

Is China Changing Its Attitude Towards UIGHUR Muslims

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Has China just issued its first conciliatory statement towards the Uighur Muslim ethnic group, which has been persecuted for years? And has it done so out of fear or embarrassment that Uighur Islamic militants have now gone global, fighting for Islamic causes in many corners of the globe?

Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang, speaking to the Communist Party chief and party delegates of Xinjiang province, appeared to be acknowledging for the first time the deep frustration felt by young Uighurs, the eradication of Uighur culture and, most seriously, the lack of jobs in the province.

"Let the people, especially the young, have something to do and money to earn," [he told them at China's annual meeting of parliament](#). He urged private companies to invest in Xinjiang and for the majority Han Chinese population to mingle more with their Uighur brothers.

"Xinjiang's development and stability ... have a bearing on nation and ethnic unity and national security," he added (according to Reuters).

For years draconian measures have been imposed on the 10 million Uighurs who live in Xinjiang, but who are being turned into a minority by the huge numbers of Han Chinese settlers brought in by the government.

There has been a harsh crackdown on Islamic traditions for what is the largest group of Muslims in China. Mosques are barred from calls to prayer, fasting during Ramadan is forbidden, children under 18 are banned from entering mosques and Uighur culture and language is being ignored.

As ethnic and religious persecution has multiplied, so have attacks by Uighurs on security forces and Han Chinese. However, rather than punish a few Islamic militants or independence-seeking nationalists, China has victimised and punished the entire Uighur population.

Uighur men arrested in September while trying to meet Indonesia's most wanted man, Abu Wardah Santoso, in Central Sulawesi [AP]

Chinese actions are being increasingly depicted in the wider Muslim world as a war against the very practice of Islam. In turn, Chinese officials claim they have dismantled 200 terrorist groups and executed 49 militants since 2014 in Xinjiang.

For nearly two decades, Uighur militants have been training and fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan with the Taliban and other Central Asian groups, much to the anger of the Chinese.

More recently, Uighurs have started attacking security forces in Xinjiang itself, usually with knives and clubs rather than explosives or Kalashnikovs.

Neighboring states

China has urged its neighboring states not to accommodate Uighurs. Pakistan has forced out the Uighurs but many have just stepped across the border into Afghanistan where they line up with the Taliban to bring down the Kabul government.

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Late last year, hundreds of Uighurs joined the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to briefly capture the northern Afghan city of Kunduz which borders on Central Asia. But the Chinese are now worried and fearful of a dramatic Uighur presence in other warzones. From Afghanistan, Uighur militants have moved to Syria and Iraq to fight for various extremist groups.

The oldest group of Uighur militants that emerged in the 1990s, calling themselves the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and loyal to Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar of the Taliban - both of whom are now dead - have now renamed themselves in the Arab world as the Turkistan Islamic Party.

In Syria, the Uighurs have formed their own units and also joined up with other Central Asian units composed of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and others. They [all mostly fight for the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front](#). However Uighur militants have now also spread into Thailand and Malaysia - countries which are critical for China's national security, trade, investment and good neighborliness.

Last August, Uighurs allegedly carried out a deadly explosion which killed 20 people at a Bangkok shrine that was packed with Chinese tourists. Two suspects later arrested were both Uighur males. A month earlier the Thai authorities had [deported 100 Uighur refugees](#) who were seeking asylum in Thailand, and the attacks were believed to be in revenge for those who were forcibly returned to China.

Uighurs in Indonesia

There is also Uighurs in Indonesia fighting alongside local Islamic militants. In January, Indonesian intelligence officials said that Uighurs were enlisting with the Islamic State group led by Abu Wardah Santoso, the most wanted militant in the country. Uighurs had arrived traversing Burma, Thailand and Malaysia to reach Santoso's headquarters in the jungles of the island of Sulawesi.

On March 16, [Indonesian security forces killed two Uighur militants in Sulawesi](#). There is now close cooperation between Indonesian and Chinese authorities to stem the tide of Uighurs coming illegally to Indonesia.

Sadly much of the Uighur presence and militancy in Southeast Asia comes from Uighurs who started out as refugees fleeing their homeland because of persecution or victimization. Treated badly in host countries and unable to get asylum, some then became radicalized.

China has never experienced widespread terrorism or Islamic militancy and it has certainly not tried to export it either. Now it is facing both dangers, and neighboring states are questioning China's ability to treat its Uighur population fairly and halt these trends. Recent Chinese official statements may be setting a new, more conciliatory trend.

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