



Syria's Idlib Militants Eye China, Central Asia as Next Targets

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Abstract

China is watching carefully as the Syrian army begins a counter-terror operation in the al Qaeda safe haven of Idlib province. At stake for China and Central Asian countries is the large presence of Uzbek and Chinese Uyghur militants that may return to Asia. Moreover, Malhama Tactical – known as the “Blackwater of Jihad” that trains various jihadi groups including the Uyghur Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Idlib – have threatened to put China in its crosshairs. Given the same al Qaeda groups are based in Afghanistan as well as Syria, Washington should seek ways for meaningful anti-terror cooperation with Asian powers to neutralize the threat in both fronts.

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Analysis

As the Syrian Arab Army begins a counter-terror operation in Idlib province, which the senior US envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk, has described as “the largest al-Qaeda safe haven¹ since 9/11,” China is watching carefully.

At stake for China and Central Asian countries is the large presence² of Uzbek³ and Chinese Uyghur militants⁴ that may go back where they came from. For Beijing, how it responds to returning jihadis may alter the security situation in Xinjiang and the rest of China.

Malhama Tactical: The Central Asian ‘Blackwater of Jihad’

A recent article⁵ by Joseph Hope published by the Jamestown Foundation discussed several indicators that Uyghurs in Syria considered China the next target.

In early 2017, an Islamic State video portrayed a group of Uyghurs threatening China, and notably Malhama Tactical⁶ – a mainly Uzbek group known as the “Blackwater of Jihad” that trains various jihadi groups in Idlib – claimed to have added Chinese nationals to its instructor ranks and trained fighters in the al-Qaeda affiliate Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). According to the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor⁷, the group is also marketing itself somewhat to Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Malhama means “Armageddon,” and the fighters are heavily armed and expertly kitted with body armor and ballistic helmets. They are similar to other private military contractors, except Malhama only services extremist groups and its videos are marked by *nasheed* playing in the background.

While a full-fledged terror attack in Xinjiang may seem fanciful at present, some analysts⁸ observe that Malhama Tactical’s threats to Beijing are now expanding from Syria to Xinjiang, and its capacity to “shape angry Uyghur youth into elite fighters” would not only threaten Xinjiang but also the land corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In his article, Hope assesses that the risk to Beijing is not the threat of thousands of fighters returning to wage an open battle, but that a few highly- trained extremists could slip through the security cracks to become “powerful force multipliers who may introduce leadership, technical and tactical knowledge, resources, and radicalization methods to the community.”

¹ “Turkey blasts U.S. envoy over ‘Al Qaeda safe haven’ jibe”, *The New Indian Express*, August 1, 2017,

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2017/aug/01/turkey-blasts-us-envoy-over-al-qaeda-safe-haven-jibe-1636718.html>

² Caleb Weiss, “Uzbek group pledge allegiance to Al Nusrah Front”, *Long War Journal Threat Matrix*, September 30, 2015,

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/uzbek-group-pledges-allegiance-to-al-nusrah-front.php>

³ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “Central Asian involvement in the conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses”, May 4, 2015,

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf

⁴ Christina Lin, “Chinese Uyghur Colonies in Syria a Challenge for Beijing”, *Asia Times*, May 21, 2017,

<http://www.atimes.com/chinese-uyghur-colonies-syria-challenge-beijing/>

⁵ Joseph Hope, “Returning Uighur Fighters and China’s National Security Dilemma”, *China Brief*, Vol. 18, Issue 13, Jamestown Foundation, July 25, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/returning-uyghur-fighters-and-chinas-national-security-dilemma/>

⁶ Kim Sengupta Urfa, “‘Inside the ‘Blackwater of jihad’: the private security company training extremists in Syria”, *The Independent*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-latest-jabat-al-nusra-blackwater-jihad-malhama-training-a7628161.html>

⁷ Alessandro Arduino, Nodirbek Soliev, “Malhama Tactical Threatens to Put China in its Crosshairs”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 15, Issue 22, Jamestown Foundation, November 27, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/malhama-tactical-threatens-put-china-crosshairs/>

⁸ <https://jamestown.org/program/malhama-tactical-threatens-put-china-crosshairs/>



Unfortunately, this threat will likely reinforce China's heavy-handed policy in Xinjiang, which in turn may drive disaffected Uyghur youths to radicalization that then further reinforces harsh policies. This vicious cycle would not bring further stability to the region. But it can be hoped that the current operation to neutralize the threat of terrorism and extremism in Idlib and its linkage to Xinjiang would incentivize Beijing to loosen its coercive measures in the autonomous region.

Syria-Afghanistan counterterrorism front

Neutralizing terrorist actors in Afghanistan would also need to be included, given that the TIP's own literature treats the Afghan- and Syrian-based operations as parts of the same endeavor. Last month the Foundation for Defense of Democracies' Long War Journal⁹ documented that the TIP's new leader in Syria was dispatched from Afghanistan, demonstrating "the connectivity between the TIP's operations in Afghanistan and Syria, as the two TIP veterans went from serving the Taliban (that is, the self-declared 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan') to leading the charge with al-Qaeda in the Levant."

China understands the linkage between the two theaters and in August 2016 implemented a comprehensive counter-terror approach for the "two Afghanistans." On August 4, 2016, China formed an anti-terror alliance¹⁰ with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, which a US State Department spokesman at the time, Mark Toner, said Washington welcomed as a "positive" for the region.

A few weeks later China signed military agreements¹¹ with the "second Afghanistan" – Syria – to provide humanitarian aid and anti-terror assistance. China already has a long history of training Afghan security forces, and as the TIP opened a new front in Syria, Beijing likewise stepped up its aid to the Syrian security forces.

However, it is unclear if Washington would equally view Chinese anti-terror endeavors in Syria as a "positive" development similar to Afghanistan, given the stovepipe organizational structure of the US military and intelligence apparatus, and the division of geographic AORs (area of responsibility) with little cross-fertilization of information. A prime example of this ineffectiveness played out in 2016, when the CIA-backed jihadist opposition in Syria battled Pentagon-backed Kurdish fighters, highlighting that America was in effect having a proxy war against itself.¹²

To avoid such dysfunctional policies in the future, it might be helpful for the US government to have a more comprehensive and holistic approach to counter-terrorism and remove some of the organizational stovepipes.

If Washington is serious about combating terrorism, then it should also be understanding of Asian countries' real concerns regarding the terrorist threats emanating from Idlib, put aside its unhealthy obsession with regime change, and seek ways for meaningful anti-terror cooperation with Asian powers to neutralize the threat in both Syria and Afghanistan.

⁹ Thomas Jocelyn, "Analysis: The Turkistan Islamic Party's jihad in Syria", *FDD Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, July 10, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/analysis-the-turkistan-islamic-partys-jihad-in-syria.php>

¹⁰ "China Forms Antiterror Alliance with Pakistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 5, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-forms-anti-terrorism-alliance-pakistan-tajikistan-afghanistan/27901474.html>

¹¹ Liu Zhen, "Chinese military to provide 'aid and training assistance to Syrian government", *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2004676/chinese-military-provide-aid-and-training-assistance>

¹² Mike Giglio, "America Is Having A Proxy War With Itself In Syria", *Buzz Feed*, February 20, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/america-is-now-fighting-a-proxy-war-with-itself-in-syria>



Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published in *Asia Times* on August 13, 2018.

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