriages and codes of cultural and ethnic relations called Pakhtunwali. They have, however, treated the border as a soft border, porous and flexible to their movement. The Pashtun tribes are deeply attached to their borderland. Not only because they have lived here for centuries but also

\* Political Science, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

† Political Science, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. Email: [samiraza@uop.edu.pk](mailto:samiraza@uop.edu.pk) (Corresponding Author)

because they have defended it for a long time from foreign invaders. On the other hand, because the economy of these mostly dry mountain ranges has been poor, the foreign and even local invaders would not take much interest in staying here for long. It is in the backdrop of the Great Game and the strategic interest that these mountain ranges offered that the British got interested in settling them. Free movement of the tribesmen has existed across the border as a traditional way for a long time. The people would cross the border on a daily basis, and neither during colonial or post-colonial times was it hampered. The people do not think of it as a close border but as a larger community.

The borderland has recently been a scene of insecurity, violence and disagreement. There has been fighting and conflict going on for more than two decades. The history can be further extended to the 1980s Afghan War when the borderland region became the foreground of the battle. Then in the 1990s, the Taliban infiltrated the region to fight against the government in Afghanistan. With the War on Terrorism once again, the border is in the fire of war and violence. These wars have uprooted people several times, and they have changed their settlements. However, because the region is largely Pakhtun, they kept thinking that they were still in their homeland.

### Concept of the Border in the Contemporary World

Borders are established to distinguish who and what belongs by creating the representative other, an identity that lies in opposition to what the state warrants itself and its people as (Edelen, 2016). Simply, a border is a line separating two political or geographical areas, especially countries. Borders are geographic boundaries of political entities, such as governmental and sovereign states. Borders are established through agreements between governmental states to control those areas; the creation of these areas is called boundary delimitation. There are two types of borders that are State internal administrative borders (provincial borders), which are often open, and people easily cross these provincial borders without any checking of legal documents or visa documents. Other borders which are between states are partially or fully controlled

by border security personals can be crossed legally only at designated border checkpoints. The latter type of border requires legal passports, visas and other identity documents for cross-border movements.

Border studies have reclaimed their position in geography, geopolitics, anthropology, public policy and other social sciences in the 1990s (Newman, 2006). The researcher in the post-modern world made borders a widespread research topic, not only in geopolitics or geography but also in other social sciences. The emergence of border studies can be found in geopolitical changes, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US-Mexico Borderlands and the globalisation phenomena to strengthen the economy. In addition, the 9/11 attacks on the US made border studies related to security concerns a prominent theme worldwide.

In Geopolitics, borders are understood as an empirical manifestation of the political process. The border is treated as a base to territorialise the political and administrative territory. It means that a border is a spatial strategy for controlling individuals as well as resources within a country's territory. The border becomes state policy to control or protect state interests and the mobility of citizens. (Brambilla, 2015; Parker, 2012; Salter, 2012) Today, the function and form (structure) of the border has become too complex and hybrid. Nowadays, the new concept 'bordering' is also used by some authors. These authors, specially Nira Yuval Davis, Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy, argue that the "concept of bordering can be useful for many others interested in the workings of current border politics." The core argument explained by these authors is that "borders and bordering move to the centre of political and social life. They redefine notions of citizenship, identity and belonging for both hegemonic and racialised minorities" (Pettersson, 2021). The soft border concept reveals that some border management or governance has shifted from soft border to hard border concept. By applying the literature review method, it explains that the Pak-Afghan border governance paradigm has shifted from a soft to hard border paradigm (by putting military force on border regulation) in recent years.

This change has a significant impact on managing border areas in the country.

## **Fencing and Dividing the Mohmand Border**

### **Fencing**

It is worth mentioning that before 2003, two types of the map were used by Pakistan and Afghanistan authorities to establish claims over the Mohmand territory. One of these maps was the Russian map, and the other was the British map. Pakistan used the British map to claim Mohmand territory, while the Afghan government used the Russian map to claim the area. The former shows a line of defence which is 64 km apart from the line shown by the latter. Both countries have claims over this area. In 2003, the Pakistan government started "border management" and deployed security forces in the area that Pakistan claimed up to the Durand line (Hayat, 2020). It is interesting to note that some tribal villages come in this strip between the two lines and they especially feel trapped between the strategic policies of the two countries.

Regarding the fencing of the Mohmand border, it needs to be mentioned that it is unlike border fencing in the other six tribal districts. It is somewhat unique in nature. The fence has been erected on the Russian line, which is located five kilometres toward Pakistan from the original Durand Line. Hence according to the official data, 80% of the Khuga Khel tribe and a couple of other tribes reside in this enclosure known as the new buffer zone. This scenario has posed many challenges for these tribesmen. Among others, security is the main concern for these people as they feel less secure after they are left outside of the fencing.

### **Dividing the Family**

Mohmand tribesmen reside on both sides of the border. They reside in the district Mohmand of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan and the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. About 60% of Mohmand is in Pakistan, and 40% is in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, their main villages are in District Goshtha, Mohmand Dara and Lal Pura. These three districts have 32 villages which touch Mohmand District on the Pak-Afghan border. Mohmand tribe residing in the border region have more cross-border

interaction with Afghan Mohmand. They share a common culture, history, and religion. In an interview with Malak Abdul Manan Kodakhel, son of former MNA Malak Fazal, the authors were informed: "We are the same Mohmand on both sides of the border. They are our brothers and from the same tribe that is the Baizai tribe. They reside in the Mohmand Dara, Kama, and Goshtha districts of the Nangarhar. The subtribe Dawar Khel, Khuga, Mula Khel and Nazar Khel are part of Mohmand, but due to current border fencing on the Russian line instead of the Durand Line, they live on the other side of the border. We have inter-marriages, cultural, social and economic links on the other side of the said tribe. We are from the same tribe, and the government does not divide the same tribe into two countries. We are Azad Qabail on both sides of the border. We share the same language, culture, history, religion etc. We participate in each other's wedding ceremonies, funerals or any other cultural programs."

The fencing along the Durand line between two neighbouring countries splits many families who have lived on both sides of the border for centuries. The residents of the Khuga Khel sub-tribe in Baizai sub-division (District Mohmand), which is 2 or 3 kilometres away from the fence, said that their villages and khuga Khel sub-tribe have been divided into two parts by the current fencing. Khuga Khel is not a village but a sub-tribe of Baizai and has comprised of 10 sub sections namely Hasan Khel, Azad Kor, Sana Khel, Pakar Khel, Ala Khel, Shalai, Maya, Saparay, Mama Khel, and Srakarnai. The five sub-section that is Hasan Khel, Azad Kor, Sana Khel, Pakar Khel, and Ala Khel, falls outside of fencing (Afghan side) but still have loyalty to the Pakistan state. The later five sub-tribes fall inside the fenced area.

Salala is a large village of Khuga Khel and has a population of about 3000-4000 people. It is a border village between Pakistan and Afghanistan. One part of the village sits in Mohmand territory, and the other is in Kunar Province. The residents of Salala village on the Afghan side have no access to Pakistani side hospitals, educational institutes, and markets after the fencing was completed in that area. Salala is a high altitude, and more than 200 families live there. Malak Abdul Qadir told in a field interview that after fencing, many people shifted to their relatives on the Pakistani side,

and the main route Anargai which connects the Khuga Khel tribe with Afghanistan Nangarhar and Kunar province, has been closed by the Pakistan Army due to border fencing, and they now use Torkham border to meet with their relatives. Another resident of Karwanda village Hasan Gul said that they had a big village, and about 700-800 people lived in this village. We have relatives across the border, but current fencing divides us from them, and we cannot participate in each other's weddings or funerals. Malak Jalal Khan, an elderly tribal who recently returned to Pakistan from Afghanistan, said that he has eight brothers. Now five brothers of mine are on the Pakistani side of the border, and three others are on the Afghan side of the border. This is a very big problem for us. We cannot meet with each other or participate in each other's occasions. Our relationship has practically stopped after the current fencing.

### Dividing the Land

The Mohmand tribe resides in District Mohmand and Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. Before fencing, the Mohmand tribe purchased or exchanged land with their relatives on both sides of the border. The sub-tribes of Baizai that is Khuga Khel, Koda Khel, Mula Khel, Nazar Khel, and Dawar Khel, which are touched or live on both sides of the border, have more lands than other tribes of the Mohmand. In an interview Malak (chieftain) Abdul Manan Koda Khel said, "Thousands of acres Land of Koda Khel subtribe have left on another side of the border fencing. Many subtribes, including Khuga Khel, Mula Khel, Nazar Khel and Koda Khel, claim the land on which border fencing is done. We don't accept border fencing, and we demand that the border fencing will be removed from our areas or that the government will facilitate us or give us compensation. The Pakistan army builds forts and other posts on our land. The government must return our land, and we can't go to our lands and other houses, which are left on the other side of the border fence. Because of that reason, we can't accept border fencing or any other border between the same Mohmand."

### Questioning and Proving their Nationality

Pakistan and Afghanistan have no dual nationality agreement. However, the tribal

people residing in the border region are mostly from the same tribe that is Mohmand, Waziris or Shenwaris. After the USSR invasion of Afghanistan, the people of the Mohmand tribe residing in the Afghanistan province of Nangarhar migrated to the Pakistan side of the Mohmand, where they have relatives and started to live with it. In an interview with Malak Hazrat Ullah, it was told that "mostly the people residing in the border region have both types of nationality that are Pakistani CNIC and Afghani *Tazkira*. They used both types of nationality in both countries in case of need. But the people of Mohmand who live in Pakistan would not show you or reveal about their *Tazkira*. They used *Tazkira* mostly for their trade and business purposes. Sometimes they used their *Tazkira* for land property owning, marriage certificates etc. In the last election of the FATA in 2018, the people of Afghan nationality who had Pakistani CNIC voted in the Pakistani election. In the same way, Pakistani nationals who avail Afghani *Tazkira* vote in Afghan elections. Further, he added that the *Tazkira* gaining process is much easier than getting a Pakistani national ID." Now the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is fenced, and it is difficult for Mohmand to get both nationalities. If someone has both nationalities and Pakistan forces or FIA capture him, then he will be considered a spy of Afghanistan, and it is now dangerous to make both nationalities. The researchers observed that still, the people have dual nationality of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Having dual nationality is illegal, and in future, it will be impossible to get/keep both nationalities.

In an interview with the Reader of the Assistant Commissioner of the district Mohmand, Mr Siyar Ahmad, he informed that the main reason for acquiring dual nationality of both Pakistan and Afghanistan by Mohmand tribal people is to enjoy rights in both countries. There are many people who have acquired Afghan *Tazkira* for trade purposes. Another reason is to simply cross borders easily to maintain social relations." Pakistan and Afghanistan have no dual nationality agreement. However, the tribal people get it for their own interests. The same Mohmand of both countries lived in each other's countries for many decades. They don't even know about the Durand Line, which the two countries bicker

upon. The Durand Line is a poor demarcation of Mohmand territory. Before the 9/11 attacks, Mohmands had the status of Azad Qabail (free tribes), and the political administration of Mohmand Agency gave them passes to cross the border. So they enjoyed rights in both countries. Now, after fencing, their movement has been restricted. The Pakistani government also orders the Afghan Tazkira holders to leave Pakistan. There are many Afghan Mohmands who reside in the Pakistani Mohmand district, and now they face the trouble of going to Afghanistan.

After fencing, the requirement of having a passport and valid Visa has become essential. In June 2016, the Pakistan government started strict control of the Pak-Afghan border to restrict cross-border attacks and illegal crossing. The nationals of Afghanistan and Pakistan must have official documents such as valid passports and visas at an official border crossing. In an interview with Malak Abdul Qadir, he said that "before fencing, there was no need to show official documents for border crossing. The Mohmand residents on both sides of the border meet with their relatives and participate in each other's cultural activities. Now, after fencing, it is impossible to cross the border because fencing was completed, and the Pakistan army guarded the border. Now locals of the Mohmand border make their visas and other official documents to cross the border. First, we reach within hours to Afghan Mohmand relatives without any visas or documents. After fencing, we first go to Torkham and show our passports and visas to border patrol police, then we cross the border and meet with our relatives."

## **Conclusion**

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Mohmands inhabit the district Mohmand in Pakistan and the province of Nangarhar in Afghanistan. Some parts of the tribe also live in Kunar and Jalalabad cities. They share the

same history, culture, and social codes of life. Because they had lived together for centuries, even when governments changed, they saw themselves as one people. When the USSR invaded Afghanistan, a large number of Mohmands from Afghanistan shifted to Pakistan and started to live here. By now, they are considered settled in society. Across the border, they have relatives and are connected through inter-marriage and property ownership.

The Durand Line divided the tribes but only superficially, formally and on an international cartographic map. The division did not work effectively on the ground for a century. But now that the Pakistani government is putting up a fence on the Durand Line. Accordingly, it has become effective on the ground and has become a challenge for the everyday life of the tribes. The Pakistan armed forces have started to strictly control the border. The requirements for passports and visas have also become essential for cross-border movement. The tribes are thus facing increased administrative encumbrances to go about their business and social life across the border. These measures have indirectly raised the question of who they are. In other words, their political identity has been questioned, and they have been asked to decide whether they are Pakistani or Afghani. Those who came from Afghanistan a long time ago have come to face the old fracture in their identity as well. The second and third-generation Mohmands of Afghan descent also face the challenge of finally declaring and settling their identity. For a long time, they thought they were one people on both sides of the border, but now the political understanding has changed. The challenge has arisen in the face of the growing concern of territorial states who want to secure and seal their borders. This concern with borders has itself grown from the War on Terrorism.

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