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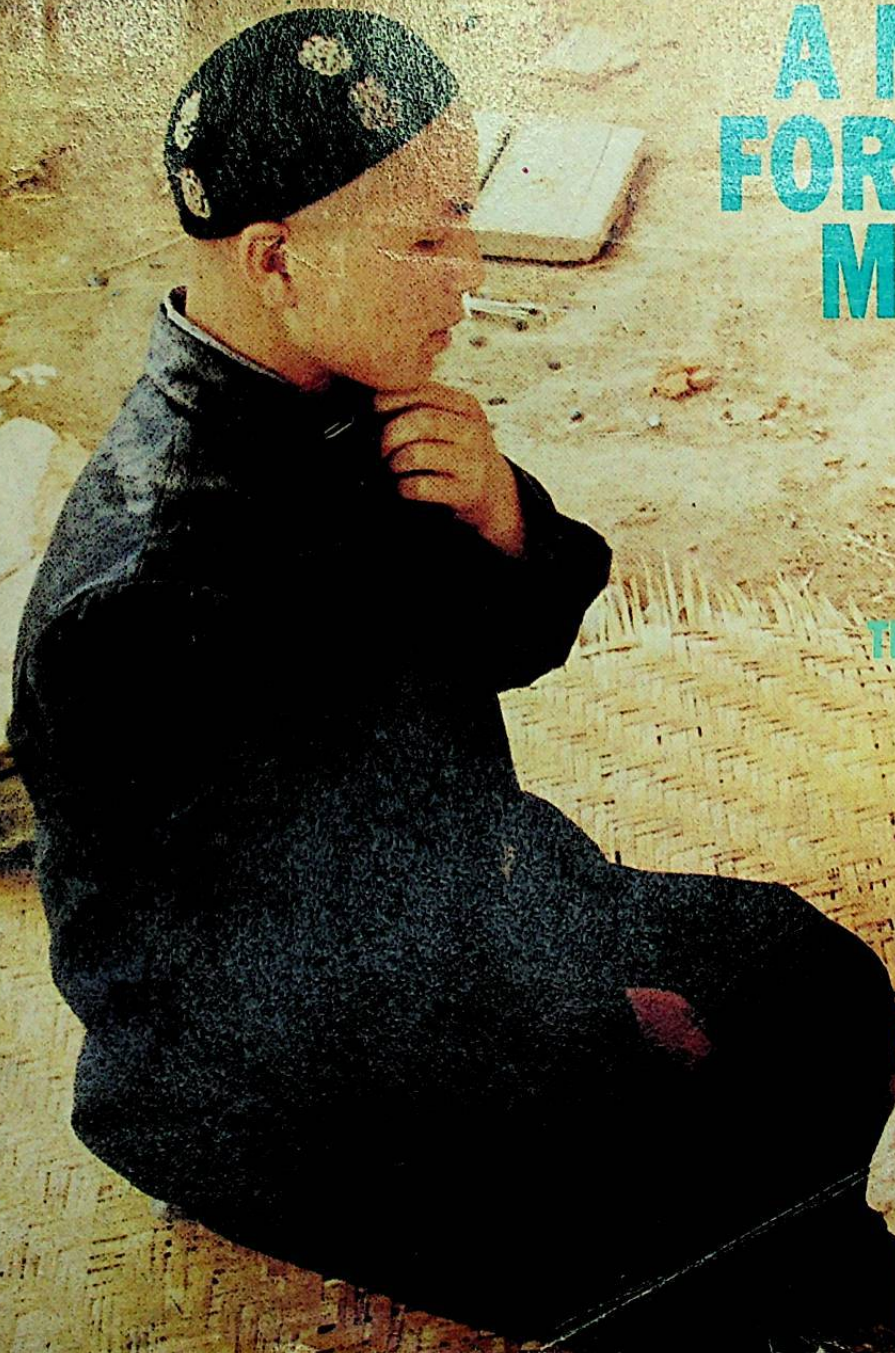


R E V I E W

A NEW LIFE FOR CHINA'S MUSLIMS?

Ramadan in the USSR

BRITAIN: NOT YET
TIME FOR THE ALLIANCE

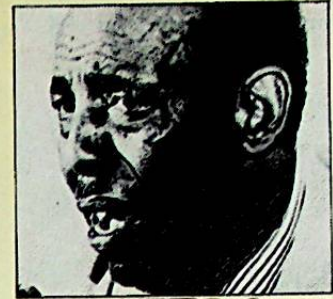




32 Egyptian elections



35 Child Health Programmes



26 Somalia arrests Sheikhs

C O N T E N T S

COVER

Cover photo: Learning Quran in a Xinjiang madrasa

5 New Life for China's Muslims

S. Enders Wimbush, an expert on Central Asian Muslims, examines the situation of the Turkic Muslims of Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and the direction things are taking for them

58 Eid and Ramadan in the USSR

Abdullah Watani reviews how the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia hold to the month of Ramadan and how they celebrate Eid

28 Britain: not yet time for the Alliance

Adam Kemp considers the formation and history of the Alliance Party, on the eve of the 11 June General Election, and looks at its possible appeal to a sophisticated electorate

CURRENT ISSUES

24 Mozambique

The *Islamic World Review* reports on the situation in this former Portuguese colony after the visit of President Chissano to Europe

26 Somalia

Recently several prominent Islamic figures were arrested and sentenced to death. The *Islamic World Review* considers the goings-on in this strategically important Horn-of-Africa country as President Siad Barre recovers in Saudi Arabia from a serious road accident

31 Media report

This month *Islamic World Review* focusses on the media of the Maghrebi country of Algeria

ISLAMIC FINANCE

35 Editorial: Child Health

Several Muslim countries are leading the field in promoting policies to reduce the infant mortality rate caused by avoidable diseases and under nutrition

36 The Gulf War and the Arms Bazaar

In the second part of a review begun in May, *The Islamic World Review* looks at the trade in armaments and matériel to the Gulf War belligerents and how countries are able to get around embargoes and even the law to sell in this lucrative market

35 View from the Banks

39 Jordan's new 5-year Plan

42 Science and Technology

Eiffel Tower Centenary plans worry astronomers. Scientific basis of Traditional Remedies. Cattle breeding in the Saudi Arabia desert. Danger of new plagues of locusts. Airports on poldered islands in the sea off Japan

LIVING HERITAGE

51 TV Review: "The Sword of Islam"

The *Islamic World Review* watched the Granada TV documentary and gives its impression, and also that of a western non-Muslim viewer

52 AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

Why is AIDS such a deadly condition? *The Islamic World Review* outlines the nature of the problem. In a further article in this feature (Combating AIDS) *IWR* looks at the policies being adopted by a number of countries around the world

55 Calligraphy

Lisa Kaaki interviewed the well-known palaeographer Dr Qasim al-Samarrai for *The Islamic World Review* who talked about the history and techniques of the writer's art

REGULAR FEATURES

10 Editorial: The Mission of this magazine

12 Letters and replies

14 Newsmoth

18 World Survey

32 On Reflection

The recent Egyptian election results show a widespread desire for radical change

44 Forum

Responses to Dr Ausaf Ali. Science, Technology and Development

48 Books

54 By the way

Aslam Abdullah comments on the symbols used to determine "primitiveness" and "advancement" (Toilet rolls)

50 Profile

The Islamic World Review profiles the Crimean Tatar hero Mustafa Djemilev, recently reported to have been released from his Russian gaol

62 Personal Notebook

According to the Chinese it is a warm wind of change that has blown through East Turkestan, but recently the temperature beneath the surface is harder to gauge and several areas still throb with ethnic and religious tensions. *S Enders Wimbush* reports on the situation



The China story

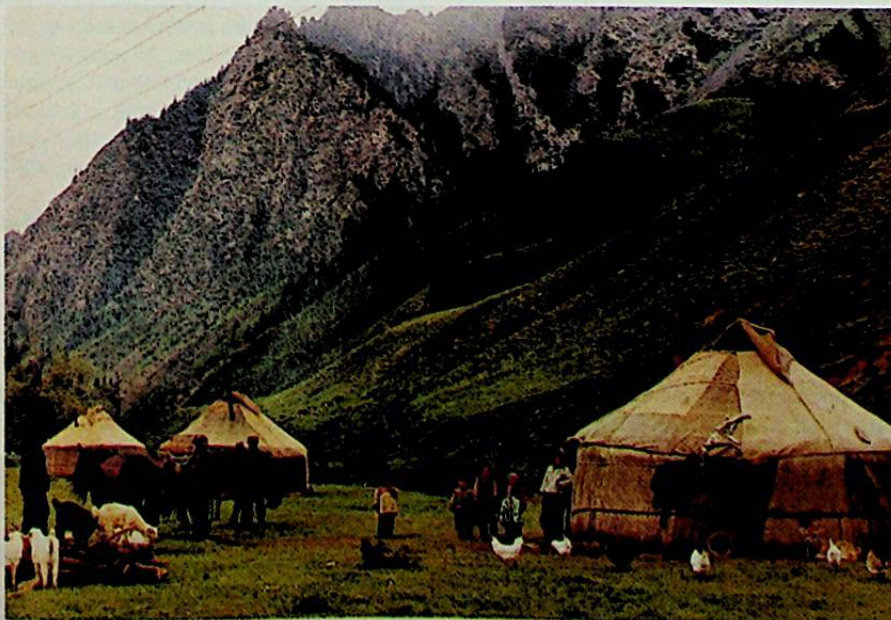
Where now Xinjiang?

When in 1980 I first travelled to the western reaches of China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, known historically as Eastern Turkestan, there was little food, few automobiles, almost no

manufactured goods in the stores, a seething local population, an almost total absence of positive policy guidance from Beijing and general uncertainty among Chinese cadre about how to deal with any of these problems.

Islamic practice was heavily restricted; most mosques remained closed. In late 1983 I returned, this time to find food surpluses, vastly improved public transportation, and an Islamic renaissance of substantial proportions. I also found the beginnings of many local manufacturing enterprises, a native population which, though clearly suspicious of Chinese intentions, had become cautiously optimistic about the direction and pace of change, and significant numbers of local cadre working alongside (in some cases with real authority) the Han Chinese.

When in November 1986 I returned to Eastern Turkestan for a third time, the historic region was in many respects unrecognisable, such has been the scale of the transformation. Many of the famous Silk Road cities had been opened to tourists. The native population of mainly Uighurs and Kazkaks – but with strong representations of Kirghiz, Dungans (Chinese Muslims), Tajiks and, of course, Han Chinese – was evidently enjoying a level of economic prosperity unimaginable a decade ago. Shops and bazaars were bursting with textiles from Pakistan, locally produced fruit, vegetables and meat and household and industrial items of local manufacture. One could even find the odd Japanese transistor radio. The ancient but sturdy Chinese clones of Soviet automobiles



Top: A group of East Turkestani dervishes with their Sheikh
Above: Uygur yurts in Xinjiang

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Crown House, Crown Lane,
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Tel. Farnham Common (02814) 5177
(Facsimile 02814 4155) Telex: 847031
Arabia G, 848296 Transh G

Editor in Chief
Dr Fathi Osman

General Manager
Dr Aly Kabbany

General Editor
Abdelwahab el Affendi

Distribution Manager
Amr Khalifa

Designer
Mustafa Aksay

OFFICES

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TURKEY

MR AHMED KOT

Piyerloti Caddesi, Daghan Sokak 10/4
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had all but disappeared. Their place has been taken by Toyota Land Cruisers and the modern Jeep, the products of a convenient marriage between Japanese and American technology and Chinese labour. Mosques were jammed to overflowing in the morning and evening, and one could purchase Islamic literature freely nearly everywhere.

Beneath the surface

On the surface at least, Eastern Turkestan has undergone a profound change which the Chinese would rather advertise than hide. Indeed, given the relatively unrestricted access which already exists to many areas of western Xinjiang, they will not be able to hide much even if they choose to do so. Beyond the main tourist centres of Urumqi and Kashgar, in more remote places which remain closed to tourists, like Ili and Yarkand, one can identify similar processes at work, although the pace is slower. According to local officials, many outlying areas like these – although probably not Ili, which lies in an extremely sensitive military region – will soon be open to outsiders, once proper hotels and other accommodation are prepared.

The temperature beneath the surface is harder to gauge. As late as 1982, Kashgar and several other areas still throbbed with ethnic and religious tensions. Violence, usually between Han Chinese and the largely Turkic Muslim populations of Uighurs and Kazakhs, was common. All appearances are that tensions have cooled somewhat, that the reforms which have engaged most of the People's Republic of China are also engaging the attention and the considerable energy of many of Xinjiang's "minorities", that is non-Han, including Muslims.

Of the many changes which have visited Eastern Turkestan since the early 1980s, few are more immediately significant or evident than the momentous upturn in economic activity. The most important economic stimuli have been the breakup of huge unmanageable and unproductive agricultural communes and the return of most of the arable land to the farmers themselves, plus the high priority assigned to completion and market forces. Let anyone miss the larger significance of this move Chinese officialdom, through euphemistic slogans and other imaginative descriptions of what is taking place, state publicly what they all acknowledge candidly in private: Socialist agriculture doesn't work; farmers produce best when the land they till is their own and they can seek their own price for their goods.

The revolution in agriculture

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Eastern Turkestan. Farmers who in 1982 could not pay the high government taxes in kind and



still put away enough food for their families for the winter months now often find that they can do both, and even sell their surplus to the government for favourable terms or in the private market for whatever they can get. Farmers who only tilled the land now also invest in livestock and other kinds of agriculture. Some have banded together to purchase tractors and other equipment, which obviously improves their performance on the land, but which also opens the door to a whole range of enterprises associated with farming, such as transport. Still others invest in small agriculture-related manufacturing schemes, such as implement making or food processing (flour grinding or the production of cotton and sunflower oils). These are collectively owned, market-oriented enterprises.

The most dramatic manifestation of both the enhanced overall level of prosperity in the region and the vast proliferation of different kinds of economic activity is the Kashgar Sunday market. One wakes to the voices of the drivers of thousands of donkey, horse, and tractor-drawn wagons shouting "Hosh! Hosh!" (give way), as they stream into the market grounds on Kashgar's outskirts from all directions. This is possibly the most vital and picturesque market in the East. On a typical Sunday 50,000-60,000 buyers and sellers congregate to barter for food of all kinds; stoves, timber, textiles, spices, camels, horses and other livestock. And also raw cotton,

leather, manufactured goods (shoes, suitcases, sports bags), tractor parts, and a wide variety of technical services.

Obviously some do better than others in this new environment, as is the case of any competitive market. Levels of prosperity differ among individuals and regions, and poverty still exists. But the Eastern Turkistani's have made no secret of their preference for the new order of things, which is more in keeping with their own cultural patterns. All seem to agree that it is better that there should be some disparities in income now, with a generally higher level of prosperity across the board, than the widespread poverty which characterised the old days.

Chinese officials, too, are enthusiastic about the region's economic progress. They envisage Xinjiang as a net exporting region, particularly of agricultural goods to the Chinese interior, with a return flow of manufactured goods from the more industrialised regions of the PRC. Outward trade is currently hampered by lack of suitable refrigerated transport, but its provision is a high priority for the future. Recent Chinese laws beginning in 1983 give the provinces, including Xinjiang, more autonomy in their own economic affairs.

Local officials are now responsible for setting most of their own priorities and development targets and for investing their own profits. An important Xinjiang government official told me that new laws



permit the regional government in Urumqi to reject any development directives from Beijing it feels are not in the interests of Xinjiang. Prefectures and counties now set their own development regulations as well.

How deep the commitment to economic de-centralisation runs is hard to judge, but it seems to go far. Economic de-centralisation is the guiding principle of the day, and its symbols are everywhere evident. For example, one no longer flies CAAC, the Chinese national airline, between Beijing and Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. The carrier for this flight, as it is for all flights within Xinjiang, is Xinjiang Regional Airlines.

Chinese officials concerned

However, the direction of Eastern Turkestan's economic development, including economic de-centralisation, will not please everyone. In particular, many local Muslims are deeply worried by what they see as the preparation of conditions to once again flood the region with Han Chinese from the interior. Many Uighurs estimate that the number of Han already in the province is twice the officially accepted figure. In 1983, I raised this issue with Chinese officials in both Urumqi and Beijing, and in both places found them aware of the problem and its implications and groping for ways to address it while still keeping the emerging industrial plans for the province on track. In November 1986 they remained

Left: An Uygur family eating together inside their yurt

concerned, but their uncertainty had vanished. Han will continue to come to Xinjiang, I was told, because they possess industrial skills which cannot now be found among the local Muslim population. One official compared Xinjiang to the American West before its opening: few people and backward conditions. Another official gave the following opinion.

Everyone will benefit from the development of Xinjiang. We must recognise the extent of the problem. This will undoubtedly mean the arrival of more Han, but it will also mean significant advancement for the native populations, too. If the economic development of the region is to succeed, more help from the interior will be necessary. Besides, it would be impossible to stimulate Xinjiang's production mechanisms by opening the province to the wider PRC market-place without accepting a two-way flow of trade and people. He sounded more like a western entrepreneur than a provincial minister. But in the meantime, I was assured, every effort would be made to upgrade the skills of the local work force to allow them to play an increasingly large role in the region's industrial development. "We are establishing many special programmes to make sure this happens." Many East Turkestanis remember Chinese behaviour towards them over many previous decades and greet such assurances with profound scepticism.

The Chinese have bitten on an unpredictable bullet and are now prepared to carry on with their plans. They recognise that most of the region's Muslims are pleased with their economic progress and that this satisfaction will probably absorb much potential discontent. Economic betterment among minorities frequently gives way to very different instincts, however, as the Soviet government recently discovered to its discomfort in Alma-Ata.

The Chinese policy requires great tact and diplomacy, qualities in which they have been notably lacking in their dealings with the East Turkestanis in the past. "We insist that ways be found to involve the native population of Eastern Turkestan to the fullest extent possible in the economic development of our region, even if this means slowing the pace of development somewhat," a Uighur cadre added. Failure to do so, he made clear, will result in discontent and new charges of Han colonialism.

In one sense, the Chinese position is paradoxical: if they retreat now, economic standards could fall in Xinjiang, just when expectations have been raised; if they carry on and Xinjiang becomes the final destination for more millions of Han from the interior, the

stability generated by the current economic reforms and prosperity could quickly erode. Heightened economic consciousness and expectations among Eastern Turkestanis, as elsewhere, will inexorably lead to heightened political consciousness and new demands. The Chinese are thus faced with a precarious balancing act. Their success will depend in large measure on how well they can carry it off.

One particularly tactful move initiated by Chinese authorities is to appeal to other Muslim countries to assist in Eastern Turkestan's economic development. Turkey has already signed contracts to build factories in the region, and other Muslim countries, notably Pakistan, are visibly involved.

Chinese leaders have reversed themselves on the treatment of Islam and other religions as a way to compensate for tensions which might be raised elsewhere. The Cultural Revolution which Chairman Mao unleashed on the Chinese empire in the 1960s battered Eastern Turkestan with particular tenacity. Islam was heavily persecuted: mosques were razed, books and theological materials were burned, mullahs were tortured and killed, and "scientific" programmes to wean the Muslim population from Islam were established. Despite this, Islam survived, although it can hardly be said to have flourished.

Today Islam is staging a dramatic comeback in Eastern Turkestan, due in large measure to the native Muslims' tenacity in clinging to their culture and to the Chinese realisation that to persecute Islam will make all other development programmes unworkable; moreover, it would invite aggravating a persistent strategic vulnerability in an important border region.

In 1980, Islam was only slowly emerging from its long travail; in 1986, the visual evidence of a substantial Islamic renaissance was overwhelming. In Kashgar Prefecture, for example, which contained only a handful of functioning mosques in 1980, the number had surpassed 6000 by 1986. Islamic instruction is widely and legally practised in homes, in mosques and in special schools. Zakat is permitted, the funds to be used for Islamic education, new mosques and for the poor. A number of Quranic schools have been established, including one in Yarkand, which was preparing 64 village mullahs at the time of my visit. An Islamic college is planned for Urumqi, which will combine religious and technical studies. An increasing number of Islamic students are sent abroad, to Pakistan, Turkey, and Egypt. Arabic study is now available from Muslim clerics and at the university level in Urumqi. Islamic literature of all kinds is available and inexpensive. Of particular interest is the work of the Islamic Society in Beijing, which coordinates many