

The Ongoing Failure of Intelligence:
A study of the Turkestan Islamic Party

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The U.S. Government is often slow to identify threats and to respond to them. The United States was unprepared for the insurgency in Iraq. This lack of preparation may be because “the United States has historically not liked fighting insurgencies” because they are costly and time-consuming and because insurgencies are often against “foes that don’t appear to be a direct threat to our national security” (O’Hern 2008). It took time for the U.S. to admit that, contrary to their original belief, Iraq was not going to be an easy victory where we would be welcomed with open arms as a liberating force. Once the government admitted that the insurgency was a huge problem, it was slow to identify the growing problem of Iran. The military felt that “Iran was not the problem,” but that rather “the problem in Iraq was the Sunni insurgency” (O’Hern 2008) – they had determined what the problem was and were slow to recognize that a change had occurred. It wasn’t until many successful attacks, and the resultant deaths of service members as a result of the increased use of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), forced the military to admit its mistake in identifying a forming threat. While focusing on the tactical – the “ten meter target” – the strategic danger was missed – the “one hundred meter target” and the Shia were killing more Americans in Iraq than the Sunni were before the military changed its tune (O’Hern 2008).

Intelligence failures are not limited to the military, and a huge body of literature has been written on the failures of the CIA. The most recent – and most costly – failure of the CIA was the failure to warn of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The CIA “was slow to take Al Qaeda seriously as an organization [and] bin Laden serious as a terrorist organizer” and “not even the suicide attack on the U.S.S. Cole ... led to any increased urgency” (Goodman 2008) despite “the path [to the attacks being] so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply

into shadow”(National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States 2004). Just as the CIA missed the threat posed by Al Qaeda until the 9/11 attacks forced them to recognize the scope of the danger, the intelligence community is making the same mistake with other jihadist groups. This paper will examine the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP) as an example of this ongoing failure of intelligence and try to identify similarities to the failure to identify Al Qaeda as a threat in the 1990s.

What is the ETIP? Is it an insurgency, a group of freedom fighters attempting to throw off the oppressive yoke of Chinese occupation, or is it a terrorist group? Insurgency is defined as “a political movement that uses violence against an existing government,”(O'Hern 2008) and the ETIP casts itself in this light for a Western audience by framing its violence in the context of freedom from Chinese oppression. According to its actions and the public media releases from Islam Awazi, the media arm of the ETIP, it is a terrorist organization. For non-Western audiences, the ETIP will often cite the struggle against China as the *prima facie* reason for violence, but will then immediately note that the violence is called for as jihad and that the struggle is for Islam against those who would oppress Muslims. The ETIP included the United States in the group of those it believes subjugates Islam and has called for “the youth of East Turkistan, whose hearts are filled with hatred and resentment for the Zionists around the world” (Islam Awazi 2009). The questions over the categorization of ETIP – is it an insurgency – and the feeling that the ETIP is a Chinese problem – not a direct threat to our national security – has resulted in ETIP flying under the radar of U.S. counter-terrorism. The principle of deception is to “induce the adversary to make the wrong choice” and even a primitive deception effort, “the mere presenting of alternative solutions ... serve[s] to confuse the

adversary” (Grabo 2002). The deception used by ETIP – as simple as it is – has had the desired effect and has led the intelligence community and policy makers to question both the threat posed by the organization and even the existence of the organization itself.

It doesn’t appear as if the United States intelligence community has learned to identify growing terrorist threats, despite clear indications and warnings from groups like the ETIP. When discussing if the CIA was able to better counter the threat of terrorism after 9/11, Goodman wrote that the CIA was “more alert to the problem” but that “institutional reforms have not been taken” and there were still “problem in the field of strategic intelligence” so that “the CIA is still having difficulty dealing with the strategic picture regarding terrorism” (Goodman 2008). Based on the lack of clear information coming from the intelligence community on the strategic threat posed by ETIP, one can make the case that ETIP has not fully integrated the threat into their somewhat-fuzzy strategic picture.

The basic deception practiced by the ETIP has given enough alternatives to keep the intelligence community in open debate about the threat posed by the group. The importance of the U.S.S. Cole attack was overlooked by some in the intelligence community, others felt it was a sign that “made it clear Al Qaeda was becoming more active and threatening in its planning and directing of terrorism attacks against the United States” (Goodman 2008). This type of situation is recurring as seen with the recent ETIP-linked attacks in Europe and the Middle East. Just as the U.S.S. Cole indicated that Al Qaeda was becoming a more operational threat, the attempted attacks in Dubai in 2008 (Pantucci 2010) and in Norway in 2010 (Wong 2010) provide indication that the ETIP has the desire to conduct attacks outside of China. Al Qaeda

warned the United States of its intentions as early as 1991-1992 in statements issued by Usama bin Laden. Despite these warnings, Al Qaeda was overshadowed by the Maktab al-Khidamat of Abdullah Azzam to the point that some analysts considered Al Qaeda to be nothing more than an Arab Veterans of Foreign Wars club for veterans of the Afghanistan jihad against the Soviets (Goodman 2008). Al Qaeda warned the world of its intentions, and the ETIP has done the same. The anti-American rhetoric of ETIP, similar to the early rhetoric of al Qaeda, should serve as early warning that the United States is a valid target for ETIP. The ETIP has adopted the language of Al Qaeda and names the “Zionist Crusader enemy led by America” and broadens the conflict to include all non-Muslims including referencing China as just another front in the war against Islam in media releases (Islam Awazi 2009).

Few in the West have a clear understanding of the ETIP. Members of the United States Government as well as independent analysts at various think tanks question the viability of – if not the existence of – ETIP. Analysts question why ETIP was placed on the State Department list of terrorist organizations in 2003 since “Uyghur militants had never targeted U.S. nationals or interests” (McGregor 2010). McGregor went on to question the role of China in using political and economic pressure to demonize Uyghurs in an effort to justify cracking down on Uyghurs in the name of counter-terrorism. McGregor’s statements do not take into account the jihadist propaganda released by the ETIP via their media arm “the voice of Islam” (Islam Awazi), statements that are consistent in their message. Analysts have questioned whether the media releases are fabrications created by the Chinese government (Reed and Raschke 2010), but that is questionable. Not only do the videos and propaganda feature speeches by Hassan Makhdum and Abdul Haq, two persons named as leaders of the Uyghurs training in Afghanistan by the

Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo (Office of the Secretary of Defense n.d.), but the ETIP itself has issued statements that identify non-official statements that are to be viewed as suspect and probable Chinese propaganda. To validate the authenticity of its statements, the ETIP has forged an alliance with well-known Al Qaeda media center, the Al Fajr Media Center, to be the primary publisher of ETIP statements. It isn't just analysts who question China's role in manipulating world opinion of ETIP. U.S. Representative Bill Delahunt also questioned China's role in influencing the United States, including holding hearings on the claims of the Chinese government related to the Uighurs detained at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and the far-fetched idea that the Chinese government played a role in the "apprehension and incarceration of the Uighur men" (House Foreign Affairs Oversight Subcommittee 2009) in Afghanistan who were later detained at Guantanamo. Representative Delahunt went so far as to call the Uyghurs at Guantanamo the victims of "some half-cocked initiative cooked up by Cheney et al, where they [the Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo] were purchased for \$5,000" (Grim 2009).

Unfortunately, claims of Chinese manipulation by elected members of Congress only serves to obfuscate the threat posed by ETIP and no proof to these claims has ever been provided. As recently as 2010, open source analysts questioned "the very existence of the TIP as an active jihadi front" (McGregor 2010).

This open questioning of the role and purpose of ETIP, combined with the already slow-moving nature of the United States government, has allowed the ETIP to operate with little interference from anyone but China for over a decade. Despite a body of reporting on Abdul Haq as being a member of the group in Afghanistan that was led by Hassan Makhdum prior to the U.S. invasion in October of 2001, the U.S. Department of Treasury didn't place Abdul Haq

on the designated terrorism list until 2009 (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2009). This body of reporting includes associations between Abdul Haq and Hassan Makhdum going back to at least 2001 according to CSRT testimony given by the Uyghurs detained at Guantanamo (Office of the Secretary of Defense n.d.). In June 2009, just two months after Abdul Haq was named to the U.S. Treasury's list of terrorists, Representative Delahunt called for a review of the U.S. listing of ETIM as a terrorist group claiming that the U.S. government "took substantial intelligence information from the communist Chinese regime and then used that questionable evidence as our own" (Tandon 2009). Some even question whether the ETIP is a new organization or an old organization (ETIM) with a new name. An article from the journal "Terrorism Monitor" claims that "no evidence has been provided to prove a direct link between the two groups" despite "Beijing's assertion that the TIP [Turkestan Islamic Party] is a new manifestation of the earlier East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)" (McGregor 2010). In essence, analysts question the assertion in media releases that Hassan Makhdum is the "former amir of the Turkistan Islamic Party" and that Abdul Haq took over leadership of the group following his death in 2003 (Open Source Center 2009).

It is often difficult to raise warning in the face of a broadly held belief. Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House, wrote in a 2009 opinion piece that the "Uighurs [detained at Guantanamo] have been allied with and trained by al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups" and that "the goal of the ETIM is to establish a radical Islamic state in Asia" (Gingrich 2009). Gingrich was instantly vilified for his remarks by Representative Delahunt and pundits alike who felt his comments were "fearmongering rhetoric" (Turkel 2009). This reaction to the challenger of a popularly held belief is similar to how Richard Clarke was isolated and described as a "chicken-

little alarmist” (Goodman 2008) for attempting to warn the intelligence community about the threat from Al Qaeda.

Those who question the existence of ETIP are either unaware of openly available information or are being purposefully obtuse, either is an example of the intelligence failures that were cited in post-mortem analysis of the events leading up to the 9/11 attacks. It is a laughable example of the snail-pace at which policymakers respond to changing situations that in 2009, over a decade after the ETIP was openly training jihadists in Afghanistan, Congress was still holding hearings with the stated goal of “exploring the nature of Uighur Nationalism: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists” (House Committee on Foreign Affairs 2009).

The ETIP may be an obscure group to western intelligence agencies, but the group is well known to Al Qaeda and the global jihadist movement. Al Qaeda introduced Turkistan to the global jihadist audience before mainstream media releases by the ETIP linked their movement to Al Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed “retribution for the blood of martyrs... in the lands of Islam, from East Turkistan to Andalusia” (Kepel and Milelli 2008). These recent media releases aren’t the first that the global jihadist movement heard of the ETIP. When discussing the Islamic Awakening, Abu Musab al-Suri – a well-known jihadist strategic thinker whose real name is Mustafa Setmariam Nasar – discussed the various jihadist groups who operated in Afghanistan during the rule of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These groups had “well defined jihadist goals” who came to Afghanistan to “rebuild their organizations” (Lacey 2008) for jihad. One of the groups specifically cited was “the immigrants from Chinese-controlled eastern Turkistan” who were under the leadership of Hasan Abu Muhammad al

Turkistani (Lacey 2008). Hasan Makhdoom (sometimes transliterated as Hassan Makhdum), who was also known as Abu Muhammad al Turkistani, was the leader of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement until his death in Pakistan in November 2003 (al-Shishani 2010). Al-Suri wrote that “the jihadists of eastern Turkistan went back to their homeland and recruited mujahideen who were brought back to Afghanistan and trained in military tactics” (Lacey 2008). This training was undertaken with the intention that it be “used against the Chinese government” according to al-Suri who specifically cited the “East Turkistan Mujahadoon” as one of three major Central Asian jihadist groups who “wanted to undertake jihad in their native countries” (Lacey 2008). The statements made by al-Suri may be their own form of deception, because his view that the ETIP only wanted to “undertake jihad in their native countries” ignores the statements from ETIP calling for global jihad against the “Zionist crusader enemy” – a label never applied to China. There can be no doubt that the goals of the ETIP are global. Shaykh Abdullah Mansur, who is featured in various ETIP media releases, clearly states that Uyghurs “have to conquer our own country and purify it of all infidels. Then, we should conquer the infidels’ countries and spread Islam” (McGregor 2010).

There is enough evidence to label the ETIP as a terrorist organization and identify the group as a global threat. Unfortunately, systemic failures in the infrastructure of the intelligence community have yet to be addressed in the years since the 9/11 attacks, failures that allow threats to the national security of the United States to go undeterred. The maturing of ETIP has followed a path made clear by Al Qaeda including training, open threats and clearly stated global goals, and attacks against public and commercial targets. The indications are

there, but the warnings are not being heeded, and we are left to hope that these intelligence failures to not lead to the unnecessary deaths of innocent people.

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