

An Al-Qaeda Associate Group Operating in China?

*Rohan Gunaratna and Kenneth George Pereire**

The threat of global terrorism has escalated significantly in the last few years. International attention is naturally focused on countries where terrorist spectaculars have occurred, or where there are ongoing high profile conflicts. The drama and, corresponding attention often leave little time or attention to 'lesser-known conflicts'. The situation in Xinjiang in Western China, an area bordering Afghanistan is a case in point.

In this remote region the indigenous Muslim Turkic speaking Uighurs are feeling pressured by the non Muslim Han Chinese immigrants to the region, as well as restrictive Chinese political controls on their religion. A recent report noted that the younger generation of Xinjiang Muslims were lamenting about how hard it was for them to learn Islam in Xinjiang. This they attributed to tight controls by the ruling Communist party over the curriculum of Xinjiang Islamic colleges.¹ This lament is part of a wider issue, the serious and widespread human rights violations directed against the Uighur community and what role, if any, it plays in the larger international jihadi conflict.

As with conflicts in Mindanao and Southern Thailand, the key issue in this conflict appears to be religious and cultural freedom. Muslims in Xinjiang have a long list of grievances with the government including what they perceive as state interference in religious worship. The young Xinjiang Muslims went on to elaborate that some of the state controls included Party authorities prescribing to Muslims what versions of the Koran to use. Party authorities were also making it mandatory for Imams to attend political education camps, run by state authorities.² These

* Rohan Gunaratna is the Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Singapore and Kenneth George Pereire is a Research Analyst International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Singapore.

¹ "China's Grip on Xinjiang Muslims," *BBC News*, November 29 2005. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4482048.stm>> (April 30 2006).

² *Ibid.*

allegations are neither new, nor are they entirely baseless. Human Rights groups have accused the Chinese government of arbitrary abuses aimed at suppressing the freedom, religion and culture of the Xinjiang Muslim minority.

9/11 and its Effects

The grievances are not entirely confined to China. Some Uighurs remain in indefinite custody at the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Many of their appeals for release from detention are rejected on unclear and difficult to verify charges. There is some optimism however, after five Uighurs were released from the US detention centre in Guantanamo Bay in early May 2006, and subsequently transferred to Albania for resettlement. Abu Bakker Qassim and A'del Abdu al-Hakim, two Uighur "militants" believed to be wrongfully held at Guantanamo since June 2002 were among the five Uighur men released from Guantanamo. The two had previously appealed even to the U.S. Supreme Court to take up the case but their appeals were rejected as the men were due to have a hearing in a lower court.³ Nevertheless, grievances still persist among the Uighur community.

These two cases of abuses are symptomatic of the kinds of abuses and repression that the Muslim Uighurs have faced for centuries. The failure of the Uighurs to be released from detention at Guantanamo Bay is also symptomatic of post-9/11 measures by coalition forces and the "War on Terror" label. Countries facing great difficulty in containing their own domestic small-scale skirmishes, insurgencies, separatist problems, choose to conveniently "hijack" the opportunity of labeling what they choose to perceive as their own domestic problems as part of the larger "War on Terror." This allows them to link a local problem to the larger global jihad legitimately in the eyes of the coalition, and thus allowing a broader range of tactics to be deployed.

Beijing has not missed the opportunity of labeling its fight against Uighur separatism as being part of the larger US-led global campaign against terrorism. While it was unlikely that there is formal Sino-U.S. arrangement on this issue, it seems clear that there was an informal understanding. China will support the global struggle against violent extremism, in exchange for the U.S. recognizing the Uighur's as part of that struggle.

In 2002, China issued a 15-page report formally linking its fight against Uighur separatism to the international war on terrorism.⁴ In

³ "Guantanamo Uighur Appeal Rejected," *BBC News*, April 17 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4916784.stm>> (April 30 2006).

⁴ International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) Database sources.

August 2002, the U.S. added the previously little known East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), based in China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang Weiwuer Zhiziqu) to its list of terrorist organizations.⁵

Although none of the Uighurs at Guantanamo claim to belong to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the continued detention of their fellow Uighurs at Guantanamo, provides the potential for all the Uighur groups to link their local grievances to the wider global jihad. What is worse, the domestic Uighur community faces continued repression. Worrying trends are already beginning to emerge. Since the late 1990s, the secular orientation of the Uighur groups has begun to change and after 9/11, the Uighur groups are significantly influenced by the developments in the global jihad arena. The World Uighur Congress (WUC), an exiled Uighur group, issued a stern warning that China's treatment of Uighurs residing in the Western region of Xinjiang risks turning the area into a "time bomb."⁶ It however stopped short of linking it to the wider oppression of Muslims.

The oppression is serious enough for the million-strong overseas Uighur diaspora spread throughout Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to warrant providing significant financial support. Several separatist political organizations such as the World Uighur Youth Congress and the East Turkestan National Congress receive substantial funding from the overseas diaspora population. This source of funding will become even more critical with the release of a prominent Uighur activist, businesswoman and fund raiser, Rebiya Kader from detention in China on 14 March 2005 and exiled to the US. She served several years in prison on charges of providing state secrets abroad and upon her release, was exiled to the US. With her assistance, the Uighur diaspora will be able to raise even more funds to support the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

In addition, there are a number of umbrella bodies for other Uighur organizations operating in Germany. These groups claim to represent the interests of the Uighur people, such as promoting and lobbying for the rights of the community.⁷ However, the Chinese government insists that these groups are terrorist organizations, with the World Uighur Youth Congress pursuing subversive activities.⁸

⁵ "In Xinjiang Province, an Uneasy Coexistence", *USA Today*, September 22 2004.

⁶ "China Given Warning on Xinjiang," *BBC News*, September 30 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4297070.stm>> (April 30 2006).

⁷ United General Assembly of East Turkestan National Congress, *PRT Press Review*, April 13 2004.

⁸ "Eastern Turkistan Terrorists Evidence Revealed," *China Daily*, February 14 2004. <www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-02/14/content_306053.htm> (April 30 2006)

“Jihad in Eastern Turkestan”

More worrying, however, is a recent hour long video entitled “Jihad in Eastern Turkestan”, posted in a Middle Eastern Website, which did establish the link.⁹ The website is an Arabic website based in the United Kingdom and posts publications and news about the developments of Jihadi groups. The video is effective as a means of communication of Uighur operational capability, and is obviously inspired by videos produced and issued by groups such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

The video illustrates Uighur militants displaying their weapon and combat training prowess with Rocket Propelled Grenades, M-16s, AK-47, detonators, and small rockets. Interestingly, the militants even make an unverifiable claim to have brought down an “enemy” plane. The enemy, being the Chinese authorities, and warn of many more attacks to come. The video also features a clip of an airplane crashing into the World Trade Centre building on September 11. This in itself illustrating that the Uighurs militants are drawing inspiration from sensational Al-Qaeda style attacks, as are many other militant groups. The video also featured people reading their wills and making last rites, possibly before embarking on suicide missions, and also featured the body of a Uighur militant, possibly killed in combat and being hailed as a martyr. In a dramatic ending, the video displays the faces of their enemies; Chinese Communist Party leaders.

Two things can be ascertained from the video. The first is that the more radicalized Uighur have begun to adopt the jihadi tactics, if not ideology. The second is that the Chinese government is running out of time if it wants to contain the Uighur struggle.

The Threat from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

Of immediate concern is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the most militant of the groups in the Xinjiang region, and the group with the closest ties to Al-Qaeda. The aim of ETIM is to set up an independent Turkic state by the name of East Turkestan for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, Western China. Among the Uighur groups, ETIM is one of the major beneficiaries of covert funding from the Uighur diaspora population. The organization has used this funding to acquire a wide range of weapons including a range of automatic weapons, and explosive devices, some of them homemade. Raids on ETIM safe houses in Afghanistan and China have discovered arms caches and equipment for producing weapons.¹⁰

⁹ The Middle Eastern Website is <www.tajdeed.org.uk> (April 30 2006).

¹⁰ ICPVTR Database Group Profile on East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

The actual scale of ETIM's financing and logistical infrastructure was discovered in a February 1996 crackdown by Chinese authorities. The raids recovered nearly 3,000 kg of explosives, 4,000 sticks of dynamite, 600 guns and ammunition, as well as other supplies.¹¹ Additional coalition forces raids in Afghanistan and Pakistan seized over 4,500 hand grenades, 98 guns, and a large cache of swords, knives, detonators and explosives.¹² The fact that these two raids recovered such a large quantity of weapons is illustrative of ETIM's rather sophisticated capability to access financing and a logistics network and indicative of closely cemented ties with Al-Qaeda.

Some of the attacks carried out by the ETIM took place in 1996. On May 12 1996, the vice-chairman of the province's People's Political Consultative Conference, Arunhan Aji, and his son were attacked while on their way to the mosque.¹³ During the year, there were also a number of unconfirmed reports of bomb attacks against utilities and railway lines. In February 1997, rioting broke out in Yining after police attempted to arrest two suspected insurgents; many were killed and demonstrations spread to Urumqi, Kuqa and Hotan. Just days later, three bombs detonated on buses in Urumqi, killing seven people and injuring at least 60 others. Since then, numerous attacks including attacks on buses, clashes between ETIM militants and Chinese security forces, assassination attempts, attempts to attack Chinese key installations and government buildings have taken place, though many cases go unreported. What is worrying however is that with ETIM being on Al-Qaeda's radar screen, more attacks within China are imminent.

ETIM's Al-Qaeda Link and the Threat to China

Al-Qaeda's biggest success has been its ability to inspire and influence local Muslim groups in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and to imbibe its ideology of global jihad. By providing finance, training, weapons and ideology, Al-Qaeda has been able to empower local Muslim groups to fight their governments and the non-Muslim populace. In the post 9/11 environment, the Uighur groups are now significantly influenced by the developments in the global jihad arena.

Al-Qaeda invited a number of Chinese Muslims to train in their camps in Afghanistan and on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the

¹¹ ICPVTR Database.

¹² "China Seeks Cooperation Worldwide to Fight "East Turkistan" Terrorists," *Xinhuanet*, December 15 2003. Reproduced at the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN Office report. Extracted from webpage: <www.china-un.ch/eng/zt/zgfk/t89062.htm> (April 30 2006).

¹³ "East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away With Impunity," Information Office of the State Council of P.R. China, January 21 2002. <www.chinaembassy.se/eng/zt/t100782.htm> (April 30 2006).

1990s. Furthermore, at least one Pakistani group associated with Al-Qaeda, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) provided assistance to ETIM. HUJI leader Qari Saifullah Akhtar cemented the ETIM link with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. According to confidential sources, ETIM is now the most active of the Chinese Muslim (Uighur) groups and is today in contact with both the Iraqi and Afghan jihadist groups. With Al-Qaeda suffering operationally, Zarqawi's group is now expanding its operational and ideological influence on local jihad groups. According to closed reports, a few ETIM members based in Europe are closely studying Zarqawi's tactics and technologies. Al-Qaeda and Zarqawi's group will continue to influence ETIM and its associated groups to take the fight to Beijing and even to its other cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai.

ETIM, and some of its veteran members, are already in some ways considered part of the "brotherhood of global jihad". Some members have also fought with the anti Soviet mujahideen in Afghanistan, alongside Filipino Moros, Uzbeks, and Arabs.¹⁴ Confidential reports also noted that Hasan Mahsun, alias Ashan Sumut, the second leader of ETIM, sent several members into China in February 1998, to establish a dozen training bases in Xinjiang and inland regions, training more than 150 terrorists in 15 training classes. Hasan Mahsun was killed by Pakistani troops on October 2 2003, when the army raided a suspected Al-Qaeda base in South Waziristan, along the Afghan border. However, others have stepped in to replace Mahsun; two of the possible successors are, Abudumijit Muhammatkelim, alias Zibibulla, allegedly director of personnel training and external liaisons, and Abudula Kariaji, alias Abdulla Dawut, deputy head of the group.

Although the Chinese security forces and the intelligence service have been effective against ETIM and other groups, their presence overseas, from Central Asia to West Asia, and in Europe is enabling them to survive. Today, Munich in Germany is their main centre for disseminating propaganda and fund-raising. The ETIM, and associated groups, have learned from groups, such as the Chechen terrorist, to exploit Western human rights and humanitarian associations, to assist in various activities. A similar pattern exists in Central Asia, particularly, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the ETIM and its associated groups are now operating. Its presence in Afghanistan and the Afghan-Pakistan border is significant, and they work closely with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in terms of training, ideology sharing, funding and resource provisions. The movement clearly has significant popular support, as it has been able to survive despite having over 2,500 members arrested over

¹⁴ See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: IB. Tauris, 2000) 128. He also wrote that the mujahideen had "come to fight the jihad...and to train in weapons, bomb-making, and military tactics so they could take the jihad back home".

the last several years and this points to the group's strong regenerative potential.

Beijing genuinely fears any disruption created by the ETIM. The impression of instability anywhere in the country can have an impact on foreign investment and economic activity in the area. Xinjiang is a valuable resource – producing one-third of China's cotton. Explorations in the Tarim Basin have also revealed considerable oil and gas reserves. The region is also the location of China's nuclear testing area. As China's gateway to Central Asia, South Asia, and Russia, the region is a highly strategic location, making the Chinese government particularly attentive to the situation. This attentiveness has not been matched with an accurate understanding of the nature and scale of the problem, thus contributing to counterproductive reactions. The Chinese authorities are thus facing an escalating and significant security challenge at their hands. Thus the Chinese authorities need to utilize more than just a security response to the escalating and increasingly substantial security challenge.

Future Implications and Conclusions

Al-Qaeda and other global jihadist groups will continue to work with ETIM and with other Uighur groups. Although the Chinese have been effective in dismantling the terrorist infrastructure, ETIM and its associated groups are quite adept at improvising weapons and acquiring weapons from criminal sources. In the not too distant future, it is likely that ETIM and its associated groups will adopt suicide tactics in China. The ability of militant Islamic revivalism to graft itself onto existing conflicts between Muslim and non-Muslim rulers has already been witnessed on several occasions, and the potential for a greater Islamicization of the Uighur conflict is a real and present danger to the Chinese government today.