



The Knotted Future of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) continues to be a uniquely important faction on the Syrian battlefield (for more background, see: “Turkistan Islamic Party Makes its Mark on the Syrian Rebellion,” *OE Watch*, June 2016; “Turkistan Islamic Party Benefiting from Syrian War Dynamics,” *OE Watch*, September 2017). Having played a key role in helping anti-government fighters seize control of Idlib Province, the Uighur jihadists have now settled in fertile, strategically located parts of Idlib and neighboring Lattakia Province, near the Turkish border. With heightened regional tensions and a growing array of international actors invested in Idlib’s fate, the TIP has become more relevant than ever.

Syria is not intended to be the TIP’s final resting point: China’s Xinjiang Province is their homeland and their mission is to “liberate” it from Beijing. In the summer of 2018, it appeared as if TIP fighters and other Central Asian jihadists would leave Syria (see: “Central Asia: Next Stop for Syria’s Foreign Jihadists?” *OE Watch*, August 2018). Since then, the Chinese government’s intensified crackdown on Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang and the Russia-Turkey Sochi agreement to partially freeze Idlib’s status likely shifted the calculus of Uighur jihadists residing in Idlib. In early December 2018, the pro-Hezbollah Lebanese news channel *al-Mayadeen* aired a report claiming that the TIP had declared an “Emirate” in parts of Syria under its control (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUyKZ8Lgd4A>). Perhaps they intend to stay after all.

In early October the *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)*, which throughout the Syrian conflict has been the main source for information from the opposition perspective, published a detailed look (excerpts of which accompany this) at how the TIP has settled in Syria. The strategic town of Jisr al-Shughur has become their base, and sections of the fertile surrounding countryside are also under their control. According to local sources, the TIP sustains itself through farming, trade, looting of former regime-held areas and land grants from its main ally, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the latest incarnation of al-Qaeda’s Syrian presence and Idlib’s most powerful armed group. The report claims that the TIP’s competing with local Syrian farmers has bred resentment, as have their checkpoints and prohibition on gathering firewood in areas under their control. They have gained Syrian adherents, though their attempts to marry into local families and integrate more generally have not been altogether successful.

According to the *SOHR*, “The TIP’s deepest and strongest relationship is with Turkish intelligence and government” and TIP fighters guard Turkish convoys and help secure Turkish observation points surrounding Idlib. The third accompanying excerpted article, from the Qatari daily *al-Araby al-Jadid*, lists some potential scenarios on the TIP’s future, all of them volatile and knotted in geopolitical complexity. The worse of bad options, the article’s author believes, involves a Syrian-Russian-Iranian decision to seek a “military solution” in Idlib, leading to a grinding and bloody battle with the TIP and other armed factions in Idlib, with strong and uncertain regional repercussions and disastrous consequences for the province’s civilians.

The third accompanying excerpted article, from Saudi Arabia’s *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, speculates that before TIP jihadists return to Xinjiang, China may come to them. The main threat for China, the article’s author argues, “is not the return of the Uighur extremists to their land but rather their targeting Chinese targets outside of China and throughout the world.” Were China to become heavily invested in Syrian reconstruction, Chinese military engagement with the TIP in Syrian territory seems plausible. The article cites declarations made by China’s ambassador in Damascus to the pro-regime Syrian newspaper *al-Watan* last August, in which he stated: “We know that fighting terrorism and Syria’s battle against terrorism is not only in the Syrian people’s interest but also in the interests of the Chinese people and the world as a whole. There has been good cooperation between our armies in fighting terrorists throughout the world, including terrorists coming from China. This cooperation will continue between the militaries and the involved agencies.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

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“Islamic Turkistan” - Turkistan Islamic Party Online Publication.

Source: jihadology website, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/turkistacc84n-al-islacc84micc84yyah-magazine-24.pdf>.



Continued: The Knotted Future of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria

“...The main threat for China is not the return of the Uighur extremists to their land but rather their targeting Chinese targets outside of China...”

Source:

الحزب التركستاني صديق جبهة النصرة

“The Turkistan Party: al-Nusra Front’s Friend,” *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 7 October 2018. <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=286816>

The city of Jisr al-Shughur has symbolic importance to the TIP, which has raised its flag in the city center since then until now. The TIP fighters continued coming into Syria in large numbers, via Turkey, until early 2016. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) monitored the arrival of many TIP fighters and according to SOHR activists they number around 7,000 fighters. Many Syrians joined them... The TIP is spread from Jisr al-Shughur and its western countryside to the Turkmen and Kurd Mountains in northern rural Latakia, as well as the al-Ghab Plain, including areas along the border with Alexandretta.... The TIP considered the mountain villages of al-Zanbaqi and Katrin safe, as its proximity to the border with Turkey kept it from air strikes and targeting... They began competing with Syrians over their livelihood and lands. Reliable sources told the SOHR that the TIP is active in trade, agriculture, and selling crops after gaining control over them, whether from people forcibly displaced by the battles in rural Jisr al-Shughur and the coastal mountains, or by obtaining them through Fatwas from the main partner, HTS. Trade and selling of crops has become a source of income and material support for the TIP in the area, in addition to “spoils” they obtained in previous battles in the al-Ghab Plain, the Latakia Mountains, and western rural Idlib. The last “spoils” came for Kefraya and Fua, which were inhabited by Shi’ites who were relocated by an international agreement... There is popular resentment in areas where the TIP is present given their competition for livelihoods and their involvement in people’s affairs, specifically the checkpoints spread throughout western rural Jisr al-Shughur and their forbidding civilians from taking tinder and firewood, as they fire on anyone seeking to do so. Meanwhile TIP members take tinder and firewood from the same spot, using it for heating or selling in the market... The TIP’s deepest and strongest relationship is with Turkish intelligence and government, after the latter facilitated and coordinated the TIP’s entry into Syrian territory via Turkish territory, in addition to the material and political assistance provided by Turkish authorities to the TIP, as well as their presence in areas bordering Turkey on the coastal mountains and western Idlib. In turn, the TIP protects Turkish convoys in the al-Ghab Plain, the coastal mountains, and western rural Idlib. The convoys are accompanied by vehicles with medium-caliber machine guns and many fighters. The TIP also protects some of the 12 Turkish observation points...

Source:

تنظيمات “القاعدة” وأخواتها في إدلب: “التركستاني” للانتقام من الصين

Adnan Ahmed. “Al-Qaeda and its Sisters in Idlib: al-Turkistani Seeks Revenge with China,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*. 15 October 2018. <https://goo.gl/ANsWFz>

In light of developments in Idlib and the Sochi agreement, the fate of the TIP is a thorny knot between a series of difficult choices: Will Turkey, for instance, accept them as humanitarian or political refugees once they have turned over their weapons, since it is impossible for them to return to China? Or will Ankara and Beijing sign an agreement whereby China must grant them the right to return and mass amnesty? Or an agreement to send them to a third location via Turkey? It is true that the TIP fighters and their families are not large in number, but this does not make their future any less complicated, given the near-impossibility of their blending into Syrian society, which is historically known for moderate Islam and tolerance, as well as due to their tendency toward isolation and preference to not mix with societies that are foreign to their culture, traditions and language. The final possibility is the most complicated, in that case that the Syrian government-Russia-Iran axis decides to pursue a military solution in areas where they are present and will face a scenario of suicide which they call martyrdom knowing that they are at full strength to do so. This is what is feared will extract a disastrous price from Syrian civilians and their remaining buildings and people in Syria’s north and west.

Source:

داعش يوقظ التنين الصيني حول العالم

“ISIS Awakens the Chinese Dragon Across the World,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 October 2018. <https://goo.gl/AVAEma>

Analysts agree that since 2015, Chinese civilian and military delegations began flowing into Damascus in order to expand support for the Syrian regime. The Chinese Defense Ministry announced that it would help restore Syrian manpower, as well as providing humanitarian assistance... Last 11 August, Qi Qianjin, China’s ambassador in Damascus, told the pro-regime Syrian newspaper *al-Watan*: “We know that fighting terrorism and Syria’s battle against terrorism is not only in the Syrian people’s interest but also in the interests of the Chinese people and the world as a whole. There has been good cooperation between our armies in fighting terrorists throughout the world, including terrorists coming from China. This cooperation will continue between the militaries and the involved agencies.”

It appears that the presence of several thousand Uighurs in Idlib Province is making China speed up the adoption of quick military plans abroad, especially since the Uighur fighters’ political astuteness allows them to occupy the front ranks during battles to defend strategic cities in Idlib Province, such as Jisr al-Shughur and its surroundings. They are described as the Syrian opposition’s secret weapon, after they taught the regime a harsh lesson in fighting and now are in possession of many advanced weapons, such as anti-tank rockets which they obtained in places such as Jubb al-Ahmar, the highest point on the Kurd Mountain.

China’s battle in Syria might now in fact begin. The need for new Chinese power may now be directed toward different sites and issues. Intelligence reports suggest that “The main threat for China is not the return of the Uighur extremists to their land but rather their targeting Chinese targets outside of China and throughout the world.”