

Pakistani scholar debunks 'Uighur internment' smear

By Richard Bardon

The present flap in the Western world over China's alleged repression of Uighur Muslims has little to do with "human rights". After all, a notorious 17 May 2017 US State Department memo¹ to then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson candidly admitted that the United States and its Western allies care not at all for human rights, except inasmuch as they can be weaponised for geopolitical purposes. As AAS has reported, the widespread claim that China has incarcerated up to one million Uighurs—a Turkic-speaking ethnic minority mainly concentrated in Xinjiang—derives from the unsubstantiated reports of US government-funded propaganda organs and pseudo-NGOs, which were spread by British Intelligence-linked news agency Reuters.² In a 26 September column for *Pakistan Today*, former Group Captain in the Pakistan Air Force-turned-author and political analyst Sultan M. Hali argues that by spreading disinformation about the state of affairs in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, the Anglo-American imperium hopes to sow distrust among China's would-be collaborators—especially those with majority Muslim populations—in the world-spanning Belt and Road Initiative development program.

Xinjiang is China's largest province, comprising 16 per cent of its land area, and is also home to its largest population of Muslims. "In the past", Mr Hali wrote, "China's eastern provinces enjoyed greater opulence and a higher rate of development, perhaps because they are closer to the coastal region and ports. However, this disparity caused Xinjiang's population to face a sense of deprivation, which was manipulated by China's detractors, who tried to incite the Muslim population, ethnic Uighurs, into insurgency." Most of these efforts have been built around the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a.k.a. Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), a jihadist-separatist militia allied with al-Qaeda, which was responsible for the spate of bomb, knife and vehicular attacks on civilians and police in 2008-15. The ETIM/TIP is proscribed as a terrorist organisation in both the USA and UK, but nonetheless they continue to support the group (via Saudi Arabia) to destabilise Xinjiang.

Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, he has "quelled the insurgency with a two-pronged policy", wrote Hali. "Security forces cracked down on the troublemakers with an iron hand, while development projects with the inclusion of Uighurs ushered an era of prosperity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the New Silk Road, which promises a new age of affluence, has Xinjiang as its focal point. The flagship of BRI, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), terminates at Xinjiang's ancient city of Kashgar, which was a major city of the ancient Silk Road and has become the launching pad of BRI into Central Asia and beyond."

According to Hali, the results have been remarkable. "This scribe has been visiting Xinjiang for the last four and a half decades and is a witness to the various stages of development", he wrote. "From a sleepy backwater of the 1970s, [provincial capital] Urumqi has become a sprawling metropolis, with high-rise buildings, busy roads, marketplaces and shopping malls. A network for underground metro trains and high-speed railway is reaching the final stages of completion." As to reports that China is suppressing Islam, Hali wrote that

the opposite is true. During his last visit to Xinjiang in June of this year, just before Islam's holy month of Ramadan, "A detailed tour of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute and discussions with Adudulrekep Tumni-az, president of the Institute and deputy director of Xinjiang Islamic Association, was very reassuring." China's constitution guarantees religious freedom, Hali pointed out, "and Islam is no exception.... Since extremists have been distorting the tenets of Islam, quoting verses out of context and leading the faithful astray with their particular brand of religion to fulfil their heinous designs, the Islamic Institute has picked up the cudgel to produce scholars and religious teachers [at a rate of about 1,200 a year], who can become Imams in various mosques, and university professors and teachers, as well as research scholars to guide the faithful and protect them from extremism." The government is also funding new mosques and halal slaughterhouses, and has even sponsored Xinjiang Muslims on their pilgrimage to Mecca.



Xinjiang capital Urumqi. Photo: Wikipedia

'Re-education centres' are exactly that

Re-education centres are indeed part of China's deradicalisation program; but as Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying pointed out in her 26 October regular press conference, China is far from unique in that regard. Asked about a supposed "detention centre" outside Urumqi, she replied: "They are not detention centres but vocational education and training institutions, which aim to eliminate extremism and prevent terrorism at the budding stage. Actually many countries around the world are also trying to do so. ... For instance, the counter-terrorism strategy announced by the British government in June this year stressed the early intervention on the people affected by extremism. In 2016, France announced that it would set up de-extremism centres in its 12 provinces to help its citizens affected by extremism return to normal life. The United States is also trying to re-mould the youngsters affected by extremism with community corrections. The relevant practices in China are no different from those in the UK, France and the USA. They all aim to nip the evil in the bud, cure the 'sickness' and save people, and make utmost efforts to protect people's basic human rights from being harmed by terrorism and extremism."

The main difference is that China's program seems to work. Hali wrote that whilst security remains tight, the government's vigilance "is efficient and more effective because the physical, financial and moral wellbeing of the citizens is being guarded. More opportunities for education, vocational training, employment opportunities and religious freedom are producing healthy students. Young boys and girls especially from the less-developed and impoverished regions are being afforded the opportunity to study in state-of-the-art boarding schools, where they are being provided quality education, mastery over arts, sciences, languages and extracurricular activities at state expense to complete high school and gain admission in inland institutions of higher learning." He concluded: "With such a heavy investment, financially, spiritually and morally, there is no way the detractors of China can lead the faithful astray any longer."

1. Balancing Interests and Values, 17 May 2017 Note to the Secretary. <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000160-6c37-da3c-a371-ec3f13380001>

2. "Uighur 'mass detention' reports fabricated by US, British propagandists", AAS 26 Sept. 2018