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Published

2015

Journal Title

Griffith Asia Quarterly

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Griffith Asia Quarterly

See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: Middle Eastern Reactions to Rising China's Uyghur Crackdown

Yitzhak Shichor*

Abstract: *This paper addresses the issue of China's rise in the Middle East through the prism of the Uyghur and Xinjiang issues. Given the Middle East's contemporary and vociferous denunciations of the perceived 'persecution' of Muslims throughout the globe, we would expect a harsh reaction to China's ongoing maltreatment of its Muslims in general, and the Uyghur, in particular, primarily from the centre of global Islam. This paper argues however that this has not been the case, particularly at the official level, where Middle Eastern government's have been constrained in their response to China's repression of the Uyghur by a number of factors, including China's growing strategic and economic weight in the region and their own authoritarian political practices.*

Introduction

One of the most notable implications, and indicators, of China's global rise is the caution with which it is treated by other countries, not only the less powerful but also the great powers. Expressed by various communities, governments, leaders, politicians and even academics that avoid 'upsetting' the Chinese – this caution has been determined not only by China's increasing economic importance (given the parallel global economic downturn), but also, perhaps primarily, by China's firm assertion that it will by no means tolerate external interference in its internal affairs. As Beijing becomes more influential, and arrogant, outsiders are careful not to tread on its toes, definitely not on such thorny issues of human right abuses, crackdowns on ethnic minorities and religious persecution. One of these issues – which has assumed growing proportions in recent years – concerns the Chinese maltreatment of its Uyghur communities.

Uyghurs are a Muslim-Turkic minority of over 11 million (0.8 per cent of China's total) which is concentrated in China's northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) where they account for some 46 per cent – still the

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largest ethnic group in the region. There are more Uyghurs in Xinjiang than there are Muslims in Tunisia and twice their number in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Still, Beijing's concern about Uyghurs is related less to their number and more to their history and nationalist claims. While the Uyghurs regard contemporary Xinjiang as their historical homeland, China's control of the region had been sporadic and superficial at best, or non-existent at worst, throughout much of its pre-modern history. In the mid-18th century, following a thousand years of absence, China reoccupied the Western Regions (*Xiyu*), by then called Xinjiang (the new territories). By the fall of the Qing Empire in late 1911, the dynasty had fought a number of Muslim rebellions which eroded Chinese domination of the province (created in 1884). Firm authority over the province could not have been restored by the feeble Republic (founded in January 1912) and this weakness was used by the Uyghurs (and other Muslim minorities, then still the overwhelming majority of Xinjiang's population, well over 90 per cent) to attempt re-establishing their own homeland. When the Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan was formed in 1933, the Soviets had already arbitrarily divided Central Asia into a number of states, each 'given' to a major nationality – such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, adjacent to China. Predominantly located in northwest China, Uyghurs did not get their own state. The Islamic Republic collapsed following a few weeks and it was ten years later, in 1944, when, along with other Muslim minorities and under Soviet auspices, the Uyghurs founded the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR). It became a model that – although choked by the Soviets in 1949 while Chinese Communist forces were on their way to 'peacefully liberate' Xinjiang – Uyghurs have wished to restore ever since.

Following the emergence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October, 1949, the pressure on Uyghurs, and other Muslim nationalities, was beginning to build up, sparking unrest primarily in Xinjiang – where Chinese communist rule was perceived as relatively weak. Gardner Bovingdon gives details of 34 cases of Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang between late 1949 and the mid-1970s.[1] This unrest has gathered momentum since the early 1980s taking advantage of China's post-Mao reforms, the relative liberalisation at home and the opening to the outside world, primarily to Central Asia where the largest Uyghur diaspora (over 350,000) lives. Since 1990 there have been a number of violent clashes, the most serious in 1990 (Baren), in 1997 (Gulja-Yining), and in 2009 (Urumqi) – all accompanied by brutal 'crackdown' policies and suppression, arrests and detentions occasionally ending in executions and a variety of religious, educational and cultural prohibitions.

Bearing in mind the widespread and loud Middle Eastern and Muslim reactions to Western abuse of Islam, to critical cartoons about Muhammad and to any anti-Islamic expressions,[2] we would expect harsh reaction to China's maltreatment of its Muslims in general and Uyghurs in particular, primarily from the Middle East as the centre of global Islam. Is this the case? This article explores Middle Eastern responses, on different levels, to Beijing's intimidation of Uyghurs from Mao's time to the present, and analyses the reasons behind these reactions.

Middle Eastern Reactions to Uyghur Persecution in Mao's China

It should be noted that the conditions of China's Muslims, the Uyghurs included, have never been a top priority for Middle Eastern countries though some, notably Turkey and Egypt, did voice their criticism of China's persecution of Islam. Some Turkish media condemned China's repression of its Muslim minorities in general, and in particular its Uyghurs in Eastern Turkestan (a name they preferred to the Chinese name 'Xinjiang'), and elsewhere.[3] In 1950, the 'Turkestani community' in Cairo reportedly complained to King Ibn-Saud of Saudi Arabia that the Chinese Communist occupation of Xinjiang had entailed chaos and indiscriminate attacks on local Muslims.[4] Again, in 1951, responding to a wave of trials and executions of Chinese Muslims, 'Turkestani circles' in Cairo (as well as Karachi, Pakistan) reportedly accused the Chinese Communists of suppressing the 'independence movement' by closing Muslim schools, appointing new *imam*s who had been indoctrinated by Communist ideology and forcing Muslim women to unveil.[5]

Moreover, in an attempt to exploit Muslim grievances against China and to take advantage of 'international Islamic solidarity', in the early 1950s Washington even considered the idea of forming a Middle Eastern Islamic Pact that would have included Egypt and Turkey (and Pakistan). It was intended to have an 'enormous impact' on the Muslims in China (and the Soviet Union) and, more specifically, possibly to help organising a fifth column in these countries.[6] This attempt failed and the pact was never established. This provided an early indication that Islamic countries and organisations apparently preferred to ignore the plight of China's oppressed Muslim minorities and Muslim refugees' reports. It was also an early indication of the Islamic world's hatred of the West. In fact, it was probably *because* of the Western sponsorship of the Middle Eastern Islamic Pact that it was doomed to failure.[7] This failure was underlined by the fact that when this idea was raised, none of the Middle Eastern countries had recognized the PRC and none had established diplomatic relations with Beijing

(with the exception of Israel, which had done so in early January 1950). Actually, most of them (again, with the exception of Israel) maintained full diplomatic relations with Taiwan and considered the PRC to be an aggressive Communist dictatorship. Still, all were careful not to condemn Beijing for the persecution and discrimination of Muslims and Uyghurs – which gives us a clue to their indifference today.

This reluctance to condemn China reflected, on the one hand, China's attempts to demonstrate that its Muslim communities enjoyed favourable treatment and, on the other hand, the 1956 decisions of Egypt, Syria and Yemen to establish diplomatic relations with China, a step that *eroded* Middle Eastern sensitivities to the plight of China's Muslims and Uyghurs. This indifference continued even when, during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, the Chinese increased their pressure on Muslim (and Uyghur) communities and when their relations with the Arab states deteriorated. Middle Eastern countries also disregarded the targeting of Muslims and Uyghurs during China's Cultural Revolution, when Beijing's recalled all its ambassadors in the Middle East (and the world, except for Egypt). Some protests came from relatively marginal Islamic countries like Jordan and Lebanon (which did not recognize the PRC at that time) and Morocco (whose diplomatic relations with China had been established in 1958). In those years China was isolated from the rest of the world: little information was available about what was going on in China, let alone in remote Xinjiang and communication systems and media technologies were relatively backward. On the other hand, China was regarded as a bastion in the struggle against Western imperialism and an ally. Thus the Arab and Muslim countries did not wish to undermine their diplomatic relations with China simply because of Beijing's persecution of Muslims.

Middle Eastern Reactions to Uyghur Persecution in Post-Mao China

Most of these constraints have been removed in the post-Mao period, especially from the early 1990s and even more so since the beginning of the 21st century. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, all Middle Eastern countries had established diplomatic relations with the PRC, including Saudi Arabia, the last Arab country to have done it (in July 1990). China is also represented in many international organisations and is open to the outside world more than ever before, including Xinjiang, which is no longer off-limits. The international media now have more access to Xinjiang (and to other regions in China), while the proliferation of advanced media and Internet technologies provide for real-time and widespread dissemination of information about the intimidation of Uyghurs and violent

clashes between them and China's law-enforcement units. All these developments have affected Middle Eastern reactions.

Uyghur unrest not only continued in the post-Mao period but also increased both in scale and in violence. Briefly, this has been an outcome of domestic, regional and global processes. *Domestically*, Uyghur unrest had been triggered not only by the relative political and social relaxation but also, perhaps mainly, by post-Mao leaders' new policy of attempting to assimilate and socialise the Uyghurs while using repressive means hardly used in Mao's time. Some Uyghurs (mainly in the diaspora) consider Deng Xiaoping as *worse* than Mao Zedong as far as the treatment of the Uyghurs is concerned. *Regionally*, the independence gained by the Central Asian countries following the Soviet collapse has rekindled Uyghur nationalist visions and aspirations and facilitated intimate relations with Uyghur communities over the open borders which also enabled the penetration of radical Islamic literature, arms and terrorists. *Globally*, the US and Western promotion of democracy and human rights, as well as the dramatic progress in media technologies, enabled the Uyghurs to propagate their grievances more effectively than ever before and to increase the resonance and volume of their discrimination, in and outside China.

Whereas 'ordinary' discrimination of Uyghurs fails to attract much international attention, this cannot be said about the occasional violent confrontations between Uyghurs (called by China 'terrorists') and Chinese law enforcement authorities – civilian and military. Starting the early 1980s there have been scores of incidents, most of which remained hidden from the public. However, as time has gone by, and given the expanding access to the Internet and digital cameras and smartphones, Beijing could no longer hermetically block the information about these incidents, especially the major ones. In the 1990s these included: the Baren violent riots in April 1990 that caused the death of over 100 Uyghurs; the July 1995 disturbances that took place in Khotan following the arrest of a local *imam* which led to many detentions; and a series of demonstrations in Gulja (Yining) in February 1997 that escalated into violence in which many were killed and thousands arrested.[8]

More recently, in July 2009 large-scale riots broke out in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, in which 197 people were reportedly killed (including many Han Chinese) and 1,721 injured, while over 1,000 Uyghurs were arrested and detained and some 43 disappeared. This incident attracted a good deal of international attention and since then there have been many more. These include clashes in Khotan in 2011 in which 18 (Uyghurs and Chinese) were killed; in Kashgar in April 2013 in which at least 21 people were killed; in June 27 were

killed in Lukchun. A violent clash at the Kunming Railway Station, Yunnan Province in March 2014 ended in 29 killed and 130 injured; in May, over 90 were injured and 31 were killed in Urumqi; and in June, 13 Uyghurs were killed when they attacked a police station in Yecheng in South Xinjiang.[9] In September 2014, following a bomb blast in Luntai County that killed six people, over forty Uyghurs were subsequently killed by security forces.[10] Many Uyghurs were sentenced to death or to long prison detention and Beijing retaliated to the upswing in violence by imposing more prohibitions, especially in the field of education and religious customs. In early July 2014 Beijing placed a ban on fasting during the holy month of Ramadan – primarily targeting students and teachers. Xinjiang authorities stated that fasting is 'detrimental to the health' of young people and have taken measures to prevent students and teachers from entering mosques and from taking part in religious activities; instilling religious thoughts in students; or compelling them to attend religious activities.[11] In early August 2014 Karamay authorities reportedly banned Muslim women wearing veils and headscarves and men with long beards from boarding buses 'for security reasons'.[12]

Occasionally, Middle Eastern media, organisations and figures *do* criticise China (e.g. regarding its UN Security Council veto on Syria or its aggressive economic policies) – but rarely with regard to its treatment of Uyghurs. Arab newspapers published some ugly cartoons against China on its Syria veto but, to the best of my knowledge, none about its Uyghur or Muslim policies. With the exception of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdoğan's impulsive exhortation in the wake of the July 2009 Urumqi riots, to be discussed below, official Arab or Islamic organisations or governments have usually avoided condemning China. Occasionally, in fact, they justify Beijing's policies, primarily in the context of fighting 'terrorism'.

Official Reactions

Uyghur terrorist acts in China, whether initiated from outside or inside, whether intentional or not, whether genuine or attributed – undermine the East Turkestan cause worldwide. It is much easier for Middle Eastern leaders to condemn acts of terrorism against China than to denounce Beijing's oppression of Uyghurs. To be sure, Middle Eastern condemnations of terrorist acts in China that the Chinese consistently attribute to Uyghurs, fail to mention Uyghurs at all, although this is implied.[13] The Saudi ambassador to China supported the punishment of 'people' involved in the Beijing Tiananmen incident of October 2013 – including the three death sentences.[14] Needless to say, all convicted were Uyghurs but the word does not appear in the ambassador's interview.

Turkey, that in the past was quick to criticise China's heavy-handed response to incidents involving Uyghurs, remained silent. Following the July 2009 Urumqi riots, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdoğan blew his top naming the incidents in China 'genocide'. 'There's no point in interpreting it otherwise', he stated and added: 'We want the Chinese administration, with which our bilateral ties are continuously improving, to show more sensitivity'. An observant Muslim who received religious education, Erdoğan had joined anti-Communist groups in his youth and is a sympathiser of the Muslim Brotherhood – the progenitor of all manifestations of contemporary Islamic extremism. Erdoğan's outburst had also been preceded by comments from Turkey's Industry Minister who urged the Turks to boycott Chinese goods to protest the violence in Xinjiang, although a spokesman later said this was the minister's personal view and not government policy.[15] These were followed by a few resignations from the China-Turkey Inter-Parliamentarian Friendship Group and by a threat to bring this issue before the United Nations Security Council. In fact, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu – now prime minister – said that Turkey 'cannot remain silent in the face of what is happening [in Xinjiang]'.[16] Yet, within two days, he was quick to telephone his Chinese counterpart, placating him that Turkey did not intend 'to interfere with the domestic affairs of China'.[17] By early August bilateral relations apparently returned to normal and there have been no more official (nor unofficial) statements by Erdoğan, or any leader in Turkey, in defence of China's Uyghurs. Iran's Foreign Minister Manoucher Mottaki also phoned his Chinese counterpart to discuss the Urumqi ethnic clashes, expressing 'concerns among Islamic countries'.[18] That, however, was the extent of official responses to the Urumqi events.

A few initial protests were evident in Jordan where forty members of parliament submitted a letter to the speaker calling on the government to formally condemn China's violent suppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Jordan's Islamic Party urged Arab and Islamic governments just 'to take a stance' on the 'practices' against the Muslims in China, but no formal government statements followed.[19] Sudan, on the other hand, was perhaps the only Arab-Muslim government that officially supported China. While visiting China, the Sudanese defence minister approved of the Chinese government's measures to deal with the Uyghur unrest. Similarly, the Sudanese ambassador to China told *Xinhua* that 'the measures adopted by the Chinese government after the riots aim to defend its sovereignty, safeguard social stability, and protect people's lives and property … The incident had an obvious political motivation and had nothing to do with Islam'.[20]

In fact no Islamic government has officially condemned China's persecution of Uyghurs – certainly not allies such as Pakistan. A senior Pakistani journalist, Kahar Zalmay, recently underscored the double standards of Pakistani religious leaders who regularly, and promptly, protest against America, Israel and India on all major issues but go silent on China, notably the recent Chinese clampdown on Ramadan fasting in Xinjiang. On 2 July 2014 he reportedly tweeted: 'China bans fasting in Xinjiang province. Any protest from Mullahs [clerics] in Pak?' and on 4 July he continued: 'Pak will protest over some cartoons but not when China bans Muslims from fasting.'[21] A Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman stated: 'I have no confirmation that the media reports are true. I have no comments on speculative reports'.[22] Oddly enough, the only denunciation of China's policy came from the Communist Party of Pakistan. Its chairman 'strongly condemned' China's ban on Muslims to fast during Ramadan and added: 'Communists don't have any right to interfere in any religion'. This ban 'is a shameful act and against the principles of Marxism' and should be lifted 'immediately'.[23]

Media Reactions

Most Arab newspapers, not only in the Middle East but also outside, commonly quote foreign news agency reports about China's crackdown on Uyghurs almost verbatim, without any criticism of Beijing.[24] Moreover, during the last decade of the 20th century, and nearly all the first of the 21st, Middle Eastern media treated China in a positive way, at best, and a neutral way, at worst. Its persecution of Uyghurs had been largely ignored, until the July 2009 bloody clashes in Urumqi. These provided a watershed moment in the Middle Eastern media attitudes towards the Chinese. This has become evident especially in the Saudi media that reflected an upsurge of public interest in Uyghurs. One Saudi observer noted in this regard that:

> This explosion of public interest also fed and reinforced pre-existing fears and conceptions about China as a "Communist country," a theme that was picked up across the Saudi press with its frequent use of Cold War terminology in its coverage on Xinjiang.[25]

Public Saudi discontent about China's Uyghur policy spilled over to more comprehensive criticism of the Chinese in general, primarily their 'atheist and immoral' culture.

Titled 'Unrest in China', an editorial in the Saudi *Arab News*, provides a pertinent example. It said that 'the violence meted out to Uighur protesters in Urumchi … comes as a shock' and 'is bound to influence the way Muslims perceive China'. It went on to deplore the treatment of Uyghurs who 'have seen their homes demolished to make way for Han immigrants; their culture has been swamped and they themselves reduced to a minority in their own homeland'. And then it criticised the silence of the Middle Eastern governments:

> Till now, however, the rest of the world, including the rest of the Muslim world, has largely ignored their plight – in no small part, it has to be admitted, because of political considerations. Turning a blind eye is not going to be an option after this incident. Views on China's attitude toward its Muslim population will harden … China has to realize that persecution of its Muslims will not go unnoticed or uncommented upon. That does not mean that relations between China and the Muslim world are going to move into a freeze. They will remain as vital as those with Western countries accused of anti-Muslim policies. But the persecution could put a strain on Chinese-Muslim relations.[26]

While Saudi Arabia's more populist media tended to place the blame for the Urumqi riots wholly on Beijing which, they asserted, had adopted a policy of 'ethnic cleansing', more elitist media, though still blaming China, called for a more *rational* solution and a *constructive* treatment of China's Uyghur policy so that it would not harm Sino-Saudi relations and avoid cornering China into an anti-Islamic position. As a matter of fact, a number of Saudi articles underline, rather sympathetically, that China had always been a 'peace-loving' country and friendly to the Islamic world. Yet, although Xinjiang is China's internal affair, its suppression of Uyghurs could erode Sino-Muslim friendship. These views, which argue that 'the Muslim world cannot afford to lose China', stimulated angry reactions in the media that protested and condemned the lenient treatment of China's behaviour in Xinjiang, regarded as 'a clear form of colonialism and imperialism'.[27]

Ultimately, it has become evident that the lenient stand on China won. Public opinion and the media by no means represent government attitudes and interests. Sino-Saudi relations have not been affected in the least. In fact, they have continued to improve, primarily in economic terms but also in political ones – to the point that some began to regard Beijing as a substitute for Washington,

as the United States has been perceived as a declining superpower, fed up with the Middle East and prepared to disengage from the region. This is not necessarily true but the perception persists.[28] Uyghur persecution by China will not stop the Saudis' engagement with China, nor even slow it down.

Some Arab media not only avoided condemning China for persecuting Uyghurs, but also blamed the US instead. A Syrian publicist argued that the US caused the unrest in Xinjiang in an attempt 'to apply pressure on the Chinese government to save the US economy by buying bonds' [sic!].[29] A Saudi columnist 'attributed the massacres in Xinjiang to the importation of Western Islamophobia to China'.[30] In a number of interviews in the 1990s Osama Bin Laden accused the United States and the CIA for inciting conflict between Chinese and Muslims and for planting bombs in China for which the Uyghurs were held responsible – unjustly.[31] In all these cases, Beijing emerged practically clean. Some Turkish media that represent opposition circles even criticised Erdoğan's accusations and argued that:

> …while the harsh response of Chinese security forces to the protesters or the poor performance of legal channels deserve criticism, certain other facts have been largely ignored, such as the instigators being mostly Uyghurs and the majority of the dead and injured being of Han Chinese origin.[32]

Religious Reactions

Initially it seemed as if Middle Eastern religious circles, notably in Saudi Arabia, had been concerned about the discrimination of China's Uyghurs. Following the riots in Yining (Gulja) in February 1997,[33] Saudi *'ulamā* (clerics) urged the Saudi royal family to offer China's Muslim communities financial and diplomatic aid. Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdulla bin Baz, a leading Saudi Salafi (*Wahhābi*) scholar who served as the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia from 1993 until his death in 1999, stated: 'We have a moral obligation to help our Muslim brothers'.[34] Yet any such attempt was categorically rejected by Beijing, whose diplomatic relations with Riyadh had been established only in 1990. Controlled by Saudi Arabia, the World Muslim League, the leading international Islamic organisation, held a conference in Mecca in 2010 calling for assistance to Muslims in non-Muslim countries. The founding council of the League demanded that Beijing grant religious freedom to Muslims in Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang).[35] However, no *mufti* or other religious figure has ever issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) against China.[36] Iran, another close partner of China, was no exception. Prominent Iranian clerics criticised their government for failing to condemn the killing of fellow Muslims in

Xinjiang,[37] yet to no avail. This role of condemning the Chinese behaviour against Uyghurs has been played by other non-governmental Islamic organisations that disregard official policies. Their support of Uyghurs is not only theoretical, rhetorical and virtual but also practical, material and actual.

Among Islamic circles, the most extensive and consistent criticism of China's persecution of its Uyghurs is articulated in *jihadi* Internet websites – as well as by some leaders of Al-Qaeda and other radical groups. One of the most anti-Chinese critics was Abu Yahya al-Libi. Born in Libya in 1963, he was killed by a US drone strike in Pakistan in June 2012. At the beginning of October 2009 he published a video clip titled 'East Turkestan: the Forgotten Wound' in which he emphasized that East Turkestan (*viz*. Xinjiang) had been an integral part of the Muslim world. In response to the July 2009 Uyghur-Han clashes in Urumqi, he depicted China as a harsh enemy of Islam and the Muslim world and blamed Beijing for attempting to clear the Xinjiang of its Muslims and to obliterate its Muslim identity through various means. Condemning Beijing's repressive policies, he called not only for a widespread public relations campaign to expose the Chinese atrocities against the Uyghurs but, moreover, to wage *jihad* against China's authorities. He assured his followers that the fate of Communist China would be identical to that of Communist Russia – total collapse.[38]

His statements were later duplicated several times in *jihadi* media, for example in issue No. 5 of the *jihadi* magazine *Sawt al-Islam* (Voice of Islam, Uyghur version – *Islam Awazi*), published by the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in 2010. Its 56 pages display firm opposition to China's suppression of Eastern Turkestan's Muslims. Moreover, TIP leader, Abdul Haqq al-Turkistani (a Uyghur reportedly killed in Afghanistan in March 2010, who in 2003 had replaced Hasan Makhsum as 'Emir' of the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement, ETIM, later renamed TIP), delivered a number of threats to China (not for the first time).[39] On 1 August 2008 he issued a manifesto titled, 'China's Massacre and Barbarism Will Not Go Unanswered'.[40] Indeed, the *Sawt al-Islam* media institute issued a video in Arabic, Chinese and Uyghur – titled 'The Military Operations of the Turkistan Islamic Party against Communist China in 2009'.[41] *Sawt al-Islam* No. 6 and No. 8 also dealt extensively with China's treatment of Muslims.[42] It also published a video clip interview (in Chinese) with Abdullah Mansour, a senior TIP member, 'in remembrance of the recent massacre perpetrated by Communist China'.[43] A TIP audio statement in Uyghur – dated 7 July 2009 but posted on jihadist forums on 16 July – warned Beijing that 'Allah's cavalry will soon fall upon you' and called on 'the brave mujahideen' to 'kill the Communist Chinese wherever you find them'.[44]

TIP's *Sawt al-Islam* is still publishing scores of anti-Chinese video clips. In 2013 it issued the 'Painful Memories of the Prisons of Communist China' and 'The Fate of Jihad in Eastern Turkistan and the Fate of the Chinese Communist Aggressor Enemy.'[45] *Sawt al-Islam* also published an audio statement by Sheikh Khalid bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Husaynan, one of Al-Qaeda's leading theologians who had been killed by a US drone strike in December 2012 in Pakistan. In it he appealed to Eastern Turkestan's Muslims, offering them religious-legal justification for waging *jihad* against the enemies of Islam (presumably China).[46] Moreover, some publications create an impression that the TIP support for Uyghurs is not just rhetorical. Thus one *Sawt al-Islam* video clip in Uyghur (with an Arabic translation) 'documented' military actions in Kashgar against Chinese security forces. In early 2014 *Sawt al-Islam* issued a video in Uyghur titled 'On the Military Operation in the Forbidden City'.[47] In early June 2014 *Sawt al-Islam* published a video in Uyghur in which it claimed responsibility for the April 2014 terrorist attack at the Urumqi train station.[48] *Sawt al-Islam* also published arms guidebooks and instruction pamphlets. Video No. 6, for example, providing instruction on the use of Kalashnikov rifles and Video No. 10 demonstrating how to prepare hand grenades were issued as a part of a series titled 'Express Mail of the Mujahideen in Turkestan'.[49] However, 'there is no evidence that TIP has ever carried out a successful attack in China'.[50] These *jihadi* publications simply appropriated incidents that had taken place in China probably without external involvement.

In fact, both the Taliban and al-Qaeda have tended to *avoid* a confrontation with China, regarding Beijing as a potential ally against Washington – the real enemy, perceived as weakening.[51] Other *jihadi* commentators not only reject the assertion that China is friendlier to the Muslims than the United States but also claim that if and when China would overtake the United States as the leading world power, its attitude towards Muslims, and especially towards *jihadi* groups, would be even worse. They criticise China's brutal colonising policies and 'mourn a weak Arab response to China's crackdown on the Uyghurs'.[52] Indeed, Beijing must be aware that as official opposition to its Uyghur and Islamic policy is silenced, unofficial, and especially web opposition, is increasing over time.[53]

By early 2014 TIP *jihadi* spokesmen had increased their calls for terrorist attacks against China threatening that the Chinese will be punished by an all-out war. They also urged 'Muslim residents of Turkistan' to contribute financial support for the *mujahidin* and help with their 'public relations campaign against China'.[54] Interviewed by a Turkish television station, Yilmaz Şahin Hilal, who chairs the Turkistan Islamic Society, said that Beijing continues to perpetrate crimes against the Muslim population living in China and stressed that the TIP is

the only entity acting to protect the Muslim population of China on behalf of global *jihad*.[55] Moreover, a Taliban magazine (published in English) rejected the concept of the nation-state and sovereign borders and listed 'Communist China' among the *kafir* (infidel) countries (or *dar al-kufr* – House of Heresy). As such, it is *dar al-harb* (House of War) and a legitimate target of 'offensive jihad' in order to implement Islamic *Shari'a* (law).[56]

These issues are briefly dealt with in a book published in 2004 by Abu Muṣ'ab al-Suri, one of Al-Qaeda's most prominent intellectuals. His survey of the Chinese occupation of Eastern Turkestan and oppression of Uyghurs displays his hatred of China,[57] and was later republished in *jihadi* Internet forums. Al-Qaeda video and audio releases, as mentioned above, initially hardly targeted the Chinese but this has changed more recently. In a summer 2012 statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri – Al-Qaeda leader who succeeded Bin Laden – he condemned 'secular and crusader forces' which attempt to block Muslims from implementing *shari'a* law. Muslims, he stated, should first work 'to liberate the occupied Muslim land' and thereby reject 'any treaty or agreement or international resolution that grants the disbelievers the right to take over the land of Muslims' – including 'China's takeover of East Turkistan'.[58]

Palestinian scholar Sheikh Yasser al-Khatwani, has also strongly criticised Beijing – as well as Arab and Muslim leaders – in a recent weekly lecture, delivered at Al-Aqsa Mosque (the third holiest Islamic site, in the Old City of Jerusalem). Posted on the Internet on 24 September 2014, this video clip said:

> It is well known that the Muslims in East Turkestan, which is called Xinijiang…have been subjected to all kinds of torment and oppression for a long time, at the hands of the Chinese…Women were arrested for the sole reason that they were wearing the *hijab*. Men were arrested for the sole reason that they let their beards grow. Students and civil service employees were forced to eat during Ramadan. They were forced to attend atheist lessons instead of Friday sermons. Chinese police raids throughout the month of Ramadan…climaxed with the crime of crimes, on the last day of Ramadan, when they shot 20 Muslims in cold blood, merely because they protested these oppressive measures…Despite all this, the Arab and Muslim rulers continue to maintain economic ties with the Chinese. Most of the products in Arab markets are made in China. One would assume that the least the decision-makers could do, if they had an ounce of devotion, conscience, faith, or piety, would be to sever these economic

> ties, to protest against the way China treats the Uyghur Muslims. But they could not care less about their brothers in East Turkestan, and it is 'business as usual' – as if China has done nothing.[59]

Four points should be underlined. One, that these Internet postings deliberately exaggerate Beijing's anti-Uyghur policy, in order to delegitimise its government and to tarnish its image so as to appeal to the widest support and enlist militants and activists all over the world, but primarily among Muslims.[60] Two, that while the source of these online attacks on China is difficult to locate, they can hardly originate in the Middle East where the governments are careful not to upset the Chinese. Nonetheless, these websites' reactions to China's persecution of Uyghurs are included here because they seem to represent and reflect the opinion of most religious circles in the Middle East although they probably originate in Pakistan and/or Afghanistan. Three, the Uyghur and East Turkestan issue occupies a relatively small part of the vast *jihadi* literature and the criticism of Beijing is no more than marginal. Four, most of the postings on China, Uyghurs and East Turkestan, have appeared after the Urumqi July 2009 clashes (commonly known as *wuqi*, or 5/7, in China) – clearly a watershed not only in the exogenous attitude towards Xinjiang but also in the endogenous impact on Han-Uyghur community relations there. In sum, *jihadi* Internet postings have condemned China's Uyghur policy most harshly, much more than Uyghur diaspora organisations such as the World Uyghur Congress – and certainly more than Middle Eastern official and media reactions to this policy.

Middle Eastern Reactions to Uyghur Persecution: Reasons

There is no doubt that China's rise is a major factor inhibiting greater Islamic and Middle Eastern criticism and condemnation of China's intimidation of Uyghurs. All Middle Eastern countries, including the most significant Islamic ones, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, have become increasingly dependent on China, primarily economically, but also politically and militarily. Middle Eastern silence about the Chinese crackdown on Uyghurs is also related to China's insistence on the principle of 'non-intervention' in its internal affairs and leads to caution not to upset Beijing, not to 'interfere' in its internal affairs and, consequently, to ignore the intimidation of China's Uyghurs. To be sure, Middle Eastern countries do not hesitate to criticise China's behaviour on international or regional issues, such as the Chinese veto (together with Russia) in the United Nations Security Council on the issue of Syria. Middle Eastern media – that generally avoided touching the persecution of Uyghurs in China – were quick to condemn China's veto, not only in virulent words but also by using some gruesome and colourful

cartoons. Still, complying with Beijing's 'non-intervention in internal affairs principle' provides only part of the explanation for the Middle Eastern relative silence on Uyghurs.

While Middle Eastern governments *may* be somewhat concerned about Uyghurs' intimidation by China and *may* feel sympathy with their *religious* hardships, they by no means sympathise with Uyghur *nationalist* ambitions and *separatist* vision, for two reasons. First, all of them, without exception, recognise the PRC and thereby also its territorial integrity. Accordingly, Xinjiang (along with Tibet and even Taiwan) is recognised as an integral part of China and any attempt to identify with Uyghur separatism, least of all to support their claims, would threaten to undermine diplomatic relations with China. Second, many of the Middle Eastern countries face the challenge of their own separatist problems: Iraq and Turkey are facing Kurdish 'splittism';[61] Iran is facing Azeri irredentism; Syria is facing territorial disintegration; and Lebanon is facing a Hezbollah state within a state. Standing by the Uyghurs would legitimise separatist tendencies in their own countries, something that is clearly unacceptable to the governments concerned. Indeed, in the past Uyghur unrest in China originated primarily in socio-economic concerns and a lack of political autonomy.[62] In recent years, however, there is a remarkable increase (that could be defined as dramatic) in manifestations of Islamic radicalism in Xinjiang.[63]

Also, terrorist acts occasionally undertaken in China by Uyghur extremists either for nationalist reasons or for religious reasons, undermine their cause as well as their grievances – however justified. Middle Eastern governments would not side with terrorism (at least not publicly). Still, while Middle Eastern countries turn a blind eye to Chinese (and Russian) persecution of their Muslim populations, they tend to react more quickly and systematically to what they consider the abuse of Islam in the West. Middle Eastern countries are not less dependent on the West than on China (in fact they are probably more dependent), yet they do not hesitate to criticize the West while disregarding China. The main reason is, perhaps, that the West is still perceived against the background of its colonial legacy in the Middle East. China in contrast does not have such baggage in the region and in fact it has occasionally been regarded as a model of political and economic development.

An example of this approach is an article written by Hamed bin Abdullah al-'Ali, former Secretary General of the Salafi Movement of Kuwait and former professor of Islamic studies at Kuwait University.[64] He condemned China's 'hostility to the Islamic world'; persecution of the Uyghurs and their demonization as terrorists; the closure of mosques and Islamic schools; 'the

detentions, torture, unfair trials, the destruction of property and executions'. At the same time, however, he blames the West for its 'dream…to separate Tibet, as well as the Uyghurs, from China', and notes that Western countries therefore overlook the so-called incidents of Uyghur 'terrorism' and promote the 'secession' of East Turkestan from China. Yet, since its modern state was founded, China does not have a colonial history. Nonetheless, al-'Ali states: 'in any case, it is our duty today to stand with the plight of the Uyghur Muslims against Chinese repression'. This reflects not only 'our loyalty' to the Uyghurs but also a 'stern message' to China that continued persecution of Muslims plays into the hands of the West. Put differently, hostility to the West is much stronger than hostility to China. Muslims are much more concerned about the West than about China.

It is also difficult for Middle Eastern governments to condemn China's brutal use of force against the Uyghurs since this is precisely how they deal with their own demonstrators. An Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Youssef Sanei, suggested that Iran, which considers itself the defender of Muslims worldwide, could not criticise the Chinese repressive tactics while it was doing the same thing. He also said Iran's silence was related to its commercial, military and political ties with China.[65]

In terms of its reactions to Chinese suppression of Uyghurs, Turkey represents a unique and rather complicated case. On the one hand, it has special affiliation to China's Uyghurs, considered – by themselves – as the ancient forefathers of the Turkish nation. Uyghurs have also regarded Turkey a source of inspiration and support and a safe haven for Uyghur refugees who escaped China as early as the 1940s, if not before. Indeed, since the early 1950s Turkey had enabled Uyghurs to set up their own organisations and became, until the end of the 20th century, the headquarters of Uyghur (or East Turkestani) trans-national activities. Yet, on the other hand, relations between Uyghurs and Turks have not always been smooth. While Uyghur expatriates in Turkey wanted to maintain their different collective identity, Turkey has treated Uyghurs as an integral part of the great Turkish (or Turkic) nation, much the same as other Turkic communities (like Uzbeks, Kazak, Kyrgyz, etc.). Put differently, Ankara has welcomed the assimilation of Uyghurs into Turkish society.[66] Given these frictions (and the migration of Uyghur leaders and organisations from Turkey to Western Europe and North America), Ankara has found itself in a dilemma as to what extent it should protect Uyghur interests in China or to what extent it should promote its relations with China. Ultimately, in spite of occasional Turkish expressions of support for Uyghurs, Beijing has been considerably more important for Turkey than the Uyghurs.[67]

Finally, the recent emergence of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and greater Syria) provides another angle to the 'silence of the lambs'. While ISIS horrible atrocities and public decapitations are rejected by the great majority of Muslims, there has been little criticism and practically no denunciations by Middle Eastern leaders – religious or secular, and no protests. This is not only because Muslims usually do not condemn other Muslims but also, and primarily, because ISIS' leader claims to represent Muhammad as a new Caliph (*Khalifa*). From the perspective of the occasional conflicts among the Muslims and their internal rivalries and animosities that often end in unimaginable brutalities and bloodshed, the Chinese suppression and persecution of Uyghurs is of marginal significance. It has been estimated that the number of Muslims killed in the Syrian civil war since its beginning in early 2011 may have reached over 200,000,[68] not to mention the violence perpetrated by such Islamist groups as Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and ISIS. The Middle Eastern offensive against ISIS, which is just starting to get organised, is driven primarily by a sense of threat to the continued rule of regional governments. No such threat is posed by Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang to Chinese rule.[69] Though there are reports that Uyghurs have joined the Syrian battlefield and are already fighting alongside ISIS troops,[70] ISIS is not expected to support Uyghur separatist claims since ISIS considers borders and nationalism meaningless. The main focal point is Islam. When Ilham Tohti, Uyghur professor of economics and a peaceful human rights activist, received a life sentence on 23 September 2014, for 'promoting separatism', US, European Union, human rights organisations and leaders called for his release but there was no reaction from the Middle East.

Uyghurs are also easily overlooked in the Middle East because they constitute a relatively small minority. Precise numbers are not available not only because of the Uyghurs' frequent mobility but also because legally migrated Uyghurs hold PRC passports and are registered as 'Chinese' as well as because of inter-marriage and assimilation. Still the Uyghur population in the Middle East is estimated at a few thousands – somewhere between 15,000 and 25,000, mostly in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey.[71] Ultimately they do not have enough political power to influence governments and leaders to act against China on their behalf.

Conclusion

Middle Eastern reactions to China's persecution of its Uyghur communities seem to follow a regular pattern. Higher and formal authorities tend to avoid accusing and criticising China, for a variety of reasons – one of them (but only one) relates

to the rise of China and its economic, political and military influence. Lower and unofficial (and virtual) levels have more freedom to condemn China, but within invisible constraints. Moreover, it is possible that occasionally they serve as the unofficial, indirect and unaccountable mouthpiece of official leaders who prefer not to confront China publicly and directly. Middle Eastern scholarly reactions, perhaps contrary to expectations, hardly address China's oppression of Uyghurs. In fact, some scholars oppose any support for, and identification with, Xinjiang's Uyghurs to prevent damage to the prospering economic relations with China: 'A constant irritant in bilateral relations between Turkey and China is the separatist activities of the Turkic and Muslim minorities in China's Xinjiang'.[72] Others pay attention to the problem but avoid criticising China.[73] Academic writings about China's Uyghurs have rarely been published in the Middle East. If at all, studies have been published about the Uyghurs *outside* China.[74] Arabic books on Sino-Arab relations concentrate on political, economic, military and strategic aspects but tend to avoid the Uyghur issue altogether.[75]

Beijing is undoubtedly well aware of the unofficial and quite marginal nature of the Middle Eastern and Islamic criticism of its Uyghur policy yet, and despite its relative sensitivity to its public image, this awareness has by no means softened its rigid nationality policy or mitigated its rough treatment of Uyghurs. Actually, and in a retrospective view, the opposite is the case. Additionally, instead of modifying its nationality policy Beijing has adopted a number of damage control strategies and techniques such as offering economic benefits to Middle Eastern and Muslim countries or greater association with Islam, at home and abroad.[76] These policies, however, may have further – and effectively – constrained external, and primarily official, expressions of criticism of Beijing's intimidation of Uyghurs, although not necessarily Islamic internal and unofficial feelings of hostility to China, which are ineffective anyway.

Isolated from the international community for nearly three decades, Mao's China was immune to exogenous criticism and condemnation and its domestic policies, whatever their nature, could hardly be pressured from the outside. Since the beginning of the post-Mao era, however, the situation has changed dramatically. For over three decades, China has been fully exposed to the outside world, intertwined in a myriad of economic, political, cultural and military ties and intensely scrutinised by the international media using advanced communication technology. At the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening' China was arguably heavily dependent on the outside world and lacking in the necessary self-confidence to deflect international criticism of its policy toward its ethnic minorities, and China was consequently *more* sensitive to criticism.

Over time, however, China's leaders have become more self-confident in their policies and have managed to create 'counter-dependencies' thereby making other countries depend on China. Consequently, China is becoming *less* sensitive to exogenous criticism. In this respect, it is behaving like a superpower. It could not care less about Middle Eastern (or any other) condemnation of its repression of its Uyghur communities. All the more so since Middle Eastern silence does not necessarily imply disapproval or disagreement. Occasionally, 'people made their views known through silence, not speech. The way in which they were silent was significant and said volumes'.[77] Unfortunately, this is not the case. Vocal criticism of China related to its Uyghur persecution comes primarily, in fact almost entirely, from outside the Middle East, from the Western non-Muslim countries. This, however, may have little to do with loving the Uyghurs, and much more to do with opposing China.

NOTES

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[2] See discussion in: Moisés Naím, 'Mute Muslims: Why Doesn't the Islamic World Speak Up about the Uighurs?', *Foreign Policy*, 13 July 2009.

[3] For example: 'Communists Massacred Eight Million Muslims in China', *Cumhuriyet* [The Republic], 12 May 1952; 'The Murders Committed by the Reds in Chinese Turkestan', *Hürriyet* [Liberty], 24 November 1951.

[4] Arab News Agency, 4 May 1950, in BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts – The Far East*, 56 (16 May 1950), p. 27.

[5] Cairo Radio, 31 March 1951 and Arab News Agency, 2 April 1951, in BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts – The Far East*, No.103 (10 April 1951), pp. 3-4.

[6] Mohamed Heikal [Muḥammad Ḥasanin Haykal], *Nasser: the Cairo Documents*, London, New English Library, 1972, pp. 46-7. See also Michael Sharnoff, 'Looking Back: Nasser's Inter-Arab Rivalries: 1958-1967', *Al Arabiya*, 30 July 2011, p. 2, in: http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/30/160027.html.

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[10] Dan Levin, 'At Least 50 Killed in Xinjiang Violence, officials Say', *New York Times*, 25 September 2014; 'Deadly Blasts in China's Xinjiang Reported', *Al-Jazeera*, 27 September 2014.

[11] *China Reform Monitor,* 1113 (24 July 2014). See also: 'China Sentences 113 to Prison in Xinjiang Region', *New York Times*, 30 June 2014; 'China Executes 13 in Xinjiang for "Terrorist Attacks"', BBC, 16 June 2014; Simon Denyer, 'China's War on Terror Becomes All-Out Attack on Islam in Xinjiang', *Washington Post*, 27 July 2014.

[12] 'China Bans Beards, Veils from Xinjiang City's Buses in Security Bid', Reuters, 6 August 2014.

[13] See, for example, Xinhua reports on condemnations of the Kunming incident of 1 March 2014 by the Turkish Foreign Ministry, the King of Jordan and the Palestinian Fatah Central Committee. All of them condemned 'terrorism' and 'crimes' but none mentioned Uyghurs, in http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-03/04/c_133157506.htm, 4 March 2014.
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-03/07/c_133169733.htm, 7 March 2014.
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-03/03/c_133154363.htm, 3 March 2014.

[14] Interview, 18 June 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-06/18/c_133417875.htm.

[15] 'Turkish Leader Calls Xinjiang Killings "Genocide"', Reuters, 10 July 2009. 'Turkish Pressure Mounting on China to Stop Killings in Xinjiang', *Today's Zaman*, 9 July 2009.

[16] Quoted by Naím.

[17] Anatolia News Agency, 12 July 2009.

[18] IRNA news agency, quoted in 'Muslim Countries Mostly Silent on China Unrest', *NBC News*, 13 July 2009.

[19] Abigail Hauslohner, 'In the Middle East, Little Outcry over China's Uighurs', *Time*, 17 July 2009.

[20] *Sudan Tribune*, 26 July 2009.

[21] See http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/8079.htm. See also Umar Farooq, 'Chinese Uighurs Defy Ramadan Ban; the Government's Attempt to Clamp Down on Religious Expression Has Backfired among Uyghurs', *Aljazeera*, 5 July 2014.

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[23] See http://www.cpp.net.pk/2014/07/04/cpp-demands-from-cpc-to-lift-bans-of-ramazan-fasting-in-xinjiang/

[24] For example *Al-Hayat* (published in London), 19 July 2011; 'China Tragets Ordinary Uighurs with Beards, Burkas', *Al-Arabiya News*, 24 August 2014 (an Associated Press report).

[25] Muhammed Turki al-Sudairi, 'China in the Eyes of the Saudi Media', Gulf Research Center, *Gulf Papers* (February 2013), p. 15. Much of the following is based on this source.

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[27] All quotes from al-Sudairi, pp. 15-19. Some of the titles of these articles reflect Saudi attitudes: 'The Confrontations in Xinjiang', '*Fitna* [rebellion] of al-Kashgar and Escape from the Dragon', 'The Uyghurs: How Can We Help Them?', 'Even Candles Are Forbidden for Uyghur Martyrs', 'The Uyghurs…A Problematic Issue for China and a Mark of Shame for the Muslim World'.

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[32] 'Turkish-Chinese Relations in the Shadow of the Uyghur Problem', *Today's Zaman*, 29 March 2010.

[33] Thousands of Uyghurs who demonstrated in protest of China's oppressive policies clashed with security forces. Many were killed and many more arrested.

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[41] JWMG, *Periodical Review*, 2, February 2010, p. 1, original in: http://www.atahadi.com/vb/showthread.php?t=12462.

[42] JWMG, *Periodical Review*, 1, July 2010, p. 6, original in: http://alfalojaweb.info/vb/showthread.php?t=125470. See also: http://al-jahafal.com/vb.

[43] JWMG, *Periodical Review*, 1, June 2010, p. 2, original in: http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=62778.

[44] MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series*, 17 July 2009.

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[46] JWMG, *Periodical Review*, First Half, May 2013, p. 25, original in: http://shamikh1.info/vb, in Arabic.

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