

# The Uighurs and China: lost and found nation

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**The broader roots of the eruption of protest in China's far-west region of Xinjiang lie in the experience of the Uighur people under Beijing's rule, says Yitzhak Shichor.**

The reports of violence and deaths in the city of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province in northwest China, draw renewed attention to this comparatively neglected region of China and of central Asia. The exact details of what happened there on the night of 5-6 July 2009 are unclear and (inevitably) disputed, though the background may include the assaults on Uighur migrant workers at a toy factory in Guangdong province on 26 June (in which two are reported dead and dozens injured).

But if the details of the immediate incident await to be confirmed, there is less doubt over the larger context of Uighur experience - both under Chinese rule and in the exile which over many years many Uighurs have been driven towards or chosen.

Uighurs are a Turkic-Muslim ethnic group which has been living in East Turkestan for centuries. This region, reoccupied by the Qing dynasty in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, had become a Chinese province named Xinjiang in 1884; in 1955, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, was reorganised as the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. The official statistics for 2007 suggest that Uighurs now number more than 10 million, and thus constitute Xinjiang's largest minority at almost 50% of its population - though this is a sharp reduction from 95% at the time of the communist takeover in 1949, the result of significant Chinese settlement in the region. The numbers of Uighurs and Han Chinese are now roughly equal.

Uighurs, claiming Xinjiang as their historical homeland, have repeatedly tried to gain independence and set up their own state - but just as repeatedly failed. Beijing, considering them a separatist and "splittist" group, has used a variety of means - cultural, social, economic, political and military - to crush any sign of restiveness among Uighurs (see James A Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* [C Hurst, 2007]).

## The world of exile

For many years Beijing had regarded Uighur unrest in China as an internal problem that should and would be settled without external interference. Since the early 1990s, however, Beijing has become aware of the growing concern in the international community about the Uighurs' persecution in China. This concern has been kindled and promoted by Uighur diaspora organisations all over the world. Most Uighurs outside China have settled in central Asia, the majority in Kazakhstan (some 350,000), but also in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (around 50,000 each). The precise numbers are difficult to verify, in part because of the occasional similarity between Uighurs and the people of other central Asian nations (primarily Uzbeks), and their gradual assimilation into the local population. Moreover, Uighurs have been settling elsewhere in central Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and have since been intensively Russified. Altogether, the Uighur diaspora may number 550,000-650,000.

Uighurs migrated from China in waves, usually following deteriorating conditions or, conversely, when the doors were opened. Some left by the mid-1930s after the first - and short-lived - Eastern Turkestan Republic had collapsed, mostly to Turkey and to Saudi Arabia. Several hundred Uighurs fled China in late 1949, following the Chinese communists' seizure of Xinjiang; among them were Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Mehmet Emin Bughra, former leaders of the (second) Eastern Turkestan Republic.

These former leaders first settled in India and then moved to Turkey where they headed Uighur diaspora organisations with Ankara's support. In 1962, hardships related to the "great leap forward" led over 60,000 people from the region - some of them Uighurs - to flee China for Kazakhstan (then part of the Soviet Union). Since the 1980s, the reforms of the post-Mao period and greater freedom of movement have enabled more Uighurs to leave Xinjiang; several thousands have settled all over the world, some with the help of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Uighur diaspora communities have formed their own associations (occasionally more than one) in every area they have settled. These have the aims of preserving Uighur collective identity (i.e. culture and language), and sustaining and promoting shared national aspirations - ultimately, independence for East Turkestan. In trying to overcome the fragmentation and disagreements that have characterised these associations, attempts have been made to set up international Uighur "umbrella" organisations (such as the Eastern Turkestan National Congress, set up in Turkey in 1992; and the East Turkestan Government-in-Exile, formed in Washington in autumn 2004).

Most such attempts have failed to achieve the unity they sought. A movement that has a chance to survive is the World Uighur Congress, inaugurated in April 2004 in Munich. Its first president was Erkin Alptekin, son of Isa Yusuf; its second, elected in November 2006, is Rebiya Kadeer (who had earlier been compelled to leave China, who has established a worldwide reputation as a human-rights advocate for the Uighurs - and who is explicitly named by Beijing as being responsible for fomenting the latest unrest). The World Uighur Congress now represents most Uighur diaspora associations; it promotes a moderate agenda underlain by a quest for human rights, democracy and self-determination, without mentioning independence.

### **The well of resistance**

This policy appears to be more attractive to foreign governments and NGOs, which are broadly reluctant to irritate or alienate the Chinese government. Some of these governments are also facing separatist claims. In fact, it has been under Chinese threats and pressure that Ankara was forced to officially adopt a more hostile attitude toward Uighur expatriates; this obliged the Uighur diaspora headquarters to relocate to western Europe and north America, far from Beijing's reach.

Beijing's tough reaction reflects its growing concern about the effective activities of Uighur diaspora groups. These include petitions, demonstrations, briefings of parliamentarians and government officials, a sophisticated use of the internet at least sixty websites are devoted to the issue of Uighur persecution, the abuse of human rights in Xinjiang, Beijing's "strike hard" campaigns and its denial of self-determination). Some of the Uighur websites have been systematically compromised and paralysed by China.

A minority of Uighur diaspora organisations and leaders are more militant and consider the use of force against China as the most efficient means to change its policy (see James A Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment* [East-West Center, Washington, 2004]). The majority of Uighurs, however, prefer the use of peaceful means. Beijing's repeated attempts to link Uighurs to international terrorism - not least over the seventeen Uighurs who had been incarcerated at Guantánamo since early 2002, and destined in June 2009 for release to the Bahamas and Palau -

have been mostly dismissed as unfounded fabrications.

It is too early to establish the precise circumstances of the turmoil in Urumqi on 5-6 July 2009. What can be said is that a full explanation of what happened will need to take into account the official policies of Beijing in the region, and the experience of Uighurs - both in Xinjiang and abroad - over several generations.

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**P.S.**

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