

# What causes radicalisation? Voices of Uyghur Muslims in Canada

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## Abstract

Uyghurs, as a group, have been targeted recently by the Chinese government as possible terrorists. Against such a background, this article discusses the perspectives of twelve Muslim Uyghur immigrants in Canada on the possible causes of radicalisation. They vehemently rejected the idea that the Islamic faith was a push factor behind the radicalisation of Uyghurs. For them, the oppressive political climate in China was the only culprit. While their voices regarding radicalised Canadians reveal their misrepresented Muslim identity, they also demonstrate a strong resistance to the official Chinese narratives around Uyghur radicalisation. Their postcolonial voices in Canada turn into agency in the context of China.

**Keywords:** [Muslim Uyghur immigrants](#); [Radicalisation](#); [Terrorism](#); [Muslim identity](#); [Islamophobia](#); [Education in Canada](#); [Postcolonialism](#); [Agency](#)

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## Introduction

Uyghur violent resistance dates back to the early Manchu occupation period in the late eighteenth century (Millward, 1998; Newby, 2005). Such resistance was largely labelled as ethnic conflict or separatism until the late 1990s by the Chinese communist government. The 9/11 terrorist events in New York and the subsequent global “war on terror” rhetoric have offered the Chinese state the opportunity to label the long-standing Uyghur unrest as terrorist activity (Clarke, 2008, 2010, 2018; Roberts, 2018, 2020; Smith Finley, 2021; Zhang, 2019). Uyghur involvement in some international Islamist militant groups (most recently ISIS), however, should not be dismissed at all. Some argue that this may have been an ongoing issue since the 1990s (Cafiero, 2018; Clarke and Kan, 2017; Israeli, 2010; Soliev, 2017). As of late 2015, the Chinese authorities claimed that around 300 Uyghurs were in ISIS territory (Clarke and Kan, 2017; Saul, 2015). According to the leaked foreign fighter registration forms produced by ISIS, in early 2016, the number of registered Uyghur ISIS fighters was 114, showing the highest number of foreign fighters from any country outside of Tunisia and Saudi Arabia (Rosenblatt, 2016). As of May 2017, in the opinion of the Syrian ambassador to China, there were as many as 5,000 Uyghurs fighting in Syria (Blanchard, 2017).

Canada, as many other Western nations, has a radicalisation issue, which has been a major political topic in the last few decades. Public Safety Canada (2017) reports that in August 2016, the number of Canadians who were fighting with foreign terrorist groups in the Middle East had reached 190. In recent years, right-wing extremism in Canada has also been on the rise, with cases ranging from protests against refugees and immigrants (Public Safety Canada, 2017) to violent events, such as the Quebec mosque attack, which resulted in the loss of six innocent lives in early 2017. According to the Canadian Incident Database, right-wing extremists had perpetrated an average of 3.3 violent incidents per year in Canada between 2003 and 2016, with increasing frequency (Parent and Ellis, 2016). The recent situation has been even more alarming (Hofmann et al., 2021; Russell, 2020).

All these events have been linked to radicalisation, which further validates that such a phenomenon can be a 'relative, subjective, and value-laden' process (Mandel, 2009, p. 101); therefore, it should be explored paying special attention to the perspectives of each stakeholder (victims, perpetrators and audiences). This becomes more obvious when we acknowledge that violent extremism or terrorism are embedded in society, and are highly diverse and multifaceted phenomena (Horgan, 2005).

Accordingly, when we acknowledge that radicalisation can be a subjective process, we also need to accept the possibility that various stakeholders possess biased or subjective perceptions and experiences in relation to radicalisation (de Weert and Eijkman, 2019). Meanwhile, the recent shift in the discourse surrounding structural inequalities from a focus on prejudice to the role of unconscious bias can be seen as a step forward in our understanding of radicalisation. The reality is that no one is free from unconscious bias. As Femi Otitoju highlights, '[i]f you have a brain, you have a bias'.<sup>1</sup> Here, subjective realities may matter most, especially because the global discourses around radicalisation over the past decade and a half have been largely constructed through our subjective understandings (Coolsaet, Ravn and Sauer, 2019).

Broadly speaking, discourse, which is 'an analytical category describing the vast array of meaning-making resources available to us', shapes our understandings of the world (Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2015, p. 79). Our everyday narratives or representations are controlled and shaped by those discourses; these narratives actually are 'a complex weave of individuals' unique concerns and recycled institutional discourses' (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 161). That being said, individual agencies can also dispute, influence and even challenge the institutional or systemic discourses that mould everyday narrative identities. In Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) words, there is an interaction 'between lifeworld and system [...] in either direction – systems can be shaped by lifeworlds, lifeworlds by systems' (p. 86); everyday 'language and the social world are intertwined' (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 163).

Coming back to the subjective nature of radicalisation, therefore, the voices of various parties

in relation to this are worth focusing on. Correspondingly, there exist some studies in this area with regard to the perspectives of Muslims (as audience) on the issue of radicalisation in the West (e.g. Esposito and Mogahed, 2007), and in some specific Western contexts, including Australia (e.g. Grossman and Tahiri, 2015; Cherney and Murphy, 2016), the UK (e.g. Akbar, 2017; Githens-Mazer et al., 2010), the US (e.g. Ali, 2014) and Canada (e.g. MacDonald, 2015). This study attempts to contribute to such interesting literature through focusing on the perspectives of twelve Uyghur Muslim immigrants living in Canada. The main reason behind the selection of these participants is that it is extremely difficult and risky to interview Uyghurs in China. The research questions are as follows: 1. What are the causes of radicalisation in the eyes of these Uyghurs? 2. How do their perspectives compare in the contexts of Canada and China? 3. How do these Uyghurs perceive the role of education in Canada in relation to radicalisation?

So far, no research on Uyghur perspectives (as audience) on radicalisation has been conducted. Equally important is the fact that in recent years there have been growing debates over the relation of Uyghurs and terrorism both in China and the West. As such, this research discusses how these Uyghur Muslims in Canada perceive and position themselves vis-à-vis radicalisation issues in two different contexts: China and Canada. To this end, I will first introduce some relevant theoretical approaches, followed by the methodological background. Then, I will present a short introduction of Chinese state narratives and rhetoric around radicalisation and terrorism in relation to the Uyghurs, before embarking on data analysis and discussion.

### Theoretical perspectives

Compared to conventional crimes, the element of ‘membership or association or affiliation’ is generally seen as a key characteristic in defining terrorism (Horgan, 2005, p. 104). Accordingly, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, ‘attitudes and ideological motivations’ behind the radicalisation process have gained the most attention globally (Koehler, 2017, p. 4). More specifically, religion has become the main focus in both public and academic discussions of radicalisation in the West. In such a process, an essentialised and homogenised “global” Muslim identity has been imposed to all people who happen to follow Islam, as a result of the Islamophobia (a fear of Islam and Muslims as a group) rising in the West (Mamdani, 2004; Sen, 2006). At the same time, this has created an “us versus Muslims” dichotomy that is reminiscent of the postcolonial/Orientalist paradigm and, consequently, Muslims have become further marginalised socio-politically in Western societies (Volpp, 2002, p. 1576).

Equally, the Muslim faith has also been subject to questioning, despite the fact that perpetrators of terrorist acts follow a very heterodox, divergent and politicised interpretation of Islam, more specifically the distorted interpretation of *jihad* or war in the name of God. While the religious texts of other Abrahamic religions also contain similarly or even more violent content, they have been largely immune to the same interrogation (Esposito, 2015; Gagné,

Loumakis and Miceli, 2016; Popovski, 2009). The key reason behind this is the mainstream discourses after 9/11 that have effectively made all “terrorism” “Islamic”, creating the term “Islamic terrorism”, which began to describe other similar events (Mamdani, 2004, p. 18). Consequently, anti-Muslim sentiments in many parts of the world have reached an unprecedented level due to the alleged connection between the Islamic faith and terrorism, and the imagined incompatibility of Islam with modernity (Afsaruddin, 2015). Although some recent events, such as the Christchurch mosque attack and the conviction of its perpetrator as a terrorist, are a step forward, it may take many more such convictions before Muslim identity can become untarnished.

The postcolonialist perspective is also very relevant regarding the debates on Uyghur experiences. China’s current colonial reality around the Uyghurs is similar to or more brutal than Canada’s not very distant history in relation to its policies regarding indigenous populations, e.g. residential schools and other assimilative and oppressive projects.<sup>2</sup> The Uyghur homeland or East Turkestan, however, should be seen as an occupied nation, like British India or French Algeria. Equally important, we are all living in a postcolonial world in which the unequal power relations between the North and the South have been manifested through the very epistemology of colonialism that subordinates the racial ‘others’ (Bhabha, 1990; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988).

Currently, one of those “other” groups is the “Muslim” taken as a whole, whose religious culture along with physical appearance have been racialised in Western discourses under premises that may be considered old-fashioned (Afsaruddin, 2015; Volpp, 2002; Mahmut, 2018). Although the increased presence of Muslims in the West has created opportunities for greater understanding of the linkages between the Islamic faith and the prevailing Judeo-Christian traditions, this has also contributed to Islamophobia. Meanwhile, the visibility of some spiritual and cultural practices tied to Islam has rendered Muslims recognisable in the Canadian or Western contexts in a manner similar to Orthodox Jews. As such, the increasingly voiceless and misrepresented status or identity of Muslim communities globally could be best analysed through postcolonialism and identity politics.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative piece of research using critical narrative analysis – an organic combination of narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014). This syncretic methodology also challenges the ‘binary of seeing the person as either the autonomous origin of his or her experience or the ideological pawn of social determination’. ‘Autonomous origin’ here means the complete independence of individuals from outside influences, while ‘ideological pawn’ refers to the domination of social factors in formulating individuals’ narratives and identities (Allen and Hardin, 2001, p. 163).

Although critical narrative analysis is a fresh methodological framework that is still evolving,

its components are not new at all. It is only novel from the perspective that the synergy between its two constituent methodologies can produce deeper understandings of social phenomena than employing either methodology separately (Souto-Manning, 2014). With its roots in critical ethnography and feminist theory, narrative inquiry is generally committed to giving voice to marginalised and oppressed groups (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Critical discourse analysis also tries to empower underrepresented and marginalised voices, being critical on issues of human rights, equality and justice (Rogers et al., 2005; van Dijk, 2015). Utilising such methodologies, which have a social justice outlook, can help us create ‘positive social change and forms of emancipatory community action’ (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011, p. 122).

In terms of research methods, this qualitative study is based on the semi-structured interviews of twelve Uyghur immigrants (aged 35–46), who have been living in Canada for the last 5–15 years. It was deemed that at least five years of life experience in Canada was needed for qualifying to participate in this study. The interviewees were recruited through personal contacts, as well as the snowball method. Ethics approval was obtained from the McGill Research Ethics Board prior to data collection. All interviews (conducted between October 2016 and September 2017) were carried out in the Uyghur language and all data was translated into English prior to analysis. The translation process formed the initial data analysis, during which I developed some important themes. The differences between the English and Uyghur languages also pushed me to reflect further on and revisit some key terms. Pseudonyms are used for all participants and all identifying information has either been deleted or altered to ensure participant confidentiality.<sup>3</sup> The interview data is analysed through a coding scheme, thematic and structural analysis and constant comparison methods, while strictly relying on inductive, rather than deductive, reasoning (Maxwell, 2005; Butler-Kisber, 2018).

This study cannot be seen as representative of all Uyghur immigrants in Canada; rather, the findings could be regarded as the experiences and positions of some Uyghur immigrants in certain Canadian contexts within a particular time period. Yet, theoretical and methodological aspects of this research can be applied to other similar studies.

Meanwhile, this is a sample of convenience, which means that most of my participants were my close contacts. While their trust in me was a positive factor, I was not able to control for their professional background, educational level (considering that post-secondary education has three levels) and the length of their stay in Canada (apart from setting the lower limit at five years). These factors may have created a significant disparity in their perspectives, which I fully acknowledge.



Table 1: Key information about participants

Participant	Immigration status	Number of years in Canada	Gender	Highest educational level	Country where degree was completed	Province
Azat	Citizen	11	Male	Master's	China	British Columbia
Polat	Citizen	10	Male	Master's	China	British Columbia
Gülnur	Citizen	10	Female	Bachelor's	China	British Columbia
Sattar	Citizen	12	Male	Bachelor's	China	British Columbia
Ramilä	Citizen	13	Female	PhD	Canada	Ontario
Zöhrä	Permanent resident	5	Female	Master's	China	Alberta
Adalät	Permanent resident	9	Female	Master's	China	Quebec
Dolqun	Permanent resident	7	Male	Bachelor's	China	Quebec
Mahirä	Permanent resident	7	Female	Bachelor's	China	Quebec
Arman	Citizen	15	Male	Bachelor's	China	Quebec
Ayshä	Permanent resident	9	Female	Bachelor's	China	Quebec
Yashar	Citizen	8	Male	Master's	China	Quebec

## The Chinese narratives and rhetoric around radicalisation and terrorism in relation to the Uyghurs

Today, the Uyghurs are one of the 55 ethnic minority groups officially recognised in China, contrasting with the Han Chinese who form a majority comprising 91% of the total population. They mostly live in the north-western border region of China, which is the hub of the Eurasian crossroads. The Manchu Empire annexed the Uyghur homeland to China proper in the second half of the eighteenth century and had ruled the local inhabitants through rather indirect means until 1884 when the Xinjiang (Chinese for “new dominion”) province was established (Millward, 1998, 2007). According to the 2017 regional statistics, the Uyghur population in China exceeds 11 million.

Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic and since the tenth century have been following Sunni Islam, which is organically intertwined with their local traditions and ancient worldviews and beliefs (Harris and Dawut, 2002). Islam has become one of the most crucial aspects of Uyghur collective identity over the centuries (Thum, 2014; Kuşçu-Bonnenfant, 2014). The Uyghurs had been able to regain their independence twice during the 1930s and 1940s before being incorporated into the People's Republic of China in 1949.<sup>4</sup> During the early twentieth century, the Uyghur collective identity underwent a huge reconstruction process while interacting with the Chinese and Russian colonial powers (Brophy, 2016).

Since 1949 and until the early 2000s, the Chinese government policies towards the Islamic faith and practices in the Uyghur homeland/East Turkestan, as well as across China, had ‘oscillated between radical intolerance, based on the imposition of the atheist principle underpinning Marxism-Leninism [...], and controlled tolerance of religious institutions that

are co-opted under the auspices of the state’ (Waite, 2006, p. 253). The 1980s witnessed some ‘relative openness’ (Millward, 2004, p. viii). During the late 1990s, however, and especially since the early 2000s, the religious and other cultural rights of the Uyghurs have been increasingly suppressed by the Chinese authorities (Bovingdon, 2010; Clarke, 2018; Roberts, 2018, 2020). Most notably, after the 9/11 terrorist events, the government rhetoric has been to equate Islamic knowledge and identity with violent separatism and terrorism (Clarke, 2018; Millward, 2004; Purbrick, 2017).

Since then, the Chinese government has conveniently conflated the Islamic identity of the Uyghurs with radicalisation and terrorism. The most recent developments showcase an unprecedented level of suppression of the Uyghur Islamic culture and ethnic identity in the name of countering violent religious extremism (Roberts, 2018, 2020; Mahmut, 2019; Zenz, 2018, 2019). In the last decade or so, the government narratives around terrorism have been framing ‘China’s identity as being under threat from Turkic enemies within, who are supported by Islamic terrorists and Western “enemies of China” from outside’ (Tobin, 2019, p. 301). As such, the sole state media has intentionally and consistently reinforced the imagined connection between Islam and terrorism in the context of the Uyghur homeland (Harris, 2013; Lams, 2013; Luqiu and Yang, 2018).

In March 2017, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-extremification was adopted.<sup>5</sup> Based on this, those who have been suspected of being too religious or showing signs of “radicalisation” would be sent to the newly opened Transformation through Education centres to unlearn their extremist religious ideologies. Since their inception in early 2017, these schools have been opened in many parts of Xinjiang to “re-educate” hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims (Byler, 2019; Smith Finley, 2019a, 2019b, 2021; Thum, 2018). The most recent estimations reveal that between one to three million Uyghurs and other Muslims are being forcibly held in more than 1,000 such camps, where conditions are extremely poor, and torture and abuses are everyday practices (Greitens, Lee and Yazici, 2020; Hill, Campanale and Gunter, 2021; Zenz, 2019). In November 2019, George Friedman, an internationally recognised geopolitical forecaster and strategist on international affairs, estimated that one in ten Uyghurs was currently being detained in re-education camps (Friedman, 2019). A more recent report reveals that mass sterilisation and forced abortion for women are rampant both in and outside the camps (Zenz, 2020). Currently, more than 900 thousand children, whose parents are sent to camps, are believed to be held in state-funded boarding schools, where they are forced to learn Mandarin Chinese and are exclusively educated on Chinese culture, while being strictly banned from speaking Uyghur and practising Islam (Idris, 2021).

Against this background, debates and speculations over the possible causes and ramifications of Uyghur radicalisation, and Chinese responses to it, have been fast flourishing in recent years. Yet, there have been virtually no in-depth studies of the positions and voices of the

Uyghur diaspora in relation to these developments. Thus, this paper tries to explore the perspectives of some Uyghur immigrants in Canada with regard to the involvement of Uyghurs in a number of ideologically motivated militant organisations in the Middle East. In parallel, the participants' positions vis-à-vis Canadian society, as well as the Canadian formal and informal educational spaces, in connection with radicalisation are discussed. It should be noted here that, while this study seeks, first and foremost, to shed light on the perspectives of Canadian Uyghurs, which is in itself unique to date, there is a growing need to understand various Muslim groups' perceptions of radicalisation. Understanding the subjective realities around the radicalisation phenomenon through the perspectives of a Muslim group can be particularly significant in our post-truth world. The voices of this particular stakeholder (as audience) in relation to radicalisation leading to terrorism are worthwhile and necessary to be explored, along with the ones of other stakeholders – the victims and perpetrators. That being said, this article also pays some attention to the voices of certain perpetrators via relevant secondary data.

### **Perspectives of the research participants**

As mentioned earlier, the Uyghurs, as a group, have increasingly become a target of Islamophobia in Chinese society since the early 2000s. Currently, discrimination and oppression against the Uyghur Islamic identity have reached their highest level since the end of the Great Cultural Revolution (Greitens et al., 2020; Smith Finley, 2019a). Meanwhile, as the phenomena of religious extremism and terrorism were being gradually linked with Uyghur Islamic identity within China (Millward, 2018; Roberts, 2018, 2020; Smith Finley, 2019a, 2019b, 2021), the Uyghurs may have become particularly sensitive regarding discussions around radicalisation and terrorism, compared to many other Muslim groups in the world. Against this background, the following are some key themes deducted from the available data.

#### *1. The participants unanimously tried to distance themselves from those Uyghurs who joined ISIS.*

First of all, most research participants appeared to have been largely unaware of the news reports on the young Uyghur fighters in Syria; only three of them said they had heard of this issue. At the same time, all of them, irrespective of whether they knew or not, expressed that those fighters could not represent either Uyghurs or Muslims. For example, Arman from Quebec said:

I don't know if there are Uyghur fighters in Syria. Even if this is true, they cannot represent the Uyghurs or the Muslims. We are all seen as terrorists by the Chinese government. The dominant groups will do whatever they can to protect themselves. I don't want this to happen in Canada.



Apart from distancing himself from those Uyghur fighters, his worries regarding the Canadian government are worth highlighting. The last thing he would want to see in Canada is a repetition of the oppression the Uyghurs are facing in China, where all are ‘seen as terrorists by the government’. When asked what he meant by ‘dominant groups’, he pointed to the Han Chinese and the Chinese government. In his eyes, these two represent one ruling entity. The systemic as well as public discrimination and exclusion the Uyghurs have been facing as a Muslim group in China led him to make no distinction between the two. Therefore, it could be seen that his lived experiences in the Uyghur homeland as a member of a disenfranchised ethnic/religious group produced similar anxieties regarding Canadian society. Meanwhile, the high level of Islamophobia in Quebec (Amarasingam and Tiflati, 2016; Forum Research Inc., 2016; Green, 2017),<sup>6</sup> where Arman lives, may have exacerbated such concerns. This is more vividly revealed in the narratives of other participants from Quebec, which are discussed later.

Ayshā’s accounts revealed her fear of Islamophobia in the West at large, which pushed her to disassociate herself openly from those Uyghur fighters:

They should not have gone there to fight. They are making things worse. Now some Uyghurs are seen as terrorists by the West, too, which is really bad. So, I don’t want to see them as Uyghurs or Muslims. They are just some lost people.

Ayshā’s perspectives are quite striking, as she was just made aware that Uyghurs were linked with terrorism not only in China but in the West too, which led to her strong desire to disassociate herself from that group. She was very disappointed regarding the tainted Uyghur or Muslim image in the West because those Uyghurs were fighting the wrong battle. The misrepresentation of her Muslim identity would only be exacerbated both in China and the West if she could not sever the ties between her and them – the ‘lost people’.

For Yashar, it is almost too obvious that those Uyghurs are actually the enemy of the whole world: ‘People or the media don’t talk about this a lot, but those extremist Uyghurs or other groups are not real Muslims; they are actually against all other Muslims too, not only the non-Muslims. They are fake, they are not part of us’. His perspective separates the Uyghurs/Muslims from those terrorists by highlighting that Islamist extremists see other Muslims as enemies or traitors, a fact which is not given enough attention by the Western public or media, according to him. This point is further explored in the discussion.

*2. For participants, the oppressive Chinese policies are the sole reason behind Uyghur radicalisation. Some openly refused to call the radicalised Uyghurs terrorists.*

Whether they had known about the Uyghur ISIS fighters or not, the participants unanimously

attributed the reason behind the former's involvement with terrorist organisations to the Chinese government's repressive policies regarding the human rights of Uyghurs. Any religious aspect of such resistance was seen as negligible, while political motivations were strongly emphasised. For example, Azat from British Columbia said:

Islam is a religion of compassion and love. Only helplessness and hatred lead to radicalisation. The Uyghur situation is special [...] All of them went there fleeing the Chinese oppression. They are not terrorists. We should ask how much they suffered and why they ended up being there, and why they could not live in China. While the Western world is neglecting the Uyghur situation, because we are Muslims, they don't have the right to call the Uyghurs this or that.

This perspective is highly in line with the speculations of various experts on China and the Uyghurs, who underline the possible negative effects of current Chinese rhetoric and policies in the Uyghur homeland on the disenfranchised Uyghur people (Neriah, 2017; Roberts, 2018, 2020; Smith Finley, 2019a, 2019b). In fact, Roberts' (2018) interviews of several former Uyghur fighters reveal that those Uyghurs went to Syria escaping the oppression of the Chinese government, while many of them were trying to seek justice through violence. The systemic oppression, and especially the ever-increasing restrictions over Islamic culture, identity and practices among Uyghurs within Xinjiang, have been 'the driving force in the recent creation of a viable Uyghur militant movement in Syria' (Roberts, 2018, p. 252). In parallel with these perspectives, some Uyghur ISIS fighters themselves specifically mention in their propaganda videos how restrictions over religious and cultural rights have pushed them to join ISIS, where they can enjoy religious freedom and fight for the cause of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Ayshā from Quebec also articulated similar points but she warned against the consequences of the choice those Uyghur fighters had made:

Although I was first shocked to know that there were some Uyghurs fighting in Syria, later I have come to the realisation that they are actually preparing for fighting against the Chinese government, nothing else. But their approach is wrong.

As mentioned earlier, she acknowledged that some Uyghurs are now increasingly seen as terrorists by the West too. Yet, here, it becomes clear that her emphasis on Chinese oppression is meant to minimise the terrorist aspect of the violent approach of those Uyghur fighters. From her perspective, it is 'nothing else' other than fighting Chinese tyranny; however, their means are problematic. Similar views were expressed by Yashar, who said that 'it is deeply wrong for them to join ISIS for sure, but I think they are there to fight the Chinese regime; they think they are preparing for a war with China'.

Coming back to Azat's narrative, while he did not call the Uyghurs involved in ISIS "freedom fighters", he utterly rejected their labelling as "terrorists". He clearly declared that these Uyghur ISIS fighters 'are not terrorists'. According to him, the Uyghurs as a whole were the victims of Chinese oppression, so there was a valid reason why they would resist, sometimes in a violent way. Meanwhile, he questioned the Western world's willingness to understand truly the plight of Uyghurs as Muslims. In his view, the Muslim background of the Uyghurs is the reason why the West "neglects" the oppression the Uyghurs are facing.

While other participants did not express the same point directly, their attribution of Uyghur involvement in ISIS to Chinese state oppression can be seen as an indirect way of avoiding to label radical Uyghurs as terrorists. Their narratives also remind us of a young man from Quebec who joined ISIS. His grievances are related by one of his friends as follows:

He considered it necessary to go out of solidarity with the people being massacred in Syria. He seemed to feel that only the Islamic State was concerned about the plight of Muslims. At one point, he said they were the only ones really helping Muslims and that no one else cared about the Muslims being killed in Palestine, Myanmar and elsewhere [...] In his opinion, that really was the case. And he said that anyway, he couldn't live here as a Muslim...<sup>8</sup>

The central point here is that the sense of marginalisation or oppression can become a push factor that may lead to radicalisation. In both contexts, whether Canada or China, the perceived or real injustices inflicted on the Muslims could bring about radicalisation; religious ideology itself can be a practically non-existent factor within this process. Indeed, the Uyghur fighters in Syria may have developed much stronger views of their plight, which could be improved only through fighting alongside ISIS, given that the international community, including other Muslim nations, was largely neglectful of their oppression under the Chinese state.

No participant mentioned religion as a factor behind Uyghur fighters joining ISIS, all attributing the fact to the oppressive Chinese state. When I specifically asked about the possibility of religious influence, most of them said they did not view it as a real cause. Some acknowledged its existence but downplayed its role. For example, according to Dolqun, religious fundamentalism 'is a very secondary reason here'. He also does not think that 'these people are fighting for Allah; they are fighting for their country'. It seems that, in the eyes of these participants, religious fundamentalism has lost its function in radicalising people. While these are just a few individual perspectives, they reflect the nexus of religion, ideology and nationalism, which is a complicated space. Religion can be a very subjective experience and it cannot be discussed outside of a wider context. We always witness devout people disavowing fundamentalism, while extremists miss the finer points of the religion they believe they follow, as in the case of two young British Muslims who bought copies of

*The Koran for dummies* (2004) and *Islam for dummies* (2003) from Amazon before traveling to Syria (Hasan, 2015). In the case of the Uyghur fighters, their nationalism may have intersected with their religion, whether they were devout or not, attracting them to ISIS. Yet, many other nationalist Uyghurs completely reject similar approaches, which indicates that the ideology behind radicalisation involves multiple complex factors.

*3. The participants regarded the Islamic factor as the primary cause leading to the radicalisation of Canadians, and argued that Canadian education or society could not radicalise people.*

Concerning the radicalisation of Canadians, the participants showed much more awareness and unanimously stressed the faith/religious factor as the main or only reason. For them, education in Canada and Canadian society as a whole do not contain any elements that could lead to radicalisation. Having said that, the participants in Quebec appeared to have been particularly well informed about radicalisation among Muslim Canadians. Yashar, for example, said:

I have heard the news about those radicalised Muslim students who joined ISIS. And I know that some Muslims attacked the police here in Canada. They are crazy people, you know. They make our name very bad. Yet, I really wonder why they became like this. I don't blame the Canadian education system. It is very inclusive and good. I think they were misled by some radical religious leaders. I am tired of these things [...] By the way, we just heard of the Quebec mosque attack.<sup>9</sup> It is a terrorist attack too, as Justin Trudeau said. The perpetrator was radicalised as well. He was not a Muslim at all, so this should make people realise non-Muslims can be terrorists too.

His views demonstrated three very important points. Firstly, he did not think that the Canadian or Quebecois educational spaces would create conditions that could radicalise young people; he held the education systems in Canada in high regard. Secondly, he felt that his Muslim identity was negatively affected by Muslim radicalisation in Quebec or other Western contexts, and revealed his voicelessness and opposition in not being able to represent himself freely and proudly as a Muslim. Thirdly, he did not acknowledge the sense of exclusion, discrimination or racism that Muslims perceive in Quebec society as a push factor that could lead to radicalisation among Muslim youth, as highlighted by some scholars (e.g. Ghosh et al., 2018). Yet, when I asked him further about the possible motivations of the Quebec mosque attacker, he said that it was the result of Islamophobia, and that it was not related to the attacker's religion: 'He hated Muslims a lot for sure, but I don't think he is a religious person at all. You know White people in Quebec are mostly atheists'. Other participants reiterated the same ideas when asked about this horrific incident, largely attributing the radicalising factors to anti-Muslim sentiments within the "non-religious" society of Quebec.

Although the labelling of the Quebec mosque attack as a terrorist act by the Canadian Prime Minister partially and temporarily extricated Yashar's misrepresented Muslim identity from the phenomenon of terrorism, the perpetrator was ultimately not charged with terrorism by the Quebec Supreme Court.<sup>10</sup> The decision not to charge the culprit with terrorism would shatter Yashar's belief that 'non-Muslims can be terrorists too', while revalidating the wider discourse that terrorism is only relevant to Muslims.

Polat and Sattar from British Columbia uttered some very similar viewpoints to Yashar's; yet, they focused on the White people who converted to Islam rather than conventional Muslims. Polat said:

I speculate that those White people (aqqlar)<sup>11</sup> who are radicalised do not have a deep understanding of Islam. I think they internalised the elements that they deemed right, but actually wrong. Their upbringing and their childhood experiences may have contributed to their being attracted to such a lifestyle. And they approached some extremist Muslims, not the mainstream ones. I don't think the Canadian education system or society are anyway responsible for this.

While he expressed some unique ideas, arguing that those radicalised converts actually misunderstood Islam, rejecting the religious factor to some extent, he did not question Canadian education or society, although he did mention that personal upbringing and relevant experiences may have entailed some possible radicalising elements. In the end, he highlighted again extremist Muslim leaders as the key radicalising agents. The rest of the participants also stressed a similar concern, and some complained that the government was not doing enough to stop them. None pointed to any potential problematic factors within the Canadian education systems or society that could lead to youth radicalisation.

In sum, the research participants were not concerned at all about possible radicalising elements within Canadian educational spaces or society, very often openly foregrounding their positive aspects. They all perceived the formal Canadian educational institutions as very much inclusive and egalitarian, thereby precluding the possibility that such spaces would contribute to the process of youth radicalisation.

## Discussion

The data shows that the research participants share some opinions regarding the radicalisation of both Uyghurs and Canadians. First of all, most of the participants did not appear to have been very knowledgeable about Uyghur involvement in ISIS. All of them, however, drew a clear boundary between themselves and those fighters, some openly refusing to label them as terrorists. In other words, they all resisted associating Uyghurs with terrorism. Otherwise, the resulting stigma would exacerbate their misrepresented and voiceless status as Muslims,



both in China and in the West. Some even challenged the Orientalist discourses around Muslims and violence/terrorism by interrogating Western willingness to understand the human rights abuses the Uyghurs are facing as a Muslim group in China. The implication is that the Uyghur cause is not heard either in China or the West precisely because the Uyghurs are Muslims.

Accordingly, the participants largely downplayed the religious/faith factor behind Uyghur radicalisation, revealing their subjectivity or bias. This, however, could be seen as an effort to minimise the terrorist nature of Uyghur resistance since, as discussed earlier, Islam is intricately connected to political violence within the dominant global discourses. By ascribing the causes of radicalisation to Chinese oppression alone, the Uyghurs as a whole can further distance themselves from terrorism. Of course, Chinese oppression is an important push factor here, so my participants' position is quite in line with the viewpoints of many scholars who have been debating this particular issue (Clarke, 2014, 2018; Smith Finley, 2019a, 2019b; Tschantret, 2018; Zenz, 2019), as well as some former Uyghur fighters who were interviewed by Roberts (2018). Relevant scholarly debates have also identified and emphasised the connection between social exclusion and marginalisation (perceived or real) and radicalisation (e.g. Ghosh et al., 2016; Jasko, LaFree and Kruglanski, 2017; Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Mandel, 2009; Mucha, 2017; Sageman, 2008; Sklad and Park, 2017). Some experts have specifically argued that personal uncertainty, perceived injustice and group threat factors are important determinants of radicalisation (Doosje, Loseman and den Bos, 2013; Koomen and van der Pligt, 2016; van den Bos, 2020). Accordingly, McCauley and Moskalenko identify twelve mechanisms of radicalisation, among which perceived injustice or threat to a group are found to be predominant (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Others confirm a positive correlation between social alienation and ideologically based violence or the intention to join a radical group (Bélanger et al., 2019). Doosje et al. (2016) analyse the motivations behind five different radical groups and emphasise grievance as the universal factor among all of them.

Indeed, terrorism is 'a process' in which 'some sort of reciprocal relationship' among various factors could ultimately lead to violent actions (Taylor and Horgan, 2006, p. 586). The above literature on the possible link between social exclusion and radicalisation features one possible aspect of such a reciprocal relationship. In the Canadian context, some scholars focus on Canadian educational spaces (Ghosh et al., 2018; Mahmut, Dhali and Ghosh, 2019). Yet, some opposing voices exist, such as the one by the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence, asserting that 'the social positioning of individuals who undergo radicalization in Quebec is not, except in rare exceptions, that of individuals who are marginalized or who can objectively be said to be socially excluded', highlighting personal factors instead (Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence, 2016, p. 34). I would argue that these kinds of decisive deductions should be further scrutinised.

Circling back to the context of China, the ever-intensifying ruthless government repression in the Uyghur region may have made my participants fully conscious of a very real and powerful push factor that would lead to radicalisation among Uyghur dissidents. Whereas we should not neglect the religious factor here at all, as ‘the religious imperative for terrorism has become the most important defining characteristic of terrorist activity today’ (Hoffman, 2017, p. 84), my participants’ unanimous emphasis on the non-religious factors within the Chinese context, again, shows their somewhat subjective and biased positions in relation to radicalisation. On this occasion, however, they demonstrate their resistance to the Chinese systemic discourse that renders Islam the only potential source of radicalisation for Uyghur Muslims. At the same time, such resistance may have made some of them more empathic towards the Uyghur fighters, with whom they share some common political grievances. As such, to reject the terroristic motivation of these fighters is to cut the connection between these Uyghurs and the terrorist groups in the Middle East. This way, the Uyghur collective identity shared by those Uyghur fighters can be revenged to some extent.

In contrast, they did not question the role of Canadian educational institutions and society in relation to radicalisation, mostly attributing the reasons behind it to the faith factor, i.e. the influence of radical Islam. They highly regarded Canadian society and education as inclusive and egalitarian, so, from their perspective, these could not radicalise people. The participants in Quebec expressed their concern regarding Islamophobia. Even after witnessing the Quebec mosque attack, however, none of them openly questioned local education or society in relation to the radicalisation of Canadians. Although they stressed the terrorist nature of this attack, they did not interrogate the religious motive of the attacker, who has a Christian background, reflecting the discourses that have excluded religions other than Islam from narratives around violence and terrorism (Gagné et al., 2016; Popovski, 2009). Thus, in this context, they could only single out radical Islam as the key factor behind the radicalisation process, underscoring the dominant Orientalist discourses around Islam and terrorism (Esposito, 2003; Jackson, 2007; Mamdani, 2004; Akyol, 2016; Silva, 2017). Within such discourses, they also felt the need to highlight the benevolent and peaceful aspects of their religion, which is necessary for protecting and legitimising the Uyghur religious identity. Yet, they could never fully free themselves from stigma, as radical Islam is still a part of Islam, objectively speaking.

That said, with the rise of right-wing politics, minority groups, especially Muslims, seem to face increasing exclusion in North America (Taylor, Currie and Holbrook, 2013; Michael, 2019). Accordingly, growing debates on the marginalisation of Muslims in Quebec are taking place, as well as in the whole of Canada (Abedi, 2020; Amarasingam and Tiflati, 2015; Cornellier, 2017; Dwivedi, 2017; Jedwab, 2015; McAndrew and Bakhshaei, 2012; McCue, Blackett, Tessier and Suleman, 2017). Statistics Canada also highlights that anti-Muslim hate crimes have been on the rise in the country. In 2017, there were 349 incidents of police-reported hate crimes against Muslims. This was a jump of 151 percentage points from the previous year, which saw 139 such reports. Quebec experienced a 39% increase in hate

crimes, mainly due to an increase in crimes targeting the Muslim population (+27 incidents).<sup>12</sup> In 2019, such crimes further increased by 9% in the whole of Canada.<sup>13</sup> According to a random sampling of public opinion taken by Forum Research Inc., in late 2016, among 1,304 Canadian adults, 48% of respondents from Quebec expressed unfavourable opinions towards Muslims, compared to 28% at the national average.

When we look at the Western world at large, such anti-Muslim rhetoric has been further reinforced by the biased media coverage in the West (Said, 1978, 2001). In the decade or so after Said's critique, such a legacy has not lost its dynamics (Gotanda, 2011; Razack, 2008). For example, Silva's recent (2017) analysis of 607 *New York Times* articles from 1969 to 2014 reveals that the US news media has been employing 'strategic discursive strategies that contribute to the conceptual distinctions that are used to construct Muslims as an "alien" to the West'. Incidentally, the content of *The New York Times* is considered to be high-quality and relatively unbiased compared to thousands of media outlets in the West,<sup>14</sup> which indicates that overall the media coverage of Muslims has been very problematic. A few of the participants were able to challenge such essentialism in relation to Muslim identity, i.e. Yashar highlighted that radical 'fake' Muslims were the enemy of all humanity, and not only 'real' Muslims, who should be separated from the tiny minority of extremists.

Meanwhile, following the surge of far-right extremism in the West, Muslim agency to dismantle the link between their faith and political violence seems to have continuously diminished. Consequently, the voiceless and misrepresented identity of Muslims, including the Uyghurs, only becomes more salient when they have to "say something" on such a controversial and sensitive topic. Their attempts to revendicate themselves, in Charles Taylor's (1994) words, from their 'false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (p. 25) will prove largely futile. At the same time, due to the long-standing reinforcement of the established discourse of Orientalism by the media, these Uyghur participants would easily overlook the possible connection between socio-economic/political marginalisation and radicalisation in the context of Canada and beyond. Yet, in the context of China, they would readily challenge the official discourses on Uyghur radicalisation citing the very obvious and possible causes of oppression and grievances, while completely omitting the religious/faith factors.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the positions of a dozen Uyghur immigrants on the radicalisation phenomenon in the context of Canada and China. Their views regarding Canada expose their biased perspectives, reflecting the dominant discourses around Islam and terrorism in the West, while in the context of China they reveal their agency to resist the state rhetoric in relation to Uyghur radicalisation. To them, the Uyghur and Canadian foreign fighters who ended up in Syria had very different sets of motivations. In Canada, the drive came from religious radicalisation (e.g. through radical preachers), while in China, it was the oppressive government policies that pushed some Uyghurs towards extremism. In both cases, the

participants neglected some key push factors, exposing their deeply subjective experiences. In the case of the former, they could not find radicalising elements in “the almost perfect” Canadian education systems or society as a whole, reflecting their internalised Orientalism. In the case of the latter, they failed entirely to acknowledge the influence of radical Islam – one key factor which should not be overlooked. Their postcolonial voices in Canada turn into resistance or agency in the context of China.

Finally, it should be noted that my participants were interviewed prior to the Chinese government’s de-radicalisation initiative – re-education camps began to be launched in large numbers in late 2017 and early 2018. Since then, the Uyghurs have been facing a state of repression reminiscent of the era of the Great Cultural Revolution (Greitens et al., 2020; Smith Finley, 2019a, 2019b). Many friends and family members of these Uyghur immigrants have been sent to re-education camps or simply disappeared since early 2018 under the rhetoric of combatting religious extremism. These notorious “re-education” or “counter-extremism” camps may only push more Uyghurs towards radicalisation rather than the other way around. The sharp decline in violent incidents since 2017 could be the sole result of tight security measures rather than a reflection of the real effects of de-radicalisation efforts (Zhou, 2019). As members of the academic community focusing on radicalisation issues around the world, we need to condemn openly the Chinese authorities that have been marginalising and oppressing their own Muslim citizens under the pretext of fighting extremism and terrorism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Educator Femi Otitoju talks about how everybody tends to have unconscious biases towards or against something or somebody in her interview to *CBC Radio*. For more information, see <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/if-you-have-a-brain-you-have-a-bias-1.4040571> (Accessed: 3 August 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> For more information about the colonial debates in relation to the Uyghur region, see Bovington (2010), Brophy (2016) and Roberts (2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Sixty- to ninety-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in various

locations where the participants felt most comfortable or where it was most convenient, such as their homes, my home, restaurants with private areas, as well as online, which was the best choice for the ones who lived farther afield. Most of the interviews were not audio-recorded but, rather, handwritten in order to ensure that the participants would not feel uncomfortable or uneasy that their privacy might be jeopardised. Uyghurs are highly apprehensive of topics that have political elements or undertones. Even though trust was established, they would still worry about the possibility of getting into trouble in case their voices were heard by the Chinese authorities.

- <sup>4</sup> These two independent states were the East Turkestan Islamic Republic (1933–1934) and the East Turkestan Republic (1944–1949). The advent of communist China in the region ended the short-lived independence of the Uyghurs. A small separatist group named the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) also exists that has been fighting for the independence of the Uyghurs for the last few decades. The US declared it a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al-Qaeda in August 2002. In November 2020, the US excluded the group from its terror list. For more information, see Bovington (2010) and Lipes (2020).
- <sup>5</sup> For more information, see the web page of The International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation, <http://www.iuhrdf.org/content/xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-regulation-de-extremification> (Accessed: 3 August 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> The following are some typical examples. The Charter of Quebec Values (*Charte de la laïcité* or *Charte des valeurs québécoises*) was introduced in 2013 as Bill 60 intending to prohibit public sector employees from wearing or displaying religious symbols. Although the Bill died in the following year, it created a lot of anxiety among Muslims in Quebec. Yet, in 2015, Bill 62 was introduced (and passed in 2017) officially banning women wearing a niqab or burqa from receiving public services. In March 2019, Bill 21 was passed outlawing public workers wearing religious symbols. These Bills have been seen by many as a sign of systemic Islamophobia in Quebec. Meanwhile, the harassment of Muslims, especially hijab-wearing Muslim women, has increased dramatically in recent years. In January 2017, Alexandre Bissonnette, a university student, shot and killed six men in a mosque in Quebec City. In June 2021, a truck attack killed four Muslims in London, Ontario, indicating that Islamophobia is still on the rise in Canada as a whole.
- <sup>7</sup> For more information, see the Jihadology Project, run by Aaron Y. Zelin, who has collected video speeches of young Uyghur jihadists. All the related videos can be found here: <http://jihadology.net/2016/06/07/new-video-message-from-hizb-al-islami-al-turkistani-in-bilad-al-sham-a-call-from-the-front-lines-of-jihad-19/> (Accessed: 23 June 2020).
- <sup>8</sup> For more information, see Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (2016), p. 29.
- <sup>9</sup> On 29 January 2017, Alexandre Bissonnette, 29, stormed into the Quebec Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City and opened fire, killing six and seriously injuring five others. For more information, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47175559> (Accessed: 3 August 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> Trudeau called this a terrorist attack, but the Quebec Supreme Court refrained from



labelling it as such. For more information, see Feith (2017).

<sup>11</sup> In Uyghur, the word *Aqlar*, literally meaning “the Whites”, is frequently used to describe people of White European ancestry. In the West, it has quickly become a very popular term, in parallel with the word *Qaralar*, which means “the Blacks”.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00008-eng.htm> (Accessed: 3 August 2021).

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00002-eng.htm> (Accessed: 24 November 2021).

<sup>15</sup> For example, see the evaluation of *The New York Times* by Ad Fontes Media here: <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/?v=402f03a963ba> (Accessed: 3 August 2021).

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