

# Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang

Topic B

High Commissioner for  
Human Rights



## Introduction to the committee

This committee is the body of independent experts that help carry out the implementation of the international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The main purpose of the Committee is to protect political and civil rights, therefore, resulting in various changes of laws, practices, and policies. This course of action has helped improve the lives of people around the world. It continues to work to ensure that everyone can enjoy fully and without discrimination all the political and civil rights guaranteed by the Covenant.

According to the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) official page, no country's record in protecting and promoting civil and political rights is perfect and free from criticism. As a result, the task of the Committee is to encourage each State party to: keep strengthening laws, policies and practices that improve the enjoyment of these rights, to withdraw or amend measures that are destructive or corrosive of Covenant rights, to take an appropriate and positive action when a State party has failed to act to promote and protect these rights, and to consider the effects in terms of the Covenant of new laws, policies and practices that a State party proposes to introduce in order to ensure that it does not regress in giving practical effect to Covenant rights.

One of the Committee's greatest strengths is its moral authority, which comes from the fact that it represents all corners of the world. Rather than representing a single point of view, the Committee speaks with a unified voice. The work of the Committee over the years has led to many changes in policies, practices, and laws. This directly affects individual cases around the world. The Committee will continue to discharge its monitoring functions while ensuring that its work remain relevant and applicable to all States parties as well as striving for universal civil and political rights which are enjoyed without discrimination by all people.

## Historical background

The Uyghur's struggle for autonomy and their ongoing persecution by the Chinese State has recently received increased media attention, although this is not a new phenomenon. The Uyghur people have long been subject to discrimination and violence because of their ethnic heritage. According to Giovanni Panzeri (2021) the history of the Uyghurs and the Tarim Basin region, later called Xinjiang (or East Turkestan, by the Uyghur people), is characterized by two opposing ideological narratives that are used to justify actions and positions on either side. The first of these claims being the Han Chinese claim that this region was always part of China and at the same time, Uyghur nationalists claim that they were the native people of the region.

There is no historical evidence to support either theory, as there is only data referencing them as part of the Uyghur Empire from 744-840 B.C. The next piece of information was by the Soviet officials designating them in 1921 during a conference in Tashkent. According to Bovington (2010), "Soviet officers divided Turkic-speaking central Asians into various "national" groups to ward off the threat of a Pan-Turkist revolt". Also, the region was a crucial trading spot for China.

Xinjiang was only declared an official province by the Qing empire in 1884, after it was conquered in 1750 when it was still called Zunghar Khanate. The rise of the province was followed by a period of gradual assimilation of the local Muslim population into Han culture (Panzeri, 2021). The "Uyghur self-determination movement" first emerged in the 1920s, sometime after the fall of the Qing dynasty. The concept of "Turkic nationalism" first arose in the wake of East Turkestan's turbulent history, as Uyghur Bolshevik sympathizers were inspired by the Marxist-Leninists ideas, to designate it to the struggles of a local Turkic Muslim population.

The Uyghur people experienced the first systematic attempts at forced assimilation by Chinese authorities trying to push through a "Hanification" of Xinjiang. The 1990s would be marked by the introduction of new economic opportunities because of China's reforms under Deng Xiaoping, at the same time, rights and liberties were gradually tightened up – this was particularly evident during this decade. The resurgence of self-determination and Islamic ideals in the previous decades alongside increasingly stringent restrictions on civil liberties led to mounting tensions and clashes, culminating in protests, bombings, and police brutality.

During the first decade of the new millennium, Han-Uyghur relations took a more drastic turn during the 1990s. This turn was characterized by three factors: the US and Chinese designation of Uyghur organizations as terrorist groups, China's plans for development and urbanization in Xinjiang Province, and 2009 riots in Urumqi (the capital of the region). It's critical to underline that no genuine

act of savagery was carried out by the Uyghur individuals against the Chinese state or Han civilians between the battles within the 1990s and 2009. Eventually, in 2009 in Urumqi, there was an explosion of violence during and initially nonviolent Uyghur demonstration. Protesters and Han civilians, supported with the aid of the police, struggled within the streets for approximately three days inflicting hundreds of deaths. This incident was a primary turning factor in how Han civilians judged the Uyghurs and began to perceive them as a real threat to Han residents and the country.

The authorities started out imposing surveillance and policing techniques against the Uyghur in 2016 which have made Xinjiang one of the most monitored places on the planet. In 2017, the Chinese authorities started detaining massive portions of the Uighur populace in what they call “reeducation facilities” but are mentioned to be prison camps.

## Topic Overview

Millions of Muslims have been detained in Xinjiang, a region in China. The reeducation camps are just one part of the government’s crackdown on Uyghurs. The Chinese government has detained more than a million Muslims in reeducation camps since 2017 according to Lindsay Maizland (2017). Most of the people who have been detained are Uyghur, a mainly Turkic-speaking ethnic group, primarily in China’s northwestern region of Xinjiang. The detentions are not the only problem, but Uyghurs have been put under intense surveillance, they have been forced into labor, and involuntary sterilizations, among other rights abuses.

An estimated eight hundred thousand to two million Uyghurs and other Muslims, including Kazakhs and Uzbeks, have been detained since 2017, according to international researchers and U.S. government officials (Maizland, L. 2022). The Chinese government call the facilities “vocational education and training centers;” the most common terms used by international media organizations and researchers are reeducations camps, internment camps, and detention camps. Some activists describe them as concentration camps.

There are more than 11 million Uyghurs live in the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, which is 45% of the total population of Xinjiang, the region has 25 million inhabitants. Over 10 million Han Chinese live in the region. The rest belong to an ethnic group, in its majority Muslim, and including Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Hui (Chinese Muslims) (Kashgarian, A. 2023). The reeducation efforts started in Xinjiang in 2014 and were largely expanded in 2017. During the beginning of 2017 they documented the construction of new reeducation camps and expansion of existing facilities of mass detention. Reuters journalists, observing satellite imagery, found that thirty-nine of the camps almost

tripled in size between April 2017 and August 2018; they covered a total area roughly the size of 140 soccer fields.

Most people detained in the reeducation camps were never charged with crimes and had no legal avenues to challenge their detentions. Information on what happened in the camps remain limited, but many detainees who have since fled China described harsh conditions. The UN human rights office released a report in 2022 based on interviews with dozens of people, including twenty-six individuals who were detained, that found “patterns of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment” in the camps between 2017 and 2019.

The UN report affirmed previous findings by international journalists, researchers, and rights organizations. Various exposés showed that detainees were forced to pledge loyalty to the CCP and renounce Islam, as well as sing praises for communism and learn Mandarin. Some people reported prison-like conditions, with cameras and microphones monitoring their every move and utterance. Others said they were tortured and subjected to sleep deprivation during interrogations. Women have shared stories of sexual abuse, including rape. Some released detainees contemplated suicide or witnessed others kill themselves.

Detention also disrupted families. Children whose parents were sent to the camps were often forced to stay in state-run orphanages. Many Uyghur parents living outside of China faced a difficult choice: return home to be with their children and risk detention, or stay abroad, separated from their children and unable to contact them. The authorities in China are being perceived as dismissive and evasive about the situation in the camps. Over the last ten years, the Xinjiang authorities have accelerated policies to reshape Uyghurs’ habits. Uyghurs have grown into living under an intrusive state, but during late 2016 some local police officers have said that they struggled to meet their new detention quotas. (Thum, R. 2018)

According to Adrian Zenz, a researcher at the European School of Culture and Theology, a new study has analyzed government ads inviting tenders for various contracts concerning re-education facilities in more than 40 localities across Xinjiang. The report reveals the state’s push to build camps in every corner of the region since 2016, at a cost so far of more than 680 million yuan (over \$107 million) (Zenz, A. 2018). Government officials first denied the camps’ existence. They publicly stated that the camps had two purposes: to teach Mandarin, Chinese laws, and vocational skills, and to prevent citizens from becoming influenced by extremist ideas, to “nip terrorist activities in the bud”, according to a government report. Pointing out that Xinjiang has not experienced a terrorist attack since December 2016, officials claimed the camps have prevented violence.

Chinese officials and state media have worked to discredit reports on Xinjiang using a range of tactics, including disseminating disinformation and harassing activists, they have repeated a narrative that “anti-China forces” in the United States and other Western countries are spreading “vicious lies”. Beijing tried to prevent the UN human rights office from releasing its report. After its release, Chinese officials described it as false information and published a rebuttal describing how foreign governments and organizations “spread numerous rumors and lies” about Xinjiang.

From 1 million to 2 million Uyghurs and members of other minorities from Xinjiang are being held in camps, where they are forced to study Marxism, renounce their religion, forced to work in factories and face abuse. Authorities say these “re-education camps” provide vocational training and are necessary to fight extremism according to Anna Schecter (2022).

Chinese officials are concerned that Uyghurs hold extremist and separatist ideas, and they viewed the camps as a way of eliminating threats to China’s territorial integrity, government, and population. Xinjiang has been claimed by China since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949. Some Uyghurs living there refer to the region as East Turkestan and argue that it ought to be independent from China. Xinjiang takes up one-sixth of China’s landmass and borders eight countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan. (Maizland, L. 2022)

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, the CCP has pushed to Sinicize religion, or shape all religions to conform to the officially atheist party’s doctrines and the majority Han-Chinese society’s customs. Though the government recognizes five religions – Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism – it has long feared that foreigners could use religious practice to spur separatism. The effort that China has done for the country’s pacification is arguably the country’s most intense social restructuring campaign since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Despite the pressure on the local economy and the potentially disastrous long-term consequences for the ethnic ties, Beijing’s support. Under Xi Jinping such as Islam or Christianity were increasingly subjected to and directed toward “Sinicization” in accordance with “core socialist values” (New York Times, March 24, 2017).

The repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang has been widely condemned by the international community. Evidence suggests that the Chinese government has been engaging in widespread human rights abuses, including mass detention, forced labor, and cultural and religious repression. The Chinese authorities have defended their actions as necessary for countering terrorism and extremism. The situation remains a matter of significant concern and calls for action to address the human rights abuses continue to grow.

## Guiding questions

1. Should the Chinese authorities be reprehended by their actions towards Uyghurs?
2. How can Turkey, as the country with more Uygur refugees living in it, handle their arrival?
3. What has been the global response to the treatment of Uyghurs?
4. How much does the culture of the Uyghur affect Han civilians?
5. What course of actions should countries near the conflict (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) take?

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