[**Talking to the TTP**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649651/talking-to-the-ttp)

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PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan [says](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649520/govt-in-talks-with-ttp-groups-for-reconciliation-process-pm-imran) the government is holding negotiations with the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) aimed at persuading its fighters to lay down arms and reintegrate into society as peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Does he have the right to do so?

Of course he does, you might say. Last time we checked, he was still the prime minister of this country. And that’s what PMs do — make such hard decisions. Isn’t this what their public mandate is all about? To make such calls on behalf of the nation regardless of what the public opinion might say? After all, Tony Blair as the prime minister of UK went against the overwhelming public opinion in his country to support and join US president George W. Bush’s war against Iraq.

So when PM Khan tells Ali Mustafa of Turkish news channel *TRT* in his interview, which airs today, that Pakistan is indeed holding talks with the TTP in Afghanistan, he is finally confirming in no uncertain terms similar broad hints dropped earlier by [President Arif Alvi](https://www.dawn.com/news/1645439) and Foreign Minister [Shah Mahmood Qureshi](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646631/pakistan-extends-olive-branch-to-ttp-members). If the PM then is not unveiling any national security secrets, and if he is not violating the mandate of the office he holds, and if he is not taking a step that has never been taken before — speaking with the enemy, that is — then should the nation really be concerned?

Forgive those who bathed this society in blood? The momentous decision cannot be taken behind closed doors.

As a matter of fact, yes.

Here’s why: TTP has not waged a bloody war just against the government, but against Pakistani society. In this bloodletting, no place was spared — office, school, mosque, shrine, and bazaar; and no one was spared — officers, politicians, women, old men, children and toddlers. The wounds run deep. They are raw, yet. Time heals, but not so fast.

Forgive those who bathed this society in blood? The momentous decision cannot be taken behind closed doors by shadowy figures armed with a rationale that has not been nourished by public opinion. The real issue here is not whether Pakistan should accord such forgiveness to the TTP — no ladies and gentlemen, not at all — the real issue is whether the government has the moral right to do so without hearing what the people of Pakistan have to say about it.

As emotive issues go, this one is a sizzler. That too with long-term consequences. No government can, or should, go it alone. The PTI government has got off to a bad start by leaking this consequential information in fits and starts without first laying out the context and injecting transparency into the matter.

But it is still not too late.

Now that the prime minister has officially let the cat out of the bag, the government may want to frame the issue in a proper and well-deliberated context before it begins to take a life of its own. It has, in fact, already started to veer off. With the government now desperately trying to explain away the prime minister’s announcement through sound bites, it appears to have no road map on how to steer the debate towards a direction that it may have planned to. If it had planned to.

Does it have any good options?

Yes. A few essentials are required: (1) following the prime minister’s interview, the foreign minister should give a policy statement on the floor of parliament explaining the rationale, progress and methodology of the talks with the TTP (2) the floor should be opened for debate in both the Senate and the National Assembly and every party head in parliament should state his or her position on the matter (3) this will automatically trigger a national debate in the media which the government should monitor very carefully (4) the government should then table a resolution in parliament that outlines the basic parametres of the proposed talks and their agenda. The resolution should be negotiated with the opposition before being tabled so it can be adopted with a broad consensus (5) then the government should conduct these negotiations with the confidence of having a broad spectrum of public opinion backing it.

**Editorial:** [*TTP amnesty?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646805/ttp-amnesty)

But before all of this, it needs to get its basic argument sorted out. The logic peddled all of Friday by the government’s official and unofficial spokespersons was dangerously superficial. Their argument: since the United States finally ended up on the negotiating table with the Afghan Taliban (TTA) after fighting with them for two decades and sustaining heavy casualties, why cannot Pakistan do the same with the TTP?

The problem with the argument: you cannot equate the US-TTA analogy with Pakistan-TTP logic for the simple reason that the US was an occupation force in Afghanistan and the TTA was fighting for its homeland against the occupiers. TTP on the other hand is fighting the legitimate state of Pakistan and its terror campaign is an act of sedition, not of liberation like that of the TTA. The government people should be very very careful drawing such recklessly trivial analogies to explain their desire to negotiate with the TTP.

This becomes all the more important at a time when the US government, legislators and the media have begun a process of painting Pakistan as the ‘villain’ primarily responsible for sustaining the TTA for the last two decades. The last thing the government needs is to botch up on the domestic front too by mishandling the TTP issue thereby opening itself up to a two-front offensive. It has already sapped its own political strength by fanning incessant confrontation with opponents and ensuring the absence of an essential working relationship. If the TTP issue is also dealt with in such a confrontational ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ manner, it could dilute the effectiveness of our policy and weaken the writ of the state.

Competence may have become a luxury in Pakistan, but can we please, at the very least, hold on to common sense?

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