

# WINEWS

## Chinese surveillance app reverse-engineered by HRW highlights monitoring of Xinjiang residents

By Bang Xiao

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**PHOTO:** The rise of the Chinese surveillance state has been dramatically felt in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. (Reuters: Ben Blanchard)

A human rights group says it has reverse-engineered a Chinese Government surveillance app and revealed how authorities use mass surveillance data to track the behaviour and patterns of residents in Xinjiang province.

In a report released this morning, Human Rights Watch (HRW) revealed how it pulled apart an app used by Chinese police and other government officials to identify and track anyone believed to be a potential threat to what it considered the stability of the largely Muslim province.

The app allows authorities to connect to the country and region's infamous social credit surveillance system — otherwise known as the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), which HRW reported on in early 2018.

The system collates mass amounts of data through CCTV, bank records, computer details, citizen movements, legal past, and phone records.

Among the features revealed in the app used was a list of 36 different behaviours considered problematic that police could filter through the IJOP for.

These included — among many other things — people who had returned from abroad, were recently released from detention, shared or engaged in

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**MAP:** China

### Key points:

- A list of at least 36 "behaviours" can trigger police scrutiny, according to a new report
- Authorities use surveillance to amass data on millions of people in the Xinjiang region
- Many are then placed in detention

Islamic activities, stopped using smartphones, failed to "socialise with neighbours", or even used too much electricity — anything considered abnormal behaviour.



**PHOTO:** The perimeter fence of a detention camp, officially known as a vocational skills education centre, in Xinjiang. (Reuters: Thomas Peter)

The criteria and filters and mechanisms within the app appear to confirm a long-suspected belief that authorities in Xinjiang province were specifically using mass surveillance to monitor problematic Muslims, like the region's Uighur population, many of whom are believed to be held in infamous detention camps.

The 68-page report, *China's Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App*, found that through the IJOP and other methods, authorities were collecting vast amounts of information on Xinjiang residents including their blood type, their height, their religious "atmosphere" and their political affiliations.

Human Rights Watch senior China researcher Maya Wang told the ABC that the app further demonstrated that Xinjiang police were using illegally gathered information to track behaviour that was completely lawful and using it against citizens.

"The system flags these micro-clues to the authorities, prompting an investigation, following which some of those investigated are detained in Xinjiang's political education camps," she said.

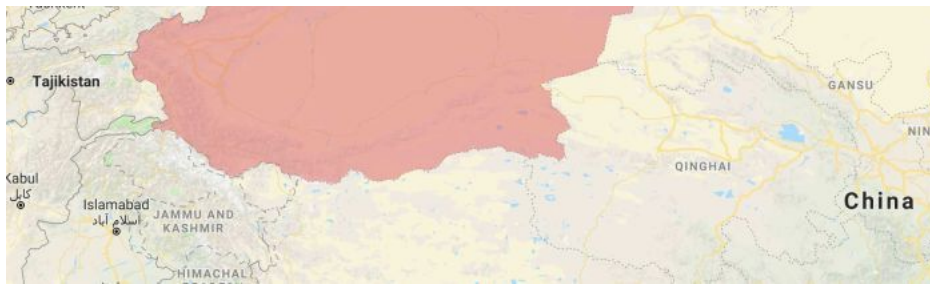
## China's frontier of fear



Satellite imagery lifts the lid on the size and spread of China's internment camps, used to indoctrinate vast numbers of the Xinjiang region's Muslim population.

## 'Window into the heart of Xinjiang surveillance'





**PHOTO:** Bordered by eight countries, Xinjiang is China's largest province. (Supplied: Google Maps)

The IJOP is a high-tech mass surveillance system that pools information on citizens.

Since late 2016, the Chinese Government's Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism has turned Xinjiang, which is predominantly Muslim and ethnically Uighur, into one of China's major centres for using innovative technologies for social control.

Ms Wang said HRW had done something not achieved by a human rights group before: reverse-engineering of the app that communicates with the IJOP system.

**External Link:** The interface of the IJOP platform that was widely used by Xinjiang Police

"The reverse-engineering process was incredibly challenging — in order to do this research we had to combine two sets of expertise, the technical and the country expertise, possessed by different people," she said.

**"It is like having a window into the heart of Xinjiang's mass surveillance systems.**

"It gives us insights into how the Chinese government tracks people and the kinds of people and behaviour targeted in the Strike Hard Campaign."

Among the other things the system tracks in Xinjiang are when the registered owner of the car is not the same as the person buying fuel, long overseas trips, or possession of any suspicious apps like WhatsApp, Viber or VPNs.

The app then alerts government officials nearby who then decide whether this seems suspicious and investigate and interrogate the person — these people are then evaluated for possible detention.

According to official documents referenced in the HRW report, this includes people "who ought to be taken" or "should be taken" as well, and HRW alleges some people were denied basic legal rights and others were tortured.

## 'You either kill me, or you put me in prison'

**External Link:** HRW report on the app Chinese authorities use to monitor Xinjiang residents.

HRW interviewed a number of Xinjiang residents who had firsthand experience with the IJOP system.

Ehmet, a former detainee who spent months in a political education camp, said his ID was on a watchlist that triggered an alarm every time he went through a checkpoint.

"The police told me I could not go out of the region because I was blacklisted. So, I went to the police in my village, and said, 'I have kids and I need authorisation to go', but the police wouldn't give the authorisation, so I couldn't leave," he said.

**"I got very angry and said: 'You either kill me, or you put me in prison, or I'll kill myself'."**

Aylin, a university student, said her mother was in a political education camp after using a SIM card that did not belong to her.

**'You have to criticise yourself'**





"The official called my mum and asked her how many years she has had this phone number, she said, '11', and the police said, 'you're lying, it's 7!'. She got frightened and then accidentally cut off the phone call," she said.

Human Rights Watch has used the report to call for a tougher line on China's activities in Xinjiang and the detention camps, including sanctions.

"Through exposing these abuses, we hope we can generate international pressure on the Chinese government, and their company enablers, to stop their abuses in Xinjiang," Ms Wang said.

China's Foreign Ministry did not respond to requests for comment at the time of publishing, though in the past, the government has defended its operations in Xinjiang as cracking down on terrorism and extremism, while asking foreign governments not to meddle in its internal affairs.



**PHOTO:** A banner at a mosque that reads "Love the party, Love the country" in Kashgar, Xinjiang last November. (AP: Ng Han Guan, File)

**Topics:** law-crime-and-justice, police, information-and-communication, censorship, world-politics, china, asia

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