



Anglo-Afghan Power and Politics, 1893–1947

The Durand Line Unmasked

NABI SAHAK

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Anglo-Afghan Power and Politics, 1893–1947

“Unilaterally imposed by the British in the nineteenth century and accepted by Pakistan but never by Afghanistan, the Durand Line continues to be contested by the two states. In the literature dealing with the dispute, the Pashtun view has been missing. Now, at last, Nabi Sahak has filled this gap in an original book of real authority. We should all be in his debt.”

—James Mayall, *Emeritus Professor of International Relations, University of Cambridge*

“The first comprehensive study of the making of the Durand Line, which has marked one of the great geopolitical fractures of the world since the nineteenth century, Sahak’s book makes use of hitherto unknown Afghan sources to give a wholly original account of this crucial boundary. It will be of interest to historians as well as policymakers.”

—Faisal Devji, *Professor of Indian History, University of Oxford*

“Drawing on previously neglected Afghan primary sources, Nabi Sahak challenges conventional narratives and reveals the true geopolitical motives behind the 1893 Durand Mission, arguing that its primary aim was to solidify Afghanistan’s northern boundary rather than redefine its border with British India. This meticulously researched work offers a reassessment of a pivotal historical moment. It is essential reading for anyone seeking a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Anglo-Afghan relations and the lasting impact of colonial diplomacy.”

—Richard Caplan, *Professor of International Relations, University of Oxford*

“Coerced by the British upon the Afghan rulers, the Durand Line has been a persistent source of instability between Afghanistan and British India, and now Pakistan, catalysing the region’s transformation into an ongoing conflict zone. In this seminal work, Sahak transcends conventional narratives, offering a balanced and deeply researched exploration of the Durand Line’s origins. He unveils a refined historical chronology, illuminating previously obscured dimensions of this contentious boundary. By dissecting historical records and presenting a nuanced perspective, Sahak provides an indispensable understanding of the Line’s complex genesis and its enduring ramifications. This book is a crucial contribution to our

comprehension of a geopolitical fault line along the roof of the world that continues to shape the region's future.”

—James Kurth, *Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Swarthmore College*

“Nabi Sahak's rigorous study offers a fresh and illuminating perspective on the Durand Line dispute, challenging historical misrepresentations and shedding light on overlooked documents. By amplifying Afghan voices and examining newly uncovered evidence, it provides valuable insights for researchers and policymakers engaging with South Asia.”

—Michael Rainsborough, *Professor and Academic Principal, Australian War College, Canberra*

“Too often, the interest and expertise of scholars of South Asia diminishes rapidly into the Western and Northern realms of Pakistan. This book brings Afghanistan back into the South Asian narrative and populates it with neglected Afghan voices and source materials. This book makes a convincing and timely case that the Durand Line is not just the contested edge of South Asia, it is integral to the historical story and contemporary reality of the whole South Asia region.”

—Matthew McCartney, *Professor, Head of Research (Africa Urban Lab, ASE-Zanzibar) and former Director of the Contemporary South Asia Studies Programme (University of Oxford)*

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To the memory of the countless lives extinguished and liberties stolen in the trans-Durand region, and to the families whose loved ones continue to fall victim to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and unlawful detentions. People of the tribes, your suffering, resilience, and unyielding pursuit of justice have not been forgotten. This work is dedicated to you.

FOREWORD

Boundaries drawn by colonising powers reflect the interests of the colonisers rather than the familial, communal, and political realities of the peoples affected. The Durand Line, separating Afghanistan and Pakistan and one of modern history's most contentious frontiers, vividly demonstrates the destructive legacy of colonial border-making.

This book takes the critically important step of bringing Afghan perspectives into international debate regarding the Durand Line. The introduction of voices often absent from global discourse brings new material and fresh insight to a decisive juncture in regional history. In so doing, this work disrupts established dogmas and provides a powerful basis for re-examining the colonial narratives shaping discussion. The Durand Line continues to be a source of impoverishment and insecurity for those whose communities it has divided. Through Sahak's analysis of its historical, geopolitical, and human dimensions, the Durand Line emerges as a catalyst for regional instability, a source and symbol of unhealed wounds, and a colonial artefact that continues to reverberate in Afghanistan as a potent injury to collective identity.

While demonstrating rigorous commitment to scholarly inquiry, this work is inspired by the effort to heal wounds, highlight injustice, and open pathways to peace. Drawing upon an exhaustive body of primary and secondary sources, Sahak explores the motivations of key actors while grounding analysis in the lived realities of Pashtun communities.

By centring the agency of affected communities, the book addresses a longstanding impasse and seeks to offer a path to reconciliation.

This is an important, meticulous new history of a vitally important region, and a thoughtful, courageous contribution to decolonisation. It is a privilege to introduce this seminal work, with the hope it sparks dialogue and action towards a more equitable future.

Brisbane, Australia
March 2025

Dr. M. Anne Brown

PREFACE

The Durand Line was one of the first geopolitical concepts I encountered as a child growing up in Kabul, Afghanistan, during the tumultuous 1980s. It was a constant backdrop to the Soviet invasion, the subsequent civil war, and the rise of the Taliban. This omnipresent line, essentially a colonial relic, has shaped the destinies of millions of Pashtuns on its both sides. I firsthand witnessed the devastation of Afghanistan wrought by the Soviet occupation and the ensuing civil war. My family, like countless others, bore the brunt of these conflicts. The city of Kabul, once a vibrant metropolis, was reduced to rubble. In the fall of 1993, a rocket exploded mere metres from my home, leaving me and two other neighbours with multiple shrapnel wounds that severely injured us. By the close of the civil war in 1996, Kabul had lost 65,000 of its residents. During these turbulent years, the Durand Line emerged as a central theme in the Afghan discourse. It was a source of endless debate, a symbol of historical injustice, and a catalyst for regional tensions. How, I wondered, could a simple line sever the bonds between families, communities, and tribes, particularly when they have consistently resisted its imposition?

To comprehend the ferocity of the Durand Line and its adverse effects on bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is essential to situate this boundary within the broader context of the Cold War in the 1980s. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 presented the United States with a strategic opportunity to avenge its Vietnam losses, a

conflict in which the North Vietnamese government, bolstered by significant Soviet military aid, including weapons, ammunition, and logistical support, inflicted considerable casualties and ultimately led to the US withdrawal. The Vietnam War ended with a victory for North Vietnam and its communist allies in 1975, when North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon, leading to the fall of South Vietnam and the subsequent reunification of the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976. This outcome left a lasting scar on American military and political prestige.

By championing the Afghan Mujahideen's jihad against the communist invaders, the United States sought not only to counter Soviet expansionism but also to restore its influence in the region. Supporting the Mujahideen was viewed as a strategy to undermine Soviet power and demonstrate that the United States could effectively challenge its adversaries. In essence, the clash of global interests between the United States and the Soviet Union transformed Afghanistan into an international battleground of Cold War rivalry and a venue for retribution against Soviet forces, enabling the United States to reclaim its standing on the world stage. Consequently, at the request of the United States, Pakistan assumed the role of intermediary, facilitating substantial support for the Mujahideen, who characterised the Soviet presence as an act of aggression reinforcing a puppet government that imposed communist agendas on the Afghan populace. This narrative gained substantial traction, particularly following US President Reagan's widely publicised Oval Office meeting with key Mujahideen leaders in 1986 and the subsequent joint press conference between Reagan and Mujahideen Chairman Mohammad Yunus Khalis in 1987. These landmark events not only captured global attention but also emphatically demonstrated American endorsement of the Afghan jihad.

Meanwhile, Pakistan seized the prospect offered by the Soviet-Afghan War to further its own geopolitical objectives. Leveraging its recent development of nuclear capabilities, Pakistan adeptly positioned itself as a conduit between the United States and the Afghan Mujahideen, thereby showcasing its critical role in the conflict. This strategic manoeuvring equipped Pakistan to gain US approval for overseeing not only the distribution of American aid and global humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, but also the military operations of the Afghan resistance. Concurrently, Pakistan sought to compel the pro-Soviet Afghan governments in Kabul to recognise the Durand Line as a legitimate international boundary. On the contrary, those Afghan governments

steadfastly rejected the Durand Line's legitimacy while also overtly maintaining their historical claim to approximately 30 per cent of Pakistan's territory, encompassing the majority of Pashtun-speaking regions. This bilateral discord cultivated a persistent atmosphere of hostility between the two neighbours. Under the guise of supporting the Afghan anti-Soviet resistance, Pakistan's interventions were, in reality, aimed at thwarting the emergence of any resilient government in Kabul that could pose a threat to Pakistan's sovereignty, especially vis-à-vis the Durand Line, ensuring that only puppet regimes could survive. In a sense, a double game was at play, employing a dual strategy that was operationally intertwined but ideologically and historically distinct in nature and scope: the United States sought to diminish Soviet influence in the region and secure its own global hegemony, while Pakistan aimed to strengthen its relations with the West, which had been strained due to its recent attainment of nuclear bombs, all while undermining Afghanistan's capacity to challenge the Durand Line.

Considering the above context, I would like to briefly outline the conditions that enabled me to write about the Durand Line. After leaving Afghanistan in the late 1990s, I found myself in Pakistan, a nation inextricably linked to the Durand Line's complex legacy. With the assistance of a Ph.D. researcher, Andrew Skews, now an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Adelaide in Australia, I secured a position as a reporter for the British Broadcasting Corporation Afghan Education Project (BBC-AEP) in its Peshawar office. As a BBC reporter, I travelled extensively across the Durand Line boundary, witnessing firsthand the challenges faced by the Pashtun tribes. One stark observation was inescapable: the relative prosperity of the Pashtuns of the urban centres juxtaposed with the abject poverty and insecurity of the Pashtuns in the borderlands. The plight of the marginalised Pashtun tribes, caught between two nations, ignited a deep curiosity within me and propelled my desire to uncover the underlying causes of their struggles. Thus, I felt a strong urge to seek answers to the questions that lingered in my mind.

In 2015, I was awarded a Rotary Foundation Peace Fellowship to pursue a master's degree at the University of Queensland, Australia. This opportunity led me back to Afghanistan and Pakistan to conduct field research on the Durand Line. Collaborating with researchers from the University of Queensland and conducting interviews with Afghan and Pakistani scholars, I quickly realised that the topic's vast scope and its impact on regional stability were too complex to be fully explored within

the confines of a master's thesis. With the support of my supervisor, Dr Anne Brown, I shifted my focus to investigate the enduring narrative of Pakistani interference in Afghanistan. This research culminated in my thesis, *Survival or Strategy: The Question of Pakistani Interference in Afghanistan*.

After completing my master's degree, I had the privilege of meeting the late Professor David Jones of King's College London during his visit to the University of Queensland. Impressed by my presentation on the Durand Line to his master's students, he invited me to pursue a Ph.D. under his and Professor Michael Rainsborough's supervision, the latter then serving as Head of the Department of War Studies. Both scholars advised that I focus my Ph.D. research exclusively on the Durand Line, utilising the wealth of primary source documents available in the United Kingdom's research centres. With invaluable financial support from a US-UK Fulbright Commission grant, I accepted the proposal and embarked on my Ph.D. journey in 2017. Over the course of seven years, this academic pursuit culminated in the completion of my formal thesis, which I subsequently adapted into the book you now hold.

I hope this book serves as a catalyst for peace between Afghanistan and Pakistan, sparking meaningful dialogue and driving action towards a future where the aspirations of resilient trans-Durand communities can be fully realised. The true value of this work will lie in its ability to contribute, however modestly, to reshaping a history of strife into a shared future of peace, understanding, and lasting cooperation.

Ashburn, USA

Nabi Sahak

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Professor Michael Rainsborough, currently Professor of Strategic Theory and Director of the Centre for Future Defence and National Security at Deakin University and formerly Head of the Department of War Studies at King's College London, together with the late Professor David Martin Jones, supervised my doctoral thesis. I am deeply grateful for their invaluable guidance and support during the writing phase of my research, which laid the foundation for this revised book. In particular, I wish to honour the memory of Professor Jones, whose intellectual rigour and mentorship left an enduring impact on my work. I dedicate this book, in part, to his legacy. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my Ph.D. external examiners, Professor Faisal Devji of the University of Oxford and Professor Richard Wolf of Harvard University, whose insightful comments and suggestions greatly enhanced the original thesis and, in turn, contributed to the development of this expanded book in its present form. Special thanks also to my publisher, Palgrave Macmillan, whose editorial team's patience and exceptional partnership have been instrumental in bringing this book to fruition. Their dedicated efforts have made the book accessible to a wider audience and transformed it into a meaningful contribution to public discourse.

Additionally, I sincerely appreciate the four-year joint fellowship from the US-UK Fulbright Commission and King's College London, which funded this research. I'm also obliged to the friendship and advice received from fellow Fulbright scholar Dr. Brittney Mengistu and the

War Studies Department, especially my cohort members: Dr. Joana Cook, Dr. Andrew Ehrhardt, Dr. Matthew Hefler, Dr. Charlotte Yelamos, Dr. Nizar Aswed, Dr. Leonardo Palma, Dr. Alexis Herrera, and Dr. Helene Olsen. My thanks also go to Professor Alan James for his excellent recommendations during my mini-viva-voce examination, and Professor Andrew Lambert for his expert counsel on the structural improvements of my original Ph.D. thesis. Similarly, I am humbled by the generosity and support of the many Afghan and Pakistani scholars who contributed to my fieldwork. Likewise, I am immensely appreciative of the requisite resources provided by SOAS's National Research Library, the British Library's India Office Records, the National Archives at Kew, the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University, and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, all of which played a crucial role in the completion of this study.

Thanks also, in no small part, to several distinguished scholars outside King's College London, whose friendship and mentorship nourished my optimism and perseverance throughout this quest, profoundly enhancing the quality of this research. These academics include Dr Anne Brown (University of Queensland), Dr. Jawan Shir (University of Pennsylvania), Professor Shah Mahmoud Hanifi (James Madison University), Dr. Nematullah Bizhan (Australian National University), Dr. Omar Sharifi (Boston University), Professor James Mayall (University of Cambridge), Professor James Kurth (Swarthmore College), Professors Richard Caplan, Matthew McCartney, and Lisa Shaw (University of Oxford), and Professor Nancy Bermeo (Princeton University).

Finally, I express my heartfelt gratitude to my family, whose care and vital financial support made this book a reality. I am particularly indebted to my mother, Khadija Sahak, alongside Fareda Ahmadi, Wali Sahak, Mina Sahak, Mustafa Sahak, and Zakariya Sahak, as well as others whose encouragement and support sustained me throughout this journey.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nabi Sahak From conflict-ridden Afghanistan to the halls of global universities and prestigious fellowships, Nabi Sahak's journey exemplifies resilience, introspection, and a relentless pursuit of understanding. A former BBC reporter, Rotary Peace Fellow, and recent Fulbright Scholar, he currently conducts independent research in the United States. Sahak holds a BA from George Mason University, USA, an MA from the University of Queensland, Australia, and a Ph.D. from King's College London. His articles, published in numerous international journals, provide unique and powerful insights into the region's enduring conflicts. This book presents Sahak's latest research into the origins of the Durand Line.

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Introduction

This research aims to examine the origins, political implications, and historical dimensions of the Durand Line agreement from the Afghan perspective. Traditionally, international debates on the subject have lacked sufficient Afghan viewpoints, often reflecting predominantly British and Pakistani positions. By incorporating Afghan views, this study presents a new interpretation and emphasises an under-analysed chronological angle. Ultimately this is where the utility of the book resides in terms of its contribution to knowledge and understanding. Before proceeding, it is beneficial to briefly clarify the term ‘Afghan perspective or view.’ The Durand Line is a prominent national issue in Afghanistan, and opinions about it differ among various ethnic groups. This book highlights the prevailing stance of the country’s political elites, who firmly reject the Durand Line as a legitimate boundary. Successive Afghan governments, including the current one, have consistently endorsed this viewpoint.

This research’s main argument is that clarification of the historical status of the Durand Line is essential for establishing an effective border control regime between Afghanistan and Pakistan. An impartial and deeper understanding of the Durand Line’s principal purpose is critical to this argument. In this context, the book examines primary and secondary sources, including the literary works of Afghan scholars such as Ghulam Mohammad Ghubar, Mohammad Hassan Kakar, Abdul Hai Habibi, Ahmad Ali Kohzad, and others. Although the accounts of

these researchers are nuanced and enrich local aspects of the debate, they are absent from the broader literature on the topic. This research equally presents the opinions of colonial officers who studied the area, including Thomas Holdich, Stephen Wheeler, Olaf Caroe, Fraser-Tytler, and others. Additionally, it offers interviews from current Afghan and Pakistan scholars to underscore the present-day relevance and scale of the Durand Line.

Analysis of these wide-ranging materials provides balanced views of key stakeholders' positions on the Durand Line and reveals critical historical factors previously not considered by other researchers. The book's core timeline is from the rise of Amir Abdur-Rahman Khan to Afghanistan's independence (1880–1919). Despite this focus, the book's first two chapters uncover relevant historical contexts, and its final chapter and conclusion capture crucial conversations and arguments regarding the Durand Line from 1919 to 1947.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

The main question this research attempts to answer is: what was the original purpose for creating the Durand Line? For example, was it intended to be a temporary political arrangement, a mutually agreed upon short-term sphere of British influence, a geopolitical frontier, a political boundary to control dissent, or an actual international border? The book also evaluates a set of secondary relevant questions throughout the text. Some of these are:

- Was the Durand Line a treaty or an agreement, and why this matters?
- Was Durand Line meant to create a frontier, a boundary, or a border, and what difference does it make? If the Durand Line was created as a frontier, what local and regional geopolitical reasons guided its establishment?
- What were some key problems with the creation of a frontier?
- What are Afghanistan's main arguments to justify their refusal of the Durand Line as an international sovereign boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan?
- What are the primary source materials telling us about the Durand Line agreement?
- Why was the demarcation of the Durand Line problematic, and what were some of its main implications?

- What was the significance of the Durand Line after the death of Amir Abdur-Rahman Khan, and how did his successors treat it?
- How significant was the Durand Line debate during the Afghan independence in 1919?
- How did Pakistan, when created in 1947, behave regarding the Durand Line, and how does this line shape current Afghanistan-Pakistan relations?

A series of historical documents, particularly the original letters exchanged between Amir Abdur-Rahman Khan and British Viceroys of India, offer nuanced understanding of these questions. These sources add new dimensions and depths to the current Durand Line debate and reveal key historical factors previously neglected or discounted by other researchers.

A SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM

It is widely understood in Afghanistan and Pakistan that the two neighbours will not negotiate their positions on the Durand Line dispute. Both sides maintain clashing interpretations of the history and origins of the dispute. While the Durand Line problem broadly affects the general peace and stability of Pakistan and Afghanistan, there is international consensus that it also disturbs regional and global peace.

Between 1809 to 1930, Afghanistan and British India concluded 15 known treaties and agreements.¹ Nevertheless, none of these settlements affected the two sides more than the controversial Durand Line

¹ The 15 documents referenced above exclude the following two infamous treaties:

1. The Afghan-Sikh agreement of 1833, which the British government mediated and approved between Shah-Shuja and the British ally in Punjab, Ranjit Singh. This treaty consolidated the Sikh power in Afghan territories west of Indus, including in Peshawar, and facilitated the 1834 invasion of Afghanistan.
2. The Tripartite Treaty of 1838, which the British government, Shah-Shuja, and Ranjit Singh concluded.

It is worth noting that these treaties involved military invasions of Afghanistan, affecting the lives of thousands. Yet, the British government and Ranjit Singh conveniently extracted them from the exiled Shah Shuja, a political prisoner in the British camp receiving a pension as an ex-king.

agreement established in 1893. Since its inception, Afghanistan has repeatedly questioned its validity, and since 1947, all Afghan governments have unanimously rejected the Durand Line as a legal border dividing Afghanistan and Pakistan. When created in 1947, Pakistan naturally inherited all the deep-rooted and complex territorial disputes Afghanistan has had with its predecessor, the imperial British India. Afghans expected the leaders of the new state of Pakistan, in part as fellow Muslims, to consider the plight of those whose communities, clans, and tribes the British had forcibly divided. Pakistan's policy on the disputed territories, however, inherited from British India, remained unchanged despite the controversies surrounding the agreement. At present, the dispute over the Durand Line constitutes one of the leading causes of bilateral friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Afghans invariably argue that the Durand Line represents a symbol of imperialism and oppression by the colonial rulers of India. They further claim that because it does not maintain the characteristics of any normal border—that is, geographic boundaries agreed upon by at least two political entities or governments—it, therefore, is not so much a border but a fictitious line dividing the Pashtun ethnē of Afghanistan.² Afghans see the establishment of this border in the same way as Arabs view the British and French agreement of 1916 mandating that to maintain the *Entente Cordiale*, the two powers had to divide the Middle East arbitrarily between them.³ The British and French drew a line in the sand from the Mediterranean to the Persian frontier agreeing that territory 'north of that stark line would go to France; land south of it, to Britain.'⁴ Basically, this agreement formed the basis of the post-war division of the region into five countries with the creation of 'Britain's mandates of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, and France's in Lebanon and Syria.'⁵

During the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Afghan government appealed to Britain to resolve the matter of the Durand Line. Afghanistan 'demanded that Pashtuns living on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line be given the right to self-determination' and predictably,

² Abdul Samad Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan: An Insider's Account* (McLean, VA: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1988), 67.

³ James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

both Britain and Pakistan refused.⁶ In response, also predictably, the Afghan government ignored the Durand Line, reasserted claims over territories on both sides of it, and voted against Pakistan's membership as a successor of British India in the United Nations.⁷ In 1949 'the Afghan parliament issued a resolution condemning the covenants signed by Afghanistan and British India and declaring the Durand Line a bogus and fictitious border.'⁸ Accordingly, from 1949 until the present, no Afghan government, including the so called pro-Pakistani Taliban regime, has ever recognised the legality, morality, or validity of the Durand Line, which at present serves as the de facto border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Besides, throughout the history of Afghanistan and Pakistan relations, the tribes on both sides of the Durand Line, especially those on Pakistan's side, have stood their ground demanding justice and freedom. They have organised many large-scale protests against Pakistan for committing 'gross human rights violations' against the tribal Pashtuns.⁹ On 15 November 2020, The Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) arranged one such event in Miran Shah, the capital of North Waziristan, where thousands of Pashtuns gathered declaring their opposition to Pakistan's military operations on both sides of Durand Line.¹⁰ In addition to calling for an end to 'extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and unlawful detentions' of the Pashtuns, the PTM leaders also called for the unification of the trans-Durand tribes chanting *lar aw bar, yaw Afghban* (Afghans on upper and lower side of the line are one)¹¹ (Fig. 1.1).

⁶ Arwin Rahi, "Why the Durand Line Matters: It Is Time for Kabul to Accept the Legality of the Border," *The Diplomat*, February 21, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/why-the-durand-line-matters/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ahmad Shayeq Qassem, "Pak- Afghan Relations: The Durand Line Issue" 5, no. 2 (2018): 88.

⁹ Mohammad Arif Sheva, "PTM Marches across Miran Shah in Protest 'against State Brutalities with Pashtuns,'" Khaama Press, 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gohar Wazir, *Miranshab PTM Jalsa Lar Ao Bar Nary* (Pakistan: #PTMMiran Shah-Jalsa, 2020), see access to film in bibliography. PTM has been widely recognised as a civil rights movement that emerged in Pakistan in response to 'state-enforced terrorism and human rights abuses of Pakistan's army and intelligence agencies in the Pashtun belt of Pakistan including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killing, and landmines.' Cited in many source including: "Pashtuns Hold Massive Public Gathering against Enforced



Fig. 1.1 PTM protesting in Miran Shah ‘against state brutalities with Pashtuns’¹²

WHAT IS THE DURAND LINE?

The line refers to the approximately 2640 kilometres border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which came into existence when, in 1893, Mortimer Durand and Abdur-Rahman Khan seemingly agreed to ‘fix the limits of their respective rule.’¹³ Under the agreement, Afghanistan lost control over ‘one-half of the Pashtuns,’ a majority ethnic group in Afghanistan and a substantial minority in present-day Pakistan.¹⁴ Virtually, the Durand Line ‘cuts [Pashtun] tribes and tribal groups in half,’ leaving one part in Afghanistan and the other in Pakistan.¹⁵ A closer look into the literature on the Durand Line indicates that the agreement was problematic from the outset creating considerable difficulties for all

Disappearances, Killings in Pakistan’s North Waziristan,” *worldnewsnetwork.net*, 2020, <https://www.worldnewsnetwork.net/news/pashtuns-hold-massive-public-gathering-against-enforced-disappearances-killings-in-pakistans-north-waziristan20201117104051/>.

¹² Ibid. Photo from: Afrasiab Khattak.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ahadi, “The Decline of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan,” 622.

¹⁵ Bijan Omrani, “The Durand Line History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan border,” *Asian Affairs*, 2009: 186.

sides involved, particularly for those whose homes, families, land, culture, and identities were at stake. The one interesting area the British left for the Amir was the ‘Wakhan corridor, a thin strip of territory whose function was to prevent the British and Russians from facing one another.’¹⁶ Omrani describes Wakhan as ‘the little area on which the British insisted to keep a distance between the British and Russian Empires’¹⁷ (Fig. 1.2).

THE CURRENT DEBATE ON THE DURAND LINE IN AFGHANISTAN

There is a range of views in Afghanistan on the problems raised by the Durand Line, and what can, or must be done regarding it. Inevitably, it is a contentious issue, not only between Pakistan and Afghanistan but also within both countries. While some positions in Afghanistan have modified over the years, Afghans are still entangled in the Durand Line debate as powerfully today as their forefathers were more than a century ago. In the past, the Pashtun leaders in Afghanistan made attempts to integrate the estimated 30 million Pashtuns who live on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line with Afghanistan. However, a more recent position of the Pashtun nationalist movements both in Afghanistan and Pakistan is that Pashtuns on Pakistan’s side of the Durand Line must gain a right to self-determination. Such a right, they believe, would enable the Pashtuns to choose whether they want to be autonomous, part of Afghanistan, or part of Pakistan.

In this introduction, the book will provide interviews with several influential Afghan and Pakistani scholars and politicians on the subject. The interviews at the outset demonstrate the current significance of the Durand Line issue both in Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly in the latter. Views contained in these interviews are offered, mostly without much commentary, as a contribution to bringing local perspectives into the international discussion. First, let us review the Afghan voices, then the Pakistani views.

¹⁶ Giunchi, “The Origins of the Dispute over the Durand Line,” 29.

¹⁷ Omrani, “The Durand Line History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan border,” 185.