

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing, Uyghur Human Rights

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Uyghurs are a largely Muslim Turkic-speaking ethnic minority spread throughout Central Asia but concentrated in Xinjiang, a region in China's northwest, where their population currently numbers about 10 million. The Qing Dynasty loosely incorporated Xinjiang into China in the 18th century; the current government claims that Xinjiang has been part of China since ancient times.<sup>1</sup>

Uyghurs, for centuries a stateless people, have long wanted a country to call their own. Repeated uprisings in Xinjiang in the 19th century, all suppressed, were followed by two short-lived independent republics in the first half of the 20th century. Both were defeated and Chinese rule restored.

But desire to govern themselves -- or at least be free from state oppression -- lives on, and restrictive Chinese policies in Xinjiang have only alienated Uyghurs further. Since the 2009 riots in the regional capital Urumqi, in which nearly 200 people were killed, the Chinese government has launched an extended and increasingly draconian crackdown on Uyghur culture, language, and religious practices, and have shackled Uyghurs in an ever-expanding security state.

The Chinese government is reaching into ever more intimate corners of Uyghur life as it seeks to control how they eat, pray, and learn, what they read, where they travel, when and how they gather together, and what language their children speak. Civil servants, government employees, and students are not permitted to fast during the holy month of Ramadan, may not wear headscarves, and may face restrictions on daily prayer. Some religious attire, including beards, face veils, and religious logos, may also be restricted. Men may have to register their names when they enter mosques. Authorities have banned more than two dozen baby names, including Muhammad, Medina, and Arafat.<sup>2</sup> Uyghur language education has been banned in schools in portions of the region. The goal is to weaken Uyghur identity and strengthen their identification with China and Chinese culture. Detractors, or those deemed dangerous to the state, may be subject to detention, arrest, prison, political re-education, or even execution.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1039223.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/world/asia/china-xinjiang-ban-muslim-names-muhammad-jihad.html>

Beijing denies all human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and claims that Uyghurs enjoy “unprecedented religious freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

The crackdown has worsened notably in the past year, as the region has turned into a 21st century surveillance state. Video cameras line the streets and alleyways of the capital Urumqi. Authorities shut down the internet entirely for months after the 2009 riots, and continue to enact a degree of internet censorship that is extreme even by Chinese standards. Mobile phones are subject to random checks by police, who may also put government software on the phones that block certain apps. Many communications are surveilled.

Local authorities claim that the measures are necessary to preserve a good environment for business and trade, but it’s clear that, at least in the short-term, the primary consideration is not economic -- currently more than \$6 billion per year is estimated to be spent on security in Xinjiang, more than half the region’s annual income.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese government claims that religious extremism and terrorism are serious problems in Xinjiang. That’s not a wholly unjustified claim. Documents leaked by an Islamic State defector in 2016 showed that at least 114 Chinese Uyghurs had joined the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> Uyghurs have committed terrorist attacks in Beijing, Kunming, and other cities, killing dozens.

But it’s clear that the Chinese approach not only violates human rights; it’s also counterproductive. The more Chinese authorities crack down on the Uyghur way of life, the more Uyghurs cleave to their own culture and to Islam as a way to maintain their identity. As I wrote after a trip to Xinjiang in 2015, for some Uyghurs, religious practice has become “a way of asserting ‘ethno-national belonging’ and expressing dissent toward the government policies that had marginalized them.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Beijing’s policies only drive the wedge deeper between Uyghurs and the Chinese state.

The situation has become so unbearable that Uyghurs are fleeing Xinjiang in unprecedented numbers. As one Uyghur refugee in Turkey told Reuters in 2015, “They don’t allow us to live as Muslims. ... You can’t pray. You can’t keep more than one Koran at home. You can’t teach Islam to your children. You can’t fast and you can’t go to Hajj. When you’re deprived of your whole identity, what’s the point?”<sup>7</sup>

Turkey has traditionally welcomed Uyghurs, occasionally angering China for doing so. While in Istanbul in 2015, I spoke with Seyit Tumor, the vice president of the World Uyghur Congress, who told me that

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<sup>3</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/02/c\\_135407591.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/02/c_135407591.htm)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/09/26/553463964/wary-of-unrest-among-uyghur-minority-china-locks-down-xinjiang-province>

<sup>5</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/20/report-100-chinese-muslims-have-joined-isis-islamic-state-china-terrorism-uyghur/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/01/china-xinjiang-islam-salman-rushdie-Uyghur/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-uyghurs-insight-idUSKCN0Q10PM20150727>

there were about 30,000 Chinese Uyghurs in Turkey -- and that about 10,000 of them had come in the past year alone. While these numbers are difficult to verify and should not be taken as precise figures, it's an indication of the increasing severity of the crackdown in Xinjiang.

But there is no escape. China has sought to extend control over Uyghurs even after they have fled its borders, using economic and other leverage to pressure foreign governments to cooperate. In 2009, Cambodia forcibly repatriated 20 Uyghurs who had applied for asylum. In 2015, Thailand deported more than 100 Uyghurs who had sought asylum, over objections of rights groups, the United Nations, and the United States.<sup>8</sup> The fates of some of these repatriated Uyghurs are unknown.

This year, China has greatly intensified its campaign to force Uyghurs living abroad to return to China. Young Uyghurs studying in Egypt, Turkey, France, the United States, Australia, and other countries have returned to Xinjiang after their relatives there were threatened. Many of those who return are detained or sent to political reeducation centers; some have been given prison sentences.<sup>9</sup>

Local authorities have also confiscated passports of Uyghur residents to prevent them from leaving the country and refused to issue new passports. This violates Article 13.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads, "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."<sup>10</sup> The UN Human Rights Committee has indicated that states are required to issue travel documents so as not to infringe upon the right to leave.

The difficulty that Uyghurs face in leaving China is, in fact, one reason that drives a small number to join extremist organizations, which may offer them logistical and financial support to flee.

Beijing has urged Washington to cooperate more closely in counter-terrorism efforts. While cooperation may be desirable in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan, where China has helped broker peace talks between the government and the Taliban, the United States should be extremely cautious in cooperating in any way with China's domestic efforts. The complete lack of transparency and the near-total media blackout in Xinjiang, combined with systematic human rights violations and the lack of an independent judiciary, means that it's difficult to know when Beijing is telling the truth about those it claims to be terrorists.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/thailand-china-uyghur-refugees/398318/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/ordered-05092017155554.html>

<sup>10</sup>

[https://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/source/prems/prems150813\\_GBR\\_1700\\_TheRightToLeaveACountry\\_web.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/source/prems/prems150813_GBR_1700_TheRightToLeaveACountry_web.pdf)