

# An Overview of Chinese Fighters and Anti-Chinese Militant Groups in Syria and Iraq

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**Bo Wang, a purported Chinese citizen fighting in Syria. (Credit: Youtube)**

In July, Western media reported that China's Middle East envoy, Ambassador Wu Sike, estimated that as many as 100 Chinese citizens are believed to be members of the Islamic State organization (previously known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq (Xinhua, July 29). [1] While most of these Chinese citizens are most likely Muslim Uyghurs from Xinjiang Province, a survey of photographic and video evidence suggests that there are also ethnic Han Chinese fighting in Syria and Iraq as well. It is likely that not all Chinese fighting in these two regional conflicts are with ISIS, but rather are part of other rebel factions, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Some of the Chinese in Syria and Iraq may also not even be "fighters" as such, but perhaps could simply be adventurers or dissidents who see "joining" the rebels as a personal way of demonstrating their disagreement with the Chinese government because they believe Beijing is wrongly supporting the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

Although the estimate of 100 Chinese represents a higher number than can be corroborated in open-source research, the number is proportionate when compared to foreign fighters from other Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have more than 125 fighters combined; and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have more than 400 fighters combined (Daily Star [Beirut], September 26; Financial Review [Canberra], June 10; Geopolitical Monitor, September 18). Yet, what makes the Chinese "foreign fighter" situation in Syria and Iraq distinct from other Asian countries is not only the prospect that they could one day return home to pose a threat to China's domestic security, but that China has the capability to respond with political and possibly military force to combat ISIS should it seek to pursue this goal. Thus far, however, China has shown no signs that it will follow the lead of Western countries and attack ISIS in Syria or Iraq.

The purpose of this article is to present several profiles of Chinese citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq, including the expatriate Uyghur militant organizational presence in these two countries, and the reasons why China will avoid becoming entangled in Syria and Iraq.

## **Chinese Citizens in Syria and Iraq**

In October 2012, Chinese government officials, including Major General Jin Yanan, first alleged that militants from “East Turkistan terrorist organizations” were joining anti-government rebels in Syria (China Radio, November 1, 2012). These Chinese government claims were not corroborated by visual evidence until March and April 2013, when the first videos of Chinese rebels emerged.

The first video was released by Liwa al-Mujahideen al-Ilami (the Mujahideen Media Battalion), which was the media arm of the predominantly Russian-speaking “Immigrant Battalion,” whose Chechen leaders later formally joined ISIS. It showed a Han Chinese man, Bo Wang, who used the Islamic name of Yusuf al-Sini, holding a Kalashnikov rifle and speaking in fluent Mandarin Chinese (YouTube, March 18, 2013). He said he converted to Islam after reading Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood forefather Sayyid Qutb’s writings on the Internet and then travelled to Libya to study Arabic. He joined Libya’s anti-government rebels when the Libyan civil war started in 2011, and after the “new Libya was born,” he travelled to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad’s government forces. He also said that Muslims and Arabs have long been friends of the Chinese but would now attack the “Chinese economy” in revenge for China’s and Russia’s blocking of international aid to the Syrian people and supporting al-Assad politically, economically and militarily.

The second video was posted on YouTube in April 2013 by the user “Al-Nusra Front” and entitled “Prayer by a Chinese Jihadist in the Land of Epics [The Levant].” The video featured a group of rebels from the FSA repairing a projectile weapon. A bearded militant, who appears to be ethnically Uyghur (as opposed to Han or Hui), is referred to by a Syrian rebel as the “Chinese Man” and leads a prayer asking God to support Muslims against “the infidels” (YouTube, April 18, 2013).

A third YouTube video of a Chinese-born national and naturalized New Zealand citizen in Syria was filmed in November 2012 and other photographs of him were released in 2013 (YouTube, November 23, 2012). It featured Chen Weiming, who has also been referred to by a Muslim name of Muhammed Chen, driving around parts of Aleppo with the FSA. In one of the videos, he chants “Allahu Akbar” and explains that the Chinese people and the Syrian people are both fighting for freedom, while also criticizing the Chinese government for supporting Bashar al-Assad’s government. Other videos and photos show him criticizing the Chinese government and spending time with men and children who were displaced by the fighting in Syria (Boxun, October 14, 2012). In Syria, Chen, a sculptor of well-known political figures, including Barack Obama, and a pro-democracy activist, wore a shirt displaying the Statue of Liberty, which is notable considering the anti-Americanism of many rebel factions. However,

the shirt likely symbolized Chen's own anti-Chinese government attitudes, as the Goddess of Democracy—a figure reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty—was also a major icon during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, when Chen was around the age of a university student.

Finally, on September 5, two photographs were published on the Facebook account of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense claiming that an injured Chinese national was taken captive during a battle with ISIS in northern Iraq (Iraqi News, September 5). These photos were later reposted by various media-affiliated websites and microblog accounts in China, but there was no further corroboration of this individual's identity. Some Chinese website commentators suggested he was Chen Weiming or Bo Wang, or possibly a Japanese fighter, but the appearance of this fighter was different than both Chen and Wang—and no word on his status has since emerged. Chen also appeared in Los Angeles in June and proved that he was alive (Radio New Zealand, June 11).

### **Anti-Chinese Groups in Syria**

In addition to Chinese fighters, there are also anti-Chinese militant groups operating in Syria and Iraq, which are issuing anti-Chinese propaganda. This supports Major-General Jin Yinan's statements that "East Turkistan [a term that jihadists use to refer to Xinjiang] organizations are taking advantage of the Syrian civil war to obtain experience and raise the profile of Xinjiang among jihadists from other theatres" (China Radio, November 1, 2012).

The main anti-Chinese militant group is the Pakistan-based and Uyghur-led Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). The TIP has carried out several attacks in Xinjiang and claimed or praised many others, including the suicide car bombing in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in October 2013, mass stabbing attacks at train stations in the southeastern cities of Kunming and Guangzhou this March and May, respectively, and the double suicide bombings at the train station in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, in April (see also China Brief, May 23).

The TIP first showed interest in the Syrian civil war with articles in its magazine, *Islamic Turkistan*, which it publishes in Arabic and has issued roughly quarterly since 2008 (see also *Terrorism Monitor*, March 17, 2011). In the 11th edition, which was released in October 2012, the TIP wrote an article called "Oh, Chinese and Russian Regimes, the Arab People's Revolution Will Never Forget Your Shameful Stances," which criticized the Chinese and Russian governments for standing against the revolutions in the Arab world, particularly the Syrian revolution (*Islamic Turkistan*, October 2012). In the 12th edition, which was released in February 2013, the TIP wrote another article titled "The Truth Has Supporters as the Tyrant Has Soldiers," which again criticized the "atheist" countries of Russia and China that "always fight against Muslims" and support the "tyrant" government of Bashar al-Assad. The article also said that "if China has the right to support Bashar al-Assad in Syria, then we have the full right to support our proud Muslim Syrian people" (*Islamic Turkistan*, February 2013).

In February, the TIP issued its first video offering “advice” to fighters in Syria and comparing the situation of “oppressed Muslims” in Xinjiang and Syria (Sawt al-Islam, February 8). Several months later, the TIP issued its first video purporting to show its fighters in Syria (Sawt al-Islam, June 7). The video, however, only featured an Arabic speaker and several dozen armed and masked militants training in a desert area with new black uniforms, so there was no proof that the militants were ethnically Uyghur or Chinese citizens. The video also appeared around the same time that the TIP adopted a new logo and new uniforms for its fighters in Pakistan and the ethnic Uzbek Imam Buhari battalion in Syria had issued similarly styled videos. This raises questions concerning a link between the TIP’s activities in Syria and China, including possibly channeling fighters and funding between the two organizations.

It also appears that some Uyghurs have used their long-standing connections to Turkey to enter Syria, where they have joined rebel groups after carrying out humanitarian operations. The Turkey-based Uyghur organization Eastern Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association (ETESA)—which praised several militant attacks and the assassination of a pro-Communist party head imam in Kashgar in June and features TIP materials on its website—carried out several aid missions into Syria to show “solidarity” between the people of East Turkistan and Syria (SCMP, September 29; ISTIQLAL TV, July 31). Some of the Uyghurs in ETESA could have immigrated from China to Turkey—legally or illegally—and then used falsified Turkish documents to enter Syria and live in rebel-held areas where no documentation is required (see also China Brief, September 10). In addition, if Uyghur fighters are captured by the Syrian government as Turks, it would be preferable for them to be handed over to the Turkish rather than the Chinese government, for which the punishment for joining the rebels would likely be death. There is a precedent for this. When four Uyghurs were arrested in the town of Poso on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi in August while visiting the pro-ISIS militant group, Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (Mujahidin of East Indonesia, or MIT), the Uyghurs were using Turkish passports and identified themselves as Turks (Straits Times, September 15). Perhaps not by coincidence, many of the Indonesians who are fighting in Syria entered the country by way of affiliations with humanitarian organizations.

### **Beijing Busy at Home: Non-Interference Abroad Remains Default Policy**

Considering China’s 1.4 billion population, including roughly 15 million Hui Muslims and 12 million Uyghur Muslims and numerous dissidents, there are likely to be at least several hundred Chinese citizens attracted to ISIS’s ideology or the Syrian rebels’ cause. The blowback to China from returnees thus far, however, has been minimal. The Chinese government has reported that returnees from Syria were involved in some small scale attacks in Xinjiang, while others who were unable to obtain permission from China to leave the country and travel to Syria carried out attacks within China (Radio Free Asia, June 28, 2013; Global Times, July 1, 2013). However, Uyghur-led terrorist attacks in China since 2013 appear to be mostly homegrown. In order to contain the growing insurgency in Xinjiang the key issue for Beijing is

to crack down on foreign sponsors of Uyghur militants from abroad and groups, such as the TIP, which incite Uyghurs to violence in China by providing training and other forms of propaganda. In addition, a major challenge for China is how to develop policies in Xinjiang to prevent disaffected Uyghurs from recruiting others to support their cause and launch new attacks.

Much to the chagrin of Western commentators, the Chinese government has pursued its optimal policy in Syria and Iraq—maintaining its long-standing non-interference policy and instead concentrating on more pressing issues closer to home. From Beijing's perspective, a theoretical policy reversal to oppose al-Assad in Syria would not necessarily lead to his defeat and would alienate countries that China depends on for energy resources, such as Iran and Russia (The Diplomat, September 15). Even if the Syrian government were defeated by the rebels, this could provide more opportunities for Uyghur and other anti-Chinese militants to train with victorious rebels groups, such as ISIS, for attacks on China. On the contrary, if China overtly supports the Syrian government with weapons, it would likely create a further anti-Chinese backlash from the jihadist groups and possibly incite more attacks inside China.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the complexity of the conflicts, China will likely abstain from deeper involvement in the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq, even though the instability in these two countries will continue to provide fertile ground for Chinese militants. Beijing may also strengthen its efforts to prevent Uyghurs from leaving China by taking steps to further increase its monitoring of Uyghurs, including withholding their passports and staying alert for possible fighters returning from Syria who may intend to carry out attacks in China, even though this risks alienating Uyghurs who want to travel for personal or professional reasons. In addition, it could prompt disgruntled Uyghurs to carry out revenge attacks, which China claims has already occurred (see also China Brief, September 10). Implementing these measures alone is no easy task for Chinese intelligence and security officials, but it is still more feasible and far easier to handle than intervening in Syria or Iraq with the hope of crushing the local insurgent movements, which could have a huge unforeseen outcome for China, not too mention dangerous blowback.