



## Chinese–Islamic Connections: An Historical and Contemporary Overview

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**To cite this article:** James D. Frankel (2016) Chinese–Islamic Connections: An Historical and Contemporary Overview, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 36:4, 569-583, DOI: [10.1080/13602004.2016.1248175](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2016.1248175)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2016.1248175>



Published online: 27 Oct 2016.



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## Chinese–Islamic Connections: An Historical and Contemporary Overview

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JAMES D. FRANKEL

### *Abstract*

*Following overland and maritime trade routes, early Muslims reached China within a century after the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) lived, when the Chinese and Islamic empires were the superpowers of their day, engaging each other in instances of both competition and collaboration: military, economic and diplomatic. Exchanges between China and the Islamic world have produced significant technological and cultural developments, and set the stage for ongoing relations between the two civilizations that helped shape world history and continue to influence global affairs today. The arrival of Islam more than 1200 years ago also resulted in a sizeable Muslim minority population in China, who play an important role between the two civilizations: sometimes as cultural intermediaries, sometimes as political pawns. The following is an overview of the history of Chinese–Islamic relations, including historical and contemporary involvement by China’s internal Muslim populations, with a survey of connections between China and several Muslim countries.*

### **Introduction**

A few years ago, in the context of my work on Chinese Muslim intellectual traditions of trans-cultural translation, I observed:

A simple confluence of facts—that China may soon be challenging the United States in its demand for foreign oil, that world oil production will peak and begin to decline within decades, and that China acts as a major supplier of arms and military technology to oil-rich, predominantly Muslim, Middle Eastern states whose region becomes less stable as oil supplies wane—all but guarantees the importance of Chinese–Islamic relations in the foreseeable future. Given this situation, the informed observer of international affairs would be well-served not only by an examination of current relations between China and global Islam, but also of historical encounters between the Chinese and Islamic civilizations, which provide valuable insight into the roots of many of today’s political and societal realities. In view of the long history of trade, not only in commodities, but also in ideas, along the geographical continuum that connects western and eastern Asia, recent relations between the Chinese and Islamic spheres of influence are grounded in an ancient tradition of economic, political, and cultural commerce.<sup>1</sup>

I made these comments in order to lend contemporary relevance to my historical study. The facts, however, increase in significance with each passing year as we proceed ever

further along a trajectory of global interdependence marked by instances of both international collaboration and competition.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of the Cold War, it became the pastime of pundits to predict the future of geopolitics in the coming millennium. Amidst the flurry of hypothetical new world orders being propounded, in the summer of 1993 an influential article in *Foreign Affairs* by Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington referred to something he called the “Confucian-Islamic Connection”. This new and unfamiliar construct immediately caught my attention because it evoked the very meeting of cultures that was at the heart of my historical research on Chinese Muslims. Of course, the article had nothing to do with the sort of historical cultural exchange or religio-philosophical syncretism that I was studying. Rather, Huntington hypothesized in chilling terms that, in the twenty-first century, civilizations would replace ideologies as the principal agents of global conflict. According to Huntington’s theory, the predominantly Christian “West”, with the US at its fore, will be besieged by other civilizational blocs around the world, some of which will join forces. “Most notably, the ‘Islamic’ and ‘Confucian’ civilizations would find themselves pushed into a utilitarian alliance.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Huntington’s “Confucian-Islamic Connection” refers to cooperation—technological, economic and especially military—to create a foil to American hegemony around the world.

Huntington urged his readers to understand his article as being descriptive of the contours of a changing world, rather than prescriptive of a particular policy agenda. Nevertheless, some policy-makers have perceived in Huntington’s words a call to action, for the West to wake up to threats coming from the rest of the world, and have invested heavily in the theory’s predictive power. Seen retrospectively, some of Huntington’s predictions have been correct, while many others have not. The foundation of his thesis, whether humanity can really be boxed into seven or eight distinct civilizations that will invariably behave according to predictable patterns, has been called into question. Thus even the idea that a Confucian or an Islamic “civilization” exists is debatable.<sup>3</sup> Huntington opts for the conceptual convenience of monolithic categorization: unique civilizations separated by borders drawn with bold lines as seen from on high. Neglected in this theory is the micro level, on the ground, where individuals within a society hold hybrid identities and multiple allegiances. So even Huntington must admit that there are cracks in his blocs and fissures in his lines; he refers to “fractured states” whose multicultural, multi-linguistic and/or multi-religious populations include representatives of different “civilizations”. Despite the impetus to reduce humanity to a collection of monolithic blocs, the reality of diversity and complexity is ineluctable. Indeed, if we look closely enough, it becomes obvious that all states are “fractured” by internal diversity, just as most individuals assume different identities, depending on the situation at hand. Such diversity cannot easily be homogenized or hegemonized.

Yet, while Huntington’s explanation of future geopolitical configurations may be flawed, there is no denying the reality of collaboration between China and Muslim countries who often share a common interest in resisting American hegemonic tendencies. Simply put, as long as the US remains the supreme military and economic power in the world, its competitors will have incentive to combine efforts to narrow the gap. In some instances, this means bilateral, or multilateral, exchanges in the realm of soft power while stockpiling the means for exerting hard power. The “West versus the Rest” paradigm suggested by Huntington may have little to do with civilizational affinities. Rather, the cooperation we see between China and various Muslim states reflects

alliances of convenience for the purpose of mutual empowerment against the Cold War's sole surviving superpower in an increasingly globalized, multi-polar world.

There is no denying that relations between China and global Islam will continue to play an important role on the international stage in coming decades, and provided we do not fall into the trap of monolithic or synchronic oversimplifications, we can invoke the abstract notion of civilizations. But hypothetical clashes or coalitions of civilizations notwithstanding, we can always find a host of other explanations for cooperation among nations. For example, behind the close relationship between China and Pakistan *realpolitik* dynamics that have little to do with Islam or Confucianism are at work. China's technological and military support of Pakistan's nuclear program, in particular, is based on the two countries' resistance to the growing power of India. Ever since China went to war with India in 1962 over disputed borders, China has been one of Pakistan's closest allies and strategic partners. Therefore, Chinese–Pakistani relations must be understood as operating under the shadow of contentious Chinese–Indian relations, and the old maxim, “my enemy's enemy is my friend”. Since the 1970s, when Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928–1979) first spoke about their shared interests, both Pakistan's and China's nuclear programs hinged on the efforts of the now infamous father of the Pakistani bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan. While China already had nuclear weapons, Khan's transfer of centrifuge technology from the Dutch lab where he was working reinvigorated Chinese uranium enrichment.<sup>4</sup> According to both Khan's own admissions and US officials, China returned the favor by delivering both fissile materials and weapon designs to Pakistan, such that the bomb that Islamabad eventually tested successfully in 1998 was virtually a direct product of Chinese proliferation. And while China is officially a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty,

...having made huge strategic investments in Pakistan over the last four decades, China will not remain a mute spectator to the gradual denuclearization of Pakistan. Therefore, Islamabad's dependence on Beijing for both missiles and nukes will increase, not decrease, if it is to keep up with India.<sup>5</sup>

Khan shared the nuclear technologies he had exchanged with his Chinese counterparts with a network of countries that included Libya, Iran and North Korea. Does this fact support Huntington's claims about Islamic civilizational allegiances, or a broader Confucian–Islamic connection? At very least it demonstrates that, when it serves its national interests, China will work with countries America deems “rogue states”. Pakistan has long been an on again, off again ally of the US, but in the area of nuclear proliferation, it has no greater benefactor than Beijing. This collaboration has nothing to do with mutual religious or cultural affinities, for as we shall see, China often struggles with the Islamic presence both along and within its borders, yet works with Muslim countries when it is expedient to do so.

Huntington is notorious for declaring that, “Islam has bloody borders”.<sup>6</sup> The insinuation that Islamic civilization is inherently prone to violent clashes with its neighbors based on the fact that there are more flashpoints of conflict along its borders must be analyzed in light of the fact that, due to its historical, geographic and demographic situation, the Muslim world simply has more borders and more neighbors than other civilizations. Really, is there any “civilization” whose borders were not drawn in blood? We must remember that Huntington's inter-civilizational boundaries are drawn in misleadingly bold lines, whereas the reality on the ground is that borders are permeable and civilizations have mixed blood, perhaps as much as they have spilled it. Most civilizations suffer from internal bleeding as well. Many of the so-called “fractured states” to which

Huntington refers are ongoing experiments in multiculturalism, where frontier regions present not only the conditions for competition and conflict, but also opportunities for constructive exchange and conviviality.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) shares borders with 14 countries, 5 of which are majority-Muslim.<sup>7</sup> China does not have a history of protracted warfare or hostility with its Muslim neighbors in Central Asia; thus, Islam's borders with China have not been especially bloody. But these borders have historically been permeable. The storied overland trade networks collectively known as the Silk Road have both relied upon and helped create this permeability, which has allowed both material goods and ideas to be exchanged in both directions. Today, as China increasingly aspires to prominence as a world power, it continues to cultivate relationships with the Central Asian states, as well as to extend its reach to Muslim countries elsewhere in Asia and Africa, in a quest for material resources, foreign markets for its products, and greater influence in globally strategic regions. In addition to China's relations with countries throughout the Muslim world, permeable borders along China's western frontiers have also created populations of Muslims within its borders. These Muslim minority communities are products of Chinese-Islamic relations, past and present, and continue to play a role in contemporary exchanges between China and the Muslim world.

Muslim minorities have often played a crucial role in world history, residing along the actual and virtual frontiers between civilizations as intermediaries between Islam and the civilizations to its east and west. Today, Muslim minorities occupy an important place in international affairs, often at the flashpoints of conflict, but also at the forefront of efforts toward reconciliation and greater understanding among diverse peoples. In western countries, Muslim minorities are frequently tied to instances of "Islamophobia". Some westerners fear Muslims living in their midst as a fifth column made up of extremist sympathizers and jihadist sleeper cells waiting to be activated to overthrow or Islamize western societies. Others, however, hope to engage members of Muslim minority communities to encourage their civic participation and assimilation in the multicultural mosaics and melting pots of open, democratic societies. Among those who espouse the latter perspective, there is even hope that these Western Muslims will help facilitate dialogue and active engagement with the greater Muslim world.

In many ways, attitudes toward China's Muslims resemble those found in the West, but there are significant differences. China's Muslim population, though indeterminate in size,<sup>8</sup> is much larger than any Muslim minority population in any western country. Muslims have also been living in China, without interruption, far longer than in any western country. Indeed, relations between China and the Muslim world are nearly as old as Islam itself, as is the Islamic presence within China. Stereotyped by many in China, viewed as an exotic extension of Islam's great legacy by many in the Muslim world, and little known to most people elsewhere, China's Muslims are also an internally diverse population: "a minority, or more correctly a number of diverse minority communities, easily overlooked in surveys of the world's most populous country".<sup>9</sup> The official picture painted by the PRC government depicts China's Muslims, neatly comprising ten out of 55 recognized *shaoshu minzu* (minority nationalities),<sup>10</sup> living harmoniously with their fellow nationalities, especially the great Han Chinese majority (*dahan minzu*), and developing alongside them under the solicitous aegis of the Chinese Communist Party.

The reality on the ground is exceedingly more nuanced. China's Muslim minority communities are each different from another, and also contain within themselves significant degrees of complexity and diversity. They represent "distinct solidarities separated by geography. They are and have historically also been divided along ethnic, linguistic,

economic, educational, sectarian and kinship lines, besides many other factors”.<sup>11</sup> In addition, members of a particular community may be distinguished from each other by the degree of their religiosity, and their “Chineseness”, that is, the degree to which they are assimilated into mainstream Chinese society and culture. The former is often correlated with their sense of connection to the Muslim Ummah outside China, while the latter tends to match up with their sense of proximity to China’s cultural center. Unfortunately, this dichotomy has often led Chinese policy-makers and casual observers to understand China’s relationship to its own Muslim population in terms of a choice between conflict and concord. However, this dualistic interpretation:

... is flawed, not because it is altogether untrue, but because it is incomplete. It is unable to depict, let alone explain, the individual and communal motivations that produced the diverse responses of Muslims in China to the social and cultural context in which they lived.<sup>12</sup>

The enormous diversity among Muslims in China has manifested as both bane and a boon to the government in Beijing. On the one hand, that some Muslims are less congenial to Chinese rule means that Muslims are not all treated equally by the PRC authorities. Particularly among the Turkic Uyghur minority nationality of China’s westernmost Xinjiang province, independence, or “separatist”, movements have received the harshest responses, including government crackdowns, which have even been subsumed under the post-9/11 “global war on terror”. Uyghur cultural politics has proven to be a persistent impediment to national unity in the PRC, and Islamic identity has played a part in this ongoing agitation. On the other hand, some Chinese Muslims, especially members of the Hui ethno-religious minority, see themselves and their fortunes as inextricably linked to the national prosperity, and thus tend to align themselves with government policies. The Hui are ethnically, linguistically and, for the most part, culturally similar to their Han compatriots, so Han–Hui relations can be held up as a shining example of the ideal of minority integration into mainstream society. Beijing can invoke its harmonious relationship with these Muslims and portray itself as the benefactor of Islam in China. This positive image has some domestic propaganda value among China’s Muslims, but perhaps even more value beyond China’s borders, where celebration of Beijing’s kind treatment of its Muslim citizens is used to convince foreign Muslim nations of China’s respect for Islam.

The Hui and the Uyghurs, China’s two biggest Muslim minorities, are unmistakably distinct from each other, with very different cultural identities and histories. Respectively, they represent the two main historical forces accounting for China’s Muslim population today: Muslim immigration and subsequent naturalization in imperial China, on the one hand; and imperial expansion and annexation of majority-Muslim regions in Central Asia, on the other. The Hui are the putative descendants of the earliest Muslims to arrive in China under the Tang dynasty (618–906), in the generations following the advent of Islam under the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) in Arabia. As Islam spread out in all directions from Mecca and Medina, the eastward expansion of the faith and the polity it inspired brought Muslim troops, diplomats, mercenaries and merchants into contact with the Tang Empire. Arab merchants had been conducting maritime trade through the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Straits to eastern port cities on the South China Sea, long before the Prophet was born. When the Arabs became Muslims, they continued this trade under the banner of Islam. Overland trade along the Silk Road, which originated under the Han dynasty (206 BCE–221 CE) and conveyed goods to and from the ancient Mediterranean world, continued during the

Tang period, bringing Muslim Arabs, Persians and Turks, among other Middle Eastern and Central Asian peoples, into the heart of China, namely the Tang capital at Chang'an (Xi'an).

Foreign Muslim merchants settled in Tang China, some of them marrying local women, their hybrid offspring ostensibly becoming the earliest ancestors of today's Hui minority. Islamic history also tells us that Islam's third Caliph, 'Uthmān (577–656), sent a diplomatic mission to the court of Tang Gaozong in 650. Within a hundred years, the westward expansion of the Tang Empire met the eastward expansion of the 'Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) at the Talas river along the border of present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, leading to the first and only military engagement between the Chinese and Islamic empires, the two superpowers of their day, in the Battle of Artlakh (July 751). The 'Abbasid forces won a decisive victory, effectively checking further Chinese expansion, and securing Central Asia as Muslim territory as the Turkic peoples of the region came under the sway of Islam. Yet Talas also represented the furthest extent of Islamic military and political expansion in Asia, the eastern frontier of the *Dār al-Islām* (Abode of Islam). In addition to drawing the border between the Chinese and Islamic civilizations, historians also credit the transmission of papermaking technology to the 'Abbasid victory at Talas, as Chinese papermakers were captured by and brought to the Muslim city of Samarqand.

Only five years after the Battle of Artlakh, the Tang dynasty was nearly toppled when one of its generals, An Lushan (d.757), rose against the regime in a rebellion that lasted from 755 to 763. A year into the conflict, the 'Abbasid Caliph, al-Manṣūr, sent 22,000 Arab mercenary soldiers to aid the Tang loyalist forces, helping the dynasty recapture the capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang. According to the Tang Annals, these mercenaries were welcomed to settle in China and intermarry with Chinese women, thus becoming the next wave of Muslim pioneers and progenitors of the Hui minority. The descendants of the early settlers came to live in various urban enclaves throughout the country, and in rural parts of western China along the Silk Road. Subsequent generations of Chinese Muslims continued to facilitate trade and diplomacy between China and the Caliphate through the duration of the Tang and Song (960–1279) periods.

The Mongol conquest of China, and establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), briefly linked China to the expansive Mongol Empire, which stretched from Eastern Europe and the Middle East to the shores of Korea. Within decades, the Mongols toppled both the 'Abbasid dynasty at Baghdad and the Song dynasty at Hangzhou, becoming lords of all that lie in between, including the expanse of majority-Muslim lands from Iraq to Turkic Central Asia. Mongol rule assured safe passage through their domains for their subjects, promoting a renewed vibrancy in Silk Road commerce. Furthermore, the Mongols also transferred populations within their vast empire, bringing administrators from one part to work in another. These conditions led to an influx of Muslims from the Mongols' western domains into China. As their forerunners had done in previous centuries, some of these Muslim newcomers intermarried with Han Chinese subjects and also mingled with existing Chinese Muslim communities. These historical factors contributed to the most rapid growth of the Muslim population of China in any historical period.

When the founder of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) overthrew the Yuan, he expelled all Mongols from China to the other side of the Great Wall. He did not similarly punish members of the various communities, including Muslims, who had collaborated with Mongol rule, but rather drafted them into the service of the new, native Chinese regime. Thus, Muslims continued to serve as scientists and mathematicians at the Imper-



ial Bureau of Astronomy and in other important civil and military offices throughout the empire. In order to promote harmony and unity among its various ethnic and cultural constituencies, however, the Ming imperium implemented policies to encourage assimilation into mainstream Chinese culture and society. For Muslims, in the central and eastern parts of the empire in particular, this meant laws encouraging intermarriage and the adoption of Chinese surnames, among other measures. These policies accelerated and intensified a process of assimilation and naturalization, or Sinicization, which had already been progressing naturally for centuries, and helped galvanize a population that was simultaneously Chinese and Muslim—the direct ancestors of today’s Hui minority. Various Hui communities and individuals embody in varying degrees a genetic and memetic mixture of “Chineseness” and “Muslimness”.

Whereas much of Ming domestic policy was geared toward cultivating national unity and harmony, while restoring native Chinese cultural and administrative institutions, the dynasty’s foreign policy was largely shaped by the lingering trauma from a century of foreign rule and the resolve to prevent another conquest. Thus, under most of its emperors, Ming policy was inward-looking, isolationist, even xenophobic, with a single exception: The second Ming emperor, Yongle (r. 1402–1424), who sought during his reign to engage the outside world and increase China’s international prestige and political-economic influence. To this end, he commissioned an imperial fleet to retrace the traditional maritime trade routes, in reverse, and establish trade and diplomatic ties at ports in Southeast Asia, the Indonesian archipelago, throughout the Indian Ocean region, all the way to the Arabian Peninsula and the horn of East Africa. To lead the seven voyages of the Treasure Fleet, the emperor appointed as admiral his close and trusted minister, Zheng He (1371–1433), a Yunnan-born Muslim eunuch. Wherever Zheng He made landfall, he impressed the local residents with the economic and military might of the Ming Empire, thus serving as an example of a strong Chinese Muslim acting on behalf of his motherland to strengthen ties overseas, particularly with foreign Muslims. This precedent of a Chinese Muslim facilitating exchange with Muslim states would not be repeated during the Ming period as the dynasty increasingly withdrew from international relations under later emperors, but Zheng He’s legacy lives on in the memories of his co-religionists in China and the countries he visited.

As Ming policies cut China off from foreign affairs, they had the side effect of cutting China’s Muslims off from contact with the greater Muslim world. Consequently, these conditions compelled a lone Muslim from Shaanxi province to buck the conventions of his day and venture beyond China’s borders into Central Asia and the Middle East, where he sought Islamic knowledge unavailable in his homeland. Hu Dengzhou (1522–1597) returned with texts and teachings and helped to reform Islamic education in China. He and his colleagues translated texts from Arabic and Persian, and began teaching about Islam in Chinese. As the reformed educational system began to spread from one Muslim enclave to another, the practice of translation and commentary in Chinese “led to the production of a sizeable Chinese Islamic literary canon, and the gradual blending of Confucian and Islamic ideas that would gain its fullest expression in works collectively referred to as the *Han Kitab* (Chinese Islamic books).<sup>13</sup> These texts and their authors represented the pinnacle of Muslim literati culture in Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasty Chinese society, and helped present Islam and Muslims “as seamlessly fitting within the fabric of Chinese society, in essence reflecting the cultural simultaneity of the forebears of Hui Muslims in” modern China.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, even as the *Han Kitab* scholars made tremendous strides in normalizing Islam in eastern and central China, the Qing Empire’s territorial expansion and occupation in



western China and parts of Central Asia ignited hostilities with Muslims of the region. During the Qing period a number of Muslim rebellions erupted in the western frontier regions. In the 1780s and again in the middle of the nineteenth century, local conflicts between the Han and Hui drew in provincial militias and, at times, imperial forces before being quelled. Consequently, Muslims in western China became stigmatized as criminals and traitors through the end of the century.

In Xinjiang, which was annexed and occupied by the Qing dynasty in the mid-eighteenth century, the political situation was even more fraught with danger for the central government in Beijing, a legacy that endures even today. Xinjiang is home to most of China's Uyghur population, the second largest Muslim minority in the PRC. The history of the Uyghurs is quite different from that of the Hui. Uyghur resistance to Chinese hegemony "must be understood in the context of the Uyghurs' long and proud history that predates the annexation of Xinjiang (literally the 'new frontier') by the Qing dynasty".<sup>15</sup> In the eighth and ninth centuries, the powerful Uyghur Khaganate ruled over most of Mongolia and Central Asia, and was an ally of the Tang Empire. Even so, Uyghur rulers strived to maintain Uyghur unity, and resisted assimilation into Chinese culture. The Uyghur Khaganate was a sophisticated society that borrowed from neighboring cultures (e.g. designating Manichaeism the state religion), but tenaciously held onto its distinct identity and independence.

In 848, the Kyrgyz, another Turkic people of the Central Asian steppe, conquered the Uyghur Khaganate. A Uyghur diaspora ensued, scattering the majority of the remnant population of the former khaganate in the various oasis settlements of present-day Xinjiang. It was here that the Uyghurs were converted to Islam, oasis by oasis, between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. Whereas the political unity of the Uyghur golden age was replaced by the fragmentation of distinct oasis-specific identities, Islam became an inextricable part of latter-day Uyghur culture and, together with their common language, a unifying force among the disparate Uyghur communities of Xinjiang. The annexation and occupation of Xinjiang by the Qing Empire provided another impetus to Uyghur unity, in the form of rebellion against imperial rule. This spirit of resistance and cultural, if not political, independence has carried over among many Uyghurs in their ongoing struggle against China's hold on Xinjiang today.

When the Republic of China (1912–1949) supplanted the fallen Qing dynasty, a moment of national unity briefly overshadowed many inter-communal conflicts in the country. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) declared the equality of the *Zhonghua minzu* (Chinese Nation), which included the Han as well as Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan and Muslim peoples. The Muslim (Hui) category included the ethnic Chinese Hui and the Uyghur and other non-Chinese Muslim ethnicities, thus glossing over the significant differences among these communities. The motivation behind this declaration, of course, was to recruit all citizens within the borders inherited by the Republic to participate in a unified effort to make this "New China" viable and prosperous. Many of China's Muslims, especially among the urban Hui, seized the opportunity to ride the wave of modern idealism and cosmopolitanism that had captured the Chinese imagination. Some used newfound rights and liberties to restore contact with the greater Muslim world, for instance traveling to the Middle East to visit centres of Islamic learning and perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. They returned to China brandishing teachings they considered "authentically" Islamic, including political notions of pan-Islamism, and the revivalist ideologies of Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*). While these efforts helped to reconnect Chinese Muslims to the Ummah outside China, they also led to divisions among Muslims in China, as some communities

and individuals preferred to uphold their traditional Chinese Islamic ways and others, in the name of modernism, opted to lead more secular lives like their Han neighbors.

As soon as the political unity of the Republic disintegrated into the first phase of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1937), old divisions once again reared their heads. In Xinjiang a Uyghur-led coalition toppled the reigning military governor and established the First East Turkestan Republic (1933–1934). Several Muslim countries—Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan—refused requests for aid or diplomatic recognition from the nascent state, opting not to enter into Chinese affairs, or challenge Soviet hegemony elsewhere in Central Asia. Stalin (1878–1953) actually helped topple the First East Turkestan Republic, fearing that an independent Turkic state might inspire secession in neighboring Soviet Central Asian republics.

While the first attempt at Uyghur independence in Xinjiang was short-lived, the idea endured. In the decade after the fall of the First East Turkestan Republic, the Soviet Union exerted strong influence over Xinjiang. Eventually, as the Chinese Nationalists lost ground in the western regions, a Second East Turkestan Republic (1944–1949) was established, this time propped up by the Soviet Union as a bulwark against the Kuomintang. This second incarnation was far less independent than the first, as the Second East Turkestan Republic remained a Soviet satellite until the Chinese Communists gained control of the country and sent the People’s Liberation Army into Xinjiang in 1949. While the territory was nominally transformed from a province into the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955, a bitter sense of Chinese occupation and colonization lingers in the hearts of many Uyghurs. But there is no single Uyghur perspective on the future of Xinjiang:

Post-1949 some Uyghurs have argued for greater political, cultural and religious autonomy with continued ties to the “New China”. Others have even advocated outright secession from China and since 1933 there has been an organized movement to create an independent Uyghur state (though activists of this movement generally operate within the Uyghur diaspora community today because, since the 1950s, the PRC has increasingly cracked down on Uyghur separatism, imprisoning dissidents and executing “traitors”). A smaller number of Uyghurs have framed their struggle for self-determination in explicitly religious terms, some invoking the language of Jihadist movements.<sup>16</sup>

Even greater than the division seen among the Uyghurs or the Hui is the gap often apparent between these two most populous Muslim minorities in China. As we have seen, divergent histories accounts in large part for their differences, but a deliberate effort on the part of the central government is also at work, a successful “divide and conquer” strategy in western China that has prevented the two groups from unifying in any meaningful way along religious lines. On a national level, rarely does the Muslim population of China speak with a single voice. The Hui, due to their hybrid genealogy and cultural simultaneity, are inherently more inclined to align themselves with the interests of mainstream Han society, whereas the Uyghurs are commonly regarded as a foreign population. Generally speaking, the two groups are treated quite differently. In its ethnic policies, the PRC has often employed a “carrot and stick” approach to reward compliance with and punish disobedience to government initiatives and regulations. More often than not, however, the Hui are beneficiaries of the carrot and the Uyghurs victims of the stick. Evidence of this double standard can be found in the way that the government dispenses religious privileges. Typically, when the PRC boasts of its patronage of Islam and Muslims in China, the examples it cites concern the treatment of the Hui rather than the Uyghurs or

other Muslim minorities. Officially, the same laws apply to all groups, including protections of ethnic and religious rights guaranteed under the PRC Constitution. Uyghur officials affirm that, “Uyghurs enjoy the same religious freedoms as Hui Muslims do.”<sup>17</sup> But statistics published in government white papers, “including how many mosques are maintained in the country; how many government-trained imams are serving; and, especially, how many Chinese Muslims have been permitted to make the pilgrimage to Mecca each year”,<sup>18</sup> do not indicate that most of the mosques built or repaired in the past two decades serve Hui communities, or that the overwhelming majority of imams and pilgrims are also Hui. More striking is the disparity in the area of Islamic education in China. While mosque-based schools are booming in Hui communities across China, religious education is strictly circumscribed in Xinjiang, where schools have been raided for hosting “illegal preachers” and children have been arrested for studying the Qur’ān on their own.<sup>19</sup>

From Beijing’s perspective, if there is any disparity between the way the Hui and the Uyghurs are treated, it is because the former are more loyal and law-abiding, while the latter are more treacherous and unruly. Upon closer analysis, the Hui, scattered throughout the country and more integrated into the Han mainstream, do not pose the same sort of threat as the Uyghurs. Xinjiang, endowed with the bulk of China’s energy and mineral resources, is strategically and economically vital to the PRC. The notion of its secession is untenable and its instability unacceptable; it must be retained and kept pacified at any cost, including the repression of its disgruntled Uyghur population. In this regard, Xinjiang forms a triad, along with Tibet and Inner Mongolia, of problem border regions encircling China. The repression of these ethnic populations is an extension of the repression of China’s political dissidents in the view of Western countries and NGOs that charge the PRC with rampant human rights abuses.

While China’s Tibetan problem certainly receives significantly more attention in the US, and the West in general, the perception of Chinese abuses in Xinjiang may have a much more damaging effect as China attempts to build partnerships with Muslim countries. The PRC would like to be able to use its internal Muslim population to help strengthen its relations with the Muslim world, but the Uyghur problem threatens to complicate them. Or does it? The reaction from Muslim countries in the wake of the 2009 riots and Chinese military intervention in Ürümqi suggests that some are willing to tolerate PRC treatment of the Uyghurs in order to maintain friendly relations with Beijing:

The riots in China’s Xinjiang region and subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Uighur minority have drawn a muted response from many Muslim countries that may be wary of damaging lucrative trade ties with Beijing or attracting attention to their own attitudes toward political dissent.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that many Arab and Muslim countries are themselves accused of political repression and human rights violations certainly contributes to their relative silence on the Xinjiang situation, and may, oddly enough, serve to make them more attractive international partners for China; these issues need not even enter into political and business relations, and neither side may assume the moral high ground, as western countries tend to do in respect to the PRC.

Two Muslim countries did speak out about the crackdown on the Uyghur protestors: Iran and Turkey. Iran’s reaction was understated, as Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki vaguely expressed “concerns among Islamic countries” in a conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi.<sup>21</sup> This may not be surprising given the timing

of events in Xinjiang, only a month after the Iranian government cracked down on street demonstrations against the contested results of the recent presidential elections. Neither wishing to embarrass China, Iran's principal trading partner and supplier of nuclear and military technology, nor draw attention to its own domestic unrest, Teheran assumed an official position of muted criticism. However, high-ranking Iranian religious leaders used the pulpit to condemn the violence against fellow Muslims:

“Silence and indifference toward such oppressions on the people is an unforgivable vice”, said Grand Ayatollah Youssef Saanei, a major religious figure who has criticized his own government's violent response to mass protests over the disputed June 12 election.<sup>22</sup>

The Ayatollah's remarks call to mind an incident 20 years earlier when Iran's erstwhile president and current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was on a state visit to Beijing. Even as PRC president Yang Shangkun stressed the affinity and commonalities Iran and China share, especially in their struggle against western imperialism and hegemony,<sup>23</sup> a protest made its way through Tian'anmen Square (approximately one month before the infamous 4 June crackdown on the pro-democracy movement). Approximately 3000 Muslim students and local Hui citizens marched to protest the publication of a book titled *Xing fengsu*, or “Sexual Customs”, which, the protestors claimed, insulted Islam by, among other things, likening the pilgrimage to Mecca to an orgy. In a rare instance of Chinese Islamic solidarity, the protest attracted both Hui students and students of other Muslim ethnicities. The protestors also aligned themselves with worldwide Islamic protests against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* the previous year, and in this way attached themselves to global Islam. They appealed to the government to punish the publishers of the book for their offense against Islam, and to ban the book.<sup>24</sup> The demonstration, itself a prelude to the burgeoning student protests of the “Beijing Spring”, garnered attention in the Chinese media. During his visit, the Iranian president expressed his full solidarity with the protesters. It would be difficult to prove what impact Khamenei's support may have had, but remarkably “the Communist government not only met the Muslims' demands to ban the book in question, but also overlooked some of the laws broken by Muslims during the protests around the country”.<sup>25</sup> Iran's rather subdued response to the Ürümqi riots and subsequent crackdown speaks volumes about the development of cooperation and interdependence between the Islamic Republic and the PRC over the past two decades.

In contrast, Turkey's response to the Uyghur situation contained the harshest criticism from anywhere in the Muslim world,

... as prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has compared the situation in Xinjiang to genocide, the foreign minister has conveyed Turkey's concerns to China, and Turkey's industry minister has urged Turks to stop buying Chinese goods. The government, however, has no plans for an official boycott.<sup>26</sup>

Erdogan's and his ministers' strong words may have been intended more for domestic purposes than actually to seek any sort of genuine redress from Beijing because the Turkish general public expressed outrage over the treatment of the Uyghurs, whom they regard not only as fellow Muslims, but perhaps more significantly as fellow Turks (based on strong ethnic and cultural ties). While the Turkish people took to the streets in protest of PRC policies in Xinjiang, the government needed to show support for this

popular sentiment, while acting carefully not to endanger the relationship it has forged with Beijing in recent years.

Following the Ürümqi incident, then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stressed human rights concerns—a point that Turkey, as a democracy, can make better than other Muslim countries. He also made it clear that “Turkey has no intention of interfering in the domestic affairs of China as it has respect for China’s territorial integrity”, but that the Uyghurs could play the role of a “friendship bridge” between the two countries.<sup>27</sup> Ankara masterfully turned the Uyghur “crisis” into an opportunity for increased engagement and cooperation in 2010, when Davutoğlu visited Beijing, landing first in Kashgar and Ürümqi. On his way there,

Davutoglu said that on one hand Turkey had to protect rights of Uighur Turks, on the other hand it would not harm its relations with a global country. “This will please not only China but also us, and we will help our Uighur brothers at the same time.”<sup>28</sup>

Davutoğlu’s arrival in Xinjiang, obviously orchestrated with Beijing’s approval, symbolically solidified Turkey’s commitment to the Uyghur cause. There, he literally embraced his fellow Turks and paid his respects at important Uyghur monuments, before continuing on to China proper, where he also paid a visit to a Hui mosque. The rest of his six-day visit included high level talks about establishing a “strategic cooperation council” between the two countries, foreign trade, a number of mutually beneficial infrastructure projects and increased cooperation in Central Asia, where both countries have strategic and economic interests.<sup>29</sup> Davutoğlu also affirmed Turkey’s role as an important international broker and intermediary between East and West, as he stated “Turkey’s negotiations traffic with both the US and the EU [European Union] is ongoing intensely and stressed the importance of China within the framework of new foreign policy parameters.”<sup>30</sup>

Among the countries most conspicuously silent in the aftermath of the Ürümqi riots, Saudi Arabia similarly maintains a close partnership with the US while increasingly cultivating economic and strategic ties to the PRC. The Kingdom’s own human rights record prevents it from criticizing China’s actions in Xinjiang. It might even be said “the Saudis like the lack of political conditions that China attaches to its economic relations”.<sup>31</sup> Business between the two countries is booming: Saudi trade with China exceeded \$43 billion in 2010, and oil giants Aramco and Sinopec recently signed deals to collaborate on building refineries worth billions of dollars in both Saudi Arabia and China. Yet the Saudis also show an interest in China’s Muslims, focusing their attention primarily on the Hui population rather than the Uyghurs. Relishing the role of representing the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia, as the custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, is responsible for hosting the pilgrimage, or Hajj, every year. As we have seen, the PRC regularly celebrates the fact that it facilitates the performance of this religious duty for its Muslim citizens in growing numbers: In 2012, 13,800 Chinese pilgrims, most of them Hui, made the journey to Mecca, up from 4000 in 2004.<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese government also credits itself with building mosques around China, and this is another area in which petrodollars from the Gulf are spent for the benefit mostly of Hui communities. One can easily spot these mosques, as they almost always sport green domes, evocative of the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. These mosques often include an adjacent madrasa, or Islamic school, and this is an important boon to the Saudi benefactors. For just as China seeks foreign markets for its consumer goods, Saudi Arabia seeks outlets for its second largest export—Wahhabism, the Kingdom’s own ideological brand

of Islam. When the Saudis build a school, they also get to supply the curriculum, and the PRC has been fairly liberal in allowing them to do so. Echoing what we saw above, one journalist has observed, “[s]tarkly different government treatment toward Muslims in Xinjiang [Uyghurs] and those in Yunnan [Hui] suggest[s] that Chinese government tolerance of Islam is highly strategic”.<sup>33</sup> While one might see the Hui being used as political pawns in the transactions between two powerful countries, the interdependence of Saudi Arabia and China has been a blessing to “Chinese Muslims in the right place at the right time ... reviving Islamic practice at an astonishing pace without significant government interference.”<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

In the short term, it seems that this juggling of ethnic constituencies will continue to benefit China in its dealings with Muslim countries, as both parties attempt to put a noble face on what are, underneath it all, relationships of mutual economic, strategic and/or political interest and benefit. The PRC and its Muslim partners can, and will, continue to use China’s Muslims as intermediaries, “friendship bridges”, or bargaining chips, exploiting a demographic and a relational dynamic that the US and other western countries cannot. But will this strategy work in the long run? At the present time, China and countries like Iran and Turkey can agree to cooperate in Central Asia, but as they each grow as regional and world powers, will their competing hegemonic ambitions eventually put an end to the “Confucian-Islamic Connection”? Moreover, as China aspires to become a genuine global superpower, will its human rights record, especially as it concerns the Uyghurs, and Muslims generally, not catch up with it? While Muslim countries may have largely held their tongues and turned a blind eye after the events in Ürümqi, not all Muslims did. Extremist non-state actors, including al-Qaeda, called for retaliation against China and Chinese nationals living in the Middle East: “‘Chop off their heads at their workplaces or in their homes to tell them that the time of enslaving Muslims has gone,’ read one posting” on a militant web site.<sup>35</sup> The rhetoric is eerily reminiscent of Osama bin Ladin’s 1998 fatwa that declared American civilians permitted targets of terrorist jihad. More recently, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) has picked up this anti-Chinese rhetoric: ISIS’ “Caliph” Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s July 2014 sermon “urged Muslims around the world to pledge their allegiance to him, saying that ‘Muslim rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine’ and ... ‘[y]our brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades’”.<sup>36</sup> In 2015, ISIS ramped up its recruitment propaganda efforts, targeting Chinese-speaking Muslims with a Mandarin language song, “I am Mujahid” exhorting “Muslim brothers” online “to awaken”, and Beijing has taken notice of increasing anti-Chinese militant activities, including ISIS’ slaying of a captive PRC national in November 2015.<sup>37</sup> It would appear that if China ever supplants America as the world’s premier superpower, it will inherit not only the benefits of the position but also its dangers.

## NOTES

1. James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God’s Name: Liu Zhi’s Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011, p. xv.
2. James D. Frankel, “The ‘Problem’ of Muslim Diversity in China”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, ed. Randall Nadeau, Oxford: Blackwell, 2012, p. 258.



3. In his follow-up book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996, Huntington replaced the term “Confucian” with “Sinic”.
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5. Mohan Malik, “A.Q. Khan’s China Connection”. *Association for Asian Research*, May 22 2004. <http://www.asianresearch.org/articles/2066.html> (accessed September 27, 2016).
6. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer, 1993, pp. 22–49.
7. North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (the latter five are majority-Muslim countries).
8. Overall population figures for Muslims in China are elusive and vary according to source. According to PRC government sources, about 1.8% of China’s approximately 1.37 billion people are classified as Muslim (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/ch.html> [updated July 2016]). That would make the overall Muslim population of the PRC somewhere around 20–25 million, though some unofficial estimates reach upwards of 50 or even 100 million.
9. Frankel, “The ‘Problem’ of Muslim Diversity in China”, *op. cit.*, pp. 239–240.
10. These ten Muslim minorities are the Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar, Salar, Bonan, Dongxiang and Tajik.
11. Frankel, “The ‘Problem’ of Muslim Diversity in China”, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
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13. Frankel, “The ‘Problem’ of Muslim Diversity in China”, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
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30. Turkish Radio and Television, “Davutoğlu in China”. *TRT.net.tr*, October 28, 2010. <http://www.trt.net.tr/trtworld/en/newsDetail.aspx?HaberKodu=805f396b-6999-4003-b974-50df3f118bd8> (accessed April 13, 2013).



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