



UYGHURS OF SYRIA: SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AND INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

UJGURZY W SYRII –
ZNACZENIE DLA KONFLIKTU SYRYJSKIEGO I IMPLIKACJE
MIĘDZYNARODOWE

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— ABSTRACT —

The main objective of the article was to determine whether the Uyghurs were a relevant group in the Syrian conflict, i.e., whether they were numerous, well-organized and determined enough to take the fight to the Syrian army or other non-state actors or cooperate with them. Several levels of analysis were carried out in this article. Firstly, article aimed to show where the Uyghurs in Syria came from. Secondly, the following section assessed their importance to the Syrian conflict, as well as who they worked with and fought against. Thirdly, it analysed whether their military and political involvement could have an impact on the international situation. Last but not least, the fate of Uyghurs, especially those who left for Syria, was discussed. The latter issue is also a question about Syria, its fate and place in the politics of other countries.

Keywords: Uyghurs; Syria; Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP); terrorism; Turkey; China; ISIS

— ABSTRAKT —

Głównym celem artykułu było ustalenie, czy Ujgurzy byli istotną grupą w konflikcie syryjskim, innymi słowy – czy byli na tyle liczni, dobrze zorganizowani i zdeterminowani, by podjąć walkę z wojskami syryjskimi czy innymi aktorami niepaństwowymi lub z nimi współpracować. W artykule przeprowadzono analizę na kilku poziomach. Po pierwsze, artykuł miał na celu ustalenie, z jakich przyczyn Ujgurzy wyemigrowali do Syrii. Po drugie, oceniono ich znaczenie dla konfliktu syryjskiego, a także to, z kim współpracowali i z kim walczyli. Po trzecie, przeanalizowano, czy ich militarne i polityczne zaangażowanie może mieć wpływ na sytuację międzynarodową. Na koniec omówiono losy Ujgurów, zwłaszcza tych, którzy wyjechali do Syrii. To ostatnie zagadnienie stanowi też pytanie o Syrię, jej dalsze losy i miejsce w polityce innych państw.

Słowa kluczowe: Ujgurzy; Syria; TIP; terroryzm; Turcja; Chiny; ISIS

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INTRODUCTION

Uyghurs are Turkic people living primarily in Western China (Xinjiang), but the article is mainly about those who had to leave their homeland for Syria, where they became one of the sides to the conflict. The main objective of the article was to determine whether the Uyghurs were a relevant group in the Syrian conflict, i.e., whether they were numerous, well-organized and determined enough to take the fight to the Syrian army or other non-state actors or cooperate with them. The main research thesis is that the Uyghurs formed their own troops in Syria, whose numbers, combat and organizational prowess accounted for their ability to operate independently, entering into coalition agreements with other actors in the conflict including taking up arms against both Syrian government troops and other opposition actors. Uyghurs have been recruited into a variety of jihadist formations including Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Their presence in Syria may have stemmed from the pursuit of Turkey's own interests as well as those of global Salafi-jihadist organisations (see: Sageman, 2004). The aim was to describe how they functioned in Syria, to understand why they went to Syria, and what impact they may have on the further development of the conflict in Syria, and whether they pose a security threat in China or other regions of the world.

In order to verify the assumptions, a number of auxiliary hypotheses were formulated and verified in the different sections of the article. In the first part of the article, the history of the Uyghurs, especially their contemporary history related to the People's Republic of China, was presented in a very synthetic way. It outlined the main problems of this minority especially in terms of China's anti-terrorist policy, which has the hallmarks of cultural genocide. This topic was not at the core of the publication, therefore a number of sources concerning the issues raised were provided. The second part outlines how the Uyghurs found themselves in Syria, and introduces basic information about their main organization – Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). In addition, the history of Uyghur contacts with the global jihad movement was outlined. It was then verified whether the Uyghur issue is on the agenda of global jihad movement. The situation of the Uyghurs in Syria, their estimated numbers, deployment and main armed formations were presented as well. The relationship of the TIP with other violent non-state actors such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and finally with the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) coalition was shown. The maintenance of relations with the Taliban and the organization's Afghan base was also indicated. The next section takes up the issue of Uyghurs in the Islamic State. Firstly, it is verified

whether the Islamic State addressed the issue of Uyghurs, secondly, whether they were members of this organization and, finally, whether there were any differences between them and those collaborating with other formations of the Islamism branch. In the section on the international dimension of the Uyghur problem, the role of the Uyghur problem in Turkish or US politics is presented, mainly in the context of relations with China. Last but not least, the fate of Uyghurs, especially those who left for Syria, was discussed. This is also a question about Syria, its fate and place in the politics of other countries.

Content analysis was the main research method, but comparative studies and system analysis were also used. Also, historical methods were applied to a small extent. Due to the timeliness of the topic, press materials were often referred to and even social media posts were analysed. The underlying methodological assumption will therefore be securitization theory and the importance of the role of the narrative (Balzacq, 2011; Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

THE UYGHUR PROBLEM: AN OVERVIEW

Uyghurs are Turkic people living primarily in Western China (Xinjiang), but also in Eastern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (East Turkestan). Xinjiang has two geographic lands north and south of the Tianshan Mountains: Junggar Basin and Tarim Basin, respectively (Zdanowski, 2005, pp. 147–148; Kamberi, 2015).

The conquest of Uyghuria ended in 1760, which consisted of the entire so-called East Turkestan, i.e., Dzungaria, Kashgaria, Tarim Basin, and Hami. In 1882, the area was named Xinjiang (Xinjiang), which means “newly conquered territory” (Sobczak, 2011, p. 70). This name has been in use till now, and interestingly, it still seems accurate. The Chinese had huge problems with maintaining the control of this area from the first years of their reign. Islam turned out to be an extremely important factor for maintaining identity. Uyghurs did not reconcile with the fact of the Chinese conquest. In 1931, an uprising broke out, in which not only Uyghurs, but also Kyrgyz or Kazakhs participated. In July 1933, after the capture of Kashgar, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan was proclaimed (Zdanowski, 2005, pp. 148–151). This was met with firm action and the liquidation of the state by the Kuomintang and the Soviet Red Army (Kozłowski, 2011, pp. 79–81). The Islamic Republic of East Turkestan was reborn after 1944 (the so-called Second Republic), the Kuomintang was ousted from

the region, and from 1946, a new state functioned under the protectorate of the USSR. It was headed by Kazakh Osman Batur (Sobczak, 2011, p. 75). In 1949, the republic was incorporated into China with the consent of the USSR. The struggle for independence continued until 1954. Finally, in 1955, Xinjiang changed its name and status (within the People's Republic of China) to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (Olechowski, 2012, p. 310).

The Cultural Revolution initiated in 1966 had a particularly strong negative impact on Uyghur culture and religion. The issue of identity returned to the discourse only in the 1980s (Jaremba, 2019, p. 223; Berlie, 2004, pp. 114–115). According to Robert Borkowski, this renaissance of the identity movement “was the result of the Iranian revolution, as well as the development of Islamic fundamentalism and jihadist Afghan guerrillas in the war with the USSR and the jihadism of Al Qaeda” (2018). However, it is worth noting that this was also due to the population's greater mobility, their education, or the slightly softer policies of the authorities after the Cultural Revolution (see: Adamczyk, 2016, p. 18).

After a series of concerns, the authorities accused Uyghurs and their organizations, such as the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)¹, of preparing terrorist attacks. However, it should be noted that the WUC is a political organisation and China's categorisation of it as a terrorist organisation is purely political. Since 1996, China is carrying out a campaign called “Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism” whose name does not do justice to its essence: it is targeting Uyghurs and other minorities of the Islamic faith, primarily from Xinjiang (Rossabi, 2022, pp. 85–89). The government also targeted Islam because Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders were concerned about so-called “religious extremism”. In 2017, it unveiled a new school curriculum that replaced the Uyghur language with Chinese in many courses of instruction. The leaders justified this change by noting that knowledge of Chinese was essential for Uyghur employment. Economic development has become a pretext for the assimilation of Uyghurs on many levels. In May 2010, the Chinese government announced the establishment of the sixth special economic zone in Kashgar. It was the gateway to Central Asia and Pakistan, crucial to the One Belt One Road project (Chou & Ding, 2015). The government began

¹ Al-Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, the correct translation should be “East Turkestan Islamic Party”, according to one of the party's founders, Abdul Kader Yafuquan, “East Turkestan Islamic Movement” is the name used by the Chinese authorities and it has come into general use (*Shi Jianyu, Person No. 1 of 'East Turkestan'...*, 2015).

to import “specialists” from all over the country, mainly ethnic Chinese (Han), changing the ethnic structure of the region. Additionally, it obtained the pretext to secure trade routes against terrorism.

In March 2017, the autonomous authorities passed an “anti-extremism” law, which banned people from growing long beards and wearing face veils in public places. The use of training centers to “eliminate extremism” was also officially recognized. This was, of course, in response to President Xi Jinping, who warned of the “toxicity of religious extremism” and advocated the use of tools of “dictatorship” to eliminate Islamist extremism (Rossabi, 2022, p. 126). In retrospect, one can see the foundations of present policies of, in fact, cultural genocide emerging from the “People’s War on Terror”, starting especially intensely in 2014. So-called “People’s War” had identified the root cause of the alleged Uyghur “terrorist threat” as emanating from Uyghur culture itself, or at least from dangerous influences that have “infected” that culture (Roberts, 2020a, p. 196).

It is estimated that more than one million people may be in the camps – the total population of Xinjiang is 26 million, of whom more than 8 million are Uyghurs and 1.2 million are Kazakhs; Han Chinese, who are the dominant nationality in the PRC (People’s Republic of China), constitute around 7.5 million. Based on official statistics from 2017, arrests in Xinjiang accounted for almost 21% of total arrests in the country although residents of the region make up only 1.5% of China’s population (Mikulska, 2021; Greer, 2018).

It is difficult to assess how much of the terrorist threat is real and how much is a provocation and narrative by the authorities (Trédaniel & Lee, 2018). In particular, the Uyghur admissions of terrorist affiliations in investigations raise far-reaching doubts about the fairness of the evidentiary and judicial process. However, these admissions have provided a great pretext for the authorities to toughen their course against Uyghurs.

UYGHURS IN SYRIA: GENESIS

The presence of Uyghurs in Syria was not something taken for granted. Before 2011, there were no recorded migrations between China and Syria. The first reports of Uyghur troops in this country were even more surprising.

Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is a Syrian branch of the ETIM. Its mother organization was established in 1940, which was liquidated after the region was annexed to the PRC. It was reactivated in 1989, and the chief initiator of

this process was Ziyauddin Yusuf (Zeydin Yusup). In April 1990, armed clashes took place in the city of Barin between Uyghurs and Chinese services, which resulted in the arrests of several thousand Uyghurs, including the leaders of the organization. Hassan Makhdum (aka Abu-Muhammad al-Turkestani or Ashan Sumut) and Abudukadir Yapuquan (Abdul Kader Yafuquan) took over the leadership (Reed & Raschke, 2010, p. 48). Makhdum sought support in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and the party was reactivated in 1997, but soon it had to move to Afghanistan, where it had enjoyed the hospitality of the Taliban since at least 1998. The party cooperated primarily with Uzbeks from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Al-Qaeda. Makhdum was killed in an anti-terrorist operation by Pakistani forces in 2003, and the party was decimated in Afghanistan and had to leave the country, its primary destination being northern Pakistan, the Middle East (mainly Turkey), and Indonesia (Webber, 2021). As an aside, it should be mentioned that the Uyghurs have been quite a problem for the Pakistani authorities. They enjoyed the hospitality of the tribal leaders, but because of the strategic relationship with China, the authorities could not tolerate their presence (Karmon, 2009; Lim, 2019). This goes against the basic tenets of Islam, which does not allow a Muslim to be delivered into the hands of an infidel (*kuffar*).

TIP AND THE GLOBAL SALAFI-JIHADIST MOVEMENT

The Uyghur issue was taken up by Al-Qaeda after 2008, whose media house Al-Fajr began to create films addressing the Uyghur issue. Abu Yahya al-Libi, one of the main ideologues of Al-Qaeda, took up the issue of the persecution of Muslims in China. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb threatened retaliation against Chinese workers in Algeria (Pantucci, 2018, p. 159). The Uyghur issue was first raised in the Caucasus Emirate Kavkazcenter news body in 2007 (Kavkazcenter, 2007). Since 2014, there has been a noticeable increase in publications on the Uyghur issue. The actions of the Chinese authorities have been called a “war on Islam”, and China has been called an “occupying power”. The emerging information has focused on the persecution of Muslims, whose religiosity has been considered by the authorities as a manifestation of a “mental illness”. Published information on persecution has mentioned that “[p]risoners in Chinese camps are forced to eat pork, drink alcohol, dance with women, there are reports of torture and death” (Kavkazcenter, 2018).

In 2010, the new leader of TIP, Abdul Shakoor al-Turkistani (aka Emeti Yakuf), was invited by Al-Qaeda leaders to Waziristan for talks on future cooperation (Pantucci, 2018, p. 162). Abdul Shakoor was killed in a drone attack in Pakistan on August 24, 2012 (RefWorld, 2012). He was succeeded by Abdullah Mansour, about whom not much information is available. He gave a few interviews in 2014, in one of which he said that “[t]he fight against China is our Islamic responsibility and we must fulfil it” (Mehsud & Golovnina, 2014).

In October 2012, Chinese officials, including Major General Jin Yinan, stated that: “East Turkistan terrorist organizations were joining antigovernment rebels in Syria”. These claims were not corroborated by visual evidence until March and April 2013, when the first footage of Chinese rebels emerged. They appeared in videos of two formations, Chechen and Jabhat al-Nusra. They were single fighters. The first footage or photographs showing whole groups of Uyghurs or ethnic Chinese were branded by the “Hizb al Islami al Turkistani in Bilad al Sham’, taking its old name and adding ‘in the Land of the Levant’, thus creating the acronym TIPL (Turkestan Islamic Party in the Levant)” (Pantucci, 2018, p. 137), or TIP, which originated in 2015. The first formations in which Uyghurs appeared in 2015 were Ansar Jihad and Katibat Turkistani (alternatively referred to as TIP).

ANSAR JIHAD

Ansar Jihad was a militia composed primarily of fighters from Central Asia, which was created under the auspices of Al-Qaeda and the Uzbek formation of the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) – an extremist organization that splintered from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. One of the prominent leaders of Ansar Jihad was Abu Omar al-Turkistani. He was an important figure in the unification of the jihadist movements within the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham project (Jabhat al-Nusra-rebranded organization). His presence in this project and his simultaneous association with TIP and Al-Qaeda may indicate the associations between these organizations, even if officially there were none. He died in an airstrike by US forces in January 2017, in which several senior Al-Qaeda figures were killed, which makes it all the more puzzling in the context of the actual relations of the jihadist formations in Idlib (Weiss, 2017).

KATIBAT TURKISTANI

Katibat Turkistani was the main formation affiliated with TIP. According to its commander, it had already been present in Syria since 2012. In February 2013, TIP published its first video offering “raids” to fighters in Syria and comparing the situation of “oppressed Muslims” in Xinjiang and Syria. A few months later, TIP published its first video purporting to show its fighters in Syria; however, it is difficult to verify whether it featured Uyghurs from Syria (Zenn, 2014). The first promotional material showing TIP fighters appeared in 2015, in which a series of videos and text messages from the organization’s press wing were presented, showing the first Uyghur suicide attack (Caleb, 2015), but they also reported having their training camp in northern Syria (Weiss, 2015a).

The Uyghurs of TIP was a prominent group during the “Battle of Victory”, the recapture of the town of Jisr al-Shughur. They fought in close cooperation with the Chechen Junud al-Sham and the Uzbek Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (Weiss, 2015b). After the town was captured, it became TIP’s primary base; even entire families of fighters settled there. TIP operated in close coordination with the Jabhat al-Nusra leadership. Another important joint offensive was the fighting in the Aleppo region that took place in May 2016 (Joscelyn, 2016).

China has observed the Uyghur problem in Syria. In March 2016, President Xi Jinping established a new office – a special envoy to Syria. This was taken up by Xie Xiaoyan, an experienced diplomat. On August 14–16, 2016, a Chinese military delegation visited Damascus and, in addition to bilateral cooperation, discussed the elimination of TIP fighters. Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, the Director of the Office for International Military Cooperation of China’s Central Military Commission, met Fahad Jassim al-Frej, Syria’s Defense Minister, in Damascus. During the meeting, it was noted that China expressed worries about the terrorists’ influence on religious extremists in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Guan stated that “China consistently supports the position of Damascus on combating international terrorism and considers that Syria should protect its sovereignty and independence” (Botobekov, 2017).

The TIP ideology has begun to evolve. Their stance toward the Chinese authorities has become even more radical. If the party’s strategic goal was earlier to wage a terrorist struggle against China’s power structures and separate Xinjiang from Beijing, they have been calling on Muslims from all over the world to join the jihad against the West since at least 2015. In May 2016, a speech was published by Abd al-Haqq al-Turkistani (aka Maimaitiming Maimaiti), one of

the TIP leaders supposedly killed in 2010 in Pakistan (*New Video Message...*, 2016). In a new audio message, al-Haqq called on Uyghurs “in every corner of the world, wherever they are”, to join the jihad. According to al-Haqq, “today they are waging jihad in Sham, helping their brothers, and tomorrow the soldiers of Islam must be ready to return to China to liberate the western province of Xinjiang from the communist invaders”.

It is estimated that there were around 2,000 fighters in the ranks of TIP (Boto-bekov, 2016). The exact number of Chinese nationals who have participated in the Syrian war is subject to speculation; however, it should be noted that there are Chinese nationals of other ethnic backgrounds in Syria as well, such as Uzbeks and Kazakhs but also Han. China’s special envoy for Syrian affairs, Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan, said in July 2018: “I’ve seen all sorts of figures – some say 1,000 or 2,000, 2,000 or 3,000, 4,000 or 5,000, and some say even more”. Last year, the Syrian ambassador to China Imad Moustapha suggested that up to 5000 Uyghurs were fighting in various militant groups in Syria, adding that China should be “extremely concerned” (Duchâtel, 2019). Most of the Uyghurs arrived with their families, settling in various regions of Idlib, including the strategic city of Jisr al-Shughur, Ariha, and the Jabal Zawiya highlands. They generally took over the homes of Alawites who had emigrated due to the fear of persecution. Since October 2015, they have been recorded taking part in the fighting in the Al-Ghab Plains and Latakia Province. According to the Al-Mayadeen TV channel, nearly 4000–5000 Uyghurs (men and women) lived in Jabal al-Turkman in Latakia Province and Zunbaki village near Jisr al-Shughur. Their families were settled there under the supervision of “Turkish intelligence in an attempt to change the demographic character of the area” (Mouzahem, 2016).

THE IMPORTANCE OF UYGHURS IN SYRIA JIHAD

TIP was involved in the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) project. As early as March 2016, extensive consultations on the establishment of an Islamic emirate in areas primarily controlled by al-Nusra, but also by organizations such as Ahrar al-Sham, took place. TIP was interested in this idea. However, it did not ultimately come to fruition, and the JFS project was established and TIP remained a separate formation (Lister, 2016). Similarly, after the establishment of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the situation became more complex. Perhaps TIP was seen as a kind of “safety valve”. While HTS officially broke off its relations with

Al-Qaeda, TIP did not, but unlike formations such as Hurras al-Din, it did not take a collision course with HTS. It continued to maintain close relations with the Taliban as Afghanistan was an important hinterland, a kind of strategic depth for the entire jihadist movement. In addition, TIP recruited Islamists not only from China but also from Central Asia, with the specific intent of promoting themselves as free of interfractional strife and providing care for entire families coming, like Uyghurs, in search of a new place to live.

One situation that belied their neutrality was the fighting between HTS and Jabhat Tahrir Souriya/Syrian Liberation Front (JTS), which was formed on February 18, 2018, from the merger of Nur ad-Din al-Zenki and Ahrar al-Sham. At this time, a proclamation was issued, stating: “At the same time we state our complete rejection of what is happening of transgression against Hayat Tahrir Shaam which is the biggest Mujahid group on the arena in Shaam [...] and they are our brothers and we fought together in one trench from the days of Jabhat Nusra and then Jabhat Fatah Shaam until Hayat Tahrir Shaam. And we fought side by side epic battles...” (Marwan, 2018). This was a clear statement in favor of one side in the conflict and was received negatively by the JTS, which called for “maintaining neutrality” and avoiding oppressive actions that would only damage the “reputation” of the “people of Turkestan” (Joscelyn, 2018). Abu Mohammad al-Julani (al-Nusra and HTS commander) was already probing to what extent HTS could count on Uyghur loyalty, possibly due to the establishment of the Katibat al-Ghuraba or Katibat al Ghuraba al-Turkistan branch in July 2017. This was a predominantly Uyghur organization, referring to Al-Qaeda in its propaganda material, but fighting under the command of HTS (Weiss, 2018).

In February 2018, two experienced TIP leaders, Abu Omar al-Turkistani and Abu Muhammad al-Turkistani, who had previously fought on the side of the Taliban, came from Afghanistan (PLEx PAGE, 2018). Abu Omar was named the “general emir” of TIP in Syria, and Abu Muhammad was named “military commander”. In any case, from that moment on, an intensification of actions in the media and even the ideological field was visible, by issuing threats against Russia (Joscelyn, 2019). The appearance of these two commanders was not accidental; it was rather probably dictated by the desire to maintain TIP’s independence from HTS. Perhaps it was even attributable to the need to stop internal divisions. It also showed how much the Syrian branch is dependent on Asian staff, which may mean that Uyghurs treat themselves as a priority but the conflict in Syria only for a certain episode. In February 2018, the US Air Force carried out bombings on training facilities in Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, “preventing the planning

and rehearsal of terrorist acts near the border with China and Tajikistan by such organizations as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and others” (Roggio, 2018).

In February 2020, in an interview with the International Crisis Group and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, al-Julani said about Uyghurs: “As for the Turkistan Islamic Party, things are a little different. These guys have been in Syria for seven years and have never constituted a threat to the outside world. They are committed solely to defending Idlib against regime aggression. As Uighurs, they face persecution in China – which we strongly condemn – and they have nowhere else to go. Of course, I sympathise with them. But their struggle in China is not ours, so we tell them that they are welcome here as long as they abide by our rules – which they do” (Khalifa, 2020).

One factor to which the attention of the media and the international community has been diverted is the military training of children. It is known that TIP had at least two training camps in Syria, including one for children (SITE Intelligence Group, 2014). Training children for armed jihad is not unusual; this is what Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Ahrar al-Sham, or the Chechens did. It conflicted with the narrative of those fleeing persecution.

The Syrian government used this to disavow the Uyghur movement. For example, the pro-government press service SYria Real Infos And News – SYRIAN – published an article by Janice Kortkamp entitled *Here’s the Deal with the Whole, “Oh the poor oppressed Uighurs!!!” Routine That People Need to Understand* (Kortkamp, 2020). The author suggests that the Uyghur affair is a mystification and that it is a new “Cyclon” operation²: “Here are pics of the ‘poor, oppressed’ Uyghurs in Idlib, Syria. Their male children are sent to jihad school and learn to kill and hate – some ‘rebels’ in Syria use boys as young as 8 to be snipers. The Chinese government’s alleged ‘concentration camps’ are not – from what I can tell they seem to be half prison, half school in an attempt to counteract the radicalization (I’m sure they aren’t luxury getaways)”.

² US operation to support Islamists in Afghanistan against the USSR.

UYGHURS AND ISIS

The majority of Uyghurs ended up in Al-Qaeda-linked units, obviously due to the shared “brotherhood of arms” from Afghanistan. The Uyghur issue has been taken up by ISIS (*Ad-Daula al-Islamiyya fi al-Irak wa-al-Sham*). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani made several notable references to China and “Turkistan”. In one statement, al-Baghdadi called upon Muslims to rise against tyrannical rulers and “support your people and your brothers in Sham, [...] Turkistan, Bangladesh, and in every place”. In other instances, he claimed, “Muslims’ rights are forcibly seized in China” and cited “the extreme torture and degradation of Muslims in East Turkistan”, with Muslims being denied “their most basic human rights”. Questioning Saudi inaction, al-Baghdadi asked “where is the relief of the rulers of Mecca and Medina for the Muslims in China?”. Similarly, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani described China as a country where Muslims face killing, abuse, imprisonment, and displacement. In an address he claimed, “the crusaders, the Hindus, and the atheists” commit “massacres, crimes and atrocities against the Muslims in Burma, Turkistan, Indonesia, Kashmir [...]” (Webber, 2021). East Turkestan was seen as part of Khorasan Province, with numerous ISIS publications calling it another *vilayet* of the Caliphate. In February 2017, ISIS released a video depicting militants and their families living in Iraq, training and executing alleged informants. One militant in the video claimed that some of their members were previously members of TIP and called on other members of the group to join the Islamic State. Another militant said that the Islamic State was already in China, and the video had shots that appear to have been shot in China. At one point in the video, a picture of Chinese President Xi Jinping was also shown, which then went up in flames next to a Chinese flag (Taylor, 2017). Geng Shuang, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said: “We have long said that East Turkestan forces are a serious threat to China’s security and we are willing to work with the international community to jointly crack down on East Turkestan separatist and terrorist forces” (Martina & Blanchard, 2017).

Surprisingly, after this video, a clear challenge to China, the Uyghur issue disappeared from the ISIS agenda. The only explicit mention of Uyghurs was published in the *Voice of Hind* magazine in July 2020. The Islamic State claimed: “Uighur Muslims are not hidden from us, neither are we indifferent towards their cause” (Stewart, 2021).

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, animosity toward Beijing came to the fore. Islamic State media channels and their online supporters

proclaimed the divine vengeance of the virus against China for its mistreatment of Muslims. Abu Hamza al-Qurashi (an ISIS spokesman) claimed that “God, by his will, sent a punishment to tyrants of this time and their followers... which can’t be seen by the naked eye” (Webber, 2021). Syrian cleric Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi, an ISIS supporter, said that Muslims can pray that the virus will annihilate China’s “enemies of Allah” who have “killed, murdered, imprisoned and oppressed Uyghurs” (Stalinsky, 2020).

Uyghurs were far less likely to become members of the Islamic State than the rival Islamist faction in Syria. Chinese media have usually quoted a total of 300 Uyghurs linked to the Islamic State, whereas the internal documents that were made public have contained 200 names. Other sources have even cited as few as 100 (Duchâtel, 2019). The Uyghurs in ISIS did not create any “national” units, nor did they have their commanders in the headquarters. They were generally older and less educated than those in TIP. Probably their exodus to Syria was not organized and they ended up in ISIS somewhat by chance. What is also important, they generally did not have families together. Some fighters joined ISIS leaving other formations, probably for a variety of motivations, from ideological to financial.

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE UYGHUR PROBLEM

Uyghur fighters reportedly moved to Syria following a China-backed Pakistani campaign against their bases on the borders with Afghanistan. During a visit to China in 2015, the defense minister of Pakistan announced that members of the Al-Qaeda-linked group had either been killed or “somehow left” Afghanistan (Hage Ali, 2016).

It cannot be ruled out that some of them came to Syria via Turkey. Since the early 1990s, Uyghurs have been recorded migrating to Turkey. They settled primarily in Zeytinburnu near Istanbul and in the city of Kayseri (Clarke & Kan, 2017, p. 10), which is still the main center of the Uyghur diaspora (Khan, 2021). The Eastern Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association (ETESA), an Uyghur organization based in Turkey, may have been involved in moving them to Syria. The official task of this organization was to bring humanitarian aid. However, it admitted carrying out (supporting) terrorist attacks, including the assassination of the pro-Communist imam Juma Tahir in Kashgar (Martina, 2014). ETESA,

in cooperation with TIP, was supposed to send several humanitarian convoys to Syria, which were perhaps used to migrate Uyghurs (Zenn, 2014).

In 1995, a park named after Isa Yusuf Alptekin was created in the Sultanahmet District of Istanbul, and a monument to the martyrs of East Turkestan was also erected. Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who was 95 years old at the time, stated that he spent his life working not only for East Turkestan but for the entire Turkish world. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the then mayor of Istanbul, said: “Eastern Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples, but it is 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 own martyrs. [...] Today, the culture of the people of Eastern Turkestan is being systematically sinocized” (Eastern Turkestan Union in Europe, 1995). Central Asia, including Uyghuria, has an important place in Erdoğan’s neo-imperialist rhetoric. Following the 2009 Uyghur riots in which 156 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured, Erdoğan said: “The incidents in China are, simply put, a genocide. There’s no point in interpreting this otherwise” (Reuters, 2009). Chinese analysts have believed that the Turkish president is using Uyghur “jihadists” to conduct proxy warfare with China to realize his ambition of recreating a “Turkish world from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China” (Mouzahem, 2016).

On November 9, 2020, the USA removed the ETIM from the list of terrorist organizations (US Department of State, 2020). It was a very surprising decision; furthermore, it should be noted that TIP as such was never on it. Abbas Sharifa, a Syrian group researcher, told Al-Monitor: “There are three hypotheses to explain the US decision. The first is that [the decision] consists of a US step to pressure China and remove any legitimacy for Chinese oppression against the Uyghur minority. Such move would be a prelude to support the Turkestan opposition against the Chinese government, as a tool to pressure China; this will complicate the file for the Biden administration, which seeks a settlement with China” (al-Kanj, 2020). The second hypothesis is that this approach would end the file on the foreign fighters in northwestern Syria and pave way for a US-Turkish security coordination in the area, and the last hypothesis is that the decision is part of the negotiation deal between the Taliban and the USA.

The last one seems unlikely as it would complicate the Taliban’s relationship with China. A State Department spokesperson even said that “there is no credible evidence that ETIM still exists”. This was, of course, a questioning of the surveillance policy against Muslims in China (The Hindu, 2020).

Abu Omar al-Turkistani, a leader of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement who lived in Idlib, told Al-Monitor: “We are not hostile to either the US or the West. We are hostile to China, which refused to grant us political rights. We came to Syria to support our Syrian brothers who were displaced and killed by the Assad regime that brought the Shiite militias from Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon to kill the Syrian [people]. In case the Syrians ask us to leave, we will certainly do so. What is important to us is the fulfillment of our Syrian brothers’ demand that the Assad regime leaves” (al-Kanj, 2020).

THE FUTURE OF THE UYGHURS IN SYRIA

Some Uyghur experts argue that the ETIM is virtually nonexistent and that Beijing has exaggerated the threats posed by the ETIM and TIP (Roberts, 2020b). However, a US airstrike on an ETIM training camp in Badakhshan in 2018 and an interview with a former ETIM leader suggest the presence and activities of the ETIM or similar militant groups in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, Beijing’s interests in Afghanistan have been driven by a desire to prevent Uyghur militant groups from using bases in Afghanistan to launch attacks against China. Therefore, counterterrorism cooperation was at the core of Beijing–Kabul relations. Chinese financial assistance and military training were aimed at strengthening the ability of Kabul to provide China with some level of security (Martina, 2018).

The Taliban were certainly aware of China’s security concerns and, following previous Afghan authorities, wanted to establish a relationship with Beijing. They assured that they would guarantee the security of Chinese investors in Afghanistan and that they would not interfere in China’s internal affairs. The Taliban’s commitment to Beijing is in line with the provisions of the Doha Agreement (*Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan...*, 2020) that the Taliban would not allow any individuals or entities to use Afghan soil against other countries, just as the grouping assured Moscow that it posed no threat to Central Asian states (Ma & Chang, 2021).

China – which is positioning itself to play a decisive role in the region – sees the group as an undeniable part of the political future of Afghanistan, whereas the Taliban sees Beijing as crucial for its international legitimacy and a much-needed potential investor in the country (Standish, 2021). China takes the threat of Uyghur terrorism seriously; however, the question is to what extent it is a real,

self-generated problem and to what extent they see it as a possible threat to their imperialism in this part of the world, which can be used against them by other players (e.g., USA, Turkey) – specifically, to what extent they may be a “Trojan horse” of the USA, Turkey, or to some extent Russia. However, it cannot be assumed with certainty that the Taliban will turn their backs on Uyghurs for the sake of business with Beijing as it would be contrary to the principles of Islam and customary law (*Pashtunwali*).

The question that remains about the Uyghurs of Syria is the same as the question about the further fate of Idlib. It seems that their fate will be determined by the strategic interests of local and global players. If Idlib is recaptured by Assad's forces, Uyghurs will face deportation to China and, in most cases, death. In all likelihood, they will have to flee to Turkey, which could be an important tool for them to put pressure on China or to use in other conflicts, as they did with the Syrians in Nagorno-Karabakh or Libya.

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