# Focus 51 – **Understanding China's policies towards its Muslim communities**

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## Abstract

News of the coronavirus epidemic outbreak in Iran disclosed the presence of hundreds of Chinese seminarians in the religious city of Qom. Reports of the link between the outbreak of the virus and the Chinese seminarians succeed very recent news of China's policies towards its Muslim minority communities. Thus, it stands in this framing as a paradox that the Chinese government stood complacent with the travel of hundreds of its citizens to Iran for the purpose of learning about and practicing Islam. As human rights violations committed in China have been framed as the reflection of an 'anti-Islamic movement' taking place in the country and condemned by international political actors as actions against 'freedom of religion', it may be worth questioning why these two very distinct realities coexist within the same system. Part of the answer lies, perhaps, in the geographical position of the most central region in the discussion of China's violations of the basic rights of Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Tajiks and other Muslim minorities – Xinjiang, China's bridge to South Asia and beyond. This Focus piece is intended as a contribution to the understanding of the Chinese government's policies towards Muslim communities in China - seeking to unpiece the current consensus on China's policies as religiously oriented policies and put forward a more sensible idea of these policies as politically and economically motivated. An idea not in any way new to the context of Asia and applicable from Xinjiang, to Burma, to Delhi to Hanau.

## Keywords

Chinese seminarians, Qom, Iran, BRI, Uighurs, PRC-IRI, Xinjiang, Coronavirus, International response, Islam, South Asia, Bridge to South Asia

## Introduction: The Outbreak in Qom

News of the coronavirus epidemic outbreak in Iran disclosed the presence of hundreds[1] of Chinese seminarians in the religious city of Qom (Khalaji, 2020, March 9). Qom, in north-central Iran, about one hundred and forty-seven kilometres south of Tehran, is home to Shiite seminaries attracting thousands of students internationally. The existence of seven hundred Chinese seminarians in the city in the times that preceded the outbreak was brought to light by Muhammad Hossein Bahreini, President of the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences. In a statement which he later, according to available sources, retracted, Bahreini reported that the number of people infected by the virus in Iran was at least partially attributable to the presence of the Chinese seminarians in Qom, who had travelled from Wuhan (Khansari, 2020, February 26; Radio Farda, 2020, March 25).

Reports of the link between the outbreak of the virus and the Chinese seminarians succeed very recent news of China's policies towards Muslim minority communities in Xinjiang (Sudworth, 2018, October 24). The United Nations has condemned the Chinese government's arrest of millions of Muslims - deprived of a trial (Wang, 2018, October 16). Numerous sources, from documentaries to investigative news reports (BBC, 2019, June 18; Shiel, F. et, al., 2019, November 24), have shown that the arrests of members of Muslim communities of Xinjiang have been made based on factors such as 'viewing a foreign website, taking phone calls from relatives abroad, praying regularly or growing a beard' (Shih, 2018, May 18). Paradoxically, the Chinese government stood complacent with the travel of hundreds of its citizens to Iran for the purpose of religious learning. As human rights violations committed in China have been framed as the reflection of an 'anti-Islamic movement' taking place in the country (Ma, 2019, June 13; Tazamal, 2019, January 21) and been condemned by international political actors as actions against 'freedom of religion' (letter to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019, July 8) it is worth questioning why these two very distinct realities coexist within the same system.

To understand China's conduct and violation of the basic human rights of Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and other minorities in Xinjiang, as a conduct directed towards the persecution of a religion, is to ignore the wider picture of how Xin Jinping's government and its Sinicization policy – *zhongguohua* - have positioned

[1] The amount of Chinese seminarians has not appeared as a constant throughout the articles here cited – this number varies from less than a hand-full to hundreds (as stated in this Focus). In remaining critical of the sources of information available on the subject, and in having considered the history of the travels of Chinese seminarians to Qom throughout the past three decades, this Focus has opted to cite the number originally mentioned by Muhammad Hossein Bahreini, President of the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences before he retracted his statement.

themselves in regards to China's internal dynamics, external relations with other nations, and what can be argued to be the Chinese government's (and its neighbouring states) long-term political and economic objectives. Therefore, this Focus piece is intended as a contribution to the understanding of the Chinese government's policies towards the Muslim communities of China - seeking to unpiece the current consensus on China's policies as religiously oriented and put forward an argument of these policies as politically and economically motivated. International political actors must be critical regarding an understanding of the Chinese government's violations of human rights as the straightforward reflection of a so-called 'Islamophobia' and question the way in which the persecution of minorities in China- and the placement of religion in intra-national conflicts more generally - has been portrayed so far.

## The geography of religion

The Chinese state has concentrated its efforts - in the words of the government's Chief on Counterterrorism - to 'fight religious extremism' (Xinhua News, 2018, October 16) in the subduing of the Chinese Muslim communities of Xinjiang, most famously the Uighurs. Yet it apparently left untouched the community to which the Chinese seminarians in Qom belong to. It is of interest in this regard to look at three factors: firstly, what has been the interaction of the Chinese state and the Uighur and Central Asian communities of Xinjiang over time; second, what are the implications of the geographical concentration of these communities in the Xinjiang province; and third, how to the Chinese Twelvers in Qom fit into China's politics of Islamophobia. Considering these factors, the internment camps appear not as an overnight measure, and not in a haphazardly picked location, but in an escalation of a number of measures taken by the Chinese state throughout the last decades with the aim of securing its western borders.

Xinjiang, a predominantly Turkic-Muslim region, has long been a disputed territory. The region was colonised by the Chinese in 1760 and taken from under the control of the Zunghars (Mongols). Xinjiang was ruled by a coalition between a short-lived Turkic-socialist regime and the Kuomintang until 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over (Newby, 1998, June). It is a vast province representing 'one-sixth of China's total land area, and 5,600 kilometres of international frontiers with India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, three Central Asian states, Russia and Mongolia' (Becquelin, 2004, p. 359). Until 1949 Xinjiang was a 'de facto Soviet protectorate, based in part on support of Uighur anti-Han sentiment' (Garver, J., 2006, p. 130). When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in Xinjiang in 1949 there was, thus, already animosity between the majority of the province's inhabitants and Han people from 'China Proper' (McMillen, 1984). In a showing of the several parties interested in having a foothold in the strategically located region, when the fall of the USSR in 1991 ignited feelings of ethnic nationalism in the communities of Xinjiang, Iranian Islamic Organisations stepped in. They looked to fuel the feeling that 'if Soviet rule

could be overturn in Central Asia, why couldn't 'Xinjiang's Muslims strive for a similar achievement' in liberation from the Chinese regime?' (Garver J., 2006, p. 130).

The repertoire of measures taken by the PRC in the attempt to place Xinjiang and its communities under Beijing's vision on how the region ought to act as part of the Chinese territory is extensive. It included a range of policies, from 'clamping down hard on militant activities' to focussing on 'economic development to provide employment opportunities and improve the socio-economic conditions of Uighurs in order to drive out discontent among the poor' (Iqbal, H., 2016); from promoting the migration of Han people to Xinjiang and sending Uighur children to boarding schools in urban Han areas to the reform of school textbooks (Goodman, 2004; Chen, et al., 2009; Zhao, T. et al., 2020).

Admittedly, whether in the media or academia, less is said about the Kazakhs, Kirgiz and Tajiks of Xinjiang - although members of these groups are also part of the population arrested by the Chinese state (Olmos, 2019, November 29). However, there is evidence that the government did, over time, apply a number of constraints to the gatherings and religious practices of these communities (Saidula, A., 2011; Feuchtwang, 2020; Madsen, 2020).[2] For example, according to the Xinjiang Religious Affairs Administration Regulation (*Xinjiang Zongjiao Shiwu Guanli Tiaoli*) 'only individuals over 18 years of age (…) may receive religious education and attend religious gatherings' and the 'teaching of religion to children of school age without state approval is considered a criminal offence' (Saidula, A., 2011, p. 82). Many of the conditions that may have set the Uighur community, throughout time, as a threat to the Chinese state and the securitization of Xinjiang can be thought to also apply to these communities perceived by China as still maintaining a very close link to Central Asia.[3] The effects of Xinjiang as a 'de facto Soviet protectorate' based on an anti-Han feeling were - either when felt by the Chinese state or by the communities living in Xinjiang - most likely not exclusive to the Uighurs (Saidula, A., 2011).

At this particular point of the analysis, it is of importance to contextualise the practice of religion as a perceived threat to state power, and explain why it is argued here that although the policies of the Chinese state in Xinjiang concentrate

[2] According to the Xinjiang Religious Affairs Administration (*Zongjiao Shiwu Guanli Tiaoli*) 'only individuals over 18 years of age and remunerated by agencies other than the state may receive religious education and attend religious gatherings. Teaching religion to children of school age without state approval is a criminal offence' (Saidula, A., 2011, p. 82).

[3] Despite the fact that these communities, throughout their time in China, have come to differ greatly from communities referenced by the same name in Central Asia – their language, religion and religious practices have come to evolve in their own way.

in limiting people's access to religious education and religious practice sites, they have very little or nothing to do with religion itself. The argument presented here is not in any way new to the context of Asia, and is applicable from Xinjiang, to Burma, to Delhi to Hanau (Devji, 1992 and 2020; Arkoun 1994; Jaffrelot 1992 and 2019). Here, in an adaptation of what are Devji's words for South Asia, Islam in Xinjiang, or rather 'the Muslim separatists' of Xinjiang, 'represent a fundamental anxiety of nationalism itself': of the Chinese nation as something unachieved (Devji, 1992, p. 1).

## A bridge to South Asia - The escalation of the CCP's measures in Xinjiang

In 2016, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping's government, it looked as if the measures taken so far to limit the movement and freedom of the Uighur and Central Asian communities of Xinjiang ceased to suffice. The reason for this, explained by Humera Iqbal (2016): the Belt and Road Initiative, currently the most central economic and political pursuit of the Chinese government, 'mainly targets China's western troubled regions'(p. 16) - thus the political stability and control of the Xinjiang region has never meant more for China. In the current 21st century '(con)fusion' (Robin, 2004) of religious and cultural practices and political dissent, the difference that has been made the most evident between former-East Turkestan and Mainland China – Islam – had to be Sinicized.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 by President Xin Jinping promotes connectivity through investments in transportation, energy and communication between China and the rest of Asia, the Middle East, Africa and, to some extent, Europe. The BRI is a subject in itself, but as regards the topic of this Focus, it is only important to mention that Xinjiang is a strategic region. For example, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), established as part of the BRI,[4] aims to connect Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province with Pakistan's sea ports in the South' (Wolf, S., 2019, p. 59).

The CPEC, one of many efforts by Beijing to open up western China through Xinjiang, means not only a connection towards South Asia, but an economic corridor which will 'also give further economic and strategic deepness to regional cooperation and integration' between China's Xinjiang border and Central Asia. India and China have also held talks regarding the possibility of creating a Joint Working Group 'for deliberating on issues of cooperation' in laying a natural gas pipeline from Xinjiang to India through Ladakh (Bhattacharya, 2004, October 29; Kulkarni, et al., 2019, December). Thus, given all the above, we move to consider why the Chinese Twelvers in Qom appear to have been left untouched despite the

[4] Previously known as the 'One Belt, One Road' project or 'New Silk Road', the BRI is 'a large-scale campaign launched by the Chinese President Xi Jinping's Government so as to promote multidimensional connectivity between Asia and Europe as well as other world regions, particularly the Middle East and Africa.' (Wolf, 2019, p. v)

Chinese state's persecution of Muslims.

## The China-Iran puzzle - possible explanations

If the presence of Chinese seminarians in Qom in late February this year appeared as an unusual sight to outside observers, it would most likely be because the numerous travels of Chinese Twelver Muslims, condoned by the PRC, over the past three decades to Qom, do not appear to be a publicised factor in the People's Republic of China and Islamic Republic of Iran (PRC-IRI) relations – by either side. It could also be that, perhaps, not much attention has been given to the history of Iranian interference in China's political sphere.

As mentioned, the fall of the USSR in 1991 ignited ethnic nationalism in the communities of Xinjiang which Iranian Islamic Organisations took advantage of. During the early 1990s the IRI mission in the PRC recruited Chinese Muslims from all over China (not only Xinjiang) to study in Qom. In Xinjiang, the IRI funded the construction of a number of mosques and madrassas without the permission of the Chinese state (Garver, J., 2006). China, it appears, eventually came to an agreement with Iran over the value of non-interference in Chinese affairs within its territory, and Beijing took upon itself to mediate visits to Xinjiang 'for high-ranking IRI visitors' (Garver, J., 2006, p. 137).

In an analysis of all that's been laid out so far, China seems to have chosen the lesser of two evils: it chose since the 1990s to itself facilitate the travel of Chinese seminarians to Iran rather than be unaware of movements within its territory. It is noteworthy that when the coronavirus epidemic outbreak took place in Qom, the Chinese government official news outlet, Xinhua News, never mentioned the seminarians. Iranian government-affiliated news outlets seemed hesitant to do so, and the mention of the hundreds of Chinese seminarians in Qom eventually vanished from news reports. It is as though - when considering the history of PRC-IRI relations and given that it has been disclosed through the passing of a virus - the reality of the 1990s, in one way or another, maintained itself. It is thus quite likely that arrests made for 'viewing a foreign website, taking phone calls from relatives abroad, praying regularly or growing a beard' (Shih, 2018, May 18), as far as it is currently known, applies to some, but not all, Chinese Muslims.

The China-Iran puzzle - and whether there is something that is not directly perceptible to the outsider regarding this relationship that explains China's seemingly passive attitude towards the travel of its citizens to Iran so as to attend religious seminaries amid its wide-spoken fight against 'Islamic religious extremism' - is not within the ability of this Focus to unveil. China and Iran do hold economic ties, but that is also true of China and a number of Muslim-majority countries, including its Central Asian neighbours. What appears more likely is that

the Chinese Twelvers are not, at least yet, perceived as dissidents to the Chinese state or a threat to the Chinese nation – and so their Islam is allowed.

## Concluding remarks

This Focus has been an effort to advise international political actors to be critical regarding the Chinese government's violations of human rights as the straightforward reflection of a so-called 'Islamophobia'. It also questions the way in which the persecution of minorities in China, and the placement of religion in intra-national conflicts more generally, has been portrayed so far.

Islamophobia has been debated in recent times as present in a number of Asian countries. In Burma, one of many examples, the initial and widely circulated analysis and consensus on the 'Rohingya crisis' as a crisis of the persecution of Muslims has been deemed 'flattening' and inconsiderate 'of socio-political dynamics' - reducing them 'into a simple narrative of state oppression of a despised and vulnerable ethno-religious minority' (Ware, A., 2018, July 6). Yet the flattening narrative likely prevails, discourteous of central economic and political pursuits and of informed decade-long research (Devji, 1992 and 2020; Arkoun 1994; Jaffrelot 1992 and 2019). China's counterterrorism discourse and China's targeting of Muslims comes then, conceivably, from a mimicking of much echoed discourses. Howbeit, it is fundamental to remember: 'anti-Muslim violence emerges from the globalisation of older conflicts' (Devji, 2020, March 27).

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