

CHINA: NEW UIGHUR ATTACKS AND ALLEGED LINKS TO THE ISLAMIC STATE

The rise of the Islamic State in Syrian and Iraq is a matter of concern for Chinese authorities, who fear possible links between IS and Uyghur terrorists in Xinjiang. Over the past weeks, Uyghur extremists stroke again hence putting political and security authorities on alert.

On March 6, a group of 3 assailants armed with kitchen knives attacked people at a railway station in the southern city of Guangzhou injuring 9 people including a police officer. Police troops managed to kill one of the attackers and to arrest another one. The third attacker managed to escape. Later investigations revealed that the assailants were ethnic Uygurs.

Over the past year ethnic Uygurs have attacked civilians in public transportation hubs such as train and bus stations. In May 2014, 6 people were injured in a similar attack at Guangzhou railway station. While in March of the same year 29 people were killed at Kunming railway station, in an incident that was later labeled “China’s 9/11”.

China has been struggling with the Uyghur insurgency for decades, but now the threat seems being amplified by the possible connections between Uyghur terrorist and the Islamic State. It appears in fact that the perpetrators of the attack were planning to travel toward the Middle East to join the ranks of the Islamic State. Moreover, on March 10, Chinese authorities announced to the arrest of jihadists from Xinjiang, who returned to China after having fought in the Middle

East alongside the Islamic State. The investigation that followed revealed that the terrorists were planning an attack, although details were not disclosed to media.

Earlier in December 2014, Chinese state media announced that around 300 Chinese extremists are fighting with IS. The Communist Party's official newspaper, the People's Daily, reported that Chinese members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) are among those joining the Islamic State, although this information was not independently verified. Still in December, China expressed concern about the increasing power of the Islamic State and the effect that it could have on the Xinjiang province, home to China's Muslim Uyghur population and of the ETIM.

For the first time Chinese state-run media linked Xinjiang insurgents to the IS terrorists in September 2014 when they warned that an unknown number of Islamists from Xinjiang region have fled from the country to get "terrorist training" from Islamic State (IS) fighters in Syria and Iraq, in order to eventually perpetrate attacks in China. Still in September, 4 suspects from Xinjiang were arrested in Indonesia while trying to join a local IS-linked terror group. The four suspects fled to Cambodia from China, and then went to Thailand where they obtained fake Turkish passports, before flying to Indonesia through Malaysia.

These latest statements of Chinese authorities highlight how China is seriously concerned about the possible linkage of Uyghur terrorists with the Islamic State, as the former may provide recruitment to the latter, which would consequently increase the threat of returning foreign fighters and more sophisticated lone-wolf attacks in the country.

The ETIM is Uyghur's most known extremist group. It has alleged ties with Al Qaeda considering that some Uyghurs were found fighting alongside Bin Laden in the Afpak conflict and for this reason it was enlisted in the list of terrorist organizations in 2002 by the United States.

Chinese authorities have blamed the group for most of the terrorist attacks in

Xinjiang, although ETIM has officially claimed responsibility only for few of them, such as the murder of Chinese nationals in Pakistani Balochistan in 2007; a series of attacks ahead of Summer Olympics in 2008; the Tiananmen Square bombing on October 28, 2013; and the already mentioned attack at a train station in Urumqi in April 2014.

At the present moment, it remains unclear and unverified the link between ETIM and IS. However, the ETIM may act as recruiter for IS in Xinjiang, hence providing logistic support for sending Uyghurs fighters in Syria and Iraq. This would allow ETIM to have better trained fighters to later deploy on the Chinese front.

Nevertheless, such alleged links may be exploited by Chinese authorities to further securitize the Uyghur issue, hence allowing them even stricter controls in the area. Xinjiang represents a strategic region for China, having large deposits of oil, natural gas and coal. In 1949, the region was absorbed by the People's Republic of China, when more than 95 percents of population were Uyghur Muslims. Since then, due to the constant inflow of Han Chinese, actively encouraged by the government, this rate dropped to below half. Over the past decades, Xinjiang has become a hotbed of ethnic tensions and a focal point of security concerns, which pushed Chinese authorities to apply limitations to Muslim religious practices. This turned into a deeper radicalization, that China has been so far unable to control.

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