

## **CHINA: XINJIANG'S VIOLENCE, SUB-STATE SEPARATISM OR GLOBAL TERRORISM?**

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In the last few years, and particularly since the July 2009 deadly riots in Xinjiang's capital Urumqi, the case of Uyghurs' separatism and their Islamic radicalisation has gained considerable attention among political observers worldwide.

Moreover, the last few months' outbursts of violence in Xinjiang - which were the worst in four years - served as a rather alarming notice that, regardless whether it is politically or religiously motivated (or both), the threat posed by the Uyghur ethnic minority in Xinjiang is still very relevant.

Here are a few recent events which illustrate this growing instability:

On Wednesday August 9 2013, on the eve of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr, clashes between security forces and Muslim Uyghurs killed 3 people and wounded a dozen others.

On Friday July 5, 2013, riot police forces were massively deployed in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang region, ahead of the fourth anniversary of the 2009 ethnic violence between the Muslim Uyghurs and the Han Chinese majority.

On Monday July 1, 2013, Chinese authorities blamed Syrian rebels for training Uyghur Muslim extremists such as those responsible for the June 26, 2013, riots which resulted in the death of 35 people in Lukqun, making it the deadliest incident

in Xinjiang since 2009. Although China has usually put the blame on Islamist separatists or on Pakistan's support, it is the first time they point fingers at a Syrian group and hold them responsible for Xinjiang's regional turmoil.

On June 28, 2013, at least 15 Uyghurs were killed and about 50 others were injured by Chinese security forces during riots after the police broke up a sermon at a mosque and arrested the Imam considered as an extremist.

The Uyghur Muslims are a Turkic ethnic group mainly settled in the western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC), but also in parts of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, among others.

More than 8 million Uyghurs live in China's Xinjiang, a region which has been autonomous (to some extent) since 1955 but is still subjected to Chinese rule.

Many observers believe that a long resentment and discontent over Chinese authority coupled with a growing economic disparity between the Uyghur minority and a rising number of Han Chinese migrants into Xinjiang have been the main triggers of separatism in this north western region of China. But the subversive work of Islamists extremists – some of them linked to al-Qaeda – cannot be ruled out as a main cause of separatism and violence.

On the one hand, Uyghur separatists claim that Xinjiang (or East Turkestan as many of them call it) is their fatherland and is not a part of China who invaded it in 1949. They aspire to secure their religious, linguistic and cultural autonomy in the face of a rather assimilating Chinese culture. The Chinese authorities underline that the region is part of the Chinese sphere of influence since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

On the other hand, Xinjiang's mineral wealth and its strategic position as a gateway to the oil-rich countries of central Asia stimulated the region's economy, increasing job opportunities and sparking a considerable wave of Han Chinese settlers who, due to various reasons tend to be better off than the region's native Uyghurs.

Uyghur separatists have created various movements such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) or the East Turkestan Independence Movement (among others) which put forward different claims: some of them fight for a separate Uyghur state, either called "Uyghuristan" or "East Turkestan", while others advocate the continuation of their existing autonomous relationship with China.

It must be underlined that not only China but also the United States consider ETIM to be a terrorist organization and that the United Nation decided in 2002 that ETIM is linked to al-Qaeda. Actually, the founder of ETIM, Hasan Mahsum was killed on October 2, 2003, when the Pakistani military raided al-Qaeda camps. At the very beginning of the operations in Afghanistan, in 2001, several Uyghur were arrested by the international coalition in al-Qaeda training camps.

Although the long-lasting Uyghur separatism has lately been on the rise, China's recent policies as well as the latest eruptions of violence in the region have increasingly suggested that Xinjiang's security situation is further complicated by external factors and might find its roots in a broader and hardly controllable regional context. Indeed, Xinjiang is situated on the edge of an enormously agitated and war-prone Central Asia from which conflict spillovers could have consequential impacts on China's stability and security.

Recent signs suggesting Uyghurs' Islamic radicalisation coupled with a growing domestic discontent and economic disparity make it difficult for observers to fully capture the essence of Xinjiang's turmoil.

Since 2012, China has claimed that Muslim Uyghur extremists are being trained and are fighting alongside rebels in Syria. According to Chinese anti-terrorism authorities, members of the East Turkestan movement have entered Syria to participate in religious extremist and terrorist activities among the Syrian rebels. They subsequently choose trained candidates to sneak into China in order to undertake terrorist attacks against the government and the Han Chinese majority of Xinjiang.

Beijing's support for Bashar al-Assad is not surprising when aware of China's concerns that Uyghurs will become increasingly indoctrinated in extremist ideology and receive military and/or terrorist training in Syria. The Chinese state, by supporting Assad, is trying to avoid the risk of a terrorist blowback if the Syrian regime were to fall into extremist hands. Syria would then become a failed state and most probably a hotbed of terrorist activity and Islamic fundamentalism, and could allow extremist Uyghurs to recklessly coordinate terrorist cells that could not only target Xinjiang but also Beijing and other parts of China. On the other hand, the

position of Beijing on Syria is in line with its traditional “non intervention” practice in international policy.

In 2009, various al-Qaeda branches made statements showing their compassion for Uyghurs in Xinjiang: al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) made a video statement in which they compared the Chinese regime with the Zionist regime of Israel.

Al-Qaeda’s as-sahab media wing described the Uyghur situation in Xinjiang as the “Muslim World’s forgotten wound”.

As these statements suggest, an exportation of the “Uyghur struggle” outside Chinese boundaries could provide them with a culturally unified support from various terrorist groups who fight against Muslim oppression worldwide.

Moreover, the similarity in Xinjiang’s attacks - which include running cars into Han civilians, suicide bombings on bicycles and protests followed by attacks on police stations - suggest that Uyghur insurgents work in coordination with each other and with the Turkestan Islamic movement. In July 2013, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) released videos called “military quick guides” which purpose is to teach viewers how to use weapons. This being said, Uyghur insurgents have rarely used guns in the past, possibly due to the difficulty of acquiring them.

The Turkestan Islamic Party’s (TIP) propaganda as well as the alleged presence of Uyghurs in Syria is not only likely to internationalise and publicise the Uyghur issue to Jihadists around the globe, but also to radicalise and spread Jihadist ideology among Uyghurs in Xinjiang, with potentially destructive consequences.

On the one hand, China describes the violence in Xinjiang as “acts of terrorism” influenced and galvanised by external groups and conflicts (e.g. Syria), and on the other hand, others claim that Uyghurs are merely driven by separatist aspirations and that China is taking advantage of the broader “war on terror” to justify its policies towards the Muslim Uyghurs.

In an attempt to clarify this controversy, one could argue that Muslim Uyghur separatists are now placing their struggle for self-determination outside domestic boundaries and in the more global contexts of Jihadism and of the fight against “Muslim oppression” as it could well benefit their cause by providing them with broader support, legitimacy, confidence and training.