



## **Crossing Red Lines?**

### **Turkey's Assault of China's Sovereignty and Incitement of Xinjiang Insurgency**

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#### **Abstract**

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Turkey is challenging China's "One China Policy" and sovereignty over its Muslim province of Xinjiang, which Ankara refers to as East Turkestan. Additionally, Ankara's recruitment for Syria's anti-Assad groups that include Uyghur separatists is fanning insurgency in Xinjiang, risking escalation of broader conflict between Ankara and Beijing. Given China wants to: (1) prevent Turkey from setting up a Salafist statelet in Syria to export Uyghur/TIP terrorism to Xinjiang, similar to US preventing Taliban in Afghanistan from exporting Al Qaeda terrorism to America; (2) counter Turkey's support of Uyghur insurgency by supporting an independent Kurdistan; and (3) fears that President Erdogan will continue to support Xinjiang secession as well as anti-China/anti-Assad insurgencies, an invasion of Syria by Turkey will likely draw China to join Russia and Iran with a military response.

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## Analysis

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Turkey is challenging China's sovereignty and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s "One China Policy" over its territory—a "core interest" and red line for Beijing.<sup>1</sup>

On 29 June, Turkey's foreign ministry issued a statement to condemn China's domestic policy regarding a ban on fasting during Ramadan for government employees, as well as teachers and students in public schools. The policy affects 20 some million Chinese Muslims, with majority of the 10 million Uyghur Muslims residing in Xinjiang while the 11 million Hui—Han Chinese that are Muslims—are largely concentrated in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in central China.

However, the AKP regime only mentioned the Uyghurs and not the Hui in what it views as China's anti-Muslim policies.

Anti-Chinese protests<sup>2</sup> erupted in some 40 locations throughout Turkey during the week, with demonstrators surrounding the Chinese consulate in Istanbul and attacking random Chinese restaurants,<sup>3</sup> one of which is owned by a Turk with a Uyghur chef. Hundreds of members of AKP's youth branch shouted slogans such as "Long live hell for torturers" and "We stand with East Turkestan" outside the consulate, and a public screening in an AKP stronghold in Ankara's outskirts saw Party Vice-Chairman Suleyman Soylu attend a broadcast called "What is happening in East Turkestan."

AKP also fails to mention China is an atheistic country and only bans fasting if they work for the Chinese government and government-run institutions, not in general. The Party thus appears to be misrepresenting Chinese domestic policy and attempting to de-legitimize Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang.

China has made no secret of its atheistic stance, and is indifferent to what people do in private as far as religious observances are concerned, whether it's Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and the like. Moreover, it is a well-known criterion that all Communist Party members or civil servants not profess any religion, and the fasting ban is to reinforce existing membership regulation. If an individual chooses not to adhere to this discipline, that individual is free to depart and seek employment outside of public service, whether in Xinjiang, Ningxia or elsewhere in China.

Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu made it a Xinjiang issue and declared "it is very natural for us to react against a human rights violation there when it happens," and now seeks to wage legal warfare, or "lawfare" to delegitimize Chinese sovereignty with a UN referral. Cavusoglu warned, "This issue needs to be handled bilaterally and internationally. We will bring this issue before the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other international organizations." He further proclaimed that Turkey closely follows the Uyghur

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<sup>1</sup> In Chinese parlance, emphasizing something as a 'core' interest means China would resort to military force when that red line is crossed. At the 2011 IISS Asia Security Summit, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie spelled out China's core interests as the following: "The core interests include anything related to sovereignty, stability and form of government. China is now pursuing socialism. If there is any attempt to reject this path, it will touch upon China's core interests. Or, if there is any attempt to encourage any part of China to secede, that also touches upon China's core interests related to our land, sea or air. Then, anything that is related to China's national economic and social development also touches upon China core interests".

<sup>2</sup> "Anti-Chinese protests continue across Turkey for 2<sup>nd</sup> Day", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 2 July 2015,

<http://www.turkishweekly.net/2015/07/02/news/anti-china-protests-continue-across-turkey-for-2nd-day/>

<sup>3</sup> "Mob attacks Chinese diner in Istanbul over China's treatment of Uighurs", BGN News, 1 July 2015,

<http://national.bgnnews.com/mob-attacks-chinese-diner-in-istanbul-over-chinas-treatment-of-uighurs-haberi/7328>



issue, echoing an August 2014 state-run Anadolu Agency article<sup>4</sup> that challenges Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang territory and that “East Turkestan issue is under Turkey’s responsibility,” not China.

Turkey’s Erzincan Bar Association President Cemalettin Ozer has applied to the UN Human Rights Council, and wants to investigate whether Muslim Uyghurs enjoy freedom of expression and thought, religious liberty, the right to assembly, equality before law, among other rights. However, looking at the laundry list, it appears Turkey perhaps may be a more solid candidate than China for UN investigation of human rights violation. On freedom of assembly, on 28 June Turkish police violated this right when it broke up the annual gay pride parade in Istanbul<sup>5</sup> with water cannons and rubber bullets. On freedom of expression and thought,<sup>6</sup> Turkey violates this right as it continues to jail journalists and censor the media. On equality before law, according to an International Crisis Group report,<sup>7</sup> Turkey continues to deny Kurds equal rights in language use, local governance, identity and political representation.

As for AKP mouthpiece *Daily Sabah* accusing China of waging cultural genocide, former US Congressman Bob Filner has equally accused Turkey of waging a “cultural genocide”<sup>8</sup> against the Kurds. And while World Uighur Congress vice president Seyit Tumturk announced a commemoration on 5 July to mark the 6th anniversary of the “Urumqi massacre”<sup>9</sup> is he referring to the 46 Uyghur Chinese or also including the 137 Han Chinese killed out of the total 184 casualties?

Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had accused the Chinese of committing genocide in the 2009 Xinjiang riot, yet last year Ankara sided with ISIS in committing genocide against the Kobani Kurds, until US airpower intervened to stop it. Even now it is supporting Al Qaeda, al Nusrah, and other terrorists in Syria that regularly massacre ethnic and religious minorities such as Christians,<sup>10</sup> Druze<sup>11</sup>, Alawites,<sup>12</sup> Kurds<sup>13</sup> Shiites as well as other Sunni Muslims. There have also been reports of Ankara’s complicity in allowing Chinese Uyghurs<sup>14</sup> to be recruited via thousands of fake Turkish<sup>15</sup> as cannon fodder for ISIS and the anti-Assad force in Syria.

And if Turkey’s accusation of China being anti-Islam were true, then according to a *Times* article, why are

<sup>4</sup> “Uighurs hail Turkey’s support for Xinjiang’s Muslims,” *Anadolu Agency*, 6 August 2014,

<http://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/369684--uighurs-hail-turkeys-support-for-xinjiangs-muslims>

<sup>5</sup> “Muslim world’s largest gay pride event in Istanbul attacked by police” *CBS News*, 28 June 2015,

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/gay-pride-parade-istanbul-attacked-by-police/>

<sup>6</sup> “Why freedom of thought is under threat in Turkey”, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/27/letters-turkey-freedom-expression>

<sup>7</sup> “ICG urges Turkey to boost Kurdish rights despite growing violence”, *Today’s Zaman*, 30 November 2012,

[http://www.todayszaman.com/latest-news\\_icg-urges-turkey-to-boost-kurdish-rights-despite-growing-violence\\_299745.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/latest-news_icg-urges-turkey-to-boost-kurdish-rights-despite-growing-violence_299745.html)

<sup>8</sup> Bob Filner, “A Future of Hope for Turkey and one of Hope and Peace for the Kurds”, Congressional testimony 29 March 2000,

<http://kurdistan.org/work/speeches/a-future-of-hope-for-turkey-and-one-of-hope-and-peace-for-the-kurds/>

<sup>9</sup> “Most Xinjiang dead Han Chinese”, *BBC News*, 11 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8146069.stm>

<sup>10</sup> “Syria: Al Qaeda-Linked Rebels Target Christians”, *Sky News*, 5 September 2013, <http://news.sky.com/story/1137492/syria-al-qaeda-linked-rebels-target-christians>

<sup>11</sup> “Nusra Front Militants Kill Druze Villagers in Syria”, *The World Post*, 11 June 2015,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/11/nusra-front-kill-druze\\_n\\_7560272.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/11/nusra-front-kill-druze_n_7560272.html)

<sup>12</sup> Alexandra Valiente, “Al Nusra Massacre 35 Alawites in Aleppo”, *Syria 360*, 29 April 2015,

<https://syria360.wordpress.com/2015/04/29/al-nusra-massacre-35-alawites-in-aleppo/>

<sup>13</sup> “Al Nusra asks members to kill Syria Kurds”, *Kurdpress News Agency*, 23 July 2013,

<http://www.kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?id=5021#Title=Al-%20Nusra%20asks%20members%20to%20kill%20Syria%20Kurds>

<sup>14</sup> “ISIL recruits Chinese with fake Turkish passports from Istanbul”, *BNG News*, 9 April 2015, <http://national.bgnnews.com/isil-recruits-chinese-with-fake-turkish-passports-from-istanbul-haber/4968>

<sup>15</sup> “Report: more than 100,000 fake Turkish passports given to ISIL”, *Today’s Zaman*, 9 April 2015,

[http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_report-more-than-100000-fake-turkish-passports-given-to-isil\\_377534.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_report-more-than-100000-fake-turkish-passports-given-to-isil_377534.html)



Chinese Muslims enjoying a faith revival?<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps, Erdogan is stirring the Xinjiang pot to support his neo-Ottoman<sup>17</sup> vision as ruler over the Muslim and Turkic world.

### Turkey's Erdogan fanning Uyghur insurgency in China

It is an open secret that Erdogan supports Xinjiang secession to become an independent East Turkestan "under Turkey's responsibility," similar to attempts of installing and backing pliant Muslim Brotherhood regimes in Syria, Egypt, Libya and Gaza (via the Brotherhood's Palestinian arm Hamas) under Ankara's "neo-Ottoman" sphere of influence.

Erdogan's support for Xinjiang separatists is well known among Chinese counter-terror and intelligence officials. While he was mayor of Istanbul In 1995, he named a section of the Sultan Ahmet (Blue Mosque) park after China's archenemy and leader of the East Turkestan independence movement, Isa Yusuf Alptekin. After Alptekin's death Erdogan erected a memorial in the park to commemorate Eastern Turkistani *Shitlerinin*, or martyrs, who lost their lives in the "struggle for independence."

On the wall near the memorial were the words "Pray for Muslim Citizens of East Turkestan that have been oppressed and assimilated by Communist Chinese Regime!" as well as a quote by Alptekin: "Now is the time for liberation of east Turkestan!"<sup>18</sup> While inaugurating the park Erdogan said, "...East Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples, but it is also the cradle of Turkic history, civilization and culture...the martyrs of East Turkestan are our own martyrs...may their struggle always be remembered. Today the culture of the people of East Turkestan is being systematically sinocized."

Moreover, obsessed with regime change in Damascus rather than combating ISIS, Ankara also appears to be playing a game of proxies with Chinese Uyghurs and antagonizing China. Recently Chinese government officials including top intelligence bureaucrats have traveled to Ankara to raise their concern regarding the illegal trafficking network of supplying Turkish passports to Uyghurs,<sup>19</sup> who then travel to Turkey to join jihad in Syria and Iraq before returning to attack the Chinese homeland. However, their warnings seem unheeded, and Erdogan is in fact fomenting Uyghur insurgency against China.

The insurgency is exacerbated by the fact that Turkey's rebel coalition, *The Army of Conquest*, includes Chinese Uyghur-led terrorist group, Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). On April 25, 2015 a coalition of rebel forces<sup>20</sup> led by al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat-al-Nusra (JN), Chinese-led TIP, Uzbek-led Imam Bukhari Jamaat (IBJ) and Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad, defeated the Syrian army at Jisr al-Shughur in northwestern Syria's Idlib governorate. According to a recent *Terrorism Monitor* article,<sup>21</sup> with the Turkey-Qatar-Saudi backed rebel coalition having a direct supply line open from Turkey's Hatay Province to Idlib, the "rebels may have enough resources to establish a de-facto state in northwestern Syria led by JN and supported by several Central Asian militias."

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Beech, "If China is nti-Islam, Why are these Chinese Muslims enjoying a Faith Revival?" *Time*, 12 August 2014, <http://time.com/3099950/china-muslim-hui-xinjiang-uyghur-islam/>

<sup>17</sup> Adnan R. Khan, "Resurrecting the Ottoman empire", *Macleans*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.macleans.ca/news/world/resurrecting-the-ottoman-empire/>

<sup>18</sup> Yizhak Shichor, *Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations*, East West Center Policy Studies No. 53, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> "ISIL recruits Chinese with fake Turkish passports from Istanbul", *BNG News*, 9 April 2015,

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHCi36E-vyQ#t=16>

<sup>21</sup> <http://moderntokyoimes.com/?p=3071>



This corroborates with the recently released 2012 US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report<sup>22</sup> that Turkey and Arab Gulf states wanted to create a Salafist statelet in Syria to apply pressure on the Assad regime. The de facto state, which ISIS condemns for allowing *jahliyya* (Pre-Islamic) symbols alongside Islamic ones—such as the blue nationalist flag of “East Turkistan” and flag of the Free Syrian Army—would now pose a security threat to China and Central Asian countries as a safe haven for militant groups to launch attacks in the home front. Indeed Chinese militant groups East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and TIP had used AfPak as launching pads for terrorist attacks against China, and now Syria/Turkey is what Beijing views as their new AfPak.

TIP was based in AfPak before the Syria war, but in 2013 it began announcing support for Syrian rebels and featured its fighters in Syria in its propaganda. According to counter-terrorism experts, while TIP had 300 fighters in AfPak, its total numbers in Syria now may reach 1,000 militants including male fighters and their families. The most prominent TIP fighter to emerge from the Jisr al Shughur videos was the spokesman for TIP's “Syria branch” since 2014, Abu Ridha al-Turkistani.<sup>23</sup> In the videos<sup>24</sup> he led fighters to take over a building, and climbed a clock tower to plant a black-and-white JN style flag on which “Turkistan Islamic Party” was written in Arabic.

These Uyghur militants have claimed a series of high-profile terrorists attacks in China in 2013 and 2014, with some Uyghurs calling for an intifada against the Chinese communist regime. Thus by deliberately stoking China's fear about Xinjiang secession and increasing radicalization, thereby egging Beijing on to clamp down on Uyghurs and prompting their exodus to Turkey to join anti-Assad rebel groups in Syria, Abdullah Bozkurt of *Today's Zaman*<sup>25</sup> observed Erdogan is actually exploiting the ethnic Uyghurs' plight for his narrow Islamist agenda.

### **Will Turkey support for anti-Assad and anti-China insurgencies draw China into Syria?**

With Turkey fanning Xinjiang insurgency against China, Ankara should brace itself for probable Chinese support for an independent Kurdistan, since the Chinese had previously warned that, “if you touch the Uyghurs, we will touch the PKK.” Despite lack of official support, the Chinese secret service has traditionally supported the PKK<sup>26</sup> and Barzani-Talabani movements in northern Iraq as leverage over Turkey's support for Xinjiang secession.

Now that Turkey is poised to invade Syria and threaten the Syrian Kurds that are battling ISIS, China may support and arm the Kurds as well as the Syrian regime. Beijing was outraged when NATO changed UN resolution of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) into a NATO bombing campaign of regime change, and thus attempted to arm the Gaddafi regime via Algeria and South Africa.<sup>27</sup> The Chinese offered Col. Gadhafi's men

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2015/05/21/west-will-facilitate-rise-of-islamic-state-in-order-to-isolate-the-syrian-regime-2012-dia-document/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEnv694zinM>

<sup>24</sup> <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/01/sawt-al-islam-presents-a-new-video-message-from-hizb-al-islami-al-turkistani-turkistan-islamic-party-in-bilad-al-sham-conquest-of-jisr-al-shaghur/>

<sup>25</sup> “Turkey's Islamists betrayed Uyghurs, damaged ties with China”, *Today's Zaman*, 13 April 2015, [http://www.todayzaman.com/columnist/abdullah-bozkurt/turkeys-islamists-betrayed-uyghurs-damaged-ties-with-china\\_377866.html](http://www.todayzaman.com/columnist/abdullah-bozkurt/turkeys-islamists-betrayed-uyghurs-damaged-ties-with-china_377866.html)

<sup>26</sup> Mehmet Ali Birand, “China's Kurdish policy is changing”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 28 February 2006, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=chinas-kurdish-policy-is-changing-2006-02-28>

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Norman, “Report: China tried to arm Qaddafi near end”, *CBS News*, 4 September 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-china-tried-to-arm-qaddafi-near-end/>



the QW-18, a surface-to-air missile similar to a U.S. stinger, capable of bringing down military aircrafts. If China supplies the QW-18 in Syria, this could bring down Turkish aircraft should Ankara proceed with its plan for a buffer zone.

China also has a massive intelligence presence in Turkey and monitors ground situations through the Third Bureau of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff's Second Department (military intelligence). The station in Turkey is one of the most important, and presumably one of the most active, of all the Third Bureau stations.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Beijing not only engages in intelligence collection in Turkey, but also in infiltrating Uyghur organizations through moles and sleepers. These Uyghurs are loyal to the Chinese Communist Party and because they look Turkic, can easily have infiltrated rebel forces in Syria. Many Uyghurs are loyal to the Communist regime and in fact a Uyghur currently holds the highest energy planning office in China—former Xinjiang governor Nur Bekri who was promoted in December 2014 as energy chief in the National Energy Administration of the National Development and Reform Commission.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it is interesting to note that this is not the first time China and Turkey come close to stumbling into a military confrontation over Syria.

In October 1957, following a few months of deteriorating relations between Syria and Turkey that brought them to a brink of a border war, China stood on Syria's side.<sup>30</sup> On October 17, 1957, Mao Zedong sent a telegram to then Syrian president Hafez al-Assad that said, "At a time when United States imperialism is goading Turkey to carry out provocations against Syria in a plot to start a war of aggression, I hereby reiterate the firm and just stand of the Chinese government and people resolutely to support the Syrian people in their just struggle to defend their independence and peace." China and Turkey did battle each other during the Korean War, with Turkish troops bayoneting 900 Chinese troops in the bloody battle of Kunu-ri and when the armistice was signed in 1953, Turkish troops suffered 3,277 casualties with 721 dead and thousands wounded or missing.

Now would history repeat itself with Xi Jinping supporting President Hafez's son Bashar should Turkey invade Syria? The ball appears to be in Turkey's court and only time will tell.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

<sup>28</sup> Ming Pao [Hong Kong], 7 October 1998. In addition to its intelligence service, China's Foreign Ministry also monitors Uyghurs abroad via its 610 office, an arm of the Ministry of State Security's (国安部, *Guanbu*), later renamed Department of External Security Affairs to address terrorism, safety of Chinese abroad, and "dealing with East Turkestan groups." *Renmin Ribao*, 6 July 2004

<sup>29</sup> China promotes governor of troubled Xinjiang to top energy post," Reuters, 31 December 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/31/us-china-xinjiang-governor-idUSKBN0K90C920141231>

<sup>30</sup> See *Renmin Shoucnce* 1958 [People's Handbook], pp.432-33.



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