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The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat

By Sean Roberts
George Washington University

March 2012

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PONARS Eurasia
The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES)
Elliott School of International Affairs
George Washington University
1957 E Street, NW, Suite 412
Washington, DC 20052

Tel: (202) 994-6340
www.ponarseurasia.org

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THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR AND THE NARRATIVE OF THE UYGHUR TERRORIST THREAT

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Sean Roberts

George Washington University

Since U.S. President George W. Bush declared war on “terrorism” in 2001, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has continually suggested that it is fighting its own “war on terror” against militants among the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority, which has a long history of resisting Chinese rule over its self-proclaimed homeland in the PRC’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).¹ Unlike America’s highly visible and externally focused anti-terrorism efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, China’s “war on terror” has received little attention outside the PRC because it has been mostly waged over the last ten years in a relatively isolated part of the country.

As this paper suggests, however, the entire premise of China’s “war on terror” is problematic because it remains unclear whether a militant Uyghur organization even exists that is capable of carrying out substantial and

¹ The PRC does not recognize the Uyghurs as indigenous to this region in northwest China, but, as the region’s official name suggests, the Chinese state has long conceded that the Uyghurs are the region’s primary inhabitants. Most Uyghurs, by contrast view themselves as the autochthonous people of the region. The name of this region is likewise a contentious issue. The name “Xinjiang,” or “New Frontier,” is generally associated with Beijing’s control of the region, first under the Qing and subsequently under Chinese states. The Uyghur independence movement, therefore, categorically refutes this name, which they view as a colonial moniker denying their right to sovereignty over the region. Uyghur activists instead tend to refer to the region as Eastern Turkistan or, less frequently, as Uyghurstan. The name of “Eastern Turkistan” was likewise created by outsiders to reflect the eastern areas of a general cultural region seen as the “land of the Turks.” Using either “Xinjiang” or “Eastern Turkistan” to refer to this region, therefore, positions oneself on one side or the other of the Uyghur–PRC conflict over the region. For this reason, I have chosen here to refer to the region by its present legal name, The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or the XUAR.

organized acts of terrorism. Furthermore, as the paper also argues, the questionable nature of the PRC's counterterrorism activities has been obscured by international actions and "expert analysis" that have helped to reaffirm and perpetuate the narrative promoted by the PRC about the terrorist threat it faces from the Uyghurs. This has had grave consequences for the Uyghurs both inside and outside China, who by most independent accounts have suffered extensive restrictions on their human rights as a result of PRC counterterrorism policies during the last ten years. In this context, the paper seeks to critically examine the creation and reproduction of the prevailing narrative about Uyghur terrorism that has been presented to the international community while seeking to provide a more cautious and evidence-based evaluation of the threat Uyghur militants pose both to China and the world.

I. The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement and the Narrative of Uyghur Terrorism

The narrative about the Uyghur terrorist threat is largely based on accusations by the PRC against a single Uyghur organization called the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also at times identified as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). Little is known about ETIM, and few if any Uyghurs or scholars studying Uyghur political movements had heard of the organization prior to 2001. Furthermore, while there have been numerous incidents of inter-ethnic violence and civil unrest in the XUAR over the last two decades, few if any of these incidents resemble the premeditated, targeted, and substantial acts of violence one usually associates with international terrorist groups. Nonetheless, a resilient narrative has formed around the ETIM, suggesting that it is a well-organized and dangerous organization seeking to carry out terrorist acts with the assistance of global jihadist networks. Although this narrative appears to have originated from official sources in the PRC, it has also been adopted by credible organizations that claim to provide expert analysis on global terrorism as well as by some academics; it thus continues to have currency among policymakers in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Given the

influential nature of this narrative and its impact on the Uyghurs inside and outside China, its creation and reproduction warrants closer attention.

The first public reference to the ETIM was in an official PRC document from November 2001 entitled *Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by “Eastern Turkistan” Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban*. In this document, which appears to have been prepared for United Nations Security Council meetings following the events of September 11, 2001, the PRC claimed that ETIM was “a major component of the terrorist network headed by Osama bin Laden,” who had provided it \$300,000 in financing, and that the ETIM oversaw a battalion of 320 Uyghur terrorists, who were fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan.² Shortly after the appearance of this document, the PRC issued a more comprehensive and detailed “White Paper” on the terrorist activities of ETIM and other Uyghur groups, entitled *“East Turkistan” Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity*, which was released in January 2002.³ In subsequent years, these documents have been followed by various official PRC public announcements that elaborate on the threat of ETIM and other alleged Uyghur militant groups and list specific individuals, which the PRC considers to be members of these groups.⁴

Given the timing of the release of these two initial official documents, many experts on China and the Uyghurs viewed them as attempts by the Chinese state to link its struggle with Uyghur political dissent to the United

² “Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by ‘Eastern Turkistan’ Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban,” November 29, 2001, *Website of the Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations* (<http://www.china-un.org/eng/zt/fk/t28937.htm>). Although this was the first time most regional experts had heard of this organization, it should be noted that Shirley Kan, a researcher with the Congressional Research Service, claims that there was an earlier reference to ETIM in a Russian newspaper article from 2000 that suggested that the group, together with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, was engaged in talks with Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. In my own research, however, I was unable to find the article referenced by Kan in the online archives of the newspaper where it was allegedly published, suggesting that this reference is at least wrongly cited. See Shirley Kan, *U.S.–China Counterterrorism Cooperation: Issues for U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, 15 July 2010, p. 7.

³ See “*East Turkistan* Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity,” *People’s Daily*, 21 January 2002 (English version distributed via internet listserve Uyghur–L).

⁴ See J. Todd Reed and Diana Raschke, *The ETIM: China’s Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, ABC–CLIO, 2010, pp. 117–159.

States' "Global War on Terror" (GWOT).⁵ Whether or not this was the intent, it appears to have been the result, since eight months after the publication of the aforementioned "White Paper," both the United Nations and the United States officially recognized the alleged terrorist threat that ETIM posed to China. In September 2002, the United States' Executive Order 13224 and the United Nations' Security Council Resolutions 1267 and 1390 recognized ETIM as a "terrorist organization," subsequently subjecting it to international sanctions and raising concerns about Uyghurs as an international terrorist threat.⁶

The U.S. government's recognition of ETIM as a terrorist organization was highly controversial. Given that no scholars studying the Uyghurs, the XUAR, or China more generally had ever mentioned this organization in their work; that there was little evidence proving that any violence in the XUAR over the last two decades was actually carried out premeditatedly by organized terrorists; and that no concrete evidence of the organization's capacity or even its existence was publicly available beyond the claims of the Chinese government, some analysts questioned whether the recognition of ETIM was a *quid-pro-quo* action aimed at involving the PRC more substantively in GWOT. While the United States probably wanted more Chinese involvement in Afghanistan at this time, a more cynical analysis of the situation suggests that first and foremost the U.S.

⁵ Although scholars have been careful to not make any direct accusations about the intent of this paper, several have certainly questioned its accuracy and internal contradictions. In this context, they have at least raised questions about the intent of the Chinese state in publishing the paper. See: Michael Clarke, "China's 'War on Terror' in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism," *Regional Outlook*, Griffith Asia Institute, 2007, pp. 112–28; James Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment," *Policy Studies*, No. 6, East-West Center, 2004, 1–62; Bovington, 2010.

⁶ The original Executive Order 13224, which was adopted twelve days following the September 11th attacks, can be found on the website of the U.S. Department of State (<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/122570.htm>). ETIM was added to the list of organizations to which this order applied only a year later in September 2002. It should be noted that ETIM does not fall on the U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list, which is subject to the strictest sanctions. Rather, it is on both the Other Terrorist Organizations and the Terrorist Exclusion list, which calls for less strict sanctions. The original UN Security Council Resolution sanctioning Al-Qaeda was passed in 1999 (See UN Security Council website – <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/>). The sanctions laid out in this resolution were expanded in 2002 through Resolution 1390 ([http://www.undemocracy.com/S-RES-1390\(2002\).pdf](http://www.undemocracy.com/S-RES-1390(2002).pdf)) in January 2002. Only in September of 2002, however, was ETIM added to the list of organizations to which these sanctions were applied.

sought China's tacit support for the invasion of Iraq, which took place a mere six months after the American recognition of ETIM as a terrorist organization.

Perhaps the most damning accusation against the U.S. government in support of such analysis is that it relied exclusively on biased Chinese and Central Asian intelligence in determining whether to recognize this group as a terrorist organization. Although State Department officials who had been involved in the decision insist that there was additional non-Chinese intelligence proving that ETIM was indeed a terrorist threat, they also do not elaborate on what that information details, noting that it is still classified.⁷

Whether or not the U.S. recognition of ETIM as a terrorist group was a *quid-pro-quo* action, over the last ten years it has been the single most important act lending validity to China's claims that it faces a substantial Uyghur terrorist threat. It has also provided the justification for the production of a long chain of knowledge about ETIM produced by think-tank experts, policy analysts, security experts, and academics. Although this chain of knowledge has been mostly based on dubious evidence at best, it has established a convincing narrative about the Uyghur terrorist threat that has spread both in the U.S. and globally. Despite frequent doubts raised by regional experts, this narrative has become particularly influential in policy and security circles in the United States and has resulted in grave consequences affecting the lives of Uyghurs both inside and outside of China.

One of the most critical links in the chain of knowledge reproducing this narrative has been the reports of various reputable "expert organizations" in international affairs and security that have provided thumbnail sketches of ETIM. Although these reports are, for the most part, merely web-based descriptions of global terrorist organizations, they represent the endorsement by credible institutions of the questionable assumption that ETIM is a capable and long-established terrorist organization that presents a global threat.

On the Council of Foreign Relations' (CFR) website, for example, ETIM is identified as "one of the more extreme groups founded by Uighurs [sic]...

⁷ See The House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, 16 June 2009, pp. 93–96.

seeking an independent state called East Turkestan,” noting that “China’s communist regime... has long called ETIM a terrorist group.”⁸ Although CFR’s characterization of the organization offers a fairly balanced view of debates surrounding the extent of ETIM’s threat and its links to Al-Qaeda, it takes as fact the disputed assertions that ETIM has long existed as a source of terrorism focused against the government of China, which first publicly referred to the organization only in 2001.

Similarly, the Center for Defense Information (CDI), in addition to suggesting that China has long accused the organization of terrorism, notes that ETIM “is a separatist Muslim group operating in China’s western Xinjiang province” and “is the most militant of various groups operating in the Xinjiang region.”⁹ In reality, however, there is no conclusive evidence that ETIM or any organized and capable terrorist group has ever been able to establish sophisticated operations within the XUAR.

Further down this chain of knowledge, assumptions made about ETIM by reputable organizations that analyze foreign affairs have allowed less established “terrorism trackers” to assert even more suspect characterizations of the organization. One such “terrorism-tracking” organization, IntelCenter (which says that its “primary client base is comprised of military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies in the U.S. and other allied countries around the world) markets a “Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) Threat Awareness Wall Chart” that outlines the organizational structure and history of ETIM.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, this chart is completely based on Chinese government documents and questionable internet-based sources. Similarly, an organization called the Investigative Project on Terrorism (IPT) (which claims to possess “the world’s

⁸ Holly Fletcher and Jayshree Bajoria, *A Backgrounder: The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)*, Council on Foreign Relations Publication 9179, last updated 31 July 2008 (<http://www.cfr.org/china/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim/p9179>).

⁹ See *In the Spotlight: East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)*, CDI website, 9 December 2002 (<http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/etim.cfm>).

¹⁰ See: IntelCenter, *About Us* (<http://www.intelcenter.com/aboutus.html>) and IntelCenter, *Wall Charts* (<http://www.intelcenter.com/wc.html>). It should be noted that the *Turkistan Islamic Party* (TIP) has more recently replaced ETIM as a threat among those who believe such a threat exists. This shift is discussed further later in this paper.

most comprehensive data center on radical Islamic terrorist groups”) asserts that ETIM “is a small Islamic extremist group linked to al-Qaida [sic] and the international jihadist movement... pursuing an independent ‘Eastern Turkistan,’ an area that would include Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Western China’s Xinjiang Uighur [sic] Autonomous Region.”¹¹ Obviously, anybody familiar with the region and the goals of Uyghur political organizations would recognize that such an expansive geographic conception of “Eastern Turkistan” is erroneous.

These organizations offer no specific evidence for their characterizations save some suspect internet-based sources and the publicly available statements by the U.S. and Chinese governments. They have adopted a clear position that, regardless of its immediate threat, ETIM is aligned with America’s enemy in GWOT, is highly organized, and is ready to carry out random acts of violence.¹²

Although scholarly experts on China and Central Asia have generally adopted a more nuanced view of the problem of Uyghur terrorism by questioning, yet not denying the possibility of, its existence, many in the field of security studies have taken at face value the assertion that the Uyghurs pose a substantial terrorist threat to China and possibly to the West. This has been at least partially propelled by the work of one prolific self-fashioned academic “terrorism expert,” Rohan Gunaratna of Singapore. Although Gunaratna has an impressive list of affiliations in the security studies field as well as with government security agencies around the world, media watchdog groups and commentators have questioned his non-evidence-based assertions about a

¹¹ See IPT, *About the Investigative Project on Terrorism* (<http://www.investigativeproject.org/about.php>) and IPT, *Terrorist Organizations and Other Groups of Concern: East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)*, last updated 24 August 2007 (<http://www.investigativeproject.org/profile/146>).

¹² Most of the secondary literature on ETIM cite as their primary sources internet communications that are assumed to originate from the organization itself. Some of these communications have allegedly appeared on bulletin boards and other interactive sites assumed to be frequented by militant Muslim groups. Others, which claim to be video messages from the organization, appear to originate from youtube (www.youtube.com). Given the many ways that information can be manipulated on the internet, the authenticity of all of these sources are difficult to verify.

variety of terrorist groups, including ETIM.¹³ In a series of articles and policy briefings as well as in his book on Al-Qaeda's global network, Gunaratna suggests that ETIM is closely associated with Al-Qaeda, is supported by "covert funding from the Uighur [sic] diaspora population," and possesses a "sophisticated capability to access financing and a logistics network."¹⁴ His sources for this information once again are limited to publicly available Chinese and U.S. government documents as well as internet-based sources of questionable origin.

Drawing on the work of Gunaratna, whose book on Al-Qaeda has the academic legitimacy of being published by Columbia University Press, others in the field of security studies, who are not specialists in Central Asia or the Uyghurs, have tended to reproduce many of his assertions as fact. Consequently, the portrayal of ETIM as a capable terrorist organization and a credible threat to China, and perhaps the world, has been reproduced uncritically throughout the academic literature related to terrorism, including in journal articles, monographs, and doctoral dissertations.¹⁵ In the chain of reproduced knowledge, the authors of these academic works on the Uyghur terrorist threat have, in turn, frequently crossed back into the policy community and into popular media through punditry.

In general, this chain of knowledge has become self-perpetuating as the literature that fuels it grows and increasingly cross-references itself. In fact, the literature on ETIM has grown to such an extent that enough information can be

¹³ See "Rohan Gunaratna," *SourceWatch: Your Guide to the Names Behind the News* (http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Rohan_Gunaratna).

¹⁴ The direct citations are from: Rohan Gunaratna and Kenneth George Pereire, "An Al-Qaeda Associate Group Operating in China?" *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4m No. 20 (2006), pp. 55-61. Additionally, see Gunaratna, "Xinjiang: China's Flashpoint?," Site Monitoring Service Jihadist Threat, 1 July 2009 (<http://news.siteintelgroup.com/component/content/article/121-rohan-0709>), and Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, Columbia University Press, 2002.

¹⁵ For examples, see John Wang, "The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement: A Case Study of a New Terrorist Organization in China," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 47(5), 2003, pp. 568-584; MAJ Shawn M. Patrick, *The Uyghur Movement: Insurgency in Xinjiang*, Monograph of the School of Advanced Military Studies, Leavenworth, Kansas, 2010; Martin I. Wayne, "Understanding China's War on Terror: Top-Down vs. Bottom-up Approaches (A Case Study of Counter-insurgency)," Doctoral Dissertation in International Studies, University of Denver, 2006.

compiled from secondary sources to fill an entire manuscript. As a testament to this phenomenon, two journalists/terrorist experts in 2010 published *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, which proudly characterizes itself as “the first book to focus specifically on the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.”¹⁶ The book exhaustively documents the narrative that has grown around ETIM, using secondary sources to provide a thorough list of alleged terrorist acts undertaken by the organization as well as brief biographies of 80 Uyghurs who are alleged to be or have been members of ETIM. Although the authors admit that they are not scholars and that their sources are primarily “media accounts and government documentation,” they obviously have aspirations of influencing policy since they cite their intended audience as being “particularly members of the U.S. defense and intelligence communities.”¹⁷

This paper does not intend to suggest that the self-perpetuating literature on ETIM is completely and intentionally fabricated. Rather, it argues that this literature is based on sloppy research and unreliable sources and that it has come together to create a dangerous and unsubstantiated narrative about Uyghur terrorism. In this context, it is important to critically engage what information we do know about the ETIM and to try to piece together a more reliable narrative about this organization and the threat of Uyghur terrorism more broadly. The remainder of this paper seeks to do just that.

II. In Search of the ETIM: What Do We Really Know about the Uyghur Terrorist Threat?

Spurred by my doubts about the accuracy of the prevalent narrative about Uyghur terrorism that has been developed by the government of China and perpetuated by the counterterrorism industry in the United States and elsewhere, I began researching ETIM and the Uyghur terrorist threat several years ago. In doing so, I examined documents from the hearings of the

¹⁶ Reed and Raschke, 2010.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

Combatant Status Review and Administrative Review Boards regarding Uyghurs who are or were interned at Guantanamo Bay detention facilities and conducted interviews with four former detainees who were released to Albania in 2006. I have also researched more intensively several events that are alleged to have been Uyghur-led terrorist attacks, and I have spoken with several Uyghurs accused of being members of ETIM both by the PRC and in the recently published aforementioned book about the organization.¹⁸

My research has demonstrated that it is very difficult to determine the full truth about this organization given the unreliability of the sources that discuss ETIM. That being said, one can make some better-informed conjectures about this organization based on that information which is available and on a broader knowledge of the Uyghur communities and the socio-political contexts of Central Asia and China where they are located. In determining the extent to which ETIM poses a threat to the PRC or the world at large, it is particularly important to address three critical questions about the organization: 1) did it ever and does it now exist?; 2) what is its support base in numbers and where are they located?; and 3) is it capable and does it have the resources necessary to carry out sophisticated terrorist attacks inside or outside of China?

In reference to all of these questions, the information provided by Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo Bay has been particularly instructive since these individuals have been accused by both the PRC and the United States of being members of ETIM. In essence, the testimonies of detainees who are or were interned at Guantanamo are the closest thing we have to raw eyewitness accounts of ETIM and its operations. The majority of these prisoners appear to have passed through some sort of Uyghur “training camp” in the Jalalabad area of Afghanistan that was intended to help Uyghurs prepare to fight against the Chinese state, and the people they identified as running this camp are the same

¹⁸ For all of the publicly available files from the Combatant Status Review Board and Administrative Review Board hearings of Uyghur detainees, see the China citizen category in the New York Times “Guantanamo Docket” (<http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/country/china>). My interviews with former detainees in Albania took place in Tirana, Albania during July 2009.

usually associated with the initial leadership of ETIM, Hasan Mahsum and Abdul Haq.¹⁹

Although all of the Uyghur detainees who were in this camp were forthcoming in their statements at various Guantanamo hearings about their distaste for Chinese rule in their homeland, they all denied belonging to ETIM, and most suggested they had never heard of the group until they were brought to the detention facilities. Interestingly, most of them also said they had not heard of Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, or even of the Taliban until coming to Guantanamo, and those who had heard of them demonstrated no interest in the global jihad ideology of these groups. Finally, all of them made a point of refuting any allegations that they saw the United States as an enemy. As one detainee noted in making this point, “a billion Chinese enemies, that is enough for me; why would I get more enemies?”²⁰

Perhaps most importantly, the detainees’ testimony about the “training camp” where they spent time does not fit the profile of a professional, organized, and resource-rich organization. They describe a small, old, and decrepit building in need of dire repair, and they note that their primary activities while at the location were to repair it and bring it back to livable condition. When asked about the training received at this camp, the detainees discuss running in the mornings and a one-time opportunity to fire a few bullets with the only Kalashnikov rifle that was available at the camp. In short, their description of this “training camp” suggests that it provided them with very little training and that it had virtually no resources to support any kind of militant operation. In fact, most of the detainees did not recognize this location as a “training camp” at all, and the majority suggested they went there as a temporary refuge as they sought ways to get to Turkey where they hoped to settle as refugees. As one detainee answered interrogators asking about the

¹⁹ Several of the detainees do acknowledge that Hasan Mahsum and Abdul Haq were associated with the “camp” in Jalalabad where they stayed. See, for example, *Summary of Administrative Review Board Proceedings for ISN 277*, pp. 3–4; *Summary of Unsworn Detainee Statement, ISN 281*, p. 4; *Summary of Unsworn Detainee Statement, ISN 328*, pp. 7–8.

²⁰ *Summary of Unsworn Detainee Statement, ISN 281*, p. 4.

“camp,” “it was a little Uigher [sic] community where Uighers [sic] went; I do not know what you mean about the place called camp.”²¹

Although one can justifiably question the accuracy of the statements of Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo concerning their activities in Afghanistan, it is notable that their statements generally do not contradict each other—they offer a cohesive story about their associations, or lack thereof, with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as well as about the relatively benign nature of the alleged ETIM camp in which they lived. Nonetheless, in an effort to get a clearer picture of how and why these individuals went to Afghanistan in the first place, I went to Albania during the summer of 2009 to interview four former detainees who had been released in 2006. These interviews generally reconfirmed the accounts from Guantanamo hearings and provided me with a richer understanding of how these individuals came to be in Afghanistan when the U.S. military entered the country in 2001.

As I began to interview the men, who had mostly become apprentice pizza cooks in Albania’s capitol city of Tirana, their stories sounded very familiar. Their lives prior to being taken captive were reminiscent of the accounts of the many Uyghur traders from China I had interviewed in Kazakhstan during the mid-1990s. Most of them were born in rural areas and had become involved in trading because few other career opportunities existed. Once engaged in trading, they realized that to make a living beyond subsistence they needed to become part of the transnational trade that joins the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China (XUAR) to its western neighbors.²² As a result, they traveled westward, trying to sell Chinese

²¹ *Summary of Unsworn Detainee Statement, ISN 276*, p. 3

²² The name of this region is a contentious issue. The name “Xinjiang,” or “New Frontier,” is generally associated with Beijing’s control of the region, first under the Qing and subsequently under Chinese states. The Uyghur independence movement, therefore, categorically refutes this name, which they view as a colonial moniker denying their right to sovereignty over the region. Uyghur activists instead tend to refer to the region as Eastern Turkistan or, less frequently, as Uyghurstan. The name of “Eastern Turkistan” was likewise created by outsiders to reflect the eastern areas of a general cultural region seen as the “land of the Turks.” Using either “Xinjiang” or “Eastern Turkistan” to refer to this region, therefore, positions oneself on one side or the other of the Uyghur-PRC conflict over the region. For this reason, I have chosen

manufactured goods in bordering states. Among the former detainees in Albania, those who had lived in the southern regions of the XUAR had gone directly to Pakistan and those who were from the north had first gone to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan before coming to Pakistan.

If the stories of these former detainees were similar to those of the men I had interviewed in Central Asia during the 1990s, there were also some important differences. Unlike in the 1990s, by 2000 it had become increasingly difficult for Uyghurs from the XUAR to make a living trading in bordering states. Larger Chinese companies dominated the trade in Chinese goods in both Central Asia and Pakistan by this time, making such small-time Uyghur middlemen traders nearly obsolete. At the same time, the Chinese state increasingly was putting pressure on the Central Asian and Pakistani security organs to closely scrutinize, and frequently extradite, Uyghurs living in their states.²³ As a result, the former detainees living in Albania all told me that they eventually needed to flee Central Asia and Pakistan either due to a lack of commercial success or because of visa problems. In this situation, the easiest destination for them was the relatively lawless state of Afghanistan, where they did not need visas to enter the country or even to work.

The four Uyghurs in Albania with whom I spoke all suggested that their move to Afghanistan was temporary. Most said they were destined for Turkey, hearing that Turkey frequently provided refuge to Chinese Uyghurs. They also claimed that people in Pakistan had told them that the safest passageway to Turkey for undocumented Uyghurs was via Afghanistan and Iran. Furthermore, they were told that there was a small Uyghur community near Jalalabad in Afghanistan, which could assist them in making such a journey. Although the

here to refer to the region by its present legal name, The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or the XUAR.

²³ By the late 1990s and early 2000s when these men came to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it was increasingly difficult for individual Uyghur entrepreneurs to make a profit in former Soviet Central Asia as this trade was increasingly becoming the domain of organized networks of Central Asian retailers and Han Chinese manufacturers or wholesalers. I have documented this elsewhere; see Sean R. Roberts, "A 'Land of Borderlands': Implications of Xinjiang's Trans-border Interactions," pp. 216–237, S. Frederick Starr, ed., *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, M.E. Sharpe, 2004.

former detainees arrived in Afghanistan at different times, they all found themselves in the same town near Jalalabad when the American bombing of the region began shortly after September 11th, 2001. The youngest in the group, who was eighteen when taken captive, said he had arrived in the country on the twelfth of September without any knowledge of the previous day's events.

When U.S. bombing began in Afghanistan, the Uyghurs with whom I spoke all fled to northern Pakistan. By their accounts, a Pakistani community gave them shelter upon arrival, but almost immediately turned them over to bounty hunters, who sold them to the U.S. military for \$5000 each. Subsequently, they found themselves in Guantanamo Bay accused of being "enemy combatants" of the United States in the GWOT.

None of the former detainees presently in Albania refuted that they are adamantly opposed to Chinese rule in their homeland, and it is certainly possible that they would have been willing to partake in violence targeting the Chinese state. They were quite clear, however, that they have never had any negative attitudes toward America. As one said to me, "we were never enemies of America; we have only seen America in films and on television; what do we know about America?" Furthermore, none of the Uyghurs with whom I spoke in Tirana blamed the United States directly for their fate. They continually characterized their incarceration as a "mistake" of the Bush administration, which Obama was now hopefully correcting. One, however, did note that he wished somebody in the United States would apologize for what had happened to him.

As one of the former detainees, Abu Bakker Qassim, wrote in a 2006 opinion piece for the *New York Times* after he was released, he and his fellow Uyghurs in Guantanamo had ended up there for "being in the wrong place at the wrong time in America's war in Afghanistan."²⁴ Given the more general fate of all of the Uyghur detainees in Guantanamo, it appears that the U.S. military essentially agrees with this assessment. Since the first five Uyghur detainees were cleared of charges against them and transferred to Albania in 2006, a

²⁴ Abu Bakker Qassim, "The View from Guantanamo," *The New York Times*, 17 September 2006.

series of litigations on behalf of the remaining Uyghur detainees was initiated. One participating judge characterized their cases as “Kafkaesque” and relieved the remaining seventeen of their “enemy combatant” status.²⁵ Fearful that their extradition to China would result in further internment and perhaps execution, the United States found refuge for six in Palau and four in Bermuda in 2009 as well as for two in Switzerland in 2010. Five Uyghurs remain in Guantanamo, awaiting a country willing to provide them a place to which they can safely relocate.

An analysis of the statements of Uyghur detainees from Guantanamo hearings and my own interviews conducted in Albania suggest a much different narrative of ETIM and its threat to the PRC than the one that has been cultivated by China and perpetuated by international “terrorism experts.” Information from the detainees does suggest that ETIM, or an organization like it, existed in 2001. This organization, apparently led by Mahsum and Haq, likely tried to recruit young Uyghur men and train them for militant activity against the Chinese state using the camp in Jalalabad described by the detainees as well as perhaps other training locations.

That being said, the statements of Guantanamo detainees also suggest that this effort was mostly informal, highly disorganized, and deprived of both weapons and financial resources. Aside from the poor conditions at the abandoned encampment that was reclaimed by Uyghurs in Jalalabad, the detainees were unanimous in noting that “weapons training” in the camp was limited to brief access to a single automatic rifle. Furthermore, while some of the detainees did note that they had gone to Jalalabad in the hopes of receiving combat training, most had ended up there through a variety of benign circumstances. While all of the detainees clearly articulated their animosity towards the Chinese state, those who had not come to Jalalabad explicitly for combat training were ambivalent at best about the prospect of participating in armed struggle.

²⁵ For a detailed survey of this litigation, see Jason S. Pinney, “The Uighurs at Guantanamo: ‘Sometimes We Just Didn’t Get the Right Folks’,” *Northwestern University Law Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 139–156.

In terms of the support enjoyed by ETIM and its capacity to carry out organized terrorist acts, almost all of the detainees suggested that they did not even view their participation in the “camp” as indicative of belonging to an organization, and they further suggested that they had never even heard of ETIM. Although this information suggests that ETIM had very little following in 2001, the self-proclaimed deputy chairman of the organization, Abudula Kariaji, claimed in a brief 2004 *Wall Street Journal* interview that the organization had at least two other training camps in Afghanistan prior to 2001, which allegedly prepared several hundred Uyghurs to carry out militant acts within China.²⁶ Although we know nothing of the other camps allegedly established in Afghanistan by ETIM prior to 2001, we can assume that if they were as poorly equipped as the one in Jalalabad, they provided limited capacity building opportunities for aspiring Uyghur militants. Indeed, in his 2004 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Kariaji even notes that none of those who were trained in these camps and had returned to China had carried out actual terrorist attacks.

In general, the statements of Uyghur detainees from Guantanamo also suggest that this organization had little, if any, contact with the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. Most detainees actually said that they had never heard of either group prior to their detention, and they all suggested that they had no interest in these groups’ pan-Islamic political aims, but were only concerned about the fate of their own people within China. Perhaps more importantly, it is unlikely that a “camp” supported financially by either the Taliban or Al-Qaeda would be as poorly equipped as that described by the detainees. Given statements provided to the *Wall Street Journal* by Kariaji in 2004, it is likely that ETIM leaders, such as Mahsum, had interactions with both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, at least prior to 2001. Kariaji noted that Mahsum had gained permission from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to establish ETIM camps in Afghanistan, but he also suggests that ETIM did not receive financing from these organizations and had

²⁶ See David S. Cloud and Ian Johnson, “In Post-9/11 World, Chinese Dissidents Pose U.S. Dilemma,” *Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, August 3, 2004, pp. A1–A6.

tense relations with them due to the Uyghurs' disinterest in global jihad and exclusive focus on China.²⁷

None of the sources of information about ETIM, its capacity, and support base provided thus far, however, sheds any light on the organization's activities after 2001. Indeed, there is little reliable post-2001 information about the organization available. Even the above-cited *Wall Street Journal* article from 2004 that cites Kariaji provides no updated information about ETIM in the post-9/11 context. We do know, however, that Mahsum was killed by the Pakistani military in October 2003.²⁸ In all likelihood, the presumably already weak organization he had established in Afghanistan virtually dissolved with his death, and its self-proclaimed deputy chairman, Kariaji, was in hiding when he gave his interview in 2004 to the *Wall Street Journal*.²⁹

It was not until 2006 that any concrete evidence of the organization's existence appeared again, now allegedly led by Haq. In 2006, videos about the martyrdom of Mahsum and the importance of jihad to the Uyghur people began to appear on *YouTube* using a new name, the *Turkistan Islamic Party* (TIP). Temporarily enjoying its own channel on *YouTube* and constructing its own public website, TIP began to publicize its existence and to make bold statements about its threat to the Chinese state. Most notably, TIP issued a video on the internet in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, boasting that the organization was poised to disrupt the international event through violent acts of terrorism.³⁰ While two bombs did go off in buses in the Chinese city of Kunming prior to the Olympics and TIP issued a video claiming responsibility, PRC authorities officially denied any link between the bombings and Uyghur

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "East Turkistan Terrorist Killed," *China Daily*, December 24, 2003 (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-12/24/content_293163.htm)

²⁹ Cloud and Johnson, 2004.

³⁰ This video, which opened with animation of a burning Beijing Olympics flag, portrayed a single masked Uyghur commander brandishing an Ak-47 automatic rifle and making threats to undertake substantial bombing attacks inside China during the Olympics. See: *Turkistan Islamic Party* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwO_wX5olNQ&feature=related)

terrorism.³¹ However, authorities did blame TIP for a far less sophisticated attack that was allegedly carried out by Uyghurs on a group of PRC security forces in the city of Kashgar just days prior to the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. It remains difficult to assess what really happened in the Kashgar attack and whether it was an organized attack or an impulsive act of violence undertaken by disgruntled citizens. It remains unclear if TIP was involved, and, furthermore, the *New York Times* raised questions about whether it involved Uyghurs at all.³²

Since the 2008 Olympics, TIP has continued to use the internet to showcase videos with impressive production values that propagate an image of a well-organized militant organization. The organization, however, mostly remains a mystery. It appears to be based in Pakistan since its initial leader, Haq, was killed by a U.S. drone attack in Waziristan in early 2010.³³ This may suggest that the organization has a closer association to the Taliban than did ETIM, but, like ETIM, it is unclear whether TIP is capable of actually carrying out organized terrorist acts inside the XUAR. The organization's videos frequently claim responsibility for violence inside the XUAR, including the murky instances of ethnic violence that transpired in the south of the region during the summer of 2011, but these videos also frequently contradict facts on the ground.³⁴ Furthermore, it remains difficult to substantiate from where these videos originate and whether there is any actual organization behind them, let alone whether their claims of responsibility actually reflect TIP-organized attacks. Although we know that TIP is capable of making videos and distributing them through the internet in order to create fear among Chinese citizens, we do not

³¹ "China Says Deadly Bomb Blasts, Olympics not Linked," *Agence Presse France*, July 22, 2008 (<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jgdEwFHtDwukLqrmGuZgQCKFWsQ>).

³² Edward Wong, "Doubt Arises in an Account of an Attack in China," *New York Times*, September 28, 2008.

³³ Andrew McGregor, "Will Xinjiang's Turkistani Islamic Party Survive the Drone Missile Death of its Leader?" *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8, Issue 10, The Jamestown Foundation, March 11, 2010 (http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36144).

³⁴ Michael Wines, "Militant Band Claims Role in Western China Attacks," *New York Times*, September 8, 2011.

know if it is capable of organizing any actual acts of violence inside or outside of China.

One means of measuring the threat of this organization or of Uyghur terrorism more generally is to simply examine the extent to which it, or any Uyghur organization, has succeeded in committing sophisticated terrorist acts in China or elsewhere. Indeed, the chain of reproduced knowledge about Uyghur terrorism attributes numerous terrorist acts to ETIM, and more recently to TIP, in China, Central Asia and even Turkey. As an example, the recently published manuscript on the ETIM described above boasts in its preface that it contains “the most comprehensive published open–source list of ETIM attacks” available.³⁵ Other articles on ETIM have similarly tried to catalog the terrorist acts of this group as have official communications from the Chinese government. Although all of these lists appear to document an impressive number of terrorist acts, there are several reasons to question their accuracy and relevance to the question at hand.

Firstly, there is little reliable information about any of these events. Given the lack of an independent media or transparent legal system in either China or the Central Asian states, we have no definitive evidence that any of them occurred in the manner that has been officially described. Secondly, the lists of ETIM’s terrorist acts generally include virtually all major violence allegedly involving Uyghurs in the region since the early 1990s regardless of motivations and despite the fact that the first official mention of ETIM by the Chinese government was only in 2001.³⁶ Thirdly, as Gardner Bovington has shown by researching primary sources, the number of alleged violent acts in the XUAR over the last decade is exponentially less than the averages for other parts of China, where violence, riots, civil unrest, and bombings have become quite commonplace.³⁷ This has led Bovington to note that, despite the hype

³⁵ Reed and Raschke, 2010, p. vii

³⁶ See, for example, Yongnian Zheng and Tai Wei Lim, “China’s New Battle with Terrorism in Xinjiang,” *East Asian Institute Background Brief No. 446*, National University of Singapore, April 2009 (<http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg/BB446.pdf>)

³⁷ Gardner Bovington, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their Own Land*, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 113–118.

about Uyghur terrorism, “Xinjiang has been far quieter since 2001 than has any part of China proper.”³⁸ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, even if we take at face-value the official accounts of the public incidents of violence chronicled in these lists, many of them simply do not qualify as terrorism.

This last point suggests the need for further scrutiny of the definition of “terrorism” used in any analysis of ETIM’s alleged “terrorist acts.” Although there is no authoritative definition of “terrorism,” this paper adopts that which is contained in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d). According to this statute, “the term terrorism means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”³⁹ In order to apply this definition to the case of the Uyghurs, I have compiled a list of 45 alleged Uyghur terrorist acts that occurred between 1990 and 2011 and have analyzed each act to determine the probability that it was indeed “terrorism.” In compiling this list (provided in the appendix), I have tried to consolidate various other lists I have encountered through my research.⁴⁰ The result may not represent every act of terrorism alleged to have been carried out by Uyghur organizations in the last twenty years, but it certainly covers most of them and includes the most important ones

Per the aforementioned definition, I was only able to conclude that one of these 45 acts of violence was, without reservations, most likely an act of “terrorism.” This was a 1998 attack on an apartment complex housing employees of the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey (incident #19 on chart in appendix). According to Turkish officials, the attack was carried out by a

³⁸ Bovington, 2010, p. 112.

³⁹ United States Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2003*, April 2004, p. xii.

⁴⁰ The list was compiled from several sources and includes acts that the PRC has claimed were Uyghur terrorist attacks as well as some that were claimed by people calling themselves members of TIP via videos posted to the internet, but where the PRC actually refuted these claims. The majority of pre-September 11th events were taken from the 2001 PRC White Paper, “Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by ‘Eastern Turkistan’ Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban.” Most events since 2001 were taken from the book on the ETIM (Reed and Raschke, 2010), with the exception of the most recent incidents, which were compiled from various news sources.

Turkish-born citizen of Turkey and two of his accomplices.⁴¹ The Turkish-born leader of the group may or may not be an ethnic Uyghur, but the names of the accomplices suggest that at least one was a Uyghur.⁴² This was a blatantly political act of violence against non-military personnel and was premeditated. Furthermore, we have conclusive evidence that it was carried out, but it is not clear that it was linked to any Uyghur organization or, for that matter, to any organized group beyond these three individuals.

Of the other 44 acts of violence analyzed, I could conclude with confidence that seven were not acts of terrorism (incidents 1, 9, 11, 14, 23, 41, and 42 on chart in appendix). Four of these acts were clearly incidents of civil unrest, most of which began as protests, one was a prison riot, one was an act of sabotage (not necessarily politically motivated), and one was a clash between criminals and the police. In addition, I concluded that fourteen of the incidents were probably not acts of Uyghur terrorism because the preponderance of evidence suggested that they were either criminal acts, civil unrest, false accusations or acts of violence not perpetrated by Uyghurs (incidents 18, 24–36, 44).

The nature of the remaining 23 acts of violence analyzed was inconclusive and was categorized as “maybe Uyghur terrorism.” Of these acts, sixteen occurred prior to the year 2000, and only seven had occurred since the beginning of GWOT and the first public reference to the ETIM. Overall, these 23 acts of violence included five alleged bombings targeting civilian locations, eleven assassinations, four attacks on police or security guards, one alleged mass arson, one alleged attempt to explode an airplane in flight, and one mass outbreak of public violence in Kashgar in the summer of 2011.

Due to the lack of transparency in China’s legal system and the general lack of accurate information coming out of Xinjiang, we know little details about

⁴¹ This information was revealed through information provided through the “Wikileaks” release of U.S. government documents (see “Guardiangate” website, <http://leaks.hohesc.us/?view=06ANKARA2352>, accessed March 22, 2012).

⁴² The name of the person arrested for carrying out the bombing is Abdulcafer Turkoglu, which does not offer clarity on his ethnicity. His accomplices were Seyit Taranci (a name of somebody who is of obvious Uyghur descent) and Kadir Karakus (a name suggesting likely Turkish descent).

these possible acts of terrorism. While they may have all been premeditated and politically motivated acts of violence, they also could have just as logically been the results of personal vendettas or frustrated rage. Generally, all of the incidents appear to lack the sophistication usually associated with international terrorism, which brings into question their premeditated nature and suggests that, even if premeditated, they were not the work of any well-organized “terrorist organization.”

The eleven assassinations, which all took place during the 1990s and primarily between 1996 and 1998, are the only incidents that have visible attributes of coordination, and they may indeed have been carried out by a religious group, and perhaps even by the precursor to the organization that Mahsum and Haq sought to establish, since they particularly targeted religious figures in the state-sponsored Islamic organizations of the XUAR. The apparent coordinated nature of these assassinations suggest that they may be more likely categorized as “terrorism” than the other incidents analyzed as being of an inconclusive nature. That said, we still lack a clear understanding of the intent of these assassinations, and it remains perplexing that almost all of these attacks targeted ethnic Uyghurs rather than Han Chinese.

Finally, it is worthwhile noting that the majority of recent acts of violence, the nature of which remains inconclusive, have targeted police and security guards. This is significant because it suggests that recent escalations in violence in the region are more likely in response to the increasingly repressive acts of security organs in the XUAR since the beginning of GWOT than they are to a cohesive separatist movement for Uyghur independence from China. In this context, these attacks on police and security forces may be spontaneous acts of frustration with authorities rather than premeditated and politically motivated violence. If they are premeditated and politically motivated, however, the targets chosen suggest that local security organs in the XUAR are helping to cultivate a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating “terrorists” through their vigorous attempts to prevent “terrorism.”

In summary, the facts do not support the idea that there is, or has been in recent history, a substantial and sophisticated Uyghur terrorist threat. The

evidence of actual terrorist acts perpetrated by Uyghurs is largely inconclusive as is the information about the capacity and reach of ETIM or TIP as a terrorist group with ties to global terrorism networks. As Gardner Bovington, who has conducted a broader evidence-based analysis of all mass protests and violent political acts allegedly perpetrated by Uyghurs in the XUAR between 1949 and 2005, suggests, “the events that triggered them (i.e. acts of protest or violence), the organizations that spurred them, and the issues they raised are far indeed from the themes of global Islamism or transnational terror organizations.”⁴³ Yet, the confidence with which most existing literature discusses Uyghur terrorism, ETIM, and TIP places the burden of proof for determining the legitimacy of claims about the Uyghur terrorist threat on those who remain unconvinced. In other words, the Uyghurs have become guilty until proven innocent of being tied to global terrorism.⁴⁴

If one analyzes all available evidence, the most likely scenario today is that, as in 2001 when the Guantanamo detainees lived in the alleged ETIM “training camp” in Jalalabad, there exist small groups of Uyghurs both inside and outside China who wish to carry out terrorist attacks in the XUAR, but they have little capacity to do so. Given the animosity that many Uyghurs harbor for the Chinese state, it is difficult to imagine that there are not at least some who would seek to use violence to achieve the goal of establishing Uyghur independence. That being said, the evidence suggests that such people have never been successful in obtaining substantial outside support or even in rallying significant numbers of followers. Finally, if such pockets of militant Uyghurs exist either within or outside China, there is no evidence whatsoever that they have embraced a jihadist ideology that would pit them against the

⁴³ Bovington, 2010, p. 116.

⁴⁴ This became particularly clear to me last year when working with a member of congress interested in releasing the remaining Uyghurs in Guantanamo into the United States. Although I was able to explain to him a variety of reasons to question the threat of Uyghur terrorism, he noted that there had to be conclusive evidence that ETIM was incapable of carrying out terrorist acts in order to challenge the U.S. government position. This is largely because neither scholars nor congressmen have access to the alleged non-Chinese documentary evidence that justified the U.S. recognition of this group as a terrorist organization since it is “highly classified.”

United States or any other non-Muslims save the Han Chinese and the Chinese State.

Given the way that the United States has quietly avoided making any vocal allegations of a Uyghur terrorist threat since its 2002 recognition of ETIM, one must assume that the U.S. government has come to similar conclusions about “Uyghur terrorism.” Unfortunately, for the Uyghurs, this does not undo the damage done to them by the original accusations from 2002 and the subsequent chain of knowledge production created by the “counterterrorism industry.”

Since 2002, human rights organizations have painstakingly documented the ways that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has justified its increased control of Uyghur political and religious expression within China and its encouragement of the Central Asian states to do the same in bordering areas by referencing the grave terrorist threat it faces from Uyghur militants.⁴⁵ Since 2002, this has led to the arrest of thousands, and likely the execution of hundreds, of Uyghurs inside China, including many intellectuals who have merely made critical statements about the state, on terrorism-related charges. According to the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, for example, some 18,000 Uyghurs were arrested under suspicion of separatist/terrorist activities in 2005 alone.⁴⁶ As a result, the Uyghurs have become increasingly marginalized in their perceived homeland and in neighboring states, but because of their perceived association with “global terrorism” there has been little serious international criticism directed at the PRC for these actions. Furthermore, due to the allegations of the Uyghur terrorist threat, numerous Uyghur exile activists outside of China who are accused by the PRC of having ties to ETIM or other terrorist groups have been denied entry into the United States. In essence, the dubious chain of reproduced knowledge about the

⁴⁵ See Amnesty International, *Uighurs Fleeing Prosecution as China Wages its “War in Terror,”* 2004; Human Rights Watch, *Devestating Blows: Religious Repression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang*, Vol. 12, No. 2(c), 11 April 2005; Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), *Persecution of Uyghurs in the Era of the “War on Terror”* 16 October 2007; and UHRP, *A “Life or Death Struggle” in East Turkestan: Uyghurs Face Unprecedented Persecution in Post-Olympic Period*, 4 September 2008.

⁴⁶ “18,000 Uyghurs Arrested ‘Security Threats’ Last Year,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 January 2006.

Uyghur terrorist threat described above has played a critical role in facilitating the Uyghurs' further marginalization and repression at the hands of the PRC.

III. The Future of China's "War on Terror" and the Uyghurs

The questionable nature of the assumptions often voiced about the Uyghur terrorist threat is all the more disconcerting in the present context. While the United States has recently toned down its rhetoric about its own "war on terror," especially after the killing of bin Laden, the PRC appears to be moving in the opposite direction with its anti-terrorism policies. Recently, Chinese authorities have stepped up both their rhetoric about and policy responses to the threat of Uyghur terrorism, particularly in the context of the inter-ethnic violence that has erupted in the XUAR over the past two and one-half years.

The first event contributing to the PRC's increased measures for combating Uyghur terrorism took place in July 2009 in Urumqi, the capital city of the XUAR. On the fifth of July, a group of mostly young Uyghurs organized a street march to protest the authorities' inaction regarding a case where a group of Han workers killed several Uyghur migrant workers in a southern Chinese factory under the suspicion that the Uyghurs had raped two Han women.⁴⁷ Although there are conflicting reports about who initiated the violence, the protest devolved into a bloody conflict between Uyghur protestors, the police, and Han citizens. The violence continued for several days as Han vigilante groups began attacking Uyghurs throughout the city in retaliation for Han casualties on the day of the protest. In the end, the unrest was the most violent ethnic conflict in China in decades. Although the Chinese state has been inconsistent in whether describing this violence as "terrorism," it has continually maintained that Uyghur groups abroad provoked it. This event increased the anxiety of the PRC with regard to Uyghur dissent and ushered in a new era of policies aimed at even more harshly restricting the political voice of Uyghurs within the XUAR.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, *"Justice, Justice," The July 2009 Protests in Xinjiang, China*, Amnesty International Publications, 2010.

In the aftermath of the violence, the XUAR government undertook a full-scale effort to hunt down, convict, and severely punish Uyghurs that were involved in organizing the original protests. A well-researched report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project documented at least 26 instances of death sentences being levied on those involved in the protests, 24 of whom were Uyghur and only two of whom were Han Chinese.⁴⁸ The number of others who were arrested and given jail terms remains unknown, but the *Financial Times* had reported that at least 4,000 Uyghurs had already been arrested within two weeks of the events.⁴⁹ According to Human Rights Watch, a large but unknown number of the Uyghurs who were detained in the aftermath of the events, often taken from their homes, have all but disappeared.⁵⁰ Although the number of these “enforced disappearances” is unknown, Human Rights Watch was able to document 43 cases in depth through interviews with family members.⁵¹ Among those who did not disappear and instead faced criminal charges, many of whom were minors as young as 14 years of age, human rights groups have documented a large number of breaches of due process in their convictions as well as instances of torture while they were in custody.⁵² Finally, in the aftermath of the events, the Chinese government closed access to the internet in the region for an entire year.

Although the harsh measures were intended to stifle Uyghur dissent within China, they arguably have resulted in the reverse. During July 2011, for example, a variety of violent incidents broke out in the southern XUAR cities of

⁴⁸ UHRP, “*Can Anyone Hear Us?*”, *Voices from the 2009 Unrest in Urumchi*, July 2010, p. 52. It should be noted that UHRP thus far has only been able to verify that nine of the executions have been carried out (eight Uyghurs and one Han Chinese). No public information has been available on the other cases. In addition to these death sentences, courts convicted an additional nine people (eight of whom are Uyghurs) to death sentences with a two-year reprieve.

⁴⁹ Kathrin Hille, “Xinjiang Widens Crackdown on Uighurs,” *Financial Times*, 19 July 2009.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch, October 2009.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵² See Amnesty International, 2010, pp. 21–25; Human Rights Watch, 2009, pp. 18–20; and UHRP, 2010, pp. 42–52.

Hotan and Kashgar.⁵³ Although the circumstances surrounding this violence and the extent of its premeditated nature remain unclear, the PRC quickly suggested that it was the work of Uyghur terrorists who are becoming an increasingly dangerous threat, which must be addressed with more vigor both inside and outside the borders of China. Furthermore, alleged representatives of TIP issued another video to claim responsibility for these acts, lending more legitimacy to the claims of terrorism coming from official PRC sources.

Perhaps due to China's assumption that TIP is based in Pakistan, local PRC officials were quick to make public statements suggesting that Uyghur terrorists trained in Pakistan had carried out the violence.⁵⁴ Although the claims of Uyghur links to international terrorist groups were not unusual for a Chinese government source, the specific suggestion that Pakistan had become a training ground for Uyghur terrorism were. In turn, the Pakistan government quickly denied that it had any links to Uyghur terrorists and insisted that it would assist the PRC in tackling the problem it faced from alleged Uyghur militants.⁵⁵ Although analysts in summer 2011 speculated on how China's accusations about Uyghur terrorism's links to Pakistan would affect Sino-Pakistan relations, it later became clear that the accusations have helped strengthen ties between the countries and have laid the groundwork for a more assertive Chinese anti-terrorism policy both at home and in South Asia in cooperation with Pakistan. This new iteration of the PRC's anti-terrorism policy became clearer in October 2011 as it was revealed that China is both contemplating the establishment of military bases in Pakistan and working on new anti-terrorism legislation.⁵⁶

⁵³ See: Michael Wines, "Police Station Raid Leaves 4 Dead in Western China," July 19, 2011, *The New York Times*; and Michael Wines, "Deadly Violence Strikes Chinese City Racked with Ethnic Tensions," July 31, 2011, *The New York Times*.

⁵⁴ Michael Wines, "China Blames Foreign-Trained Separatists for Attacks in Xinjiang," August 1, 2011, *The New York Times*.

⁵⁵ Stephanie Ho, "Pakistan Denies Link to Chinese Terror Group," August 24, 2011, *Voice of America* (<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/Pakistan-Denies-Involvement-with-Xinjiang-Terrorists-128312668.html>)

⁵⁶ See: Amir Mir, "China Seeks Military Bases in Pakistan," October 26, 2011, *Asia Times* (http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MJ26Df03.html); and Christopher Bodeen, "China Considers New Law Better Defining Terrorism," October 24, 2011, *The Associated Press*.

This intensification of both the rhetoric and implementation of counterterrorism policy by the PRC is troublesome on multiple levels, especially given the questions surrounding the reality of the Uyghur terrorism threat to the PRC that have been recounted above. Firstly, the claims of an increased Uyghur terrorist threat offers the PRC more justification for dealing heavily-handedly with its Uyghur population, which has demonstrated increased disgruntlement with the PRC's rapid development of the XUAR and the associated increase in numbers of Han migrants from China proper settling in the region. As the aftermath of the harsh measures taken against Uyghurs in China following the July 2009 events demonstrate, this will most likely only lead to increased ethnic tension, more violence, and increased potential for conflict in the XUAR. Secondly, if the increased profile of counterterrorism in China's domestic and international policies actually does lead to the establishment of Chinese military bases in Pakistan, it may further aggravate the tense relations and general insecurity of South Asia.

In conclusion, it should be stated that these policies, if they do come to fruition, are a dangerous game for China. In South Asia, it could turn Islamic extremists against China in a way that has thus far not been the case. As a result, it could bring the relatively few Uyghur militants something that has thus far been elusive for them, external support. In China itself, it likewise could sway much more substantial popular support among Uyghurs toward such militants. As such, it could serve to turn what is now an over-exaggerated Uyghur terrorist threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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The author welcomes comments at seanrr@gmail.com.*

Appendix: Analysis of Alleged Uyghur Terrorist Acts, 1990–2011

#	Date	Alleged Act	Terrorism?	Reasoning
1	April 5, 1990	Killed and injured more than 100 civilians and soldiers in Baren Township	Not Uyghur terrorism	Organized uprising intended to occupy town, not intended to attack civilians or invoke fear. Would be better characterized as an insurrection than as terrorism.
2	February 28, 1991	Explosion in a video theatre of a bus terminal in Kuqa county, killing one	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little reliable information is available about these explosions, who was behind them, or their intended purpose.
3	February 5, 1992	Bus explosion in Urumqi killing and injuring over 20 people	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little reliable information is available about these explosions, who was behind them, or their intended purpose.
4	June–September 1993	Series of bombings in southern area of XUAR	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little reliable information is available about these explosions, who was behind them, or their intended purpose.
5	August 23, 1993	Two men stabbed a government official and an Imam in Yencheng County	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. Both victims were Uyghurs
6	March 22, 1996	The vice-chairman of the Islamic Association of Xinhe County shot	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. The victim was a Uyghur.
7	April 29,	An attack on the	Maybe	Very little is known about this

	1996	home of a local Uyghur government official, killing four	Uyghur terrorism	event, but since it was an attack on a local government official, it may have been politically motivated. It may have also been motivated by a personal vendetta. All victims were allegedly Uyghurs.
8	May 12, 1996	Attack on a local representative of the Islamic Association in Kashgar region and his son	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little is known about this event. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta.
9	July 15 1996	A prison rebellion in Xayar County killing 15 people	Not Uyghur terrorism	PRC claims this was planned; we do not know. But, even if planned, a prison rebellion is not terrorism.
10	August 27, 1996	An attack on a government building killed a government official and a policeman	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. It is not clear whether the victims were Uyghurs or not.
11	February 5, 1997	A riot organized in Kuldja that resulted in over 300 casualties	Not Uyghur terrorism	This event began as a protest that was not likely planned to become violent. Young Uyghur men protested religious restrictions, and they clashed with security forces. It remains unclear who started the violence (protestors or security), but regardless it does not seem to have been premeditated.
12	February 25, 1997	Bomb explosion in Urumqi that	Maybe Uyghur	Very little reliable information is available about these

		caused nearly 100 casualties	terrorism	explosions, who was behind them, or their intended purpose.
13	March 23, 1997	An attack on a government official and his wife in Aksu region killed both	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. Both victims were Uyghurs
14	February, 1997	Shots fired at Chinese consulate in Istanbul	Not Uyghur terrorism	Although the PRC mentions shots being fired, independent media sources only remark on a protest. ⁵⁷ If shots were fired, it was more likely a spontaneous action by an angry protestor.
15	June 4, 1997	A local government official in the Hotan region was killed in his home	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. The victim was a Uyghur
16	November 6, 1997	Imam and Chairman of the Islamic Association of Aksu killed	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. The victim was a Uyghur.
17	January 27, 1998	A local government official and Imam in Yecheng County killed	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. The victim was a Uyghur.
18	January–February	Poisonings in Kashgar region	Probably not Uyghur	Very little information is known about these poisonings, but it

⁵⁷ See Millward, *Violent Separatism*, p. 19.

	1998		terrorism	appears to be an odd act of violence to blame on terrorism, especially since no explanation is offered of its political meaning or its targeting.
19	March 5, 1998	Bombing attack of Chinese consulate in Istanbul	Probably Uyghur terrorism	This was actually an attack on an apartment complex in Istanbul that housed workers from the Chinese consulate. According to Turkish authorities, a Turkish-born citizen of Turkey (maybe ethnically Uyghur) allegedly carried out the attack.
20	April 7, 1998	Bombings at homes of government officials in Yencheng Country, injuring eight	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little reliable information is available about these explosions, who was behind them, or their intended purpose.
21	May 23, 1998	15 cases of arson at businesses in Urumqi	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been related to either business or criminal activities. Authorities claimed it was carried out by a known Uyghur organization (East Turkistan Liberation Organization).
22	August 23, 1999	Murder of local police official and his son in Kashgar region	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. The victims were Uyghurs.
23	October 11,	Cotton burned at a	Not Uyghur	This may or may not have been

	1999	cotton processing station in Hotan	terrorism	politically motivated, but if political, it would be more an incident of sabotage than terrorism. Nobody was injured.
24	October 24, 1999	Attack on a police station in Zepu County, resulting in the murders of a police officer and a criminal suspect	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. The fact that a criminal suspect was killed, however, suggests that this attack may have been a retribution attack on the criminal, not on the police.
25	May 2000	Kidnapping and killing of Chinese businessman in Kyrgyzstan	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	The facts surrounding this event remain murky, but there is evidence that it involved conflict over the making of counterfeit passports and was likely related to criminal activity rather than politically motivated.
26	May 2000	Bazaar burned down in Kyrgyzstan	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	The facts surrounding this event also remain murky, but there is very little evidence that it would have been politically motivated since the bazaar's owner is Uyghur and is politically active among Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan.
27	May 25, 2000	Xinjiang officials investigating the death of the Chinese businessman that same month in Kyrgyzstan	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	The facts surrounding this event also remain murky, but most evidence suggests that this was not politically motivated violence, but criminal activity. The people who allegedly attacked these

		attacked, one killed		officials and murdered one later were arrested in Kazakhstan and had a gun-fight with policemen. In speaking with a Kazakh lawyer familiar with the case, he told me that these individuals were part of a criminal band rather than a political group.
28	March 2000	Murder of a Uyghur political leader and businessman in Kyrgyzstan	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	These attacks were allegedly undertaken by the same people who bombed the apartment building of the Chinese consulate. They assassinated several Chinese businessmen in Istanbul.
29	February 3, 2001	Attack on the home of a court official in Kashgar region, resulting in the death of the official	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, but it was more likely a personal vendetta given its isolation from other assassinations and that it involved a judge. The victim was a Uyghur.
30	May 2002	Attempted bombing of U.S. Embassy in Kyrgyzstan	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	This is a very suspicious accusation that was made against some Uyghurs from China who were implicated in the May 2000 murders of a Chinese businessman and a Chinese official in Kyrgyzstan. One of these people allegedly had a map of the U.S. Embassy, and on this basis, it was decided that they intended to bomb the embassy. This occurred at a convenient

				<p>political moment where the PRC was seeking U.S. recognition of the existence of Uyghur terrorist groups. There seems to be very little hard evidence behind the accusations that these men intended to attack the U.S. Embassy, and they had no motivation to do so.</p>
31	August 8, 2005	Bombing in Fujian Province	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	<p>A group claiming to be the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in 2008 claimed responsibility for this attack in a video released on YouTube. The Chinese government had actually never claimed that Uyghurs were behind this attack and had convicted a local farmer of the attack.</p>
32	March 7, 2008	Attempted plane explosion	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	<p>In the run-up to the Olympics in Beijing, it was claimed that a 19-year old Uyghur woman tried to use a flammable liquid to set fire to the bathroom of a flight from Urumchi to Beijing while in the air. Little information is known about this incident or its motivations.</p>
33	March 13, 2008	Explosion at a vehicle repair plant in Guangzhou, China	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	<p>Like the bombing in Fujian, this was an explosion that was claimed by people on the internet claiming to be TIP. The PRC actually refuted that this explosion had anything to do with Uyghurs. Furthermore, the video on the internet had the facts wrong regarding the</p>

				explosion, suggesting it was in a plastics factory.
34	May 5, 2008	Explosion on a bus in Shanghai	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	Like the bombings in Fujian and Guangzhou, this was an act claimed on the internet by a group of people suggesting that they are associated with TIP. The PRC again refuted that this explosion had anything to do with Uyghurs and was not terrorism.
35	May 17, 2008	A tractor hit a mini-bus and caused an explosion in Zhejiang Province	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	Again, this was claimed by people allegedly belonging to TIP on the internet. The PRC refuted that it was at all related to Uyghur political aims and was carried out by a local disgruntled gambler who was en route to a blow up a casino when his tractor full of explosives hit the mini-bus.
36	July 21, 2008	Two bus explosions in Kunming, Yunnan Province	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	Again, this was claimed by people allegedly belonging to TIP on the internet. The PRC refuted that it was at all related to Uyghur political aims. It was never clear who carried out the attacks, but it did appear to be terrorism, but likely planned by local disgruntled citizens rather than Uyghurs.
37	August 4, 2008	Attack on group of police officers in Kashgar	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	This attack during the Olympics in Beijing has often been touted as evidence of Uyghur terrorism, but it is also questionable whether it was actually a terrorist act. Two

				Uyghur men allegedly drove a truck into a group of policemen doing morning 38 exercises and then attacked the police with knives, killing 16. It may have been politically motivated, but also may have been a personal vendetta or a sudden outburst of violence against police in the region.
38	August 8, 2008	Bombing of a police convoy in the Kuldja region	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	It is not clear whether this act ever took place. The only information available on this attack comes from an alleged internet communication by a group claiming to be TIP. Given the many false claims of attacks made on the internet in 2008 by people claiming to be TIP, one should cast serious doubt on the legitimacy of this claim.
39	August 10, 2008	A series of bombings in Kuqa killing two and injuring several others	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. TIP later claimed credit for the attacks, but given past false claims, this does not tell us much.
40	August 12, 2008	Stabbing of four security guards at a roadside checkpoint in the Kashgar region, resulting in three killed	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	Very little information about this event is known. It may have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. Given that it happened at the checkpoint, it may also have been related to criminal activity. TIP later

				claimed credit for the attack, but given past false claims, this does not tell us much.
41	August 27, 2008	Clashes with police investigating the stabbing of security guards	Not Uyghur terrorism	According to accounts of this event, it appears that people investigated by police clashed with the police, resulting in deaths. This is more a conflict with authorities than terrorism regardless of whether the original attack had been politically motivated.
42	July 5-7, 2009	Ethnic riots in Urumqi	Not Uyghur terrorism	These riots were perhaps the largest incident of civil unrest in China since the Tiananmen Square conflict in 1989, but it did not resemble terrorism. There was massive violence carried out by both Uyghurs and Han Chinese, resulting in substantial loss of life and property damage. The PRC is not consistent in whether it suggests that the riot was an act of terror. Generally, however, the PRC blames Rabiya Qadir and the World Uyghur Congress, rather than ETIM or TIP for instigating it. Evidence is not clear as to how the event transformed from a peaceful protest into a violent riot, and it remains unknown whether it was protestors or security forces that carried out the first violent acts.
43	August 19, 2010	Explosion in Aksu targeting security	Maybe Uyghur	Very little information about this event is known. It may

		officers	terrorism	have been politically motivated, or it may have been a personal vendetta. Apparently, it involved driving a vehicle with explosives into a group of security guards.
44	July 18, 2011	Attack on a police station in the Hotan region	Probably not Uyghur terrorism	Few details are known about this event, but it appears to have been a mass disturbance at a police station preceded by a protest against security tactics in the region. It is unclear when the incident became violent, but most accounts make the event sound more like civil unrest rather than premeditated terrorism. TIP later claimed credit for the attacks, but given past false claims, this does not tell us much.
45	July 30–31, 2011	Violent attacks and explosions in Kashgar	Maybe Uyghur terrorism	The details of these events are murky, but they appear to have included two men driving a truck into a crowd of people and then attacking them with knives. Allegedly, there were explosions both that day (July 30) and the next in the city, and several people were killed. It is unclear if this was a series of violent events triggered by local issues or a politically motivated and premeditated act of terrorism. TIP later claimed credit for the attacks, but given past false claims, this does not tell us much.

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