



How The Middle East Can Help China's Muslims

October 9, 2018 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; China; Middle East

(translated to English from Arabic)

The proof is increasingly irrefutable: China's Uighurs are under assault.

For nearly two years, details of an extensive campaign of official repression against the Muslim minority of China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region have trickled out past the PRC's strict web of official censorship. The stories have detailed pervasive monitoring, curbs on Islamic traditions, and the mass detention of as many as one million citizens in the equivalent of "reeducation" camps. Now, a new investigative report by Estonian news portal Meduza had provided what is perhaps the most extensive – and damning – documentation to date regarding this campaign, and the extent to which the Chinese state is repressing and erasing the Muslim traditions and culture of its westernmost province.

These revelations have left observers with two questions: What lies behind China's intensifying Xinjiang campaign? And what can and should be done about it?

The answer to the first is at least partly found in domestic Chinese politics. In August 2016, Xinjiang became the first Chinese province to officially adopt the country's new national Anti-Terrorism Law. The regulation establishes a three-tiered anti-terrorism mechanism at the provincial, prefecture and city levels, allowing authorities to suspend civil liberties, prevent public demonstrations, curtail mass activities, and implement a host of other restrictions on national security grounds. This framework has allowed local officials to impose significant restrictions on the practice of Islam in the province, which they see as a potential ideological challenge to the Chinese state there.

But China's foreign policy ambitions play a part as well. Since it was first proposed in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the much-celebrated "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) has become a centerpiece of Chinese foreign policy. A sprawling framework of trade and commercial ties, the BRI is designed to make China a key economic and strategic player across Eurasia. But the BRI is also a double-edged sword, because the growing transit of goods and people into China envisioned by the BRI could also lead to the importation of extremist ideas and actors – something that Beijing is working actively to prevent.

Already two years ago, when I last visited the province, it was apparent that these factors were likely to spur greater official repression against Xinjiang's nine-million-member Uighur minority, which Beijing sees as particularly susceptible to radicalization. But the scope of China's current offensive is far broader and more invasive than anyone could have predicted. It is also more hostile, entailing – among many other things – a ban on the issuance of Islamic names, travel restrictions and the confiscation of documents for Uighurs, and the forcible violation of Islamic dietary restrictions in the province. The goal, as one recent visitor to the province described it, is to force "assimilation" and subservience by any means necessary.

The international community has begun to take notice. Chinese authorities have come under scrutiny from the United Nations for the mass internment of Uighurs. A number of nations have gone further and formally demarched Beijing for its repressive policies. And the U.S. government is now said to be considering punitive sanctions against the PRC specifically on human rights grounds.

Middle Eastern states, however, have remained silent, worried that any criticism of Chinese policy in Xinjiang might upset their extensive economic and trade ties to the PRC.

This represents a major miscalculation. The People's Republic is already deeply reliant on Middle Eastern energy to fuel its expanding economy. In 2016, China imported nearly one-fifth of its total oil imports from five regional suppliers (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE) at a cost of more than \$18 billion. This dependency, moreover, is increasing. The International Energy Agency predicts that China will double its energy imports from the Middle East by the year 2035.

All of which gives the countries of the region a powerful lever by which to shape Chinese conduct, if they choose to use it.

They should. Chinese authorities have publicly denied the extent of their campaign in Xinjiang, or its apparent goal. What Beijing is trying to do is simply to create "reform through education," China's domestic security czar, Guo Shengkun, has insisted. Whether this is the case, however, is simply not known, because the PRC has not given the international community the opportunity to examine what is actually taking place in Xinjiang.

Many nations are now prompting Beijing to do just that. But China's Middle Eastern allies, by dint of their economic clout and their extensive energy ties to the PRC, are clearly in the best position to press the issue.

If they do, it would send a powerful signal to Beijing that the world is watching.

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