



## KARTARPUR CORRIDOR: A HOPE FOR PEACE

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The Pakistan Government has announced to open the 4.7 kilometer long, visa free Kartarpur Corridor on the 550<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Baba Guru Nanak in November 2019. While inaugurating the project in November 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated, “There have been mistakes on both sides [in the past], but we will not be able to move forward until we break the chains of the past. The past is there only to teach us, not for us to live in.”<sup>1</sup>

Every year thousands of Sikh devotees come from India to Kartarpur to celebrate Baba Guru Nanak’s birth anniversary. Kartarpur is located in Narowal district of Pakistan’s Punjab province. About three kilometers away from the border with India, Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara is located on the banks of River Ravi in Pakistan and is the site where founder of Sikhism, Baba Guru Nanak spent his life’s last 18 years before dying in 1539.

Kartarpur Corridor will provide visa free access to Indian Sikh pilgrims to visit Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib (the final resting place of Baba Guru Nanak) in Pakistan. Since 1947 when India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain, this is the first time that Indian Sikh pilgrims would be able to travel to Pakistan without a visa. The proposal was first put forward in 1998 when Pakistan and India

<sup>1</sup> Asad Hashim and Zeenat Saberin, "Pakistan and India break ground on visa-free Kartarpur corridor," *Al Jazeera*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/pakistan-india-break-ground-visa-free-kartarpur-corridor-181128111752755.html>

agreed to construct a corridor from Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan to Dera Baba Nanak in India — but due to tense relations between the two neighbors the project could not materialize.<sup>2</sup>

It has been agreed that the Indian government will construct the Kartarpur corridor from Dera Baba Nanak in Indian Punjab's Gurdaspur district to the border, while Pakistan will build the rest of the corridor connecting the border to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in the Kartarpur area of Narowal.<sup>3</sup> The construction of a new road and a bridge connecting the two sites is underway and about 40% of the development work has been completed so far. The two sides are scheduled to meet on March 14 to finalize the modalities, particularly the coordinates of the corridor.

While the development work over Kartarpur corridor is in full swing, both India and Pakistan are blaming each other for escalating tensions along the LoC after the Pulwama attack. With the general elections in India just round the corner, BJP has used this as an opportunity to appease the Sikh community and weaken Indian National Congress's foothold in the Punjab province. Considering the current hostile situation between the two neighbors after the Pulwama attack, Kartarpur corridor can serve as a peace gesture and confidence building measure between India and Pakistan. This initiative can not only serve as a tool of religious and cultural diplomacy to promote peace and harmony by bringing people of the two countries together, but also has the potential of enhancing tourism in Pakistan. According to a study conducted by World Bank, it is estimated that if proper facilities are provided and marketing efforts are made, religious tourism could exceed to 300,000 persons per year, yielding economic benefits of up to \$300 million annually.<sup>4</sup> In order to enhance its soft image in the world, Pakistan could also extend this initiative and offer visa on arrival to Sikh pilgrims living in other parts of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> "We want civilised ties with India': PM Khan lays foundation stone for long-awaited Kartarpur corridor," *Dawn*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1448172>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Kartarpur religious tourism potential," *Business Recorder*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.brecorder.com/2018/12/05/456784/kartarpur-religious-tourism-potential/>