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Uyghurs in China

Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are an ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) northwest. Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The XUAR, often referred to simply as Xinjiang (pronounced “SHIN-jyahng”), is a provincial-level administrative region which comprises about one-sixth of China’s total land area and borders eight countries. The region is rich in minerals, and has China’s largest coal and natural gas reserves and a fifth of the country’s oil reserves. Beijing hopes to promote Xinjiang as a key link in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which includes Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and energy development in neighboring Central and South Asia.



Source: CRS using U.S. Department of State Boundaries; Esri; Global Administrative Areas; DeLorme; NGA.

Some Uyghurs refer to Xinjiang as “East Turkestan,” a term regarded as subversive by PRC leaders. All or parts of Xinjiang have been under the political control or influence of Chinese, Mongols, and Russians for long periods of the region’s documented history, along with periods of Turkic or Uyghur rule. Uyghurs played a role in the establishment of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. The PRC asserted control over Xinjiang in 1949 and established the XUAR in 1955.

Uyghurs once were the predominant ethnic group in the XUAR; they now constitute roughly 45% of the region’s population of 24 million, or around 10.5 million, as many Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, have migrated there, particularly to the provincial capital, Urumqi. Many Uyghurs complain that Hans have benefitted disproportionately from economic development in Xinjiang.

Human Rights Issues

Since an outbreak of demonstrations and ethnic unrest in 2009 and clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel that spiked between 2013 and 2015, PRC leaders have sought to “stabilize” the XUAR through more

intensive security measures aimed at combatting “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.” According to PRC official data, criminal arrests in Xinjiang increased by over 300% in the past five years compared to the previous five.

Two prominent Uyghurs serving life sentences for state security crimes are Ilham Tohti (convicted in 2014), a Uyghur economics professor who had maintained a website related to Uyghur issues, and Gulmira Imin (convicted in 2010), who had managed a Uyghur language website and participated in the 2009 demonstrations.

In tandem with a new national religious policy, also referred to as “Sinicization,” XUAR authorities have instituted measures to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society and reduce the influences of Uyghur, Islamic, and Arabic cultures and languages. The XUAR government enacted a law in 2017 that prohibits “expressions of extremification,” and placed restrictions, often imposed arbitrarily, upon face veils, beards and other grooming, some traditional Uyghur customs including wedding and funeral rituals, and halal food practices. Local authorities reportedly also have banned some Islamic names for children. Thousands of mosques in Xinjiang reportedly have been demolished as part of what the government calls a “mosque rectification” campaign; others have been “Sinicized”—minarets have been taken down, onion domes have been replaced by traditional Chinese roofs, and Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed.

Some Uyghurs—estimates range from hundreds to thousands—have fled religious restrictions and persecution in China during the past decade. Many have migrated through Southeast Asia to Turkey, which has a large Uyghur community. In response to pressure from Beijing, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand repatriated nearly 150 Uyghurs to the PRC between 2009 and 2015.

By contrast, the Hui, another Muslim minority group in China who number around 11 million, largely have practiced their faith with less government interference. The Hui are more geographically dispersed and culturally assimilated than the Uyghurs, are generally physically indistinguishable from Hans, and do not speak a non-Chinese language.

Many experts attribute the proliferation and intensification of security measures in the region to new national and provincial counterterrorism laws and to the leadership of Chen Quanguo, the former Party Secretary of Tibet, who was appointed Party Secretary of the XUAR in 2016. Recent security measures include the following:

- **Police Presence and Surveillance:** Thousands of “convenience” police stations, furnished with

antiriot and high-tech surveillance equipment, have been installed.

- **Biometric data collection:** Authorities have systematically collected and cataloged DNA samples, blood types, and fingerprints and performed eye scans of Uyghurs for identification purposes as part of its social stability campaign, often under the guise of “health physicals.”
- **Internet and Social Media Controls:** Uyghurs in some areas of the XUAR are required to install an application on their mobile phones that enables authorities to monitor their online activities.
- **Home stays:** The government has sent an estimated one million officials and state workers from outside the XUAR, mostly ethnic Han, to live temporarily in the homes of Uyghurs to assess their hosts’ loyalty to the Communist Party.

Mass Internment

According to various estimates, Xinjiang authorities have detained over 1 million Turkic Muslims, mostly ethnic Uyghurs, and Kazakhs, in “reeducation camps” without formal charges, trials or hearings, and with no timetable for release. Many detainees have little or no contact with their families and, in some cases, young children. Some PRC officials describe the Xinjiang camps as “vocational education institutions” in which “trainees” learn the Chinese language, legal knowledge, and job skills, and undergo “de-extremization.” Other PRC authorities state that detainees are “infected with religious extremism and violent terrorist ideology.” According to some reports, many detainees had engaged in activities that authorities may now deem “extremist,” including participating in religious services outside of officially sanctioned places of worship; home-schooling one’s children; spending time abroad or having relatives living abroad; and expressing religious sentiments.

Many detainees reportedly are compelled to express or chant their love of the Communist Party and President Xi Jinping, sing patriotic songs, renounce or reject many of their religious beliefs and customs, including their avoidance of pork, alcohol, and smoking, and undergo ideological indoctrination and self-criticisms. According to former detainees, treatment and conditions in the camps include beatings, food deprivation, and crowded and unsanitary conditions. Some reeducation centers reportedly contain factories where detainees are forced to work, in some cases producing goods for export.

U.S. Responses

PRC forced-assimilation policies and the mass detention of Uyghurs have been condemned by the Trump Administration, including by Vice President Mike Pence in an October 2018 speech on China policy and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo in November 2018 remarks at the U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue. On December 4, 2018, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy held a hearing entitled

“The China Challenge, Part 3: Democracy, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law,” in which the internment of Uyghurs was prominently featured.

In January 2019, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act was introduced in the Senate and House (S. 178 and H.R. 649). The act would mandate four U.S. agency reports on the Uyghur human rights situation and urge the Administration to establish a U.S. Special Coordinator for Xinjiang in the Department of State. The act would in part call upon U.S. law enforcement agencies to protect members of the Uyghur diaspora in the United States from PRC harassment. It would urge the Secretary of State to consider imposing sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act (subtitle F of P.L. 114-328) upon Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The Global Magnitsky Act authorizes the President to deny entry into the United States and freeze assets held in the United States of foreign individuals responsible for “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.” The UIGHUR Act of 2019 (H.R. 1025), introduced in February 2019, would in part call upon the Administration to engage in international advocacy in support of Turkic Muslims in China, promote Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur language programming, and restrict the export of U.S. technologies that facilitate the mass arbitrary detention of Turkic Muslims in China.

Terrorism

The PRC government has attributed numerous deadly incidents in the XUAR to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Chinese officials portray ETIM as Uyghur terrorist group with ties to Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State that advocates the creation of an independent Islamic state that would include Xinjiang. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002 (to block terrorist financing) and placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List in 2004 (to prevent the entry of terrorists into the United States). ETIM is not on the Department of State’s narrower “Foreign Terrorist Organization” (FTO) list. The U.S. government “identified sufficient evidence” to consider three violent incidents in China purportedly involving Uyghurs as terrorist attacks in 2014, although the lack of information in most cases has made it difficult to verify PRC accounts of alleged terrorist activity. According to some experts, ETIM, whose members reportedly spent time in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s, was a small, loosely organized and poorly financed group that lacked weapons and had little if any contact with global jihadist groups.

Roughly 100 Uyghurs from China entered Islamic State territory during 2013-2014, according to the New America Foundation. Over one dozen Uyghurs purportedly were involved in terrorist activities in Thailand and Indonesia during 2015-2016. In 2016, a car bomb exploded outside the PRC embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which local authorities attributed to Uyghur militants based in Syria.

Thomas Lum,

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