

The Story of Contestation of Space in Karachi in the Backdrop of Safety and Security Issues

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Introduction

Karachi, the largest city of Pakistan, has passed through many transformations during the recent past. Swift and frequent break down of public safety and the security situation is a core issue that has become a major concern for all the stakeholders. Multiple acts of terrorism have taken place in the city during the past fifteen years. These attacks targeted military installations, places of worship, market places, government buildings, residential quarters, buses and public transport vehicles, major streets and intersections and a wide variety of commercial locations. Thousands of people have lost their lives while many more have been severely or partially wounded. Extraordinary damage to the assets and property of people and government has taken place during the course of these events. Trauma, fear, psychological disorders and anger are some of the common conditions that continue to affect millions of residents in the city. Due to weakening of urban governance and gradual decline in the maintenance of public safety, lawless elements have strengthened their stronghold in the city, especially along peripheral and low income neighborhoods. These lawless elements have started influencing the physical outlook and urban fabric of Karachi city. This paper will therefore, put an effort not only to highlight these lawless elements but will also indicate the forms physical spaces have taken in the wake of the alarming safety and security situations of the city. With extraordinary rise in militancy through terrorist groups, sectarian and targeted killings continue unabated. Many elements possessing links and support of some political groups resort to street crimes, robberies, kidnappings for ransom and other heinous deeds. As a response, people have developed several mechanisms to enhance their personal safety and security. They have also resorted to initiatives to safeguard their residences, places of worship, public spaces, work places and other category of spaces. Installation of physical barriers on streets, thorough fares,

alleys, public assembly grounds and similar spaces are a major visible outcome. These interventions have changed the status of conventional public, semi-public, semi-private spaces in functional and jurisdictional manner.

Other stakeholders of the city have taken similar measures. The organized resident groups of the city have barricaded and walled their houses and streets as well as hired private security guards for added protection. Many political parties have constructed fortifications around their headquarters and homes of prominent leaders and offices, after closing access roads for their protection, with armed guards and police patrolling. Police and military authorities have also adopted similar measures for protecting their offices and installations. This paper is based upon an extensive research which was conducted between December 2013 and January 2015 to examine the status of public spaces in Karachi with reference to safety and security issues.¹ The research methodology comprised literature review, field survey, structured and semi-structured interviews from key stakeholders and silent probe and observation in many locations of the city.² Whereas the full study included several neighborhoods and spot locations in Karachi, two of them – namely Nine Zero and Block 'C' in North Nazimabad – are included in this paper to conform to the length and scope.

Context

Karachi is the largest metropolitan center in Pakistan with an estimated population of over 20 million. It is the main seaport and financial center of the country, as well as the capital of Sindh province. Within its folds, the city possesses more than 700 squatter settlements, a category of informal neighborhoods which is continuously on the rise. Observers believe that many criminals and terrorists are able to disguise and hide in these neighborhoods due to the porous nature of such settlements.

Karachi plays an important role in the national economic activity. The city generates about 15 percent of the national GDP, 42 percent of value added in manufacturing sector and 25 percent of the revenues of the Federal Government. The city's economy is large and diverse which is highly benefitted by the presence of dynamic industrial enterprises. It is predicted that the city can maintain its important role as the major industrial and commercial center of the country over the next decade, provided peace and stability are restored to an acceptable level.

Being the major seaport of the country, Karachi serves as the shipping and maritime hub for Pakistan as well as for landlocked Afghanistan. It provided hundreds of jobs to skilled and semi-skilled laborers, many of whom came from different parts of the country. As a result, the city has become a target for terror attacks due to its extraordinary importance to the national economy.

Karachi Strategic Development Plan 2020, the recently prepared planning document, informed that during the recent past the city added an average of 200,000 migrants each year from within Pakistan as well as from the neighboring countries, which has had a tremendous impact on the quality of life in the city (see Table-1). As the majority of these migrants are in their twenties and new entrants to the job market, their economic and social needs are not properly addressed due to the poor planning of urban growth. Moreover, they are left to sustain on their own. This age group is the most vulnerable, to whom any radical ideology is easily acceptable. They can become capable collaborators in violence. Because of this, the *katchi abadis* (squatter settlements) and peri-urban locations, in which most of them end up, have become breeding grounds for violent protests and criminal activities (such as drugs and gambling dens). In Lyari for instance, as mentioned by a senior journalist, there are a number of ethnicities including Baloch, Katchis, Pathan, Sindhis and Urdu Speaking. Bihar Colony, Agra Taj Colony, Kalri, where one finds Urdu speaking folks and then Lea Market, Art Chowk and Chakiwara are Baloch dominated areas.

	1981	1998
Migrant as % of population	46.1	23.8
From other country	22.2	5.5
From KP/FATA	7.5	5.0
From Punjab	11.3	6.7

Table 1

Population and Percentage of Migrants. Source: Gazdar 2011

As Karachi's economy is growing, the space requirements/needs of the expanding economic activities deserve appropriate allocation of developed space in suitable locations where these can grow in a harmonious relationship with the rest of the city.

A sizable scale of vacant and unoccupied land also exists in Karachi. The eastern, north eastern and western territories of the city possess a vast expanse of unutilized and underutilized land. Land speculation at the formal and informal level is a formidable investment option. However, as the transactions and operations of land disposal are not usually transparent, they often cause conflicts and disputes which result into violence and long ranging communal feuds.

In terms of transport and public mobility, Karachi has very few decent options. The city lacks mass transit and functions along informal choices. Motorcycles are another prominent mode of transport subscribed by ordinary citizens. The number of bikes is rising exponentially due to its lower cost and convenience in use. However, motor bikes are also a vital catalyst in the conduct of street crimes, target killings and kidnappings. City police is unable to effectively manage the data of bikes, their ownership and transactions. On sensitive occasions, such as religious events or political rallies, the administration imposes a temporary ban on pillion riding. This move helps to a partial extent only. Security barriers, other physical checks and blockages principally target to limit the movement of motor bikes in a bid to prevent crime and terror attacks.

Many lands that were used as sewage farms and other public spaces now face the threat of land grabbing. *Gutter Baghicha* (sewage farm) in South West of Karachi has been encroached to a great extent. In situations of sewage system break downs, flooding of streets and lanes and conflicts and protests erupt in different neighborhoods. It is also important to note that managers of land grabbing along *nallahs* create barriers to prevent undesirable people from entering the localities.

There are areas in the city, such as cantonments and Defense Housing Authority, under the control of the defense authorities. Due to the location of such areas near Arabian Sea and commercial markets, these locations have become highly desirable residential enclaves for the rich. The boards that manage development in these areas have become influential players in the residential real estate markets and are developing and leasing serviced residential plots to non-military and military customers alike. This in turn has made the already porous nature of the city more available for illegal and unlawful activities.

Development of social assembly spaces is yet another development trend in the city. Along major arterial roads, especially in North Nazimabad, Gulshan, Gulberg and Malir Towns, one of the new commercial uses that are replacing large-sized residential plots is social assembly facilities such as marriage halls. These facilities bring large volumes of vehicular traffic, predominantly during evenings and weekends and result in congestion on local neighborhood streets. Moreover, this has made the private residential quarters of the city open to the public, thus accessible for terrorist and illegal activities as well. Yet another trend which can be seen across locations such as Saddar, Gulshan-e-Iqbal and North Nazimabad, is the proliferation of aggressive signage and billboards. These signs appear in all sizes, heights and color. Rather than benefiting the commercial establishments by presenting a coherent message, these signs compete with each other for prominence and result in a highly inconsistent and cluttered visual environment.

Furthermore, there is a densification of planned and unplanned neighborhoods. Issues of ownership, access to public space and amenities remain unresolved which cause an enormous amount of trouble and conflict.

Urban Conflicts – A Review

Karachi has been in the grip of violence for over a decade. From 2003 through 2011, nearly 5,549 people were killed by different types of violence in the city, involving terrorism, target killings and sectarian attacks. The number is persistently on the rise, in the backdrop of intensifying turf wars among land and drug mafias and criminal gangs. The situation looks no different when one observes the trend of other crimes. Be it car snatching and theft or abduction for ransom, all show an upward rise.

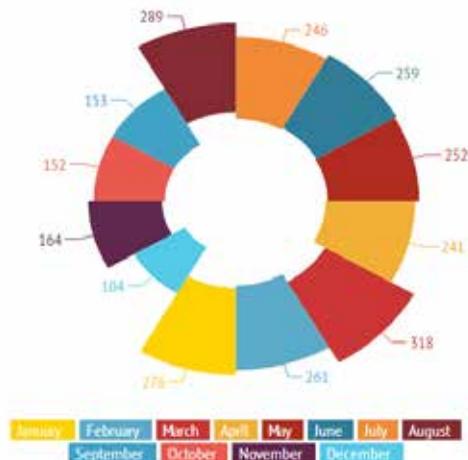
The violence, based mainly on sectarian and political grounds in many ways reflects the state of security in Pakistan's urban centers. As Karachi is the largest city of Pakistan, the government has taken several steps in resolving the precarious state of affairs in respect to safety and security of the common people. The situation in Karachi is being reviewed on an urgent basis as a national security issue that impacts the conduction of business of the state.

Different types of conflicts and violence is experienced which is stated below:

- Political violence continued to mar the security scenario of Karachi with a very high number of disturbing incidents taking place since the past decade. Most incidents of political clashes in Karachi were reported between various political groups including the Muhajir Quami Movement (or MQM Haqiqi)³, Sunni Tehrek (ST) and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). The supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)⁴, the Awami National Party and the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP)⁵ were also reported to be into such violence on a political basis. Also, a considerable number of criminal groups in the city which enjoy political backing from one party or the other were involved in violence.

The poor state of law and order resulting from the 2010–11 surges in ethno political violence enabled militant groups to consolidate their presence and launch attacks in Karachi. There have been unconfirmed reports of the key Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)⁶ operatives relocating to the city. The TTP, an umbrella movement uniting militant factions in Pakistan’s northwestern tribal areas, has increased its fundraising and recruitment activities in the city and launched several high-profile attacks (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1
Karachi Terror Profile
of 2013



Over 2,700 people were killed in Karachi in 2013.

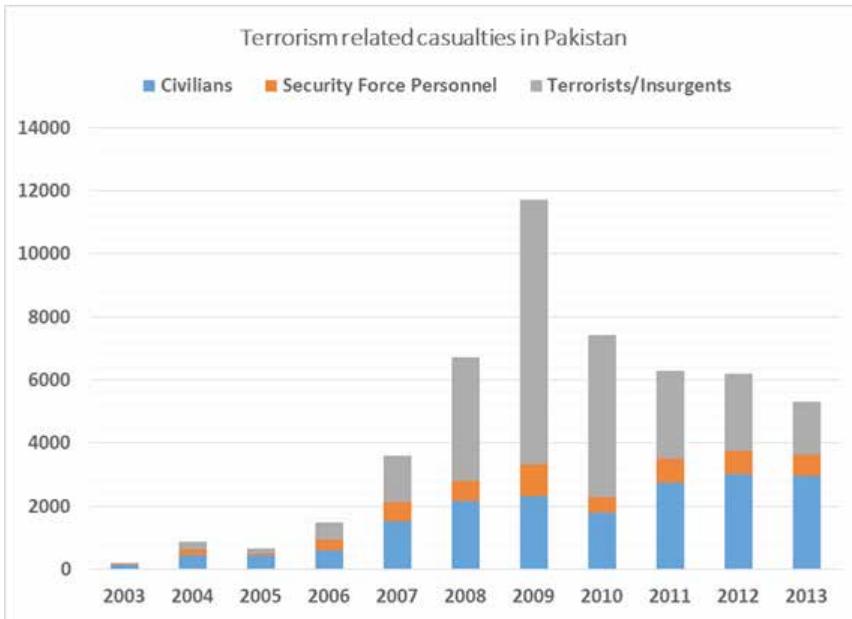


Figure 2

Profile of Suicide Attacks

Militant groups, including the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and extremist sectarian organizations have consolidated their presence in the city. In addition to drawing new recruits and generating funds through criminal activities, militants increasingly attack state and security targets in Karachi. The objective of ultra-right religious organizations is to enforce an obscurantist version of the religion. To achieve this objective, these organizations resort to violence, target killings of opponents and terrorist attacks. Easy availability of arms and weapons, existence of internally displaced people from the northern part of the country, poverty and unemployment become catalysts in the spread of such violence.

- Karachi has witnessed a surge in sectarian violence since 2009. Sixty four sectarian attacks took place between January and November 2011, up from fifty one in 2010. A 2010 Crime Investigation Department (CID) report stated that more than half of the 246 terrorists arrested in Karachi between 2001 and 2010 were affiliated with sectarian outfits (Figures 3a and 3b).

Figure 3a

Sectarian killings in Karachi

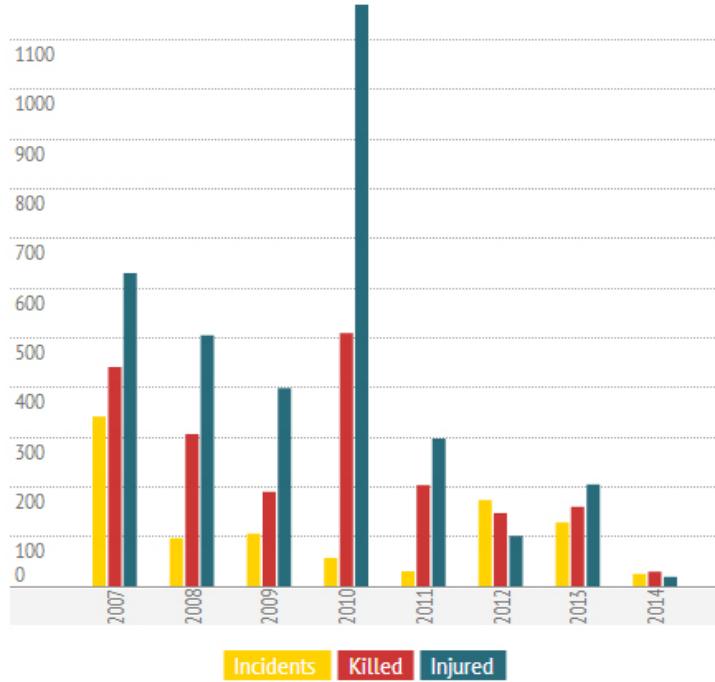
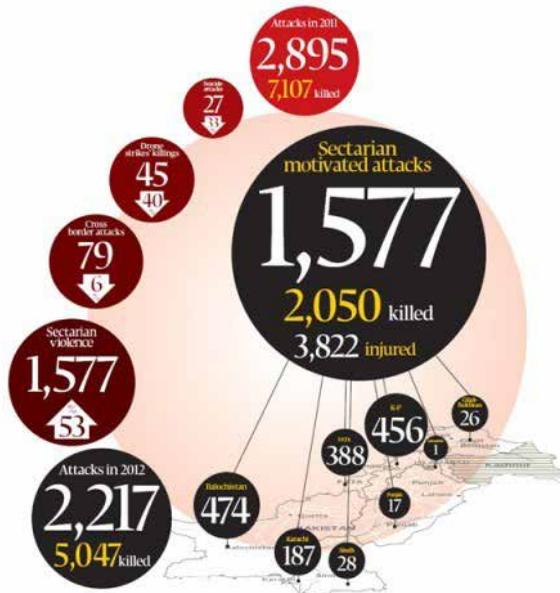


Figure 3b

Sectarian killings in Karachi

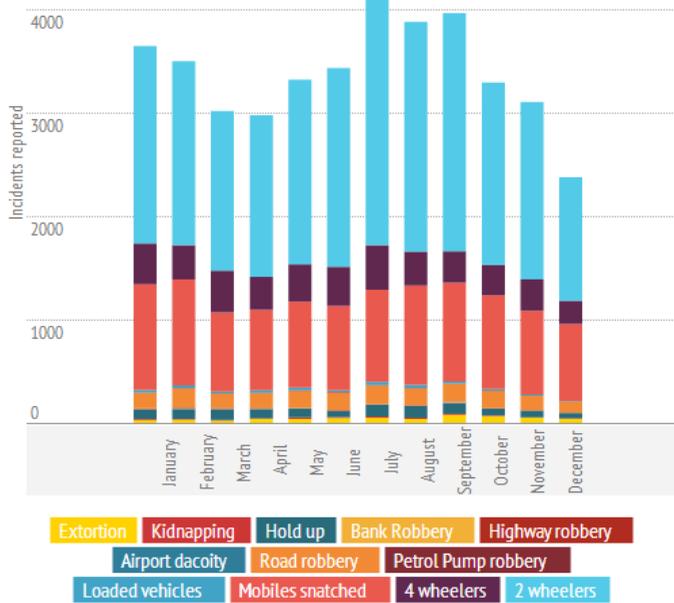


- Karachi’s ethno-political violence is facilitated by an overall crisis in law and order, as pointed out earlier. Many of the gunmen involved in target killings were not political party activists but members of one of approximately two hundred criminal gangs in the city, many of which boast affiliations with mainstream political parties. The gangs foster a perpetual sense of insecurity in the city by engaging in various criminal activities. The incidence of crime in Karachi is extremely high but criminal activities with political dimensions are the most disruptive to Karachi’s stability (Figure 4).

Many criminal gangs patronize land mafias that manage the apportioning and sale of encroached land. These mafias occupy commercial plots, government land and illegal squatter settlements - often through violent or illegal means, including intimidation, forgery, bribery and arson and sell them to the highest bidders.

Figure 4

Crimes reported in 2013



- In addition to political power and land, Karachi’s political parties have clashed over access to the illegal funds generated through

extortion by both political party workers and criminal gangs. According to news reports, over Rs. 12 million (\$0.13 million) are informally collected daily from more than four hundred markets and shopping plazas, transporters and tankers that need to park in the city, small business owners, traders, factories and the residents of the illegal encroachments. Citizens generally believe that supporters of political parties extort money to both fund their activities and to mark their turf across the city.

Between March and June 2012, twenty traders were killed for allegedly failing to pay extortionists and another fifteen were abducted to facilitate payments.

- Karachi's largest and perhaps most powerful criminal gangs operate out of Lyari, a low income settlement with a population of over one million. Historically, Lyari has been a PPP stronghold and a hub of drug smuggling, weapons trafficking, extortion, kidnapping and gang warfare. After the death of Abdul Rehman, who controlled Lyari's warring gangs, the outfit has been headed by Uzair Jan Baloch. He was trying to escape the country but was arrested by Interpol while crossing into Dubai from Muscat on 28 December 2014.

Most of the residents believe that Karachi is a poorly policed city. During its recent past, performance of the municipal bodies has declined and the resource base for usual maintenance and development works diminished. Ongoing administrative friction between provincial government and local institutions is the main reason for this state of affairs. The ethnic, religious and sectarian, socio-political and economic complexities have caused deep fault lines in the overall urban composition of the city. Inflow of arms, gradual development of militant wings and armed gangs under political and sectarian patronage and a weak regulatory capacity of state institutions has caused this schism to grow. Violence erupts to settle dispute (and causing fresh ones), camouflaging criminal enterprises and usurping the control of assets, territories and neighborhoods.

This is a slightly different take on the roots of violence in Karachi. People experience ethnic tensions in Karachi. The political parties, that are largely consistent with different ethnic identities, desire to

sustain power in their traditional constituencies. All these factors are vital to understanding Karachi. Police force and the system of justice are inadequate and incompatible to the present day challenges faced by the city. With an estimated population of over 20 million, Karachi possesses a police force of 32,524 which is dangerously low in number.

Political influence in recruitment, massive corruption in the routine functioning of the force (as confirmed by studies by Transparency International) and inaccurate deployment leave very little room for proper maintenance of law and order. The criminal justice system is in need of reform. The procedures and conduct of trials and disposal of cases are slow and not free from errors. Observers criticize that very few hardened criminals could be given lawful sentences despite their long crime tallies.

Ordinary citizens resort to developing physical barriers and guard posts at the entry and exit points of residential lanes and streets to obtain some measure of safety. The following sections discuss this phenomenon in some detail.

Physical Barriers⁷ as Means of Public Safety and Security

Physical barriers such as fences, walls and vehicle barriers act as the outermost layer of security. They serve to prevent, or at least delay attacks and also act as a psychological deterrent by defining the perimeter of the facility and making intrusions seem more difficult. Tall fencing, topped with barbed wire, razor wire or metal spikes are often emplaced on the perimeter of a property, generally with some type of signage that warns people not to attempt to enter. A police officer (who wishes to remain anonymous) during a discussion alludes that containers and physical barriers are temporary barriers put in place to cordon off areas to avoid clashes and to remove any possibility of skirmishes. He further indicates that for events such as rallies, processions and protest sit ins, direct co-ordination is formed with party leaders and main organizers and security is provided according to their demands. Many times interests of two political parties are provided for, while anticipating any need for additional security in case of clashes between the two. Streets and areas are blocked which are understood to be main threat zones and are vulnerable to attacks. Areas are sealed. A route for the main rally is decided and noted. Care is taken that no outsider or

unrelated person is able to enter the demarcated area. Jamming devices are used to ensure no explosive material is activated. The inconvenience to the other citizens, those who are not part of these gatherings, is a second priority. The main focus is the security of the people that are part of the event. He further mentions that street barriers are helpful to the extent that they stop movement of cars and mainly motorcycles which are the main mode of transport for criminals on the street. If a person complains about the blockage in the streets or violation in his right of passage, his opinions are heard and action is taken according to the merit of his argument.

North Nazimabad, Block C

North Nazimabad is a well-planned neighborhood in the north eastern part of Karachi. While it possesses residents from different social, religious and cultural backgrounds, some sub localities have become focal points of specific religious communities. The 'C' block in this neighborhood is dominated by Dawoodi Bohra community which is an off shoot of Shia Muslims. Most of the apartments, single unit houses and other form of residences belong to this community. The Bohras have their *Jamaat Khana* (place of worship) and other communal facilities in this area. Till recently, there were no barriers in this neighborhood as Bohras led a low profile social life with cordial relations with other communities.

However, this community was impacted by several terror attacks which left many people dead and wounded. As a result, feeling of insecurity spread fast amongst the community members. Now all the streets leading inwards to the sub-neighborhood are being blocked with metal and concrete barriers. No vehicle or pedestrian can enter without a check (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Part plan of North Nazimabad, Block-C.
Source: Author



Prior to the various attacks on the Bohra Community⁸ and that too near their place of worship, the streets of Block C commonly known as Bohra Compound had *chowkidars* (watchmen) but movement was not as restricted as it is now after the attacks. Block C houses a Bohra mosque, a *Jamea* (university), hostel and auditorium. To protect these buildings from further attacks, all streets surrounding these important locations have been closed including the secondary streets. A long detour has to be taken by a back route to enter the area. National Identity Cards have to be produced to enter the area and inform at the guard post the house one is visiting. The entrance is also the only point of exit.



Figure 6

Partial plan – Bohra neighborhood in North Nazimabad.
Source: Daily Dawn

Social polarization has been on the rise, following the security challenges observed in the city. Block C is such a case where majority of the houses are owned by Bohris and more are being sold out by non-Bohri residents to members of Bohra community (Figure 6).

Azizabad '90' – Headquarter of Muttahida Qaumi Movement

90 (nine zero) is the home of the main leader of Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the second largest political party in Sindh. Although he resides abroad, all party activities take place in the vicinity. It now acts as the head office of MQM.

All streets leading to the house are blocked by arm lever barriers and are monitored by party volunteers. The road leading from Mukka Chowk has been gradually blocked over time. Initially, only one side of the road had been surrounded, now no traffic is allowed on either side of the road. Once a main thoroughfare, it has been completely cordoned off. Entrance is marked by a police vehicle, party volunteers (often believed to be armed), city wardens, concrete and traffic police barriers. One is allowed inside only if he is a resident, wishes to visit a resident or wants to visit the party office. A small cabin servicing as a help desk is where visitors have to register and show identification and state purpose of visit. After entering this checkpoint, visitors are relatively

Figure 7

Rangers outside
Azizabad '90'.⁹

free to move about. However, if visitors wish to visit the Khurshid Memorial Hall - The Rabata (Liaison) Committee office, they have to register a second time and hand over any sharp objects they may have. There are other guard posts as one walks towards the office. As visitors reach the office, their belongings are checked again



for any suspicious objects. According to a representative of MQM the physical barriers have now become mandatory in order to have security, especially after the numerous terrorist attacks at their office and the target killings of their party workers. He said that it is the responsibility of the government to provide security to each and every citizen but since the Police Department has failed to fulfill their duty, everyone has taken the matter in their own hands (Figure 7).

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The research clearly indicates that there are multiple stakeholders who exercise influence on the control of space. As observed in the case example of Nine Zero in Azizabad, the periodically stabilized political influence of the MQM plays a vital role in the management of safety and security of residential locations, commercial enterprises and other amenities in the area. The law enforcement agencies have reconciled their role in alignment with this reality. The same status prevails in other locations and neighborhoods of the city where the law enforcement agencies and municipal authorities attempt to align their role according to the overt and covert influence of the stakeholders. This dilution of administrative authority and consequent rise of informal practices has evolved into a spatial anarchy that continues to expand unabated.

The city requires a re-positioning of the roles and responsibilities of state and non-state actors in respect to safety, security and control of public spaces. The absence of this clarity is favoring the various vested interest groups who utilize public spaces to their private advantage. Similarly, spot responses in the form of installing barriers or guard posts only serve to a limited extent. Karachi requires a clear strategy of public space management to enable her citizens to collectively benefit from the existence and access to such spaces.

Endnotes

- 1 The author acknowledges with gratitude the financial support received from International Institute of Environment and Development, London UK towards this research.
- 2 The research team included Architects Bushra Owais Siddiqui, Dureshahwar Khalil and Sana Tajuddin.
- 3 MQM is a secular political party in Pakistan mainly representing Urdu speaking *mohajirs* and other members of the society. MQM is generally known as a party which holds strong mobilizing potential in Karachi, having traditionally been the dominant political force in the city and many other cities in Sindh.
- 4 Jamaat-e-Islami is a social conservative and Islamist political party. Its objective is to make Pakistan an Islamic state, governed by Sharia law through gradual, legal and political process.
- 5 Pakistan Peoples' Party is a center-left, progressive and social democratic political party in Pakistan. Affiliated with the Socialist International, its political philosophy and position in the country's political spectrum is considered center-left.
- 6 Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is the banned umbrella organization of militants and terrorists who claim to enforce a version of Sharia law by resorting to terror attacks and militancy on the state and people of Pakistan.
- 7 Discussion with a police officer
- 8 S. Raza Hasan. 19 September, 2012. "Infant, six others killed: Twin blasts hit Bohra community in Karachi". *Dawn*. <<http://www.dawn.com/news/750388/infant-six-others-killed-twin-blasts-hit-bohra-community-in-karachi>>
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Post Script

This research is based on the field work done from December 2013 to January 2015. Some changes have appeared in the status of barriers after the intensive launch of Karachi Operation under Pakistan Rangers since 11 March 2015. Partial removal of barriers from some locations has been done. The changes during the current time period merit a fresh probe.