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## THE ISLAMIC STATE ADDS A NEW TWIST TO CHINA'S UIGHUR PROBLEM

*ABSTRACT: China has long faced terrorist attacks that she blames on Uighur separatists, the East Turkmen Islamic Movement, influenced by external elements like Al Qaeda and now the IS, as in 2014 300 Uighurs were reported to be fighting alongside the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Therefore now the last thing China wants is to have these militants return home and carry out attacks in Xinjiang or any other part of China. In this article, through the examination of what actual threat these Uighurs from the Middle East could mean, and what kind of antiterrorism measures China takes in order to protect herself, her territorial integrity and foreign interests, I will examine the question whether this kind of new threat from the IS could motivate China to go against her main principle of non-intervention, and intervene in the Middle East as a responsible great power and join the US-led coalition in fighting against IS.*

*KEYWORDS: China, terrorism, Uighurs, Islamic State, counterterrorism*

### INTRODUCTION

Both ISIS and Al Qaeda have declared war on China and claimed Xinjiang (under the name of East Turkestan) as part of the Islamic Caliphate.<sup>1</sup> This is a new kind of direct threat, especially with the 300 Uighurs who have allegedly joined the fighting in the Middle East on the side of the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup>

Ever since China realized that her Uighur problem can no longer be treated merely as a domestic problem, there has been an effort to link China's fight against the "three evils", separatism, extremism and terrorism, to the international community's struggle. In the 1990s, however, Uighur separatists and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) bore no explicit support from neighbouring terrorist organizations like the Taliban or Al Qaeda. As Brian Fishman explains in his article, "despite their freedom to train in Afghanistan, the Taliban banned fighters from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from attacking China from their territory."<sup>3</sup> With the US operations taking place in Afghanistan they would have been foolish to anger China and risk a war fought on two fronts. They also thought that the rise of China could be the force to weaken and thus eventually help them topple the US hegemony.

The new millennium, however, brought the realization that – referring to the oppression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, specifically after the crackdown on the riot in

<sup>1</sup> Lin, C. „China and the Islamic State”. chinaandgreece.com, January 16, 2015, <http://chinaandgreece.com/china-islamic-state/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Besenyő, J., Prantner, Z., Speidl, B. and Vogel, D. *Az Iszlám Állam, Terrorizmus 2.0 – Történet, ideológia, propaganda*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Fishman, B. „Al-Qaeda and the Rise of China: Jihadi Geopolitics in a Post-Hegemonic World”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011, 47-62, 48.

2009 – in the eyes of extreme Islamic terrorists China became just another tyrant of the world. Yet they did not consciously aim to invite China to fight against terrorism away from home. The Islamic State on the other hand doesn't share the Taliban's cautious approach to China.

In this article, through the examination of what actual threat these Uighurs from the Middle East could mean, and what kind of antiterrorism measures China takes in order to protect herself, her territorial integrity and foreign interests, I will examine the question whether this kind of new threat from the IS could motivate China to go against her main principle of non-intervention and intervene in the Middle East as a responsible great power, and join the US-led coalition in the fight against IS.

## UIGHURS FIGHTING WITH THE ISLAMIC STATE

In a speech released on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014 emir of the proclaimed caliphate, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi called for all the Muslims around the world to pledge allegiance to him, and said that "Muslim rights are forcibly seized in China" (as listed first among a dozen other countries). He also sent a message to Uighurs, China's Turkic-speaking, Muslim minority, whose radical organizations had been expecting wide-ranging support in their fight for independence from Al Qaeda, claiming "your brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades." Additionally, a map also depicted a great part of Xinjiang as a region to be seized by the Caliphate within the next five years.

In July, China's former Middle East envoy Wu Sike said that there were about 100 Chinese people fighting for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>4</sup> Since then there have been other Global Times articles, citing sources from security officers in Iraq's Kurdistan region, Syria and Lebanon, that 300 Chinese extremists are fighting with IS in Syria and Iraq, and that most of these people travelled to their destination to join the jihadist fighters through Turkey, using Turkish passports. "According to a senior security official from the Kurdish region of Iraq, terrorists from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) [...] have travelled to Syria via South-Eastern Turkey's Sanliurfa Province to join the Islamic State jihadist group."<sup>5</sup> The same article also claims that ETIM and Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) both pledged allegiance to the IS, as they have incorporated its initials into their name.

On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Zhang Chunxian, Communist Party secretary of Xinjiang claimed that "there are Uighurs that have fled overseas and joined the Islamic State [...] We have also found that some who fought returned to Xinjiang to participate in terrorist plots,"<sup>6</sup> although he didn't elaborate on these plots or the exact number of those returned. Raffaello Pantucci, a terrorism researcher at the London-based defence think tank Royal United Services Institute, wrote that while he didn't doubt that people from Xinjiang could be fighting in Iraq and Syria, he had some doubts whether they would be able to make the journey back home; one of the problems stemming from the difficulties for Uighurs to get a passport, and

<sup>4</sup> Nanzao.com. „Al Qaeda Journal says Xinjiang will return to be part of the Islamic Empire (in Chinese) 基地组织杂志要将新疆重归伊斯兰帝国”, nanzao.com, October 23, 2014. <http://www.nanzao.com/sc/international/14c31686035cc62/ji-di-zu-zhi-za-zhi-yao-jiang-xin-jiang-zhong-gui-yi-si-lan-di-guo>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Yongzheng, Q. „Turkey's ambiguous policies help terrorists join IS jihadist group: analyst”, Global Times. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896765.shtml>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>6</sup> The Associated Press. „China Says Muslim Uighurs Have Joined ISIS”, March 11, 2015. <http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/1.646317>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

also whether IS would let them leave. "We have seen numerous reports of foreigner fighters getting executed for trying to leave, including groups of Uighurs," he said.<sup>7</sup> Yet, this could change with the pressure growing on IS, and the more territory the organization loses the more it might encourage new recruits to rather carry out attacks in their homeland instead of calling them to the Middle East.

## UIGHUR WOES

The lure of the Islamic State could be felt worldwide, but why would Uighurs want to join its ranks? It is worth noting that most Uighurs, who number about 10 million in North-Western China, do not support terrorism or violent fighting for their region's independence. It is argued that what they really flee from is oppression, limitations in their religious freedom, restriction of the expression of Uighur identity, violation of human rights, or the influx of Han Chinese into Xinjiang. It leaves them feeling discriminated and also left out of the economic boom. Between 2004 and 2009 Xinjiang's GDP doubled and is still growing over 10% annually, the region also accounts for up to 40% of China's coal reserves, has the largest stores of oil and natural gas as well.<sup>8</sup> Xinjiang is also one sixth of Chinese territory, which makes separatism that much more threatening for the central government's rule.

While the vicious circle of discrimination (slim chances of getting employed compared to Han Chinese applicants are among some of the problems)<sup>9</sup> creates further resentment among the Uighur minority, the government's controversial policies also give ground for extremist organizations' propaganda. Al Qaeda's English magazine *Resurgence* claims that the signs of Muslims' suppression in China are the aforementioned Han migration into Xinjiang (East Turkestan in that magazine), the restrictions of fasting during Ramadan, the ban on wearing Islamic clothing (veils for women, beards for men are forbidden). Yet, the Chinese<sup>10</sup> claim these accusations as unacceptable and insufficient. The article quotes Ahmed Hashim, a terrorism expert at Nanyang Technological University, who claims that it is China's general rise and increase in global power that is seen as the oppression of peoples. He also states that it is in great part due to Uzbek jihadists who provide assistance to Uighur jihadists to link them to the international network. Who, now, as they join the Islamic State do not simply want to receive training but also to build connections and be integrated into international networks of terrorism in order to gain support for terrorist attacks they would want to carry out in China.

<sup>7</sup> The Associated Press. „China Says Muslim Uighurs Have Joined ISIS“, March 11, 2015. <http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/1.646317>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Kuo, K. „China's Wild West. The problem with Beijing's Xinjiang policy.“ *Foreign Affairs*, January 26, 2014. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2014-01-26/chinas-wild-west>, Accessed on 5th July 2016.

<sup>9</sup> For example „The government has made token efforts to create job opportunities for Uighurs on the coast, sending busloads of them to work in factories. But employers are wary. In June 2009 in the southern city of Shaoguan in Guangdong province, a brawl between Uighur and Han Chinese workers at a toy factory left two Uighurs dead and dozens injured. This fuelled ethnically charged riots that erupted a few days later in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, in which about 200 died.“ Also in greater detail see: Economist. „Don't make yourself at home“, economist.com, January 17, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21639555-uighurs-and-tibetans-feel-left-out-chinas-economic-boom-ethnic-discrimination-not> Accessed on 5th July 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Nanzao.com. „Al Qaeda Journal says Xinjiang will return to be part of the Islamic Empire (in Chinese) 基地组织杂志要将新疆重归伊斯兰帝国“, nanzao.com, October 23, 2014. <http://www.nanzao.com/sc/international/14c31686035cc62/ji-di-zu-zhi-za-zhi-yao-jiang-xin-jiang-zhong-gui-yi-si-lan-di-guo>, Accessed on 5th July 2016.

While there is no doubt that international jihad does influence radical and terrorist groups like TIP and ETIM, it is also important to recognize – as it greatly affects the possible means to battle such issues – the roots of the unrest in Xinjiang. That might be, contrary to what the Chinese government claims, more of the result of misplaced or miscalculated government policies that fail to properly recognize cultural and ethnic aspects of the problem.

## CHINA FIGHTS TERRORISM (MOSTLY) AT HOME

There have been several terrorist attacks in China which were mostly blamed on Uighur separatists. However, lately, “in contrast to earlier attacks, which had been aimed at government buildings and security forces in Xinjiang, these occurred in various locations in China, including Beijing, and were aimed at civilians.”<sup>11</sup>

- October, 2013, Beijing, Tiananmen Gate, 5 dead
- March, 2014, Kunming, 31 stabbed to death, 141 injured
- April, 2014, Urumqi, bomb attack, 3 dead
- May, 2014, Urumqi, two cars with explosives drove into a market, 31 dead, 90 injured
- June, 2015, Kashgar, Uighurs attacked police at checkpoint, 18 dead (including 15 suspects)
- September, 2015, Aksu mine attack, 16 dead (including 5 police officers), 18 injured. An additional 28 people were killed as a result of the following manhunt for the attackers.

China has long treated her terrorist problem as something coming from the outside, a deliberate scheme to spread radical ideology among the minorities in China to disrupt her territorial integrity, support separatism and religious extremism, and weaken the authority of the central government. The problem of Uighur separatism has been blamed on external forces, terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, and recently ISIS, such as exile Uighur diasporas and ETIM and TIP (Turkestan Islamic Party) from the nineties. Yet, the first official step to connect Uighur militancy to ETIM and to Al Qaeda was made only in 2001 in a report published by a Chinese mission to the United Nations in November.<sup>12</sup> ETIM was officially placed on the list of international terrorist organizations – by both the United States and the UN – and it served as a means to connect the Chinese struggle against Uighur militants into the international war on terrorism. Especially as the Chinese media continues to group terrorists and peaceful separatists together. This shift is visible also in the labels the official media terms Uighur nationalist movement as well: in the nineties they were referred to as “splittists” (fenliefenzi), then after 9/11 they were increasingly referred to as “terrorists” (kongbufenzi).<sup>13</sup> Even despite that, China remained within her own borders to fight terrorism and ethnic discontent.

China’s continuous operations to restore stability and order in Xinjiang have forced most of the radical militant separatists to Pakistan and other neighbouring states where they – contrary to the authorities’ aims – have also managed to establish links to local Al Qaeda and Taliban organizations. They have succeeded to the point where ETIM leader Abdul Haq gained a significant role within Al Qaeda’s decision making process. TIP also joined Jaish

<sup>11</sup> Propper, E. “The Islamic State: The Danger that China Would Rather Not Name”, In Yoram, S. and Einav, O. *The Islamic State: How Viable is it?* Tel Aviv, 2016, 254, ISBN: 978-965-7425-86-2

<sup>12</sup> Dickey, L. „Counterterrorism or Repression? China Takes on Uighur Militants.” *ISN*, May 2, 2016. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/196705>, Accessed on 5th July 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Fishman, 2011, 55.

al Fatah, a jihadist-led alliance of rebel groups that also includes the Al Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda's official branch in Syria, as a founding member.<sup>14</sup>

After the recent terrorist attacks in Urumqi and various other parts in China, the IS announcement of the establishment of the caliphate, and the reports about Uighurs joining the organization, China stepped up her counter-terrorism activities in 2014. Xi Jinping pledged to build "walls made of copper and steel" and "nets spread from the earth to the sky" in order to capture terrorists.<sup>15</sup> These efforts are represented at three levels: domestic crackdowns, repatriations from abroad, and remaining true to China's main principle of non-interference.<sup>16</sup> "As part of the year-long counter-terrorism campaign, Chinese police said they have confiscated thousands of videos inciting terrorism and blocked online materials teaching terrorist techniques."<sup>17</sup> As the Chinese government claims, Uighur youth is corrupted through such materials brought into Xinjiang through the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Even though previously several laws have already provided authorities with necessary means to act against terrorist threats, in December 2015 the National People's Congress Standing Committee approved China's first counterterrorism law, which came into effect on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2016.<sup>18</sup> It requires tech companies to hand over encryption keys to security agencies on demand, and would also allow the People's Liberation Army to participate in counterterrorism operations overseas with the approval of the Central Military Commission and the countries involved in the operation. The law was passed amid heightened concerns regarding the unrest in Xinjiang, and reports claiming that Uighurs have joined to fight with the Islamic State, who pose a significant threat if they return to China. The South China Morning Post article quotes retired Colonel Yue Gang, who said military should be involved if countries are threatened who would affect China, "but we should do it without affecting the sovereignty of other nations."

At multilateral level there is cooperation within the SCO, and joint military exercises ("Peace Missions"). The one in 2014, for example, took place in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, where 7,000 troops practiced on the basis of a scenario: a separatist group was assisted by international terrorists who plotted a terrorist attack, a *coup d'état*.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, last year at the end of the two-day SCO summit Chinese Premier Li Keqiang called for the signing of an anti-extremism treaty which reflects Beijing's growing worries about the lure of Islamic State.<sup>20</sup> However, as it is with most of the organization's work, the agreements signed at the summit are still considered by critics as more form than substance. As, for example, the insufficient and uncertainly set aims and means of operation of the

<sup>14</sup> Lin, C. „Will China support an independent Kurdistan?" *asiatimes.com* 2016. 05. 29. <http://atimes.com/2016/05/will-china-support-an-independent-kurdistan/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Propper. „The Islamic State: The Danger that China Would Rather Not Name". 2016, 255.

<sup>16</sup> Dickey. „Counterterrorism or Repression?", 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Gracie, C. „Xinjiang: Has China's crackdown on 'terrorism' worked?" *bbc.com*, January 2, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30373877>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Kwong, P. „China passes landmark law to battle terrorism at home and overseas". *South China Morning Post*, December 27, 2015. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1895436/china-passes-landmark-law-battle-terrorism-home-and>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Lin, C. „ISIS Caliphate meets China's Silk Road Economic Belt." *rubicenter.org*. February 22, 2015. <http://www.rubicenter.org/2015/02/isis-caliphate-meets-chinas-silk-road-economic-belt/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Wu, W. „China on IS threat: Could government launch anti-terrorism cooperative in absence of global unified force?" *South China Morning Post*. December 16, 2015. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1891720/shanghai-cooperation-organisation-forge-closer-economic>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) are constantly criticised – especially for a regional organization with a primary aim to guard the region’s stability and present a front against terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

On the other hand, China sees the key to fighting extremism and terrorism through the economic development in the threatened regions. One of these regions is the post-Soviet Central Asia, where China aims to improve economic cooperation within the member states of the SCO, and also through the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative (or New Silk Road), which also would put Xinjiang into a very important transit position in China’s long-term plans. The main idea is that the stability granted by economic development, new job opportunities, and the (forceful) establishment of a national – Chinese – identity would help secure China’s territorial integrity, border security, and would also secure the energy supply both from Xinjiang and from Central Asia that is essential for the Communist Party to retain its power and control. Through the tightened economic relationship with Central Asian countries China also aims to stop the spread of radical Islam and any kind of support for ETIM.<sup>21</sup> It envisions connectivity through infrastructure that runs from China on land through six corridors and one additional Maritime Silk Road. If it succeeds, which both demands and supplies security and stability in the regions which it runs across, it would enhance Chinese power projection, primarily through economic connectivity, but if needed, also through military means.<sup>22</sup>

“By developing extensive gas and oil pipelines, as well as developing a network of transportation links, China is making itself economically indispensable to Xinjiang and the countries lying within the modern-day Silk Road.”<sup>23</sup> While it is favourable for the government, and makes Xinjiang a vital part of China’s future, it also brings controversial consequences for the region, and its Uighur inhabitants as well. They would have to decide whether they support the Chinese Communist Party, which brings economic development to the region, and agree to lose some part of their autonomy, or they can continue to oppose it, which brings the consequences of a continuous iron-fisted rule. The main problem is that there is no middle ground.

## WILL THERE BE A CHINESE INTERVENTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Usually China’s growing interests in Iraq’s considerable oil resources and infrastructure investments are considered a good basis to support Chinese intervention against ISIS. Especially, as despite the attempts to diversify China’s oil import, Iraq still remains a significant (5<sup>th</sup> largest) exporter to China (where China, too, is the largest importer of Iraqi

<sup>21</sup> For example through the SCO-supplied cooperation Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan willingly participate in repatriation of Uighurs to China. And, as part of proof for the commitment in the OBOR, in September 2015 Mamnoon Hussain, Pakistan’s Prime Minister told Xi that a recent Pakistani antiterrorism operation, code-named Zarb-e-Azb, had successfully eradicated all members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement from Pakistan. Source: Shah, F. „Costly Corridor. How China and Pakistan Could Remake Asia.” *Foreign Affairs*. December 3, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2015-12-03/costly-corridor>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>22</sup> In greater detail see: Lin, C. „ISIS Caliphate meets China’s Silk Road Economic Belt”

<sup>23</sup> Ooi, S-M. and Trinkle, K. „China’s New Silk Road and Its Impact on Xinjiang”. *thediplomat.com*, March 5, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/chinas-new-silk-road-and-its-impact-on-xinjiang/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

oil at the demand of 22% of Iraqi crude oil in 2014).<sup>24</sup> “Although much of the fighting has occurred away from the production areas where Chinese oil companies conduct business, Beijing has kept itself abreast of any developments in the energy and infrastructure sectors where its citizens are involved.”<sup>25</sup> Then at the end of 2015 Fan Jinghui, a 50-year-old Chinese citizen, along with another Norwegian hostage, was executed by ISIS. In a speech President Xi Jinping condemned the killing of hostages and said that terrorism was the enemy of all mankind. Also the Chinese State Department vowed that Beijing would bring the criminals to justice – although the means are still uncertain.

There had been reports about the deployment of the Liaoning aircraft carrier to Syria as a sign of China’s willingness to send troops to fight in the Middle East, however, this information was quickly proven as nothing but mere rumours. The Global Times also added that “China has no reason to rush to the frontlines and play a confrontational role.”<sup>26</sup> With the execution of Mr Fan, and the large number of Chinese enterprises and Chinese workers present in the Middle East and specifically in Iraq, Chinese interests are directly threatened. However, this still has not solved Beijing’s great dilemma: should China intervene directly, going against her long-standing principle of non-intervention and neutrality, in order to protect economic interests; or should she rather stay away in fear that sending troops would only lead to even more vicious retaliations that would then lead to further and greater losses?<sup>27</sup> It further adds to the dilemma, that at home China should also project the capability of the government and the Communist Party to protect Chinese citizens and interests abroad as well.

China is still adamant on her main principle of non-intervention in other countries’ internal affairs. And even though she has shown certain signs of flexibility (especially regarding UN peacekeeping operations and the mandate of the combat troops China started sending), the growing economic interests in Iraq and the region are not a profound enough ground for China to join the USA’s war against IS.<sup>28</sup> As it is stated in an often cited article originally published in Huanqiu, “the Chinese power projection is limited, and the Islamic State group has not yet threatened China’s core interests.”<sup>29</sup> Also, China views the turmoil

<sup>24</sup> United States Energy Information Administration (EIA), “China Brief.” Updated May 15, 2015. <http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/China/china.pdf>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>25</sup> According to Hua Chunying, China Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson, it means about 10,000 Chinese workers in the country. Which brings up the potential need for the PLA to conduct evacuation missions similar to those it had done in Libya previously if the situation deteriorates any further. Some of the companies have already evacuated some of their staff. However, an evacuation of such large scale would threaten the state-owned companies to lose billions of dollars in investment as it did happen in Libya in 2011, the repetition of which would be highly undesirable for the government. Source: Butch, T. „Why China wil intervene in Iraq”. *atimes.com*, September 9, 2015. <http://atimes.com/2015/09/why-china-will-intervene-in-iraq/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Reuters. „Chian says not planning to send military ships to Syria”. *reuters.com*, October 14, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-china-idUSKCN0S80W120151014>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Liu, Z. „Analysis: China’s limited capacity to counter Islamic State” (in Chinese) 分析: 中国反击伊斯兰国能力有限, November 20, 2015. *nanzao.com*, <http://www.nanzao.com/sc/national/1512087e7c7cccd/fen-xi-zhong-guo-fan-ji-yi-si-lan-guo-neng-li-you-xian>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>28</sup> However, it is worth noting that there was a significant lack of the usual condemning rhetoric in Chinese media when the US airstrikes started in Iraq and Syria. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that China was „keeping an open mind” about operations that would „help maintain security and stability” in Iraq. Olesen, A. „China Sees Islamic State Inching Closer to Home.” *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2014. *foreignpolicy.com*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/11/china-sees-islamic-state-inching-closer-to-home/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Tian, W. „US Calls To Fight Islamic State for Much Selfish Gain”, *watchingamerica.com*, September 29, 2014. <http://watchingamerica.com/WA/2014/09/29/us-calls-to-fight-islamic-state-for-much-selfish-gain/>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.

in the Middle East as a result of American actions, treating al-Qaeda and now the Islamic State as a by-product of the Iraq war, and will continue to treat it as American responsibility until the USA shows willingness to cooperate with Syria (the US government is still adamant on overthrowing Assad's regime) and Iran. China doesn't feel responsible for the turmoil of the Middle East, and thus feels no obligation to actively participate in its solution outside of a full-international alliance.

Others, like Tian Wenlin back in 2014, go even further in urging caution and waiting with an intervention:

*"According to scattered news sources, this organization is providing water and electricity, wages, and traffic control, and is managing establishments like bakeries, banks, schools, courthouses and mosques within the occupied territories. Therefore, it is still inconclusive whether the Islamic State group is a heinous terrorist group or an inevitable product of the current development in the Middle East. Involvement in strikes against its military is premature given that the key issues have not yet been resolved. This cautious attitude is exactly what China as a "responsible power" is demonstrating."*<sup>30</sup>

Liu Zhongmin, Middle East expert at Shanghai International Studies University says that while Beijing feels the international pressure to act against the Islamic State, it is unlikely that China would contribute to the fight against ISIS by military means, since she does not have military presence in the Middle East. "Even if China would like to [intervene], the conditions do not allow it."<sup>31</sup> William Callahan from the London School of Economics claims that the only way for Beijing to take measures against the Islamic State is through Security Council-issued sanctions against Syria – which China is still reluctant to support.<sup>32</sup>

Christina Lin, on the other hand, claims that it became almost inevitable that China would have to step up and intervene in the Middle East, but she also emphasizes that it would be only acceptable under the banner of the United Nations. She maintains that China would never fight US battles, or be involved in a US-led coalition. According to a South China Morning Post article<sup>33</sup> the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in favour of the early settlement of the Syrian conflict, but only as part of the international community, with the support of the Security Council, and only if the future of Syria was decided by the Syrian people – alas the intervention is neutral in nature.

## CONCLUSION

In the article it was examined how the Islamic State affects China's Uighur problem. Even though there are some extremist Uighurs who had reached the Middle East and joined the IS militants, and while there is a certain threat of the spread of radical Islamic propaganda from the Middle East, there is little to worry about the return of these Uighurs to Chinese territory and carry out terrorist attacks there. According to this, China mainly fights terrorism within her own borders and in her immediate neighbourhood. She does so through

<sup>30</sup> Tian. US calls to fight IS.

<sup>31</sup> Liu. China's limited capacity, 2015, nanzao.com

<sup>32</sup> Liu. China's limited capacity, 2015, nanzao.com

<sup>33</sup> Nanzao.com. „Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister says 300 extremist Chinese fight in Syria: eliminate them before they return" (in Chinese) 300中国极端分子在叙参战 叙副外长: 在回流前消灭, October 19, 2015, nanzao.com, <http://www.nanzao.com/sc/international/1507e742b586ce8/300-zhong-guo-ji-duan-fen-zi-zai-xu-can-zhan-xu-fu-wai-chang-zai-hui-liu-qian-xiao-mie>, Accessed on 5. July 2016.



multilateral organizations like the SCO, through certain restrictions of the exercise of religion in Xinjiang, the approval of China's first counterterrorism Act, and through promoting economic connectivity and development. It was also shown that despite the growing pressure, both at home and from the international community, of being a global great power and the need to protect her economic interests there is still little chance of China's active intervention in the Middle East, or its participation in the coalition against the Islamic State. Especially not in the way the USA does.

If China joined the fight against the Islamic State, she would still have to face the possible consequences of discontent and the limitations of the applied crackdowns in Xinjiang which could result in the radicalization of the otherwise moderate elements within her own society.

Despite her economic interests and energy security being threatened in the Middle East China is more concerned with Uighur extremism and separatism emerging through the umbrella organization of ETIM, which might gather further international support. If it is possible, China would prefer to avoid painting a bullseye on her back, or get tangled up in the conflict of the Middle East, especially as the situation is considered to be US responsibility. An intervention would be only acceptable through the United Nations, with a Security Council mandate, which would also entail the notion that the US admitted that it was no longer strong enough to lead a coalition on its own, and full international support – and most notably China's – would be needed to tackle this global problem of terrorism. Until then China would remain within her own borders and find common ground in this war with the international community. The reported presence of 300 Uighurs among IS militants further entitles China to her (flexible) iron-fisted ruling in Xinjiang, despite all kinds of criticism of blurring peaceful protestation with terrorism, and using that to violate human rights. These militants should be prevented from returning to China, which needs secure her immediate neighbours, Central Asia, first.

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