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Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping's China: And its Consequences for Sino-Saudi Relations

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Introduction

The main purpose of this report is to offer readers an overview of new developments that have taken place in China with respect to the party-state's management of Islam, as well as the consequences of these new developments for Sino-Saudi relations. The report is organized into four sections. The first section discusses the authoritarian turn under way in China, which serves to contextualize the new religious controls as the backdrop of a system-wide transformation. The second section looks at the party-state's traditional approach towards the religious sphere and the mechanisms of control it employs towards it. The third section highlights some of the changes that have taken place in the party-state's management of the religious sphere. It demonstrates the departures from traditional approaches of control, especially with regards to Islam and discusses some of the factors that have contributed to altering the party-state's attitudes, including, for example, Saudi Arabia's perceived role in promoting religious subversion. The last section considers some of the consequences this may carry for the future development of Sino-Saudi relations, and offers in turn a few policy recommendations aimed at avoiding such outcomes.

Fortress Besieged: The Authoritarian Turn in Chinese Politics

Over the past decade, the Chinese party-state has, according to Shambaugh, undergone a gradual transformation from being a “soft authoritarian” system to one increasingly assuming the characteristics of a “hard authoritarian” one, akin to that which briefly emerged in the aftermath of Tiananmen in the period of 1989-1992.¹ This process of change is marked by heightened securitization and renewed attempts to deepen the Communist Party of China's (CPC) internal ideological and organizational discipline as well as external control over an

(1) David Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

increasingly differentiated and dynamic society.² This process started in the late Hu Jintao era around 2008, and has continued to gather pace following Xi Jinping's ascension to the helm of the leadership as the CPC General Secretary and President of the People's Republic of China in 2013. A diverse set of factors have catalyzed this change at the systemic-level, including:

a) deepening societal inequality and class unrest arising from the country's economic transformation³ and the failure of populist and people-centric restructuring reforms by the Hu-Wen administration (2002-2012) to address these problems, especially in the rural countryside⁴ b) the challenge posed by the proliferation of non-government organizations, new media outlets and networks, and the appearance of potentially de-stabilizing mass movements of a nationalist or ideological bent; c) the continued failure to re-construct a persuasive state ideology;⁵ d) the widespread perception within leadership and academic circles of an endemic legitimacy crisis;⁶ e) the associated perception, again within the ranks of the leadership, of the eroding organizational cohesion,

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- (2) See Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); David M. Lampton, "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (95): 2015; Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, 2015. "The rise of the Chinese security state." *The China Quarterly* 222: 339-359; Teresa Wright, *Party and State in Post-Mao China*. (Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Sebastian Heilmann, *China's Political System* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).
- (3) Teresa Wright, *Party and State in Post-Mao China*. (Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- (4) Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Yongnian Zheng, *Contemporary China: A History Since 1978* (Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
- (5) Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley, *In Search of Legitimacy in Post-Revolutionary China: Bringing Ideology and Governance Back In* (No. 127), (GIGA Institute 2010). Idem, "Ideology after the end of ideology. China and the quest for autocratic legitimation." *Democratization* 20:1 (2013): 61-81.
- (6) David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2008). Interestingly, the Chinese system enjoys one of the highest rates of public support in the world, a feature that has been confirmed repeatedly by many surveys and studies conducted by Chinese and Western scholars over the years. Dickson's recent book, *The Dictator's Dilemma*, substantiates these findings with one of the most extensive studies ever done on the subject. See Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Jinghan Zeng, "The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China: bridging the wide gulf between Western and Chinese scholarship." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23:88 (2014): 612-635.

loss of ideological orientation, and growing corruption among Party cadres and the threat this poses to the future survival of the CPC;⁷ and finally, f) the intensification of ethnic tensions along China's strategic borderlands, Tibet and Xinjiang, both of which saw major uprisings in 2008-2009 at a sensitive time in which the party-state was overseeing the Beijing Olympics and their aftermath.⁸

These heterogenous factors have been long-standing features of the Dengist order since the very start of the opening up (*gaige kaifang*) reforms in 1978-79 and underscore, as Shirk aptly described it, China's status as a "fragile superpower."⁹ What has compounded and amplified the problematic effect of these factors are two system-wide challenges that the party-state has had to contend with in the past few years. The first challenge relates to the exhaustion of the country's export-led economic model and the party-state's need to find new sources to fuel domestic growth under conditions dubbed as the "new normal" (*xin changtai*).¹⁰ The latter has been produced by a set of problems encompassing China's plateauing economic dividends after nearly three decades of double digit growth, considerable capital flight, declining international trade and a reversal of globalization trends, an upcoming demographic crisis typified by a rapidly aging society, and deepening—as well as socially and economically disruptive—processes of atomization and robotization. The danger posed by these changes is that they threaten to undermine the eudemonic or performance legitimacy that had ensured public support for the post-Maoist regime since the 1980s.¹¹ Without a new formula

(7) David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2008).

(8) Sebastian Heilmann, *China's Political System* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Tony, Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

(9) Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

(10) Arthur. R. Kroeber, *China's Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

(11) Andre Laliberte and Marc Lanteigne, *The Chinese Party-state in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy*. Vol. 10. (New York: Routledge 2007).

ensuring a smooth restructuring of the economy—a task necessitating, according to the leadership, greater centralization of powers—social stability (*weiwen*) is jeopardized. More disconcertingly, the possibility of a Japan-style stagnation scenario or worse still, a hard landing, could indefinitely derail the attainment of the goal of national modernization that lies at the heart of the CPC’s (legitimizing) nationalist narrative of building a wealthy and strong state (*fuqiang guojia*).¹²

The second system-wide challenge stems from the ongoing perceived threat of a Western-led plot to bring about regime-change in Beijing *via* either direct military confrontation or the more subversive means of “peaceful evolution.”¹³ This has always been a perennial concern following the “near-death” experience the CPC faced during the course of the Tiananmen events (April-June 1989). However, developments over the last decade, such as the eruption of the Color Revolutions within the former-Soviet republics in the mid-2000s, the American military “encroachments” in Central Asia and the Chinese maritime periphery, the “Arab Spring” uprisings from 2010 onwards, and the Hong Kong/Taiwan mass anti-Beijing demonstrations in 2013-2015 (Occupy Central, the Umbrella Revolution, the Sun Flower movement) have all contributed to deepening anxieties within the party-state regarding

(12) There are two major milestones of modernization set by the party-state. The first is achieving a “moderately prosperous society” by 2021 (marking the CPC’s centennial founding anniversary) and the second is the realization of the “China Dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by 2049, which marks a different centennial anniversary: that of the founding the People’s Republic of China. See Ross, John. “China’s Five Year Plan to achieve a ‘moderately prosperous society’” China’s Five Year Plan to achieve a ‘moderately prosperous society’ - China.org.cn. October 30, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2017. http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2015-10/30/content_36935303.htm.; “minzufuxing zhongguo meng” [People’s Revival, China Dream] (undated) *Xinhua*. <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/szxt/zgm.htm>.

(13) David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2008); Russell Ong, “‘Peaceful Evolution’, ‘Regime Change’ and China’s Political Security.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16:53 (2007): 717-727; Idem, *China’s Security Interests in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Peaceful evolution (*heping yanbian*) is an old concept that dates back to the 1950s during the early phases of the Cold War. It refers to a perceived strategy being pursued by the United States to engineer, through trade and cultural exchanges with the socialist bloc, a peaceful transformation of their political and economic systems towards more capitalist and democratic lines.

the dangers of Western-led subversion.¹⁴ Most of these events were seen by the party-state leadership through the prism of Soviet collapse (1989-1991), where ideological vulnerability and Gorbachovian compromise supposedly allowed for the unchecked spread of Western liberalism, individualism and religious influences, all of which eventually contributed towards the downfall of the communist system by weakening its ideational foundations and pillars of legitimacy.¹⁵

This sense of ideological besiegement has been coupled moreover with the intensification of strategic competitive pressures within the Sino-American relationship, and a growing sense that the United States is increasingly pursuing a strategy of containment against China in East Asia. The Obama administration's initially much-touted "Asia pivot" has come to comprise a variety of measures suggestive of such a strategy, including a proportional re-allocation of military personnel and naval deployments towards the Pacific theaters,¹⁶ efforts to cultivate closer intelligence-military cooperation between American allies such as Japan and South Korea, and the attempt to construct (a now-aborted) Trans-Pacific Partnership excluding China. Interestingly, the Trump administration may actually come to constitute a "strategic opportunity" for the party-state and relieve—for some duration—its concrete fears of encirclement. Nevertheless, tensions are bound to grow and the relationship will become more conflictual, as can be discerned in the more negative tone adopted towards China among establishment elite (Republican and Democrat) and think tanks in the United States. The specter of a growing

(14) David Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Teresa Wright, "Perpetuating communist party rule in China." *Journal of International Affairs* (2011); Jeane L. Wilson, "Coloured revolutions: The view from Moscow and Beijing." *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 252: 2-3 (2009):369-395.

(15) David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2008); Sebastian Heilmann, *China's Political System* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

(16) Marcus, Jonathan. "Leon Panetta: US to deploy 60% of navy fleet to Pacific." BBC News. June 02, 2012. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-18305750>.

(albeit momentarily subdued) American threat will probably contribute to strengthening President Xi's influence in the lead-up to the Nineteenth Party Congress scheduled to be held in Autumn 2017.

Over the past few years, the party-state leadership under Xi has responded to many of these challenges by promoting greater securitization and centralized control over the Party itself, the state, and of course, broader Chinese society. A sustained anti-corruption campaign, overseen by the formidable Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection run by Wang Qishan, has been ongoing for several years now, netting several "Tigers" (*laohu*) or major figures such as Zhou Yongkang, Ling Jihua, Xu Caihou, as well as disciplining over 200 thousand cadres.¹⁷ Ideological supervision and instruments of control have also been strengthened, both within the Party itself – as epitomized by the infamous "Document 9"¹⁸ issued during the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress – and the re-appropriation of many Maoist techniques of control; and throughout society at large, with significant attention being accorded to vulnerable constituencies such as students, intellectuals, and the youth, writ-large. Greater investments have been made into expanding the party-state's coercive and "stability-maintenance" apparatuses and upgrading the quality of its propaganda work as well.¹⁹ In addition, new institutional arrangements have been made to improve party-state controls over sensitive and threatening spheres such as cyberspace; the creation of new coordinating bodies like the

(17) Sebastian Heilmann, *China's Political System* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Tony, Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

(18) The document was produced during the Third Plenum of the Sixteenth Party Congress held in 2013. It called for the party to combat the spread of neoliberalism, universal values, promotion of civil society and western-style constitutionalism, as well as historical nihilism (i.e. critiques of the Maoist era), among others. See "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation." ChinaFile. October 30, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

(19) Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, 2015. "The rise of the Chinese security state." *The China Quarterly* 222: 339-359; Anne-Marie M. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009); Idem, *China's Thought Management* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Kingsley Edney *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda: International Power and Domestic Political Cohesion* (New York: Springer, 2014).

Central National Security Commission (*zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui*) and the passage of various forms of legislation circumscribing and limiting foreign influence in the country, including the NGO Law, Charity Law, and Counter-Terrorism Law, among others.

A Troublesome but Profitable Sphere: Religious Controls under the Leninist Party-State

The Party-State's Contradictory Views of Religion

Despite past attempts to eradicate religion in Maoist China, and especially during the Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming*) in 1966-76, the party-state at present views religion with begrudged toleration. It holds unto a teleological perspective of religion in which the latter will, in a teleological fashion, dissipate as the people's 'quality' (*suzhi*) improves, their livelihoods (*minsheng*) become better, and the country advances towards a higher level of modernity and civilization.²⁰ This newfound accommodation is reflected in the 1982 Constitution Article 36, which enshrines the freedom of religion. Discrimination on the basis of religion is banned by the party-state, and citizens cannot be compelled to believe or not believe in any faith. Although the party-state formally censors and prohibits proselytization of superstitious and feudal beliefs (*mixin; fengjian xinyang*) and openly propagates atheism given its historical orientation as a Marxist-Leninist entity, the party-state extends limited protections, and even patronage, to five officially recognized faiths: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Protestantism, and Islam.

The party-state's newfound toleration in the Dengist era is justified on several practical grounds. Domestically, toleration was needed for the purpose of

(20) Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Hongyi Lai, "Religions and Chinese Socialism: China's Religious Policies Since the 1990s." In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016). Jessica Batke, "PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP." *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (2017).

establishing and upholding stability while re-legitimizing the state's authority among minorities and religious groups that suffered significantly in the Maoist years. The religious opening that the Hui and Uyghur minorities came to enjoy in the 1980s is a typical example of this dynamic (Cook 2008).²¹ Given the centrality of economic development for the party-state during the Deng Xiaoping era and beyond, religion has been perceived to play a potentially positive role in supporting the modernization goals of China: whether through the provision of social goods by way of local religious communities or in religion's branding value and ability to attract overseas investments and tourism. The latter economic calculations could be discerned in the 1980s trend of reconstructing temples and ancestral shrines along coastal Southern China for the purposes of attracting overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) support or in the refurbishment of ostensibly Jewish religious and cultural sites in Shanghai or Harbin.²² Internationally, showcasing party-state toleration and even patronage of religion serves to alleviate external human rights criticisms surrounding its treatment of religious communities and can, more significantly, have a facilitating effect in the pursuit of foreign policy goals: China's recent "Buddhist" diplomacy²³ is interesting in that regard. The Sino-

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- (21) The Hui and the Uyghurs are the two largest groups among the ten of fifty-six ethnic groups (*minzu*) that predominantly profess Islam. Estimates place the numbers of Muslims in China at around 20 to 30 million, with most concentrated in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Yunnan, Henan, Shandong, and Shaanxi. Liu, Joseph. "About the Project." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. January 26, 2011. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-about/>. James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (No. 149). (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1996); James N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*. (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1998).
- (22) The authorities in Kaifeng, Henan, where a small Sino-Jewish community has survived and re-emerged culturally and spiritually with the aid of various international Jewish and Christian organizations, used to adopt a similar approach but since the wider 2016 crackdown on religion began, have halted efforts to promote the city's Jewish heritage. Buckley, Chris. "Chinese Jews of Ancient Lineage Huddle Under Pressure." *The New York Times*. September 24, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/world/asia/china-kaifeng-jews.html?_r=0.
- (23) Angelskår, Trine. "China's Buddhist diplomacy." *Report of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*. March 2013. Accessed March 16, 2017.. http://noref.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/280b5bde8e7864209c33d01737fd2db0.pdf

Saudi rapprochement of the 1980s, prior to the inauguration of formal ties in 1990, was characterized likewise by the party-state's active leveraging of Islamic symbols and expressions to win recognition.²⁴

Notwithstanding the potentially positive roles played by religion, it remains, in the eyes of the CPC, a potential rival "on ideological, organizational, and even fiscal grounds."²⁵ Its danger has certainly grown in light of the religious revival experienced across post-Maoist China,²⁶ especially among Buddhist (the Mahayana and Tibetan variants), Daoist, Christian (Protestantism along the coasts and Catholicism within the interior), and Muslim communities.²⁷ Although much of this has taken place within officially prescribed parameters, growth in "grey" zones unsanctioned by the party-state, in the form of underground Christian churches (Vatican-aligned Catholics or evangelical Christians of various stripes) for example, has also been significant. Other (unrecognized but generally tolerated) non-traditional faiths have gained many converts across China over the past few decades such as Mormonism (although the Church does not permit proselytization in the mainland), and Baha'ism; more problematically for the party-state, what it perceives

(24) Nasir Al-'Abudi, the former deputy head of the Muslim World League, has written five volumes dealing with his separate visits to China that cover many of these episodes.

(25) Hongyi Lai, "Religions and Chinese Socialism: China's Religious Policies Since the 1990s." In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016).

(26) Albert, Eleanor. "Religion in China." Council on Foreign Relations. June 10, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.cfr.org/china/religion-china/p16272>.

(27) There has been a Confucian revival as well, at times half-heartedly backed by the state, although much of this growth has been driven by overseas Sinophone scholars and *guoxue* (national studies) academics. It should be noted that despite attempts to "restore" Confucianism to a position of centrality in the moral-ideational life of the country (through the enactment of public ceremonies and the celebration of Confucius' birthday), the tradition remains problematic and contentious for the party-state as well as for a wide array of intellectuals, Leftist ideologues, and even nationalists. Many see in Confucianism a viewpoint that goes back to Westernization movement (*xifanghua yundong*) of the 1920s, which is a major cultural obstacle for the country's modernization. They also see a force for feudal and reactionary thought, and an effete and feminine tradition that allowed the country's humiliation by outside forces. See Werner Meissner, "China's search for cultural and national identity from the nineteenth century to the present," *China Perspectives* 68 (2006); Sebastian Billioud, "Confucianism, 'Cultural Tradition,' and Official Discourse in China at the Start of the New Century" *China Perspectives* 3 (2007).

to be “cults” (*xiejiao*), like the Falungong Dafa, a movement which mixes millenarian Buddhist and Daoist populist beliefs with *qigong* practices, have also gained ground. More benign folk-religions have likewise proliferated across the country, although these have been largely left to their own devices by the authorities.

The party-state sees in religion a latent political danger to its authority. Religion has the capacity, especially when it assumes a missionizing and non-ethnicized garb, to potentially mobilize its adherents and followers across social/class cleavages and regions against the rule of the CPC.²⁸ Reinforcing these fears are the lessons that the CPC has drawn from two historical events; the Catholic Church’s role in bringing down the Polish communist regime in the 1980s, and, closer to home, the Falungong Dafa’s 1999 demonstrations outside Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound in Beijing.²⁹ Hovering behind these lessons is an even older historical precedent rooted in China’s imperial history: millenarian religious groups have cyclically contested the authority of the Chinese state, often with extremely destructive consequences. The Taiping rebels who mixed Christian and popular Buddhist-Daoist beliefs nearly brought down the Qing imperial government in the mid-19th century in one of modern history’s bloodiest civil wars.³⁰

As a more circumscribed threat, religion can also function as an ideational and tribal rallying symbol for secessionist minority groups, such as the

(28) Hongyi Lai, “Religions and Chinese Socialism: China’s Religious Policies Since the 1990s.” In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016); Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

(29) David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2008); Hongyi Lai, “Religions and Chinese Socialism: China’s Religious Policies Since the 1990s.” In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016); Ian Johnson, *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Russell Ong, *China’s Security Interests in the Post-Cold War Era*. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

(30) Elizabeth J. Perry, “Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: ‘Re-Orienting’ Party Propaganda.” Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series 2013.

Tibetans, Mongols and Uyghurs.³¹ In such instances, however, religion is highly “ethnicized” and its appeal is assumed to be congruent with certain geographic zones (i.e. for Tibetan Buddhism, its ethno-religious communities are dispersed across Tibet, Qinghai, and Sichuan). The threat is less about the possibility of religion offering a system-wide challenge to the regime through its inherent mobilizing capacity, but rather, more about its cultural-national function that could undermine the territorial integrity and unity of the Chinese state. Accordingly, religious controls on the border provinces (Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia) tend to be stricter and more intrusive than those found in the interior.³² In Xinjiang, for instance, the provincial party-state authorities have gradually imposed a range of regulations and religious controls since the 1990s in tandem with the escalation of violence there.³³ These include age restrictions for entry into mosques; a ban on niqabs on public transportation in Urumqi³⁴ and general discouragement against the maintenance of beards; banning “unofficial” religious gatherings like congregational Quranic recitations; the imposition of heavy controls on the circulation of religious materials in person or electronically; withholding passports from Hajj applicants; and monitoring of the religiosity and practices of Muslim residents (in a manner akin to the imperial *baojia* system)³⁵ by officials as well as appointed laymen. Many of these policies are designed with the explicit aim of circumscribing social identification with religion and

(31) Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

(32) Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Hongyi Lai, “Religions and Chinese Socialism: China’s Religious Policies Since the 1990s.” In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016).

(33) Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

(34) Urumqi is the provincial capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

(35) The *baojia* system, which goes back to the Song period in the 10th century and which was revived by subsequent dynasties including the Ming and Qing, basically involves the delegation of authority and supervision to localized authorities that would oversee several tens of households. These authorities would be entrusted with the collection of taxes, managing tensions, and raising troops, and would be held accountable by the central government for any problems or disturbances.

hence, any cultural-national identity that is incompatible with the narrative promoted by the Chinese party-state. These measures are also meant to re-orient public sentiment (*ganqing*) towards a modern ethos embodied by Han China and its “civilizing mission” in the border provinces.

The potential involvement of foreign forces (*jingwai shili; waiguo shili*) looms large in all of these threatening conceptualizations of religion. The relatively liberal regime of movements that had emerged in China since 1978-79, hand in hand with the globalizing effect entailed by the spread of modern telecommunication technologies, has enabled the development of strong ties between local and global communities of faith. More disconcertingly for the party-state, some Chinese believers look towards spiritual authorities abroad for guidance, and at times in total rejection of CPC-backed ones at home, as is the case with Chinese Catholics.³⁶ This state of affairs conjures up the shadow of historical precedent drawn from the country’s national narrative of “one hundred years of humiliation” (*bainian guochi*) wherein foreign countries leveraged their connections to religious groups for the purposes of realizing their imperial designs over China. Limiting foreign connections for the purposes of circumscribing their potential influence over these communities, as well as ensuring monopolized control over religious hierarchies and organs, are thus key and understandable objectives of the party-state in light of historical precedent.

(36) Hongyi Lai, “Religions and Chinese Socialism: China’s Religious Policies Since the 1990s.” In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016); Jessica Batke, “PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP.” *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (2017).

The Party-State's Management of Religion

In order to maintain a guiding role (*zhidao*) over religion,³⁷ the party-state has endeavored to do two things. First, it “gave itself the central role of defining and protecting religious orthodoxy”³⁸ whereby it could exclude certain religions or sects from recognition by characterizing them as popular beliefs, superstitions, and/or evil cults. This cesaro-papist role is rooted in older Imperial traditions that fuse civil and religious functions together in the body of the state.³⁹ A demonstrative example of this, and one specifically pertaining Islam, is how the late Qing authorities sought to deal with Muslim sectarian infighting - which routinely erupted in the Northwest between the Khufiyya and Jahriyya Sufi orders throughout the 17th and 18th centuries – by designating an orthodox moniker (*laojiao* or old religion; sometimes implying “orthodox”) on the former against the more latter (and presumably) more disruptive arrival (*xinjiao* or new religion; sometimes implying heterodox).⁴⁰ Another illustrative example of this from the contemporary period is the party-state’s insistence that the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama can only be identified by Chinese officials.⁴¹ The current exiled Dalai Lama and “spiritual leader” of Tibet has repeatedly expressed in recent years that the practice of reincarnation might end with his death. This has been unsurprisingly rejected by the atheistic party-state which has sought to assert its cesaro-papist role in accordance with the 2007 regulations dealing with the selection “living

(37) The ninety million CPC cadres are prohibited from having any religious beliefs of their own. The Party carries out campaigns against religious belief and practice, applications for membership often include religious screening, and cadre family members are often discouraged from open participation in religious rituals and ceremonies. Albert, Eleanor. “Religion in China.” Council on Foreign Relations. June 10, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.cfr.org/china/religion-china/p16272>.

(38) Vincent Gooddaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

(39) John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

(40) James N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*. (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1998).

(41) “China sticks to right to decide reincarnation of Dalai Lama.” Reuters. November 30, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-idUSKBN0TJ0LN20151130>.

Buddhas” through the State Administration of Religious Affairs.⁴² Another facet of the cesaro-papist role played by the Chinese party-state is expressed in its promotional support of “indigenous” religions (*bentu zongjiao*) such as Buddhism and Daoism, and more cautiously, Confucianism,⁴³ despite its presumably atheistic character. This strategy serves the purpose of implicitly countering the spread of presumably foreign traditions such as Christianity and Islam while ensuring that the religious landscape remains, for the most part, fragmented.⁴⁴

Second, the party-state manages religion through a web of institutions and apparatuses that are either part of the civilian state structures, such as the Religious Affairs Bureau, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Public Security, or which are part of the CPC itself, such as the United Front Department and the Propaganda Department.⁴⁵ The most important are probably the Religious Affairs Bureau – which regulates all legal (*hefa*) religious activity – and the Ministry of Public Security, which is tasked with combating illegal (*feifa*) religious activity, including counteracting the spread of cults (*fanxiejiao*). In addition to these regulatory structures, the party-state also depends on affiliated functional organizations such as the

(42) “Reincarnation of living Buddha needs gov’t approval.” Reincarnation of living Buddha needs gov’t approval. August 4, 2007. Accessed March 16, 2017. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-08/04/content_5448242.htm.

(43) Hongyi Lai, “Religions and Chinese Socialism: China’s Religious Policies Since the 1990s.” In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016); Jessica Batke, “PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP.” *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (2017); Fenggang, Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

(44) Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

(45) Over the last two decades, a growing body of legislation has also emerged to clarify the responsibilities of the abovementioned institutions and apparatuses as well as deepen the party-state’s control over the religious sphere. “Document 145” (1994) and “Document 426” (2004) for example imposed limits on the activities of foreign charities and organizations, concentrated foreign religious engagement to official bodies like the yixie, and sought to put caps on the growth of religious organizations and places of worship. Jessica Batke, “PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP.” *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (2017).

Chinese Islamic Association (*zhongguo yisilanjiao xiehui*—henceforth *yixie*)⁴⁶ which was re-established in 1982 (under “Document 19”) as representative bodies for religious communities. The *yixie* is tasked with religious oversight of all Muslim religious sites (which must register with it), organizing the Hajj missions, the promotion of patriotism, (usually under the slogan *aiguo aijiao*, “loving the homeland is from loving religion”) and combating any religious activities that might endanger ethnic unity or undermine party-state authority. Further control is maintained through “semi-formal” bodies such as the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (which exists at all administrative levels), in which religious elites, including clerics, Sufi *shuyukh*, intellectuals, and like, are co-opted and included in party-state deliberations.

These explicit structures of control are conjoined with a number of other measures aimed at reinforcing the party-state’s management of the religious sphere. Clerics, as a rule of thumb, are expected to meet once a month with officials from the Ministry of Public Security in order to report any issues or unusual occurrences among their congregations. They also play a role in upholding social stability and are relatively integrated into the structures of governance as mediators of conflict within their communities.⁴⁷ Additionally, the party-state mandates ideological education for clerics and other religious specialists, and involves these groups not only in its patriotic promotion initiatives, but in its mass-mobilization campaigns as well. Restrictions also play a critical role in the maintenance of party-state control over the religious sphere. Officially, religious literature not published within China itself is illegal, although this ban is difficult to uphold in light of the globalized and

(46) Other organizations include the Buddhist Association of China, the China Taoist Association, the Patriotic Association of the Catholic Church in China, and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches of China.

(47) Matthew. S. Erie, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

commercialized nature of Chinese society today.⁴⁸ One can easily find at present many Saudi, Turkish, or Iranian religious books available in Sino-Muslim bookstores across the country. Nonetheless, given prevailing sensitivities, there is considerable self-censorship and editing of foreign texts on the part of Chinese religious adherents.⁴⁹ Messaging apps like *weixin* and internet websites are likewise subject to surveillance and continued monitoring as well as censorship.

Changing Attitudes and Policies on Islam

Since 2015, and largely in accordance with the authoritarian turn discussed in the first section of this report, the party-state under Xi has moved towards exerting greater control over the religious sphere. This trend has been accompanied by greater securitization and policing of Muslim communities outside the confines of Xinjiang who have not been historically affected by such measures and policies in places like Yunnan and Gansu. This change can be observed in the new “watchwords” (*tifa*) increasingly being used in elite speeches, policy documents, and high-profile conferences.⁵⁰ One key term that has gained considerable circulation over the past two years, and is certainly reflective of the party-state’s evolving thinking on the question of religion in China, is that of “indigenization” (*bentuhua*) or alternatively, “sinification” (*zhongguohua*). The All-National Religious Work Meeting (*quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi*), in April 2016, which involved members of the Politburo Standing Committee including Xi Jinping, and the first to be held since 2001,

(48) Anne-Marie M. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

(49) The Saudi cultural attaché office circumvented this problem by importing Saudi published religious material by placing them under a different label when bringing through customs, a practice it has only begun to resort to in recent years as a result of growing restrictions over the importation of religious literature.

(50) Gang, Qian. “Watchwords: the Life of the Party – China Media Project.” China Media Project. September 11, 2012. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/09/10/26667/>.

invoked these terms in its call for enhancing party-state management of religion.⁵¹ Sinification denotes the emergence of a national-orientation: this is reflected in the leadership's exhortation for religious communities to support the realization of the national project, the China Dream (*zhongguo meng*), and to guard themselves against the subversive influence of hostile forces (*didui shili*) under increasingly dangerous and porous new conditions (*xin xingshi*).⁵²

This discursive shift, clearly aimed at combating the "Three Evil Forces" (*sangu shili*) of separatism, terrorism and extremism through a vocabulary of "indigenization" and propagandistic framing, has been coupled with more intrusive and intense crackdowns over the past few years to turn back foreign influences and reign in the perceived excesses observed in the growth of the religious sphere. The latter include, with respect to Muslim communities, the closure of "Wahhabi" affiliated schools in Yunnan, more intense regulation of "roaming" student practices,⁵³ the incarceration of several Muslim activists and teachers, outside of Xinjiang, and the repeated censorship of Muslim-affiliated internet and messaging content (most recently the closure of the popular website *zhongmu wang* 2muslim.com), among other incidents, all of which are aimed at managing and minimizing global/foreign influences on Chinese Islam.⁵⁴

(51) "Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai beijing zhaokai xi jinping jianghua li Keqiang zhuchi [All-National Religious Work Meeting Opens in Beijing, Xi Jinping gives speech, Li Keqiang hosts] 2016. The State Council of the People's Republic of China. April 23. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-04/23/content_5067281.htm. Jessica Batke, "PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP." *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (2017).

(52) "Buduan tigao zuohao xinxingshixia zongjiao gongzuo de nengli" [Unceasingly improve the ability of doing religious work under the new conditions] *Renmin Wang*. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0902/c1001-28684956.html>

(53) "Roaming" here refers to the well-established tradition (going back to the Ming-Qing era) of Muslim students travelling from one province to the next for further education.

(54) "China." Human Rights Watch. January 27, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/china-and-tibet#ada87c>; <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf>. Hongyi Lai, "Religions and Chinese Socialism: China's Religious Policies Since the 1990s." In *Governing Society in Contemporary China*, edited by Lijun Yang and Wei Shan, (New York: Routledge, 2016); Jessica Batke, "PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP." *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (2017).

What are the factors contributing to this more forceful assertion of the party-state's guiding role *vis à vis* the religious sphere? The first, broadly touching upon the theme discussed in the first and second sections of this report, is the continued anxiety of the party-state over the durability and solidity of its rule, its residual fears regarding religion, and its pursuit of further “centralization” and “consolidation” under Xi as a means towards reigning in an increasingly uncontrollable and diffused religious sphere. The discursive, institutional, and structural response follows developments seen in other spheres. The second factor is the deterioration of the security situation in Xinjiang, especially since the 2009 Urumqi riots, with violence reportedly reaching 1990s Chechnya-levels of intensity in the southern part of the region where most of the Uyghur population resides.⁵⁵ The conflict in Xinjiang, which sees routine bombings and assaults against military and police installations, has naturally spilled over into other provinces in China, illustrated by a number of major acts of terrorism including the minivan attack in Beijing (October 2013), the knife-attack in Kunming which left 29 victims dead (March 2014), and another similar attack in Guangzhou (May 2014).⁵⁶ In light of the “nationalization” of the Xinjiang problem, the party-state has sought to broaden the scope of its counter-terrorism strategy, viewing “the entire country,” instead of just Xinjiang proper, “as one chessboard,”⁵⁷ according to Vice Public Security Minister Yang Huanning.

The third factor is closely tied—discursively, symbolically, and perhaps materially—to the violence in Xinjiang, and relates to the ascendance of a visible and dynamic Uyghur element among international Jihadi organizations.

(55) “Weiguang Wang. *kongbuzhuyi guojia anquan yu fankong zhanlve* [Terrorism: National Security and Counter-terrorism strategy] (Shishi chubanshe: 2011).; Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

(56) Zenn, Jacob. “Beijing, Kunming, Urumqi and Guangzhou: The Changing Landscape of Anti-Chinese Jihadists.” Jamestown. May 23, 2014. Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/beijing-kunming-urumqi-and-guangzhou-the-changing-landscape-of-anti-chinese-jihadists/>.

(57) Famularo, Julia. “How Xinjiang Has Transformed China’s Counterterrorism Policies.” *The National Interest*. August 26, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-xinjiang-has-transformed-china%E2%80%99s-counterterrorism-13699>.

This is manifested in the growing successes of such groups like the Al-Qaeda aligned Turkestan Islamic Party in Syria (which scored several victories during the Jisr Al-Shugur 2015 rebel offensives against the Assad-regime) or in the more pronounced attention accorded to the Uyghur-issue in the propaganda of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS).⁵⁸ This visibility is often linked with concerns over the long-term consequences associated with the return of such individuals groups to China: according to official estimates, the Syrian battlefield alone has already attracted well over three hundred citizens.⁵⁹ The intensification of religious controls then should be seen as part of the party-state's enunciation of a more comprehensive and pre-emptive counter-terrorism strategy, which has crystallized in the passage of a new counter-terrorism law (*guojia anquan fa*) in late 2015.⁶⁰

The fourth factor is connected to the spread of Islamophobic discourses at the popular and elite levels in China over the past few years. The catalysts behind their diffusion are complex and difficult to desegregate, but they appear to originate from several sources. To begin with, the impact of China's own domestic terrorism problem, coupled with the decade-long American "War on Terror" campaign, has shaped popular perceptions of Islam and Muslim communities globally and within China. Coupled with this has been an avid reproduction, within China, of Islamophobic discourses particular to the West. Some of these appear to be driven by transnational groups seeking to popularize anti-Muslim ideas among non-Western audiences. Christian polemical websites,

(58) Botobekov, Uran. "China's Nightmare: Xinjiang Jihadists Go Global." *The Diplomat*. August 17, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/chinas-nightmare-xinjiang-jihadists-go-global/>.

(59) Zenn, Jacob. "An Overview of Chinese Fighters and Anti-Chinese Militant Groups in Syria and Iraq." *The Jamestown Foundation*. October 10, 2014. Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/an-overview-of-chinese-fighters-and-anti-chinese-militant-groups-in-syria-and-iraq/>; "shuliya guangfang huiying '300ming zhongguo jiduanfenzi daoshu canzhan (1) [Syrian official responds to claim of 300 Chinese extremists arriving in Syria to join the war] 2015. *Zhonghua Wang*. October 19. <http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20151019/20584127.html>.

(60) "Yuanquan fabu: zhonghuarenmin gongheguo guojia anquanfa"[authorized declaration: People's Republic of China's National Security Law] 2015. *Xinhua*. July 1. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/01/c_1115787801_3.htm.

mimicking answerislam.com abound in Chinese cyberspace, for example.⁶¹ Pro-Israeli advocacy, with all of its anti-Arab and anti-Islamic language, has found some resonance with academic and popular segments among the Chinese public.⁶² Right-wing style, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim arguments have also registered a presence on the Chinese internet.⁶³ In many cases, these arguments reproduce familiar Western themes of “creeping Sharia” and demographic time-bombs. With respect to the particularities of the Chinese context, they also represent latent public hostility towards the perceived “privileges”⁶⁴ enjoyed by minorities and a xenophobic reaction to the growing presence of African/Arab foreign communities in places like Guangzhou and Yiwu. Perhaps indicative of how disconcerting the situation has become, it should be noted that prior to his electoral victory in November, Trump enjoyed considerable popularity among urban Chinese due to the perception that he was anti-Muslim.⁶⁵

The resonance of these views at the official level can also be discerned

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- (61) It is interesting to note that in recent years, some Christian underground movements in China have developed a missionizing attitude towards Muslims both within and outside the country. One of these, supported by Evangelical churches in the United States, the “Back to Jerusalem Movement” (Brandner 2009) is animated by a messianic and Zionist impetus that seeks to “save” Muslim populations on the way to Jerusalem (from China) as a means towards speeding up the return of the Messiah and bringing about the End of Times.
- (62) Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “Adhering to the Ways of Our Western Brothers.” *Sociology of Islam* 4 (1-2): (2016): 27-58.
- (63) Lecture by Dr. Zhang Zhongfu “Is China Islamophobic? A survey on historical and contemporary perspectives” given on the 11th of August, 2015 in a panel for an international conference “Reconnecting China with the Muslim World” held in Malaya University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Alice, “Harmony and Martyrdom Among China’s Hui Muslims.” *The New Yorker*. June 06, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/harmony-and-martyrdom-among-chinas-hui-muslims>; Leibold, James. “Creeping Islamophobia: China’s Hui Muslims in the Firing Line.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. June 20, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/creeping-islamophobia-chinas-hui-muslims-in-the-firing-line/>; Chunshan, Mu. “Anti-Muslim Sentiment Is Taking Over China’s Social Media Scene.” *The Diplomat*. September 13, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/anti-muslim-sentiment-is-taking-over-chinas-social-media-scene/>.
- (64) Under the ethnic minority system, non-Han groups were exempted from the one-child policy restrictions and accorded extra points to their college examination (gaokao). See Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People’s Republic* (No. 149). (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1996); Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- (65) “Posts about Foreign Policy on Chublic Opinion.” Chublic Opinion. November 15, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://chublicopinion.com/category/foreign-policy-2/>.

within certain institutional-provincial contexts, such as the Ministry of Public Security or the Xinjiang party-state provincial authorities. These entities have traditionally expressed opposition to initiatives such as the One Belt One Road project due to fears that integration between the province and the Muslim hinterlands will exacerbate the dilemma of “extremism” within the Uyghur population.⁶⁶ Although the central authorities do not necessarily share the Islamophobic views and rhetoric found elsewhere, and especially such narratives of an impending conspiracy to “Islamize”/ “Arabize”/ “Greenify” (*yisilanhua/alabohua/lysehua*) China, there is nonetheless a domestic milieu, hostile to Muslims and Islam, that the party-state must accommodate and engage with. This has had an impact. The Chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, Wang Zhenghui, a Hui official who had long advocated for the preservation of the ethnic autonomy system and the promulgation of a “Halal” standardized law for the country was summarily dismissed from his post after a sustained attack claiming that he was attempting to introduce religious laws undermining the secular constitution and seeking to “Halalify” (*qingzhenhua*) Chinese society.⁶⁷ The important point is that these discourses and their associated narratives claim that foreign influences are radicalizing Muslim communities in China and transforming them into fifth columns. This argument, or aspects of it at least, is increasingly echoed by elements within the Chinese party-state in how it views the underlying causes of the “Xinjiang problem” i.e. as a byproduct of low economic development and the spread of non-indigenous forms of Islam. This translates increasingly into attempts, in the discursive and actual policy-making arena, to limit the transnational connections between China own local Muslims communities and the wider Islamic world.

(66) Personal conversations with Chinese scholars in Hong Kong during November-December 2016.

(67) Leibold, James. “Creeping Islamophobia: China’s Hui Muslims in the Firing Line.” The Jamestown Foundation. June 20, 2016. Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/creeping-islamophobia-chinas-hui-muslims-in-the-firing-line/>.

The fifth factor involves Saudi Arabia and relates to the growing hostility to “Wahhabism” or “Salafism” and the perception that the latter constitute the major ideological sources fueling the spread of extremism among China’s Muslim communities. Increasingly, many non-Muslim academics and officials see the spread of Salafism within China, both within Xinjiang but more broadly across the country, as deeply problematic and antithetical to the maintenance of stability. The growing popularity of Salafism for such circles is gauged by the visible rejection of Chinese cultural practices in clothing choices (for instance, the donning of the Saudi-style *shimagh* or black *abayas* in the Northwest) or in the adoption of “Arabic” or “Middle Eastern” architectural designs for mosques. Salafis, as fundamentalists, are viewed to be intrinsically opposed to modernity and thus vulnerable to resorting to violence. These perceptions are reinforced by global anxieties surrounding “Wahhabism” and its connection to radicalism/terrorism on the one hand, and anti-Wahhabi and anti-Saudi discourses voiced by various Sino-Muslim communities in China, and especially from among Yihewani elites and Sufi tariqas that view the Salafis⁶⁸ as theological and organizational sectarian rivals.⁶⁹ The latter groups seek to limit the spread of Salafism in China by aligning themselves with the party-state—as promoters of a “moderate Islam”—and inviting securitization measures against their rivals. One cannot discount anti-Wahhabi polemics from some Iranian⁷⁰ and Turkish Naqshibandi⁷¹ sources, who seek to amplify

(68) Sometimes derisively called *santai* or the sect of “three elevations” in reference to the Hanbali manner of prayer.

(69) Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “Adhering to the Ways of Our Western Brothers.” *Sociology of Islam* 4 (1-2): (2016): 27-58; Leila Cherif-Chebbi, “Between ‘Abd al-Wahab and Liu Zhi: Chinese Muslim Intellectuals at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century” In *Islamic Thought in China* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016); Alexander B. Stewart, “Where is Allah? Sectarian Debate, Ethnicity, and Transnational Identity among the Salafis of Northwest China.” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1:1 (2016): 12-27.

(70) For instance, Iranian Chinese language radio ran a series in 2012 entitled “wahabipai de zhenshi mianmu” [The Real Face of the Wahhabi Sect]. <http://chinese.irib.ir/component/k2/item/41868-%E7%93%A6%E5%93%88%E6%AF%94%E6%B4%BE%E7%9A%84%E7%9C%9F%E5%A%E9%E9%9D%A2%E7%9B%AE%EF%BC%8826%EF%BC%69>

(71) Fieldwork notes from time spent in Gansu and Qinghai in 2014.

these sentiments among Muslims in China as a reproduction of intra-Muslim sectarian discussions.

Within this narrative, Saudi Arabia is viewed as the main promoter of the Salafisation trend within China and is consequently identified as the black hand (*heishou*) behind the unrest and radical violence experienced in different parts of the country. This narrative is given credence by the perception that the Kingdom wields disproportionate influence over China's Muslim communities, ranging from its role in popularizing certain standardized translations of the Quran to its hosting of hundreds of students in religious institutions like Medina University.⁷² The material resources deployed by the Saudi state—or agents and actors perceived to be associated with it—with respect to these communities confirm the notion of an ongoing process of Salafisation and even Islamisation. Evidence for Saudi support for these processes is varied: for example, Saudi-backed non-government organizations, from the Muslim World League to the Haramain Foundation (until 2004), have been long involved in charitable and educational ventures in places like Yunnan and Gansu.⁷³ Many Saudi preachers moreover, such as Mohammed Al-‘Ariyfi, ‘Aidh Al-Qarni, and Abdulaziz al-Fawzan, have come to include China in their global *da'wah* (preaching) tours. More troubling still has been the emergence of Saudi-funded missionary organizations attempting to make in-roads into the mainland such as the China-Saudi Cultural Dialogue Center (*zhongsha wenhua jiaoliu zhongxin*) in Riyadh. All of these examples contribute to the perception that Saudi is subversively (*ganshe*) involving itself in China and undermining the party-state's sovereign authority over the religious sphere.

(72) Mohammed Al-Sudairi, "Adhering to the Ways of Our Western Brothers." *Sociology of Islam* 4 (1-2): (2016): 27-58; Leila Cherif-Chebbi, "Between 'Abd al-Wahab and Liu Zhi: Chinese Muslim Intellectuals at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century" In *Islamic Thought in China* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016).

(73) Mohammed Al-Sudairi, "Adhering to the Ways of Our Western Brothers." *Sociology of Islam* 4 (1-2): (2016): 27-58.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The many challenges facing the Chinese political system, the mounting problem of terrorism, and the spread of Islamophobic as well as anti-Wahhabi discourses have, in conjunction with other factors, contributed to the trend of strengthening party-state management over the religious sphere. This development, as recounted above, inevitably involves Saudi Arabia—given its custodial role over the holy cities and the clout of international Islamic organizations—and will affect how it is viewed and discussed within Chinese academic and official circles. These perceptions and discussions in turn can potentially shape, positively or negatively, the future trajectory of Sino-Saudi relations, depending on whether more nuanced or guarded attitudes prevail. The core national interests of Saudi Arabia dictate the formulation of a more receptive and accommodating policy approach that can address the potentially adverse consequences arising from such a development. Such a policy approach would be comprised of three major elements. The first two are more specific, while the third constitutes a call for reform at a more structural level.

First, bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation needs to be maintained and strengthened. There have been many positive developments in this particular arena. Security agreements have been signed on both sides, and counter-terrorism exercises were held in Sichuan province in late 2016.⁷⁴ More significantly, Meng Jianzhu was sent as a special envoy of President Xi to Saudi Arabia on November 6, 2016, where he met with most of the Saudi leadership including King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef.⁷⁵ As head of the CPC's powerful Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (*zhongyang zhengfa wei*), an organ overseeing the security and legal apparatuses of the Chinese party-state through the party organization,

(74) “Al-Seen tajri awal tadribat mushtaraka ma’ al-su’udiyya ‘ala mukhafahat al-irhab” [China holds first partnered counter-terrorism drills with Saudi Arabia] 2016. *Reuters*. October 27. <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN12R0GE>.

(75) “Shate alabo guowang saleman huijian meng jianzhu” [Saudi Arabian King Salman receives Meng Jianzhu] 2016. *Xinhua*. November 8. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/08/c_1119873693.htm.

Meng's visit was a clear signal expressing the Chinese party-state's deep and serious commitment towards expanding security ties with the Kingdom. This momentum needs to be reciprocated and maintained by Riyadh. A possible opportunity may emerge after the leadership transition expected to take place during the Nineteenth Party Congress in late autumn this year. Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli, the Standing Politburo member who heads the Saudi-Chinese Joint Committee, is set to retire. This could create space for the ascension of new official blood into the Committee and, with the correct input from the Saudi-side, facilitate a push for a stronger and more security-oriented agenda that also takes religious cooperation under its purview.

Second, there is pressing need for more direct and intense collaboration on the religious front. Saudi institutions and organs, for instance, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, need to develop stronger ties with their Chinese counterparts, such the State Administration of Religion and the State Commission on Ethnic Affairs.⁷⁶ Fixed channels of dialogue could be established between the two sides to manage and oversee religious transnational links.⁷⁷ Controls on the flow of Saudi *shuyukh*, organizations and *da'wah* literature into China could be enacted to the mutual agreement of both sides. Programs aimed at deepening the understanding of the Chinese party-state's different apparatuses about Saudi Arabia, its religious institutions, and the character of the religious discourses it promotes, could also be enacted (and, likewise, a China-focused program could be created for Saudi officialdom).

In light of the "War on Terror" atmosphere that prevails within China today, such a task, defined by greater cooperation and coordination over religious issues, is

(76) A few sporadic contacts appear to have emerged over the past few years. For example, the State Administration of Religion's website carried a brief news piece describing the visit of a guest from the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Ma Jin huijian shate waijiaobu keren" [Ma Jin receives Saudi Foreign Ministry guest] 2016. *Guojia zongjiao shiwuju*. October 27. <http://www.sara.gov.cn/nsjg/ywss/gzdt5/378799.htm>.

(77) This already takes place for the Hajj's logistical and organizational arrangements. There are also occasional institutional exchanges, but this needs to be expanded considerably.

urgently needed in order to ensure that Sino-Saudi ties are not impacted over the long run by the spread of wider populist anti-Islamophobic sentiments and closely associated anti-Saudi views. Through the creation of a framework of engagement in the religious sphere, challenges to the bilateral relationship can be avoided. However, this must be done carefully and following extensive dialogue with the Chinese side so as to avoid possible frictions and confrontations. The King's extension of an invitation to stranded Chinese pilgrims as his guests for the Hajj in 2005, and which came following major Uyghur demonstrations in Pakistan, was misinterpreted by the Hu-Wen administration as a violation of China's sovereignty and interference in its national affairs.

This brings us to the third dimension: the Saudi government must consider comprehensively revising the character of its engagement with China. Although relations have deepened considerably since the establishment of formal ties in 1990, and most notably with the designation of the relationship in 2016 as a comprehensive strategic partnership (*quanmian zhanlve huoban*), it remains fundamentally transactional and undermined by serious weaknesses.⁷⁸ The latter stem primarily from the inherent quality issues surrounding Saudi diplomacy with respect to China. Due to many understandable cultural and historical reasons, the diplomatic presence in Beijing lacks the cultural and linguistic capital needed to engage with the party-state and wider Chinese society.⁷⁹ Most Saudi diplomatic officials are not fluent in *putonghua*, have not attended Chinese institutions of higher learning, nor possess, for that matter, specialized knowledge about the country and its politics. If anything, their understanding of the system's inner workings remains rudimentary at best, a fact very much on display in the quality of works they produce. Worse still,

(78) "Shonghua renmin gongheguo he shate alabo wangguo guanyu jianli quanmian zhanlve huoban guanxi de lianhe shengming" [The People's Republic of China and Saudi Arabia's joint statement on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership relationship] 2016. *Xinhua*. January 19. http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/20/c_1117828248.htm.

(79) Saudi elites and university graduates are more oriented to the Anglophone and European continental countries. They speak the dominant languages there and are more familiar with the political, social, cultural, and economic environments there. The same cannot be said with regards to China.

most of their assessments of the country and the state of bilateral relations tends to miss the mark, especially when one compares their reports with what is being said in Chinese reports and studies on the Sino-Saudi relationship. As a result, there is a total obliviousness to Chinese official and non-official conversations about Saudi Arabia, which places Saudi interests there at considerable risk. More pertinently with regards to the question of religion, awareness of China's regulations and the general religious landscape as a whole, remains rather circumscribed among such individuals.

This lack of suitable skillsets and cultural sensitivity also means that Saudi diplomats are unable to cultivate deep ties with Chinese officialdom and academia, a serious problem when considering the emphasis placed on personal relationships particular to the political culture there. Instead of substantive engagement, Saudi diplomats have often resorted to unnecessary grand gestures (such as the Wenchuan 2008 earthquake donation or the Shanghai Expo 2010 pavilion participation) or placing too much of an emphasis on Islamic and Arabic-language "soft power" initiatives. Although these gestures and initiatives have their uses, and are appreciated by the Chinese political establishment as concrete demonstrations of Saudi political and cultural capital being invested into the relationship, they do not substitute the task of building personal ties, creating channels of engagement, and having a Saudi voice heard in political and academic venues of import. In some instances, some of these gestures only serve to deepen anxieties and fears surrounding Saudi Arabia's presumed attempts to "Islamise" China.

Addressing these problems will take time, resources and effort, but a few preliminary steps should be taken. First, the state must consider establishing formal *putonghua* language programs in Saudi Arabia as there is an urgent need to improve the linguistic proficiency of Saudi diplomats heading to China.⁸⁰

(80) There is an existing program in King Saud University that started in 2004. Run predominantly by an Egyptian faculty, it appears to be directed mostly towards translation work: <https://colt.ksu.edu.sa/ar/chinese-dept-faculty>.

This could be accomplished by opening a Confucius institute managed by the *hanban* under the Chinese Ministry of Education (*jiaoyubu*) and linked to the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸¹ Second, the state must support and cultivate Asia-focused think tanks⁸² and research centers that can work in tandem with the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help inform and prepare diplomats before they depart for East Asia. Third, the state should consider establishing a semi-formal program, primarily linked to the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that routinely brings in delegations of Chinese academics and officials to lecture diplomats and officials headed to China.⁸³ Enhancing the quality of the Saudi diplomatic presence in China would allow the Kingdom to realize its goals more effectively and help minimize sensitivities surrounding religious issues.

(81) There have been issues in the past about using the “Confucian” moniker as it would suggest the institution functions as a religious center. This could be addressed in a variety of ways to the satisfaction of both sides.

(82) Or cultivating such an Asia focus within already existing entities, including the Institute of Diplomatic Studies.

(83) Potentially, a cooperative agreement could be reached with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Central Party School or other party-state research institutes of that nature.

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