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From China to Turkey: The Uighurs in a Position of a New Asia's Rising Force in the Global Jihad

Abstract

On New Year's Eve, Istanbul had to witness another major terrorist incident. The gunman who attacked a popular night club in the Turkish Metropole and murdered 39 people and severely injured many more, most likely belonged to the Uighurs, a Muslim community residing in China (1). This became evident for the Turkish authorities, especially after they arrested numerous suspicious Uighurs in the aftermath of the bloody assault. Being a NATO member and a significant partner in the US-led coalition fighting ISIS (particularly in Syria), Turkey is getting increasingly identified by international terrorists who represent the main target in their Global Jihad (2). As such, the experience with terrorist attacks at the Bosporus is nothing new (3). Moreover, this can also be seen in more than 30 violent acts against Turkish state and society during the last year. Plus, the fact that the Islamic State (IS) is claiming

Keywords: Uighurs, China, Turkey, Istanbul Attack, Syria, Terrorism, Global Jihad, Islamic State, al-Qaeda

¹ Shamil, Shams (2017, January 6). Istanbul attack: Why China's Uighurs are joining global jihadist groups. Deutsche Welle. Retrieved from: http://www.dw.com/en/istanbul-attack-why-chinas-uighurs-are-joining-global-jihadist-groups/a-3703552

² Grierson, Jamie (2017, January 3). Isis claims Istanbul nightclub attack as perpetrator remains at large. The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/02/isis-group-claims-responsibility-for-istanbul-nightclub-attack

³ The New York Times (2017, January 5). Wave of Terror Attacks in Turkey Continue at a Steady Pace. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/turkey-terror-attacks-bombings.html

responsibility for the New Year's onslaught is reckoned.⁴ However, the allegation that the New Year's attack in Istanbul was carried out by Uighurs⁵ is surprising and marks a new phenomenon in international terrorism. Having said this, the 'Uighur assault' during the New Years' celebrations raises several questions. Firstly, why are the Uighurs getting involved in terror attacks outside China and especially in Turkey? Secondly, why is the Islamic State claiming responsibility for the attack and what is the connection between the Uighurs and IS? Thirdly, are Uighur jihadists capable of launching major terror attacks like the one in Istanbul, and do we have to perceive militant Uighurs as a new major force in the global Jihadist movement?

The Uighurs in China: A community between perceived repression and responding militancy

The Uighurs refer to a distinct and mostly Sunni Muslim ethnic community which is residing in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR)⁶ and represent one of the 55 country's recognized ethnic minorities. However, they often feel suppressed by the Chinese central government and view Beijing as a 'colonising power' attempting to undermine their cultural identity, political rights, religion and to exploit ('their') region rich in natural resources. This is gaining significance since the Uighurs identify themselves as original inhabitants of Xinjiang, which they describe as 'East Turkistan.' Similarly, many of the Eastern-Turkic speaking Uighurs (what makes them feel linked to Central Asia even more closely) favour separation from China or at least opt for greater autonomy. It is not surprising

Retrieved from:

⁴ Grierson, Jamie (2017, January 3). Isis claims Istanbul nightclub attack as perpetrator remains at large. The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/02/isis-group-claims-responsibility-for-istanbul-nightclub-attack

⁵ Grierson, Jamie (2017, January 4). Istanbul nightclub gunman identified, says Turkish foreign minister. The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/04/istanbul-nightclub-gunman-identified-says-turkish-foreign-minister

⁶ Radio Free Asia (2010, April 6). Pakistan Uyghurs in Hiding. Retrieved from: http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pakistan-uyghur-04062010143250.html

⁷ Holmes, Oliver (2015, July 9). Thailand forcibly sends nearly 100 Uighur Muslims back to China. The Guardian. Retrieved from:

http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/09/thailand-forcibly-sends-nearly-100-uighur-muslims-back-to-china

⁸ Pantucci, Raffaello and Edward Schwarck (2014), Transition in Afghanistan: Filling the Security Vacuum – The Expansion of Uighur Extremism?, CIDOB Policy Research Project, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

http://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series_de_publicacio/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/transition_in_afghan istan filling the security vacuum the expansion of uighur extremism

that this tension will most likely cause a sharp reaction by Chinese security circles that aim to have Xinjiang under their tight control, both for economic and geostrategic reasons. Furthermore, constituting one-sixth of the China's territory, Xinjiang is perceived as an integral part of the modern Chinese nation state. Hence, the Chinese government have already struck down several separatist intensions in the respective province. This led to an increasing militancy among extremist elements within the Uighur community, which in turn further radicalized. The situation is becoming even more complex due to the fact that the Uighur separatism is not only an ethnic-nationalist movement but has a religious dimension, too. More recently, they have claimed that the Muslims in Xinjiang felt oppressed by the central and regional authorities represented by the dominant Han Chinese majority¹⁰ in terms of practicing their Muslim culture, traditions, and religion. 11 This has laid the foundations for Islamists capitalizing the course for 'East Turkmenistan' for their 'Global Jihad'. By observing an increased intermingling of international Jihadist networks with Uighur militants aiming at the separation of Xinjiang from China, ¹² Beijing has subsequently enforced its regulations even harsher; raised its budget for internal security dedicated to Xinjiang; and intensified activities to fight terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. ¹³ Consequently, tensions between Uighurs and Han Chinese majority were dramatically growing and, among other clashes, violent riots broke out between both groups in July 2009 which resulted in at least 197 fatalities, hundreds of injuries, and extensive damage of buildings and infrastructure in Urumqi, the capital of the XUAR. 14 Another wave of violence happened in 2012. Experiencing a deadly rioting vicious cycle of unrest and retribution, many of the Uighurs fled from China and migrated (legally or illegally) to other countries. Not all of them joint the

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⁹ Pantucci, Raffaello and Edward Schwarck (2014), Transition in Afghanistan: Filling the Security Vacuum – The Expansion of Uighur Extremism?, CIDOB Policy Research Project, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs. Retrieved from:

http://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series_de_publicacio/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/transition_in_afghan istan filling the security vacuum the expansion of uighur extremism

¹⁰ Reuters (2015, January 14). China arrests 10 Turks who may have helped terror suspects: Global Times. Retrieved from: http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/14/us-china-xinjiang-idUSKBN0KN0B220150114

¹¹ Radio Free Asia (2010, April 6). Pakistan Uyghurs in Hiding. Retrieved from: http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pakistan-uyghur-04062010143250.html

¹² Keck, Zachary (2014, October 22). Al-Qaeda Declares War on China, Too. The Diplomat. Retrieved from: http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/al-qaeda-declares-war-on-china-too/

¹³ Radio Free Asia (2016, June 29). Uyghur Attackers Came From 'Religious Family'. Retrieved from: http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/family-06292015153300.html

¹⁴ Numbers are based on official Chinese resources;

Yan Hao, Geng Ruibin and Yuan Ye (2009, July 18). Xinjiang riot hits regional anti-terror nerve. Retrieved from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/18/content 11727782.htm

militant resistance against the Chinese state, but the increasing numbers are alarming not only for Beijing but also for the international community.

The Turkey-Uighur puzzle: From affection to alienation

Apparently, the emergence of such grievances between Turkey and the Uighurs is a new trend these days. Traditional Turkish people and Uighurs share some ethnic features and have not only religious but also cultural bonds. ¹⁵ Therefore, it seemed that there is much interests at the Bosporus for the plight of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Here, religious radicalized and ultranationalist conservative elements among Turkish society (like the neo-fascist organisation Grew Wolves or the rising nationalist civil society organization Turanci Movement Platform/Turanci Hareket Platformu) showed remarkable understanding and sympathies for the resistance of their Islamic fellow believers against the alleged repressive state policies of Beijing (e.g., ban of religious practices like worship and fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan¹⁶). Latter phenomenon founds its expression in a tremendous growth of the anti-Chinese sentiments and protests in Turkey during the recent years, like burning of Chinese flags, organising attacks on Chinese restaurants, harassment of tourists, and the violent agitations against the consulate of the People's Republic of China in Istanbul and the Chinese embassy in Ankara in the Summer of 2015.¹⁷ In this context, it is important to note that these anti-Chinese agitations got not only enforced by radical Islamist press and state media but also instrumentalised by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his search for support from conservative political powers in order to maintain its grip over the country and society, especially in view of the last general elections in 2015.

However, by witnessing 'open sympathies' for Chinese Muslims and some exchange of diplomatic blows between Ankara and Beijing, ¹⁸ many observers got the impression of friendly Turkish-Uighur ties. But in fact, the relationship turned sour for several reasons.

¹⁵ Girit, Selin (2015, July 9). China-Turkey relationship strained over Uighurs. Retrieved from: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-33440998

¹⁶ Aljazeera (2015, June 18). China bans Muslims from fasting Ramadan in Xinjiang. Retrieved from: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/china-bans-ramadan-fasting-muslim-region-150618070016245.html

Aljazeera (2015, July 5). Beijing warns citizens in Turkey of anti-China protests. Retrieved from: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/beijing-warns-citizens-turkey-anti-china-protests-150705172423183.html; Erdemir, Aykan and Merve Tahiroglu (2015, July 30). Turkish Grey Wolves target 'Chinese'. POLITICO. Retrieved from: http://www.politico.eu/article/turkish-grey-wolves-target-chinese/
 Dorsey, James M. (2015, July 15). Anti-Chinese Protests in Turkey: Relations with China Under Test. RSIS

Commentary. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co15153/#.WHPs0_nhDIU

Firstly, the Uighurs had to realize that the anti-Chinese protests were inspired by domestic power political dynamics, rather than by seeking 'revenge' and justice for the Uighurs. In contrast, instead of experiencing substantial support, at least from state authorities and major civil society organizations, the Uighurs had to face indifference towards their own cause. Increasing racism and discrimination against Asian people including the Turkish Uighurs strengthened the feeling of neglect and led to further alienation of the Uighurs from the Turkish state and its people. Secondly, besides the fact that the 'Uighur issue' got highjacked for political partisan interests by R. T. Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) for the last electoral campaign to win over conservative and right-wing votes, the recent shifts in Ankara's foreign policy seems to determine an important factor too. Against this backdrop, besides Turkey's own intricated and nebulous military involvement in Syria, the latest rapprochement with Russia was not well taken by some Islamist hardliners, identifying Moscow with the genocide in Aleppo, the mass killings of Muslims, and numerous other crimes against humanity. In this context, especially Moscow's increasing involvement in Afghanistan and Central Asian states and the emerging Sino-Russia security cooperation in counter-terrorism in the region, has repercussion for Turkey too. As such, Erdogan's Moscow policy is perceived as anti-Uighur. Thirdly, Turkey's slacking economy is in need for more impetus. In order to address this problem, President Erdogan is pivoting towards Asia in general and China in particular. 19 More concretely, he wants Turkey to become a new partner of the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative, a multi-billion dollar investment project financed by China to improve industrialization, and connectivity between Asia and Europe.²⁰ As such, Uighur militants are identifying Turkey as part of the 'Chinese Orbit'. By fighting China not only within its own borders but also targeting Chinese economic and geopolitical interests abroad, Turkey is increasingly moving in the focus of the Uighur separatists and other anti-Chinese forces.

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¹⁹ Singh, Michael (2016, October 24). Is Turkey Pivoting to China? PolicyWatch 2715. The Washington Institute, Washington D.C. Retrieved from: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-turkey-pivoting-to-china

pivoting-to-china ²⁰ Ze, Shi (2015), A look at a new concept and the remarkable practice of China's development through the "One Belt, One Road", Presentation at the International Conference of the Schiller Institute, Paris, France, 13-14 June 2015. Retrieved from: http://newparadigm.schillerinstitute.com/media/pr-shi-ze-regard-sur-le-concept-nouveau-d-une-ceinture-une-route/

The Uighurs and the global Jihadist movement

In the early stages, Islamic State and al-Qaeda did not seem to engage much with the Uighurs and showed only little interest in the situation regarding Chinese Muslims. However, this has changed during the last decades. It is important to note, that the active international terror organizations such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda in particular, declared Jihad against China by condemning Beijing for bad handling of its Uighur minority. Both groups worship the fight against the Chinese as their 'Islamic responsibility' describes them as an 'enemy of all Muslims. This classic Sunni-Jihadist propaganda on the persecution of Muslims was also adapted in the Uighurs' rhetoric. This is evident in various videos and materials, in which Uighurs call for global Jihad and uprisings in China. Obviously, such situation created 'Uighur terrorist inroads,' first into Syria and now into Turkey.

However, due to searching for a shelter in Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban regime, Uighurs got increasingly in contact with the global jihadist movement, especially with al-Qaeda. In addition, Uighur militants got not only trained and equipped, but also ideologically indoctrinated with the notion of 'Global Jihad'. During the last years, this situation turned even more difficult for the Uighurs in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region due to the Chinese pressure on Pakistan. Through various military campaigns organised by Pakistani Army like Zarb-e-Azb, the Uighurs were forced to close their camps in the country and move into Syria.

In Syria, many Uighurs joined the Al-Nusra Front (previous branch of al-Qaeda still supported by its 'mother organisation'), which was allied with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), today also known as Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), one of the major umbrella groups of the Uighur fighters. However, there are also reports that the Uighurs can be found among other Syrian war parties, especially within Islamic State. It seems that

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²¹ Nash, Paul (2014, October 27). Al-Qaeda Joins Islamic State in Setting its Sights on China. Diplomatic Courier.

Retrieved from: http://www.diplomaticourier.com/channels/beijing-telegraph/2397-al-qaeda-joins-islamic-state-in-setting-its-sights-on-china

²² Saud Mehsud and Maria Golovnina (2014, March 14). From his Pakistan hideout, Uighur leader vows revenge on China. Reuters. Retrieved from: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/us-pakistan-uighurs-idUSBREA2D0PF20140314

²³ Pantucci, Raffaello and Edward Schwarck (2014), Transition in Afghanistan: Filling the Security Vacuum – The Expansion of Uighur Extremism?, CIDOB Policy Research Project, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs. Retrieved from:

 $http://www.cidob.org/ca/publicacions/series_de_publicacio/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/transition_in_afghanistan_filling_the_security_vacuum_the_expansion_of_uighur_extremism$

Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front are even competing with each other in recruiting new Uighurs. Moreover, there are also reports that the Uighurs are fighting alongside ISIS in Iraq. At the moment, it seems that many of the Uighur fighters are joining Jihad in Syria or Iraq from economic reasons, rather than because of the ideological notions or traditional links with certain groups like Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda. In this context, it is reported that the Uighur fighters in general are 'popular' among IS recruiters. Being geographically, demographically, and socioeconomically diverse in terms of force composition, IS seems to be attracted to Uighurs very much. In general, many Uighurs are poorer and older, and often accompanied by their families. As such, joining Jihad in Syria or Iraq means a necessary geographical relocation because of their forced migration from China. Subsequently, many Uighurs are not a 'seasoned fighters' (like many Taliban mercenaries in Afghanistan), but only looking for a longterm engagement. Despite the fact that some Uighurs do not have appropriate experience, they are still attractive for IS, since they are known for being less involved in sectarian tensions. Plus, it would weaken the coherence of IS forces. Lastly, due to the situation that the Uighurs cannot turn their backs to China or to other neighboring countries without facing tremendous challenges, they are becoming remarkably dependent on the war parties in Syria.

Final thoughts: The Uighurs as a new international terrorist threat

At this stage, any assessment of militant Uighurs and their organizational structures (ETIM operating particularly outside China) regarding their strength, size, scope and capacities is difficult. A recent Reuters report has placed the figures at around 400 in Pakistan and 250 in Afghanistan.²⁴ The Global Times stated the approximate number of 300 Chinese nationals (meaning the Uighurs) fighting for Islamic State.²⁵ These numbers are not verified and thus many questions appear not only regarding the exact size of the Uighur terrorist network, but also how dangerous it can become.²⁶ However, even if the number of the Uighur militants

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²⁴ Mehsud, Saud and Maria Golovnina (2014, March 14). From his Pakistan hideout, Uighur leader vows revenge on China. Reuters.

Retrieved from: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/us-pakistan-uighurs-idUSBREA2D0PF20140314 Yongzheng, Qiu (2012, December 15). Turkey's ambiguous policies help terrorists join IS jihadist group: analyst. The Global Times.

Retrieved from: http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896765.shtml

²⁶ Ghosh, Palash (2005, December 31). China Prods Pakistan To Crack Down On Uighur Separatist Militants. International Business Time.

Retrieved from: http://www.ibtimes.com/china-prods-pakistan-crack-down-uighur-separatist-militants-701001; Tiezzi, Shannon (2015, January 15). China's Uyghurs and Islamic State. The Diplomat. Retrieved from: http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/chinas-uyghurs-and-islamic-state/

seemed to be relatively marginal and kept a relatively low profile, they would start to constitute an increasing, severe threat. In regard to some new reports, the lack of members and material resources got compensated by logistic, financial and personal support from globally acting Jihadist networks. The Uighurs got not only integrated in their existent international terror structures and actions, but also extended their radius of operations. The Uighur fighters fought alongside al-Qaida and Taliban forces in Afghanistan during the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom and offered support in fighting against NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. Moreover, the Uighurs also gained combat experience in Chechnya and were involved in several terrorist activities in Kyrgyzstan, for example in plotting the attack on the U.S. Embassy in 2002 or the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2016.²⁷ Having this in mind, the Uighur militants are also alleged to be involved in the deadly 2015 bombing of Bangkok's Erawan Shrine, a popular tourist side, especially among Chinese visitors.²⁸

In recent years, from within Afghanistan, they have got massively recruited for the war in Syria. Latest surveys are claiming that the number of the Uighur fighters in Syria are running in high hundreds. ²⁹ Other sources are claiming even couple of thousands. ³⁰ These engagements at the 'global battlefields of Jihad' determines a critical juncture for the Uighur militants in regard to the strategy and methods. In order to gain a broader support base for their fight against China, they not only attacked Chinese facilities abroad, but also joined terror groups outside their own region. In this context, they acquired more technical skills and switched to the use of more sophisticated weapons. ³¹ Obviously, the internationally operating Uighur terrorists gained additional strength and efficiency due to the growing numbers of refugees building up vast transnational networks. These networks are gaining importance, especially since they have got deeply entranced into the new, growing terrorist-crime nexus as

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²⁷ Phillips, Tom (2016, August 30). Suicide bomber attacks Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan. The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/bomb-attack-chinese-embassy-kyrgyzstan-bishkek

²⁸ BBC (2015, August 17). Bangkok bomb: Deadly blast rocks Thailand capital. Retrieved from: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33963280

²⁹ Pantucci, Raffaello (2016, September 1). Now China, too, is in Isil's firing line. The Telegraph. Retrieved from: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/01/now-china-too-is-in-isils-firing-line/

³⁰ Ali, Mohanad Hage (2016, March 2). China's proxy war in Syria: Revealing the role of Uighur fighters. Alarabiya. Retrieved from: https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/02/China-s-proxy-war-in-Syria-Revealing-the-role-of-Uighur-fighters-.html

³¹ Initially, their preferred weapons were knifes.

petty criminals and terrorists.³² The latter case is characterised by a phenomenon that appeared in Europe several times (i.e., the attackers from Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin). In view of the high number of fake Turkish passports providing Uighur terrorists the opportunity to travel,³³ it could be seen as an indication for the Uighurs' linkages with criminal networks. Taking everything into account, large community of the Uighur militants, the experiences with how to conduct Jihadist activities from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and from others places, as well as various skills provided by criminal networks or activities, the Uighurs are now able to carry out major terror attacks in Turkey. In consequence, the international community must recognize the plight of the Uighurs not only as a humanitarian and fundamental rights issue, but also as a growing factor in the 'world of Global Jihad'.

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³² See for the increasing significance of the Crime-Terror Nexus in detail: Basra, Rajan, Peter R. Neumann, and Claudia Brunner (2016). Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus. ICSR (The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence), London, UK. Retrieved from:

http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ICSR-Report-Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures-European-Jihadists-and-the-New-Crime-Terror-Nexus.pdf

³³ BBC (2015, January 14). China 'breaks Turkish-Uighur passport plot'. Retrieved from: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30810439

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http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/turkey-terror-attacks-bombings.html

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