

American Foreign Policy Council

CHINA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 1,373,541,278 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 9,596,960 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Han Chinese 91.6%, Zhuang 1.3%, other (includes Hui, Manchu, Uighur, Miao, Yi, Tujia, Tibetan, Mongol, Dong, Buyei, Yao, Bai, Korean, Hani, Li, Kazakh, Dai and other nationalities) 7.1%

Religions: Buddhist 18.2%, Christian 5.1%, Muslim 1.8%, folk religion 21.9%, Hindu < 0.1%, Jewish < 0.1%, other 0.7% (includes Daoist (Taoist)), unaffiliated 52.2%

Government Type: communist state

GDP (official exchange rate): \$11.39 trillion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Prior to 1949, China's Nationalist government recognized Muslims as one of the "five peoples" constituting the Chinese nation—along with Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans and Han. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has maintained this recognition and continued to push Muslims toward integration. China, in the words of one official, "allows the practice of religion, but not at the expense of the state."¹ In all, Beijing recognizes ten separate Muslim nationalities, the largest being Uighurs, Hui and Kazakhs.

The spread of Islam in China, particularly in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region—a sprawling western expanse of inhospitable deserts and mountains—has long been a source of official concern, resulting in numerous laws restricting assembly, as well as religious practices and teaching. These repressive measures have also led to the incarceration and persecution of political activists and vocal nationalists. More subtly, the Chinese state has made efforts to dilute Uighur dominance demographi-

cally through the transplantation of Han Chinese to the province. This policy has resulted in a material shift in the demographics of the region; according to official estimates, Han Chinese, who made up just 6 percent of the overall population of Xinjiang in 1949, comprised 38 percent of the provincial total as of 2014.²

Put succinctly, “to be a practicing Muslim in Xinjiang is to live under an intricate series of laws and regulations intended to control the spread and practice of Islam.”³ Nevertheless, signs suggest that Islam’s popularity within China continues to grow, along with Uighur dissatisfaction with official policies, particularly in Xinjiang. Chinese officials ascribe rising social and political tensions in the province to the growing influence of radical Islam – rather than to repressive state policies. As such, they see radical Islam as an external threat to what would otherwise be a peaceful and happy Chinese religious minority.⁴

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Chinese authorities collectively classify separatism, extremism, and terrorism as the “three forces” that represent a threat to the nation. Chinese authorities divide their struggle against these evils into five phases between 1990 and 2007.⁵ During this period, religious radicalism underwent a significant metamorphosis, culminating in the rise of groups such as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party [TIP], or *al-Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani*, the East Turkestan Islamic Reform Party, the East Turkestan Democratic Reform Party, and the East Turkestan Justice Party.

The Xinjiang Autonomous Region is the epicenter of concerns about Islamic extremism, and the focal point of China’s long-running anti-terror campaign. Xinjiang is China’s largest province, spanning more than 1.6 million square kilometers in the country’s extreme west. Its territory abuts eight foreign nations, five of which—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan—are majority Muslim. According to official Chinese statistics, Muslims make up the barest of majorities (just over 11 million) of Xinjiang’s population of 22 million. Of these, the largest ethnic bloc is the Uighur, who number over 11 million.⁶

Relations between Xinjiang and the Chinese central government have long been fraught, and recent years have seen escalating efforts by Beijing to repress and control residents there. This campaign is complex, since radical Islamism and Uighur separatism are inextricably linked in the minds of many Chinese officials and citizens. Han Chinese—even those with progressive attitudes toward democracy—often cannot see the difference between a politically active Uighur and a separatist.⁷

Uighurs have long lived as *de facto* second class citizens within China, with many denied economic opportunity and political representation over the past five decades—and with little attention paid, at least until recently, to the living standards and economic conditions affecting them. Over time, a comparatively tiny fraction of Uighurs, what experts have defined as “a very small minority within the minority,”⁸ has become politically active through illegal and/or militant groups. The goal of these organizations is, invariably, the promotion of Uighur rights and separatist tendencies in Xinjiang.

In December of 2003, China’s Ministry of Public Security released a list of organizations deemed to pose a threat to the state. The document listed four distinct groups—the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, also known as the Turkestan Islamic Party, or TIP), the East Turkestan Liberation Organization (ETLO), the *World Uighur Congress*, and the East Turkestan Information Center—as well as eleven individuals.⁹ Of these, only ETIM/TIP remains active today.

While there is broad consensus regarding some of these organizations (ETIM, for example, was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. Department of State in September 2002), the status of others remains hotly contested, due largely to suspicions that their blacklisting was driven by political considerations on the part of the Chinese government.¹⁰ Indeed, although U.S. officials concurred with Beijing in the case of ETIM/TIP, they have historically resisted Chinese pressure to designate other Uighur groups as terrorists.¹¹

Until quite recently, China did not have a terrorism problem, at least not as commonly understood in the West. Prior to 2008, low-grade insurgent activity did occur sporadically. Nevertheless, regional law enforcement agencies appeared to have effectively neutralized Islamist radicals. However, over time, the state’s increasingly tight controls on speech, movement, and the practice of Islam engendered widespread frustration and anger among Chinese Muslims. A growing resentment of heavy-handed state intervention in religious life—not the insidious intervention of foreign influences, as Beijing claims—solidified the separatist movement and strengthened its grassroots support. This, in turn, catalyzed large-scale and violent Uighur anti-government riots in 2008-2009, and has perpetuated sporadic instances of violence since. These have included, among other incidents, a March 2014 Uighur attack on a train station in Yunnan province,¹² a January 2015 small-scale riot in Xinjiang,¹³ a July 2015 police raid that resulted in the deaths of three purported Uighur terrorists in Shenyang,¹⁴ and the death of four people at the hands of Uighur assailants in Xinjiang in February 2017.¹⁵

Over time, this unrest has prompted a change in Islamist groups active in Xinjiang—most directly, ETIM/TIP. Thus, while previously only nominally connected to external Islamist networks (such as al-Qaeda), following the 2008-2009 timeframe groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the al-Qaeda linked *Islamic Movement of Uzbeki-*

stan (IMU) began to exert greater influence over ETIM/TIP's ideology and tactics,¹⁶ with the latter reportedly involved in the training of the group's militants.¹⁷ ETIM/TIP ideology promotes Uighur independence and resistance against the suppression of Islam in Xinjiang. For example, one Uighur separatist publication, *Turkistan al-Muslimah* (Muslim Turkistan), regularly links Islam and separatism by claiming that ETIM/TIP is "seeking freedom and independence and to be ruled by God's *Shari'a*."¹⁸

Information regarding ETIM/TIP is tightly controlled by the Chinese government, and as a result little is known about the group's current size, strength and sources of funding. Nevertheless, the organization's increasingly strident Islamist rhetoric in recent years, as well as its surge of attacks against Chinese targets, which have been carried out in spite of deepening state repression, suggest that the organization continues to constitute a real—albeit limited—threat to Chinese security.

Over the past several years, both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have begun targeting China with both threats and online propaganda.¹⁹ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has labeled China an enemy of the Muslim world, as has the leader of the al-Qaeda-affiliated TIP, Abdul Haq.²⁰ The Islamic State, meanwhile, released a propaganda video in early 2017 highlighting Chinese Uighurs living and training to fight in the Islamic State, as well as depictions of the torture Uighurs suffer at the hands of the Chinese government.²¹

Nevertheless, the Islamic State has yet to gain a significant foothold within China, although its ideology has begun to resonate among the country's disaffected Muslims. Official state media has estimated that approximately 300 Chinese Muslims have joined the group's ranks in Iraq and Syria to date.²² Other calculations, however, have put the number significantly lower, at 118.²³ Nevertheless, Chinese Muslims do have a notable presence within the Islamic State's rump *caliphate*. A 2016 study by the New America Foundation, a Washington, DC-based think tank, noted that ISIS fighters from China were overwhelmingly Uighur in ethnicity, and hailed from Xinjiang. Moreover, these fighters tended to be older than the average foreign fighter, and in many cases brought their families with them, suggesting that they intended to stay with the Islamic State for the foreseeable future.²⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As of 2015, the Muslim population of China was estimated to be 1.7 percent of the total, or 23,142,104 people out of a population of 1,332,810,869.²⁵ The largest segments of this population are Uighurs, Hui and Kazakhs, which have been formally recognized by the Chinese state since 1949.

The Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim minority, populate the rugged, oil- and mineral-rich territory of Xinjiang that constitutes one-sixth of China's total land mass. Uighurs are

the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, accounting for approximately half of the region's total population of roughly 21 million.²⁶ Uighurs have practiced Sunni Islam since the 10th century, and the faith has experienced a revival among the community in recent years. As of 2008, Xinjiang was estimated to be home to approximately 24,000 mosques and 29,000 religious leaders.²⁷

Uighurs have had an historically tense relationship with the Han Chinese majority, and thus many support the idea of independence, or at least greater autonomy, for Xinjiang. In fact, Uighur activists often refer to Xinjiang as East Turkistan, as it was called during its former days as an independent republic.

The Uighur community has numerous grievances against the Chinese government: restrictions on their religion, language and culture; official policies that encourage Han emigration to Xinjiang to dilute the strength of the Uighur ethnic identity; and common Han discrimination towards Uighurs. China's authorities reject the validity of these complaints, saying Uighurs should instead be grateful for Xinjiang's rapid economic development and targeted investment from the government over the last decade. Beginning in 2008, these racial and religious tensions fueled Uighur protests against state restrictions on Islam. A simultaneous series of radical Uighur attacks against the authorities and their Han neighbors only precipitated increasingly restrictive countermeasures. Ultimately, this cycle culminated in the mob violence of July 2009.

With no real voice in politics at the national level, the political interests of the Uighur community are largely represented by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). The WUC is the most well known international Uighur political organization. It is an umbrella group of smaller Uighur nationalist organizations formed after the East Turkestan National Congress and the World Uyghur Youth Congress merged in April 2004.²⁸ The WUC claims to "peacefully promote the human rights, religious freedom, and democracy for the Uyghur people in East Turkistan."²⁹ Beijing, on the other hand, asserts that the WUC is a front through which Western nations can clandestinely channel funds and weapons into Xinjiang and undermine the integrity of the Chinese state.³⁰

With a population of over 10 million scattered throughout China, the Hui make up just under half of the country's Muslims.³¹ They are most numerous in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu, Qinghai, Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Xinjiang. Although anthropologists and historians debate their origin, Hui ancestors include Central Asians, Persians, Han Chinese, and Mongols. During the Tang and Yuan Dynasties, people from Central Asia and Persia migrated to China along the Silk Road. Over the centuries, their descendants intermarried with Mongols and Han Chinese, giving rise to the Hui people. Over time, the Hui have lost their proficiency in Arabic and Central Asian languages and adopted Chinese as their native tongue. Today's Hui are best understood as Sinicised Muslims that (unlike other official Muslim groups)

look Han and speak Mandarin or other local dialects. Unlike the Uighurs—whose claim to Xinjiang predates that of the Han—the Hui settled in areas already dominated by ethnic Hans.³² The Hui today enjoy far more religious freedom than they did in the first decades of Communist rule, when all religion was repressed. However, greater religious freedom has also increased mosque attendance among Hui—a tendency that many Han interpret as clannish.

Finally, approximately 1.5 million Kazakh Muslims reside in the north of Xinjiang, on the border with the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan.³³ Unlike the Hui, Kazakhs speak their native language and feel a close connection to clans in neighboring Kazakhstan. In Kazakh society, rituals are generally performed in accordance with Islamic tradition, and include prayers, fasting, observance of the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), and adherence to Islamic burial rites. Similarly, Kazakhs supplement their official legal marriages with traditional ceremonies. Generally speaking, Kazakh Muslims have maintained a better relationship with the Han than have the Uighurs.³⁴

The tight controls on information in China (particularly in Xinjiang), coupled with the severe penalties for either financial or rhetorical support for unrecognized Islamic organizations, make it impossible to determine who donates to Islamist groups, and how much. However, it appears that the Uighur community (rather than the Hui or Kazakhs) is the primary domestic constituency and support base for Islamist movements that call for Xinjiang's independence. *Turkistan al-Muslimah*, for instance, publishes articles on government persecution of Uighurs, but does not mention the plight of Hui or Kazakh Muslims in Xinjiang.³⁵ The magazine publishes only the names of “martyred” Uighurs, and in its first issue, the journal stated its aim as exposing “the real situation of our Muslim nation in East Turkistan, which is living under the occupation of the Communist Chinese.”³⁶ Publications of this ilk do not appear to exist within either the Hui or Kazakh communities.

Xinjiang's economic situation has only exacerbated the potential for extremism among its populace. In 2012, the *People's Daily* reported that the poverty rate was 13.8 percent higher in regions populated by ethnic minorities in comparison with the national average.³⁷ Furthermore, Xinjiang's economy depends on subsidies from Beijing, and in 2014 made up 60 percent of the region's budget.³⁸ Uighurs, meanwhile, feel the economic strain and stresses of the situation in Xinjiang acutely. Farming remains the primary source of income for approximately 80 percent of Uighurs in the poor southern portion of the province.³⁹ Many face discrimination in the job market, both over their ethnic and religious heritage. This discrimination is exacerbated by the linguistic barrier between the Uighurs and the rest of China.⁴⁰ One government program, known as Xinjiang Class, sends thousands of Uighur and Han students from Xinjiang to other parts of China to continue their education and seek job opportunities. Approximately 50 percent of those students, however, are ultimately forced to return to Xinjiang.⁴¹

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The Chinese state maintains an intricate system of control over its Muslim minorities. The regional Commission on Religious and Ethnic Affairs (CREA) closely monitors China's Islamic educational institutions, which span grades one through 12. Its teachers and clergy are thoroughly vetted by the parallel Islamic Association to ensure they do not harbor extremist ideas or tendencies. In practice, this has created a series of state-sponsored and tightly-controlled religious schools for Chinese Muslims.⁴² This has included the underwriting of academic efforts to “reinterpret” Islamic scriptures so that they are more in keeping with Chinese society and values, as well as the promotion of communist ideas and integration among different ethnic groups (namely, the Uighur and the Han, with intermarriage actively encouraged by authorities). It has also advocated bilingual education (both Uighur and Mandarin) for the region's residents.⁴³

The Chinese government has invested heavily in Islamic education. China currently has 10 Islamic institutes nationwide, but the most prominent is the Islamic Institute of Xinjiang in Urumqi. Now some three decades old, the Institute has a capacity of 450 students and turns out between 40 and 80 graduates per year. As of September 2016, it had graduated roughly 750 alumni, all of whom go on to become *imams* themselves, mostly within China.⁴⁴

Funding for the Institute comes from the country's Islamic Association. However, the Institute was originally built thanks to a grant from the World Islamic Union, suggesting at least some economic (and perhaps ideological) involvement from the broader Muslim World. Currently, curriculum at the facility is 30 percent academic and 70 percent religious (including Quranic recitation, the study of the *hadith*, and other subjects). The average course of study lasts five years, and students are nominated to attend the institution by their local communities, with candidacies considered by regional authorities to ensure they are in keeping with the larger ideological bent of religious policy.⁴⁵

This investment is part of a strategy to reduce the exposure of local Muslims to radical ideas and teachings now proliferating throughout the greater Middle East. However, China's Muslims are not hermetically walled off from divergent ideological strains of the religion. Notably, a small minority receives additional religious education abroad at institutions in Libya or Pakistan, or at Egypt's famed Al-Azhar University—a potential “weak link” that could lead to their exposure to the radical ideas now proliferating throughout the greater Middle East.⁴⁶ That said, according to local Chinese officials and administrators in Xinjiang, China has developed long-term relationships with these institutions and they have yet to experience adverse consequences from sending students to these schools.⁴⁷

Limits on religious activity likewise abound. Prior to the 2008-2009 timeframe, propaganda and education controls, coupled with an ample security presence, appeared to suppress Islamist activity within China's Muslim communities. However, as previously discussed, in July of 2009, Xinjiang's capital of Urumqi became the site of several days of violent clashes between the local Uighur and Han communities—a culmination of months of simmering ethnic and communal tensions throughout the region. The initial demonstrations, and armed counter-protests, left more than 150 dead, marking the largest instance of public violence in China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.⁴⁸

The government response to the Urumqi riots was sharp and swift. Among its numerous policies, it suspended all text-messaging and Internet services in Xinjiang between July 2009 and January 2010.⁴⁹ Authorities in Yining “smashed two violence gangs, and arrested more than 70 suspects,” according to Jiao Baohua, secretary of the Yining city CPC committee.⁵⁰ Since then, the Chinese state has implemented a series of new measures designed to prevent further violence. Thousands of armed police, special police, and public security personnel began to patrol the Uighur sections of Urumqi and carry out raids.⁵¹ The government issued new ordinances calling on local businesses and residents to register guests with the authorities⁵² and temporarily restricting travel after dark.⁵³

The state has expanded its propaganda efforts, and increased its control over legal and information services. Propaganda efforts included the implementation of a “political education” campaign to promote “new model citizens with a modern attitude.”⁵⁴ Legal controls included new restrictions on—and warnings to—lawyers,⁵⁵ as well as death sentences for some rioters and harsh prison sentences for others.⁵⁶

Since then, authorities have sought to more rigidly enforce laws and provisions that severely restrict the practice and teaching of Islam. These regulations, which had been on the books for years, are now publicly posted online and on banners throughout Xinjiang.⁵⁷ Examples of policies that limit Islamic activity included half-hour limits on sermons, prohibitions on prayer in public areas and prohibitions on the teaching of the Quran in private. They also include restrictions on worship, with Muslims only permitted to attend mosques in their hometowns, and restrictions on government workers and CPC members from attending mosques.⁵⁸

Two of Islam's five pillars—the sacred fasting month of Ramadan and the *Hajj*—are also restricted. Authorities use propaganda and control of passports to compel Muslims to join government-run *Hajj* tours that deliberately reduce exposure to Islamist teachings.⁵⁹ Local governments in Xinjiang have even expanded their policies to encompass bans against traditional clothing. In 2015, legislators in Urumqi banned women from wearing *burqas* in public. In other cases, men in religious garb with full beards have been banned from riding public buses. The city of Karamay also banned veils, large beards, and several forms of Islamic dress.⁶⁰ The Chinese government

has also applied a variety of other invasive measures to weaken Uighur communities, including explicitly ordering Muslim restaurant and store owners to sell alcohol and cigarettes, and promote them in “eye-catching displays.”⁶¹ The government has also banned fasting during Ramadan,⁶² and indicated that parents or guardians who “encourage or force” their children to be religious should be reported to the police. Though China claims to allow religious freedom, minors are not allowed to participate in religious expression, and there have been crackdowns on covert *madrassas* in the past several years.⁶³

In 2014, a massive contingent of 200,000 Communist Party officials visited 8,000 villages in Xinjiang. Formally, the officials were there to listen to local grievances and improve the relations of local communities with the state. In actuality, however, they worked to establish a vast network of informers designed to keep tabs on villages throughout Xinjiang.⁶⁴ Following the uptick in inter-ethnic violence and terror later in 2014, 3,000 former members of the People’s Liberation Army were deployed to Xinjiang communities. The former soldiers were under thirty years old and were meant to fortify security in the region.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, instances of violence continue to occur. In December 2016, attackers drove a car into a government building and set off explosives, killing one.⁶⁶ In February 2017, three attackers, allegedly Uighurs, killed five people before being shot by police. In response, tens of thousands of police in full riot gear and military vehicles participated in at least four military “parades” as a show of force the same month.⁶⁷ Official Chinese policy continues to endorse combatting these and other instances of unrest with increased shows of force and military personnel, despite claims that tightened government control over religion are to blame over extremism causes.

Today, Xinjiang remains an inhospitable place for Muslims. A vicious cycle of repression and rebellion exists, in which the state’s suppression of Islam broadens the appeal of extremist Islamist ideologies among Uighurs. Furthermore, the implications of radicalization are increasingly international, as the issue affects China’s level of cooperation with its neighbors and South Asian partners. In one instance Beijing was able to pressure Cambodia into deporting a group of asylum-seeking Uighurs back to China. After they returned to China, the Uighurs were placed in a residence outside of Beijing, where they were compelled to disclose the names of all of those that had helped them escape China. Within a week of their deportation, China rewarded Cambodia with a package of new trade deals worth over \$1 billion.⁶⁸

Chinese officials believe that Xinjiang, despite its past history of independence, represents “an integral part of China.”⁶⁹ As such the PRC will not brook any activism that they view as separatist in nature. Indeed, authorities have cracked down harshly on instances of real or perceived dissent, resulting in a massive—and ongoing—security operation in the region. To date, according to Chinese scholars, some 2,000 extremist groups and cells have been dismantled by Chinese security forces.⁷⁰

Against this backdrop, many officials in Xinjiang—and at least some in Beijing—have come to view their country’s official policy of “reform and opening up” as potentially dangerous, insofar as it permits greater expression and political activism. This perception, moreover, is amplified by the growing stature of Xinjiang as an integral part of China’s westward expansion strategy, commonly known as the “One Belt, One Road.”

Since it was first proposed in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the “One Belt, One Road” initiative (OBOR) has become a centerpiece of Chinese foreign policy. A sprawling framework for the development of trade and commercial ties with the countries of Eurasia, it is comprised of two distinct parts: a land-based economic “belt” along the historic Silk Road trading route of antiquity, and a maritime “silk road” connecting China with oceangoing economies of Middle East and South Asia. Official Chinese tallies of the projected economic scope of OBOR are not readily available, but China’s policy banks, primarily the China Export-Import Bank and Silk Road Fund, have indicated they will make up to \$4 trillion in concessionary loans to OBOR countries to support about 900 projects built by Chinese state-run companies.⁷¹

While OBOR will undoubtedly spur vast growth and new international connections for the PRC, it nonetheless represents a double-edged sword for Beijing. While the initiative is designed to expand prosperity, and to make China a key power center in Eurasia, the facilitation of the transit of goods and people along the “road” will bring with it heightened potential for the intrusion of radicalism, and the infiltration of militants into the PRC.

Chinese officials are keenly aware of these risks. Greater interaction with the majority-Muslim states of Central Asia carries with it a potential for increased extremism within China’s own borders—a reality that is likely to spur greater rigidity and repression, particularly toward the Uighur minority, which Beijing sees as particularly susceptible to radicalization. This same rationale drives China’s ongoing efforts to “harmonize” Xinjiang, transforming cities like Urumqi—which, until recently, retained a distinct Central Asian and Islamic character—into facsimiles of other Chinese urban centers.

ENDNOTES

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