

FROM FRONTIER TO FORTRESS: CAUSES OF THE SECURITIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN PESHAWAR (2015–2025)

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Abstract

This paper outlines the structural, historical and institutional factors which led to a frontier city of public spaces in Peshawar being increasingly secured and closed for trade and commerce between 2015 and 2025, and from then on, the frontier city was increasingly transformed into a highly controlled urban space dominated by the logic of defence, surveillance and risk management. It rejects the notion that the city's security context is a product of terrorism alone and proposes a more complex interpretation of the security context as the culmination of geographical vulnerability, colonial history, long periods of regional insecurity, cross-border militancy, mass displacement, and a lack of a centralized government. This, in the broader context of the paper, is looking at the effects of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations, administration improvisation and institutional adaptation on urban form in conflict-affected societies, and how the strategic location of Peshawar at the Afghan border increased its vulnerability to violent extremism, pushing successive governments to focus more on security than urban functionality. The study shows that physical security measures, such as checkpoints, blast walls, fortified compounds, surveillance systems, limited mobility, and poorly coordinated zoning practices, are not individual countermeasures against particular threats, but are a visible expression of a broader structure of fragilities that exist in governance, planning and state capacity. They slowly changed patterns of mobility, economy, public interactions and perception of safety, thus changing the relationship of urban space and citizens. Finally, the paper considers a series of policy recommendations to tackle securitization's long-term spatial, social and psychological impacts through integrated urban planning, institutional coordination, community engagement and security-sector reforms that can revive Peshawar as an accessible, vibrant and welcoming gateway city, underpinned by sustainable public security provision.

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Introduction

In the twenty first century, the city has increasingly become the field where the struggle between state power and non-state violence is played out, and in this way cities are no longer just administrative and commercial centres; they are places where security, symbolism and power are clearly visible (Markin, 2012). Across the course of urban history, the built environment has been a vehicle that is telling an announcement of longevity and permanence through broad streets, monumental doors, open squares and other physical lexemes that are claiming the citizenship of the people (Montesi & Calestani, 2021). But the same language is perverted as soon as a city is the constant victim of insurgent attacks: the very buildings that claimed to be open are being gradually

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fortified to claim to be closed. Peshawar is a good example of this inversion. A city that served as an entry point for caravans carrying goods from the Silk Road, a city of bazaars that marked regional prosperity, and a city of colonial cantonment that symbolized the state's ordered administrative authority, becomes an alluring symbolic target to those who want to show that the state cannot even secure its most public spaces (Ali & Khattab, 2019).

But it cannot be concluded that the change in the public space of Peshawar in the last decade is due to the short-term tactics of the militants only. It must be embedded in a broader causal framework in which non-state actors target precisely those actors who possess symbolic authority, setting off a state response, one which is not restricted to intelligence alone, and which, rather, is invariably visible and tangible, a re-assertion of control of the urban terrain (Dayan & Pedahzur, 2025). The result (that has been observed in several historic cities that have been subjected to extended asymmetric warfare) is an architecture of protection that starts to replace the architecture of invitation, as perimeter walls, hydraulic bollards and biometric checkpoints become the language of civic space, rather than an exception to it (Quagliarini, Fatiguso, & Cantatore, 2024). This paper picks this larger displacement as its starting point and tries to narrow the question and raise a more specific one, namely, what were the causal drivers, historical, geographic, political, and administrative, that led to the securitisation of the public space of Peshawar between 2015-2025?

The answer to this question is important because the impact of conflict on urban space is much more than the physical damage caused by a particular attack – it shapes how citizens perceive, utilise and are allowed to move through their own city, and can persist for a length of time and a scale of impact that goes beyond the immediate violence that triggered them (Coaffee, 2009). As perimeter defences are installed around cities, as public squares are restricted to sterile zones and left unoccupied to 'peripheries', and as the traditional ideals of urban life, openness, spontaneity, unplanned social mixing are gradually replaced by the defensive model of urban form, their social and psychological costs begin to accrue quietly, year by year (Muggah, 2012). Peshawar's experience of this displacement is not unique, or simply local: cities that encounter extended asymmetric violence construct architectures of fear that last long after the incidence of violence has decreased (Ellin, 1997).

Peshawar is a case of particular interest because of a number of reasons. Firstly, unlike cities which have known rare, high-profile attacks, Peshawar has been a long-term frontline city, and the impact of the Soviet-Afghan war, and even more recently, the War on Terror being waged across the region, can be felt here over a truly longitudinal period (Karim, 2017). Second, the violence in Peshawar is not just episodic and isolated, like what is seen in the West, but is more persistent and intense, and thus creates a unique and compounded urban militarization (Rafique & Sarfraz, 2016). Thirdly, Peshawar is one of the few places in the old world where traditional urban fabric is compact and imbued with history, yet faces threats from the modern world like VBIEDs; its urban form's incompatibility with the security requirements of the modern world accentuates the tangible costs of securitization (Shinwari, 2010). Lastly, the indirect nature of this cost – in lost trade and business, loss of heritage and a constant, low-grade psychological burden – means that Peshawar's experience provides a template that other cities in the Global South are currently experiencing, and which may be a template for how they can recover (Afridi & Fatima, 2025).

This discussion is based on a theoretical assertion that must be set aside at the beginning: public space is never a neutral surface, a stage onto which political life comes and goes, but is instead a product of the social and institutional relations that inhabit it, and the transformation of one of them is not just a change in people, but a change in who has power in the city (Lefebvre, 1974). In this regard, the securitization of Peshawar is not just a series of physical barriers but a protracted negotiation over who gets to occupy the most public areas of the city, and on whose terms, in which the Pakistani state's own insecure status in the international system, caught between its status as a frontline partner in the War on Terror and its own domestic fragility to the very networks that the War on Terror has promoted, is hardly negligible (Hippler & Ahmed, 2022).

The rest of this paper is organised thematically, and not chronologically, and deals with the various layers of the causes of the securitization processes that made Peshawar vulnerable to the transformation by war in the first place; the geostrategic context of its location on the Afghan frontier; how the reordering of priorities of security institutions by the terrorist threat led to the physical fortification of the city; how the informal urbanization caused by displacement resulted from the securitization processes; how governance gaps enabled the securitization processes to crystallize as permanent measures; and how deliberate security-driven urban policies institutionalized the process of spatial control. The paper ends with policy oriented suggestions and an epilogue which reflects on the implications of the transformation of Peshawar for post-conflict urbanism more widely.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF URBAN VULNERABILITY

To comprehend the conflict driven securitization of Peshawar, one must consider, among other things, its historical significance. Without acknowledging and considering the historical importance of Peshawar it is difficult to understand its vulnerability to conflict driven securitization. The city's history is a complex one, with each invasion, synthesis and reinvention of administration adding a new layer and ultimately predating the War on Terror (APP, 2010) which was a more recent phenomenon. At the east end of the Khyber Pass, Peshawar was a major overland centre between the Indian subcontinent and the trade routes of Central Asia, endowed with an extraordinary commercial vigor and at the same time with an extraordinary exposure to the movement of armies, migrants and ideas through the pass (Dani, 1969).

These two inheritances, the city's prosperity on the basis of openness, and its vulnerability on the basis of exposure, are at the heart of any causal explanation of the city's subsequent securitization. Well before its days of being called Purusapura, the capital of the Kushan king Kanishka, this place was already more than a mere town; it was a hub for armies to pass through, pilgrims to travel, and ideas to spread, and this cosmopolitanism continued to endure through the various conquests and cultural shifts that would affect it in the future (Caroe, 1958). What had enabled merchants, scholars and travellers to come and go freely through the gates of Peshawar over the centuries became instead, under the very different of circumstances of insurgency, an unmanageable liability—no institutional memory existed for excluding guests.

The urban character of Peshawar before the escalation of intensive large-scale insurgency further highlights its structural value in being fortified. Known as the City of Flowers to the locals,

pre-insurgency Peshawar was a dense city with many gates and neighbouring mohallas, and a larger and tree-lined British-era cantonment that created a hybrid urban form, where commerce, sociality, and administration integrated in a walkable, largely open public realm (Government of Punjab, 1884). The city was ecologically soft and socially soft, providing a contrast to the hardened urban form that is to come, with community guesthouses, open-air tea stalls and orchard belts along the rivers of Bara and Kabul. (Shinwari, 2010) But it was precisely because this urban fabric was organic, non-institutional, and based on fluid movement and mutual trust, that it was structurally incapable of handling the sudden demands of an internal, decentralized insurgency when the post-2001 security environment was established.

The city's layered inheritance was not simply commercial or architectural, it was also institutional and educational and endowed the city with a civic identity that went beyond the image from outside which many frontier cities were given. The early 20th century's establishment of Islamia College as an institution that attracted students and scholars from farther away, reflects that Peshawar's pre-insurgency identity was as much that of an intellectual and administrative centre as it was a trading post (Shinwari S. A., 2008). The province's political history during the decades leading up to independence, however, reveals that its social fabric already bore a significant amount of political complexity, prior to the arrival of an entire new register of violence in the War on Terror (Shah, 1999). Its importance lies in the fact that this deeper institutional and political layering shows that the securitization studied in this paper was not imposed on a socially simple or undifferentiated city, but rather on a city whose civic identity was already a complex mix of historical allegiances to which a decade of fortification would add significant weight.

The war against terror which followed September 2001 and the war itself have thrown this historical urban balance right off balance, in a manner which was not gradual and reversible. As a hub for international forces operating in Afghanistan, Peshawar was also the main target for the blowback from Afghanistan (Khan, 2014). The threat facing the security forces was no longer the conventional military forces assembling at the historic pass, but rather an internal, largely invisible foe, which meant that Peshawar's administrators had to shift their priorities within the city to address the new threat that was subtly operating within their informal settlements and markets (Iqbal, 2015).

Between 2001 and 2014, it is argued that the city experienced the most chaotic years of its recent history, a series of suicide bombings, vehicle bombings and targeted assassinations were perpetrated with a clear aim to show the weakness of the state apparatus by targeting symbolic locations, hotels, courts and police buildings (Finance Division of Pakistan, 2011). It is this pile of violence that gives rise to the historical conditions in which securitization would be justified, normalized and eventually become an everyday part of the urban governance as "business as usual". It is key to understand this deep historical layering, as it can illustrate that the fortress city that emerged after 2015 was part of the exposures and vulnerabilities that the city has faced and inherited since its creation, and was not something that was suddenly imposed on an unsuspecting city (Kurtz, 2011).

GEOSTRATEGIC LOCATION AND BORDER DYNAMICS

The geostrategic location of Peshawar in relation to the Afghan border and the Khyber pass is a major contributor to this causal chain of events that lead to the securitisation of Peshawar. For

thousands of years, the pass itself, a fifty-three-kilometre-long corridor through the mountains between the Peshawar valley and the eastern part of Afghanistan, has provided the main overland route to the subcontinent of the invading armies of Alexander the Great up to the founders of the Mughal and Durrani empires (Caroe, 1958). This gatekeeper role has made Peshawar a strategic city in the region geopolitics and it is this very aspect that has been its constant point of tension during every other instability in its immediate neighbour.

Because of its geographical closeness with Kabul, which is just about one hundred and nineteen kilometres away, political or military turmoil within Afghanistan seldom stays within its borders and instead spills over into the streets, markets and security posture of Peshawar (Murtazashvili, 2021). The geographic fact has been split in two ways throughout history. While on the positive side, the cross-border trade and transit through the pass have contributed to the prosperity of the region, on the negative side, the same openness that allows trade has also allowed militants, weapons, and refugees to travel, demanding some form of state control over the border in practice that is often ad hoc, inconsistent and military in character (Khan, 2025). Peshawar has, therefore, served as a sort of regional indicator: if things are calm across the pass and across the border, then it becomes a city of merchants, but if there is instability in Afghanistan, it becomes a garrison town (Khan, 2014).

The post-2001 Afghan occupation of Afghanistan upped the ante on this. The international coalition forces used the Pakistani airspace and territory to support operations across the border and Peshawar was found to be a rear logistical base and a frontline target; a situation few other cities in Pakistan were facing (Ishfaq & Ashfaq, 2021). The subsequent and enduring insecurity in Afghanistan, marked by the recurring cycles of insurgencies, foreign withdrawal and re-emergence of intra-Afghan violence, has repeatedly led to cross-border spill over in the form of infiltration of militants and arms smuggling and population displacement, which have in turn led to the Pakistani state taking a more security-oriented stance with respect to its borders, and, subsequently, with respect to the city of Peshawar itself (Lieven, 2011).

This border dynamic has also changed the perception of the state towards the historically fluid flow of population from the amalgamated tribal areas to settled areas around Peshawar. Up until the early years of the conflict, movement across this administrative border was largely made by customary arrangements and light federal regulation; but during the course of the conflict, security screening became more formalized, driven by the state's fear of its inability to adequately monitor a long and porous border (Khan, 2021). Years of war and displacement, combined with ongoing land and property disputes on the Afghan side of the border, have maintained the status of the border as a variable on the table of Peshawar's urban administration, but one that has real and tangible consequences for the security of the city itself (Murtazashvili, 2021).

It is also important to mention that this geostrategic vulnerability also has an economic aspect which enhances its security aspect. The historic trade of transit between Peshawar and Afghanistan has been gradually diminished since the security tensions at the entry/exit points have rendered other trade routes through Central Asia or other Pakistani ports more appealing to traders (Yousaf & Khan, 2023). The net result has been a city that thrived on its role as 'gatekeeper' but now sees its strategic location as a liability or a vulnerability to be managed instead of developed (Rahman & Ali, 2025).

One of the main geostrategic issues driving securitization analyzed in this paper is also this tension between gateway and garrison function.

The geostrategic exposure has also been accentuated by the framing of the region in international policy discourse for a long time. Western interpretations of the frontier have tended to see religion as a potential insurgent threat; this has influenced both the external assessments of threats to the frontier and indirectly, the domestic response to threats to the city and to the neighbouring districts, for decades (Greg, 2003). The politics of this securitized stance remain difficult as any quick easing of border-related security measures becomes difficult to defend in the province and the province itself and its provincial capital continue to be characterised as an area of persistent though variable instability, directly linked to conditions across the border (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). The external and internal framing aspects have thus been to firmly establish the Peshawar's identity as the frontline security city for the region and not as a commercial hub as it would otherwise be according to its geographical position.

TERRORISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SECURITY PRIORITIES

Whereas geography has accounted for the vulnerability of the city to conflict, the continuous campaign of terrorist violence against the city from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s has accounted for the way in which this exposure manifested itself as the securitised urban form. This violence was significant by any measure and there is credible evidence that it took the lives of tens of thousands in Pakistan during the heyday of fighting, especially in the cities at the edge of the tribal belt like Peshawar (Iqbal A., 2015). Rarely was an attack conducted without symbolic significance and always targeted symbolically resonant locations, such as hotels, security installations, markets and courts, precisely because attacks on these locations had the intended strategic objective of establishing the limits of state authority (Ali & Khattab, 2019).

The most significant event in this shift was the attack on the Army Public School in December 2014 when over a hundred and thirty children lost their lives, an attack on a school rather than a military or administrative building, which changed the definition of residual risks as acceptable to the Pakistani state and public (Rana, 2015). In the wake of the attacks, the focus on security in the city began to shift from one that was focused around a small number of sensitive government and military targets, to much more pervasive and intensive security, applied to schools, hospitals, markets, and other day-to-day civic facilities. In fact, successive attacks on public and religious buildings around the country further into the next decade highlighted the failure of the current protection regime, making the transition over a period of time. (Davies, Gozzi, & Cursi, 2023).

Security priorities also shifted, as did the conception of the adversary. Security planners had come to realize that they were not subjecting themselves to a conventional force that they could confront at a clear border, but rather a self-radicalizing network that could exploit the anonymity of dense urban settlements (Dayan & Pedahzur, 2025). In the context of the larger project, this reorientation is typical of a pattern other cities in the study region have experienced in cases of protracted asymmetric conflict: the security institutions end up monitoring the entire civilian population as a potential threat source, not a specific class of enemy combatants (Graham, 2010).

The economic and social consequences of this change were already large prior to the development of its full urban impact. The economic impact of the terrorist attacks in the broader picture indicates that investment, trade and employment were negatively impacted in conflict affected regions and that the psychological impact of these attacks was being felt by those living under conditions of chronic insecurity in Pakistan (Abbasi, 2013). Similar studies of the economic costs of extended internal conflict in other regions also show that the costs of individual acts of terrorism are not the only ones that endure when the frequency of attacks wanes, but that the costs to regional production continue long term, as the Peshawar business community would eventually report as a “durable security tax” on commerce in the region (Abadie & Gardeazabal, 2003).

The other important aspect was the impact of continuing terrorist activity on the internal priorities of state institutions. Security agencies that were once confined to a very specific counter-terrorism remit were now tasked with a much broader range of governance duties, including urban surveillance and population screening – an expansion of scope which was the result of the government's assessment that the scale of risk facing the city could no longer be managed by conventional civilian administration (Basit, 2021). It is not this single tactical action, but rather this reallocation of institutional priority, which would set in motion the deeper structural fortification of the city that was to follow in the next ten years, to which the paper now focuses.

The socio-economic aspects of this violence is especially noteworthy as they contribute to an understanding of why the securitization that followed was so readily accepted by a population otherwise suffering from the burden of the costs of securitization. The losses, which included destroyed infrastructure, disrupted trade, and the displacement of development funds, were in the tens of billions of dollars during the heydays of the conflict and made what has been termed ‘heavy visible security investment’ by the state look like a proper response instead of an excessive one in the eyes of the public (Center for Research and Security Studies, 2014). In conflict-affected districts, such as those around this area, similar household-level research found that income, employment and educational access dropped significantly for households directly affected by violence, and that this decrease was accepted by the public despite the lack of full realization of the longer-term social costs. (Ali, Rahman & Nosheen, 2021). It was this double-dose of exceptional material damage at the household level, and spectacular symbolic assault on public institutions, that provided the long-lasting public validation for the subsequent shift in priorities of security, even though the price of such a shift would only become clear over the next decade or so.

COUNTER-TERRORISM OPERATIONS AND URBAN FORTIFICATION

The pivotal counter-terrorism measures taken after the Army Public School attack, most notably Operation Zarb-e-Azb and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad were not limited to the tribal areas from where much of the militancy had emerged, but entailed the concurrent and corresponding restructuring of Peshawar's internal security structure as well (Khan Z. A., 2014). In the city itself, this reorganization was reflected in an intelligence-driven network of checkpoints and biometric screening, as well as in search operations that involved targeted raids to remove militant cells thought to be entrenched within residential neighbourhoods, which clearly crossed over into the zone of civilian space, and into that of active security operation (Iqbal, 2015).

These physical remnants and their imprint on the present-day urban fabric of Peshawar is what is most strikingly visible. Concrete T-walls, coils of concertina wire, and hydraulic bollards are all felt as temporary emergency measures and have become permanent built features, so that residents now navigate by the location of checkpoints, rather than historical and cultural landmarks (Caron & Khan, 2022). It reflects a regular pattern found in the wider literature on urban warfare, in which temporary security fortifications, having been installed, are exceptionally hard to dislodge once the acute threat for which they were put in place has passed (Skiba, 2024).

The working consequences of this fortification go past the only visible. The shrinking of once-open streets into narrow security corridors, for example, has been shown to reduce the ability to respond to emergencies, especially during the immediate aftermath of an incident, while simultaneously creating physical obstacles to such incidents at times, as in the many documented instances of defensive infrastructure actually being a contributing factor to the situation (Peracha, Khan, & Ahmad, 2012). Likewise, the heavy and enduring nature of the blast walls created in the highly planned, but dense, lanes of the Walled City have caused significant damage to the city's public health by harming sewage and water lines, though not only in the context of security (Nizamani, 2021).

Urban fortification has created an unusual spatial division in the city—one that has manifested itself beyond the physical costs. The Walled City and the northern peripheries have been increasingly targeted by security interventions that are reactive rather than proactive or protective, and in many instances experienced by residents as more of an intrusion than a safeguard, whereas administrative and elite residential neighbourhoods like the cantonment and university town have been progressively zoned off with layered checkpoints and access restrictions that create a sense of a localized safe space for residents. This division has been defined in the literature of securitised urbanism as the creation of green zones and red zones within a single city, a spatial hierarchy characterised by a shift from safety as a universal civic right to safety as a commodity that is available to those who are already near to institutional powers to a greater degree than others (Graham, 2010).

Fortification has also created a unique gender burden in the architecture of the fortifications. Gendered under-resourcing of checkpoints, and the use of intrusive physical search of women as they move through the securitized city, has been found to place disproportionate mobility costs on women, which often result in social costs in excess of the economic/educational advantages the movement was intended to achieve (Bari & Khan, 2022). The gendering of urban fortification reflects a seemingly neutral logic of counter-terrorism infrastructure that collides with pre-existing social hierarchies to generate differential impacts on the population and to strengthen rather than challenge existing forms of exclusion (Hussain & Ahmed, 2022).

As a whole, the counter-terrorism operations of the post-2014 period account for the physical form of urban fortification in Peshawar: a set of tactical, site-specific responses to an ever-changing threat, which, once in place, proved politically and institutionally challenging and subsequently became harder to reverse as the security emergency started to fade (Savitch, 2008).

The military aspect of such operations also had repercussions far greater than just in terms of immediate security in discussions, and indeed in social terms, in the communities where people

were most directly affected by search-and-strike operations. Long-term military engagements both within and around the combined districts that feed into Peshawar have been found to break or alter traditional patterns of authority and culture, leading to a shift from informal community dispute resolution and mutual support to outsider-imposed regulations, one that outlasts the military operations and influenced the relationship of displaced and border communities with formal state authority as soon as they reached Peshawar (Khan, Wazir, & Khan, 2019). More general evaluations of military operational doctrine during this era also highlight that in practice, campaigns that are supposed to be finite have instead left a "permanent security footprint," insofar as the institutional frameworks set up to conduct a counter-insurgency campaign are unlikely to end once the mission is declared over (Fair, 2014). This institutionalisation, both in the countryside and in Peshawar itself, is a key factor in the failure of the city to fall under any control despite the relative decline of militancy in the region a decade ago.

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AND INFORMAL URBANIZATION

Another causal factor that is as significant as the attack on Peshawar is the demographic pressure created by IDP from the conflict affected districts that are surrounding Peshawar. The increase in the number of TDP's as counterinsurgency operations increased during the period, was not absorbed within the formal camp infrastructure and resulted in a major influx of people into the peri-urban fringe of Peshawar, which permanently changed the demographic and spatial balance of the city (Ibrar, 2013).

This injection added to the overburdened city infrastructure. Housing, water supply, sanitation and transportation networks were built to accommodate a significantly smaller and more stable population, and a rapid and unplanned population growth resulted in settlement patterns that were not well referenced to the formal zoning framework of the city (Din, 2022). Since many of these moves were not part of a clear movement but instead took place over a lengthy and irregular period, municipal authorities had little opportunity to proactively plan how to accommodate the displaced population; instead, informal settlement was encouraged to coalesce under the assumption that the displacement was temporary, but this proved to be incorrect as many households displaced by the city's expansion found it necessary or desirable to stay permanent within the city's growing periphery (Shah & Ahmed, 2021).

Indirectly, the core city area was itself securitized, reinforcing the trend of informal urbanization. The city centre grew ever more policed, costlier, and harder to navigate due to checkpoints and access restrictions, while both groups of people and small businesses also moved to the suburbs and to the northern fringes of the city, where the state's presence was relatively weak, but its provision of even the most basic municipal services was also (Muggah, 2012) In fact these peri-urban settlements evolved in a legal and administrative void where land is informally occupied and buildings are constructed in an ad hoc manner that results in an urban form which is not resilient to shocks impacting the environment, nor easily to be integrated into the city's existing security and service system (Jan, Alhumaid, & Safi Ullah, 2026).

This was seriously exacerbated by the demise of the Peshawar Development Authority's regulatory powers. Over the years, there has been a tendency in the city to give away formal planning

powers over vast tracts of the urban fringe to informal power brokers and developers making decisions without any systematic and coherent planning framework, thereby leaving the infrastructure and land use decisions to be worked out on an ad hoc basis (Afridi & Fatima, 2025). The impact of the vacuum of governance cannot be limited to the present; these peripheral settlements are under-served in water, sanitation, and electricity services and have been a structural weakness which has remained unrecognized and unaddressed by the security oriented urban policy (Jan, Alhumaid, & Safi Ullah, 2026).

The experience of living within the city itself has also been changed by the displacement. Frequently, people entering Peshawar internally from the tribal areas have reported suspicions at internal checkpoints and being viewed as potential threats to Peshawar rather than as victims of the same conflict that caused their displacement, a situation that has been termed as an internal frontier within the city's social fabric (Shah & Ahmed, 2021). This internal bordering has measurable social implications, which impact the traditional codes of hospitality that have historically included strangers and travellers and integrated them into the social life of the city relatively harmoniously, such as the Pashtun tradition of 'melmastia' (Hussain & Ali, 2024).

An informalized, under-serviced periphery whose inhabitants are also simultaneously suspected at the city's internal borders and neglected by the city's formal planning and service delivery systems – this is the cumulative effect of internal displacement (Din, 2022). This is one of the more structurally enduring reasons for the continued securitization of Peshawar as it has created a population whose grievances have been neither addressed by the state via inclusion nor sufficiently compensated by the state to date.

The dynamics of displacement into Peshawar should be considered in the context of the wider existence of Afghan refugee populations, who have been in place over a longer period of time and have influenced attitudes towards displacement more generally within the host community. The results also reveal that the attitudes of the Peshawar residents toward Afghan refugees have hardened over time, especially since the competition for housing and employment, as well as for municipal services, has increased over the years with the arrival of the latter internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the merged districts (Khan, Rahman, & Khan, 2025). This has layered on top of other displaced populations, both from across the border and internally displaced citizens, and has increased pressure on the city's infrastructure and social tolerance of those who move into the population, whereas it has diffused the attention and awareness of what has been described elsewhere as slow violence, the slowly accumulating harm that is less likely to be noticed by the public than any single dramatic event but could nonetheless have an equally corrosive effect on the long-term wellbeing of a community over time (Nixon, 2011). In this sense, the informal urbanization of Peshawar is not merely a symptom of engineering or zoning issues but the tangible symptoms of multiple layers of displacement histories that municipality governance has lacked the means to address effectively.

GOVERNANCE DEFICITS AND PLANNING FAILURES

In addition to the immediate threat of terrorism and displacement, the securitization of Peshawar has been maintained and even embedded in deeper deficiencies in urban governance. The most prominent of these is the gradual infiltration of security institutions, military, para-military and

intelligence bodies into areas of urban administration which have traditionally been the purview of civilian institutions, creating a parallel form of government where security and civilian functions are growing closer to each other, but the mechanisms for accountability remain unclear (Ali & Ullah, 2024). This blurring of the civil-military divide is a wider characteristic of Pakistan's strategic culture where the military has always been a large force, not only in national defence, but also in the broader administration of the country, which has been reinforced by the ongoing regional conflict in the country (D. Hopkins & Marsden, 2012).

Such institutional cross-over has put a lot of stress on the civilian bureaucratic machine handling mundane urban administration. The increasing need for coordination with multiple security agencies in routine planning and regulatory decisions also led to the introduction of more complex administrative processes, longer and more repetitive decision-making processes, and, what could be called an institutional strain as conventional systems of municipal governance became stretched beyond their original design (Fair, 2014). The practical impact has been a transactional approach to governance, focused on short-term risk management, rather than a coherent long-term approach to urban planning; and a reactive approach to governance that has thus failed to address many of the structural drivers that facilitated securitisation even as the individual crises of security have been dealt with.

The tension over legitimacy is added to the governance deficit. The need for stronger security has been largely accepted by the community, but as the implementation of these measures has taken place without significant public consultation, over time public confidence in State institutions has eroded (Jaffrelot, 2016). This leads to a form of conditional legitimacy: the security apparatus of the state is accepted as necessary but not necessarily trusted, with important implications for long-term stability of governance, as institutions tolerated but not trusted will need increasingly harsh methods to get people to abide by them (Ullah & Khan, 2023).

These governance shortcomings have been further exacerbated by urban planning shortcomings of Peshawar. The Peshawar Development Authority (PDA), which has already been under-resourced, compared to the scale of reconstruction work required after the conflict, has seen its regulatory powers gradually reduced to the fortified core of the city, while leaving large tracts of peripheral development to informal actors without any particular organisation or coordination in the form of a zoning plan (Bollens, 2007). This reduction in planning capacity has resulted in decisions being taken without intentional policy or planning, which can be hard to undo, especially because no one institution can be blamed for a failure that is spread across multiple overlapping responsibilities (Nizamani 2021).

The data also suggest the presence of hybrid governance arrangements that fill in the formal gaps, in parallel. There are a number of documented examples of how information sharing and crisis response has taken place across the frontier where traditional leadership, local community networks and informal state institutions have cooperated in ways that are not formally established, demonstrating a form of frontier statecraft that is common in such regions where governance has long been constructed through the dual poles of formality and informality (D. Hopkins & Marsden, 2012). This hybrid approach can be either a lasting solution to building trust or a short-term fix that will need to be improved in more fundamental ways when it comes to urban

governance, which must be more inclusive and accountable if the practice is to be more effective (Ali & Ullah, 2024).

The governance failures collectively may account for the fact that despite a significant decrease in the number of major attacks in the last decade, the unwinding of the securitization of Peshawar has been a monumental challenge. The incentives that Peshawar's administrators have faced have always been to keep security infrastructure rather than to eliminate it, even when it becomes less and less marginal security beneficial (Basit, 2021).

The failure of successive provincial governments to develop a more enduring peacebuilding process that can resolve the grievances that fuel militancy in the first place is indicative of this governance failure. Wider analyses of insurgency and counter-insurgency in South Asia warn that while military and security successes have been followed by economic opportunity and political inclusion, they have been wasted where they are not accompanied by parallel investment in governance capacity, particularly in a city like Peshawar where spending on security has consistently been greater than that on civilian administrative capacity (Yusuf, 2014). In more conceptual terms, some scholars have suggested that there is a real ontological change in the citizens' relationship with the state in the wake of conflict, and indeed the expectation of protection is separated from any expectation of involvement or responsibility in the state, resulting in a population that tolerates a high degree of state control over public space precisely because they no longer have any expectations of anything else from the same state (Ali, 2021). When read together, these accounts point to a more disturbing and profound shift in the expectations of citizens of Pakistan from their own government, and the lack of governance in Peshawar is not only a lack of administrative capacity.

SECURITY-DRIVEN URBAN POLICY AND SPATIAL CONTROL

Transformations in Peshawar can be attributed to the latter, and perhaps most significant, reason: the deliberate policy decisions made based on the concept of security that have now pervaded the city's spatial structures. In the past, the balance of providing services, economic growth and civic engagement has been a hallmark of urban governance, but in the post-2015 policy landscape, Peshawar's emphasis is on surveillance and control, implying that the state considers the risk of further attack is more significant than the social and economic costs of permanent fortification (Mbembe, 2003).

This hierarchy is evident in the city's technological surveillance infrastructure, which is expanding throughout the city. Provincial officials have touted Safe City as a modern addition to traditional security strategies, but the information captured by the elaborate closed-circuit camera and verification systems has been channeled primarily towards furthering the expansion of surveillance – not traditional municipal functions like traffic control or trash collection – (Ahmad & Jan, 2020). The impact is to superimpose a 'digital' securitization process over the 'real' securitization process of walls and checkpoints, adding to and not supplanting the erosion of privacy and spontaneity that has always been part of urban life (Haqqani, 2005).

Security policy has also contributed to the economic geography of the city, beyond the immediate sphere of any checkpoints, which are reshaped as a result of the policy. The ongoing

conflict over key strategic highways like the Grand Trunk Road and the Ring Road in Peshawar has caused disruptions to existing supply networks, and a significant shift in commercial traffic towards alternative routes to avoid Peshawar altogether has resulted in a measurable impact, as described as 'transit choking' by Yousaf & Khan (2023) which has undermined the traditional role played by markets like Namak Mandi as regional trading hubs. But investors seem to have interpreted permanent blast walls as a consistent risk sign rather than protection from the state and this has been observed across various cities and countries, which has led to capital running to comparatively less protected cities like Islamabad (Rahman & Ali, 2025).

This spatial control is also reflected in the architecture of individual buildings. The new commercial and institutional buildings throughout the city increasingly employ a defensive architecture vocabulary, which includes small windows, reinforced setbacks and thickening perimeter walls and sacrifice the more open, street-oriented designs that were associated with the city's earlier commercial buildings (Hussain, 2022). This "defensive pragmatism" marks a broader institutionalisation of the need for blast resistance over aesthetic, access, and civic considerations in forming the city's built environment that will dominate the environment for decades to come, as described by Skiba (2024).

Public space policy has also shifted its focus towards the logic of control. Squares including Chowk Yadgar, which was a site of political and social discussion, have increasingly been surrounded by ever more permanent barriers and camera systems, whether for security purposes or not, but which have the practical effect of discouraging the spontaneity of assembly and conversation which were central to the city's public culture (Caron & Khan, 2022). The combined impact of these interventions—whether they are in the form of how a city is policed, how it is sold as a product, or the form of its buildings—is a policy turn in which the preservation of visible and technological control over urban space has become a good for itself, apart from, and sometimes at odds with, the economic and civic life of a city (Waheed, Cheema, & Zeeshan, 2025).

It is crucial to note that this policy stance expressed in a uniform rhetoric of temporary necessity has in fact become persistent and much of it self-reinforcing. After the installation of the security infrastructure and surveillance systems, the institutional incentives in place for the agencies responsible for them incentivize maintenance and growth of the security system, even if the underlying threats that initially gave security its justification have disappeared (Ahmad & Jan, 2020). This institutional inertia, more than any one ongoing security threat, is what has kept a policy response that was designed during the acute crisis years since 2014 to continue as the city's default spatial order ten years later.

This is not unique to Peshawar, but the latter is a good example of the way in which gated and fortified communities, wherever they occur, tend to exacerbate and not resolve underlying social tensions: people who can afford to have a walled compound that is more secure than the rest of the city have less incentive to invest in the overall security required to make the city safe (Flint, 2010). It is also important to note that the city's own political history is marked with a rich tradition of civic organisation, often non-violent, most notable of which was the mass movement around Abdul Ghaffar Khan in the early decades of the twentieth century, which stands in instructive contrast to the securitized, control-seeking model of public order which has been pursued in recent decades,

teaching that the city's cultural repertoire for organising collective life around trust and voluntary discipline is far from absent, but has been largely obscured by the more immediate demands of counter-terrorism (Kurtz L. R. 2011). The recovery of some of that other civic tradition, even in part, may be as crucial to any future de-securitization plan as the actual tearing down of walls and checkpoints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The costs that have been accumulated over the past ten years as a result of a decade of security-based urban policies need to be reversed and require a concerted and intentional series of interventions which break the cycle of reactive thinking that gave birth to this Fortress City. The recommendations presented below are grouped by the causal drivers that were identified in this paper and are meant to be considered as a programme of measures and not as individual solutions.

In fact, the provincial government should have a tactile audit of security infrastructure, conducted on a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis, by an independent person or entity to identify tangible security requirements that are still needed and those that are no longer. T-walls, checkpoints and barriers found during this audit should be removed over a period of time, and priority routes in terms of commerce, emergency response and pedestrian movement should be considered first.

Second, any security hardware not currently able to be removed should be redesigned to be transparent and serve the purposes of the community. The modular, glass-fronted checkpoints could be used as facilities where soldiers and police would learn to perform both security and public assistance duties, thereby lessening the antagonistic nature of everyday interactions between citizens and the state.

Third, the regulatory powers of the Peshawar Development Authority should be reinstated and extended to the peri-urban periphery, which has grown up informally in the last decade. There should be a programme of conditional land regularization that moves informal settlements into formal municipal streets and services based on compliance of certain safety and service requirements, not just seen as a security issue or invisible.

Fourth, there should be a formal process for non-civilian oversight of final decisions on urban security planning, involving urban planners, public health experts and community members in a permanent advisory body with decision-making authority on the installation of security infrastructure, and its removal, so that this is no longer a unilateral decision of security institutions.

Fifth, the capital flight and lack of economic activity in the city's historic markets, as detailed in the city's markets report, could be addressed through targeted economic measures such as tax incentives for businesses that remove private fortifications and reopen street facing facades, as well as infrastructure investments that focus specifically on restoring the reliability of the transportation routes linking Peshawar to traditional trading partners on the other side of the border.

Sixth, displaced and peri-urban communities must be considered as full partners in security planning and not primarily as security suspects, and the structured community liaison programmes must provide a channel to raise the concern of disproportionate security burden and offer alternatives based on local knowledge.

Lastly, the provincial authorities should take the care of the restoration of the public gathering places, squares, bazaars and pedestrian corridors of the city, not as an afterthought, but as a deliberate policy decision: the resilience of the city as a frontier city is as much about the vitality of shared civic spaces as it is about the density of physical fortifications.

All these recommendations do not call for the immediate and wholesale removal of all security measures in place. Some risks along the border and in the newly combined districts are still very real and any sensible programme of de-securitisation must be gradual and in step with a verifiable and consistent decrease in the threat, not on a political timetable. The above recommendations call for one important shift in the default assumption—that the burden of proof is on the city to keep a piece of security infrastructure, not to take it away—and another, that decisions about the city's public space should be made using a transparent, accountable and truly civilian-led process, not the accumulated momentum of successive emergency measures. The exception can't become the rule in a city if it's going to become the rule if it's going to stay alive.

CONCLUSION

The paper proposed the process of securitization of public space in Peshawar from 2015 to 2025 could not have happened for any one particular reason or due to any particular policy decision. Instead, a number of factors were responsible for this process of securitization, which includes: the geography and history of the place making the city vulnerable to conflict; a decade of terrorist attacks that changed the priorities of institutions within the state; counterterrorism efforts that turned into physical infrastructure and became part of the urban space; internal displacement and emergence of a parallel underdeveloped urban periphery; deficiencies within the governance structure that facilitated the institutionalization of emergency measures; and, lastly, the specific policy direction wherein control of space was the goal rather than a measure.

What is evident here is that the evolution of Peshawar from an open gateway city to a walled fortress city is just another example of an unfortunate trend that is observed in other conflict-affected cities around the world, wherein the weight of the city's fortification system tends to overshadow its civic activities altogether. What is evident here is that security and openness can coexist without posing any problem at all; however, to maintain a balance between the two would need more political effort, effective governance reforms, and even the courage to deconstruct what was once constructed. What the suggestions provided in this paper aim to do is merely a start toward such a process where Peshawar can be seen to operate as a welcoming city once again.

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