

American Foreign Policy Council

CHINA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 1,330,141,295

Area: 9,596,961 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Han Chinese 91.5%, Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uyghur, Tujia, Yi, Mongol, Tibetan, Buyi, Dong, Yao, Korean, and other nationalities 8.5%

Religions: Daoist (Taoist), Buddhist, Christian 3-4%, Muslim 1-2%; officially atheist

Government Type: Communist State

GDP (official exchange rate): \$4.814 trillion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)



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, with the largest being Uighurs, Hui and Kazakhs.

China has a total of 21,667,000 Muslims, representing 1.6 percent of the Chinese population and 1.4 percent of the world's Muslims.² The spread of Islam in China, particularly in the Xin-

jiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang)—a sprawling Western region of inhospitable deserts and mountains—has long been a source of official concern, resulting in numerous laws restricting religious practices and teaching. 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 from the last two years suggest Islam’s popularity continues to grow, along with Muslim dissatisfaction with official policies, particularly in the region of Xinjiang.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Chinese authorities divide their struggle against the “three forces” of separatism, extremism and terrorism into five phases between 1990 and 2007.⁴ During this period, religious radicalism within China underwent a significant metamorphosis:

- 1990-1995: Four terrorist organizations emerged—*East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) [aka al-Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani (Turkistan Islamic Party -TIP)]*, the East Turkestan Islamic Reform Party, the East Turkestan Democratic Reform Party, and the East Turkestan Justice Party - and low grade violence and civil disobedience increased. (Of these, only ETIM/TIP is still active.)
- 1996-1997: Emerging Islamist movements pushed for the politicization of religion to boost recruitment.
- 1997-1999: Islamist expanded their extremist activities and links to foreign actors and began attacks beyond Xinjiang.
- 2000-2002: Terrorist activities were rolled back as regional law enforcement officials cracked down on Islamists.
- 2003-2007: Islamist radicals became more involved in criminal conduct such as weapons and drug smuggling.

The Xinjiang Autonomous Region is the epicenter of these concerns, and the focal point of China’s long-running anti-terror campaign. There, China currently contends with a small but notable challenge from two organizations: ETIM/TIP and the World Uyghur Congress (WUC).

ETIM/TIP

Effectively shut out of official politics for over five decades, “a very small minority within the [Uighur] minority”⁵ have become politically active through illegal Islamist groups established to promote Uighur rights and/or separatism. ETIM/TIP is generally accepted as the most active Uighur separatist organization seeking an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang, yet there remains substantial disagreement regarding the extent and sources of its foreign funding as well as its size, location, and ideological influences.

The evolution of the militant Uighur separatist movement—particularly Islamist-based separatism—began in the 1940s, when *Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan* emerged in Xinjiang to oppose local warlords and later the CPC. After numerous failed uprisings, the movement faded from view for over two decades until reemerging during the relative freedom of the 1980s. In this period, Abdul Hakeen, a founder of *Hizbul Islam Li-Turkistan*, was released and established a series of underground religious schools in Xinjiang to expand the reach of Islam and Uighur nationalist ideologies; among his students was ETIM’s founder, Hasan Mahsum.⁶

In April 1990, after Uighur Islamists in Xinjiang were discovered plotting an uprising, Beijing launched a series of what it called “strike hard” campaigns to suppress the nascent Islamist rebellion. The clampdown, however, did not have its intended effect; while in prison, Uighur separatists arrested in these crackdowns honed and spread their Islamist-separatist ideologies. The result was the development and dissemination of increasingly extreme Islamist ideologies and the expansion of interpersonal networks among Uighur radicals. According to the global intelligence firm Stratfor, during the 1990s ETIM’s efforts to gain support from the Uighur Diaspora in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey failed, forcing them to turn to more radical elements in the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) for support.⁷ Between 1998 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Stratfor reports that ETIM was based in Kabul and “recruiting and training Uighur militants while expanding ties with the emerging *jihadist* movement in the region.”⁸ In a 2009 interview, ETIM’s current leader, Amir Abdul Haq, also claimed to have attended training camps in Afghanistan with his ETIM colleagues in the late 1990s.⁹

For at least a decade, Beijing has stridently declared that ETIM/TIP received substantial funding as well as weapons, transportation, and safe haven for wanted Uighurs, from the Taliban and al-Qaeda.¹⁰ After September 11, 2001, Beijing pressed Washington to name the group a terrorist organization and freeze all of its U.S. assets—something Washington agreed to do in August 2002. Indeed, both U.S. and Chinese intelligence agencies believe that ETIM/TIP has received “training and funding” from the al-Qaeda terror network.¹¹

But there is disagreement within the U.S. government on this score. On June 20, 2008, for instance, in the case of *Parhat v. Gates*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit rejected the government’s evidence of an al-Qaeda-ETIM link, noting that “The grounds for the charges that ETIM was ‘associated’ with al Qaida [sic] and the Taliban, and that it is engaged in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners, were statements in classified documents that do not state (or, in most instances, even describe) the sources or rationales for those statements.”¹² Similarly, in June 2008 Congressional testimony, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Randall G. Schriver explained that “the information provided by the Chinese government about suspected terrorists groups was unreliable, and very likely tied to ulterior political motives.”¹³ He said that U.S. officials resisted Chinese pressure to designate other Uighur groups as terrorists, but agreed in the case of ETIM/TIP.¹⁴

Contemporary ETIM/TIP ideology seeks to weave Uighur political objectives with the oppression of Muslims and the suppression of Islam in Xinjiang. Between 2007 and 2009, ETIM/TIP disseminated numerous online videos, narratives, and messages glorifying the Uighur people’s history and calling for continued struggle against China. Yet there is disagreement regarding the current source of ETIM/TIP’s funding and ideology. Some analysts say that Uighur publications lately have shown a trend toward rhetoric preferred by al-Qaeda and affiliated groups – a sign that “either the Turkistan Islamic Party is trying to associate itself with al-Qaeda and allied Salafi-Jihadi groups or al-Qaeda is aiming to attract ‘Turkistanis’ to their global *jihadi* movement.”¹⁵ Others, however, suggest that al-Qaeda’s ideology has not had as much influence over

the evolution of ETIM/TIP as that of Hizb ut-Tahrir; a nonviolent pan-Islamic Sunni movement whose objective is the creation of “an Islamic society such that all of life’s affairs in society are administered according to the *Shari’ah* [sic] rules.”¹⁶ Yet, as Uighur resentment and frustration with Chinese rule mounted in 2008-09, violent Hizb ut-Tahrir splinter groups appear to have exerted greater influence over ETIM/TIP’s ideology and tactics.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Haq himself has acknowledged that ETIM/TIP was part of the military wing of IMU, which is reported to have trained the group’s militants after U.S and Chinese forces forced them from Afghanistan and Xinjiang, respectively.¹⁸

Whatever the source of its funding and ideological influence, in 2008-9 ETIM/TIP’s growing radicalism was reflected in both its increasingly Islamist rhetoric and an uptick in attacks against Chinese targets. One Uighur separatist publication, *Turkistan al-Muslimah* (Muslim Turkistan), regularly links Islam and separatism by claiming ETIM/TIP is “seeking freedom and independence and to be ruled by God’s *Shari’a*.”¹⁹

World Uyghur Congress

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 2004.²⁰ Participants elect the WUC leadership and General Assembly to serve three-year terms. WUC claims to “peacefully promote the human rights, religious freedom, and democracy for the Uyghur people in East Turkestan.”²¹ By contrast, Beijing believes that Western nations have used the WUC to clandestinely channel funds and weapons into Xinjiang.²²

These fears have been fanned by the leadership of the WUC itself. At the organization’s third General Assembly in Washington, DC on May 21-25, 2009, delegates and observers unanimously reelected Rebiya Kadeer as president.²³ Ms. Kadeer is a controversial figure; she served as a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 1992, and a member of China’s delegation to the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, but after criticizing China’s treatment of Uighurs at the 1997

CPPCC session she was stripped of her party membership and forbidden to travel abroad. In 1999, while on her way to meet a U.S. Congressional delegation, Ms. Kadeer was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison for allegedly “stealing state secrets.”²⁴ The mother of eleven children, she spent six years in a Chinese prison before being released to the United States in 2005. Before her arrest she was also a well-known businesswoman and at one time the seventh wealthiest person in China.²⁵ China’s state-run media has vilified Kadeer,²⁶ and Chinese officials have accused her of “carrying out reactionary propaganda and deceptive agitation” with the help of “the anti-China forces in the West.”²⁷

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

China has a total of 21,667,000 Muslims (about 2-3 million less than Saudi Arabia), representing 1.6 percent of the Chinese population and 1.4 percent of the world’s Muslims.²⁸ 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 CPC expanded this recognition to ten separate Muslim nationalities—with the largest being Uighurs, Hui and Kazakhs—and continues to push Muslims toward integration.

The Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim minority that historically has had tense relations with the Han ethnic group, populates the rugged, mineral-rich territory of Xinjiang. Uighurs are the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, accounting for 46 percent of the region’s total population of roughly 21 million.²⁹ Many Uighurs favor independence or greater autonomy for Xinjiang, which makes up one-sixth of China’s land mass and borders eight Central Asian countries. Uighur activists often refer to Xinjiang as East Turkistan—a one-time-independent republic that existed intermittently since before the Common Era, most recently from 1933 to 1934 and again from 1944 to 1949, before Communist troops took control.³⁰

The Uighurs began adopting Sunni Islam in the 10th century. Although patterns of belief vary, Islam has enjoyed a surge in popularity after the harshest decades of Communist rule. There are now

roughly 24,000 mosques and 29,000 religious leaders in Xinjiang, and Muslim piety is especially strong in Kashgar, Yarkand, and Khotan.³¹ Han Chinese discriminate against Uighurs, who have long complained about officially encouraged Han emigration to Xinjiang and government restrictions on Uighur religion, language and culture. China's authorities largely reject such claims, saying Uighurs should be grateful for Xinjiang's rapid economic development and government targeted investment over the last decade. In 2008-09, these tensions fueled protests against state policies that control the spread the Islam. Beginning in March 2008, a series of Uighur attacks against the authorities and their Han neighbors precipitated a range of increasingly restrictive measures culminating in the mob violence of July 2009.

With a population of about 10 million, the Hui, who make up about half of China's Muslims, are scattered throughout China. They are most numerous in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu, Qinghai, Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Xinjiang. Although anthropologists and historians debate their origin, the Hui people are generally accepted as mixed race. Their ancestors include Central Asians, Persians, Han Chinese, and Mongols. During the Tang and Yuan Dynasty, peoples from Central Asian and Persia migrated to China along the fabled Silk Road. Over centuries they intermarried with Mongols and Han Chinese, giving rise to the Hui people. Over time, the Hui have lost their proficiency in Arabic and/or Central Asian languages and become Chinese speakers. Today's Hui are best understood as sinicised Muslims that (unlike other official Muslim groups) look Han and speak Mandarin and/or local dialects. Unlike the Uighurs—whose claim to Xinjiang predates that of the Han—the Hui moved to settle in areas dominated by ethnic Hans.³²

Hui and Han Chinese generally coexist peacefully, but in October and November 2004 violent clashes broke out in Nanren, Henan. Fierce fighting between the two communities raged for hours and left more than a hundred dead and more than 400 injured.³³ Authorities moved quickly to quell the violence, even deploying paramilitary troops. Yet despite this and other sporadic frictions,

the Hui today enjoy far more religious freedom than they did in the first decades of Communist rule, when all religion was repressed. Yet, more religious freedom has also led to an increase in mosque attendance among Hui—a tendency that makes them appear clan-ish to many Han.³⁴

Approximately one million *Kazakh Muslims* are located in the north of Xinjiang, on the border with Kazakhstan. 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 legal marriages with traditional ceremonies. Generally speaking, Kazakhs have maintained a better relationship with the Han than have the Uighurs.³⁵

The tight controls on information within China, and in Xinjiang in particular, coupled with the severe penalties associated with either financial or rhetorical support for unrecognized Islamic organizations, makes it impossible to determine who gives to Islamist groups and how much. It appears, however, that the Uighur community (rather than the Hui or Kazakhs) is the primary domestic constituency and support base for Islamist movements calling 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.³⁶ The magazine publishes only the names of “martyred” Uighurs and in its first issue the journal stated its aim was exposing “the real situation of our Muslim nation in East Turkistan, which is living under the occupation of the Communist Chinese.”³⁷ Publications of this ilk do not appear to exist within either the Hui or Kazakh communities.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

China maintains an intricate system of control over its Muslim minorities. China's Islamic educational institutions, which span grades 1 through 12, are closely monitored by the region's Commission on Religious and Ethnic Affairs (CREA), and its teachers and

clergy are thoroughly vetted by the parallel Islamic Association to ensure they do not harbor extremist ideas or tendencies. As a practical matter, this has meant the creation of a series of state sponsored and tightly-controlled religious schools for Chinese Muslims.³⁸

Despite policies that give Uighurs preferential admission to China's secular universities, there remains a lack of university-level Islamic education. China currently possesses no Islamic universities or upper level curricula in Islamic affairs.³⁹ Those Muslims interested in becoming *imams* or religious leaders, therefore, must travel to established Islamic universities in the Middle East, such as Egypt's al-Azhar University, to complete their theological instruction. These educational institutions, however, have historically served as breeding grounds for Islamic extremism (al-Azhar was the birthplace of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 20th century) thus creating the potential for the radicalization of China's Muslims in the last stage of their theological training.⁴⁰

Foreign funds flowing to Islamic schools—historically a source of radicalization among Muslim communities in other parts of the world—are tightly controlled in China. Foreign funds for education in Muslim communities are channeled through CREA and the official Islamic Association, and the independent construction of mosques and religious schools is strictly prohibited.⁴¹ At the same time, the CPC supplies students' textbooks, thereby controlling the content of what is taught in Muslim educational institutions. Like all students in China, in order to advance Muslims must reproduce answers that reflect history as described within officially approved texts.

Limits on religious activity likewise abound. Until the unrest of 2008-09 (described below), propaganda and education controls coupled with ample security appeared to have sufficiently mitigated Islamist activity within China's Muslim communities. After widespread unrest in Xinjiang began, however, authorities sought to rigidly enforce laws and provisions that severely restrict the practice and teaching of Islam. These regulations, which had been on the books for years, were now publicly posted online and on ban-

ners throughout Xinjiang.⁴² Examples of policies that limit Islamic activity include:

- Half-hour limits on sermons
- Prohibition on prayer in public areas
- Prohibitions on the teaching of the Koran in private
- Restrictions on worship, with Muslims only permitted to attend their hometown mosques
- Restrictions on the studying of Arabic to special government schools
- Prohibitions on government workers and CPC members from attending mosque

Two of Islam's five pillars—the sacred fasting month of Ramadan and the *Hajj*—are also carefully controlled in China. To reduce exposure to Islamist teachings, authorities use propaganda and control of passports to compel Muslims to join government-run *Hajj* tours rather than travel illegally to Mecca.⁴³ Yet, policies that compel students and government workers to eat during the holy month of Ramadan have faced the most pushback. In 2007, one university in Kashgar forced students to eat during the day by locking its gates and putting glass shards atop the campus walls to prevent them from returning home after dark to break the daily fast.⁴⁴

Similarly, China's Muslims are systematically shut out of national (although not regional) politics. One major reason is that Han Chinese—even those with progressive tendencies toward constitutional democracy—often cannot see the difference between a politically active Uighur and a separatist.⁴⁵

Until quite recently, China did not have a terrorism problem, at least not one as commonly understood in the West. Although low-grade insurgent activity did unquestionably exist, regional law enforcement agencies appeared to have effectively neutralized Islamist radicals until 2008-9. While there was, and remains, no indication that radicals in Xinjiang enjoy widespread popularity in other parts of the country, the state's increasingly tight controls on the practice of Islam and limits on speech and movement have engendered wide-

spread frustration and anger among Muslims, Uighurs in particular. Building resentment of heavy-handed state intervention in religious life—not the insidious intervention of foreign influences, as Beijing claims—has solidified the separatist movement, given it grassroots support, and catalyzed a campaign of Uighur aggression against the state in 2008-9.

Although the details remain unclear, it appears that state repression of Islam was the catalyst for a wave of Uighur unrest including a variety of attacks against the Chinese authorities, military, and the Han citizenry that took place in the spring and summer of 2008. Between May and August 2008, Uighur separatists reportedly attacked police in Wenzhou using an explosive-laden tractor,⁴⁶ bombed a Guangzhou plastic factory,⁴⁷ and coordinated a series of deadly bus bombings in Shanghai and Kunming.⁴⁸ These attacks culminated with two deadly terrorist attacks in early August 2008—the first involving an assault on police officers in Kashgar,⁴⁹ and the second involving a series of 12 homemade pipe bombs that simultaneously hit a public security station, the industrial and commercial administrative office, a local department store, a post and telecommunications office and a hotel in the city of Kuqa.⁵⁰

In response, Chinese authorities launched a series of countermeasures. In August 2008, hundreds of Uighurs were detained and thousands of paramilitary forces were deployed throughout Xinjiang. Police patrolled Kashgar's Uighur neighborhoods, entering houses to check occupants' names against a government list.⁵¹ By the end of that month, approximately 200,000 police had been mobilized to "check and register" the transient Uighur population. Police swept hotel rooms, rental apartments, and remote villages for separatists and set up checkpoints between townships and villages.⁵² These enhanced security efforts reportedly uncovered 12 cells operating in Kashgar, resulting in 66 arrests; five cells in Urumqi, resulting in 82 arrests, and; the destruction of "41 training camps that had been engaged in illegal proselytizing and the training of *jihadists*."⁵³ The crackdown culminated in the reinstatement of the "10-household mutually insured system" in Kashgar and Khotan. Under that policy, if one person is found guilty of anti-state activities, the

10 neighboring families will also be held responsible.⁵⁴

The state's campaign targeting the "three evil forces" also led to greater emphasis on regulations restricting Islam by local governments within Xinjiang.⁵⁵ The strict enforcement of laws designed to inhibit the practice and spread of Islam appears to have significantly eroded public support for the state and galvanized public anger and resentment into a force that extremists can manipulate. In this way, increased security measures have served to confirm Islamist claims about state repression. Indeed, almost 1,300 state security-related arrests were carried out in Xinjiang between January-November 2008, and about one-half of all trials in China related to the crime of endangering state security take place in Xinjiang.⁵⁶

Beijing has long had a policy of encouraging Uighur migration to other parts of China in the hope that economic opportunities and intermarriage will gradually integrate Muslim Uighurs into secular Chinese society. Although the incidents that sparked the large-scale ethnic violence in July 2009 took place thousands of miles away in Shaoguan, Guangdong,⁵⁷ the massive scale of the Uighur response in Urumqi reflected widespread public hostility towards the state's tightened restrictions on Islamic activity. Thousands took to the streets on July 5th in an initially peaceful protest that turned violent against the state and ethnic Hans. The Han responded with their own wave of anti-Uighur violence and when the smoke cleared nearly 200 were dead and at least 1,680 injured, most of them Han.⁵⁸

Soon after state security suppressed the Urumqi riots, authorities in Yining "smashed two violence gangs, and arrested more than 70 suspects," according to Jiao Baohua, secretary of the Yining city CPC committee.⁵⁹ In all, the Chinese state has implemented a series of new measures designed to prevent further violence. These steps entailed:

- *Increased security*, including the deployment of thousands of armed police, special police, and public security personnel to patrol the Uighur sections of Xinjiang's capital city,

Urumqi, and carry out numerous raids;⁶⁰ new city government ordinances calling on all local businesses and residents to register guests with the authorities;⁶¹ new traffic restrictions and a city-wide after dark curfew;⁶² harsh sentences for those involved in the riots;⁶³ and manhunts for suspected Islamists.⁶⁴

- *Expanded propaganda*, including the initiation of “face-to-face interactions to explain the truth and expose the lies and sinister intentions of the hostile forces both at home and abroad, and preach the importance of nationality solidarity and stability”;⁶⁵ the creation of Uighur working groups “to conduct intensive propaganda and educational work and to safeguard social stability”;⁶⁶ and the deployment of some 2,100 more officials and police to communities in Urumqi “to explain government policies and solve disputes.”⁶⁷
- *Improved information and financial controls*, including the suspension of text-messaging and Internet services in Xinjiang between July 2009 and January 2010;⁶⁸ and a region-wide effort by law enforcement agencies throughout 2009 to target the finances and properties of extremists and groups agitating for Uighur independence.⁶⁹
- *Legal controls*, including new restrictions on—and warnings to—lawyers,⁷⁰ as well as death sentences for some rioters and harsh prison sentences for others.⁷¹
- *Investment*: Investment injected from the central government and state-owned enterprises will help Xinjiang “realize fast-paced economic development.” The central government has also paired up Chinese municipalities and provinces with different areas of Xinjiang to provide large amounts of capital, technology and talent. (The term “talent” may be a euphemism for “Han Chinese labor immigration,” a major source of irritation within the Uighur minority.)⁷²
- *A reshuffle of governmental personnel*, including the ouster of Urumqi’s Communist Party Secretary, Li Zhi, and Xinjiang’s regional police chief. Wang Lequan, the hard-line secretary of the CPC Committee of Xinjiang for 15 years and an ally of President Hu Jintao, came under unprecedented pressure but managed to retain his post until April 2010.⁷³ He

was finally transferred to Beijing and replaced with Zhang Chunxian, who as Party chief of Hunan province gained the reputation as a soft-liner.

Today Xinjiang remains a difficult place to practice Islam. A vicious cycle of repression and rebellion now exists whereby the state's suppression of Islam continues to broaden the appeal of extremist Islamist ideologies among Uighurs.

ENDNOTES

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