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2014

Terrorism in China: Urumqi Market Attack



[TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity](#)
[\(TRISA\)](#)

Complex Operational Environment and
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of the 22 May 2014 Urumqi market attack.
- To provide information on reasons for continued ethnic unrest in the Xinjiang province of China.
- To provide details, implications, and analysis of the attack.

Executive Summary

- Historic ethnic tensions between minority Islamic Uighurs and majority Chinese Han in China's Xinjiang province have resurfaced, resulting in several recent terrorist attacks against Chinese Han.
- Radicalized Uighurs have increased terrorist attacks against majority Han within China, targeting larger crowds and adopting deadlier tactics.
- The Urumqi market attack is the most deadly, sophisticated attack within China to date.
- The escalation of terrorist attacks throughout China since April 2013 represents an increase of attacks that is three times the average annual rate.
- As a result of the Urumqi market attack, the Chinese government declared a year-long campaign against the terrorists of the Xinjiang province. The campaign, dubbed *yanda* ("strike hard" in Chinese), is described as a brutal crackdown on Islamic influence and terrorist activity in China.
- With this new declaration and a historical past of brutality and suppression against the Uighur society, there exists a potential for increased ethnic destabilization throughout the region that may result in more destructive, deadlier attacks within China.
- China's Xinjiang province shares a border with eight Central Asian countries: India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Russia. With such close proximity to volatile regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the potential for radicalized Uighurs to travel between borders and join conflicts in neighboring states is high.

Cover photo: [Urumqi Market Attack](#), 22 May 2014.



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Map



Figure 1. [Map of China's Provinces](#)

Introduction

Bordering eight countries, the province of Xinjiang, China, located in the Northwest corner of the country, was once predominately populated by Turkic-speaking Muslims, known as ethnic Uighurs. In recent years, the region has become a focal point of growing and pervasive violence that manifests itself along ethnic fault lines. Tensions have substantially increased between minority Muslim Uighurs residing in the province and majority Buddhist Han who relocate to the province to capitalize on lucrative employment opportunities. Since April 2013 there have been a total of six terrorist attacks throughout China, targeting police, government officials, and Han citizens, resulting in 109 victim fatalities. Previously, on average, there were one to two violent incidents per year resulting in fewer casualties. The escalation of attacks within the 18 months represents an increase in incidents that is three times the average annual rate.

Formerly known as East Turkistan, present-day Xinjiang province was subsumed into communist China in 1949. Indigenous Uighurs of the region traditionally identified with the Islamic culture of Central Asia,



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as opposed to the ethnic Han Buddhist culture of China, creating unrest between the two cultures. As a result, Uighur society soon became the minority within the Chinese communist Han construct. As a minority, Uighurs were not afforded the same opportunities for education and employment as the majority Han society. During Xinjiang province's transition into communist China, the government initiated a brutal campaign of suppression against the minority Uighur society throughout the region. The xenophobic Chinese government made a concerted effort to buffer and isolate communist China from the traditional Islamic influence and culture Uighurs identified with.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several Islamic-based Central Asian states successfully gained independence from Russia. Seeking similar freedoms as those afforded to Islamic neighboring states, influential Uighurs in Xinjiang unsuccessfully petitioned the Chinese government to have the territory reverted back to the historic name of East Turkistan and be granted full independence, instilling a sense of nationalism and recognition for minority Uighurs. In a continued effort to marginalize Uighur society and maintain control over the region, all requests for an independent East Turkistan state were denied by the Chinese government. With this action, China continued to synthetically isolate the identification of the former independent state of East Turkistan in a continuing effort to suppress Islamic influence within the country.

Today, ethnic tensions between Uighurs and Han are attributed to economic growth and development within the region. In the past decade, large deposits of minerals and natural resources have been discovered in the areas of Aksu and Karamay, spurring an oil and petrochemical boom for the province. Economic growth has substantially increased throughout the region, as the oil and petrochemical industry account for 60% gross domestic product for the province.¹ This has resulted in wide-scale development, creating higher-paying jobs that require skilled labor. With such advanced development comes greater competition between minority, uneducated Uighurs and technologically-educated Han for advancements and economic opportunities.

The majority of development projects throughout Xinjiang are financed by wealthy Han businessmen of Beijing. Ethnic Uighurs predominately claim they are discriminated against, as the majority of high-paying jobs are provided to skilled Han Chinese with little regard given to Uighur men or women. Many Uighurs are left with low-paying manual labor jobs. This has been a primary source of contention over the years, which manifests itself into violent, anti-Han attacks perpetrated by radicalized Uighurs. The Urumqi market terrorist attack is the latest example and remains the largest terrorist attack inside China to date.



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Figure 2. [Xinjiang Province](#)

Chronology of Unrest

4 August 2008: Two Uighur men steal a dump truck and drive it into a group of policemen in the western city of Kashgar, killing sixteen people. Police officials state the act of violence was perpetrated by Islamic terrorists with links to al-Qaeda.²

5-7 July 2009: Violence erupts between Uighurs and police in the city center of Urumqi. Clashes throughout the city escalate over a span of two days, resulting in 197 fatalities, most of which were Han Chinese.³

18 July 2011: A group of 18 young Uighur men attacked a police station outside the city of Hotan in southern Xinjiang, taking several hostages. Two officers and two hostages were killed. Of the 18 perpetrators, 14 were killed by security personnel.

24 April 2013: Several Uighurs stabbed a neighborhood security patrol officer and attacked a police station in a village outside Kashgar. Twenty-one police officers and a local government official were killed.

26 June 2013: Uighur assailants raid police and government offices in the eastern Xinjiang town of Lukqun, killing 24 officers and civilians. Police say the attackers belonged to a 17-member Islamist extremist cell.

28 October 2013: A jeep carrying a Uighur man, his wife, and her mother breaks through a barricade in downtown Beijing, striking several tourists before coming to rest in front of the Tiananmen Gate. As



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bystanders rushed to the vehicle, the jeep exploded into flames. A total of five people were killed, including all occupants of the vehicle and two tourists. This was the first known incident involving a suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) in China.

1 March 2014: Five knife-wielding Uighur men and women attack a crowd of commuters at a railway station in the southwestern city of Kunming in Yunnan province, killing 29. The incident was the largest attack outside Xinjiang, and resulted in an increase in security nationwide.

30 April 2014: Two Uighur men wearing personal borne IEDs (PBIEDs) detonate their explosives at the exit to the Urumqi train station, killing themselves and one other person. Another eight individuals attacked passengers with knives, during the chaos that ensued leaving 79 injured.

22 May 2014: Two SUVs sped through a crowded open-air market in Urumqi tossing paint-can type IEDs from the vehicle windows. Thirty-one shoppers, mostly Han Chinese were killed and an additional 94 wounded. This incident is the deadliest terrorist attack inside China to date, and depicts a shift in tactics by way of targeting large crowds and using IEDs thrown into crowds. One Uighur male was taken into custody and is the sole survivor of the group of attackers.

The Attack

In the early morning hours of 22 May 2014, two SUVs broke through a fence in the Shayibake District of Urumqi, an area largely populated by the city's ethnic Han. As the SUVs sped down the open market, both vehicles struck and killed several elderly shoppers. Eyewitnesses indicated that neither vehicle had license plates and occupants of both SUVs tossed paint can-type IEDs out of the vehicle windows as they sped down the street, targeting large crowds of shoppers.⁴ Several devices failed to detonate and were recovered by police at the scene.⁵

Figure 3 below depicts the sequence of events that unfolded. Both vehicles traveled in a western direction and struck multiple elderly shoppers. As the SUVs continued down the market, passengers from both vehicles tossed homemade IEDs out the windows into crowds of shoppers, resulting in additional victims. At the end of the street, one vehicle was blocked by a group of citizens using vendor carts, hampering it from moving farther.⁶ After two minutes, that vehicle exploded, killing all occupants inside. The second vehicle came to a stop directly behind the first and also exploded, killing two of the three occupants. The third occupant escaped, but was later apprehended and held by Chinese police in Bayingolin Prefecture, south Urumqi.⁷



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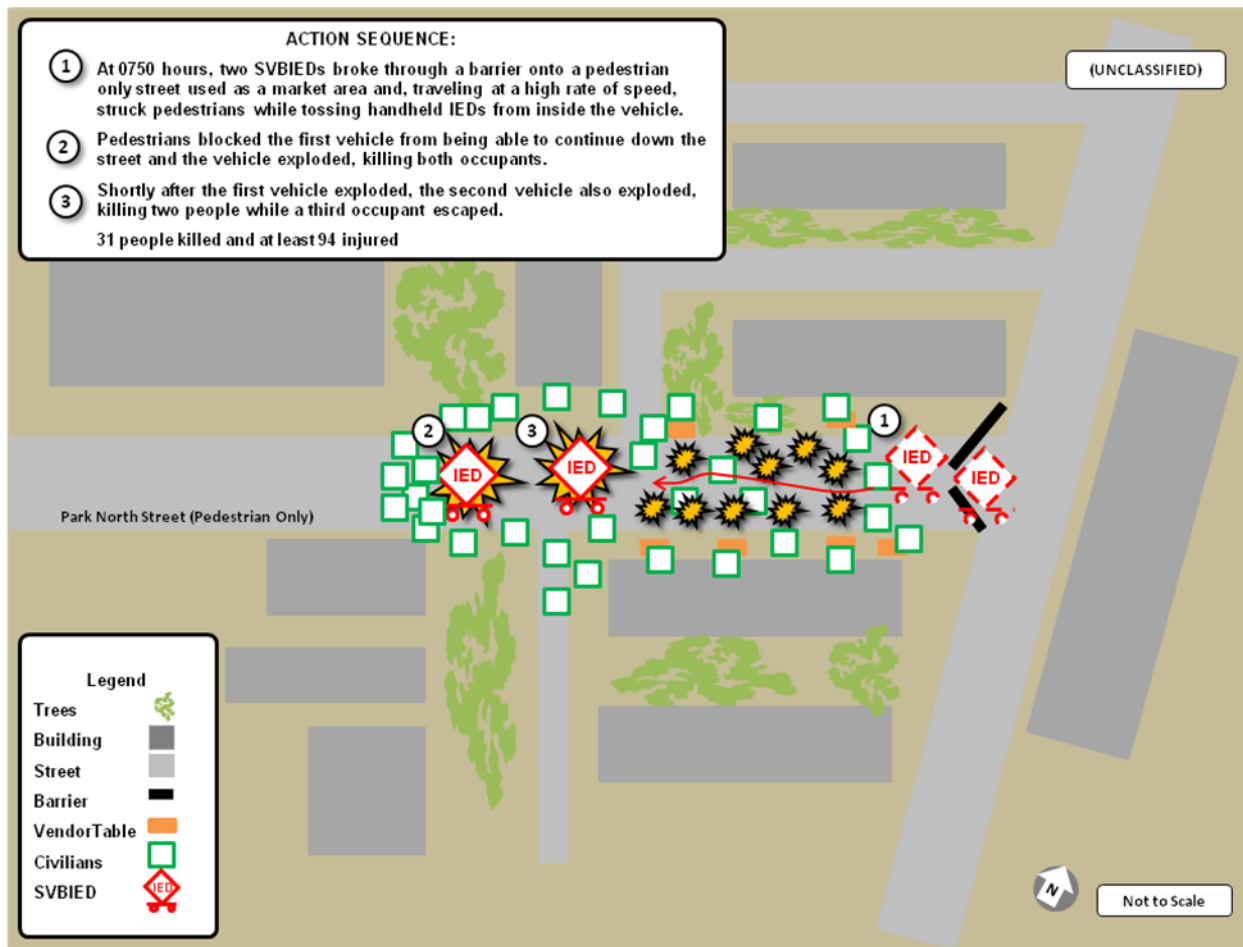


Figure 3. Map of the Attack

Figure 4 shows the quick police response, sealing off the crime scene to journalists and bystanders. Chinese officials indicate the attack was premeditated and the market specifically targeted due to large crowds of ethnic Han shoppers, who are known to gather in the early morning hours to shop for fresh fruit.



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Figure 4. [Police Respond to Urumqi market attack](#)

The aftermath, shown in figure 5 below, was described by vendors located at the scene as chaotic and gruesome. The street was littered with elderly victims killed while being struck by the speeding vehicles. Crowds of shoppers who gathered to assist the casualties were abruptly forced back by responding police officials, and journalists were forbidden from taking pictures of the scene.



Figure 5. [The Aftermath](#)

Figure 6 shows the abrupt ending of the attack when both vehicles exploded. The fact that both vehicles exploded may indicate that detonation was not accidental or coincidental. If only one vehicle had exploded, this could have been perceived as accidental, as one of the IEDs may have detonated inside the SUV. However, having both explode indicates the possibility that either the vehicles were wired for remote detonation by a third party, or that the occupants of the vehicles purposely detonated them, making the incident a suicide attack. To date there is no public information available as to the specific cause of the explosions, as Chinese investigators remain silent on what has been found inside either vehicle.



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Figure 6. [Vehicles exploded](#)

The use of vehicles as a specific weapon is not a new terrorist tactic in China. The first known incident occurred 4 August 2008, when two Uighur men stole a dump truck and purposely struck and killed 16 people. The second instance using a vehicle as a weapon of choice occurred five years later. On 28 October 2013, Usman Hasan, his wife Gulkiz Gini, and his mother Kuwanhan Reyim drove their SUV into a large crowd gathered at Tiananmen Square, a popular tourist site. After ramming security barricades and striking several tourists, the vehicle exploded, killing all three occupants of the vehicle and two tourists. Upon investigation, police found gas cans, knives, and steel rods inside the vehicle. The vehicle's license plate was traced to Mr. Reyim, a Uighur resident of Xinjiang Province, which is located more than 1,300 miles from Beijing.⁸



Figure 7. [Tiananmen Square Terrorist Attack](#)

Adapting tactics, perpetrators of the Urumqi market attack removed license plates from both vehicles prior to the attack, thus inhibiting police officials from being able to trace either vehicle back to any specific person. By removing the license plates, the perpetrators learned from the mistake made from the Tiananmen Square attack.



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Regional Threat Actors

The most well-known threat actor operating within and proliferating from Xinjiang province is ETIM (East Turkistan Islamic Movement; also referred to as Turkistan Islamic Party). Created in 1993 by two ethnic Uighurs, ETIM was established with a nationalistic ideological goal, identifying with the former Uighur independent state of East Turkistan in an effort to link the group with the struggles ethnic Uighurs have endured under harsh Chinese suppression. The primary goal of the organization was to establish a separate Islamic Uighur state, independent from Chinese Han influence and rule. When the movement failed to resonate with the local population, the original group disbanded in late 1993.

In February 1997, growing unrest between ethnic Uighur and Han Chinese erupted in mass protests throughout Xinjiang Province. Demonstrating against wage discrimination and low-paying manual labor jobs, hundreds of disgruntled Uighurs took to the streets, prompting a disproportionate, repressive police response. During this time, clashes between police forces and protesting Uighurs resulted in over 100 protester deaths.

In the context of this tenuous environment and with increased resolve in establishing an independent Islamic State, Hasan Mahsum, an ethnic Uighur from Xinjiang's Kashgar region, reestablished ETIM in 1998 and quickly sought support from regional extremists in neighboring Afghanistan. Moving ETIM headquarters to Kabul, Mahsum became familiar with al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, who assisted ETIM with financial support and military training.⁹ Drawing from a base of despondent Uighurs from Xinjiang eager to support extremist causes, ETIM quickly recruited a small number of militants willing to travel to Afghanistan. While in Afghanistan, new ETIM members gained valuable training in militant tactics and explosives by al-Qaeda and Taliban members that members of the organization later used against coalition forces during Operation Enduring Freedom.¹⁰

Mahsum was killed in October 2003 by Pakistani officials in an al-Qaeda training camp in Kyber-Paktunkhwa, Pakistan. After Mahsum's death, splinter groups from ETIM began to relocate back to Xinjiang province, bringing their knowledge and skill set of battlefield tactics with them. Members of ETIM have taken credit for several attacks inside China, including a series of bus bombings in the city of Kunming just prior to the Beijing Summer Olympics of 2008. Present-day numbers of ETIM members vary widely. The United Nations indicates there are 200 active members with close associations to al-Qaeda.¹¹ While known to operate regionally alongside al-Qaeda and Taliban militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, recent reports suggest ETIM members have joined militant groups in Syria.¹² This would suggest the group has acquired the capacity to engage targets well beyond its known base of operations inside Central Asia.

Common tactics of the organization include the use of explosives, small arms, and the use of vehicles as a weapon. Additionally, on 29 June 2012, members of the group attempted to hijack an aircraft in Urumqi but were unsuccessful.

The US Department of State (USDoS) originally placed ETIM on its Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list after 11 September 2001 but later removed the organization from the list, stating ETIM did not pose a threat serious enough to warrant inclusion. In 2004, the USDoS did place the organization on its Terrorist Exclusion List (TEL), which holds lesser credence than the FTO. The FTO authorizes the US government to seize and/or freeze financial assets of a particular organization, whereas the TEL serves



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as a means of barring undesired foreign nationals from immigration to the United States. The TEL also facilitates apprehending aliens associated with terrorist organizations around the world.

Analyst Assessment

Largely regarded as a police state, China maintains strict control over perceived threats emanating from Xinjiang Province and responds quickly at any suspicion of terrorist activity to mitigate the threat. Chinese officials are quick to assert that incidents involving suspected terrorist activity are premeditated attacks attributed to radical Uighurs of Xinjiang Province.¹³

The ETIM is the only known terrorist organization operating in that region, and has alleged links with al-Qaeda. While ETIM has not claimed responsibility for the Urumqi market attack, the perpetrators are suspected of being members of the group as the tactics used in this attack closely resemble known tactics of the organization. China continues to use the terrorist threat in Xinjiang Province as a pretext for further isolating and suppressing the minority Uighur population, which only increases tension and discontent already prevalent throughout the province.¹⁴ Intimidation tactics are often used throughout the region by public officials in an attempt to dissuade the populace from participating in acts of violence against the government. Public trials of suspected terrorists are common in the region.¹⁵

The Xinjiang Province of China will remain an unstable and volatile region of Asia for the foreseeable future. Until a political resolution is achieved alleviating discrepant hiring practices and supporting cultural and religious rights of minority Uighurs, tensions will remain high. A recent study conducted by Maplecroft assessed statistical data of 197 countries over the course of seven years. The report concluded China is among the top five countries of the world that have seen a significant increase in terrorist activity, adversely affecting the economy.¹⁶

A continued effort by the Chinese government to isolate and suppress the Uighur community will only result in greater tensions throughout the region. Additionally, this type of environment has the potential to be used to recruit susceptible Uighur youth into the terrorist organization. Increased economic growth and development will contribute to hotspots as competition for higher-paying wages will remain an issue. Understanding the historical context of ethnic disputes between the Uighur and Han cultures will be essential in establishing a viable and long-lasting political solution. Though practical, this seems unlikely, as the Chinese government remains focused on preserving cultural heritage of Han society with little regard to diversification or acceptance of Islamic heritage or influence within its borders.

With such close proximity to Pakistan and Afghanistan, ETIM members will continue to travel to neighboring states to acquire militant training. Once this knowledge and skill set is acquired, it can easily be transferred and tailored for use in China.

The continued suppression and alienation of Uighur society closely resembles the fate of Baluchi separatists operating in Ariana, as depicted in [DATE 2.1](#). Similar to the Baluchi separatists, Uighurs feel repressed by the Chinese government, a condition that reinforces and aggravates existing ethnic fault lines. A continuation of this suppression will likely result in an increase in violence targeting the majority Han population perceived as the enemy.



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Training Implications

- Ethnic tensions create increased potential for destabilization. A small, seemingly insignificant event may cause a larger conflict with strategic implications.
- Without a formal process for adjudicating grievances, minorities become despondent and isolated, often resulting in hostile acts targeting the majority population.
- Citizens from various countries can travel to foreign nations to train in specific insurgent techniques and participate in foreign wars. These citizens can travel back to their respective home countries at will, bringing this knowledge and skill with them.
- Attacks often occur where people gather such as markets, shopping centers, malls, and airports.
- Attacks can occur in combinations; small hand-held IEDs may serve as a diversion or a prelude to larger SVBIED attacks.
- Flimsy barricades intended to prevent vehicle traffic are often insufficient to deter terrorists determined to break through any barrier protecting a prospective target.
- That citizens can band together to stop attackers is demonstrated in this case by vendors who used their carts to stop the lead vehicle, preventing further destruction.

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Figure 2. [Xinjiang Province](#), Wikimedia, 08 February, 2011.

Figure 3. Diagram of the Attack, CTID Analyst, 16 July 2014.

Figure 4. [Police Respond to Urumqi market attack](#), YouTube, 22 May 2014

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End Notes

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