



Pakistan's Government Negotiates With Taliban

Negotiations between the Pakistani government and representatives of the Pakistan Taliban (TTP, which stands for Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) began on January 6 in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. The talks are aimed at resolving the ongoing insurgency between the TTP — an umbrella organization of Islamic militants based in Pakistan's northwestern Federally Administered Tribal Areas — and the government.



Irfan Siddiqui, a government negotiator chosen by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, sent a text message reading "Talks on," and described the atmosphere as "cordial and friendly."

AP reported that Sharif made an announcement last month that his government intended to pursue negotiations and named a four-member team led by Saddiqui, a journalist, and one of his own advisors. Also in the government group was another journalist, a former spymaster, and an ex-diplomat.

In addition to Maulana Samiul Haq, who leads their team, the Taliban negotiators include Maulana Abdul Aziz, a cleric at the Red Mosque in Islamabad, and Mohammed Ibrahim, the head of the militant Jamaat-e-Islami party in northwestern Pakistan.

State-run Pakistan Television reported that Saddiqui told Haq that Sharif wants to see an end to terrorism. Haq, in return, promised his full support for the success of the peace process, the report said. During a statement at a news conference following four hours of negotiations, Haq said: "It is necessary for the success of the talks that all activities against peace and security should be ended."

Haq continued: "The process of talks should not be a long one as the nation is waiting for good news. Therefore, this process should be completed in a short period."

Haq and the government's negotiators each made requests for meetings with their counterpart's higher-ups — with the Taliban representative requesting a meeting with the prime minister, army chief, and head of the intelligence agency and the government team asking to meet with the Taliban leadership.

Despite the government's announced intention to negotiate, a flurry of recent attacks by the Taliban has caused Pakistanis to put pressure on Sharif to initiate a military operation against the Taliban in their support base bordering Afghanistan. Some critics assert that the government's participation in peace initiatives in the past have failed to produce results and have only emboldened the militants.

A report from APP (Associated Press of Pakistan) carried by the Pakistan-based *Business Recorder* noted that it was the stated intention of the government's negotiating committee to inform the Taliban that peace talks should be held within the bounds of the constitution and that there should be an end to the violent attacks in the country.

The government negotiators also said that the subject of the talks should be limited to areas of Pakistan impacted by the militants' attacks, and should not be about the entire country.



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Additionally, the committee said that there should be no activity that is contrary to peace and security and harmful to the talks' success, which echoed language used by Haq, who said that both sides were positive about the prospect for the success of the talks.

Business Recorder reported that Siddiqui thanked the Taliban committee for holding the meeting and said it seemed that there were not two committees, but only one committee holding talks.

Siddiqui said, "We are happy that the meeting was held according to our wishes and expectations and in an atmosphere of conciliation and goodwill."

"There was not even a single moment of tension and the meeting was useful and fruitful. The meeting clearly set the objectives for the future," added the government's team leader.

The *Christian Science Monitor's* Asia editor, Chelsea Sheasley, in a [February 6 article](#) about the peace talks, noted that the Pakistan Taliban is "a loosely organized militant group that is affiliated with but distinct from the Taliban in Afghanistan."

A Wikipedia article confirms the distinction, also noting that the TTP is not directly affiliated with the Afghan Taliban movement led by Mullah Omar. However, the Afghan Taliban had its origins in Pakistan, during a time when Pakistan hosted and helped train the mujehedeens who were fighting against their Soviet occupiers.

After the fall of Soviet-backed Afghan regime of Mohammed Najibullah in 1992, civil war erupted in the country. After years of fighting, the Taliban entered Kabul on September 27, 1996, and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban are dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group, which originated in Iran. The large Pashtun population in Afghanistan and western Pakistan creates a natural constituency for the Taliban that spans the border.

Sheasley writes that the TTP "have been trying for years to topple the government in Islamabad and establish Islamic rule. Thousands of civilians have been killed since the group rose to prominence in 2007, reports the BBC and the first month of 2014 saw an uptick in Taliban attacks across the country."

Prime Minister Sharif, she notes, has been pressured by his citizens to respond to Taliban attacks with military force. And the Pakistani media have reported that the government and military are planning "a full-scale offensive in the tribal areas in March."

On January 27, a majority of the members of parliament from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party voted in favor of a military operation against the TTP, and the following day, a top PML-N official, Rana Sanaullah, said that the country was "on a war footing."

However, the following day, Sharif announced that his government would seek peace talks with the TTP, sending an obviously mixed message.

Sheasley's explanation is that "with the impending withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan, Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, and its bosses in Pakistan cannot afford to offend the TTP too much."

The CSM's Asia editor offers two reasons for this apparently timid approach against the TTP. First, leaders in Islamabad are afraid that following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the influence of the allies of India — Pakistan's bitter rival — may increase.

The other explanation offered by Sheasley is:



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The Pashtuns in Afghanistan have always resented the British division of their lands and quite a few in Pakistan feel closer to their Afghan brethren than the regimes in Islamabad. The Taliban veil has masked this hostility and given it religious colors, but, underneath it all, the national question remains strong. If a section of the ISI supports the armed networks, it is difficult for other wings of the ISI to close it down.

The answer to how the conflict between the TTP and Pakistan's central government plays out may become more apparent after the United States withdraws its forces from Afghanistan. If Islamabad's military has not by then attacked and decimated them, the Pakistan Taliban may then move into Afghanistan to assist their Pashtun brothers.

Which also raises an interesting point: The reason for sending U.S. forces to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 was to unseat the Taliban, which had provided a safe haven for the al-Qaeda terrorists. Now, over a dozen years later, with more than 2,200 Americans killed in Afghanistan, and a price tag of over \$641 billion, what exactly has been accomplished to justify such a price?

Photo of Irfan Siddiqui (left) and Maulana Samiul Haq at a news conference in Islamabad Feb. 6: AP Images



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