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**China's Islam in Xinjiang: from functionalization to elimination**  
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## 7. Conclusion

The core of CCP policy on religion since the post-Cultural Revolution reforms has been to tolerate religion's existence as long as it does not pose a threat to the political status quo. Institutions like the China Islamic Association were reinstated in the 1980s and were tasked with keeping religious activities within the bounds of CCP control. The state had a general weariness of religion's capacity to instigate civil society movements and also had specific concerns about certain religions. Islam's connection to foreign authorities was considered a threat, as well as its connection to ethnic identities, and the possibility it created of separatist movements that made use of Islamic identity politics. In the early 2000s, inspired by patriotic literature produced for Christians in China as well as the Chinese Islamic community's own proclaimed need for well-trained religious leaders, the China Islamic Association created a state-approved curriculum for Islamic education. The association also organized sermon and recitation competitions, resulting in edited volumes of curated sermons. With this material, the state trained new religious affairs administrators and imams and organized workshops for established religious leaders. These were expected to communicate state-approved interpretations and state policies to their communities and to convey the message that being a good Muslim constituted being a good citizen of the Chinese nation. The narrative on Islam forged by the state was meant to stimulate a positive attitude towards CCP policy and simultaneously ensured that the state could label any behavior it deemed undesirable as un-Islamic. At its core, the system presented a pragmatic tool to control what was said by religious leaders and made sure the state could outlaw them if they did not conform to the state-approved program. Important to note is that the actual use of this official narrative and the state's educational settings were not solely determined by the interests of the state. Religious community leaders and members of the religious community all had different ways to engage with the state's narrative and institutional arrangements. Being educated at state institutions meant access to resources, having a state diploma meant official recognition and wages, and using state-approved terminology and sermons could assure state support for community needs. But in terms of state intentions, the functionalization policy that made use of Islamic scripture and figures and locations endowed with Islamic authority were part and parcel of the state-initiated circumscription of religious activity. The policy did go further than the more liberal approach of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the state mainly controlled religious activities through legislation and administration. By claiming the authority of religious interpretation, the state had a more intrusive tool to take control of what happened in religious communities. The position of religion as an unwanted factor in society remained unchanged with this policy. The Chinese state's appropriation of the Islamic tradition for social engineering cannot not be seen as the state granting Islam any social authority, but rather as the state trying to get a grasp on

Islam's authority and subjecting it to official control. Rather than from any degree of social acceptance of the state-approved orthodoxy, state control stemmed from the state's power to outlaw specific persons or activities on the basis of that prescribed orthodoxy.

In Xinjiang, religious leaders were expected to attend classes under the "love your country, love your religion" program. Hundreds of imams were trained and expected to preach the CCP message to their mosque communities. While the program ensured a stricter control over what was said in mosques, it amplified the already existing resentment among Uyghurs about Chinese government intrusion. To Uyghurs, the post-Cultural Revolution period had meant new opportunities to reconnect to Islam and re-educate people in Islamic teachings. These new freedoms were met with large-scale socio-economic shifts, which meant that new social issues arose, and new questions were being asked within the Uyghur Islamic discursive tradition. In this time of reinvention and rekindling of the Islamic tradition, the relation between the Chinese state and Uyghurs was difficult. Social, economic and political conditions had widened the rift between the state and Uyghurs, Uyghur protests were not uncommon in the 1980s, and the Chinese fear of separatist movements increased after Central Asian Soviet states gained independence in 1991. Several Uyghur leaders that stirred the status quo at the time had spent time studying abroad in Central Asia, Turkey or the Middle East and became teachers and imams in Xinjiang upon their return. The state found itself struggling with the social authority and the foreign connections of these figures and shut down the platforms that these people used to spread their ideas. Uyghur social activities embedded in the Islamic discursive tradition have been increasingly repressed and outlawed since the early 1990s. In this context, the state's creation of an official curriculum of Islamic teachings and its certification of mosques and imams did not give Uyghurs the idea that the state was working in their benefit to modernize the institutions of Islam. On the contrary, the state reinforced the fear among Uyghurs that the state sought to undermine Islam as a source of social normativity. Similar to what happened to official state versions of Xinjiang historiography, Uyghurs distrusted the state narrative that was presented to them. Lacking the authority to make any claims on normative values using the Islamic discursive tradition, the state's intrusion did not accomplish a rapprochement between the state and the local religious communities, but rather revealed another way for the state to control what happened in Uyghur communities.

The state's apprehension of Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang grew as technology and socio-economic changes diversified the platforms and spaces for Uyghurs to communicate and Internet-use exploded in Xinjiang in the early 2010s. At around the same period, several violent terrorist incidents such as the Kunming knife attack in 2013 and the bombing at Urumqi train station in 2014 raised the stakes for state action in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, under Xi Jinping, CCP central leadership became less tolerant of dissident voices and demanded an ideological tightening of the political and public arena. The

Chinese state showed a greater ambition to become the focal point of economic, political, as well as social leadership. The CCP touted its social and political principles, of which the core was the importance of the nation and loyalty to CCP leadership. In this era of new politics, the unrest in Xinjiang became an ever more urgent topic.

Up until the early 2010s there was space for pragmatics and ambiguity even in Xinjiang. It allowed citizens and, in some circumstances, low-level administrators as well to be involved with religion or religion-related affairs without insurmountable hazard. While the functionalization policy was not rooted in the idea that the state approved of Islamic teachings and recognized Islamic authority, the policy followed the pragmatic governance principle whereby the state needed to work with and take into account the importance of Islam as a site of social normativity. But while the state considered it safe to use religious doctrine and religious authority to strengthen its grip on religious communities, it was not prepared to accept the existence of ethno-Islamic identities as strong as that of the Uyghurs. State-instigated religious repression in the 1990s and the early 2000s was plentiful, but the hardline stance that was kicked off with the People's War on Terror in 2014 and implemented on an increasingly intrusive scale since the installment of Chen Quanguo as provincial Party head in 2016 meant the Beijing-led sacrifice of a policy of ambiguity in favor of using Islam as a scapegoat in coping with the Xinjiang problem. The state decided not to tolerate Islam anymore as a meaningful social symbol, let alone make use of its social significance. References to Islam were seen as a threat to the social order and needed to be replaced with CCP symbolism. The slogan "love your country, love your religion" was replaced with "love your Party, love your country," identifying Chinese culture—as defined by the Party—as the source and focal point of social normativity. The only aspect of the functionalization policy that remained in place in Xinjiang was the public display of Islam's loyalty to China and to the CCP. The display of loyalty is no longer a means for religious communities to ensure that they can conduct religious activities, but rather a state tool to demonstrate that the Islam that is allowed to exist in China does not pose a danger. For large-scale intrusive state action Islamic extremism was a convenient target, since it was an established evil in both local and global narratives and any anti-state aggression could be labeled as stemming from it. The emphasis on religious extremism as the root problem instead of terrorism also enabled the state to focus on ideology and education and provided a reason for the deep societal penetration by the state. This was fully in line with the more general emphasis on ideological conformity emerging from Beijing.

While this thesis argues that Islamic extremism was not the core problem in Xinjiang, but was presented as such to mitigate the threat of Uyghur dissent, this also does not nullify the point that Matthew Erie, researcher on Islamic law in China, rightly names: ethics is not apolitical, and religious

traditions can stand in conflict with state sovereignty.<sup>532</sup> This is a central point of friction that any state seeks to navigate, with varying degrees of success. Post-Cultural Revolution China was trying to find a new balance with religion, navigating a grey area of pragmatism and ambiguity. Now under Xi Jinping, the Party's demand to be the center of social normativity for its citizens has heightened, and the role of Islam as a symbol of Uyghur identification as well as a platform for social organization became a threat. And so a conflict that has been potentially inherent in a state's relation with religion has been driven to full confrontation.

What the consequences of this persecution of Islam in Xinjiang are, cannot be judged at this point. It is improbable that the violent re-education measures introduced in Xinjiang will be applied to the same degree among other Muslim minorities in China. Uyghur unrest had its origin in broader social, economic and political issues, and as one of the largest ethnic minorities in China at the fringes of the Chinese nation, the Uyghurs constituted a specific threat that the Chinese state sought to eliminate. However, with regard to other Muslim minorities in China, we already see a rising hostility towards Islam and a fear of Islam as a force that could threaten Chinese social order. This translates into stricter administration and less tolerance for Islamic practices and communities in local administrations, as well as a rising self-censorship among the communities themselves. What role the narrative of a patriotic Chinese Islam assumes in the rising tensions surrounding China's Muslim communities remains to be seen. It is a legitimate question to ask for the other Muslim minorities in China whether the rising intolerance towards religious expressions, combined with demands of political loyalty, will have the reverse effect of alienating Muslims from the Chinese nation.

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<sup>532</sup> Erie, *China and Islam*, 184-85.