Reflections on Good Relations with China on Eastern Turkestan

While Turkey is in the middle of a difficult and tumultuous time which requires protection of its presence and unity due to the surrounding circumstances, the pursuit of new alliances against this threat leads the country to a dead end with the abuse of certain Turkish sensibilities and the people of Turkey.

The imposition of a ban against Turkey commenting on its new allies' oppression of the minority communities that live within their borders and share common religious, cultural or ethnic elements with Turkey, both harms relations with the public and creates a significant contradiction.

In recent days, the statement by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, during the recent negotiations between Turkey and China on the economy, that China's security is equal to that of Turkey's, and that no activities, news and reports targeting China will be allowed, has led to concerns and reactions from the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey. The reason why such a consensus and assurance against "terrorism" bothered all the Uyghurs, while the fact that there have been some Uyghurs joining Daesh recently, is another matter of concern.

According to the statements of some Uyghur organizations in Turkey, these words were disclosed to the press by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China in a deliberate and manipulative manner, excluding its terrorism context.

Yet, the authorities' failure to deny the accuracy or framework of such information, gives rise to the thought that such concerns might be justifiable. On the other hand, the fact that China does not show the same sensitivity that it does for its own unity and stability when it comes to those countries with which it is building alliances, points to the practice of a great double standard. Because it does not seem acceptable that when applying such an imposition on Uyghurs China is ambivalent to the presence of a large Uyghur diaspora in Turkey and the fact that the discomfort they feel would bother Turkey, and also that China prioritizes only the unity and integrity of itself in its international dealings. One of the emphasized issues on this matter by the Uyghurs in Turkey is the Communist Party of China's invitation to the HDP, which Turkey considers to be the political party version of the PKK , to visit China after the elections on June 6. This is shown as a sign of China's double standards and disingenuity.

The good relations that China has built with many Muslim countries in economic terms within the framework of certain conditions have negative effects on the lives of the Uyghur diaspora living in those countries. Failure of Muslim countries to demonstrate a determined stance on the issue of Eastern Turkestan is an inexplicable negligence for the Islamic community that prevents resolution of the problem. As a result, the incomprehensible violation of the cultural and religious rights of the Muslim Uyghurs in the region in particular, and the negligence of Muslim countries regarding the prevention of such violations, as well as their failure to raise the issue to find a solution are among the most important reasons why the problem is still continuing. For instance, the return of Uyghur students studying in Saudi Arabia and Egypt to their own countries through the violation of their rights of education not only puts the Uyghurs in a deadlock, but also clearly shows the unresponsiveness of these countries to the politics of China which are getting increasingly tougher.

We are starting to see the results of the increasing ostracism of the Uyghurs in the region by China post 9/11 within the scope of the so-called War on Terror. The ostracism policy and "anti-Uyghur nationalism" [1] created under the guise of the War on Terror after 9/11 started to become effective with the incidents that took place in the region in the 2000s. The most important of these was the conflict that occurred between Uyghurs and Chinese in a factory in the state of Guangdong in July 2009. In the events that started with claims that the Uyghurs were being discriminated against, Uyghur workers were lynched and protests were made leading to the death of more than 150 people during police intervention.

Instead of investigating the reason behind the events and punishing those responsible, China closed the area to the press and human rights organizations, and claimed that the Uyghurs in the area were followers of international "separatist" and "jihadist" movements, and that the events in Xinjiang were linked to global "jihadist" groups. Furthermore, the protests took place not in the south of Xinjiang as reported by China, but in Urumqi, the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region where the Muslim Uyghurs make up 10% of

the population, and no slogans or symbols with religious motifs were used according to witness statements.[2]

İlham Tokti, economics professor at Beijing Central University for Nationalities reacted to these events and was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2014 on charges of separatism. It was his statement that “China will never succeed in becoming an attractive and great country unless it really assures multi-nationality” which led to his removal from the university and imprisonment. Born in Artux, Kashgar, Tohti has no ideology or defense based on Islamism or a similar religion, and was actually explaining how China could achieve unity.[3]

The Communist Party of China has become the target of criticism also within the country due to this attitude. For instance, in Guangdong where there were conflicts among factory workers, Party Committee Secretary Wang Yang commented that China should make reforms to its policies concerning ethnic communities in order to prevent bigger riots.

The significance of İlham Tohti and Wang Yang’s warnings was unfortunately not understood until the attacks at Guangzhou train station in May 2014, the knife attack in Kunmig that resulted in the death of 29 people, and the bombing and knife attack in Urumqi train station that resulted in the death of three people. The fact that Tohti was involved in no other discourse or action except for the demand that citizens of Eastern Turkestan should have the same rights as the Chinese and an environment where they can exercise their religion, culture, customs and language, and that his discourse was an important step towards the protection of China’s unity, rather than its disintegration, are somehow still ignored. While China’s pressure is the main reason behind the problems [4] that have been continuing for years in Eastern Turkestan, Tibet, and other regions, the government keeps increasing the pressure in these areas rather than making reforms to recognize and secure the presence of these communities.

On April 1, 2017, a series of laws under the name of the “Fight Against Extreme Religious Movements” were enacted in the Uyghur Autonomous Region, i.e., Eastern Turkestan. These laws are considered as a total denial of the identity of the Uyghurs and officially acknowledge the fact that Uyghur identity is perceived as a threat. The mentioned legislation includes a total of 50 articles under seven titles.

Intervening in the Uyghur way of life down to the last detail, these decisions also affect Uyghurs outside the country. One of the articles in the law stipulates the repatriation of Uyghurs studying in other countries. This decision enacted through the “Uygur Notice” (*Ukturuşname*) seemed to be targeting Uyghurs studying in madrasahs and colleges in Islamic countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

These estimations were confirmed when Egypt arrested 70 Uyghur students and took them into custody before deporting them from the country. It is also reported that Al-Azhar University in Egypt has stopped accepting Uyghur students upon the request of China. One of the agreements signed upon the visit of Salman bin Abdulaziz, King of Saudi Arabia, to China in March 2017 concerned education. It seems that as part of the agreement made during King Salman’s visit, Saudi Arabia is implementing a practice similar to that in Egypt.[5]

The English translation of the notice issued to the families living in Eastern Turkestan regarding the repatriation of students is as follows:

Notified Subject and Law **:** *Pursuant to the Law on the Management of Border Gates and the Uyghur Autonomous Region Law on Religious Activities, it is illegal for individuals to study religious subjects abroad, and such an act is one of the crimes that is against our relevant laws and requires punishment.*

Explanation of Notice **:** *If you have children that are minors, legally under your guardianship, and study religion abroad, it is required by the law for such children to return to their residence/family by May 20, 2017, and to absolutely follow this practice. If your children do not agree to return to your residence/family by the specified date, Ministry of Public Security and its relevant units will conduct an investigation on those studying religion, as well as their families, and take legal actions.**[6]***

Upon the warning that Uyghur students abroad will be arrested unless they return to China, it is said that about 400 Uyghur students returned to China. Reports circulated that students who returned to their country were taken to “retraining” camps and that arrested families were not released, thus other students in Egypt decided not to return, but about 70-80 of these students were then arrested by the Egyptian authorities. According to Uyghur sources, there are nearly 4,000-5,000 students in Egypt.[7]

While it is true there is an increased discontent and anger among the Uyghurs in the region and diaspora towards China, radical approaches in the region have led to the emergence of marginal groups. The biggest force behind this is China which treats all groups struggling politically to gain their rights in the region as “terrorists.” Everybody knows that the reason behind the tension in the region today is the policy of oppression that has been used for years rather than “the effect of international jihad connections in the region”.[8]

The fact that Eastern Turkestan became the economical focus of China in the 90s was an important milestone in the destiny of the region, as the operations aimed at this region were increased. In recent years, Eastern Turkestan’s location on gas and oil supply routes from Africa, Middle East and Central Asia, as well its proximity to the Gwadar Port Project being conducted with Pakistan and to Central Asia makes the region a highly important location for China which wants to involve the mentioned regions in its mandate.[9] It is observed that a more strict period started in changing the demographic structure of the region and cultural assimilating the Uyghurs within the scope of the “Western development projects” and other mentioned targets that were introduced after the current president Xi Jinping came to power.[10]

Any rejections to operations conducted in the region are considered as “separatist, terrorist, or radical” activities. The arrest of academics such as İlham Tohti is an obvious example of this situation. Furthermore, the young generation that cannot raise their voice against the injustices they are exposed to since the region is totally cut off to the outside, has no mechanism for defending their rights and are subjected to intense pressure. They are thus being dragged into militantism, as seen with other minority regions. It is widely known that violent actions are directly proportional to oppression, however, it is also understood that China has no intention to follow another method with regards to this situation. [11]

Practices that systematize incomprehensible oppression in the region from the ban on certain names for babies, wearing veils, growing beards, and fasting, to a regulation issued in March 2017 in the Aksu region of Xinjiang under the name of “ *Revealing Errors”* forcing the people to denounce each other in mass meetings, are applied as a mechanism that actually encourages especially young people in particular to join armed groups. Lastly, China’s attempt to create a negative perception by tarring all Uyghur organizations with the same brush, its requests following the meetings between Turkey and China, and the assurances that are claimed to have been given, make the Eastern Turkestan topic a current issue once again, especially for the Uyghurs.

Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

China is attempting to discredit this case by showing specific groups and organizations as examples, and tarring all the Eastern Turkestan resistance movements worldwide, leading individuals, and people in Eastern Turkestan with the same brush. The most important movement referenced by China is the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Established by the Uyghurs in Xinjiang region and defined as an armed organization, this group was declared as a terrorist organization by the US Department of the Treasury in 2002 when the US-China cooperation aimed at the war on terrorism increased. This group was also included in the terrorism list of Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee by the United Nations Security Council. Since 2002, the Chinese army has been conducting operations in this region together with other Central Asian countries and Russia. In August 2002, the USA declared that it would freeze the assets of this group in the country as a result of Beijing’s pressure.

In the intelligence gathered on the ETIM, the specialists have no common opinion on either its nature and power or its terrorist actions and links to global terrorism. According to the information provided by China, this group is said to have emerged and been deployed in the Xinjiang region, and it is highlighted that Xinjiang has borders with eight countries including Pakistan and Afghanistan. The first rumors about the

organization originated from an article published by Russian newspapers in 2000. This article claimed that Osama bin Laden provided funds to the ETIM and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was also claimed to be led by Laden, in meetings held in Afghanistan in 1999. Allegedly established by an Uyghur named Hasan Mahsum from the Kashgar region of Xinjiang, ETIM is also listed as an extremist separatist group by the US Department of State. There are allegations that the group aims to establish an independent state under the name of Eastern Turkestan covering Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and some regions of Turkey.[12]

According to China, the group has been involved in more than 200 terrorist actions in the country between 1990 and 2001. It is said that some Muslim leaders, civilians, and civil servants of Eastern Turkestan lost their lives in these actions in the form of attacks against public areas. It is also claimed that the group has carried out some attacks against the unity of China outside the country. For instance, the attacks made on the Chinese embassy in Turkey in the 90's are attributed to this group.[13]

After Hasan Mahsum was killed by the Pakistan Army in a shelter where an operation was conducted on suspicion that the shelter belonged to Al-Qaida on the Afghani border in 2003, the leadership passed onto Abdul Haq who was later killed in Pakistan in 2010. In a report published by the Chinese state media in August 2014, it was reported that Memetuhut Memetrozi, who was the founder of ETIM and is serving a life sentence due to terrorist activity claims, was brainwashed in the madrasahs of Pakistan. The report also claimed that Memetuhut met with Masum in 1997 and founded ETIM one year later, which was not supported by the community, and that this Uyghur separatist movement was linked to Pakistan. [14] There is no clear information as to whether Pakistan, which has a huge level of economic cooperation on projects with China, has an answer to such a targeting.

Some specialists allege that ETIM is an umbrella structure that involves some other small groups, one of which is a group that operates in Pakistan and Central Asia.

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is another leading group founded by Uyghurs in 2006 who fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 90s. This group is reported to claim responsibility for attacks in some cities including the bombings in Shanghai and Kunming in 2008. While the US-based intelligence unit Stratfor finds it unlikely that the TIP is capable of attacks of such scale, it still emphasizes that the group should be considered as a threat risk. While the TIP is recently reported to have been increasing its social media activities and called Uyghurs to "jihad", the independent terrorism-monitoring firm Intel Center in the USA states that it is suspicious as to whether the TIP is cooperating with ETIM or whether it is an independent organization, but that both organizations act with an Islamic and nationalist motivation.[15]

Among other allegations are that ETIM does not represent the Eastern Turkestan and Uyghur resistance alone, that many other Uyghur institutions and political organizations based outside Eastern Turkestan have been operating for years in the region, and that ETIM is supported by China to discredit the Eastern Turkestan case.

The Convenience of 9/11

In the wake of the events of 9/11, China has made the issue of Eastern Turkestan an international matter under the War on Terrorism within the global conjuncture involving Russia and many other countries that experience problems with minorities. Eastern Turkestan's struggle for existence that had been going on for many years before this date has now become known as a fundamental global terrorism movement.

After the Cold War, when the Central Asian Republics previously known as Eastern Turkestan [16] or the Soviet Republics gained their independence from the USSR in the 90s, China saw this is as a cue to increase its oppression in the region, fearing that a similar event would occur in Eastern Turkestan. While the people in the region were considered potential threats and ethnic conflicts intensified in the country, an increased number of people started to emigrate or flee the region.[17]

Madrasahs and religious schools in Eastern Turkestan that had even survived the oppression of the Mao period were closed, and the pressure was increased in the following years with the transfer of military and police forces to the oppressed region under the law. [18] Meanwhile, Uyghurs who had fled the oppression they were subjected to in China faced a similar fate in other countries. The Uyghurs in Pakistan were

expelled from the mid-90s onwards in line with China's demands. When America invaded Afghanistan, the Uyghurs living in the region and receiving education at madrasah were also affected to a large extent. Taken to Guantanamo from these countries, 22 Uyghurs were kept there in an unlawful manner, and released in 2006 after they were "found innocent". [19] The Shanghai Cooperation Organization founded by China in 1996, and signed by Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, stipulated the prevention of groups promoting demands for the independence or rights of Uyghurs, and the repatriation of Uyghurs fleeing China. It is even claimed that China developed some policies to prevent the spread of Uyghur activities in Central Asia to Eastern Turkestan and that the Shanghai Five was founded for this reason as the first step of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Across the region China aimed to spread the "separatism-terrorism-fundamentalism"-based security concept that it had created and which it dubbed the "three evil powers".[20]

The events of 9/11 contributed greatly to this process. A much tighter and more violent grip was kept on Eastern Turkestan in line with the concept of the "fight against separatism-terrorism-fundamentalism". Seen as an internal issue for China up until then, and used by Western states to target China, it now gained a more international scale. [21] Practices targeting ethnic and religious identity in the region were intensified after this date. The last of these practices was made effective on April 1, 2017 under the name "Fight Against Extreme Religious Movements" in Uyghur Autonomous Region, i.e., Eastern Turkestan, as explained above.[22]

Rather than linking the discontent created internally by the "One-China" trauma to the intervention of external powers (especially the USA's intervention in regions such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong, as well as Eastern Turkestan) and finding solutions to the issue, China has a "nationalist" approach that is ironically increased and used by the Communist Party of China to oppress the problematic regions in the country, particularly Eastern Turkestan. The reason behind such a nationalistic attitude or discourse is the fear that the ideological failure of communism that happened after the breakup of the USSR will also happen in China.[23]

Such a nationalistic stance targets Western countries and Japan outside the country and mostly Uyghurs at home. All Uyghur demands are perceived as separatism, and presented to the Chinese public in this way. Such an approach is interpreted as a more controllable nationalism that does not oppose the USA or harm economic relations.[24]

Economic cooperation can be moved forward with equal conditions between countries and an honest approach to each other. However, an economic development that is achieved without assuring peace at home will not be sufficient to maintain the unity of a country.

While China is rapidly improving its economic relations on a global level, especially building very close relations with Muslim countries, the oppression of the approximately 30 million Muslim Uyghurs in the country is increasing more and more every day. Thus, due to the "One-China" reflex, among the first principles stipulated by China to nearly all the countries with which it has economic relations is that its violation of minority rights must not be brought up and that the movement of diaspora forced to leave its lands is restricted. This stands out as a source of big problems in terms of both the countries hosting Chinese diaspora, and China itself.

[1] http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/uygur-sorunu-ve-cinin-balkanlasma-korkusu

[2] https://www.hudson.org/research/10480-repression-in-china-and-its-consequences-in-xinjiang

[3] http://insamer.com/tr/cinde-ifade-ozgurlugu-ilham-tohti-ornegi_5.html

[4] https://www.hudson.org/research/10480-repression-in-china-and-its-consequences-in-xinjiang

[5] http://www.uyghurnet.org/46565-2/

[6] https://eastturkistaninfo.com/2017/04/07/yurt-disindaki-uygurlara-zulum-basladi/

[7] https://medium.com/@rukiyeturdush/egypts-dirty-love-with-china-money-over-fait-168f893f0686

[8] https://www.hudson.org/research/10480-repression-in-china-and-its-consequences-in-xinjiang

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[10] https://www.hudson.org/research/10480-repression-in-china-and-its-consequences-in-xinjiang

[11] https://www.hudson.org/research/10480-repression-in-china-and-its-consequences-in-xinjiang

[12] https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim

[13] https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim

[14] https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim

[15] https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim

[16] http://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/akifemre/turkistan-neresi-2034303

[17] http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/uygur-sorunu-ve-cinin-balkanlasma-korkusu

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[19] http://www.uyghurnet.org/musluman-ulkeler-ile-cin-arasinda-sikisan-musluman-uygurlar-4-bolum/

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