

# Uighur Foreign Fighters:

## An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge

Uighurs, specifically individuals of Turkic descent from China's northwest province of Xinjiang, have become a noticeable part of the constellation of globally active jihadist terror groups. Uighur jihadists first came to the world's attention when the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001. While continuing their cooperation with the Taliban under the banner of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Uighur jihadists have now spread to Southeast Asia and the Middle East. ETIM's members are part of the Turkestan Islamic Party fighting with the Al-Qaeda umbrella group in Syria, but other Uighurs have joined IS in Syria and Iraq, and still others have joined local terror groups in Indonesia. However, Uighurs are currently underexamined as active participants in jihadist organisations. Publications about Uighurs have been piecemeal – focusing on their struggles against the Chinese government or narrowly describing the specific groups in which Uighurs have been participants. This Policy Brief explores the scope and scale of Uighur Foreign Fighters (UFF) activity in various locations, its implications and how their participation in global jihadist groups may evolve.

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## About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

On the sidelines of a May 2017 meeting between Syrian and Chinese businessmen in Beijing, Syria's ambassador to China startled reporters with a surprising number – 5000 – which represented how many Uighurs he claimed were fighting in Syria for various jihadist groups.<sup>1</sup> The figure was several times higher than the Chinese government's estimate of 300 Uighurs fighting for the Islamic State (IS) in Syria.<sup>2</sup> The precise number of Uighurs fighting in Syria is difficult to assess. The Syrian ambassador's high figure may have been an intentional overestimation in an attempt to further encourage Chinese support for the Assad regime. In turn, the Chinese government may have purposefully underestimated the number to lessen public anxieties among ethnic Han Chinese that Uighur attacks have created in recent years. Regardless of the exact numbers, Uighurs, specifically predominantly Sunni Muslims of Turkic descent from China's northwest province of Xinjiang, have become a prominent cog in the constellation of globally active jihadist terror groups.

Uighur jihadists first came to the world's attention in 2001, when the United States (US) and coalition forces killed and captured a number of them fighting alongside the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan under the banner of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). However, Uighur jihadists have now spread to the Middle East and Southeast Asia. ETIM's members not only continue their operations in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan but are part of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) fighting with the Al-Qaeda umbrella group Jabhat Fateh al Sham (JFS) in Syria. Other Uighurs have joined IS in Syria and Iraq while still others have joined local terror groups in Indonesia.

Although they participate in disparate organisations with differing goals, Uighur Foreign Fighters (UFFs) share unique characteristics as a group. Uighurs consider themselves separate and distinct in ethnicity, culture, and religion from the Han Chinese majority that governs them. These distinctions form the basis of the Uighurs' religious ethno-nationalist identity, leading some of them to engage in violent activities aimed at establishing their own state, East Turkestan. Indeed, over the past two decades, Uighurs have launched several terror attacks in China in pursuit of this goal. Some recent attacks have included:

- October 2013: ETIM attack at Tiananmen Square in Beijing kills five.<sup>3</sup>
- February 2014: A knife attack at a train station in Kunming kills 30.<sup>4</sup>
- April 2014: A knife and bomb attack at the South Railway Station of Urumqi kills three and wounds 79.<sup>5</sup>
- May 2014: Two cars crashed into a market and the attackers lobbed explosives, killing 31 people in Urumqi.<sup>6</sup>
- September 2014: Bomb blasts (including suicide bombers) and clashes left 50 people dead and 50 injured.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ben Blanchard, "Syria Says up to 5,000 Chinese Uighurs fighting in Militant Groups," *Reuters*, May 11, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-china-idUKKBN1840UP>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Martina, "About 300 Chinese said Fighting Alongside Islamic State in Middle East," *Reuters*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-china-idUSKBN0JT0UX20141215>.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, "Islamist Group Claims Responsibility for Attack on China's Tiananmen Square," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/25/islamist-china-tiananmen-beijing-attack>.

<sup>4</sup> David Wertime and Rachel Lu, "Enemies of Humanity," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/02/enemies-of-humanity/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Blanchard, "China Says Three Killed in Attack at Xinjiang Train Station," *Reuters*, April 30, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-blast-idUSBREA3T0HX20140430>.

<sup>6</sup> "Urumqi Attack Kills 31 in China's Xinjiang Region," *BBC News*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27502652>.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Levin, "At Least 50 Killed in Xinjian Violence, Officials Say," *New York Times*, September 25, 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/world/asia/death-toll-in-xinjiang-violence-may-be-higher-than-reported.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/world/asia/death-toll-in-xinjiang-violence-may-be-higher-than-reported.html?_r=0).

- October 2015: A knife attack on a coalmine kills 50.<sup>8</sup>

China's repressive tactics in Xinjiang, such as banning certain religious names for Uighur babies, restrictions on the length of men's beards, limits on observing Ramadan and preferential treatment for Han Chinese in employment and education, have further hardened Uighur identity and increased Islamic radicalisation. This oppression is also a factor in the increasing Islamisation of what was previously a separatist insurgency.<sup>9</sup>

Uighur identity and Islamic radicalisation have been reinforced from beyond the borders of China as well. Turkey has been historically sympathetic to the Uighurs because Turks share an ethnic link with them. In fact, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once proclaimed, "Eastern Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples but also the cradle of Turkic history, civilisation and culture [...]. The martyrs of Eastern Turkestan are our martyrs."<sup>10</sup> Turkey's sympathies may have also translated into assistance to Uighurs seeking to join jihadist groups in Syria.<sup>11</sup> Apart from Turkish kinship and support, the appeal of radical Islamic ideology outside of China has attracted many Uighurs to participate in violent jihadism as part of their religious identity and as a way to further their struggle against the Chinese authorities. This appeal was evident in a recent IS video, in which two Uighurs directed their threats at "evil Chinese communist infidel lackeys" and promised to spill "rivers of blood" in China as "retaliation for the tears that flow from the eyes of the oppressed."<sup>12</sup>

UFFs are, therefore, the products of the push of repression at home and the pull of ethnic and religious appeals abroad. These particular characteristics of Chinese Uighurs have created different contours in their participation as foreign fighters in jihadist operations. However, Uighurs are currently underexamined as foreign fighters. Analyses of Uighurs have been piecemeal – tightly focusing on their struggles against the Chinese government or narrowly describing the operations in which Uighurs have participated. Given the difficulty of developing quantitative studies or conducting research of a clandestine group engaged in violent operations in a number of different battlefronts along with the difficulty of foreigners gaining access to Uighurs in Xinjiang, relying on secondary sources nonetheless paints a portrait of the widespread participation of Uighurs in jihadist circles. This Policy Brief uses media accounts and think tank studies to explore the scope and scale of UFFs in various locations, their implications for international security and the ways in which their participation in global jihadist groups may evolve.

## UFFs of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria

As a participant in the Syrian Civil War, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement operates as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which is also known as "Katibat Turkistani"

<sup>8</sup> "At Least 50 Reported to Have Died in Attack on Coalmine in Xinjiang in September," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/at-least-50-reported-dead-in-september-attack-as-china-celebrates-xinjiang>.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the separatist aspect of Uighur terrorism, see Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya and Wang Pengxin, "Uighur Separatism: East Turkestan Groups," in *Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China* (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 47-88.

<sup>10</sup> Erdoğan made this statement when he was mayor of Istanbul in 1995. "Istanbul Names Park For Isa Yusuf Alptekin," *East Turkestan Information Bulletin* 5, no.4 (August 1995), [http://caccp.freedomsherald.org/et/etib/etib5\\_4.html#4](http://caccp.freedomsherald.org/et/etib/etib5_4.html#4).

<sup>11</sup> Christina Lin, "Chinese Uyghur Colonies in Syria a Challenge for Beijing," *Asia Times*, May 21, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/chinese-uyghur-colonies-syria-challenge-beijing/>.

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Hornby, "IS Uighurs Threaten Rivers of Blood," *Financial Times*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/ddeb5872-ff1f-11e6-96f8-3700c5664d30?mhq5j=e1>.

(Turkistan Brigade). Information about the origins of ETIM is sparse. According to a Council on Foreign Relations study, a Russian newspaper is the first to have publicly mentioned ETIM in 2000 when Osama Bin Laden pledged his support for the group during a 1999 meeting in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> However, ETIM is believed to have been in existence well before this 1999 meeting. The group is believed to have begun as a separatist movement, but became drawn to radical Islam with the nearby presence of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as well as increasing Chinese repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang. ETIM seeks to violently split the territory of Xinjiang, China, and link it with other Uighur territory across Central Asia. Its members have trained with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, the US Department of State labeled ETIM as a foreign terrorist organisation because of its relationship with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

In keeping with ETIM's ideological and strategic affiliation with Al-Qaeda, TIP originally fought with Al Nusra, Al-Qaeda's franchise in Syria. On July 28, 2016, TIP became an official faction of JFS, the most recent iteration of Al Nusra, which acts as an Al-Qaeda umbrella organisation in Syria dedicated to the overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of Sharia law. However, Chinese Major General Jin Yinan believes that TIP is using the Syrian conflict to increase the recognition of its struggle against China and to gain operational experience in order to return to China and breathe new life into the insurgency back home.<sup>14</sup>

According to Uran Botobekov, an expert in Central Asian jihadist groups, there are approximately 2000 members of TIP in Syria, largely grouped in Idlib province.<sup>15</sup> Following the battlefield deaths of several TIP leaders, Ibrahim Mansour rose to assume leadership of the group. Although a Uighur by ethnicity, little else is known about Mansour's origins. His name is not Turkic and was likely selected as an Arabic nom-de-guerre, in keeping with the habits of other foreign fighters. TIP appears to work well with locals in the territories where it is present and has readily cooperated with a number of non-Uighur jihadists who are part of JFS in key battlefield operations in Latakia and Aleppo. In those towns occupied by JFS, TIP members are relatively popular because they are not associated with administrative issues, such as levying taxes or enforcing Sharia law.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, Uighurs in TIP are not unsullied by some of the more extreme actions perpetrated by their fellow extremists and have desecrated churches, executed Christians,<sup>17</sup> and participated in suicide bombings.<sup>18</sup>

Last year was pivotal for TIP's public profile. The group began to release a series of propaganda videos highlighting the fighting prowess of Uighurs in Syria and showing the Uighurs confronting the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi. Some videos resembled music videos with heroic images of TIP fighters and songs in the Uighurs' Turkic language playing in the background. A translation of one

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<sup>13</sup> Beina Xu, Holly Fletcher and Jayshree Bajoria, "Backgrounder: East Turkestan Islamic Movement," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified September 4, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim>.

<sup>14</sup> Antoine Vagneur-Jones, "War and Opportunity: the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Syrian conflict," *Fondation Pour La Recherche Strategique*, no. 07/2017 (March 2, 2017), 5, <https://www.frstrategie.org/web/documents/publications/notes/2017/201707.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Uran Botobekov, "China's Nightmare: Xinjiang Jihadists Go Global," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/chinas-nightmare-xinjiang-jihadists-go-global/>.

<sup>16</sup> Mohanad Hage Ali, "China's Proxy War in Syria: Revealing the Role of Uighur Fighters," *Al Arabiya*, March 2, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/02/China-s-proxy-war-in-Syria-Revealing-the-role-of-Uighur-fighters.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Vagneur-Jones, "War and Opportunity," 6.

<sup>18</sup> Caleb Weiss, "Suicide Bombings Detail Turkistan Islamic Party's Role in Syria," *Long War Journal*, May 3, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/05/suicide-bombings-detail-turkistan-islamic-partys-role-in-syria.php>.

song's lyrics in the video entitled "My Desire" are "we want to live according to Sharia law as true Muslims and conduct holy war against infidels on earth."<sup>19</sup>

In May 2016, an audio message was broadcast from ETIM's leader Abd al-Haqq al Turkistani, who was believed to have been killed in 2010 by a US drone strike, although this was later disproven.<sup>20</sup> Al-Haqq's 2016 audio message was a critical rebuttal to the rise of IS as a powerful jihadist movement that had eclipsed the ETIM's partner, Al-Qaeda. From 2014 forward, many Uighurs have joined IS and fought in Iraq and Syria. Sensing the competition for the recruitment of Uighur jihadists, Al-Haqq's message condemned IS and articulated ETIM's goals for TIP members in Syria. Al-Haqq firmly stated "the proclamation of Caliphate [by IS] was equivalent to unripened crop harvesting, since it was established without the approval of the Islamic leaders and the Ummah [the international community of Muslims]."<sup>21</sup> Affirming the assessment of Chinese Major General Jin, Al-Haqq further directed TIP members to shun IS and "to make jihad in Sham, help their brothers, and tomorrow the soldiers of Islam must be willing to return to China to emancipate the Western province of Xinjiang from the communist invaders."<sup>22</sup>

Despite al-Haqq's expressed goals (and Major General Jin's fears) of having TIP members return to China to wage jihad, the Uighurs who have travelled to Syria appear content to remain in the country. In fact, unlike many other foreign fighters in the Syrian Civil War, many Uighurs have brought whole families with them to settle in towns abandoned by Assad's allies. Arriving as whole families is consistent with the Uighurs' belief that they are fleeing an oppressive Chinese regime and are seeking to live as Muslims unmolested by the authorities. To pay for the journey from China, Uighur families have sold their homes and property in Xinjiang, thus there are few attachments in Xinjiang that would draw them back. The seeming disinclination to return home is also apparent in their willingness to show their faces in propaganda videos, therefore making their identities known to Chinese authorities. Their lack of concern about anonymity is one more characteristic that stands in contrast to many other foreign fighters who routinely conceal their identities.<sup>23</sup> Another unique facet of Uighurs bringing their families to join TIP in Syria is the presence of their children in war zones. TIP is proficient in training child soldiers, which was a strength of ETIM's operations in Afghanistan. As part of their responsibilities to JFS, TIP trains not only Uighur children, but local children to be "little jihadists."<sup>24</sup> While many jihadi groups have children in their ranks, TIP specialises in the training of children as one of their niche capabilities. In a series of videos, TIP shows nearly five dozen child soldiers using weapons and chanting jihadist slogans.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, the Uighurs who have joined TIP in Syria may be working at cross purposes with al-Haqq's broader goal of bringing jihad back to China. The Uighurs, particularly those who have brought their families, may be dedicated to jihad only as it serves as a type of religiously-based refugee resettlement program rather than as part of a larger

<sup>19</sup> Botobekov, "China's Nightmare."

<sup>20</sup> Bill Roggio, "Turkistan Islamic Party Emir Thought Killed in 2010 Reemerged to Lead Group in 2014," *Long War Journal*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/turkistan-islamic-party-emir-thought-killed-in-2010-reemerged-to-lead-group-in-2014.php>.

<sup>21</sup> Botobekov, "China's Nightmare."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ali, "China's Proxy War in Syria."

<sup>24</sup> Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Uighur Jihadist Group in Syria Advertises Little Jihadists," *Long War Journal*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/uighur-jihadist-group-in-syria-advertises-little-jihadists.php>.

<sup>25</sup> Caleb Weiss, "Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria Shows more Little Jihadists," *Long War Journal*, September 29, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/turkistan-islamic-party-in-syria-shows-more-little-jihadists.php>.

religious or ethno-nationalist struggle. They may be unwilling to give up their new lives and risk returning to China to fight for the Xinjiang's independence. Moreover, Uighurs in TIP may also be constrained in their ability to return to China. For example, there is speculation that Turkey views TIP as an important "cat's paw" for its ambitions in Syria,<sup>26</sup> and that Turkey may also want to soothe its relationship with China over the Uighur issue.<sup>27</sup> These possibilities may create a Turkish unwillingness to facilitate TIP members' movement through its country or offer them any means to leave Syria. TIP Uighurs may be a fixture in the region with few means, or incentives, to return to China.

## Uighurs Joining IS in Iraq and Syria

Tens of thousands of foreign fighters flocked to join IS from over 80 countries – one of which was China. As discussed above, the overall numbers of Uighur foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria is unclear. The Chinese government has suggested the number could be as high as 300, while other sources have pegged the number closer to 100. Whatever the actual number is, there is little doubt that Uighurs have left China's restive Xinjiang province and joined the jihad in the Middle East, fighting specifically under the banner of IS. While there is a longstanding relationship between Uighur foreign fighters and groups in South and Central Asia, the Middle East is fairly new ground.

The profiles of the fighters are atypical as well. An analysis by the New America Foundation of 4,000 registration records of fighters who joined IS between mid-2013 and mid-2014 found that Uighur foreign fighters were "generally older, poorer, and more likely to join IS with their families."<sup>28</sup> And as noted in *Foreign Policy*, almost without exception, the Uighur recruits were "unskilled, and uneducated."<sup>29</sup> Most of those who traveled to Iraq and Syria were probably intending the move to be permanent, given the high cost of travel and relocation. IS's recruiting pitch toward Uighurs emphasised camaraderie and educational opportunities available to those living in the Caliphate. As previously mentioned, many Uighurs likely fled due to China's increasingly draconian policies specifically targeting the Uighur minority, a major push factor in their radicalisation.

Interestingly, the majority of the Uighur sample from the New America report had no jihadist experience, meaning they were unlikely to be connected to ETIM, TIP or other well-known Uighur jihadist organisations. These previously unaffiliated recruits could very well have joined the Al-Qaeda-linked TIP or the IS-affiliated ETIM after arrival in Syria. In any case, ETIM and TIP reportedly collaborate closely on the battlefield in Syria, suggesting the Al-Qaeda versus IS rivalry does not always extend down to the lower echelons of the jihad.<sup>30</sup> Still, there have been splits within the broader Uighur jihadist movement before, a development that frightened Beijing, as it seemed to lead to a

<sup>26</sup> Giancarlo Elia Valori, "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement," *Modern Diplomacy*, May 30, 2016, [http://moderndiplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=1460:the-east-turkestan-islamic-movement&Itemid=488](http://moderndiplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1460:the-east-turkestan-islamic-movement&Itemid=488).

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Caffero and Bertrand Viala, "China Turkey Relations Grow Despite Differences over Uighurs," *Middle East Institute*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/china-turkey-relations-grow-despite-differences-over-uighurs>.

<sup>28</sup> Nate Rosenblatt, "All Jihad is Local: What IS' Files Tells Us About Its Fighters," *New America Foundation*, July 20, 2016, 2, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-is-local/>.

<sup>29</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Report: More Than 100 Chinese Muslims Have Joined The Islamic State," *Foreign Policy*, July 20, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/20/report-100-chinese-muslims-have-joined-isis-islamic-state-china-terrorism-uighur/>.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, "Uighur Islamist Militancy in Syria: Between Al-Qaida and the Islamic State," *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, June 20, 2017.

spiral of outbidding between the main groups. The result was an increase in fiery rhetoric calling for attacks against the Chinese state.<sup>31</sup>

A March 2017 video shows Uighur militants threatening China with an image of Chinese President Xi Jinping before switching to a shot of a burning Chinese flag. Some videos appear to have been produced in China, with threats that Uighur foreign fighters will return home to wage jihad.<sup>32</sup> Both IS and Al-Qaeda have weighed in on the situation in different media products, with IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alleging that Muslim rights in China have been “forcibly seized” and advocating revenge.<sup>33</sup>

## UFFs in Southeast Asia

Uighur foreign fighters have appeared frequently in parts of Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. From these countries, they have traveled to Turkey and then either remained in Turkey or continued on to Iraq or Syria.<sup>34</sup> In numerous cases, Uighurs have been detained in transit countries in Southeast Asia where they were traveling illegally on forged Turkish passports or were falsely claiming to be Turkish citizens.<sup>35</sup>

There has been a recent crackdown in Indonesia, in which the Indonesian security agencies have arrested and in some cases engaged in shootouts with Uighur militants affiliated with the Eastern Indonesia Mujahedin, a terrorist group sympathetic to IS.<sup>36</sup> There have also been links alleged between Uighur terrorists and the deadly bombing in Bangkok, Thailand in August of 2015.<sup>37</sup>

## Future Directions for UFFs

UFFs have now increased their recognition abroad and widened their connections with other jihadist groups, expanding their militant network across the globe. As a result, UFFs will be an abiding presence in international jihadist violence in the near future. Nonetheless, like other foreign fighters, UFFs confront a number of dilemmas. As events in Iraq and Syria unfold, surviving UFFs in those countries must decide whether to remain active in both countries with their respective groups, retreat and regroup in

<sup>31</sup> Michael Clarke, “After IS Threat, China May Have to Get off Sidelines in Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/03/after-isis-threat-china-may-have-to-get-off-sidelines-in-middle-east/>.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Taylor, “How Trump Could Find Common Ground With China, Thanks to the Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, March 2, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/02/how-donald-trump-could-find-common-ground-with-china-thanks-to-the-islamic-state/?utm\\_term=.bed71c706563](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/02/how-donald-trump-could-find-common-ground-with-china-thanks-to-the-islamic-state/?utm_term=.bed71c706563).

<sup>33</sup> Isabel Larroca, “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of China’s Anti-Terrorism Efforts,” *Wilson Quarterly*, August 18, 2015, <https://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/the-self-fulfilling-prophecy-of-chinas-anti-terrorism-efforts/>.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Small, “What’s Behind China’s Growing Security Presence in Afghanistan?” *World Politics Review*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/21590/what-s-behind-china-s-growing-security-presence-in-afghanistan>.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Clarke, “Uyghur Militants in Syria: The Turkish Connection,” *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, February 4, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/uyghur-militants-in-syria-the-turkish-connection/>; See also, Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, “Uighur IS Fighters Vow Blood Will ‘Flow in Rivers’ in China,” *Reuters*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-china/uyghur-is-fighters-vow-blood-will-flow-in-rivers-in-china-idUSKBN16848H>.

<sup>36</sup> Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim, “Brussels and Lahore Bombings: Implications for China’s War on Terrorism,” *Eurasia Review*, March 30, 2016, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/30032016-brussels-and-lahore-bombings-implications-for-chinas-war-on-terror-analysis/>.

<sup>37</sup> Heather Timmons and Zheping Huang, “Is China’s Homegrown Terrorism Problem Behind the Bangkok Bombing?” *Quartz*, August 19, 2015, <https://qz.com/482841/thai-police-are-reportedly-investigating-whether-chinas-homegrown-terrorism-problem-led-to-the-bangkok-bombing/>.



another country, join other jihadist groups, attempt direct attacks in China or disengage from participating in radical jihadist operations altogether.

Unlike many foreign fighters, however, UFFs face these dilemmas in ways that are unique to their Uighur identity. Any significant alteration in the push/pull factors of Chinese repression in Xinjiang and opportunities to engage in jihad abroad will add to the pressures and inducements facing UFFs. China's increasing crackdown in Xinjiang may create both a new surge in Uighur radicalisation and a new pool of recruits willing to engage in jihadist operations abroad. Seemingly under the radar, China has figured prominently in jihadi strategy for the past decade, and the Uighur veterans of the Syrian civil war could be envisioned as shock troops in the simmering insurgency in the Western part of the country.<sup>38</sup>

There is little doubt that the Chinese government is concerned. In late December 2015, Beijing handed down new counter-terrorism legislation that would permit the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Armed Police (PAP) to seek permission from the Central Military Commission (CMC) to conduct counter-terrorism operations outside of China.<sup>39</sup> One thing this could signal is Chinese concern that its citizens or assets in the Middle East or elsewhere could come under attack from Uighur jihadists. China's rising interest in Syria may lead to greater support for taking a harder line against jihadist groups that include UFFs among their members. A more aggressive Chinese approach to counter-terrorism would be a departure from the status quo, as China has typically relied on assertive security policies on the domestic front and a foreign policy centered on economic interests and sovereignty as a code word for non-intervention.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to Chinese government actions, the actions of the Turkish government will also contribute to the shaping of the UFFs' decision-making. Because of their kinship with the Turks, UFFs are at the mercy of the Turkish government's calculations on the civil war in Syria as well as Turkish-Chinese relations. If the Turkish government decides to increase, stem or halt support for Uighur issues, UFFs in Iraq, Syria and as far away as Southeast Asia would feel the effects.

## 1. Become Proxies of Turkey in Post-Conflict Syria

UFFs in TIP may evolve into the "cat's paw" of the Turkish government's designs in Syria if its civil war concludes or becomes stalemated. There has been suspicion that President Erdogan is already using TIP as a way to exert influence on the events in Syria without directly intervening with a large-scale conventional military operation.<sup>41</sup> With the proximity of the fighting in Idlib to Turkey, President Erdogan has attempted to sway control in favour of Turkey's interests. However, his government recently supported Ahrar al-Sham, which is a rival to JFS.<sup>42</sup> This puts into question whether he may alter his ongoing support for TIP as he challenges JFS or if he wishes, or is able, to split TIP from JFS. The shifting strategic terrain in the Syrian civil war could alter many Turkish arrangements with rebel groups.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Fishman, "Al-Qaida and the Rise of China: Jihadi Geopolitics in a Post-Hegemonic World," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 48, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2011.588091.

<sup>39</sup> "China Passes Anti-Terror Law," *Xinhua*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/960826.shtml>.

<sup>40</sup> Guy Burton, "China and the Jihadi Threat," *Middle East Institute*, August 9, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/china-and-jihadi-threat>.

<sup>41</sup> Valori, "East Turkestan Islamic Movement."

<sup>42</sup> "Turkey-Backed Rebel Reinforcements Arrive in Idlib for Nusra Fight-Rebels," *New York Times*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/07/20/world/middleeast/20reuters-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey.html>.

## 2. Seek Sanctuary in Turkey

Now that the Caliphate is collapsing, some UFFs linked to IS may wish to disengage from the fight and settle in Turkey. There are already significant Uighur communities in Turkey – the Zeytinburnu neighborhood of Istanbul and the town of Kayseri – where UFFs could choose to reside. However, the Turkish government may not welcome Uighur jihadi veterans in the same way that it has welcomed Uighur refugees and Uighurs in transit to Syria and Iraq. Turkey has already suffered a number of terror attacks and the government may be unwilling to gamble that UFFs would not radicalise Uighurs already residing in Turkey and engage in violent operations within the country. Sharing an ethnic kinship is no guarantee that UFFs going to Turkey would be pacifistic in their intentions or in their actions. Turkey may also substantially crack down on Uighur immigration in an effort to strengthen its relations with China. Since the Turkish government's severe reaction to the attempted coup in 2016, Turkey has faced greater international criticism. To reduce its sense of isolation and the possibility of it becoming an international pariah, Turkey has sought to improve relations with countries that were once unfriendly towards it, including China. The Turkish government may also be unwilling to suffer additional international criticism that would come from harbouring radical jihadists like UFFs. Pan-Turkic nationalism, therefore, may take a backseat compared to other Turkish foreign policy priorities, resulting in a decline in support for Uighur issues.

## 3. Return to China

Inevitably, some portion of the overall Uighur foreign fighter population that survives the current onslaught in Iraq and Syria will attempt to return back to China. With that reality in mind and already faced with rampant smuggling across its borders, China has begun building its border patrol capacity through training and exercises.<sup>43</sup> Xinjiang shares a border with both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and China is especially concerned about the increasing encroachment of what it considers jihadist ideology and influence throughout its westernmost province, which is geopolitically important due to abundant natural resources, including natural gas, oil, coal, minerals and water.<sup>44</sup>

One of China's primary reasons for consternation is the sense that Xinjiang's once separatist insurgency could soon be dominated by those advocating for jihad, which could transform the nature and severity of the low-level conflict into a bloodier insurgency.<sup>45</sup> The conflict in Chechnya followed a similar trajectory during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. If a more violent and lethal insurgency does indeed develop in Xinjiang, it could jeopardise China's prized "Belt and Road Initiative," the centerpiece of Xi Jinping's foreign and economic policy.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> "China, Kyrgyzstan Border Forces Hold Exercises to Stop Arms Smuggling," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-27/china-kyrgyzstan-border-forces-hold-exercises-to-stop-arms-smuggling>.

<sup>44</sup> Chris Zambellis, "Uighur Dissent and Militancy in China's Xinjiang Province," *CTC Sentinel*, January 13, 2010, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/uighur-dissent-and-militancy-in-china%E2%80%99s-xinjiang-province>.

<sup>45</sup> Alexa Olesen, "China Sees Islamic State Inching Closer to Home," *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/11/china-sees-islamic-state-inching-closer-to-home/>.

<sup>46</sup> "Fellow Uighurs Should Beware of 'Two-Faced' People in Separatism Fight, Official Says," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-04-10/fellow-uighurs-should-beware-of-two-faced-people-in-separatism-fight-official-says>.

## 4. Intensify Jihadist Connections in Southeast Asia

UFFs in Iraq and Syria may venture beyond the region to find other jihadist battlefields. Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, has emerged as “alternative jihadi ground” for many radical Uighurs who have been unable to travel to Iraq, Syria or to Turkey.<sup>47</sup> In many ways, Southeast Asia has become both a transit hub and a chokepoint for Uighurs seeking to travel to join terrorist groups in the Middle East. Many give up the quest and join local groups with links to either Al-Qaeda or IS. It is possible that UFFs who did make it to Iraq and Syria via Southeast Asia could return to the region and connect with UFFs that have become part of local jihadi groups. This would create a potent combination of battle-hardened Uighurs and those Uighurs connected with local networks.

## 5. Participate in a Potential Strategic Coalition between JFS and IS

Not only are JFS and IS at odds over the conduct of the Syrian war, they both have come into armed conflict in other regions where Muslim sectarian violence has become the norm. Along the Pakistan-Afghan border, IS and forces backed by JFS parent organisation, Al-Qaeda, have engaged in bloody armed skirmishes, resulting in the deaths of hundreds. Meanwhile, the two groups have created rifts between jihadist factions in hotspots including Somalia, Nigeria, and the Indian subcontinent.

In the unlikely event that JFS and IS decide to suspend their ideological animosity in an effort to focus on the narrow objective of toppling the Assad regime, UFFs will also have to put aside their differences. Establishing a joint command between JFS and IS may ease the division of labor for UFFs. However, some UFFs may choose to reject such an arrangement. For the new JFS-IS coalition, this could lead to problems in command and control, intra-coalition disputes or disengagement.

## 6. Seek Sanctuary in Central Asia

By most accounts, China remains an inhospitable destination for many returning Uighur foreign fighters. Accordingly, some may seek to return to the broader region of Central Asia, which could then be used as a staging ground to launch attacks against China. The Uighur diaspora extends across the Central Asian steppe, with large numbers of potential recruits in countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan is home to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) while Kazakhstan has experienced a sweeping wave of Islamic extremism within the past several years.<sup>48</sup> Some Uighur foreign fighters with extensive battlefield experience have already returned to Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nordirbek Soliev, “S-E Asia: An ‘Alternative Jihad’ for Xinjiang’s Uighurs?” *Today*, February 21, 2017, <http://www.todayonline.com/world/s-e-asia-alternative-jihad-xinjiangs-uighurs>.

<sup>48</sup> Reid Standish, “Our Future Will Be Violent Extremism,” *Foreign Policy*, August 1, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/01/central-asia-kazakhstan-eurasia-terrorism-extremism-isis-al-qaeda/>.

<sup>49</sup> Small, “What’s Behind China’s Growing Security Presence in Afghanistan?”

## 7. “Privatise” Their Activities for Profit

Those fighters who will neither return to China nor seek to inhabit sanctuary and safe haven in Central Asia may seek to join a private military contractor (PMC). Reports out of Syria suggest that an organisation calling itself Malhama Tactical serves as the “Blackwater of Jihad,” and has been contracted to fight, provide training and “battlefield consulting” to a range of extremist groups fighting the Assad regime. This PMC has even fought on the battlefield alongside Uighur foreign fighters in southern Aleppo in September 2016. It is likely that other itinerant jihadists could form similar outfits by emulating Malhama Tactical, whose leader has suggested China and Myanmar as two countries in particular that would “benefit from jihad.”<sup>50</sup>

## 8. De-radicalise/De-mobilise

Another potential future for Uighur foreign fighters is deradicalisation and demobilisation. In essence, these are jihadists that could seek to return to China, disillusioned with their experiences in Syria and Iraq, and attempt to return to the trappings of everyday life. However, returning foreign terrorist fighters are unlikely to deradicalise on their own, especially if they are continuously provoked or oppressed by Chinese government authorities. To date, China has offered very few signs that it is willing to take anything other than a hard line with what it deems to be terrorists. Commenting on acts of political violence by disaffected Uighurs in China, terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna noted that “Beijing has invested in building infrastructure, but not in creating reconciliation.”<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, it seems that the Chinese government’s repression of Uighurs is actually increasing, with little attempt to assuage what are clearly deeply-held grievances among this ethnic minority.<sup>52</sup> In early 2017, Chinese officials in Xinjiang required all drivers to install a satellite navigation system in their vehicles, which will help authorities track and monitor their movements more efficiently.<sup>53</sup> For the record, China has voiced concerns that at least a portion of its 10 million-strong Muslim minority is vulnerable to radicalisation.<sup>54</sup> However, in many ways, China has implemented measures that have exacerbated rather than ameliorated the situation, such as roadblocks and security checks throughout the region, including at restaurants, shops and hotels.<sup>55</sup> There has even been what officials have referred to as blatant displays of “thunderous power” by the authorities, which has entailed thousands of paramilitary troops marching through the streets in a show of intimidation.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Rao Komar, Christian Borys and Eric Woods, “The Blackwater of Jihad,” *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/>.

<sup>51</sup> Levin, “At Least 50 Killed in Xinjiang Violence.”

<sup>52</sup> For an overview of Chinese tactics in Xinjiang, see Martin Wayne, “China’s Society-Centric Counterterrorism Approach,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Edward Wong, “Western China Region Aims to Track People by Requiring Car Navigation,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/world/asia/china-xinjiang-gps-vehicles.html>.

<sup>54</sup> “No Beards, No Veils: Uighur Life in China’s Xinjiang,” *BBC News*, March 18, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-39307077/no-beards-no-veils-uighur-life-in-china-s-xinjiang>.

<sup>55</sup> Sue-Lin Wong, “Security Clampdown in Far-Western China Exact Toll on Businesses,” *Reuters*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-xinjiang/security-clampdown-in-far-western-china-exacts-toll-on-businesses-idUSKBN19I310>.

<sup>56</sup> “The Bullies of Urumqi: The Extraordinary Ways Which China Humiliates Muslims,” *The Economist*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21721680-bans-abnormal-beards-and-even-name-muhammad-extraordinary-ways-which-china-humiliates>; See also, “Chinese Officials Warn of Global Religious Extremism Threat,” *Voice of America*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-global-religious-extremism-threat/3762916.html>.

## Conclusion

Beijing could very well be exaggerating the threat posed by its Uighur minority or could be suppressing it to inspire investment and instill confidence in government leadership. In either case, the difficulty in reporting from this area leaves it unclear which narrative is more accurate. Several experts on China's Uighur minority, including George Washington University cultural anthropologist Sean R. Roberts, have called the situation in Xinjiang a "self-fulfilling prophecy," as "Beijing's exaggeration of the threat it faced from Uighurs in the early 2000s resulted in increasingly repressive policies that have intensified discontent in the region and helped push more and more Uighurs toward militancy."<sup>57</sup>

The heavy-handed policies of the Chinese Communist Party have done the government a grave disservice. Even a cursory glance at the history of insurgencies in the modern era would reveal that what begins as rather banal grievances can manifest over time and develop into more deeply seated issues between minority groups and the ruling party. Authorities maintain tight control over the restive Uighur population in Xinjiang, and can likely continue to do so through repressive measures – at least in the short-term. However, if the conflict becomes global, as has occurred in places like Afghanistan, Chechnya, the Balkans and now Syria, Beijing could soon find itself in the crosshairs of a religiously motivated, battle-hardened crop of returning foreign terrorist fighters – an unenviable position for any nation, to be sure.

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<sup>57</sup> "Is China Really Facing a Terrorist Threat From Uighurs in Xinjiang?" *World Politics Review*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/21811/is-china-really-facing-a-terrorist-threat-from-uighurs-in-xinjiang>.

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# Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge

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The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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