

“Arab revitalisation” and the Uyghur crisis: the problematic nature of Sino-Arabic cooperation in the “Silk Road Spirit” era

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Abstract: In June 2014, Xi Jinping's opening address at the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum concluded that Sino-Arab cooperation should promote "the Silk Road Spirit" and further the realisation of "Arab revitalisation". Presently, Sino-Arabic Silk Road Spirit is defined by Middle Eastern deference to China marked by complicity and/or deafening silence on the unfolding mass detention of the mostly Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This paper examines the links between the Belt and Road Initiative, the mass detention of Uyghurs and how the dream of "Arab revitalisation" has seen Middle Eastern states support Beijing's policies towards the Uyghurs.

Keywords: BRI, Xinjiang, Uyghur, Middle East, Silk Road Economic Belt

Introduction

In June 2014, Xi Jinping’s opening address at the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum concluded that Sino-Arab cooperation should promote “the Silk Road Spirit” and further the realisation of “Arab revitalisation”. He defined Arab revitalisation as encompassing a period of economic growth that would allow Arab states to determine their futures via “reform in their own way”.¹ It also incorporated “1+2+3 cooperation” with the Arab states, with “1” referring to Sino-Arabic cooperation in energy, “2” referring to the “two wings” of development in infrastructure, alongside trade and investment, and “3” referring to development and technology transfer in nuclear energy, space satellites, and new energy. Via Sino-Arabic cooperation, Beijing also hopes to introduce China’s BeiDou Navigation Satellite System to Arab states.²

Beijing’s Arab revitalisation discourse was in part a response to the 2011 pivot to Asia by the United States (US).³ Washington’s pivot rhetoric provided Beijing the opportunity to extend the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Middle Eastern states anticipating a US withdrawal from the region.⁴ This also meant that the southern regions of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) became instrumental in achieving Sino-Arabic BRI goals, centred around the mostly Uyghur Kashgar City as a special economic zone.⁵ The Silk Road Spirit, which is frequently evoked within the official rhetoric, is a romanticised portrayal of the former Silk Roads and positions Sino-engagement as promoting “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit”.⁶ However, by 2018/2019 it appeared the Sino-Arabic Silk Road Spirit had increasingly become defined by Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) deference to China, most notably marked by their complicity and/or deafening silence on the unfolding mass detention of the Turkic Muslims across XUAR. Using the “Xinjiang letters” to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council in 2019, this paper examines the extent of MENA complicity and silence in Beijing’s persecution of the Uyghurs. It argues that BRI loans and investment as part of the “Arab revitalisation” is driving the deafening silence from the MENA states, despite increasing evidence of the unfolding Uyghur crisis.

¹ Xi also stated: “The challenge of achieving [Chinese] national renewal calls on us to carry forward the Silk Road spirit, bolster development and cooperation, and constantly reinforce a strategic Sino-Arab relationship of comprehensive cooperation and common development”. See: Xi, Jinping, *The Belt and Road Initiative* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2019), 44.

² Xi, *The Belt and Road*, 49.

³ In a speech at the Arab League Headquarters on 21 January 2016, Xi articulated China’s approach of the Middle Eastern states as: “Rather than looking for a proxy in the Middle East, we promote peace talks; rather than seeking any sphere of influence, we call on all parties to join the circle of friends for the Belt and Road Initiative; rather than attempting to fill any ‘power vacuum’, we build a cooperative partnership network for win-win outcomes”. See: Xi, Jinping, *The Governance of China: II* (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 2017), 503.

⁴ Wechsler, William F, “US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality,” in Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition* (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019).

⁵ See: Hayes, Anna, “Interwoven ‘Destinies’: The Significance of Xinjiang to the China Dream, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Xi Jinping Legacy,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2019.1621528

⁶ Xi, *The Belt and Road*, 43.

The Uyghur Crisis

While Beijing's official discourse purports the Turkic Muslims detained in XUAR are dangerous extremists, the global #MeTooUyghur campaign has demonstrated the official discourse is false. By the end of 2016, the Uyghur diasporic community began to identify an increasing number of their relatives still living in XUAR were disappearing. By mid-2017, communication with relatives living in XUAR became increasingly fragmented. Twitter became a site of growing transnational awareness of the unfolding situation in XUAR and the #MeTooUyghur campaign has been especially effective, generating lists of the missing. One list compiled in January 2019 identified more than 221 academics, University heads, cultural figures, musicians, journalists, authors, folklorists and other custodians of Uyghur culture have been disappeared.⁷ Other lists identify the ranks of the disappeared include prominent businesspeople, pregnant women and mothers of young children, housewives, even retired civil servants who spent years working for the Party.⁸

With growing satellite evidence of the proliferation of the camps, and more accounts circulating about disappeared loved ones, in mid-2018, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) held a hearing investigating the camps. The final CECC's report stated that over 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minority nationalities had been imprisoned in detention camps, which they identified as "political re-education centres".⁹ While Beijing initially denied the existence of the camps, as more satellite evidence and first-hand accounts of detention surfaced, it was forced to acknowledge their existence labelling them both "vocational training" centres and "de-extremification centres".¹⁰ This remains Beijing's official explanation of the camps to all states, including MENA states.

Earlier, in September 2017, Beijing revised Constitutional regulations on religious affairs with the changes taking effect in February 2018. Officially, the changes were represented as an innocuous attempt at "maintaining religious and social harmony and regulating the management of religious affairs".¹¹ In practice, the constitutional changes precipitated government efforts to Sinicise religions such as Islam. In XUAR, the constitutional changes

⁷ Uyghuryol, "List of Uyghur Intellectuals imprisoned in China from 2016 to the present," January 2019, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://uyghuryol.com/2019/01/1003/>.

⁸ See: Wong, Chun Han, "China Says Majority of Xinjiang Detainees Released, but Activists Question Claim," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 2019, accessed 25 September 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-offers-rare-update-on-detainees-in-xinjiang-detention-camps-11564490302>.

⁹ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *Annual Report 2018*, 115 Congress, Second Session, 10 October 2018, accessed 9 November 2018, <https://www.cecc.gov>. Also see data compiled by Australian Strategic Policy Institute: <https://tinyurl.com/wup3ywr>.

¹⁰ See: Vanderklippe, Nathan, "UBC student uses satellite images to track suspected Chinese re-education centres where Uyghurs imprisoned," *The Globe and Mail*, 8 July 2018, accessed 1 September 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-ubc-student-uses-satellite-images-to-track-suspected-chinese-re/>. Also see data compiled by Shawn Zhang: <https://medium.com/@shawnwzhang>.

¹¹ State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China Revises Regulation on Religious Affairs," 7 September 2017, accessed 20 September 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2017/09/07/content_281475842719170.htm.

resulted in intensified controls over mosques, Imams and Muslims.¹² Assisting in the control and detention of Uyghurs has been the surveillance efforts rolled out across Xinjiang. They have pushed boundaries with high-tech strategies including face and voice recognition, iris scanners, DNA sampling and 3D identification imagery of Uyghurs.¹³ There has been a proliferation of security checkpoints, facial scanners, and smartphone searches by authorities.¹⁴ More than 7,000 newly built police stations now dominate the region.¹⁵ Surveillance spending has also received a significant boost. In 2015, Beijing spent US\$27 million for the whole year on surveillance in XUAR. However, total spending for 2017 was US\$9.1 billion (mainly on technology-based surveillance), an increase of 92 percent from the previous year’s total.¹⁶

The large incarceration of adult Uyghurs has also seen Uyghur children being sent to orphanages and entering boarding school facilities.¹⁷ Adrian Zenz has located numerous reports evidencing the massive expansion of boarding facilities at all levels for the children of the detained.¹⁸ Reports he located online identified children from so-called “double detained

¹² There have been at least 15 significant mosques demolished (documented via satellite imagery), and another 31 mosques and 2 shrines show signs of serious damage to buildings and infrastructure. For mosques that remain intact, there has been a process of removal of Islamic symbols such as the crescent and the dome not just in XUAR but also across Hui regions in other parts of China. According to two academics who conducted observational field research in XUAR in December 2018, remaining mosques have been padlocked, denying entry to local Muslims, and those that remain open are abandoned because entry to the mosque would allow the individual to come under the suspicion of being a “religious person”, which constitutes grounds for detention. See: Kuo, Lily, “Revealed: New evidence of China’s mission to raze the mosques of Xinjiang,” *The Guardian*, 7 May 2019, accessed 21 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/07/revealed-new-evidence-of-chinas-mission-to-raze-the-mosques-of-xinjiang>.

¹³ Millward, James, “What It’s Like to Live in a Surveillance State,” *The New York Times*, 3 February 2018, accessed 11 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/opinion/sunday/china-surveillance-state-uyghurs.html>.

¹⁴ Chin, Josh & Burge, Clement, “Twelve days in Xinjiang: How China’s Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2017, accessed 11 March 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355>.

¹⁵ Feng, Emily, “Security spending ramped up in China’s restive Xinjiang region,” *Financial Times*, 13 March 2018, accessed 21 May 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/aa4465aa-2349-11e8-ae48-60d3531b7d11>.

¹⁶ Shichor, Yitzhak 2019, “Handling China’s Internal Security: Division of Labor among Armed Forces in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2019.1580426.

¹⁷ See: Millward, “What It’s Like”.

¹⁸ Children in such centres range from just a few weeks old right through to primary school aged children. In other instances, older children are reported to be taking care of their much younger siblings. For example, a Becoming Family team visiting Aksu Prefecture reported they had given “consolation gifts” to poor households in the region. One household was a double detention household. The gift recipient was an 18 year boy who was forced to care for his three younger siblings due to their parent’s detention. The Becoming Family team encouraged him to “face the problem squarely”, to “not follow the evil, old path of his parents”, and to “work hard and be a good person, and always follow the Party. The Party and the country will not forget you”. They even trotted out the standard trope of “the lives of peasants are getting better day by day”. This approach indicates the Party is attempting a re-education of the general population of a scale not seen since the Cultural Revolution. See: Zenz, Adrian, “Break Their Roots: Evidence for China’s Parent-Child Separation Campaign in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Political Risk*, vol. 7, no. 7 (2019), accessed 1 October 2019, <http://www.jpolarisk.com/break-their-roots-evidence-for-chinas-parent-child-separation-campaign-in-xinjiang/>. See also: 163.com, “Like! This group of great children in Hotan use the power of art to promote the study of national language and characters,” 3 January 2018, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://3g.163.com/dy/article/D78J6F690514E09F.html> and National Forestry and Grassland Bureau Propaganda Center, “The third batch of visiting relatives of the Forestry Department made a solid progress in the ‘Six One’ activities, and the effect was obvious,” 6 November 2017, accessed 1 October 2019,

parents” became a significant issue for authorities from 2017, and a massive expansion of boarding facilities occurred alongside the expansion of detention facilities. Inter-generational separation of children, like what is currently unfolding in XUAR, is a technique of cultural genocide.¹⁹ It seeks to destroy the undesirable minority culture, assimilating the children into the majority culture. It leads to inter-generational trauma and psychological illness, alongside the cultural, religious and ethnic dislocation intended to result from the practice. Government propaganda on the inter-generational separation of Uyghur children purports that the Party is more suitable to care for the children than their own parents.²⁰ This is a justification that has long been used by colonial authorities against dispossessed peoples the world over, including in Australia.²¹ Hence, Beijing is adopting a classic colonial stance in removing Uyghur children in XUAR, which at the very least, can be considered an internal colony of the Chinese state.

The purpose of the mass detention centres has been identified by multiple government sources as “re-education” with the deliberate intention of “wash[ing] clean the brains” of internees.²² Moreover, official documents on the camps identify internees as being in a state of “involuntary internment”, despite portrayals in some official propaganda that Uyghurs voluntarily attend such centres. Therefore, forced re-education of the Uyghurs has become a national security goal. Moreover, the Uyghur crisis has occurred because XUAR is integral to the success of the BRI, with Beijing prepared to commit violations of human rights based on an ends justifies the means mentality.²³ According to Shichor, it is “potential crises” that are of most concern to China’s leaders. He has argued that XUAR’s “brutal suppression conforms to [Beijing’s fears over] what may happen in the future if tough measures are not taken at present”.²⁴ Tobin has identified that Xi’s strategy to “build a ‘great wall of iron’ to protect national unity” has seen the Uyghurs and Uyghur identity not only placed last in China’s hierarchical ethnic relations, but has also situated them as a threat to China’s securitised *Zhonghua Minzu* (Chinese national identity).²⁵ The response of the MENA states to the unfolding Uyghur crisis is important in assessing Beijing’s regional engagement with

<http://xinjiangzm.lmzmcn.com/coohome/coserver.aspx?uid=xinjiangzm&aid=E596A84E52EA496AB775DED C78313C40&clid=9&t=24>.

¹⁹ Tatz, Colin, “Confronting Australian genocide,” *Aboriginal History*, vol. 25 (2001), 16-36.

²⁰ Zenz, “Break Their Roots”.

²¹ See: Bird, Carmel (ed), *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1998); Broome, Richard, *Aboriginal Australians: A history since 1788*, 4th edn (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2010); and McGrath, Ann (ed), *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 1995).

²² See Zenz, Adrian, “Brainwashing, Police Guards and Coercive Internment: Evidence from Chinese Government Documents about the Nature and Extent of Xinjiang’s ‘Vocational Training Internment Camps’,” *Journal of Political Risk*, vol. 7, no. 7 (2019), accessed 1 October 2019, https://www.jpolarisk.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiangs-vocational-training-internment-camps/#_ftn3.

²³ Roberts, Sean, “The biopolitics of China’s ‘war on terror’ and the exclusion of the Uyghurs,” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2018), 232-258.

²⁴ Shichor, “Handling China’s”.

²⁵ Tobin, David, “A ‘Struggle of Life or Death’: Han and Uyghur Insecurities on China’s North-West Frontier”, *The China Quarterly*, (2019), doi:10.1017/S030574101900078X.

BRI partners. The “Xinjiang letters” to the UN Human Rights Council offer crucial insights into these dynamics.

The Xinjiang Letters

In July 2019, 22 states signed a letter to the president of the UN Human Rights Council condemning the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs in XUAR and resultant human rights violations. The letter called on China to uphold its obligations as a member of the UN Human Rights Council and its own national laws on freedom of religion.²⁶ Signatories of the letter included a range of mostly European states, many of which were extra-regional middle powers.²⁷ In response to this letter, Beijing mobilised 37 states to write a second letter, defending China’s record in XUAR. Many of the signatory states for the second letter were BRI partner states, including a number of Muslim-majority states.²⁸

Prior to any content releases from the second letter, Saudi Arabia’s UN Ambassador initially attempted to downplay the contents of the second letter. He stated:

[T]he letter talks about China’s ‘developmental work, that’s all it talks about, it does not address anything else... What we have said in that letter is that we support the developmental policies of China that have lifted people out of poverty.’²⁹

However, once segments of the letter were released his claims soon unravelled. Published sections of the letter demonstrated it proposed that as a result of Beijing’s actions “security has returned to Xinjiang and the fundamental human rights of people of all ethnic groups there are safeguarded”.³⁰ Therefore, by signing the letter, signatory states were endorsing the

²⁶ The letter stated: “We call on China to uphold its national laws and international obligations and to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, in Xinjiang and across China. We call also on China to refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uyghurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang”. A PDF version of the first letter can be accessed from Putz, Catherine, “Which Countries Are For or Against China’s Xinjiang Policies?,” *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2019, accessed 1 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

²⁷ Signatory states of the first letter included: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Notable absentees from either letter included the United States, Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia.

²⁸ Signatory states of the second letter included: Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Belarus, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Kuwait, Lao, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

²⁹ Nichols, Michelle, “Saudi Arabia defends letter backing China’s Xinjiang policy,” *Jakarta Post*, 19 July 2019, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/07/19/saudi-arabia-defends-letter-backing-chinas-xinjiang-policy.html>.

³⁰ A PDF version of the second letter can be accessed from: Hassanein, Haisam, “Arab states give China a pass on Uyghur crackdown,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 26 August 2019, accessed 1 October 2019, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-states-give-china-a-pass-on-uyghur-crackdown>.

religious suppression of Uyghurs in XUAR.³¹ The second letter also praised China's "remarkable achievements in the field of human rights", its "contribution to the international human rights cause", and it called on "relevant countries to refrain from employing unfounded charges against China based on unconfirmed information", insisting that the region's people "enjoy a stronger sense of happiness, fulfilment and security". Hence, there was far more in the letter than the Saudi Ambassador first acknowledged.

Beijing has sought to co-opt MENA states into its unfolding crackdown in XUAR in order to legitimise its actions. Leibold argued that Beijing's Foreign Ministry spokespersons frequently label news about the camps as "fake news" or "slandorous lies".³² By maintaining that the actions inside the camps are de-extremification and vocational skills acquisition, Beijing has attempted to "create a plausible and palatable counter-narrative...for consumption by China's key trading partners in the Muslim world and beyond", particularly states with sizeable Muslim populations who should be concerned by the scale of religious oppression occurring against fellow Muslims in XUAR.³³ In addition, many of these states are also found wanting when it comes to human rights within their own borders, so by siding with Beijing they hope to also deflect external scrutiny and condemnation on their own internal affairs.

In his assessment of why MENA states have been supportive of Beijing's actions in XUAR, Hassanein identified five key factors driving complicity. He argued that the Arab states in particular are operating on a principle of non-interference in the affairs of other states in order to avoid similar scrutiny inside of their state borders. In addition, Hassanein argued that some of the MENA states supporting Beijing also fear political Islam and separatism within their own states. Therefore, by framing the narrative as being centred on eliminating political Islam and counteracting separatist movements, Beijing has convinced such states to support its current policies. More significantly and linked to their position as largely middle power states, is that complicity has been achieved due to the desire of MENA states for continued economic development via the BRI. Speaking at the 2014 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, Xi pledged to increase bilateral trade with Arab states from US\$240 billion (2013) to US\$600 billion within the decade. Foreign direct investment in non-financial sectors was also earmarked for an increase from US\$10 billion (2013) to over US\$60 billion within the decade.³⁴ Therefore, although there may be internal disquiet over the religious suppression of fellow Muslims, the public face is one of silence and support in order to keep the economic lines flowing. Finally, Hassanein identified that among MENA states is a growing belief that China is too big to challenge and this further limits their capacity to speak out against China. Hence, the rising power of China, and the MENA states economic dependence on BRI, is limiting their independence on such issues.³⁵

³¹ Nichols, "Saudi Arabia".

³² Leibold, James, "The Spectre of Insecurity: The CCP's Mass Internment Strategy in Xinjiang," *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2019, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://www.prcleader.org/leibold>.

³³ Leibold, "The Spectre".

³⁴ Xi, *The Belt and Road*, 49.

³⁵ Haisam, "Arab states give China a pass".

Even so, there have been dissenting voices inside MENA states rejecting the prioritisation of trade and investment over human and religious rights. For example, in 2018, an editorial titled ‘Chinese Muslims want to fast like you too’ was published in the Urdu language version of *Dawn*, Pakistan’s leading and most widely circulated newspaper.³⁶ After outlining the unfolding Uyghur crisis in XUAR, the editorial explained why Arabic states were mostly silent. It concluded: “Many Muslim countries are indebted to the Chinese, and any verbal opposition or action on the Uighur issue can hamper their financial gains from China”.³⁷ Similarly, Qatar’s newspaper, *The Gulf Times*, regularly reports on developments in Xinjiang. In 2018 it ran a story identifying that at least 38 Pakistani men had been separated from their Uyghur wives and children after they were swept up into the detention camps.³⁸ Moreover, it identified at least another 300 Pakistani men whose Uyghur wives and children had gone missing while in Xinjiang. The men were compiling their own disappeared lists and were lobbying the Khan government to assist them in getting their wives freed. Pakistan’s Defence website re-printed the story on its official site under its ‘current events’ section.³⁹ Therefore, there is some awareness of the situation in XUAR for Muslim Uyghurs across segments of the Arab population.

Herein lies the central problem for the MENA states. Many of the accounts on the unfolding crisis in XUAR are taken from: the Chinese government’s own sources; Chinese media reports; the testimony of Uyghurs; nationals of other countries who have been wrongfully detained by Chinese authorities and later released, usually Kazakhs; and the testimony of those who have loved ones wrongly detained, like the Pakistani husbands and fathers. These accounts are not, as the second letter claimed, “unconfirmed information”, nor are they “distortions” or Western media “hypocrisy” as Beijing frequently claims via its diplomatic corps.⁴⁰ This has become even more evident following the leak of more than 400 internal Chinese documents in November 2019, demonstrating that inside of the Chinese state there are people opposed to government policy in XUAR.⁴¹ Moreover, the Uyghur diasporic voices have grown louder as more relatives back home have been detained and they have nothing to lose by speaking out. For most of the states that signed the second letter, BRI funding has

³⁶ Zakaria, Rafia, “Chinese Muslims want to fast like you too,” *Dawn*, 8 May 2019, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://www.dawnnews.tv/news/1102909/>.

³⁷ The article stated: “With each passing day, hour and minute, Pakistan is becoming more and more indebted to Chinese loans, Chinese-made infrastructure and technology. This is probably why the voice of the Uighurs is not voiced [inside Pakistan] and the problems they are facing are not found anywhere in the country, and it is happening in a region that is geographically close to where freedom of religion and independence are concerned. These are serious violations”. See Zakaria, “Chinese Muslims”.

³⁸ Shephard, Christian & Wen, Philip, “China’s big mistake: Pakistanis lobby to free wives trapped in Xinjiang,” *The Gulf Times*, 26 September 2018, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://www2.gulf-times.com/story/607379/Pakistanis-lobby-to-free-wives-trapped-in-Xinjiang>.

³⁹ See: Pakistan Defence, “China’s big mistake: Pakistanis lobby to free wives trapped in Xinjiang,” Pakistan Defence Forum, 26 September 2018, accessed 29 September 2019, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/chinas-big-mistake-pakistanis-lobby-to-free-wives-trapped-in-xinjiang.578903/>.

⁴⁰ Cumming-Bruce, Nick, “China’s Retort Over Its Mass Detentions: Praise from Russia and Saudi Arabia,” *The New York Times*, 12 July 2019, accessed 24 September, <https://nytimes.com/2019/07/12/world/asia/china-human-rights-united-nations.html>.

⁴¹ See: Ramzy, Austin & Buckley, Chris, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims,” *The New York Times*, 16 November 2019, accessed 24 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

already been provided or talks for funding are progressing. Therefore, they have much to gain from supporting Beijing and much to lose by speaking out against Beijing. Their silence and complicity on XUAR is made even more hypocritical given many of the same states recently supported strong statements condemning Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya people.⁴²

In a welcomed development, one of the signatories to the second letter, Qatar, decided to withdraw its signature shortly after the full letter was published. Qatar's permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Ali al-Mansouri explained Qatar took this step because it decided to take a "neutral" position on the issue and offered "mediation and facilitation services".⁴³ Zweiri argued that Qatar's withdrawal of its signature from the second letter was not only a "policy correction" but also constituted a message from Doha to Beijing that "it cannot close its eyes" to Beijing's treatment of the Uyghurs.⁴⁴ Qatar's position appears to have altered due to the expanding evidence and global focus on the religious suppression of Uyghurs by Beijing. Moreover, despite this policy correction, Qatar has not experienced a strong reaction from Beijing for its withdrawal of support for the second letter. In an opening address at a BRI conference in Doha, Lim Meng Hui (the Chief Executive Officer of Qatar Free Zones Authority) identified Qatar's expansive natural gas reserves and its strategic location at the "crossroads of global trade" as key elements in Qatar's appeal to Beijing.⁴⁵ Therefore, MENA states do have some ability to pushback against Beijing and its policies, and the desired resources they possess could become crucial bargaining chips in their bilateral relations with China. Should other MENA states follow Qatar's lead in response to the growing evidence of the extent and nature of the religious suppression of Uyghurs in XUAR, the pressure on Beijing by BRI partner states could reach a tipping point and provide a swift resolution to the Uyghur crisis, in unison with the signatory states of the first Xinjiang letter.

Conclusion

The Uyghur crisis is an issue that demonstrates the influence of BRI to the foreign policies of the MENA states and the degree of complicity and silence Beijing can garner under the right circumstances. Therefore, it is imperative that the Uyghur crisis and the voices of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and others caught up in this issue continue to receive media attention, wearing down the official propaganda accounts. Significantly, the impact of this policy on Uyghur children warrants careful and prolonged attention as the impacts of the program on the children will highlight its true nature. So will the birth rates. Data on Uyghur birth rates will also be useful

⁴² See: Human Rights Council Forty-second session 9–27 September 2019 Agenda item 2 Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 26 September 2019 42/3. Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar, accessed 15 November 2019, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?b=10&c=125&t=11.

⁴³ *Gulf Times*, "Qatar's support for Uyghurs welcomed," 23 August 2019, accessed 24 September 2019, <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/639685/Qatar-s-support-for-Uyghurs-welcomed>.

⁴⁴ *Gulf Times*, "Qatar's support".

⁴⁵ Shoeb, Mohammad, "Belt & Road Initiative to bring Qatar and Mideast closer to the world: QFZA chief," *The Peninsula*, 4 November 2019, accessed 2 December 2019, <https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/04/11/2019/Belt-Road-Initiative-to-bring-Qatar-and-Mideast-closer-to-the-world-QFZA-chief>.

in demonstrating how disruptive this has been to the Uyghur population. Pressure must continue to be applied by concerned states, regardless of their classification by Beijing as being “Western” or “European”, both of which are deliberate attempts at obfuscation. Neutral states need to reconsider their position in the face of increasing evidence of the scale of the Uyghur crisis. Finally, MENA hypocrisy on this issue should continue to be called out as states prioritise economic development over the largest mass detention of a religious group since World War Two. Diasporic Uyghur communities have provided the strongest evidence of the disappearances and the nature of the unfolding Uyghur crisis. However, government leaks, publicly available data, China’s own media reports, and satellite imagery have all corroborated their testimonies.