# Local Capacities for Peacebuilding in Xinjiang

**Peter Gill**

**University Honors**

**Spring 2013**

**Faculty Advisor: Dr. Abdul Aziz Said, SIS**

**Abstract**

*The study analyzed the ongoing conflict in China's Xinjiang region from a new perspective by focusing on local tools that could potentially facilitate peacebuilding. This study found that Muslim leaders and Uyghur intellectuals could play a vital role in local peacebuilding by serving as a much-needed channel of communication between Xinjiang's sharply divided Uyghur and Han communities. This hypothesis is based on a brief historical account of the conflict as well as an in-depth conflict analysis which demonstrate how ethnic tensions between Uyghur and Han make up the foundation of the conflict. Because of their unique relationships with local Uyghur communities and urban Han communities and officials, religious leaders and intellectuals are jointly in a position to enact positive change in the Xinjiang conflict at the local level.*

**1. Introduction**

In the existing body of research and analysis about the Xinjiang conflict, the emphasis has largely fallen on the role of the Chinese government in motivating and suppressing violence. Much attention has rightfully been given to official policies in the areas of language, education, religion, development, and counterterrorism, and understanding the government's approach to all of these issues is extremely important to gaining a meaningful comprehension of the conflict and the unique challenges it poses to peacebuilders. However, in this focus on the state, Xinjiang conflict scholarship has overlooked certain local actors who very well could play a key role in peacebuilding. On the other hand, research about the history and culture of Xinjiang and the Uyghur people has proven impressive at illuminating the nuances of this oft-misunderstood group and the various transformations that the Uyghurs have experienced over time, both indigenously as well as in response to external forces. However, academics approaching the topic of Xinjiang from a historical or cultural perspective have tended to prioritize their role as documentarians and curators instead of utilizing their research to engage with the conflict in Xinjiang today.

This conceptual gap in current Xinjiang research begs a key question: what local tools or actors in Xinjiang can potentially make a positive contribution to peacebuilding in the region? That is exactly the question that this project intends to address. Although the author's knowledge of the Xinjiang conflict and the Uyghur people is admittedly limited compared to that of the numerous scholars who have previously touched upon the margins of this question, the hope is that this attempt at articulating a preliminary answer will encourage the emergence of fresh  perspectives and approaches to thinking about Xinjiang, the Uyghurs, and peacebuilding in general.

This research will focus on the potential of local intellectual and religious leaders as agents of peace. Both of these groups of actors have unique characteristics and abilities that could enable them to serve well as peacebuilders. The author has chosen to write about both groups because their skill sets and relationships to citizen and state actors in Xinjiang are quite complementary; it is likely that through cooperation, intellectuals and religious leaders could constitute a local tool for peacebuilding that is more powerful than the sum of its parts. Equally important is the fact that this cooperation is realistically possible within the framework of existing government policy, which is a vital factor when considering the capacity of local actors in an authoritarian state like China.

The first section of this project will provide a background of the Xinjiang region and conflict with a particular emphasis on more recent developments since the 1980s. This background will be followed by an in-depth analysis of conflict dynamics, which will draw upon the Conflict Assessment Framework used by the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in order to explain the conflict drivers and mitigating factors in the case of Xinjiang. The third section will examine intellectuals and religious leaders and analyze why and how these actors could potentially be utilized for localized peacebuilding. This same section will also discuss the limitations and possible negative externalities of these actors participating in peacebuilding.

## 2. Conflict Background

The conflict in Xinjiang can arguably be traced all the way back to uprisings against the Qing dynasty in the 1860s, but more recent developments during the 20th

century are more relevant to the state of the conflict today. During the 1930s, rebellions against the Republic of China occurred all over Xinjiang, culminating in the establishment of the Eastern Turkestan Republic in the western city of Kashgar. Although the ETR only lasted for approximately four months (from November 1933 to February 1934), this remains an important moment in the history of the conflict and has colored both the government's response to regional crises as well as the rhetoric and actions of some separatist groups.

In 1949, the Chinese civil war came to a close with victory proclaimed by the communists, who then preceded to retake control of Xinjiang. Around 1949 and 1950 is when CCP leaders in Beijing began incentivizing Han Chinese to migrate to Xinjiang in an effort to stabilize the region, and the next few decades would see huge demographic shifts in the region that turned the Uyghurs from a clear majority to less than half of the total population. 1955 saw the proclamation of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

The next few decades until Mao Zedong's death in 1976 were a turbulent time for much of the country, and Xinjiang is no exception. The 1956 Hundred Flowers campaign and ensuing Anti-Rightist Movement saw witness to the persecution of many intellectuals in Xinjiang and elsewhere, and the Cultural Revolution beginning in the late 1960s constituted a concerted attack on intellectuals, capitalists, and religious leaders, with many mosques being destroyed and violent factional conflict taking place in Xinjiang.

The current phase of the conflict began in the 1980s during the early years of the reform era, which saw the state take a radical turn toward liberalization following the death of Mao. During this decade, student demonstrations and separatist movements

gradually became more vocal in Xinjiang. In the 1990s, many of these demonstrations and movements became notoriously violent as Xinjiang witnessed deadly clashes between protestors and security forces, attacks on government buildings, bombings of buses, hotels, and markets, and kidnappings.[1]

2000 saw the inauguration of the Great Development of the West program aimed at stabilizing the region through development projects and tapping into Xinjiang's abundant natural resources, especially oil in the north. While the region experienced an era of relative peace throughout much of the 2000s, the end of the decade seemed to echo the violence of the 1990s with the 2009 Urumqi Riots that resulted in almost 200 casualties. Most recently, violent clashes in a town near Kashgar have resulted in 21 deaths and numerous arrests, although it is still unclear what the source of the violence is, although the government has already started linking the violence with the separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement.[2]

## 3. Conflict Assessment

Before exploring local capacities for peacebuilding in Xinjiang, it is necessary to understand the various factors incentivizing participation in the conflict. The USAID Conflict Assessment Framework serves as a useful tool for understanding the causal factors behind the conflict in Xinjiang because of its comprehensive approach to deconstructing incentives for violence and mitigating factors. Ultimately, this assessment will demonstrate how salient ethnic tensions with few cross-cutting cleavages are at the center of violence in Xinjiang. Starting with incentives for violence,

---

[1] James Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment." East-West Center, 2004: 3, 8-22.

[2] James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 373-381; "China 'Arrests More Suspects' Over Xinjiang Clashes," *BBC*, April 29, 2013.

it is clear that a number of ethnic, religious, economic, environmental, and demographic factors have contributed to this conflict.

Ethnic and religious tensions between Xinjiang's Han Chinese and Uyghur populations have proven to be a major driver of conflict. These tensions stem largely from a massive influx of Han migrants that began in 1949 and has continued up to the present day. Although some accounts differ as to the exact scale of this population shift, it is generally understood that the proportion of Xinjiang's population made up of Han has increased from around 5% in 1949 to 40% today[3], with the share of the Uyghur population simultaneously decreasing from 90% in 1949 to around 45-50% today.[4] Now, Xinjiang's 9.5 million Uyghurs live predominately in the province's southern rural areas, while the 8 million Han are concentrated more in the north and urban areas.[5]

This influx of Han migrants has exacerbated tensions between Xinjiang's two largest ethnic groups for three key reasons. First, major religio-cultural differences separate the two groups with very few cross-cutting cleavages. These differences are dietary, matrimonial, time zonal, and educational, and ultimately prevent positive and meaningful social interaction between Han and Uyghurs despite the increased prevalence of Han Chinese in the region.[6] Of particular note is the wide language gap between the groups, with few Han in Xinjiang speaking Uyghur and few Uyghurs attaining fluency in Mandarin.[7] Second, this Han influx has frequently been seen by

---

[3] Kelsey Strampe, "Uyghur Separatist Conflict in Western China," *ICE Case Studies* 183 (2006); Yitzhak Shichor, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," *Asian Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2005): 121.

[4] Chien-peng Chung, "China's "War on Terror": September 11 and Uighur Separatism," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (2002): 12.

[5] Enze Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict in Xinjiang, China," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2010): 249.

[6] Ibid., 250-252.

[7] Linda Tsung, *Minority Languages, Education and Communities in China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 135-136.

Uyghurs as an attempt by the PRC to force Uyghur assimilation into Han culture and society, suspicions that are certainly not unfounded.[8] Third, sociopolitical differences between the two groups and government policies have solidified disparate sects of the Uyghur population into a more unified and cohesive group vis-a-vis the Han,[9] a phenomenon that will be explained in greater detail shortly.

Ethnic and religious considerations also work in tandem with other incentives for violence, particularly in the area of economics. In Xinjiang, there is substantial economic inequality between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. This inequality is due in part to the difficulties many Uyghurs face when seeking employment. China's large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were once a key employer of minority workers, but many of these SOEs were privatized during economic reforms in the 1990s. Now, the private sector in Xinjiang is largely run by Han business owners who prefer not to hire Uyghurs because of a comparative lack of Mandarin and technical skills compared to Han applicants, meaning unemployment rates are considerably higher among Uyghurs.[10] Furthermore, those Uyghurs who lack Mandarin skills are essentially ineligible for most government positions and high-paying jobs.[11]

In addition to income inequality, another economic factor that coincides with ethnic divisions is the issue of where development in Xinjiang is concentrated. To date, the majority of the PRC's development efforts have been focused on heavy industry and infrastructure projects in northern Xinjiang because that region already has a solid industrial foundation.[12] As previously mentioned, northern Xinjiang is where the

---

[8]    Blaine Kaltman, *Under the Heel of the Dragon* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 133.
[9]    Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict," 246.
[10]   Shan Wei and Weng Cuifen, "China's New Policy in Xinjiang and its Challenges," *East Asian Policy* 2, no. 3 (2010): 59; Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict," 254.
[11]   Chung, "China's 'War on Terror,'" 12.
[12]   Wei and Cuifen, "China's New Policy in Xinjiang," 60.

province's Han population is largely concentrated, so even though Xinjiang's recent GDP growth has surpassed the national average, the benefits of this growth have not been felt as strongly by the region's southern Uyghur populations. Both of these economic factors coincide strongly with existing ethnic tensions and therefore contribute to Xinjiang's conflict dynamic.

Another set of incentives for violence is tied closely to environmental and scarcity problems. Water scarcity has become a major problem in much of Xinjiang, particularly in the Tarim River Basin in the south. The main reason for this is rapid population growth in the area; in two particular areas, the population increased from less than 20,000 in 1950 to 420,000 in the 1970s, and then to 460,000 by 2000. This population growth coupled with the overuse of water resources has drastically reduced the volume of water available (as one study points out, "by the 1980s, the Tarim River had shortened by more than 320km"), as well as the water quality due to greater concentration of salt.[13]    The problems of water scarcity and excessive population growth have also contributed to another environmental dilemma: land degradation. As water resources downriver have become scarcer, populations have gradually relocated upriver, leaving behind a trail of desertification and unusable land. Additionally, a combination of overdevelopment, overpopulation, and side effects of oil industry activity has resulted in land degradation, which has severely harmed local economies that rely on agricultural activity and such exports as grapes, melons, and cotton.[14] On a similar note, soil and groundwater pollution near a Chinese nuclear test site at Lop Nor have

---

[13]    Leiwen Jiang, Tong Yufen, Zhao Zhijie, Li Tianhong, and Liao Jianhua, "Water Resources, Land Exploration and Population Dynamics in Arid Areas: The Case of the Tarim River Basin in Xinjiang of China," *Population and Environment* 26, no. 6 (2005): 478-482.

[14]    Jiang, et. al., "Water Resources, Land Exploration and Population Dynamics," 500; Strampe, "Uyghur Separatist Conflict."

caused birth defects and other health problems among the local population.[15] As excessive population growth continues to put pressure on valuable water resources and arable land, a variety of negative consequences are likely to occur, including damage to local economies, competition over resources, and mass movements of populations that will inevitably put greater pressure on other locales.

Massive population shifts themselves can serve as drivers of conflict when they exacerbate existing issues and tensions. This is clearly evident in the widespread migration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang over the last six decades and the resulting problems that have arisen. Essentially, the region's conspicuously large Han population has provided a target for Uyghur frustrations over government policies as well as for fringe separatist movements. Demographic changes also obviously play into the aforementioned issues of environmental scarcity. Furthermore, as one analysis points out, continued government investment in infrastructure and development coupled with unnatural rates of desertification and the diminishing of agricultural activity are likely to lead to greater rates of urbanization, and it is possible that many rural migrants with inflated expectations could be "ripe for radicalization" by those who would seek to incite violence.[16]

This leads into the next section of conflict assessment, which looks at how resources may be mobilized for conflict in Xinjiang. Overall, it appears as though the resources available for conflict mobilization are not as strong as the incentives, which could explain why conflict in Xinjiang has generally remained at a level of low intensity characterized by occasional incidents of violence rather than continuous conflict. Admittedly, there are some organizational resources that could be utilized to mobilize

---

[15]  Chung, "China's War on Terror," 12.
[16]  Wei and Cuifen, "China's New Policy in Xinjiang," 64.

violence. For example, the Baren Uprising in 1990 (which consisted of synchronized attacks on government buildings in Kashgar) was largely organized through local mosques.[17] However, separatist movements in Xinjiang are for the most part unorganized, at least to the degree that there is no concerted effort toward inciting violence. There are reportedly very few underground Uyghur organizations and no independent militias to speak of.[18] Furthermore, the transnational separatist movement is fragmented, and has been virtually leaderless since the death of Isa Yusuf Alpetkin in 1995.[19]

In terms of financial resources in Xinjiang, it appears that diasporas are the most significant sources of funding. However, while these diasporas may be becoming more active and coordinated in supporting separatist movements through both peaceful and violent means, they remain woefully ineffective. Uyghur diasporas are generally weak, lacking in financial support, inadequately embedded in their respective countries, fragmented, and represented by a younger and less radical generation of leaders who have proven extremely willing to forgo hard demands for independence and instead embrace compromise.[20]

The human resources available for mobilization are more salient than the organizational and financial resources available, which explains why much of the conflict in Xinjiang has revolved around riots and demonstrations. For one, unemployment rates for Han Chinese in Xinjiang are significantly lower than those for Uyghurs: according to Minority Rights Group International, in 2008 the regional

---

[17] Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 14-15; Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Ethnic Conflict," 247.
[18] Arienne M Dwyer, "The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse," East-West Center, 2005, 92.
[19] Shichor, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism," 125.
[20] Ibid., 120, 126, 130-131.

unemployment rate for Han was 1% while a full 70% of Uyghurs were unemployed.[21] This staggering disparity clearly coincides with existing ethnic disparities and provides a readily available human resource for mobilizers of conflict.

Although organizational resources remain relatively weak, the repetition and scale of civilian demonstrations suggests widespread frustration with government policy, so it would be useful to discuss PRC institutional capacity and response. It is common knowledge that the PRC is an authoritarian regime governed centrally from Beijing. Although the CCP has recently initiated minor steps toward political reform and "democracy", the government still disallows certain types of speech and has a reputation for harshly stifling dissent, from Tiananmen to Xinjiang.

As alluded to earlier, government policies in Xinjiang have collectively been quite exclusive and divisive between Han and Uyghur citizens. As Wei and Cuifen point out, preferential policies towards Uyghurs (including less stringent childbirth limits and high quotas for minority admission to Xinjiang universities)[22] outlined in the 1984 Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law have tended to inadvertently sharpen the Han-Uyghur divide.[23] At the same time, certain government policies have indiscriminately repressed the entire Uyghur population. Restrictive policies barring "illegal religious activities" have led to the dissolution of Muslim scripture schools and the prevention of mosque construction as well as the arrests of key religious and community leaders, actions which have fueled the rhetoric of radical Muslims and separatists while alienating a considerable number of mainstream Uyghurs.[24] This policy of religious repression has had the dual effect of

---

[21] Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - China : Uyghurs*, July 2008.

[22] Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict," 252-253.

[23] Wei and Cuifen, "China's New Policy in Xinjiang," 59-60.

[24] Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict," 254; Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 15; Ildikó Bellér-Hann, M. Cristina Cesáro, Rachel Harris, and Joanne Smith Finley, ed., *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company,

unifying disparate sects of the Uyghur population and driving another wedge between Han and Uyghur groups.

Additionally, China's handling of Xinjiang's educational systems has been markedly exclusionary, and this has contributed to conflict. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the PRC shifted away from accommodation of Uyghur language and culture and began covertly espousing a monolingual and monocultural educational model in Xinjiang.[25] It should be noted that Uyghur pro-independence groups and student demonstrators in the region began to become more vocal and active during the same time period, followed closely by a decade of violence in the 1990s. Xinjiang schools now use one of two distinct educational systems; one system, *min kao han*, is centered around a Han-icized education, while the other system, *min kao min*, is more traditional and rooted in Uyghur language and culture. The PRC has gradually pushed for more schools to switch over to the *min kao han* system and to replace Uyghur language with Mandarin in classrooms, prompting allegations of forced cultural assimilation. Unsurprisingly, these government efforts have been met with a backlash by many Uyghurs and have ultimately worsened perceptions toward the region's Han population.[26]

Government economic policies have also had the effect of further dividing Xinjiang's two major ethnic groups. As previously noted, investment in Xinjiang has mainly targeted the industrial north, predominately benefiting Han citizens and business owners. As China has pursued its goal of turning Xinjiang into the new national energy epicenter, policymakers have chosen to prioritize investment in the oil industry over promoting economic equality and development, a decision that has certainly affected

2007), 168.
[25] Dwyer, "Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse," 59.
[26] Han, "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict," 250-253.

the state of ethnic relations and attitudes toward Beijing. In fact, the heavy extraction of oil has compromised the livelihoods and living conditions of many local Uyghur communities, who have received a disproportionately meager share of oil profits.[27]

Lastly, the government of China is widely seen as being extremely corrupt, and this is no different in Xinjiang. While the sheer scale of corruption among the region's officials is unclear, what is clear is that the population recognizes the existence of serious corruption. Frustration over corruption was one major grievance that fueled the deadly 2009 Urumqi Riots.[28]

Although regional and international factors don't currently play a major role in this conflict (outside of Uyghur diasporas), there are two points to consider. First, many Turkic and Islamic states in Central Asia with their own Uyghur populations could potentially be supporters of a pro-independence movement in the future,[29] although for the time being many of these potential states have indicated a commitment to respecting China's territorial claims and sovereignty. Second, the events of 9/11 allowed China to justify a new campaign of repression of Uyghurs in the name of counterterrorism, and the United States essentially went along with the policy, even though only a small minority of Uyghur groups participated in acts of terrorism. This implies that the U.S. may be less inclined to intervene in Xinjiang's affairs in cases when an appeal to counterterrorism can be made.

Lastly, it is important to consider possible windows of vulnerability that could trigger conflict in Xinjiang. However, a review of major incidents of violence in the history of the conflict reveals that windows of vulnerability can take many forms. The 1995

---

[27]  Strampe, "Uyghur Separatist Conflict."
[28]  Charles Hutzler, "Income Gaps, Corruption Fuel China Riots," NBC News, July 14, 2009.
[29]  Wei and Cuifen, "China's New Policy in Xinjiang," 65-66; Strampe, "Uyghur Separatist Conflict."

Khotan Demonstration occurred following the arrests of three imams; a series of protests, assassinations, and bomb attacks in 1996 stemmed from the establishment of the Shanghai Five and the announcement of the PRC's first Strike Hard Campaign; the 1997 Ghulja Incident was preceded by the arrests of two Uyghur students near Ramadan; lastly, a series of bus bombings in 1997 was timed to coincide with memorial ceremonies for the recently deceased Deng Xiaoping.[30] Many of these windows of vulnerability are virtually impossible to predict until after the fact, *but* one common theme in many of Xinjiang's incidents of violence is demonstrations. The events with the most causalities and injuries have not been random bombings, but rather protests and demonstrations that have intensified into violence because of overzealous demonstrators and/or overly repressive security forces. The Baren Uprising, Khotan Demonstration, Ghulja Incident, and 2009 riots that left almost 200 dead all began as peaceful demonstrations that eventually turned violent.

## 4. The Potential of Intellectuals and Religious Leaders as Local Tools for Peacebuilding

As the conflict assessment above indicates, this is an extremely complex conflict that is being fought across myriad fault lines, with most facets of the conflict rooted in fundamental ethnic tensions between Xinjiang's Uyghur and Han populations. The basic ethnic nature of the conflict explains why official state policies have failed to bring any real resolution; CCP policies have actually tended to exacerbate ethnic tensions and further divide the two groups. Thus, there are no easy solutions or panaceas for this situation, but it is clear that any effective peacebuilding approach will need to involve

---

[30] Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 14-18.

bridging the fundamental ethnic gap. Consequently, any local tool or actor for peacebuilding will necessarily require a positive connection to both Uyghur and Han groups, in order to posses the capacity to facilitate a search for common ground across ethnic lines.

Uyghur religious leaders have strong potential to constitute part of this interethnic bridge. Muslim religious leaders are highly respected in Uyghur communities, as Islam makes up a major facet of Uyghur identity.[31] Although many Uyghurs differ in their commitment to the daily practice of Islam, the fact remains that most profess Islam to be a significant part of their lives. Interestingly, this is true for Uyghurs living in all parts of Xinjiang, meaning that Islam is the one true characteristic shared between otherwise disparate oasis identities. Religious leaders guide their communities both formally (through leading prayer and other religious activities at mosque) and informally (for example, advising younger members of the community through *täbligh*.[32] Most of these religious leaders are older men who were received their instruction in Islam prior to the 1949 revolution that brought the communists to power in Beijing. Consequently, they have held onto their beliefs and passed them down primarily through oral transmission during the ensuing decades of Mao Zedong's religious repression, evident in such events as the Cultural Revolution.[33]

Interestingly, a newer cohort of religious leaders has begun to emerge in recent years. As improvements in communications technology and overall trends of global connectedness have eased and facilitated the spread of information and ideas all over the world, global conceptions of Islam have crept into Xinjiang and into the minds of

---

[31]  Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 136; Kaltman, *Under the Heel*, 127.
[32]  Bellér-Hann, et al., *Situating the Uyghurs*, 171.
[33]  Ibid., 165-166.

these new leaders. As a result, a younger generation of religious leaders has emerged to establish a more orthodox form of Islam in Xinjiang. This development has challenged the current form of Islam that prevails in the region; this more "localized" type of religious practice is less concerned with scriptural accuracy than it is with incorporating and upholding regional tradition and custom. This younger generation of leaders is mostly concentrated in the capital city of Urumqi, while traditional religious leaders remain scattered throughout the rest of the region, including the epicenter of Uyghur Islam in the southern city of Kashgar.[34]

Regardless of whether traditional or emerging religious leaders are more prominent in a given area, the fact remains that the prevalence of Islam in all areas of Xinjiang means religious leaders occupy a unique position of moral authority in local communities all over the province. In this respect, they seem like a natural choice to participate in local peacebuilding. Their religious authenticity gives them unique access to the most local levels of the conflict, and their unique capacity to genuinely employ a spiritual/moral approach to resolving and preventing conflict means that these religious leaders can appeal to everyday Uyghurs' central sense of religiosity in ways no other actor can. Furthermore, Xinjiang is hardly the only situation in which Muslim leaders have been recognized as potential agents of peacebuilding; the success that religious leaders have achieved in addressing conflicts in places like Israel/Palestine and Nigeria[35] shows promise for similar success in Xinjiang.

The inherent weakness of religious leaders as peacebuilders in Xinjiang is their limited capacity to work under CCP rule. The communist state has seemingly

---

[34] Ibid., 172-178.
[35] *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*, ed. David R. Smock (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 9-11; 21-24.

internalized the Marxist concept of religion being the "opiate of the masses." This internalization was painfully clear during the Maoist era which saw witness to the widespread destruction of mosques and detainment of religious leaders in an effort to keep alive the revolutionary spirit of the Chinese people. During the reform era following the death of Mao, the state's religious policy has been ambivalently repressive; the government has at times halted the construction of mosques and dismissed religious leaders, and a more recent ban on "illegal religious activities" has been frustratingly unclear, thus allowing the state to interfere with religion whenever it sees fit.

Somewhat relatedly, many Han Chinese do not think very highly of the Uyghurs' religiosity. Surveys conducted by Blaine Kaltman found many Han to view religion as backward, and the Uyghurs' strong faith in religion as indicative of that group's own alleged backwardness.[36] Paradoxically, it seems that the very religious qualities of Muslim leaders are what connect them so well to Uyghurs yet simultaneously distance them so much from Han. As a result, while these leaders can be expected to successfully handle disputes and mitigate against conflict in local Uyghur communities, they cannot be expected to singlehandedly bridge the gap between Uyghur and Han groups. As discussed earlier, this ethnic gap is one of the most salient drivers of conflict in Xinjiang, so it is clear that another local tool would be required to supplement religious leaders.

Uyghur intellectuals in Xinjiang have the potential to perform this supplementary role in order to enable localized peacebuilding. Intellectuals were similarly persecuted during the Maoist era; the Hundred Flowers Campaign in which the government surprisingly encouraged the expression of constructive criticism from citizens was

---

[36]  Kaltman, *Under the Heel*, 15.

quickly followed by the Anti-Rightist Movement which saw thousands of intellectuals persecuted for the criticisms they had espoused, and the Cultural Revolution famously led to the persecution of many more intellectuals. The reform era has been kinder to intellectuals, although individuals still need to be cautious when levying criticism against the government out of fear of possible retaliation.

Today, Xinjiang's Uyghur intellectuals belong to a number of occupations, serving as party officials, politicians, writers, historians, professors, economists, journalists, doctors, artists, lawyers, and the like. Many of these intellectuals live and work in Urumqi but retain ties with their home oases. When they do return to their homes for visits, Uyghur intellectual figures often find themselves occupying the center of the community's attention. Although many intellectuals work for the state, it is very important to note that the group as a whole has an ambiguous relationship with the government; as Rudelson observes, they are at once potential opponents *and* current beneficiaries of the state.[37] Thus, it is not their relationship to the state that defines this group, but rather their relationship to the collective Uyghur people.

As highly educated and powerful figures in Xinjiang society, Uyghur intellectuals are in the best position to define the present and future condition of Uyghur identity. As Rudelson writes in his *Oasis Identities*, "…[I]ntellectuals are the Uyghurs most capable of articulating and shaping notions of ethnic identity, national consciousness, and cultural values."[38] This otherwise disparate group of intellectuals is united through their nationalistic sentiments regarding the Uyghurs. Through their daily work in Urumqi's Han-dominated society and their selective evocations of the Uyghur past, Xinjiang's intellectuals are deeply engaged in a relentless struggle to reconcile the Uyghurs' rich

---

[37]  Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 114-115.
[38]  Ibid., 145.

history and heritage with the encroaching forces of a Han-centric China and a globalized world. In this struggle, their beliefs diverge. Some are strongly supportive of an independent Uyghur state that will more dutifully preserve Uyghur culture and better respect the needs of the Uyghur people. Meanwhile, others recognize that participation in Han society may be the best path to ensure the brightest possible future for the Uyghurs. This debate is at the foundation of issues over state language and education policy in Xinjiang. *Min kao min* schools may better preserve and celebrate the Uyghur heritage, but *min kao han* schools provide students with the skills and education they need to prosper in modern China.[39]

These and other issues divide Xinjiang's intellectuals, but they also demonstrate that Uyghur intellectuals are closely engaged with the plight of the Uyghurs and possess a nuanced understanding of the seemingly inscrutable relationship between Uyghur and Han society. This is what makes them so valuable as potential agents of localizing peace. Intellectuals in Xinjiang simultaneously have on eye on the big picture and one eye on local conditions. Looking at the big picture, these visionary individuals see the overarching issues of ethnic relations that reside at the core of the region's conflicts; at the micro level, they are engaged in their own personal internal conflicts as well as conflicts in their communities. Ultimately, of all the actors in Xinjiang, Uyghur intellectuals are perhaps the most intimate with the ongoing process of making a square peg fit a circular hole. However, their greatest weakness when it comes to peacebuilding is their lack of a close connection to common Uyghur people, and their greatest challenge has been effectively persuading local communities in their intellectual endeavors.

---

[39] Ibid., 127.

Together, religious leaders and Uyghur intellectuals have the potential to enact substantial positive change in the Xinjiang conflict. Working together, they could provide an important bridge between local Uyghur communities and Han society. Intellectuals and especially religious leaders are both looked up to by Uyghurs as community leaders. Religious leaders are key figures of spiritual and moral authority for Uyghur communities and individuals that hold their Muslim faith to be a central facet of their identities; in this respect, they command a significant amount of trust and influence in their communities, although their bonds with nonreligious Han society are weak at best. Among Uyghurs, intellectuals are the group most embedded in Han society and provide an important link between the oases of Xinjiang and the rest of China. Neither intellectuals nor religious leaders are singlehandedly sufficient in facilitating a positive engagement of Uyghurs with Han society, but they are likely to have more success in this endeavor if they work together.

The areas in which they can work together are numerous, although pinpointing exact areas would require a greater degree of knowledge about local conditions and needs. One example that has been proposed by some intellectuals is working with religious leaders to spearhead a health education campaign aimed at reducing alcohol use, which is a problem among some Uyghurs despite their self-identified commitment to Islam. The strength of a campaign like this is that it downplays the religious implications of the campaign by focusing on health and being partially coordinated by secular intellectuals, yet the involvement of religious leaders adds a powerful appeal to one's personal morals and beliefs. Additionally, because the campaign would be largely secular on the surface, it is a project which does not create the perception of a threat to the government; the CCP is extremely wary of what it terms "religious activity" because

of the rare instances in which religious extremists have utilized religious organizational structures to mobilize violence. Therefore, any peacebuilding project that does not portray itself as a religious movement is less likely to be met with resistance from the state.

These are the types of roles that intellectuals and religious leaders working together would have the most success performing. By deemphasizing religious components without abandoning them entirely, there is a greater likelihood that these agents for peace can succeed in the seemingly impossible task of facilitating a search for common ground between Uyghur, Han, and government actors in a conflict setting characterized by many incentives for violence aligned along ethnic lines. Additionally, intellectuals are more likely to invest themselves in their peacebuilding role if they perceive it as more than a religious movement.

What this dual-sided peacebuilding tool probably would *not* do is dissuade religious extremists or separatists from carrying out acts of terrorism, as was more prevalent in the 1990s but is less so now. Although the government is quick to characterize any violence or unrest in Xinjiang as definitively extremist or separatist in nature (as we have seen with its handling of the recent killings near Kashgar), it is clear that what is really at the root of the conflict and recent violence are disparities, real and perceived, of how Uyghurs and Han are treated by government officials in Beijing and Urumqi, law enforcement officers, leaders in the private sector, and society has a whole. Therefore, what this tool for local peacebuilding *would* do is provide an authentic, productive, and nonviolent channel for marginalized voices to be heard, as well as to assure marginalized individuals that their voices are indeed being heard. This tool can provide local Uyghur communities with local inroads to Han society, with the hope that

the distance between the two will diminish as more meaningful exchanges take place through religious leaders and intellectuals.

## 5. Conclusion

A localized approach to peacebuilding in Xinjiang through the use of religious and intellectual leaders would bring locally embedded capacities and innovations to the forefront of the peace process. It does not directly address many of the conflict drivers outlined in the conflict assessment above (such as economic disparities and divisive government policies), but neither do the CCP's current "peacebuilding" policies of ruling Xinjiang with an iron fist and promoting Han-centric development. The primary strength of this local peacebuilding tool is that it gives local Uyghur communities the agency to address conflict-driving factors to Han society in a manner that is likely to be accepted, or at least tolerated, by everybody involved in the process (including the government). Furthermore, it allows these communities a sense of ownership in the ongoing process of building and sustaining peace at all levels of society in Xinjiang, meaning that individuals or groups who might otherwise resort to or support violence to make their voices heard are instead more likely to invest themselves in this nonviolent system of expressing local needs and expectations. Deeper investigation is required into the exact issue areas in which intellectuals and religious leaders can effectively facilitate the search for common ground, but this project will hopefully represent the springboard to take the search for peace in Xinjiang to new heights.

# Works Cited

Bellér-Hann, Ildikó, M. Cristina Cesáro, Rachel Harris, and Joanne Smith Finley, ed. *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.

"China 'Arrests More Suspects' Over Xinjiang Clashes." *BBC*, April 29, 2013.

Chung, Chien-peng. "China's "War on Terror": September 11 and Uighur Separatism." *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (2002): 8-12.

Dwyer, Arienne M. "The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse." East-West Center, 2005.

Han, Enzer. "Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict in Xinjiang, China." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2010): 244-256.

Hutzler, Charles. "Income Gaps, Corruption Fuel China Riots." NBC News, July 14, 2009.

Jiang, Leiwen, Tong Yufen, Zhao Zhijie, Li Tianhong, and Liao Jianhua. "Water Resources, Land Exploration and Population Dynamics in Arid Areas: The Case of the Tarim River Basin in Xinjiang of China." *Population and Environment* 26, no. 6 (2005): 471-503.

Kaltman, Blaine. *Under the Heel of the Dragon*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007.

Millward, James A. *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Millward, James. "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment." East-West Center, 2004.

Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – China : Uyghurs*, July 2008.

*Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*. Edited by David R. Smock. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006.

Rudelson, Justin Jon. *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Shichor, Yitzhak. "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang." *Asian Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2005): 119-135.

Strampe, Kelsey. "Uyghur Separatist Conflict in Western China." *ICE Case Studies* 183 (2006). http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/xinjiang.htm#r1.

Tsung, Linda. *Minority Languages, Education and Communities in China*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Wei, Shan, and Weng Cuifen. "China's New Policy in Xinjiang and its Challenges." *East Asian Policy* 2, no. 3 (2010): 58-66.