

In China, rise of Salafi Islam has drawn the attention of the government

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A young Uighur boy waits for customers to sell Muslim caps for men in Hotan, China, April 6, 2008. The Chinese government is not happy about the growing number of Salafi Muslims. AP/Eugene Hoshiko

LINXIA, China — They call it “Little Mecca,” a city of prayer caps and hijab, minarets and green domes.

In some ways, Linxia, in northern China’s Gansu province, is a city united. About 60 percent of its 250,000 people are Muslim. On a frigid Friday afternoon in December, its street life grinds to a halt. Hundreds of men wearing scruffy beards and white caps pack into the tile-clad Xinhua Mosque for afternoon prayers. An imam chants passages from the Quran in throaty Arabic. A speaker crackles, and a flock of birds takes flight.

It is also a city divided. There are the mainstream Muslims, locals say — and then there are the Salafis.

Form Of Islam Harkens Back To Sixth Century

Salafism is an ultra-conservative school of thought within Sunni Islam, espousing a way of life and prayer that looks back to the sixth century, when Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was alive. Islamic State militants are Salafi, many Saudi Arabian clerics are Salafi, and so are many Chinese Muslims living in Linxia. They pray at their own mosques and wear Saudi-style kaffiyehs.

The growth in the Salafi movement here has rattled China's officially atheist communist government. It finds religious fervor to be unnerving, especially when it carries associations with foreign extremists.

The Chinese public increasingly connects Islam with terrorism, and many other Chinese Muslims see Salafis as fanatics.

Chinese Officials Are Keeping A Close Eye On Salafis

Experts say that in recent years, Chinese authorities have put Salafis under constant surveillance, closed several Salafi religious schools and detained a prominent Salafi cleric.

"China discriminates against religious people — not only Salafis, but also people from other religions," said a local Salafi man. "We don't have equal rights."

Estimates of the number of Chinese Salafis range from thousands to tens of thousands. Yet experts and Linxia Muslims agree that the movement, which is growing worldwide, is also growing in China, even among ethnic Han Chinese, which make up the vast majority of people in China.

"Clearly Muslim ideologies can be very powerful," said Dru Gladney, an expert on Chinese Muslims at Pomona College in California. The Islamic State "is appealing to many marginalized young men throughout the world. And I think Han Chinese men, as well as younger (Chinese Muslims), look at this and say, What are the alternatives to communism, to capitalism, to socialism?"

Chinese Muslims Fall Into Two Groups

The Islamic State is an extremist group attempting to set up its own country in the Middle East governed by Islamic law. It has also been called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group's fighters have captured parts of Syria and some of northern and western Iraq.

Chinese Muslims mostly fall into two groups. Uighurs live primarily in the northwestern region of Xinjiang. Authorities blame Uighur "separatists" and "terrorists" for scores of violent attacks in recent years. Intermittently, they place large areas of the region under military lockdown.

Then there are the Hui people, who live throughout the country, tend to be well-assimilated into mainstream Chinese society and are generally free to pray as they please.

Experts say Salafism is spreading among both groups.

Chinese Government Has Closed Islamic Religious Schools

On March 1, 2014, four Uighur assailants hacked 31 people to death at a train station in Kunming, the capital of the southern province of Yunnan. Soon afterward, Chinese state media reported they planned the attack from Shadian township, a Salafi stronghold about 150 miles to the south.

Ding Long is an Arabic professor at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. He said the government has since shuttered many of Shadian township's madrassas, or Islamic religious schools, over concerns they could be breeding grounds for violence.

In late 2015, authorities from Xinjiang detained Ma Jun, an influential Salafi imam and teacher in Gansu's capital, Lanzhou, and released him 27 days later, according to overseas Chinese media reports. Authorities had detained one of Ma's students, a Uighur, on suspicion of "studying religion with an illegal organization" and "endangering state security."

Even in Linxia, there are signs the authorities are on edge. Propaganda is widespread — mosques are festooned with massive government banners calling for "unity," "harmony" and "patriotism."

Salafism Spread After Chinese Traveled To Mecca

In 1984, Beijing began allowing individual Chinese Muslims to make the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Some learned about Salafism and, attracted by the idea of a "purer" form of Islam, spread its teachings at home.

Meanwhile, Saudi preachers and organizations began traveling to China. Some of them brought training programs for clerics, Qurans, money for new "Islamic institutes" and mosques.

"The new generation, which was much more engaged and influenced by Saudi Arabia, began to contest the knowledge of the older generation," said Mohammed Al-Sudairi. He is a doctoral student at the University of Hong Kong who spent years researching Salafi Muslims in China. "You had a lot of excommunication within the (Muslim) community, people were saying to each other that they were not real Muslims."

In recent years, the Saudi-China grass-roots relationship has grown more complex. Experts say Beijing increasingly views foreign religious influence as a threat and that Chinese Salafis have rejected contact with Saudis because they are fearful about how officials — and other Chinese Muslim groups — would react.

Anxious Worshipers Decline To Discuss Issue

In Linxia, few worshipers were willing to discuss the issue.

One man at the Xinhua Mosque, dressed in a beige jacket and white skullcap, had arrived early for evening prayers.

“The Han like us because we care about cleanliness and peace,” the man said, his eyes darting anxiously. He refused to answer questions about the different Muslim groups and he did not give his name. Above him, a fluttering propaganda poster encouraged the spread of “positive energy.”

“We’re a peace-loving people,” he added. “We care about unity and harmony.”