

The Islamic State: The Danger that China Would Rather Not Name

Eyal Propper

The growth and expansion of the Islamic State over the past two years, as well as its power to transcend borders, has been watched by the entire world with much alarm. For its part, China too has extended its activity during this period, and consequently, its economic and political interests in many regions, including the Middle East. Chinese companies and citizens are thus potential targets for extremist terrorist groups – a point made poignantly by the leader of the Islamic State, who referred to “our suffering brethren” in his Ramadan speech of July 2014 and began the list of guilty countries with the Chinese,¹ “who are hurting our (Uyghur) brethren” in the province of Xinjiang.²

In November 2015, China strongly condemned the Islamic State, which executed a Chinese hostage in Syria, and the jihadist al-Murabitoun group in Bamako, Mali, which killed 27 people, including three Chinese nationals. At the same time, the global media’s comparison of the brutality and evil of the Islamic State with the cruelty of Genghis Khan, who at his peak controlled Central Asia and China, has almost certainly not escaped Chinese attention.³ It is therefore worth considering whether Chinese attitudes toward the Islamic State have changed over the course of the past two years, and if so, in what way; how growing alarm about the influence of the Islamic State on the stability of China is expressed; and how the regime is preparing to meet this new threat, especially in terms of international cooperation in the struggle against terrorism.

Activity by the Islamic State and its Proxies in China

At a press conference toward the end of the annual meeting of the Chinese Parliament in March 2015, Zhang Chunxian, Communist Party Secretary

of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and a member of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo, confirmed – in a statement published in the official Chinese media – that “some Xinjiang residents have crossed the border illegally to join the Islamic State. The group currently has a growing international influence, and Xinjiang is affected by it, too.”⁴ Zhang did not disclose information on the number of Muslims who had joined the Salafi jihad forces, but Chinese publications indicated that approximately 300 Chinese had joined the circle of foreign combatants in Syria and Iraq.⁵

Turkey serves as a center for recruiting students and young Muslims from China, who are then sent to training camps and operations in Syria and Iraq. In an article that appeared in December 2014 in the *Global Times*, a publication sometimes used to deliver blunt party messages, a Chinese expert on terrorism claimed that Turkey’s ambiguous policies made it possible for young Chinese of Uyghur origin to obtain passports, which enabled them to go to Syria and join the Islamic State.⁶ A clip published by the organization in Syria in early 2015 showed an 80-year-old Uyghur, a former imam in Xinjiang, who had left the province with his family in order to join the fighters after, in his words, “60 years of Chinese oppression.” The clip also depicted 10 year-old children training to “drive the Chinese heretics out of Turkistan.”⁷

Responding to a question about reports of Chinese joining the Islamic State, a spokesperson from the Chinese Foreign Ministry replied: “We have noted the recent report about Chinese citizens joining the ISIS. We are verifying and will follow up on this.” She proceeded immediately to add that China was in direct danger of terrorism by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).⁸ Cheng Guoping, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, recently clarified his country’s position at a press conference published only outside China by confirming that there was a concrete connection between the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and the Islamic State.⁹

Terrorist Attacks in China

Over the past two years, both Chinese citizens and foreign visitors have been injured in a number of terrorist attacks inside China, which the government has been quick to ascribe to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. In contrast to earlier attacks, which had been aimed at government buildings and security forces in Xinjiang, these occurred in various locations in China, including Beijing, and were aimed at civilians.¹⁰

On October 28, 2013, a car driven by a Muslim from Xinjiang hit pedestrians in Tiananmen Square and caught fire. All three people inside the car and two passersby were killed in the attack, and about 40 were injured. The terrorist attack, which occurred near the government buildings in central Beijing, was a warning sign for Chinese Communist Party leaders. The government accused the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and arrested some of its operatives.¹¹ On March 1, 2014, a group armed with knives attacked passengers in the railway station of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province in southwestern China, killing 29 civilians, and wounding 140. On April 30, 2014, a bomb exploded in the railway station of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Province; one person was killed and 79 injured. A month later, on May 20, 2014, a number of explosive devices were thrown into a market square in Urumqi, killing 39 civilians and wounding 94.¹² This series of attacks induced the party leadership, led by Party General Secretary and President Xi Jinping, to hold a special two-day meeting of the “main working group on the subject of Xinjiang” immediately after the May 2014 attack. Following the meeting, Xi was quoted in the media as saying that China would step up its international cooperation in the struggle against terrorism and build “walls made of copper and steel” and “nets spread from the earth to the sky” in order to capture terrorists.¹³

In accordance with decisions made at the meeting, security forces were reinforced in those parts of Xinjiang where Muslims were a majority, and a tough stance was taken against them. Communications networks used by Muslims were heavily monitored, and the ban on women wearing burkas and veils in public places as well as men growing beards was strictly enforced.¹⁴ Students and Muslim government employees were reportedly forbidden to fast during the month of Ramadan.¹⁵ In addition, China is preparing for the possibility of a terrorist offensive in its major cities, and its security forces conduct terrorist attack emergency drills in key public spaces.¹⁶

International Cooperation in the Struggle against Terrorism

Has China decided to bolster its cooperation with Western countries against Islamic State elements due to its growing anxiety over the potential spread of terrorist attacks on its territory? The answer to this question lies in China’s consistent refusal to join coalitions and alliances, partly due to its traditional policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. In this case too, China is portraying its policy as independent and distinct from

that of the United States and other Western countries. The Chinese argue that not all Muslim believers should be classified as enemies, and that those committing terrorist attacks should be isolated as criminals, but they do not represent true Islam. According to this argument, the spread of a phenomenon such as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq results in part from the instability caused by the United States, which has resorted to military force instead of proceeding with sensitivity and relying on cooperation with the Muslim world.¹⁷ As a display of its independent policy, China has not yet joined any international coalition in Iraq and Syria, and has not involved itself in military actions against Salafi groups outside of China.¹⁸

The detailed statement by the United States and China at the conclusion of their annual high level strategic dialogue in late June 2015 exposes the gaps between the two countries. Despite direct US involvement in the struggle against the Islamic State and President Obama's clear statements on the global effort to combat the phenomenon, the joint sections in the document that discuss the situation in Syria, Iraq, and the war on terrorism do not include any direct mention of the danger of the Islamic State – almost certainly due to Chinese opposition. The section addressing the situation in Syria and Iraq notes that the two countries “reaffirmed their joint commitment to resolve the Syrian issue through political means... and called on the international community to step up humanitarian assistance.” The statement on the struggle against terrorism simply asserts; “The United States and China condemn all forms of terrorism and concur on the global threat posed by terrorist organizations.”¹⁹

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China supported the resolutions taken by consensus against Salafi jihad organizations. These as well as UN Security Council Resolution 2170, passed on August 10, 2014, and Resolution 2199, passed on February 10, 2015, were directed against the Islamic State and its operations. The first of these was in fact passed when China held the presidency of the Security Council. Chinese Ambassador to the UN Liu Jieyi was quoted in the Chinese media as saying: “China actively participated and played a constructive role in the consultations on the draft resolution,” which were designed to extend sanctions against “relevant terrorist groups.” His remarks as reported do not refer explicitly to the Islamic State.²⁰ The same is true of the UN Security Council Summit on Terrorism, held during the UN General Assembly in September 2014. Here Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke about the dangers of international

terrorism and mentioned the East Turkistan Islamic Movement's use of violence within China. Although he spoke about China's intention to allocate 60 million yuan for emergency humanitarian assistance in Iraq, he did not specify the reason behind this need.²¹ Perhaps the earliest sign of a shift in this cautious attitude lies in the summary declaration of the seventh BRICS summit of five countries in Ufa, Russia, in July 2015, which condemned terrorism, violence, and severe human rights violation by the Islamic State.²² A test of this shift will be China's policy following the execution of a Chinese citizen by the Islamic State in November 2015, an act that was condemned sharply by President Xi.

Conclusion

Since the turn of the millennium, the political and economic status of China has improved gradually and consistently, transforming the country into the world's second leading economic power. China's companies have expanded their business, and its citizens are now working and traveling all over the globe, including the Middle East. The American call to China a decade ago to behave as a "responsible shareholder" with respect to global problems has become ever more relevant over the years.²³

China's traditional policy of refraining from open intervention in the internal issues of other countries is thus put to the test at a time when borders between countries in the Middle East are being erased, and the destructive forces responsible continue to blur even more borders and may perhaps affect China itself. Yet an examination of China's statements and mode of operation in both the multilateral and bilateral sphere indicates that despite growing challenges, China has not altered its policy of "restraint," which includes maintaining a low media profile and avoiding involvement in alliances and coalitions that could mark it as a key player in the combat against Salafi Islam, along with a focus on its own terrorist challenges and resistance to calls for independence in Xinjiang.

China's use of force against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang makes the country a potential target of the Islamic State and makes terrorism a concrete threat to its citizens. Official information on Chinese Uyghurs joining the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, and the danger to which they allegedly expose China upon their return home, indicates that Beijing is worried about the effects of the Islamic State on the stability of Xinjiang Province as well as attacks against Chinese on foreign soil. Nonetheless, China prefers to act

independently, as it has done in other situations and with discreet cooperation that allows it to upgrade its capabilities without disclosing information on its methods for dealing with Muslims and other groups regarded by the Communist Party as liable to jeopardize stability and the Party's rule.

As part of its plan to strengthen its control over hostile factions, the regime expedited discussions on the formulation of a new bill on the struggle against terrorism. A draft of the "Terrorism Law," presented in March 2015 at the annual plenum of the Chinese Parliament, revealed that the regime intends to tighten further its supervision of social media and the flow of information. The draft evoked severe criticism outside of China, mainly relating to the option of unlimited monitoring of internet traffic and foreign companies inside China. This will force the Beijing regime to reconsider the new bill before giving it final approval.²⁴

In the international arena, China has more than once expressed its disappointment with the West, as led by the United States, which, instead of supporting the struggle against Uyghur terrorism, has questioned the accuracy of the information coming from Beijing, while criticizing the country's human rights record and the tough measures taken against the Muslim population in Xinjiang. China therefore prefers to pursue cooperation with countries (such as the BRICS states) that do not intervene in its internal affairs and can also teach it methods to fight terrorism. Among other moves, China is conducting joint maneuvers with Russia and a number of other countries in Central Asia within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and is seeking cooperation with Middle East regimes that it regards as stable, such as Iran and Israel.²⁵

The ideal solution for China is to find a path that will dissociate it from the chaos that reigns in large expanses of the Middle East, distance itself from Salafi jihad terrorists, and prevent them from penetrating Chinese territory. This will make it possible for China to maintain internal stability and Party rule, by building operational capabilities in counterterrorism and firewalls for controlling the flow of information, as well as additional, complementary capabilities.

The return to China of Uyghur veterans with a revolutionary attitude molded by the Islamic State, with training and experience in terrorist funding and attacks as well as organizational and interpersonal connections, could jeopardize stability in Xinjiang and inspire terrorist activity within China and against Chinese citizens abroad. As a result, China is likely to step up

its security and intelligence coordination with other countries threatened by Salafi terrorism, such as Israel. The possibility of recruiting China as an active member in the international coalition depends on the coalition's ability to persuade decision makers in Beijing that cooperation of this kind would strengthen China in its war against separatism, bolster the legitimacy of its regime in the struggle against terrorism, and help it preserve internal stability. The more the threat increases, the clearer these points will become to Chinese Communist Party leaders.

Notes

- 1 Abdallah Suleiman Ali, "Baghdadi Vows Revenge in Announcing 'Islamic State,'" *al-Monitor*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07/iraq-syria-baghdadi-call-muslims-caliphate.html#>.
- 2 The Uyghurs are Muslims of Turkish origin. Approximately 10 million of the 22 million residents of Xinjiang Province are Uyghurs.
- 3 Dan Murphy, "ISIS Leader Baghdadi Cementing Reputation as the New Hulagu Khan," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Backchannels/2015/0205/ISIS-leader-Baghdadi-cementing-reputation-as-the-new-Hulagu-Khan>.
- 4 Cui Jia, "IS Recruits Xinjiang Residents," *China Daily*, March 10, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/10/content_19770997.htm.
- 5 The figure of 300 is based on Chinese publications. One report states that in a single year, 800 Uyghurs were arrested in Vietnam trying to cross the border in order to continue from there to the Middle East and that the Chinese had established a special police unit called 4.29 to combat illegal border crossings. See Kyle Mizokami, "China has an ISIS Problem," *The Week*, March 2, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/541531/china-isis-problem>. Thailand recently returned 100 Uyghurs to China who had crossed the border illegally. See Oliver Holmes and agencies, "Thailand Forcibly Sends Nearly 100 Uighur Muslims Back to China," *The Guardian*, July 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/09/thailand-forcibly-sends-nearly-100-uighur-muslims-back-to-china>.
- 6 See Qiu Yongzheng, "Turkey's Ambiguous Policies Help Terrorists Join IS Jihadist Group: Analyst," *Global Times*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896765.shtml>. Another report speaks of seven Chinese arrested on the Turkish border while trying to join Islamic State forces. See Mizokami, "China has an ISIS Problem."
- 7 "O Chinese kaffar (non-believers), know that we are preparing in the land of the khilafah (caliphate) and we will come to you and raise this flag in Turkestan with the permission of Allah." See Tom Wyke and Jenny Stanton, "Is this the Oldest Jihadi in ISIS? Elderly Man Flees China with his Family to Fight Alongside

- Terror Group in Syria,” *Mail Online*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3110022/Is-ISIS-oldest-jihadi-Elderly-man-flees-China-family-fight-alongside-terror-group-Syria.html>.
- 8 “FM Press Conference on September 10,” http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/bilingual/2014-09/11/c_133635859.htm. East Turkistan is another name for Xinjiang Province in northwestern China. East Turkistan existed as an independent country for short periods when Chinese rule was weak (e.g., in 1933-34 and 1944-49). The Muslim residents are currently fighting for independence.
 - 9 “Rivals Pakistan, India to Start Process of Joining China Security Bloc,” *Reuters*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/06/us-china-russia-pakistan-india-idUSKCN0PG09120150706>. The Chinese news agency did not quote the statement about the Islamic State. See “Acceptance of India, Pakistan into SCO on Ufa Summit Agenda,” *English.news.cn*, July 6, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/06/c_134387348.htm.
 - 10 “Update: China’s Xi Demands Action after 3 Killed in Attack,” *Asahi Shimbun*, May 1, 2014, <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201405010022>.
 - 11 “Five Detained over Tian’anmen Terrorist Attack,” *English.news.cn*, October 30, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-10/30/c_132845415.htm.
 - 12 “Xi Urges Anti-Terrorism ‘Nets’ for Xinjiang,” *English.news.cn*, May 29, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/29/content_17552457.htm.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 An article by the Director of the Research Center of Ethnic and Religious Studies at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China claims that extreme terrorist groups persuade people to use these coverings to boost support, and confirms that the Party is acting against this phenomenon. See “Burqas, Hijabs and Beards in the Governance of Xinjiang,” China Policy Institute Blog, April 29, 2015, <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/04/29/regulating-burqas-hijabs-and-beards-to-push-or-pul>.
 - 15 “China Bans Ramadan Fasting in Muslim Province,” *al-Jazeera*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2014/07/china-bans-ramadan-fasting-muslim-province-20147371648541558.html>.
 - 16 “Counter-Terrorism Exercise in Shanghai,” CCTV News, July 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ua-nsce4Zv4>.
 - 17 “Commentary: Muslims, their Religion should not Take Blame for Terrorists’ Crimes,” *English.news.cn*, June 28, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-06/28/c_134362926.htm. Its statement of support for Islam did not help China, which was condemned by the Turkish government following reports that the regime was forcing Muslims to eat during the month of Ramadan. These condemnations incited violence against Chinese throughout Turkey, including the burning of Chinese flags and vandalism directed against Chinese-owned restaurants. See “Turkey Expresses Concern over China’s Ramadan Bans on Uighurs,” *Today’s Zaman*, June 30, 2015,

- http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_turkey-expresses-concern-over-chinas-ramadan-bans-on-uighurs_392385.html. See also Ivan Watson and Steven Jiang, "Beijing Issues Travel Warning after Turkey Protests Target Chinese," CNN, July 8, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/06/asia/china-turkey-warning/>.
- 18 Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting," US Department of State, December 3, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm>. In a press interview the Iraqi Foreign Minister claimed that at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told him that China's political principles did not allow it to join a coalition, and that it would aid Iraq outside the coalition. Asked about this claim, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded ambiguously: "China has been fighting terrorism and has been providing support and assistance to Iraq, including the Kurdish region," *RT*, December 14, 2015, <http://rt.com/news/214243-china-iraq-military-isis>.
 - 19 U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic Track, US Department of State, June 24, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/06/244205.htm>.
 - 20 Amy He, "China More Proactive at UN," *China Daily*, November 30, 2015, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-03/02/content_19692303.htm.
 - 21 Working Together to Address the New Threat of Terrorism-Statement by Wang Yi At the UN Security Council Summit on Terrorism, September 24, 2014, <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/zywjyjh/t1196288.htm>.
 - 22 VII BRICS Summit Ufa Declaration, July 9, 2015, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1282066.htm>. The BRICS countries are Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.
 - 23 Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, Washington, September 21, 2005, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.
 - 24 See Counter-Terrorism Law (Initial Draft) at <http://chinalawtranslate.com/en/ctldraft/>; and Scott D. Livingston, "Will China's New Anti-Terrorism Law Mean the End of Privacy?" *China File*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/will-chinas-new-anti-terrorism-law-mean-end-privacy>.
 - 25 See the report on the dispatch of a special messenger on behalf of President Xi to promote cooperation with Iran in the struggle against terrorism, Cio Siqi, "Beijing, Tehran to Fight Terrorism," *Global Times*, November 19, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/892520.shtml>. On Israel, see the report on the training of Chinese armed policemen in anti-terrorism military exercises at an Israel Border Police base, "What Were Armed Chinese Officers Doing with the Border Police," *JDN*, December 29, 2011, <http://www.jdn.co.il/news/24139>.