

INTERVENTIONS

ROUTLEDGE

# Violence, Discourse, and Politics in China's Uyghur Region

The Terroristization of Xinjiang

Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino



# VIOLENCE, DISCOURSE, AND POLITICS IN CHINA'S UYGHUR REGION

This book investigates how Uyghur-related violent conflict and Uyghur ethnic minority identity, religion, and the Xinjiang region, more broadly, became constituted as a 'terrorism' problem for the Chinese state.

Building on securitization theory, Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), and the scholarly definitional debate on terrorism, it develops the concept of terroristization as a critical analytical framework for the study of historical processes of threat construction. Investigating the violent events reported in Xinjiang since the early 1980s, the evolving discursive patterns used by the Chinese state to make sense of violent incidents, and the crackdown policies that the official terrorism discourse has legitimized, the book demonstrates how the securitization, and later terroristization, of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, is the result of a discursive and political choice of the Chinese state. The author reveals the contingent and unstable nature of such construction, and how it problematizes the inevitability of the rationale behind China's 'war on terror', that has prescribed a brutal crackdown as the most viable approach to governing the tensions that have historically characterized China's rule over the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

This book will be of interest to scholars and students of the politics of contemporary China, security and ethnic minority issues, International Relations and Security, as well as those adopting discursive approaches to the study of security, notably those within the critical security and terrorism studies fields.

**Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, UK.

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*Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino*



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For my parents, Juan Francisco and Mari Pepa



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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>List of Abbreviations and Acronyms</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>Note on Transliteration</i>	<i>xvi</i>

Introduction	1
Situating the Discursive Construction of Terrorism	2
Questioning the Chinese Official Narrative	4
Central Contributions	7
Outline of Chapters	8
1 From Securitization to ‘Terroristization’	12
Adjusting Securitization Theory for the Study of Terrorism in China	13
<i>Key Tenets of Securitization Theory</i>	13
<i>From Securitization to Terroristization</i>	15
<i>Moving Terroristization beyond Democracies</i>	16
<i>Discourse and Materiality: Terroristization’s Minimal Foundationalism</i>	19
‘Terrorism’ Definitions as Mapping Device	22
<i>Understanding Terrorism Definitions as Discursive Anchors</i>	23
<i>Terrorism Is Premeditated Violence</i>	26
<i>Terrorism Is Violence against Civilians</i>	28
<i>Terrorism Is Indiscriminate and Unexpected Violence</i>	29
<i>Terrorism Is Symbolic Violence That Communicates Fear to Coerce</i>	31

	<i>Terrorism Is Political (Violence)</i>	32
	<i>A Matrix for Interpreting Violent Events as Terrorism</i>	34
	Conclusion	37
2	Securitizing Xinjiang: The Years of ‘Counterrevolution’ (1978–1990)	40
	Mapping Violence in Xinjiang in the Early ‘Reform and Opening Up’ Period	41
	<i>Payzawat 1981</i>	42
	<i>Kashgar 1981</i>	43
	<i>Student Protests 1985</i>	44
	<i>Ürümchi 1989</i>	45
	<i>Baren 1990</i>	46
	<i>The Spectrum of Violence during the ‘Reform and Opening Up’ Era</i>	48
	Talking ‘Counterrevolution’: From Restraint to Securitization	50
	‘Neither Serious nor Surprising’: <i>The Riots Discourse during the Early 1980s</i>	51
	‘Counterrevolution’ and ‘Splittism’: <i>The Discursive Shift on Riots in the Late 1980s</i>	53
	<i>The Baren ‘Counterrevolutionary Rebellion’</i>	56
	The Politics of ‘Counterrevolution’ in Xinjiang	60
	<i>Gradualism: A Moderate Response to Violent Unrest</i>	60
	<i>Abandoning Gradualism, Singling out Xinjiang for Crackdown</i>	64
	Conclusion	67
3	The Proto-Terroristization of Xinjiang: ‘Striking Hard’ against the ‘Three Forces’ (1991–2001)	69
	Mapping Violence during the Proto-Terroristization Phase	70
	<i>Key Episodes of Violence in Xinjiang and beyond</i>	70
	<i>The Broad Spectrum of Violence during the 1990s</i>	75
	New Language, Old Arguments: The Emergence of ‘Terrorism’ in the Framing of Violence in Xinjiang	78
	<i>Constructing the Threat</i>	79
	<i>Prescribing a Long and Merciless Fight</i>	81
	<i>Change of Language: From Counter-Revolution to Terrorism</i>	83
	<i>The Terroristization of the Ghulja Riot</i>	84
	<i>Internationalizing the Threat</i>	87
	The Politics of ‘Striking Hard’	89
	<i>A Legal-Executive Security Apparatus to Fight Separatism</i>	90
	<i>Implementing Document No. 7</i>	93



<i>The ‘Strike Hard’ Campaigns: A Terroristization Device</i>	97
<i>Exporting the Proto-Terroristization of Xinjiang</i>	98
Conclusion	101
4 The Terroristization of Xinjiang (2001–2020): Waging a People’s War on Terror	103
Terroristization in the Absence of Violence	104
<i>Seizing the Chance: The Recasting of Violence in Xinjiang as Terrorism after 9/11</i>	104
The Spectrum of Violence in 21st-Century Xinjiang	107
<i>Key Episodes of Violence in the Terroristization Phase</i>	108
<i>Mapping the Features of Violence during the Years of Terroristization</i>	112
Terroristizing Violence, Prescribing a ‘People’s War’	117
<i>Materializing the Threat: The Terroristization of All Violence in Xinjiang</i>	117
<i>Prescribing a ‘People’s War’ against Terrorism and ‘Religious Extremism’</i>	123
China’s War on Terror in Xinjiang: Sustained Crackdown and the Advent of the Surveillance State	127
<i>Establishing and Implementing a Counter-Terrorist Apparatus</i>	127
<i>Sustained Crackdown in the Name of Fighting Terrorism</i>	132
<i>Chasing and Hunting ‘Terrorists’ Abroad</i>	141
<i>Sine die Terroristization: Surveillance State and ‘De-Extremification’ Camps</i>	144
Conclusion	150
Conclusion	152
The Concept of Terroristization	154
Violence, Discourse, and Politics in the Uyghur Region	155
Broader Lessons from the Terroristization of Xinjiang	159
Implications for Future Research	160
From Terroristization to Assimilation	162
<i>Appendix: List of Violent Events</i>	164
<i>Bibliography</i>	176
<i>Index</i>	242

# FIGURES

1.1	Interpretative scale of terrorism according to violence and motivation	35
1.2	Three-levels of the terroristization framework	38
2.1	The spectrum of violence during the ‘reform and opening up’ era (1978–1990)	49
3.1	The spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the proto-terroristization stage (1991–2001)	76
4.1	The spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the phase of terroristization (2001–2018)	113

# TABLES

1.1	Most frequently cited <i>definiens</i> in scholarly definitions of terrorism	24
1.2	Definitional clusters and <i>definiens</i>	25
2.1	Key features of ‘reform and opening up’ era events	48
3.1	Key features of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s	75
4.1	Key features of violence in Xinjiang (2001–2018)	113
4.2	Case studies of <i>terroristization</i> according to category of violence	118
4.3	Mentions to definitional markers of terrorism in Chinese official narratives about violent events	119
4.4	Types of comments and behaviour considered religious extremism according to Article 9 of the XUAR Regulation on De-extremification	132

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AI	Amnesty International
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CPC	Communist Party of China
CECC	U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China
CS	Copenhagen School
CS's	Copenhagen School's
CTS	Critical Terrorism Studies
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
ETIP	East Turkistan Islamic Party
ETUE	Eastern Turkestan Union in Europe
EU	European Union
GWoT	Global War on Terror
HRIC	Human Rights in China
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IAC	Islamic Association of China
IRBC	Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NPC	National People's Congress
PAP	People's Armed Police
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSB	Public Security Bureau
RWB	Reporters without Borders
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCIO	State Council Information Office
TS	Terrorism Studies

TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
UAA	Uyghur American Association
UHRP	Uyghur Human Rights Project
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	UN Security Council
UNRF	United National Revolutionary Front
US	United States
WHO	World Health Organization
WUC	World Uyghur Congress
XASS	Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences
XPCC	Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps
XUAR	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

## Media

AP	Associated Press
AFP	Agence France Presse
ANSA	Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata
AFR	Australian Financial Review
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBCME	BBC Monitoring Europe
BBCMCA	BBC Monitoring Central Asia
BBCMF	BBC Monitoring Newsfile
BBCMFSU	BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union/USSR
BBCMSA	BBC Monitoring South Asia
BBCMSAP	BBC Monitoring Service Asia-Pacific
CCTV	China Central Television
CDT	China Digital Times
CRI	China Radio International
IPRSID	IPR Strategic Information Database
IPS	Inter Press Service
NPR	National Public Radio
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
PTI	Press Trust of India
RFA	Radio Free Asia
TDN	Turkish Daily News
SCMP	South China Morning Post
UPI	United Press International
VOA	Voice of America

# NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This book uses the Hanyu-Pinyin Romanization system for the transliteration of the names of Chinese officials (i.e. Wang Enmao) and geographical locations (i.e. Beijing, Xinjiang). For some official documents (i.e. ‘Document No. 7’), existing English translations by the Chinese state media or other academic sources are used. With respect to the names of geographical locations within the Xinjiang region (prefectures, counties, cities, townships, and villages), these are referred to with their long-established Uyghur names using the Uyghur transliteration system except for specific cases (i.e. Kashgar) in which I have maintained the Western spelling because it is widely accepted across English-language scholarship on the region. Alternative spellings have also been used when in quotations.

# INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 4 August 2008, four days before the inauguration ceremony for the Beijing Olympic Games, two young adults from the Uyghur ethnic minority attacked a group of 70 Chinese civil border policemen in Kashgar, China's north-western region of Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 2008a). One of the attackers drove a truck against the policemen during their regular morning jog. Then, both hacked the victims with machetes and hurled explosives at the Keshen police barracks before their arrest (*ibid*). According to the official account, the perpetrators, Kurbanjan Hemit and Abdurahman Azat, killed 16 Chinese officers and injured another 16 in the attack. In one of the first dispatches reporting the event, the Chinese state news agency Xinhua announced that the police considered the incident 'a terrorist attack' (Xinhua, 2008d).

The assault in Kashgar seemed like a self-fulfilling prophecy that aligned the Chinese government's narrative on the terrorist threat that had emerged in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) in the United States with the material 'reality' of Uyghur-related violence in Xinjiang. Following the attack, the very same Chinese officials who, days before 9/11, had declared the situation in Xinjiang as 'better than ever in history' (BBCMSAP, 2001c), subsequently characterized the region as the locus of a terrorist threat by Uyghur Muslim separatists. This discourse gained significant traction in the run-up to the Olympics. In January 2007, Beijing reported a raid against a 'terrorist' training camp of Uyghur militants accused of having links with Al Qaeda and Bin Laden (Reuters, 2007a, BBC, 2007). Later, the Chinese authorities announced they had foiled an 'organized and premeditated' flight hijacking 'terrorist attack' (Xinhua, 2008b). In the months before the inauguration of the Olympics, the Chinese security forces trained explicitly on the basis of apocalyptic terrorist threat scenarios like the explosion of a radiological 'dirty bomb' near an Olympic venue (Reuters, 2007b, 2008a).

## 2 Introduction

Yet one important element had been absent from the Chinese security focus on an imminent 'terror' threat in Xinjiang prior to the events of August 2008: no violent attacks were reported in the region for years. Western media, as well as academic and government circles, disputed the existence of a militant Uyghur terrorist organization and challenged the official accounts about 'terrorist' camps or 'terrorist' plots (see Poch, 2007; Elegant, 2008; Joshi, 2008; Harmsen, 2008). Although the violence neither took place in the burgeoning Chinese capital, nor did it involve weapons of mass destruction, militant training, or membership to Al Qaeda, as much of the official accounts had suggested since 9/11, Hemit and Azat's violent attack on Chinese officers on the morning of 4 August 2008 allowed the government to support the narrative of Xinjiang as a terrorist hot spot with concrete names and actions – therefore, supplying evidence that they had not merely been 'crying wolf'. A rudimentary plan organized by a taxi driver and a vegetable peddler in a distant city-oasis from the Ancient Silk Road provided the Chinese state with necessary 'proof' to support long-standing claims about a violent Uyghur minority threatening Chinese national security and legitimize an ever-intensifying crackdown in the region.

During the events in Kashgar, I was in China, 4,400 kilometres away, in the newsroom of the Spanish international news agency EFE in Beijing. After spending three years in the Chinese capital, I had become familiar with the many stereotypes that surrounded the Turkic Muslim ethnic minority hailing from Xinjiang. To many of the Han Chinese I knew, the Uyghurs were a picturesque ethnic group known for an exotic lineage, excellent gastronomy, and a vibrant artistic repertoire that included folk dance, music, and acrobatics. Alongside these amiable descriptors, there were other less friendly ones. Uyghurs were perceived with social distrust amongst some Chinese who saw them as thieves, pickpockets, and treacherous knife-carrying peoples. Uyghur intellectual Ilham Tohti thus likened the social status of the Uyghur community with that of gypsies in Europe (see Zambrana, 2010). What happened in Kashgar, and its aftermath, sparked a keen interest in the research focus of this book: the process of how the Chinese state had arrived at defining dissidence in Xinjiang as a terrorist threat, a move which would eventually pave the way for the internment of hundreds of thousands of members of the Uyghur minority under the guise of counter-terrorist 'reeducation' and 'de-extremification'.

### **Situating the Discursive Construction of Terrorism**

For the Chinese state, the characterization of the Uyghurs has been heavily politicized for a long time. For centuries, violent frictions with a dissident dimension had been an intermittent element in China's rule over the ethnic minorities in the so-called 'New Frontier' following the annexation of the region by the Qing Empire (1750s) (see Millward, 2007; Perdue, 2005). Since the Communist Party of China (CPC) gained power in 1949, these anxieties came with a set of labelling practices that evolved with the international historical and political context.



As Uyghur activist Erkin Alptekin recalled, Uyghur dissidents were represented as ‘agents of the American paper tigers’ in the 1950s, as ‘agents of Soviet hegemonists’ in the 1960s, as religious ‘fundamentalists’ after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and as ‘splittists’ in the 1980s (quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, 2005). In the aftermath of 9/11, so Alptekin said, members of the Uyghur ethnic minority became ‘terrorists’ for the Chinese state (*ibid.*). Against the assumption that the socio-linguistic construction of security threats is necessarily culturally bound and specific (Van Rythoven, 2015, p. 466), this suggests that a discursive link exists between the framing of the sudden violence in Kashgar to the way in which a diverse range of issues have become subsumed under the headline of Islamic terrorism in the wider international arena.

Indeed, the discursive connection between the four coordinated attacks by Al Qaeda against the United States on 11 September 2001 and dissident violence in a remote Chinese region is a prime example for the far-reaching reverberations of 9/11 in the international arena at the level of language and politics. The construction of a ‘war on terrorism’ as the adequate response to the attacks on the United States not only enabled the military campaign that followed 9/11 (Jackson, 2005) but also led to the adoption of the ‘war on terrorism’ discourse in places other than the origin of the conflict. As Buzan and Wæver (2009, p. 253) point out, the same way local conflicts in Latin America that had nothing to do with communism were re-phrased as part of the Cold War, many governments have adopted the ‘alibi of fighting terror’ to re-frame their localized conflicts against domestic dissidents in places from Chechnya to Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Well into the 21st century, terrorism has remained at the top of countries’ security and defence agendas (see Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014; UK, 2015; US, 2017; US Department of Defense, 2018; Government of Pakistan, 2015; Republic of Turkey, 2019; French Republic Presidency, 2017), often subsuming complex and violent socio-political dynamics under the terrorism headline. The prevailing ‘Islamic terrorism’ paradigm (Jackson, 2007) attached to violent events and threat scenarios continues to influence how states perceive and react to dissidence (Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

The way in which the framing of the (inter)national security environment under the discursive umbrella of terrorism quickly spread across the globe after the events of 9/11 – without an obvious shift in the frequency and phenomenology of non-state violent events (see Smith & Zeigler, 2017) – also had a profound effect on the academic analysis of (inter)national security dynamics. This includes the field of Terrorism Studies (TS), broadly conceived. The powerful rhetoric of ‘terror’ that accompanied the Global War on Terror (GWoT) (Jackson, 2005), combined with increasing concerns over scholarly quality, data reliability, and normative weaknesses within the traditional study of terrorism (Dunne, 2011, p. 972; Reid, 1993, p. 23; also Boyle, 2012; Dixit & Stump, 2011; Gunning, 2007; Jarvis, 2009; Silke, 2001; Shivani, 2007) and the avalanche of mainstream ‘pseudo-academic’ literature that emerged in response to the events of 11 September 2001 (Ransport, 2009), accelerated this transition, epitomized by the advent of a critical terrorism studies (CTS) branch (see Smyth, Gunning, Jackson, Kassimeris, & Robinson, 2008).

## 4 Introduction

What is central to this book is that this critical turn in terrorism studies gave way to a greater emphasis on a constructivist ontology that understands terrorism as an inter-subjective process of meaning-making, rather than as simply given (Ben-Yehuda, 1993; Turk, 2004) or as ‘fully formed, extra-discursive object of knowledge’ (Jarvis, 2009, p. 14). Indeed, CTS scholarship rejects the TS claim of the possibility of researching terrorism as a problem to be solved in a universal, value-free, and objective fashion, pointing instead to its boundedness in terms of time, space, and ideology (Pape, 2009, p. 644; see also Rapoport, 1984; Schmid, 2011).

Although acknowledging the productive power of the language of terrorism is not merely a post-9/11 phenomenon (see Chomsky, 1987; George, 1991; Zulaika & Douglass 1996), much of the CTS research agenda is explicitly aimed at understanding how and under what conditions the problem of terrorism is discursively constructed – and with what consequences. This translates into unveiling the historical, social, political, and discursive conditions through which terrorism has emerged as an identity, problem, or threat within policymaking communities as well as for academic and popular audiences (Jarvis, 2009, p. 18; see also Smyth, 2007; Gunning, 2007). It has also entailed freeing up the space for discussing experiences, practices, and forms of knowledge that are neglected in ‘dominant accounts of security and terrorism’ (McDonald, 2007, p. 253) and for employing qualitative and discourse-centric research methods (Dixit & Stump, 2013).

Much of the ‘backlash’ against the traditional field is ‘old vinegar poured into new bottles’ (Weinberg & Eubank 2011, p. 131); yet, while traditional TS may have recovered (Silke, 2009, p. 47–48; also, Pape, 2009, p. 646), CTS has firmly established itself as an alternative way of studying terrorism in the context of this widely articulated ‘rhetoric of failure’ (Stampnitzky, 2011). Just as in other areas of the security studies field, the critical turn away from the study of ‘objective’ material realities towards processes of social construction has persisted (see Spencer, 2012; Baker-Beall, 2014). This exploration into the terrorization of Xinjiang is a case in point. Specifically, the book sheds light on the discursive processes that have, over time and linked to the framing of security threats in the international arena, given sense to Uyghur-related violent unrest in the region as terrorism, casting particular issues, individuals, ethnicities, and religions as part of a terrorist threat (Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 23; Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 575).

### Questioning the Chinese Official Narrative

This book questions the Chinese official narrative on Uyghur-related conflict in Xinjiang. It examines how the Chinese state discourse about Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, in particular, became fixated upon terrorist threats at a time when no violent events had been reported for several years prior to the Kashgar incident in 2008. In doing so, the volume investigates the processes by which violent events become understood as terrorist attacks, even if, materially, they did not reflect dominant understandings of terrorism as a category of political violence. The book thus delves into the cogs and wheels of the Chinese state’s representations of Uyghur-related

violent incidents in Xinjiang over the last four decades and puts the materiality of these events in direct conversation with the discursive construction of terrorism.

In this interrogation of the Chinese official narrative about Uyghur unrest, the book tries to make sense of how violent events in Xinjiang, and elsewhere in China, as well as the Uyghur identity, Islam, and the region more broadly, have become constituted as a terrorism problem for the Chinese state, and with what effect. To this aim, it adopts a multi-level approach to understanding this process of terroristization, focusing on three core dimensions, each with their own line of enquiry. The first dimension that I approach is the historical phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang, with a primary focus on the violent incidents that have been reported in the region since the early stages of the Chinese 'reform and opening up' era (1980s). This focus on the materiality of violence may seem counterintuitive for a book that adopts a largely post-positivist understanding of terrorism as a social construction; however, integrating a 'minimal foundationalist' position (Toros & Gunning, 2009; Jackson, 2011) allows us to both acknowledge that the materiality of violence plays a role in the interpretation and representation of terrorism and draw a conceptual connection to dominant scholarly definitions of the concept. At this phenomenology-centric analytical level, the book is preoccupied with identifying the features that characterize violent events and the extent to which they overlap, or not, with the core definitional markers of terrorism.

The second dimension I investigate is the Chinese state discourse on violence in Xinjiang. Here, the focus is on how the Chinese state has socially constructed Uyghur-related violent conflict. The enquiry turns its attention into the core discursive patterns that the Chinese state has produced when interpreting and representing specific violent events, particularly when it comes to labelling and characterizing the perpetrators of the violence and their motivations. At this level, the book examines the extent to which Chinese official representations of violent conflict tap on the dominant academic understandings of terrorism. Crucially, this is also the space where the volume identifies the political possibilities that the Chinese official narratives have opened or avoided to respond to unrest.

The third and final dimension that I examine comprises the political implications of the Chinese state discourse regarding violence in Xinjiang. At this level, the book explores the political consequences of the way/s in which the Chinese state has interpreted and represented Uyghur-related violent incidents in the region and elsewhere in China. It examines the policies implemented by the Chinese authorities in response to the unrest and how the state security practices have affected the lives of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities from Xinjiang, both at the domestic and international stages.

Across these three analytical levels, the book draws extensively from primary sources, such as official Chinese national and regional documents, Chinese state media reports, and other government and non-governmental sources. Methodologically, the study is based on the collection of Chinese official narratives, including instances of speech acts by government officials and information about violent events reported in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. Relevant data have been gathered from sources

in Chinese language – either directly obtained from Chinese state media like Xinhua or government sources such as the State Council Information Office (SCIO) or indirectly through the reports of Western news agencies or the BBC Monitoring Service – and in English language, such as those obtained from English-language state newspapers like China Daily or non-governmental sources like Radio Free Asia (RFA). While field research in Xinjiang could have supported the qualitative empirical analysis of violent unrest in the region, the current situation in China – one of censorship and persecution of non-official sources of information – prevents the gathering of extra data through observation and interaction with the people, notably members of the Uyghur ethnic minority, because of ethical concerns, including the safety of the author and potential interviewees.<sup>1</sup> While the perspectives of local discourse producers and audiences on violence in Xinjiang could therefore not be analysed on the basis of original, empirical data collected in the field, the broad range of publicly available sources nevertheless allowed for a rigorous exploration of the patterns and features of violent events in the region as well as their discursive representation without putting anyone at risk.

The investigation of the historical phenomenology of violence, the first analytical level of the study, is based on a database of violent incidents that occurred between 1978 and 2018, which I constructed from publicly available data. An abbreviated version of this original database is included in the appendix of the book. To analyse this database, the book uses an original scale for the interpretation of the phenomenology and framing of violence in light of dominant scholarly definitional understandings of terrorism. How such definitions can be understood as a mapping device for the interpretation of violent events is discussed in Chapter 2. For the discursive level, that of the Chinese state framing of violence in Xinjiang, the book intertextually explores the discursive practices of government officials across many temporal moments and events (Hansen, 2006, pp. 73–82; Doty, 1993, pp. 306–309). Here, I identify and code core thematic arguments in the Chinese official narratives contained in publicly available materials through which the Chinese authorities have represented Uyghur-related unrest in Xinjiang over four decades, paying specific attention to language used to characterize violence, its perpetrators, and the causes and motivations of their actions.

To connect the study of discourses of violence with the exploration of the Chinese policies responding to unrest in Xinjiang, the book traces the links between the evolving violent phenomenology – or the absence of it – the changing Chinese security narratives, including the gradual insertion of the language of terrorism in a broader official discourse, and the reshaping and intensification of state security practices in Xinjiang. These connections demonstrate how the changing discourse, in particular the systematic representation of violence as terrorism, has widened the limits of political possibility to enable the Chinese state's implementation of increasingly harsh security practices in the region.<sup>2</sup> Building on existing debates and interventions on the Copenhagen School's (CS's) concept of securitization for the study of the discursive construction of terrorism in both non-Western and historical contexts, the book traces the process of terroristization of Xinjiang.

## Central Contributions

This is a book about violence, discourse, and politics, which I tie together through the concept of terroristization. Research that lies at the intersection between security discourses and security practices generally assumes that language is productive in the sense that it produces, fixes, and transforms meanings, identities, discourse, and environments (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 55; Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2). Language also sets the boundaries of political possibility (Holland, 2013) and of what is thinkable (Epstein, 2008). These are all assumptions shared by this book, particularly when it comes to its original impulse of understanding how it became possible for the Uyghurs to emerge as a terrorism problem for the Chinese state, while acknowledging the quasi-causal effect of the broader terrorism narrative on the constant state of crackdown in Xinjiang. At the same time, (inter)national security scholarship has remained vague about what language is productive of when it comes to its effects beyond linguistics processes of sense-making and sense-giving. The study of terrorist events is no exception to this. By investigating the notion of terroristization (see Dixit, 2016), the book proposes a way to understand the process that goes from violent events to counter-terrorism practices.

The concept of terroristization developed in this study is inspired by the idea of securitization. Works related to securitization theory, as developed by the CS over two decades ago, have provided a conceptual entry point for understanding how issues move from the realm of normal politics into the realm of security and emergency politics through ‘speaking’ security. In expanding the concept of terroristization, the book builds on the securitization literature to make three key contributions to the disciplinary fields of international security and terrorism studies. First, by intertwining insights from the definitional consensus in TS about the materiality of events with their discursive representation, I offer a novel explanation for why terrorism narratives ‘stick’ (Ahmed, 2014). Second, I provide an original, conceptual pathway to exploring terrorism discourses as historical processes, which also allows the integration of pre-2001 historical contexts that have been subjugated in much of the post-9/11 literature on terrorism (Smyth, 2007, p. 261; Gunning, 2007, p. 370). Finally, I account for the construction of terrorism narratives by illiberal regimes, thereby transcending the Western liberal perspective that remains dominant in traditional TS.

Under this conceptual umbrella, this book offers an empirical investigation of the Chinese state terroristization of Xinjiang. It includes a detailed account of violent dissidence in the region over four decades, and of how Chinese government narratives and policies have evolved over time. In doing so, I work to better understand both the historical processes by which actions, behaviours, individuals, regions, religions, or ethnicities are constituted as terrorist or terrorism (Jarvis, 2009; Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 23) and the spillover effects of the GWoT discourse in localized conflicts (see Bhatia, 2005; Bartolucci, 2010; Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah, 2005; Russell, 2005; Tan, 2003; Santos, 2010). Second, this book contributes to area studies scholarship (see Dillon, 1995, 2004, 2018; Bovingdon, 2002, 2004, 2010; Starr (ed.),



2004; Smith Finley, 2013, 2019; Roberts, 2012, 2020; Clarke, 2018; Becquelin, 2000, 2004; Millward, 2004, 2007; Leibold, 2016; Hopper & Webber, 2009; Ma, 2003; Mackerras, 2001; Gladney, 2004; Sautman, 2000; Schluessel, 2007) and works by human rights organizations (i.e. HRW, 1998, 2005; AI, 1992, 1999; UHRP, 2007, 2012a, 2016) that have examined a wide range of aspects related to conflict in Xinjiang. Unlike previous work, this book does not attempt to determine whether violence in Xinjiang is terrorism or not, why conflict occurs in the region, or how (un)ethical the Chinese policies, which speak for themselves, are. Rather, it aims to grasp how Uyghur-related violence became discursively constituted as a terrorism threat in the first place, and with what political consequences.

In mobilizing the concept of terroristization, the book demonstrates that, when used as an analytical tool rather than as an explanatory theory, and in conjunction with rich empirical analysis, the CS's securitization framework has utility for understanding processes of threat construction across time and space. At the same time, it is not only a study of discourse, for it puts the brute materiality of violence into the spotlight. By integrating a 'minimal foundationalist' dimension into a discourse-centric conceptual framework, I acknowledge that the act of violence and its victims matters, including for political constructions of terrorism (cf. Schmid, 2011, p. 470). As such, this book helps to establish a conversation between traditional and critical scholarly communities working under the conceptual umbrella of 'terrorism' (see Gunning, 2007; Horgan & Boyle, 2008).

## Outline of Chapters

This book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 develops the concept of terroristization as a conceptual framework for the study of the discursive construction of violence as terrorism, and consists of two main sections. The first section explores the key tenets of the CS's securitization theory in a conceptually productive fashion that demonstrates how the concept of securitization can be used to understand the discursive construction of violence as terrorism by states and the politics this enables. I examine existing debates and interventions on securitization theory to adjust the original securitization framework to account for historical processes of terroristization in non-democratic countries. The section also examines the politically productive power of narratives and investigates the relationship between materiality and discourse to make the case for a 'minimal foundationalist' approach to the study of terrorism. The second section of the chapter brings into focus the traditional scholarly debate about the definition of terrorism as the discursive context in which processes of terroristization take place. I analyse the interpretative possibilities of key terrorism markers and develop a matrix of the degree to which the phenomenology of violent events and their discursive representation correspond with dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism properties. This book uses this matrix as a mapping device for the empirical investigation of Uyghur-related violent incidents and their discursive construction. The section concludes by establishing the three-level terroristization framework that guides this study.

The remaining chapters form the empirical heart of this book, analyzing in detail the process of terroristization of Xinjiang. The chapters follow a chronological outline that corresponds to the phases of pre-terroristization (1978–1990), proto-terroristization (1991–2001), and terroristization (2001–2018) of violent conflict in Xinjiang. Following the three dimensions set out above – historical phenomenology, discursive patterns, and the political implications – each chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the phenomenology of Uyghur-related violent conflict reported in Xinjiang, and elsewhere in China, a critical examination of the Chinese state discourse representing it, and an investigation into the subsequent politics implemented in the region.

Chapter 2 explores the pre-terroristization phase, which this book describes as the years of ‘counterrevolution’. Here, I demonstrate how the spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the 1980s appears to have been dominated by events that were primarily situated on the socio-ethnic spectrum of intra-state violence, resulting from a combination of demands for greater regional and religious autonomy, clashes between the police and Uyghur protesters, and ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and the Uyghur minority. I show how high-profile violent events were rare, and when they occurred, they mapped only partially onto the core, definitional markers of terrorism. I then provide an analysis of how the Chinese narratives about the tensions in Xinjiang went from a moderate discourse that framed violence as a social problem rooted in historic inter-ethnic frictions and economic disparities to a more aggressive tone that represented the tensions as part of a long-term fight against ‘splittism’ and an incipient security threat, one which culminated in 1990 with the construction of the Baren unrest as a ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’. This is followed by an investigation into the Chinese policies in the region between 1978 and 1990, which I show evolved in parallel to the changing official discourse. These policies shifted from a ‘gradualist’ approach based on economic development and cultural and religious liberalization and a moderate response to the violent events registered in the years 1980–1981 to a securitization approach characterized by the militarization of the region and a crackdown on dissent and religion.

Chapter 3 investigates the proto-terroristization phase. Here, I examine how – following a combination of factors, including the intensified state repression that came after the Baren turmoil; the increasing Han-Uyghur economic inequalities; and the emergence of a violent dissident agency amongst some Uyghurs – violent incidents increased in Xinjiang during the 1990s, peaking between 1996 and 1999 and appearing in more varied manifestations than in the 1980s, with some events getting closer to dominant understandings of terrorism. Next, the chapter explores how the Chinese state discourse established separatism and religious extremism as the core threats to the stability of Xinjiang and represented the tensions with the Uyghurs as a life-or-death struggle against a foreign-instigated threat. At this point, the book pays attention to how the language of terrorism appeared for the first time in Chinese official narratives, albeit in an anecdotal, non-dominant way. It also examines how the Chinese authorities began to export their discourse on Xinjiang to the international arena, articulating – together with Russia and some Central

Asian states – the ‘three evils’ of ‘separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism’ as a regional security threat. Chapter 3 also demonstrates how the Chinese securitization narrative, which prescribed a fight against a dehumanized enemy as the way forward for Xinjiang, facilitated the intensification of the crackdown policies in the region, which involved an increasing repression of Islam, the launching of ‘strike hard’ campaigns resulting in thousands of arrests, and a series of efforts aimed at stifling Uyghur political dissent in Central Asia and other countries like Turkey.

Chapter 4 examines the terroristization phase of the Xinjiang conflict. Here, I first investigate how Chinese leaders seized the post-9/11 *momentum* to frame Xinjiang as China’s front in the GWOt. I pay particular attention to how the language of terrorism became the dominant language in Chinese security narratives about Xinjiang at a moment when violence was almost virtually absent in the region. Further, I explore how the Chinese government retrospectively recast Uyghur-related violent unrest as terrorism by linking the historical tensions in the region to the events on US soil and representing Uyghur dissidence as the ‘East Turkistan terrorist forces’. The chapter then shifts its attention to the resurfacing of violent phenomena in the region after years of relative calmness. As I demonstrate, the wave of violence that rocked Xinjiang, and other parts of China, between 2008 and 2016 took place only after the Chinese state had first constructed Uyghur-related unrest as terrorism and then acted in consequence with an intensification of repressive policies in the context of counter-terrorism. The chapter analyses dozens of violent incidents that, as this book demonstrates, tap in almost every possible interpretation of violence, from ethnic riots to attacks that reflect dominant understandings of terrorism. This book examines the core patterns of the Chinese state discourse during this period. I demonstrate how Chinese officials and state media sustained the government’s claim warning of terrorism through the systematic representation of all types of violent events as either terrorist attacks or terror-related incidents, no matter the fact that much of the violence in Xinjiang reported during this period was far from general scholarly understandings of terrorism. I also show how the Chinese state established a link between Islam and violence to prescribe a ‘people’s war’ on terrorism and religious extremism as the only possible or logical response to Uyghur-related violent unrest. Chapter 4 goes on to trace the effects of this discourse. It examines how Xinjiang has remained in a permanent state of emergency since 2001, with the rise of a counter-terrorism apparatus that has tightened the grip over the Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in the region and abroad. This chapter also explores the Chinese government’s most recent steps in its war on terrorism, which include the advent of a surveillance state in Xinjiang and the mass internment of Uyghurs for purposes of ‘re-education’ and ‘de-extremification’, as a sign of the *sine die* terroristization of the region.

The conclusion reviews the central argument and findings of this book. It reflects on how, why, and with what consequences the Chinese state has constructed violent tensions as terrorism in Xinjiang. Here, I discuss the broader implications of this study for future research on terrorism and violent conflict. Specifically, I outline that a terroristization framework emphasizes the importance of recognizing

the limits and complexities that the constructed nature of terrorism entails. I also suggest further avenues for research on terroristization, including the ‘discursive past’ of localized conflicts dominantly constructed as terrorism; processes of ‘deterroristization’ in which violence ceases to be constructed as such; and alternative narratives of contest and destabilization of dominant discourses of terrorism.

## Notes

- 1 Chinese authorities have arrested Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang for facilitating information or speaking to journalists and academics reporting in the region.
- 2 In doing so, the book does not attempt to establish direct correlations or make causal inferences about the relationship between Chinese government’s security discourse and its security practices, but to use a soft process tracing approach (e.g. Mahoney, 2010, pp. 125–131; cf. Beach & Pedersen, 2013) that emphasizes, through careful and historically rich description, the quasi-casual effect of discourse on security practices.

# 1

## FROM SECURITIZATION TO 'TERRORISTIZATION'

This chapter develops the idea of terroristization (see Dixit & Stump, 2013, pp. 23–24; Dixit, 2016) as a conceptual framework for the study of the discursive construction of terrorism. In expanding this notion, I build on existing debates and interventions around the core tenets of the securitization theory framework developed by the Copenhagen School (CS). Here established as a conceptual avenue for the study of terrorism in China, the idea of terroristization I propose results, initially, from adjusting securitization theory to study the discursive construction of violent conflict as terrorism as a historical process that combines general security narratives with the representation of specific violent events as terrorism. Next, it builds on adapting dominant Western-centric frameworks of securitization to the study of non-democratic countries. In doing so, this chapter stresses the utility of terroristization for such regimes based on functions such as deterrence, moral support, legitimization, agenda-setting, and retrospective recasting. Finally, the terroristization framework here presented results from engaging with Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) scholarship to reflect on the productive political power of ‘talking’ violent events into being ‘terrorism’, while integrating a ‘minimal foundationalist’ lens to capture how the materiality of violence is intertwined with terrorism discourses, and vice versa. Far from emerging in a vacuum, processes of terroristization take place against the discursive setting of dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism. Highlighting the relevance of the core definitional terrorism markers as discursive anchors that foster mapping a new instance of violence as an act of terrorism, this chapter considers the range of interpretative possibilities that emerge from such setting. Based on this analysis, I develop a terrorism ‘mapping device’ that allows making inferences about the degree to which both the phenomenology of a violent event and its discursive representation correspond, or not, with dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism. The chapter concludes by putting together the three-level terroristization framework that guides the empirical analysis of this book.

## Adjusting Securitization Theory for the Study of Terrorism in China

Following the end of the Cold War, much of the Security Studies discipline, broadly conceived, broadened, and deepened towards considering a greater range of issues and referent objects within its remit. Security scholarship increasingly moved away from primarily strategy-centred approaches limited to the 'study of the threat, use, and control of military force' (Walt, 1991, p. 212) and began to transpose the linguistic turn of Western philosophy to the study of security following the end of the Cold War (see Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Mutlu & Salter, 2013). With the concept of securitization, a group of scholars often referred to as the 'Copenhagen School' (CS) (McSweeney, 1996; Neumann, 1996; Huysmans, 1998) has here provided 'one of the most innovative, productive, and yet controversial' frameworks (Williams, 2003) that understands security as a product of discourse (Williams, 2003; see also Wæver, 1995; Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Frequently described as a 'theory' (Stritzel, 2007; Vuori, 2008; Ciută, 2009; Balzacq, 2011), the CS's idea of securitization is the answer to the question of 'what quality makes something a security issue' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21) and provides a 'theoretical tool to facilitate practical security analysis' (Taureck, 2006, p. 55). While securitization theory has significant limitations, some of its core tenets can be adjusted and expanded in a conceptually productive fashion to study terrorism as discourse, including in non-democracies.

### *Key Tenets of Securitization Theory*

The concept of securitization rests on a post-positivist ontology that sees security not as an objective condition, but as a discursive construct. Contrary to concerns about the designation of 'objective' or 'real' security problems based on material factors, and following language theory and post-structuralist thought, securitization theory defines security as a 'speech act' and a 'self-referential practice' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). This means that something 'becomes a security issue not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat' (ibid.). Security is talked into being by discursively representing an issue as 'posing an existential threat to a designated referent object' – generally by narrating 'a plot that includes existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out' – that calls for the use of 'extraordinary measures' which lie 'outside the normal bounds of political procedure' (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 21, 24, 33). The 'grammar of security', as the CS conceptualizes it, thereby has a decidedly Schmittian connotation (Williams, 2003, p. 522; Aradau, 2004, p. 392). At the same time, because of its emphasis on the necessity of justifying and legitimizing the use of extraordinary measures to gain domestic institutional approval, its application is implicitly limited to liberal-democratic regimes (Browning & McDonald, 2013, p. 248; Balzacq, 2011, p. 9; Biba, 2016; cf. Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998, pp. 21–23).

The CS's research agenda is mainly concerned with the study of state-centric processes of securitization (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 35). This is because in securitization theory, the 'social capital' and 'position of authority' of the securitizing actor – the speaker of security – increase the resonance of the securitizing discourse (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 33). The state emerges as the most powerful securitizing actor, one that has been 'historically endowed with security tasks and most adequately structured for the purpose' (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 31–37). While securitization theory moves the study and definition of security significantly beyond mainstream positivist approaches in the Security Studies field, it thus retains both a 'static element' (Stritzel, 2007, p. 366) and a connection to the traditional realist meaning of national security as a matter of state survival from external military threats. As Ciută (2009, pp. 306–307) emphasizes, securitization theory freezes the meaning and conceptual logic of security as a matter of survival.

Securitization theory also reserves a role for materiality more broadly, acknowledging that extra-discursive contextual factors may affect the resonance of a security discourse. These are conceptualized broadly as 'facilitating conditions... under which the speech act works, in contrast to cases in which the act misfires or is abused' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 32). One of these conditions is the extent to which the non-discursive features of a securitized issue are 'generally held to be threatening' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 33). For example, a government is likely to gain support from a legislative body or a constituency for extraordinary policy measures and powers, if the securitized issue is generally assumed to be actually threatening. Material factors thus act to increase or decrease the credibility of a threat, which, in turn, impacts upon the securitizing actor's ability to complete the securitization move.

Securitization theory holds significant potential for the study of terrorism as discourse along with three main analytical principles. To begin with, it provides the conceptual starting point that a violent event which is discursively represented as a terrorist incident should be understood not as consisting of objective material features that 'make' terrorism, but as a matter of choice by political agents to do so. Terrorism is 'talked' into being, that is, an event or issues is *terroristized* through discourse. Second, it provides a convincing rationale for assigning significant agency in terroristization processes to a country's political leadership, with the state featuring as the most salient 'speaker' of terrorism (R. Jackson, 2005; Bhatia, 2005). As is the case in much of securitization research, the centrality of government speech acts in terroristization processes is derived from its formal authority and social capital in defining security threats, stimulating related public debates, and shaping security policy agendas (see Schmid, 2004, p. 384; 1992). Finally, reflecting the (thin) Schmittian logic within the securitization framework, if the 'grammar of security' enables the securitization of an issue by articulating an emergency scenario in which the survival of a referent object is at stake, framed as demanding an exceptional response, the language of terrorism can then be regarded as an instant *securitizer*. Terrorism is a potent label of enmity and threat, which carries a 'powerfully negative emotional baggage' that provokes retribution (K.J. Long, 1990, p. 203).

In Dixit's words (2016, p. 33), the use of the term 'automatically authorizes states to use forms of violence that they would otherwise be penalized for'. As R. Jackson (2005, 2007) noted, when violence is constructed as terrorism, this enables exceptional coercive and punitive counter-terrorist strategies, as opposed to alternatives in the realm of normal politics, such as dialogue, compromise, and socio-economic reforms.

While providing a useful entry point for the study of terrorism discourses, the original outline of securitization theory also has significant weaknesses. In particular, international security scholarship has pointed not only to conceptual tensions within the securitization framework but also to its broader analytical limits, its overly linguistic approach to discourse, and the normative challenges it poses (Aradau, 2004; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008; Balzacq, 2005, 2011; Williams, 2003; Wilkinson, 2007; Ciută, 2009; Biba, 2016; Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020), all of which point to its 'narrowness' (Balzacq, 2011, p. 8; Wilkinson 2007, p. 12). This suggests that securitization theory should not simply be taken as 'shorthand' for the study of the social construction of terrorism (McDonald, 2008). Indeed, the development of a terroristization framework based even loosely on the concept of securitization requires adapting the latter in a way that integrates history, context, and functionality into the study of the dynamics and implications of terrorism discourses and widens its application beyond Western liberal democratic countries.

### ***From Securitization to Terroristization***

The CS's concept of securitization has a narrow temporal scope, with the 'speech act' considered only as a specific moment in time during which the construction of security takes place. Here, the very act of discursively presenting an issue as a 'security threat' is conceptualized as the defining instance in the social construction of security (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). Yet, as McDonald (2008, pp. 575–576) pointed out, issues become security threats not only at particular occasions, but also over an extended period of time, and within historical contexts (see Ciută, 2009, p. 317; Salter, 2010, p. 118). To address this issue, Balzacq (2011, p. 13) proposed that the study of securitization should be adjusted to clearly account for it as a process that is sensitive to particular 'historical conjunctures' rather than a singular linguistic event.

The idea of terroristization here developed takes up these suggestions to account for context and focuses explicitly on broader historical processes that can be divided into three distinct stages: (1) a *pre-terroristization* period during which a discursive representation of an issue – in this book violence and dissidence in China's Uyghur region – as terrorism is largely absent; (2) a *proto-terroristization* phase during which the language of terrorism gradually appears in official security narratives about the issue; and (3) the stage of *terroristization*, which is characterized by a hegemonic narrative construction of an issue as terrorism in government discourse and significant, even extraordinary political measures (cf. Jarvis, 2009, p. 14).

The understanding of terroristization as a historical process does, however, not preclude the analytical relevance of specific instances where terrorism is



constructed. Rather, whether and how terroristization moves from one stage to the next is intertwined with the accumulation of speech acts in which the language of terrorism is used. These discursive representations of terrorism can refer to a variety of referents such as states, individuals, and groups, describe conditions or identity markers such as ethnicities and religions, and also narrate specific events as acts of terror or terrorism attacks (Dixit & Stump, 2013; Jarvis, 2009). What is more, despite the significant variation of instances in which the language of terrorism can be applied, a process-oriented understanding of terroristization that puts history and context centre stage allows capturing how narrative maturing is linked to, rather than removed from, the materiality of violent events. Integrating 'catalytic events' past and present, into terrorism speech acts allows terroristizing political agents to narrate an otherwise abstract threat as 'real', attaching the veneer of legitimacy to security policy agendas (Homolar, 2011, pp. 706–708). In line with the CS's assumption that materiality acts as a kind of intervening variable in securitization moves, the concept of terroristization thus underscores that there is a fundamentally different quality and pulling power of terrorism discourses that can move beyond representing unspecific conditions, phenomena, or behaviour as a source of insecurity and danger (Homolar, 2014, pp. 3–6). As I discuss in more detail below, an analytical focus on violent events within their historical context thus provides a window for capturing how materiality influences discourse and when it may facilitate the social construction of terrorism (or not).

It is important to note here that the focus on different terroristization stages and the impact of catalytic events on these is neither to imply that the gradual shifting of violence and dissidence into the realm of terrorism is an automated process nor that it is without a point of return once the terroristization journey has begun. As Williams (2003, pp. 522–523) suggests, the CS treats securitization not as a decisive speech act, but as a 'social process' which opens a 'framework of communicative action and legitimation' with the potential to expose and even frustrate abusive security discourses (see Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 34–35), including by means of 'counter-securitization' (Topgyal, 2016). As is the case for securitization, the study of terroristization processes that is integral of violent events may not only free up 'space for dialogue and deliberation' (McDonald, 2007, p. 253) but could indeed contribute to un-making practices of security (Aradau, 2004, p. 406) by exposing the constructed, contingent, and political nature of security episodes or fostering a 'reflexive understanding of political violence' that interrogates, for example, the use of specific tactics, from torture to surveillance, in the name of countering terrorism (Dixit, 2016, p. 46).

### ***Moving Terroristization beyond Democracies***

In states like the People's Republic of China (PRC), decision-makers do not require a formal mandate or public approval to implement far-reaching security policies and counter-terrorist measures. In the case of Xinjiang, the Communist Party of China (CPC) is in complete control of the Chinese government, and the

CPC leadership decides how to deal with the tensions in the region. Neither the political opposition, nor the media, nor academia can freely propose alternative issues for securitization or critique and hinder securitization moves initiated by the Chinese government, with academics, journalists, and political dissidents having been imprisoned for criticizing China's handling and control of the region. China presents a case where, as Wilkinson (2007, p. 12) emphasizes, significant sections of the population are not afforded the ability to freely express their security concerns. As Biba (2016, p. 427) puts it, in non-democratic settings, those individuals threatened can hardly speak or be heard about security without assistance. This in turn reveals the 'ontological premises' and 'constructivist' limitations of the CS's securitization theory (Holbaard & Pedersen, 2012, pp. 192, 195) and problematizes the 'inherently Eurocentric assumptions about the social and political context' (Wilkinson, 2007, p. 12) on which these assumptions are based.

Reflecting on this issue, Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde (1998, p. 24) had pointed out that securitization theory is of limited utility to understand security dynamics in non-democratic countries such as the PRC, where 'secrecy of violation of rights is the rule and where security arguments are not needed to legitimize such acts'. Examining the case of China, Vuori (2008, p. 68) likewise argued that in non-democratic countries, 'there is no need to move security issues away from the democratic process into 'special politics', as there are no democratic processes to begin with'. China presents a case where the difference between 'emergency' and 'normal' politics (N.J. Jackson, 2006, pp. 311–312), between 'rule' and 'exception' (Holbaard & Pedersen, 2012, pp. 172–176), is vague and problematic.

How, then, can a concept of terroristization that draws significantly upon the securitization framework be analytically useful for a non-democratic regime in which broad institutional and public support are not required to instigate a repressive counter-terrorism programme? How can securitization theory be adapted to offer a 'more accurate representation of security in undemocratic, illiberal and other non-Western settings' (Mabon & Kapur, 2018, p. 2)? Paraphrasing Wilkinson (2007, p. 22), how can securitization, or in this case terroristization, be adapted to travel beyond the 'presumptions of Western democracy' so as to cope with local conditions such as those of the PRC? Or, to put it in the context of this study's empirical focal point, why would the authoritarian Chinese government (Linz & Stepan, 1996; T. Shi, 2008) need to engage in processes of *terroristizing* violence and dissidence in Xinjiang? The answer to these questions can be found, at least partially, in shifting our conceptual attention away from formal decision-making processes towards the realms of moral support, agenda-setting, and retrospective recasting, including in the international arena.

The CS conceptualized securitization moves as requiring not only that 'security' is uttered by 'authoritative' speakers to conjure the image of an existential threat to a referent object – in particular, the state – but also that their audience must accept this claim to the extent that emergency measures to counter the securitized threat are implemented (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25). This suggests that the audience support necessary to complete a securitization move is understood essentially as limited to

enabling the formal-institutional endorsement of security policy measures. Balzacq (2011, p. 9) argued, however, that a broader understanding of the role of audiences in securitization processes is key to capture other forms of domestic public support, because they may be crucial for maintaining the broader backing of constituencies. At the international level, security utterances that overlap with the interests, norms, and rules can likewise be a source of (in)formal support, but they may also prevent international diplomatic and economic sanctions on the regime. Vuori (2008, pp. 79–81) underscored here that even political agents that are in a position of 'de facto control of subordinates' attempt to avoid unwanted actions by 'another state, secessionist group, or protesters' by discursively discouraging it. In fact, as Lupovici (2019) suggests, securitizing moves can have a strategic deterrence effect on the audiences targeted. For an authoritarian regime like the one established by the CPC in China, discursive deterrence is an effective way of keeping dissidence at bay.

Meanwhile, and although there is no formal (and conceptually causal) requirement for an 'empowering audience' to agree with the claims of the authoritarian securitizing actor, a severing of social bonds can impact negatively on both their credibility and, in extension, their leadership staying in power both at the domestic and international level (Balzacq, 2011, pp. 8–9). While seeking formal acquiescence may be less of a concern for non-democratic countries in mandating security policy measures, the authoritarian leadership of countries such as China may still want to 'cloak security arguments in the semantic repertoire' of a particular audience, such as the domestic constituency or the international community, to win moral support for the government and its security policy agenda (see Balzacq, 2011, pp. 8–9). At this juncture, the terroristization of violence and dissidence can be an enticing discursive avenue for the Chinese government. It allows levelling the playing field with its liberal democratic counterparts in the justification of emergency politics and obtaining moral support at home and abroad for repressive actions and extraordinary controls.

In an illiberal context such as the PRC, a securitization discourse can reach a variety of audiences with a set of purposes different from obtaining the formal-institutional endorsement of 'special' or 'emergency' politics. This book reveals a sustained deterrent purpose in the Chinese state discourse aimed at domestic audiences, initially epitomized by an active discouraging of 'counterrevolution' during the 1980s and part of the 1990s, and then, following 9/11, by Beijing's outright condemnation and rhetorical defilement of those engaging in the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. Domestic deterrence by securitization and/or terroristization has not only been aimed at the broader Chinese population, in particular, the broader Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities and within them, political or religious dissidents, but also at government officials and Party members, as the signalling of 'two-faced' cadres for persecution demonstrates (see RFA, 2017l; Gan, 2017a; C. Liu, 2017). In contrast, the official use of terrorism narratives aimed at international audiences to justify the crackdown emergency politics in Xinjiang, avoid widespread condemnation of repressive practices, and mobilize support amongst allies was first manifested during the *proto-terroristization*

stage through the internationalization of China's discourse on Xinjiang amongst friendly international audiences in the regional community of shared interests that is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Second, following 9/11 and during the *terroristization* period, through the attempt to legitimize the crackdown in Xinjiang in the eyes of the liberal democracies from the West and the broader international community by framing Xinjiang as China's front in a Global War on Terror.

The variety of audiences, and their different relevance depending on the period, is reflected in the sources the book uses for the empirical analysis. Chapter 2, which is concerned with the 1980s and the language of 'counterrevolution', relies mainly on the monitoring of Chinese state media in Chinese language, which suggests an initial primordial preoccupation with domestic audiences by the Chinese state. Meanwhile, Chapter 3 and, to a greater extent, Chapter 4 are based on Chinese state media reports in English language, which indicate a strategic narrative opening-up and outward orientation of Beijing when 'talking' violence in Xinjiang. As this book demonstrates, the Chinese state has thus evolved from a position of restraint and opacity when discussing Uyghur-related violent unrest in the region, epitomized by the scarcity of information on violent incidents during the 1980s and the 1990s, to one of post-9/11 openness, verbiage, and even sincere enthusiasm about sharing its perceived terrorism problem and counter-terrorism successes with the world.

The utility of narrative persuasion in the implementation of extensive security policy measures should therefore not be discarded outright in a study of terrorism in non-democratic regimes that builds upon securitization theory. At this point, a terroristization framework may illustrate how authoritarian political agents tune their language to the experience of the audience in terroristization moves, curbing resistance against political leadership at the domestic level (cf. Balzacq, 2011, pp. 8–9) and pre-empting criticism and even gathering support at the international level. No government can rely exclusively on the power of violence and coercion (Arendt, 1969), and this book suggests the Chinese regime is no exception to this maxim.

### ***Discourse and Materiality: Terroristization's Minimal Foundationalism***

Following from the above is that by broadening the temporal and analytical scope of securitization theory, a terroristization analytical framework allows exploring the processes of how violence and dissidence emerge as terrorist threats in non-democratic countries like China. In line with the post-positivist underpinnings of both securitization theory and critical terrorism scholarship, this book approaches the issue of terrorism in Xinjiang as a process of discursive social construction (Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 575) that gives sense to Uyghur-related violent unrest as terrorism, in the way transforming issues, individuals, ethnicities, and religions into terrorist threats (Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 23). Specifically, the terroristization

lenses guiding this book consider two major tenets firmly situated within a focus on studying the emergence, dynamics, and consequences of terrorism narratives.

The first is the creation of meaning of violent events through discourse. This presupposes that language and discourse play a mediating role between the material and the social worlds, and the assigning of a terrorist meaning to a violent event is no exception. It is only through discourse, predominantly linguistic, that we construct the meaning and qualities of things and social facts (Milliken, 1999, p. 229; Guzzini, 2013, p. 201) and give sense to events as 'security problems'. Understood in this way, terrorism is a social practice productive of subjects and objects that involves an interpretation of events and their presumed causes that is far from value-neutral (Turk, 2004, pp. 271–272; Yee, 1996; Milliken, 1999; Doty, 1993). As R. Jackson (2005, p. 21) argues with respect to using the terrorism label, 'words are never neutral: they don't just describe the world, they actually help to make the world'. Terrorism and terrorists, then, are constructed not by virtue of the material features of violent phenomena, but through the very process of labelling them as such. This assumption lies at the heart of the idea of terroristization.

The second tenet is the productive power of 'talking terrorism'. In creating meaning, language and discourse have political consequences because they set a 'social script to choose among various policy options' (Doty, 1993, p. 300). As Yee (1996, p. 95) explains, 'languages or vocabularies authorize or restrict, as well as prioritize and distribute, the ideas and beliefs that policymakers can think and in doing so partly delimit the policies they can pursue'. The productive power of terrorism narratives and labels lies in their capacity to determine political outcomes by framing the range of possible action, rendering some political avenues as reasonable, appropriate, plausible, or acceptable, while denoting others as unreasonable, inappropriate, implausible, or unacceptable (Yee, 1996; R. Jackson, 2005). Importantly, naming particular entities as terrorists has significant political, economic, and military implications (Turk, 2004, pp. 271–272). They may take the shape of 'delegitimizing domestic dissent and resistance' (Jarvis, 2009, p. 19), justifying state counter-terrorism policies (Gunning, 2007, p. 377; R. Jackson, 2009; Dixit & Stump, 2013, p. 162), or the broader 'dehumanizing and depoliticizing' of a specific group of people (Jarvis, 2009, p. 19; Dixit, 2016, pp. 40–43). In the context of the Global War on Terror (GWOt), the UN (2002) suggested that the practice of 'labelling opponents or adversaries as terrorists' was a 'time-tested technique to de-legitimize and demonize them'. This book traces the emergence of 'terrorism' as a 'master signifier' of security and an asymmetric concept used to legitimize violent counter-action in Chinese politics (Vuori, 2014b, pp. 129–136). In doing so, it explains how the Chinese state has used this technique within a broader process of terroristization of Uyghur-related violence and the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities of Xinjiang.

A fundamental question that arises from a focus on the productive power of language in the study of terrorism concerns the role played, if any, by the *actual* violence taking place. If, ontologically, terrorism is a social construct and, epistemologically, its discursive construction is the main focus of critical research, how shall we

then understand, ontologically and epistemologically, the act or event of violence that has taken place? At this point, this book provides a conceptual entry point into bridging the material-discursive divide in the study of the phenomenology of violence through the lenses of terroristization.

This is particularly significant, as some CTS scholarship has explicitly prioritized a focus on terrorism as a discursive construct while removing it entirely from a material essence. Here, 'completely constructivist' (Stump, 2013, p. 219) approaches, for example, have denied the 'objective existence' of terrorism 'as a thing in the world' (Heath-Kelly, 2016, p. 67; see Jarvis, 2009; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996; Stump & Dixit, 2013). From this follows that rather than any actual violent event, the 'primary source of terrorism research must be the discourse in which the social construction of terrorism takes place' (Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 575). This is not to say that these scholars do not acknowledge that a material reality of violence exists. As Hülse and Spencer (2008, p. 575) emphasize, 'there are real people who purport real actions'. Instead, they argue that terrorism can only be understood as a social fact detached from the materiality of violence, because 'what these people and their deeds mean is a matter of interpretation' (ibid.).

This means that, from such a radical constructivist position, the politics of terrorism do not lie in the phenomenology of violence, but in how violence is interpreted and constructed regardless of how violent incidents unfold and what material features they may have. In other words, there is nothing to 'see' in the act of violence itself, and thereby nothing worthy to analytically and empirically integrate outside the realm of discourse. As Zulaika and Douglass (1996, p. xi) put it, 'terrorism' only exists as an 'empty signifier' in a 'postmodern world'. And while the question of what conditions enable the label of terrorism to 'be successfully applied to particular acts – violent or otherwise' (Stump, 2013, p. 220) is central to much radically constructivist CTS research, any concession to the positivist position that terrorism is a type of violence with specific (material) characteristics is seen as risking to reify and reproduce 'terrorists' and 'terrorism' and endorsing them as legitimate categories of state action (Stump & Dixit, 2011).

Yet not all critical approaches to the study of terrorism share what Porpora (2016, p. 81) has characterized as an 'extreme' social constructivist ontological view. Some scholars have explicitly taken issue with completely discarding the materiality of violence from terrorism research (Toros & Gunning, 2009; R. Jackson, 2011; Toros, 2012; Porpora, 2016). This book, and the notion of terroristization it presents, is firmly situated within this not radically constructivist scholarly camp. The theoretical premise here is that discourse and materiality are 'entwined' (Hardy & Thomas, 2015) in the sense that the *actual* materiality of violence shapes the *constructed* discourse of 'terrorism', and vice versa. Building on Toros and Gunning (2009), R. Jackson describes this 'minimal foundationalism' approach as one in which:

The ontological distinction between subject and object is preserved, and discourse and materiality are conceptualized as shaping each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic (rather than the one being solely constituted by

the other), allows for research on both instances of 'real world' political violence like terrorism, as well as the discursive processes by which such violence is given meaning.

*(R. Jackson, 2011, p. 118)*

This suggests that a 'minimal foundationalist' lens enables the investigation of the dialectical relation between materiality (violence) and discourse (terrorism). At the same time, it serves as 'a bridge between critical and traditional scholarship' (Toros & Gunning, 2009, p. 92). A minimal foundationalist orientation does not mean, however, that terrorism, as a category of violence, has an immutable objective reality. Rather, it posits that terrorism should be understood as a social, historical, and culturally contingent discursive construction that is linked to material characteristics that make it different from other violent phenomena (see R. Jackson, 2011, p. 118).

But how, then, are we able to assign features to a violent event that explains how and why its interpretation as terrorism is possible and more likely than alternative characterizations? Engaging with the quintessential traditional-positivist endeavour of defining terrorism, R. Jackson (2011) has here suggested that the definitional exercise within the traditional terrorism field can serve as an analytical entry point. This is because it consists in finding a series of 'observable regularities' on which to build the discursive (definitional) construction of terrorism, and these can serve as 'relatively secure' knowledge 'anchorages' that allow linking materiality and discourse (ibid., p. 119). Rather than sidelining definitional debates around terrorism as a positivist endeavour with no value for critical scholarship, this book moves such processes into the centre of conceptualizing how particular material features may make the interpretation of a violent event as terrorism both possible and thinkable (Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

## 'Terrorism' Definitions as Mapping Device

Narratives do not emerge in a discursive vacuum, but in a context of pre-existing 'structures of signification' with a 'background capacity' (Milliken, 1999, p. 23). This also holds for discursive representations of issues, actors, and actions as terrorism that takes place within a context of historical practices of labelling (Dixit, 2016, p. 32) and specific linguistic cultures (Salter, 2010, p. 118). The original securitization framework, however, does not feature a 'comprehensive awareness' of the broader social contexts 'from which both the securitizing actor and the performative force of the articulated speech-act/text gain power' (Stritzel, 2007, p. 365). In this section, I address this shortcoming by conceptualizing definitional exercises as an integral part of the socio-linguistic setting in which processes of terroristization take place. The long-standing debates over how to define terrorism matter because they enduringly and regularly expose audiences to claims about its constitutive characteristics. In fact, they have decisive effect on what we think about when we 'see' and talk 'terrorism' into being.



### *Understanding Terrorism Definitions as Discursive Anchors*

Definitions are, in a very broad sense, the discursive outcome of a process of thinking and abstraction that is later translated into words (Schmid, 2004). In this process, the defining agent conceptualizes an object by attaching a set of essential properties to it, while at the same time restricting these properties to make the object 'clear or definitive' (Collins Dictionary, 2015). In the case of terrorism, definitional exercises have thus far not produced a universally accepted answer to what terrorism is and which necessary and sufficient constituent parts it features. Instead, these debates have only provided a negative definition of terrorism as violence that is not insurgency, guerrilla action, ethnic riots, or hate crimes, while suggesting that non-state actors should be considered as the primary culprits (Laqueur, 1986). Indeed, while terrorism remains a fundamental taboo in world politics that is placed outside the boundary of legitimate political contestation (cf. Loadenthal, 2013, p. 93), its exact meaning remains a matter of intense dispute amongst policymakers and scholars. Brannan et al. (2001) thus pointedly observed a 'perverse situation' where a phenomenon – terrorism – is extensively studied although its essence has not been pinned down.

That attempts to conceptually pin down the essence of terrorism have thus far failed to deliver a universally accepted definition need not, however, be resolved to understand their relevance as the discursive setting in which processes of terroristization take place. This is because the many debates within the academic and policy communities over what distinct features should serve to objectively categorize events as terrorism as a unique type of political violence (cf. Boyle, 2012, p. 529) function as discursive anchors that bias interpretations of what happens, to whom, and why in the direction of salient 'terrorist' reference points that we have previously been exposed to (Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019, p. 4). In their definitional effort, scholars attach a series of properties, or *definiens*, to the *definiendum* terrorism, and while critical terrorism scholarship may keep a significant distance to more traditional approaches, it has nevertheless echoed the key markers contained within their orthodox counterpart's definitions in the latter's rejection (e.g. R. Jackson, 2011, p. 123; Finn & Momani, 2017, pp. 838–834; Gunning, 2007, p. 38; Burke, 2008, p. 39; cf. Stump, 2013). This means that even though terrorism definitions are continuously marred by contradictions (cf. Stampnitzky, 2017), they nevertheless expose us to the very same discursive elements. If a frame is negated, it is still activated (Lakoff, 2004), and the repetition of a particular terrorism marker in definitional debates – in the affirmative or negative – only serves to amplify it. The reiteration of the core elements contained in the plethora of terrorism definitions – as well as their broader public resonance – serves as background setting to discursively map a new instance of violence as an act of terrorism.

Nearly three decades ago, Schmid (1992, p. 7) identified academia as amongst the most relevant definitional agents producing understandings of terrorism. Scholars across the critical-orthodox divide in this 'intellectual forum' on terrorism (Schmid, 1992, p. 7) have assigned a 'logical priority' (Baldwin, 1997, p. 8) to the premise of



**TABLE 1.1** Most frequently cited *definiens* in scholarly definitions of terrorism

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1	Violence, force
2	Political
3	Fear, terror emphasized
4	Threat
5	Psychological effects and (anticipated) reactions
6	Victim–target differentiation
7	Purposive, planned, systematic, organized action
8	Method of combat, strategy, tactic
9	Extra–normality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints
10	Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance
11	Publicity aspect
12	Arbitrariness, impersonal, random character, indiscrimination
13	Civilians, non–combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims
14	Intimidation
15	Innocence of victims emphasized
16	Group, movement, organization as perpetrator
17	Symbolic aspect, demonstration to others
18	Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence
19	Clandestine, covert nature
20	Repetitiveness, serial or campaign character of violence
21	Criminal
22	Demands made on third parties

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Source: Adapted from Weinberg et al., 2004.

defining their object of research (see for example, Jenkins, 1983, p. 8; Gibbs, 1989; K.J. Long, 1990; Merari, 1993, pp. 214–217; Hoffman, 1998, p. 43; Bjørge, 2005, p. 2; Horgan, 2009, p. 2; Crenshaw, 2011, p. 3). While unsurprisingly offering a wide and multifaceted range of definitions, 22 *definiens* of terrorism stand out (Schmid et al., 1988; Weinberg et al., 2004). These scholarly terrorism markers, which are summarized in Table 1.1, have emerged as central in a total of 182 definitions generated through both a definitional survey (Schmid et al., 1988) and articles published in three key academic journals focused on political violence (Weinberg et al., 2004). While the frequency of the definitional elements varies on each definition, put together they provide the essence of the academic understandings of terrorism.

A closer look at these dominant terrorism markers reveals the existence of three core definitional clusters of constituent properties around which scholars have constructed the concept of terrorism. As I summarize in Table 1.2, the first of these markers indicates that terrorism is predominantly a type of physical violence with distinct characteristics regarding the level of organization, choice of targets, degree of predictability, and publicity. The second cluster envisions terrorism as a type of violence that has psychological effects and coerces audiences other than its immediate physical victims. Finally, a third ideational realm points to terrorism as

TABLE 1.2 Definitional clusters and *definiens*<sup>1</sup>

- 
1. Terrorism is *violence* (1) as it...
    - is organized and planned (7)
    - is covert and clandestine (19)
    - attacks victims categorized as innocent/civilians/non-combatants/neutrals/outside-
   
 (13, 15) in an arbitrary/impersonal/indiscriminate/random way (12), considered extra-
   
 normal, without humanitarian constraints and in breach of the accepted rules (9)
    - occurs in an incalculable/unpredictable/unexpected fashion (18)
    - presents a symbolic/publicity aspect (11, 17), it is demonstrated to others (6)
  2. Terrorism is *terror* (3) because its violence...
    - has psychological effects (5), like fear and/or terror (3), in third parties different to the
   
 immediate victim (6)
    - intimidates/coerces/extorts/threatens (4, 10, 14) third parties different to the immediate
   
 victim (6) so they react (5) in a way which benefits the objectives of the perpetrator,
   
 potentially by fulfilling/complying (10) with its demands (22)
  3. Terrorism is *political* (2) because its violence has...
    - a *political* purpose (7) for which a group/movement/organization (16) uses it in a
   
 systematic way (7, 20) as a method of combat/tactic/strategy (8) in a wider conflict
- 

Note: Author's clusterization of the core definiens of terrorism identified in Weinberg et al., 2004.

violence with a political motivation. I explore the individual clusters and *definiens* further below.

It is important to note here that while the individual properties contained within the three clusters may not always each be present in either terrorism definitions or the discursive representation of events as terrorist acts, the clusters themselves are interrelated and do not stand in isolation. For example, if an attempt to achieve political objectives is not accompanied by physical violence, it does not fit squarely in the scholarly box of terrorism. Similarly, an event that is seen as featuring 'terroristic' material properties such as indiscriminate violence against civilian targets without a motivation that is understood as political would not satisfy the minimal scholarly consensus of what terrorism is – and neither would a violent attack with a clear political motivation that does not contain any elements associated with 'terror'.

Following from the above is that the essential 'material' ingredient for labelling an event as a terrorist act is physical violence described as arbitrary, indiscriminate, and extraordinary – violence that is constructed as illegal and morally unjustifiable and as targeting civilians and non-combatants for a (under-defined) political purpose. A terrorist attack is also associated with a high degree of premeditation, in terms of planning and coordination, and with the clandestine and serial character of violence that is aimed at addressing a secondary audience rather than the primary victims. Yet what at first glance may seem an intuitive, even common sense, understanding of terrorism that emerges from the scholarly definitional markers is, however, full of interpretive pitfalls. Questions arise, for example, on what the nature of violence is, who falls under the category of 'civilian', what constitutes a

'political' motivation, or how fear and coercion actually work. Because of the role dominant terrorism markers play in terroristization processes as discursive 'background noise', it is necessary to highlight the range of interpretative possibilities and the politics their particular use entails.

### ***Terrorism Is Premeditated Violence***

Terrorism is understood first and foremost as violence and/or force in scholarly definitions, where it ranks as the most frequently cited element (Weinberg et al., 2004, p. 781; see Table 1.1, marker 1). The meaning of violence, however, is not clear-cut. As Wolf-Dieter Narr (cited in Imbusch, 2003, p. 14) points out, the concept of violence presents itself a series of 'chameleon-like colorations', which, in turn, widens the interpretative possibilities of understanding violence as terrorism.

To begin with, mainstream definitions of violence have firmly wedded this to a physical dimension and frequently see it as interchangeable with the concept of force. Popitz (cited in Imbusch, 2003, p. 17), for example, conceptualized violence as an

act of power leading to intentionally physical injury of another, regardless of whether its purpose for the agent is actually in carrying it out ... or whether the action is intended to be translated into threats and lead to lasting subjugation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) likewise taps into the idea of violence as a deliberate act of physical force, defining it as:

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.

*(WHO, 2002, p. 5–6)*

Many official definitions of terrorism likewise represent violence as brute force, whereby it is evoked as an act involving 'death and bodily harm with the use of violence' (Government of Canada, 2015), one that 'endangers a person's life' (UK, 2000, 2006), 'acts dangerous to human life' (US Code, 1990), or 'attacks on people resulting in death' (EU, 2002). This dominant understanding also underlies UN counter-terrorism conventions on bombings and 'nuclear terrorism' (UN General Assembly, 1997, 2005) or the manufacturing and trade of weapons (IAEA, 1979; UN General Assembly, 1991), phenomena implying the material destruction of life.

Not all conceptualizations of violence see it as an exclusively physical phenomenon. Beyond its flagship definition, the WHO (2002, pp. 6–7), for instance, distinguishes four modalities of violence: physical, sexual, psychological, and deprivation or neglect. The last two categories do not imply the use of physical force.

When the United Nations Development Programme formally introduced the concept of human security in 1994, it likewise pointed to many areas of insecurity that are not linked to direct physical violence and deliberate brute force, such as liberty, self-determination, development, health care, and economic well-being (Homolar, 2015). These broad understandings of what violence may entail are loosely linked to Galtung's (1969, p. 168) conceptualization of forms of indirect violence that prevent human beings from achieving the full potential of their 'somatic and mental realizations'. The idea that violence transcends physical interaction is also present in Fanon's (1963) analysis of the 'structural violence' imposed by the colonial state, Bondi's (1974) 'economic violence' of capitalism, or Bourdieu's (2000) 'symbolic violence'.

Some terrorism definitions have incorporated an extended meaning of violence and conceptualize terrorism as a phenomenon that may encompass both physical and psychological dimensions. The US Patriot Act of 2001 holds, for example, that 'threatening to commit acts of violence' already is a 'terrorist activity' (US Congress, 2001), equating emotional blackmail (the mere act of threatening) with actual physical harm. When discussing a draft law on counter-terrorism in 2015, China's National People's Congress (NPC) included thought and speech in its definition of terrorism (Zhou, 2015). What is more, 'neoliberal' oppressive economic deprivation has also been imbued with the capacity to 'terrorise' populations by means other than direct and intentional physical force (Heath-Kelly, Baker-Beall, & Jarvis, 2015).

While indirect violence has begun to be subsumed under the headline of terrorist activities, physical intentional force has remained dominant in characterizations of 'acts of violence' by political agents, and this also holds for the minimal scholarly consensus on key terrorism markers presented above. This is, to a significant degree, owing to the centrality of the elements of premeditation and intention in definitions of terrorism. The properties of a significant degree of (clandestine) organization, planning, and premeditation, in particular, set terrorist incidents apart from violence that erupts only as a spontaneous and reactive response to an immediately previous development, whether an aggression, a provocation, or the escalation of existing tensions (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, pp. 5–6; Schmid, 2004, p. 408). For example, riots or violent clashes between street protesters and state authorities lend themselves less well to being interpreted as terrorist incidents because they are usually preceded by a confrontational situation that escalates (e.g. Collins, 2008; Moran & Waddington, 2016). When violence is not the result of an organized plot, it is more challenging to perceive it as falling within the minimal consensus understanding of terrorism.

The understanding of terrorist violence as an organized deliberate act is frequently linked to other phenomenological aspects such as the type of weaponry used. Incidents where the attackers use advanced weaponry and explosive devices more readily signal a premeditated violent aim. This, however, does not suggest that the use of more rudimentary devices including knives and vehicles prohibits assigning a significant degree of intentionality and, by extension, the interpretation of such violence as terrorism. Rather, it points to the idea that the use of automated

weapons rather than boxing gloves to cause physical harm lends greater weight to representations of acts of violence as terrorist incidents and may fall more intuitively within the minimal scholarly consensus on terrorism markers.

### ***Terrorism Is Violence against Civilians***

Terrorism is overwhelmingly constructed as premeditated physical violence that is directed against victims that are categorized as 'civilians' and 'innocent' (see Table 1.1, marker 13). The international legal framework prohibiting violence against civilians has been a cornerstone of the interstate system for nearly 70 years (e.g. ICRC, 1949, pp. 169–170; ICRC, 2019, Rule 3, 5, and 6; United Nations, 1998, p. 5) and the deliberate targeting of attacks against civilians lies at the core of the international community's critique of terrorist events. The violence-against-civilians marker is the context in which violence is understood to occur, and the interpretation of whether an act of violence is considered to be part of a 'proper' armed conflict plays a crucial role in delineating who belongs to the 'civilian' category and who does not. Indeed, based on the terrorism markers above, a violent event cannot be easily classified as a terrorist act if the victims are not 'civilians'.

The category of 'civilian' originates from the international law governing armed conflicts between states or civil wars, and which seeks to limit the use of military force and direct physical violence 'to the amount necessary to achieve the aim of the conflict' (Sassòli & Bouvier, 2006, pp. 81–82). The terminology of 'civilian' applies to 'non-combatant' persons who are 'not members of the armed forces', are 'no longer members of the armed forces', or 'who do not participate in hostilities' (ICRC, 1949, 2019). Despite its centrality in international human rights law, however, the category of 'civilian' has some limitations and is not as straightforward as this definition suggests. To begin with, it does not apply in the context of domestic intrastate hostilities when these are not understood as part of an 'armed conflict' that falls within the remits of international law despite its domestic location (United Nations, 1979, p. 661). If there is no armed conflict, the combatant status vanishes – but so does the category of the civilian as its binary opposite. In 'peacetime', both the perpetrators and victims of the use of force can be construed as civilians.

Because international law does not provide a 'lower threshold at which violence amounts to an armed conflict' in a domestic context (Sassòli, 2006, p. 963), what counts as armed conflict remains highly contested, and states are biased against declaring internal turmoil as either armed conflict or civil war. This is because in doing so, states would concede their opponents a legal status of combatants in a non-international armed conflict that falls under the remits of international law. Such a status would entail immunity for such agents of violence from prosecution under domestic law for taking up arms against the state (ICRC, 2019). States thus have an incentive to limit the reach of international law regarding conflicts within their boundaries (Scharf, 2001), and this is reflected in how they represent violent domestic turmoil even if non-government fighters may use uniforms, infantry-light weapons, or commando-style tactics (Merari, 1993). Consider, for example,

the recent hostilities in Syria, for which President Bassar Al Assad has systematically rejected the label of 'civil war' between two domestic contenders (Mroue, 2012) and instead drawn a parallel to the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 that took place in the absence of intra-state conflict (Bacchi, 2015). At the same time, there is a 'substantial consensus' amongst state actors about 'terrorism' in peacetime that has no grounding in international law (Cassese, 2006, pp. 936–937), and which expands the category of 'civilian' victims to encompass every person, including state officials, members of state enforcement agencies, and the security forces (see UK, 2000; EU, 2002; US Congress, 2001).

On the other hand, those waging violence against the state seek legitimacy and reject the terrorism label by representing their fight as part of an armed conflict that falls under the remits of international legal frameworks. This is illustrated in the names adopted by dissident groups, from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to the Irish Republican Army (IRA), or in their depiction of their struggle as part of a war or an armed conflict. 'When you kill in war, it is an act that is allowed', pointed Yigal Amir after killing Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 (CNN, 1995). The Basque separatist group ETA (Homeland and Liberty) describes its militants as commandos engaged in 'armed conflict' (Veres, 2006). In the case of Xinjiang, dissident organizations like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) claim to be engaged in a 'holy' war against China (RFA, 2012h).

The lack of precise provisions around the categories of 'civilian' or 'combatant', of legitimate targets, and of agents of violence outside of internationally recognized armed conflicts opens space for narrative contests over the status of the victims and perpetrators of violent events. This is the case in spite of such categories appearing as unambiguous properties in the minimal consensus over what constitutes an act of terrorism. Perpetrators here seek to discursively represent their victims either as combatants or part of an oppressive state apparatus, and thereby as legitimate targets, whereas governments tend to emphasize the civilian status of victims in the same event to represent violence as outside the boundary of legitimate conduct (see Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019, pp. 8–9). The latter frequently paves the way for legitimizing repressive and extraordinary measures against perpetrators on the basis of denying them combatant status (see R. Jackson, 2011).

### ***Terrorism Is Indiscriminate and Unexpected Violence***

Delineating terrorism through the character of an act of violence is not limited to the question of whether premeditated violence claims 'innocent' civilian lives. Conceptually entwined with violence against civilians as a core constituent property of terrorism are the degree of target selectivity and forewarning involved. A key definitional marker holds that a terrorist violent event is generally an act of indiscriminate violence, also described as 'arbitrary', 'impersonal', or 'random' violence, which also occurs in a way that is 'unexpected', 'incalculable', or 'unpredictable' (see Table 1.1, markers 12 and 18). Collins (2008, p. 400) notes here that terrorist attacks are characterized as such precisely because the attackers launch violence

avoiding any previous confrontation or detection. In a similar vein, Gibbs (1989, p. 330) suggests that terrorists conceal their identity and location while they plot their actions and until the very moment of the attack.

As it is the case with the civilian definitional marker, this element again links to long-standing international (legal) norms over the use of force that, in this case, holds for intrastate conflict (Crawford & Pert, 2015, p. 198; ICC, 1998, p. 5). International Human Rights Law prohibits 'indiscriminate attacks', which are defined as those instances of the use of direct physical force that are 'not directed at a specific military objective', 'which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law', and which 'are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction' (see ICRC, 2019). International law also offers some guidance on how to delineate the suddenness and unpredictability of terrorism, which, in addition to an explicit warning, includes the concealing of weapons and civilian clothing rather than uniforms (Merari, 1993; Pfanner, 2004). The key here is that the unexpected and random disruption of everyday life challenges the international normative consensus on the use of force by violating conditions of pre-emption and self-defence.

To analytically establish whether the use of force is intentionally indiscriminate and surprising is often, even if implicitly, derived from two material factors of violent events: the technology used to carry out violent attacks and the types of spaces targeted. For example, some advanced technologies associated with the use of force are primarily indiscriminate by design, such as explosive devices and weapons of mass destruction, while other more rudimentary devices including guns and knives as well as objects not intended for the use of physical force, only gain the indiscriminate status through the way in which they are deployed. Likewise, the locations of violent events can more or less readily foster interpretations of indiscriminate physical harm against civilians. In contrast to spaces associated with the state security apparatus such as military barracks or police stations, public venues including transport hubs, busy squares, and markets are widely associated with the presence of a predominantly civilian population that does not anticipate an act of violence. Acts like 'detonating a bomb in a public place clearly do involve random targeting' and foster the interpretation of the act as a terrorist attack (R. Jackson, 2011, p. 120), whereas it is more 'difficult to conceive how an act could be labelled as terrorist if ... the author identifies himself as an attacker while he is visible to the combatants he attacks during and prior to the launching of the attack' (Sassòli, 2006, p. 9). Within the context of 'highly patterned' events such as riots, for example, ethnic violence is neither random nor unpredictable and surprising (Horowitz, 2001, p. 1), but often part of a broader pattern of 'build-up, outbreak, and escalation of public disorder' (Moran & Waddington, 2016, p. 172).

Yet again the mere materiality of either technology and space or clandestine elements such as civilian clothing that are central to establishing an act of violence as indiscriminate do not automatically invite the interpretation of violent events as terrorism. A case in point is China's selective application of the terrorism label for events that could all be understood as indiscriminate acts of violence. In

July 2013, the Chinese authorities did not characterize the detonation of a home-made explosive device, without causing fatalities, at the Beijing airport, by a man who protested his ill-treatment by the police (X. Chen, 2013; Zheng & An, 2013). Neither did they frame as terrorism the explosion of nine bombs by ex-convict and local resident Feng Zhijun, outside the headquarters of the CPC in Taiyuan (Shanxi province) in November 2013, which killed one person and left eight others injured (Meng, 2014a). In contrast, when events concerned Uyghur-related violence in Xinjiang, the Chinese police presented 'boxing gloves' as 'evidence of a terror plan', and framed as a 'terrorist' attack an episode in a remote mountainous area in which the alleged terrorists were accompanied by children (see RFA, 2012e, 2011i). Just as for the civilian property of terrorism, the definitional category of indiscrimination is satisfied less through the materiality of a violent event but is instead dependent on how political agents chose to frame the incidents.

### ***Terrorism Is Symbolic Violence That Communicates Fear to Coerce***

Scholarly conceptualizations of terrorism properties prominently feature a communicative dimension. This is linked to definitional markers that imbue terrorist violence with a 'symbolic' character that pursues 'publicity' through violence with the intent to instil 'fear' or 'terror' in victims other than the immediate physical target of an attack (see Table 1.1, markers 3 and 17). As Jenkins (1974, p. 4) suggested, terrorism is 'aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims', which makes it a form of 'theatre'. The presumed aim of such fear-inducing symbolic violence is the coercion, intimidation, extortion, or threatening of third parties into acting in a way that satisfies the perpetrators' agenda (cf. GTD, 2014, p. 8; ICRC, 2019).

The construction of terrorism as a communication device is based on the underlying assumption that in contrast to 'legitimate' uses of deliberate physical force, terrorist attacks are not conducted with the intention or capacity to achieve direct territorial or military gains but rather to generate a broader psychological reaction that follows the direct physical act. The idea that 'fear and trembling' (Rapoport, 1984) is a potent military and political strategy can be traced back to the classic Chinese strategist Sun Tzu's maxim 'kill one, frighten ten thousand' (see Prunckun, 2014). Rapoport (1984, p. 669) recalls here the effects that Zealot violence had on the Romans, for whom 'the panic created was more alarming than the calamity itself; everyone, as on the battlefield, hourly expected death'.

Based on the psychological reach of violence, terrorism has been constructed as a rhetorical device with the capacity to intimidate and coerce third parties into complying with the political objectives of the perpetrator, that is, 'propaganda by the deed' (Fleming, 1980). The uniqueness of terrorism lies, according to Schreiber (1978), in the existence of a speaker, an audience, and a language. The terrorist is the speaker, the audience – which may be the public, the media, or the government – is the part to be coerced and extorted, and violence is the language. The media, from television to newspapers to the Internet, emerge as the conduit of this communicational process, the guarantor that the terror-to-coerce mechanism will unleash (see



Jenkins, 1974, p. 4; Decker & Rainey, 1980, pp. 4–5; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2009; Weimann, 2008).

In contrast to the terrorism properties discussed in the previous subsections, the communicative dimension is challenging to link to specific material features. As Schmid (2004, p. 395) emphasizes, differentiating terrorism from other types of political violence on the basis of its 'coercive and communicative tactics' is a difficult task. At least in theory, every violent attack has the potential to terrify and intimidate audiences beyond the immediate victims. Terrorism does not have the monopoly of these effects, as the use of rape as an instrument of war demonstrates (Clifford, 2008). The US Patriot Act's definition of terrorism echoes the challenge of determining the intentionality of spreading terror, noting that for an act to be considered as terrorism, it merely needs to '*appear to be intended*' (US Congress, 2001, p. 275; my emphasis).

To some extent, the symbolic element of terrorism can be deduced from the choice of target. By selecting a locus for a violent attack that is likely to be considered broadly as traumatizing or by implementing violence in a shocking way, perpetrators may obtain more greater publicity, which, in turn, may hold the potential to facilitate the spreading of terror and anxiety, and, in extension, increase the likelihood of achieving the coercive effects intended. Scholars have attributed this 'spectacular' element to aircraft hijacking tactics (Rapoport, 2002), the September 11 attacks in the US in 2001 (Kellner, 2004), and the diffusion of gruesome executions through the Internet and the social media (Friis, 2015). In contrast, a violent attack that because of its remote location goes unnoticed and unreported will hardly be interpreted as an intentional act of terror.

### ***Terrorism Is Political (Violence)***

A final but fundamental definitional marker assigns a 'political' property to violence for it to become interpreted as terrorism. Indeed, this element stands alongside violence and terror as one of the three core clusters underpinning the concept (Weinberg et al., 2004, p. 781; see Table 1.2). It is, however, equally vague and open to interpretation as the previous terrorism properties, perhaps even more so if we understand the political arena as comprising 'the entire sphere of the social' (Hay, 2002, p. 3), and with the boundaries of what is political as opposed to private, personal, or peculiar generally seen as difficult to establish (Stampnitzky, 2017). To narrow the breadth of phenomena that fall within the 'political' dimension of terrorism markers, terrorism scholarship has generally zoomed in on the motivation of the perpetrators. This, however, evokes questions on what precisely is political about a motivation for violence and how we can identify it as the perpetrator's overarching rationale for violence.

Analytically, a first difficulty is here that violence is always political in as much as it is always subject to legal scrutiny in the public realm. Unlike other social phenomena, from making friends to doing sports, violent interactions are regulated by the state. Broadly speaking, violent phenomena are either part of the state's

monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory (Weber, 1919/1965) or fall into the private sphere, where they are regulated according to country-specific systems of law and legal prosecution (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5). What is more, there seems to be no agreement in the international arena as to what the specific political motivation of terrorism is. For the WHO, terrorism has a 'social' motive, as differentiated from a 'political' one (Krug et al., 2002, p. 8). International Law, broadly conceived, interprets terrorism as having a political or ideological motivation of public scope, as opposed to private ends such as a personal economic profit (Cassese, 2006), but some scholars find 'narco-terrorism' to be a political phenomenon (Björnehed, 2004) or see a political dimension in 'the pursuit of economic goals for criminal organisations' (Toros & Mavelli, 2013, p. 73).

It is similarly difficult, if not impossible, to establish whether a set of ideas are political, ideological, or religious. Interestingly, while there are no clear boundaries between these realms, they have all been traditionally associated with motivations for terrorism. For example, Rapoport's mapping of 'modern terrorism' into four: anarchist, anti-colonial, new left, and religious waves shows how ideological and religious energies are intertwined with political ones. In the contemporary era, the idea of 'Islamic terrorism' has gained particular prominence amongst policymakers and scholars alike (R. Jackson, 2007, pp. 398–400). Overall, as Wieviorka (2007, p. 96) suggests, 'the political dimensions of terrorism are permanently fuelled (sic) or invaded by other logics where meaning is lost or overloaded by new elements', leading violence to be 'either infrapolitical (and then dominated by economic or purely criminal goals)', or 'metapolitical (and then dominated by religious goals, including life after death)'.

An alternative way to analytically grasp the political definitional marker, and one which finds ideological or religious motivations as compatible with a political agenda rather than in opposition to it, is to start from a definition of politics as the 'strive for a share of power or to influence the distribution of power' (Weber 1919/1965, p. 78). Based on an understanding of politics as intimately connected to (contests over) power scholars have studied terrorism as both a dissident tactic and a state strategy, despite the differences between both phenomena (Laqueur, 1986, p. 89).

Violence by non-state actors has been the core focus of terrorism scholarship. The insurgent groups cited by Rapoport (2002) saw their ultimate purpose in the subversion of the established order, whether this was a monarchy, in the case of anarchism, colonial states, or Western liberal democracies. Theorists and strategists associated with such movements often explicitly emphasized the crucial role of violence in achieving their politically subversive aims. George Sorel (1919/1999), for example, praised the proletariat's violence as a core means to counter the state's orchestrated terror and repression, whereas Carlos Marighella (1969/2002, p. 3) suggested that 'to be an assailant or a terrorist is a quality that ennoble any honourable man because it is an act worthy of a revolutionary engaged in armed struggle against the shameful military dictatorship and its monstrosities'. Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 61), in turn, proposed 'greater violence' as the means of defeating a 'colonialism'

that he labelled as 'violence in its natural state'. Such terrorist violence against what is perceived as oppressive regimes is here understood as political because it disputes their legitimacy in a competition over power.

While a bias exists towards assigning terrorist agency to non-state actors (R. Jackson, 2009, p. 179), scholars have also considered the political dimension of terrorism in the context of repressive state practices, in particular, as means to hold on to power and suppress dissidence. The idea of terror by the state is rooted in the violence that the revolutionary French regime adopted during the period known as *La Terreur*, and amongst others, Lenin's reservation of a crucial role for 'organized terror' as a means for state coercion once in power (cited in Leggett, 1987). Arendt (1969) pointedly referred to 'terror' as 'the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control'. Today, the notion of 'state terrorism' generally refers to 'violent repression for control of state power' (Marsden & Schmid, 2011, p. 161), and while the idea of state terrorism has been mainly associated with totalitarian regimes, it has also been used to describe violent campaigns implemented or sponsored by liberal democracies of the 'global North' (see Jarvis & Lister, 2014). Such terrorist violence can, therefore, be understood as political in as much it aims to hold and wield power over a regime's subjects.

Finally, a reference to a political dimension is also contained in the definitional property that characterizes terrorism as violence that is carried out by a group, movement, or organization (see Table 1.1, marker 16), which includes both a political affiliation and a desire to further political ends for a wider community on the part of the attackers. Violent acts that are committed by individuals without any organizational connection and for reasons such as personal revenge or private grievances do, thus, not routinely fall under this dominant understanding of terrorism. If violent attacks that are carried out by isolated individuals are represented as acts of terrorism, the perpetrators are commonly portrayed as 'lone wolves' (Baker & De Graaf, 2011) who have a strong ideological affiliation and cause (see Pantucci, 2011).

As with the previously discussed terrorism properties, invoking a political dimension to interpret violence as an act of terrorism is a sign of agency. It is not imbued unambiguously by the phenomenology of either the event or motivation of the perpetrators. This is exemplified by the recent labelling 'leniency' towards right-wing extremist positions and violence as 'hate crime' that otherwise displays key markers of terrorism if compared with a straightforward association between Islam, violence, and 'terrorism' (R. Jackson, 2007). This underscores that although the phenomenology of violence and material observable features do matter in identifying violence as terrorism, it is ultimately its discursive construction that plays the lead role in giving sense to violent events as terrorist acts.

### ***A Matrix for Interpreting Violent Events as Terrorism***

Following from the above is that the 'things' used to identify a terrorist event are not simply 'empty receptacles of discourses nor do they have "essential" characteristics

... but emerge in relation with material-discursive practices' (Aradau, 2010, p. 494). Yet while they are neither immutable nor passive or fixed (Barad, 2007, p. 151), the core markers of terrorism can nevertheless serve as core ingredients of an analytical mapping device that allows making inferences about the degree to which both the phenomenology of a violent event and its discursive representation correspond with dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism.

The interpretative matrix that this book uses as a mapping device of violent events features two perpendicular lines, or axes, which show the phenomenological distance of an event to each of the key terrorism properties discussed in the previous sections as well as to the minimal scholarly consensus: (x) the degree to which a political motivation on the part of the perpetrator can be assigned to a violent act; and (y) a scale of how much a violent incident overlaps with the material *definiens* of terrorism. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the higher an event is situated on both axes, the higher the degree of correspondence of a violent event with scholarly understandings of terrorism.

In the empirical investigation of the terroristization of Xinjiang that follows, the phenomenological quality of an event is assessed by placing it at the intersection of both axes, which can be divided further into 15 quadrants according to their proximity or distance to the minimal scholarly terrorism definition. It is important to note here that while this mapping device is designed to provide a pathway to approximate the spectrum of violence in Xinjiang vis-à-vis academic definitions of terrorism, the individual categories are far from either unequivocally or clear-cut. As the dashed lines demarcating the different quadrants acknowledge, the definitional markers of terrorism are fluid and open to negotiation, contestation, and manipulation by political agents.

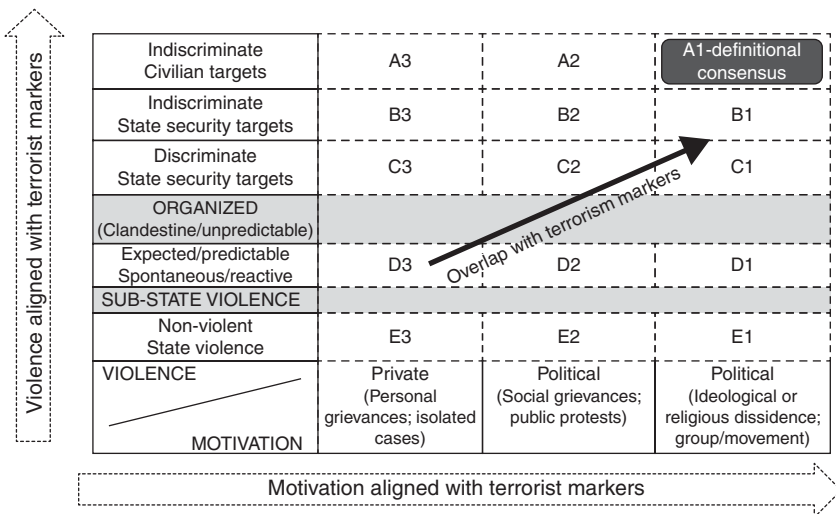


FIGURE 1.1 Interpretative scale of terrorism according to violence and motivation

Box A1 contains events that fit squarely into the consensus because they correspond with all core terrorism properties: they are premeditated, unpredictable, and indiscriminate violent attacks against 'civilians', and they are carried out by organized groups with a political dissident agenda. In turn, events that fall onto quadrants A2 (social grievances) or A3 (personal grievances), while presenting similar material features, lack a distinct political dimension because they are not accompanied by a dissident agenda or cannot be traced to an insurgent organization.

Box B1 corresponds to actions with the same material and motivational features of A1 and denotes events in which victims are seen as 'combatants' rather than as civilians. Attacks against 'combatants' motivated by personal reasons (B3) or by public grievances but with no insurgent aim (B2) are one and two degrees, respectively, further removed from overlapping with the definitional consensus. C-boxes follow a similar pattern to those in the B-quadrants, with the exception that violence here is not indiscriminate but deployed against selectively targeted victims. When these victims are perceived as 'combatants', or members of a 'repressive apparatus', and their targeting implies an insurgent aim, targeted assassinations display a stronger 'terroristic' character (C1) compared to events in which the perpetrator is motivated by personal grievances directly linked to the targeted victim (C3).

Events in D-boxes are those that, while potentially exhibiting some of the features present in A1, such as involving indiscriminate violence against 'innocent' victims, do not involve a significant degree of prior organization or premeditation. Instances of spontaneous or reactive violence that follow an immediately previous confrontational context, even if displaying some dissident motivational dimension (D1), generally fall in the D2 box when wider socio-political tensions linger in the background, or the D3 box when they stem from personally aggrieved individuals. Ethnic riots are a case in point for events within the D-quadrants. They combine different violent patterns, from indiscriminate attacks launched by mobs of 'civilians' against other 'civilians', to the repression by the state security forces ('combatants') of peaceful 'civilian' protesters, but lack the elements of organization and premeditation. While riots are often predictable considering that they result from the escalation of immediately previous tensions, they may still involve dissident individuals who may act as opportunistic instigators. Finally, E-boxes reflect either non-violent events or state violence, both of which lay outside the definitional consensus on what constitutes terrorism.

Overall, then, the matrix developed here serves to make claims about the material anatomy of an event to assess whether its phenomenology should facilitate a terrorist interpretation. Yet, as the above discussion of the key terrorism properties featuring in this study suggests, whether and how violent events are discursively mapped onto prevalent definitional markers of terrorism requires agency. There is a *palette* of interpretative possibilities associated with each marker, some of which may steer violent phenomena away from dominant understandings of terrorism, while others may indeed facilitate a 'terroristic' meaning. If political agents employ salient

'terrorist' reference points in the message text to represent a violent event, this interpretative route invokes discursive anchors that prompt memories of terrorist violence, fostering unreflective knowledge towards interpreting a violent event as an act of terrorism because they fit onto pre-existing discursive maps. References to terrorism markers are a discursive choice, and, if present, are indicative of terroristization processes. This book explains how the Chinese state has chosen, over the past three decades, to construct Uyghur-related violence as terrorism, facilitating in the way the broader terroristization of Xinjiang.

## Conclusion

This chapter has developed the core elements of terroristization as an analytical framework for the study of the social construction of terrorism. Building on securitization theory and adopting a 'minimal foundationalist' approach, I have conceptualized terroristization as a framework that enables the study of discursive constructions of terrorism in authoritarian regimes, such as the PRC.

With its emphasis on the discursive construction of threats and the emergency politics this enables, securitization theory and the interventions adjusting and expanding the CS's proposal provide a template from which to investigate the processes by which terrorism discourse makes counter-terrorism practice a political possibility (see R. Jackson, 2005; Holland, 2013). Other critical approaches to the study of security have proved useful to investigate the emergency politics in Xinjiang, notably the emergence of a surveillance state or the internment of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities in so-called 're-education camps' (see Chapter 4). Drawing on Foucault (1997), Roberts (2018) has analysed the gradual exclusion of Uyghurs as a manifestation of *biopolitics*, where the Chinese state approaches the ethnic minority group as a biological threat to society that must be quarantined through surveillance, punishment, and detention practices. Meanwhile, Walsch (2020, p. 15) has recognized Agamben's 'state of exception' (2005) in the police state of Xinjiang, one 'where the rule of law is lifted and replaced with x-rays, iris scans, GPS tracking systems in all vehicles, collection of DNA from medical checkups, banning of all communication software, and sporadic arrests'. Also building on the ideas of Foucault and Agamben, Li (2016, p. 38–39) has reflected on China's 'Panoptical surveillance' over the Uyghur ethnic minority, examining how Uyghur culture, language, and habitus have been constrained or rendered useless by the Chinese state in the name of a safe development of the society. As these and other critical perspectives (see Zhang & McGhee, 2014) emphasize, the biopolitics, surveillance, and state of exception present in Xinjiang, conceptualized in this book as indicators of a *sine die* state of terroristization, are the result of the predication of a terrorism threat and the labelling of Uyghurs as terrorists (see Roberts, 2018, p. 234; Walsch, 2020). Securitization theory, with its capacity to link security discourse and change in practice (see Salter, 2010, p. 122), hence provides the entry point to investigate the discursive patterns, historical context, and political implications of

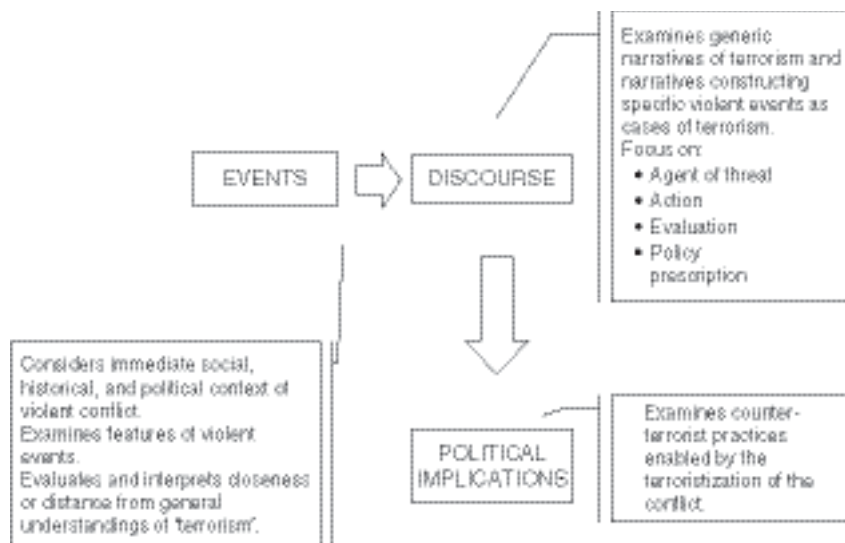


FIGURE 1.2 Three-levels of the terroristization framework

these labelling and predication. And it does so in combination with the dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism, which this chapter has introduced as both the materiality-informed discursive structure of knowledge that provides a background to, and influences the terroristization process and as the basis to develop a mapping device for the study and interpretation of violent events.

The terroristization framework that guides this book enables the empirical investigation of the discursive construction of terrorism across three levels, which are summarized in Figure 1.2. The first draws on the scholarly dominant definitions of terrorism to examine the extent to which violent events echo general understandings of terrorism. The second level examines the linguistic patterns deployed by political actors to characterize violent conflict and to construct specific violent incidents. The third level looks at the wider political implications of the way violence is interpreted and represented discursively. Chapters 2–4 analyse these three core dimensions (violence, discourse, and politics) of the terroristization process at three different contemporary stages within the historically chronological order they occurred.

As this book shows, neither discursive practices nor material phenomena should be understood as ontologically or epistemologically prior (Barad, 2007, p. 822) because, as Hardy and Thomas (2015, p. 686) point out, 'material objects and discourses are intertwined, with the former acquiring its identity through the discourses in which it is situated'. This means that the material basis of Uyghur-related violence here examined does not automatically anchor an event as a terrorist attack in processes of sensemaking – even if it significantly overlaps with

the predominant terrorism markers contained within the surplus of definitions. Rather, in the process of terroristization of Xinjiang, it has been the invocation of a terrorism repertoire in Chinese state narratives about violent events that has functioned as the key device to hold meaning (terrorism) and matter (violence) together.

## Note

- 1 Author's clusterization of the core *definiens* of terrorism identified in Weinberg et al., 2004.



# 2

## SECURITIZING XINJIANG

### The Years of 'Counterrevolution' (1978–1990)

Until the turn of the 21st century, terrorism in China's northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) did not exist. This is not to suggest that there were no episodes of violence in the region, on the contrary. Rather, the term 'terrorism' was essentially absent from the Chinese state discourse about conflict and dissidence in Xinjiang. During the 1980s, in the absence of a terrorism repertoire, the Chinese authorities instead used the label of 'counterrevolution' to diagnose a security threat in the region. At the time, 'counterrevolutionary' or 'struggle' were the master notions used nationwide by the Party to determine which 'bad elements' ought to be removed from society by violent means (see Ter Haar, 1996, p. 81). As this book argues, in the absence of the 'terror' jargon, this period nevertheless played an important part in setting the scene for the securitization of ethnic tensions in the region and should therefore be understood as a stage of pre-terroristization.

This chapter explores the Chinese government's move away from gradualism and discursive restraint to suppression and 'counterrevolution'. Access to information on – and narratives of – violence at the time is possible because, in contrast to the hermetic character of the Maoist rule (1949–1976), Deng Xiaoping's early leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which coincides with the period under investigation here, tolerated media openness to the extent that the 1980s have been described as a 'golden age' in foreign reporting on China (Gittings, 2006). Nevertheless, in particular, the analysis of the phenomenology of violence comes with the caveat that incidents other than those presented here can – and will – have occurred in Xinjiang during the 'reform an opening up' (*gaige kaifang*) period even if their details remain unavailable (cf. Abel, 1985).

The chapter shows that the emergence of the discourse of 'splittism' and the construction of a 'counterrevolutionary' threat was a gradual process that replaced the government's earlier restraint in acknowledging and responding to violence in Xinjiang, which had characterized the beginning of the 'reform an opening up' era

in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The securitization of the region was complete when authorities represented a violent outburst in the Baren township (Aqto county of Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture) as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' and a 'holy war' and abandoned moderation and gradualism (see Connor, 1984) in favour of a militarized response to the tensions with the Turkic Muslim minorities of Xinjiang. The period of 'counterrevolution' thus sets the scene for the stages of proto-terroristization and terroristization and plays a vital role in understanding the contemporary Chinese discourse on terrorism.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section explores the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang during the 1980s, analyzing official and alternative narratives in response to a series of reported violent incidents. The focus lies here on mapping their material features and evaluating the degree of their correspondence to dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism. The second section centres on the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang. It traces how the statements of Chinese officials and the state media began to increasingly represent violence and dissent in the region as a separatist 'counterrevolutionary' threat to the stability and unity of China. This discourse, I argue, enabled the securitization of the tensions with the Uyghur ethnic minority in Xinjiang. In the final section, the chapter turns its attention to the political responses that were enabled through this discursive shift, demonstrating how the Chinese authorities abandoned conciliatory policies towards the ethnic minorities in favour of a crackdown campaign that has remained in place until today.

## Mapping Violence in Xinjiang in the Early 'Reform and Opening Up' Period

Violent conflict has been a feature for much of Xinjiang's modern history (Forbes, 1986; Gladney, 1990; Benson, 1990; Perdue, 2005; Millward, 2007). Inter-ethnic tensions, in particular, have long fuelled secessionist attempts such as the emirate of Kashgaria (1864–1877), the First Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (1931–1933), and the Second Eastern Turkestan Republic (1944–1949) (see Kim, 2004; Forbes, 1986; D. Wang, 1999), or the resistance to the CPC's 'peaceful liberation' of Xinjiang after 1949 (Y. Zhang, 1994; Dillon, 2004). Following the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and despite the moderate policies that the Chinese government adopted to please ethnic minorities and defuse political dissent, violent outbursts continued to erupt in the region. The 'reform and opening up' period is no exception.

This section explores the spectrum of violent activities reported in Xinjiang between 1978 and 1990 and analyses their features and the extent to which these overlap with academic definitions of terrorism. It focuses, in particular, on four violent events known to have taken place in Payzawat (1981), Kashgar (1981), Ürümqi (1989), and Baren (1990). The analysis also integrates the student protests taking place in Ürümqi, Beijing, and Shanghai in 1985 and which, while not violent, provide insights into how the Chinese state discourse and policies vis-à-vis

dissent evolved over the decade. Drawing on the insights gained in Chapter 1, the section assesses how well these incidents map onto the terrorism interpretive grid. To this aim, it examines the extent of their political motivation, their level of organization and premeditation, and whether violence was deployed indiscriminately to target civilians.

### ***Payzawat 1981***

One of the first violent events that occurred in Xinjiang after the end of the Cultural Revolution is the failed armed uprising reported in the spring of 1981 in the county of Payzawat, in Kashgar prefecture. According to available accounts (Dillon, 2004: pp. 59–60; Rong, 2003; X. Chen, 2014), a group of nine students led by Ismail Hasan had founded the Eastern Turkestan Prairie Party that year. Within two months of existence, the organization recruited 148 members, the majority of them students aged between 15 and 20. In their founding meeting, the party had committed to rising in arms against China to build an East Turkestan Islamic Republic.

On the evening of 26 May 1981, party members, divided into three groups, kidnapped the guard of the county armoury on the outskirts of Payzawat and seized 152 firearms, including ammunition and grenades. Before they could move forward, the Chinese authorities, alerted by the guard's wife, had mobilized the army and the police. The 'rebels' gathered in a forest 3 kilometres outside the town, where they claimed they would fight as 'mujahideen ranks'. Surrounded by troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA), they accepted to negotiate with a representative of the local Public Security Bureau (PSB), and eventually surrendered. Accounts differ on the fate of the insurgents. Some Chinese sources emphasize that the uprising was put down without 'a single shot' and 'without shedding a drop of blood' (X. Chen, 2014). Others point out that 13 received prison sentences (Rong, 2003), while Dillon (2004, pp. 59–60) suggests that authorities adopted a differential response in which some armed insurgents were dealt with 'severely' while secondary participants were merely reprimanded. Local witnesses suggested years later that the PLA stopped the uprising violently, leaving many dead (Reuters, 1988b).

Based on the material features of the episode, the events in Payzawat overlap significantly but not entirely with dominant constructions of terrorism. To begin with, if a political purpose is understood as a dissident revolutionary, secessionist, or insurgent agenda, the armed uprising in Payzawat fits neatly into the politically motivated violence box that forms a cornerstone of many academic markers of a terrorist act. This is because, according to the available accounts, the group had explicitly stated that the purpose of their resort to violence was to achieve secession of the region from the PRC. The Eastern Turkestan Prairie Party also sought to act upon its foundational principle of rising in arms against the Chinese rule. To do so, they had seized a weapons cache and were on their way to launch an attack when the authorities halted the operation. This suggests a significant degree of covertness,

organization, and premeditation, all core features within the dominant construction of terrorism. However, since the attack was not carried out and there is no available information of the insurgents' choice of target or locations, it is difficult to attach a clear-cut terroristic character to this episode.

### ***Kashgar 1981***

A second relevant episode was the Kashgar riot on 30 October 1981. This was triggered by a street scuffle in which an ethnic Han Chinese killed an Uyghur peasant. The victim, Abdulla Kader, had complained to the perpetrator, Ye Xin, objecting to the construction of a drainage ditch through Uyghur property (Wren, 1983; Dillon, 2004, pp. 59–60). The discussion escalated into a fight in which Ye accidentally shot dead Abdulla, afterwards turning himself into the police. According to a local Uyghur official, what at this point should have ended as a criminal case quickly turned into an ethnic riot of considerable dimensions: hundreds of Uyghurs took the streets parading the body of the victim, shouting slogans against the Han Chinese and calling for the establishment of an independent 'Uyghuristan' (Oziewicz, 1983). Armed with knives and clubs, they went on a rampage beating Han Chinese, looting shops, smashing cars, and attacking municipal buildings and other public facilities. Two people were killed, 59 were significantly injured, and 570 sustained minor injuries. Some Chinese accounts emphasize that the riots were instigated by an organization named the Central Asian Uyghuristan Youth Spark Party, created only a month before by young Uyghurs (Rong, 2003). According to this version, the organization took over the protests, distributing leaflets, seizing weapons, and calling to jihad and martyrdom. Twelve of the group's leaders were executed after the riot (Y. Liu, 2014), and the Chinese state compensated the original victim's family and executed the perpetrator along with an accomplice (L.H. Sun, 1985).

While official accounts of the unrest in Kashgar emphasized the participation of an organized group with a separatist agenda, the way in which the events unfolded suggests that this organization merely capitalized on a riot already underway and that it had no role in premeditating or triggering the event. Instead, the protest in Kashgar originated from an inter-ethnic quotidian scuffle that ended with murder. While not a unique or isolated case – violence was not an uncommon feature of the tense inter-ethnic interactions of the time – the primary trigger of the riot was not a political agenda, but a reaction to a private violent incident, even if the latter had an ethnic dimension. The core motivation of those who took to the streets, which included the victim's family and friends, was to protest the crime and possibly to demand justice from the Chinese authorities. The course of the events changed because protesters eventually channelled their fury through ethnic rioting. Even if members of an organized group provoked protesters into violence and attached separatist slogans to the riot, this does little to qualify the violent episode as 'revolutionary' action. The broader context remains a public demonstration resulting from a crime partly rooted in ethnic mistrust, rather than an armed

premeditated attack with a straightforward political motivation that takes centre stage in dominant constructions of terrorism.

### ***Student Protests 1985***

Another key episode of unrest in Xinjiang during this period is the student protests of December 1985. While not violent, hundreds of ethnic minority students illegally assembled in the streets of Ürümchi, Beijing, and Shanghai. The protests started on 12 December in the region's capital Ürümchi when approximately 2,000 ethnic minority students from several universities demonstrated in front of the local government offices against the nuclear tests undertaken in the region. The students also demanded an easing of the family planning policies, the fulfilment of the constitutional provisions for ethnic autonomy, the improvement of education for minorities, and the reinstatement of Ismail Amat as regional governor following his replacement days earlier by Tomur Dawamat, whom they considered unqualified for the post (Burns, 1985). They shouted slogans such as 'Han out of Xinjiang' or 'Independence, Freedom and Sovereignty for Xinjiang' (Dillon, 2004, p. 61). A Chinese official interviewed by a Western news agency explained that the march 'dispersed after patient persuasions by the (Communist) Party and government leading comrades who explained to the students that nuclear tests in Xinjiang didn't have any harmful effects on the people' (AP, 1986). Another Chinese official pointed that, in front of the students' 'reasonable opinions on various government policies', his colleagues 'used verbal persuasion and education to have the students return to a normal academic situation' (Reuters, 1986).

At the end of the month, the protest was repeated in Beijing, where around 300 ethnic minority students from the National Minorities Institute demonstrated in Tiananmen Square and marched to the entrance of Zhongnanhai, the Chinese government headquarters (AP, 1985). The students renewed the demands of their peers in Ürümchi, and additionally called for democratic elections in which local officials from the ethnic minorities could participate and for the end of the policy of sending criminals to Xinjiang. Chinese officials, amongst them a minister and four vice-ministers, met with 30 student representatives, to whom they explained that nuclear tests were necessary and that China's policies towards minorities were generous (AFP, 1985). Only days later, 100 students paraded in Shanghai waving banners reading 'Stop nuclear testing' and 'Don't turn Xinjiang into a concentration camp'. One of the protesters, commenting on what response the demonstration would have from the authorities, pointed out that he expected the government would be 'reasonable' (UPI, 1985). This comment greatly reflected the moderated approach to dissent that the Chinese government showcased at the time of the events.

The student protests in 1985 displayed clear-cut political orientation, but a separatist motive is difficult to establish. Rather, the demands centred on achieving the implementation of the Chinese constitution provisions for autonomy and the election of governors, as well as on improving education and the halting of the

nuclear tests in Xinjiang. Far from dissident, these demands were made of the Chinese government suggesting an implicit acceptance of its authority. Chinese officials responded with moderation, meeting with some of the students, considering their demands and reassuring them concerning the nuclear tests. In late 1988, a protest that followed a similar pattern occurred. Uyghur students demonstrated in Beijing against Chinese films that they said distorted Uyghur history and culture. They carried banners reading 'minorities demand human rights' and 'we want national unity based on equality' (Roche, 1988e). Despite the fact that the demonstration was illegal under local rules that required protesters to apply for advance permission, Chinese officials from the State Nationalities Commission met the marchers and promised to investigate their grievances (ibid), in another sign of the moderate response to political opposition that the government adopted at the time.

### **Ürümchi 1989**

A third major violent episode is the string of violent riots that broke out in Ürümchi in 1989. Protests had already erupted in other Chinese Muslim-populated provinces like Ningxia, Gansu, or Qinghai against the publication of the book '*Sexual Customs*' (1987), as it was perceived as condescending Islam. On 12 May 1989 around 2,500 Muslim demonstrators marched in Beijing in a procession that, unlike the well-known demonstrations in Tiananmen Square later that year, was authorized by the PSB. Furthermore, the municipal government supported the suppression of the contentious book because it attacked 'the unity of China's minorities' (Pomfret, 1989). The protest march ended in Tiananmen Square, with Muslim religious leaders delivering a letter to the National People's Congress (NPC) that called for the imprisonment of the book editors (Pomfret, 1989; Roche, 1989).

In Ürümchi, however, a similar – although unauthorized – demonstration ended in violence. On 18 May 1989, a procession organized by senior religious figures and community leaders from mosques and Islamic schools marched the streets of the regional capital with slogans defending Islam against discrimination, demanding the destruction of the book '*Sexual Customs*', and calling for the punishment of the authors and publishers (Mudin, 2012). The march congregated up to 5,000 individuals in front of the regional headquarters of the CPC, where the organizers tried to meet with senior government figures but to no avail. The protest dissolved peacefully but some of the organizers were later arrested and others prevented from repeating the procession. The next day, thousands of people congregated again in the streets, this time rudderless, in a tense environment and under heavy police and military presence. At some point, two fire engines directed their water cannons onto demonstrators to disperse the protest, after which riots erupted (see Mudin, 2012). What followed, according to the official version of the events, was a 'counterrevolutionary' riot in which hundreds of 'hooligans' stormed the government compound, beating and injuring 150 policemen and government officials (BBCMSAP, 1989a). A Chinese court later sentenced ten rioters to prison terms ranging from a year to life, accusing them of robbery, sabotage, and defacing property (BBCMSAP, 1989b).

Subsuming the case of Ürümchi under the category of terrorism is difficult, in particular, because a clear-cut insurgent political motivation and premeditation to instigate violence are absent. The origin of the event was a procession organized by local clerics who demanded government action, implicitly recognizing the Chinese state authority. Violence only erupted when the regional authorities decided to disband those demonstrating in the streets of Ürümchi. While some individuals may have shouted separatist slogans during the riots that ensued and actively engaged in the acts of 'smashing, looting and beating' denounced by the authorities, it is misguided to understand the event as a dissident revolutionary action per se that can satisfy any of the core terrorism markers.

### ***Baren 1990***

The most publicized episode of violence reported at the time in Xinjiang is the Baren revolt in 1990. On 6 April 1990, hundreds of Chinese security forces ended unrest that had begun the day before in the township of Baren, 50 kilometres from Kashgar, killing 15 'rebels' and eventually suppressing the turmoil. This violent incident is widely considered by scholars as a turning point in the Chinese approach towards dissidents in the region (Dillon, 2004, p. 62; Becquelin, 2000, p. 69; Millward, 2007, p. 325). There are, however, widely differing accounts on the nature and course of the events.

Religious protests were frequent at the time of the Baren riot, in particular, after recently announced official plans to limit the number of mosques and Islamic schools, which the government feared could be harbouring dissident political activities (The Straits Times, 1990b, 1990c; Schmetzer, 1990). The Chinese official version of the incident, echoed by the state media (see BBCMSAP, 1990a; Dinmore, 1990a), described the protests as a premeditated armed rebellion organized by an anti-government 'jihadist' organization, the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP). According to this account, the group had spent months extorting people to obtain funds, as well as training and equipping dozens of youngsters 'to serve as their hired thugs during the rebellion' (The Independent, 1990). During the month of Ramadan, on 5 April 1990, the group led a religious protest in the streets of Baren as they had been forced to act because the authorities had gotten wind of their activities, so the official story goes. Those marching were said to have threatened merchants who opened their businesses or sold tobacco and to have chanted separatist slogans in favour of 'a republic of East Turkestan', claiming that Islam would 'triumph over Marxism and Leninism', and announcing the formation of suicide squads. According to the official Chinese account, one of the leaders shouted:

we should not merely pray five times a day. We must fight. Our purpose is to eliminate the heathens. We must attack them... Even Moslem [*sic*] women must kill the enemy.

(BBCMSAP, 1990a)

In the official story, when the demonstration arrived at the town hall, Chinese officials sought to reassure the protesters, but this was met with violence. The protesters 'frenziedly stopped and attacked the public security personnel who went to perform their duty, robbed them of their weapons and killed six armed police officers, injured 13 others and destroyed four police vehicles' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). Some reports painted a picture of rampaging Muslims attacking ethnic Han Chinese on the streets (S. Long, 1990b). The Chinese official account put significant blame on the ETIP, pointing to their funding and training efforts towards an armed uprising, which overlapped with statements by local witnesses mentioned in non-official accounts (Paula, 1994). Some Western media reproduced and amplified this version of events by reporting that Afghan guerrillas had provided weapons to the local insurgents from across the border (Kynge, 1990b; S. Long, 1990c). However, this was later contradicted by official recounts of the almost inexistent rebel weaponry (Millward, 2007, p. 327). A Chinese book published in 1994 summed up the event as 'a well-planned, well-organized and premeditated violent act' that sought to 'occupy the Baren town by armed revolt and establish the "Eastern Turkistan Republic"' (Y. Zhang, 1994).

Alongside the official version, local testimonies describe the episode as a demonstration against government restrictions placed on religious activities that escalated into a riot that was forcefully repressed by Chinese forces (see Kyodo, 1990; Kynge, 1990a; AI, 1992). According to these alternative accounts, on 4 April 1990, only a day before violence erupted, groups of 60 to 200 Uyghur demonstrators had assembled in mosques to request more religious freedom (AI, 1992). The Chinese authorities initially tried to persuade the protesters to disperse, but resorted to the use of force on 5 April, right after 'the end of a peaceful public prayer meeting held by about 200 protesters near government offices' (AI, 1992). Some of these testimonies also suggested that violence erupted when two Chinese officials 'were killed after talks hit a deadlock' (Kynge, 1990a).

The stories of both the 'armed rebellion' and the 'repressed demonstration' overlap in their account of the course of the events: both emphasize the sequence of a religious protest, some sort of negotiation or discussion between Chinese officials and protesters, and a final escalation of the demonstration into violence. However, they significantly differ on the trigger of the violence: in one account it was the lynching of two officials by the protesters, in the other, the Chinese authorities' resorting to force in their attempt to disperse protesters. As the previous examples and detailed historical accounts of the region suggest (Haider, 2005; Acharya, Gunaratna, & Wang, 2010, pp. 52–54), it is not unlikely that a Muslim fundamentalist-leaning group organized the demonstration and also instigated a violent outcome. However, significant doubts arise on the extent to which the uprising was armed. According to official accounts, all the weapons used by the rioters, except for one gun, were snatched from the Chinese police in the course of the events (Millward, 2007, p. 327). This aspect would make it difficult to describe the unrest as an armed revolt. Uyghur dissident groups in exile praised at the time and afterwards the riot as an 'armed uprising' by 'freedom fighters' against 'the



unjust Chinese rule’ (ETUE, 1991, 1992; WUC, 2015b), implicitly reproducing key elements of the Chinese official version of the events.

In 2002, the Chinese government retrospectively presented the Baren incident as the first contemporary attack of the so-called “‘East Turkistan” Terrorist Forces’ (SCIO, 2002). Nevertheless, this violent episode does not map well onto dominant understandings of an insurgent uprising that overlaps with core terrorism markers. Official narratives acknowledge that there was a demonstration in which hundreds of protesters congregated in front of the township hall that escalated into violence. In this sense, while members of a subversive group may have planned the protest or contributed to the escalation of a negotiation deadlock into a violent confrontation, this incident is comparable to the disturbances in Ürümqi a year earlier: a large-scale demonstration motivated by religious grievances, in particular, over the control of religious practices by the Chinese authorities, rather than a separatist agenda, should be seen as the primary stimulus. As it occurred with the Kashgar riot, violent subversive activities only took place under the cover of a wider event that was not violent in origin.

*The Spectrum of Violence during the ‘Reform and Opening Up’ Era*

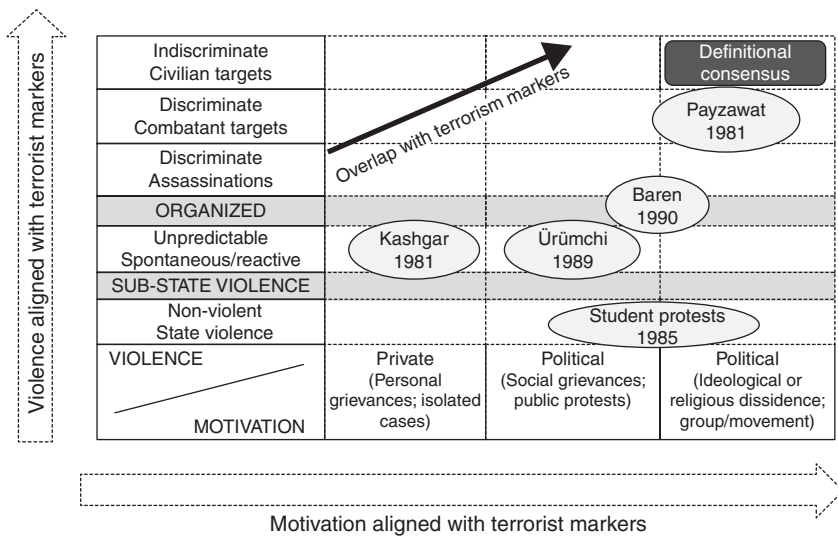
The above suggests that high-profile violent events were rare during the ‘reform and opening up’ era in Xinjiang. When they occurred, they were primarily situated on the socio-ethnic spectrum of intra-state violence and their material features mapped only partially onto the core definitional markers of terrorism. This is illustrated in Table 2.1. Certainly, the episodes of violence of the 1980s were all political in the sense that they had a social dimension (Hay, 2002; Wieviorka, 2009). They stemmed from social grievances, often shared nationwide such as those expressed in the pro-democracy demonstrations. Meanwhile, they also had a profound impact in the public sphere, or involved the intervention of the Chinese authorities. The incidents in Ürümqi and Baren should be understood primarily as broader public protests of a minority group that were eventually high-jacked by dissident elements. Only the Payzawat incident, reveals an insurgent pulse that can be seen as politically motivated in the sense of the ‘counterrevolutionary’ threat that the Chinese official discourse conveyed at the end of the decade.

**TABLE 2.1** Key features of ‘reform and opening up’ era events

	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Unpredictable violence</i>	<i>Premeditated violence</i>	<i>Indiscriminate violence</i>	<i>Civilian victims</i>
Payzawat (1981)	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown
Kashgar (1981)	Private/dissident	No	No	Yes	Yes
Student protests (1985)	Political/activist	No	No	No	No
Ürümqi (1989)	Social/religious	No	No	No	Yes
Baren (1990)	Social/dissident	No	Partially	Yes	Yes

While the violent episodes in Kashgar, Ürümqi, and Baren were not political in the revolutionary or separatist sense the Chinese government would increasingly assign to them, they nevertheless share a core feature commonly associated with terrorism. This pertains to the type of victims targeted as these frequently fell under the category of civilian or 'innocent' victims: rioters attacked Han Chinese citizens in the streets of Kashgar; the mobs attacked government civil servants in Ürümqi, and during the Baren incident, unconfirmed reports pointed that the unrest spread to Kashgar, where groups of rampaging Muslims attacked Han Chinese civilian bystanders (S. Long, 1990b). However, except for the Payzawat failed uprising, which was carried out clandestinely and showed a significant degree of prior organization, planning, and premeditation, the violent incidents in Kashgar, Ürümqi, and Baren lack the element of surprise or unpredictability suggested by academic constructions of terrorism. In these cases, violence erupted neither suddenly nor unilaterally. Rather, it broke after the situation became increasingly tense and escalated, sometimes for days after an initial trigger. While the precise moment when protests would turn into violence was unpredictable, the resort to violence was a likely feature, considering a context where streets were filled with outraged protestors, and security forces were deployed for an eventual crackdown. It is thus problematic to assign the terrorism marker of surprise to these events.

Generally, the incidents discussed here featured a broad range of material characteristics and motivations. As the positioning of the events on the terrorism grid suggests (Figure 2.1), none of them aligns well with the dominant construction of terrorism as reflected in the definitional consensus established in Chapter 1.



**FIGURE 2.1** The spectrum of violence during the 'reform and opening up' era (1978–1990)

While Payzawat holds the highest position on the terrorism grid, it is difficult to discern the course of events had the group indeed reached the town, but their foundational commitment to an armed uprising with the aim of secession makes a confrontation with the security forces, rather than an indiscriminate attack on civilians, a more likely scenario. The student protests of 1985, while not being promoted by a known organization, were politically significant and showed a public outreach in their demands. However, they fell short of counting as violent dissident episodes. When it comes to the Kashgar, Ürümqi, and Baren incidents, the reported unrest differed regarding their level of premeditation and insurgent political purpose. Accounts of the Kashgar incident suggest a spontaneous non-premeditated riot immediately triggered by an isolated murder. The violence in Ürümqi originated from an organized demonstration caused by religious grievances, a protest with public outreach in a Muslim society. In the case of Baren, while the official narrative blamed a fundamentalist secessionist organization for the violence, the way the events unfolded casts doubts on whether it was actually a rebel armed uprising, or if violence, as it had occurred in Ürümqi, precipitated from a confrontation between protesters and the security forces. The event was political in the sense that it stemmed from a social religious grievance, and that it created a public security incident that demanded the intervention of the police. It was not, however, initially violent, and in a way comparable to the protests in 1985 or 1989. While a militant organized group had allegedly plotted an armed uprising for months, they had to settle for instigating violence in the context of a protest against religious policies (BBCMSAP, 1990a; Paula, 1994). The reported fact that the Chinese authorities only sent a few rioters to prison, releasing others without charges, suggests that the event was not interpreted, even from the state's perspective, as a secessionist rebellion.

Overall, the spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the 1980s appears to have been dominated by events that were a combination of demands for greater political and religious autonomy, clashes between the police and Uyghur protesters, and ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and the Uyghur minority. How, then, is it possible that the violent events during the early years of the 'reform and opening up' period era played a central role in the discursive shift of the Chinese state towards securitizing violence in Xinjiang through the terminology of counter-revolution? What enabled their retrospective recasting as evidence for long-standing terrorist activities in the region at the turn of the millennium? This book suggests that the answer to the key questions of how Uyghur-related violent tensions in Xinjiang became *terroristized* lies in the way in which the official discourse shifted in response to domestic and international challenges to the CPC authoritarian rule.

### Talking 'Counterrevolution': From Restraint to Securitization

The Chinese authorities maintained a moderate discourse in relation to the context of Xinjiang during much of the 1980s decade. Violence in the region was not initially conceptualized as a national security threat, but as a problem that resulted

from historic inter-ethnic frictions and economic disparities. This position changed towards the end of the decade, amidst a changing national, regional, and international security environment. Particularly, the Chinese state perceived riots in the neighbouring region of Tibet, the incipient dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communism, and increasing calls for political reforms at the domestic level, as threats to China's territorial integrity and authoritarian rule. From 1988 onwards, official statements on Xinjiang acquired a more aggressive tone, with the ideas of an existing long-term struggle against 'splittism' and an emerging threat of 'counterrevolution' increasingly dominating the Chinese state discourse. The framing of the tensions in Xinjiang as a security threat culminated in 1990 when the violent disturbances in Baren were represented as the materialization of the threat of 'counterrevolution'. As we shall see, this paved the way for a crackdown approach to unrest in the region and set the scene for the 'strike, hard' (*yanda*) campaigns that led the Chinese government's response to violence in the 1990s decade.

### ***'Neither Serious nor Surprising': The Riots Discourse during the Early 1980s***

In the first years of the 1980s, the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang reflected a moderate approach in which violence, far from being constructed as an emergency security threat, was understood as the inevitable result of long-standing frictions and mistrust between the local ethnic groups – mainly between Uyghurs and the Han Chinese population. This exercising of restraint towards tensions in the region during the early years of the 'reform and opening up' era is reflected in the way in which Chinese officials discursively constructed violent events. The episodes were mentioned only in passing, and when Chinese officials did choose to weigh in on the circumstances, their statements signal a disinterest on the part of the government to play up the tensions in Xinjiang.

To begin with, the official state media mentioned the Payzawat uprising and the Kashgar riot in 1981 barely and belatedly (Thomson, 1987). This is significant because the atmosphere during these years, the type of environment in which the Kashgar riot inflamed, was tense. As Xia Ri, an economic research official in the region, commented, even 'if a Uyghur was hit by a car, it became a major incident' (Elliot, 1985). Rather than simply ignoring the Kashgar incident, Eisa Shakir, an Uyghur communist official, actually downplayed the riot and emphasized that it was neither surprising nor serious:

[the Kashgar riot] started from a quarrel between two men. The Han took a hunting gun and shot the Uyghur and killed him. It was about four hours before the public security bureau got on to the case. By that time, some bad elements started instigating trouble by suggesting that the Han bully the Uyghurs. They did this to sow dissension.

(Oziewicz, 1983)

A prominent exception to these otherwise moderate narratives was that of region chairman Ismail Amat. In the aftermath of the tumultuous 1980–1981 period, he vowed to 'deal blows at all violations of law, crimes and counterrevolutionary sabotage carried out under the cloak of religion' (quoted in Wren, 1983). This more confrontational tone would nonetheless become the dominant mode of discourse at the end of the decade.

The tensions and mistrust between indigenous minorities and the Han Chinese (many of whom had settled in Xinjiang during the communist era) were, however, perceived as an obstacle to economic development, which was the main objective envisaged for the region in the 'reform and opening up' period. Bahar Rayim, director of the Department of National Minorities in Ürümqi, explained in 1983 that China could not realize the CPC's campaign to strengthen the country through four modernizations – agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology – 'without unity and stability' (quoted in Oziewicz, 1983). Ürümqi's Mayor Ismail Mahsut emphasized the same year that a recently launched campaign to promote inter-ethnic unity was not in response to ethnic tensions but rather an effort to foster 'unity among the minorities' (quoted in Wren, 1983). The emphasis on multicultural coexistence under the umbrella of the Chinese state was also conveyed by then CPC national chief Hu Yaobang who, during a visit to Xinjiang, praised the fact that members of 40 different nationalities lived within the community and urged everyone in the region to work towards 'conciliation' (ibid). In 1985, Wang Enmao, then acting CPC chief in Xinjiang, described the state of inter-ethnic relations as 'very good', but nevertheless admitted there had been 'serious problems' at the beginning of the decade (L.H. Sun, 1985). He also pointed to ongoing 'disparities between the Han and the minorities' because of economic inequality, adding that 'where there are disparities in income, there will be friction' (ibid).

In short, the official discourse on Uyghur-related unrest was characterized by moderation, pragmatism, and restraint during most of the 1980s decade. Violence was primarily framed as a social problem rooted in a long-standing history of ethnic mistrust and as stemming from the growing economic gap between the different groups. Meanwhile, the repertoire of an insurgent dissident threat was generally absent in official language about violence in Xinjiang. The situation in the region was nevertheless an integral element of the political priorities of Deng Xiaoping's CPC chairmanship. Deng was intensely aware that the scale of autonomy of ethnic minorities was a pressing issue in post-Maoist China (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 41). Following the Payzawat and Kashgar riots, the Chinese leader described the situation in Xinjiang as 'unsteady' (L.H. Sun, 1985). In 1981, he, therefore, promoted the aforementioned Wang Enmao – a moderate figure with a good reputation amongst the ethnic minorities – as CPC secretary in Xinjiang, that is, as the *de facto* regional leader. Despite a significant degree of unrest in the region, Xinjiang remained unsecuritized in the Chinese state discourse. This, however, would soon begin to change.

### **'Counterrevolution' and 'Splittism': The Discursive Shift on Riots in the Late 1980s**

Narratives emphasizing ethnic conflicts and economic disparities as the primary causes of violent outbursts in Xinjiang gradually faded into the background towards the end of the 1980s. In their place, a discourse emerged amongst Chinese leaders and officials that characterized the regional tensions as a threat to the stability and unity of the Chinese nation, a seed already laid through their characterization as detrimental to the reform programmes. Inter-ethnic violence – and dissent more broadly – became the threats of 'counterrevolution' and 'splittism', and the arguments they entailed started to dominate Chinese official assessments of Xinjiang. At the end of the 1980s, Chinese leaders and officials began to describe the tensions in the region as a threat to the stability and unity of the Chinese nation. Xinjiang went from being just another region requiring a push in the expectation of wider profits from the 'reform and opening up' policies to becoming the scenario of a 'struggle' or 'fight' against an enemy that threatened the very core of the Chinese communist regime.

This discursive shift, characterized by an increasingly alarmist and bellicose tone, was underpinned by three main lines of argumentation. The first is that 'hostile forces' operated within Xinjiang under the cloak of religious grievances to undermine Chinese national unity and the core principles of the communist regime. Groups presumed to conspire against the regime from outside China alongside a few elements within the region were of particular concern. The forces understood to infiltrate Xinjiang were seen as 'opposed to socialism' and promoting 'bourgeois-liberalisation' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990b) and acting 'under the banner of freedom for ethnic minorities and religion' (Ismail Amat quoted in Wo-Lap Lam, 1989).

Chinese leaders had already accused 'agents of some anti-Chinese foreign forces', in reference to international organizations supporting the Dalai Lama and the dissident exiled Tibetan community, for instigating violent riots in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Thomson, 1988). The same argument was then applied to the Uyghur exile, which, unlike the Tibetan diaspora, had a much less visible position in the international arena. In 1988, a CPC document quoted by the *Xinjiang Daily* alerted of 'separatist infiltration' from abroad (Roche, 1988b). Wang Enmao warned that 'very few individuals', whom he described as 'scum and traitors', were 'hiding in dark corners engaging in conspirational activities' and planning to 'overthrow the CPC and restore the old reactionary system' (ibid.). Another Party document claimed that outsiders and insiders worked to 'split the motherland and destroy ethnic unity' (Roche, 1988c). In 1989, the Chinese Minister of Public Security, Wang Fang, maintained that these 'unstable elements in Xinjiang, mostly separatist forces – their source being from the United States and other countries – have not given up their splittist and subversive secret plots' (quoted in Reuters, 1989b).

The second line of argumentation was that religion played a major part in stirring up counter-revolutionary sentiments and was generally in contrast to both the core principles of the communist regime, and the development and prosperity

of its people. Huang Zhaobang, regional deputy governor, related the presumed separatist foreign forces to the person of Isa Alptekin, an 88-year-old Uyghur political leader who fled to Turkey when the CPC rose to power (Benson, 1991). According to Huang, Alptekin, a long-term advocate of regional full autonomy for the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, had 'always wanted to split China', and his 'spies' had been recently arrested in the region (The Straits Times, 1990c). While Alptekin was popular amongst young Uyghurs in Xinjiang, he denied having any 'agents' inside China, advocating instead for a 'passive resistance' to the Chinese government (Pope, 1988). Despite the predominantly secular nature of the Turkic Uyghur dissident movement in Istanbul, Huang insisted upon connecting Alptekin with the threat of 'religious infiltration' rather than looking at the religious fundamentalism introduced in Xinjiang by preachers from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Dreyer, 1993, p. 292; Haider, 2005; Acharya et al., 2010, pp. 52–54). The official media accused 'a small number of national separatists' of 'using the pretext of revitalizing Islam to spread religious mania', emphasizing that these individuals, in 'trying to win over youngsters from us', had set up 'illegal schools to teach religious scriptures and instill [sic] separatism in students' (L.H. Sun, 1990).

It is important to note that the language of 'counterrevolution' was not novel in the 1980s in relation to religious grievances and dissidence. At the end of the 1950s, in the midst of a government campaign against religion, a high-ranked regional official claimed, for example, that 'individual counterrevolutionary elements' had 'infiltrated into Islam', and put on 'the cloak of religion' in order to carry out 'counterrevolutionary activities' (McMillen, 1979, p. 115). By the end of the 1980s, however, the Chinese government's position had shifted towards diagnosing an incompatibility between religion and good Communist citizenship. This was reflected in an editorial at *People's Daily*, which claimed that 'people of minority ethnic groups must choose between Marx and Allah' and emphasized 'the absolute supremacy of the party over religion' (Goodspeed, 1990).

The final line of argumentation was that calls for independence, in particular, on the basis of ethnicity, were essentially threatening China's survival as a state. At the international level, China had long been wary of separatist developments at the other side of the historically sensitive 2,250-kilometre-long Soviet–Xinjiang frontier (see Shichor, 2005). Over the course of the 1980s, however, the anxiety of the Chinese government grew with the ethno-nationalist riots registered in the neighbouring Central Asian Soviet republics (Kuzio, 1988; Keller, 1989; Ljunggren, 1990). Xinjiang was perceived from Beijing as a strategically important 'area with different nationalities' that 'shared boundaries with quite a few countries', as Qiao Shi, head of the Chinese security forces, pointed out during a visit to the region after the Baren incident (quoted in Wo-Lap Lam, 1990f). In February 1990, amidst riots in Tajikistan, and only weeks before the unrest in Baren, Ismail Amat, then chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, underscored the Chinese government's uneasiness with the 'recent developments of ethnic conflicts in the Soviet Union' as well as 'radical changes in the East European countries, and the awarding of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama' – events which he presented as a



threat to ethnic unity and national stability (quoted in Sampson, 1990). One month later, the region's Communist Party chief, Song Hanliang, requested 'the people's armed police border squads' to 'continue serious alertness strategies' so as 'to protect the border' with the then tumultuous Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Kirghizia (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 1990a).

At the domestic level, dissatisfaction with the CPC authoritarian rule and social and economic injustices had by now come to the fore as unintended consequences of the 'reform and opening up' policies. The students' national demonstrations of 1986, culminating in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, are a case in point (Kwong, 1988; Zhao, 2001). In the case of the autonomous ethnic regions, Xinjiang and Tibet, these broader socio-economic grievances were combined with ethnic, religious, and other indigenous concerns, as the slogans used in the students' demonstrations in 1985 show. Importantly, dissent in Tibet had acquired a violent dimension, with pro-independence demonstrations resulting in deadly clashes with the security forces (Fu, 1987; Uhlig, 1988; Kristof, 1989). At this point, the Chinese government began to replicate the counter-revolutionary framing applied to characterize the situation in Tibet in the discourse about Xinjiang, with a particular emphasis on using the label of 'splittism'. A literal translation from the Chinese word *fenliezhuyi*, the term emerged as the 'worst epithet' levered against those expressions criticizing the Chinese 'occupation' of Xinjiang and Tibet, or the reunification of Taiwan and the mainland (Callahan, 2004, p. 209). The political crime of 'splittism' was now ranked high as a core threat to the regime (K.C. Wong, 2010, pp. 66–67).

Alongside the portrayal of counter-revolutionary splittism as a threat to China's rule in Xinjiang, the official discourse also articulated the measures to adopt in order to counter the perceived problem. For this, and despite the absence of an armed insurgent movement operating in the region, the Chinese leaders surmised a response based on crackdown policies, force, and militarization. In 1988, Wang Enmao urged local CPC cadres to 'resolutely struggle' against 'splittism' (quoted in Roche, 1988b). To counter dissident acts, Wang drafted in the help of the army and police regional contingent, made up of 460,000 members, and the two million people workforce, mostly Han Chinese, of the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) (Kyodo, 1988). Following the suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrations in June 1989, Ismail Amat warned that the response to unrest in Xinjiang would be 'simple and brutal' (quoted in S. Long, 1990a). In turn, and suggesting a preventive security agenda, Premier Li Peng vowed to 'wipe out all separatist activities' while these were 'in the embryonic stage' (quoted in Kristof, 1990), and Xinjiang regional chairman Tomur Dawamat promised to 'smash saboteurs who are the scum of the nation' (quoted in Kynge, 1990a).

By 1990, then, the Chinese authorities had rhetorically identified 'a small number of separatists' as 'the greatest threat to Xinjiang's stability' (AP, 1990). According to Li Peng, 'splittism' threatened communism, 'the unification of China', the 'socialist system', and the 'development and prosperity of minority areas' (Kristof, 1990; SCMP, 1990a). In 1988, Amudun Niyaz, then deputy secretary of the CPC committee in the XUAR, had already referred to dissident activities in Xinjiang



as a threat to 'the unity of the motherland' and 'national solidarity and stability' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1988a). Just two years later, as Huang Zhaobang reiterated, 'calling for independence' had become a 'counterrevolutionary crime' (quoted in The Straits Times, 1990c). At the same time, new regulations adopted at the end of the decade were conceptualized as measures to tackle those who disrupted 'socialist modernization [sic]', damaged 'ethnic unity', and opposed China's four cardinal principles (*si xiang jiben yuanze*), established by Deng's government in 1979: the 'socialist road', the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', the 'leadership of the Communist party', and 'Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought' (Roche, 1988d; CPC, 2007). This signalled the victory of confrontational jargon over more pragmatic, conciliatory approaches in Chinese state discourse.

While prominent, these three lines of argumentation were not the only narratives evaluating the unrest in Xinjiang. Moderate positions outlining economic disparities and ethnic frictions as the root causes of violence continued to exist. For example, a CPC document criticizing separatism likewise blamed the Han Chinese community in Xinjiang for prejudice against the ethnic minorities (Roche, 1988c). Weeks before the 1990 Baren incident, Ismail Amat underscored that the 'economic problems faced by areas inhabited by minorities and the mistakes incurred by various levels of government' were factors contributing to ethnic strife (SCMP, 1990a). Amat also recommended treating the 'contradiction among the people', a Marxist conceptualization of the ethnic frictions, with 'flexibility' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990a). By the end of the 1980s decade, however, these calls were eclipsed by the dominant confrontational discourse.

### ***The Baren 'Counterrevolutionary Rebellion'***

The Chinese government began to persistently and vigorously warn of an immediate rebel threat thriving in Xinjiang as the 1980s took their course. However, until the end of the decade violence in the region had essentially been absent for many years (or at least unreported), since 1982. While the official discourse had moved towards characterizing dissent in Xinjiang as 'splittism' and counter-revolution, there was hence little evidence of violent resistance that would ground this discursive shift in actual events of resistance and rebellion. Only students had repeatedly grated on the nerves of the Chinese authorities with relation to Xinjiang during their demonstrations in 1985 and 1988, which were met with a reprimand and 'patriotic education' (Dinmore, 1988).

The riot in Ürümqi in 1989, which followed demonstrations against the book '*Sexual Customs*', ended this comparably peaceful spell. To condemn the turmoil, regional officials echoed the broader government discourse that represented religious grievances as a mere cloak for counter-revolution. The riots, they argued, were 'created by the scum of Islam' who incited 'the masses unaware of the truth to storm regional party organs, engage in beating, smashing and looting', all 'under the pretext of protesting against the book' (BBCMSAP, 1989a). Chinese authorities did not, however, interpret it as a separatist revolt or as an outright challenge to the

Chinese rule in Xinjiang. Some officials even described the riot as another 'mistake' to blame on Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the CPC purged for opposing the use of force to end the protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, and they linked the events in Ürümqi to the wider tensions with China's pro-democracy movement. In a meeting of the standing committee of the NPC, a legislator from Xinjiang said the book triggering the riot was the product of 'Zhao Ziyang promoting bourgeois liberalisation in the central government', which had facilitated that the 'indecent book was available on the market' (quoted in Reuters, 1989a). Within the main official discourse, the Ürümqi riots were therefore understood as part of the (ideological) strife of the CPC against those pushing for a liberal democratic regime in China.

It seems that Wang Enmao's warning of a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' in the region (quoted in MacDougall, 1990) would become a discursive self-fulfilling prophecy when violence erupted in Baren only six months later. The official interpretation of the Baren township riot in 1990, produced by the state media and the statements of some political leaders, reiterated the mainstream argument of characterizing dissent within the increasingly hostile Chinese state security discourse of counter-revolution and splittism. The violent events in Baren were simultaneously blamed on dissident groups within Xinjiang, hostile external agents, and religious infiltrators who threatened the core principles of the communist regime and national unity, hiding behind religious grievances. Niyaz accused 'enemies' within China and unnamed 'hostile foreign forces' of orchestrating the violence (Reuters, 1990d). Kuerban Rouzi, president of the Regional Higher People's Court, accused 'a small number of nationalist splittist extremists acting in the name of religion' (The Straits Times, 1990e). The regional state media blamed 'splittist forces within and outside the country' for causing the violence, and described those participating as a 'counterrevolutionary organization' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). The Xinjiang television explained that the gang presumably responsible for the revolt had acted 'under the banner of religion, incited a religious craze, and wildly proclaimed the launching of a sacred war to eliminate the heathens' (Dinmore, 1990a). It also announced that 'they concocted reactionary slogans, saying that they would establish a republic of East Turkestan, that Islam will triumph over Marxism and Leninism, that they would form dare-to-die squads of Moslems [*sic*]' (ibid). Meihemaiti Simayi, an Uyghur high-level regional official, insisted on the idea that 'a handful of reactionaries, under the cloak of religion' had coordinated 'at distance with separatists abroad' to prepare the incident (Tyson, 1990). Meanwhile, a commentary on the *People's Daily* outlined the necessity of preventing 'ethnic separatists' from linking up with 'forces advocating bourgeois liberalism', and stopping 'infiltration, subversion and separatist activities of hostile forces' (Reuters, 1990f).

The Chinese authorities also conceptualized the incident more broadly as a separatist existential threat to the stability of China, which endangered the cultural unity of the nation and the core principles of the communist regime. For Wang Enmao, the events in Baren showed that it was 'an objective fact' that 'separatism' was 'the major danger facing Xinjiang', and one should 'never treat it

lightly' (Reuters, 1990i). The *Xinjiang Daily* presented violence as a 'premeditated activity' that undermined 'the motherland's unification and unity among nationalities' and opposed 'the communist party and people's regime' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). The regional state television alerted its audience that 'the primary danger' in the region came from 'the splittist forces inside and outside the country' that had 'never stopped their scheme of attempting in vain to separate Xinjiang from our great motherland' (Reuters, 1990c). A government report produced weeks after the incident described 'national splittism' as the gravest danger faced by the region (S. Long, 1990d) and officials claimed that the situation demanded to safeguard 'stability and unity' (Reuters, 1990a). In his visit to the region on July 1990, Qiao Shi declared that the CPC was 'very concerned about stability in Xinjiang', which was necessary to achieve the economic construction of the region, for which he vowed to 'strengthen the unity of the nationalities' (Xinhua, 1990b; Wo-Lap Lam, 1990f). Similarly, while touring the area months after the incident, Jiang Zemin, then General Secretary of the CPC, emphasized that unity was crucial to achieving the 'common objective' of turning Xinjiang into a 'production base for cotton, grain, sugar and animal husbandry' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990g).

In addition to reiterating the notions of a counter-revolutionary and splittist threat that had begun to increasingly underpin the security rhetoric of the final years of the 1980s, the government's reaction to the Baren incident also introduced the idea that violence in Xinjiang was part of a lasting conflict. Official statements on the episode depicted the situation in Xinjiang as a problem that rather than being solved was instead intensifying, and projected a long-term campaign to confront this threat. A militaristic-leaning statement from the *Liberation Army Daily*, newspaper of the PLA, warned of the possibility of 'local war and military conflicts in the border areas' of China, in reference to Xinjiang and Tibet (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990d). Other state media outlets outlined that 'the struggle against splittism' would be 'protracted, complicated and arduous' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). The *Xinjiang Daily* commented that 'feudal, backward religious forces' were 'continually expanding their battlefields', and alerted that 'the construction of civilization in the spirit of socialism' would meet 'serious obstacles' (Reuters, 1990i). Reports from the regional state television broadcasted images of hundreds of riot police carrying shields and truncheons in Xinjiang, warned that 'a very small number of hostile elements in our society may stir up new trouble', and revealed that the security forces were 'emphasizing training to deal with all eventualities' (Reuters, 1990g). In the aftermath of the violence, Ba Dai, member of the regional CPC standing committee, affirmed that 'hostile forces at home and abroad' were 'stepping up their infiltration' and that 'national separatists' were 'intensifying their sabotage' (quoted in Tyson, 1990). Six months after the incident, the Xinjiang television reported that the public security forces were in the midst of a 'people's war' on 'counterrevolutionary crimes', which Jiang Zemin described as a 'struggle in blood and fire' (Benjamin, 1990). More than a quarter of a century later, the mantra of a 'people's war' would be applied again in Xinjiang, this time to represent a 'people's anti-terrorism war' (Xinhua, 2015a).

The Chinese state discourse had by now moved significantly away from proposing a pragmatic, moderate response to unrest in Xinjiang and beyond. An early indicator that Beijing planned to forcefully deal with dissent was the government's decision to have Qiao Shi, who had applied the use of force earlier in Tibet and was an advocate of strong-armed tactics against ethnic upheaval, tour the Xinjiang region only weeks after the Baren riot. There, he stressed that 'the theme of countering secessionism' should 'absolutely not be relaxed' (quoted in Wo-Lap Lam, 1990f). Jiang Zemin further emphasized the determination of the CPC to use the military and the police to crack down on 'splittist' activists by Uyghur nationalists (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990g). The Xinjiang state television called for 'governments at all levels' to 'heighten their vigilance' (Reuters, 1990g). Indeed, the official line replicated in the state news media was that the threat to the public order remained 'very grave' in Xinjiang well after the Baren incident, and that restoring stability required 'another upsurge in the crackdown' (Reuters, 1990j).

In the weeks and months immediately following Baren, there were also calls for increasing the pressure on religious spaces and practices. Tomur Dawamat, for example, vowed to foster 'the construction of socialist spiritual civilisation' in order to counter 'splittist and sabotage activities', in particular, by intensifying the surveillance of religious activities and venues and preventing any 'outside forces' to intervene in religious issues in Xinjiang (Reuters, 1990b, 1990e). Ethnic minority CPC officials went a step further and called for 'harsh penalties' for anyone operating private religious schools and for close supervision of religious publications (The Straits Times, 1990d). The official discourse also stressed the importance of reinforcing the communist values and CPC rule in the region, as the way to overcome the threat. Qiao Shi called to unite those 'religious leaders and worshippers who are patriotic and who support national unity' to increase support for 'the modernization and construction of socialism' (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990d). Another official called to 'strengthen the socialist legal system and bring into further play the dictatorial function of the state' (Reuters, 1990a). Only under the rule of the communist party, so the official story went, could 'China's reform and opening policy proceed along the socialist road' in Xinjiang (Jiang Zemin quoted in Snyder, 1990).

In contrast to earlier incidents, the Chinese official discourse reacting to the Baren incident proactively marginalized alternative interpretations of violence as a phenomenon rooted in ethnic grievances or a reaction to controversial social policies such as those related to family planning restrictions or the control of religious practices. Some of the official statements on the events had suggested such alternative understandings of the Baren incident. For instance, using the Marxist jargon, Ba Dai had identified 'hot spots of social contradictions' as one of the factors causing it (Tyson, 1990). However, arguments and explanations for dissent in Xinjiang that did not fall into line with the official discourse blaming splittism and counter-revolution were quickly dismissed. The regional television emphasized that unrest 'was not caused by either nationality or religious problems' (BBCMSAP, 1990a). Dawamat linked those who opposed family planning with the threat of 'national splittism' (Reuters, 1990h). In turn, Umar Kara Aji, a patriotic religious figure and

the imam of a Kashgar mosque, argued that violence was 'not a minority problem nor (...) a religious problem', but had occurred 'because of social scum who are using religion with the intention of opposing communism' (quoted in L.H. Sun, 1990). By fixating an understanding of the Baren unrest as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion', to the detriment of alternative interpretations of the causes and nature of the event, the Chinese state discourse paved the way for and legitimized what by then was an ongoing shift in the policies applied in Xinjiang.

## The Politics of 'Counterrevolution' in Xinjiang

Chinese policies in Xinjiang between 1978 and 1990 evolved in parallel to the shifting official discourse. For the most part of the decade, in line with the moderate response to the violent events registered in the years 1980–1981, Beijing deployed a set of policies that have been described as 'generally gradualistic and moderate' (McMillen, 1984, p. 569), as allowing an era of 'cultural and religious freedom' (Rudelson, 1997, p. 129) and as a 'significant liberalization of autonomous cultural expression' (Dwyer, 2005, pp. 11–12) for the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. These years of gradualist policies are nowadays conceived as a golden age that Uyghurs recall with 'nostalgia' (Kehoe, 2016). From 1987, under the domestic and international factors that contextualized the discursive construction of a 'splittist' and 'counterrevolutionary' threat in Xinjiang, moderate policies were progressively abandoned, giving way to a security crackdown that became dominant after the Baren incident in 1990. Between the first years of the 'reform and opening up' era and the end of the 1980s' decade, Chinese policies in Xinjiang went from a combination of the 'carrot' of economic development and the 'candy' of cultural and religious liberalization to the introduction of a crackdown 'stick' that since then has dominated China's rule in the region.

### *Gradualism: A Moderate Response to Violent Unrest*

The violence registered in Xinjiang during the 1980–1981 period and the moderate political response that the Chinese authorities adopted in the face of events like the Payzawat failed uprising or the ethnic riots in Kashgar can be better understood when the immediate historical context, heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), is considered. The national turmoil was particularly cruel for ethnic minorities. In Xinjiang, Islam was widely persecuted. Hundreds of mosques were destroyed, ethnic minority cadres and elites were purged because of their religious background, and minority cultural customs were attacked and subjected to total Chinese assimilation (Bovingdon, 2004, pp. 29–33; J. Lin, 1997, p. 194). These practices, along with the massive arrival of Han migrants, which saw the Han population grow from roughly a 5% of Xinjiang's total population in 1949 to over 40% in 1978 (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 24), greatly eroded the legitimacy of the CPC regime vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities. This exacerbated inter-ethnic mistrust and violence, and further destabilized

a socio-economic environment already damaged by economic deprivation in southern Xinjiang (McMillen, 1984).

The Chinese government's reaction to this critical conjuncture and the violent outbursts of 1980 and 1981 was a return to the moderate policies that had characterized the first years of CPC rule in the region, between 1949 and 1957, before the Maoist radical turn that culminated in the Cultural Revolution. As McMillen (1979, pp. 113–115) explains, these early policies 'sought to overcome anti-Communist and anti-Han sentiments', an aim which implied avoiding coercive measures and respecting religion and other local idiosyncrasies in the exercise of government. This approach pleased many Uyghurs and members of other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. It brought a degree of governmental autonomy for the region, regulation of the economy in a manner that benefited all residents in Xinjiang, freedom to practice their religion, and relaxed control over cultural and linguistic matters (Bovingdon, 2004, pp. 5–6).

Two Chinese political figures epitomize the logic re-enacting the gradualist response to the tense environment in which violence had erupted in 1980–1981. The first was Hu Yaobang, the national reformist whose death motivated the Tiananmen protests in 1989, and who had devised in 1980 a programme for Xinjiang that included genuine autonomy, a cultural and educational revival, locally sensitive economic policies, and the gradual transfer of Han officials out of the region (Dillon, 2004, pp. 35–36). The second, Wang Enmao, historical leader of the CPC in Xinjiang whose trajectory represents like no other the evolution of Beijing's political approach to Xinjiang. In the 1950s, Wang had implemented the moderate policies consolidating the CPC's control of the region without creating discomfort amongst the ethnic minorities. When these measures were abandoned, the CPC entered a spiral of radical policies and 'anti-local nationalist' campaigns, and ethnic unrest broke out in some cities (McMillen, 1979, pp. 118–119; 1984, p. 569). Wang was later purged during the Cultural Revolution but Deng Xiaoping chose him in 1980 as the leader in charge of implementing the return to gradualism and ensuring Xinjiang's integration with the rest of China (McMillen, 1984, p. 569). The logic of the approach devised by Hu and implemented by Wang rested on the assumption that Xinjiang posed a low separatist threat that would be further deactivated, along with anti-government protests, through economic development and moderate policies enabling a cultural and religious revival amongst the ethnic minorities (McMillen, 1984, p. 576; Rudelson, 1997, p. 129; Dillon, 2004, p. 36).

Consequently, and as opposed to opting for a widespread crackdown, the gradualist approach of the early 'reform and opening up' period sought to defuse dissent by encouraging the rehabilitation of the aggrieved ethnic minorities in several realms, from religion to economy. Islam, a core element of the Uyghur identity, was a significant front for liberalization. Chinese officials publicly criticized the Marxist rejection of religion and saw Islam in a positive light. Zhou Fusan, Deputy Secretary of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), acknowledged that experience showed it was 'necessary and possible to unite the religious believers of

every nationality to jointly build socialism' (Reuters, 1985). Vested in supporting a patriotic understanding of Islam, the government reinstated the Xinjiang Islamic Association in June 1980 as a vehicle to support the practice and study of religion, improve inter-ethnic relations, and open the region to other Muslim countries in line with the Chinese foreign policy at the time (McMillen, 1984, p. 577; Christoffersen, 1993). The Chinese authorities also facilitated the reopening of mosques and Islamic schools, the reprinting and distribution of the Quran and other Islamic books, the celebration of weddings officiated by imams, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, measures all embraced with enthusiasm by Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups (see L.H. Sun, 1985; McMillen, 1984, p. 577; Butterfield, 1980; Wren, 1983; Oziewicz, 1983; Bovingdon, 2004, p. 33).

The religious relaxation was accompanied by a set of policies that facilitated a revival of the culture, language, and education of the minorities. The state approved preferential policies for ethnic minority students. These included favourable quotas to enter the university, programmes taught in their native languages, the reintroduction of an Arabic-based script for the Uyghur language, and the enactment of laws and policies explicitly supporting the use of minority languages (Xinhua, 1989b; A.S.L. Lam, 2005; Butterfield, 1980). The revitalization of language spearheaded the official efforts to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the ethnic minorities (Dwyer, 2005, pp. 11–12). Uyghur literature blossomed, with some writers exploring the Uyghur historiography and reinforcing in the way a collective political identity, sometimes with separatist tones (Rudelson, 1997; Bovingdon, 2004). Student associations were formed to promote the culture and rights of the Uyghurs (Castets, 2003). In this context, Uyghurs could practice again the *meshrep*, an art form integrating song, dance, and entertainment considered 'the most important cultural carrier of Uyghur traditions' (UNESCO, 2010), and which would be banned in the 1990s following the abandonment of the gradualist approach.

The moderate approach also entailed the rehabilitation and training of cadres from the minority nationalities envisaged by Hu Yaobang. In this sense, the CPC declared a fight against 'Great Han chauvinism' and ethnic discrimination by increasing the number of communist officials from the ethnic minorities (McMillen, 1984, p. 577). By 1989, ethnic minority officials made up 46.4% of the total regional force (Xinhua, 1989c).

Along with the benefits derived from the religious, cultural, and social rehabilitation of the ethnic minorities, the Chinese government worked on the economic development of the region. The regional economic strategy included surveying the energy and commodity resources of Xinjiang to supply the Chinese coastal regions – main geographical focus of the national economic transition – developing logistical infrastructures to facilitate this domestic supply, improving the regional agriculture and industrial output through the decollectivization of the rural economy, and rectifying the urgent needs of the less developed southern areas (McMillen, 1984, p. 578; BBCMSAP, 1984; Burns, 1985; L.H. Sun, 1985). As Clarke (2007, p. 62) notes, the secondary role attached to Xinjiang at this initial stage of the nationwide reform, as a region placed at the service of the prioritized coastal regions, resulted



in many local businessmen resorting to foreign trade as a way to prosper. This would promote regional exchanges with the USSR, Pakistan, and other so-called 'Islamic circles' (Christoffersen, 1993; Clarke, 2007; BBCMSAP, 1985a; BBCMSAP, 1985b). The economic development pushed by Deng Xiaoping's reforms brought unprecedented but insufficient prosperity to Xinjiang. While many traders from the ethnic minorities profited from the commercial opening with the rest of China and the world, the regional gap increased between the more developed north of the region, the Beijiāng, where the majority of the Han population lives, and the rural agricultural south, the Nanjiāng, where violent tensions have been historically concentrated (Becquelin, 2000, p. 68). The government acknowledged this gap. The state media often reported on the poverty-stricken areas of the south, and Chinese officials blamed the preferential policies prioritizing the development of the Chinese coastal regions for the existing disparities (BBCMSAP, 1986; Reuters, 1988a). Noting the socio-economic roots of violent unrest, the Gansu province governor Jia Zhijie described the economic gap as a factor destabilizing the 'unity of the nationalities' (O'Neill, 1988).

A crucial consequence of the religious and economic reforms pushed by the gradualist policies was the opening of Xinjiang to the world. Areas like the Kashgar or Aqsu prefectures, which had remained closed to the exterior for decades, were opened to foreign visitors in 1986 (BBCMSAP, 1987). In this sense, the commercial opening of the Karakorum Highway and the authorization of the Hajj pilgrimage made Pakistan and Saudi Arabia referents of Islam in the region. Uyghur imams and mullahs from Kashgar or Hotan studied in Pakistani madrassas (Roberts, 2004). Trade ventures between Uyghurs and Pakistani businessmen were common, and Pakistani merchants and tourists frequently visited the southern oasis of the region, leaving a cultural mark in the region (Haider, 2005, p. 525; see also Rippa, 2014). Having the possibility to travel to countries like Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey facilitated the development of the Uyghur identity as part of the Muslim world, but also as a specific Chinese Muslim group (Gladney, 1990, p. 18). An unwanted effect of this opening would be the expanding influence of religious fundamentalism in the region, mainly through the earlier mentioned funding of religious schools and mosques, or by sending preachers and religious materials (Y. Zhang, 1994; Dreyer, 1993, p. 292).

Overall, the gradualist approach to Xinjiang at the beginning of the 'reform and opening up' era was significant not only for the soft conciliatory policies it adopted but also for the policies it did *not* embrace. The politics of gradualism avoided the repression of the ethnic minorities that had characterized the Cultural Revolution or the security crackdown that would dominate the proto-terroristization and terroristization periods that this book explores. This does not mean that the Chinese government was naïve in front of separatism at the time, but that its response to the issue was moderate to the extent that this period is nowadays remembered amongst ethnic minorities as a 'relaxed' (*qingsong*) era (Kehoe, 2016). Nevertheless, moderation had its limits. As McMillen (1984, p. 579) suggests, toleration was 'selected' and liberalization was 'guarded'. At the same time, as Bovingdon (2004, p. 29) remarks,



power remained during this period on the regional secretary of the CPC, a position always occupied in Xinjiang by an ethnic Han official. Besides, and to intercept the potential role Islam could play as a vehicle for dissent and separatism, Deng's autonomy concessions were given an aura of patriotism (Dillon, 2004, p. 4; McMillen, 1984, p. 577; Haider, 2005, p. 525). While relevant, the threat of 'splittism' remained at a second level during most of the 1980s and while the student protests between 1985 and 1988 included calls for independence or anti-Chinese slogans, the Chinese authorities understood them for the most part as a natural outcome of disparities resulting from the economic reform or the historical ethnic mistrust, grievances boosted by Han migration into the region.

The pragmatism and moderation that dominated the early years of 'reform and opening up era' could be particularly felt in the Chinese government's political response to the students' protests, with Chinese officials meeting the protesters in 1985 and reassuring them about their grievances. This conciliatory approach continued until 1988, when amidst reports of pro-independence leaflets and posters circulating in the region in a campaign allegedly instigated from abroad, the regional authorities refrained from launching a crackdown and opted instead to organize a programme of classes about the official theory of nationalities and the nationality policy amongst Uyghurs (Kyodo, 1988; Dinmore, 1988). The Chinese state abandoned this approach at the end of the 1980s decade, first through a change of perceptions on the situation in the region and then by adopting series of measures that seemed to revert the gradualist path and justify a crackdown approach, further spurred with the construction of the Baren riot as a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' in 1990.

### ***Abandoning Gradualism, Singling out Xinjiang for Crackdown***

The same way Hu Yaobang and Wang Enmao embodied the return of the moderate policies to Xinjiang, the demise of the former and replacement of the later marked the abandonment of gradualism in the region. When Song Hanliang replaced Wang Enmao as the Party Secretary in Xinjiang in October 1985, the regional economy and the inter-ethnic relations seemed to have stabilized, and Song was set for a continuation of Wang's policies (Clarke, 2011, p. 83). However, following the nationwide student protests in 1986 (Kwong, 1988), Hu Yaobang was purged in 1987, and the former Xinjiang Military Commander Wang Zhen, who had been contrary to Hu's conciliatory approach vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities, promoted the abandonment of the accommodating policies in the region (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 21). The fact that dissent, anti-Chinese and anti-Han feelings, or separatism were alive in Xinjiang despite the moderate policies was a backbone argument for those rejecting the gradualist approach. A Han official who supported a hard-line policy to stabilize Xinjiang pointed out, in reference to the ethnic minorities: 'you give them autonomy and they will only turn round and create an East Turkestan' (quoted in Dillon, 1997, p. 82). With a similar idea, the official *Xinjiang Daily* criticized those who, despite the 'tremendous assistance' of the Chinese state to the development of

the region, were denouncing that the 'exploitation of Xinjiang's resources' had not benefited the ethnic minorities (BBCMSAP, 1988b).

The abandonment of gradualism was initially epitomized by two sets of policies which, when implemented, contributed to the protests leading to the Baren incident: the extension of mandatory birth controls to the ethnic minorities, and the control on religious practices, specifically the limitation of the number of mosques. In the first case, minority couples were limited from July 1988 to a maximum of two children, three for those living in rural areas (AP, 1988). This policy was perceived amongst Uyghur families as interfering with a choice, that of reproduction, they felt should be left to the realm of their religious and cultural convictions (L.H. Sun, 1990). Conscious of the controversy that family planning policies would create in Xinjiang, regional chairman Tomur Dawamat, an ethnic Uyghur himself, outlined the progressive character of these policies and the fact that they were being practised in other Islamic countries, leading a regional campaign to avoid religious interference during their implementation (Roche, 1988a).

The religious liberalization also came to a halt at the end of the decade. The Chinese authorities had grown increasingly wary of the 'obsession with Mosque building, praying and Hajj' amongst Uyghurs, and the potential of mosques and religious schools as strongholds for 'counterrevolutionary activities' (Y. Zhang, 1994). In this sense, an unexpected outcome of the economic opening of Xinjiang was the presence of foreign religious organizations in the region. Fundamentalist groups have been reported to fund mosques and schools at the time while spreading religious opposition to the atheist values of communism (Y. Zhang, 1994; Haider, 2005; Castets, 2003). Consequently, the Chinese authorities increased their monitoring and administration of religious venues from 1988 (Xinhua, 1990a) and began to scrutinize the practice of religion at the private sphere, a trend that would increase in the years to come (Waite, 2006). In March 1989, the *Xinjiang Daily* announced a six-point action plan against religious proselytizing which included the limitation of the number of mosques. According to the report, the existing temples – which had experimented a remarkable growth during the 1980s decade (Y. Zhang, 1994; Bovingdon, 2004) – were 'sufficiently numerous' to care for the believers' needs, and prior authorization would be required for the construction of new mosques (The Straits Times, 1990b). Along with family planning and religious controls, there was a change of perception on the Chinese authorities regarding the role of ethnic minority languages, increasingly seen as an obstacle to the development of Xinjiang (Xinhua, 1989a; Xinhua, 1990a). This belief paved the way for the future backlash against what was perceived by the CPC as an excess of cultural autonomy (Dwyer, 2005, pp. 11–12).

The response to the Baren incident in 1990 consolidated the shift from 'gradualism' to securitization. Unlike the 'political resolving, public persuasion, [and] propaganda education' which followed the Kashgar riot, or the 'persuasion, social work and intensive ideological and political education policy' with which the Chinese government had handled the student protests, the Baren incident was met with 'prompt military suppression and political dissolution' in order to 'quickly

destroy it' (see Y. Zhang, 1994). This military hard-line approach predated the incident. Weeks before violence erupted in Baren, Chinese President Yang Shangkun had asked the PLA to consider the 'deployment of forces' in Xinjiang, to intensify the surveillance of 'splittist' activities, and to be prepared 'to forestall sudden incidents', a call followed by the transfer of tens of thousands of troops to the region (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990c). The same way the discursive construction of Baren as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' was to a certain extent a self-fulfilment of the premonitory words of Wang Enmao, the Chinese military was expecting a violent outburst only days before the events. It should then come as no surprise that 1,000 members of the security forces, including the army and police units with heavy weapons and air support, were mobilized to put down the unrest, killing 15 rioters in the process (AI, 1992, p. 4). Unofficial sources, however, suggest that more extrajudicial killings may have occurred, as well as cases of torture and ill-treatment of the hundreds of suspected protesters allegedly arrested for participating the incident (AI, 1992, pp. 4–5). The Uyghur intellectual Abduweli Ayup recalls that 'protesters were loaded like bricks and hauled away', and the police 'not only took custody of the living but also the bodies of the dead' (quoted in Byler, 2022).

In the weeks and months following the episode in Baren, the Chinese government ratified the end of an era of moderation and gradualism. It further promoted the militarization of the region by positioning a hard-line ideologue, Major General Cao Pengsheng, as Political Commissar of the Lanzhou military region, which covered Xinjiang, and sending Lieutenant General Fu Quanyou to inspect the regional border with Tajikistan, very close to Baren, where he asked guards to oppose separatism and contribute to Xinjiang's stability (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990e). In addition, the authorities deployed paramilitary units in Kashgar to prevent unrest before a Muslim festivity in July (Jae-Bok, 1990).

Together with the deployment of security forces in Xinjiang, the Chinese government launched a two-month crackdown in which 500 'counterrevolutionary gangs' were smashed, several thousand 'counterrevolutionary activists' were arrested, and more than 3,000 cases of 'counterrevolution' were dealt with (Reuters, 1990j). Meanwhile, the control of religious practices and spaces greatly intensified. Months after the unrest, the *Xinjiang Daily* announced that 'drawing a lesson from the counterrevolutionary riot of Baren', the Chinese authorities had ordered the closure of 50 'superfluous' mosques, halting the construction or restoration of 153 others in the district (The Straits Times, 1990f). Tighter controls resulted in a purge of the clergy, a clampdown on illegal religious education and publications, and a ban on foreign preachers (S. Long, 1990d). A container carrying copies of the Quran sent by Saudi Arabia, a shipment authorized before the Baren riot, was relabelled 'counterrevolutionary material', confiscated and burnt by the police, leading to a Sino-Saudi diplomatic row (Dinmore, 1990b). The crackdown also reached the ranks of the CPC. The Party expelled dozens of cadres perceived to have lost their 'revolutionary zeal' or who participated in the unrest, and subjected several party organizations accused of 'weakness' to a process of 'rectification' (BBCMSAP, 1990b).

Alongside the domestic crackdown, Beijing took some early diplomatic steps aimed at obtaining the favour of other countries to hinder the Uyghur dissidents abroad. These moves marked the beginning of a strategy to export the crackdown in Xinjiang abroad, notably to the then Soviet Central Asian republics, and to countries like Turkey or Pakistan, home to the Uyghur diaspora and considered safe havens for Uyghur cultural and political organizations. As chairman of the XUAR, Tomur Dawamat accompanied premier Li Peng in an official visit to Moscow shortly after the Baren incident. The threat of separatism featured highly in the bilateral agenda and was described as a common source of anxiety for both states (D. Chen, 1990). In Istanbul, the home of Uyghur exile leader Isa Alptekin, the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen asked for Turkish collaboration in containing the activities of the Uyghur organizations based there (Wo-Lap Lam, 1990g; L.H. Sun, 1990). China also started efforts to normalize diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, a task entitled to a charismatic Uyghur CPC cadre, Saifuddin Azizi. Full diplomatic Sino-Saudi ties would be eventually achieved, projecting an image of communist tolerance with Islam reinforced by the cordial relations of the PRC with other Islamic countries, from Indonesia to Pakistan (SCMP, 1990b). In neighbouring Central Asia, the XUAR government continued a bilateral rapprochement vis-à-vis the Kazakh, Uzbek, and Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republics, nations on the verge of becoming independent states in 1991 (BBCMSFU, 1990; Xinhua, 1990c), and which hosted politically active Uyghur communities that included groups openly separatist (Rashid, 1990a, 1990b). While visits by Xinjiang official delegations were at the moment focused on economic, trade, and technical cooperation, there was a clear incentive for China to co-opt its neighbouring countries into the securitization of Uyghur dissent. This objective would be further advanced and consolidated during the 1990s through the creation of the Shanghai Five, later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

## Conclusion

In the early years of the 'reform and opening up era', there was no 'terrorism' in Xinjiang. There were episodes of violence, some of them serious enough to be interpreted as a 'rebellion' by the Chinese authorities, but nowhere during these years the government in Beijing considered Uyghur-related tensions a 'terrorist' issue. The 1980s decade, however, witnessed a U-turn in the way the CPC responded to ethnic minority unrest in Xinjiang. As this chapter has shown, the Chinese political elites evolved between the early years of the decade and 1990 from a prudent and pragmatic interpretation of violent events as the product of historical ethnic frictions and economic disparities to the construction of Uyghur-related violence as a foreign-instigated separatist threat to the stability and unity of China.

This chapter demonstrated how this discursive evolution was paralleled by a change in the way the Chinese authorities dealt with Xinjiang. Under the initial gradualist approach, Beijing opted for moderate policies that assisted in rehabilitating the aggrieved Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim groups, even in spite of the

violent events reported at the beginning of the 1980s, some with a clear dissident dimension. When Uyghur students marched in the mid-1980s demanding equality, autonomy, or protection, CPC officials tried to reassure them of the government's policies in the region, refraining from cracking down on the demonstrations. From 1988, amidst an evolving domestic and international context, the CPC changed its approach to Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, replacing the moderate approach for stricter controls on areas such as the practice of religion or the adoption of family planning measures. This signalled a transition towards the securitization of the tensions in the region, which culminated in 1990 with the construction of the Baren riot as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' and the launching of a long-term crackdown in Xinjiang. China's sense-making of the Baren incident, and the harsh response that followed, paved the way for the 'strike, hard' (*yanda*) approach that would characterize Xinjiang in the 1990s decade, a proto-terroristization stage in which the language of terrorism was to enter the Chinese official jargon for the first time.

# 3

## THE PROTO-TERRORISTIZATION OF XINJIANG

### 'Striking Hard' against the 'Three Forces' (1991–2001)

Terrorism made its first official appearance in Xinjiang during the 1990s – at least from the perspective of the official Chinese narrative framing violence in the region as well as through the lens of the definitional consensus on the materiality of this violence. On the one hand, amidst increasing social tensions between Chinese authorities and ethnic minorities, several bombings took place in public spaces during these years, in instances of violence that can be clearly understood as overlapping with core scholarly markers of terrorism. On the other hand, the language of 'terrorism' emerged for the first time in the Chinese state discourse, at a time when the terminology of 'counterrevolution' that was prominent during the 1980s faded away. In the broader process of terroristization of Xinjiang, the developments in the 1990s thus form what this book conceptualizes as a proto-terroristization stage in China's treatment of the Uyghur region.

This chapter specifically explores violence, discourse, and politics in Xinjiang between the Baren 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' in 1990 until the weeks preceding the attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. The first section examines the phenomenology of violence during these years, primarily in Xinjiang but also extending to other parts of China and abroad where violent events played a role in the development of the Chinese official security discourse on the Uyghurs. It reflects on the materiality of events and their position vis-à-vis scholarly understandings of terrorism, and it pays specific attention to how violence intensified between 1996 and 1999. The second section analyses the Chinese state discourse about Xinjiang during the 1990s. It identifies the core arguments underpinning the official narratives, notably the framing of Uyghur separatism and religious extremism as the main threats to the stability of Xinjiang and the recommendation of a 'merciless' crackdown to counter these perceived threats. The final section traces the political consequences of this discursive process. These include the erection of a legal-executive security apparatus, the implementation of security

practices aimed at controlling religion, a propaganda campaign, and the militarization of Xinjiang. Here, I also show how the politics of ‘striking hard’ propelled by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the 1990s interlinked with its international strategy to neutralize Uyghur political activities abroad.

## Mapping Violence during the Proto-Terroristization Phase

Violence increased in Xinjiang during the 1990s. A statistical analysis of violent events in the region during this period shows a comparatively calm first half of the decade, a significant increase in the number of violent incidents between 1996 and 1999, and then a declining in violence towards the end of the decade (Rodríguez-Merino, 2009). It is important to note here that, as Millward (2004, p. 2) has suggested, some of this rise in violence might be less reflective of the actual increase in violent events and more a consequence of their broader resonance and reporting in the international media. Yet, as the following overview of the material features of the violent events reported in Xinjiang during the 1990s shows, violence became more varied in their nature than in the previous decade.

### *Key Episodes of Violence in Xinjiang and beyond*

The number of Uyghur-related reported cases of violence significantly increased between 1991 and 2001. In contrast to Chapter 2, which presented incidents along a historical timeline, the violent events reported during the proto-terroristization stage will be introduced and analysed thematically. Specifically, they are grouped into five main categories: attacks in public spaces, assassinations, attacks against the Chinese security forces, escalation of non-violent conflict, and state security operations.

### *Attacks in Public Spaces*

The most remarkable aspect of the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s is the arrival of events that can more readily be classified as ‘terrorism’ in the light of dominant scholarly understandings of the concept. In particular, in comparison with violent events in the region during the 1980s, a significant number of incidents with elements of premeditation and organization targeted public spaces throughout this period. The first such case of ‘terrorist’ violence reported in Xinjiang occurred in February 1991, when a device exploded at a video theatre in the county of Kuchar (Aqsu prefecture), killing one person and injuring 13 others (see SCIO, 2002; S. Wang, 2004). This was followed by similar incidents during the next couple of years, with the explosion of two bombs in public city buses in Ürümqi in 1992 (Reuters, 1992; AP, 1992; Grace, 1992; BBCMSAP, 1995e) and in other public venues in Kashgar and Hotan in 1993 (SCIO, 2002), as key examples. A high-profile indiscriminate violent attack in a public space took place in 1997, during the ‘peak’ phase of violence that characterized the mid-1990s. In February

that year, five explosive devices destroyed two buses in Ürümqi killing nine and wounding a further 68 people (BBCMSAP, 1997r; Kyodo, 1997b). While certainly salient, bomb attacks were not the only indiscriminate mean used to against civilians. For example, Uyghur radicals attacked Han Chinese dwellers in Xinjiang in 1997, hanging their heads and bodies on a bridge (BBCMSAP, 1997n; AFP, 1997e).

### *Assassinations*

The premeditated targeted murder of individuals with a public profile – the type of action that Ben-Yehuda (1990) conceptualized as a ‘political assassination’ – was not a novel phenomenon in Xinjiang during the 1990s, when a significant number of such cases were reported in the region. However, except for a *People’s Daily* report informing on attacks on Chinese cadres in Kashgar in 1983 (Abel, 1985), such incidents had essentially remained unreported in the Chinese state media during the 1980s. Nevertheless, their number multiplied during the 1990s. These attacks targeted individuals perceived as collaborators of the Chinese government or agents of the ‘presumed oppressive apparatus’ in the conflict (Walzer, 1977, p. 202). The victims were predominantly police officers, government officials, Party cadres, and pro-government religious figures. Members of the Uyghur ethnic minority associated with Uyghur Party cadres were also amongst those targeted, seen as ‘traitors’ to ‘the aspirations of Uyghur nationalism’ (H.Yee, 2003, p. 449).

There are many examples of these actions during the proto-terroristization period in Xinjiang. In the case of attacks on police officers, for example, Chinese authorities confirmed in 1996 the ‘premeditated and organized murders’ of two policemen (Dickie, 1996). Between 1997 and 1998, non-official sources reported at least 18 further cases of assassination of police officers (BBCMSAP, 1998n; Reuters 1998b; AFP, 1997r). In 1997, a Chinese official denounced a wave of attacks on ‘police officers and their families’ (AFP, 1997q). The state media reported many more attacks on policemen at their homes later in the decade (BBCMSAP, 2000b).

When it comes to attacks on government officials and Party cadres, a Chinese official confirmed in 1996 that several incidents had occurred in which ‘rural cadres’ were killed by what he labelled ‘terrorists’ (Earnshaw, 1996b). In 1997, Uyghur exile sources reported that ‘radicals’ had killed four Chinese officials in Aqsu (BBCMSAP, 1997z). Another example is the murder in 1998 of the Alik village CPC secretary Aliqiong Bozli, who managed the local family planning and state religious affairs, by a group of attackers led by a former imam (AFP, 1999d). The Chinese government continued to reveal attacks on ethnic Uyghur officials and their relatives between 1997 and 2001 (Hutzler, 2001; SCIO, 2002).

There is also a broad range of examples where Muslim ‘patriotic’ clerics loyal to the Chinese government became the targets of assassinations. In 1993, for instance, there was a murder attempt against the imam of a mosque in Qaghiliq, in the Kashgar prefecture (SCIO, 2002). In 1996, the Chinese government confirmed the killings of several ‘progressive religious leaders’ (Earnshaw, 1996b). The same year, in the streets of Toqsu County (Aqsu prefecture) two masked men shot dead imam



Akenmu Sidike who was widely known for his support to the government (Dickie, 1996), whereas attackers seriously wounded 73-year-old Aronghan Aji, one of the highest religious officials in Xinjiang, when he walked the streets of Kashgar (Dow Jones, 1996). According to the Chinese authorities, the attackers were inspired by militants from ‘foreign terrorist organizations’ they had met on pilgrimage to Mecca (Dow Jones, 1996; BBCMSAP, 1996o). More ‘patriotic’ clerics were assassinated in 1997 and 1998 (see SCIO, 2002).

### *Attacks against Security Forces*

Another main category of violent events reported in Xinjiang in the 1990s are ‘hit-and-run’ attacks launched against the Chinese security forces and official buildings, often suggesting a significant degree of prior organization. These were generally incidents characterized by both the use of basic firearms and the focus on compounds, detachments, and patrols from Chinese security forces, rather than targeting either specific public figures or public spaces. One example is an attack launched in August 1996 by six men in ‘combat fatigues’ against a government office in Qaghiliq county, in which two local government officials, one police officer, and three security guards were killed (SCIO, 2002). That same year, unconfirmed accounts also reported an attack by Uyghur ‘nationalists’ who opened fire with a machine gun against a group of Chinese policemen, killing 16 officers (The Economist, 1997; Meyer, 1997). Similar episodes included an attack with ‘guns, machetes, incendiary bottles and grenades’ against a police station in Poskam county (Kashgar prefecture) in 1999 (BBCMSAP, 1999l); the blowing up of a military vehicle in front of a military training facility in Ürümqi in 1996 (Kang Lim, 1997c); and the explosion of two bombs in a traffic police watchtower in Hotan in 1998 (AFP, 1998d).

### *Escalation of Non-Violent Conflict*

Violent incidents closely patterned as the riots of the 1980s transpired again in the 1990s. In these events, violence was not premeditated, but the result of the escalation of other phenomena such as protests for religious and/or social grievances, or tensions derived from arrests.

The first riot confirmed by the Chinese government during this period took place in Hotan on 7 July 1995, and it resembles in many aspects the Ürümqi riot of 1989. Hundreds of Muslims protested against the arrest of Abdul Kayum, imam of the Baytulla mosque, popular for his interpretation of the Quran in a socio-political light. Crowds marched from the mosque to an official compound asking for Kayum’s release (AI, 1999, p. 14). When they got no satisfactory response, they occupied the CPC headquarters, triggering a clash with 50 police officers (ibid.). Further riot police squads dispersed the clash with tear gas, beating up the protesters and arresting dozens, of which 20 were sentenced from 3 to 16 years of prison (AI, 1999, p. 15). The Chinese authorities described the rioters as ‘an extremely small

number of counter-revolutionary criminals' who 'had used religion as the pretext to deceive and incite a small number of ill-informed believers to carry out attacks on the party, government and police headquarters' (ibid.).

Yet the most significant riot, and probably the Xinjiang-related violent incident with the largest international impact at this period, happened in Ghulja, in the Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture, between 4 and 6 February 1997. As Millward (2007, p. 331) emphasizes, accounts on the Ghulja incident are 'starkly different' depending on the source. Still, as it is the case with the Baren riot, a close look at the official and alternative versions of the incident suggests that both accounts are not necessarily incompatible.

The official version of the events, put forward by Chinese officials and the state media, represented the riots as an abrupt wave of vandalism and violence in which innocent bystanders were attacked. Chinese officials pointed out that the unrest started with a protest by 200 members of an 'illegal religious organization' who, acting in the name of Allah, burnt their identity cards and stripped off their 'Han' clothes as an affirmation of their 'true Muslim' identity (quoted in Hutzler, 1997b; see also Sina News, 2001). Regional CPC secretary Wang Lequan and regional government spokesman Liu Yisheng initially described the incident as a case of 'beating, looting, and robbery' (quoted in Hutzler, 1997a; BBCMSAP, 1997k). The state media underscored that 'local people's lives and property were jeopardized and normal public order was disrupted' during the tumult (BBCMSAP, 1997o). Three Uyghurs were condemned to death for 'malicious arson, hooliganism, and beating, smashing and looting' (ibid.). The Chinese state account emphasized that both Uyghurs and Han Chinese victims died in the incident, confirming, willingly or not, that the riots had somehow followed a peaceful protest (see Hills, 1997; Leicester, 1997). In 2002, the Chinese authorities revealed further details about the attacks on innocent pedestrians that took place amidst the riots (SCIO, 2002).

Alternative accounts of the Ghulja incident are based on the testimony of local residents or sources related to them and cast light on the immediate context and causes of the riots, missed in the official narrative. Citing these accounts, Western media and human right groups emphasized three aspects of the event. First, they contextualized the incident within the tensions that had been mounting up during months in Ghulja after the traditional Uyghur *meshrep* gatherings had been banned in July 1995 (see Dautcher, 2004, pp. 286–287; AI, 1999; WUC, 2013). The prohibition of the *meshrep* had triggered protests in July 1995 and in August 1996 (Dautcher, 2004, pp. 286–287; BBCMSAP, 1997f). These protests were the prelude of the violent unrest in 1997, as illustrated by the fact that one of the leading activists in the 1995 and 1996 disturbances, Abudu Helili, had been arrested and released after receiving 'ideological education', only to be condemned again as a leader of the February 1997 riot (Reuters, 1997c).

Second, alternative narratives emphasized that the riots were not a premeditated violent attack organized by a dissident group, but the result of the escalation of a tense protest which erupted on 5 February after the police had arrested hundreds of Muslims the night before, amongst them youths and women, while they were

praying at home (Leicester, 1997; WUC, 2013). Following this flashpoint, thousands of Uyghurs occupied the streets to demand the release of those arrested (WUC, 2013; SCMP, 1997a). They shouted slogans against the CPC and the official decision to appoint mullahs through administrative channels (Grabot, 1997; Reuters, 1997c). At this point, some reports outline that Chinese security forces ‘brutally suppressed’ the demonstration and clashes erupted (WUC, 2013; Kyodo, 1997b). Some reports cite the public execution on 6 and 7 February of around 30 arrested protesters as a factor that further exacerbated the tensions (Reuters, 1997b; AFP, 1997c; Grabot, 1997; Kyodo, 1997a).

While emphasizing the suppression of the protests and the killing or execution of protesters as the main violent actions taking place during the riots, non-official accounts also confirm that Uyghurs engaged in rioting and attacked the police as well as Han Chinese passers-by. A Russian residing in Ghulja at the time explained that dozens of young Uyghur men ‘attacked shops and ethnic Chinese with whatever they could get their hands on while they shouted independence slogans’ (quoted in AFP, 1997a). Other residents confirmed similar patterns of aggression (Reuters, 1997a; BBCMSAP, 1997e).

The official and alternative accounts of the violence in Ghulja are compatible. Together, they reflect the eclecticism of the ethnic riot as a type of violent phenomena that follows a pattern of ‘build-up, outbreak, and escalation of public disorder’ (Moran & Waddington, 2016, p. 172). The Ghulja riot probably included state repressive actions which acted as immediate triggers, tense protests, an escalation towards violence possibly fuelled by the brutality of the Chinese security forces, and widespread chaos during which mobs of Uyghurs possibly attacked Han Chinese residents. As with the Baren ‘rebellion’, it remains unclear who started the violence, if the Uyghur protesters or the Chinese security forces. This aspect, however, does not preclude the conceptual gap that exists between this incident and the dominant definitional understandings of terrorism, particularly in what refers to features such as premeditation, a political insurgent motivation, or an element of surprise. The official and alternative narratives of the Ghulja incident differ on the number of casualties. At the time of the events, Chinese official sources estimated that 10 people were killed and 132 ‘innocent people’ were injured (AFP, 1997a, 1997c). Alternative accounts, however, raised the death toll to between 80 and 100 victims, both Han Chinese and Uyghur (Grabot, 1997; AFP, 1997a). Other witnesses estimated 125 people were killed when Chinese soldiers opened fire on protesters (Kyodo, 1997a; WUC, 2013).

### *State Security Operations*

Clashes between Uyghurs and Chinese security forces also erupted during the course of police operations against separatist suspects. In these cases, violent unrest cannot be considered premeditated or organized because the Chinese security forces initiated it. An example of this type of event occurred in May 1996, during an operation against several suspects of killing ‘seven patriotic figures’, when the

Chinese police killed nine suspected ‘Islamic separatists’ in a gun battle (AP, 1997c; AFP, 1997c; Macartney, 1996a). Another case took place on June 1997, when members of the Chinese military police exchanged fire with a group of Uyghurs during a house search. One policeman and the owner of the house were killed and three Uyghurs were arrested (BBCMSAP, 1997v). The same year, two Uyghur suspects and a Chinese police officer were killed in the course of a police operation against a ‘separatist group’ that had allegedly planned an attack during the Hong Kong takeover by China (Fong, 1997; Kang Lim, 1997d). Similar incidents were reported in Ghulja in April and June 1998, leaving dozens of victims on both sides (Kyodo, 1998; Reuters, 1998c; BBCMSAP, 1998j).

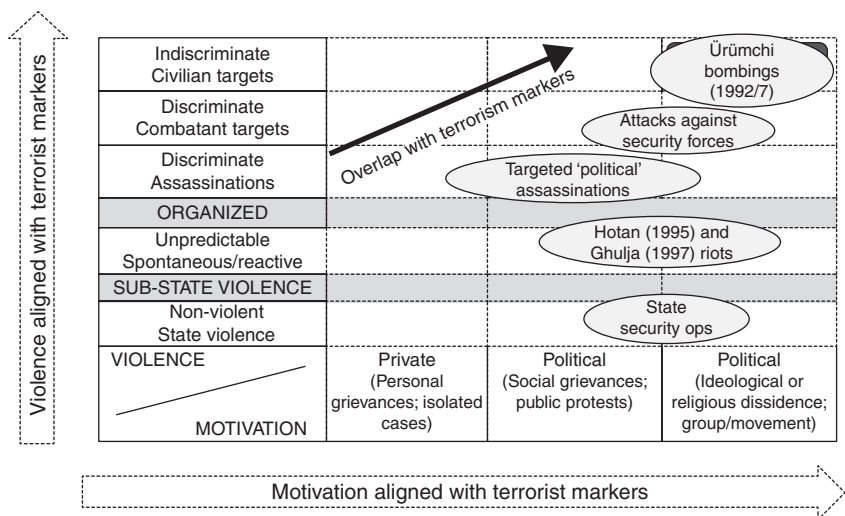
### *The Broad Spectrum of Violence during the 1990s*

The spectrum of violence in the 1990s increased in quantitative and qualitative terms. Taking the definitional markers of terrorism as a reference, Table 3.1 summarizes the core attributes of the most paradigmatic events reported during this period. Meanwhile, Figure 3.1 illustrates how the spectrum of violence got closer to dominant understandings of terrorism. It did so in two ways. First, incidents exhibited tactical attributes associated with scholarly constructions of terrorism to a greater extent. Second, the nature of the motivation guiding these acts reflected a more politically driven agency.

Examining Figure 3.1, the Ürümchi bombings (1992, 1997) exemplify the highest level of proximity to interpretations of terrorism. These were organized attacks intentionally aimed at indiscriminately killing civilians, carried out with a presumably dissident or separatist motivation. The attacks against the Chinese security forces present similar characteristics to the Ürümchi bombings, but

**TABLE 3.1** Key features of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s

	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Unpredictable violence</i>	<i>Premeditated violence</i>	<i>Indiscriminate violence</i>	<i>Civilian victims</i>
Ürümchi bombings (1992/1997)	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Assassinations	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	No	No
Attacks against security forces	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Hotan riot (1995)	Social/religious	No	No	Yes	Yes
Ghulja riot (1997)	Social/dissident	No	No	Yes	Yes
State security operations	State security	–	–	–	–



**FIGURE 3.1** The spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the proto-terroristization stage (1991–2001)

they fall short of a core marker of terrorism, as the perpetrators refrained from targeting civilians. Meanwhile, the assassinations share some similarities with the indiscriminate attacks against the security forces, but they differ in their selective nature and means as they targeted specific individuals. At the same time, in terms of motivation, they stand at the intersection of violence caused by private or personal grievances, and violence motivated by a political or ideological dissident agency. A step further away from constructions of terrorism, the Hotan (1995) and Ghulja (1997) riots reflect a lack of premeditation considering their patterns of escalation from non-violent scenarios into violent disturbances. Examining the nature of the protests from which they originated, they were caused by a mixture of social grievances and, to a lesser extent, a separatist insurgent element, therefore standing in between both categories in the scale. It is also unclear whether a sub-state actor or the state security forces initiated the violence in these cases. Finally, security operations, while part of the phenomenology of political violence, fall out of the category of sub-state violence, as the Chinese security forces initiated them.

While the above categorization suggests a clear-cut typology of the phenomenology of violence, these categories are, far from solid and non-negotiable, fluid, and open to interpretation. In particular, the element of motivation and purpose of the sub-state violent agent emerges as a site for potential interpretive contestation.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning that not all attacks against public or civilian targets reported during this period necessarily involved a political motivation. Intentional explosions in public areas were not uncommon across China at the

time (see AFP, 1999a, 1999f; *The Economist*, 1999; *The Washington Post*, 2001; BBCMSAP, 1998a; Fackler, 2001a; SCMP, 1999a). Hundreds of bombings rocked the country during the 1990s. Some targeted trains or busy streets, or symbolic spots such as Tiananmen Square or the Forbidden City in Beijing, suggesting a clear aim to inflict civilian casualties (*ibid.*). Other bombings detonated in official buildings such as the Beijing Railways Ministry, implying an intention to attack the Chinese government (*ibid.*).

In many of these cases, the attacker's motivation was far from a dissident separatist drive against the Chinese state. For example, disgruntled workers urging the Chinese government to worry about the growing social instability caused by unemployment or corruption were blamed for some bombings (China Focus, 1998). This is relevant because, in the vacuum of responsibility that followed some intentional blasts reported in China at the time, Uyghur militants emerged as usual culprits in incidents for which they were eventually cleared. This was the case in Beijing in 1997 and Wuhan in 1998, when explosions against public buses left dozens dead and wounded, or in Ürümqi in 2000, when a vehicle carrying explosives detonated, killing six and leaving more than 300 injured (AFP, 1997h, 2000e; Reuters, 1997f; BBCMSAP, 1998a, 1998c). Despite speculation to the contrary in the Chinese state and international media, these events were ultimately attributed to angry labours, peasants with alleged marital problems, or poor road conditions (AFP, 1997g, 1997n, 1999a; BBCMSAP, 1997i). Similarly, the explosion of a device in the facilities of a state company in Kashgar in 1993, officially represented as 'terrorism' a decade later (SCIO, 2002), was considered at the time as motivated by the dissatisfaction of peasants with the government's tax policy (Kyodo, 1993).

The construction of the assassinations of police officers, government officials, or CPC cadres as acts with a political dimension is also open to contestation. Other logics of a private and not necessarily anti-state dissident nature might have triggered these actions. A high political profile is certainly latent in the status of these victims, representative figures of the Chinese repressive apparatus. Chinese officials emphasized that, in the eyes of their attackers, CPC cadres held a clear political relevance (BBCMSAP, 1996x; Earnshaw, 1996b). They underscored that attackers saw victims as 'spies' of the CPC (Dickie, 1996), or as 'prominent' Uyghur supporters of the state (BBCMSAP, 1997ab). The status of the victim, however, does not necessarily imply a political, dissident, or ideological agency. In some occasions, the attacks were driven by personal revenge (BBCMSAP, 2000b). Personal grievances also stemmed from the application of controversial policies. For example, Chinese officials were attacked by Uyghurs acting in revenge against the implementation of family planning policies (BBCMSAP, 1998j; AFP, 2001b; Reuters, 1991c). Other attacks involved economic grievances against government officials (*The Straits Times*, 1994). As this chapter reveals later, the boundaries between political and economic motivations were distorted in the official discourse and practices, notably in what refers to the 'strike, hard' anti-criminal campaigns. This suggests that part of the violence in Xinjiang has been interpreted as having a political motivation only

by virtue of the attackers' ethnicity, since not the tactics, neither the targets necessarily implied an ideological dissident driver.

Finally, the characterization of violence in Xinjiang as a sort of 'guerrilla' or insurgency (see Wayne, 2008, 2009; G. Collins, 2015; *The Guardian*, 2011; Brown, 2014) is equally fluid and open to contestation. In this regard, at no time between 1980 and nowadays, the Chinese government has faced an insurgency in Xinjiang that reflected academic understandings of this type of political violence such as the control of territory or the systematic use of military weaponry (see Merari, 1993). Despite this, reports inflating the quantity, quality, and scope of violent events in Xinjiang were frequent during the 1990s. Uyghur dissident groups outside China, like the United National Revolutionary Front (UNRF), flamboyant name of an organization actually consisting of two men – father and son – based in a flat in Almaty, claimed at the time that an underground insurgency was thriving in 'the mountains and forests' of Xinjiang (AFP, 1996o, 1996q). The UNRF reported attacks on Chinese military columns in the Taklamakan desert (see AFP, 1996b; Grabot, 1996), or clashes leaving hundreds of casualties in the Chinese security forces (AFP, 1996k; see also AFP, 1996i, 1996m). Similar accounts depicting a state of quasi civil war in the region were reproduced by journals in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Russia, or Turkey (AFP, 1995a; *Inside China Mainland*, 1998; BBCMSAP, 1999d; BBCMNE, 1999; Artykova, 1993; Working, 2001). Such reports offered inconsistent accounts of violent incidents and exaggerated the capabilities of Uyghur militants engaging in dissident violence, casting doubts on the actual extent of a rebel violent threat in Xinjiang.

### **New Language, Old Arguments: The Emergence of 'Terrorism' in the Framing of Violence in Xinjiang**

During the 1990s, the 'terrorism' lexicon appeared for the first time in the Chinese state discourse on violence in Xinjiang, while the language of 'counterrevolution', so vivid in the 1980s, gradually faded, replaced by notions such as separatism or religious extremism. This shift, which accelerated in the second half of the decade, did not imply major changes in the key argumentative lines of the Chinese government's discourse. Ideas of 'hostile' foreign forces or the perpetuation of a life-or-death struggle against the enemy still dominated Chinese state narratives about Xinjiang. If anything, Chinese officials intensified their representation of religion as a negative force and denigration of the 'separatist' enemy, calling for a brutal response to dissidents in a discourse that, like in previous political eras in the PRC, singled out an inner adversary for removal and elimination (see Vuori, 2014b, p. 115). At the end of the decade, a new 'terrorism' vernacular entered the official jargon that made sense of Uyghur-related violent unrest. Used only sparingly by Chinese officials in the domestic realm, the idea of terrorism gained relevance in the international realm, where China, alongside Russia and some Central Asian countries, established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which articulated a fight against terrorism and other 'evils', notably separatism and religious extremism, as its security *leitmotif*.



This section analyses the core dimensions of the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang during the 1990s. First, it examines the articulation of separatism and religious extremism as core threats to the stability of Xinjiang and investigates the prescription of a long and ‘merciless’ fight to counter them. Next, it traces the fading of the ‘counterrevolution’ jargon and the appearance of a new language of ‘terrorism’ to describe Uyghur-related violent tensions. Then, the section explores in detail how the Chinese authorities *terroristized* the Ghulja riots before turning its attention to the internationalization of the Chinese discourse on Xinjiang.

### ***Constructing the Threat***

Throughout the 1990s, the Chinese government’s discourse about violent conflict in Xinjiang reproduced and expanded core arguments used in the past. A key idea emphasized during the 1980s and further elaborated in the 1990s was that external forces were destabilizing Xinjiang. During this decade, high-ranked Chinese officials kept warning of the infiltration of ‘reactionary’ and ‘hostile’ forces in the region (AFP, 1992a, 1997b; BBCMSAP, 1996r). The external enemy described by state narratives presented a changing, at times inconsistent, multi-faceted nature. In the early 1990s, Chinese officials identified Western influences as the primary negative exogenous force. Former CPC regional leader, Wang Enmao, and his successor until 1994, Song Hanliang, associated external threats with ‘capitalism’, ‘imperialism’, or ‘bourgeois liberalism’ (quoted in AFP, 1991b; Reuters, 1991a). Ismail Amat, minister in charge of the State Nationalities Affairs Commission, later blamed the ‘imperialists’ for creating the geographical notion of ‘Eastern Turkestan’ to spread separatism (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1994g), while the government accused external forces of trying to ‘westernize’ and ‘split’ China (BBCMSAP, 1997j).

Chinese officials also represented religious extremism as the main threat to the stability of Xinjiang. They tied the religious threat to ‘secret societies from outside our borders’ (AFP, 1991d) or ‘foreign religious inimical forces’ (AP, 1991a). This discourse constructed Islam in a binary opposition. On the one hand, religious practices were accepted as long as they were in line with socialist values and the law (Reuters, 1993a). State-endorsed clerics were described as ‘patriotic’ figures that ‘loved their country’ (Reuters, 1997k; AP, 1997c; 1997d). From this friendlier perspective, Chinese President Jiang Zemin vowed in 1998 to ‘trust the religious mass’ and incorporate ‘religious activities in a way that they be harmonious with the legal system and the socialist society’ (quoted in SCMP, 1998). While this ‘patriotic’ Islam was to be tolerated, the Chinese authorities did not hide their disdain for religion. Nur Bekri, then mayor of Ürümqi, conveyed this contempt in 2000 when he claimed that it was better to spend time ‘studying science and technology’ than ‘going to the mosque and praying’ (quoted in AFP, 2000c).

On the other hand, the Chinese government framed religion as a separatist force and a threat to China’s national security. In this fashion, Wang Lequan warned in 1995 of ‘a handful of people’ who had entered Xinjiang ‘to advocate fundamentalism’, which he defined as ‘the concept of combining religion with



politics' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1995b). The government accused 'backward' religion doctrines of being 'incompatible with the current Chinese laws and statutes' (BBCMSAP, 1997x) and the clergy for 'coercing' people in issues such as justice, education, or family planning (BBCMSAP, 1996c, 1996k), promoting a separatist 'crusade' (SCMP, 1991c), declaring a 'religious war' (AFP, 1995b), or persecuting clerics with 'terrorist means' (BBCMSAP, 1997x). Meanwhile, the Chinese state media warned of a pan-Islamist movement seeding 'anti-imperialist sentiment' to consolidate 'the power of landlords and mullahs' (Reuters, 1996d; AFP, 1997i).

The Chinese authorities linked these threats to external scenarios. Throughout the decade, Chinese officials identified Afghanistan, Turkey, the United States, Switzerland, or the Central Asian nations as epicentres of Uyghur separatist activism (SCMP, 1991a; Landers, 1995; BBCMSAP, 1995c, 2000a). In 1999, Wang Lequan warned of forces 'hidden in countries near Xinjiang', in a veiled reference to Central Asia and Pakistan (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1999i). The authorities also presented Uyghur exiled activists such as Isa Alptekin or Wu'er Kaixi as the faces of the enemy abroad (SCMP, 1991a; BBCMSAP, 1995c). In 2001, using the novel 'terror' jargon to frame the external enemy, regional chairman Abulohat Abdurixit accused 'international terrorists' abroad of assisting separatists in Xinjiang (quoted in AFP, 2001a).

The construction of a multi-faceted external enemy underpinned the slogan that 'national separatism' and 'illegal religious activities', instigated by external forces, posed the 'greatest danger' to the stability of Xinjiang. This slogan featured prominently in CPC statements (BBCMSAP, 1996d), institutional declarations of the People's Armed Police (PAP), or the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) (AFP, 1996e; BBCMSAP, 1996i), as well as in the speeches of high-ranked regional officials such as Wang Lequan, Song Hanliang, or the regional chairman between 1994 and 2003, Abulohat Abdurixit (AFP, 1991b; BBCMSAP, 1996w).

The stability of Xinjiang thus emerged during the 1990s as the core referent object to protect from the threats of separatism and religious extremism. Stability was, as Ismail Amat put it in 1993, the 'central task that overrides everything else' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1993c). When Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the region in 1998, he aimed for 'a stable political situation' (quoted in SCMP, 1998). Chinese officials and state media linked the region's stability to other referent objects. Stability and economic development often featured together in the official discourse. Ismail Amat declared stability 'a prerequisite for improving the economy' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1993c), while Wang Lequan described it as 'the prevalent factor for Xinjiang's economic development' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1995d). Chinese officials also related the stability and the economic development of Xinjiang to national unity. Early in the decade, Jiang Zemin connected the dots when he declared the 'strengthening' of 'minority unity' and the 'economic and cultural development of the ethnic minorities' as requirements for 'protecting social stability and the state's long-term security' and achieving China's 'target of modernization' (quoted in AFP, 1991e). At the turn of the century, the Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji emphasized the necessity to 'strengthen unity among

nationalities’ and ‘maintain social stability’ as a ‘basic prerequisite and guarantee’ for the development of Xinjiang (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2000h).

The concept of security also acquired a greater dimension in the Chinese state discourse during the 1990s. Notably, it was invoked in 1993, when China approved its first State Security Law, which explicitly stated the purpose of ‘safeguarding State security, protecting the State power of the people’s democratic dictatorship and the socialist system, and ensuring the smooth progress of reform, opening-up, and the socialist modernization drive’ (PRC, 1993). Meanwhile, the category of ‘crimes of counter-revolution’ was replaced with that of ‘crimes of endangering state security’ in the Criminal Law in 1997 (AFP, 1997f). By the turn of the century, security was a core referent object in the Chinese government’s discourse used to make sense of the tensions with the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. On July 2001, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) declared Xinjiang as China’s ‘most important security problem in the next 20 years’ (Marquand, 2001).

### *Prescribing a Long and Merciless Fight*

During the proto-terroristization stage, Chinese state narratives claimed that a ‘long’ and ‘merciless’ fight against separatism was needed for the stability of Xinjiang, an idea that would become instrumental to the Chinese security policies. Over the years, Chinese officials described this fight in different ways. In 1994, Abulahat Abdurixit called to ‘fight resolutely’ against separatism to reach stability (quoted in Zhongguo Tongxun She, 1994). In 1996, Wang Lequan advocated a ‘people’s war’ against separatists to achieve ‘a social environment of unity and stability’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1996a). Earlier, Song Hanliang had vowed for ‘a firm struggle against the destructive acts of a small handful of national separatists to ensure the smooth progress of reform, opening up and economic construction’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1993b). Linking the fight against separatism with regional stability and food security, the Chinese state media would present the ‘bumper harvests’ of 1999 as the result of the ‘stable environment’ created by ‘combating illegal religious activities, and stopping violence and terrorism’ (BBCMSAP, 1999f).

As they did in 1990 following the Baren incident, Chinese officials represented the fight for the stability of Xinjiang as the continuation of past struggles that they also projected into the future. In 1991, Public Security Minister Tao Siju announced an upcoming decade of ‘struggle against nationalist splittists and criminals who carry out sabotage in the name of religion’ (quoted in AFP, 1991c). Commenting on the State Security Law of 1993, Amudun Niyaz, then chairman of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People’s Congress, described this ‘struggle’ as having been ‘acute and complicated’ since the founding of the PRC in 1949 (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1994c). In numerous editorials, the Chinese state media underscored the ‘ceaseless’ and ‘protracted’ nature of the conflict (see Reuters, 1996d; BBCMSAP, 1995h, 1996g, 1996w, 1997q). Attaching an inevitable character to it, Jiang Zemin affirmed in 1998 that ‘the tree may prefer calm, but the wind will not subside’ (quoted in AFP, 1998a).

In articulating a ‘fight’, ‘war’, or ‘struggle’ as the logical response to unrest, the Chinese authorities instilled a sense of emergency and exceptionalism in their narratives making sense of the state tensions with the ethnic minorities. It was the official position that the fight could not be relaxed under any circumstances. The *Xinjiang Daily* described the regional situation in 1996 as ‘serious’, one that vowed for ‘deepening’ the fight and not ‘letting down our guard’ (AFP, 1996l). Chi Haotian, Minister of National Defence, pointed out in 1997 that the geographic conditions in Xinjiang demanded ‘a high state of alert’ (quoted in Reuters, 1997l). In 1999, Wang Lequan vowed not to ‘relax our vigilance’ (quoted in Kwan, 1999). For Chinese officials, the fight against separatism and religious extremism had to be maintained even in times of peace or receding violence. These were Jiang Zemin’s instructions in 1998, when he called to ‘be prepared for danger and prevent turmoil in times of peace’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1998l). At the turn of the century, when the incidence of violence had faded in the region, Ismail Tiliwaldi, member of the Standing Committee of the Xinjiang Regional CPC, called to persist in the crackdown (BBCMSAP, 2000k) while Wang Lequan warned of ‘increasingly serious threats’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2000i).

The construction of a protracted exceptional fight as a requirement for the stability of Xinjiang facilitated the continued endorsing of a ruthless crackdown that would have severe consequences for those Uyghurs in the region singled out as ‘separatists’. In the view of the Chinese government, stated early in the decade, ‘only the methods of dictatorship’ could work in Xinjiang (AFP, 1992b), a position that the Chinese officials made clear in a variety of ways.

First, they singled out the Chinese state security forces, and notably the army, to fight separatism alongside the peoples of Xinjiang. In this sense, senior figures routinely called the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to lead the struggle and the XPCC to ‘beef up militia reservists’ and become a ‘backbone force’ in the region (BBCMSAP, 1995i, 1999k, 1996i, 1994b). A Xinhua editorial called in 1997 for building ‘a great wall of steel of army-people unity and ethnic unity’ (BBCMSAP, 1997g).

Second, the official narratives deployed epic and bellicose verbiage that recalled of military conflict when weighing up on Xinjiang. This included references to a ‘people’s war’ (BBCMSAP, 1996a, 1996b; Reuters, 1997m), a slogan that would be recovered almost two decades later in the context of China’s fight against ‘terrorism’. Chinese officials also described the conflict as a ‘you die, I live’ struggle (BBCMSAP, 1996i, 1997j), or as a fight ‘between the enemies and us’ (BBCMSAP, 1997c). Those who died in the crackdown were described as ‘martyrs’ and ‘heroes’ who had ‘sacrificed’ their lives for the unity of China (Reuters, 1998c; BBCMSAP, 1998m).

Next, and to legitimize a brutal crackdown, the Chinese state discourse represented dissidents in a dehumanizing way to the point of justifying their elimination. Chinese officials and state media compared separatists with ‘rats in the street, followed and cornered by passers by’ (AFP, 1997s), or ‘rats’ at the sight of which ‘everybody cries “kill them”’ (BBCMSAP, 2000m). Amudun Niyaz

described violent separatists as ‘poisonous grass’ and ‘killer bugs’ to be ‘wiped out’ for the sake of ‘stability and prosperity’ (quoted in AP, 1997b). The dehumanization of the enemy justified a ‘harsh retaliation’ or a struggle ‘without mercy’ (AFP, 1996l, 1997o; BBCMSAP, 1999m). In parallel, Chinese officials explicitly rejected alternative approaches to the tensions based on ‘leniency’, ‘benevolence’, or ‘tolerance’ (BBCMSAP, 1997c). ‘How can we be lenient towards these ferocious thugs?’, Wang Lequan asked in 1997, before stating that ‘killers should be killed in kind’ (quoted in SCMP, 1997b). By comparing them to insects and rats, ‘separatists’, and later ‘terrorists’, would become the new focus for an existing tradition in the PRC of violent combat against ‘apocalyptic threats’ that stresses notions such as ‘cleanliness and hygiene’ or ‘healing’ to justify the elimination of the perceived *other* (Ter Haar, 1996, p. 81).

In short, the Chinese state proposed during the 1990s a long fight aimed at the extermination of separatism and religious extremism. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the crackdown campaigns that characterized this period were named ‘strike hard’ and aimed at ‘striking mercilessly and hard’ (BBCMSAP, 2000h), dealing ‘annihilating blows’ (Page, 2001), or using ‘all available measures to unearth enemy activities’ (Reuters, 1996a). In 1999, confirming that the long and merciless fight was well under way, a police officer in Kashgar revealed that Chinese security forces were striking hard ‘every day, each season, all year, leaving ethnic separatists and terrorists no room to breathe’ (quoted in Reuters, 1999).

### ***Change of Language: From Counter-Revolution to Terrorism***

The proto-terroristization stage saw the fading of the language of ‘counterrevolution’ that had characterized Chinese official narratives during the 1980s. In parallel, a new jargon entered the Chinese state security vernacular making sense of Uyghur-related violent unrest in Xinjiang, one that had ‘terrorism’ as its flagship term. During the first half of the 1990s, Chinese officials and the state media still constructed their arguments about Xinjiang with mentions to counter-revolution. Rebels were described as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ (AFP, 1992b) or ‘counter-revolutionary murderers’ (BBCMSAP, 1996x), their actions being framed as ‘counter-revolutionary incitement’ (BBCMSAP, 1994a), or ‘counter-revolutionary and serious criminal activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1994d). In 1994, a study on ‘Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism’ of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences (XASS) explored the incidence of ‘ethnic rebellion’, ‘counter-revolutionary separatist thinking’, and ‘counter-revolutionary’ individuals and organizations (AI, 1999, p. 13; see Zhang, 1994).

From the mid-1990s, however, the language of counter-revolution disappeared from the Chinese state discourse, at a time when the language of ‘terrorism’ made its first appearances in official narratives. This incorporation was gradual and never to the extent of dominating the Chinese security jargon during the decade. The XASS study published in 1994 had included a reference to ‘terrorist acts’ in Kashgar in 1993 (Reuters, 1994), while in 1995, a regional security official had cited ‘terrorism’

as a form of ‘sabotage activity’ (Reuters, 1995). A major turning point in this direction was the modernization of the 1979 Criminal Law in 1997. Explaining the change of wording, Wang Hanbin, vice-chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC), pointed out that ‘new situations and problems’ had arisen that demanded the revision of ‘crimes of counter-revolution’ as ‘crimes of endangering state security’ (quoted in AFP, 1997f). Amongst these novel issues, Wang cited ‘offences in the nature of terrorist activities’ (ibid.).

A fundamental aspect of the use of the terrorist vernacular during the proto-terroristization stage is that, unlike during the terroristization phase, the Chinese authorities used the notion of ‘violent terrorist activities’ as a category for specific events within the broader phenomenology of Uyghur-related violence. Before 1995, and in the absence of the label, Chinese officials had used a wide range of descriptors to conceptualize violent events with a political dimension. These included ‘revenge killings’ (AFP, 1994a), ‘counterrevolutionary and serious criminal activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1994d), ‘subversion, sabotage and infiltration’ (AFP, 1991b), ‘destructive acts’ (BBCMSAP, 1993b), or ‘explosion incidents’ (BBCMSAP, 1995c). From 1995, Chinese officials and the state media started to use the terror jargon to describe ‘cases of explosions and assassination’ or ‘acts of violence’ (AFP, 1996e; BBCMSAP, 1997m), as well as the individuals, groups, training camps, means, and ideas related to these cases (AFP, 1997p, 1999b; BBCMSAP, 1997o, 1996w). The Chinese official discourse differentiated these activities from other phenomena such as ‘sabotage activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1997h), ‘separatist activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1996w), or ‘illegal religious activities’ (AFP, 1996l), which suggested a conceptualization of terrorism as a distinct category of violent unrest. In other words, Chinese officials used the terror vernacular in selective ways that were reminiscent of dominant scholarly constructions of terrorism. As such, the authorities referred to organizations that aimed ‘to terrorise the people and spread chaos in Xinjiang’ by exploding bombs (AFP, 1997i), or criminals who used ‘ruthless’ methods to ‘fan ethnic hatred and create an atmosphere of terror’ (Reuters, 1998a).

The early use of the terror jargon by the Chinese state was nonetheless erratic during the 1990s. While it certainly entered the Chinese state discourse on Xinjiang, it never did it to the point of becoming the dominant vernacular. Other labels, such as separatism or splittism, appeared more frequently in the Chinese official narratives on violent conflict in Xinjiang. By the end of the decade, terrorism featured as a marginal issue in state security narratives. The government’s *White Paper on Defence* published in 1998 did not mention terrorism at all, and the 2000 version only did so in passing (Scobell, 2005, p. 306). This situation would change abruptly after 9/11, when the Party moved to reframe its historical frictions with the Uyghurs as a ‘terrorism’ problem.

### ***The Terroristization of the Ghulja Riot***

The Chinese government maintained a low profile when it came to reacting to fresh violent incidents during most of the 1990s. Chinese officials did not admit

or comment on many of the Uyghur-related violent episodes reported during this period, some of which were revealed only years later (see SCIO, 2002). During the early 1990s, it was mainly Uyghur diaspora groups and foreign media organizations that reported on violent events in Xinjiang (Preston, 1992; AP, 1992; Artykova, 1993). The Ürümqi bombings in 1992 went almost unnoticed at the time. Only in May 1995, when a Chinese court sentenced the attackers to death, the Chinese state media elaborated on the episode, blaming a ‘counter-revolutionary’ group for the violence (BBCMSAP, 1995e). Despite the unambiguous ‘terroristic’ features of this event, there was no mention to terrorism in the official reports on the trial, demonstrating the contingency of the label in the Chinese state discourse.

This situation changed from 1996 onwards when the Chinese state media began to inform about the increasing violence in Xinjiang. In 1996, the *Xinjiang Daily* warned of ‘gangs of assassins and bombers’ in the region (Reuters, 1996b), and the regional government revealed the existence of ‘cases of explosions, assassinations and other violent terrorist activities of a political colouring involving party members and cadres’ (Reuters, 1996c, BBCMSAP, 1996n). As the occurrence of violence continued to surface, the Chinese authorities also went public to dismiss far-fetched accounts of violence as ‘pure lies’ (AFP, 1996f) or ‘completely groundless’ stories (AFP, 1996p).

The government’s low profile on the incidence of violence in Xinjiang came to an abrupt end in February 1997, when riots erupted in Ghulja. Only 72 hours after the violence exploded, Turkish media outlets were reporting on the incident, prompting a protest with hundreds of Uyghur exiles in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul (SCMP, 1997a). Soon, Western media agencies were informing of a major incident in Xinjiang (Hills, 1997; AFP, 1997b; Leicester, 1997). As it occurred in 1990 following the Baren incident, the Chinese authorities had to come to the fore and provide an official account of the events unfolding in Ghulja. Their narratives provide a valuable empirical case to demonstrate the contingent and political nature of the Chinese state integration of the terror vernacular into its broader security discourse.

In this sense, Chinese officials commenting on the Ghulja incident did not mention ‘terrorism’ – or any related term – in their initial evaluations of the riot. Liu Yisheng, spokesman of the regional government, and one of the first Chinese officials to comment on the episode, described it as ‘a serious case of beating, looting and destruction’ (quoted in AFP, 1997c). Liu also attached a premeditated and political dimension to the event, for which he blamed ‘a small number of hostile elements’ that ‘plotted to overthrow the people’s political power and to split the unity of the motherland’ (ibid.). Contrary to Liu’s take on the incident, Zhang Yuliang, director of the regional CPC propaganda department, seemed to downplay the events in Ghulja. He emphasized that ‘the vast majority of those arrested were members of the public who had been hoodwinked into taking part and they have been released’ (quoted in Reuters, 1997d). In the aftermath of the incident, Zhang also announced ‘a session of education for the masses to teach them about ethnic unity’ (ibid.). Neither Liu nor Zhang mentioned ‘terror’ or ‘terrorism’ in their statements.

The absence of a terrorism lexicon in the official narratives produced in the aftermath of the Ghulja incident contrasts with the use of the label to describe the Ürümqi bombings a few weeks later. An official statement published in the front page of *Xinjiang Daily* described the bombings as a ‘premeditated act of violence carried out by a terrorist organisation’ (AFP, 1997d). Unlike the Ghulja riot, CPC leaders in Xinjiang described the attack in Ürümqi as ‘terrorist bomb explosions’ (quoted in AFP, 1997m). Wang Lequan described the incident as ‘typical terrorist activity’, and denied any connection with the events in Ghulja, which he differentiated from the ‘terrorist’ Ürümqi bombings, representing the unrest as ‘a practice of beating, smashing, and looting’ to ‘pursue national separatism’ (quoted in Kang Lim, 1997a; BBCMSAP, 1997k). The different treatment given by Chinese officials to the Ghulja incident and the Ürümqi bombing suggests an early discriminate use of the terror lexicon by Chinese officials. The riot was seen as unrest linked to separatism, while the bombing was perceived as terrorism. This initial differentiation of violent events according to their features was to be abandoned.

The terroristization of the Ghulja riot started when Chinese courts issued the first sentences for the unrest weeks after the incident. Crucially, between the occurrence of the incident and the issuing of these first sentences, the Chinese government revised the ‘crimes of counter-revolution’ as ‘crimes of endangering state security’ (AFP, 1997f). In April 1997, under the new legal framework, local courts described the Ghulja riot as a crime that ‘seriously endangered state security’ (BBCMSAP, 1997o). Meanwhile, Chinese officials blamed the unrest on ‘a group of violent terrorists and criminals’ that had acted ‘by violent and terrorist means’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1997o, 1997w). The following month, the courts characterized the Ürümqi bombing as a ‘terrorist’ crime ‘by extremely cruel and criminal means’ (Reuters, 1997j), effectively attributing the same criminal dimension to the Ghulja riot and the explosions in the regional capital despite the evident differences in their nature, motivation, and characteristics.

From that point onwards, the Chinese authorities continued to make sense of the Ghulja incident as a case of terrorism, introducing newfound motives and culprits in the official account of the events. In 1999, new judicial statements portrayed the riots as ‘violent terrorist activities’ and the rioters as ‘religious terrorists’ (AFP, 1999c, 1999e; BBCMSAP, 1999c), adding religious extremism to separatism and terrorism as factors explaining the unrest. The process of terroristization of the Ghulja incident culminated in 2002, when what the Chinese government had initially described as a case of ‘beating, smashing, and looting acts’ by members of the public deceived by separatist elements, was retrospectively re-casted as a ‘terrorist incident’ in the official document ‘East Turkistan Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity’ (SCIO, 2002).

Beyond marking the irruption of the language of terrorism in the Chinese state discourse making sense of Uyghur-related violent unrest in Xinjiang, China’s evolving official narratives about Ghulja also demonstrate how Chinese officials used violent events to materialize the state security discourse and legitimize a



constant state of emergency and crackdown. A case in point here is the speech delivered by Amudun Niyaz in front of the Party cadres of the Yili prefecture on July 1997. In his intervention, Niyaz attached a political and premeditated nature to the incident. The riot, he said, was ‘by no means an accidental or isolated incident’, but ‘a separatist and sabotage activity’ carried out ‘in a planned and organized way’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1997ab). Niyaz also presented all types of violent phenomena, no matter their nature, as well as some non-violent dissident activities, as proof and part of a similar threat. He related the riot to ‘terrorist acts and assassinations’ before and after 1997 (ibid.) and to other ‘law-breaking criminal activities’ such as the spread of dissident propaganda, or ‘illegal religious activities’ (ibid.). The events in Ghulja, Niyaz said, proved that separatism was ‘the main danger harming Xinjiang’s stability’ and demanded a ‘life-and-death’, ‘acute and fierce’, and ‘long-term and complex’ fight (ibid.). He concluded his speech calling for a continuous crackdown in Xinjiang which, he claimed, was ‘a just action’ based on the ‘sacred duty of protecting the people and striking at the enemy’ (ibid.). Alternative interpretations of China’s response to the Ghulja riots, Niyaz emphasized, were just ‘rumours to mislead people’ (ibid.). For this ‘life-and-death’ struggle, he encouraged his fellow cadres to ‘crack down, according to law, on law-breaking criminals who endanger state security and public order’ (ibid.). In a single speech produced with the occasion of the Ghulja incident, Niyaz conveyed the pivotal themes of China’s security discourse on Xinjiang during the proto-terroristization stage.

### *Internationalizing the Threat*

The Chinese authorities internationalized their discourse on Xinjiang during the 1990s. Chinese officials did so in two ways. First, and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they integrated their arguments about a terrorist threat in the region into their political and diplomatic exchanges with the post-Soviet republics in Central Asia. Second, the Chinese state discourse conceptualized terrorism as a global phenomenon with domestic ramifications in Xinjiang, conveying the idea that China was a victim of a problem shared with the international community.

An international element was explicit in Chinese official narratives on Xinjiang since the beginning of the 1990s. The region featured prominently in discussions about developments in neighbouring USSR. Chinese officials, for instance, framed the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an event that could galvanize separatism in Xinjiang. Following the failed coup against the government of Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991, Chinese Vice President Wang Zhen warned of ‘murky and changeable times’ and predicted a ‘treacherous’ road ahead (quoted in Goodspeed, 1991). Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities described the collapse of the USSR as a move that had emboldened ‘separatists’ in Xinjiang (SCMP, 1991c; BBCMSAP, 1996y). Throughout the decade, leading cadres such as Song Hanliang or Nur Bekri continued to emphasize that China should not and would not repeat the same ‘mistakes’ of Moscow in dealing with the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang (quoted in Yeung, 1991; SCMP, 1999b).



As the decade advanced, the uncertainty of the ‘murky’ and ‘treacherous’ times proclaimed by Chinese leaders after the fall of the Soviet Union gave way to optimistic forecasts about Xinjiang based on a changing international environment. This feeling increased as Beijing’s diplomatic efforts in Central Asia started to bear fruit in the mid-1990s. From 1994, when the Prime Minister Li Peng toured the Central Asian nations, and particularly after the signing in 26 April 1996 of the first Shanghai Five treaty, Chinese high-ranked diplomats and the Chinese President Jiang Zemin reached with their Central Asian counterparts a ‘commitment’ to oppose ‘splittism’ in Xinjiang and disallow Uyghur separatist activities on foreign soil (AFP, 1994b, 1996a, 1996h, 1997j; BBCMSAP, 1995a, 1996u). Following this inaugural treaty, the Chinese state media described the ‘international and regional’ context as ‘peaceful’ and ‘friendly’ in relation to Xinjiang (AFP, 1996g, BBCMSAP, 1996t).

In this new environment, the Chinese leaders replicated the core arguments of the national security discourse about Xinjiang in their international diplomatic exchanges. Visiting Kazakhstan in 1996, the Chinese Minister for Economic Reforms Li Tieying denounced the ‘instigation of foreign forces’ in Xinjiang (quoted in AFP, 1996n). In 1997, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen welcomed the commitment of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz presidents to fight ‘splittism’ and ‘preserve regional peace and stability’ (quoted Reuters, 1997h). Echoing the calls for a ‘merciless’ struggle against ‘ethnic separatism’, Chinese General Chi Haotian told fellow ministers of Defence from Central Asian nations to ‘not be soft-hearted’ in this fight (quoted in AP, 2000b). In a significant step towards the proto-terroristization of Uyghur-related violent unrest, the terrorism vernacular entered the Shanghai Five summits at the end of the 1990s (see Y. Chan, 1998; Piskorskaya, 2000). In 1999, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov vowed to ‘prevent, combat and investigate terrorist activities’ that threatened ‘regional or worldwide peace and security’ (quoted in AFP, 1999g). In 2000, Chinese Vice-President Hu Jintao and Kazakh Prime Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev pointed that they were ‘ready to oppose jointly the forces of international terrorism and extremism so as to protect security and stability in this region’ (quoted in Reuters, 2000b). Thanks to Beijing’s initiative, this was the first time that China’s historical frictions with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities came to be addressed as a terrorism problem in international fora.

China’s exchanges in the context of the Shanghai Five initiative culminated with the creation of a label that grouped all perceived threats in the region under a single signifier: the ‘three forces’. In March 2001, regional government chairman Abulhat Abdurixit had vowed to ‘crack down on three forces: splittists, religious extremists and terrorist groups’ in Xinjiang (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2001b). Later that year, only weeks before 11 September attacks in New York, the Shanghai Five, now renamed as the SCO, signed a convention to ‘combat terrorism, separatism and extremism’, which would eventually be conceptualized as an ‘evil’ triad (SCO, 2001).

Beyond exporting the discursive representation of Uyghur-related violent unrest to the Central Asian stage, the end of the decade also saw Chinese officials relating

violence in Xinjiang to other conflicts around the world. In 1998, commenting on violent attacks in Northern Ireland and Africa, regional vice-chairman Zhang Zhou affirmed that Xinjiang was ‘no more dangerous than any other part of the world’ (quoted in Y. Chan, 1998). Chinese officials also compared the situation in Xinjiang with conflicts in Russia or Kosovo (Kwang, 2000). ‘They say that what happened in Kosovo today will happen in Xinjiang tomorrow’, Wang Lequan emphasized (quoted in Kwan, 1999). The Chinese official discourse thus represented the world stage as a realm where ‘the perils of separatism and ethnic conflict’ had plunged peoples ‘into the abyss of misery and death’ (BBCMSAP, 1997q). Xinjiang was no exception to these threats. In Wang’s opinion, ‘neither criminal cases nor terrorist incidents’, and these included those in Xinjiang, could be ‘eliminated in any country, including developed ones’ (BBCMSAP, 1997k).

China also used the internationalization of the Xinjiang threat to legitimize its crackdown in the region. Chinese officials insisted in representing the repressive measures against Uyghurs as a logical reaction that could be found elsewhere in the world. ‘Like any country in the world’, a regional official said, China was ‘opposed to terrorism’, which meant that separatist activities would be ‘punished with the full might of the law’ (quoted in AFP, 1996j). Commenting on the attacks on pro-government imams, regional vice-chairman Yusufu Aisha reminded that this ‘brutal behaviour would be condemned and cracked down upon in any country’ (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1997x). In his speech following the Ghulja riots, Amudun Niyaz defended the handling of the event by the Chinese security forces on the basis that ‘no country in the world would permit it’ (BBCMSAP, 1997ab). To further reinforce these arguments, the Chinese state media depicted violent incidents in Xinjiang as events spreading terror worldwide. The *Xinjiang Daily* stressed that the Ürümqi bombings and the Ghulja riots had ‘caused a fairly great impact both at home and abroad’ (BBCMSAP, 1998f). Meanwhile, Xinhua represented the violent unrest in Ghulja as the ‘terrorist actions that shocked China and the world’ (AFP, 2000b). In such ways, China moved during the proto-terroristization stage from a position of discursive restraint in relation to violent phenomena in Xinjiang to one that presented a localized riot linked to ethnic, cultural, and religious grievances as a ‘terrorism problem’ with international ramifications. As it happened in the 1980s decade, the discursive change came with a set of distinct policies that deepened the broader process of terroristization in Xinjiang.

### The Politics of ‘Striking Hard’

The Chinese state discourse about Xinjiang during the 1990s was instrumental to the policies that the government implemented in the region. The framing of Uyghur-related violent frictions as caused by a separatist, terrorist, or religious extremist threat inspired or directed from abroad and aimed at destabilizing the country enabled the adoption of an ever-intensifying crackdown as the logical response to the purported threat. These policies are here described as the politics

of ‘striking hard’, following the slogan of the crackdown campaigns that swept Xinjiang during this period. In this section, I first focus on the establishment of a legal-executive security apparatus to fight separatism in Xinjiang. This includes analyzing the issuing and implementation of the directive *Document No. 7* in 1996, a key development that effectively set a new security agenda for Xinjiang. Next, the section examines China’s domestic crackdown in Xinjiang, including the persecution of religion, the militarization of the region, and the accompanying propaganda campaigns. At this point, the book assesses China’s landmark security device during the 1990s, the ‘strike hard’ crackdown campaigns, and their effects on the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The final part of the chapter explores China’s international efforts to stifle Uyghur political dissent in Central Asia and reduce its influence in other countries such as Turkey, a strategy that reached its zenith with the establishment of the SCO in 2001.

### ***A Legal-Executive Security Apparatus to Fight Separatism***

During the proto-terroristization stage, the Chinese government equipped itself with the legal and executive tools required to crack down on the threats it had articulated in its security discourse. This process involved the creation and updating of laws that further constructed and reacted to these threats, and the issuing of executive directives that set the agenda to neutralize Uyghur dissidents in Xinjiang and abroad.

The 1990s saw a worsening of China’s nationwide crackdown on religious activities, increasingly perceived as a security threat. At the beginning of the decade, the Chinese authorities issued a series of directives aimed at tightening their grip on the practice of religion outside government’s control. An early example was ‘Vigilance against Infiltration by Religious Forces from Abroad’, published in 1990 (HRW, 1992, p. 67) and described by human rights activists as a ‘green light for severe repression, if not persecution, of unofficial religious groups’ (Duckworth, 1991). In February 1991, the CPC Central Committee issued the ‘Circular on Further Tackling Certain Problems of Religious Work’, known as *Document No. 6*, which urged public security agencies to ‘resolutely attack those counterrevolutionaries and other criminal elements who make use of religion to carry out destructive activities’ (Pomfret, 1991). *Document No. 6* called for controlling the activities of ‘monasteries, Taoist temples, and churches’, and ‘bible colleges, convents, and theological seminaries’ (CPC, 1991, p. 57). It also prohibited the interference of foreign religious organizations and individuals in domestic religious affairs (CPC, 1991, p. 59) and called for the strict control of religious publications, audio and videotapes, and other propaganda materials from abroad (CPC, 1991, p. 60). The circular was followed by a nationwide crackdown on religious activities. By November 1991, cases of religious persecution against underground Christian churches were reported across China in the provinces of Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangsu, and Henan, or the cities of Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (AP, 1991b; SCMP, 1991b). As

*Document No. 6* emphasized, temples, churches, seminaries, and religious institutes were the ground of competition between religion and the Chinese government for the hearts and minds of young people (CPC, 1991, p. 57; Pomfret, 1991).

Another key national legal development that impacted Xinjiang was the adoption, in February 1993, of the State Security Law, the first of its kind in China. The law was aimed at opposing ‘espionage bodies and various hostile forces outside China’s territory’ (BBCMSAP, 1994c) and called for the prosecution of ‘any act endangering the state security’ (PRC, 1993). This category included activities such as ‘plotting to subvert the government, dismember the State or overthrow the socialist system’, ‘joining an espionage organization or accepting a mission assigned by an espionage organization or by its agent’, or ‘stealing, secretly gathering, buying, or unlawfully providing State secrets’ (PRC, 1993). A year after its promulgation, and commenting on its implementation in the region, the *Xinjiang Daily* praised the law as a ‘legal weapon’ to ‘safeguard state security’ (BBCMSAP, 1995f). In this safeguarding, the vagueness of the law’s provisions proved crucial for the unrestrained crackdown on dissidents. As an illustration, Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer was charged under this law with ‘the crime of illegally providing national intelligence people abroad’ for mailing copies of local newspapers abroad (AP, 2000a; BBCMSAP, 2000c).

To a certain extent, the efforts in the first half of the 1990s were aimed at countering the influence of political or religious dissidents nationwide. Particularly, *Document No. 6* targeted Western influences on Catholic and Protestant Christian churches in China. As the decade advanced, however, the new legal developments targeting religion shifted their focus towards spiritual practices such as Falun Gong, which became securitized by the end of the decade (see Vuori, 2008, 2014a), and Islam in Xinjiang. At this point, the ‘Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No. 7’ directive emerges as a key document to understand the evolution of China’s policies in Xinjiang during the proto-terroristization stage. Distributed in March 1996 amongst the CPC regional ranks, the circular conveyed the core arguments that underpinned the Chinese state discourse at the time. *Document No. 7* placed ‘national separatism and illegal religious activity’ as ‘the main threats to the stability’ of the region, painting a grim picture with ‘some real and potentially dangerous elements facing Xinjiang’ (CPC, 1996, pp. 10–18). At the same time, it asked for increased ‘vigilance’ and suggested a series of policies that would inform the politics of ‘striking hard’.

The directive set the Chinese security agenda in the region for the years to come. Specifically, *Document No. 7* outlined four lines of action that would guide the Chinese state security practices in Xinjiang (and abroad) during much of the terroristization process and well beyond the proto-terroristization stage. First, and foremost, it called for a restriction of ‘all illegal religious activities’ in Xinjiang (CPC, 1996, p. 11). It ordered the ‘severe’ control of mosques, the closure of ‘underground religious schools’ and Quran studies meetings, higher control of Muslim students and clerics, and the exclusive management of religion by ‘patriotic

religious leaders' (ibid.). To enforce these measures, *Document No. 7* recommended establishing a covert 'sensitive information network' in south Xinjiang to monitor suspected individuals (CPC, 1996, p. 12). Second, the directive called for an intervention on the cultural and educational fronts. It discouraged the incorporation of foreign teachers and prohibited cultural exchanges of local students with foreign schools (CPC, 1996, p. 12). It also ordered the removal of contents inspiring 'ethnic separatism' or publicizing 'religious ideas' from textbooks and the confiscation of all published and audio-visual works involving a 'twist' in history (ibid.), that is, challenging the CPC's official historiography. Next, *Document No. 7* emphasized the potential of the PLA to form a 'stronghold against ethnic separatism', and tasked the XPCC with the defence and development of Xinjiang (CPC, 1996, p. 13), conferring the paramilitary organization a status similar to that of the regional government (see Seymour & Anderson, 1998; Seymour, 2000). The XPCC would become the main destination of Han migrants in the region, answering the call of *Document No. 7* to relocate Han cadres in Xinjiang and 'import talented people' (CPC, 1996, p. 11), mostly Han settlers, into the region. Finally, the circular asked for a diplomatic campaign aimed at putting pressure on countries such as Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to 'limit and weaken the activities of separatist forces inside their borders' (CPC, 1996, p. 13). To accomplish this task, the document pointed out that China was to impose its 'political superiority' over these nations. Alongside diplomatic and economic means, the directive ordered the espionage of the Uyghur diaspora communities and the division of the 'outside separatist forces' (ibid.). Considering that violence in Xinjiang actually intensified from 1996 and paraphrasing *Document No. 7*, which described a situation of security emergency requiring to 'dam the river before the floods come' (CPC, 1996, p. 10), it could be argued that the actual *floods* of violence only unleashed *after* the Chinese authorities built the *dam* in the first place with this directive.

*Document No. 7* was not the last or only instrument at the service of the crack-down in Xinjiang. With the 'strike hard' campaigns in full development, and in order to facilitate the actions of the security forces, the CPC issued an order to 'kill on the spot with the authority of the law' all criminals in a series of categories that included 'ringleaders and backbone elements of gangs creating violence and terrorist activities' (BBCMSAP, 1996s). Meanwhile, in March 1997, the government amended the 1979 Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It reconceptualized as 'crimes of endangering national security' those offences previously known as 'counterrevolutionary' crimes and included provisions against 'terrorist activities' (PRC, 1997). The amended law also included provisions against 'acts to split the country or undermine national unification' (ibid., article 103), 'armed riots' (ibid., article 104), or crimes of 'murder, explosion, or kidnapping' carried out by members of a 'terrorist organization' (ibid., article 120), as well as against 'those provoking ethnic hatred or discrimination' (ibid., article 249). These orders and categories would be routinely invoked to provide a legal basis for the repressive measures implemented in Xinjiang.

### ***Implementing Document No. 7***

Most of the policies adopted by the Chinese government in Xinjiang during the 1990s involved the implementation, in the name of fighting separatism and illegal religious activities, of the legislation and directives examined above, notably *Document No. 7*. China's actions to counter the purported threats of separatism and religious extremism can be grouped into four broad lines of action. First, the restriction and control of religious activities deemed 'illegal' by the Chinese authorities. Second, a propaganda campaign sustained by a stronger control and monitoring of cultural and religious publications. Third, a variety of surveillance measures aimed at monitoring and infiltrating the Uyghur community at home and abroad. And finally, the continuous deployment of Chinese security forces in Xinjiang.

In this sense, a speech pronounced by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1999 conveys well the Chinese state approach to religion during the proto-terroristization stage. On the surface, Jiang's words painted an image of China as a haven for religion in an otherwise secular country. As he put it, China guaranteed the 'freedom to be or not to be a religious follower' or to 'believe in one or another religion' and the state protection of 'normal religious activities', while holding the view that 'religion must be separated from government' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 1999h). However, Jiang also emphasized that China should administer religion 'on its own', avoiding 'intervention by any international religious force', and forbidding religious 'intervention' in 'state administrative and judicial functions' (ibid.). On these grounds, and throughout the 1990s, China securitized the practice of Islam in Xinjiang, which became subjected to how Chinese officials interpret which individuals, groups, practices, or places are harmless and which are 'illegal'.

During this period, the crackdown on religion had, as a preliminary task, the closing of venues where, according to the Chinese government, Uyghur 'separatists' were organizing and encouraging 'illegal' religious activities. To this effect, the authorities banned all religious preaching outside venues authorized by the government (Macartney, 1996b). A campaign followed to shut down 'illegal' mosques, eradicate underground religious classes, and send those administering these classes to re-education (ibid.). From 1996, religious 'rectification' campaigns swept the region, and hundreds of mosques and study groups were closed down (BBCMSAP, 1996x, 1997u, 1996q, 1997ac, 1999f).

The Chinese authorities also intensified the control of the religious clergy and the practice of Islam. From 1995 and throughout the second half of the decade, the regional government compiled lists of authorized clerics and places of worship, and required imams, mullahs, and other religious figures to undergo an examination to obtain a certification to operate legally (AFP, 1995b; BBCMSAP, 1997u). Those who had been critical with the CPC were rebuked (Grabot, 1996). Other measures were intended to govern the customs of Muslims in areas such as prayer or dress codes, or to exclude religion from public life, in ways that actively contributed to the construction of Muslim religious practices as a source of political instability. In 1998, during the celebration of the holy festival of Kurban Ayt (also known as

Eid al-Adha or Feast of the Sacrifice), the regional authorities restricted traditional prayers on the streets and the use of loudspeakers in mosques in order to ‘preserve stability’ (BBCMSAP, 1998g). Another rectification campaign, launched in 1997, tried to eradicate the use of veils amongst women in rural areas, encouraging them to ‘voluntarily’ abandon the garment and live a ‘productive labour and social life’ (BBCMSAP, 1997t). In 1999, the Ürümqi City Public Security Bureau launched a crackdown campaign to ensure stability and public order with the occasion of Ramadan (BBCMSAP, 1999a). The enforcement of these and other measures, aimed at shaping religious and cultural customs deeply rooted in Uyghur communities, heightened the tensions and triggered outbreaks of violence, such as the killing of a family planning official in Aqsu in 1998 (BBCMSAP, 1998j; AFP, 2001b). This suggests a connection between the intensified pressure that accompanied the implementation of *Document No. 7* and the increased incidence of violence during the second half of the decade.

The scrutiny of religion was particularly intense on members of the CPC. Party cadres were banned from subscribing to religion or participating in religious activities (BBCMSAP, 1997d). Despite this prohibition, the participation of Uyghur Party cadres in religious activities and their belief and practice of Islam were not rare. In 1997, the Turpan Prefectural CPC Committee reported that, since 1990, 25% of the party members in the prefecture had taken part in religious activities, with participation reaching 40% in some villages (BBCMSAP, 1997a). Facing this situation, the Chinese authorities went on to prosecute those officials they saw as ‘corrupted by religion ideologically’ or holding ‘illegal’ religious thoughts (BBCMSAP, 1996j, 1997a). In areas with a majority of religious population, such as Turpan, the government organized campaigns of ‘atheist’ education and ‘face-to-face persuasion sessions’ amongst party members (BBCMSAP, 1997s). At the same time, the CPC did not accept positions of political tepidity in the struggle against separatism and punished officials who made comments that the government perceived as ‘detrimental to the stability of Xinjiang’ (AFP, 1996d), or those ‘who lacked the strength to oppose illegal religious activities’ (BBCMSAP, 1996p).

In line with the directives of *Document No. 7*, the Chinese government also launched several campaigns aimed at ‘purifying’ the cultural market for books and audio-visual products (BBCMSAP, 2000d). Censorship policies had been in place before the directive was issued. For instance, the government had banned radio stations that ‘endangered social security and stability’ (BBCMSAP, 1995g) and confiscated foreign magazines and pamphlets including content related to ‘Eastern Turkestan’ (K. Chen, 1994a). From 1996, the focus shifted to Islamic books, journals, and audio-visual materials. The Xinjiang People’s Publication House became the only official channel allowed to publish books about Islam (AFP, 1996a). The authorities banned the printing or import of materials published abroad (BBCMSAP, 1996e, 1996f) and included themes like ‘religious fanaticism’ or ‘feudal superstitions’ as proscribed contents along pornography (BBCMSAP, 1996f, 1996c). To control the narrative on Xinjiang, the government tightened the grip on the historiography of the region, which became another source of state insecurity.



Already in 1991, China had banned the works of Uyghur historian Turghun Almas because they offered an alternative geographical and historical vision of the Uyghur people (Dillon, 2004, p. 51). In the official view, Almas' books 'brazenly advocated independence, agitated for splitting the country, harmed ethnic unity and damaged the unity of the motherland' (Reuters, 1991b). In 1996, the Central Propaganda Department and the State Press and Publication Administration issued a warning against publications that re-evaluated historical figures and events (BBCMSAP, 1996v). The censorship reached authors whose publications criticized the CPC. Uyghur activist Abduwayiti Aihemaiti was accused in May 1996 of 'writing and editing reactionary articles' that, according to the Chinese authorities, sought to 'divide the motherland and overthrow democratic dictatorship of the people' (see AFP, 1996c; Kang Lim, 1996). To enforce these regulations, and as it happened with the scrutiny of religious practices and customs, the government organized house inspections, particularly in the south of the region, in a sign of further intervention in the privacy of the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. In this drive, those found in possession of 'illegal' publications or tapes were sentenced to prison (BBCMSAP, 2000g).

The securitization of religion in the name of protecting national security also reached schools and universities. The Chinese government issued specific calls to 'firmly occupy schools' and prevent them from engaging in religious activities (BBCMSAP, 1996f). Materials seen as promoting 'national division' or publicizing 'religious doctrines' were removed from textbooks (BBCMSAP, 1996c, 1996f). In parallel, regional vice-chairman Wang Huaiyu launched a campaign of 'rectification' in 1996 aiming at stopping the 'infiltration of religions' in university campuses of Xinjiang (quoted in Earnshaw, 1996b).

The campaign against religion was paralleled by a propaganda effort to 'occupy the ideological and cultural position' in Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 1996f). As Wang Lequan put it, the media was a 'battlefield' where China waged 'struggles against infiltration and secession' (BBCMSAP, 2000i). The government fought this battle for the cultural hegemony through a plethora of measures. It opened new radio and television networks, published official 'ethnic books', promoted party papers and journals, and organized actions to 'enhance ideological and political work among young students' (BBCMSAP, 1996f, 1998f). As an illustration, and with the occasion of Ghulja riots, local authorities in the Yili prefecture distributed materials explaining 'the truth about the *5th February* incident' (BBCMSAP, 1997u).

To further control the narrative on Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities made the region inaccessible to foreign media and organizations, acting against foreign journalists in several instances. In 1991, the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused Gisela Mahlmann, a correspondent for a German television channel, of instigating separatism and unrest amongst minorities in Xinjiang through her reporting (AFP, 1991a). In 1997, the authorities expelled three BBC journalists from Xinjiang for 'illegal coverage' (AFP, 1997k). A Japanese correspondent and a German reporter were expelled in 1998, accused of obtaining secret documents (Xia, 2012). These actions followed the arrest of two British journalists in the late 1980s for travelling



to Kashgar (Wilhelm, 1988), and inaugurated a trend, that of silencing journalists or academics investigating Xinjiang, that would intensify during the terroristization stage. In a similar vein, the Chinese government issued a series of regulations aimed at monitoring the work of non-governmental organizations, which it said were being ‘exploited’ by ‘hostile forces’ to carry out sabotage activities (BBCMSAP, 1999g).

The proto-terroristization stage also witnessed some precursors of the ‘surveillance state’ that the Chinese state would erect in Xinjiang during the second half of the 2010s (see Chapter 4). These included the recruitment of Uyghurs to praise the ‘wonders’ of the CPC policies amongst their fellow peoples (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 22) or the organization of meetings to lecture the population against separatism, during which residents would hand over the names of relatives implicated in criminal acts (AFP, 1997p). In 1997, Uyghur sources abroad claimed that the Chinese police had deployed informants during anti-separatist exhibits to report the reactions of the audience and uncover and arrest potential dissidents (BBCMSAP, 1997y). According to the Chinese state media, only in 1998, there were more than 1,000 tip-offs to the authorities (BBCMSAP, 1998d). A direct answer to the call made by *Document No. 7* to scrutinize the movements of Uyghurs, these measures led to the worsening of their status across China. Already subject to negative stereotypes in the eyes of the Han population, the suspicions and mistrust of the Uyghur community increased nationwide after the government encouraged the profiling of individuals based on their ethnicity (Ngai, 1997; BBCMSAP, 1998e, 1999j).

Finally, and following the leading role given in *Document No. 7* to the army and security forces as a safeguard for stability, Xinjiang underwent a deepened process of militarization during the 1990s. The government deployed extra troops and paramilitary forces in the region following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 (SCMP, 1991c) or in the aftermath of the Ghulja riots (Kang Lim, 1997b; AP, 1998; BBCMSAP, 1997n). The state media also reported, and encouraged, an increase of ‘militia reservists’ to maintain ‘social stability’ and ‘strengthening border defence’ (BBCMSAP, 1994b, 1994e). Military and armed police troops often carried out intensive training exercises and were inspected for their ‘combat readiness’ (BBCMSAP, 1993a, 1996l, 1998k). In 1996, in a rare use of the terror jargon at this period, the PAP called for more controls in border crossings to ‘abolish the terrorist activities at the very beginning’ (AFP, 1996e). The massive display of Chinese military might, which paved the way for China’s contemporary understanding of Xinjiang as the scenario of a ‘peoples’ war’, sought a deterrence effect on the social, religious, and political aspirations of Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. In August 2001, the PLA organized a large military exercise in a mountainous plateau not far from Kashgar (MacLeod, 2001). Thousands of soldiers took part and fighter jets, as well as helicopter gunships, flew the area during days, in what was interpreted at the time as a ‘warning to Muslim separatists’ (ibid.).

### *The ‘Strike Hard’ Campaigns: A Terroristization Device*

Underpinned by a discourse that called for ‘harsh retaliation’ (AFP, 1996l), ‘merciless’ action (BBCMSAP, 2000h), or ‘annihilating blows’ (Page, 2001), it should come as no surprise that the main security device of the Chinese state in Xinjiang at this stage was named ‘strike hard’ (*yanda*) (Trevaskes, 2008, p. 397). These anti-criminal campaigns had been launched nationwide from 1983 to eradicate crimes ranging from rape to drug dealing (see China Daily, 2010). In Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities used these drives to target Uyghur dissidents (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 22; HRW, 2005; Earnshaw, 1996a), making the ‘strike hard’ campaigns a beacon of the emergency measures that accompanied the proto-terroristization of the region.

The ‘strike hard’ campaigns followed a principle of criminal justice that prioritized the ‘serious and swift punishment’ of criminal offenders (BBCMSAP, 1996t; Trevaskes, 2008, p. 397). Their logic has been described as one of ‘quick approval, quick arrest, quick trial and quick results’ (Reuters, 2001a). As such they served as ‘massive dragnets’ (Bovingdon, 2004, p. 22) of suspected criminals. The pressure to yield results forced the police and judicial bodies to perform in a fast, steady, and brutal way where the potential for miscarriages of justice increased (Fackler, 2001b; Reuters, 2001a). This was exacerbated with the earlier-mentioned CPC’s order to ‘kill on the spot’ (BBCMSAP, 1996s), a *de facto* license to kill ‘separatists’ in Xinjiang. These elements, alongside the widespread use of the death penalty in China (Trevaskes, 2008, p. 397), led Amnesty International (AI) to depict the ‘strike hard’ operations as ‘an execution frenzy’ and ‘a huge waste of human life’ (Reuters, 2001a).

While anti-criminal campaigns had targeted separatists in the past (BBCMSAP, 1994f), the focus on Uyghur dissidents intensified following the issuing of *Document No. 7* and the signing of the Shanghai Five initial agreement (Rudelson & Jankowiak, 2004, p. 317; Clarke, 2011, p. 129). Following these developments, a large campaign against ‘splittism and illegal religious activities’ kicked off on April 1996 in Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 1996s). The operation was hailed for ‘scoring significant victories in cracking down on violent crimes, terrorism and national separatism’ (BBCMSAP, 1996m). Another major campaign was launched in 2001, with the aim ‘to suppress and deter Xinjiang independence elements’ (BBCMSAP, 2001a). These large drives were complemented with shorter localized efforts that targeted specific crimes or were circumscribed to specific areas (Kwan, 1997; BBCMSAP, 1997l, 1997p, 1999e, 1997b, 1999f).

Chinese official accounts on the number of arrests, imprisonments, and executions, while incomplete, illustrate the massive outreach of the ‘strike hard’ security crackdown during the second half of the 1990s. Nationwide, during the first phase of the ‘strike hard’ campaign starting in 1996 – from 15 April to 15 July, – the Chinese police arrested more than 297,150 ‘serious criminal suspects’, of which approximately a 40% were sentenced, with 692 ‘resisting serious felons’ shot dead only a month into the campaign (Svartzman, 1996). State figures confirmed that

3,212 people had been sentenced to death by the beginning of May (BBCMSAP, 1996s). According to AI, more than 4,400 criminals were executed during the whole campaign (Fackler, 2001b). In Xinjiang, the campaign resulted in the arrest of 2,773 criminals between April and June (Earnshaw, 1996b). Only during the last week of April, the Chinese security forces arrested 1,700 ‘criminals and criminal suspects’ in the region (BBCMSAP, 1996h). A further 2,000 people were arrested during the three months following the phase launched in 1997 (AP, 1997a). Between April and July 2001, right before the 9/11 attacks gave new impetus and justification to the process of terroristization of Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities reportedly executed 1,781 criminals in a fresh national ‘strike hard’ operation (Reuters, 2001a).

### ***Exporting the Proto-Terroristization of Xinjiang***

At the beginning of the 1990s, the local Uyghur communities in countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Turkey enjoyed considerable levels of freedom of cultural and political expression and association, a context that changed dramatically as the proto-terroristization of Xinjiang advanced and the Chinese authorities implemented the call in *Document No. 7* to monitor Uyghur communities outside China and suppress their dissident activities (CPC, 1996, p. 13).

During the first half of the 1990s, Almaty, Bishkek, and Istanbul were safe havens for the Uyghur diaspora. These capitals hosted Uyghur associations with a hectic political activity such as the Kyrgyzstan Uyghur Unity (Ittipak) Association, the Kazakh Inter-Republic Uyghur Association, or the Eastern Turkistan Refugee Committee in Turkey (Shichor, 2009; Kynge, 1994). They published printed bulletins and audio-visual materials, often with a nationalist tone (Kynge, 1994; ETUE, 1991; Shichor, 2009, p. 18; BBCMSAP, 1997v). Uyghur activists outside China organized protests worldwide, from the Central Asian capitals or Istanbul to the UN headquarters in New York (Hunt, 1992), and for issues ranging from the nuclear tests in the Lop Nor area in Xinjiang (AFP, 1994c) to the violation of human rights in the region (AFP, 1998b, 1998d). Uyghur activists also promoted their causes and grievances amongst heads of state, international organizations, and the broader international community (Reuters, 1993c; BBCMCA, 1999; IPS, 1992; BBCMSAP, 1997aa). During this period, the activism of the Uyghur diaspora acquired an international dimension with the organization of meetings held in Turkey (Central News Agency, 1998; IRBC, 1999) or Munich (BBCMSFU, 1999), precursors of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), which would consolidate the Uyghur dissident movement in exile from 2004.

Those states hosting the Uyghur communities, including their political activism, maintained at the very least an ambiguous position vis-à-vis Uyghur dissidents, when not subtly supporting them. Several cases illustrate this degree of latitude. While Uyghur separatism was not straightforwardly welcome by the Kazakh government, officials would acknowledge in public that, unlike China, Kazakhstan was a democratic state where exile groups could not be silenced (Kynge, 1994). Uyghur activists enjoyed programmes in Uyghur language on the Kazakh state

television that often reported on the Chinese repression in Xinjiang (ibid.). In Kyrgyzstan, Nurmammed Kenjiev, president of Ittipak, a pro-independence Uyghur organization, was a member of the Kyrgyz parliament (ETUE, 1993). Meanwhile, Turkey – a country with strong ethnic, historical, and cultural ties to the Uyghurs – tolerated Uyghur activism and was the first choice for Uyghur exiles in search of political asylum. The Turkish leaders' relationship with Isa Yusuf Alptekin, leading Uyghur political figure in exile, epitomized Turkey's tolerance and even support for the Uyghur nationalist cause at the time. President Turgut Özal or Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel met with Alptekin and, in 1995, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then mayor of Istanbul, named a section of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque Park after Alptekin, where the local authorities erected a memorial dedicated to the 'martyrs' of the fight for the independence of East Turkestan (see Shichor, 2009, pp. 2, 25–26).

Following *Document 7.*, the Chinese government started to action its self-stated 'political superiority' (CPC, 1996, p. 13) to intercept the fragmented albeit active, and incipiently transnational, Uyghur dissident movement in exile. This initially translated into using China's economic and trade promise to obtain support for Beijing's security agenda. This give-and-take had already characterized economic exchanges with former Soviet republics early in the decade (L.H. Sun, 1991; Reuters, 1993b). A further step in this direction came with Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng's Central Asian tour in 1994. During 12 days, he visited Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia, the first occasion in which Chinese business representatives accompanied a political leader in a formal state visit (Artykova, 1994; Burles, 1999, p. 16). During this maiden trip, Li offered economic assistance and access to the Chinese market in exchange for support against Uyghur separatism (Artykova, 1994). Presidents Askar Akayev (Kyrgyzstan), Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan), Saparmurad Niyazov (Turkmenistan), and Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan) all issued statements reassuring China on their opposition to Uyghur separatism (ibid.). Illustrating the logic of the exchange, Karimov later urged Turkic-speaking states against showing support to Uyghur claims for self-determination, and invited them to focus on improving the economic relations with China (BBCMSFU, 1998b). The exchange of economic benefits for political support would characterize later bilateral arrangements. Extradition treaties were signed alongside financial agreements, and gradual moves towards a common security agenda accompanied China's efforts to secure energy resources in Central Asia (AFP, 1996h; Reuters, 2000b).

Yet the landmark (in)security move against Uyghur political dissent in Central Asia was the Shanghai Five forum, held on April 1996, only weeks after the issuance of *Document No. 7.* Meeting in the Chinese metropolis, the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed the 'Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field along the Border Areas' (UN General Assembly, 1996). A year later, the same parties signed a second treaty focusing on troop reductions and the former Soviet-Chinese border (People's Daily, 2000). This second agreement also stated the 'determination to fight jointly against national

separatism, international terrorism, religious extremism' (People's Daily, 2000). In this way, Chinese leaders effectively demanded its Central Asian partners a compromise against Uyghur separatism, not only as a requirement for obtaining Chinese economic support, but also as the basis for cooperation over security issues. Further summits deepened this scheme, underscoring the importance of 'effectively combating international terrorism' and pushing against using human rights as 'a pretext for interference in the internal affairs of states' (UN General Assembly, 1999). In 2001, the Shanghai Five became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and incorporated Uzbekistan as a new member. In its opening statement, titled 'Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism' (HRIC, 2011), the SCO placed the crackdown on the Uyghur dissidence, now linked to terrorism at the regional level, at the forefront of its agenda.

The internationalization of the proto-terroristization drive had immediate effects on the social, cultural, and political lives of Uyghurs outside China. In Central Asia, Uyghur organizations with a nationalist or separatist agenda were banned in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, forced to either abandon their political aspirations or go underground (Thoenes, 1996; Busvine, 1996; BBCMSFU, 1995). Other Central Asian nations banned any protest against China (Forney, 1997; Reuters, 1997i; BBCMSFU, 1997). At the same time, the first cases of deportations of Uyghurs were recorded following the signing of the extradition agreements within the SCO framework and on a bilateral level (Hutzler, 2000; AFP, 1996h). In 1997, three Uyghur exiles wanted by Beijing were arrested in Kazakhstan and deported back to China (Reuters, 1997g). AI reported that four Uyghur adults, two of them religious teachers, and four children, were sent back to China in 1999 after having fled to Kazakhstan (AP, 1999). Some countries reproduced the Chinese blueprint in Xinjiang and tightened their control of religious practices at home. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan cracked down on fundamentalist religious groups, which they accused of interfering in their countries' internal affairs by promoting Uyghur separatism (AFP, 1998c; BBCMSFU, 1998a). In Bishkek, the Kyrgyz police arrested three prominent Uyghur political dissidents accused of having ties to Islamic extremism (BBCMSAP, 1998h). Under a similar pretext, the Uzbek authorities arrested the Uyghur writer Emin Usman, who died in police custody in 2001 (Peuch, 2001).

The CPC's international strategy against Uyghur dissidents reached other regions in the 1990s, notably Turkey and the South Asia. During the second half of the decade, Chinese leaders compelled the Turkish government to control Uyghur activism (AFP, 2000a, 2000d). Following the pressures, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit conceded in 1998, after meeting Chinese President Jiang Zemin, that Turkey would have to account for China's interests and adopt a stronger stance against Uyghur dissidents (TDN, 1998). Following this, the Turkish government urged ministers and officials not to participate in activities held by Uyghur organizations in Turkey (BBCMSAP, 1999b). Turkey also downgraded the status of future Uyghur immigrants coming from Xinjiang from granting them citizenship to only providing a residence permit (BBCMSAP, 1998i). In 2000, following Jiang Zemin's visit, both countries announced a cooperation agreement

against international terrorism and a commitment to ban separatist or religious extremist activities in their respective territories (BBCMSAP, 2000e). The Chinese state media interpreted this communiqué as a major blow to the ‘Xinjiang split-talist forces in Turkey’ (BBCMSAP, 2000f). China signed similar security bilateral agreements with other Central Asian countries outside the SCO, such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (Rashid, 1993; Gittings, 1998). More discreetly, and pondering the positive bilateral ties, Beijing also pressured Pakistan to prevent interference in Xinjiang by Pakistani religious organizations and preachers (Reuters, 1997e; PTI, 2000). Pakistan replied by deporting 12 young Uyghurs who had crossed the border illegally fleeing repression in China (AFP, 1997f) and expelling dozens of Muslim students and pilgrims from Xinjiang for their alleged links to terrorism (BBCMSAP, 2000j, 2000l). Finally, in an effort to control the activities and influence of Uyghur dissidents beyond Chinese borders, Chinese diplomats travelled to Afghanistan to be reassured by the Taliban regime that Uyghur Islamist groups would not be supported there (Rashid, 1999; AFP, 2000f; Reuters, 2000a). For all the official narratives against Uyghur ‘religious extremism’ in Xinjiang, this move placed China as one of the very few countries that had diplomatic exchanges with the fundamentalist Taliban regime.

While certainly effective, the Chinese government’s strategy to intercept Uyghur nationalism in Central Asia and other countries was not decisive. Uyghur organizations continued to operate abroad, and political demonstrations did not disappear altogether (Forney, 1997; IPRSID, 1999). Still, by the turn of the century, the context had radically changed for Uyghur communities in places such as Almaty, Bishkek, or Istanbul. Once safe havens for the Uyghur diaspora, these capitals were now under the security clout of Beijing.

## Conclusion

In the mid-1990s, Uyghur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer featured in the international media as an example of the entrepreneurial spirit of a Muslim woman who had gone from poverty to becoming a millionaire (K. Chen, 1994b; Kang Lim, 1995). Her tenacity and philanthropic character, invested as she was in helping fellow Uyghurs to prosper, did not go unnoticed by the Chinese government. Kadeer was appointed to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, China’s national advisory group, and represented China in the United World Conference on Women in 1995 (BBC, 2009). From 1997, Kadeer’s life changed, as she turned into an unwelcome figure for Beijing. Her husband, Sidik Rouzi, a former political prisoner, had earlier fled to the United States for his defence of the Uyghur human rights or the cause of self-determination. In 1999, Kadeer was arrested on her way to meet a visiting delegation from the United States Congressional Research Service to complain about political prisoners in Xinjiang (ibid.). Ürümqi courts sentenced her to prison for posting copies of local newspapers to her husband (BBCMSAP, 2000c). In the new environment of the 1990s, such an action constituted a crime against China’s national security.

The rise and fall of Rebiya Kadeer in the eyes of the Chinese government embodies the intensification of the securitization of Xinjiang during the decade of the 1990s. At the domestic level, Beijing increased the pressure over Uyghurs in the region, notably after the issuing in 1996 of *Document No. 7*, after which Islam became either ‘patriotic’ or ‘illegal’. Thousands were imprisoned or executed during periodic ‘strike hard’ anti-crime campaigns. At the international level, China externalized the Xinjiang conflict in the Central Asian regional arena. The Xinjiang threat, now also described with the ‘terror’ jargon in the state discourse, albeit in a non-dominant way, gained a salient status in the discourse that China shared with its Central Asian partners and Russia in the Shanghai Five forum and the SCO. Building on this network, China expanded its reach over the Uyghur communities in the exile that, from Almaty to Istanbul, felt the tremors of the crackdown in Xinjiang.

In this context, violence became ‘the only vehicle of showing frustration’ in Xinjiang (Castets, 2003, p. 13). In this sense, Dautcher (2000, p. 277) emphasizes that, despite the economic disparities, unrest in Xinjiang during the 1990s resulted mainly from ‘three much less tangible social goods: freedom of association, of religious faith, and of cultural expression’ (Dautcher, 2000, p. 277; see also Dautcher 2004, p. 285–288). All of these had been directly targeted in the first place by *Document No. 7*, which suggests that violence only increased in the 1990s when it became clear that the Chinese state had replaced the moderate policies of gradualism for a harsh crackdown.

With violence almost absent in the region at the end of the 1990s and the goal of ‘stability’ virtually achieved, an unexpected event encouraged the Chinese state to make another shift in its discourse, push the crackdown further, and sow the wind of a new wave of violence. This incident took place far from China, on 11 September 2001. It would spur the full-blown terroristization of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs.

# 4

## THE TERRORISTIZATION OF XINJIANG (2001–2020)

### Waging a People's War on Terror

On 11 September 2001 (9/11), a series of terrorist attacks were carried out on American soil, shocking the United States and the international community. The tragic events represented a 'critical juncture' (see Pierson, 2004, p. 35) that put many countries on a firm path to fight international terrorism at home and abroad. The post-Cold War interregnum, in which Francis Fukuyama (1992) saw the beginning of the end of history, came to a sudden end.

Far away from the epicentre of the attack, Chinese leaders seized the post-9/11 *momentum* to frame Xinjiang as China's front in the Global War on Terror (GWOt) and the language of terrorism became dominant in Chinese state narratives about the region, with significant implications. The terroristization of violent phenomena in Xinjiang enabled a deepening of the crackdown already underway under the pretext of countering separatism. After years of increasing repression, this was answered with the resurfacing of violent dissidence in 2008, exacerbated with the Ürümqi riots in July 2009, which killed close to 200 people, mostly Han Chinese. The terroristization of Xinjiang from 2001 onwards led to a cycle of repression and violence, and to the Chinese government's declaration of a 'people's war' against terrorism that would see the mass internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in camps for the purpose of 'de-extremification'.

This chapter investigates the period of terroristization of Xinjiang between 2001 and 2020 in three steps. The first section illustrates how Chinese authorities discursively built up the terrorist threat in Xinjiang in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks despite the absence of significant violent incidents in the region between 1999 and 2008. The second section maps the phenomenology of violence that erupted from 2008 onwards, mostly in Xinjiang. It pays specific attention to the material features of violent events and evaluates the extent to which they overlap with dominant understandings of terrorism. The third section explores how the



Chinese authorities have systematically constructed Xinjiang-related violence as terrorism and how they have emphasized the link between Islam and violence to prescribe a crackdown on religion. The final section of the chapter focuses on the political implications of the terroristization of Xinjiang. Here, the book investigates the establishment of a state counter-terrorism apparatus and the increasingly harsh practices that are linked to its institutionalization, in particular, the intensified and sustained repression of religion. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the emergence of the ‘surveillance state’ of Xinjiang.

## **Terroristization in the Absence of Violence**

On 2 September 2001, welcoming international businessmen to a trade fair in Ürümqi, the secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Wang Lequan, told foreign reporters that the situation in Xinjiang was ‘better than ever in history’ (BBCMSAP, 2001c). Yes, there had been ‘destructive activities’ by ‘national separatists’ and ‘religious extremists’ in the past, he conceded, but the different nationalities were now working in peace, ‘united as brothers’ (ibid.). A few weeks later, following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan spoke at the 56th General Assembly of the UN, signalling a U-turn in how the government described the region. Specifically, he claimed that a dissident movement in Xinjiang, ‘the Eastern Turkestan terrorist forces’ were ‘trained, equipped and financed by international terrorist organizations’, posing a significant security threat to China (Bezlova, 2001). Despite the absence of violent outbursts in the region, separatist violence in Xinjiang was now elevated to a top national security threat, and China’s leading diplomat embedded this shift within a globally emerging narrative of the ‘international fight against terrorism’ (ibid.). The official discourse about the region continued to change its tone from a rather conciliatory approach to one of confrontation and terroristization in the aftermath of the 9/11 events in America. As it happened, the Chinese government had seized the 9/11 momentum to capitalize on the attacks in its dealings with domestic Uyghur dissidents.

### ***Seizing the Chance: The Recasting of Violence in Xinjiang as Terrorism after 9/11***

In the weeks and months that followed the 11 September attacks in the United States, the Chinese state discourse on terrorism picked up significant pace. From a restrictive use of the label primarily within the realm of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) statements at the turn of the century, terrorism became the dominant theme in the Chinese security narratives about Xinjiang. As the following suggests, in the aftermath of the attacks, Chinese leaders and the state media swiftly moved to frame the region as a front in the GWoT and discursively linked the historical tensions in Xinjiang to the events on US soil.

The argument that violence in Xinjiang was part of a global menace is latent in Chinese officials' initial condemnations of the 9/11 attacks. In their statements, they voiced their opposition to 'all forms of terrorism', implying the existence of a common terrorism threat from New York to China with distinctive manifestations across different geographical settings. On 14 September 2001, Chinese President Jiang Zemin declared that the events were 'not only a disaster to the US people but also a challenge to the world' (MacAskill, Traynor, & Gittings, 2001). Jiang told his counterpart George W. Bush that China would stand with the United States and the international community 'against *all manner* of terrorist violence' (*ibid.*; my emphasis). In the following weeks, the Chinese leader reiterated the Chinese opposition to 'terrorism of *all forms*' (Kyodo, 2001; my emphasis), and described terrorism as 'a grave threat to international peace and security' and 'a rampant infringement of human rights' (AFP, 2001c). Tang Jiaxuan noted similarly that China condemned '*all forms* of terrorism' (my emphasis), presenting terrorism as a threat to 'international peace and security', and describing it as 'the common enemy of all mankind' (quoted in BBCMSAP, 2001f). Importantly, Chinese officials claimed that China was 'one of the earliest countries' that had 'fallen a victim to terrorism' (Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue, quoted in BBCMSAP, 2001g). What is more, the Chinese government constructed an image of China as a country on the verge of a terrorist invasion. The country closed its borders with Pakistan soon after 9/11 based on the narrative that terrorists would otherwise 'come to China' (AP, 2001). In 2003, China claimed it was training its security forces to intercept 'terrorists who were trying to sneak into China, set off bombs, attack a motorcade, use chemical weapons, hold hostages and hijack an aircraft' (Reuters, 2003).

Pushing for China's status as a rightful victim of the same type of violence that had rocked the United States to its core in 2001, the Chinese authorities began to actively *terroristize* the historical frictions between the central Chinese powers and the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. In this process, Chinese officials and state media reframed terrorism as a problem that could be traced as far back as the beginning of the 20th century, long before the terror lexicon had entered the Chinese official discourse. To support this claim, media outlets began to publish pieces that reflected upon the long history of terrorism in Xinjiang. An article in *Ta Kung Pao*, a Chinese state-backed newspaper in Hong Kong, traced the threat of terrorism in Xinjiang to collaborators of 'foreign colonialists' before 1949 (BBCMSAP, 2001d). A state news agency described an Uyghur nationalist organization founded in 1944 as a group of 'separatists terrorists' (BBCMSAP, 2001i), and *China Daily* reported that the 'East Turkestan forces', represented as the vanguard of the Uyghur-related terrorism threat, had plotted violent incidents 'since the 1930s' (Xie & Wang, 2002). The rewriting of the history of Xinjiang through the lens of terrorism also included the re-evaluation of key historical Uyghur figures. A case in point is Seypidin Azizi, first chairman of the XUAR between 1955 and 1967. When Azizi died in 2003, the state news agency Xinhua focused their tribute on what they characterized as a 'great contribution to the fight against splittism, religious extremism and terrorism' (Xinhua, 2003) despite the fact that

the language of terrorism was virtually absent in Party narratives at the time of Azizi's spell as a CPC leader in the region.

A key step in the post-9/11 retrospective terroristization of violence in Xinjiang was the publication by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) of the document 'East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity' (SCIO, 2002). Released in January 2002, the document reframed the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang during the 1990s as a series of 'terrorist incidents' that 'threatened the security and stability of related countries and regions' (ibid.). Notably, it recast the Baren incident, represented as a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' in 1990, as an attack by 'a group of terrorists' who 'created an atmosphere of terror' (ibid.). Similarly, the Ghulja incident, described in 1997 as a 'serious case of beating, looting and destruction', was recreated in the document as the work of 'terrorists' and 'terrorist organizations' (ibid.). Furthermore, the report directly linked the 'East Turkestan terrorist forces' to the villain behind the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden, and his organization Al Qaeda, which were previously absent in the official Chinese discourse on Xinjiang. In October 2001, Tang Jiaxuan claimed that Muslim separatists within China had been 'trained at the secret training camp established by Bin-Ladin [sic] in Afghanistan' (BBCMSAP, 2001e), a link that he reiterated in front the UN General Assembly weeks later (AFP, 2001c). Xinjiang officials likewise underscored the connection between violence in the region and Al Qaeda. In March 2002, regional chairman Abulahaat Abdurixit claimed that Uyghur 'separatists' had fought with the Taliban 'in Afghanistan' (EFE, 2002) and Wang Lequan argued that Al Qaeda had trained 1,000 Uyghur militants in Afghanistan and other regions (BBCMSAP, 2002c). From this point onwards, Chinese officials have continued to stress that ties exist between the 'East Turkestan forces' or Uyghur 'extremists' in Xinjiang with groups widely understood around the world as terrorist organizations, such as the Taliban or Al Qaeda first (S. Sun, 2005; AP, 2007a) and later the Islamic State (BBC, 2012c; Reuters, 2013b; Fox News, 2015).

Chinese officials lobbied internationally to recognize the fight against the 'East Turkestan terrorist forces' as part of the larger US-led GWoT. Foreign Ministry officials frequently put forward the idea that separatists in Xinjiang posed a global international threat beyond the Chinese context, often framing separatist activities in Xinjiang as a threat to the 'security and stability of the whole region' (Leicester, 2001; BBCMNF, 2002; AFP, 2002c). In the words of both Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue and Xinjiang party chief Wang Lequan, China's fight against the 'East Turkestan terrorist forces' was an integral 'part of the international anti-terrorism struggle' (BBCMSAP, 2001g). Tang Jiaxuan put it this way while addressing a meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC): 'the 'East Turkestan' is an out-and-out terrorist group and a part of international terrorism and must therefore be resolutely fought' (BBCMSAP, 2001f). Although the construction of a terrorist threat in Xinjiang was internationally controversial, Chinese officials did not hesitate to claim that the 'crack down on the East Turkestan terrorist forces' now underway had an 'important international legal basis' following the UNSC listing of

the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – an obscure organization previously absent from the official Chinese discourse on Xinjiang – as a terrorist organization (BBCMSAP, 2001e). As Sun Weide, spokesman for the Beijing Olympics, put it in 2008 to justify the pre-Olympic anti-terrorism crackdown, the UN-listing of the ETIM as a terrorist organization made the terrorist threat in Xinjiang ‘a fact of life’ (AFP, 2008c). As such, China has continued to use the ETIM’s status as ‘UN-listed terrorist group’ (Xinhua, 2021) to validate its security policies in the region and in places like the neo-Taliban Afghanistan (Rodríguez-Merino, 2022).

Carving a keystone in the process terroristization of Xinjiang, China jumped on the 9/11 bandwagon prior to the eruption of violence in the region more than half a decade after the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. With the publication of the 2002 *White Paper on Defence* terrorism was officially – and for the first time in China’s history – placed at the top of threats to the country’s national security (see Scobell, 2005, p. 306; Channel News Asia, 2002). At the same time, it now featured as the biggest danger to the social stability of Xinjiang (BBCMSAP, 2003b) with Chinese officials, including President Hu Jintao, continuing to stress that the terrorism threat in Xinjiang was both ‘real’ (AFP, 2003c; Reuters, 2006; Xinhua, 2011c) and a top security threat for China (AFP, 2005b). By early 2007, China had elevated terrorism in Xinjiang to the category of ‘core’ domestic interest (PTI, 2007a), and the authorities predicted that terrorism in Xinjiang would be a major threat at present and in the future (AFP, 2007a; People’s Daily, 2010d), all in spite of the absence of violent outbursts in the region.

China’s terrorism discourse was at a high point during the preparations for the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, which Chinese officials declared under the threat of terrorism (ANSA, 2005; SCMP, 2007; AP, 2007c). Chinese security forces trained to respond to apocalyptic threat scenarios such as the explosion of a radiological ‘dirty bomb’ nearby an Olympic venue or maritime attacks against the Olympic coastal venues (Reuters, 2007b, 2008a). The Ministry of Public Security warned about the hijacking of civil aviation planes (Reuters, 2007c), and airport police officials speculated with terrorists shooting down aircrafts flying over the Beijing airports (Reuters, 2008b). And indeed, after years of ‘crying terrorism’, violence finally rocked China on 4 August 2008, four days before the opening of the Olympics, but 3,000 kilometres away from the Olympic city, in Xinjiang’s Kashgar. There were no aerial attacks, sea invasions, dirty bombs, or kidnappings of athletes as the Chinese official discourse had suggested (BBC, 2008a; SCMP, 2008a), and the attackers were not international terrorists connected to Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, but local residents, a taxi driver and a vegetable peddler.

## The Spectrum of Violence in 21st-Century Xinjiang

The relative calmness in Xinjiang that lasted almost a decade ended abruptly in the summer of 2008 with the attack in Kashgar. The period that followed was characterized by significant eruptions of violence in the region, reaching a peak of 34 incidents in 2014 alone. Given their large number, this section will first provide a

thematic overview of the range of violence during this phase based on the material features of the events, in a similar fashion to Chapter 3. It then turns its attention to laying out how well this phenomenology of violence aligns with a dominant understanding of terrorism.

### ***Key Episodes of Violence in the Terroristization Phase***

The phenomenology of Uyghur-related violent incidents during the second violent phase within the period of terroristization in the 21st century is characterized by a broad spectrum of violence. The availability of information about such events significantly increased in comparison to the previous pre-terroristization and proto-terroristization phases discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. Violence in the terroristization stage is thus split into five thematic clusters, categorizing events according to their dominant features: attacks against the Chinese security forces, events escalating from non-violent conflict, attacks carried out in public spaces, assassinations, and state security operations.

#### ***Attacks against Security Forces***

The key incident that ended the years of relative calmness in Xinjiang from the late 1990s onwards, and which also put violence in the region back onto the radar of the international community, was the violent attack against Chinese security forces in Kashgar. In August 2008, two members of the local Uyghur ethnic minority – a taxi driver and a vegetable peddler – unexpectedly drove a truck into a group of over 70 officers who had been jogging in the proximity of a police station. The action killed 16 policemen and injured another 16 members of the police force (Tarn & Choi, 2008; Xinhua, 2008e). Over the next few years, similar vehicle-ramming attacks against the security forces, such as police officers and paramilitary units, followed. For example, in Aqsu city (capital of the Aqsu prefecture) in 2010, leaving 7 border patrol officers killed and 14 injured (Ifeng News, 2010; People's Daily, 2010c) and in Qaghiliq county in 2012, killing an undetermined number of people (RFA, 2012m).

On many other occasions, violence against the Chinese security agencies involved the use of bombs and homemade explosive devices against police stations (Macau Daily Times, 2008; Oriental Daily, 2013; Wan, 2013; Meng, 2014b; RFA, 2014j, 2014u) as well as Chinese police checkpoints and officers on patrol (BBC, 2008b; RFA, 2014l, 2014v, 2015g, 2015k; WUC, 2015a). In other cases, the assailants carried out the attack directly confronting the police with bladed or edged weapons (RFA, 2012n; Global Times, 2013; RFA, 2014a). Attackers also targeted Chinese security forces alongside other government and CPC buildings. In June 2013, for instance, Uyghurs used incendiary devices and knives in a combined assault on the Lükchün township, in Turpan's prefecture Pichan county (Buckley, 2013), targeting the township governmental building, a police station, a station of auxiliary police, and a construction site run by Han Chinese (Xuyang, 2013; Qiu & Yang, 2013). The

incident left 27 people killed, amongst them nine police and security guards, and ten ‘rioters’ who were shot dead by the Chinese police (ibid.).

### *Escalation of Non-Violent Conflict*

Once violence had restarted in Xinjiang in the summer of 2008, public expressions of dissidence and ethnic tensions quickly turned violent as well. In many of these cases, violence was a consequence of escalating non-violent conflicts. The most prominent case in this category is the Ürümqi riots, which took place on July 2009 and were widely reported around the world. On 5 July, approximately 1,000 Uyghurs attended a peaceful protest in the downtown of Xinjiang’s capital city (China News, 2009). Demonstrators had gathered to protest against the Chinese government’s handling of an incident days earlier in Shaoguan (Guangdong province) when at least two Uyghur migrant workers were killed by a mob of ethnic Han co-workers in a toy factory (Buckley, 2009). However, the protest in Ürümqi quickly turned violent, leaving at least 197 dead and hundreds of injured, most of them Han Chinese killed by Uyghur violent mobs (Xinhua, 2009f; Hu & Lei, 2009). Accounts differ significantly on how and why the non-violent demonstration escalated into one of the most deadly incidents in the region. According to the Chinese authorities, the violence was conceived and provoked by the main Uyghur political organization in the diaspora, the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) (Xinhua, 2009a; Wu, 2009). Alternative accounts blamed the violent repression of the protest by the Chinese security forces for the unrest (Marquand, 2009) while acknowledging that local Uyghur radicals played a role in instigating the violence (Sainsbury, 2010). In the aftermath, the Chinese authorities detained around 1,500 suspected rioters, at least 43 of whom, mostly teenagers, were documented missing (Bristow, 2009).

Similar incidents shook the region after the Ürümqi riots. In Hotan in July 2011, more than a dozen Uyghur men broke into a police station and the adjacent government buildings, reportedly armed with knives and Molotov cocktails (Xinhua, 2011b; Shao, 2011). While the Chinese authorities described the attack as a premeditated act by a separatist group (ibid.), alternative sources described the event overwhelmingly as a violent side effect of an escalating peaceful protest. According to this scenario, police officers violently dissolved a peaceful demonstration against a local clampdown on women wearing black veils and traditional outfits (WUC, 2011a; SCMP, 2011b). In the process, they arrested some of the protesters, which prompted a group of Uyghurs to storm the police station demanding the release of their family members (ibid.). The incident resulted in nearly 20 people killed, including a policeman, a security guard, and 14 Uyghurs who were shot down by the Chinese police (L. Liu, 2011). This event relates to wider government practices of enforcing a ban on the use of veils and headscarves by women (see Leibold & Grose, 2016), which has led to deadly clashes when Chinese officials forced Uyghur women to remove their coverings. A case in point is a violent incident reported in the town of Sèriqbuya (Maralbéshi county, Kashgar prefecture) in 2013

(Grammaticas, 2013; RFA, 2013g, 2012o; Cui, 2013a), which originated when a local community watch group was enforcing the banning of veils in the home of a religious family that had had long-standing issues with the local authorities. During the visit, the group ordered a woman to lift a veil covering her face, which she refused. When one of the community workers forcibly removed the veil, a clash ensued with Uyghur relatives attacking the community workers and the armed police gunning down the rioters (ibid.).

Another deadly incident related to religious grievances happened on June 2013, when hundreds of Uyghurs took the streets of Hanerik township in Hotan prefecture to express their anger over the arrest of a young imam and the closure of a mosque. Violence broke out when the police blocked the demonstration, on its way to Hotan, and started to arrest the protesters, killing 15 and injuring 50 (Qiu, 2013; RFA, 2013j). Two months later, violent clashes erupted in Aqsu city's town of Ayköl after government officials prevented hundreds of Uyghur residents from attending prayers in the mosque on the eve of the Eid Muslim festivity (RFA, 2013m). The incident left three people dead and about a dozen injured when the police opened fire to disperse the crowd (ibid.).

In July 2014, another unrest, this time in the Élishqu township of Kashgar's Yeken county, turned violent and led to dozens of deaths. Narratives about the course and materiality of events also differ. According to the Chinese official version, a gang armed with knives and axes attacked a police station and government offices, assaulting civilians and smashing vehicles as they passed (Xinhua, 2014h). Alternative sources described hundreds of Uyghurs, some carrying farm tools, marching on a road to protest for the killing of innocent villagers, including the shooting death of a family over a dispute about wearing traditional headscarves (Haas, 2015; RFA, 2014r). In this account, the march met a line of security personnel armed with assault rifles, who opened fire, killing dozens of protesters (ibid.).

### *Attacks in Public Spaces*

Beginning in 2011, several cases of indiscriminate violence carried out in public spaces against bystanders, for the most part, ethnic Han Chinese, were reported in Xinjiang or associated with Uyghur attackers when they occurred in other parts of China. These attacks were frequently carried out in public venues like transport hubs, shops, or food markets (Qiu & Chang, 2014; RFA, 2014u, 2014w; Xinhua, 2014j; People's Daily, 2011; Shao & Zhao, 2011). In one of the most publicized events of this type, in 2014, a suicide bomber immolated at Ürümqi's South Railway Station, leaving three dead and 79 wounded (Wan & Ng, 2014; SITE Intelligence Group, 2014). Uyghur militants were associated with violence against Han Chinese outside of China, including the Erawan Shrine bombings in Thailand's capital Bangkok in 2015, which killed 20 people and injured 125 (Reuters, 2016d). In other occasions, the attackers used knives and other bladed instruments against pedestrians (Global Times, 2012a; RFA, 2012c; Ng, 2017). The highest-profile attack of this type took place in 2014 when Uyghur assailants launched a stabbing



rampage at Yunnan's capital Kunming railway station, leaving 35 dead, including four attackers, and 143 injured (Sina News, 2014; Xinhua, 2014k).

Alongside the use of explosives and knives, Uyghur perpetrators also launched vehicle-ramming attacks in public spaces. In October 2013, three members of an Uyghur family drove a sport utility vehicle (SUV) through a crowd in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing three pedestrians and injuring 39 (Cui, 2013c). In a similar sequence, assailants drove two SUVs against pedestrians in a busy street groceries market in Ürümqi in May 2014, killing 39 and leaving 94 dead, mostly Han Chinese (People's Daily, 2014). These events are the closest to scholarly understandings of terrorism ever reported in Xinjiang, although they constitute only a small fraction of the violent phenomena the region has experienced.

### *Assassinations*

Between 2008 and 2017, Xinjiang witnessed a series of assassinations that targeted CPC and government officials, members of the security forces, and other victims directly linked to the Chinese state apparatus, including pro-government religious figures. The victims in these violent acts were both Han and Uyghur CPC cadres and government officials, sometimes alongside members of their families (RFA, 2014h, 2014s, 2014b, 2015h). In some occasions, the attacks were linked to the implementation of specific policies. Maishalihan Aihemaiti, Uyghur cadre and party secretary in a village in Hotan, was killed after preventing the building of an unofficial mosque (Reuters, 2005). A prominent pro-government cleric killed in Xinjiang was Juma Tayier, imam of the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar (Cui, 2014a). Assailants also targeted police officers and members of the People's Armed Police (PAP) at the forefront of the Chinese state security apparatus (RFA, 2014d, 2014p, 2015a).

Other assassinations targeted members of the ethnic Han community that were not directly affiliated with the government apparatus or the security forces, but linked to Chinese interests and presence in the region. Victims included Han Chinese farmers, businessmen, and immigrant workers (RFA 2014q, 2014t, 2010e, 2013k). One of the most high-profile attacks in this line was launched against a colliery in Aqsu prefecture's Bay county in September 2015, leaving at least 40 people dead or injured, including police officers, security guards, mine owners, and workers, as well as the attackers (RFA, 2015o; see also BBC, 2015c).

### *State Security Operations*

A significant part of the violent phenomenology during the terroristization phase has to do with counter-terrorist operations carried out by Chinese security forces. A prominent case here is a police raid in a mountainous area of the Pamir plateau in Aqto county in January 2007, during which the Chinese security forces shot dead 18 suspected terrorists, and one policeman was killed. The official account placed the violence in the context of a security operation aimed at dismantling a terrorist training camp (CRI, 2007). Alternative sources, however, described the incident as



a clash between Chinese police officers and members of the Uyghur community who protested against the acquisition of a local coalmine by an ethnic Han businessman (Poch, 2007). Deadly counter-terrorism operations generally had a significant share in violent events occurring in Xinjiang before the Kashgar attack marked the reigniting of the violence in the region in August 2008. For example, between February and July that year, seven Uyghur suspects were killed in two counter-terrorism operations carried out in Ürümqi against groups that were accused of planning to attack the Beijing Olympics (Xinhua, 2008a, 2008c). In August 2008, two security officers and six Uyghur suspects were killed during another police operation carried out in a cornfield of Payzawat county (Sina News, 2008b).

In line with increased violent tensions in Xinjiang more broadly, anti-terrorist raids greatly increased from 2013, after the Chinese authorities launched a large counter-terrorist campaign. The ensuing raids targeted houses, farms, or remote spots suspected of hosting ‘illegal’ gatherings, separatist activities, or alleged terrorist training camps, and ended with dozens of Uyghurs shot down by police teams (RFA, 2012d, 2012f, 2013n, 2013o, 2013p, 2014i, 2014k, 2014m, 2015d, 2015j; Boehler, 2013; Xinhua, 2014g). But security operations that lead to death and injury were not limited to anti-terrorism raids. Frequently, they were centred on preventing members of the Uyghur ethnic minority to leave China. In December 2011, for instance, the Chinese police sought to prevent a group of Uyghur migrants from crossing over the border into Pakistan through the mountains of Guma county, in the Hotan prefecture (Yang, 2011). Seven members of the group and one police officer died in the clash, while several women and children were arrested (RFA, 2011i). Similar incidents were also reported outside of Xinjiang. In January 2014, Kyrgyz security forces in Pikertyk, an isolated mountain region in Kyrgyzstan 40 kilometres from the Chinese border, shot dead a group 11 Uyghurs trying to flee China (Trilling, 2014). In December that year, police in the southern Chinese province of Guangxi killed one person and detained 21 other members of several Uyghur families who sought to cross into neighbouring Vietnam (RFA, 2014x; Xinhua, 2015b). In 2015, Chinese police officers shot dead three Uyghur near Shenyang, in China’s northeastern Liaoning province, when they were in route to leave the country (A. Chen, 2015).

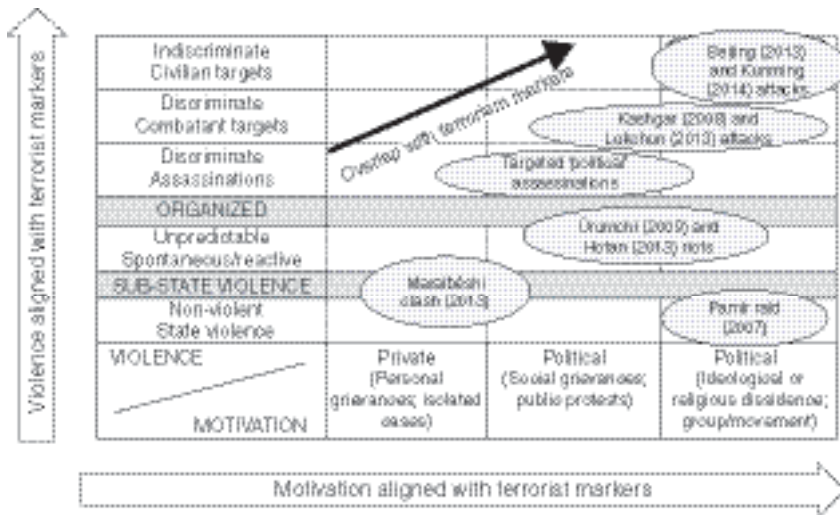
### ***Mapping the Features of Violence during the Years of Terroristization***

As in the 1990s, the wave of violent incidents reported in Xinjiang during the years of terroristization between 2008 and 2016 represents a broad spectrum of violence quantitatively and qualitatively. Table 4.1 summarizes the core features of selected incidents of each one of the categories explored during this period. Meanwhile, Figure 4.1 illustrates how they map vis-à-vis dominant understanding of terrorism. The variety of incidents taps into almost every possible interpretation of violence.

At first glance, and examining Figure 4.1, attacks such as those occurring in Beijing’s Tiananmen in 2013 or the Kunming railway station in 2014 closely align with dominant understandings of terrorism. These are clear-cut examples

**TABLE 4.1** Key features of violence in Xinjiang (2001–2018)

	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Unpredictable violence</i>	<i>Premeditated violence</i>	<i>Indiscriminate violence</i>	<i>Civilian victims</i>
Beijing attack (2013)	Political/insurgent Social/religious Social/dissident	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pamir raid (2007)	State security	–	–	–	–
Kashgar attack (2008)	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Ürümchi riots (2009)	Social/dissident	No	Unclear	Yes	Yes
Sèriqbuya clash (2013)	State security Social/religious	Yes	No	No	No
Kunming attack (2014)	Political/insurgent Social/religious Social/dissident	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hotan riots (2013)	Social/dissident	No	No	Yes	No
Lükchün attack (2013)	Political/insurgent Social/dissident	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Assassinations	Political/insurgent	Yes	Yes	No	No

**FIGURE 4.1** The spectrum of violence in Xinjiang during the phase of terroristization (2001–2018)

of premeditated violence indiscriminately launched against civilians for political purposes. The attacks against a Chinese police border patrol in Kashgar in 2008 or the raid against the Lükchün police station in 2013 present similar characteristics, but they intentionally targeted the Chinese state security forces and not bystanders from the public. Meanwhile, the attacks on individuals associated with the Chinese state apparatus present a selective individuated nature and wide range of motivations, from private grievances against the victim to an insurgent purpose. Moving away from the dominant understandings of terrorism, events like the ethnic riots in Ürümqi in 2009 or the Hotan riot in 2013 lack the levels of premeditation or the dissident dimension of previous examples. Despite presenting innocent civilian victims, they display the eclectic nature of the riot or mob violence (see Moran & Waddington, 2016), resulting from the escalation of non-violent situations, a role of the Chinese state security forces in the unleashing of the hostilities, and a heavier role of social grievances as motivators of the unrest, rather than a clear political dissident agenda. Finally, the clash in Marabelshi (2013) and the raid launched by the Chinese security forces in the Pamir Mountains (2007) are examples of incidents that can hardly be conceptualized as sub-state violence, the first representing a violent reaction towards the enforcement of specific security practices, and the second illustrating the Chinese state counter-terrorism crackdown.

Despite this seemingly clear-cut mapping of the spectrum of violence, violent events during the phase of terroristization present multiple points of interpretive containment. These are related to core definitional markers of terrorism, notably the motivation of the attackers or the level of premeditation and/or surprise of their actions, demonstrating again the fluidity of the categories used to make sense of violent events.

In this sense, the issue of motivation is a key area of contestation. As seen earlier, the region witnessed episodes that certainly recall the dominant archetype of terrorism. Attacks like those in Tiananmen Square (2013), the Kunming train station (2014), or the market in Ürümqi (2014) present evident 'terroristic' features, such as the premeditation of the attacks, their indiscriminate nature, or the targeting of victims who fall under the category of civilians. The technological and spatial dimensions of the attacks reinforce this perception. The arbitrariness is explicit in the vehicle-ramming tactics, the randomness of the stabbing spree, or the choice of locations like Beijing's Tiananmen Square, a crowded street groceries market in Ürümqi, or the busy Kunming's railway station, places which not only ensured a high rate of casualties, but also secured an impact beyond the immediate victims of the violence, with a capacity to reach the media and shock and shape the public opinion.

No matter these features, the political purpose of the attackers can be disputed in these incidents. A priori, a political agency can be inferred in all three scenarios. In Beijing, the perpetrators recorded a video announcing their radical deeds before carrying out the attack and carried a flag with a black standard commonly used by Islamist militant groups (Ng, 2013). In Kunming, the attackers carried a blue flag with the Muslim statement of faith (*shahada*) and the star and crescent (Ifeng News,

2014; Kaiman, 2014). Similarly, the attackers in Ürümchi had allegedly undergone a process of ideological radicalization (Xinhua, 2014e). However, despite these ideological markers, other logics might have invaded these strictly political motivations (see Wieviorka, 2009, p. 26). Specifically, and at least in two of these cases, personal grievances different from an active dissident agenda seem to lure behind the attacks. Usmen Hesen, the Uyghur who drove the vehicle that exploded in Tiananmen Square, had lost a relative in the Ürümchi riots (RFA, 2013q), and publicly vowed revenge after the Chinese police tore down the courtyard of his local mosque (RFA, 2013r). The fact that Hesen carried out the attack alongside his wife and his elderly mother adds weight to the argument that the resort to violence emerged from a personal grievance, and not from an established insurgent political agency. It is also relevant that the ‘terrorist group’ was created only a month before the attack (VOA, 2013). If anything, it was an *ad hoc* one-time militant cell. Meanwhile, the violent agency of the Kunming attackers can be directly traced back to the repression following the earlier-mentioned riots in Hanerik (RFA, 2014c, 2013i). Hundreds of Uyghurs left Xinjiang escaping from the crackdown that followed, amongst them the Kunming attackers (ibid.). As such, alternative narratives zoomed in their ‘desperation’ as ‘asylum seekers’ that could not escape the country as the revengeful motivation behind the attack (RFA, 2014c).

In contrast to the cases of Beijing and Kunming, the instability in determining a political motivation for the attackers disappears when evaluating the attacks reported in Kashgar in July 2011. Then, Uyghur assailants used knives, explosives, and vehicle-ramming tactics in a twin attack in a pedestrian street and a restaurant that left 14 killed and 42 wounded over the course of a weekend (People’s Daily, 2011; Shao & Zhao, 2011). In this case, a month after the incident, a militant group, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), released a video that showed one of the attackers, Memtieli Tiliwaldi, wrestling with other ‘fighters’ in a Pakistani training camp months before the attack (Wines, 2011; M. Lin, 2011). In this case, the documented links of Tiliwaldi with an established militant organization outside China certainly reinforce the official representation of the attackers as terrorists trained in Pakistan (Xinhua, 2011a). As Zenn (2011) put it at the time, Tiliwaldi’s background was ‘the most concrete evidence ever introduced that links attacks in Xinjiang to the ETIM or militants in Pakistan’.

The political motivation is also far from clear-cut in the targeted assassinations. Considering the profile of the targets, there is an obvious political dimension in attacking figures representing the Chinese state apparatus. Following the murder of an ethnic Han Chinese CPC official, the vice president of the Uyghur American Association (UAA), Ilshat Hesen, explained that ‘township heads and party secretaries are the main power brokers under the county government, so to attack and kill a Han Chinese township head clearly indicates the level of resistance the Uyghur people feel towards China’s repressive policies’ (RFA, 2015h). This ‘power-brokering’ role can be inferred in many of the victims of violence in Xinjiang, who are perceived by Uyghur as collaborators of the Chinese regime. However, personal grievances may have also triggered some of the assassinations. A case in point here

is the killing of the PAP chief in Tagharchi township Fang Kezheng and his wife. The attackers came from Beshkent township, in Kashgar's Yeken county, where days earlier Fang and other police officers had shot dead a woman from the Uyghur ethnic minority (RFA, 2015a). Another example is that of Rejep Islam, party secretary in Hotan prefecture's Qaraqash county, who was targeted in revenge for the death of an Uyghur man shot dead by the police (RFA, 2014s). A similar logic can be traced to the attack in 2013 against the Lükchün police station and other government buildings. While the Chinese authorities represented it as a terrorist attack by a terrorist group (Reuters, 2013a), alternative narratives zoomed in the heightened tensions in the area due to the arrest and disappearance of Uyghur men, forced demolition programmes, and a previous incident in which an ethnic Han man had killed an Uyghur boy as potential triggers of the attack (Uighurbiz, 2013; RFA, 2013f).

Claims of a political agency as the main driving force behind the violence are also far from clear-cut in the case of isolated selective attacks against ethnic Han residents associated to the Chinese interests and cultural influence the region, but without a direct role in the Chinese state apparatus. While Han migration in Xinjiang constitutes one of the more salient grievances for the Uyghur population, this does not necessarily entail a dissident political agenda. Other dynamics such as religious prejudice, ethnic hatred, and feelings of relative deprivation cast light on the violent agency of the attackers, as other instances demonstrate (see RFA, 2010e, 2010t, 2014f).

Alongside the political motivation marker, another feature prone to contestation and destabilization is that of the premeditation of the violent attack, closely linked to the element of surprise that is presupposed to terrorism. This is very relevant considering that, during the phase of terroristization, the Chinese state has constructed almost every violent incident in Xinjiang as a case of terrorism. In this sense, the framing of clashes resulting from the implementation of Chinese policies as terrorist attacks can be contested on the absence of the premeditation or plotting element. This is the case of the clash in Sëriqbuya (2013), where violence only erupted after a community worker lifted the veil of a woman (Grammaticas, 2013; RFA, 2013g) or the clash between the Chinese police and a group of Uyghur families who were trying to flee the country in 2011 (Yang, 2011), both constructed by the Chinese government as acts of terrorism. At the same time, the absence of premeditation and surprise destabilizes the construction of ethnic riots as acts of terrorism. Beyond the complexity of discerning whether violence started premeditatedly or spontaneously amongst the protesters, or as a reaction to the violent repression of the security forces, disturbances that result from the escalation of tensions can hardly be considered acts of terrorism. This is because, paraphrasing Sassòli (2006, p. 9), it is difficult to conceive how an act of violence in Xinjiang could be labelled as a terrorist attack if the alleged terrorists are visible and identified as potential attackers right before the actual attack. In this sense, the Chinese government portrayed the riots in Hotan (2011), Hanerik (2013), and Élishqu (2014) as terror attacks or terrorist incidents (L. Liu, 2011; Qiu, 2013; Xinhua,

2014h). Yet all three official narratives were contested on the basis that they were not terrorist attacks because violence only started after the repression of protests (WUC, 2011a; Haas, 2015; SCMP, 2011a).

## **Terroristizing Violence, Prescribing a ‘People’s War’**

The process of terroristization of the Xinjiang conflict by the Chinese state in the post-9/11 period was culminated with two core discursive moves. First, the materialization of the terrorist threat through the systematic representation of all types of Xinjiang-related violent events as either terrorist attacks or incidents linked to a terrorist threat. In this way, the Chinese state has sustained its claim that the Uyghur terrorism threat is ‘real’, even though many of these events do not map onto dominant scholarly understandings of terrorism. Second, the Chinese authorities have articulated a ‘people’s war’ as the only possible and logical response to violence in Xinjiang. In doing so, they have emphasized a link between Islam and violence to legitimize a crackdown on religious ‘extremism’ as the core front in the counter-terrorism efforts.

### ***Materializing the Threat: The Terroristization of All Violence in Xinjiang***

During the first years that followed 9/11, Chinese officials constructed a terrorism threat in Xinjiang in the absence of violence. Following the event, and as the years passed, the state of imminent threat transmitted in the official discourse was not reflected by events on the ground. The absence of violence, which contradicted the sense of emergency conveyed in the words of Chinese officials, came to an end in Kashgar in August 2008. Then, the Chinese government and the state media reported for the first time – and in real time – what they described as a ‘terror attack’ in Xinjiang (AFP, 2008d). Since then, and throughout the most recent wave of violent unrest, the Chinese government has constructed all Uyghur-related violent incidents in the region and elsewhere in China as terror-related attacks, no matter if their features made these events close or far from dominant understandings of terrorism. To illustrate the terroristization of the entire spectrum of violent phenomena in the Chinese official discourse, this section examines the official narratives produced with the occasion of five violent events that correspond to some of the core categories of violence explored in this chapter (see Table 4.2).

The official narratives about these incidents provide a window to explore, in the first place, how violent events have been *terroristized* in the Chinese state discourse. That is, what discursive tactics have been used by Chinese officials to frame specific episodes as terror-related events, when not straightforwardly as terrorist attacks or acts of terror. Second, these cases illustrate how the Chinese authorities have used violent events to redeploy the main arguments of their post-9/11 discourse of terrorism. In constructing violent incidents as terrorist attacks, Chinese narratives have materialized a threat that would have otherwise remained abstract.

**TABLE 4.2** Case studies of *terroristization* according to category of violence

<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Case study</i>
Attacks in public spaces	Tiananmen Square (Beijing) attack (2013)
Attacks against security forces	Kashgar attack (2008)
Escalation of non-violent conflict	Ürümchi riots (2009)
Escalation of non-violent conflict (during implementation of religious restrictions)	Sëriqbuya clash (2013)
State security operations	Pamir Mountains raid (2007)

At this point, two discursive tactics facilitating the terroristization of violent events in Chinese state narratives deserve our attention: first, the use of a terror lexicon; second, the mobilization of the core definitional features of terrorism.

When it comes to the first discursive tactic, the more direct way of constructing a violent incident as a case of terrorism is by labelling it as a ‘terrorist’ attack or describing the attackers as ‘terrorists’, amongst other usages of the terror jargon. This is evident in the five cases here examined. Chinese officials and state media described the Tiananmen episode as a ‘terrorist attack’ (Xinhua, 2013b; 2013c) or a ‘violent terrorist incident’ (BBC, 2013b), and labelled the attackers as ‘terrorists’ (Xinhua, 2013d). They also identified the Kashgar attack as a ‘terrorist attack’ and painted the attackers as ‘violent terrorist forces’ (People’s Daily, 2008). In the case of the Ürümchi riots, regional chairman Nur Bekri blamed the incident on the ‘three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism’ (CRI, 2009). Chinese officials also described the clash in Sëriqbuya as a ‘terrorist act’ (AP, 2013a) and a ‘terrorist criminal case’ (Xinhua, 2013a). Meanwhile, Xinjiang senior officials classified the raid in the mountains of the Pamir as an operation against a ‘terrorist training camp’ and linked it to ‘international terrorist forces’ (PTI, 2007b).

The second discursive tactic involves the use of the dominant scholarly definitional markers of terrorism to construct events. The Chinese government is not unaware of academic debates about what constitutes terrorism and what not. In 2002, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-affiliated Beijing Service Bureau for Diplomatic Personnel argued that the ‘East Turkistan forces’ were actually ‘terrorist elements’ after measuring their nature and actions against those ‘basic factors’ of the concept of terrorism that are ‘widely recognized by scholars around the world’ (Xie & Wang, 2002). Amongst these criteria, they mentioned a ‘clear-cut political objective’, ‘extreme violent methods’, ‘organized and carefully planned’ activities, or ‘civilians’ as ‘major targets’ (ibid.). Conscious of their rhetorical power, Chinese officials and the state media have routinely mobilized these definitional markers to attach a ‘terroristic’ dimension to violence in Xinjiang, as the five cases studied below demonstrate (see Table 4.3).

In this sense, the definitional marker of terrorism that refers to the organized and premeditated nature of the violence featured in the Chinese official

**TABLE 4.3** Mentions to definitional markers of terrorism in Chinese official narratives about violent events

<i>Event</i>	<i>Core definitional markers of terrorism</i>		
	<i>Organization and/or premeditation</i>	<i>Victims' status</i>	<i>Political motivation</i>
Tiananmen attack (2013)	'Organized and premeditated'	'Innocent civilians'	ETIM and 'international terror organizations' 'Extremist religion'
Kashgar attack (2008)	'Meticulously plotted'	'Unarmed' 'Young lives' 'Sons of parents'	'Jihad' 'Overseas terrorist groups'
Ürümchi riots (2009)	'Premeditated and organized' 'By no means incidental and spontaneous'	'Innocent civilians'	'Profound' political background 'Deceived by separatists' 'Masterminded and remotely controlled by overseas separatist' 'Instigated and directed from abroad'
Sërïqbuya clash (2013)	'A premeditated attack'	'Law enforcement personnel, innocent residents, disregarding their gender or ethnic group'	'Split the motherland and undermine national unity' 'Affected by extremism and hoped to commit themselves to Jihad' overseas 'East Turkestan terrorists'
Pamir raid (2007)	'Preparations for a series of terrorist acts'	'Martyr' 'Upright and honest boy' who 'showed respect to his parents'	ETIM 'International terrorist forces'

narratives in all five cases. Meng Jianzhu, member of the CPC 25-member Politburo responsible for domestic security, outlined that the Tiananmen attack was 'organised and premeditated' (BBC, 2013b). Commenting on the Kashgar attack, Shi Dagang, vice-chairman of the regional government, noted that it was 'meticulously plotted' (BBCMSAP, 2008a), a circumstance also emphasized by Wang Lequan (BBCMSAP, 2008b). Chinese state narratives also underscored that the Ürümchi riots were 'premeditated and organized' (Xinhua, 2009b), and 'by no means incidental and spontaneous' (Xinhua, 2009d). Similarly, following the clash in Sërïqbuya, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying described the event as 'a premeditated attack' (BBC, 2013a), despite violence only broke out following the lifting of a veil. As per the Pamir raid, an operation initiated by the Chinese security forces that could hardly be represented as an attack by a sub-state actor, Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao drew attention to the



fact that those arrested were in ‘preparations for a series of terrorist acts’ (ITAR-TASS, 2007). In a way, the actions of the 18 Uyghur suspects shot dead by the Chinese security forces were preventively *terroristized* in the absence of an actual terrorist attack.

Another definitional marker of terrorism featuring in Chinese official narratives on Uyghur-related violent unrest was that the violence targeted ‘civilian’ and ‘innocent’ victims. In press briefings, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons Hong Lei and Hua Chunying noted that the attack in Tiananmen had targeted ‘innocent civilians and tourists’ (Reuters, 2013c; Xinhua, 2013c). Meanwhile, the official *China Daily* underscored that the victims in the Kashgar attack ‘were unarmed when they were slain in the most brutal way’ (S. Liu, 2008). They also highlighted their condition of ‘young lives’ and ‘sons of parents’, sidelining their professional status as agents of the Chinese security apparatus at the front of the crackdown in Xinjiang (ibid.). Following the Ürümqi riots, Nur Bekri stressed that ‘most of the victims were innocent civilians’ (Duncan, 2009) and the state media emphasized that rioters had targeted civilians with premeditation (Xinhua, 2009d). Speaking about the clash in Sēriqbuya, regional spokeswoman Hou Hanmin pointed out that the incident showed the obvious features of a terrorist attack because the attackers did not care whether the victims ‘were officials or members of the public’ (Yang, 2013). Meanwhile, Meng Hongwei outlined that ‘the terrorist suspects brutally killed law enforcement personnel, innocent residents, disregarding their gender or ethnic group’ (Xinhua, 2013a). When it comes to the Pamir raid, Nur Bekri focused on constructing the figure of Huang Qiang, a policeman who died in the operation, as a ‘martyr’ who ‘sacrificed his valuable life for the national security of China and for the tranquillity of the people in Xinjiang’ (BBCMSAP, 2007b). The Chinese state media also focused on the familiar dimension of Huang, represented as an ‘honest boy’ who ‘showed respect to his parents’ (ibid.), sidelining his role as member of the Chinese security forces involved in the extra-judicial killings in which the violent raid resulted.

Chinese official narratives also tapped on the political motivation of attackers and/or rioters. In this sense, three discursive patterns can be found in the Chinese state narratives that politicized these violent events to advance their terroristization: the construction of the incidents as dissident insurgent separatist acts, the representation of the attackers as militant religious extremists, and the identification of external forces as instigators of the violence. All these patterns can be found interspersed in all the five cases studied. For example, following the Tiananmen attack, Hua Chunying claimed that violent separatists with links with groups outside the country were threatening China (Martina, 2013). Meanwhile, Chinese officials and the state media described the attackers as being ‘under the strong influence of extremist religion’ (Hatton, 2013; Cui, 2013c). When it comes to the Kashgar attack, Shi Dagang claimed that religion led the attackers to ‘carry out jihad’ (SCMP, 2008d; Kyodo, 2008a) and argued that local militants were taking orders from ‘overseas terrorist groups’ (Kyodo, 2008a). As per the Ürümqi riot, the Chinese government underscored the ‘profound’ political background

of the incident and noted that rioters were ‘deceit by separatists’ (Xinhua, 2009e). In this sense, Chinese officials and the state media represented the riot as ‘masterminded and remotely controlled by overseas separatists’ (CCTV, 2009b) or ‘instigated and directed from abroad’ (Xinhua, 2009c). Chinese narratives also conferred a separatist and religious extremist character to the clash in Sëriqbuya. Nur Bekri described it as an action meant to ‘split the motherland and undermine national unity’ (Xinhua, 2013a) and Hou Hanmin claimed the attackers ‘were affected by extremism and hoped to commit themselves to Jihad’ (CNN, 2013). Hou also pointed the finger abroad by revealing that the attackers had radicalized by watching videos ‘from overseas’ (ibid.). On his part, Meng Hongwei warned of the constant influence of overseas ‘East Turkestan terrorists’ in Xinjiang (Xinhua, 2013a). Finally, in the case of the Pamir raid, Ba Yan, spokeswoman for the Xinjiang Public Security Department, said that the training camp was run by the ETIM organization (CRI, 2007) and Liu Jianchao, commenting on the incident, reminded that ‘East Turkestan groups’ in Xinjiang were connecting with ‘international terrorist forces’ (Reuters, 2007a).

Beyond fixating a political motivation to the attackers, Chinese officials emphatically dismissed alternative causes behind their violent agency, specifically those frictions with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities resulting from the policies implemented by China in the region. After the Tiananmen attack, Hua Chunying criticized alternative narratives representing the riot as a protest against the country’s ethnic and religious policies (Xinhua, 2013c) and Hong Lei accused those presenting alternative interpretations of ‘connivance with terrorists’ (Reuters, 2013c). In a similar vein, and evaluating the violence in Ürümchi, city mayor Jerla Isamudin outlined that the riot was no ‘ethnic issue’ (Hu, Lei, & Zhao, 2009). Following the clash in Sëriqbuya, Nur Bekri claimed that the incident was ‘not about ethnic or religious issues, but a terrorist act’ (Xinhua, 2013a) and Hou Hanmin refuted the argument that the riot had been caused by China’s ‘suppressive policy’ in the region (BBCMSAP, 2013).

Other definitional markers of terrorism featured in the Chinese official narratives representing these violent incidents. For example, commenting on the Tiananmen attack, Chinese experts quoted in the state media stressed that the incident was aimed at causing a greater fear amongst people (Xinhua, 2013d; Cui, 2013c). Meanwhile, weighing on the Sëriqbuya clash, Hou Hanmin underscored the surprise element of the event to dismiss alternative narratives claiming that violence was the result of oppression (BBCMSAP, 2013). Chinese officials also highlighted the extranormal, inhuman nature of the violence. Meng Hongwei said that the ‘tragedy’ of Sëriqbuya showed the ‘anti-human and anti-social nature’ of the attackers (Xinhua, 2013a). Meanwhile, speaking about the Ürümchi riot, Nur Bekri described the rioters as the ‘most inhuman, barbaric ... extremely vicious, unscrupulous and brutal’ (Duncan, 2009).

Besides fixating a ‘terroristic’ meaning by attributing the definitional markers of terrorism to these violent events, Chinese officials used the main ideas conveyed in broader security narratives about Xinjiang to make sense of the incidents. In this

sense, a first core argument was the notion that violent events in the region were not isolated cases, but the manifestation of a greater, lineal, inter-connected threat. Chinese state media and officials put forward this idea by relating the Tiananmen attack to previous episodes of violence (Xinhua, 2013d; Cui, 2013c), or the Kashgar attack in 2008 to the Pamir raid in 2007 (Xinhua, 2008f). They also linked the Ürümqi riot in 2009 to the same Kashgar attack, an earlier plot to blow a passenger plane, and a series of counter-terrorism operations conducted in 2008 (Xinhua, 2009b). In this sense, the *China Daily* reinforced the idea of the Ürümqi riot as a continuation of past phenomena by presenting it as an episode in a timeline that reached as far back as the Baren ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ in 1990 or the Ghulja riot in 1997 (China Daily, 2009).

Another core argument deployed in the official narratives was that violent unrest was the confirmation of the Uyghur terrorism threat. Following the Tiananmen attack, Hua Chunying described the ETIM as a long-term challenge and the ‘most direct and real threat to our security’ (Xinhua, 2013d). Chinese experts cited in the state media painted the Kashgar attack as proof that China ‘also’ had a terrorism threat (SCMP, 2008c, 2008b). Commenting on the Ürümqi riot, Xinhua warned that the ‘three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism’ were ‘at work again’ (Xinhua, 2009b), and following the clash in Sërıqbuya, Chinese officials reiterated that the fight against terrorism would be ‘prolonged and complicated’ (Xinhua, 2013a). In 2007, Chinese officials declared the Pamir raid as the beginning of a protracted counter-terrorist campaign. Zhao Yongshen, an official with the Ministry of Public Security, announced that the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ would remain ‘the main terrorist threat facing China’ both ‘in the current period and in the near future’ (AFP, 2007a).

Next, Chinese officials used these violent events to call for a continued pre-emptive harsh crackdown in Xinjiang. Following the Tiananmen attack, Chinese diplomat Qin Gang vowed to continue to ‘crack down’ on the ETIM (Krishnan, 2013), and Hua Chunying, called for ‘severely punishing terrorists according to the law’ (Xinhua, 2013c). After the Kashgar attack, Shi Dagang said China would ‘spare no efforts to fight violent crimes and terrorists’ (Xinhua, 2008g), and Wang Lequan called for ‘active attacks’, a ‘hard’ crackdown, and pre-emptive measures ‘against the enemy’ (BBCMSAP, 2008b). With the occasion of the Ürümqi riots, Meng Jianzhu called for punishing ‘key rioters with the utmost severity’ (CCTV, 2009b) and regional CPC leader Zhang Chunxian pledged to strike separatists with ‘iron fists’, leaving terrorists with ‘no place to hide’ (BBC, 2012b). Chinese officials renewed the calls for a crackdown after the unrest in Sërıqbuya. Meng Hongwei vowed to ‘punish terrorists with no mercy’ (Xinhua, 2013a), Nur Bekri called to ‘leave no room for compromises and concessions’ (ibid.), and Shi Dagang called to ‘prevent the spreading and promotion of extreme thought in the name of religion’ (Cui, 2013b). After the Pamir raid, police spokesman Wu Heping pledged to take ‘strong measures’ and ‘strike against all criminal activities of terrorist groups’ (Reuters, 2007a) and Nur Bekri vowed to ‘deal heavy blows at any attempt to separate China’ (BBCMSAP, 2007b). In such ways, the Chinese discourse continued

to prescribe hard counter-terrorism as the way of dealing with ethnic frictions in Xinjiang.

Finally, Chinese officials used these violent incidents to legitimize China's counter-terrorism in front of international audiences. Following violent unrest, they would invoke the UN-listing of the ETIM as a terrorist organization as a source of legitimacy in China's war on terror (VOA, 2013; CCTV, 2013; Sina News, 2008a). Or underscore the global character of the terrorist threat China was fighting in Xinjiang. Following the Tiananmen attack, the government depicted terrorism as the 'shared enemy of all humanity' (Martina, 2013) and Chinese officials described the incident as one against 'humanity, society and civilization' (Xinhua, 2013c). Meanwhile, Hou Hanmin compared violence in Sërriqbuya with the Boston Marathon bombings, describing terrorists as 'the common enemies of peace-loving people across the world' (Yang, 2013) and Liu Jianchao affirmed, after the Pamir raid, that China's counter-terrorism actions were 'in the interests of China and the world' (AFP, 2007b). In this manner, violent incidents, no matter their material features, or whether these made them close or distant to dominant understandings of terrorism, emerged in China's discourse as the tangible proof of the Uyghur terrorism threat in front of international audiences. As Hua Chunying suggested, following the Tiananmen attack, the 'international society' could now have 'a clear view' about what was going on in Xinjiang (CCTV, 2013).

### ***Prescribing a 'People's War' against Terrorism and 'Religious Extremism'***

The stage of full terroristization of Xinjiang has seen the articulation of a pre-emptive war against terrorism and religious extremism as the rational response to conflict with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in the region. This argument, often conveyed with crude bellicose expressions, has been instrumental to the intensification of China's counter-terrorism crackdown against Uyghur and other ethnic groups. The rhetoric of war has come to permeate much of the contemporary post-9/11 official narratives on Xinjiang. Already in September 2003, with the occasion of the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Wang Lequan announced a war on terror in Xinjiang in which China could not 'guarantee total victory' (AP, 2003). After years of crackdown, the party secretary in Xinjiang, Zhang Chunxian, renamed the campaign a 'people's war' (Xinhua, 2014f) or, as two high Chinese military officials describe it, 'a real war with knives and guns, a life and death war' (Reuters, 2015b). Zhang's successor Chen Quanguo reiterated the idea in 2017, instructing the Chinese police to 'bury the corpses of terrorists and terror gangs in the vast sea of the people's war' (SCMP, 2017). To Xinjiang deputy party secretary Zhu Hailun, China must be 'ready for [combat]' in Xinjiang in order to 'definitely win' the campaign (Tianshan News, 2017). To this aim, he vowed to 'load our guns, draw our swords from their sheaths, throw hard punches and relentlessly beat, and strike hard without flinching at terrorists who must be brought down a peg or two' (ibid.).

China's post-9/11 *warmongering* discourse also recalls the 'long fight' declared by Chinese officials in Xinjiang during the pre-terroristization and proto-terroristization stages. In 2010, Xinjiang governor Nur Bekri claimed that separatism 'was there in the past, it is still here now and it will continue in the future' (BBC, 2010b), suggesting a ceaseless fight in the region that dated back in history. In a similar vein, following the July 2009 riots, Ürümqi mayor Jerla Isamudinhe announced a 'fight against separatism now and for years to come' (People's Daily, 2010b). Chinese leaders have thus described the counter-terrorism campaign as 'long-term, complex and sharp' (AP, 2011) or 'chronic, complicated and severe' (Cui & Gao, 2014). In making the case for a protracted 'people's war', Chinese official narratives have constantly represented the conflict as, far from receding, intensifying. The fight against terrorism has thus been painted over the years as 'extremely grim' and 'not promising' (BBCMSAP, 2003f; AFP, 2010), or 'more severe' and 'more fierce' (C. Zhang, 2009). In this vein, Zhang Chunxian announced a 'more complicated and more intensive' phase in the fight against terrorism in 2015 (Global Times, 2015a), signalling a shift towards an even more intense crackdown. To articulate and enable a 'people's war' on terrorism in Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities had to maintain the threat alive for years, declaring an emergency, even in the absence of significant Uyghur-related violent incidents. This was the case in 2005, when Chinese officials warned that 'heinous terrorists' were at large preparing for 'new rounds of attacks' (S. Sun, 2005) and issued calls to 'be prepared for danger in times of safety' (Shi, 2005).

The representation of the Uyghur terrorism threat as either dormant or intensifying has allowed the prescription of a pre-emptive and proactive counter-terrorism approach as the logical response to terrorism. Following 9/11, Wang Lequan vowed in 2002 to 'take the initiative of attacking' terrorists and separatists 'when they emerge' and to 'keep up a high pressure crackdown on the three evils' (quoted in China News Service, 2002). Since then, Chinese officials have routinely called to 'go on the offensive' and 'strike the first blow' (BBCMSAP, 2004a), to 'maintain an aggressive posture of cracking down hard' (BBCMSAP, 2005a, 2007a), and to act 'beforehand' against 'sabotage activities' (People's Daily, 2010b). This is a pre-emptive approach that 'should reach every single village and household', as pointed out by Public Security Minister Guo Shengkun (Global Times, 2014b; Wan & Ng, 2014), and which 'should leave terrorists no place to hide', as suggested by Zhang Chunxian (BBC, 2012b).

China's discourse of terrorism conceives the 'people's war' as one of extermination. Because of this, official narratives have dehumanized the 'terrorists' to condone their eradication. Chinese officials have continued to represent terrorists as 'rats scurrying across a street, hated, and detested by everybody' (AFP, 2004a), 'weeds' that must be cut at the root (Jacobs, 2014), or as a 'savagely and evil' army (ibid.). Chinese leaders have been explicit in their calls to kill terrorists. In 2004, Wang Lequan instructed the government to kill 'terrorists with an iron hand whenever they appear' (BBCMSAP, 2004b) and a Xinjiang CPC cadre vowed the same

year to ‘destroy them one by one’ (BBCMSAP, 2004a). The endorsement of a *licence to kill* terrorists is conveyed in an article published by Xinhua in 2008 that described how the Chinese police, in their training, ‘shot targets of swaying eggs 15 metres away within 1.5 seconds to practise killing terrorists’ (Xinhua, 2008h). The terrorist, the saboteur, or the secessionist, have thus emerged in the Chinese state discourse as a species to be ‘hunted down and punished’ (Xinhua, 2014a) or ‘battered resolutely’ (AFP, 2008a). Dissidents are therefore equated to ‘evils’ against which, when fought, the Chinese security forces ‘must aim at extermination’ (Jacobs, 2014).

During the phase of terroristization, the Chinese state discourse has continued to represent religion as a negative force, and to link religious extremism to violence as terrorism. When violence resurfaced in the region in 2008, Shi Dagang, then CPC secretary in Kashgar, pointed at religion as the force behind those engaging in the attacks. Referring to Uyghurs engaging in violent incidents, Shi said that ‘religion is more important to them than their own life, and so they set out to perform jihad’ (Dyer, 2008). In 2013, this time as deputy governor of Xinjiang, Shi blamed again ‘people who are brainwashed by religious extremism’ for the increase in violent incidents (Cui, 2013b). In a similar vein, regional chairman Nur Bekri pointed out in 2014 that religious extremism had ‘misled people, particularly the young, into terrorist activities’ (Xinhua, 2014d). Making a point repeated in the state discourse when making sense of violent events, regional vice-chairman Arkin Tuniyazi claimed that religious extremism, and not China’s ethnic policies, is the cause of ‘terrorist attacks’ in Xinjiang (B. Chen, 2014).

With religion in the spotlight, the Chinese state discourse has further divided the religious sphere between good or ‘patriotic’ and evil or ‘extremist’. The line that separates this binary understanding of religious practices is the one that determines whom, for what reason, or because of which behaviour, becomes a target of China’s counter-terrorism policies. In this sense, Chinese officials have constructed specific Islamic practices or customs as manifestations of religious extremism and markers of terrorist radicalization. The study of Islam, for example, has been articulated as a vehicle of transmission of radical anti-China positions. Chinese officials have represented underground schools as environments where children are educated on separatist ‘reactionary ideas’ (BBCMSAP, 2003f). Religious education has thus being equated to ideas such as that ‘jihadist martyrs go to heaven’ or that ‘killing a pagan is worth over 10 years of piety’ (Xinhua, 2014d). The Chinese authorities have also identified religious ceremonies, like weddings or funerals, and other social gatherings, as spaces of insurgent activity, where people ‘engage in sabotage activities’ or transmit ‘religious extremism’ (AFP, 2001e, 2002a; Cui & An, 2013). In the official discourse, religious fundamentalism is painted as inspired by ‘extremist forces’ or linked to terrorism. Practices like the refusal of state religious documents; the rejection of singing, dancing, or watching television activities; and the expression of joy at weddings or mourning during funerals (Xinhua, 2014d; B. Chen, 2014; Reuters, 2013f) have been linked to terrorism. No other religious custom has garnered more negative attention in the Chinese terrorism discourse than the

use of the Islamic veils amongst women and the growing of beards amongst young men. In the post-9/11 environment, Chinese officials have continued to politicize burkas or black veils as the ‘garment of extremism’ (R. Li, 2015a; Xinhua, 2014d; B. Chen, 2014) and beards and moustaches as symbols used to ‘incite separatism’ (RFA, 2009a).

On the other side of the binary, Chinese officials have defined the contours of what religious practice is acceptable and in accordance with the values of patriotism, socialism, Chinese culture, and modernity. In the context of terroristization, Chinese officials have praised religious leaders who ‘are quite patriotic’ and ‘love the motherland’ as opposed to ‘terrorists’ using ‘the purity of religion to cheat people’ (Schauble, 2002). In 2003, regional chairman Ismail Tiliwaldi urged patriotic religious people to fight terrorism and ‘accommodate a socialist society’ (BBCMSAP, 2003f). More recently, Chinese officials have called for religious beliefs to be assimilated into state-sanctioned paradigms of Chineseness or modernity, paving the way for the establishment of so-called ‘re-education’ camps. In 2015, Zhang Chunxiang announced that religions should be ‘sinicised’ and immersed in the ‘Chinese culture’ to become ‘normal and healthy’ (Yu, 2015). Other Chinese officials have called for Islam to conform to modernity and encouraged Muslims to ‘move toward modern civilization’ (Reuters, 2015b) and abandon the ‘backwardness’ of the burka (R. Li, 2015a), further sedimenting this constructed binary.

Beyond religion, the Chinese state terrorism discourse has framed areas such as education, culture, or the Internet as core fronts in an ideological combat against terrorism. In the post-9/11 context, the Chinese regime has painted the struggle for an ideological hegemony as a fight against ‘spiritual terrorism’ (Marquand, 2003). A core front in this purported contest is the education system, which Chinese officials have described as infiltrated by the ‘three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism’ (Leng, 2017). To counter this influence, the Chinese government called in 2002 to ‘clean up and reorganise the schools, their leaders, (and) the teaching body to turn schools into a stronghold against separatism’ (AFP, 2002b). Alongside education, the Chinese authorities have represented cultural realms from poetry to archaeology as fronts in the war on terrorism and separatism (Marquand, 2003; Bai, 2017). Chinese officials have directed their attention to the media and cultural production industries, accusing ‘ethnic splittist forces’ of ‘taking advantage of broadcasting, publications, audio and video products, art and literary works, the Internet and other media to infiltrate Xinjiang’ (BBCMSAP, 2002c). Above all these platforms, the official discourse has presented the Internet as a counter-terrorism front. In 2009, the CPC secretary in Kashgar, Zhang Jiang, announced that the war against terror had ‘extended to the virtual world’ as ‘terrorists’ were using the Internet as ‘their tool to spread their radical ideas’ (AP, 2009). Constructed as a multi-faceted threat in China’s discourse of terrorism, one which spreads from mosques to schools, from Uyghur homes to the Internet, the ‘people’s war’ embodies a multi-faceted security apparatus that the next section explores.



## China's War on Terror in Xinjiang: Sustained Crackdown and the Advent of the Surveillance State

During the terroristization stage, China has suspended Xinjiang in a state of permanent counter-terrorism emergency. The region, now a core issue in the Chinese national security agenda, has witnessed an intensification of the security practices following 9/11, taking the Chinese state grip over Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities to levels unseen before. China's war on terror is one that persecutes not only rebel violence, but also political dissent and what the government perceives as 'religious extremism'. Under China's counter-terrorism apparatus, Uyghur and other suspect communities are constantly monitored, their movements restricted, their freedoms and identity markers intervened, scrutinized and eventually assimilated into the Chinese nation frameworks of what constitutes the Chinese nation. This is a war that is not restricted to Xinjiang or the rest of China, for the persecution of the 'East Turkestan terrorist forces' also affects Uyghur abroad.

This final part of the chapter addresses the political consequences of China's terrorism discourse, that is, the 'actual' war on terrorism in Xinjiang. Here, this book explores the assembly of a counter-terrorist apparatus at the administrative-legislative and military levels. Second, the attention turns to the counter-terrorism crackdown, with particular attention to religious repression. Next, the chapter analyses China's war on terror from an international perspective, tracing how Beijing has extended its pressure over Uyghur communities abroad. Finally, the chapter presents a core finding of this book, that of the *sine die* terroristization of Xinjiang by the Chinese state, illustrated by the transformation of the region into a surveillance state where broad segments of the Turkic Muslim ethnic minority are disciplined through re-education and forced labor, amongst other measures, in the name of fighting a never-ending 'people's war on terror'.

### *Establishing and Implementing a Counter-Terrorist Apparatus*

Since the elevation of Xinjiang to the status of China's domestic front in the GWoT, the Chinese government has developed a counter-terrorist apparatus consisting of administrative, military-security, and legislative structures aimed at building the capacities needed for a sustained crackdown on the 'three evil forces'. The Chinese state move to adapt to a new international context was clear right after 9/11, when the Chinese authorities moved swiftly to take advantage of the GWoT momentum for domestic security purposes.

Only four months after the attacks, the Ministry of Public Security established a National Anti-terrorism Coordination Team to manage China's anti-terrorism campaign (The Straits Times, 2002; X. Zhang, 2013). This new bureau gathered personnel from the military, national security departments, the police force, various political and legal committees, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, amongst other bodies (*ibid.*). Authorities at the regional and provincial levels quickly followed suit and created their counter-terrorist units (The Straits



Times, 2002), helping to spread the perception of a Uyghur terrorism threat across the country.

In 2003, the Ministry of Public Security integrated the National Anti-terrorism Coordination Team into a newly setup Counter-Terrorism Bureau, dedicated to the research and promotion of anti-terrorist policies (Feng, 2009). This unit published the first list of ‘East Turkistan terrorists’ and organizations in December 2003 (People’s Daily, 2003b). In 2013, the National Anti-terrorism Coordination Team was replaced by the National Anti-Terrorism Leading Group to ‘command’ China’s counter-terrorism strategy (China Daily, 2014). Led by the minister of Public Security, the new body includes officers from the Foreign Ministry, the ministries of Public Security and State Security, the PAP, and the PLA General Staff (X. Zhang, 2013). From this heightened militarized profile, and from 2014, the group launched and directed China’s ‘people’s war on terror’ (Xinhua, 2014a).

While these organs play a central role in China’s war on terror, it is up to the Chinese security forces to implement most of the counter-terrorism operations on the ground. The PAP and the PLA are China’s main counter-terrorism agencies. The PAP is considered the major Chinese regular counter-terrorism force (China Daily, 2014; Ifeng News, 2013). It gained major relevance in China’s war on terror in 2005, when the Ministry of Public Security ordered the establishment of anti-terrorist Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units across the country (Savadove, 2005). In 2008, the Central Military Commission raised the status of the PAP contingent in Xinjiang from the category of ‘deputy corps command’ to that of ‘full corps command’, conferring the paramilitary force a leading role in managing the region (Reuters, 2008d). This illustrates the exceptionality of the emergency measures put in place in Xinjiang. Other PAP-related counter-terrorist units active in Xinjiang are the Snow Leopard Commando (Cui, 2011; Xinhua, 2019) or the Snow Eagle, first female special group unit in China (CRI, 2015).

Combating terrorism has also become a core task of the Chinese army and a fundamental part of its training curricula (BBCMSAP, 2003f). While the PLA, through its special military forces, is assumed to command anti-terrorist operations when these affect the national security, the military presence in Xinjiang is largely aimed at supporting and complementing the armed police and its special units (Ifeng News, 2013). In this sense, a crucial role of the PLA is that of deterrence, achieved via frequent military drills, often in the south of Xinjiang, where tanks, armoured vehicles, drones, assault helicopters, and thousands of soldiers are often displayed to off-put any resistance to the Chinese rule (SCMP, 2013; Reuters, 2016b; Deng, 2017).

Alongside the PAP and the PLA, the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) have acquired a significant role in China’s war on terror. Instrumental in quelling the Baren ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion’ in 1990, the case of the XPCC illustrates how a pre-existing resource used to deal with violent disturbances in Xinjiang has been reshuffled with a counter-terrorist character. China also elevated the status of the XPCC to ‘deputy corps command’ in 2012 – equalling the rank of the PAP in most provincial areas, but Xinjiang – after its

decisive role in settling the Ürümchi riots in 2009 (L. Liu, 2012) and emphasizing, again, the exceptionalism with which China deals with ethno-political unrest in Xinjiang.

China's counter-terrorist apparatus has been sustained with the exponential deployment of security manpower in Xinjiang. This is imperative for the levels of policing, crackdown, and surveillance of the ethnic minorities implemented in the region during the terroristization phase. The Chinese state started to multiply its presence in Xinjiang in the aftermath of 9/11. On the brink of the US invasion of Afghanistan, the PAP transferred several hundred troops from Ürümchi to Kashgar (August, 2001) and the PLA transferred four army divisions, a total of 40,000 troops, to the south of the XUAR (Kyodo, 2002). However, the presence of security forces in Xinjiang, mostly from the PAP, rose steeply after the ethnic riots in Ürümchi in July 2009, a critical milieu during which China only stabilized the area following the deployment of 14,000 armed police troops (Zenz & Leibold, 2016). Tracing the development of a security state in Xinjiang, Zenz and Leibold (2017a) have revealed the massive increase in the state recruitment of police forces in the region. First, as a response to the Ürümchi riots, when security-related recruitment doubled in Xinjiang, rising from 6,876 positions in 2006–2008 to 15,841 in 2009–2011 (People's Daily, 2010a). Then, during the expansion of the policing and surveillance efforts in the rural south (2012–2013), when 11,559 police and other security-related positions were advertised (ibid.). Finally, with the launching of a major counter-terrorism campaign in Xinjiang, already under the 'people's war' banner, with almost 20,000 security-related positions advertised in the 2014–2015 period (ibid.).

Alongside the massive deployment of police and paramilitary troops for hard security purposes, the Chinese government has sent thousands of officials to Xinjiang with the mission of winning the 'local people's hearts' (M. Lin, 2014). The Chinese authorities had been sending officials to assist with the economic development of the poorest areas of Xinjiang since 1997, but these efforts have acquired a new dimension and goals under the people's war on terror. The influx of CPC cadres into Xinjiang has steadily increased in the era of terroristization. In November 2001, the CPC assigned 1,750 cadres to south Xinjiang to 'get to know' the residents (AFP, 2001d). This detachment paled in comparison with the escalation that started in 2014, when the regional authorities deployed 200,000 civil servants in the rural areas of Xinjiang, who joined a group of 40,000 public workers sent to the region in 2013 to 'accumulate grassroots experience and help improve local livelihoods' (Xinhua, 2014c). Under the programme 'Visit the People, Benefit the People, and Get Together the Hearts of the People' (*fāng huì jù*), beacon of the mass line mobilization efforts of the Chinese state in Xinjiang (see Newman & Zhang, 2021), the transfer has intensified from 2016, when the government started assigning government officials as 'relatives' to Uyghur families and homes (H. Zhang, 2018). China has presented this initiative as a counter-radicalization effort aimed at winning Uyghur support to the people's war by countering 'religious extremism' and preventing violent unrest, while improving ethnic relations

and promoting development (see Zhou, 2017). Alternative accounts of the initiative, however, describe a pervasive intrusion on the lives of Uyghurs in which those ‘visited’ are scrutinized on their religiosity and political views, while receiving political, cultural, and secular indoctrination (see HRW, 2018a; Byler, 2018), pointing to a broader state assimilationist effort under the pretext of combating ‘religious extremism’.

China has sustained this burgeoning counter-terrorist apparatus with a regular increase in the regional security budgets. Public security expenditures by the XUAR government dramatically increased from 1.54 billion RMB in 2009 to 6.7 billion RMB in 2015. In between, there were two significant boosts. The budget increased an 87.9 per cent up to 2.89 billion RMB in the 2010 budget, the first after the ethnic riots in Ürümqi. Meanwhile, it boosted another 24 per cent to 6.1 billion RMB in 2014, coinciding with the launching of a ‘people’s war’ on terrorism (see Famularo, 2015).

In parallel to these developments, the Chinese authorities have created over the years a legal framework to underpin the security crackdown on terrorism. Again, and with other measures, the 9/11 attacks emerge as a tipping point for the restructuring of China’s legal apparatus. Following the event, the Chinese government amended the Criminal Law to punish the crimes of terrorism and those who formed, participated, or funded a terrorist organization (PRC, 2001). According to AI, many Uyghurs were charged under the revised Criminal Law right after the amendment (Reuters, 2002). This was the first of many steps to establish a legal framework for counter-terrorism, which culminated in 2015 when, following years of discussions, reviews, and draft bill readings (see AFP, 2005b; Valli, 2014; Global Times, 2015b), the National People’s Congress (NPC) adopted the first Chinese counter-terrorism law (PRC, 2015).

China’s counter-terrorism law defines terrorism as

any proposition or activity that, by means of violence, sabotage or threat, generates social panic, undermines public security, infringes on personal and property rights, and menaces government organs and international organizations with the aim to realize certain political and ideological purposes. (*ibid.*)

As Zhou (2016), notes, this definition, while close to those of international institutions such as the UN or the EU, is vague enough to allow for the punishment of speech or thoughts. With 97 articles distributed in ten chapters, China’s counter-terrorism law establishes the basic operative rules of the Chinese counter-terrorism strategy, as well as the guidelines for preventing violence, handling attacks, punishing terrorists, and developing international anti-terrorist cooperation efforts (PRC, 2015).

China’s counter-terrorism law captures the essence of the state security practices in Xinjiang during the era of terroristization. First, and foremost, the law conceptualizes religious extremism as the ideological source of terrorism. As the

approved bill reads: '[China] opposes all extremism that seeks to instigate hatred, incite discrimination and advocate violence by distorting religious doctrines and other means, and acts to eradicate the ideological basis for terrorism' (PRC, 2015). Second, the law calls for a severe control of the freedom of expression and the free flow of information, presenting the Internet and social media as spaces of dissemination of terrorist and extremist ideas (ibid.). Next, it conveys the idea of a 'people's war' on terrorism by calling for rewards for those Chinese citizens who make 'outstanding contributions' to the anti-terrorism work, mainly through reporting terrorist activities or terrorist suspects, or by assisting in the suppression of terrorist attacks (ibid.). The law is thus a reflection of the terroristization of religion as the ideological source of terrorism, the politicization of Uyghur identity and cultural expressions, and the transformation of counter-terrorism into a societal structure in Xinjiang aimed at reaching all individuals and households.

Alongside its first counter-terrorism law, the Chinese authorities have issued other legal provisions to sustain the *de facto* terroristization of Xinjiang. Some specifically target religious extremism or separatism. This is the case of the Law on Education for Ethnic Unity in Xinjiang, adopted in 2010, which banned 'speech detrimental to ethnic unity' and activities such as 'gathering, providing, producing, and spreading information to that effect', while declaring 'an obligation for all citizens to work towards national unity and against secession' (RFA, 2010a). Another case in point is the revision in 2015 of the Xinjiang regulation on religious affairs in order to target 'religious extremism' (Cui, 2014b). The new regulation reframes extremism as 'activities or comments that twist the doctrines of a religion and promote thoughts of extremism, violence and hatred' (ibid.). It contains 18 articles and gives legal force to previous government directives issued to crack down on religion. Amongst them, the prohibition of wearing 'extremist' clothes or logos and distributing or viewing videos about jihad, the strict control of the religious venues, and the elimination of religious practices from government offices, public schools, businesses, or institutions (ibid.). Other legal developments have framed behaviours such as forcing others to wear 'extremist garments' (R. Li, 2015b) or preventing students from receiving high school education in the name of religion (Reuters, 2016c) as terrorist crimes. Another crucial legislation against religious extremism is the XUAR Regulation on De-extremification, which offers a compendium of 'extremist' types of comments or behaviour (PRC, 2017; see Table 4.4). These benchmarks signal the religious practices that the Chinese state persecutes in the name of fighting terrorism and have been updated to keep pace with the 'people's war' on terror (RFA, 2017l).

Altogether, the military, administrative, financial, and legislative counter-terrorist structure has provided the Chinese state with the necessary mechanisms to sustain, reframe, and intensify the 'strike, hard' crackdown of the 1990s under the context of a war on terrorism. Instruments that were already in place before 2001, such as the deployment of security forces in the region or the use of the XPCC for hard security purposes, have been adapted to fit the post-9/11 global environment and narratives. Other resources, such as the anti-terrorism legislation or the

**TABLE 4.4** Types of comments and behaviour considered religious extremism according to Article 9 of the XUAR Regulation on De-extremification

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1. Advocating and spreading extremist ideas
  2. Interfering with the freedom of religion of others, by forcing them to participate in religious activities, or to provide properties or work services to religious clerics or venues for religious activity
  3. Interfering with others' activities such as weddings, funerals, or inheritance
  4. Interfering with others' communicating with other ethnic groups or religious faiths to exchange information, cohabit, or push people of different ethnic group or faith to abandon their homes
  5. Interfering with cultural and leisure activities, avoiding or rejecting public goods and services such as radio and television
  6. Generalizing the concept of halal, extending it to other fields beyond that of food, and manipulating it to interfere with other people's secular life
  7. Wearing face-covering veils or robes, or compelling others to wear extremist garments
  8. Spreading religious fanaticism by wearing abnormal beards or using abnormal names
  9. Failing to perform the legal procedures for religious marriage and divorce
  10. Preventing children from receiving public education, and obstructing the functioning of the national education system
  11. Intimidating and instigating others to resist the national policies, to intentionally destroying legal documents such as resident identity cards or household registration books, or to deface currency
  12. Intentionally damaging or destroying public or private property
  13. Publishing, printing, distributing, selling, making, downloading, storing, reproducing, opening, copying, or possessing articles, publications, audio and video with extremist contents
  14. Intentionally interfering with or undermining the implementation of the family planning policy
  15. Other extremist speech and acts
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Source: see PRC, 2017.

National Anti-Terrorism Leading Group, are novel developments that illustrate the terroristization of Xinjiang, a region transformed into a counter-terrorism front.

### ***Sustained Crackdown in the Name of Fighting Terrorism***

During the terroristization stage, the Chinese state intensified the crackdown in Xinjiang, officially recasted as a fight against the so-called 'evil forces' of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. This means that, in the context of the GWOt, the Chinese government persecutes, not only those it holds responsible for organizing sub-state violent acts, but also a wide range of non-violent religious and cultural practices that the Chinese state sees as the ideological foundation of terrorism, and those manifestations of Uyghur political dissidence or critique, which the Chinese authorities frame as separatism. China's war on terror is thus not a mere effort against the use of insurgent violence, but a broader security apparatus that targets religion, Turkic Muslim identity, and political dissent.

China's war on terror is, first and foremost, a war against 'religious extremism'. China defines this category with specific benchmarks (see Cao, 2014) in ways that often frame local Islamic traditions and customs as potential signs of terrorist radicalization (see Harris & Aziz, 2019). Under the alibi of combating the ideology behind terrorism, the Chinese authorities have thus made broad segments of the Turkic Muslim population suspect of 'religious extremism'.

The terroristization of religion in Xinjiang cuts across different dimensions, traditions, and practices. One of this is the spatial one, where the Chinese authorities have established what venues are legal or illegal for the practice of religion. Religious activities undertaken in non-officially approved venues are considered illegal and targeted by the Chinese security forces for their potential for hosting processes of extremist radicalization or terror-related activities. Under this logic, religious activities traditionally held at home by Muslim families, such as holding prayers, reciting the Quran, or celebrating Mawlid (the birthday of the Islamic prophet Muhammad), have all been linked to religious extremism and hence prosecuted (AFP, 2001d; RFA, 2011h, 2013d, 2016c). A consequence of such move is the criminalization, under counter-terrorism provisions, of the transmission of religious values, customs, or education in the private sphere. In a society where, over the years, religion had been barred from the public realm (see Cui, 2014b), and where children under the age of 18 and women are not allowed to enter the mosques (RFA, 2006), the personal space had emerged as the realm for Uyghurs to educate their children in the Islamic faith, values, and rites. Under the terroristization paradigm, this is illegal. Through surveillance and house-to-house inspections, the Chinese authorities have persecuted hundreds of unregistered Islamic schools, many of them in private residences, accusing organizers of hosting 'illegal religious activities' (AFP, 2004c; BBCMSAP, 2005b; Olesen, 2009; RFA, 2012b). Religious teachers, imams, and adults involved in underground schools have been sentenced to prison terms of up to 16 years for spreading 'extremist religious thought and inciting others to wage a holy war' (UHRP, 2012b), endangering state security (RFA, 2015b), or inciting ethnic hatred and disrupting the social order (Xinhua, 2014i). Another consequence of the spatial controls is that Muslims cannot participate in religious activities, even authorized ones, when these are held in a different district. The practice of 'cross-village worship' is thus considered a crime (RFA, 2009c). The restriction of movements for religious purposes also affects prayers, gatherings, and ceremonies held in shrines and other remote religious sacred sites, which are now prohibited (A. Su, 2017). In a dramatic turn of the events, the spatial disciplining of religion to avoid the transmission of 'extremism' has led to the outright destruction of material structures – including mosques, shrines, and graveyards – that stand at the heart of the Uyghur ethnic and religious identity (Ruser et al., 2020; Thum, 2020).

On the other side of a spatial binary that separates state-sanctioned religion from 'religious extremism', the authorized mosque has emerged as the only space for worship within the boundaries of Chinese law. By restricting religious activities to officially sanctioned spaces, the state secures the control of how the Islamic faith is practised, reproduced, and shared. Registered mosques facilitate the supervision

and surveillance of the faithful by the Chinese authorities, and the prevention of children from practising religion (RFA, 2013d; CECC, 2006). As an illustration, the Chinese government sent more than 350 officials to Hotan in 2016 for three years with the mission of monitoring mosques (RFA, 2016k). Legal mosques have also become platforms for the Chinese authorities to disseminate patriotic propaganda on the faithful. Chinese flags and pro-CPC red banners hang in the temples, and patriotic ceremonies such as the singing of the national anthem are held alongside religious ones (see Hayoun, 2013; RFA, 2017j).

In disciplining the practice of Islam, the Chinese authorities have continued to determine who can preach and educate in religion, and to establish a cohort of clerics instructed in spreading patriotism and promoting the state religious policies, including provisions for counter-terrorism. To this end, thousands of imams and other Muslim religious figures have continued to participate in official programmes of political re-education and patriotic propaganda (V.P. Chan, 2001; BBCMSAP, 2003f; Jiang, 2016). Some of these activities have bordered on humiliation. Imams have been forced to dance in the streets and swear an oath that they would not teach religion to children while chanting slogans in support of the CPC (The Express Tribune, 2015). Such propagandistic drives have not been restricted to religious figures or spaces. Authorities in Xinjiang have organized public lectures throughout the region aimed at explaining and rallying support for the country's religious policies (Reuters, 2012). Evening classes for farmers and herdsmen, primarily aimed at poverty eradication, are now accompanied with instructions on how to counter religious extremism (RFA, 2016n), demonstrating how the process of terroristization cuts across all spheres of life in Xinjiang.

The Chinese state also dictates who can practice, or not, Islam. In the era of terroristization, the collectives prevented by the state from practising religion have steadily increased. As an example, in 2006, the local authorities in Kashgar banned a series of categories of people from entering the mosque and conducting religious activities. Amongst them, it listed CPC cadres and members of the Communist Youth League; state employees, workers, and retiree; youth under the age of 18; prefecture employees; and women (RFA, 2006). While the prohibition of entering the mosque to state officials and children had been in place at least since 1996 (Rotar, 2003), gender-based restrictions are a post-2011 phenomenon. In this effort to prevent people from engaging with religion, the Chinese state has particularly targeted children and CPC cadres or government officials. The Chinese government has not only distanced children and teenagers from Islam through their exclusion from mosques or by prohibiting religious instruction at home, but also through the systematic persecution of religion in educational venues, from kindergartens to high schools (Chang & Bai, 2014; Reuters, 2016c). The terroristization of religion in Xinjiang is evident at this level. At home, Muslim parents are not allowed to 'encourage' their children into religion, and must instead protect them from being lured into extremism and terrorism (Reuters, 2016c). In the schools, Uyghur students who hold a prayer can be expelled, accused of 'illegal religious activities' (RFA 2011d). At the university, students cannot graduate unless their political



views are approved (Reuters, 2013e). Meanwhile, the pressure on state officials has also intensified (RFA, 2017d). It affects not only government employers, active or retired, but also their families and relatives (RFA, 2011h). Under this paradigm, gestures of faith, connivance, or sympathy towards religion may end up in a disciplinary fault. In 2017, a Xinjiang official was demoted for refraining from smoking in front of religious figures so as not to offend their beliefs, a gesture interpreted as timidity in the fight against terrorism (C. Liu, 2017). The same year, an Uyghur CPC cadre was fired for holding her wedding ceremony at home according to the Islamic tradition (RFA, 2017d).

The terroristization of religion in Xinjiang affects all sorts of Islamic manifestations, including materials, rituals, festivities, and traditions. A case in point is here is the pressure that the Chinese authorities exert over the Muslim holy book, the Quran. Traditionally present in every Muslim household, the Quran has become an object of suspicion for its potential links to terrorism. Its study and discussion (Coonan, 2014), the dissemination of its passages (Tong, 2017), or its sale and distribution (AFP, 2008), have become practices of risk that may lead to prosecution. Raids confiscating copies of the Quran are not unheard of (RFA, 2009c; RFA, 2017k), while the Chinese authorities are striving to impose a ‘patriotic’ interpretation and edition of the book (HRW, 2005, p. 53; RFA, 2009e). This scrutiny over the Quran is representative of a broader crackdown on unapproved religious literature and audio or video materials (BBCMSAP, 2005b; RFA, 2012j, 2014g).

The Chinese government has targeted other central elements of Islam for their purported links to ‘religious extremism’ and terrorism. This is the case of the Hajj, the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims must carry out at least once in their lifetime. The Chinese authorities have restricted this activity for fears that local pilgrims may come into contact with subversive religious ideologies. In doing so, many Uyghurs have become deprived of fulfilling their religious duty. Pilgrimages that are not organized by official channels like the Islamic Association of China (IAC) are straightforwardly prosecuted (RFA, 2017h), and those that are authorized are expensive and inaccessible for the majority of the people (AP, 2007b; OnIslam, 2011b; Krishnan, 2011). Similar measures have been imposed on the observation of fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Pressures on students and state officials to avoid fasting during this period have been reported for years since 9/11 (BBC, 2002), with controls becoming systematic since 2008 (RFA, 2008b; BBC, 2014; Al Jazeera, 2012; Reuters, 2015a; Payton, 2016). The Chinese government does not prohibit fasting to the whole of the Muslim population, but it tries to avoid the popularization of its observance amongst students or civil servants, in a way that stirs them away from religion. The Chinese authorities in Xinjiang have thus established units monitoring that teachers and students do not fast during Ramadan, sometimes accompanying the students to the canteen to make sure they do not observe the tradition (RFA, 2008b; Patience, 2014; RFA, 2014o). Meanwhile, the authorities offer free lunches to state employees to prevent them from fasting (RFA, 2008c; AFP, 2012). The Chinese authorities have also discouraged fasting amongst those Uyghur Muslims who are supposedly allowed



to fast. To this aim, they have forced Muslim restaurants to stay open all day under the threat of economic or administrative penalties (RFA, 2008b; Al Jazeera, 2015). At the same time, the Chinese authorities have established surveillance controls at the mosques during Ramadan to intimidate the Muslim population, profile those who observe the fasting (RFA, 2012k), and arrest those who encourage observing it (OnIslam, 2011a; RFA, 2016h).

Under the pretext of countering religious extremism, the terroristization of Xinjiang interferes with the lives of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities by conditioning their dress, physical appearance, or the names they can give to their children. Demonized as ‘abnormal appearances’ (The Straits Times, 2015), the Chinese authorities have eradicated the use of veils in women and beards in men, perceived by the state as signs of extremist radicalization. The practice of encouraging women with incentives to stop wearing veils, characteristic of the 1990s, has given way to the straightforward prohibition of these garments in the post-9/11 period. In the first years of terroristization, the ban on veils was only applied to government employees and students (Smith, 2001; York, 2004). Then, it entailed harassing users and extending the ban to all the female population (CECC, 2011; RFA, 2013d). The prohibition now affects a wide range of religious attires such as full headscarves, jilbabs, hijabs, burkas, as well as combinations of black veils and black robes (Savadove, 2008; RFA, 2011h, 2013d; Reuters, 2013d; Ho, 2015). To encourage the abandonment of veils and other garments with religious connotations, the government has also organized campaigns under names such as ‘Project Beauty’ or slogans like ‘Let Beautiful Hair Flutter, Let Beautiful Faces Be Revealed’ (SCMP, 2011b; CECC, 2011; C. Huang, 2013; see also Leibold & Grose, 2016). The beard plays for men the same role as a marker of religious extremism that the veil does for women. As such, Chinese authorities have prohibited state employees and men under the age of 50 from styling beards (RFA, 2009a, 2013d). ‘Crescent moon-shaped’ beards have become the symbol of religious radicalization (RFA, 2015i) and styling a beard has become punishable with prison (CECC, 2011; AFP, 2015). Finally, the Chinese state has also criminalized the choice of ‘overly religious’ names for the children – including Islam, Quran, Mecca, Jihad, Imam, Saddam, Hajj, or Medina – threatening to bar children with forbidden names from accessing public health and education (RFA, 2015p, 2017e).

Altogether, and under the pretext of combating religious extremism, the Chinese government has ‘nationalized’ and ‘patriotized’ Islam in Xinjiang, disciplining the Muslim faith, extirpating it from the personal, and moving it into the realm of state counter-terrorism. The state-sanctioned religious structures – characterized by what the Chinese state media often praise are a large number of temples, religious schools, clergy, and associations – represent for the Chinese government the proof that there is religious freedom in Xinjiang, and that the state can ‘satisfy believers’ normal religious requirements’ (SCIO, 2016). However, alongside this manufactured image of ‘patriotic’ religious freedom, a state assimilationist pulse has gradually permeated in Xinjiang during the terroristization stage with the aim of diluting the Uyghur ethnic identity and conscience, including the core marker of

religion, and replacing it with a Han Chinese secular and patriotic idiosyncrasy. This is a parallel agenda of patriotic flag-raising and national anthem singing ceremonies (RFA, 2016m); of Uyghurs forced to eat pork, smoke cigarettes, or drink alcohol during Chinese cultural festivals or in front of their Chinese ‘relatives’ (RFA, 2019; Byler, 2018); of shops forced to sell and encourage the consumption of cigarettes and alcohol (RFA, 2015f); of mass events where the Uyghur population is pushed to adopt traditional Chinese garbs (RFA, 2016i); or of the state promotion of inter-ethnic marriages of Uyghur women and Han men (Xiao, 2019). In fighting the ‘religious extremism’ that nurtures terrorism, China is introducing an agenda of sinicization under the slogan of fostering the ‘Chinese nation’s valuable traditions’ and spreading a ‘patriotic education’ (see Gan, 2018). This is the critical juncture where terroristization meets assimilation in Xinjiang.

China’s war on terror is more than a war on religion. It also entails the persecution of political opposition under the excuse of opposing another ideological force that the Chinese state sees as conducive to terrorism, that of separatism. During the period of terroristization, Uyghur activists or intellectuals critical with the Chinese policies in Xinjiang have been persecuted as agents of the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’. No better example illustrates the logic by which the Chinese state conflates political disagreement with terrorism than the Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti, sentenced to life in prison in 2014 under charges for separatism. During years, Tohti, an intellectual and lecturer at the Minzu University in Beijing, drew attention, often in the international media or through his website Uyghur Online, to many of the social grievances affecting the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, including unemployment, poverty, inequality vis-à-vis the Han, or the absence of real political autonomy for the ethnic minorities (RFA, 2009b, 2008a). Tohti was also very critical of the Chinese state’s harsh response to violence and dissent in Xinjiang (see Kwok, 2010; Ramzy, 2010; G. Wong, 2013; RFA, 2013s) and investigated the cases of Uyghurs disappeared in the state crackdown that followed the Ürümqi riots in 2009 (Tohti, 2013). Nevertheless this critical stance, he publicly declared himself against the independence of Xinjiang, explicitly framing his activism as aimed at the fulfillment of ethnic minority rights and autonomy as enshrined in the Chinese law and constitution (RFA, 2008a; Tohti 2014, 2015). This character and the fact that he never espoused violent means earned Tohti a reputation as a moderate figure needed to build an understanding between the Chinese government and the Uyghur ethnic minority (The Economist, 2014). Yet despite this moderation, and following years of state pressure to stop him from airing his opinions (RFA, 2012l, 2013b, 2013l, 2013c), the Chinese authorities sentenced Tohti in 2014 to life in prison, accused of separatism (Bo, 2014).

The case of Ilham Tohti is a reflection of how the Chinese government deals with critical voices from Xinjiang under the war on terrorism: through an association of critique with dissent, dissent with separatism, and separatism with terrorism. Under this terroristization of non-official politics, many Uyghur intellectuals critical with the Chinese government policies in Xinjiang have been persecuted accused of threatening China’s ‘national unity’ and ‘security’ and connivance with

‘terrorists’. This could be felt soon after 9/11. In January 2002, as China was re-inventing the contemporary history of Xinjiang as a long struggle against terrorism, Uyghur poet Tursunjan Emet was arrested in January 2002 for reciting a poem critical with the Chinese policies. The Chinese authorities described the piece not only as a ‘reactionary, anti-society, anti-government and agitation poem’ (HRW, 2005; BBCMSAP, 2003c), as they would have done in the 1980s or the 1990s, but also as ‘terrorism in the spiritual form’ (Marquand, 2003). In 2005, Uyghur writer Nurmuhennet Yasin was sentenced to ten years in prison for writing ‘Wild Pigeon’, the story of a blue pigeon that commits suicide rather than living without freedom (HRW, 2005, p. 21). The work was described as a ‘strong portrayal of a people deeply unhappy with life under Beijing’s rule’ (RFA, 2005b; WUC, 2011b). Uyghur journalist Mehbube Ableshe, who worked for the state Xinjiang People’s Radio Station in Ürümqi, was arrested in 2008 after posting articles online that criticized the regional government policies in Xinjiang (UHRP, 2015). Another Uyghur journalist, Memetjan Abdulla, who had worked for a state radio station, was sentenced to life in prison in 2010 on charges that he spread subversive information at the time of the Ürümqi riots (E. Wong, 2010). In 2015, a court in Xinjiang sentenced Uyghur religious scholar Qamber Amber, who had a history of speeches critical with the state policies in Xinjiang, to nine years in prison for ‘crimes related to state security’ (RFA, 2015c). Although treated with greater leniency, ethnic Han journalists have also been punished for criticizing China’s war on terrorism. Zhao Xinwei, editor-in-chief of the Ürümqi-based *Xinjiang Daily* newspaper, was sacked in 2015 and removed from the CPC because his ‘words and deeds’ opposed China’s counter-terrorist policies (China News, 2015).

Following the government’s calls to build an anti-terrorism front in the ‘virtual world’ (AP, 2009), China’s war on terror is also waged on the Internet and media realm, in an attempt to dominate the social, cultural, historical, and political narrative about Xinjiang. Between 2012 and 2017, and with the pretext of combating the circulation of ‘extremism’, the Chinese authorities have arrested hundreds of people for their online activities (Y. Wen, 2013; RFA, 2013e; C. Wong, 2014; Global Times, 2017b). Under the terroristization framework, uploading e-books with what China perceives as Uyghur nationalist or separatism tones, watching or disseminating ‘extremist’ content, discussing ‘extremist’ ideas, or fabricating rumours are punishable actions (Y. Wen, 2013; RFA, 2013e; RFA, 2013h) with jail sentences that range from two years to life in prison (RFA, 2013e; Reuters, 2014). Online comments critical with the government policies have been characterized as rumours or ‘hostile attacks’ (Global Times, 2017a). As put by a Chinese terrorism expert, the online clampdown is aimed at ‘misleading messages such as accusing the government of oppression’ (C. Wong, 2014). From 2015, the Chinese government has also banned the use of virtual private networks (VPN) – broadly used to circumvent censorship – now described as ‘terrorist software’ (Mozur, 2015; RFA, 2016l).

China’s online anti-terrorism crackdown has involved the closure of many Uyghur-language websites, in a ‘massive digital book-burning’ that has effectively dismantled the Uyghur Internet (Szadziwski & Fay, 2014). A case in point

here is Tohti's popular website Uyghur Online, conceived as a vehicle to foster understanding between the Han Chinese and Uyghur communities, and closed in 2008 for alleged links to Uyghur 'extremists' abroad (RFA, 2008a). Following the Ürümqi riots in 2009, several Uyghur webmasters and bloggers were imprisoned, their websites closed, under accusations of publishing illegal news, propagating separatism, endangering national security, or leaking state secrets (BBC, 2010a; RFA, 2010d, 2011a, 2011b, 2015n). While Uyghur blogs have been found to be platforms for subversive political communication in the form of veiled expressions of frustration or discontent with Chinese state policies (see Clothey et al., 2016), most of these sites dealt with literature, entertainment, or broader Uyghur cultural content (see Szadziwski & Fay, 2014; Reyhan, 2012) and not dissident, insurgent, or radical agendas. This makes China's clampdown on the Uyghur Internet a direct attack on Uyghur popular culture and heritage, which suggests, again, an assimilationist impulse in China's anti-terrorism policies in the region.

In their broader effort to control the narrative about Xinjiang, and to prevent alternative accounts of the unrest from reaching the outside world, the Chinese authorities have turned the region into China's 'black hole' of information (Stone, 2013). The government has shut down the flow of communications following violent incidents. In the aftermath of the July 2009 riots in Ürümqi, China suspended the Internet, stopped mobile phone services, and cancelled international outbound calls, leaving the Xinjiang capital 'cut off from the rest of the world' (The Indian Express, 2009; RWB, 2009a; Blanchard, 2009). The government also ordered search engines and social networking and blogging sites to block sensitive terms related to the riots (China Digital Times, 2009; Cui, 2009). Similar blackouts were reported in 2013 following the Hanerik riots (Jacobs, 2013), or after violence erupted in Lükchün (RWB, 2013).

Tantamount to this effort, and intensifying practices recorded in the previous stages of the process of terroristization, the Chinese government has curtailed the work of foreign journalists and academics working in and on the region. In the era of terroristization, China has criminalized speaking to foreign media, punishing those Uyghurs who do so. Sitiwalidi Tilivaldi was arrested in 2004 after discussing the crackdown with an American journalist (PBS, 2005). Ekberjan Jamal was sentenced to ten years in prison in 2008 for the crime of leaking state secrets after he sent the sounds of a protest to friends in the Netherlands (RFA, 2009d). Uyghur journalist Gheyret Niyaz, who worked for the Chinese state media, was sentenced to 15 years of prison in 2010 accused of 'endangering state security' for giving interviews to the foreign media about the Ürümqi riots (RFA, 2010c). Meanwhile, the mother of an Uyghur man who disappeared after the Ürümqi riots was charged in 2016 with leaking state secrets because she discussed her son's disappearance with RFA (RFA, 2016d). In the meantime, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RWB) have singled out Xinjiang as a place where the Chinese authorities regularly obstruct the work of journalists, specifically when it comes to reporting on violent incidents (see IFJ, 2017, 2019; RWB, 2013). Foreign journalists were harassed and beaten by

the Chinese police when investigating violent incidents (Kyodo, 2008b; IFJ, 2008; RWB, 2009b). State harassment of journalists has become the norm, beyond sensitive times, for all reporting on Xinjiang is sensitive, no matter the context. Foreign correspondents have been monitored, questioned, or arrested, by the police, their cameras and laptops being searched and seized, while carrying out regular reporting activities in the region (Makinen, 2014; BBC, 2015b; Hui, 2017). The Chinese authorities have also expelled journalists whose coverage of Xinjiang displeased Beijing. In 2012, Melissa Chan, a correspondent for Al Jazeera English in China, became the first accredited foreign correspondent to be expelled from the country in 14 years. Chan, whose translators had suffered surveillance and intimidation practices while reporting in Xinjiang, was expelled for violating ‘relevant laws’, according to a Foreign Ministry spokesman (BBC, 2012a; Xia, 2012). Meanwhile, French journalist Ursula Gauthier did not get her press credentials renewed in 2015 in reprisal for criticizing the repression in the region (Gauthier, 2015). According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang, Gauthier’s critique ‘overtly’ advocated ‘for acts of terrorism and killings of innocent civilians’ (K. Wang, 2015). In the latest of these developments, the Chinese government has threatened and forced out reporters Megha Rajagopalan, Chun Han Wong, and John Sudworth for their critical coverage of the human rights violations in the region (Reuters, 2018; Hutzler, 2019; BBC, 2021).

China’s attempts to control the narrative on Xinjiang extend beyond Internet and the media and affect the international scholarship. For years since 9/11, the Chinese authorities have prevented scholars from entering the country based on their research agenda, their affiliations, or specific works about the region. Japanese researcher Naoko Mizutani was arrested at the Beijing Capital Airport and sent back to Tokyo in 2010 for her links with Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer (RFA, 2010b). Similarly, the late Elliot Sperling, a historian of Tibet, was rejected entry to China at the Beijing airport, and sent back to the United States, for his research interests and support for Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti (Finney, 2014). Another case in point is that of the so-called ‘Xinjiang 13’, a group of mostly American scholars whose co-authorship of the book *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* (Starr et al., 2004) earned them a backlash from the Chinese authorities, having their visas to China denied for years (Golden & Staley, 2011). The authors of the book, leading figures in Xinjiang studies, were described by a Chinese academic as a ‘hodgepodge of scholars, scholars in preparation, phony scholars, and shameless fabricators of political rumor’ (De Vise, 2011). As historian James Millward, one of the co-authors of the book, suggests, the backlash may have resulted from a mix of circumstances that included the politicization of the book under the GWOt context (Millward, 2011). The case of the ‘Xinjiang 13’ illustrates how sensitive information about violence in the region has become for the Chinese authorities, which have also requested international academic publishers to self-censor their repositories of articles in their Chinese websites, under penalty of having these shut down (Lau & Mai, 2017). Articles about Xinjiang are, alongside other topics such as Taiwan or Tibet, amongst the topics that the Chinese authorities wants to see erased from the

domestic Internet in order to control audiences in the terroristization move. In the latest strings of actions, China has sanctioned scholars like Joanne Smith Finley or Adrian Zenz, accusing them of ‘lies and disinformation’ with regards to the human rights situation in Xinjiang (PRC, 2021a, 2021c). As suggested by Chinese Foreign Ministry, those who do not stick to the official narrative on the Uyghur in Xinjiang ‘will have to pay a price for their ignorance and arrogance’ (PRC, 2021b).

### ***Chasing and Hunting ‘Terrorists’ Abroad***

In the era of terroristization, China has given new vigour to an international strategy that places the security and stability of Xinjiang at the centre of its bilateral relations with other countries. China’s success in establishing the region as an internationally legitimate front in the GWOt is illustrated by the moral, diplomatic, and operational support that numerous states have given to Beijing’s counter-terrorism agenda. Throughout the terroristization stage, many countries have voiced their support for China’s war on terrorism in Xinjiang, amongst these Kazakhstan (BBCMSAP, 2002b), Uzbekistan (AFP, 2015a; Xinhua, 2010), Turkmenistan (AFP, 2006a), Afghanistan (BBCMSA, 2002), Turkey (BBCMSAP, 2002d, 2003a; People’s Daily, 2003a; Xinhua, 2012), Pakistan (CNN, 2001; VOA, 2011; Blanchard, 2011; Dawn, 2011), and Russia (PTI, 2002; BBCMSAP, 2003d). Signs of support have ranged from the acknowledgement that violence in Xinjiang is part of the global terrorist threat, to an explicit commitment to fight Uyghur militants and hand them over to the Chinese authorities. The SCO has also reiterated over the years its commitment to the fight against the three forces of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism (Kammerer, 2002; Nekrasov, 2017). Despite the pageantry of the SCO institutional summits, the organization has for the most part not developed any substantial multilateral counter-terrorism tool (Weitz, 2012). Instead, China has relied on bilateral agreements with countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan to combat the three ‘evils’ (AFP, 2006b; BBCMCA, 2007; BBCMSAP, 2002f). Anti-terrorist cooperation has been equally intense with countries bordering Xinjiang such as Afghanistan or Pakistan. With these countries, China has exchanged aid and support for the Afghan and Pakistani security forces in exchange for intelligence, and protection for Chinese nationals working there (AFP, 2003b, 2004b; Xu, 2012; PTI, 2014; Reddy, 2004; PTI, 2005; BBCMSAP, 2008c; Global Times 2010). Other bilateral exchanges have included the creation of a Russian–Chinese anti-terrorism working group (BBCMSAP, 2001i), or specific agreements to share intelligence on Uyghur suspects with the Turkish (Intelligence Online, 2007) and Indonesian authorities (The Jakarta Post, 2010). While critical of China’s human rights violations in the name of fighting terrorism, Western countries and international organizations have equally contributed, inadvertently or not, to China’s terroristization of Xinjiang. For instance, by listing the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a nebulous organization unheard of before China called into existence following 9/11, as an international terrorism threat (US Department of State, 2002; Wo-Lap Lam, 2002; UK, 2021; see also Roberts, 2020, pp. 65–81),

or by engaging China as a partner in bilateral exchanges on counter-terrorism (see Duchâtel & Ekman, 2015).

In internationalizing the war on terror in Xinjiang, the Chinese state has managed to secure the deportation and extradition of hundreds of Uyghurs who had previously fled Xinjiang (see WUC, 2016). Countries such as Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, or Uzbekistan have acceded to the requests of the Chinese authorities and deported Uyghurs accused of illegal migration (Cheang, 2009), criminal activities (WUC, 2011c), human trafficking (Allard 2011), involvement in the 2009 Ürümqi riots (RFA, 2011e), or travelling with the purpose of joining militant jihadi groups (Blanchard, 2015; see also Zenn, 2014). It is difficult to establish the veracity of these claims. In some cases, particularly some extraditions from Pakistan, the suspects seem to have taken part in an armed militant movement (AP, 2002; The Indian Express, 2009). In other cases, the violent nature of the crimes that prompted the extradition is unclear. This is the case of the dozens of Uyghurs extradited over the years by countries such as Nepal (BBCMSAP, 2003e; AI, 2002), Cambodia (Cheang, 2009), Malaysia (RFA, 2013a), or Kazakhstan (WUC, 2012; HRW, 2011; RFA, 2011b), while they were in the process of applying for refugee status to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Meanwhile, other deportations have involved large groups of families including women and children, as reported in Pakistan (RFA, 2011f), Laos (RFA, 2010f), Myanmar (WUC, 2011c), or Afghanistan (Matta, 2015). In one of the most publicized cases, more than 90 Uyghurs, including women and children, were deported from Thailand to China in 2015 (RFA, 2015l, 2015m). Far from criminals at large, the group was made up of families who had fled the country out of fear of being persecuted for their religious and political beliefs (RFA, 2011f; WUC, 2012), or because of the state crackdown that followed the 2009 riots (Cheang, 2009; RFA, 2010f, 2014e). For the most part, and once deported, the fate and whereabouts of the extradited Uyghurs are unknown, particularly when it comes to men (RFA, 2010f), although some have received sentences to prison terms accused of terrorism and separatism (RFA, 2012a, 2012p; Blanchard, 2015).

Where Beijing's extradition demands are not met, the Chinese state has relied on what has been described as a 'sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression' (Freedom House, 2021). In some cases, this has consisted of diplomatic pressure. A case in point here concerns the 22 Uyghurs who were arrested in Pakistan and sold for a bounty to the US forces after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Held for years in the Guantanamo Bay prison (Cuba), and later declared as No Longer Enemy Combatant (NLEC) by the US military, the so-called 'Guantanamo 22' were gradually resettled in third countries such as Albania, Bermuda, El Salvador, or Slovakia, with the whole group having found a host country by 2014 (Savage, 2013; Henriquez, 2015). During these years, the Chinese government unsuccessfully called on Washington to repatriate them to China, arguing that they were 'terrorists' who should face the Chinese law (Reuters, 2001b; VOA, 2004; AFP, 2004d, 2009; AP, 2006; Reuters, 2008c; El



País, 2010). This pressure turned into economic extortion and veiled threats for the countries that accepted them, or considered doing so at some point, including Palau (Carreon, 2011), Norway (BBCMSAP, 2004c), Switzerland (Swissinfo, 2010), Albania (BBCME, 2009), or Costa Rica (López, 2014). Uyghur exiles have thus developed a condition of ‘sensitive refugees’ that makes it very difficult for them to be accepted in many countries, even in those with a tradition of welcoming refugees, or with an already settled Uyghur community, such as Sweden (AFP, 2008b) or the Netherlands (RFA, 2011g).

Other common Chinese tactic in its internationalized war on terror is the harassment of Uyghur associations in the diaspora, which Beijing often frames as part of the ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’. With the connivance of the local authorities, and sometimes the help of Chinese agents on the ground, Uyghur leaders and cultural associations outside China have felt the effects of the terroristization of Xinjiang. This has notably been the case in countries of the SCO such as Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan (Working, 2001; BBCMNF, 2004). But China’s terroristization clout has transcended the realm of the SCO. In 2003, Beijing published a list of wanted terrorists that included leaders of violent militant organizations as well as peaceful activists living in Western countries (Cloud & Johnson, 2004). The experience of Dolkun Isa, president of the WUC, and who featured on this list, illustrates China’s capacity to harass Uyghur activists abroad by accusing them of having links with terrorism. Isa, who fled Xinjiang in 1997 and became a German citizen in 2006 (AI, 2009), has openly rejected the use of violent means to advance the Uyghur cause (Das, 2011). However, following China’s request, he became the subject of an Interpol red notice for terrorism (PRC, 2016). On the grounds of this notice, he has faced restrictions to his movements in countries including Italy, India, or South Korea (see J. Huang, 2017; The Times of India, 2016; AI, 2009). China’s pressure on Dolkun Isa has reached the premises of the UN in New York, where security guards expelled him without explanation in 2017 as he intended to attend an event organized by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (RFA, 2017g), in an example of China’s influence in international organizations when it comes to Xinjiang and the Uyghur issue. Many other Uyghurs living abroad have seen their lives and political activism obstructed because of Chinese pressure during the years of terroristization. Ahmadjan Osman was expelled from Syria in 2004 after 15 years living there because of his open support to the Uyghur rights cause (Cloud & Johnson, 2004). The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) questioned Erkin AlpTekin after Chinese embassy officials asked the US Department of State to deny him entry to American soil (*ibid.*). The German authorities arrested and questioned Mohammed Tohti and other Uyghur activists from Canada in 2004 when they intended to attend a meeting of the Uyghur diaspora (*ibid.*). And brothers Omer and Akbar Khan, founders of the Omer Uyghur Foundation, have been blocked by Pakistan from travelling to Istanbul to attend a summit of the Uyghur nationalist movement (RFA, 2011c). In parallel, Uyghur associations and activists based in the West have seen their websites and computers attacked by hackers based in China (Constantin, 2012; Mimoso, 2013).



Finally, China has also resorted to espionage and extortion activities against the Uyghur émigrés. Since 9/11, the presence of Chinese intelligence operatives spying on Uyghur communities in the diaspora has been reported in countries such as France (Intelligence Online, 2006), Germany (Intelligence Online, 2007), Sweden (The Local, 2009), or the Netherlands (Expatica.com, 2012). Chinese tactics include the extortion of Uyghurs abroad by means of pressuring their families back in Xinjiang. In 2004, Dolkun Isa denounced that government officials had invited him to cancel a meeting in Munich during a call made from China from a room where his parents were present (Cloud & Johnson, 2004). In 2012, the Chinese police reportedly threatened to confiscate the passports of the parents of dozens of Uyghur refugees seeking asylum in Europe unless they returned to China (RFA, 2012g). Chinese authorities also harassed for years the family of US-based Uyghur journalist Shohret Hoshur, prompting the complaints of the US Department of State in 2014 (Dietz, 2015). Meanwhile, many Uyghur students who studied Islam at Egypt's Al-Azhar University were ordered by Chinese authorities to return to Xinjiang in 2017, with family members held hostage in some cases to force them back (RFA, 2017f). Uyghurs abroad have also been cut off from their families in Xinjiang as punishment for their activities. This happened to some of the Uyghurs from Guantanamo resettled in Bermuda (NPR, 2009). Or to Isha Kokbore, an Uyghur émigré in the United States who has received death threats for his activism, and whose family back in Xinjiang has cut ties with him for fear of state reprisals (Khatchadourian, 2021). In other cases, the espionage and extortion efforts overlap, as occurred to Erkin Urban, an Uyghur living in Canada who was urged by the Chinese police to spy for them on his fellow exiles if he wanted to see his family again (Mooney & Lague, 2015). Similar cases of intimidation and surveillance have been reported amongst the Uyghur communities in Turkey (Beck, 2020).

In the era of terroristization, fleeing the persecution in Xinjiang by traveling abroad is not an immediate guarantee of achieving freedom or protection for Uyghur exiles and refugees. Outside China, whether they engage or not in political activism, Uyghurs have become potential suspects of taking part or coalescing with the 'East Turkestan terrorist forces'. At the initiative of the Chinese government, many have been detained, questioned, arrested, and, in the worst case, extradited accused of terrorism. For those Uyghurs who reach their destination, and even for those who have lived abroad for decades, the peace of mind is never total, with diaspora communities seeing their political or cultural activities monitored and obstructed, sometimes by the very countries that host them, often hesitant to confront a powerful China that continues to play broad parts of the script determined in 1996 in *Document No. 7*, now under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

### ***Sine die Terroristization: Surveillance State and 'De-Extremification' Camps***

The terroristization of Xinjiang has culminated with the emergence of a surveillance state in the region and the internment of hundreds of thousands of members

of the Uyghur and other ethnic minorities in ‘de-extremification’ camps (see China Law Translate, 2017). These developments, which the Chinese government has justified under the pretext of countering religious extremism and terrorism (SCIO, 2019), signal the *sine die* structuration of the terroristization of Xinjiang, a region whose existence is now inextricably linked to its condition of China’s frontline in the war on terrorism, and the Uyghurs, an ethnic minority silenced into an indefinite status of a ‘terrorism suspect’ community.

The high-tech mass surveillance state apparatus that now pervades Xinjiang has emerged in parallel to the declaration of a ‘people’s war on terrorism’ in 2014 and the appointment of Cheng Quanguo as the new Xinjiang Party Secretary in 2016. Known as the ‘security’, ‘police’, or ‘surveillance’ state (Rajagopalan, 2018; Chin & Bürge, 2017; Millward, 2019), this conglomerate of security practices presents levels of intrusion into the lives of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities that have transformed the region into ‘one of the most closely surveilled places on earth’ (Chin & Bürge, 2017).

The surveillance state involves, first, a ‘grid-style social management’ surveillance system that Chen previously implemented in Tibet (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b). This system involves the segmenting of urban communities into geometric zones to enable practices such as fencing off neighbourhoods or installing checkpoints at their entrance (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b; The Economist, 2016). Another element of Chen’s design is a network of so-called ‘convenient’ neighbourhood-based police stations, which serve as operational bases for police surveillance (Leibold & Zenz, 2016; see also Xinjiangnet, 2016). According to available estimates, there are up to 7,300 stations across the region, with 949 only in the region’s capital Ürümqi (Energy News, 2017; Gan, 2017b). Inside the grid, thousands of CCTV cameras monitor the population (People’s Daily, 2010e; P.Wen, 2017; Chin & Bürge, 2017). As some local media in Xinjiang put it, this system allows for ‘complete coverage without any chinks, blind spots, or blank spaces’ (quoted in Zenz & Leibold, 2017a). The grid contributes to an overarching surveillance system of ‘filters’ aimed at identifying and arresting those who the Chinese state find ‘abnormal’, ‘deviant’, or untrustworthy (see Leibold, 2019).

The mass surveillance apparatus controls the movement of the population inside and outside the urban communities. It restricts and supervises internal travel around the region by members of the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, who are routinely stopped and scrutinized. Uyghurs need official permission when they travel outside their home districts, or when they move from the rural areas into the urban cities (RFA, 2012i; The Economist, 2016). Restrictions include the creation of special identity cards known as *bianmin* (convenient), a sort of internal passport (The Economist, 2016), and an extensive system of checkpoints and facial-recognition systems aimed at identifying the population as they transit in transport hubs, roads, hospitals, or hotels within and outside the region (RFA, 2012b, 2015e, 2015q, 2015e; Global Times, 2015c; Rajagopalan, 2017; Chin & Bürge, 2017; R. Li, 2017a). Travelling outside China is also severely restricted by the confiscation of passports or by refusing to issue new documents to prevent

Uyghurs from moving overseas (RFA, 2012q, 2016j; BBC, 2016; E. Wong, 2016; HRW, 2016).

Mass surveillance infiltrates the daily lives of the ethnic minority population through a variety of intrusive practices. Households and personal items, from knives to carpets, are identified, categorized, and scrutinized (The Economist, 2016; Lai, 2017; RFA, 2017c). In parallel, broader projects of modernization transform the Uyghur home spaces according to Chinese standards (see Grose, 2020). The invasion of the Uyghur personal space is particularly aggressive when it comes to electronic devices such as cell phones, external hard drives, or laptops, which must be taken to the police for registration and scanning (O. Lam, 2017). Residents are forced to install a spyware app on their mobile phones to monitor ‘terrorist’ content and prevent them from accessing ‘terrorist information’ (RFA, 2017i; O. Lam, 2017), and pedestrians can be stopped at any moment, having their cell phones checked for sensitive content, from specific apps or messages, to ‘extremist’ videos (RFA, 2016a; Rajagopalan, 2017; HRW, 2019).

The surveillance state also relies on gathering data from citizens, which the Chinese authorities defend as required to ‘protect national security’ (R. Li, 2017b). From 2017, the Xinjiang authorities have collected DNA samples and other biometric data including fingerprints, blood and voiceprint samples, or 3D body and iris scan images as a requirement to issue new passports (HRW, 2017b, 2016; RFA, 2016g), or under the guise of a free public health programme (HRW, 2017c). According to some estimates, nearly 19 million residents of all ethnicities, almost the whole population of Xinjiang, estimated in 21.8 million (M.A. Kuo, 2017), have been profiled. Data profiling can be used for a variety of applications, such as to regulate the household registration system known as *hukou* and by which people can access education, medical, and housing benefits in their region of birth (Griffiths, 2017). At this level, DNA matching can clarify the biological relations between fathers and their presumed children to uncover cases in which ethnic minorities have resisted state family planning measures by sending ‘extra’ children to relatives (M.A. Kuo, 2017). Meanwhile, non-biometric data collection includes surveying the Muslim communities for religious profiling according to parameters including praying habits, travelling patterns, or contacts abroad (Chin & Bürge, 2017). International human rights organizations have criticized the banking of biodata and other information as ‘a gross violation of international human rights norms’ (HRW, 2017c) that adds to the speculation that the emerging surveillance state in Xinjiang serves as a laboratory for the social credit system that China seemingly plans to apply nationwide (M. Wang, 2017). At the heart of the mass surveillance system, a data management system known as the Integrated Joint Operation Platform (IJOP) analyses the information and predicts who is suspect of religious extremism or criminal intent on the basis of 36 person-types based on what the authorities perceived as suspicious behaviours (see HRW, 2019; Welch et al., 2019). These include donating to mosques or preaching the Quran without authorization, styling an ‘abnormal’ beard, using a phone registered to another person, being related to people who have obtained a new phone number, or to people who have

links abroad, but also not using a mobile phone, using the back door instead of the front, consuming an ‘unusual’ amount of electricity, or insufficiently socializing (*ibid.*).

To police the region and sustain the surveillance apparatus, the Chinese authorities have relied on the very ethnic minority population it monitors, displaying the popular dimension of the ‘people’s war’ on terror. As Zenz and Leibold (2017a) point out, the Chinese government has applied the colonial ‘imperial book’ to formally recruit a job-thirsty ‘native’ population for the incipient security industry. In parallel, the government has erected a scheming system of financial rewards in exchange for tips about suspect behaviour. This system, already applied in the months following 9/11, contemplates rewards of up to five million RMB for tip-offs depending on their counter-terrorist ‘value’ (see BBCMSAP, 2002a; Li & Kim, 2013; China Daily, 2013a; Jiang & Fang, 2014; Global Times, 2014a; RFA, 2016e; K. Huang, 2017). A quarter of the 400 terrorist suspects arrested in the first four months of the ‘people’s war’ crackdown launched in May 2014 came following tip-offs from informants of the general public (RFA, 2014n). In this scheme, the Chinese authorities have taken advantage of the precarious financial situation of much of the security workforce and other segments of the population, who see the tip-for-reward arrangement as means to make an extra salary (RFA, 2017l). Other measures mobilizing the public for surveillance purposes include constraining villagers into spying on their neighbours under threat of collective punishment (RFA, 2016f), organizing families into ‘anti-terror’ units to ‘encourage the masses to actively provide tips related to terrorism’ (RFA, 2017b), or forcing villagers into ‘revealing errors’, confessing their faults, and exposing other people’s mistakes (RFA, 2017a). Uyghur cadres and officials constitute a core target of these campaigns, with the government particularly keen on obtaining tips that expose so-called ‘two-faced’ party members or cadres who do not demonstrate enough zeal in following the official directives, and who are accused of disloyalty or of promoting extremism or separatism (RFA, 2017l; Reuters, 2016a; Gan, 2017a; C. Liu, 2017; Ramzy & Buckley, 2019; Khatchadourian, 2021). In enlisting the Xinjiang population to underpin the surveillance apparatus, the Chinese state has created an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust amongst the people it monitors, instrumental to the control and disciplining of the ethnic minorities.

In the context of the emerging mass surveillance apparatus, Xinjiang has become the nationwide epicentre of criminal punishment. In 2017, the region accounted for 21 per cent of all arrests made by the Chinese state that year, even though the XUAR population is only about 1.5 per cent of China’s total (CHRD, 2018). The period between 2013 and 2017 saw an increase of 306 per cent of the arrests in Xinjiang when compared to the previous five-year span (*ibid.*). In turn, the year 2017 alone accounted for nearly 70 per cent of all the arrests made from 2013, showing the impact of a surveillance state erected to fight the ‘war on terror’ (*ibid.*).

One of the purposes of the mass surveillance system is to gather intelligence on which to accuse people of religious extremism and send them to ‘re-education’ camps. In what constitutes the latest development in China’s war on terrorism,

hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities – up to two million according to UN-cited estimates – have been forced without trial into these ‘political camps for indoctrination’ (Nebehay, 2018), in what constitutes ‘the largest mass incarceration of a minority population in the world today’ (CECC, 2018). The Chinese authorities have mapped the mass internment of Uyghurs as part of the country’s crackdown on terrorism and extremism. Chinese officials have described the camps as ‘boarding schools’ (Gan 2019), ‘campuses’ (Reuters 2019), or ‘vocational education and training centers’ (PRC 2019). A Chinese delegation to the UN described the camps as facilities where ‘those who are convicted of minor offences’ are taught ‘vocational skills in education and training centres, according to relevant laws’ (L. Kuo, 2018; China Daily, 2018). In the words of Li Xiaojun, director for publicity at the Bureau of Human Rights Affairs of China’s State Council Information Office, the camps are ‘like your children go to vocational-training schools to get better skills and better jobs after graduation’ (quoted in Miles & Nebehay, 2018). Chinese official narratives also claim that the camps have successfully stabilized the region, preventing it from becoming ‘China’s Syria’ or ‘China’s Libya’ (Global Times, 2018).

For many observers, however, this unprecedented campaign represents no less than a ‘vast new gulag’ (Millward, 2019), a ‘complex system of incarceration and control of minorities’ (VanderKlippe, 2019), a ‘massive policy of indefinite detention without trial, mass internment, and imprisonment’ (UHRP, 2019, p. 2), or China’s ‘definitive solution to the Uyghur question’ (Zenz, 2019). Meanwhile, Western scholars, activists, and governments have started to make sense of China’s latest actions in Xinjiang as an orchestrated ‘genocidal’ effort against the Uyghurs (see Smith Finley, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Wong & Buckley, 2021).

Due to the reporting restrictions in the region, journalists and academics only started to notice the extent of the mass internment of Uyghurs in 2017 (Zenz, 2018; Rajagopalan, 2017). The available information suggests a variety of reasons for internment. Some people have been arrested for motives related to the crackdown on ‘religious extremism’. They were confined for participating in unauthorized religious activities, wearing veils and other religious attire, or having ‘extremist’ or ‘separatist’ content stored in cell phones (HRW, 2017a; RFA, 2018b; Rajagopalan, 2017; Chin & Bürge, 2017). Others have been imprisoned for travelling or having connections abroad, either because they studied religion or travelled to Muslim nations, or because their relatives live in other countries (*ibid.*). Some internees are in the camps not because of their deeds, but because their relatives have been previously arrested (*ibid.*), or for past actions, as far as a decade ago, such as having attended Koranic studies classes or watched ‘terrorism’ videos (CHRD, 2018). In some cases, illiterate minority farmers with no criminal records have been detained and interned simply for not speaking Chinese (Shih, 2018).

Overall, and as a Chinese official declared to HRW, the authorities in Xinjiang have been arresting people, not simply because of their links to ‘religious extremism’ or potential for participation in dissident activities, but in a random manner aimed at filling quotas and satisfying the wishes of the upper echelons of the Party (HRW,

2020; see also Khatchadourian, 2021). The broad scope of people arrested and sent to the camps signals an effort on the part of the Chinese government to net as many as possible into these facilities. Judging from their physical features – they include security walls, barbed-wire fences, reinforced doors and windows, watchtowers, camera surveillance systems, and entry checkpoints (Z. Li, 2018; Zenz, 2019) – the camps look far from the ‘vocational’ or ‘educational’ training centres that China claims they are.

Inside the camps, the Chinese authorities pursue a programme of ‘de-extremification’ based on the idea of ‘transformation through education’, a concept previously applied in contexts like the persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual practice, disciplinary processes within the CPC, or drug addict rehabilitation (Zenz, 2019). An official research paper describes the ‘transformation through education’ effort as the ‘permanent cure’ for Xinjiang (Shih, 2018). This method, the paper points out, was applied on people ‘who did not know what they had done wrong when they were sent to re-education’, and who, only after being released, realized of their ‘mistakes’ (ibid.). The idea of mass internment of bodies ignorant of their disease that need to be ‘de-extremized’ and ‘transformed’ fits into the bio-political and dehumanizing dimensions of the Chinese state terrorism discourse in Xinjiang (see Roberts, 2018). Recalling metaphors used in the past, a Chinese official has praised the camps in the following terms:

You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one – you need to spray chemicals to kill them all ... Reeducating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. That is why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people.

*(quoted in REA, 2018a)*

Accounts on the life inside the camps provided by informants, former internees, and their relatives explain how the Chinese state implements the ‘transformation’ and ‘de-extremification’ agenda. Their testimonies speak of a programme of cultural sinicization, secularization, and patriotic indoctrination held in very poor conditions. Internees receive Chinese language and history lessons, which are taught as a matter of ‘patriotism’ (HRW, 2017a; HRW, 2018b). History lessons present Xinjiang as a land ‘liberated’ by the CPC, its inhabitants rescued from slavery and backwardness (Shih, 2018). Chinese assimilation is paralleled by the rejection of religion as a harmful and dangerous practice. This has prompted fears of a ‘cultural cleansing’ (ibid.) of the Uyghur ethnic identity through the erosion of one of its core markers. Chinese officials lecture internees on the dangers of Islam (ibid.). They also invite them to disavow their Muslim beliefs, and apologize for and reject as ‘extremist’ many of the religious practices benchmarked as such in the official discourse (ibid.; see Table 4.4). The re-education camps are a vehicle to replace religious faith with a patriotic loyalty to the CPC and the Chinese state. In this ‘coercive social re-engineering’ effort (Zenz, 2019), internees are forced to learn and recite Xinjiang laws and policies, watch pro-government propaganda videos, sing

the Chinese national anthem and praises of the Party, raise the Chinese flag, learn ‘red songs’, attend lectures on Xi Jinping’s thought, and thank the CPC and Xi for their meals (HRW, 2017a, 2018b; Shih, 2017, 2018; Dooley, 2018; Khatchadourian, 2021). The programme is implemented under a strong psychological pressure that reflects the same mechanisms of the surveillance state, forcing the internees not only to criticize themselves but also to denounce other members of their ethnic group (Shih, 2017; Dooley, 2018). Resistance is met with widespread mistreatment and abuse which, according to available accounts, includes torture, rape, solitary confinement, food and sleep deprivation, lack of treatment for illnesses, suicide attempts, custodial deaths, or gynaecological problems in women (BBC, 2018; Shih, 2017, 2018; EFE, 2018; HRW, 2018b; Hill et al., 2021; Haitiwaji & Morgat, 2021; Khatchadourian, 2021).

In the process of terroristization, the surveillance state and the mass internment of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities for their ‘transformation through re-education’ signal the *sine die* structuration of the terroristization stage, one in which the systematic construction of violent tensions as a terrorism problem, and the politics this enables, permeates the everyday of Xinjiang and its population. As a massive dragnet for the incarceration of the thousands, China’s mass surveillance apparatus transcends religious or political boundaries. It does not simply target mosques or universities, the politically sensitive or the devoutly religious. It is everywhere, affecting everyone. In the name of fighting terrorism, the Chinese state has *terroritized* Xinjiang, transforming vast segments of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and others in the Turkic Muslim communities into perennial terrorist suspects by virtue of their religious faith or their ethnic condition.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the Chinese state *terroritized* violent unrest in Xinjiang following 9/11, how it transformed the region into China’s front in the GWOt, and how hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities became a terrorism suspect community. The official representation of violent conflict in Xinjiang as largely the result of a dissident separatist and religious extremist agency linked to international terrorist forces has been instrumental to the reproduction of an endless state of emergency in the region. The ensuing ‘people’s war’ has come to permeate the life society, culture, and politics of Xinjiang. This chapter has traced the reification of the terrorist threat in the everyday existence of vast segments of the Uyghur people, whose lives are surveilled, their bodies disciplined, and their identity intervened and re-engineered. This threat is observable in the active checkpoints and convenient police stations that overrun the streets, in the show of force embodied in massive military parades, in the Chinese flags that hang from mosques in Xinjiang, in the system of re-education camps, or in the propaganda banners that flood the Uyghur villages and neighbourhoods (BBC, 2015a). As this chapter has shown, the social construction

of terrorism in Xinjiang has international ramifications, with China increasingly intruding upon and harassing Uyghur communities in the diaspora.

The post-9/11 Chinese state discourse of terrorism in Xinjiang and the security practices it enables appear indefinite in the horizon. The terroristization of Xinjiang is now structural, *sine die*. This is particularly the case in light of the increasing power of China in the international arena. In 2005, in the early years of the process of terroristization, and under pressure from Washington, Beijing agreed on releasing Rebiya Kadeer from prison. Under the current context, China's tight grip on Xinjiang and the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities seems inexorable. One can hardly imagine other fate for Ilham Tohti different from serving a full life sentence for 'separatism'.



# CONCLUSION

In January 2018, the Secretary of Defence of the United States, James Mattis, revealed that, within US security strategy, the main focus of national defence would shift from fighting terrorism to countering the growing military might of China and Russia. The announcement signalled a change of priorities already suggested in the 'Pivot to Asia' policy promulgated during President Barack Obama's administration (2009–2017). Mattis' statement confirmed Washington's distancing, almost two decades after the 9/11 attacks in New York, from the Global War on Terror (GWOt). The demise of terrorism as a priority for the American national security agenda has only been accentuated with the worsening of US–China relations during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). The same fight against terrorism that seems to have lost its prime spot on the American security agenda has continued, however, to be paramount to the domestic and foreign policy of Washington's newest rising contender, China.

For China, the GWOt continues to be a fresh priority that justifies renewed domestic repression in the name of counter-terrorism, a crackdown recently manifested in the mass internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in Xinjiang for 'de-extremification' and 're-education' purposes, in what Western scholars and legislatures increasingly see as an orchestrated 'genocidal' effort (see Smith Finley, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Ever since the 9/11 attacks, Chinese officials have indistinctively represented political opposition, ethnic and religious tensions, and violent unrest of all kinds as *their* terrorist problem, making lobbying for international acceptance of this framing a core element of their foreign policy undertakings. In the first anniversary of 9/11, linking the 'East Turkestan forces' to Al-Qaeda, China reminded the world that it was 'a victim of terrorism' (AFP, 2002c). Often with 'crude political opportunism' (Sudworth, 2015), the Chinese government has continued to evoke the threat of Uyghur-related terrorism every time a violent attack takes place in

the world (BBCMSAP, 2001h, 2004b; AFP, 2003a; Dasgupta, 2008). While it fades in the American security agenda, the GWoT is very much alive for the Chinese state, which enthusiastically presents to the world its ‘people’s war on terror’ in Xinjiang as an example of what a successful counter-terrorism policy should look like (Yi, 2019). For President Xi Jinping, the region continues to be ‘the front line of terrorism’ (M. Lin, 2014). Interestingly, however, despite long-standing—and often violent—upheaval in Xinjiang, the threat of terrorism did not exist in the Chinese government’s security repertoire before 9/11.

When the original field of terrorism emerged in the US in the 1960s (see Rapoport, 1984; Schmid, 2011), terrorism was conceived merely as a ‘new mode of conflict’ ready to be analysed with established research tools and frameworks (Jenkins 1983, pp. 8–9). To examine terrorism in China, this book moved significantly away from the positivist–realist tenets associated with such traditional study of terrorism, based on its reification as an objective type of violent action, and mainly concerned with defining terrorism and exploring its causes in order to counter it. Exploring how terrorism is not simply ‘given’, the book showed that, while the materiality of violence matters, it does so in conjunction with discourse and the broader context in which narratives emerge and develop. Specifically, this book contributed to our understanding of how it was possible that Xinjiang became a ‘terrorist’ problem for China by revealing the origins and evolution of the Chinese state’s discourse about this conflict and its tensions with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, notably the Uyghurs.

To this end, the book developed a terroristization conceptual framework for the analysis of the discursive construction of terrorist threats in wider historical contexts. This was conceptually based on the core ontological, epistemological, and normative tenets of the critical and narrative turns in Terrorism Studies as well as on a discussion of the concept of securitization, as devised by the Copenhagen School and expanded in later interventions. These frameworks enabled an examination of the discursive constructions of security threats by non-liberal regimes and within their broader historical context. Empirically, this book examined Uyghur-related violent events, the Chinese state discursive representation of such incidents, and the way Chinese official narratives enabled particular policies to respond to the conflict, both before and after 9/11. In particular, the book assessed how the material features of violence have shaped the Chinese state’s discursive representation of violence in Xinjiang and how the ensuing official narratives have, in turn, moulded the security practices subsequently enacted by the Chinese government to police and discipline the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities.

Examining the question of how security discourses develop and change over time, including in non-democracies, such as the People’s Republic of China, contributes to our understanding of how, why, and with what consequences internal conflict and violent events are interpreted and represented as terrorism. As this book has shown, ‘terrorism’ exists in Xinjiang as a security threat not because of particular violent phenomena that can be objectively recognized as ‘terrorist’ incidents by virtue of their features ranging from the motivation of the perpetrators to the ways

they exploit violent means. Rather it exists because the Chinese state has chosen to systematically frame Uyghur-related violent unrest as a ‘terrorism problem’ in the context of the global fight against terrorism that followed 9/11. The rationale for the ‘war on terrorism’ that the Chinese government has been waging for years in Xinjiang, including through a protracted crackdown on the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, is thus not grounded on a change in the nature or incidence of violence in the region, but on the Chinese state’s political agenda.

As this book demonstrates, the construction of violent conflict in Xinjiang as terrorism is a contingent representation that is not inevitable. Indeed, as it has been shown, there was a time when violent unrest in Xinjiang was not represented as terrorism, and when the Chinese state managed the tensions in the region through a moderate and restrained approach. This was an approach, this book emphasized, that, far from interpreting violence as an emergency threat demanding a security crackdown, understood it as the outcome of long-standing structural factors, including inter-ethnic mistrust and economic grievances. Such an approach prioritized moderate policies towards the region’s ethnic minorities.

## The Concept of Terroristization

To answer the core research question of how violent tensions in Xinjiang came to be understood as a terrorist problem for the Chinese state, Chapter 1 developed the idea of terroristization into an original conceptual framework. To advance this aim, and in line with critical approaches to the study of terrorism, this book conceptualized terrorism as a social construct rather than as an objective extra-discursive object of knowledge. Based on the premise that terrorism does not exist independent from interpretation and representation, the chapter turned its attention to discussing the core tenets of securitization theory to develop the notion of terroristization. It reflected on core elements of securitization, such as the relevance of the state as the key author of political discourse that seeks to legitimize exceptional emergency measures which lay outside the realm of a ‘normal’ politics characterized by deliberation, dialogue, and compromise. This opened an analytical avenue to empirically study terrorism as something that is ‘talked’ into being by a country’s political leadership in order to enable extraordinary counter-terrorism agendas.

Chapter 1 built on existing interventions and debates expanding and refining the Copenhagen School’s concept of securitization to explicitly develop the terroristization framework in two directions. First, it widened the temporal scope of ‘speaking terrorism’ in order to account for how political agents construct generic security threats and specific violent events before, during, and after the emergence of the language of terrorism. Such moves were identified as pre-terroristization, proto-terroristization, and terroristization stages in the historical processes of the discursive construction of terrorist threats. Second, the chapter reflected on how authoritarian regimes, although they do not require institutional approval for a repressive ‘emergency’ policy agenda, may find a terroristization discourse appealing because it aids their legitimization of past or future action to curb internal resistance,

including the enforcing of extraordinary controls of the population, and obtaining formal and moral support at the international level. In developing the idea of terroristization, this book introduced a conceptually productive analytical avenue for the study of the discursive construction of violent conflict in Xinjiang by the Chinese state.

Chapter 1 also engaged with recent Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) scholarship to explore the discursive turn in the study of terrorism. Identifying terrorism as an instant securitizer, it reflected on the rhetorical power of the language of terrorism to confer a set of meanings to violent phenomena that enable some courses of political action while marginalizing others. While putting the socially constructed nature of terrorism at centre stage, the study reserved an important role for the material features of violence in the terroristization framework. In doing so, it integrated a 'minimal foundationalist' perspective that permitted the investigation of how the materiality of violence shapes how terrorism is 'talked' into being and vice versa. Further, examining how materiality and discourse are intertwined, the chapter explored the dominant scholarly definitions of terrorism as a structure of knowledge that provides the background to, and influences, the social construction of terrorism. Based on dominant scholarly definitional markers introduced here, the book created a mapping device that facilitates interpreting the phenomenology of violence as terrorism according to observable characteristics of violent phenomena and considerations about the motivations of the perpetrators. This 'scale' of terrorism materiality enabled the examination of how well the interpretation and discursive representation of Uyghur-related violent events in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China map onto general understandings of what terrorism is and making inferences about the Chinese state's terroristization moves.

## Violence, Discourse, and Politics in the Uyghur Region

Part Two of this book consisted of an in-depth empirical analysis of the three main dimensions of the terroristization conceptual framework applied to the case of Xinjiang: the phenomenology of Uyghur-related violence and its mapping (or not) onto prominent terrorism markers; the Chinese state discourse on interpreting and representing violent conflict and constructing specific violent incidents as terrorism; and the political implications of this official discourse.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 analysed the terroristization of Xinjiang as a historical process that evolved in the three key phases of pre-terroristization (1978–1990), proto-terroristization (1991–2001), and terroristization (2001–2020). Through this empirical investigation, this book explored how Xinjiang came to be understood primarily as a terrorism problem following 9/11. It helped uncover how security narratives about violent conflict, informed by the materiality of violent events and dominant discursive structures defining terrorism, are productive in the sense that they set the limits of political possibility and shape political action. This oriented the empirical focus of research on violence in Xinjiang away from a narrow analysis of the assumption that China faces a terrorist threat in the region that demands

definition, explanation, and response. It also suggested a greater focus on the discursive patterns through which intra-state conflict, ethnic minorities, 'dissident' territories, or identity markers, such as religion, are constructed as terrorist elements, how these narratives have endorsed and informed subsequent counter-terrorism policies, and how they connect with pre-existing discursive contexts such as the definitional debate on terrorism or the GWOt discourse.

The empirical analysis in Chapter 2 focused on what this book described as the years of 'counterrevolution' (1978–1990), when the Chinese state securitized Xinjiang. The chapter showed how, despite sporadic violent outbursts with a primary socio-ethnic character in the early years of the 'reform and opening up' period, the Chinese government maintained a moderate discourse during much of the 1980s. Far from conceptualizing Uyghur-related violent unrest as a national security threat, Chinese authorities represented it as a social problem rooted in a long-standing history of ethnic mistrust and economic grievances between the Han Chinese population and the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities. As this book suggested, this was a discourse that actively played down violent tensions in the region, displaying moderation, pragmatism, and restraint in respect of ethnic-related violence. Yet despite the lack of significant violent incidents during the second half of the decade, the absence of evidence of an organized violent resistance in Xinjiang, and in a context of domestic and international challenges to the CPC's authoritarian rule, the discourse of Chinese officials and state media underwent a gradual shift. From 1988 onwards, they began to represent violence and dissent in the region as a separatist 'counterrevolutionary' threat to the stability and unity of China. The chapter illustrated how this emerging discourse constructed religion as a major force pushing 'hostile forces' to undermine Chinese national unity and the survival of the communist regime. The Chinese government's approach to Xinjiang changed in line with this discursive shift. The authorities abandoned the 'gradualist' policies that, even in the face of violent incidents, sought to defuse the tensions with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities by encouraging their religious, cultural, and economic rehabilitation. Instead, they adopted an increasingly repressive approach characterized by a religious clampdown, the increased deployment of security forces, and a suspension of the liberalizing trends that had characterized the ethnic politics during the 1980s. As the chapter emphasized, this shift culminated when the Chinese authorities linked their abstract claims about a 'counterrevolutionary' threat to the 'real' violent incident in Baren (1990), which they framed as a 'counterrevolutionary rebellion' and a 'holy war', establishing Xinjiang as the locus of a lasting conflict.

As this book argued, the prescription of a security response to the Baren incident, which combined domestic crackdown and militarization with early diplomatic moves aimed at obtaining support to neutralize Uyghur dissidents abroad, set the scene for the Chinese government's approach to Xinjiang in the 1990s. Chapter 2 thus showed the importance of understanding that there was a period in the contemporary history of Xinjiang when the Chinese government chose not to represent violent tensions with the ethnic minorities as a national security – let alone

a terrorist – threat. It also emphasized how the Chinese authorities abandoned this approach through a politically driven discursive shift that proactively marginalized interpretations of these tensions as a reaction to the increasingly repressive policies, and favoured instead the representation of the violence as a direct religiously and exogenously inspired political challenge to Chinese rule in the region.

The patterns and political consequences of the Chinese state's discursive construction of the tensions in Xinjiang during the 1990s were investigated in Chapter 3. This book described this period as a proto-terroristization stage to signify how the language of terrorism gradually emerged in official narratives, while the 'counter-revolutionary' jargon of the 1980s faded, but never to the extent of becoming dominant. The chapter showed how, following the Baren incident, violent events continued to rock the region in various forms, a few of which exhibited the tactical attributes associated with terrorism by scholarly definitions to a great extent. It also highlighted how violent incidents reached a peak between 1996 and 1998, following the Chinese government's increased pressure and crackdown on the Uyghurs. As demonstrated, the Chinese state's discourse continued to shape the policies in Xinjiang by articulating dissident separatism and religious 'extremism' as externally instigated core threats to national stability. This discourse, the study revealed, instilled a sense of emergency and exceptionalism in Xinjiang, dehumanizing enemies and calling for a 'merciless' fight in the region. The chapter revealed in detail how the official narratives prescribed the escalation of the crackdown in the region as the logical response to an ever-intensifying threat. In particular, it shed light on how the construction of religion as a negative threatening force facilitated the securitization of Islam in Xinjiang during the 1990s. These developments were accelerated by the publication of the official directive, *Document No. 7*, in 1996 and further embodied by launching massive 'strike-hard' crackdown campaigns in the region. The chapter demonstrated how this directive activated the internationalization of the crackdown in Xinjiang. It traced how the Chinese government used its economic might during these years to enlist the support of countries to suppress Uyghur dissident activities abroad, a strategy culminated by the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the group's commitment to fight the 'three evil forces' of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. The chapter revealed how Chinese officials who, during most of the 1990s had maintained a low profile when it came to reacting to violent incidents, constructed the Ghulja riots in 1997 as a terrorist incident with a global dimension to reify their claims. This was despite the fact that the characteristics of the incident hardly mapped onto the general understandings of terrorism. Noticing the contingent nature of the terrorism label in the official discourse, the chapter evidenced how, during the years before the Ghulja riots, the Chinese government did not use the jargon of terrorism to represent violent incidents in the region, even in the face of attacks that echoed most of the dominant definitional features of terrorism.

The final empirical chapter of this book analysed how the Chinese state *terroristized* the tensions with the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang following the 9/

11 attacks in New York in 2001, enabling the launching of a ‘people’s war on terrorism’ in the region. Chapter 4 demonstrated how Chinese leaders seized the post-9/11 *momentum* to reframe the conflict in Xinjiang as China’s domestic front in the GWoT. By discursively linking historical tensions in Xinjiang going as far back as the beginning of the 20th century to the events in the US, Chinese officials and state media elevated a domestic issue to the category of a global terrorism problem. This move, the chapter showed, was sustained by narratives reproduced at the international level that lobbied to have the fight against the newly labelled ‘East Turkestan terrorist forces’ recognized as part of the larger US-led GWoT. The study showed how, after bandwagoning on the GWoT, the Chinese state continued to represent Xinjiang as the scenario of an imminent terrorist threat, going to the extent of declaring that the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics were under the threat of terrorism, despite the absence of significant Uyghur-related violent unrest in the region between 1999 and 2008. This new-fangled official terrorism discourse, the chapter explained, constructed Islam as the ‘extremist’ force behind terrorism and articulated a pre-emptive and pro-active ‘people’s war’ of extermination as the logical and legitimate way of responding to what it represented as an ever-intensifying threat. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, the Chinese state materialized what up to then had been an abstract threat when, following years of repression under the pretext of fighting non-existent terrorism, violence resurfaced in Kashgar in August 2008. This was done, it was shown, through the systematic construction of all subsequent violent events as terrorist attacks or terrorism-related incidents, despite the fact that the vast majority of these episodes did not map onto general understandings of terrorism. The chapter traced how the official discourse continued to shape China’s policies in the region during this stage, which consisted of an exponentially intensified crackdown on religious practices and political dissent that culminated in the erection of a surveillance apparatus in Xinjiang and the internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in ‘de-extremification’ camps. The chapter also analysed how the Chinese state exported the framing of Xinjiang as China’s front in the GWoT to the international stage, using its political and economic power to increase the pressure on Uyghur activists abroad and claim the deportation and extradition of hundreds of members of the Uyghur ethnic minority who had previously fled Xinjiang. At this point, this book stressed the relevance of appreciating how the Chinese state seized 9/11 to reframe as ‘terrorism’ long-lasting violent tensions dating from a time when the terror jargon was absent from the official discourse. As it was highlighted, Chinese officials constructed and inflated the terror threat in Xinjiang even in the absence of violent incidents in the region. They then appealed to that threat to legitimize an intensification of the crackdown on the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, and used the ensuing resurfacing of violence to justify previous claims and re-orientate the crackdown towards an institutionalized ‘people’s war on terrorism’, marking the *sine die* terroristization of Xinjiang.

## Broader Lessons from the Terroristization of Xinjiang

As the foregoing chapters have shown, the Chinese state interpretation and representation of violent tensions in Xinjiang gradually changed between the early years of the 'reform and opening up' era (1978–1990) and the post-9/11 period. Chinese official narratives evolved from perceiving conflict in the region as the inevitable result of structural factors including the historical ethnic mistrust and economic gap between the Han and Uyghur populations, into a radical position that first constructed the frictions, the region, the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, and their cultural and religious identity first as a security threat, and later, spurred by 9/11 and the GWoT, as a terrorism problem. This discursive shift enabled a change in the Chinese policies in Xinjiang, which evolved from a compromising approach to the tensions focused on the rehabilitation and liberalization of the ethnic minority identities and the economic development of the region, into one that espoused a protracted crackdown on these groups as the logical response to the threat. Through a gradual process that greatly relied on shaping specific violent events in ways that fixated and certified the core tenets of these overarching official narratives, the Chinese government used the terroristization of Xinjiang to articulate this repression, and to justify, legitimize, and rally support for its regional policies in the domestic and international arenas. These findings and the overall process of terroristization provide broader lessons for the study of terrorism and political violence in general and the understanding of the Chinese state policies in particular.

In this sense, this book underscores first and foremost the relevance of political discourse and the social construction of security and terrorism narratives in the quasi-causal shaping of political change and political outcomes. It highlights how overarching state narratives can transform issues into security threats, defining the contours of the agents of the threat and their motivations, and shaping the political possibilities to confront them. These narratives, this book suggests, are consolidated through the representation of catalytic violent events in accordance with previously articulated discursive patterns, in a way that legitimizes and re-enacts existing political avenues. At the same time, this book reveals the revitalizing role that the integration of politically productive vernaculars that resonate with the dominant geopolitical context may have for these narratives, as the Chinese state post-9/11 elevation of the terrorism jargon in the official discourse demonstrates. The focus of this lesson lies, therefore, not in merely stressing the importance of discourse in shaping political outcomes and having a quasi-causal effect on political change, but on investigating how and in which ways, this process unfolds.

Concerning the Xinjiang conflict, this book reveals the contingent and unstable nature of the Chinese state construction of violence in the region as terrorism. It problematizes the inevitability of the rationale behind China's 'war on terror', which prescribes a brutal crackdown as the only possible approach to govern the tensions, violent and non-violent, that have historically characterized China's rule over the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. This rationale, that constructs an externally instigated extremist separatist agency as the core factor



driving Uyghur-related unrest, marginalizes other crucial factors that have enabled the incubation and eruption of violent outbursts in the region, in particular, the tensions created by the counter-terrorist policies with which the Chinese authorities have been trying to placate the unrest. From a normative perspective, this draws attention to the abusive nature of the Chinese state systematic use of the terrorist jargon to represent the tensions in Xinjiang. When the Chinese authorities have opted for a restrained interpretation of violent tensions and a moderate response through gradual policies, the result has been a defusing of the tensions and an improvement in the government's relation with the ethnic minorities in the region. The Chinese state social construction of terrorism in Xinjiang, this book argues, is an example of a contingent avoidable discourse that renders crackdown and repression possible, while militating against moderate policies. It also stresses the importance of exploring the local context and historical experiences, in particular before 9/11, of contemporary scenarios of 'terrorism' (see Smyth, 2007, p. 261; Gunning, 2007a, p. 366).

Another lesson of this book is that definitions of terrorism, and more specifically dominant scholarly constructions of terrorism, have an unmistakable influence in the political arena, not because of the legal or political implications of the actual meaning/s that they attach to terrorism, but because they constitute a discursive structure of significance with a capacity to influence the interpretation and representation of violent events by political actors. These structures do not exist in discursive isolation, but in dialectal relation with the materiality of violence, which as it has been shown, influences the formation and articulation of security narratives, as well as their political productivity. In highlighting the relevance of scholarly definitions of terrorism for critical discursive approaches to this subject, this book opens space for bridging the traditional and critical divide within Terrorism Studies.

## Implications for Future Research

The arguments and findings presented here have important implications for future research on terrorism and violence and conflict in Xinjiang. First and foremost, this book has reiterated the need for security and terrorism scholars to recognize the socially constructed nature of the concept of terrorism and the unavoidable political cargo of using the language of terrorism to represent violent phenomena. Regardless of whether they hold a positivist or post-positivist intellectual orientation, terrorism scholars must pay serious attention to the importance of having a conceptual discussion and interrogating the concept of terrorism before delving into research. This is not to say that the study of terrorism ought to be discursive in nature but to emphasize that there are conceptual, analytical, and normative complexities in the use of terrorism as a concept guiding research on political violence. Studies on terrorism should at least be reflective, acknowledge, and ideally try to accommodate these complexities, explicitly recognizing the limits of the concept and the potential implications of these limitations in analytical and normative

terms. In short, this book suggests that terrorism is an analytically productive but otherwise 'imperfect' concept.

This book also indicates the need for additional research on the 'discursive past' of localized conflicts that have become dominantly constructed as scenarios of terrorism before or after 9/11. Tracing the historical background of the representation of these conflicts may reveal pre-existing alternative ways of naming dissident populations – and dealing with them – in turn unveiling the contingent nature of contemporary constructions of terrorism and the abusive nature of political approaches that are perceived as levelheaded under dominant 'counter-terrorism' rationales. Studies in this fashion may consider the terroristization analytical framework developed in this book to investigate the historical processes by which violent conflicts have become dominantly represented as terrorism by looking at the material, discursive, and political dimensions of such constructions.

Considering securitization theory, future research on the social construction of terrorism might also adopt the Copenhagen School's reverse idea of desecuritization to explore processes of what could, in turn, be conceptualized as deterroristization. Where desecuritization refers to the process by which political actors declare an issue not to be an existential threat, in a way that enables the opening up of domestic space for open political struggle and deliberation and non-emergency politics (see Wæver, 1995), deterroristization could be developed into an analytical framework for the study of discourses which refrain from using the language of terrorism to construct violent conflict. Such a framework could inform the study of modes of representation that avoid uncritical stances constructing violence and perpetrators as an 'evil' that ought to be eliminated, and instead reflect upon social and historical contextual factors to offer a more nuanced view of violent conflict, in the way rendering possible political solutions different to a counter-terrorism or military-informed crackdown. These research avenues could, for instance, approach the Chinese state discourse on the violence of the early 1980s as an example of restraint and moderation that departs from previous more radical discourses during the Cultural Revolution. Another case study in this direction could be the peace agreements between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which have explicitly refrained from using the terror jargon prioritizing instead terms such as 'conflict', 'bilateral hostilities', and 'guerrilla organizations' and opening up a less confrontational route of engagement between the two parties (Gobierno de Colombia, 2012, 2016; see also Homolar & Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

A final avenue for future research that this book suggests involves investigating in greater detail how the Chinese state discourse has been contested and destabilized. The social construction of terrorism is an open-ended inter-subjective process and, while having a powerful position, the Chinese state is not the only political actor making sense of violence in Xinjiang. As the study of the official and alternative narratives constructing violent events in the region has demonstrated, there are a number of actors, from Uyghur groups in the diaspora to other governments around the world, that have provided alternative interpretations and representations

of the violent tensions in Xinjiang and the incidents taking place there, in the way challenging and destabilizing the Chinese government's self-purported 'truth about Xinjiang' (PRC, 2020; Global Times, 2020) and enabling the imagination of political possibilities different to the 'war on terrorism'. This line of inquiry may also examine how political actors resisting the state discourse have relied on underscoring that the phenomenology of violence in Xinjiang does not reflect general understandings of terrorism, prompting the terroristization move to lose political track and potentially backfire.

## From Terroristization to Assimilation

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, during the first years of the 'reform and opening up' era, Chinese authorities adopted a moderate approach towards the violent tensions that had historically characterized the relations between the state and the Uyghur- and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in the region. This approach did not play up the tensions between the Han and Uyghur ethnic populations by constructing them as a dissident challenge to China's rule in the region. Rather, it sought to defuse them by taking into consideration their historical, cultural, and economic dimensions. The policies that resulted from this gradualist agenda made Xinjiang live up to its condition of Uyghur Autonomous Region. They were based on the religious, cultural, and economic rehabilitation of the Uyghurs, who today look at those years as a sort of 'golden age' for the affirmation of their ethnic identity. This trajectory, one in which the ethnic minorities could have found accommodation within the Chinese state under a political-administrative setting that was sensitive to their cultural and religious traits, stands nowadays as a historical curiosity. More than three decades later, the region seems closer to the days of the Cultural Revolution than ever. As this book has demonstrated, the securitization, first, and terroristization, later, of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs, is the result of a discursive and political choice of the Chinese state, which, regardless of how these tensions developed, consciously abandoned a path of accommodation in favour of a 'war on terrorism'. The latest manifestation of this 'people's war' is the emergence of a surveillance state where hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities are interned for their 'de-extremification' and assimilation. As shown here, the terroristization of Xinjiang that led to this outcome was not inevitable.

This book has therefore advanced a straightforward argument: the Chinese state has discursively constructed violent tensions with the Uyghurs in Xinjiang first as a security threat and then as a terrorism problem by shaping the interpretation and representation of these tensions and specific violent incidents in ways that fitted an overarching security narrative. The purpose of that narrative, moreover, is to advance and legitimize crackdown in the region for the sake of a certain conception of stability. The terroristization of the Uyghur ethnic minority and the transformation of Xinjiang into a front of the GWoT are the latest of a string of discursive and political strategies used by the Chinese state to crack down on ethnic groups that it has historically regarded with mistrust. This latest development, however, is

one that transcends the very purposes for which it was originally constructed. The rationale behind the Chinese policies in Xinjiang is not anymore about cracking down on political dissidents under the excuse of fighting terrorism. The *sine die* terroristization of Xinjiang suggests that there is no possible end to this localized war on terrorism, which has become institutionalized and now underpins an ulterior agenda aimed at diluting the ethnic consciousness of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities to assimilate them into the Chinese nation.

# APPENDIX

## List of Violent Events

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
1981	Payzawat County (Kashgar prefecture)	Failed armed uprising by the Eastern Turkestan Prairie Party.	Dillon, 2004; Rong, 2003; X. Chen, 2014; Reuters, 1988b
10/1981	Kashgar	Ethnic riot triggered by a street scuffle in which an ethnic Han Chinese killed an Uyghur peasant.	Wren, 1983; Rong, 2003; L.H. Sun, 1985; Y. Liu, 2014; Oziewicz, 1983; Dillon 2004
1983	Kashgar	Unspecified attacks against CPC cadres.	Abel, 1985
12/1985	Ürümchi, Beijing, Shanghai	Student protests.	AP, 1985, 1986; AFP 1985; Burns 1985; UPI 1985; Roche, 1988e
5/1989	Ürümchi	Rioters storm government compounds, beating officials and police.	Mudin, 2012; BBCMSAP, 1989a, 1989b
4/1990	Baren township (Akto County, Kizilsu Kirghiz autonomous prefecture)	Riot and clashes with the Chinese security forces following a religious protest in the streets of Baren.	BBCMSAP, 1990a; Dinmore, 1990a; Paula, 1994; S. Long, 1990b, 1990c; Kynge, 1990a, 1990b; Millward, 2007; Kyodo, 1990; AI, 1992

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
1991	Ürümchi	Riots erupt following a protest against the exploitation of the resources of Xinjiang.	SCMP, 1991c
2/1991	Kuchar (Aqsu prefecture)	A device explodes at a video theatre, killing one person and injuring 13 others.	SCIO, 2002; S.Wang, 2004
2/1992	Ürümchi	Two bombs explode in public city buses.	Reuters, 1992; AP, 1992; Grace, 1992; BBCMSAP, 1995e
3/1992	Kashgar	Chinese security forces suppress a pro-independence protest, killing some demonstrators.	Preston, 1992
8/1993	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	A device explodes in a government-affiliated building.	SCIO, 2002
8/1993	Hotan	A device explodes in front of the Cultural Palace.	SCIO, 2002
8/1993	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	Murder attempt against Abliz Damolla, imam of a mosque and CPC cadre.	SCIO, 2002
7/1995	Hotan	Riots erupt after hundreds of protesters occupy the CPC headquarters protesting the arrest of local cleric Abdul Kayum, imam of the Baytulla mosque, and clash with the police.	AI, 1999
2/1996	Onsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Premeditated and organized murder of two Chinese policemen.	Dickie, 1996
1996	Unspecified	Chinese government confirms the killings of several rural CPC cadres.	Earnshaw 1996b
1996	Unspecified	Chinese government confirms the killings of several 'progressive religious leaders' in the region.	Earnshaw, 1996b
2/1996	Ürümchi	Explosion blows military jeep in front of the Xinjiang Military District Teachers Training Centre.	Kang Lim, 1997c
2/1996	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Two masked men shoot pro-government religious cleric Akenmu Sidike dead.	Dickie, 1996

(continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
3/1996	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Pro-government imam Hakimsidiq Haji, vice-chairman of the local Islamic Association is assassinated.	SCIO, 2002
4/1996	Qunas Village (Alaqagha township, Kuchar county, Aqsu prefecture)	Attack against CPC cadre Qavul Toqa, his relatives, and three local Uyghur grassroots officials are attacked.	SCIO, 2002
5/1996	Kashgar	Assassination attempt against Aronghan Aji, vice president of the China Islamic Association and president of Xinjiang Islamic Association, and the preacher of Id Kah Mosque, and his son.	Dow Jones, 1996
5/1996	Kuchar (Aqsu prefecture)	Chinese police kill nine suspected 'Islamic separatists' on the course of a security operation.	AP, 1997c; AFP, 1997c; Macartney, 1996a
8/1996	Jianggeleshi township (Qaghiliq county, Kashgar prefecture)	Six men in 'combat fatigues' attack a government office, killing two local government officials, one police officer, and three security guards.	SCIO, 2002
11/1996	Hotan	Uyghur attackers open fire with a machinegun against a group of Chinese policemen, killing 16.	The Economist, 1997; Meyer, 1997
1997–1998	Unspecified	Reports on 18 cases of assassination of police officers.	BBCMSAP, 1998n; Reuters, 1998b; AFP, 1997r
1997	Unspecified	Official source reports wave of attacks against police officers and their families.	AFP, 1997q
1997	Yingmaili village (Ghulja, Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture)	Uyghur policeman Kesemu Nasser is killed in an explosion.	AFP, 1997q
1997	Hong Kong	Two Uyghur suspects and a Chinese police officer die during the course of a police operation against a 'separatist group'.	Fong, 1997; Kang Lim, 1997d.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
2/1997	Ghulja, Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture.	Riots and clashes with the police erupt during demonstrations against the Chinese government's religious policies.	Hutzler, 1997a, 1997b; Sina News, 2001; BBCMSAP, 1997e, 1997k, 1997o; Hills, 1997; Leicester, 1997; WUC, 2013; SCMP, 1997a Grabot, 1997a; Reuters, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Kyodo, 1997b AFP, 1997a, 1997c; Grabot, 1997; Kyodo, 1997a
2/1997	Ürümchi	Five explosive devices destroy two buses in Ürümchi, killing nine and wounding a further 68 people.	BBCMSAP, 1997r; Kyodo, 1997b.
4/1997	Ghulja, Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture	Uyghur 'radicals' attack Han Chinese dwellers, hanging their heads and bodies on a bridge.	BBCMSAP, 1997n; AFP, 1997e.
6/1997	Ghulja, Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture	Fire exchange between members of the Chinese military police and a group of Uyghur suspects during a house search.	BBCMSAP, 1997v
8/1997	Aqsu prefecture	Chinese officials are attacked when they returned from a banquet.	BBCMSAP, 1997z
1/1998	Qaghiliq county, Kashgar prefecture	Assassination of Abliz Haji, executive committee member of the CPPCC Qaghiliq County Committee and imam of the county's Great Mosque.	SCIO, 2002
4/1998	Ghulja	Police and Uyghur suspects clash on the course of a security operation.	Kyodo, 1998; Reuters, 1998c; BBCMSAP, 1998j
7/1998	Hotan	Two artifacts explode in a watchtower used by the police to regulate the traffic in front of the town hall.	AFP, 1998d

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<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
10/1998	Alik village (Awat county, Aqsu prefecture)	Village CPC secretary Aliqiong Bozli is stabbed to death at home by a group of attackers led by a former imam.	AFP, 1999d
2/1999	Ürümchi	Uyghurs clash with the police after dozens shouted pro-independence slogans.	AP, 1999b
8/1999	Poskam county (Kashgar prefecture)	Attackers kill Hudaberdi Tohti, political instructor of the police station of Bosikem Township, and his son.	SCIO, 2002
10/1999	Poskam county (Kashgar prefecture)	Attack with 'guns, machetes, incendiary bottles and grenades' against a police station.	BBCMSAP, 1999l
1999	Unspecified	Nineteen policemen are killed in Xinjiang during 1999.	BBCMSAP, 2000b
2/2005	Wuluwati village (Qaraqash county, Hotan prefecture)	Maishalihan Aihemaiti, Uyghur cadre and party secretary in a village in Hotan, is killed for preventing the building of an unofficial mosque.	Reuters, 2005
1/2007	Pamir plateau (Aqto county of Kizilsu Kirghiz autonomous prefecture)	Chinese security forces shot dead 18 suspected 'terrorists', and one policeman is killed, during a raid against an alleged 'terrorist' training camp. Alternative sources describe the incident as a clash between Chinese police officers and Uyghurs who protested against the acquisition of a local coal mine by an ethnic Han businessman.	CRI, 2007; Poch, 2007
2-7/2008	Ürümchi	Seven Uyghur suspects accused of planning to attack the Beijing Olympics are killed in two counter-terrorism operations.	Xinhua, 2008a, 2008c
6/2008	Sangong township (Manas county, Changji Hui autonomous prefecture)	An attack with rocks and petrol bombs hits the local police station, allegedly triggered by the pre-Olympic crackdown.	Macau Daily Times, 2008
8/2008	Payzawat County (Kashgar prefecture)	Two security officers and six terrorist suspects are killed during a police operation in a cornfield.	Sina News, 2008b

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
8/2008	Kashgar	A vehicle-ramming and knife attack against a jogging border police patrol kills 16 Chinese officers and injures another 16.	Tarn & Choi, 2008; Xinhua, 2008e
8/2008	Yamanya township (Yéngisheher county, Kashgar prefecture)	Knife-wielding attackers ambush and kill three Chinese security officers in a checkpoint.	BBC, 2008b
7/2009	Ürümchi	Riots erupt after the repression of a demonstration by thousands of Uyghurs, leaving at least 197 dead and hundreds of injured, most of them Han Chinese killed by Uyghur violent mobs.	China News, 2009; Xinhua, 2009f; Hu & Lei, 2009; Xinhua, 2009a; Wu, 2009; Marquand, 2009; Sainsbury, 2010
8/2010	Yiganqi township, Aqsu city (Aqsu prefecture)	A vehicle-ramming attack against a border police patrol leaves seven officers killed and 14 injured.	Ifeng News, 2010; People's Daily, 2010c
11/2010	Kashgar and Hotan prefectures	Han Chinese migrants are assassinated in different villages.	RFA, 2010e
7/2011	Hotan	Clash erupts in a police station between the Chinese police and a dozen Uyghur men who protested the arrest of fellow Uyghurs who had earlier demonstrated against a local clampdown on women wearing black veils and traditional outfits. The incident results in nearly 20 people killed, including a policeman, a security guard, and 14 Uyghurs shot down by the police.	Xinhua, 2011b; Shao, 2011; WUC, 2011a; SCMP, 2011b; L. Liu, 2011
7/2011	Kashgar	Uyghur assailants use knives, explosives, and vehicle-ramming tactics to launch a twin attack in a pedestrian street and a restaurant, leaving 14 killed and 42 injured over the course of a weekend.	People's Daily, 2011; Shao & Zhao, 2011

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<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
12/2011	Guma county (Hotan prefecture)	Chinese police intercept a group of Uyghur migrants who were trying to cross over the border into Pakistan, killing seven members of the group, and arresting several women and children.	RFA, 2011i; Yang, 2011
2/2012	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	A group of knife-wielding Uyghur youths go on a stabbing spree against Han Chinese bystanders, and are later shot dead by the police.	Global Times, 2012a; RFA, 2012c
3/2012	Towurchi village (Korla city, Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Chinese police shot dead four Uyghurs after storming by mistake what they thought was a bomb-making operation in a farmhouse.	RFA, 2012f, 2012d
9/2012	Mekit county (Kashgar prefecture)	A Muslim Uyghur kills a Han prostitute offended with the construction of a brothel.	RFA, 2014f
10/2012	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	Vehicle-ramming attack against a PAP border guard base in a rural area.	RFA, 2012m
10/2012	Korla city (Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Uyghur knife-wielding assailants attacked members of the PAP in a police station.	RFA, 2012n
2013	Poskam and Yeken counties (Kashgar prefecture)	Twenty-one Uyghurs killed and 20 injured in three different police raids against a training camp, a private residence hosting an assembly, and a house.	RFA, 2013n, 2013o, 2013p
3/2013	Gujiang Bage township, Hotan	Attack with petrol bombs against a police station.	Oriental Daily, 2013
4/2013	Sëriqbuya (Maralbëshi county, Kashgar prefecture)	A violent clash erupts when community workers inspected the house of an Uyghur family, forcing the women to unveil and men to shave off their beards. Fifteen police officers and officials and six Uyghurs who confronted them are killed.	Grammaticas, 2013; RFA, 2013g, 2012o; Cui, 2013a

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
06/2013	Hanerik township (Hotan prefecture)	Clashes erupt after the police blocks a demonstration against the arrest of a young imam and the closure of a mosque. The repression leaves 15 killed and 50 injured.	Qiu, 2013; RFA, 2013j
6/2013	Lükchün township (Pichan county, Turpan prefecture)	Uyghur attackers use incendiary devices and knives in a combined assault against a township's governmental building, a police station, a station of auxiliary police, and a construction site run by Han Chinese, leaving 27 people killed, amongst them nine police and security guards, and ten 'rioters' shot dead by the Chinese police.	Buckley, 2013; Xuyang, 2013; Qiu & Yang, 2013
7/2013	Qaraqash county (Hotan prefecture)	Five knife-wielding Uyghurs kill seven Han Chinese workers who were building a dam on the Qaraqash River.	RFA, 2013k
8/2013	Yilkiqi township (Qaghiliq county, Kashgar prefecture)	A Chinese SWAT team guns down 22 suspected Uyghur terrorists after surrounding the house where they were praying.	Boehler, 2013
8/2013	Ayköl town (Aqsu city, Aqsu prefecture)	Violent clashes erupt after government officials prevented hundreds of Uyghur residents from attending prayers in the mosque on the eve of the Eid Muslim festivity, leaving three people dead and about a dozen injured when the security forces open fire to disperse the crowd.	RFA, 2013m
10/2013	Beijing	Three members of an Uyghur family launch a vehicle-ramming attack with sport utility vehicle (SUV) through a crowd in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing three pedestrians and injuring 39.	Cui, 2013c

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<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
11/2013	Sëriqbuya (Maralbëshi county, Kashgar prefecture)	Nine Uyghur youths, armed with knives and sickles, stormed the local police station killing two Uyghur auxiliary police officers.	Global Times, 2013
12/2013	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	Eight ‘terrorist’ suspects are shot dead by the police during an attack with knives and explosive devices against a police station. Non-official accounts describe the incident as a peaceful demonstration against arbitrary arrests repressed by the police.	Wan, 2013
1/2014	Yéngi-Ériq town (Awat county, Aqsu prefecture)	Uyghur men armed with sickles attack a group of auxiliary guards at the local police station.	RFA, 2014a
1/2014	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	Two blasts rock a beauty salon and a grocery market.	Qiu & Chang, 2014
1/2014	Pikertyk (Kyrgyzstan)	Kyrgyz security forces shot dead a group of 11 Uyghurs trying to flee China.	Trilling, 2014
3/2014	Ghadir village (Karakal township, Aqsu city)	Uyghur local CPC secretary Jume Tohtiniyaz is stabbed to death.	RFA, 2014b
3/2014	Kunming (Yunnan province, China)	Uyghur assailants launch a stabbing rampage at Yunnan’s capital Kunming railway station, leaving 35 dead, including four attackers, and 143 injured.	Sina News, 2014; Xinhua, 2014k
3/2014	Ürümchi	Attackers kill police officer Osmanjan Ghoji.	RFA, 2014d
4/2014	Ürümchi	A suicide bomber immolates at Ürümchi’s South Railway Station, killing three and injuring 79.	Wan & Ng, 2014; SITE Intelligence Group, 2014
4/2014	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	Three senior county level Han Chinese officials are murdered on during a fishing expedition.	RFA, 2014h
5/2014	Muji township (Guma county, Hotan prefecture)	Two Uyghurs are shot dead by the police during a security operation against the attackers of a police station.	RFA, 2014i
5/2014	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	A bomb explodes in front of a Chinese police department.	RFA, 2014j

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
5/2014	Toqsu county (Aqsu prefecture)	A house-raid in search of two bomb-making suspects leaves four Uyghurs killed and one police officer stabbed to death.	RFA, 2014k
5/2014	Ürümchi	Vehicle-ramming attack against pedestrians, mostly Han Chinese, in a grocery street market, killing 39 and leaving 94 dead.	People's Daily, 2014
6/2014	Qaghiliq county (Kashgar prefecture)	A vehicle-ramming and explosives attack against the main police station leaves 13 attackers and three police officers dead.	Meng, 2014b
6/2014	Qaraqash county (Hotan prefecture)	Attackers stabbed to death two police officers guarding a checkpoint, killing three others by setting fire to the room where they slept.	RFA, 2014l
6/2014	Mekit county (Kashgar prefecture)	Police clashes with 'terrorist' suspects during an inspection of a house to retrieve a cache of bladed weapons. Two Uyghur police officers and three Uyghur suspects die in the operation.	RFA, 2014m
6/2014	Purchaqchi township (Hotan prefecture)	A three-month police operation leaves three Uyghur suspects killed and two jailed, all members of the same family.	RFA, 2015d
7/2014	Payzawat County (Kashgar prefecture)	Attackers stage a motorcycle accident to lure and murder the head of the local traffic police, Li Hongjiang.	RFA, 2014p
7/2014	Uchturpan county (Aqsu prefecture)	Six Han Chinese farmers and landowners are stabbed to death in a village.	RFA, 2014q
7/2014	Qaraqash county (Hotan prefecture)	Assailants wielding axes and knives attack party secretary Rejep Islam, killing his wife.	RFA, 2014s
7/2014	Aqsu city	Five Han Chinese businessmen are killed after attackers waylay their car.	RFA, 2014t

(continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
7/2014	Elishku township (Yeken county, Kashgar prefecture)	A gang armed with knives and axes attack a police station and government offices, assaulting civilians and smashing vehicles as they pass, according to Chinese official sources. Alternative accounts describe hundreds of Uyghurs, some of them carrying farm tools, marching on a road to protest for the killing of innocent villagers, later being shot down by the police.	Xinhua, 2014h; Haas, 2015; RFA, 2014r
8/2014	Kashgar	Three assailants kill pro-government cleric Juma Tayier, imam of the Id Kah Mosque.	Cui, 2014a
8/2014	Hotan prefecture	Nine Uyghur suspects are shot dead and one was arrested during a security operation reportedly joined by 30,000 civilians.	Xinhua, 2014g
9/2014	Bügür city, Yengisar and Terekbazar townships (Bügür county, Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Three attacks with bombs and knives target Chinese officials and police officers in government buildings and police stations.	RFA, 2014u
9/2014	Bügür county (Bayingholin Mongol autonomous prefecture)	Several explosions rock a shop and a market, killing six bystanders and injuring dozens.	RFA, 2014u
10/2014	Maralbéshi county (Kashgar prefecture)	Four Uyghur men armed with knives and explosives attack a farmers' market. Twenty-two people are killed, including police officers, Han Chinese stall owners, and the attackers.	RFA, 2014w
10/2014	Guma and Kokterek townships (Guma county, Hotan prefecture)	Two Uyghurs go on a stabbing spree killing three police officers on patrol and three government officials.	RFA, 2014v
11/2014	Yeken county (Kashgar prefecture)	A group of Uyghurs attack bystanders in a food street, injuring 14, with 11 assailants shot dead by the Chinese police.	Xinhua, 2014j

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Source</i>
12/2014	Guangxi province (China)	One Uyghur is shot dead during a Chinese police operation that results in the arrest of 21 members of several Uyghur families who sought to cross into neighbouring Vietnam.	RFA, 2014x; Xinhua, 2015b
3/2015	Tagharchi township (Yeken county, Kashgar prefecture)	The head of the People's Armed Police (PAP) local Fang Kezheng and his wife are killed in a targeted attack.	RFA, 2015a
5/2015	Lop county (Hotan prefecture)	Three Uyghurs carry out two suicide bombings against a security checkpoint, killing three police officers and injuring four.	RFA, 2015g
5/2015	Layqa township (Hotan county, Hotan prefecture)	A knife-wielding Uyghur kills the head of the local government, a Han Chinese.	RFA, 2015h
6/2015	Duwa township (Guma county, Hotan prefecture)	At least eight Uyghurs are shot dead during a raid against an illegal gathering outdoors.	RFA, 2015j
6/2015	Tahtakoruk district (Kashgar)	A group of 15 Uyghurs launch a vehicle-ramming and knife attack against a police traffic checkpoint, killing five police officers and injuring four.	RFA, 2015k
7/2015	Shenyang (Liaoning province)	Chinese police officers shot dead three Uyghur 'terrorist' suspects when they were en route to leave the country.	A. Chen, 2015
8/2015	Bangkok (Thailand)	Uyghur criminals are accused of the Erawan Shrine bombings that killed 20 people and injured 125 in Thailand's capital.	Reuters, 2016d
9/2015	Bay county (Aqsu prefecture)	Knife-wielding assailants attack a colliery leaving at least 40 people dead or injured, including police officers, security guards, workers, and mine owners, as well as the attackers.	RFA, 2015o; BBC, 2015c
2/2017	Guma county (Hotan prefecture)	Three knife-wielding Uyghur attackers randomly stab pedestrians in the streets, killing five.	Ng, 2017



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# INDEX

*Note:* Page numbers in *italics* indicate figures, **bold** indicate tables in the text.

- Abdulla, Memetjan, 138
- Abdurixit, Abulahat, 80, 81, 88, 106
- Ablesh, Mehbube, 138
- acts of violence, 8, 21, 27–30, 84, 86, 116
- Aihemaiti, Abduwayiti, 95
- Aihemaiti, Maishalihan, 111
- Aisha, Yusufu, 89
- Aji, Aronghan, 72
- Aji, Umar Kara, 59
- Akayev, Askar, 99
- Al Assad, Bassar, 29
- Almas, Turghun, 95
- Alptekin, Erkin, 3, 143
- Alptekin, Isa, 54, 67, 80, 99
- Al Qaeda, 1–3, 106, 107, 152
- Amat, Ismail, 44, 52, 54–56
- Amber, Qamber, 138
- Amir, Yigal, 29
- Amnesty International (AI), 97
- Ayup, Abduweli, 66
- Azat, Abdurrahman, 1
- Azizi, Saifuddin, 67
- Azizi, Seypidin, 105
- Baren violent event, 1990, 46–48, **48**, 56–60
- Bekri, Nur, 79, 87, 118, 120–122, 124, 125
- Bin Laden, Osama, 1, 106, 107
- biopolitics, 37
- bourgeois liberalism, 57, 79
- Bozli, Aliqiong, 71
- Bush, George W., 105
- catalytic events, 16
- Central Asian Uyghuristan Youth Spark Party, 43
- Chan, Melissa, 140
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), 61, 81
- Chinese official narratives, 4–6
- Chunxian, Zhang, 122–124, 126
- Chunying, Hua, 119–123
- Cold War, 3, 13, 103
- Communist Party of China (CPC), 2, 16–17, 40, 70, 104
- conceptualized violence, 26
- constructivist ontology, 4
- Copenhagen School (CS), 6, 12, 13, 153, 154, 161
- counterrevolution, 19, 40–68, 78, 79, 83–84, 90, 156; cultural liberalization, 60; gradualism, 9, 40, 41, 60–67, 102; politics of, 60–67; reform and opening up era events, 42–48, **48**; religious infiltration, 53; religious liberalization, 60, 65; from restraint to securitization, 50–60; separatist infiltration, 53; spectrum of violence, 48–50, 49; splittism, 40, 51, 53–59, 64
- counterrevolutionary crime, 56, 58, 92
- counterrevolutionary rebellion, 9, 41, 56–60, 64, 66, 68, 69, 106, 122, 156
- counterrevolutionary threat, 40, 41, 48, 60, 156

- counter-securitization, 16  
 counter-terrorism, 7, 10, 17, 19, 20, 26, 27,  
     37, 104, 112, 114, 122–134, 136, 141,  
     142, 152–154, 156, 161  
 counter-terrorism law, 130–131  
 counter-terrorist apparatus, 10, 104,  
     127–132  
 critical juncture, 103, 137  
 critical terrorism studies (CTS), 3–4, 12,  
     21, 155  
 cultural liberalization, 9, 60  
 Cultural Revolution, 41, 42, 60, 61, 63,  
     161, 162  
  
 Dagang, Shi, 119, 120, 122, 125  
 Dai, Ba, 58, 59  
 Dalai Lama, 53, 54  
 Dawamat, Tomur, 44, 55, 59, 65, 67  
 de-extremification, 2, 10, 103, 131, **132**,  
     144–150, 152, 158, 162  
 Demirel, Süleyman, 99  
 discursive construction, 2–6, 8, 12, 20, 22,  
     34, 37, 38, 60, 66, 153–155, 157  
 domestic deterrence, 18  
  
 Eastern Turkistan Prairie Party, 42  
 Eastern Turkistan Republic, 47  
 East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM),  
     107, 121–123, 141  
 East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP), 46  
 East Turkistan terrorist forces, 48, 104, 106,  
     122, 127, 137, 143, 144, 158  
 Ecevit, Bulent, 100  
 economic violence, 27  
 Emet, Tursunjan, 138  
 Enmao, Wang, 52, 53, 55, 57, 61, 64, 66, 79  
 Erdogan, Recep Tayyip, 99  
 ethnic separatism, 88, 92  
  
 Fang, Wang, 53  
 Fanon, Frantz, 33  
 fear-inducing symbolic violence, 31  
 feudal superstitions, 94  
 Finley, Joanne Smith, 141  
 Fusan, Zhou, 61  
  
 Gang, Qin, 122  
 Gauthier, Ursula, 140  
 Global War on Terror (GWOt), 3, 7, 10, 19,  
     20, 103, 127, 132, 140, 152–153, 156,  
     158  
 Gorbachev, Mikhail, 87  
 gradualism, 9, 40, 41, 60–67, 102  
 Guantanamo 22, 142  
  
 Hailun, Zhu, 123  
 Hanbin, Wang, 84  
 Hanliang, Song, 55, 64, 79–81, 87  
 Hanmin, Hou, 120, 121, 123  
 Haotian, Chi, 82, 88  
 Hasan, Ismail, 42  
 hate crime, 34  
 Helili, Abudu, 73  
 Hemit, Kurbanjan, 1  
 Heping, Wu, 122  
 Hesén, Ilshat, 115  
 Hesén, Usman, 115  
 holy war, 29, 41, 133, 156  
 Hongwei, Meng, 120–122  
 Hoshur, Shohret, 144  
 Huaiyu, Wang, 95  
  
 illegal religious activities, 80, 81, 84, 87, 91,  
     93, 94, 97, 133, 134  
 indirect violence, 27  
 indiscriminate violence, 25, 29–31, 36, **48**,  
     70, **75**, 110, **113**  
 Integrated Joint Operation Platform (IJOP),  
     146  
 International Human Rights Law, 30  
 interpretative scale of terrorism, 35, 35  
 interpreting violent events, 34–37, 35  
 Irish Republican Army (IRA), 29  
 Isa, Dolkun, 143, 144  
 Isamudin, Jerla, 121, 124  
 Islamic Association of China (IAC), 135  
 Islamic terrorism, 3, 33  
  
 Jackson, R., 15, 20–22  
 Jamal, Ekberjan, 139  
 Jianchao, Liu, 120, 121, 123  
 Jiang, Zhang, 126  
 Jianzhu, Meng, 118, 122  
 Jiaxuan, Tang, 104–106  
 Jinping, Xi, 150, 153  
 Jintao, Hu, 88, 107  
  
 Kadeer, Rebiya, 91, 101, 102, 140, 151  
 Kader, Abdulla, 43  
 Kang, Lu, 140  
 Karimov, Islam, 88, 99  
 Kashgar violent event, 1981, 43–44, **48**  
 Kayum, Abdul, 72  
 Kenjiev, Nurmammed, 99  
 Kezheng, Fang, 116  
 Khan, Akbar, 143  
 Khan, Omer, 143  
 Kokbore, Ishtat, 144  
 Kurban Ayt, 92–94

- Lei, Hong, 120, 121  
 Leninism, 46, 56, 57  
 Lequan, Wang, 73, 79–83, 86, 89, 95, 104, 106, 119, 122–124  
  
 Mahlmann, Gisela, 95  
 Mahsut, Ismail, 52  
 Marighella, Carlos, 33  
 Marxism, 46, 56, 57  
 Mattis, James, 152  
 Millward, James, 140  
 minimal foundationalist approach, 5, 8, 12, 19–22, 37, 155  
 Mizutani, Naoko, 140  
  
 Narr, Wolf-Dieter, 26  
 National Anti-terrorism Coordination Team, 127–128  
 National Anti-terrorism Leading Group, 128, 132  
 National People's Congress (NPC), 27, 45, 84, 130  
 national separatism, 80, 86, 91, 97  
 Nazarbayev, Nursultan, 99  
 Niyaz, Amudun, 55, 81, 82, 87, 89  
 Niyaz, Gheyret, 139  
 Niyazov, Saparmurad, 99  
 No Longer Enemy Combatant (NLEC), 142  
  
 Obama, Barack, 152  
 Osman, Ahmadjan, 143  
 Özal, Turgut, 99  
  
 Pamir raid, 119–123  
 Pan-Islamism, 83  
 Panopticism surveillance, 37  
 Pan-Turkism, 83  
 Payzawat violent event, 1981, 42–43, **48**  
 Peng, Li, 55, 67, 88, 99  
 Pengsheng, Cao, 66  
 People's Armed Police (PAP), 80, 111, 128–129  
 People's Liberation Army (PLA), 42, 82, 128–129  
 people's war' on terrorism, 10, 103–151, 153, 158  
 physical violence, 24, 25, 27, 28, 33  
 political motivation, 25, 26, 33, 35, 42, 44, 46, 76, 77, 115, 116, 120, 121  
 political violence, 4, 16, 22–24, **25**, 32–34, 76, 78, 159, 160  
 post-positivist ontology, 13  
 premeditated violence, 26–29, 36, 47, **48**, 58, **75**, 86, **113**, 114, 118  
 pre-terroristization phase, 9, 15, 40–68, 108, 124, 154, 155  
 proto-terroristization phase, 9, 15, 18–19, 41, 63, 68–102, 154, 155, 157; anti-criminal campaigns, 97–98; attacks against security forces, 72; constructing threats, 79–81; counterrevolution, 83–84; *Document No. 6*, 90–91; *Document No. 7*, 93–96; Ghulja riot, 84–87; internationalizing threats, 87–89; legal-executive security apparatus, 90–92; long and merciless fight, 81–83; non-violent conflict escalation, 72–74; political assassination, 71–72; public space attacks, 70–71; religious extremism *see* religious extremism; separatism *see* separatism; spectrum of violence, 75–78, 76; state security operations, 74–75; striking hard politics, 89–101  
 Public Security Bureau (PSB), 42, 94  
  
 Qiang, Huang, 120  
 Qichen, Qian, 67, 88  
 Qiyue, Zhang, 105, 106  
 Quanguo, Chen, 123  
 Quanguo, Cheng, 145  
 Quanyou, Fu, 66  
  
 Rabin, Yitzhak, 29  
 Rajagopalan, Megha, 140  
 Rayim, Bahar, 52  
 re-education, 2, 10, 37, 93, 126, 127, 147, 149, 150, 152  
 reform and opening up era events: Baren, 1990, 46–48, **48**; Kashgar, 1981, 43–44, **48**; Payzawat, 1981, 42–43, **48**; spectrum of violence, 48–50, **49**; student protests, 1985, 44–45, **48**; Ürümqi, 1989, 45–46, **48**  
 religious extremism, 9, 10, 18, 69, 78–80, 82–83, 86, 93, 100, 101, 105, 123–127, 129–137, **132**, 141, 145–148, 157  
 religious fanaticism, 94  
 religious infiltration, 53  
 religious liberalization, 9, 60, 65  
 religious terrorists, 86  
 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), 29, 161  
 Ri, Xia, 51  
 Rongji, Zhu, 80  
 Rouzi, Kuerban, 57  
 Rouzi, Sidik, 101

- sabotage activities, 59, 84, 96, 124, 125
- securitization theory, 13–22; catalytic events, 16; counter-securitization, 16; definition of, 13; discourse, 19–22; domestic deterrence, 18; extraordinary measures, 13; grammar of security, 13, 14; minimal foundationalism, 19–22; pre-terroristization phase, 9, 15, 40–68, 108, 124, 154, 155; proto-terroristization phase, 9, 15, 18–19, 41, 63, 68–102, 154, 155, 157; role for materiality, 14, 19–22; special/emergency politics, 18; speech act, 13–16; stages of, 15; terroristization, 12–39, 103–163
- separatism, 9, 10, 18, 54, 56, 57, 63, 64, 66, 69, 78–80, 87, 132, 137–139, 141–142, 147, 151, 157; ethnic, 88, 92; fight, 81–82, 90–92, 124; infiltration, 53; national, 80, 86, 91, 97; perils of, 89; threat of, 67, 80, 93
- separatist activities, 55, 57, 84, 88, 89, 106, 112
- Sexual Customs*, 45, 56
- Shakir, Eisa, 51
- Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), 19, 67, 78, 104, 157
- Shanghai Five initiative, 67, 88, 97, 99, 100, 102
- Shangkun, Yang, 66
- Shengkun, Guo, 124
- Shi, Qiao, 54, 58, 59
- Siju, Tao, 81
- Simayi, Meihemaiti, 57
- social capital, 14
- Sorel, George, 33
- Sperling, Elliot, 140
- spiritual terrorism, 126
- splittism, 9, 40, 51, 53–59, 64, 84, 88, 97, 105
- State Council Information Office (SCIO), 6, 106
- State Security Law (1993), 81, 91
- structural violence, 27
- student protests, 1985, 44–45, **48**
- Sudworth, John, 140
- surveillance state, 144–150
- symbolic violence, 27, 31–32
- Taliban, 101, 106, 107
- Tayier, Juma, 111
- terrorism; *see also* terroristization; violence; all forms of, 105; counter-terrorism law, 130; definitional clusters, 24, **25**; as discursive anchors, 23–26; discursive construction of, 2–6, 12, 38, 153, 154; indiscriminate violence, 29–31; interpretative scale of, 35, 35; interpreting violent events, 34–37; as mapping device, 22–36; people's war *vs.*, 123–126; political (violence), **25**, 32–34; premeditated violence, 26–28; scholarly definitions of, **24**; spiritual, 126; symbolic violence, 27, 31–32; unexpected violence, 29–31; violence against civilians, 28–29
- terroristization, 12–39, 103–163; *see also* pre-terroristization; proto-terroristization; assassinations, 111; assimilation, 162–163; attacks against security forces, 108–109; case studies of, **118**; categories of violence, 117, **118**; characteristics of, 15; Chinese official narratives, 4–6; concept of, 7–8, 16, 17, 154–155; critical juncture, 103, 137; de-extremification, 10, 103, 131, **132**, 144–150, 152, 158, 162; definitional markers, 118–122, **119**; discursive tactics, 117, 118; features of violence, 112–117, **113**; minimal foundationalist approach, 5, 8, 12, 19–22, 37, 155; non-violent conflict escalation, 109–110; public space attacks, 110–111; religious extremism *see* religious extremism; *sine die*, 10, 127, 144–150, 163; state security operations, 111–112; surveillance state, 144–150; three-levels of framework, 38, 38
- terrorist software, 138
- terrorist threats, 1–2, 4, 19, 87, 103, 106, 107, 117, 122, 123, 141, 150, 153–155, 158
- Tiananmen Square, 44, 45, 55, 57, 77, 111, 114, 115
- Tieying, Li, 88
- Tilivaldi, Sitiwaldi, 139
- Tiliwaldi, Ismail, 82, 126
- Tiliwaldi, Memtieli, 115
- Tohti, Ilham, 2, 137, 140, 151
- Tohti, Mohammed, 143
- Tokayev, Kasymzhomart, 88
- Tuniyazi, Arkin, 125
- Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, 2, 5, 10, 18, 20, 41, 61, 88, 90, 95, 96, 103, 121, 123, 127, 136, 137, 145, 148, 150, 151, 153, 154, 156, 158, 159, 162, 163
- Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), 29, 115
- Tzu, Sun, 31
- unexpected violence, 29–31
- UN General Assembly, 106

- United National Revolutionary Front (UNRF), 78
- United Nations Development Programme, 27
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 142
- United States Congressional Research Service, 101
- UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 143
- unpredictable violence, 36, **48**, 49, **75**, **113**
- UN Security Council (UNSC), 106
- Urban, Erkin, 144
- Ürümchi violent event, 1989, 45–46, **48**
- US–China relations, 152
- US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 143
- Usman, Emin, 100
- US Patriot Act (2001), 27, 32
- Uyghur American Association (UAA), 115
- Uyghur region *see* pre-terroristization; proto-terroristization; terroristization; violence
- violence: acts of, 8, 21, 27–30, 84, 86, 116; against civilians, 28–29; conceptualized, 26; economic, 27; indirect, 27; indiscriminate, 29–31; mainstream definitions of, 26; modalities of, 26; physical, 24, 25, 27, 28, 33; political, 4, 16, 22–24, **25**, 32–34, 76, 78, 159, 160; premeditated, 26–29, 36, 47, **48**, 58, **75**, 86, **113**, 114, 118; spectrum of, 48–50, 49, 75–77, 76, 107–117, *113*; structural, 27; symbolic, 31–32; terrorist activities, 84–86; terroristization phase *see* pre-terroristization; proto-terroristization; terroristization; unexpected, 29–31; unpredictable, 36, **48**, 49, **75**, **113**
- war on terrorism, 3, 10, 124, 126, 127, 130, 131, 137, 138, 141, 145, 147, 154, 158, 162, 163
- Weide, Sun, 107
- White Paper on Defence*, 84, 107
- Wong, Chun Hon, 140
- World Health Organization (WHO), 26
- World Uyghur Congress (WUC), 98, 109
- Xiaoping, Deng, 40, 52, 61, 63
- Xinjiang 13, 140
- Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, 140
- Xinjiang Islamic Association, 62
- Xinjiang People's Publication House, 94
- Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), 55, 80, 128
- Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), 40, 55, 67, 81, 104, 105, 129–131, **132**, 147
- Xinwei, Zhao, 138
- Xin, Ye, 43
- XUAR Regulation on De-extremification, 131, **132**
- Yan, Ba, 121
- Yaobang, Hu, 52, 61, 62, 64
- Yasin, Nurmuhentment, 138
- Yisheng, Liu, 73, 85
- Yongshen, Zhao, 122
- Yuliang, Zhang, 85
- Zemin, Jiang, 58, 59, 79–82, 88, 93, 100, 105
- Zenz, Adrian, 141
- Zhaobang, Huang, 54, 56
- Zhen, Wang, 64, 87
- Zhijie, Jia, 63
- Zhijun, Feng, 31
- Zhou, Zhang, 89
- Ziyang, Zhao, 57