

**Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight**

**Sean R. Roberts, PhD
Associate Professor of Practice
Elliott School of International Affairs
George Washington University
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Chairman Berman, Representative Delahunt, and other members of the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak today about the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Clarifying what we do and do not know about this relatively obscure organization should be an issue of significant importance to the government of the United States. Despite the lack of reliable information on the ETIM, the U.S. State Department recognized this group as a terrorist organization with links to Al Qaeda in 2002, resulting in grave consequences for many Uyghurs. Recognizing ETIM as a terrorist group directly led to the imprisonment of twenty-two Uyghurs in the Guantanamo detention facilities for between five and seven years despite the eventual acknowledgement that they had not been guilty of any wrong-doing. Less directly, ETIM's terrorism designation contributed to an increase in the violation of Uyghurs' rights inside China as the People's Republic largely evaded international criticism over the last eight years while using the threat of Uyghur terrorism as a pretext for hundreds of politically motivated arrests and numerous executions as well as for the establishment of stricter limitations on the Uyghurs' freedoms of speech, movement, and religious observation.

Despite these serious ramifications of the ETIM's designation as a terrorist group, we still know very little about this organization, and there remain many unanswered questions about the group's goals, its actual membership, and its capacity to perpetrate violence. Given the lack of reliable information about the organization, I will not claim to answer all of these questions today. I will, however, raise some substantial doubts about the assumptions we have made about the ETIM in claiming that it is a dangerous terrorist group linked with international *Jihadi* movements.

When the United States recognized ETIM as a terrorist group with ties to Al Qaeda in 2002, few scholars studying the Uyghur people had ever heard of this group. I, for example, spent much of the second half of the 1990s living among Uyghur communities in Kazakhstan, but I had not heard of the group prior to its classification as a terrorist organization by the United States. This was particularly puzzling to me since I had become personally acquainted with most of the major Uyghur diaspora political groups in the course of my research, participating as an observer at many of the meetings organized by transnational Uyghur political organizations in the second half of the 1990s. Given how little was known of this organization in 2002, many scholars even questioned whether ETIM existed at all and whether the group's recognition by the United States was entirely motivated by a desire to gain China's support for the American-led Global War on Terror.

It appears, however, that the ETIM, or at least an organization known as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP), did exist in 2002 since at least one western journalist was able to interview its leader, Hasan Mahsum, in Pakistan shortly after ETIM was designated by the United States as a terrorist organization. At that time, Mahsum asserted that ETIM, or ETIP, had not received assistance from Al Qaeda and had no intention of targeting the United States or Americans. Rather, he painted a picture of a small group of religious Uyghur men who had lofty goals of

challenging Chinese rule in their homeland but little capacity or resources to do so.

This portrait of the organization is consistent with my understanding of the Uyghurs who lived in Afghanistan during the 1990s. While it has been documented that a small number of Uyghurs had made their way to Afghanistan in the later 1990s, most of them had gone to the country with the intent of making their way to points further westward where they hoped to obtain political refugee status. It is likely that some of the Uyghurs coming through Afghanistan at this time did find the *Jihadi* ideals of local groups attractive, but there is also evidence that the Taliban regime was not welcoming of Uyghurs who sought assistance for militant endeavors after 1999. In that year, the People's Republic of China had sent a diplomatic delegation to meet with the Taliban, and this delegation had reportedly made a deal with its Afghan counterparts, where China would provide the pariah government of Afghanistan with a variety of assistance, including updated weaponry, in exchange for the Taliban's pledge to not harbor Uyghur militants. Although it has not been substantiated, there were also rumors that China established similar agreements with Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Whether or not the rumors concerning Al Qaeda bear any truth, China did enter into negotiations with the Taliban, and following those negotiations, stories spread in the South Asian media that the small number of Uyghurs thought to be in militant training camps inside Afghanistan were arrested, executed, or forced to leave the country.

Furthermore, there is little evidence that there was a substantial Uyghur presence in militant training camps prior to 1999. Unlike the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which several times in the later 1990s had attempted to bring militants into Central Asia from Afghanistan, there are no reliable accounts that Uyghurs based in Afghanistan during this time were able to enter China and carry out attacks. When the U.S. entered Afghanistan, therefore, ETIM was in all likelihood a small and isolated band of religious nationalists who had neither strong ties with the Uyghur communities in Central Asia and China nor the assistance and support of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. This also explains why the apparent leader of the organization, Hasan Mahsum, would have given an interview to a western journalist in 2002 in which he sought to deliberately distance himself from Al Qaeda and its *Jihad*. Despite his claims in the interview that he was neither associated with Al Qaeda nor involved in anti-American activities, Mahsum was reportedly killed by the Pakistani military that same year as a suspected enemy combatant.

What we know about ETIM's activities after 2002 has primarily been supplied by Chinese authorities, who greatly exaggerate the organization's reach and capacity. Regularly, Chinese government sources have suggested that every violent disturbance created by Uyghurs in China over the last twenty years has been perpetrated by ETIM and that the entire Uyghur nationalist movement outside of China is within ETIM's terrorist network. While Chinese authorities have continued to arrest Uyghur nationalists inside China over the last eight years, claiming that they are part of ETIM's terrorist network, these arrests have generally not been in response to acts of violence, but instead are related to political dissent. Furthermore, there is not credible evidence I have seen that those arrested have any connections with militant groups, real or imaginary, in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Probably the most egregious of these arrests was China's successful request to have Uzbekistan extradite a Uyghur activist and Canadian citizen in 2006 while he was visiting relatives in Uzbekistan under the pretext that he was a member of ETIM. He is presently serving a fifteen year prison sentence in China.

It was my assumption, and I believe still a valid one, that ETIM ostensibly ceased to exist after Mahsum was killed in 2002, if not earlier. This was substantiated by the fact that nothing was heard of the organization after this time outside of Chinese government sources, which had vested interests in exaggerating the threat of Uyghur terrorism. In the run-up to last summer's Beijing Olympics, however, ETIM was once again receiving international attention. Beginning in the

Spring of 2008, stories began to emerge from China that ETIM cells had been discovered inside Xinjiang. In addition, Chinese authorities claimed to have thwarted an attempted attack on a passenger airplane perpetrated by a Uyghur woman in possession of a flammable liquid and to have suffered an attack on Chinese soldiers in Kashgar perpetrated by two Uyghur men during the early days of the games. The Chinese authorities, of course, claimed that these acts were the work of ETIM. Unfortunately, given the lack of transparency in the Chinese justice system, it is difficult to substantiate or refute these claims. Even if one takes these claims at face value, however, they hardly lend credibility to the accusations that these incidents were the work of a sophisticated international terrorist network associated with Al Qaeda. No sophisticated explosive devices were found on those arrested, and the attack in Kashgar, which involved two men allegedly driving a truck into a line of soldiers and then attacking them with knives, looked more like an act of desperation by frustrated individuals than a well planned act of terrorism.

The claims that these were acts of terrorism, however, was bolstered by the posting of several videos on *YouTube* by a group calling itself the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which the community of “so-called” terrorism experts suggests, without any particular justification, is merely a new alias for ETIM. These videos showed masked men with automatic rifles speaking in the Uyghur language and threatening to disrupt the Olympics while standing in front of an Islamic banner. Just as the attacks that took place around the Olympics in Xinjiang did not utilize methods known in international terrorist networks, such as suicide bombs or car bombs, these videos lacked the cohesion of terrorist messages that come from sophisticated groups. The group, for example, claimed credit for a bus bombing in Yunnan before the Olympics, but the Chinese authorities said the attack had nothing to do with Uyghurs. Furthermore, the videos threatened to conduct bombings throughout China, but later the group only took credit for the unsophisticated disturbances mentioned earlier that took place in Xinjiang, none of which used explosive devices. Thus, while the videos looked similar to those created by established terrorist groups, those who made them seemed to be entirely disconnected from events taking place in China. In other words, they were created by people with capacities to make videos for posting to the internet, but without the capacity to organize sophisticated terrorist attacks inside China or perhaps anywhere.

In all likelihood, the people who made these videos had a vested interest in exaggerating the Uyghur terrorist threat and are not related at all to those originally part of ETIM. Many Uyghurs suggest that they were created by people in the Chinese state structure, whether on the national or provincial level, a claim that cannot be discounted given that these videos further justify China’s crackdown on Uyghurs as terrorists. It is also possible, however, that they were the creation of some isolated group of Uyghur nationalists outside China who wanted to scare the Chinese state during the Olympics. One final possibility is that they were the products of transnational *Jihadists*, such as a segment of Al Qaeda, who want to recruit Uyghurs and/or create the perception that their movement has a wider reach than it does. This final theory may be substantiated by recent reports from the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor that the Turkistan Islamic Party has begun publishing a journal, which is modeled on publications of other more established *Jihadist* groups and is posted on forums frequented by such groups.

In conclusion, it is difficult to justify the allegations that the ETIM is a sophisticated and dangerous terrorist organization with links to Al Qaeda, and it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the organization no longer exists at all. While there were likely at some point a handful of Uyghurs in Afghanistan who viewed themselves as members of this group, it never appears to have been a threat to China, let alone to the United States. The most convincing support for this argument is that there is no conclusive evidence that this group, or any Uyghur organization, has ever perpetrated an actual coordinated terrorist attack. While the Chinese government has claimed that various acts of violence in Xinjiang and Central Asia over the last decade were the work of

ETIM, this has never been proven and the acts of violence themselves may not even have been acts of terrorism. No Uyghur group has ever been tied to well-known methods of terrorism such as car-bombings or suicide bombings, which might confirm links to sophisticated transnational organizations such as Al-Qaeda. Instead, they have been accused of organizing disturbances and assassinations, which could be alternatively explained by a variety of other motives from popular political dissatisfaction to personal vendetta and crime-related violence.

Given the lack of evidence that ETIM is an active terrorist group, or even an active organization anymore, it is particularly disturbing that the United States' decision to recognize this group as a dangerous terrorist organization has caused substantial suffering to the Uyghur people. So, the question that I would like the members of the subcommittee to ponder is what led us to recognize this group as terrorists? Was it merely a *quid pro quo* arrangement with the Chinese in order to obtain their support in the Global War on Terror, or does this reflect a serious defect in the manner we have gathered intelligence about terrorist groups over the last eight years? While I am sure that our intelligence agencies' colleagues in China, Central Asia, and even Pakistan can provide us with evidence that ETIM is a dangerous terrorist organization, they also have vested reasons to do so. China's interests are obvious. The People's Republic does not tolerate Uyghur political dissent, and international recognition of a Uyghur terrorist threat gives their security organs a freer hand in cracking down on internal political dissent in Xinjiang. The Central Asian states and Pakistan likewise have reason to exaggerate the Uyghur terrorist threat in order to win favor with China. Furthermore, for the Central Asian states, a local threat of Uyghur terrorism provides a way to engage the United States on the Global War on Terror without implicating their own people, and for Pakistan, it is yet another means of deflecting attention away from that country's own indigenous terrorism problem. In this context, I question the reliability of the intelligence we may be receiving from these countries, which we would not likely trust without reservation in other matters of international importance. Let's hope we are not using it to determine who is and is not our enemy in the Global War on Terror.

Thank you very much for your attention.