

# Pakistan: Pakhtuns and violence of border fencing

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**If you want to see how the Pakhtuns cope with militarisation, visit any crossing point on the Pak-Afghan border and observe not only their miseries, but also how this wretchedness is represented or controlled by the system.**

While reports of people's helplessness at border points such as Ghulam Khan and Angoor Adda in North Waziristan are coming in, my reference point is the Torkham crossing located 40 kilometres west of Peshawar. Soon after the fall of Kabul, I wanted to visit this site on the Durand Line, but no matter how close my home is to ex-Fata (only 2km) and no matter how long I have reported on the tribal areas (over 10 years), I feel traumatised every time I make plans to enter this 'no-go-area'.

In my interactions with displaced tribal students, whom I interviewed for my research, I found that the experience of living in a war zone deterred them from going back home. Enrolled in educational institutions across the country, a few did not even want to look back on their past. Their pain and agony have turned them away from their ancestral land — a place they feel is not worth living in anymore.

Nevertheless, I could not say no to British journalist friends who sought my help in reporting on cross-border trade and traffic. As they were to be flown in from Islamabad in a military chopper, I decided to visit the border on my own hoping to get an independent view.

The fencing of the Pak-Afghan border is causing economic and social devastation.

Driving through Khyber district, I found an unending stream of battle-ready soldiers standing on alert on mountaintops on both sides of the corkscrew road. A TTP attack seemed imminent, I thought. What I came to know later, however, was that this spectacle was part of security arrangements to ensure the protection of foreign journalists.

Next, I saw a bunch of children, all clad in black, standing by the roadside with placards in their hands. "Give workers their due rights," said one placard hanging around the neck of a girl. Nearby stood workers with a huge banner demanding the opening of the Torkham crossing. Previously, this crossing would be closed intermittently for two years because of the Covid-19 situation, and later, due to Kabul's fall to the Afghan Taliban. Protesting such closures, these children and workers appeared as detached from their surroundings as the troops were from their presence. However, violence and deprivation in Fata have always been political.

After the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent petro-dollar 'jihad', a state of permanent regional militancy drained local economic resources, leaving the border crossings the only means of income for the large number of orphans and widows the conflict created. While those monitoring such crossings earned possibly billions by patronising the local informal economy, labourers only got their daily wages to feed their families. As long as the regimes in Kabul and Islamabad did not control cross-border ties of production and mobility, local tribes continued to

flourish on account of the social relations of production. Shops on one side of the border attracted buyers from the other; schools on Pakistan's side enrolled students from Afghanistan, and farmers tilled land on both sides of the border.

In post 9/11 Pakistan, however, militarising the local space became the state's obsession. Starting in 2017, the fencing of the 2,600km-long Pak-Afghan border damaged beyond repair the interests of over eight million tribal Pakhtuns from Bajaur district in ex-Fata to the Chaman crossing in Balochistan. The fencing was officially defended in the name of keeping Pakistan safe from the TTP and its supporting agencies across the border. While the TTP attacks continue, even in the absence of these agencies, the fencing has deprived thousands of local workers of their means of sustenance.

At Torkham, local miseries are an open wound that immediately draw attention. When the border is closed, shops are without business. When open, the place is swamped with hundreds of desperate people including critically patients. Burqa-clad women with incomplete documents wait for days with sick, crying babies in their laps. I was told of an octogenarian who slept on a concrete pavement for six days to see his daughter, who is married across the border. He left without seeing his daughter for he had no money and travel documents. Children could be seen waiting for a chance to 'smuggle' edibles across the border. Hiding in between the wheels of large moving trailers, some would be lucky to earn \$6 per day to feed their families, if they survived.

While the use value of local labour has been turned into a crime (smuggling), the exchange value of local miseries never depreciates. "Touts take Rs50,000 to smuggle a person across the border," said a cab driver. Videos of truckloads of spoiled fruit are heart-wrenching. The state spends millions in taxpayers' money on pleading the case of the Afghan Taliban, but the queue of loaded vehicles parked on both sides of the divide tell a different story. When the Torkham corridor is closed for business, local workers either sit idle or organise protests. Such border crossings have become an iconic spectacle to observe the state's virtual war on the local people.

Caught in this irony, I wanted to record the workers' protest at Torkham. "Don't defame Pakistan," said an armed official to one worker. I was surrounded by people, but nobody dared talk. A conflict zone is never ordained by fate; but the state demonises the Pakhtuns and projects the situation as one that demands military action. Objective reporting can expose this narrative. Moustafa Bayoumi, a professor at the City University of New York, once said: "It is the peculiar fate of oppressed people everywhere that when they are killed, they are killed twice: first by bullet or bomb, and next by the language used to describe their deaths." The tribal Pakhtuns share this peculiar fate. Killed by bombs and drones, they are not only sliced apart by fencing, but their voice is also taken away from them. Living in this state of apartheid, they are left with few options but to quit or become war fodder in the state's foreign policy designs.

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