



# The question of Uyghurs in Xinjiang

United Nations Human Rights Council



From a separated world to global peace: the need for  
a new look on institutions.



**Forum:** Human Rights Council

**Issue:** The Question of Uyghurs in Xinjiang

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**Position:** Chair and Deputy Chair

## Introduction

The situation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang has been an issue for quite a long time already. Since 2014, The Chinese government, under the administration of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have been making Uyghurs disappear or detaining them. In late 2017, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) began receiving increasing allegations by various civil society groups that members of the Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minority communities were missing or had disappeared in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China) In 2018, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances reported a “dramatic” increase in cases from XUAR “with the introduction of “re-education” camps in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region by the Government of China”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-asesment.pdf>



## Definition of Key Terms

### Uyghurs

A Turkic ethnic group in Xinjiang, China. They are recognized as native to the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and are one of China's 55 recognized ethnic minorities. They differ culturally and ethnically from the Han Chinese, as they are Turkic. Their language is similar to the Uzbek language from nearby Uzbekistan and distantly related to Turkish from Turkey. Most Uyghurs are Muslim. The total Uyghur population is 13,5 million, of which 12,8 million live in China, mainly in Xinjiang. They have been sent to so called "re-education camps" where they would learn how to be a good citizen of China.

### Xinjiang

Xinjiang, officially the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR), is an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China, located in the northwest of the country. A little less than half of the population of Xinjiang is Uyghur, even less are Han-Chinese and the rest of the population is other minority groups. Besides the Uyghurs, many of the other minority groups in Xinjiang are Muslim, such as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Chinese-speaking Hui.



## General Overview

### Origins

The state of Uyghurs in Xinjiang has been a point of discussion for many years already.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Turkic people began forming independent states in Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recovered and thus, there was no such liberation for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Frustration led to an upsurge of resistance by clandestine militant groups inside Xinjiang and the other Turkic states. In 1995, demonstrations in Yining led to a 'Strike Hard' campaign being launched, because Beijing issued Document No. 7 which identified the conflict in Xinjiang as the most serious threat to the Chinese state. The repression under this campaign never stopped. Anyone suspected of sympathies for 'seperatism' – advocating an independent Uyghur state – or involvement in 'illegal religious activities', could be detained without trial. Most conflict occurred in the old Sufi strongholds in the south of Xinjiang but, in July 2009, clashes between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in the regional capital, Urumqi, cost many lives. 197 people lost their lives and more than a thousand were injured. They also resulted in the detention of thousands of Uyghurs, some of whom were also executed.

### One Belt One Road

China has been working on their "One Belt One Road" initiative since 2013. This would be a set of train tracks that would make it possible for people to travel from China to Europe by train, in one go. Unfortunately for the citizens of Xinjiang as well as for the Chinese state, this road goes through Xinjiang. A lot of economic prosperity lies in Xinjiang. The Belt Road initiative is supposed to improve living standards and thus decreasing unrest in the province, but little of that seems to be happening. It is in China's interest to ensure the citizens of Xinjiang do not cause unrest, so that they can work on their Belt Road initiative without any problems. This is one of the reasons for the harsh repression of the Uyghurs, many of whom live in poverty at the moment.<sup>2</sup>

### Detention camps

Since April 2017, at least 800 thousand to possibly 2 million Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minorities have been detained in internment camps for indefinite periods of time. It is estimated that Chinese authorities began the reeducation efforts in 2014 and that they were greatly expanded in 2017. Reuters journalists found that in 2018 the "vocational education and training centers" – what the Chinese government calls them – covered an area of about 140 soccer fields, all over Xinjiang. Germany-based Xinjiang expert Adrian Senz analyzed local and national budgets over the past few years and found that construction spending on security-related facilities in Xinjiang increased by 20 billion yuan (about \$2,96 billion) in 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2019/6/17/xinjiang-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative>



They have not had trials and reasons for their detention can vary, even detaining them because they travelled abroad or have family abroad. Uyghurs are detained in “re-education camps”, or as president Xi Jinping called them, “vocational education camps”. These camps were set up to supposedly help young, unemployed people in Xinjiang learn job skills and Chinese, even though renowned Uyghur intellectuals and retired professionals were also detained in these camps. Uyghurs who got out of these camps mentioned they were forced to eat pork and drink alcohol, which is against their religion. Some have even reported being forcibly medicated with unknown substances. These substances have even made women infertile. They also had mandatory classes where they had to recite Communist slogans and sing songs praising the Chinese Communist Party. There are reports of the use of stress positions as a means of, cold cells, and sleep deprivation in the camps. There have also been reports of other forms of torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, including sexual abuse.

One common goal in reports from former detainees seems to be to forcing detainees to renounce Islam and embrace the Chinese Communist Party. For example, praying and using common Muslim greetings are forbidden in the camps. There are reports that authorities constantly surveil detainees to ensure that they do not pray, even in their own beds in the middle of the night.<sup>3</sup>

## Surveillance

Besides the “vocational education camps”, Uyghurs are also repressed through surveillance in many different ways. The first is an app that every citizen of Xinjiang should have installed on their smartphone. Human Rights Watch was able to reverse engineer the mobile app that officials use to connect to the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), the Xinjiang policing program that aggregates data about people and flags those deemed potentially threatening. By examining the design of the app, which at the time was publicly available, Human Rights Watch revealed specifically the kinds of behaviors and people this mass surveillance system targets. They found that the app collects all kinds of data, ranging from height and blood type to political and religious background. The app’s source code also reveals that the police platform targets 36 types of people for data collection, including those who “collected money or material for mosques with enthusiasm”.

The IJOP platform tracks everyone and everything in Xinjiang. Many ordinary things can be seen as “suspicious activity” by the app, such as: using an excessive amount of electricity, gasoline being bought by someone else than the original buyer of the car, taking trips abroad that the state deems too long. It creates invisible fences throughout the state. One citizen who had recently been freed from the detention centers, tried entering a mall, but as soon as he did, an orange alarm went off. He was taken to the police center and was told he should not enter the mall anymore and it would be better for him to just stayhome.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418\\_Busby\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120418_Busby_Testimony.pdf)



The state collects data with this program to ensure they can maximize the amount of people in detention centers who are deemed “untrustworthy”. They are interrogated without basic protection and they have no right to legal counsel, some are even tortured<sup>4</sup>.

### **Other human rights concerns**

Besides the obvious concerns of imprisonment and surveillance, there are other human rights concerns about Xinjiang.

Freedom of religion and “normal religious activities” are protected in China’s Constitution.<sup>5</sup> However, laws and other legal texts applicable in China generally and in Xinjiang specifically regulate religion in a detailed, intrusive and particularly controlling manner. Religious activities are allowed only in Government-approved locations, conducted by Government-accredited personnel, and on the basis of Government-approved teachings and publications<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2019/05/02/china-how-mass-surveillance-works-xinjiang>

<sup>5</sup> Article 36, Constitution of the People’s Republic of China

<sup>6</sup> See Xinjiang Religious Affairs Regulation (XRAR), amended in 2014; and the Religious Affairs Regulation (RAR) amended in 2017. See also State Council of the People’s Republic of China, White Paper on “Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang”, June 2016



## Major Parties Involved

### Uyghurs

The most obvious party involved is the Uyghurs themselves. They are the ones suffering under this regime.

### China

The other obvious party involved is China. The state is repressing the Uyghurs in many different ways. They claim it to be re-education.

### United Nations Human Rights Council

The United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR) had commissioned a long report on the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The situation in Xinjiang concerns human rights and thus making the Human Rights Council a major party involved in this issue.



## Timeline of Events

5 February 1997

The Ghulja Incident: Uyghur demonstrations

5 July 2009

The start of the Urumqi riots

2017

The situation becomes alarming

31 August 2022

OHCHR report





## Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been very few attempts to solve the issue. China is a very important country for nearly every other country and it is also very powerful. There have been discussions in the Human Rights Council about whether they should condemn China's treatment of the Uyghurs and a joint letter has been signed by 25 states. The joint letter expresses concern about the situation in Xinjiang and mentions that every nation in the Human Rights Council must uphold the highest standards in promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and fully cooperate with the Council. The condemnation is a good start, but far from intrinsic help. There is still a lot to be done to actually solve the issue.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/hrc41-l-25-states-jointly-condemn-chinas-suppression-minorities-xinjiang/>



## Possible solutions

A solution which would make most sense to the Uyghurs, is to give them an independent state and not have it be part of China anymore. That would mean that the repression of Uyghurs would no longer be possible, or at least much more complicated. Uyghurs would have their own government and would be able to decide policies that work for them. This is obviously not a solution that would make China content, as they need Xinjiang for their Belt Road initiative, as well as for other things.

Another solution would be to have Xinjiang remain part of China, but have the citizens make their own policies, while remaining in close contact with China. This does not seem a very viable solution either, as China prefers their entire country to have the same policies, those of the Chinese Communist Party. Letting Xinjiang make up their own rules does not fit in with China's profile.

It would be possible to put up sanctions for China, from the UN. The problem with this is that China is an important business partner for many countries and nearly every country imports goods from China. It would be a great loss to those countries to have to cut ties with China.

The last and maybe most creative option would be to facilitate mass migration to other Turkic countries, such as Uzbekistan. This could be done by the UN, with agreement from Uzbekistan and other countries. It would be a difficult mission and not preferable for anyone, but it could be used as a last resort if there is no other way to ensure safety for Uyghurs.



## Useful documents

OHCHR report: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>



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