

The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority

Sean R. Roberts, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020, 29.95 \$
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BOOK REVIEW

The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority,

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China's Northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has become known for its sometimes violent interethnic clashes and long-standing aspirations for more cultural and political self-determination. In recent years, China's treatment of the XUAR's Turk-speaking Muslim minority populations has been one of the most controversial topics in the country's international relations. In Western academia and media accusations abound regarding reeducation camps, coercive labour, forced sterilizations and many other alleged mistreatments, while China justifies its harsh measures in the name of fighting terrorism and eradicating religious extremism. Sean R. Roberts is an expert on Central Asia and the Uyghurs. Based on thorough research his monograph is one of the first to shed light on the conflict and he proposes an original explanation for the near-unimaginable turn of events of recent years. His main argument is that the Chinese Party-state took the opportunity of US president Bush's announcement of a 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) after 9/11, 2001, to re-brand its Uyghur 'separatist' problem an instance of 'terrorism' with linkages to global jihadist groups. The de-humanization inherent in the label terrorism over time turned the Uyghurs as a whole into targets of further state and societal discrimination ultimately giving rise to some real violent resistance and attacks that deserve the moniker terrorism. This escalation of violence was answered by a hardline securitization of the region beginning in 2014, followed by more resistance and ultimately the wide-ranging crackdown including the erection of reeducation camps in 2017 for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Uyghurs. Thus, the main thesis advanced by Roberts is that the Party-state played a crucial role in creating the long-proclaimed terrorist threat as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This analysis is set against a brief overview of the XUAR's tumultuous history. Roberts describes how the region, once indirectly ruled by Beijing, was turned into a settler colony for Han Chinese by the turn of the millennium. He then details the way the Uyghurs were cast as terrorist threat, even though almost none of the 'separatist' violence of the 1990s qualifies as terrorism. That is, according to the working definition of terrorism which he employs: an act that is 'violent, politically motivated, and deliberately targets civilians' (p. 13). However, it is worth pointing out that this narrow definition excludes assassinations of 'red Imams' (those collaborating with the Party-state) since they are treated as representatives of the state instead of civilians. In one of the strongest parts of his monograph, Roberts analyzes in great depth the origins of ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) – an obscure separatist outfit in Xinjiang during the 1990s – and its successor TIP (Turkestan Islamic Party), active at first in Afghanistan and after 2011 primarily in Syria. He criticizes the Chinese official stance that whichever name is being used, all Uyghur resistance is attributed to the ETIM and connected to amorphous 'East Turkestan forces'. However, he effectively demonstrates that Uyghur nationalists share this indistinct perspective – 'a belief that their struggle with modern China is timeless and continuous' (p. 101). Thus, for both Chinese authorities and Uyghur fighters the movement appears like a Hydra: Once one head is severed, two more will rear up. At any rate, Roberts depicts the TIP for most of its time as 'a video production company with a militant wing' (p. 116) and after 2012 as a 'guerilla warfare force in Syria, but not necessarily an international "terrorist organization"' (p.


126). He forcefully argues against violent resistance being instigated or orchestrated from abroad. However, one might add, this does not conclusively rule out the possibility of it being at least inspired by transnational Islamist terror propaganda.

For Roberts the real problems behind the escalation of violence in the region are socio-economic inequalities, discrimination of Uyghurs and policies aimed at weakening their ethnic identity. These led to disaffection which boiled over in deadly street protests in the region's capital in July 2009. This set in motion a vicious cycle of securitization campaigns, further violent resistance and the Chinese state's 'people's war on terror', announced in 2014. In Roberts' own words, 'A dangerous combination of the Han-dominated state's settler colonization aspirations in the region with the Islamophobic and security-obsessed narrative of GWOT had created a situation where Uyghurs and the state were pitted against each other' (p. 158f). Ultimately, in Roberts' analysis, this led to the cultural genocide after 2017. The system of reeducation camps set up under XUAR Party secretary Chen Quanguo is the most prominent aspect of this full-scale assault on Uyghur ethnic identity. But it is complemented by a whole gamut of accompanying measures to 'erase and replace Uyghur identity' (p. 227) including the 'Sinicization of Islam' and destruction of mosques, coercive labour and forced sterilizations of Uyghur women. In the conclusion, Roberts reflects on the role of the US-led GWOT in enabling such systematic human rights abuses and possibilities for international action to counter them.

From this reviewer's perspective, the most original contributions of the book lie in Roberts' fine-grained analysis of the terror narrative, his in-depth examination of Uyghur separatist groups including interviews with former fighters active in Syria and his comprehensive treatment of the whole predicament of state counterterrorism in China. These achievements make his monograph essential reading for anyone interested in the on-going Xinjiang crisis. If there is anything to criticize, it might be the above-mentioned narrow understanding of terrorism that allows him to gloss over considerable violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s. Moreover, he uses 'Uyghur homeland/region' instead of the terms Xinjiang or 'East Turkestan' which he deems to be politically loaded. But this may be seen as equally problematic given the fact that Uyghurs (who were not known by that name before the early twentieth century) were the main inhabitants only of the southern part of today's XUAR. This is indicative of the complete lack of treatment of other ethnic groups in Xinjiang, such as Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Tajiks etc. throughout the book. It is surprising that Roberts, the Central Asia specialist with a long track-record of working on the Uyghur diaspora, omits them even from the index. These groups constitute around one tenth of the XUAR population and are also targeted in the current crackdown, although they never constituted a 'terrorist threat' even by the Chinese government's own admission. Finally, for the period since 2017 the sources used could have been scrutinized more thoroughly. From this reviewer's experience, some of the central works by US and Australian think tanks tend to overstate their cases against Chinese authorities to a certain extent. While I concur with the main thrust of the analysis, a more source-critical reading would have stood a scholarly work in good stead. That said, Roberts comprehensively presents the state of the field in the international literature on the subject. His book will be a work of lasting significance in the field of Xinjiang studies.

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