

Bush's pay-off to China over Iraq: Uighur group declared "terrorist"

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On September 12, the United Nations accepted a joint recommendation by the governments of the United States, China, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan that the Chinese-based East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) be declared a terrorist organisation. In the midst of the war preparations by the Bush administration against Iraq, Washington's support for this motion can only be interpreted as a US pay-off to the Beijing regime to secure its acquiescence in the UN.

The ETIM is one of a number of Islamic separatist movements operating among the Turkic-speaking and Muslim Uighur population of Xinjiang, the oil-rich province of northwest China bordering Central Asia. Among the separatists, Xinjiang is referred to as East Turkestan. In recent years, the backwardness and inequalities endured by Uighur Muslims have led to rising unrest in the province. Beijing's brutal response, including arrests, curfews and executions, has enabled the separatist movements to win a wider hearing.

Since the September 11 attacks on the US, the Chinese government has sought to justify its oppression in Xinjiang by linking the ETIM and other organisations with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda movement. [See: China's "war on terrorism"—brutal repression of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang]

The Bush administration's decision to back Beijing's call to outlaw the ETIM marks a shift. On December 6, US counter-terrorist envoy Francis Taylor declared after talks in Beijing: "The US has not designated or considers the East Turkestan organisation as a terrorist organisation... In our discussion we discussed the fact that while these people are indeed involved in terrorist activities in Afghanistan, the legitimate economic and social issues that confront people in north-western China are not necessarily counter-terrorist issues and should be resolved politically rather than using counter-

terrorism methods."

In the months following Taylor's visit, the Bush administration appeared to be preparing to add China's treatment of the Uighurs to the list of human rights abuses used to pressure Beijing. As recently as August 5, the Uighur American Association testified before the US Congressional Executive Commission on China, calling for the establishment of a US government "Special Coordinator for Human Rights" for Xinjiang, as exists already for Tibet.

On August 26, however, following talks with Chinese vice-president Hu Jintao, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage announced that ETIM had been added to the State Department's list of terrorist organisations. The about-face was an obvious concession to Beijing aimed at garnering some measure of Chinese support for a military attack on Iraq. It also underscores once again the way in which the US and others exploit the label of "terrorist" as a device for their own political ends.

The East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC)—an umbrella for the main Uighur separatist organisations—immediately warned that the "US has given China a green light to do whatever China wants to do with the Uighur people... The issue will no longer be looked at as a human rights issue but as a terrorism issue". According to ETIC, the ETIM is "an obscure group even the majority of Uighurs know nothing about".

The US embassy in Beijing attempted to justify the shift, releasing a statement on August 29 citing more than 200 acts of ETIM terrorism in China, causing at least 162 deaths and 440 injuries. The embassy also alleged it possessed maps showing ETIM might have been "planning attacks against US interests abroad, including the US embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan".

The embassy simply reproduced the statistics from a Chinese government document published in January. Significantly, in the original Chinese version, the attacks were blamed on eight organisations, whereas the US pinned all responsibility on the ETIM. As for the plot against US facilities in Bishkek, Kyrg security officials publicly cast doubt on the evidence. “The maps were of Bishkek and the diplomatic districts, but we had no indication that the US was a target,” one told the *Washington Post*.

The US support for the UN resolution on ETIM was warmly received in Beijing. Since the US used the activities of the Kosovo Liberation Army to justify the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999, the Chinese regime has been concerned that Washington could exploit the Uighur movements for similar purposes. Xinjiang is the geographical linchpin for China’s ambitions to tap into the vast oil and gas resources of Central Asia. A major gas pipeline is currently under construction to the coastal areas around Shanghai, with long-term plans to construct further oil and gas pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

While the US has not branded all Uighur groups as “terrorist,” its designation of the ETIM has reassured Beijing, however temporarily, that the US has no immediate designs in western China. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan declared the US decision demonstrated that “China and the United States share extensive common interests in the field of anti-terrorism”.

Beijing duly reciprocated in kind. In meetings with Iraqi representatives on August 27 and subsequent statements, Chinese officials have lined up with the US accusation that Iraq has defied the UN. They have repeatedly insisted that Baghdad allow the re-entry of the UN weapons inspectors. Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan demanded in the UN last week that Iraq abides by UN resolutions “in an earnest manner”.

In 1990-1991, the Chinese Stalinist regime played its part in facilitating the first war on Iraq. It supported 11 UN resolutions against Iraq, and abstained in the final vote that authorised military action. As one of the five states that have veto power in the Security Council, this abstention was crucial in providing the fig leaf of UN approval for the US war. Having been given a guarantee that Washington will not interfere—for the time being at least—with China’s interests in Central

Asia, there are ample grounds for anticipating Beijing is prepared to do the same in 2002.



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