

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XVII, ISSUE 10

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BURKINA FASO: RECENT ATTACKS POINT TO SPREAD OF TERRORISM IN BURKINA FASO AND THE REGION

Brian M. Perkins

On May 16, Burkina Faso's Foreign Minister called for the creation of a new counterterrorism coalition in the Sahel amid an escalation of terrorist activity throughout the region and the ongoing deterioration of security in Burkina Faso. The Sahel G5 force—comprised of personnel from Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger—is already present in the region, as are French forces operating under Operation Barkhane. However, despite the presence of these forces, the number of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso has steadily risen and expanded beyond its northern border near the Sahel Reserve.

Among one of the more challenging aspects of the security situation in Burkina Faso is the presence of multiple groups, rather than the threat stemming from a single organization. Ansaroul Islam, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, are among the preeminent groups operating in and around Burkina Faso, but the country also recently

saw the entry of a group of Islamic State West Africa Province fighters in March. Further, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi accepted pledges of allegiance from fighters in Burkina Faso on April 29 during his first video appearance in nearly five years ([Jihadology](#), April 29). The arrival of new IS cells in Burkina Faso has also coincided with an increase in attacks across the country, including those targeting Westerners and local Christians.

The country has witnessed two significant attacks against Christians in recent weeks. The first attack occurred on May 12 when gunmen attacked a Church in Dablo in central Burkina Faso, killing at least six people, and the second took place a day later and targeted a Catholic parade in the Zimtenga area of Kongoussi, killing four people ([Africa News](#), May 12). Meanwhile, two French tourists that were kidnapped in neighboring Benin on May 1 were rescued by French forces during an operation in Burkina Faso that resulted in the death of two French soldiers. During the operation, an American and a South Korean hostage were also recovered. According to French officials, the captors were reportedly en route to Mali with the hostages ([France24](#), May 11).

These recent incidents highlight a number of concerning factors in the escalation of terrorism in Burkina Faso. The escalation of attacks against Christians points to efforts to build upon communal distrust and animus and a shift away from a focus on attacking government and security forces. The attack in Dablo, as well as a recent spike in violence there, points to the trend of terrorism increasingly spreading to central Burkina Faso. The kidnapping of the French tourists in Benin and the captors' movement through Burkina Faso toward Mali are indicative of the coordination among groups across territory as well as the seemingly inevitable westward expansion of terrorist groups to historically peaceful countries such as Benin.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

YEMEN: HOUTHİ DRONE ATTACKS DEMONSTRATE INCREASED TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE

Brian M. Perkins

As tensions between the United States and Iran continue to mount, the Houthi's use of drones and their level of sophistication has become more evident. The Houthis have been using drones since at least mid-2016, but their style of attack as well as their targets have evolved over the course of the war. While the drone platforms themselves have not seemingly changed, their successful use points to a growing knowledge of the technology as well as improvements in their operational capabilities.

The most recent attack occurred on May 14, when a Houthi guided drone struck two oil pumping stations located west of Riyadh and along the country's East-West pipeline, which carries oil from fields in the east to the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea ([al-Arabiya](#), May 14). The attack reportedly forced Saudi Aramco to temporarily cease operations at the stations, which allows the oil to flow through the pipelines. Two other notable attacks were an attack at Abu Dhabi airport that caused minimal damage in July 2018 and the January attack on Yemeni military forces at al-Anad Air Base ([Aden al-Ghad](#), January 10).

What sets the most recent attack apart from others, however, is that the attack on the pipeline would have required the drone to fly upwards of 500 miles to reach its target, passing over Saudi territory undetected. Photographic evidence and on the ground studies have indicated that the Houthis are using a platform that is nearly identical to that of Iran's Ababil T, but renamed by the Houthis as the Qasef-1. The Ababil T variant is a fixed-wing platform that is GPS guided but reportedly does not have the factory range that would have been required to strike the oil stations. [1] As such, this suggests that the Houthis have managed to either make advancements to the drone's engine or have improved their communications systems, allowing them to control the drone for further than would typically be possible. Additionally, the strike would have required careful planning in terms of timing and collecting locational data on their target. All of these factors point to increased technical knowledge and training that would have typically fallen outside of the Houthi capabilities, likely suggesting outside training and advising.

It is still unclear how many drones the Houthis have access to, but the persistence of their use suggests a concerning stockpile, as each attack inherently means the loss of one drone since they are being used as loitering munitions and thus cannot be recovered. While it is unlikely that the attack marks the beginning of an escalation in the frequency of Houthi drone attacks, it does signal a noticeable improvement in capabilities and a shift in targets from military to economic. Foreign companies operating in Saudi Arabia have already started to increase security measures for their personnel operating at oil facilities across the country. Further targeting of this type of infrastructure could have notable implications for Saudi Arabia.

Notes

[1] To access the March 2017, Conflict Armament Research report on "Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen," go to <http://www.conflictarm.com/publications/>

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

TTP's Future Under the Leadership of New Emir Noor Wali Mehsud

Farhan Zahid

Since its establishment in 2007, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has remained a potent threat and the most dangerous Islamist terrorist organization in Pakistan. The TTP has been involved in upwards of 1,400 terrorist attacks in Pakistan's four provinces, tribal areas, and the federal capital of Islamabad over the last 12 years ([GTD](#), START, Accessed on May 17). The TTP under its second emir, Hakeemullah Mehsud, even masterminded a suicide attack against U.S. intelligence officials in Afghanistan that resulted in the death of seven CIA officers at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Chapman in 2009 ([CIA](#), December 31, 2009). The TTP was also implicated in an attempted terrorist attack in 2010 when Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad parked an explosive-laden vehicle at Times Square in New York City.

The TTP's first three emirs were killed by U.S. drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Baithullah and Hakeemullah were killed in these tribal areas in 2009 and 2013, respectively, and Fazalullah died in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan in 2018. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud was selected as emir of TTP in June 2018 following the death of Fazalullah. Noor Wali's selection was a crucial decision made by TTP's central *shura* (council) amid military operations and U.S. drone strikes that significantly damaged the TTP infrastructure over the past five years. The group's recent activity, however, suggests Noor Wali's appointment could help revive the TTP.

An Author, Warrior, and Ideologue

Noor Wali's selection is remarkable in a sense, as he is considered an ideologue among jihadist circles of Pakistan. Moreover, he is an experienced and seasoned fighter having fought alongside the Afghan Taliban against the Northern Alliance forces during the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001), and later against Pakistani security forces after the commencement of operations against the TTP and al-Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan. He has written books on jihadist strategies, history, and sharia laws. His last book, *Inquilab-e-*

Mehsud (2017), maps the history of TTP, its operations, and highlights future jihadist strategies.

Implications

The selection of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud (a.k.a. Abu Mansoor Asim) has heralded a new era for TTP ([Dawn](#), June 23, 2018). Noor Wali Mehsud appears to be an apt choice as he is a Mehsud (of the Zafarkhel subtribe) as well as a veteran and experienced jihadist with at least two decades of experience. Unlike the appointment of Hakeemullah and Fazalullah in 2009 and 2014—which proved controversial and was the cause for internal discord among TTP factions—Noor Wali's selection is hailed by all of the group's factions and there has yet to be reports of infighting.

Noor Wali's appointment appears to have unified the TTP factions under his command, which is essential to resurrecting the group. Recent terrorist attacks perpetrated by TTP in Pakistan are glaring evidence of its increased unity. The new TTP emir has also written about his aim to create a larger platform for all of the jihadist forces fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which he termed *Ittehad-e-Bain ul Mujahdeen*. [1] He considers the failure of jihadist forces in the region is a result of their disunity and factional fighting. He has close ties to al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Chechen Islamist militants (Emirate-e-Kaukav), and Chinese militants under the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement. Unlike Fazalullah, he is from the tribal areas of Pakistan and remained emir of TTP's Halqa-e-Mehsud (Mehsud tribe circle of TTP). He also still maintains a firm support base there and has clout among Islamist militants based in Karachi.

Since his appointment, it has been observed that factional fighting within TTP has nearly ended, and TTP-aligned terrorist entities are now coordinating their efforts. Previously, the TTP factions—including the Sajna group, Omar Khalid Khurasani's Jamaat ul Ahrar, Mukarram Khan's Hizb ul Ahrar, and others—continued fighting one another after the death of Hakeemullah Mehsud. Further, these factions began carrying out their own operations. The fact that there have been no reported cases of infighting among contenders after the selection of a new emir is unusual compared to past appointments.

Though still far from its past ferocity, the TTP appears to be back in action, causing a surge in terrorist attacks over the past year, some of which have resulted in mass casualties. Since its inception, the TTP has been aligned with al-Qaeda and has considered itself a rival of Islamic State in Khurasan province (IS-K). In 2018, the TTP could not keep up with IS-K's pace in perpetrating acts of terrorism, but the group has proven its resilience by launching attacks on both Pakistani cities and tribal areas. In fact, since Noor Wali took charge, the TTP has been involved in some of the largest terrorist attacks in Pakistan ([Pakistan Today](#), December 16, 2018). Most recently, the group conducted a suicide attack on police personnel at a shrine in Lahore on May 8, causing 11 fatalities and scores of injuries ([Dawn](#), May 10).

Conclusion

The revitalized TTP under Noor Wali appears to have grown deadlier than it has been in recent years and could potentially usher in some changes to the current jihadist landscape of Pakistan. The selection of Noor Wali could prove pivotal in resurrecting TTP, and counterterrorism forces need to view the situation seriously. If successful, the plans envisioned in Noor Wali's seminal book could be disastrous for peace and tranquility in the region. Counterterrorism policy makers in Pakistan need to reassess the threats and update their strategies and priorities.

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Notes

[1] For details please see Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-e-Mehsud, South Waziristan: Firangi Raj se Amreeki Samraj Tak* (2017)

Evaluating the Expansion of Global Jihadist Movements in Mozambique

Brian M. Perkins

The jihadist landscape has increasingly pivoted from the Middle East to Africa, with a proliferation of both local and international terrorist organizations to the continent. The past several years has seen the growth and expansion of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the Sahel region and the establishment and expansion of Islamic State (IS) branches spanning most corners of the continent. Longstanding insurgencies tied to hyperlocal economic and political grievances as well as terrorist groups espousing hardline Islamist ideologies have increasingly been brought into the fold of global jihadist groups. As both al-Qaeda and IS continue to court local groups in Africa, it is important to look also to the countries where jihadist groups have not been a prominent feature of the security landscape in the past to evaluate whether these global terror networks have created in-roads and the likelihood of their expansion.

Among those countries is Mozambique, which has not been a priority for international counterterrorism forces or featured prominently in al-Qaeda or IS propaganda. The coastal East African nation has a long history of political violence between its two warring parties—The Mozambican National Resistance (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*—RENAMO) and the Mozambique Liberation Front (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*—FRELIMO)—but had not experienced notable jihadist violence until 2018, when the shadowy group Ansar al-Sunna began wreaking havoc in the country's northeastern Cabo Delgado province. Little is actually known about Ansar al-Sunna due to both a lack of reporting on the ground and a lack of public claims, propaganda, or even stated goals. While this lack of information makes it difficult to forecast the group's trajectory, it is prescient to analyze what is known about the group, IS, and al-Qaeda's strategies in Africa, and the local and regional context in which the insurgency is taking place. Mozambique is demographically unique when compared to the countries in which al-Qaeda and IS have found success or where jihadist violence is more prevalent.

Islam in Mozambique

Unlike many other countries in Africa where jihadist groups are present, Muslims represent the minority in Mozambique, with only around 20 percent of the community practicing Islam while the majority of the population is comprised of those adhering to various forms of Christianity. Islam in Mozambique, however, dates back to at least the 8th century and has transformed over several key periods, most notably with the arrival and occupation of the Portuguese, during Mozambique's fight for independence, and the arrival and spread of Wahhabism.

Islam was particularly prevalent in the north and coastal regions of Mozambique and was intimately tied to regional Swahili tradition and culture, particularly among the Bantu peoples. Those traditions continued on through much of the colonial period as these communities largely remained outside the sphere of Portuguese influence and became a major hub for the trade of ivory, rubber, and slaves. The trade boom saw Islam expand further into the mainland with the migration of people and arrival of more Arab and Persian traders. During this period, the Islamic culture in the area was also closely tied to that of Dar Es Salam, Tanzania. The Portuguese, however, eventually began to view Islam as a challenge and worked to control these predominantly Muslim areas. Meanwhile, outside of the predominantly Muslim sphere in the north, Swiss missionaries, Dutch reformists, and other European groups worked to spread various Christian doctrines, particularly in southern and mainland areas less tied to long-standing Swahili Islamic traditions.

Presently, the majority of Mozambique's Muslim community is located in northern provinces, with upward of 58 percent of Cabo Delgado following Islam ([The Conversation](#), June 2018). Among them are the Mwani people, a group with Bantu lineage that comprises a large percentage of the population in Cabo Delgado and from which the core of Ansar al-Sunna is reportedly drawn ([Quartz Africa](#), June 16, 2018).

A large portion of Mwani people remained in Portuguese camps or fought with them against FRELIMO during the war for independence between 1964 and 1974, which was primarily fought in Cabo Delgado. Conversely, the majority of the largely Christian Makonde people aligned with FRELIMO to fight the Por-

tuguese and have continued to be rewarded by the ruling FRELIMO party through pensions and political concessions. The Mwani were once considered by the Portuguese to be more open and economically savvy, but the perception has shifted and many Makonde and other Mozambicans view the Mwani as backwards or irreverentists for supporting, or at a minimum, living among the Portuguese and eventually supporting the opposition RENAMO party. The Mwani are largely recognized as the original occupants of coastal Cabo Delgado but their current social status and economic standing is not reflective of their past. Portugal's relationship and influence over the coastal regions was far greater than that of the inland areas. As such, the war furthered ethnic tensions between the Mwani and other coastal people and the Makonde and inland tribes. These divisions have been kept alive by the memories of war and the ruling party's policies towards its supporters during the war, many of which migrated toward the coast. Ansar al-Sunna attributed attacks have also demonstrated this division, with Mwani people being spared in many of its attacks.

Islam in Mozambique was historically linked with the mystical sect of Sufism blended with local Swahili culture and then eventually consisting of two primary orders, the Shadhuliyya and the Qadiriyya orders. However, Wahhabism began to emerge in 1960. Haji Ahmad Haji Yussufo, the son of a prominent Qadiriyya figure, is largely credited with helping spread Wahhabism after returning from studying in Mecca. He joined other recent graduates from Saudi and other Gulf schools, most notably Abubacar Ismael 'Mangira', and began to challenge the Islamic tradition in northern Mozambique.

Wahhabism is doctrinally very different from Sufism. The country's traditional Sufi communities quickly became the target and strife between the two mounted. In 1977, FRELIMO began a brief jaunt with Marxism and religious persecution but eventually relented and established the Islamic Council, which was headed by Mangira. Subsequently, a rival organization known as the Islamic Congress was established and included many of the pre-colonial Islamic organizations, including the Sufi orders. This saw tensions build and Wahhabism spread as the Islamic Council tapped Gulf NGOs to provide scholarships for students to study abroad. It is from the Islamic Council's activity and its sub-organizations that Ansar al-Sunna reportedly emerged.

Regional Connections

As previously noted, Muslims in northern Mozambique have long been tied to Swahili traditions in the region, including those in coastal Tanzania. The population of Cabo Delgado, due to its shared border, is particularly linked with Tanzania and Mwani people live on both sides of the border. In fact, Ansar al-Sunna reportedly also refers to itself as Swahili Sunna, suggesting a reference to the Mwani's past as the original people of northern coastal Mozambique ([Quartz Africa](#), June 16, 2018). Its claim to the coastal region, former glory, and current marginalization likely contribute to the group's discontent with oil exploration in the region and the targeting of foreign oil workers in February.

There have also been connections built between Wahhabi adherents during the sect's expansion in the early 2000s. Further, militant and smuggling networks have tied some communities in northern Mozambique to those in both Uganda and Tanzania, the latter being where many members of Ansar al-Sunna received training ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 14, 2018). Tanzanian authorities have noted that they have seen an increase in Tanzanians attempting to cross into northern Mozambique and have also arrested hundreds of individuals accused of setting up terrorist training camps in Mozambique ([East African](#), August 11, 2018).

Similarly, Mozambican security forces have arrested countless Tanzanians, Ugandans, and Congolese. The arrest of Ugandans and Congolese fighters has also raised concerns over alleged links with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which is now suspected of being closely linked with the emergence of Islamic State Central Africa Province. Mozambican media as well as the Ugandan government have alluded to ADF activity in Mozambique, with Ugandan officials claiming the group is sending fighters to train militants in Mozambique ([Club of Mozambique](#), April 2).

IS and al-Qaeda Inroads

Both al-Qaeda and IS are keen on expanding and aligning with jihadist groups across Africa, and while Ansar al-Sunna has not publicly pledged allegiance to either group, pro-IS news wires have circulated images of Mozambican fighters, referring to them as "Soldiers of the Caliphate in Mozambique" and stating that a pledge of allegiance was imminent ([Daily Maverick](#), June 13,

2018). These references, while not indicative of any material ties, do suggest that pro-IS groups have taken notice and it is likely a matter of time before the group attempts to court Ansar al-Sunna. Further, the alleged connection between ADF cells and Ansar al-Sunna raises additional concerns about potential inroads for IS.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda has a storied history in Tanzania and maintains significant recruitment networks there. A recent study has also linked Ansar al-Sunna to the prominent and now deceased Kenyan imam, Aboud Rogo, and his Muslim Youth Center, which had close ties with al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab. However, there is little evidence of any deeper ties to al-Qaeda, and there have not been any official pledges or recent al-Qaeda propaganda referencing Mozambique.

For now, it seems that Ansar al-Sunna is predominantly local with tentative links to both al-Qaeda and IS. Both groups are likely to attempt to court the group as its ranks and profile grow. Regardless of which group, if either, enters Mozambique, the ongoing insurgency and the local dimensions of the conflict need to be carefully monitored and controlled to prevent any further expansion.

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Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Reinvigorating East Turkistan Jihad

Animesh Roul

China is increasingly facing transnational jihadist threats as a result of the long-standing plight of its ethnic Uighur Muslim citizens, who are mostly concentrated in the country's northwestern region of Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region). Amid mounting Western criticism of China's handling of its minorities in Xinjiang, especially over the last couple years, there has been a puzzling lack of outcry from the larger Muslim world. However, ongoing state-sponsored religious restrictions and persecution in China continue to give enough fodder for jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) to raise their virtual jihadist campaigns against China and its interests abroad.

Over the past several decades, China has suffered a number of violent incidents (e.g. riotings, arson, knife attacks, and bombings) perpetrated by suspected Uighur militant separatists. The majority of incidents have targeted the ethnic Han Chinese in Xinjiang and critical infrastructure such as railways. Among the most notable and recent attacks were the October 2013 suicide attack in Tiananmen Square, Beijing; violence in the city of Urumqi (capital of Xinjiang) in May 2014; and attacks in Pishan in Xinjiang in February 2017 ([SCMP \(Hong Kong\)](#), November 1, 2013; [China Daily](#) (Beijing), May 22, 2014; [SCMP \(Hong Kong\)](#), February 15, 2017). China blames the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and its offshoot, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), for anti-Chinese violence in Xinjiang and beyond.

The United Nations—along with several countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Pakistan—have listed the ETIM as a terrorist organization which aims to create an independent 'Uighurstan' or 'East Turkistan' comprised of a geographical area that would include parts of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang region of China ([UNSC](#), April 7, 2011; [State Department](#), September 2002). Most of its members are operating abroad, coopting or aligning with other jihadist groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

(formerly Jabhat al-Nushra) in Syria, and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Central Asia.

Although the full details regarding the emergence of ETIM remain murky, it was founded by Hasan Mahsum (Abu-Muhammad al-Turkestani), a Uighur from Kashgar region, possibly in the late 1990s. The group received a major ideological and financial boost with the announcement of Osama bin Laden's support to wage war against China during its formative years. With the death of Hasan Mahsum in Pakistan in 2003, however, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani took over the reins of ETIM and became a core member of al-Qaeda's executive leadership council in 2005. With his expertise on the Islamic concept of jihad, oratorical skills, and a position within al-Qaeda's rank and file, he became a go-to person for the rival Taliban factions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During this time ETIM virtually ceased to exist as it had previously, and the TIP emerged under Abdul Haq al-Turkistani in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. After a few years, most of the TIP's leadership and cadres shifted to Syria to participate in the civil war there, alongside al-Qaeda's affiliated factions. Though it is difficult to estimate TIP's Uighur fighters in a war zone like Syria, according to some estimates, there were upwards of 3,000 TIP fighters engaged in the Syrian conflict in and around Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs in 2016 ([al-Arabiya](#), December 17, 2018).

Al-Qaeda to the Rescue

In a March 2019 audio message, al-Turkistani urged Muslim clerics for moral support and appealed to use their platforms to speak out about the ongoing abuses faced by Muslims in China's Xinjiang province. A transcript of the TIP message shared through Telegram channels featured pictures of Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, pro-al-Qaeda cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada, and al-Muhaysini among others ([Jihadology](#), March 18). Following his appeal, support from jihadist leaders came pouring out for the Uighur's cause. Influential Jordanian jihadist cleric, Sami al-Uraydi, who is closely associated with al-Qaeda factions in Syria, came out in support of al-Turkistani's appeal. His endorsement was followed by another influential Syria-based jihadist cleric, Abdallah al-Muhaysini, who is closely associated with Syrian jihadist group HTS. Al-Muhaysini has reinvigorated the pro-Uighur solidarity movement and anti-China

operations by launching an online "I Support East Turkistan" campaign.

In early April, al-Qaeda's general command expressed solidarity with Chinese Uighurs through a statement released in *As Sahab*. Pledging support for Uighur's liberation, the general command called on Muslims to stand with the Uighurs and raise awareness in all platforms about the atrocities and plight of Uighur people in Xinjiang. The message also urged for financial support to TIP through charity and donations ([Jihadology](#), April 4). This is not the first time so many al-Qaeda-linked jihadist ideologues came out in support of TIP and the Uighur's cause. Al-Qaeda leadership regularly acknowledges the long-standing contributions and support of ETIM or TIP in al-Qaeda's quest for jihad. Its October 2014 English language magazine *Resurgence* (*As Sahab* Media-Subcontinent) devoted a section describing China's restive Xinjiang region as an occupied Muslim land with 10 factoids about the history of Uighurs and Chinese atrocities against Muslims. In this magazine's October 2014 cover story titled "Besiege Them," al-Qaeda's senior ideologue Adam Yahya Gadahn clearly stated al-Qaeda's long-term ambition that "Palestine and other occupied Muslim lands from Spain to East Turkistan can be recovered and their Muslim populations be able to live in security, honour and dignity in the shade of the Islamic Caliphate." [1]

Al-Zawahiri and al-Muhaysini are both very vocal in their support for Uighurs, and regularly call for anti-China jihad. Muhaysini was part of a similar audio-visual campaign in mid-2015 to garner support for the TIP as its fighters had contributed substantially in Syrian battlefields against the Assad regime. Al-Muhaysini is often seen in propaganda videos inciting Uighur Muslims to raise their children as jihadist fighters who would embrace martyrdom over other worldly things. He also calls on Muslims of the world in several videos to aid the cause of the TIP, recognizing their role in the Syrian civil war. Similarly, Ayman al-Zawahiri has been a constant supporter of TIP and the Uighurs' cause. In a July 2016 address, he urged Uighur Islamists to have patience and to strengthen the ongoing jihad against China. In this address, he directly called upon the TIP cadres to perform jihad against Chinese interests anywhere in the world with the sole purpose to overthrow the atheist regime in China and to liberate Xinjiang from occupation. This message was part of al-Qaeda's "The Islamic

Spring” series titled “Turkistan: Patience and Then Victory”(Jihadology.net, July 2, 2016).

Islamic State’s Tryst with Uighurs

Arguably, al-Qaeda is not the only jihadist group that exploits the situation of Muslims in Xinjiang. IS, which has ideological and operational differences with TIP and al-Qaeda, also called for jihad against communist China in support of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. IS ventured into the region virtually in 2014 when its supreme leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi mentioned the Chinese atrocities against Muslim Uighurs whose rights were being “forcibly seized.” The November 2015 execution of Chinese hostage Fan Jinghui notwithstanding, IS initiated concerted outreach efforts to entice Uighurs in its ranks. However, there is no reliable data to show how many of them have joined IS, but according to few publicly available estimates, around 114 Uighur Muslims have joined IS between mid-2013 and mid-2014 (SCMP, July 21, 2016).

In late February 2017, al-Furat Province of Islamic State (the Euphrates Province, Western Iraq) released a video highlighting the Uighur fighters in its ranks. The video message signaled for the first time, IS’ burgeoning anti-China agenda. In this video, Uighur fighters vowed to return to their homeland and “shed blood like rivers and avenging the oppressed” in attacks against Chinese targets (al-Jazeera, March 1, 2017). This video message was undoubtedly aimed at garnering support and inspiring violence in Xinjiang. However, the most recent IS propaganda called for direct violence against China, and urged jihadists around the world to kill or capture Chinese citizens in order to spread fear and terror among diplomats and embassy staffs around the world. IS’ periodical ‘al-Naba’ devoted a sub-section titled “Stop the Communists’ criminality,” urging jihadists to prepare for a long war with China (al-Naba, No.171, February 28). While pushing Muslim Uighurs to fight the Chinese atrocities, it also advised them to migrate to the nearest Islamic country or to a “less evil” country. [2]

Conclusions

According to an estimate by the United Nations human rights panel in mid-2018, nearly 1 million Uighurs and Muslim minorities were forced into camps for the so-called “de-extremification” in the western Xinjiang autonomous region. [3] Similar estimates by the United

States also mentioned the detention of millions of Uighurs and members of other Muslim minorities that have intensified since April 2017. International rights bodies often criticize Beijing’s heavy-handed tactics—military mobilizations, forced detention, and systematic domination—in the embattled province to root out perceived extremism. Even though China initially considered the Uighur separatist movement as domestic ethnic dissent, the localized unrest eventually snowballed into a larger jihadist movement against China, receiving international jihadist support and attention.

The recent spate of pro-Uighur and anti-Chinese jihadist propaganda is certainly aimed at infusing new life into this longstanding conflict. Attracting new recruits from the disgruntled Uighur population in Xinjiang and beyond (e.g. Central Asia) and funds for waging jihad against China are two immediate goals jihadist groups would be looking to achieve in the near future. While there is a discernible absence of coordination among the existing militant Uighur groups irrespective of their ideological orientations, both al-Qaeda and IS’ renewed efforts to strengthen the ongoing anti-China movement in Xinjiang and elsewhere would bolster attacks against Chinese nationals and interests worldwide.

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Notes

[1] *Resurgence*, As Sahab Media, Subcontinent, October 2014, p.50.

[2] “ISIS Weekly Al-Naba’ Calls On Muslims To Wage Jihad Against The Chinese Government And Target Chinese People, Investments, Interests, And Embassies Everywhere” MEMRI, March 01, 2019, <https://www.memri.org/jttm/isis-weekly-al-naba-calls-muslims->

[wage-jihad-against-chinese-government-and-target-chinese](#)

[3] See UN Panel Report:

<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhslsns7v-Ayg8M3uDZ7rn5ZZMW4pslG8%2fevE%2fZXWBEvc-RTevsX4htmWQRmXdLs%2fC29wCxsvSRzNMUUMc2k-VpwgZMtPy7CP%2bLMBCCgcm%2fXghaV49BfVszv5rt-lelug%2f%2fhhbA%3d%3d>