

China's Overtures in Syria Show Concern Over Turkistan Islamic Party Fighters

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

In mid-July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Syria in what was the highest-level Chinese government visit since the start of the Syrian conflict, timed to coincide with the swearing-in of Bashar al-Assad following his most recent election. Amidst widespread speculation regarding the visit's meaning to the future of Sino-Syrian relations and China's role in the Middle East, several local media analyses have linked China's new focus on Syria to concerns over the future of Syria-based Uyghur jihadists from the "Turkistan Islamic Party" (TIP) (for more on the TIP see: "The Knotted Future of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria," *OE Watch*, January 2019).

According to the first accompanying excerpt, from Egypt's semi-official *al-Ahram*, China is concerned that the Syria-based Uyghur jihadists from the TIP may seek refuge in Afghanistan, leaving China with the difficult choice of either doing nothing or becoming more deeply involved in Afghanistan. The opinion piece from the prominent pro-Qatari *al-Araby al-Jadid* agrees that China is increasingly concerned about the TIP, specifically about the potential for the United States to use the group against Chinese interests. Beyond the symbolism and diplomatic platitudes in Foreign Minister Wang's visit to Syria, the author argues, unless the TIP was a central topic of discussion, the Chinese visit to Damascus does not add anything new to China's Syria policy.

Last June, a TIP official was killed by an IED in the Syrian town of Salqin, near the border with Turkey. As noted in the accompanying article from the pro-Syrian opposition news website *al-Modon*, the killing may have been part of a broader campaign against the TIP, launched by the Syrian government with encouragement and support from China. According to the article, in early 2021 a Chinese "military-

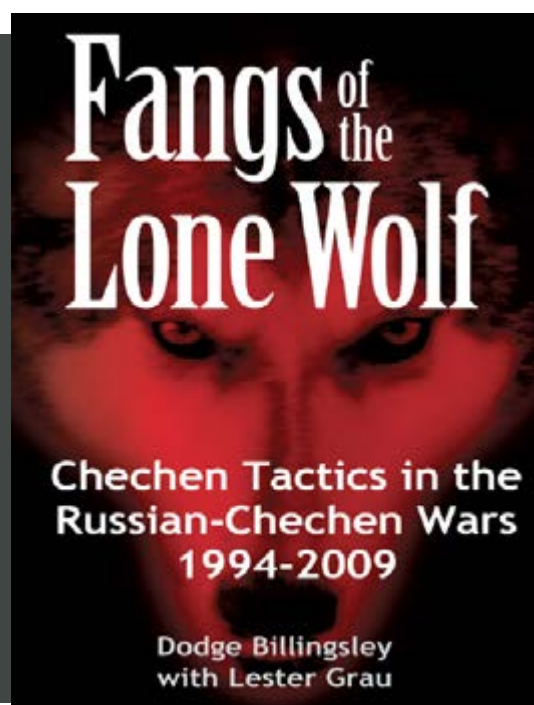


Wang Yi, China's Foreign Minister, addresses the jobs and economic development pledging session at the Supporting Syria conference (2016).

Source: Adam Brown/Crown Copyright, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dfid/24789378436> Attribution: Public Domain

commercial" delegation visited Syrian government positions in Idlib Province, possibly laying the foundations for supporting an anti-TIP campaign. The article adds that China has supplied the Syrian military with JY-27 radars and unspecified "jamming and communication devices and equipment for night combat" to help its efforts in Idlib. The second excerpt from *al-Modon* sees the TIP as a valuable card that many parties will seek to play, including the Syrian government, which may use the TIP's presence in Syria to gain concessions and support from China. The article's author surmises that the TIP is likely to gain in prominence as various parties seek to use it to their advantage, whether in Syria, Central Asia, or both.

“... If the Uyghur military organization was not a central topic in the Chinese minister's visit, the visit does not add anything new to the existing situation...”



Fangs of the Lone Wolf is about combat experience in urban, mountain and fairly open terrain. It is not a comprehensive history of conflict. This book is a series of snapshots — of vignettes — describing the difficulty, the hardship, the victories and the defeats of the participants. It is an examination of the raw data of combat in a foreign land, and is aimed to advance the professional military study of conflict.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/195587/download>

Continued: China's Overtures in Syria Show Concern Over Turkistan Islamic Party Fighters

Source:

(China's new predicament)," *al-Ahram* (semi-official Egyptian daily), 22 July 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/4j34f66w>

مأزق الصين الجديد

China is supposed to feel comfortable with the withdrawal of US forces from neighboring Afghanistan, but the Chinese statements related to this withdrawal are deeply concerned about the negative repercussions of this on China's national security... The source of Chinese concern is that the Taliban, when it ruled Afghanistan before the attacks of September 11, 2001, provided a safe haven for some Uyghur fighters. Beijing fears this will repeat on a larger scale in the next stage. If Beijing remains silent and does not act, it will face problems immediately upon the return of the Uyghur fighters from Syria. If it does move in advance and intervenes in Afghanistan, it will face even greater problems, as happened to the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Source:

(Syria and China's calculus)," *al-Araby al-Jadid* (pro-Qatari daily), 23 July 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/n6rdah6z>

سورية والحسابات الصينية

Lots of hollow propaganda accompanied the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Damascus... China fears America's intentions to employ the Turkistan Islamic Party and its fighters, who have gained extensive experience from fighting in Syria, to carry out military operations on Chinese soil, starting from Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of American forces. This is especially true given that the Uyghur party receives support and backing from Afghan Islamic organizations. It was originally established in Kabul in 1993 after the Islamic parties took control of it after the long war with the Soviet occupation. If the Uyghur military organization was not a central topic in the Chinese minister's visit, the visit does not add anything new to the existing situation. Certainly, China is smarter than raising this sensitive issue publicly, through the visit of its foreign minister.

Source:

(Idlib: China supports eliminating the Turkistan Islamic Party)," *al-Modon* (pro-Syrian opposition news website), 25 June 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/vxzudxe8>

إدلب: الصين تدعم تصفية الحزب التركستاني

Over the past few days, opposition media websites have circulated information about China providing military equipment to the regime to support a military campaign against the Turkistan Party fighters in Idlib. The websites said that a number of military formations affiliated with the regime forces and militias obtained advanced Chinese weapons, including JY27 radars, which have a range of 400 km, as well as jamming and communication devices and equipment for night combat. A Chinese delegation comprising commercial and military figures had previously visited the regime headquarters in Idlib province, in the city of Khan Sheikhoun, south of Idlib. During its visit, which took place in early 2021, the delegation met with Governor Muhammad Natouf. The delegation also toured the area of operations close to the lines of engagement with the opposition, south of Idlib. A military source in the National Liberation Front told al-Modon, "Since the Chinese delegation's visit at the beginning of the year to areas south of Idlib, it is believed that the Chinese are trying to secretly support some military or security move against the Uyghur fighters in the Turkistan Party. I do not rule out that Air Force Intelligence assassination cells receive financial and logistical support, to adapt operations against the fighters of the party that opposes the government of China."

Source:

(Turkistan Islamic Party as a golden ticket in Syria)," *al-Modon* (pro-Syrian opposition news website), 13 July 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/4zca78m2>

التركستاني "كورقة ذهبية في سوريا"

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is a valuable card for Turkey (to bargain with Washington and Beijing and by proxy with Russia as well), as well as for the Syrian regime and Moscow behind it... Last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping promised to boost Sino-Syrian cooperation "to a new level" in the context of a telegram congratulating President Bashar al-Assad on his "election." This promise and reports of aid coming in last month coincided with the assassination of "Sheikh Jawdat," the director of the TIP's Economic Office, in a car bomb explosion in the city of Salqin. The Syrian regime seizes opportunities, and sees them as a way to attract the support it needs to survive. There must be a connection between the strikes against the TIP and the Chinese "aid" ... It is difficult to imagine a quick end to this confrontation. The TIP's moment in Syria has not yet arrived. It may attract many interventions, even though Afghanistan, where the organization has a limited presence, appears to be a more attractive arena that also borders China. This is a battle that has just begun and will not end soon.