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Jihad in China? Rise of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

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INTERNATIONAL attention tends to focus on countries where terrorist spectaculars have occurred, or where there are ongoing high-profile conflicts. The drama and, corresponding attention, often overlooks what is perceived as 'lesser-known conflicts'. The situation in Xinjiang in Western China, an area bordering Afghanistan is a case in point. In this remote region, the indigenous Muslim Turkic-speaking Uighurs are feeling pressured by the non-Muslim Han Chinese immigrants to the region, as well as restrictive Chinese political controls on their religion. As with Mindanao and Southern Thailand, the key issue in this case appears to be religious and cultural freedom. Muslims in Xinjiang have a long list of grievances with the government, including what they perceive as state interference in religious worship.

Jihad in Eastern Turkestan?

The grievances are not entirely confined to China. Some Uighurs remain in indefinite custody at the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Barring the release of five Uighur men from Guantanamo in early May 2006 and their subsequent transfer to Albania for resettlement, many Uighurs continue to be wrongfully detained.

The failure of the Uighurs to be released from Guantanamo Bay is also symptomatic of post-9/11 measures by coalition forces and the "War on Terror" label. Countries facing difficulty in containing their own domestic small-scale skirmishes, insurgencies and separatism choose to label their own domestic problems as part of the larger "War on Terror." This allows them to link a local problem to the larger global jihad, thus enabling a broader range of counter-measures to be deployed.

In the case of the Uighur community, worrying trends are emerging. Since the late 1990s, the secular orientation of the Uighur groups has begun to change. After 9/11, the Uighur groups are significantly influenced by the developments in the global jihad arena.

One sign of this is a recently released hour long video entitled "Jihad in Eastern Turkestan", posted on a Middle Eastern website which indicated that the Uighurs are indeed increasingly influenced by the global jihad phenomenon. The video is effective in communicating Uighur operational capability and is obviously inspired by groups such as Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The video illustrates Uighur militants displaying their weapons and combat training prowess with rocket-propelled grenades, M-16s, AK-47s, detonators, and small rockets.

The video also features a clip of an airplane crashing into the World Trade Centre building on September 11, suggesting that Uighur militants are drawing inspiration from Al Qaeda attacks. In a dramatic ending, the video showcases the faces of their enemies -- the Chinese leaders. The video is believed to have been the work of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the most potent of the Uighur groups in Xinjiang today and the one with the closest ties to Al Qaeda.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

The aim of ETIM has always been to set up an independent Turkic state by the name of East Turkestan for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, Western China. ETIM is one of the major beneficiaries of covert funding from the Uighur diaspora population. It has used this funding to acquire a wide range of weapons including automatic weapons, and explosive devices.

ETIM has carried out numerous attacks in and around Xinjiang since 1996, including a number of unconfirmed reports of bombings against utilities and railway lines. In February 1997, serious rioting broke out in Yining after police attempted to arrest two suspected insurgents; many were killed and demonstrations spread to Urumqi, Kuqa and Hotan. Just days later, three bombs detonated on buses in Urumqi, killing seven people and injuring at least 60 others.

Since then more attacks have taken place, including clashes between ETIM militants and Chinese security forces, assassination attempts, attempted attacks on Chinese key installations and government buildings. These have however either gone unreported or been classified as mere 'accidents.' With ETIM now genuinely seeking to realign its goals with that of the wider jihadi community, more sensational attacks are likely.

ETIM's Al Qaeda Link and the Threat to China

Al Qaeda's biggest success has been its ability to inspire and influence local Muslim groups in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to imbibe its ideology of global jihad. By providing finance, training, weapons and ideology, Al Qaeda has been able to empower local Muslim groups to fight their governments and the non-Muslim populace.

Al Qaeda invited a number of Chinese Muslims to train in their camps in Afghanistan and on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the 1990s. At least one Pakistani group associated with Al Qaeda, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) provided assistance to ETIM. HUJI leader Qari Saifullah Akhtar cemented the ETIM link with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. ETIM is also now in contact with both the Iraqi and Afghan jihadist groups. As a consequence of the war in Iraq, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi's group is now expanding its operational and ideological influence on jihad groups globally. This reach is believed to be extending despite Zarqawi's death and his successor, Abu Hamsa Al Muhajir will probably cement the link.

Some ETIM members based in Europe are closely studying the Zarqawi group's tactics and technologies. Al Qaeda and Zarqawi's group will influence ETIM and its affiliates to take the fight beyond Xinjiang.

Other reports also note that Hasan Mahsun, alias Ashan Sumut, the second leader of ETIM, sent several members into China in February 1998, to establish a dozen training bases in

Xinjiang and inland regions to train more than 150 militants. Hasan Mahsun was killed by Pakistani troops on October 2, 2003, when the army raided a suspected Al Qaeda base in South Waziristan, along the Afghan border. However, others have stepped up to replace Mahsun.

Although the Chinese security forces and the intelligence service have been effective against ETIM and other groups by conducting numerous arrests and clampdowns, the Uighur militants' presence overseas -- from Central Asia to West Asia and in Europe -- is enabling the groups to survive. ETIM and its associates are also quite adept at improvising and acquiring weapons from criminal sources. ETIM has emulated groups, such as the Chechen terrorists, to exploit Western human rights and humanitarian concerns

Future Implications

Al Qaeda and other global jihadist groups will continue to work with ETIM and with other Uighur groups. In the not too distant future, there is a possibility that ETIM may even adopt suicide tactics in China. Unless the Uighur grievances are addressed, the potential for a greater radicalisation of the Uighur conflict along the Islamist path can pose a real challenge to the Chinese government.

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