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Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Reinvigorating East Turkistan Jihad; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 10

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China is increasingly facing transnational jihadist threats as a result of the long-standing plight of its ethnic Uighur Muslim citizens, who are mostly concentrated in the country's northwestern region of Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region). Amid mounting Western criticism of China's handling of its minorities in Xinjiang, especially over the last couple years, there has been a puzzling lack of outcry from the larger Muslim world. However, ongoing state-sponsored religious restrictions and persecution in China continue to give enough fodder for jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) to raise their virtual jihadist campaigns against China and its interests abroad.

Over the past several decades, China has suffered a number of violent incidents (e.g. riotings, arson, knife attacks, and bombings) perpetrated by suspected Uighur militant separatists. The majority of incidents have targeted the ethnic Han Chinese in Xinjiang and critical infrastructure such as railways. Among the most notable and recent attacks were the October 2013 suicide attack in Tiananmen Square, Beijing; violence in the city of Urumqi (capital of Xinjiang) in May 2014; and attacks in Pishan in Xinjiang in February 2017 (SCMP (Hong Kong) (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1345178/beijing-says-uygur-militants-behind-suspected-tiananmen-terrorist-attack>) , November 1, 2013; China Daily (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/22/content_17532424_3.htm) (Beijing), May 22, 2014; SCMP (Hong Kong) (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2070868/eight-killed-xinjiang-knife-attack>) , February 15, 2017). China blames the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and its offshoot, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), for anti-Chinese violence in Xinjiang and beyond.

The United Nations—along with several countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Pakistan—have listed the ETIM as a terrorist organization which aims to create an independent 'Uighurstan' or 'East Turkistan' comprised of a geographical area that would include parts of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang region of China (UNSC (https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement) , April 7, 2011; State Department (<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/13403.htm>) , September 2002). Most of its members are operating abroad, coopting or aligning with other jihadist groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (formerly Jabhat al-Nushra) in Syria, and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Central Asia.

Although the full details regarding the emergence of ETIM remain murky, it was founded by Hasan Mahsum (Abu-Muhammad al-Turkestani), a Uighur from Kashgar region, possibly in the late 1990s. The group received a major ideological and financial boost with the announcement of Osama bin Laden's support to wage war against China during its formative years. With the death of Hasan Mahsum in Pakistan in 2003, however, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani took over the reins of ETIM and became a core member of al-Qaeda's executive leadership council in 2005. With his expertise on the Islamic concept of jihad, oratorical skills, and a position within al-Qaeda's rank and file, he became a go-to person for the rival Taliban factions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During this time ETIM virtually ceased to exist as it had previously, and the TIP emerged under Abdul Haq al-Turkistani in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. After a few years, most of the TIP's leadership and cadres shifted to Syria to participate in the civil war there, alongside al-Qaeda's affiliated factions. Though it is difficult to estimate TIP's Uighur fighters in a war zone like Syria, according to some estimates, there were upwards of 3,000 TIP fighters engaged in the Syrian conflict in and around Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs in 2016 (al-Arabiya (<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/02/China-s-proxy-war-in-Syria-Revealing-the-role-of-Uighur-fighters-.html>) , December 17, 2018).

Al-Qaeda to the Rescue

In a March 2019 audio message, al-Turkistani urged Muslim clerics for moral support and appealed to use their platforms to speak out about the ongoing abuses faced by Muslims in China's Xinjiang province. A transcript of the TIP message shared through Telegram channels featured pictures of Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, pro-al-Qaeda cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada, and al-Muhaysini among others (Jihadology (<https://jihadology.net/2019/03/18/new-video-message-from-%E1%B8%A5izb-al-islami-al-turkistanis-shaykh-abd-al-%E1%B8%A5aqq-al-turkistani-to-the-religious-scholars-of-the-islamic-nation/>) , March 18). Following his appeal, support from jihadist leaders came pouring out for the Uighur's cause. Influential Jordanian jihadist cleric, Sami al-Uraydi, who is closely associated with al-Qaeda factions in Syria, came out in support of al-Turkistani's appeal. His endorsement was followed by another influential Syria-based jihadist cleric, Abdallah al-Muhaysini, who is closely associated with Syrian jihadist group HTS. Al-Muhaysini has reinvigorated the pro-Uighur solidarity movement and anti-China operations by launching an online "I Support East Turkistan" campaign.

In early April, al-Qaeda's general command expressed solidarity with Chinese Uighurs through a statement released in As Sahab. Pledging support for Uighur's liberation, the general command called on Muslims to stand with the Uighurs and raise awareness in all platforms about the atrocities and plight of Uighur people in Xinjiang. The message also urged for financial support to TIP through charity and donations (Jihadology (<https://jihadology.net/2019/04/04/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-and-if-they-seek-help-of-you-for-the-religion-then-you-must-help-fulfillment-and-support-to-our-people-in-muslim-turkistan/>) , April 4).

This is not the first time so many al-Qaeda-linked jihadist ideologues came out in support of TIP and the Uighur's cause. Al-Qaeda leadership regularly acknowledges the long-standing contributions and support of ETIM or TIP in al-Qaeda's quest for jihad. Its October 2014 English language magazine *Resurgence*(As Sahab Media-Subcontinent)

devoted a section describing China's restive Xinjiang region as an occupied Muslim land with 10 factoids about the history of Uighurs and Chinese atrocities against Muslims. In this magazine's October 2014 cover story titled "Besiege Them," al-Qaeda's senior ideologue Adam Yahya Gadahn clearly stated al-Qaeda's long-term ambition that "Palestine and other occupied Muslim lands from Spain to East Turkistan can be recovered and their Muslim populations be able to live in security, honour and dignity in the shade of the Islamic Caliphate." [1]

Al-Zawahiri and al-Muhaysini are both very vocal in their support for Uighurs, and regularly call for anti-China jihad. Muhaysini was part of a similar audio-visual campaign in mid-2015 to garner support for the TIP as its fighters had contributed substantially in Syrian battlefields against the Assad regime. Al-Muhaysini is often seen in propaganda videos inciting Uighur Muslims to raise their children as jihadist fighters who would embrace martyrdom over other worldly things. He also calls on Muslims of the world in several videos to aid the cause of the TIP, recognizing their role in the Syrian civil war. Similarly, Ayman al-Zawahiri has been a constant supporter of TIP and the Uighurs' cause. In a July 2016 address, he urged Uighur Islamists to have patience and to strengthen the ongoing jihad against China. In this address, he directly called upon the TIP cadres to perform jihad against Chinese interests anywhere in the world with the sole purpose to overthrow the atheist regime in China and to liberate Xinjiang from occupation. This message was part of al-Qaeda's "The Islamic Spring" series titled "Turkistan: Patience and Then Victory" (jihadology.net (<https://jihadology.net/2016/07/02/new-video-message-from-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-the-islamic-spring-9-turkistan-patience-and-then-victory/>), July 2, 2016).

Islamic State's Tryst with Uighurs

Arguably, al-Qaeda is not the only jihadist group that exploits the situation of Muslims in Xinjiang. IS, which has ideological and operational differences with TIP and al-Qaeda, also called for jihad against communist China in support of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. IS ventured into the region virtually in 2014 when its supreme leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi mentioned the Chinese atrocities against Muslim Uighurs whose rights were being "forcibly seized." The November 2015 execution of Chinese hostage Fan Jinghui notwithstanding, IS initiated concerted outreach efforts to entice Uighurs in its ranks. However, there is no reliable data to show how many of them have joined IS, but according to few publicly available estimates, around 114 Uighur Muslims have joined IS between mid-2013 and mid-2014 (SCMP (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1992418/beijing-policies-xinjiang-driving-chinese-muslims-join>), July 21, 2016).

In late February 2017, al-Furat Province of Islamic State (the Euphrates Province, Western Iraq) released a video highlighting the Uighur fighters in its ranks. The video message signaled for the first time, IS' burgeoning anti-China agenda. In this video, Uighur fighters vowed to return to their homeland and "shed blood like rivers and avenging the oppressed" in attacks against Chinese targets (al-Jazeera (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/isil-video-threatens-china-rivers-bloodshed-170301103927503.html>), March 1, 2017). This video message was undoubtedly aimed at garnering support and inspiring violence in Xinjiang. However, the most recent IS propaganda called for direct violence against China, and urged jihadists around the world

to kill or capture Chinese citizens in order to spread fear and terror among diplomats and embassy staffs around the world. IS' periodical 'al-Naba' devoted a sub-section titled "Stop the Communists' criminality," urging jihadists to prepare for a long war with China (al-Naba, No.171, February 28). While pushing Muslim Uighurs to fight the Chinese atrocities, it also advised them to migrate to the nearest Islamic country or to a "less evil" country. [2]

Conclusions

According to an estimate by the United Nations human rights panel in mid-2018, nearly 1 million Uighurs and Muslim minorities were forced into camps for the so-called "de-extremification" in the western Xinjiang autonomous region. [3] Similar estimates by the United States also mentioned the detention of millions of Uighurs and members of other Muslim minorities that have intensified since April 2017. International rights bodies often criticize Beijing's heavy-handed tactics—military mobilizations, forced detention, and systematic domination—in the embattled province to root out perceived extremism. Even though China initially considered the Uighur separatist movement as domestic ethnic dissent, the localized unrest eventually snowballed into a larger jihadist movement against China, receiving international jihadist support and attention.

The recent spate of pro-Uighur and anti-Chinese jihadist propaganda is certainly aimed at infusing new life into this longstanding conflict. Attracting new recruits from the disgruntled Uighur population in Xinjiang and beyond (e.g. Central Asia) and funds for waging jihad against China are two immediate goals jihadist groups would be looking to achieve in the near future. While there is a discernible absence of coordination among the existing militant Uighur groups irrespective of their ideological orientations, both al-Qaeda and IS' renewed efforts to strengthen the ongoing anti-China movement in Xinjiang and elsewhere would bolster attacks against Chinese nationals and interests worldwide.

NOTES

[1] *Resurgence*, As Sahab Media, Subcontinent, October 2014, p.50.

[2] "ISIS Weekly Al-Naba' Calls On Muslims To Wage Jihad Against The Chinese Government And Target Chinese People, Investments, Interests, And Embassies Everywhere" MEMRI, March 01, 2019, <https://www.memri.org/jttm/isis-weekly-al-naba-calls-muslims-wage-jihad-against-chinese-government-and-target-chinese> (https://www.memri.org/jttm/isis-weekly-al-naba-calls-muslims-wage-jihad-against-chinese-government-and-target-chinese)

[3] See UN Panel Report:

<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhslsNs7vAyg8M3uDZ7rn5ZZMW4pslG8%2fevE%2fZXWBEvcRTevsX4htmWQRmXdLs%2fC29wCxsvSRzNMUUMc2kVpwgZMtPy7CP%2bLMBCCgcm%2fXghtaV49BFVszv5rtlelug%2f%2fhbha%3d%3d>
([http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%](http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhslsNs7vAyg8M3uDZ7rn5ZZMW4pslG8%2fevE%2fZXWBEvcRTevsX4htmWQRmXdLs%2fC29wCxsvSRzNMUUMc2kVpwgZMtPy7CP%2bLMBCCgcm%2fXghtaV49BFVszv5rtlelug%2f%2fhbha%3d%3d)

2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhslsns7vAyg8M3uDZ7rn5ZZMW4pslG8%2fevE%
2fZXWBEvcRTevsX4htmWQRmXdLs%2fC29wCxsvSRzNMUUMc2kVpwgZMtPy7CP%
2bLMBCCgcm%2fXghaV49BFVszv5rtlelug%2f%2fhbhA%3d%3d)

ecoi.net summary:

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