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# Fortified enclaves as process: spatial practice, class politics, and security in Karachi's urbanism

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## Abstract

**Ethnographic scholarship on fortified enclaves has explained how spatialised modalities and practices of urban security shape city life, yet it has rarely probed how everyday practices of security-provision co-produce social order within these enclaved spaces. Building on seminal work on gated communities, this article repositions enclaves as ordinary but politically charged sites of security-provision in insecure, postcolonial southern urbanisms. Through an ethnographic account of the processes of 'enclavisation' within a fortified enclave in Karachi, the paper brings the production of space into conversation with everyday boundary-work, affective judgments, and negotiation between guards, residents, and service-class entrants. Focusing on how routine security work is enacted and encountered at entry gates, the article reveals the temporal, processual, and relational nature of security-making in a socially stratified, postcolonial urban context marked by class division and democratic fragility. It argues that understanding enclaves as ongoing processes—rather than as static products—illuminates how subjective experiences of security are intimately tied to shifting power relations, processes of exclusion, and urban citizenship. The analysis offers new insights into the local politics of boundary-making. It shows how class, status, and postcolonial urban governance fundamentally shape the circulation, negotiation, and resistance that constitute everyday security in Karachi's urbanism.**

**Keywords** gated community, class politics, everyday, security, spatial order, Karachi

In insecure global cities characterized by high degrees of social polarisation, mundane security concerns around theft and burglary sit alongside fear of exceptional violence. Governing this range of 'everyday' insecurity is dependent on spatial, social and political configurations that coalesce a variety of security technologies and actors (Hagmann, 2021; Kaker, 2024; Nyman, 2021). In such contexts, despite evolutions in disciplinary technologies, older technologies of walling and gating continue to remain significant for ensuring security-provision (Hagmann, 2017). From Mike Davis' famous discussion of 'Fortress LA', where heavily securitized built spaces of residence, work and leisure marked the 'epochal coalescence' of 'urban design, architecture and police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort' (Davis, 1990, p. 224) to Caldeira's account of 'fortified enclaves' in insecure Sao Paulo (Caldeira, 2001), we learn that enclaves—whether in the form gated communities, business districts, special economic zones, migrant camps, or shopping malls—remain important sites of security-provision. They are determined through a combination of material infrastructures, technologies, and/or security discourses that filter and curtail potentially insecure urban circulations.

These two canonical works, set in the USA and Sao Paulo respectively, are the starting point for urban studies scholars studying ordinary spatializations of security (Ghertner et al., 2020; Lemanski, 2004; Maguire & Low, 2019; Mycoo, 2006; Waldrop, 2004). This scholarship contextualizes enclaves as localized urban phenomenon, recording their effects on society. It explains how de-regulation and privatization of urban security governance enable enclave production (Glasze et al., 2004). Operating through hybrid political and material configurations producing a striated urban world (Fawaz et al., 2012; Kaker, 2014). Enabling policies, architectures and technologies linked to their production and maintenance reinforce socio-political differences along race and class (Atkinson & Blandy, 2009; Lemanski, 2004; Muller, 2016). Enclaves materialize urban psycho-social detachment (Nielsen et al., 2021) and insularity (De Cauter, 2004; South & South, 2023), while enclaved urbanism is generative of infrastructural 'disembeddness' from the wider city (Rodgers, 2004). This literature provides descriptions of architectures and technologies that characterize security within such spaces (e.g., walled enclosure, security patrols, signs articulating exclusive use, guarded or unguarded security gates, booms, barbed wires and CCTV

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cameras). It explains and contextualizes significant spatialized modalities and practices of urban security, recording its effects on society. Yet, it does not interrogate *how* the production of space couples with ordinary practices of security-provision to construct security within urban enclaves.

This article addresses the analytical and empirical gaps identified above by bringing theories of the production of space into dialogue with practices of security provision. It builds on anthropological work on spaces of security (Glück & Low, 2017; Maguire & Low, 2019) and on embodied interactions at checkpoints and border crossings (Hammami, 2019). The analysis draws on an ethnographic case study of what I term 'enclavisation', i.e., the everyday processes through which spatialized security is constructed and continuously enacted. Focusing on Karachi, a postcolonial megacity, this article asks three questions: How do enclaves spatialize security and social order? What kinds of security and order do they materialize? How does security operate within enclaved spaces, and what work does it perform? By centering urban space and spatialized security practices, the article offers a detailed account of the everyday life of security. Through this investigation, it contributes to recent debates in critical security studies that argue for the significance of vernacular and spatial analysis in understanding the politics of security (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016; Hagmann, 2017; Jarvis, 2019), particularly for developing open-ended assessments of security apparatuses in understudied southern contexts (Hagmann, 2021; Nyman, 2021).

This article proceeds in four sections. In the first section, I outline my methodology for studying enclaves as processual sites of security and introduce the concept of 'enclavisation' as an ongoing process of security-provision. In the next, I contextualise the production of enclaved spaces in Karachi as an outcome of fraught political relations between the urban elites and the majority. I elaborate how these relations intersect with histories of chronic insecurity, democratic instability, and institutional informality. In the third section, I present a case study of enclavization in Askari, a paradigmic 'gated community' in Karachi. I examine routine practices of boundary-making at Askari, and the lived experiences of those encountering them. The conclusion highlights that in the deeply polarized city, where ethnicity and class structure everyday experiences of security and insecurity, enclaves function as ongoing processes. They are continuously produced by those tasked with enforcing security, simultaneously being negotiated, resisted, and subverted by those subjected to processes of enclavization.

## Space and security-provision: a methodological note

Geographical concepts offer a powerful lens for analysing enclaves as spatialized processes of security-provision. Enclaves address the challange of governing everyday urban insecurity in within increasingly mobile and fluid environments (Hannam et al., 2006; Turner, 2010). In many southern cities, security is rarely unwalled (Hagmann, 2017). Instead, it is maintained by low-tech, ordinary security tools (gates, barriers, walls, identity cards) and experiential arrangements (private or public security guards, community watches) to structure flows, movements, and circulations (Abourahme, 2011; Baumann, 2016; Hammami, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). Enclave mechanisms do not aim to fix or demarcate territory. Instead, they regulate urban circulations to control movements and hence manage insecurity (Foucault, 2007). Enclave gates thus function as passage-point architectures like checkposts—sites where security is actively produced through continuous, embodied, and interactive practices of sorting and regulating bodies (Hammami, 2019). In this way, enclave gates represent the 'place' where security happens.

Recent anthropological work recognizes the relationship between security and space (Glück & Low, 2017). Defined as a dynamic and complex process that both responds to and constructs threat, danger, fear and uncertainty, security is increasingly understood as both a social and a spatial process (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016; Ghertner et al., 2020; Glück & Low, 2017). Glück and Low (2017, p. 285) develop a socio-spatial framework of understanding security. They highlight that global, regional, national, and/or local processes and experiences both structure micro-subjective, affective, bodily level experiences, while being shaped by these as well. This framework allows us to consider the production of secured spaces—as fortified enclaves—as a reflection of historical and multi-scalar relations of power. It also opens possibilities to consider how everyday processes, micro-practices, and contestations of spatialized security-work to construct security as a process.

I conceptualize enclaves as relational spaces—produced through dynamic sets of relations between objects, events and processes stretched across various temporal and spatial scales (Allen et al., 2005; Amin & Graham, 2005). In Karachi, as I discuss in the following section, global political influences, fragmented governmental authority, uneven urban infrastructural development, and fraught ethnic and class relations combine to produce an urban environment where security is increasingly provisioned through spatial order. Since space structures flows, mobilities and interconnections—and through these, produces exclusions and disconnections (Massey, 1991)—I examine how spatial order is both shaped by power relations and serves as a medium through which power relations is exercised and distributed. Processes of security-provision within enclaved spaces are, therefore, deeply embedded in and productive of power differentials.

Keeping these intersections in mind, I conceptualize enclaves as spaces where the work of security-provision is inseparable from the on-going production of space. Security, in this sense, is a continuous process—produced through the intersection of governance structures, material architecture, and security practices. I term this process 'enclavization': the everyday processes through which spatialized security is constructed and enacted. This is different from the term 'enclave', which refers to the physical form of secured space. While 'enclave' denotes a spatial configuration, 'enclavization' captures the dynamic and ongoing processes that sustain it. This methodological focus is particularly suited to studying the everyday life of security, as it encompasses the three dimensions of everyday security outlined by Nyman (2021, p. 317): everyday spaces (what occurs in mundane locations), routine security practices (undertaken by ordinary people, security professionals, technologies and objects), and lived experiences (how security is felt, negotiated, and made on the ground). Focusing on enclavization allows me to examine security as a web of

relations among residents, visitors, guards, and material infrastructures within enclaved spaces. Drawing attention on circulation as the terrain of securitization, moreover, enables a critical analysis of both enclaves and security as dynamic, relational processes.

My analysis of enclavization draws on ethnographic fieldwork on sets of relations that structured Askari as one of many diverse 'fortified enclaves' I studied in Karachi.[1] Primary data sources include field notes, participant observations, informal interactions and in depth, semi-structured interviews, while secondary data sources include maps, reports and circulars published by security-governance bodies.[2] To explain the context of urban security and its governance in Karachi, I draw on interviews with urban security officials (serving and retired home ministry, police, and Citizen Police Liaison Committee officials, as well as owners of private security firms), security analysts, and urban residents from different walks of life. Discussion on processes of enclavization in Askari is developed from interviews and interactions with members of Askari's governing body, city administration officials, police officials and home-office consultants. Analysis on the spatial production of security-provision and its politics within Askari is based on interviews and informal interactions with governors, residents, security guards and visitors (domestic workers and guests), as well as participant observations that examined mobility and circulation as the terrain of security-production (Aradau, 2016; Buscher & Urry, 2009; Huysmans, 2022). Observations focused on the movement of residents and non-residents who differed across identity-based registers (ethnicity, class, colour, gender, and affluence) and by mode of entry (pedestrians, motorists and cyclists). In addition, interviews with residents, security workers, domestic workers, and visitors of enclaved spaces focused on understanding the challenges of negotiating life in an insecure city and on the complexities of accessing, living in, and working within Askari.

Throughout the process, I remained conscious of how my identity (as a young, middle-class Pakistani woman) shaped my research. My social class and positionality as researcher/observer were often equalized given my intersectional identity as a young woman in a patriarchal society. Respondents usually viewed me as a naïve, non-threatening native student-researcher. Establishing rapport with male security guards and domestic workers, however, was more complex, especially as the research developed. I engaged in frank interactions and reflexive discussions on boundary-crossings with guards and domestic workers as a visiting participant-observer in the preliminary stages of the project. I initiated conversations with male guards and domestic workers using kinship-labels such as '*bhai*' (brother) or '*chacha*' (uncle). In turn, I was often addressed as *beta* (child) and sometimes as *baji* (big sister). When older guards or domestic workers used '*baji*', it signalled recognition of my class position, framing me within a servant-master relationship—a common relational structure in South Asian culture (Dickey, 2000).

This positionality was difficult to step outside of. It structured our exchanges, maintaining some formality and reservation. However, the status of '*baji*' was less limiting in establishing trust with domestic and security staff than my status as a 'researcher' who had been formally approved by enclave managers to interview residents, visitors, domestic and security staff, and their managers. This formal status influenced some observations and interactions throughout the project: domestic workers became more constrained, and guards often adopted a performative stance. My stated politics on allyship, presented during project introductions, along with assurances of anonymity, helped facilitate more open exchanges. Additionally, sharing preliminary insights with guards and domestic workers contributed to building trust and deepening understanding.

## Contextualizing the production of enclaved spaces in Karachi

Between 2007 and 2015, the Pakistani megacity of over 18 million people experienced a sharp increase in everyday crime, militant political conflict, and spectacular acts of terrorist violence. This period coincided with the withdrawal of the Pakistani military from national—and urban—politics. The decade-long rule of General Musharraf had ended in humiliation, and Pakistan had reverted to democratic governance. The prospect of elections energized Karachi's notoriously violent ethno-political parties, which mobilized their militant neighbourhood units to consolidate territorial influence over labouring and working-class constituencies. The resulting escalation in ordinary crime and political violence was an extension of the city's deeply entangled ethno-political landscape, where criminal networks overlapped with ethno-political organizations (Hussain & Shelley, 2016). Both state and non-state actors completing for power in Karachi routinely leveraged disorder as a political tool (Gayer, 2014).

Around the same time, terrorist violence peaked in Karachi. This was the fallout of the Pakistani military's unpopular alliance with the US and NATO in the war against terror. Al-Qaeda and Taliban groups strengthened the city's existing ethno-political-criminal nexus (Yusuf, 2012), as the city became a retreat, recruitment ground, source of funding, and site for intelligence gathering. The city's delicate balance of 'ordered disorder' collapsed (Gayer, 2014), and crime and violence spread beyond their usual hotspots: the sprawling working class settlements on the North and West zones of the city. Muggings, mobile and vehicle snatchings, kidnapping, armed robberies, and threats of terrorist bombings became common in previously safe affluent spaces in South and Central Karachi. Government and military offices, foreign consulates, luxury hotels, and busy shopping districts within the administrative districts of Saddar Town and Clifton Cantonment became vulnerable to terrorist violence, while affluent residents living in localities such as DHA, Bath Island, Sea View, and Clifton lived in fear of muggings, doorstep robberies, and violent burglaries.

As Karachi developed an international reputation of being one of the 'most dangerous megacities of the world' (Khan, 2013), urban security governors found it difficult to manage insecurity. The Sindh Police faced multiple challenges to its authority

[1] I carried out fieldwork between 2011 and 2013. During this time, multiple forms of securitized enclaves were established to respond to spiralling insecurity. These included fortified apartment complexes, privately barricaded streets, and open and unwalled irregular settlements that are discursively constructed as restricted-access spatialisations of security. Broader research on enclaves in Karachi highlights the diversity of enclaves in both physical form and socio-political relations, showing how gated communities, enclosed neighbourhoods, and irregular settlements popularised as 'no-go areas' are, in fact, co-constituted and relationally produced (see, for example, Kaker, 2014, 2020).

[2] Participant names are anonymised to protect identities.

and effectiveness. The police had low credibility for its historical entanglement in politics, and poplar knowledge of its corruption (Waseem, 2022). Despite their motivation to tackle Karachi's security challenges, senior police officials felt constrained in their ability to make a meaningful impact. Interviewed officers cited chronic under-resourcing and inadequate funding. Across ranks, police officers expressed fear of reprisal from arresting criminals who might later receive political favour and protection (See also Waseem, this issue).

Senior police and government officials acknowledged—and sympathized with—the anxieties of urban elites forced to live under constant threat (Interviews, 1–4). For Karachi's senior security-officials, who were themselves part of the urban elite, security carried significance not only as a political tool for defending state power, but also as a liberal ideal protecting property and enabling the pursuit of profit (Neocleous, 2017). Many sympathized with the middle class, often describing them as 'those most affected' by security situation (Interviews, 2 and 3). Pressure from resident business elites, a group whose interests the Sindh police and paramilitary rangers had historically looked after (Waseem, 2021; Yusuf, 2012), further shaped their approach (Interviews, 1, 3 and 4).

Karachi's security governors implemented two immediate measures to stabilize the megacity. The first was a rapid expansion in the licensing and provision of security through private security services. In 2010, the number of armed guards outstripped active on-duty police officers by approximately 48% (Siddiqui, 2010). As private security became a lucrative industry, with an annual turnover of around £60 million, police and state security officials began to profit directly by establishing publicly incorporated private security firms (Siddiqui, 2010). The second response was fortification of urban spaces. In an enactment of what Graham calls 'the new military urbanism' (2010, p. xiv)–a condition in which cities not formally at war are nevertheless securitized through militaristic logics–Karachi's landscape became peppered with razor wires, temporary pickets, identity checking posts, and road barriers. Metal detector gates, CCTV cameras, police mobiles and private security guards became ubiquitous symbols of security, supplementing architectures of immobility in shopping malls, government offices, schools, leisure centres, apartment complexes, and even ordinary neighbourhood streets. These materials and technologies were designed to restrict access to fortified enclaves, allowing only those deemed 'safe' by their organizers. The idea was to both slow circulation and to filter the movement of people and vehicles through the city.

The production of fortified enclaves as a means of providing security between 2011 and 2014 was not a novel phenomenon in Karachi. Similar strategies had been developed and practised by vulnerable ethnic groups and the business community during a peak in ethnically motivated political violence in Karachi in the late 1980s. By the end of that period, walls, gates, and security architectures within politically active (often low-middle income) ethnic neighbourhoods were forcibly dismantled by the state, while those in elite localities and cantonment areas—residential zones under military jurisdiction—were left intact. The more recent enactment of enclavization was similarly selective. Officials encouraged residents from religious minority backgrounds, as well as those living in formally planned lower-middle and middle-class neighbourhoods, to fortify individual streets or, in some cases, entire localities through privately organized enclosure.[3] In contrast, attempts at territorialized security within the city's *katchi abadis* (irregular settlements) were met with state opposition and often violence, as these areas were stigmatized and criminalized as 'no-go areas'.

I argue that the selective encouragement of enclavization in Karachi cannot be reduced to a neoliberal fusion of urban planning and security (Berg, 2021), nor understood merely as a marker of class distinction (Caldeira, 2001; Waldrop, 2004). In the postcolonial context, the production of enclaved space emerged from the intimate entanglement of insecurity, urbanization, state rationalities, and elite political culture—each shaped by longer histories of reconfigured sovereignties and uneven governance. Attending to these intersections allows us to understand enclaved spaces not as static urban forms, but as *topological processes* continually produced through specific modalities of state power (Gluck & Low, 2017). In the following section, I trace how enclavization materialized through shifting rationalities of governance in postcolonial Karachi, shaped by the interplay between structural conditions and local socio-political relations.

## State-spatializations, urbanization and violence

Since Pakistan's independence from colonial rule in 1947, democracy never really took hold. In 2008, for the first time in the county's history, a democratically elected government was able to complete its term without being forcibly removed through a military coup or falling through political conflict causing dissolution of the parliament. The constantly shifting tide of power between civilian and military governments and between one democratically elected government and another significantly have altered the structure of state power and operation within Pakistan (Gardezi & Mumtaz, 2004; Shaikh, 2009). It is a hybrid regime, with elements of electoral democracy co-existing with military influence (Talbot, 2021). The resulting order is structured through informality and parallel regimes of influence and power (Azeem, 2020; Malik, 1996). Politics is localized, and citizens are used to accessing welfare and public resources by trading favours, *rishwat* (petty bribes), *sifarish* (recommendations), and *jaan pehchaan* (social capital) through representatives at the lowest rungs of democratic organization (Akhtar, 2018). The fact that governance is often managed through arrangements which supersede state instability allows some level of operational stability in an otherwise unstable political environment. However, this political model has a knock-on effect on urban political conflict. Especially in Karachi, where predictably structured violence is intrinsic to political participation (Gayer, 2014; Verkaaik, 2004).

The violent struggle over urban politics (Siddiqui, 2023) in Karachi is inextricably linked to the production of space (Anwar, 2014; Gazdar & Mallah, 2011, 2013). From the 1960s onwards, the settlement of low-income urban migrants in *katchi abadis* was used by governmental and political actors (across the city, provincial and federal level) as a strategy to retain power over urban politics in Karachi. State officials worked in collusion with illegal

[3] The term lower middle class and middle class references Pakistani understandings of the identity classification. It is an intersectional identity that moves beyond income to include education, housing status, lifestyle and occupation (see Phedra and Ranjan's 2022 review of literature for details).

land developers and political party bosses to facilitate the settlement and regularization of katchi abadis, ensuring that these areas remained ethnically homogeneous vote-banks, politically responsive to their benefactors (Budhani et al., 2010). Over time, many of these socio-politically homogenized *abadis* became territorialized as turfs by ethno-political militant and/or criminal groups, many of whom were co-opted in state politics (Kirmani, 2015; Siddiqui, 2023). For policymakers and the 'good citizens' at large, the city's sprawling *katchi abadis* represented all that was wrong with urban governance in the Pakistani megacity: informality, corruption, criminality, and urban violence.

## Democracy and socio-spatial order

The return to democratic politics fostered a resurgent elite political culture in Karachi. For affluent Karachiites, democratic revival served as a metaphor for decline and disorder. Firstly, it threatened to stunt the project of globalizing and securing Karachi initiated during General Musharraf's decade long (2001–2008) neoliberal dictatorship. Anwar and Viqar (2014) record how Musharraf's era reshaped the dynamics of development and security in Karachi. During this time, urban socio-spatial organization became reoriented along elite interests as opposed to strategic ethno-political calculations. Secondly (and relatedly), it intensified insecurity. As urban politics picked pace, urban conflict amplified. This time, routine ethno-political conflict coupled with terrorism. Violence spread beyond the well-known hotspots in peripheral Karachi to beleaguer previously secure middle-class spaces and residents. Historically, attempts to reestablish control over urban violence were linked to local governments' secession of control to the state military, which had led brutal paramilitary operations against ethno-political-criminal groups (Fazila-Yacoobali, 1996).

Middle-class Karachiites nostalgically wished for a repeat operation and even a return to military rule—an era they described as one of modernity, progress, and peace. This imagined separation of the state and military from democratic politics, and the belief in the military's independence from destabilizing forces, was both naïve and uninformed. It ignored the military's long-standing criminogenic practices in ensuring political power within the city.[4] This ignorance was strategic, following from material and lifestyle gains accrued during military rule, especially through speculative real-estate projects, financial liberalization, and cultural shifts that upheld their authority and class-based dominance (Ahmed, 2023). During this time, middle classes and the state–military apparatus embraced the informality embedded within Karachi's planning framework to pursue their territorial interests (Anwar & Viqar, 2014; Kaker & Anwar, 2024). They also mobilized these informalities to shape security policies in ways that centred their collective interests (Gayer & Russo, 2022; Kaker, 2014, 2020; Waseem, 2022). Together, these dynamics reflected the middle class's relationship with the state and their orientations toward the public sphere at the end of military rule, while extending longer-standing governmental logics of security and securitization into the period of democratic transition.

[4] For example through settling and regularizing katchi abadis to develop vote banks (Kirmani, 2015) and maintaining links with sectarian groups and criminal gangs (Felbab-Brown, 2023).

## Security and urban circulations: postcolonial continuities

In Karachi, governmental logics construct the urban middle class as uniquely deserving of security, perpetuating colonial attitudes that criminalized and spatially distanced the urban poor from elite spaces (Nabi, 2016). This mindset endures in postcolonial governance, where the bourgeoisie's dominance replicates British colonial strategies—mistrust and routinized policing of urban circulations continue to shape relationships between state authorities and working-class residents (Glover, 2007; Ishaque, 1978; Kaker, 2014; Legg, 2007). Reinforcing historical practices of spatial exclusion and selective policing, urban policymakers have actively promoted enclavization in affluent neighbourhoods, while opposing similar efforts in *katchi abadis*.

Middle-class Karachiites often characterize *katchi abadis* as 'unruly', 'insecure', and 'backward', associating the perceived disorder of these spaces with the bodies of their inhabitants. As one enclave resident remarked during a walk in his local park: 'The rest of the city is overrun by *junglis* (the uncivilized). But you won't see any such *katchra* (dirt/rubbish) here'. Such narratives justify the production of surveilled and bounded spaces, allowing the middle-class to reclaim access and control over public spaces in their neighbourhoods.

The creation of enclaves thus functions as both a security measure and a form of political power, consolidating middle-class environments, identities, and lifestyles. Business-community-led organizations such as the Citizen Police Liaison Committee (CPLC) have facilitated private neighbourhood enclosures, with public police support and connections to private security teams (Kaker, 2014). Analogous practices in India have been described by Gooptu (2013) as 'demophobia', marked by defensive responses to the growing democratic mobilization of the poor and lower castes, and a heightened demand for protective enclosure of both public and private realms.

The proliferation of 'safe bubbles' within the wider, insecure city imposes structured interaction between affluent and poor groups, leveraging circulation as a technology of governance. As Simone's work in Douala illustrates, circulation within urban environments is a terrain of both power and resistance, involving tactics aimed at bypassing or manipulating systems of control (Simone, 2005). This raises critical questions about the effectiveness of these security processes: How do enclaved spaces produce distance and order between urban masses and elites? What happens when the functioning of enclaves depends on the labour of those classified as risky or insecure? The next section will address these dynamics through an analysis of enclavization in Askari.

# Security as socio-spatial order: processes of enclavization in Askari

Askari, a leafy green and quiet neighbourhood near Saddar's dense downtown, typifies Karachi's fortified enclaves (see Figure 1). The enclave was established in the 1980s as a housing co-operative to accomodate ex-military and civilian residents on cantonment land—a legacy of colonial segregation and militaristic urban planning (Ahmed, 2023). While cantonment areas were historically reserved for official and military use, postcolonial transformations have seen them opened to civilian residency and

**Figure 1** A street within Askari. Source: photograph by author, 2022.

commercial development. Governance structures for cantonment lands—like the Karachi Cantonment Board—operate beyond civilian city government oversight. Resultantly, cantonments function as juridico-political spaces of exception, enjoying privileges insulated from democratic accountability.

Askari's reputation for order and safety has made it a desirable locality for middle-class Karachiites. Its walled and gated perimeter, strict security protocols, and reliable municipal services sharply contrast with the broader city's disorder, infrastructural shortages, and political turbulence. Residents consciously distinguish Askari as 'a sea of order in a city of disorder', reinforcing their separation from the turmoil of Saddar and wider Karachi (Interview, 5).

Askari residents are subject to strict by-laws covering property transactions, domestic conduct, and communal usage—far more restrictive than those found in other urban developments. In return, Askari offers homogeneity, governance efficiency, and reliable municipal amenities. This willingness to exchange democratic participation for order and predictability becomes starkly evident as residents routinely express dissatisfaction with the failures of democratic governance. As Irfan summarizes, resident distrust of public institutions runs deep:

> The police are a source of insecurity rather than security, the government is extremely corrupt. The only time the government runs properly is when it is under the Army's baton (Interview, 6).

Ultimately, Askari's enclavization highlights how residents negotiate the risks and disappointments of urban democracy, privileging tightly managed spaces that ensure security and order even at the cost of diminished citizenship and public engagement.[5] With spiralling insecurity adding to pressures of urban life, this sense of control is valued above democratic freedoms. '*We're (Askari is) governed by an institution that gets things done. It doesn't have to bother with all the bureaucracy and politics of the city government*', says Jawad, a resident who had moved into Askari just two years ago, highlighting the enclave's appeal as an effective alternative to the inefficiencies of municipal democracy (Interview, 7). Saima, chimed in sharing the surprising fact that '*residents feel so secure that they can even leave their front doors unlocked!*'.

[5] See Kaker and Anwar, 2024 for a detailed discussion on the consequences of this distorted politics.

She added that this reminded her of old Karachi, '*a community-oriented Karachi where security and trust flourished'.* Her reflections illustrated the depth of longing for restored certainty and solidarity within controlled enclaves (Interview, 7).

## Security and discipline

Security in Askari is neither incidental nor passive—it is carefully devised through layers of physical and social boundaries that regulate everyday circulation. The enclave is encased in extensive perimeter walls, with three passage gates with barriers in place that operate as everyday checkpoints, sorting entrants by their status and perceived security risk. At these gates, different actors, all overseen by the enclave's Executive Committee, work together to enforce protocols and sustain the enclave's reputation for order. Cantonment guards distinguished by military discipline stand guard at the main gates, supplemented by commercial private security guards. Meanwhile, a police mobile stands outside the main gate, poised to spring to action if called inside, or to chase on exit. While residents move smoothly through these controlled thresholds, domestic staff, drivers, and municipal workers face a more demanding and scrutinized journey. These actors and barriers combine to configure movement not as an open right but as a privilege earned, negotiated, or withheld in the pursuit of security.

Residents glide easily past the main gate, often waved through without checks. Their Executive Committee-issued security passes are displayed prominently on vehicles, serving as tokens of legitimacy that grant them the freedom to move unimpeded. For residents, the walls, gates, and guards are not barriers but assurances, proof of the enclave's commitment to comfort and stability. Meanwhile, municipal workers and delivery drivers enter via the secondary gate. For them, every routine trip is punctuated by checks and questions. This class of people is highly managed and always peripheral to the heart of Askari's social life.

It is at the third gate, reserved for domestic staff, drivers, and other service workers, that the enclave's security protocols are most visible and most exclusionary. Entry for these workers is conditional to layered security protocols. Entry begins with the requirement for all passing through to be carrying an official security pass with photo ID and expiry date. This security pass can only be obtained after passing a criminal background check against national databases.[6] This pass, issued by the Executive Committee, is mandatory and must be displayed each time a worker passes through the dedicated service gate. Upon arrival, domestic staff may be frisked by security guards to ensure they are not carrying prohibited or suspicious items. Bags carried on exit are routinely checked, requiring a written note from the mistress or employer explaining the contents and purpose for any items that could belong to residents. The process is designed to signal vigilance and order but has the effect of marking domestic workers as perpetual suspects. It reinforces a daily experience that is both humiliating and constructive of criminality as linked to class and occupation within the enclave.

[6] This can be done using an SMS service that checks NIC numbers against personal information recorded in the government's database. The next step is to register the NIC with the local police. This allows the police to check whether the applicant has a criminal record, and in any case provides the police with the essential information needed to locate the employee in case he or she becomes a suspect in any criminal activity in the neighbourhood.

For domestic staff and service workers, movement is an exercise in negotiating suspicion and demonstrating compliance (see Figure 2). In practice, security is a daily test of innocence. As Kiran, a domestic worker (maid), poignantly observes: '*We come in and go out every day. Every day we are criminal until proven innocent'* (Interview, 8). The cantonment guards, with their military training and discipline, anchor this regime. Residents and enclave managers see them as the true custodians of order—better trained and more trustworthy than the private guards supplementing their work. In Karachi, private security guards often resemble watchmen in both role and perception. Their uniforms lend an air of official identity, signalling their presence and purpose to residents and visitors. Yet, beneath this visual authority, as Carriere finds (this issue), many are known to be poorly trained and unskilled. In Karachi, these are often urban migrants from northern regions of Pakistan, without prior expertise in security work. Their selection frequently hinges on availability rather than capability, and physical fitness is not a standard requirement (Babakhel, 2016). As a result, commercial private security guards within Askari provide a visible deterrent but are rarely trusted with more complex or high-risk security responsibilities. The uniform offers momentary legitimacy, but the underlying anxieties about competence and social difference remain, particularly in comparison to military-trained cantonment guards.

Overseeing the choreography of gates, guards, government databases, security passes, notes, checkpoints, and police is the Executive Committee. Tasked with enclave management, the committee continuously adjusts protocols, issues new passes, reevaluates procedures, and instructs guards to tighten security in response to political unrest or surges of urban violence. For example, during the course of my fieldwork, as urban insecurity heightened, the Executive Committee passed a new rule whereby visitors wishing to enter Askari were requited to surrender their National Identity Cards as collateral, to be picked up on the way back. This rule was to be implemented by security guards, who applied it unevenly to entrants. Movement inside Askari was therefore contingent on the gatekeeper's intuition about risk and propriety. In moments of uncertainty, the lines between safety and suspicion blur, and the ordinary rituals of access become negotiations of trust.

As Foucault reminds us, 'it is in terms of this option of circulation, that we should understand the word freedom…'(2007, p. 49). Within Askari, freedom is distributed according to status and legitimacy. Those who belong circulate with ease, while those who labour navigate intricate, often humiliating checks—a choreography of movement that is as much about the performance of discipline as it is about protection. The regime of security, visible in every guarded passage and scrutinized credential, ultimately produces Askari's defining social geography: a stratified circulation, where privilege and suspicion are intertwined, and everyday movement is shaped by the technologies, affect, and politics of exclusion. In this terrain, the walls and gates do not merely contain; they actively create boundaries of trust and belonging, rendering security as both promise and discipline, comfort and constraint.

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**Figure 2** Maid undergoing security check in Askari. Source: photograph by author, 2011.

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## Security and identity

Security and identity in Askari are forged through daily interactions shaped by spatial routines, affective judgments, and persistent anxieties about risk and suspicion. This relational logic is manifest in how security actors—particularly guards—draw on years of experiential knowledge to interpret subtle cues of social difference. Masood, a veteran cantonment guard, remarks: '*We may meet people for the first time, but we know who they are. I've been a security guard for so many years. […] It is a matter of experience*' (Interview, 9). Profiling is routine: young, unaccompanied men, domestic workers, or drivers are generally cast as suspicious bodies. '*We always stop young men who are unaccompanied by anyone—especially if they are drivers or domestic workers*', Kareem, standing guard next to Masood continued (Interview, 9).

These attitudes circulate beyond the gates. Nighat, a housewife, shares her conviction: '*Whenever incidents of petty crime have occurred, it's always the maids—one has to be very careful!*' (Interview, 10). Major, a member of the Executive Committee, expresses a harsher sentiment: '*These bloody servants are not loyal like before. They are our first point of suspicion, and we are usually right*' (Interview, 11). The repetition of these claims crystallizes a structure of feeling: domestic staff are seen as necessary but risky, blurring the social and spatial boundary between 'inside' and 'outside'. Yet the situation is more complex. Though often viewed with suspicion, maids and domestic workers are essential to the enclave's everyday operations. Their ongoing presence unsettles any straightforward divide of space or status: they move through, work within, and engage across the enclave, rendering its boundaries provisional even as they are continually reinforced.

Guard instructions are explicit: to reduce the risk of theft, they are required to stop and check maids, servants, pedestrians, and especially motorcyclists. By contrast, those arriving in cars—particularly when accompanied or visibly affluent—are waved through with minimal scrutiny. My own passage through the enclave underscored this asymmetry. I was seated in the back of an unstickered car driven by Nawaz, my (non-resident) friend's driver. At the checkpoint, a brief explanation through a partially rolled-down window—'*I'm here to meet a friend*'—was sufficient for entry, directly contradicting the Colonel's account of the enclave's stringent protocols. Nawaz's immediate remark—'*It's always easier when someone's in the car with me*'—captured the irony succinctly: class, context, and companionship reshape how one is treated (Interview, 12). His experience was conditioned not simply by who he was, but by the relational presence (or absence) of his affluent employers.

Middle-class residents, those whom the enclave aims to keep secure, are far less likely to be checked. When they are, it provokes frustration. Usman, a keen proponent of Askari's 'island of order', described his annoyance when questioned about security-labour: '*Why do they stopping us, why do they harass us? We live here for God's sake!*' (Interview, 5). For Usman and many like him, security work is meant to target 'others'—outsiders, servants, visitors—not themselves. As Gooptu (2013) observes in similar Indian enclaves, residents expect guards to perform servility as much as vigilance.

Security actors are acutely aware of these sensitivities. To avoid confrontation, guards sometimes refrain from enforcing regulations, navigating a delicate space between authority and subordination. Major, from the Executive Committee, admits frustration:

> When the guards stop them they complain to us. But when we ask why they haven't displayed the 'resident' sticker on their cars, they avoid the question. Instead, they say things like, 'We have been living here for so long, how can we not be allowed inside—don't you recognise us?' … We keep telling them that they must clearly display the stickers we issue them on their cars—it shows guards that you live here! But still, they refuse (Interview, 11).

Nishtar, a newly recruited private security guard, captures this dilemma: 'They don't put up stickers on their cars, and then they protest if I stop them. I'm a poor man—I'm in the position that damns me if I ask and damns me if I don't' (Interview, 13).

In turn, these repetitive acts of stopping, questioning, and checking become routines of performative security (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007), producing and fixing identities of those who are 'to be secured' and those who are constituted as threats (Aradau, 2010; Butler, 2006). The tools and technologies for these judgments—resident stickers, executive committee-issued passes for staff, National ID Cards—become extensions of the enclave's power, artefacts of governmentality (Tawil-Souri, 2012). Critically, these routines are not neutral. They criminalize domestic staff, distinguishing them as a certain 'type'. Following Foucault (2020), identity is made and remade at the checkpoint—not just recognized but produced through the regulatory act.

## Power, negotiation, and resistance

At the enclave's gates, security is not just technical but deeply relational—a site of negotiation, improvisation, and resistance. The power geometry of Askari, as Massey (1991) theorizes, is constantly shifting, produced through encounters between managers, guards, residents, and service workers. Guards must make fine-grained judgments about whom to check. Their weaker economic and social position undermines their authority, especially when confronting the middle classes, who often dismiss security checks as affronts to their status. As a result, guards balance expectations and risk, sometimes choosing not to enforce protocols strictly.

According to Fateh, an cantonment guard, the responses of middle-class entrants encapsulate this tension:

> The most common response is 'Do I look like I'm trouble?' or 'Don't you know who I am?'... To be honest, how can we (guards) really tell what trouble looks like? There was an incident of car stereo system theft here. Kids from such good were responsible for it! Some of them lived here with their parents! Since then, I stop arrogant residents who are not displaying stickers. If they get angry, I tell them that I am just doing my job, following orders!' (Interview, 14).

Colonel, a member of the Executive Committee, finds this resistance frustrating, lamenting both guards' and residents' lack of discipline:

> They don't even check anymore! Their job is to watch over the entry and exit of cars. Even then 100 percent security is not provided. They are very careless. Every day I scold them and threaten to fire them! … No one cooperates! … they don't display the stickers! They have them, but won't display them (Interview, 15).

At the same time, domestic helpers and service-class visitors are anything but passive. This became clear through Nawaz, my friend's driver, who arrived alone in an unstickered car at the enclave's gates to pick me up one afternoon. I was unsure he would gain entry without my number or a security pass, given Askari's strict protocols and his position as a service worker. When I joined him and asked how he got in, he explained matter-of-factly: '*They (guards) know not to bother me too much, because I use Amjad Sahib's name. I'm on duty with his guest, and he'll get angry if I say you delayed me*' (Interview, 16). The vignette shows how power is appropriated and negotiated from below. Drivers and helpers routinely project ties to powerful residents, or use personal recognition, to ease passage. The exchange unfolded in real time as Nawaz moved between visitor, service staff, and recognized proxy for a resident, illustrating how everyday negotiation and social ties can subvert—and subtly reshape—the enclave's intended security order.

Such practices subvert registers of identity by association and reveal a repertoire of urban tactics (Fawaz et al., 2012). Who is stopped and who is allowed to pass is shaped not only by official regulation but by affect, positionality, and improvisation (Monroe, 2016). In this way, the spatial order in Askari is revealed to be provisional and porous, always subject to attempts at transgression and negotiation. Processes of enclavization are, thus, laden with power, continuously producing, contesting, and negotiating boundaries within and beyond Askari. Borders are subjective (Balibar, 2002): security gates exist differently for distinct social groups and for individuals at different moments. Since identity is always unfinished and contested—capable of being reframed through discursive and performative practices—enclave security is an ongoing project, always at risk of subversion and reinvention.

# Conclusion

Security in Askari, rather than a settled regime, is a dual process: it restricts as much as it enables, creates flows as much as boundaries. The decision about whom to stop or permit passage is strategically, contextually, and relationally negotiated. By acknowledging the mutable, multi-scalar nature of spatialized security-provision, this article makes clear that fortified enclaves like Askari are never simply spaces of exclusion, but vibrant nodes where power, identity, and resistance are ceaselessly at work. While the paper presents a detailed ethnographic vignette of Askari, its insights and conceptual approach are generalizable to the spatial practices of security found across the spectrum of middle-class securitized enclaves in Karachi (see also Kaker, 2014).

Examining practical security measures in Karachi's enclaved spaces reveals that urban security is an ongoing, processual negotiation shaped by material boundaries, social identities, and everyday interactions. Drawing from a reflexive, ethnographic methodology attentive to the lived experiences and relational exchanges among guards, residents, domestic workers, and visitors, this research demonstrates that security is enacted, resisted, and continuously renegotiated at enclave gates and within these urban spaces. Such practices at once regulate access and produce registers of inclusion and exclusion, but they also reproduce and contest broader social divisions—often criminalizing subaltern identities while privileging the mobility and security of elites.

Central to this analysis is recognizing how enclavization operates across multiple scales, linking micro-level boundary negotiations to macro-level realities of democratic instability, class stratification, and urban governance in postcolonial Karachi. Security practices in these enclaves reflect and reinforce the selective promises of democracy, as middle-class Karachiites often trade public participation for the perceived stability and homogeneity of tightly managed spaces.

This paper highlights how security regimes, grounded in postcolonial logics and informality, perpetuate exclusionary attitudes and practices towards low-income, ethnic, and migrant communities. By attending to the temporal, subjective, and relational nature of security provision, this analysis shows that

enclaves—whether Askari or others like it—are vibrant yet contested spaces, where boundaries, identities, citizenship, and urban freedoms are continuously created, subverted, and reimagined through everyday negotiations and resistance

## Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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## Declaration of artificial intelligence and large language models

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5. Usman, Askari resident (apartment renter, civilian), interview by author at respondent's residence, Karachi, 23 July 2011.
6. Irfan, Askari resident (villa owner, civilian), interview by author at respondent's residence, Karachi, 18 July 2011.
7. Jawad and Saima, Askari residents (apartment renters, civilians, interview by author at respondent's residence, Karachi, 12 May 2012.
8. Kiran, Domestic worker (maid, working in 3 households within Askari), interview by author at Askari park, Karachi, 21 July 2011.
9. Masood and Kareem, Cantonment guard employed in Askari, interview by author at gate, Karachi, 21 July 2011.
10. Nighat, Askari resident (villa renter, ex-military), interview by author at respondent's residence, Karachi, 18 July 2011.
11. Major, Askari resident and member of Management Committee (ex-military), interview by author in Askari management office, Karachi, 12 May 2012.
12. Nawaz, Driver to non-resident, recorded in fieldnotes by author, Karachi, 23 July 2011.
13. Nishtar, Private security guard employed in Askari, recorded in fieldnotes by author, 14 May 2012.
14. Fateh, Cantonment guard employed in Askari, interview by author in park, Karachi, 14 May 2012.
15. Colonel, Askari resident and member of Management Committee (ex-military), interview by author at respondents residence, Karachi, 25 July 2011.
16. Nawaz, Driver to non-resident, recorded in fieldnotes by author, Karachi, 18 July 2011.

# Biographical statement

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