Social Cohesion and Islamic Radicalization: Implications from the Uighur Insurgency

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Abstract

This article starts with a critical review of the current literature on the Islamic radicalization and Uighur insurgency in Xinjiang, pointing out that existing literature focuses too narrowly on certain aspects of the Uighur insurgency, and is insufficient to explain the causal mechanism of the insurgency and Islamic radicalization. Built upon historical evidence, this article uses sociological analysis to explore the structural changes in the Uighur community over the past decades, and demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of social cohesion theory in identifying the key causal variables which underlie and determine the course of Uighur insurgency and Islamic radicalization. The last section of the article offers policy implications on Islamic radicalization prevention at both international and domestic levels, and on how to reduce the negative impact of Islamic radicalism on national security and stability.

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By Tong Zhao

Introduction

Violent Islamic radicals are among the most dangerous enemies who pose a serious threat to international and domestic security. Nonetheless, very little in the literature that studies the root causes of Islamic radicalization explores the mechanism of radicalization on a macro-community level. The case of Uighur insurgency in China provides a unique opportunity to look critically into the issue of radicalization by employing social cohesion theory. Social cohesion theory not only explains the gradual radicalization of Uighur communities in Xinjiang, but also sheds light on the impact of declining social cohesion on non-Muslim communities in the same region. By taking into consideration the reciprocal interaction between radicalizing Muslim communities and non-Muslim Han Chinese, social cohesion theory uncovers the dynamics of Islamic radicalization and its impact on ethnic conflict.

The Uighur case has universal implications for policymakers and practitioners who deal with Islamic radicalization. A systemic analysis of this case reveals the critical importance for maintaining and enhancing social cohesion in regions with significant Muslim populations. Western governments also have a lot to learn from the frustrating experience of the Chinese Government in dealing with Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang. In addition, the Uighur case is relevant in the sense that it points out effective approaches for governments to check and contain anti-Muslim sentiment in a multi-ethnic society.

This article starts with a critical review of the current literature on the Islamic radicalization and Uighur insurgency in Xinjiang, pointing out that existing literature focuses too narrowly on certain aspects of the Uighur insurgency, and is insufficient to explain the causal mechanism of the insurgency and Islamic radicalization. Built upon historical evidence, this article uses sociological analysis to explore the structural changes in the Uighur community over the past decades, and demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of social cohesion theory in identifying the key causal variables which underlie and determine the course of Uighur

39

Journal of Strategic Security

insurgency and Islamic radicalization. The last section of the article offers policy implications on Islamic radicalization prevention at both international and domestic levels, and on how to reduce the negative impact of Islamic radicalism on national security and stability.

Root Cause of Uighur Insurgency: Current Schools of Thought

The Uighur insurgency existed before the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and has experienced a non-linear history of development. The initial decades of the 1960s and 70s were relatively peaceful, but the Uighur insurgency re-emerged in the 1980s following the end of the Cultural Revolution, reached a peak in the late 1990s, lost some of its momentum in subsequent years, got revitalized during a series of terrorist attacks before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and finally culminated in the riot at Urumqi in July 2009. Since the beginning, violent Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang significantly contributed to the growth of Uighur insurgency. Most of the insurgent incidents were instigated and organized by Islamic radicals, and the development curve of the insurgency closely resembled the growth trend of Islamic radicalism in the region.

A variety of causal factors of the Uighur insurgency has been suggested. Government imposed restrictions on religious activities are believed to be one of the major reasons behind the insurgency.[1] Economic inequality between the Han Chinese and the Uighurs in Xinjiang is also frequently mentioned as an important contributing factor.[2] Other explanations include: cultural discrimination and oppression;[3] immigration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang, which to some extent caused economic inequality between the two nations;[4] political oppression (inadequate Uighur representation in the government);[5] external influence of radical Islamism;[6] growth of Uighur nationalism;[7] and the government's tough measures against the insurgents (the so-called Strike Hard policy).[8]

All of these proposed factors are certainly helpful to understand the Uighur insurgency and Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang. However, they fail to provide a coherent explanation consistent with the historical evolution of the insurgency. For example, the frequently suggested correlation between religious restriction and insurgency is questionable. The most restrictive religious policies in Xinjiang were adopted during a series of country-wide political campaigns which began in the late 1950s and peaked in the 1970s. Particularly during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the government's religious policies were the most repressive since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Religious facilities were systemati-

40

cally destroyed, and most religious practices were simply forbidden. During that period, however, Uighur insurgency was relatively rare.[9] In contrast, after the end of the Cultural Revolution the Chinese Government had taken substantial steps to replace its ill-advised religious policies with more lenient and relaxed measures. By 1989, the number of mosques in Xinjiang had increased 5.8 times compared with a decade earlier to some 20,000; by the end of the 1990s, that number had reached 23,000, and continued to grow.[10] Nonetheless, the Uighur insurgency intensified in the early 1980s and continued to escalate.[11] In general, the theory of religious repression does not fit well with the trend of the insurgency.

Furthermore, the current literature has focused exclusively on the growth of Uighur insurgency to the neglect of the emergence of Han Chinese antipathy against the Uighurs. The growing antagonism between these two groups contributed significantly to the ethnic conflict between the Han and the Uighurs during the Urumqi riot. It is necessary, therefore, to explore the evolution and root causes of the Han aversion to the Uighurs in China, which will shed light on the interactive dynamic between Islamic radicalization and its repercussion in a multi-ethnic society.

Social Cohesion: A New Perspective

Unlike the approaches taken by existing studies, the theory of social cohesion starts with macro-community analysis, and most appropriately incorporates various contributing factors into a coherent mechanism that best explains and reflects the trend of Uighur insurgency and Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang.

The definitions of social cohesion in sociological literature vary, but are closely interrelated.[12] In this research, social cohesion generally refers to the bonds or "glue" that bring people together in society. Among the literature on social cohesion, the work led by Professor Ivan Turok at the University of Glasgow lays out the main components and dimensions of the concept, and thus is particularly helpful for this research to examine the evolution of social cohesion in Xinjiang.[13]

According to Turok, social cohesion is comprised of five main dimensions: the first is material condition, which is the fundamental component of social cohesion, including particularly employment, income, health, education, and housing. The second basic element of social cohesion is so-called passive social relationships, meaning social order, safety, and freedom from fear. The third dimension, active social relationships, refers to the positive interactions, exchanges, and networks between individuals

41

Journal of Strategic Security

and communities. The fourth dimension is about the extent of social inclusion or integration of people into the mainstream institutions of civil society. The fifth and final dimension involves the level of fairness or disparity regarding access to opportunities or material circumstances, such as income, health, or quality of life.[14] Among the five dimensions of social cohesion, material condition is the foundation upon which the others rest.[15]

Through the lenses of the main dimensions of social cohesion, the following sections of this article conduct a historical analysis of the evolution of Uighur insurgency in the context of societal structures of the Uighur community in Xinjiang, and seek to examine the relationship between social cohesion and Muslim insurgency and radicalization.

Social Cohesion and Uighur Insurgency (the early 1950s–the late 1970s)

Two years after the liberation of Xinjiang, in 1952, the Chinese Central Government initiated land reform in rural areas of Xinjiang. During the reform, the government confiscated land from landlords and redistributed it among the population. They also started a country-wide program of "Agricultural Production Cooperatives" which encouraged peasants to pool their production resources (land and machinery) and farm jointly. The initial success of such programs encouraged the top leadership of the central government to go further in the direction of agricultural collectiveness—People's Communes were widely promoted and established across China in 1958.

The framework of People's Communes served as the foundation for economic collectiveness in Xinjiang from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. Communes that generally consisted of thousands of households were divided into production brigades and production teams. The communes exercised management and control of most agricultural resources such as labor and land, and were responsible for providing jobs to their members.[16] In such a system, every individual was relatively equal in terms of assets and economic benefits, and was dependent on the commune for employment, income, education, and to some extent even housing. The close connection between individuals and the commune served as the material foundation for social cohesion in Xinjiang during this period.

The communes also had important political functions. Communes operated as the main political institutions through which mass political campaigns were implemented, and close political and societal ties

42

between individuals and communes were established and strengthened in this process as well. During the 1950s, a number of political campaigns were launched across the country, such as the Three Antis Campaign (anti-corruption, anti-waste, and anti-bureaucracy), the Five Antis Campaign (anti-bribery, anti-theft of state property, anti-tax evasion, anti-cheating on contracts, and anti-stealing state economic information), and a series of Rectification Movements including the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Large scale political campaigns continued during the 1960s, including major anti-corruption campaigns such as the Four Clean-Ups Movement.[17] During these campaigns, study and discussion groups were organized by units of production teams, production brigades, or communes, which further strengthened the social and political ties between the individuals and the collective units.

The international and regional environments also affected social cohesion in Xinjiang. Historically, Russia possessed a traditional sphere of influence in the northwest territories of China. After the Sino-Soviet relationship soured in the late 1950s, the Soviet threat became prominent. From then on, the main theme of China's political campaigns became heavily focused on anti-Soviet revisionism. Because of Xinjiang's geographical proximity to the Soviet Union, the perception of Soviet threat was particularly manifest in this region. The perception of serious external threat, as a result, overwhelmed potential internal divisions and significantly contributed to social solidarity and cohesion in Xinjiang.

From the early 1950s to late 1970s, the economic foundation, social structure, political institutions, and international situation all contributed to a high degree of social cohesion in Xinjiang. During this period, Uighur insurgency was relatively rare and lacking in popular appeal, compared to the situation after the 1980s.[18] Insurgent incidents during this time frame shared a number of common features. First, most riots before the 1980s grew and escalated slowly.[19] The riot in Moyu County in 1954, for example, took the instigators several years to plan and recruit, but in the end only 300 hundred people were recruited. In contrast, in the 4/9 Incident which took place in Aksu in 1980, more than 3000 people got together in a very short time without previous coordination. Second, most riots before the 1980s took place in remote mountainous areas where the natural conditions, though tough, made it easier for the insurgents to hide. On the contrary, the riots after the 1980s began to move into towns and major cities. During the late 1980s, for instance, at least three riots took place in Xinjiang's capital city Urumqi alone.[20] Third, the instigators and participants of the insurgency before the 1980s were mainly middle aged or senior people who were mainly remnants from the previous generation

of separatists, whereas most of the organizers and participants of riots after the 1980s were young people, as were seen in the most recent Urumqi riot.

Declining Social Cohesion and Growing Uighur Insurgency (from the Early 1980s onward)

Collapse of Economic Foundation for Social Cohesion

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping's taking over control of China, the policy of Reform and Open-up was adopted by the government, which drastically changed the economic structure in the country. Xinjiang was no exception.

With the introduction of a market economy and privatization of state-owned companies and assets, the collective foundation of economy in Xinjiang collapsed. People's communes were disintegrated; collectively-owned enterprises were overwhelmed by private ones and no longer offered reliable employment. The close economic ties between individuals and communes dissolved, but no viable substitute was established. As a result, the economic foundation for social cohesion no longer existed. Under the new market economy, individuals became economically independent and were thereafter responsible for their own employment and economic benefits.

Economic liberalization also saw a freer flow of migrants across provincial boundaries. Many Han Chinese came to Xinjiang during the 1980s and 1990s because of the rich resources and opportunities there. Today, economic marketization, together with a growing number of the Han in Xinjiang, poses a serious problem for the Uighurs. Muslim culture in the Uighur community does not emphasize the importance of entrepreneurship, and most Uighurs are based in rural areas where there are few chances of being exposed to the new economy.[21] Moreover, language barriers make it even more difficult for the Uighurs to be employed in private enterprises that are mostly owned and operated by the Han.[22] In general, the Uighurs tend to be less adaptive to the market economy than the Han, and they have become economically isolated as a group. The Uighurs have been forced into an economic competition against the Han in which they have little advantage.

44

Declining Social Ties

With the collapse of collective economy, the whole set of social mechanisms that were associated with the economic structure vanished as well. No adequate substitutes for the social mechanisms were established to continue serving the purpose of incorporating individuals into mainstream social institutions.

As economic relationships between individuals became competitive, social relationships between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged turned sour and tense. Both within and outside Xinjiang, widening economic gaps between the Han and the Uighurs led to social estrangement. All over China, Uighurs who faced difficulty in integrating into local economies felt distanced from mainstream society, and their societal identification substantially diminished as a result. Indicators of declining social identification of the Uighurs include the growing numbers of social security incidents involving the Uighurs in major Chinese cities. Rampant Uighur thieves have caused serious social problems across the country, not only because of unprecedented crime frequency, but also because of the brutality in those violent incidents. Many Uighur peddlers have also been witnessed conducting coercive selling through violence or threat of violence.[23] These incidents clearly point to an increasing level of psychological isolation and a declining level of social identification of the Uighurs in a Han-dominated society.

Increasing Islamic Puritanism and Radicalism

The economy of Xinjiang began to take off in the late 1980s, but a number of social problems followed. Corruption and social injustice contributed to the perception of social disparity in terms of access to opportunities and economic benefits, further undermining the degree of social cohesion in Xinjiang. Consequently, traditional moral standards are no longer observed as strictly as before, and many Uighurs today worry about the future of their younger generations, and blame the "evil society" for young people's misbehaviors.

Collectively, economic isolation, social marginalization, and the perception of social disparity and injustice have led to declining social cohesion. The primary consequence of this was an increasing thirst for orthodox and conservative Islam among the Uighurs who now find themselves greatly unsatisfied with and largely marginalized by the society and as a result turn to religion to seek relief, consolation, and hope. Hence, in recent decades, especially since the 1990s, the influence of Islamic puritanism among the Uighurs has continued to grow.

45

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Journal of Strategic Security

The trend of a renewal of orthodox and conservative Islamic practices is manifest in at least several aspects. In the mid to late 1990s, for example, the traditional form of *mashrap* gathering—a vehicle for regulating moral, religious, and social etiquette and forming male peer groups—was resurrected among Uighur communities in parts of Xinjiang. Some Uighurs have recently also begun to celebrate religious holidays that are traditionally celebrated in some Middle Eastern and Central Asian Muslim communities. Furthermore, the trend of returning to the mosque is probably the most salient manifestation of Islamic renewal. Since the 1980s, the number of mosques in Xinjiang has grown several times.[24] In Urumqi, the increasing number of worshippers has necessitated the replacement of small mosques with much larger ones. In addition, young people are now comprising a large and ever-growing proportion of the people going to the mosque, as opposed to two decades ago when almost only the elders went to the mosque.[25] Moreover, renewed Islamic puritanism among the Uighur people has developed further into Islamic radicalization in some cases. With the number of Islamic radicals growing, more terrorist attacks and insurgent incidents were witnessed in Xinjiang.

Social Cohesion and Ethnic Conflict

Declining social cohesion promoted Muslim radicalization and insurgency, and also substantially contributed to uneasiness of the Han Chinese in the region. Ultimately, these factors led to increasing Han resistance to perceived Muslim aggression perpetrated by the Uighurs.

Similar to Uighurs, Han individuals under current economic and social structures have also become largely independent in economic and social terms compared with the previous state controlled collective system. The government no longer exercised as much influence over individuals (both the Han and the Uighurs) as before, and its capacity to manage political campaigns and public propaganda has also been undermined by a low degree of social cohesion and weak connections between the public and the government.

As provocative incidents led to increasing antipathy of the Han toward the Uighurs, the Han no longer felt restrained by the reconciliatory ethnic policies of the government as they did before. They began to act on their own and to retaliate against perceived Uighur aggressiveness. The low degree of social cohesion has not only contributed to Uighur insurgency, but has also undermined tolerance and self-restraint of the Han, and weakened the government's capacity to sell and implement its reconcilia-

46

tory policy among both the Uighur and the Han. As a consequence, the Urumqi riot in July 2009 quickly turned into an unprecedented violent ethnic conflict between the Uighurs and the Han, and the Chinese Government had to mobilize tens of thousands of armed police from other provinces to Xinjiang to stabilize the situation.[26]

Implications Outside China

Social cohesion, as demonstrated in this article, most effectively explains the trend of Uighur insurgency and Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang, and incorporates various contributing factors into a coherent and manageable causal relationship. From the perspective of social cohesion, the following points need to be taken into consideration by policymakers to formulate their approaches of dealing with violent Islamic radicalization in both international and domestic arenas.

First and foremost, economic liberalization and political democratization programs in countries and regions plagued by Islamic radicalism should be pursued with extreme caution and thoughtfulness.

As Turok correctly pointed out, material and economic conditions are the fundamental component of social cohesion.[27] In countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, the overall social structures of most Muslim communities are built upon their traditional forms of economy, and any rude attempt to swiftly transform their traditional economy to a liberal market-oriented one would inadvertently undermine the economic foundation of the social cohesion that has been playing a key role in sustaining those Muslim communities for decades and even centuries.

Liberal market economics, to a certain extent, is built upon individual responsibility and entrepreneurship, whereas the economic foundation of most traditional Muslim communities embraces a certain degree of collectivism. The case of Uighur people in Xinjiang, for example, reveals the negative impact on social cohesion in their communities when the traditional social connections under a collective and local economic system were swiftly broken and no alternative measures were taken to establish a new set of economic and social ties under a liberal market system.

Most Muslim communities in Central Asia have no strong traditions of individual entrepreneurship, and are not very adaptive to or competitive in a market economy.[28] When social cohesion declines as a result of rapid economic liberalization, violent Islamic radicalization is accelerated. Such problems were widely and repeatedly seen in Muslim communities across

47

Journal of Strategic Security

the globe, from Uighur communities in Xinjiang to Muslim communities in Indonesia—the biggest Muslim country in the world—during Indonesia's economic transformation period in the 1990s.[29] Therefore, efforts and resources need to be directed toward programs that aim to sustain and reinforce social cohesion in those Muslim communities. Economic liberalization should be carried out with great prudence and patience, and should be accompanied by measures aimed at building positive interpersonal connections and strengthening social cohesion.

The social cohesion theory reveals the false correlation between growth of wealth and de-radicalization. Policies that focus on growing the economy and increasing the wealth of Muslim communities do not necessarily prevent radicalization from happening because economic growth does not always contribute positively to social cohesion. Because of declining social cohesion, the number of violent Islamic radicals in Xinjiang has increased even though their average income continues to rise. Policymakers should not make the same mistake as their Chinese counterparts did who tried to contain Islamic radicalization by focusing exclusively on reviving and growing local economies in troubled Muslim areas.

By the same token, policymakers need to be fully aware of unintended consequences that the process of political democratization could bring to a traditional Muslim society. If handled rashly, side effects of political democratization could result in societal split and disintegration, undermine social cohesion, and ultimately contribute to radicalization in Muslim communities. The precarious political situations in Afghanistan and Iraq require policymakers to think carefully about their way of implementing political democratization and to make greater efforts in sustaining social cohesion during the democratization process.

Conclusion

The Uighur case illustrates the catastrophic consequences of a vicious cycle between violent Islamic radicalization and non-Muslim revenge in a Muslim-minority society. Conflicts along the lines of ethnicity and religion can cause much greater damage to a society than one-way radical Islamic violence, and thus require a government to take every effort to prevent Islamic radicalism from spreading hatred, provoking revenge, and splitting society. However, although the United States and many European Governments have launched programs to help Muslim immigrants adapt to western cultures and societies, not enough attention has been paid to encourage native residents to engage and develop positive interactions with Muslim immigrants. In recent decades, the numbers of

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anti-Muslim incidents have risen quickly in several western countries, which is alarming and dangerous if the trend of escalation is not effectively contained.[30]

The Chinese Government applies preferential policies towards the Uighurs in the hope of harmonious integration, but their approach in implementing the policy seems problematic and in fact further provokes antipathy among the Han Chinese against the Uighurs. What the Chinese Government has failed to do is also what the American and other Western Governments have so far largely ignored: initiatives and programs that focus on the majority non-Muslim residents to prevent anti-Muslim sentiment from spreading across society.

About the Author

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50

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51

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