



PERSPECTIVES

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Crackdown in Xinjiang: The Islamic World's Achilles Heel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A disagreement between major Indonesian religious leaders and the government on how to respond to China's crackdown on Turkic Muslims raises questions about the Islamic world's ability to sustain its silence about what amounts to one of the most concerted assaults on the faith in recent history.

Rejecting a [call on the government by the Indonesian Ulema Council](#), the country's top clerical body, to condemn the Chinese crackdown on Turkic Muslims that has seen [up to a million Muslims detained in re-education camps](#) in China's northwestern province of Xinjiang, Indonesian vice-president Jusuf Kalla recently insisted that [the government will not interfere in the internal affairs of others](#).

The disagreement could take on greater significance after the elections in April, which incumbent president Joko Widodo is expected to win. Widodo's vice-presidential running mate, Ma'ruf Amin, is the Ulema Council's chairman. Since joining the ticket, Amin has [retained his Council position as non-active chairman](#).

Nonetheless, Kalla's position is in line with that of a majority of Muslim countries. Eager as they are to attract Chinese infrastructure investment, those countries have opted to remain silent on the crackdown in a bid to avoid jeopardizing relations with the People's Republic. These same countries have responded angrily to far less threatening incidents, such as the [condemnation of British writer Salman Rushdie](#) for his novel, *The Satanic Verses*; the [cartoon depiction in Denmark of the Prophet Muhammad](#); and the [burning of a Qur'an](#) by an American pastor.

In a similar vein, Mushahid Hussain, chairman of Pakistan's Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, said the cardinal principle of Pakistan-China relations is to refrain from commenting on anything to do with another other country's domestic issues – even though [some 200 small Pakistani businessmen have been campaigning for the release of their Uyghur spouses from Chinese camps](#), or for the lifting of travel bans on their children, or for permission to visit them.

“Given the relationship of Pakistan with China, and in the Muslim world in particular, the Chinese narrative is apparently being accepted across the board as the one that is correct,” Hussain told Associated Press.

Turkey, too, despite its ethnic and cultural links to China's Turkic Muslims and past support for Uyghur aspirations, has [adopted a similar attitude as Chinese investment and financial aid expands](#).

With the exception of a few protests in Bangladesh and India and critical statements by Malaysian leaders, Muslims across the globe have largely refrained from pressuring their governments to speak out about developments in Xinjiang. In fact, China retains its status as [Asia's top tourism destination for Muslim travelers](#).

Nabeel Shariff, founder of UK-based halal holiday company Serendipity Tailormade, struggled with the ethical aspects of promoting Muslim tourism to China, but concluded that “In a way, it makes sure the Uyghur community are not forgotten.”

Shariff's justification notwithstanding, there is little evidence that the plight of China's Turkic Muslims remains in the Muslim public eye. Muslim and Chinese leaders appear to be betting that the silence is sustainable. That threatens to be a risky strategy.

For one thing, the crackdown in Xinjiang is expanding to the Hui, China's non-Turkic Muslims. The autonomous region of Ningxia Hui recently signed a cooperation agreement on anti-terrorism with Xinjiang in a bid to learn from the crackdown on the Turkic Muslims, or, [in the words of the *Global Times*, a Communist Party organ](#), “to learn from Xinjiang's experiences in promoting social stability.”

Mounting Western criticism of the crackdown, which is toughest on Muslims but [also targets other religious groups, including evangelists](#), puts Muslim nations on the spot. The criticism is likely to lead to Western companies boycotting products made in Xinjiang by inmates of the re-education camps, which China describes as institutions for vocational training.

[A recent Associated Press investigation tracked the shipment of sportswear from a factory linked to the camps](#) to Badger Sportswear in the US, which supplies university bookshops and sports teams around the country. “We will voluntarily halt sourcing and will move production elsewhere while we investigate the matters raised,” said Badger CEO John Anton.

New Jersey Republican Congressman Chris Smith, a member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, [called on the Trump Administration to ban imports from Chinese companies associated with detention camps](#).

A potential black swan is anti-Chinese sentiment in a number of Muslim countries, some of which have ethnic links to China’s Turkic Muslims. This could be a result of perceptions that Chinese commercial terms for project finance and loans associated with the People’s Republic’s infrastructure-driven Belt and Road Initiative are debt traps.

In an illustration of the risk, Kunaysh Sultanov, a member of the Kazakh parliament and former deputy prime minister and ambassador to China, took issue with the government’s attempt to balance its relations with China with its need to stand up for the rights of Kazakhs.

“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,” Sultanov said after an escaped Chinese camp worker of Kazakh descent testified in court about what she had witnessed.

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