

Part 6. ‘Afghan’ jihadist terrorism comes to Xinjiang

Xinjiang: China’s western frontier in the heart of Eurasia (Part 6)

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The impact of Afghanistan on separatism in Xinjiang

The first glimmer in Xinjiang of radical Islamist terrorism, generated out of the Anglo-American-Saudi-Pakistani project of training and deploying radicalised guerrilla fighters against the Soviet Union in 1979-88 (Parts [2](#), [5](#)), came in March 1981. That month a small group called the East Turkestan Prairie Fire Party popped up near Kashgar (Kashi) in southwestern Xinjiang. In May they raided a government weapons depot in Jiashi, 60 km east of Kashgar, but were soon caught and suppressed. Significantly, the group reportedly said they were “fighters for the Jihad who were going to drive the Chinese out of Eastern Turkestan”.^{[1](#)}

After the Chinese Revolution ended with victory for the Communist Party of China in 1949, occasional incidents of unrest in Xinjiang had stemmed from various geopolitical shocks: the legacies of the 1930s British-backed and 1940s Soviet-backed East Turkestan Republics; turmoil in the region when remnants of the defeated Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) army, including surviving Hui Muslim military officers, ended up there when the fighting stopped; population flows of ethnic groups back and forth between Xinjiang and Soviet Central Asia because of adverse conditions on either side of the border at various times; and the Sino-Soviet split beginning in 1956. A short-lived Uyghuristan People’s Revolutionary Party, promptly renamed the East Turkestan People’s Revolutionary Party, appeared in both Kashgar and Urumqi in 1967-68, evidently with some degree of ill-advised Soviet backing as the Sino-Soviet split intensified in those years.

In the late 1980s, there were scattered incidents of student and other unrest in Xinjiang, coinciding with similar events elsewhere in China, leading up to the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989. A sharper turning point in Xinjiang was an insurgency in Baren Township, south of Kashgar, in April 1990.

In the Baren Riot or Baren Rebellion, as it is called, two hundred Uyghur militants armed with weapons and explosives besieged local government offices and fought government troops. There are various reports on how long the siege lasted (from “several days” to “nearly three weeks”), who its leaders were, and where the Uyghur insurgents obtained their weapons (whether locally, or across Xinjiang’s nearby short border with Afghanistan).^{[2](#)}

Where there is no disagreement, is that the Baren Riot was a serious incident, with at least 22 people killed (initial foreign press reports said the toll was as high as 60), and that its participants viewed it as a “jihad” event coherent with the Afghanistan mujaheddin’s fight.

It was also in connection with the Baren Riot that the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) began to be mentioned. This is the entity that in 2002 would be listed by the United Nations as terrorist. The USA listed ETIM in 2002 as a supporter of terrorism, upgrading it to the Terrorist Exclusion List in 2004. ETIM was de-listed in November 2020 by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the height of the anti-China frenzy in the final months of the Trump Administration. Pompeo claimed that ETIM did not exist.

Singapore academic Rohan Gunaratna, in a January 2018 article,^{[3](#)} traced ETIM and its successor, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) to an organisation formed in 1940 by several Islamic scholars and activists, who had identified with the abortive, pro-British Turkish-Islamic Republic of East Turkestan in 1933-34 ([Part 4](#), “Central Asia between the Wars”). Their 1940 project was called Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan (the Islamic Party of Turkistan or Turkistan Islamic Movement). The Washington think tank Stratfor’s history of ETIM/TIP (Note 2) presented the same account of its roots. The 1940 organisers had been imprisoned after attempting uprisings first against Xinjiang warlords and then against the Communists after 1949. Two of them died in the 1950s, but a third, Abdul Hakeem, survived and came out of prison during the relaxation of China’s restrictions on Islamic activity in the 1980s ([Part 5](#)). He proceeded to set up underground schools for Islamic study, especially near Kashgar.

Gunaratna writes that it was members of this movement, revived in 1988 by one Zeydin Yusup (also written as “Dia Uddin” and “Zeyiddin Yusuf”) with the addition of “East” in its name, who led the Baren Riot. A retrospective on ETIM/TIP posted 18 October 2016 by the Turkish-language *Dogu Turkistan Bulteni* (*East Turkestan Bulletin*) concurred: “Established by Rahimullah Zeyiddin Yusuf in 1988 in East Turkistan, the Turkistan Islamic Movement were the heroes of the resistance against China in East Turkistan on 5 April 1990, ... and continue their jihad in the way of Allah.”

A leading UK-based terrorism expert assessed the Baren uprising as a momentous shift: “What in the

1980s would have translated [as] *just another* ethnic riot gained this time a 'jihadist' character".⁴

There were unconfirmed hints of a "Pan-Turkic" dimension to the Baren events, as well. Author Michael Dillon (Note 1) reports from the BBC's *Summary of World Broadcasts (Far East)*, that Chinese officials had accused Istanbul-based Uyghur émigré Isa Yusuf Alptekin of involvement. Participants at the 1992 Pan-Turkist conferences in New York ([Part 4](#), "Post-Soviet Pan-Turk revival"), attributed Baren to activation of a Free East Turkestan Movement, which may have been an alternative translation of the East Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), set up in Turkey in the 1990s.

ETIM in Pakistan and Afghanistan



East Turkistan Islamic Movement leader Hasan Mahsum (above) in 1999 reportedly met with al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (below) and subsequently merged ETIM into their terrorist infrastructure. Photo: Screenshot

Abdul Hakeem died in 1993. One of his students, by the name of Hasan Mahsum, detained in a broad security sweep that followed the Baren Riot, was further radicalised by interaction with fellow prisoners in 1990-91. At the end of 1996, after another brief jailing for pro-separatist activity, Mahsum left China via Malaysia, to seek backing from the Uyghur diaspora in Saudi Arabia. In the first half of 1997 he proceeded to Pakistan and then Turkey in search of support. In 1997 he and Abudukadir Yapuquan reconstituted ETIM once again.

In 1998 ETIM headquarters were shifted to Afghanistan, according to Stratfor's and other histories of the group. There were reports that Mahsum met there, under Taliban protection, with al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU; introduced in [Part 5](#), "The Central Asia blueprint"). It was apparently in the context of these contacts that the group removed "East" from its name and began to go by Turkestan Islamic Movement (or Party), thus implicitly encompassing all of Central Asia rather than only Xinjiang.

ETIM/TIP literature increasingly adopted the "takfiri" attitudes of al-Qaeda, namely denouncing and anathematising other Muslims.

Gunaratna (Note 3) writes about this period: "ETIM benefitted from the existing vast Taliban al-Qaeda (AQT) infrastructure. The Uzbeks and Uyghurs were the first two Central Asian groups to build a strategic partnership with AQT.... A prominent Egyptian Sheikh, 'Marjon Solim Javhari alias Shaikh Isa, from the time of Taliban's rule in Afghanistan to 2007, taught jihadi knowledge to Uyghur and Uzbek mujahideen in Afghanistan and Pakistan.'... Mahsum operated from Kabul under an Afghan passport and met with Osama bin Laden in 1999. The Afghan Taliban created a dedicated village for the Uyghurs in Jalalabad and al Qaeda provided him a dedicated training facility in Tora Bora.... Uyghurs in Xinjiang travelled into Pakistan through the Karakoram Highway and by flight.... The external Emir of the Khalden Camp, Abu Zubaidah from Saudi Arabia received them at the Islamabad airport and transported them to Afghanistan for training. Mahsum rebuilt the infrastructure in Xinjiang including training bases inside Xinjiang."

Israeli



Al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Photos: Wikipedia-Hamid Mir

researcher Ely Karmon⁵ found credible a Chinese government report that in 1998 “dozens” of ETIM members trained in Afghanistan infiltrated back into Xinjiang and set up secret training cells for bomb-making. Some of the resulting ETIM weapons depots were raided by police. Western nations’ intelligence reports in 1996, already, indicated that veterans of the mujaheddin in Afghanistan were training “scores” of Uyghur militants in Xinjiang. In 1999, it was reported that Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency was training Uyghurs in its schools (Note 4).

After the USA invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and bombed Taliban and al-Qaeda locations there in the Global War on Terrorism, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, as many as one thousand ETIM cadre escaped and retreated mainly to Pakistan. Mahsum was killed there during a Pakistani military operation in 2003. By 2006, a new leadership of ETIM/TIP, now calling itself primarily TIP, appeared to have jelled around his associate, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani; other sources speculated that the revived TIP was actually the result of a split-off from the IMU (Note 4).

In 2014 a retired American intelligence official told journalists from *Executive Intelligence Review* that Pakistan-based Lashkar e-Tahibi (“Army of the Good”), a militant Islamist group behind the training of terrorists for attacks inside India, had been continuing to train Uyghur jihadists in Pakistan as well.⁶

Another impact of Xinjiang’s interface with the Afghanistan mujaheddin was its incorporation into the rapidly exploding international narcotics trade. Afghanistan’s opium production rose from 350 tons in 1986 to 4,581 tons by 1999 and, after the USA/NATO occupation of the country, to 8,200 tons in 2007. Like the mujaheddin, Uyghur militants were active in trafficking of this product, which also funded terrorism and fed into the growth of an underground criminal drug mafia in Xinjiang. The region became a transshipment route for Afghan opium and heroin, while domestic illegal cultivation of the ephedra shrub, to produce the stimulant ephedrine, also boomed. Xinjiang became China’s region with the fastest rising level of drug addiction.

Terror attacks in China

The Chinese government reports that between 1990 to 2016 more than one thousand civilians were killed in thousands of terrorist attacks, committed by “East Turkestan” groups in Xinjiang.⁷ These attacks included bombings, assassinations of government officials and Uyghur and Muslim religious leaders, mass murders, and attempts to hijack and blow up planes.

After the Baren Riot and subsequent crackdown, there were isolated bombings in Urumqi, northern Xinjiang, in 1992 and 1997. Australian scholar Justin Hastings in 2011 used the Global Terrorism Database, maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, to chart the number of violent incidents in Xinjiang in 1990-2009 (Note 2). He found that the number of targets of such attacks had hovered at five to 10 annually in 1990-96, but then zoomed to 15 in 1997 and above 35 in 1998. These were the years when Hasan Mahsum and others reconstituted ETIM/TIP.⁸

Another strong crackdown on unrest, called by Beijing the Strike Hard measures, brought the number of attacks down to very few in the early 2000s, only for it to surge again a decade later.

Isolated knife attacks occurred in or near Kashgar and Urumqi in 2011-12. In 2013 Jacob Zenn, a terrorism specialist now at Georgetown University, enumerated five incidents in four Xinjiang cities during March-June of that year; several dozen people were killed at that time in ethnic (Uyghur vs. Han Chinese) street fighting, a police station bombing, a raid on a bomb factory, and knife attacks on police.⁹

Three horrific attacks committed in March-May 2014, this time not in Xinjiang alone, were an escalation to a new level of expertise, timing and coordination. On 1 March eight attackers wielding knives and machetes killed 33 people and injured more than 140 at the railway station in the southwestern city of Kunming, Yunnan Province. Two months later, on 30 April, a knife attack and bombing at the Urumqi railway station left three dead and 79 hurt. And on 22 May terrorists drove two SUVs through a marketplace crowd in Urumqi, killing 39 and injuring nearly 100 people. In May 2014, Xinjiang Communist Party chief Zhang Chunxian announced an intensive counterterrorism and anti-extremism campaign, warning that “Violent terrorist attacks have become the most immediate and realistic peril to social stability in Xinjiang.”¹⁰

Chinese official statements often attribute all the attacks to “ETIM/TIP”. There were many smaller groups reportedly engaged in some degree of “armed struggle” in the 1990s and 2000s, some of them mentioned only once or twice in Chinese sources, others confirmed by multiple foreign scholars. A 2010 book (Reed & Raschke, Note 4), for example, listed, besides ETIM/TIP and the ETLO, a Uyghur People’s Party (based in Kazakhstan, formed in 2001 as a merger of the United Revolutionary Front of East Turkistan and the Uyghur Liberation Organisation), an Islamic Reformist Party, the Tigers of Lop Nor, the East Turkistan National Solidarity Union, the Islamic Holy Warriors, the East Turkistan Opposition Party, and the Eastern Turkistan Grey Wolf Party—all as either implicated in bombings, or advocating “armed struggle” in their propaganda.

International jihadis call for attacks on Xinjiang

The run-up to the renewed terrorist outbreak in Xinjiang in 2011-14 was marked by a crescendo of calls from international terrorist groups for attacks on Xinjiang. On 6 October 2009 Sheikh Abu-Yahya al-Libi, then al-Qaeda's second in command, released a video titled "East Turkestan: The Forgotten Wound". He denounced "crimes committed by the pagan Chinese" and demanded that all Muslims "stand by their oppressed and wounded brothers in East Turkestan and aid them with everything they can".¹¹



Mourners outside the Kunming railway station following the 1 March 2014 terrorist attack. Photo: AFP/Xinhua/Lin Yiguang

Two weeks after the March 2014 Kunming railway station attack, TIP leader Abdullah Mansour spoke with Reuters, apparently by satellite phone from somewhere in western Pakistan. Repeating al-Libi's line that the fight against China was now a universal jihad obligation, Mansour said, "If the fighters of East Turkestan are now fighting with swords, knives, and mallets, our dear Allah will soon give us opportunities to fight the Chinese using automatic guns."

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a 2016 video, praised Hasan Mahsum as a legendary jihadist and Uyghur jihadists as "mujaheddin brothers" fighting against an "atheist occupier"—the government of China.¹² The video showed the Uyghur/"East Turkestan" issue was gaining importance within transnational terror groups, for use as propaganda to whip up the Muslim population in various countries. A 2017 article documented al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) propaganda calling for Muslims to wage global jihad against Chinese non-believers and revenge alleged deaths of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. In 2014, it reported, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had extended the boundaries of the would-be Islamic Caliphate to include Xinjiang.¹³

One result of such agitation was an increase of terrorist attacks targeting Chinese expats, particularly in Central Asia.

A 2017 report commissioned from two American experts by the Netherlands-based International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) noted the Chinese government's concern that Xinjiang's separatist movements could become dominated by violent jihadists.¹⁴ The authors acknowledged that this scenario could "transform the nature and severity of low-level conflict into a bloodier insurgency", mirroring the trajectory of the 1990s-2000s conflict in Chechnya, Russia. If this were to happen, "Beijing could soon find itself in the crosshairs of a religiously motivated, battle-hardened crop of returning foreign terrorist fighters—an unenviable position of any nation".

'Foreign fighters' from Xinjiang

There are already significant numbers of such fighters, beyond the initial wave into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Already in 2008, an Indian intelligence analyst pointed out two different outlooks among Uyghur activists. One tendency was to emphasise an independent Uyghur homeland—"East Turkestan". These people, he said, were not necessarily "pan-Islamic" in orientation and did not all accept the jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda. The other was fully on board with al-Qaeda and global violent jihad.¹⁵

After 2001, 22 Uyghurs were detained by the USA in Afghanistan and subsequently held at Guantanamo Bay. Most were rounded up in or near Taliban camps (Part 5, "The Central Asia blueprint").

The above-cited 2017 ICCT report detailed a growing transnationalisation of Uyghur terrorist fighters,

who had spread into Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Some of them joined local terrorist organisations in Indonesia, while many proceeded to Iraq or Syria. As the report put it, “seemingly under the radar” while most studies of Uyghur activism focused on Chinese domestic policy, China has “figured prominently in jihadi strategy” for the past decade.

With the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 and the obsession of the American and British governments with overthrowing the Syrian government, that country became a new magnet for jihadist terrorist groups, including remnants of al-Qaeda and subsequently ISIS, which had grown out of the Anglo-American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Offshoots of these groups, constantly changing their names, received funding and arms from the USA and UK through various organisational structures. For the American CIA, covert support of “rebel fighters” in Syria became its most expensive operation since Operation Cyclone in 1980s Afghanistan ([Part 2](#)).

ETIM/TIP terrorists are present among the 20,000-30,000 foreign militants who have fought in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan backed the American operations in Syria from the outset, with Turkey becoming a transit point for international terrorists on their way there. Erdogan, who rose to power as an Islamist politician eager to undermine Turkey’s secular traditions in government, also espouses Pan-Turkist ideology. In 1995, as mayor of Istanbul, he dedicated a park in honour of the Uyghur émigré and Pan-Turkist activist Isa Yusuf Alptekin ([Part 4](#), section “Post-Soviet Pan-Turk revival”). Declared Erdogan, using the Pan-Turkist name for Xinjiang Region, “Eastern Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples but also the cradle of Turkic history, civilisation and culture.... The martyrs of Eastern Turkestan are our martyrs.”¹⁶

In 2015 reports emerged in the Turkish and Indonesian press that Uyghur ethnic men from Xinjiang, detained in Indonesia and Thailand, had been travelling as Turkish citizens on passports issued by Turkish embassies in Southeast Asia. The Turkish newspaper *Meydan Daily* claimed that “more than 50,000 Uyghur Turks came to Turkey with these fake passports from China via Thailand and Malaysia and entered Syria after staying a day in Istanbul”, while the Chinese government accused Turkey of facilitating the shipment of Uyghur Chinese citizens to Syria as “cannon fodder”.¹⁷ The *Meydan Daily* numbers are far on the high end of claims about the number of Uyghur fighters in Syria; other estimates range from several hundred to several thousand.

Unlike other al-Qaeda offshoot groups, which usually consist of lone men, Uyghur fighters often brought their wives, children and parents to Syria, with multi-generational families living in villages and farms after Syrians had been driven out. It was reported in 2018 that 3,500 TIP militants and their families were living in the Syrian village of Zanbaqi, with schools established for hundreds of Uyghur and local children being trained to be “little jihadists”.¹⁸ The 2017 ICCT report said that TIP specialises in training child soldiers, as a niche capability. Articles in *The Diplomat* in 2017 reported a propaganda video of Uyghur children interacting with a militant teacher who addresses the Chinese government: “We will come to you to shed blood like rivers and avenge the oppressed”; and an ISIS video in which a Uyghur boy aged eight or nine executed a prisoner with a gun and threatened that every Chinese non-believer would share the same fate.

The ICCT report described other 2016-17 TIP propaganda videos, featuring heroic images of Uyghurs fighting in Syria and songs on a “holy war against infidels”. Uyghur militants were shown burning the Chinese flag and threatening to return home to wage jihad. In other TIP propaganda videos, Uyghur militants promise to wage “holy war” throughout the world.

The late war journalist Andre Vltchek spent several years investigating Uyghur jihadists on the ground in China, Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Indonesia, culminating in his 2019 article “March of the Uyghurs”.¹⁹ Vltchek characterised the Uyghur militants as among the most dangerous terrorists in Syria, being “fully trained ... battle-ready, indoctrinated and extremely brutal”. Vltchek interviewed Syrian eyewitnesses to these jihadists slaughtering the local population; the witnesses said the fighters appeared “brainwashed, mad”, and used narcotics as “combat drugs”.

The 2017 ICCT report outlined possible scenarios for Uyghurs in post-conflict Syria, including the inevitability that some fighters will return to China. Uyghurs might intensify jihadist connections or strategic coalitions between terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, or “privatise” their activities for profit, as had already happened with the private military contractor Malhama Tactical in Syria. Guerrilla groups fighting the Assad government hired this company to fight, provide training and “battlefield consulting”. Uyghur militants fought alongside Malhama Tactical in Syria, and the contractor’s leader has suggested China in particular as a country that would “benefit from jihad”.

[Next: Part 7. The ‘East Turkistan’ narrative](#)

Footnotes: (Click on footnote number to return to text)

¹. Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Far Northwest* (Routledge Curzon, Durham East Asia Series, 2004), a book based on studies initially commissioned in 1993 for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Dillon’s report on the Jiashi incident and the Prairie Fire Party’s statement relied on a 1999 history of separatism, published by a Xinjiang

Region government publishing house.

- [2.](#) Composite accounts based on both Chinese radio broadcasts at the time and publications sympathetic to the Uyghur insurgents are given by Dillon and in "China: The Evolution of ETIM", Stratfor, 13 May 2008; J. Todd Reed, Diana Raschke, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat* (Praeger, 2010); Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, Wang Pengxin, *Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Justin V. Hastings (U. of Sydney), "Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest", *The China Quarterly*, Dec. 2011.
- [3.](#) Rohan Gunaratna, "Salafism in China and its Jihadist-Takfiri strains", 18 Jan. 2018, online at mesbar.org.
- [4.](#) Pablo Adriano Rodriguez, "Violent Resistance in Xinjiang (China)", *Historia Actual Online*, 2013. The author, then at the University of Warwick, today works at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.
- [5.](#) Ely Karmon, "Pakistan, the Radicalisation of the Jihadist Movement and the Challenge to China", *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (In Asia)*, No. 3, 2009.
- [6.](#) "Xinjiang's Uighur Jihadists and the Wahhabi Empire of al-Qaeda", *EIR*, 18 Apr. 2014.
- [7.](#) "The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang", white paper, State Council Information Office, People's Republic of China, 18 Mar. 2019. Online at www.gov.cn. The white paper is valuable not only for its documentation of the terrorist attacks, but as testimony to how Chinese leaders view them. In the present article we have chosen to cite chiefly non-PRC sources on the attacks, because so many readers have formed the habit of dismissing official statements from Beijing.
- [8.](#) Note 2, Stratfor.
- [9.](#) "China Claims Uyghur Militants Trained in Syria", *Terrorism Monitor*, 12 July 2013, Jamestown Foundation (online at jamestown.org).
- [10.](#) "Xinjiang's Party chief wages 'people's war' against terrorism", *China Daily*, 26 May 2014.
- [11.](#) Note 6.
- [12.](#) Thomas Joscelyn, "Zawahiri praises Uighur jihadists in ninth episode of 'Islamic Spring' series", *Long War Journal*, 7 July 2016.
- [13.](#) Uran Botobekov, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Take Aim at China", *The Diplomat*, 8 March 2017.
- [14.](#) Colin P. Clarke (Rand Corporation), Paul Rexton Kan (U.S. Army War College), "Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge", *ICCT*, Nov. 2017 (online at icct.nl).
- [15.](#) Ramtanu Maitra, "The Uighurs: Britain's Double-Edged Razor to Cut up China and Beyond", *EIR*, 11 Apr. 2008.
- [16.](#) "Istanbul names park for Isa Yusuf Alptekin", *Eastern Turkestan Information Bulletin*, August 1995.
- [17.](#) Peter Lee, "Deeper and Darker in the Uyghur-Turkish Passport Mystery", *China Matters* blog, 10 April 2015; Ben Blanchard, "China says Uighurs being sold as 'cannon fodder' for extremist groups", *Reuters*, 11 July 2015.
- [18.](#) Steven Sahiounie, "From Idlib to Xinjiang: Uyghur Fighters Trained for Terror", *21st Century Wire*, 26 Sept. 2018.
- [19.](#) Andre Vltchek, "March of the Uyghurs", *New Eastern Outlook*, 21 July 2019.