

Uighur Dissent and Militancy in China's Xinjiang Province

By Chris Zambelis

IN JULY 2009, communal rioting unsettled the provincial capital Urumqi in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR). The rioting, between Uighurs—a largely Sunni Muslim and ethnic Turkic minority group—and Han Chinese, highlighted the contentious position of ethnic Uighurs in China and the underlying tensions between Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang in particular. The worst spate of ethno-sectarian strife in China in decades was sparked by a confrontation between Uighur migrant workers and Han Chinese at a toy factory in Guangdong Province in southeastern China that left two Uighurs dead. Subsequent public demonstrations by Uighurs in Xinjiang protesting the government's handling of the incident spiraled into violence.¹ Approximately 192 people were killed—two-thirds of whom were Han—and thousands more injured on both sides in the ensuing chaos that captured international attention.²

Xinjiang's Uighurs consider themselves the targets of a systematic campaign of state discrimination and repression aimed at destroying Uighur identity and culture and undermining Uighur rights in Xinjiang. Uighur nationalists refer to Xinjiang as East Turkistan or Uighuristan, and it is a region they consider their ancestral homeland. For Uighurs, Beijing's decision to raze the Old City in Kashgar, the Uighur cultural capital and a key stop on the Silk Route, and to build new structures in its place is emblematic of China's hostility toward them.³ China has

1 Andrew Jacobs, "At a Factory, the Spark for China's Violence," *New York Times*, July 15, 2009.

2 Given the generally favorable opinion of China in the Middle East and greater Islamic world, China was sensitive to international Muslim public opinion during the crisis. For more details about the effect of the violence in Xinjiang on Muslim perceptions of China, see Chris Zambelis, "Xinjiang Crackdown and Changing Perceptions of China in the Islamic World?" *China Brief* 9:16 (2009).

3 Michael Wines, "To Protect an Ancient City, China Moves to Raze It," *New York Times*, May 27, 2009. China justified the action on the ancient city's vulnerability to earthquakes.

long regarded popular expressions of social and political dissent and the vocalization of grievances by Uighurs as a threat to domestic stability. China also perceives the history of Uighur separatist sentiments and activities, to include two short-lived periods of independence in the 20th century⁴ and incidences of terrorist violence and persistent political activism, as a threat to its territorial sovereignty. Frequently downplaying the veracity of Uighur grievances, China instead equates Uighur aspirations with those promulgated by radical Islamists. China links Uighur militants to al-Qa`ida and the Taliban and the specter of radical Islam in Central and South Asia. Public statements by al-Qa`ida that called attention to the Uighur question following the July 2009 riots raised another set of questions regarding al-Qa`ida's possible intentions toward China.

While there is evidence of a fringe extremist current within the larger Uighur nationalist movement that frames Uighur aspirations in a radical Islamist context and is involved in transnational radical Islamist movements, the Uighur question never figured prominently in al-Qa`ida discourse prior to the July 2009 violence. This article will examine some of the key political and cultural aspects of the Uighur question in China, shed light on the regional and global nature and implications of Uighur activism and simmering ethno-sectarian unrest in Xinjiang, and highlight some of the reasons why the Uighurs are attracting increased attention among radical Islamist groups such as al-Qa`ida.

Demographics and Geography

Understanding the demography and geography of Xinjiang is central to comprehending the geopolitics of the Uighur question. Demographic data on the number of Uighurs in China and other parts of the region are often politicized.⁵ The total Uighur population

4 Two separate albeit short-lived independent Uighur-led "East Turkistan Republics" existed between 1933-1934 and 1944-1949.

5 Uighur or international Muslim activists concerned with the plight of Uighurs may have an interest in inflating the actual numbers of Uighurs in China. Similarly, fearing the specter of emboldening Uighur secessionist or identity activism, China may have an interest in downplaying the number of Uighurs in Xinjiang in a possible

in Xinjiang is estimated to range between 8-10 million, representing roughly half of Xinjiang's total population of approximately 21 million.⁶ Many observers often mistakenly lump the Uighurs in Xinjiang together with other Chinese Muslims such as the Hui Muslims⁷—a Chinese Muslim group constituting the largest Muslim community in China—or smaller ethnic Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Tajik Muslim communities, exaggerating

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their actual numbers in the process. The distinction between Uighurs and Hui Muslims is significant in the context of Chinese ethnic politics. Although the Hui are regarded as essentially Chinese culturally, the Uighurs, in spite of their status as an officially recognized minority, are largely viewed as foreigners. Ethnic Uighur minorities are also found in the neighboring Central Asian republics⁸ and Uighurs likewise share close linguistic, cultural, and religious ties with the other Turkic Muslim peoples of Central Asia. While the Uighurs are exempt from China's one-child policy due to their official

effort to diminish their perceived presence or influence in Chinese society.

6 Matthew Teague, "The Other Tibet," *National Geographic*, December 2009; Joe Havelly, "Q & A: China's Restive Uighurs," al-Jazeera, July 9, 2009.

7 For more background on the history of China's Hui Muslims, see Matthew Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement and Sects* (Richmond, VA: Curzon Press, 1999).

8 With a community of approximately 300,000, Kazakhstan is home to the largest Uighur population outside of China. Kyrgyzstan is home to an estimated 60,000 Uighurs, and approximately 6,000 Uighurs reside in Tajikistan. Smaller Uighur communities are also found in Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Turkey.

minority status, China's aggressive efforts to encourage the migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang under the auspices of its "Go West" campaign to offset the Uighur population reflects the true nature of Beijing's concerns about the demographic composition of the province.⁹

Representing its largest political region, China's Xinjiang Province is located in the northwestern part of the country and shares frontiers with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. China's concerns about instability in Xinjiang stemming from Uighur nationalism are compounded due to the region's vital strategic significance: Xinjiang is rich in natural resources, boasting the highest concentrations of natural gas and oil reserves in China,¹⁰ as well as extensive coal, mineral, and water resources. Pipelines originating in neighboring Central Asian republics also traverse Xinjiang transporting natural gas to Chinese consumers. Since Xinjiang shares a border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, Beijing worries about the spread of al-Qa`ida- and Taliban-style influence in the province, especially amid the war in Afghanistan and mounting instability in Pakistan. Other threats, such as opium and heroin trafficking, already a serious problem in the region, are also a major concern for Beijing.¹¹

Political Activism and Militancy

Uighur rights advocates in the diaspora who engage in peaceful political opposition to what they often describe as the "Chinese occupation of East Turkistan" are politically savvy, organized, and can often count on allies in diplomatic, human rights, and religious circles.¹² One such group, run by exiled Uighur activists, is the World Uighur

Congress (WUC) led by Rebia Kadeer, a native of Xinjiang living in self-exile in the United States.¹³ Beijing is concerned that foreign powers such as the United States will use the Uighur issue as a political lever over China.¹⁴ Beijing's opposition to the WUC is such that it accused the group of masterminding the July 2009 violence.¹⁵ Despite a lack of evidence, China considers the WUC to be a terrorist organization, an accusation likely meant to tarnish the group's reputation globally.

Since the 1990s, Beijing has implicated a number of Uighur organizations in terrorism, including bombings, arson attacks, assassinations, and abductions in Xinjiang and other parts of China.¹⁶ The ideological impetus for Uighur militancy, however, is a point of contention. China often ascribes all manifestations of Uighur militancy to violent Islamism. The 9/11 attacks, in essence, provided Beijing with an opportunity to frame its campaign against Uighur separatism and other forms of activism—both peaceful and violent—in the context of the U.S. war against al-Qa`ida.¹⁷ This approach afforded China a greater license to crack down on all forms of Uighur dissent.

In reality, Uighur militancy does not comprise a monolith—let alone a radical Islamist monolith—characterized by Beijing.¹⁸ While acknowledging evidence of individual Uighur participation in

radical Islamist movements outside of China, many observers attribute acts of Uighur militancy to nationalist resistance or civil unrest.¹⁹ Uighurs have traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan and joined the Taliban and other radical Islamist militant groups operating in Central and South Asia in the 1990s.²⁰ Yet, many Uighur nationalists fled the province for Afghanistan (as well as Pakistan and other countries) to evade Chinese authorities; others may have intended to travel westward to gain political asylum.²¹ Overall, the radical Islamist strain of Uighur militancy constitutes a fringe among Uighur militants, not the dominant trend claimed by Beijing.

China's accusations regarding the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM),²² an obscure Uighur organization linked to violence and terrorism, provide insight into its approach to the larger Uighur question. Beijing accuses the ETIM of executing more than 200 terrorist attacks over the years.²³ Beijing also accuses the ETIM of having received financial and material support from al-Qa`ida and the Taliban²⁴ and of maintaining links with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),²⁵ an al-Qa`ida-linked group with a presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan and across Central Asia.²⁶ ETIM is also implicated in plots against Chinese interests and other targets outside of China, such as an alleged plot to attack embassies—

9 Henryk Szadziewski, "How the West was Won: China's Expansion into Central Asia," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 3:2 (2009): pp. 210-218.

10 "Xinjiang's Oil and Gas Equivalent Ranks First in China," *People's Daily Online*, July 11, 2008.

11 Lei Xiaoxun and Zhu Zhe, "Xinjiang Targets Drug Trafficking," *China Daily*, March 10, 2009.

12 Much to China's chagrin, the Dalai Lama also supports Uighur rights and maintains ties to the WUC, often likening the Uighur question to the situation in Tibet. See Laura MacInnis, "Uighur Unrest Shows China's Failures - Dalai Lama," Reuters, August 6, 2009.

13 For more details about the World Uighur Congress (WUC) and its numerous affiliates, see the official website of the WUC at www.uyghurcongress.org.

14 "'East Turkistan' Forces Seriously Disrupt Xinjiang's Development Progress: White Paper," Xinhua News Agency, September 21, 2009. Also see "White Paper on Development and Progress in Xinjiang," Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, September 21, 2009.

15 "Anti-Terror Expert: World Uyghur Congress behind Xinjiang Violence," Xinhua News Agency, July 7, 2009.

16 James Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment," East-West Center, Policy Studies 6, 2004.

17 Sean Roberts, "Ethnic Clashes in China: Uighurs vs. Han Chinese," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2009. Also see Yitzhak Shichor, "Fact and Fiction: A Chinese Documentary on Eastern Turkestan Terrorism," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4:2 (2006): pp. 89-108.

18 Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, "Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China," Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2008.

19 Sean R. Roberts, Ph.D., testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, June 16, 2009. Also see Dru Gladney, Ph.D., testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, June 16, 2009.

20 Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 204; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 128.

21 Roberts, June 16, 2009.

22 The East Turkistan Islamic Movement is also often referred to as the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP).

23 Millward.

24 "Uighur Group 'Linked to al-Qaeda,'" al-Jazeera, March 9, 2007.

25 The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, in an effort to showcase its wider, regional focus, now refers to itself as the Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT).

26 Bahukutumbi Raman, "Strange Bedfellows: China's Problems in Xinjiang are Forcing it to Reach out to India. But Does India Care?" *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2009.

including the U.S. Embassy²⁷—and other targets in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek,²⁸ as well as another plot to abduct Chinese diplomats in Pakistan in 2006.²⁹ The United States designated the ETIM a terrorist organization in 2002, a controversial move in light of reports that the U.S. decision was based solely on Chinese information.³⁰ The group's late leader, Hasan Mahsum, who was killed by Pakistani forces at

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a suspected al-Qa`ida hideout in South Waziristan in 2003,³¹ denied that ETIM maintained any links to al-Qa`ida or the Taliban and said that the group had no intention of targeting the United States.³² Details surrounding Mahsum's presence in Pakistan are unclear. In spite of his denials of ETIM links to al-Qa`ida or the Taliban, it is conceivable that Mahsum may have eventually joined ranks with militants.

The veracity of China's claims tying ETIM to al-Qa`ida has come under scrutiny. Although China claims the ETIM has extensive reach and capabilities, little is actually known about the group. Moreover, ETIM may be comprised of Uighur nationalists who fled Xinjiang for Afghanistan in the 1990s to plot against China and not, as Beijing asserts, to join forces with al-Qa`ida.³³ While acknowledging its

separatist agenda, many observers argue that China exaggerates the perceived threat of ETIM by conflating all acts of violence that may occur spontaneously or by the hands of other Uighur groups to ETIM to justify further repression of Uighur political dissent in Xinjiang.³⁴ Since Mahsum's death in 2003, the very existence of ETIM has also come into question due to the lack of credible information about the group that does not originate from Beijing.³⁵ The controversy surrounding the Uighurs held at Guantanamo Bay who China accuses of membership in ETIM also raises questions about China's previous claims about the group.³⁶ The men, who resided in a camp in Afghanistan for Uighur nationalists who had fled Xinjiang, were detained by U.S. forces as enemy combatants. In spite of Chinese protests, the men were exonerated by U.S. authorities, with a number of them subsequently resettled in Albania, Bermuda, and Palau due to U.S. fears that they would be mistreated in China. Seven Uighurs remain in custody at Guantanamo Bay.³⁷

Separate from the ETIM, in July 2008 China was threatened by another obscure Uighur militant group, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). The group released a videotaped statement titled “Our Blessed Jihad in Yunnan” in the Uighur language by “Commander Seyfullah.” The statement claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks, including a string of bus bombings in Xinjiang, the southern province of Yunnan, Shanghai, and elsewhere.³⁸ The video also contained a threat to stage attacks during the summer 2008 Olympics in Beijing: “The Turkistan Islamic Party warns China one more time...Our aim is to target the most critical points related to the Olympics. We will try to attack Chinese central cities severely

using the tactics that have never been employed.”³⁹ What sets TIP apart from other Uighur militant groups is its radical Islamist discourse reminiscent of al-Qa`ida-inspired extremists.⁴⁰ Little is known about the TIP. Despite a lack of concrete evidence, TIP is sometimes referred to as an affiliate or offshoot of ETIM or even ETIM operating under a different label, while others believe that it is tied to other Central Asia-based militants who are themselves tied to al-Qa`ida, including the IMU. Uighur activists have charged that Beijing may be behind the creation of the TIP in an effort to justify further crackdowns against Uighur activists in Xinjiang.⁴¹

Al-Qa`ida Singles Out China

A key feature of al-Qa`ida's platform is its determination to speak on behalf of besieged Muslims across the globe. Compared to al-Qa`ida's emphasis on the suffering of the Palestinians and the overall negative impact on Muslims of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the plight of Uighurs in China has received only scant attention over

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the years. The July 2009 violence in Xinjiang, however, prompted al-Qa`ida to issue its first direct threat against China. Al-Qa`ida's Algerian-based North African affiliate, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), reportedly announced their intent to exact revenge against China and Chinese interests, including the approximately 50,000

27 Philip P. Pan, “U.S. Warns of Plot by Group in W. China,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2002.

28 Millward.

29 “Editorial: Uighur Terrorist in Pakistan,” *Daily Times*, June 27, 2006.

30 Shaun Tandon, “US Lawmakers Seek Review of Uighur ‘Terror’ Label,” *Agence France-Presse*, June 16, 2009.

31 “Military Confirms Killing Chinese ‘Terrorist,’” *Dawn*, December 24, 2003.

32 Mahsum's denial of links to al-Qa`ida or the Taliban is significant considering that allies or affiliates of al-Qa`ida typically boast of their associations with the group. See Roberts, June 16, 2009.

33 Ibid.

34 In addition to ETIM, China implicates a host of obscure Uighur nationalist groups in violence, including the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO), United Revolutionary Front of East Turkistan (URFET), and the Uighur Liberation Organization (ULO).

35 Roberts, June 16, 2009.

36 Tandon.

37 “Guantanamo Uighurs Sent to Palau,” BBC, October 31, 2009.

38 Tania Branigan, “China Plays Down Terror Link as Bus Explodes,” *Guardian*, July 28, 2008; Deborah Charles, “Group Threatens Olympics Attack, Claims Bombed Buses,” *Reuters*, July 26, 2008.

39 Charles.

40 One interesting aspect of TIP is its presence on the internet, namely its release of Arabic-language publications typical of al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. For more details, see Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Journal of the Turkistan Islamic Party Urges Jihad in China,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7:9 (2009). In a related point, since the July 2009 riots, the Uighur question tends to receive more attention on Arabic-language radical Islamist websites and chat room forums.

41 Roberts, June 16, 2009.

Chinese living and working in Algeria, days after the riots in Urumqi.⁴² Additionally, in a videotaped statement that featured senior al-Qa`ida leader Abu Yahya al-Libi that appeared online on October 7, 2009, Abu Yahya called on Muslims to direct their attention to the plight of the Uighurs. Regarding the violence in Xinjiang, Abu Yahya declared:

This massacre is not being carried out by criminal Crusaders or evil Jews who have committed crimes against our nation...Today, a new massacre is being carried out by Buddhist nationalists and communists against the Muslim population in eastern Turkestan... It is a duty for Muslims today to stand by their wounded and oppressed brothers in East Turkestan...and support them with all they can.⁴³

Al-Qa`ida's decision to single out China is noteworthy on a number of levels. Given al-Qa`ida's unshaken focus on targeting the United States and U.S. interests abroad, it is unclear if the group is capable of or interested in expending resources to target China. In this regard, al-Qa`ida may not be interested in opening up another front in its campaign that would entail taking on China directly; this would likely encourage the United States and China to cooperate more closely in destroying the organization. Rather, al-Qa`ida may be content with providing moral support to others who may choose to strike China and Chinese interests in other countries independently.

AQIM, for instance, claimed responsibility for an attack on June 17, 2009 against an Algerian paramilitary police convoy escorting Chinese construction workers; 19 paramilitary police and one Chinese worker were reportedly killed in the incident.⁴⁴ AQIM has a history of targeting foreigners in Algeria, including foreign workers, and the group's apparent intent to target

Chinese in particular following the July 2009 riots may lead to further attacks against Chinese interests in the region. It is also unclear if al-Qa`ida has the resources required, namely capable networks operating on Chinese soil, to strike inside China. At the same time, al-Qa`ida's decision to exploit the July 2009 riots demonstrates its ability to harness current events dominating the news cycle to further validate its narrative as a vanguard of Islamic resistance. In this case, al-Qa`ida saw an opportunity to speak in defense of what it sees as a besieged Muslim minority suffering under an oppressive regime as most of the world—Muslims and non-Muslims alike—stand by in silence.

Conclusion

The nature and scope of the violence in Urumqi in July 2009 and the increasing international interest among Muslims and non-Muslims alike in the Uighur question will impact the future of the region. By all accounts, China will continue to treat the Uighur question as a vital security matter. In doing so, it will go to great lengths to root out all forms of dissent, peaceful or violent, under the guise of counterterrorism. Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida's foray into the politics of Xinjiang should remain cause for further observation. Yet it is unlikely that the group will set their sights on China in the near future when there are far more pressing issues at hand, such as striking their primary targets: the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad.

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Ninawa Province: Al-Qa`ida's Remaining Stronghold

By Andrea Plebani

SINCE THE DEATH of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in June 2006, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) has been seriously weakened as a terrorist and insurgent organization. The group was unable to achieve its main objective of creating a "genuine" Islamic state in the heart of the Muslim world. Nevertheless, AQI continues to retain sufficient support and capabilities to prevent the complete normalization of the Iraqi system, to wage a prolonged low-intensity conflict (focused on several strategic provinces¹), and to implement high-profile coordinated attacks such as the operations targeting Baghdad on August 19, October 25 and December 8, 2009.² While Baghdad continues to remain AQI's major operational center of gravity, its presence in the capital is limited due to the strong pressure exerted by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and U.S. forces. In this framework, several elements indicate that Ninawa Province is the movement's main stronghold and financial hub.³

This article will show how the death of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in June 2006 marked the gradual weakening of AQI, identify the factors that have made Ninawa Province the group's main remaining stronghold, and assess whether AQI has moved toward a more traditional terrorism campaign and away from the "mini-state" model.

1 Some 79% of the attacks waged from July to September 2009 took place in four provinces: Baghdad, Ninawa, Diyala and Salah al-Din. See "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," U.S. Department of Defense, report to the U.S. Congress, September 2009.

2 The August 19 bombings hit the Foreign and Finance ministries and killed at least 100 people. On October 25, attacks targeted the Justice Ministry and the Baghdad governorate headquarters, killing at least 150 people. The December 8 attacks targeted a courthouse, two colleges, a mosque and a bank, killing at least 120 people. For details, see Steven Lee Myers and Marc Santora, "Election Date Set in Iraq as Bombs Kill Scores," *New York Times*, December 8, 2009.

3 Eric Hamilton, "The Fight for Mosul," Institute for the Study of War, April 2008.

42 Liam Stack, "China Warns Citizens in Algeria of Al Qaeda Threat," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 2009.

43 "China: Al-Qaeda Urges Holy War to Defend Muslims," Adnkronos International, October 7, 2009.

44 Christian Lowe and Lamine Chikhi, "Insurgents Ambush Algerian Police Convoy, Kill 19," Reuters, June 18, 2009.