



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Turkic Muslims: China's and the Muslim World's Achilles Heel

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 959, September 26, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A list of 26 predominantly Muslim countries considered sensitive by China reflects Chinese concerns that they could reinforce religious sentiment among the People's Republic's Turkic Muslim population with potentially far-reaching consequences if the Islamic world were to take it to task for its crackdown in Xinjiang, the most frontal assault on Islam in recent history.

A list of 26 predominantly Muslim countries considered sensitive by China, which was compiled by Human Rights Watch as part of a [just published report](#) on the crackdown in China's strategic northwestern province, details the rollout of the world's most intrusive, 21st-century surveillance state as well as an attempt to re-educate a population of 10 million. That population includes primarily Uighurs, an ethnically Turkic Muslim group, as well as Muslims of Central Asian origin.

The [re-education](#) is designed to reshape the population's religious beliefs so that they adopt an interpretation of Islam that is in line with the Chinese Communist Party's precepts rather than prescriptions of Islamic holy texts in a bid to counter Turkic Muslim nationalist, ethnic, or religious aspirations as well as political violence.

China worries that national and religious sentiment and/or militancy could challenge China's grip on Xinjiang, [home to 15% of its proven oil reserves, 22% of its gas reserves, and 115 of the 147 raw materials found in the People's Republic](#) as well as part of its nuclear arsenal.

Included on the list of countries are Afghanistan and Pakistan; former Soviet Central Asian nations, many of which border on Xinjiang; Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia and Indonesia; and key Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and [Turkey, which have historic, ethnic, and linguistic ties to China's Turkic Muslims and have been sympathetic for decades to Uighur aspirations](#).

China's crackdown, according to [a plan developed by the Baluntai Town government in north-central Xinjiang](#), involves targeting, among others, Turkic Muslims who remain in contact with family and friends abroad, people who have stayed abroad "too long," and those who have, independently and without state permission, organized Hajj pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia. China is particularly concerned about Uighur contact with Muslim countries.

Human Rights Watch quoted Inzhu, a 50-year-old mother, who lives in an unidentified country, as saying, "It was 2 a.m. and my daughters [in a foreign country] were chatting with their father [in Xinjiang] on the phone. You know, they're daddy's girls and they were telling him all their secrets ... when suddenly my daughters ran in to tell me, 'The authorities are taking away daddy!'"

For China, the [Muslim world's silence](#) constitutes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Beijing's campaign in Xinjiang is effectively enabled by this silence, which is driven primarily by the desire of governments, many of which are deeply indebted to China, to preserve economic relations. It allows it to largely ignore criticism by Western nations and human rights groups as well as the Uighur Diaspora.

On the other hand, the silence potentially gives Muslim countries a degree of leverage. Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Muhammad seemingly exploited that leverage with [China treading carefully](#) in the face of an anti-Chinese election campaign that returned the 93-year old to office in May. Mahathir subsequently suspended US\$22 billion of Chinese-backed Belt and Road-related infrastructure projects.

This leverage could also factor in the intention of financially troubled Pakistan to review or renegotiate agreements related to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crown jewel in the Belt and Road initiative and at US\$50 billion plus, its single largest country investment.

The risk for China is that mushrooming publicity about its crackdown in Xinjiang, which includes pressure on Uighurs abroad to return to the Chinese province or risk incarceration – a push that has led countries like [Egypt](#),

Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Malaysia to extradite Uighurs to China – will make it increasingly difficult for Muslim countries to remain silent.

The risk is also that the crackdown could have a boomerang effect, fueling radicalization at home as well as abroad. A [study quoted in *The New York Times*](#) by Qiu Yuanyuan, a scholar at the Xinjiang Party School, where officials are trained, warned that “recklessly setting quantitative goals for transformation through education has been erroneously used ... The targeting is imprecise, and the scope has been expanding.”

The risks are enhanced by black swans such as a recent court case in Kazakhstan that forced the government in Astana to walk a fine line between avoiding friction with China and shielding itself from accusations that it is not standing up for the rights and safety of Kazakh nationals.

Kazakhs were taken aback when 41-year-old Sayragul Sauytbay, a Chinese national of Kazakh descent, [testified in an open Kazakh court](#) that she had been employed in a Chinese re-education camp for Kazakhs only that had 2,500 inmates. She said she was aware of two more camps reserved for Kazakhs.

Ms. Sauytbay was standing trial for entering Kazakhstan illegally. She said she had escaped to Kazakhstan after being told by Chinese authorities that she would never be allowed to rejoin her family because of her knowledge of the camps. Ms. Sauytbay was given a six-month suspended sentence and allowed to stay in the country where her recently naturalized husband and children reside.

The inclusion of ethnic Kazakhs, a community in China of 1.25 million people, in the crackdown sparked angry denunciations in Kazakhstan’s parliament. “There should be talks taking place with the Chinese delegates. [Every delegation that goes there should be bringing this topic up](#) ... The key issue is that of the human rights of ethnic Kazakhs in any country of the world being respected,” said Kunaysh Sultanov, a member of parliament and former deputy prime minister and ambassador to China.

[Anti-Chinese sentiment in the Pakistani Chinese border province of Gilgit-Baltistan](#) ran high earlier this year after some 50 Uyghur women married to Pakistani men were detained on visits to Xinjiang and China refused to renew the visas of Pakistani husbands resident in Xinjiang.

Beyond economic leverage, China has so far benefited from the fact that Muslim politicians and leaders see more political mileage in pushing causes

like the Palestinians rather than those that have not been in the Islamic world's public eye.

["You gain popularity if you show you are anti-Zionism and if you are fighting for the Palestinians, as compared to the Rohingya or Uighurs,"](#) said Ahmad Farouk Musa, director of the Islamic Renaissance Front, a Malaysian NGO.

It's a bet Muslim countries and China could continue to win, but could prove costly if they eventually lose.

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.

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