

REPORT



Islamabad Policy Institute

Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Talking to TTP-Challenge of Legitimization

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Introduction

The federal government of Pakistan's unilateral announcement to engage the outlawed terrorist organization, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has caught the opposition, civil society, and other stakeholders off guard. The government's undemocratic move has long-lasting political and security implications for the country. The government's decision to mainstream the TTP has arisen the fears of extending legitimacy to the group, which has killed thousands of innocent Pakistanis over the years. The development has also questioned the rationale behind engaging a group, which, many analysts believed, was not even present in Pakistan and was using the Afghan soil as its launching pad. Many experts have expressed their fear that the move is tantamount to surrendering to an incapacitated group, whose manpower, as per the estimate of the Federal Minister of Information and Broadcasting Fawad Hussain Chaudhry, does not exceed 2,000 members. The government's decision is undermining the writ of the state and emboldening other sectarian and ethnic groups who too might expect a national amnesty after committing heinous crimes.

Moderator: Iftikhar Shirazi**Journalist**

- Even more than Afghans, Pakistan and its citizens are likely to get harmed by the changing political developments in neighbouring Afghanistan.
- The optimism generated in the wake of the Afghan Taliban's repeated assurances about formation of an inclusive government and upholding human rights in the war-ravaged country seems to be on the wane.
- Challenges for Pakistan are mounting as the terrorists of TTP are joining the ranks of the Afghan Taliban.
- To counter this emerging security threat through the influence Pakistan enjoys over the Afghan Taliban, the government of Pakistan is engaging with some factions of the TTP if they renounce violence, lay down their arms and reiterate the sanctity of the Constitution. It, however, seems a risky move given the history of the TTP with a poor record of complying with their commitments.
- The opposition parties have also expressed their uneasiness about the unilateral move of the government to initiate talks with a terrorist group which in the past has shed blood of thousands of innocent Pakistani citizens, including armed forces, and has caused the national economy a substantial loss in billions of dollars.
- Doubts have also arisen about the efficacy of the talks since all the past efforts to mainstream terrorists have been ultimately futile.
- In 2004, then Pakistani head of the state President Pervez Musharraf signed the Shakai agreement with Nek Mohammed, a militant leader from Waziristan. Soon after the deal was signed, Nek resumed his anti-state activities by renegeing on his commitments.
- Then the government's attempt at appeasing Nek Mohammed's successor Baitullah Mehsud through an understanding called Sarorogha peace deal of 2005 also did not yield desirous outcome and the militants intensified their anti-state activities in the following months. The government's subservience to Baitullah Mehsud emboldened him to such an extent that he formed the TTP in 2007. After his death in a drone attack, his successor, Hakimullah Mehsud, continued a brutal campaign against the people of Pakistan until his death in 2013.

- Similarly, the provincial government of erstwhile North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), signed the Swat agreement in February 2009 with an ageing cleric, Maulana Sufi Muhammad, who was the leader of the Islamist Movement for the Implementation of Shari'a (TNSM). Sufi Muhammad could not win his fanatic son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah, over to peace. Despite the provincial government's surrender to the demands made by Sufi Mohammad, the violence continued unabated. Likewise, Hafiz Gul Bahadar reached a peace agreement with the government of Pakistan in 2006 and promised that he would drive out foreign militants from Waziristan, yet no positive development was seen in the aftermath of the deal. He, in fact, joined the ranks of the TTP in the following year of its formation by Baitullah Mehsud.
- Then there were peace agreements with Mangal Bagh's Lashkar-i-Islam, and Qazi Mehboob's Ansar-ul-Islam too. The list of the government's attempts at appeasing the radical groups goes on end but without bearing any fruit.

Syed Sajjad Bukhari**Executive Director, IPI**

- In the wake of new developments in Afghanistan, Pakistan is facing multifarious challenges. The ascendancy of the Taliban regime has emboldened the TTP among other fundamentalist groups within the country.
- In a bid to tackle this challenge, the government has indicated that it would be open to negotiating with some elements within the TTP if they lay down their arms, renounce violence and embrace the Constitution of Pakistan. In return, TTP insurgents are being offered amnesty. These talks with the TTP could have far-reaching political and security implications for the country.
- PTI government has come under public criticism for moving ahead with talks even before engaging other political parties, civil society, and especially families of those who lost their loved ones in deadly violence perpetrated by the TTP.
- Meanwhile, questions have been raised on whether talking with the TTP will legitimize its violence against innocent civilians and personnel of security forces. More importantly, it poses question about the writ of the government, which for a decade has battled the TTP.
- Reports from the ground indicate that the Taliban are regrouping in the Eastern Afghanistan and are planning to retake parts of the now-merged tribal districts, which they lost in major military operation by the Pakistan Army more than seven years ago.
- Statistics indicate that hundreds have lost their lives in TTP sponsored terrorist attacks only this year. There has been a marked intensification in attacks since August 15, when Taliban took over Kabul.
- It is in this backdrop that government has opened talks with the TTP. It appears that these talks are being facilitated by the Afghan Taliban. A key challenge facing the government, political parties, civil society and other stakeholders is figuring out how to disarm and demobilize the TTP without according it legitimacy.
- In a democratic society, writ of the State is enforced through implementation of its Constitution and legal regime. And more importantly, only State and its designated personnel are allowed to use force against other citizens.

- When a group takes up arms and targets unarmed civilians along with military personnel, the dynamics change. While the State and its organs can forgive and forget violence inflicted against them, what about innocent civilians and their families? Is a new precedent being set in Pakistan, that from now on, any armed group which has targeted unarmed civilians can be brought into political mainstream through talks if it renounces violence?
- Today, Pakistan's decision-makers, including politicians and jurists are faced with a herculean challenge of exploring ways of talking to the TTP without according them legitimacy. Thus, it is pertinent to assess the current state of talks with the TTP, and its implications on our democracy.

Khurram Dastgir Khan**Vice President, PML-N**

- A Czech writer, Milan Kundera once stated: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”
- The government’s move indicates that we have lost our collective memory. The government has perhaps forgotten how the group has been wreaking havoc on the people of Pakistan since 2007.
- The TTP as a group has remained in an amorphous state since its formation. The public is still clueless about its formation, goals and tactics.
- The TTP has rejected the olive branch the government has been holding out to its factions and has debunked the reports that there is any schism in its rank and file.
- Mainstreaming a group has never been a panacea as it reflects in the case of mainstreaming the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), whose devotees continue to block national roads and highways, attack security personnel and vandalize the public and government properties. Despite being a banned organization, the TLP was made eligible to contest the general election in Azad Kashmir. It has set a dangerous precedent for the political stability of Pakistan as the entire country is suffering from the religious extremism exhibited by its workers every now and then. In a nutshell, both negotiations and mainstreaming exercises remain unsuccessful in the long run.
- PML-N has adopted a straight-forward and well-defined posture on the issue. As long as the public remains unenlightened about the nature, goals and formation of the TTP, all attempts at initiating talks with the terrorist group will remain fruitless. Unfortunately, the government was not open and above board and did not bother to take the opposition parties into confidence. The unilateral move was undemocratic, premature and without any clarity.
- We reject any such initiatives in which the opposition is not kept in the loop. The government’s initiative is tantamount to the Britain’s policy of appeasement towards Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. Like Hitler reneged on its commitments and his army run amok into European states, TTP insurgents will follow suit if the government’s submissiveness to the group continues.

Senator Faisal Ali Subzwari**Senior Leader, MQM**

- All 25 Members of the National Assembly of MQM, despite being a coalition partner of the PPP-led federal government in 2009, had abstained from voting for the Swat peace agreement. We were not in favour of talking with an extremist group. The peace agreement provided those insurgents a breathing space to resume their activities afterwards.
- When political parties are in the opposition, they criticize such moves, but when they are at the helm of affairs, there is something which compels them to talk with them, leaving behind their earlier stance. It is a strange political norm.
- We have failed to construct a unanimous public opinion to act against the decades-old indoctrination within the country. We are reluctant to talk against extremist elements present in our constituencies despite criticizing them at in-camera national security meetings. We need to get out of the political point scoring and set up a nation-wide consensus across all political lines.
- Narrative building should not be ignored at any cost to counter these extremist elements.
- Character building of the public was an important step but many politicians prefer to win domestic votes over the larger national interests.
- After the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August, everyone appeared jubilant in Pakistan. This jubilation has spill-over effects within the country.
- We could not produce an Islamic, civilized, societal and geographical narrative for the public.

Senator Farhatullah Babar**Secretary General, PPP**

- We need to ask the security institutions of our country about their long-term objective as we lack clarity on the political issues. Even majority of the TTP leadership is killed by the US drones strikes.
- Hayatullah Khan, a prominent young journalist in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), once exposed the fake encounter claims of our security forces. He was later kidnapped and murdered. Afterwards, his wife was also killed.
- In 2013, different laws were promulgated which prohibited any terror outfit from resorting to new name after it was outlawed. The TLP when attacked the country, our institutions emboldened them by distributing money to them. Later, they were mainstreamed but all in vain as they are again willing to march towards Islamabad.
- Two retired senior military officials, Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul and Lt. Gen. Asad Durrani, have publicly admitted that these terrorists who were used to defeat the erstwhile USSR were recently employed to defeat US.
- Pakistan must have a strategic goal in sight which is to protect Afghanistan from dismemberment.
- For long, Pakistan has supported only one faction, the Afghan Taliban, and now there is a new anti-Pakistan wave in Afghanistan as the country is ethnically diverse.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan labelled TTP insurgents as Pashtun nationalists. The TTP received psychological support by stating that since the Pashtuns are victims of injustice, they should raise their voice for them.
- The Afghan crisis could be a part of a greater game in which Islamabad can end up as a vulnerable scapegoat. In the wake of the intensifying US-China rivalry, the US would like to destabilize the region through the Taliban. Zalmay Khalilzad's interview also hinted at the sabotaging the CPEC and BRI.
- We should reach out to the people of Afghanistan and not to the Taliban.
- The government of Pakistan should extend support to the war-torn country through international and regional organisations.

- The government's decision to extend the amnesty to the Taliban is disastrous. If we offer them one inch, they will ask for a mile. There was no need of extending unilateral concessions to the group.
- We should enact legislation for Afghan refugees. We deliberately kept them disenfranchised. It was a governance failure and gave birth to many other problems. It was agreed by the previous government that a new legislation regarding documentation of Afghan refugees inside Pakistan will be promulgated but the present federal government did not play any positive role.
- Pakistan must make use of its soft power to establish a common ground with Afghan refugees considering personalities that are revered on both sides of the border and initiate legislative measures on the matter of refugees.
- Areas of erstwhile FATA have not been mainstreamed in true spirit despite their merger with KP; it should not remain a no-go area for the people, must be demilitarized and transparency must be ensured.
- The legislation tabled in the United States Senate which talks about Pakistan's support for Taliban is an alarming development. The actions taken against Pakistan based on the findings of their reports can be damaging for the country and we must take this matter seriously.
- Pakistan's foreign policy in Afghanistan has been India-centric and 5G warfare as well as perception of imminent threat from the enemy has been used as a pretext to continuously misguide people.

Samar Haroon Bilour**Senior Leader, ANP**

- I am representing three fronts of the society: (i) a Member of Awami National Party (ANP), (ii) as representative of the families and victims of war on terror, and (iii) Pukhtun Nationalism. We are being vilified unprovoked by the Prime minister himself.
- We have lost many people during the war on terror having been direct victims of it and it has been a very difficult struggle.
- Despite several attempts at negotiations by previous governments with the TTP, nine of them failed.
- When a suicide attack takes place, it does not discriminate between the government and the opposition. Everybody becomes a victim based on their progressivism and rationality; unfortunately, Bashir Ahmad Bilour was a senior minister when he was killed in a suicide attack. Similarly, Haroon Bilour was killed when he was member of the opposition.
- It is very disturbing and shocking when the prime minister casually announces during an interview with international media that negotiations may take place with the organization that has killed many innocent people.
- During a time when the wounds are still raw and the society is polarized how are the negotiations taking place and on what terms.
- We are not against negotiations but against the method adopted by the ruling party, the opposition, civil society and the entire parliament has been bypassed.
- Prime Minister should have called a joint session of the parliament and spelled out our compulsions, terms and conditions, and the parties we are negotiating with; whether with all the splinter groups or some of them.
- Negotiators, moderators and the participants of these talks should have been defined.
- Negotiations also took place during the tenures of past governments but they were carried out after taking the parliament and people in confidence.
- Even if the security issue was immediate, government should have held an in-camera session to inform representatives of the people.
- The issue with unilateral negotiations and rendering general amnesty to a group such as the TTP would imply that the government can also give a leeway to thieves, dacoits, general

miscreants and rapists if they join hands and ask for forgiveness. What would then stop such people from forming organizations.

- If a blanket amnesty is rendered to the terrorizing elements, how would they be reincorporated into the society and over what terms and conditions? These people have lived different lifestyles, how they would be engaged in the mainstream society without proper rehabilitation first.
- The state has not owned our martyrs. During the attack on Haroon Bilour in 2018 election campaign, dozens of people were killed and 4 of them were the sole bread earners of their families.
- In the past few years, we have been unable to get the government to at least financially compensate the affected families.
- The victims are seen as nameless bodies by people in the government and no effort is made to compensate their families. Instead negotiations are held with the attackers without considering the reservations of bereaved families.
- This is against the law as well as Islam there should be no forgiveness for the attackers without the consent of the victims' families.
- The governing bodies and representatives of the victims must be called on a platform and explained status of the ongoing negotiations.
- There are many pending cases and FIRs against members of TTP by the bereaved families and thus their names are exposed. If an amnesty is given to the TTP, then who will guarantee that they would not harm the plaintiffs in those cases?
- These are some of the complications for which the involvement of stakeholders is necessary and the issue is to be addressed systematically by the government.
- Narratives have been perpetrated against our party, calling them Afghan agents and stooges which in reality can turn out to be harmful for national unity.
- We have to play the role of honest peace brokers instead of using the platform of the United Nations as a spokesperson of Afghan Taliban. We as a neighboring country must talk about the Afghan nation's problems.
- The ill-thought out statements and actions of the government are condemned by our party and by the bereaved families of the martyrs.

- When terrorism is tied with Pashtun Nationalism, the sentiments of those Pashtun people get hurt that have been directly affected by bloodshed and terrorism in the region.
- These people have sacrificed the most and are still standing with the nation, yet they are targeted which leads to immense hopelessness and resentment as evident on social media.
- All governments are elected for a temporary time and thus a mess must not be left for the successive government to inherit and resolve.

Syed Nasir Shiraz**Deputy Secretary General of MWM**

- Afghanistan became center of militant activities due to its peculiar history and the negative spillover of that has been endured by all the regional countries, especially Pakistan.
- It was thus claimed that a TTP was the cause of militancy in Pakistan which was using tribal regions near to the Afghan border to launch attacks. This led Pakistan to launch military operations in those areas.
- The reason that Pakistan suffered more than other regional countries in this situation is the fact that there were many political and economic leakages which were exploited by the terrorist elements.
- To address that challenge, the National Action Plan (NAP) was initiated which was great in theory but unfortunately it became a target of political victimization in practice and it could not help to stop militant activities. This led to deep penetration of extremist dangers into the society.
- A national level policy ought to be devised by the stakeholders which must be implemented with full political will.
- Prioritizing individual or institutional interests would prove to be counterproductive and the fundamental objective of negotiations would not be achieved.
- There can be dangerous consequences when terrorist organizations get the message from the government that they can be forgiven even after carrying out heinous attacks like that of the APS and killing many people as well as security personnel.
- The focus must be on preventing the ideology of the TTP to flourish. The general amnesty would only embolden them further to commit heinous crimes with impunity.
- The main concern is whether there is a guarantee that the elements within the TTP would give up on their ideology and embrace the Constitution of Pakistan wholeheartedly, or would it be for the time being.
- How must it be believed that they would accept the sanctity of the borders and laws of the land as they have wanted to implement their own ideological system?

- They may regroup during the time of partial relief which may lead to more devastating consequences.
- Deliberation and calculation are required to take a decisive action on this matter because the morale of terrorists may fortify and the people may get demoralized.
- When a case is filed through anti-terrorism act, there is no choice for reconciliation; the criminal ought to be punished for terrorism. On ground however, the government is talking about giving immunity to these people and mainstreaming them in the society.
- Mainstreaming of terrorists would undermine the sacrifices of people who were martyred fighting with them. Killers and criminals are being supported.
- There is no strategy to monitor the ideology of these people if they are mainstreamed.
- We carried out several operations one after the other yet we were not able to completely counter these people which raises the question as to why our comprehensive policy was a failure.
- A proper mechanism for the negotiations must be followed which ensures the involvement of the respective stakeholders.
- If the members of TTP do not intend to give up on their militant ideology and mindset then the state should display its will and establish its writ.
- Constitutional principles must be upheld to demoralize the terrorists by a giving clear message that they would be punished according to the law of the land.
- There are external powers behind many groups of the TTP, can it be ensured that their link has been severed.
- There is need for a national narrative and a collective stance of all the stakeholders on the matter of negotiations with group(s) of TTP.
- There should be zero tolerance for militants and their supporters.
- NAP must be implemented in its true spirit. Its political utilization should be minimized, otherwise the policies would become counterproductive and militants would be rendered a new input within Pakistan.

Lt. Gen Naeem Khalid Lodhi**Former Defence Secretary of Pakistan**

- There are many situations in which state does not have the jurisdiction to forgive elements that have been involved in terrorism and murder.
- We all agree that negotiations should not take place without taking into consideration the reservations of all the stakeholders, however, the dialogue ought to be supported.
- There has never been a war in history which could be completely resolved without negotiations and diplomacy whether we take example of US in Afghanistan or the talks during the world wars.
- There is no sense in engaging in a war where every single person of the enemy party has to be killed. It is not logically possible to do so.
- The request for negotiations has come from some elements of the TTP, not the entire group and neither the government has started it on its own.
- It is easier to fight with smaller groups by dividing them and disarming some of their elements.
- The negotiations with the TTP by previous governments had failed because many foreign elements were supporting them but now that support base is deteriorating.
- The TTP was carrying out increased attacks with whatever resources they had left in recent months due to the fact that they wanted to negotiate from a position of strength. It is not linked to developments in Afghanistan and the rise of Afghan Taliban there.
- The negotiations have conditions, first and foremost is to give up on arms. Further, as the people would return to their tribes, the tribal heads would have to give guarantees to monitor them and sanction them accordingly if they are found guilty.
- There is no across the board amnesty. Many involved in killings and direct terrorism have already been punished but their presence in the country was not declared as it would have created issues.
- The leadership of TTP would not be allowed in Pakistan neither would they be forgiven; the effort is being made only to disconnect the foot soldiers and weaken the organization.
- We should be content that an occupying force has left our neighborhood as it was destroying the peace of the region.

- The network of RAW has been uprooted from Afghanistan due to which there is hue and cry in the Indian media.
- The Afghan Taliban would have to mend some of their conduct since they need support and recognition from other powers to effectively run the state affairs.
- No one can rule Afghanistan without the support of the local Afghan people thus it must not be said that Afghan Taliban does not have public support.
- Kabul is not the entire Afghanistan, it is just a part of it and thus it cannot show the will of the majority of the public.
- It would require some time for the Afghan Taliban to engage with and contain groups like TTP. The space for such groups would definitely shrink with time.
- The threat of emboldening of some extremists who get inspired by militants is genuine and this must be controlled.

Fawad Hussain Chaudhry**Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting**

- TTP is not one group but joined by three major factions; Noor Wali, Faqir Muhammad and Gul Bahadur, which are then further divided into splinter groups.
- Many people joined these groups for various reasons; some are ideological, some joined due to unfair treatment and grievances, while some joined due to poor economic conditions.
- The hardcore insurgents in these groups are not more than 1000-2000.
- Some of the people in the groups are also connected with the Afghan Taliban.
- We have fought a prolonged war and it must be concluded.
- There is an understanding that those who joined the group due to economic reasons should be mainstreamed as they are willing to come back under state's jurisdiction.
- We are definitely going to fight against those who are against the constitution and challenge the writ of the State, so the negotiations are not for the entire group.
- The State wanted to give opening to those people who were ready to give up on arms as we cannot continue wars for generations.
- Two types of strategies work to counter these extremist groups: first, those who wish to part ways with their ranks should be encouraged; and second those who do not renounce violence must be battled fiercely.
- Government should always negotiate from a point of strength.
- The US made a mistake negotiating with the group when they were at a weak point.
- We are in complete control of our affairs and thus the opportunity to negotiate must be availed.

IPI Findings

1. The unilateral announcement of the federal government to offer concessions to the TTP is considered a thoroughly undemocratic, hasty and unpremeditated move by the opposition parties and civil society.
2. If history is any indication, the ongoing efforts aimed at mainstreaming the TTP are unlikely to produce any concrete result. All previous initiatives to engage various extremist groups have not only failed but have also undermined the anti-terrorism policy initiatives by previous governments.
3. The victory of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul has boosted the confidence of the TTP and other fundamentalist groups inside the country.
4. The government's unilateral concession to the TTP is interpreted by many as an ignominious surrender of the state before an extremist group against whom it had been fighting since 2007. It is going to stir up the debate on the contested issue of extending legitimacy to a group which had killed thousands of innocent Pakistanis.
5. The current government of Pakistan, like the previous governments, appears clueless about the true nature, formation and objectives of the TTP. Unless a well, thought-out policy is articulated to tackle the menace of the TTP, the policy makers in Islamabad will remain at a loss to come to grips with the challenge.
6. There is a dire need to push an anti-terrorism narrative in Pakistan.
7. Irresponsible statements given by senior politicians and retired military officials have tarnished the image of Pakistan in the region and beyond.
8. Pakistan must diversify its cooperation with other Afghan ethnicities as well. Relying only on the Afghan Taliban for strategic engagement will generate an anti-Pakistan, hostile narrative within the war-torn country.
9. The government must not aid the war-torn country through the Afghan Taliban. It should, however, use the channel of non-governmental organisations and join the efforts of global community to support the Afghan people.
10. Labelling any political party or faction a foreign agent or group of traitors is deleterious for the national unity.