

UYGHUR ETHNICITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE IN POST 9/11 CHINA

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History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme
---Irish poet Seamus

“We are in the early stages of what I would describe as the third world war”
---Newt Gingrich, July 2006

[We are fighting] “Islamic fascism”
---George Bush, August 2006

Introduction

The Uyghurs¹, a Turkic Muslim ethnic group of about 8 million (0.6 % of China's 1.3 billion) inhabit Xinjiang, China's largest province. Xinjiang's Muslims constitute only two-fifths of all Chinese Muslims, but they have long hoped for greater autonomy or even independence, calling upon human rights and other standards of justice. However, since September 11, 2001, their cause has been tarnished by being included in the American proclaimed civilizational struggle between Islam and the “freedom-loving” West. The United States, a champion of the global human rights regime since its formation after WWII, has abandoned its own standards in Iraq, Guantanamo and elsewhere. In August 2002, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage announced that one small faction of Uyghur activists, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement” (ETIM) was a “terrorist” organization, along with Hezbollah and al Qaeda. The United States supported inclusion of this Uyghur group on the U.N. Security Council's list of terrorist organizations.²

¹ There is no standard romanization for the Turkic-Uighur language, and the term “Uyghur,” can be Uighur, Uygher, and Weigur. In Chinese, it is transliterated as *Weiwu'er* [维吾尔].

² June Teufel Dreyer, “China's Vulnerability to Minority Separatism,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32:2 (Summer 2005), p.78. This is a good summary of Chinese treatment of Tibetans, Mongols, and Uyghers in their respective “autonomous” regions. Human rights groups estimate that only 4-14 ETIM leaders can be associated with terrorism, without substantive links to al Qaeda. One theory has it that President Bush wanted to smooth relations before his visit with Jiang Zemin in October 2002.

China has eagerly embraced the post 9/11 “war on terrorism” to suit its own agenda of suppression of Uyghur culture and aspirations for autonomy. Xinjiang, like Tibet and Taiwan, is a region of economic and strategic importance of considerable concern to leaders in Beijing worried about separatist or “splittest” movements. I will examine the role of ethnicity and human rights in this strategic frontier of China, with particular attention to the last five years.

Uyghur History and Identity

A shared history and ethnic background, real or “imagined,” are fertile if not always essential grounds for creating ethnic political identity, but for contemporary Uyghurs, the “invention” of their history is problematic.³ There was a Uyghur Empire (744-840 C.E.) in northwestern Mongolia composed of Turkic steppe nomads, but from 844-932 this transhumance group became sedentary, centered on the Central Asian oasis of Turpan, with Buddhist, Manichean, and Nestorian Christian beliefs filtering in via trade routes to the South and West.

From 932-1450 the term Uyghur applied to a mostly Buddhist Turkic society still in Turpan called Uyghuristan to distinguish it from Islamic Turks to the west. However, when this Buddhist group converted to Islam in the 15th century, the Uyghur term fell into disuse until the 1930s when the Chinese Republic, or rather the Han warlord Sheng Shicai, defeated a short-lived (1931-1933) self-proclaimed Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkistan. Uyghur identity had emerged in opposition both to the Chinese (Han) regime and their allies, the Tungans (Chinese Muslims or Hui), which were a non-Turk ethnic group.⁴

Perhaps persuaded by Soviet practice in Central Asia, the Chinese gave minority ethnic status to the oasis dwellers of Xinjiang, calling them Uyghurs. Other ethnic groups in this vast region were Han, Tungans, and Kazaks, giving the Uyghurs a multiple set of “others” in which to define themselves. Lifestyle as much as anything defined identity. In Olivier Roy’s study of Islam in Central Asia, he notes that “...the ‘ethnic groups’ were intermingled with each other, and were distributed more according to ecological and socio-economic criteria than by territory.” Roy argues that tribe, clan, local, and family identity was more important than ethnicity.⁵

As in other modern nation-states in Asia and elsewhere, frontiers are often where ethnicities contest each other for legitimacy and power. The Uyghurs, although the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang in the 1930s, have not been able to forge a single ethnic nationalism due to political differences between urban secular activists and rural Islamic movements and the policy of the communist state after 1949. Given the size of Xinjiang, almost equal to

³ The problematic aspect of ethnic politics is discussed by Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. He is reluctant to conclude in his “afterword” on ethnic conflict and democracy (pp.681-684) that democratic institutions cannot survive ethnic conflict (democracy failed in Iraq, Sri Lanka, Nigeria); because there has been a variety of global responses to ethnic division, hostility to other ethnic groups does not inevitably lead to violence. However, it is the violence that attracts media, NGO, and government attention.

⁴ Rudelson, Justin Jon. *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China’s Silk Road* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 6, 149.

⁵ Roy, Olivier. *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York University Press, 2000), 3.

Europe, and the large expanse of the harsh Taklimakan desert, geography has played an historic role in dividing the Uyghurs, and it still shapes identity today.

In his *Oasis Identity: Uighur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road*, Justin Rudelson argues that the geographic distance between the major oasis centers and the practice of endogamy (marriage within the community) has perpetuated and strengthened a local identity that undermines hopes to create a pan-Uyghur nationalism, even though there is a shared Islamic tradition. Furthermore, class distinctions between peasants, merchants, and intellectuals are strong. Urban Uyghurs tend to be more educated and secular, sometimes viewing Islamic rural Uyghurs as backward, a view shared by most Han. Islam, potentially a unifying force, cannot define the identity of all Uyghurs, as the educated elite tends to be secular, in spite of growing conviction of Han Chinese that all Uyghurs are jihadists.

Rudelson points out that the immensity and harshness of the Tarim Basin, which dominates southern Xinjiang, separates rather than unites the oasis centers that formed on alluvial fans of the surrounding mountains. The strong sense of place has made it impossible to build a coherent Uyghur national identity except, ironically, in times of repression by Han Chinese. Beijing encouraged the immigration of large numbers of Chinese in the 1950s in the name of developing natural resources and securing the geo-political boundaries of Xinjiang, first against the Soviets and now against Islamists in Central Asia. Other Chinese have migrated into the region in search of work. In 1949, according to the government, there were only 300,000 Han in Xinjiang, but by 2003 there were about 8.25 million, outnumbering the indigenous Uyghurs. There were also Kazakhs, Hui, Tajiks, and other minorities in a total population of 19.25 million. These official figures probably underestimate the Han population of Xinjiang as some are "temporary workers" who in fact are long-term residents.⁶

In the capital of Urumqi the ratio of Han/Uygher residents has shifted even more dramatically from 20:80 to 80:20, creating an urban island of mostly Han residents. As in Tibet, Uyghurs have become a minority in their own homeland, with economic development, environmental stress (especially water resources) and Han workers taking the lion's share of new jobs leading to growing resentment.

As Lewis and Wigan suggest, maps of political boundaries are often visual devices suggesting a unity or morphology that does not exist on the ground. Xinjiang has four different cultural-geographic regions, each tied by mountain passes to regions outside the contemporary boundaries of Xinjiang. Contacts across the mountains have been easier and more frequent than between the distant oasis centers which once formed links in the famous Silk Road. Sheer size of Xinjiang is another factor: it is as big as Germany, France, and Italy combined, and in fact includes three basins separated by the Tian shan Mountains: the southern Tarim Basin (Taklimakan Desert), northern Zhungarian Basin, which is part of the Asian Steppes, and the Turpan Depression, which is closest to China in location and culture. During the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911) the term Xinjiang (New Territories) was applied

⁶ People's Republic of China, "History and Development of Xinjiang," Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China: May 2003. <http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-06/12/content_916306.htm>, accessed June 4, 2007. This is the official version of Xinjiang history supporting Chinese historic claims and denouncing "splitism."

only to the northern Zhungarian Basin where the Zhungarian Mongols were defeated by Qing armies.⁷

While the current Chinese administrative capital of Xinjiang is Urumchi, located in the northern Zhungarian Basin, most Uyghurs live on the fringes of the Tarim basin to the south, which is approximately 600 miles wide and 250 miles north to south. The oases differ in size and population, from as small as 20,000 to 750,000 in Kashgar, the largest and most problematic in that it is the center of both protest and repression in recent years.

Cross-border contacts as well as distance have helped create competing Uyghur identities. For example, Kashgar is close to the Ferghana valley, and it has strong Central Asian influences, including identity in recent years with Islamic movements in the region (more about this later). The oases along the northern edge of the Tarim basin share this heritage, albeit in different versions.

Khotan and other oases along the southern Tarim Basin look to India and Pakistan for historic contact and modern trade. In contrast, the Kazaks of the Zhungarian Basin look to Kazakstan, and finally, the Tungans of Turpan are culturally Chinese, although practicing Muslims (Hui). Speaking Chinese, they are cultural intermediaries between Uyghurs and the Chinese.⁸

In the confusion of war with Japan and the civil war in China (1945-1949) following Japan's surrender, Uyghurs in the Ili region near the Soviet (now Kazakstan) border revolted and established the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR). Taking advantage of the political vacuum and chaos of the war, this marked "...the most significant indigenous independence movement in this century" for the Uyghurs.⁹ The leaders of the short-lived (1944-1949) republic called for a pan-Turkic state encompassing Xinjiang as well as parts of the Soviet Union. The fragile Nationalist government signed an accord with the ETR granting many rights, including freedom of expression and universal suffrage, but a coalition government of Chinese and ETR officials fell apart in 1947 when Chinese officials violated the accord. However the ETR remained independent until the death of their leaders in a suspicious plane crash enroute to a meeting with Mao and other Chinese Communist leaders. In 1949, after the creation of the PRC, the Chinese army reasserted Han control, but in 1962, partly due to the economic disaster of the Great Leap Forward, 60,000-120,000 Uyghurs and Kazaks fled to the Soviet Union.

Treatment of Uyghurs under the Communist Party since 1949 has been driven by radical policy shifts rather than consistent adherence to law respecting minority rights. Uyghur intellectuals were attacked during the Cultural Revolution, and expression of ethnic identity or Uyghur autonomy were harshly suppressed. However, for a brief period, 1985-1990, in an attempt to prevent minority uprisings, limited freedom to create and disseminate Uyghur identity was permitted. The events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 led to

⁷ Lewis, Martin W. and Karen Wigan, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (University of California Press, 1997); Rudelson 1997, 18-38.

⁸ Rudelson 1997, 39-69.

⁹ Rudelson 1997, 29.

party suppression of “splittism” and in response there was a flurry of violent Uyghur protest which peaked in the mid-1990s.¹⁰

Problems of Ethnic Identity Among the Uyghers

Writer Peter Hessler sums up the identity problem as well as anyone:

“...a small, remote group like the Uighurs were almost never perceived on their own terms. The Chinese saw them as ethnic minorities of the People’s Republic; Turkic groups saw them as Turks; Islamic fundamentalists saw them as Islamic; Senator Helms saw them as anti-China and pro-American...there was so little information about them that anybody could remake the ethnic grouping his own image.”¹¹

Most Uyghur intellectuals live in the capital of Urumchi, largely (85%) populated by Chinese who employ them at government institutions. Although part of the state bureaucracy, they are not fully accepted by their Chinese colleagues. Some have internalized and accept the Chinese negative stereotypes of rural Uyghurs, especially those who live in the Tarim oases. Thus the northern Uyghurs tend to consider those in the south as primitive and overly-religious orthodox. This makes it difficult for them to construct a pan-Uyghur identity that resonates with and reflects the values, especially Islamic values, of the peasants of the oases.

Educated Uyghurs must choose between sending their children to Uyghur language schools with a link to their traditional culture, or to Mandarin schools where they might assimilate and advance their careers by entering the structure of Chinese state. Unlike Uyghurs in Kashgar who assert their links to Islam, “...the majority of Uyghur intellectuals are highly nationalistic and strongly reject Islamic conservatism.”¹² Following the break-up of Soviet Union after 1991, Uyghurs were encouraged by the emergence of Islamic states across the Chinese border. However, in an authoritarian state such as modern China, separatism or hopes for real autonomy in the “autonomous” regions has been an elusive goal as organized cultural resistance is an easy target to suppress.¹³ The appearance of potential charismatic leaders makes them liable to “reeducation camps” or worse.

This leaves only anarchy and violence as a form of resistance. It is difficult to suppress entirely because it rejects organization and is often spontaneous. Combined with the recent nihilism of militant Islam, anarchy is perhaps the greatest potential threat yet to

¹⁰ Rudelson 1997, 141.

¹¹ Hessler, Peter. *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present* (HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 375-6. Yitzhak Shichor, “Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 32:2 (Summer 2005), pp. 119-135, notes the various agents which manipulate reality in Xinjiang to create perceptions, to create a “virtual” situation of ethnic tension rather than the real one. He argues that both the Chinese government and various Uyghur groups manipulate reports – information on the ground is difficult to get – to create an artificial discourse for “...not only the public but, more important, policymaking agencies such as foreign governments, parliaments, commissions, and NGOs – and some academics and researchers.” (p.131).

¹² Rudelson 1997, 119.

¹³ Dreyer, “China’s Vulnerability to Minority Separatism” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32:2 (Summer 2005), p. 69.

Chinese control of Xinjiang and its important oil and gas resources. On the other hand, lack of social and political organization among the Uyghurs makes repression easier¹⁴

Creation of an authentic identity has been problematic for the Uyghurs. Friedman has argued that “identity is not negotiable” to those who accept it as reality, but clearly in the Uyghur case a convincing ethnic paradigm has not emerged. If history is imprinting the present on the past, construction of Uyghur identity has to be seen as a threat to the integrity of the Chinese nation-state as well as plans to develop the mineral resources of Xinjiang.¹⁵

In 1989, prior to the Soviet break-up and creation of new independent Islamic states in Central Asia, most Uyghur intellectuals had given up hope of an independent Xinjiang, especially since the numbers of Chinese immigrants were growing. Some argued that science and secular education were the only path to progress and survival, seeing resurgence of Islam among the Uyghur peasantry as putting them into a primitive role similar to that of the American Indian or the Ainu of Japan: “What are we to do?...retreat into our culture so that Hans [Chinese] can come watch us like animals in a zoo? No! We must compete with the Chinese on their terms.”¹⁶ But this position reflects a universal issue of identity: if survival requires accepting the norms of the dominant culture, then does this not impose a self-destructive denial of authenticity?

Although urbanized and in many ways co-opted into the Chinese order, Uyghur intellectuals apparently have not been able to transcend the identity of their home oasis in their formulations of self; they are neither hound nor hare, competing to become the defining core of the ethnic group:

“...by proposing diverse conceptions of Uyghur identity which, though nationalistic, have a strong oasis biases that correspond to the propagator’s birthplace, intellectuals are actually fueling a renewal of the historic rivalry among the oases. The competition undermines the possibility of a cohesive intellectual leadership and inhibits adoption of a pan-oasis ethnic identity”¹⁷

Thus, the problem facing would-be Uyghur nationalists is the lack of an effective unifying principle that transcends history and geography at the local level while drawing upon it at a larger ethnic level. Ethnic identity, as noted above, is no more cohesive than national identity. Considerable differences in self-identity occur among both Uyghurs in Xinjiang and in the various diaspora communities.¹⁸ Yitzhak Shichor presents a dire analysis of this issue:

¹⁴ Wallerstein, Immanuel, “The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture,” pp. 91-105 in King, Anthony D. *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 102.

¹⁵ Friedman, Jonathan. *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (Sage Publications, 1994), p.140.

¹⁶ Rudelson 1997, 144.

¹⁷ Rudelson 1997, 116.

¹⁸ See Castells, Manuel. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. II: The Power of Identity* (Blackwell Publishers, 1997) for a discussion of ethnic authenticity. The classic study of both the promise and problems of ethnicity and identity in political life is Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Uyghurs, both in China and abroad, must have also been aware of their own weaknesses, their failure to unite and their inability to agree on a common program and a world-class leader to carry it out, their lack of resources and the limited and conditional support available from outside....unwilling to compromise on anything less than their own homeland¹⁹

Ethnic Protest Before 9/11: The 1990s

In 1991 the Chinese government made its position on Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongol separatism clear, maintaining that external human rights advocates were a threat to sovereignty : “China has firmly opposed...any country interfering in the internal affairs of other countries on the pretext of human rights...China has always maintained that human rights are essentially matters within the domestic jurisdiction of a country.”²⁰ This was clearly in response to growing unrest among Uyghurs, perhaps boldened by the emergence of Islamic states across the border in the former USSR. This is a direct negation of the idea of universal normative values of the UDHR.

In April 1990 Uyghurs and Kirgыз near Kashgar had protested central government limits on mosque construction and birth control policies. Reportedly, fifty were killed as Xinjiang was closed to outsiders for several months. The Chinese government claimed, in September, 1991, that weapons were being smuggled in from Afghanistan and Pakistan by militants. There were indeed some Uyghurs willing to use terrorist tactics: in February 1992 six died in a bus bomb in Urumchi. In the summer of 1993 three were killed in bomb in Kashgar. In 1995, apparently police provoked a riot in Khotan when streets were full of mosque worshippers.

The peak of violence and unrest seems to be 1996-1997. In 1996 a worried government in Beijing announced the national anti-crime “Strike Hard” campaign, but it had an ethnic impact in Xinjiang where it tried to prevent any hint of separatist thought. Details are skimpy, but some Uyghurs were killed by police in Kucha: 2,700 terrorists, murderers, criminals and weapons were seized in Xinjiang. In reaction to the crackdown, Uyghurs rose with unprecedented protests, civil violence, and terrorist acts. On February 5-6 in the town of Ili, 100 students waved East Turkestan Republic flags. Thirty-one were killed by police and 200 wounded. There were reports of ten more anti-Chinese protests in Ili, one involving 5,000 people. The new aggressive Chinese policy was met by equally violent Uygher reactions.

On February 12 Uyghur separatists derailed a train enroute to Urumchi filled with mostly Chinese passengers. On February 25 three Urumchi buses were bombed to coincide with Beijing funeral of Deng Xiaoping. These terrorists acts killed 23 and injured 74 victims. Ten days later, a pipe bomb allegedly planted by Uyghurs on a bus in busy shopping district

¹⁹ Shichor, 2005, p.130. Despite this strong criticism, he also points out the formation of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) in April 2004 (p.122). However, the Chinese government (and the West since 9/11) does not make a distinction between moderate and mainstreams organizations and the “marginal” militant Uyghur groups.

²⁰ White Paper from Information Office of the State Council in Beijing, quoted in Schulz, William. *Tainted Legacy: 9/11 and the Ruin of Human Rights* (Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003), pp. 34-40. See also Steiner, Henry J. and Alston, Philip. *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 233.

brought the violence to Beijing. There were warnings of further attacks from Uyghur groups in exile. Although Beijing may have exaggerated the threat of Uyghur separatism, it is clear that “Eastern Turkestan forces” had engaged in violent terrorist acts, with 162 reported killed and 440 wounded.²¹

The government claimed that there were more than thirty “Eastern Turkestan terrorist organizations” and reported that hundreds of “terrorists” were captured, tried, and many executed. However, in most cases the unrest did not require mobilization of troops: local police were sufficient to stifle the unrest, and by 1998 these efforts seemed to work as incidents of violence died down. Although some compared Uyghur separatism with the religious extremism of Chechnya and the Palestinian West Bank, Beijing seems successful in controlling ethnic, religious, and political protest. The government speaks of a “great wall of steel” in Xinjiang, but border defense expenditures and troop deployment suggests a low level of concern, even though the U.S. is building air bases and stationing troops in three bordering Central Asian states.²²

The Post 9/11 “Terrorism”

Despite the relative peace since 1998 in Xinjiang, after the attacks on 9/11 the Chinese press and officials stopped calling Uyghur dissidents “Xinjiang separatists” and began using the more foreign sounding omnibus term, “East Turkestan terrorists,” which made the Bush administration more supportive of Chinese goals. Instead of a suppressor of the human rights of an indigenous dissident minority, China was now among those threatened by Islamic terrorists from outside and a partner on the greater “war on terrorism.”²³

By associating all Uyghurs with Islamic terrorism, China is able to conflate domestic genuine human rights issues with external threats of violence. Shortly after 9/11 Beijing said: “The United States has asked China to provide assistance against terrorism. China, by the same token, has reasons to ask the United States to give its support and understanding in the fight against terrorism and separatism.” In other words, Beijing was manipulating the United States into supporting suppression of “...those who, usually nonviolently, seek independence for Tibet and the Muslim province of Xinjiang.”²⁴

At the urging of Beijing, the Bush administration agreed to designate the ETIM a terrorist group, eroding the Uygher view of U.S. as benevolent supporter of their human

²¹ Yitzhak Shichor, “Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32:2 (Summer 2005), pp. 120-121.

²² Yitzhak Shichor, “The Great Wall of Steel: Military and Strategy in Xinjiang” in S. Frerderick Starr (Editor), *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004). This volume, in that the authors include most of the important scholars working on Xinjiang, is essential reading.

²³ Hessler, 374. He notes that conservatives like Senator Jesse Helms resisted the reclassification of Uyghurs as terrorists: “...there is no justification in lumping the Uighers with the murderous fanatics who demonstrably mean us harm. The Uighurs are engaged in a just struggle for freedom from Beijing’s tyrannical rule, for the most part peacefully...” (p.375).

²⁴ Schulz 2003: 79.

rights claims, if not independence. China has used the “war on terrorism” to suppress dissent of all types.²⁵

After the attack on New York, the PRC was quick to label any discontent among Xinjiang minorities as “terrorism,” and they successfully sought American approval of this approach. Although only the ETIM group has been recognized by the U.S. State Department as “terrorist,” by implication other Uyghurs are included, thus legitimizing harsh suppression of dissent in Xinjiang. The official view is:

After the September 11 incident, the voices calling for an international anti-terrorist struggle and cooperation have become louder and louder. In order to get out of their predicament, the “East Turkistan” forces once again have raised the banner of “human rights,” “freedom of religion” and “interests of ethnic minorities,” and fabricated claims that “the Chinese government is using every opportunity to oppress ethnic minorities,” to mislead the public and deceive world opinion in order to escape blows dealt by the international struggle against terrorism.²⁶

In January, 2004, Zhang Xiuming, deputy secretary of the XUAR committee of the CCP, issued the following attack on those who opposed the state on the grounds of human rights, religious freedom, and ethnic rights:

We need to take the initiative and go on the offensive, crack down on gangs as soon as they surface and strike the first blow. We must absolutely not permit the three vicious forces to build organizations, have ringleaders, control weapons and develop an atmosphere. We need to destroy them one by one as we discover them and absolutely not allow them to build up momentum.²⁷

Under Chinese law, even free expression and non-violent activity in support of “separatism” can be punished by ten years to life imprisonment.²⁸

Oil and Mineral Resources

China is searching for more diverse sources of oil to meet its growing needs, and Xinjiang is being rapidly developed to provide more oil, and it is also the pipeline to Kazakhstan and the rich petroleum resources of Central Asia. Economic growth and per capita income exceeds most of non-coastal China, yet ironically this may lead to more, not

²⁵ New York Times December 22, 2002.

²⁶ People's Republic of China, May 2003; see footnote 6 above.

²⁷ Amnest International Report on Uighurs: AI Index: ASA 17/021/2004 (7 July 2004).

²⁸ Article 103 of the Chinese Criminal Law: Whoever organizes, plots, or acts to split the country or undermine national unification, the ringleader, or the one whose crime is grave, is to be sentenced to life imprisonment or not less than ten years of fixed-term imprisonment; other active participants are to be sentenced to not less than three but not more than ten years of fixed term imprisonment; and other participants are to be sentenced to not more than three years of fixed term imprisonment, criminal detention, control, or deprivation of political rights.

Whoever instigates to split the country and undermine national unification is to be sentenced to not more than five years of fixed term imprisonment, criminal detention, control, or deprivation of political rights; ringleaders or those whose crimes are grave are to be sentenced to not less than five years of fixed term imprisonment.

less, Uyghur dissatisfaction as most of the economic benefits of growth fall into the hands of Han Chinese. Uyghurs in Xinjiang seldom get pipeline construction jobs in the oil industry as Han workers are brought in from Sichuan and elsewhere. Far from profiting from oil and mining ventures, some Uyghur communities have found their environment threatened and water resources diverted. Martin Andrew argues that strategic oil issues will lead to further insurgency and demands for independence by the Uyghurs, but the Chinese government will be certain to protect sources and routes to oil in Central Asia.²⁹

Utilizing Radical Islam

In February, 2005, a U.S. State Department Report on human rights in Xinjiang noted that it is "...difficult to determine whether particular raids, detentions, arrests, or judicial punishments targeted those seeking to worship, those peacefully seeking political goals, or those engaged in violence." Since 9/11 religious activity of any sort has been considered threatening to the state. Islamic activity, teaching, and places of worship are closely monitored by the party. Where ethnic protest has occurred, building of mosques and the training of clergy is forbidden. Children are not permitted to attend a mosque until age 18, although many are taught the Quran privately. Imams have been forced to support the state or face censorship or arrest.³⁰ Only one publisher, the Xinjiang People's Publication House, is allowed print Muslim literature. Educated Uyghurs who are party members, government officials, teachers, professors, and university students cannot practice religion openly. Restrictions on mosque building in Xinjiang contrasts sharply with construction and renovation in parts of China where Hui live. Another sign of special government worry about the control of Uyghurs is the fact that permission to make the Hajj is reportedly much easier for Hui.³¹

The campaign against separatism initiated in 1997 targeted "three evils": extremism, splittism, and terrorism; since 9/11 the state calls any religious expression outside of state control terrorism. This makes it difficult for Uyghurs to appeal to human rights standards in a world increasingly hostile to radical Islam. Beijing has magnified acts of violence which peaked a decade earlier to justify suppression of any peaceful political dissent or religious independence. Many groups besides the ETIM have been listed on Beijing's "East Turkestan Terrorist List."³² According to Human Rights Watch, Xinjiang leads the nation in executions for state security "crimes," with over 200 executed since 1997.³³ A number of writers and scholars have been given long prison sentences on trumped up charges of "separatism."

Radical Islam in Central Asia and elsewhere has led Chinese leaders to a policy of suppression and control of religion:

²⁹ Martin Andrew, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (October 6, 2005), at <<http://www.Jamestown.org>>.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* 2004. Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 28, 2005.

³¹ Ibid. The report notes that not all destruction of mosques is the result of government action; sometimes it is the result of intra-religious conflict.

³² Ibid. For example, groups advocating independence (but not violence) such as the World Uyghur Youth Congress and the East Turkestan Information Center are listed as terrorist organizations.

³³ Human Rights Watch, April 2005.

The state attempts to control everyday life. Religious holidays, studying religious texts, or showing one's religion through personal appearance are strictly forbidden at state schools. The Chinese government decides who can be a cleric, what version of the Koran may be used, where religious gatherings may be held, and what may be said on religious occasions³⁴

In January, 2003, Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan noted that the PRC would deal harshly with Uyghur separatists: "Xinjiang will always keep up the intensity of its crackdown on ethnic separatist forces and deal them devastating blows without showing any mercy."³⁵ In November, 2004, China passed rigorous new national religious rules, effective March 1, 2005. Officially these will protect "freedom of religious belief" and to regulate "the administration of religious affairs," but the effect is to stifle beliefs that are not approved by the government. The new national law is very similar to earlier rules in Xinjiang and Tibet, and it also applies to non-Muslim Han groups like the Falon Gong. The Chinese state reacts, not to real and present danger to national integrity, but to perceived potential future threats by its many unhappy minorities. Any threat to national security and integrity trumps religious freedom and human rights.

Firm policy to control Islam in Xinjiang predates 9/11, but it initially focused on the loyalty of the clergy. The appearance of radical Islam across the borders of Xinjiang in Iran and Afghanistan (the latter funded largely by fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia) in the 1970s and 1980s worried Chinese leaders. As the new Islamic republics appeared in the 1990s and more trade routes opened up, there was danger of "religious extremism," Beijing's euphemism for Islamic radicalism. In fact, Islam is under firm control. Between 1987 and 2001, only about 200 "patriotic" approved clerics graduated from the single approved school, the Xinjiang Islamic Religion Institute, whose curriculum in turn is mandated by the China Islamic Association in Beijing. This was only about fourteen a year for a Muslim population (Uyghurs and others) of around eleven million.³⁶

Since 9/11 all believers are suspect as schools are purged, publications controlled, and non-conformist Mosques are torn down. Only mosques under government supervision are allowed, and children and young adults cannot receive religious training. Driven underground, secret meetings and religious education is now held in homes. Beijing argues that strict measures are needed to stop any ideas of Uyghur autonomy or independence, linking that fear with the danger of Islamic terrorism. The more oil and gas resources grow in importance, the more likely that China will continue harsh suppression of ethnic grievances. Geostrategic priorities may lead to a Uyghur fate similar to that of the Tibetans.

Certainly Uyghur separatists point to the recently independent Islamic states across the border, and argue that their history and culture make an equally compelling case for independence. But as more Han move into the region, Uyghurs, like Tibetans, must struggle for cultural survival. It appears that non-Uyghur ethnic groups -- Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Mongols -- are seen as useful tools to counter Uyghur aspirations, as they are subject to less

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, 2004.

³⁶ Shichor 2005, p. 127-8.

stringent controls. Indeed, if Xinjiang were to become independent, these ethnic groups would become the new minorities.

China's attempt to suppress radical Islam may actually be counter-productive as religious expression goes underground into more radical forms of religious identity. This no doubt would lead to a nasty cycle of further government suppression of human rights in Xinjiang. It is true that some Uyghurs were found fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and several ended by in Guantanamo, but they cannot be said to represent the eight million Uyghurs. Yet they have been demonized in the Chinese press just as Muslims in general have been treated by clumsy and ill-advised American statements about the "war on terrorism."³⁷

The Leadership Problem: Rebiyah Kadeer

Unlike Tibet, which has the popular and very visible Dali Lama as a spokesman, there is no Uyghur leader who commands both ethnic support and international recognition. Suppression of charismatic leadership is a common nation-state technique to quell ethnic aspirations, and China has taken pains to prevent a leader from emerging. Perhaps the most egregious case is that of Rebiya Kadeer, an Uygher businesswoman, in itself an unusual achievement. Kadeer was well-known as the CCP used her success as an entrepreneur as a poster child of tolerance for Uyghurs. Kadeer had been appointed a member of the provincial-level Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, but in 2000 she was convicted under Article 111 of Chinese law of sending "passing state intelligence" to her exiled husband: copies of public newspapers such as the *Kashgar Daily*, *Xinjiang Legal News*, *Yili Daily* and *Yili Evening News*.³⁸

Kadeer, her son, and her secretary had been arrested in 1999 while on their way to meet an American Congressional staff delegation. Some think she was considered a dangerous voice of Uyghurs because of her husband's previous advocacy of Uyghur causes and his association in exile with Radio Free Asia. Suffering from medical conditions in prison, Kadeer was finally released after serving five and half years of her eight year sentence on March 17, 2005, when she joined her husband in exile in Washington D.C. She has been able to transcend oasis, class, and gender identity as a spokeswoman for Uyghur rights in Xinjiang. Recent reports suggest that her family and the employees of the Kadeer Trading Center in Urumqi have been harassed by the government. Beginning on May 11, 2005, Chinese police arrested family members and associates of Kadeer in Urumqi, beat employees, and raided the company offices. They also tried to arrest Kadeer's son, Ablikim Abdiriyim, who escaped into a supportive crowd who kept the pursuing police at bay. Ablikim had been arrested in 1999 at the same time as his mother and sentenced to two years of reeducation through labor.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Uyghurs point out that various pejorative terms have been used since the founding of the PRC: "feudal elements" and "ethnic nationalists" in the 1950s and 1960s; "counter-revolutionaries" in the 1970s and 1980s; "separatists" in the 1990s; and since 2001, as "terrorists."

³⁸ Her husband had been jailed for political activity, and was exiled in 1996. Article 111: Whoever steals, secretly gathers, purchases, or illegally provides state secrets or intelligence for an organization, institution, or personnel outside the country is to be sentenced from not less than 5 years to not more than 10 years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, he is to be sentenced to not less than 10 years of fixed-term imprisonment, or life sentence, and when circumstances are relatively minor, he is to be sentenced to not more than 5 years of fixed-term imprisonment, criminal detention, control, or deprivation of political rights.

Kadeer has been a moderate advocate for the rights of fellow Uyghurs increasingly concerned about the state-sponsored Tibetan-like internal migration leading to the arrival of 1.2 million more ethnic Chinese settlers over the past decade. Several days before Kadeer was released from prison, guards warned her that her “business and children would be finished” if she contacted Uyghurs abroad or revealed “sensitive” information. She has not heeded this warning and has spoken with journalists, policymakers and Uighur groups since her release and exile.

On May 13, 2005, police raided the company’s offices, claiming problems with a loan the Kadeer Trading Center had recently received from the state-owned Bank of China. Police detained two of the bank’s employees who were involved with processing the loan. According to eyewitnesses, nearly 100 security personnel gathered outside the company’s offices while others conducted a thorough search. Kadeer’s family has denied any suggestion of wrongdoing, claiming compliance with all laws and regulations. “This latest episode again demonstrates the Chinese government’s abusive behavior against the Uyghurs, despite all the rhetoric about respecting the rule of law and the rights of religious minorities,” reports Brad Adams, Asia Director for Human Rights Watch, “It looks as if the Chinese government is intent on ruining any legacy she may have left behind by destroying her business and silencing her children”³⁹

In September 2006, Annelie Enochson, a member of the Swedish Parliament, nominated Kadeer for the Nobel Prize, stating: “Rebiya Kadeer champions the rights of western China’s Uyghur ethnic group and is one of China’s most prominent advocates of women’s rights.” The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs lost no time in condemning the nomination, accusing Kadeer of being a member of the terrorist ETIM, although Kadeer denies knowledge of this group until she arrived in the U.S. after her release from prison in 2005. In acknowledging the nomination, Kadeer issued the following statement:

I am honored to have been nominated for such a prestigious prize. I view it as a mark of recognition of the plight of all Uyghur people. I am a woman of peace, therefore I oppose all violence and acts of terrorism. I am committed to campaigning peacefully for the human rights of Uyghur people. I will continue to speak out against China’s persecution of not only the Uyghur people, but also Tibetans, Mongolians, and the Chinese people themselves until all of them can enjoy their rights and freedoms.⁴⁰

Kadeer is very visible, but the World Uyghur Congress may provide a broader platform for articulating moderate Uyghur concerns to supportive governments, NGOs, and the media. This new organization is headed by Erkin Alptekin, son of Isa Yusuf Alptekin (Ai Sha in Chinese criticism of Uyghur unrest) a member of the 1944-1949 Eastern Turkestan Republic who fled abroad, dying in exile in 1995.

Conclusion

Although granting some genuine autonomy in Xinjiang might make ethnic identity and radical Islam less appealing to many Uyghurs, China’s strategic and energy problems

³⁹ HRW 2005b.

⁴⁰ <<http://www.uyghurcongress.org>> Accessed October 1, 2006. Among other nominees are the "Tiananmen Mothers" for their fight for democracy in China.

probably rule this out. Concessions to limited Uyghur autonomy might have a negative impact on minority issues in Tibet and other frontiers, and even Taiwan. Human rights concerns before and since the declared ‘war on terrorism’ have been ignored by both the Chinese government and the Bush administration, although not by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other NGOs. Diaspora Uyghurs have utilized their websites on the internet to maintain some visibility, although there is disagreement on goals.

In the near future, China’s control over the Uyghurs seems secured by international security agreements and the police power of the state. However, further economic development and Han immigration will add environmental stress to an already tense ethnic conflict. Lacking a breakdown of the Chinese political system, a very unlikely prospect, perhaps the best hopes for Uyghurs is for less discrimination and a more genuine limited autonomy (albeit a contradiction in terms).⁴¹ Because the integration of Xinjiang via transportation, communication, pipelines, satellites and the like is growing stronger, not weaker, basic human rights, including a greater share in the growing Xinjiang energy economy, seem the only realistic goal. Human rights discourse, not independence or radical Islam, seem to offer the only viable path at present.⁴²

⁴¹ While some see strains on the Chinese political system as the economy grows, Andrew Nathan argues that the leadership of the CCP will cope with change: see his “Authoritarian Resilience: China’s Changing of the Guard,” *Journal of Democracy* 14:1 (January 2003), pp. 6-17.

⁴² Shichor, 2005, p. 133, offers a very negative view in calling for a redefinition of “self-determination” to stop short of independence. While reasonable in the present geopolitical climate, ethnic claims in other time and places have frequently not been noted for reasonable compromise. In that ethnicity is a product of emotional attachment as much as rational calculation, Shichor may be too idealistic in proposing a middle ground.