CHAPTER FOUR

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SOVIET UNION AND
RESURGENCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN XINJIANG

4.1 Re-emergence of Turkic Nationalism

Fear of persecution in Xinjiang drove many Turkics to migrate to Soviet Central Asia, most taking refuge in Kazakhstan and Kirghistan. The close ethnic relations between the Turkics in Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang made it easier for them to migrate. And being familiar with the terrain of the Xinjiang-Soviet frontier made it easier for them to migrate to the USSR. In 1962, approximately 6,000 Kazakhs fled to the USSR, many of them former leaders of the ETR. The Sino-Soviet rivalry in the 1960s also prompted the USSR to exploit the Turkic resentment against the Chinese in Xinjiang. From April to June 1962, there were almost 67,000 Turkics from Xinjiang who migrated to Soviet Central Asia.¹ These refugees testified about mass discrimination practised against them and the local Chinese officials who knew of their intention to leave encouraged them to do so.² The situation became worse in the spring of 1962 when it was alleged that the Chinese organised a massacre of Turkics in Kulja, resulting in over 46,000 Turkics to migrate to Soviet Central Asia between 15 October 1962 and 1 May 1963.³ By the end of 1962, there were at least 200,000 Turkics had taken refuge in Kazakhstan, and among them were the Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kirghizs. Despite living in Kazakhstan, they never gave up their struggle for national independence.

² Ibid., p. 914.
³ Ibid.
In 1963, the Turkics established the East Turkestan Liberation Committee (ETLC) and the East Turkestan Liberation Army (ETLA) in Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan. The main objective of these two organisations was to liberate Xinjiang from Chinese rule and most of its members were former leaders of the ETR. Whilst the ETLC was headed by Ziya Samedi, an Uighur nationalist who escaped to the USSR, the ETLA was headed by Zunun Taipov, an Uighur military leader who served the Ining National Army (INA) during the 1940s. Both the ETLC and ETLA were aided by the USSR. The USSR made plans to ensure that the ETLC and ETLA would weaken Chinese position in Xinjiang and was aimed at restoring the formers influence in northwest China, especially Xinjiang. The ETLA had its own broadcasting station, known as the Free Turkestan Radio (FTR). Sponsored by the USSR, the FTR transmitted news to Uighurs in Xinjiang with the hope of inciting them to rebel against the Chinese. In fact, the Academy of Science of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic also published two books to instigate the Turkic migrants and those in Xinjiang to retaliate against the Chinese. These books were *Studies in the History of Kazakhstan* and *East Turkestan*.\(^4\) In April 1964, the People’s Congress of the XUAR passed a resolution condemning the USSR’s involvement in Turkic separatist movements. In fact, the Cultural Revolution in 1966 caused more Turkics to flee to Kazakhstan to seek refuge.

Since 1969, the Sino-Soviet border conflict made China realise the necessity of ethnic minorities for national security.\(^5\) This realisation and subsequent change of heart were significant because right after the Cultural Revolution, the customs of the minority

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groups were encouraged as an expression of ethnic diversity. Religious sites in Xinjiang were restored and the use of Turkic language in local schools was allowed. However, the schools were still government controlled. In 1980, the CCP of Xinjiang permitted the use of the Arabic script for the Turkic language and in the same year, the Xinjiang Islamic Association (XIA) was given the permission to reintroduce the Arabic script for the Uighur and Kazakh languages. Turkic Muslims were also allowed to perform the hajj in Mecca. In 1984, 15,000 imams were trained and 150,000 copies of Quran were published in Xinjiang. Despite the Chinese government’s attempt to reform its policy towards the Turkics during the late-1970s and throughout the 1980s, Turkic nationalism was not deterred. It is noteworthy to mention that although the CCP wanted to reform and improve the ethnic relations with the Turkics, they however still continued the policy of Han migration. The Han population living in Xinjiang was almost as much as the Uighurs in 1970. The Turkics never gave up the aspiration for independence even after reforms were made by the CCP in the 1980s. In April 1980, there a riot erupted between Turkic youths and government troops in Aksu, with another one occurring in October 1980.

7 Lillian Craig Harris, “Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China’s Policy in the Islamic World,” The China Quarterly, No. 133, March 1993, p. 120.
4.2 Political Developments and Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia and Its Influence in Xinjiang

Turkic resentment toward Chinese rule deepened when their fellow relatives living in the former Soviet Central Asia republics achieved independence after the disintegration of the USSR. Anti-Chinese sentiment amongst the Turkics found expression in Islamic self-assertion under the impact of an expanding wave of Muslim fundamentalism and militancy.¹¹ The disintegration of the USSR was a mixed blessing for China. Though it eliminated China’s security threat to the northwest it however created a volatile political scenario especially that in Central Asia. Five Central Asian republics achieved independence after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.¹² Consequent political developments in Central Asia also contributed to the strengthening of ethno-nationalism fervour in Xinjiang so much so that the emergence of ultra ethno-nationalism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia destabilised Xinjiang, Kansu and Qinghai.¹³ In Xinjiang, the Turkics who had long been struggling against Chinese rule began to develop relations with their ethnic and religious kins in the former Soviet republics.¹⁴ The independence of these former Soviet Central Asian republics further motivated the Turkics to fight for the independence of Xinjiang. Turkic refugees in Kazakhstan provided arms to their counterparts in Xinjiang during the April 1990 riots.¹⁵ In short, the

independence of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, Islamic resurgence and pan-Turkism were the three driving forces that presented security challenges to China in Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{16}

Islamic militancy in Xinjiang can be traced to the mid-1980s during the Afghan War. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) of Pakistan and the Hizbe Islami, the Afghani Mujahideen group of Gulbuddin Heckmatyar, recruited the Turkic Muslims from Xinjiang to fight against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. After the war, the Turks who participated in the Afghan War returned to Xinjiang and rejoined the Turkic nationalist movement against Beijing and the Han settlers.\textsuperscript{17} In December 1995, the JI managed to influence 100 Uighur students at the Islamic University of Islamabad to join them. They were indoctrinated and inspired by the JI to fight against communism in their attempt to liberate Xinjiang from the \textit{kafirs} (infidels).\textsuperscript{18} It was alleged that there existed guerrilla warfare training camps for the Uighurs in Jalalabad, Afghanistan and Landi Kotal in Pakistan. However, the Pakistani government denied the existence of any such training camps. Afghanistan, under the Taliban regime, became a centre for terrorism and arms-smuggling across the Central Asian region.\textsuperscript{19} The Mujahiddin were supported and aided by the United States (US) in the 1980s to fight the USSR occupation of Afghanistan, playing an important role in bringing about victory to the Mujahiddin.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jun-7.html
\textsuperscript{19} Echo of Islam, July 2000.
\textsuperscript{20} Rashid, \textit{The Resurgence of Central Asia}, p. 223. See also John Cooley, \textit{Unholy Wars}, p. 276.
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The success of the Mujahiddin in defeating Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s became a source of inspiration for Turkic nationalism in Xinjiang. The Turkics identified their own plight with that of the Mujahiddin because both were fighting oppressive regimes. The Turkic militant groups received military training from the Taliban in Afghanistan who in turn received support from the Pakistan.\textsuperscript{21} The assistance was in the form weaponry such as tanks, jets, rockets and other sophisticated weapons delivered mainly through the south-western frontiers of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{22} Subsequently, the Taliban made use of the military equipment to train other terrorist groups. Pakistan granted assistance to the Taliban basically to counter balance India's military might and destablise the latter, mainly by making use of the Taliban to organise terrorist attacks into Indian Kashmir. Weapons like machine guns and revolvers were manufactured in Afghanistan by the Taliban and were also smuggled into Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{23}

The Wahhabis, originating from Saudi Arabia and practising a very conservative approach of Islam, sought the overthrow of secular states and establishment of Islamic theocracies. As such, they supported any independent militant group or anti-government religious group in order to achieve this objective. The influence of Wahhabism in Central Asia started in 1912, introduced by an Arab called Sayed Sharie Mohammad. By the 1980s, the Saudi Arabian government was providing financial assistance to many Central Asian republics and as such brought about the revival of the Wahhabism in the Central Asian region.\textsuperscript{24} The Wahhabis were alleged to have instigated the Uighurs to oppose

\textsuperscript{21} http://www.future-china.org.tw/spel_rpt/uygr/uygr19990204.htm
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Asiaweek}, 22 September 1995.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Echo of Islam}, No. 181, October 1991, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{24} Ahmed Rashid, \textit{The Resurgence of Central Asia Islam or Nationalism}, p. 221.
Chinese rule by providing these militant groups with weapons. They also instigated anti-
Beijing and anti-Han sentiments and trained many Turkics to be religious teachers. Upon
their return to Xinjiang, they established private madrassas (religious schools) that were
sponsored by the Wahhabis and JI that conspired with anti-Beijing elements among the
Turkics. They also propagated and encouraged jihad against the infidels. The Xinjiang
Academy of Social Sciences in Urumqi published a report that exposed the Turkic
Muslim separatists for infiltrating Xinjiang by means of literature, videos, radio
broadcasts, and by using religious schools as a cover up for political indoctrination.\(^{25}\)

The Uighur diaspora led by individuals like Erkin Alptekin in Turkey also
provided assistance to Turkic nationalist movement. Another Turkic nationalist was
Yusuf Isa Alptekin, the 90-year-old leader of the Turkestan Liberation Movement (TLM)
in Istanbul. Trans-national linguistic ties formed the basis of Turkish appeal to the Turkic
nationalists. Some of the Uighur exiles were recruited as language translators for Radio
Liberty stationed in Munich and run by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the
1960s. In fact, some of the present Uighur nationalist leaders are former CIA translators
or operatives.\(^{26}\)

Since 1995, there have been several Turkic separatist organisations established by
the Uighur exiles. These are mainly the East Turkestan Union (ETU) based in Europe and
led by Erkin Alptekin, the Eastern Turkestan National Freedom Centre (ETNFC) based in
Washington D.C. and led by Anwar Yusuf as well as the Organisation for Turkestan

\(^{25}\) Lillian Craig Harris, "Xinjiang Central Asia and the Implication for China's Policy in the Islamic
World," p. 121.
Freedom (OTF) based in Turkey. Besides that, there are also several organisations based in Kazakhstan especially the Organisation for the Liberation of Uighurstan (OLU) led by Ashir Vakhidi and the Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkestan (RFET) led by Modan Mukhlisi.27 The Karakoram Highway and the railroad that links the Turkic Muslims of Xinjiang with their counterparts in Central Asia and Turkey has to a large extent restored the trans-territorial ethnic and religious solidarity.28 The local Turkics are now able to meet their counterparts while performing their annual pilgrimage in Mecca.

The Iranian revolution and Afghan resistance proved to be an inspiration for the Turkic struggle to liberate their homeland from Chinese rule. Since the disintegration of the USSR, a political vacuum has emerged in the Central Asia region. The lack of leadership in the Central Asia region enabled various countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan to extend their influence to the region. Providing assistance to their fellow Muslims in the region is the means to consolidate their own position with Islam playing the role of a unifying force for the Turkics across Central Asia. In Xinjiang, there are three main driving forces that motivate Turkic separatism, namely religion, ethnicity and nationalism.

4.3 Political Violence in Xinjiang

1990 marked the 41st anniversary of PRC’s rule over Xinjiang (1949-90). Despite various efforts made by the Chinese government to eliminate Turkic nationalism and

27 Ibid.
separatist tendencies, the Turkics continue to struggle for an independent state. Although the PRC granted Xinjiang the status of an autonomous region, in reality the CCP remains the main decision making body and most of the important positions in the provincial government are still held by Hans. The existence of the Turkics was threatened by the mass migration of Hans into Xinjiang. Most of the Han migrants live in northern Xinjiang, namely in the Urumqi-Shihezi-Karamay development areas where they outnumber the Uighurs and enjoy affluent lifestyles whilst most Uighurs live in the backward and under-developed areas of south Xinjiang.²⁹

This disparity engendered serious concern as well as discontent amongst the Uighurs especially when most of the job opportunities were given to Han migrants. It provided a basis for Islamic groups and national separatists to arouse discontent and anti-Han sentiments amongst the Uighurs. Turkic nationalists who were vocal in criticising the government were sent to *laogai* or labour camps to be reformed whilst and equal number were tortured and killed. Apart from that and due to rising ethnic tensions, between 1949 and 1972, there were as many as 360,000 people killed in 548 separate incidents of clashes between the Turkics and Hans. During the Cultural Revolution, many mosques in Xinjiang were demolished by the PLA or used as grounds to rear pigs.³⁰ *Ahungs* (religious teachers) were forced to rear pigs and many of them were persecuted because of their reluctance to renounce Islam. The PLA also destroyed the tombs of *sufi*


shaykhs (saints), considered sacred for the Turkics. Inhuman policies such as the coercive birth control, was introduced to control and reduce the Turkic population vis-à-vis the Hans.

Despite the reforms implemented by Deng Xiopeng in the 1980s, the Turkics still felt colonised by the Hans and considered the so-called freedom and ethnic equality as mere rhetoric by the CCP. Because of the injustice upon the Turkics was not voiced out by Turkic representatives in the National People’s Congress that was pro-Beijing, the Uighur nationalists argued that they had no choice other than violence because all other means of self-expression were closed to them. For example, all education was conducted in Chinese and they were even not allowed to have any form of media in their own language with the local populace denied representation in the province. Only members of the CCP dominated by the Hans were allowed to occupy high positions in local government. It is noteworthy to mention that not all Turkics in Xinjiang were supportive of acts of violence committed by ultra-nationalist groups because not all Turkic Muslims were fundamentalists. Although most Turkics despised the Hans as colonisers, not all of them opted for violent retaliation against the Hans. In reality, most acts of violence in Xinjiang were committed by Uighurs, who had fought the Afghan War in the 1980s, with their military skills obtained from the JI and the Taliban.

Zahideen Yusuf, a Turkic Muslim from Baren, a poor Uighur village south of Kashgar, was involved in arms smuggling from Afghanistan into Xinjiang. He was

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influenced by the Mujahideens who had fought the USSR. He started The Baren Organisation, which fought for the independence of Xinjiang by means of force. The organisation managed to win the confidence of the Turkics to go against the Chinese. On 5 April 1990, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the Chinese police raided Baren looking for weapons. The PLA was mobilised and the Turkics fought with the army for two days. As a result of this clash, 30 people were killed, including Zahideen and several Chinese police.\textsuperscript{32} In 1992, a similar tragedy took place in Baren where a bomb exploded and killed 22 people. Further, on 5 February 1992, two bombs exploded on a bus in Urumqi while the Han migrants were celebrating the Lunar New Year, killing six people.\textsuperscript{33} Apart from these, during the winter of 1994, the Turkics demonstrated against the Chinese authorities over the publication of a book, which was critical of Islam. The demonstration eventually led to racial riots between Turkic and Han migrants. In 1996, clashes between Turkics Muslim separatists and the security forces in Xinjiang continued. Between April and June 1996, 2773 people were arrested and more than 600 guns were seized in Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{34} Nine Turkics armed with guns and homemade bombs were killed in a battle with the Chinese police in April 1996 in the district of Kulja.

Since 1997, Turkic insurgency has become more daring. Prior to 1997, the Turkics launched a low-level insurgency in Xinjiang but this changed after 1997, as there was a terror campaign of bombings and assassinations. The PLA responded with detention and executions. It was the Turkic separatists way of getting the attention of the international community because whole world’s attention was on China as Hong Kong

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Asiaweek}, 24 October 1997.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

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was about to be returned to China in July 1997. The Turkic separatists seized this opportunity for publicity to highlight their plight to the world. On 5 and 6 February 1997, a large group of Uighur youths totalling 1000 marched on the streets of Yining shouting anti-Chinese and pro-independence slogans. According to Ismail Cengiz, the Secretary-General of the East Turkestan Immigrants based in Istanbul, the protest was a result of an arrest of a group of Turkic women reading prayers during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in a private home on 4 February.\(^\text{35}\) However, the Chinese authorities denied such an allegation. The People’s Armed Police were mobilised to curb the violence at the scene of the clash between the protesters and the police. According to an Uighur newspaper in Central Asia, the *Golos Vostochnova Turkestana* (Voice of Eastern Turkestan), the two-day rioting resulted in 55 Hans and 25 Uighurs killed and at least 550 persons arrested.\(^\text{36}\)

In early 1997, Haji Harun Khan, a 73-year-old *imam* of the Eidyah Mosque was nearly stabbed to death by Turkic militants. They attempted to assassinate him because they considered him as a government sympathiser who had betrayed Turkic nationalism.\(^\text{37}\) Similarly in 1997, a Han doctor was stabbed to death by a group of Turkic youths in Xinjiang. The Turksics Muslims militants expanded their violent and terrorist attacks even to Beijing, with the objective expressing their resentment and hatred to the PRC leaders. The attacks were well planned because they coincided with the National People’s Congress Meeting in Beijing and aimed at gaining attention of the foreign media


\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) *Asiaweek*, 24 October 1997.
present in Beijing. On 5 March 1997, a bomb exploded at a commercial building in Beijing's Chaoyang district but fortunately no one was hurt in the explosion.\(^{38}\) Two days later, another bomb exploded in a bus in the Beijing's Xiddan district resulting in three deaths and 30 injuries.\(^{39}\) Uighurs living in exile in Kazakhstan claimed responsibility for all the attacks in Beijing and explained that the attacks were as retaliation against China's suppression of pro-independence activism in Xinjiang. According to the Xinjiang Daily in 1997, Chinese police managed to seize 2,723 kg of explosives, 4,100 sticks of dynamite, 604 guns and 3100 rounds of ammunition during a raid.\(^{40}\) A third bombing of a bus took place on 25 February 1997 in Urumqi, killing nine persons and injuring 74 others.\(^{41}\)

However, China denied the existence of such serious problems in Xinjiang with the official media often censoring news of violence by Turkic militants. In March 1996, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau held a meeting chaired by President Jiang Zemin to discuss the problems in Xinjiang. The official record of the meeting issued as a 'top secret' classified document known as 'Document No. 7' was indicative of Beijing leadership in dealing with the challenges confronting Chinese rule in Xinjiang.\(^{42}\) The aim of Document No. 7 was to prepare for any emergence of massive social and ethnic unrest in Xinjiang. Among the strategies highlighted in Document No. 7 were condemnation of separatist movements in Xinjiang, strengthening control of ethnic as well as religious affairs and a full-scale mobilisation at all levels of the security apparatus to counter social

\(^{38}\) *Time*, 17 March 1997

\(^{39}\) *The Economist*, 15 March 1997

\(^{40}\) [http://www.Asiaweek.com](http://www.Asiaweek.com)

\(^{41}\) [http://www.amnesty-usa.org/asa/china/xj.html](http://www.amnesty-usa.org/asa/china/xj.html)
unrest in the region. Document No. 7 also suggested the use of diplomacy in the Central Asia region to pressure neighbouring countries into cracking down on various exile Uighur groups. In May 1996, the Chinese Chief of Staff, General Fu Quanyou visited Xinjiang and pledged that the army would build “A Great Wall of Steel” to safeguard the region. From then on, the Chinese authorities began a major crackdown on the separatist movements, arresting more than 5000 Uighurs, many amongst them intellectuals, religious leaders and artists. Wang Lequan, the secretary of the Xinjiang Communist Party called for an all out effort against the independence movement, which he termed as “anti-revolutionary violence.”

New restrictions were issued to forbid Muslim religious teachers to teach subjects with sensitive issues such as Uighur history and the doctrine of jihad and no Arab teachers were allowed to work in Muslim religious schools in Xinjiang. In addition, only hajj applicants aged 50 and above were only allowed to visit Mecca and no Turkics were given permission to study in either Iran or Pakistan. Private religious schools and mosques were closed and many Turkics suspected of harbouring anti-Chinese sentiments were arrested and executed. All in, about 100 Turkic Muslim secessionists were executed as a result of their involvement in the riots in Yining on 5 and 6 February. The CCP also prohibited the publication and printing of religious books. On 25 January 1997, Abdulahat Abdurixit, the Chairman of the XUAR, called for action against Turkic Muslim separatism.

42 http://www.caccp.org/conf/doc7.html
44 The Economist, 13 July 1996. See also, The Economist, 20 April 1996
The Chinese authorities also started their diplomatic efforts to pressure neighbouring Central Asia countries to cease support to separatist movements. In April 1996, China signed an agreement with the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for Confidence Building Measures (CBM) in the militarised areas of border regions. Further, in July 1997, President Jiang Zemin visited Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where he issued a joint communiqué expressing strong opposition to ethnic separatism. In November 1997, Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Shi visited Turkey and warned her against agitating ethnic separatists in Xinjiang.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, China also tried to overcome the separatist movement in Xinjiang by encouraging economic development of the region. This was an attempt on their part to win the hearts of the people in Xinjiang. China increased its trade with the Central Asian republics and established joint oil and gas exploration projects with Kazakhstan. It is hoped that the Central Asian republics would co-operate with China for the prosperity of the region instead of supporting the Turkic separatists. How much of all these measures have borne positive results is yet to be seen but one thing for sure is that the political volatility of the Central Asian region continues to impact greatly on the Turks of Xinjiang. The struggle for a separate political entity remains an important agenda amongst some, if not all, of the Turks of Xinjiang. What remains to be seen is the post-September 11 effects on this region especially in view of the disbanding of the

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Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. According to latest reports, most of the Al-Qaeda operatives formally based in Afghanistan are today hiding somewhere along the Afghani-Pakistani border. At worst, some could have even slipped into Xinjiang!