



PERSPECTIVES

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Why Did Islamic State Choose to Threaten China at This Time?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 423, March 12, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the power of the Islamic State (IS) declines, it is becoming less menacing and less able to sow fear in the world at large. The group sees threats against China as a way to renew that sense of threat. IS claims to offer hope and refuge to the Uyghur Muslims, who are subject to a campaign by the central government in Beijing, and thereby to achieve two major goals: recruiting new volunteers and attracting further attention.

On February 28, 2017, the Iraqi branch of IS issued a video, about half an hour long, threatening to strike Chinese targets. “Oh, you Chinese who do not understand what people say! We are the soldiers of the Caliphate, and we will come to you to clarify to you with the tongues of our weapons, to shed blood like rivers and avenge the oppressed.” IS addressed these threats to the people of China in their own language, Mandarin. The video shows adult warriors together with heavily armed children. It features prayers, lessons, speeches, and above all — as is common in IS videos — on-camera executions of collaborators or of those suspected of other acts against the organization. The video also shows images from the Xinjiang region in northwestern China, including Chinese police officers in the streets. China’s current president, Xi Jinping, appears in it as well.

This is not the first time IS has directed proclamations at China. Early in December 2015, the group’s propaganda arm, the Al-Hayat Media Center, issued a threatening message to China in a video that called, in Chinese, upon the “Muslim brethren” to awaken. The video includes a song in Chinese, entitled “I Am a Jihad Fighter,” which declares that “to die in a war on the battlefield is my dream” and that “no power can stop our progress.” It goes on

to proclaim: “Our shameless enemy is frightened by the sight of us”; “One hundred years of slavery, let us leave this shameful memory”; “Awaken, Muslim brother, now is the time to awaken — take your faith and your courage, and fulfill the lost doctrine”. The song is aimed at recruiting volunteers among the Uyghur Muslims in China, who could pose an indirect threat to the powerful country.

The recent IS video is different from that earlier video and from other threatening messages against China in that for the first time, IS is threatening the Chinese homeland rather than solely trying to recruit Muslim Chinese. This difference raises questions. How will the Chinese government react to this threat? Will it change its policy in the Middle East? And, above all, why is IS choosing to directly confront the gigantic power to the east? And why now?

The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a restrained response: “The Chinese government wants to cooperate with the international community in fighting the Uyghur terrorists, who in recent years have committed several very severe attacks in China and murdered hundreds of people. China fears that Muslims from the Xinjiang region, which is in its west, have gone to Syria and to Iraq in order to join the Islamic State in its war to establish an Islamic Caliphate.” It appears that Beijing is sticking with its regular call for a war on terror, directed first and foremost at the threat it perceives from the Uyghurs.

The official statement also declared that “we oppose every kind of terror and actively take part in the international community’s efforts to eradicate terror.” These words suggest that, while highlighting the concrete threat the Uyghurs pose to China, the regime does not intend to mount its own offensive against IS or alter its policy in the Middle East.

The Uyghurs are a Muslim minority of the Chinese population in the Xinjiang region. Unlike other Muslim minorities in China, they demand political independence and are using terror tactics to that end. The regime fears the return of Uyghur fighters who, after long tenures as members of IS, will be more committed to Islamic doctrine, better trained, and more determined to wrest an independent Muslim state from China.

The question of why IS is confronting China right now can be answered by considering two facts: first, China has no military presence in the Middle East that could threaten IS; and second, despite China’s growing dependence on energy imports (oil and gas) from the Middle East, it is not part of the US-led coalition fighting IS.

On February 27, 2017, thousands of police officers, backed by helicopters and armored vehicles, attended a show of force in the Xinjiang region planned by the Chinese regime. The display was meant to demonstrate to the Uyghurs that if they keep agitating for an independent state, the regime will fight them. Over

the past year, the regime has issued laws aimed at the Uyghurs prohibiting religious ceremonies. Many studies have found that China's activities have been turning even moderate Uyghurs into radicals fighting for their identity.

In this state of affairs, with the Uyghurs subject to a hostile campaign by the central government in Beijing, IS is stepping in to offer them a refuge and a hope. IS has been suffering casualties and steadily losing territory. By assuming sponsorship of the Uyghurs, it can achieve several major goals at once: recruit new volunteers, attract attention, and boost morale. To this end, the group issued the video threatening China and portraying itself as the Uyghurs' protectors.

As IS's power declines, it becomes less threatening and less able to sow fear around the world. The group believes that by threatening the world's most populous country, China, including its institutions and representations abroad, it can restore its dissipated power. China realizes, of course, that IS cannot really threaten such a powerful country, just as it cannot existentially threaten any of the world's other powers.

During the years of its existence, IS has specialized in intimidation through abhorrent acts of terror, and it appears it will continue to do so. The video directed at China's population and regime is intended to reinforce the threat the organization projects and refresh its supply of volunteers.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family