



## For China, Syria is the “New Afghanistan”

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### Abstract

In May 2017, a reporter for Dubai-based Al Aan TV aired an undercover story<sup>1</sup> on Idlib province – the Syrian “rebel” opposition stronghold that is supported by the US and other Western governments – and the site of the recent alleged chemical attack that prompted direct US missile strikes against the Syrian Arab Army. While the report confirmed that al-Qaeda dominates Idlib, there was another unexpected revelation: the presence of large Chinese Uyghur jihadi<sup>2</sup> colonies<sup>3</sup>, and highlights the negative consequences of misguided US/Western policies for violent regime change in the Middle East. Istanbul-based BirGün Daily interviews Dr Christina Lin, a China-Mideast expert at Johns Hopkins University, to discuss the implications of these developments for China and the West. According to Lin, the outgrowth of these colonies was supported by Turkey's Erdoğan regime to breed anti-Assad jihadists, and in the face of these anti-Chinese militants using the Syrian base to also launch attacks on Chinese interests, this will provoke Beijing to increase its military involvement in the Syrian war.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9NyL78kDUQ>

<sup>2</sup> <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/chinese-uyghur-colonies-in-syria-a-challenge-for-beijing/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://twitter.com/jenanmousa/status/864593687191465984?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=http%3A%2F%2F](https://twitter.com/jenanmousa/status/864593687191465984?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2F)



## Interview

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*BirGün Daily:* Could you please explain us the Uyghur jihadist colonies, their presence and activity in İdlib?

*Lin:* It's important to put the colonies into context and trace how they were established. They are an out-growth of misguided US, Turkish and other allied policies for violent regime change in Syria.

After the Syrian war broke out, Turkey became an important supply line for the inflow of foreign fighters (including from Asia<sup>4</sup>), weapons, and support to the Syrian opposition. The 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency report<sup>5</sup> warned of the desire of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to carve out a Salafist statelet in Syria east of Assad-controlled territory in order to put pressure on his regime.

Al Qaeda and its affiliate Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Afghanistan/Pakistan also began moving their operations to Syria, so that İdlib has become the new Tora Bora for global jihad. In April 2015 TIP, Al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham and various Free Syrian Army factions colluded to form the Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fatah), and with US-led coalition's support, took over the İdlib governorate where Al Nusra<sup>6</sup>, regardless of its cosmetic name change, is now attempting to establish an Islamic emirate.

Around the same time, Chinese press<sup>7</sup> revealed that since the end of 2014, thousands of Uyghurs have been smuggled into Turkey and are housed in government buildings in Kayseri guarded by local police<sup>8</sup>. Many of them were desperate and exploited/sold by jihadist recruiters in Turkey to fight in Syria and Iraq, and some analysts<sup>9</sup> surmised the possibility of President Erdoğan using Uyghur manpower as his potential power projection asset in Syria. They have a safe haven in İdlib replete with training camps, access to western weapons, gaining valuable combat experience, and more determined to defend the area because they have settled with their wives and children, unlike other militant groups that did not bring their families.

While China acknowledges that Turkey is hospitable to Uyghur refugees and holds the notion as protector of the Turkish-speaking world, Beijing would take issue with Ankara setting up a pipeline to encourage Uyghur emigration for Syrian and eventual Chinese jihad.

*BirGün Daily:* What is the role of Turkey in this traffic as well as the settlement of these colonies?

*Lin:* There have been well-documented cases of significant Uyghur migration via people smuggling networks through Southeast Asia since 2009, not only with transit countries<sup>10</sup> such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand but also Turkey. Starting in 2013 there were increasing reports<sup>11</sup> on Ankara's complicity<sup>12</sup> in recruitment of Uyghurs fleeing Xinjiang into jihadist groups in Syria, supplying refugees with forged<sup>13</sup> Turkish documents<sup>14</sup> if they are delayed in southeast Asia.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-aligned-central-asian-militants-in-syria-separate-from-islamic-state-aligned-imu-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://levantreport.com/2015/05/19/2012-defense-intelligence-agency-document-west-will-facilitate-rise-of-islamic-state-in-order-to-isolate-the-syrian-regime/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sPY0X8SrLo>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/938731.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-uyghurs-insight-idUSKCN0Q10PM20150727>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/02/24/curtain-coming-down-on-erdogans-excellent-uyghur-adventure/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/undocumented-uyghur-migrants-find-new-route-to-southeast-asia/#.V8iWCnkpi5>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/turkey-china-xinjiang-uyghurs-isis-prevent-extremism.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1835677/turkish-embassies-southeast-asia-gave-fake-travel>

<sup>13</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/18/c\\_134424601.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/18/c_134424601.htm)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/world/asia/10-turks-said-to-be-under-arrest-for-aiding-terrorist-suspects-in-china.html?\\_r=2](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/world/asia/10-turks-said-to-be-under-arrest-for-aiding-terrorist-suspects-in-china.html?_r=2)



Peter Lee<sup>15</sup> of *Asia Times* has covered this extensively, especially regarding the difficulty of forging biometric passports found in the hands of some of the Uyghur refugees. Chinese intelligence had been concerned about this development and quietly pressed Turkish authorities behind closed doors. Unlike the West that usually makes public pronouncements to the press, China prefers quiet diplomacy in order to “give face” and “save face” with their counterparts. However, when there was lack of progress with Erdoğan’s government, it culminated in a public<sup>16</sup> denouncement<sup>17</sup> by the head of China’s Ministry of Public Security in July 2015.

After TIP and Nusra in Idlib executed the August 2016 attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, China has stepped up its anti-terror and intelligence cooperation with Kyrgyzstan. When asked about the Al Aan report on the large Uyghur colonies, a counter-terrorism official in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs remarked “I just came back from a trip to Kyrgyzstan...what they told us confirms this.”

*BirGün Daily*: Do the US still support the Uyghur colonies by sending gun?

*Lin*: It is unclear if US still tacitly supports these Uyghur colonies by arming the “rebel” opposition in Idlib since President Trump came into office. During the Obama administration, CIA’s Operation Timber Sycamore launched in 2012 was responsible for working with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to arm and train anti-Assad rebel groups that later became intermingled with Al Qaeda and ISIS. This is what prompted the bipartisan Stop Arming Terrorist Act (SATA)<sup>18</sup> currently under review by Congress. The CIA program was frozen in February this year, but there are reports that it has been partially restored<sup>19</sup> in April.

In 2015, TIP<sup>20</sup> and al Nusra were instrumental in taking Idlib from the Syrian government. According to Charles Lister, formerly at Brookings Doha Center with close ties to the Syrian opposition, the Idlib offensive had been planned for eight months to capture and transform it into the opposition core area of control, and was coordinated by the U.S.-led operations room<sup>21</sup> known as MOM in southern Turkey.

Several commanders of the Idlib operation informed Lister that whereas previously these multinational operations rooms have demanded that recipients of military assistance cease direct coordination with al Qaeda groups, the Idlib offensive was a game changer that actually prompted closer cooperation with the Conquest Army jihadi groups. In 2015 General Petraeus<sup>22</sup> had also called to support al-Qaeda as an asset both against ISIS and against the Syrian army<sup>23</sup>, and in a September 2016 article in the German newspaper *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*<sup>24</sup>, an al Nusra commander confirmed American anti-tank TOW “missiles were given directly to us” and not through the Free Syrian Army.

The Nusra commander said initially the US lumped Al Nusra with ISIS, but now “the Americans are on our side” and assisting with “use of satellites, missiles, reconnaissance work, thermal surveillance cameras” to help overthrow the secular Syrian government, echoing Lister’s article in 2015 regarding US-led operations room increasing assistance and provision of intelligence to the Conquest Army.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.unz.com/plee/passport-gate-turkeys-brewing-uyghur-passport-scandal/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://chinamatters.blogspot.de/2015/07/another-shoe-drops-in-turkish-passports.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-turkey-idUSKCN0PL08520150711>

<sup>18</sup> <https://gabbard.house.gov/news/press-releases/gabbards-stop-arming-terrorists-act-introduced-senate>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/syria-moderate-rebels-form-alliance-170403064144285.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-aligned-central-asian-militants-in-syria-separate-from-islamic-state-aligned-imu-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/why-assad-is-losing/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/02/david-petraeus-bright-idea-give-terrorists-weapons-to-beat-isis>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/02/david-petraeus-bright-idea-give-terrorists-weapons-to-beat-isis>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.ksta.de/politik/interview-mit-al-nusra-kommandeur--die-amerikaner-stehen-auf-unserer-seite--24802176>



If CIA has indeed restored the program in April to arm the rebel opposition, then yes US would also be arming the Uyghur jihadists in Idlib.

*BirGün Daily:* How the Uyghur jihadist colonies will affect the region as well as Turkey?

*Lin:* The presence of not just Chinese, but also other Central Asian jihadists would draw Asian powers to intervene militarily in the region. As counter-terror expert Jacob Zenn<sup>25</sup> assessed, with its base in Idlib, the rebel coalition had a direct supply line open from Turkey’s Hatay Province to establish a de facto state in northwestern Syria led by Nusra, and supported by TIP, several Central Asian militias (e.g., Uzbek-led Imam Bukhari Jamaat and Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad) as well as Chechen militias. Returning militants is thus a threat to Asian security and stability.

Moreover, while the US no longer needs Mideast oil and can retrench from the region at will, in contrast Asian states are increasingly dependent on the region for market access and energy sources. Al-Qaeda, ISIS and various Salafist groups in the Mideast also pose a real threat to China’s \$1 trillion<sup>26</sup> Belt and Road project across Eurasia.

New Delhi and Beijing also face another grave challenge—protecting India’s seven million<sup>27</sup> migrant workers and China’s two million in the Middle East. As such in August 2016, both India<sup>28</sup> and China<sup>29</sup> have upgraded their security ties with the Syrian government to counter al-Qaeda and ISIS, and deny them a permanent safe haven in Syria. Asian states would increasingly pressure Turkey to cooperate in this front.

*BirGün Daily:* How the Uyghur jihadist colonies will tend towards the West?

*Lin:* Since Uyghur jihadists are also in the ranks of ISIS, Al Qaeda (Nusra, JFS, HTS), the Syrian Taliban (Ahrar al sham), eventually they will target western interests. Similar to their previous pattern in Afghanistan when US/Saudi backed Afghan jihadists morphed into Al Qaeda and attacked the West, US also caught 22 Uyghurs in Al Qaeda and sent them to Guantanamo. The West would likely catch Uyghur militants in Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other extremist groups conducting future attacks against Western targets from their base in Syria. That’s why China has called Syria the “new Afghanistan.”

*BirGün Daily:* Why do you think the Western countries ignored the Uyghur jihadists for a long time?

*Lin:* It’s the same logic as US support for jihadists in Afghanistan and Libya—a proxy tool for regime change operations in countries deemed unfriendly towards the West.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-aligned-central-asian-militants-in-syria-separate-from-islamic-state-aligned-imu-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/china-is-spending-nearly-1-trillion-to-rebuild-the-silk-road/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/whats-behind-ties-between-assad-and-india/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/syria/india-throws-its-weight-behind-syria-s-al-assad-1.1883712>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-china-idUSKCN10R10R>



**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

This interview of Meltem Yilmaz, *BirGün Daily*, with Dr Christina Lin was firstly conducted in English on May 25, 2017 and published in Turkish on BirGün Daily on May 27, 2017. See also <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/cin-ortadogu-uzmani-christina-lin-suriye-cin-icin-yeni-afganistan-161405.html>

### About the Author of this Issue

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