

Plight of Uighurs in China

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The Uighur issue is not new, it was started as a result of the occupation and annexation of East Turkestan by the Qing dynasty in the middle of the eighteenth century. The Uighurs never made peace with the occupation, there were many revolts against the central government, and independent Uighur states were even established several times. Although the last East Turkestan state was established in 1944, the Chinese Communists, who won the Civil War in 1949, conquered this territory after a six-year struggle and established the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955. Under the rule of the People's Republic of China, the central government has been unable to maintain long-term stability in the region, local rebellions and resistance remain intact. That is, the Chinese government has always considered Xinjiang a problematic area and recent policy shows that the central government prefers the most radical methods to solve the problem – building a permanent surveillance system by using modern technology, establishing internal camps and detaining Uighurs along with other Turkic-speaking Muslims in the name of *re-education*.

The area of Xinjiang Autonomous Region is 1.65 million square kilometers and it is the largest administrative-territorial unit in China. According to the 1953 census, Uighurs made up 75% of the population, while Han Chinese accounted for only 6%. As a result of the central government's policies, the demographic situation has changed over the past 50 years, and now the proportion of Uighurs has dropped to 46% (about 10 million) while the proportion of ethnic Hans exceeds 40%. One of the rationales behind the Uighur protests in the past was related to the demographic policy pursued by the Chinese government: Muslims are a minority in China and the central government is trying to turn them into a minority in the region too. Xinjiang's geostrategic importance for China is

enormous as it is in the center of Eurasia and the north-west gate of China. The region borders with eight states: Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, India, and the parts of Jammu-Kashmir under Pakistani control. Xinjiang also shares a border with Tibet, another problematic region in the eyes of the Chinese government, which is an additional reason for the central government to tighten up its control over Xinjiang to prevent the spread of any unrest from one region to another. The ancient Silk Road crossed through East Turkestan, and one aspect of the modern Silk Road covers this area. One of the three Trans-Eurasian economic corridors (the North Corridor – China-Central Asia-Russia-Europe) of China's global infrastructure project *One Belt, One Road* passes through Xinjiang. Xinjiang will be an important logistics center with 15 built-in ports (cargo terminal) and 2 airports. Thus, the long-term stability in the region and the elimination of potential protests become a vital task for China. The region is rich in natural resources such as oil, gas and coal; 30% of the country's oil production, about one-third of its natural gas, and 40% of its coal is extracted from this region, which is another factor that increases the importance of Xinjiang for China.

People Detained in Camps

Xinjiang attracted world attention in recent years with serious human rights violations. In fact, human rights problems are characteristic of all continental China where rigid centralized governance and a single-party regime dominate; what is special about the Uighurs and other Turkic-speaking Muslims is that in their case, the whole ethnic and religious group is perceived as potential rebels, and systematic repressive measures are aimed at their assimilation. While the economy of China is open to the world, it is not easy to get information from a country where information space is under the total control of the government. The detainment of Muslims in special camps has been exposed by Western scholars who have analyzed Google

Earth satellite photos and discovered tenders of local administrations for the construction of camps. For example, [Adrian Zenz](#), a lecturer in social research methods at the European School of Culture and Theology in Germany, analyzed the contractor's proposals for the tender and estimated that at least 680 million yuan (\$107 million) has been spent on the construction of camps since 2016, and the construction of new camps continues. The majority of the tenders were related to the installation of security systems in the camps – watchtowers, barbed wire, and video surveillance equipment. Zenz, relating this information with other sources, came to the conclusion that hundreds of thousands, and even more than a million Uighurs were detained in those camps.

Specialists in criminal psychology, former military men of the Chinese Army, and former police officers are employed in the detainment camps. Information about it gradually drew the attention of the world media. [CNN reported](#) in February 2018 that thousands of Uighurs in China have been detained in *re-education camps*. Then, international human rights organizations (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) submitted reports to the UN, resulting in internationalization of the issue and UN reactions against China. HRW China Director [Sophie Richardson](#) says that such training centers are illegal according to the international law: "No one in detention received a warning or was sentenced. Local authorities say very clearly that you do not need a lawyer to avoid being sent to camps. This is a method used to force loyalty to the party." In August 2018, [Gay McDougall](#), a member of the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, announced that more than 2 million people, namely, the Uighurs along with other Muslim minorities are detained in massive internment camps. The US representative in the United Nations has expressed concern over repressions against the Uighurs and other Muslims in China, and called for China to put an end to this policy and free all those

detainees. An activist group *Chinese Human Rights Defenders* said that “21 percent of all arrests recorded in China in 2017 were in Xinjiang.”

BBC reporter [John Sudworth](#) went to China and produced an extensive report. His research article was published in November 2018 and played an important role in informing the world about the problem. When journalists asked what the large complex with 16 watchtowers in Dabancheng district is, one hotelier told them that they are re-education schools: “There are tens of thousands of people there now. They have some problems with their thoughts.” The hotelier is not entirely wrong: Although the camp is not an educational center in the sense that we use, in these facilities, people are taught Chinese and love for the Communist Party, they are trained on work habits and personal discipline rules. It is not an exaggeration to say that these re-education camps are rather correctional detention facilities. This claim is also confirmed by their dress code; everyone in the camps is provided with the same uniforms and Muslims are prohibited from covering their heads.

Camp Life: Sad Stories

Despite all the secrecy of the regime, information and stories about the physical and moral torture suffered by Muslims have been spread throughout the world. [Mihrigul Tursun](#), who stayed at the camp for 3 months in Xinjiang, gave testimony in December 2018 before the US Congress. Tursun went to Egypt to study and married there. In 2015, she decided to return to visit her relatives. When she arrived in China, she was arrested, taken away from her children and sent to a camp. One of her children died later. She was allowed to leave the camp in the summer of 2017 and go back to Egypt on the condition that she return. Tursun contacted US diplomats in Egypt and with their help, she emigrated to the United States. In her testimony she said: “There were around 60 people kept in a 430 square feet cell so at nights, 10 to 15 women would stand up

while the rest of us would sleep on sideways so we could fit, and then we would rotate every 2 hours. There were people who had not taken a shower over a year...Before we ate breakfast, which was water with very little rice, we had to sing songs hailing the Communist Chinese Party and repeat these lines in Chinese: 'Long live Xi Jinping' and 'Leniency for those who repent and punishment for those who resist...' They forced us to take some unknown pills and drink some kind of white liquid. The pill caused us to lose consciousness and reduced our cognition level. The white liquid stopped women's periods, though it caused extreme bleeding in some women and even caused death... This was very hard for a daughter and a mum to take. I felt a huge sense of guilt and worthlessness. I cried and begged them to kill me."

Kazak national [Ömir Bekali](#) describes his daily life in the camp: "The day in the camps starts before dawn. First, we have to sing the Chinese national anthem. Then we raise the Chinese flag at 7:30 a.m. Afterwards, people are sent to large classrooms to learn 'red songs' and study Chinese language and history. Before meals, we chant: 'Thank the Party! Thank the Motherland! Thank President Xi!' Those who do not obey the rules are put in jail and for hours they are forced to stand on their feet facing the wall." Bekali was born in China in 1976 and moved to Kazakhstan in 2006. He went to China on March 23, 2017 to see his relatives and the next day he was detained. After spending seven months in an ordinary prison, he was sent to the re-education camp. There, he was forced to perform self-criticism, abandon Islam, and praise the Communist Party. "We are against extremism, against separatism, we will fight against terrorism!" Detainees were forced to repeat these sentences several times a day. Because he refused to comply with the orders, he was locked in a cell without food for 24 hours. On the 20th day of torment in the camp, Bekali attempted to commit suicide. After an eight-month isolation, unexpectedly he was released (probably thanks to the efforts of the Kazakhstani government) and [returned to](#)

Kazakhstan in December 2017.

HRW Senior Research Officer in Hong Kong, [Maya Wang](#), says Xinjiang is currently the worst region after North Korea in terms of human rights. The Chinese government has built a well-functioning high-tech surveillance system, which collects information about each person under their individual identification number, and citizens' smartphones are constantly monitored through special programs. Any suspect is immediately taken either to a camp or prison. Wang says that the Uighurs are under the microscope. No one can escape this surveillance network. Another practice is that Chinese civil servants or teachers go to the homes of Uighurs every two months. Uninvited guests stay at their homes for at least 5 days and gather information about the Uighur families' religious and political views. They also teach the national anthem and language lessons to families with poor Chinese.

In 2016, Bilkız Hibibullah, with her 5 children, migrated from China to Turkey. She was not able to take her own 3-year-old little daughter Sakina with herself because the child did not have a passport. Sakina stayed in China with her father, and the plan was that when the child's passport was issued, she and her father would come to Turkey for family reunion. However, Hibibullah cannot contact her daughter or her husband. Her husband is likely to be arrested, and the child's whereabouts are unknown. "In the middle of the night, after my other children have gone to bed, I cry a lot," [Hibibullah says](#). "There is nothing more miserable than not knowing where your daughter is, if she is alive or dead."

Target Values: Family and Religion

The fate of the children whose parents are detained in the camps is probably one of the questions that occurs to everyone. There are also special camps for children. [Bitter Winter](#), an online magazine on human rights and religious freedoms in China published by Italian researchers, shared

photos of one of these camps. Human rights activists say “Loving Heart” is a euphemistic name giving to the centers for children by the Chinese government with the purpose of concealing the true nature of the facilities. Children, who have been taught in Chinese, do not have any contact with the world around them. Buildings are protected by watchtowers, barbed wires, and surveillance cameras. Once a month the children are allowed to talk with their parents in a video call. However, one of the teachers says that after talking with their parents, children cannot stop crying for a long time. [Refugee Uighurs say](#) that although these places are presented like kindergartens, they are the centers for brainwashing and assimilation, and they bring up those children to be faithful and obedient to Chinese communism. [HRW China Coordinator Richardson](#) emphasized that separating Turkic Muslim children from their families and relatives is an integral part of the government program. In October 2016, Chen Quanguo, the Xinjiang secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, instructed the local authorities to place all orphans and those children whose parents were detained in state-owned orphanages. This process should be completed by 2020.

In short, the two basic values □□(family and religion) of the Uighurs and other Muslim nations are being systematically undermined. While at first the Chinese government pursued assimilation on a national-cultural basis (for example, by restricting use of the Uighur language), in recent years its new policy is targeting religion because Islam plays an important role in maintaining Uighur identity. Therefore, it is not surprising that [reports](#) of the destruction of ancient mosques, even Muslim cemeteries, have increased. Satellite photos have revealed that the central graveyard in the city of Hotan has been destroyed. The Uighurs say that the goal of the government is to destroy all traces of the Uighurs in the region. [France Presse](#) posted satellite images of 36 destroyed mosques (a list of completely or partially destroyed mosques can be found at [this link](#)). Professor [Darren Byler](#) from the

Uighur Studies Department at the University of Washington noted that all manifestations of Islamic faith are regarded as religious extremism and ethnic separatism.

[Over 300 people](#), whose have been identified by their relatives, have been detained in the Uighur region over the past two years. They are doctors, teachers, scholars, journalists, poets, writers, and artists.

Diplomats in Camps

At the end of 2018, on Canada's initiative, 15 ambassadors of Western countries sent a letter to the local government to visit the Xinjiang region to study the situation. In fact, before this appeal, British diplomats visited the region in August and managed to conduct research. In his speech at Westminster, the British Foreign Secretary [Jeremy Hunt](#) said that the facts detailed in the reports of human rights organizations concerning the region had been confirmed. During his visit to Beijing in November, German Foreign Minister [Heiko Maas](#) called for the Chinese government to be transparent on the violation of Muslims' rights, and he declared that the camps were unacceptable. In response to the ambassadors' request, [the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman](#) said that this issue was not included in the mandate of the ambassadors under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, so their visit to the region would not be permitted. Nevertheless, soon after, the Chinese government organized a visit of four groups of foreign diplomats to the region. But most of the diplomats were from [Muslim-majority countries](#). The ambassadors of the United States and major European Union countries were not included. These countries, which have serious problems in the fields of human rights and democratization, were not expected to prepare critical reports on the treatment of Uighurs; and they did not.

China's Position

We pointed out that the Xinjiang Autonomous Region has been a

source of constant concern for the Chinese government. If we name all the uprisings that have taken place since 1763, when the area was annexed by the Manchus, we would have a long list. The USSR, which opposed potential Japanese influence in the region and did not want the establishment of a Muslim-majority state near its borders, helped the Chinese to suppress revolts in East Turkestan in the 1930s. However, at the beginning of the 1940s, the USSR backed the Muslims against the anti-communist Homindan, and in 1944 an East Turkestan state was established with the help of the USSR. In 1949, nevertheless, with the help of the USSR, the Chinese Communists placed about 250,000 troops in the region and organized a mass migration of Hans to East Turkestan to change the demographics. To this day the Uighurs have not accepted this situation; there have been many armed and peaceful protests against the government. It is worth mentioning the role of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, established in 1993, in these events. This organization has been recognized as a terrorist organization by the West and China.

The idea of creating camps is believed to have been triggered by the bloody events of [2008](#), [2009](#) and [2014](#). Hundreds of people were killed and wounded in these incidents. Apparently, the Chinese government decided to create long-term stability in the region by implementing the most radical solution of the problem. Undoubtedly, like all sovereign states, China has the right to fight terrorism. But seeing an entire ethnic-religious group as potential terrorists and taking preventive measures against all of them; establishing camps reminiscent of the Nazi concentration camps in the twenty-first century; and collectively arresting people without any trial, is not compatible with fundamental human rights, international law, humanity, or conscience. Initially, the Chinese government denied allegations and accusations that Muslim minorities were placed in camps.

In August 2008, a panel of 50 people from China attended the UN Human Rights Commission. A spokesman for the Central

Committee of the Communist Party of China said all citizens of China, including Muslims, enjoy equal rights and allegations that 1 million Uighurs are detained in camps are false. At the same time, the Chinese officially recognized the existence of camps by saying that “those deceived by religious extremism ... shall be assisted by resettlement and re-education.” The official publication, *Global Times*, justified the harsh security measures in Xinjiang with a familiar argument: [it will not be allowed to turn into China's Syria or Libya!](#)

The Chinese government [issued an official document](#) on the fight against extremism in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region on October 9, 2018. Manifestation of radical religious ideas, boycotts (against property, services, and official measures), interference in daily life and public opinion, calls for hatred, discrimination and violence, are regarded as forms of extremism. The official names of the camps are *education and transformation training centers*. The official document envisages to provide individual training in the education and transformation training centers in order to eradicate extremism. Organizing marriages and funerals in accordance with religious rules, the notion of *halal*, refusing to use television and radio, destroying government documents, national currency, the national flag or photographs of the country's leaders, and preventing children from going to public schools are forbidden. In order to fight against such cases, religion, in this view, should be adapted to conform to the demands of Chinese socialism. Telecommunications companies are instructed to create a monitoring system in the region and prevent the spread of extremist content in the form of audio, video, or text. The Chinese Komsomol is asked to encourage intermarriage among ethnic groups in Xinjiang; and local authorities are responsible for the legality and the organization of marriages. Officers report each year about the implementation of anti-extremist measures and they are awarded based on their success in this work.

Despite international calls, there is still no sign that the

Chinese government will mitigate its policies and abolish the camps.