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War and opportunity: the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Syrian conflict

Abstract

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a largely Uyghur jihadi movement advocating the independence of the Chinese province of Xinjiang, has become embroiled in the Syrian civil war. Having long been active in Pakistan's tribal areas, the group has knitted close ties to al-Qaeda and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (previously known as the Taliban). Most of its combatants in Syria fight under Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, a jihadi organisation which controls large swathes of territory in the country's northwestern regions. From deploying troops in northern Latakia to participating in the battle for Aleppo, TIP has combined its military commitment to the Syrian conflict with consistent efforts to publicise its activities online. But a number of developments threaten TIP's existence. China has strengthened its antiter-

rorist measures, a military campaign has been launched in TIP's old Pakistani stomping grounds and Turkey's support for Uyghur separatism has diminished. Yet, in the face of such hurdles, TIP's involvement in Syria shows how jihadi groups can strengthen their networks and raise their international profile by waging war abroad.

Résumé

Prônant l'indépendance de la province chinoise du Xinjiang, le Parti islamique du Turkestan (TIP), groupe djihadiste majoritairement composé de combattants ouïghours, s'est immiscé dans la guerre civile syrienne. Longtemps actif dans les régions tribales du Pakistan, le mouvement a noué des liens étroits avec Al-Qaïda ainsi que l'Émirat islamique d'Afghanistan (antérieurement connu

sous le nom des Talibans). La plupart de ses combattants en Syrie luttent sous la houlette de Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham, organisation djihadiste qui contrôle de vastes pans de territoire dans le nord-ouest du pays. Ayant déployé ses troupes dans le Nord de Lattaquié et participé à la bataille pour Alep, le TIP a su conjuguer son engagement militaire envers le conflit syrien à des efforts soutenus en vue de médiatiser ses activités en ligne. Un certain nombre de développements menacent cependant la pérennité même du TIP : la Chine a renforcé sa politique anti-terroriste, une campagne militaire a été lancée dans son ancien terrain d'opérations au Pakistan et le soutien de la Turquie pour le séparatisme ouïghour s'est vu réduit. Face à de tels obstacles, la présence du TIP en Syrie démontre néanmoins comment les groupes djihadistes parviennent à renforcer leurs réseaux tout en accroissant leur notoriété sur le plan international.



Having lost control of all borders bar that shared with Lebanon, the Syrian government has been unable to stem the inflow of fighters arriving from abroad. Despite its domestic roots – and the fact that groups fighting the regime remain predominantly made up of Syrians – the Syrian civil war has attracted large numbers of foreign fighters, diverse in both their motivations and origins. In May 2016, the head of the United Nations' Counter-Terrorism Committee claimed that just under 30,000 international combatants were present in both Syria and Iraq¹. Many of the conflict's most powerful actors rely on their presence – they are thought to make up over half of IS' rank and file². Responding to widespread consternation regarding the threat of domestic attacks by returning jihadi fighters, Western media and academics have largely focused on combatants stemming from European countries as well as fighters arriving from Arab states (Tunisia and Jordan have received particular attention).

Recent scholarship has, however, broadly overlooked the role of Chinese nationals of Uyghur extraction fighting for the Syrian wing of Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), one of the only large, unified and non-Arab *muhajireen* (jihadi foreign fighter) groups fighting the Syrian regime. A much-cited report on foreign

1. Cynthia Koet, "UN: 30,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq", *Politico*, 7 Nov 2016.

2. Zachary Laub, "The Islamic State", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 10 Aug 2016.

fighters published by the Soufan Group paid them little heed³. This is likely due to the methodological difficulties encountered in analyzing their presence in Syria, stemming from both a lack of reliable statistics as to their numbers and paucity of sources regarding their activities on the ground. Yet the breadth of their operations across multiple governorates, alongside the fact that there are more Muslims in their native province in China than there are in Tunisia (and twice as many as in Jordan)⁴, renders their presence worthy of note.

Composed of Uyghurs hailing from China's Xinjiang province, TIP's combatants have played an active role on a number of fronts, having played an instrumental part in the 2015 Idlib offensive against regime forces before taking part in heavy fighting in northern Latakia and Aleppo in late 2016⁵. The group's arrival in Syria has notably allowed it to foster connections with a range of jihadi movements under Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra). While US airstrikes and regime forces zeroing in on Idlib-based rebel groups, Turkey has come under increasing Chinese pressure to take a hard stance on Uyghur separatism. TIP's fate thus hangs in the balance. That said, and despite the fact that, in the wider scheme of things, its contribution to the conflict cannot be said to be more than marginal, TIP's engagement in the Syrian theatre has raised its profile in jihadi circles and widened its network. This increases the probability that it will continue to engage in transnational jihadi activity well beyond the civil war's conclusion.

Uyghur separatism and the emergence of TIP

Uyghurs are native to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), a Chinese province in the country's northwest, conquered by the Qing dynasty in 1759. A Turkic, largely Sunni ethnic group, China's Uyghurs number over 11 million, constituting around 0.8% of the country's population⁶. As a whole, their

3. Richard Barrett et al, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment on the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", *The Soufan Group*, Dec 2015.

4. DV Buyarov et al, "Demographic Situation in Xinjiang-Uigur Autonomous Area in the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century", *Global Media Journal*, 24 June 2016.

5. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Factions of North Latakia", *Syria Comment*, 10 Dec 2015.

6. Yitzhak Shichor, "See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: Middle Eastern Reactions to Rising China's

living standards are significantly lower than in most Han-majority provinces. Tuition and school fees, poor job prospects and language policies that place those with a poor grasp of Mandarin at a disadvantage have all contributed to low levels of attainment at Uyghur schools⁷. In addition, tensions abound regarding relations with the central government, with human rights groups deploring instances of religious repression and heavy-handed counter-terrorism initiatives⁸. Targeting violent extremism and terrorism, the most recent series of “strike hard” operations, launched by the Chinese government in May 2014, has been particularly criticized by advocacy organisations⁹. Allegations – much-publicised by both international human rights groups as well as Uyghur jihadis – range from the imposition of restrictions on fasting to incidents of extrajudicial torture¹⁰. Penn State University’s Kiliç Buğra Kanat bemoans the absence of an effective communications mechanism between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Uyghurs, arguing that it prevents the emergence of any form of dialogue between the two parties¹¹.

Although a number of Uyghur separatist cells are active across the province, the degree to which a single, overarching separatist movement can be said to be active across Xinjiang has been called into question. Most separatists call for the creation of “East Turkistan”, whose territory would encompass the XUAR’s, roughly approximating that claimed by past attempts to found an independent state. While the “First East Turkistan Republic” proved little more than a flash in the pan, collapsing a few months after being declared in November 1933, a second republic, this time supported by the USSR, emerged in 1944 before being subsumed into the newly-formed People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. As argues a report drafted by the Council on Foreign Relations, it is important to recognize the heterogeneous nature of Uyghur unrest across Xinjiang¹². Residents of Turpan, in the pro-

Uyghur Crackdown”, *Griffith Asia Quarterly* 3(1): 62-85, 2015. p. 62.

7. Timothy A. Grose, “The Xinjiang Class: Education, Integration, and the Uyghurs”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30(1): 97-109, 2010. p. 106.

8. “China: Religious Repression of Uyghur Muslims”, *Human Rights Watch*, 12 Apr 2005.

9. “China 2015/2016”, *Amnesty International*, 2016.

10. “China: Religious Repression of Uyghur Muslims”, *Human Rights Watch*, 12 Apr 2005.

11. Kiliç Buğra Kanat, “The Securitization of the Uyghur Question and Its Challenges”, *Insight Turkey* 18(1): 191-218, p. 215.

12. Beina Xu et al, “The East Turkestan Islamic

vince’s northeast, are treated more leniently than those of such southern cities as Kashgar by virtue of their historical lack of resistance to Chinese rule¹³. As a result, attitudes among Uyghur communities towards Chinese rule, as well as the degree to which various entities identify with pan-Turkism or to the wider Islamic *ummah*, differ throughout the province. Referring to the minority of Uyghurs actively seeking to secede from China, Van Wie Davis of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies stresses that there is “no single Uyghur agenda”, the goals of such groups running the gamut from being granted a greater degree of autonomy with China to establishing a separate state¹⁴.

Founded in 2006 in the Af-Pak border region by Uyghurs who had fled from China in the 1990s¹⁵, TIP’s leadership has always been based outside of Xinjiang. While the organisation’s genesis remains unclear, the Chinese government describes the group as a new manifestation of what it referred to as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), to which it has attributed over 200 attacks between 1990 and 2001¹⁶. Yet doubt has been cast on the link between TIP and ETIM. Cited by the Council for Foreign Relations, Omer Kanat, senior editor of Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur service, argues that TIP may have in fact developed as an offshoot of the Islamic Party of Turkistan, renamed from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan¹⁷, a jihadi movement active in the Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region which, supported by bin Laden’s training facilities and seed funding, emerged during the Afghanistan War¹⁸. While commentators, media agencies, governments and the UN tend to conflate the two organisations, the majority of Uyghur combatants fighting in Syria do so under the

Movement (ETIM)”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 Sep 2014.

13. Colin Mackerras, *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation*, London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p. 118.

14. Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China”, *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, Jan 2008.

15. Beina Xu et al, “The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 Sep 2014.

16. Andrew McGregor, “Will Xinjiang’s Turkistani Islamic Party Survive the Drone Missile Death of its Leader?”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, 12 Mar 2010.

17. Beina Xu et al, “The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 Sep 2014.

18. David Malet, “Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts”, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 190.

TIP's banner.

Since it threatened to target the 2008 Beijing Olympics, TIP has positioned itself at the head of the separatist cause. Dozens of attacks have been committed in its name, including the detonation of a car bomb in Tiananmen Square and a spate of stabbings in Kunming. TIP's activities have spread beyond China's borders, with the organisation blamed for such attacks as a suicide bombing on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan, carried out on 30 August 2016¹⁹. TIP's primary objective, as stated in the 19th edition of its Arabic-language "Islamic Turkistan" (*Turkistan al-Islamiya*) e-publication published in April 2016, is "the establishment of an Islamic caliphate according to the book and the *Sunnah*"²⁰. In part two of its "Blessed are the Strangers" video series, TIP distinguishes itself "from all manner of democracy, nationalism and patriotism"²¹. The organisation broadcasts bulletins and videos in Arabic, Uyghur, Mandarin and occasionally Urdu. Published by its media agency, *Sawt al-Islam*, such content alternates between lauding the accomplishments of TIP fighters and perpetrators of terror attacks in its name on the one hand, and criticising the movement's enemies (notably the Chinese, Russian and Syrian governments) on the other. It and its affiliated media organisations (such as the Turkish-language *Doğu Türkistan Bülteni*) play fast and loose with the facts, from claiming that in China are sold "Halal pork"²² to contending that Chinese slaughterhouses process Uyghur fetuses to be sold on for popular consumption²³.

TIP's international jihadi network

Facing a change in domestic priorities following the September 11 attacks combined with increased cooperation on antiterrorism with China, the US labeled ETIM a terrorist organisation in 2002, with 22 of its alleged members being held in Guantanamo before

being released for lack of evidence²⁴. The group was particularly active in the tribal regions bestriding the Afghan-Pakistani border; its then-leader Hasan Mahsum was killed by an US drone in Pakistan's FATA. Similarly, TIP's current commander, Abdul Haq, was reported to have met his end in drone strike in North Waziristan four years later in 2010 before reemerging in May 2014²⁵. TIP's activities, including running a training camp in close cooperation with Al Qaeda and a number of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA, previously known as the Taliban) groups, among which it is described as wielding considerable influence²⁶, appear to vindicate Chinese allegations regarding the predominantly Uyghur group's involvement with international terrorist networks. TIP's headquarters are said to be located in Mir Ali, close to the border with Afghanistan²⁷, and its cooperation with the local IEA group is buttressed by having pledged *bay'ah* (a formal oath of allegiance to a leader) to Mullah Omar²⁸.

Moreover, the ninth episode of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's "Islamic Spring" video series explicitly recognises Mahsum as a noteworthy jihadi leader, praising ETIM's struggle against the Chinese "atheist" occupier²⁹. The video lauds the presence of TIP members in Syria, highlighting their cooperation with the then-al-Nusra front (now JFS), which, until recently, operated on behalf of al-Qaeda in Syria. In addition to Abdul Haq's open support for al-Zawahiri³⁰, the UN claims that the TIP leader has been a member of al-Qaeda's *shura majlis* (executive council)

24. Beina Xu et al, "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 Sep 2014. Charlie Savage, "U.S. Frees Last of the Chinese Uighur Detainees from Guantánamo Bay", *The New York Times*, 31 Dec 2013.

25. Bill Rogio, "Turkistan Islamic Party emir thought killed in 2010 reemerged to lead group in 2014", *FDD's The Long War Journal*, 11 Jun 2015.

26. Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda appoints new leader of forces in Pakistan's tribal areas", *FDD's The Long War Journal*, 9 May 2011.

27. Rohan Gunaratna and Stefanie Kam, *Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing, 2016, p. 494.

28. "Turkistan Islamic Party Fighters Killed in Syria", *The Line of Steel*, 19 Jul 2015.

29. Thomas Joscelyn, "Zawahiri praises Uyghur jihadists in ninth episode of 'Islamic Spring' series", *FDD's The Long War Journal*, 7 Jul 2016.

30. Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Turkistan Islamic Party leader criticizes the Islamic State's 'illegitimate' caliphate", *FDD's The Long War Journal*, 11 Jun 2016.

19. Olga Dzyubenko, "Kyrgyzstan says Uighur militant groups behind attacks on China's embassy", *Reuters*, 7 Sep 2016.

20. "Who are we?" [*Man nahnu*], Islamic Turkistan [*Turkistan al-islamiya*], 19 Apr 2016, p. 2.

21. "Blessed Are the Strangers #2", *Jihadology*, 26 May 2016.

22. "25 'Radical' Hui Muslims taken into Custody [25 Müslümanımı 'Radikal Olmak' Suçlaması İle Tutukladık]", *Doğu Türkistan Bülteni*, 11 Nov 2015.

23. "Blessed Are the Strangers #2", *Jihadology*, 26 May 2016.

since 2005³¹. Potter of the University of Michigan notes that he played a mediation role between warring IEA factions – proof of the considerable influence he then wielded³². In addition, the rivalry between JFS and IS has come to the fore, with Haq’s echoing the former’s stance by describing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as “illegitimate”³³, while hagiographic articles about such influential al-Qaeda members as Abu Musab al Suri have been published in TIP’s aforementioned magazine³⁴. There is thus little doubt that the group has been part of al-Qaeda’s network for some time. Whether TIP’s position in this regard has since changed, notably following JFS’ rebranding and supposed split from al-Qaeda, carried out in late July 2016 due to pressure from Gulf-based donors, remains to be seen. It is however certain that, upon entering the Syrian theatre, TIP combatants were able to count on the cooperation and support provided by al-Qaeda.

TIP in Syria

Following the outbreak of the civil war, information as to Uyghurs fighting in Syria was not long coming. In October 2012, Chinese major general Jin Yanan stated that TIP was taking advantage of the Syrian conflict to obtain experience and a broader recognition of their cause³⁵. TIP formally announced its involvement in the Syrian conflict in December 2012 in the twelfth edition of its “Islamic Turkistan” e-magazine³⁶. In March 2014, TIP released a video in which Abdul Haq restated his organisation’s military presence in Syria³⁷. However, despite a steady flow of information detailing their arrival in force, it was not until

2015 that reports concerning Uyghur fighters in Syria described large numbers entering through the notoriously porous Turkish border³⁸. On social media, supporters of the Syrian regime routinely highlight their presence as proof of the uprising’s exogenous roots.

Many sources cite the adhesion of Uyghur fighters to IS. Eager to underscore its international reach, the jihadi group released a video in June 2015 showcasing its mobilisation of fighters hailing from Xinjiang, the veracity of which was buttressed by a European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) report which estimated that it currently fields around 200 Uyghur fighters, most of whom travelled from China through Malaysia and Turkey³⁹. Others cite figures as high as 300⁴⁰. Such statistics pale before the number of Uyghur fighters affiliated with groups close to al-Qaeda. Citing numbers originally published by the East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association, a media agency promoting the separatist cause, The Levant News claims that a total of 2,000 to 2,500 TIP combatants are currently fighting in northern Syria⁴¹. More tentative, the aforementioned ECFR report puts the number of Uyghurs in Syria at several thousand, adding that most have joined Jabhat al-Nusra (JFS)⁴². Unlike fighters travelling from Western or many Arab countries, however, there is little in the way of official statistics documenting the departure of Uyghur jihadis from either Xinjiang or Pakistan’s FATA; while TIP’s presence in Syria is undoubtedly significant, no definitive figures exist as to the precise numbers it has mustered.

Due to TIP’s long-standing ties with al-Qaeda⁴³, its fighters have largely fought under the aegis of JFS⁴⁴. It is but one of many

31. “Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing: QDe.088 Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement”, *United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs: Sanctions*, 7 Apr 2011.

32. Philip B. K. Potter, “Terrorism in China: Growing Threats with Global Implications”, *Strategic Studies Quarterly (Winter 2013)* 7(4): 70-92, p. 75.

33. Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Turkistan Islamic Party leader criticizes the Islamic State’s ‘illegitimate’ caliphate”, *FDD’s The Long War Journal*, 11 Jun 2016.

34. “The Syrian experience [Al-tajriba al-souria]”, *Islamic Turkistan [Turkistan al-islamia]*, April 2016, pp. 27-28.

35. “Jin Yanan: America Wants to Overthrow Bashar’s Regime [Mei xiang tui fan Bashaer zhengquan]”, *CNR*, 1 Nov 2012.

36. *Islamic Turkistan [Turkistan al-islamia]*, 12 Dec 2012, p. 3.

37. Bill Rogio, “Turkistan Islamic Party emir thought killed in 2010 reemerged to lead group in 2014”, *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 11 Jun 2015.

38. Michael Clarke, “Uyghur Militants in Syria: The Turkish Connection”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, 4 Feb 2016.

39. Mathieu Duchâtel, “Terror overseas: understanding China’s evolving counter-terror strategy”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 Oct 2016, p. 4.

40. “Over 100 Chinese Fighters Have Joined Islamic State in Syria”, *New America*, 25 Jul 2016.

41. “Uyghur ‘Jihadis’ Role in Syria War”, *The Levant News*, 19 Apr 2016.

42. Mathieu Duchâtel, “Terror overseas: understanding China’s evolving counter-terror strategy”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 Oct 2016, p. 4.

43. Christian Shepherd, “Syria-based Uyghur militants linked to Chinese embassy bombing”, *Financial Times*, 7 Sep 2016.

44. Mohanad Hage Ali, “China’s proxy war in Syria: Revealing the role of Uyghur fighters”, *Al Arabiya English*, 2 Mar 2016.

contingents of *muhajireen* to do so. JFS fields the largest contingent of foreign fighters after IS, with 30% of their rank and file consisting of international combatants⁴⁵. Primarily active in northwestern Syria, the organisation controls an estimated 7,000 fighters in the Idlib region alone⁴⁶. Its success is partly down to the skill with which it brought existing jihadi movements under its command structure. JFS allows such adherents to remain structurally independent, offering them both a degree of latitude in carrying out their own operations while strengthening its influence in areas beyond its immediate control⁴⁷. In addition, despite the difficulties inherent to coordinating disparate and heterogeneous actors on the field, Cafarella argues that the looseness of these alliances ensures that such groups retain their camaraderie and command structure, increasing their effectiveness in the field⁴⁸.

One such peripheral ally, TIP has operated alongside JFS throughout its involvement in the Syrian theatre. The group's Twitter pages have been regularly updated with the names and photos of well over 20 Uyghur fighters killed in Syria⁴⁹. They have risen to especial prominence during the battle for Jisr al-Shughur, a town historically opposed to the Assad regime wrested from regime control during the April-June 2015 Northwestern Syria offensive. The operation, part of a broader campaign to seize a number of strategic positions straddling the Hama and Idlib governorates, involved an estimated 700 Uyghur fighters joined by a number of Islamist factions, including the then-al-Nusra front and Salafist brigade Ahrar al-Sham. The group is thought to have lost over twenty soldiers over the campaign's course⁵⁰.

Upon taking the town, TIP produced a video of a local church steeple bearing its flag⁵¹, with additional accounts regarding its practice of

desecrating churches⁵² and executing Christian civilians reported throughout Idlib province⁵³. Thence, TIP fighters have been at the forefront of the fighting in Latakia, claiming 30 "martyrs" on 27 November 2016, fallen during fighting in the Jabal Turkman region⁵⁴. Also active in the Sahl al-Ghab plains west of Hama, the group's military activities in northwestern Syria are thought to have come at a total cost of 300 men⁵⁵. From April through to May 2016, TIP launched a series of military operations south of Aleppo. In November and December of the same year, a number of Twitter accounts reported TIP's marked presence during the battle for Aleppo, with the organisation claiming to have carried out a significant number of "martyrdom operations" against encroaching regime forces. TIP's media wing heavily publicized its involvement in the battle for the "1070 Apartments" project, a housing development in southwestern Aleppo which was the site of bitter fighting between the Syrian army and JFS. According to the Syrian News Center, a regime-backed news channel, TIP appears to have been one of the last groups to have left the city and its surrounding areas⁵⁶. Two training camps operated by TIP have been identified by the Long War Journal, an American website which reports on jihadist activity, specifying that one is located in Idlib while the other is either in Idlib or Latakia. In addition, one of the two is known to be dedicated to training child soldiers⁵⁷. There are no reports of TIP activity on the southern front.

Further reports have surfaced regarding the colonisation of abandoned settlements, whereby groups of foreign fighters, their families in tow, have taken over villages whose Christian or Alawite populations have long since fled⁵⁸, alongside settling down in villages

45. Charles Listen, "Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra", *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World: Analysis Paper 2*, Jul 2016, p. 35.

46. "Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)", *Counter Extremism Project*, Dec 2015.

47. Jennifer Carafella, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda", *Institute for the Study of War (Middle East Security Report 25)*, Dec 2014, pp. 16-21.

48. Ibid.

49. "Turkistan Islamic Party Fighters Killed in Syria", *The Line of Steel*, 19 Jul 2015.

50. Ibid.

51. "Şawt al-Islām presents a new video message from Hizb al-Islāmī al-Turkistānī [Turkistan Islamic Party] in Bilād al-Shām: 'Conquest of Jisr al-Shaghūr'", *Jihadology*, 1 May 2015.

52. Metin Gurcan, "How the Islamic State is exploiting Asian unrest to recruit fighters", *Al-Monitor*, 9 Sep 2015.

53. "Islamist Faction Accused for the Execution of a Man and his Wife on the Outskirts of Jisr al-Shughur [I'dam rajul wa zaujatuhu bi rifi Jisr al-Shoghur wa ittihat li fasil islami bi tanfidh al-i'dam]", *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 14 Jan 2016.

54. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Factions of North Latakia", *Syria Comment*, 10 Dec 2015.

55. "Syria : numerous Chinese Uyghurs are fighting in Syria [Syrie : de nombreux Ouïghours chinois combattent en Syrie]", Jean-René Belliard analyse le Proche-Orient, 30 May 2016.

56. Video published on Tishreen Newspaper's [Sahifat Tishrin] Facebook page, 22 Dec 2016.

57. "Jihadist training camps in Iraq and Syria", *FDD's Long War Journal*, Nov 2014.

58. "Uyghurs and the Changing Demographics of

controlled by JFS⁵⁹. They are reported as having taken over much of the town of Jisr al-Shughur. Such accounts, however, have been transmitted by pro-regime news sources such as the Beirut-based satellite television channel Al Mayadeen, which have likely exaggerated the extent to which Uyghurs are engaging in any form of long-term repopulation of north-western Syria. It must be noted that TIP, whether through its propaganda or declarations, has never cited the colonisation of captured territories as one of its aims. Lastly, TIP's relative laxness regarding the enforcement of Sharia law has been highlighted as having increased the local population's tolerance of their presence⁶⁰.

While TIP is far from being a major player in the Syrian theatre, it has deployed its fighters across the country and contributed to a number of significant operations. The commitment with which it has entered the war stands testament to the conflict's symbolic pull. While the motivations of individual jihadi fighters are so varied as to evade broad generalisations, the arrival of myriad noncoethnic groups to join the conflict is testament to the pull of a struggle framed as relevant to "all Muslims as a broader transnational community"⁶¹. In addition to their proven combat effectiveness, the arrival of Uyghur foreign fighters is symbolically powerful. From IS to JFS and its allies, jihadi groups tend to frame the presence of Chinese nationals in their ranks as proof that they represent the *ummah* in its entirety, that their cause has rallied fighters from across the globe. Similarly, Arabic-language Russian⁶² and regional, pro-regime⁶³ media agencies go to great lengths to highlight the presence of Uyghur combatants, in order

Syria's Idlib Province", *The Foreign Military Studies Office* 5(1), Nov 2015, p. 15.

"Three new ethnic groups which have become part of Syria's demography [*Thalath qawmiat jadida dakhlat al-tarkiba al-sukania fi souria*]", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 11 Oct 2015.

59. "Idlib, jihadi capital: preparations for the big battle [*Idlib 'asima "al-jihadin": tahdirat lil ma'raka al-kubra*]" *Al-Alam*, 23 Dec 2015.

60. Mohanad Hage Ali, "China's proxy war in Syria: Revealing the role of Uyghur fighters", *Al Arabiya English*, 2 Mar 2016.

61. David Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts", Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 190.

62. "Chinese newspaper: Uyghur extremists are fighting in Syria [*Sahifa sinia: al-mutatarrifin al-uighour yuqatiloun fi souria*]", *RT*, 29 Oct 2012.

63. "Chinese Uyghurs... 'Erdogan's new inghimasis' [*Al-sinioun al-uighour... "Inghimasiou ardoughan" al-judud*]" *Al-Manar*, 19 May 2015.

to frame the uprising as an alien incursion and thus shore up claims that it alone represents the country's indigenous population. Professor of political science at California State University, As'ad AbuKhalil argues that Western media has in turn shied away from commenting on the role of TIP fighters in lifting the siege of Aleppo, for fear of detracting from "the narrative of the secular democratic rebellion"⁶⁴.

Promotion of the Uyghur cause

Parallels can be drawn between international combatants currently active in Syria and those who fought in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89), notably the "Afghan Arabs" rallied to fight the USSR by Abdullah Azzam's Services Bureau (*maktab al-khidamat*). Hegghammer recounts how the establishment of a community of foreign fighters in Peshawar, backed by a sympathetic pan-Hijazi activist network, laid the organisational and ideological foundations for the conduction of jihadi operations well past the Afghan War's conclusion⁶⁵. Likewise, whether through the forging of ties or the accumulation of experience, the Syrian crucible will equip such groups as TIP to broaden their international operations once the dust has settled, capitalising on the role they played to better pursue their own agenda. The conflict's network-building potential is likely to be all the more amplified by the fact that the presence of foreign fighters in Syria dwarfs that of Azzam's Afghan Arabs.

Similarly to the Afghan Arabs' adroit use of modern media to market their cause⁶⁶, TIP has been capitalising on its presence in Syria to promote its separatist mission and underline its jihadi credentials. It has experienced some success in doing so, with Shichor contending that online jihadi posting have taken up the East Turkistan issue with particular fervour⁶⁷. As mentioned above, it has been increasing awareness as to the Xinjiang separatist movement as well as its military exploits through its Sawt al-Islam media division, regular tweets as well as a

64. As'ad AbuKhalil, "Chinese Jihadis among the fighters in Aleppo", *The Angry Arab News Service*, 8 Aug 2016.

65. Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad", *International Security* 35(3): 33-94.

66. Ahmad Muaffaq Zaidan, *The "Afghan Arabs" Media at Jihad*, Islamabad, ABC Printers, 1999.

67. DV Buyarov et al, "Demographic Situation in Xinjiang-Uigur Autonomous Area in the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century", *Global Media Journal*, 24 June 2016.

number of uploaded videos. Although, as has been mentioned, it periodically releases hour-long videos in Uyghur as well as content in various other languages, the fact that much of TIP's propaganda is published in Arabic suggests that the organisation is seeking to rally support throughout the Muslim world, aiming to secure its position within a transnational "imagined community" that is the internationalised Sunni jihadi movement. A wider recognition as to their legitimacy and combat effectiveness is essential to their continued funding and support from sympathetic sponsors beyond al-Qaeda, an issue of central concern as shown by TIP's reported reliance on other organisations when operating in Syria⁶⁸.

TIP's future in Syria

TIP's propaganda indicates that the movement's ultimate goal remains the liberation of Xinjiang. Any move to take the fight back to its homeland after leaving Syria, however, will face steep odds. As has been noted, far from relying on China-based networks, TIP's leadership has long been implanted in North Waziristan⁶⁹, meaning that its decision-making mechanisms are fundamentally dislocated from Xinjiang. Yet even this base of operations is far from secure. At China's behest, the Pakistani military has applied increased pressure on the organisation through its Zarb-e-Azb operation, launched in June 2014⁷⁰, which forced many fighters to relocate to the Syrian theatre; China, meanwhile, has developed world-class standards of airport security⁷¹. In addition, there are reports that many fighters have sold off their houses before moving from Xinjiang⁷². Worries that TIP is poised to ravage the PRC, therefore, seem overblown. The fact that the most effective domestic attacks by Uyghur militants on Chinese soil have been carried out by local groups, independent of any form

68. Mohanad Hage Ali, "China's proxy war in Syria: Revealing the role of Uyghur fighters", *Al Arabiya English*, 2 Mar 2016.

69. Rohan Gunaratna and Stefanie Kam, *Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing, 2016, p. 494.

70. Scott Stewart, "Assessing recent militant attacks in China", *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 29 May 2014.

71. Mathieu Duchâtel, "Terror overseas: understanding China's evolving counter-terror strategy", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 Oct 2016, p. 12.

72. Syrie : de nombreux Ouïghours chinois combattent en Syrie [*Syria : numerous Chinese Uyghurs are fighting in Syria*], Jean-René Belliard analyse le Proche-Orient, 30 May 2016.

of support from abroad⁷³, mean that, for the time being, the Chinese government likely has bigger fish to fry.

Regardless, the continued presence of Uyghur foreign fighters in Syria is far from certain. "Turkic ethnic solidarity with the Syrian Turkmen" has been cited as a vehicle through which TIP might wield influence in such regions as North Latakia⁷⁴. Yet there is little in the way of evidence suggesting that local Uyghur fighters are engaging in any form of meaningful cooperation, whether with local Muslim Turkmen or their largest military faction, the Syrian Turkmen Brigades. History shows that foreign fighters settling in conflict-ridden regions are often driven away, either through indigenous upheaval or intensified military pressure. Simpson, formerly on the faculty of the US Marine Corps' Command and Staff College, argues that "foreign fighters are more effective in the conflict's beginning but that their relationship with the local population erodes over," notably citing the case of the tribal *sahwa* (or awakening) against al-Qaeda forces in the al-Anbar governorate from late 2005 to mid-2007⁷⁵. Most recently, the Pakistani military – cooperating with Pashtun tribesmen – drove out Uzbek militants belonging to such organisations as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The ongoing Zarb-e-Azb operation has received strong support from the area's population, bringing into focus foreign fighters' vulnerability to the fickle sympathy of local tribal networks⁷⁶.

With IS' hold over Mosul and Raqqa loosening by the day, combined with the regime's recent takeover of Eastern Aleppo, the focus of the fighting has shifted to Syria's northwestern regions, increasing the pressure applied to such groups as JFS and Ahrar al-Sham. The US Department of Defense confirmed that its airstrikes are actively targeting JFS on November 18 2016; a campaign aiming to remove the organisation's senior leaders is thought to have been underway since October of the same year⁷⁷. On 1 January 2017, a drone strike killed

73. Zia Ur Rehman, "ETIM's presence in Pakistan and China's growing pressure", *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, Aug 2015, p. 5.

74. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Factions of North Latakia", *Syria Comment*, 10 Dec 2015.

75. "The Foreign Fighter Problem: A Conference Report", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Oct 2009, p. 2.

76. "Tribal elders of North Waziristan assure support to Zarb-e-Azb: ISPR", *Pakistan Today*, 21 Jun 2014.

77. "Syria Situation Report: November 19 - December 2, 2016", *Institute for the Study of War*, Dec 2016.

a TIP leader – also one of JFS’ top brass – Abu Omar al-Turkistani. Two days later, an airstrike (whose perpetrators remain unknown) carried out on January 3rd 2017 struck JFS’ Idlib headquarters, killing at least 25 of its members.

Moreover, having declared his plan to cut off Idlib-based rebels’ supply lines and push them back to Turkey⁷⁸, Assad will be vying for influence with an increasingly assertive Erdogan. Such is the anticipated military pressure on the region that the UN envoy, Steffan de Mistura, has warned that Idlib could become the next Aleppo⁷⁹. The need for greater rebel unity has been highlighted on a number of occasions. A scaled-down version of Saudi preacher Mohammad al-Moheisini’s ill-fated “Ummah Initiative”, a fatwa was promulgated by 17 Islamic scholars on 31 December 2016, urging groups active in Idlib, including TIP, to place their troops under a common, centralised leadership⁸⁰. Nearly a month later, JFS, bolstered by a number of defections from rival group Ahrar al-Sham, merged with four other Islamist and jihadi groups to form Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham⁸¹. The apparent unification of several opposition organisations under a single banner may strengthen their hold over Syria’s north-western regions. Yet, facing the likely return of these territories under regime control, jihadi groups such as TIP will be impelled to relocate or suffer heavy losses. Of central importance will be the degree to which Turkey would be willing to subject itself to international opprobrium by harbouring fleeing TIP fighters.

The role of Turkey

From the thousands Turkish boots on the ground in Syria to claims made by the Syrian ambassador to China that Erdogan has been granting Uyghur fighters safe passage to Syria⁸², Turkey’s position on TIP is of central importance. Having served as a safe haven to

78. Ilya Arkhipov and Donna Abu-Nasr, “Assad Says Aleppo Assault Is Springboard to Retake Rest of Syria”, *Bloomberg*, 14 Oct 2016.

79. “Aleppo battle: What next for the evacuees?”, *BBC News*, 21 Dec 2016.

80. “Seventeen scholars in Syria have published an Islamic verdict which obligates rebel factions in Syria to go ahead with a merger and unite”, *liveuamap*, 1 Jan 2017.

81. “Northern Syria... Factions join Ahrar al-Sham while others join Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham [*Shamal al-souri... Fasa’il tindam ila Ahrar al-Sham wa ukhra li Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham*]”, *Orient Net*, 29 Jan 2017.

82. Lin Meilian, “Xinjiang terrorists finding training, support in Syria, Turkey”, *Global Times*, 1 Jul 2016.

Uyghurs fleeing Chinese rule since the 18th century⁸³, Turkey has a long history of harbouring separatists advocating East Turkistan’s independence. Since the end of the Cold war, spurred by both an inclusive brand of ethno-nationalism as well as the creation of five Central Asian states⁸⁴, Turkey sought to reassert itself within the pan-Turkic sphere. This included offering those migrating from Xinjiang such benefits as “financial support, housing, and citizenship”⁸⁵, providing an environment within which separatist movements could operate freely, backed by a Turkish electorate sympathetic on account of a shared faith and a common Turkic heritage. Furthermore, right-wing, pan-Turkic solidarity exerts considerable pressure on the Turkish government, with Uyghurs afforded special consideration due to their description as “ancient forefathers of the Turkish nation”⁸⁶. As mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan described East Turkistan as “the cradle of Turkic history, civilization and culture”, declaring that “the martyrs of Eastern Turkistan are our martyrs”⁸⁷. Since acceding to the presidency, he has likened China’s reaction to the Ürümqi riots of June 2009 to the perpetration of genocide⁸⁸. A final sticking point concerns Turkish passports found on those responsible for the 2014 Kunming terror attack, seized as they attempted to flee by way of Indonesia.

Nonetheless, Shichor notes that Turkey, wary of antagonising China, has progressively reduced its support for Uyghur separatism. Throughout the last two decades, increasing Chinese investment and arms sales have pressured Turkey to temper its stance, leading to the wholesale removal of official support for pro-East Turkistan organisations and official recognition that Xinjiang is part of China (though unlike many Central Asian countries,

83. Michael Clark, “The Impact of Ethnic Minorities on China’s Foreign Policy: The Case of Xinjiang and the Uyghur”, *China Report* 53(1): 1-25, p. 8.

84. Heinz Kramer, “Will Central Asia Become Turkey’s Sphere of Influence”, *Perceptions* 3(4), Mar-May 1996, p. 2.

85. Yitzhak Shichor, “Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations”, *Policy Studies* 53, 2009, p. 11.

86. Yitzhak Shichor, “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: Middle Eastern Reactions to Rising China’s Uyghur Crackdown”, *Griffith Asia Weekly*, 3(1), 2015, p. 77.

87. Michael Clark, “The Impact of Ethnic Minorities on China’s Foreign Policy: The Case of Xinjiang and the Uyghur”, *China Report* 53(1): 1-25, p. 9.

88. “China, Turkey: friends or foes?”, *Al-Monitor*, Jun 2015.

Turkey has refused to extradite Uyghurs to the PRC). Turkey's dependence on Chinese economic largesse will only continue to grow – November 30th 2016 saw the conclusion of the first lira-yuan currency swap⁸⁹. Moreover, the arrest of 100 Chinese Uyghurs using false passports in Ataturk Airport in May 2016 signals a change of tack; in the wake of the attempted coup d'état of July 2016, an increasingly isolated Turkey, disillusioned with the West, is striving to improve relations with China. Given the CCP's marked concerns regarding TIP's activities, the movement's fighters are unlikely to be welcome in Turkey once driven out of northwestern Syria. This is rendered all more certain by JFS' description of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield as a veiled attempt to spread American influence⁹⁰, as well as much-publicised claims that the IS-affiliated gunman responsible for an attack on an Istanbul nightclub on January 1st 2017 was a Uyghur. Malet notes that statelessness fuels transnational jihadi movements⁹¹. With nowhere to call home, TIP's combatants are unlikely to revert to a civilian lifestyle, wherever they end up.

Conclusion

Renewed Chinese anti-terrorism initiatives, combined with the continuation of Pakistan's operations in North Waziristan, call into question the extent to which TIP can return to carry out operations in Xinjiang or the FATA. This is all the more pertinent due to the intensification of the civil war in areas where it maintains a combat presence, with the

89. "Turkey, China conclude first lira-yuan swap deal", *China Daily*, 9 Dec 2016.

90. Alex MacDonald, "Former al-Qaeda affiliate urges Syrian rebels to oppose Turkish invasion", *Middle East Eye*, 23 Sep 2016.

91. David Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts", Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 194.

ultimate expulsion of its fighters out of Syria drawing closer by the day. Lastly, a rapprochement between China and Turkey leaves TIP cornered. Yet, despite this grim appraisal of TIP's future prospects in Syria, the group's activities have demonstrated the paradoxical benefits little-known jihadi movements can draw from their commitment to conflicts. The peripheral nature of the movement's military impact notwithstanding, the civil war provided the opportunity to raise awareness of the Uyghur separatist cause among transnational jihadi networks. TIP has devoted significant resources towards this end, whether through its presence in key military campaigns, Sawt al-Islam service or frequent publications through social media. Although the results of these efforts remain to be seen, TIP has certainly capitalised on a chance to raise its international profile.

In addition, having rubbed shoulders with jihadi groups stemming from across the globe, from Chechnya to Morocco, fighting alongside JFS' *muhajireen* battalions has offered TIP the opportunity to widen its international network. The Syrian melting pot is likely to have the same effect as the Afghan conflict, which birthed a new generation of transnational jihadis by fostering terrorist networks and opening up new sources of funding. With foreign fighters in Syria more numerous, diverse and effective than the Azzam's Afghan Arabs, the results are likely to be all the more dramatic. The fact remains that, however TIP fares throughout the future fighting across Idlib, the movement's military capabilities will emerge substantially weakened. And yet, as with many other contingents of foreign fighters, through the acquisition of combat experience and having burnished its jihadi credentials, the Syrian quagmire will have endowed TIP with new partners, strengthening its ability to assert itself on the world stage. ♦

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