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### CHINA UNDER THREAT

Jihadist community has China in its sights

Debate brewing over whether rising dragon should be seen as Muslims' friend or foe

By Rebecca Givner Forbes

Al-Qaeda and its associated jihadist movement regularly add to their list of enemies, rendering once neutral states potential targets of terror.

Since Sept 11, 2001, this list has grown considerably. Countries involved in the invasion of Iraq have been added. Even nations which opposed the Iraq war but supported coalition efforts in Afghanistan have not been spared.

In 2006, with a smattering of ink in the form of editorial cartoons, another handful of European countries were also deemed enemies of the faith.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that this occurs without much thought. The process by which countries are classified as targets is accompanied by heated debate, which can be observed on jihadist websites.

Discussions about the desirability of attacks in various countries take place regularly on jihadist websites, with participants ranging from anonymous jihad supporters to well-known religious clerics and the upper echelons of Al-Qaeda leadership.

Fierce debate accompanied terrorist attacks in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Algeria, and even the July 7, 2005 attacks in London provoked discussion over the permissibility of attacking the United Kingdom.

Al-Qaeda leaders often weigh in on the subject of which countries make the list. Recently, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri publicly affirmed that Al-Qaeda supported terrorist attacks in Japan and Norway, in spite of the fact that their foreign policies in the Muslim world are relatively benign.

Due to the increased international media attention on China and its growing business presence in the Muslim world, jihadists are beginning to consider the ramifications of an ascendant China.

Al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden have railed against more than 20 nations, but have not yet mentioned China. However, there are signs that a real debate is brewing. Two writers popular among the jihadist community have already put forth their views on how Muslims should react to China.

The most prominent radical to take a stand on China so far is Kuwaiti cleric Hamid Al-Ali, whose multitude of religious fatwas and other publications are widely disseminated on jihadist websites.

In a statement published on March 21 this year, the cleric called on Arab countries to throw their support behind China. He forecast that China's rise to prominence on the international scene could curtail American power.

'The dreams of the neo-conservatives for what has been called 'the American Century' have been shattered' by the Iraq war and other foreign policy missteps, he argued. He believed that this created an opening for China, and implied that Chinese influence abroad will be more benign than that of the United States.

He contrasted America's trials in Iraq with China's 'astonishing success' in Africa. 'Africa has found a prosperous future in Chinese economic development,' the cleric wrote. He urged Arab nations to back China, saying that 'the biggest losers' of an Arab-Chinese alliance would be the Israelis.

### **The Jewish connection**

Dr Akram Hijazi, a Jordanian professor, is not explicitly jihadist, but his writings reflect an anti-Western slant and are thereby popular on jihadist websites.

In August last year, Dr Hijazi wrote a lengthy analysis forecasting that jihadist leaders would eventually confront China due to the country's friendly relations with Israel and the Jewish community.

In his article, he contended that Chinese-Jewish relations are strong and that China will become the next major protector of Israel. He described military cooperation between China and Israel, including alleged transfers of weapons and technology and direct collaboration on the development of new weapons systems.

He also discussed in detail the Jewish community within China, including the presence of synagogues and academic centres for Judaic studies. He predicted that Israel would substitute China for the US as its superpower patron. Because China would be as friendly to Israel as the US has been, it would have the concomitant problems with radical Muslims.

Dr Hijazi also looked at China's treatment of its Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang province. He alleged a history of massacres, cultural destruction and economic inequality. He described how the seriousness of the situation in Xinjiang and the international Islamic community's puzzling neglect of the issue have led some writers to refer to Xinjiang as 'the Forgotten Palestine'.

In the light of the oppression of Chinese Muslims, Dr Hijazi wondered why Al-Qaeda has ignored China in its post-Sept 11 publications.

'Perhaps the nature of the conflict with the Jews and the West is critically different in some way than the historical conflict between the Muslims and Chinese,' he wrote. The conflict between the Muslims and the Jews, he explained, is part of religious dogma in Islam, described in the Quran.

The West's decision to side with the Jews makes them part of this conflict. The problems between the Chinese and the Muslims do not share this religious aspect, he reasoned, but concluded that future Chinese relations with Israel would alter the situation.

Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) is the only Islamist organisation in the region to try to draw attention to the plight of the Uighurs. HTI is a large and influential Islamist organisation whose stated goals are to implement syariah law and erect an Islamic caliphate.

On June 18, HTI featured an article on its website titled Muslims Suffer Under China's Colonisation. The article related the history and current conditions under Chinese domination in Xinjiang. It described how the Muslims, who call the region 'East Turkestan', have tried to break away from Chinese control repeatedly throughout history, and claimed that the Chinese name Xinjiang means 'New Domination Area', which succinctly reflects the Chinese attitude towards its inhabitants.

The article went on to claim that the Uighurs are forbidden from engaging in Muslim religious practices like praying, fasting and owning the Quran. It claimed that ethnic Han Chinese have assumed control of business, education and professional fields in Xinjiang, and have exploited the region's natural resources to the deprivation of the Uighur population.

The situation of China's Muslim minority could become a significant issue among jihadists if the international media or the jihad's Internet-based propaganda machine gave it more coverage. Currently, however, coverage of real or alleged oppression of the Uighurs is minimal.

The jihadist community has few friends in the world; indeed, any offence from a particular country can provoke a flood of vitriol and calls for violent terrorist attacks.

A recent example occurred when a Dutch parliamentarian produced a short film critical of Islam, and scores of jihadists, from anonymous website members to Al-Zawahiri, emerged to call for terrorist attacks in the Netherlands.

It is unlikely that China, as it goes about the business of statecraft abroad and development at home, will be able to avoid inflaming the sensitivities of this fickle mob.

China should expect that the Olympics will draw more media attention to its Uighur population and that some of its counter-terrorism activities in preparation for the big event could raise the ire of radical Islamists. We can expect the debate to heat up soon.

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