

Unnecessary Evil

China's Muslims aren't terrorists. So why did the Bush administration give Beijing the green light to oppress them?

BY JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

THE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, and the Bush administration's response to them, have unsettled much of the world. But few places have been more profoundly—and negatively—affected than Xinjiang, an obscure province in China's far northwest. Though the name is Chinese, most of the people who live in this Texas-sized swath of rugged mountains and high deserts are Uighurs: Turkic-speaking Muslims, more culturally akin to the Azeris of Baku than the Han Chinese of Beijing.

As in Tibet, the Chinese government has spent decades trying to pacify the land of the Uighurs (pronounced WE-gerz) with a mix of political repression and colonization by Han Chinese. The drab green uniforms of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have long been a common sight on the province's streets. But since September 11, the Chinese government has sent in 40,000 PLA reinforcements. On a recent visit to the desert city of Hotan, I watched newly arrived Han Chinese soldiers running wind sprints along the side of the road, a practice that the locals in Hotan—where summer midday temperatures top 110 degrees—surely regard as lunacy. In the provincial metropolises of Kashgar and Urumqi, Chinese police patrols wander the streets and lounge conspicuously at the upscale hotels where local Chinese dignitaries gather.

With the beefed-up military presence has come increased cultural and political oppression. During the Muslim festival of Ramadan in 2001, some Uighurs were forbidden to fast and thousands of Uighur-language books were burned in massive ral-

lies throughout the province. More than 3,000 Uighurs reportedly have been secretly jailed since 9/11, and many have been executed for no given reason. Xinjiang province, as Craig Smith recently noted in *The New York Times*, remains the only place left in China where people are routinely put to death for purely political disagreement. Resentment toward the Beijing government, and indeed toward ethnic Chinese in general, now simmers just below the surface in many Xinjiang households.

The growing repression in Xinjiang is part of the dark side of the Bush administration's response to September 11. By declaring war not just on al Qaeda but also on terrorism generally, the president gave rhetorical cover for other leaders to ratchet up the repression of their own terrorist-infiltrated sub-populations. Ariel Sharon and Vladimir Putin have famously exploited this. But at least Israel and Russia face real, immediate terrorist threats. China faces nothing of the kind from the Uighurs. By any honest reckoning, Xinjiang, though hardly quiescent, is not the hotbed of Islamic militancy that China claims.

Nor are the Uighurs remotely a threat to the United States. Yet in September, the Bush administration declared that a hitherto-unknown Uighur separatist group had ties to al Qaeda. Though there is virtually no serious evidence of such connections (the charge came primarily from the Chinese government), the Bush administration added the group to its terrorist list in the hopes of winning Chinese cooperation in the wider war on terrorism and support for (or at least acquiescence in) an invasion of Iraq. For a critical but still uncertain level of support in the war on terrorism, Washington has given the Chinese government the equivalent of a human rights get-out-of-jail-free card. And China is playing that card ruthlessly.

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Little Istanbul

Without setting foot on the ground in Xinjiang it is difficult to grasp how unlike the rest of China this region really is. The scenes I saw walking through the provincial capital of Urumqi reminded me of Istanbul or Amman, not of any city in eastern China. In the city's central market, where Turkish pop music drifts out of a nearby music store, young Uighur men, with their broad, Turkic/Central Asian faces, milled about in long robes and Muslim skullcaps. Nearby, older Uighur women in headscarves and long, flowery frocks sat at tiny streetside cafes, pulling apart dense, Middle Eastern-style sesame bagels. At the entrance to the market, kebab sellers frantically fanned their charcoal grills and cut pieces of shwarma, while dried-fruit vendors hawked their wares at the top of their lungs. Inside, smiling carpet merchants pawed at my arm, inviting me into their stalls to sip tea and view pomegranate-dyed rugs, the Uighurs' most famous handicraft.

A week later, I touched down in Kashgar, one of the major centers of Uighur culture, and home to the Idh Kah mosque, one of the largest religious structures in China and a hotbed for traditional music. As I walked around the outskirts of the mosque, I saw Uighur lute strummers congregating for impromptu performances. That evening, I experienced another permutation of local melodies at a nightclub, watching a young Uighur crooner belt out electrified rock versions of haunting traditional songs. As the music for each tune began, Uighur diners would take to the dance floor in droves, circling their partners with one hand flamboyantly raised above their heads in a style that reminded me of parties in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Uighur culture is traditional but evidences none of the harsh repression of women found in many Muslim countries. Uighur women run businesses, walk the streets in long but still sheer dresses, and interact with men as equals; two teenage girls I met vowed that they would never marry anyone who did not love them.

In almost every respect, the real Xinjiang is a very different place from that which Beijing portrays to the world—and which all too many in Washington have accepted. Though there are Islamist groups in Xinjiang, the real issue is regional autonomy, the struggle of a religiously and ethnically distinct people to resist

domination by Beijing and annihilation by the country's dominant ethnic group, the Han Chinese.

Twice during this century, the Uighurs of Xinjiang, a province which encompasses nearly one-sixth the area of China, actually did declare independence. After the last Chinese dynasty collapsed, the Uighurs established independent republics of East Turkestan (a common Uighur name for Xinjiang) in 1933 and,

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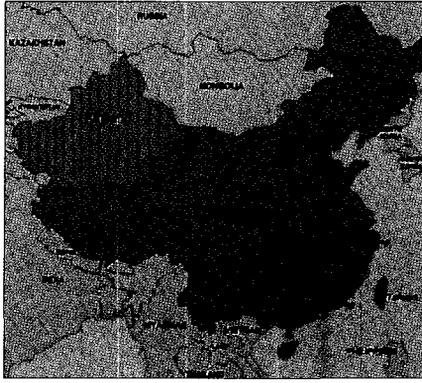
again, in 1944. But the 1944 republic was abolished when Mao's Communists took power in 1949, and Xinjiang was incorporated into China. From the early days of Communist rule, Beijing attempted to establish stronger Chinese control over Xinjiang, primarily through resettlement policies. The policies worked: While only 300,000 Han lived in Xinjiang in 1949, more than 8 million Chinese now live in the province, out of a total of roughly 19 million residents. But in the late 1970s and 1980s, as Deng Xiaoping opened China's economy, Beijing relaxed its grip, allowing significant economic and sociopolitical liberalization in Xinjiang.

After the 1989 Tiananmen riots and several incidents of violent Uighur separatism in the early 1990s, Beijing backed away from sociopolitical liberalization in Xinjiang. Some of the separatist incidents were indeed frightening—including a rash of bus bombings in Urumqi and assassinations of local government officials. But Beijing's reaction went too far. The government reasserted control over all religious institutions and accused thousands of Uighur writers of "advocating separatism," a broad term which often means little more than producing works in the Uighur language. Hundreds of artists were jailed and reportedly tortured. The security services also incarcerated prominent Uighurs who might have served as effective advocates for Xinjiang autonomy, men and women such as Rabeya Kadeer, a leading businesswoman whose husband lives in America.

Uighur Smear Campaign

An already bad situation deteriorated rapidly after

September 11. Shortly after the al Qaeda attacks on America, China began a massive propaganda campaign designed to convince its citizens, the international media, and foreign countries that the small number of Uighur separatists who do exist had trained in Afghanistan and developed close ties to al Qaeda. Less than a month after the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked, Chinese



Xinjiang is a province in China's far northwest.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi announced that “efforts to fight East Turkestan [i.e. Uighur] terrorist forces should become part of the international efforts [against terrorism.]” Senior Chinese ministers accused Uighur groups of “belonging to the bin Laden clique” and charged that over 1,000 Uighurs had migrated together to Afghanistan to train in al Qaeda camps. Chinese government flacks took journalists on closely-monitored tours of the region. The PR specialists alternatively touted Xinjiang as an ideal tourist destination—still a long shot, given that tour guiding in the province consists largely of screaming at clients and pushing them from place to place—and telling hair-raising stories of terrorists waiting around each corner. Most farfetched, Beijing prepared a detailed report which alleged that bin Laden had pledged large sums of money to fomenting Islamic rebellion in Xinjiang, an assertion American terrorism experts discount completely.

Like the assertion about bin Laden’s cash, Beijing’s allegations about Uighur ties to global terror find very little substantiation. There is political violence in Xinjiang, but it tends to be isolated and rooted in local ethnic and socioeconomic tensions. Small numbers of Uighurs may have fought for the Taliban against the United States, and there are allegations that a handful of captured Uighurs are cooling their heels at Guantanamo Bay. But in a comprehensive report released last fall, Human Rights Watch demonstrated that Beijing’s claims that Uighurs belonged to international Islamist networks probably were spurious, since Uighur leaders are extremely distrustful of the ethnic Pashtun Taliban and of Arabs. Eyewitness interviews with Uighurs captured by the Northern Alliance suggested that they had come to Afghanistan on an individual basis.

What’s more, despite a few small separatist incidents, most Uighurs not only reject violence but also probably do not wish to split from China. In fact,

notes Dru Gladney, an expert on Xinjiang at the University of Hawaii, the serial economic collapse of neighboring Central Asian states has convinced many Xinjiang residents that to strike out on their own would be disastrous. “Xinjiang was one of the first provinces allowed to have private businesses when China began to open its economy, so they have experience with capitalism and, despite the political

repression, have benefited from economic reform,” says Gladney. Indeed, most Uighurs I met in Kashgar were aware of the massive economic problems in Central Asia—traders from the region frequent Kashgar’s huge Sunday market—and realized their best economic option was to remain in China.

Instead, argues Nicolas Becquelin, a Xinjiang specialist based in Hong Kong, most Uighurs reject fundamentalism and merely want the autonomy to control their religious institutions, attend schools taught in Uighur, and get a fair shake in the Chinese economy. Even the few Uighur groups openly supporting independence, such as the East Turkestan National Congress, which operates from bases in foreign countries, have advocated creating a secular, democratic government in Xinjiang and have explicitly condemned al Qaeda. Protestations about democracy are not uncommon for rebel groups that later impose more authoritarian regimes. But radical Islamists are usually rather open in criticism of secularism. And, in any case, the East Turkestan National Congress has consistently denounced violence in Xinjiang.

Beating around the Bush

What has George W. Bush, who so frequently claims that religious freedom is an issue dear to his heart, done to defend the Uighurs, perhaps the most pro-U.S. Muslims in the world? Not much. The State Department’s most recent “Country Report on Human Rights” harshly criticized China for its treatment of the Uighurs, and many American officials privately acknowledge that Beijing has not substantiated its claims about al Qaeda ties to Xinjiang. President Bush also has told Chinese leader Jiang Zemin how important the Bible is to him and has mentioned that the war on terror should not provide an excuse to persecute minorities. According to media reports, Jiang was “impressed” by Bush’s commitment to his faith, though apparently not impressed

enough to alter his gruesome policies towards religious minorities.

The Bush administration has done little to back up its words. When Ronald Reagan visited Moscow in 1988, as the Soviet Union, like China today, was confronting serious internal tensions, he gave a major public speech about freedom and human rights. Unlike Reagan, Bush has not used visits to China to seriously highlight concerns about repression in Xinjiang or even bargain for the release of a leading Uighur like Kadeer. Instead, the president has praised Jiang for standing “side by side” with the United States in the war on terrorism.

Even the State Department, which has taken a relatively tough line on China, has backpedaled, its officials recently arguing that some “credible reports”—namely, Beijing’s assertions—had described that Uighurs trained in al Qaeda camps. And on a recent trip to Beijing, intimidating Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage did not just soft-pedal America’s criticism. Armitage thrilled Beijing by announcing that Washington had placed one obscure Uighur separatist group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, on America’s official list of terrorist organizations. Never mind that the group is virtually unknown and that most independent experts on Uighur matters are unconvinced that it exists.

Beijing Fling

Washington does seem to have reaped some rewards from its concessions to Beijing. China recently passed new statutes aimed at controlling exports of missile technology, chemical weapons, and other weapons of mass destruction. China has also stayed out of Washington’s way as the United States has pursued its campaign in Afghanistan. And the Chinese appear willing to forgo using their Security Council veto power to block an invasion of Iraq.

But China’s cooperation is easy to exaggerate. Although Beijing appears to have given help in some areas—allowing, for instance, the FBI to open a branch office in Beijing—diplomats say China has offered little substantive assistance to the anti-terror effort, sharing only limited amounts of its intelligence with either the FBI or the CIA. In an

appearance before the House International Relations Committee, Colin Powell admitted as much, stating that the United States “didn’t get much of a response” from Beijing.

What’s more, while Beijing has signed accords on controlling exports of weapons of mass destruction, it has failed to curb its exports of dual-use technology. Chinese state-linked firms reportedly

Untold numbers of innocent Uighurs will end up with bullets in the back of their heads as a direct result of U.S. action.

continue to sell chemical and biological weapons components to Iran, which is allegedly actively expanding its arsenal of such weapons and attempting to build a nuclear bomb. Eight Chinese companies have been barred from doing business with the U.S. government and may be slapped with further sanctions. (China has denied these allegations of assisting proliferation.) Chinese state-run companies also reportedly continue to provide advanced missile components to China’s longtime ally Pakistan, which uses this technology to build missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. And Pakistan in turn is suspected of providing weapons of mass destruction technology to North Korea, the country which recently shocked the world by admitting it was developing nuclear weapons.

In some respects, China is actually hindering the war on terrorism and a potential war with Iraq by stoking the fires of anti-Americanism. Party-controlled media companies have produced popular videos glorifying the September 11 attacks. In one video, a camera focuses on the rubble of the World Trade Center, while over the image, a commentator remarks: “Blood debts have been repaid in blood ... This is the America the whole world has wanted to see.”

This campaign against the United States has continued even after Washington gave Beijing its green light to crackdown in Xinjiang. In fact, it’s continued even in Xinjiang. Imams in the province have been rounded up and forced to attend “re-education sessions” laced with anti-American propaganda—reels of news footage of hate crimes against American Muslims. This anti-American campaign serves two purposes. It

strengthens Chinese nationalism, which Beijing relies on as adherence to communism wanes. And since the United States has over the past decade welcomed some Uighurs and other refugees from China, the Uighurs have become among the world's most pro-American Muslims. Beijing does not want imams broadcasting human rights abuses in Xinjiang to Uighur-American organizations, and it hopes to prevent this possibility by demonizing the United States.

In addition, despite China's various anti-American actions, many China experts believe Beijing would have gone along with the war on terror and the potential campaign against Iraq even if Washington had not given Beijing carte blanche to repress the Uighurs, arguing that former President Jiang Zemin would have supported or at least abstained on the Afghanistan resolution even if the United States had not lobbied Beijing, since, after 9/11, China did not want to be viewed as hindering the war on terror. According to this view, Jiang, who is approach-

ing retirement, wants to be seen as a statesman, not a pariah, in order to maintain his influence at home and abroad as he loosens the reins of power. Indeed, before the recent Bush-Jiang summit in Crawford, Texas, he took pains to emphasize the "growing interdependence" of the United States and China.

In addition, the argument that China needed much convincing to jettison Iraq should be viewed skeptically. Though Beijing has been outwardly friendly to Baghdad over the years, China does not get a significant portion of its oil from Iraq, and Chinese leaders have often expressed concern about Saddam's intentions. Indeed, toppling Saddam might even help Beijing's main petroleum providers, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Minor Threat

Yet even if we grant that turning our backs on the Uighurs was a cruel but necessary price to be paid in the service of the war on terror—and there are good arguments to be made—it is folly to believe that price

Beijing's Long Arms

By Soyoung Ho

JANET XIONG IS AN AMERICAN citizen living in New York. Thousands of miles away from China, she didn't think she had to worry about the Communist Party's crackdown against Falun Gong. She was wrong.

In October 1999, three months after the Chinese government stepped up its repression of the spiritual movement in response to a series of peaceful demonstrations against Communist Party persecution, Xiong's apartment was broken into and ransacked. Drawers were opened. Documents and files were scattered. Yet nothing was taken. A year later, police in China detained some of Xiong's American friends—fellow Falun Gong practitioners—and questioned them about her role in the movement. The police told them that they knew about practi-

tioners in the United States and listed off names including Xiong and her husband. "I'm being watched," said Xiong, still remembering the chill she felt that day. "I also received phone calls threatening me to stop Falun Gong."

There are an estimated 100 million Falun Gong practitioners—a movement based on elements of Taoism and Buddhism—more than 65 million of whom are members of the Communist Party. To date, 100,000 adherents have been arrested, detained, or sent to labor camps, and more than 500 have been killed. On July 7, 1999, after Chinese President Jiang Zemin delivered a speech to the Politburo on the need to eradicate Falun Gong throughout the world, China reportedly expanded its crackdown overseas—especially in the United States, home to some 24 million ethnic Chinese.

There are roughly 10,000 practitioners in the United States, including the movement's founder Li Hongzhi, who is wanted in China. China accuses Falun Gong

of being an "evil cult" that brainwashes adherents to commit suicide and refuse medical treatment. Western China experts, however, say that what the Communists really fear is a large civil-society-based group existing outside the Party's control or supervision. James Seymour, a China scholar at Columbia University, says Chinese authorities fear large, well-organized groups. "This comes partly from their own sense of insecurity and partly from their understanding that such movements have historically overthrown dynasties," says Seymour.

Last April, in response to harassment in the United States, 50 Falun Gong practitioners, including a number of American citizens, filed a groundbreaking civil rights lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, accusing China's security ministries, its embassy, and various regional consulates of conducting a criminal campaign designed to systematically intimidate, injure, and suppress U.S. adherents of Falun Gong.