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## **CAN TUNISIA'S JIHADISTS CAPITALIZE ON COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC CRISIS?**

*James Brandon*

Two militants were killed and at least one member of the Tunisian security forces was injured on February 1 during clashes in Gabes province ([al-Bawaba](#), February 2; [al-Arabiya](#), February 2). The clashes began after three militants armed with assault rifles accosted local shepherds and in an attempt to steal their food. The shepherds then alerted the military who pursued the militants. The incident indicated that the militants were not from the area and were not able to rely on local contacts for support. Unlike many other recent incidents, the latest clashes did not take place in mountainous areas near the Libyan border, but rather in sparsely-populated desert-like areas, located closer to the Libyan border. Previously, in January, the Tunisian authorities said they had arrested nine extremists in Bizerte in northern Tunisia who were recruiting fighters to travel to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria ([Al-Arabiya](#), January 27). The incidents show that Islamist militants in the country remain active, both seeking to operate domestically in guerrilla fashion

in rural areas, and also working to provide manpower to Islamic State abroad.

These events occurred against a backdrop of social unrest elsewhere in the country, primarily over poor economic conditions and the country's chronic lack of jobs and opportunities for young people. Protests resulting from the unrest were concentrated in the country's poorer inland areas and were often led by unemployed graduates focused on provincial cities, and saw protesters seizing some local government buildings and blockading highways. In addition, on January 25, thousands of Tunisian police joined the protests, largely to ask for higher pay, a request partly motivated by the realization that they are now priority targets for Islamist militants ([Al-Arabiya](#), January 25). Although this led to the country declaring an overnight curfew, casualties among both protesters and the security forces were light, primarily resulting from the Tunisian authorities opting to avoid the use of force against protesters out of the fear of escalating the situation and to steer clear of comparisons to Ben Ali, the country's former strongman who was forced out by protests in 2011.

However, while the protests do not constitute a mortal threat to the government and are largely directed against the economic situation than against the country's democratic system of government, they underline that the country's poor economic situation may be exacerbating youth susceptibility to Islamist radicalization. Tunisia Prime Minister Habib Essid, gave a revealing interview in September 2015 for the Council on Foreign Relations in which he said that the country's radicals were generally motivated by either ideology or by money. He said: "Some of them, they think that through jihad they can go to paradise and things like that. [...] but the most important part of them, they're there for economic reasons. They didn't have jobs" and "they couldn't have a normal life"; as a result have turned to jihadist groups who can offer to pay them a regular salary. [1] Given the high levels of unemployment in Tunisia — the World Bank estimates youth unemployment at 37.6 percent and graduate unemployment at 62.3 — much will depend on whether the government is able to take steps to effectively address these problems, and secondly whether the Islamic State and other militant groups will be able to find a way to capitalize on this discontent (*The National*, January 27). So far, youth dissatisfaction in Tunisia has been mainly directed against politicians and political parties, rather than against the country's new democratic system itself. However, this could change if the Islamic State is able to convince Tunisia's youth that democracy has failed them and that terrorist group's promised theocracy holds the solution to Tunisia's problems.

Notes:

[1] "Assessing Tunisia's Opportunities and Challenges: A Conversation with Habib Essid", Council on Foreign Relations. September 30, 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/tunisia/assessing-tunisias-opportunities-challenges/p37055>

## ISLAMIC STATE ARRESTS WORLDWIDE ILLUSTRATE GLOBAL THREAT

*James Brandon*

A fresh wave of arrests of suspected Islamic State militants around the world, as well as the reported disruption of a range of intended plots, indicates the growing global reach of the group. In one of the most significant incidents, six individuals were arrested in the French city of Lyon. French media reported that some of them were believed to be planning attacks against targets in France, although no weapons were found, suggesting that the attack may not have been imminent (RFI, February 2). This followed growing evidence of links between French Islamist radicals and the Islamic State, most notably through the group's online release of a video showing some of the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks with other Islamic State members in either Iraq or Syria prior to the attacks (France24, February 25). Some of the footage reportedly showed the attackers beheading and shooting prisoners. Further underlining the links between domestic militancy in France and groups abroad, a leading French member of Islamic State, Salim Benghalem, was sentenced in absentia by a French court to 15 years in prison (France24, January 7). Benghalem, who is believed to be in Syria, is thought to be a key link between various French radicals, and has been linked to Said and Cherif Kouachi, the brothers who carried out the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, and to Mehdi Nemmouche, who attacked a Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014 (Ibid.).

In other countries, migrant workers have also been arrested, illustrating another (so far) overlooked aspect to the Islamic State threat. In Singapore in January, 27 migrant construction workers from Bangladesh were deported for having links to Islamic State and al-Qaeda (*Straits Times*, January 20). Upon their return to their home country, 14 of the men were charged by Bangladeshi police for their with links to Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a local militant group that has carried out a range of low-level attacks over the last year

([Channel News Asia](#), January 21). Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs had said that they were not planning attacks overseas but in Singapore, raising the possibility that they were planning attacks on their eventual return to Bangladesh. Similarly, on January 28, the United Arab Emirates deported three Indian migrant workers who were believed to have been radicalizing others and planning attacks in India, while working in the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi ([New India Express](#), January 30). Separately, a UAE national on trial in Abu Dhabi recently confessed to fighting for Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, although he denied planning to expand terrorist attacks into the UAE and to declare a branch of the caliphate there ([Gulf News](#), January 31).

Meanwhile, through Western countries, arrests of Islamic State supporters and activists have continued. In Germany, a Syrian citizen who was pursuing his PhD was arrested by the police for allegedly putting a video online in which he explained his support for Islamic State and in which he described the United States as "the figurehead of heresy" and of the country's Arab allies as "worse than pigs" ([DW](#), February 3). The preceding week, in an unrelated development, police in southern Italy arrested a 25-year-old Moroccan man on suspicion of previously attempting to travel to Syria to join Islamic State; he had previously been deported from Turkey ([DPA](#), January 25). In the U.S., police in North Carolina charged a 19-year-old teenager with allegedly attempting to provide material support to Islamic state ([UPI](#), February 2). Further afield, in Rwanda, the police arrested an imam in the capital of Kigali on the suspicion of recruiting for the terrorist group ([Reuters](#), January 30). He was later shot dead "while trying to escape," meaning that the extent of his activities may not be fully known. These - along with a slew of other arrests - strongly illustrate both the growing spread of Islamic State influence and the extensive international cooperation that will be needed to effectively disrupt its activities.

## Growing Evidence of Islamic State in Pakistan

*Farhan Zahid*

After months of denying the Islamic State's presence in Pakistan, the Pakistani government has finally acknowledged that the terrorist network, both as an inspiration and an organized group, is fast luring Pakistani jihadists into its fold. In one such admission, the Provincial Law Minister of Punjab Province officially confirmed the Islamic State presence in Punjab ([Frontier Post](#), December, 29, 2015). Earlier, at the federal level, Pakistan's foreign secretary Azaz Ahmad Chaudhry admitted that Islamic State poses a serious threat to the country ([Dawn](#), February 23, 2015).

The Islamic State considers itself the true heir of al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden and has been able to attract some former al-Qaeda affiliated cells of jihadists from across the globe. Salafist jihadist organizations in Pakistan such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) as well as anti-Shia militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) may find a new inspiration in the Islamic State's nascent rise and could attempt to pledge their loyalty to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This reflects that the Islamic State is taking root in many Muslim-majority countries - Pakistan is no exception. Indeed, in the past few months, the Islamic State has shown a steady growth on the Pakistani jihad scene and perhaps more broadly, as shown by the appearance of pro-Islamic State graffiti on the outskirts of Karachi and Peshawar.

The global terrorist organization's growth in Pakistan partly reflects that its idea of establishing an Islamic caliphate built upon the foundation of Sharia law has much more appeal to radical jihadists than does al-Qaeda's vision, which is more focused on conducting attacks on a worldwide scale rather than creating a state. This is significant, as Pakistan has more than 60 proscribed organizations operating in its territory. Most of these are Islamist terrorist organizations, with many having links with al-Qaeda Core/Central, which is based in Pakistan.

Islamic State, for its part, considers Pakistan as part of its Khurasan Waliyat.

### **The Karachi Cell**

According to Superintendent of Police of the Counter Terrorism Department of Sindh's police force, Omar Khattab, Islamist militants linked to the Islamic State were behind the May 2015 Safoora Goth incident, in which 43 Ismaili Shias were killed; it was one of the most significant sectarian killings in Pakistan in recent years (Dawn, May 14, 2015). The victims were traveling by bus, which was halted by the militants near Safoora Goth, an outskirt of Karachi. The passengers were then killed at close range. The cell responsible was headed by Tahir Minhas (aka Tahir Saeed), a veteran of jihad previously running an al-Qaeda cell in the port city of Karachi. The cell had been part of al-Qaeda's broader network and was founded by Haji Sahab, a brother of Ramzi Yousaf, an early and well-known al-Qaeda member.

Despite their prior affiliation to al-Qaeda, starting in early 2015, Tahir Saeed and other members of the cell began carrying out a large number of attacks in Karachi in a bid to attract and impress Islamic State's leadership (Dunya News, July 1, 2015). Such attacks included the assassination of NGO worker Sabeen Mehmud for speaking in favor of celebrating Valentine's Day, the shooting of U.S. professor Dr. Debra Lobo, a bombing that killed a naval officer, a suicide attack against Brigadier Basit of the Sindh Rangers, grenade attacks on private co-education institutes, and the targeted killing of three workers from the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), a secular political party. Other attacks included the killing of three members of Bohra Shia community, bombings of police in different areas of Karachi, and assorted other killings of police and security personnel.

The police subsequently arrested three women involved in assisting, recruiting and financing these Islamic State-inspired militants in Karachi. The women are wives of Islamic State cell members based in Karachi, and their arrests ultimately revealed a network of 14 women in-

involved in aiding related Islamic State activities (News 247, December 21, 2015).

### **The Sialkot Cell**

Punjab Police's Counter Terrorism Department disrupted an eight-member Islamic State cell in the province's Sialkot district in December 2015. According to the investigators' account, the cell members wanted to "overthrow democracy and introduce *Khilafat* in Pakistan through armed struggle" (Dawn, December 29, 2015). Police also recovered weapons, explosives, computer discs, propaganda material, and laptops. The members of the cell had pledged allegiance to Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. During police interrogations, the cell members revealed that a Pakistani national, Abu Mauvia Salfi, was in charge of Islamic State militants of Pakistani origin in Syria. Abu Akasha, another member of the cell, was reportedly responsible for liaising with militants in Syria. Fellow cell member Waqas alias Rizwan, who hailed from Sialkot District, was earlier killed in Syria while fighting the Syrian forces. All cell members previously belonged to Jamaat ud-Dawa, the political wing of Lashkar-e-Taiba (Nation, December 31, 2015). Moreover, in subsequent raids based on information revealed by the Sialkot cell, a total of 42 Islamist militants linked to Islamic State were arrested across Punjab (Dawn, January 4).

Underscoring the appeal of Islamic State to militants in Punjab, the Punjab police killed Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) Emir Malik Ishaq, his sons and 12 other militants when they attempted to escape police custody near Shahwala in Mazafargarh district in July 2015 (Dawn, July 30, 2015) According to police sources, the LeJ leader had considered joining Islamic State in Pakistan. [1]

### **The Islamabad Cell**

The police of the Islamabad Capital Territory as well as other security agencies have conducted local raids notably arresting Amir Mansoor, the Islamic State's Emir for Islamabad. According to the security services' sources, the emir had reportedly provided the authorities with a

list of people who had received training in Afghanistan under Mullah Muhammad Abdul Rauf, a senior Taliban leader who later pledged allegiance to Islamic State. He also reportedly revealed that the Islamic State is paying Pakistani recruits Rs 35,000-40,000 per month (\$380) for fighting for the group in Syria (Abbtak News, January 2016).

## Conclusion

These developments leave little doubt about Islamic State's growing presence in Pakistan, as the group is clearly finding the country fertile ground for recruitment. However, the government and security establishment now appear willing to acknowledge the group's presence and to take action against it, as the most recent arrests illustrate. The Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the official voice of the Pakistani military, stated that, "in Pakistan, there is zero-tolerance for Daesh [a term used by some of the group's detractors];" their claims put on display the resolve of the Pakistani security establishment to stemming Islamic State's growth (CNBC Pakistan, Nov, 2015). However, despite these efforts, the group appears to inspire Pakistani jihadists and is well-placed to capitalize on Pakistan's diverse landscape of deeply-entrenched extremism.

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Notes:

[1] Discussions with Punjab police officers who requested anonymity.

# The Islamic State's Targeting Strategy in Egypt

*Muhammad Mansour*

The Egyptian government's state of alert, under which dozens of activists were arrested ahead of the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, did not prevent militants from the Islamic State group in Sinai from claiming the lives of several policemen and soldiers across the country's provinces. The violence underlines the Egyptian state's continuing struggle to control Islamic State-related activity in the country, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, where the group's Egyptian branch is based and where it is most active. Recent attacks by Islamic State show two clear trends: attacks on the security services and targeting of tourists and the tourism industry.

## Attacks on the Security Forces

In the Sinai Peninsula, at least five Egyptian army soldiers were killed and 12 were wounded when an armored personnel carrier exploded on the outskirts of the city of Arish, according to security and medical sources (Al-Youm al-Sabae, January 27). Unidentified militants had reportedly planted a roadside explosive charge and remotely detonated it as a military vehicle passed (Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 27).

The following day in the same city, a roadside bomb planted near a school hit another armored personnel vehicle, claiming the lives of three soldiers and wounding five others (Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 28). Later that day, a heavy exchange of fire between soldiers and militants killed four children and wounded seven south of Rafah, near Egypt's eastern border with the Palestinian Gaza Strip. The Rafah hospital said that the children fell victim to the use of heavy weapons; some were buried under rubble when buildings were hit and consequently collapsed (Akhbar Al-Youm, January 28).

In Arish city on November 24, a stronghold of Islamic State militants, Wilayat Sinai - the group's franchise in

Egypt formerly known as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM) - also claimed responsibility for a double suicide attack on a hotel, leaving seven dead, including two judges, as well 14 others wounded, according to Health Ministry spokesperson Khaled Megahedas (*Al-Shorouk*, November 25, 2015). The two assailants had attacked the hotel where judges tasked with supervising parliamentary polls were staying.

Investigations suggested that a booby-trapped car was used to attack the security personnel stationed at the hotel and in the ensuing havoc, a militant sneaked into the hotel and opened fire on passersby until he was shot to death by a policeman (*Al-Arabiya*, November 24, 2015). In a statement circulated by Islamic State-affiliated accounts on social media, the militant group said the operation has been carried out by two suicide attackers in retaliation for what they call "the military's arrest and humiliation of Muslim women in military checkpoints" [1]. On January 6, 2016, the group additionally released footage of the execution of nine people who it accused of being agents of the Egyptian security services, as well as announcing a list of 37 wanted individuals wanted by the Islamic State, including prominent tribal chiefs (*MubashirMisr*, January 6).

Just days ahead of the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution on January 25 in which long time autocrat Hosni Mubarak was overthrown, seven policemen and three civilians were killed during a police raid on a militant hideout in Giza province, west of Cairo (*Al-Ahram al-Masai*, January 22). *Al-Watan* newspaper reported that during the raid, a large explosion occurred when "four Muslim Brotherhood militants" opened fire on policemen who were storming their apartment - which had been used to manufacture explosive charges - when one bullet hit a device and detonated the other 14 (*Al-Watan*, January 22). The resulting cluster explosion was so significant that it led to the collapse of four floors in the building. However, state-owned newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported that Wilayat Sinai claimed credit for the incident in a statement issued the following day and disseminated through its alleged Twitter accounts. The statement said that the 10 Egyptian police personnel

were killed when they entered a "booby-trapped" house (*Al-Ahram*, January 22). However, just one hour after the announcement, another militant group called "Revolutionary Punishment" claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement on Facebook. The reportedly Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group claimed that it had lured police to the apartment, and after storming the building, two of the group's members carried out a suicide bombing which killed a former state security police officer, among others (*Al-Masry Al-Youm*, January 23). It remains unclear whether the incident was a deliberate attempt to 'trap' the policeman or if the explosion was accidental.

### **Attacks on Tourism Sector**

In addition to targeting security forces, Wilayat Sinai has claimed responsibility in recent weeks for several large-scale operations against tourists and tourist locations. Such claims include the taking of credit for the bombing of a Russian passenger aircraft in Sinai on October 31, which killed all 227 people on board (*Al-Hayat*, October 31, 2015). This incident dealt a major blow to the country's already ailing tourism sector. The fatal crash led foreign airlines to suspend their flights to Red Sea resorts following widespread reports that security system at the airports did not meet international standards of safety.

Having largely wiped out the foreign tourist trade in the Sinai Peninsula, militants then turned to Hurghada resort, located further down the Red Sea on the Egyptian mainland. On January 8, 2016, three Europeans were targeted in a Hurghada hotel by two assailants armed with knives. A statement from the Interior Ministry added that the two attackers had been neutralized - one shot dead and another wounded and arrested. Commenting on the accident, Minister of Tourism Hisham Zazou said such attacks were destroying all efforts that the ministry had made to encourage the flow of foreign tourism to the country (*Al-Watan*, January 9). [2]

Further damaging Egypt's tourism industry was the accidental slaying of tourists by the military in mid-Sep-

tember 2015; the military had accidentally killed 12 Mexican tourists and injured ten in the Western Desert. The military mistakenly launched an aerial attack on the group with an airplane and helicopters after suspecting the group, who were traveling off-road in jeeps, were terrorists (Al-Shorouk, September 14, 2015).

As a result of these incidents, 2015 tourism revenues dropped 15 percent and the number of incoming tourists declined by 6 percent, according to Egyptian Ministry of Tourism (Al-Youm Al-Sabae, January 18, 2016). According to the Ministry, 9.3 million tourists visited Egypt last year, while tourism revenues for the year stand at a total of USD 6.1 billion. The impact in 2016 is liable to be even greater.

## Conclusion

Egypt appears to be caught between a rock and a hard place. Terrorism is rising despite intensive counter-insurgency campaigns, while the government simultaneously panics from the seeds of social movements planted by the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011. As a result, the security apparatus is struggling. Instead of having a smart and effective strategy to dismantle the terrorist networks in Sinai, the government instead seems distracted with detaining and imprisoning thousands of activists and independent journalists in Cairo and the Delta. For instance, during the past few years on the anniversary of the 2011 uprisings, the security apparatus arrested at least 150 activists and journalists, according to local media estimates; 23 Journalists were arrested in 2015, which made the Committee to Protect Journalists rank Egypt as the second worst jailer of journalists worldwide following China. These numbers supplement the myriad reports of oppositionists 'disappear[ing]' and being tortured in prison. Moreover, while militant groups in Egypt are evolving, the government insists on its old-style policy, such as excluding and repressing critics.

At the same time, the tourism sector, which had relatively flourished under former president Hosni Mubarak, is significantly declining. The Egyptian economy is flailing, with foreign investment also diminishing as insurgencies

gain ground. There also exists the danger that the government's repressive policies that incite violence, sectarianism and closure of avenues for peaceful dissent will lead some to take the path of radical jihad.

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Notes:

[1] [https://twitter.com/abu\\_muaz7/status/669196978241339392](https://twitter.com/abu_muaz7/status/669196978241339392)

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/MoiEgy/photos/a.181676241876047.36036.181662475210757/1011131968930466/?type=1&theater>

[3] <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2016/01/28/egypt-justice-minister-muslim-brotherhood>

# Uyghur Militants in Syria: The Turkish Connection

Michael Clarke

The Chinese authorities have claimed that since 2013, “hundreds” of Uyghurs have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other jihadist organizations; such claims have been used as justification for new counter-terrorism policies (*Xinhua*, July 29, 2014). Alleged linkages between rising incidents of violence in Xinjiang over recent years and jihadist groups such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda (AQ) have also figured prominently in official statements surrounding China’s first counter-terrorism legislation that was passed unanimously by the National People’s Congress (NPC) on December 27, 2015. Just prior to the NPC’s passing of the legislation, for instance, China’s security czar, Mei Jianming, said that in formulating the new approach, the government explicitly “took the growing influence of Islamic State into consideration after it planned to recruit Muslims from all ethnic groups in China, posing new challenges for the country” (*China Daily*, December 17, 2015).

## Uyghur Connections to Syria

Given these competing claims, what in fact do we know about the extent of Uyghur connections to the war in Syria, and what may be their implications for China? It appears from available evidence that a small but growing number of Uyghurs may be joining jihadist groups in Syria, often by circuitous journey through Central Asia or via people-smuggling networks in Southeast Asia. What remains unclear to date, however, is whether the Turkish government, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is simply tolerating or actively abetting this Uyghur presence.

## “The Martyrs of Eastern Turkestan”: The Uyghurs and Turkey

Turkey has long been a supporter of Uyghur aspirations in Xinjiang, China’s western-most province where most Uyghurs live. It has also historically been a major destination for Uyghurs fleeing Chinese rule. During the great Turkic-Muslim rebellion (1864-1876) in Xinjiang against the Manchus, led by the Koqandi adventurer Yaqub Beg, the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul not only provided Beg’s prospective state in the Xinjiang city of Kashgar with weapons and military advisers, but also bestowed on him the title of *emir*. [1] In the 20th century, Turkey became a haven for Uyghur nationalists fleeing Xinjiang after it was “peacefully liberated” by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949. Prominent among these was Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who became leader of the Uyghur diaspora throughout the Cold War. Alptekin focused on a two-track approach to raise the profile of the Uyghur cause. First, he actively sought to cultivate links to Turkish political and military leaders with pan-Turkist leanings, most notably Suleyman Demirel and Turgut Ozal. Internationally, Alptekin attempted to enlist support for Uyghur nationalist claims through a broad appeal to anti-communist sentiments in the Muslim world, the non-aligned developing world, and Taiwan. These efforts bore little fruit due to Beijing’s limited ties with Turkey, its ideological offensives in the Third World, and its ability to paint Uyghur nationalists as aided and abetted by both “Soviet revisionism” and “reactionary” due to the links with NATO-member, Turkey.

The end of the Cold War and the creation of five independent Central Asian republics raised hopes among Uyghur and Turkic nationalists that this situation could be reversed. Their hopes were also raised by a revival of dormant pan-Turkist themes in political debates in Turkey that, in contrast to its late Ottoman antecedent, was primarily constructed as a “civilizational geopolitics” in which international behavior would supposedly be determined by civilizational attributes. This was also apparent, for instance, in Turkey’s activist diplomacy in the Caucasus and Central Asia where Ankara sought to cre-

ate a leadership role economically and politically for Turkey as opposed to a supra-national union.

The Uyghur diaspora in Turkey thus appeared to have found a conducive environment in which to continue their lobbying efforts. In an episode that underscored this, in 1995, Erdogan - then mayor of Istanbul - named a section of the Sultan Ahmet (Blue Mosque) Park in honor of Alptekin. When officially opening the new section of the park, he declared, "Eastern Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples but also the cradle of Turkic history, civilization and culture. To forget that would lead to the ignorance of our own history, civilization and culture. The martyrs of Eastern Turkestan are our martyrs" (*Eastern Turkestan Information Bulletin*, August 1995).

At the same time, however, Ankara was simultaneously becoming more circumspect about the impact of the Uyghur issue on its emerging relations with Beijing. China exacerbated these concerns by drawing attention to Turkey's problem with its Kurdish population, pointedly noting the contradiction between Ankara's rhetorical support for "self-determination" of "Eastern Turkestan" and its repression of the Kurds. In a symptomatic development, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz issued a directive to his cabinet in February 1999 that Ankara would henceforth recognize Xinjiang as a part of China, and that government ministers should refrain from attending meetings or events promoting "Eastern Turkestan." [2]

In the wake of 9/11, China has made concerted efforts to portray unrest and violence in Xinjiang as aided and abetted by "East Turkestan terrorist forces" based abroad. In its bilateral relations with Turkey since 9/11, Beijing has also repeatedly emphasized the need for both parties to combat the "three evil forces of separatism, terrorism and extremism" and "East Turkestan terrorism" in particular. Some Chinese observers went further than the official statements, suggesting that Turkey's "harboring" of "East Turkestan forces" was analogous to the Taliban's harboring of Osama bin Laden. [3] To dispel such perceptions, Ankara acceded to Beijing's

exhortation and cooperated with China on monitoring the activities of "East Turkestan forces" in Turkey for most of the 2000s although - in contrast to many Central Asian states - it did not extradite Uyghurs to China. Throughout this time, Turkish leaders reaffirmed the position, first stated by Prime Minister Yilmaz, that Xinjiang was a part of China. Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit reiterated this during Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's 2002 state visit, and argued that Xinjiang's Uyghurs in fact constituted a "friendship bridge" between the two countries (*Global Times*, April 30, 2002).

Despite such assurances, much of China's post-9/11 approach to the Uyghur issue in Sino-Turkish relations has been implicitly framed by the perception that Turkey remains "the political and cultural epicenter of pan-Turkism." [4] This was strongly reinforced by Turkey's reaction to the inter-ethnic violence that erupted in Xinjiang's capital of Urumqi in July 2009. The violence, which claimed the lives of a least 200 people, and subsequent mass arrests of Uyghurs prompted Turkey's then-Prime Minister Erdogan to denounce China in terms reminiscent of Alptekin, likening Beijing's treatment of Uyghurs to genocide and demanding China "abandon its policy of assimilation" in the region (*Journal of Turkish Weekly*, July 11, 2009).

Such rhetorical flourishes, while downplayed by Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were consistent with both the view of "civilizational geopolitics" that has come to characterize Turkey's foreign policy under President Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

### **Uyghur Terrorism: From "Af-Pak" to Syria**

Chinese authorities have long claimed that Uyghur separatism has been supported by external sources. During the Cold War, this was directed at exiles such as Alptekin and Moscow-based "socialist revisionists." The 9/11 attacks and the United States-led War on Terror fundamentally changed this narrative. From 2001 onward, incidents of violence in Xinjiang were inevitably linked to "international terrorism" and rarely to Uyghur exiles in Turkey. Beijing's first detailed document cataloguing

terrorist incidents in or connected to Xinjiang was published in January 2002; it claimed that an unknown organization, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and “supported and funded” by Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, had been responsible for many terrorist attacks in Xinjiang (*China.org.cn*, January 2002).

For the rest of the decade, Beijing repeated this charge, attributing violence in the region to the malevolent influence of ETIM and its successor organization, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). While the claim of al-Qaeda’s direct support of ETIM has been widely disputed, it is clear that ETIM and TIP have had a presence along the Af-Pak tribal areas, particularly in the Mir Ali region of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and an evolving relationship with the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). [5]

After 2009, Beijing began to shift some of its focus to the potential links of Uyghur militants with groups beyond the “Af-Pak” region. This, in part, was driven by the denunciation of China’s handling of the Urumqi events by a number of al-Qaeda’s affiliates in the Middle East such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The first public reference to possible Uyghur connections to Syria by a Chinese official, however, came in October 2012, with Chinese Major-General Yin Jinan stating that “East Turkestan organizations are taking advantage of the Syrian civil war to obtain experience and raise the profile of Xinjiang among jihadists from other theaters” (*CNR*, November 1, 2012). *Global Times* also published an interview with Syrian Foreign Minister Imad Moustapha in July 2013 in which he said that at least 30 Uyghurs had travelled from jihadist training camps in Pakistan to Syria via Turkey and that the Syrian government was sharing its intelligence on the Uyghurs with Beijing (*Global Times*, July 1, 2013).

Reports of linkages between Uyghurs and the fighting in Syria increased in 2015. *Al Monitor* columnist, Metin Gurcan, reported last September that an “Ankara intelligence source” estimated “1500 recruits from Central Asia” - including Uyghurs - were already fighting for the

Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (*Al-Monitor*, September 9, 2015). Lebanon-based *Meyadeen TV* aired a report on September 3, 2015 that purported to show not only Uyghur fighters of the TIP engaged in the conquest of the town of Jisr al-Shughur but also the settlement of Uyghur militants and their families in nearby villages (*Memri*, September 3, 2015). Meanwhile U.S. analyst Christina Lin asserted the following month that the TIP had established training camps in Idlib, Syria (*Asia Times*, October 11, 2015). Finally, *Al Masdar News* reported on October 26 that a Uyghur terrorist identified as “Abbas Al-Turkistani” had been killed by the Syrian Army in Northwest Hama (*Al-Masdar*, November 26, 2015).

It is important to note that some of the reports cited above do not accurately distinguish between Uyghur and other Central Asian militants. The *Meyadeen TV* report, for example, uses footage that reportedly shows an Uyghur child soldier, “Abdallah al-Turkistani,” in the service of Islamic State executing two alleged Russian spies. The same footage, however, was taken from an Islamic State propaganda video that was covered widely by international media as an Islamic State-recruited Kazakh child soldier (*RFE/RL*, January 14, 2015).

### **Uyghurs in Syria: Implications for Beijing**

Even with this caveat, it appears that there is a Uyghur presence, albeit of unknown number, in Syria. The broader question - given Turkey’s record of support for Uyghur refugees and Ankara’s current support of anti-Assad forces - is whether the Turkish government has facilitated the presence of Uyghurs in Syria.

Such speculation has gained traction over the past few years due to a number of developments. First, there have been well-documented cases of significant Uyghur trans-migration through South East Asia since 2009, in which Uyghurs detained by authorities in transit countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have been traveling on either forged Turkish passports or have claimed Turkish citizenship (*Asia Times*, October 10, 2014). This issue achieved prominence in the after-

math of the bombing of the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok on August 18, 2015, which some reports speculated was perpetrated by Uyghurs in retaliation for Thailand's earlier deportation of 109 Uyghurs discovered by Thai authorities in a human trafficker-run camp in southern Thailand (*The Diplomat*, July 2015).

Secondly, in January 2015, the Chinese authorities announced they had broken up a human smuggling ring when they arrested 10 Turkish citizens and a number of Uyghurs in Shanghai (*Huanqiu*, January 14, 2015). According to *Global Times*, the ring was orchestrated by an "Uyghur living in Turkey and a Turkish suspect" who "charged 60,000 yuan [\$9,680] per person," as well as procured Turkish passports for their prospective clients (*Global Times*, January 14, 2015).

Third, media reporting from the Middle East asserts that Turkey has supplied fake Turkish passports to Islamic State and other jihadist groups in order to facilitate recruitment of militants (*Today's Zaman*, April 9, 2015). This charge has been echoed in China, with Chinese media reporting on cases of prospective Uyghur recruits being supplied with forged Turkish documents and directed to seek the assistance of Turkish embassies if apprehended in Southeast Asia (*Xinhua*, July 18, 2015)

There are a number of troubling implications flowing from these developments for Beijing. The apparent linkage of Uyghur militants not only to long-standing sanctuaries in the "Af-Pak" frontier region but also to the jihadist "witches brew" of Syria points to an unprecedented trans-nationalization of Uyghur terrorism. While the number of Uyghurs involved would appear to be small, the danger for Beijing is that some may either return to Xinjiang or seek to influence or recruit others.

To date, China has avoided entanglement in the Syrian crisis due to its much-touted foreign policy doctrine of non-interference and a calculation that its core national security interests are not directly compromised. An attack on Chinese nationals or economic interests in the Middle East by Syria-based Uyghurs or a TIP attack in Xinjiang, however, could change this calculus and

prompt some form of Chinese intervention in the Middle East or closer to home in the Af-Pak region. That such a scenario is being countenanced in Beijing is reflected in China's new counter terror legislation of December 27, 2015, which would permit the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police (PAP) to seek approval from the Central Military Commission (CMC) to conduct counterterrorism operations abroad (*Global Times*, December 28, 2015) [6].

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Notes:

[1] *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877*, Hodong Kim (Stanford University Press, 2004).

[2] "Dynamics of Sino-Turkish Relations: a Turkish Perspective," Selcuk Colakoglu, *East Asia*, March 2015, Volume 32, Issue 1, pp 7-23.

[3] "Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations," Yitzhak Shichor, *Policy Studies*, No. 53, East-West Center, 2009.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] See: Zenn, Jacob, "Jihad in China? Marketing the Turkistan Islamic Party," *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, March 17, 2011, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=37662&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37662&no_cache=1).

[6] See: Mattis, Peter, "New Law Reshapes Chinese Counterterrorism Policy and Operations," *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, January 25, 2016, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45016&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=7370bc012534f2a79f7f20db9f82bcae#.VrN70jaMC9Y](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45016&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=7370bc012534f2a79f7f20db9f82bcae#.VrN70jaMC9Y).