

The Uighur Riots in China: What do Facebook groups say?

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Introduction

In July 2009, China witnessed its worst ethnic clashes in decades, excluding those in Tibet, when protests by Uighurs in Urumqi, capital of the western Xinjiang province, turned violent after police intervention. The protest started after two Uighur workers in the southern district of Guangdong had been killed as a result of racial violence. Soon afterwards, individuals belonging to the majority Han ethnicity, who represent about 92% of the Chinese population, but only 40% of the population of Xinjiang, attacked Uighur targets and individuals. The death toll rose to at least 150 individuals, although the racial breakdown of the deceased is still not quite clear. The government moved quickly to round up suspects and threatened to execute those directly involved in the violent incidents. Hundreds of Uighurs were detained by police¹.

In this article, we review a number of group pages on Facebook to understand the ideas and dynamics that influenced opinion toward the Uighur cause in China. Our survey is limited to groups that are in English, and we focused on groups that are large enough in terms of numbers and that are active in terms of discussions and posts. We focused on groups that had an earlier interest in the Uighur cause and those that sprang up after the riots to defend the Uighur rights and/or criticize the Chinese government's position and policies. Thus the groups we chose were mostly supportive of the Uighurs. We thought that this would create a more manageable pool of groups to discuss and direct our attention to the lessons to be learned from this window of knowledge.

Our purpose is both to open a new window for understanding the situation and to direct attention to an important channel for political mobilization and socialization that will gain even more importance and attention in the near future. We start by briefly introducing the characteristics of the Uighur population in China, and the Chinese government's response to the

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¹ The violence in Guangdong started when a female Han worker was reportedly sexually harassed by Uighur coworkers in the residence quarters in the factory where she worked. Violence erupted on June 25 and 26, and two Uighur workers were killed as a result. Police investigations found no evidence of the rape incidence. The demonstrations in Xinjiang started as a peaceful protest against the killings in the distant Guangdong province, especially that the police were accused of failing to protect the Uighur workers and to arrest any of the Han people allegedly involved in the killing. The purpose of the demonstration was to express discontent with the Chinese authorities' reaction toward the violent events and to show sympathy with the families of those killed or injured in Guangdong—some 1000 miles away. Chinese authorities have accused a number of expatriate Uighur organizations of masterminding these demonstrations, especially the World Uighur Congress headed by the U.S. based Ms Rebiya Kadeer, who has denied these accusations.

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recent riots and its policies toward this group. We then move on to discuss the main trends we could highlight from the discussions and posts of the Facebook groups that discussed the Uighur riots.

Before proceeding with our discussion, it is important to note that the purpose of this article is to discuss perceptions of the Uighurs and their support groups. We understand that the issues presented in this article are controversial, touching on historical and political events and accounts which could be perceived from different angles. We also understand that the Chinese government's policies toward the Uighur minority are inseparable from its overall approach to democracy and human rights. But we still believe that as a result of economic development and broadening gaps in wealth and opportunities across the country, there should be at least some modifications of China's policies and approach to social and political rights as well as more international attention to the links between minority issues across the globe and hence the need to pay more attention to the Uighur cause. The purpose is to create an understanding of the issue and to draw attention to the pitfalls that the Chinese government and other governments as well, including the American government, need to avoid and learn from.

Who are the Uighurs?

The Uighurs are an ethnic and religious minority in China who are Muslims of Turkic origin. Their roots go back to the Gaoche and Tiele tribal unions². The majority of Uighurs live in the western "autonomous region" of Xinjiang. The region's capital, Urumqi, where the protest started, is a heavily industrialized city. Xinjiang fell under the control of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Before that, the Uighurs managed to establish independent republics twice during the 20th century.

Historically, the Uighurs are one branch of the ancient Turkic people. Ancient Uighurs settled on territory of Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang at present), and of present Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan a long time ago. The First Uighur Qaghanat³ was established in Khanghaj in 323, and lasted for 200 years. The Second Uighur Qaghanat was founded in 523 and existed for 80 years⁴. The third Qaghanat was built in 744 after the Uighurs seized power from the Gok Turks. It stretched from the Caspian Sea into eastern China. The Uighurs helped China settle some internal unrest, which gave them important gains in the Silk Road trade. This empire fell in 840 as a result of the invasion of the Kirghiz of the Upper Yenisei region, a Turkic Qaghanat⁵. After this fall, the Uighurs created a number of states including one in Xinjiang⁶. Some Uighurs who arrived at the borders of China submitted to its authority, and their leaders joined the

² Michael R. Drompp. *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

³ Qaghan is a title in the Turkic and Mongolian languages equivalent to an Emperor.

⁴ The Uighurs. Available through: http://the_uighurs.tripod.com/hist.htm. Access Date: September 11, 2009.

⁵ Michael R. Drompp. *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

⁶ The Uighurs. Available through: http://the_uighurs.tripod.com/hist.htm. Access Date: September 11, 2009.

cosmopolitan martial aristocracy. Those who did not were killed⁷. Islam arrived to Xinjiang in the tenth century and became the dominant religion. Before that, the dominant religion was Buddhism⁸.

Xinjiang Under China's Rule

Xinjiang was never directly ruled by China until the Qing dynasty. By the late 18th century, the Qing dynasty consolidated its power and expanded its empire, nearly doubling China's size. The purpose of this expansion, at least in part, was to protect the country from the Great Game machinations of Russia and the United Kingdom. After conquering Xinjiang, China created small, self-sustaining military colonies there. For almost 200 years, the Qing dynasty never allowed the Uighurs autonomy. Instead, Beijing coerced the natives into forced labor and barred them from local political positions. A Uighur revolt in 1825 led to the killing of some 8,000 Chinese soldiers, prompting a harsh response from the central government. Such revolts reflected the inability of Beijing to completely pacify Xinjiang⁹.

Local landlords were able to make use of the chaos that resulted from the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1912 and established short-lived states prior to 1949¹⁰. These independent states, which were declared in 1933 and 1944, remain critical for the calls for an independent state for the Uighurs. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took over the territory and declared it a Chinese province. In October 1955, Xinjiang became classified as an "autonomous region" of the People's Republic of China¹¹.

Despite economic growth, many Uighurs complained that they have become second class citizens and that the fruits of growth are concentrated in the hands of the Han population. The Chinese government puts various restrictions on the Uighurs, such as curbing the teaching of the Uighur language. The restrictions that the Chinese government has put on religious practices have particularly aroused resentment. These restrictions include limits to the number of people allowed to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, teaching Islam in schools, and fasting during Ramadan.

The Uighurs feel that their culture is being threatened by what is perceived as sustained Chinese government policies to dilute their identity and integrate the region under the control of the government in Beijing. The main threat comes from the influx of Han Chinese into Xinjiang, something that is perceived as a result of conscious government policy. The influx of Han Chinese into Xinjiang was mainly driven by job opportunities in the region, although a number of Uighur activists and organizations perceive it as a government attempt to tilt the ethnic and religious balance in the province. Also a 2007 report to the U.S. Congress pointed out that the Chinese government provides incentives for Han Chinese from various parts of the country to

⁷ Michael R. Drompp. *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

⁸ Ishaan Tharoor. 2009. A Brief History of the Uighurs. *Time*. July 9.

⁹ Joshua Kurlantzuck. The Unsettled West: China's Long War on Xinjiang. *Foreign Affairs* 83(4): 136-143.

¹⁰ Joshua Kurlantzuck. *Ibid*.

¹¹ Preeti Bhattacharji. Backgrounder: Uighurs and China's Xinjiang Region. Council on Foreign Relations. Available through: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16870/>. Access Date: September 11, 2009.

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migrate to Xinjiang in the name of recruiting talent and promoting stability. On the other hand, the Communist Party says its policies in Xinjiang are designed to promote economic development, not demographic change. Since the 1950s, the percentage of Han Chinese in Xinjiang has grown from 5 to 40 percent of the region's total population. Local Uighurs are becoming increasingly more resentful of control from Beijing and discrimination and economic domination by the Han population. Economic development in the region apparently had a limited effect in ameliorating this discontent¹².

The accusations of each side toward the other is a reflection of the challenges the Chinese economic and political systems are facing, and are expected to continue facing, in the coming decades. China could boast economic development that would put it on possible parity with the United States in the near future. The Chinese development scheme was able to achieve huge economic progress and raise the overall standard of living. With this increase in wealth came large disparities in income, regional grievances, and political demands. As history has shown time and again, economic development does not only create new social classes that call for a say in public issues, but it also creates expectations and raises awareness about rights and identity that need to factor into the way the political system functions if development is to be sustainable.

In the eyes of the Uighurs, the Han Chinese control the most important positions in the government, encourage Han migration to dilute their identity and establish their subordination, and show little respect for the Uighurs' cultural and religious traditions. On the other hand, the Han Chinese view the Uighurs as harboring separatist aspirations and being ungrateful for the economic prosperity created in the region under government policies and the special benefits minority groups receive in the country¹³. These benefits include favorable standards for college enrollment and exemption from the one-child policy.

These perceptions show that the Chinese model is not that successful after all, and it might be carrying the seeds of its own defeat through rising dissatisfaction especially among minority groups, political unrest, and growing international resentment. In the current financial crisis, China could point to impressively positive growth rates that keep it largely unaffected by the global financial meltdown. But the same Chinese development model reflects ingrained illnesses that result from lack of representation and limitations on freedom of expression. It also reflects simmering tensions created by authoritarian control and limited attention to cultural and other human rights. With similar legitimate concerns voiced by other minorities in the country, especially by the Tibetans, the Chinese government is clearly in need of rethinking its policies toward minorities and human rights. This rethinking should be based on an understanding that standards for human and individual rights have become global in an international environment where borders are playing an increasingly diminishing role.

The Economist articulates this logic in the following simple and direct way, "the unrest in Xinjiang calls into question basic assumptions about China made by both the government and foreign investors: that Chinese citizens are ready to trade political dignity and fairness for economic progress and wealth; and that irrational forces, such as religion and ethnic nationalism,

¹² Preeti Bhattacharji. 2009. Background: Uighurs and China's Xinjiang Region. Council on Foreign Relations. Available through: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16870/>. Access Date: September 11, 2009.

¹³ Minxin Pei. 2009. Uighur Riots Show Need for Rethink by Beijing. *Financial Times*. July 9.

are distractions that can be bludgeoned away to enable the smooth technocratic transformation of society.”¹⁴

The Chinese Response: Old Wine in Old Bottles!

Despite the alarm produced by the recent riots, the Chinese government seems to be responding according to its prototypical approach. Threats of retribution and execution were voiced openly by a number of top Chinese officials. Li Zhi, the top Communist Party official in Urumqi said on July 8, “To those who have committed crimes with cruel means, we will execute them.” As shocking as these remarks are, they raised little more than comments of “alarm,” “concern,” and calls for “restraint” from the international community. Compared to efforts on the formal and informal levels that were mobilized for other causes such as the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and even the Tibetan cause, the international response to the Uighur uprising could be perceived as mediocre at best.

These mediocre responses could be attributed to the lack of international attention to the cause of Uighur rights as compared to, for example, those of the Tibetans. This could be attributed to their limited number and low media profile. The Chinese global economic influence is arguably another reason for the relatively modest international reaction. Another reason that has been stressed in a number of comments on the topic concerns the Uighurs religious affiliation. The Chinese government moved quickly after 9/11 and made use of the attacks to link the cause of Uighur rights to international terrorism. The Chinese government stressed the fact that a number of Uighurs have spent some time in Guantanamo Bay after being captured in Afghanistan as “enemy combatants.”

China also accused certain groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, of being part of *al-Qaeda*¹⁵. The United States backed this accusation although a number of sources have argued that the evidence is at best mixed¹⁶. As a result of such accusations, repression against the Uighurs and Uighur rights groups has been stepped up long before the riots¹⁷.

The Chinese government’s approach to the riots exemplifies old wine in old bottles, employing similar classical controls on information dissemination and freedom of expression. In addition to cracking down on the riots, rounding up hundreds of individuals, and warning lawyers from providing legal assistance to anyone accused of rioting, the government introduced restrictions on internet and cellular phone usage that seem alien in the current international environment. Within hours of the riots, internet access was cut across Xinjiang and international

¹⁴ The Economist. Beijing’s nightmare. July 9th, 2009.

¹⁵ At least 18 Uighurs were caught by the U.S. military in Afghanistan and sent to Guantanamo, which strengthened the Chinese claim of a link between Uighur separatist movements and al-Qaeda terrorism. The U.S. military has ruled that five of them posed no security threat and set them free. Fearing they would face torture or death if handed over to Beijing, the US arranged asylum for five of its former captives in Albania.

¹⁶ Preeti Bhattacharji. 2009. Background: Uighurs and China’s Xinjiang Region. Council on Foreign Relations. Available through: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16870/>. Access Date: September 11, 2009.

¹⁷ Alim A Seytoff. 2005. Speaking Freely: Uighurs Fear China’s squeeze. *Asia Times*. June 14. Available through: <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/GF14Ad03.html>. Access Date: August 5, 2009.

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telephone calls were blocked. Forty eight hours later, text-messaging services were also suspended.

The government attention attributed to such social networking sites as Facebook and Twitter reflects their rising importance as tools of mobilization and the understanding of the Chinese government that they can be critical tools for information dissemination and political action. Both sites, Facebook and Twitter, were blocked after the Urumqi clashes¹⁸. China has already been paying special attention to restricting internet networking. The government has recently mandated that all PCs in the country must use software called “Green Dam-Youth Escort”. Once installed, this software can block access to banned web sites. The Green Dam-Youth Escort software also does things associated with spyware, like logging keystrokes, taking screen shots and sending information from a PC to third parties¹⁹. If Facebook is put on the Green Dam-Youth Escort banned site list, it will dramatically impact Facebook’s international growth prospects.

The official Xinhua news agency, however, reported that the government will not rush ahead with this new policy. This news notwithstanding, the Chinese government is still paying special attention to controlling the media, including the internet, through censorship on internet activism, controlling access to certain websites, and direct attacks on U.S. internet service provider companies such as Google²⁰.

This special attention to cutting off Xinjiang from the rest of the world and even limiting communications within the region shows that the Chinese government has learned the lesson from the recent Iranian presidential elections, where cell phone messages and internet sites played central roles in mobilizing demonstrations against election fraud. Opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khameneh, who lost the elections against incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, continued mobilizing his young supporters through these channels in a clear challenge to the Iranian system itself.

Uighur Support Groups on Facebook

The groups that we came across that focused on the Uighur case are generally small in number relative to other groups on Facebook that champion similar causes such as the Palestinian cause. The members of these groups range from ten to a few hundred, although some groups exceeded one thousand members. This situation reflects a general lack of attention for the Uighur case and limited international publicity. There is also limited attention to the riots on websites, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and internet groups that focus on issues related to the Arab and Muslim issues²¹. The groups we reviewed are listed in the Appendix to this article.

¹⁸ A number of media sources referred to restrictions imposed by the Chinese government on accessing foreign web services such as Google, in addition to crippling internet services generally. There were also news that the government blocked access to websites such as Facebook and Twitter. See: Robin Wauters. 2009. China Blocks Access to Twitter, Facebook After Riots. *The Washington Post*. July 7.

¹⁹ Evgeny Morozov. 2009. Control Issues: China's Internet plan may backfire. *Newsweek*. June 20. Available through: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/202867>. Access Date: August 5, 2009.

²⁰ Bruce Einhorn. China Censorship: After the Green Dam Fiasco. *Business Week*. July 1.

²¹ Mona eltahawy. 2009. If Only the Uighurs Were Buddhist and China Was Israel. *The Huffington Post*. July 22.

The purposes of the groups we reviewed range from opening a forum of discussion, raising awareness of the Uighur cause and the atrocities committed by the Chinese government against them, to calls for reducing economic and diplomatic relations with China, boycotting Chinese products in their countries, and mobilizing mass demonstrations. Calls for boycotts came especially from Turkey, the United States and Britain. Interest in the Uighur case in Turkey is attributable to the Turkic ethnicity of the Chinese minority group. Most of these groups posted links to videos and news stories as a tool for information dissemination. A number of them posted graphic pictures from the recent riots, while other groups had some less intense postings such as Michael Jackson's "They don't care about us."

The discussions of groups on Facebook reflect a number of orientations that we group under the following three categories.

1- Bitterness regarding the perception of Islam and Muslim cases

This is reflected in a number of ways from direct criticism of the positions of governments in the West to using curse words that reflect anger and lack of trust in the possibility of change. The Chinese government portrayed the Uighur cause as one of radical Islam. Although this characterization gave the government some leeway in dealing with this minority group, it backfired in the sense of directing anger in a direction that is more difficult to resolve. In other words, while it is possible to address minority rights through policies that respect these rights and grant more regional sovereignty, a clash of religions could be more difficult to address and could prove to be more lingering in its lifespan, with possibly more deadly repercussions.

For example, in the group "Worldwide Protest in Honor and Support of Uighurs Dying for Freedom," we find a link to an article by MPACUK (Muslim Public Affairs Committee in the UK) asking "What if the Uighurs were Tibetan rather than Muslim?" The article argues that if the Uighurs were Buddhists in Tibet or Christians, instead of Muslims, a minority anywhere, their fighting for freedom would have been hailed and they would have gained greater media attention. The article criticizes the position of the American and Western governments regarding the uprising and reflects the bitterness of many Muslims because anti-Muslim feelings are perceived as spreading in Western countries.

We also find in this group a link to a rally event demonstrating the killing of an Egyptian woman in a court in Germany in front of her 3-year old son by a German extremist whom she had sued and won a case against for insult and abuse. This Egyptian woman, Marwa El-Sherbeeney, became famously known as "the Headscarf Martyr," since the brutal attack that led to her death and the serious injury of her husband was attributed to the rising anti-Muslim feelings held by the German killer. The murderer was convicted of insulting El-Sherbeeney by calling her an "Islamist," "terrorist" and a "slut" when she asked him to make space for her son to go on the swings in a playground in Dresden²². Feelings of injustice and discrimination against Muslims are common expressions in these groups.

²² Spiegel Online International. 2009. Egyptian Fury at Dresden Murder: Protesters Accuse Germany of Racism. July 7. Available through: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,634842,00.html>. Access Date: July 23, 2009.

2- Religious Overtones

We find clear religious overtones in a number of groups supporting the Uighur rights. Although the portrayal of the cause as one of injustice against Muslims might not be the best alternative to rally international support for it, it could be perceived as a natural outcome of a post-9/11 rhetoric where a number of governments, both democratic and authoritarian, found in terrorism and linking it to Islam a good excuse for the violation of human rights.

This could explain why we find in discussions in a number of these groups such phrases as “Allah Akbar” (God is Great). Despite this characterization as an Islamic cause, Arab media failed to direct attention to the riots. Xinjiang and its Muslim inhabitants are almost unknown to Arab and Muslim audiences²³, which could also explain why we found almost no reference to the riots in groups discussing other Arab and Muslim causes.

These same religious feelings in protesting the Chinese response to the Uighur riots also show that economic considerations clearly won over religion. While Iran showed outrage for the killing of Marwa El-Sherbeeney and summoned the German Ambassador to protest the incident, it did almost nothing in response to the Chinese atrocities against the Muslim ethnic minority in China. This is clearly a sign of how Iran values its economic ties to China, in addition to the fact that both countries cracked down on opposition uprisings at almost the same time. In Iran, the crackdown followed demonstrations against the alleged fraud of the presidential elections.

3- Linking the Riots to Other Minority and Human Rights Issues

The two cases which were commonly cited in conjunction with the Uighur situation were those of the Palestinians and the Tibetans. For both the Palestinians and the Uighurs, the governments of Israel and China were perceived as violating human rights and discriminating against the original populations. Migrations in both cases, of Jews to Palestine and Hans to Xinjiang, were perceived as a policy orchestrated by the respective governments to change the demographic composition and dilute the identities of the original population. Economic and cultural subordination was also described as an attribute of the policies of both governments.

The other case which finds even clearer linkages with that of the Uighurs is that of Tibet. A number of groups called for freeing Xinjiang and Tibet and respect for the human rights of the people in both countries. The photos and links on a number of groups' Facebook pages included atrocities against both the Tibetans and Uighurs, and a number of wall posts called for unity among both groups in defending their rights against China. A number of groups also highlighted the cooperation among the leaders of both groups.

Conclusion

The recent riots in China which pitted the Uighur minority in Xinjiang against the majority Han group and government forces in one of the most violent events in the country's recent history shows that the Chinese economic and social trajectory may need revision. The formula of putting aside political rights for economic growth can hardly continue untouched in the future, especially with the increasing gaps in income and power created as a result of

²³ Mona eltahawy. OpCit.

economic development, and the perception that the payoffs of economic growth are not fairly distributed.

Facebook groups and discussions opened interesting windows for us to approach the social and political dynamics related to these riots. These windows are especially important given the government's restrictions on information and media channels, in addition to the relative lack of international attention to the Uighur minority. Our survey of pro-Uighur groups on Facebook shows some results that may need be considered in future decisions by the Chinese government as well as decisions that Western and other governments might take regarding China's policies toward its minority groups.

The first point is related to the pitfalls of portraying legitimate rights as arising from "terrorist groups." The international community needs to get past the immediate post-9/11 rhetoric. Legitimate rights of minorities are more easily answered by effective policies that respect minority rights and create balanced growth. Attributing a religious dimension to a particular cause could only complicate the issue, invite in more radical elements, and direct attention away from the more direct and attainable solutions.

There is also a need to address human and minority rights in a more holistic and international approach, given that the issues get linked together anyway. The plights of the Uighurs, Tibetans, and Palestinians are linked on Facebook group pages, although they might not be as linked on the Chinese or American foreign policy agendas, except for linking them probably for the sole reason of fear of terrorism.

Finally, this article directs attention to the rising importance of internet-based networking. The networking possibilities created through such internet sites as Facebook are not only linking people as globalization optimists argued in the 1990s, these websites are also becoming an arena for political mobilization and upbringing. They promise more opportunities for participation and social and political mobilization. While we understand that this article might seem a bit odd, or maybe special, within this periodical, we predict with confidence that in a few years from now, Facebook and Twitter, and other similar internet sites, will become regular topics of empirical investigation in political science periodicals.

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Appendix

Facebook groups referred to:

- The truth of Urumqi Violent ethnic riots of China (94 members)
- UIGHUR WARRIORS (470 members)
- Support Uighur Turks/Uygur Turk'lerini Destekleyin (532 members)
- Worldwide Protest in Honor and Support of Uighurs Dying for Freedom (3373 members)
- Independence For Eastern Turkistan! (1604 members)
- Killer China ! Stop Genocide in East Turkestan!! (424 members)
- Chinese Government Stop Killing Uighurs (131 members)
- Support Uighur Muslim Community Against Chinese Oppression (106 members)
- Worldwide Protest in Honor and Support of Uighurs Dying for Freedom (3378 members)
- FREE EAST TURKESTAN! (1472 members)
- CHINA STOP THE PERSECUTION OF THE ETHNIC MUSLIM UYGHUR COMMUNITY (383 members)
- Stop ouigoure oppression in china (251 members)
- Independent East Turkestan Republic (38 members)
- East Turkestan (Uyghurstan) Freedom (217 members)
- Free East Turkestan (3 groups: 1475, 138, 24)
- Independent East Turkestan Republic (38 members)
- Free East Turkestan and Tibet (53 members)
- East Turkestan (Uyghur) Genocide by China ! (271 members)
- STOP THE GENOCIDE IN EAST TURKESTAN (375 members)