

## Backgrounders

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### The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

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#### **Introduction**

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is a Muslim separatist group founded by militant Uighurs, members of the Turkic-speaking ethnic majority in northwest China's Xinjiang province. The U.S. treasury department listed ETIM as a **terrorist organization** in 2002 during a period of increased U.S.-Chinese cooperation on antiterrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. The group and its ties to Muslim fundamentalism have compounded Chinese concerns about the rising threat of terrorism within the country as its restive western regions faced a spate of terrorist attacks in 2014.

#### **What is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement?**

Experts say reliable information about ETIM is hard to come by, and they disagree about the extent of ETIM's terrorist activities and ties to global terrorism. Xinjiang province, where the group is based, is a vast, sparsely populated area that shares borders with eight countries, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. The first mention of ETIM surfaced around 2000, when a Russian newspaper reported that Osama bin Laden had pledged funds to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and ETIM during a 1999 meeting in Afghanistan.

Reportedly founded by [Hasan Mahsum](#), a Uighur from Xinjiang's Kashgar region, ETIM has been listed by the State Department as one of the **more extreme separatist groups**. It seeks an independent state called East Turkestan that would cover an area including parts of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). After Mahsum's assassination by Pakistani troops in 2003 during a raid on a suspected al-Qaeda hideout near the Afghanistan border, the group was led by Abdul Haq, who was reportedly killed in Pakistan in 2010. In August 2014, Chinese state media released a report stating that Memetuhut Memetrozi, a co-founder of ETIM who is serving a life sentence in China for his involvement in terrorist attacks, had been indoctrinated in a madrassa in Pakistan. The report, which said Memetuhut had met Mahsum in 1997 and launched ETIM later that year, marked a rare public admission of Pakistani ties to Uighur militancy.

Some experts say ETIM is an umbrella organization for many splinter groups, including ones that operate in Pakistan and central Asia. The Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), for instance, is one of the most prominent groups, formed in 2006 by Uighurs who fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s. That group took credit for a **series of attacks** in several Chinese cities in 2008, including deadly bus explosions in Shanghai and Kunming. According to U.S.-based intelligence firm Stratfor, the TIP's "claims of responsibility appear exaggerated, but the threat TIP poses cannot be ignored." Stratfor also said that the TIP had expanded its presence on the Internet, issuing videos calling for a

jihad by Uighurs in Xinjiang. Ben N. Venzke, head of the U.S.-based independent terrorism-monitoring firm IntelCenter, says it is unclear whether the TIP is separate from ETIM, but notes that the groups' objectives are both Islamist and nationalist.

*"Beijing's inability or unwillingness to address adequately the well-founded political and economic grievances of the Uighurs does not minimize the actual terror threat that China might face from Uighur separatists, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement." —Elizabeth Economy, Council on Foreign Relations*

Others are not convinced. Omer Kanat, senior editor of the Uighur service for U.S.-funded Radio Free Asia, says the TIP may not even be a Xinjiang-based Uighur group. He suggests a possible affiliation between the TIP and the Islamic Party of Turkestan, formerly known as the **Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan** (IMU).

China's communist regime, which fears that China could splinter if regional separatist movements gain ground, has long called ETIM a terrorist group; after September 11, 2001, China warned the Bush administration that ETIM had ties to al-Qaeda and **bin Laden**. The group is also listed by the UN Security Council's al-Qaeda/Taliban Sanctions Committee, although it is not on the U.S. state department's main list of **foreign terrorist organizations**. Since 2002, the People's Liberation Army has conducted military exercises in Xinjiang with central Asian countries, as well as Russia, to combat what China calls "East Turkestan terrorists." In August 2002, after months of pressure from Beijing, the Bush administration announced it would freeze the group's U.S. assets.

### **Who are the Uighurs?**

The **Uighurs** (pronounced WEE-guhrs) number around **ten million** in China, largely in Xinjiang, which became a province in 1884. Ethnically Turkic, they speak Uighur and most practice Sufi Islam. The Uighurs briefly achieved statehood twice after the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)—once from 1931 to 1934, and again from 1944 to 1949, when the communists took power and brought the region under their complete control. In 1955, Xinjiang became classified as an "autonomous region" of the People's Republic of China, although many Uighurs complain of forced assimilation.

There is **no unified Uighur agenda**, wrote **Elizabeth Van Wie Davis** for the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in a 2008 paper. While some Uighurs seek a separate state, others prefer to maintain a cultural distinction and autonomous rapport with China, she noted. Some are also content with integration into the Chinese system. Moreover, ETIM has never served as the sole representative of Uighur separatism. Many **separatist political organizations** among the million-strong Uighur émigré community are not radical, nor do they advocate violence.

"It is clear that the Chinese leadership fears that Xinjiang separatism has and will continue to gain support from transnational Muslim extremists, with possible ramifications both for other latent Chinese separatist movements without a Muslim connection and for other Chinese Muslims without a separatist agenda," Van Wie Davis wrote. In 1996, China signed the Shanghai Treaty with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, using the accord to pressure Central Asian states to deter their ethnic Uighur minorities from supporting separatism in Xinjiang and to **guarantee extradition** of Uighurs fleeing China.

Tensions between China's ethnic Han majority and Uighurs have led to sporadic hostilities. In July 2009, a fight erupted in a factory in the southern province of Guangdong when Uighurs accused Han Chinese coworkers of racial violence. A consequent demonstration organized by more than a thousand Uighur protestors **escalated into a riot** in Xinjiang's capital of Urumqi, leaving more than 150

casualties; it was the country's deadliest public violence since the 1989 crackdown on demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Ilham Tohti, a prominent Uighur economist who had written critically about government policies toward the ethnic group, was later detained and has since been placed intermittently under [house arrest](#). The event led then Guangdong Party committee secretary Wang Yang to suggest that China needed to [reform its ethnic minority policies](#) or face further "difficulties."

A recent spate of knife attacks has heightened concerns. An assault outside a railroad station in Guangzhou in May 2014 marked the [third of its kind](#) since March, when a group of Uighurs killed twenty-nine people at a [railway station in Kunming](#), Yunnan province. In late April, a bomb and knife assault left three people dead outside a train station in [Urumqi, Xinjiang](#). President Xi Jinping ordered Xinjiang authorities to take "resolute measures" and crush "violent terrorists" after the attack.

### **Does the ETIM have ties to al-Qaeda?**

Since the 1990s, China has publicly linked ETIM to al-Qaeda, as well as the Taliban, although such claims have been debated. In January 2002, a Chinese [government study](#) reported that ETIM had received money, weapons, and support from the terrorist organization. According to the report, ETIM militants were trained by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and crossed back into Xinjiang, where they set up terrorist cells. ETIM leader Mahsum denied this, claiming the group had [no organizational links](#) to al-Qaeda or the Taliban.

In a [2013 paper for \*Strategic Studies Quarterly\*](#), expert Philip Potter writes that "China's ongoing security crackdown in Xinjiang has forced the most militant Uyghur separatists into volatile neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, where they are forging strategic alliances with, and even leading, jihadist factions affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban." As a result, militant Uighur groups will likely deepen their collaboration with a dense web of [international terrorist organizations](#), and potentially enable the capabilities of those groups. In March 2014, TIP leader Abdullah Mansour vowed from his hideout in Pakistan a holy war against the Chinese, whom he described as an "enemy of all Muslims." TIP separatists have mainly hidden in the restive North Waziristan region—a troubling association that has prompted Beijing to pressure Islamabad on its [counter-terrorism efforts](#).

*Information about ETIM's activities is tightly controlled by China, which has blamed the group for more than two hundred terrorist incidents in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001.*

The United States also believes there is a link between ETIM and al-Qaeda. The State Department said ETIM has received ["training and funding"](#) from al-Qaeda and has fought in the group's ranks against the U.S. troops during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. In August 2002, the Bush administration designated ETIM as a terrorist organization. That same year, U.S. officials captured twenty-two Uighurs from a camp in Afghanistan, and detained them at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, on suspicion of being enemy combatants. They were ultimately cleared of terrorism charges and repatriated to Albania, Bermuda, Palau, Switzerland, and Pakistan.

While experts agree that hundreds of Uighurs joined al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan in the past, some doubt that ETIM continues to have significant ties to bin Laden's former network. Since September 11, 2001, China has repeatedly tried to paint its campaign against Uighur separatists in Xinjiang as a flank of the U.S.-led war on terrorism and has tried to convince Washington to drop its long-standing protests over Chinese human rights abuses in its crackdowns in Xinjiang.

### **What kinds of attacks has the group launched?**

Information about ETIM's activities is tightly controlled by China, which has blamed the group for more than two hundred terrorist incidents in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001. China has [accused ETIM](#) of bombing buses, markets, and government institutions—as well as assassinating local officials, Muslim leaders, and civilians—in attacks that have killed 162 people. The Chinese government has also accused the group of organizing violence beyond China's borders, alleging that ETIM launched two attacks at the Chinese embassy in Turkey in the late 1990s and was associated with the 2000 assassination of Nighmet Bosakof, president of Kyrgyzstan's Uighur Youth Alliance.

In 2002, two ETIM members were deported from Kyrgyzstan to China for plotting to attack the U.S. embassy in Bishkek, although no such attack took place. The group drew particular attention before the 2008 Beijing Olympics; in July 2008, ETIM, under the banner of the TIP, threatened the games. The same year, ETIM claimed responsibility for two bus bombs in Kunming, Yunnan province.

The group took credit again in July 2011 for [two attacks](#) primarily targeting government officials in Xinjiang, according to the State Department: an incident at a police department in Hotan claimed four lives, and a series of bomb and knife attacks in Kashgar left at least twelve dead and over forty injured. A 2013 Tiananmen Square car bomb attack, which killed five and injured forty, marked the first time the government blamed an attack directly on ETIM. China's security chief labeled the group the "most direct and [realistic security threat](#)" to the country, although Uighur activists [denied](#) the charges.

### **How does China respond to ETIM and other Uighur separatist movements?**

Beijing's policies toward separatists have involved the threat of military force; a series of exercises spread over one month in 2001 in Kashgar, Xinjiang, was one of the largest ever staged by the Chinese military in the region. A burgeoning security presence, marked by a proliferation of campaigns in which suspected nationalists [are rounded up](#), has also sought to limit the spread of radicalism. The government increased its public security budget for Xinjiang by almost [ninety percent in 2010](#). The regime has also deployed economic tools to address socioeconomic gaps, with current and previous administrations emphasizing [development strategies](#) [PDF] to reduce poverty and build regional infrastructure in a bid to quell separatist fervor.

But human rights groups maintain that China uses counterterrorism efforts as a pretext to [suppress Uighurs](#), who often resent the restriction of religious and cultural expression. And China's increased economic efforts in the region have stirred resentment amongst Uighurs, who complain that the heavy influx of Han Chinese has taken jobs from Uighur natives. After the 2013 Tiananmen attack, Uighurs blamed the violence on cultural repression, corruption, and [police abuses](#). The 2014 [knife attack](#) at a Kunming train station, labeled a Xinjiang separatist "terrorist attack" by the central government, triggered [further concerns](#) of discrimination.

The incidents have [revived debate](#) about China's policy toward its ethnic groups in the wake of its high-profile Third Plenum in November 2013, which set a policy roadmap for the next decade but mentioned little of its ethnic policies. So far, Beijing has "done little to address the [real sources](#) of its Xinjiang problem, which are economic, political, and cultural," writes CFR Senior Fellow [Elizabeth Economy](#). "Beijing's inability or unwillingness to address adequately the well-founded political and economic grievances of the Uighurs does not minimize the actual terror threat that China might face from Uighur separatists, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement." China's rise and increasing global prominence has also made it a more desirable target for terrorist attacks, particularly as its quest for resources leads it to the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions central to the interests of established terrorist organizations.

## Additional Resources

Expert Philip Potter addresses the growing threat of terrorism in China in [this paper](#) [PDF] in *Strategic Studies Quarterly*.

This [Congressional Research Report](#) [PDF] discusses ETIM and U.S.-China counterterrorism cooperation.

This [article](#) profiles Chinese Muslim radicals and the developments of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.

This [State Department country report](#) offers an overview of terrorism threats in East Asia, including a profile of ETIM.

Chien-peng Chung profiles Uighur separatism in [this Foreign Affairs article](#).

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